



The Nassau Literary Review



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STAFF PAGE





EDITOR'S NOTE





We Are Writing

An interview with Jonathan Safran Foer

*On December 5th, the Nassau Literary Review traveled through a blizzard to to Brooklyn to meet with **Jonathan Safran Foer**. We got a table at the 2nd Street Caf , where the walls were plastered with school children's drawings. Over pecan pie, we talked about what it means to him to be writing.*

Nassau Literary Review: Can you talk a little bit about the process of writing your creative thesis? How did the advising process work for you?

Jonathan Safran Foer: I had written about half of it before my senior year. In a weird way, the process was about creating new things but also really editing. I'd meet with Joyce once every two weeks and we'd just talk, not usually about specifics. It was helpful to me to know what she thought worked and what didn't work. She was very honest. There's nobody like her. She doesn't have to teach, but she's honest to god the most old-fashioned person who really cares about students and about writing.

NLR: You were a philosophy major. The philosophy department let you write a creative thesis?

JSF: No, I also wrote a philosophy thesis, but it was not particularly good work.

NLR: How did you have time to do that?

JSF: Because it wasn't really good work, honestly. I put it off as long as possible. I just didn't do a great job on it

NLR: Did you feel interested in it?

JSF: Well, I had to. That's the only way I could write it.

NLR: What made you decide to go for it with the book? Many people who write creative theses, although they do



continue writing after Princeton, abandon their thesis project.

JSF: I never really thought it was my thesis project because I had been working on it before and I knew that I was going to continue to work on it. I just liked it and I didn't want to let it go yet because I had a certain amount of positive reason, like from Joyce, to think that I should keep on going with it.

NLR: So what did you think about Princeton in general?

JSF: I had a great experience...I think I had a lucky experience. If I hadn't gotten involved in the writing program I think I would have had a hard time—actually it really was my saving grace. And Joyce—I can hardly comprehend how much she influenced my college experience. I met her as a freshman in a creative writing course.

NLR: How did you feel about the end product of your thesis?

JSF: I don't remember. I'm sure that I would never want to look back at my thesis. I don't ignore the fact that I wrote it, but I'd never want to look back at it.

NLR: Yet people make you do it all the time when they ask you about the book.

JSF: Every time I think about it, it changes, but the whole problem with the book is that it doesn't change even if I wanted it to.

NLR: What did you intend to accomplish with the book?

JSF: That's what my philosophy thesis is about: what is the role of an author's intention in any reading of a book and with what regards that's to be taken. You think my book is about one thing and I think my book is about this. Who's right? Or is neither of us right?

NLR: Why did you change the title of your thesis, *The Book*



of *Antecedents*, to *Everything is Illuminated*?

JSF: *The Book of Antecedents* is a good title. The only problem is that “antecedents” is such a dippy word, like who can relate to that? And *Everything is Illuminated* is so warm. It’s a great title.

NLR: It’s something the reader can hear you, the author, and Alex, and the character Jonathan Safran Foer saying. What kind of a relationship did you have with the Jonathan Safran Foer character?

JSF: I don’t think about it anymore. I was glad I did it at the time, when I thought that always anything I wrote would be like that, but it’s not—my new book’s not like that. Maybe it’s something that I’ll return to at some point. It makes sense for the story because you can really sense???

NLR: Some readers would say it makes the story appear self-conscious. Do you think you wrote the novel like that to be show your freedom from self-consciousness or because you were self-conscious, or both?

JSF: Or neither? *Laugh*. It was really never a decision that I made and it never even occurred to me that I was doing it. I just did it—it was the only way it could be done. Once the book was done and I started showing it to people then I became aware of the fact that I had made, unconsciously, this decision. Then I thought about it and thought “well, is that going to be self-conscious or this or that or that?” but in a way those are questions that anybody who reads the book can answer.

NLR: In the novel you focus a lot on the interaction between image and text. For example, the design of the cover and the icons that introduce each chapter..

JSF: I’ve always loved visual art. I probably go to that for inspiration more than I do to literature. I always want the experience of reading my writing to be like looking at a piece



of art more than reading a book, whatever that even means, because I don't know. So what I'm working on now is even more visual and it incorporates all sorts of images.

NLR: In one of her lectures on the novel, Professor Elaine Showalter discussed the chapter on Augustine and how Augustine's house is a micro-museum. That seems somehow connected to your use of icons.

JSF: Visuals can become like exhibits in a book because the whole point of an exhibit is to take something out of context and say, "Let's look at it, just on its own—let's put it in a case and take something that we may ordinarily overlook and see what's special about it." In a book you just can't help but have that be the case anytime you have something that isn't a word. The problem is that everyone's so inclined to think that anything you do that isn't straight ahead is a gimmick, and I think it's that kind of thinking which is completely absent from the way people talk about visual art or music. What would a gimmick sound like in pop music?

NLR: Still on the subject of the visuals in the book, can we talk about the ellipses? You fill a couple consecutive pages with them in the novel. ~~Many many editions later on~~ If *Everything is Illuminated* goes on to be published in several editions, is it more important to you to have the exact number of lines of ellipses or that it finish the chapter?

JSF: I don't care how many there are. It's not numerology or anything like that. I do like how it ends the page. Like the "we are writing" thing. I like the way it looks. I'd do another page of it. Originally I had a lot more ellipses—I think I had three full pages, but my editor thought that would be distracting, and I think he's probably right about that. I did enough "we are writings" to fill a page. There's a fine line. There's a point to which the more you do the more powerful the effect and then at a certain point you just become an idiot.



NLR : Do you feel like there's a pressure on young writers to be spokes-models for their writing? The jackets of books by young writers often feature photos that could appear in a modeling or acting portfolio. They are presented as part of the book—well, obviously the author is part of the book—but like the author's physical appearance is somehow part of it.

JSF: I'm always curious about what an author looks like. I guess I wish I weren't, and I know in my heart that it doesn't matter at all. I think it's not a bad curiosity—I don't need authors of the books I love to be great looking. I just want to feel a connection with them. Books I really love make me want to feel close to the person who wrote them. Having a picture on the back is a way to get closer. I think the culture now has taken it a little bit further—a little bit too far and then books become about image or they become about the story about the book rather than the story within the book.

NLR: These days you could pick up an issue of *Vanity Fair* and instead of it featuring "18 Performers Under 18" it could be all of the young New York writers standing around, looking very...writerly.

JSF: In a way that's bad, but in a way it's very good because part of the problem is that not enough people read. There's an anxiety about reading in this culture, for some reason. Can you imagine if you saw a billboard for a book? If I had a billboard for my book, people would say, "What a sellout, what a commercial jerk." On the one hand, I would say that, too. I understand that the anger is towards somebody who is perpetuating this modification of literature. On the other hand, if you accept that you want people to read a lot of books then maybe books should respond to the culture in the same way that other media has. I think it would be better if people were reading Paul Muldoon's poems than listening to Britney Spears, so how can I accept that Britney Spears is plastered everywhere and yet Paul Muldoon is kept on a tiny cover?



JSF: What are the books you love, out of curiosity?

NLR: I really like classics, like Kafka and ??? and I really liked W.G. Sebald who died a few years ago. There's this writer Helen Dewitt who wrote a book *The Last Samurai*, not to be confused with the movie that's now in theatres, ~~which~~ I think ~~is~~ it's one of the best books I've ever read. (ask JSF more)

NLR: It seems you were influenced a lot by Marquez and Borges.

JSF: I think I was, I don't think I am as much anymore. They are very impressive; I was impressionable. It was easy to be influenced by them—which is good, it says something about their work. I bet you there are many, many people who decided to become writers when they read those two writers' work. Now, do I still like it? I sort of have a hard time when I reread it. But that's okay, that doesn't say anything. Maybe Marquez doesn't read as much Kafka anymore.

NLR: What excites you about your new book?

JSF: It's hard—in a way writing is like you're constantly putting this carrot out of your reach, if you're doing it correctly. That's the whole point: you're doing something that's harder than you can do. So you're constantly setting yourself up for—not disappointment—but reality. So I feel like I've always ????? which is really exciting but is also a terrible way to work. I like what I'm working on, I guess, I like working on it.

NLR: How do you go about the process of writing?

JSF: For my new book, I have two files on my computer. One of them is the latest draft of what I'm working on—I also keep the things I cut so that if I change it—not fiddling around, but really changing it—I have a previous version in case I really screwed something up. So now I'm on the 28th draft, which is like 350 pages. Then I have a file called “cast-offs” where I put everything that wasn't good enough to be in the book but that I still might want later. It's like 6800



pages. And that's because I have no idea what I'm doing. And I have huge sub-plots. That way you can be let in to places that you'd never be smart enough to get yourself. There's a great saying the poet Joseph Brodsky said, "The rhyme is smothered in the poet." If you put yourself in the way of having to rhyme more, that can accidentally lead you to a place you wouldn't have chosen. That's why Paul Muldoon writes the way he does—with his really insane forms. It's not only because they're pretty and they sound great, but also because it makes him do really great things.

NLR: Can you talk a little bit about what you think your role as a writer is right now, how you're contributing right now?

JSF: I think writers, generally speaking, have roles. Each different writer has a different role. And what's really most important is just that writing have a role. The role of some writing—most writing—almost all of writing—is really just to entertain. Except there's no burden for writing to entertain: there's so much TV, movies and music. But there are still things that writing can do that those things can't really do. Like they can move people in certain ways or they can startle or fascinate them in certain ways. I don't know what I think my role in the world is, but I know that what I want to do is to find out what all of my books can do. I think at the bottom of it is always affecting change. The kinds of books that I want to write are the kinds of books that are different, that do things for the first time. And in a way that can be enough—it's interesting just in the context of art to do something new. But I think once something new happens, like once you learn how to see something differently, like in a painting, a book or a song, you see things differently in the world, and people always need to see things differently in the world.

NLR: When you toured to promote *Everything Is Illuminated*, you began a project that involved people sending you things. Can you tell us about that?



JSF: Yeah, it was fun. When I went on book tour I gave everybody these plastic baggies. Inside was a little envelope that had my return address on it. And in the envelope was an index card that was reasonably big. It was blank but at the bottom it said “self portrait of _____” to let them do whatever they wanted to do on it and send it back to me. I liked the idea because something felt really off about going to places and doing readings and not having any avenue for people to respond. That had nothing to do with the way that I think about writing. So I handed out lots and lots and lots of these.

NLR: And did you get back interesting stuff?

JSF: Oh, it was incredible. Really really interesting stuff. It was pretty unusual, but what surprised me was that people got really personal—just talking about whatever was going on in their lives, just trying to express who they were. I thought at one point that maybe I could put them together into something and make a little book out of them, but once I got them I realized that I couldn’t—I can’t even show them to my friends because they are so personal. It would really be a betrayal.

NLR: You didn’t think they would be that personal?

JSF: I guess I didn’t know. I didn’t know what people would say. I don’t know what I would do.

NLR: Do you want an index card?





Cravings

Jonathan Safran Foer

EMMY HITLER ATE LAMP SHADES IN HER THIRD TRIMESTER.

Frances Edison had inexplicable cravings for tungsten (which was then still known as wolfram), and glass. Doctor Williams, who'd known Frances since she was knee-high to a corn stalk, told her to control herself. Couldn't be good for her, or the baby. *Pregnancy...*, he said, *every now and again you see it do something funny to a woman.*

It wasn't funny, though, when Reba Carter chased down three pounds of unshelled peanuts with a handful of *Not Cool for Cal in '24!* buttons -not funny to her esophagus which was jabbed and pricked by the buttons's needle backings, and not funny to her rectum that had to pass Coolidge and shards of undigested shells, only centimeters from her birth canal. Nor was it funny to Wade Carter when he received the phone call notifying him that his wife was in the emergency room, three-quarters-crazy, and that perhaps he should come home.

May Earhart sat in front of her Windmaster fan, mouth open, letting the air move into her like a long leg into a stocking. For hours she would sit in front of the propeller blades, which she propped up on a bookshelf by the window so she could watch the clouds flirt and exchange vapor. She daydreamed of ailerons and elevators, fuselages, rudders and leading-edge flaps, friction, airfoils, air flow, air pressure, columns of heated and cooled air, thrust, and *lift*. She walked herself to the hospital when it was time, arms spread out at her sides, palms cupped, collecting wind like sails.

Cinderella's mother, her real mother, longed for glass. But unlike Frances Edison, who was content with thick or thin glass, clear glass or tinted, Sestina fancied stained glass. Her craving, (a passion she might have called it), the intense hunger which drove her to wander the streets at night looking for high windows at which to throw rocks, left her lacerated and empty. Chipped teeth, bloody gums, torn gut ... *Cinderella*, she said at her navel (for she had known both that she was to have



a daughter, and her unborn daughter's name since she herself was only a child, *Cinderella it's killing me. I can't do it. It's not within the covenant of motherhood.*

Vera Wilde extinguished matches on her blackened tongue, and blew wafts of smoke out of her mouth.

Sabina Curie saw through her husband, but spread her legs anyway. She craved a tighter belt.

The wife of C.W. Scheele, the man who discovered wolfram (now known as tungsten), drank mercury to get her husband's attention. While she knew she was no 1.5 parts per million of the earth's crust, relatively useless in the production of record needles, and hadn't had a high boiling point since she was a teenager, she refused to be ignored. 1741 was a cold year—too cold for the quick silver in her stomach. So she died in childbirth.

Betty Astaire yearned for the tap-tap-tapping in her abdomen to stop.

Mary wanted to be left alone.

When her water broke, Jacques Cousteau's mother was performing cunnilingus on her swim instructor (who was also heavy with child, but one month behind Mrs. Cousteau), in the showering room, after a long lesson. It was the smell of the sea she craved. The taste of the ocean. To be around, up, and in the body of a true swimmer. That clitoral pebble which washed up on the beach, after centuries of turning over and over, of being smoothed by evolution's slow, deliberate surf - that was what she wanted between her lips. She thought about her instructor in that way as Mr. Cousteau reached the coital meridian that would, five months later, be the swell in her stomach. That was the first time. It scared her—a feeling so foreign she wanted to call it a symptom. It happened again when she first felt Jacques kicking, as if his translucent foot was a bass drum pedal. *BOOM, BOOM... the sea ... BOOM,, BOOM... the ocean floor.* She had an acute awareness of Jacques's positioning in her belly. She tracked him, blindly, using genetic sonar. His deep heart beat ping resonated back to her, and her's to him. What was that thing in her stomach that moved her, that *possessed* her to roll around in bloated 69? to tango that double fetal distend on the cold blue tile floor of the shower



room?

Mary Coltrane also felt the bass pedal, but the captivating rhythm was enough to make her drink her own blue-tinted breast milk, and eat flowers from the neighborhood park. Her stomach became a garden of swing—blossoming pulse, throb, and cadence. High-hat pansies. Double-bass daisies. Rim-shot rose-pedaled diarrhea-inducing botany. *Boom, tssszz...* The areolas of her tom toms moved outwards, like concentric ripples emanating from a pebble hitting the water. *Boom, ta tssszz...* She was all the way mad. And lonely. The fairy with the straight blue pubic hair (Geppetto was nowhere near the slouch that legend would have us believe) ate formica.

Frank Lloyd Wright's mother knew she was going to give birth to greatness. She didn't have sex during her pregnancy, fearing a too-sharp jab of Mr. Wright's pelvic t-square (which, let's face it, was not so different from Pinocchio's nose) might rip into the embryonic sac.

Methuselah's mother couldn't sleep at all the last two weeks, but still had waking nightmares of milk and honey.

Leda gnawed on her down pillows when the crests of her tidal contractions broke too far over her head.

The mother of Pope Pius II swallowed gold coins during the winter of 1427. She would quarter an apple and embed a coin in one of the slices, so she didn't have to think about swallowing such a large circle of metal. It was a game of currency roulette, in which each spin of the Red Delicious wheel might mean another clink clink in her stride. She checked her bowel movements, but none of the coins were ever returned. *He's rich in there, she thought, like a king.* And her belly was a finance house, investing placental vitals, and collecting tuberculosis

and malaria as interest. She also died in childbirth.

Chelsea Braille ate her husband's eyeglasses when she realized the condom broke.

Like Mrs. Cousteau, Caesar's mother longed for the sea. She slept at night with shells tied around her ears, and imagined chesty mermaids serenading her from all sides. She massaged anchovies into her body, training closed the pedaled lips of her



vagina, until the vulvan moss showed no breaks -no weaknesses in the bulwark. He would have come out in the tenth month, or even the ninth, if he had had an access of escape. *I won't do it*, she said to herself. *I won't*. The stomach was her husband's idea.

Instead of crying, Brucha Chagall licked the blue bottles in which she collected rain water.

Erna Lamaze was compelled to strangle herself at night. Not to death, of course -until she could feel her hands shake, and the floor shake beneath her, and watch her stomach rise and fall in tiny ripples. When she came to, she would search her raw, swollen neck for any cuts, and promise herself that this was the absolute, unequivocal last time. Until the next night.

Hitler. Could it be that all Emmy craved was lamp shades? Not sweet pickles, or tapioca pudding, or even semi-sweet chocolate? Not blue glass, not jazz, not feathers, not air? It's too eerie to believe.

But there was something more thing she craved.

She felt so much like a candle holder on a high shelf, never made full with a candle, never knowing the weep of soft, hot wax. Had he even seen her naked body since that night? Had he shown any interest when she told him of the hammering, how it felt like baby Adolf (for she had also known the sex and name of her son since she was a child) was trying to pound his way out? Had he ever put his ear to her stomach and said: *Lady, I swear by all flowers that this child will do wonderful things?*

She longed for the attention received by a painter's wife the feel of lamplight on her face, the sound of a brush laying her down on canvas. And fingers. She craved fingerprints on her skin, epidermal tires skidding across the roadway of her torso. . And light. And light. To be around it. To encapsulate it.

What about Jack the Ripper's mother? Judas's? Napoleon's? Houdini's? What did Charlemagne's mother wake her husband for in the earliest hours? What was it that she needed?





Foreshadow

Rosanna Da Costa

A crow perched precisely at the top of the roof,
and the scale balanced. A clock paused.

“There are things I tried to tell you...”
The stream is choked and padded with debris,

but there is some nerve in me
that won't let me leave. So.

A crow paused and everything slid backwards:
sloshed soup bowl of Monday with me in it.

Now, tonight, I'm tired. The moon won't wait,
but slides away up the window:

raindrop in reverse and inverse.
Suds that sting, crumbs floating in the water,

and public radio jazz, soft as 40-watt light.
It's past time to come in; the geese have flown,

a plume of clematis still wavers in the dark.
The road lies in its track. I know the sense of the tilt

will persist past midnight, and tomorrow it will rain.
I clear rosemary from the drain. The house settles.

Maybe tomorrow you will clean your windshield
and remember, or else pull on a glove and remember.

Maybe. I know I'm not holding my breath,
but something else is. I'm sure of it.



Country Store

Molly Gulland

The beginning of the memory is blurred, with a dreamy, drunk quality, like he's missing something that everyone else understands easily. He recalls the cold of the vinyl seat in the truck, the odd cotton candy smell of the interior from that time he spilled sugar candy down the heating vents. His father, next to him, sits tall the way he always does when driving the truck. Strangely, Clark doesn't remember the kitten on his lap. He guesses it's possible that his little sister is holding it, but he doesn't remember her being there, either. It's a matter of being told that she was there, her saying that she was there, that inserts her in the memory. How can he possibly know what is his own and what some inner author has added, deciding that it's better than real life?

He does know, though, that for some reason, they decided to take the cat to the store with them. They'd just gotten her from the pound, because Bonnie, his father's little girl with the yellow pigtail braids, had begged and begged and begged. She was persistent, relentless even, and it was the iron will and not the sweet smile that meant she and Clark now shared a kitten. Every once in a while, he thought to himself then, there were benefits to having a cute little sister.

This was back when where they lived was nowhere, when the landscape of corn and hay and cows stretched for miles before there was anything resembling civilization. Down the two-lane road, there was an intersection, and a right turn there led to the only town in the area, Aldie, with a population of about eighty people. There, the Withers ran out of their historical home a small inn bordering the river, called simply—as everything there was—the Little River Inn.

Then there was the store.

And that, too, had an apt name: the Aldie Country Store. From the sound of it, one might think it would be quaint—someplace owned by man with a fat, round, smiling face



dispensing hard candy to the town's children while his wife chats about knitting or canning or the like. In reality, the store was a frightening display of need, visceral evidence of a family doing whatever it could to make ends meet. It sold fat, veiny red bait worms next to the ice cream, bad pizza, lottery tickets, and beer. Neon signs hung in the windows advertising cigarettes, and pickled eggs sat in a large jar on the counter.

The family that ran it had a disturbingly ambiguous quality, with too many middle-aged men and teenage girls for everything going on there to be wholesome or legal. The old woman who seemed to be the matriarch of the lot was not warm and sweet-smelling, but sharp-looking and severe, a little crazy maybe, and her hands were always dirty when she handed out pieces of the doughy, lukewarm pizza. She charged extra for a paper plate.

It must have been some misguided sense of community that kept his parents from avoiding the place altogether. They didn't want to be considered the yuppies who bought the farm down the road for kicks, but they were anyway, once people talked behind their backs. Sometimes Clark's parents would take Bonnie and him there to get Gatorade after they played tennis on the weedy, untended courts at the park. And they always went after church on Sundays, establishing themselves unintentionally but firmly as the Catholic imports to the fiercely Episcopalian, church-picnic atmosphere.

