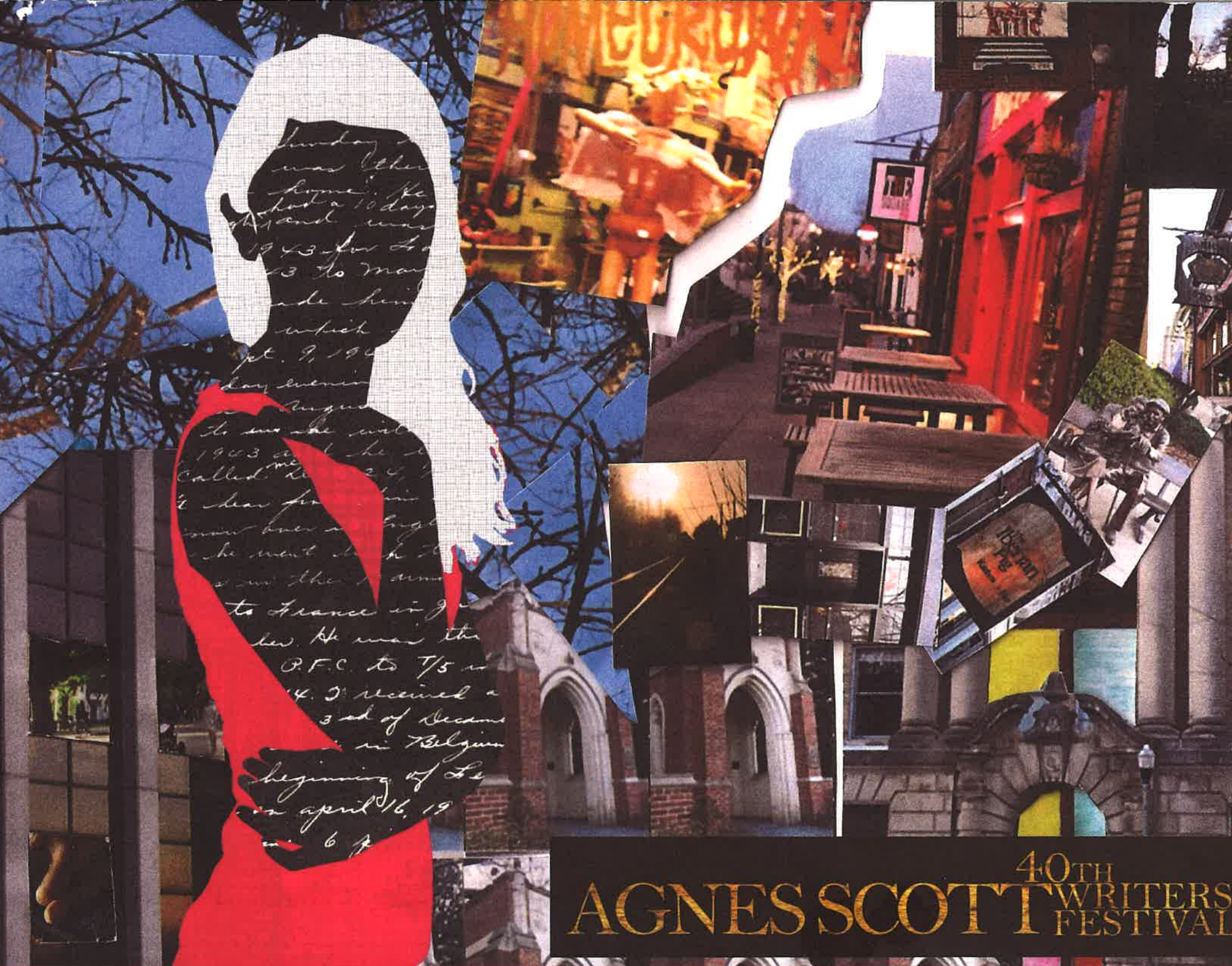
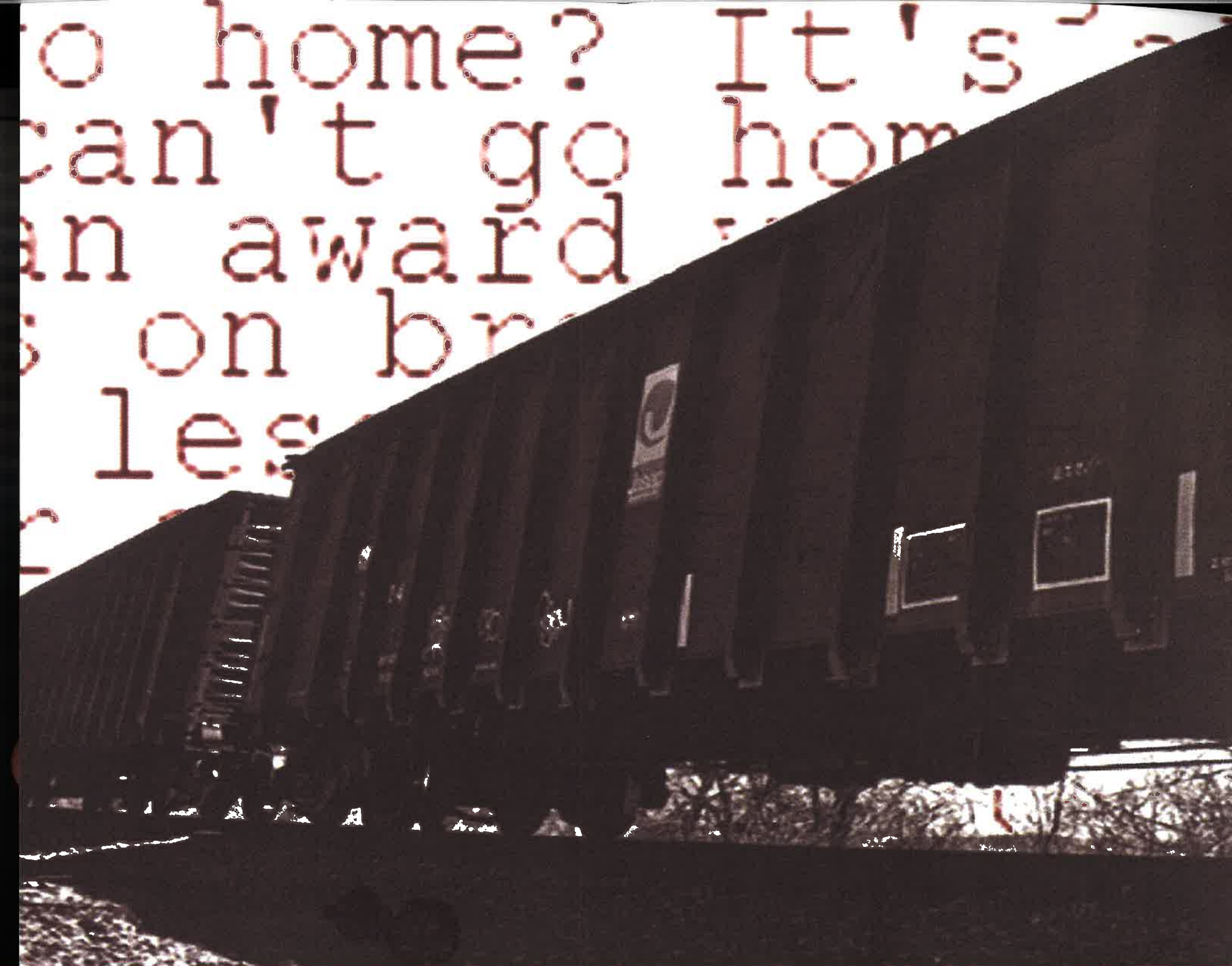


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AGNES SCOTT ^{40TH} WRITERS FESTIVAL





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AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

**40TH ANNUAL
WRITERS' FESTIVAL**

MARCH 31 - APRIL 1, 2011



AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

THE WORLD FOR WOMEN

Agnes Scott College
141 E. College Avenue
Decatur, GA 30030

March 2011

SELECTION COMMITTEE:

Poetry and Creative Nonfiction: James Allen Hall

Fiction and One-Act Play: Laurie Watel

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Dr. Amber Dermont

This year's 40th Anniversary magazine stems from themes of "going home" and "muses." The unnamed protagonist of the magazine's artistic landscape travels through Decatur with a suitcase representing her life story and all that she brings to her art. The suitcase could contain anything, and even though she is dragging the suitcase, it is actually leading her through a journey of inspiration and development. Her giant size is an allusion to Alice in Wonderland, with the traveler taking the place of the writer establishing dominion over an imaginary world.

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Send any correspondence or inquiry regarding the Writers' Festival Magazine to Dr. Amber Dermont, Department of English, Agnes Scott College, 141 E. College Avenue, Decatur, GA 30030-3770.

The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has been held annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring nationally acclaimed writers to campus in an atmosphere of community with student writers from the colleges and universities of Georgia. While on campus our distinguished guests give public readings, award prizes in the Festival's statewide literary competition and conduct workshops for finalists in the competition. The guests for this year's Festival are Jennifer Nettles, Danzy Senna, and Arda Collins.

The Writers' Festival competition is open to anyone enrolled in a college or university in the state of Georgia. The works printed in this magazine have been selected by outside judges as finalist entries in the competition. The visiting writers make final decisions during the Festival, and a prize of \$500 is given to the first place finalist in each contest category.

The Writers' Festival is made possible by the James T. and Ella Rather Kirk Fund. We wish to thank President Elizabeth Kiss, Dean of the College Carolyn Stefanco, Eleanor Hutchens '40, and the estate of Margret Trotter for their support. We also thank Dr. Christine Cozzens for organizing and overseeing the Writers' Festival Publicity Committee, Sol Design Co. for supervising and inspiring the design and production team, Demetrice Williams for her aid as Director of Special Events and Community Relations, The English Department and Dr. Peggy Thompson for their support and our outside selection committee for their time and careful reading.

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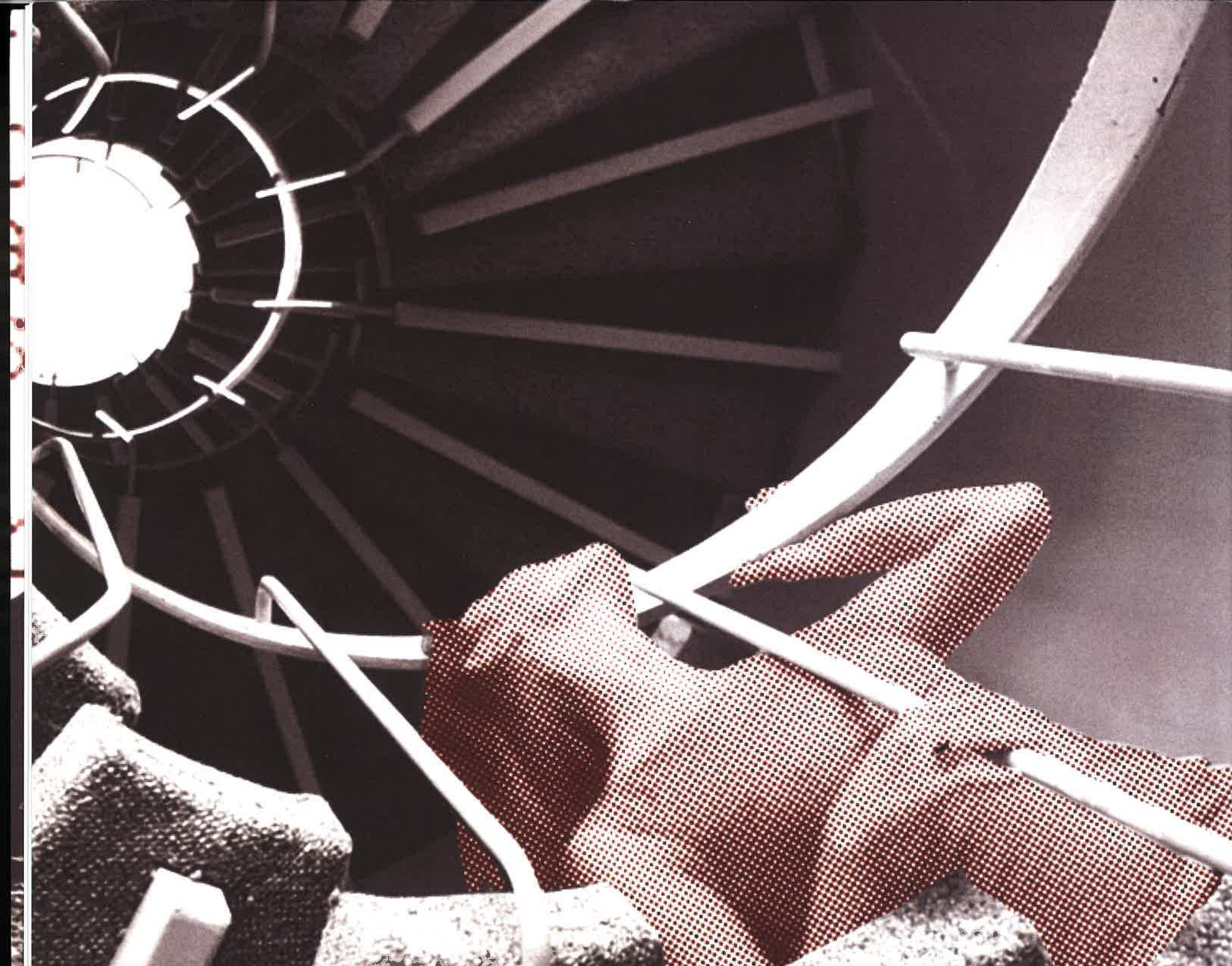
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POETRY

DONNIE DARKO, UPON PASSING
THROUGH THE PEARLY GATES, ASKS
EVAN ALLGOOD

My Lord, I cursed my mother under
My breath, laughed not in the face of
Death, but worse – from afar. I set fire
To a man's home and flooded an institution
With my impure, self-aggrandizing ideas.
So what kind of savior am I? Why send
A one-eyed leporid to guide such a man?
You saw how I emptied bottles, asked greedily
Of my lover's mouth, and threw myself
Into science. Flawed and proud of it. Shunning
Greatness, able to recognize greatness but
In my own reflection, where clairvoyant pangs
Stab at the glass like impotent butcher knives.
I knew what was left for skeptics like me:
A feast of brief dreams, a rally of rationale,
The Tangent Universe, death.

CIRCULATION

-AFTER EDWARD HIRSCH
ALICIA BRANDEWIE

Give me back my grandmother, her ponderous
circuits round the kitchen and dining room—
the muffled thudding of each step following the groan
of her walker. Mother urging *around again, around again*.

Bring back the ace bandages, those long
white flags of surrender, and the hydrogen peroxide,
hidden in its opaque brown bottle—used to force
the blood to flow through her legs, keep the rot away.

Give me back the days I thought nothing was moving
inside her head; she had reverted, no longer speaking
English. After she died I learned that I just had to ask.
After she died I learned how to understand German.

Bring her back, now
that I have these questions
that no one else can answer. We will start
with *Wo bist du gewesen? Where have you been?*

WEEKEND STRIP CLUB, 1959

JENNIFER M. BROWN

My great uncle Mike, late in the evening,
snuck upstairs to cross-dress, returning

in false eyelashes and a satin pink shift.
Trumpets brought him back downstairs

in a beige Playtex Cross-Your-Heart bra,
high heels, and jet black panties, flirting

with his wife, his brothers, tossing
shed garments to the whooping crowd.

The basement bar, now filled with cans
of tomatoes that I stack and re-stack, held

Tanqueray for Tom Collins and posters
of mostly nude women pasted to the wall.

Legs spread, breasts blurred by bottles,
swooping blonde curls tossed over

bare shoulders, cherry-puckered lips,
a few feathers, sequins, and white lace.

They're still here now under a hanging
light bulb, but painted into beach scenes

or on a park bench, red umbrellas in hand.
Corners peeling off the walls, they've

outlived uncle Mike. Smiling, eyebrows
arched; pink fingers still lifting hemlines.

MASQUE

TRISTA EDWARDS

The night can't be helped, we don't know who
we are anymore. Jester-masked gentlemen
twitch for the company of a cigarette and women

buckle their slender fingers tighter around the stems
of wine glasses. There's something about having no
face that makes everyone a ghost. We can mutt

our pasts like dogs, we can lose our ties and suits,
we can laugh at those people we are every day.
There's a woman in the corner lifting her skirt

for the chef. Crumbs glaze his beard telling us
he must dip into the wares, that he knows how
to enjoy what his hands touch. I can see her thigh

now. Its absolute whiteness disrupted by the red
ring of her tight garter. She knows I'm watching,
that we're all watching. The chef starts to lip

her ear, the soft, rolled part that feels like a peach.
It is not true what the other guests say, she's married,
he's a felon from Turkey, because no one knows.

Tonight we dress to undress, we wear no face,
we forget histories. We sculpt our wants in corners
with strangers, with hands we pretend aren't ours.

SNAKES

A. KAY EMMERT

When I was lost, they simply appeared
stretched out and slick across my bed
as suddenly as thirst. They were gifts,

for a while. Each one reached inside me
where the cold was. I found myself
moving as they moved, clinging to their curves,
rejoicing in my body, wet-through with rebirth.

I didn't have a choice. Nights, I'd wake
with one wrapped around my waist,
his body jolting roughly against my back,
squeezing me tight until we became
like the joint of a jaw cinched closed.
After, nothing remained but empty bodies.

Lately, I sprawl in bed, for hours
I loosen, watching the sun's arrow illuminate
one corner then another until I'm bathed in light,
my skin scrubbed to a quiet peach. I shift
toward stillness. It's enough

as a whisper in the morning is enough
to open your eyes and your mouth to me.

PAIN JANE

JESSICA D. HAND

Once, Jane's body was not
coals and flames. Once, Jane touched something
she should not.

A fire-wire.

That's when her synapses surged
and crackled. That's when
she plugged in her spinal cord, when
brush fires first popped

from her footsteps.

Stop it,

Jane said, her parents said, the preacher said, stop it.

The doctor said, it won't. It won't,

the doctor said.

The doctor roasted a marshmallow. A joke,
the doctor said. You will want to die,

but don't,

said her friends. Lie back,
we'll have a barbecue. Jane's brain began to think
the way fire thinks. Jane wanted
to lick everyone.

The state of California banned her,
even when she got a water wife. She was an act of God.

Men flipped down masks, calculated
her heat input, welded things
together. Jane tried to keep

her sparks to herself,

but her friends' arm hairs

kept singeing into burnt hair smell.

Health Insurance said talk to Fire Insurance.

Fire Insurance said talk to Health Insurance.

All the ears closed

fire-proof doors.

Stay home, the doctor said, but Jane would not
stay home. Now

that she was an eternal flame,

she had to go to the graves, had to

be the light lighting

the path between the breathing, the stopped.

ANNIVERSARY DINNER

SARAH HUGHES

The blonde woman
in the French restaurant
wants to take off her blue shoe
and throw it at the man
sitting across from her.
Hurl the stiletto right at his face.
See it bounce off his nose,
hear it clatter on his plate.

Someone needs to tell her
she is prettier than the moon.
Some man needs to grab her
hand, lead her to a dance floor
and teach her to samba.
Some stranger needs to wind her up
and spin her out, then catch her
face in his hands. Come on.
Someone must be aching to do this.

SELF PORTRAIT

HANNAH C. RITORTO

I spin so hazily between
these quiet spaces:
a cobwebbed room corner—
a shut umbrella—discarded boots
awaiting more bad weather.
There is no recipe for stillness here.

The good dog at the doorway
will always treat you well—
enormous dope eyes ruined with loving,
with the expectation of returns.
But I will never learn
that brand of need, that desperation.

The walls are plastered over
with photographs of wind—
each worn shoe upon the closet floor
poised anxiously—it is not a blessing
to be so transient, a child of running-women.
It is not a blessing.

Beneath the dusty bedskirt
my leather-bound album of former virgins
tries to hide itself in shadows.
(I have caused too many of these darkenings.)
And etched into the margins,
vulgar definitions of the word hasty.

I have no explanation
for the empty bottles in my wake—
but the dredges of their broken spirits
will tell you everything:
the hiding places of my lost door keys,
the best methods of forgetting.

EUTHANASIA

JEN RIVERS

When cancer grates and livers fail, when dogs fight
and clients don't pay my sister, an executioner, arrives
with her intra-muscular *Telazol*, her smock of bright colors.
In my dreams she leans over the meek, the old, the lame
of paw, pierces the skin of their hindquarters soft
as the belly of a mushroom, injects what she calls
the *pink juice—Euthasol*—a drug with too much
earnestness, too much enthusiasm, too much
ease. In my dreams, she grabs the splintered foot,
cold stainless steel already sticking, and shaves patterns
from the toes. People pay, and good, for private cremations
and paw molds. And in my dreams, my sister
never overheats the kiln, never breaks a mold.

But in this life

she breaks a mold, grabs some boarding dog, parts fur to phony.
In this life, she tosses the body into the fridge next to Tuesday's
sandwich and Cerenia, which, she tells me is the color of raspberry.
She tells me of Bob, the pudgy cremator, how, with each bagged body,
he quips It's a dead dog in a feigned British accent. She laughs
every time. She laughs because, in this life, there's no playing God,
no mechanic husband crying on examination tables over
an HBC (hit by car), no doubt when they find tire marks
between shoulder blades. Afterward, she scrubs the table
with Roccal-D, signs condolence cards. Last week, she
brought me three, asked me to weigh them carefully, pick the best.

TOOMBS

JEN RIVERS

There are many clues to where
we are: Pine trees lined like corn stalks,
onions and pecans fed on sand.
Cotton fields colored like cranberry, flecked harsh
with childhood. The people—white,
withered—trail to baptisms and sermons,
pray for harvests. Pumping
wells and frying corn, they gaze at the
minstrels chained to wall, watermelon
wallpaper unthreading. They recite
Little Black Sambo for grandchildren,
after the town library burned it.
I pick the porch cracks under my feet,
imagining those vidalia fingers reaching
from ground to Toombs, Georgia.
I too was grounded—in grade school
for letting black girls braid my
hair, traipsing fingers
past cheeks and ears, dipping
through the strands of my
mother's interjections. Those girls
later told me, white people
only learn the chorus of the song.

DECOMPOSING A SONG

KRISTIN ROBERTSON

During a July heatwave,
a dead thing, hidden

by chance or mercy,
will hang on the air

like the single
note of an oboe.

This morning my land-
lord and I divine

the sweet stench—
corn brooms poised

to muck oak leaves,
stacked like disheveled

sheet music, their veins
a staff measuring

this decrescendo of
some thirsting tanager,

some foolish waxwing.
We'll bring this reeking

to light, unearth
its phantom timbre, then

like the whippoorwill's
broken record, release it

into the sky beside
the catbird's chainsaw hum.

EUCCHARIST

KRISTIN ROBERTSON

A wren swoops under a beam in the sanctuary
like a drop of sweat from a stained-glass hand

as she raises hers for the white cracker.
Beside her at the altar, her uncle presses his arm
to her teenage chest like a locked turnstile:

No communion for you, he whispers.
Just cross yourself, be blessed.

Like slots, the other congregants suck up
their tokens of that unleavened bread,
and she studies the coin in her crimson loafer.

(She'll tongue it later against unbaptized teeth.)
Bow your head, close your eyes.

The untipped chalice passes her with the blood
of Heaven, as more birds seep from the rafters
like heavy rain. She pretends to scoop

their wet bodies and hold them to her mouth,
these sips of God, and then pin some,
spread-winged, to her skirt, as if their flailing

toward the surface, like the earth divers
in the book of myths she read by flashlight,
will pull land to rest on, create the world

from deep water, and lift her with mud and seeds
into the light of the doorway below the exit sign.



The Iberian Pig

SMITH'S

SPICES &
ENTIRE FAMILY

SQUARE PUB



F I C T I O N

HER

ANNA CABE

I don't know when Uncle James met her. They don't talk about that around me, grown-up stuff. I do know Mom calls her the s-word and w-word — I can't say them, even in my brain, because Mom said she has ears in there, just for bad words. I don't know why she can say stuff like that out loud, but she told me to be quiet when I said why and that she was a grown-up.

Grown-ups are weird, even Uncle James, but he's *real*, real weird. He has a ponytail like a girl and tattoos all over his arms; one is a big red Devil with scary horns and a pitchfork. Lola makes the sign of the cross every time she hugs him, at least she did before her, before she came and Uncle James stopped visiting. *Jesumarijose!* she would yell. *Are you trying to tempt the Devil?*

That scares me, the idea of the Devil coming up and taking Uncle James to Hell, but Uncle James would laugh and laugh and pick up Lola, saying, *Relax, Mama, the Devil won't want a skinny old thing like me. There's not enough meat for him to chew on*, which makes me feel better because Uncle James is real skinny.

Uncle James can pick up Lola because she is real little, even though she's real fat. She looks like a muffin, but when I told Dad that once when I was littler, he laughed and told all my other aunts and uncles and they laughed at me, and I cried. But I was only four, a baby.

Anyway, Uncle James is real weird, but I like him the best. My aunts calls him "Baby JJ," which is weird because he's taller than my cousin BoyBoy, who is two and has two teeth like a squirrel, but when I asked Mom, she said that was because he was the littlest of Dad's family.

First, there is Lola and Lolo, who is in Heaven now, then Dad is the oldest, then there are my two aunts, Tita Sunny and Tita Lulu, who are twins, but they don't look nothing alike, then my Tito Connie who's still in the Philippines, then Uncle James.

Uncle James was the only one born in America, which makes him an American like me. I once heard Dad say, *If James had been in the Philippines, he wouldn't be like this*. I think that's because Dad and Tita Sunny and Tita Lulu and everyone can speak Tagalog, but Uncle James can't, so they have to talk in English when we're all together, and I think that makes them grumpy.

Anyways, Uncle James is my favorite because he draws me cool pictures all the time: superheroes and racecars and spaceships and zombies with lots and lots of gory blood.

He draws other stuff, too. He even draws on buildings; he showed me once when he was baby-sitting me.

I was five. We had been watching *Superman* when he got up real fast and told me to put on my jacket. He went in the garage and got out lots of spraypaint cans, then we walked to a bridge.

He said, Watch this, and he started making pictures. He drew a city and my favorite boxer, Manny Pacquiao, and my favorite superhero, Spiderman. He even drew me but with a mask on.

I wanted to tell Mom and Dad and Lola when we went home, but Uncle James shook his head. *It'll be our little secret. That's why I gave you a mask, SuperPaul*, he said.

I said, *Why?*

He said, *It's illegal*.

What's illegal? I asked.

He said, *That means the government won't like it and might put me in jail, and your parents and Lola wouldn't like that*.

I didn't understand when I was real little. I saw a picture of President Obama, and it was in three colors, red, white, and blue, so I didn't think he would mind having so many colors over the ugly gray bridge. But, Uncle James was looking at me real serious, and I didn't want him to go to jail, so I promised my best promise. It was like a pinky promise and a spit promise together, and my Mom told me not to do it because spit was *unsanitary*; so I save it for impor-

tant stuff.

When we finished, Uncle James looked at me real weird. *Paul, kiddo, be a better son than I am, okay? Want things that won't make your Mom sad, okay?*

I asked why, but he didn't answer. I wonder if one of the things was her.

One day, Uncle James came to a party with her. It was Lola's sixty-fifth birthday at our house because Lola lives with us. Dad's a doctor and is *filthy rich* like Tita Sunny says, so we have the biggest house. There was pancit and a huge lechon and flan, which I don't like because it has eggs, and a pretty cake. Tita Lulu had baked it, and it had two parts and lots of candles because Lola is real old.

Lola was pretending she was twenty-five, but I said, *You're not twenty-five; Uncle James is*, and everyone laughed while I cried like a big baby even though I'm seven and too big for that.

And then Uncle James came in with the weirdest-looking white lady I'd ever seen. Her skirt was so tight that I could see her butt — it made me feel weird — and her hair was two colors, yellow and blue. The blue was pretty, but I've never seen not-hair-colors up so close before.

Everyone stopped laughing and then Dad went up to Uncle James and yelled, *Why did you bring her here?*

Uncle James yelled back, *Ashley is my girlfriend, and I can take her wherever I want to*. Then they shouted bad words at each other, lots of 'em, and Lola started crying, *Why, why, why, shame . . . married woman . . . American* and then started talking in Tagalog so I couldn't understand. She was slobbering a lot, snot flying on me.

Ashley — her — just was next to Uncle James. There was a ring in her nose; I wondered if it hurt. Then, I thought Mom and Lola and my aunts had rings in their ears, and that didn't seem to hurt.

Then, Mom was yelling, too, all the bad words she told me not to say.

Your fault, she yelled and pointed at her.

Your fault what, I thought. Was it because of her that Uncle James didn't come to my house anymore?

Uncle James and her weren't talking. They just left with Uncle James's hand tight around her butt.

Mom, Dad, Lola, and all my aunts and uncles and cousins watched them leave. Dad and Mom looked mad; Lola was still crying. Lola then hugged me. *Never*, she said, *Go with a bad woman like her, Paul*.

A bad woman. I tried to figure out what she meant, but it was hard to think with Lola crying all over me. Ashley had a ring in her nose, and Mom, Lola, Tita Sunny, and Tita Lulu did not. She had not-hair-colors, and they did not.

Was that what made her bad? I wondered, but it sounded too babyish to me. Mom always told me that appearances didn't count, that the beggar in the street could be Jesus come to life, like a zombie. Of course, then, she would yell at me for not taking a bath or combing my hair, so that didn't make sense, but Uncle James had tattoos and girl-hair, and she seemed to like him, at least before her. Lots of things changed after her. I didn't like her, for making Uncle James leave. I wished I could blast her with laser-vision or use mind-power to make her disappear. But I couldn't.

It's boring without Uncle James. Tita Sunny's and Tita Lulu's kids are too little for me, and Tito Connie's kids are all babies, too, in the Philippines. Uncle James was the only one who would play with me.

I like to line up all of Uncle James's pictures on the ground. First, I put down the first picture he gave to me, the one he gave to Mom after I was born, because Dad and Mom had a hard time having a baby before me. It's a picture of baby-me with a cape and a *P* on my chest for SuperPaul. He told me it was because I must have had superstrength to make it into the world.

I wish I was really SuperPaul because then I can vanquish Ashley and make Uncle James come back.

Next are a bunch of ones of animals, like bears and lions and sharks. They're all eating dolphins and zebras and deer with lots of blood, which Mom hates because she says they're too scary, but I think they're cool.

Then there are the spaceships and racecars, Manny Pacquiao drawn like a real Pacman but with boxing gloves, and then, my favorite, Spiderman.

Spiderman, said Uncle James when he gave it to me, right before Ashley came and made him go away. *Spiderman is the most awesome because he's just an ordinary guy like you and me, but he gets special powers that make him different.*

Then, he stopped and made a weird sound, like *hmmmpphhh*. He scratched his head. *He's a loser at first, but Uncle Ben and Aunt May love him anyway. Then his Uncle Ben dies, and he couldn't stop him from getting killed, and his Aunt May cries, but he makes it up to them, you know? He makes her proud in the end, and Uncle Ben is probably proud in Heaven, too.*

Uncle James often said stuff like that, stuff I couldn't understand. Thinking about it makes my head feel funny, twisty and fuzzy, but I stop because Lola comes into my room.

Paul, get up, she says. We're going out.

She drives us to the scary part of town, where all the houses are small and mean-looking with broken windows and big dogs with spikes in their collars barking at us. She stops in front of the nicest-looking one, though. There's a sign that says *Dangerous Designs* which has a weird picture of a heart with a big mouth with teeth. When I squint, under it is *Spike and Ashley Watson*.

Was this Ashley's house? I wonder if we are going to bust out Uncle James like superheroes do, like Superman saves Lois and Spiderman saves Mary Jane. Lola stops the car and gets out. She lets me out, too. *It shouldn't take too long*, she says. She looks real sad. *I just want to talk.*

We walk up to the porch and then go through the rickety door, which tinkles a bell. The inside is dark and real hot and sweaty. There are papers all over the tables and squishy chairs and posters all over the wall. I look at them.

They're like Uncle James's! I yell. There are vampires and werewolves and superheroes and stuff, but then, when I squint a little bit, I see some weird naked —

Don't look at the wall, Paul! Lola snap, and then Uncle James comes through a door. *Mama?* he says. His eyes are real big.

Lola looks like she is about to cry. *JJ*, she sniffles. *I want you to come back.*

Uncle James's eyes become teeny. *I'm a grown man, Ma*, he says. *Ashley says it's time for me to leave the nest.*

Lola snorts. *What does that slut know? You're not married yet; I didn't even leave my Papa's house until I married your Papa.*

This is America, Mama. Anyway, I need space to figure out. . .stuff, he says and then stops. He sees me and says, *You brought Paul here?*

I couldn't leave him by himself. He's only a child, she says. She looks at me and says, *Stay here, Paul.*

Then, she takes Uncle James by the arm, and they go through the door, where I hear them talking, but while I try real hard to hear, I can only hear, *You need to accept her. . .never. . .not even divorced. . .need space. . .find. . .myself. . .*

What are you doing?

I jump, and there is Ashley. Her blue-and-yellow hair is shorter, but it is all different lengths, and she's wearing tight, tight jeans and a tight, tight shirt that makes her boobs look weird. I wonder how she can breathe if she's squeezed like that.

I do not answer. Her nose-ring is shining, and she says,

You're James's nephew, right?

I nod. She laughs. It isn't a nice sound. *Didn't your Mom teach you not to stare, brat?*

I'm sorry, I blurt and wish I hadn't because it is her, and she has called me brat, which is real mean.

She laughs again, but it sounds nicer. Less mean. *Okay, she did. I'm sorry.* She squints at me. *You look like James, you know?*

I blink. I don't think so, except that I am real skinny, like Uncle James. *Do not*, I say. *I don't have girl-hair.*

Okay, okay, she says, laughing. It is not as mean as the first laugh but meaner than the second. *I thought you would like that. James won't stop talking about you. I think you're his favorite out of all of them.*

I grin real big, even though I don't want to.

Really?

Yes. She stops and says, *More than me, anyway.*

But he left me, I blurt. My eyes are sting-y, and I don't want to cry in front of her.

She turns away and says in a quiet, mean, sad voice, *Don't mean a thing.* She laughs. It's the meanest laugh of all, but it makes me sad for her because it's a sad laugh, too. Like the bad rain, the one with blowing winds and dead leaves all over the ground, which makes you feel grouchy all day long. In a weird voice, she says, *People think they love people, but they don't. They don't, and it hurts them. I did it before, loving someone so I could escape. She stops and then says, Not that I did, really. Anyway, karma bit me in the ass.* She makes a choking sound. I wonder if I need to give her a Heimlich, like we learned about at school, but then she says, *James really loves you. You're lucky.*

I don't understand, and she laughs again at me. *It doesn't make any sense now. You're just a kid.* Then, she walks through another door.

And then, Lola comes out, crying. She grabs me and takes me to the car. I squirm and squirm, and I can see Uncle James behind us with his hand up in the air, like he wants to stop us, but he can't, because there's a force-field between us. And this time, I cry and cry because I'm not SuperPaul with super-strength. I'm just a blubbering baby who can't break through the wall and bring him home with me, so he can draw pictures for me again, without her and her mean, sad laugh looming over us.

THE BAY HOUSE

KELSEY CLODFELTER

Most of the time, June liked to be in the den. It was the only place in the house where the sun didn't shine right in without any consideration. Even in her own room she couldn't keep it out. Her tan curtains were too thin. When pulled across the window, they glowed hurtful orange and let the room fill up with a tired but persistent light. The kitchen was the worst, with glass everywhere and no curtains at all. The floor tiles were always hot, and the counter was always hot. The den was okay though, because it was in the center of the house, and because it was lower than the rest of the rooms, and because it was covered with a mossy green carpet like a forest floor. So that's where she stayed, especially in the summer.

