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Volume 39 · 2011

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ROLLINS COLLEGE

Winter Park, Florida

Brushing is the literary and art journal of the Rollins College student body. Brushing publishes poetry, fiction, non-fiction, play excerpts, photographs, and art.

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Long live the Cult of the Oak Table.

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Prompt # 427

brushing the canvas:

stroke weight

lighting

color palette

subject

theme

figure

perspective

where to begin?

ALEX RUIZ

A Fashion Indictment:

To you, sir,
caught in the Eighties back draft
whiplash of retro-stylings.
No excuse, not even Hefenweiser
consumption-levels capable
of toppling the greatest
man-made obelisks,
is acceptable.

Unless you wear lip-contortions
like open snatches, peroxide
frosting á la Billy Idol
qualifies as a capital crime.

And what demented free-for-all
inspired the pleather-bladed
anti-hero, slashing eyelids
like the throats of Persians,
and drawing stares like gashed rivers
flooding war-torn streets,
streets brought to mind
by the carefully crafted ripped denim
cascading your legs like entrails.

For your war-crimes of fashion,
sentencing will be detoured
to the Haus of Gaga,
where heinousness stitches a reputation
of Sartre-esque punishment all too appropriate
for the likes of you,

May Versace have Mercy on Your Soul.

CARY HALL



ALEX RUIZ

Police Statement from the Night of the Riots

I was home alone, stewing
in a short cauldron of microwave popcorn
and Mystery Science Theater
when I heard the screams.
With the mechanic curiosity
of an insect to blue light,
I drew the curtains to witness
Ghetto Gomorrah burning cinders
into moonlit night.

Sans reason, I moved to the attic,
as though fleeing flood water.
The ruins stretched
a blood-red polish brush
across sodden nails.

I heard billowing death howls
from some distant rooftop;
The view offered me
the street corner, where White Tents
gathered, a circus of rage at
another version
of the existence I myself played with
that night. That was the first time
I ever saw the moon
for its blackness.

PAIGE EVANS

Two Percent Milk

Last night
at the kitchen table
There were snowball cookies.
(blizzards of them)
You were sitting
just
like
 this,
with tiny paper plates,
wearing your fathers giant socks.
You smelled like
shampoo
but your knees were
rushed-bath mud-stained
And you giggled making
bubbles
in your two percent milk.

PAIGE EVANS

Marrakesh Children

Midnight plaza crawling wide
to drum beat, coin
right from your pockets
they'll
slight-of-hand your golden locket.

Climb their monkeys
on your shoulders
redfaced starving
tantrum-smolder
breathing ether
slouched in allies
rotten teeth and silent rallies.

They'll touch your jeans
with backs to Allah
wide eyed lost
they'll bite and holler
bloodied
down your
purchased brew,
They'll beg to come
and follow you.

PAIGE EVANS

Marrakesh Children

Midnight plaza crawling wide
to drum beat, coin
right from your pockets
they'll
slight-of-hand your golden lockets.

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bloodied
down your
purchased brew,
They'll beg to come
and follow you.

AARON CHILDREE

The Boulevard Montmartre at Night, 1897

When the sun's light first bows behind the buildings
To make way for the lamp-lit night,
When the rain ceases but leaves evidence of its falling
On the blackened street;
Then the carts and carriages find their way out,
Skidding down the damp road,
The people in their long, heavy coats line the sidewalks,
Glad to once again be a part of the blurred masses,
And I watch the scene come together
Through the condensation on a pane of glass,
Like vapor rising into a melody.

AARON CHILDREE

Fall

Leaves that travel in slow-turning spirals,
Wavering down to dust—
Dust that nabs at my feet along with brittle reds and yellows,

Shedding trees that flank me and silently nod
As large columns supporting the sky,

Grass that bends and reaches towards the source of its shine
And finds the light descending, closer with each tick
But cooler with each falling breath:

I stand, seeing, hearing, feeling it all through the given lens,
But less and less and
Less with each shadow lengthened
And each leaf falling.

CARY HALL

40 Years

This is a strange togetherness. You and I
frustrated, calmly sit in our living room.
I have my cracked brown leather chair;
you have your pilled plaid recliner.

Tomorrow we will go for drinks with friends,
and you will surprise them with quiet rapidity
and empty whisky sours,
while you laugh gaily and talk about the holidays.

I will sit deafened by staticky bar chatter,
beginning new conversations on top of yours,
stealing a friend, then putting him back,
while you carry blithely on, not looking at all at me.

The girl will bring our check and you will hand it over
and any answer I offer you will earn me
you smiling, bright-eyed, across at them, retorting shortly,
quietly, sideways at me words like drops of vanilla.

CARY HALL Summer

The pregnant sky lies with me, my exhausted lover,
Moving strands of my hair in and out of place
With her eyes closed and a sighing smile.

My lover's heartbeat is irregular; I hear it distantly
Thumping though the cavity of the atmosphere.
Like the start of a symphony,

raindrops begin to fall.
They are measured and slow; I hear each note.
Then they hurr~~y~~tofall, nearing a crescendo
On the porch steps, I let the drops fall on my feet
Until the mosquitoes force me inside.

I retreat, still listening, still watching,
Looking down to the raindrops beating, bouncing—
Mallets on tight timpani.

KIM HAMBRIGHT

Are You Looking at My Boobs?

It's okay,

I want you
to look. Trace the shadowed
daggers on my face
scoop down my chin
drip slowly past my neck.

Rest here
at my breast.
Melt them down and lick
the caramelized sugar off the tips.
Go ahead, undress me.
Fold my arms

behind my back
and rip my face
away from you.

Blow your brains out
in me,

blow mine out too.
Open my mouth and fill me
with desire.

Feed me your bloody heart,
the meat

of passion. For a moment
forget

your mind
belongs to me.

KIM HAMBRIGHT
Sexuality

Slip into it
like a dress
 one size
fits most

Put in on
take it off
put it on
 a shelf

Let it sit
collect regret
then dust it off
 again

Wear it out
no excuse
 confidence
is always "in"

MICHELLE PRESTON

And When They Made

And when they made eye contact, there were sparkles. But hidden sparkles, as if their eyes were peeking out from behind the walls built by their hands, walls built up by bricks of insecurity, bricks of heartache, bricks of love that could have been, bricks of not being good enough, bricks carved during that time of one's life where being weird wasn't prized upon or adored, but being weird was simply weird. But when their eyes met, their eyes sparkled and smiled and one brick fell down off of the wall. And they realized they'd been looking at each other for ten seconds straight and neither one had said a word and so they looked away and tried to find the brick to replace it, but it had disappeared, and so they tried to build a new brick from the new awkwardness that was present in their relationship, but there were no supplies. There were no tools to build a new brick, to expand the wall, so they looked away from each other, but they smiled when they looked away, because they didn't entirely mind. They didn't entirely mind at all. The brick was simply gone.

ZACH BLOOM

To Walk Away

To walk away
would be to pull heads
from stems
of the flowers in your hair,
that you wore when I met you—
grown from the grounds that grew you.

To walk away
would be to crush bones with my bare
hands and breathe
the fine powder that reeks
of our promise to the you and me
who were stifled and stacked
like old things and put away
with surfaces fractured by veins
made when one person
or two people
tried to force their contours
to align.

ABBOTT J.
before I.

Before I was born
before my dad had my mother
before their hormones raged
before they wreaked havoc on the earth
before his dad had had his sister's friend
before all of this
a seed had been planted
and up from the ground it grew
and grew and grew
and germinated
and matured
and flowered
was turned to fruit
was ripened
was bitten
was ravaged
it's flesh once soft
and nubile was used
and torn for pleasure
and of this happened
before I was born.

ABBOTT J.
saturn.

So I take a sip of this
 emerald liquid,
 thick as caramel and
bitter as your first divorce,
and I cast my eyes upward,
 and I suck in the thinner-than-thin air, and
take another swallow,
 and, shifting around me, revealing
 deep, dilated, pupils,
the walls
 convalesce into
 a blackness,
you know it's
 that blackness which only happens
in those parts
 of the ocean so deep the water
 absorbs and digests all light,
 down in those places that no one really knows
 how life was established in the first place,
and the walls stop quaking and
 naturally I take another
 sip of the seething,
 Eve-green wormwood juice,
and out from the bottom-of-the-ocean-black walls
a silhouetted shadowy flesh-toned
 ape of a man is taking form
claiming the deep, dilated pupils as his own—
and his hands are gripping, and his maw is gawping,
 and I wonder
what it is he grips.



TANYA GRAE

Abecedarian Prayer

Apology and
bargaining
canted of
disaster
elicits that
freak out
gyre toward
hell bent
insane, but
just to the side
Kant isn't
listening, rather
musing metaphysical
notions, the experience,
observing everyday
people, cause and effect
quirks of karma, and the absence of
REASON
said
to—it's a miracle—
undo illusion, the
voracious wanton
why, how
x happens despite
yawping
zealots.

Prompt # 13

brushing against:

cultures your skin
 social mores a wall
attitudes authority
 received knowledge
 people borders

the pavement

the effect?

J. CHRISTOPHER SILVIA

Lobsters

WHILE MOM WAS BOILING LIVE, shrieking lobsters, I stood on a chair playing “bug civil war” with the dead sill-flies, and staring out the old high-screened window.

“All I’m saying,” Grandpa was saying, “is that if you expect to raise reasonably intelligent children, you shouldn’t cast your lot in with folks that would seek to undermine the entire educational system with pork-barrel tax breaks for oil barons.”

Grandpa emphasized his point by eating a bite of cheese. It was the fancy red wax cheese I wasn’t allowed to have. I wouldn’t be allowed the lobster that was hollering in the pot either, but I would sneak some garlic butter when no one was looking.

“Dad,” said Mom, a lobster band clutched in her fist as she turned around, “I told you I’m not interested in discussing politics with you, but since you insist, I must say I’m shocked at how naive you are for a man of your... advanced years.” She crossed her arms and tapped her foot, which she did sometimes when she was pissed.

“First,” she said, extending her index finger, “public education is a mess because of a loss of values, not a lack of funding. Simply throwing money at problems rarely solves anything. I’d think you would appreciate that fact more than most. Second,” she continued, extending the next finger, “we have always been dedicated to a quality education for our children regardless of cost, so please restrict your thinly veiled criticisms to areas where you have arguments based in fact.” Mom adjusted the pot on the burner, picking up the lid to peek inside.

Grandpa harrumphed and stared at his plate of cheese. I bowled a week-dead honeybee at my collection of assorted deceased spiders and ants, which scattered and ricocheted off the screen in a cascade of legs, thoraxes, and antennae.

“There’s a matter of your mother’s estate that we need to talk about,” said Grandpa.

Mom turned and removed her oven mitts, crossing her arms again. Grandpa cleared his throat.

“As you know, your mother had a substantial life insurance policy on herself. When she passed away, it was stipulated in her will that the money be placed in trust funds for your boys. You’ll have access and control until their 18th birthdays. As the executor of that will, I have to express concerns over your ability to

J. CHRISTOPHER SILVIA

accurately manage these funds until the boys are of age. I don't want you running off and investing it in some idiot startup business or something worse, blowing it all."

Mom's face turned radish-red and I could see steam rising from her skull, or maybe it was the lobster pot, or maybe she was doing her best lobster impression. She crunched her knuckles, her snapping claws. She glared blazing bolts across the kitchen.

Grandpa, at a loss for words for once, ate more cheese.

He began choking.

I cried.

Mom performed a sort of magical stomach thrust (amazing, considering Grandpa's girth) and the cheese was ejected to the floor where it was immediately consumed by the dog. We called the dog "Muffin," but his name was actually "Reginald Marksman VI." He had papers.

Mom went back to the lobsters.

Grandpa went back to the living room.

I went back to my flies.

LOGAN GANIER

Better of the Two

AS THE SUN WAS ON THE RISE and the sprinklers began spitting, like any other Monday morning, the quiet and quaint Floridian suburb recovered from the weekend past and started off in its usual way: people were fetching their morning papers at their doorsteps as others departed for work, or exercised, or smoked their first cigarette of the day. Many released their children out of their homes, allowing them to flock to the bus stop carrying lunch boxes and book bags—and in these modern times even cell phones or, most definitely, portable video games. A good portion of the children walked in groups and carried on about their “witch-like” teachers and so on, while others walked alone, perhaps because of a pre-pubescent social status or maybe because of insignificant reasons left unknown. One father, a younger man, proudly waved goodbye to his son and half yelled (or more so stressed to his boy), “Pay attention today! *Listen* to what she says!” The child nodded before innocently disappearing somewhere into the depths of the school bus, and the father waved good-bye.

Standing at the front door, peeking out between the blinds, a young woman in her mid-twenties watched all the goings-on in her neighborhood as she sipped her hot morning coffee in the oversized men’s shirt she often slept in. Other than her long brown hair that was appropriately disheveled from sleeplessly wrestling a pillow all night, she was pretty and petite, with an angular face and soft tan skin.

The morning news on the television provided an ample amount of company as she continued to gaze out into other people’s lives. . . .

“... and in other news, after more than three years, investigators have called off the search for young—”

The voice on the television disappeared, startling the young woman. She turned to see him place the remote on the coffee table, saying, “We don’t need to hear any more of that trash—although, I assume you heard it all by now?”

“Yeah, I did,” she said, moving towards the kitchen counter to fetch him a cup of coffee. “I can’t believe it’s been three years already. Oh! How time flies. Just yesterday it seemed like the turn of the millennium—now look, it’s been almost ten years! Cy, I’ve been thinking—”

“No-no! No cream please. You know I’ve switched to non-dairy creamer, Gabby,” he said disappointedly, lighting the cigarette that was behind his ear.

“Sorry. I forgot.”

Gabby hung her head and threw away whatever it was she was going to say, stirring the nondairy creamer into his coffee before tapping the spoon on the mug's edge.

She handed him the coffee, saying, "You came in later than usual last night. Later and later every night it seems."

He simply looked at her, her eyes seemingly sad and potentially heartbroken, eclipsed with the faint outline of yesterday's mascara. "And . . . ?" he raised.

"Nothing. I was just saying. . . ."

He continued to look at her before turning his back to pace around the house and, while nursing his coffee, glanced out the windows for his peek at life's parade, pulling on the smoke hanging from his thin lips. Gabriella grabbed a cigarette from the pack near by, another habit she picked up off of Cy but was only allowed to light-up when he did, for Cy only preferred the smell when he himself smoked.

Cy Retenir was the man's name, an older southern man from Louisiana whom tasted nearly a half century in this world; a taller scraggly man in expired clothes, and though strong jawed he was short of handsome, having yellowed teeth and heavy bags beneath his eyes; just as well his hair was salt-and-pepper, a medium length glistening with grease.

Gabriella and Cy were Katrina migrants that floated their way down from the flooded outskirts of New Orleans. They kept to themselves and were considered devout Christians, "the quiet type," as anyone would say—of course they hardly knew anyone in the neighborhood and (rather instinctually) had the social graces of barbed wire.

He carelessly smoked about the barely furnished house; the living room as well as the dining area and the kitchen were all spotless and brilliantly clean; the place all together looked untouched and preserved, as though no one had ever lived there before. Cy had continuously preached that with a can of Comet and a keen eye for detail one could achieve living quarters cleaner than that of a hospital. There was, however, a touch of elegance amongst such drab furnishings: a couple of roses on the counter, losing their beauty in a drinking glass half emptied of water; though one of them was significantly fresher than the other and filled with color, both roses were prematurely snipped from their bush.

"I'll start breakfast," Gabriella said, and went for the refrigerator.

"I'll help ya," said Cy.

"No, nonsense, I got it, hon. Besides, I know how to cook your eggs better than you do."

"No, really," he said, "I'll cook the bacon," and came to her, smashing the cigarette out in the ashtray. He was, and looked, nearly twice Gabriella's age and could easily pass as her father.

Pulling the produce out of the refrigerator, Cy suddenly stopped and sniffed the meat. "This bacon's old, but there's 'nother package in here. I'm gonna throw this out."

"That bacon is perfectly fine, Cy," she said. "We opened it no more than three days ago. No sense wasting perfectly good bacon."

He pondered. "Nah," was his reply, and tossed the dated piglet strips into the trash.

As the freshly opened bacon crackled on the hot pan, and the eggs cooked next to it, Gabriella loaded the toaster with sliced bread, staring at Cy as he refilled his coffee and leaned on the counter and read passages from *Our Daily Bread*. The bacon began to burn.

"We don't cook breakfast like this anymore, together," Gabriella finally said. "At least, not like we used to."

"Hm?" he looked up.

"Remember? Remember when it was just you and me. You would do most of the cooking back then, if not all of it. And I would sit at the counter and you would feed me little teasers of what was to come—it was you who taught me how to cook."

"I taught ya more'n that I hope."

"You did," she answered without thought. "But back then—"

"—was back then," Cy interjected. "You were a young lady then, and I guess I treated you so."

"Cy, lately you just seem to be so distant and—"

"Stop it, Gabby," he said, slightly irritated.

She gave him her back and tended to the food on the stove. The spitfire bacon threw grease in every which direction.

"We can't just pretend like it's the ol' days, Gab. The good Lord allowed us the opportunity to blaze down a different path, and we need to be thankful of that."

"Ouch!" The grease splashed her arm.

"You're a mother now, Gab, and I need ya to grow up a little."

"That's not—*ouch!*—what . . . I was talking about, Cy." She rubbed her arm with a towel and applied cold water to it over the sink.

The toast popped.

"Then what is it? Is it sumptin' I done?" he asked. "That is besides provide for this family, and take care of us to the best of my abilities cuz I hafta work fifty hours a week at the plant."

Gabriella tried to speak but was silenced by Cy who neared her and kissed her on the lips. Then, lifting up her chin and looking into her eyes, he smiled and said, "Now I *love* you and I *love* our daughter, and there ain't nuthin' gonna change that. And we gonna be one happy family, all celebratin' the grace of God, together. . . ." He looked at her in the eyes again. "You know I need you, and I don't know what I'd do without you, Gab. Who else could handle matters while I'm away?"

She shrugged him off the way one shivers in the cold.

"Why you been comin' in so late, Cy?" she pleaded. "What've you been doing?"

"Nothing. We've been over this time and again—"

"Because you been putting me off again and again. All I ask is that you make some attempt at showing me affection like you used to, but it seems you're drifting away more everyday, Cy. Don't you love me anymore?"

"Of course I do," he said, going back to his reading.

"Have you fallen in love with someone else?"

"I told you I love *you*, Gabby, what more do you wanna hear from me?"

"It's not what I wanna hear, it's what I wanna see and feel . . . from you." There was a pause, then, "You're in love with *her*, aren't you?"

"Gabby, I love you now more than ever." Placing the book down, he neared her once more but this time she moved a step back away from him. "Now, I think you're the most attractive gal I ever seen."

"Then why won't you sleep with me anymore?"

The question stopped Cy. He looked at the ground and shook his head.

"It's not what God wants, Gabby," he breathed. "It's—"

"—it's because I'm barren, isn't it?"

"That has nothing to do with it."

"That has *everything* to do with it!" she screamed.

"Enough!"

She drew on her cigarette.

There was a brief silence where only the bacon whistled and popped.

"You're gonna wake Kayla hollerin' like that," Cy said. "Do you want her to hear the way you're talkin' right now?"

She spun around and angrily switched off the stove. Then, removing three plates from the cupboard she began distributing the food, while saying, "She is a fifteen year old girl, Cy, and I think she could bear to overhear our adult talk." A pause. Then, "And she ain't my daughter."

"There you go again," protested Cy. "I can't believe you, Gabby, you're unreal right now. Why, she is just as much your daughter as she is mine."

Turning to his face, she reiterated, "That's my point, Cy!"

Cy pushed Gabriella aside, snatching the utensils from her hands and began plating the food himself. She stepped back and watched Cy the way she used to, remembering what it was like to have someone pay attention to her, cater to her, and love her. However, watching him prepare the meal this time—with such cold intentions—upset her deeply.

"I get it," Gabriella said, observing him take more care into the preparation of one particular plate. "You want to have a child of your own, don't you? Your own blood. Is that it?"

"Now, Gab, I don't need—"

"It is, isn't it?" she said. "I'm not good enough for you anymore. I'm just here to clean and cook and wash clothes and play 'Gabby-homemaker' while you spend your evenings embracing another woman. What kind of *father* are you?"

Piercing the toast with the butter knife, Cy roared, "A great father!" then slammed his hands to the counter and glared at Gabby. Then, calm and slow, mapping out his road to composure, he swallowed and repeated, "A great father."

"What you're doing is wrong . . . what *we're* doing is wrong." Her eyes swelled with hot tears. "And none of . . . of . . ." swinging her arm around "*this* is right. It was different with me, Cy, I came from a broken home, I needed to be rescued and you did that for me. But don't you think this is different, it's gone too far," she sniffled, and with it came the aroma of cooked bacon and stale cigarette smoke that lingered in the air, making Gabby gag a little.

"You're just jealous, Gabby. Plain jealous! And of all days to be like this?" He gave himself a quick shot of peppermint spray in the mouth. "This is a day of celebration," Cy said. He plucked a rose from the glass—the better of the two—and placed it on a tray that held a plate of food and a glass of orange juice. He picked up that singular tray and headed for the backdoor.

"She isn't adjusting well, Cy . . ."

"You're wrong. You haven't seen it the way I have."

"I'm sure I haven't." She marched behind him. "It's obvious your love for her is so deep it's just penetrating!"

He stopped; she bumped into him. He turned and looked down at her sharply. This time she had gone too far with the subject, and Gabriella herself realized this to be true as she looked up at Cy, the man who provided her with so much.

"I'm—I'm sorry, Cy, I didn't mean it like that. . . ."

"I've had it!" he shouted, his words shaking the young woman. "You betta' watch that yammer of yurs—how dare you talk to me this way. You know what—you know, I don't think your able enough to celebrate this day with us, Gab, and I suggest you get on your knees and pray for forgiveness cuz you do nuthin' but disrespect me. Now go on!"

He turned, then before exiting, added over his shoulder, "Sometimes I pray to the Lord to help me love you more than I already do. . . ."

Gabriella's cheeks were wet with tears. She covered her mouth with her hand, frozen over what she'd just heard.

