



red cedar
REVIEW

RED CEDAR REVIEW IS AN ANNUAL LITERARY MAGAZINE PUBLISHED IN THE SPRING BY MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATES WITH SUPPORT FROM THE MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF ARTS AND LETTERS AND DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH.

COVER PHOTO AND DESIGN BY DANIELLE OWENSBY.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

JORDAN POLL

Dear Loyal Readers,

From 1963 to today, the *Red Cedar Review* staff is proud to present the 50th anniversary volume of the *Red Cedar Review*. Over the years, we have had the pleasure of publishing renowned authors such as Margaret Atwood, Pablo Neruda, Tom Bissell, Stuart Dybek, Carolyn Forché, and many more. With our 2012 volume, we began focusing on publishing the work of student writers and artists, to honor the *Red Cedar* tradition of being an undergraduate-managed magazine. For this issue, we have compiled a group of creative pieces from students across the country that we feel represents the fine writing of American undergraduates, including Paulina Minnebo, Amber Slack, Loren Smith, and Caitlyn Syman. However, as an anniversary present to our loyal readers, this issue will also contain the work of established writers including Jim Daniels, Roy Bentley, Valerie Guardiola, Zachary Schnitta, Hannah Shaw, and John Tavares.

In addition to the list of award-winning authors featured in this volume, past Co-Managing Editor, Greg Beamish, interviewed Michigan poet Jamaal May. Their interview was transcribed by past *Red Cedar* staff member Leslie Zimmerman and is featured as the closing piece of this anniversary volume.

As with any student-run project, each year brings turnover, joys, and challenges. This year we hit the ground running as we began work on *Red Cedar Review*'s 50th volume while also initiating a whole new staff and finishing Volume 49. It has been an absolute joy to work with everyone and to finally see it finished. This

year we are proud to be a part of *Red Cedar Review's* impacting leap into the world of digital publications. Our issue has been converted to an entirely online format and furthermore we have made the archived volumes of our publication available for free on our website, redcedarreview.com.

We decided to celebrate this special volume with a stunning cover image specially designed and photographed by MSU student Danielle Owensby to match our golden anniversary theme. We chose gold because the Red Cedar Review is the longest-running journal of its kind in the U.S. We expect to continue our golden standards long into the future.

Of course we need to extend our thanks to our reading and editing team. Without them we would have no issue to distribute. These are the individuals that spend their time doing what they love to do: read. We go through hundreds of submissions each year and our readers use their keen writing and reading skills to pick what they think you would like. We would also like to thank our amazing typesetters, Leslie Zimmerman, Caroline White, Taylor Neverman, and Mary Litteral, and the counsel of Professor Kathryn Houghton and Professor Robin Silbergleid. We also extend gratitude to the Department of English, for its continued support of this project.

Thank you, everyone for your patience, hard work, and dedication! And to you, our loyal readers, we would like to extend our warm gratitude to you for your interest in our publication.

Sincerely,
Red Cedar Review Managing Editor,
Jordan Poll

SKINNY SISTER

JOHN TAVERES

Maria grew excited at the prospect of travel in Winnipeg, as she chatted over the telephone with her Uncle Manuel, who invited her to visit his house. Her mother had given her permission to travel to the Winnipeg and stay at her uncle's place in the suburbs over the March break holidays. These days Maria received the impression everybody was treating her special. She felt exhilarated: her life and circumstances were finally starting to get better, to improve, since she had lost weight. Now she was skinnier than she could ever remember. Earlier that evening her brother Andre had taken her cruising around the streets of Sioux Lookout in his Corvette and had even offered to allow her to drive his precious sports car, but she had refused. Although she was old enough, she didn't hold a driver's license and getting a driver's license was not a priority with her. Besides, she didn't feel confident and skilled enough to drive a motor vehicle. Definitely, she didn't want to smash her brother's Corvette in an accident; he loved his sports car more than his former girlfriends. Andre had also taken her to a sparsely attended movie, which she considered sophomoric, but she had enjoyed the experience since she hadn't visited the local theatre in a few years. She liked the ambience of the big screen, even though the carpets were worn and threadbare and the seats were torn. During the movie, she chatted with Andre, who was, surprisingly, nice. During a particularly boring section of the movie, *Meatballs*, which seemed to alternate between the perverse and juvenile, she bought a medium-sized box of buttered popcorn at the takeout counter, took the saltshaker, and shook salt over the puffy kernels. She kept sprinkling salt on the popcorn and couldn't saturate the puffed kernels with enough sodium crystals. Scrunched up in his leather bomber jacket in his driver's seat, her considerably bulkier brother was relieved to see his skinny sister receiving nutrition, eating some form of food. After all, she was his only

sister—his only sibling, in fact. He didn't mind having her around and could easily imagine the hysteria, blame, and mutual recrimination that would occur if she died.

After she slipped into bed at home, as Maria tried to sleep, she could feel her heart beating irregularly. Her heart felt intensely irritated. As she continued to feel excited by the prospect of visiting her uncle, an abrupt pain hammered against her chest. It felt as if her heart had blown up like a balloon and then burst. The fear that she was suffering a heart attack and that she would die paralyzed her momentarily. She felt the urge to scream to her mother to call for an ambulance, but she realized it was probably best if she stayed calm. Bringing up her knees to her bony chest, against her pointy breasts, she sat up in bed. She tried to cope with the pressing pain and gauge its strength and significance. Perspiration breaking in beads on her brow, she slumped and breathed hard. Assuring herself she would not die, she lay her head on the pillow and eventually fell asleep.

The following morning, she felt as if somebody as bulky as her brother was kneeling on her chest. Since she needed a break from school and usually seized any opportunity to skip class, she decided she better visit a doctor and called the clinic. The doctor who examined her was new to the town of Sioux Lookout: he was dark, handsome, and had a big butt. He looked like a stereotypical cop, which was how Maria preferred the appearance of any potential husband. The doctor methodically went through the physical examination, listening to her heart and lung sounds through his stethoscope, but she was so hyper his manner seemed abrupt.

“How much coffee have you been consuming?”

She shifted uncomfortably as she lied. “I just drink a few cups a day.” In reality, she drank about a gallon a day.

His brow knitted, he wrote some notes on ruled paper, pharmaceutical company stationary. “Now I'm interested specifically in these chest pains. How did it or does it feel? Is it intense, oppressive, severe, brief, or prolonged?”

The questions confused her since she was distracted by his movie star looks. Her mind had been racing recently and she gave a clumsy, rambling response. The doctor handed her documents and forms and gave her instructions to visit the hospital for blood tests and an electrocardiogram. Later, as she walked across town to the hospital and reviewed the appointment in her mind, she realized she was a walking contradiction. She thought she may have had a heart attack

and felt pain in her jaw, arm, and chest, yet she was walking across town like nothing had happened to her. After she stopped by Lee's Cafe for a few cups of coffee, she walked into the hospital. In the outpatient laboratory, a grey-haired woman in a lab coat took two vials of blood from a vein in her lean, muscular arm. Then a nurse brought her to the white-haired, sprightly medical laboratory technician, who wondered aloud why a healthy girl wasn't in school and needed an electrocardiogram. She was imperturbable, despite the persistent pain in her chest. After the electrocardiogram, she felt relieved she had no time to return to school. She headed to work at her part-time job as a grocery clerk.

At Valencia's Supermarket, while she was changing the price tags—which, she had complained to her mother, was illegal according to her economics teacher—on endless stacks of canned tuna fish, her manager with his large bald head fringed with white hair approached. He told her she had gotten an urgent telephone call he wanted her to take in his office. While she looked around the piles of invoices and order forms and payroll slips on the manager's desk, she took the worn receiver of the telephone. She listened to a local nurse who shopped at the store, whose voice she recognized say she should report to the clinic immediately to see the pediatrician.

After she was ushered into the doctor's office, she instantly recognized the pediatrician, since she had recently seen him on a local television news documentary. He was the chief of a surgical team that had transplanted a donated liver into a critically ill indigenous child. Doctor Jansen asked her questions about how much she ate and how her parents treated her. He wanted her to travel to the Health Sciences Centre in Winnipeg for treatment.

"I need to speak with my mother first."

"I've already spoken with your mother, and she gave me permission to treat you and understood the gravity of your illness."

She swallowed and gasped. "Illness?"

"Based upon laboratory analysis of your blood, you're malnourished and at risk of sudden cardiac death."

"Sudden cardiac death?"

He impatiently tapped the medical chart with the tip of his pen. “Sudden cardiac death.”

After the appointment, Maria walked to the bank. Since the bank was already closed and the westbound Via Rail train would be leaving for Winnipeg that evening, she had to call the manager from a pay phone. She withdrew a few hundred dollars from her savings account, money she was saving from earnings at her part-time job to pay for college tuition. After meeting her mother at Lee’s Cafe for coffee, they both walked to the travel agency. Her mother insisted on paying for her fare and protested when Maria said she had withdrawn savings for travel expenses, including a train ticket to Winnipeg. As soon as she had turned sixteen she had written the test to obtain a beginners drivers’ license, but she had never taken the practical road tests to obtain her license. Her mother couldn’t drive her to Winnipeg in the pickup truck or the Cadillac because she had been charged and convicted of impaired driving for the second time. Her brother Andre couldn’t drive her to Winnipeg in his Corvette because her mother would not permit him. He would drive on Highway 72 and the Trans-Canada highway with the urgency and speed of a paramedic heading to the scene of an airline crash. Besides, her mother didn’t want her brother to miss his grade twelve classes when he was already a year late in graduating. And, since he was still making payments on his Corvette, he probably didn’t want to miss a shift of work at Ralph Curtis Motors where he was an apprentice mechanic.

By the time she arrived at the Health Sciences Centre in Winnipeg early the following morning, she was riding a roller coaster of emotions—euphoric one minute, gloomy the next. At the Health Sciences Centre, Maria took an almost instant disliking to the head nurse, who kept insisting she gain weight. Nurse Carlton reminded her she had to gain an average of four kilograms per week or she would lose her visiting privileges and wouldn’t be allowed to leave the ward. Her intransigence would force her into bed rest. Nurse Carlton set down a long list of rules that Maria supposedly had to follow as a patient, including never having guests beyond visiting hours. What did Maria care anyway? She was only expecting the occasional visit from Uncle Manuel.

Every morning, Maria faced a battery of medical diagnostic tests. She travelled through a vast network of tunnels underneath the hospital

complex, en route to a CAT scan in the neuroscience wing, an EEG in an epilepsy clinic, intelligence quotient tests in the psychometric facility of the psychology building beside the power plant. Every morning a young male nurse, recently graduated from Red River College, would meet her, and offer her a fresh strawberry milkshake with a smile and a warm touch. He would chat with her and ask her how she was doing. Was she gaining weight? Why or why not? She considered the male nurse good looking and she liked him, but he aroused Maria's suspicions. Were the doctors and nurses trying to set her up, make her feel good, brainwash her into thinking this guy had something going for her? In her hospital room, which she shared with six patients, Maria watched with fascination as a young diabetic, two beds down from her, injected herself with insulin. She felt some sympathy for the girl with leukemia who lived on a farm and left the tub they all shared lined with grime and dirt.

Her Uncle Manuel visited her occasionally at night. He would bring her upstairs in the hospital complex to the cafeteria. Knowing her fetish for ice cream, he would bring her a one-litre container of gourmet ice cream in an exotic flavor such as chocolate chip cookie dough, or pineapple coconut. But he was depressed over the pregnancy of his daughter, who wasn't married, and would usually start weeping. Eventually Maria was introduced to a psychiatrist, a thin, frail-looking woman with a pitted, wrinkled face.

"She wears these, like, expensive pant suits and looks as if she was way past retirement age," she commented during a visit to her Uncle Manuel, who was starting to wonder why she simply couldn't eat and become healthier.

The psychiatrist told her about her luxurious lifestyle, the television satellite dish at her family cottage on Lake Winnipeg. Then she started asking Maria about her parents, her family, her relationship with her brother, her sex life, and her career aspirations. Maria broke down, went hysterical, and paced around the room. She insisted she wasn't the person who had starved herself. She wasn't the young woman who limped because she broke her leg after falling from the Queen Elizabeth District high school roof one August night while looking for a peaceful dark place to frolic and fool around with a girlfriend. She wasn't the girl who hadn't had her period in seven months and no longer had a sexual interest in guys. She remembered happier, carefree days, when her friends were far more numerous, she was outgoing and fun-loving, and had a crush on a number of different boys.

Later, the ward nurses told her she could go downstairs to the refrigerator in the staff kitchen below and eat whatever she wanted whenever she desired. After meeting her uncle or arriving home from an outing downtown at about nine or ten p.m., she hurried downstairs and helped herself to the cuplets of ice cream in the freezer compartment. First, she would plunge her finger into the vanilla or chocolate ice cream to test it, to ensure it was the proper texture and creaminess. The ice cream couldn't be too hard or too soft. If it was the correct creaminess, texture, and hardness, she would grab a plastic spoon and eat it on the spot; if not, she would set the lid back in place and put the cuplet back into the freezer box with the indentation her finger made in the ice cream. Occasionally she tested more than ten cuplets of ice cream before she found one that satisfied her. When she found no ice cream that suited her taste, she became bitter and angry. One afternoon Nurse Carlton confronted her about the cuplets of ice cream.

“What a waste.”

“The nurses on the floor said I could have ice cream whenever I wanted,” Maria protested. After she started sobbing Carlton pursed her lips in consternation and left her alone.

Allowed to leave the ward after undergoing all her morning tests and examinations and meeting all her doctors, Maria would skip lunch and not even bother with the hospital cafeteria. She would grab her Sony Walkman, which contained her Rolling Stones *Tattoo You* cassette, the narrow black tape nearly worn out since she had listened to it straight through at least three hundred times. She rode the city transit bus to Portage Avenue, where she'd eat a piece of pizza or a submarine sandwich before wandering around the stores and shopping malls downtown. Bounding downtown with her seemingly limitless energy, she liked the narrow elongated shadow her thin body made on the sidewalk and the way the pressed cloth and sharp cuffs of her snug jeans hugged her body, wrapping neatly and tightly around her legs and ankles. During her trips downtown she started shoplifting, stealing fashion accessories, lipstick, eyeliner, and eye shadow from the cosmetics sections of the department stores downtown, Hudson's Bay and Eatons, and slipping them inside her coat pockets. She tried to be casual and cool about her petty thefts. Traipsing from music stores and bookstores in the Eaton Place shopping mall, she also stole a few Rolling Stones cassette tapes and magazines and paperback novels. If anybody apprehended her, caught her, or called the police, she decided she'd pretend she was disabled, deaf and dumb, and gesticulate wildly and excitedly, making grunting and guttural noises. If necessary,

she'd try to communicate through non-verbal messages she was a patient at a hospital and hurry off.

Towards the end of her second week as a patient at the Health Sciences Centre, she rapidly strode down the hallway to leave the ward on her afternoon outing. Her long thin legs marched steadily forward and her headphones acted as a comb for her unruly, untamed hair. But Nurse Carlton blocked her path, with her tall wide figure overshadowing Maria's skinny stature.

"This time you're not going anywhere. Your treatment regimen has been changed to behavioural modification. That means bed rest. You won't be allowed to leave the ward until you've gained ten pounds and even then only after you've gained an additional five pounds a week." Carlton gestured back towards the room, but Maria stood motionless. So she grabbed Maria's arm and pushed her back to the room. "You can't be doing whatever you want anymore."

"I don't do whatever I want. I'm confined to a hospital."

"Everybody is using such a soft touch with you, letting you do whatever you want."

"That's not true."

"You're a spoiled brat. It's that simple."

"You don't know what kind of life I live. You can't pass judgement on me."

"You're undisciplined and unruly. At least you're not a slut, although that might come later. You need discipline, rules, routines, regulations."

"You're just being bossy. You love power."

"Somebody has to look after what's in your best interest. Otherwise, you'll never be well."

Clenching her Walkman against her side, Maria tried to leave the ward. When she managed to slip past her room door, which held six hospital beds but now contained only her as a patient, Nurse Carlton dragged her back inside. The old woman was strong, Maria thought, but she decided she would assert her

independence. “Nobody is going to violate my constitutional and legal rights!” she shouted as Nurse Carlton restrained her by the arm.

The nurse and Maria became entangled in a pushing and shoving match. When Maria tried to bolt from the hospital room again, the nurse clenched her wrist and ripped the Walkman out of her hand. The portable stereo crashed to the floor. When Maria retrieved it she saw that the plastic lid that covered the cassette player had broken off. The starched white hat that normally rested on Nurse Carlton’s august head had also fallen in the struggle, so Maria quickly ran over to the headgear, stomped on the top with her running shoes, and kicked the crumpled piece across the polished waxed floor.

“Get the hell out of here. You’ve broken my cassette player. Now what am I going to do? Listen to nurses crabbing all day long?”

Whimpering, Maria abandoned any hopes of leaving even her room then, let alone the ward. Cheeks quivering, wide-eyed, trembling, Nurse Carlton tried to maintain her dignified composure and erect bearing, although she felt aghast and shocked by this outburst, this affront, this unruly behaviour. She picked up her crumpled, dirtied hat and, seeing this rude, undisciplined patient was finally subdued, trooped her bulky mass back to the nursing station.

