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literary review

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# • **TABOO** •

*Whenever a taboo is broken, something good happens, something vitalizing...  
Taboos after all are only hangovers, the product of diseased minds, you might say,  
of fearsome people who hadn't the courage to live and who under the guise of morality  
and religion have imposed these things upon us. - Henry Miller*

From the Editors:

The issue you are now holding in your hands outlines a Princetonian “taboo”—and reveals how hesitant we are to break the rules. Whether this comes from a fear of retribution by some supernatural force, as the original Polynesian word connotes, an ingrained sense of political correctness, or simply “conscience,” we do not presume to say. By this introduction, we only hope to place this slim volume within a continuing social discussion, to urge readers to pause and consider why we hold some things sacred and others not, be they the smallest conventions of grammar and form, the unapproachable subjects, or just the propriety of printing words in a Princeton magazine that can’t be found in a children’s dictionary.



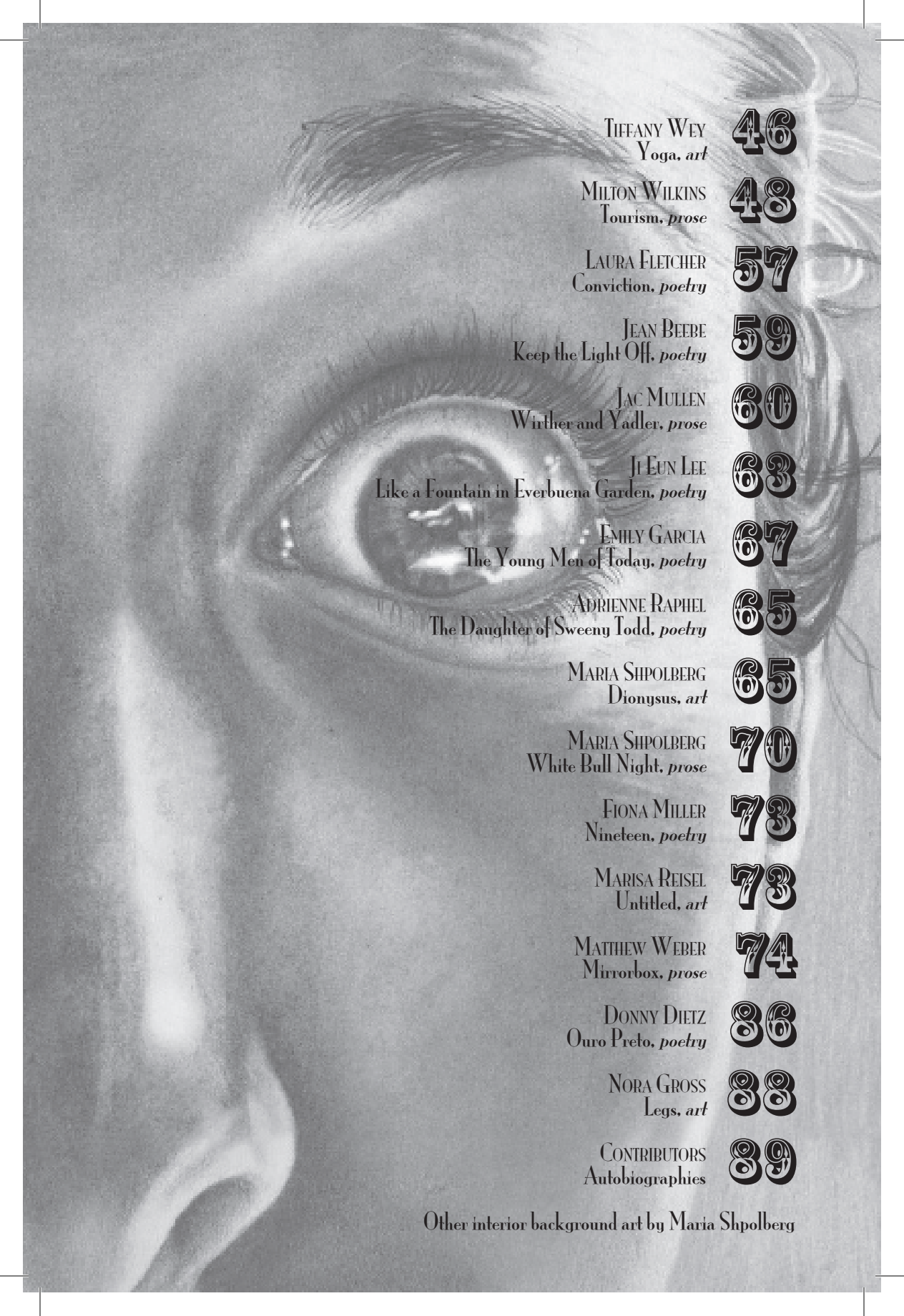
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# SESTINA

Michael Skansgaard

And clenched in fright, my infant hands were torn<sup>1</sup>  
From my royal mother's arms. They ruined her shrine,  
And urinated on her likeness: Cleft  
In two, her image<sup>2</sup> on the Helicon  
Was shattered, and her pillars toppled.  
Shamed, helpless, furious, I vomited  
On soft Greek soil. I fell, and grieved upon it,  
Birthing streams of sadness with slow tears:<sup>3</sup>  
I beat my breast<sup>4</sup> with rage and swore to topple  
Roman statues, desecrate their shrines,  
When come of age. Then through the Helicon  
I sprinted, swift as fluttering wings that cleave  
The liquid air. Inscribed on Iliac leaves,  
My purpose held: I never wavered from it,  
Garnering strength; I scoured the Helicon  
And gathered troops. Through battlefields we tore  
Ferocious, brave Aegean men enshrined  
In tales and memories; [yea, women sang<sup>5</sup>  
Of our unrivalled prowess in the arts  
Of war; and of those amorous in kind,  
Where I am said to have excelled all the rest.  
We came upon the sensuous soil of Rome:]  
We breached the walls,<sup>6</sup> and from the top pulled  
Earthward towering stones; and as they toppled,  
Cheers went forth; my hearty warriors cleft  
Rome's boundaries. All the skies with darkness shone,  
As in the distance Aetna<sup>7</sup> vomited  
Thick sulphur. Rising from the darkening tarn,  
A half-formed skull broke through the Rubicon,  
With bits of flesh upon it; Hell's icon  
Engraved upon its chest. The skin's top peeled  
From her red-glowing bones; her vast hands tore  
The boiling meat in<sup>8</sup> swaths. She walked with cloven  
Feet. The Romans looked and vomited  
As vertebrae unravelled in her spine.

My soldiers cheered and charged great Remus'<sup>9</sup> shrine:  
 With blazoned hearts we crossed the Rubicon.  
 I swung my axe; and soon, heads vomited  
 Soft brains upon the Roman pillars, toppled.  
 My blade drank foreign blood in streams and cleft  
 The thigh-thick armour, as it raged and tore  
 The flesh of them that toppled my mother's shrine.  
 Torn limb-from-limb,<sup>10a</sup> they stained the Rubicon;<sup>10b</sup>  
 Their armour sunk, with thick gore cloven from it.

1. This fragment appears to have been torn from an early English translation of a Greco-Roman biography; unfortunately, neither the original manuscript nor the translated volume seems to have been preserved.

2. There is a great deal of critical debate as to the identity of the goddess in question. Manderlichen argues that it is Athena, the protector of Greek heroes; Phallon more plausibly contends that it is Aphrodite (or appropriately "Venus," if originally written in Latin), the goddess of erotic love.

3. Metaphor comparing himself to the source of the Danube, or "River of Sorrows," up which Heracles sailed before lighting fire to himself.

4. The speaker of this passage is perhaps Jason, if the goddess is in fact Athena (Minerva). Venus, the ancestor of Aeneas, Iulus, and thus the Julii, may also be the goddess, in which case the speaker seems to be Julius Caesar. Neither case fits the narration perfectly; I prefer the explanation that this is a translation of Plato, whose uncontrollable passion and hatred of the Romans is clearly evident. The speaker may also be Oedipus, unless we assume the speaker to be an Amazon, in which case she is female and has only one mammary gland.

5. This section of the poem is unreadable; it appears that the author either spilled part of his lunch on the page, or else the ink is contaminated by some bodily fluid. Our department is currently unable to fund research into this matter, and scientists are not to be trusted in any event, so I have re-constructed the passage to the best of my ability in an attempt to remain true to the spirit of the narration, based on much critical research as to the author's intent.

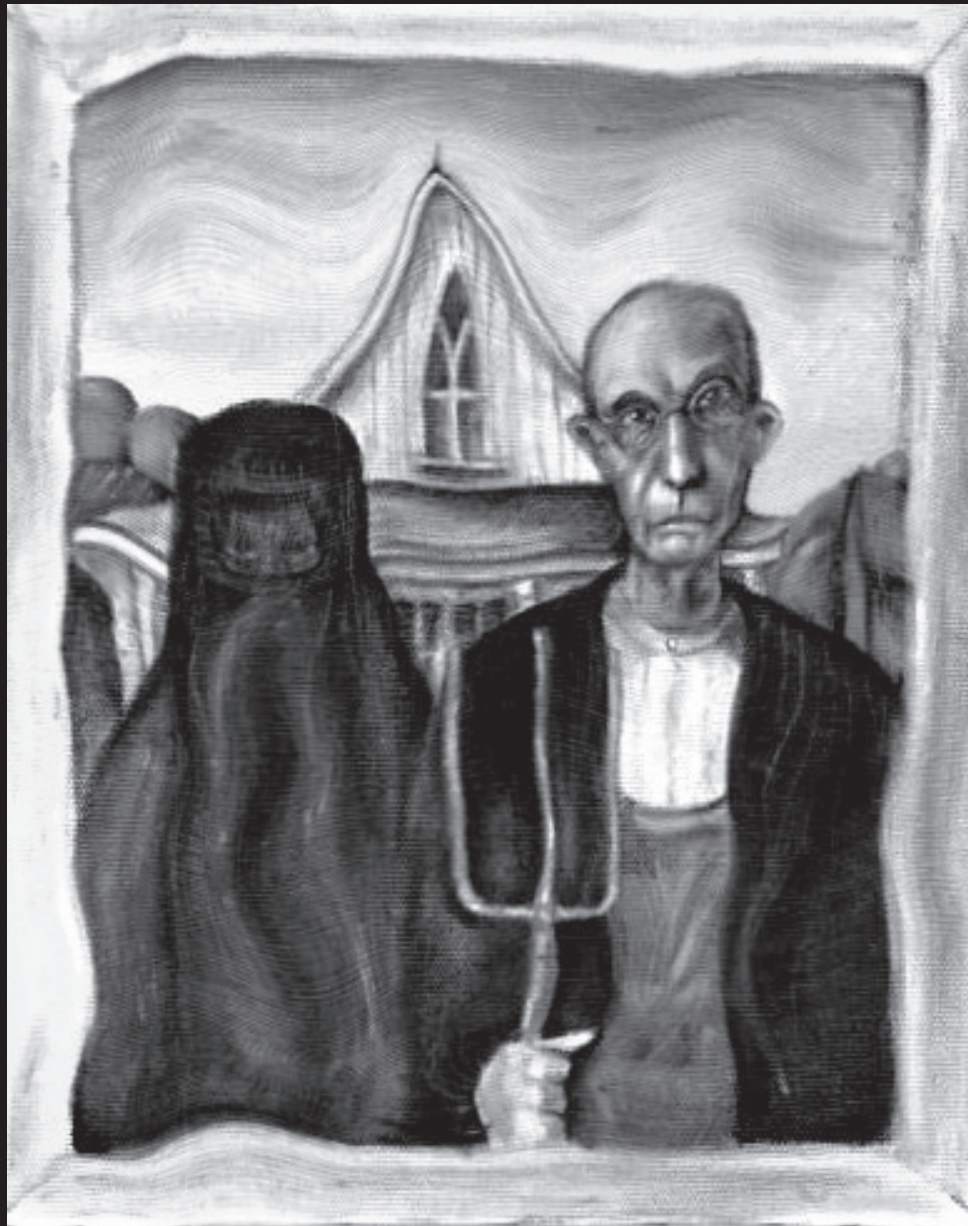
6. This violent imagery, "breaching" the entry of the Roman women, is a clear metaphor for rape, avenging the ravishment of his mother's statue. This reveals a subtle sexual bond between the hero and his mother.

7. By "Aetna," the narrator most closely means "penis." The mountain's massive ejaculation symbolizes the hero's need to relieve his repressed and unachievable sexual desires for his dead mother through battle.

8. Greeks hated midgets.

9. Romulus and Remus are the fathers of Rome. They hatched from an egg laid by a half-wolf, half-centaur that spoke with a Phrygian accent but wrote in only Sanskrit. One of them was probably a woman in disguise. Remus fathered Elicitus, Hypococon, Anaxamander, Mitochondria, Hypochondria, Hypoglycaemia, and four other sons whose identities are contested; the ten sons went on an expedition to find an all-water route to India, but instead wound up in the present-day Falkland Islands which is why Brazil continues to be a Spanish-speaking country.

10 a&b. Romans believed themselves to be descended from the Trojans. They also saw Greek culture as their "father" culture; yet here, the Romans take on the figure of Oedipus' father (Laius, who sodomizes Jocasta and stands in the way of his son's legitimate sexual desires). In a role-reversal the son here castrates the father figure, by removing the fifth "limb" in a violent fashion. The "Rubicon" is also an unmistakable phallic image, along with "stained," "torn," "from," and every other word in this sentence. It is evident that the narrator believes himself to possess an incredible penis.



# DEBT

Roberto Pena

JARBO 2007 • 9

**W**ednesday, January 19

I wrote the first letter cross-legged on my classroom carpet on January 19. First I crumpled a sky blue sheet of paper and picked at its edges like a child; then I poured a big box of crayons on the floor and chuckled, and my students chuckled with me. I snatched a bundle of lighter tones, and humming, I traced soft designs or hammered weak rainbow flecks on the paper. I put the bunch down, then swept the whole crayon pile with my eyes and tickled it with my fingers till I found carnation pink. I wrapped my left hand around it and traced and retraced a D; for each letter after that I let a student pick a different color, and when I put down the last one the letter read:

“DEAR CRAYOLA,

“THANK YOU.”

I showed my students the letter and gasped at them as if astonished. “Look children,” I said slowly, “what a pretty letter we made! How many of you like the letter we made?” My students flung up their arms, smiling, and then I nodded and said, “Very good, I like it too. Who can tell me what it says?” Most of them kept smiling but fiddled with their hands and lost interest; a few squinted in puzzlement at the paper and back at me, and one or two began timidly to read out the first letter.

“Why don’t we read it together?” I started to recite it in the tone of a pledge, and with my left hand I pointed at each word as I read it.

“Dear Crayola, thank you. That’s what it says. We’re going to sign this letter, and then we’re going to send it to the men and women who make our crayons, to tell them ‘thank you.’ Who can tell me why we should thank them?”

I spoke to my students tenderly but with great care and deliberation. I took pains not to leave a sentence unfinished and never to stutter in front of them. It has an impact on how kids behave—if you command their respect they follow your gaze intently, wide-eyed and -eared, and they keep order. That is my most guarded secret: even the female teachers envy my skill. Now the half of the class with its hand up was looking at the pile of crayons, while the others sat smile-eyed with their little mouths agape waiting for cues from me. Annie with the pink-ribbon, blond ponytail lifted her hand so hard it was almost waving, so I called on her.

“Because it’s nice.”

“Very good, Annie. Saying thanks is important when people do something nice. Why should we say thanks to the people who make our crayons? Can you think of anything we use crayons for?” I looked to my left, where on the wall were posted the fish and birds the children had drawn a week earlier, when college students talked to them about the water cycle. “Ben?”

“I drew a frog.”

draw frogs?”

“A big frog.”

“Yes, Ben, a big frog.”

“That one.” He pointed at the drawn blue frog pinned to the wall.

Substitute teachers found Ben’s persistence annoying, but not I. I am extremely patient. Even when my students fixate on trivial things, or when I lose their attention to some cute dog outside or to small arguments, they will not see me flinch. If they did, I could not teach them about patience or love. Words are useless without an example to follow. When I started teaching I would bore my children with dry parables on virtue that did no good. It turns out virtues are like brushing one’s teeth: they must be learned through practice.

I swiftly packed the crayons in their box, then I got up and walked to Ben’s side. I sat down by him as one more student, ran my fingers slowly through his hair, and said, “Ben, you drew a very big, very pretty frog the other day, didn’t you?” He smiled back at me squinting and gave a nod.

“What did you use to draw the frog?”

Ben mumbled something.

“Could you say that louder?”

“Crayons.”

“And the people at Crayola made those crayons, didn’t they?”

Ben nodded.

“Did you have fun drawing the frog with the crayons they made?”

Ben nodded; I started back to my place.

“What about you guys? Isn’t it fun drawing with crayons? Okay, so why should we say thanks to the people who made our crayons?”

A child with his hand up leaned forward.

“Jimmy?”

“When we say thanks, it makes people happy.” Jimmy sat up with a smug grin.

“That’s right.”

4:57 p.m.

On screen, Mike said, “So you’re telling me I can get the CleanCut set, this set of meat knives, this vegetable peeler—”

“And—”

“—and the EasyDice—”

“That’s right.”

“—for how much?”

“Just four easy payments of \$19.99. That’s less than half of the retail value on the last set of knives you’ll ever need.”

*It was a very simple calculation*, Ron thought, and idly, he changed the channel on his plasma screen TV.



Thursday, February 10

“Good morning boys and girls!”

“*Good morning Mr. Leonard!*”

“I have a big surprise for you today!”

As I announced the surprise to the children I stretched my neck towards them, bugged out my eyes, and smiled as wide as a planet, all with the desired effect: some bobbed in their seats and bounced their fists on the tables, while the more vocal ones filled the room with *surprise surprise surprise what is it can we see it please*. They all loved surprises. Sharing in their excitement, I got up and started fake-running laps around the middle of the classroom, where the tables were, and all the students left their chairs to run with me.

“Wow, you guys are very excited about the surprise! I’ll tell you what it is, but you need to be real quiet so you can hear me. I’ll give you the surprise when you’re all back at your seats and quiet.” After another minute of celebration, they settled down.

“Remember the thank-you note we sent to the guys at Crayola? They wrote us back a nice letter, and they sent us presents!”

They blew up in cheers.

“Before I give you the presents I’m going to read you the letter:

“Dear students:

“Thank you for your letter. We at Crayola appreciate all consumer feedback, and we know that satisfied customers are the foundation of our success.

“Sincerely,

“Frank Weston,

“Binney & Smith, Crayola Division”

They clamored for the presents, but first I read the letter again and again until I felt the children were quite sure of its purpose. When they had all understood I pulled out from under my desk a new box of crayons and sheets with dinosaur outlines on them.

“The people at Crayola sent us ... a new box of crayons ... and two coloring books! Since you all have crayons, the box is staying with me—but you guys each get a sheet of a coloring book!”

I barely held out my hand with the sheets of paper, and instantly they were fluttering all across the room, like fickle glowing doves that flew just above the children’s reach, the children leaping to catch one.

When they had colored the sheets, I had them sign their work and collected it, and then I took down whatever drawings were posted on the wall and hung the new work in their place. Then, from my desk, I asked them my trademark question:

“Whom should we say thanks to next?”

7:49 p.m.

*It was a very simple calculation*, Ron thought, and he drew one deep breath that

gertips slid on his oily, bald head. Despite the sad eyes, he smiled. His throat was sore, and he felt a dry rash where his elbow rubbed on the table, but for a while longer he remained still. In the twilight kitchen hung the sickening blend of cold sweat, whisky vapors, and clouds of cigarette smoke.

A dusky thread rose from the stuffed ashtray into the haze above.

He could hear only the delicate ticking of his Omega.

Sometimes a car drove by.



*Tuesday, April 19*

“Whom should we say thanks to next?”

No one answered.

I waited a bit longer while they racked their brains. Their assignment was not to stare at me blankly, but to come up with someone they’d like to thank, and if I waived it when they were silent, they would not only miss on a chance to say thank-you, but they might learn that idleness has rewards.

I knew better than to chalk their silence up to mere apathy. Writing the thank-you letter was their favorite part of the day. A teacher can tell. When they felt the time nearing, they turned alert and could think of nothing else. That very morning I had delayed the letter time for about half an hour to see if they asked for it, and just as I expected they began to hint at it with common tricks for a child. Some just sat pensive and doodled, as if writing a note; Annie looked around the room for a clock to give me the time. Greg played with his buckle restlessly, then caved under the pressure and asked for a rest-room pass. Children can be subtle about what they want. There prevailed the feeling that I was neglecting my duty towards them, and at last I felt bad that I had made them wait.

“Very well boys and girls, whom should we say thanks to next?” I said.

No one answered.

They wanted to suggest someone, but they couldn’t think of anyone we hadn’t already thanked. First came the brands: Crayola, Elmer’s Glue, Bic, and the rest of their school supply manufacturers; then food companies, and so on. I used that early period to press the habit and gave my students merchandise of each brand as if it had sent it. Simple positive reinforcement. Then they wanted to thank their parents, siblings, uncles, grandparents, coaches, and other teachers and friends. We sent notes to all of them. We sent notes to superheroes and their artists at Cartoon Network. We contacted Maurice Sendak. We contacted every person they named, and one day they simply could not think of anybody.

It made no sense to keep pushing them, so I helped.

“My neighbor is a very nice lady,” I said. “She watches my cat Shing-a-ling when I’m here. Isn’t that nice?”

They nodded.

“It’s very nice. Do you think we should send her a thank-you letter?”

They said yes, and I began writing. If some of them don't forget the favor, I may get letters one day.

4:14 p.m.

*It was an honest mistake*, Ron thought while on the TV a man in a chef costume showed off a kitchen knife.

"That's right, Mike. In fact, how would you like a demonstration?"

The camera switched to Mike. "Let's see a demonstration because, Pablo, I've got to tell you—I've never seen a knife that can cut anything—"

"I know—"

"—as cleanly as you say."

"I know, Mike, and that's the problem!" The camera went back to Pablo. "I used hundreds of different knives when I was a chef, and they were all the same pain in the neck."

The shot opened to show both men. The back of the set was fashioned like a white kitchen with polished cupboards and sinks. The men shuffled behind an island where tomatoes, onions, and oranges lay in neat stacks. Under the stage light everything was shining so bright that on a different day Ron might have turned down the brightness, but his sight fell somewhere beyond the screen, and he didn't mind.

"We've all been there: lemon zest gets in your eye, tomato juice bleeds everywhere. If you care about presentation at all, you just can't get by with an average knife." Pablo grabbed a tomato with his left hand and placed it on a pristine board in front of him.

"I know! I've got the best set of knives from every department store and it's the same story with all of them. That's why I need to see CleanCut before I can believe it. I mean, it just sounds too good to be true."

"You're preaching to the choir, Mike! Before CleanCut I spent easily over a thousand dollars on different sets of knives that sold themselves as the standard. Well, now thanks to CleanCut there's a new standard. Watch this." On screen a left hand steadied the tomato while a right one held CleanCut over the base of the stem.

The tomato did not spill a drop of juice when the blade fell.

"Look at this," Pablo said as he picked up the stem and spun it to show the audience.

"I can't believe it!"

"Is that a flawless cut?"

"That's a flawless cut."

### *Summer Break*

I spent summer break looking for things and people to write about.

9:45 a.m.

Ron almost knocked over the bedside lamp when he reached to pick up the

“Hello...?”

“Speaking, who is this...?”

Suddenly the hurry left his voice.

“No, I’ve told you guys a dozen times you’ve got the wrong number...”

“That is my name, but I’m not the person you’re looking for...”