". . . but miracles are rare occurrences in this world," he finished before shutting the door behind him as Gabriella sobbed her way back to the kitchen.

Cy tramped through the yard, its perimeters lined with a tall wooden fence cutting off the outside world. He crunched along on the freshly cut grass with the very same shoes he once fled Louisiana in, towards a shed surrounded by tall shrubbery and a few plastic trash cans filled with lawn clippings. Setting the tray aside for a moment, he moved the cans and began unlocking the giant padlock on the shed's door. Inside was a young girl lying chained to a cot. She awoke, blocking the rays of sunshine that shone through the barred window.

"Good morning, Kayla," Cy gleefully said with a broad smile that showcased his yellow teeth. He presented the tray of food to her. "Today is a special day, honey. You're officially part of the family."

AUBRI PLOURDE

Birthright

PAM BREATHED THROUGH HER MOUTH so the jet fuel wouldn't crawl its way into her head and she doused the roar of the engine with an album she liked. As the lights of the city appeared just below a thick sludge of clouds, she looked out the window at the long, needlely island. The buildings looked like a lover, waiting for her to come back.

Sometimes she thought of the world in two parts: the city, and everywhere else. She gave a halfhearted effort not to be a New York snob, critiquing everyone else's water and saying things like "Why isn't anything open past nine?" She wasn't actually sure the city was better. She was sure that there were two different ways to live life, and she liked how they did things in New York. But this trip had been too long. She rested her head back in her seat as she felt the plane landing with the first yo-yoing of her stomach. Four months. Had the subletter ruined her apartment? Did it still smell like Frank? Did she want it to?

She'd rushed back from Illinois riding the snap decision to go to Jesse's show. It would be hard, watching him. Growing up, he'd told them both that he wanted to do something else. He didn't want to chase his parents' echo. They'd told him he could do anything, be anyone he wanted—support was a luxury neither of them had received. She knew, from thirty years of living in the city, that most of the population lived severed from families. It was a city of chaotic isolation, full of the nameless. She refused to let her son become one of them. So here she was, twenty-five years later, going to watch him perform.

There had been a fight, of course, when he'd announced he planned to sing. Frank had called it disrespectful, insulting to expect success without the years of diligence others had given. He trained some students for years before he considered them decent. Years ago, when they'd met, he'd made Pam stop drinking soda and start yoga, all in the name of the art. And here was his son, insisting that he wanted to sing, claiming it like his birthright. Like walking into a home, Frank had said, and refuse to eat at the table. She would forgive him, because she was his mother. But New Yorkers don't believe in birthrights.

The plane landed, and Pam took a cab back to the small strip of neighborhood between the Upper West Side and the Heights. The apartment had been left clean, with only a few things out of place: a coffee table readjusted, some books in the wrong places. She went to the kitchen to find most of her groceries already stocked, delivered by the local grocery store and arranged by the subletter. She

made herself a sandwich and pulled the bottle of wine from her handbag. She hadn't realized how much she'd like Merlot until after Frank had died.

As she sipped from the glassware her best friend had given her for their wedding, she scanned the walls of the kitchen. There was the picture of Jesse graduating from high school. Underneath one of the cabinets was a fuzzy old photograph, not framed, featuring a small, blonde figure on a dark stage. A guest sitting in the kitchen wouldn't know who it was, but Pam remembered that night, remembered Frank managing her water intake and bossing all of the sound technicians. There were no pictures of Jesse singing, and if you'd looked, you wouldn't have seen any of his records. She wondered, when he did sign with a label—and he would—would she keep his albums out, like the trophies of motherhood? Or would she keep them rotting in her closet?

The show would begin in an hour. She should get ready. Pam tossed the bottle into the small wastebasket on her way out.

Summer in New York. Passing her studio, she inhaled deeply. She'd go in tomorrow. She supposed she'd have to send an email out to let her students know classes were back on. Maybe put together a group thing of the better singers for sometime in the fall. The sight of the studio made her wish for the drone of Illinois. Haunting the doors, a kid who could have used a belt tried to sell her a fake iPod.

She walked the short distance to Lincoln Center. The place was crowded with students, tourists, and the rare guest trying to find the performing arts center. Construction scaffolding got in the way. But Pam knew how to find it, and she ducked under the structure and into the walkway, following the makeshift tunnel until she came to the giant entrance.

It was a beehive. People everywhere, trying to find each other, trying to purchase roses for the performers. She took a playbill from the usher quietly and found her seat, where she sat, eyes closed, until her son took the stage. The people buzzed.

On a diet of Coke and cheeseburgers, with no classical training, no experience, he was going to sing tonight at the cornerstone of Juilliard. Pam wondered vaguely how the other students felt about him. Did they resent him? Idolize him? She wondered how long they'd dreamed of going, how many hours of rehearsal and how many outings with friends they'd sacrificed to be there. She supposed they would assume that he, like them, had made those sacrifices. They might never know that he'd wandered into this life, un-vetted and unasked.

The lights blinked, and the audience calmed down. Eyes still closed, Pam listened as people took their seats and the din of the theatre was replaced with the silent but equally audible hum of anticipation. Behind the proscenium, singers would be doing scales, holding each other's rib cages as they breathed, making grotesque faces to loosen up their muscles. She remembered the night of performance like she remembered what it was to feel tired.

Her students would say of her that they'd never met anyone with more passion on any subject. Of course, she spent her days unaware of and apathetic to the students' daily lives. It was about the work. If her class caused strong singers to think themselves slackers and weak ones to quit, all the better. None of that was relevant. It was the work.

But Jesse was brilliant.

He sang with the group for most of the numbers, but as the production reached its height, he walked onto the stage alone. His blonde hair stood out on top of his head, and she saw that it was the same length as hers. The orchestra began, and he opened his mouth.

The song was slow, a ballad. It would have been one of Frank's favorites. Jesse navigated the notes expertly, and even she, with the passion that wrapped a fist around her stomach, could see the time spent on that one song hanging in the air, the minutes and hours attached to every note. His mouth opened wide, and she heard his soft palate rise up as high as it would go, turning his body from flesh and blood and fear into a solid instrument, cradling the sound. She felt the tiny hairs on her arm stand up as his warm, buttery voice pulled a high, clear note out like a spinner pulling a thread, and she listened.

When Jesse had entered high school, he'd tried out for the golf team. They'd given him the choice: he could continue drawing classes, or he could go out for the school golf team. They hadn't been able to afford both. He'd chosen golf, and Frank had taken him to the nearest pro store to pick out some new clubs, piecing together a set from the new ones and a few they'd borrowed from Frank's brother. They'd taken him to the driving range every day, watching while he practiced with the team, working on his swing.

He hadn't made the team. The coach had had a meeting with all of the boys on the last day of tryouts, and Jesse had been one of the first to leave the huddle. He passed her, mumbled, "maybe next year," and headed over to a putting green. Frank had had a class that day, so she'd sat by herself on a bench as she'd watched him in his new orange polo shirt, practicing his putting.

If she'd thought of it, she probably would have assumed that the feeling she had then and the feeling she had now would stand like two opposite bookends of her motherhood. The high and the low. But as she sat, watching him sing, hearing the awe in the breaths of her neighbors, the feeling was familiar.

When the concert was over, most of the audience filed out the small doors at the sides of the auditorium, refilling the city with their energy. A few lingered, talking in small groups or meandering around the atrium, reading about Juilliard performing arts. As she waited, the crowd diluted itself until the only few left were those waiting for the performers. She saw a middle-aged couple and their young son, clearly from out of town, waiting for someone. There, an older man Pam suspected of waiting for a younger lover. And directly across the room, a pretty girl trying to look interested in a group of sculptures in a glass case, glancing at the door every few seconds. She looked like one of the girls Frank had kicked out of class for skimping on scales. The kind that liked to call themselves "alternative." The bold colors and strange, geometric hint to her clothing couldn't conceal her nervousness, and Pam knew the girl didn't belong there.

She checked her watch, knowing it would take them awhile to take off all of the makeup and get through the end-of-show routine. Finally, a group of kids came out the double doors together, talking quickly in shimmery voices. As they entered, they split to find their own small groups. She watched a young girl find her parents and little brother, noticing that she was one that had had a spectacular voice, one that she and Frank would have loved to coach. And then came Jesse, shifting his gym bag on his shoulder as he brushed wet hair off his face.

He grinned at her easily and waved. Then, he nodded to the girl in the geometric jumper thing and she fell into step beside him as they approached Pam. Oh, fucking fantastic. So there was a girl. And this thing was it.

"You're here!" he said as he reached her, giving her a hug and kiss on the cheek. It had been years since she'd been able to hug him without standing on her toes. He returned his arm to the girl's shoulders. "Ma, this is Alexandra."

Pam nodded and shook the girl's hand.

"You did great!" the girl gushed.

"Thanks," he said, smiling the exhilarated smile that can only come from the rush of a weekend performance night.

They headed out the doors and out into the night, toward the courtyard of Lincoln Center. Every ten feet or so, someone would stop them, or call out, "Great job, Jesse!" to her son. Pam didn't recognize anyone.

They were right, of course. He was better than she was, better than Frank had been. She'd tried to keep expectations to a minimum. The nasty corner of her brain couldn't help wondering if maybe he was so good because neither she nor her dead husband had had any part of his musical education.

"So, Mrs. Moller, does Jesse get his talent from you?"

Pam regarded the girl. "No."

The girl's face was limboing between a false smile and discouragement.

"Coming to eat with us, Ma?" Jesse asked.

"No, I can't."

"Oh, come on. You can't have anything planned—you just got back."

"I have my classes," she said. "They need planning."

They had arrived at a subway station. The yellow line. The girl loitered there, and Pam guessed that this was the train they took to wherever they were going. She wondered if they lived together.

"Well, maybe some other time then," the girl said.

"Thank you, Mama, for coming."

Pam hugged him, trying to form her mouth into a shape other than the tight line, and she waved goodbye to the girl. "I'll see you soon," she said to Jesse, thinking of the bottle of wine the subletter had been forward-thinking enough to arrange on the baker's rack.

"Bye, Mrs. Moller!"

She headed off, walking uptown toward the wine, forgetting what she'd forgotten to tell him. His voice was excruciating. She spent the night trying to exorcise the sound—to replace it with wine and rivalry.

DANIEL FRONTADO-BLANCO



SANDRA CHÁVEZ JOHNSON

The Foreigner

BETO AND HIS SON SAT stiffly in their seats. Neither spoke. Instead they looked out the café's storefront at the horizon where they saw the top of *El Volcán de Colima* obscured by a gray cloud-like formation. It had been two days since Beto's son arrived in Nogueras and only three hours since the volcano erupted. Bits of violet-grey ash collected at their feet. Beto smiled nostalgically. His son moved his feet further under the Mexican barrel chair.

"Alejandro!" Beto finally said. "Alejandro. *Miño*."

"Call me Alex, Dad," he said, without taking his eyes off the horizon.

"Okay. Alex," Beto said, his accent thicker than normal from trying so hard.

"*Miño*, you know, the first time I saw it erupt, I was just a boy. Me and your Tío Rubén, we were fishing at one of the lakes on *El Nevado*—"

"Dad, how close are we to the volcano?"

"Not so close as you think. There is nothing to worry."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Yes. I am sure, *Miño*."

Alex, needing something familiar, looked at his wrist where his watch usually rested. Then he remembered that he'd accidentally left his watch at his apartment back in the U.S., along with most of the other comforts of home. This last-minute trip to Mexico had come out of a desperate call late one night about a week earlier when his father claimed to be ill. Sitting across from him, his father seemed lonely, not ill. Alex traveled to Mexico to help his sick father, but he had nothing to offer that could aid with the loneliness.

After some silence, Alex asked, "Dad, what do you need from me?"

"I am fine now. You are here. I am fine."

Alex stared blankly at his father, and without a word, walked over to the refrigerator in the corner of the café to help himself to a cup of *ponche*. In Alex's mind, knowing about the hidden stash of alcohol ranked high among the benefits of having your family own the local internet café.

Alex looked around the room. He liked the warmth of the Mexican-tiled floor and the terracotta walls, but could not understand the altars with the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe or the miniature skeletons decorating the interior walls of the café. In the same way, Alex loved his father, but could not understand why he moved back to Mexico after emigrating to the United States over four decades earlier.

As Alex crossed back over to his father, he noticed a woman enter the side entrance to the café. Her matted blonde dreads stood out among the other dark-haired patrons. He considered an introduction, but decided instead to sit down again near his father.

“What are you drinking?”

“Just *ponche*, Dad.”

“You know I don’t like it when you drink.”

“Well, if you are fine, then I’m on vacation.”

“Okay! Tomorrow we go visit the sugarcane fields. We will go early, so don’t sleep late.”

“Dad, but are you sure it’s safe to stay? I mean, I can change my flight to go home earlier. Or no, we can go to Guadalajara, or maybe Tequila—to the factory.”

“Maybe.”

As the sun started to set, streaks of light escaped the mountainous horizon and gave the town a surreal quality. Outside, a group of men oblivious to the ash still sprinkling down walked along the street dressed in full mariachi costume with instruments in tow, likely coming home from a wedding reception or birthday party. Alex never liked mariachi music or the Mexican *corridos* his father liked to sing. He preferred Phil Collins or Sting when he played with The Police—music that made it easy to blend in with his friends.

“Dad, I think I want to change my flight. I came here because you said you were sick. You said you’re doing fine. And truth is, I can’t afford a vacation right now.”

“Okay,” Beto said. “Maybe before you go, I will take you to Tequila.”

“That’d be fine.”

Beto folded his hands on the table and pressed his index fingers together. He stared out across the street at the door of the house that used to belong to his father and then to his brother Rubén. His brother, although younger than him by four years, had died a year earlier of a heart attack.

Just then, the blonde woman from across the room walked toward Alex and Beto. She wore a broom skirt and a peasant blouse, and as she approached, Alex recognized the faint smell of patchouli.

“I’m sorry, but I was overhearing your conversation. Are you from the U.S.?” she asked, looking at Alex. In her right hand, the woman held a mug steaming with black coffee and under her other arm a notebook fat with papers pressed against her hip.

"Yes," Alex responded.

"Oh, good! I'm Elaine. Elena," she said. "I was hoping to find someone to talk to, I'm just sort of nervous about the volcano. No one seems to be worried around here, so I guess it's okay. But, I mean it really makes you appreciate life, you know. Anyway, I just wanted to find someone to talk to."

"Oh, yes. Well, I'm Alex and this is my dad, Norberto. Beto," Alex said.

"*Mucho gusto. Me llamo Elena,*" she said, taking a seat at the table.

"*Mucho gusto. ¡Que bien hablas!* You speak Spanish so well. How long have you been?" asked Beto.

"Here, in Mexico? *Dos años.* Two years," she said.

"Really? Why so long?" Alex asked.

"I'm doing my doctoral thesis on architecture—studying the haciendas in Colima. I've been in Nogueras for about three months now."

"That's interesting," Alex said with little inflection.

"*¿Como?*" Beto asked.

"*Estoy estudiando la arquitectura de las haciendas,*" Elena said before Alex even thought of translating.

"Yes? You know, my great, great uncle was killed at the door of that hacienda," Beto said, waving toward the hacienda, which in the dark could still be seen faintly across the plaza. "That was during the revolution, and it happened a lot like that," Beto said.

"So much history. Nogueras has been one of my favorite places to visit so far. *Me gusta mucho.* So, have you seen the volcano erupt before?" she asked Beto.

"Oh yes. The first time I saw, I was just a boy. I was fishing at a lake on that mountain," Beto said, pointing at a peak to the left of the volcano, barely visible due to the ash cloud. "That is *El Nevado*. It is also a volcano, but it doesn't work anymore. It is, how you say? Extinct."

Elena squinted at the horizon—the mountains black against a sky of orange, except for the persistent mushroom-shaped cloud above. "*Porque El Nevado?*"

"They call it *El Nevado* because when it gets very cold, not every year, but some years, yes. When it gets very cold, up there, it snows!"

"*¡No me digas!*" Elena said, throwing her hands up exaggerated surprise.

"*¡Sí!*" Beto continued, "but let me tell you about me and my brother Rubén. It was summer and we were fishing to bring home for the family. Well, not fishing, but that is what we told my papá so he would not make us work in the sugarcane fields."

"When was that?" Elena asked.

"Oh, sixty, sixty-five years ago. A long time," Beto said. "But the chiste is this. We were fishing. Yes. And we heard the sound. Boom! And we got scared. I was the older, so I was not scared like Rubén. He jumped and said, *Vamonos!* So we did." Beto's eyes gleamed as he spoke. "On the way home we saw some ripe mangos at Dona Ramirez's house. We picked them, even though we knew we shouldn't. And she saw us! That old witch! She was waiting at her window to catch someone, I'm sure. She comes out saying how she is going to get us. And just when she starts after us, I say, *¿Dona Ramirez, no sabes? Don't you know, you should not run around after the volcano erupts. It is bad for your breathing.* She stopped long enough for me and Rubén to run around the corner and get away from her!" Beto laughed at his prank which made Elena laugh, though she didn't know why.

The laughter turned to a satiated silence and Beto looked at Elena and said, "Let me show you something. *Un momento.*" Then, he got up and walked toward the counter where his nephew stood counting change out to a customer. Just out of earshot from Alex and Elena, Beto exchanged some whispered words with his nephew. His nephew shuffled things around the counter and then handed some photos to Beto.

"He tells stories," Alex said.

"They're great! So rich with culture. I wish I had stories like that," Elena replied.

"Where you from?" Alex asked.

"Iowa. Des Moines. You can't get more boring than that. Lived in farm country, but it's not like we had a farm."

"Never been. What do they grow there? Potatoes?"

"That's Idaho. Corn is our big crop. Anyway, I went to school in San Francisco."

"No way! We're from the Bay Area. Well, I'm from the Bay Area. Small world," Alex said.

"Yeah. So your father lives here?"

"Yeah, when he retired two years ago he decided to come back here. I don't know why. This is the first time I've been out to see him."

"I'd love to have a home to come to here. You're so lucky."

"Yeah," Alex said, although not convinced by Elena's enthusiasm. "So, you study architecture?"

"Yes. The haciendas in this area are fascinating. The one in Nogueras has changed hands several times since the revolution, but has been preserved

especially well. It's largely constructed from river stones and a kind of cement made from volcanic ash. The grounds are beautiful, too. Have you been?"

"No," Alex said. "My dad mentioned that we have some distant relationship to the family that owned the hacienda before the revolution. We're related to everyone here, I swear. I guess that's why my parents moved to the U.S." He laughed at his own joke.

"The Rangel? Oh, yes, I've read about them." Elena didn't seem amused by his humor.

Alex fidgeted.

Beto returned and thrust several color photos onto the table in front of Elena.

"Mira. Look, here are photos of el volcán. This one, this is 1982. See. That was a big one," Beto said, pointing to a night photo of the volcano which showed lava streaming down the sides of the mountain.

"Wow. Oh, look. This one has lava!" Elena looked at the photo and started leafing through the others as Beto sat down.

"Yes, that is a different kind of erupt. Today was not so bad as that," Beto said.

"That's good to know," Elena said.

"You know, there are some indigenos who live close to the volcano and when it erupt they run outside to get *la ceniza*. They use it for cleaning."

"They're not scared?"

"No. *Los indigenos* have been living here for a long, long time. *Así son*. Some people say they even eat clay made from *la ceniza*."

"I can't imagine living up there," Elena said, continuing to look through the photos, her eyes now sparkling with curiosity. Beto smiled.

Alex peered at the photos with mild interest and then leaned back in his chair, running his fingers between the taut pigskin and the rough cedar that made up the chair's frame. He sat there and imagined another life where Elena was his father's daughter and he was the stranger.

"You really like Mexico, don't you?" Alex asked Elena.

She looked up, not sure if Alex was speaking to her. When her gaze met his eyes, she put down the photos. Beto continued to look through the pictures.

"Yes, I love it. There's so much life here. Even in how they treat death. Like those day of the dead skeletons on the wall," she said, pointing to a skeleton puppet playing a guitar and draped in flowers. "Imagine if we treated death with that kind of joy instead of fearing it so much."

"I guess."

"You have no idea how lucky you are," Elena said. "I just wish I could be linked to this culture through something other than curiosity."

"I wish I had that curiosity."

A stiff silence sat in the air as Elena searched for a response. Alex stared at the empty plastic cup, debating the benefits of more *ponche*.

"You know," Elena finally said, "I didn't even speak Spanish when I got here, but it didn't take long to pick it up. Everyone I've met has been so patient with me. They've treated me so warmly." Elena paused to sip her coffee. "Well, it was nice talking. I don't know why, but I always find foreigners in this café."

"Foreigners?" Alex asked.

Elena smiled, pulled her chair out, and turned to Beto.

"Mucho gusto, Beto. Gracias por tu compañía."

"Sí. Sí, Elena."

Elena stood up and walked toward the door, her skirt gently swaying.

Alex stared after her and then at the empty doorway, until finally moving his gaze to Beto. Sitting across from his father, the question of whether to change his flight seemed less important. He shifted his feet and settled into the chair.

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MERLAINE SIVELS

Daddy Issues

WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, he stuck around. He got an apartment nearby, dropped in whenever mom went to work and my brother went to play basketball. He would rent movies, a new one every week. We would watch them together. Eat all the frozen pizzas in the house together.

The next day, mom would warn me not to let him do that again. She'd say it was bad for his blood pressure.

As I got older, he drifted farther away.

Location wise, he was a nomad.

Parked his truck in empty fields and slept in it. He only parked in places where he knew he wouldn't get a ticket, and he would call me, telling me the newest place he'd managed to fall asleep. It was dangerous, his line of work. People robbed trucks and shot truckers, I was told. I hadn't known that, and for the longest time I would spend nights awake, wondering if I would get a call from him the next morning. He always seemed to make it, and, by day, he emptied the truck to the designated store. Then be on his way again.

He had sent me postcards.

Alabama, Washington, Las Vegas, Utah, Texas, Maryland, California.

I still have them. My favorite was Virginia. He would call and ask me if I'd receive the latest postcard, I would reply with a yes, I had, but Virginia will always be my favorite.

For a while, she let him come back, my mom.

She let him stay with us and we played house. He was the daddy. She was the mommy. I was the daughter. My brother, the son. The roles were intricate. My part was easy. Everyone else struggled. Eventually, my mom got sick of pretending. She wanted him out. He left.