Her parents were usually outside when they weren't at work. They liked living in Florida in a way that June never understood. When they said "Florida," they put a great deal of emphasis on the first two syllables and let the last float away much like a moth. They felt very proud about living right on the water and having a dock, so they spent all of their free time out there. That was okay with June because she liked to pretend things, and pretending things was much easier without noise disturbances. She liked pretending to be a mother, but only when she was by herself. When she had a friend over, she had to share the children and make joint decisions. This annoyed her so much that she decided to never get married. Her friend Goldie told her she'd never find a husband anyway, because her arms and legs were bony and her hair was frizzy and her lips were so thin they were practically nonexistent. All of that was fine with June.

One Tuesday in the summertime, June was pretending to be the mother of one of her favorite dolls, Sally. The only problem with Sally was that she was nearly as big as June. She had a big bald head and wide baby eyes, but she had the body size of a grown child. June tried to carry Sally around cradled in her arms, but she was too cumbersome, and she eventually just had to drag her around holding onto one wrist. That afternoon, she was trying to make Sally go to church, because she was pretending that it was Sunday and not Tuesday. She had just gotten Sally in her Sunday clothes when she heard the phone ring.

On the third ring, June's mother rushed in through the sliding glass door, wearing an orange tank top and faded denim shorts. She pushed the sweat on her forehead back into her big frothy curls, and then picked up the phone.

"Hello? Oh hi Sharon, no not at all, I was just out back on the dock but I'm so glad you called...no no no, not at all!"

This was something June's mother did often. She said no three times in a row rapidly when she wanted to make it known that she was not being inconvenienced. June stopped convincing Sally to go to church so she could hear her mother's conversation.

"Oh, how did that happen? Well, you know, I'm so proud of him, I think we all are. He is *more* than welcome to use it anytime he wants. Tell him to come right on over! I am just *so proud* of him. It's really great that he's...turned things around. Send him on over!" June's mother kept nodding her head up and down while she was saying this, even though Sharon couldn't see.

"Take care, now!"

She hung up the phone and padded into the den. She told June that her cousin was coming over to use the treadmill because his was broken, and he liked to run every day. June said okay and her mother went back outside. Then, June thought about this news.

Her cousin Brent was 15 and used to weigh 250 pounds. Then he developed a rare condition and went blind. The words "rare condition" were the only ones June had ever heard as explanations. After that, Brent started running and he lost eighty pounds. He always ran on a treadmill because he couldn't see outside, but his was broken so he was coming to June's house. June liked Brent, even though adults always called him surly. He had dark hair that swooped in front of his left eye, and that's maybe why they thought that. But he had a kind doughy face, even after he got thinner, and June never said much to him but always liked him.

One time, June had overheard a conversation about Brent between her mother and Aunt Sharon in the kitchen a month after he started running. Here is how it went:

"I think that Brent has been put in that really crucial position that teenagers always face, where he can either shape up or, you know, just kind of fall back. And I think he has chosen to shape up. It may be the best thing that's ever happened to him," said Aunt Sharon while stirring a fat bowl of pasta salad. June couldn't tell just what she meant. Her words sounded like they were intended for someone else, someone who wasn't Brent.

"Oh yes, certainly! I mean, you can never really have it all, and look at him. He's happier now! And best of all, he looks great," said June's mother.

June didn't think Brent seemed much happier. She thought of all the things he couldn't do, like drive or read or go most places alone. It seemed so terrible that she wanted to run into the kitchen and knock the bowl of pasta salad out from under Aunt Sharon's hand. She wanted a deluge of mayonnaise and bowties, because then maybe the adults would be so mad that they couldn't act like children.

June didn't want to make Sally go to church anymore on account of the news. She wanted to be doing something else when Brent got there other than play. She was a six-year-old, far too big for nonsense.

June threw Sally's big body aside with forceful thrust and stood up. She looked over to where the plastic child had scuttled and saw that her head was all twisted back in a way that looked uncomfortable. She started forward to straighten her up but thought twice of it. Instead, she left the room. Then she remembered that her mother liked to nag at her for leaving her belongings all over the place. She thought she would go back and get Sally and put her in her proper place, but only because her mother said so, and not because she was too attached to a doll for a girl of her age. She got the baby, left the den and began treading the stairs.

Two knocks landed themselves firmly on the door and June stopped dead in her tracks. She didn't think that Brent would get there so soon. He did live right around the corner, but she was surprised anyway. She couldn't answer the door because Brent would think she was stupid for playing with a baby doll. So she just stood still.

Oh! she thought at once.

Brent couldn't see anything, so she could answer the door without him noticing Sally. But by the time she'd thought of this, he was already cracking the door open, saying "hello?" into the hollowed foyer. Now she really couldn't move. Her mom told her that people who were blind could hear better than others, and he would know she was there and that she hadn't opened the door for him if she moved even an inch. She pressed herself into the banister of the stairs, knowing well that he would have to climb up them to get to the treadmill in the recreation room. She held her breath. Brent, wearing purple shorts that revealed loose thighs and calves, stuck out his white stick and walked to the stairs. He went up them, one by one, with ease.

June and Sally were on the eighth stair. As Brent approached, June sucked everything inward. He glided past her.

She sighed in relief.

Brent stopped and swiveled his head around. Carefully, he paced back down the stairs. When he got to the eighth one again, he stopped. He slowly extended his left hand and June cringed away.

The result was that his palm landed squatly on Sally's bald head.

A ghostly appearance passed over Brent's face and his lips parted slightly. He snatched his hand away, holding it to his abdomen as if he were wounded. He looked terribly frightened.

June didn't know what she ought to do, and before she knew it, a word flew out of her mouth, and the worst one possible given the situation. "Hi," she said. Just "hi."

Brent jolted and scoffed.

"Jesus Christ June, what the hell do you think you're doing? You just about scared me to death!"

June was silent.

"Well, what do you have to say? And what is THIS?" he asked, reaching out and

grabbing Sally with his white bread hands.

June turned the shade of crimson and a hot wave boiled over her cheeks.

"It's nothing...I was just standing here and..."

"Standing here with a baby doll trying to scare me to death? Or were you just hiding from me?"

June thought about it and neither one seemed nice. Neither one would get Brent to like her much.

Brent sighed. "Well it doesn't matter anyway," he said, and offered Sally back. The kindness melted back into his face. "That's one huge doll, huh?"

June nodded but he couldn't see her. So he went his way up the stairs and into the recreation room.

It was then that June walked up and went into her bedroom, which was right next-door. She put Sally with the other toys and lay down on her bed, on top of the comforter which was quilted with all sorts of dull shades of mauve and beige. She watched the ceiling fan twirl around slowly, focusing on one blade at a time, until her eyes began to droop. The fan made a little clicking noise as it went around; she could hear Brent's feet pounding the treadmill and all the creaks in the house. She could even hear some boat out on the bay. She felt like she could hear everything at once, and it was all very tiring.

June's eyes finally fell shut. The insides of her eyelids pulsed red as a result of the afternoon sun. Everything seemed to drift away except the sound of Brent's feet. Were they getting faster? Or perhaps she was dreaming it.

No. They were getting faster. June jolted herself back into consciousness. She tried to imagine how fast she'd have to run to keep up with the pounding noise. It was fast, inhumanly so.

That's too fast for anyone, June thought.

And as soon as she did, she heard something slam into the wall, hard. The wall shook with the impact, and she heard a low whimpering followed by a stifled moan.

The noises sounded like the next-door neighbor's dog sounded when the next-door neighbor kicked it once. He'd thought June wouldn't see, but she did.

June ran into the recreation room. The treadmill was still on, revolving the same strip of material around and around at a frightening speed. On the opposite side of the room, Brent was crumpled into a heap, his limbs hanging everywhere, his loose skin pooling on the ground. He was still whimpering. His eyes were glazed and puffy. He was drenched in sweat and red everywhere.

"Are you okay?" June asked in a voice that sounded too small. Brent made no effort to compose himself.

He gasped in some air.

"Not really," he said in a strange, high voice.

"Were—were you running too fast?" June stammered.

"I guess I was, yeah," he said.

A thick silence settled in the room. Brent's eyes became watery but his body stayed just the same, a mess on the floor.

June felt a question on the edge of her lips and it wrestled itself out before she could stop it.

"Why were you running so fast?"

Brent's face scrunched up, all of the loose skin coming together in a knot around his nose. His eyes flashed. He jerked his head toward his approximation of where June was standing.

"Well what—what else am I supposed to do?" he said, his words breaking at every syllable and inflecting upward.

June was silent. Brent was silent.

She wanted to leave. She wanted so much to leave.

At once, something snapped in Brent; he straightened his body and wiped his brow. He slowly

drew himself up the wall and shook out his arms.

The treadmill was still going so he walked over and turned it off.

"I'm sorry, June, I didn't mean for you to see me like this," he said apologetically, stiffly. "Just forget about it, okay? Don't tell your mom or anything. I'm just fine. Don't tell her otherwise."

He was limping a little bit as he picked up his white stick and padded it around and walked out of the room.

June was alone, and as soon as she heard the front door shut, everything seemed too quiet. The room, the house felt enormous. She wanted to be somewhere smaller or somewhere where there were people. She couldn't tell if she was lonely or scared, but her whole body felt rigid and shivery.

As she treaded down the stairs, she was overcome with the feeling that someone was there, just at the edge of her peripheral vision. But when she swiveled her head around, no one was.

June wanted to see her parents terribly in a way that she hadn't for years. She wanted them to be sitting on either side of her, putting their limbs around her, encasing her in a tight loop. She would settle in next to their bodies on the cool leather couch in the den, or even out on the hot dock, if they preferred. She would go anywhere, as long as they were there.

When she got downstairs, June began walking urgently through the hall, through the den, toward the sliding glass doors so that she could find her mother and father. She would tell them to be with her, and they would have to, because that's a parent's job. Then, she wouldn't have to be alone with only fake dolls for company.

She knew that sometimes her parents went over to the neighbor's house without telling her, but she felt that they would be right outside on the dock at that moment. After all, she really needed them, and that was what parents were for. They were supposed to have a sense for such things, and wouldn't go over to the neighbor's if they did.

June pushed the door open and walked outside into the cruel dome of warmth. She looked at the bare dock and saw it stretch out into the sharp line where the water ended. Her parents weren't there, but she didn't want to believe it. So she called out "Daddy" four times and let the word ring all over the yard and the bay.

The yard was still and the bay gave no reply.

She did it one more time, and something happened.

A choppy motorboat appeared up near the dock. And in the boat were four teenagers and they all had mouse blonde hair and they all had cigarettes dangling from their lips.

One of them, a boy with a patchy beard, stood up and jutted his jaw out at June. Then he made his mouth into a big sloppy pout and furrowed his eyebrows and said "Daaaddy, Daaddy, I want my Daddy!"

A cloud moved an inch and the sun, as a consequence, shined into June's eye. She couldn't see them anymore, but the teenagers all burst out in laughter. She heard them mock her all the way until they were out of earshot. Then she squinted her eye to compensate for the oppressive light and she looked out into the bay. She saw their boat go to the right edge of the bay, then, skirt around the corner, then come back on the far side.

They rode by the dock again but paid her no attention. They did this over and over as June sank and sweated into the soil of her mother's garden. They did it as the dusk enclosed her in its hot dark oven.

The teenagers went around in loops, over and over again, as the sky turned gray. They did this because the bay was nothing more than a big fat circle.

There was nowhere else for them to go.

DRONES

ELEANOR MAXWELL FOWLER

I noticed them one day while sitting in algebra. I was twirling my Bic mechanical pencil idly while listening to the professor drone about linear equations when I looked above me to see them. Six of them buzzed around the classroom, landing on pencil erasers before darting off to other destinations in the room. I watched them curiously. Other students swatted at them too. As the hour and a half passed, more and more of them infiltrated the room. Six became eighteen. Eighteen became thirty-five. Thirty-five became fifty. They began teeming and congregating in the florescent lights. Bobbing in and out of the air conditioning vents. Settling on the dry erase board. Flies. Swarms of them—huge horse flies. Over the course the week, I noticed them in all of my classes. They began to accumulate in the Science building as well as in Owens Student Center. I asked some of my classmates about them, but I'm not so good with people. For some reason, they didn't seem to notice them like I did. As the days passed, their buzzing became ceaseless. Their incessant noise slowly droned out each and every one of my professors during class. From Dr. Buffington's biology lectures to Professor Gibbs' intro to psych course, I couldn't hear a thing. There was nothing to learn with their deafening humming reverberating through the lecture halls. At that point I gave up. I stopped going to class. There was no reason any more.

Days pass. I spend my time taping up all the cracks in my dorm room ceiling. The flies could get in that way. Sometimes I wake up and I feel them crawling on my skin. I jolt awake every night at three AM and frantically tape the spaces in my air conditioning vents. That must be how they are getting in.

The weekend comes. My mother calls to check up on me. I let her call go to voice mail. I can barely hear anything above the persistent drone. I'll call her back when I can think clearly again.

One week has passed. Professors email me about missing class. I email them back, rationally explaining the deplorable conditions of the classrooms here. Those flies. I wonder to myself how anyone could even try to teach in a place like this. The buzzing still echoes in my ears.

A week and a half. A knock on my door. Some Student Services bureaucrat wants to "talk." My RA hovers nervously behind the faculty member, flitting from one side of the doorway to the other. Maybe she too has been affected by the flies? They look at me with concern. They ask me about class. They talk to me like I don't speak English; their speech is slow and deliberate. They want to know how I am doing. How am I doing? I tell them, calmly and rationally, that there is no way that I can possibly attend class with the fly problem that we have around campus. The bureaucrat looks at me for a moment. His eyes rest on my dirty hair. For a second I try to recall the last time I took a proper shower, but I brush that thought away. Why should I try to shower when this disgusting place attracts swarms of pest? He peers into my dark room, admiring my handy work. He seems to be solemnly considering something. He looks at my RA before he picks up his cell phone. He says that he's going to get me some help. *Well*, I think, *it is about time*.

EBB AND FLOW

MICHELLE HADDAD

Rebecca Blunt's husband kills himself by swimming out into the ocean. There is a tiny dock just off the coast of Maine, a secluded private beach where he has gone swimming every morning for the past seventeen years. But there is something very different about the day on which he dies. Later, Rebecca will picture the events in meticulous succession, a neat list of details to fill in the blank of his death as cold and fathomless as the sea.

She envisions him walking out onto the dock as the first blush of rose-colored sun illuminates the sky, bare feet flopping against the weathered boards, goosebumps covering his skin in the sharply-chilled air. He does not hesitate as he comes to the end, stepping off of solid ground and landing in the water with a muffled splash. His strokes are long, fast, and assured: he has always been an excellent swimmer.

The water, clear and icy cold, quickly drains his energy as his limbs cut through it. His strength fades, and still he keeps swimming, haplessly chasing the horizon, the forgotten dock a tiny speck in the retreating background. His movements falter, the rolling rhythm of the tide overtakes him, and his breathing becomes at first feverish and ragged, then slow and shallow. Eventually he stops altogether, and his lifeless body bobs gently up and down, out beyond the place where the waves curl and break.

It was a deliberate choice, Rebecca is certain. She does not consider even for a moment that it might have been an accident, though she cannot understand the why of it. Roger has always known his own limits as well as he knew the tides. Rebecca knows he would never have risked his life in this way unless he had intended to lose it.

The call comes while she is at work, and that seems somehow strangely fitting.

Rebecca looks around the interior of her office as she holds the receiver to her ear and listens to the disembodied voice of a policeman on the other end of the line. Across from the painstakingly organized surface of her desk sit a plush leather couch and an armchair in soothing shades of brown; on the bookshelf, a small meditation fountain burbles away cheerfully. In studies, it has been shown that this type of décor helps people to relax and enter a mindset where they may be analytical about their problems.

Today, listening to a stranger describe her husband's death, Rebecca does not feel relaxed. Today, the room feels fake, a facade constructed with the intent of manipulating her into forgetting what real problems are like. Today, nothing makes sense and she feels lost, alien in her usual surroundings.

"A couple of fisherman found the body and called us in," the officer is saying. There is the sound of paper shuffling, and Rebecca pictures him flipping through the pages of the report. To the officer, this will be a well-practiced routine. Just another part of the job. Nothing to get emotional over.

"Thank you for letting me know," says Rebecca at last, her voice sounding hollow and deceptively calm in her own ears.

"Deaths like this, we normally do an autopsy. Look into the possibility of foul play," says the officer. Perhaps not entirely routine, then, yet still not so out of the ordinary.

"That won't be necessary," says Rebecca firmly, and leaves it at that. She does not want the answers an investigation might provide, has always been most content with her own conception of things.

"You sure?" The officer sounds surprised for the first time. "He wasn't wearing anything but swim trunks. That far out in this kind of weather? You'd need a wet suit to have any hope of surviving long enough to make it back to shore."

"Thank you for your time," Rebecca answers coldly, and hangs up the phone.

She'd been fascinated by disorders of the mind since her mother had jumped from the balcony of her childhood home.

Rebecca was still very young when it happened, not yet old enough to be told the details, but able to understand that the whispers her mother had heard from underneath the floorboards were not real. Afterward, the family had tried not to speak of her mother's

death, had simply called it a tragedy and an accident, no further explanation required. But Rebecca had never forgotten as they had perhaps hoped; instead, she had been consumed by a newfound need to analyze and quantify the problems and secrets of everyone around her. To ensure that never again would she be caught unawares by catastrophe, a leap from a balcony or a descent into the twisted world of psychosis.

It wasn't until later, after Rebecca had gotten her counseling license, that Aunt Eliza had whispered the truth in her ear at the family Christmas party, as though even then it was too shameful to speak the words aloud.

"She heard voices, you know." Aunt Eliza had drunk four glasses of Merlot with dinner, and the redness seemed to have permanently tinted her cheeks and the tip of her long, sloping nose. Her words were slightly slurred as she leaned close to Rebecca's ear, the smell of alcohol on her breath nearly overpowering.

"I know," Rebecca had answered carefully. "She asked me if I could hear what they were saying, sometimes." She had never been a drinker, the lack of self-control repulsive to her.

"She thought the neighbors were plotting to have her arrested," said Aunt Eliza. She had always been the family gossip, the one attracted to the type of secret just dirty enough to make a juicy story. "She thought she could hear them talking about her through the floor from downstairs. That they knew she was crazy. Ironic, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," said Rebecca meaningfully, though she'd been thinking more of the family's later judgment than any opinion of the neighbors'. She was used to people treating mental illness as taboo by now, had read in textbooks about the damage that sort of stigma could do. And yet, surrounded by relatives decked out in layers of holiday finery and rampant hypocrisy, all Rebecca could do was stand paralyzed and listen.

"She threw herself off the balcony to avoid getting locked up in an asylum," Aunt Eliza had whispered, shaking her head in insincere regret. "She would have been better off with the straightjacket and padded walls, if you ask me. Such a tragedy."

"Right," Rebecca had said, wondering why she was so incapable of confronting her own family's ignorance. "A tragedy."

It had taken Rebecca a very long time to find a suitable life partner.

In school, she had never had the time, had been obsessed with her textbooks to the exclusion of anything else, shutting out everyone in the pursuit of learning how to save them. When she'd finally gotten her counseling license, she'd wrapped herself up in unraveling the intricacies of other people's lives, had lived vicariously through her clients' successes and crises. Later, when she'd moved to New England and started her own practice, she had finally begun thinking about the possibility of a family for herself.

But by then Rebecca had been indelibly marked by her career, the scars from other people's pain having formed around her heart like an invisible callus, so subtly that she had not realized until it was too late. By then, she had learned to see the pathology in everyone's thoughts, the potential for ruin lurking just around every corner. She'd begun to see only symptoms, where once there had been intentions and emotions, and she could not lull herself back into blissful ignorance.

Some women looked for a man with beautiful eyes, or the ability to make them laugh, or the sensitivity to make him an excellent future father. Rebecca searched for one whose thoughts did not even remotely fit the descriptions in the thick textbooks which filled her shelves, whose mind and soul were guaranteed to remain healthy.

She had met Roger at a research conference she'd been attending to learn about the latest medications for the treatment of depression, the newest generation of miracle pills touted for their ability to fix chemical imbalances in the brain. As if it might be so simple to mend a person after a lifetime of brokenness. Rebecca had never believed much in medications, and had welcomed the distraction of Roger's presence.

He was an artist who specialized in drawing three-dimensional renderings of the

brain, a hot commodity in textbooks and research journals. He'd been sitting behind a table in the spacious vendors' room at the conference with a large reprint of one of his drawings hung on the wall behind him. It had looked as though his own perfect mind might be displayed for the whole room to see, the lobes stained vivid colors, sulci and gyri standing out in stark contrast like the neon coils on a billboard.

"Penny to draw your thoughts," he'd said to Rebecca when she'd stopped in front of his table and winked in a way which said he knew exactly how cheesy his joke had been. He had a long face with a slightly hooked nose, and blue eyes which seemed to sparkle with a depth of knowledge and wit.

"How do you know what I'm thinking?" she'd asked, at once bemused and intrigued by his boldness and by the heart of her work sketched on the wall behind him, the invisible made clear for the world to see.

"If you look at enough brains," he'd said, "you learn how to read people. You should take me up on that offer. I bet you have a beautiful frontal lobe." He'd winked again, and this time Rebecca couldn't help but laugh.

That night, Roger had shown up at the door of her hotel room.

It was nearly midnight, and Rebecca had been sitting up stiffly against the headboard, reading the articles for the next day's research presentations with eyes full of sandpaper. The knock had startled her out of a drowsy haze; there were still two days left of the conference, but she was already exhausted by early mornings and the deluge of new information. She was not expecting anyone else to be up and around at this hour, let alone coming to see her. Still, she'd forced herself to sit up, swing her legs over the side of the bed with a yawn, and tuck the hotel's cheap terry cloth robe around herself before going to glance through the peephole. Roger stood there in a t-shirt and paint-spattered jeans, clutching a rolled up piece of paper in both hands.

"Hi," he'd said, when she'd opened the door, not quite as self-assured as he'd been earlier in the vendors' room, but neither nervous nor shy.

"Hi," Rebecca had echoed, confused. "It's late. What are you doing here?" She had recognized the flirtatious spark in his eyes that afternoon, knew that must be why he was here now. She understood the behaviors, could read his intentions as easily as she read her clients, but here they felt out of context. She had never allowed a man to pursue her before.

"I brought you something," said Roger, offering the paper.

Rebecca took it tentatively, inhaling the starchy scent of ink and parchment. The distance to the small desk had felt incredibly long, her heart fluttering in her chest. She was not accustomed to feeling this way; she had always gone out of her way to ensure that no one would take her by surprise. But tonight the sensation was not all bad, even as it seemed to send her world spinning off its axis. On the paper was the outline of a freshly-sketched brain, but in place of the anatomically correct lobes, he had drawn an intricate bouquet of flesh-colored roses.

Rebecca drew in a breath, surprised to find herself captivated by the strange magnificence of the thing. "It's beautiful."

"Sometimes impressions can be more accurate than measurements," Roger said simply. "You're a counselor, right?"

Rebecca nodded. "How did you know?"

"You've got that vibe," he'd said, and smiled crookedly. "Also, I read your nametag earlier."

After the call, Rebecca sits in the seclusion of her office, trying to decide what to do. Her colleagues will be filled with sympathy and compassion if she tells them. After all, they specialize in healing the minds of damaged people, just as she does. They will have good advice, strategies for coping healthfully. And yet, in this moment, Rebecca cannot imagine admitting to them the news she has just received. It feels strangely like a failure, not because Roger has died, but because she has no idea why he would want to kill himself. She

cannot bring herself to face anyone at the practice, let alone Roger's family, when there are still so many unknowns.

The workday is nearly over by now, no more appointments scheduled until the morning. Rebecca finishes the paperwork she was filling out when the phone rang, feeling numbed by this task. It is so much simpler to record the results of a mental status exam than to think about her husband drowning himself; here, there are clear-cut answers, the neat translation of an illness into discrete manageable terms. She has never liked open-ended questions, and the possibilities surrounding Roger's suicide are as profound as the deepest of oceans.

When she gets home, Rebecca goes straight to her neatly categorized and alphabetized bookshelf, gets down onto her knees, and pulls out her copy of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. The thick book falls open in her lap; its paper has yellowed with age, and the spine is broken in the middle from overuse, flimsy pages threatening to come loose from the thin layer of glue holding them together. In this book, Rebecca has always found her answers, all the complexities of life neatly broken down into explicit diagnostic criteria. Understanding is as simple as matching each puzzle piece to its correct groove.

Roger had proposed on the top of a hill, with the green treetops below stretching on for miles.

Rebecca had never paid much attention to nature, had always been more interested in people than insect or plant life. But Roger drew inspiration from the outdoors, spent long hours walking on the beach or hiking in the woods. He'd told her, once, how the brain was like a rugged landscape, filled with cliffs and valleys. He had wanted to map all its variations the way cartographers had once discovered and recorded the vast secrets of the Earth.

"We need to get away," he'd said, after a year together. "Spend some time alone in nature. It's what we both need." Roger had been patient, tolerating her endless hours at work, her penchant for staying at the office to finish paperwork in spite of their plans. Until now, he'd been content to live on the periphery of her career, though it was clear that he loved her.

He had insisted that they come on this camping trip, that Rebecca take time off from work for the first time since she'd started her practice. She'd been apprehensive, of course, feeling committed to her clients, despite the help of her colleagues filling in. But she had faith in Roger, too, knew that he loved her and that this was likely to be the best partnership of her life. For the first time in a very long time, she had no apprehensions about the future. She understood that relationships were based on give and take, had taught it to endless people struggling with marriage, friendship, family. Just one more thing on which she was expected to be the authority, though she had never experienced it for herself.

So when Roger had told her that this trip was imperative, she had recognized this as an instance where their relationship must take precedence over her career. And she had grown to know him well enough to suspect he wanted to propose besides. She did not understand what was so crucial about doing it in the woods, but she knew the act was important to him.

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you," Roger had said. The ring caught the sunlight, sending bright reflections dancing across the rocks, and over the edge of the nearby cliff. In the distance, a pair of butterflies wove through the air in an intricate mating dance, ethereal as they floated above the valley below, untouched by the pull of gravity.

Rebecca had nodded and allowed him to slip the ring neatly onto her finger. It fit perfectly, and though she was not superstitious, everything about the moment had seemed to suggest good things to come. She had been silently studying their relationship for a long time, and yet could see nothing but happiness in the future.

In retrospect, Rebecca wonders whether Roger's obsession with nature and isolation should have been a warning sign from the start.

At the time, it had seemed healthy, an inspiration and an escape like his art. His

drawings had seemed invariably linked to his long walks in the woods, his morning ocean swims. She had been aware of these things, but had not seen any of it as threatening, as warranting any action on her part. She had always assumed that these behaviors were completely innocuous, a part of his work just like her late nights at the clinic. And yet, now, she realizes that she must have missed something, or this would not have happened.

Looking down again at the book in her lap, Rebecca flips to the section on depression. The multitude of disorders are described in clear, bullet-pointed diagnostic criteria designed to distinguish between the subtleties of different diseases. She knows this section well, can recite most of the symptoms by heart. But today she feels like a stranger, wandering despondently through these well-worn pages. She stays like this until her knees ache, outlines of the carpet fibers pressed red and sore into the skin of her shins. She has made a fresh and exhaustive search through every page of the chapter on depressive disorders looking for clues, any sort of hint she might have missed. But there is no definitive answer to make it clear why Roger has killed himself. Nothing to absolve her of her ignorance.

Sliding the book back into its place on the shelf, Rebecca glances through the other titles before deciding that none of them are likely to be of any more help. All of her adult years, she has relied on textbooks and theory to give her the answers when life is bewildering. It has always felt like something of a race to her, she realizes, scrambling to learn all of the possibilities before any of them might overtake her. But tonight, the very foundations of her existence seem to have been irrevocably changed; she has fallen into a void of confusion and there is nothing to grasp for balance. All along, she has had the correct answers, been aware of every contingency, and yet now her husband is dead, deliberately drowned beneath the waves of his beloved ocean, and she hasn't the slightest idea why.

Getting to her feet at last, Rebecca makes her way slowly to the back room, which Roger had set up as a studio for his art. The walls are covered from floor to ceiling with the many brain scans he uses for reference. As she turns on a light, they look to her more like a mob of grotesque abstract faces, grimacing back at her in austere black and white contrast. It feels like entering a tomb.

A large sketchbook lies open on the table in the middle of the room, and Rebecca sucks in a breath as she forces herself to walk over to it. On the first page, there is an unfinished drawing, the outline of a brain with bones where the characteristic folds of tissue ought to be. The skeleton of a mind, a world. Turning the page reveals another drawing, this one of a brain riddled with dark holes, flesh rotting from the inside out.

Rebecca stifles a cry at its appearance and closes her eyes, trying to picture roses instead.

They had rarely fought.

When they did, it was more a clash of logic than the typical arguments of passion Rebecca heard about in her therapy sessions. She had always been grateful for this, though she had been taught that conflict could be healthy for a relationship. That they could settle their differences through philosophical debate rather than yelling and tears was another fortuitous way their personalities fit together.

"You really think you know everything about everyone, don't you," Roger had said once, when she'd been talking about one of her clients, a teenage mother who was having trouble adjusting to her rushed marriage.

"It's my job to know everything about everyone," Rebecca had answered, surprised that he'd questioned her assurance in her ability to help the girl. "Or at least about my clients. That's what they're paying me for. You think I could be a good counselor if I didn't understand people?"

"I think you're getting cocky," said Roger. "It's been years since I've heard you take a second to consider the possibility that you might be wrong. That there might be more to a situation than what you got taught in school. Being a counselor doesn't make you omniscient. You can only observe, you can't actually read their minds."

"Then how am I supposed to help people, if I'm always supposed to be thinking I'm wrong?" Rebecca had asked, unsettled. It wasn't that she thought she could read minds. That would have been absurd. But she was confident in her ability to read behavior, to listen to a client describing a situation and know how they felt and what they needed. She had made a career on teaching people the things they could not yet see for themselves.

"You help them make realizations about themselves," Roger had said. "You figure it out with them. They're human beings, not stopped-up plumbing. You can't just look at them and know everything in absolutes."

At the time, she had dismissed his opinion, decided that he was simply frustrated with the increased hours she'd been spending at the clinic. She'd made a point of getting home by dinner for the next week, and considered the matter solved.

A thought traveling through the brain makes a shape like a wave, electrical current cresting, breaking, and crashing down only to rise again. This is the immutable way in which the mind works, the life cycle of every idea, behavior, and emotion. An invisible dance buried beneath the deceptively smooth serenity of skin and bone, never ceasing until death.

It is not yet light outside when Rebecca arrives at the beach, parks her car at the edge of the dirt road, then removes her shoes and makes her way down the hill toward the shore. The sound of the surf is loud in her ears, the sand damp and deeply chilled beneath her feet, guiding her ever-closer to the water's edge. The tide is out, she can see, as her eyes adjust to the darkness, and the horizon turns the deep blue which signals the coming of the dawn. Small ocean creatures lie on the exposed sand, some trying feebly to drag themselves back toward the water, others simply still, seeming to have accepted their fate.

Rebecca steps over them carefully, making her way out onto the dock. The boards are wet with dew and she shivers, hugging herself as she walks to the far edge. Looking out at the ocean, she tries to picture her husband, to untangle the things she is feeling in this moment. Confusion is still foremost in her mind, stealing her breath and making her world feel cracked at its foundation. She ought to feel grief, she thinks, but that has yet to come. She loved Roger once, she is certain, but what emotions she harbors toward him now, she cannot say. In recent years, she has grown comfortable with their marriage, let it fade into the background of her many other fears and responsibilities. And she does not know how to face herself, her own loss, or the many others who will have been touched by this tragedy.

She realizes she has been standing in the stillness of the morning for a very long time when the sun finally begins to climb into the sky, waves crashing onto the beach as the restoration of the tide brings redemption for the stranded. They will be expecting her at work in a few minutes, but Rebecca feels immobilized, unable to go back to her once-tidy world which now feels like a wishful lie. She does not know what she is doing out here, except that she feels the overwhelming need to understand. For the first time in her life, rational scientific analysis and logic have failed her. Sucking in a breath of the salt-sharpened air, Rebecca pulls her sweater over her head and lets it fall to the dock in a pile of damp artificiality.

Then, quickly, she lifts her arms above her head, takes three steps forward, and jumps.

VANTAGE POINT

ELLI ANNE KARRAS

Rob loves washing his car in his long straight driveway. After they separated he bought himself a sweet shiny Aston Martin with a cool gun metal gray paint job. He probably shouldn't be thinking about guns right now. Besides, the car wasn't replacing her or anything. He started unraveling the hose. How could anyone think he would be shallow enough to buy a car to replace his wife. He twisted the knob angrily and the hose shot his foot with a jet of pressurized water. "Goddamn it!" he shouts and yanks the tip of the hose over the bucket.

Rob is not having a mid-life crisis. He abandons the hose to get the cleaning solution out of the garage. They were married for twelve years. Then she decides they should separate for a while. Just like that. No reason. He violently squeezes the bottle so the hood of the car is splattered with green liquid drips that vaguely resemble a Pollack.

His ex loved art but not traditional romantic art where the subject was clearly distinguishable. Lara loved modern pieces that would make you stop, stare, and tilt your head sideways. She was always coming and going from auctions and museums. Her paddles and ticket stubs used to cover every side table in the house. He couldn't tell you the number of times she begged him for a new piece of like her life depended on it. He could hear her whiny voice pleading, "Rob, this one's different. It's exquisite. I have to have it for the living room. If we don't like it in our space I can sell it at the gallery."

"Shit." He runs over to the overflowing bucket and turns off the hose. He lugs the bucket over and drops it with a thud by the left front tire. He's elbow deep in warm water as he reaches for the sponge. Several grand would go missing now and then. The credit card bills were lined with names of obscure art galleries in New York, Los Angeles and wherever the hell else "artists" sell people like her a blue blob in the middle of a white canvas and convince her it's the next big thing. He pulls the sponge out of the bucket and starts blending the Pollack soap splatter into Starry Night swirls.

They went to a Van Gogh exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art for their first date. He asked around at Penn and found out she was an Art History major. He was a finance major so he knew absolutely zero about art or dating. That was before he became a successful financier. The times when they drank cheap beer and walked around Philly. He moved from the hood and started scrubbing the doors.

The Vantage is a sports car. It only has two doors. When people see it they probably think the man behind the wheel has an ego problem when they should be thinking how fortunate they are to behold the most beautiful combination of power, beauty, and soul. He rests his left hand on the door handle. His hand had shaken when he opened the door for her on their first date. Back then he drove a faded blue Camry that had seen better days.

She stopped in front of "Vase with Twelve Sunflowers." She stared at it for what seemed like an eternity. He shoved his hands in his pockets and sort of rocked back and forth while he waited behind her. She turned around suddenly and said, "Rob, how does this painting make you feel?" He looked at her blankly. A minute or two passed. "I like the yellow." She rolled her eyes; reached for his hand and they kept going.

He took a break from the body to get his bench for detailing the wheels. He rolled it from the driveway to the car and walked back. He opened up the car care cabinet mounted to the side of the garage. It was jammed with bottles of leather conditioner, exterior wax, interior cleaner, wheel cleaner, carpet foam, and air freshener.

He remembered a yellowed photo of Lara from junior year of college sitting on his desk at work. She was grinning behind the wheel of a red Cadillac convertible. It was a surprise rental for his twenty-first birthday. They drove all over Philly. They parked. Then they split a cheap greasy cheese steak so he could buy them expensive drinks with absurd names like Alpine Sprite and True Amaretto Sour.