“No. No, you listen to me. I live here with my wife and three children and I’ve never had an account with your bank. If you keep pestering us I’m going to report you to whatever credit authority—to whatever credit authority will shut you up. Have a good day.”

Still on edge from the ring that woke him, he remained in bed and stared at the ceiling. Beneath the swollen eyelids shone two dull gems. He stretched his arms and legs, sighed with satisfaction, and thought, *This one will never get me.*

*I stopped sending them minimum payments not three months ago, and I already know they’ll never get me. None of them will. If you’re not attached to anyone, and no one cares where you go, it’s not hard to make an art of biding. Move often and tell nobody. Have a common name—there are many John Smiths in the phonebook. Change your telephone number and don’t give it out.*

*You follow these easy rules, and soon you get tired of not getting caught. Tired of the collectors’ persistence and their frustration. They’ll call members of your extended family, and even people like an ex-wife, to try to locate you. They might even talk of collecting money from them instead, see if that way they’ll out you. Never mind it’s all against regulations—if there’s a chance in hell that it will work, you rest assured, they’ll try it.*

*They’ll be the ones chasing you, but they will never hide their desperation. From the day you notice it, you’ll feel bad for them. You’ll come to know their names, know that they have a family, and hope that they catch some half-wit and finally get a check. And in time, they’ll become your only friends, and you’ll never feel alone again.*

The beep of the coffee maker dragged him out of bed.

*I should call my brother. I’ll go make change at the train station; they have phones. I wonder if it’s the same number.*



*Saturday, August 27*

Towards the end of August I had the chance to show the mailman my appreciation. Needless to say I owed him plenty, and his case was a welcome respite. I needed a break from weeks of dropping twenty-dollar bills or standing at the train station like a lost puppy till someone offered to pay for my ride. It can take forever: the hardest part is always searching for people who do the right thing.

For this once, I wanted to say thanks in person. He handles so much mail every day that giving him an extra letter seemed tactless. And he is an upstanding man. I believe he’s in his fifties. He is lean and tall; he looks very good in the grey uniform, except the hat comically rounds up hair by his ears. He’s a bit lonely, but he never holds back a smile.

Around noon, he came by my street. He stopped in front of my house,

picked up two letters, and commented on the hot day.

“As hot as it’s been all year!”

“It’s supposed to rain tomorrow,” I said and relaxed my knees slightly. “Listen, you guys really keep the country running, and it seems like you don’t get your due. And I work weekday mornings, but if you ever need a breather on Saturday, or a glass of water, just knock on my door.”

“Hey, it’s not all that. But thank you; this heat keeps up and you might regret that offer!” He waved his hand and went back to his truck.

“One more thing,” I yelled.

“What’s that, son?”

“Remember a few years ago when they raised the postage to thirty-seven cents?”

He did.

“Before I knew about it, I put the old stamps on two letters and left them in my mailbox. And you picked them up anyway.”

## ODE TO MEDIOCRITY

Tamara Spitzer-Hobeika

Paris, frozen grey, her hair cascading down her shoulders.  
Twingos and Toyotas sputter in greasy tracks,  
As if she were a tongue licked by a knife.

In the mist she waves majestically to us –  
The young, blasé, and ever-dreamers,  
For whom the tour-guide’s flag  
And rowdy boy’s bleeding knee  
Are always lipstick-red.

small. When a man forgets this, he becomes jaded and no longer sees any reason to do the right thing; but a well-timed letter can fan the dust right off of his moral compass.

*11:09 a.m.*

The phone rang four times before someone answered.

“Hello?”

The second Ron heard his brother, he drew in air like a backwards sigh.

“How are you?”

There was a pause, then the voice answered, “Who is this?”

“It’s me. Come on, you recognize your brother.”

“What do you want?”

“Just wanted to check up on you,” Ron said. “Make sure you’re staying out of trouble.”

He explained that it was fine, that it didn’t matter.

“Thank you,” I said.

Do not be misled. It is not enough to simply say “thank you.” Anyone can do that. My practice is about changing the life of the person I thank. It is about rekindling a stranger’s childhood faith in man—about letting him know that no good deed goes unnoticed, no matter how

"I'm fine."

He felt a ponderous coil around his chest.

"And your son?"

"Struggling to pay for college. Why did you really call?"

"How's mom?"

"You should have more shame than to ask me that, but with you I guess it's to be expected."

"How's mom?"

"Mom is fine. She says she knows you'll never pay her. She doesn't care anymore. You're in trouble, aren't you?"

For a moment, inexplicably, he considered asking for a made-up favor. Something like, *You ... you're right. I'm in a real bad spot. Listen, I'm desperate; I've been hiding since I moved here, and I don't know anyone. You've got to give me a hand. If you don't help me, I'm done for.*

"I knew it. You're in debt again. Where are you calling from? Is this your number? Fucking debt collectors won't stop asking for you. Well, thanks for calling; at least now I can tell them what number to phone"

"You're not being fair." Ron spoke moving only his mouth, breathing imperceptibly.

"What the hell do you know about fair? You took mom's savings, all the money she slaved over for her whole life, and somehow, you lost it in days. I took a second mortgage to bail you out! Now my son has got to work his way through college because ten years ago his idiot of an uncle thought he could run a business, and I was stupid enough to throw my money at him."

"You know that I lost money, too. I lost all I took out from my credit cards."

"You mean you lost money that wasn't yours." He felt his brother's eyes narrow on the other end. "Old habits die hard, huh?"

"Why do you hate me so much? If mom's forgiven me—"

"Who said anything about that?"

"About what?"

"Who said that mom forgave you?"

A cold shiver pushed through his legs.

"Then what did she say?"

"She knows you'll never pay her, but that doesn't mean you guys are fine. Ronald, mom has a life insurance policy on you. She knows you'll never pay her 'cause you don't have any money, but if something happened, she'd at least like to see some of it back."

The noise of a train a few tracks down drowned Ron's words, but he could not speak over it. "Mom ... wants her money back?"

"(No one honey ... yeah, it's him. We'll talk about it.) I have to go, but as I said I've got your number."

"It's—yeah, bye."

He took half a minute to hang the receiver, then with a deaf moan he collapsed, and laid stranded in the middle of the bustling station. Silently the tears began to

flow, and they flowed until he had no strength even to regret using a fucking payphone because his brother had caller I.D. and would get his number if he called from home.



*Friday, October 7*

I know that the letters work every time a parent calls me to tell me how well behaved her child is or how much her child likes me. When they ask me about my secret, I tell them only that I teach through my example, and then they nod and pretend they understand.

In truth they do not suspect how much work goes into each letter.

Say for humor's sake that a stranger offers you candy, that the candy tastes good, and that you feel you should thank him. The fundamental task before you is to find out enough about him to mail him a letter. Basically, get his name and address. You could ask him directly, but from my experience this rarely works. You might just ask for his name; if he gives you first and last name you've all but succeeded. There are never more than a handful of entries in the phonebook for any given name, and you can take as long as you need to scout each address.

Scouting a place has its own technique. I like to drive by the house first to see if there's someone inside. In case there are people on the lawn, you need to hide your interest. If the house has people outside, do not even turn your head. Use the mirrors instead. In any case, I often speed up through the house's block so that observers think that I'm heading somewhere else.

If you spot no one on the lawn, but you see movement inside, you can park your car one or two blocks down the road and make your way slowly back up the street. When you're close, you can take a look from the sidewalk, and if you're sure there are no dogs around, you can even walk up almost to the window.

This is all assuming that you have the stranger's name. If you have no information, you'll probably have to follow him home. If this is the case, keep a safe distance, try to get other helpful information, like his license plate and the roads he drives on, and be prepared to follow him for a long, long time. You might have to do this anyway, as it helps to know as much as possible about each person you thank.

I've polished my practice well, but it's not perfect. I often review the parts of it that, if misconstrued, could call my good faith into question. If my commitment were not quite clear to the recipients, they might brush aside my letters with a huff of condescension, thinking them insincere. Now I write in every letter not only what deed of theirs I'm acknowledging, but also facts about them as would be sufficient to get them interested in what I say.

*6:06 p.m.*

*It was a very simple calculation. My annual salary minus rent, food, clothing, and household items, times the number of years left to work—say, twenty-five—equals my possible lifetime savings. My debt outstanding consolidated at an annual interest rate plus an estimate of litigation fees and moving expenses amounts to my lifetime debt.*

*It was a very simple calculation. A child could have worked it out. I must have done it myself sub-*

*consciously. It stands to reason. In fact the amazing thing would be if I hadn't—but no one could go this long without solving such an obvious puzzle.*

*All the numbers were there. I must have seen them ciphered in the receipt of every purchase I ever made. I must have worked out the problem mentally many times while I waited on a credit card payment. Maybe the banks had crammed the numbers into the magnetic strip from the beginning and all each swipe did was decode them one by one.*

Newspaper ads and clippings offered help graciously from the kitchen floor.

“Get out of debt in 30 seconds!”

“Consolidate your debt today!”

“Is debt weighing you down?”

“Is debt crushing you?”

“Would you like to breathe again?”

Some ads featured anecdotes from everyday people. An approachable, middle-aged woman with fluffy hair had a balloon above her that said, “I thought I’d never climb out of debt. Then a friend pointed me to the Credit Doctor, and one month later I can live debt-free again!”

*The nerve of fluff-headed woman—telling King Midas he can live gold-free.*

*For me there is no debt consolidation. My debt is solid enough.*

For a good while more he pondered.

*One easy payment, he thought, and he felt in the mood for smiling.*



*Monday, October 24*

“Nick Tejada is a thirty-seven year old handyman and the father of two girls. He fixes up old houses before their owners sell them. He charges too much for materials, but he wouldn’t make much otherwise and he’s got two kids to feed. Nick is a decent man; he held a door open for me at a gas station.

“Patricia Coleman is a partner at a law firm. She defends people in court to keep them out of jail—sometimes she defends bad people too. She’s not married, but she has many guy friends. One of them is a man she defended in court. The man was in court because they accused him of selling a very bad thing. Sometimes the man gives Patricia some of the bad thing for her to put in her nose. Remember: never put anything in your nose. What she does is very bad, but to me she was a kind woman. She gave me the right of way at a four-way stop.

“Alex Portz is a sixteen-year old high school student and a lifeguard at his neighborhood pool. He pulled me out of the pool when he thought I was drowning, which is heroic, but it’s his job. At school he works hard and treats everyone with respect. The problem is that sometimes he sneaks out at night and sleeps over with his friend Jason without letting his parents know. The parents don’t seem to know anything about it. That is terrible. Your parents should always know where you are.

“Whom should we say thanks to next?”

*9:41 p.m.*

Slowly, ceremoniously, Ron pulled the new red pen out of his coat pocket, picked up

a legal pad, and sat down at the kitchen table. In a thorny script, with his hand shaking, he wrote “THANK YOU FOR YOUR SILENCE” in huge letters, then he went over each letter many times to make the message easier to read. He ripped the sheet off and clenched it with his left fist. He turned off all the lights in the house, walked out to his front lawn and crouched behind a bare shrub in the tarry darkness.

*One easy payment*, he thought.

At 9:49, he took a few quick steps, and holding up the note, he dove under the wheels of a speeding car.



*Saturday, December 17, 8:57 p.m.*

The teacher came into OfficeMax three minutes before closing. He had a list of supplies—pens, crayons, pencils, paper, stamps—that totaled \$19.01 with tax. He knew where to find each item, but nonetheless he moved at a snail’s pace and browsed each aisle as if he were in a library.

It was his standard mode of operation. He would walk up to the cashier in the one open register, look at his total, and see that he was one penny short. And the cashier would let it slide, and he’d earn his letter. And because it was closing time, the cashier would have to leave, and the teacher should not have to wait outside for more than half an hour.

Ahead of him at the register was a short man in his mid-forties who looked like he had just left a social event, with his shoes and watch full of luster and the smart shirt drenched in sweat. He was facing the cashier, but the teacher could tell that he was pinching out credit cards from his wallet, staring at each one of them, and dropping them on the counter.

The man stopped.

He turned to face the young teacher with his armful of supplies, and with a sideways nod, he let him cut in front of him.

The teacher could not speak. The man was buying a single red pen. As far as he could remember, this was the nicest unprompted gesture a stranger had ever paid him. He doubted if he could ever thank a man of his worth.

The teacher took mental note of the man’s name from one of his stray credit cards. When he heard his total, he handed the cashier a twenty, grabbed his bag, and walked out through the main entrance.

As the teacher walked away, the cashier thought, *What a strange kid*, and then wondered if the man had let him go first because he was embarrassed. *He looks like a rich man, but who knows? We get some weird people this late at night.*

The man pulled the last card out and said, “This one.” He signed the receipt, threw the pen in his coat pocket, picked up his wallet and cards, and left.

Outside, fifty feet from the main entrance, the teacher saw the man come out and plod into the tarry darkness. The teacher had a name to look up, all night to scout him, and the materials for the best thank-you to date. All was, well, *exhilarating*.

He got in his car and drove.

# EVEN THE SUN

Paul Muldoon

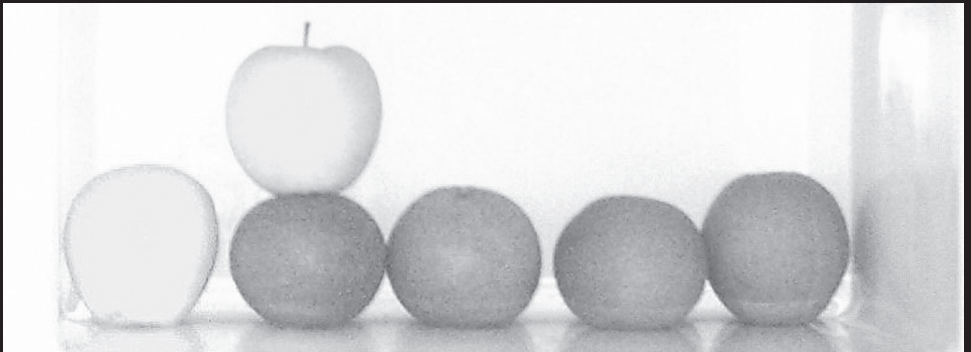
EVEN AN EYE HAS TO PAY SOME HEED  
EVEN AN EYE CAN TAKE IN A STREAM  
EVEN A STREAM WILL GET OUT OF BED  
EVEN A STREAM HAS TO SHAKE A LEG

EVEN A LEG HAS BROKEN SOME TABOO  
EVEN A LEG KNOWS THE PULL OF THE MOON  
EVEN THE MOON HAS SOME GET UP AND GO  
EVEN THE MOON WOULD THROW ME A BONE

EVEN A BONE STANDS OVER WHAT IT UNDERTOOK  
EVEN A BONE SPRINGS BACK LIKE WOOD  
EVEN A WOOD KNOWS IT'S DROPPED ITS GUARD  
EVEN A WOOD KNOWS IT'S CHANCED ITS ARM

EVEN AN ARM WILL ROLL UP ITS SLEEVE  
EVEN AN ARM FOLDS INTO A FIELD  
EVEN A FIELD KNOWS IT NEEDS AN EDGE  
EVEN A FIELD KNOWS ALL GRASS IS FLESH

EVEN THE FLESH CAN TAKE A HINT  
EVEN THE FLESH TRADES HILL FOR HILL  
EVEN A HILL IS AN EASY SELL  
EVEN A HILL WILL GET OVER ITSELF



EVEN IT KNOWS WHEN IT'S PUSHED ITS LUCK  
EVEN IT KNOWS WHEN ITS NAME IS MUD  
EVEN MUD IS ON A SHORT LEASH  
EVEN MUD WILL COCK AN EAR

EVEN AN EAR WILL FOLLOW A DRUM  
EVEN AN EAR LISTENS TO THE BLOOD  
EVEN BLOOD HAS TO GO WITH THE FLOW  
EVEN BLOOD CAN BE GOT FROM A STONE

EVEN A STONE KNOWS ITS NUMBER'S UP  
EVEN A STONE HAS A SHOT AT THE SUN  
EVEN THE SUN HAS TO RISE AND SHINE  
EVEN THE SUN WILL OPEN ONE EYE

# TOPOGRAPHIES

Alexis Shaitkin

When I was eleven years old, my father told my mother and I to go fuck ourselves at the dinner table in front of Helene Flinn from down the street. This was not a normal occurrence in our house. Though they fought frequently, and though occasionally it would turn heated, with my mother throwing something—a shoe, a hairbrush—at my father, they were not usually so vicious with each other, and they always kept their strife to themselves.

My father had promised to come help out at the class parade that we had on the first Friday of the school year. He didn't come, and my mother was livid. She put a great deal of stock in the virtues of education, parental involvement, and reliability. This was the sort of thing she hated him for. And so, that night when we sat down to dinner, she nailed it into him. She had a way with guilt, and rage, and emotions in general. But my father never budged on these things, and that was another thing she hated him for, though she loved him and he loved her.

"I never said I would do it. I said I would do it if I could," he said.

"That's not true. You *know* that's not true."

"Honestly? I'm done with this. I mean I'm just done with it. I spend the whole day making money *for you*, and all you say is that I didn't come to this or show up for that. And now, I'm just tired of it." He rubbed his eyes as if to say that the disagreement was wearying or boring, I couldn't tell which.

"You're tired of it? Do you know your daughter cried her fucking eyes out this afternoon? And still, and *still*, God forbid you should change your priorities. God forbid you should miss a single hour of work for her. And you're the one who's done with it? Do you have any idea what a lousy father you are?"

It was true, I had cried. He was always doing that kind of thing. Breaking plans. But even when I cried, I adored him, and I hated for her to yell at him. She was too violent, I thought, too angry. It wasn't fair; he did his best. A lot of nights when they had dinner plans with another couple, he would call at the last minute to say he was stuck at work, and she would give him hell. "Don't you have an ounce of compassion?" she would scream, "don't you see what you do to me?" I would beg her to stop. I didn't realize then what it must have meant for her to love someone whom she could not count on. Now I think of her going out to all of those dinners alone, making excuses for him, suffering for long hours next to whole couples, the degradation of having other people know where she fit into her husband's life. The loneliness of keeping our small house and waiting for him to come home.

"I have a job," he said. "You have to work when you have a job, even when you don't want to. That's what a job *is*. That's how they work, and I've done it so you don't have to, so don't tell me I'm doing a lousy job because you don't have a fucking clue how much I do."

"You did say you were coming," I said. I knew I should have left them to fight it out between them, but I was so mad at him and after all, they were talking about

me. Though of course, now, I see that they weren't really. My father looked down at me from his seat at the head of the table. We were the kind of family where my father sat at the head, and it never occurred to us that it could be otherwise. I can remember how that felt, how tall he seemed in his chair. My father was a big man, tall and strong from years working summer jobs in slate mills and playing football on scholarship to pay his way through college—the kind of things nobody else in our upper-middle-class town had ever done. And he looked at me with all of that size and those decades of accumulated muscle and grit, looked at me like he couldn't believe that I—this sassy brat—could be his daughter, and I wished I hadn't said anything. I slouched down in my chair and waited for what was coming.

“What did you say?” he asked.

“I said you promised. And you should have kept it.”

“You, too?” he yelled. I stared at my shirt. “Un-fucking-believable! Just like your mother!”

“Don't you talk to her that way,” my mother yelled back at him. She screamed so loud you could hear the pull on her vocal chords. “Don't you say another word to her, not another word or I swear to God I'll hit you.” She was not one to be shamed by her rage. She didn't care about seeming out of control, and in her fights with my father she reached extremes of anger and venom that I do not think I have ever witnessed in another person. Her teeth were clenched so hard her head shook, and she had a wild look in her eyes, like there was something not human in her that was coming out. My parents just stared at each other, hating each other but also puzzled by one another and by the strange moment they were sharing, the perverse intimacy of their disappointment in each other.

From the kitchen, we heard somebody unlocking the front door. My parents both jerked up in their seats, and we all listened. “Hello?” somebody called. It was Helene from down the street, my mother's best friend. She came by sometimes to take cookies or candy from our kitchen because she was on a diet and didn't keep them in her house. We all froze. I think we were all wondering if we would be able to act like civil people, to hold it up for a few minutes. But my mother was not the type to smooth things over so easily. She liked to instigate, and she liked to test my father.

“You don't deserve us,” she whispered through her teeth.

He clenched his knife and fork in his hands, raised them up, and threw them down as hard as he could on the tile floor. “Fuck you!” he yelled. “Just fuck you both!” He shoved his chair away from the table, walked out of the kitchen, passed Helene in the hallway without even looking at her, grabbed his keys and walked out the door. He slammed it so hard a ripple went through the house. My mother put her head in her hands and started to cry. Helene came in from the hallway, looking bewildered, to comfort her. I did not want to see or hear what would happen next. I ran out of the kitchen and up the stairs to my bedroom, where I curled up in my bed. I didn't cry. I was a child with a highly developed sense of doom. I believed in the inevitable unraveling of things, and I had been expecting the coming of a day when our lives would make a break with the past and everything would come undone. I always assumed that they would divorce. Here we were, then, the day at last.

I think that I was a bit awestruck by the great reaches of seriousness that had been achieved, by the way they had so freely changed everything in a few minutes. My father had said *fuck you*, and he had said it to me. I was amazed by the adult feelings that had been directed at me. I just lay there, squeezing my pillow hard, thinking, *my father just said fuck you to me*, and wondering what that meant. *My father just left the house*, and wondering what that meant, too. I remember that I wished that our golden retriever was still alive, so that I could put my head on her soft belly and listen to her breathe and stroke her back. A car had hit her three months earlier, and before my father buried her, he let me see her. He did not believe that children should be shielded from such things, and there she was, her chest broken and deflated, her legs poking at strange angles, her eyes still wonderfully black and alive. I thought of what it must have been for her to see the car and know she was going to die. I cried for her instead, which I guess must have been easier.

I lay there a long time, hearing my mother downstairs, wondering when my father would come back and where he had gone. We had planned to go camping the next morning, just my father and I, an overnight in the Poconos, but now I knew that wouldn't happen. I heard my mother tell Helene that she just wanted to be alone, and that she was so sorry Helene had to hear all of that nonsense, and that really things usually weren't like this at all. When Helene was gone, my mother came up the stairs, and I thought she would come into my room to see if I was okay, but she didn't, and my stomach caught a bit when I heard her go into her bedroom and close the door.

When the fighting started, we had just sat down at the table. We hadn't started eating yet. I thought about our food waiting patiently in the dark on the wood table. I was hungry but too scared to go downstairs, too scared to move off my bed really, the same way I was always scared to get out of bed after a nightmare. I lay there wondering whether my mother would come out of her room or my father would pull in the driveway. First.

It was my mother, as it turned out. An hour later, she knocked on my door and came in. Her eyes were puffy, her face was pink-white and blotchy, and she was wearing a nightgown and slippers. My mother's face was neither pretty nor ugly, but endlessly kind. She was Irish and looked it in a plain, gracious way: deep red hair, a young, soft face, faded freckles that hinted at the bright, bold ones she had as a child. She was thin, but her body was soft and comfortable, and she had the kind of thin, pale skin that goes translucent when it's wet, so that all of the pale blues and greens and twilight purples underneath glowed through. She looked, always and still today, constantly ready to give her life to save anybody else. She walked over to my bed and sat down next to me. "I am so sorry," she said. "He doesn't have a human bone in his body. He's just a monster. He's just an absolute monster." I nodded. "Come here, sweetheart," she said, opening her arms up. I hugged her. Her body quivered, and I worried that she would cry. "And you still didn't eat any dinner," she said.

"I don't care," I said, "I'm not hungry."