She apologized to me.

To my brother.

MERLAINE SIVELS

I remember going into another room and calling him, telling him that she apologized. He never picked up. Never called back.

I am a girl of false hopes, my mother told me once. He promises me things. I cling to them with all my heart, all my soul. When he doesn't deliver, I am heart broken. But he makes more promises and I cling some more.

Nowadays she tells me that I don't remember the old him. The one who sent me to bed without food. Who pushed me to the ground whenever I would kiss her goodnight. The one who pinched me so hard he split my tender six-year-old skin in half for biting on a straw.

She says that if I remembered the way I would cry in her arms while he was outside mowing the law, the way I would wail in my bedroom at night after he went to work, the way I would shake in his presence when I did something he didn't like. If only I remembered that side of him then I wouldn't hold on the way I did.

But all I can say to her is, he is my dad, and you can never let your number one fan go.

He doesn't call me on my twentieth birthday. I don't wake up waiting for it, but at the end of the day, I realize there is one voice I haven't heard from. When I call him, he assures me, yes, he did call, and he even left a message. While he is speaking, I check my phone for the voicemail sign.

It's not on.

I ask him when I will see him again. It'd been almost a year. We make plans for Sunday. He has a delivery in Miami for Monday, so he will pass through Orlando for a few hours.

I am excited. Not just to see him, but just to be in his presence. To hear him talk, in person, for once. To see his facial features, that huge smile I used to get from him. I miss it all.

He does not call me on Saturday.

On Sunday, I wake up early, dress, and put my keys in the ignition, as my phone buzzes with a new text message. I don't need to read it. I pull my keys out, go back inside, undress and go back to bed.

At my bedroom door, my mom is on the verge of tears because she can hear mine.

False hopes, honey. False hopes.

Three days later, I read the text message. We have new plans for Sunday again. He will be there, my phone assures me.

Once again, there is no call on Saturday. On Sunday, I wake up early, dress, and put my keys in the ignition. My phone is silent the entire drive.

Since sixteen, we have met at the Navy Exchange, even though I am twenty nothing has changed. I drive around the parking lot, looking for him. I find his truck.

The purple eighteen-wheeler is tall behind the old lawn and garden building. When I pull up he is not there. I park behind it and go look for him. I find him exiting the barbershop. From faraway, he is my dad. My daddy.

The man that woman would swoon over at my brother's basketball games, at my job, in restaurants, in theme parks. He is tall and poised, walking with his back straight, like the military taught him. His hair, which has been balding since before I could remember, is cropped closely to his head. From far away, that smile is bright with memories of his little girl, and momentarily I expect him to run to me and scoop me into his arms like he used to. But he doesn't. He keeps walking, and when we are standing face to face with each other, I realize that I have made a mistake.

This man is not my father.

His hair is salt and pepper instead of black. His eyes, usually vigilant and alert, are tired and baggy, as if they threaten to close at any moment. His stomach, once flat and muscular, is now heavy with the threat of a gut. His muscular arms are skinny.

And his face.

He is handsome still. But his face is accented with heavy lines around his mouth, around his eyes, on his cheeks, like origami art that has been deconstructed.

I stare because I don't know what to say. What do you say to a stranger?

MERLAINE SIVELS

He speaks first; a loud obnoxious greeting that if I was still thirteen would have made me laugh hysterically. Now it makes my bottom lip quiver.

I greet him, closing in for a quick hug. He embraces me and even manages to lift me off the ground an inch or two. I do not stay airborne for long, and it scares me to think that there will come a time when he will no longer be able to do that.

When he releases me, my cheeks are wet. I tell him it is allergies. He believes me.

We walk and he tells me about the allergies he had while in Alabama. He throws his head back in a laugh and says that I wouldn't last a minute there. I nod, still looking at him, never looking away. I want to be able to see when this man will turn back into my dad. I want to watch the metamorphosis. He asks me what's wrong? It's my birthday.

I should be happy.

I reply that I am old now. He laughs again. That same laugh that sounds like my dad's. He asks me how I have been. How is my boyfriend? How is my brother? How is my car (he can't help but comment that it still looks like shit)?

I tell him everything is good. Everyone is fine.

I don't tell him about how I have moved in with my boyfriend, how my brother has moved out because of fights with mom, how my car stopped working in the middle of the highway the other day, how my heart stutters when I laugh too hard or sleep on my stomach, about my puppy, about my grades.

He doesn't pry.

He tells me about his fiancée.

He calls her Mrs. Sivels.

When he says this, I laugh for the first time. I picture my mom. She isn't, but to me, she will always be the only Mrs. Sivels. It is not as funny to him as it is to me. To him it is not funny at all.

We walk around the exchange for an hour. When he finds something he likes, he gets my attention by calling my name and begging me to look.

It reminds me of our road trips when I was younger. When we would pass a field of horses or cows, he would nudge me repeatedly.

Look! Look! Cows!

I indulge him by feigning interest.

In return, I point to things I like. He merely nods, continues walking. Makes a comment about my mom buying me something if I want it bad enough. When we pass the jewelry department, he shows me the ring he plans on buying for the new and improved Mrs. Sivels.

It is five thousand dollars. He informs me that she is worth every penny.

He does not have time to take me out to my birthday lunch as we planned. He admits that I took too long getting there. We eat at a sub shop.

I do not like subs, but I don't speak up. He doesn't ask.

He eats quickly.

Mouth full, he confides in me that he loves their subs. How does mine taste? As he is speaking, mine slips out of my hand on to the floor. He laughs. My stomach growls. I did not eat breakfast that morning in order to have room for lunch.

He says, *Oh, well.* He shrugs.

We are silent as we walk to my car and his truck. I still cannot help but look at him, but this time I know he is not going to change. For me, there will be no metamorphosis into the man I knew.

He pats me on the back as I stop in front of his truck. He tells me that he has something for me. I cannot help it—I get excited. I did not expect anything from him. He dashes into the cab of his truck and rummages around for a few minutes. The longer he takes the more my heart sinks. He yells down to me that he might have lost it—oops, he found it.

He steps down the cab with two envelopes. One blue. One yellow.

Both of them read: **To My Favorite Girl.**

Before I can open them, he tells me that he has to get going. He's sorry he can't stick around.

MERLAINE SIVELS

I understand, or at least that's what I tell him.

I admit to him that I had a good time. It had been too long since I last saw him.

He is already in his truck, turning his keys, and pressing buttons. He pulls the string that hangs by his head, and the sound of his horn reverberates through the parking lot as he exits on to the highway.

When I can no longer see him, I open the first envelope.

The yellow one.

It is a Valentine's Day card. When I open the card, it sings a quick song and to the side he writes a simple message telling me to be good, don't do anything he wouldn't. I smile. Close the card. Slip it back into the envelope, and slip the envelope in my bag.

I open the second card, the blue one.

There is a small postcard inside. There are big city lights and people smiling, showgirls dancing, casinos and gambling all on the front. Las Vegas, it reads in pink lettering.

When I flip it over there is a small greeting. To the right is his scribbled handwriting:

*I always remembered that this one was your favorite.
Happy 22nd Birthday, young lady.*

ELIZABETH HURT

Apes

LAST NIGHT, THE LION FINALLY GOT HIM. It wasn't a full on pounce, but he managed to get one foot in his jaws and probably would have eaten it whole if Tom hadn't woken, sweating, and kicking at his sheets. He sat straight up, glancing around his stark bedroom, panting a bit before settling back against the pillow. He did his best to steady his breathing before he would let himself close his eyes again. This was the fifth one in three weeks, but the first time the animal had gotten at him. It frightened him to think of that—you weren't supposed to die in your dreams—and even though it had only gotten his foot, it seemed unnatural that he should be having these nightmares again and again.

Since he'd moved home, nothing had felt the same. At school, in his cramped dorm room with the broken thermostat and his snoring roommate, he longed for the comfort of his own bed, made up by his mom with clean sheets that felt cool on warm nights and smelled pleasantly of Tide. On nights when he seemed to be the only one staying in while the rest of the hall drank their body weight in cheap beer at some frat party, he found himself wishing he was home with his dad, playing gin rummy and eating boiled peanuts with the hum of his mother's vacuuming as a soundtrack. His social life had been equally nonexistent in high school, but somehow, he had never felt all that lonely. As an only child, his parents had plenty of attention with which to spoil him, and though at school he was a loner, at home he felt at peace.

Now, he thought, laying twisted in his damp bedding, he was in prison. It wasn't that his parents loved him any less, but rather, that outside the realm of their unending devotion, he'd had time to really look at himself, and realized quickly that he was a loser. He always thought he was misunderstood, a gifted kid too smart for his hometown, and that outside its confines, he would flourish. He was the only person he knew from his high school to choose an out-of-state college, and his acceptance to a university of such caliber made the local paper. In his valedictory speech, he made grand statements about the kind of changes he hoped to make in the world, the ones he hoped they'd all make. Now he was just known as the epic failure, the wunderkind who flunked out after one semester away, relegated to his parent's house and a future painting houses or plunging toilets.

Why had he thought he was so special? He should have known he could never handle life in a fast paced college town, defenseless without the protection of his

parents' love and completely devoid of any social skills to speak of. He thought he'd be among intellectuals there, bookworms like himself who could debate with him over Freud and wouldn't laugh at his graphic novel collection. Instead, he found guys who played lacrosse and had houses in Cape Cod, and girls who all attended the same Connecticut boarding schools and wouldn't even look in the direction of a loser like him. He eventually became so depressed he couldn't even bear to get out of bed in the morning, and stopped attending class altogether. Scholarship lost, spirit crushed, he returned, dejected, to his hometown at Christmas and then the dreams started.

SHE STARTED THE DAY like any other, rising from bed at seven to go make his coffee. He had to have his coffee in the morning, he always said, or he couldn't function. Her hair still in curlers, blue bathrobe clutched tightly around her, she tiptoed down the stairs as quiet as always, because he was a light sleeper. After starting the coffee pot, she went to the pantry to retrieve his Grape Nuts, and only when she picked up the empty box did she remember. It was so hard to accept the death of a lover, especially when one becomes so used to caring for them. Especially hard when that person is so deeply engrained in the fabric of your life, under your skin, in your pores. She had never known life without him, and every morning since the funeral she followed the same routine. She was like a machine, programmed to function for his care, and it was only when the cereal box felt so light in her hand that the truth came rushing back to her, settling in her stomach like a stone.

She began to feel dizzy with the weight of that realization, and she had to sit down. At the kitchen table, with its pug-shaped salt and pepper shakers and black rattan placemats, she traced the knots in the wood where they had shared more than food. She was in his seat, and it was as if she could feel the indentation left from his presence there. She was too small in that chair where such a great man had taken his meals. His scent was still everywhere in the house, and it always took her aback when she caught it in each of his places: the laundry room where he hung his neatly pressed button downs; the office, where he spent so many nights hunched over, grading papers; and of course, in his bed, where they spent many nights with their bodies entwined, whispering promises neither would keep into each others' ears.

Unable to stand his presence everywhere, she began making trips during the day to get out of the house and away from the memories that were inescapable

within its walls. Some days she drove out to her sister's, where the heaps of clutter and whining of her perpetually snot-covered niece made her grateful for her own tidy home. Other times she would make the trek out to Scottville, the tiny town she grew up in, and as she drove past the crumbling houses with their rusted swing sets in the yard and peeling car ports, thanked God she got out of that place before high school. Today, though, she didn't feel very nostalgic, and decided instead to head to her latest favorite haunt where she could be undisturbed in the cool, contemplative silence and perhaps find comfort in her companions.

HE HAD DEVISED THE PLAN when he'd first woken from the dream, but soon drifted back to sleep, knocking out for the next six hours and waking again around 1 a.m. with no recollection of his previous resolution. Stumbling past her into the kitchen, he mumbled a "good morning" to his mother where she sat knitting in front of the TV, and didn't wait to hear her reply. His depression made her weary, and she lost interest in keeping house since he'd been gone. Now the once spotless kitchen was littered with dirty dishes, unpaid bills, and discarded bits of food. Stained coffee cups piled up in the sink, while the fridge was full of leftovers in various states of decay. His father was rarely home now, working late, and probably having an affair, according to his mother, and when he did make his appearance known he always threw in some comment on her housekeeping that would later make her cry. The decline of the house just added an extra layer of disparity to the miserable shroud surrounding his latest existence, but Tom said nothing.

Now, making a passable peanut butter jelly on two mismatched heels of bread, he wondered what clever way he'd think of to get out of the house today. It wasn't that he needed someplace to go. Nowadays he almost always made his first stop at Jerry's to smoke a joint and help him with his algebra, and his second at the woods behind the high school where he would continue to smoke the weed he traded for tutoring, thinking of ways in which to survive his hellish life. This became his routine, and it suited his lifestyle as much as any, but he couldn't very well tell his mother what he was up to. For some reason, he felt she might crumble if she knew how her only son was spending his days, and so he came up with elaborate lies each day to make his life sound less desperate than it actually was: *Going to the library, Mom, I want to get a copy of Lolita. Remember last summer when I said I was going to make my way through the classics? I have the time to do it now, or I think I'll go to the job fair at the CC today, it's not only for students,*

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and there might be some good opportunities for me to make some cash while I decide what to do about school.

Yesterday, he told her he was going to the animal shelter downtown to ask about volunteering, and it almost broken his heart to see her smile, because they both knew it was a lie. He didn't know why he felt the need to make up these stories each day, when they weren't fooling anyone. He felt unrecognizable from the perfect son he used to be, his parents' greatest accomplishment, and a paragon of scholastic aptitude. Now he was a stoner drop out who spent his days alone in the woods and his nights tangled in fear over zoo dreams.

That was it—the zoo. He suddenly remembered the plans he made with himself after the last dream, the idea that came to him so suddenly and clearly that he almost jumped from the bed right then. He resolved, after his breathing slowed and he had time to contemplate the nightmare, that the only way he could reconcile these strange dreams was to go to the place where each one had occurred. Because always, in the dream, he had been at some kind of zoo, and yet its cages had offered no protection. Maybe now, if he actually faced the beasts head on, he could decipher the dreams' meanings and be done with them. With the first real motivation he'd felt in weeks, he bounded up the stairs to get dressed, yelling as he ran.

"Later, Mom. I'm going to the zoo!"

SHE IS GETTING FRUSTRATED. She brings her focus solely to Timmy and his stare, but the sticky child with the red balloon keeps tapping her dirty fingers against the glass, and it makes her want to scream. Didn't they know you weren't supposed to do that? That it upset the animals? She had always been so quiet and well-behaved as a child, she couldn't understand why all children weren't that way. This girl, and her niece as well, they were beasts, spoiled and filthy and dressed deceptively like princesses. The one who is dirtying Timmy's enclosure now with her constant tapping is Cinderella, ketchup stains dotting her blue polyester ball gown, and as her father makes to pull her away, she loses grip of the balloon she'd been holding. With a wail louder than any animal, she screeches as he carries her out of the gorilla house, crying for the prize she has so carelessly let slip away.

It is quieter now, with the demon gone, and only a few whispering tourists casting glances at her friends. Timmy looks relieved to have the source of the tapping gone, and even swings down from his post to meet her at the glass. He rarely leaves his leafy platform in the corner for anyone, but they had an understanding between them, and he would sometimes put his large, padded, black hand right

up to the glass to meet with her small, blue veined one. The look in his dark eyes let her know he had suffered loss as well, and they ached together silently in the cool serenity of this safe house.

When the last of the tourists have passed through, she leaves Timmy and walks to the larger enclosure, the window to which is smudged with fingerprints she wipes away with a handkerchief. This is the home of Doc, the oldest gorilla, who presides with wisdom over his fellow apes. Steven is in his usual spot by the window, looking forlorn as he dreams of his mother and tugs at the cage's ropes like heartstrings. Franny and Rose are playful as usual, swinging from platform to ground and putting on a show, as they always do, for the patrons whose presence they cherish, thinking themselves loved. They were new, you could tell, and didn't know yet how lonely life can be when love dries up or blows away. Still, their naiveté makes her smile, which she so seldom does these days, and since the loss of her lover, they have been her only friends.

Lost in her thoughts of a life spent with apes, she does not hear the next visitor approaching, the soft fall of his footsteps or the faint smell of grass he brings with him. She is so distracted by the fascinating way they blink just like humans, that it's not until he clears his throat with an awkward "Ahem," that she even looks up from the glass.

"Hi," he says, trying to sound friendly but afraid that the catch in his throat makes him sound like he's been crying.

"Hello." The greeting is icy, as though he has interrupted something, and she barely looks him in the eye before turning back to the gorilla cage.

While trying to decide whether or not to speak again, Tom takes note of her peculiar appearance. She is young, that much is obvious, probably not more than seventeen or eighteen, but dresses like his grandmother. Her dress is a dusty pink with blue flowers, and her tiny frame swims in its folds. Her hair is curled and set in pins like a librarian, and she wears an oversized pair of pearls clipped onto her earlobes. She stands with her back as straight as if someone had placed a book on her head, and her shoulders are stiff with tension. She appears as though she might break if handled too much.

"So you must really like those monkeys, huh?" Again he is aware of the awkward pitch of his voice, and the forced way the words fall from his mouth. He is no good with girls.

Turning slowly to face him, there is a look of disgust in her eyes as she corrects him. "Apes. They're not monkeys, they're apes."

"Oh right, sorry! I should know that, biology," he says, trying to laugh off his

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mistake and pretending to slap himself on the head. "Yeah, apes! Definitely not monkeys."

His awkward display of humility is enough to make her soften, and with the slightest of smiles, she offers her hand and introduces herself.

"Annie," she says politely.

In that moment he realizes that he knows her. They went to high school together, though they probably never spoke. She kept to herself, much like him, and had dressed strangely then, too, though not quite like this. People said she and her sister were very sheltered and that their father wouldn't let them wear pants or cut their hair, some religious thing.

"Tom," he offers, then adds "we went to school together, right? I think I remember seeing you around." She blushes now, and shakes her head, but he persists. "Annie Starks, right? You and your sister were a grade apart—Jill?"

"Julia," she says quietly.

"Yeah, Julia. She was in some of my classes when she was a senior and I was a junior, I remember that now, in Calculus. She had a baby right? Don't you remember me?"

She shakes her head again, though she does remember him. He was the valedictorian, and in all those honor societies. She was never allowed in any clubs. She pretended not to know him, not for her sake but his. She had heard what happened when he went away to school. Everyone had.

"Well it's just as well you don't know me, but I do remember you. What are you doing here anyway? At the zoo all by yourself?"

"What are *you* doing here?" she asks softly, and he laughs. Taking her by the hand he sits down on the bench near the glass, and begins telling her about his dreams. He explains how they had happened, night after night, and how each time, it was a different animal trying to get at him.

"I've just been in such a strange place lately," he says. "So in my head, you know? And I thought maybe if I came here I would figure out what's going on up there. But stupid me, all I found out was that the zoo stinks a lot more than I remember from third grade."

He hopes this will make her laugh, as she seems so sad, yet just by being here, she is making him buoyant with energy. She merely shrugs her shoulders, and as she does, he remembers he heard her name recently, about something that had happened to her. Before he can remember what it was, she stands again.

"I came here because I talk to the apes," she says, almost to herself. "Not with words, but we can communicate other ways. They are so much like humans,

you know. Just look at their ears! Don't they look just like yours and mine? It's remarkable. . . ."

She trails off, wandering over to the adjacent wall where a solitary gorilla sits in its enclosure, its gaze unmoving. He follows her over, and reads the plaque on the wall beside the glass. The gorilla's name is Timmy, and he's a Western Silverback that had been living in the zoo for the last seven years. He is just about to make a comment about this when he catches her gaze in the reflection of the glass. Her eyes glisten with tears and he puts a hand on her shoulder, attempting to offer comfort.

"Stop," she says, stiffening, then moving away. "You don't understand them like I do, you're making fun." Her shoulders sag as she seems to collapse onto the bench, sinking under the weight of some sadness that he senses must run deep.

"Hey, no, no, no," he says softly, moving toward her cautiously. "I understand, they're great. I could probably spend all day here, too. It's quiet, and you know, peaceful." He sits down beside her and eases his arm around her slim shoulder. She doesn't move away.

"Then stay here, will you?" Tears catch in her throat as she looks up at him, and pleads, "just stay here with me until it's dark, okay, then you can go."

Pleasantly unsure of how he has ended up with this strange, beautiful girl in his arms, Tom's smile is genuine as he squeezes her shoulder and says, "Of course. Of course."

THOUGH SHE IS STILL UNSURE of Tom's intentions, his comfort has brought her back from the edge of sadness, for when she looks into Timmy's eyes, she sees the eyes of her lover reflected. Tom is no substitute of course, but he is kind, if ungainly, and she feels safe again. He tells her about school, how no one talked to him, how it wasn't like he thought it would be. She tells him about coming to the zoo with her father when she was a child, how he would buy her a balloon and warn her not to let it go. Disobedient Julia would always send hers soaring, but she held hers tight, knowing how special the gift was and how she would be punished if she let go. In the cool, dark gorilla house, they share secrets that make them vulnerable, because both are comforted by the other's strangeness. When Tom takes her face in his hands and kisses her, Annie does not pull away.

He suddenly realizes that the dreams have led him to this. He thought he was meant to escape the beasts somehow, but now he realizes he is supposed to fight them. There is something worth protecting that he has to fight for, and now he sees that this is Annie. Here is a sad, lonely girl, spending her days surrounded by

apes, and he can rescue her from solitude, rescue both of them. She has probably never been kissed, never told she was beautiful, and he can save her from herself, from the beasts she considers her only friends.

He kisses her again, with more force this time, and though she does not pull away, he senses her discomfort. He is reminded again of someone mentioning her recently, a friend, or a kind of a friend, saying they had heard something about her, but he still couldn't place it. Instead, he pulls back and looks her in the eyes.

"We can save each other, Annie. It's ok."

With these words he moves his hands to the buttons of her dress, and she looks away as he fumbles with each one. She is shy, he thinks, but he will be careful to make her feel safe. Once he slips her dress over her head, he lays her back on the bench, a hand beneath her head, the other itching to touch her. He has never done this before, but will pretend to know what he's doing if only to put her at ease. He moves his hands up and down her torso, is amazed at the smoothness of her breast. His breath quickens as he feels himself growing harder, and without hesitating any further, he pushes himself inside her.