He was on the last wheel by now. He looked up at the famous wing emblem. If he said "wings" to Lara she would start talking about her favorite wing at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

"Thanks for bringing me here Rob."

"Just wanted to make you happy."

She took a step closer and got on her tip toes to kiss him. He had been with girls in high school but he never seriously dated anyone before Lara. She was sexy and confident. She was passionate about modern art and obscure films. What the hell got into her? Why would someone just leave with no explanation?

Rob thinks he needs to stop thinking about her. He has to stop otherwise he'll do something irrational. Besides, it's time to rinse. He picks up the hose coiled near the bucket and resets the spray so the pressure won't get his foot again. Suds roll off the car and trickle down the driveway.

BOX

MERRILL MONTGOMERY

I'm going to start this story with a place, because that's the easiest part. I want you to imagine it. It's somewhere in the desert. Please don't imagine 200-year-old cacti and fennec foxes. That's the wrong kind of desert. No, not expansive African desert with camels and moons that glow red. Also wrong. Bombed out ruined desert in the west of the American continent? You got it. Throw in some "Air Force Base, Restricted Area," signs, some misery, and a highway that's not one way but looks it and you've got your location. Then there is me. I am in this location. I am hot, and mad and sixteen years old. Yeah, the one dressed in the obscene tube top, the highwaters and the converses. As for the other jokers standing around the gently smoking late model car, that's my family. Somehow dad forgot to check the water in the radiator before we pulled out of our hotel this morning, and now we're all paying the price.

"Oh Frank..." My mother is saying in her sad, disappointed way. Sad disappointment is the emotion she uses in lieu of anger. It makes her into a bunny or a kitten or something, and you simultaneously want to cuddle her and kick her, but the thought of kicking her makes you into an asshole, so you end up just standing there and not doing anything. I'm pretty sure it's a deliberate manipulation tactic on her part. She turns her doe eyes to the ground and shuffles away. I've got no trouble being angry and I start picking up the chunks of loose pavement from the lane nearest us and throwing them into the desert. There isn't a chance in hell that a car is coming, so sitting in the road isn't posing any particular threat to my well being.

"Amanda, don't do that." My father says, as he wipes his two-toned aviator sunglasses on his mauve fishing shirt and replaces them on his shiny, sweat-soaked visage. "Ok Super Trooper." I say, and keep throwing the chunks of road into the desert. I've been calling my dad Super Trooper for the whole trip, and he's too clueless or downtrodden or whatever to understand that it's because of his sunglasses. "I'm really not that much of a disciplinarian," I heard him whispering to my mom one time after I'd tried showing him my driver's license and registration at a rest stop. She'd smiled dopily and patted his arm. I really hope my mom's on drugs, because the alternative is too much to bear.

The point of those past details, the ones about my mom and my dad, and my angry self in my high waters are to delineate in no uncertain terms, just how fucked we are as a family. We are fucked, by the way, in case you didn't notice, because Dad has now taken the spare out of the trunk of the car and is rolling it around in circles, even though there is nothing wrong with the tires. My mother is asking if he needs help with the tires, and I've single handedly created from a pot-hole a breakdown in the road system that would best be described as a bathtub-hole. My mother comes and looks at it and says:

"Amanda, do you think maybe your time would be better spent otherwise?"

"Yeah, mom" I say. "Yeah, I'll get right down to inventing a flying machine or curing cancer or something. What do you suggest I do?"

"Maybe help your dad with the tire?"

I look at her, and slowly pick up an extra large chunk of Nevada Department of Transportation property and fling it into the desert.

"Oh Amanda," My mother says sadly, and pats my arm. "Frank..." She calls "Can I help you with the tire?" and scurries off.

Normally, I would have ridiculed my mother or at the very least taken the time to roll my eyes at her idiocy, but I've noticed something peculiar (I be wearing highwaters, but I am not a complete idiot.) The last chunk of cement I threw, it doesn't make the same noise as the others. It makes a sharp, hollow thud and there is no cloud of dust. I walk closer to examine it.

"What are you doing dear?" My mother asks in her same dreamy tone, and my dad bounces the tire like he's a NASCAR crewmember. I am already half way over the fence with the "Restricted Area" sign.

"Spending my time otherwise." I call over my shoulder. I reach the spot where my

rock has fallen and there is a square of wood the size of a work-boot shoebox below it. It appears to be a lid, so I dig in the loose white sand around it, and before long I am holding a good-sized shining wooden box.

"What's that?" My dad asks. He's sitting down on the tire to watch me dig.

"Maybe it's a time capsule left by elementary students..." My mother says with misty eyes. This elicits a look of confusion and slight horror even from my father, who usually is quite generous with my mother. I even once heard him tell his friends that he married an intelligent woman. I'd asked him what happened to his first wife, and was she my real mother, and he'd looked confused and told me he'd only been married once. I lay awake at night thinking about how shallow my gene pool really is.

I hand the box to my mother, and scramble over the fence, wondering what long-term effects my foray into the restricted area will have on my health. Best Case Scenario: my children will have none of my DNA.

I grab the box from my mother, and set it on the car and slide the top open. Inside there is a gallon of water, still sealed.

"Look at that!" My dad says and snatches it from me, hurrying to pop the hood and pour the water into the radiator. I take the box and go and sit in the backseat.

"Do you think a park ranger left it? Or perhaps...the children?" My mother asks.

No response.

My dad slams the hood and then the trunk closed, throws the spare tire in the backseat with me, and hops in the car. The car roars to life.

"What a lucky break we had!"

Lucky indeed, I think. They would have found three bodies in the desert, one dead from natural causes and the other two throttled to death.

I slide the lid closed and think idly how nice it would be to have a book to read or a can of cold soda to drink, and I suddenly feel the box on my lap grow heavier. I slide the lid open, and a can of soda, sweating in the Nevada heat, sits in a koozie next to a Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, and a copy of *Confederacy of Dunces*. I am momentarily surprised and then I think, Bravo, Magic Box, you have a sense of humor. "Thanks," I whisper to the box (I am grumpy, but not incapable of emotion). A figurine of a Jesus giving me the "Thumbs Up" appears in the box along with a bar of chocolate. Fuck yeah, Magic Box. You're the best.

So let's zoom out again, so you don't lose touch with reality, because after all, I've just told you about me finding a generous, clever, Magic Box in the desert. So here we are, in the middle of Nevada in our late model car, me drinking a soda and reading a book, my mom singing along to the news, my dad making occasional clicking noises with his mouth, which means he's deep in "thought" or whatever it is that happens to him when his neurons fire. So remember, you're in reality. And now you're probably also curious about the box that you only half-believe exists.

FAQ time. Did I tell anyone about the Magic Box? Hell no. Well, just you, actually. But before you, nobody. I just kept it with me all the time, and we had quite a relationship. I realized, after a while, that it needed things too. It would ask in subtle ways, giving me hints of what it wanted through figurines and drawings and the occasional note. Sometimes it wanted polished, other times it wanted conversation, and one time it wanted a photo of a 1989 Toyota Corolla and a small bottle of lotion. I didn't ask. Boxes have all kinds of needs too, I guess.

FOR WANT OF A PUPPY

MERRILL MONTGOMERY

Marlene and Ken are in their third and final year of marriage. They are in a green Saab south bound on I-95, Marlene drinking a ginger-ale purchased for more than it was worth at South of the Border, and Ken growing more and more annoyed with the way she is smacking her lips after every sip. She smacks her lips and burps loudly and Ken gives her an icy look.

"Marlene, can you drink a little quieter."

"Ken, can you be a little more tolerant."

Silence from mile marker 125 to 120.

Lip smacking starts again.

"Marlene, please."

Marlene leans forward and turns the music on. She scans until she finds a station not on the commercials. It's a rap station. The singer is counting away in Portuguese. Ken hates rap, but Marlene leans happily back in her seat and continues slurping away at her ginger ale. She bought three, so Ken knows that there will be no respite when this one has been slurped away. He becomes more and more aware of the fact that he hates her.

"Marlene, dear, can you turn the music down."

She does, sulkily.

Slurp.

Slurp.

Slurp.

Ken says nothing. Ken has nothing to say.

"Seriously, did you have a good time visiting my parents?" Marlene asks for the third time, this time after cracking open her second bottle of liquid annoyance.

"It was pleasant. Virginia is lovely country."

"Virginia is lovely country. I thought the restaurant we ate at last night was good."

Ken has already told her that he didn't care for his meal, but he tells her again.

"I thought my halibut was a bit over-cooked."

"You just don't like seafood Ken, and that isn't the restaurants fault. God, I bet if it had been with your parents you would have loved the halibut."

"You're being a little irrational."

He regrets those words as soon as they leave his mouth.

"Irrational?! I'm being irrational!" She laughs. Big, separate, angry HA's that slap Ken in the face as they leave her mouth. "Do you want to talk about irrational? Mr. Pot, I'm Mrs. Kettle!" She laughs again.

Slurp.

Ken realizes quietly that he would like to kill her, but instead turns up the music. The man singing is talking about taking the knife off of the A.K. and cutting some "itches" and Ken nods in solidarity with the man. He understands.

Marlene turns down the music.

"Marlene, can you please turn the music up again."

"Are you kidding?"

"Turn up the God. Damn. Music. Marlene. I like that song."

"You don't like the song. You just don't want to talk to me."

"What is there to say Marlene? What is there to say?"

"How did you like visiting my parents, how do you like my brother's new house? God.

It's like being married to a statue. A sulking statue."

There is a pause. Ken is remembering sitting in her parent's house, the cat, which he is allergic to, perched on his lap, her parents asking him time and time again "what it was he did for a living". Marlene's dad is a retired investment banker, and Ken lies and tells him that he's doing pro-bono work for a law firm protecting innocent citizens from corrupt investment firms. Ken laughs a little at the memory and goes to turn up the music, and Marlene slaps his hand away.

"Don't slap me." Ken says.

"Don't touch the radio."

"It's my radio. I paid for it."

"You don't pay for anything anymore."

"It's not my fault I'm under-employed, Marlene."

Marlene doesn't say anything.

"You couldn't have just kept your old job, like I told you to." Marlene says finally, and smacks her lips loudly. "You could have stayed with the firm you were at, instead of trying to start your own. I told you that you didn't have enough of a client base to have your own law firm. But I guess I don't need to say I told you so. Your BooksAlot uniform is enough." She turns up the music really loudly, and now the song is an annoying low one that is about love. Ken gets more and more angry.

"Maybe if we had a family, I'd have more impetuous to find a new job."

Marlene's face turns white, and Ken once again regrets the words he spoke, this time more than the first. He holds his breath, waiting for her retaliation, but she is silent, no lip smacking, no angry screeches, nothing. Silence for 60 miles until they whiz off of the interstate and into their suburban neighborhood.

They pull into the driveway and are silent. They are both in their own separate memories. Ken is in a memory that Marlene doesn't know he has. It is one of her standing on the bank of a little pond, throwing bread to a family of merrily quacking ducks. She is smiling serenely, wearing a big brimmed hat and a long floral dress, and he is thinking that she is the most beautiful woman in the whole world. He is thinking about how he cannot wait to spend the rest of his life with her.

There is a picture of them that day, one taken with the timer on the camera. They are kissing on the bank of the pond, and their happiness is tangible.

Marlene's memory is quite different. The two of them are sitting in front of the fireplace, right after they married. She is wearing a robe and he is in pajamas, he has some case files open in front of him, but they are holding hands and looking at the dancing flames. Her hand is uncomfortable within his. Too hot. They are silent because they just got in an argument. He wants a dog but she doesn't. She knows she'll have to do all the work. She told him this, and he got angry and told her she that is an ungrateful bitch. They are newly weds, so they still hold hands when they fight.

In the car, Ken turns to Marlene to say sorry, almost expecting to see the woman he loved in the seat next to him. She is gone, though, replaced by a sad and tired stranger he's never seen before. The stranger turns her crystal blue eyes towards him, and places her hand on the handle of the car.

"What happened?" He asks her, this strange woman.

She smiles sadly and shakes her head, opening the door and stepping out without a sound.

FURTHER

CANDACE NADON

Dear Robert,

I've never written to a famous person before. I know you're not a rock star, you're more of an underground rock star because not everybody knows who you are (thank god) or at least didn't know who you were until MTV started playing the video for "Love Song" all the time. I love that song, just like I love all of your songs, but it's really annoying that any stupid GapJ.CrewEsprit wearing cheerleader in my high school now thinks The Cure is suddenly okay to listen to and thinks they understand the true implications of your songs even though they wouldn't know "10:15 on a Saturday Night" if it hit them in the face and have no idea "Killing an Arab" is based on The Stranger. My English teacher, Mr. Hart, taught me that term. He really taught everyone in English II that term, but he said I'm the only one that really understands what larger implications means and knows how to describe them after we've read something. I used to think he was a cool teacher - he completely got what I saying about the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleberg being a symbol for the eyes of authority that are always watching and trying to narc on you no matter where you are and are basically trying to make us all CONFORM. That's when he told me I understand what larger implications means. His full name is Baron Hart, which I still think is a perfect name for an English teacher or a writer - even if he is an asshole. He's writing a novel - or at least he says he is. I think "Killing an Arab" is every bit as good as The Stranger, and I wouldn't just say that.

I always thought writing to someone famous was something the previously mentioned cheerleader/jock/popular/i.e. CONFORMIST girls did, but writing to you is different. You're like what the eyes of T.J. Eckleberg should be. I've been wanting to write to you for a long time, but I didn't want to be like every other screaming Cure fan that wears Cure t-shirts to concerts and paints their faces white and listens to nothing but your music on the way to the concert, which is not only lame but is bad luck.

But I absolutely had to write to you, because I had a true, real spiritual moment when I did that gravity bong at Ashley's sixteenth birthday party when we were camping up Four Mile. Kate brought her boom box and we played Disintegration over and over and when "Fascination Street" came on the third time the whole ground shifted sideways and I saw the knobs on the trunks of the aspen trees surrounding the grove where we were camping suddenly became what they really are - they are really millions of third eyes that are so wise and see beyond this plane - but then the other girls brought out the cake that Kate and I made for Ashley (without our permission, by the way) and everyone except Kate and I went racing towards it and stuck their hands in it and smeared it around and totally destroyed the beautiful cake that Kate and I had spent all day making for Ashley - it had green and purple and blue and pink swirls of frosting all over it just like Fuurther, Ken Kesey's bus - and I couldn't stand to watch the debacle (Mr. Hart taught me that word) so I watched the eyes on the trees instead and they were so sad because the girls were acting like such cretins (I learned that word myself) and I totally realized that I am not one of them but I am one of the trees and you, you were singing, and then "Prayers for Rain" came on and I realized that you understand me and you are one of the trees, too. I used to think Mr. Hart was one of the trees, too. You're either on the bus or off the bus, just like Ken Kesey says, and you are ON IT!

Mr. Hart says I should work on getting to the point sooner when I write and not get caught up in extraneous information, which I don't know if I totally buy or not. He doesn't know everything about writing, as I found out. Here is the overarching reason I had to write you. I'm really really really sorry, but I'm not going to be able to go see you in June at Red Rocks, even though I've never seen you live before and Red Rocks is the absolute best place to see a show. My uncle took me to see the Dead there last summer - he said it was time I got out in the world - and even though I don't like the Dead that much it was still a great show. It was an experience. That's what Mr. Hart says about Dead shows - they're an experience. The first day of class he said the first thing he did when he moved to Colorado from Vermont was to see the Dead at Red Rocks. He was at the same exact show I was, but I didn't know it,

and now I'm glad I didn't. It would have ruined the vibe. My uncle got me high at the show and he made me swear not to tell my mom or my dad. My uncle works for my dad at his restaurant. My mom says my uncle is a deadbeat (She doesn't get the joke) and thinks my dad should fire him, so I had to promise not to tell them he got me high. I'm a little smarter than that. I have to look out for myself too.

Dakota bought me the ticket. He's definitely on the bus, but...I don't think he totally understands what it means to be on the bus yet. He didn't want to read The Stranger, for example. He'd rather skate, which is fine - he is the best skateboarder I've ever seen. Dakota is one with his skateboard. We'll go up on McClure Pass, which is really steep but has great turns, and he'll skate down the pass and I'll follow him in his Subaru. He's beautiful, but he's not as deep as you, or, Mr. Hart. At least I used to think Mr. Hart was deep. It was so nice of Dakota to buy me the ticket, but today I realized I have to break up with him because he's just not - there - yet. If I break up with him before the concert, I don't think it's very nice to still ask for my ticket, even though I know I'm going to sit at home at cry that night. I think I have to do the right thing, unlike other people I know.

My mom won't let me go to the alternative school where all my friends and my boyfriend go. They get to design their own curriculum there and learn what they want to learn, which my mom says means I won't be able to get into any good colleges. She won't let me go to CRMS, which is a progressive private school, either. I said I would get a better education there and would get to read books like The Stranger, and do outdoor ed. She said if I can read The Stranger on my own there's no use paying \$20,000 for me to read it in school and if I wanted to do outdoor ed. I could go climb the mountain behind our house. When I pointed out that I would also engage in community service she said I could take the leftovers from the restaurant to the soup kitchen if I wanted to help the community.

She just doesn't get how much my high school sucks, and I mean really sucks. I hate sitting in class all day doing nothing with all the cretins while all my friends are expanding their minds at the alternative school and taking long lunches to continue discussing big ideas if they want to. The cretins at my school can't even think for themselves and they hate anybody who does, and the Administration lets them get away with it. I think my mom really won't let me go to the alternative school because she thinks one day I'm going to wake up and decide I'm really meant to be a popular girl and I'll join the dance team and NHS and I'll try out for the lead in the school musical and quit wearing black. She doesn't understand that this is WHO I AM and you have to fight so you don't get sucked into the system. Once you're on the bus, how can you get off?

Mr. Hart is on the bus too, or at least I used to think he was on the bus. His class is (or was) the only class I like and since I've already been busted ditching three times already and their eyes are on me all the time so I have to go to my other classes. (So sometimes getting a little high at lunch helps, you know? But I don't want you to think I'm another one of those depressed stoners who thinks listening to the Cure will cure - ha! - his depression. I don't ever smoke pot before Mr. Hart's class because that would be uncool - we would be on different planes then and wouldn't be able to connect. It would like if I was in the front of the bus and he was in the back and we couldn't hear each other.) Mr. Hart said on one of my papers that I am very advanced for a sophomore. I even showed him a poem I wrote one day after school. I wrote it in response to One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest - that book totally has larger implications and Mr. Hart said it was really deep.

We just finished these big research papers. Mr. Hart said I could write mine on The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test like I wanted but that I should add something more so I wrote about Cuckoo's Nest too. Mr. Hart said my thesis was really interesting. He also said my outline was really smart and my paper was going to be really interesting. I wrote about how Ken Kesey couldn't write until he got away from the system. I thought Mr. Hart was going to really understand my paper, but as it turns out, he's either a big poser or he doesn't have the guts to do the right thing and fight the system.

Mr. Hart said he was going to choose one of our papers to submit to the writing contest at school. I thought he was going to choose my paper, and not just because he asked for a copy of my outline to use as an example for other classes of how to write a good outline, but because he basically told me so. One day he asked me to stay after class and told me if my paper was as good as my outline he didn't see why it wouldn't win the contest. He told me again my writing and my thinking was very advanced for my age, and then he said I had an old soul. An old soul! That was the best thing ever - I've always felt I had an old soul and old souls find each and connect. That's why I love the Cure so much. But then today he handed our papers back at the end of class. I got an A, like I thought, but then he announced whose paper he selected for the contest and it wasn't mine. He didn't pick mine! He picked this stupid paper that one of the stupid blond cheerleader girls wrote on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. What's there to really critique about that book? I mean, it's a great book, with an important message, but it's so obvious. What is there to argue? Plus, she's a horrible writer. I had to critique one of her papers in peer workshop and it sucked. I stayed after class and asked him what was wrong with my paper after everything he told me. He got this funny look on his face and said, "Well, Claire," just like any old stupid teacher, not like someone UPFRONT, and said he couldn't submit my paper because it was too subversive because *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* is about doing drugs and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* might as well be, and what would it look like to the school administration if a first-year teacher was letting his students who weren't even old enough to drive write about drugs and not following rules? He said of course it was a wonderful paper and he'd still recommend me for Junior Honors but he couldn't submit it to the contest. He said he was really sorry but he hoped I would keep writing. I just stared at him. Then I said, "Whatever," and walked off. I heard him call after me, but I didn't turn around.

I went straight out to the parking lot where Dakota was waiting for me. I told him I wasn't going back that afternoon which made him happy. So we drove up Four Mile to my favorite meadow that is surrounded by aspen trees and right now is full of dandelions. We spread out a blanket and got high and ate peanut butter sandwiches and then we made out. It should have been really beautiful, but when I looked at the eyes on the aspen trees they were disappointed. I had one of those epiphanies like stupid Mr. Hart told us about and I realized that he is not an old soul. He's so sweet, and he was totally happy all afternoon and even wanted to make out more, but I just said I needed to get home because I had to meet Kate. All he could talk about on the way to my house was how wonderful the afternoon was and how much fun we were going to have at the concert. That's when I realized I would have to break up with him because I could NEVER go see you sing with someone who maybe isn't really on the bus. It just isn't right.

When I got home I almost wanted my mom to be furious because the school had called wondering why I had been there in the morning but not the afternoon because after the last time I got busted taking the afternoon off she said if I ditched any more school I wasn't going to the concert but of course, the one time I didn't really care if I got caught I didn't. She just wanted to chat and was all happy like there's nothing horribly wrong with the whole IDEA of the world.

So, Robert, I'm really really really sorry that I won't be at the show. I would have done everything I could to create a positive vibe so you would have a good experience at Red Rocks, but I can't go. I'm really sorry. Unless Dakota decides to let me keep the ticket, which, after all, would be the right thing to do, considering the circumstances. But you never know with people.

Sincerely,
Claire

GUBER COUNTY BATS

JEN PIRKLE

The last funeral Hannah had gone to was her father's. The church was packed: at least four hundred adults she hadn't known at all, who gripped her mother's cold hands and repeated what a good man Buck Buckley had been, looking over Hannah's head like she wasn't even there. Sometimes she remembered the funeral as though she hadn't been there, watching the memory of these people dressed in black and whispering to each other like watching a movie of a whole town waiting backstage for a play to begin.

Boone's funeral wasn't like that. There were so few people there Hannah wasn't even sure at first that Second Baptist was the right church, and although almost no one talked to her at this service either, she felt very clearly and uncomfortably present. Maybe it was because she hadn't spoken to Boone Thigpen in nine years, since before they'd graduated from high school, and so it was obvious that she was out of place. Or maybe it was because she didn't belong in Berry Branch anymore, or Guber County, even though she was raised here and her mother still lived in that same old house near the gorge. Whatever the reason, Hannah couldn't help looking at everything as though she'd never seen it before. The whole place seemed much smaller than it used to, the perfect tiny replica of a tiny Georgia town, so detailed that she could see the individual outlines of the bricks that made the buildings, and Hannah herself felt so large that she seemed to tower over everything. She couldn't blame everyone for looking at her.

She sat near one of the Knox boys, the one who had graduated the same year she and Boone had, and afterward he asked her if she was going to Zoey Murphy's party that night. Hannah was surprised he even recognized her after so long. She told him no. It didn't seem right to go from a funeral to a party, and anyway she still felt much taller than everyone else, like she could easily smash their houses while they stared up at her in awe. But she wrote the address on her palm just in case. After pulling into the gravel driveway of her old house and sitting there staring at the front door for a while, Hannah backed out again without even turning off the car. Anything, even a party, would be better than seeing her mother.

She was the first guest to arrive. As soon as Zoey Murphy saw her, she threw her arms around her and said, "Hannah? Oh my god, it's been ages," and pulled her inside by the hand as though they were long-lost best friends. Hannah had never been close to any of the Murphys, but Zoey looked exactly the same as she had in high school, and it was easy for Hannah to recall all the times they'd found themselves hanging out together anyway because their town was so small. She played along with a similar exclamation and a smile that made her face feel like she hadn't used it in a long time.

The house was an old two-story. Right inside was a staircase with a tiny adjustable fence stretched across the bottom stair, and a doorway to the left led, presumably, to the living room. Hannah presumed this because a wide couch had been wedged through there, half in the living room and half in the entry. "You have a nice house," Hannah said, looking at the couch. It was yellow with a large green and orange floral print and must have been at least thirty years old.

"Oh, it's not mine," said Zoey. The wooden floor made popping sounds as they walked. Zoey stepped up onto the couch, walked across it, and jumped down on the other side of the doorway, barefoot but for her fishnet stockings. As she still had Hannah by the hand, Hannah had no choice but to follow her up onto the furniture and back down, wobbly on the cushions in her high heels. "It's Bud Shankly's. He's letting me borrow it for tonight. Isn't that sweet?"

Bud Shankly had been a Guber County police officer for about fifteen years. He used to come to all the parties when Hannah was in high school and promise not to tell their parents about the beer as long they let him stay. They called him Bud Skankly. "Yeah, that's. Really nice of him," said Hannah. The living room had no furniture in it, besides half of the yellow couch sticking in through the doorway. The only decoration in the whole space was a brown shag rug in one corner, which looked like it had crawled over there to die. Some kind of sound system with enormous speakers squatted on top of the rug.

Zoey let go of her hand as they turned a corner and entered the dining room. The long table was crowded with food. Zoey walked into the adjoined kitchen but called back over her shoulder, "When did you get back to town? I heard you moved to New York or somewhere."

"Boston," called Hannah. She wasn't sure if she was supposed to sit down or not. She picked a stuffed olive out of a bowl and popped it into her mouth. Something smelled like a pot roast, but there didn't appear to be any meat on the table.

"I've always wanted to live in New York," Zoey said. "I've been a few times. Really seems like my kind of city." Hannah could hear her opening and closing cabinets. "Zach's taking me back up there for New Year's. We're going to Times Square for the countdown and everything! I can't wait. I just love that feeling you get in big cities where nobody knows who you are and you can just get lost in the crowd. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah," said Hannah. A plate of neatly stacked cheese cubes sat next to the olive bowl. She picked up a cube with her fingernails and looked at it.

"So why on Earth did you come back?" Zoey appeared in the kitchen doorway holding a white CorningWare dish with mismatched oven mitts.

Hannah looked up. "Boone's funeral."

"Ohhhh, right." Zoey's enormous green eyes gave her a sympathetic look. "You two must have been really close, for you to come all the way back from New York." She came over and set the dish on the table. It was a roast. In gravy.

"Boston," Hannah murmured.

Zoey didn't seem to hear her. She picked up two giant knives and stabbed them into the gravy puddle, still wearing her oven mitts. She began cutting the meat into chunks. Hannah watched the steam rise up from it. "I was wondering why you look like you dressed for a funeral instead of a party," Zoey said conversationally. "You know, I brought a couple of extra outfits for tonight if you want to check them out. I bet we're about the same size, and I've got a skirt that would go just perfect with..." She looked Hannah up and down and then smiled. "With this top that I also brought. Come on, I'll show you."

Zoey left the knives sticking out of the roast and grabbed Hannah's hand again. Hannah dropped the cheese she was holding. It landed in the bowl of olives, a little orange cube of disparity. The olives all stared at it. Zoey tugged Hannah away from the table and through the living room. When they got to the couch, her hand slipped out of the oven mitt as she climbed up and then down, leaving Hannah holding the mitt on the wrong side of the doorway.

"Come on," Zoey said again. She took off her other oven mitt and placed it over the decorative ball at the end of the stairway banister, leaving it sticking up while she moved the little fence out of the way. Hannah hobbled over the yellow couch and left her mitt lying on one of the cushions.

"I don't want you to feel pressured to change," Zoey said, taking her hand again to lead her up the stairs. "But I can't imagine you feeling comfortable dancing in funeral clothes."

"Dancing?" Hannah repeated. "This is a dance?"

"Yep. That's why I moved the couch out of the way. So we'd have enough room."

Zoey's idea of out of the way apparently differed from hers. "You made roast beef for a dance?" Hannah asked. She followed Zoey into a bedroom that had an open suitcase lying on the bed.

"Sure. You can't really have a party without meat. Or beer. Here are the plates!" Zoey picked up a stack of white paper plates with ridges around the edges. They'd been sitting on the bed beside the suitcase and looked as though gravy would pass right through them. They might as well eat off of dish towels. "I'll be right back," Zoey said. "Help yourself to my clothes!" She gave Hannah a smile and pulled the door shut behind her as she walked out.

Hannah looked in the suitcase. All of the clothes looked like the sorts of things Zoey would wear. She pulled out a black skirt that was obviously supposed to go with a brightly colored top and a black top that was obviously supposed to go with a brightly colored skirt.

Together, the black top and black skirt looked very similar to what Hannah was already wearing. She sat down on the bed and pulled off her shoes. Then she let herself fall backward against the pillows. The bed smelled like no one had slept there in a long time. She closed her eyes and thought about Boone. She couldn't remember the last thing she said to him.

Hannah woke up almost two hours later. The room was dark, and at first she thought she was home in her apartment, but then she stretched and accidentally kicked Zoey's suitcase. She could hear music coming from downstairs, and the rise and fall of voices and laughter. She turned on the lamp beside the bed and looked at Zoey's party clothes. They were rumpled because she'd been lying on them. She wondered if there were a way for her to slip out of the party without anyone noticing that she'd ever been there, but then she thought about seeing her mother. She took off her black clothes and pulled on Zoey's black clothes. There was a full-length mirror on the back of the bedroom door, and she turned to face herself. She didn't look any different. She'd barely changed at all in nine years.

Hannah rummaged through Zoey's suitcase once more and pulled out a long red scarf. She draped it loosely around her neck. It made her feel ridiculous, like she was wearing a costume, but she supposed Zoey would like it. Deciding not to bother with shoes, she opened the door and headed down to the party.

"There you are!" Zoey exclaimed as soon as she saw Hannah on the staircase. She'd been hanging her head out of the front door talking to someone on the porch but had turned around just in time to see Hannah nearly trip over the little fence stretched across the bottom stair. She had to raise her voice over the music. "I was just telling everyone, you'll never guess who I've got sleeping upstairs. Hannah Buckley!" She pulled Hannah into a hug as though they hadn't seen each other in much longer than two hours. Hannah noticed her noticing the outfit. Zoey grinned. "Come on, everyone's just dying to talk to you!"

Hannah allowed Zoey to pull her up onto the couch and back down into the living room, where several people she recognized from years ago were dancing and laughing and spilling beer on each other. She forced herself to smile as Zoey dragged her from old acquaintance to old acquaintance and re-introduced her the same way every time: "Can y'all believe this? It's Hannah Buckley!"

An hour and five beers later, Hannah was nearly convinced that she had, in fact, been living in New York City this whole time.

During an eventual lull in the dancing, when almost everyone had crowded into the dining room to eat roast beef and hot dogs and assorted hors-d'oeuvres made with Ritz crackers, and the rest had gone out onto the front porch to smoke, Hannah found herself sitting down alone on the ugly old couch (the half that was inside the living room). She tucked her bare feet up beneath her butt and began to peel the label off her beer bottle. She should probably just leave. It was already getting late, and her mother was expecting her. She resolved to excuse herself from the party as soon as she was sober enough to drive. After she finished this beer.

The front door opened and closed while she was sitting there, and a moment later, a guy threw himself down on the other side of the couch. He seemed startled as soon as he noticed she was there. "Hey," he said to her. He was wearing a t-shirt and jeans and cowboy boots and smelled like smoke and too much cologne. Hannah tried to remember him from nine years ago, but she couldn't.

"Hi," she said.

They looked at each other for a moment. He had his hand curled around a beer bottle. The hand was inside one of Zoey's oven mitts. He said, "Are you okay?"

"What?" said Hannah.

The guy leaned closer to her, almost through the doorway, and said in a louder voice, "Are you okay?"

There was still music playing, but it wasn't too loud to hear him. She just thought it was a strange line to lead with. "I'm fine," said Hannah. "Why? Are you okay?"

"I'm great," said the guy. He leaned back again and kept looking at her.

"Am I supposed to know who you are?" said Hannah. It wasn't the most tactful way to ask, but she'd lost her subtlety a couple of drinks back.

"Tyler," the guy said. "Tyler Shankly. It's, ah--" He gestured around with his beer. "My cousin's house."

"Oh," said Hannah. "I'm Hannah."

"The Buckley girl," he said, nodding. "We was just talking about your dad."

If she'd been waiting for something all night, Hannah realized at once, this was what she'd been waiting for: someone to acknowledge what they were all thinking about when they looked at her. She'd left that legacy behind when she left Berry Branch, but apparently she'd picked it up again as soon as she came back, waving it over her head like a flag. Sitting there, she could practically feel herself inflating like a parade balloon, even more enormous now than she'd been at Boone's funeral, like this half of the couch couldn't quite contain every part of her past that she carried with her, the parts people saw no matter how much time had gone by. "Why were you talking about my dad?" she asked, even though she already knew.

Tyler Shankly shrugged. "We was talking about that guy, Boone Thigpen. Lotta people here knew him. I didn't." He emphasized this as though it were important. "And then, you know, conversation got around to other folks in town who..." He stopped short and looked at Hannah as though he suddenly realized who he was talking to.

"Who killed themselves," Hannah finished for him. She drank the rest of her beer. She was going for nonchalant, probably pulled it off judging by the look he gave her.

"Yeah," he said. "Got a little too heavy for me, so I came back in."

"And started talking about it again," Hannah pointed out.

He chuckled and looked down at his hands. "Yeah, I just. Sorry. I'm drunk." He held up the beer in his oven mitt hand as evidence.

"It's all right," Hannah said. "I knew they were thinking about it. It's what everyone thinks about when they see me. That's why I never come here."

Tyler nodded.

"I hate small towns," Hannah said. "You can't get away from people who think they know you when really they only know what happened to you when you were thirteen. Whatever you've done since then doesn't make a difference." She dropped her empty beer bottle on the floor beside the couch. "It's disgusting. And you know what's worse? I'm doing it, too. I talked to Kyle Chambers for half an hour, and all I could think about was that time he fell through Catfish Hanson's front windshield and for the next two years everyone called him Glass Ass."

Tyler laughed. "Glass Ass Chambers," he said. "We still call him that sometimes."

"Exactly," Hannah wasn't laughing. "He's Glass Ass, and I'm the girl whose dad shot himself in the head. Even people I've never met before--" she gestured at Tyler "--know my whole history. There's no getting away from it."

"I don't know your whole history," Tyler offered.

Hannah sighed. "You fucking do now." She took the end of Zoey's red scarf in her hand and looked at it. "I hate this," she said.

"So take it off."

"Not the scarf," said Hannah, although she did, in all fairness, hate the scarf. "This. This party. Those people out there talking about my dad." She had to lean close to Tyler to gesture around the doorway at the front door.

"Maybe they're talking about something else now," he said.

"I should just leave." Hannah stood up. She stepped up onto the couch in her bare feet, towering over the seated boy on the other side. "If you don't move, I'll step on you," she said. She wobbled a little bit and grabbed the doorway for support.

He smiled up at her, head tilted a little to one side. "I don't think you should leave yet," he said.

"Well, it's a good thing I don't care what you think, Tyler Shankly." She deliberately stepped on his thigh, but he didn't seem to mind. His hand went to her hip to help her down from the couch.

"Tell you what," he said, when she was standing safely in front of him in the entry. "I'll take you home."

"You're drunk," she said.

"So are you."

Hannah sighed again. She reached down and shoved Tyler's legs to one side, then squeezed back onto the couch next to him, both of them on one side of the doorway. "I don't want to go home until I'm sober," she said. "But I don't want to stay here anymore either."

