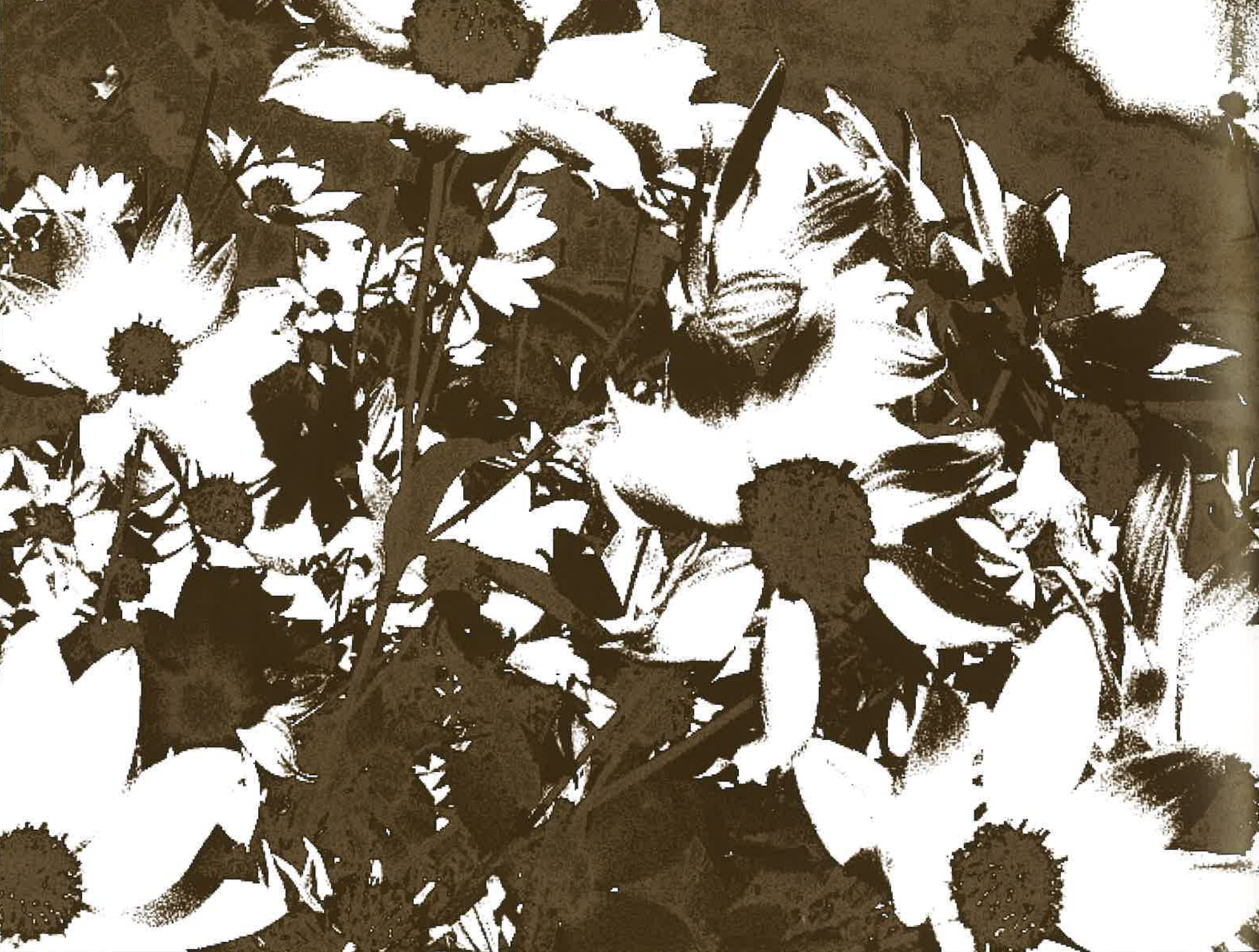




Agnes Scott

Writers' Festival 2007



Agnes Scott College

36TH ANNUAL WRITERS' FESTIVAL
March 22-23, 2007

March, 2007

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AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE
THE WORLD FOR WOMEN

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

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 Yusef Komunyakaa, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Beatriz Rivera-Barnes.

The Writers' Festival competition is open to anyone currently 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. Final decisions are made by the visiting writers 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 Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, Eleanor Hutchens, and the estate of Margaret Trotter for their support. We would also like to thank our outside selection committee for their time and careful reading.

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Poetry



KYLA BERRY

I Remember Savannah

*—and then, as / we sweetly departed, that she-wolf moon bowled after
us / until it burst into a shower of lost names —Wanda Coleman*

Eight years earlier, you are on a
cobblestone street, listening to
jazz ladle out of a high rise window like sweet rum

magic, the notes line up
like marbles in a deep groove, like
Pluto and Mars, that sway in your eyes as you run.

Oh, but where is the sun?
Like a Russian egg, hidden within its paint,
and the night, a foam carton that cannot be contained.

Love is an extraordinary saw that
cuts through terror as terror does also
cut through love, leaving her scarred,

demystified, the wrinkles steamed out
like a sundress left
behind the shower curtain.

But I've learned to love again the sugar from
those kisses at the hem of the mouth
where lips meet and stick and are pried open each morning,
the sugar that fills the wrinkles in my skin like wind fills the spaces

between tree leaves, and gum fills the gaps
between hard square teeth.

And as you are a diamond cut into the
shape of forgetting, forgetting history
and a lifetime of suffering,

I am that black seed
caught in your throat
that begs to grow a melon in your belly—

I am that knife,
that saw, that splinter of glass
that cuts into your flesh leaving a scar raised—

I am the daisy that sheds tears,
the color of white noise that
implores the grace of crackling sunshine,

hug-shaped raindrops
briny earth,
to remember the roots

of presents past
and the wound ends of wicks
encased in carved wax—

I am the lost last name that your body forgot

IAN DAVISSON

Taking a Picture of the Infamous Liz Woodward

I.

"Liz Woodward said the F-word over the Storyland intercom.

It was enough to get her fired, though her cousin crashed the pirate ship
into the magic fairy float, while James, her brother,
whored his way through all the maidens in the castle—and both stayed on.

No, of the Woodwards, Liz was worst, the director managed to say,
handing Liz her severance package (six months worth of tickets to Storyland
plus parking, free of charge.) Liz moved on

to become one of New Jersey's junior opera stars
stealing every stage, from La Boheme to Wagner's Valkyries,
and though she earned top billing, not one rival shaved
Liz's head before a show (an old theatre trick, but one that works, they say).

But Liz left that life for Paris, where I found her, taking pictures
with the gypsies—small frame for such a big voice, but what else is wrong, look
at her eyes, big as June, and, lying on that chair, becoming

Manet's Olympia, what with that lightning hair,
and the gaze right at me, not where it should be,"

II.

I wrote a poem about Liz Woodward near the cathedral at St. Sulpice
the old, bird-silent white towers perched above the roads of St. Germain,
that is, I told the poem to a few friends, who were eating crepes
and drinking calvados and getting very drunk and very rowdy

while accusing me of writing bad poetry. I responded with another poem,

this time about the shit-eating dogs out behind the cafe:

The way the dogs eat
well-worn soles set deep

and how the jaws bend
trunks of trees in crossing wind

They would go on that night to piss in the streets, sing the national
anthem at Chez George, fall in with the crowds from l'esquive,
drink Italian beer and wait for their girlfriends to call long distance

at 3:30 in the morning, because by that point they were sick of each other
wishing only to be home and safe again.

III.

Later that night I wrote another poem for Liz Woodward.

She was standing on Calatrava's bridge in Valencia. Her hair was purple and glowed.

She said "Never show this poem to another person."

I had no ears, and no mouth.

IV.

Liz Woodward took me trout fishing at Camp Catocin.

We did it with our hands

under the brown skin of the river

watching the teeming fish, silent as plants.

Liz Woodward's skin is white as porcelain.

Standing in the mud, she looks like an exposed bone,

and if trees had skeletons, they would look like

long lithe Liz Woodwards stacked upon one another
and perhaps they would sing arias as they were chopped down.

V.

I had a dream, and it was about "Trout Fishing at Camp Catoctin."

we tossed onto the bank
the longbodies witnessed with dry eyes
the greyheaded features flopped slumped and then died
while Ms. Harris Lee was growing the world's largest pumpkin
which weighed two thousand pounds and when hollowed
would house the camp catoctin noodlers 12 boys
who will sleep in its belly while night
the lazy fish drifts calmly in a black sea
of starry fingers and light twinkling eyes

The belly of Liz Woodward was submerged in mud.

VI.

"Suppose I wrote a poem, and it was called
"Liz Woodward Wrote a Poem about Ian Davisson"
and it was about a picture you took in the Jardin de Luxembourg
resembling either the continent of South America
or an African woman in a green mumu
who held her round arms up against a potbellied sky
waiting for the rain to fall on her dry village
while you slept next to the Medici fountain
and dreamed about me, in a green mumu
drinking rainwater in a cafe, where waiters
panicked at the sign of the coming drought"

VII.

In the low fields of Vermont
Liz Woodward broke her leg cross-country skiing.

She lay in the ice for an hour.
Her mother found Liz with blue lips.

Her hair had crystallized and
broke off her skull as she was lifted

onto a national park stretcher
leaving fingerlong strings behind.

She was driven to the hospital
in a veterinarian's homemade ambulance

The seats of his car

were covered with the hair of animals
which adhered to the scalp of Liz Woodward

as she lay across the rumble seat
by now unconscious.

VIII.

A.

I have read every book that Liz Woodward has ever read

but I do not believe the things that she believes.

B.

That beliefs correspond with the literate self, as pertaining
to the

C.

Someone, who knows Liz Woodward, what she believes,
or how she dances: gray lines across a page of poetry.

D.

because

E.

There are two vital images 1. The folds of purple leather hair.
2. How can she lay so still across a page, when

F.

If dancing, then how I have watched her long lithe body,
how I have then watched her long lithe body.

G.

Her nerves are wrong and if she dies
well it is no surprise to me, well, I knew it all along.

IX.

I want to share the world with you, Liz Woodward.

The earth bellowed.

Clouds dismantled.

We were on a train from Utrecht.

I watched the face of an East Berliner—his eyes on Liz Woodward.

Outside, the bridges were painted gold.

Centraal ahead, and the gay valley.

X.

"You do not always know what I am feeling"

XI.

I wrote a poem for Liz Woodward, and it was called

"The Idea of Being Alone."

The way a tongue feels when it whispers,
or is whispering, the unreal action
of that mouthed motion, this is a body in total darkness,
feeling for another.

The trees are swathed in bones and rattle.

I am a stomach in the world's unending supply of feed.

XII.

I took a picture of a tree in the Luxembourg Gardens
four inches away, and it looks like the gardens at Giverny.
Millions of people come to see the waterlilies.
Millions of people come to see the Japanese prints.

Millions come to see the Eiffel Tower.

Millions come to see Spiderman 2.

Millions to see the Moulin Rouge.

Millions to see the wineries with animal labels.

Millions the Pope.

Charles de Gaulle Airport.

The faces of our generation.

And millions of people have not seen

a damn thing, Liz Woodward.

XIII.

An idea for writing a poem:

When I met a deaf old woman in a nursing home.

Her name was Liz Woodward, and she did not have any hair.

She rambled on about her dead husband.

The trees in her backyard were bending
and bowing to their partners.

If I ever wrote a poem this would be its primary image.

XIV.

In front of a mirror I am watching my lips separate,
existing in the cool territory of shape. Absence
of speech, God's tongue, diaphone. Subsume.

When I touch myself I am feeling the touch

upon myself and the touch of myself, together,
twinned nerves, twinning the touch, together,
as if two touches, as if two become some new touch,
the feel not of skin but of a twice-found territory,
tight against the not-quite-boundary of my flesh.

When I touch Liz Woodward I am only touching Liz Woodward.

XV.

how?

when I met Liz Woodward, at Cafe 729
she was drinking Stella Artois
Liz Woodward doesn't drink beer
Liz Woodward drinks Stella Artois
her face was pink and her hair was
like dark spots in the ocean

there are no aesthetic parameters
there are no boxes without shapes there are no shapes
there are no lines in a curved universe
there are no curves there are no bumps on your body
we are not bodies we are shapes

programmatically hearts and total visions and ways
I have not written a line yet to make you laugh
not today the sun valleyburning and buried

I asked Liz Woodward
what was she eating?
the fish sunk in white
her legs were crossed
I was not watching her legs
I was watching the face of Liz Woodward
I would go on to write a dozen poems
about the face of Liz Woodward
(until she came to me in a dream)

loose filaments from a frost white weeping bulb (I walked home alone, through the parc Montjuic)
we are ghosts of the phrases people mouth over dinner and she was not wearing the face of Liz Woodward)
we are strands of hair in a porcelain sink her face shined in gold back towards me
I haven't shaved no I am growing a beard another face

XVI.

A Dozen Poems about the Face of Liz Woodward:

1. Three months later I buy sausages on College Avenue.
2. From Noelle, 45, who owns a silver cart.
3. but it has lost its flash. I ask for ketchup.
4. The sausage lies like a black dash buried
5. —
6. in aluminum foil, hot and thick.
7. What am I eating?
8. Today the weather is gold and mists and there is no chance of rain.
9. Today I begin to write a dozen poems about Liz Woodward's face.
10. Red stains a white paper napkin.
11. Fried curves of dimpled bread.
12. Under a beer-brown sky the trees shake their tiny white faces which are filled with light and smile.

XVII.

She had this beautiful short red hair, and boy eyes.
This beautiful short red hair, which nearly reached
the crescent red halfmoon eyebrows of her boy eyes.
This manycolored red short hair, and white and blue
beautiful boy eyes (I could dope you up, I say to her blank
eyes, to her hashish-red eyes, to her Morocco blue-bleeding

body supine like a massacre on my blue bed. My blue flower
pot, my blue diamond-cutter)—Liz Woodward was
a ghost in her flesh, a white balance on the heat of clouds.

XVIII.

In the afternoon the air grew heavy with worms.
Smells of rain. Pasolini at the Accottone.

XIX.

In the afternoon the air grew heavy with worms.
I ate lunch along the street which defines one edge

Where Liz Woodward took me trout fishing

of the Jardin de Luxembourg. The west edge. One
cup of Café Americain and a ham crepe. The dogs

She saw them in some green weeds

behind the café are digging for bones in the street
pavement, but they have long teeth, so one

Soaking sunlight like people do

of their teeth they use for the tearing, and one to chew, blue
pavement from under the pedestrians, who

Lovers, loving like people love

do not stop for the animals—
the holes, now permanent abysses in the earth,

Liz Woodward. Do you love Liz Woodward?

are full of people bones, and the rain is falling
and the rain drops down in my eyes, washed out,

The rain falls, breathing the bubbles of a thousand fish
and the bones are floating like the grey bodies of fish
in the dark-heart shape of each pond.

XX.

Sometime while in this white lonely world
I dreamed I was Liz Woodward.
Lying in bed, this would be my hair,
arms and legs, birds in space.
Down my woman-arms, my fingers are something
like cigarettes, or my woman-legs, now, great small engine-pistons,
smooth, new, and trim, sucking into themselves and
moving like a gasping whale in a bowl of ocean dust.
Should I have wanted her breasts, should I have wanted
her hips and her dark other parts, I would have them now,
but formed under the sheets of her sheets my appendage
Liz Woodward formed, collected, now more
than anything, stillborn, and now my exhales, in the dark, matching hers,
beside the ocean, my breathing woman-mask,
but it doesn't matter, because I don't remember a single thing
about Biarritz (maybe it never happened), but
her breath, slow and slowly mine, I matched,
waiting for my own Liz Woodward, maybe,
I felt I was in a bed, alone, listening
to the long breathing ocean,
a woman waiting between each breath for her own,
when she breathed.

It was a window swinging open,
which I then closed, it was the ocean
breathing like a woman giving birth quietly
with her face behind a mask—it was me, lying like
Liz the ocean, at Biarritz, lapping at the moribund sand,
a night-animal, wild and eager, slow and maybe sleeping,
with woman-long hair and curtained eyes and eggs in my belly,
birthing maybe the masked Liz Woodward from the ocean bowl,
the spilling carafe of ocean-soft sand, welled within my
woman-ness in a gasping gaping hole where we slept,
slow and maybe alone, in the dim dark hall single bedroom by the beach,
but it doesn't matter, because I don't remember a single thing
about Biarritz (maybe it never happened) but
I remember now that as she was breathing, and
as I was breathing, I felt I was in a bed
alone, listening to the long empty ocean,
a woman, waiting between each breath for my own Liz Woodward
breathing, there
in the dark beside, where the ocean
slow and maybe mine, I heard breathing, slow
inward moans like the sound of Liz Woodward,
violent still sounds of Liz Woodward in the dark, alone,
lonely and maybe still there, sleeping between the sheets
of my sheets, my breathing woman-mask, closing my eyelids
which are windows, and feeling my eyeballs lunar pass
across the great dark universe of my stillborn dreaming mind.

XXI.

The night tongue of Paris like a dog's drags itself
across the rolling street to where Liz is drunk, stumbling
on the holes in the pavement, her heels catching,
smoking a cigarette, swallowing stained air.
Total dark. Liz Woodward takes me in the Bari Cotic,
in a shoe warehouse. Hers are broken, and
she doesn't speak a word of French (where are we now
I ask myself) taking a long look at her heels which
are two boiled white eggs, and I am trying to write a
poem about her, here, in the 300 year old building that
is the oldest in the quarter—the rest torn or bombed down. And
I have a list of metaphors in my mind which
explain nothing, are only pictures of a girl who is drunk
and barely made it down the Boulevard de Montparnasse,
but I say I was never supposed to write a poem about her
I say my voice was never supposed to sing, so
in my dreams I have the most beautiful words for it all
and I am always coming up with the most beautiful songs
like this one: it is a symphony of broken high heel shoes
with a featherlight soprano, who lost her voice, forgot all the words
or is unable to speak them, spotlit, I would like to think, on stage,
but now I know that we are only on the rue de Plantes, opening
the door to the Hippodrome, where there is no stage, there is
only a silver bar with half a dozen stools.

He Sang Her Song.

Liz Woodward, get out of your Longchamp lamb-trimmed sweater, and your half-torn skirt.
Get out of your clawfooted tub with your wet hair and your dripping and your stained feet.
I want a girl with no bones who is willing to sing songs while I am sleeping.
Get out of your body (I have constructed something), and wear (now you must) your quiet costume.

I want you to understand,

Liz Woodward, that this is not you—I have taken a picture of the infamous Liz Woodward
and the girl I have found is on every postcard in the Latin Quarter, with her skirt up
or her two hands on a wine bottle, and not you, white, wizening, sick, somehow,
medicated today, my gold-lipped Liz Woodward, because I know this girl, and
she is sleeping in a warm blooded river, she is sleeping along the bank in a tent full of newspapers
and shopping bags and pages from old books, because it is cold in Paris this time of year (by this time
I have already left) and the multicolored womb of the heart of Liz Woodward, sunk and buried
in the riverside concrete like a grey box full of the first breath she ever took, born not naked
but clad in a fur-lined secret many colored coat, beats easier now that she is at rest, respiteful,
subdued, and she is not sure to move until hands are laid upon her.

XXII.

Port Beau, horse-ringed by mountains and strangely white.
Tall orders of beer, the dusty cups are like rapidly disappearing clouds
full of yellow piss-water. Liz Woodward, from the top of the flagpole,
I am watching our silver-shadowed train hyphenate the Spanish coast.

XXIII.

This is a poem called we are nowhere and now
we are underwater again—before which
I stuck it out in California for 8 weeks and
headed back west northwest towards Crater Lake and
the canyons that run horizontal with the border

I tried to cross, but couldn't, what with
my pharmacy suitcase, so I held out in Washington
instead, and stopped writing Liz Woodward poetry—
all about the gypsies I met.

Brought them to California for 8 weeks—
waking up in a baked bread desert—
brown boots and chaps and cowboy hats—
todos lo que usted ruega
los ojos de amigos están mirando.

Postcard from Younkersville:

*How now the leaves are stretched
flopping, slumping, dying. Crater Lake, socket
of a terrified eyeball, like a beautiful Picabia.
Hole in my heart, red empty theaterspace.*

In the empty spaces of the desert goatherders are training
a shoeless donkey to walk against a cliff parallel,
while its face, long and tired, waits like an unopened envelope
full of loveletters, yes, loveletters.

XXIV.

1997 Tee shirts magnetic puzzle post cards love hope bracelets copy machines host viruses double clicks pensacola
1970s television fire alarms kitchen sink shift eye bring back the time when all girls were yours
1998 Bidder seller this item Sign item If status. options: Sell larger bid: US . Reserve price: vehicle shipping. quote to: United TEXAS
bids High payment . This Plus Sellers methods Feedback: sellers items: List Visit buyer fraud vehicle. Specifics Use: Make:
1999 Geck Rebecca Grosset Dunlap Bonnie Bader Debra Dorfman Gryphon Leah Allyn Johnston Chief Diego Sterns Grove Jeanette

Doren Wagon Kathy Dawson Reid Ruth Katcher

2000 She stayed away fifty hours before. And until he knew whether or not she was dead, he couldn't burn the house down, making a beacon that would bring help on the run.

2001 you trip stumble and then fall and then I tied myself together some leaves 2002 the numbers are simple

2003 book of books and so we get cites 2004 or wildest. or prettiest. or 2005 so 2006 we are?

XXV.