Although the cover case for the portable cassette player was broken, Maria still tried using the Sony Walkman. When she tried to play The Rolling Stones’ *Tattoo You* cassette tape she discovered the knitting needle-like rotors wouldn’t turn so she couldn’t hear the music through the headphones. She dropped back on her bed and started reading a magazine, *Cosmopolitan*, that she had shoplifted. When Carlton finished her shift at four p.m., Maria sneaked to the telephone in the ward lounge and made a long distance call to her mother at the insurance office in Sioux Lookout where she worked as a broker. The staff at the Health Sciences pediatric ward weren’t allowing her to leave the ward and one nurse had broken her Walkman, Maria protested. Although her mother told her things would get better and promised her a new Walkman, Maria continued to cry into the telephone.

“I don’t belong in a pediatric ward. I’m too old.”

“You’re still in the right age group.”

“I had to drink a milkshake with radioactive dye. Then doctors scoped my intestines and checked my insides. They stuck a little camera connected to cables up my ass.”

“Oh, Maria, do you have to talk that way over the phone?”

“Well, it’s true, and I could even see my guts on a television monitor. They told me not to eat anything the day before, but I had some late night snacks. So they had a mess on their hands, but I didn’t care—they deserved it, and I laughed afterwards. I wasn’t going to deprive myself of ice cream for some medical test.”

On the verge of weeping at her insurance brokerage desk, her mother sighed. “Before you weren’t eating, and now you’re eating nothing but ice cream. Maria, you have to consume a balanced diet.”

“And the pain in my chest is getting worse.” Maria grew quiet and weepy. “I bet I had a heart attack.”

“Maria, the doctor said there’s nothing wrong with your heart. They said your electrocardiogram was OK.”

“They said there were anomalies and changes in the tracings they couldn’t explain.”

“But the doctor said you shouldn’t worry about the electrocardiogram.”

“Well, they didn’t feel the pain I felt. And I still have chest pain, but at least it’s not as bad.”

“Maria, the doctors said your electrocardiogram is not a concern.”

“And, Mom, the nurse got into a fight with me. She made me break my Walkman, and I think she did it deliberately.”

“You were fighting with a nurse? Oh, my God. We can’t have you arguing with hospital staff. I’ll have to talk with the head nurse.”

“She was the head nurse.”

“You were fighting with the head nurse? Oh, my God, what are we going to do about you? Well, I’ll just have to speak with the doctor about your conduct. But you do whatever the doctors and nurses order.”

“I’m not into bed rest, mom. The pediatrician never said anything about bed rest. And what about my Walkman?”

“Don’t worry about your music. We’ll get the player fixed—sooner or later.”

“Mom, I want out.”

“No, you’re not ready. You need to get better so you can return to school.”

“I don’t care about school anymore.”

“You’re going to back to high school and then university whether you like it or not. But we’ll discuss education later. You just follow doctors’ orders and remember to eat. Now I have to return to work. Just enjoy your spring break. Appreciate the rest while you still can.”

Muttering absently, Maria set down the receiver after her mother hung up the telephone. Her mother didn’t want her to gain weight; she wanted her daughter thin and lithe, svelte and fashionable. She had always reminded her of the importance of maintaining a slim figure and had always bought her diet soft drinks, artificial sweeteners, low-calorie salad dressing, low-fat peanut butter, fat free yoghurt. Her father, who had a potbelly, couldn’t care less and said he would die with a full stomach. He accurately predicted his own demise: he died of a massive myocardial infarction two years ago, with a full stomach, after dinner of tenderloin steak on a Sunday evening, with a telecast of *The Wonderful World of Disney* in the background.

After returning to her room, Maria tried to listen to The Rolling Stones’ *Tattoo You* cassette tape again. When the Walkman still wouldn’t work, she decided that she had enough. Although she wasn’t certain what she would do, she decided she wouldn’t tolerate being bullied by the head nurse. She had enough of being imprisoned in the hospital ward. Perhaps she would call her Uncle Manuel and ask her father’s brother if she could stay at his house in Transcona. Depending on how expensive the nightly room rates, possibly she would stay at a motel downtown, even if it was seedy. For the first night at least she could stay in all-

night cafes.

She picked up her broken Walkman and placed it in her backpack. Then she decided she'd carry the cassette player in her hand while she walked and try to fix the device. She shoved the rest of her most valued belongings in her backpack, although she tried to make it look as if she was still occupying her room by leaving some of her rumpled clothes lying on the unmade bed. Then she looked out the window. It had suddenly gotten cold and was probably around minus ten degrees, not including the wind chill. She checked the Yellow Pages for a listing of electronics retailers and appliance repair shops, preferably downtown, where she could have her Walkman fixed. She tore two pages out of the Winnipeg telephone directory, folded them, and stuffed them in the tight pocket of her jeans. She walked past the nursing station without turning her head. She just pressed straight ahead and nobody challenged her. Relieved to be free, she moved down the back stairs and outside of the hospital. She hiked on the street in the cold, the smoke rising in curls from the pipes and smokestacks for the furnaces and power plants.

As she headed down the icy street she realized she had forgotten to withdraw money yesterday. She had left her bank card inside her wallet, which she had left inside the bedside table drawer in her hospital room. She didn't even have a Winnipeg bus ticket, only a small amount of cash in her pocket. "Eff it," she muttered, startling a passerby, a mother in a quilted down-filled ski jacket pushing a baby in a stroller. She would figure something out. Shivering from the chill of an unseasonably cold spring in Winnipeg, she continued to walk through the Health Sciences Centre, a vast complex of brick and concrete buildings, old and new, heading in a direction that she knew would bring her downtown. She continued walking along Sherbrook, striding quickly. A thin, reedy, diminutive man, with a shaved head, crossed the street, along which only an occasional motor vehicle passed, and strode alongside her. He was actually short, nearly a midget. Why did she attract the trolls?

"Do you want some speed?"

"I don't do drugs."

"Wow. A goody-two-shoes. I like them. But most goody-two-shoes never let on because they want to act cool. I'm not a narc."

“You don’t look like a narc.”

His smile faded and his expression turned blank, as, seemingly disappointed, he looked down. “You sure you don’t want some weed?”

She glared at him.

“Do you want to mess around?”

“No.” Her expression grew alarmed, her voice trembled, and her cheek and eyelid twitched when she saw the intensity in his masculine gaze. He pulled out a knife and pressed the blade flat against her collarbone. “Now do you want to fool around?”

“I’m having my period.”

“Nice excuse. We can do it through the back door. I prefer it that way because you don’t have to worry about babies.”

He pushed her down on her hands and knees against the dumpster. She thought she needed to distract him, as she clenched the Sony Walkman against her bony thigh. Her grip tightened on the portable cassette player and her muscles tensed. She clenched her jaw and the tendons and gristles tightened and twitched across her lean cheekbones. She said she needed to stand to take off her top. As she revealed her slim waist and gripped her Walkman with the other, she asked, “Are you, like, a drug dealer or a pimp?”

A chance existed she might have offended him and angered him, but she saw that he looked flattered. She had distracted him and might have just asked him if he was a brain surgeon. She quickly brought up her arm and smashed the Sony Walkman against his face. She whacked the walkabout tape player over his head until she was breathing hard and he was stunned. As she brought down the Walkman on his head, she remembered the pediatrician’s words, “Sudden cardiac death.” She couldn’t believe the damage her manic burst of energy had inflicted, his head bruised and face smashed to a pulp and streaked with blood. She had knocked him unconscious, and his body form was sprawled along the sidewalk. After the rush of energy, she stared at his prostate form, which was breathing regularly, and started to feel afraid again. Lost, she ran along the Sherbrook Street sidewalk, towards what she hoped was the broad street and lights and

traffic that was Portage Avenue. She needed a bite to eat, just a bite, and a pay telephone.

The encounter somehow put her in the mood for fast food. She walked furiously, with long bounding strides, until she reached Portage Avenue downtown and found a twenty-four-hour sandwich shop open. She ordered a foot-long submarine sandwich, all dressed, with shredded lettuce, olives, sliced onions, diced peppers, gobs of mayonnaise, chopped mushrooms, sliced tomatoes, and every variety of cold cuts, sliced ham, pastrami, salami, and mozzarella and cheddar cheese. Then she raced to a McDonald's fast food restaurant and ordered a large super-thick chocolate milkshake, a bacon double cheeseburger, a large serving of french fries, and a coffee. She sat alone at a table near the window overlooking Portage Avenue and watched the elderly, bar and nightclub patrons, street people, police officers, bus drivers, and pedestrians, the lost and lonely, walking past to their apartments, houses, sleeping bags in a doorway, or benches in a park. As the night stretched, she had a few more refills of coffee and bought a few more vanilla soft ice cream cones for dessert, sneaking in yet another ice cream cone before they turned it off for the daily cleaning. By the end of her meals and snacks, she felt sick, nauseous, bloated, disgusted with herself. She locked herself in the women's washroom in the fast food restaurant and vomited just about everything she had eaten that evening. She scrubbed, washed, and rinsed herself at the sink. Looking in the mirror at her reddened eyes, she realized she had nowhere to go but back to the Health Sciences Centre.

I TRIED ASKING YOU

CAITLYN SYMAN

i tried to ask you what being in love was like but you just turned the t.v. up louder

the same infomercial has been playing for
40 minutes now and the
remote is on the coffee table but her head has been in my
lap for two hours,
sleeping for one so I
haven't been able to take my hands
from her hair long enough to
change the channel. So I will gladly
sit here learning about the powers of the
magic bullet because her hair
is softer than I could have ever imagined and she
is so much more herself right now.

Today was
the first day I told her
that she's beautiful and she
took that like the compliment was a broken elevator her
heart a string pulling up but her
head a string pulling down and the "close door" buttons
were jammed in.
She said
"no one has ever
told me that before," and it wasn't
a thank you just a
reminder that no one had ever told
the elevator wire girl that she
was beautiful. Not in the way her eyes looked before and
after she lined them in the mornings and
no one told her the paleness on the back of her neck
made her look like the breakable porcelain doll she saw herself as.

When she told me that, I noticed she was
smoking her cigarette down to the filters again and texting the boys
with the printer paper skin and
broken mascara wand bones tied together
with barbed wire and chain links.
All those fallible things
all those girly things
roughly tied together with metals they thought
made them manly just like they thought
not taking "no" would make them strong they thought
it would build their bones from broken make up wands to bench press bars and
turn their skin from flammable paper to ceramic tiles those
boys thought hitting her made them men.
Those boys were just boys and they thought
telling her she was beautiful meant nothing because they never
needed her to say "yes" anyways and those boys
just wanted to be men but didn't know how and telling her she was
beautiful wasn't the way but maybe
it was a good place to start.

She
told me they were at war now,
with another country, but I knew
she meant with themselves and she looked at me with her
blue highlighter eyes and asked
if I'd pass her the salt and I did,
numbly waiting for her to say more but she just
stopped.
She knew talking
wouldn't make what happened to her different and she knew
talking about them wouldn't make me any clearer for her and
I knew talking
wouldn't make her believe she was beautiful so
we didn't talk for hours
until we wound up here:
in front of the magic bullet infomercial with her head
in my lap my hands
in her hair and her whispering
"You're beautiful too."

THE HAIR DYE AISLE AT WALMART ON JULY 31ST

CAITLYN SYMAN

Her pink shirt looks like it was white once
her tan shorts button too tight at the top. She's got her
brown hair tied up in a bun and she's looking at bright red hair dye
the kind that didn't come in nature.
She's got a guy with her, he looks at the box and says
"don't buy that ugly shit,"
she laughs, thinks he's kidding
so she says "I like it,
I think it'd be... different."
He stares blank eyed and bored
his mouth full of chewing tobacco, says
"buy that ugly shit and you can walk home."
Her smile melts away and she walks down the aisle
towards the blondes,
picks up a box of honey colored hair dye. He says
"that's better, I guess" and walks away.

She notices me—wearing bright red lipstick
the color of the dye she wanted and she
smiles and laughs the way you do with strangers who overhear your boyfriend
being a jerk.

“What can ya do with them, ya know?” she asks. I wanted to tell her
you can leave him, ya know? You are too pretty for him and I can tell
by the way you stand and pull your hair back
that no one has told you that before.

I wanted to tell her that if he ever tells you that you look fat in anything, leave
him.

If he ever tells you he’s smarter than you, leave him.

If he ever tells you to stop talking, leave him.

I wanted to tell her that she is so much stronger than the men in her life
have told her she is. That she can dye her hair whatever color she wants or shave
it off and she’ll still be beautiful. I wanted to tell her
she will one day learn that the weak mocking
from the hundreds of men who have torn her down
will never be stronger than what she holds in the muscle hidden behind her
chest because she
is made of gold tiles that can build mountains.
She is resilience kept in a glass bottle
that can’t break.
She is worth so much more than him.

I wanted to say to her
I’ll buy you that red hair dye as long as you promise
to pack your bags and leave him
but instead I just smile
shrug,
and answer her.
“Dump him.”



© Danielle Owensby "Falling"

FALLING



© Danielle Owensby, "Burning"

BURNING

FLOWERS FROM OPHELIA

HANNAH SHAW

Sometimes I think that Wall and I could have fallen in love if he hadn't stepped in front of that SUV. It probably was coming down Grattan too fast – though it wasn't the driver's fault. I heard how he lingered at the edge of the street, watching car by car blow by; and, how still watchful, he stepped off the curb at just the right time. I heard he got sucked right under it, and that it grounded him up so bad that he was cold before the ambulances arrived. I'm glad I wasn't there that night. I'm glad I was in my room, the way I am now, the way I so often am. I'd rather it be that I was flipping through pages of *The Stranger* while his heart stopped beating. I'd rather it be as it was. Olive told me through some second or third-hand source, "You know that boy, that one you talked to sometimes? He's the one – Wallace Doyle. He's the one that died." And I suppose she could have put it more delicately, but that's Olive. I stared back at her, eyes blank, lips stoic. She just spun around and collapsed onto her bed, sprawling luxuriously as a cat. "It's sad, don't you think?"

Of course, it was sad. But I only looked down into the spine of my book, turning my thoughts back to Meursault's. It was then that our door slammed shut. I shuddered.

Olive's almond-shaped eyes fell to me. "So Freddy has returned?"

My back stiffened. "It looks like it," I said in a breath. Olive had known me long enough to know that I believed in ghosts but not long enough to know what I meant by that.

"Cause it's never just the wind," she teased. It was just the wind, but Freddy was the ghost that lived in our dormitory, whether real or imagined. I didn't really believe in Freddy. I never saw Freddy. He was only a long-standing rumor kept alive by the building staff. I did believe in Joshua.

Joshua didn't show up until Monday. He came as he always did, in a black suit, black tie, possessing an air of formality he'd never had while I'd known him. He appeared across the quad by the skeletal crab apple tree, standing in the piles of dead leaves. Beside the skinny, bare tree, he seemed smaller than ever. I tried not to look at him. I walked the opposite way towards the library. I pulled up the hood of my coat, like blinders on a horse. I didn't have to look. Joshua didn't acknowledge me and I didn't acknowledge him. I settled into the library, in a nook between two tall shelves of books. It wasn't cozy but it was safe where I could read my lab manual without thought. No Joshua. No Wall. I opened the manual to the centerfold and ran my finger over the words I scrawled in: *doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results*. The marks of the pen and the feeling of the words beneath – I read it like braille. I was alone and had nothing to worry about. Just pigeons. Pigeons walking in figure eights.

* * *

One year, one month and twenty-seven days before Wall's death, Olive said, "We're going out tonight." I didn't have a choice. I didn't mind. I was a freshman and she was my roommate, and I liked her enough.

"Where to?" I asked.

"That house on the corner of Putnam and Grattan. The guy there, Jeff, invited me. Might be some cool people. We're going," Olive demanded. She tugged the

sleeve of my sweater. “You have to come with me. No books tonight, Vie.”

“I said I’ll come.” My voice was plain and my feet dangled off of my freshman bed. Olive smirked and answered, “You didn’t say it. I can never tell with you.” She let go of my sleeve and with gentle care, I stretched out the creases she’d made with her grip. Olive spun on the ball of her foot, twirling, arms raised. She was graceful even though she was pudgy. I watched her from my bed as she danced in front of the mirror, smacking bronzer onto her cheeks.

“Aren’t you going to get ready?” Olive asked me.

I shrugged at her. “I think I am ready.” I stood up and examined myself in Olive’s mirror. I was in a powder blue skirt that hung down around my knees and white blouse my mom bought for me last year.

“You look like you’re going to church. You’re not wearing that,” Olive told me, without looking away from her vanity mirror. Once she was “ready,” she put me in a skirt of hers that she couldn’t wear, one so short I could feel raw air on my butt-cheeks and a tank top, which was mine, that I had never worn alone. Olive strapped a pair of stilted heels onto my feet, a glittery pair that looked like gold. “Pain is beauty,” Olive echoed.

The house in a normal sensibility was one step above a slum: a shutter dangled from one latch and the siding was crooked and fell off in places, but in my freshman eyes, in the dark that night, it was grand. The windows flickered with dim little Christmas lights and the front door pulsed with the radiating bass of house music. Olive let herself in without knocking. “It’s okay,” she said. “They *did*, after all, invite me.” I slipped in behind her.

The front room reeked of pot. The air was thick and stale. The lights were out, but Olive headed into the house, undeterred. I recall nearly tripping on a fern on the floor by the door.