Tyler upended the last of his beer, then set the bottle on the floor beside his boot. He patted her thigh with his oven mitt. "I know where we can go," he said. "Come on."

Hannah didn't stop to get her shoes, so the walk was uncomfortable. When he noticed her bare feet, Tyler picked her up on his back and carried her the rest of the way. It wasn't far. There were no cars on the road at one in the morning, and Hannah could hear cicadas calling to each other from patches of trees. She'd almost forgotten what that sounded like.

"Tell me why we're going to church," Hannah said, nudging his leg with her dangling foot. Her face was near his neck. He smelled all right for a Georgia boy, too much cologne notwithstanding.

"You'll see when we get there," he said.

When they did get to Second Baptist, he carried her around to the white brick chapel building and slid her down off his back. They walked up the concrete steps together. "This is the second time I've been here today," Hannah said. When he gave her a questioning look, she added, "Boone's funeral."

"Oh," he said. "I mean, we can go somewhere else. I just wanted to show you something. Is that okay?"

"Yeah," said Hannah. "I don't care."

Tyler had a key to the chapel building. As he let them inside, he said, "They gave me this for tomorrow. I'm supposed to come back early and do some work."

"You work here?" Hannah asked.

"Just for tomorrow." Tyler found the light switch and flipped it on. They were in a vestibule outside the chapel itself. A staircase led up to the balcony, though it had been roped off for Boone's service. Tyler unhooked the rope, and Hannah followed him up the stairs, her bare feet sinking into the pale green carpet. The place smelled musty and old, with a hint of ammonia. When they emerged into the balcony, Tyler headed to the far corner and flipped on another light.

"It's pretty here," Hannah said, leaning over the rail to see the rest of the chapel hall, which was still mostly dark. The stained glass windows had a very different effect at night without the sunlight shining through them.

"Yep," said Tyler.

When she turned around, she saw him pulling the cord to an overhead attic door. The door came down with a squeaking hinge sound, and Tyler unfolded the built-in ladder. It landed with a soft thud on the carpet, and then he turned to her and extended a hand. "Up here," he said.

"We're going in the attic?"

"Yeah." He grinned. "You're not scared of... anything, are you?"

She didn't like the sound of that. "Should I be?"

"Nah, I was up here this morning. It's fine. Just step where I step."

He indicated that she should go up first, so she climbed the ladder into the very dark attic, aware that if Tyler cared to look, he could see up her skirt. She paused at the top, her head and shoulders inside the dark space. It was warmer in there, and the musty smell was stronger. She could hear some faint squeaking and movement. "Tyler," she said into the darkness. "How can I step where you step if you're not up here stepping?"

She felt his breath on her ankle as he answered. "The floor is solid right at the top. Just go on up and don't walk around."

Hannah felt around on the floor. It was definitely solid, felt like particleboard, so she crawled up on all fours, the wood scratchy under her knees and palms. She sat down facing the hole in the floor, and a few seconds later, Tyler's head popped up, blocking the dim light. She said to him, "It smells funny up here."

"Yeah," he said, crawling up beside her. "It's bat guano."

"What?"

"You said you weren't afraid of anything, right?"

"There are bats up here?" The room was too dark to see farther than a couple of feet around the hole in the floor, but she could feel them now around her, clinging to the walls and rafters, clusters of tiny warm bodies.

"I left a flashlight," Tyler said. "If you want to see them. But it's okay if you just want to leave."

"No," said Hannah. "Show me."

He moved away for a second and then came back with the flashlight in his hand. He sat very close to her on the sheet of particleboard, their knees touching, and aimed the flashlight at the corner of the attic. He clicked it on.

And then there they were, a group of them, hanging upside down with their wings folded close to their bodies, some of them much bigger than she'd expected, and some of them very small. They were brown, shiny in the direct light, and though they weren't moving that much, they gave the impression of movement just by hanging there and breathing. That corner of the attic looked alive.

"Oh my god," said Hannah.

"Yeah, it's pretty cool." Tyler moved the flashlight to show her the rest of the wall they were facing. Here and there, bats clung to the woodwork in small bunches, covering about a third of the surface. The other walls were the same. There must have been hundreds of the little animals. "Most of them are gone right now," Tyler said.

"Most? Are you kidding?"

"Nah, you should've seen it this morning. It was like they built the place out of bats. They was crawling all over each other and shit. The other ones must be out hunting. They do that at night."

"Bats in the belfry," Hannah said. "That's wild."

She felt more than saw him nod. "This is the biggest infestation I've ever seen. I can't believe they didn't handle it earlier."

"What do you mean 'handle it'?" Hannah asked. "What are they doing?"

"Well, we're getting rid of them," Tyler said. "It's why I'm coming back in the morning. I work for Powell Exterminating." He said this matter-of-factly, like it wasn't horrible at all.

"You what?" said Hannah. "You're saying you brought me up here to show me all the things you plan to kill tomorrow?" She tried to scoot away from him and nearly got a splinter in her thigh. "What kind of a freak are you? I mean, who does that?"

"What? No, we're--bats are protected. We can't kill them. Hey. Hey, calm down." He put the flashlight down so that the beam shone across the floor and then put his arm around Hannah's thin shoulders. She hadn't meant to, but she'd begun shaking. It was the idea. All these living things becoming suddenly dead. "We're not killing them," Tyler said again. "They'll be fine. They just have to live somewhere else." He rubbed his hand up and down her arm. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Hannah said, though she wasn't, not really. Something flapped a few feet to her right, the sound like the snap of a sheet when you make a bed. "How do you tell a bunch of bats they have to go somewhere else?"

He'd left his arm around her. "We found the place where they're getting inside, and we're going to cover it with something that lets them get out but not back in." Hannah rested her head on his shoulder, and he lowered his voice. She liked it better when he spoke softly. He seemed easier to hear, somehow, like his voice was in her head and not in her ears. "It's

shaped like a cone, and it fucks with their hearing so they can't find the hole to come back inside. In a couple days, this whole place will be empty."

"That's terrible," Hannah said.

Tyler squeezed her. "It's better than killing them, ain't it?"

She thought about Boone's service this afternoon. While she was sitting downstairs crying, the bats were up here quietly clinging to each other, making the walls inhale and exhale. They had no idea that one day they wouldn't be able to come back home. She imagined them finding another place to live, only to be evicted again. Then another place and another place. Once they left here, they wouldn't belong anywhere, and every time they tried to come back, they'd get lost. "I don't know," said Hannah. "Maybe it isn't."

"Well, I think living's better than dying, no matter where you have to do it," Tyler said.

"Pretty sure these critters would agree with me."

Boone wouldn't, she almost said. But Tyler didn't know Boone. And he didn't know her father, and he didn't know Hannah either, not well enough to know the right thing to say to her. He was just a guy she met at a party. Officer Skankly's cousin. He didn't even know she was wearing someone else's clothes.

When she didn't say anything for a while, Tyler said her name.

"What?"

"Are you okay?" It was the third time he'd asked her in one night. She didn't know if he could really tell something was wrong, or if he just didn't have anything better to say. His mouth was very close to her ear. Here in the dark, she almost couldn't see him at all, but she felt his breath, and his warm arm around her, and his jeans against her thigh. He seemed so solid. She thought about telling him she was fine.

"I'm sitting in the dark with a guy I don't know," she said, "who kills things for a living. We're in an attic full of bats, and I'm wearing Zoey Murphy's ugly scarf because I thought it would make me fit in at this party that I didn't even mean to go to. Everyone keeps looking at me. I don't remember the last thing I said to Boone, and I keep trying to go home but ending up some place else."

"Is that all?" said Tyler.

She thought about it. "I don't know where my shoes are."

He laughed.

"I want to go somewhere," said Hannah, "that I think I left when I was thirteen." She knew he wouldn't have any idea what she meant, so she didn't say anything about always leaving places she couldn't find her way back to, or how she wanted nothing more than to be in that house by the gorge with a whole, happy family instead of a drunk mother, an absentee brother, and an empty space where her father used to be, how she missed the days before labels and before old friends lost their hope in the world and before she learned the way a girl could blame herself for everything that ends. Instead of saying this, she just sat there with her head on Tyler's shoulder, listening to the quiet scratching and squeaking of the bats.

"I'm sorry," Tyler said. "I wish I could take you someplace better than this."

There isn't one, she thought. Not anymore.

He tightened his arm around her. She closed her eyes. The two of them sat there that way for a long while, just breathing together, and the bats in the chapel attic went in and out all night, paying them no attention.

Done with work for the evening, wandering around the city a little bored and sick of myself, I found a lunchroom I had passed earlier in the day. In the food court the only restaurant open was a Japanese counter. I ordered a combination meal to go, beef barbecue from the Teriyaki menu and a tuna roll from the sushi side. There was also a small convenience counter still open in the hall. The worker there was standing where the line would have been most other hours of the day, staring at his wares. If he was very, very good at his job, he may have been taking inventory. If he was taking inventory that would have meant that he knew exactly how many units came in each box of every candy bar and pack of nuts he sold, and that he could determine how many units had been moved by the empty space remaining in the box rather than having to count them by hand. He may have been taking inventory, he may have had whole spreadsheets in his head with columns and rows adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing as they were supposed to. I hoped he was taking inventory but if he was anything like me he was so bored so late in the day that acting like he was working was the last remaining distraction available.

He sold me a Snickers Bar and I looked around the space at what I could have had for breakfast (vegan French toast) and lunch (brown rice bowl) at the counters that were now closed. The floors and table tops had been thoroughly cleaned and just the three of us were there minding our own business among the 2 dozen or so tables. A placard listed the capacity of the room at precisely 103 Persons. There was room for an additional 100 souls among the space and us. I imagined the room in sepia as a depression-era haunt with skinny, tired men wearing hats, guiltily helping themselves to local, organic foods before going back to their jobs where they earned nickels and worried more about their families and fascists and commies.

I travel for work about three months out of the year. I go all over the place, all different places, but about a quarter of that travel time is spent in large cities. If I'm in a big city for work it usually means I'm at a trade show and if you don't know anything about trade show culture, you're lucky. Trade shows are certainly useful—I'm not arguing that. They also have plenty of economic potential for people and organizations that have nothing to do with the given trade, all of which is good for them I guess. But unless you get really excited about lanyards and novelty knickknacks that even the neighbor's weird kid won't want to play with, you'll find trade shows a little tiring. Especially if, like me, you don't get too excited about the product in which you deal.

After a day of the show (which I was working alone) I turned to wandering around the city to regain feeling in my legs, to hear myself think, to try to get away from the sound of my own voice. Usually I can wander myself to somewhere to eat, but this day that took a little more wandering than I had counted on. Downtown Los Angeles has many of the trappings of a big city; skyscrapers, too many coffee shops, wide avenues—but it is not really a big city. Of course, LA is a big city, but if your idea of the place is beautiful famous women, rows of lanky palm trees and rush hour traffic jams, you are not thinking of downtown LA but rather various aspects of the periphery of downtown LA. Downtown LA is merely a collection of large buildings where no one lives, surrounded by smaller buildings where nothing very interesting takes place. I am not making any inspired observations here, anyone who lives in any part of California or has spent a few hours researching the city of Los Angeles knows just as much. Downtown LA is not an entity unto itself but a place where you go to work for a bank for a few hours—then leave, or watch a basketball game—then leave, or hear a concert—you get the point.

The lack of happening in downtown Los Angeles may have something to do with the fact that you cannot find anywhere that sells a single beer can to go. Or maybe nothing happens because you can't buy a beer. When I paid the nice man with the big face and huge hands for my food and climbed two steps back to street level with my plastic bag I thought I was on the home stretch. Just one little lonely can of beer the size of two normal cans of beer was all I needed to go back to my hotel room and have a lonely, satisfying dinner. The first convenience store I tried sold something called mochi and other things wrapped in seaweed but no beer to

speak of. I asked the girl at the counter if the place was a convenience store and she asked me what I was looking for. After telling her, I followed her finger to an admirable wine selection. Looking back up the girl was still smiling at me. The shelving of the place was lined up so shoppers funneled into the counter where she stood, a Mexican teenybopper smiling like a tuned out hippie. Caught in her doe-gaze I waited, not sure if she was going to apologize for not knowing the difference between beer and wine or tell me how dreamy I was. When I pulled myself away and walked out of the place I did not look back.

On the streets in LA the normalcy is prevalent even if it does not overwhelm. There is some noise, some traffic, some weirdoes. Unlike Chicago you don't feel like you are about to be crushed to death by an invisible, punishing noise-force. And unlike Atlanta you don't feel that the next turn you take will leave you in an unpopulated wasteland that could be impossible to find your way back from. Walking through Los Angeles I actually felt like I belonged as part of the fabric and, never having been to the place before, that worried me. I detoured from the main avenue I was cruising and before too long found a much more generic convenience store. Inside the place was even seedier than I had hoped and I started getting excited. A narrow passage led past the counter into the main part of the store and the clerk stared like a dead man at the not-dirty magazines on my right as I passed him. But once I got inside it didn't take long to discover they didn't have what I was looking for. There are only so many places a few cold beers could be hiding on the floor of a store like that. There were a few six packs, even a twelve'er. I was about to push the clerk for more information but as I walked towards him again, I worried doing so may lead to my discovering corpse. Plus, I did not have much experience with pushing anybody for anything.

Traveling for work, traveling being an essential part of my job, is a neutral thing. It has benefits (seeing new places, catching up with old friends, sky miles and hotel points) and downsides (not seeing my wife, loosing sleep, eating poorly, getting sick of myself). Some trips are just golden; life-affirming goodtimes that make me proud to be an employed American. Sometimes though, when I can't buy 24 ounces and 24 ounces only of beer at a retail price to enjoy in the relative comfort of my hotel room I get in a real stink. I kept on in my search but in all of the pharmacies and convenience stores I wandered through while my teriyaki cooled and my sushi warmed the product was not for sale in the form I wanted to consume it. Sure, I could have bought a six pack, letting the majority of the beers get skunky in my refrigerator-deficient hotel room. But that would have meant giving up—me the guest who was bringing so much money to the neighborhood. What's so wrong with the double-deuce, what's wrong with the oil can, what's wrong with the single?

I moved on, moved around, for another hour. Wandering was how I intended to find what I wanted and I would let the landmarks guide me. If nothing else there would be some park with a café that would pour something in a plastic cup—the weather was just fine. But I could not pick up on any impulse of movement towards grass and trees and so did not find any grass and trees. My next brilliant idea was to have the streets speak to me. This, I realized, was the great West. So why was I sticking to the safety of 2nd, Broadway and Grand, streets that I could wander just as hopelessly in any desperately abandoned downtown in America? I backtracked to Figueroa where I was certain some destiny awaited. But within a few minutes, plodding the avenue with a pretty name was just the same as plodding all the others.

I was stinking at a street corner when an elderly man with perfect facial hair whispered to his elderly wife something about the car, nodded to another street corner and then departed in the opposite direction toting a cane his partner looked to have could used. To this day I have no idea what was going on there and it still crosses my mind. The man seemed pleasant enough and he wasn't scolding the woman but what do you call a moment that doesn't follow any logical sequence when you don't know what the logical sequence should have been in the first place?

As we waited for the crosswalk I got the undeniable feeling that she wanted to talk to me, but the only thing I had to say to anyone at the moment was how I hated life for a beer.

However, I had only been on the road for 3 days and was not yet at the point of speaking my flighty mind to strangers (not that I'm above that; I've said some random things to some random people in my time). But before I could lurk off to the next Famima! or 7-Eleven, she opened up with a one-two combination of irritating small talk, "Is that a wedding ring on your finger? You look too young to be married." When someone directs a question and observation at you in one breath it can be really frustrating. Usually I would respond something like, "Yes it is. Hag." Actually I would never say such a thing. I can be flighty but I have a hard time being a regular jerk. I am indeed young looking and a newlywed. I have no reasonable excuse for my apparent youthfulness and no words to tell anyone how married life is getting along.

But I still had to say something, I couldn't just pretend like she had not spoken to me. The conversation was happening and that meant I had to think of something other than my beer problems. First I made the split decision to leave off any titular appellation. Being from the South my regular go-to is "Ma'am". Calling a strange woman over the age of 16 'Ma'am' is like playing Russian roulette, a few chambers packed with pure angry. So I put together something along the lines of, "It is. I haven't been married too long though; at least not so long ago that we had to get parental permission, not even where we're from." I'm not sure why I wrapped up my pitiable comment the way I did. The joke was bad enough, but the bit of self-condescension was so weak that it even managed to elude a negative meaning. Was I really trying to say that where my wife and I came from you had to be even older to marry without parental consent than other areas of the country? Could that be a bad thing anywhere in the Western hemisphere? Who the hell knows? I wished I hadn't said that. So did she.

"Oh, don't say that. I think it's sweet that you married young. Everyone gets married so old these days, they don't have the chance to just have fun together. "We"—she said 'we' as if I knew her shady husband who just drifted off around a corner of a bank HQ to the only secret happening place in that un-destination—"have friends"—not children, children's friends, children of friends, not even nieces or nephew—"who have gotten married at 29, 30, 35 and now all they have time to do is try to make babies."

"No, no fun at'al," I said. I nailed it. Maybe I was capable of clever small talk. She giggled, "Oh whoops, that's not what I meant. You know what I meant right?" We were passing the Disney Opera House, a Gehry creation. I looked up at it as we crossed another street. I watched it, to use a verb its creators would probably appreciate. But I didn't really appreciate it; it had all of that going on but what was going on inside? I did not know, probably never will, because I had no desire to get inside the thing. I wished my companion could tell me something about it but the subject at hand was too lively to change. She went on, "It just seems like people get married and then they just have to get on with life. You know what I think the key to a good marriage is—what has made my marriage great all these years?"

It was, of course, a rhetorical question. This little woman who walked slowly but seemed to enjoy walking immensely nonetheless, who was roundest about the middle of her as if she had an equator not at all unlike the Earth's—unmarked in reality but clearly discernable from a certain distance—intended to be answered by me with a question, and then tell me what had made her marriage great all these years. But I had to make us wait for it. I turned and gave her a pensive look; I leaned towards her as she took the curb in case she needed a boost to get over. Could the secret be some weird game you and the old man play downtown, where you split up with an until-the-last-minute unknown objective, then make a few blocks seeing who can get more crazy kids to show you their underwear? Or is the secret going into the whole operation assuming your mate is entirely self-dependent and announcing the same for yourself so that each gesture, each minute action of service is done in the spirit of total adoration? And why the secret, why is such paranoia and pain reducing information not widely available? Why available only to wobbly geezers and their husbands with Van Dykes?

I'll never know, because before I got around to taking my dictated place in the conversation the fellow walking at my 5 o'clock was violently tackled to the shout of 'I'm gonna kill you bitch!' and my companion fell off the sidewalk into the street. It took no time to realize that

we were in no danger of gang violence. These guys were not members of the notorious Bloods and Crypts I was advised against joining by an extensive Sheriff Deputy's presentation in my Jones County, Georgia 7th grade health class. These guys were bellboys. And although they could have been of Central American descent, they lacked the telltale tattoos of the even more notorious Mara Salvatrucha who I had learned about prior to getting my substitute-teaching certificate right out of college, again in Jones County, Georgia. They honestly scared me too, to such an extent that it was the two jacklegs and not me that realized the lady was lying in the road. They quickly went to work redeeming themselves, one brandishing a whistle and stepping into traffic to divert a handsome, black Mercedes and the other crouching over the lady and holding her hand. I stood by and looked nervous.

When the bellboy took out his phone to call 911, I considered doing the same thing but decided to let him handle it, since he knew the patient's name and everything. The next few events followed in predictable fashion, the EMT's arrived very quickly, so hurried in fact that they probably would have run over the poor woman if it wasn't for the whistle-toting bell-boy. The paramedics then proceeded to take a very long time getting their patient in the ambulance, leaving me, as always, to wonder why they drive so fast to get there in the first place. As they lifted the gurney into the ambulance I prepared myself to walk over to the lady. I would pat her on the arm, careful not to touch the wide, scabbed bruise forming there, and she would be surprised that she had forgotten about me. As I leaned over the stretcher she would smile and laugh at how foolish and clumsy she had been before coming through with that anecdote she had promised, the one about perfecting marriage. Sensing the daze her wisdom put me in, she would wrap everything up with a charge to be sweet to my 'precious little wife' and erase all need for follow up or concern by saying, 'I've never been in an ambulance before, Walter will be so jealous.' Walter being, of course, the name of her husband and, interestingly, the grandfather I never met.

No such thing happened. I gave a weak wave from the wrist that I'm pretty sure she did not see before they carted her off. Then I set off in search of a bar that would let me bring my food in with me. I thought maybe that was the metaphor, if not the secret, to a perfect marriage. Marriage is the bar that lets you bring in the take out dinner with you and even hopes you legitimately enjoy it because it wants you to be happy and expects you to stay long after the take out is just another memory. But that metaphor doesn't really carry; it doesn't still make everything okay after 40 years. And it turns out there aren't many bars in downtown LA, at least not the kind I was looking for. So I paid too much for a six-pack of Mexican beer and went back to the room to eat sushi.

When I called my wife to check in the version of the story I gave her was so watered down I wondered why I bothered. What I wanted to tell her I could not quite prepare, but the story had actually started a few days earlier. On my flight into LA from the east coast I was allergic as hell to something, uncomfortable and cramped. Totally surrounded, unable breathe and sneezing and hacking uncontrollably I started getting legitimately anxious, so much so that I could foresee the next thing to happen was for me to make a scene. The descent into LA, with all the sunniness in Southern California, can be a long overview of desert, mountain, suburb and city. And things are so clear, with the lack of the forests that cover my home turf. So I sat leaning my head out the window and concentrated on every little highway and subdivision until I could eventually make out schools and driveways and for every example of human life I saw I thought, nearly out loud, "That is me, that is me." Saying that to myself helped, long enough to get me on the ground and somewhere I could catch my breath, blow my nose. I had forgotten about the little exercise until I started talking to the old lady. Not that I was consciously thinking about it while we spoke, but rather I was grasping again that pleasure of connection—or it was grasping me. But then very quickly she was gone and I was left alone wondering if I had pushed her.



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CREATIVE NONFICTION

SOMETHING THAT DOESN'T END

JOANNA CARVER

The 101 is the major highway linking Scottsdale and its suburbs to the rest of the Phoenix area. It was built in the fifties, and is consequently peppered with desert designs on adobe partitions, sculptures of Phoenixes at highway entrances and engravings of coyotes and Kokopelli on the bank of the medians underneath elevated roads. It has been called the most "user-friendly" highway in the United States. Its aisles of wide concrete lanes soar over the desert. Step on the gas and you can fool yourself into thinking you're on an airplane.

The Via de Ventura exit leads to The Pavilions, the old people's shopping mall, which is abandoned except for on Saturday nights, when twenty or thirty people can be seen wandering out of the grimy movie theater with the stale popcorn. The University exit leads to Arizona State University and all its appendages. 90th Street is my Dad's house, the old house, where he lives with the woman he left my mother for. The Subway with the Greek guy who smiles at me and gives me discounts is down the street. Scottsdale Road will take you and the other tourists to Fashion Square, which holds the luxury stores where the girls from my high school with ribbons in their hair received Communion. The Waterfront, with no water, is worth seeing. I spent six weeks working there, at my father's restaurant, after high school and after the divorce before finally washing him out of my every day life. Bell Road will take you to Wal-Mart, and NYPD Pizza, the new one, where Jenna and I went to get delicious and inexpensive meals before she went to Wellesley and I didn't. Desert Ridge leads to the massive shopping center that was built out instead of up. It has the movie theatre with ten-dollar tickets and the big, red armchair seats that don't fold up. Fountains that glow gold at night, and the fire pits in the plaza where the bands play live on weekends. The most romantic place I've ever been. Alma School Road is less attractive than most exits, with only grey concrete cubes of buildings beckoning you from the highway. The fencing studio is around the corner, where I haven't been in a full year now, since my coach slapped my face for fighting with a teammate and sent me packing. This is something I cannot imagine doing now, or even coping with. There is no point in fighting anything.

"You said you were interested in computers," says one of ASU's academic advisors, "You could take Data Programming."

"Fine."

"And you took AP Spanish your senior year?" she says, typing.

"Yes."

"How did you do on the exam?"

"I didn't take it."

"Spanish, then," she says, eyes on the screen. I am certain she hasn't blinked in several minutes at least, "You'll have to take a placement exam online."

"English," I say.

"Introduction to Creative Writing."

She holds down the control key, and then the letter P. My class schedule prints underneath her desk. She reaches down, retrieves it and hands it to me.

"Placement exam," she says, "Then you're ready for college."

It is spring semester of the 2006-2007 school year at Arizona State University. I am eighteen years old and I haven't sat in a classroom for six months. None of my old friends can say the same.

Even before I was hired, I knew I didn't need to take the highway to get to Old Navy. I am one of the few graduates of my high school to have acquired or even sought a part-time job. I took a two-month break from working, thinking I wouldn't have time to work and do college at the same time. I was mistaken, and now I am back.

I arrive at six o'clock, and it's still dark. The lights are out inside the store, which is designated as a superstore by corporate for obvious reasons. We are in one of Scottsdale's many prime shopping centers, and here, like everywhere in this city, the layout is massive.

I stay in my car, and watch the door until our manager, the one with the sour attitude, Jan, arrives. Sitting in our vehicles, scattered across the parking lot, we all recognize her car. "We" is the logistics team, assigned to get there early and make the store fresh and presentable by way of setting out new product and building displays to frame it.

I remember my first day, last semester, when I first had a shift that started before opening hours. I left my car and found the doors locked, and no one inside. I paced back and forth, confused, for several minutes, and, with no direction, considered going home. When a manager showed up, my co-workers popped out of their cars, glancing at each other, concealing their amusement as they approached the store.

Now I know to wait. I follow the others inside, and we silently cross the half-mile from the front doors to the back room, where we clock in and receive our assignments. Between now and nine o'clock I'll unwrap new clothes, put them generally where they belong, and tolerate one of my co-worker's morning radio show, which is emphatically anti-Janet Napolitano, our governor. When I was in high school, my hobby was hating George W. Bush and debating my classmates, all Republicans, on his shortcomings as a candidate. I sniffed at them for adopting their parent's views, deliberately ignoring that I had done the same. Now, the radio show's conservative leanings don't bother me. It's the shrill voices of the commentators that get on my nerves.

I groan whenever I find something that isn't already out on the floor. Ivan helps me find it in the guidebook. He is a tall, wide Mexican with an Indian braid, who occasionally trades name tags with me to toy with the customers, who we all assume have no souls. We dismantle a rack of women's cardigans and make a new one for tank tops. It's currently forty degrees outside, but everything comes in a full season early.

The store is infected by customers at nine o'clock and we don radio headsets to communicate. Those of us who have been trained in both logistics and customer service have to suffer being called to the register or the fitting room and leaving our work in order to help customers. Ivan and I hide in the back room and open boxes very slowly, tearing away the protective plastic of the new product and hanging the clothes on rolling racks. We let our headsets hang around our necks so that we can't be bothered, but swiftly place them back around our ears when the door from the outside begins to open.

In February I get a brand new car from the Toyota dealership and the next day I am rear-ended on the way home from class. The perpetrator is a culinary student who has let his insurance expire and wants me to say that his mother was the one who collided with me. My mother refuses on my behalf, and cannot help but note (out loud) that my father, her future ex-husband, is a chef.

I have been waiting for it to happen all day, and cannot concentrate on my construction as a result. I am called to the register, leaving a section full of unhung shelves behind, with a folding cart of perfectly arranged merchandise to be placed upon them. I know by the time I get back the customers will have destroyed my flawless shirts, thinking that the folding cart itself is a display and they are free to sort through whatever they find within these walls. This is true, actually, but it still feels like a breach of etiquette.

The main cashier, Dana, has been calling for sign checks every ten minutes because we didn't bother to finish that job this morning, so things that aren't fifty percent off appear to be. She has a very long line because she is the cashier that unquestionably submits to the will of customers. I sign into another computer and even before announcing that I am open, four women shovel their piles of cheap, foreign-made clothing onto my counter, and don't look me in the eyes.

"And how are we doing today?" I say.

"You've got almost nothing in Medium," she says. The sunglasses propped in her hair are embossed with silver overlapping C's.

"Sorry," I say, "We're re-stocking as we speak."

"Sure," she sighs, and slides her glasses down over her eyes.

I see the sales manager, with her clipboard, hovering three counters away.

"Would you like to save ten percent and open an Old Navy account today?" I inquire.

"No," she says, and hurriedly slides her card through the machine, even though I have rung nothing up. She concentrates intently on the screen.

"Not yet," I say, and slide her clothes over the scanner.

"It ruins your credit," she says, and is entirely correct.

I try to find her eyes through her sunglasses.

I can see the route from the parking garage. The campus, like most campuses, is in a bad part of town in a big city. My Creative Writing class starts before eight in the morning, and even though in four months it will be over a hundred degrees outside, it is freezing now. I bought my coat at work. Outerwear is the only thing Old Navy sells that lasts.

The Palm Walk, a wide concrete walkway stretching through twin rows of palm trees, starts at the end of the walking bridge that arches over College Road. The lamp posts shine down on me with the orange light that glows on the pavement of all the roads in Phoenix once the sun goes down. That's how I know I'm downtown. My classmates focus on the ground their feet are about to tread upon, and usually so do I. Sometimes I watch them walk past me.

The cold seeps through my jeans and chills my legs, and I finally feel my exhaustion as I walk into the building, I don't recall the name, but it's made up mostly of computer labs. My writing class is located in one such classroom. I am one of the first to arrive.

It's hard to process anything this early, but I gather that my creative writing professor's name is Steve Beatty. He is a balding man, with a few stray bits of gray hair over his ears, who charges in every morning in a windbreaker with a look of excitement on his face. He assigns essay readings about young people who deal with disfigurement, anorexia, and steroids. My first homework assignment is to take a picture of myself and make a collage out of it that will express who I am. I give myself a chopped up, mismatched outfit, a feather headdress and a Superman belt. I tell Jenna about this on the phone and she scoffs, "It sounds very high school." Jenna no longer has much use for high school, because she's a sister at one of the Seven Sisters.

I do my reading anyway, and one morning we are given a pop quiz. I am the only one who doesn't fail, and Beatty scolds us in the way my previous classes have been scolded a thousand times for four years prior. "A good teacher has patience and doesn't lose his temper," I write in my notes.

We write an essay about the most important things in our lives. One guy actually writes about his cock and gets an A.

Arianna appears around the corner, near the fitting room.

"Christine," she grunts as she walks into the maternity section. I am re-folding a display of shirts ravaged by half a day's browsing, with a gray plastic rolling cart to assist me. This is termed "recovery."

"She treats me like a fucking failure," Arianna says, referring to our Manager of Managers, "I'm a goddamn college student, you know. My career is one of the highest paid careers you can pursue."

And on she goes. I already know everything she is going to say and I've only known her for a week. Arianna is Indian-American, and she wants her fellow humans to know that her immigrant parents don't appreciate her need for independence. She is the one managers assign to follow shop-lifters, a demeaning and tiring job that usually involves a messy confrontation. Old Navy's policy concerning wrong-doers is one of passive aggression: approach, acknowledge, walk away.

The video explained it better.

"I think my Dad's going to marry Kimberly Ann Senkel," I say.

Arianna has been gazing at a display of pregnant mannequins that I built this morning. After a moment, she catches my comment and looks at me, puzzled.

"Who's Kimberly Ann Senkel?" she asks.

My parents appreciate my need for independence. I live in a condominium with my mother down the road from my old high school. I drive back and forth to the university alone and don't answer my father's calls, because I don't know what else to do.

"Excuse me?"

Arianna and I both look at a middle-aged woman holding a little boy's t-shirt.

"Do you have any that say 'Arizona'?" she asks us.

We blink at each other, and then shake our heads at her.

Now there are pictures on Facebook of my closest friends at University of Arizona, in Tucson. It's snowing there, and they're giggling, bent over the building signs at night. They are shown in a dorm room, dancing, like in the pictures from the night of my graduation party. That was when my mother found out about the other woman. A boy I knew is walking into the U of A library. I read wall messages between him and his new friends. This is where I am supposed to be.

When the tours happened, I went with both my parents, and my father instantly decided that I would be going here. My application was accepted long before graduation, and I attended early orientation with a pair of friends, who are there now. We worked out our housing, classes and meal plans. I got lost more than I felt I should have, but the orientation councilmen reassured me that soon I'd know the place perfectly.

A few weeks later my parents took me on my graduation trip. The day we got back they told me that they were divorcing.

I withdrew from U of A a week before classes began, and started looking for a job.

If you want to know, I was relieved.

I am sitting in the back with Ivan, who I assume never went to college, and tell him about the cock-writer. I am grinning at him and he is laughing as Cat emerges from her office.

"I thought college was a waste of time," she says, "My brother started college when I started working, and by the time he graduated I was already a manager."

"But I don't want to be a manager," I tell her.

"So go to college," Ivan says. He takes my name tag off its lanyard and hands me his.

I have to drive under the Bell Road 101 highway entrance to get home from work. Mom is upset when I tell her about my exchange with Cat.

"Don't you ever listen to her," she says, "Successful people go to college."

We have new furniture, which has kept her composed for several weeks now.

You take Shea to get to Fountain Hills from the condo. The first time I happened to be driving through this town it was around three o'clock in the afternoon, and I thought there had been a water main break. The hundreds-feet high tower of bubbling, white water was just the eponymous fountain, which sits at the center of a pond in the middle of a park. In this part of town is Pei Wei, which serves Americanized Chinese food to go. It's the dining experience of a divorced person, which I am. I am divorced in every way a person can be.

My father has stopped calling. My mother let him keep our dog for a few weeks, and then we took her back for good. I put her in my bathtub and scrub her until she is made of soap suds. She cannot see, so she licks my hands. Kimberly Ann Senkel is still an enigma, wandering around a house where I had lived, petting my dog, cooking with my father, hanging her clothes on my mother's side of the closet. I have never even heard her voice, but I am conditioned to think that she is filth and the root of my ruined life, the woman who stole my compass.

When my store makes it to YouTube I post it on Facebook within seconds. It's my day off and I have missed seeing in person the seven year-old boy whose mother was attempting to teach him to self-soothe. In the middle of the women's denim shop, he came to the conclusion that he had had quite enough and started tearing clothes off their shelves and hangers. He knocked over two mannequins that I had personally dressed, and rolled around, shrieking, on the floor, immersed in the spoils of his destruction. His mother stood, her arms folded, waiting for him to stop, saying nothing. I can hear this kid crying like he has lost a toe, and no one does a fucking thing.

Beatty puts us into three-person groups to write a single paper on the nature of love and romance in popular culture. We cite Wikipedia as a source. An excerpt:

"Even though Scarlett is a selfish spoiled brat, dashing and mischievous Rhett adores her. Even when he threatens to crush her skull to quell his own jealousy, no one's disgusted with Rhett, but for Scarlett for not knowing how great it must be to be in a marriage where arguing looks this good."

I edit my group members' passages so that they sound more like mine, and the three of us proudly ruin the curb for the rest of the class.

I was born in Georgia. My mom and I left when I was eleven, following my father, who always led the way. This is what I am thinking as Beatty reads my own words, which I am sure of, back to me.

"Who said, 'You can never go home again'?" he asks, smiling, as he hands the paper back to my group.

There is construction on College Road, and throughout Tempe, that will never end. They are building a light rail downtown that will be finished by the time I graduate. 202 to 101 home, 90th Street and Pima, Chuck Powell on 103.9.

I can still hear Beatty's voice as I drive away and feel as if I am running in knee-deep water.