"Come down and eat with mommy," she said. She gave me a tight squeeze, and we went downstairs together. My mother pushed her plate away from her as we sat

down, making it clear that she was not going to eat, that she was just here to make sure that I did. The food was cold. The string beans had shriveled up, the rice was hard and pebbly, and my drumstick was dried out. My mother did not realize that the food was cold. She was too distracted, I guess. I ate it quietly, chewing slowly, hoping she wouldn't realize that I was eating a cold dinner, because this was the sort of thing she would berate herself for as a mother. But she didn't. She looked out the window at the backyard. Scratched her scalp. Looked over occasionally to make sure I was eating. She shook her head. "I just don't know," she said, not looking at me, speaking to the air or to God or maybe to my father.

At nine o'clock, he still wasn't back. My stomach hurt. I could feel the flesh from the chicken sitting in me, settling down in my stomach as if to the ocean floor. It was dark out, and the air in the house was thick and tasted like warm water. That was how summers were: windows flung open to lure in the night air and breezes. My mother and I sat on top of the comforter on my parents' bed and watched television. There was a strange mix of feelings in me. I was scared and sad about all that had happened, about the departure of my father and what that might mean and whether or not they would get a divorce. But I was also disappointed, in the most mundane way, that our camping trip had been spoiled—the same way I would be disappointed if it was cancelled for rainy weather or if one of us were sick. I had been looking forward to our overnight for a long time. This was going to be the year when I was to become an equal partner in the trip, the year he would teach me how to do all of the things that he had done for me in the past. We were going to camp up on the high ridge that I had been too small to climb to last summer. At the top, there was a fire tower, and he had promised that we would climb it if I didn't tell my mother, and from there you could see out past Pennsylvania to Delaware and Maryland and New Jersey if the day was perfectly clear. Now, it seemed that everything was spoiled, and I sat next to my mother wondering how you would know whether or not you were looking at Maryland, and whether she would call the police if my father wasn't back soon.

At eleven o'clock, with my father still not back, she turned off the television. We lay next to one another in the dark. "Maybe you'll sleep with your mommy tonight?" she said. "Have a sleepover?" When I was a little girl, my mother and I always slept together in her bed when my father was away on business. It was a treat for me, along with the food she made for dinner—corn fritters with honey, which my grandmother made for my mother when she was a girl. My father hated it. We only ate it when he was away. Looking back, I guess my mother did not much like to sleep alone. But even on that night, when I was eleven, we had not slept together in her bed in several years. I didn't want to. That she asked me to suggested that things were terribly wrong, because I knew that I was too old to sleep with her, but I didn't say anything. She pulled the covers down, and we climbed inside. I tried to lie very still so that she would fall asleep.

But soon, she started crying. I reached out my hand and put it on her back. Her body quivered, and she made little gasps into her pillow. "I have to leave him, don't I?" she asked. "Don't I have to leave someone who can say such awful things to me? In front of other people?" I didn't know what to say. Maybe she did have

to. I thought about how much I had wanted to go camping. I wondered when he would come back. She kept crying, and I just stroked her hair, wondering if she had to leave him or not. She sounded young when she cried, like a girl, and I didn't know how to protect either of us. "I—picked—him!" she said, as if in disbelief at her own choice. Each word came out in a burst because she was crying so hard she couldn't talk. "I picked him, I picked him." She said it over and over.

But usually, they seemed happy together. They teased each other, and they did not hold back from touching in front of me. Often after I went to bed, they would have Helene Flinn and her husband Max over for drinks, and I would hear them all laughing together until late at night. They went to Philadelphia together for a night sometimes to see a show and do other things that I wouldn't have known to guess at then. There are couples who seem to have very little of a secret shared life, to have only a very small world that is expressly theirs. My parents shared a big, deep world, and maybe that was part of the problem.

I fell asleep right up against her. She made the bed hot, and I turned over and over in my sleep, searching for bits of coolness in the sheets. In the middle of the night, I woke up sweaty with my mother sleeping deeply next to me. At first, I was afraid to move, but after a little while, I got up the courage and hurried back to my own bed.

I woke up, and my father was standing over my bed. Either he had been about to wake me up, or he had been standing there a long time watching me. It was gray-light outside, still very early. "Time to get going," he said. "I already loaded the car." He said it without looking at me, not nicely or meanly but just directly. "Get your things together," he said. "Be sure to bring your jacket." So he had come back, and we were still going to go camping. I didn't know if I wanted to go. Or I wanted to, but it had seemed last night that the thing had already been so completely spoiled. But either way, I was going to go, was going to listen dutifully after what had happened the night before. I got undressed and put on shorts and a t-shirt and my hiking boots. I packed my backpack with pajamas, my jacket, and clothes for the next day. I walked downstairs, being quiet because my mother's door was closed, which meant that she was still asleep. There was an English muffin on the table for me and jelly and a glass of milk. My father didn't eat anything. He looked out the window at the fog. "I'm going to wait in the car," he said. "You come out when you're done."

"Did you tell mom we're going?" I asked.

"She knows," he said.

It was still cold out because it was so early. The heat in the car was turned on, and it leached out the smells from the fabric seats. Our car had the particular smell of an old car that has been seriously lived in, like a dirty, wet, towel, burning, stale Cheerios, coffee, baseball mitts, and the echoes of the smell of our dog from years ago, conjured by the heat. There were coffee stains on the seats, and sometimes there would be puddles on the floor when it rained. Nobody in our suburban town drove a car like this. My father drove it by choice—he could have afforded something much nicer—and proudly. He didn't talk to me on the drive. I thought about whether my mother was going to leave. She'd said she had to, and

maybe she did; maybe the next day when we got back, she would be gone, and my father would just stand in the driveway, looking heartbroken. I wanted so badly to tell my father what he didn't know: *she's going to leave you, we should turn around, win her back! Save us!* But I was too afraid, because he wasn't talking to me and because an eleven-year-old is not equipped to say such things to her father, especially when he is big and quiet, as my father was. He was the kind of person you don't meet in the kind of place where I grew up, hardened and simply spoken and without an ounce of irony or sarcasm. A real person, unshaded, clear and real as pond water. And all of this made it difficult to tell things to him, because of the flat, unadorned truth with which everything was always played out with my father. There were no complications, no nuances. You could not tell him something halfway, and I was afraid of the things I had to say.

And so, we rode on, as if he was alone in the car, and I was alone in the car. I didn't tell him, and instead, my stomach hurt, and I curled up in my seat and looked out the window. We were driving through a sunken valley of farms. It was like being at the bottom of a green pan. The fields were all great, sweeping squares and circles that seemed to leap across the earth, and in the middle of the fields were houses with front porches and wonderfully sloped eaves and weathervanes, but no people. That was the strange thing about driving through farmland; you rarely saw anybody, as if the farms tended themselves, and the houses lived out pleasant, solitary lives nestled amongst them. Hills ran down the sides of the valley, and in front of us, where we were driving, were the mountains. They started out green, but further back, they turned blue and hazy, as if the sky was in front of them. The farthest away, low-backed hills were so faint they looked as if they might be clouds. I wanted to tell him she was going to leave him so that he could go back and save her. I wished she hadn't told him I cried. She had done that for her benefit, at my expense.

At the edge of a town, we stopped for gas. I had to go to the bathroom, and when I told my father he said, "Well go on and get the key," so I had to ask the attendant for it myself. My mother still did that sort of thing for me at that age. When I got back, my father was leaning against our car. "Bought you something," he said. It was a pack of Hostess apple pies. I ate it in the car. When I asked my father if he wanted one, he shook his head. "For you," he said, "skinny one." That was what they called me sometimes, an odd, androgynous term of endearment that disappeared when I hit puberty, and it was no longer apt. *Hey, skinny one, come eat your dinner. What'd skinny one do today?* I had the kind of body on which bony parts—elbows and knees and knuckles and ankles—seemed enormous and whose details could be seen through the skin. When I was at friends' houses, their mothers would often say, don't you eat anything, dear? My father said I was just skinny because I moved around and that it wasn't that I was skinny, anyway, but that everybody else was fat now, and that I looked like a genuine, outdoors, American-made kid. Those were the sorts of phrases my father used with utter sincerity. *A real, American-made kid*, like I was a Chrysler in a July Fourth parade. That was the kind of America, the kind of family, the kind of life, that he believed in, and if it didn't exist, then he would make it, earnestly, out of sayings that didn't fit with the things that were in

our world.

It was only just getting to be a hot, full-bodied summer morning when we reached the trailhead. Not that it was much of a trail head, just a dusty turnoff from Route Seven with a small, brown park service sign that you would only see if you already knew where you were supposed to go. My father went around and got our packs out of the trunk. When we both had them on, he took a look around, smelling the trees, scanning the clouds, taking a reading on the general heartbeat of the woods.

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## ON THE LEDGE

Diana Chien

The hawk took its meal;

the head came away  
trailing pink-grey velvet,  
spine popping like a champagne cork,  
black eyes  
frozen  
in the absolute surprise.

seed pods. They'll be coming down in a month or so." The more common ones he would quiz me on. "This one here you must know," he'd say.

"Northern Red Oak."

"Good. What about that whole grove over there?"

"Aspen."

"Good again. You know what it means for there to be Aspen here?"

"No."

"It means that most likely where we're standing was wide, open space a hundred years ago. A farm, or maybe a fire, cleared the whole area out. They grow up on open land. Hear that bird? The one making the flutelike sound, hear the irregular pattern, like somebody who knows what he's doing is improvising on an instrument?"

"I think so."

"The call with the high trill at the end?"

"I think. Yes." I wasn't really sure at all.

"That's a Woodthrush. One of the most common birds in the whole Northeast. A kind of sparrow."

These were the kinds of things we talked about: the way to peel birch bark, the russet-colored sides of the Eastern Towhee and its whirling call, how ice sheets carved the whole region out 10,000 years ago, the limestone and slate threads they

"You feeling good?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Good enough to walk up this mountain by mid-afternoon?"

"Yes," I said.

"I'm following you," he said. He handed me the map.

The trail was straight up. We walked mainly in silence, but every few minutes, he would stop to point something out to me. "See that slim tree along the stream bed there? That's Box Elder. You usually find that down in the valley, but they'll grow along streams even higher up than here. See how smooth and thin the bark is, like skin? And the wings there are the

had left in their wake. My father always wanted me to know things. Facts were important to him. That was his way of being in the world, of knowing where he stood. My mother could float without knowing and without caring to find out—she could like a song that came on the radio and not care at all that she didn't know who sang it, could see an unusual flower in a neighbor's garden, and it would never occur to her to ask what kind it was. But for my father, it was necessary to know what he was dealing with in these simple terms, and all my childhood, and in every category, he tried to instill in me the same thirst for the concrete, to give me the same firm footing in the known.

It was late afternoon and starting to cool when we reached the ridge at the top. The woods up here were solidly made of Table Mountain Pine. The air smelled dark and clarified, full of terpenes, the piney scent particles given off by evergreens. About a half-mile along the ridge, the trees cleared away, and there, soaring above us, was the fire tower. The ground was dusty and scattered with the yellow stubs of dead grass and ragged huckleberry bushes burning away in the August haze. Though we had seen nobody on our hike up, here there was a meager crowd, all lying about in sweat-soaked t-shirts, many with their boots kicked off, eating apples, drinking warm beer. There was a group of shaggy looking teenagers, up for the weekend most likely, and an old man settled by himself, sunning like a desert lizard on a rock.

The fire tower was really an abandoned fire tower, a rickety metal structure with spreading patches of buff-colored rust around all of the bolts. "You going up with me?" my father asked, looking at the tower. We stood right at the base, so that the whole structure seemed as if it might fall on top of us.

"Yes," I said.

We made our ascent with a lot of solemnity and sense of duty. There were stairs missing and no railing and places where rotted wooden planks had been fashioned into ramps. My father made me go first. In case I fell and he had to catch me, I now realize, but at the time, it seemed a way of forcing me to be brave. At the top, there was a small platform with handrails that creaked and groaned in the wind. My father put his hand on my shoulder as I stood in front of him, tucked in, head against his stomach.

"Quite a view from up here," he said.

It was. From up here, you might have believed that the Northeast was still a wilderness. Great swaths of green stretched out as far as you could see, with shifting patches of darker green underneath passing clouds. It was a big, expansive world, all of it more or less the same, a great soak of young green. In the middle of it all, there was a lake that was a brilliant, cerulean color, a color that did not belong in this landscape at all. Even at that age, I had a keen sense of the import of moments. I could feel out the spots where there would be nostalgia in the future, like warm spots in a pond, with that same brief wave of feeling. Up here, it seemed, we lived our one last, great moment before everything came to a head.

"What states do you think we can see?" I asked.

"No way to know," he said. "All looks the same, anyway."

Though I knew it shouldn't matter, I found it unsettling not to know what we were looking at. And though I knew there was no way for my father to know any better than I did where the state borders in this unmarked view were, for some reason, I had expected that he would.

That night at our campsite, my father made me light the cookstove. "You should be old enough to do this yourself now," he said, as he pulled the tiny stove out of his pack. "Eleven should be old enough." He lacked the natural sense my mother had of what things were appropriate for a child, her instinct for child-rearing, her effortless ability to know. My father reared through calculation and estimation and hoped he got it right. "You remember how to set it up?" he asked, and I shook my head. "I'll show you once, and then you'll do it yourself." First, he attached the legs to the main cylinder, then he pumped the fuel bottle, connected it to the stove, and set the safety latch. Then, the stove was ready to be primed. I watched, terrified, as my father opened up the fuel valve just enough to let a small pool of liquid fuel fill the circular dish at the base of the stove. Then, he brought a lighter down right next to the dish, flicked it, and the whole stove went up in a giant flame. It burned a pale orange, flapping in the wind like a sheet hung up to dry, until all of the primer was gone, and the flame shrank to a blue thread before blinking out. The stove now primed, he opened the fuel valve again, and this time, the fuel vaporized instantly. He took the lighter to the stovetop, lit it, and the stove hissed to life, ready to cook our dinner. Then, he turned it off. "Wait for it to cool," he said, "then you try." He handed me the lighter. "I'm going to set up the tent. You call me when you're ready to do it."

I stared at the stove. He set up our tent, and still I sat there, staring. He came back over to me. "Must be cool now," he said. I nodded but didn't look at him. "Let's see it then," he said. "From the beginning. Unhook the fuel bottle and the legs, and then let's see you do the whole thing."

I unhooked the wire legs and set them in the dirt. I opened the safety lock that kept the fuel connected to the fuel line, took the pump out of the fuel bottle, screwed the cap back on, arranged all of the disassembled parts in front of me. Then I set to work reassembling them, until I had the fuel bottle pumped and attached to the stove. Everything was ready to be primed. "Remember not to flinch on this part," he said. "Once you've got that fuel in the dish, you've got to get to it fast before it starts to vaporize. You don't want all of the air around you to be full of fumes by the time you light."

I squatted over the stove, hand on the fuel valve, waiting for the courage to turn it. "Just count to three, and get on with it," he said. "You'll do it fine." His exhortations were firm but so gentle. I wanted so badly to do it. To turn the valve, set a spark to that dark pool of fuel and watch it burn. My hand was sweaty and shaking. I wanted to do it for him. But I had never even lit a match before. Did he know that? Did he understand how much he was asking? Did he not see that I was a little girl, that I couldn't do things like this, that it was wrong of him to ask? We sat there not talking, my hand on the valve, my father waiting; he would wait all night, that was the type of person he was, full of patience and expectations. I counted to three over and over.

“Can’t you do it?” I said finally, turning to my father.

“First you have to try,” he said.

“I did try. You do it.”

“What happened to my brave girl?”

I didn’t say anything.

“You have to be able to do things for yourself,” he said.

At last—no reason as far as I could see why this time was any different from the others—I counted to three and turned the valve. The cup flooded with fuel. I closed the valve. I held the lighter to the cup. I couldn’t light it. The space around the stove would be filling with fumes, I knew; it would only be worse the longer I waited. *Now now now*. But I couldn’t. “Here!” I said, pushing the lighter over to my father. He took it, came over to the stove, and lit it. For a brief moment, the fire flared up to fill a wide space around the stove, then it receded to its normal radius, burning away until the stove was hot and primed. “Maybe next year,” he said.

We ate rice and chili made from a powder. For dessert my father had brought oatmeal raisin cookies that my mother baked earlier in the week. We were a family with an actual porcelain cookie jar that actually held homemade cookies most of the time. When we were finished, he put all of our food and trash into a plastic bag and hung it from a tree, so the animals wouldn’t get to it. Then I went into our tent to change into my pajamas. It was cold out at night this high up, and I shivered when I took off all of my layers. When I had changed, I climbed into my sleeping bag and hugged myself tight. I put my cold hands under my shirt to warm them against my stomach. When my father came into the tent and zipped up the flap, the tent grew warm with body heat.

“What a great day,” he said.

“I liked the fire tower.”

“I’ll tell you, I love to get away up here, even for a night.”

“Me, too.”

“I’m sorry if that was too much with the stove before,” he said. “Maybe you are too young for that.”

“I think I’m too young.”

“I know. I just, I want my girl to be tough. Your mother says that I think I’m raising a son, but I know I’m not. How I see it, it’s especially important for a girl, for, uh, for women, to be self-reliant. I know all of this stuff with trees and stoves doesn’t, well, it doesn’t translate exactly into the world, but my thinking is that if I can teach you all that, then you’ll know that you can count on yourself, and if you can count on yourself, then you’ll never have to sit around and take anything. That’s what I’m trying to do.”

I saw then how helpless my father was. How desperately he was trying to raise me to be a woman who wouldn’t marry somebody like him, who wouldn’t stand for the treatment my mother stood for.

“I know what not to put up with enough,” I said.

“Glad to hear it,” he said. He put his hand on my head and patted my hair. I curled up inside of the great arc of his body. Never mind what he had said to me, never mind what he had done to my mother, what he did to her all the time, what

he would do to her forever. Never mind that he had left, that he had let Helene Flinn see the gutted insides of our family. In that tent, tucked into my father, with his arm coming down over me and hugging me, I felt so safe that it pains me now, so many years later, to think of it. Never mind that it was him who had hurt us, he was still the person I wanted to comfort me. I could forgive him anything then. It was the same with my mother, and I guess that was part of the problem.

We woke up at first light. Ascending the mountain was an all-day affair, but going back down took half the time. The day was cool, and deep in the trees it smelled of moss and wet rocks. We walked back along the ridge, crossing over the dusty brown clearing where the fire tower stood. I looked for the turquoise lake, but you couldn't see it from on the ground.

By noon, we had reached our car, and we drove to the nearest town for lunch at a place called The Blue Moon Eat-In, where we stopped every year on the way home. We ate open-faced turkey sandwiches with gravy in the parking lot at a picnic bench that was swarming with bees. Back in the car, my father turned on the radio. "You put on whatever you want to listen to," he said. I picked a station that played the things I knew my father liked: Johnny Cash and Elvis and country music I didn't know, and we listened to that the whole drive back.

My father slowed the car when we turned onto our street. At our house, he didn't pull in the driveway but instead pulled up alongside the curb. He didn't turn off the ignition. I looked up at him, and he was staring at our house, his eyes glassy and faraway, as if this was already a place of his past, and us sitting in the humming car that smelled of coffee and our dead retriever was part of a memory of the same time. "You should always be kind with your mother," he said. He reached down and unclipped my seatbelt. We looked at each other then, and I could see years of buried pain and confusion welling up like deep, old light in his eyes, and it seemed he was trying with his whole body to say something. He gave me a look that I am certain he meant as a goodbye.

Then my mother came out the front door. She had gotten a haircut; my entire life, her hair had been the same, down below her shoulders. Now it just reached below her chin. She was wearing a light blue dress and sandals and she stood in the driveway, not waving, just standing there. My father paused, and I could see the hesitation painted clearly across his face. Then he turned off the ignition. He unclipped his seatbelt, and we unloaded the car.

"How was it?" she asked.

"A great time," he said.

As we walked inside, he put his palm on her back and held it there. He ran his hand through her short, blush-red hair, feeling its new length, but he didn't say anything about it. We sat in the kitchen, the three of us, drinking lemonade.

"It's the last night of the Franklin County Fair tonight," my mother said. "I was thinking that might be a nice thing to do."

"I haven't been to a county fair in years," my father said. "Where in Franklin is it?"

"In Blindsbury. I don't think it should be more than an hour from here."

"Do you think that would be fun?" he asked me.

“Yes,” I said.

At the fair, we walked through rows of Holsteins and saw baby quail in an incubator, visited the baking building with its first prize gingersnaps and cheese-cake, saw the crochet display and the biggest tomato and smallest bell pepper. We watched the demolition derby—saw people take cars and smash them into each other until the drivers had to climb out the window because the doors were broken in—watched it all as if these things had anything at all to do with us. We weren’t pretending, though. We enjoyed ourselves truly.

Years later, my mother told me where she had gone the day my father and I went camping. She had taken the train to Philadelphia, wearing a dress and heels and makeup, and when she got there she had gotten her hair cut at a salon. Before she left our house, she had called Joel Pyle, who had been her boyfriend before she met my father, and they made plans to meet for lunch. “I just wanted to see if I could do it,” she said. “If I could, then I thought I would leave your father. Not for Joel necessarily. He was a place to test the waters.” She walked through the city proud and ready for everything to change. She sat in parks and looked at the men who walked by, testing herself to see how it might be to be on her own. She must have assumed, deep down, that the day would be a failure, if that was the right word for it. She must have expected that she would return home that evening feeling just a little bit sorrier for having tried. I can’t imagine that she really believed that what did happen would happen. But she did go back to Joel Pyle’s apartment after lunch. “But after I did it just seemed to have nothing to do with your father and me. It didn’t bring anything to bear on whether I should stay or go. It was just a separate thing I did. Once only.” She took the train home, and then she read the newspaper as she waited for us to get back, and that was where she read about the fair up in Franklin County.

How close they had both come to leaving! And who could ever say what would have been better? How we would have been happiest? It’s possible that neither of them were as close to leaving as they seemed. There might have been a very long way between what my mother did with Joel Pyle and deciding to become a single mother. Though the look my father gave me, as we sat in his car with the ignition going, was as real a goodbye as I can imagine, full of his own regrets and his hopes for me.

The last thing I did at the fair in Blindsbury before we drove back home was buy a frozen banana from a stand by the exit to the fairgrounds. I had already split a funnel cake with my parents and at first they said no. Then my father pulled his old, leather wallet out of his back pocket and gave me two dollars, and I ran up to the frozen banana stand with its yellow lights while my parents waited a ways back together. And the whole time while they dipped the banana in chocolate and rolled it in chopped peanuts I could feel them back there, feel that they were side by side, touching. And I felt that this was the safest place in the world, and I hoped so hard that we would all live forever and in just this configuration. But I also knew that somewhere within us, this was not real. I sensed for the first time the great underbelly of that configuration, as if at the same time as we stood here, we were also in a deep sea of submerged mountains, an unreal place where everything was

lived out a second time, rawer and harder.

Now I see how little they knew. They were dependent on each other and disappointed with what they had gotten, and in love, too, and they didn't quite know what to make of their marriage, didn't know whether theirs as it was warranted divorce, if what they did was for the best. Their marriage, what had seemed such an ordinary and familiar and knowable thing to me—them, either fighting or not, but either way, it had always seemed clear what was what—was really a world without coordinates, a world as solid and vast as the view from the fire tower, endlessly green, with nothing to hold onto.