He doesn't know now how his parents could have believed it would help them fit in.

He wonders if it is the cold or the scenery that's making him think of all this.

It's been a decade since he pondered the store, or the events there that day, though he must have driven past its slovenly, sloping porch hundreds of times over the years.

Jogging in place, waiting for a break in the traffic running over the tiny, one-lane bridge that the County claims it will expand soon, Clark surveys his options. He's thirsty, and has to go to the bathroom, and in the zip-up pocket of his lycra pants, he keeps a few dollars in case he gets hungry or thirsty during



a run. If he turns right, he'll be at the store in about thirty seconds. If he turns left, it'll be another forty minutes before he gets home, a near hour of discomfort.

All week, back at his parents' for Thanksgiving, Clark has been running on the old dirt road that's the alternative to the highway now crowded with SUVs from the surrounding suburbs. The dirt road he trains on weaves lazily along the remaining horse farms and cow fields, which are now interspersed with growing development neighborhoods. After about three miles, the one lane hits Aldie, and ends perpendicular to the state road that now needs to be expanded to handle volume. It's silly, he knows intellectually, for a grown man to avoid a store because of something small—no, *tiny*—that happened fifteen years before. Waiting for the traffic to ease, he feels his heart race, and then a flare of anger at his own cowardice. It's just for Gatorade and a place to go to the bathroom, he growls inwardly. He tells himself: Go. Now.

The one of the parts of the memory that is clear is once they're on their way. It was his dad, Bonnie, and him. Bonnie was in the middle of the truck's bench seat, because Clark always sat by the door and protected her. It was so cold at first, until the heat and the sugar smell. And there were Christmas songs on the radio, he remembers, because Bonnie was bouncing up and down to Jingle Bell Rock, scaring the kitten, whose name was Chez. It wasn't their choice of a name, but something the bored-looking teenage girl at the pound must have thought up. But now Bonnie said it would be mean to change it.

How would he like it if people just upped and decided to call him Phil? she argued. So 'Chez' stuck.

As they pulled into the parking lot of the store, Clark saw a few of the men on the porch, smoking or dipping—he doesn't know which, now. They followed the truck's progress along the gravel lot with their narrowed eyes, as if they couldn't make out what it was, or like they were scanning the horizon for the sign of a submarine scope. Clark's dad's voice was enthusiastic, the way it usually was at bedtime when he was suggesting that brushing their teeth would be fun. Clark was wary of the voice



by then, but Bonnie was still at the point of falling for it.

“Okay, guys! Let’s go get some cat food!” His dad said.

“Yeah!” Bonnie responded, in a vague, faraway tone that showed she wasn’t sure why she was excited. She just knew she was supposed to be.

“I think I’ll stay here,” Clark said, glancing at the porch. Some of the men had gone inside.

He remembers seeing black and red checked shirts, but that seems too stereotypical to be right. Or to be wrong, maybe.

“Oh. I’ll stay, too, daddy. With Chez,” Bonnie said. She didn’t like the idea of Clark having the cat all to himself, he guessed.

“Nope—you’re both coming with. Come on, let’s get it over with,” Clark’s dad said, losing the voice. “Out. Now.”

“No—wait, Daddy! We can’t leave it in the car,” she whined.

“What are you talking about, Bonnie? We’ll be back in two minutes.”

“No, no! It’ll freeze!”

“Fine. Get it. Bring it in with you.”

Clark looked off into the yard behind the store while his father fiddled with the locks. There was a small paddock where a muddy circle was worn into the crab grass. Along the side stood a miserable looking pony, his fur matted and mane and tail caught up in fistfuls of burrs. Clark walked to the edge and reached out to the creature, clicking his tongue to call it. It rolled its watery brown eyes toward him and rested them on his outstretched hand for a moment, then turned away.

Returning to the truck side, Clark found Bonnie clutching the struggling kitten in her hands as it worked desperately to escape. Pinning it in a headlock while letting the rest of its body flail below her arm, she turned her excited face to him.

“Let’s go! She’ll like it!”

“Bonnie, God, give it to me!” He took it from her, cradling it like a baby along the curve of his arm. He could swear it gave him a grateful look. It stopped moving and settled into his elbow.

He turned toward the store, his father several strides ahead of him, and jerked his head to signal to Bonnie to move along. She was standing with her arms crossed, looking at the ground,



tracing lines in the dirt with her foot. Her jaw was clenched.

Shrugging, Clark walked quickly toward the porch, trying to catch up. Bonnie would come in a second, once she realized he was leaving her alone, he thought to himself.

Then the crazy lady was screaming nonsense at him.

One moment, he'd been talking to Bonnie, and the next, the old woman was out on the porch with a broom, swinging it around her head. She was looking at him, peering into his face like he was something hideous, shrieking so unrestrainedly that spittle was flying from the corners of her mouth. Freezing, he clutched Chez, who was terrified and digging her claws through his shirt. He could feel his skin ripping.

She was a witch. Her white hair spiked in disorganized tufts around her head and her eyes were bloodshot. Her nose was pointed, her chin pointed, even her cheekbones were pointed—she looked like she could dig her face into raw meat like the lions on Wild America. She was hobbling down the stairs with the broom. Any minute she would take off, catch him up, fly with him to a cave somewhere and starve him.

Then Clark was in the air, but not on her broom—in his father's arms, a heap of squirming cat and blood and salty water from his eyes. He pushed his face into his father's chest and felt the determined, choppy rhythm of his gait while he carried Clark back to the truck.

Now there is a sign outside for sandwiches—Turkey, Roast Beef, the Best Barbeque in the State! Clark walks once around the parking lot with his hands on his hips, catching his breath, so the people in the store won't think he's crazy.

The porch has been painted. A bell jingles as he walks in the door. A woman, thirtyish, looks up at him from behind the counter.

“Can I help you?” she asks.

“Umm, a bathroom?” he ventures doubtfully. It was always off limits to customers before.

“In the back. Help yourself,” she says, looking back down at the counter. She's doing the crossword.



Some of the inside looks the way he remembers it—worn wooden floorboards no one has bothered to paint, shelves with chips and beef jerky. Fridges with soda, beer. In one corner, though, there's a "Virginia's Best" section with an assortment of honeys, jams, and apple butter. There are also "Virginia is for Lovers" t-shirts. The egg jar is gone. The bathroom is dirty, but passably so—it's probably what you'd expect from a place like this. It has a fake, fruity smell, and he guesses there's a round air freshener tucked behind something.

He finds a drink and pays for it, studying the woman there. She's wearing stylishly cut jeans, riding boots, and a starched button-up shirt.

"You from around here?" he asks, trying to sound nonchalant.

She looks up, apparently surprised he's still there.

"Oh, no—not originally. My husband and I moved out here from the city a few months ago," she says. "This place was about to close, and we thought it could be made nice. We live up the road. He commutes to the city."

Clark nods, smiles, and tells her good luck. He finishes his drink on the porch and recycles the bottle in the proper can. A team of holiday bikers in brightly colored spandex pulls in and situates in the corner of the parking lot. It's paved now, and longer, he notices—it now extends beyond where the paddock used to be.

He stretches and heads home.



The Moth Cycles

Julia Friedlander

When the porch was no more than dimly lit,
in the crying hour of cicadas who throttle their lungs
and the moths who beat their bodies against the unyielding
screen,
the reddened and weather-tried wood sides of this house and
history settle more deeply.

The insects and I are no more than ghosts,
flitting from night to day for another round of drinks, of
morning, of midsun stress,
and coming to the pith, self-battery at all odds, the winged
and I.

I live here, I do not live here, I rotate and do the roundabout,
I edify, I decompress, I rise and lose.

The wind is a stranger to intimacy, as is a soldier's strongstep
while someone else acts like Salome in circles around him.
As the stolid air becomes sodden with goldenrod and flying
matter from hopeful flowers,
the ground prepares for harvest tones,
yellow for the chrysanthemums that signal the descent of
fall like an emblem,

or a metered section of verse that throws metonymic
allusions to gods and objects.

And plastered to the walls and foreheads of the chic:
the new brown, the color of the season's handbag and
perfect little items,

from Dolce & Gabbana and Los Angeles and East Berlin,
patterned and colored after nature's flying masochists,
spotted and dappled and injured and attracted to artificial
light.

The trains come in by the quarter hour and spill forth their
traveling hopefuls,
who load their affairs and limbs into vehicles with ritual and
wine,



or the hope that in this next place, fueled by this transported
spirit,
stronger shields, trap doors of some mantra of a medieval
castle will chant away
for good the ghosts and aliens of a wretched past.
They may confront minutes colored by caffeine and the
perpetual grinding
of ever-sharp and shining gears, having veered sharply from
the porch,
from the evening light and lightning, from the moths and
their shattered exoskeletons.

The Victorians believed in fairies and the Papists in pious
love,
never seen and altogether unencountered and unaccounted
for,
while perhaps the moths do not need the firelight or the
glowing screen,
but treasure the danger and beauty nonetheless.
Their poor, soulless senses and I, oiling the cranky engine,
in the outer orbit and frigid reaches of paradise.
There is a wonderful photograph attached to my knees,
of excellent brilliance and electrified pigmentation,
the colors worn by birds and beasts of the Amazon, by Dior
and passing fashion,
to outdo the moths who hate themselves anyway.

The voices of the stars and the creatures and their cousins
are barely audible,
the efforts of nearby and idle technology make a neglected
wine glass feel the refractions and the
acceptance in the dregs it contains,
wherein a miniature earthquake has occurred in the silence.
The futile warriors begin to slide down the planes they
encounter,
leaving streaks of unnameable liquid in their wake.
Hills acquire the likeness of rusting bobbins unspun,



a witty child's rendering of an untethered landscape,
a paintbrush run amok on unwilling paper, or a baton hand
fallen adrift
in the muddy rhythm of a lunatic and his erratically stated
tempo.
In the miniature and meaningful world of this winged
gamble the tyrant wins,
and the churning reinstates itself in a gentle and tragic and
predictable slide,
I am reminded and we recollect that we are and will be all the
same again.





A Monster Under Her Bed

Erin Ebbel

And she said the butterflies are not all in her field and she ran and she runs and she rolls and she can't find him or it or whatever it is that makes wings patter splatter raindrops off the tips of fingers or eyelashes. And she tastes her lips and the stars are twinkling but the moon but the moon is too low for her to see and instead a leg and a leg and she doesn't trip but she is running blind. Blind like a blade of grass in the summer. Alone. It is alone she is alone only with family forks and spoons and knives and the rhythm she tries to block out so she can listen to her mind. But it beats and it beats and it beats and she is lost in the nock of a branch in a forest in a friend in a whisper in her cat's meow. A pencil scratch but she can't figure it out and can't get all of the words on a piece of paper on a note on a letter. The letter J. Jay. Black keys below the pads and white. They gave her gold but she asked for silver and the butterflies are not in her field.

But a glance and the edge of his lips and the weight of an elbow on her neck. The clink and the clank and the labels that blurred her Friday night and brought her into dawn and brought her into night. She would have been fine lost in the night. The pink and the white. He reaches reaches for her hand and she lets him touch it. Strands of hair and the wrinkles in her finger. Now what now who now when. Now. Why.

A little monster under her bed and she pushes her hand in the dark and finds her pillow. Rest and the music stops her head sinks her back curves and a moment to think. Think of strawberries and the smoothness of juice. Guava. Nectarine and tree and branch and a shadow on her stomach. Sip drip and now a butterfly has flown into her window. A sunbeam and her toes caress the floor.



Produce

Katherine McGirr

If only a peach would suffice -
the same relish of sinking teeth,
the weight of something precious,
something plucked
to the warm palm of belonging.
For then you could buy a dozen
from a street corner,
or a slantly lit store,
and suddenly find love
swinging by your side
in a plastic bag.



Frozen in the Layers

Laura Petrillo

With Grandpa out of the hospital and settled into his house again, my mother finally has a stretch of time to herself. She doesn't sleep; anxiety keeps her awake at night, wondering what to do with her father now the gall stones are gone but his senility is worse, and he and my grandmother can no longer be left alone, yet they refuse to quit their residence of fifty-two years. My grandfather is a compulsive pack-rat, and the house is filled with junk: electronic gadgets and television carcasses from his years as a TV repairman, decapitated plastic detergent bottles filled with golf balls, stacks of videocassettes, framed pictures on every surface. The décor has not changed since they first furnished the house, or so it seems, and looking around one has the eerie feeling of peering through the residual layers of fifty-two years of the couple's lives. My grandparents are caught there in the layers, nestled deep into their knickknacks and rituals. No amount of convincing could uproot them for a nursing home—nor does my mother have the heart to make them leave.

On her free morning, she drives to her favorite flea market in Lambertville, New Jersey, where she immerses herself in more junk. Rows upon rows of used furniture, china, jewelry, books, gardening tools, and faded clothing comprise the open market—the emptied contents of other people's houses. My mother is happy as a clam. She “simply levitates,” she says, and from her elevated view she zeroes in on the diamonds in the rough, or as her latest passion dictates, the hidden pearls. Last month she found a pearl ring she believes to be an authentic Mikimoto, a three-tiered cluster of rosy beads on a silver band. I ask her if Mikimoto would really set in silver, and she says that it's a little known fact, but the designer often preferred sterling to platinum or gold. She knows things like that, how to spot the real gems from the junk, a skill honed by years of treasure hunting at flea markets and garage sales, and by her volunteer work at second-hand stores. I remember scouring the clasps of gold bracelets for the “14K” symbol as a little girl, thrilled to learn the secrets



of my mother's trade. She taught me how to tell if pearls are real, by rubbing them gently across your teeth: fake pearls feel perfectly smooth, almost slippery to the tooth, while real pearls are gritty and rough.

The uneven surface of a pearl is a natural result of the biological process that creates the gem. When an irritant body—such as a particle of food, parasite or piece of organic detritus—becomes lodged between an oyster's mantle and shell, the oyster coats it with nacre, a composite of aragonite crystals and organic conchiolin, which also comprises the shell of the mollusk. Many layers of nacre later, the irritation is embedded in a pearl. The layers are translucent and irregular, thicker in spots and incomplete in others, each a product of the environment the oyster was in when the layer was formed. Nacre production slows in winter in temperate climates, yielding more perfect crystal formation than in summer months, when growth is faster and more haphazard. Storms, changes in water temperature, and changes in the physiology of the oyster interplay to affect the microstructure of the pearl.

The collective radiance of light broadcasting from distinct layers creates the pearl's luster, each stratum sending forth beams of remembrance from different stages of creation. My mother can tell the quality of a pearl just by looking at it. "You can see deep inside a fine pearl, like looking through water," she says. "Lesser pearls are more opaque."

Pearls can be perfectly round, teardrop-shaped, smooth, bumpy, pink, white, or purple-black, depending on the kind of oyster that produced it and the shape of the irritant. If the irritant is small and flat, it may be incorporated into the shell of the mollusk, creating a "blister pearl," but most irritants are isolated and coated in their entirety to yield autonomous pearls. In phenomenal cases, small fish or snails work their way into the oyster's mantle and are pearlized into lustrous, true-to-form fossils.

Long before my father gave my mother her first pair of pearl earrings and ignited her passion for the gemstone, pearls have mesmerized wide cross-sections of cultures, from ancient Mesopotamians to Roman emperors and early explorers of the



Americas. Christopher Columbus bartered with native Venezuelans for pearls to bring back to Queen Isabella of Spain, the first treasures from the New World. Renaissance paintings depict the height of European aristocracy dripping in pearls, and in the twentieth century, images of celebrities like Audrey Hepburn in pearls cemented their status as an elegant American classic. There is an important distinction, though, between Hepburn's pearls and Isabella's: both are the products of the same natural process, but the irritant in the Queen's oysters embedded itself by utter chance, while Audrey Hepburn's oysters were provoked to make a pearl by an implanted irritant, a technique called perliculture.

Kochiki Mikimoto did not invent perliculture, but he refined and popularized cultured pearls in the beginning of the twentieth century. Mikimoto experimented with methods of grafting, duration of harvest, and different environments to create the perfect pearl. A round bead of mantle from a U.S. mussel shell is the best irritant, and the gonad of the Akoya Pearl Oyster is the ultimate womb for pearls in the Mikimoto fashion. Variations on Mikimoto's technique are performed in many countries, including China, Vietnam, Thailand, Iran and Sri Lanka, and on various islands throughout the Pacific.

Cultured pearls are the standard in modern jewelry—naturally formed pearls can only be found in pre-twentieth century estate pieces. My mother estimates that all the pearls in her collection are cultured, though it is impossible to tell without the aid of an x-ray. Recently, her fellow treasure-hunter Rosemary found a strand of enormous, lustrous pearls with a platinum and diamond clasp at the Salvation Army for ninety-nine cents and gave it to my mother as a gift. It is probably her favorite strand, but too valuable to wear on a regular basis. Lately she wears a pair of round white pearl earrings, on her trips back and forth to the hospital and to her father's home. The pearls capture the light reflected off the accumulated objects throughout the house, the familiar objects that will not let my grandfather leave but are swallowing him by nacreous degrees, until my mother can only see him by looking deeply through the water in her eyes.





A Man in Three Portraits

Nicole Muller

I. Boy

On crude concrete, he smashes
dried chicken bones to dust
and feeds chalky handfuls to the flock.
Something in him understands
the appeal of cannibalism.
Once he failed to brush back
a snapping beak from danger
and then struck it—
it leaked black blood
from a deep scratch.
He fed this one special treats
until the Sunday it disappeared
and Mutti served chicken for dinner.

II. America

At thirty, he makes his daily sandwiches
with half a pound of bologna
to compensate for years of cabbage.
He loves New York but hates the actors
who practice in the neighboring building.
During their rehearsals he blasts
“Brush Up Your Shakespeare” from his window
to drown them out until they relocate.
His apartment has inch-thick wall padding,
a stolen subway poster of Olivia Newton-John
and cockroaches.



III. Progeny

He buys his wife mink and they go to the opera
for four nights of Wagner while Nana watches the kids.
When it's on PBS, the whole family stays up way past
bedtime,
watching the end of *Götterdämmerung*.
The youngest, seven, tells him
she wants to marry Siegfried.
She will remember crying in his lap
when Wotan puts Brünnhilde to sleep,
her small fingers safe in his hands
through these waking moments with her father.
In the summer, flaming marshmallows
become calls to Loge, fire god,
and every swimming pool teems with Rhine maidens.



The Drought

Margaret Johnson

Jack was ten the year of El Paso's worst drought. It ran August to July, nearly a year, a blight on the land that persisted until it forced the county to import water from across the state, from Galveston where the moss-dripping oak trees languished in more water than they could drink. The water arrived in tank trucks that coughed orange-brown clouds of the dusty earth up around them like auras or halos.

It was the year of the summer that Luby came to work for them, the same summer of the day Jack's sister Gray wandered off, the week their thirst peaked. Luby was the first live-in to stay more than two months. Maria was hard of hearing and became indignant when Jack spoke Spanish to her. She told Jack's parents that their children were not right and worked on her nerves. She moved back to Costa Rica. Kjirsten, the exchange student, read Swedish women's magazines all day long with the hand holding her cigarette propped on the windowsill ashing into the flowerbed below. She only knew how to make fish sticks and blueberry crepes, and Jack's mother usually forgot to buy the blueberries. She lost her Visa, or perhaps Jack's mother accused her of stealing a bracelet, but that could have been another girl. He couldn't remember. His mother found the bracelet two weeks after the other girl or Kjirsten left. "So strange," she told Jack's father. "It was just there in my jewelry box, right where it was supposed to be. Of course I looked there before." The other sitters, the ones who didn't get picked up by a sleazy guy in a rusting coup one night and not show up again in the morning and send for their stuff later on, simply moved on to other children for whom they acted out the motions of care without pretending to love. Au pairs are like prostitutes in that way.

Following the departure of each, Jack felt the euphoria known only to children who think they have been given one more chance to attract the attention of parents whose eyes



seem always turned elsewhere, to whose ears their voice must always sound shrill and invasive. He tried to believe it would not happen, but there always came the morning that she announced the next arrival. Before school on a morning at the end of May, his mother told him about Luby.

“Was Maria illegal, too?”

“She herself wasn’t illegal. Her being here was.”

“Will the police come if they find out we have her?” Jack asked hopefully.

“They won’t find out. There are too many of them.” If anyone asked where she was from, he was to say El Paso, that she lived on Wyatt Parkway, a decaying strip-mall- and motel-cluttered highway on the uniformly poor, Hispanic side of the city, near the airport. Then he was supposed to call his father’s cell phone right away.

“Do you remember the number?”

Jack recited the number.

A few weeks later, perhaps at a birthday pool party his mother forced him to attend, he overheard her telling another mother, “My new nanny is just wonderful. Sweet, gentle as a bird, does everything exactly like you ask.” The other woman whispered something to his mother, the two women’s heads coming together behind their oversized sunglasses like those of a pair of courting insects. After a moment, his mother drew back her pale, triangular face, “Oh, of course not, she’s from El Paso. She lives out on Wyatt, takes the bus every morning.”