I now think about school at work. Beatty assigns a memoir for us to write. I write most of mine on the back of Old Navy Card applications during my breaks. It is about those weeks I spent as a hostess at one of my father's restaurants. I was hooked into the job before graduation, as a place to work during the summer. It is a gushing outpour of actions and emotions. The title is too long. I scratch out lines and blacken them over and over again for several minutes. When I finally type it out and turn it in, I have left out the most important part: I knew about Kimberly Ann Senkel before my mother ever did, and I never said a thing. I figured it out. I saw it happening, knew what was going on, before I even heard of her. With all my father's traveling, I even knew she was from Texas before he told me.

My fellow students fall over in adoration over it, and I smile politely. I have looked Atlanta up on Wikipedia for fun and re-discovered a college there that my older sister toured when she was about to graduate high school. She never got in, but I have applied. Beatty gives me a recommendation.

"Who knows?" he says, smiling warmly, as he hands it to me.

If you drive toward Fountain Hills on Shea, you'll eventually run out of road. Turning right, you can drive for half an hour and make it to Mesa, and maybe find my fencing coach and my former teammates. My advice is to turn left.

The road is narrow and has two lanes, one for each direction. There's nowhere to turn around for miles once you start on your way. It turns into desert immediately. Stretches of mesas, hills of cacti and desert shrubbery. Animals you ought to be afraid of slinking in and out of the vegetation. You can see everything and nothing forever in front of you, and you'll wonder, or at least I did, what the point would be in turning back.

CONVICTED

MARTHA HOLLOWAY

This past summer, I accidentally found out that my cousin Cliff, who is only three years my senior, is a registered sex offender. I say accidentally because this information came to light in a search for other, less juicy family secrets. Cliff didn't divulge this information to me and he doesn't know that I know. The charge: aggravated sexual assault. Copious Internet searches have provided no understandable definition of this crime. The crime is worse than sexual assault, but not as bad as rape. Aggravated sexual assault falls into a murky gray area of crime. My sister's police officer boyfriend looked up the charge in his Georgia criminal codebook, trying to get a usable definition, but to no avail. The state of Georgia can't charge you with aggravated sexual assault. He even called in a few favors and got a hold of the Kansas criminal codebook, since Cliff was convicted in Kansas, and it turns out Kansas can't charge you with aggravated sexual assault either. It is a federal felony. I'm not even sure what that really means, but it can't be good.

I'd rather count dots on a ceiling tile than read a book. Cliff imparted this delightful statement to me one Thanksgiving, when I entered the room clutching a copy of the fourth *Harry Potter* book and he marveled at the fact that I would voluntarily read such a thick book. His statement was off-putting but made sense for him, the same person who did and probably still does only read the bolded parts of magazine articles that actually interest him. Cliff's graduation from high school was a minor miracle. My parents and I think even his own parents had doubts about him graduating. He has never been one to take anything too seriously, be it schoolwork, relationships or sports, but he wasn't raised to take his actions too seriously. Cliff's mother raised him with a "boys will be boys" attitude. Whenever he did anything stupid, mean, dangerous, criminal or a combination of all four, his mother would dismiss the action with a wave of her hand and a simple excuse of "Well, he's just being a boy," like that somehow made up for whatever it was that he had done.

Do Cliff's parents even know he's a registered sex offender? Part of me isn't so sure that they do know, even though he lives at home with his father. Cliff was twenty-two when he was convicted, an adult only in the legal sense. He lived in Kansas, where he was stationed in the army at Fort Riley. My uncle had let it be known previous times that he really only heard from Cliff when he needed something, like money, coffee, beef jerky or canned turnip greens, so it's possible that his parents don't know.

I don't want to get too close. I'm afraid she's going to rise up and slap me. Our grandmother died the same month that Cliff was convicted. During visitation at the funeral home Cliff kept to himself, standing in the corner of the room, farthest away from the casket. He said he felt like our grandmother was going to rise up and slap him if he got too close, which seemed like an odd statement at the time. Knowing what I know now though, his statement makes perfect sense. He was convicted of aggravated sexual assault a mere twelve days after her funeral, at least according to his page on the Georgia Bureau of Investigations website. Our grandmother was the only one who could see through him, the only one who could get through to him. When we were younger, and he was cooking up some scheme to get his younger brother and me in trouble, our grandmother would come into the room just in time to stop him. Most of the time she didn't even have to say anything to him. She would just give him a knowing look, as though she was reading his mind and piercing his thoughts. Then she would leave the room. Cliff would always stop whatever it was he was doing. There were times of course when she would have words with him, or the time when she told him to go out in the yard and pick his own switch, but usually it only took a stare from her to stop him.

As we got older and his schemes got more complex and more stupid, her same tactics still worked. When Cliff had gotten in trouble several times for throwing rocks at car windows and no amount of talking to his parents would stop him, our grandmother took him aside one day, squeezed his arm and told him that there would be no more of that. And there was no more. He stopped. Staying at least an arms length away from her casket at the funeral was

probably a good idea, because if anyone could have come back from the dead just to discipline him, it would have been our grandmother. Part of me hopes that the reason Cliff's legal troubles never came to light in the family arena is because of our grandmother's death and how close it was in time to his conviction. I assume that even before her death he was going through the legal process and probably knew that in a few short weeks he'd be a convicted felon.

When I turn on the street, I want people to know something big is coming. Cliff spent most of last Christmas talking about his new truck. It's not a fancy truck, a standard black Ford F-150 decked out in about seventy-five dollars worth of University of Georgia apparel. He'd been working on the truck for weeks, souping up the engine. The goal: hearing his truck before you could see it. He also allowed as how he'd spend weeks crafting a special box for under the front seat for his gun, which made me fairly sure that his parents don't know about his conviction. It's illegal for a felon to own a gun, but when he mentioned the special gun box, Cliff also mentioned that the pistol was a gift from his father when he was discharged from the army in October.

Cliff's discharge is another question. When I first heard he was being discharged I was relieved. I'd worried about him being in the army because it was something he was not excited to do. His father thought it would be good for him, since he wasn't going to college and had no prospects on getting a job, other than delivering pizza. The army scared Cliff. He would never come out and say he was scared but I remember when I spoke to him the night before he left for basic training, his voice cracked when he said goodbye to me. I worried about him being over seas in Iraq for a year, but thankfully he made it home safely. I worried about Cliff when he called home to announce that he was learning to drive a tank. I had visions of him accidentally mowing down his entire battalion. Cliff never wanted to talk about his time in the army or his time overseas. He always said he just couldn't, which made me worry even more about him, thinking up various stress disorders being in the military could have given him. I was relieved when he was discharged.

Cliff's discharge doesn't add up though. Cliff said it was an honorable discharge that he'd almost served the four years he was required to, but was being let go early so he could go to college, something he'd never shown a shred of interest in before. The dates just won't match, no matter how much I try to force them to. Cliff joined the army in August of 2006 and was discharged in October of 2008. No matter what method of math I use, that is barely two years. The minimum you can serve before you're discharged for educational purposes is three and a half years. If I had to guess, I would say he was discharged from the army, and not honorably.

I like doing things where the next day, I'm like, damn that was cool. Remembering the good times I've shared with Cliff over my twenty-one years of life is hard now. It's almost impossible not to see his mug shot in my mind, staring at me in a stupor that has me half way convinced that he can't believe he's a registered sex offender either. Truthfully, Cliff and I haven't been very close in recent years, so most of my good memories of him take place before the age of ten. Cliff is the one in all of my birthday pictures from the ages of one to seven making a stupid face behind me, usually the same stupid face: index fingers pulling the corners of his mouth wide, tongue sticking out, eyes closed. Cliff is the one I had to hide my Barbie dolls from, if I didn't want them to become headless, naked pieces of plastic. Cliff is the one who picked me up and made me feel better after I fell and scraped my knee rounding third base during an ill-fated baseball game played in the rain. Cliff is the one who hugs me so tight it feels like he's breaking my ribs every time he sees me. Cliff is the one I helped bake a chocolate cake so he could impress his girlfriend for her birthday. Cliff is the one I now refer to as "my favorite family felon." *I'm more than likely the coolest person ever.*

QUARTER LIFE CRISIS

DIONNE IRVING

My quarter life crisis began, in DC between jobs and running out of money. I'd left my job at a newspaper after turmoil and there was one unpleasant interview after another. Over drinks at the Tombs in Georgetown one night my friend Tara told me that she knew a quick and easy way for me to make money by doing hardly any work. I assumed of course she meant prostitution. And it kind of made sense because she always had money and never went to work. But it turned out that she didn't make money in our nation's capitol on her back, but by doing what's known as promotional modeling.

There was nothing about promotional modeling that didn't sound like escort work to me, but I let her explain. If you're young enough (and was 25, so I was pushing it) and thin enough (which I was because I was too poor to eat) you too can enter the fabulously lucrative world of promotional modeling. Their business plan works not unlike an escort service. You send in your picture and your measurements, and your resume and if you fit what their clients are looking for they'll offer you the job and the agency takes a small cut of your earnings. The more jobs you go out on the more calls you get for work.

But what is the work exactly? Well that depends. It can be anything from passing out samples of Tylenol to encouraging people to take shots at a club. But with a long penniless summer looming in front of me, and not knowing what I wanted to do next. I let Tara sign me up with her promotional agent, who I took to calling my promo pimp.

No justice, no peace

When my promo pimp called to say that they were doing a promotion on Thursday at Lowe's and were paying \$20 an hour, I jumped at the chance. Getting a promotional job at a hardware store meant that there wouldn't be any skeezy outfit to wear, and that I could work during the day leaving my nights free for to ponder my questionable life choices.

My boss for the day was a girl named Amber. They'd flown Amber in from New York to work the event and to manage me for the day. We spoke on the phone Wednesday night and arranged to meet in the parking lot of the Lowe's an hour before the store opened. It rained hard Thursday morning and I waited in the parking lot for nearly 30 minutes before Amber showed up. Six feet tall and rail thin Amber was stunning. She had the long thick hair of a model and the kind of angular features you usually see in Vogue layouts.

Amber told me she dropped out of college to do promotional modeling full time. She explained that it was really much more lucrative than financial aide. She gave me my uniform for the day, a t-shirt and some circulation depriving khaki pants and told me that my job was to give out \$5 gift cards to anyone who could make 10 baskets in a minute in one of those pop-a-shot basketball nightmares. It was kind of like being at a carnival, a carnival with lumber, sheetrock and concrete in a tub. But far less oppressive than some of the other assignments I'd been sent out on.

There was also a list of rules. Mostly keep a big smile on your face, be friendly, and don't be afraid to flirt a little. Pretty standard for most promotional jobs. The purpose of the game was to do what any giant company wants to do to its customers, entice them to open a credit card. Apparently the best way to get people to open a line of credit is to place young girls in tight t-shirts with basketballs in their store.

Now when you're in a hardware store enticing the contractors, construction workers and do-it yourselfers of the world to play a carnival-like basketball game, you're going to get the chance to meet some special people. And I did. Some of those people will wink, some of those people will smile and some of those people like Mike will ask for your number while cradling his nine day old baby.

And it would have been nice, to have an ally in the pop-a shot fiasco, but Amber wasn't exactly, focused. During the eight hour shift and she wandered around the store for 20 minute intervals, coming back to the booth time after time looking excitable and shifty. After the fifth time that day she returned to the booth with a ragged looking man. "This is my cousin," she said. "He's going to hang out here for a while." The man grunted hello at me and made a makeshift stool out of one of tubs of concrete, rested his head on the side of the pop-a-shot

booth and drifted off into a deep sleep. No small feat in a Lowe's. And then Amber disappeared again. And then, the managers forcefully ejected her cousin. And then, I was left to pack up the pop a shot booth alone. And then sign my own time card in a signature that I hoped resembled hers.

Putting the Key in the Ignition and Other important Life Lessons

The next time my promo pimp called me was to offer me \$30 an hour to work for a major American car manufacturer and I thought, why not. Rent was due, and I kind of wanted to upgrade to the Ramen noodles that came with the freeze dried vegetables.

The car company was doing a tour to promote the "good" work they were doing. I love the way "good" can become subjective. I hated this company with every fiber of my being, both because I drove a 1996 Geo Metro and because I spent three days frying in the hot sun.

The crux of this promotional campaign basically amounted to featuring their new line of gas guzzlers in non air conditioned tents during the two hottest days of the summer.

They'd hired seven promotional models for the event. It galled me that I was among the oldest of them. I was so embarrassed I shaved a year or two off my age hoping the fact that I was 23 and standing in the hot sun fully made up seemed somehow less shameful. Our job description for the day was to "welcome" guests to this purposeless event. Think carefully for a moment about the word 'welcome.' Imagine this as your entire job description, how would you go about doing it? Now imagine that you have to stand outside, it is 98 degrees and the sadists from the major American auto manufacturer won't so much as let you sip bottled water. Now think carefully again about how you might "welcome" someone. I started out well enough, I said hello, I smiled my biggest and best smile. But after an hour and a half this degenerated to a half smile and a shrug. After the end of the second day it was the kind of "what's up" head nod that you give to people you don't care enough about to open your mouth for. Imagine doing that for three days. I would have loved to do something, anything, hand out flyers, stack a pile of q-tips, clean the parking lot with my tongue, anything.

During my breaks I would look at all the back patting literature the company had displayed. There they were bragging about their vehicles that got 15 miles to the gallon, and discussing satellite radio options, but the one that really caught my eye was a brochure called "Women and Driving." This brochure had "important" facts like putting the key in ignition and not negotiating with a dealer about the price of a car. They also likened car shopping to shoe shopping and talked about vanity mirrors and upholstery colors. My feminist soul hurt, and wept. But she had to pull it together, because I had to go back out into the sun to continue "welcoming."

My other job duties included keeping unsavories out of the event. While they said that the event would be open the public, in this case public didn't mean people without available lines of credit as much as it did owners of local car dealerships.

"Keep out anyone who looks shifty or is wearing a t-shirt," our supervisor cautioned us the second morning of the event. Which seemed totally realistic given the 98 degree weather. As scary as I'm sure myself and the other fresh faced 19 year old girls working the event looked, I'm sure none of us signed on to be a bouncer in front of a tent.

To add insult to injury the car company had about 40 people working at the event, not including the local girls they'd hired, to "welcome." The manufacturer had bought all kinds of food and of course water. On our first day they told us not to touch any of it. This was fine, whatever they wanted, it was for the guests. I understood, until the other 40 people working there made a point of eating drinking and generally making merry while the seven of us stood and watched, on the edge of heat stroke thinking of what a single drop of water would feel like on our parched yet heavily glossed lips. That's when I started to believe that GM was indeed in league with the devil.

Welcome to Whoretown, Population: Me or I was an Axe Angel

I spent the better part of a week trying to entice ragged looking men into buying cheap cologne. And how do I know it was cheap? Because no good cologne sells for \$24 a bottle at Wal-Mart one aisle over from bath salts and hemorrhoid medicine.

I was already leery when my promo pimp sent me the job information packet telling me I was going to be an Axe Angel. Axe is body spray, marketed at the kinds of boys who don't date or bathe regularly. It smells a little bit like bug spray with a coating of musk.

My Axe Angel uniform included a white lab coat, a tight t-shirt and a clip board. For this promo I had to approach men, in a Wal-Mart, wearing the lab coat and try to entice them to buy this cologne, which supposedly attracts "the ladies."

According to the Axe training guide I was supposed to be looking for men who (quote) "Probably own a handful of fine fragrances, but use only 1-2 regularly. They buy them in department stores and in mass merchant retailers. They realize the stakes are higher at this point in the game."

The stakes are higher? And what game? What does that even mean? So my 'job' (and I use the term loosely) was to try and get men ages 21-34 to stop and talk to me, not because I was offering free samples, no, that would have made my life too easy, instead I had to give them a promotional Rorschach test. Rorschach tests, more commonly known in pop culture as the ink blot test, involves looking at an inkblot and explaining what you see. In sitcom land a character tells the psychiatrist the weird shape they intuit, thereby revealing their psyche and the punch line ensues. Too bad I was the punch line.

Here's how it went. I went up to a man, asked him if he was interested in attractive women, then I gave him card with an inkblot picture of a butterfly on it, then I sprayed the card with Axe and gave it to them to rub between their hands. While they were rubbing I was supposed to comment "Axe will make you smell good for the long haul, and you know how much us girls like that in a guy." These scripted lines offend my very soul. Seriously, I don't know any girl that wants her boyfriend to smell like a frat boy with no money, but perhaps I just know people with discriminating tastes. Once they finished rubbing the card, the inkblot was magically transformed into a pair of bright red seductively pursed lips with a \$4 off coupon for the cologne.

Spraying cheap cologne on a paper card about 50 times while seemingly propositioning men is a quick route to a headache. A massive one. One so massive that by the end of the promotion I was scowling and ill tempered and instead started just shoving cards at men without explanation.

"Here," I would say, shoving a card into someone's hand. "Take this."

"I don't want it," the men would protest

"Yeah," I would say "well neither do I."

Five minutes before my shift ended I pressed the card into the hand of a man who stood mulling his choices of Old Spice antiperspirant

"Girl," he said looking at me aghast. "I don't wear any cologne that doesn't say Versace or Dolce and Gabbana on the bottle."

When I decided to go to grad school at the end of the summer I thought I was giving up my life with my promo pimp for good. But here's the thing about surrendering your dignity for money it give you insight. Not in a way that smacks of epiphany or a way that makes you rethink all your previous life choices, but in a way that makes you understand that we all pimp ourselves out for money.

When I decided not to do promotional modeling anymore, I didn't have to stop smiling or doing things that I felt ambivalent about or taking money for things about which I had reservations. And even though the promotional modeling was a really direct way of selling myself, don't we all do that, a little bit, everyday in small ways. When we smile at the boss we hate, when we pretend to agree with a clients' crazy political views, when we let a student turn in a

paper late just so we don't have to hear them complain anymore. We all give ourselves over a little at a time, for money.

THE WORST PERSON IN THE WORLD

JAMES MAY

Five days before I moved to Houston, my mother contracted a bacterial infection on her right hand when she cut it on the bottle cap of a 10oz Coke and then repped one of the flowers in the backyard without putting a band-aid on. In just two days the entire heel of her palm turned black—nothing a very minor surgery wouldn't repair, but there I was in her hospital room, trying to understand why she was refusing the operation.

"I hate deformities," she told me. Before I looked at my father, who was propping himself on the windowsill with his arms crossed, I processed the absurd gravity of her vanity: my mother would sooner let some bizarre strand of bacteria eat its way through her flesh until it would eventually gorge itself on one of her vital organs and ultimately kill her than end up with the likely three inch scar on her hand or, in the worse case scenario, part of her thumb removed. And this could happen if the antibiotics her doctor gave a 50% chance of working didn't work. Not helping matters was my mother's hatred for her doctor, a hatred based solely on the fact that "he looked like he smelled" even though he didn't actually smell, the same insult she used against Andie McDowell and Sarah Jessica Parker. I had walked in as her doctor was walking out, just in time to see her lower the flipped bird she gave to his back.

My parents are both lawyers, so, they told me, it would be very hard for them to get a second opinion: when lawyers are involved, doctors tend to side with doctors and won't contradict each other.

In the parking lot, I asked my father if he thought she was really serious. "James, you know your mother." And he was right, I did. This was a woman who flew to New York City every two months to get shots of Botox from Madonna's dermatologist. (She'd been getting Botox since the 80s, before Madonna was, well, Madonna.) The woman who made me take Acutane when I was twelve, a drug that eradicates acne better than any other but also manipulates the patient's hormone levels so much that even the most mellow of teenagers sometimes kill themselves. My side effects weren't that bad. My skin got very dry and flaky. "Face dandruff" my mother called it. And I did cry at awkward times, no time worse than when watching Forest Gump, that scene where Forest and Jenny meet at the war protest in front of the Washington Monument. My best friend Guy looked over at me, saw the tears, and looked away.

But my mother's superficiality, I knew, had a definite and validating source. From the time she was born until she was about, say, thirteen, my mother was ugly and was treated as such. She was always smart, got the best grades in school, and was a good enough painter at that age to have attracted the notice of one of the University of Pittsburgh's art professors who told her she could apply to the graduate program the same time she applied for her bachelors. Then in one weekend, as she told me, she bleached her hair and replaced her coke-bottle glasses with contacts. Not long after, family friends kept telling my grandmother how beautiful my mother was, and all of a sudden my grandmother treated my mother to shopping sprees. Instead of being banished to the basement when company was over, my mother was allowed to sit and eat at the table, where she was even allowed to speak! A decade later, even though she finished second in her class at the University of Pittsburgh's Law School, I'm sure she suspected (and probably even hoped) every job offer she received was obtained by her attractiveness.

And twenty years later, she started her own immigration law firm. That summer I was working as her paralegal until it was time for me to move to Houston for graduate school. I worked on asylum cases, helping to put together applications that proved the client would be at risk of extreme harm or even murder if he or she were to go back to his or her country of origin. I spent most of my summer researching female circumcision and genital mutilation. Every day when I started my research I would remember how a few months earlier my Religious Studies professor had written "Female Circumcision" on the chalkboard and I whispered to my friend, "This would be the worst time for a loud high-five" and then how the girl in front of us looked back at me as if I was the worst person in the world. Which, as my research continued, I realized I was.

The day after visiting my mother in the hospital, I went into the office to meet Fatimah,

a twenty-seven year old Sudanese woman whose case my mother took up pro bono. Months earlier, my first assignment as a paralegal was to write everything down about why Fatimah left Sudan. Fatimah, though exceptionally tall and beautiful, spoke in a deep soft voice, almost like a woodwind, with an English accent she picked up while studying in London for most of her teenage years. When she returned to Sudan she was twenty-one; FGM is usually performed between the ages of four and eight, so she thought she'd missed the window and was effectively safe. But then her grandmother realized she hadn't been circumcised. While her parents were out of town for a few days, Fatimah's grandmother enlisted the help of some of the more conservative neighbors, tied Fatimah's hands together and told her she was to be circumcised that day. To make sure she didn't run, they locked her in the bathroom with her nine year old sister who was also to be circumcised. While in the bathroom her sister was able to untie Fatimah's hands, and they were both able to open the bathroom window. But Fatimah's sister wouldn't leave. "She told me to go, but that she couldn't leave the family," Fatimah said during her first meeting with us. So she ran, stayed the night with some family friends, and then made it back to London, but since her student visa had expired there, she had to leave. She opted for Pittsburgh because a friend of hers from college now went to Carnegie Mellon University's graduate program.

I got to the office an hour before our meeting. Paralegals and law clerks zig-zagged between cubicles, stacks of cases covered my mother's desk, her voicemail light, it seemed, blinked more frantically than ever. So many questions left for her I couldn't possibly answer. I sat down, imagined what would happen if those antibiotics didn't work. What would I tell my friends—that my mom died of a chronic case of vanity? The infection would spread from her hand to her arm, and if it did, then there'd be absolutely no chance of an operation. I remembered standing in line with her at Taco Bell when I was seven. She saw the register worker only had one hand, so we left without ordering. I felt bad even then. But I knew, too, she was in a way more honest than a lot of people who hide their discomfort and prejudices. Every year in the spring my high school canceled classes for the Day of Caring, where we would go to places like hospital wards, retirement homes, sometimes even jails to visit with what my Social Studies teacher called "lonely souls." Forced volunteerism. But every year, thank god, my mother wrote me an excuse, then took me to the ice rink so I could play pickup hockey until lunch time when she'd take me to some ritzy place downtown, and then after our meal she'd say, "Don't worry, I'll tip very well. That can be our charity for the day." We laughed all four years.

When Fatimah didn't show for the meeting, I called my mother. "She's so stupid," my mother said.

"Huh?"

"I know what she's thinking—her mother has cancer and she's going to try to go back to see her. If that happens, she won't be allowed back to the U.S.. And her grandmother will probably get her anyway. Stupid. Just stupid."

"Well, what should I do?"

"Call her, tell her I said if she goes back she's stupid."

"I'm not going to say that, but okay."

I tried the two numbers Fatimah had written down on the blue information sheet at the top of her case file. No answer at either number. She had written an address too. I wrote it down and headed for my car the first chance I got. If she was still in Pittsburgh, I was going to find her.

My Honda Civic already had half my life in it. Boxes of books, a duffel bag of clothes. My parents were shipping some furniture to me once I got to Houston. Until then, this was all I was going to have.

The address Fatimah gave us was in Bloomfield, the closest thing Pittsburgh has to a Little Italy. And unlike most cities, Pittsburgh was built on a triangle rather than a grid. Throw that complicated geometry on top of a bunch of steep hills and you have the most cock-eyed road system in the country, maybe even the world. The only place I know of where you can

make three immediate rights and get completely lost. Which is to say I had to park almost a mile away.

It was cool for July. The sky kept threatening to rain but never did. At the corner of Bloomfield Street and Gross, I waited to cross the street, an obese woman trilling away on her cell phone next to me. She saw the traffic light change, but didn't notice or didn't care that the pedestrian light still gave us the don't walk hand. As I watched her step onto the crosswalk I saw a black Hummer turning left toward her. I had time to think about whether or not I should grab her and pull her back to the sidewalk, to worry about whether or not invading someone's personal space like that would be okay, to cringe at the thought of touching one of her flabby arms (she looked like she smelled). Wouldn't she just pull me into harm's way with her? The Hummer blew its horn and skidded within inches of the lady. She screamed, dropped her phone. In that long pause that always follows a near-accident, it felt like they were all looking at me: the woman, the driver, the German Shepherd in the back seat. And not only them, that girl from my Religious Studies class too. And Ms. Wilson, the Social Studies teacher who organized the Day of Caring and ended up crying every year in assembly when she told us about all we accomplished as a school. What the hell was wrong with me? Was this genetic?

By the time I made it to the battered Victorian house Fatimah had listed as her address, I was convinced the antibiotics wouldn't work and my mother was going to die because I missed the last chance God gave me to reclaim some Karma for this family. There were eighteen years between my mother and father. I said earlier that my mother probably wished every job offer she got was due to her looks, well, this in some ways is true: my father was the only person who ever hired her, and it wasn't for her legal mind—which he found out later was excellent, better than his in fact—but, rather, as he once told us, he hired her because she wore a tight sweater to her interview. It took my father almost dying from a heart attack and my mother basically becoming an expert in cardiology by reading every medical book she could get her hands on to convince my older half brothers and sisters, my aunt and uncle, even my grandparents, that this pretty blonde girl didn't marry him in hopes of inheriting all his money when he died. She fought with doctors for him, and when he was out of the hospital, she made him revise his red-meat diet. No more bacon-wrapped fillets. No more breakfasts at the Dunkin Donuts which closed three months after his heart attack. If she goes, I thought, he'll soon follow—same thing happened last year to Johnny Cash when June Carter died.

The button for Fatimah's apartment, number four, didn't have her name on it. When I rang it, a Sudanese woman who was about the same age as Fatimah answered the door in a CMU sweatshirt. "I'm here to talk with Fatimah." She looked at me, said nothing. "I'm not an ICE officer," I told her. "I'm her paralegal, I'm here to help her." Could I have sounded lamer? (Trust me, I was trained by lawyers!)

"I haven't seen Fatimah all week," she said while shutting the door in my face. I tried to stop it, but once the door clicked, I couldn't turn the knob. Did she think I was there for a bill or something? Her case was pro bono. I pounded on the door, rang the bell for five minutes, and when I finally stepped back from the porch and looked up to the top-floor apartment, I saw, vaguely, what looked like two women looking down at me. I went across the street and sat in a covered bus stop. I'd wait until she tried to leave if I had to.

Down the street, a crew was power-washing one of the oldest churches in the area—another project the city implemented under the gentrification plan that started a decade after the steel industry collapsed. For as long as I had been alive, Pittsburgh didn't want to be Pittsburgh. For two hours, I watched a violent jet cut chalk-white lines through what was probably a century's worth of soot. No one had come in or out of Fatimah's building. I tried calling my mother and father, but neither of them picked up. I could barely sit on the bench, and each time I started to feel the least bit comfortable, my mind began to wander, back to that intersection where I had failed as a human being. After two more hours my phone rang, it was my father. My mother just got out of surgery and everything went well.

"She just didn't want you to worry," he said.

I hung up. Looked around at Pittsburgh, knowing in all likelihood that I wouldn't come back to live there. Ever. That my life in the city was all but over. I went back to Fatimah's door, rang the bell. No answer. I looked up at the window, saw that there was a light on. I knocked. Nothing. An old woman with grocery bags passed by, started walking faster when she saw me. Then I slammed my fist on the door. "I won't leave until I help, damn it!"—I shouted it at least twice before I gave up and walked all the way back to my car.

IN AN EFFORT TO RESIST LEAVING EVERY PIECE "UNTITLED"

KAYLA MILLER

1-

so, let me first say that i believe in the list. my belief has been steady throughout my childhood, in which i'd become enthralled in the making of lists for kindergarten homework: find all the words that start with g, everything that's blue, everything a butterfly adores.

2-

the list is a dominatrix. the list is a bitch.

3-

what i'm wondering is quite simple: can one follow the paths of one's lists throughout the corridors of one's life? of *existence*?

4-

lists act as lieutenants, misering and ruling collections of our nebula, our scatterings of schedule.

5-

or, this habit that i have, to compile these notebooks of everything, writing everything into them, taping select scraps of paper--receipts, movie tickets, braves tickets, museum tickets. cards: one from a coworker, a quiet kindness, one from my grandmother, an unsolicited well-wishing, a bell tower in sun. a document of days. in a move towards forgetting nothing, a collection of everything.

6-

in grief, it is not uncommon for one to become fixated upon the lost loved one's items, their clothing, their possessions. we find ourselves unwilling to part with the hairbrush, the perfume bottle, the loafers. we leave these items untouched, or we touch them regularly. a shrine to the dead. a collection of everything.

7-

my grandmother's grief had weighed in on her, bent her back; her breasts, like sighs upon her chest.

8-

this inability to part with the things of a deceased loved one, this thrusting out of one's arms, opening them wide and pulling all the minutia of the person's life to them, pulling it tight and pulling it close. this is often a form of resistance, a *well, if their things aren't here, that means they're really gone*, a kind of magical thinking.

9-

in grief, we go back to that old childhood idolatry. we attempt to be magicians.

10-

when my grandmother's son, my uncle, died in a car accident, i was eleven years old. my grandmother's grief, a heavy cloak around her. in my concern for her, in my childish attempt to protect her from any mentioning of her lost son, i erased the pencil writing on his birthday in her wall calendar. when she saw it, her voice was accusatory, *why did you do this?* i floundered, not knowing what to say. i don't know, i said.

11-

and what of lists now? compilations of things to do? things done? things needed? synopses of life? synopses of me?

12-

if i never let anything go, and if i keep everything documented, and ordered, then perhaps i will not forget the life i have led, the way my mother forgets hers.

13-

the death of my mother's brother, my grandmother's son, my mother's favorite brother, left a crack in the vase of my mother, running parallel to the sky, opening to the sun. venus fly trap.

14-

at his funeral, my grandmother's son's, the church was on an incredibly high hill. when you drove up the driveway into it your car would lean backwards, climbing vertically, the force pushing you into your seat. there was a cat running around outside of the squat building. my cousin chased it during the eulogy outside of the sanctuary's french doors, its calico body always evading her grasp, but unwilling to leave, the congregation of people having too much appeal for it to deny.

15-

the same church in which my mother had taken me to be baptized, at the age of twelve, the era of the butchy haircut.

16-

in smallest form, if we rolled it and compressed it and stuffed it into our shoes and jacket pockets, how many suitcases could we fit our grief into? could we augment and segment and shrink our grief into its most concise, bring it in our carryon?

17-

organize it. list it. something i can read again and again while i'm standing in line at the drug store, or recite during a traffic jam, or sing about while i'm shampooing my hair.

~~18-~~

~~at least we can all agree that there is nothing quite so enjoyable as crossing something off a list.~~

19-

after the death of my father, after rolling my grief into its tightest form, i etched lists into my skin. so yes, perhaps i am not unbiased. i have an affinity.

20-

all of this, from rooms with dining chairs on waterbeds. all of this, and i'm still talking about you.

21-

there are friends that i smoke with. friends that have dark patches above their upper lips, and hot pink lipstick, and blue-dyed hair. we are friends because of our shared affection for recreational drug usage, and i visit them several times a month in their home. we enter through the basement, screen door banging shut, stepping onto concrete stained brown from cat piss.

22-

immediately, a wall of noxious smell. olfactory overload. cat feces have been ground into the floor, the rug, sitting in corners next to the walls. litterboxless.

23-

what is this relentless collection of objects, this incessant need to hold everything close to

oneself, a fear of letting things go, if not a form of grief?

24-
it is what we are grieving over that is the question.

25-
perhaps, then, my notebooks are trappings of this grief in miniature. a grief that has never left me, a grief that i have battled before, a grief that has left its mark on me, a grief that is stingy in its captivation of my attention.

26-
their basement has become a fermentation laboratory for cat shit. the classroom-like tiled ceilings were missing most tiles, with only a few rem(a)inders remaining.

27-
piles of things. i have never seen so many discarded, abandoned items of human possession. a tour of their home: a small canoe in a sea of waste. as we walked, cats weaved in and out of our legs, climbing mountains of clothes in corners. my mind races to television shows i have seen, to rats, to cockroaches. the house seems almost to vibrate, to hum, with the movement of cats in its walls.

28-
shit on stovetop.

29-
but can we, reader, call this a form of grief?

30-
a room with a computer on a desk. boxes and boxes of dolls. dolls mounted on all four walls, perimetering the room. piles of dolls on dressers, in corners. another room, this one with splatters of red paint. a box of kittens on the floor. one, bleeding. a gash in its thigh. its tiny, sightless eyes stay enveloped in the fleshy light pinkness of its eyelids. its helpless mews sounding like church bells.

31-
a quick glimpse in a dark bedroom, illuminated by a giant old television: the mother, asleep in a bed surrounded by masses of objects, piles of possessions, and cats roaming the lot, their tails casting seaweed shadows on the blue lit walls.

32-
i see this potential in myself. in my drawer of miscellany. in my file folder of letters. in my notebooks, waterlogged, but saved. the magicality of our objects.

33-
we roll our blunts on the stained sheets of friend's lifeless mattress. cats jump from the ceiling, acrobats in a stage show, gymnasts. we flick our ashes, empty our ashtrays, onto the wasteland of the concrete floor. smashed cupcakes, spilled juice, never cleaned, step around it. the roaches you know are behind everything, in every dusty space. the mice you know are running beneath piles of clothes, nesting.

34-
what are these relics? what, these objects? what are these posters on the walls, drawn obvi-

ously in elementary school, proclaiming future farmers of america allegiance?

35-
we throw some things away, in a garbage bag wrapped over an elderly person's walker, complete with sliced-tennis-ball feet.

36-
and here i deleted a line drawing these things together, because i think the reader can see how they connect.

37-
i am a collector of found objects, of serendipitous memorabilia. my grandmother is a connoisseur of the sad story, so abundant and alone is she in her mourning that she can only connect with tragedy. her repertoire of the worst kinds of buzzkills was always remarkable. my friends, collectors of examples of human specimen--not discriminatory, they leave both waste and treasure for the discerned eye to discern.

my lover can be disparaging of these friends, perhaps i should say our friends. she is a fellow collector, a collector of the colorful. like a bird forging one bright, dynamic trick to attract a lover (the desperate need for a lover a desire stronger than all others), coveting and thieving, rendering its nest aglitter. walking into her bedroom was like walking into a kaleidoscope, the pinks and reds and greens, an optomological orgasm.

38-
so too, shall one collect these things, the remembrances of their lost loved one, as if to rely on them. so shall we rely on our objects.

39-
perhaps the dividing of it, the labeling, the listing, the numbering, perhaps it doesn't do what we think it does.

40-
or, maybe it does exactly what we want: lays everything bare, straightens things out, nice and loudly.