Because of you, white smiling Liz Woodward, puddle reflected
tall and skinny and brown in a mackandack jacket,

staring back through a smoked-brown glass window
with your black nailed hands like grenades clinched behind you

and your Phototopia lens eyeballs like a river reflecting
blue and grey water-faced Liz Woodward, back and forth forever,

in a swirling world of fish skin and dog hair, behind you
smelling Shalimar by a store window,

wild and wonderful Liz Woodward
reconfigured cool, grey-white against the ocean dead sky-floor

shadowed under flesh-flowering umbrellas in the rain
when the holes in the earth are clogged with dulled visions

of a red haired, splashing, re-reflected Liz Woodward
backwards in motion, swimming underground

or lunatic flying (I stood alone on a back-alley near the Seine
watching myself evaporate)

in a torrent of waves by the liquid sky where
a thousand tiny tongues are licking my stone face, Liz Woodward,

caught again, I might say, in my mind's refraction
the tight warm face of Liz Woodward, written tightly,
a thousand tiny tongues, repeat repeat repeat repeat.

XXVI.

What we might have done
with your body, now that its veiny writhing snake-coiling
strips itself uncontrollably, psychotic puppet-like, stiff, 5'2"
cold wood-stiff,

way down to the bones of Liz Woodward

I woke in the bones of Liz Woodward and I was not breathing,
the window, already slipped past the pane, now flat, broken on the street
where Liz Woodward seemed to wrap herself around heavy glass shapes.
Touching nothing, nerves nowhere around the bones of Liz Woodward.
The nowhere bones of Liz Woodward. Down by the river, the fish have stopped breathing,
the cages are empty, and the dogs are, have always been, wild, wouldn't stay
put, gone already, I didn't know, but knew it would be. I then woke in the bones
of Liz Woodward, in the prison bones, stiff and not lithe, and by the time my eyes
were opening, I couldn't see, a bald naked bone, blind and small.

XXVII. Approaches. In August I began again.

KATIE FESUK

If Men Were Angels

*"If men were angels, no government would be necessary."
from The Federalist Papers, no. 51*

But some of them are—
some of them are so gentle that you barely
notice the feathers brushing against your thigh,
your naked shoulder, your navel exposed
and ministered to by curly locks of angel hair
and smoothness of angel fingertips.
They appear to you in a manner you can understand
bearing strong Adam's apples, high cheekbones,
five o'clock shadow. Some fly in on Fridays
and keep you in an expensive hotel room
for three whole nights. They order peach
sorbet and vanilla ice cream from room service,
champagne and penne pasta, ladyfingers, artichokes.
Unlike their old meals with Abraham,
they feed you spoonfuls of buttery rapture
from expensive silver. You hear them talking to God
in the shower, lathering their wings with your
scented body wash, pondering your salvation.
They pass you almonds to nibble over pillow talk,
and then they wax nostalgic about the origin of the sun
and the moon and every star. Your body becomes
the earthquake they both inspire and quell.
Your body, they say, is as great as the heavens,

and with the same angel hands that strike death,
harbor wind, and summon lightning,
they show you just how great.
Your neck, the night sky. Your breasts, two Jupiters.
Your hair, a comet. *And this*, they say,
touching the flesh above your heart, *the universe*.
You almost forget their mortality is a construct,
some are so enchanted with you, with wine, with good
blues and opera and martinis. No, not all men
are angels, but some are. Some will leave you
satisfied, sleeping, dreaming of unruly whiteness
and the pelvic curve. Some will leave you
born again, mumbling in tongues, *bene elohim*,
tasting honey on the subway before the moment of grace
subsides. You think indefinitely of wings,
of others who have entertained angels unawares,
in what ways they were tended.

KATIE FESUK

Blake's Elm Angel

*"He looks up and sees an angel full of trees."
-high school student, misquoting Blake's childhood
vision of a tree full of angels*

f he sees an angel full of sassafras
and river birch, it's still a divine vision.
He's no less awed at its hemlock lips,
its vine-braceleted arms. Still the eerie wings
wrap around angelic husk, a hovering seraph
drenched in bark and moss, and the boy
on the ground, mumbling *branches, oh god,*
the branches, humbled by inexplicable wood.
Roar of wind like a choir, then an unfolding,
flutter of hair and leaves let loose. Roots dangle
where toes might be, drip clumps of dirt
that hit the earth and break into ravens and starlings.
Sap falls from its fingers, turns to water, wets
the crown of the boy's head. He tastes bitter
apple, blackberry, strange mint. Rustling, the wings
open. He sees myrtle and sweetgum, a twisted
limb ribcage, hint of magnolia blooms beneath;
it breathes white petals over his body,
its voice a wreath of dogwood. He cracks open
walnuts at his feet, eats until he speaks in tongues,
and falls asleep. When he wakes, he writes *heaven*
and *poem* and *blessing* in leftover shells
carves his name in an elm.

COREY GREEN

The Night Wile E. Coyote Met Road Runner at a Party

It was at the ACME party, not the place I'd ever expected to find a bird.
Still, there he was, taunting this predator with all his feathery blueness,
honking as an intimation of speed, of 90 mile-per-hour hot rubber,
so fast he seemed not to move at all, standing in front of the refrigerator,
his profile turning toward me before he raced off somewhere down the
hall,
through the smoke, clear to the end of the road paved to nowhere.
I followed his motion marks that fell to the floor like yarn unraveled.
He was gone. The refrigerator was white and cold.

I bought all the bait I could find, all the poison. I faced the road
like an arrow lying in a bow, arcing it tight, ready to fly at his flash.
I hoisted pianos and safes, chipped ledges to their last finger hold,
prepared
for a kind of war complete with missiles and heavy cannons, anything
to slow him down, make the minute before his disappearing last, if even
another minute. Then I painted signs, pitiful red signs to explain to
everyone my inevitable doom.

COREY GREEN

Informing My Mother of Her Death

This is the dress, hung on wire,
shadow of an Easter dress,
dress that drags the ground.

This is my mother called to her bedroom,
called from clanging in the kitchen,
to me and my gift of a black dress.

This is her before her mirror
holding the dress as though
it never gave light.

This is me with no light.

My mother changing,
These are her knees, her thighs,
white skin, and this
the dark hair between her legs,
her nipples, all, then,
covered by the dress.

She says nothing.

This is the sound of my mother
with empty hands.

The dress spills a path to the door.
Opening, its hinges cry.
These are the hinges quieted.

JESSICA D. HAND

Betty Burlesque, Perpetual

All she knows is she can't
stop moving: she'll lily-pad
across the dead—toes tap tears
but her cheeks stay dry because
she's a roller: her stomach
pond-ripples, claims anything hard,
reaches back to shore—she's a roller,
a body/beauty-art/spirit-space/
rhythm-everything/self ch-cha ch-cha
dancer—arms trace water trails:
water weighs bodies down, but
she keeps rolling, rolls water
on up to cloud: she's
intimate with evaporation, shakes
and shimmies from soil to sky,
says she'll dance bread, yeah
bread into every mouth left open—
grief's slow tango can't keep
pace with muscles moving this
fast—she's professional, dances beyond
leg-tremble-belly-cramp but knows
muscle-jelly means stop

she knows not
to let her audience see anything
but motion, arms float giant fans
front and back—she closes,
a pearl reclaimed by clam: she's
found disappearing's secret—all
she sees
as rows of eyes fish-egg
her sea-swollen city
are feathers.

JESSICA D. HAND

A First Grader Tries to Speak in Tongues at McDonough First Assembly of God

She figures God's lips must be heavy,
pressed against so many bodies
until they tremble and fall.

The congregation looks
like it got its weekly spanking,
and she understands God the Father.

God's words must be holy,
his giant tongue pushing them
from behind teeth as big as mountains,
and not a single cavity.

The ushers—Mr. John from Zach's supermarket,
and Neighbor Tim—place blankets over those who fall
unconscious under the weight of God's secret code.
They flourish squares of paisley printed cloth
over each body until the church is a garden
waiting for God's green thumb.

She thinks, if God were a woman,
if she were God, she'd stitch
all those paisley people into a skirt.
She'd dance—her feet taking up
the whole stage of the earth.

But God does not dance.
She'd startled Sunday School

with that question, learned no,
God does not dance.
God sends people to Hell.

Hell is where they pour boiling water
on all the body's secrets.
There are no cartoons in Hell—
she'd asked that, too.

She does not want to go
to a place without cartoons.
If she were the voice of God—
like Mrs. Jacobs, whose jaw fluttered
before she passed out—if she were pure
enough to bring God inside
and let him back out, syllable by syllable,
then she'd never go to Hell.

She feels the Spirit move
over her, sees those transparent
fingers beckon.

She moves to the aisle, waits
for the heaviness of language
so large it fills heaven,
waits for God's moist breath.

Preacher Max silences his sermon,

KERRY HILL
The Naturalist

a congregation of eyes waits
for God to squeeze himself
inside the skin of a little girl.

She can hear the air-conditioning roar,
wonders if that's God
trying to slip through the vents,
thinks maybe he got stuck.

The congregation whispers.
Her mother's face grows red as Hell,
her father hisses like a snake.

She prays for God to drop his weight
like an anvil, to flatten her
into a cartoon pancake.

But the only heaviness is her mother
pulling her back into the pew.
Her father, holding her there.

1.
The park was trembling and white,
all the tree branches were glossy in ice
gloves, and the red berries froze together
in bunches that fell occasionally
to the pavement, where they cracked open
like little bells. His hands turned red, froze
tight together as a hoof. His coat pockets
bulged with buttons, coins, and relics
that crowded his fists out of the flannel.
His breath-clouds puffed like steam
from a boat and he chugged through the park
jingling and crunching. On the street
trees staggered out of the sidewalk,
wrapped in fences of fierce black stitches,
and the shadows shuffled and crouched.
The street was a dark wet blue and right
before he ducked into the doorway
to go upstairs, a horse pulling a small carriage
surged around the corner. He watched the muscles
under the thick skin, rising, pulsing,
all in the chest like a fist of hearts beating
at once, and the wide nose that opened
its sails to the hard air, then pushed
the frost out in gusts.

Upstairs his mother was in the kitchen sighing
silently over a pot, her dark twine hair in a braid
down her back. His father slept in the living room
in a busted green chair, breathing heavy,
his knobby fingers twitching slightly.
His forehead was punctuated with stern lines.
The radio croaked and snored till the walls sagged
in, filled with the static. When he gently pushed
open the door and his mother stepped away
from the counter to kiss his cheek,
he saw that some ingredient drew a stain
down the side of her long face.

2.

In his room he rips out of his jacket and spills
his pockets onto the desk. They explode
onto the papers and books, ringing, clapping.
His eyes dart and his blotchy hands
search until he finds the dirty buttons
and hunk of charcoal. On the wall
he draws a horse with a mane curling
like paper sailing out of a window,
and a long braided tail, and a chest
that ripples like boiling water, and in his other
hand are the buttons that he shakes
to make the sounds of sleigh bells.
He draws his mother, married and silent

at seventeen, and his father the doctor
who only loves horses
for industry, and gradually he spreads
across the wall mustangs with spots and braids
and stains. They are more like faded maps than Clydesdales,
more delicate and stark than Lascaux.
Countless brawny legs twist across the room
till he slips away into someplace dark, a forest
or a storm, where the hoof thunder is muffled
and the voices are unfamiliar and he chokes
on all the dust.

KIM KARRIS

your kiss

like japanese beetles like pheromones like teenagers like love
like art like kinetics like whirligigs like color like spotlight like
underwater like breathing like ribbon eels like sex like mouth like
eating like spoons like crushed ice like superhero like desert like
thunderstorms like jupiter like air like flying like vacuum like god
like rain like needles like angora like iron like press like commas
like poland like communism like falling like revolution like you
like me like commonwealth like spring like japanese beetles

ELIZABETH OTT

Paperweight

"The only part of Percy Shelley that wouldn't burn was his heart. It was given to Mary Shelley, who kept it in her desk the rest of her life." —Kristina Hartmann

Careful of the crisped edges
she lays the little blackened organ down,
wondering whether there is blood inside.
How long will it take for it to dry? She imagines
it is like a can of paint left open to the sun.
The drawer grows sooty and is stained.
At night she is relieved not to hear it beating.

Everything else is burned and gone,
his finger bones, his fleshy calves.
Even his left eye, which she had often observed
was not quite like the right. His skull
succumbed to flame, along with his liver.
His pelvis did not stand a chance.

Is it moist to the touch or has it become obstinate?
Almost purple in its blackness
it is a perfect lump. She never touches it
though she could. It must glow in the dark
the way she feels it when the drawer is closed
and the lights off.
It must have something
that she does not
to exist so.

ELIZABETH OTT

The Yellow Umbrella

Her older brother, born jaundiced, she knew
would have had something to say
about the color yellow and beauty.
Umbrellas, too, were hard to believe in,
though they did have a certain utilitarian
severity that lent them a kind of attractiveness,
the way a neat drawer of knives
may make one pause to admire
if only they shine a little in the light.
But the yellow umbrella wasn't beautiful
and she could not make it so.
It was too dingy to be smart, used,
and had a tear in its fabric
through which droplets of water
would sometimes meander, defeating
both its purpose and its silhouette.
She would rather have been trumped up
in a trench coat, some ridiculous hat,
galoshes that gulped half a leg each
than to carry the thing.
But what if the wind took it away, what then?
To walk bare headed through the downpour
and brave the soaking of a favorite dress?
Better the awkward bird than that,
and so she lifted it, the yellow eyeball, to the sky.

SARAH SCOLES

A Linear Progression

- 1985: Her birth certificate states Tri-County Hospital;
she went back to visit once and was impressed by the
sagging doublewides, the vintage car collections of
rural Missouri
- 1986: She looked like an irradiated Dalmatian
Her cousin had chicken pox first.
- 1987: Religion found her parents.
- 1988: She was given a doll the day her sister was born;
when pulled the string, the doll spoke major chords.
Her sister never did that.
- 1990: Her kindergarten teacher asked the class to spell
"butterfly"— it was a test of their phonetic functioning.
Her mother kept the page, lanes of red and blue
highway parallel to the letters *b-u-d-d-e-r-f-l-i-e*.
- 1992: She married Grant Wills in his treehouse, and they kissed a
consummation while his mother was inside ordering pizza.
- 1993: She was baptized in the name of the Father
and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen;
She knew she was supposed to feel something.
- 1996: She wanted to look like Kerri Strug, so she let a manicured
woman slice her hair. A 6th grader asked if she was a girl,
and she wanted puberty for Christmas.
- 1999: She carried a tin Superman lunchbox so people would
consider her unique; without insulation, the Jell-O
always melted.

AUSTIN SEGREST

Dying Lioness, Carlos Museum

2003: At graduation, no one had more decorations. Someone had counted— it was official. A jingling bell in black shaking the principal's hand and accepting a blank scroll. Actual diplomas would come via post.

2005: She saw an empty 40-ounce in the middle of an intersection and said, "That's poetic." She said the same thing when a can of corn was spilled near some yellow flowers.

2006: She noticed that Sunset Assisted Living's new advertisement banner said, "Now with a special neighborhood for the memory impaired!"

She drags her hind legs, her midriff
broken, pierced through
with arrows: one grinds
between her shoulder blades.

Her eye is a fixed
moon, a chipped inset missing
its jewel. Holding out for the horizon
forever in relief, she's losing

one vertebra at a time.
This fallen strength. This paralysis.
Teeth bared and a terrible moan.
Who shot you? Were you taken

by siege? No. Conspiracy. Perhaps
it's better to ask who carved you
with so much mercy and softness
from this black slab of stone.

FEDERICA ZANET WILHEM

Notes From Betrayal

never saved a dying bird
never considered dying
a reversible process
never knew wrinkles
were signs of aging
and of birth never knew
everything in between the first breath
and the last is a working problem
an equation given
x find y and nothing
else never knew struggles
of the beginning stayed
the same at the end
did I ever learn not all
can be saved or helped
by easing the falling
not to expect anything
in return not even silences? didn't know
the first glimpse at ourselves
is the same as the last one

Fiction





There had been a need for an upgrade on the overbooked flight to Mumbai from Toronto. *Would he mind?* the gate agents asked him with what appeared to be no irony. So Sunil had taken the single seat up front while his wife Peshar and newborn son Kalil sat in the back a few rows into the economy class cabin. Sunil reasoned he deserved the rare indulgence. Peshar did not drink, therefore, could not enjoy the fine spirits available up front, and Sunil could certainly not provide for their son as she did. Kalil would fill his belly with breast milk and sleep through the entire journey. Peshar would enjoy a movie and sleep herself in the quiet of transatlantic darkness. Still, Sunil suffered.

He heard the squeak of his young son. When he thought of his wife fussing with Kalil, her elbows knocking the passenger's beside, he worried he had abandoned them for a temporary treat. Surveying the cabin, he recognized the veteran occupants of first class air travel for they had already made use of their free eye masks, earplugs, and travel socks, and had curled up under their warm wool blankets. Sunil tried not to reveal the giddiness he felt at flying first class, his status as amateur flyer. He would order another of the Johnnie Walker he had enjoyed only once before in his friend Jal's student apartment. And once they were airborne, dine on vegetarian pasta and a chocolate sundae complemented by an after dinner coffee and liqueur. Sunil thought of Peshar eating the curried dumplings, boiled vegetables and rice she had prepared in case there were no vegetarian options. Other passengers would grumble, he knew, over the spicy dishes. These bitter thoughts simmered until the flight attendant returned, and Sunil let them go to the lemony scent of the hot towel over his face, the warm whiskey in his belly,

and the plush leather seat beneath him.

If he were a character in a novel, Sunil mused, he would not be a likable one at first. But that would change. One might read of the Indian immigrant returning with his wife and newborn son to Mumbai from Toronto inside a heavy hardback. On an airplane in the first class section of a Boeing 747. Inside the colorful book, details of his difficulties would unfold as the flight flew into darkness. His struggles would uncover a sympathetic character and shine an indubitable light on his sacrifices. Like the 747, his character would rise to wonderful heights, his iron will and what his mother had always called his *stubborn smarts* prevailing against the challenges of his adopted life. But for now, Sunil remained on the ground—a long, slow taxi to the runway. The trials of his life circulated in his head like the recycled air in the narrow cabin, stale thoughts each of them.

A year earlier, Sunil had been granted a postdoc fellowship to teach and research biostatistics and how they related to the spread of diseases with the University of Toronto. He enjoyed the work, but his stipend was not enough to support them in the expensive Canadian city. With no space available in graduate housing, he and his family were forced to rent a third floor, one-bedroom walk-up in Chinatown, above the China Hut take-out. Each day Sunil and his family endured the reek of fried pork and beef, the sour scent of boiling vegetables, and the stench of garbage from the Dumpster below their kitchen window. Even in winter with the windows and doors shut tight, the oily odor of Chinese entrees managed to dwell in their apartment, clothes, and bed sheets.

Without a car, they could not afford to live in Etobicoke with other Indian families, the neighborhood too far from the university. Sunil relied on a used mountain bike to get him back and forth to school each day, the chain from the \$80 bicycle forever jumping its crank. In winter, its knobby tires were no match for ice and slush, and Sunil had to navigate the slick streets with care. After the first heavy snow, he had wounded himself in a fall that required five stitches to his chin and an emergency room bill nearly half his apartment rent, despite insurance. For everything else, there was the train. But that cost money too. Peshar had taken a part-time job in a dry cleaning shop, hemming slacks and mending sweaters; she was not supposed to work and her small paycheck was not enough to cover the cost of childcare. It was safer and more affordable for her to stay at home with Kalil. Some days, Sunil's money worries were so distressing he found it impossible to concentrate on his research or find room in his heart for his students' concerns, which he found to be remarkably trivial.

Conversely, he had bills for gas, water and Kalil's medical care, many of them unpaid and beyond his means. They no longer had a telephone, not even a cell phone, so its bill was not a concern. Sunil used the payphone in front of the China Hut or the phone in his office. And still, no matter how he shuffled the numbers—numbers that had always been a solace for him, they came up short each month, one or another basic necessity left ignored. Life in Toronto was no different than his life in Mumbai, and Sunil resented the unpleasant reminder. Peshar too had been unhappy in Toronto. She missed her family, had no one to help her with Kalil, and had no friends beyond the acquaintances she had made at the cultural

center in Etobicoke. She loathed the cold and had lately grown bored with their dreary life.

It seemed to Sunil that injustices followed him wherever he went. At least there would be time for another whiskey before they took off, an indulgence he rarely enjoyed. The whiskey left him still and smiling in his seat. He ordered another; the flight attendant called him *Mr. Sharma*. His mood brightened with the sound of ice tinkling in the heavy-bottomed glass—finer glassware than in his own home, Sunil judged. But this thought also depressed him, temporarily countering the warmth of the alcohol. Was he to be denied the freedoms of money when he worked so hard?

The pilot announced they would likely spend another thirty minutes on the tarmac, and Sunil groaned in disbelief at his appalling luck. Would he not leave it behind in icy Toronto where it seemed to confound his every step? But when the flight attendant brought him his drink—*Johnnie Walker and ice*—the lovely woman a dark Indian princess, Sunil felt his good mood return and began to enjoy the charade of being a frequent flyer. The small tragedies of bad weather, mechanical trouble, and airport congestion they endured together in comfort. Behind him in the confines of coach, they drank soda and sugary juice from thin, plastic cups, if they drank at all. With the jet still on the ground and its engines relatively quiet, Sunil heard again the sound of his young son's bubbling cry from behind the blue curtain that separated the two cabins. From experience, he knew the percolating whimpers would soon turn to wails.

With the third whiskey washing warm through his veins and so quickly to his head, he located the nerve to speak to the passenger

beside him, a shabbily-dressed young woman with brown hair woven into thick, untidy braids. Joanie was from the suburbs of Brampton and she was going to backpack through India for as long as it took.