As he thrusts himself clumsily into her, her mind goes back to the last time she was with her lover. The night had grown cold and he came into her room with a blanket. Wrapping her up in it, he kissed her forehead softly, and whispered in her ear.

"I built a fire in my bedroom. You should come stay warm with me."

She played hard to get at first, claiming fatigue, but eventually gave into his pleas. He was gentle with her that night, and held her tightly when they were done. If she had known it was to be their last night, she would have never let him go.

Now, with Tom grunting on top of her, she sees her lovers' face floating behind his. She sees the eyes of Timmy and Doc and the others, watching her. She is the spectacle now. And just beyond these sets of watchful eyes, she sees the red balloon, left behind by a careless child, who was no doubt at home in bed by now. Did her father tuck her in tight?

Tom grunts once more and comes. With a great sigh, he rolls off of her and sits on the floor. Sweat is beading on his brow, his cock bouncing uselessly as he takes staggering breaths.

"Oh, wow." He giggles now, giddy with contentment. It is not until he notices Annie, laying limp as a rag doll on the stone bench beside him with tears in her eyes, that he snaps back to life.

"Hey, hey—what's wrong? What's the matter?" He tries to touch her but she flinches at his hand. "Hey, it's ok, that was beautiful. Why are you crying?" She

looks away and mumbles something he can't understand.

Turning at the sound of these words, she stops crying and stares at Tom. All the gaiety has gone from his face and he now wears a look of genuine concern. She has to look away. Her eyes go to the ceiling, where the red balloon floats too close to the fluorescent light fixture. It will pop when it reaches it. She watches it bob for a while as Tom keeps grasping at her hands, trying to wipe away her tears.

Waiting for an answer, Tom looks Annie up and down for some sign of her distress. There is no blood, though someone had told him that happens sometimes. She is staring into space, and he looks up toward the ceiling too. Spotting the balloon, he suddenly remembers.

"Oh God, Annie, I heard about—oh God, I am so sorry. I only just remembered, and I am so sorry. Your dad—"

"Died," she says soberly, cutting him off. "Yes."

Her eyes never leave the balloon as it inches its way to the light, lingers for a moment there, and then pops with a deafening sound. The apes roar.

Abandoned

JUDE'S THUMB MOVED on autopilot to the band of gold around his left finger as he stood on the shore watching the sun cascade into the horizon. At the point where the sun and ocean met, it was hard to tell what was being reflected where. The ocean reminded him of a toddler's unauthorized finger painting after getting into an unlocked paint supply: smudges of orange mixed with smears of blue.

Jude's fist clinched as he filled with anger at the light breeze that cradled the back of his neck the same way she used to. The soothing sound of the ocean only served to remind him of the mural he'd painted around her room when she first got sick. The salt air put him in mind of the sweet smell of her skin when he'd nuzzle into her neck, making her giggle with glee.

Taking a deep breath, Jude steeled himself for the days to come. This was the first step towards moving on. This had to happen for them to progress and heal and he'd put it off for far too long. His resolve hardened, Jude reached down and lifted the dusty urn at his feet and found himself marveling at its lightness. *They cremated my baby and left nothing behind*, he thought.

With eyes watering from the salt air, spine stiff with resolve, and hands trembling from the chill of the twilight breeze, Jude lifted the lid and sifted his four-year-old daughter's ashes into the sea.

"Did you do it?" his wife asked, her bloodshot eyes staring at the empty expanse before her as he returned to the car.

"Yes," he said, his voice only breaking slightly. "I wish you'd have come with me."

"The sun's set. Let's go," she said.

DIEGO ORLANDINI

Angie

SITTING ON THE FLOOR, resting against the foot of her twin-size bed covered with a quilt of unicorns and rainbows, Angie was silent, looking at her mother yelling. Her dingy white dress covered her crossed legs—and the pair of scissors she was sitting on. Strands of Angie’s seven year-old virginal hair covered the wooden floor. “Angie, answer me!” she heard her mom say, but the whistling of the hotdog guy outside the window distracted her. The voices of the women at her mother’s salon on the lower floor also distracted her, taking her into a lenitive trance. The frenetic nasal congestion of the fortysomethings and the smoke-filled howls of the fiftysomethings could have easily passed as a lullaby.

Her mom, her sweet mom, with her French manicure, her three-inch heels, and her golden wavy hair covered with hairspray. Her mom, always insufferable. Her sweet mom, pure torment.

“Why did you do that?” she yelled again, snapping Angie back into the room. She was holding a piece of Angie’s hair like a valuable trophy now broken.

In the room, Barbie dolls everywhere and a vanity table her mother had installed. Taped in the mirror, a monochromatic picture pulled out of a magazine: Her mom, child pageant winner, circa 1972. Below that, a comb tangled with strands of hair.

Angie fixed her eyes on the comb and drifted out again. She thought about nighttime and her mom brushing her hair, the intoxicating smell of the hairspray getting closer and closer, and the strokes of the comb, over and over again. She thought about the burning sensation, thick layers of suffocating makeup. “Finally, you look decent.” She thought about the one time she tried to wash that paste off her face, but the paste wouldn’t give up.

“Respond to me child. I’m talking to you.”

Angie looked at her mother. Angie pulled the scissors out from underneath her legs. She ran her index finger through the blade. Angie’s blood began to drip on the dingy white dress. Angie would never become her mother. That was clear now.

NASTASSIA ALAYETO



"SO DO YOU THINK YOU could do this one today? I know you don't have a license still and all that bullshit, but I need the help. I figured you'd think she was a pretty new lady friend."

The rancid stench of Sailor Jerry's rum leaked from the pores of his uncle's body. The odor pervaded through the room, mixing with the harsh chemicals hiding the smell of decay. Smoke from his uncle's cigarette rode towards to the battered fan and tumbled in circles around them.

"Lady friend, lady friend," was echoed.

Fin looked over at that voice instead of his uncle's. His chapped lips parted as he eyed that damned parrot that repeated selective words said at some point around him. The black claws of the bird clung to the perch underneath him in the far corner of the room. It never flew around and it hardly ate. It only sat there bobbing its head, shifting its dark eyes this way and that.

Fin couldn't wait for the day the parrot would fall to its death in the middle of repeating something crude. He knew his uncle adored the bird; it was the only animal that remained alive in this building. Since the day he had arrived, Fin planned the creature's demise. Kicked out of college for plagiarism, it cost every last bit of dignity for Fin to come back to this place. He thought he had escaped this odd small town life. He was wrong. His uncle's *God Help the Dead Mortuary* was his last resort.

Fin's eyes were arid and moved aching in their sockets. No visible muscle spasms went through him as he stood next to his uncle. He didn't scratch, he didn't cough, he didn't speak. He was avoiding the corpse on the table in front of them. He knew her, not personally, but he had known *of* her. His body lacked sleep, sleep that he was never to reclaim once he left here.

His sight trailed down the light green tiles lining the walls. They were chipped, stained with all sorts of disasters. They had brown patches between them, some type of growth that he and his uncle ignored. The walls might have been rebelling against the chemicals in here, used to help the bodies reflect some form of life after death. Even dead they wanted to remain, to some extent—human.

His uncle continued to remind him of procedures for preparations of the body. Fin ignored him and looked back to the female in front of them.

Through his fantasies he had fallen in love with her. It disturbed him thinking of all the times in this room that he had imagined her warm caress, her voice,

her laugh. But now he would only see her cold and dead, voiceless requests that would go unheard, unfulfilled.

His eyes followed from her naval, to her flat stomach, to her discolored breasts, and he paused. The left was more prominent than the right. He gazed at her neck, where the cause of her death glared back at him. Jagged slits lined her throat, some nicking the jaw. The attacker made the slits obnoxious, a murder of rage, not a planned assault.

"... just make her look cute enough for grandma, not like the tramp she was alright?" his uncle slurred. Fin caught the end of his uncle's drunken monologue and nodded. In this state, he was lucky enough to stumble to his room, let alone perform on a corpse. Fin had seen the arrangements for a body many times before. He could do this alone.

He wanted to do this alone.

"Yeah," Fin whispered. Tiny cracked lines from his dry lips split opened. His tongue moved out to moisten his lips, tasting the small amount of blood.

His uncle lifted her chin and whistled.

"Boyfriend decided to play tic-tac-toe on that pretty little neck, didn't he?" He laughed.

Fin didn't laugh—it wasn't funny.

Both of them inspected her. The lines across her throat seemed to be dancing, crossing and crashing into each other in the process. She didn't have a big neck; there wasn't much room for drastic moves there.

"They got into some disagreement, guess he won." His uncle's glossy, beady eyes glanced at Fin then back to the wounds. "Told ya, this job is kind of like admiring someone's art, took a lot of creative thought to do that to her."

Fin shook his head, achieving some normal human gesture. His arms still lay motionless though, his long legs in the same spot on the dirty ground.

"It's not creative at all. He did it in a fit of rage. Creative would have been doing it two days after the fight, right after things were starting to look up for them."

His uncle huffed. "Sick son of a bitch."

"Son of a bitch," the parrot squeaked. He started to say it again when the phone upstairs shrilled through the house, cutting him off.

"Better not be that fat cunt Lisa calling again," his uncle mumbled under his breath. "I can smell her miles away," He looked back at Fin. "Just get started, I'll be back to check later." He burped and patted Fin on the back, shoving him forward.

On the way out, he flicked the hard purplish nipple of the body, grinning to his nephew. Fin glimpsed at his hairy back sleeked with sweat under his stained wife beater as he walked away. How the hell did he grow up here years ago? Nothing was clean. Nothing except . . .

Fin looked to the corpse again. Her hair was black, short and pixie-like, a Winona Ryder at best. It was dirty though, like she hadn't gotten a chance to wash it for days before her death. Fin wondered if it was stiff. He had always wondered that when he saw her in town, her eyes large and vacant underneath her choppy bangs. Reaching a pale, slender wrist out, he touched the top of her head, fingers lacing through the edgy pieces, not too stiff, just dirty right now.

He dragged the back of his hand down the side of her cheek. It was cold, not as cold as he had expected though. He felt that she didn't feel much different than when she had actually been living. There was a mole at the top of her chapped, blue lips. He pushed his index finger against the parting of her top and bottom, pushed inside her mouth, then pulled it out. Staring at his finger, he placed it to his own mouth and copied the movement done to her. He licked his lips, imagining what her chap stick might have tasted like.

Stroking her cheek again, his hand jumped over the intricately carved gash on her neck. He held onto her wrist for a second, looking on the insides at the dark holes and purple veins that decorated her arm. She was so delicate, so fragile. The track marks by her veins insulted her perfection. Fin placed a hand where her heart ceased to give life. His eyes then flickered across her breasts.

He bit his lip.

His fingers danced down to her stomach, he paused with his fingers near her belly bottom. He looked at her eyelids. Her lashes were thick, black and long. He had never gotten this close to her before. He wondered what she saw last, if she screamed, fought, if she just accepted and invited death right in.

He envisioned the scene playing out like a projection of rapid movie stills winding up on the tiled wall across him: She'd shout. He'd yell. She'd hit him. He'd push.

"YOU'RE A SELFISH WHORE!" There'd be dribble from his lips as he bellowed at her. He wouldn't wipe it away. He'd let it dry and cake on his face.

"You don't have the balls. Kill me. Do it, do it," she'd taunt.

He wouldn't do it. He wouldn't really do it.

The scene changed, fluttered faster, more danger. He'd have a knife, how'd he get that? Fin shouldn't have gotten up to go pee during that scene; he had missed

something important. What was he going to do with the knife? Her eyes widened even more from the Ketamine she had cooked up. Was he really going to do it this time?

He'd pace angrily, he'd pace and pace. He'd pace before he killed her and he'd pace afterwards. He wouldn't believe he actually did it.

Then the movie would end. Just end. Well, it'd end for Fin. He'd say it was cheesy, want his money back. For her though, she got to see the movie for free, got the VIP access. Even with closed eyes, she'd wince for her death, and every time she'd still die and think *fuck*, because there wasn't a damn thing she could do.

Turning his head, Fin slowly lowered his ear against her chest, imagining what her heart had sounded like. He wondered if the guy did this at any point. If he listened to her breathing, to the life that once filled her up. She had been with so many guys, Fin would never figure out which one finally murdered her.

She was undead a long time ago, borrowing that body only for a few more years of self destruction. She'd pay a high overdue bill. The owner of the body—her old self—wouldn't want it back. She'd say *keep it*; it was used and tainted beyond renovation now.

Fin licked his lips and squinted at the tools in the metal bin beside him. Raising his head, he placed his arm on the other side of the table so his upper body towered over her. She had to have been in her early twenties, around his age—young. He allowed his body all movement now, his breathing loud and shaky, his muscles twitching, his eyes flickering. He used every organ he could to admire her.

Closing his eyes, he leaned further down, imagining what it would feel like to kiss her. To be accepted by her.

He had imagined this the day he moved back into town and saw her. She was leaning against a corner, a wolf on the black shirt hanging off her pale shoulder. Fin had thought she was a hooker maybe, but she wasn't, she was just one of the living dead, like him. Trapped within a body, using it for their own ill use, till they finally gave up. She had become his obsession really. His uncle had no clue.

Fin stayed where he was, mouth above mouth as if he could breathe life into her again. As if he could show her that he too didn't really like living, but taunting someone to kill you wasn't the way to go out. There were so many more options, so many routes that he could have revealed to her.

"Perv. Perv.," was screeched near him.

Fin jerked back against the metal stool, crashing into it as he hit the floor. A low buzzing echoed in his ear. His eyes darted, afraid that someone had seen what

he was about to do. As if he was some type of sicko or something. He glared up at the parrot. The parrot, who just kept bopping its head, its claws moving on the stand.

"Pervert. Fin's a pervert."

"Fuck you," Fin hissed back at the bird. Rubbing his hands against his jeans, he pulled himself up and steadied the metal stool. He glared at the parrot.

He wasn't going to let that bird distract him, not this time, not with her here, he had waited too long for this. Carefully, Fin snuck his arms underneath her bare body and cradled her. He inhaled the musk smell of formaldehyde seeping from her body. He imagined it to be a sweet apple cinnamon instead. He had always imagined her to smell that way.

Placing a tender kiss to her forehead, he eased their bodies to the cold tile, not as smooth and romantic as he had wanted it to be. Her head hit the floor roughly; his elbow scratched the corner of the table, fumbling lovers, caught within their first attempt at making love.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered. He hated to believe that she had wasted such beauty on such scum-of-the-earth men. He could have taught her real love. He could show her now. He wouldn't let a small thing like death separate them. He didn't even see the knife carvings on her neck, he didn't see her pale blue skin, he didn't smell her reek of death, he didn't notice how unresponsive she was, he didn't see any of that.

Lying along her, his leg between hers, his palm against her face, he only saw her for the exquisiteness she was capable of. He saw her skin alight, this eternal glow, the curves of her body, she fit perfectly against him. He studied the rhino-shaped birthmark above her left hipbone. He kissed the scar on her right shin, carefully, gently. He would woo her like she deserved. Stroking his cheek against hers, he imagined her cupping his own cheek, whispering in his hair.

"Thank you, thank you for showing me what it's like," she'd murmur.

Fin rested his head on her small chest. He laced his fingers within hers.

"You're welcome," he said back. He raised his shirt over his head, his skin as pale as hers. He pressed himself back down on her, feeling the refreshing touch of skin against skin.

He kissed her upturned nose, he kissed along her high cheekbones, he rubbed his face and hair against hers like a cat. He wanted to be a part of her body.

"Tell me everything, Fin," she'd said against his ear. She'd hold his head in her small palm. She'd squeeze her fingers with his fingers, she'd wrap her leg around the back of his leg, and she'd urge him to continue what he had started.

And Fin would continue.

AKIN RITCHIE
"The Secret"



TYLER JACKSON

Wasted on the Young

IT WAS THE FIRST DAY of my last semester at Rowland and as I hovered over the toilet in the men's room, sick with the anticipation, all I could think is that soon all of the parties and the sex and the drugs, all of it was going to be over soon and I was going to join some shitty place called the real world. It was like all the excitement of my life had bottlenecked into this last semester and everything after was just going to seem boring. Because I, and everyone else I knew, had grown up too quickly and was already bored, I couldn't imagine that anything outside my liberal arts country club would be worth writing home about.

Isn't it funny how college has become the epicenter of the young person's life? But to be completely honest, if you asked me what my major was at a party, I would tell you that I forgot (probably because for the most part, I had). I dabbled in a little bit of everything and spent most of college undeclared. For a while I thought that was a major, Undeclared, but as it turns out, there's no course credit for playing Holden Caulfield. I talked to my academic adviser about it, and he asked me what I was good at. I wanted to tell him that I was the S-D-D in my group of friends (the safest drunk driver). Or that I could roll him a joint more perfect-looking than a tootsie pop stick, but I instead I just zoned out on a picture of Dorian columns in his office that afternoon and by the time he got my attention again, I forgot the question.

But one of the things I hadn't forgotten, besides the fact that heroin really makes for an awful hangover, is the day I met Graham Marchmain.

I YANKED OPEN THE DOOR to the men's room and went straight to the first stall to yak my brains out, and there he was. He wasn't doing any business on the pot or anything like that, just sitting all lackadaisical on a closed toilet seat, doodling away on the walls to the stall. It was my first day of freshmen year, and I was hung over from celebrating the escape of my parent's suburban shithole with my new roommates and Jaeger all night. I remembered thinking he wasn't real, looking at me with his Ray Bans still on and acting like he was working on the Sistine-fucking-Chapel. He had a different color Sharpie in each hand and one dangling from his mouth. A thick chunk of blonde bangs hung in his face. He stared at me as I cupped my hand over my mouth, going wide eyed with panic and then pointed frantically at the stall next door. I dove into the stall and a river

of vomit ejected out of my mouth. It was mostly liquid, with only little bits of what looked like Cheetos. Puke splashed into the water of the toilet and onto the edges of the seat. When I emerged, still pale in the face, I joined him at the sink and we both washed our hands in silence. He grabbed a handful of paper towels and dried his hands while I hovered over the sink, splashing cold water onto the back of my neck.

"So," he said, the paper towels crunching in his hand.

I looked up at him and he slid his glasses down the brim of his nose and exposed a set of brown and bloodshot eyes.

"Do you party?"

We exchanged numbers on the spot and the rest is, as they say, history.

"Tight. I'll hit you up this weekend. There's a party off campus. I'll text you."

I nodded at him and went back to splashing handfuls of water onto my face.

"Hang in there, man. It's only the first day."

He walked out of the bathroom and pushed on the door to the stall he had been scribbling in. The door swung back and forth on the hinge and the bleachy smell of Sharpie markers wafted around in the bathroom. *What had he been working on in there?* I dabbed my face dry and walked toward the stall Graham had been in. I caught the door as it swung out and saw the little encouragement Graham had left for me and everyone else on the first day of fall:

Everything will be okay.

AND YOU THINK after twenty two years of bullshit I would have been over it, over the allure of my delusional Bret Easton Ellis way of life, but to be completely honest with you, I wasn't. Not even after another sleepwalking semester of snorting coke and sucking cock. Not even the fact that the only thing I had to show for it was being locked in for an extra term at school and it delayed my summer plans. I wasn't over it because even though it was the first day of an extra semester there was a party at Booth's house tonight and the last time I went there we had an orgy. Graham was there too.

I looked at my watch. I was already ten minutes late for the class I was supposed to be in. *If you're gonna go in late, better to go in high*, I thought to myself. I pulled the little bit of dope I had picked up from Cut out of my pocket. My keys jangled as I produced them from my pocket. I dug the key to my campus mailbox into the bag and took a bump from the bag and pocketed it. I went back to the sink and washed my hands and by the time I was done I decided to skip. *It's only the first day*. I texted Graham, but figured he was probably in class. I walked

out of the Rockefeller building and I thought about plopping down on the quad and waiting for him to call me back, but didn't feel like explaining myself if the Prof. walked by. So I walked down Park and stopped where all the old people and kids feed the pigeons and sat on a bench for a while.

So has anyone ever told you what it's like when you're on heroin?

It's like holding your hand down on a record. Just a slow and muffled noise, barely above a whisper, that's what it sounds like when people are talking and you pass by them at the coffee shops on the corner. It's like taking a platter of tequila shots and then diving head first into a hot tub. This feeling, like your whole body is having an orgasm, just rushes over you and any kind of guilt or confusion just slips away.

I cradled my head in my hands and felt my eyes rolling around in their sockets like gumballs in a machine. I was peaking and trying not to let the spit bubble up in my mouth for the whole park to see. I took my hands out of my hair and looked around me. I always find it's good to pick something specific on when you're really fucked up. When you've done so much dope your heart beats like a hummingbird's and you just want to collapse. I tried to focus on the fountain, but the water droplets looked too trippy. I closed my eyes and a breeze drifted through the park, just enough to mist the water from the fountain onto me. I thought about home and watching the sun go down on the surf of the pacific and how I couldn't remember my address anymore. I thought about driving down the PCH, mainlining China White while someone held the wheel with one hand and a candle to cook up with the other, drifting slowly across four open lanes that went straight into the sunset.

My phone vibrated in my pocket and brought me back to reality.

I still had my eyes closed when I groped through my pocket for my phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey, dude," it was Graham. "No call, no show to class, huh?"

"What?"

"Thinking Big in the 21st century, remember? We're in that at two o'clock.

Well, I guess I should say I'm in it. Where were you?"

"Mannnn," I sighed into the phone, "I am just . . . chillin." I opened my eyes and realized I had sunk pretty far down on the park bench. My body was practically parallel to the ground and I had my feet so far out that you would have had to step over them or go around the bench if you were walking on the sidewalk. A little group of kids, two boys and two girls, came rushing up behind me and toward to the fountain. All of them were gasping for air when they braced them-

selves for impact against the base of it. They circled around it and stared into the water that was filled with coins. Some of their faces were blurred behind the water as it cascaded from the porcelain fountain and into the reservoir.

"Dude?"

"What?" I scooted up on the bench and one of the kids looked over at me.
"What?"

"I assume you're done for the day?"