41-
in their grief, people have done things both strange and sad in attempts to bring the truth out of fog. i may not have collected as many things in stacks in the corners of rooms and closets, but i have collected memories like the cognitive miser i'm sure that i am. i have been shoring away bits and pieces of you like the mice in fairy tales.

42-
i have written about you in my grief.
i have written about you in my grief.
i have written about you in my grief.

43-
it was my grandmother and i, together, running errands in jonesboro, who pulled into the driveway and saw the police officer there first. we have been trying to reach you, he said. we need you to go to the hospital, he said. the rush, heartbeat picks up, catches up with your breath, panting. the scuffle, someone to watch eleven-year-old me. watching out the window as they pull away, speeding out of sight.

the news, later on, at my home.
evening.

less than two years after my father's death, i sobbed, not again.

44-

my grandmother has not walked away from her grief unscathed. in order to make room for it to home with her, to hunker down, there was a certain accumulation of things. she is not without it. her home is cluttered with ancient souvenirs, reclaimed from lives she's never lived.

45-

my mother and grandmother seem peculiar examples of inner grief twisted, and like magnets you've held the wrong way, propel. the one, dependent upon yet incredibly condescending to and disdainful of the other. the other, exasperated with, frightened of, and contemptuous of the one.

46-

the worst part of grief is the going to bed, and knowing your sorrow will not contort overnight. you will awaken, not with a hurt that has double-jointed itself into a small glass box. you will awaken, and know immediately in your heart that nothing has changed, because nothing can change, and things are as worse as they've ever been. this is a particularly lonely moment.

47-

friend opens plastic dresser drawer next to a bed that's stained and sagging. friend pulls out an opened package of *sargento* cheese (i could've sworn that stuff had to be refrigerated?). she eats contentedly.
sometimes, grief provides.

48-

perhaps it was the effect of war on all of us, and hot georgia sun. to know that, as one grieves, a war rages. to be humbled, and hopeless. to have the sun forever in one's eyes, blinding, searing. headachy.

49-

if there were a to-do list of our grief, what would my grandmother put on hers?

*dismantle the basketball goal my son played with
cling to his old plaid shirts
frame every photograph*

and what would be on mine?

50-

i have never asked these friends, these collectors, of their various collections. i have not asked about the stains on the bed. i have not asked about the makeshift couch, boxes on top of boxes, with a comforter on top. i have not asked about the cat shit, piled up around corners. i have seen, but have not asked about, the toilet paper rolls, silently gliding along the floor, a cat following behind, paw outstretched. i have seen, but have not asked about, the same toilet paper being picked up, carried to the bathroom with whoever is brave enough to do their shitting and pissing. i have not asked about the spilled milk on the floor, and how it has been there for months. i have not asked about the crumbles of kibble. i have not asked about the unlocked doors.

instead, i have watched the cats roam, and i have waited.

51-

there is a trick of the mind. the dirtiest trick of the mind. it happens after you have lost the one you have loved, the one you thought that you could never lose. it happens after that sore blow in the dark, that quiet moment of thunder. it has happened to me twice in my grief over you. perhaps it is not a trick of *the* mind (generalities), but a trick of *my* mind, something harbored by the old masochist in me. it is when i am walking, or driving, and i see the back of a head, or a pink tank top with wide arm holes like hungry, gaping mouths. suddenly, my synapses are firing faster than before. my breathing speeds up. my heart becomes skittish. i reach out a hand, i pull over. i turn around. i know you, i think. i would know you amongst all others. once, i ran. i actually *ran* to a stranger, thinking him, you.

52-

let's not even begin a discussion of dreams.

53-

i have left records of you impeccable. i have documented your very existence, if only for a decade, if only because i have spent over a decade trying to decipher what's written in a strain of braille upon your tombstone.

54-

all hail the list, its transparency a gift. nowhere to hide.

55-

what we often mistake for obsession, for the inability to unclench one's fist, for lack of self control, is not this, but the utmost of care. my friends have known this, possibly longer than i have. it is not the inability to control oneself that keeps the fingers moving, the eyes from settling, the accumulation of objects leaving less and less room on your favorite loveseat. my grandmother has known this. we, collectors of lost objects, or found objects, or collectors of things that shall never become lost.

55-

we are historians. we are documentarians. we are the dictators, we are the dictated to. forever taking notes in longhand, desperate work in the dark.

BRIGHT LIGHTS

LESLEY PARKS

For a few years as a young child, my favorite bath toy was the breast self-exam card that hung in my parents' shower. On it, surrounded by instructions outlining this new ritual of women everywhere, was a tiny toy breast with a mock lump in it. It was soft and made of flesh-colored rubber and it flew around the bathtub like a torpedo when I finally pried it off the card and covered it in soap.

We all grew up with breast cancer. With pink ribbons and cute "fight like a girl" t-shirts and "save the ta-tas" stickers. We grew up learning that October meant news stories about fighters and mothers and daughters, expecting to see pictures of bald women bravely smiling and crying and hugging each other, hanging by the credit card machine at every lane in Kroger.

Although there's no history of breast cancer in my family, my mom had her first biopsy at 21, and mine came at nineteen. It was all a part of the routine of women's health and "lumpy boobs," a health professional at my women's college informed me, as I lay topless on the table. I wasn't worried then, or later, on Christmas Eve, for surgery at the Breast Center that ran like a large and whirring machine, with smiling nurses and countless other patients holding their robes together with tight fingers. I was surprised by the depth the needle seemed to reach, tough tissue resistant to the rough and painful push. On Christmas morning, I passed out in the shower after seeing the stitches on my chest, and hit my head on one of the paint trays that had been in our bathroom for months, a monument to the first stage of home renovation. Painting the shutters or buying new furniture is a crisis mode go-to in my family. It's always been easy to keep track of turning points and emergencies in our lives just by remembering how rooms in our house looked at different times.

I came home again in May, excited for a low-pay job and an unpaid internship, vacation at the beach, Steeplechase, my third year at Bonnaroo. Excited for friends and water and sun and beers on the trampoline, excited for everything and nothing, excited to be home. I saw age in my mother, who, at 56 had looked the same as most of my friends' parents, some of whom were more than a decade younger. Her short dark hair was thinner, greyer, and her fair skin looked more translucent and drawn than ever before. My mom had been tired for what seemed like years, and in May her exhaustion was extreme. It's the only way I knew her – hard working and smiling and "just a few more minutes" on the black leather couch, eventually pulling herself up to make dinner or hug us hard, to do paperwork or call her best friend, to pick out new curtains or consider new paint colors or pull weeds or sweep the floor.

I usually doubt my instincts out of severe uncertainty in the concept of instinct, but the truth is Mama and I have a connection that some people acknowledge with amazement and others don't understand or believe. We sense each other's feelings, sometimes when the other isn't even yet aware, often from miles away. In some ways, this is disastrous – Mama wakes up in the middle of the night, knowing I'm out somewhere breaking rules. She knows when I'm lying and I know when she's worried. We are so similar that our frustrations are often explosive, destructive, incommunicable; we detach and say things we don't mean. It also means that we understand what the other is thinking without having to say it. That I understand some of her joys and pains as completely as if they were my own, and she most likely understands my joys and pains as if she is living, and re-living them herself. It is a delicate balance of pulling our hair out and crying out of complete recognition of each other's feelings. We believe in this sappy, mother-daughter connection with all our hearts, but simultaneously accept it with resignation.

The men in our family stay out of it; they never know what to do. They are there when we need to laugh so completely that our stomachs and chests collapse from overuse.

The night before my mom's yearly mammogram, I stayed awake for hours, crying, worrying, praying and bargaining and wishing on delusions created by a combination of intense, assured fear and the demons that fend off sleep. I knew she had breast cancer that night, armless and legless and throatless in my bed, and I went out of town for a week, and

my parents kept it a secret until my brother and I returned from our adventures, five days after diagnosis.

We all ended up wearing blue the day of the first surgery, dressed up and unintentionally coordinated. Early morning as my mom was climbing into the car with a smile and shining teeth; she told us she'd decided on her fight song for cancer. "Beat It, she said, you know! Jenny and I used to love Michael Jackson. We choreographed dances to almost every song of his. I'm going to beat it!" And we said hell yeah you're right and hugged and kissed each other and got ready for the parade of visitors and gift baskets and magazines and distractions and the sickening waiting of the day. A friend and I were looking at the newborns down the hall when we heard the news that Michael Jackson had just died of cardiac arrest. Outwardly, I kept my composure, but I felt as if my brain dropped to the floor. I floated out of my body. An omen, a sign, she wasn't going to make it. A rhythm of "it's over, that's it, it's over, that's it," kept creeping into my thoughts for hours until we saw her, doped up and itchy and green-eyed on a hospital bed. After the fourteen-hour day was through, my brother and I drove home, listening to an erratic mix c.d. of folk and hip-hop, getting dinner and staring over each other's heads. We returned to new hardwood floors in our bedrooms, shining yellow when we turned on the lights.

Five months later, Mama's head is peach fuzz and stark white scalp. A few days ago I noticed the deep blue bags under her eyes. Sometimes, she says hurtful things to me, because she knows I can take it, to prevent herself from releasing all the anger I see in the rigidity of her tired stance. She looks younger than she has in years, maybe because she is resting, or because her weight is distributed differently, heavy in the middle. I hope it's because treatment is working, and she's turning back into herself after all these years. She is fighting off something none of us can comprehend, pain and loss and steroids and chemicals, and we've all coiled back to protect ourselves in corners of our finally finished home – new floors, new patio, new paint on the walls, lights bright in their sockets.

Every once in a while, Mama and I can sit on the back porch and know some of the beauty that has come from this process. In April, after radiation, for the first time since I can remember, there is no certain plan. We've both learned to wait. We've learned to roll with things as they come and take opportunities as they're presented, perfectly and easily. We've learned to slip into what makes sense instead of forcing what was never going to work. We've learned to sit with each other, and listen, and look forward to what's next and what's now.

EMPIRE

SAMANTHA TANNER

A laceration runs wide and deep. Cutting the Earth, we mined for limestone, blasting dynamite into sides of dry high desert mountains. And milled around like stupid ants under a magnifying glass. Building an economy of dirt.

I was fresh out of high school. Graduation was a happy time and I shed no tears. Tehachapi High School, sandwiched in between the San Joaquin Valley and the Mojave desert was a mountain passage that acted as maybe the most intense wind tunnel in California. Cold wind whipping hair in our faces, some of us lost our graduation caps before we could even throw them. Jubilation was muffled by the sounds of the trains in constant motion across the street, their destination: desert.

My dad works at Cal Portland Cement Company, and has since I was ten years old. Every summer, as an incentive to their employees, the plant offers summer jobs as day laborers to their relatives. The requirement is that you had to be at least eighteen, and enrolled full time as a college student. I would be riding to work with my dad for several months, learning more about him and the other world he inhabited by day. This was to be my most poignant placement for a summer. I thought of little else besides the fact that I had to go out and sweat in the armpit of a location, Mojave. I hardly noticed the nervous tears my mother shed when she talked about her baby about to leave the nest, not hearing my sister tell me she'd kinda miss me too. The job was 40 plus hours a week and I'd be paid sixteen dollars an hour. The cash flow and the preoccupation it allowed kept me grounded and less anxious before the flight from home, off to college in the fall.

First, the blasted limestone gets taken from the quarry in giant loaders. Joel drives the biggest loader. He also went to Tehachapi High School, now he lives in Mojave. He liked to compare himself to me, saying

"You know, Sam, I'm sure you just love working out here with us stinking bastards," he chuckled at himself and would stare "but you really ought to stay in school."

The rock gets taken to the crusher where it's ground into a fine dust. The dust spills out into the raw mix silo, waiting to be mixed with other materials, clay, slag, ash, sand, iron, bauxite, gypsum and others depending on the purity of a given sample of limestone from the quarry. The mixed materials get put into giant bins where they wait to be taken to the kiln. Joel sits inside the loader everyday, moving mountains.

I had never wanted to invade a grown man's privacy, but the standard procedures of the plant begged otherwise and forced me into close quarters with the rest of the "labor gang." We all sat huddled in the conference room one morning, the guys afraid they'd dirty up the office's fabric swivel chairs with their dusty, greasy jeans. Is still sat like I was at a tea party. I even would wear mascara to work sometimes, just to make myself feel dainty. I didn't need to; the men constantly reminded me of my sex. We were all called out from the scorching heat to take a drug test. Peeing in a cup is no dignified act, and we called them on that. Safety first, though, and worry about the humiliation after they make sure we're all straight as an arrow. It was awkward. I heard them all joking about it, as I waited on these men to take me back out into the field where we'd have to be around each other for hours. I didn't want to think about their bathroom habits, much less see their urine in a cup next to my own. Lunch might be even more uncomfortable than usual.

I was one of two women working as a miner that summer. The other, Tiffany, was several years older than me and had a mouth dirtier than some of the guys. The first day she nudged me and grumbled at me to look for a shovel. We had to clean out the coal silo. They use coal to

power the machinery at the plant. Tiffany was strong armed and big boned. I am and always have been frail. My friends had laughed at me incredulously when I told them that I was on the labor gang at Cal Portland. When Tiffany and I walked down into the basement of the silo, we saw nothing but piles of fine coal powder in mounds to our shoulders. Some of the coal had gotten wet at the base of the piles, making it heavy to shovel out. Beginning, it was almost fun. I felt like the proverbial badass-working-woman. I had visions of myself in with my sleeve rolled up chirping "We Can Do It!" After 20 minutes of shoveling with fresh blisters on my hands, swinging buckets of the stuff up stairs to throw on a conveyor belt, I felt burning in muscles I didn't know existed. I was done playing Rosie the Riveter-Coal miner tough girl. My hard hat collected heat and I felt sweat coming down the sides of my face, making a black ring around my dust mask. After we emerged from the silo into the yellow heat I realized I was covered in black. I looked like I had rolled in it; the soot was everywhere, deep in my pores.

The kiln. A giant, rotating oven for baking clinker lies in the middle of the plant. Clinker is emitted from the kiln as a fine black dust. They used to have 5 small kilns up until the fifties when they built the monster. This is where the raw materials are sent after the roller mills and crusher. The gigantic cylinder radiates heat and spits massive piles of dust particles into heaps of burnt ash on the ground below. Sometimes the labor gang would have to sweep underneath the hard to reach places directly under the sweeping heat waves of the kiln. We'd try to stay hydrated, waiting for one of the supervisors to yell "alright, you lazy sons of bitches, go wash up for lunch." I don't know if they realized how hard I actually pushed myself. I set myself apart with physical weakness and self-conscious behavior. A furtive glance towards the boss when he came around the corner; I clutched my broom harder, worried he'd single me out. What made me so uneasy was the fact that everything I appeared to be in normal life – a petite, bookish girl – had no place here. My back aching, I wanted to understand this world, master it like a subject in school. But I couldn't.

I walked in and knew that there was some sort of social order I had to figure out. Everyone at the plant called the Yards and Roads lunchroom/locker room "The Dog Pound." It was like being in the school cafeteria again, trying to figure out who ruled the place, where it was ok to sit your stuff, and who was a friend. Unlike my school cafeteria there were Playboy centerfolds on the walls and it smelled like old feet.

"Hey little darlin, you're gonna sit with us." Russ had already figured out where each kid was going to sit. The two girls would sit on either side of him at the big table. His throne was an old office chair at the head of the table, overlooking the entire room. He was king of the Cal Portland underworld, collecting keys to closets, bartering for extra pairs of gloves, even controlling who got fridge space for their lunch. If you "needed protection" you came to Russ, who in his thirty odd years at the plant had lost part of his index finger in an accident, and compensated for it by gaining a reputation. He took a liking to me, and when the other guys would talk dirty at lunch, he'd yell,

"Watch your fucking mouths, there's a lady in here!"

Lady or no lady, I wanted so badly to have a mouth like Russ. Be a guy. What set me apart, really, wasn't my comical attempt at swearing or the fact that I made the mistake of wearing a pink colored t-shirt to work once. I was supposed to leave in the fall, go to college. These guys wouldn't let me forget that. I could get involved in the politics of the dog pound or take an interest in driving the sweeper. But in the end, it was pretend time for me. The cruel heat of summer played tricks on me, searing hallucinations of my place among the balance of the system at Cal Portland. Crushed under the reality that change was coming, I could barely handle knowing that the labor gang was going to continue on past summer, into fall, through the ice of winter

without me. The hardest thing I learned that summer was not physical pain, but the boundaries of place and reality. Some places are not your own, and will not grow kinder towards you.

My dad has an air-conditioned office in the main building. He's the plant's project engineer, his most notable project being designing the new finish mill. He'd try to talk to me about the "industry" on our rides home. I did in fact take a newfound interest in the empire that funded my home and my world of stuff. Cement is everywhere. It is the aggregate in most construction material, the dry powder that you mix with water and sand to get concrete sidewalks and patios. Trucks from all over California and Arizona came through the plant, loading up the finished product from the giant silos at the perimeter of the dust clogged out road. Swinging through concrete jungles, we never realize that we are resting on foundations of sweat and rock. For the first time that summer, I realized that we harvest it all from the earth. From the house I live in to the minerals in the cereal I eat – it all comes from the chemicals swirling in the dirt.

The Mojave Desert is a vacant property across the forgotten part of Southern California. When my dad was considering taking the job in Mojave, the guys at the plant told him that he ought to drive my mother through there at night on their first visit out. Otherwise she'd feel the oppression, taste the hot sand and never let him take the job out in such "godforsaken" country. I find the desert beautiful. The wide scope of sky turning purple at its airy rim as we drove away from the plant every evening always satisfied me. I tried to look up, away from the burnt dirt, averting my eyes away from the crumbling mountain that was weak from our dynamite blasts. My physical energy spent, I let the landscape rushing across the car window carry the weight of my thoughts. Oftentimes my dad was quiet in the car, we had an understanding. As we left the plant we'd consider silent prayer for the open Earth; silently baking in the heat as we ripped it up for profit.

WATER IN YOUR POCKET

SAMANTHA TANNER

I know from experience that it only gets this hot in Texas. Here at Aunt Carol's the mosquitoes come out to play and fire ants tickle your feet with stings and itches. Today it's partly overcast, and my achy sunburn gets a little respite. Pinkish, freckly skin against hers; Mama holds my little waist as we walk through the backyard, circling the greenish swimming pool that's organ shaped and odd. I allow her this, though I'm sixteen and not overly fond of motherly affection. I allow her to hold me though it's sticky and sweaty in the mid day oppression.

At some point between the back porch where the dogs set up camp and the palmetto tree by the deep end of the pool Mama's missing from my side. She starts running.

"What in the Sam Hill does she think she's doing," Grandma is safe behind the screen door, and she forgets people can hear her. I hear her muted and muffled; a buzzing noise in my ear after the sound of the dogs barking emergency, and the cicadas humming in the daytime.

Who knew that today we'd witness a 44 year-old woman take flight? She careens off the edge of the concrete siding, getting air before she hits water. My mother jumps in the pool with all of her nice, decent clothes on. She's wearing her summer uniform of a sleeveless cotton blouse, denim jean shorts, leather sandals. The splash reaches me, and there is a puddle of pool water on the ground where she had just been standing.

News reporters would ask me perhaps, "Did you see the crazy lady jump? Why'd she do it? What's the matter with y'all, anyway?"

Nothing's the matter, except that I'm sixteen and looking down at my mother like she's a misbehaving toddler. Nothing is wrong with her minus the fact that her baby brother is dying. Uncle Mark's in the hospital and the whole family is here buoying each other up in frenzy, panic, and awkward stares across the dining room table. Uncle Mark, at age 40, is still a young man.

Her shirt billows around her, bloated and unfamiliar. Cutting the stillness, she propels herself through the water. Mama is laughing and calm and I look at her open mouthed. The stink of the chlorine is unsettling to me. I watch her swim in little doggy paddle circles, and I look down at her. Her hair is slicked back and she looks so tiny. I shift my step and shake my head. I wonder if she knows how much her dignity means to me. As Mama moves through the water, her denim shorts are like inflatable pillows around her legs as her pockets fill with water. No one knows what to do, and I am the only adult here. I know from experience that this is not normal.

Death will become messy to me, an erratic change in the world. Uncle Mark is the first one we'll lose, and won't be the last. Bizarre like heavy wet denim that chafes your thighs, I stood so out of place on the concrete siding.

"Donna's in the goddamn pool!" Grandma shrieks, but in the moments before the family begins to hover, to inspect; it's just Mama and I. She looks at me hard, and throws her arms up, hitting the surface to splash. I see the smile on her face, and I know she has surprised herself as much as she has me. My mother has jumped off the face of the earth, and I assume she feels glorious.

BARBO

VALERIE WAYSON

The African sun was already high and beating down through a yellow haze when I stepped out of my house to go to market. I lived in an empty classroom in a school in Brickaville, my Peace Corps village on Madagascar's east coast, and although it was the height of summer and the rainy season was long gone, the region remained dotted with palm and fruit trees, sugarcane and rice fields. The yellow bananas, chestnut huts and red earth were especially vivid against this spectrum of green, even obscured by the dim cloak of millions of tiny dust particles suspended in the air. The classroom—a concrete box with a tin roof—absorbed and imprisoned the heat, but was still a respite from the hard sunlight I had just stepped into, which, after just a few months, had already darkened my skin and lightened my hair. I felt the rays now on my face and imagined I could feel the skin cells warping and turning cancerous.

I locked my door and, basket in hand, headed to market through a maze of huts. My flip-flops kicked up dirt that covered my feet in a thin red film. Small children wearing stained and torn shorts ran past chasing bicycle wheels they balanced with long sticks, while women wearing tank tops and swaths of cloth tied round their waists squatted in groups playing bingo. Some people ignored me, some stared, some greeted me with a *manakory* even if I didn't know them.

I returned their greetings with smiles that didn't reach my eyes. Memories of the previous weekend filled my head, along with the lingering aches of a residual hangover and its ever attendant shame. Doubts of my suitability for this job, Peace Corps Volunteer, good will ambassador, representative of America with never a day off, plagued me.

Drinking has long been a problem for Peace Corps Volunteers. In training, the instructors drilled into our heads it was much more dangerous here than in the States, that horrible things can happen when you let your guard down. They told us stories about beatings, robberies, rapes. In one account a man in an Eastern European country lost both feet from frostbite after he was robbed and left naked in the snow. Rumor had it that the countries who've had Peace Corps for the entire fifty years of its existence hated volunteers, the majority of which come straight out of college, where they've learned to binge drink to the point of losing control. Not only was it dangerous to learn the consequences of this kind of drinking in a third-world African country, but the impressions locals got of us—raucous, drunken, stumbling—were not flattering.

In Madagascar, women were warned not to drink at all. Or smoke, or cuss, or dress in skimpy clothes. All the strides women had made in first world countries meant nothing here, so even if I was an American and, in my estimation, should've been considered outside its unspoken rules regarding women, I wasn't. As women our duty was to show how we are strong, sensible, equal to men to in our own country; yet to earn their respect we had to heed their rules.

Which I'd been following. No drinking, cussing, or short skirts. I'd even given up drinking Coke because my villagers thought it was decadent. Peace Corps stripped me of my vices when I needed them most: stranded in a strange land, attempting to understand an alien culture and speak an unfamiliar tongue. The stresses were such that in training I'd picked smoking back up after having been cigarette-free for two years, but that was obviously off-limits in Brickaville. With every vice given up I reminded myself that my service was finite; two years of want would be worth far more to me on my deathbed, in my final review of my life and the things that I'd done. I'd had no illusions that Peace Corps would be easy. But by the time my banking weekend trip came around every month, I was ready for a drink.

These weekends got me through each day—I looked forward to them like a kid looks forward to Christmas. Even though Tamatave was only 120 kilometers away, the trip took from six in the morning to three in the afternoon, but this didn't matter. At the end of it I'd check in to the hotel, meet the other volunteers, and we'd go to the bank, go shopping in the bazaars, and maybe get some ice cream. My favorite part of the weekend—of the month—came in the evening. Lean-tos set up on the beach sold cold THB, the local beer of Madagascar, as well

as snacks: beef shish kabobs, salty peanuts, and warm pasta. The proprietors always obliged when we asked them to set up stools and a table in the sand, in view of the water, where we sat playing cards and regaling each other with stories from our villages until well after the sun set. What a relief to be around other Americans. To speak English! This made us almost as giddy as the beer.

That weekend the beer went down more smoothly than I'd anticipated, and filled my belly before I had a chance to put much else in it. During my stories my tongue betrayed me, subtracting syllables from words or adding consonants to clusters, no matter how hard I concentrated on enunciation. At one point a rat ran by my foot, and, surprised and not as in control of my faculties as I'd been two beers before, I fell flat on my back in the sand. My friend Doug helped me up, a look of concern on his face, while Jessica laughed outright behind him. I was embarrassed, but unable to deny the humor of the scene. Dusting sand off my clothes, I agreed it was time to eat something substantial.

We went to a pizza place with two pool tables and a dozen broken pinball machines lining the walls. It was owned by a French man, and although the pizza wasn't very good it was reminiscent of cuisine from our old lives, and at least a welcome change from the endless rice we ate on a daily basis. Walking in I saw Gilda, a woman from my town. She'd befriended me when I'd first moved to my village and commanded a bed and chairs to be built; she and her boyfriend owned the furniture store. She was nice, pretty, and educated—although she hadn't finished college, she'd attended for two years. She was also a respectable woman, and as such, didn't drink. I'd wanted to be her friend, and she'd wanted to be mine, but I couldn't get over the feeling that we were too different to relate; by giving up my vices I felt I was pretending to be someone I wasn't: a respectable woman like her. What would she think if she knew that I'd slept with men, drank, smoked, and had no intention of marrying? I constantly felt the need to hide my true self from everyone.

She approached me, smiling, but her smile faltered as she drew closer. Despite my inebriated state I could see the quick assessment, the flicker of the eyes up and down, which took in the glassy sheen in my own eyes and the careful poise I affected to counteract the wobbliness. It was just an instant before the smile renewed itself and she greeted me, but it was there: judgment. I was mortified.

Three days later the mortification hadn't lessened. The scent of hot palm oil and the sizzle of bread frying rising from a black wok in glowing coals, indicating that I'd reached the market, turned my still queasy stomach. A woman sitting on a short stool turned over samosas and balls of dough in the sputtering oil with a metal spoon, her face glistening in the steam. Behind her, on either side of a narrow paved street studded with potholes, booths displayed a rainbow of fruits and vegetables, clothes (always too small for me), batteries, hats, shoes, tweezers, rat traps, buttons, umbrellas—it seemed like the market had whatever I could think of, but never what I was looking for.

People milled throughout the booths, laughing, chatting, fingering bolts of cloth, haggling over tomatoes. A thick swarm of large black flies buzzed around a table piled high with raw pork, coarse black hairs sticking out of the skin, the severed pig's head sitting next to the mound. At the first vegetable stand I bought tomatoes, carrots, green beans, onions, garlic, rice and peanuts. After paying and placing my purchases in my basket, I continued on in search of eggs.

As I was scanning the booths, a sharp yell pulled my attention to a man vaulting over the produce from behind one of the vegetable stands. He wore bright blue basketball shorts and nothing else—no shirt or shoes. I'd recently learned the word for these men, people who drink all day instead of working: *barbo*. For some it's everyday; for others, when they have no work. This man's muscles were defined and rippling, his skin burned a black that was almost purple—both signs of poverty, of manual labor under the unforgiving sun.

He ran over to me and slowed. His eyes were bloodshot and unfocused, his feet

leathery and splayed wide; he didn't wear shoes often. I waited for him to say or do something, but he didn't.

Next to me was a clothing booth. rummaged through the clothes and inspected the flip flops. He didn't attempt to hide the fact that he was waiting for me, like a reluctant boyfriend dragged along on a girlfriend's shopping spree he stood there, staring at his feet. After several minutes I abandoned the clothes and continued on my way, hoping he wouldn't follow. He did. I turned to him.

"*Manakory,*" I said. He didn't respond, or even look at me. "*Inona vao vao?*" I questioned, to no response. "*Fa maninona miaraka izaho ano?*" In my broken Malagasy I asked him why he was following me, my frustration mounting because, even to my ears, my rudimentary language skills made me sound like a child. He didn't acknowledge anything addressed to him, but when I stopped at booths or moved on, he stuck close to my side.

I'd never liked asking for help. In sixth grade, a Child Protective Services representative came to our house to speak with our family. Before he arrived, my mom pulled me and my sister aside. "They'll take you away from me and put you in a foster home," she said, her face crumpling the way it did when she was on the verge of crying.

While the representative talked, I sat on the couch and said nothing. The man was Hispanic and wore a crisp white button down shirt and black slacks. The visit lasted an hour, but the only thing that remains in my memory is him detailing proper punishment as "an open-handed slap on the buttocks," blading his hand to demonstrate. After he left we never heard from CPS again.

Years later my sister admitted to me she had made the abuse report to the school counselor. Nancy had been trying to tell people for years: she mentioned it in a Girl Scout meeting, showed friends and family the bruises on the backs of her legs, once she'd run over to the neighbor's and pounded on their door. They'd answered to see Ray dragging her away by the hair. The neighbors looked shocked, but never spoke of it. In the Girl Scout meeting everyone remained silent until the subject was changed. It was as if she hadn't said anything.

Thoughts of eggs were gone; my only concern was getting back to my house without leading this man there. My already dark mood worsened. Ever since Gilda had seen me drunk a few days before doubts had been flitting through my mind. How did one not let their guard down for two years straight? Maybe this job was better suited for someone who didn't need some sort of release every once in awhile, who didn't need a drink after a month of teetotaling and being mocked and scrutinized by everyone who crossed her path because of her foreign ways. I'd never wanted to quit, but the discouragement I felt that day threatened to overwhelm my resolve. And now, being harassed by some drunk bum because he was bored and I, with my white skin as a beacon, made an easy target!

Possible solutions ran through my head. Physically I was no match—if I started running he would have no trouble catching me, and the situation would escalate further. He'd know he'd gotten to me, knowledge that would cue him to step up his bullying. Going to the gendarmerie was an option; the police knew who I was and had been instructed to look out for me, but I was loath to take it to that level. I didn't want to resort to asking for help, and anyway, involving the gendarmes seemed an extreme action to take. The barbo wasn't doing anything to me; they'd laugh at my weakness. No other option presented itself, so as much as I disliked it, I saw no other recourse.

The market was a loop, and near the end stood a group of my students. Cyrille and Jean Robin were Première students, the equivalent to juniors in high school, and Narcisse was Terminale, a senior. Cyrille was one of my brightest students, and although Jean Robin tended to talk in class, they all thought their American teacher was cool. They smiled when they saw me.

I had no plan, and didn't ask them for help, but something about my apprehensive

smile conveyed what I couldn't. They looked at me, looked at the barbo, and understood the situation immediately. Without a word to me Jean Robin hooked his arm around the man's shoulders and steered him up the path, while Narcisse escorted me in the opposite direction until the barbo was out of sight. As I watched his retreating form I felt a twinge I didn't quite understand, and somehow it felt vaguely wrong that I hadn't said goodbye. I thanked Narcisse and he nodded in a way that implied he thought my thanks unnecessary before moving to rejoin his friends. The only thing I'd said to them was hello.

The sun was sinking into ribbons of pink, purple and orange clouds. The cloak of dust particles and harsh sunlight had disappeared in the golden light which now bathed the huts and vegetation, the browns and reds deep against the bright greens. It was my favorite time of day, when the soporific stupor of the heat faded away and the world renewed itself before the coming night. A child giggled and screamed from the road, and the boys leaving the school pushed at each other and laughed, showing off for the girls, whose smiles peeked out at them from behind prim hands. The giddiness infected everyone. I inhaled, filling my lungs with the scent of the grass under my feet and the charcoal women were lighting to cook dinner for their families. I turned to my front door and stuck the key in the lock. I was home.





ONE-ACT PLAYS

BIRDHOUSE

EVAN ALLGOOD

(Lights up on a bare bones, open-faced birdhouse against a background of pale blue. Sitting inside the house, his wings folded across his chest, is (blue) JAY. He's whistling with precision, a wistful tune, "Blue Bird" by The Rosebuds.

After a beat, ROBIN flies in from stage left, landing inside the house. JAY nods at her awkwardly and stops whistling.)

Oh, please don't stop. You sing beautifully.

ROBIN

Thanks.

JAY

(An awkward beat.)

So, fly here often?

ROBIN

Heh. I, uh... I didn't fly here.

JAY

Why not? Do you have a broken wing?

ROBIN

Something like that.

JAY

(ROBIN places a sympathetic wing over JAY'S chest.)

Or is it a broken heart?

ROBIN

(JAY brushes her wing away.)

What are you, some kind of psychic?

JAY

(uncomfortable)

Robin. I'm a robin.

ROBIN

Are you a psychic robin?

JAY

No. But females – we can tell when someone's in pain.

ROBIN

Lucky you.

JAY

(JAY resumes whistling. The tune this time is happy

and loud, but it feels phony, like a Monday smile. After about fifteen seconds, he stops.)

I'm a blue jay, by the way.

ROBIN

I know.

JAY

I guess it's sort of obvious, huh?

ROBIN

(nods)

I'm usually not drawn to blue jays, but I think you're the most beautiful one I've ever seen.

(JAY is taken aback, but before he can respond ROBIN flies out of the house and does a few flaps around it. JAY seems bewildered by her behavior. Is she playing hard to get? If so, it doesn't last. She soon returns to the little house.)

ROBIN

I like this house. The open face... It's not so claustrophobic, you know?

JAY

Yeah, it's... nice.

(re: the flying)

So what was that all about, anyway?

ROBIN

Oh, just flying around. I love flying.

JAY

I can see that.

ROBIN

You know, people; they all wish they could fly.

JAY

They can fly. Ever been to an airport?

ROBIN

No, I mean, they wish their bodies could fly. They think it's a superpower. Can you believe that? A superpower! But we fly all the time. I think we take it for granted.

JAY

Yeah well, sometimes flying isn't so super.

(JAY looks away, gestures half-heartedly with his wing.)

When did it break? ROBIN

It's a fresh wound. That's kind of why I'm here... Needed to get away from everything. JAY

Are you alone? ROBIN

Now that's a helluva question— JAY

I mean, did you come here alone? ROBIN

Oh. No. I came with a friend. To watch over them... Make sure nothing weird happens. JAY

I see... ROBIN

(beat)

Do you think I'm weird? JAY

I, uh— ROBIN

Don't answer that! ROBIN

Okay. JAY

I think you're beautiful. ROBIN

You know— JAY

Yes? ROBIN

You shouldn't just throw that word around like that. JAY

(disappointed)

Oh. Why not? If I mean it— ROBIN

It's meaningless. You've said it three times in the past five minutes. You probably say it to everyone you meet at these things— JAY

ROBIN
(moving towards him)

But I don't—

(JAY pulls away from her, moves to the other side of the birdhouse. ROBIN tries to pursue him but a trapdoor in the center of the house opens and up springs SQUIRREL.)

SQUIRREL
(to ROBIN)

Well hell-o.

(SQUIRREL climbs through the trapdoor and shuts it behind him. He speaks roughly, with a New York or New England accent.)

Is it hot in here or is it just you?
(ROBIN frowns)

No, it's hot in here.

(SQUIRREL moves to the bench inside the birdhouse, sits down, removes his head and paws and lights a cigarette. His head is sweaty, his hair matted.)

ROBIN
(turns away)

You squirrels are filthy.

SQUIRREL

Head's off, honey. I ain't a squirrel at the moment. I'm Jerry.

(He wipes a hand on his suit and extends it. ROBIN looks at the hand briefly, blankly, like it's a foreign object, then turns back around.)

ROBIN

Well you're about the strangest-looking squirrel I've ever seen.