"How cool is that, eh?" she said, her silver nose ring catching the light from above.

"Yes, yes. Quite cool," he replied.

"I really wanna, like, see the other side of life on this planet. Get out of my head for a while," the young girl answered when Sunil asked why she was going to India. "My mom's scared of terrorists, but who blows up Canadians anyway? She says they hate anyone from the West, you know the Muslims. You aren't Muslim are you?" Before Sunil could answer, Joanie continued. "'Cause if you are, I didn't mean anything by it. We got loads in TO, but you gotta admit, it's hard to know who to trust these days. As my dad says, 'You don't know who's gotta bomb in their backpack.'"

Sunil had endured this kind of thinking before, from landlords, shop clerks, policemen, strangers on the train, students, and even a few of the faculty. More confounding, however, was why she so desired to visit third world locations when Canada was full of such wealth. Sunil dreaded going back to Mumbai and its maddening crowds, its flooding downpours, its poverty and corruption. How odd that she saw romance there instead. Despite her scruffy clothing and unkempt hair, Sunil recognized an air of entitlement, a sense of privilege he also detected in many of his U of T students. Her trip was one of leisure, a semester off from school and six months to travel for no other reason than to travel. He could not bring himself to ask her how she was able to afford first class. Sunil was uncertain about the *other side of life* to which she referred, but he thought the

young girl would be a friendly companion for the long flight and he could speak well of India before she arrived to find the ferocity of Mumbai.

Kalil burst into the rhythmic, gulping wails Sunil had predicted, for hunger, a sodden diaper, he knew not what. He recognized his wife's attempts to calm the boy, her cooing and singing, the odd little rhyme about a boy with a large head who didn't need an umbrella when it rained (*Big head, big head...*). He imagined her bouncing the boy like she did, one hand behind his head, the other under his bottom. As Kalil's cries grew louder, Sunil felt the urge to go to his wife and son, but convinced himself he could do little to calm the boy.

The young girl rifled her daypack and turned to Sunil. "Oh man, I'd hate to be the guy sitting next to *that*."

Sunil forced a smile and took another sip from his drink, the ice now a golden, syrupy brown as the whiskey melted the hollow cubes. He could not bear to tell her Kalil was his child, and again struggled with his position in the first class cabin. When the young girl put on expensive-looking headphones, the tinny sound of music filtering into his seat, he was relieved. Sunil unwrapped the free airline headset from his amenities kit and found a classical music channel. The familiar sounds of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* drowned out Kalil's cries and inspired daydreams of the vacation to London he had believed possible a year earlier. Of long visits to the Tate and National Galleries, the Victoria and Albert, the Science and Natural History museums. Of a stay in Chelsea with family friends, a day in Hyde Park and an evening in the West End with a musical or one of Shakespeare's tragedies. Of a romantic river cruise with Peshar.

Then Kalil was born, and Sunil's dreams of vacation were replaced with an obligatory trip home to present their new son to family. Sunil could not have been happier with Peshar's efforts to provide him with a handsome boy and he dearly loved his son, but they had not anticipated her pregnancy or the hardships they continued to face. Unable to give in completely to his new environment, Sunil picked up his copy of the airline magazine, a slick monthly with colorful pictures of exotic destinations and advertisements for high-end products: stainless steel watches, noise-canceling headphones, and family vacation packages. One ad stopped Sunil with its glossy blue skies and bleached sands, a tropical isle he would surely never see: the gleaming smiles of an untroubled life on the handsome father and his beautiful wife, the striking children laughing inside an impossibly grand sand castle underneath a sun the color of a Van Gogh sunflower. *You Can Have It All*, the ad read.

It had been more than thirty minutes since the pilot announced their delay, and they remained on the tarmac. When the flight attendant passed again, Sunil held his glass up for another, a gesture that made him uncomfortable, his confidence a sham. Nonetheless, he managed a smile of reassurance for her as his courage blossomed like the red flowers across his cheeks. The flight attendant hesitated and looked at her watch, but took his glass anyway. By the time the plane departed Toronto, Sunil was drunk, and joyfully so. For the time it took them to reach cruising altitude, he did not drink, but bathed in Mussorgsky's magnificent themes, moving from the introductory "Promenade" through "The Old Castle" and "The Tuileries" while Joanie bobbed her head to a faster tempo. He felt

as if the music were a soundtrack for his journey. He, as protagonist, was in harmony with its rhythms, lifted to heroic status in the film of his life. And if not for the unpleasant taste of Joanie's patchouli fragrance, like a sour varnish on Sunil's tongue, he would have slept, a longing sleep, the whiskey keeping him wistful and contented. The captain announced cruising altitude, and passengers began to move about the cabin. Sunil ordered another drink, though this time the flight attendant took his glass without a word.

"I can't drink on planes," Joanie said. "Makes me sick."

"Yes," Sunil answered, all he could think to say.

Sunil knew he should check on Peshar and Kalil, but he did not wish to interrupt the symphony. One more movement, he decided and closed his eyes again; then he would go to them. But into the recurring "Promenade" theme, the musical idea he most associated with his own solo visits to museums, he sensed a presence nearby. A flight attendant, a man he had not seen before, leaned into his seat mouthing words he could not hear. Sunil removed the headphones. "I'm sorry?"

"Mr. Sharma?"

"Yes," Sunil said sheepishly, worried the flight attendant was there to return him to coach.

"Your wife would like to see you." The flight attendant pointed to the back of the plane where Sunil now realized Kalil cried a rapid succession of hiccups and coughs.

"Yes, thank you." Sunil stood and attempted to skirt the resting Joanie, her mouth open. He was glad she slept, unable to associate him with the crying infant behind them. Sunil angled his hips around her feet and knees, but lost his balance. As he tried to correct his fall,

he caught himself by thrusting both arms forward until he landed on the seatback with an arm to each side of the young Canadian's head. He looked as if were straddling the girl or preparing to kiss her, his face only a few inches from hers. With the jolt of Sunil's awkward landing, Joanie's eyes popped open.

"What the...?" she said and ripped her headphones off.

Sunil struggled to right himself, but the weight of alcohol and his inelegant position held him fast. He thought he might collapse against the girl. "I'm sorry. I was trying..."

Joanie cringed, pushing her hands against his chest.

"Forgive me." Sunil turned his body to the left, leaving his right hand free to pull himself up with the seatback in front of them. Others in the first class cabin watched him with reproach, and Sunil understood he was no longer one of them.

The flight attendant rested a hand on his back. "Sir, are you ok?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. I lost my balance."

Sunil smiled apologetically at Joanie once more, but she had already closed her eyes. He could not face the other passengers and turned to the back when he heard Kalil scream again, a shrill cry that unsettled his stomach.

In the back, Peshar attempted to calm the flailing, howling Kalil. Her nursing blanket had slipped from her shoulder, exposing the swell of her right breast. Neighboring passengers seemed to glare at Sunil when he approached. One adolescent girl held her hands over her ears, while the girl's mother scowled at him. Peshar shook her head.

"Oh, Sunil. I don't know why he won't settle. Maybe it's the

pressure on his ears. If he would only suckle, but I can't keep him on my nipple," she said, louder than Sunil preferred. He blushed at the mention and tried to cover her exposed breast with the nursing blanket.

"It's no use. He won't take it. Can you try walking him? I have to go to the lavatory." Peshar looked exhausted already, her eyes rimmed in red, her usually neat black braid frizzed where it had rubbed against the seat back. They had only been in flight an hour and had at least twelve hours more in the air, then another hour to get to his parents' home in their eastern Mumbai suburb. As he took Kalil from his wife, Sunil felt like a fool, weary of this travel experience that seemed destined to disappoint. He rocked his son from side to side, a method that usually worked well for him. And it was just such moments of calm—at three AM in the darkness of their kitchenette—that reminded Sunil he was his son's father, guardian against all that life tossed his way. Times like this Sunil believed himself capable of navigating the day's turbulence, in control of his life, confidence inspired by love for his son. He enjoyed his role as father and protector, and understood the inextricable bond between them, the lifelong commitment he accepted with gratitude.

As Kalil wailed on, Sunil rocked harder, walking towards the front of the plane to keep his son in constant motion. There had been times he rocked his son so hard, in desperation, in the darkest, most solemn hours of morning, he was surprised Kalil's head didn't pop right off. He often wondered if he might have damaged his son in some way, jostling his budding brain against his soft skull and bruising a vital membrane, weakening a thin vessel. With this thought, Sunil realized he did exactly the same now, Kalil's head

bobbing up and down, his wails growing louder. What a poor father he must appear to the other passengers.

As he neared the blue curtain between first and economy, the flight attendant who had so firmly placed his hand on Sunil's back shook his head just enough to let Sunil know that he and baby were not welcome up front. If he wanted to return, he would have to do so alone. He turned to see Peshar make her way to the rear of the plane, nodding her head to the other passengers in apology. Why should she apologize? Kalil was an infant; he didn't know any better. It was certainly not their intention for the boy to cry. A flush of anger rose at the pettiness he believed swelling in the other passengers. He alternately offered Kalil coos and the other passengers a fixed stare emboldened by alcohol. Finding the rocking and walking to be insufficient and the passengers' glares intolerable, Sunil followed Peshar to the rear, where he stood next to the lavatory door, waiting for his wife to return. Kalil cried on, and Sunil wondered if there was something wrong with him. What if he were trying to tell them he was ill? What if their regard for the other passengers was blinding them to the welfare of their only child? Another flight attendant, a blonde woman with a South African accent, held open her arms and smiled.

"Would you like me to try? I've a record of success with babies on board."

Sunil warmed at her offer, the simple kindness evidence of a more compassionate world.

"You're kind to offer, but I'm hopeful he will calm when my wife returns and can better provide for him."

As the flight attendant smiled her understanding, Peshar emerged

from the lavatory.

"My god, I heard him the whole time. Not even one minute's peace. Here, let me have him."

Peshar took Kalil from his arms without another word. "I'll stand here awhile, give the other passengers some peace. Go. Sit down. Enjoy your seat. I'll be fine."

"Are you sure? Perhaps if I sing to him." Sunil was proud of his tenor voice and wanted to propose concrete solutions, beyond the generic offers of assistance he knew sounded inadequate.

"I'm fine. I think our noisy boy is beyond singing now." She bounced Kalil in her arms and rubbed her nose against his. "Aren't we, noisy boy? Aren't we?"

But Kalil would not stop crying, and Sunil experienced the urge to kick in the airplane door and leap into the effortless collapse of cold, cold air.

When Sunil returned to his seat, another Johnnie Walker waited. The flight attendant, the lovely Indian princess who had called him *Mr. Sharma*, smiled sympathetically.

"I have a one-year-old."

Sunil wanted to embrace the young beauty. Perhaps there *was* goodness in this world. The swell of attraction rose within him: for the attendant's black hair, so tidily pressed into a silken bun, the slimness of her hips held firm by her tight blue skirt, the stretch of cotton across her breasts, the gloss of her cherry lips. He blushed as he thanked her, the heat of alcohol and his anxious walk rising in his cheeks. He sat down, this time carefully avoiding Joanie's knees, and though he knew he should not drink anymore, the idea

of the soothing liquor swathing his rattled nerves was irresistible. He swallowed the drink in one gulp and nearly threw it back up immediately, the whiskey burning his throat and causing him to gag. He closed his mouth tight and leaned back into his seat; he was dizzy, but perhaps he could sleep now. Kalil's cries had finally subsided, and Sunil's shoulders and neck relaxed for the first time since they had boarded.

Sunil had managed to keep down whatever wished to rise up in his throat for fifteen minutes, forcing it back down after each heave of the airplane. For just as he had crumpled into sleep, eye mask on, blanket tugged up to his chin, the pilot announced severe turbulence. And that's what they got, a bouncing ride on rough seas. Sunil struggled with nausea from the first buffeting bump of air, but when the aircraft dropped so dramatically drinking glasses toppled from tray tops and passengers cried out in alarm, Sunil could keep it down no longer and threw up into his airsick bag. Joanie appeared not to notice, her hands fastened to the armrest, her eyes closed in alarm. Though after another yawning lift of the aircraft, she reached for Sunil's hand, her fingers clawing his from the armrest. For that moment, he again felt a part of the kinder human race, glad to provide comfort to a fellow passenger.

With the return to calm skies, Sunil was no better. He was still drunk, and the persistent taste of whiskey-tinged vomit left him nauseous and unable to sleep again, his catnap now a fading fantasy. The flight attendants, too busy recovering from the unexpected commotion, had yet to retrieve his airsick bag, nearly full now. Sunil held it underneath his blanket, hoping Joanie wouldn't see.

The turbulence had set Kalil off again, like a fire alarm forecasting trouble. Had his son been injured during the turbulence? Was Peshar able to hold on to the boy during the wild ups and downs? He turned to see her, but the curtain remained closed. Sunil needed to get up—to dispose of the dangerously full airsick bag, to rinse his mouth clean with the mouthwash from his amenities bag, and to check on his wife and son—but the *Fasten Seatbelt* sign remained lit and the pilot warned of more turbulence.

Joanie turned to follow his glance, then to him, her eyes scanning his face, his body underneath the blanket. "Man, are you alright? You don't look so hot. You're all sweaty."

"It's the rough air."

"Suppose so." She seemed to have forgotten her own terrified response to the turbulence, her tight grip on his hand. She wrinkled her nose. "Man, smells like somebody on this plane puked. You smell that?"

Sunil could stand it no longer: Kalil's cries, the turbulent air, the hidden bag full of his own sick, the ridiculous girl beside him. His legs twitched underneath the blanket and a surge of nausea swept over him again. He absolutely had to move from his seat, where instead of reclining in its comfort, he felt trapped. Kalil's cries soared to another octave. The flight attendants would understand. He had to take care of his family. He would dispose of the airsick bag, perhaps force himself to be sick one final time, and freshen up. He would go to his family, insist Peshar move up front while he calmed his poor unsettled son, endure. Hadn't Peshar endured enough for him? Why shouldn't she enjoy the fruits of their good fortune? Especially when Fate seemed to suggest he not be allowed

this small luxury. If this was his fate, then he embraced it. Sunil stood, keeping the airsick bag underneath his blanket.

"Please, excuse me," he said to Joanie.

"Pilot said we gotta stay put."

"Yes," again all Sunil could think to reply. How could and why should he explain to this ragamuffin girl his feelings? He forced a thin smile and leaned forward.

"Whatever." She eyed the blanket and pulled in her knees.

As he stepped by Joanie, knocking her knees this time instead of trying to scoot around them, Sunil thought he heard the familiar chords of Mussorgsky's "Promenade" refrain. His theme. But for better days. For afternoons in museums, over tea in a London hotel. A stroll along the Thames with his wife and son, a photograph of the three, Tower Bridge behind them. Clear of the seat, Sunil turned towards the front lavatory, prepared to discreetly reveal his airsick bag to the kind Indian princess, as if to say, *I don't wish to trouble you. I've got it.*

"I'm sorry, sir," the Indian princess said, pointing to his seat. "You need to stay in your seat."

Joanie mumbled behind him, "Told you."

"Yes, I know. But I have to..." Sunil lowered his voice to a whisper, hoping to get closer before he pulled the airsick bag from under his blanket.

"Please, sir. For your own safety."

A beefy man in a Maple Leafs sweatshirt to his right turned to look up at him. Sunil felt the heat of his gaze. Sweat trickled into his eye, blurring his view. If he didn't get to the bathroom soon he would vomit in the aisle. The airplane lurched, and Sunil lost his

balance, leaning into the Maple Leafs fan, who wrapped his beefy fingers around Sunil's arm and pushed him back into the aisle. But the man's fingers caught the blanket, exposing the airsick bag.

"Sir, please," the Indian princess said, before she saw the airsick bag and gasped.

Sunil had no time for manners and lurched towards the lavatory, the Indian princess thrusting her hands forward to stop him. The cabin turned a blinding frost before Sunil's eyes; a shivering chill rippled through his limbs and up his spine. A heavy blow from behind sent him crashing to the aisle floor. Sunil caught his chin on an armrest and landed painfully on one knee, the airsick bag exploding beneath him. He heard shouts, cries of fear, and anger. Was the plane crashing? Would the turbulence send them all to their deaths? Sunil choked at the thought, of Kalil, Peshar, of getting to them before the plane hit the ground.

"What do you think you're doing, Mohammed?" It was the beefy man, working his beefy forearm around Sunil's neck until Sunil thought he might black out. Instead, he threw up, a spray of vomit that shot across the Indian princess' blue flats.

"Oh, god." The Indian princess stepped back, and the flight attendant with the firm hand knelt before him.

"Mr. Sharma? Are you alright?" The flight attendant looked up and over him. "Stop it! He threw up, don't you see, he threw up. You're choking him."

The chokehold around his neck slackened, and Sunil inhaled desperately. People moved about him, shouting. As he listened to the alarmed voices around him—"Oh Christ, I think he's bleeding too. Can you get me..."—trying to determine what had happened,

ALISON HENNESSEE

Seals

if the plane was indeed returning to earth, he also heard the familiar strains of Kalil's cries. Blood from his chin pooled on the carpet, and he felt hands on his back, around his arms, someone trying to turn him over or lift him up, he couldn't tell. Kalil's wail rose above the more immediate sounds around him. His boy, his beautiful boy. And his forgiving wife—*Sunil? Oh my god, Sunil?*—who bounced their son in her arms. For Sunil, those cries were the one thing that assured him all was okay. The plane was not speeding towards earth. He was on the floor of the first class section of a 747 on its way to Mumbai with a gash in his chin, in a puddle of his own vomit, but he would survive, this moment of suffering. Sunil wished only to stand, to take his crying son from his wife's tired arms and rock him to sleep like he had done so many dark mornings, exhausted but in love with and in awe of the helpless bundle in his arms. And as he was abruptly lifted from the floor, he heard echoes of Mussorgsky's "Promenade"—his theme—blend with the cries of his infant son, pleas for someone, anyone to help him.

It was five o'clock and mostly dark, the city hanging in the in-between place when the sun has set but its residue still clings to the buildings and the harbor looks glassy and polished because the light is just skimming the surface, neither abandoning nor illuminating it. I was living with Marla, my last remaining friend from junior high and her boyfriend Patrick because the rent was cheap in Patterson Park and I didn't have a job. I didn't have a job, not anymore, not since the manager of the delicatessen on Charles Street fired me for mixing the non-fat mayonnaise with the regular to make the regular go further. I told him that it wasn't an issue because non-fat mayonnaise was an absurd concept anyway, mayonnaise is only fat, how can you have non-fat fat, but Frank told me that some of our customers were very weight conscious and I told him that I was also very weight conscious, conscious of the weight of this job on my creative drive and the weight of his presence on my emotional well-being. It was the last part that got me fired, really. The mayonnaise was just a red herring.

I meant to get a new job and I'd turned in some applications, where, I don't remember because none of them were places I wanted to work. What I wanted to do was finish my book, which I'd been writing since I finished at Dickinson six years ago; but this was harder to do than I anticipated, partly because I didn't have much written, just the title and the opening sentence: "Alice stepped outside and found her face reflected in the world." Another part of the difficulty was that I couldn't get inside Alice's head; I didn't know her at all. Sometimes I considered changing the name, because women are strange if you're not one, plus Marla was always telling me what hubris it is for a man to try to write from a woman's perspective, a

statement with which I was inclined to agree. I tried replacing Alice with Dylan and William and Ian and once for the hell of it I tried Paul, thought perhaps a little post-modern author-as-character might be fun and edgy. The male names didn't do anything more than Alice did. They did less, because I did know them and I think that's why I buried them. I kept Alice around because she kept evading me.

I had just woken up with the sheets twisted around my legs and torso and the Orioles stadium blanket, nylon on one side and fleece on the other, lying in a black and orange heap on the floor by the day bed. The blanket was on the floor because the day bed was so narrow that no matter how hard I tried to keep the blanket on me, it had no room to rest, to pile up its extra material or spread itself out and so it hung off the edge of the bed and its own weight pulled it down to the floor. I didn't try to put it back on the bed, because it was futile and because I felt guilty for sleeping all day. Marla told me it didn't matter to her what I did as long as I paid the rent and didn't keep dairy products in the apartment. Marla was mortally terrified of dairy products. Rather, it wasn't the dairy products themselves that scared her, but the possibility of their spoiling. To her, anything made of milk was little more than a petri dish. Once, in high school, I asked her for how long she thought milk was good. She shook her head and let all her thick brown hair fall in front of her face. Without looking up, she said,

"Never. It's always about to spoil and that's just as bad as being spoiled already."

Marla's parents were divorced.

Patrick had no problem with dairy products, though he didn't keep them in the apartment out of respect for Marla. That's one

thing I can say about Patrick. He was a very respectful sort of guy, polite and considerate and thoughtful, too, the kind of person that would remember what you'd told him your sister did for a living and who, without being asked, would make your stir-fry separately because you didn't like onions. He was very respectful and kind and being in the same room with him was, for me, torturous. It's possible that I wasn't in love with him, but I thought I was, certainly thought that I hadn't been this infatuated with someone since Andrew Mulcahey, my ninth grade lab partner. I hadn't told Marla; there just didn't seem to be a tactful way to tell her that I was in love with her boyfriend. She might have known just the same, but she kept quiet about it, for which I will forever thank her.