Except that from the fire tower, there had been that turquoise lake, beaming up like a beacon, shining out loud and singing up to the heavens, that one spot of shameless certainty, of absolute location and knowing. It is—the lake, sunk in the valley—the kind of early childhood memory that crops up for a moment every few years, a memory so clouded by time and by the fantastic way that everything is seen as a child that what is true in it is never clear. There is no way for me to tell now whether the lake was the utterly out of place color I remember, or why it would have been that way, what strange things must have happened to it—what factories must have spilled their waste, what rocks must have leached their minerals into the water—for it to look that way. There is no way to know what it really was, that turquoise lake, blazing away with the beauty of everything we ever wanted.

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## CROSSING

Sarah Wheelchel

I am thinking of my lover  
when I hear your feet in the gravel  
but I don't really see or know it's you  
until we've almost passed—  
the proverbial ships in the night  
and my lookout was daydreaming of clean sheets out of the cold.  
You look determinedly ahead—I no longer think of it as past me;  
I am trying to get outside myself.  
Damn, to express that thought takes an 'I.'  
I pass an old man and an old woman  
embraced by the wind together,  
and he is speaking to her  
in a language I do not understand.  
I hear my feet in the gravel.  
My lover I am thinking.

# BOYFRIEND

Ellen Adams

While your shtick was fidelity, mine  
was music. So when the main  
man on the scene in this city wanted to  
take me to the silo for a picnic at 11 at night  
I said I'd go with him.  
I don't know if I ever told you this,  
but I promised myself a long time ago  
that I'd never compromise myself  
unless I wanted to.



Justine Chaney

# MÉNAGE À TROIS AT THE CLUB BURLESQUE

Nicholas Lilly

*Observations from Miss Lilian:*

Mr. S. leans against the door-jam, a half-smoked cigarette clenched between two fingers. Her, for beneath the tailored wool and silk, I have found a person shockingly feminine, her lips pull the paper from its glowing tip in peeling ashes. She wears a suit, pinstriped and navy, her eyes and curling hair hidden away behind the rim of a black fedora. Beneath its lip perch the gildings of a pinned-on monarch butterfly. The room is tight with smoke seeping into clothing and lungs, drying up skin, tautening it, and casting it yellowish. Mr. S. speaks.

“I want to go to South America,” she says, “back to South America. I left there six months ago and haven’t been happy since.” She smiles.

Her companion, a Mr. J. in brown tweed and golfing cap, lights another cigarette for her and places it between her lips.

“I don’t miss him, you must know that?” She laughs. “But I miss everything else, the place, the noise of the cities, even the dysentery.”

Mr. J. laughs; another orange flame glides up to her mouth beneath the darkness of her golfing cap.

“He wrote me yesterday: having a festival and a baby at the same time. Guess it’s a good thing I came back when I did; I could’ve ended up a mother and a hostess—exhausting. And you, my fine lady, what have you to say? Why so quiet this evening?”

“I have never been to South America,” I say.

“Really? You lucky soul.” She inhales.

“I would like to, though, to go that is. I have read it is a beautiful place,” I reply.

Mr. S. grunts. “Too beautiful—it is a continent that can make even food poisoning and the trappings of motherhood seem glamorous.”

“A very free place, I am told...”

“Ah, yes, freedom—liberation amongst the mountains, the trees, the winding white beaches, and the llamas.”

Mr. J. laughs.

And Mr. S. grins. “Especially amongst the llamas.” She jams the stub of her cigarette into the floor, and Mr. J. passes her her own.

“You are very cynical, Mr. S.,” I say.

Mr. S. smiles knowingly, “Yes, I am. And wise, I must say. You have never been to South America?”

“No.”

“You have no idea how suffocating its sort of freedom can be.” She hands

me her heavy cigarette.



*Thoughts from Mr. S.:*

I hate the smell of smoke, the way it drips down your throat in acrid and acidic rolls and puffs out your nose in powdery, cancerous fog—but I love the feel of the cigarettes at my fingertips, the warmth on my face and between my lips as I inhale and swallow their squalor; they offer a contradictory metaphor: death by breathing and the pleasure of a vital warmth at your mouth. Much like myself—I empathize with their cruelty. Where’s my case of cigarettes? Jane has them in her jacket pocket—I brought Jane here tonight, it excited her to leave our rooms at the hotel. For once, she said. She wanted to meet that famous Miss Lilian that I had been telling her of, so charming and demure in his fishnets and Victorian feathers climbing his legs and tilting off the side of his head in a heap of reds and purples—the gaudy colors of flesh freshly bruised. He is not that famous, I assured her. Only so loved because he is convincing, so genuine and winning, so kind, unassuming and upright; it’s funny, is it not? That someone could be lauded for such things when his existence relies on the persistence of lies, on disguise. And they know Miss Lilian lies, all of them do, but they don’t care; they revel in it and fawn over him like disgusting newborns at the udder ... and so do I. I rely on the same deception now. But I win no such praise. Downstairs, I remain unnoticed as the younger crowds cluster round their tables, tight skirts and hairy legs dangling from worn down chairs; they drink in eager gulps and scream their conversations from one ear to the next, spreading obnoxious rumors and laughing in their telephonic circles. Jane tries to listen as we pass—she always tries to listen to passersby, why? I wonder—but she, like the bartenders, like me, like them, I am sure, only hears the music echoing in the walls. Yet she’s laughing, tinnily, like a nervous animal, like ice breaking or the scraping of glass on glass. Quiet, Jane! You don’t *hear* anything, no speech, and we need to go upstairs now, Miss Lilian is waiting. Lighting is futile in this place; lines of red, glowing beads illuminate the clouded halls and stairwells, dangerous eddies of shadows and costumed bodies, doorways like gashes opening in bloody smog along the walls and floors; I imagine this is what death is like, endless dark halls of the grotesque. Miss Lilian is sitting at his usual spot near the blackened windows, a prickled, cactus-like silhouette of feathers, taffeta, and woven hat. Jane is laughing again; I need a cigarette.



*Determinations from Mr. J.:*

Susannah loves that man. I can tell. She listens to him. She speaks to his face as she leans in the door. But I cannot understand. Months ago I met her. We fell in love and we left together. We ran away, as she had done before.

Once, Susannah ran away to South America. But she came back, and she found me, and she loved me. I was happy. But now, Susannah says she was not. And she has come to love somebody else.

He is wrinkled and sick-looking. At his eyes are spotted paints, blue and red. The paints look like they have become part of his skin, so old, so long used. His feathers droop. They hang sadly around his face. They curve down like his mouth. Yet he sits upright in his dress and in his netted stockings and dark shoes. He is so placid and emotionless. He is so fixed. That famous Miss Lilian is sick.

But Susannah loves him. She hands him my cigarette. He smokes, and I laugh. I laugh because I am nervous. I laugh because I do not know what else to do.

“And you, Mr. J. It is a pleasure to meet you at last. Mr. S. has spoken of you most incessantly.” He smiles at me, and I fear his face will crack.

“Thank you, and likewise, it is a pleasure meeting you, as well. Susannah talks of nothing but you.”

“Indeed? How charming of Mr. S.”

Susannah motions for another of her cigarettes. I open the case and discover that it is empty.

“Have you traveled as Mr. S. has, Mr. J.?” Miss Lilian inquires.

“No,” I say.

A waiter walks toward us along the dark hallway. The red lanterns on the wall move as he brushes by them, a wave of crimson fringe. Miss Lilian looks up to the waiter. “Here we are. Would you like another box of cigarettes, dear? Or perhaps something to drink?” Miss Lilian asks me.

“No,” I say, “I have decided to stop smoking.” I stand up and walk toward the doorway.

“Jane, where are you going?” Susannah asks me.

I turn round to face Miss Lilian and Susannah. Susannah stands straight. “To South America,” I say. “I want to see the llamas.” And I leave.

# FOUR NURSERY RHYMES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Larisa Baste

TARBOO 2007 • 39

## I. THE MAN IN THE MOON

The man who pins back the night  
keeps the fabric in his attic,  
cobalt bolts that wane nostalgic,  
collects dustpans, but lets marbles loose,  
and is afraid to kill the goose.

## II. LITTLE JACK HORNER

In his caffeinated adolescence,  
he smacked his lips with prepubescence  
and grinned epiphanies:  
*Cream tangerine and montelimar*  
*I feel your taste all the time we're apart.*

## III. SEE-SAW, MARGERY DAW

Beset, besot, besotted:  
the girls are getting potted.  
Just hope they remember  
not to lay down in the dirt.

Today they ring the rosy,  
and learn their catechism,  
Tomorrow they'll get married  
and cross-stitch till they're blue.

Questions do not burn; they rot.  
If you seek answers, don't get caught.  
*But you'll have to have them all pulled out*  
*after the savoy truffle.*

## IV. DING-DONG-BELL

Beneath the tones in the bones of ears,  
bells cry dry tears.  
No bloated notes can replace a voice,

# TOUCH

Taylor Beck

Mole is different. He doesn't feel like you do. He doesn't live like you do. He doesn't want what you want. You don't understand. You see life with eyes. Mole's eyes are covered with fur. You live above-ground, in open air: blue sky, puffy white clouds, sunshine. Mole spends his life alone in subterranean tunnels, burrowing. Mole was born, lives, mates, and dies in a hole. He eats earthworms; he's usually alone. You walk. Mole digs.

You see the world. You've been seeing your whole life: your mother's face, her nipple, your first bike, the first girl you had a crush on—her face, neck, hair, hips, her legs, her lips, her breasts. Your vision happens when light hits the retina at the back of your eye. You build your world from your retinas. Mole doesn't even have retinas, hardly.

Focus! When you see something out of the corner of your eye, you turn and focus light on your fovea, the center of your retina, to see better. Mole does the same thing, sort of, but his fovea is the middle finger on the front of his face, right next to his mouth: the eleventh ray, his "tactile fovea," as Scott calls it, one of twenty-two face-fingers, eleven around each nostril. His star-nose. You and Mole both live on Earth, in the same world; you breathe the same air, and you touch the same soil. But Mole feels the world differently. The world in his head isn't yours. Mole digs through dirt with the fingers on his face.

Everyone else sees the world; Mole feels it.  
Mole is different. Trust me.



"Imagine brushing your teeth with your fovea!" Scott said. Our three faces grinned in the dorm-bathroom mirror. *More biology. Couldn't he stop being a scientist for just one night! Hadn't we heard enough at the dining hall?*

I was using my finger. Claire and Scott had brushes.

Scott stuck out his tongue at me in the mirror. It was Crest-mint green. Crayola grass green. I crossed my eyes at him, my pointer finger in my cheek. Claire laughed, her lips frothy with toothpaste.

Scott spat.

I held up a bath towel like a curtain between Claire and me. She looked sideways at me in the mirror. Scott made a crazy finger beside his head. I made a V at Scott with my eyebrows, like an angry bull, an angry bull with his finger in his mouth. My lips were tight around my index finger to hold in the mint toothpaste lather. Froth. Like an angry bull! I bared my slobbery teeth at him and growled.

Claire giggled. Scott spat in the sink then kissed her on the forehead.

Scott always takes forever to brush his teeth. He says it's his time to think.

I watched him as he brushed. Front teeth, incisors, molars, gums. He was methodical. His face focused, his blinking mole-eyes lost in thought. Scott is blind as a bat without his contacts. To him, Claire and I probably looked like pinkish, smiley blobs. I guess it's easier to lose yourself in thought when you're blind.

Palette, upper gums, lower gums, tongue. Claire was brushing now. I watched her every move. Every precise methodical move, I watched in awe. What proof was she computing? What bedroom memory was she re-living? What was it like to be a woman?

What was it like to like a boy who likes you back?

"It would be like rubbing your retina across your mouth," Scott mused, washing toothpaste spit out of the sink. "Only your retina is on your finger, not your eye, your finger is on your face—and it doesn't see, it feels."

Scott squinted, smiled, and scrunched up his nose. He bared his teeth and scrubbed some more, so unselfconsciously at-ease, as always.

"That's how the star-nosed mole takes in the whole world."



When I went to bed that night, in the guestroom of Scott's college dorm, all I could think about was biking by the river with him when we were kids. We used to ride our bikes through the woods—over snapping sticks and potholes, past bright-blue robins' eggs, red squirrels and cardinals, box turtles and blue herons. We traded comic books. We went fishing.

I remember watching Scott unhook a large-mouth bass from his line, the gritty, simple way he had of dealing with dirt and blood. I was always squeamish around guts and slime. Scared of getting spiked in the hand with the fish's razor-sharp spines. Scott always had to take my fish off the line for me. I loved to catch them but never knew what to do with the thrashing, frantic, slimy, wet animal on the dock. I knew I was supposed to perform—to *do* something—but I always froze up.

It was just the same feeling I'd have later, when I tried to sleep with girls. Helpless. Curious, in an intellectual way, but frightened and vaguely nauseated when it came to actually *touching* the wet, slimy, bloody, mysterious animal: this alien *other* that I couldn't understand, like a terrifying amphibian from another planet.

Helpless, I felt. There was a gene, it seemed, that men were supposed to have—the gene for caring about sports and cars and women's bodies, for hunting and fishing and dealing with blood and guts, for fixing broken radios and refrigerators—but I didn't have it.

So Scott would take my fish off the line, and I would watch his thigh where his swimsuit rode up: his bare boy's back, his bicep, the smooth, swift way he had of solving problems. I was in awe of his manliness—no, his boyishness, really—the way he knew so effortlessly how to be a boy.

He'd always smile my way as he tossed the bass or bream or catfish back

yours.”

We were best friends, after all. We took care of each other.

Then of course, there was high school. Scott and I stayed best friends, grew our hair long, quit shaving, and our group gained some members, other weirdoes like us, “alternative” kids who liked music and traded books by Kerouac and Salinger. The other guys, always horny, talked incessantly about girls, but none of our close friends dated seriously. We spent our hot southern Friday and Saturday nights cruising round Richmond in our parents’ minivans, listening to Pink Floyd, the Talking Heads, or the Flaming Lips, fighting about politics. We spent lots of late nights at 3rd Street Diner, talking Nietzsche or Ayn Rand, the latest, hip philosophical trend or band or independent movie. We were different, we felt. We were all different. We were *intellectuals*, or “artists” whatever that meant, or at least bohemians: we were *hip*. We were different, we thought, from the rest of the world, and like one another.

We were brothers, all of us; we loved each other.



I tossed in my rented bed, in Scott’s dorm. My head felt hot.

What can you say? How can I say—how can I tell what to say. What to say. How do you tell someone? What do you say? A friend. Not someone. A friend. My best. How do you, how can you, what do you say? “*I love you. I always loved you.*” No no no no no no—What do you say? How not to change. Please, please don’t change! Don’t let *us* change. My best. Friend. My friend. I need you. Please. “*I met this girl...*” “*O Scott! I’m so happy! For you. I’m so happy for you—*” “*She loves science, like me.*” Like you! Not me. Not like you. I like you. You. You. “*She wants to be a surgeon. A doctor a doctor a doctor like me.*” Like you. “*Claire.*” A doctor. Science. Like you. Not me. Like you. *I like you.* “I like you.” I like you. “*Scott.*” God, I like you.



We did, we loved each other. And we weren’t afraid to show it. Confident in our sexuality—or they were, anyway—we showed our warm, brotherly fraternity with huge hugs, loving arms around the back, shoulder touches, and handshakes. Great big bear-hugs and “great-to-see-yous,” and nights of movie-watching puppy-piled together on the living room couch at 2 am, arms and legs all akimbo and intertwined. Uptight athletes, frat boys, jocks, and squares could be damned—haze one another, beat each other up, treat each other like crap to show how much they cared—but we weren’t repressed, we weren’t inhibited. We were free. We were best friends, we loved each other, and we weren’t too insecure to show it.



Recently, I overheard Scott and one of our high school buddies, Jack, talking over beers at a summer home-from-college party.

“You know, I was thinking lately,” Jack said, lighting a Marlboro menthol (a college habit, our group never used to smoke). “Maybe our way of being physical together in high school wasn’t such a cool progressive thing after all.” He offered the pack to Scott—“Want one?”—with a raised eyebrow. Scott hesitated, then took a long white cancer-stick and stuck it between his lips; I cringed. Jack went on, “I mean, we thought we were so damn *open*, so tolerant, free-spirited, uninhibited, and all that. We were comfortable in our skins, we had something special, our group of guys, and we could damn well show it. We had nothing to hide, nothing to cover up. We weren’t too tough to admit we cared about each other. We were free, and we thought of our group as such a comfortable, accepting environment. We were so *comfortable in our sexuality*. So *open*, we thought. But think about it...”

He exhaled a plume of smoke above his head, blowing rings to show off his college skills. “Imagine if one of us had actually been gay. The way we touched each other all the time, hugging and snuggling—almost *boasting* how cool and comfortable we were—how comfortable, confident, un-homophobic and *straight*.

“We didn’t exactly make it easy to come out in our circle of guys...did we?”



Fingers sweaty, clenched in tightened sheets. Pillow wet with sweat. *I need you in my life.*

How do you, what do you say? How do I tell him I want him I need him I love him I need him. My friend. My best. My only. I want you I need you. You. In my life. I need you. My friend. My best. I need you. I need you to know. Good god! I need you, I want you to know, to know. Me. I want you to know me to love me I need you to need me I want you to want me. *But*. I know. *I know I know*. You. “Claire.” *Your voice, her name*. “*I love her*.” I know you do. Her, not me. No hurt: she a girl, you a boy. I’m burning. I want you, I love you, I need you. I know, I know, “I you too, but not”—it’s okay.

I want you to know.



Of course, being lofty-minded liberals in the south, my friends and I all wanted to get the hell out. We applied to urban, *cosmopolitan* (that was a word we were always using at the time. I think someone had picked it up from the *New Yorker*) liberal-arts colleges in the northeast—NYU, Brown, Wesleyan, Harvard, Columbia—and as the acceptance letters started rolling in, we celebrated together. One night, Scott got into Princeton, to study biology: What else? He was always the one of us, after all, dissecting fish and turtles and

birds—checking out the gills or the lateral line system on the side of a fish he'd just caught—"See those grooves? Those are his ears! That's how he feels vibrations underwater!" That night, the whole group of us piled onto his bed, lit candles and listened to the Flaming Lips' new album *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots* seven times. My arm across Scott's chest, I remember swearing to all the guys that I'd never forget them.

None of us did, either.



I got up to pee in the night. Dark bathroom, cold floor underfoot: cold, dark.

My reflection in the mirror was like a shadow, like a ghost. I could still see Scott and Claire in the mirror, like an echo, phantoms making faces at me. Tongue sticking out, grass green, eyes mad like a bull, playful faces. *Please don't change. Don't let us change. I need you. I want you to know.*

I walked back to my bedroom, slid into the covers. My head hit the pillow. I was so sleepy, so brain-addled, gears were still whirling in my skull. Eyelids like weights dragged me down down down underwater. Underground. Down down.

*I need you to know—*



Digging in darkness. Deep, deep dark.

Deep underground, I'm alone.

I'm cold, ice cold. I dig.

Blind: No eyes. Only touch.

Only fingers: grasping—reaching, digging, clawing, raking—reaching reaching reaching. Reach for what?

I want. I want. What I want.

Dig. Dig. Dig. Dig!

Touch. Only touch. Reaching out, to touch, what? To touch! To touch! I want to touch, to be touched. To feel. I want to feel. I need to feel.

I can't see! I *don't* see, only feel.

I feel. I feel. I feel!

Dig dig dig—cold alone, cold alone—Dig dig—cold alone, cold alone.

I feel.

Fingers, on the front of my face: feel. Dig. Claw. Reach. Grasp. Touch.

Twenty-two fingers.

Focus on the middle finger. Center on the middle finger. Center. Center. Center. Focus. Touch.

No eyes. No eyes to see. No friends.

Only me. Alone.

Dig dig dig—cold alone, cold alone—Dig dig—cold alone.

Cold alone.  
*I need you! Don't leave me alone.*



I woke up to the sound of Scott singing in the shower.  
 The aftertaste of dreams filled my mind, the smell of soil, the rough feel of rocks on my face and hands, the cold. Dreams fell off my mind like the cocoon off a butterfly.

We were friends. Best friends. We had always been friends, since forever. I knew Scott; I knew all of him. I knew what to expect. He knew me, all of me—he *already* knew me.

I knew what I had to do. I took a breath, and opened the door.



Looking back now from so much later, I realize I had nothing to fear.  
 What I told Scott that morning, he already knew. We were best friends, after all.

We still are.



Nora Gross





photo spread by Tiffany Wei

# TOURISM

Milton Wilkins

Havana, 1954.  
*The nude, white back was covered in little, red freckles that started to dance and move across the sheet of skin like a cartoon. Her brunette hair lay impossibly straight and flat against her back as if it was wet or she were standing straight up, most of it not even touching the pillow until I pulled it away from her ear with one free hand. A red right ear wiggled, as it sometimes did when she laughed, as I leaned in to whisper to her and to look at her face again, at her nose and her lips, to see if she was smiling. The sun was coming up. My lips were there at the edge of the pinna when her right hand came in from out of nowhere under the covers and smacked her ear shut like a mosquito was trying to crawl inside.*

With that snapping sound, I'm awake in a blue-tinted bed in front of a window and looking bleary-eyed into what I think is the moon. It's not the moon, it's a lamppost, and her back, the girl's back, looks like malted milk melting in the florescent moonlight from the lights of the building across the street. I'm not going to go back to sleep for a long time. I can't remember exactly what I was dreaming about, but I have an idea, and I normally can't sleep after those dreams, whether I want to go back there or not. I never took a good look at her face, this girl. I'm reaching for her again like she's a tall glass of cold water, when the glass door of the bedroom flies open, three men fly in and drag me out, and I don't really fight them but more flop like a fish as they scoop me up. The girl doesn't even scream, ducking under the covers without making a sound or lifting her head. She must have seen this happen before, and I dig my heels into the rug just in the hope that I can see her lift her head. I just want a face. The faceless men get me facedown in the parlor of the two-room suite as my eyes readjust; all I see is a dark figure by the window and the overturned fern tickling my face. The light's coming in from an awkward angle at this window, and I can barely make out his silhouette.

"Boss wants to see you. Don't worry about your date; she's paid by the hotel." The next words come slow; the man's making sure I can hear him, or my brain's taking extra time to register. "One of your friends broke the rules." I hear the girl shut the double-door between the bedroom room and the parlor.

They grab a few things out of my top drawer and toss me into the bathroom with the clothes like we're both two heaps of dirty laundry.



"I can call Sam. Lutz. I'm—I'm—I'm sure he'd want to know if he's done anything wrong."

It's fifteen minutes later. I'm practically whispering this, dizzy from what

I've been hearing or from the hangover, and my left leg is asleep. There's no chair in the room except for his; it's oxblood leather and studded twice along the back and once down the arms.

"I'm sure he would have no idea."

He shakes his head at me in disbelief and grins, rubbing his greasy hands down his tie to flatten it against his chest. "My people tell me that your friend is strung-out somewhere in *Padré Varela*, so high that he can't remember his own name. That he's being a disgrace of a white man tonight, that's what my people are telling me. You would, though, wouldn't you? Bobby?"

"Ex-excuse me?" Sweat is rolling down my arms between my open fingers.

"Know right from wrong."

I think back. I remember the past five days as fragmented abstracts, so much of it already forgotten or suppressed. It's early in the morning. And there are certain, terrible moments that I remember vividly, but I can't put them into context; they're like the pages of a photo album with no name or date, each one showing something despicable. But I flip the pages rapidly to figure out what I could have done "wrong" by Danny Duvanni in particular. I keep my face entirely placid; I try to betray nothing, no guilt and no remorse. Duvanni stares me right in the eye, looking for it, that recognition, and that mortal fear of his anger that I can't give him just yet. I try to find my backbone; to hell with him, I think, I won't even blink. He swivels around and I'm staring wide-eyed at the leather back of his chair. "Find him."