“Of course,” said the other mother. Behind the dark plastic lenses, her eyes could have confirmed that she believed his mother or that she understood.

Jack wondered if the women who watched the other kids in the neighborhood were also illegal. He would have asked around except that he had never been able to overcome the sense that the other children were foreign beings to whom he related only distantly. To Jack, they were like a race from the other side of the world whose members were clearly of his own species but who, in every other sense, could not be more different. He did not speak their language.



The week Luby moved in, the last week of school before summer vacation, Luby insisted on walking the four blocks of expansive, desiccated lawns—oil money bought land but not green; you can't buy green, Luby once said—that stood between Jack's house and El Paso Country Day School.

"What are you doing? I go by myself." Jack informed her Tuesday morning as she put Gray in the stroller and locked the door to the house. His father had already gone to work. His mother had not yet emerged from her room. "I'm not an infant."

"I know," she said, but she thrust the stroller forward. Jack felt the newborn void in the conversation grow and draw close and scratchy around him with the heat until he could not bear it.

"So why is your name Luby?" He finally asked. "It sounds like an old lady's name."

"I am not an old lady."

"I know that. You're probably younger than my mom. There's a cafeteria named Luby's. Actually, it's a chain. Are you named after that?"

"No."

"Then what does Luby stand for?"

"What do you mean 'stand for?'"

"What's your real name?"

"Camilla."

"That doesn't sound like Luby."

"My second name is Lubina. My brother called me Luby."

"I gave my sister her name." Gray's real name was Abigail Grayson Barnes, but Jack called her Gray, both because it was a superior name and because it's what she was the first time he saw her. Before she was born, his parents stuck an ultrasound picture of her to the refrigerator door. He stared at the small, surprising blur of his sister, still curled in her private chamber, waiting in that warm dark that bloomed somehow within his mother's chilly abdomen, and realized he would never have to be alone again. His parents said, "That's a color, not a name. People will hear you call her that and think we're hippies." But soon she answered only to Gray, which meant that



she did not respond to his parents very often and that she spoke almost exclusively to Jack.

Gray had already drifted back to sleep in the stroller, and Jack could see her eyes moving back and forth behind their nearly translucent lids. He wished that, without disturbing her sleep, he could make her tell him what she was seeing like she did with her music. Gray was a musical prodigy. She spent hours at the piano each day entranced, oblivious to how much Kaptain Kangaroo she was missing, drawing extraordinary noises from the wide chest of the piano. Jack listened to her songs as translations of the sounds he imagined echoing inside her body, calls arising from an uncanny well of knowing, messages that pertained to him but that he could only hear with Gray as his medium. Although, at age four, Gray could already read books, she could not read music. When she played, she simply watched her own hands, as though they were attempting their movements on their own.

The parents had gotten tired of Gray playing so incessantly in the living room—having a prodigy is one thing, but having to listen to her all the time is quite another—and had gotten the shiny baby grand moved out of the living room, into the prim pink bedroom whose décor they had commissioned for Gray before she was born, before they ever could have known what she was about. They thought the distance from the center of the house would mute her sounds, but the effort failed. Jack was glad. He liked the hours of sound that flowed out of Gray and her diminutive hands. The sound formed an atmospheric constant diffusing across the twisting vaulted spaces of the house, the many sheets of mirror, the wide picture windows that reflected the world outside, the green and dry, endless blue, back at itself when it tried to pour in. The music covered the sound of ignorant birds flying into the glass in the slanting afternoon light, thinking the windows were just more sky.

“Does your brother protect you like I’m going to protect Gray?”

“Protect me?”

“Yeah, does he beat people up for you? Is he big and strong?”



“It is not good, to beat people up. Besides, you don’ thing I’m strong enough?”

For the first Jack considered her body. She could not have been more than thirty. Her arms were taut with smooth, tight muscles, the kind that come from doing jobs that other people won’t do.

“I guess you are.”

“I guess I am. Now you go inside.” They had reached the Country Day elementary school building. It was just one of a spread of pristine yellow stucco buildings with Spanish tile roofs, joined by porticos that would have been knotted with wisteria had there been any water for the wisteria to drink.

“Bye,” said Jack.

“Bye-bye.”

Once school let out, they began the daily routine of walking to the country club pool, Gray, Luby, and Jack, trekking across the carefully groomed dead landscape of the neighborhood. They walked because Luby did not have a drivers’ licence. His mother never hired someone who could take them anywhere, Jack thought.

Lakeland Country Club was a seven-minute or 896-step—Gray counted—walk from home. At the end of Falcon Lane, the white stucco Spanish-style clubhouse gleamed like a mirage, their oasis. Gray’s cheeks were always flushed with heat by the time they arrived, and Luby would make her drink a cup of water while she lathered spf 45 sunscreen all over Gray’s small, skinny arms and legs, running her strong brown hands under the straps of the purple bathing suit, over the small wings of Gray’s shoulder blades, to make sure she covered every inch. Luby wore her white uniform even when they went to the club, a shirtwaist dress that hit just below her knees. It was belted tight around her waist, which was a good deal smaller in circumference than her chest, almost impossibly so, as though a portion of the flesh between her hips and ribs had been spooned out of her, leaving a vacancy the rest of her could not fill. Her shoes were ugly and sensible like a nurse’s, and her



floppy white cotton hat bore a few spots of dirt on the brim, almost shaped like a child's handprint. Her sunglasses looked to Jack like a poor drugstore version of his mother's, plastic with gold-tone insignia on each side.

Jack tried to sulk conspicuously through June, especially in the presence of his parents, speaking to the new surrogate as little as possible, choreographing various displays of resentment. The first time he was forced to accompany Luby on foot to the grocery store, he once brought Gray with him up to the counter of the store and told the manager that their mother had left them there. In an act that later overwhelmed him with guilt, he had intentionally walked Gray past the meat counter beforehand, specifically the rows of chicken carcasses, pink, white, and bloody, not knowing how else to make her cry. The manager had called the police by the time Luby got to the check-out counter, but [take out the "the" here] he wouldn't let Luby take them home until Jack's mother came and proved that Jack and Gray were hers.

This was his most overt protest to date, which surprised Jack himself because Luby was their best au pair yet. Some Saturday nights, after his parents hustled themselves out the door on their way to a cocktail party, keys jangling, his mother's chiffon rustling against the hose she wore despite the unremitting heat, Luby prepared her own recipe for homemade beef enchiladas. Gray insisted that they be beef because she could not stand the idea of killing birds. This was the type of distinction Gray was always making, as if she knew of a special ordering of things that other people never thought to notice, not even Jack, although he tried. To make the enchiladas, Luby used the hamburger meat that his mother stocked in abundance and all sorts of seasonings from his mother's immense spice rack that his mother never actually used because she did not cook. More than once, Jack saw Luby run her finger across the labels on the containers and let out a small note of longing, her eyes shining.

After dinner, they watched reruns of *Walker, Texas Ranger*, which Jack liked, and *Dallas*, which Luby liked. Gray would get



out a box of old nail polish her mother had given her to play with, and Luby would let Gray paint her toenails, each one a different color. Jack made meticulous milk mustaches and practiced talking like Walker, trying to get Gray to laugh, and Luby, also, he guessed. Gray's lips were small and her top one was a little fatter than her bottom one, so that she always looked innocent and sad, except for her eyes, which said that she was not sad at all. When she laughed, her mouth opened so wide that Jack always felt like she was opening up a space for him in the world, as though he had been suffocating up to that instant and not even known it and she was saving him, making a hole through which he could breathe. Luby's light pink-brown lips always seemed naked, not quite colored in. She smiled as though the conditions were almost right for her to laugh open-mouthed like Gray, except for some reservation, something missing that cautioned her not to waste energy on laughter.

Once, when it was still light outside when the toenail polish dried, Luby announced that they were going for a walk.

"All we do with you is walk," Jack told her.

"Come on," said Luby.

Gray got a red popsicle out of the freezer to eat on the way. It was going to melt all over her before she could eat half of it, and she knew it. As they walked along, their skin searching the stagnant air for a breeze, Gray told Luby, "Ellen doesn't like for me to have popsicles because they drip, like this." Gray held out the bright, streaming sweet at Luby and waved the stick a little. Gray never called our mother "mom." "Most other people call you Ellen," she told our mother. "Only Jack calls you 'mom,' and that's because he calls people by names that other people don't call them, like me, Gray." Her first word, one morning when she was sixteen months old and began speaking as if she had never not known how, was "sonata." So-na-ta.

"Do you know what we are like right now?" Gray was skipping ahead of them. Luby hadn't even made her get in the stroller.

"What?" Jack answered.

"We are like the book I read last night, about a family of



three children who make up their own language, and the parents are so frustrated because they cannot understand what the children are saying.”

“But Luby isn’t a kid.”

“Gray, hold my hand to cross the street.” Luby took one of Gray’s hands in her own without flinching at the visible stickiness of the small fingers.

“See,” Jack said.

“But she is not a parent either.”

“But the parents pay her. How much do they pay you, Luby?”

“I don’t tell you that.”

They walked to the country club, but this time Luby led them out on the golf course.

“We’re not supposed to be here,” Jack told her. “I bet we’re going to get in trouble. Then you’re going to get fired.”

“Shhhhh,” said Luby, in a way that did not say, “Behave,” but instead, “Just wait.”

As she led them across the groomed fairways, Jack could not take his eyes off the ground. He had never realized that amid the drought the golf course stayed green, a shameless, nearly iridescent green. It did not crackle under his shoes as they approached the lagoon placed at the heart of the front nine, full to its banks with twenty dust-covered trucks full of water. The three of them stood staring at its surface, perplexed, as though they could not identify the matter before them.

Suddenly, Gray whispered, “Look!” the sound dawning in her mouth in the same moment that she registered and pointed to the site before her.

From behind an ostentatious, non-indigenous palmetto bush stepped a solitary egret, its body gray in the cool blue of dusk.

“A stork,” said Jack.

“An egret,” Gray whispered.

Luby murmured a word in Spanish that Jack didn’t recognize.

The bird turned its head to look on them, acknowledging their presence. It was almost invisible in its vertical slenderness, its legs steely and without muscle, yet Jack felt confronted by



an aloof and massive beast. It stepped towards the water once, cautiously extending one of its stem-like legs, as though testing the soundness of the ground. Then it unfurled from its side two wings the length of a tall man and took flight, easing its weight into space as though the moistureless air were as buoyant as water.

Gray said nothing but stared into the sky, mesmerized, even after the animal had disappeared into the seeping dark. Finally, Luby took her hand and began to lead the way back home, with Jack following behind.

That night, while Luby read a book to Gray in broken English, Jack padded into the hall in his boxers and t-shirt and stood listening outside the door, just beyond the glow of the lamp and Luby's voice that surrounding Gray's bed. He burned with the desire to go in—it would surely feel like entering a dream—but could not quell a voice that said this was a cage, a beautiful wicker cage with a dome top and a pool to play in and perhaps a swing, that when he entered the door would snap shut behind him, that if he followed Luby, she would never leave, and he would forget to wish she would.

At the end of June, Mr. and Mrs. Barnes left to spend the month in France, as they did every summer. Their flight left early on a Saturday morning. Jack heard Gray ask them the night before to wake her before they left, but they didn't. Perhaps they wanted to let her sleep, or maybe they considered ducking their heads in to say 'I love you' but decided not to bother. Maybe they forgot altogether. When Luby woke Jack up the next morning, Sunday, for his little league practice at eight, they were gone.

The week after they left, the ferocious Texas July moved in closer, escalating, scorching the air with a heat so greedy it leached all the water not only from the land but from its inhabitants as well. Futile sprinklers sprayed combs of water back and forth across the wide, brittle lawns on either side of [theirs], and insects chased one another angrily, restless in their holding patterns, afraid to land because the ground might burn their spindly feet. Each morning, Luby woke Jack with two



firm taps, “Get ready. We go to the pool. I get Gray.”

On Saturday, Jack groaned, “I don’t want to. We always go to the pool.” He didn’t move.

A few minutes later, Luby alarmed him by appearing again in the door of his bedroom. Would she make him go? He realized that he believed she could. He was afraid. Luby didn’t notice.

“Where is your sister?” she asked him, even though he had just awakened. Jack took pleasure knowing that Luby asked him because she understood that Jack always knew where Gray was. He had always simply known. Once Gray crawled under the house and lay there on the cool dirt wearing her hot pink Scooby Doo sunglasses—she was pretending to be a mole—and Jack sensed it somehow. Not the Scooby Doo sunglasses but where she was wearing them.

“I don’t know,” he responded, which, strangely, was true at the moment, when he stopped to consider it.

“You do know. Fine.” Luby turned and went off to search the labyrinthine house on her own.

Jack lay in bed several more minutes before it occurred to him that he could not hear the piano. Gray was always playing when he woke up. He rose then and found Luby on the second floor, calling Gray’s name.

“You really don’t know where she is?” he asked. Luby did not answer but kept calling as she descended the back stairs to the kitchen. She scanned the smooth countertops, as though Gray might be hiding in the sugar jar. Jack opened a few cabinets and slammed them, his indignance at Luby’s presence newly aroused, to show Luby how incompetent he found her. Then they noticed the kitchen door standing open. The glaring yellow rain boots Gray had taken to wearing daily were no longer beside the door.

“Dios mio,” Luby whispered before she charged out into the yard.

“Where is she?” Jack followed. They circled the house three times. “You let her go outside alone? You’re here to watch her! She’s not like other kids! She needs *watching*.”



“We will find her. She cannot be far.” The words were careful, even, hollow, and she said them, Jack realized, for herself, not for him.

The week before she had forced Jack and Gray go over to play with the neighbors’ kids, whom they had lived next door to for two years but had never met. “You need other children at the pool. It is good for you. Don’t be ugly.”

Luby introduced herself to their housekeeper, Angelica, who was old and wide and no longer shaped like a woman. She had hairs growing out of her chin, and the skin on the back of her arms hung like dough.

The neighbors had two children, a girl a little younger than Gray and a boy Jack’s age with a gap between his front teeth and a slightly conical head that his buzzed haircut only accentuated. He was the type who was always pulling Jack off of the monkey bars at school. The girl carried a baby doll around with her everywhere she went, talking to it like it was real. She whimpered constantly because her brother was always ripping it cruelly from her hands, holding it over her head and laughing.

Luby sat with Angelica on the neighbors’ grandiose yellow brick steps. Gray plopped down Indian-style at her feet, ignoring the neighbor girl and her fake infant. Gray hated dolls. She has always had a good sense of what is alive, and worth your time, and what is dead. Unfortunately, people tended to give her lots of dead things. She never asked for anything, which made adults uncomfortable and more forcefully generous. She left most of the toys she received in their packaging on a shelf in her room, rows of them staring blankly out through the cellophane windows of their boxes—a legion of dolls and plastic ponies and over-dressed plush bunnies.

To make the compulsory visit to the neighbors’ pass more quickly, Jack climbed the ugly mesquite tree in the neighbors’ front yard, hoping the neighbor boy wouldn’t hit him with his football. He was punted it again and again across the yard, impossibly high and with frightening force. That such a creature had been given such bodily force baffled Jack and made him



suspicious of God.

Hanging upside down from one of the limbs, he listened to the staccato exchange taking place in Spanish between Angelica and Luby. Gray was staring across the street, thinking about something, and didn't seem to be listening, though probably she was. Angelica asked all of the questions, and Luby responded, though I could barely hear her.

"When did you come?" I heard Angelica ask after they had been talking for a while.

"One year ago."

"You are not from Mexico."

"Guatemala."

"Are you married?"

"Was."

"You had to leave him behind?"

"He's dead."

"It was that bad, then?"

"Si."

"Babies?"

"Two, one boy, one girl."

"Que Pasa?"

Luby looked where Gray was looking, far away from us. "Secuestrados." *Taken.*

"Jesus Cristo."

Luby's wide-set eyes were not crying. Jack thought of the kidnappings he had watched in movies: men in ski masks shoving children into battered vans. Women crying. Why wasn't Luby crying? Jack had never seen an adult cry except on television. You should be crying, he thought, finding himself still quick to impeach her. Why she didn't she cry every day for her lost babies, cry into their plates of food as she placed them on the table in front of them? Jack scrutinized the fat woman interrogating Luby with her fleshy arms crossed above the formless girth at her middle. Maybe Luby was ashamed to cry in front of this woman. He would be, he thought. Instead,



Luby looked down into her hands, resting open, empty, on her lap, and at Gray on the floor beside her.

“You are lucky, though.” Angelica told her. “Yours—the Barnes—they don’t behave as badly as these. Mother of God, my poor nerves. And their mother! But yours—”

Luby raised her head to locate Jack in the tree. “These are not mine,” she said, and rose to take them home.

Now, standing in the yard, Luby took her keys out of her pocket and locked the door to the house. “We look for her.” They walked a half-block in the arid heat before they started calling Gray’s name in every direction, like they were missing a pet instead of a child.

It began to pour with no warning, no preliminary drizzle. The drops fell fat, loaded, assaulting the tops of their heads like hell had relocated to the sky and was throwing its whole weight down on them. Luby and Jack kept walking. A deep, vibrato thunder began rolling in towards them. Jack felt himself and Luby reach the deepest place in their individual panicking, though neither said so. Jack thought of Gray walking small and alone in her bright yellow boots and felt weak. He pictured men in ski masks seizing her, his diminutive sister who played the same songs over and over on the piano and shunned dolls and looked at everyone and everything with wide, drinking eyes, letting it all in, who showed up in the grainy image on the refrigerator and made him not alone.

For Luby, he suddenly knew, this was not just about Gray, who was probably just down the street, probably very close to them from a bird’s eye view. For Luby, there was the thought, the possibility, that it had happened again, that she bled or breathed the curse that causes people to have what is most precious ripped away from them. That she carried it like a pestilence, that she had visited in on Jack, that she had opened herself to be visited by it once more.

Jack looked ahead, down the street, scrutinizing the vast, naked lawns that spat and gurgled as they turned to mud. As they passed the country club, a bolt of lightening struck so



close and low that Jack expected to see one of the massive mesquite trees in front burst into flames. And then he knew, before Luby did, where to find her. He stood for a moment, saying nothing, aware of Luby still scanning the yards before her in terror. It was his greatest moment of power, the few additional seconds he allowed Luby to suffer while he breathed for the first time in an hour. Jack filled with shame.

He took Luby's hand, tentatively at first and then tightly, and charged across the parking lot, past the caddy shack and the golf course manager yelling that they were going to be struck by lightening, onto the wide plane of the course. They could already see the small figure near the lagoon, standing in bright yellow boots like the girl on the Morton's salt container, holding its wet, matted brown head back, mouth open to the rain, arms spread wide as though waiting for an embrace.

Jack called out, "Gray!" She looked up. "Jack?" she asked, as though she had not expected company. Luby rushed towards her and gathered her up roughly, first squeezing her tight like a doll, then pressing Gray's cheek to her own and kissing her all over her face. Luby held Gray straight out in front of her, the muscles in her arms taut and unwavering. "You don't do that! You hear me?" She shook Gray slightly for emphasis. Gray was speechless, her legs dangling in the air. Luby put her down and said again, "Why did you do this? We were looking for you! You stay with us. You don't do THAT. Here, give your brother a hug." She pushed Gray's body into Jack's. He put his arms around her lightly, sensing that if he let himself embraced her fully, he would do so with such violence that he would surely crush her. "I wanted to see the bird again," she whispered in his ear. "The egret. It flew away too soon before."

An hour later Jack stood in the doorway of Gray's bedroom watching her play, feeling the music spread through the house, room to room, calming it. Gray's hair, still wet, bled a water spot onto the back of her dress. Still, listening to Gray, he did not miss the sound that arose high in the house, the sound Gray did not hear deep in her music, of a grown woman beginning to cry.



This was why he was not surprised when, several mornings after his parents returned from France, Luby was gone, not collected by any guy in any dilapidated vehicle, having taken everything with her. Neither Gray nor Jack mentioned it around their parents. At the piano that afternoon, Gray stopped playing.

“It’s my fault, isn’t it?” she asked Jack solemnly, turning to face him. “I scared her.”

“They always go, Gray. You know that. You can’t trust them.”

“You don’t do that,” said Gray. “Not to Luby.”

At dinner that night, their mother told them, “I don’t know why you haven’t asked where Luby is, but I let her go yesterday.”

Let her go. “Like the girl with the bracelet?” Jack demanded. “She didn’t leave on her own?”

Gray stared at her mother with large, blank eyes. Deliberately blank, Jack knew. With her eyes, Gray could exit at will.

Jack could not resist addressing his mother once more. “Why did you get rid of her? We liked her! We wanted her!”

“Why would she leave on her own? Your father and I discussed it while we were in France. She was too involved. And illegal, as you know.”

“Mmm hmm,” their father, ever voiceless, murmured agreement.

“We weren’t comfortable with the liability,” added his mother.

Jack felt the way Gray’s eyes looked, vacant, as though he had lifted himself up and out of his body, out of the glass box of the dining room, and was moving back through the weeks before, until he landed in the spot on the carpet outside Gray’s room, just beyond the circle of voice and light. This time he entered, quietly climbing up onto the bed, resting himself opposite Gray in the curve of Luby’s body, intertwining the fingers of one hand tightly in the folds of her dress.