My attraction was further complicated by my immense guilt about the fact that I was doing precisely nothing with my life. It would have been easier if Patrick had gotten on my case about not having a job, but he didn't. Patrick was so respectful to me that I could tell he thought I was lazy, which I was, and shamelessly sponging off Marla, which I also was and it was the fact that he was so right which hurt me the most. That and the fact that even though I was all the things he thought I was, he was still respectful. This made me feel guilty, a kind of guilt that was a sick smear that spread through me. He never said anything nasty at all, just kept smiling at me when I finally stumbled out of bed and buying me tapioca cups when he went grocery shopping because once, when I had lived with them a week, I mentioned that my mom used to make it and it tasted like childhood.

It was five-thirty-nine when I came into the kitchen. I had tried to make myself look less disheveled, less like a lazy sponger. I had

washed my face and shaved, nicking my Adam's apple for the second time that week, put on a pair of corduroys that Marla had patched for me and a Talking Heads tee-shirt I got at a concert in high school. I was rumpled, but I hoped the effect was artistic, or at least not pungent. All the six mismatched glasses in the house were dirty or missing so I turned on the tap in the kitchen sink and put my head under the faucet, neck twisted to tilt my mouth upward.

"Are you all right, Paul?"

It was Patrick. I sputtered and jerked my head away from the faucet, reaching toward the handle of the oven door for a dishtowel to dry my face. Finding the handle empty, I wiped my mouth across my forearm and then smiled at Patrick.

"Oh, yeah, great. I, uh, was just, well, all the glasses are gone..."

Paul was looking at me with his brows furrowed. He was standing in the doorway between the meager living room and the kitchen with a paper bag nestled against his ribs in the crook of his arm. "Gone?"

"No they're no really gone, they're in the washing machine. I mean, the dishwasher. They're not gone, they're just dirty. There wasn't some glass exodus." I didn't realize it was a pun until I'd said it and then I hated myself. Patrick would have to laugh because he was so considerate that he couldn't ignore a joke, even a bad one, but the thought that he would think that I made the pun intentionally was a bitter one. Patrick would laugh and I would feel low and cheap.

He did. I did.

"Glass exodus," he chortled. "That's a good one. Glass exodus." He set the bag of groceries on the table and began unloading it: a head of iceberg lettuce, a package of chicken thighs, two jars of

chunky peanut butter that said "2 for 1" on acid green stickers. I took a carton of eggs and a netted bag of oranges to the fridge. As I pulled open the fruit drawer, releasing the strong scent of rot masked by baking soda, I asked over my shoulder,

"So, how were the old salt mines today?" Christ, I thought. Another pun. Patrick worked at the McCormick spice factory as a pre-scaler.

Thankfully, he ignored my choice of clichés and nodded slowly for a few moments as he put the peanut butter and some packages of saltines in a cupboard. Patrick was so thoughtful that he even pondered questions like this, the perfunctory questions that people say to fill the air with their noise, as if Patrick thought his answer could give meaning to his existence and that of the asker.

"Pretty good. I'd have to say, it was a pretty good day. It was bay leaf day. That's one of my favorites." He took three tins of tuna fish from the bag and stacked them next to the peanut butter. Then he turned and smiled at me, and I looked up quick because I had been staring at his hands as they held the cans. His fingers were long with what Marla's palm-reading books called spatulate fingernails that were chewed to the nub, like mine.

"Bay leaves. Huh. Why's that your favorite day?"

"Bay leaves are packaged whole. And that means..." He looked at me with his eyebrows raised and his mouth expectant. I was supposed to fill in the blank.

"No dismemberment?"

Patrick's face crumpled, but he recovered and returned to his typical respectful neutrality. "No dust. That means there's no dust." He sat down at the kitchen table, opened a package of paper napkins

and began sliding them into the wire napkin dispenser.

After a few minutes, Patrick slid his chair away from the table and opened the fridge. He pulled out a Seven-Up and popped the tab. After a long sip, he gestured at me with the hand holding the soda can. "Hey, Paul, I was thinking. I have the day off tomorrow. What do you say we go down to the plant? I'll be able to show you what's what. I only know the warehouse stuff, but at least that will give you a feel for the place."

I swallowed. When I first lost my job, Patrick suggested he might be able to get me a job at the plant in a managerial position. "With your brains, you wouldn't want to be working in the warehouse. Waste of that college degree." Patrick had dropped out of high school and gotten his GED at twenty-two. I had been tactfully declining his offer of a tour for weeks, with fabricated interview appointments and imagined maladies. It wasn't the job that I was so opposed to; it couldn't be any worse than the scores of low-end retail positions I'd held. It was Patrick I wanted to avoid, or rather Patrick and I together. Every day, taking the bus to work, home from work, punching the clock at the same time, going out for lunch breaks. If I spent that much time with him, I knew I would say something. He would say, "Do you have change for a dollar?" and I would say "I love you."

"I don't mean to pressure you," Patrick continued. "I know you can find a job on your own. I just thought you might be good with the sales or marketing guys. It's not exactly literature, but it's still writing. And better than nothing."

I ransacked my brain, mentally thumbing through the thousands of ways I could refuse the offer one more time. In the end, I panicked

and chose none of them.

"Sure. Tomorrow would be fine."

"Great! I have to talk to the super about it first, but unless you hear otherwise, why don't you meet me down at the plant around, say, three?"

"Three. Got it."

When I arrived at the plant, Patrick met me at the entrance, then took me down to the blending room.

"Today is peppercorn day," he shouted over the roar of machines. "We're grinding them and all these sacks," he pointed to an enormous pile against the unpainted cinderblock wall, "gotta go over there." He gestured to a point against the opposite wall that seemed miles in the distance.

"Then what?" I yelled back.

Patrick grinned. "Then we dump 'em in the turbo. That's the best part. After that, we weigh out the portions that the blend specialists will use to make mixes. You know, like prepackaged rubs and specialty stuff. Cajun seasoning, garam masala—you can't make it without pepper. You just sit tight there and watch for a bit. See how the job goes. I'm gonna go talk to Trent about those office jobs he mentioned last week." As he trotted off, he looked quickly back at me and smiled. I smiled back and waved enthusiastically, then cursed myself.

After five minutes of watching the pre-scalers and material handlers drive forklifts back and forth and then unload sacks of peppercorns into an enormous cone that funneled them into the turbo grinder, I was in pain. My eyes stung and my throat was

burning from the fine black dust that was swirling all around us. A sooty layer of ground pepper coated my shirt. It stuck in my arm hair and under my fingernails and to the inside of my nostrils. When I wiped my eyes, I realized it was in my eyelashes and my eyebrows and my attempt at visual clarity had only resulted in sharp pain. My eyes pooled with tears that ran down my face, creating tracks through the dust.

The men in the factory had goggles and face masks, which made them look futuristic and insectlike, as well as hairnets and blue booties over their shoes, which made them look like high school lunch ladies. They worked precisely and efficiently and did not talk because it was too hard to hear over the mechanical cacophony. They cradled the necks of the peppercorn bags with one work-gloved hand and with the other lifted up the end of the bag so a river of peppercorns came pouring out into the machine.

When Patrick returned from the offices upstairs, he held up a hand to me and then walked over to his coworkers. He distributed greetings and some hearty claps on the back and helped carry over a few extra-large bags of pepper. After another five minutes or so, Patrick gave some quick waves and gestured over to me. His coworkers gave curt nods and returned to their work, while Patrick began walking in my direction.

"What do you say we go out to the smoking patio for a bit?" The most I could manage was a squint-eyed nod.

When the door opened I drank in the air, cool and clear in my seared lungs. I swallowed repeatedly, trying to clear the grains from my throat and looked thankfully at the harbor, resting my bloodshot eyes on its stillness.

"How're you feeling?" asked Patrick. He put his right hand on my left shoulder in a gesture that was neither condescending nor mocking, but both firm and gentle. "I'm sorry. I should have gotten you a mask. I didn't think of it." He looked worried, which I liked because it was the first time I had seen him less than composed. It made him human.

I coughed. "It's pretty intense in there." I looked at him for any signs of similar irritation, but Patrick was seemingly unaware of the blackish patina that covered his face and clothes and dulled his sandy hair. "Do you notice it? Does the smell and stuff bother you? I mean, even with the gear, it must still get into your clothes and on your skin. I feel like I bathed in Tabasco sauce."

Patrick shrugged and removed his hand from my shoulder. He reached in his breast pocket and pulled out a package of Lucky Strikes. He extended the pack towards me, but I shook my head. He lit the cigarette, slowly and carefully, cupping his palm around the flame of the lighter, though there was no wind. After a couple of drags, he said, "I don't know if it bothers me. I don't think I can tell anymore. The spices and stuff, they're just... kind of in my head already." Patrick trailed off and we watched a jet rend a scar across the sky.

We sat in silence for a minute, two minutes. I thought the conversation was over. After all, I was the talky one, the college-graduate with the English degree and the over-developed vocabulary that Marla ribbed me about. Patrick was the quiet fellow with the blue-collar job. It fit. We were filling our roles. Then Patrick spoke again, but distantly, as if the words were a repetition of a conversation he had long ago.

"When I first started working here, three years ago—was it four?" He paused a moment, then took a last drag on the Lucky Strike and threw it down. "Well, anyway, when I first started working here, whatever spice we were working on that day would seem like it filled my whole brain and all I could smell would be nutmeg or turmeric or coriander or what-have-you. The smell would be so strong that I could taste it. Whatever I did on paprika day or thyme day got all tangled up in the smell." He lit another cigarette. "The day I met Marla? Everything was cardamom. I guess it's kind of one of those smell association things—I smell cardamom, I think of meeting Marla. But now they're so mixed up, I can't tell if cardamom reminds me Marla or the other way around."

As Patrick talked, I watched his face. He kept his eyes fixed in the distance, maybe at the top of the mast of the old Constellation or maybe somewhere just above or below it. He didn't move his lips much as he talked, as if rationing motion; there was only so much movement he could use and he needed to save it for cumin and allspice. The slight breeze from the water was lifting the tiny grains of pepper from his cheeks and nose, wearing away his coating the way it does sand dunes and drifts of powdery snow. I guessed the wind must be cleaning my face as well and I imagined that if we sat there long enough, the wind would finish with the pepper and then start on our skin, lifting layers away gently, removing our covering cell by cell until we lay completely exposed.

I wanted to ask him if he remembered what the world had smelled like the day Marla introduced us, me already sitting at his kitchen table drinking burnt coffee, waiting for him to come home from work so that Marla could tell him I would be living with them.

I remembered that I knew nothing about him apart from how Marla had met him: while at the outdoor seal pool at the aquarium one day after work. I remembered that I didn't know I was nervous until Marla placed her hand on top of mine and I looked down to see a pile of tiny paper cranes I had made from napkins. She told me to stop drinking coffee and calm down, that Patrick was sure to like me, but I was unconvinced, as I am always unconvinced. I told her I knew he would, but I was also unconvincing and she cocked her head at me and scrunched her mouth to one side in a way that said she knew I was lying. I remembered what Patrick was wearing when he came in—a pair of wrinkled khakis and a denim button-up shirt, tucked in with the sleeves rolled up, exposing forearms that were strangely smooth and hairless.

Cloves. He had smelled like cloves that day. When he walked in the front door of the apartment I could smell it, the sharp, heady scent, both sweet and fiery. By the time he was in the kitchen, the smell was almost unbearably strong, aromatic to the point of intoxication. When he shook my hand, he left the scent on my palm. Marla wrinkled her nose and ordered him off to the shower, but the aroma lingered in the kitchen and mingled with the flavor of my coffee. Hours later, retiring to my day bed in the living room, I could still smell it.

Patrick lifted his hand to put the cigarette to his mouth and the sun lit his arm from behind. It wasn't hairless. The hair was so fine and pale as to seem invisible, but with the light behind it a golden nimbus covered his forearm. As the pepper smell blew away, I could smell the salt from the harbor and the ripe odor of the piers. I could also smell cloves. I knew that this smell was only in my mind, but I

could smell it nonetheless.

What spice would I be? How would Patrick remember me? Suddenly, I was desperate to know just what smell I conjured, what spice lingered in the back of his throat at the mention of my name. I needed to know that there was a bottle somewhere that contained his idea of me.

"Are there any other spices you associate with people?" I couldn't bring myself to ask him openly. It was as bad, maybe worse, as asking someone if they thought you were beautiful or if they would think of you in twenty years: no one can answer these questions honestly.

Patrick rubbed his knees with his palms and pressed his lips together. He sighed. "Let's see here. Well, a lot of times we make cinnamon on Mondays, so I never have liked cinnamon. Reminds me that the weekend is over." I laughed too hard and then was silent, waiting for him to continue. "And the day that I heard about the Challenger we'd been grinding mustard seed, so those weeks afterwards when it was all over the news, I kept smelling mustard. Seemed kind of wrong, to be smelling something so ordinary when those people had died, you know?"

"Yeah, I know." I said this just to fill in the blank, and to hurry him on to mentioning me, but when the words were out of my mouth, I found it was true. I did know. "The day we got the letter about my Dad, you know the one that goes, 'We regret to inform you,' I'd been making a collage in class and my friend Jody dared me to eat paste."

Patrick laughed. It sounded genuine and I decided that for now, I would believe that it was. "Did you?"

"Of course. I was an eleven year old boy and my honor was at

stake." We laughed again and Patrick leaned back on his hands with his arms extended behind him. As he did so, his shoulder brushed mine. His hand was right next to my leg, the pinky finger touching me and I waited for him to move it, but he didn't. "All that day, all I could think about was paste. It was in my nose and on my tongue and in my throat. My father's death smelled like a fifth grade geography project. I felt so bad, like why couldn't I smell something that was really meant my father. Like his cologne or his shaving lotion or his shoe polish or his goddamn sweat. Nope. I got paste. Even now, whenever I think about my dad or hear anything about Vietnam, I smell paste."

There wasn't much daylight left, and the last rays of sun couldn't warm us; this was November and the sun was no longer strong. I looked at the bricks of the courtyard floor, scuffed and littered with cigarette butts. I didn't dare look over at Patrick. I imagined how uncomfortable and anxious to leave he must be. Marla and I had always complained about the people we called dirty launderers, the kind of people who would tell you their whole life history if you spent more than five minutes in their presence. I was one of those now. I'd left Patrick with nothing to say.

Jesus, I am such an idiot, I thought. I should end this before it gets any more awkward. I comforted myself with the thought that as soon as I got out, I would splurge on a medium coffee at Dunkin Donuts. My stupidity and embarrassment, I rationed, merited the \$.79 luxury I usually didn't allow myself.

I stood up from the picnic table and straightened my pants, brushing them with a flattened palm to remove as much of the pepper dust as I could. Patrick got up, too, and followed suit. There

were a few moments filled with the *kssbb kssbb* of skin against fabric. I straightened, mustered my resolve and faced Patrick.

"Thanks for the tour. It was good of you to do this on your day off. I really appreciate it."

Patrick nodded. "Hey, no problem. It was my pleasure. I'm just going in to talk to the guys. I'll only be a minute if you want to wait. Then we could take the bus home together."

This was the last thing I wanted. I couldn't stand to spend any more time with Patrick today, knowing what a fool he must think me and yet disgustingly glad just to be so close to him. It was sick and I wanted to be alone.

"No, thanks, I've got some errands I need to do. I'll see you back at the apartment." Maybe I could pick up a newspaper on the way and check out the classifieds. If I got a job, any job, I could probably afford something on the East Side. I started toward the gate of the courtyard, but Patrick followed me.

"Can I at least walk you to the end of Light Street?" Patrick's thick brows were furrowed. I couldn't understand why he should be so concerned. The bus stop was less than three blocks away.

I shrugged. "Sure."

We walked together in silence the half a block to the end of Light Street. I tried hard not to look at Patrick, but I kept glancing at him from the corner of my eyes. He started to bite his nails, checked himself, and shoved his hands deep in his pockets. He seemed nervous and it occurred to me that this was the moment that Patrick would tell me he and Marla had decided they wanted me to move out. I sighed involuntarily.

When we reached the corner of Light, we stopped, facing each

other awkwardly. I made my face blank and waited for Patrick to break the news. I knew he would do it kindly and that this would make it worse.

Instead, he said, "Trent said there were some openings in marketing and PR. He said to send your resume in, that it was likely you could get a job. If you wanted it."

"Well, I'll definitely think about it."

Patrick shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "It's getting cold," he said, looking out toward the harbor.

I nodded. "I heard they were predicting snow next weekend." Why were we talking about weather? Why wasn't he throwing me out? Why wasn't I leaving? I was getting nervous and the need to be alone became more urgent. "Patrick, I—"

But I could not finish. In a moment, Patrick had closed the distance between us and put his mouth to mine. I froze momentarily, but as his tongue met my lips, I opened my mouth and let him in. He was gentle, yet probing and he tasted peppery and hot, tempered by a mellow sweetness. I felt his taste and smell slide down my throat and warm my chest. As the feeling spread down through my stomach, I stepped closer to Patrick and reached around his waist to grab the small of his back and pull him in.

Patrick broke the kiss and stepped back.

"I know," he said. Then he smiled with his lips closed, smiled both thanks and an apology, turned around and walked toward the factory.

I watched him until he disappeared into the courtyard. I felt limp and exhausted, and wanted nothing more than to collapse in the gutter and wait for someone to find me. But I needed to deny myself,

needed to remind myself that the things I most wanted were the things I could not have. I wanted to be purposeful, quick and decisive, so I aimed myself at the inner harbor and started walking. The water was cold hard obsidian, though it was just after five o'clock. It looked hard enough to walk on and I imagined it would feel dry and cool to the touch. As I walked along the edge, I saw the ferries coming in from their final trips of the day. Street performers were packing juggling pins and hula hoops into black cardboard trunks. Like me, these were artists who could find no audience for their trade. They, however, could force their audience to find them.

After a few minutes, I looked up to see the canvas awnings of the aquarium entrance sloping above me. I walked through the bars that demarcated the lines, relishing how quickly I could weave through them. I bypassed the escalators that led to the building's doors and walked to the seal tank. Ignoring the signs that exhorted viewers not to stand on the railings, I stepped up on the lowest rung and looked down into the water.

I had been to see the seals countless times, especially in the months of my unemployment because you didn't have to purchase a ticket to see them. They were free and I was broke; it was a symbiotic relationship I cherished. I'd never seen them in the dark. It was a different experience. In the light, the seals were genial, playful animals, their bodies sleek and spotted, their faces those of sweet marine teddy bears. Their barks were raucous and joyful and seemingly unprovoked, like children who babble for the pleasure of hearing their noise momentarily change their world. They were the sort of animals it was easy to anthropomorphize. When I was a child, I had named them all. I wondered if any of the seals I had

christened were still here. I doubted it. These seals had short life spans, their deaths mostly caused by pennies and food thrown in by careless or cruel passersby.

In the dark the seals were animals I did not know. The water no longer looked its usual shade of topaz, but a dark and inky blue and I could not see the bottom. As my eyes adjusted I saw there were seals resting on the rocks, little more than rocks themselves. In the water the seals were hard to see except when they were very near me, so that they seemed to materialize, dark, long shapes that glided through the water at alarming speeds. These new seals were powerful and dangerous, only distant cousins of their daylight counterparts.

I wondered what time it had been when Patrick had first seen Marla staring into the seal pool. Had it been daylight? What time of year did Marla say it was? I could not remember. If it was in the late spring or summer, it was probably still light out. The seals had been friendly and ursine, their flippers a mere footnote. Or had Marla met Patrick here at night, like this, when the seals asserted their separateness, that they occupied a different realm in which we could not touch them; in which they, of our two species, were dominant? I could not tell which I hoped was true.

Three years later, I received a letter from Marla. I was living in New York with Ben, who was beautiful and moody, and I had gotten a job with Ballantine as an editorial assistant. The letter was emotional and chaotic in typical Marla fashion, a stream of consciousness that was on one level fascinating and on another, totally maddening. Interwoven with snippets of conversation she had overheard at work (after much searching I found she was working in the ER at Sinai)

and gushing over various contemporary events ("My *god*, the fucking Berlin Wall!!! Can you *believe* it????"), I found a thread that pertained to her personal life. I would like to say that I was concerned only about Marla's well-being, her health and happiness, that my intense scrutiny of her letter was to glean as much information about my oldest friend as I could. I'd like to say that, but if I did, I'd be lying. I was looking for Patrick. We hadn't spoken since I moved to a vile apartment in Greenwich Village, hoping to soak up some of the area's famed literary inspiration and instead finding myself involved in a string of volatile relationships. Though in my conversations with Marla in the early days of the move, she never failed to mention that Patrick said hello, we didn't converse directly. Then Marla and I went through a dry spell of correspondence. I was ashamed to admit to myself how often I thought of him.

In the letter, Marla told me that the McCormick plant had shut down a year ago. Patrick lost his job and as the length of his unemployment extended, lost his sense of self-worth. Marla just lost patience. They'd been broken up for almost a year now and she said they rarely talked, but that he was "really doing *great*." I heard what Marla meant: she didn't talk to Patrick anymore. Marla was good at eliminating from her life significant others who were no longer significant.

I left the letter on my desk for several weeks. Every couple days, I would review it, skimming through the melee until the word "Patrick" jumped out at me. One day after reading about the break-up yet again, I sat down at my desk and picked up the phone receiver. I dialed.

"What city?" said the mechanical voice on the other end.

"Baltimore." I didn't even know if he lived there anymore.

"What listing?"

"Patrick.." What was his last name? Patrick, Patrick... "Patrick Kellner."

"One moment, please."

I waited, my pulse thumping in my neck and wrists. The operator came on, and read a telephone number. I ignored it. Some things I still had to deny myself. I asked for a street address and scrambled for paper. Finding none within my reach, I scribbled it down on the desk itself.

The next morning, I put a large package in the mailbox in the lobby of my apartment building addressed to "Patrick Kellner, 1468 Ramsay Street, Baltimore, MD." Inside were the first hundred pages of a manuscript. It began "Patrick stepped outside and found his face reflected in the world."