"Mr. Duvanni, how am I supposed to know where he—"

"Because you're Lutz's friend. Because you walked into my hotel with him, dragging that wasted waste of space in on your shoulder like a duffel bag. Because you were going to be his best man next month; that's what he kept babbling on about in the casinos. If you can't find out where he is then that will end bad for you, Bobby." He cuts me off quietly, uninterested, his back to me. My head's so low I'm nearly kneeling. I'm actually scared of losing the man's attention at this moment; I don't know why he needs me to find Sam, but Danny Duvanni is the law in west Havana, so he could find him with or without me, and so it's better for me that I do him a favor. The worm in me tells me *be grateful you can do the man a service. Be glad you were asked.* I'm thinking about the Christians underneath the Coliseum, the less brave ones just praying for the Roman emperor to spare them from the lions. I used to think about them a lot, the early Christians, back when my parents sent me to Sunday school. Deep, selfish fear can bring out the worst in people, and I used to wonder who the cowards, the newer converts, were really praying to. "It's not that I don't admire what he did," Duvanni continues. "His girl got raped for God's sake," he says with a sudden hint of understanding, swiveling back around.

Blood pounds. Images flash into my head, smiling lips and freckles and bright eyes. I remember everything I'd dreamed about. At the words "his girl" my mind takes off, and I'm thinking about Lilly, and on the word "raped," my blood is pumping backwards in panic, and I want to tear the phone receiver

off his desk to call her home before I start thinking, and start thinking, knowing, that what I'm fearing right now is impossible. Lilly's two thousand miles away in a big, safe, expensive house surrounded by her parents and cousins and trying on her mother's wedding dress. I look up, and I realize that Duvanni's gotten that powerless, piss-myself reaction he's wanted out of me, and when he wasn't even trying. I manage to sputter "who" to him before he can continue.

"His girl. His Cuban girl. Who do you think, his goddamn fiancée? Don't play stupid, you're not buying time; that local slut from the Emperor down the road. The one you two picked up gambling—Yelina something—my boys know her." He gets louder and louder. "My only question would have been whether you helped him, but you don't seem the type to stomach what he did. That besides, he's the one that the soldiers identified."

I squeeze my eyes shut and let out a slow breath. I'm less confused than I was a second ago, in the only way that matters, but I'm still lost. "Other soldiers? Mr. Duvanni, I don't even know what he's done."

During the past five minutes, I've etched a new wrinkle into my forehead; but this time when he shuts me up, my nerves give in, and I can only shut my eyes and start thinking again, blood pounding in my ears. I tell myself, Lilly's safe. I tell myself that Lilly's a safe two thousand miles away.

Duvanni keeps carrying on as if I'm still lying to him, but he's suddenly more patient about it, like the more he thinks about it the less he wants to care. "Cute. Just forget all about it. It'll just slip all of our minds; chalk it up to sundown syndrome or some shit. Look, I have no problem with the chivalry of what he did, even though she was a stripper, you know, and a Cuban; but one of the boys he killed was a Colonel's son and that's that. I'm not saying I don't understand. What guy doesn't want to do what he did to some other guy, some time in his life?" Duvanni continues carrying on like this, since I can't get enough breath in my lungs to talk and still wouldn't get a word in edgewise. "Most of us wait for that chance opportunity once in our life to hurt somebody bad for a good reason. Some of us go looking for fights; but this isn't the fucking frontier. And you wouldn't have taken that opportunity, would you, had it been your girl?" My mind starts to drift in the middle of his sentence. It's at latest two in the morning. If *Lilly* were my girl... "Because you knew where the line was, and you were *thinking*." All I can think about is Lilly. "And you were thinking, 'What would make Danny Duvanni, my generous host, angry today?' That's why I'm so sure about you. I'm sure you'll do the right thing now, right by me and right by you. You're my guest. I'm Batista's guest. You'll help me do what I need done. For your own good."

I have no answer. There's nothing to say. Nero's given me an order, and he wants Lutz dead.

I think about my faceless girl; I think about Lutz's "girl," probably holed up in some hospital if she's that lucky; I think about capitulation to sin and about copulation and about the wedding ring I left in the envelope at the bank with Lutz's traveler's checks. But every other thought I have, every time I try

to shift gears, is Lilly. Now I know I was dreaming about her last night, because she's still in there, inside my head in the shadow of every half-conscious thought. As soon as I realize what Duvanni wants I realize how far I am from her. How far we both are, Sam and I, from anybody. Whatever happens next, just like the last five days, well, it's just like Sam said at the airport.



We were getting off the plane at Jose Marti International. I was frozen stiff from the ride because high-altitude morning air had filtered into the cabin. Sam seemed to jump from his seat directly onto the runway while I dragged my bags slowly down every step, listening for my suitcase with the duct tape on the bottom to rip open on the steel staircase they'd rolled up under the cabin door. Sam had left one of his bags on the plane, the one Lilly had packed for him with his medication, and it was yanking on my shoulder something hard and weighing me down. I should have left it behind under his seat for another planeload of Americans to discover on the return flight, but what kind of friend would that have made me?

I followed him down step by step, just trying to take in the warmth of the sunlight and not dislocate my arm. Sam's arms were wide open like he was stretching, or about to try and fly, just take off from the damn runway back up into the cold, morning air. I stepped behind him to heft the bag over his shoulder when he turned to me and he said, "We're on the moon right now, Bobby, thousands of miles away from Lilly and Becky and the firm and even President fucking Eisenhower." His grin. Wider than mine. I dropped one of my bags and then shrugged his off my shoulder onto the runway, picked mine back up and walked past him. It should have broken both bottles inside. Sam didn't notice. "They know where we are, Bobby, but they're never going to know where we've been."



And all of that compresses into one picture in my mind as I sit there in Duvanni's chair, sweat shrinking my clothes. Sam Lutz standing in the sun bright-eyed and lighter than air. It's the first picture of the photo album, and the caption says *what happens here, stays here*. Duvanni wants me to help him kill Lutz; I'm certain of it now, and there's no dodging it anymore that that's where I've wound up. And the first thought on my mind is that she'll never know. Lilly will never know later what I do right now. I hand myself over. I look up at Duvanni, and he sees the recognition that he's been looking for.

"Lutz is off the reservation." Duvanni finally finishes his thought. The emperor's thumb is pointed dead downward. I feel colder than the far side of the moon. *Lilly forgive me.*

In comes the lion. A muscled monster comes in from the parlor on cue; he throws open the two side doors in the room, and I can catch a draft from

the open windows that penetrates the wall of smoke. Havana is dark and hot tonight, and there is a storm descending. It hasn't rained here all week.

The behemoth is a pale man with thick, red hair; I know Duvanni by reputation likes hiring tough Irishmen and Germans out of New York for protection and their tough looks, preferably ex-boxers. I know this only through Lutz, who told me he'd gotten to know the man while doing promotional work for "Mr. Duvanni's" hotels in the city. Duvanni calls the behemoth O'Hara and tells him to go with me.

"What have you heard about this Lutz guy, O'Hara?"

"He's a sexual tourist. Degenerate's been down here before, on his own. Never made trouble like this, but he does some taboo shit, and I know where he'll go." Completely uninterested. Light brogue. Looking at his feet.

"And the drug angle?" Duvanni's looking at the wall.

"If he's high, and if he's hiding, that's more places to look, and I'm not sure where to start. I'll walk my brothel route and wait to hear something."

I can only gape. He rattles off "sexual tourist" as if that could entirely sum-up the man. *He is this. He is there. He is a dead man.* This is when gravity hits, and I get how serious these people are. They aren't mad. They aren't going to talk to Lutz, calm down, beat us both up, and give us a warning. I keep both feet planted and inhale slowly and deeply and spit out whatever comes to mind, just one final chance to pull away from this insanity; my fingers tap at my thighs through my sportjacket in some random pattern like they're typing, and I can't blink. I can't think. I can only talk.

"I won't see him again until we're both on a plane back to Miami, Mr. Duvanni; and he's probably not coming home. The man's flipped, I think we can both agree on that; he's turned into something else, something un-American, and I've had nothing to do with him since early last night after the casinos. Besides that he paid his own way here; I don't know why I'm even here, Mr. Duvanni, believe me his vacation is his vacation, and I never—"

Duvanni bolts to his feet and howls at me, hands supporting him as he leans over his desktop like an animal on its front paws. "Do I look like a joke to you? There's going to be no plane back, not with the trouble he caused; the vacation is over, and it is your problem because you brought him to my hotel. Or came with him. Whatever; brother's keeper. Be a man, Bobby. Take some responsibility." Duvanni suddenly turns, exhausted, disgusted, dropping his voice and gritting his teeth. To the behemoth, then me: "I gave Yankees like me a playground, O'Hara... you'll find him tonight or you're him. Do you understand me? You'll get hurt." Cigar smoke shoots from his nose; it reminds me of steam shooting out of the snout of a bull in a Bugs Bunny cartoon. A cloud of smoke was already suffocating the room when I arrived. He sits back down and gestures to me with his calm right hand before plucking the cigar stub out of the ashtray.

"Now, relax. Mr. O'Hara here ain't interested in you, boy, and you're in no danger. So you don't have to make excuses for yourself or try to get out of this; we know that you've been a good boy, a good guest down here and that you

can appreciate all that I've given you on the cheap. You like the women? You should; you insisted on the only white brunette I had on tap. Playing out some fantasy, boy? That's what I like to hear. You win any at the casino downstairs? You like the junk, Bobby?"

"Yes, I—" I cough on the smoke. "I won enough to rent the brunette, and I stopped."

"See—that—is good. Restraint is the only thing our white mothers gave us that a man can't afford to lose, here or wherever however. That's the moral. Now get the fuck out."

I'm muttering to myself with my hat crumpling in my hands. I find myself already replaying the conversation, renegotiating, trying to find an angle in that cloudy reasoning, just waiting to wake up in Havana, the place where my best friend told me at one o'clock in the morning that he'd just killed a man, and I'd slept on it like a baby, asking not a single question, dreaming about his fiancée.

"Our guest's in shock, O'Hara. Take him out for some fresh air."

And with that, I am really awake, and the start of a long-overdue hangover has rolling thunder echoing in the soft cracks in my brain. I drag one foot behind the other as my torso decides to turn around before my head does; I'm both compelled by the man's orders and too scared to take both eyes off of his gray reflection in the window and the back of his chair.

All I consciously want to do is go home to Becky, crawl up in bed with her, and never leave her again, not even for work. But the apartment is cold and empty, and while Lilly's at least in Chicago where I live, Becky's in Nebraska with her new boyfriend. She hasn't even visited "home" in more than a month. But when you're standing in an elevator with an executioner right behind you, a coward stops thinking about what he can do with the next ten minutes to change his lot and starts praying to go back in time. I go back to when Becky was good enough for me, better than Lilly, about five years ago. But when I come back to reality, I rediscover anger. I realize that this is not fair all around; Duvanni isn't even going to miss those Cubans that Lutz murdered, or killed in self-defense, or got vengeance on, or however it went down. And I can't understand why a man like Duvanni would care about justice. Whatever happened in Havana, Americans were supposed to come back to America. There was supposed to be no other way. While I can't conceive of him—Lutz—doing it, killing a man, what is more impossible to believe is that O'Hara is standing right behind me waiting to play judge and executioner to a man who's about to be married and for a crime that shouldn't matter.

O'Hara gives me the space I need to think inside the elevator, leaning against the back wall about three feet directly behind me so that I can always see myself outlined in his dark silhouette reflected in the gold-plated doors. I start getting a rash, feeling the red skin bubbling up on the back of my neck the more I think about him, and I stop thinking about a way out of this. My tie is hanging flat like a loose scarf around my collar; I anxiously do it up without even rebuttoning my shirt, my fingers almost ripping it apart in my hands. I

hear something click, and I nearly soil myself, but O'Hara is just playing with a lighter. I reach into my pockets for cigarettes, and O'Hara lights one for me. I focus all of my attention on keeping it from trembling in my mouth.

"We almost never let guests smoke in the elevator cars; it makes them smell like death. Appreciate this privilege." Duvanni must have taught him that line. O'Hara's brogue is light and calming; by the additional light from his lighter, I can easily tell that the man is younger than I am by a little less than a decade. I'm only thirty-seven and maybe a good four years away from my midlife crisis. "Take a vacation in Havana, and you can get it over with early," Lutz had joked with me back in Miami. "Have it all in one night." I take a gamble and try to face the kid down, craning my neck to look right up into his eyes.

"How much 'we' do you think there is in how this place is run?"

O'Hara smiles. "With the people Daniel works for, there is no retirement plan. If his American guests keep getting themselves arrested, then those cabana boys running this country will finally shut him down like they want to, so he can't let that happen, or he'll wind up worse than Lutz. I'm pretty important." Low voice. He's not even looking me in the eye, so detached from all this. The Neanderthal's eyes are on the lighter in his hand; fascinated with the fire, he hasn't shut it yet. It's early in the morning for him, too.

"You just think he's being evil, don't you?" O'Hara continues. "He's just being responsible. He's taking culpa, you're taking culpa, and I'm keeping count." He smiles.

"This happens often?"

"More often than you think."

I used to blanch sometimes, pale, like the moment I got fired from the ad agency I'd worked in for five years without a raise. I know I'm blanching now. But I'm breathing normally. We're making small talk, and that kind of calms me down, like I'm talking to Sam again.

"Now smoke, relax a little, and let yourself come to terms with what's going to happen this morning." He never says it has to happen. He's going to make it happen. He sounds like a cop. Maybe that's the Irish in him. *Lilly*. My thoughts scatter as another headache clamps a vise on my brain. O'Hara clamps his hand on my shoulder. "It's a long way down."

His hands curl tightly around the supporting bar at the back of the elevator that was obviously put there for the drunks to lean on. O'Hara starts whistling. I put on my crumpled fedora. When we hit the lobby, he goes over to talk to Natalie at the front desk, then a minute later he holds the door open for me as we leave.

We hit the streets. Buena Vista, Bayamesa, De Camino, Murmullo; the square block of Padré Varela we cover takes a couple of hours with the rain now pouring down. A number of people just left their convertible Chevies out in front of the strip clubs without putting the roofs up; they were counting on the weather never changing. One turquoise dreamboat is turning into a wading pool; I think about the tiny plastic pool I bought for my eight-year-old

stepdaughter, Becky's kid. I don't think about her long enough to start thinking about Becky again. Just long enough to remember how much I was liked, once. "Bobby," she had finally gotten used to calling me. Her mother never corrected her. Nobody who'd stay married to her mother long enough to be her father and make a real family, but an offshoot she could prune out of her life; a stand-in man. Now she was in Nebraska.

Thoughts such as these are just flooding back in as I'm sitting outside the Emperor with cold coffee in my hands watching the sky turn purple. It's past four or five. O'Hara's walked me past the pubs and clubs like a dog on a leash, and every second I'm remembering a street or a person I grew up with or something about Sam. The big, white house he bought with two wide windows on each floor and a garage. The engagement ring, Lilly's; me picking it out for him, for her. Since we landed, I've never even thought about home or about the people I love, Lilly aside; they were back on Earth. With what I've done with the past 108 hours, I wouldn't have wanted to think about them.

O'Hara's in a strip club. O'Hara's gone to three shows in the past hour. One thing we may have in common: he's done his job too often to like it anymore or be diligent. I'm sure every time he goes into a back room for a private show and the girls ask him if he's a big shot, he just shows them his revolver and gives them the line that he gave me, justifying his spot on the ladder back at the hotel. Then again, maybe his boss is a recluse, too busy on the job to even enjoy the town; maybe he tells people he's Danny Duvanni.

It's still as muggy as it was when Lutz and I arrived, but the delirious heat from yesterday is gone. The florescent explosion from the neon lights and marquees up and down the streets still stirs something in me, something that finally reminds me of Chicago, and I feel that something tickling me when O'Hara clamps a meaty hand on my shoulder.



"Hey."

It was the previous night. Sam had stumbled right past me while trying to keep up, walking right into two women, old mothers with scarves over their heads. He had been too drunk to notice, and I certainly didn't give a damn, but he said "good morning" to them in broken Spanish and threw his back against the doorway to the Chupacabra Club to keep himself upright. His belt was gone. "Hey. You're walking away. Are you trying to walk away from me?"

"What do you want, Sam?" I kept my pace and never turned to look directly at him.

"I want to say thank you," he said as he slung his arms around my neck, and I shoved him off. "I couldn't come here alone this time. Not after last time. It...I would have made a mess of myself, would have stopped taking my medication without someone looking out for me." He hadn't taken anything in over twenty-four hours except alcohol and potato chips, but he'd been too drunk for too much of it to remember how long it had been, and I had never reminded

him. He'd been consuming so much alcohol that mixing it with the pills would have stopped his heart; I knew I'd done him a favor. I had never reminded him to call Lilly, either. She would have told him to sober up. "I need to go back to bed, though. You know where we're staying, I don't . . . I can't find it exactly." He started pointing in two different directions with either hand. The lit façade of the Chupacabra spilled light all over his shoulders and back, and he glowed orange.

"It's still pretty early, Sam. Say. I know of a place." It was midnight.

"You what?"

"I know of a place on the edge of Varela. The concierge told me about it. You'll have fun there."

"That's what you said about the casino."

"And you got yourself a date there, didn't you? That was a nice-looking girl." I mock-jabbed at him but he was too drunk to deflect, and I actually hit him in the chest. He just blinked. I did it again, harder. I punched him.

"Stop it."

"I will when you go back there and pick her up. Hotel's that way. She'll probably know which one it is." I winked at him.

Sam raised his forehead and looked at me with eyes the size of lightbulbs.

"Hey, you won't tell anybody. . ."

"Hey. Far side of the moon. I'll catch up with you."

Then we parted directions, and I made it to the hotel first, fast, sweating, awake and stone sober. I'd asked Natalie at the desk to make the call to Astoria. I'd called Lilly.

"Oh, just checking in. Oh, we're having a great time, Lilly. Oh. Yeah. Your fiancé's. . .well, he's enjoying himself. No I don't know where he is right now; yes, I think I lost track of him, Lilly, but he's really cutting loose tonight! I can't even keep up with the man." Let that put all kinds of thoughts in her head. I knew I'd hit pay dirt when she asked me about the medication; "I tell him on the hour, I'm playing nurse out here." I made her see me as responsible as a Boy Scout. Then I started really talking to her. "You know, I'm really flattered you both decided to invite me to the wedding, I mean my God, be the best man. Christ. I know we haven't always been—"

"That was his decision, Bobby." And she hung up.



I didn't even see O'Hara cross the street from the Chupacabra, and now he's right behind me, the only other man on the Emperor's patio. The rain's stopped coming down; I take a second to wipe my glasses and he drags me out of the chair.

"Get up and stop weeping; you're a sorrier sight than that widower back at the Flamingo. Ha! Grabbed a stripper—" He starts it like he's telling an anecdote to his drinking buddies. I don't turn to stare at him and laugh on cue because we both saw it happen. I keep my eyes on my cup of coffee. "Said she looked like his dead wife, and that he could kidnap her if he wanted! How do you think she liked that late shift!"

"I think the man was drinking rubbing alcohol if he can't tell his wife from a Latin whore. I think she should put up with her job because we keep her fed and warm." I sit

back down. He needs me, so I'll sit right back down and finish my damn coffee.

"You're surly all of a sudden. It ain't her job to be taken for somebody else."

I slam the table with my forearms and spill the coffee all over my sleeves and cufflinks.

"Yes it is. That is their job. She's an ex-wife, and you're an Irish setter if we feel like believing that. That's what we're entitled to, a place on Earth where what we want and what we dream can come true, and your boss and his bosses told us that was exactly what we were paying for! This entire half of the city's a red light district, and it's the only place on Earth that we're supposed to run the red lights."

O'Hara doesn't wind up or even draw his fist back. I don't really feel the initial impact. I fly out of that chair like two men picked me up and threw me. Clutching my bleeding nose and crawling off of the café patio I pull myself up on the railing of the stairs and stumble out into the street. I feel O'Hara grab me from behind and drag me down the last block of Murmullo Street before the dead end.

"Damn Yankees. You backtalk me, but I'm making your dreams come true right now, ain't I? I talked to the man at the Chupacabra, and he remembers you. Pusher."

Moving his hand from my collar to the end of my tie O'Hara unwinds me like a yo-yo and dangles me in front of him, my heels now dragging lines in the muddy gravel. His face turns as white as the sun in the headlights of an oncoming car braking to a halt. O'Hara doesn't notice. He starts backhanding me senseless; things disintegrate into dots.

"You've known where he was all night. You've been jerking me around, boyo." The car's still sitting there, and the man inside isn't honking. Under those lights O'Hara looks like an albino sasquach, and from where he's sitting, the driver has to see his shoulder holster and pistol. O'Hara doesn't look up; he's been to this place before. "So what happened? Did you lose your nerve? You drag him from bar to bar for days, strip clubs; you never let him sleep, do you, you keep him off his medication, keep it away from him, you make sure he hardly eats, and then you get him to try all the things that you don't have the backbone to."

"Sam Lutz is my friend—"

He rips my inside jacket pocket and tosses the bottle at the windshield. It explodes

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## CONVICTION

Laura Fletcher

*Doubt thou the stars are fire*

—Hamlet

Behind Akhenaten's sunny drapes  
squats a small altar to Osiris  
where he kneels to whisper "Daddy"  
after his Aten-Father has fled the horizon.

Hitler blinks his brown eyes,  
oils his brown hair,  
stretches his spine and swallows,  
delicately assured of his short, dark worth.

Surely Gandhi once bit his tongue and,  
rubbing his fingers together,  
desired slick blood between them.

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on impact, scattering dozens of little white pills across the wet hood of the Buick; most of them slide off back into the street and one bounces right in front of my face. I shut my eyes.

“I don’t want this to happen. I’m his best man, I’m his best man.”

“And you know where he went. You showed him the way, and when he wanted to leave, you wouldn’t come back for him. Natalie took that call at the switchboard; she likes listening in. He called you, you son of a bitch. He asked for your help. C’mon, Bobby. Let’s go see the edge of Padré Varela.”

O’Hara bearhugs me back to my feet and drags me by the collar the rest of the way. Someone in the Flamingo must have told him about this place. For the first time all morning, I actually think about Lutz; I think about him as I knew him. College years. Roommates in Brooklyn. Parting ways and getting jobs, and reconvening the day he met Lilly. I’m staring into the broken windows of the abandoned, blue tenement house. The façade is peeling away.

It’s called the “Junk Yard” of Padré Varela. The Shooting Gallery. The Poppy Suites. The horizon’s glowing orange. There’s a bright, golden haze on Gehenna.

“Friends don’t let friends come here.” O’Hara’s voice is a dull echo above me. “What the hell do you think he’s turned into tonight?” That’s not even a question. The next one is. “What could he possibly have done to get you to hate him so much?”

I get that clamping feeling in my chest. I can’t breathe again. I’m terrified for Lutz now, and I’m not even thinking about Lilly, and I’m certainly not thinking about O’Hara. Until O’Hara brings out the tiny revolver and holds it by his side where I can see it, still gasping for air on the ground and completely soaked.

“I didn’t want this.”