One of the boys stuck his hand into the water of the fountain. He leaned as far over the side as he could and stuck his tongue out as he probed the bottom for pennies or even better: quarters. The other boy laughed and egged him on.

"Yeah, totally, totally. Still going to Booth's party tonight, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I can give you a ride and stop saying totally."

The boy pulled out a small fist of change and both of the girls said his name *Marshall* at the same time.

"Put it back," one of them said.

"Yeah, put it back."

The other boy just frenzied on Marshall and asked him to show him the coins and the girls stomped their way over to him and demanded he put it back.

"You're taking people's wishes."

"Yeah, you're taking people's wishes."

He snatched his hand away from them and put it behind his back.

"Nuh-uh. Finders keepers." He grinned at them and darted off towards the other end of the Park. His friend bounded after him.

"Dude!" the ear piece in my phone crackled.

"Sorry, sorry," I said, rubbing my eyes.

"Lock it up, man. How stoned are you?"

"Why don't you pick me up and find out?"

"No can do, bro. I have another class at 6."

"You're killin' me."

"Meet me at my place around nine. I want to show you something."

"What is it? Can you get ahold of Cut so that I can re-up?" I dug into my pocket and touched the plastic of the baggy. Just to make sure it was still there. I didn't want to run out before I saw Graham.

"Relax, man, relax, you'll kill your buzz. No need to worry about that, everything will be o—"

"You're totally killing my buzz, *man*. Just tell me what it is."

"You'll see when you get there. And stop saying totally."

He hung up the phone and the two little girls wandered toward the other side of the park, where the boys had gone. The one that had been crying before had her arm around her friend and they walked that way until I couldn't see them anymore.

I wondered if you could really steal people's wishes. Like if you could just reach into that endless ocean of wants and desires and take whatever you wanted. And I thought about how those kids really believed that you could, as if it were as easy as putting on someone else's clothes. But I guess in some ways it is. Half the time I'm living my life like a character in the books I read. I thought about running up to them with handfuls of change and coming back to the well and sitting with them until they fixed all the things that had gotten so fucked up. And making them believe, like, really believe when I told them, "Everything will be okay."

But I didn't believe it either.

I GOT TO GRAHAM'S ON TIME, but he refused to show me what he was talking about earlier.

"When we get there," he said. A joint dangled from his lips.

So we drove to Booth's house and hot-boxed Graham's Beamer on the way. I flipped through the radio presets a few times and couldn't find anything I liked and stopped on a song off "The Wall" that I couldn't remember the name to. Booth lived on the lake on the shore opposite of Rowland. The car skipped over the uneven brick roads and I stopped at a four way stop to crack the windows because I couldn't see out of the windshield.

"I hate this neighborhood. There's fucking palm fronds growing over every street sign."

"I think you turn here," I said.

"Are you sure? It says no outlet."

"Yeah, it's in that cul-de-sac."

I dashed out the rest of the joint into an empty Altoid can and tucked it back into the middle console. We got out of the car and Graham followed behind me. It wasn't late enough to be in full swing, but there were already a few cars lining the street with Rowland parking decals on them so I figured there had to be a few people that we'd know in case we couldn't find Booth. I traced my finger over the dust of a random sedan as we neared the house.

"Why do I feel like I've never been here before?"

"Probably because I end up driving home every time," I said.

I looked over my shoulder and he grinned behind a cigarette.

Graham closed the door behind him and plopped down on the mattress next to me. Booth's hair was shorter than I remembered. He sat in the double armed chair by his desk and rolled up the sleeves of his oxford.

"So, I told you both I had something to show you."

I licked my lips with anticipation. I was hoping it was going to be like the best dope ever, like, ever. Booth had his legs crossed and bounced his propped foot up and down. His loose topsider slapped against his heel.

"I just picked this up today," he said, reaching into his blazer. He pulled out a baggy that had three rocks of stuff that looked like Martian rock. Orange crystals speckled the walls of the bag.

"What is that?" Booth said.

"This, my friends, is 51."

"What is that?" I said.

"It's everything."

"*Everything*," Booth and I repeated, mystified.

"This is from Cut's personal stash. He hooked this up for me on a favor. There isn't even a street value on this. This is everything he's diced up on the table for the past 6 months."

My mouth was already salivating. Normally my mouth doesn't even start doing that until someone gets out the belt out or lights the first candle. This was six months of every different kind of dope you could imagine: Belushi, Goofball, Dynamite, Cheese, China White, it was like the SPAM of a dealer's dope. Everything he had left over mashed together.

"Well, do you wanna get high or sit here and drool?"

Booth dug around in his desk and pulled out a candle. I took off my belt.

"I don't have a spoon in here."

"Don't worry about it," Graham said, "I got that taken care of." Graham pulled out a spoon that he had been using for months. It was pure silver he said. He snagged it from his Grandmother's china cabinet and we used it to cook up all the time last semester. "I love the ritual."

Booth lit the candle and placed it on his desk. "Who's first?"

"It's your house, dude."

Booth bobbed his head up and down, enthusiastically.

I handed my belt to him and he slipped it around his left arm. Graham dipped his forefinger into one of the solo cups he brought with him into the room. Water dribbled from his fingertips and plopped into his grandmother's spoon. He held the silverware over the candle and the 51 started to sizzle. With the spoon

hovering over the flame, he dug into his blazer and pulled out a pre-packaged syringe. He tore the package open with his teeth. He placed syringe on the desk next to Booth and handed him the basing spoon. Booth took the syringe out of the packaging and pulled back the plunger. With the syringe, he slurped up the 51.

Then someone knocked on the door. Booth stopped tapping the cartridge of the syringe for bubbles and looked at both of us.

"Don't worry, I'll deal with it," I said.

"Are you ready for this shit?" Graham said to Booth.

I walked towards the door and gripped the doorknob. There wasn't a lock, but I braced my foot near the base of the door.

"Who is it?"

"It's Brian."

"Shit," Booth said.

I turned and looked over at him and the needle hung from his saggy flesh. It was empty and he had mainlined the 51. His eyes were already getting heavy. "It's my brother."

"Booth, open the door."

"Dude, go away. We're busy."

"Open the door or I'm going to tell Mom you had people over."

"You teeny boppin' fuck—"

"I'm serious—"

"Just open the door, man," Booth sighed.

"Are you serious?" I turned and looked at him. His eyelids fluttered and I could tell he was climbing, fast.

"Just open the door," Graham repeated.

I opened the door and Brian walked in. He only came up to my chest and his blonde hair bobbed up and down as he passed me and plopped down on the bed next to Graham. Booth put a cigarette between his lips and flicked his lighter over and over again. He flicked it probably ten times and just stared at it before he finally lit the cigarette. I closed the door and slid down to the ground, bracing it with my body weight.

"What the fuck do you want?" Booth slouched back in his double arm chair.

"Why do I have to stay in my room? It's not like I haven't been to a party before."

"Oh, yeah? Is that right?"

"Yeah," his brother said, and plucked the cigarette out of his lips. "Nicky Medina had a party with coke at it."

"Is that right? So you're a big man now? Did you graduate from jacking off too?"

"I've been with girls. When was the last time you queers got any?"

"Booth—"

"Fuck it. Let him stay." Smoke drifted out of his nostrils.

"Yeah," his brother said. He took a drag of the cigarette he bogeyed. He looked at his brother's arm and then around at all of us and then back at the empty needle.

"What are you guys doing?"

"This ain't Nicky Medina's party," Graham smirked. He tapped the edge of the baggy and one of the rocks tumbled into the spoon. He held it over the candle and started to base the next hit. Booth was rotating his head around in circles, you know, like the stretches they make you do in gym class as a kid.

"You'll find out when you grow up," said Booth.

"Yeah, well, I'm old enough to know about this." Brian pulled a joint from under his mop-top that he had tucked behind his ear. He showed it to all of us with his arm stretched out, like it was show and tell and we had never seen one before.

"Where did you get that?"

He yanked it back, "Hey, not so fast. Finders keepers, it's my house and I found it."

Graham chuckled at him tapped out a vein on his arm. He took out one of the prepackaged syringes from inside of his blazer with his free hand.

"See man?" Booth sighed, "My brother's cool, mannn." Booth scrubbed his hand over his brother's hair, leaving it disheveled. He held out his lighter and flicked it a few times before he got a light and his brother leaned in with the joint he found. He took big drags in the beginning and inhaled a lot of burnt paper and started coughing.

"Hmph," Graham chuckled. He shot up and then he sighed a long breath of air, like one you'd make if you were about to come, and fell back onto the mattress. He laid with his hands crossed at the chest. The empty syringe pointed upwards at the ceiling. With his eyes still closed, he reached his hand up towards Booth's brother, in what seemed like slow-motion and snapped his fingers at him.

"Don't Bogart it."

Brian took another drag of the joint and coughed again, but not as hard and passed it on.

"Want some, bro?" He held it out to his brother. Booth took it from him and toked on it.

"Help yourself, dude" Graham said.

TYLER JACKSON

I pushed myself up from the carpet and walked over to the desk. I just wanted to hurry up and shoot up and get out of the room. Brian hovered over my shoulder and I wanted to scream at him to leave. But the needle's calling is stronger than your conscience. It always is. That's why you lie to the people you love and steal from them and show up begging on the door step one night, only to disappear in the morning. I knew that any kind of guilt I felt would be dissolving away in moments.

I tapped out the last of the 51 into Grandma Marchmain's antique spoon and began the basing process. Brian shifted around on the bed and leaned over Graham to watch more intently. I took the plastic tip off of the syringe Graham left out for me and smacked my arm.

"What's that like?" his brother said.

I didn't look at him. I didn't want to. I just wanted to get high and get the fuck out.

"I tell you what—" Booth said. He leaned over and took the empty bag from the desk.

I pulled back the plunger and flicked my middle finger against it rapidly. Booth reached into his pocket and produced his car keys. He rubbed the walls of the plastic baggy together and powder gathered into one of the corners. I started to sweat. Booth stuck one of his keys into the bag and scooped the last bit of the dope onto the tip of the key. He held it out to his brother and I stared at both of them with the syringe in my hand.

"Why don't you find out?"

"Booth, don't," I said.

Graham leaned up on the bed and smiled at Brian behind his half opened eyes. "Yeah, you're hanging with the big dogs now."

He glanced back and forth at both of them. I had the needle close to my arm and tried to steady my hand. Brian took the keys from his brother and closed his left nostril with his thumb. He took a deep, nervous breath out. Sweat dripped down my forehead and I held my thumb on the plunger of the syringe.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" one of them said.

And then I pushed.

WHEN I CAME TO, we were outside underneath the stars and the moon. I heard the sound of water trickling back and forth. I figured we were probably in Booth's backyard. They must have carried me because I don't remember walking, but I also don't remember collapsing in Booth's room and smacking my face against the

corner of his desk. I touched my lips and could feel dried blood caked into the scruff on my face.

"Dude, are you okay?" Graham was squatted next to the chaise lounge I was splayed across. Booth's brother was farther up the dock and dangling his legs off. My eyelids were heavy and it was hard to keep them open. I could feel my heart beating, more like galloping, inside of my chest. The blood vessels underneath my armpits and in my stomach burned every time blood would pump in, then out. That was when I knew I took too much.

"You took too much. Fuck, you're not overdosing on me are you?" Graham shook me by the shoulders. He pushed back his blonde bangs and held his hands behind his head. He bit down on an unlit cigarette he had in the corner of his mouth.

"I don't think so," I sighed. I closed my eyes and when I opened them again, I had been moved again. I was propped up at the back against one of the beams on the dock.

Brian was bent over on all fours next to me and puking off the dock and into the water. Yellow gobs of beer and bile splattered onto the lily pads. The little bits of puke that drifted around in the water vanished into the mouths of the stupid fish that ate them.

Graham and Booth were behind me and I could hear them arguing back and forth with each other. Brian groaned and tried to spit out the acids still in his mouth.

"Do what you want, he's your brother," I heard Graham say. "But I'm taking him to fucking hospital."

"Not in my car, you're not. I'm not going to have two whacked out dopers driving around in my fucking car. They're fine, they're both fine."

Isn't it funny when something you love bites you back?

You never think it will happen to you. Shit, it only happens to those losers and dick-sucking junkies that you pass in the alleys of downtown. The worst you've ever had it is where you'd wake up the morning after and your chest hurts a little and you smoke a pack of cigarettes and think to yourself, "I shouldn't do that again." But you always do it again. You do it again because you think you keep your shit together better than everyone else. Better than the kids older than you, who think they're smarter than you. You convince yourself of this by only buying primo shit. You insure it by only using clean needles. And you don't just let some moron mainline it for ya. You tap out the bubbles, because you know heroin is safe, it's just the fucking idiots who shoot up wrong. But when it finally happens,

when you finally go over the edge, all your experience and ego, it all goes down the fucking tubes. You panic. You panic the same way you do when everyone's hitting the brakes in front of you in the traffic lane or when the neighborhood dog you've shooed home for years is tearing off the face of your toddler. You never thought it would happen to you.

I heard the feet stomping down the dock and Booth stopped beside his brother and ran his hand over his back.

"You're alright, bro, you're alright."

"Why is it so hard to swallow?" Brian whined.

"It's just the drip," Graham said. He knelt down beside me. I tried to smile at him, but I must have looked retarded or something because he laughed at me.

"I feel cold."

"Okay, dude, well I'm gonna take you to the hospital. We're just gonna say . . . we'll tell them that—"

"Can I have a cigarette?" I said.

"Fuckin' lightweights," Booth hissed.

"Booth! Shut the fuck up!" Graham shouted at him over his shoulder. Graham looked back at me and dug around in his jacket for his cigarettes. Brian sat down and draped his legs over the side of the dock again. He wiped his hand across his mouth and let out a moan of relief.

"Are you done or what?" Booth said to his brother.

"I—" Brian took a deep breath of air, "I dunno."

"Fuck this. I'm going inside. You guys are killing my fucking high."

Graham slid a cigarette out of his pack and put it to his mouth. After he had it lit, he plucked it from his lips and stuck it between mine.

"Alright, dude, I'm gonna go get my car and pull it into the driveway, okay?"

"I don't think I can walk." I couldn't even lift my arm to ash the cigarette.

"I'm gonna carry you, but you owe me okay?" his voice shook when he talked. This was the first time I ever heard him nervous in the four years I had known him.

"Graham, am I okay?" I said.

He looked at me for a long time without saying anything and then stood up.

"I'm going to get the car. Brian?" He walked over to Brian and lightly shook him by the shoulder. "Can you watch him? Can you just watch him for me? Can you make sure he keeps his eyes open?"

"Yeah, yeah, just lemme be for a second," he groaned and put his hand back on his stomach.

"I'll be right back." Graham turned and left. His oxfords knocked against the boards of the dock. He went back towards the house and cut through the inside. The sliding glass door got left open behind him and I could hear the chorus to "Time to Pretend" playing inside. Brian picked out acorns that had fallen between the boards of the dock and tossed them into the water, but they didn't sink. Not even the fish ate them.

"He hates me you know."

"Who?"

"My brother."

"No, he doesn't hate you. He's just . . . he's just high."

"No," he sighed. "He treats me like this all the time."

"Like you're puking?" I blinked hard. I couldn't remember what we were talking about anymore. What were we talking about?

"Like his life would be better without me." He plopped another acorn into the water. "I wish I could change his mind and show him that I could be a cool brother if he'd just give me a chance."

I wanted to tell him that his brother really loved him or something like that, but I barely knew the kid. I mean, I barely even knew his brother and I had an orgy with the guy.

"He'll come around."

"But what if he doesn't? What if you're wrong and he doesn't change at all?"

"Brian—" I paused. I couldn't think of anything to say to make him feel any better. I mean, I could barely think of anything to say to myself to keep going, to stay awake. I wanted to tell him the same thing I wanted to tell those girls at the park today, that the world wasn't full of Marshalls and people like me. I wanted to tell him there was no such thing as "Finders Keepers." And there weren't really people out there who could warp all your wishful thinking into their own personal fetishes. That there weren't people out there living lives of make believe, like fucking characters out of a book they once read or a movie they once watched. But I would have lied to him. Just like how I would have lied to you earlier, about being sick of spending my nights like this. Not overdosing, but you know what I mean: blowing lines, blowing through stop signs, living life at the speed of a Ramones song and pretending not to mind. Because the real addiction, the parties and the sex and the drugs, it never goes away, but it never really lets you down either. It was always everything you came to expect. It wouldn't disappoint you like some coins lost at the wishing well. A life like this didn't take a fistful of change or positive thinking to get something you wanted. In fact, the less of

TYLER JACKSON

that you brought with you the better, it made letting go of everything else easier. And after a while, it became the only thing that made sense. Because it didn't matter if it was original; that needle was real and so was the feeling and every brat-pack cliché dissolved away when you stuck it into your arm, didn't it? You don't think about all of that during the high times. About all the other places you could be instead and all the other things you could be doing with your life. You don't think about that until the wax melts and you're falling too fast for anyone to catch you. And even then, you convince yourself that just before you hit the ground you're going to wake up.

"Don't worry. Everything will be okay," I said.

He looked at me for a long time and then back at the water where his acorns floated on the surface. I felt myself starting to fade again.

"I don't think I believe you."

ADRIAN ALEXANDER

Word from the Wise

"PERHAPS IF YOU got to know me better, you'd see I care too," the doctor responded, scribbling notes on his pad.

"Perhaps I don't want to know you. Perhaps I'm only here because they think I should be, because they think it'll help," Jeremy said from his place in the overstuffed armchair. For a moment, Jeremy fidgeted in his seat trying to remember the way real men crossed their legs so as not to appear feminine. Finally, he settled on placing his ankle on his knee and hoped his confusion didn't show.

"Well, grown ups might not be perfect . . ."

"No shit," he offered in a whisper.

". . . but their thoughts and opinions do tend to carry a level of weight. They do have life experiences that make them wise, so what seems to be the problem that's led you here?"

Jeremy hesitated in his response as his eyes were drawn to the rainbow HATE FREE ZONE sticker on the door. "You wouldn't understand," he sighed. Feeling uncomfortably certain he'd made the wrong choice in his posture, he stood and made his way to the room's only window.

"Why not?"

"Grown ups never do," he offered in a whisper. Staring out into traffic, Jeremy kept his back to the doctor in an attempt to preserve what little power he felt he had left.

"Oh, I'm sure we understand better than you think."

"Which is exactly the problem," he exclaimed, turning to face his accuser. "You think you have it all figured out; you think you know so much. You all think you know exactly what I'm going through and you've been here and done this before, but you haven't. You've never had . . ." Flushed and breathing heavy, Jeremy allowed his thought to go unfinished. "You raised by both parents? Mother and father who loved you?"

"Yes."

With a grin on his face and a chuckle, Jeremy walked to the door. "Then what the hell makes you think you can help me?"

MELANIE WEITZNER



Final Presentation

DAVID REACHED DOWN and thumbed the small piece of plastic that lay in his pocket. The small piece of plastic moved slightly, containing 25 percent of his grade somewhere in its maze of chips and tiny wires.

His feet were bricks and his eyelids were heavy as he climbed the final stair to the third floor of the building. It was now just a short trek down the hallway and he would be in the room. He had reached the point of no return. He was now mentally bound to give this presentation today. He was prepared but the information kept fleeing from his tired mind. Little facts and tidbits would run into the foreground of his brain before disappearing into his all-nighter induced haze. With each fact came the memory of a slide, not in any particular order, they were just appearing. His fingers remembered typing dates and names.

He was passing the bathrooms now. He pulled out his phone and saw he was early. This was rare—it was a side-effect of the all-nighter, no sleep, no reason to be late for that first class. He ducked into men's room and stared at the mirror. The dark circles under his bloodshot eyes hinted that he had enjoyed himself far more than he actually had the previous night. He had lost some color and his lack of sleep only added to his now almost ghostly complexion.

David turned on the faucet and let the cold water fill up and overflow the small cup his hands had formed. He plunged his face into the cold liquid feeling the sting of its temperature engulf his face. He blinked a few times, took a deep breath and looked at his dripping face in the mirror. Water collected on his eyebrows and on the pathetic excuse for a beard that adorned his cheeks and chin. He had meant to shave before class but had not had a chance to go back to his apartment. Drops of water fell off the tip of his nose and the bottom of his chin back into sink.

He grabbed a paper towel and wiped his face. The harsh edges of the paper poked his face, reluctant to contour to the curves of his nose and cheek bones. He looked at the mirror. He now appeared as a slightly damp ghost. He exhaled and left the bathroom to continue toward the classroom.

Outside the bathroom David stopped and took a sip of warm water from the water fountain. At this point he was just stalling, looking for anything to keep him out of that classroom. The doors were close now. He could see them, slightly

SPENCER MILLS

ajar, as if they were inviting him in only to slam behind him trapping them in there. Trapping him with his subpar presentation and mediocre grade.

David walked down the hallway, past other empty and filling classrooms. His view continued to stray to find anything that could get him out of his predicament. He considered finding someplace to say he slipped and broke his leg. Not only would he not have to do his presentation but he could sue and be set for life. These fantasies played with his tired mind. He knew none of this would happen but in his desperation he feared he had forgotten all his information.

He arrived at his class. David took a deep breath to try to compose himself before entering. He tried to remember everything during that one breath. He thought about everything he had read, everything he had written and everything he had practiced for this presentation. He pushed the door open and walked into meet his fate.

The room was fairly empty still as he entered and took his normal seat in the far back corner. As far from the professor's desk as one could be. This made it easier to sleep. As he sat down, the weight on his eyelids grew and he shut his eyes burying his head in his hands. He knew he could not fall asleep, but he wanted to so bad.

Only one other person had made it to class as early as he had. A girl sat on the other side of the room, opposite David. As close to the teacher as possible. Her obscenely organized notebook already lay open and a pen sat centered in the first blank sheet notebook paper. David had never bothered to learn her name. She was too far away to copy from, and beyond that he saw little value in her.

People started to trickle in one by one. Some were tired, but none to his extent, others appeared to be in good spirits. There was the customary person who stumbled through the doors in the delicate state between still being drunk and being hung-over. The desks were filling up and the clock began to get dangerously close to 9:30. David hoped against hope that the professor would not show up, that something had gone wrong, traffic, family emergency, anything to get him out of the assignment. At 9:29, Dr. Griffith walked in and shot a smile to the girl in the front row.