She had a job as a baker in an international bakery owned by a Lebanese family. Her name was Frances Connors Eltsin. She had left Lenore five years before, and since then, she had gone from place to place and attempted a number of occupations: a waitress in Sprouling, a bike messenger in Farsdale, a janitor in Trout Hills, a nanny, a tutor, a toll booth operator, and so on. Briefly, she had considered joining the army. Now, on both sides of the bakery, the parking lot stretched dark and thin like spilled ink. Every morning she unlocked the purple door at 4:30, switched on the buzzing light, and dodged behind the shelves of dry goods into happy concealment in the kitchen, pulling out trays as she moved around. She punched dough and lugged pillowcase-sized bags of flour with her strong arms. She knew how to make baklava, harisa, klecha, pan de huevo, cuernos de azucar, empanadas, kuchen, rugelach, anpan, fruit tarts, croissants, pain au chocolat, and many other kinds of bread and cookies. She was self-taught, having learned mostly by instinct and a few gaudy cookbooks. Her fingers, as they folded and smeared, were long and white. Damp hairs framed her face, and her red bandana was floured in some places and torn underneath. It showed in her person that nearly half of her one-room apartment was bare.

At quarter to six, the Lebanese family's daughter Magda came to set up the cash registers, make coffee, and wait on customers. She did this for an hour and a half before going to school, sweetly and silently, without so much as a word to Frances. The older brother Nabil would arrive to take over, followed by their parents, Yasser and Nada. They stayed generally in the front of the store, talking to each other and to customers, most of whom they knew, or in the tiny office off to the side, where Yasser thumbed through books

and placed telephone orders and occasionally smoked cigarettes. Once or twice a week, Yasser's two brothers came and the three of them would crowd into the office and smoke cigarettes and look at receipts. While she baked, Frances thought only about baking. She thought about bread, sugar, rosewater, nuts, yeast, butter, and jam. She rolled small pieces of dough between her fingers and then slid her teeth into them. She was, while at the bakery, her eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hands. Able, bodied. After work, late in the afternoon and at night, she was without her senses, she was only mind and memory. She missed certain chairs and curtains. And she thought with fierce, unbridled singleness about her husband, Peter Eltsin, the folklorist, from whom she had heard nothing for five years. These days, Frances felt her life beginning to pull. Too often she took strong prescription pills that she ordered using the internet at the public library. The online pharmacy was called "Fast and Direct Rx" and the padded brown envelopes came, fast and direct, from someplace in western Ontario. She took the white pills with cold milk. The corners of her mouth were whitish, and she suspected something was wrong with her stomach.

Frances's smile, although rare, was bright and clean, and she was well-liked by her employers. They nodded their approval of her with their proud, big noses, and Yasser often patted her shoulder clumsily on his way to the office, the heft of his hand made heavier by the thick gold watch around his thick wrist. The war was making everyone nervous. Frances took in their kindness with small sips, frequently averting her eyes and always leaving without lingering when her day was done. She wished they would mistreat her a little bit. Their warmth, or any warmth, was distressing.

In the evenings, in her apartment, with the effects of the narcotics draped over her, tucked under her chin like a blanket, she carefully wrote in a steno book all the means she could think of for tracking down her husband. Her fingers around the pen and its nib surely working across the greenish pages filled her with satisfaction. She had many ideas, and all of them felt not only plausible, but morally and philosophically important. In the mornings, though, none of it made sense, even her handwriting looked delusional, and as the nausea crept in, she shoved the notebook beneath the bed as far as her hands could reach.

Lately, she had begun to feel interested in another idea, that of planning her own death, and when thoughts of it interfered with her husband-finding efforts, she decided to set a date: December 1st, after work. So transfixed was she by the planning and strategizing that the final goal, her actual death, was almost entirely overlooked. This was familiar, the same reason, really, why she did not eat what she baked. She gorged herself so fully on the making that she rarely had an appetite for the cooled, finished thing. It looked, to her, regurgitated. As did, in the morning, her plans to self-destruct. But washing her face and knotting her bandana, Frances was only absolutely certain about one thing—that her life had been reduced to rinds, that there was no earthly reason to keep peeling.

December 1st came, and Frances awoke feeling like she usually did, startled and remotely ashamed. She got to the bakery and flipped on the lights and the small radio. She heated the ovens. She went in and out of the deep freeze and walk-in refrigerator, lined pans with waxed paper, hoisted and poured bags and jars and bowls. She looked at her hand while she mixed and it was, she decided,

a very good hand. With a strange revulsion she realized that she would miss that hand. Otherwise, nothing seemed remarkable about the day, and she was glad. Nothing looked better or worse, nothing broke, nothing bled, nothing augured anything. She was glad. And then she wondered about her gladness—her gladness for the nothing, for the ordinariness, and she thought that if she could feel such gladness always, she would not find death so suitable. But, she reasoned as she opened the oven door, if she did not find death—the reality of it, the proximity—so suitable, she would not feel so pleased by the dark light outside the window, the glint of stainless steel, her little piles of flour. Frances paused with arms in the oven, the heat blowing onto her face curiously cooling, the heat through her industrial-grade mitts itchy, the heat atop the tart sighing and bubbling, and while she knew it was all the same heat, she experienced a nice confusion. She was sorry, in the cold space created by the closed oven door, to feel her wits return.

Stuck to a prep shelf was a note from Nada in her careful immigrant cursive: she and Yasser had somewhere to be, and Nabil and Magda had "activities," so Hilda, Nada's sister, would mind the store during its quiet hours. They would return before the dinner rush. Hilda, the note said, spoke no English but could "do money." A few minutes before three, just as Frances was putting on her coat to leave, she heard the front door open and saw, through the hanging spoons, a bundled, heavy-set woman. It would not do, Frances thought, to make introductions today. Her sneakers were mercifully quiet against the tiled floor as she made her way through the rolling carts, past the sink and the freezer, behind the pantry, and slipped silently through the back door. For a split second, her glance at the

red EXIT sign revealed an S between the I and T. Peter always told her that he wished he could borrow her eyes for one day, convinced as he was that they saw the world and everything in it as a fabled fox, a cunning prankster. That was how Peter talked. She had said that the lamppost was looking at them funny. "Oh, my Fran. You look at everything funny, and that's how everything looks back at you." Behind the bakery, near the dumpster, Frances stopped and crouched, put her head between her knees. Peter. He watched her see things.

Once at her apartment, Frances made sure everything was in order. There was not much to order. At the bakery, her preparations had made her extra conscientious and industrious—she had made extra dough and chopped extra nuts and filled large bins with diced and stewed ingredients, figuring it might be at least a couple weeks before Yasser found a replacement. She wished she had bins to fill at home, things to chop. But there were only some clothes, books, old records, steno pads, nothing she felt inclined to make arrangements for. She wished she could, once and for all, tag and catalogue her memories of Peter, her questions, all of the remarks and observations she had been waiting to tell him for five years, and leave them here on her unmade bed. Sixteen pills left, and she was going to take them all. She decided she would pace for a little while first, and then shower, and then swallow.

Hilda had one customer that afternoon, a curly-headed man she couldn't understand. He pointed around the store, and she pointed to the glass cases and the shelves behind her. He kept shaking his head, alternating between cupping his hands to his chest and gesticulating desperately. Hilda shook her head, smiled, and put three baklava in

a paper bag for him. He stood very still, holding the bag, and then smiled and left hurriedly. The purple door thudded behind him.

The pills were big, and Frances had to keep refilling her glass. She had run out of milk. After six, she felt sick from the water. In her hand she held a small bottle of gin, but she had never been able to drink liquor and worried she wouldn't be able to stomach it. Frances stretched out on her bed after having swallowed ten pills and felt uneasy. Her stomach was distended, a taut orb of water. She belched several times and there was a chalky rising in her throat. It occurred to her that if she died, she might do so in her own vomit. Fearing the indignity, she rushed, gurgling, to the tiny bathroom, and retched into the sink. Some of the pills were still whole. Her throat burned. She stayed there, bent and heaving, water streaming from her eyes and nose, for what seemed to her like five years. The time it takes to lose everything in a violent rush.

Frances went to work the next day to escape her apartment, which felt suddenly like a coffin she'd climbed out of. She'd ruined her own funeral. Baking, she thought, was maybe the only thing she could bear, and she moved like a new ghost around the kitchen she'd so meticulously readied for someone else. She was unsteady on her feet, and the oozing, flaking sweetness of everything sent her twice to the bathroom. Nibbling her day-old bread, she told herself: just forget it. Maybe it was a dumb idea. But she couldn't shake the thought that it was actually the best idea she'd had in a long time. Magda's mother arrived around six instead of Magda, and her bustling, heavy-footed presence was vaguely comforting to Frances. Nada came to the back and made tea, pouring a strong cup for herself and one for Frances.

"You look pale, you are sick?"

Frances burned her tongue, a good and clean feeling. "I'm fine—I think it's just a little bug, maybe something I ate."

Nada laughed. "Nothing you ate here I hope!"

Frances laughed a little and sipped again.

"Hilda says a man came here yesterday and she didn't know what he wanted. She described. Either he wants to buy the place or he was looking for somebody. I don't know who it can be."

Frances shrugged. "Maybe he needed directions?"

Nada rubbed at a stain on her sleeve with her other sleeve. "That's what I say too." She looked at Frances. "You need someone to take care of you. Why you go with nobody? It's no good, to be so much alone."

"I'm fine, I--"

"It's too much alone. Maybe one of Yasser's cousin's friends."

They stood on either side of the chopping block, steam softening both of their faces, but Nada's glance was sharp. She clattered her cup into the sink. "Today, go home. I'll finish here. You look pale."

Frances went home. Her apartment smelled vinegary. She opened the window and stood in front of it, freezing. After some minutes she lay down on the floor and managed to sleep, wondering, as she drifted off, if there was enough pill left in her that she wouldn't wake up. When she opened her eyes, it was pitch-dark; she touched her eyes to make sure they were open. The cold and the dark and her light-headedness felt like some kind of after-life, but as soon as her eyes adjusted, she remembered Peter. She rose and groped and took three pills with the water left in last night's glass. She walked to work, unlocked the door and switched on the light and radio as

always. Classical music issued forth weakly, choked by the stillness and the menacing appliances, their knobs and dials like many eyes. The clock said 4:48. Frances turned on the big oven, opened its door, and stooped to look inside, all the way in. She breathed in the coils and the metal, the charred drippings and the faint antiseptic. She opened her mouth to the hissing air, gulped it, felt all the moisture beneath her face turn to vapor and then to sighing. She filled herself like a balloon, floated.

By 5:45, when Magda arrived, the classical music had turned to talk, and Magda hung her coat and umbrella in the corner and started putting bills from the locked box into the cash drawer. She broke rolls of coins into their small compartments. She did not smell gas right away, and when she did, she mistook it for the damp smell of metal on her hands. Wet wind shook the storefront windows and rain sounded loudly on the roof. Reaching for a box of pens, Magda knocked a partially open bag of coffee to the floor. Grounds scattered thickly behind the counter, pungent and fertile like top soil.

When a man walked in, Magda was kneeling with dustpan and brush while a jingle for coffee—the same kind she was sweeping—clamored on the radio. The man smelled gas faintly but saw no one. She grinned at the coffee jingle coincidence but heard no one. He stood hesitatingly, as if caught in the midst of a botched robbery, before leaving in a hurry. When Magda stood to shake the pan into the trash, she saw through the smeared windows an old car leaving the parking lot in a cloud of exhaust, smelled gas unmistakably in the car's wake.

At the airport a man with a "Hi, my name is" sticker approached me, told me he was the man named Sixto, and asked me if I was the woman named Amy. I was, and I got in his car, which had three wheels on the sidewalk and one wheel in the no-parking zone.

Death probably thought I was too cheap a shot, huddled against the "oh, shit" bar of a government van. I think that is the only reason I survived the hour and a half ride from the Luis Munoz Marin International Airport in San Juan to my new home. Sixto seemed to think that double solid yellow lines meant "please cross me."

Sixto caught the volume knob between the hairy knuckles of his second and third fingers. He turned down the talk radio and looked at me for ten seconds before speaking. "English is so confusing. For example," he said, picking up a printout of my flight confirmation, "how do you call this?"

"My flight confirmation."

"No, no. In *general*."

"A piece of paper."

"No, not that. Another word."

"A sheet of paper?"

"Yes. A *sheet*." He smiled and seemed not to notice when the car's wheels awakened cyclones from the side of the road. "So how do you know the difference between this and what you do in the bathroom?"

I paused, watching the primary-colored houses reflect against the peeling window tint and trying to think of an appropriate response. "I guess you just get used to it."

"English is so confusing."

When we arrived at Arecibo Observatory, I decided that the

largest, most expensive telescope in the world looked more like the largest, most expensive skate park in the world. There was the 305-meter dish, listening to the universe's twenty-four hour broadcast, and all I could think was that I wished I had the coordination for extreme sports. I thought that maybe Dr. McLaughlin should have sent someone who could have come up with a better description.

I was a graduate student, and my advisor, Dr. McLaughlin, had applied for time on the telescope. He was the kind of tenured professor who had enough job security to say whatever he wanted about black holes, wormholes, time travel, and other astrophysical subjects of interest to the masses, so he was on sabbatical writing a sci-fi novel. Because he wanted the data from this project but didn't feel like taking time away from his literary pursuits, he used his NSF grant money to send me to Puerto Rico. I found it impossible to refuse two free weeks on a tropical island, especially since I needed glowing letters of recommendation from my benefactor.

Sixto removed my luggage, which held clothing I considered adventurous and books I considered grounding, and pointed at a woman sitting on the porch of Unit 4. Anya Dauren and I would be living and working together on the pulsar collaboration, he said. Anya was wearing a purple plastic bracelet with the word "care" stamped into the band, synthetic pants that zipped off into shorts, a t-shirt from the gift shop of El Yunque National Rain Forest, and a pair of rubber gardening clogs.

Sixto said goodbye with a pat on the back that felt more like a spinal aneurysm. His brake lights created a cone of red haze around us as the van slid down the mountain and the molecules of humidity trapped the light. Anya handed me a frozen drink.

"*Con*," she said.

"Cone what?"

"Just *con*. In Spanish, it means 'with.' In Puerto Rican, it means 'with alcohol.'"

We sat on the porch of Unit 4, which was a 2BD/1B box made of weather-treated plywood held together by creative combinations of two-by-fours. We listened to the *coqui* frogs, who are named onomatopoeically after the noise they make from 8 p.m.-7 a.m. We talked about magnetars and millisecond timing techniques and our limited Spanish vocabularies. We sipped our pina coladas *con*. She settled herself into the porch's red lawn chair, and in the light that came through the haze of moth wings, I thought she had caught fire.

Pulsars are formed when a massive star can no longer support fusion. The star collapses under its own gravity. The area around it is assaulted with enough radiation to outshine the other 100 billion stars in the galaxy. The star lights up places that have been dark since darkness existed. It goes supernova and never goes back.

Left in the middle of this expanding light is a ball the size of Manhattan with the mass of two suns, a sphere that spins 86,400 times as fast as the Earth and is made only of neutrons. Every time it rotates, we see one pulse of light. Thus, pulsars.

Pulsars are the most stable objects in the universe—the only thing that can change a pulsar's rotation rate is a starquake, which is a very exotic kind of earthquake that happens very far away. After the subatomics have settled, the pulsar is never the same.

Anya and I were at Arecibo to observe two pulsars that orbited

each other. They had recently been discovered and creatively named (J0737-3039A and J0737-3039B). Together, they formed the first known system of this kind, although surely there are millions of these binary systems at which we have simply failed to point our telescopes. I thought the most fascinating part about J0737-3039 was that A was much more massive than B. Its gravitational pull was stronger, its magnetic field larger. The power dynamic of this system was tilted in A's favor.

A and B were spinning so fast so close together that astronomers were already writing papers predicting their collision and subsequent merger.

The control room looked like a rocket's cockpit. Machines seven feet tall buzzed and blinked their communications. Wires seemed to come out of nowhere and then snake away into their hard drive holes. A huge plate glass window looked out on the white telescope. Positioned on this cliff, it looked like someone had spilled millions of gallons of paint into a valley. A beautiful mistake. In reality, the dish is made of 38,778 aluminum panels that fit together exactly. With a few keystrokes, I could control what all of that metal was looking at.

Anya and I sat in the control room on our first day, going over the plan we had made for the pulsars, when Richard came in. After observing Richard for the next two weeks, I realized that he had seven pairs of size twelve tennis shoes, but only one pair of shoe laces. I knew because the plastic ends of these purple laces were chewed off in exactly the same way every day. I was surprised he didn't have the days of the week written in permanent marker on his

footwear. I guess he just kept track in his head.

Richard was our telescope "friend," the name given to people who work at the observatory full-time and help visiting astronomers navigate the \$100,000,000 of equipment. I can't see why they didn't trust us on our own.

"Where is he?" Richard asked.

"Who?" I asked.

"The observer in charge," he replied. He cleared his throat, making a noise an octave higher than I thought could come out of someone with such large feet.

"Anya," I said, pointing to Anya, "and I are doing the observations."

"Hm. Well. There were no first names on the schedule." He cleared his throat again.

Richard had jumped to a conclusion, and he was not happy to be wrong. Anya and I sat down to begin looking at the pulsars. Everything was going well until I dropped my pencil, and he muttered, "Can't do anything right," and pushed my chair away from the controls. He started typing, moving the telescope. "Just leave this to me. You two can go on and do... whatever you do."

I always remember the next moment in the way you remember an over-dramatized movie in which there are only three character roles: the villain, the victim, and the hero. I watched Anya tap Richard on the shoulder. When he turned, she curled her pointer finger in the come-hither gesture and whispered conspiratorially, "This is what we do."

Richard left and told the director that we no longer needed a "friend."

The karst mountains in northwest Puerto Rico were formed during the Oligocene epoch. Between twenty-three and thirty-four million years ago, the top carbonate rock was dissolved by the Caribbean Sea, leaving a section of island that looks like a crowd of giants wearing ghost sheets and growing tropical trees on their heads. Underneath these mountains is a cave network large enough to be used for nationalistic bragging rights, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and the kind of tours on which the guide points to the rocks (which are illuminated by Crayola-colored spotlights) and says, "Those are stalactites, not stalagmites. You can remember because ceiling starts with a 'c'."

Traveling from Arecibo Observatory to anywhere else on the island requires driving from the top of the karst to the bottom, and it always felt like a trip from the sky to the sea. The roads, on which no one found it necessary to paint lane lines, had an abundance of hairpin turns and a deficit of guardrails. There were no flat, comforting stretches, and there were no certainties. Were stray dogs congregating in the road around that curve? Would the car tailgating me down this 50% grade push his front bumper against my back bumper and propel us down the hill at unsafe speeds? These questions could never be answered until you either hit an animal or another car hit you.

Three days after I arrived, Anya grabbed the keys to a car, pushed them into my hand, and told me that all I needed to remember when driving through the mountains was that death isn't really that bad. She had spent a summer here two years before, and I assumed that gave her authority on this subject.

"If you want me to give you directions," she said as she belted

herself into the passenger seat of the observatory's 1993 Chevy Cavalier, "you need to stop hyperventilating. You won't be able to hear me over all that breathing." I turned on the radio at volume 32—the highest it would go before the bass crackled and the left speaker only worked on every third beat.

We listened to WLYT, Your Station for Everything You Want to Hear, which was the most popular of five stations devoted solely to remixes of late 80s/early 90s adult contemporary billboard hits. *Unbreak My Heart*, *The Wind Beneath My Wings*, *Please Forgive Me*, etc. This music was the only kind I was allowed to listen to from ages 0-12, when my mother always played the "Lite Rock, Less Talk" station in the car. The musical experiences from my formative years proved (definitely for the first time) to be useful.

The song I knew best came on as we entered the one-bar town of Esperanza. When I was about to say that I could deliver the most rocking rendition of *Lady in Red*, she turned the volume up to 33 and showed me that mine was only second best.

"Do you want to be authentic, Amy?" she asked me after Chris DeBurgh was done crooning.

"Authentic like how?"

"See that unlit, unmarked highway about three hundred meters up? Turn there."

I drove for a few minutes on the road least traveled before she yelled, "There he is!" and grabbed my wrist so hard that the steering wheel pulled us next to a van that said *Luigi's* on one side and *Lugi's* on the other. "Authentic like this."

Lugi Luigi's Pizza Parlor was a vehicle that had been in the same place for so long that I could see the passing of the seasons in his

paint. The owner's name was actually Madesio, and he had never actually sold a pizza in his life. He bought the van from a bankrupt roadside pizza chain, but he thought that people who stopped to buy pizza would be pleasantly surprised. His culinary specialty was the *pincho*—cubes of chicken or pork smothered in red sauce and placed on a stick, a piece of garlic bread impaled on the top. A totem pole of calories. A monolith of taste. I still do not know what the sauce is made of. It is the kind of unidentifiable combination of familiar ingredients that makes you say, "This tastes familiar, but." The same way strangers can look familiar simply because their facial features are some combination of your third cousin and your best friend from third grade.

Madesio's head was too large for his shoulders. It made him look like the food he sold.

"For here or to go?" he asked.

"Would you like to eat with us?" Anya replied.

Madesio pulled a folding card table from the space between the grill and the van's center console and said, "Business is slow."

We each stood on one side of the table, placing the plate of *pinchos* at the empty end. Anya made a rule that each time anyone picked up a stick, they had to confess something strange they said, did, thought, or thought about saying, doing, or thinking. Something that would usually come out in late-night conversation when a friendship was a year or two old.