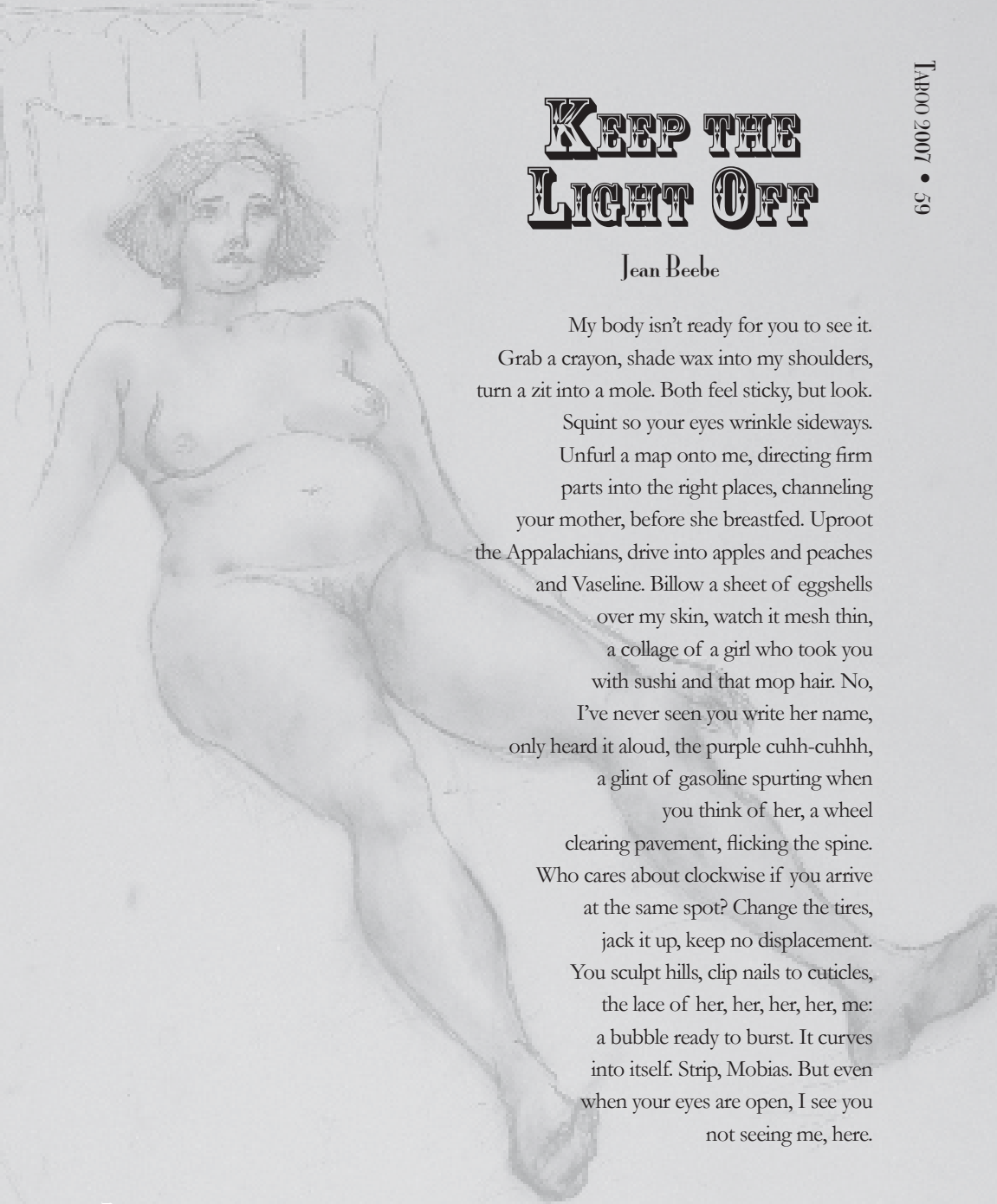
“Shut up. You helped make this. You hung up on him. You just didn’t want to see this.” O’Hara finally turns to me, and he’s got to see the look on my face because he starts furrowing his eyebrows and grinning with maybe a little sympathy. “Show me your elbows.” I yank out my cufflinks and show him; I just don’t want him to hit me anymore. He tsks. Dawn’s coming up.

“This isn’t right. This ain’t the fucking frontier!”

O’Hara walks in like John Wayne; the door seems to almost fly off the hinges. I’m hung over, I’ve been beaten, and I’m not even wearing my glasses. Inside, minutes later, I see flashes like flashbulbs are popping in every window, and I hear the howling of an animal getting killed. I can’t pull myself off the ground. Brightly colored cars roll by with their roofs up, splashing rainwater from the gutter all over me. I try to think about that face, that wonderful, white face and the freckle-pattern around her nose. I picture that long, brunette hair and that smile. It works. But she’ll never come around to me, and I’ll never see it again.

# KEEP THE LIGHT OFF

Jean Beebe



My body isn't ready for you to see it.  
Grab a crayon, shade wax into my shoulders,  
turn a zit into a mole. Both feel sticky, but look.  
Squint so your eyes wrinkle sideways.  
Unfurl a map onto me, directing firm  
parts into the right places, channeling  
your mother, before she breastfed. Uproot  
the Appalachians, drive into apples and peaches  
and Vaseline. Billow a sheet of eggshells  
over my skin, watch it mesh thin,  
a collage of a girl who took you  
with sushi and that mop hair. No,  
I've never seen you write her name,  
only heard it aloud, the purple cuhh-cuhhh,  
a glint of gasoline spurting when  
you think of her, a wheel  
clearing pavement, flicking the spine.  
Who cares about clockwise if you arrive  
at the same spot? Change the tires,  
jack it up, keep no displacement.  
You sculpt hills, clip nails to cuticles,  
the lace of her, her, her, her, me:  
a bubble ready to burst. It curves  
into itself. Strip, Mobias. But even  
when your eyes are open, I see you  
not seeing me, here.

Mania Shpolberg

Mania 07

# WIRTHEY AND YADLER

Jac Mullen

With the shovels I walked behind him up the hill. They all weighed heavy, and I carried them on my shoulder, clanking and shaking every time I took a step. Him in front of me, he walked with a limp, his leg buckling in like a bone snapping when his foot hit the soil, every time tilting his body to one side. On his shoulder wasn't clanking, in the sack, his sack, just lifelessness unmoving, limping to one side as we were walking up the hill.

"The pick, toss it to my spare," he said with his teeth, turning around halfway up and gesturing. I reached into my bag, cut my finger on the pick and bled then pulled it out. He took it in his hands, and it didn't cut him anywhere. We walked.

"The valley," he said then stopped. "Arid," he said then stopped. "Over there," he said.

Up the hill again cracked his limp against the soil, the body's upper half weighed under the force of lifelessness unmoving. And walking then, and then whispering, was the valley of Araby the deeper we climbed into it. Him in front of me laid down the sack at the top of the hill, pointing upward.

"Yadler, look, an owl."

We looked into the sky.

"That's an omen, Yadler."

Him in front of me would often talk on end of omens. I couldn't understand it, even then with the omen there above me. Now I looked at him in front of me with his words flying of omens, and teeth turning around he said:

"Ah, damn it, don't you hear anything I say?"

He looked at me with his eyes again and stood still. Then he made a noise and picked up the sack back on his shoulder. The limp came back, and the more we moved into the valley, a dark welcoming below, the grass and dirt and the crack of his limping leg rose. He went on talking.

"This is dirty work, Yadler. Dirty, dirty work. You looked at his eyes, didn't you? You saw it then, in those two bright sockets? I certainly did. Damned little man, it's there, it's in his eyes. Money, Yadler, that's what you see; swear it to God like two coins, sitting and shining right at you. But it's more than that too. It's more than the coins; it's a little bit of evil, Yadler, and this right here, this is dirty, dirty work."

The valley stretched out gleaming dead all around us, hills and white dust and hollow willows, hollow and rotting blind in the gleaming dead. So many hills and white dust.

The limp then left as the sack left his shoulder, and him in front of me straightened upright, hitting his clothes with his arms and hands.

"This," he said, "looks like the spot."

Raising above him the pick, he went working on the topsoil, solid and frozen under depths of the white dust. The soil rang out screeching like it was crying about it being hit by the pick and like it didn't want to be broken. He spoke again, still picking at the ground:

“Yadler, this soil ... it will break, eventually. Then you and I, we’ve got some digging to do. Dump this sack, yes, dump it right in there. That’s what he said, isn’t it? Just come to Araby and dump it right here. Damn his two eyes! Money, we’re all slaves, all of us peasants to it. Can’t do anything about it. Can’t do anything but this right now, for his eyes, for money. For our debt. They were iridescent, you know. Burning up sockets, those coins in his eyes, burning up the sockets....”

The soil shattered, and I felt in my bones Araby shake, and the white wan dust scattering in the air, and then the manic white dust until it settled filled the air. He said:

“Well, there you go.”

Him in front of me got a shovel in his hand and cracked down at the soil. The beaten ground dry, it fell off the shovel in clumps and made the dust rise again. With every cracking every thrust whispered, and every thrust made Araby talk to us in a low voice through the wind. But then the white dust in the wind fell back down, shading the fields of the gleaming dead around us, and the talking stopped.

“Yadler, why aren’t you helping me? Take up a shovel.” He reached and gave me one, so by the side of him then I started digging.

“Dirty, dirty work. We should be more careful now on, not to use money like that, not to have associations with men like Bartaud...Only bad can come of it. Things so much worse...”

The cracking of every dig yelled aloud.

“Things so much worse ... we see here ... I can’t even think about it, you know, Yadler? I can’t ... but the Marquis said ... it’s not like we’re responsible for this ... person’s ... end, this person’s end ourselves, right? It’s not like we took away any chances, did anything wrong ... and the Marquis—I was looking in his eyes but I heard him say – that this was not our sin. But the ... the one here ... the one here....”

I listened to the valley. The ground kept moaning because by then the hole looked like a big canker, sick and painful, in Araby’s white lip. I felt my arms getting heavy and wanted to lay down the shovel and stand next to him only while he shoveled alone. Because I didn’t, I didn’t want to shovel anymore; the ground moaning was so loud, and the sky was screaming too.

“I mean, he said ... not our sin, that’s the words he used. He told us don’t think about it, don’t shoulder this load ... he laughed, I mean ... his eyes ... this is not our sin, he said. This is just ... something we have to do, something we have to dispose of to erase things, to wash our ... debts....”

The sky screamed gruesome. It was night time all around us, and the white dust was gleaming dead, and I could feel the night come down on us. Its dark black weighed heavy on my shoulders, and I wanted to stop shoveling, the ground moaning.

“We’re washing our debts, Yadler. We just have to dig. He told us, it’s not our sin, just put this in the ground and bury it. And he said don’t open the bag.” He fell silent. “Oh, this is dirty, dirty work....”

The dark gruesome crushed me then finally. Weighted heavy, I put down my

shovel and he kept talking and then noticed.

“Yadler, what do you think you’re doing? Pick up your damn shovel! Pick it up right now!”

I didn’t move.

“Yadler ... this is our debt, together, it’s something we’ve got to do. Pick up your shovel!”

Still I didn’t move. Taking big steps, he threw down his digging and came at me. I saw it in him like flames going around, in his big teeth clamoring at me, and I wanted to pick it up but I couldn’t, I couldn’t because the night was gruesomely dark, and it weighed heavy, and I just couldn’t pick it up. I didn’t move.

“What the hell, Yadler? What the hell? You’re not deaf too, pick up your goddamn shovel, you—” Him in front of me then stopped sudden, the fire in him quelling. Quiet, he looked at the white, wan dust mixing with the air. He breathed in deep. “It’s...it’s wrong, isn’t it? It’s wrong that we’re doing this ... It ... isn’t it Yadler?”

I backed some and fell some, and I wanted to get away from the darkness around me, clutching at my clothing.

“But we had no choice...” he said. “Bartaud isn’t going to ... just let it go, you know? He isn’t just going to forget it ... and then what is it, Yadler? More money? Our homes? Our lives? We really do need the Marquis’ help. This is how he offered it; we had to take it. Didn’t we ... didn’t we have no choice?”

I didn’t move outside, but inside I hid with all my might from the gruesome deadness of the wind. He looked at me for a long time saying nothing. Then he came closer and laid his hand down on my shoulder.

“No ... you’re right ... it is our sin ... it is, and ... and ...”

He turned sudden and quick walked to the sack.

Lifelessness unmoving, he bent his knees and touched the top of it. “We were told not to look inside of it,” he said, fingers searching for the strings that held it shut. I sat down on the ground. “We can’t always do what we’re told,” he said, “not when it’s our sin, too...” Him in front of me undid the strings, while I felt then, in the air, a murmuring from the valley building up into a chorus.

And then in the sack the one breathed.

Him in front of me jumped back shocked with realizing what was going on, for then after breathing, the one moaned, the moaning not of Araby but of lifelessness unmoving, and still him in front shouted loud and kept moving back from the sack breathing heavy.

“Oh holy God holy God holy God,” he said, backing away.

I looked at the sack, the one inside once lifelessness unmoving. His hair I saw was grey, while his face, like mine but younger, lay obstructed by cracked blood and dirt upon it. And again then, he let out a moan, and him in front reacted shouting: “Oh holy god, Yadler, what the hell are we going to do?” The one inside, his eyes open, began coughing and his lungs opened then too, and he started darting around his eyes, lit up and big, bright white, and again reacting now him in front of me shouted then stopped dead cold.

“He wanted him in there alive,” he said, shaking his head. “He wanted him in

there alive...”

Again the one, seeming injured, moaned, and in chorus moaned the valley.

“We’ve got to ... figure this out,” him in front of me said shaking his hands. “What do we do here? Can we ... do this? Should we do this?”

The chorus of the two moaning rose, steady in increase and becoming stronger. Scared now, I looked from the ground at him and tried to hide from the sound of the chorus.

“But ... but my God...”

Him in front of me began moving around frantic in circles, shaking his hands and soon, still moving, spoke quickly:

“Yadler, Yadler, what in hell should we do now Yadler? Because oh my god look now, Yadler, look at this situation we’ve gotten ourselves in. This—I knew it, I knew it all along!” He clutched his hat from off his head, still walking frantic. “Dirty, dirty work I said, didn’t I, Yadler? Didn’t I say this was going to be some awful, dirty work? Because from the start I knew it reeked, putrid like hell, reeking bad and with only awful things coming of it. Because, because—because I, now, I—Oh hell what are we going to do now?”

Him in front of me then began kicking the ground with his boot. With every kicking, the chorus of the valley and the one grew louder still, and I clamped my hands to my ears to stop the shoutings I heard. Finally him in front of me stopped moving around kicking, and the chorus grew again softer. Then, still moving, him in front of me spoke with the white dust floating round him.

“We’ve got to think now, Yadler, we’ve got to wonder, if, I mean, can we? I just, I don’t know, can we?” He fell quiet and still. “Because now, with what we’re faced with ... it’s—” He stopped. The moaning. “It’s—it’s—” he said again then stopped. The moaning again began rising, I could hear, rising fierce. “It’s,” he said again. “It’s, I mean, it’s—”

Clamping my hands to my ears again, at the same time I saw him in front of p and run quick to the one, once lifelessness unmoving, landing upon him with his boots and then shouting; “Shut up! Just shut the hell up! You stupid, stupid bastard just don’t say anything, don’t moan anymore, I’m trying to speak!” And the chorus rose up flying fierce, and it started screaming in my head, and him in front of me kept shouting at the one and said, “You stupid bastard, you stupid bastard don’t you get it? Don’t you?”

Him in front of me suddenly fell backwards, breathing deep for air. In the sack, the one moaned painful. I unclamped my hands, for the chorus of the valley and the one returned lower, lying for the time quiet. Him in front of

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## LIKE A FOUNTAIN IN EVERBUENA GARDEN

Ji Eun Lee

Like a fountain striving against gravity  
To live such a life I wish  
Unlike common waters flowing  
Downwards from upside obeying

*Like a fountain in Everbuena Garden*

---

me stood up and walked towards the hole. He spoke then, his head to the sky.

“His eyes. The whole time it was his eyes, Yadler. Money, I said to you before, two coins and they’re like money; a little bit of evil, seething, in his sockets burning them up. And I knew it ... I knew it all along! And now—and I knew it, and now look, look at where we are, look at where we’ve come ... this ... situation, this awful, dirty situation. It’s men like Bartaud too, I know it. He’s a bad man, Yadler, you look at him and swear it, just by seeing him you can tell the things he’s done. To men, to their families. It’s his fault, really ... that we’re here at all. Him, that God damned debt, it’s his fault, it’s ... it’s...” The hat still in his hand, him in front of me tore it in part.

“Our fault. Just ours. It’s our debt. We were fools for getting into it, with Bartaud, in the first place. And now, Yadler, what are we going to—to—”

Stopping, him in front of me turned his head off the sky and at me, there, on the ground sitting, and then suddenly his eyes were boiling on his face, and he shouted. “Yadler! Yadler, are you listening to me, are you even—” His eyes got narrower, and his nostrils flared wild. “You’re, you’re not!” he screamed, and then ran toward me, throwing loudly his foot down on top of the ground in front of me. “Yadler! Yadler! God damn it Yadler, get up!”

Facing me close, him in front of me sneered and yelled vicious, but I stayed sitting, because I could hear in chorus, moaning, the valley and the one of lifelessness unmoving, rising yet, and in rising I could feel them on my skin and in my head creeping, covering all around me and ready to pounce.

“Yadler, get up God damn it! Get up!” him in front of me yelled again, and the chorus began wailing now, brutal, around me then and coming from all sides. I was listening pained, and it was growing louder and continuously louder, coming after me, so I clamped my hands again to my ears. And at the same time with its rising then, him in front of me yelling grabbed my shoulders and started pulling me to get up. He kept screaming for me: “Yadler! Listen to me, Yadler, listen to me right now! Come on! Just get up!” But I couldn’t, I just couldn’t do it, because with him in front of me rising, the chorus kept rising too, and it just wailed to endless while he just kept tugging harder.

“Get up! Get up right now!” he shouted, and grabbed me then with both hands. He pulled, cursing, with his strength to lift, giving what he could but then finally with the chorus exploded. “Oh, you God damned stupid mute!”

The boot across my face felt blunt and heavy, and I fell backwards. For a second the chorus stopped, and looking up the stars crossed in the sky. “Oh, you stupid goddamned mute, you deserved that,” him in front of me said, turning his shoulder to me. He didn’t say any more. I leaned up slowly to look at him, and as I did the chorus began again, but this time softer and feigning near stasis.

Then, without the chorus, the one, once lifelessness unmoving, again moaned loudly.

“God damn it,” cried him in front in response, “I told you, oh, how I told you not to do that again!” And he flung himself at the one in sack, landing again on him with his boots. With it so the chorus, rising, tore apart in my ears, but fell then immediate as back fell him in front of me, breathing deep for air. “Don’t,” he said

backing away from the one, “just don’t.” Stumbling again then, as if almost weighed still by the sack lifelessness unmoving, him in front of me came back to near the hole and buried his face in his hands. “I just ... need...” he said muttering into them. “I just...” He collapsed himself intentionally down upon the ground, still muttering into his hands. Above him, the moon, looming low and heavy in the sky, shone orange. “I just ... need...” He put his eyes to the soil.

“I don’t want to die. Oh, my God, I don’t want to die, and they ... I have to choose, for ... my safety, within it ... and if ... if for myself, myself because I don’t ... want to die ... to die, so to him ... I’ll have to ... to him...” Him in front of me then slowly raised his head, ending with his eyes straight to the moon, orange, burning up the sky; and the two, together, hung in silence, until finally he spoke:

“I will.”

The chorus then screamed blood and tore apart my head, ripping into my eyes, and for a time, I couldn’t see at all, and when again the chorus grew softer, I could see and him in front of me was in my face staring, in his hand clasping two shovels and shouting. With taking strength he pulled me up and put in my hands a shovel meant for me. The chorus had fallen softer now, in stasis, I could tell, resting but wanting then to rise again. Him in front of me took my both arms by the sleeves and said, with his teeth into my face:

“Follow and don’t you dare fail on me now. We have a debt and ourselves to look out for, so let’s do this right and end this man, end him like the Marquis wants us to. Let’s finish this awful job.” And then again, tearing at my head, I heard the chorus rise wailing, and screaming him in front of me whipped around and saw:

The one, once lifelessness unmoving, had torn free from the sack and was making way down the hill.

“Oh, oh God,” him in front of me yelled and broke into running after the one, and I heard in my head the valley wailing, wailing more frantic and growing with every kick as boots came down upon it. Clamping again my hands to make it stop I saw the white dust manic, covering them in the air as they kicked it up, while below it, in stasis, I could hear the chorus ready, coming up, and then the chorus—it snapped, shattering with a wail brutal, with him in front of me leaping and coming down upon the one and together both slamming loudly to the ground at the bottom of the hill.

And then screaming, all I could hear in my head, screaming, both of them rising strong into the chorus, of the valley in shock, tearing manic at the air and the one, once lifelessness unmoving moaning wild, both then rising in my insides and burning wild. And then shouting him on top of it all, “Yadler, now, come now with the shovel! Hurry!” While the two moved, struggling, the dust around them suspended, static, white by the air. And then into a raging climax everything built and began tearing my insides right powerful through, and with the shovel in my hand, pushed by the cries of it, I stumbled fierce down the hill towards them, and “Hurry Yadler, now, hit him! Hit him!” was on top of it all screaming, and in chorus then it all screamed, formed pulse-ridden growing in steps wailing brutal, and I felt my insides being flailed, and I fought my way down the hill, and “Yadler! Hurry! Yadler!” I could hear being shouted, and I just wanted to make it stop, to make stop

the chorus burning me and tearing apart my insides, and I heard “Yadler do it!” and I just wanted it to stop, and I got closer, and my lungs closed, and my throat closed, and it burned, and the chorus then broke open, raging and ravaged right through me, and I just wanted it to stop, and I heard “Yadler, now!” and the world fell down, and I heard him yell again and again and again, “Yadler now!”

So I did.

Back fell him in front of me, bleeding from the face and choking loud. Standing there over him, I felt the weighted heavy lifting from my shoulders. I struck him again. He started shaking. Raising the shovel above my head, I hit him in front of me one more time. He stayed still.

The one, once lifelessness unmoving, rose up weary to his feet, the white dust settling upon him. He crept backwards from me, the whole time staring wide-eyed.

“Why...?” I heard him say, looking at me, standing upright. There was a silence, continuing, that hung in midair as we stood there staring in the echo of his word.

And then he took off running west.

Looking for a moment, I laid down my shovel and sat upon the dust of the valley, upon the vastness of Araby. In the sky, the glow of the moon shone bright, and with the clouds moving in, it was clear a rain was coming.

Grabbing his legs by the boots, I pulled him in front of me then up the hill, a slow moan escaping from the valley as I dragged him belly-down across it. Eventually, we reached the hole. Lifting him above my head, I threw him into the pit once meant for lifelessness unmoving, now meant for him. His body landing made no sound.

I went to work then setting all of it right. Using the selfsame shovel I had run across his face, I covered him from sight with the soil he had before removed, giving back to Araby, to the breathing land around me, what belonged to it.

By finish it was dawn, and the sun had brought thunder, and with thunder came the rain. Fixing the shovel upward in the ground I left the hill, the white dust settling on me as I kicked it up into the air.

The further I wandered into it, the more Araby spoke to me, soft in hummings and murmurs. I moved south. At late morning, I first turned around and looked back. Still with the singing gentle in my ear, I saw the hill starkly, bright and set out from the thundering around it.

The shovel, fixed skywards in the ground, pointed straight at the moon.

The moon, though setting in the sky, still bright-lit orange from the rain.

In the valley, where I stood.

I heard him in front of me moan.