“Livie!” A guy said. He caught Olive over the shoulder and swung her around as though she were light. He was a mess of brown hair and source of the smell, clamping a joint in his lips as he spoke. “Thought you wouldn’t make it!”

“Only for you, Jeff,” Olive giggled. She looked to me as though she all the sudden remembered I was there. “Oh... and this is my roommate, Violet.”

“Violet, eh?” Jeff stumbled, putting his weight into Olive and the foyer wall. “Well, can I get you ladies something? Refreshments?” Olive said something I didn’t hear and Jeff disappeared behind us. Olive tugged me along. A couch, a few boys lounging, a few girls in tight skirts and tight tops, loud music, and more plants. The girls sipped from a single, shared, suspicious solo cup and the boys were looking bored. Jeff returned with a can of Bud light in both hands. He nudged one into my hand and presented Olive with the other. “Welcome, ladies.” Jeff sounded ridiculous but Olive seemed to be buying it. “My *casa*. Whatcha think?”

“The ferns are a bit much.” I spun around to find him behind me.

“No one asked you, Wall,” Jeff said.

Wall: a narrow, gaunt frame, trimmed, short hair, tired and perhaps mousy. He was nothing special to look at. A wide-lensed camera dangled from his neck. And yes, the ferns were a bit much. There were six of them – some had to be almost as tall as me – positioned all around the room.

“I like them,” Olive said which didn’t go ignored. I didn’t see her again until we walked back to our room together much later, around dawn the next morning.

“The ferns are a little overtaking,” I said, quiet enough he might not have heard me.

Wall smirked. “So I’m not the only one. You see, he wants to be a botanist. Look at stupid plants for the rest of his life in a lab. But to each his own.” He didn’t quite look at me when he spoke. His eyes flitted about the room but his voice was quiet and only I was close enough to hear.

“To each his own,” I repeated.

“You’re not an aspiring botanist, right?” Wall asked.

“No... Not my first choice anyway. And obviously you hate the idea of it,” I said.

“Botany? Nah.” Wall hunched his shoulders, still staring out into the room. His back pressed against the old floral wallpaper. He pulled on his camera strap. “Photography is more my forte.”

“And what do you take pictures of?”

“Just stuff.”

“Obviously not plant stuff, then.”

In my peripherals, I saw him look to me, his eyes on my pale face. “Only if the plant stuff is pretty.” He slunk down to sit with his back against the crown molding on the tawny shag carpet floor. I copied him and sat with my legs extended out in front of me. “The ferns sure aren’t,” he went on. “But, you know, it’s Jeff’s decorations. He says he’s going to break me one day.”

“Break you?” I watched the ferns, the way the Christmas lights shown through their translucent fronds. From the floor, the room felt different, like a child’s vantage, the world exciting and innocent. “Like bones?”

“Like horses. Maybe. Except the opposite, I assume.”

“Huh.” I breathed as smoke from across the room rose in thin wisps towards the ceiling.

“Jeff’s an idiot. He thinks he can make me more like...”

“Like an idiot?”

Wall nodded his head. His hair clung to the wallpaper with static.

“Yeah, I know. Olive dressed me up tonight,” I said.

He eyed my heels, the high arches and flashy gold beading of my borrowed shoes. They did not belong to me and my own feet felt separate, another person’s feet. Out in front of me, they seemed stiff, like a skinny version of Olive’s feet, certainly not mine. “Then you do know,” he said.

We leaned into the floral wallpaper and the night passed just that way. Wall and I made small talk into the night as my roommate did God knows what with the botanist.

* * *

Five days after Wall's death, it was two days from Monday that I met with Carrie. It was the same day Joshua brought a friend to stand in the hallway outside my room with him. His friend was Abigail and her lips were blue. Her blonde ponytail hung limp from the nape of her neck and she was still donned in clean white PJs. The two stood non-conversing and independent. Joshua, very short, and Abigail, a few inches taller than me. They looked out with absent, clouded eyes in the spaces around my door. Not at me, but by me. I could see their faces. They didn't see me as I ran between them. I ran down the halls even though it was seven a.m. and the hall was mostly still asleep and didn't think twice on my loud, resounding footsteps against the linoleum. I ran and I ran. I shut my eyes so I didn't have to see them. And once I reached the end of the hall and my hands hit the cinderblock wall, I broke for the exit. Abigail and Joshua didn't chase me. It just isn't in them. Doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results. I had nothing to worry about.

* * *

I met with Carrie at noon. Her real name was Carrier Pigeon Number Six. My classmates thought it was nice to name the pigeons, though I personally didn't care much about her name. I guess I lacked the imagination to come up with a good one. I would have called her Six or some variant: Zes, Seis, Hex, Seks Sex, Sex, Sex. Her name was Carrier Pigeon Number Six for a long time until that just became Carrie. I prepared Carrie in our little Skinner box and waited. It's a lot of waiting and a lot of watching to get your pigeon to walk in an unnatural pattern. Carrie walked. Reward. And again. Reward. I watched the bird progress in subconscious cycles. She doesn't know it, but she's learning. Reward again. Kimberly, across the room, rewards her bird much more often. Is her bird learning faster or is mine just dumb?

* * *

Eight years, seven months and twelve days before Wall's death, I was nine years old when Joshua died. He fell in the river that ran just outside of town. He climbed trees and had a crush on Ellen Biernacki who lived on our street. At the wake, I wore a new black velvet dress with the tags tucked inside to be returned afterwards and I wondered how many other girls had worn this dress to funerals and returned it afterwards. Then the funeral parlor, the somber lighting and plastic flowers: here this happened all the time. The coffin was small and Joshua's head rested, slightly raised on a pillow. His color, snow white. He could have

woken up. He wore a suit, even though I'd never seen him wear a suit in his life. Did they all wear suits?

I cried a lot, I think. I remember tissues and monogrammed kerchiefs coming my way, but Ellen didn't. She twirled a bit in her dress, standing next to her mother. Ellen was better than tears; she smiled at me and during the funeral she braided her hair.

Two days after the funeral, Joshua opened his eyes. He stood outside the window of my fourth grade classroom by the jungle gym with eyes like a doe's on the side of the road, dark and cloudy.

I broke into gasps, loud and tearful. I felt my face burning a hideous red. "Violet!" I heard the teacher shout. The subtle whisper of my classmates. My eyes stayed fixed out the window on Joshua. I panted, my cheek pressed against the sticky surface of my desk in the culmination of shock, fear, and grief. "Josh," I gaped. "It's Joshua." My teacher's hand on my back and a shutter that trickled down my spine. "It's alright, Violet. We're all very sad about what happened to Joshua." She gave me two wisps of a Kleenex and sent me to the Nurse's Office until I was calm enough to return.

* * *

Six months, twenty-four days before Wall's death, it was spring of last year, when I sat beneath the skeletal crab apple tree in the quad. The tree was getting less and less skeletal and had begun to break out in soft pink flowers. I was reading about REM cycles until I felt eyes on me. A form in my peripherals had stopped across the quad and held out a black box. I looked and our eyes locked. Wall stared unabashed before walking to meet me.

"Did you take a picture of me?"

Wall pulled at the camera strap around his neck. "Yes." He fell down to his haunches, hovering just above the grass. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Why?"

"Why would you mind?" he said.

“No, why did you take a picture?”

“It was pretty, I guess.” The scene was pretty, or was I?

“Oh.” His motion with the camera had been so fluid and natural, I wondered if I would have thought a thing if he hadn’t come over to talk to me. I had a secret suspicion he had taken pictures of me many times before and maybe I had just never noticed.

I thought of saying something clever about ferns but nothing came. In daylight, in the middle of the quad, he looked foreign, like a piece of background under a spotlight. He wore a blazer with suede patches on the elbows and gold buttons.

“What are you reading?” He said. His eyes followed the book.

“It’s umm... stuff about sleep. Delta waves and dreaming... that kind of thing.” I shut the book and covered it with my sleeves.

“Sleep stages? I took Psych 101 last year... So what’s it say about dreams? Is it like... uh— Freud, and everything’s a penis?”

I made a noise – something like a laugh but not quite.

“Nevermind. I’ll let you get back to that...” Wall said. He stood up, brushing the wrinkles from cords and walked across the quad without looking back.

* * *

One week after Wall’s death, Olive woke me up on Friday, slamming the lid of a trunk beside her bed a little too loud. I rolled to my side and opened my eyes to her. She wore a scowl and her hair was tied into a fat knot on the top of her head. She held a black sweater in her hands. “Morning...” She mumbled. I yawned and sat up. Olive resumed her search, digging into a dresser drawer. “Damn it.”

That was my signal. “Something wrong?” I slipped out of bed and began to dress.

Olive huffed. “It’s nothing,” which is never true. “Jeff is going to be at that memorial thingy today and of course it’s the one day I can’t find my black dress.”

Olive took to ripping apart her bed.

“Which dress?” I pulled on a pair of black tights, rolling them over my toes and up my calves.

“That one I wore umm... I wore it like two weeks ago? I dragged you to that party, remember?” Olive thought aloud. The frustrated knot on her head bobbed.

“You puked on your own shoes?”

Olive snapped her head around at me and giggled for a moment—yes, that was the night—before snapping back to business. “Do you remember where it went?”

The dress... a little tight, a little skimpy. Threw it onto her desk. She was a mess and hardly made it to the garbage can. Still in my tights, I searched around her desk. Chocolate bar wrappers, purple gel pens, crumpled tissues, two dainty bras dangled from the desk lamp, a jar of peanut butter and, of course, the little black dress. “Got it.”

“Yes!” Olive thrust me into her arms, wrapping tightly around me like a boa constrictor. “Knew I could count on you.”

I held it up in front of me. It was one of those dresses Olive has never and will never convince me to wear—a little too much skin exposed to the raw air. “Where are you going again?” I pried myself out of her grip to slip into my own simple, muted dress.

“The memorial service for that kid...” Olive said. She was already pulling the dress over her head. “Jeff is going to be there.” Olive was already eyeing herself in the mirror, tugging the dress into place. “Come with me. It’s at ten.”

I had seen Jeff’s house since the incident—the one on the corner of Grattan and Putnam—with graying ferns in the windows. Today the local news headline talked of college suicide rates. Maybe Jeff wouldn’t notice Olive at all.

“I don’t think I have a dress,” I said. The itch of an invisible, folded price tag spread across my back.

“Just borrow one of mine—maybe that one you wore to that night I bought

boxed wine?” Olive tried, poisoning one hand on her hip. The dress clung across her belly and billowed out at her hips, entirely backless. “Come on. I need some backup.”

“I think I’ll be in the lab with the stupid bird.”

Olive rolled her eyes. “Fine. School is school. You don’t have to come this time. I’ll just text you how it goes then.”

* * *

One week and three days after Wall’s death, on that following Monday, it rained. Heavy drops fell in thick sheets, drenching and pounding. I crossed the quad, heading towards the library. No onlookers in sight. Neither Joshua nor Abigail. I tugged at my raincoat, zipping it up to my chin. Thick pelts of rain dribbled down my back and front, soaking into my tights, down my calves and into my boots.

In the library, I found a nook between the stacks with an armchair that didn’t seem uncomfortable. I threw off my dripping coat and hung it across the back of the chair and reached up my skirt to pull off my tights. I wrapped my fingers in the nylon netting and began to roll them down over my hips. I propped my left leg up on the chair, rolling my tights down my thigh.

A digital *click*, the sound of camera shutters snapped behind me.

I shuddered, breathing quickly. I stood up, glanced around. Behind me: metal bookshelves, the spines of the books, some thin, some thick, all old and the holes between them empty. One foot bare and the other still wrapped in the translucent, wet netting of my tights, I crept into the next aisle. Empty. And the next. Empty. With speed, the next. And the next. And the last. All empty. One empty leg of my tights dragged. I pulled the nylon from my legs and sighed. My eyes welled and suddenly, there was tapping in my head. I balled up my tights and clenched them in my fist.

No one is taking pictures of me now.

I trekked back down across the aisles, hugging my shoulders. My wet toes felt the grit of the library carpet. I slipped my shoes back on my feet and climbed into the

armchair, rolled into a ball, feet tucked in tight. It wasn't cozy. Pigeons in infinite figure eights. I breathed. I could do this.

* * *

One week and five days after Wall's death, it was Wednesday. Wednesday was for Carrie and she seemed more content to flap her wings in the tight little Skinner box than to try to learn the pattern. Maybe I did get a dud. I recorded her flapping in my notebook in a neat curly-cue letters. The lab semester was ending soon. I looked into the eye of my pigeon. She and I didn't have much time left. She pecked the glass. But what happened to her once I was done? The mice get euthanized. Would Carrie too be dead as soon as she served her menial purpose to this class? She would. She was too stupid to really do anything else. She would probably never even learn how to walk in a figure eight pattern. For a moment, I felt eyes on my back, emanating from the corner of the lab. I didn't need to think about death. I watched Carrie. Carrie started walking in the shape of a slow arching pivot. Reward. Finally.

* * *

Two years, six months and two days before Wall's death, Abigail didn't deserve this. I wished she'd just haunt a courtroom, maybe wear a professional pencil skirt with those painful yet beautiful black pumps I'd see in the apartment building elevator every so often. Maybe she wouldn't seem so pathetic here then. I should never have seen Abigail's body. It was morning and I wore a backpack and knee socks. The police broke in the door. My mother and I stood by in all the ruckus and they pulled out her beautiful bluing body strapped onto a rolling stretcher. It all happened just next door. She OD'd, we heard much later—a foul concoction of sleeping pills and pain pills. A bad accident. She was thirty-two, no boyfriends, fiancés, husbands; her only living family in a small patch of land in Washington. A man with a cat moved in next door to fill her place. Now, she only wore pajamas. I could wish she wore pumps, but she'd always stay barefoot, cold toes and pristine, white pajamas.

* * *

Three weeks and two days before Wall's death, it was Halloween. Olive designed our costumes and we stumbled inside the house on the corner of Putnam and Grattan again. The ferns seemed taller, greener, than before, and the rooms were overcrowded, a collage of masked co-eds. Olive took a long swig from an open

tequila bottle that floated about the room; sweat from the night had begun to make her eyeliner cat-whiskers bleed across her face. She passed the bottle to me and I passed it off to a boy dressed as a monkey. "I can't see Jeff anywhere!" I doubt Olive knew she was screaming.

"Maybe he's in costume?"

"JEFF!" She squealed, running her hand across her body. The botanist was nowhere to be seen. Olive brushed through person after person, dragging me by the wrist, then up the stairs, where the house became dark and intimate. She opened one door and slammed it quickly. "Not *Jeff*," she said, not to me but to the door. The next had a light on and Olive let herself in.

"Is Jeff here?" Her hand fell to her hip, sassy. I hovered behind her, out of view from the door.

A figure stepped into the threshold. Wall. His hair slightly longer, less kempt, but the rest of him the same. His eyes turned to me. "Violet. Umm... Hi."

Olive let out a frustrated grunt and twisted from my side, leaving me alone. I don't know whether or not she ever found Jeff. I never asked.

"Hi," I said and raised a hand, then dropped it behind my back immediately. "Yeah... Want to come in?" He swung the door open further to reveal a half-lit room. I stepped inside. He had been sitting at a small, cluttered desk. The rolling chair spun slightly. The walls were bare, white, and the bed was half-made; a crumpled comforter looked well-lived in. "What are you supposed to be? A bird or something?"

I shook my head. "An angel... Olive designed it." I toyed with the hanger-wire and feathers.

He raised a brow. "Should have guessed." He sat back into his desk chair. "Sit."

I sat down on the corner of his unmade bed. "How come you're not in a costume?"

Wall shrugged. "It's a Wednesday? I don't know. Jeff didn't tell me he was throwing a party."

“On Halloween?”

“Yeah, I know. Should have guessed.” Wall leaned back in his chair, letting it rock back.

I slid my hands behind me and leaned into them, the room appearing gray and yellow, lit and unlit. “So where do you keep your photographs?”

Wall’s eyes fell to the floor and he began to swivel side to side in his chair. “They’re tucked away. Nice and safe.” He tapped a knuckle against his desk several times.

“You don’t hang any of them up?” The tapping continued.

“No. I don’t like them on display. They’re... I don’t know, personal.” He stood up off his chair and sat beside me on the bed. I felt the pressure of him in the mattress. “If they were on the wall, they’d be seen. Could be seen by anyone. Not just by me—but by people like you and whoever else comes in—like the people downstairs.” I felt he would have been tapping his knuckles again, impulsive knocking. Though he didn’t move. He stayed put. The knocking, I could feel, went on inside. “They like to say things. They wouldn’t get it. I don’t even know that you would.” He exhaled slowly, until he was entirely still. “But—I don’t know. Maybe.” Wall collapsed onto the bed, staring out into the dark, unlit ceiling as though it were a great empty void. He sighed with the subtle rise and fall of his chest.

I leaned back, further into my hands, until I lay in the crumpled comforter beside him. The wire angel wings furrowed into my back, arcing to the shape of my ribs. Wall turned his head to me, inspecting me. The room was dark and his eyes were close and wide. There was only stillness and breath, almost soundless. My skin became hot and raw. He licked his lip. I gasped. My chest filled with air and like a balloon, I could no longer stay grounded.

I pulled myself up, out of the mess of comforter and sheets and left the room. I went out the door and down the stairs. There was no air. I couldn’t breathe. I found Olive on the porch and told her it’s time to go. “What happened to you?” she asked me. She fumbled with her heel as she walked.