He wore his brown suit and matching slacks, the top button was undone on his white shirt. He didn't wear a tie. His extraordinarily thin frame made him appear very young, almost as though he was an overdressed student. However, his glasses made him look older than he really was. They sat on the pinnacle of his very long nose. He pulled out a piece of paper and started calling names.

"Anderson," he said, looking down his nose at the room.

He continued through the alphabetical list. "Turner," he said, and David raised his hand. "And, you'll be giving our first presentation today, correct?"

"Yep," David replied. He hated it when people asked questions they knew the answer to. Griffith did that all the time. He was also the kind of professor that would sit there and not go forward in class until someone answered his question. David could not stand that either. There had been times where Griffith would pose the class a question and it would remain silent for minutes. David always wanted to just get up and leave when that happened. There was just too much tension. However, Dr. Griffith seemed to thrive on the students' despair. He liked to watch the ones that cared about the answer try to look it up. He stared into the eyes of those students not as motivated trying to find out what was at the core of their nonchalantness.

David hated Griffith really. That was part of the reason he had put off doing that presentation until the very last possible seconds. Griffith just symbolized everything David hated in a teacher. His *I'm right and you're wrong* attitude annoyed David to no end. He felt Griffith was far too confident in his own knowledge. David just wanted to smack those glasses off his face every time he walked by him to leave the classroom. God, how good that would feel.

Griffith finished roll, "Wilson?" A hand rose in front of David in response.

"Ok, so we have a couple more presentations to get to today," the professor said, locking his fingers together and grinning malevolently. "David, I believe you are going to be starting us off today."

David rose from his seat in the back of the room. The combination of standing up too quickly and lack of sleep made him all of a sudden very light headed. He put his hand on his desk and acted like he had to dig for something in his backpack. David took a few awkward steps between desks and chairs to reach the aisle that led to the front of the room. As he walked, Dr. Griffith's eyes met his. David pictured the television mounted above the professor head falling, knocking his professor unconscious. A little trail of blood trickling out from under what now looked like a fallen television with legs. David would not call an ambulance; he would leave that to the girl in the front row. He would just keep walking right out the door to his freedom.

He was shaken from his daydream as he almost tripped over a backpack that had fallen into his path. He caught himself, fairly gracefully, he believed. He did not think anyone had noticed the near fall.

He looked again at his nemesis. Griffith was now walking towards him, probably going to find a place to sit and watch his torture mechanism, which was this

presentation. He had a small smirk on his face. Again, David pictured himself throwing a haymaker directly to the jaw of the unsuspecting professor. He would drop, lip busted open. It was so tempting.

“Good luck,” Dr. Griffith said, with a smile, as they passed.

David had never heard more fake words nor seen a more fake smile in his life. His long nose turned upward when he smiled. And his thin lips became almost invisible when they turned upward. His mouth opened just enough for David to get a look at two rows of ridiculously oversized teeth. David returned the smile with a quick head nod and a smile that he was sure looked just as, if not more phony than the one that had just been sent in his direction. He tried to catch a glimpse of the grade sheet in Griffith’s hand to see if it had already been marked with an *F* or if he was going to wait until the presentation actually started.

A couple more steps with his increasingly heavy feet and David had reached the head of the room. His hand dove into the pockets of his old shorts to find the flash drive that he had been messing around with on his trip to the room. David did not feel anything. Panic ran through him. There was no way he had lost the drive in the few short minutes since he had last felt the cold plastic.

“Is everything alright?” Griffith asked with a look in his eye that made David think he wanted the answer to be no.

“Yeah, everything’s fine.” David reached farther into his pocket. Then he felt it, hidden amongst his cell phone and his keys, temporarily lost in the confusion was the small piece of plastic. David exhaled a little.

He was still in a daze as he walked over to the computer and slipped the drive into one of the many USB ports that peppered the side on the unit. Standing in front of the class, feeling all those eyes on him, made David very nervous. With his anxiety came drowsiness. Again his eyes became heavy; he wanted to lie down and sleep. He did not even care about his grade anymore; he just wanted rest.

He was shaken out of his sleep-deprived trance by a loud beep from the computer. An error message was on the screen in front of him and was also being projected, for the class to see behind him. Was this his way out? There was nothing he could do if the computer did not work, that was not his fault.

“Just press *OK*,” Dr. Griffith said from the back.

David looked up to see that he had taken his seat, the back corner. Rage built up inside of him. His seat, which had always been untainted, far away from the virus that was Professor Griffith, was now covered in filth. David pressed the *OK* button and the message disappeared. He was forced to open PowerPoint and to face his fate.

David finally turned around. The presentation was open behind him. All the things he had learned and practice were moving around in his sleep deprived mind. He was not sure where he should be starting anymore, what he should say first.

"Can you please turn the lights off, David?" Griffith asked from David's seat.

David walked over to the light switch. Ya, I can turn the lights off, he thought, anything to make it harder to see your face. Thoughts of his hatred for this class and this assignment and this teacher mingled with dates and names for his presentation creating wild confusion in David's head. He reached up and batted at the light switch. His bewildered mind and tired eyes had lied to him as he came well short of actually hitting the switch. He took another step forward, again flicking at the switch. This time the room went dark.

Oh, how easy it would be to fall asleep now, David thought.

"Thank you, you can begin now," Dr. Griffith said with a tone that David read to mean "I can't wait to see this."

Again, David tried to settle his thoughts. He cleared his throat and looked around the room at all the people staring at him. Everyone was waiting for him to speak, but he had nothing. All the research he had done the previous night had vanished with lights. He just wanted to sleep. He cleared his throat again. He knew he was running out of stalling time and he would have to talk soon. He had time for one more cough he thought. He brought his hands to his mouth and coughed once.

"Excuse me," he apologized.

Alright, that was good. He wondered if he could keep this up all class. Just stand there in front of his peers and not say a word for an hour until it was time to leave. The thought made him smile. He fell back to reality. People were still staring at him. Griffith's smirk in the back row had grown into an evil smile. It was time to start. He had to say something. He had it, he was ready to start, to get an *A*, to pass this class, to shove it in Dr. Griffith's face. He had the perfect thing to say. David opened his mouth.

"Ummm."

STEFANY SOSA



ZACHARY BALDWIN

Of Duty and Lilies

THE TIP OF HIS PENCIL BROKE. He took out his knife, found the tip again, and continued to sketch the lone flower before him. The breeze poured upon the last few acres of chaste meadow. In the background a constant drone was heard, but not from the bees so familiar to the area. No, it was the so-called “Hornets” of the 103rd Airborne Division that interrupted the peace of the countryside—the most pressing question became whether to show the plant swaying in the wind or to simply let it reside in a peace so long past. He chewed the top of his pencil as he grappled with his next move.

Lines bent along the page to show the arch of the petals; each one rose triumphantly to its vertex, only to suddenly fall. He often wondered if that was how he would exit the war. Rising, square shouldered, confident then falling in natural elegance. But he was not naïve. Men were shot; they fell without grace. It was a bland, repetitive tragedy.

The stem had a slight curve. As he sketched, the dinner party replayed before him. He could still see her across the table. He wished he could say she looked happy. Often he had asked himself if she loved him; he no longer asked. The dinner party had answered his question. That entire night he searched for a glimmer of affection. He saw only the blank stare of dutiful fidelity. She had to play the part of the patient beloved, awaiting her brave companion as he faced the terrible German Bear. For the sake of queen and country she could not refuse his company, though there had been little to refuse. He added a few scrawny leaves to the stem. She loved him enough to keep the shattered pieces of his heart from scattering. He was indebted to her.

Shade was added to the ground at the base of the stem. She loved lilies. It was fitting that the only blossom around camp should be her favorite. The romantics of the past age would have called this Nature’s smile. The embittered realists of the day would call it a cruel token of distant memory. No matter: this was what he had committed to doing. This was the only way he could think to repay her for her kindness. The shading was complete.

He had prematurely signed his name at the bottom, mostly to keep himself from writing something hollow and overly sentimental. How could he pour into someone who would not readily pour into him? She would not bear anymore of his burdens. Besides, he had nothing to say, or at least nothing to express. He could go through, in his head, the exact phrases he wanted to use and try and

reach a heartfelt climax as he drew his letter to a close. But he knew that the climax would never come. He needed to iterate the unutterable. Words would only be unfulfilling specters, mere shadows of what he needed to express.

Amber hues began to stretch out behind his recreated flora. His mind wandered away from the dinner party. It was almost time for afternoon recon. He thought of home and picked up another piece of pigment. He thought of Anders screaming before jumping from the cockpit. More color was needed for the setting sun. He thought of the first plane he ever shot down, the look of terror on the young pilot's face. He dotted the grass with red specks. Red pigment poured from the young German's cheeks—no, the pigment was bleeding on the page. He hurriedly dabbed the pigment off the page and shook his head. He thought of kissing her—the alarm sounded.

The paper was folded neatly and tucked into a pocket. He rose and walked away.

Tongues of fire appeared on the horizon.

AMANDA DRUM

Completely Gone

FOUR SOLDIERS SAT in a room at the airport. One had a broken foot. George had lost the hand. His father was the sordid man who would understand, and that was him calling on George's cell.

He felt the buzz in his pocket. After four like buzzes, one of the soldiers next to him turned his head. George could see the question in his thin black eyebrows: *you gonna get that?* Well, no, he wasn't. He was obviously too taken with the spectacle of his foot tapping the greasy tile floor under his chair. Soon the buzzing stopped.

No one spoke until five minutes had gone by. George had his good hand on his lap. With the noise of a crowd approaching, it twitched. Everyone's weight shifted. The youngest private, a sandy-haired college kid, even smiled. George didn't look up until he could see in his peripherals their families: the bouncing children towed by the hands of nervous mothers, gruff in-laws, and an assortment of other well wishers that meant very little to him now.

He saw Carol. Her red bob swished over her shoulders, and her eyes were scanning the room for him. He was sitting twenty feet in front of her, and her eyes were searching for him. He waited a moment to see if he could catch her gaze before he waved. He waved the arm with the metal cap on the end.

Their four-year-old daughter Sarah had a round face like his. She was full of energy, but when she glanced at her father she stopped skipping. The other soldiers had rejoined their families. George was still sitting and tapping his foot.

"Daddy!" she cried out. She toddled over in a run that resembled a penguin waddle.

His face squinched in what would have been a mimic of her beaming grin. He held out his whole arm—his right—and scooped her up in the crook of his elbow. She clung onto the sleeve of his uniform and buried her face in it.

Carol approached George more apprehensively. She hesitated, seated herself next to him, and put a hand on his knee. Her thumb moved back and forth. After a moment or two he couldn't stop himself from flinching away from it.

"She missed you," Carol smiled.

For a moment, she kept the picture alive in her head: the military husband home from the war, rejoining his patient wife with a lovely daughter to share. She paused.

"We don't have to talk about it," she said slowly, softly. "You don't have to say anything. I know, honey. I know."

She knows. She knows a six o'clock alarm, not a two a.m. raid siren. She knows morning newspapers, not what headlines are really made of. She knows packing her daughter's lunch, sipping coffee, grocery shopping and the Food Network. She was not.

He jerked, and he leaned down to look at his daughter. While he was thinking, Carol was talking. "Everyone's by baggage claim to see you; your father called earlier, didn't you know? Your mother's worried and your sisters prayed every day you would come home safe, didn't you know? Don't you know I *completely* understand, George?"

God his daughter's eyes were blue. She stared at her reflection in the metal cover they used on his wrist, where he lost his hand. The heavy harsh terminal lights produced a glare that cut just below her cheekbones, mixed with the afternoon sun. She reached out a finger and almost got far enough to touch it.

"Oh sweetie, no, don't do that," Carol cut in. She took Sarah's arm and pulled it away. Sarah followed her mother's lead obediently and stood by her side.

"It would have been fine," George grunted. Those were the first words he had said in four hours. And what meaning they had. It would have been fine.

It would have been fine if the HUMV hadn't driven over a trigger-wire. It would have been fine if they didn't land in the earthy pothole that caused them to stall, sitting duck for the grenade someone launched from a dark side street. The sky turned from brilliant blue to gray ash to bloody in seconds. Clods of dirt shot up around them. Shrapnel flew.

"It doesn't matter if it doesn't hurt or anything, George. I don't want her messing with it until she knows what it means. She'll realize soon that she has two hands, and you have one." She cringed when she said that, yet she shook herself slightly and kept going.

Someone grabbed his shoulder and started yelling, but he couldn't hear the words. All he saw was the soot streaming from those panicked eyes, and then he heard a sharp whistle in his own left ear. He was yanked by the collar out the passenger side door, but not before a second explosion ripped a shard of metal from the frame and launched it with surgical precision. Gore, glare, light-shine, all of it streaming from his wrist. And it would have been fine if his daughter laid a finger on it.

"We need something to tell her when she starts asking questions, but we don't need to get into that now. We're not even home yet, and I imagine you just don't want to think about it, right?"

Flying sand, grainy and golden, fists pumping the air. It would have been so easy. He remembered his vision started swimming.

"We need to go now, George." She waited, wide-eyed, then shook his shoulder lightly. "George? Everyone's left, and your family is still waiting—"

It couldn't have been found, not when the ground shone like diamonds anyway. The sand grains were gold bands, scuffed under the bare feet of city dwellers, clinging to their ankles, and it would have been so easy.

"—and we have a roast in the crock pot, your favorite. Come on, get up. Let's go."

Daddy?

"The ring is gone," He said. Carol had a wrist wrapped around his elbow about to pull him up, but she stopped. He kept going. He bent down to lift his carry-on and Sarah raised her arms to be carried, completely oblivious to the situation.

"I'm sorry?" Carol asked. George shook his head. The expression on his face was difficult to read; it could have been indifferent if it wasn't so heavy. It was so saturated with one emotion that it had no choice but to be indifferent now. His voice was husky and low, like he had been coughing for some time.

"The ring. It's gone. I don't have it anymore."

They stood looking at each other. Carol didn't understand, until she glanced down and realized that his left hand had been sacrificed. His left.

". . . oh," she said. She felt small, shrunk by the realization. Then she thought of the implications the loss could have on his guilt. But what was a wedding band? Of course she would understand its displacement—it wasn't his fault. Completely forgivable.

She couldn't help but smile and chuckle once. "Is that all, George?" she asked. They hadn't moved yet.

"You don't need the ring. I understand. Really." I completely understand, George.

"I couldn't keep it," he mumbled, but she cut him off.

"Let's go now. Everyone wants to see you." Carol spoke as if George was hard of hearing. She finally picked up Sarah with a grunt and balanced her on one hip. Then she crossed to George's other side and clutched his hand. They finally walked together through the quite empty terminal. George's boots shuffled on the white tile. Gritty gray footprints followed him.

Three hours later, George was slumped forward on their living room sofa digging at the back of his neck. He stretched, leaned back, and pinched the bridge of

his nose with two fingers. He grumbled and slammed the couch cushion with his left arm. The springs winced.

Carol poked her head from the doorway leading to the kitchen-and-dining room.

"Don't do that George, you'll scare Sarah."

Sarah had a Barbie doll in each fist in front of the TV. It blared *Wheel of Fortune*, but no one was straining to buy a vowel.

"It itches," he said. Carol emerged wiping her wet palms on the back of her jeans. She stood with her hands crossed, and then stepped over Sarah's toy bin to sit next to her husband.

"Is there anything you need to tell me? You've been quiet all night," she asked under her breath.

She leaned over to rest her head on his shoulder. He didn't budge any which way. The olive colored sofa felt scratchy, and the walls were wood panels, straight from the seventies. There was too much brown to think, brown everywhere, clods of dirt.

One of Sarah's dolls was talking to the other, shaking up and down in her fist. Then the second would copycat the waving. Sarah never said a word, but she probably imagined plenty. All of a sudden she looked down at the first doll, and pulled one of the outstretched arms down to its waist. Then she covered it with one finger. A one-armed companion—how cute. She looked up at her parents with an expectant look.

Carol sighed. "Things will be back to normal soon."

She swiveled around to see George better, putting her weight on one hip and criss-crossing her legs.

"What was your father telling you at dinner? Mom was talking so loud I couldn't catch anything he said."

George shrugged one shoulder. "Dunno. Asked if I needed someone to talk to. I said no."

Carol frowned. "You said no? You're obviously upset, George. You've been deployed for almost a year and a half and you don't seem happy to be here at all."

George clucked his tongue. "Never said that. I'm just..."

She nodded slightly to encourage him when he didn't answer right away. He stopped because his thoughts whisked themselves back to the airport motel room, about three days before he arrived home.

"Just what, George? Don't be afraid, I can listen to you."

Sarah decided that the Barbies spontaneously hated each other, and started

banging them together in a vicious cat-fight.

"I don't have the ring, Carol." The ring, the rim of the trashcan, the ring that should have been on the left hand, left finger. It was a similar shade of silver. He closed his eyes and she blinked.

"You said that already. You lost it, I know." She laughed out loud but it sounded strained. She squeezed his shoulder. "You don't need to be upset, you didn't have a choice—" He pulled away before she could finish, because he couldn't hear the words.

The motel room had white walls and green carpeting. The bed coverlets were maroon. The trashcan was silver. He stood in front of it, tapping his foot for the longest time, staring at the bottom. There was a black scab of gum stuck to it with a mint wrapper that wasn't his. He lifted up his right hand, his thumb and forefinger centered. Ready, aim. He opened them, and the ring fell through the crest of the receptacle. It clattered to the bottom. Vaguely, the noise reminded him of his wife's chatter. Now the engraving on the ring reflected into the shiny bottom, caught in the bar of sun the blinds created. A backwards *Love*. The band was in shadow.

George sighed. "I threw it out." He opened his mouth to say more, but closed it again. What would elaborating do, exactly?

Carol didn't move; not her hand on his shoulder, not herself in her curled position.

"... no," she said slowly, dragging out the word with a little bit of an exasperated huff afterward. "You lost your hand, and the ring with it. I mean, you were wearing it over there."

"No, Carol. I wasn't." He stepped away from the trashcan, and there was a rapping noise on the door. Everyone was meeting in the hall for check-in. The plane would be leaving in an hour.

"Yes, you were, George," she persisted. Now she was looking past him, and her voice was escalating. She sat up straight as a board. He remained calm. "We've been married for five years, and we have Sarah, and you've been gone for a year and a half, and no you didn't George . . ."

He couldn't let her get a word in edgewise without the truth. He finally had room to breathe. He reached out and grabbed her shoulder. "None of the guys wear them over there because it's like they have nothing to lose. And now it's lost. It was lost to me when I got on the plane. I'll never have it again Carol—"

"*Stop it George!*" she finally cried out, shaking her head and slamming the cushions with both hands. He promptly stood up, and skirted the edge of the couch

AMANDA DRUM

toward the stairwell. He thought about commenting that she shouldn't scare Sarah, but he chose against it. Carol's gritted her teeth while she stared into space. Her chest was fighting for shallow breaths.

Sarah was, and would ever be, as adept at tuning out Carol as her father; she didn't break her concentration once during her parent's dispute. She was focusing too hard on wriggling her left fingers back and forth. She took the cusp of her long sleeve, and pulled it over her wrist, clear over the entire hand. She smiled.

She turned her head toward her parents for more approval, but they had both left the room.

GERRY WOLFSON-GRANDE

Mrs. Carraway: Reflections on Green and Blue (with apologies to Virginia Woolf)

"I CAN'T BELIEVE you've still got that damned parrot."

The scissors rasped nastily across the paper, narrowly missing decapitating the cutout figure she was working on. Melissa bit back an unladylike word and deliberately stilled the movement of her fingers, not to mention the sharp metal edges.

"He doesn't have any problems with anyone else."

Except you. The unspoken words hung in the air, and Melissa waited for their trailing gray-blue outlines to dissolve before looking up. "Hello, Roger."

Roger Marsh was still glaring at the parrot, which had buzzed him again before settling on top of a large Oriental vase, the intense green of its feathers contrasting boldly and bizarrely with the orange dragon winding around the red lacquer of the piece. "Miserable little beast."

"Wrong class," Melissa said calmly. "Birds are not beasties. That leviathan out in the Bay is a beastie. So what brings you back from—where was it you went again?"

He had started to approach her, to take her hands and maybe even try to kiss her, but her tone brought him up short. "Madagascar, Melissa. Don't you remember? I went to Madagascar."

"Oh, yes. Where the lemurs are." Melissa smiled, remembering the photograph Roger had sent of himself with his fiancée, Betsy Something-Or-Other. She had looked a bit like a lemur, come to think of it—big, round brown eyes made even bigger and rounder by granny glasses far too large for her small face, tiny little hands and even tinier feet. "How is dear Betsy, anyway?"

Roger's face puckered into a weak frown. He'd always been a sniffer; not substantial enough for all-out, honest weeping, only willing to allow the random tear to trickle down his cheek as if it were running away. Melissa hoped fervently that no tears were planning an escape attempt. "Roger?"

He snuffled again, but sucked it up manfully. "Betsy and I are no longer together," he pronounced sonorously, as if he were narrating *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Without waiting for a response (and possibly fearing its lack of sympathy), Roger flung himself to his knees, sliding to a halt before Melissa's chair, but not before colliding with and caroming off of the ottoman where she had laid her handiwork. Melissa winced at the squeal of paper tearing, and quickly put out a hand to shove the ottoman and its contents out of harm's way.

"Melissa," Roger said breathlessly, a tremor of latent tears still in his voice, "I've seen the error of my ways. I was a fool, an idiot, a jerk even, to have left you. Left you here in East Hampton. Left you to marry that stick of wood Edward—Jesus Christ!"

Apparently taking umbrage to the sound of the ripping paper, the parrot had flown over to castigate the person it considered responsible. Roger slapped it away from his head and continued his confession, which had turned into a diatribe. "Left you with that damned bird." He shoved one hand blindly in her direction while continuing to flap the other around in an attempt to discourage the parrot from returning.

Melissa sighed and took the groping fingers in her own. "Roger, even though we haven't had this conversation—well, we've had this conversation. You and I both know we wouldn't have worked out. If nothing else, your irritating habit of clinking whatever noisy bits you have in your pocket would have driven me up the wall."