Villains Don't Blink

Rosanna Da Costa

We don't, even when the odds are stacked up
against us. To be alive is to be
continuously revving the engine.
Loose in the rain. Beads falling in the gutter.
A clan of parachute beauties, my friend;
the shortest distance between down and out.

Strand us in the desert, and we don't care.
We're our own water on this caravan,
and anyway, it is too good to be
breathing to sacrifice the free-floating.
It must be something in the blood that turns,
like seasons, or leaves on the stream bed
tumbling under the water, over stones and bones
cold and wild, past the homes of sleeping fish.





Floorboards

Lydia Fitzpatrick

As best she could guess, she'd been under the floorboards for three days. Scenes flew threw her mind jumbled and irrational: Thomas's fingers pressing buttons on the plastic box attached to his hospital bed, shifting the mattress like a snake so that he could watch her... Words from the book: *Sometime, somewhere, her first husband had bade a last farewell to several of his close friends and had entered the belly of an iron fish before putting to sea. Her husband died, destroyed with the iron fish. His flesh was torn into many pieces that drifted down to the bottom of the sea, where they must have attracted the real fish feeding there...* Her daughter staring, as she frantically jammed the planks into place, closing the compartment... Thomas again, but young and healthy, letting his hand linger in hers as she helped him into the compartment under the floorboards... Her son, Robert, knocking at the front door, holding out his arm to help her down the front steps...

Her body jerked, and her arms flailed above her, batting at the wooden planks. Robert hadn't knocked on the door, had he? Was he knocking now? Is that why the scene had entered her subconscious?

"No! No. The mailman's come three times." Her voice echoed shrill and high in the compartment. She hated its lack of control.

Three times, she'd heard him push her mail through the slot by the front door. That made it Tuesday - three days, not four. Robert comes on Wednesdays at six. Tomorrow, he'd pick her up, he'd get her out of here, and they'd drive to Rotterdam - to that little restaurant that boiled fresh lobsters and served them with mayonnaise and dame blanches for dessert. Her mind wandered further, picturing the steaming platters, the salty lobster meat...

Thomas had watched her on one of those Wednesdays. She could picture his smile and wave as she and Robert left.



But now she could see him after they shut the door. His smile drooped and the muscles in his cheeks slackened, leaving gray hollows above his jaw. His tongue licked his lips, as hers was now, wanting desperately to get up and out, to be at that restaurant by the sea.

“Rubbish.” Her voice was low and measured this time. “Thomas never knew whether I was in or out. He wouldn’t have wanted me to just stay home. He knew me. He knew I was busy.”

The kids loved the story of how they’d met. Neighbors too. Mrs. Neilson had even suggested they write a book. Everyone wanted to hear it over and over, but Thomas always seemed reluctant to indulge them. So Selly herself would tell the tale, in her matter-of-fact way.

“You see,” she’d begin, “Thomas was a Dutch marine during World War II. The marines were the last to stand up to the Nazis. But, once the country was taken over, the soldiers who didn’t die had to go into hiding – from the Germans.”

“My mother wasn’t a hero. It just seems to me, like she woke up one morning and realized that everyone was hiding soldiers in their homes. She didn’t want to be left behind, so we got a soldier too. On May 17, 1940, Thomas crawled into a compartment under the floorboards in our front hall, and he stayed there for almost five years, until the Allies marched into Vasenaar.”

When Selly finished, she could never remember if Thomas had actually winced at her words, or if she’d just imagined it.

They bought a hospital bed, and put it in the living room fairly soon after the doctor’s prognosis. Thomas was still active – relatively healthy. It was Selly’s suggestion. She felt that by jumping the gun, it became just a normal move – a whimsical desire to change rooms – not an admission that soon Thomas wouldn’t be able to climb the stairs. And, once he couldn’t, he hadn’t minded being in the living room. It was right off the front hall, and Thomas liked to be in the middle of things – to



watch people come and go, to watch her come and go.

She could remember him, watching her sweep the front hall. She'd been cleaning furiously, trying to get the house spic and span because Robert and Helen were coming home that weekend.

"Selly?" Thomas interrupted her. She didn't look up.

"What?"

"Do you ever stop to think when you're on that spot?"

"Oh, Thomas..." She balanced the broom against the wall and pulled her hair back into a neater bun as she spoke, "What spot?"

He jerked his hand towards the floor beneath her, towards the crawl space beneath the floorboards. Sometimes he'd step on that spot in the midst of yelling at one of the kids or as he dashed off to work, and he'd stop, confronted with the sound of hollowness below him, reminded for a second of the bigger picture.

A flush crept onto her face and he could feel her annoyance. She wiped her hands on her apron. "Thomas, I-

A knock on the door stopped Selly. It was a neighbor, Mrs. Neilson. The postman had delivered a package to her house, but she thought he'd gotten the wrong address. The package was meant for Thomas. Mrs. Neilson held it out so Selly could see the address label as she read his name softly and nervously, like he was dead already.

Selly could feel Thomas' eyes on her back, and she knew that if she turned, they'd be laughing – laughing at this woman's awkwardness, and at Selly's awkwardness moments before. He stayed in that bed all day, just watching, thinking, judging-

She needed to escape.

Mrs. Neilson had started back down the front stairs, but Selly called after her, "It's uh... Well, it's Robert's birthday in a week or so and uh... May I come over?" She paused for a moment, convinced that Thomas would begin to laugh at her naked attempt to flee. But, he was silent. She cleared her throat and kept going,



“May I come over to... to borrow that recipe for the bundt cake you gave us for Christmas last year.” It was a stretch. She’d never heard of anyone making a bundt cake for a birthday, but Mrs. Neilson didn’t seem to notice. She stood there on the steps, a flattered smile on her face, muttering about how it was an easy recipe, as far as cakes go.

As Selly grabbed her coat from the closet, she stole a glance at Thomas. She couldn’t see his eyes. He lay curled on his side, turned away from her. The sheet was stretched tightly over his back so that his spine made a row of sharp bumps in the fabric. She wanted to move his bed back upstairs.

By the third ring, Selly picked up the phone in the hall. Thomas must have gotten to the one in the bedroom before her, because by the time she picked up, Helen was jabbering excitedly in English to her father. Helen went to university in the States, and whenever she called home she spoke English. It had been Thomas’ idea for Helen to go so far from home.

She could barely understand a word Helen was saying. Something about a book. Yes, Selly could make out that word. Helen was talking about a Japanese book. Probably something for one of her classes.

“Better the Japanese than the Germans.” Thomas muttered this, in Dutch, and Helen scolded him, but Selly could imagine the indulgent smile on her daughter’s lips.

Their voices continued – connected, earnest, loving. They played off each other, like they always had. Talking with an ease that Selly knew would disappear if she spoke up.

Selly came home once, from the market, to find Thomas helping a seven-year-old Helen into the crawl space in the hall. Selly stood on the threshold, watching, and her stomach contorted in fear. Why is he putting the little girl in there? Selly didn’t think of why she was so afraid– she dropped the bags of groceries, whisked Helen into her arms and began to push the rectangular chunk of wood back into place. Holding the child in one arm, she struggled to close the compartment,



to make the floor into one smooth surface. One of the corners refused to lodge into place, and she hammered at it with her fist, panting and pushing, until she felt it give way. Her palms were sticky. They were covered in milk and flecks of blood. One of the milk bottles had broken and Selly was kneeling in a puddle of milk and glass.

Thomas and Helen were silent. Selly's breath echoed raggedly in the hall. She could hear milk dripping into the crawl space, through cracks in the floorboards. In a few days, it would start to rot, sending a sweet, sick smell into their house.

Later, when she and Helen were alone, she asked the little girl why she'd tried to go under the floorboards. Helen looked at her, with those wide-set, honest eyes and said, "Mamma, I wanted to see what it was like under there. I wanted to see what it was like for Pappa."

"Selly?... Selly?" It was Thomas's voice. She was still clutching the receiver to her ear.

The line was silent, and she realized Helen must have hung up. Selly hadn't said hello yet.

She had translated the phone conversation correctly, or at least almost. Helen wanted Thomas to read a short story from her Introduction to Japanese Literature course.

"But you're a *foreign* bookshop! How can you not have any Japanese authors? It's called *Iron Fish*. The author is Kono Taeko. You must have it!" Thomas shouted into the phone, not bothering to hide the frustration in his voice.

He slammed the receiver onto the cradle. It was the fourth bookshop he'd phoned. On Selly's suggestion, he'd started calling ahead, after wasting liters of petrol driving to two stores in the Hague and three in Amsterdam. The whole thing was crazy, she thought. What was an iron fish, anyway?

"Thomas, this is such foolishness!" she said, poking her head out of the kitchen so he could hear her in the hallway.

"Helen said I'd love it. She thinks I'll love it..."

He muttered to himself, not in response, as his fingers traced the next number in the phonebook.



Thomas died. *Iron Fish* was propped open in his lap. All afternoon, Selly had thought he was asleep. She closed the book, put it back on the shelf in the living room and cleared his breakfast dishes. At two thirty, she brought in his lunch tray. Thomas didn't move, and Selly didn't notice.

A chunk of dried oatmeal was stuck to his blanket, left over from breakfast. Selly scratched at it with her fingernail and brought a damp rag from the kitchen to clean the stain. She rubbed at it, shaking Thomas' chair. His head fell forward, drooping at the neck. She pressed her fingers into his forehead, pushing his head back until it rested against the chair back. His eyes were open. She snatched her fingers away from his skin.

"Thomas." She said it sternly, in case he could hear her. But there was nothing. She took a last swipe at the oatmeal stain, folded the rag into quarters, slid it in the pocket of her apron and walked into the hallway to phone the children.

Sometime, somewhere, her first husband had bade a last farewell to several of his close friends and had entered the belly of an iron fish before putting to sea. His wife knew nothing about this. The iron fish had destroyed itself against another great fish ... Her husband died, destroyed with the iron fish. His flesh was torn into many pieces that drifted down to the bottom of the sea, where they must have attracted the real fish feeding there...

When it was confirmed that her husband was indeed among the enshrined, she did not go to visit the spot. It was not that she was skeptical about the act of enshrinement: rather she simply did not feel like going to a place that must be horribly gloomy.

It had taken Selly a year to pull *Iron Fish* off the book shelf, and several times through the first paragraph to understand that the author wasn't being completely literal. The "iron fish" was a tiny submarine used by the Japanese in World War II. It was the nautical version of the kamikaze airplanes. But, she understood this Japanese woman's feelings immediately. Why



dwell on the war? Selly was sure that the woman must have had children. She must have been busy. Why dwell on gloominess?

She shifted in her chair, taking a bite of one of the biscuits she had made that morning, and turned the page. The next one was filthy, coated with so much grease from Thomas' fingerprints, that it looked like wax paper. A dark coffee stain obliterated the first few words. He must have loved this page, this part of the story.

The Japanese woman changed her mind. She went to the shrine after all. It was a museum, with a real iron fish on display. The woman hid until the guards locked the place up for the night.

“That is what he rode in,” she’d muttered to herself as she read the explanation on the plate. “He must have entered from this hole here,” she said, noticing a round opening on top that had lost its lid. She reached her arm out to touch it... She explored the curved bottom of the cylinder with her hands and then climbed into the iron fish.

Selly pushed her chair back. She started to stand, propping herself up with her hands against the kitchen table, keeping the weight off of her hip. It took a minute for her hip to warm up.

She had to get down on her hands and knees to pull the lid off of the crawl space. She could only pull it halfway off, so she slid into the opening slowly, hesitantly, from one end, like getting into a cold swimming pool. Inside the crawl space, she lay on her back and walked her feet along the lid, pushing inch by inch until its corners fell back into place. The air was clearer than she'd imagined. Her breath came easily.

She extended her arms, barely touching the sides of the crawl space. Three days. Her fingertips traced the rough walls upward into the crevices where they met the floor above her. Light shone through the cracks in the floorboards, and she could see the clouds of dust that followed her fingers.



For five years, during the war, Selly barely saw him, barely spoke with him, but it made every interaction intensely amplified. A whisper, a smile, a look – each one took on meaning and created a connection between them. For five years, she lived in a fever of fear, of violence, of hunger – she thought of love. But Thomas had fallen in love with her staring at the gray undersides of these floorboards, not at her face.

Her hands dropped from the wood above her. It was a blank screen. He could have projected whatever he wanted upon it. He could have cast her in whatever image he chose. Had he wanted someone who thought more, listened more, who stopped at the sound of hollowness below her? Had he wanted the woman in the story?

Selly closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

“Mamma!! Mamma!!!”

Helen was shaking her frantically, screaming, pulling her out of the crawl space. Selly’s eyes couldn’t focus. She pressed her hands to her temples. The light made her head pound.

“Are you OK?” Helen’s voice was softer now. Her hands covered Selly’s. “Mamma?”

“I’m fine.” A croak. “I’m fine.” She couldn’t make her mouth work. Her spit was thick and heavy.

“Robert phoned this morning to make sure you remembered about dinner tonight, You never answered. He was worried – we were so worried - he called me from work to come check on you. Mamma, what were you doing in there? How’d you-”

Selly cut her off, forcing herself to speak, “I wanted to clean in there. I was just thinking of how dirty it must be... You know me.”

Helen was silent.

Feelings Thomas’ stare in Helen’s eyes, Selly started to stammer. Her hands reached for her hair, impulsively wanting to tidy it. But she forced them down into her lap before she shrugged and her eyes met Helen’s, just as they started to cry.



Flashcards

Christine Malvasi

In eighth grade,
I shared a locker with Tiara,
who was three years too old and late
in the mornings. I'd wait for her
to come rushing down the deserted hall
with a cigarette instead of a pencil
pinched between fingers
as I balanced books on my skinny arm.
She'd call me "string bean," smiling,
and tell me about her boyfriend,
as if to explain why she ran
behind schedule. We'd slip
into class where I'd admire
her jewelry--loud and piercing
my hazy thoughts with its shine,
the teacher's voice like a dim light
somewhere in the distance.
By ninth grade, she'd left.
I pushed through
freshman halls, trying to not notice
how the traffic, throughout the months,
thinned like smoke.
I turned over moments,
one after the other. I rehearsed
in whispers the names to faces,
watched them flicker.



Noses

Olivia Wills

I hate noses. The way they crinkle up, like rotting apples. The way that people can look down them, viewing things as if from the barrel of a gun. I hate the way they can be tossed into the air, pointing towards better things than the people in front of them. Noses. They are vehicles of disdain. There are atrocities of cartilage and dry skin. I just hate them.

Mr. Grable's nose is the worst. It's gigantic and twisted so that it is impossible to ignore or avoid. Mr. Grable's nose speaks for itself. Its long, spaghetti-like nose hairs hang half way down his upper lip. They warn people not to get too close and imply a certain 'distinction.' His nostrils are like lipless mouths that broaden when he is disgusted or taken aback. Their gaping width increases proportionally with the degree of idiocy with which they are presented. Most of all, Mr. Grable's nose is agile. It does not merely curl in distaste. The nostrils pull back until his large snout is in hundreds of folds, each trying to move away from the offensive odor. Or person. Like me. Mr. Grable's nose is always telling me off. I walk into his office almost every week to be reprimanded. "Lindsey," Mr. Grable's mouth will say with a weak smile, "I suppose you know what you've done wrong." (He's looking down the barrel of his nose at this point. His eyes travel down the crooked slope and seem tired and bored by the time they reach my face.) "You've been fighting again, right? We don't fight at Wilkshire Elementary, do we now, Lindsey?" (His nostrils are spreading wide enough to swallow me whole.) I try to defend myself. I tell him why I end up kicking and hissing. I have prompted the skin on his nose to recoil, however, and it slides back, utterly repulsed by my speech. I am pathetic, his great honking beak screams. His face tries to smile again, though. "We don't resort to violence now, Lindsey. Maybe if you were nicer to the children, they wouldn't be so mean to you. I don't want us to talk about this again." His nose has recovered from its initial dismay and settled proudly back into



its prominent position on Mr. Grable's visage. I sigh. The nose has spoken. I have been tried and convicted, examined and condemned.

Noses understand very little. They don't see past their bridges out towards girls like me. Mr. Grable's nose will never know what it's like to be a lardy, lumpy kid in a mass of cookie cutter children. It will continue to lift and curl and sneer at the small, defective odor that I am.



Wynnewood Fantasy Football League

Jay Katsir

We ambled to the park,
an elastic caravan,
bunching on corners
for red lights, expanding
across the placid

streets to toss the ball through
telephone wires or line up
and salute passing
cars. We wore old sweatshirts,
hat brims reversed and

shimmering mesh jerseys
on Saturday afternoons,
as we gathered here
to play and scald our lungs
with winter air. New

teams split in familiar
patterns. The ball zipped on a
tight wobble, pebbled
leather cracked into raw
hands, and steam curled from

mouths as we streaked across
the field, frozen under a
crisp, pale sky. As we
trudged home, we narrated
that week's highlight reel.



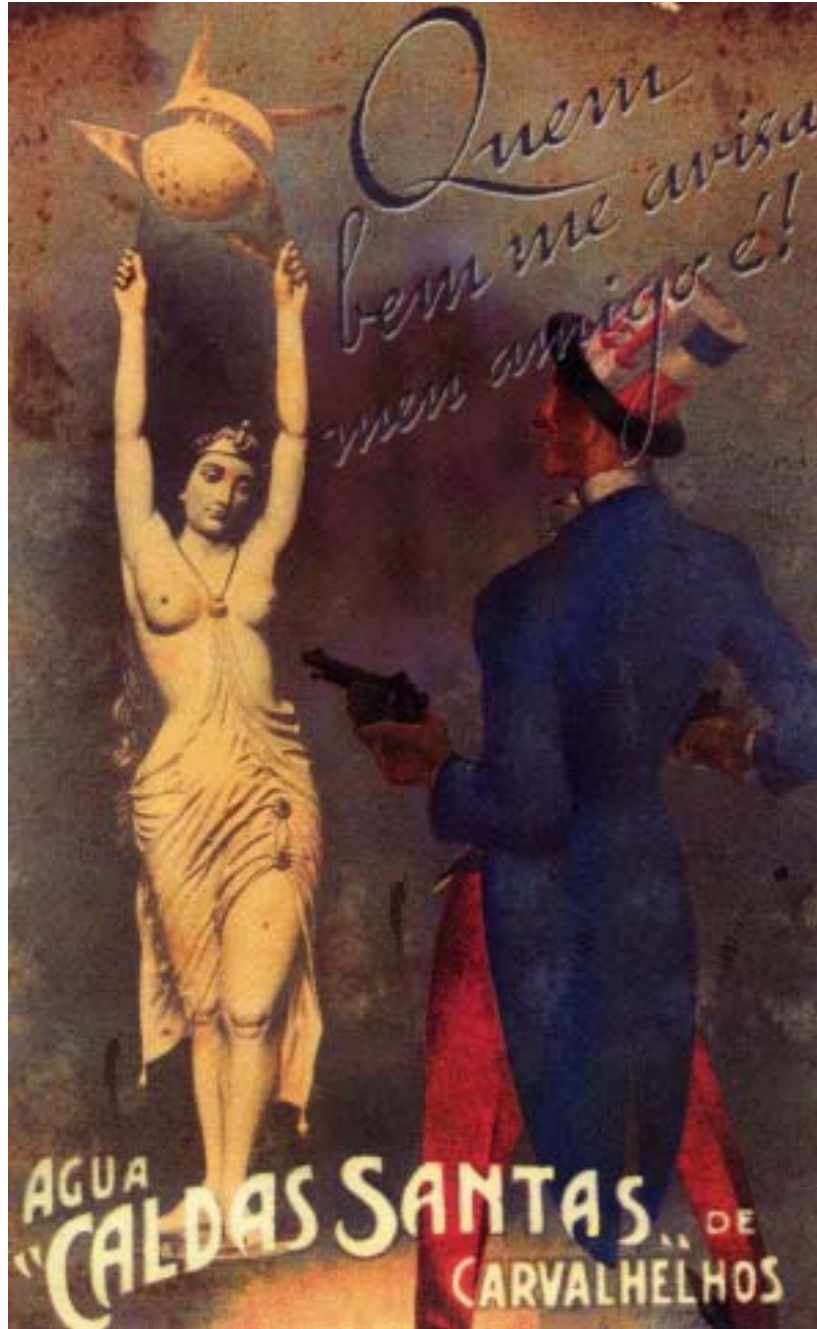
Circular

Maggie Goodman

Are we staying here? she asks. They slouch on sticky barstools,
the clockhands numb. Her question sinks, gets kicked aside.

He reports the hockey score, blood on the ice,
pulls out a cigarette and taps it on the bar's edge.
She counts out cab fare, his hand wanders
between her shirt and belt. He looks up
and their eyes catch, she slides the change
back into her jeans.

At home he forgets the pack of Marlboros
in his chest pocket and she can smell its sweet staleness
pressing into her as he fumbles with her shirt buttons.
His mufflings and punchlines push
into her shoulder; he tells her skin
unfinished stories of high school fistfights.
His gin-laughing eyes are like the blue centers of flames.