“Nothing. Nothing happened.” I took in the cold October air. Inhale. Exhale.

The knocking went on inside.

* * *

One week and seven days after Wall's death it was Friday. I read Shakespeare in my room, while it was still early enough to read by sunlight. *There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray, love, remember: and there is pansies. That's for thoughts... There's a daisy: I would give you some violets, but they withered—*

"Vie!" Olive rushed from down the hall. The soles of her shoes were booming. "Vie! There's something you need to see."

"What?" I closed the book and peered up at her. Olive wasn't smiling.

"You're everywhere! It's not good. And Jeff—he doesn't know what he's doing—" Olive ripped at my arm. I dropped my book. "Come on!"

"What are you talking about?" But Olive didn't answer, she strode quickly, yanking me along behind her. Coatless, she started running. I chased. "Olive!" Through the quad, past the student center, she took me to a coffee shop, a claustrophobic room that reeked of coffee beans.

Then I saw it: the pictures. I had never seen them before but now I felt I could recognize them anywhere. An enlargement tacked by the door—I knew it: soft, pink cherry blossoms, a girl with dark hair, pouring over a book. *Me*.

"No."

I ripped the photo down. But there were more. The coffee shop was covered. Behind the line for the counter, Jeff moved frantically between tables, taping them where he could. I grabbed the next photograph, a bunny rabbit; then the next, children laughing; and the next, me in the lab with Carrie – her wings in mid-flap; a red leaf; me on the street; me in the dining hall; me in my room. I was everywhere.

Olive grabbed me. "Violet! What are you doing?"

I struggled out of her grip. Me in an armchair, me sipping coffee. Off the wall. Then, Jeff, whose eyes were ringed and red, caught me on the shoulder. "Stop it!"

He tugged at the prints in my hands. I didn't let go. "Put them back! They need to be seen! They have to be!" He yanked the photographs again. I didn't let go. I crashed into him. My nose pushed into his sweatshirt, my arm swam through the fabric. Jeff and I fell to the floor. The photographs spilled between us.

"Why did he do it?" Jeff whispered, his shoulder on the dusty linoleum. His body curled, his knees pulled into him. I felt the tears in my throat, pooling inside me. "I thought he was happy... He was doing so well. Why?" I could drown at any moment. Olive grabbed Jeff's arm to pull him upright. Jeff's eyes were downcast and welling. His eyes watched the floor as he stood up. He took slow, gentle breaths.

Olive helped me to my feet. Her almond eyes were cold. "You're hurting Jeff, Vic. Let's just put them back, okay?" Jeff's face began to swell red, not in anger but in defeat. Wall was gone.

Olive put her hand on the photos, collecting them into a pile. "Let's just put these back up real quick." I wanted to scream. I couldn't breathe. The drowning began. I shoved Olive hard, taking the photographs from her hands, and ran.

* * *

I reached the lab. Carrie was in her cage. Stupid eyes on her cocked head. I held the photographs to my chest. Why, Wall? Why did you do all of this? I sniffled. I splayed them out across a lab table. My knuckles wrapped against the table. He couldn't be Joshua and Abigail. Not this way. Not because of me. Not because of doing the same thing over and over again.

I piled up the photographs and rolled them up, scrunching them to fit together, like a flowerless bouquet.

I set a match to the photos. The bouquet melted in my hand, smoke rising from it. I sobbed softly. The fire alarm went off. The high-pitch ringing echoed through the rooms, resounding, building a choir. The photos I was never meant to see contorted before my eyes, shrinking into nothing. Shuffling of shoes in the hall. I breathed in the smoke. It could kill me. The whole building could burn. And maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing.

How could you do this, Wall? Did you step into the street and wish you hadn't?

Were you like me, doing the same things over and over again?

I couldn't do it anymore.

I dropped the photographs into the sink and slowly the flames died out. I inhaled. Thin wisps of smoke rose up. The alarm's crying went on.

I reached into Carrie's cage. I held her in my hands and she let out a bubbling coo. We left the lab, then the building. No one stopped me. No one was around to.

Outside, I felt the air, cold and dry. I let it fill my lungs. I threw Carrie up into the air. She extended her wings and flew away. I exhaled slowly, a sigh of relief. She was never going to learn about figure eight shapes or patterns. And maybe it would be okay if she just disappeared.



© Danielle Owensby, "Waiting"

WAITING

WHEN IT RAINS HARD

LAUREN BROOKS

The rumble of the nearby train brings me to awareness.

I uncurl myself, the wet blue cotton of my dress clinging to my stomach, and I blink my surroundings into reality. The fog in my head keeps my eyes from focusing, and my teeth chattering send the tiny bones of my skull into high frequency vibrations. The small unfamiliar train station greets me with grey foreboding. Only the sound of heavy black rain pushing down the gutters on the roof cuts through the silence the train leaves behind. The small cement platform is devoid of life and I find myself missing the crowds of impatient people, usually hovering and watching out at train stations like buzzards waiting for an antelope to die. I'm alone and I'm definitely not in Munich anymore. After so long, after so much money saved, I made it to America, and everything feels so wrong.

My eyes catch the movement of a sign swinging from the roof as the wind whips through the empty space of the train station. I stare at it, trying to place the deeply engraved name and wondering if “cherry” and “wood” mean anything I'd recognize in German. My understanding of the language is limited to what I was

able to gather from my English classes in high school. Of course my brain has replaced it with more prevalent things such as how to file taxes and how to make the perfect schnitzel. In fact, I had been trying to brush up on my English on the train with a new book I bought.

Where was that book anyways? I start looking around for my purse and luggage, but both are missing. I feel in my pockets of my pea coat, finding nothing but a tube of lipstick and an illegible receipt with its ink smeared from the damp. My hands shake as I unscrew the lipstick, my brain relying on imagination to explain how I must have fallen asleep waiting for my American cousin. My image is reflected in the delicate silver tube and I run my fingers through the knots of my thick hair as I try to coax it back into its original place. I press the lipstick to my lips and feel the memory of a hand on my face. My mother is guiding the lipstick over my 5-year-old lips, and I take in the vanilla scent of her breath as it leaves her nose. “Simone, be who you are, but always wear lipstick.” The sweet memory usually brings a smile to my face, and I feel nothing but grateful that I remember my dead mother at all.

I take deep breaths, steadying myself, and then get up. My knees threaten to give into the spinning in my head but I yearn so badly to get away from the platform. Cherrywood? Where was that? Was this really the stop my cousin Diana had told me to get off at? How long had I been asleep? Whatever the story, Diana is nowhere to be found. Everything I’d brought with me to start over in America is nowhere to be found. My short-term memory is obviously nowhere to be found. I have to find Diana.

I walk to the end of the platform and pause to decide what direction from the station to head in. The rain is already creating rivulets on my face as it trickles down my skin but it’s more refreshing than cold now. There are buildings on my right but for some reason I’m drawn to the open road on the left. Something tells me Diana might be down there.

But feeling lonely, I walk right.

There aren’t many people braving the rain, however one redheaded woman knocks me in the head with her broad umbrella as I try to pass her.

“Sorry!” I say although it isn’t my fault. I want her to help me. She looks at me for a moment with an indecipherable look before readjusting the umbrella on her

shoulder and continuing on. Surprised from her rudeness, I involuntarily admit a gasp which brings tears to my eyes.

Not before long, I come to a café with a sign indicating it's open. The bell chimes as I press my body weight against the surprisingly heavy glass door. A few people sit inside at tables, only one reacting to sound of the door opening. At the moment no one is manning the counter so I take some napkins and sit down. I begin blotting and wringing out my hair. I rub my shoulder that has grown suspiciously sore on my walk over, and I wonder if this has anything to do with my memory loss.

A cup clatters down on a white saucer in front of me and I look up.

A middle-aged man with a tidy beard hovers far above me smiling down at my head. The cup is filled with coffee and I can almost feel the heat radiating from the sides.

"No dollars," I say, rubbing my fingers together to show him in case he doesn't understand.

"On the house," the man says. "Are you okay? No offense, but you look like you're fraying at the edges."

I reach out and take the cup in my hands to kill time as I decipher the meaning behind in his words.

"I am okay. I am new from Germany. I need my cousin. She is not here. I do not know where here is, also."

"Do you need a phone?"

"I don't know her number."

"Do you know where she is?"

My face was pinched up in order to disguise the pain in my heart but as he kept asking questions the tears already present around my lashes have spilled over and are now dripping off my chin, marking their territory on the tabletop.

“Hey, it’s okay. Look, I’m sorry. Hey, Ashley –” the man walks away and my shoulders respond by shaking with sobs, my body needing to release my emotions. The man comes back and places a large but comforting palm on my back.

“It’ll be okay. I’m actually the owner and I just moved above this dump. We’ll find your cousin and at the very least I can offer you dry clothes and a shower,” he says and as I study his eyes, the crow’s feet around their black pools give them the appearance of gentle honesty.

“You are very nice,” I say, but want to say so much more in a different language. He helps me up, my energy sapped by my hysterics. “I’m Brian, by the way.” I manage a weak smile through my tears and tell him my name.

He brings me around the side of the building and I notice him slowly limping up the metal staircase. Feminine instincts encourage me to still keep a wary distance as he leads me into his apartment. There are boxes pushed against the wall and I avoid crushing the Styrofoam peanuts scattered like confetti on the scarred floor. The only furniture is an empty brown leather couch smelling newly dead.

“Sorry for the mess, haven’t had any time to unpack yet. I’ll be right back. Feel free to sit,” he says.

He disappears from the living room and I remain standing, too uncomfortable to touch anything. The tears are already drying on my cheeks.

Brian brings me a T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants, muttering about how they’re his “ex-girlfriend’s”, and he sits down with a laptop.

“The bathroom is the second on the right,” he says. “Feel free to shower.” I go down the hallway and slowly push on each door, finding a laundry room and a different room, standing empty save for a large white mattress, before I find the bathroom.

“What’s your cousin’s name? I’ll see if I can at least find her address if not her number,” Brian’s voice filters through the closed bathroom door.

“Diana Laurenz!” I yell. I forego the shower and put on my new clothes, each article sagging on my body helplessly. The bathroom light makes me look creepily gaunt and skeletal. I run my hand over my arm, almost surprised to feel the cool

softness of skin.

I come back out to find Brian clutching and staring at the closed laptop resting in his lap.

He looks up, and his expression slumped. “Simone, are you sure Diana Laurenz is your cousin?”

What kind of question was that? “Yes, of course,” I crease my brow, concerned that in memory loss I’ve also made up a fake American family member.

“Simone, I knew your cousin. She didn’t live far from here. WE didn’t live far from here,” he says giving me a level but pitying look that leaves emotional tears in my flesh. “But she died. I’m sorry. Simone, she died over a year ago.”

“No,” even if I hadn’t been able to interpret his English, his face would have told me everything. I want to tear apart the clothes that he’s given me.

Brian touches my arm and even though I prepare to swell with more emotion, my eyes have already cried all the tears they can. Instead, I’m left numb. Somehow, deep down, I feel like I knew she was dead and I almost feel a sense of relief, even though I could have sworn I talked to her just the other day. I have to sit down.

“How?” I say, the word finally croaking out between my cracked lips. I look at Brian, whose eyes are swollen with grief, and I almost regret asking him.

“She died in a car accident. She slid off the town’s only bridge, but at least she didn’t suffer. She died on impact. I’m so sorry. I loved her so much. There’s actually a memorial at the bridge. I’ve never gone to see it, but maybe you’d want to go? It’s pretty close by. They put a plaque there to mark where she died,” he says.

“Okay,” I say, but hesitantly.

Brian takes me to his van parked out front. The rain is beginning to lessen slightly and the sky is brightening. I find myself wishing the rain would continue until it floods the streets with my loss.

I watch Brian squirm his way into the driver’s seat.

“Peg leg,” he says, noticing my eyes. “Just kidding, but I do have a fake one, a prosthetic.”

“What happened?” I ask.

“Gulf War, I actually almost died. Luckily all they got was the leg,” he says.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Nothing to be sorry for when you’re alive,” Brian says and then winces realizing his choice of language is not the best for the situation we were in. I pretend as if I don’t understand to save him from the awkwardness.

He drives me out to the bridge and when we come up to it, there’s a grizzled man in a dark coat leaning out over the edge with something in his hand. When Brian pulls over to park at the side, I see the square he’d mentioned. I eagerly leave the car before Brian follows and find myself running down the one-way bridge and toward the memorial. While I’m running my memories come racing back as well, plaguing my mind with bright and painful images.

I meet my cousin at the train station. She’s pulling me close to her and into her new blonde hair that smells of coconut. She’s so happy to see me and I’m incredibly excited to have finally made it. She and I didn’t stop talking until we get home. Except we never get home. We only get ten minutes from the train station when we approach the one-way bridge in the heavy rain. Diana isn’t paying enough attention to the road, too ecstatic and rushed about my arrival, she drives on the bridge without looking out for oncoming traffic, used to it being empty. But then she sees the truck and I hear the screams from our mouths combine into one piercing sound as she swerves. The car crumples as it hits the guardrail, but breaks through and goes flying over the water. I feel my shoulder hit the dashboard and the shock travel through the cracks it creates in my bones. Diana’s face is bloody and blank. The car hits the brackish water. I run my fingers over the memorial’s embossed lettering.

The sun breaks through the clouds. By the time Brian gets out of the car, the bridge is empty save for the man in the raincoat with a fishing pole grasped in his worn hands. Brian looks down the road, and even over the side of the bridge but is greeted with nothing but swirling water.

“She’s beautiful isn’t she?”

Brian turns and comes face to face with the older fisherman much closer than he was a moment before. Brian’s face reads confusion.

The fisherman chuckles a hollow laugh and reels in his line before recasting it. He shakes his head, “Every time it rains. Every time it rains hard.”

The rumble of the nearby train brings me to awareness.

THE SIN EATERS

ROY BENTLEY

Because there is a life in the body and the hope of a hereafter, taking a life is a sin, a term meaning “denied God’s grace,” the condition of human aloneness and separation before redemption. Of course “taking a life” can mean forcing generations to work in the coal mines of Kentucky because no other job promises anything like a living wage. Maybe the body is what the owner class in America uses against the working class, let’s go ahead and put it in those terms, and say that sinners come in all shapes and sizes, though we’re a lot quicker to judge the transgressions of the poor as weaknesses or flaws, than, say, the Satan who shows up with lawyers and bodyguards. In Appalachia, they called those who came to the deathbed to perform rites of purification the “sin eater”—because these accepted the transgressions of the dying who could then rest in peace. The sin eater’s last task was to eat the crust of bread placed on the chest. The life-and-death world was in the bread. I guess the act arose from looking hard at a death, any death, and thinking, I’m afraid too. They could hardly be blamed for believing we require help to shovel and load the forlorn coal of self, the unusable portion, so that we might leave this body unburdened by our failures.

My grandfather worked in a mine until he got up one morning, dressed,
breakfasted on biscuits and gravy, and started up the hollow
to where a Red-shouldered Hawk sat. Stone-still. When it lifted off,
the hawk, he told anyone who'd listen "That was all she wrote,"
meaning he turned and walked back to their row house as one converted,
all his unrighteousness exploded in a fit of wings at first light.

for James Riley

EMPTY SPACES

AMBER SLACK

There's a place I used to know
On a road named for distant lands
In a neighborhood that time half forgot.
It's a house that once held all
The most precious things I've ever had.
In the living room that's painted
The color of moss on a forest floor
Her favorite recliner sits in the corner
Next to the books she devoured.
Its rough mauve texture contrasted
By the comfort its overstuffed cushions
Once provided her slender frame.
The piano sits silently against the far wall
Where practiced fingers no longer move deftly
Over pearly white keys to create soothing melodies
That float pleasantly through every room.
The kitchen ovens are void
Of all the warm aromas of baking cookies
That wafted through the air
And would wrap you up in a phantom hug.
Here is where the taste of coffee and conversation
Are no longer savored on quiet tongues.
Where her soft and wrinkled hands

Are no longer busied with the making
Of a million Sunday dinners.
Here her gentle smiles and rich laughter
Will never again pierce the silence.
Downstairs in the family room
All the furniture faces the ancient TV
And no fire crackles with life and warmth
On cold and unforgiving winter nights.
Out back beside the cracking patio
The weathered rust red porch swing sways
In a breeze as if some forgotten specter saw its sadness
And decided to return its purpose.
The creaking of the chains which hold it up is matched
By the rustling of the great oak's leaves
As they fall to earth as if it were raining sunlight.
This house still holds those who once did,
And very surely always will, love her.
But it has become a house of empty spaces
Left quiet in her wake.
An empty recliner.
An empty kitchen.
An empty porch swing.
Full only of memories of days long past.
Days filled with her smile, her laughter, her presence.
And it will always hold all of the most precious things
That I have ever had.

THE BRIDE'S BEST FRIEND

COLIN HALBMAIER

The card fell from my hand and into the basket of pastel-colored envelopes. I smiled and moved into the chapel's crowded reception area, careful not to bump into the other guests.

“David!”

I turned around to see Jimmy running toward me, nearly knocking over a photo board. He stuttered an apology to the woman looking at the display and turned

to me, breathless.

“I wasn’t sure you’d come,” he confessed.

“I couldn’t miss Cassadee’s wedding,” I said. “She’d kill me.”