Clink, clank, clink . . . the sound trailed off as Roger's free hand, which had gone from imitating a scarecrow to his pocket, stopped playing with his keys and spare change. He gave Melissa a sheepish look and withdrew it, awkwardly trying to add it to its mate. She took advantage of his clumsiness to reclaim her hands, depositing them primly in her lap.

"So—Roger, please don't try to tell me that I'm the reason you came back. Whatever happened to that—that—what kind of business were you in again?"

This time his lower lip did quiver. "You never did pay any attention, Melissa. I was just a passing fancy for you. I could have told you I was bootlegging booze and you wouldn't have noticed."

She forbore to point out that alcohol hadn't been illegal when he left, nor was it any more. Roger had never been good with details. "You know that isn't true, Roger. It's just that you—you had so many things you were involved in, I just lost track a little teensy bit."

"Oh." Mollified, he stood up, catching his left hand as it sought refuge in the pocket with all of the lovely clinky bits and clasping it with the other behind his back. It was an unfortunate stance, providing him with more than a passing resemblance to the parrot, in build at least, as it required him to push out his chest and rock back and forth on his heels. The bird in question cocked its head, whistled derisively, and returned to its perch on the vase, where it continued to eye Roger with unabated interest.

That gentleman took a moment to glance around the room. Melissa preened as Roger's eyes traveled from shiny green thing to shiny green thing, widening as they focused on the enormous chandelier hung with myriads of dagger-shaped pieces of green glass. "Good lord," he finally blurted. "How long has this obsession been going on?"

Melissa raised an eyebrow. "Whatever do you mean, Roger?"

He waved a hand helplessly. "All of this—green. The parrot, the knickknacks, the chandelier—which could kill someone, by the way. All of it. When I left you were emulating Picasso."

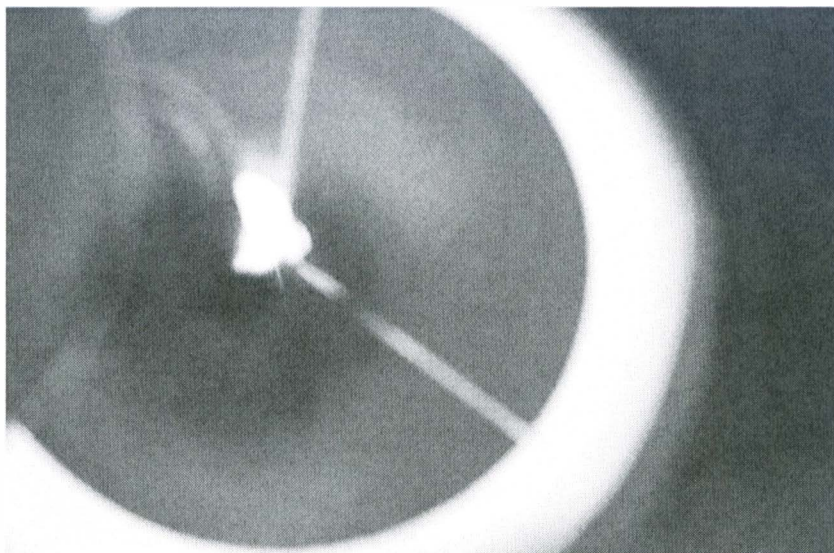
Melissa ground her teeth. That was another thing she really, really disliked about Roger; his heavy-handed attempts at witticisms. At first, he hadn't had enough self-confidence to try more than one a week, but her failure to put an end to it then had resulted in a larger and more frequent quantity until she feared she would be quite smothered by them, not to mention the fact that trying to figure out the more abstruse references usually gave her a headache. She could feel one starting to tap insistently at her temples now.

"I assume you mean my Blue Period."

Roger shrugged. "I have to admit it was a little calmer. Nice, peaceful water-scapes, quiet silver-blue wallpaper, the dolphins leaping through the water of the Bay, that sort of thing." He walked over to the window and peered outside. "Where are the dolphins, anyway?"

"The leviathan scared them off," Melissa said absently. She'd had enough of the conversation, of Roger, of thinking about the past. The present was what mattered now. And she had a party to get ready for, and decorations to complete. The unfinished string of green paper dolls, one now missing its head thanks to Roger's ineptitude, stared at her accusingly, and she picked up her scissors.

"Roger, it's been delightful. Let's do it again sometime. I'm sure my parrot will love to see you."



SONJA BURROUGHS

Books

A FEW MONTHS AGO I purchased a third bookcase to hold books that had been stacked on the floor in my home office for awhile and to relieve two existing overburdened bookcases. I counted the books while I was rearranging them. There are about six-hundred and twenty books on those bookshelves. That doesn't count the seven books on the hutch of my desk, or the nine very large art books in my living room, or the four boxes of books I have in air-conditioned storage because I have no room for them. Neither does it count the two-hundred and twenty books I sold a couple of years ago (one of the biggest regrets of my life). I can't seem to resist a *see so-and-so* reference when I'm reading. I end up following that prompt, and, if intrigued, point and click on the internet icon on my computer screen and go straight to Amazon.com and buy it. I love perusing bookstores for new and used books, and can't resist popping into bookstores when I travel. Expeditions through various book stores and bibliographies plus being in college for years have resulted in what I consider a respectable and interesting array of books.

It is a small collection of books by many standards, and large by others. But most importantly, it is my collection, and like most personal collections it includes various genres of works by writers I have studied or admire, and is comprised of subject matters that have interested me through the years. There are also about twenty-five books that date from between the early-to mid-1800s to about the 1940s or so. Other books are collectibles for different reasons, and some illicit memories or have stories of their own aside from what is contained in the printed text between their covers.

One such book is a 1923 hardcover edition of William Wordsworth's poetry that my father gave to my mother when they married in 1941. It has a personal note to her on the inside front cover. But what is interesting about this book aside from that note is the fact that my parents divorced over forty years ago; he passed away five years ago. Yet, I found this book on a bookshelf in *his* living room after his memorial service. I couldn't help but wonder why it ended up on his bookshelf and not hers. I know better than to ask my mother that question. I'll never get a straight answer. At most I will get a very breathy, southern-bellish, "Why, I don't know why he would have taken that back." So my question just kind of hangs in the air when I happen across this book from time to time.

There's a hardback copy of *Webster's Unabridged Universal Dictionary of the English Language, Volume I, A-Lithistid*, dated 1937. I paid five dollars for this

single volume at a used book store in Sarasota, Florida about twelve years ago and I've been looking for Volume II ever since. I'm afraid to open this book it's so fragile. But when curiosity overtakes me, I enjoy the discovery of previously unknown words like the word "Lithistid" on the cover of that old *Webster's*. I looked that one up and learned that it is marine biological term that refers to the "ordinal fossil sponge family." When will I ever need to use that bit of knowledge? I must have been procrastinating doing something else on the day I followed that breadcrumb trail. But it was interesting to know that word was in only one of three print dictionaries that I own, was not in the 1989 *Britannica Encyclopedias* that my sons used in school (which I have held onto), and that the convenience of technology, specifically Google, led me directly to an online database that contained specific additional information about "Lithistid"—the marriage of old and new; a bit of heaven for a logophile.

I do seem to Google every vagrant thought that wanders through my head, and use digitized books and articles regularly for research. It's so convenient and efficient. But these computerized activities and images cannot replace the poignancy and personal value of these and other books, like the print copy of my father's 1938 edition of *Les Miserables*. My father wrote his name on the inside front cover, and below that he wrote and double-underlined the phrase, "Dreams mingled with happiness." This phrase happens to be a subchapter at the end of Book V, which is about the characters Marius and his love, Cosette, the daughter of the protagonist, Jean Valjean. I guess I'll always wonder what my father was thinking when he wrote that phrase under his name, just like that dangling question about the Wordsworth book.

MY FATHER WAS A BUILDING CONTRACTOR, and also had an interior design degree. He was a very intelligent and very talented man. He was also a jazz guitarist. I recall many wonderful moments in my teens during summer visits listening to him practice. But, like Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables*, though he didn't serve time in jail, he did have an otherwise difficult life that he pulled himself up and out of, and he, too, loved a woman he lost, my mother, and was estranged for many years from his two daughters. My sister and I didn't begin visiting him until we were about thirteen years old. Perhaps this is what spurred him to copy the phrase DREAMS MINGLED WITH HAPPINESS on the inside front cover of the book. I have always liked *Les Miserables* for its elements of historical fiction, as an expression of hope heady with the realism of the human condition. But I now love the duality

of meaning my father's handwritten notes illicit and the subtext they create, both of which exist *ad infinitum* alongside the printed text of this book.

The most fragile book in my collection is an 1878 copy of *Shakespeare's Complete Works* that I found at Pike's Place Market in Seattle, Washington for \$2.50. A few months ago, I located a digitized copy of *Publisher's Weekly* dated 1878 on the Google Books website, and actually found this Shakespeare edition listed in the "Christmas List" section of that issue with a detailed description of the edition I own. I rarely open this book because of its delicate state. But each time I do or even when I just see it on the bookshelf, my memory is jostled and I recall the solo drive I made in 2002 from Sarasota to Seattle to visit my sister, the trip during which I found this book. It was a long but interesting and liberating drive, and this book jostles my thoughts and I recall vivid memories of the Pacific Northwest including the wonderful spring when cherry blossoms covered the sidewalks and the roads, and filled the air like a pink mist. That trip is relived in a nanosecond when I see this old, rather ragged, burgundy, cloth-bound edition on my bookcase.

A French version of *The Little Prince* was a gift from a man I met in Paris the spring of 1997 before my son began studying at the Sorbonne, and it stands side-by-side with several small philosophy books in French that I bought at the Bibliotheque de le Sorbonne. *The Little Prince* was the first book that Frenchman said he learned to read as a child and one he thought could be my first French reader as well. I later learned from my son that the three philosophy books were authored by one of his female professors at the Sorbonne, who just happened to be that Frenchman's former wife. She apparently fell in love with another female professor and, subsequently, left her Italian/Parisian "Little Prince" of a husband behind. I guess that's about when I came along. That explained some of the odd and uncomfortable moments of that brief encounter.

Since I have never been able to speak French, and can only read the language through a laborious exercise of will with an opened French-to-English dictionary close at hand, I have never been able to read these French books. I suppose I should pull them out one-by-one some afternoon and set them along side one of the *Idiot Guides* to learning foreign language that I have on another shelf and see what I can make of them.

There's a hand-tooled burgundy leather-bound book entitled *Florence* that my husband and I bought in Port-au-Prince, Haiti one summer. We used to fly to South Caicus with friends for a long weekend at least once each summer to go

snorkeling among the beautiful reefs that surround the island. On one particular trip in 1979, we decided to fly over to Port Au Prince for the day. As we taxied to the small terminal, a woman ran out of the terminal onto the tarmac screaming with her hands waving in the air. Two guards armed with assault rifles ran after her. She got to the plane, banged on the wings, and then on the door of the Learjet we were in, crying out with words none of us could understand. We heard a scuffle, the banging stopped, and then a mournful wail filled the air. We watched from the inside of the plane as the two guards gripped her arms and pulled her back to the terminal with her toes of her low-cut tennis shoes dragging the ground behind her. After that, we all sat in the plane for awhile trying to decide if we should get out or just take-off and return to Caicus. The pilot talked to the tower, and finally, another guard came out to the plane and talked with the pilot face to face.

We stayed in Port-au-Prince that day, but it was a very uncomfortable beginning that never fully dissipated and set the tone for the entire day. I had never seen such poverty before; it was overwhelming. Children sat on curbs with their bare feet in filthy water that ran along the edge of the street and ate some kind of beige mush out of wooden bowls with dirty hands. A woman walked through the market area with a large hammered-tin bowl on her head selling lemonade by the ladle, which everyone drank from and then it went back inside the bowl until the next buyer came along.

I handed out almost all of my cash to every child that asked, which created quite a parade crowding us and following us down the street. The men of our group finally hailed a taxi and pushed me into the back seat and proceeded to talk to me all at the same time as we drove off. We averaged about one mile per quart of oil in that taxi as we travelled around Port-au-Prince that day.

We finally found our way back to the Straw Market, and that is where I found that beautiful burgundy leather-bound book that was written in English and printed in Florence, Italy in 1958. How it got to the Port-au-Prince straw market I'll never know. But my husband paid two US dollars for it, and after going through property settlement during my divorce, it now occupies a proud space on one of my bookshelves. This book was my introduction to the Medici Dynasty. Now, it reminds me that there's always a good memory to be found among all the bad, and it always keeps me a little humble when I remember where it came from and I recall that day in Port-au-Prince.

I have a chubby book entitled *The Pound Era* about Ezra Pound and the symbolist movement that I bought at a used bookstore in Quito, Ecuador for

three US dollars in 2001. It was a book that made goose bumps on my arms when I discovered it. (I was really into the Modernist period at that time.) But this book created a bit of a row with the two male sales clerks at the shop because they wanted to see my passport in order to make the sale and I refused to show it to them. After I told them in very broken Spanish that they apparently did not want to make a sale, and mumbled in English that I would have to talk to the American Embassy about that, they called me back and after a bit more jockeying about my name, finally sold me the book with only my grandmother's first name on the sales receipt and "southern part of North America" as the address. You see, you don't need a passport or driver's license to buy a used book in Quito no more than you need these documents to buy a cup of coffee. The American Embassy had warned against a supposedly fake passport business in Quito at that time, which means if you didn't protect your identity, chances were by the time you were ready to leave the country you may arrive at the airport just to discover you have already departed.

But, even with the memories these books elicit and the fondness I hold for their printed texts, there is relatively little that is contained in any of them that cannot be found on some website or in digitized form available for download onto a light-weight, paper saving, space saving Kindle, iPad, iPhone, or other electronic reader. Even the replicas of the beautiful memories I have of the Pacific Northwest can be found online in JPEG. But none of this is new technology or even new news. Digitization has been going on for years, and its apparent efficiency is becoming more and more necessary for a variety of reasons from economics to ecology. However, it has just recently sunk in for me how antiquated my "print" book collection is, or is becoming, with the aggressiveness of modern technology.

Thomas Pettitt, Associate Professor of English at the University of Southern Denmark and a regular MIT speaker, recently stated that the entire history of media has been merely interrupted by the age of print. *The Economist* reported in a 2007 article entitled "The Future of Books" that Google's contract with Berkeley's library alone required a reported 3,000 books per day minimum to be digitized; almost 110,000 per year on average, and that was just one of the twelve universities under contract with Google in 2007. As of August 2010, they had collected an estimated 600 million pages of raw data. They have over 2,000,000 books available for download on their Kindle, and prompts you to request digitization of every book you search for that is not digitized whenever you order a book. The numbers are growing exponentially. On Amazon.com and in college

bookstores you can now choose “new,” “used,” “rented,” or “digitized” textbooks. Digitized is certainly easier than the five pound *Norton Anthology* I carried around one term, but I would certainly miss all my handwritten notes beside certain texts, and I would miss that Bible-thin paper. Funny, the things one becomes accustomed to. But then, none of this is new “news.” is it. It’s just becoming an accepted choice, an expected choice, commonplace.

Information Today, Inc. reported in a recent update on digitization that Microsoft, who was not letting Google tackle mass digitization alone, contracted with the British Library’s Digitisation Program in 2005 to digitize 25 million pages of 100,000 out-of-copyright titles from the British Library’s 19-century literature collection. Now this is something I find intriguing. It’s exciting to have this body of literature available digitized or otherwise. In 2008, Microsoft added Columbia University’s library to their client list, and in 2009, they contracted with Yale. What do you suppose that number is now? Anyone involved in research knows how convenient it is to have these connections through library member systems, to have access to so many articles and books and knowledge. Why, you don’t have to worry about even going to a library any longer and having to trouble yourself with saying *hello* or *goodbye* to anyone. In the least, it will create more sophistication in the symbology of our tweeting and texting. These things are still being discussed, as we memorize more symbols of the new orality and forget exactly how to spell the real word as we press ever forward into a digitized world.

More fixed print texts in more genres are becoming accessible to us with just the nominal movement of our index finger than we will ever read in a lifetime. Although I use digitized books and journals for research as a matter of habit and convenience, I have never paid to download a book and still have the propensity to order the print copy of a book first. That print copy, however, does include a couple of anthologies of digitized works. One company busy promoting digitized collections is Nabu Press. I recently purchased from them a digitized copy of the 1912 out-of-print edition of *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* that I have found quite enjoyable to peruse. Owning books has always been a personal choice, but it is becoming a more poignant one in a world of technology vs. ecology. But truth be known, digitization provides convenience as well as the opportunity to see books to which you may otherwise never have access to—that is, if that kind of thing is of interest to you.

Time, perceptions, and habits do evolve. I remember a few strange perceptions that created some pretty odd habits during the Cold War when I was in elementary school. It was the mid-1950s and we had periodic “atomic bomb drills” that

alternated with our weekly fire drills. But instead of walking outside in a single file, the atomic bomb blast drills required us to squat under our desks, tuck our heads, and hold the back of our necks with clasped fingers to protect ourselves from flying glass. Little did we know that was the least of our worries. An elementary school student today would meet that with definite skepticism and Google it, probably from their iPhone or in-class laptop, to find out the truth of the matter before they ducked and squatted. But we blindly obeyed, and experienced a strange dichotomy of angst and a false sense of safety that followed us for years. We all grew up to realize that all those drills did was give us opportunity to kiss our ass goodbye. One day we may be looking at the novelty of a print book with a similar chagrin.

I recently read in an on-line version of *The Canadian Herald-Sun* that some newspapers and magazines are now thinking up new marketing ideas, such as touting the “wonderful new world of print” as a way to keep public interest and their print media businesses alive. At the rate technology moves it will be a new idea again soon enough.

Personally, I like knowing that words, like “Lithistid” once existed in print, and when I have nothing else to do trying to find out where they went. With Google, I don’t really need a print copy of a book to tell me that, although I would have never known that word existed had I not first seen it printed on the cover of my old hard-copy *Webster’s*.

I also like understanding the origin of words, such as the word “alone” which used to be written as two words, “all one,” meaning that to be “alone” was not a state of loneliness, but rather a state of being “all one” with oneself. I guess I could have learned that without reading it a fixed print book, but I came upon it by chance when I looked up the etymology of another word that I don’t even recall because it didn’t resonate as much with me. I don’t think that chance discovery would have occurred without my print book.

I like the subtext written in my father’s hand in certain books, and the notes I make in books I read that serve as markers on the timeline of my life and point to where I have been, where I am now, and where I have yet to go. How will I do this in a digitized format? Is this another habit that will soon not be missed as I transition more and more into a new world of continually advancing, time-saving, space-saving technology?

Does it really matter in what form of presentation the written word is received? The text itself is there, whether printed on paper or digitized; we can keep personal histories elsewhere. But what personal value do we give up or compromise

for space and convenience? Are we being relegated to selected text within limited viewing parameters? Books do that, too—to an extent, but there's more space for your eyes to roam and pick-up new and interesting word, phrases, and ideas. These are only a few of the adventures of reading a print copy of a book that intrigues me—there are also those wonderful white-space margins where you can make all sorts of wonderful little notes, and leave intriguing markers to guide you back to see the difference between the you *now* and the you *then*.

I'm still not warming to the idea of cuddling up with a cold, plastic Kindle or iPad on a stormy day, but I recognize the ease of it, and the time saving, cost saving, tree saving benefits of it, and the expanded accessibility to the written word that it provides. It's easier at the beach, and you don't have to pay an extra baggage fee just to carry a book to read on an airplane, because electronic readers weigh next to nothing and take up even less space.

We were forewarned of social media and the capability of digitization, when linguist Walter Ong began touting in 1987, a technology-birthing new orality that was emerging as participatory media in contemporary society, the theory that Thomas Pettitt expanded upon with his thoughts on the interruption that print has created in the history of media. Today's Dragon software has brought to life Star Trek's Captain's Log entries that began in the 1966 television series. And remember all the little hand-held computers used by McCoy and Scotty, and later Geordi and all the other characters through the evolution of the series? iPads have created a tangible reality of those little hand-held computers that they walked around with on the Enterprise.

Written journals are out the door, and it seems typing may not be far behind with the emergence of Dragon software. And e-mail, texting, and blogs and their participatory format are bringing Walter Ong's theories of new orality to bear. But, does it seem that through the advent of new technology and its plethora of forms and uses that we may be arriving where we started and knowing it for the first time?

Value is relative just like everything else, including the ownership of printed books. I place a high value on the tangible accessibility of my collection of books, and the duality of value some of them possess because of the history created by the juxtaposition of fixed text, personal notations, and memories. Then there are those books in my collection suffused with personal stories aside from their literary value, but subtexts that none-the-less have become a part of their historicity, and which show the growth of my personal perception.

As much as I incorporate modern technology and social media into my daily life, I still find reassurance in knowing that my books and the fixity of their words will be there each time I return with only the pliability of my perception to create a new adventure of understanding. I'm still adjusting to the participatory format of social media, Walter Ong's new orality, and it's onslaught of new symbols of language. I can be happy with the space my books take up, and with their bulk, and weight. I am sure I will continue to Google, and use digitized books and articles for general research, and may even get a Kindle or iPad one day to have portable access to all the hundreds of thousands of digitized books that I cannot afford to buy the fixed print edition of to provide me with that sometimes longed for access. The venue of social interaction is more and more technology based, and has merit and place, but how invasive do we want personal technology to be?

I realize that this discussion is not over. In fact it may not be a discussion at all much longer. It is quickly becoming a given in our daily lives. Technology is not slowing down, and neither is our fascination with it, and real or imagined need of it. I suppose it comes down to personal choice. My choice is to keep my wall of books, continue to add to them, and enjoy the convenience of technology as a matter of proficiency and efficiency. I will always thrill at that single, delicious moment of enlightenment that happenstance learning provides, or the unexpected journey through memory that the duality of text provides with some of my books. But I do wonder, will I recall with the same vivid sensual delight that my print books illicit the day I downloaded a book on my electronic reader?

Prompt # 3938

brushing the surface:

small talk

white lies

face value

poser

skipping rocks

icebergs

static

and the unsaid?