ישראל  
צפת

# THE YOUNG MEN OF TODAY

Emily Garcia

TABOO 2007 • 67

Thin shadowy silhouettes  
Bone and tendon and solid flesh mannequins  
Four, a prideful tribe  
Catching feminine flies  
With fashionably rotting honey  
Watch the one on the left turn his head  
Like an olive-toned Brancusi face  
But aloof and empty  
See how thick the eyelashes  
And in the limbs  
A sleepy elongated grace  
Formerly reserved for empire-waisted  
Frocks and models  
At a dimly-lit party  
Like slit-eyed foxes at night  
In the green forest

Maria Shpolberg

Maria Shpolberg

# THE DAUGHTER OF SWENEY TODD

Adrienne Raphael

Old Mrs. Van Clemming  
Was a motherly duck,  
With her apple-bright eyes  
And her clickety-cluck.

Her cheery, wee shop  
In the heart of the town  
Sold mittens and sweaters  
And one knitted gown:

For in sewing, in knitting,  
In darning or hemming,  
No one could rival  
Old Mrs. Van Clemming.

Old Mrs. Van Clemming  
Served tea to the poor,  
She gave away cakes  
And crumpets galore.

A corset would have seemed  
A nightgown in a breeze—  
The gown grew so small that  
The lass could not wheeze.

Her sweaters all shrunk  
‘Round the customer’s necks,  
But Mrs. Van Clemming  
Still raked in the checks,

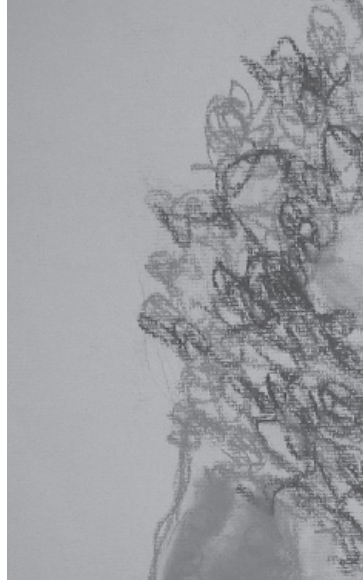
For her knitting was bright  
And her store oh-so-clean  
That nobody guessed  
What the death rash could mean.

Throughout the whole town  
Her scarves choked and killed,  
Her sweaters all strangled—  
But the folks were still thrilled

But no one suspected,  
Oh, none ever knew  
That behind the pink grin  
Of that dear little shrew

Was the crafty murderer  
With her darning and hemming:  
That pearl of a seamstress,  
Old Mrs. Van Clemming.

Maria Shpolberg



She wore white fringed shawls  
And round, little glasses  
She patted the heads of  
The lads and the lasses.

But behind her pink housecoat  
And pepper-pot nose,  
Those needles click-clacking  
Wove strange tricks with clothes.

Her sweaters squeezed smaller,  
Her legwarmers tighter,  
Her mittens forced hands to  
Grow whiter and whiter.

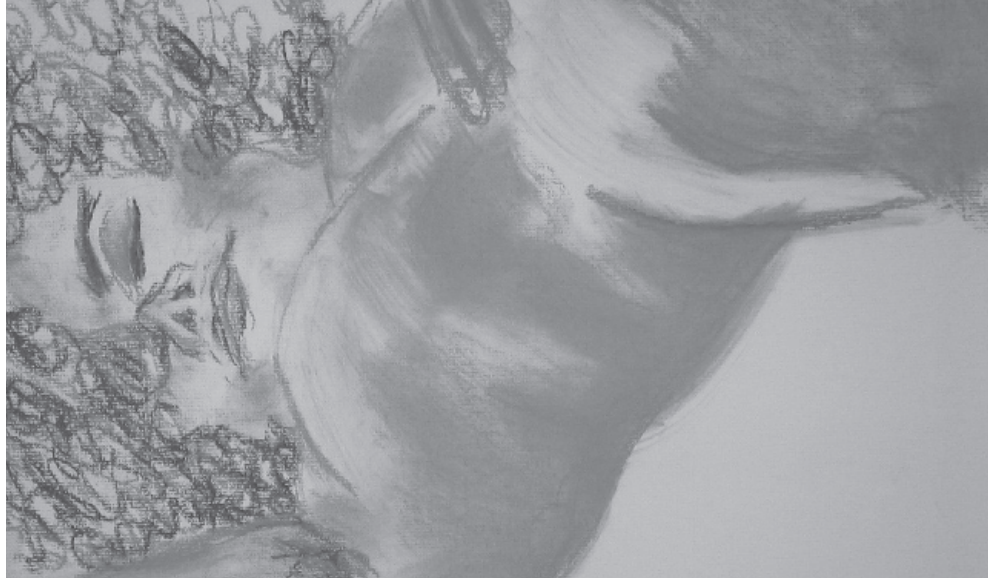
The strange knitted gown  
That a young lady bought,  
Imperceptibly shrank  
Growing more and more taut—

Who purchased the goods  
Of Mrs. Van Clemming!  
Not knowing she'd caused  
All this strange post-mortemming.

“You will never take  
These fine sweaters off!”  
Claimed the sign in the shop—  
And they were so soft

That every celebrity  
Fancied one too!  
Not knowing the yarn  
Would make them die blue.

The morgue baffled the cops—  
From whence were they stemming,  
Choked folk in the yarns  
Of Mrs. Van Clemming?



# WHITE BULL NIGHT

Masha Shpolberg

The moon. Deeply, deeply so spinning down. A silver-blue shadow on the tall church steeple and Ophelia floating by slowly, among the ice in the half-frozen river. Tom's hands, rough hands - one reaches out and takes mine. We were sitting on the old barn fence. The kind I like best, with just two squarish bars between the poles, one to sit on and one for the feet. Deeply, deeply so spinning up down.

Down. The comfort of the down pillow—there's a reason, I suddenly think, to sleep on the same feathers whose quills they wrote with. The greats: the ones with the good handwriting and the parchment. Try making a statement in sans-serif 12-point-font. (I'm late for school, as usual.)

In the fall, the moon gets bigger. Mary-with-the-bell goes around the village and the outlying farms ringing, ringing. She means to say it is the Hunter's moon tonight. And the farmers come out of their cottages, and the women prepare a midnight meal. Then the moon spins out, big and orange, and I remember a myth, Babylonian I think? They taught us in grade school about the goddess Ishtar. Ishtar with the two gleaming white horns who carries the moon on her head.

The only one carrying anything on her head around here is Caitlin, and that's an imaginary crown. She walks down the hall past my locker balancing it carefully on her stiff, long, tri-colored, foil-highlighted locks. And there's the court jester, waiting for her promptly. No, not court jester...he doesn't say much and what he does say is not worth hearing. He just has dignity. Not enough for a King—Prince of Wales, perhaps?

I write: "Tom, too, talks little, especially in the moonlight. That's what I like about him. He looks like a young bull; he has that in his eyebrows, and he looks at me so intensely that I can't help but go spinning down. I'm lucky the Earth is so solid and hard."

The asphalt is swollen with heat and tar. They just put this new one down yesterday from the huge, wailing machines, and already they make us run on it around the goddamn chain-link-fenced place. I'm in the far rear, with the smokers today. I'm thinking of a name for my main character. Somehow they all end up named Clarisse.

The sun is setting and the page is still blank. The walls have assumed their neutral dark blue, and I can't even read the vague line where I scrawled the name of the story, let alone the untouched "Hamlet" essay assignment. When did people stop rising and going to sleep with the sun?

The moon. Now that it's colder, it's golden, going on white. Ophelia's hair is the moon path, flowing before her in the river while Tom holds my hand tighter. There's a white snow-hill, and we have to get to the top. I don't know why, but Tom pulls me. Half-way up the hill is a forest; the moon shines coldly through.

Late again. This time I'm in for it good. Just as I get to the door, I spy Mrs. Nielsen, the V.P., walking down the hall. It's not worth the shit-show she'll put up if she sees me now—I hit the road. On the way out, there's Prince of Wales smoking around back. He gestures me over. If I can bum one, I'll bum, so I take the hint. Wales makes small talk. He seems glad for the company. I wonder how he dares miss a day at the royal court with Caitlin and her handmaidens. I say I'm going to head into town, away from this dump. He offers to walk me. He tells me about his brother, the lacrosse team, how strange he's been feeling lately...unrest. This is probably the most I've ever heard him say, I think. It's a beautiful day, sunny, warm. What a good choice. Wales takes off his jacket, and walks in a wife-beater. On his shoulder I notice for the first time a tattooed crescent moon. How haunting.

"In grade school we drew charts of the moon's phases. I liked that, because it meant the moon had moods. Sometimes it wanted to show its face and sometimes it didn't. That was its right."

I'd written that five days ago—03/15/04. I recite it to him now. It's the closest thing I have to poetry.

In my dreams, I always meet Tom by the far edge of the field, at midnight. No one knows except Annaliese because she followed me once. And I promised not to tell them about James who kissed her in the schoolyard once so she keeps quiet. We share a room, Annaliese and me because she's the next youngest, and when she has nightmares, she shakes. I come into her bed and hold her.

I take off at the corner of Watson. Not that I have any place particular to be, but I don't want to draw it out. I'd rather pull out now, before the whole thing gets stale. Maybe I'm a coward.

I tell Tom I can't climb much further. The pines leer in and the snow is too smooth to hold on to, silver quicksand. They lean and leer all the way up to the top, and there's no progress made, none except the slipping of the snow through my gloved fingers and of the sand through the big hourglass at home, in the kitchen.

It's already afternoon. Three coffee cups later at Slave to the Grind, and I've made no progress on my Hamlet essay. How are we to interpret the explanation of Ophelia's death? Is it suicide? Murder? Accident? I am invited to propose my own explanation. Instead, I set off to look for Wales. He's busy in conversation with two other guys outside the shopping arcade, but he sees me: "Hey, I forgot to say - there's a party tonight at Ryan's place. You know... You should stop by."

So much for *Hamlet*. I give myself until 6; only the introduction done. I think Wales-Wales-Wales and dream of castles and rolling green hills. Wales leads to England, to Scotland, across the sea to Denmark....Why does Ophelia die by water? Because she is pure. She drowns in her own innocence. She dies out of control, falling, drowning, powerless...having no grit of life experience under her fingernails to support her. It's hard to hold on to things when you're well-groomed.

Ha! And here I am, vainly applying nail polish. I already feel that I should have known better, but continue regardless. He had been willing to spend all day with me, after all, had I not been stupid. At 7 pm, I am ready. I sit in the darkening room perfectly still, beautiful, watching the moon sail up over the grimy roofs of the town. Mauricio, our cat, comes in and murmurs the quietest meow.

The party is the usual stream of cars and people and vulgar laughter. Beer, smoke and the usual vomit everyone smells but can't quite seem to place. Slightly buzzed, I wander the rooms doing character study, little sketches I occasionally write down in my little black book. In a room there is Wales. He leaves Caitlin and walks toward the door, toward me.

Tom grabs hold of me and propels me upstairs. I smile at him in appreciation. At the top of the hill is an old mill. I don't remember it at all. The wind rustles the tops of the trees around the clearing, and I swear I saw something white and silvery fly by. Tom squeezes my hand and all the snow falls down off my mitten like flour off of mother's hands when she's finished baking. He looks more like a bull now than ever, and I wonder if I'd been wrong about Ophelia all along, *swoosh* into the water with the garlands trailing behind her...Did Ophelia die during the day?

No time to think about that—I am *swoosh* in the hay of an upstairs bed, and it prickles the exposed skin on my lower back. Tom, Wales, a man is on top of me, moonshine in his eyes from the skylight. And it's too cold, I say, no. But the rough skin is at my naked side. He pulls on my hair and Ophelia drifts by by by inside. I twist and writhe to free myself but all I see is his eyebrow arched violently towards the sky.

And the moon, the moon, the moon....

It is so big and so close. Rough and almost scaly, but Tom is soft, warm, Tom is gone and where I don't know him anymore. The moon has passed through the hole in the wall and is gone. When I close my eyes, I can see it circle, circle, wax and wane and circle, and the starriness is inside, in my eyelids.

I feel the air run by, past my cheeks. Cold, warm—it doesn't matter. The stars are big as apples, and the Hunter's moon is back, back! It circles bloodied in the sky and pales into silver. I can't find it, but everywhere I turn is so bright with moonlight. Down low by a lake, I turn my face and catch sight of a gleaming white horn. My eyes are Tom's eyes, blue. And somehow Wales' too, and oh...that white bull in the lake. I am Ishtar.



Marisa Reisel

# NINETEEN

Fiona Miller

The first time I thought I might be in love with a woman  
 I ran into her one night in a concession stand at the movies,  
 the night after we had lain together like magnets  
 in a bed that belonged to neither of us, shivering  
 and terrified and sure, the night after she had hooked  
 her index finger into me and pointed from between my legs  
 straight up to my heart, which had shattered on impact  
 like hot liquid in a cold glass. I saw her across the lobby  
 and the room melted into a carousel of colors orbiting her,  
 and I was at her side, and I was smiling, and I wanted to wail,  
 and I wanted to fall to the ground, and she was smiling, and I  
 could barely stand up. There is no language to remember  
 what I felt then, what happened in those precious seconds,  
 only that after she was gone I found my sister by the restrooms  
 and I laid my whirling head on her shoulder and sobbed,  
 and my sister, who was thirteen years old at the time,  
 asked me nothing, just reached up with her innocent hand  
 and stroked the tears from my cheeks, smoothed my hair  
 and said over and over *it's okay sweetie, shhh, don't cry, it's okay.*

# MIRRORBOX

Matthew J. Weber

Mona and the eleven maimed soldiers sat in a circle of plastic chairs in the multi-purpose room at the YMCA. An empty coffee urn and a cookie tray with a grease-spotted doily sat on a rickety, fold-up table by the wall. The soldiers had lost arms in conquered deserts and cities overseas; Mona had lost hers on Election Day. She'd just finished driving a bus full of middle-aged, first-time voters to the high school. Police in riot gear had come to break up a group of hairy young people protesting rigged voting machines. There had been gunfire and an explosion, and she had awakened on Thursday with a headache, a blood transfusion, and a right arm that ended at the elbow. Mona was still out of breath, having dashed to the Y from her office, and her gone hand was blazing, clenched as though she were trying to crush a diamond in her fist. She and the soldiers had gathered in the multi-purpose room for an information session about an experimental therapy for hand and arm amputees with chronic pain. The only thing missing was the information.

Eventually, the double door squeaked open, admitting a woman with thick tortoiseshell glasses and hair like a pile of beige feathers. She was wrangling a big box in a vinyl cover. A few soldiers rushed up to help her, but she smiled and shook her head and managed to place the box safely next to the cookie tray. Mona saw a ring on the woman's finger; it was average, a single, tiny diamond in a plain, gold band. *Someone loves that woman*, Mona thought. *Someone met her at a party or a bar, and he's going to marry her even though her hair looks like beige feathers.* Mona didn't feel scornful or jealous. It was just an odd thing, that someone could look at this tortoiseshell-rimmed woman and see every day of his future in her.

The woman unzipped the box's vinyl cover. There were two holes on the side lined up with the table's edge, and a double-sided mirror bisected the inside of the box between the holes.

"My name's Jenny," said the woman. "You can call me Dr. Juracek, but I wish you wouldn't. I'm sure you're all wondering how that thing on the table is going to help your pain. Well, it will."

"That thing?" said a young Latino man—well built, with big features and beautiful black eyes and his left forearm gone. "What do we do, look at how ugly we are until we forget how much our arms hurt?"

The doctor laughed. "OK. Who feels like their missing limb is prone to terrible cramps, and it would feel fine if you could just relax it?"

Ten of the twelve raised a hand or stump, including Mona.

"That's a common response to this kind of trauma, and it happens because the part of your brain that used to register feeling from your amputated arm stopped getting any input after you lost it. Adjacent areas of the brain dealing with sensation took over, and in the process some wires got crossed. So, instead of perceiving touch in your stump, sometimes you perceive pain, in the form

of that terrible clenching sensation. When you try to unclench it, nothing tells you that you've succeeded—the hand's not actually there, so your motor system can't confirm it, and you can't see it, so your visual system can't either. It's the visual system we're dealing with tonight. And I'm positive at least one of you is feeling that pain right now. So that person is going to come up here and put his arms into the mirrorbox."

No one moved.

"Come on. What are you afraid of? You've all been through emergency trauma surgery. You can handle this. Whose arm is hurting?"

Mona stood up.

"All right," said the doctor. She pulled an extra folding chair in front of the mirrorbox. "What's your name?"

"Mona."

"Mona, come sit down and put your arms in the box. Rest your elbow and your stump in the cups in front of the holes, so your forearm is all the way in." Mona sat down and did as she was told.

"Everyone, gather 'round," said the doctor. Mona heard them coming up behind her. "Look into the box."

Mona looked; so did the soldiers. She saw two arms, with identical shrapnel scars on the undersides. The reflection of her left arm perfectly matched where her gone right arm would have been. She looked whole again. She felt her throat tense up and coughed to mask the shudder in her breath.

"Is this a joke?" said the Latino soldier who'd asked the question. "Are you making fun of her?"

"Of course not," said the doctor. "Mona, I need you to make a sort of conducting motion, like this, as if you were keeping time for an orchestra." Mona looked behind her to see the doctor making the motion, a symmetrical swishing gesture originating from the elbows. "Make sure you use both arms. Keep your eyes on the mirror."

"Both arms?" asked Mona.

"Trust me. Just move both arms."

Mona conducted.

It was like the arm was back. She opened both hands and felt the gone arm relax. She wiggled the fingers on both hands. She wanted to tip her head back with the relief but remembered that she had to keep looking in the mirror to keep the pain away. She conducted some more and smiled.

"It doesn't work for everyone," said the doctor, "but I guess it works for Mona, which is wonderful. Regular therapy with this apparatus can sometimes eliminate your phantom limb permanently. There's a signup list for future sessions on the clipboard."

By the time the hour was over, the list was full.



Mona thought of nothing but mirrorboxes on the way back to her apart-

ment.

Ma had called while Mona was out. She had joined Falun Gong, which she called *jwan sab lwun*, a few months after Daddy died and was forever drowning Mona in literature and the good word. The less said, to Mona's mind, about a dumpy, Southern materfamilias raised on Baptist gospel and hellfire sermons joining *jwan sab lwun*, the better.

"Ma," said Mona, "I'll tell you right now, I am not in the mood for your shakubuku."

Ma said she was going to China.

"Come on, Ma," said Mona. "You're not going to China."

Ma said she was going to China to help out her brothers and sisters who were being persecuted, and she would be back in six weeks.

"Do you speak Chinese?"

Ma said of course she spoke Chinese.

"Speak Chinese to me."

Ma said something that sounded like a kindergarten bully's imitation of Chinese. Mona couldn't tell what it was.

"You can't just go out and protest over there, Ma. It's not like here. What if you got a tank drove over you or something?" *Driven*, she corrected herself, gritting her teeth.

Ma said that all this negativity was epiphenomenal to the imbalance in Mona's life.

"You got me, Ma. My problem is I'm epiphenomenally imbalanced—my left arm is longer than my right. Sometimes I walk in circles."

Ma said that Mona's jokes were only hiding her pain.

"Ma, you joined a cult. Don't tell me how to cope with missing Daddy."

Ma said that if Mona took the time to think about the universe as an interconnected whole in which all times, places, and souls were one, she'd understand that there was no reason to miss Daddy.

"Jesus, Ma," said Mona. "I gotta go. Have fun in China."

Ma said some literature was coming in the mail. Mona hung up.



By day, Mona was a social worker.

Taquisha was Mona's age and had five kids and Type II diabetes. Her husband had run off to join a Rastafarian commune a while back, and she was having trouble keeping the kids in clothes and hot meals. She had been fired from Long John Silver's a week ago for sneaking home bags of frozen fishsticks. This was the first Mona had heard about it. Taquisha wanted a bottle of cough syrup.

"Come on, Mona. \$6.95. It's for Nelson! You supposed to help me take care of my kids!"

"Taquisha, I can't just hand you drugs. Or money. I didn't make that rule."

"My baby real sick."

Mona had seen Nelson. He was tiny, pale and fussy, with an unassertive cry. “Why didn’t you tell me you got fired?” she asked. “Why were you stealing food?”

“I’ll get a job. Now how am I supposed to find work with my baby boy be sick all the time?”

Mona massaged her left temple. “First things first. Do you have enough food?”

“No fresh, but I got frozen and canned. We’ll be fine.”

“Then why were you stealing food?”

“Not your affair.”

“You came to me, Taquisha.”

“And if you won’t give me what I need, I’ll go.”

Mona’s gone hand jerked shut.

“My hands are tied. I can’t just disburse on your say-so.”

“I got a hundred-fifty-dollar tax refund last year. I cash that check myself. Y’all need to learn how to manage your budget, Mona. There’s people in need out here.”

Mona spoke softly and evenly. “You think \$150 might have bought you that Tylenol, Taquisha?”

Taquisha levered herself upright. “Don’t tell me how to spend my money. I got five kids!”

“Quit having kids!”

Taquisha’s eyes squeezed deep in their sockets, bright and black. She turned around without a word and slammed the door. The tears sprang from the corners of Mona’s eyes, and her gone hand closed around an invisible diamond.



That evening was canvassing. Mid-terms were coming up; at stake was a Democratic Senate seat the party couldn’t afford to lose. Canvassing was shit work, like telemarketing, and Mona did not want to think about how few minds they changed. But, in the apathy of mid-term elections, any slam of a door could be the crash of a coffin-lid. That was how she had to think about it, anyway, to stay out in the rain and the dark, clenching her umbrella between her breast and her shortened bicep.

Mona was accompanied by two college students, a morose and sensitive boy who held the literature and a girl in a tight shirt who’d convinced him to carry it. Mona gave the speech; people were less inclined to slam the door on an amputee.

Which was not to say that no doors were slammed on her that day. Most people who knew the senator’s name at all had heard it only in attack ads, most of which emphasized allegations of homosexual impropriety—which, as Mona explained, were decades old, poorly substantiated, and originated from an associate at a law firm with known connections to the challenger. It was embarrassing work, but in truth an ounce or two less mortifying than explaining why,

for six years, the man had lacked any legislative agenda of which to speak.

And then there was the Latino soldier with the beautiful eyes in a shabby, little rowhouse, at whom Mona almost yelled for not warning her of his presence. She began the speech: “Good afternoon, sir, if I could take a minute of your time, I’d like to talk to you for a few minutes about our Senator—”

And then Mona stopped, shook her head, and smiled up at him.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Whenever I give the speech to someone I know, I realize how dumbshit it sounds.” She could hear the college kids shifting their weight behind her.

The soldier stepped into the doorway and leaned on the sill, supporting himself with this stump. He smiled briefly at the kids. “Why would you think you can get votes peddling something you know is stupid?”

“It tests well. All the likely voter demographics respond to it. Even a single-word deviation from script does worse. They checked.”

The soldier grinned. “I guess you lost my vote, then.”

“Well, that depends. The canned speech is the one that does best on average.” Mona took a deep breath and looked him in the eye. “Are you average?”

“I heard the average Hispanic male in the USA has less than two arms. Since I got back, anyway.” He shrugged. “I guess that makes me average.”

“Too bad. Well, if I don’t get your vote, I’d guess I’d better be moving on.”

“I guess you’d better.”

“All right,” said Mona, trying to keep the tone of her voice from falling. “Thanks anyway.” She turned around.

“But if you ever want to try to sell the senator to an average voter, you might have better luck at Cenzano’s, over a Corona, say 9:30.”

Mona turned back, but the door was shut.

Mother *fuck*.

“Oh my God, Mona,” said the girl with the tight shirt. It said *I’M VEGAN. ASK ME WHY!* “You’re totally getting laid tonight.”

“Him? We know each other. He’s just playing.”

“But you’ll see him at Cenzano’s at 9:30.”

“I hate Corona.”