“Either way, it’s good to see you,” he replied with a goofy smile I hadn’t seen since college. His tuxedo didn’t quite fit right; his curly brown hair was an untidy mess; and his shoes were scuffed. He hadn’t changed at all. Despite his disheveled appearance, he looked good. Healthy, even.

“Have you seen her yet?” I asked, scanning the room for the bride. Her familiar golden curls were nowhere to be seen in the sea of black tuxedos and pastel dresses. The wedding was supposed to start soon.

“Relax, David,” he said, putting a hand on my arm. “We’ll pull through this together and go grab a beer after. There’s an open bar, right?”

The large wooden doors creaked open and the room went silent. Time for the big event. I stepped into the crowd of people flocking to the entrance, knowing Jimmy would follow. He was well-liked in college, but he never made an attempt at being social. Out of everyone there, he only knew Cassadee and me.

“Are you sure about this?” Jimmy asked as we entered the chapel and took our seats in a pew near the back.

“Do I have a choice?” I asked in return. He bit his lip as he looked at me. I sighed and added, “No, I’m not. But I’ve got a plan.”

“The last time you had a plan, I was drawing my eyebrows on for a month.”

“Relax,” I assured him, “You won’t burn any hair off today. I’m going to tell her I love her.”

“*What?*” he asked, stunned. “Tell me you’re joking. You’re going to tell someone about to get married that you love them?”

“What else can I say?” I replied. “It should be me on that altar, not Lance.”

Jimmy looked around, afraid of someone overhearing our conversation. He opened his mouth to speak, but the pipe organ cut him off. The crowd fell silent as they turned to face the wedding procession.

The family entered first, then the priest, followed by a last-minute arrival who realized his mistake halfway down the aisle and dropped into the first open seat. The groomsmen and bridesmaids filed in wearing matching suits and dresses. I recognized a few of them from college as they passed, leaving a flower trail in their wake. Lance entered next, freshly shaven and dressed in a fine black tuxedo with a pink rose on his lapel. He looked good.

Once Lance reached the altar, Cassadee stepped into the chapel alongside her father. Her golden hair fell over her bare shoulders, her long white dress trailing behind her, shimmering in the light. She tried to train her eyes on the altar ahead, but she snuck small waves at her friends in passing. At the sight of me, she smiled. I waved, unable to think of anything clever.

As Cassadee took her place beside Lance, the crowd settled in for the ceremony. As the priest gave his opening remarks, Jimmy leaned closer and whispered, "I can't believe you're even thinking about this."

When I didn't answer, he added, "Cassadee is my friend too, you know. I'm not going to let you ruin her wedding."

"Whatever you say," I replied.

The elderly woman to my right jabbed me hard with the tip of her cane. I bit my tongue as I tried to hold back a yelp of pain and surprise. Jimmy sat back in his seat, content.

The ceremony passed slowly. As the priest rattled on about the sanctity of marriage, I daydreamed about what Cassadee would say when she discovered how I felt. By then, they would be married, but maybe it would at least start a fight.

"If there's anyone here who believes these two should not be married," the priest said, "let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

Lance and Cassadee turned to the audience, daring someone to speak. Jimmy

tensed.

When no one made a sound, the couple turned back to one another and the ceremony continued. Jimmy looked to me, surprised.

“You know that’s when you’re supposed to say something, right?”

“I thought you were trying to stop me,” I pointed out. “I put it all in her card. She’ll read it later.”

“You did what?!” he said a little too loudly. The woman reached past me and smashed her cane into Jimmy’s shin. Karma, I thought as he rubbed his leg in pain.

As the crowd let out a faint “aww,” I realized we’d missed their vows. Cassadee laughed as she wiped away a tear rolling down her cheek. I looked away as Lance kissed her and the crowd erupted in cheers. Jimmy glanced at me as he clapped half-heartedly, unsure of whose side to take.

As soon as the ceremony ended, he led me out of the chapel by the arm, eager to reach the bar first. Friends and family surrounded the newlyweds, but I didn’t have the stomach to face them yet.

Other guests streamed through the basement doors, heading for the reception hall. I was about to follow when I realized Jimmy had disappeared. I finally spotted him near the entrance display with the basket of cards. Groaning, I pushed through the crowd to reach him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I asked when I caught up. He had stacks of envelopes in his hands, scrutinizing each of them for my handwriting. Even if he found it, I wondered if he would recognize my penmanship.

“Are you right in the head?” he asked, grabbing my shoulders. “You call yourself her best friend, but you’re already trying to ruin her marriage. Can’t you at least give her a few years to get divorced?”

People around us started to stare. An older man walking by gave us a strange look. Jimmy removed his hands from me and brushed the nonexistent dust from his jacket.

“She’s not going to read the card right now, so stop worrying,” I said. “Let’s go to the reception and have that beer you promised me.”

He still wasn’t happy, but the promise of beer took his mind off it. We joined the crowd and descended into the basement.

We took our seats at one of the round tables on the perimeter of the dance floor. Music blasted through the speakers, marking the start of the reception. He offered me a beer, but I turned him down. He shrugged and downed it himself. I grabbed food from the buffet and sat at the table, driving my fork into a piece of ham while the other guests flocked to the dance floor. Jimmy was already coming back from the bar again.

“How can you do that?” I asked as he returned with another cup in each hand.

“It’s an art,” he replied, passing me one of them. “This one’s for you. Maybe it’ll help you find a *single* girl out there.”

I looked up to see a couple attractive girls watching us. They giggled when they caught us staring. Jimmy waved, but I looked away.

A slow country song played through the speakers as the bride and groom had their first dance. Cassadee smiled as she looked into Lance’s eyes, revealing her perfect teeth. She didn’t know what she was missing. Maybe Jimmy was right and they would divorce in a few years. I took a sip of my beer as I savored the thought.

“Aren’t they cute?” Jimmy asked. He finished the second drink and started on a third.

“Shut up, Jimmy,” I replied. He didn’t listen.

“What are we going to do about that card?” he asked, pulling me close. “You know you’re asking for trouble.”

“At least she’ll know,” I replied. “I *need* her to know.”

“At the risk of losing your best friend?” he pressed. “Look at her, David. Yes, she’s with Lance, but she’s happy. Isn’t that enough for you?”

This was why Jimmy and I never went out for drinks.

They leaned closer and kissed as the song ended. The crowd around them cheered and applauded. Jimmy joined in, but stopped when I shot him a look.

“Just think about what you’re doing,” he said before shakily rising to his feet and making his way to the stools at the bar. I sighed and followed him.

My mood brightened as the night went on. By the second drink, I felt myself loosening up. Jimmy cheered me on with each sip. Even buzzed, I knew my limits, and protested when he ordered me a third.

“Stop it, Jimmy,” I said, pushing the cup away.

“No, David, you stop it,” he replied, pushing it back to me.

“I need a walk,” I decided, standing up. Jimmy opened his mouth to protest, but belched instead. I stepped away and started pushing my way through the crowd.

“David!”

I froze as someone grabbed my shoulder. I turned around to see Cassadee’s perfect smile.

“I haven’t seen you all night!” she said, dragging me out of the crowd. “Come on, you owe me a dance. I requested our song and everything!”

She pulled me to the center of the dance floor and we began to sway to the music—a smooth, soulful tune we listened to in college. Mascara and eye shadow adorned her amber eyes. Her golden curls fell past her bare shoulders and rested against the top of her strapless dress.

“Having a good time?” she asked proudly as our eyes met.

“Is that even a question?” I replied, avoiding the answer.

Cassadee shook her head and smiled, her arms wrapped around the back of my neck. I felt my hands sweating against her waist.

“When are we going to dance at *your* wedding?” she asked. “I haven’t heard you mention any girls these days.”

“I’m between girlfriends at the moment,” I replied.

She narrowed her eyes. “You make it sound like a job.”

“Sometimes waiting for the right girl feels like one,” I said, looking behind her at the crowd. Lance was at the bar talking to the attractive women from before. He glanced in our direction and returned his attention to his friends. I hoped he was jealous. Jimmy noticed us too, and frowned.

“She’s out there,” Cassadee said, “and she’s worth waiting for. When your turn rolls around, we’ll talk about this again and laugh.”

We swayed without a word for a while longer until she looked up.

“Hey, David?” she said. “Thanks... for everything. I know things were a little rough between you and Lance in the beginning, but I know he likes you.”

“Is he worth it?” I asked. She didn’t seem offended by the question.

“He is,” she promised. “He really is.”

I closed my eyes, and for a moment I could almost pretend that this was all for us. For a moment, Lance meant nothing. For a moment, I was dreaming.

“I love you.”

The words slipped out of my not-so-sober mouth before I knew what I was saying. My eyes flew open and my brain scrambled for a recovery, but found nothing.

“I love you too, David,” she said, standing on her tiptoes and planting a kiss on my cheek. “Best friends. Nothing will change that, not even Lance.”

I forced a smile, holding back the tears. As we swayed, I couldn’t look her in the eyes, so I pulled her close and rested my head against hers.

The song faded as Lance approached and put a hand on her arm. She turned around and smiled before kissing him.

“Thanks again, David,” she said, turning back to me with an arm around her husband. “I’ll call you as soon as we get back from our honeymoon.”

I forced a smile and nodded. They waved as they walked away, disappearing into the crowd.

“Hey, buddy,” Jimmy said as I approached. He was still at the bar, a young woman on each side. “Good dance?”

“Fantastic,” I said, grabbing his arm. “Come on, we’re leaving.”

“Woah now,” he replied, breaking my grip. “You just got here! C’mon, stay a while and talk with us.”

I grabbed him more forcefully, pulling him to his feet. He teetered uncertainly as I dragged him to the stairs.

“What’s gotten into you?” he asked. “Did she read the letter?”

“No,” I replied. “You’ve had enough. I’m taking you back to the hotel.”

I ushered him up the stairs, into the reception area, and through the heavy wooden doors leading to the parking lot. Millions of bright stars filled the night sky. I opened the car door and helped Jimmy inside, slamming it shut behind him.

As I opened the driver’s door to get in, my eyes looked to the chapel windows where candles burned brightly on the ledges. The faint sound of the bass from the speakers interrupted the quiet night. Cassadee always dreamed of the perfect wedding.

“I’ll be right back,” I told Jimmy before closing the door and half-walking half-sprinting back to the building.

Piles of carefully-wrapped gifts surrounded the basket of cards in the center of the room. I shuffled through the pastel colors in search of my own handwriting. It didn’t take long to find. Cassadee’s name, written in my best cursive; I hadn’t

bothered to write Lance's.

I tucked the letter inside the front of my jacket. Someday it might come in handy, but not tonight. With one last look at the chapel, I pushed open the doors and disappeared into the summer night.

NAMES

NATE DUKE

Had I first been called
the sun of the morning
instead of *[your name]*,
then I would have doubtless
too have fallen.

Had you first been called
the word that was with and of,
then we would doubtless
have spoken.

Had they first been called
the Jungian *other*,
and not the kind human,
then we would doubtless
have loved folks.



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FAERIES



© Danielle Owensby, "Stars"

STARS

BOYS CLUB

VALERIE GUARDIOLA

Sometimes I wonder
if I messed up in my youth
by falling for men
who were
dead.

I can't help wondering,
in my most narcissistic moments,
if my now terrible taste in men,
my attraction to trembling boys
yielding American Spirits
and tattered copies of Bukowski,
is because
my sophomore year
I tainted my tongue by memorizing *The Wasteland*,
in the hopes that TS Eliot would feed
me chocolate-covered coffee beans.

To this day,
when a poet is around me,
I can smell him from across the bar.

It is not that his hair is parted a certain way,
or that his coat hugs his body perfectly.
Not the movement of his lips when he says the word “inextricable,”

or even that he uses the word “inextricable.”

I can find these boys through crowded room,
because we share lovers.

They smell of Fitzgerald’s cologne,
and lean against walls so hard they squeal,
as I’m sure the walls in San Francisco did
when they birthed the whiney beats, clad in
ripped wife-beaters and wired glasses.

They hold themselves as Hemingway did,
and the clink of ice cubes in their glass
sends shivers up my spine.

They drop names in their poems,
like I do,

but without the fear of gin-drenched ghosts.

To this day,
when a poet is around me,
I take the long way around telling them I write.

I take my time with letting the words go,
listening to them lecture on
the benefits of T.C. Boyle and J.D. Salinger,
a plethora of authors
winding their lifetimes
in the abruptness of double initials.

And when the silence in the conversation rises,
and they pause to take a sip of whiskey,

or a drag of their cigarette

or to fumble in their pockets while staring at another girl,

I say, “I know.”

And from my tongue strikes the chorus of acknowledgements
of pieces of my lovers
who took my breath away before
these boys lost their bits.

Because I learned the difference
early on,
between the boys who wield the words of others,
who try so desperately to write like our lovers,
and the men whose hands are endless.

SHORT BLACK OUT

JIM DANIELS

I was once a semi-pro candle lighter
for the church. I told no one
my wishes, not even God.

I also snuffed the candles out.
No one's coming back from the dead
or turning into bread and wine.
I knew that, even then, scrubbed semi-
pure, hair combed wet into silence.
The money came from the families
of the deceased, or the bride
and groom. New money, usually—
the stiff smell.

The power went out last night.
My daughter was home
for a visit. We stumbled
into each other, and laughed.
We lit candles.
We never took her to church.
All I know is
life is not a contest, and if it is,
I should have bought
more tickets.. I used to ring
the bells in church,
I tell her across the table.

We are all beautiful
when flickering, I don't tell her.

A violent shake,
and the echoing
trill. Would somebody ring
the bells for me? I don't ask.

The idea of God hung in the air
in that second where music fell
into silence no matter what
the priest was doing.

My daughter
celebrates her birthday elsewhere
these days. Her soft voice
sweetened the darkness.

When the lights
came back on—too soon!—sadness
seeped through my skin
until I was a black, unlit wick.
We blew out

our candles. I can't say
whether my daughter made a wish.

I did not. We each returned
to our separate rooms.

The refrigerator hummed
its steady hymn.

THE SECRET IDENTITY

PAULINA MINNEBO

As fingers dance across the keys,
I fall in only deeper.
I've never met him in real life
but I know he's what I want.
"You're beautiful," he tells me,
and I thank him, playing shy,
but something about the compliment stings.
Stings like the strain the bright screen's
constant glowing has caused on my long-exposed eyes.
I take a breath, knowing it's time.

I have to break his heart, again.
"I have bad news," I type out regretfully.
I feel terrible. All I want is to make him happy,
but I guess I'll do anything
to make sure he likes me,
at least for now.
"Oh no, is it about Friday?" he asks,
and I close my eyes, a lump in my throat.

It always gets this way when I say it.
"Yeah. I won't be able to make it."
"My mom wants me to visit my grandparents with her.
I mean, I can't say no,
not when my grandma is sick."

He doesn't answer right away,
and I feel my heart clench
in my chest.
Would this be the last time?

No.

"It's okay, I understand," he responds.
"I get that it's a hard time for your family.
Cancer sucks. I just wish I could finally see you,
finally look into those beautiful brown eyes in person."
"I know, I'm sorry," I type back.
"I want to see you too."
At least all that is true.

I let my eyes wander over
to the picture frame on my desk
and I take a small comfort
in my grandmother's image.
Her arm around my shoulder,
her smile wide.
It's the last picture of us together.

He sends a message, and my gaze
is back on the shining screen.
"I still love you, don't worry," he jokes.
I grin. It's this that really matters,
the feelings,
the love...
I have nothing to worry about.

"I love you too," I tell him.
"But it's midnight here now.
I think I need to sleep."
"No problem," he says to me.
"Same time tomorrow?"
"Always," I type.
"Sweet dreams. You'll forever be my girl," he says.
"Good night," I respond.
And we sign off.

The harsh glow of the monitor
finally flickers off.
I stop by the bathroom
before heading to bed.
The light from the bathroom
is brighter than the light from the computer.
It engulfs me.
I wince.
As I use the toilet, I look into the mirror
my gray eyes looking bloodshot,
tired.

I finish my routine
and go to bed,
falling under the covers
and feeling peaceful for once.
I think of him.
He really does love me.
But I'll never be good enough for him.
He says I'm his girl,
and I try so hard to be,
but I can't lie much longer...
it's impossible.

There's a soft knock on my door.
It's my mother.
"Do you have any plans for Friday?" she asks.
She looks just as tired as I do.
"I thought maybe we could visit Grandma's headstone," I say from my bed.
She smiles. "That'd be nice. You know, Grandma
would really be proud of you, honey," she says.
"You've grown into quite the young man."
"Thanks, Mom," I say softly.
"Good night." She shuts the door.
I sleep.

SHARK ATTACK

ZACHARY SCHNITTA

1.

Diving

down
into dark waters
vacation begins.

Flying south
along betraying mountains
I study the terrible secrets of lights
and envision heaven on fire.

A car drops me off
at a house overlooking an ocean.
On the way to my room
a motmot eclipses a setting sun
a lizard bleeds by a door
surely metaphors to forget
that which came before.

Eating, drinking, not talking
with papa, dada (rehtaf, tafreh, afreht).
The father speaking to father

the father in love with father.

At nights on the veranda by the sea
listening and waiting
for that perfect call of pregnant symmetry.
Resigning
to eating stars as baby food
hey, there goes dad in the nude!

Drinking up four nights with two ladies
to salsa, techno and trance
Malodorous dance.
Imperialism strikes the bed
and
suicide secures its foothold in the universe.