Episode 1: Hulls Cracked Our Cracking

Alfred Brown

We were young, we three, and the sun didn't shine much on us. All around, Venice was bright lights like the movies and the sun beamed in around the windows through the gaps in the stucco like a 20th Century searchlight. Everyone and everything was bathed in sunbeams, palm fronds turned yellow and then burned brown by October, but never cold enough to detach and float down to the concrete. Year round it was warm, hot usually, black asphalt eating away at the layers of skin that separated my soles from the street. I'd walk on the white lines in the center, the balls of my feet rubbing into the melting latex like two sized five exclamation points, on footbridges over the dirty ducks in the canals and down to the ebb and flow of the circus that danced in perpetual motion at the edge of the sand.

Our little lives in Southern California were to the 1980's what Elvis' hips had been to the 1950's, echoing like Lee Harvey's footsteps down the stairs and out into the open air. All the excitement was caught up in something that you never really saw, something just off screen, that never really existed. We saw everything in Panovision, every silicone breasted bikini, every fire-breathing, glass-walking street performance, every oiled muscle that hoisted melting metal up to the sun like steroid covered badges of self worth. There was the sense that there, on the beach, just blocks from first dates rowing through Howland Canal, as everything wavered like Atacama mirages, that our lives were somewhere out of the shot, just below Ed Sullivan's cameras. There was the sense, at least for us three, that life wasn't tan lines, an airbrushed TANYA £ BILLY tank top, or a piña colada snow cone dripping down a strollered baby's fat cheeks.

For us, there was drugs, cocaine mostly, though I didn't know any of it back then, cooked into my Sunday morning cartoon air like stale cotton candy. There was a one bedroom



apartment, the Pirate and my mother sharing the fold-out with Here's Johnny every night, my eyes pressed tightly closed, trying to escape the panting and axe jugglers and movie stars that echoed in through the wall. There was a lot of hot dogs and tap water. There wasn't a lot of teeth brushing, and some nights there wasn't even a reason for me to come home from the bums under the pier or Rastaman Russ and his roller skated guitar playing out in the alleys, sneaking sips of gin out of his paper bagged bottle. They wouldn't know most nights if I was there or not. It was a come and go life, a do it yourself kind of thing, like the paint by numbers books I'd get for Christmas.

But the sun didn't shine much on us.

My mother was Astra Phelle Metzger until she was dead and gone and lowered into that coffin. She had picked out something of a silver bullet, which ended up being too reflective for my corneas and two inches too small, her feet twisted up just so she could fit. Other than that, eventless, unceremonious, just me and her too-short coffin lowered into plot 756 at the Rose Hills Cemetery, Tarzana, California. Until then, she was Astra, a sheet of black hair rained down on porcelain shoulders, frail, blue veined and framed by doubt, and to me, mom, or, after 14, fuckyouyoufuckingbitch. As I understand it, she had grown up in the Bayou somewhere. I always thought of it as a place named Mesopotamia or Crete, twisted roots and alligators that smelled like home cooked beans, red skins peeling into Sunday dinner after church. But she was New Orleans like the rest of my Bayou roots, and had married my father, Paul Metzger, or dad, as he never was to me: strong, silent, with a nice scowl in the picture that he is to me. She married him because she could and because there was nothing else to do, really. He made me somewhere in her somewhere in a small apartment and then went to war (Vietnam) and never came back.

Astra was left with me outside her outside in the humid misting air as her hair rained straight down and black over her naked skin into the laps of paying men. She stripped with me



in a crib in the back, she would tell me in naked red eyes, and made the money she needed for me to eat and for the small apartment I ate in. She never said it, but I knew that the Pirate had paid her the most, an everyday customer, working his green cash into her bloody heart like an aspirin to our poverty. That big, black, patch-eyed jazz improvisation of a man. The Pirate, our savior. Hallowed be thy name.

However he did it, or her, he did, and it set us, us three, in slow motion toward Venice Beach, from one of the Pirate's dead end night jobs to the next. Into the sun, as it set, one tank full of regular unleaded at a time, Astra, her son Paulson, and the Pirate. The pictures say dirty motels and careless hickies and that I slept a lot, even with the bright flash of the Polaroid snapping at me. She was young, and she always told me it was like Bonnie and Clyde, just laughing out the window, Pauly, with Arizona thunder and lightning pouring down like the goldrush and the Doors and Morrison blaring out the one good speaker, and Miles would tickle you before you went to sleep and you liked how big and dark he was and how his eyes lit up in the night, Pauly. We stumbled over months and onto one-lane roads, following some sort of beaten path my toddler eyes never saw, deserted and cactused and slimy McDonalds wrapped up in the night. The Pirate had us deadset for the end of the western world, shot out against the Pacific winds and through the whirling windmills, bald tired and tired eyes searching for FOR RENT on the Pacific Coast Highway like it was our salvation. By the time I could remember, 811 B (up the stairs, to the left) Strongs Drive, Venice, CA 90291 was home, a duplex, chipped wood with dapper yellow latex melting into termite holes. The arrival I do remember, smacking my head and chipping my tooth on the doorknob, and feeling broken and tired and ready to jump straight into the ocean and find the mermaids. The Pirate was big and mysterious, working at Rhino Records in Westwood and making nothing but an album a week, and Astra, mom, waited tables at Dinah's in neighboring Culver City. She'd bring home the fried chicken on Sundays, when it was near night and still bright out, and I could run down to the strand



for dessert.

When I was nine, my mother started to get fat, and I told her so. It was during Punky Brewster on a Saturday afternoon. When I think back, Venice Beach was never anything but a Saturday or a Sunday. There was no school, only swirling amongst the crowds down at Muscle Beach, or eating Big Sticks, sticky in the sand with sweaty foreign men yelling at other sweaty foreign men to watch them eat a stick of fire or break the concrete slabs with a breakdance, just put a dollar in the hat and watch, you hairy apes. It was never Monday, or Tuesday, most certainly not Wednesday because the Pirate humped everyday, and Thursday only came once in a while when Astra would have to take me to the doctor. Everything was a Friday or Saturday or Sunday night with the Pirate and my mother heavy stepping onto the shag carpet or my fingers shooting fireworks at expensive cars as the wealthy stole into the canal streets with movie deals and divorce settlements, sending the hippies (and Astra and the Pirate) and the backyard bonfires and Hell's Angels fisticuffs of the 1970's on their way to the gallows. No, it was never a weekday, and this day it was Saturday, in the afternoon, and Soleil Moon Frye was telling Cherie Johnson that she had no idea where Brandon had buried his bone and I was telling my mother, Astra, that she was getting fat. Which she was.

Eat your cereal, Pauly, I don't need your shit today. I've got a double shift and my stomach's all in a knot.

I'm just saying, mom. Maybe you should go on a

Paulson, I'm warning you. Today is not the day, ok, killer? Just eat your cereal and watch your stupid show. Aren't those runabouts doing something today? No frogs to go throw in the canals?

I'm tired of the frogs. I'm gonna go help Rastaman Russ I think. You get fried chicken today?

Yes, Pauly, I'll get it.

Try not to eat it all, fatso.

Pauly.

She took me by the ear and twisted. Hard. She didn't like hitting me, only did it when she wasn't thinking or thinking



too hard. She had a habit of grabbing the folds of my ears with her fake glue on nails, pushing in and splitting skin until all the blood drained out and they got so cold that they'd burn when my heart pumped through them again. She thrust my head back onto the pillows and I ate my Fruit Loops and watched Punky dig up Brandon's bone.

Venice was coughing its way into summer that day, and the sun was working overtime, burning the midnight oil. We lived among the few canals that still existed, watching Abott Kinney's grand mockery dry up as the years pressed on. The gutters lolled out into the muddy water, five or six feet deep at most, with dinghies and Tom Sawyer rafts and teenage riffraffs stumbling home in the lamplit breeze. Every home or apartment or duplex was jugged up tight against each other that summer, squeezing spring flowers into color and life out into the runoff of the narrow waterways. There were people lined up everywhere along Sherman Canal, tawny bronzed men in Ocean Pacific shorts, sun bleached hair just long enough to jut out from under ratty fish-gutted baseball hats, feathered Farah Fawcets clinging with estrogen to their tattooed arms. It was the day of the Linnie Race, hundreds of homemade boats swirling about drunkenly in the canals, ten foot masts cracking against the bridges, the bridges stuffed with the leathery locals. It was a once a year free for all, two hours to make a boat, about ten minutes to destroy it and swim through the algal blooms back to the gutters on the shore. There weren't winners, only those that didn't get wet, and the bonfires always puffed marshmallows and pot like SOS signals from a dying generation of bohemians.

I slipped out and could hear the masts cracking against each other, the low footbridges, the heads of their drunken craftsmen as they came toppling down. I spent the day racing from camp to camp, crowd to crowd, worming between the hips and bikinis to get a glimpse of the spraypainted sails puffing out like asthmatic lungs in the breezeless afternoon. Across the canal and up on one of the bridges I saw Rastaman Russ strumming Mick Jaggering his lips, slipping back and forth on his roller



skates. The man, a vagrant, his beard tangled into his dreadlocked hair, was something of a local legend, our very own Pecos Bill. He could play anything you asked, and asked only what you had in your pocket. From me, he usually only asked that I collect everything in a nice empty hat turned brim-side down.

Russ, hey Rastaman, down here man! No, hey, here, yeah, hey Paulson? Fucking Paulson. Motherfucking Paulson! Get up here, man, come get a load of this view, man! Fucking boats look like the stupid dirty ducks, man! How bout' that pirate ship over there, like cap'n ahab or somethin. Jesus, get the fuck up here Pauly!

The crowds were hovering in closer and closer as the boats came waterballooning down the canal, hulls cracking and crews tossed over board. It's hard even to get it right, to write down right. The way it all just, all that life and living and lives just jutting up against each other and cutting one another up and and and the sun burning everything into my head. You can't get back there through this, the way I felt alive like that, the way everything outside in the world, Rastamen and drunken sailor ships were more home than the Pirate or Astra, the way the circus could swallow you up whole and keep you safe and out of the shadows, dripping into the sunlit spotlight, back into the frame. The way I jumped from the bridge and swung down the mast of some brittle vessel, my hands burning as I clung to the wood, and the reflection off the Ray Banned captain as I splashed down into the water. And the way Rastaman Russ was cheering me on above as I doggy paddled through the muck. Everything was coming together and breaking apart all at once, and the Linnie Race was sending me home, wet and muddy and smiling.

As the sun set, everywhere, everything was being uprooted. Venice was breaking apart and losing it's flowered children, its one-eyed Bayou men with thick mustaches and hand rolled cigarettes and Technics record players singing velvety undergrounds into the night. The alleys were cracked and between the crumbling apartments and driftwood homes was the smell of barbeque and vodka, thick and settled at the bottom



of a thick layer of smog. From their new, three-storied balconies, the twenty-somethings had started driving out the soul of Venice and were focused in with binoculars on the wild heathens below, their boats flitting on the dirty duck water between the war of Beachwood shacks and stucco sky-lighted dreams. In between it all, I was barefooted and blistering, sucking on the ends of my sun bleached hair as they fell past my eye, trying to find a way through the Venetian circus.

When I came home, she was with him, a cheat. I saw my mother's body sliding down, the cheeks of her aging ass heaving with glistening passion on someone white, someone with black tangles of oily follicle mess covering cracking whitewashed shin skin, someone with two baby blue eyes that shot out in confusion at me as if I was some sort of intruder poised to steal his dignity – or maybe just his rhinestone belt – away. Heaving and panting with this someone. Someone not the Pirate.

I hadn't really known it until then, how much I sided with the Pirate. It didn't really ever occur to me, wasn't an emotion I really ever felt the need to deal with. But I picked him as my teammate there and then, as Astra's head twirled back at me, and her eyes cut open like fish gills and sputtered out laughter and unimportance and regret that Paulson Metzger, me, her son, Paul's son, had ever been left behind to suck her dry and leave her gasping for air on the deck of some black Bayou motherfucker's wallet. Astra and the cheat were suspended, paused, and caught me like headlighted deer. I was in the doorway, nine years old, the child of a man who had been stabbed through his breast plate and into his left ventricle, slowly, so he could watch the sparkling teeth of the blade first split his skin with a few quick drops of red and then inch its way towards the dead stop of his heart, letting him remember everything he'd never get to know, like when I was born and how his wife's ass would feel when she finally let him in it. I was the son, the son of that and a would-be stripper that took smoking breaks to punch dirty mirrored lines of coke into a bloody nose, a woman, a mother, Astra, who had forgot that Saturday night



to bring home friend chicken. Who was with a cheat, cheating.

She looked at me with her slitty eyes and I knew that the Pirate was one-eyed and black and a Bayou motherfucker, but that he had tickled me when I was about to fall asleep in Arizonian storms, and I ran at my Astra and her sweaty cheat and pushed him out of her and her onto the ground and punched again and again, deep into her stomach with my little shoe sized five, aged nine fists and screamed like the circus. I curled my thumbs under my fingers and into my palm, and my fist deep into her fat little belly, her getting-fat torso wavering and earthquaking over her pale, blue-veined skin. In the background it was the laugh of a cheat and something Rod Stewart. Young hearts be free tonight.

She was laughing and gurgling, I remember, as I kicked my way into bed, with bonfire still thick in my hair and my ears plugged to block out the living room. The cheat and my Astra dug in for a while longer, finished the job, and he went off into the night, perhaps to drown in a canal with the frogs. She tried to come in and speak with me, but I had jumped out of bed and wedged the door shut.

Fine, killer, have it your way. Miles took your fried chicken to work with him, anyways. If you care.

I didn't. I closed my eyes and closed her out and heard a lawyer yell this isn't your neighborhood, it's our neighborhood in the distance and the crackle of beer cans being tossed into the flames.

In the morning, the house was empty and quite, the sun forcing its way past the gaps between the stucco near the window, and I found my unborn baby brother floating in the toilet water. At first, through the haze of early morning eyes, I thought it was just something normal, toilet paper maybe soaked and twirling. But the water was red, crimson clouds like Mars swirling in on one another, and there were specks like fish guts dappled about, and the smell, the acid smell, was sprinting down my mouth and down my throat and up into my brain, the dead child, inches long, coating my lungs, my life. I bent down and fished him out with my tiny fists, still pale, almost



see-through, smooth, umbilical chord spiraled around and withered. I knew what it was, half-formed with toes arching out and the tail not yet a spine poking into my palm. And I knew who it was from. And I knew how it had died.

I was holding him and was calm, steady handed. I rinsed off the body in the sink, bent over the muddy toilet water of the toilet, and let loose my insides into the basin.

The body was cold and brittle in my hands. My mother Astra had left me a note saying that she had gone to the doctor with the Pirate, and not to worry. There were donuts in the kitchen. Out into the sun, I carried my brother, the yellow of the sky illuminating the pupils behind his sealed lids. I couldn't stop looking at him, all curled, tight, wound like a canon ball ready to explode. Venice was quiet, the ducks still picking through the trash of the race the day before. I cradled the body in my hands and placed him down into a cracked Styrofoam cup that had washed onto shore. Big Gulp. I smiled at the boy and put the splintered plastic lid back on, and shoved him out to sea. As it spun away, I saw what I had inked into the cup: Rest In Piece. Mileson.

An excerpt from The Heavy Heads Will Roll But Hollow Hearts Will Never Sink or the Five and a Half Episodes that Changed My Life.



from “Seven Poems about Loss”

Sarah Dunn

#4

Maybe you want a picture:
pink seashells
on a hot day
mint waves
and dusty sand dunes
of New Jersey...
pebbles on asphalt
and a blue house
in a garden
of yellow stones.

I wasn't born there
the people who used to live there
are still alive
but only in the picture
are they young and tan
and smiling
on the porch.

#5

In the movie
the drunk
and the prostitute
fall in love.

They drink
and fuck
respectively.

One dies.



At Birdland

Matthew Martin Nickoloff

You used to be able to see Bird for a few bucks
worth of whiskey;
Now you can pay to hear wealthy Russian tourists
Talking loudly,
Ignoring the truth sublimed from the lips of a tenor sax on
a Friday night
at Birdland. You can bring a date or a client
and see the show,
The spectacle of a young man playing music
for a living,
Enjoying the buzz of alcohol and of coming
so close to It
that your brain resonates and your head bobs
to the music
and you flail hopelessly in the sea of notes and lost certainties
dispelled from an idol's golden elbow which has become
a man's mouthpiece
for blowing away the smoke and the haze of cigars and
cigarettes and the
aroma
of wine which floats
in the space between the lips of two intoxicated lovers
with candles
for eyes
who hear their names in the silken tunes of Ezekial Aaron,
on the lighted altar, ordained
priest for the evening, haloed by a neon sign which casts a
shadow in the shape of the
Tau
on his forehead
like the bad memory from which the notes and thoughts try
to escape in a mass exodus,
searching the walls of sand for holes through which to



place their fingers and glimpse
into the inner chambers of the temple
and see
twenty five young men and women facing the eastward glow
of the stagelight sun caught
in the hollow of a tenor saxophone, desperate monks
searching for escapes from the haze
into secluded grottos,
caught in the air
by nets formed of bacardi fumes and marijuana vapors, and
their moans cup around
angels' ears as they lean to hear, gathering around the
spotlight, their beer soaked wings
bristle softly at the touch of the light wind of the prophet's
voice as it chants a soft
lament, wailing
for his exile to Babylon, and the desecration of this
sacred temple
but across the room the Russian lady complains
about the charge.
You have come so close to It and if only you could
look past your glass
You would see winged living creatures in the smoke-filled
atmospheres
singing human sounds, voices changed in
the throats of birds-
notes fading, the flapping of pigeon's wings, flying out into
the darkened streets
to the music.



Grace

Fairy Pardiwalla

She feeds the birds meticulous seeds,
cuts open a wound every night
and lets it drip into their eager beaks. She watches, weeds
the garden in her head. Every night,
she tries to flesh him out again.
Mass and momentum drop from her dry hand.
She recycles thoughts no mother should have - again
she falls instead of him, again she resurfaces. He used to feed
the crows and
gurgle at gaping beaks, his laugh etched fast
on the third floor window. Crows saw him land,
now every night at 8 PM, she gropes among beady eyes
for distant answers to divine plan.
Their heads bob accusingly on the windowsill, she tries
to reason with them. She thinks they miss him, she thinks
they can.
*Never let your child go, cast
your eye upon him at all times. Amen.*
So now she feeds birds and lives in the past,
caught between windows and land.





The Companion

Jay Katsir

Nobody understood his devotion to the camel. Having a camel is like having an autistic brother whom you love despite his being lost inside his body, he always explained, you simply have no choice but to care for him if you have the time and the resources. At this they nodded, although both he and they knew that the burden of the autistic brother's care fell most often to the parents. But they did not want to argue when it came to such sensitive matters. It made no difference; the young man was devoted to the camel because it reminded him of Rachel, and because it was a true companion in his empty house.

That evening he walked along the main thoroughfare of the town, leading the camel by its bridle chain. He was on his way to a place where he believed he might find some part of what he was seeking. The fat grocer who sold him the vegetables he used to prepare his daily stews smiled and waved from the doorway of his shop. The grocer was one of the few in town who had ceased whispering about him and his empty house with the closed doors, and about his devotion to the camel. The young man suspected it was because he spent money at the grocery not only on food for himself but also on the finest leaves and grasses available for the camel. The one time he had entered his father's study since he had returned from his travels several months ago, he had read in an old encyclopedia that camels could subsist on thorny plants. But the young man did not want it to suffer unnecessarily. He waved back to the grocer as he passed.

Up the street, he saw a man and a young woman sitting outside the café beneath an umbrella. The man was singing to the young woman in a private falsetto; she responded with coos and claps. This sight reminded the young man of a game he and Rachel had once played, in which each would have to perform any task, no matter how difficult or distasteful,



dreamed up by the other. One-on-One Dare-or-Dare they had called it. His dares were direct and simple, desires for which he found the game a convenient outlet (neck massage, fellatio with ice cubes). Hers were imaginative and often cumbersome, playful humiliations and challenges to his limits: eat a cooked mushroom (which in his mouth had the turbid texture of a slug), put on my grandmother's old picnic dress, ink a smiling face onto your body with the nipples as eyes and walk around shirtless for the rest of the afternoon. He had sighed, half resignation and half contentment, and complied. Rachel's tiny, sheared dog peeked his head into the doorway of the room. The young man's mother and father did not expect him home until late. In that way, they had always been very understanding. That had been three years ago.

For a moment longer he watched the couple beneath the umbrella, and the woman noticed him and his camel. She pointed them out to her companion, who turned with a look of surprise. The camel coughed and shook its melancholy face. The young man sighed and walked on, pulling it behind.

He arrived at the entrance to the pub, a building known as a place for outsiders, visitors in the midst of their travels from the distant city. The young man had been in many like it during his own travels, in towns where the law was not as strict as here, but he had been too young to enter this one before he had departed. It still held for him a certain forbidden appeal, although admittedly this had staled. He knew some of the town's girls came here to meet traveling men. But this is not why I am here, the young man told himself.

He looped the camel's chain around a tree and patted its thick hump. It gave a mournful bray. I know, thought the young man, you and I may be seeking much the same thing. The camel was an awkward beast, but compassionate. The young man noticed a thistle on its cheek and brushed it away. I will return soon, he told it.