“That wasn’t a no.”

Mona glared at her with no particular sincerity; her mind was elsewhere.



Cenzano’s was a dive with good, cheap bar food; the soldier’s name was Carlos Quintana, and his mattress boasted a beat-up copy of Bulgakov’s *Black Snow* but no bedframe; and Mona was a little surprised, when they made love that night, that she did not feel any sort of electricity when his shortened left arm touched her right. He was not the first man she’d had since she lost her arm, but he was the first amputee, and their mirror symmetry made for lopsided fucking; her right breast felt crushed, afterward, from his leaning on it. But he was athletic and inventive, and he laughed at his mistakes.

“Do you know anyone who could make us a mirrorbox?” Mona asked, panting a little bit, after they’d finished.

“Is that what this was all about?” asked Carlos, grinning. “Funny way of asking.”

“Maybe I should ask again,” said Mona.

“Definitely. But give me a minute.”

“I know the therapy is supposed to get rid of the phantom arm eventually. But I hate waiting. How hard could that thing be to build?”

“Mona,” said Carlos, “I just moved back here. I’m trying to find a job, trying to get used to normal life. Give it some time.”

Mona kissed his cheek and pillowed her head on his shoulder.

“Let me show you something,” said Carlos after a few minutes. “Lie back.”

Mona lay back. Carlos began kissing her, moving up and down the right side of her face. Mona tried not to giggle, but gave up. “What are you trying to show me?”

“Just pay attention,” he said, muffled, and continued exploring.

Mona felt his lips on her fingers. The gone fingers. She froze up, wide-eyed. She felt his lips form a smile, both on her cheekbone and on her gone hand.

“How the hell?” she asked.

“I learned it in physical therapy.”

“I thought they had don’t ask, don’t tell.”

Carlos bit her; again she felt it on her gone arm. “Beaker showed me by poking me with a pencil. The special treatment is just for you.”

“But how?”

“It’s the way your brain’s built. The part that feels things on your face is near the part that feels things on your forearm. So when you lose the forearm, the face part starts taking over the forearm part.”

“Get off,” said Mona. “Face me.”

They lay on their sides, face to face. Mona ran the backs of her fingers across his left cheek. “Tell me when you feel my fingers on yours.”

“There,” he said. Her forefinger was on his cheekbone, her pinky near the corner of his mouth. “Let me find yours.”

“There,” she said when he did.

They lay still, touching one another’s faces, for a long time.



Nine days passed. Carlos and Mona made love five times. The therapy for her gone arm was every three days; she was addicted, but he only attended once more. She did not resurrect the topic of the mirrorbox. The Senator was trailing in the polls, five points more than the margin of error. Taquisha did not return to the office.

Ma called. She was in China, she said.

“Where you staying?”

Ma said she was staying different nights with different local *jwan fab lwun* practitioners. She only went outside in the middle of the night to change houses. Everyone was nervous about being tattled on, Ma said.

“Ma, that’s called being informed on. It’s what happens in a repressive authoritarian regime where no one gives a shit about basic human freedoms—”

Ma said she knew it was repressatarian, that’s why she was there.

“What are you going to do?”

Ma said she was going to go out to Tiananmen Square with the rest of *jwan fab lwun* and protest injustice.

“Please, Ma...”

Ma said that someone with Mona’s political inclinations shouldn’t be telling a woman not to speak up for her fellow man.

“Fine. Just don’t get yourself killed. You ain’t no good to nobody if you dead.”

Ma said tell that to Jesus and hung up.



Taquisha missed her second scheduled appointment, and Mona made a trip to her apartment after work. She had memorized its position in the building, a festering housing project in the freeway’s penumbra. As she approached on the street, she saw a flicker of bluish light, as from a television, leaking through the blinds. But by the time she’d reached Taquisha’s apartment, no light shone in the peephole. Mona listened quietly at the door and heard nothing. She called Taquisha’s number and heard the phone ring in the apartment; no one answered, and no voice mail picked up.

Mona knocked at the next door over. A wiry old woman with a shaved head, a terry cloth bathrobe, and a cane opened the door. “What can I do for you?” she said.

“My name’s Mona Debevois. I’m with the Department of Social Services, and I’m looking for Taquisha McAdams. Do you happen to know where she is, or when she might be back?”

“Etta Leonard,” said the old woman. “Pleased to meet you. She left this morning, took all the kids with her.”

Something was frying. Mona’s stomach growled. “You don’t know where she went?”

Mrs. Leonard looked uncomfortable. “I suppose she must have taken them to school, then gone to work.”

“Does she usually leave with all her kids?”

“Oh, yes,” said Mrs. Leonard. “She certainly never, ever leaves them at home alone.”

Mona forced her eyes not to roll. “Ma’am, thank you,” she said. She felt tired. “I’m sorry to have bothered you.”

“It’s fine, honey,” said the old woman. “But if you’re going to stay any longer, I have to get my dinner off the stove.”

“That’s all right. I’m going home.” Mona’s stomach growled again. “What are you cooking, though? It smells delicious.”

“Fishsticks,” said the old woman, her face creasing with a big, wrinkly smile.

When Mrs. Leonard had closed the door, Mona went over to Taquisha’s apartment, dug two twenty-dollar bills out of her wallet and slipped them through the mail slot.

Mona passed by Taquisha’s window again on her way to the subway. After she turned the corner, she waited half a minute, backtracked, and took another look. The cathode-ray flicker had resumed.



Mona was on top when the pain seized her gone arm without warning. Her whole body tensed up, and Carlos doubled up and yelled, and she dismounted, massaging her right bicep. She stumbled into the bathroom and opened up the mirrored cabinet door. She wasn’t tall enough to get her shoulders level with it. “Carlos,” she said. “Bring me a stool or something!” She choked back a sob.

“A stool?” Carlos walked bowlegged into the bathroom, his erection gone. “You put a kink in my dick, and now you want a stool?”

“Then hold me up. It’s my arm, Carlos. Get me level with the mirror.”

“I look like I can pick you up?”

“Try!”

Carlos wrapped his arm around her and picked her up. She bumped against the mirror and swung it away, then repositioned it perpendicular to her chest. She could hear Carlos grunting and shivering with the strain. Mona was not overweight, but she was no swimsuit model either. “Move me forward,” she said to Carlos, and he did; the mirror was between her breasts now. She put her arms up in the conducting position and unfurled her hands, her gone one and her flesh one. She felt her gone arm relax.

“I gotta drop you,” said Carlos.

“Don’t!” said Mona. “I just need a minute.”

“Can you at least get your leg up on the sink, take some weight?”

“I have to stay level with the mirror.”

Carlos set her down gently.

“Fuck it all, Carlos!” she said, before she could stop herself. She could feel his shoulders tense. “Sorry, baby, I’m sorry.” She leaned on the sink with her hand. “I’m so sorry. But you see why we need one of those boxes?”

Carlos looked back up but didn’t reply. Mona closed the mirror and looked his reflection in the eye. “Baby, you OK?” she asked.

They stood for a few moments, both sweaty and panting. Mona felt his erection against her thigh and moved her hand back to grasp it. She looked back in the mirror; his eyes were closed. “Come on, honey,” she said. “You earned this.”

She guided him inside her. He began to move; she arched her back as best

she could with only one hand to support herself against the sink. His hand was in the center of her stomach, pressing on her bladder, instead of on her hips where it would have been if he'd had two. They were both straining to stay upright, a tightrope act on a tile floor. He slipped out, let her go to try to guide himself back in. She braced her shortened arm on the sink and reached back to do it herself. His second entry was hard and sudden, and the pressure on her stump made her bite back a yell. The pain in her gone arm returned, and when she gasped it was for that, not for his half-hearted fucking. Neither of them looked in the mirror. Carlos finished with the rushed humping of a boy afraid it was now or never.

"I'm sorry," said Carlos, still inside her but shrinking.

"It's my fault," said Mona. "I made you do what I thought you wanted."

"I meant about not being able to hold you up," said Carlos. "I should have been able to do it. I can curl 100 pounds, you know that?"

"People are harder to hold than weights," said Mona. "There's no good place to grip onto them." She gasped in pain again.

"What's wrong?" said Carlos.

"My arm. It's back."

"Did it ever go away?"

She shook her head.

"Hold on, baby. I got a few books, we'll get you level with the mirror."

Mona washed off while Carlos ransacked the house for books. She tried to think of what sex had been like when she'd had both hands, tried to imagine clasping her gone hand gently around Carlos's penis, but inevitably it clamped shut, and the accompanying image made her heave with revulsion.



Carissa, the vegan, had all but dropped out of school to campaign. She was greatly amused by her fellow Democrat's trysting with a soldier and alternated between slumber-party mischievousness and grave, jargon-ridden disapproval, sometimes in the same sentence: "When you get fucked over by the military-industrial complex, you get fucked all over by the military-industrial complex." Mona did not know how to answer this sort of abuse except by heaping scorn on Carissa's eating habits, an effective way of changing the subject.

They were canvassing a downtrodden stretch of the such-as-it-was campaign trail, owing to Mona's so-called "demographic appeal," a code word if ever there was one. Which brought Mona, Carissa, a backpack stuffed with literature, and a rapidly cooling autumn evening to a row of tenements bowing like overloaded girders under the weight of the air. Mona knocked on the door. The third rap was torn from their ears by a shriek like steel on slate.

Mona turned back to stare at Carissa, whose eyes were wide and whose face was drained of blood. Terror and aversion rammed her.

Seconds passed in silence.

Trying not to think about it, Mona turned back to the door and knocked

again, harder, faster, louder. She heard a croak from Carissa and tried the door, which swung open. Before Carissa could speak, Mona was inside the tenement. The tiny foyer was painted in piebald brick-red, the floor tiled in pre-scuffed black and white linoleum; several pairs of shoes lay scattered across the floor. There was a kitchen, a bathroom with a poster board-and-Sharpie BABY ESPERANZA POTTY CHART tacked to the door, and a bedroom, its door closed, which emanated regular grunts and arrhythmic sobs and screams. Mona approached the bedroom, and there was a curse, a scuffling of feet and a low moan. She was thrown back by some indistinct brown force that sped past her, hands holding up its jeans, dashing her into the wall in its rush to escape.

Carissa screamed, and Mona turned to the front step. Carissa was breathing hard, holding the backpack of literature like a mace in one skinny, white hand. It had split open, and pamphlets blazoned with the senator's likeness littered the step and floated to the ground without haste, like brick-and-navy autumn leaves. Mona rushed into the bedroom. There was a woman bent at the waist over the bed, naked below the waist and weeping, her face beaten bloody and the space between her legs a red mess. Mona knelt down, suppressing the wild urge to launch into her canvassing patter, and began to stroke the woman's hair and ask questions like "What's your name?" and "Is there anyone we should call?" and "What's the address here?" and listened to the dialing of Carissa's cell phone, boop beep-beep, and said, "It's OK, sweetie, everything's going to be OK, I'm a social worker."



Carissa gave the backpack to the police in the hope of a DNA match. They never contacted her, and she didn't have the heart to ask for it back.

Carlos stopped coming to therapy. He also stopped calling.

Taquisha did not come to Mona's office. Mrs. Leonard would not say anything new, although she winced visibly when Mona asked after Nelson.

And the less said about election night, the better.



Eventually Carlos agreed to meet up at Cenzano's. He said he did have things to talk about, but not on the phone, and he was busy.

"I got a job," he said, during the obligatory small talk over drinks. (Mona was drinking Coke. She wanted to be sober for whatever was going to happen.) "In Washington. The anti-war lobby is looking for soldiers."

"I'll go with you, Carlos," said Mona. "If that's what all this was about, that's my answer."

"No," said Carlos. "I mean, I wish we could do that. But no."

"So what is it, then?"

"It's hard to explain." Carlos made a vague gesture with his shortened fore-

arm. “The mirrorbox. You use it to fool your brain into thinking you’re a whole person. That’s how it works.”

“Carlos, the problem comes from your brain thinking you’re a whole person. You wouldn’t feel anything if your brain understood that your arm wasn’t there any more.”

“That ain’t misunderstanding,” said Carlos. “It’s memory.”

“If it’s just a memory, why is the pain real?”

“Sometimes it hurts just to remember,” said Carlos. “You don’t got any memories like that?”

“Yeah,” said Mona. “All right.”

“Would you give them up?”

“No.”

“I don’t want to forget I ever had an arm,” said Carlos. “I don’t want to forget that someone did this to me.”

“Someone you probably bombed the shit out of three seconds after it happened,” Mona snapped.

“It was an IED. No idea who planted it. That’s not the person I’m talking about.”

“Oh,” said Mona.

“You understand?” said Carlos.

“Not really. I mean, I understand the words. But—”

“There’s a fundamental divide,” said Carlos.

“It’s masochism,” said Mona. “It’s a gesture. I can’t watch you suffer for bullshit.”

“If it seems like bullshit to you, then—”

“I know.” Mona took a sip from her Coke. It tasted sour. She put it on the bar, along with three dollar bills, and kissed Carlos on the lips. “Take care of yourself on the Beltway,” she said. “Don’t get a tank drove over you.”

“What?” he asked. But she was gone.



Mona mentioned her breakup to Carissa, who responded with a teary, half-coherent monologue about breaking up with her own girlfriend, the exact cause of which remained vague but seemed to stem from Carissa’s not being very attracted to women. Out of sympathy and loneliness, Mona invited Carissa over for a night’s dinner and drinking. Carissa was no cook; after ratifying the veganess of Mona’s ingredients, she planted herself on the couch with a glass of wine and began clicking the remote.

“You get BBC News?” she said after a minute. “That’s cool.”

Mona had forgotten about BBC News, although she’d signed up for cable specifically to get it. She listened with half an ear while cutting green peppers for the lasagna, bracing the halved, seeded shells carefully against her stump.

—of protesters from twenty-three nations in Tiananmen Square has secured the release of several hundred Chinese political prisoners, practitioners of the

Falun Gong religion. The protesters, themselves followers of Falun Gong, flew over a few weeks ago in solidarity. Our Beijing correspondent has the story.”

Mona emerged from the kitchen to watch. “Stay on this channel. My mom is on this mission thing.”

“Wow,” said Carissa. “I guess activism runs in the family.”

“I never thought of it that way,” Mona said.

The Beijing correspondent showed footage of a human chain stretched across Tiananmen Square. No tanks were visible. A battalion of police armed with riot gear soon arrived, but no violence erupted. The story moved to speeches from politicians and celebrities. At the end of the report, the camera turned to an old Chinese man who looked like an appetizer next to a stout black matron in a flowered housedress. He was introduced as one of China’s preeminent Falun Gong masters, she as Floretta Debevois of Galveston, Texas, and as the old man began to speak, she began beamingly to translate:

“Our American friends have demonstrated, once again, the power of the committed individual. We have always said that nothing is more powerful than the human will, and again we have been proven correct. We view the release of our brothers and sisters as a beacon of hope and as a sign of better things to come.”

Mona’s mind had already queued up enough counterarguments and counterexamples to last through the lasagna and well into the chocolate soufflé. But she only said, “You can’t argue with results,” laughed, and returned to the bell peppers.



Julianne Viske (upside-down close up)

# OURO PRETO

Donny Dietz

Maria Shpolberg

Here, the parrots flock in tiny, green  
Clouds and dart in and out of mind;  
And through the morning fog,  
The sun is gaining first strength,  
Melting the clouds off the hills and trees  
To which they must have clung, shivering, all night.

We took showers, afraid of the chilly twilight,  
Of the shocking device that warmed the water,  
And in our burlap beds, we piled the blankets high,  
Dreaming of clean cold and white clouds.

Somewhere in town, a slow cab  
Is grinding up the steep streets  
To where it will lug us between altars  
Made of wood caked with gold.  
A woman is sitting down, poised  
To collect coins at the broken door  
Of the broken church,  
Under the baroque frieze that rots above it.  
Somewhere, a man is nursing his tiny son's chicken pox  
And donning a stained t-shirt  
To guide strangers to the darker parts of town:  
To the gold mine (spent) beside the house of the man  
Who runs it (whose fathers ran it, grandfathers  
Dug it) and dreams of advertising on the Internet,  
And to the old slave church,  
Ornate as any other,  
Still curiously unvisited.



And suddenly I'm looking down,  
 Pretending not to notice the money  
 And the bag exchanging hands,  
 Or the smudge on the furtive child's face  
 As he learns first-hand what I,  
 At nineteen, have only read about in textbooks.  
 Yes, it's me who's looking down,  
 From fear, and ashamed of the fear,  
 And just ashamed to be the one they're wishing  
 Wasn't there to watch,  
 But hoping to memorize the cobblestones of  
 These bumpy streets,  
 Nestled in these lush, amnesic mountains  
 Underneath the earth, miles from the city,  
 Worlds from the world, and  
 How they were built to carry out gold  
 On the backs of those reproving eyes.

Out there, the fog is melting from the mountains,  
 Revealing God's golden city,  
 City of churches, city of visible breath.  
 But here, in this clearing, the coffee is strong.  
 The guava and cheese share one piece of bread,  
 Chased by papaya like parrots across the field.  
 From far away, the pristine churches bask  
 In the proud sun, calling like lions  
 To others claiming other precipices  
 Because here, in this clearing, we are above it all.  
 The parrots in company are distant,  
 And green, and drowsy.



Nora Gross

# CONTRIBUTORS

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**Adrienne Raphael** is a member of the class of 2010 from St. Johnsbury, VT. She enjoys singing, drinking tea, doing crossword puzzles, and baking cookies—occasionally all at the same time.

**Allysa Adams** is a junior in the mol bio department, and she is sick of having her name misspelled. She is one of those reclusive artists who nobody can find and whose art is thus of great value.

**Alexis Schaitkin** is a senior in the Comparative Literature Department working on a creative thesis. She enjoys running, hiking, lying in the sun and most other outdoor activities. She is really looking forward to spring.

**Diana Chien** is a freshman majoring in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, spends her spare time knitting and taking photos of fruit flies, and needs to get more sleep. She would like to thank both Emilys for being her writing buddies.

**Donald Elmore Dietz IV** was born clad in overalls amid a Kansan rain that seemed to fall directly from space. Since then, he has thrice scaled Everest, as well as achieving the honorary title of “Donny, Champion of the World.” A member of the class of 2009, he hopes to major in English.

**Ellen Adams** writes songs, letters, and (other words) in notebooks, and takes particular interest in parks, flamenco, cutting hair, being a roller derby groupie, PUDS, Lofts Bay, New Jersey Transit’s Northeast Corridor, and Andalú.

**Emily Garcia** is a fresh(wo)man from Colorado who cares about languages, vegetable gardens, and the Rocky Mountains. Many thanks (and assorted waterfowl) to Diana Chien and Paul De Maret.

**Fiona Miller ‘09** is a displaced desert dweller with a taste for treeclimbing, trains, big east coast cities, window plants, verbs, polaroid film, and snuggling. Special thanks to Mr. Bojangles, Joanie, Yolanda, and the sound of Melissa’s mind at work.

**Jac Mullen** is reminded that he, too, is a stereotype. He listens to jazz and bands from Vancouver and people who sound like Lou Reed. He reads dead white men. He is New York-born, reared in New York and Westchester. This clear when you meet him, which you should do.

Anyone will tell you that **Jean M. Beebe** is a force to be reckoned with. Ze’s a spoken word artist, a film-maker, a radical feminist, and the founder and director of [www.movingforwards.com](http://www.movingforwards.com), an organization that doesn’t “bend” gender, but breaks it.

**Ji Eun Lee** stayed at Princeton as an exchange student last semester. She is studying English literature at Seoul National University in Korea. She is dreaming of writing astonishing novels in children's literature someday.

After graduation, **Joanna Friedman** plans to pursue an M.St. at Oxford on a Fulbright and then hop back across the pond to earn a Ph.D. in English. Eventually, she hopes to become a professor. So Joanna expects to be in school for another six years – at least. Good thing she greatly enjoys literature (and evading the grown-up world).

**Juliann Vikse** '08 came to Princeton wanting to be “artsy,” but blew her chances when she joined the College Republicans as a freshman. A year later, she put the final nails in the coffin by running for Publisher of the *Princeton Tory*. She's hoping that her appearances in the *Nassau Lit*, paired with her roommate's Terrace membership and WPRB DJ status, will give her another shot.

**Justine Chaney** '10 hopes to study philosophy, French, and film. She's not an artist; she just likes to play with what Nabokov called “the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art.”

**Larisa Baste** is a junior in the Politics department who believes the meaning of life is to attend as many meetings as possible, in which case, she's winning. She likes hiding from her inbox, dying her hair, knitting, and radical feminism.

**Laura Fletcher** likes dark chocolate, jasmine tea and high heels. She plans to marry Shakespeare when she grows up, after becoming a rock star and ruler of a small country.

**Maria Shpolberg** comes from the Ukraine and goes to Princeton. Now, she is quite busy being the prose editor, story writing, Prince-article-writing, viz-artering, acting, and briefly, ballroom dancing, whereas before, she was in the Ukraine.

**Marisa Reisel** is a senior, originally from Los Angeles, California. Marisa has been making art for the majority of her life and is currently an Art & Archeology/Visual Arts major concentrating in painting.

**Matt Weber** is a graduate student in psychology and neuroscience.

**Milton Perry S. Wilkins** is a sophomore and Politics major from Saint Louis, MO. His favorite authors are James Ellroy, Tom Wolfe, and fellow Missourian Mark Twain. He is honored to be recognized by America's second-oldest college literary cavalcade.

**Nick Lilly** is a senior Ecology & Evolutionary Biology major working on certificates in Creative Writing and Environmental Studies. He is mystified that for the second time this year the *Nassau Literary Review* has published a story of his concerning llamas. However, he feels that the preponderance of spitting quadrupeds in his work

aptly represents his character, and therefore, this publication pattern pleases him. He thanks both the *Review* for its openness to said creatures, as well as the good friends whose spectacular costuming inspired this story. He is from Oak Park, Illinois.

**Nora Gross** is a junior who is taking five art-related courses this semester, is serious about photography, and has great taste in music but a terrible soft spot for bad television.

Though popular song is thought to be off limits by some poets, **Paul Muldoon** wouldn't say taboo to a Mother Goose.

**Roberto Pena** flies when you have fun. Roberto Pena bides your time. Roberto Pena sleeps while you're awake. Ask your doctor before taking Roberto Pena.

**Sarah Whelchel** is a sophomore of undecided direction from Atlanta, GA. She would very much like to find a cousin here, if you know of anyone else who's looking.

Michael "**Skansgaard**" is a perfect name for a philosopher; unfortunately, I aspire to be a poet. It is a Norwegian name, which is unrepresentative of my ethnicity as I am mostly German. To put it bluntly I have no interest in my heritage and consider myself British, although I have never been to England and I think drinking tea is just silly. My religion is very important to me: every Sunday I worship football players for 6-9 hours. I write epics to commemorate their triumphs, and elegies to mourn the fall of great dynasties (namely USC, 2005). I am suing the next person who calls my poetry "archaic."

**Tamara Spitzer-Hobeika** is a freshman from Paris, France. She is really into the song "Mr. Bojangles" at the moment.

**Taylor Beck** is a senior in the psychology department, who when he is not imagining he is a subterranean mammal with fingers on his face, enjoys reading Spiderman out of his friends' imaginations with a giant magnet. He likes folk songs and comic books from France and is happy he has friends, not just for their brains. He also gets a kick out of living in foreign cities that don't speak his language, and he wishes there were more kinds of sexualities in this world so he could have one of those.

**Tiffany Wey** was the NLR Design Editor for many beautiful issues until we lost her to her senior thesis and the Student Design Agency. We are sure she is going off to a wonderful, artistic future.

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