Sullen and quiet to father
on skiff to snorkel and to drink some more
we put on our goggles
and head to ocean's floor.

I am the water in which I swim.
A ghost or specter underneath eternally diffused—
A shriek
A scare
A mouth opening black

Shark Attack!

2.

I close my eyes and become the ocean.

If the moon, a current, a wave, a school of fish push me in a direction, that's where I go. I have to, you see. I am the water in which I swim. Blue, green, a little turquoise to tangle with, large and beyond what anyone could ever imagine for

themselves. Is this vanity?

I open my eyes and look around at the dark green and blue water. I look up to see the sun faded and deformed yet waiting to touch me.

Take off this mask, take off this mask! You are not needed.

Stay afloat and die alone.

Diving down—to bottoms opening up to new and endless bottoms I know—I feel—this is home.

My picture on my phone. So ugly and fat in the face. Thinning hair and my mole about to explode. Cannot even get a rise from flying these days. My face feels down. And my ears popping like popcorn. But you know I'm not even sure if this is fun anymore. Is traveling still fun? Still possible in this age?

Beyond the window a mountain of clouds. A mess of clouds thick, bulbous, piled on top of each other, rising skyward. A gush of light! A gush of light and a mountain is severed, punctured...bleeding light. I want to weep but will not. I close my eyes and my body is flying. It strikes a cloud, then disappears. It strikes sunlight and dissolves...but reappears with power and light emanating from my fingertips and mouth...the mouth opens wide and a coronet of electricity issues forth to air.

I shut out the light and know there is nothing to worry about. The clouds and I scudding along in unison, respecting each other's distance. One day I will singe the plains of heaven.

My luggage is heavy as I walk across our veranda. Before the stairs I look up to see a blue-crowned motmot perching on a chair. Its green and orange body eclipses the setting sun, its pendulum wings pointing straight down.

I open the door to my room, but wouldn't you know it? There's blood. I set my bags down and look at this blood on the smooth baby blue tiles outside my door. A small lizard has been amputated. Its chalky, near translucent body sliced widthwise just a little more than halfway down its torso. My god...the lizard is still...alive. I panic because the lizard does not panic.

I know in my heart it's still alive because its eyes are blinking. Tiny, perfectly circular black eyes. I stare into the eyes. Eyes to eyes. I have to, you see. I want to save its life.

In a drunk-like fashion the lizard scuttles a few inches. From the fresh blood I assume this lizard is not used to living with one foot, or living without half his small intestine.

Dad wolfs down rice, beans, steaks, fruit. A few orange seeds collect in his beard. A few stains of something in his grey and white chest hair.

I sit and cut my steak with a knife and fork.

Dad says a lot of people are really stupid.

I say that's nice.

Dad says he is smarter than everyone else.

I nod.

Dad says that life is good.

I smile.

Dad says he's the king of the mountain and no one lives higher than us.

I open a beer.

Laying in a hammock I write down words, both good and bad. I wait for more... at best coherent, at worst miserable pretension. Shadowed valleys and dark mountains under stars. The ocean existing by moonlight. All of God's insects sounding the Earth—wild yet controlled.

My God...the stars. Each and every one...mapped out, unyielding, alert, and proud of their beauty. Each and every one a dimension and unimaginable universe filled with something even worse than misery—chaos.

I set my pen and notebook down on the ground.

I light up a joint.

There will be no more writing for this evening. Only thoughts and precious wasted time. Wasted time to stretch out and refine.

A noise from the front of the house and I hear a body emerge from the pool. Dad with his pregnant beer belly and limp penis walks to his room. His testicles casually swinging to the left and right like a pendulum.

Have I seen this before?

Sheeit, my belly is looking bigger. Babying outwards...

I enter a club, or the club enters me. A few girls, a few boys. A few ladies, a few men.

One beer. I meet a lady, or the lady meets me. One more beer.

Time goes by.

Two beers and one shot.

More time goes by.

Many heads, torsos and limbs dancing. Loud, fast, smelly music. A dipsomaniac dance style overwhelming and outliving the ornate. A crash of people dancing to music not of this land's heart.

A scary beast is let loose in this jungle of big beats.

Two beers and two shots and I walk out with the lady to a black beach.

We make out and then go to her bed by the village square. We fuck in half life, half light. Her breath smells of cigarette smoke and cat food.

Arms hairier than mine around my neck. Lips curling, giving off charm and

endurance. On her wall a cross and a praying Madonna.

I dream. I dream of eyeless bodies covered in papules, nodules, chancres. The bodies join hands and form a circle. They dance on the surface of rough water. In a flash giant, shiny red-lipstick covered lips rise from the horizon and smile down on the sick, poor souls.

I wake up throw up. Outside her bathroom window early morning light. Not enough light to live so I think I will die today. She has given me a disease, and now it's only a matter of time.

I deserve it this time. I remember:

Inside—sweltering, sticky, little bumps right above where it's most hairy and wet. After tasting the inside I looked up and she smiled and for a moment there was love—not quite love but love as a drug, a drug that never fails, it was fleeting yes, but it was there—more tangible and real than I could ever be. But it left... quickly. As if all along half of that love and warmth and shelter was blankness and oblivion, and because it was half—it was its equal—and so cancelled it out. A terrible ruse and falling. A terrible thunderclap of reason, reality, age, experience, knowing, knowing it would not last, and only reminding me of that which I felt long ago will not happen again. To even imagine it could, a terrible disservice to its beauty and memory.

All today's light, suicide life.

A snorkeling expedition. A boat cruise I guess. A few drinks, a few beers. My dad's relaxed and in good conversation with himself. I hang on to his voice to ward off oblivion.

Everything is pleasant and the way it should be.

I am quiet and do not look at anyone's face.

I check for bumps. Too soon?

I look at the ocean and envy its smoothness.

I dive into the ocean with my human fins and tube.

Blue, yellow and silver fish swim by, somewhere in the murky distance a dream of a stingray.

I feel ugly and sick. A spirit sent here from someplace far away has congealed within. Or perhaps a spirit from long ago left something behind which I now inhabit.

Yes, yes. Time to escape.

Is there a route in this ocean to escape ocean?

I close my eyes and become the ocean. If a current, a wave, a school of fish push me in a direction, that's where I go. I have to, you see. I am the water in which I swim.

I open my eyes and look around at the dark green and blue water. I look up to see the sun faded and deformed yet waiting to touch me.

Take off this mask, take off this mask! You are not needed.

Stay afloat and die alone.

Diving down—to bottoms opening up to new and endless bottoms I know—I feel—this is home.

This spirit has been banished! Cast out!

Sea rock pimpled, coarse and white. Whiteness where it should not be. White reefs...this cannot be.

But a shadow...

A quiet noise of deep water moving fast. Overwhelming and full. Fast enough to betray me.

I cannot breathe. If there is time for a breath it must be soon. I scream. The water subdues protest.

I kick and rise, but there is no rise. Just shock and hurt. I smell blood and am alone.

I !!!!!!!!!

Allthereisevertosayisthatyourdeathisthegreatestviolencetotheuniverseimaginable. Why isn't someone else here? I hurt I hurt. Why am I swimming alone? A guide! I hurt! A lover! Father!

3.

Sam snorkels beneath the calm surface of the Pacific Ocean. The water is an opaque dark green diffused with a thin sheen of sunlight. Towards the surface the water illuminates to a light blue. His body is pale and thin and he wears swimming trunks covered in silhouetted palm trees set against sunsets. Behind him in a blank expanse of water a few yellow and blue fish swim in disorderly fashion. Sam extends his arms out and closes his eyes. He kicks his feet to stay afloat as his body slowly drifts to the left, then to the right. His swimming trunks undulate, making constant ripples and folds.

After a few minutes Sam opens his eyes. He looks up at the surface then back down. He takes off his goggles and snorkeling tube and watches them hover in the water. Shavings of sunlight reflect off the goggles which remain near the surface, while the tube slowly sinks out of sight into a domain beyond retrieve.

Sam smiles, then dives downward.

The 747 flies steady and southward. It's full of families, couples, businessmen and businesswomen. A flight attendant walks down its only aisle holding open a trash bag.

Towards the rear of the plane Sam sits next to a middle-aged couple in the midst of a conversation. He pulls out his newly purchased phone and scrolls and presses down on its screen. Flipping it around he takes a picture of his face.

The narrow picture frame perfectly borders his quiet, rigid visage. His chapped lips are horizontal, expressionless and dull. On his left cheek black hairs stick out of an agitated, nearly infected red mole. A patch of black hairs above his nose far

past a hint of a unibrow.

Sam sets his phone on the tray table and slowly tilts his head down. After a few moments he rolls his head around his shoulders and stops once he has made a circle. He stares at small interwoven shapes in the blue fabric on the seat in front of him.

He looks outside the oval window to the east and makes out somber, silver-gray clouds thick and high, whose peaks are elevated far above the flight of the plane. The clouds are massive and slow moving and form a vague mountain range of clouds miles long. A few rays of light are revealed by small, rouge cloudslides and for a moment the sun's light is impregnated with a luminosity able to tear through any strength or size of cloud.

The light fades back behind that which it pierced, but a few moments later reappears stronger and denser as a field—a ground—a sea level of profuse sunlight from which the clouds rise.

The 747 runs into turbulence and rolls to the right causing its eastward wing to tilt upwards by a few degrees. Still staring out the window Sam remains unfazed and tilts his head to the left to counterbalance this shifting of axis to achieve his original view of the outside world.

Minutes before sunset Sam steps out of his father's red four-wheel drive jeep and looks at the Pacific Ocean. The view is from the west and two-thousand feet above sea level on top of the largest mountain in Playa Potrero's sixty-eight square miles of land. The water is a dark blue and shares its space on earth with two triangular rock islands between the shore and the horizon. The land is dry and brown and only fits of green plants dot the foothills bordering the beach.

Carrying a backpack and a duffle bag, Sam walks up a small hill to his father's house. On the veranda, a blue-crowned motmot lands on a antique, wooden chair standing a few feet behind a hammock. The bird walks across the top rail then turns to look out over the ocean blocking Sam's view of the setting sun. As it gently fidgets to find the desired footing, its turquoise and dark teal wings settle down on rich orange and tangerine plumage. The blue center tail feathers twitch like a jolted pendulum on a clock back and forth, back and forth. Sam walks across the stairway landing to his room but before he enters he stops

and looks down. A dried out, brown grasshopper adheres to the bottom of his door. A little over a foot to the left is a small unmoving house gecko with the lower part of its rectum, right hind limb and the majority of its tail cut off. Blood is pooled in between the majority of the body and its dismembered parts. Sam looks up to see if his father is around. He looks back down and locates the gecko's eyes. They blink once, twice, as does Sam.

Sam and his father Samuel sit at a small wooden table eating breakfast. Samuel is in his mid-sixties with grey hair on his chest and a few remaining tufts of grey hairs on his skull. He has thin long lips, small beady blue eyes, and a squarish, compact head.

Large spoonfuls of white rice and Costa Rican black beans go into Samuel's mouth, which balloons outwards as he chews. Steak is cut haphazardly with fork and knife and washed down by more rice and beans. Orange slices are squeezed and seeds come tumbling out into Samuel's neatly trimmed beard. A stray seed or two make their way down to breasts then into a thicket of chest hair. Sam neatly cuts his steak with a fork and knife and avoids looking at his father while he eats.

"You know, everyone said I was crazy. They said I was nuts for building up here. They said he's lost it, they said he's loco man" Samuel snorts and takes a sip of beer, "there was a war going on in Nicaragua and no one wanted to come here. No one! Oliver North was landing planes on a strip of land on Costa Rican soil just twenty miles to the north. On clear days you can see it from the house here. This was considered freaky-dickey stuff man." Samuel takes another sip of beer, "But look at this place! It's buteeful. Buuteeeful."

"I like it," says Sam.

"Now everyone is so jealous. They all wish they had this kind of view."

"It's nice."

"But now all my friends are getting old, getting cancer, getting sick. They have medical bills, mortgage payments. Some owe the I.R.S. money. Some are in jail. Some are dead. They're all struggling, falling apart...except me. Why is that? What have I done that is so different?"

"Well you've been good with money."

“That and I didn’t remarry.”

“And you didn’t remarry.”

“And now I’m at that age where things should be comfortable and easy...and they are. Things are good and I’m enjoying life, you know? I’m taking it easy.” Samuel finishes his beer and lets out a loud, deep burp. “My mountain,” he spread out his arms like an eagle, “our mountain, mi montaña. It’s all wild and protected natural parks. No one is higher and no one can build here. No one except me. Only I can live here and still do the funky chicken.” Samuel lifts his arms and dances like an Egyptian.

Sam smiles, then unscrews the cap to his bottle of Imperial beer and takes a long drink.

It is evening and the crisp, clear night sky is full of stars. A waxing crescent moon hanging low lights a strip of ocean miles from shore electric white.

Underneath a dim orange light, Sam lays in a hammock in the northern balcony of the house writing in his spiral bound notebook. Beyond the balcony a dark valley rests between converging mountains ridges. The silhouettes of the tenderly serrated mountain crests visible by starlight.

Sam sets his pen and notebook down on the ground. He picks up a pack of cigarettes and pulls out a joint. A few green seeds fall onto the floor as he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a matchbook.

Lighting the joint, he cups the glowing end with his hand and deeply and methodically inhales.

A splash of water in the distance and Sam turns his head ninety degrees. Through a pair of windows Sam sees Samuel casually walk towards the kitchen at the other side of the house oblivious of any observers. With his large beer belly jutting out he walks with his forearms held high and horizontal at breast level as if leading a marching band. Thin, wet, hair channels his arms and legs and in an evanescent glimpse below the chest Sam sees his six-inch long penis hang loose and casual from a bundled mane of dark pubic hair. Beneath this his testicles loosely caged in his reddened scrotum gently swing to the left and right. Sam looks down to his belly and feels his growing paunch.

A kilometer to the west of Potrero's village square lies a club and restaurant called Lasprezas. Right after nine p.m. Ticos are scattered along its bar, drinking Imperial beer and watching a soccer match on a flat screen TV. It's Costa Rica versus Panama and emotions run high both on and off screen. A man in tight jeans and a shiny red soccer jersey is hooking up wires to speakers on a stage overlooking the dance floor next to the bar.

Sam walks in and takes a seat, ordering an Imperial. To his left, with only a bar stool between them, sits a middle-aged Tico woman, wearing a faded white cocktail dress sipping on water. Sam looks over at the woman and smiles. He watches the soccer game and downs half his beer. The woman moves over next to Sam.

"Hello."

Sam tilts his head down and looks over at the lady keeping his jaw hid behind his left shoulder, "Hola."

"Hola."

"Buenas noches."

"Buenas noches."

"Hablas Inglés?"

"Sí."

Sam grins and finally reveals his bearded face. He glances around the bar then looks at the woman.

"What's your name?"

"My name is Jenny. What is yours?"

"Sammy."

"Do you know where the hospital is in Playa Flamingo?"

“I think so.”

“I work there. As a nurse.”

Sam finishes his beer and orders another.

“You live in Potrero?” asks Sam.

“Yes.”

“In the village?”

“Yes.”

Jenny smiles and wraps her arms around her chest, “Buy me a drink?”

“Imperial?”

“No no no, that shit tastes like dog water. I like Pilsen. Pilsen huh?”

A little later in the night after unmeasured and unaccounted for drinks, Sam takes notice of new surroundings and new people. On the dance floor Ticos and a few Gringos dance to loud bass and loud electronic clamor with arms held high or to the side or around nearby waists. Sam walks to the bathroom through this crowd keeping his head low and hips static. In the line for the men’s bathroom, a three hundred pound, heavily tanned bodybuilder grinds up on men and women. Some consent, others do not.

Sam orders another round of drinks for himself and Jenny. They make a genuine attempt at conversation despite the loud music and dance.

“You know I’m not a prostitute.”

“I know.”

“A lot of you guys come in here from the States think so, but I’m not.”

“I know, I know.”

“I work at a hospital. As a nurse for the elderly.”

“Really?”

Sam and Jenny walk out to the beach where it's dark save for a few fires outside Lasprezas where meats are grilled and people stand around smoking and talking. At ocean's edge Sam puts his arms around Jenny and kisses her on the cheek then on the lips then on the forehead. Their feet sink in the wet sand as mosquitoes bite ankles and thighs.

Sam drops a crumpled fifty-dollar bill between Jenny's breasts, she looks up at him with scorn and narrowed eyes. She takes the bill off her breasts and pushes it flat against Sam's chest. Sam straightens out the bill and licks the United States Capital, then pushing it back down her bra he wraps it around her nipple. He takes out another fifty-dollar bill and repeats the process on the other side of her bosom.

Jenny leads Sam to her twin-sized bed in the backroom of a wooden shack outside the village square soccer field.

Awash in obscure orange light, Jenny's small and thin hairy brown arms are squeezed and caressed by Sam as they encompass his neck. His erect penis circles around her abdomen and cleavage. His bony fingers cup and press down on her breasts.

Sam tongues Jenny's right arm and furrows trails in her arm hair around birthmarks and moles where he sprinkles and snorts cocaine.

Jenny turns on music from her small transistor radio and Sam dances in the nude without rhythm or timing.

Jenny goes to her kitchen and brings back a pint of rum and takes a swig. Sam grabs it from her hands and guzzles it. He begins to talk gibberish and shouts out racial slurs.