Inside, the pub appeared empty. Two men with close-cut hair shot pool beneath a green lamp. At the bar sat an old man and a girl around the young man's age, several stools apart and



drinking from bottles. Across the room, beside guttering neon signs that read boys and girls, was a bulletin board, crowded with flyers and announcements. The young man approached it and looked it over with care. As he had suspected, this was where outsiders left their advertisements, unaware that the people of the town would rarely see them in such a place. He pulled a few sheets of paper from the board; each became taut in his hand and then sprung loose. He folded them and placed them into the pocket of his pants. He moved his eyes over the flyers again, thinking about a small, sheared dog.

You're going to laugh at me, Rachel had once told him, petting the dog in her lap. No, no I won't, he said. Fine, but if you laugh I will make you leave my house, and I will never speak to you again, she said. Just tell me, he said, amused. She was always making threats, making him promise that he wouldn't laugh. He admired her athletic body from across the bed, broad in the shoulders and tapering to the waist, with high, heavy breasts and a muscled stomach. The only light in the room was cast by a desk lamp turned to the wall. Rachel looked at him in a very serious way. I have always wanted to join the circus, she said. He did not laugh. That is not so strange, he told her, you're a gymnast. But I have always been afraid it was cliché, she said. No, he said, you would be good at riding a tricycle along the tightrope with a chimpanzee on your back, or even standing on a galloping horse with a headdress made of chimpanzees. There is nothing less cliché than that. She punched him in the shoulder, hard enough to cause him pain.

He walked towards the bar and waved to the bartender. One beer, please, he said. When he had thought of the town during his travels, he had often thought of the pub, and had imagined that upon his return he would enter it with a sense of confidence, familiar with how one was to act in such a place. He did not feel this now, but he was not yet ready to return to his empty house with its closed doors and its echoing kitchen for the night. He sat on a stool and began to sip his beer. After some time, the old man turned to him. The old man had a hard face and white stubble climbing his neck above his collar. Is that your



camel outside, he asked, and pointed.

Yes, the young man replied, but did not turn. Two stools away, the girl was listening.

It is a fine camel, the old man said. It is young and strong.

Thank you, said the young man. He had not known this. To him the camel appeared old in the face, a kindly and aging stranger.

Why do you have a camel in a town with cars and roads, asked the girl. The young man appraised her, a temporarily forgotten habit from his traveling days. Once the pain of Rachel had dulled, he had sought out girls similar to this one. She had thin arms and dark hair to her shoulders. Her face was childlike and challenging. When she spoke he could see her gums and her teeth like small squares of porcelain.

I avoid cars if I can, said the young man, but that is not why I have the camel.

Then why, the girl asked.

Bah, said the old man, waving away her question. It is a fine camel. Do you mind if I take a look at it?

Not at all, the young man said.

I'd like to come too, said the girl. I've never seen one up close, only at the carnival. They are strange animals. I've heard they spit.

Did you go to the carnival the last time it was in town, asked the young man.

No, she said.

Outside, in the light cast by the glowing signs in the pub's windows, the old man ran his hand along the underside of the camel's stomach and said, hmm. The young man looked at the girl again. The shadows on her face, deep under her eyes, a stripe across her upper lip, were the same as Rachel's the night before he left for his travels, an image long imprinted on his mind. They had sat in the park across from her house and shared a picnic prepared by her mother. Even in his sadness, he could not repel the thought that the shadows made her look like a melancholy panda in disguise. She cried with angry indifference, allowing mucous to mingle with her tears,



occasionally drawing her sleeve across her mouth. It was their last night together. The small, sheared dog had clawed up the grass and whined. The young man too had cried, but had long ago convinced himself that his going was right. The town was a place where many became mired, and he believed he needed to see the unknown things of the world. These were his ideas at the time. He had held them with great conviction and he had shared them with Rachel. There in the darkness of their last night, he later realized, it was natural to grasp them more tightly so he would not reel. I don't have the choice to leave, Rachel said, your parents let you do what you want but I don't have the choice to leave. No, he told her, my parents don't want me to go.

In his house early the next morning, the morning of his departure, the young man's mother had stood in his room in silence watching him pack as his father busied himself with loud clangings and cabinet closings in the kitchen across the hall.

Just as I thought, the old man was saying, a Boran, a fine breed. This is a camel suited for racing; it is well bred. The old man ducked his head beneath the camel's belly. Ah, he said, and patted the udder. Good for milking too. Where did you get it?

How do you know so much about camels, the girl asked.

Bah, said the old man, and awaited a response to his question.

The young man told them the truth. When I returned home from my travels, it was standing on the front lawn of my house. The grass was overgrown. It was eating my mother's garden. At first I was angry, but it did not leave, and later I decided to care for it.

Where did it come from, asked the girl.

I don't know, said the young man.

The Boran is a show camel, said the old man, such a camel does not come from nowhere.

I know.

The camel grunted, and spit onto the trunk of the tree to which it was tied. The young man believed it did not care to be



in the clean smell of her dark hair.

The young man and the girl made clumsy love. In the midst of it he thought of his travels, and afterwards he felt a steep homesickness, although he was already in his house.

In the morning they awoke to the sound of a loud snort above the young man's bed. The girl brought the bedsheet to her chin and shrieked, why is your camel in here? Still clearing his head from deep sleep, the young man laughed, for the girl had seemed so interested in the camel last night in the pub. Go out, he said to the camel, but it simply swung its head from side to side and made waste onto the floor. Caring for the camel is like caring for a feisty but incapacitated grandfather, the young man explained, he can become quite agitated when meals are not served at the customary time. The girl frowned. Come; let's eat, he said. First I have to wash myself, said the girl. The bathroom is down the hall, he told her.

The young man walked the camel across to the kitchen and began to prepare a meal. The kitchen was too much a place of his father, but the young man's need for it was great and he could not lock its door. On the wall beside the table was a sketch of the young man drawn by his mother when he had been a boy. The girl soon carried herself in, now dressed but still wrapped about her shoulders in the sheet. She sat at the table. I am glad she is here, thought the young man.

Why are all the doors closed and locked down the hall, she asked.

I do not go into the other rooms, said the young man, they are my parents'. He slid the carrots and potatoes he had chopped into a large pot and turned the burner up. The camel snorted and clomped its feet on the worn kitchen linoleum.

The girl was curious. Why do you keep that camel inside the house, she asked, how can you even afford to live in such a house alone?

These were good questions. He told her the truth. He said that he feared the camel would become cold outside as it was native to more arid climates and that the house was left to him along with a substantial life insurance policy by his parents,



who had died in a car accident while he was away. That was why he had come home.

The girl said nothing, and drew the sheet around her shoulders. The young man realized it was the first time he had spoken this fact out loud in months; most in the town already knew it. When he had first returned, each time he said the words he felt as if he were throwing them against a wall whose distance away he could not gauge until he spoke. Now it seemed like quite some time elapsed before they bounced back to him. He shivered. The girl sipped water from a mug and was silent.

The day the young man returned from his travels, he had stood on the doorstep of his house, the key ring heavy in his hand. He had told those who called him back to the town that he did not need a ride home, that he would like to walk back to the house alone. They offered to help but he felt slow and numb and wished to be by himself. There was no other family; he had been through a flurry of offices legal and clerical. On the walk back to the house, he had seen the camel from afar, but at first it did not seem unusual in the context of the day. As he approached, he recognized that the camel was treading in his mother's garden, and he began to regard it with anger. Get out of here, camel, he yelled hoarsely. It chewed the grasses of his mother's garden slowly, and brayed. He stepped towards it with aggression, and it backed away, rearing its unwieldy body. Its face looked ashamed. Perhaps it knew. The young man climbed the low stairs to the door of his house. Standing there, holding the key ring, he waited. He could not yet go inside. It was early evening and the air was beginning to become cold. Maybe, he thought. He turned and began to walk the old familiar distance to Rachel's house, the camel still ambling behind him over his front lawn, where it would be when he returned.

So you are here, Rachel's mother said, standing in the doorway, not having invited him into her house. She was a small woman, but formidable. How long has it been?

Almost three years, said the young man.

I know, said the mother. I wish Rachel could have been



here to see you but she is gone. She left town with her job. I made her stay as long as I could, but she had been looking for work that would take her away for a long time. Rachel's mother stared at the young man. You did not call her.

I know, said the young man.

Her features softened. I am so sorry about your mom and dad, she said, and gently closed the door.

In the kitchen, the meals were ready. The girl frowned at the quality of the grains the young man had placed in a new bucket for the camel in relation to the quality of the vegetable stew that he had prepared for them. The camel is like a son with severe dietary allergies, the young man said, if he is not fed the healthiest in foods he may sink deeper into himself and become more difficult to reach. I do not understand your analogy, said the girl. The young man sighed. I will be right back, he said.

He returned to the bedroom and sifted through the pants he had discarded at the foot of the bed. Here were the papers he had removed from the bulletin board in the pub, folded into rough quarters. He opened one. Finsterman's Traveling Carnival, it read. See amazing sights, experience endless delights! Witness the Imperial Bear Ballet, the Dragon of Prague, the Incredible Flying Salamaros! Coming to your town soon: The young man ran his finger down the list of dates and locations of the carnival's tour. It had been in the town one week before his return. A fine camel, he thought, a show camel. The camel stepped into the room. It bent and lifted a strewn shirt in its mouth, chewed it, and then let it drop. The young man looked at it from doleful face to cleft toe and was filled with gratefulness for its presence. It was a finicky beast, but a good companion. He looked down at the advertisement. His finger had come to rest at the name of a town several miles away, where the carnival would arrive the next morning on the return loop of its tour. If you are a racing camel, he thought, how fast will you go?



Edgar

Rachel Zuraw

I watched him amble,
Replete with steak bits
(no need to sneak them under the table, my parents feed him too),
Stroked and molded into a
Sausage-shape of
Fuzz and nothing-to-do.

He puddles,
Paws in front and in back,
Gazing nowhere special,
Waiting for nothing.

Blissed out;
The only way to describe this
Supposedly lower,
Allegedly understandable
Animal pleasure.

When, though, was the last time you
Sprawled?

Really sprawled, not just collapsed,
An inert mass,
Beaten down by
Work and friends and
A bad desk chair.

You need to spread yourself out
Across a tile floor
Like you mean it

Before you can think yourself,
Sitting here reading this,
Higher than a bulldog
Moving with his patch of sun.



Ode to Frenchie's Elephant

J.D.M. Williams

frenchie had a stuffed elephant (like normal kids have bears) –
bottle-cap green eyes, and a limp to one side where the
stuffing had migrated,
and bunched in puffy ankles and elbows – and she dragged
him around by the ears,
which were lovingly torn and patched with spilled spaghetti-
o's

she taped on earrings that were parrots (that grandma p had
gotten her)
with matt's athletic tape (genius sprained his wrist playing
football on ice)
because she thought the elephant looked pirate-like, because
he had a pirate's leer, a swagger

and she made him a super-man cape out of a ripped and
snitched corner of mom's good curtains,
to give him legitimacy, maybe, or at least x-ray vision,
and put the two together and called him captain hook-
dumbo, who could fly

zzzzzzzooooooooOOOOOOOOOOOmmmmm (frenchie said),
sliding down the banister of the front stairs, flailing summer-
brown legs,
bicycle-scraped, curling her toes, laughing, the elephant
(unperturbed) aloft,
SUPER-ELEPHANT! CAPTAIN HOOK-DUMBO –
beedledee-dee-dah-dee –
and then, crash-heaped at the bottom of the stairs, the good
guys and the bad guys flipped,
ARGH! (frenchie said, the elephant said) TIME TO WALK
THE PLANK! (frenchie said)
(no, no!) (yes, yes!) (no, no!) SPLASH! ARGH! YO-HO-HO
AND A BOTTLE OF RUM!



silence,
then she giggled

mom used to say she wanted a clicker with a freeze-frame
click, or at least a volume –
to get us out of her hair (she said)
stop being such little hooligans (she said) what do you think
god made outside for?

but i think what she really wanted was to freeze frenchie and
the elephant mid-air,
like kids who catch periwinkles and bucket-slosh try to carry
them home and feed them
lettuce and fruit snacks and potato chips,
just so the beach is longer than a day

but, for all the unvoicings of mom's peter pan, frenchie grew
– or stretched –
into lanky pimples and braces, then shakespeare, then little
starched-and-ironed boys,
and had people call her francine, and did her hair, and chewed
on pencils

she came to my room one afternoon with the elephant by the
ear, said
keep this

and i do, for her – he's in my closet (with the socks, in the
dark),
waiting for a time machine, summer, and the light



The Sheep

Alexandra Silver

I wonder if it actually works for some people. The repetition, the rhythm. Not for me. It's not that my problem isn't the same as theirs— I experience the same sleeplessness — but it just doesn't work for me. Counting sheep never worked for me.

My main problem with the whole sheep scenario is, where are they going? What the hell happens to those perfectly identical sheep once they jump the fence? Granted the post-jump experience is of no importance for the purpose of falling asleep, it's just the counting that matters. But whenever I dutifully imagine them in my head, they start bumping into each other in mid-air. Rather than simply jumping and being followed by another sheep, which in turn will miraculously disappear, my sheep all land in a massive baaing pile on the other side of the fence. I follow each as they run up, jump...and fall into the heap. For some reason, they don't keep running after they jump the fence. Where are they supposed to go?

“And you stayed up all night thinking about this.”

“I know, it's strange. I've got to stay away from the farm animal counting method.” I sipped my coffee and put the mug gently back on the table. “Really, though, you can joke all you want, the point is I couldn't sleep and I haven't been sleeping for a week now.”

“Blame the sheep.”

“It's not the sheep.”

“I know.”

“It's terrible. My days are ineffectual. I'm like this all the time.” I slumped back in the chair with a dramatic sigh, to ensure she understood the gravity of the situation.

“Why don't you take a sleeping pill?”

“That works for one night, but then...I don't want to have to take them that often.”

“Once in a while isn't bad.”

“I know. But still it's strange; I've never suffered from



insomnia before.”

“Maybe this is just a bad week. You’ve been so stressed with that latest account, it’s not that surprising that you can’t sleep. Actually, I’m surprised it’s the only strange behavior you’ve been suffering from.”

“Very funny.”

“No, really. At least you have your sanity.” She smiled.

“Great.” Diana was the first person I’d talked to about my problem, and all she could offer was it could be worse. We’d been roommates throughout college, and now about five years after graduation, still saw each other often. I looked through my bleary eyes at her impeccably arranged hair and flawless make-up. “Are you going out somewhere today?”

“Only here. Why?”

“You just seem very put-together. Neat.”

Diana smiled. “For you, I try.” She started to get up from her chair. “Look, all I can say is try a sleeping pill. One night. Get some sleep and tomorrow you’ll feel better.”

I asked her if she wanted some more coffee, but she refused before I’d finished the question.

“I should be getting home. Lots of stuff to take care of. Call me if you want to talk some more though.”

“I will. Thanks.”

That night I tried her advice and took some medicine.

In the morning my limbs felt heavy. Eventually, knowing I had to get to work, I got out of bed and slid into my robe. Teeth, face, contacts. I drank my coffee while standing in front of my closet deciding which skirt or pair of black pants to wear with which blouse. I must have chosen something, because soon I was out the door.

In the office elevator I felt like I was in the middle of a herd. We rode up in silence punctuated by the occasional cough. When we reached the seventeenth floor I maneuvered my way out into the narrow hall.

The office is an artificially bright place, full of the usual desks and door plaques. I proceeded through the hall – “Good



morning, Tom...Hi Liz...Fine, thanks..." - to my very own door plaque and desk. Every now and then I wonder how I got these things. How I got this job. According to my resume I was perfect for it, but when had I decided to work at a marketing firm? Actually, I don't think I actively made a decision. It just happened. Sometime between my childhood Broadway dream and now, I'd acquired the qualifications, the skills, the "dedication and enthusiasm" necessary to be a successful junior marketing executive.

I'd attempted to personalize the room with some photos and a plant, but they still couldn't hide the fact that it was an office. I placed my bag on the desk and sunk into my chair. In a moment I'd get the latest account information out, but first it was my designated sagging in the chair time.

It was during this sacred "me time" that my plant tried to commit suicide. I heard a thump and turned around in the chair. There it was, my personalizing plant, lying on the carpet. I stared at it for a while. My plant had never jumped from the sill before. Had I not watered it enough? Maybe the abundance of artificial light was the cause. I sighed, looking at my plant that didn't want to stay planted. It was a very depressing sight.

Later in the day, after I'd put most of the dirt back in the pot and actually started to work, Diana called. She insisted I go with her to a cocktail party that night somewhere downtown. I was in the middle of my grand protestation when she rushed me off the phone; she was on her lunch break and needed to get back to the office. "I'll see you around 8:30." Our conversation over, I went back to my routine.

Diana was already there when I arrived at the party. She introduced me to a few people and then, after they'd mingled away, she asked me if I'd gotten any sleep.

"Kind of...I dreamt last night."

"Well that's good."

"It involved the sheep."

"The counting sheep?" Diana took a mushroom crustade from a passing tray.



“Yes, what other sheep could they be? Anyway, I was following them-”

“Following, not leading? It makes a difference. You’re sure you weren’t the shepherd?” She drank from her glass.

“No, listen. I was following. I wanted to see where they were going. They were running after something-”

“Not away from something? You’re sure they weren’t running away?”

“Yes, I’m sure. They were definitely moving towards something. Anyway, I’m running after them, to see what they’re running after, and all of a sudden, there’s a cliff. The herd kept moving towards the cliff-”

“Oo, and then did they do the cartoon hovering trick before falling to the bottom?”

“No...listen...this is serious...I’m still behind them. I see the sheep in the lead go over the cliff – no hovering, it just falls – and the rest of them, they went over too. I was shaking, I didn’t know what to do...”

“Did you stop? Look over the edge?”

“No.” I wasn’t looking directly at Diana. My eyes were replaying the dream in the empty space next to her.

“Hey, hello? I’m over here.”

“Yeah, oh...I’m sorry. It’s just the cliff...I knew it was there...but I...I followed them.”

“You went over?”

“Yeah.”

“And then you woke up, before you hit the bottom.”

“Yes.”

“So now the sheep aren’t only keeping you up, they’re waking you up.”

“It appears so.”

“Well at least you slept, right? That’s the important thing.”

“I guess...but why did the sheep have to jump? Where do they think they’re going?”

“I think you need to stop analyzing the sheep. Let them go. Tonight, take another sleeping pill – another night or two won’t hurt – and just get some more sleep. You’re still exhausted,



you can't catch up a week's rest in one night."

She was right. I just needed some more sleep. I nodded, and we were talking about the crowd at the party when someone waved to her and started pointing enthusiastically at the hors d'oeuvre in his hand. Diana smiled. "Hey, Dan's here. I'll be back in a little while. Have fun. Mingle." She made her way through the herd until she reached Dan. I remained where I was, sipping my wine.

The next day was Tuesday. Excepting the party and the plant incident, it was identical to Monday. Same with Wednesday. The only exceptional thing about Thursday was that I found out I was shrinking.

"I'm shrinking."

Diana wasn't sure how to react.

"I just thought you should know."

"You're shrinking?"

"Apparently."

Diana leaned back in the chair thoughtfully. "How do you know?"

"I went to the doctor."

"The doctor told you that you're shrinking?"

"Not exactly. But she measured me. I haven't been to their office before, so since it was my first visit and they wanted to get all my information. I said I was five five and a half, maybe five five and three quarters. She decided to measure because of my uncertainty."

"And?"

"And I was five four. That's over an inch shorter than I used to be. This isn't normal for a twenty-six year old woman."

By now Diana was laughing.

"Way to show support."

"I'm...I'm sorry. It's just that...have you been measuring the height of your hair all these years?"

"It says five five and a half on my driver's license."

"What's a license matter anyway?"

"Diana" – I had been smiling but now I was serious – "I feel



like I'm disappearing."

Her smile faded at my change of tone. She leaned forward and looked at me carefully, listening as I talked. I went on for about an hour about everything that had been on my mind...about shrinking, about the plant, about the sheep.

On Friday I quit my job.

That night, I actually slept. Better than I had in a long time, and without a sleeping pill. As I lay in bed looking at the ceiling, I knew I wouldn't have to face in the morning the same thoughts that had been keeping me up. The countless sheep. The last thing I remembered thinking before drifting off to sleep was the image of a lone sheep in a meadow. She didn't know where she was going...but it was a beautiful meadow.





Stability

Kendall Turner

She is tired when she starts
walking briskly up the hill
of evenly-spaced, parallel-parked cars,
but her heavy grey sneakers step
up the rise and she thinks,
this is good
for me and for my waistline.
She does not dodge
puddles along the walk, not
out of resignation, but concentration;
she is hurrying and then running
along the old, appointed route.
Some cat-caller calls her, *hey,*
baby, maybe you wanna come by
sometime, when you're free,
but she doesn't see
him or his steely southern truck
because she is following
the cracks in the concrete,
as if they hold
more than rainwater, or form
more than passageways for ants,
as if they are
the very lines she must shadow.
They direct
her to whom and what she must love
and how much and when and why
she asks these questions.
These cracks, she is convinced,
will build stability.



Framing Caroline

Clare Beams

“I’ll get it,” my mother said, when the phone rang. She pushed her TV table aside and went into the kitchen. Bill reached for the remote on the arm of his chair and lowered the volume two courtesy notches.