1. Anya read the CNN.com headlines every day, but rather than clicking on the serious news stories, she clicked on ones like "Shaken, not stirred—cocktail robots mix drinks" and "Emu on the run crashes kindergarten graduation."

2. Madesio was scared of accidents. All kinds. Because you couldn't see them coming but you knew that eventually, statistically, they would.

3. Every time I got the hiccups, I thought that the situation would turn into the world-record kind. There was a man who had the hiccups for 68 years. If I have the hiccups now, why should they ever go away? Why should anything change?

We ate and shared until the plate was a blank full moon, and Madesio said he had to go home and make dinner for his wife. We could stay as long as we wanted.

"Leave the table out. Someone might need a place to sit," he said and turned off the incandescent advertisement on the roof of his establishment. He walked to the house across the street, and we watched his shadow pull someone else's close.

We left a note on the table. It said only, "We'll be back."

I still have a hard time sitting in restaurants with cushioned privacy benches and piped-in easy-listening music, because the whole time I think about how much I want to eat meat off a stick, hold a can of Medalla Light in a sweaty death grip, and look at faces visible only because they are reflecting the moonlight. I may not have found myself that summer, but I found a few other people.

The Tanama River is a forty-minute hike from Arecibo Observatory. When Anya asked me to swim up the river with her, I said no, because flash floods routinely caused it to double in volume in 10 minutes. That seemed unnatural to me. Anya didn't ask me again, but she did bring me a bagged sandwich and some water and

say, "Follow me."

During the trek down to the Tanama, we assumed we only had to be careful to avoid wet rocks, wet dirt, and wet lizards. What we failed to consider were the chickens. While clinging to a tree in a particularly steep (and wet) part of the jungle, I heard the call of a rooster. I automatically assumed it was some eight-foot-tall doppelganger alien that used the cockadoodledoo to lure in its prey, which it would skewer and roast and feed to its doppelganger family.

"Holy shit, what was that?" My voice came out all uneven.

"That was a chicken." Anya's did not.

"Who let a chicken into the jungle. Chickens can't go in the jungle!"

"You're here," she said, then smiled with her head tilted down and her eyes looking up, the way people do when they want you to forgive them for something stupid. "The farmers around here don't keep their livestock in cages. It's a very adventurous kind of free-range."

I looked around and saw the domesticated bird sprinting through the underbrush. The three claws dug into the ground, and occasionally a leaf stuck to one for a few steps. The rooster saw us, panicked, and ran into a tree trunk.

When we finally got to the Tanama canyon, the whole scene was straight out of the Mesozoic Era. I usually don't associate rivers with amazing beauty (it's more like alligators and algae), but I felt like I should have brought a camera to film a dinosaur documentary.

The water was cold, a rarity this close to the Equator. Anya and I swam upstream a bit, and I tried not to think about the flash floods.

The cliffs were probably 50 feet above us, and when I floated on my back with my ears underwater, the only sound was flowing and the only color was green. The canyon's rock formations made me wish I were a geologist, simply so I could do more than mutter, "Awesome," over and over again. Water gushed out of holes in the cave systems surrounding us, and stalactites screamed, "We are so much older than you!"

"Can I take you somewhere?" Anya asked.

She took me to a place where the river was mostly blocked, and it fed a wide pool of translucent green water. A thirty-foot waterfall flowed out of the pool, crashing at a 30° angle against some rocks before continuing on to more rocks at the bottom. We sat on a safe rock and looked over the edge.

"They died here," she said, focusing her eyes on some distant point past the treeline. "They thought the water looked calm."

Anya told me about two other grad students who were at Arecibo during the summer she spent there. The three of them hiked to the Tanama. The two others, a man and a woman, were not thinking about the undercurrent that pulled water from the river, across the falsely placid pool, and down the waterfall.

Anya was taking pictures of the mountains, and she turned around just as the woman tried to grab a rock and stop herself from being pulled downstream. Anya's shock caused her muscles to tighten, pressing down the button on her camera. She has a picture of a woman, arms reaching upward out of the water, her head about to hit a rock at a 30° angle, her face registering knowledge of this. The press reported that the man's body was found under a rock at the bottom of the waterfall, but that the woman's was never located.

"That's why I don't read the real news."

Anya's tears mixed with the river water. When she spoke, she said that she was sorry, and it looked like the words were a line of blue jazz notes coming out of her mouth. I said I was sorry too. I said there was nothing she could have done.

I felt her arms around my waist and the rock biting my vertebrae. My eyes were closed, and I didn't say anything—I only wanted one sense to feel this moment. If it were split between five, a part of it might be lost or the pieces might be separated. I knew her only as heat. I was sure one side of me would blister by morning. That was how close we were.

It couldn't last forever. "I think we should go get some *pinchos*," she said. "I need to get out of here."

That night we went back to Madesio's. I let Anya drive; she needed to fear death a little bit less. When we arrived, he said, "Ay, gringos!" and immediately brought out the card table.

"My wife bought me a new grill for our anniversary," he said. It was a nice grill. It had racks for the *pincho* sticks, a gas heating mechanism, and a control panel, while the old one was based on the combination of steel, charcoal, and a match.

"I love her," he said, "but I hate this." He kicked the grill and glanced across the street at his house. "This? Has too much power."

"You can always turn the gas down," Anya said.

"Yes, but will the gas listen, is the question." Madesio gestured toward the panel of knobs and then turned the flame from red to blue. "I like being able to put out the fire myself."

Anya said, "But you can control it."

"No, no. We are not partners. We are in this relationship, me and

this machine, but I am afraid always that it will find out it has much more power than me. Do not tell it, and do not tell my wife."

I understood Madesio then. Empathized. But he laughed and said he was just kidding, that it was just a bunch of metal and that it had no thoughts and not to worry. I did not feel like it was a joke. At least not a funny one.

For fourteen days Anya and I spent hours in front of four control room computer screens. For thirteen days we saw nothing interesting. Nothing worth writing either home or the *Astrophysical Journal* about.

It was the last day. Anya left the control room and came back with two paper cups. The kind with windowsill flowers printed on the sides. The ugliest kind. Caffeinated steam escaped from the tops.

"They were out of Styrofoam," she said, handing me the one with unidentifiable flora the color of combustion.

"This coffee is too dark for Styrofoam, anyway," I replied. "It looks much nicer next to the flowers."

We drank until the caffeine made us dizzy with the feeling of being awake. Anya brought the coffee in new cups every time because she said that the sooner the supply was gone, the sooner the world would be a better place. At least the world inside the control room. I believed her.

We were slewing the telescope to its final rest position when Anya looked at Screen 3 and drew in so much breath I thought her lung would puncture itself to relieve the pressure.

"Amy," she whispered. "It's different."

I looked at the computer and saw that J0737-3039B's profile had changed. Anya and I would later write a paper describing how the starquake was caused by J0737-3039A's magnetic field. The powerful north-south magnetic lines had twisted around the smaller pulsar in a way that made its surface crack, shift, settle. But at that moment we weren't thinking about publishing.

I couldn't find any appropriate words. I had always thought, without ever saying so, that starquakes never actually happened, that pulsars remained always the same. That the theorists who came up with the idea had botched a differential equation or, at least, forgotten to carry the one at some point.

The only thing that could have changed J0737-3039B was J0737-3039A. They had approached close enough to become gravitationally bound, and A transformed B. Was this power good? Was it bad? Or was A's potential for influence just frightening? I thought about Madesio's not-funny joke.

"Do you think J0737-3039A is scary?" I asked Anya.

"No," she said. "What do you mean?"

"Do you think it was J0737-3039A's right to disorient J0737-3039B's world?"

"Are we ascribing consciousness to balls of neutrons?"

"I guess it's more like a metaphor," I said, and turned away.

Anya pushed my ergonomic rolling chair into the window that overlooked the telescope. I thought I might fall through the glass, maybe just drift out and over the expanse of tiles. Get away. I wished that the binary pulsars had just collided and merged, like everyone thought they would. That would have been fairer. More balanced. If we were ascribing consciousness to balls of neutrons, that is.

"Let's go to Luigi's and discuss our discovery over some food and maybe some beverages *con*," Anya suggested.

"We've had more coffee than there is in water in the Caribbean," I said.

"Coffee is a stimulant; and beer is a depressant. I think we deserve to even things out."

When we arrived at Madesio's van, it was mostly gone. Everything was the color of his secret sauce. The flames ripped upward and sent their ashes to Madesio's roof. As we passed by, a piece of bread shot out of the roof and fractured. It looked like a flock of birds on fire.

The man sat cross-legged ten feet from his burning livelihood. Watching, just watching. His wife stood farther back and waved her hands at the fire as if that would make it stop. "She looks like the woman in my picture," Anya said.

We did not stop.

I took Anya's right hand in my left and moved my thumb north to south along her lifeline. Up and down. Touching the places hardship had washed away, feeling the karst topography of her skin. Seeing her sheeted ghosts.

Anya made a U-turn, and we went back up the sky without saying anything. *Lady in Red* was playing in my mind, and I could feel Anya's hand shaking. A handquake, which is a very exotic kind of earthquake that hits very close to home.

Creative Nonfiction





ERIC BETTS

A Thousand Faces

Myth and Dream: When I Grow Up

A short list of every Halloween costume I ever chose for myself:

Age 3 – Link – *The Legend of Zelda*; saves fictional realm of Hyrule from the evil Ganon

Age 4 – Mega Man – *Mega Man*; saves world from mad scientist Dr. Wily

Age 5 – Skeleton – undead human skeletal system; lame hand-me-down costume

Age 6 – Knight – armored chivalrous badass; saves princesses from dragons

Age 7 – Mega Man – *Mega Man*; saves world from mad scientist Dr. Wily

Age 8 – Robin Hood – *Robin Hood*; saves poor from high taxes by robbing from the rich

Age 9 – Luke Skywalker – *Star Wars*; saves the galaxy from the evil Empire

Age 10 – Han Solo – *Star Wars*; helps Luke save galaxy, but is infinitely cooler

Age 11 – SWAT guy – saves hostages; last-minute costume

Age 16 – Juan Likel – Mexican cowboy; had cool poncho

Age 18 – Clark Kent/Superman – saves truth, justice, and the American way

Age 19 – Solid Snake – *Metal Gear*; saves world from nuclear Armageddon

"Help! Help! Save me! Save me!"

My whole life has been a wait for those words. A life of scanning busy streets for small children who don't look both ways, tall buildings for signs of smoke, railways for damsels tied to the tracks. A life gone by without having witnessed a single mugging or

carjacking or kidnapping. Superman has stayed pretty busy since his first appearance in Action Comics #1 in 1938, but I can't get a single desperate cry for help thrown my way. Why can't people humor me by getting into trouble at the right time in the right place? The only thing harder than saving the world is waiting patiently for your chance to do so.

This unholy passion of mine is the learned response derived from years of cultural training. Every superhero, every adventurous knight, every Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle taught me that there's a whole lot of evil going on out there in the wider world. And while my brain soon realized that there are (sadly) no such things as superheroes, no more adventurous knights, no Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, it failed to make the logical leap that the kinds of evil they fought were also a fictitious creation. Just because Lex Luthor isn't on the front page of the *Daily Planet* every day, I reasoned, doesn't mean there aren't people out there actively and maliciously hurting people. After all, who was Lex Luthor based on?

I should clarify. My adolescent male fantasy was and is not merely to save the world; it's to save the world in a unique manner. I want to be the only man for the job. I want to be the sole answer to the question, "Who ya gonna call?"

Departure: Everyday Legends

A sampling of reviews for Shigeru Miyamoto's The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, released in 1998 for Nintendo's Nintendo 64 console.

International Gaming News --- 10/10
Gamespot.com --- 10/10
Games Master UK --- 97/100
Famitsu (Japan) --- 40/40
Electronic Gaming Monthly --- 10/10

In Homer's *Iliad*, the Greeks and Trojans fight a war that lasts for ten years. That's a lot of battles, a lot of crashing swords and hurled javelins, a lot of action. To be an action hero requires action. This is not the drama of the broken teacup we're talking about, but the drama of broken noses, collapsing buildings and death-ray-wielding mad scientists. Violence isn't always the answer, but it does make the answer more audience friendly, especially if that audience consists of little boys whose mothers won't even allow toy guns inside the house. Kids like to watch violence because they've seen on TV that it gets results, but they've been told by their moms that it will result in them getting into trouble. Thus, they pretend to beat up on imaginary foes because they know they can't get away with the real thing.

For virtual violence, it's hard to get better than *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. *Ocarina*, like the rest of the *Legend of Zelda* series, was developed under the eye of artist-turned-producer Shigeru Miyamoto, who just so happens to be the greatest video game designer of all-time. The man conjured up the ideas for *Donkey Kong*, *Super Mario Bros.*, *The Legend of Zelda* and *Star Fox* out of thin air, and worked as a consultant on countless more classics. Miyamoto would be the Beethoven of interactive electronic entertainment, but only if Beethoven had written his symphonies, Wagner's operas, the entire

Beatles catalogue, and Gnarl's Barkley's "Crazy."

Ocarina pits the 10-year-old orphan boy Link (the titular Zelda is actually the princess Link must rescue) against the forces of the evil witch-king Ganon in the series' first 3D adventure. Link, armed with just a sword, a medieval gadget assortment (bombs, boomerangs, bows and arrows) and his own testicular fortitude must hack and slash, venture and solve his way through eleven dungeons and two different time periods (one seven years in the future) in order to save his homeland of Hyrule. He can shoot a bow or slingshot with impeccable accuracy, throw a boomerang so it rebounds off a wall and into a switch before returning to him, and do a standing back flip to avoid the sword of an enemy. He's part King Arthur, part MacGyver and part Indiana Jones.

Despite not knowing who King Arthur or MacGyver or Indiana Jones was, the appeal of a combination like that is hard to beat for a three-year-old on Halloween. Miyamoto's creation became my hero. Armed with a heavily duct-taped cardboard sword and shield constructed out of the Sam's Club boxes my dad's cream soda came in and a pointy green hat that made me look like one of Santa's elves (Link pulls it off with much more panache) I ran around Hunter's Inlet, bashing the sword into trees and pausing only to collect the candy my neighbors were happily handing out to "cute" little kids like me.

Link's been kicking ass and taking names since exactly a week before I was born, when the original *Legend of Zelda* was released on August 22, 1987. Miyamoto reportedly based his creation on his memories of exploring the hillsides near his hometown of Kyoto, which makes me wonder what kinds of cool things are out there

in the Japanese wilderness. It was this original Link who I took my Halloween cues from, and for years afterwards it was this Link who I wanted to be, even after I grew into early elementary school and traded in my cardboard armaments for a more durable plastic set of Wiffleball bat sword and trash can lid shield.

Because of Link, my childhood weekends and summers were divided equally between time spent playing Wiffleball and time spent pretending to save the world. While the stories my friends and I invented when playing pretend only rarely actually featured Link, (Link traditionally went it alone, and we had two or three people to accommodate) he undoubtedly influenced the directions our imaginary quests took, whether that meant discovering a dungeon full of enemies or finding a pair of boomerangs to use. As kids, we were just waiting for some great and powerful evil to try to take over the land. We were ready to go; give us a sword and a shield and we had no doubt that, like Link, we'd come out on top.

But as I grew older the dream of one day becoming a hero like Link fell to Earth like so many Supermen with so many lumps of Kryptonite chained around their necks. I read stories of the Children's Crusade, which told of a group of as many as 20,000 European children that are said to have followed a French youth to the Holy Land to retake Jerusalem. Their youthful piety was supposed to grant them the favor of God and enable them to succeed where the continent's mightiest armies had failed, but when they arrived at the Mediterranean, they took passage with a group of dishonest sailors who took the would-be crusaders straight across the Mediterranean and sold them into slavery in Tunisia. Where was their hero when they needed one?

The story of those ill-fated children cast a shadow of doubt on the myth of invincibility as demonstrated by Link. Imagine the reaction of the Greeks watching Achilles stepping awkwardly onto a rock and cutting a gash into his heel, and that's what my realization of my own fallibility felt like. Reality has such an annoying habit of getting in the way of my hopes and dreams.

Initiation: Going the Distance

"Human beings are free except when humanity needs them."

--Colonel Hiram Graff, *Ender's Game*

In Homer's *Iliad*, the heroes aren't really heroes anymore. It has been approximately 2700 years since Agamemnon stole Briseis away from Achilles to kick off the epic, and since that time our values have changed. We are no longer moved by the motives of the Greek and Trojan heroes. Achilles fights for glory; Hector out of blind loyalty to king and country. There is no mention of truth, justice, and the American way. People simply did not fight for such things at that time (especially not, for obvious reasons, the American way). The heroic model set forth by Homer's heroes is dated, the heroes themselves are deeply flawed. Being a hero does not mean being the biggest and the strongest; it means committing oneself to something larger, working for the greater good.

Ender Wiggin is not the biggest or the strongest. He can't wield Link's sword, can't shoot Robin Hood's bow, can't fly like Superman. At the outset of Orson Scott Card's novel *Ender's Game*, Ender is a small six-year-old, bullied by his bigger classmates at school and his

older brother Peter at home and in possession of a self-awareness far too acute for his age. He's also a certifiable, grade-A genius, and within five years he's going to ruin his life in order to save the planet from an alien menace out to conquer all of Earth.

Ender is one of hundreds of the Earth's smartest children who in the not-so-distant future are taken from their homes and shipped off to the Battle School, a giant ring-like space station located somewhere towards the outer edges of our solar system, to learn the military tactics necessary to defeat the buggers (the aforementioned alien menace) who have already razed most of China and routed Earth's defenses during their first two jaunts through our solar system. Ender learns strategy, first in the confines of the Battle School then while controlling a simulated fleet through a series of marathon mock battles designed to prep him for the actual invasion. The stress put upon Ender is incredible; during the latter parts of his training, Ender stops eating what's not fed to him through a tube and wakes from sleep to find that he's been gnawing on his own fist. He's less King Arthur, MacGyver and Indiana Jones and more Albert Einstein, Genghis Khan, and Beaver Cleaver.

It sounds like pretty typical (and typically corny) sci-fi fair, and you probably won't be surprised to learn that Ender does in fact prevail in the end. He saves the world by wiping out an entire sentient race in the ultimate game of us vs. them survival. If James Bond is, as his creator Ian Fleming initially characterized him, "a blunt instrument wielded by some Government Agency," then Ender is a hydrogen bomb dropped upon the heads of the unsuspecting buggers on behalf of the people of Earth.

For all his brains and his seeming maturity, Ender is still a child,

initially trusting, eager to please, and easily manipulated. Ender is raised to believe both that no one will ever save him but himself and that he must save all of humanity. His teachers instill in him the desire above all else to be the best at what he does. As one of them tells Ender, "There's only one thing that will make them stop hating you. And that's being so good at what you do that they can't ignore you. I told them you were the best. Now you damn well better be."

As it turns out, Ender did become the best. Ender's record has no Waterloo or Bull Run or failed sieges of Jerusalem to mar it. He succeeded against incredible odds, winning every Thermopylaic confrontation he was ever pitted in. But while turning into a lean, mean, xenocidal machine, Ender sacrificed everything that made him a human being – his ability to connect with other people, his ability to love, his ability to have fun – to turn himself into a killer. When he meets with his older sister Valentine while on his final Earthbound leave, he finds himself unable to look her in the eye. Instead, he spends their time together squashing bugs.

When Link saves the world, he goes home, hangs up his sword and shield and lives a perfectly happy and normal life. He gets to be Cincinnatus, the general who took absolute command of Rome's armies as dictator for the sixteen days necessary to defeat the menacing Aequi and Volscian tribes, then relinquished that power to go back to his farm. When Ender saves the world, he does so at a tremendous cost to himself. There's no going back to his normal life when he's finished, he gave that up when he turned himself into a tool for use by the human species.

There is a treehouse in my backyard which my dad built for me when I was four so I'd have a place to play outside. It was there

for my entire childhood, a twelve-foot tall, two-leveled rectangular prism, little more than two floors, two sets of walls, and a ladder connecting the two through a hole in the top floor. This treehouse featured prominently into my childhood playtime, every enemy tower my friends and I stormed and every hidden forest place we operated out of took the form of that treehouse.

One Christmas, my nephew Joey, then three-years-old and already riding a bike with no training wheels, was playing on the second level when he tripped over a floorboard, fell face first into the ladder and fell six feet down, landing on the floor of the first level. He cut a gash on his upper lip and scraped both palms of his hands and screamed loud enough to give Lois Lane a run for her money.

I was right there, on the ground watching him, the adult in the matter. The memory of his fall plays out in slow motion. I saw his foot hit the board, saw him lose his balance and tumble forward, saw his face hit the wooden ladder. I moved to catch him, but my own acceleration was no match for gravity's 9.8 meters per second squared. He sprawled out like a skydiver as he fell. I didn't make it in time. It's harder to be a hero than I thought.

Return: The Best at What He Does

"First time I put it on, I felt stronger."

--Brandon Routh, Superman in Superman Returns, on wearing the suit

In Homer's *Iliad*, the best of the best come out to play. The

heroes described in his poem are the pinnacle of Greek humanity, everything we can and should be; a group of people who are making the most out of what they've been given.

In the first incarnation of Superman, a short narrative written in the early 1930s and titled plainly, "The Reign of the Superman," creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster wrote the character, complete with most of his amazing powers, as a bald Nietzschean construct out to take over the world. They gave the Man of Steel an iron fist. Not a single publisher expressed any interest whatsoever in the story.