Later in the evening on the far edge of the bed Sam lays on his side. On the wall a fresco of a praying Madonna and above that a bronze sculpture of a cross. Sam holds his stomach tightly against his stomach waiting for vomit. He gets in the

fetal position and closes his eyes. A few minutes later he falls asleep.

Sam wakes up in a puddle of his own urine and gags. He goes to the bathroom and violently throws up. On his knees taking deep breaths he looks up at faint blue morning light in a small rectangular window. He gets up to the sink and turns on the faucet, drinking as much water as he can with his hands. Sitting down on the toilet, he stares at Jenny peacefully sleeping in the bed.

Swallow-tailed kites swoop down to catch prey, mild north-easterly trade winds drive the ocean surface. Sam sits on a bench circling round the main deck of a fishing boat. Samuel sits on the opposite side drinking a beer.

“Can you see our house?” Samuel points to the top of a mountain.

“I think so.”

“When I came here in nineteen-eighty-two there was only two dumpy hotels and one little grocery store, but now...” he sweeps his arms across Potrero’s hotel and condo covered peninsula projecting out into the ocean, facing his mountain from across Flamingo bay.

“I bought my land in nineteen-eighty-two for three thousand dollars. Do you know how much it’s worth today? Do you? Huh?”

“Eight-hundred and fifty million dollars.”

Samuel nods and drinks his beer.

The boat heads west two kilometers before turning to the south. They pass along flocks of birds, schools of jumping dolphins, birdshit-covered rock islands. The captain of the ship comes down from the upper deck and heads to the cooler for a beer. Samuel talks to him about land, money, history. Sam smiles for a moment, then looks away to the ocean. He gets up and heads below deck to the bathroom. He slips his hand underneath his shorts and feels around his crotch. Feeling one spot, then another, his hand slowly circles his groin then comes to the tip of his penis, which he begins to stroke. A few minutes later he returns to his spot on the bench and stares again into passing water.

Sam snorkels beneath the calm surface of the Pacific Ocean. The water is an opaque dark green diffused with a thin sheen of sunlight. Towards the surface the water illuminates to a light blue. His body is pale and thin and he wears swimming trunks covered in silhouetted palm trees set against sunsets. Behind him in a blank expanse of water a few yellow and blue fish swim in disorderly fashion. Sam extends his arms out and closes his eyes. He kicks his feet to stay afloat as his body slowly drifts to the left, then to the right. His swimming trunks undulate, making constant ripples and folds.

After a few minutes Sam opens his eyes. He looks up at the surface, then back down. He takes off his goggles and snorkeling tube and watches them hover in the water. Shavings of sunlight reflect off the goggles which remain near the surface while the tube slowly sinks out of sight into a domain beyond retrieve.

Sam smiles, then dives downward.

Sam swims along a white coral reef twenty feet below sea level. Coming across a large patch of bleached staghorn coral he spreads his arms wide and scrapes his skin against the coarse nodules of the polyp's limbs. Over three-hundred yards away two leering bull sharks smell Sam's blood and head in his direction.

Ocean water turns red and crimson amongst frenetic thrashing and kicking of limbs, muted shouting, loosening of bowels. Hands reach above to the faded and deformed sun, still waiting for Sam.

The End.

PANTOUM FOR JOEY KLETT

OLIVIA CYR

Murdered at a party in Bristol, CT

How the flat, blunt point of that blade must have scored you.
Unafraid, peacemaker, you with your hands open. The
Glistening of it, unsheathed from sagging jeans,
And the whisk of it into your stomach, made you weak.

Unafraid, peacemaker, you with your hands open
And fingers spread, I imagine you speaking low.
And the whisk of it into your stomach made you weak,
Five clean slits the width of quarters, right into you,

Fingers spread. And I imagine you speaking low—
Imagine your sheet-white mother hear that you took
Five clean slits, quarter-width, into the softest part of you.
You buckled—people scattered blindly as you bled out.

Imagine your sheet-white mother hear
That you wouldn't make it.
You stood before danger, buckled and bled out;
The Army was going to teach you so much in July.

But you didn't make it.
I wept for your hollow body at the wake. Knew that
The Army would have taught you so much,
To know of human atrocity.

I wept for your hollow body at the wake. Knew you
Were scared when the coward's wicked blade unfolded
From sagged jeans, and sank into you, glistening.

WHEN REFERRING TO MEN AS ANIMALS

LOREN SMITH

While a young man may be a young “pup,”
a middle aged man a “dog,”
and an old man an “old dog,”
the thing to remember
is that even though an old man may be an “old fart,”
and that even though men have a keen a sense of smell in this scenario
and that dogs smell other dog’s bums all the time,
men do not, despite popular belief, like smelling other peoples’ bums,
so keep it to yourself, please.

Of course, a man could be a “young buck,”
but that’s only because he’s still got hair,
(the analogous object here being antlers)
which is why there is no term for old men
likening them to an old deer,
despite the fact that old deer have antlers.

Other men make up for this slight
by using the term “silver foxes,”
which denotes not only a full head of hair,
but a smart head of hair, too.

While an old man could be an “old warhorse,”
which denotes usefulness and experience,
and a young man a “stud,”
denoting sexual desirability,
there is only one type of man that should be avoided,
that being the “old coots,” and coots being birds
that are known to play favorites among their offspring
by feeding the strongest and letting the weakest die,
which is unfortunate when such a mentality is combined with the ability to fly,
but which explains how old coots manage
to rain down surly, blunt, and unwanted advice on everyone else,
despite the fact that they are an entirely different animal.

MILLIONS ON TOAST

REBECCA CORT

now

Apartments are cold. They're also what I afford. I am also cold. The door creaks like a morning stretch when somebody walks in. It's this dry-walled cave, sunlight spraying the ill-colored carpet from the blinds, which are half-closed, tired eyes. It's a sort of sick reflection that I avoid. Or I could just take off my glasses, but I don't. I want to poison myself with familiarity. And the cold gets to me, and the quiet stops being peaceful, and I can practically see my own dead body on the ground, still cold, so I put on a jacket hanging up in the coat closet. And then I look at the purple couch, that goddamn couch, picked up while driving home from a bar at 2 o' clock in the morning. He said, "Hey, look at this fucking piece of shit we can sit on!" and I laughed and looked at a sign, and it was free, which is what I can afford. It was on a sidewalk and it had crows pecking and pooping all over it, but we were laughing and I had cleaning products in a cabinet somewhere. He had to do most of the hoisting himself but we got it on top of the car, realized we didn't have any sort of rope, and used extra clothing in the back of the trunk. We had sex on it before I'd even cleaned it.

I look at the couch, that goddamn purple couch, next to my tired-eyed window, and there's one indent in the cushion, and it's mine.

Everything I touch has more fingerprints than I expect. The couch cushion is warm in all the wrong ways, but I'm a dumb coffee girl. If I had enough money, I'd go out and dye my hair bubblegum pink or move to Greenland or some other shitty, desperate attempt at change I'd end up regretting. I've heard good things

about Greenland. My eye keeps catching glimpses of purple.

Fuck the couch! I walk out. The door squeaks. And I'm on a bus.

It's sixty seven degrees outside and I'm still wearing my jacket from the coat closet. I'm depositing coins and then I'm next to some white-haired man without front teeth wearing a motorcycle vest. The seat is hard metal and my butt is cold. Okay.

I stay on the bus for a while, and eventually the man in the motorcycle vest leaves, and I have two metal seats to myself. I'll only get off when I feel some stupid emotional urge, the one people use to write novels, or the one that people say made them talk to their wife in a Taco Bell line, and they have kids and good jobs and a house and life is great, isn't it, because I did something ordinary and made it miraculous.

I never had any of those things, or any combination of them. Well, two months ago, I had one, but the others never really indented the purple couch the same way, and I never cared. I'm half-ugly and tall and can't see and I'm a barista and live in an apartment that shakes from college parties above me and I was 100% okay with sitting on a couch that used to have bird poop on it because the couch was not what defined me. I liked my smile, and I liked who I was, and I was in love with whatever my life was because somebody I loved was in it. He clipped his toenails in the sink and I loved him.

then

I am startled awake at 4:07 AM. By hands. His hands. On my shoulders. Shaking a magic eight ball: you're in luck.

Baby, fucking get up, it's important, baby, c'mon.

Blue blankets flung at my face. A hot, melted seclusion. I'm laughing and escaping and his eyes are so green, I can find constellations.

He says, it's so important, baby!

What's so important?

We need to watch Hercules.

Okay, and I roll over into fresh covers, closing my eyes.

Right now, he says.

What?

We need to watch Hercules right now.

You're crazy. Go to bed.

Disney brings out my wild side.

You animal.

I'm laughing so hard I let him pull me up, take my hand, lead me into our sad excuse for a family room, for a family we don't have, but we have two bodies at least, and I like to think a family is at least one more than yourself.

We make a fort with the blue blankets, a chair, and the purple couch. It is shitty.

He says, that's it, baby, we're selling this damn apartment for our architectural blanket slash chair slash couch masterpiece. What a glorious, blue shithole. Grab the rest of the corn chips and get in.

We watch. In the middle of the movie, he yells, AHA! FUCK!

What, I say?

Fuck baby, fuck, look at that Pegasus' ass. That is a porno horse butt.

What the hell? Is there something you wanna tell me?

No.

Are you sure?

Yes.

Brief silence.

Well, you're fucking beautiful, for one. I wanna tell you that.

Watch the movie!

He was right. The movie was very, very important.

now

I get off the bus. Puppy. Floppy ears. Too loose on a leash. The owner pulls it away from a half-eaten Whopper and the puppy cares for only about six seconds. It wiggles its little rear from excitement upon seeing me, a new human, a new distraction and new smell, right here. Bounding from thing to thing, place to place. I want to be nomadic and distracted. I want to be a frog on lily pads or a curious Cocker Spaniel puppy.

“Lulu!” Its owner. Puppy is tugged away from the Whopper box again. Some things are just hard to move on from.

We are in front of a store now, and the owner hooks the leash around a rusty bike rack. Lulu circles it, licking the red metal, barely noticing her owner leaving until she's alone. Then she sits down facing the store and whines.

I walk over to her and she doesn't even react when I stroke her ear, preoccupied with absence. Lulu's owner will return, even if Lulu doesn't know it yet. Lulu is not alone, and I never want to go back to my apartment ever again.

I see the owner through a dirty window, browsing through a small aisle of frozen goods. A little girl in a baseball hat walks by and squeals.

“Can I pet your dog?”

She is positively giddy; Lulu is lonely and her owner is gone.

“Uh, okay,” I'd never been one for children.

“What's her name?”

“Lulu.”

“Thank you! It was nice to meet you, Lulu!” She runs back to her father who has stopped to watch and they turn and walk down the street.

Lulu is waiting and whining and not caring.

She doesn't care that I am here.

She doesn't care about little girls in baseball hats.

She is nomadic and distracted. Nomadic and distracted, except from the one thing she loves most.

I do not want to be a Cocker Spaniel.

But maybe I want a Cocker Spaniel.

Glancing into the store to see the owner again, I grab Lulu's leash, sweep her into my arms, and start running.

She yelps once in my ear but then goes quiet as my feet stab the sidewalk. I can't turn around, I can't turn around, I can't turn around.

then

Plates break if you drop them on blue tile. I drop some. He throws one.

He says, I know where I put my money! Where is it?!

And I tremble like an earthquake and tell him we need groceries and there is no money and we need food more than beer, I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry.

He says, give me my fucking money!

I tell him my paycheck comes next week, I will have money, can you not drink until then, please, and we have food in our fridge now, eat something?

There is a tectonic shift, as if the ground is breaking, and it does, it cracks like a soda can under our feet and then one of my only ceramic plates is in puzzle pieces and I'm not smart enough to understand how it fit before, or how our

bodies ever did. And two months later I still have to put on tennis shoes before I go into the kitchen, and I still only use paper plates.

I try to sleep on the couch that night. It smells and I only have one blanket and my feet are cold. He doesn't even try to get me into the bedroom with him. It is almost peaceful, this mutual separation, our hearts getting some air, taking a walk in different directions. But my feet are cold and they can't find his wrapped around them.

I sleep in the bed with him the next night. I still can't find his feet.

now

It feels like a lifetime ago, the plates. Now I'm running away from a convenience store with a stolen puppy in my arms.

I know there must be some kind of law or regulation against stealing other people's dogs but I don't know the specific logistics. Asked to return it? Arrested? Prison? Why did I take something that will surely pee all over the carpet I never clean?

It will leave its butterscotch-tinted fur over my goddamn purple couch. It will chew my shitty cabinets and track toilet water down the halls and not let me sleep in my own bed. Though I wouldn't know- I have never had a pet before. When I was six I got a beta, but it died after two weeks and that was childhood devastation at its finest. I have not had a pet.

Maybe it will be kind of nice. I will wake up to something instead of nothing. I will wake up to something instead of broken ceramic on the blue tile and I will be too distracted to reminisce about a couch. I will be cleaning up after an animal and pouring dog food into paper bowls and I will not think about things besides shedding and how I'm going to walk a dog that I stole. I will not think, I will be nomadic and distracted and I will not think, my mind has run its race and it will be still and frozen like a photograph.

She dangles from my arms, her paws flailing as if trying to run in water. I become padlocked, gripping her to my chest; I am a safe with money, lots and lots of money. Her heart is pounding, a dodgeball on the side of a wall.

And then I am bursting through a door that squeaks and I pant, releasing Lulu from my arms. She slides to the ground and bounds towards the door, which is now closed. I want to please her. Make her smile, purr, pee, whatever dogs do when they are happy. I go to my fridge and find some baby carrots in the bottom drawer, reaching one out to her. She launches herself towards my palm and cradles it in her jaws before quietly padding away to eat it in private.

I don't have any real food for her. A puppy is wandering around my apartment and I have nothing to give her or do for her. No walks, no treats, no company while I am at work serving coffee to rude boys in red trucks. Fuck, I make nothing at my job and I can barely afford my house and now I have to afford a dog that will pee over my floor when I can't afford new carpet. I am too tired to think and too tired to dig out more baby carrots, so I find Lulu back at the front door, waiting, and scoop her into my arms, her body dangling like a necklace. I put her in the bathroom for the night.

I suddenly think of Lulu's owner. *I took your dog. I took her. She is in my bathroom.*

And then, *I'm sorry your dog is in my bathroom.*

then

He comes to me and tells me he has picked up the big chunks of glass from the plates we dropped. He says it's okay and he forgives me, we will forgive each other. He holds my face in his hands and looks into my eyes and his eyes are so green. He says it's okay, it's okay. I cleaned it up, baby, our mess, it's okay. I want to be fresh laundry with him and fold into drawers.

My heart is limp and I want to go sleep with Derek with the brown eyes across the street, but his eyes are so green and his hands touch my face and his lips are gentle so I don't. I laugh as he tickles me into the kitchen and he asks if I want grilled cheese, which I do, so he makes some, and it is slightly overcooked, and we sit on the couch and laugh for half of Jerry Seinfeld until we are kissing and then we are undressing and I am still giggling.

Breathing. Breathing. Breathing.

Our bodies are melted cheese in a toaster and the bed squeaks.

I've never had this, done this, felt this, I don't know this world. I'm in Europe for the first time, I'm map-less, I don't care, I don't care. His collarbones make craters I want to fill and his hands are on my back and we're breathing, breathing, breathing, am I breathing? He's on my neck and thighs and throat, he is everywhere, if I sneezed he'd come out of my nose. I'm born into a pale, shiny madness of fingertips; I can't even get my bra off but we laugh about it. There are fumbles, awkward slapping. I'm tipping back and forth on a bridge and he is just here in my neck and thighs and throat.

The bed is squeaking. I am breathing into his craters. It's beautiful and stunning and naked and I think I am still breathing but if I wasn't I wouldn't care I wouldn't because right now I am just water filling his crevices and drinking his sweat and we are breathing.

Sometimes I run to Derek's apartment pretending I don't have wet tire tracks on my face and he pretends he doesn't see them; instead we get naked and I fall asleep with an arm bent in a weird way and collapsed lungs. I want to eat toast in the morning and watch cheese melt on top but he doesn't have the right bread.

We eat cereal in silence.

now

I wake up to yowling. Lulu has peed in the bathroom. I take her outside in the back where neighbors can't see us and she sniffs flowers but doesn't pee again. She is probably very hungry, so I put her back in the bathroom, which still has pee, and go to the drugstore. I am gone for no more than an hour and I return with the cheapest dog food I could find and a new surplus of cleaning products, which I will undoubtedly need forever and once again I wonder why the fuck I stole a puppy.

Lulu eats from a paper bowl while I clean the bathroom.

"It's okay, girl," I scratch her ears afterwards as she waits by the door again. "I cleaned the mess. Your mess. It was yours. You did it, don't do it again."

The bathroom mirror is streaky but I can still see the bruise on my back when I pull my shirt up. But the floor is clean, and it doesn't smell like pee temporarily, and Lulu is fed even if she doesn't want to live with me and prefers waiting by the

door for an owner that will never come. And if she does, I'm screwed.

Lulu and I spend an unusually peaceful week together. She eats out of a re-used white paper bowl and pees in the bathroom only every other day and she sits by the door less. Instead, she sits under my feet as I eat boxed macaroni, she comes into my room at night with only the glow of the gross little TV, she lets me pet her often. The house is furry, as I expected, and the bathroom floor has a slight urine tint at times, but she lets me scratch her head as she rests it on my leg, so nothing is really that bad at all.