“You don’t have to do that,” I said. “She won’t be able to hear it from the kitchen anyway.”

“Oh, ok.” Bill turned the sound up to where it had been before. He gave me an awkward smile, his hands pinching nervously at the knees of his pants. In the few months since he’d been dating my mother the two of us still hadn’t had a real conversation. I smiled back at him, the kind of smile, I imagined, that a schoolteacher would give to a shy child in an attempt to inspire confidence. Bill squirmed under the encouragement and seemed on the verge of speaking, searching for that one word to start with.

He still hadn’t found it when my mother reappeared and seated herself again. “Caroline’s stopping by tomorrow,” she said. She curled her bare feet around the bottom of the TV table and pulled it closer to her, leaving her legs entwined with the table’s in a kind of embrace.

“Why?” I asked.

“Why? What do you mean, Jim?” She blinked at me with eyes wide and magnified behind her glasses. “She’s your sister. She’s coming by to see us.”

“What, she just happens to be passing through?” We hadn’t seen Caroline in almost a year. She was not the type to spontaneously stop by in the absence of deeper motives.

“She wants the four of us to go out to dinner,” my mother said, ignoring me. She tucked her hair behind her ears, pushing the gray wire of her curls out into new directions, and turned to smile at Bill. “I think she’s very excited to meet you.”

The tips of Bill’s ears went red. He looked at the television in silence, momentarily overwhelmed.



My mother bent again over the work spread on the table in front of her. She was a receptionist at an accounting firm, which was where she had met Bill, but on the side she did freelance work for a craft store in town. It was called “Country Crafts,” and, like many stores that are not in the country but have “country” in their names, it was in a red building shaped vaguely like a barn. Country Crafts was not greatly concerned with variety, and my mother did her projects for them in an unceasing seasonal cycle: heaps of painted wooden ornaments around Christmas, woven baskets full of painted wooden eggs around Easter, painted wooden hearts hanging on strings around Valentine’s Day. And then, of course, the painted wooden nesting dolls she was working on now – they lasted all year round.

They were the kind of dolls that fit one inside the other, the smallest into the next smallest, and that one into the next smallest, and so on until the last. Every Monday they were delivered unpainted to our house in long, flat boxes, which my mother would unload on our dining room table. She arranged the pieces of each set in a line according to height, so that they always looked to me like miniature and gradually diminishing bowling pins; when she was finished the dining room table would be covered by some twenty rows. We never ate at that table – anyone eating there would have been stared at by the whole faceless waiting army of them.

My mother took one row at a time into the family room; there she painted them into families. The biggest doll was always the father, who had a beard and a straw hat, and sometimes (if my mother was feeling whimsical) a pitchfork. The next one, aproned and smiling, was the mother. Then came the daughter, with red circles for cheeks, and finally her grinning gap-toothed brother – the only doll that didn’t split in half, because there was no one to put inside him. The basic pattern of these dolls had never changed, and by this point they seemed to me like people I had known for a very long time. There were minor variations – sometimes the father had a pipe, or the daughter a doll, and the colors of hair and clothing



were often different – but every set was an unmistakable echo of the same family.

My mother twisted open the lid to her paint, now, and dipped her brush into it. I caught a whiff of its familiar smell. She was working on the sister doll, putting the finishing touches on her dress. As I watched, she covered the torso in red, always careful to clean the paint out of the crack between the two halves with her thumbnail (you didn't want to paint them shut if you ever wanted to get them open again.) She hummed while she worked, tunelessly.

Bill cleared his throat. "Looks good, hon," he said. His voice was perpetually a little choked up, as if he had a head cold, maybe, or was on the verge of tears. He always startled me slightly when he spoke – he didn't do it enough for me to ever expect it. I don't know exactly how long he and my mother knew each other at the accounting firm before he started coming over here at night, but I think it must have been years.

My mother looked up, smiled, and adjusted her glasses, leaving a smudge of red paint on her cheek. "Thank you, Bill," she said. "But I'm not done yet."

Caroline got to the house at about five o'clock the following afternoon; I heard the front door slam from my room. "I'm heere," Caroline sang out. She made "here" into two syllables, and her voice wavered operatically on the second.

By the time I got to the top of the stairs, my mother was already in the foyer, hugging her hard and asking how her drive had been.

"Not bad," Caroline said. She stooped to slip the strap of her suitcase off of her shoulder. It thudded to the floor. "Hey!" she said, looking up and seeing me.

"Hi," I answered, coming down the stairs.

"God, you're big," she said, swinging her arm in a circle to stretch it out, as if she'd been carrying that suitcase for hours instead of the twenty feet between her car and the door. She stopped and brushed rainwater out of the dark fringe of her bangs.



I shrugged. “No bigger than the last time you saw me. Think I’m pretty much done growing.”

Caroline smiled. “Well, older, then. You look older.”

I couldn’t argue with her there. I was, in fact, older.

My mother was standing back, looking at Caroline appraisingly. “You look terrific, honey,” she said.

“Thanks, Mom. New York agrees with me, I think.” Caroline stripped off her coat and flung it over a chair. Her arm stayed suspended for a moment after she’d thrown the coat, poised in the air. She dropped it back down to her side with an energetic slap.

“How is everything going there?” my mother asked.

“Wonderful. Really fantastic. It’s just so exciting – it’s like you could never possibly run out of things to do.”

‘Exciting’ was a religious word for Caroline. On Christmas mornings when we were little, she used to wake me up at 6:00 to sing carols with her in her bedroom until it was 7:30 and we were allowed to go downstairs and open presents. She wanted to make sure we had worked up a level of excitement appropriate to Christmas by the time Christmas actually came. Her worst fear was realizing, just as she was opening her last present, how much fun she was having.

“Oooh, I almost forgot!” Caroline cried suddenly. She stooped to retrieve something from her suitcase. “I brought us a bottle of wine. Oh good, it didn’t break. Let’s have some before dinner!”

“Sure,” my mother said. My mother usually deferred to Caroline, who had a habit of wanting small things very intensely.

After the wine, a cheap red that we drank out of juice glasses since all but one of our set of wine glasses had long ago shattered or snapped their stems, Caroline went upstairs to get ready for dinner. I carried our glasses into the kitchen, where my mother was already standing by the sink with the water running. Her hands leaned on the counter’s edge and she was staring through the rain-dotted glass of the window. When I came in she turned around as if I’d startled her out of a light



sleep.

“Mom – ” I started.

She stopped the sentence by reaching out and taking the glasses from me. I noticed suddenly that one of them had a just-visible rim of green around its lip, like a grass-stain – she must have used it, once, for her brush-rinsing cup while she was painting. I wondered if that was the one I had drunk from. “You should hurry and go get dressed, Jim,” my mother said.

Upstairs, I walked by the bathroom on the way to my room. The door was open, the light from inside flooding one strip of the dark hallway. I paused and leaned against the frame.

Caroline stood in front of the mirror with her face very close to it, putting on dark red lipstick, leaning her hips against the sink. Her skirt was black and lacy and much too short. “Hi,” she said, still staring into the mirror, and I had the momentary impression that she was greeting herself.

“Hey,” I said.

“I’ll be done in a second, if you need the bathroom.”

“What’re you doing?” I asked her.

She capped her lipstick and turned to look at me. “Getting ready.”

“You know we’re just going to Manny’s, right?” My mother used to take us to Manny’s on Friday nights when we were small. It was an Italian place with sticky red leather booths and trivia games printed on the paper placemats.

“I know,” she said. “I just felt like getting dressed up.” She smiled at me. Her mouth was almost the color of blood.

I turned to go.

“Hey, what time are we meeting Bill again?” Caroline asked. She said his name like she was testing out a new word and didn’t much like the taste of it.

“Seven,” I said. I went to my room and got dressed.

Bill was already there and waiting for us when we got to the restaurant. He’d been sitting in a booth and staring into his open menu; when we came in he stood and waited while we



crossed the room. He had one hand on the table, in what was probably meant to be a casual lean, but his knuckles were white and the effect was of a man trying to hold himself up.

“You must be Caroline,” he said, extending a hand to my sister. “It’s real nice to meet you.” I saw that he’d dressed up, too – he had on a blue suit that I’d never seen before, just one shade too bright to be navy. It looked like he’d wet his hair down.

Caroline was taller than him with her heels on. “It’s wonderful to meet you too, Bill,” she said. The cheeriness of her voice made me nervous.

She slid into the booth with a deliberate grace. She hadn’t lost her old, conscious way of moving and holding herself, like she suspected everyone was watching. Everyone usually was. Caroline wasn’t really pretty, or at least I had never thought so – there was something a little too pinched about her face for that, as though her skin was never quite able to keep the secret of the bones beneath. But she had always had a way of taking up the whole of any room she entered, of making any background into a frame.

My mother smiled at Caroline and sat down across from her. Bill sat next to my mother, and I slid in next to my sister. Caroline stretched her legs out into the open space between our booth and the one next to us, ran a hand over the stockinged sheen of her knee. “God, they don’t give you much room when they build these, do they? Maybe they were expecting to feed more midgety people than me.” She laughed, at nothing in particular, and opened her menu. “I’m starving! This all looks great. Remember the time you brought us here after Jim’s soccer game, Mom, and we ate almost a whole pizza each? I thought I was going to explode. So anyway, Bill, you work with Mom, right?”

Conversation with Caroline was always like this – shifting and rapid and impossible to pin down, often with no real pauses after questions for the answers to fit into. Bill hadn’t adjusted to the pace yet. He had been looking at his menu and jerked his head up when he heard his name. “Oh, yes, that’s right,” he



said.

“Bill’s one of the assistant vice directors,” my mother supplemented.

“How nice,” Caroline said. She drummed her cherry-colored fingernails on the table. They made a dry, stiff sound that reminded me of new cards being shuffled.

A minute later, the waitress came over. “We all set here?” she asked.

“I think so,” my mother said. “Why don’t you start, honey?” she said to Bill.

Bill ordered the stuffed shells. I got spaghetti, my mother ravioli. Caroline, when it was her turn, ordered the stuffed shells too.

“Like father like daughter,” the waitress said. It sounded like the kind of thing she said twenty times a night when people got the same thing, subbing in different relational categories to make it context-appropriate.

“Oh, he’s not my father!” Caroline said. Her voice was delighted, like she’d just heard the funniest joke in the world. “God, he’d have had to been what, about ten when he had me?”

Bill opened his mouth to speak. My mother spoke for him. “Bill is thirty-eight,” she said.

“Oh, sorry, Bill.” Caroline fluttered her eyes ceiling-ward, doing some rapid arithmetic. “Fourteen, then.” She flashed Bill a brilliant smile and recrossed her legs. The one on top swung back and forth like a frantic pendulum. “I’m surprised you can keep up with him, Mom.”

She put a hand, briefly, on Bill’s arm across the table. Bill cleared his throat and stared at the carpet – he didn’t seem to know quite what else to do.

I saw my mother notice, before Caroline took her hand away.

The food came with blessed quickness, and I pulled my plate of steaming pasta towards me, eager for the reprieve from talking that chewing promised us all. Caroline, though, didn’t seem to be interested in being spared. She took a very small bite of her steamed shells, small enough to talk around.

“So, Bill, any kids? Been married before?” she asked. Her



eyes were very wide, very interested.

Bill sputtered. “No, nope.” In his haste to answer he hadn’t finished chewing, and with the “p” a small piece of stuffed shell flew across the table to land inches from Caroline’s plate. She looked down at it with faint distaste, just long enough to underscore what had happened in case any of us had missed it, and then raised her eyes back to Bill’s face.

He wiped his mouth with his napkin, collected himself, and began again. “No, this is my first...” he trailed off, searching.

Caroline giggled, merrily. “Yes, what would you call this, Bill?” She looked over at my mother. “Mom? Any ideas? Maybe you can help him out.”

“Caroline,” my mother said, her that’s-enough voice, still rare and forbidding enough to check Caroline a little. At least temporarily.

There was silence for a minute, the kind of silence that makes you abnormally aware of the squishing sounds your own chewing makes. Then my mother cleared her throat. “So, Caroline, I love your hair that way, a little longer. Don’t you think it looks nice?” She looked around the table, at me and at Bill, her eyes a mute appeal.

I nodded dutifully, and Bill followed suit.

“Thanks,” Caroline said. She fiddled with it, still subdued, less from my mother’s reprimand than from her own involuntary response to it. An idea seemed to strike her, and she brightened. “It was my friend Chad’s idea. For me to grow it out this way, I mean.”

“Oh?” my mother said. She looked visibly relieved at the turn things were taking, towards a normal, diffused conversation.

“Yeah. I met him at the coffee shop I always go to, over by the park. He works there.”

“Does he?” my mother chimed. Bill, I noticed, was watching them as they talked, eyes darting back and forth between the two like a man watching a tennis match. I could tell he was thrilled to be a spectator again.

“Yup. Not for long, though. He’s a photographer. Just



waiting till he gets enough exposure, and then he'll quit his day job." Caroline paused, took a sip of her drink. "He's taken some pictures of me, actually. They're quite good."

"How nice!" My mother was relaxed now. "Do you have any with you?"

"No, I don't," Caroline answered her. "It's too bad, though, really. They're nudes. I bet Bill here would have really liked to see them. Wouldn't you, Bill?"

Bill had enough trouble with the most mundane conversations. He was completely at a loss now.

"It's all right, Bill!" Caroline's voice was bright. "We all have to come to terms with our natural urges! Pretty clear my mother has, huh?" She stood up. "I think I'll go use the restroom. Back in a sec!"

I couldn't get my mother to meet my eyes across the table.

After dinner, my mother suggested that Caroline drive me back to the house, since she had to stop by Bill's and pick up something she'd forgotten on the way home. Caroline drove as fast as she always had, with one hand on the wheel, leaning back in her seat as if she were very tired. The rhythm of the windshield wipers was a little irregular, like a slight limp.

She pulled into the driveway and stopped the car. "Well, Jim, it was great to see you," she said.

"Aren't you going to come in?"

"I don't think so. Mom and I said goodbye at the restaurant."

I started to get out, then changed my mind. I turned to look at her instead. "Why did you do that?" I asked her.

"Why did I do what?"

"What you did, back there."

Caroline dropped her hands into her lap with a staccato, irritated slap. "All right, well, at least you're talking, finally. I could feel you all night just, just –" she stopped, looking for the right word. "Just fuming at me."

"Well, don't you think you were kind of absurd?"

"What did I do?" she said. "I didn't do anything."

"No?"

"I'm not planning on doing anything. Mom can take care



of herself. She can do whatever she wants. If she wants to date some younger guy who when he takes our family out can't stop staring at my legs – “

“He wasn't staring at your legs,” I said, even though he had been, maybe, a little. “Mom sure noticed you trying to get him to stare at your legs, though.”

“That's absurd,” Caroline said, but she seemed too exhausted to muster real outrage. She sighed and was quiet for a minute. It was raining harder now, and the water ran in a sheet down the windshield, blurring the outlines of our house in front of us. “Look, Jim,” she said. “Why do you like him so much, anyway?”

“I don't,” I said, and it was true. I didn't, not especially. I wasn't even sure my mother did. But there was something about the timid way they were together, the slow hesitance my mother had, taking this first something for herself – they were so defenseless, both of them. Attacking them was the worst kind of cheap shot.

I should have said some of that, I guess, but it seemed sort of pointless.

I looked at Caroline, angled half-towards me in her seat, her lipsticked mouth a black line in the dark. The lights from our porch came through the windshield to make shadows in her lap. “You look ridiculous, you know that?” I said, and opened the car door. “Bye, Caroline.”

When I got inside my mother was already there, waiting for me. She was sitting in the living room, working on the brother doll of the set she was painting. She was almost done. She'd turned on the lamp over her shoulder but left the overhead lights off, so that she was sitting in a kind of spotlight. Hearing the door, she looked up and smiled. “Hi,” she said. The skin of her face, illuminated, looked like someone had stretched it down towards her chin.

“Hi, Mom.” I went and sat next to her on the couch.

“Caroline gone?” she asked.

“Yup.”



We were quiet for a minute. I watched her fingers feather the brush across the brother doll's head. The finished father, mother, and sister dolls were lined up on the table, watching her with painted smiles.

"You're not going to let him come back, are you?" I said. It wasn't really a question.

My mother kept working without answering. When she spoke, a minute later, it was like she hadn't heard me. "You know, I'm worried about your sister," she said.

"Oh?"

"She doesn't seem very happy. All her life she's tried so hard to be happy." She finished painting the brother and put him down on the table, with the others.

"Mom," I said. She looked up at me. "Caroline's going back home. Why does it matter what she thinks? You should do whatever you want."

"Whatever I want," she said, softly. Her hands, working as if of their own accord, started putting the family together, piece by piece, one inside the other. I wondered if the paint was still wet.





From Breakfast to Madness

after Sexton *Charif Shanahan*

You find
me on the dock
by my mother's house
after eggs and syrup and
the juice, with sugar and pulp,
you loved. You on the brink of a choice
about which of my ribbons you liked best
Me stuck on your smile through jelly glasses
of gin we hid on the basement shelves between
paint cans and plaster because your doctor got mad
You, in your red picture hat, with your pants rolled up
on sand with no color and you said it was our door
to our one place and you just needed fresh air
and to forget about your mother's lovers and
Me on the dock you find after breakfast.



Onomatopoeia

Alex Day

Who invented Bougainvillea must have been a poet.
He breathed in and chewed the juicy vine,
Red pigmentation spilling over his lips,
His ancient mouth was so filled with water
That he was forced to exhale slowly,
Trying to hold it in
But it poured out anyway into a dictionary.



Three Sonnets on Lost in Translation

Teng Kuan Ng

*But the underlying strangeness of this world, - the psychological
strangeness –*

is much more startling than the visible and the superficial.

- Lafcadio Hearn, Japan: An Interpretation

One feels as though one's soul has found for itself a strange home.

- Soseki Natsume, Kokoro

*Because you say, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need for
nothing"*

— and do not know that you

are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.

- Revelation 3:17

I

Thrust into Shinjuku

Beneath the endless canopy of garish neon

They gaze blankly at the panoply of objects

Placidly proffering themselves

Pachinko machines driven mad by their own ringing

Blond haired youths dancing their lives away in front of
machines

Karaoke kitsch in loud mangled english

Short valets bowing in obsequious reverence, revering what,
they do not know

The terrible spectacle of cold bodies, gyrating naked bathed
by reechy eyes

Wizened old men waiting dourly in lifts, faces left impassive
by entropy

That mountain of a million perfunctory postcards, still
capped in forgetful snow



Buddhist monks chanting away in indeterminable drones,
illusion of serenity
Soaring skyscrapers buried like terracotta under the weight
of wan sunlight
Today the delicate clasping of hands – tomorrow the reality
of cold uneaten suppers

II

They lie side by side, in a communion of words
Furtively caressing their jaded beings
With the silence in the middle

Perhaps we are in this world, they say, and not of it
There is so much that is unbearable in this world –
This big waiting room of the world

Inhabited by souls that look like theirs
Ontologies whose only proof of existence
Is that emptiness in their eyes

Telling of how long and how wide and how deep and how
high
Is this aloneness that passes understanding –
This consciousness, ever so aware

Still they all have to live
For lonely is such a lonely word

III

But there is nothing lost in translation
Into the language of space and time
That cannot be recovered
As the spirit witnesses



The wine they sip, thirsting for eternity
That insomnia they share, restless for rest
The city they skulk, pallid and unreal
Even the whore, seducing in vain
The frame they carry, sad image of glory
Those senseless words, letters that kill
The fidelity they bear, vestige of virtue
That strangeness of things, not in themselves
And the love they find: unspeakable whispers
Thrust into Shinjuku





The Ticket Taker

Brent Scharschmidt

Rudy walked slowly through the aisle, looking for new passengers. The train was a quarter full this Monday night, a typical mix of teens, elderly couples, and scattered tourists returning from New York City. Rudy preferred these mellow night types to the business groups that invaded the train in late afternoon, whose cellphones gave him headaches and whose cramped heat made his back sweat. At this hour, he could listen to bits of teenage chatter. The elderly couples had their tickets out and waiting, and would smile when he punched a destination card and put it in the clasp on top of their headrests. The care they took with their tickets made him feel pleasant. He was amused by the European families that spoke loudly to each other, ceasing quickly as the mother scrambled to find the tickets and offered them to him, smiling as if to say, "Please give us a break if these aren't the right kind." Yes, these nights were nice. The smell of broiling concrete had long since dissipated and a mild breeze full of civilized sounds penetrated the car through the vertically sliding windows. The darkness outside the car gave Rudy a sense of control over the world, as if these nights and their regular progression belonged to him.

He moved past three teenagers in basketball jerseys rehashing highlights of a game. Looking down the length of the car, Rudy noticed a man by the door gazing out at the dark buildings that moved quickly by. Rudy felt his contentment with the night atmosphere dissipate at once, as he recognized the figure at the end of the car.

The Thursday of the week before, Rudy had been working the same shift and had asked for the man's ticket. "Sure thing," said the businessman, breaking from his reverie and twisting to access his back pocket. He had pulled out a wallet and searched the fold, furrowing his brow after several seconds. "Hmmm, it should be in here somewhere," he murmured.