So Siegel and Shuster were forced to reinvent the character, this time as a champion of truth, justice, and the American way. It's a good thing too. Can you imagine a country trying to get out of the Great Depression with this guy buzzing around, throwing people off the tops of buildings and knocking down skyscrapers? Life is a lot more fun when the near-omnipotent aren't out to get us.

Superman is the greatest modern hero of our greatest modern myth. Everyone knows him and what he does, he is our Zeus, the mightiest of our legends, and in 2000 years I'm sure he'll be featured quite prominently into the latest updated edition of Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*. He catches bullets, stops locomotives, and leaps tall buildings with a single bound. We'd be fools not to be jealous of his tremendous capabilities. But as impressive they may be, Superman did not become Earth's mightiest hero by virtue of being super all the time.

One may dismiss the name "Superman" as mere genre convention, but to do so would ignore the fact that once you strip away the "Super," all you're left with is a man. Straddling the line between deity and humanity, Superman chose the latter, choosing to spend

more time as his mild-mannered alter ego Clark Kent than he does as Superman. He is a part of us, a surrogate member of mankind and as such his good deeds are motivated not by some inflexible code of right and wrong, but by a compassion for the human race. Christopher Reeve was the ideal Superman for the 1978 movie adaptation not because he was the best actor, but because he naturally embodied the concern Superman has for all humanity.

With Link, it's easy to get caught up in all the action, to forget that somewhere in the middle of all those sword swings and bowstrings this little kid is serving a greater good. Link saves the world in big chunks which can be tough to keep sight of. With Superman, it's impossible to forget that he's a good guy. Supes foils plans to nuke California or flood North America then pulls a cat out of a tree for a little girl. One can't help but think he'd help people even if he didn't have his powers. Superman doesn't differentiate between saving the world and stopping to change a stranger's flat tire; all that matters to him is that he's doing a good deed. He truly lives up to his nickname as the big blue Boy Scout. He's not just an action hero, he's a role model.

My favorite scene from the 1978 Superman movie is the first appearance of Superman. A helicopter on top of the *Daily Planet* building is beginning its takeoff sequence when a cable on the landing pad snags and throws the chopper into a series of nauseating gyrations. When the chopper finally comes down, it does so on the edge of the building, half its mass dangling over the crowds now gathered the street below. The passenger's side door snaps open and out dangles none other than Lois Lane herself. She screams just as mild-mannered Clark Kent leaves the building at street level. After

a comical play on Superman's traditional costume change, the Last Son of Krypton appears in his traditional big red cape and bright red boots. Lois falls from the helicopter. Superman leaps into the sky, catching her high above the ground. When the helicopter breaks free of the building, he simply catches it with his other hand.

In Homer's *Iliad*, everyone knows when Achilles enters the fray. Being an action hero means garnering attention no matter where you go. Bad guys watch you when you enter a room because you're too potent for them not to do so. Pretty ladies do so for the same reason. The average citizen admires you for your good works, and children adore you because you do things they wish they could do.

Last October, I dressed as Clark Kent halfway through one of those costume changes for my freshmen hall's Halloween date party. Walking to the party, red and yellow S-logo revealed underneath my dress shirt, I passed the Emory University Hospital building just as the rotors of a dark blue Medevac chopper began to whine in their takeoff sequence. I stopped and looked up, wondering who was trying to be funny here. I felt very small and a little inadequate, like a little kid trying on his dad's shoes. I realized I didn't even know which muscle I would flex in order to fly, but I stayed underneath that building and watched that helicopter until it flew safely away.

JENN BLAIR

The Basic Trick

to writing is putting down a sentence, and then another one. Don't think about it too much.

*

Once created, she stood up and started shouting.
He stays at the window long after I call him away.
She should believe, but she is always doubting.
(See how I am drug behind these horses of clay!?)

*

Plaintive, wist free, friendly, authoritative. I don't try on shoes. Voices. I like to try on voices. Some almost fit. . .one foot. For a few steps.

*

The world is a slippery bar of soap. It slides away from you, yet reaching for it, the tips of your fingers grow delightfully clean. You are swallowed in the suds, bathed in the essence that has broken off, yet still searching for the original block, the true Plymouth rock, the animal underneath all these shed skins.

*

"I fear this is an odd request," the great philosopher said,
"but I'm looking for someone who'll repeatedly hit me.
To come on the hour, and hurl a stone at my head—because
I can't remember Aristotle, unless I do so very quickly."

*

The broken banana hulk sat on the carpet. What it held? Vanished (in me).
I spilt its life blood. I ought to write at least one page or two of poetry today to pay for that.

*

Planets and wheels turning in your head. Self awareness can morph into self absorption, but who sees the line until they have stepped over it? Honest

inquisitiveness, oh good, but when it moves from innocent fascination at mechanics and cogs, to the shamefully being stuck in a swamp of self, all roads going out, clogged? Houston, we have a problem the whole universe of Texas will not be able to solve.

*

Is not the body connected to the soul, yesterday to today, me to you, all past the sorting out? Fabulous terrifying mess.

*

Noticing startling arrangements: a Methodist church next door to a bowling alley situated next to a Chinese buffet that sells hotdogs.

*

I can't get at the world directly. It is much like the sun. Emily was right. I am an imbecile, and need a slant. And for me, it has always been books. Take a tree, for instance. A tree is too startling. So cut it down. Make a page. Take some ink and write the word 'tree.' Ahh, I say, almost gratefully. It is finally far away enough for me to see it.

*

My favorite part of typing out a longer piece is the part where the computer says that there are so many mistakes it can no longer be expected to take the time and energy to point all of them out to me. I fake a face fall. I nod that I understand. "Thank you for being here as long as you were." Once the informant is safely out the door, I start typing faster.

*

Here is an article on how to write with "children underfoot." (Laws-a-mercy, I can't barely write with my own self underfoot).

*

Being brave in an empty room. Reaching out from behind a closed door.

*

All it is, really, is living by yourself and having a lot of crooked thoughts, turning one of your hands into grist for the mill while the other hand works furiously to get down each knuckle arch and nail gleam. While its only sibling is being torn apart, all it can think is—this might have the makings of a really good piece.

*

When she visited the Tower in London, Virginia Woolf noted, "Prisoners scratched their names, very beautifully, in the walls." There is that, if nothing else. But I still say that's the very least of it. When I pause and think about what I will write next, though, there is always this uneasiness—a dim sense—that the hourglass is already shattered.

*

Wordsworth, Hopkins, and others remind us that for a few seconds everything is plugged in the socket. You know how it glows. Delighting you. Baiting your breath. Everyone is holding the one glass slipper and calling out, "come back." We spend days to get moments. Read pages and pages looking for the one underlined sentence. The world is a rotting dog with lines of gold hid in its ribs. You kick the body, call it Ichabod, and curse. But at the oddest times, you fall down before it like it was a fair maiden, weeping and grateful for no explainable reason. You say this drags on too long, but you will never get enough of it.

*

She said it, not me. Loneliness started it all. Loneliness was the hunger. It created begonias and beeswax and blue bottles. It created ginger and jasmine and Jello. I am in earnest. Something did not

want to be alone. And I can't blame it. And so, Something spoke. We are born and live and die in the aftermath, the echo of that voice—and the echo is one of either two things. It is silence. Or the voice was so powerful, so strong, that it could not make the long journey back—and the voice shattered into trees, rocks, poems, us. And each of our weary hearts is a splinter of it, hoping to one day knock on wood, home.

*

T.S. Eliot, come on.

The Metaphysicals were not that out of bounds. Who doesn't like stringing things together. Popcorn piece, popcorn piece, cranberry, tuba, cranberry, mud room sink, popcorn piece, salmon. What is poetry if not violently dragging four corners into one room, trying to stitch two languages into one tongue? David Jones wrote of this stringing together with the following words:

Now making a work is not thinking thoughts but accomplishing an actual journey. There are the same tediums: struggling with awkward shapes that won't fit into the bag, the same mislayings as of tickets, the missings of connections, the long waits, the misdirections, the packing of this that you don't need and the forgetting of that which you do, and all such botherations not so speak of more serious mishaps. Until in the end you may perhaps wish you had never observed that mote of dust in the beam from the clerestory light that set you willy-nilly on your journey. You might have been better occupied. You well might. (135)

Red eyes, frizzy hair, no sleep, drafty hotel rooms, an out of control

high school dance below in Grand Ballroom C, jet lag, train lag, bags bulky and cutting into your shoulders. But to not travel at all? A singer and songwriter once said that he keeps writing songs after all these years because he thinks that this song might be *the* one. It never is. But that doesn't necessarily mean he throws it away. All we can have are failures. But I would like mine to be a little more successful. Perfect shapes are floating in our heads, the air, but not content to be good Platonists, we wrestle claws onto thought. And find that the lithe creature that was about to pounce, all Blake-Tyger-like, stuffed and threadbare, slumped over, lumpy, and about to fall over. A play thing, not a terror. But the glass scratchy eyes, if they are not real, perhaps they glimpsed something that was. So we keep them and keep asking them questions. Just in case.

*

She's not from around here anymore. She married an Italian. Yes, she knows. It sounds like a dream. She sits at her desk and looks out the window at all the red roofs. But it doesn't get any writing done. As much as we hate to profess it, a chair and some glue are the only good locale. And those hours spent waiting for the midwife invisible? They are the doubtful hours, the hours between idea's inception and the first good wail. Sometimes these hours go so slow you think the day must be crawling backwards.

*

You have to fight, clumsy kick your way into artlessness. Swallow the river, gag, choke, and then drown, before you rise, begin to flow.

*

You have to live, as though everything were a happening.

*

"When will this mystery become a part of me at last?"
asked the kneeling artist and the penitent at mass.

"When will the fleeting vision become the fibers of my bone?
Love, take me in, for it was for you, I lost my home."

*

Sometimes we cannot breathe because there is so much. Of everything. Pathos. Beauty. Terror. Sadness. Brilliance. Yes, I know. When the disturbing vagueness crystallizes and smears, into language, it comes across as trite. But how are we supposed to capture the liquid pool that is a horse's eye, the intoxication that is the smell of just overturned earth?

God is waiting for my praises. And I am pondering whether or not to buy a book on trees. I need specific names. Else the narrative will fall flat. I think everything needs specific names even as I forget things sometimes die because of them. I don't read much of the night nor go south in the winter, but I did buy a tube of biscuits and honey in a bottle shaped like a bear. The bear was more expensive but I had settled in my heart to have him before the first footstep fell in the aisle. So touching, when plastic takes on a shape, holds its paws against the sides of a stomach.

*

Who else has had this feeling? (many, I know)—that a momentous occasion is beginning to stir inside them? It feels—very much—like being sick. You want this thing—whatever it is—to be born. The tide gets caught in your throat, slips back to somewhere. So you sit and examine the inseams of your arms, then look out the window, and wait. Pulse plodding, heart hopeful. The blue sky sparks between

telephone wires, the phone on the counter is silent. No one calls. Everything rings. You wake and live and cry—stand up and pass away in this contradiction.

*

I thought I might write a book. Be decent. That's what the morning does to you, I guess. Makes you hopeful.

*

It is just you and your hands and some weather in your head. You are trying to hook one thing another and maybe even get enough sparks to light up a snatch of the dark. But not too many sparks. A tick may finally push back from the table feeling satisfyingly full, but this is right before it pops. Punched like that, no one ever punches the time-clock ever again. Bleary eyed mornings, stale coffee, silence. Humble things. But we need them. We cannot do without their relief. Bushes usually have to hold the burnings in their bones—so birds can alight on their branches, sing, and build their nests.

*

Revelation. Brevity is not its descriptor so much as its essence. A twenty four hour revelation equals a day. And just as suspected, no one has time for it. Or in it. And still, the wish continues—to have Jesus up on the mountain even as he presses through crowds in the valley's flat palm.

*

Sometimes, we try to pry back each stone that covers the earth, imagining that all comfort will be there. We think the stream is sluggish and want to snap it back into place. We want to peel away a flap from the forehead of a mountain and see the brains of God. Which we will promptly worship. Just before we sell flakings of it

in jars. Somewhere in there, we started believing ourselves splatter proof. And that is where our existentialist dilemma, and philosophical headache began. Why the guts fly up on the windshield, so surprised.

*

Be earnest in the joke. Dodge the impending bucket of cold water. Do not break form, even if ten elephants with toenails painted red are romping down the streets with running refrigerators strapped on their backs. Keep a starched shirt of a constitution for the tornado. Act as if there was nothing unusual about each aberration of fence post. Keep going to the post office every Thursday at 3pm to buy stamps. When the lady behind the counter impatiently tosses you some American flags, say, "Please don't think me unpatriotic, but my phone bill was hoping for something with a little more zip, some flowers or fruit—or maybe even Marilyn Monroe."

When everything is so serious about nonsense, you must be graver still about its refutation. Plant marigolds, petunia borders. They are your ritual, your rosary. Your shining beads. If wayward truck tires roll over them, so be it. Devoutness has never been dependent on the tangible world, never needed anything that exhales and inhales to breathe, feed, and grow.

Faith, heroics, it is a cancer, climbing inside you, and heck if you know how they got there, these tendrils of vine twisting around your entrails, flourishing in your chest. As saints and madmen clasp hands on each other's shoulders, they wish each other even sicker. This is their health. They keep drawing all over the world, even though they are too old for crayons. They are witness to color's clash and stomp, clear cold streams of cerulean blue, swaths of violet

swimming in skies where the clouds are hung too low.

I remember how I used to draw a house. Like one half had imagined the other half into being. They say that the trick of physical beauty is symmetry; they say even babies are quicker to smile at a face that is two exact likeness-es sewn together. Yet, it is the teeter, the wobble, the thing that does not quite line up that entices the one who dreams, desires. One day, they will walk out of the door of the perfect house, walk down the lane that has equal numbers of trees planted along it, and then escape into the one gap, the one fleck and speck, and be gone.

*

*There is no milk in my house / But I have a little bread / and page after page of
pristine forest / I admire, even as my ink / slices down through ridges / longing
to discover a clear cold stream it can stomp in for a second / before contamination
resumes, rushing in to / split the all the shells of the silver-sheened fish / and replace
every one of their miracle eyes / with glossed over glass marble X's.*

*

Communing

"The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
The desert sighs in the bed
And the crack in the tea cup opens
a lane to the land of the dead."

W.H. Auden

"To walls and window curtains cling
Their voices at each breakfasting,
as the cups pass from hand to hand
crying for drink in no man's land."

Charles Williams

Everyone remembers where they were the day JFK got shot. But what about the day after? What did you do September 12? We live in isolation and insulate ourselves even further—but every once in a while, the veil is torn away—and somewhere else in the universe becomes as pivotal a point as the place where we stand. Just as they are about to grasp two points simultaneously, our brains wither like leaves. Two frames of reference nailed together is always a type of cross. One short look—not even head on—and the heart fails, melting like wax. We have to turn away.

But we have to keep looking. Because the poet's art is the lover's wish is the work of a life. To dissolve—even if only temporarily—the lines holding the past, present and future apart. In truth, we dismantle our teacher. We try and do it to the earth, because we remember that the earth has sometimes done it to us. We were walking down the lane as usual, but then suddenly, a sidestep put us on a more direct path than we had ever been on before. The boundaries that usually hold things inside themselves, intact and apart from each other, were momentarily erased. When those boundaries disappeared, we perceived all manner of things swirling simultaneously swirling around us—the faces of the lovers our grandparents turned away, a program for a fifth grade spring play in Arizona, and a bowl of soup that was warm four hundred years ago.

The poet tries to gather all things together in his lap, even as he sniffs the impossibility of the endeavor—she perceives that all things are one, not because of some grandiloquent creed said on Sundays, but a dirty truth. Our dust ground down grows the world again. We breathe in the composers of the songs we were taught to sing. It is sharing in the meanest way possible. Before we get "aholdt"

of sharing, sharing gets aholdt of us.

So why do we stretch backwards to touch what we already are in essence? And what is it in us that makes us reach forward? That is the irreducible element, the cupcake God slipped into the bag of ashes.

Walking through the pear orchard west of my house, I notice that the grass growing in between the rows is growing straight up through last season's grass. The fathers and mothers were not looking good. How fortunate we would be if only a memory of them remained. But no, the corpses are still lingering. They are white, ragged, and short, like pushed down cuticles. They are wrinkling tubes encasing tender green stems. How would that feel? To have to wear your great uncle for a suit coat? I only fondly imagine I need to ask.

History is now and England, T.S. Eliot said once, as he sat in a chapel watching the stones growing cold. And one of Tolkien's characters mused, "I sit beside the fire and dream/of people long ago/ and all those who will inhabit a world/that I shall never know." We do not always enter the Promised Land on foot. But our bones, our ashes still go across the Jordan. Brought there by thoughtful posterity, or more likely—a garbage truck or a strong wind. So we go, we go. And become part of the world we once dreamed of, just as the world we tried to remember ran inside of us. Dust in-breathed was a house. A wall and wainscot and a mouse. Gross. For sanitation's sake, consider a moratorium. For mercy's sake, breathe more deeply than you ever have before. "We must love each other or die," Auden said. This poem always comes around again because it makes it simple. Love. Or die. Die and give the soil the nutrients it needs to feed your enemy's sons.

*

Riding a Bus (Endless Caverns, Endless Praise)

We are not rich...

We travel slowly, humbly, hugging the earth. Our visions are limned with gashes of insect juice. It is late autumn. Pumpkins sit on porches with leaky grins, as we pass upturned and rusted radio flyers, and cows set like cities on the hill. At the factory by the river, broken green glass juts out of half the windows like jagged teeth. On the sidewalk packets of peat moss pile up near a trio of pink flamingos. In the window of an archery shop, a plastic deer stands with a red bow stuck on its side—its own life blood pinned to it, cascading down.

We pick up speed again, overtaking a truck full of wood chips, we fly by bound up Christmas trees riding on roofs, slaughtered and ready. On both sides of us are boarders of teasel weed, billboard ankles swathed in black mud, hay huddling under tarps, and civilizations of compost pile slowly mouldering into greatness one year at a time.

No smooth uninterrupted line, we stop. And start. And pause... for a cigarette. As we count five more minutes, luggage is loaded, and people wait to board. Some kiss goodbye. Some carry plastic sacks full of diapers and soda crackers. Some uneasily shift weight from shoulder to shoulder, even as they try to yank their children out of hyper-animation.

How do you mark it? This chatter and falling silent again, this gift and loss of towns, store windows with old sewing machines and

flags. Scenes appear, then rip away like bandages.

Get it down, some urgency instructs, get it down...get down how roast beef still hovering on someone's flannel sleeves smells. Paint these smudges of forehead and fingers left on the pane. Account for the fear guitars have of flying. Imagine them tucked safely in the berths of their battered cases. Describe what it is that holds steady under the lurch of thoughts and wheels, as all rolls on and swallows hard, looking for the next lotto ticket, sticky bun, and field of pavement fair.

She turns around. See the lay of that valley. She says it to me more than asks. I look out past her arm and spy a snatch of country that would make a gypsy itch to be local, cause a wander-foot to buy cuttings for jars, so they could watch roots descend into water.

"Wampler Homes, John 14:6, Jesus Saves," an ocean of cars, half the hoods popped open like errant waves. I sit, writing furiously, trying not to miss it. As if all that was not found on my paper will be gone tomorrow morning. Such a duty, for thoroughness, then, have I. If I am lazy on my watch, people will wake up, drive to the grocery for milk, and gasp. The well lit aisles will have vanished, and in their place will be a flat space—a vacancy. No, no. You are right. They will wake and dress and find their wax beans. The loss that my ink is foaming against—is a loss that is just as real, but it is loss that will happen to me alone.

Fear grows in equal proportions to the true or false sense one has that one is getting away with something. That is why being caught makes us "Startle up like a guilty thing surprised" (Keats felt that line of Wordsworth's was chillingly right). Because of this, I imagine that the un-amused looking man behind me will take me to task.

Any minute now, he'll tap at the glass and say, "Look, there is already a world out there. It has lanterns and biscuits and black eyes and frying chickens and coriander and cat tails. It's good, but it's messy. So what kind of thinking figures that solace will come of creating yet another?—And this one, on strings we can see, held together with nothing more than some wadded chewing gum, bailing wire, and a little spit."

But he doesn't confront me, he just falls asleep, his patch covered denim jacket carefully crumpled to cushion his balding pony tailed head. So I keep writing. And I think I know (somewhere deep in me) that creating another world is not what this is really about. I am still scribbling because just a few minutes ago, we drove past an owl right outside Buena Vista who seemed unconcerned with us all.

Eye Work

Turning Point

"Work of the eyes is done, now
go and do heart-work
on all the images imprisoned within you;"

Rilke (translated by Stephen Mitchell)

I have seen a friend betrayed, light sketching its own portrait on leaves. I have seen my brother fall in love. I have seen my own stubbornness rising up like heat off a panting horse on a frosty

winter morning. I have seen an old woman in a red apron walking down a dirt road to see if her mail has come. I have seen the river flash its greeting between hills and trees, and the house set back in the clearing with its secret diamond panes of window. I have seen two lovers kissing—on a crowded street, at the edge of an ocean, under lamplight. I have seen loneliness race me down the sidewalk, peering out from the slats of fence posts—just wanting someone to stop for a minute. I have seen my hands grow empty and I have seen what the setting sun looks like on the planes of a thoughtful face. I have seen longing grow up in my sleep.

I have seen China stacked in a cabinet and rows of cheerful yellow and green pottery bowls. I have seen her hold that high note longer than the gods thought possible. I have seen her looking at her baby as he laughs. I have seen the morning swoop down like a swallow—then startle back just as it was about to devour its inhabitants whole. I have seen urine accidentally make its way down to a tiled floor—pooling there as a reprimand, against age, against death. I have seen a discontented woman trapped in a car with a man, the way she leans her head against the pane and shuts her eyes. I have seen the way the frozen ground holds back its flowers, not sobbing a one of them out. I have seen lucidity grow hazy.