SQUIRREL

That's real cute. Y'know, technically you two ain't even supposed to be here. You're all feathers, no fur.

ROBIN

This is a birdhouse. If anyone doesn't belong here, it's you.

SQUIRREL
(laughs)

Right, right! Of course! And here I thought this was just a designated smokin area. The damn roof of the buildin!

(SQUIRREL looks to JAY: Can you believe this chick?
But JAY refuses to side with him.)

Whatever you do, honey, don't go back down there. There's so many folks with their heads off, you're liable to run back up here and jump off... Bye bye birdie, am I right?!

(laughs hard and alone)

Alright, you two are boring.

(He flicks his cigarette, puts his head back on, gathers his paws and moves over to JAY.
He whispers.)

If you're lookin to get freaky later, me and Mrs. Squirrel, we swing. Play a little Choke the Chicken, eh pal?!

JAY

I'm a blue jay.

SQUIRREL

Hey, we can choke you too.

(hands him a card)

If you change your mind... You or the lady. We ain't picky.

(SQUIRREL exits through the trapdoor.)

Sayonara, squawkers!

JAY

That squirrel really is filthy.

(Unseen to JAY, ROBIN wipes a tear away.)

ROBIN

Unbelievable.

JAY

You know, everyone says these things aren't about sex, but I've only met two people here, and they've both hit on me.

(ROBIN recovers, turns to face him.)

ROBIN

But I'm not—

JAY

You said I was beautiful.

ROBIN

You are, but—

JAY

But what? Is it just a game? A role-play?

ROBIN

I don't know what you're talking about... What game?

JAY

(laughs bitterly)

One time, just one time I'd like a woman to give me a straight answer instead of dancing around the damn question.

ROBIN

I'm not a woman...

JAY

Oh, just drop it already.

ROBIN

(hurt)

Drop what?

JAY

This little... anthropomorphic fantasy! It's over, alright? "Jerry" killed it.

(ROBIN appears not to understand.)

Alright, fine. Here.

(JAY starts removing his head.)

It's a costume, alright? I'm a man. You're a woman. We're people.

ROBIN

(turns away from him)

I don't like the way you're talking to me...

(JAY'S head is completely off now. He tosses it on the ground, moves to ROBIN, tries to spin her around.)

JAY

Look at me! I'm a person, alright? This is me! Do you still think I'm beautiful?

ROBIN

(refusing to look at him)

Let go! I don't know!

JAY

(relents briefly)

Alright, off with it.

Off with what? ROBIN

I can wait all night.

Off with... your head. JAY

(JAY whistles the same wistful tune from the beginning as the lights dim once more, then fade completely.)

You wouldn't kill a poor, defenseless bird— ROBIN

JAY
(trying to pry her head off)
You know what I mean, damnit.
(struggling)
Take... this... thing... OFF!

(ROBIN'S head comes off in his hands. JAY'S jaw drops.)

Oh my god... you're... (beat)

You're beautiful.

(She is. But ROBIN, devastated, "flies" away crying. She doesn't slow down as she reaches the edge of the roof.)

Wait, don't—

(ROBIN jumps off stage-left as if leaping off the building.)

NO! Oh my god...

(JAY runs to the side of the stage, looks down. He heaves a sigh of relief, wipes his brow with his wing.)

Fire escape.

(JAY walks back to the "birdhouse." He sits down inside it, turning Robin's head around in his hands.)

Can I please have my head back? ROBIN

Not unless you come out of there... JAY

(The lights dim slightly.)

It's gonna be dark soon... (no response)

(CURTAINS.)

DUNGEONS & VEGANS

EVAN ALLGOOD

(Lights up on a dorm room. Sitting at a coffee table in the center of the room are SARA and AERYN. SARA, wearing a cloak, has just helped AERYN, drinking a PBR, create her first Dungeons & Dragons character. Papers, pencils, and various-sided dice litter the table. AERYN holds up her character sheet, beaming.)

AERYN

Wow, my character is so sick. I can't believe how big his fucking beard is.

(She displays her character sketch.)

I mean look at that thing! I drew a Sharpie mustache on my face last weekend but this is way cooler. My guy looks just like Iron and Wine only short and fat.

SARA

Watch your tongue, Aeryn. Dwarves prefer to be called stout.

AERYN

Fat, stout, whatever. My guy is going to like dominate this campaign.

SARA

Aeryn... Do you truly, sincerely want to play D&D with us? It sounds like you're just participating for irony's sake—

AERYN

Whaaat? Sara, c'mon. I'm all about trying new things. I mean we don't have much in common; we didn't even know each other before I moved in. I'm trying to formulate some common interests here.

SARA

Are you sure? I mean, your character—

AERYN

Sam Beam.

SARA

Right, Sam Beam. Sam Beam is nothing like you, Aeryn.

AERYN

Um, isn't that the whole point? Look, just because I'm agnostic doesn't mean my guy can't be a cleric. That's borderline offensive, Sara. If I were Jewish would you tell me I couldn't be a paladin?

SARA

Of course not! But I take my position as Dungeon Master VERY seriously. The boys will be arriving soon, and I don't want them to think we've made a mockery of the game, or their campaign.

AERYN

I'm not mocking anything. Trust me, Sara. I'm totally, legitimately excited about this.

SARA

Alright...

(SARA smiles weakly. There's a knock at the door. SARA answers it as AERYN darts off-stage. At the door are BERTO and TREVOR.)

Speak, friend, and enter!

BERTO

Wassup, Sara?

TREVOR

We come bearing burgers! Also fries.

(He and BERTO hold up a pair of greasy brown bags.)

SARA

You are a fellowship of five! ...Five Guys, that is.

(She chuckles hard at her joke.)

TREVOR

But Sara, there's only two of us!

(The three of them laugh joyously as BERTO and TREVOR enter, setting the food on the table. They sit down just as AERYN is returning from off-stage. She's drawn a big, black, messy Sharpie beard all over her face. Her jaw drops at the sight of the food.)

AERYN

Oh my god... What...

AERYN/BERTO

(re: burgers/re: Aeryn's beard)

The fuck is THAT?

BERTO

Yo Sara, you didn't tell me your roommate was like, crazy and shit. Does she legit think we're in Krynn right now?

SARA

Of course not. Aeryn, what have you done to your face—

AERYN

It's a Sharpie beard, Sara. I'm trying to get into character.

TREVOR

(sincere)

Genius.

AERYN

Of course, it's going to be hard to do anything without vomiting as long as that evil disgusting

shit is disgracing our coffee table. I snort coke off that table, Sara! You know that!

BERTO

(mouthful of burger)

You raunt rum?

AERYN

No I don't raunt rum. Do you have any idea what kind of effect meat has on the human body? You're destroying yourself right now.

(AERYN takes a big swill of her PBR. BERTO takes another bite.)

I think I'm gonna be sick. I've gotten sick from watching people eat meat before.

SARA

Guys, would you mind setting your bags on the floor? Aeryn's vegan, and, well, cows upset her.

AERYN

Only when they're being slaughtered. Like pigs.

TREVOR

Of course, no problem!

(TREVOR grabs his food and BERTO'S and sets them on the floor. BERTO frowns. After a long beat, AERYN joins them at the table.)

SARA

Well I suppose introductions are in order. Aeryn, this is Berto...

BERTO

Sup.

(AERYN scowls.)

SARA

...and Trevor.

(TREVOR wipes his hand on a napkin and extends it to AERYN, who reluctantly shakes.)

TREVOR

Glad to meet you, Erin.

AERYN

Ugh. My name's not "Erin." It's Aeryn. A-E-R-Y-N.

BERTO

Yo, is she for real?

SARA

Yes... Yes she is.

TREVOR

I'm, uh, sorry I mispronounced your character's name—

AERYN

That's not my character's name. That's my name. My character's name is Sam Beam.

TREVOR

Oh, Iron and Wine...

(dramatic/booming)

THERE SHALL BE NO SHORTAGE OF EITHER ON THIS CAMPAIGN!

BERTO

Word, I'm tryin' to get fucked up and play some bitches. Yo, but what kind of name is "Sam Beam"? This is supposed to be role play, cuz. You're supposed to pick something interesting, not something run-of-the-fucking-mill.

SARA

Berto—

AERYN

Oh yeah? And what's your character's name?

BERTO

Broderick Brokeback.

AERYN

Are you serious?

BERTO

Straight up and down! My dude stays breakin' backs! He's a warrior, cuz!

AERYN

Wow.

(to TREVOR)

What's your guy's name, Gyllenhaal?

TREVOR

Yorick Half-Elven. He's a mage.

AERYN

(impressed)

Shakespeare, very cool. Very... Shakespearean.

TREVOR

I got it from a comic book.

SARA

Okay, enough banter. Can we please resume the campaign? Aeryn has a party to attend later

and I'd like to at least introduce your next quest.

BERTO

Word. Where we at?

SARA

Let's see...

(SARA sifts through a bunch of charts and papers, finally finding the spiral notebook she needs. She pulls it close to her, overly secretive, and skims it quickly.)

Okay. Broderick and Yorick, having successfully attained Tasselhoff's Ring, have just reached the town of Solace--

BERTO

(shaking TREVOR giddily)

Oh shit! Fuckin' Solace, son!

SARA

Ahem. You've just reached the town of Solace, a sprawling tree town featuring a weapons shop, armor shop, magic shop, and of course, the Inn of the Last Home, which doubles as a tavern--

BERTO

SOLD. We're goin' to the tavern.

TREVOR

Berto--

BERTO

Broderick. You address me as Broderick or Sir Brokeback, or you don't address me at all, bitch.

TREVOR

Sir Brokeback, my mage is running low on both hit points and magic points. I really think we should rest in the inn before we stop by the tavern--

BERTO

Are you serious, 'rick? Every time we hit a new town, where's the shady dude we gotta talk to in order to move forward in the campaign?

TREVOR

(sighs)

In the tavern.

BERTO

In the fuckin' tavern, cuz! Why don't we hit up the tavy tav, grab some ale... Then we can just pass out upstairs.

TREVOR

Alright. But should we encounter any enemies--

BERTO

It ain't gonna be more than a fistfight, cuz! Ain't no monsters in the damn tavern, just bitch-ass NPC's. We'll be straight.

TREVOR

Alright. Let's go to the tavern.

AERYN

(bored)

Okay, great. You guys go to the tavern; I'm gonna go to the bathroom.

(to SARA)

Call me when I exist, okay?

(AERYN exits.)

BERTO

Damn, if she's here, who's running Mordor?

(BERTO and SARA laugh.)

TREVOR

Sara, focus. Are we in the tavern yet?

SARA

Right. Yes, you're in the tavern. To your left you see a large group of Halflings--

BERTO

Gay.

SARA

--a human couple celebrating, and a lone, robed dwarf with a mace at his side. At the bar are three elven maidens, and in the shadowy corner of the tavern sits a mysterious man smoking a pipe. Do you want to talk to any of these people?

BERTO

Uh, gee, I wonder who has some information for us... Could it be the shady dude in the corner?

TREVOR

I'm not sure. That dwarf with the mace might be... special.

SARA

AERYN! You're on the verge of existing!

AERYN (O.S.)

Okayjustaminute!

BERTO

Alright 'rick, why don't you talk to the dwarf while I approach the mysterious dude in the corner?

(AERYN runs back to the table, her nose now covered in white powder.)

AERYN
Am I in yet?! Did you guys meet me?! Sweet beard, right?! Ohmygod all I can smell is dead cow. I still can't believe you brought burgers here. That shit'll fucking kill you swear to GOD.

(AERYN wipes some coke off her nose. The table is taken aback.)

Wow.
SARA

What?
AERYN

(to TREVOR)
BERTO
Yo, rein in the snow queen here. Sir Brokeback's gonna pump that shady dude for information—no homo—and then grab one of those elven biddies at the bar to bring back to his room.

Oh, not cool Brod! Not cool!
TREVOR

What? You obviously like her—
BERTO

Not that! I'm talking about you seducing a human woman right in front of Yorick! Again! You know my character's elven mother was raped by a human man! You know he has issues with--with...human-elf relations!
TREVOR

What the fuck, cuz! I'm not rapin' these bitches! If I were rapin' 'em I'd do a strength roll instead of charisma! Right, Sara?
BERTO

Um, I guess technically...
SARA

Your charisma's 18! That roll is a freaking formality!
TREVOR

Yorick, chill. The fuck. Out. I won't smash those maidens if it's gonna upset you, aight?
BERTO

Alright... I appreciate that.
TREVOR

Will you talk to Sunbeam here while I find out what our next quest is?
BERTO

SamBeam! Yeahyeahyeah talk to me!
AERYN

(She puts her hand on TREVOR'S arm.)

AERYN (CONT'D)
Talktometalktometalktome! I wanna join your party! Pleeeeease!

TREVOR
The feeling's mutual... I mean, uh, I talk to the dwarf.

BERTO
And I talk to the mysterious man in the corner. Yo Sara can we just skip ahead to the action? I mean no offense, but you ain't The Most Innovative DM in the World.

SARA
Oh, yeah? Then what's going to happen next?

BERTO
The dwarf is Aeryn's character. That dude joins up with us. The dude I talk to mentions some sort of treasure or magical item we need to snag, so we go off into the forest or up the mountain or down into the dungeon—please Sara, not another fuckin' dungeon—encounter some bad guys, slay those bitches, level up, get the treasure and roll into the next town like the champs we are.

(A beat.)

SARA
That's not... entirely accurate.

BERTO
Oh c'mon! Can we just skip forward to the good part!

SARA
Alright fine! But be careful what you wish for, Broderick Brokeback... You might just get it.

BERTO
Word. So where are we now?

SARA
You're in the forest—

AERYN
Oh pretty!

SARA
—where you've run into a GANG OF BANDITS.

AERYN
Oh shitty!

SARA
(rolls a die)
There are six of them. You're outnumbered two-to-one, and they've got the element of surprise.

TREVOR
This is not good... This is not good...

BERTO
Don't sweat it, cuz. Broderick's got this.

SARA
The chief bandit moves toward your weakest link: Sam.

BERTO
Who the fuck is Sam?

AERYN
(panicked)
I'm Sam, you ass!

BERTO
Shit, Sam's on his own then...

SARA
The bandit's almost upon him. If he connects, Sam won't survive--

AERYN
(shaking SARA)
What?! Why?! Why won't Sam survive, you bitch?!

SARA
Sam's only Level 1! He only has seven hit points!

AERYN
(releasing her)
Motherfucker.

TREVOR
I want to cast Magic Missile at the bandit! Like, now!

SARA
You can't--

TREVOR
What?! Why not?!

SARA
Because Broderick wouldn't let you two rest at the inn. He insisted that we skip ahead to the "good part," so you never recharged your magic points... Or your hit points.

TREVOR
(standing, to BERTO)
You buffoon! Do you realize what you've done!

BERTO

She just joined the party, cuz! We've done fine without her! I mean check out this ring! It gives off a faint blue light whenever bandits are near...

TREVOR
(intense beat)
I want to jump in front of Sam.

BERTO/AERYN
WHAT?!

TREVOR
I can't cast any spells, but if I do a dexterity roll I can step in front of the bandit, right? Take the hit for Sam?

SARA
Yes, but... your dexterity's only 10. And if he connects, you die too.

TREVOR
I want to do it. Give me the die.

SARA
You asked for it...

(SARA passes the die to TREVOR. He rolls.)

Six... You jump in front of the bandit and...

(SARA rolls the die.)

take the hit for Sam. You're dead, Yorick.

(TREVOR slumps back into his chair.)

BERTO
Shit.

(A moment of silence for Yorick.)

AERYN
Oh my god, that was like the most noble thing I've ever seen.

TREVOR
Well, Yorick always had a soft spot in his heart for...

(He moves closer to AERYN.)

dwarves.

AERYN
Do you wanna come to this party with me?

TREVOR
Do!! ...But what about the campaign?

Screw the campaign!

AERYN

(They clasp hands and joyously exit together.
A beat.)

Well, Broderick? What now?

SARA

I wanna kill Sam...

(grabs the dice)

BERTO

(CURTAINS.)

ORBITING SPACE

BRITTANI N. BANKS

SETTING: A back parking lot of an apartment complex in Carrollton, Georgia. On the floor there are faded white lines for parking spaces which are empty. There is one street light.

AT RISE: TASHA, CHLOE, and MICHELLE enter. TASHA leads the way with her heels in her left hand and her jumbo size purse over her right shoulder. CHLOE follows TASHA while looking up at the sky. She is wearing an oversized letterman jacket. MICHELLE follows CHLOE. She fiddles with her pearls and looks around the stage. TASHA sits down inside the parking space and looks up. CHLOE does the same. MICHELLE remains standing.

MICHELLE

Tasha, can't we do this some other time?

TASHA

It's a meteor shower. How often will we get the chance to see a meteor shower?

MICHELLE

I've seen them before, remember? At Georgia Highlands I joined that astronomy appreciation club--

TASHA

Great, so you saw them in books. This is an opportunity to see them in person.

MICHELLE

In person?

TASHA

Yeah, to see their physical...astromagical... life...ness.
(pause)

Whatever. You know what I mean.

CHLOE

Besides, Michelle just got back. We need to celebrate.

MICHELLE

I know. It's just we've had a long day--

TASHA

Oh Michelle, we're already here. Let's just enjoy it!

(TASHA lies down on the ground. CHLOE copies TASHA and lies down as well. MICHELLE continues to fiddle with her pearls and looks around the parking lot.)

TASHA

(sits up suddenly)

There's one!

(TASHA traces a long line in the sky with her pointer finger. CHLOE sits up quickly and follows TASHA's gaze.)

MICHELLE

That's a plane.

TASHA

No it's not. It's a meteor.

MICHELLE

Meteors don't move that slowly. They don't have flashing lights either. Plus, you're never going to see anything next to this street lamp. It makes everything too bright. My apartment is just upstairs. I have a balcony with patio furniture and everything.

CHLOE

That'd be more comfortable.

(CHLOE starts to get up.)

MICHELLE

Yeah, I mean it'd be a tight fit, but it's a better option.
(looks around parking lot)

At least it would be safer.

TASHA

Ah, we're *fine*. Besides, I like having lots of space. Your patio will make me claustrophobic.

(CHLOE shrugs and sits down. A brief moment of silence amongst the group.)

CHLOE

So how much trouble did you get into in Europe, Tasha? I heard through the grapevine that your parents were starting to get concerned.

TASHA

Yeah. I sort of got banned.

MICHELLE

From what?

TASHA

A-pen. No, Ap-pen-zell In-inner-something. It's this place in Switzerland. I kinda can't go there anymore, but it's no big deal. It was a no man's town anyways. They were very up tight especially for Europeans--

MICHELLE

How do you get banned from a country?

TASHA

(shakes both fists in the air)

God, I miss it there! Well, not Switzerland, but Europe in general. It was the best two years of my

life! They really know how to live there, ya know? People there are honest and straightforward. They don't find practical jokes funny, but they drink. *All the time!* Pubs filled with people drinking and playing stupid games that only make sense after your fourth shot. It's nothing like the *one* bar we have in Carrollton. It could be the pub, but it could be the people too. Ah, perfect example: those creepers we met tonight. They just stood around in corners, scared to move or even touch a beer. God, those people were weird! But that's Carrollton folks for you, right?

(There is an awkward pause in the conversation.)

CHLOE

So, I guess this means you didn't like your welcome home party?

TASHA

(awkward pause)

Huh-- Wait, what?

CHLOE

The party? I wasn't sure if you were going to like it. I mean it was supposed to be a welcome back *blowout* but most of our good friends couldn't come. So we decided to invite some of Michelle's friends. I told her that it probably wasn't a good idea, but--

MICHELLE

Don't even start, Chloe. No one else could come! If we threw a welcome back party with just the three of us I would have never heard the end of it from Tasha. Besides, the party would have been fine if she had just mingled.

TASHA

(mockingly)

Mingle? Why would I mingle? I didn't know that party was for me. How was I supposed to know that the party was for me? They were your friends and they didn't say two words to me. You didn't say anything. There were no welcome back signs--

MICHELLE

You didn't tell us you were coming home until yesterday. I had to plan the whole thing in *one* day. It just threw everyone off and the guests were kind of confused.

TASHA

Obviously. So where were all our *real* friends?

MICHELLE

Real friends?

TASHA

I mean, where's Rick or Destinee? Are they back from Georgia State yet?

CHLOE

Well, they never really went to Georgia State. They just stayed around Carrollton.

TASHA

How about Vicki? She's at Auburn, right?

CHLOE

No, she's still here.

TASHA

Really? Man, what happened? We all made plans to leave Carrollton after college. I was going to Europe; Marcus was going to Georgia Tech. Michelle, didn't you get accept into like Vanderbilt?

MICHELLE

(sweetly)

Tasha, these are trying times. It was hard enough for us to get our associates, much less our BA--

TASHA

So you have to do a little work. So what?

MICHELLE

It's a lot of work, Tasha. Getting your BA costs money and Lo-Mart or Jenkins' Pub will offer you a mangers position as along as you have your associates.

TASHA

So have any of our friends gone anywhere?

CHLOE

Nope.

TASHA

(sarcastically)

The Black Hole of Carrollton strikes again!

MICHELLE

Anyway, Tasha, *if* you manage to leave again be sure to tell us when you're planning on coming back so I can throw a better party. Otherwise, we'll just reserve a parking spot and look at the sky instead.

(MICHELLE laughs. No one else does. MICHELLE stops awkwardly.)

TASHA

Well... Maybe Chloe should plan my party next time.

(There is an awkward silence. MICHELLE crosses her arms over her chest.)

CHLOE

Are you sure you couldn't tell what the party was for?

TASHA

Honestly? I thought it was some random crappy house party.

MICHELLE

Wow. Thanks.

TASHA
But at least I knew you guys at the party. Plus, we haven't hung out in like two years. Since graduation, right? No, the graduation party! Rick always knew how to throw a party. Where's he at now anyways? Jenkins' Pub or Lo-Mart?

CHLOE
Super-Lo.

TASHA
What's that?

CHLOE
A new branch of Lo-Mart.

MICHELLE
(pouts)
I don't remember being invited to any graduation party.

TASHA
This has been a great time to catch up with you guys... I really missed you, ya know? Georgia Highlands forever!

CHLOE
Hell yeah! And the night is still young.

TASHA
Exactly.

(There is a brief moment of silence. MICHELLE gets up and moves around the parking space, walks to the other side and stands next to TASHA. MICHELLE stretches her legs and arms, signaling that she wants to go.)

TASHA
(points to the sky)
Meteor!

MICHELLE
I don't see anything.

TASHA
There was one! Right there! You missed it.
MICHELLE
Sure.

(There is a brief moment of silence in the group.)

CHLOE
So, got any exciting plans now that you're back home?

TASHA
Can you even *have* exciting plans in Carrollton?

CHLOE
Ha. Ha. You know what I mean.

TASHA
(chuckles)
Yeah, I know. No, I don't have any big plans. Right now I'm just waiting for my parents to settle a few debts for me before I leave again.

CHLOE
You're leaving again?

TASHA
Yeah. Soon, I hope. I just need some money first.

MICHELLE
So, you're getting a job?

TASHA
No, my parents don't mind giving me the money. They're loaded, remember?

CHLOE
What's taking so long then?

TASHA
It's sabotage. They don't want me to go, but I have to. Staying in Carrollton for too long will melt your brain.

MICHELLE
And on that note, can we go inside? I'm bored.

CHLOE
I'm not bored.

TASHA
That's the spirit, Chloe; plus, I want to show you something else. When I was in Rome there was this old man who stood on the sidewalk next to the Trevi Fountain. He looked like crap, like he hadn't bathed in a while. He would lean against a pole, smoke cigarettes, and occasionally point out constellations to couples for spare change. I passed by him nearly everyday for a few weeks and he never said anything to me. Then one night, a few nights before I was about to leave he stopped me and showed me the Chamaeleon constellation. It's beautiful. I'll try to show it to you. The man said it was a symbol of my life. He said that my life is going to change.

CHLOE
(sighs)
Wow... that's amazing and so romantic.

TASHA
Yeah, I know. It would have been even more romantic if he wasn't so old, but I think he was talking about my next trip. I've been thinking about South America--

MICHELLE
Umm...Tasha? There's no Chamaeleon constellation in the northern hemisphere. It's in the southern hemisphere.

TASHA
Well, we're facing south. Stand right here. I can show you--

MICHELLE
No, I mean there is no way you could see those stars unless you were in Australia or something like that. I remember from Georgia Highlands.

TASHA
Georgia Highlands! Michelle, this man *lived* by the stars! He used to work on a fish boat when he was a teen and they *depended* on the stars to navigate.

MICHELLE
Well, unless he was fishing in the southern hemisphere there is no way he could see those stars. He was probably just lying for money. Did you, ya know, give him money to point stars out to you?

TASHA
Oh, forget it! It doesn't matter.

CHLOE
It's still romantic. You can show it to me if you want.

TASHA
Never mind. I'm not in the mood.

CHLOE
You know NASA's Skylab disintegrated in Australia.

MICHELLE and TASHA
What?

CHLOE
The space lab. They were trying to bring it back into Earth's orbit safely, but it got out of control and fell to pieces over Australia in 1979. Their government charged us four hundred dollars for littering.

TASHA
Where is this coming from?

CHLOE
NASA: Mission Accomplished. It's a book I got from the library. It's my new hobby.

TASHA
What happened to your televangelists? You were obsessed with the crazy ones for so long.

CHLOE
It got too complicated. After awhile I couldn't keep the crazy ones straight from the sane but weird ones. Besides, I'm finding the space shuttles more interesting. For instance, did you

know that six of NASA's astronauts were Georgians?

TASHA
Any from around here?

CHLOE
(pause)
I don't know... probably not. If there was an astronaut from Carrollton we would have like a twenty-foot monument of them next to the courthouse.

MICHELLE
(places a hand on CHLOE's shoulder)
A new hobby? I thought you were looking for a job. You've got to start paying those bills. They're going to start cutting off your--

CHLOE
I've got time to find a job and you never know, this stuff may be handy one day.

TASHA
(picks up purse and pulls out three beers)
That's right. You know in Europe people value trivia, a lot more than Americans. Want a beer?

CHLOE
Thanks, I need one.

TASHA
(hands a beer to MICHELLE)
Here, have a beer. You obviously need one too.

MICHELLE
No, thanks. God, my feet hurt.

TASHA
(puts the beer down)
Sit down with us or take off those shoes.

MICHELLE
I don't want to take off my shoes *here*. Let's just go.

TASHA
I just got back. I wanna have some fun! Why don't you go inside? We'll be up in a minute.

MICHELLE
(looks surprised)
Huh?

TASHA
Go inside. We'll follow you in a bit.

MICHELLE
(looking flustered)
Oh no. That's okay. I'll just *stand* out here. Blisters aren't the worst thing anyways.

What's with you?
TASHA

She doesn't want a repeat of last time.
CHLOE

What happened last time?
TASHA

I got a little loud in front of Michelle's apartment. I was drunk and someone thought I was underaged and they called the police. It was no big deal.
CHLOE

You were nearly arrested.
MICHELLE

Nearly arrested, that's my point. It's no biggie.
CHLOE

What about me? The exec board for the apartment complex has me on their list now. *Their list*, Chloe. One more bad thing and I can be punished, fined, or maybe even kicked out! This is a good apartment in a great neighborhood. I'm don't want to get screwed over by you two.
MICHELLE
(paces around the parking space)

Chill, Michelle. We're not being loud this time and I remembered to bring my I.D. Plus, look at my hair. I don't look like I'm underage with this new haircut, do I?
CHLOE

No, but your boyfriend's high school letterman jacket isn't helping matters. Listen, at least put away the beers.
MICHELLE

No way, José. This is my welcome back party: *part two!*
TASHA

(TASHA and CHLOE raise their arms and cheer. MICHELLE groans.)

So tell me about this boyfriend of yours. What's he like?
TASHA

His name is Perry. He's been taking good care of me while I look for a job and live at his place.
CHLOE

What does he do?
TASHA

He's a bum that plays the ukulele, or used to before that automated deli-meat slicer down at the Lo-Mart went haywire and took off his pointer finger. Well... a portion of his finger. Now, they live off his Lo-Mart settlement check.
MICHELLE

He's not a bum, he's a free-spirited soul and a great musician. He's going to be famous one day.
CHLOE
(speaking directly to TASHA)

How so?
MICHELLE

He's impaired like Django Rinehart or Jerry Garcia. Perry's going to be famous for blazing up the ukulele and blowing our minds, even though he's missing a finger... part of a finger.
CHLOE

Chloe, you can do so much better than--
MICHELLE

Michelle, I love you like a sister, but if you start on Perry I swear I'll scream and wake up the whole block.
CHLOE

Well, then. Umm... oh! I was just promoted to night shift telemarketer manager of section 5C. It's a great honor; I beat out five other people for it. Now I have a cubical with an actual window that faces the parking lot. My boss says another year or so and I could be--
MICHELLE

I may change my name to Nebula. What do you think?
TASHA

Nebula? I think I could see that.
CHLOE
(takes a long look at TASHA)

Wait, I wasn't done with my story.
MICHELLE

Oh, I thought we were just giving random short tidbits.
TASHA
(snotty attitude)

Where did Nebula come from?
CHLOE

I was thinking about that man in Rome. I need a change.
TASHA
(MICHELLE pouts.)

What's wrong with the name your parents gave you?
MICHELLE

What does Tasha really say about me? Nothing. But Nebula leaves a unique impression.
TASHA

MICHELLE
It's a little strange, don't you think?

TASHA
When I was in Spain I went to this bar, well I went to a lot of bars when I was in Spain, but there was this one that had an *amazing* salsa band who wore red leather pants.

MICHELLE
Yuck!

TASHA
Yeah, well the pants were unfortunate, but they played like *gods*. Sometimes, I would stay after the club closed and just chill with them. The drummer, Alejandro, said that my name should be Nebula since my head's all cloudy, all the time. Ya know a nebula is just a cloud of random stuff.

CHLOE
Was that a compliment?

TASHA
(pulls out phone from purse)
I don't know... Maybe it was the Spanish beer making me cloudy. Wanna see pictures?

CHLOE
(takes cell phone from TASHA)
Sure... Oh cute! But those leather pants are terrible.

MICHELLE
(sneaks a glance at the phone)
Okay. Is everyone done now? Can we leave?

TASHA
Do you realize that you are always rearing to go when we aren't talking about you?

MICHELLE
(stops looking at the phone.)
That's not *true!* But we might be disturbing the neighbors.

CHLOE
(opens the third beer; shouts)
How about another beer? Come on, Michelle. We don't need a designated driver anymore; we're not gonna use your Kia to get upstairs.

MICHELLE
I'm not drinking. Too much alcohol makes me nauseous.

TASHA
You haven't had any yet. Here!

(TASHA forces the bottle onto MICHELLE. MICHELLE pauses for a second and then takes the smallest sip imaginable.)

TASHA
Oh, jeez! Just give it back! Hand it over!

MICHELLE
(gives the beer to TASHA)
I told you I don't like alcohol.

TASHA
Obviously.

MICHELLE
Now what?

CHLOE
Do either of you know about the Shuttle Columbia from NASA?

TASHA
No. What about it?

CHLOE
Well, it's sort of a sad story. It was this shuttle that exploded with seven astronauts on board. Well it didn't explode, it disintegrated I guess but--

MICHELLE
Chloe, I love you like a sister but I'm not in the mood to stand here and listen to a sad space story.

CHLOE
(obviously angry)
Nobody was talking. I was just trying to end the silence.

MICHELLE
Don't worry about the silence. Silence is good.

(CHLOE takes the beer from TASHA and takes a large gulp. TASHA takes the beer back and drinks some. TASHA hands the beer to MICHELLE. MICHELLE returns it. MICHELLE sneezes.)

TASHA
Michelle, you know you shouldn't stifle you sneezes. When you sneeze, you shouldn't hold back. Just let loose.

MICHELLE
Are you critiquing the way I sneeze now?

TASHA
Well... kinda.

MICHELLE
So what are you trying to say?

TASHA

(sarcastically)

And here we go. I'm just saying that you're a little tense, a little tense. Just let some of that stuff go! I met this cabdriver named Doris in Switzerland when I was traveling to Rome. She had a hygiene problem, but she told me that when you sneeze you are releasing all these bad spirits--

MICHELLE

(groans)

Tasha, no more stories okay? I can't take anymore.

TASHA

Are you jealous?!

MR. MOONY

(shouts from off stage)

Ms. Hopewell?! Is that you?! What is this ruckus?!

MICHELLE

(to her friends in a loud whisper)

Oh God! It's one of my neighbors.

(shouts to MR. MOONY)

I'm so sorry, Mr. Moony I didn't think we were being so loud! We'll be quiet now!

(turns back to her friends)

Now are you happy? We're disturbing the neighbors. Enough of this! Let's go inside. *Now.*

TASHA

Who are you talking to?

(looks around the parking lot sarcastically)

I know you aren't talking to me. My little anecdotes aren't good enough for the all-mighty Michelle, remember?

MICHELLE

Tasha, you know I didn't mean it like that. Just... why do we have to keep talking about you?

TASHA

It's my welcome back party: *part two!*

(CHLOE and TASHA cheer.)

MR. MOONY

(shouts from off stage)

Ms. Hopewell!

MICHELLE

You know we have lives too? We've had some fun times.

TASHA

(laughs a little)

Oh, really?

MICHELLE

Forget it. Let's go inside.

TASHA

You really don't get it, do you? For once everything isn't about you and your perfect grades or your perfect job or your perfect apartment or your perfect little life--

MICHELLE

I never claimed to be perfect. And how many beers did you have at the party?

TASHA

Nevermind that! This night is mine and if I want to sit in a parking space, drink beer, and talk about Europe then that's what I'm going to do. You can go inside, Michelle. If the cops come, I'll tell them I'm with Mr. Moony.

MICHELLE

Oh, come on, Tasha. You can come to my patio. You can have it all to yourself. I'm going to bed anyways.

TASHA

I want to be left alone!

MICHELLE

Fine, be alone. Moony's number is 1161. Chloe and I can go upstairs. Oh, and guess what! I just bought new sheets for the spare bedroom. They're from Martha Stewart!

(CHLOE sits the third beer bottle down and walks with MICHELLE. CHLOE and MICHELLE start to exit the stage. TASHA picks up the bottle and turns it over; it's empty too.)

TASHA

No, wait! I didn't mean alone-alone. I meant... well... Chloe can stay. It's not that much of an explosion, part-two, if you're by yourself, right?

(CHLOE looks from TASHA sitting on the floor to MICHELLE, back and forth and back and forth.)

CHLOE

Well... it is her first night back, Michelle...

TASHA

(motions for CHLOE to sit down)

Great!

CHLOE

(sits down)

Okay! You wanna hear about the Shuttle Columbia?

TASHA

Umm... Not really.

CHLOE

(sadly)

Oh.

TASHA
Hey, did they mention nebulas in that NASA book of yours?

CHLOE
I don't know... It'd be cool if they did mention nebulas.

MICHELLE
(standing further away)
Nebulae.

CHLOE
What did you say?! I can't hear you!

MR. MOONY
(off stage voice)
Keep it quiet down there!

MICHELLE
(shouts)
It's not *nebulas*; it's *nebulae*!

CHLOE
(to MICHELLE)
Okay, sure. Nebulae.
(to TASHA)
Why is she shouting?

TASHA
Maybe she thinks we're drunk and stupid.

MICHELLE
(comes forwards, near CHLOE)
I knew it! You two are teaming up against me, *again*.

TASHA
Why are you still here? Why won't you go upstairs?

MICHELLE
It's like Georgia Highlands all over again. You two were the best of buddies and I was always the outlier. Why am I always the one who gets left out?!