I am surprised I have lasted this long without even a panicking knock on my door, gimme my dog back, gimme my dog!

I wish I could knock on her door and say the same thing.

then

One night he carries me out of a house party. I am a corpse, still, framed, sweating alcohol, but conscious. He holds me in his rubber band arms with my right cheek against his chest and walks six blocks until we are home, drapes me onto the couch as I cry for God knows why, a blanket of a hand down the small of my back. I can almost see his whispers like smoke coming from his mouth as he mumbles shh, hey, baby, sleep, okay?

I have never fallen asleep so quickly. He is only barely drunk.

I wake up from wooden pounding. He is pattering around the kitchen, cupboards open.

I say, it's so early!

I'm making breakfast, baby.

What's the point?

You're in bed and gonna be hungry, so I'm making toast with jam and shit, the best fucking toast ever, I'm opening a goddamn restaurant and we'll make millions on our specialized toast, and then I'm getting us out of this dump.

I know you will!

Don't doubt me; I'm gonna do it.

I wouldn't ever.

You know when Hercules finds out he can go into the god world and decides not to because he loves Meg? I make the rules, baby, I'm getting us both into the god world, together, to thrive and be gods and have god-like sex. Not that we don't already have that.

Definitely have god-like sex.

This toast is gonna be so fucking good, baby.

You call me baby so much!

So? What do you call me?

Baby, I guess. But not as much as you do!

Sometimes I call you your name.

You're ridiculous.

Baby, you love me.

now

As I walk home from the bus stop that afternoon, I see a "Lost Dog: American Cocker Spaniel, Name: Lulu, Responds to Name, Red Leash. Please call" sign.

I walk past it.

Then I walk back and write the phone number on my hand in blue ink.

When I get home, Lulu barks and runs to me. I pet her with my inked hand. She doesn't know how close her owner is, a phone call away on my hand stroking her little head. She stares at me with brown eyes, the eyes I slept with across the

street.

I love green eyes. But I tried cereal.

then

A Saturday night spent in the house on a purple couch. He has been gone for nights. There is stillness. There is a drying as if I am a towel. There is breathing.

And then there is pounding. Then a crinkle of key fumbling. Then a squeaking door that almost doesn't have time to squeak from how fast it is thrust open.

There he is. Tired. Dark circles. Tall. Suddenly bearded. Black eye. Where did he get that. Stubby nails and fingers. Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. My face softens from fear into ice cream as I stare at him, black eye, beard, everything, beautiful. He is beautiful when he pounds on doors and thrusts them open. He is beautiful as he stumbles over to me. He is beautiful as he strikes me. He is beautiful as I expect it. Beautiful, breathing and beautiful, beautiful.

A crisp pain folds into my envelope cheek, sealed and stamped and sent. He is shouting, his words underwater, slurring, dripping, I will clean it up, this time I will, come on baby, get in with me, oh, I love you, I love you, baby.

I am already scared but only terrified when he tries to touch me again; he reaches out not for a punch but for a rough handling of my cheek, grainy fingers like a filter, and there is a part of me that wants to collapse into leaves of his body. I want to love the man I am in love with, burrowed in a hole. I want a purple couch to exist without needing to be cleaned and needing to be drunk, I want disappearing back stains so I can be clean like our laundry, I want to solve ceramic puzzles of our bodies and find his feet under covers. We can buy a new couch, a blue one, a longer one to make sex easier, maybe, and he has a black eye and I have a goddamn purple couch and I never even got to clean it and he stands there, beautiful.

He is stumbling, tripping over words and feet. The world feels like water, like a swamp. The air is mud even when I am sober. Staccato steps. He trips again and again, this rabid dog, beautiful rabid dog, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, clothed in foam.

It is all he wants, one hit, then a stroke. He falls onto the couch, mumbling, eyes rolling, then closing. His neck hangs off the edge of the arm, a hat on a clothesline.

It was the first time he hit me and I expected it.

I didn't expect it the last time.

Bruises become fossils on my skin. I am geology and you can only climb mountains with footholds. My porosity is high.

If you want to fix me, all you need is water.

now

Lulu sleeps beside me in the bed tonight. The first thing she does in the morning is run to the door.

At 5 PM, after Lulu's dinner, I manage to pick up the phone.

then

He fixes people's computers in the afternoon and goes out on weekend nights. I trust the morning creak of the door and flop into bed. I make toast and elevate his feet just because he likes it. He half smiles in my direction, telling me he loves me. I chew his words like gum; sometimes they are too salty but I always cook eggs with a little extra salt anyways.

Fuck, baby, you should've been there.

Yeah?

Yeah, fuck, I feel like I died.

You're alive and in my bed, just where I like you to be.

I'm dead, baby.

No you're not.

Oh, baby, it killed me, it killed me right here, check my bullet hole.

Shut up.

Check it!

Suddenly slightly concerned, I brush my fingers over his red shirt, which is torn at the sleeves, then lift it. His stomach is a glazed, white donut. My heart pecks at my chest like a hen, tracing over his belly button, my fingers skipping rope over his skin.

Where's the hole?

Fuck, I guess I don't have one.

I guess you don't.

That would've been cool though, baby. Badass.

Yeah, it would've.

Your arm looks sad.

It's just a bruise.

I did it.

What?

I hit you once, didn't I?

He's never brought it up before. More than once. Look at my skin. You did this. Your mess, your mess, your mess.

Maybe. Are you tired?

Fuck, baby, it was an accident.

I know. Go to sleep.

Accidents happen, baby, because I love you so goddamn much.

I love you too. You done with your toast?

Oh, it was so good, baby. Buttery and cheesy. Kiss me. Oh yeah, I love you. You are an angel sent from above. Like, wow. My angel.

Goodnight.

Goodnight, baby.

now

I put Lulu on the left side of the couch and sit down next to her. We just sit together quietly for no more than a minute. She doesn't run to the door, in this moment. She doesn't cry, in this moment. She doesn't pee in the bathroom.

I look at her, yellow fur and purple cushion. I memorize the color pigments, fur and fabric, things I couldn't sew together, the piece she is on slightly sunken from her weight. I hear the television whining quietly from the bedroom. Then I pick her up and leave.

INTERVIEW WITH JAMAAL MAY

BY GREG BEAMISH AND LESLIE ZIMMERMAN

Jamaal May grew up in Detroit, Michigan, where he taught poetry and worked as an audio engineer. His poems have been published in journals such as *The Believer*, *The New Republic*, *POETRY*, *Ploughshares*, *Kenyon Review*, and *New England Review*. May has received many awards for his poetry, including the American Library Association's Notable Book Award, the Beatrice Hawley Award, and an NAACP Image Award nomination. Other honors bestowed upon him for his writing include the Spirit of Detroit Award, the Stadler Fellowship and the Indiana Review Prize. In March 2014, May read from his recently published book *Hum* at Michigan State University, where he met with students from the Advanced Poetry class.

Greg Beamish

Let me start with an obvious question. How did your childhood in Detroit affect your writing?

Jamaal May

I started by avoiding writing about Detroit altogether. I specifically write about people, and it wasn't until I had all the poems collected together that I was like "wait, all these people are Detroiters." I was trying to look at interpersonal

relationships and solitude--these different things I didn't think about as being "Detroit things." This led me in a roundabout way towards an aspect of Detroit that doesn't get written very often: the materializing of people. That's when the idea of what Detroit was arose for me. So I moved the poem called "A Detroit Hum Ending with Bones" to the front of the book. So much is contextual. If I was to try to write about everything in the framework of Detroit, I would have failed, but because I was writing about all that stuff and Detroit was kind of making its way in I was able to write a book that was broader. I mean, you have a book about any kind of kid in the city to a degree and I think that's why it doesn't feel like a book that's just about Detroit. It was more about the isolated youth. It was important to start the book with the poem "Still Life," which is a third person look at a child playing alone in the cityscape. The book ends with "Ask What I've Been," which presents an adult looking back at the city. If you look at the structure of the book, you can see how varied an experience there can be.

Beamish

I enjoyed getting an outer view of the boy and the debris of the city around him. Then, you write about the boy from inside the boy's head. It was a great poem to start out with.

May

It felt kind of risky to start off with that poem. It wasn't a head-cracker, those poems that get published in the best journals and they get republished and talked about and reblogged. That poem had a smaller life than some of the other poems in the book. So it seemed like a risky move to start with that poem; a lot of people say you want to start with poems that announce themselves, and I wanted to start with this poem that doesn't have any action verbs until two thirds into it. The poem is literally staying still. I'm playing with what's inanimate versus what's alive. I'm starting off with no action verbs, and one of the default workshop things is that you have to have action words. But that's one of the ways I find poems. I ask what am I not supposed to be able to do and what's the "why" behind it? The "why" behind why you use action verbs is because you want a poem to move. You don't want a poem to stand still. Now it doesn't seem as risky because it worked, but I remember thinking maybe I should lead with "Athazagoraphobia" because it's got this weird word to start off and there's an intense pacing to it. But in the end I thought it was really important to start with this quieter poem that has a little more subtlety.

Beamish

Speaking of your poem “Athazagoraphobia,” when did the idea come up to use all kinds of phobias for poems? Phobias are very much a kind of interior part of people’s lives. Is there a connection there?

May

With me, I don’t really do a lot of series of poems. It’s not me. It became a thing that I noticed I can do with titling, though. I was thinking about Pinsky’s poem “Ode to Meaning.” It’s an ode to an abstraction, but because of the title, your brain’s always processing out every line and how it relates back to the abstraction. I realized I could do that too, and the phobias became this way to create a title that gave a concern for the poem to be interrogated back and forth. “Macrophobia” is a perfect example. A lot of the images in the poem only work as juxtapositions next to the idea of waiting; so, for example, when I say “It is a foot pressed against the door/ of a locked closet. A girl stands in line in the rain/ holding two concert tickets and this/ is what rattles us,” I like you thinking about the fear of waiting as you read those lines. And then later, some poems became “phobia poems” that weren’t originally because I wanted to put them in conversation with the others, so a lot of titles connected issues across poems. The tension of the poem is that there’s a negotiation between the fear and torment. The poem “Macrophobia” deals with both patience and impatience. It deals with both the benefits of patience and the benefits of impatience and the drawbacks of each. That worked. Some of the poems existed just because of a cool idea, and those poems failed.

Beamish

You perform some of your poems differently from how they’re written on the page. How do you decide what is good for performance while some need to be in print?

May

There’s a variation of reasons for why I perform them differently. One of them is that I edit obsessively so by the time poems make it to literary journals, they’ve gone through many versions. Sometimes it’s that when I’m reading a poem, I try to get as close to the work as possible. I don’t think “alright, now I must perform

the poem.” I think “why did I write this? What’s the relevance? Why did I say this word instead of that word?” and I try to get close to the language of it. When you get that far inside of it, you know what the poem is good for. One of slam poetry’s tropes is that slam tends to be two-and-a-half to three minutes long, so what do you do when all your poems are shorter and you want to compete with your work? For a while, when I was trying to figure out performance and page, I would combine poems. For example, there are two poems “The God Engine” and “Pomegranate Means Grenade” that for a while I performed as one poem.

Beamish

Can you elaborate on your writing process? How does it go from idea to finished poem?

May

I was taught that process changes content. Our brains are pattern machines. Our brains are always trying to figure out just how we did it last time. If I lock into a process, I’d probably write poems in a certain kind of vein, but sometimes I switch what that process is. Right now, it’s all about collecting parts of things and figuring out how they go together later. I accumulate thoughts and things. I know I’m concerned with a lot of stuff and watching the world in certain ways, so for me that’s part of the process of writing. For the last few years, my process has basically been writing thirty new drafts and then picking through them over a few months and figuring out what I should keep, whether it’s a full poem, a stanza or a section.

Beamish

In class earlier today you talked about poetry and politics. Could you elaborate your ideas about the relationship between them?

May

For me, as far as what I’m trying to do with art as expression is the idea that poetry is about connection rather than separation. Metaphor and metonymy are at the core of poetry and promote juxtaposition. How does this thing look

next to that thing? We argue that the world has greed, and you look at atrocities, wrongdoing and injustice, and it always comes from a place of imbalance, a place of separation in the sense that we are not connected. Art is an emotional, participatory experience, and that's why art can connect you to something that data does not. That's why for me, art seems like a call to action. You're asking people to think about your experience or their own experience in a way that connects them to the big picture. So the idea of writing as a political act is the idea that you're writing towards understanding. I think moving toward that kind of understanding is moving toward peace because war starts with a misunderstanding of humanity and ends with a misunderstanding of the self. That's the political act of art, I think. Art proves that we are connected. Making and sharing it is a political act even before you get into the history of political poetry. Writing the interior life in and of itself is a political act for those reasons. To give you a specific example, I've gotten emails about the poem "There are Birds Here," not just from Detroit, but from the Bronx, or other places about someone's experience of being misunderstood. It's been difficult to write about Detroit in an honest way and to deepen the conversation about Detroit, but now with "There are Birds Here" I'm proud of what it's done. It feels like an evolution from *Hum* because of the work the poem has been able to do in the real world.

Beamish

So what's the plan for the future?

May

Finishing the new book, *Exit Strategies*. It's going to be a multi-genre project, but I'm not sure how those different genres are going to play out in the book just yet. And if I get my way, I will get to be a designer on it. I got a few ideas that would make it weirder and longer than *Hum* so I'm trying to figure out exactly how much I can get away with in the book. Some of the elements I'm playing with possibly are collaborations with a composer in Australia, so I'm looking to have some sheet music in it. I would love to have barcodes that lead to videos. There will be some prose.

Beamish

Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

May

Everyone always says to read twice as much as you write but reading closely is the important aspect of it. You could read everything in the world but if you're just glossing over it then you're not getting enough. I think it's important to think about the why. Busting poetry open and finding the pieces of things that work is really useful for a writer. Also, I like to tell young writers to expand their knowledge. Write a lot of poems about a lot of subject matters. It's important to keep trying new, different techniques. And don't get caught up in aesthetic wars. I'm in a lot of different literary communities and it's interesting to hear the authorities of a community speak about the other communities of poetry that they don't know anything about.

CONTRIBUTORS

ROY BENTLEY's awards include an NEA Creative Writing Fellowship and grants from the arts councils of Florida and Ohio. His books include *The Trouble with a Short Horse in Montana* (White Pine, 2006) and *Starlight Taxi* (Lynx House, 2013). He lives in Barnegat, New Jersey.

OLIVIA CYR is a sophomore at the University of Maine at Farmington majoring in Creative Writing and English. In her spare time she is an avid reader and enjoyer of poetry collections and spoken word poets. While Cyr works mostly in poetry and short prose, she is currently attempting to write a novel, and to journal every day—though sometimes nothing more happens on a particular day than a dribble of Hazelnut Mocha onto her scarf and losing a boot trying to get over one of Maine's infamous muddy snowbanks.

JIM DANIELS' fourteenth book of poems, *Birth Marks* (BOA Editions, 2013) was selected as a Michigan Notable Book and received the Milton Kessler Prize. His fifth book of short fiction, *Eight Mile High* (Michigan State University Press) appeared in 2014 and was also selected as a Michigan Notable Book. Daniels teaches at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where he is the Thomas Stockham Baker University Professor of English.

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VALERIE GUARDIOLA started writing seriously after her father gave her a copy of Fahrenheit 451 - she figured it was as good a time as any to start fighting the patriarchy. She has since been published in *The Lone Cypress Review*, *The Homestead Review*, *Pif Magazine* and *Scheherazade*, among others. She most recently curated a poetry exhibit highlighting National Poetry Awareness Month at her university. Valerie lives in Monterey, California and enjoys drinking stale coffee, marathon viewing *The West Wing*, and writing...always writing.

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Colin hopes to keep writing and creativity at the heart of whatever adventure comes next.

PAULINA MINNEBO, a Michigan native, is a freshman pursuing a Professional Writing major at Michigan State University. In her free time, she's written countless poems and short stories and has participated in National Novel Writing Month five times. When she's not writing she can be found watching Netflix, eating chocolate, or studying hard at the MSU Union, caffeinated beverage in hand. This poem was a personal piece that she hopes others enjoy.

DANIELLE ELLEN OWENSBY, also known by the acronym of her full name, "Deo," is senior studying English and Studio Art, specifically photography. Her work has been exhibited nationally and she has been published in over ten publications. To see more of her work, visit: danielle-deo-owensby.com.

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CAITLYN SYMAN is a college student currently studying and searching for corned beef in Dublin, Ireland. She is a writer, activist, and professional complainer. She edits the literary and fine arts magazine *Willard and Maple*, based out of Champlain College. Her poems have previously appeared in *The Casserole*. Follow her on Twitter for some funny & lame observations // @wheretheducksogo.

JOHN TAVARES has had his fiction published in many literary magazines in Canada and the U.S., including *Rampike*, *Windsor Review*, and Centennial College's campus newspaper. After acquiring a diploma at Humber College, he trained as a journalist at Centennial College. His reportage was published in community and trade publications in Toronto. He recently wrote a novel and acquired an Honors BA from York University. He volunteered as radio broadcaster for a community station in Sioux Lookout. His many interests include economics and photography, and he is currently studying the Canadian Securities course.