DENISE DAWSON

Lost in Their Memory of Other Days: Analyzing Meaning and Style in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

... Clamped tight in the grip of terror, he finds his eye looking through a chink in dirty washing . . . and sees a woman crying in a bathroom. Rain dropping from a thick black cloud. And now more sound, more motion: his mother's voice has begun to speak, two syllables, over and over again; and her hands have begun to move. Ears muffled by underwear strain to catch the sounds-that one: dir? Bir? Dil?-and the other: Ha? Ra? No-Na. Ha and Ra are banished; Dil and Bir vanish forever; and the boy hears, in his ears, a name which has not been spoken since Mumtaz Aziz became Amina Sinair: Nadir. Nadir. Na. Dir. Na. And her hands are moving. Lost in their memory of other days, of what happened after games of hit-the-spittoon in an Agra cellar, they flutter gladly at her cheeks; they hold her bosom tighter than any brassieres; and now they caress her bare midriff; they stray below decks...yes, this is what we used to do, my love, it was enough, enough for me, even though my father made us, and you ran, and now the telephone, Nadirnadirnadirnadirnadir-nadir...hands which held telephone now hold flesh, while in another place what does another hand do? To what, after replacing receiver, is another hand getting up? . . . No matter; because here, in her pied-out privacy, Amina Sinair repeats an ancient name, again and again, until finally she bursts out with "Arre Nadir Khan, where have you come from now?" Secrets. A man's name. (Rushdie 183)

SALEEM SINAI IS HIDING. He is looking out from the shadows, a child-voyeur trapped by an illicit moment. His life bubbles up from this intimate encounter. Hiding in a washing-chest. Watching his mother masturbate to the memory of a long-lost love. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* details Saleem's coming-of-age set against the vibrant backdrop of a young India. Rushdie's approach uses vivid characters and lush description to transport the reader. Yet what makes this passage effective is the way that Rushdie communicates this moment. Saleem merges with his mother, loses himself in her memory, connects with her outside of time, space, and conduct. His spirit taps into hers, and for a moment, he understands her. What follows is a syntactic analysis that will explore the techniques Rushdie uses to build this moment, namely, his use of purposeful punctuation, generative rhetoric, and word choice.

As Martha Kolln and Robert Funk explain in their guide *Understanding English Grammar*, purposeful punctuation goes beyond the basic rules of language; it can be stretched and manipulated to serve as an invaluable tool to communicate meaning and control the pace of a piece. John Dawkins concurs, and argues that “what ‘good writers’ do...is punctuate according to their intended meaning, their intended emphasis” (534). Rushdie’s use of punctuation in this passage is primarily rhetorical, and a crucial tool to communicate the intimacy of this experience. For example, Rushdie’s makes liberal use of the ellipsis throughout the passage. One would initially attribute Rushdie’s ellipsis to an effort to avoid redundancy, or to omit irrelevant information. Used rhetorically, however, the ellipsis lend to the disorienting feeling of the passage,

... Clamped tight in the grip of terror, he finds his eye looking through a chink in dirty washing...and sees a woman crying in the bathroom. (183)

Rushdie begins the paragraph with the ellipsis, showing that Saleem is watching in a fog, unable to fully digest the images before him, and they are used again as the image of his mother comes into view. Rushdie also uses the ellipsis to allude to the graphic details of Amina’s sexual act. He writes that her hands “stray below decks...,” and states that “...hands which held telephone now hold flesh” (183). Later in the passage he asks, “To what, after replacing receiver, is another hand getting up?...” (183). In this way, the ellipsis morphs from a tool used to de-emphasize or dismiss details, to one that contributes to the meaning and effect of the passage through association.

One can also benefit from applying Rushdie’s punctuation choices in terms of their degree of separation. John Dawkins, in “Teaching Punctuation as a Rhetorical Tool,” discusses the Hierarchy of Functional Punctuation Marks, used to gain insight into an author’s meaning through the levels to which they have raised, or lowered, the punctuation in a passage. He lists the punctuation from maximum degree of separation: question marks, exclamation points, and periods to maximum connectedness using commas, or by opting out of punctuation altogether. Rushdie’s writing straddles extremes in this passage. His use of hard stops often breaks words off of independent clauses—and even splinters words as Saleem struggles to decipher his mother’s chant,

Ears muffled by underwear strain to catch the sounds—that one: dir? Bir? Dil?—and the other: Ha? Ra? No-Na...Nadir. Nadir. Na. Dir. Na.” (183).

In these lines, Rushdie raises the level of separation between the syllables. What would have had little or no punctuation, is given maximum effect by creating hard stops between syllables. Note also that the author chooses not to capitalize “dir,” which indicates that Saleem is unaware, at first, that Amina is repeating a name. Later in the passage Rushdie leans to the opposite extreme, lowering the punctuation level to squeeze images together,

Lost in their memory of other days, of what happened after
games of hit-the-spittoon in an Agra cellar, they flutter gladly
at her cheeks; they hold her bosom tighter than any brassieres;
and now they caress her bar midriff, they stray below decks . . .
yes, this is what we used to do, my love, it was enough, enough
for me, even though my father made us, and you ran, and now
the telephone, Nadirnadirnadirnadirnadir . . . hands which
held telephone now hold flesh, while in another place what does
another hand do?

The author could have broken the sentence above into independent clauses, but Rushdie utilizes semicolons and commas to connect the words in a swirl of thoughts and memories. He omits punctuation altogether as Amina utters Nadir’s name again and again in a flood of breath and emotion. Rushdie jumps to the top of the punctuation hierarchy at the end of the passage by using four words to end the paragraph,

Secrets. A man’s name. (183)

The author wants to emphasize the plunge back into reality by forcing the reader to absorb that Amina has a secret infatuation that she is keeping from her family, from her husband. The authorial intention is clearly shown in the varied use of purposeful punctuation. Rushdie wants to create a rhythm that mirrors Amina’s sexual act. He uses high punctuation to make the words pulsate in a deliberate letting-go, and lowers, or omits, punctuation as she moves toward her moment of bliss. After Amina climaxes, Rushdie uses maximum separation as she faces the gravity of her feelings, and Saleem gains a new understanding of his mother’s private anguish.

Just as a writer can use punctuation to drive pace and illuminate meaning, so they can also use generative rhetoric to thread substance and texture to a piece. In *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric*, Christensen advocates the addition of “levels of structure” to aid in “discovery” and to foster meaning in a passage (24). He argues

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that the true meaning, movement, specificity, and texture of the work is housed in the modifiers rather than the main clause of a sentence. Rushdie's modifiers demonstrate all four of Christensen's principles. For example, he adds meaning from the start of the passage, using layers of participial and prepositional phrases to set the mood of the scene,

. . . Clamped tight in the grip of terror, he finds his eye looking through a chink in dirty washing . . . and sees a woman crying in a bathroom. (183)

Rushdie could have simply stated that Saleem watches his mother. Instead, Rushdie demonstrates the first principle of generative rhetoric by adding meaning with modifiers. The fact that Saleem is "Clamped tight in the grip of terror" tells us that he is frightened, frozen (183). The fact that Saleem is "looking through a chink in dirty washing" highlights that he is in the shadows. The modifier also shows that Saleem is hiding among soiled clothing, which parallels the act that soils his mother's pristine image.

Rushdie shows movement by strategically placing his modifiers in cumulative sentences. Christensen says that a cumulative sentence is "dynamic rather than static, representing the mind thinking" (28). The reader wades through Saleem's thoughts as Rushdie's modifiers ricochet between past and present,

. . . hands which held telephone now hold flesh, while in another place what does another hand do? To what, after replacing receiver, is another hand getting up? (183)

Rushdie's relative clause "which held telephone" is in a medial position as it is modifying "hands," so while it moves the reader's mind back to the moment before Amina entered the bathroom, the position of the modifier keeps the reader pushing forward in the passage. "To what, after replacing receiver," are two prepositional phrases that are in the initial position, again causing the reader to remember the preceding scene, but they push the reader to the main clause at the end of the sentence, and then tug the reader backward to link the main clause to the modifiers that give it meaning. The result is an ebb and flow that builds syntactical tension, another parallel to the sexual tension in the scene.

Levels of generality, Christensen's third principle of generative rhetoric leads the reader from abstract ideas into more defined images. While either of the examples for the previous principles could demonstrate the effectiveness of moving from general to detailed, it is also advantageous to view this principle in terms

of the passage as a whole. Saleem begins by seeing “a woman” in “a bathroom” (183). The description is very vague, detached. He moves into specific references to “his mother,” yet the other details remain abstract. Saleem is not sure what Amina is doing and saying. As the sentences and modifiers accumulate, Rushdie forms a distinct picture by describing the motions of her hands and naming the man in her fantasy. The ultimate specificity is in the merging of Saleem’s thoughts with his mother’s,

. . . yes, this is what we used to do, my love, it was enough,
 enough for me, even though my father made us, and you ran,
 and now the telephone...(183)

While Christensen’s focus is on the cumulative sentence and levels of abstraction on a localized level, this broader view of the progression demonstrates how cumulative sentences can layer specificity. By the end of the passage, the reader has moved with Saleem to merge with his mother in her intimate moment.

Texture is the most abstract of Christensen’s principles, combining all of the preceding points. Christensen states that texture, “proves a descriptive or evaluative term” (30). Texture is the layering of cumulative sentences and variation in rhythm to create richness and density. Using the examples above, one can assess Rushdie’s commitment to the use of lush description to advance his vision.

This analysis must also consider the author’s word choice in the passage. Theodore A. Rees Cheney discusses word choice in *Getting the Words Right: 39 Ways to Improve Your Writing*. He argues, “. . . the writer’s choice of words—his diction—played a central role in creating what we recognize as his *style*” (154). Word choice is key to recognizing the writer’s meaning as well. Rushdie’s style and meaning are clear, for example, in his choice to use “flutter,” and “stray” to describe how Amina’s hands move in the scene. Those words are delicate; they lack a sense of agency, and instead suggest that Amina is acting on a type of compulsion, against the better instincts of a pious Indian woman. As Saleem watches her crying, her tears are “Rain dropping from a thick black cloud” (183). The black cloud is Amina’s long black hair—a beautiful image, yet carefully chosen to emphasize Saleem’s emotional distance. Word choice is the most intuitive literary tactic, but it can also be the most difficult to master. Rushdie’s efforts in this area create an unforgettable literary episode.

Salman Rushdie’s use of purposeful punctuation, generative rhetoric, and word choice bring this passage to life for the reader. He uses the hierarchy to its fullest potential, raising and lowering punctuation for effect. He employs all

four of the principles of generative rhetoric to layer meaning and density into his description. Rushdie also chooses his words carefully to ensure that each connotation supports his authorial intention. The result is a beautiful, and disturbing, moment between a young boy and his mother. The reader feels the emotional distance, gropes with the boy to find meaning in her words, and then uses this insight to merge with Amina, to hear her thoughts and feel her sorrow. Rushdie understands that rich writing is key to channel a vision, and that it provides a more rewarding experience for the reader.

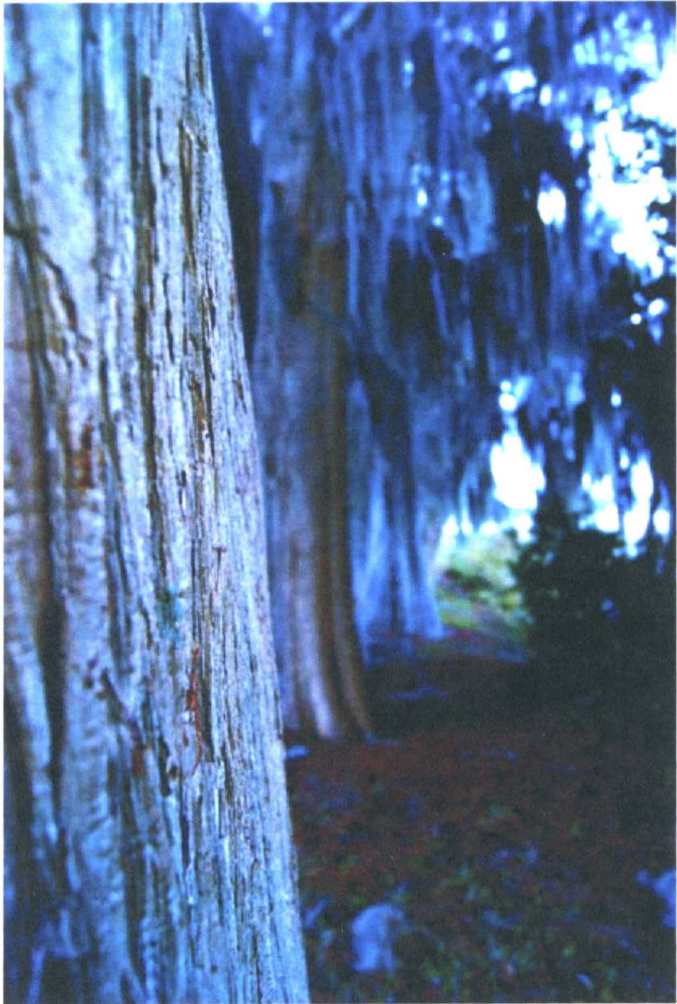
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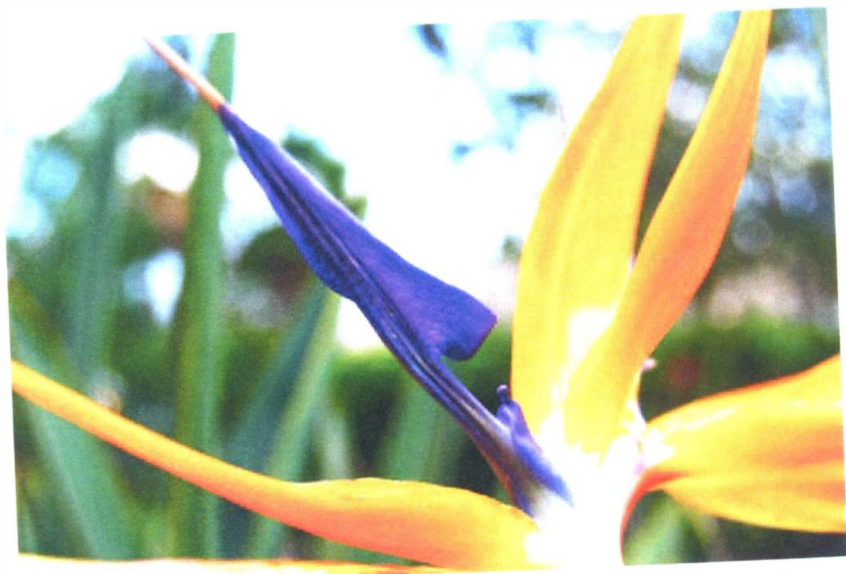


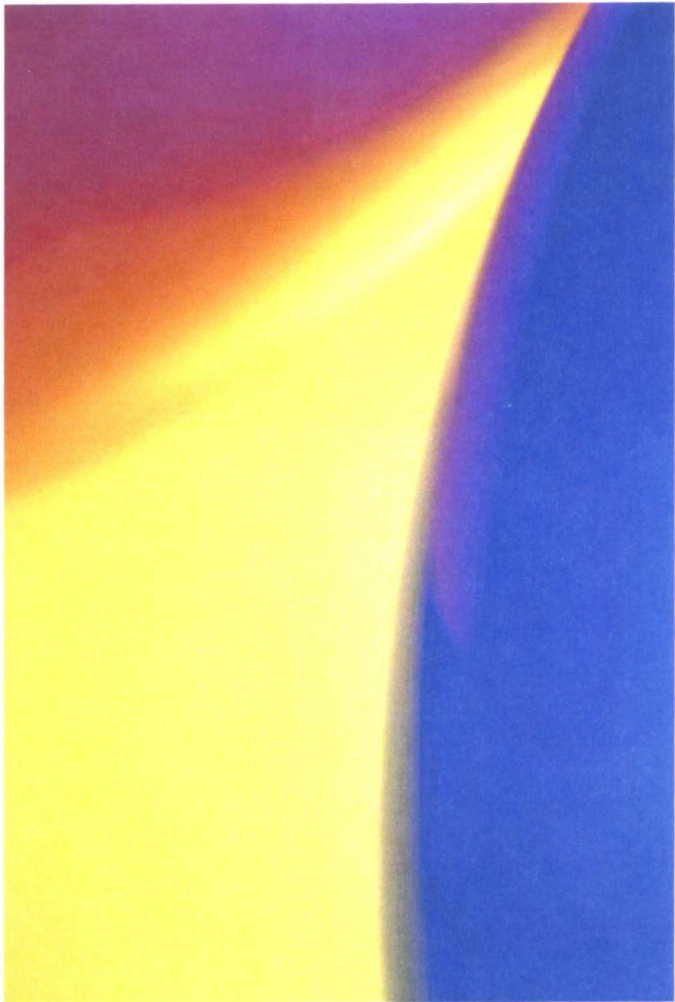






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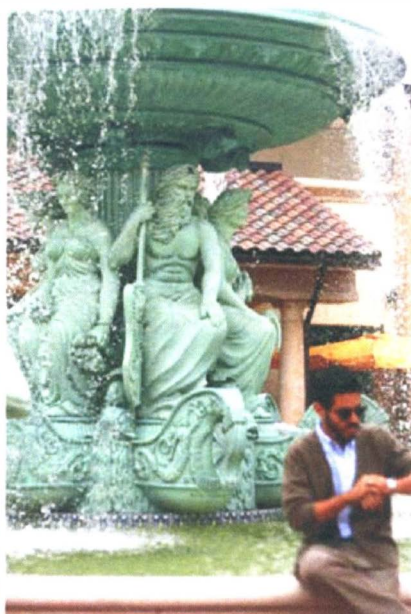
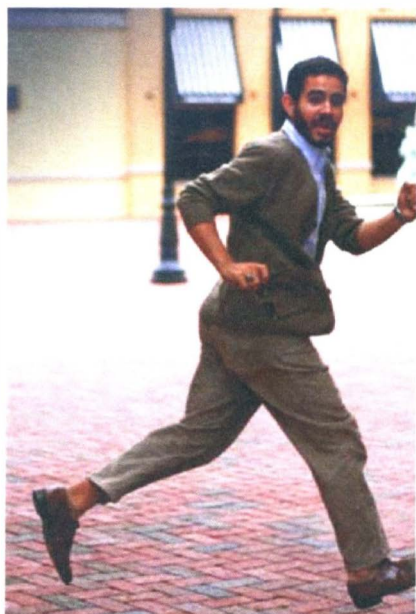


OMEAD TABRIZI





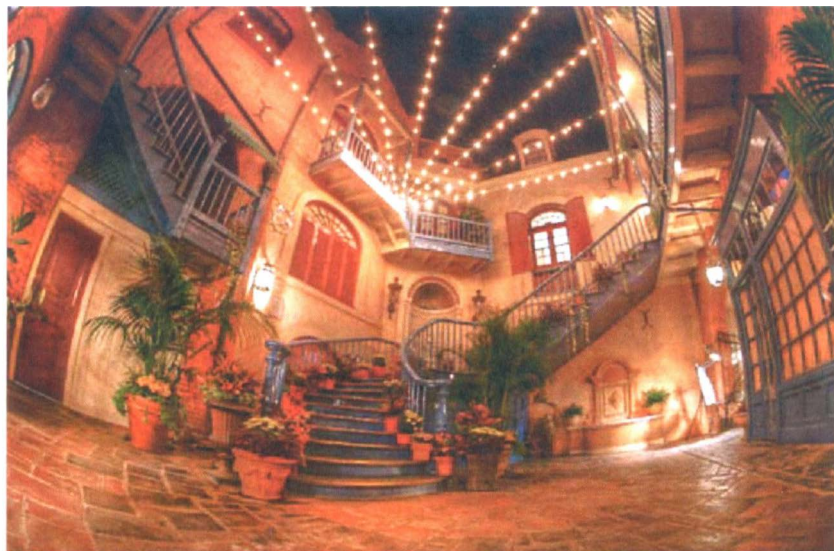
PRAISE SANTOS
"Late"



PRAISE SANTOS
"Curled"

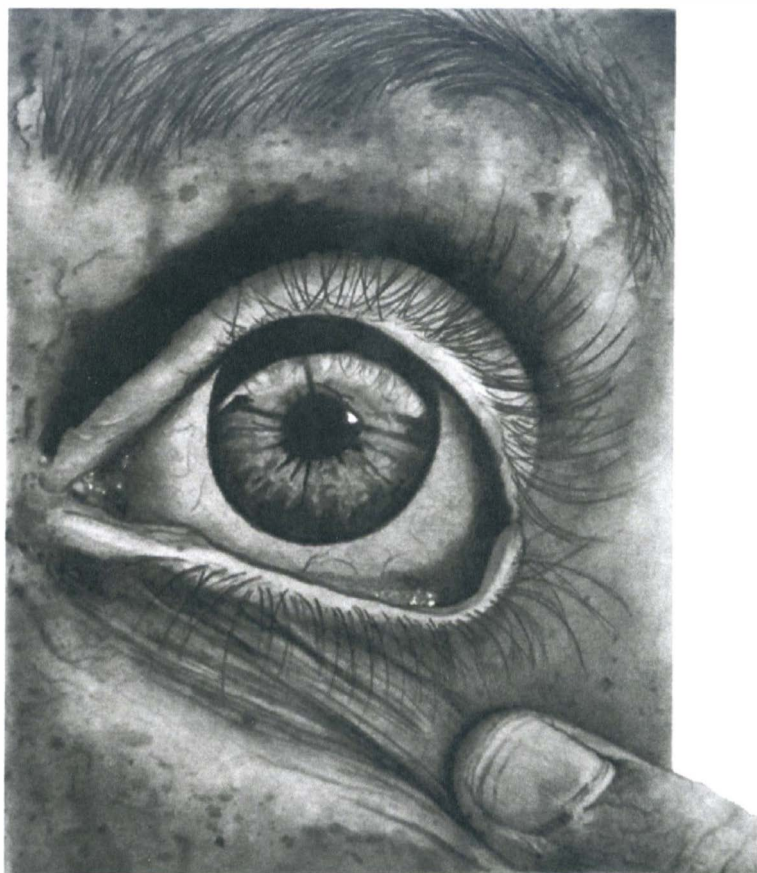






ALLIE OSTERLOH
"Red"





DANIELLE BLALOCK
"Umbra Revolution"



PRAISE SANTOS
"Norske"



MELANIE WEITZNER