MR. MOONY
(off-stage voice)
I said quiet! Dammit!

CHLOE
Sorry, Mr. Moon! Michelle, you know that's not true. We care about you. You were never the outlier, it's just--well, we like different things, Tasha and I. We drink, we party, we sleep past seven in the morning--

MICHELLE
I have to work.

TASHA
We live in the moment, that's the bottom line.

CHLOE
Michelle, you would rather, ya know, scrapbook or bake brownies for your staff or watch the TLC channel--

TASHA
We do lots of random crap for no reason and it bothers the hell out of you. So why should we ask you to join the fun?

CHLOE
(stands up and pats MICHELLE on the back)
Don't be upset. We're all friends.

TASHA
Don't encourage her, Chloe. This is exactly what she wants, to be the center of attention as usual.

MICHELLE
I am not *trying* to be anything! Unlike--

MR. MOONY
(off-stage voice)
That's it! I'm calling the police!

MICHELLE
(in a polite and sweet voice)
Sorry, Mr. Moony. We were just a disagreement, but we're leaving so don't worry. Night, Mr. Moony!

(MICHELLE signals for her friends to keep quiet. She takes CHLOE's arm and pulls TASHA up from the floor. She begins to lead them off stage.)

TASHA
(pulls away in protest and loudly whispers)
No.

(MICHELLE grabs TASHA again and pulls both friends off stage. TASHA pulls MICHELLE'S hair to force MICHELLE into letting her go. CHLOE stands aside and looks amazed. MICHELLE is persistent and in the struggle TASHA accidentally pulls MICHELLE's necklace so that the pearls fall to the ground.)

MICHELLE
No! No! No! No!

TASHA
Oops.

MICHELLE
My dead grandmother's pearl necklace is all over this disgusting parking lot and all you have to say is oops?!

TASHA
Oooops...y Daisy?

MICHELLE
Ah! *Oh my God! Oh my God!*

MR. MOONY
(off-stage voice)
Dammit! Shut up!

MICHELLE
Mr. Moony, *please* stop yelling at us!

(Slowly the sirens approach.)

CHLOE
Don't be upset, Michelle. Don't cry over spilled--

MICHELLE
This isn't spilled milk. This is an heirloom that I practically killed two other cousins for!

TASHA
All that carnage for a cheaply-made necklace? Wow, we're strung out in Carrollton. Get it? Strung out?

(The police sirens get louder.)

MICHELLE
This isn't funny, Tasha! When are two going to grow up?

TASHA
I was just trying to lighten up the mood.

(MICHELLE gets on her hands and knees and pats the ground. CHLOE and TASHA remain standing.)

MICHELLE
No time for that. Don't just stand there. Help me!

(MICHELLE mutters to herself and tries to pick up as many pearls as possible, putting them into one of the empty beer bottles. CHLOE and TASHA slowly pick up pearls one at a time. The police sirens get even louder.)

CHLOE
Umm... Does anyone hear the sirens or is that just me?

TASHA
Huh?

MICHELLE
Oh God! Run!

(CHLOE and TASHA watch as MICHELLE gets up from the ground with her bottle of pearls and runs off stage, leaving her purse behind. CHLOE and TASHA now look to the opposite side of the stage, presumably where the siren is coming from. No one comes, instead the siren gets softer until it is not heard any more. CHLOE and TASHA shrug.)

TASHA
It figures that she would ditch us like that.

CHLOE
You know she didn't do it on purpose. She just got scared. For a second there it did sound like the cops were coming our way. Oh well! At least she's in her apartment. You know Michelle's never really been a night owl type person.

TASHA
(sits down, takes MICHELLE's purse and searches inside)

She'll be back.

CHLOE
What makes you say that?

TASHA
She left her purse--
(pulls out keychain)
--with her keys.

CHLOE
Are you going through her purse? You shouldn't do that. You know you shouldn't do that.

TASHA
Don't worry. There is nothing *remotely* fascinating in here; although, I am starting to question this romance novel. It looks scandalous.
(reads the back cover and sighs)

Never mind.

CHLOE
You really shouldn't mess with her stuff. She notices every little thing.

TASHA
(takes something from MICHELLE's purse, stuffing it into her own)

I'm sure of that.

CHLOE
What did you just take?

TASHA
Money for beer. I'm still negotiating with my parents.

(CHLOE sits down next to TASHA.)

TASHA
You know, the more I hang with Michelle the more I realize that she hasn't a clue about the real world.

CHLOE
What do you mean?

TASHA
She thinks life is about money, hard-work, and labor. That's so not true!

CHLOE
Oh, yeah? Then what is it about?

TASHA
(points to the bottle)
Beer.

CHLOE
Beer?

TASHA
And ukuleles and sad, spacey trivia and leather pants--

CHLOE
So life is about... random stuff?

TASHA
Exactly, it's the little things. Michelle just doesn't get it, but you and I see eye to eye. Huh. That's funny. ou and I see eye to eye.

CHLOE
Well, I don't know. Money plays a huge part too. Yesterday, Perry deposited another hush check from Lo-Mart. You know what he said to me? He said that he was starting to look for work again and that we needed to save the last checks. He kept talking about weddings and kids.

TASHA
He sounds responsible. What's with the change of attitude?

CHLOE
His lawyer. Perry said the lawyer told him how much money he has left from the settlement. It's not much.

TASHA
You know just 'cause he's getting a job and demanding stuff from you doesn't mean that you have to listen. Stand up for yourself. Leave him. You're an independent woman.

CHLOE
Well, not really. I don't have any money to be an independent woman. Besides, I don't want to leave him just because he's made all these plans for the future. I was just surprised. I wasn't expecting him to do all of that. Michelle was right. He was a bit of a bum, but now he is maturing. I figured I could meet him half way, ya know?

TASHA
Don't be so silly. Don't change yourself for Perry. Live it up! Oh! You could come with me to South America--

CHLOE
I'm not thinking about changing for Perry. I was just thinking about making a change. You know, like you said about the stars and--

TASHA
I have no idea what you're talking about. Let's stop talking for now. I'm starting to get depressed.

CHLOE
Want to hear about Shuttle Columbia then?

TASHA
God no!

(MICHELLE appears on the stage. She walks and looks around.)

MICHELLE
(whispers loudly)
Are the cops here?

CHLOE
They were never here. They kept driving down the street. Where have you been? You left your keys with us.

MICHELLE
I realized that when I couldn't get into the building. I walked around the block for a little while.

TASHA
(sarcastically)
Thanks for coming to check on us.

(MICHELLE gets on her hands and knees to look for her pearls.)

TASHA
Or did you just come for the pearls.

MICHELLE
Both.

(after a pause)
Wait, I can never tell when you are being sarcastic.

TASHA
Always assume I am being sarcastic.

(CHLOE joins MICHELLE in her search for pearls.)

TASHA
God! I hate it here. Why can't everybody just live in the moment? Who cares about responsibilities or pearls! In Carrollton, a few good moments are all you're gonna to get before you're six feet under in the only cemetery in town. Why won't people just explore? Everybody's packed up into this one itty, bitty place like stupid, stinking sardines, too afraid to move *one* little inch.

MICHELLE
(stands up)
What the hell are you talking about? Life here is great. And *news flash*, you're from Carrollton too!

TASHA
Chloe, I hope you get to leave, even if it's just *two miles* out of Carrollton. Just go! Your mind will open up so much! You'll see that Georgia Highlands was a waste.

MICHELLE
Georgia Highlands wasn't a waste. What ever happened to--
(mockingly)
"Georgia Highlands *forever*"?! So you left the country for a bit? Who cares? You're right back where you started from like the rest of us and what's the likelihood that you'll get to leave again?

TASHA
I'm making plans for South America. I have everything pretty much figured out--

MICHELLE
You and I both know that that is nothing but talk. Where in South America are you going? Have you actually made reservations for a flight? For a hotel?

TASHA
I have *plans* to make *travel plans*. Jeez, I just got back!

MICHELLE
You're never going to go if your depending on your parents.

TASHA
They'll give me what I want. They always do, ever since my first crappy year at stupid Georgia Highlands.

MICHELLE
Is that what you think of your parents, of your education?

TASHA

Oh, *come on!* It was *community college*, not Harvard! Carrollton community college at that.

MICHELLE
What's wrong with Carrollton? People are happy here. You're the one who's always complaining! And why would Chloe have to leave? Yeah, her boyfriend is weird and she doesn't have a job, but she's happy here too.

CHLOE
Come on, you guys! Let's not talk about this anymore.

MICHELLE
Plus, Tasha, you're always bleeding your parents dry! Your speeding tickets, parking fines, traveling debt--

TASHA
Don't pretend like you understand me, cause you don't--

MICHELLE
That's right. I don't understand. You just got back and you're already sitting idly, not doing anything. Where's that adventurous spirit? You think your life is changing? Well I think you are finally getting your wake-up call. You are no better than me, Chloe, or anyone else in Carrollton. The only difference is that I am actually making something of myself. I have a job and my own place. I can go out and do things for myself. That's freedom.

(MICHELLE snatches her purse.)

TASHA
And what types of things do you get to do in Carrollton with your freedom? Decide between Walmart and K-mart?

MICHELLE
I'm free to be happy.

TASHA
(waves MICHELLE off)
Free to be stuck in this town, never living in the moment.

MICHELLE
God, would you stop saying that.

(TASHA sits next to CHLOE.)

MICHELLE
How are you living in the moment? You've spent the whole night doing nothing but getting drunk, which is exactly what you did when you were abroad. Your freedom is booze.

TASHA
Don't underestimate the power of a buzz. I was just telling Chloe that life is all about the beer--

CHLOE
Let's talk about something else! Michelle, I was telling Tasha about Shuttle Columbia. It disintegrated when it--

MICHELLE

Your liquid courage is the only thing holding you together. You think you're one in a million, but you're just a bum, the same bum you were in college. And just to let you know a cultured bum is still a bum, no matter where you've been.

TASHA

I'm not a bum. I can leave whenever I want. I'm just waiting on my parents to give me the money. They'll give it to me. They always do. Chloe, you understand, right? I just don't have the money right now, but my parents are going to give me the money soon. You'll see!

CHLOE

(ignores TASHA)

Michelle, don't get too upset with her. We're twenty-two. We aren't in high school anymore. We aren't at Georgia Highlands anymore. I guess Tasha is just saying that we should have fun while we're still young. We should, ya know, drink a little, travel a little, party a little--

MICHELLE

(slowly walks away)

But when's she going to do something that matters? When are you? You're spinning in circles. I'm tired of chasing after both of you.

CHLOE

Wait, where are you going?

MICHELLE

I'm out. I need some sleep so I can actually do something tomorrow. Besides, there aren't anymore meteors.

CHLOE

But isn't this beyond meteors? This is about... us.

MICHELLE

I've made my decision. No more drunken nights in parking lots for me.

TASHA

Fine! Leave! No one wanted you to stay anyways.

MICHELLE

(walks away)

Yeah, I realized that.

TASHA

It's about time she was leaving. She's such a downer.

CHLOE

Michelle, wait. Tasha, I think she was right. Don't you think we are just running around in circles?

TASHA

Who cares? Circles are natural, beautiful things. It's fun to spin in circles.

CHLOE

I guess. But don't you think you'll get tired of this?

TASHA

Don't start, Chloe! Can't you see that she's trying to trap you? Remember what I said; it's all about the beer.

CHLOE

I don't think I can do that anymore. Michelle, stop!

(MICHELLE stops and looks back. CHLOE gets up to leave. TASHA knows she is about to be abandoned and looks sad.)

CHLOE

Well, this is awkward.

(kneels near TASHA)

Wanna hear the Shuttle Columbia story before I go? It's really good. The whole thing fell apart when they were just sixteen minutes away from home. Just *sixteen* minutes... it's so unreal when you think about it--

TASHA

What exactly was the point of that story?

CHLOE

Huh? You know what? I don't remember. Oh well, I think I'm gonna go upstairs with Michelle. You wanna to come with me? That spare bed of hers is pretty big.

TASHA

No, I'm staying out here.

CHLOE

You sure?

TASHA

Just go.

(TASHA and CHLOE stare at one another. CHLOE joins MICHELLE at the back of the stage. MICHELLE and CHLOE walk off stage. TASHA hangs her head and does nothing. Eventually, she starts slowly searching through her purse. Then she frantically searches her purse. TASHA turns the contents on the floor. TASHA sorts makeup and beer caps, gets discouraged, and hangs her head.)

TASHA

Mr. Moon! Can you call me a cab?! I can't find my phone.

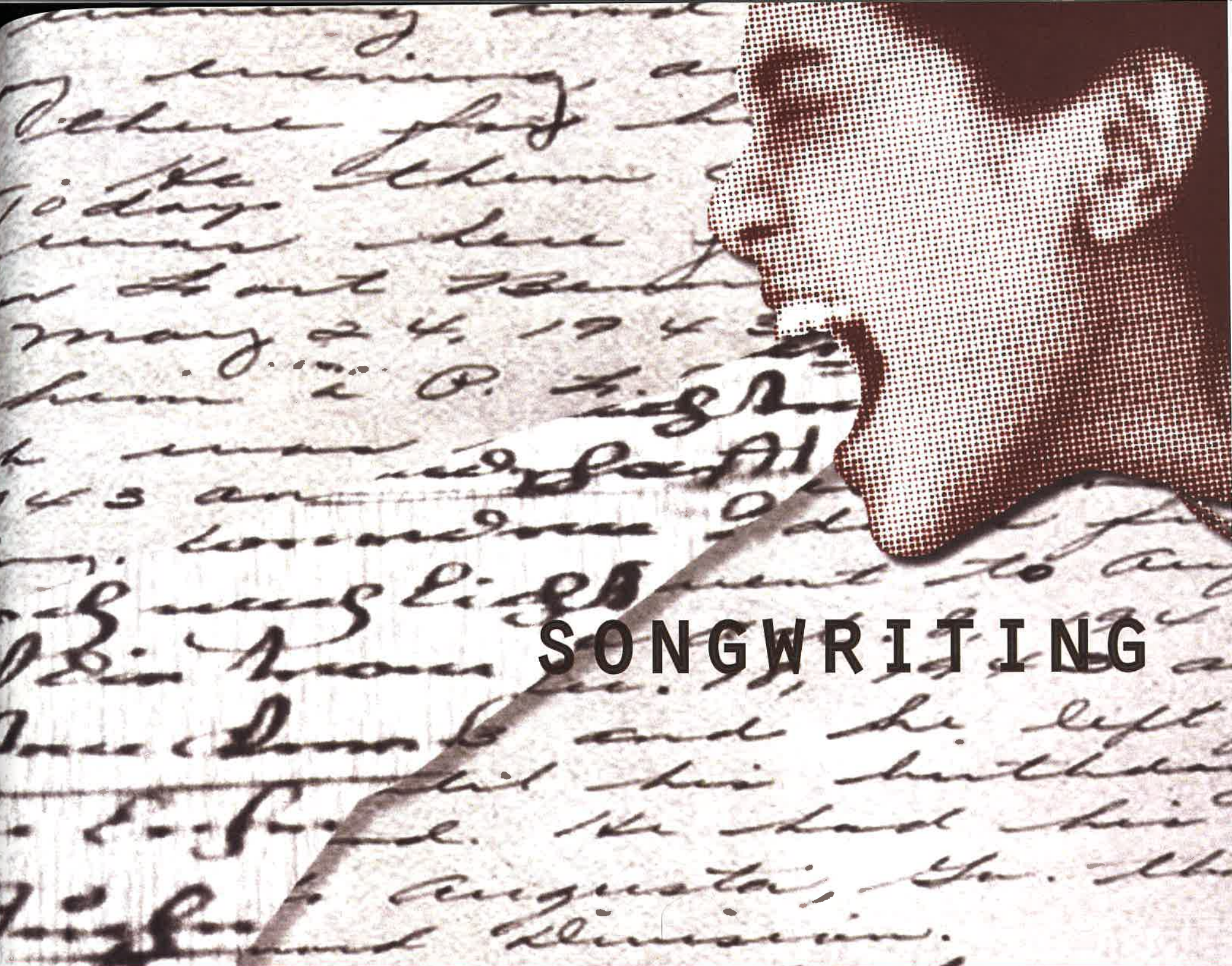
MR. MOON

(off-stage voice)

Shut up!

(The lights dim.)

... Sunday ...
... 1943 ...
... to come home ...
... furlough ...
... March 25, 1943 ...
... May 14, 1943 ...
... which made ...
... August ...
... Sept. 9, 1943 ...
... Tuesday evening ...
... 1943 ...
... to ...
... 1943 ...
... ..
... ..
... ..



SONGWRITING

... morning and
... evening, a
... there for the
... He then
... today
... was when
... out
... Mary & 4, 194
... P. 4
... was
... At
... 43 an
... I
... light
... to any
... 194
... and he left
... his
... had his
... Augusta, Ga. the
... Division.

LOVE ME FOR FREE

ROLYNNE ANDERSON

Wandering aimlessly but my destination's known.
The baby's trying to sleep but I'm far away from home.
Don't judge me, just love me, for free.
Pickle in my purse and a bottle in my hand, I know it could be worse but nobody understands. Don't judge me, just love me, for free.

Standing in the rain when a stranger called my name. it didn't sound the same and I wrestled in my brain. Don't blame me, don't shame me, I plead.

I brush the baby's hair as she smiles without a care.
I rush and miss the bus but she's just happy that I'm here. No judging, she loves me.
For free.

I'm coming home.
Where I belong.
Safe in your arms.
I'm coming home.
Where I belong.
Where love is warm.

Oh when I get home
You'll welcome me with open arms,
and shower me with a mother's love.
I can't wait for the day,
just to hear you say,
I love you.
I love you.

SARCASM AND CHAPSTICK

TALLY DEUSHANE

Lacey Wells faced the night the only way she knew how,
With sarcasm and chapstick.
It was another night in another life
And she was tired of waiting for the morning light
The moon was shining brighter than the sun
And Lacey got tired of trying to please everyone
So she ran away with the sarcasm and left the chapstick behind...
...But then she changed her mind.

For lack of a better wordplay, she was no blushing
beauty queen but something in between
The girl that everyone wants around and the one
that everyone wants six feet underground
It wasn't her fault, she was raised just right and they were
all raised in a manner not quite
So forgiving and accepting and appreciative of sarcasm,
Chap Stick and the way Lacey lived

She was impossible to control— your temper
never helped out much with this endeavor
Besides, she liked the look in your eyes
as you said your farewells and your goodbyes
She was a puzzle with hidden pieces—
finders keepers didn't count, because she hid in tiny creases
Locked up and propped up on a shelf full of knick knacks,
she had a knack for nearly losing herself

For lack of a better wordplay, she was no blushing
beauty queen but something in between
The girl that everyone wants around and the one
that everyone wants six feet underground
It wasn't her fault, she was raised just right and they were
all raised in a manner not quite
So forgiving and accepting and appreciative of sarcasm,
Chap Stick and the way Lacey lived

She smiled so wide and displayed a smirk so nice
That her dentist never had to tell her twice
To brush up on her Shakespeare and mannerisms
She gave thanks and gave way to a new rhythm
Of a song you perhaps heard once on the radio
Driving down the road to anywhere you want to go
A one-hit wonder, a top forty wreck— a forgotten 45
on broken disc and reformatted hard drive

THE SUN GETS IN YOUR HAIR

ANDREA LOVE

For lack of a better wordplay, she was no blushing
beauty queen, but something in between
The girl that everyone wants around and the one
everyone wants six feet underground.
It wasn't her fault, she was raised just right, and they were
all raised in a manner not quite
So forgiving and accepting and appreciative of sarcasm,
chapstick, and the way Lacey lived

So Lacey Wells faced the night the only way she knew how...
with sarcasm and chapstick.

The sun gets in your hair...

Curling 'round my fingertips,
Tangled like relationships.
Knots of my own making,
Making hard to pull away.
I won't stop if you don't mind
Continuing to unwind.
Though my heart is clutching,
Touching you can't null the way
I care.

The sun gets in your hair...

We've known each other too long.
Couldn't bear to hear I'm wrong.
You are just too lovely, love
I couldn't face rejection.
Okay with simply being here,
Not too close but always near.
You shall live forever,
Never knowing my affection.
Unaware
How the sun gets in your hair.
The sun gets in your hair...

The sunlight trickles through my hand
Landing on each silky strand.
If you could know my heart right now
Maybe you would understand.
The sun gets in your hair...

SOME PEOPLE HAVE NOTHING BETTER TO DO THAN GET HIGH

ALEXANDREA LUSHINGTON

The next day they'll get paid and fly away
The next night they'll ride by in the sky
The next life they'll sit by lookin' high
Wonderin' what it's like
Wonderin' what it's like

It's like livin' in the norm when you are in the city
Waitin' for a landing to come by and try to hit you wit it (hit you wit it)
Maybe if you get it you will quit it then after 'while you will try to sit back and forget
it (forget it)
But for now you're tryna get in your time
Tryna do whatever you can so you can feel right
But it's not like how you want, but you still flaunt it lookin' at the person to your right
wonderin' how (how)

The next day they'll get paid and fly away
The next night they'll ride by in the sky
The next life they'll sit by lookin' high
Wonderin' what it's like
Wonderin' what it's like

The next day they'll get paid and fly away
The next night they'll ride by in the sky
The next life they'll sit by lookin' high
Wonderin' what it's like
Wonderin' what it's like

Now, now you're thinking 'bout how now
You have a person runnin' 'round in your house
Smellin' like grass as they pass breakin' your glass
And every step they take you're close to just kickin' their
Aspirin is gone can't find a relief or the phone
There's no solution or a reason to for what's goin' on
Wit your brain n your left hand and your hammer on your right as you're lookin' at
what might be wonderin' how (how)

The next day they'll get paid and fly away
The next night they'll ride by in the sky
The next life they'll sit by lookin' high
Wonderin' what it's like
Wonderin' what it's like

MEMPHIS BLUES

A. MARIE PETRILLA

I look back and can't recall
what it was that changed it all
my baby, baby, baby doll... come back to me
had the perfect lover, perfect friend
a man on whom I could depend
thought it would never, never, never end... not this way

At the bottom of your dresser drawer
I found a one-way ticket to Memphis
touchdown in the land of the delta blues
I don't even get one last kiss
wait up baby, don't leave so soon

why would you ever want to leave this home
you're the only love I've ever known
pick up, pick up, pick up the phone... I'm calling you
oh you know you're killing me
listen baby don't you see
I'm begging, begging, begging please... don't do this to me

At the bottom of your dresser drawer
I found a one-way ticket to Memphis
touchdown in the land of the delta blues
I don't even get one last kiss
won't wait up baby, you're leaving soon

If leaving me is what you choose
I'd be so torn up and confused
I'd just sit around sing the blues
what will I ever, ever, ever do... hmmm

At the bottom of your dresser drawer
I found a one-way ticket to Memphis
touchdown in the land of the delta blues
you don't even get one last kiss
don't wait up baby, I'm leaving you

WANT NO MORE

ROGER SOLLENBERGER

Tomorrow's out stalking these fields with his scythe
Because the emptiness is swelling between the withouts and the withs
But instead we stayed in bed and told each other myths

And oh, the carnival that filled us with dread,
The fireworks bursting, they're the minds of the dead
And I cup your breasts as Internets explode above our heads

For

Love always lasts longer than war
And for every shell there's a shore
Cause today's the day that I want no more...

The emptiness still swells between the withouts and the withs
And tomorrow now is talking in tongues with the kids
But instead we stayed in bed and made each other new myths

And oh, the carnival I loved as a boy,
When rides were spinning, when confusion was joy
And now you and I uncork the wine and ohhh boy.

For

Love always lasts longer than war
And for every shell there's a shore
Cause today's the day that I want no more...

Because you are my desire.

SAVE YOU

ANNA YOUNG

I wanted to love you so blindy
That I didn't see those perfect eyes
When reality shot me right back to sanity
I realized that I've got to

Save you from saving me from myself
Oh, myself
My head and my heart and my soul

I guess it's a lonely world out there
Living life on your own
If this is reality, I don't want any part of it
But as hard as I try, I can't help but

Save you from saving me from myself
Oh, myself
My head and my heart and my soul

Dreaming of life in the stars
We'll fly away till the dawn
And when you reach for my hand
I'll remember my eyes open wide
To your emotional suicide
I'll remember to

Save you from saving me from myself
Oh, myself
My head and my heart and my soul

Give me a spin, pretty girl
In your wild abandon
You don't care for the real world
But give it a try, and you might

Save me from saving me from myself
Oh, myself
My head and my heart and my soul

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

Evan Allgood is an aspiring scriptwriter from Northern Virginia. In May he will earn his MFA from Georgia College. This is the closest he's ever come to winning something.

Rolynne' Anderson is a nineteen-year-old Memphis, Tennessee native. She is a sophomore at Agnes Scott College and is majoring in Creative Writing/minoring in Music. Inspired by a confluence of musical genres; she is a first time festival competitor and her entry "Love Me For Free" is what she deems a "country fusion prodigal daughter piece."

Brittani N. Banks is a senior at Agnes Scott and a Decatur native. Banks will be graduating with a major in English Literature-Creative Writing and a minor in Women's Studies. Her passion is children's literature. When she is not perusing chapter books she is writing fictional short stories and plays.

Alicia Brandewie grew up in Wyoming, Ohio and is currently a junior creative writing major, anthropology minor at Emory University. "Circulation" is part of her senior honors thesis collection. She plans to earn her MFA and share her love of words through her books and as a professor.

Jennifer Brown is a poet and photographer living in Atlanta. She received her MA from University College Dublin in 2009 and is currently working on a PHD at Georgia State University.

Anna Cabe is a sophomore English literature-creative writing major at Agnes Scott College, who hails from Collierville, Tennessee. Most of her public writing until this point has involved AP style, midnight deadlines (journalism), a timer, and a wingnut (the University of Memphis's WordSmith competition). She is glad that isn't the case for the Writers' Festival.

Joanna Carver hails from Scottsdale, Arizona and is currently a senior at Agnes Scott College completing a degree in Creative Writing and English Literature. She most often works in the fiction genre, focusing on family drama and dark comedy, but has recently been experimenting with science fiction and nonfiction. She is also a dedicated collage artist and was involved in the design of this year's Writers' Festival Magazine.

Tally Deushane is a Junior Creative Writing major at Agnes Scott. She writes ukulele songs in her spare time and posts them on her YouTube channel, live2tivo, where they have been viewed nearly 600,000 times. Her songs have been featured in various places on and offline, including one which was used on the season five DVDs of *How I Met Your Mother*.

Trista Edwards is a graduate student at the University of West Georgia studying English. She is currently in her final semester working on her thesis—a collection of poetry—and will graduate in the summer of 2011. After graduation she plans to pursue an MFA in creative writing. Her other interests include crocheting, cooking, hiking, travel, and spending time with family.

Eleanor Maxwell Fowler was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia. She graduated from the Galloway School. Currently, she is a Women's College student and English major at Brenau University. Eleanor is also an active member of Delta Delta Delta.

Michelle Haddad is a senior at Agnes Scott College, majoring in Neuroscience. She is currently writing her first short story collection, and is honored to be chosen as a festival finalist for the second time. After graduation, she plans to pursue a doctorate in Clinical Neuropsychology.

Jessica D. Hand received her BA's in Creative Writing and Psychology from Carnegie Mellon. Her MFA will be from Georgia State. She is published in *The Minnesota Review*, *Redactions*, and *The Cortland Review*, among others. She won first place in the 2008 Agnes Scott Poetry Competition, judged by Martín Espada.

Martha Holloway is a senior English Literature – Creative Writing major at Agnes Scott College and a native of Decatur, Georgia. After graduation Martha plans to pursue an MFA in Creative Nonfiction so she can continue doing what she loves: writing about the fantastically real people and experiences that frustrate, define and inspire her.

Sara Hughes is a graduate student at Georgia State University, where she is working on her PhD. Her poems have appeared in *Rattle*, *Rosebud*, *Old Red Kimono*, *Red Clay Review*, and *Ouroboros Review*, among other journals. She frequently finds herself having heartfelt conversations with minor celebrities, and she would like Luke Perry to know that she believes in him.

Dionne Irving's work has appeared in the *Missouri Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and *Carve Magazine*. She is the 2009 winner of the Hurston/Wright Award for College Writers. Irving is currently earning her doctorate in creative writing at Georgia State University.

Hello, my name is **Elli Anne Karras** and I'm grateful for the opportunity to share "Vantage Point" with you. This piece was the product of one of my first creative writing exercises last semester. I was both thrilled and surprised it was chosen for publication. Thank you to the individuals who inspired me to write it.

Andrea Love is a junior at Agnes Scott College, majoring in music with a minor in political science. A native of Seattle, Washington, she was awarded Outstanding Soprano Vocalist at the Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival in 2007, and recently won a chance to perform a solo opera piece with the ASC Community Orchestra in the spring. She was a nonfiction finalist in the Writer's Festival in 2009.

Alexandrea Lushington is a sophomore, Music and Psychology double major attending Agnes Scott College. Born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, Alexandra is a veteran of the fine arts with over 13 years of writing, recording, and performing experience. Her song writing styles range from many genres including Alternative, Pop, and Soul. Her goal is to graduate college with an established career as a writer and performing artist.

Raised in Sewanee, Tennessee, **A.Marie** earned a B.S. in Public Health from the George Washington University, then moved back to her roots in the southeast to pursue a Master's degree at Emory's Rollins School of Public Health. As a spoken word poet and singer/songwriter, A.Marie's writing is greatly influenced by her work in that field both locally and abroad. She currently lives in Atlanta.

James May's poetry has recently appeared in *The New Republic*, *The New Ohio Review*, and *32 Poems*. He's the editor-in-chief of *New South*, and lives in Decatur, Georgia, with his wife, the poet Chelsea Rathburn.

Kayla Miller is a senior English Literature-Creative Writing major at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, GA. She loves leopard print, coffee, and dogs.

Merrill Montgomery was born in Gainesville, Florida and has been writing fiction ever since she acquired the ability to write in the first grade. She lives in Decatur, Georgia with her husband Leandro, her gender-unknown tortoise Francis(es), and her three fish Dorian, Isadora, and Willamina. She is majoring in Biology.

Candace Nadon is a PhD candidate in English with Creative Writing Concentration at Georgia State University. She earned an MFA from Stonecoast Low-Residency MFA. Her work has been published in *Dogwood: A Journal of Poetry and Prose* and she was a previous finalist for Agnes Scott's Writer's competition in fiction.

Lesley Parks graduated from Agnes Scott in December 2010 with a major in Psychology and a minor in English. She currently lives in Nashville, Tennessee, where she is working in Entertainment PR and is learning how to honkytonk from the best.

Jen Pirkle graduated from Georgia Southern University with a degree in Writing and Linguistics and is now pursuing an M.F.A. from Georgia College and State University. She works as the Assistant Fiction Editor for *Arts and Letters*. Although Jen attempts to write literary fiction for school, her real passion lies with sci-fi and comics. Seriously, she's a big nerd.

Alec Ridley is a post-baccalaureate pre-medical student at Agnes Scott College. As a first time undergrad he received a BA in English from Hampden-Sydney College. Alec lives in Decatur, GA with his wife and her dog.

Hannah Chapple Ritorto studied English at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York. She is currently enrolled in the Masters of the Arts in Teaching program in Secondary English Education at Agnes Scott College. She lives in Decatur, Georgia with her husband Mark.

Jen Rivers will graduate in summer 2011 from the University of West Georgia with a degree in English and German. She will pursue an MFA in Poetry. She has studied abroad in Germany and Norway and looks forward to traveling further.

Kristin Robertson is a PhD candidate in creative writing at Georgia State University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Passages North*, *Cimarron Review*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Roanoke Review*, *Whiskey Island*, and *Yemassee*.

Roger Sollenberger is a writer and erstwhile musician. He's currently working toward an MFA in Fiction from Georgia College & State University. When he grows up, he wants to be an astronaut.

Samantha Tanner is a senior at Agnes Scott College. She enjoys writing as a way to create a world using the tiniest of details. Samantha is honored and thrilled to see her name in print for the first time.

Valerie Wayson studied Linguistics and French at the University of Texas at Austin. She left the corporate world of computer sales for Peace Corps service in Madagascar, then serving in Americorps in Austin after her return. She is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Non-Fiction at Georgia College.

Anna Young is a senior at Agnes Scott majoring in Psychology and Classical Civilizations. She will attend graduate school for a PhD in I/O Psychology. Anna has been a singer-songwriter for 9 years, and performs frequently at the Redlight Cafe. She wants to thank her friends and family for all their love and support.

WRITERS' FESTIVAL PREVIOUS GUESTS

- 1972 May Sarton, Michael Mott, Marion Montgomery
1973 Robert Penn Warren, George Garrett
1974 Hollis Summers, Larry Rubin
1975 Richard Eberhardt, Josephine Jacobsen
1976 Reynolds Price, Michael Mott, Nathalie Fitzsimmons
Anderson
1977 Eudora Welty, Guy Davenport, Josephine Jacobsen
1978 John Young, Larry Rubin, Josephine Jacobsen
1979 Harry Crews, Donald Davis, Josephine Jacobsen
1980 Howard Nemerov, Josephine Jacobsen
1981 James Merrill, Theodore Weiss, Josephine Jacobsen
1982 Margaret Atwood, Doris Betts, Josephine Jacobsen
1983 Donald Justice, Josephine Jacobsen, Gretchen Schultz
1984 Richard Wilbur, Linda Pastan, Gretchen Schultz, Kay
Stevenson
1985 Maxine Kumin, Greg Johnson, Gretchen Schultz
1986 Denise Levertov, Andrew Lytle, Memye Curtis Tucker
1987 Tillie Olsen, Memye Curtis Tucker, Jane Zanca
1988 Michael Harper, Anne River Siddons, Memye Curtis
Tucker
1989 James Dickey, Memye Curtis Tucker, Elizabeth Bartlett
1990 Josephine Jacobsen, Alfred Uhry, Memye Curtis Tucker
1991 Gloria Naylor, Sharon Olds, Memye Curtis Tucker
1992 Rita Dove, Robert Coover, Greg Johnson, John Stone,
Memye Curtis Tucker
1993 Jorie Graham, Charles Johnson, Judith Ortiz Cofer,
Memye Curtis Tucker
1994 Carolyn Forché, Melissa Fay Greene, Lee Abbott, Mary
Kratt
1995 Michael Harper, Peter Carey, Julie Kalendek, Memye
Curtis Tucker
1996 Alicia Ostriker, Philip Lopate, Joy Williams, Sally Ann
Stevens
1997 Jane Smiley, Katha Pollitt, Pearl Cleage, Anjail Rashida
Ahmad
1998 Jamaica Kincaid, Thylia Moss, Sherman Yellen
1999 Tim O'Brien, Eavan Boland, Frank Manley, Memye Cur-
tis Tucker
2000 Joyce Carol Oates, Li-Young Lee, Jim Grimsley, Robert
Earl Price
2001 John Updike, Marsha Norman, Sharon Olds, Anjail
Rashida Ahmad
2002 Marilyn Nelson, Bapsi Sidhwa, Scott Russell Sanders
2003 Julia Alvarez, Greg Williamson, Cary Bynum
2004 Chitra Divakaruni, Bo Ball
2005 Oliver Sacks, Linda Hogan
2006 Paul Muldoon, Percival Everett, Nathalie Fitzsimmons
Anderson
2007 Suzan-Lori Parks, Yusef Komunyakaa, Beatriz Rivera-
Barnes
2008 Martín Espada, Gillian Lee-Fong-Farris, Rubén Martínez
2009 Junot Díaz, Anita Desai, Quiara Algora Hudes, Sabrina
Orah Mark
2010 Scott Russell Sanders, Paul Guest, Sarah Scoles