"Take your time," Rudy had said, resting an elbow on a



seatback and looking out the window as he always did at night when passengers couldn't find their tickets. He remembered how the ticket takers on the trains he rode as a child always seemed impatient, and would often make passengers more uneasy by looking right at them or saying things like, "Did you buy a ticket?"

"I'm sorry," the man said, "I think I forgot to buy a ticket tonight." Rudy looked back at him.

"Where are you going?"

"Just to Elizabeth. Can I buy a ticket from you?"

"We don't sell tickets on the train," Rudy replied. "There are booths in the stations where you can buy tickets."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was running late and just forgot." Rudy frowned and looked out the window. "It's been a really hectic week," the man said, laughing nervously. Rudy was listening, but thinking more about how to manage the situation. The company protocol was to escort the passenger out at the next stop, hand him off to one of the station workers who would then accompany the passenger to a counter where he would buy a ticket at twice the price or be issued a citation. Rudy looked out the window, catching the sweet scent of the trees that lined the tracks at intervals.

"You know what," Rudy heard himself saying, "don't worry about it this time. Just remember to buy your ticket next time."

"You just saved me five bucks! That's great!" The man beamed at Rudy for a moment, then turned again to look out the window. Rudy had reached the end of his car and sat down across the aisle.

These recollections filled Rudy's memory as he moved throughout the car tonight, stepping between the backpacks and crossed feet that bordered the aisle. This was the third weekday in a row that the man had sat in Rudy's car. The ticket taker glanced uneasily toward the figure near the door before stopping next to an old woman with no destination card on her headrest. She put down her newspaper and handed him her ticket.

"Pleasant evening, isn't it ma'am?"



“Yes,” she said quickly, then looked back at the newspaper. He had hoped to talk with the woman to delay his collection, but she clearly wasn’t the chatty type. He punched her card and slipped it under the metal clasp. Glancing up, he saw the man looking his way. Rudy gave an awkward smile, and moved on to the next passenger.

The day following the first encounter, Rudy had noticed the figure again at the back of the car. It was curious to see someone on his same train again, let alone in the same car.

“Hi there,” he had said. “Can I have your ticket?”

“Sure thing, let me see here,” he had said, searching through his wallet. “Oh, you know what— I forgot to buy one again.” He smiled sheepishly at Rudy. “I got held up at work and had to run to the train. What can I say?” The man shrugged his shoulders.

“You have to buy a ticket or you can’t ride the train. That’s the rule. We’re supposed to make passengers get off who don’t have tickets.”

“Oh, c’mon. I forgot again. Is it so hard to give me a break?” Rudy looked uneasily out the window. He felt the buoyancy of the night slip away, leaving heaviness in its stead. The soft breeze and light smells were present, but not registering. Gazing at the buildings moving by, Rudy clenched his jaw, hoping that the man would produce a ticket and explain that he had only been joking. Did he really want to take him by the arm and lead him off the train at the next stop? That option only irritated Rudy more. He thought of the attention that it would draw, the argument that would ensue. He imagined himself walking calmly over to the intercom, requesting that the conductor have an attendant waiting at the next stop to collect the passenger. He saw the man pleading his case, appealing to pity, then guilt. He saw him yelling loudly, cursing, causing all other conversation to cease as the passengers twisted about to look at them. The elderly couples would lean together and whisper, perhaps turn their heads slightly. He imagined the foreigners whispering together, reinforcing prejudices or forming new ones.

“Fine,” Rudy said, making his irritation obvious. This is the



last time though. You really need to have a ticket.”

“Yeah, sure thing buddy. Thanks for covering for me.” Rudy had retraced his steps through the train, walking slowly to give the impression of double checking his work. Then he sat down at the far end of the car.

Rudy was now approaching the man for the third time in as many days on the job. He could feel his chest tighten and heard the idle chatter behind him take on a fragility that hadn't been there before. He prepared himself for the worst. “Okay, buddy,” he imagined himself saying, “I'm going to need you to get off at the next stop. You will have the option to either pay twice the regular fare or receive a citation.” He would speak calmly, firm but non-judgmental in his tone. “There will be another train by in fifteen minutes.” He saw the man nodding, moving toward the door, and grimacing humbly. He saw him nodding, reaching into his pocket, and pulling out his hand with the middle finger up. “Go to hell,” came the harsh reply. Rudy saw the man throwing a punch at his cheek. Rudy would see it coming and use the man's momentum to push him to the floor. He would pin his arms and ask a nearby passenger to hit the red button by the intercom phone. “Don't make me choose,” he thought to himself.

The man was smiling as Rudy approached. “Hello. Ticket please.”

“Yeah, hang on,” The man pulled his wallet from a back pocket. “Listen, I just wanted to say thanks for covering me those last two nights. Here you go.” Rudy reached for the ticket and found it thicker than usual. He pushed its edge and fanned it open to reveal three identical tickets. The significance of the tickets took a moment to register, as for a moment Rudy entertained thoughts that he was the butt of some vague practical joke. “All even, right?”

“Yes... thanks. Thank you,” Rudy said, clearing his throat. He punched a destination card and slid it between the arms of the clasp, then sat down across the aisle. He leaned his head against the headrest and removed his cap.

“Is everything okay? You look as though you've seen a



ghost.” The train rumbled over a bump in the tracks and Rudy’s head bobbed inadvertently. “Good. Listen, I want to hear about the strangest thing that’s ever happened to you on one of these trains. You must have seen just about everything.” Rudy nodded, on purpose this time. He took a deep breath and felt the raw smell of metal enter his head like an elixir. At the far end of the car, the basketball boys were standing up, reenacting a moment from the day’s game.





Like So Much Copper

Kimberly Spoerri

And what if the answer was in front of you
the whole time you were looking under the
seat for the change you dropped?
Your metamorphosis. Your emersion. Your shining future.
Dropped like so much copper
falling out of pockets
as we sit, walk, run, take off our clothes
and fall into bed, sleeping next to each other.
Waking to alarms and false alarms and you.
And what if you fell out my pocket on the subway
one day and when the train came to a stop you rolled
under someone else's seat and we said goodbye
just like that.



The Crowd

Rob Buerki

So the Rabbi stopped telling stories when his saliva stopped secreting itself and when the leather in his throat could no longer make sounds. He had begun eighteen hours ago, burning through his encyclopedic repertoire of tales, commentaries, jokes. He had begun when the huge door slammed shut, locked, and commenced a baby crying. When he mentioned his first “One day in Kiev, there was...” the train was frozen to the miles of iron in the railyard, and his nervous breath shivered in the air and silently disappeared. The Rabbi had never been on a train until that moment, so he closed his eyes and remembered stories. He shared them with the Kol Nidre voice that the others on the train knew best and had won him praise (“A natural! The voice of a genuine Prophet!”) when he was in yeshiva. Because the noise of the train was so deafening he had been shouting every word, but now we heard only the loudest silence of ghost-filled cars shambling through night.

After about ten hours inside the car, where these 241 villagers from Smolenka took turns standing up and sitting down, it had become stifling hot and reeked of urine and vomit. You couldn’t see any walls or ceilings in here and there was the most incredible perception of hollowness and a crowded hive. After twelve hours Dov’s sister began pulling out her hair, longest to shortest. After seventeen hours, Zeyde, who insisted that he was the son of Napoleon Bonaparte, died without being noticed. He was either 125 or 127 years old. (The version of his story I heard: Zeyde’s mother had been raped by le petit corporal during his momentous retreat from Russia, that she traveled all the way to Paris when her son was born, that when she arrived she was told that Bonaparte was in Elba, but she did not go to Elba, and returned to Smolenka).

At the eighteen hour mark, as I have already stated, the Rabbi could no longer continue with his stories. He opened his cataracted blue eyes and drifted his gaze around the inside of



the car until Chaim offered a glass of water he didn't have. I was sitting on a pile of coats and winter things, stripped off because of the heat. The heat felt better than the poisonous new quiet fogging our atmosphere. It was Yehuda's laughing that finally broke the silence. He cackled, hooted and guffawed and slapped his palm against his knee several times. He laughed and I stared right at him wishing he would just shrivel away, vaporize. Because with every snort and chortle he reminded me that the Rabbi had not been able to keep this train away from us, that to the Germans, our Rabbi was nothing more than another Jew, and that the crowd's impossible prayers were dying with an impossible G-d.

Yehuda laughed until someone pushed him down onto another pile of coats; through the crowd, I couldn't really see what was happening. I actually liked Yehuda, he used to tell me stories about when he visited his rich uncle in Odessa and would swim with girls in the ocean, bruise his feet on underwater rocks, and sponge up sunshine along the beach. I couldn't swim, because I had never visited the ocean, but Yehuda always assured me anyone could, that it was just instinctive. I found his laugh painful and operatic and I tried to spot him lying in the pile of coats. He had left behind in Smolenka everything except for his beard, which he grew because he was a couple years older than I was. We stood near each other for a few of the first hours on the train, and while the Rabbi was speaking I admired his beard.

"Nu, what do you think my beard will look like?" I asked him.

"Like your mother's." An older man's searchlight stare arrested me, and I asked again, softly and so Yehuda could read my lips.

"It will look like what it looks like." Then he said to me "Hersh, we'll be home by tomorrow, stop worrying," and proposed that his rich uncle in Odessa would send money for our release.

Yehuda's laugh came like a thunderclap. Shouts flooded the car, and I was swimming among accusations and fatalistic



despondency. I recognized the voice of Yossl, my friend: fought! We could have *tried!* That would have been better than this!

Yossl had been in the Polish Army. Before he could make it to the front lines, the war was over, his unit had been captured, then slaughtered, and he never forgave himself. An aged voice shot back: so Smolenka is supposed to fight the whole German Army? Yossl said something that I couldn't really hear, but the response, from a younger voice, was: no, Yossl, we're already dead.

You know, Yossl joined the Polish Army because he wanted girls to like him, to dream about him. Every week he wrote letters from his garrison, which was 20 miles over there, to Lieba, who liked dancing and had once kissed him, to Mirka, his cousin, to Ettel, who had fantastic breasts, and especially to Minah the virgin. Yossl left everything behind in Smolenka except for his Polish Army uniform, which he was wearing underneath several concealing shirts. He shouted and stomped his foot and called men cowards because they were still alive. He told us what the Germans came and did to everyone in Chernigov. They burned the synagogue there, too, and put the Jews on a train, just like this one.

I stopped listening to Yossl because my eyes burned from the air inside the car and I concentrated on the pain, squinting them closed. In their burning I think I saw my father, he had been saving money so I could spend a long summer in Kiev, because it is important for young men to see the world. In their burning I asked him if Yossl was right about what had happened in Chernigov. I asked him who had prevented me from ever having finished reading *The Three Musketeers*, because I was almost done with it. And so tears released themselves and bouldered down my cheek. My raw eyes couldn't even tell if they were from the noxious air or because I was still just a child.

* * *

I lived by the crowd. I lived by the expressionless golems,



swaying with every lurching motion of the car, and by the hushed voices that occasionally cough or whimper. You might not notice me looking at you, but am fixing every one of you in my mind, in my memory. Golde Bilowsky sat in front of me. I knew this because Golde always hummed nonsense notes and the woman in front of me was humming nonsense notes. She had left behind everything in Smolenka except for the fancy, expensive silverware her great-grandfather had bought in Riezak-Schlatska, about which Moishe the playwright had written a famous play (in two acts). She was busily scribbling little notes and tying them to the amber handles of spoons and forks that had little jewels inside. What are you doing, Bibik asked, because he was her husband. I'm tossing these out of the train, she said. When someone finds them they will read the note (in Polish, Russian, and French: From the villagers of Smolenka! Our lives are in danger! Please help us!) and know where we are. She continued humming.

And so Avram had left everything behind in Smolenka except for his American typewriter. He edited a newspaper and I had heard that he was writing a story, which he would not let anyone read. Avram's hair was long and the Germans had dragged him through the street by it before we got on the train. They wanted to take his typewriter away from him, but he shouted back several times "I am allowed one piece of luggage! I am allowed one piece of luggage!" and they gave up. He spoke Greek and Latin and had been to Istanbul, where men wore a fez.

"Avram, let me look at your story." I asked him.

"Who is that?" I crouched down next to him and saw that he was wearing a scarf to cover up the missing chunks of scalp.

"It's me, Hersh. Let me see your story."

"I don't like people reading my story. People criticize, you know. People think that they are good enough to offer suggestions and they try to change your mind. Besides, it's too dark in here to read."

He was unmarried and had turned down 7 proposals from 6 fathers. When everyone had started arguing after Yehuda had



started laughing, he stood up and squeezed over to near where I was sitting. He walked like ghost who said, “Excuse me” when he bumped into people, and ran elongated fingers over the wall in case the train lurched.

“So you can tell me about it.” I said, “I promise not to criticize. I’m not one of those people.”

It was entitled ‘Dvorah’ and dealt with people in the city. Avram’s fingers danced around the distance between our faces and his gestures described moments, bits of rapture, and fleeting emotions. They were so agile, those fingers. I like how Avram spoke, the way he emphasized certain words and used things like adjectives and metaphors; I thought about how he would make a good rabbi one day. ‘Dvorah’ began on a rainy day because he was born on a rainy day. The girl in the story was based on a girl he met while traveling, while on a cruise. “The day was humid and you could almost mop up the atmosphere. It was hot, and birds were afraid their feathers might melt. But the ocean spray was cooling, peaceful and although she and I had never talked before we both laughed and ran to meet every momentous splash that hit the gunwale, until we were drenched in mist.”

“And her name was Dvorah, then?” I asked.

“I never learned her name, but I imagine it would have been Dvorah.” In Avram’s story, Dvorah works for her great uncle, colorizing portraits of Russian generals and politicians. She likes to sit in the audience of the courtroom and watch trials. She still puts her thumb in her mouth, but only sometimes. I told Avram that this was a good story. Avram said he knew a publisher in Kiev who didn’t charge him extra because he was a Jew.

And me, I had left everything behind in Smolenka. We were allowed one piece of luggage, but I couldn’t decide what to bring until it was too late, until I was pulled out of our house, my hands cold because they were empty. Three soldiers scared my mom and my sister and they were directed to another car. And so I saw Iztik, my father, clutching one of the seferot torah, burning with pride, shouting to me something like,



“Hershel, son, look at me, remember me. Remember that there are Jews...” He went on, my father. He had a loud voice, but I couldn’t hear him, so I just waved and flailed words to him in response with my hands, which were cold because they were empty. My father’s long coat flowed down his shoulders, draped him like a statue would be draped, and amongst the group of men charging from the shul, he plowed tradition into the emptying streets of Smolenka. My father named me Hershel after my grandfather, who died when a Russian horse kicked his head as he was bringing some food to the soldier atop it’s back.

* * *

And so Minah the virgin cried because she was a virgin. She was a year younger than I was, but had known when, where, and in what position she had wanted to lose her virginity for nearly three years. She also knew her lover would whisper French words to her, press his face against her breasts, and pretend to have had sex before. Minah cried and despaired her face into her folded arms until I waded through the crowd and sat down next to her.

She had once told me how she would lie in bed every night and imagine all the fascinating aspects of fucking she would one day discover and put to use on any number of boys, but especially Hillel, except that he was married. I had always found Minah beautiful, and once, I had told her so. Now, while she was crying, she asked me “Hersh, do you remember when you told me how you found me beautiful?”

I said “Of course, I remember when I told you how I found you beautiful.”

“You’re the only person who has ever said anything like that to me.”

“I can’t believe that, because you are truly beautiful.”

“Hersh, have you ever made love to a girl?”

“Yes. “ I pretended. She asked me to tell her I loved her, which I did, and then proceeded to remove her bundled blouses and skirts, so she could wrap her legs around me. I pressed and



pushed; she squeezed and shuddered. Minah's eyes were still wet because she had been crying, but with them she screamed into mine.

"Hersh, oh my G-d," she said to me when it was all over. I thought that several of the 239 villagers from Smolenka standing around us in the car must have noticed those hemorrhagic fragments, and understood that her blood on the tracks was by far the most profound response that Smolenka could have ever mustered against the Nazis.

I fell asleep and I dreamed of Smolenka. Not the jarring crowded marketplace with bundled families and frightened children shuffling past clean-shaven soldiers, aloof and tired. Not the wild flames consuming our synagogue, burning holy books and desks and chairs. No, I dreamed the Smolenka that I always had dreamed of, with a few trees and several horses tied up in front of the shul where powerful men with powerful beards prayed, like I would pray one day. I dreamed of the crowded tables after weddings where I always poured myself an extra glass of wine and sang off key because there were just so many generations! I dreamed of only the greatest words, those the Rabbi spoke, which you could read as they resounded from his chest. I dreamed of the my cousin, Shlomo, who sold everything he owned, cut his hair, shaved, and bought a ticket to Chicago, one way. I dreamed of my youngest sister, Bella, who was a baby when I cuddled her with clasped hands and showed her the songs of the green violinist, the flying cows. (I want her to remember me not as her brother, but as the boy who gave her such blue and yellow and purple that she could only sigh with wonderment.) I dreamed that Bella was a dancer, that she whirled so fast that her hair was horizontal and your mouth parted and your eyes widened and your heart paused to get a glimpse of her pirouette. I dreamed about what my beard would look like.

When morning came in through the unmended holes in the roof of the car I was still laying next to Minah. She clutched my upper arm with the strength and resolution of a hundred



women; her fingers squeezed the blood vessels against the bone, so a magical numbness flowed down my arm. I wondered if we would be able to have sex again, Minah and I, because it made me feel so grown-up, so important, so holy, holy, holy. She still seemed to be crying and was enthusiastically biting her inner cheek. I don't think she had slept afterward, because I had heard that few people ever did. And so Minah reached for my face and repositioned it so that her soggy eyes were once again engaging mine.



“I wasn't scared at all, Hersh, I don't know why. It felt so natural, so expected, so *ordinary*. It's as if I was destined to have been here, on this train. Destined to be with you, surrounded by this crowd.”

“I know, I know.” I wondered aloud, “Minah, what's going to happen us? Not you and me, I mean all of us.” She really was



beautiful.

She said, “Hersh, only G-d knows. Just look around, look at me...remember me, remember that there are Jews...” And so I focused on the scene inside the car, the scene visible in the gathering light from the unattended holes in the roof. We were alone: from those cloaked, scarved bodies still asleep to those others who swayed with the car, pondering with their eyes, we were almost outside the crowd. Most of the men inside the car were standing, facing towards one corner, shuckeling, murmuring familiar phrases, because today was Thursday and yesterday had been Wednesday, and the sun had set and risen in between. I made my own whispered confession, and remembered that there are Jews.

And so a voice shouted my name.

“Hershel! Hershel! Hershel, you bastard!”

I gazed up and saw the crowd slightly separated, a few blank stares piercing me. Yossl emerged, my friend.

“And you! You slut! You total, fucking whore!”

“Yossl, what are you talking about? Calm down, Yossl,” I said, and Minah either continued or started to cry. I noticed the brass of his Polish army uniform, attended to with great care.

“Haven’t I sent you letters every week? Haven’t I promised you that we would get married soon? You complete, traitorous slut!” He pulled me off the floor of the car and shoved me, with such passion he shoves!, against the wall.

Minah wailed and I told Yossl again to calm down, that he could talk with Minah as soon as he was not so angry. He shouted back: Fuck you, you think you can tell me what to do, because you pricked her, you sick bastard? And so I shoved him back and he came towards me, Yossl, my friend, with fast fists. But the train lurched and I felt the earth tremble, and several pairs of arms from the crowd held him back. He skulked back into the 240 faces, all staring blankly now at me and at Minah. I coughed her name.

Once again the train lurched and I felt the earth tremble, maybe it would open up enough to swallow this entire car, with



all of us inside, and Smolenka would forever disappear and be forgotten. Minah grasped my arm, pulling it with all her strength. I calmly kissed her and then stood up, because there were spaces in the walls that I could crane my head to look through to the outside.

“Hersh, what do you see?” Minah asked.

“A country road. A tree.”

“Is that all? Nothing else is out there?”

“No, nothing.” The barren wasteland carpeted out before me plunged my imagination into hyperanxiety and all I cared about was when. When the train would stop, when we would arrive wherever we were going, when we would know. I didn’t care about Yehuda’s laughing, or Avram’s story, or what my beard would look like. All I could think about was dying, I could feel bullets tearing through my chest and I could feel my palm pressing this hard to stop the blood flow and my heart leaving behind a grand agenda. I didn’t even care about Minah, who was still clutching my arm, as if to say that I was unique to her, because we were not strangers. And so with the Rabbi’s Kol Nidre voice still echoing and Yossl shouting Fuck you all, you cowards and sluts, you fucking Fascists!, I closed my eyes and dreamed of the green violinist, the flying cows.



All Canded Things

Heather Lichy

She loves all canded things
that begin in a blaze, a struck match
and end in an ember
whistling into the darkness.

She loves to hold ice in her hands
knowing held ice is something
that can and cannot be
as the water bleeds out between her fingers.

But how can she sit alone on the floor
in a room whose walls breathe in and out
like long curtains in an open window?
How can she scribble into the whiteness

into the wetness of the melted ice
into the smoke smell of the blackened wick
into the yawning mouth
and not grow heavy, like bread in water?

And how can she become the apostrophe
that must replace an alphabet
the eyelash poised above the abyss
and not jump









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