I have seen pages where people have cut something out of themselves, handing it over as directly as they could. I have seen cramped handwriting from an economics class left up on a blackboard. The letters stay to face the empty room, teaching the forlorn plastic chairs. I have seen disappointment. The last word left to be said, still sitting there in his eyes, useless. I have seen a forgotten man, on a sidewalk eating a sandwich. Throwing out the lettuce and tomato

on the pavement. As if the world that did not give him enough, also gave him too much. I have seen hope pushed into cracks between stones. And I have seen despair turn to something worse. I have seen that there are a hundred places to escape, and that there is not one place to go.

Artists talk of searching for material, but the real problem is not the dearth of it. It is the excess. A man walking down the road, absorbed, searching for a story. He himself is a story. But we cannot be eternal—at least not for very long. There comes the renouncing point. The hour where we must step back, abandoning the feast. Sometimes grateful, sometimes sorry, but still, there is no room left. We must go. Now it is time to gather up all the images like sheaves—to try and chew the harvest down to a manageable size. The eye work is done. Now onto the heart work, onto hoping we will be able to sweat some life out of this stuffed corpse at last.

AMANDA FURNESS

I, Toubab

Goree Island, Senegal

June 1, 2005

The crosses are disarming. Green wrought iron, they encircle the front of the Eglise St. Charles Boronne Gorree church. Its blonde façade has begun to fade and chip with time, and it is easy for me, an American, to see Third World/Ninth Ward New Orleans here, a city descendant of this island's horrific history. The architecture fits, and the spirit in the air is rife with contradiction and shame.

My classmates have disappeared inside, but I cannot enter this, or any church, for a very long time. Africa's history has come to me in spurts of late-night studying and a slew of classroom discussions, and the truths of its Diaspora have become an academic passion. Too often, I've found the Christian faith that I was raised in implicated in the slave trade and its resulting miseries; finally on African soil, I'm looking for answers, and respite from the hypocrisy. Instead, here on Goree, it slaps me in the face.

Yards away, the slave house awaits.

Casamance, The Gambia

May 31, 2005

The innocence in her eyes seems a well-crafted marketing mechanism.

Balancing the bowl of cashews atop aisles of tiny cornrows, she harkens out to me to buy. "Mrs.," she says, and I look around because I'm not quite sure who she's talking to; at home I'm hardly spoken to

with such deference. A single mother—and the white single mother of two black male children at that—I am usually regarded in stores and by random passer-by with a mixture of contempt and politically correct, self-enforced tolerance.

I recognize that look in her eyes, as I raise my own orbs to meet hers. It reflects a rebuking of hardship, a denial of circumstance that I have long cultivated within my own self. I know she is poor, that she needs the money the cashews will bring. Rather than reaching into my pocket for some of the few dalasi I have left, though, I lean in closer to the girl's face, which is now perched on the edge of the buses' windowsill. "Go to school," I tell her, my voice firm and hard. "Go to school and leave boys alone."

She recoils from me in surprise. Perhaps my voice reflects a motherly concern, a tinge of warning... maybe I am too harsh. But as a woman, as a poor woman, I know how easy it can be to make the transition from peddling your skills or wares to selling off pieces of your body and soul, especially when you're hungry.

Also, I've just come from talking with Mother Theresa, the matriarch of the Senegambia craft market. Her stories, of Gambian girls 'gone wild' and the repercussions of their decisions on their own lives and on the lives of those around them, have left me angry and determined. I want, no, *need*, this girl to know how important an education is, to see that there is much more to life than just these dusty Gambian streets, or the prospect of becoming a mother when you're still a child yourself.

Senegambia Craft Market, Kololi, The Gambia

May 29, 2005

Larger than life as she sits in her stall at the craft market, surrounded by mounds of fabric and the occasional woodcarving, Mother Theresa spins a story for me that illustrates some of the challenges that Gambian girls face. It is a tale that also raises one's awareness of the unbalanced, gender-based power structure that exists in Gambia, and it clearly shows how unequal beginnings between the sexes can metamorphose into unequal lives.

"Many girls, starting sometimes at 10-years-old, are kept out of school and sent into the streets by their mothers to peddle peanuts, cashews or mangoes because the family needs the money," she says. This is where their troubles begin; the girls have little parental supervision and comb the streets all day, looking for customers to purchase their wares. Eventually, they're approached by men who buy not just one mango, but an entire plate of them. Impressed by their customer's buying power and by how fast the money comes, the girls strike up uneasy friendships. Perhaps they sense that the next time, a customer may try to stroke a leg or a breast as he buys mangos. More often than not, Theresa notes with sorrowful eyes, such relationships do become sexual ones.

These men often "get the girls pregnant and then leave," she says. In Kololi, Gambia's tourist area, this merchant has seen countless young girls lured into affairs with older locals, tourists and visiting businessmen. Poverty is their introduction into these relationships and often paves the way for a shift to outright prostitution, and to early parenthood.

In Transit, Gambia
May 28, 2005

I thought I left my color back home. In America, everything's about

color. "White Girl, Honkey, Red-neck, Trailer Trash, Snowflake, Snowbunny," my schoolmates and the kids at the skating rink used to call me. I was usually the only white one, in a predominately African-American world. Africa, I'd naively thought, would judge me by the content of my character, rather than by skin color; my years of long-distance research had accumulated in an idealized continent.

Children, though, can wake us from even the sweetest of dreams.

"*Toubab, Toubab.*" Their shouts thunder in my ears. A group of them run alongside our taxi, as it winds its way through the maze-like streets of suburban Banjul. This is the term assigned to "white" people in The Gambia, and I hate it. It reminds me of home, of the fact that color—and history—define us, no matter where in the world we are.

My mother has always been disappointed by my complete disinterest in sex. She should have learned I would be a difficult child while trying to explain the concept of sex to me when I was eight.

"You see, men and women have different 'parts.'" She held up a book to demonstrate what the different parts were. Having been decently versed in these visuals by the cruder children in the apartment compound, I already knew about the different 'parts' and the basic mechanics of sex for that matter. I shut my eyes and covered my ears.

"I just want to go outside and play," I sobbed. "I just want to play."

She tried to remove my hands from over my ears. "I'm trying to explain something so you understand it better."

I shook my head, fat tears rolling down my cheeks. "I just want to play."

When I was twelve and fully understood the idea of sex, my mom took it as an opportunity to play mentor. We were on vacation, walking by the Roman coliseum and I began to quiz mom on the more moral connotations of sex. Living in Saudi Arabia at the time, these questions were never quite addressed adequately. Where better to get information than in Rome where men's hands frequently wandered on local buses and crowded streets? Nervous, I skirted around the point.

"So, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure." Mom shrugged as we walked by engraved maps noting the expansion of the Roman Empire.

"I mean, it's really personal. You don't have to say."

"It's fine; I think I can handle it."

I bit my lip and felt my face flush. I ducked my head down.

"How old were you when you first had sex?"

Mom looked at me, blushing a little, but kept a straight face.

"Eighteen," she noted with a certain aire of authority.

"Eighteen?" I gasped. "Were you married?"

She sighed and pursed her lips. "Kelli, premarital sex is *good*. I expect you to have premarital sex. I will be *disappointed* if you don't have premarital sex."

I was mortified. It's not that I thought premarital sex was immoral, it's that my mother expected *me* to have it. *Me*. What mother has ever wished their child to fall from the grace and innocence of Eden? She was holding the apple of the tree of knowledge before me. "Come on," she seemed to say. "Take a bite. All the cool kids are doing it."

Since then, I have learned that it's generally better to keep my mouth shut on the subject of my own intimate life and I cite spending puberty in Saudi as my excuse for being prudish. I don't know what in particular made me so avoidant of the idea. It's certainly not from lack of understanding or support. I just don't see it as necessary for a fulfilling life.

"You'll like it once you try it," my mother notes, nodding conspiratorially, like an old girlfriend letting me know the dirt on a mutual acquaintance.

"That's how people start smoking," I respond.

I've become somewhat of the token virgin of my closer friends. My sex drive has never really kicked in and the standing joke is that I'm really asexual and reproduce by hacking off limbs. I suppose I

wouldn't be *known* as the token virgin if it weren't for the fact that my mother managed to produce in me a slight obsession with the topic. It's not that I'm fascinated by sex, *per se*, but that I'm fascinated with other people's hidden (or not so hidden) knowledge of it. I have a natural gift of voyeurism and I treat it with the clinical interest of a fact-checking psychologist. My mother's willingness to answer any question and offer her own opinion has led me to believe that with the right inquiry everyone else will be as equally inclined to answer. You can learn the most fascinating things about your friends if you are legitimately and genuinely naive.

"Really. He was how long?" I slur nonchalantly while sipping my third martini. And my question is answered precisely and with few giggles.

People I have asked open up to this willingly, often enthusiastically, because I don't know any better. For being such a forbidden topic, I haven't met many who aren't willing to discuss the nitty-gritty once they realize that to me, they're all experts.

I was once reprimanded for not having sex. "You don't even *masturbate*?" A young woman exclaimed. "God, that's weird. I do it all the time"

As she rode home in my car that night, I watched where her hands rested every time she moved.

I related this story to my mother and she laughed. "That sounds like you."

"What do you mean?" I smirked.

"You being so uptight. I didn't raise you to be such a prude, you know."

It's true. She didn't. She speaks to me openly about birth

control, she's eager to discuss who I'm dating and what they're like and wonders aloud when she'll have a grandchild.

"Cats, mom. You're getting grandcats," I remind her.

"You'll want kids someday. I didn't want kids, but then I changed my mind."

I sighed. "Am I out of the will if you just get cats?"

Mom shakes her head, her blonde hair resting over her eyes. "Nope. You're the only kid I've got."

My mom worries about me. Her nonchalant attitude about social norms make some see her as neglectful, but she always sighs when we speak.

"Are you happy?" she asks, worry lines exposed.

I went to boarding school when I was sixteen and since then, I've ached for her company. When I went to Iowa this summer for a wedding, it was to see her more than anything else. The wedding was not important to me, and while I enjoy my extended family, we never have too much to talk about. I dragged my boyfriend along on the ten hour drive from Atlanta to Iowa.

To my boyfriend, meeting the parents is being judged by the parents. And that's where my fear resides, partially, because that's a convenient way of thinking about it and Derek has always been convenient and level-headed. I'm not. To me, the fear of meeting the parents is not entirely based on being judged so much as them being the revealing factor of their respective children. Once the parents are met, you know too much. I dragged Derek to Iowa with me because I wanted him to understand exactly what kind of DNA was at work in my body. I was trying to say, "This is where the

synapses developed, in *this womb*. This is my primordial soup; the origins of my amoebic upbringing into this strikingly neurotic being before you."

"She's nice," Derek said.

I frowned. It was all too simple. "She knows we sleep together."

He smiled a steady smile, though I noticed his eyes didn't crinkle. I got the intended effect.

"I know your mom knows about us," he responded evenly.

"Just wait. She may start grilling you."

Of course my mother is tactful enough not to ask the people around me about my sex life. She knows she can get it out of me without trying; our previous Q & A sessions left me equally exposed and expressed.

"You're a lot alike. I can see why you guys get along." Derek put his arm around me and I shrugged it off, not wanting to let things settle so cleanly into place.

My last day in Iowa, Mom and I went on a long car ride. We go on a lot of long car rides. She calls it "exploring" and I call it "lost."

"It's fine. I'll figure it out eventually."

"It's Iowa, Mom. Everything looks the same. You're bound to get lost by just thinking you've seen something before," I sank down into my seat and letting the warm air from the heater blow on me. It was June and it was rainy and cold. I listened to the wet gravel rattle the insides of the car.

"Oh relax. I'll recognize something." She kept her hands firmly on the steering wheel as we drove past fields, the winding dirt path

muddying the sides of my grandparents' car.

"You and Derek seem happy," she said.

I nodded slowly. "Yeah. He's a nice guy."

"I can tell. A really nice guy."

There was silence.

"So, are we lost yet?" I asked.

The grey day made the cornfields look a muddy brown and I made a face. I never quite liked the way Iowa looked at any time of the year let alone in the rain. I leaned my head against the window.

"Oh! I know where we are!" Mom sped up as we passed a little cornfield next to a creek.

"Where are we then?"

Mom grinned and pointed to the field. "That's where I lost my virginity."

I stared straight ahead. Alone in the car with my mother, I resembled a skittish deer with the urge to bolt.

"I'm sorry, what?" I asked.

"I lost my virginity over there. The back of a car. That's no easy feat," she chuckled.

I opened my mouth and closed it, gulping like a fish. "I..." I couldn't think of anything to say. "Why...?"

"C'mon. It's not like you haven't lost your virginity someplace."

I blinked. "I haven't, actually."

"Lost it anywhere?"

"No," I shook my head cautiously. "I haven't lost my virginity at all."

Mom slammed on the brakes. "You *still* haven't had sex?" She swung around to look at me, her eyes wide and accusing. "God.

What are you waiting for?"

I gaped at her, still in shock. "You lost your virginity out there?" I pointed to the corn field. "You lost your virginity in a corn field?"

"In the back of a *car* in the corn field." She eased back on the accelerator and pursed her lips the way we do when we're miffed. "You know, the longer you wait, the harder it's going to be to have sex later."

"I'm waiting for something other than a cornfield. A bed, maybe," I muttered, pursing my own lips and glaring at the field as we drove past.

The rest of the weekend we spent bickering about cooking and the wedding, the possibility of grandchildren or cats, and held in our lungs the weighted, worried sighs of leaving one another the next day. We ate mulberries off of the tree in Grandma's backyard and sat near one another on the couch, fitting so perfectly next to one another.

"Are you happy?" mom asked me before I went to bed that night.

I hesitated and nodded, pushing my hair from where it rested on my forehead. "For now, I'm happy."

She hugged me and I was surprised, always forgetting how much smaller my mother feels as we age.

"Good," she whispered.

I may never be able to regard Iowa fields with the same apathy as I used to, but I am certain that a piece of my mother, vivacious and sexual, lurks somewhere in me. In my voyeuristic world full of

inquiries and answers, blushed and martini-ed conversations, I know all the secrets of sex and intimacy. I am not naïve; my mother has taught me to be unafraid of these questions with the courage to reach out to another to find an answer. I know that when I am handed that apple, I will bite into its crisp flesh and savor it, every minute.

One-Act Plays





ISABEL HARDING

WORD PLAY

A Play in One Act

CHARACTERS:

SAMMY, eldest sister, all-knowing

TONY, middle sister, adores Chekhov

BECKY, youngest sister, reads Beckett

SETTING: A stage, with a large wall in the center of the stage.

AT RISE: SAMMY stumbles on stage after TONY. They have been arguing about something. TONY is frowning, restless. SAMMY is cool, calm.

SAMMY. I love you.

TONY. (*Irritably*) Oh, amo, amas, amat. (*Pause*) What's that from?

SAMMY. It's Latin.

TONY. (*Disgusted*) It's Chekhov.

SAMMY. It's also Latin. (*Pause*) Whichekhov?

TONY. Wichita?

SAMMY. (*Enunciating, calmly*) Which Chekhov?

TONY. You know, the one about (*lovingly*) Moscow.

SAMMY. Aren't they all?

TONY. Aren't we they? (*Pause*) Where's our Third Sister? Wichita?

SAMMY. Becky? Becketting.

TONY. Picketing?

SAMMY. Becketting.

TONY. Picketing Beckett?

SAMMY. Bickering.

TONY. I can't for the life of me remember what we were arguing about. We fight, Becky Becketts. Can't we all just get along?

Enter BECKY. She is puzzling over a copy of Beckett's *Endgame*. She looks rather distraught. Looking up from her book, seeing her sisters.

BECKY. It's called *Endgame*, and they keep acting like it's about to end, but it doesn't! It just goes on and on and on! They just they just keep

TALKING!! (*Bursts into tears, covers her face with hands, etc.*)

TONY (*Watching, bemused*) That was . . . overdone.

SAMMY (*Same*) Yes. Overdone. Like . . . like popcorn, in the microwave. That sets the entire dorm ablaze. (*To herself*) Say, Sammy . . . (*She moves forward a little, like a lightbulb's gone off in her head*) Reciting: "Like popcorn in the microwave / that sets th'entire dorm ablaze. Like popcorn in the microwave / that "

TONY (*Doubtful about rhyme*) "Ave" and "aze"?

SAMMY. Have and has.

TONY. Have as has can. Wave, laze. Lazy.

BECKY (*Still in tears*) I am NOT! I did my absolute best to finish it! But it just . . . won't . . . end!

SAMMY. That's what they all say. But all is absolute.

BECKY. Beckett! (*She flings the book furiously across the stage*) FECKETT!!!

TONY. Oh my. Such language.

SAMMY. I know. (*Moving a little forward again*) Such language. "Like popcorn in the microwave / that sets th'entire dorm ablaze "

TONY. That's poetic.

BECKY. That's PATHETIC.

SAMMY. There is no call for your criticism.

BECKY. You used to value my opinion. (*Pause*) I did love you once.

SAMMY. Indeed, you made me believe so.

TONY. STOP!

SAMMY and BECKY. What?

TONY. No more of that. No more. Can't we all just get along?

BECKY. Oh, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a queen of infinite space, were it not that I have two sisters.

TONY. I hate *Hamlet*. You know I do. Why must you make these constant allusions?

SAMMY. Why these constant *illusions*? You might do better to ask that.

TONY. Allusions. Illusions. All allusions make me ill. Whatever. I just wish we could stop. For one minute.

BECKY. Let it end, you mean?

SAMMY. I hesitate to end. To be or not to be . . . ?

TONY. No *Hamlet!* This has gone on long enough. Enough of these games.

BECKY. BORED games.

SAMMY. Bored. Boring? (*Retrieves a screwdriver*) Boring. Drilling.

TONY. Drilling but not thrilling.

BECKY. Killing.

TONY. Killingly done.

BECKY. Unwillingly.

TONY. Vanished.

BECKY. Vanquished.

TONY (*Impressed*) Well done. Not overdone. (*Pause*) Not over.

BECKY. Anguished. (*Pause*) Where were we?

SAMMY. You might do better to ask "where are we?"

BECKY. (*Reflectively*) Anguished. The point is

TONY. THERE'S A POINT??!!!

BECKY. The point is, I hate Beckett.

SAMMY. Now that's not true. You only think you do. Because it's the end of the semester and you're tired. Tried and tired. Bored. (*Aside to audience*) Boring. (*Disappears behind wall*)

TONY. At least you've already done most of your reading. You can check off Chekhov.

BECKY. (*With emotion*) I just want it to be over.

TONY. I know. We all do.

(*Pause*)

BECKY. Where's Sammy?

TONY. (*Glancing behind wall*) Back here. Sammy? *Qu'est-ce que tu fais?*

SAMMY (*Perhaps banging on the wall*) I don't like this wall. I'm trying to break it.

BECKY. I think we did a long time ago.

TONY. Oh, when we were younger? Yes, I remember.

BECKY. We were all younger once. Just minutes ago we were younger than we are now.

SAMMY. (*Still behind wall*) Don't remind us. (*Pause*) I hate time.

TONY. (*Still reminiscing*) I remember . . . I remember . . .

SAMMY. Don't remind us. Don't reminisce!

TONY. We were home alone because Mother had gone to Wichita.

SAMMY. For witching? She was a witch.

TONY. She wasn't all bad. I think she was picketing something.

BECKY. Picketing in Wichita?

TONY. Who knows? It was a long time ago. Let's just say picketing. (*Throughout the next bit, she continues staring wistfully into space, lost in memories*)

SAMMY. (*Still behind wall*) You know, I always liked fences. Picket fences. So charming. It's walls I can't stand. Barriers between people. Especially fourth walls, superior and utterly superfluous. Things are better in threes. Three sisters, three walls.

BECKY. (*Irritable*) Will you be quiet? She's trying to tell us a story. This is finally going somewhere!

Sammy comes out from behind the wall and the two listen to Tony's narrative.

TONY (*Recollecting*). It was it was when Mother was in Wichita. And we were home alone. Father had died, soon after Becky was born.

BECKY. Sorry.

TONY. It wasn't your fault. I just thought I should remind you.

(*Continuing*) We were alone. Mother was working on a production of *The Three Sisters* at the college. They were opening the night after she came back from Wichita, so she had to leave pieces of the set at home, to work on as much as she could in her spare time. We made ourselves our microwave dinners.

SAMMY. Like dinner in the microwave / That sets th'entire house ablaze.

TONY. And after you two had fallen asleep, I was lying awake in bed. Feeling so . . . lonely. I wanted Mother. (*A little bitterly*) Not you. Mother. So I got up and wandered into the hallway, and I saw this giant shape standing there. I got so happy, thinking it was her. Mother! You came back! Mother! (*Pause. Change of tone*) But it wasn't her. It was a wall, a giant wall, for the set of *The Three Sisters*. And I was so angry. Little six-year-old me got so mad! I started kicking that wall, shoving it, and then you two woke up and came in to see what was the matter and you started

attacking the wall, too, just because I was, and it toppled over and broke.
(After a pause)

SAMMY. It was a crappy wall. So superior.

BECKY. And that was the beginning of the end.

TONY. And then Mother died too, and it was snowing. The snow was white. I don't know if you remember that.

BECKY. Snow? White? (Nodding) Makes sense.

TONY. Father died on your birthday, Becky. You were a month old.

And Mother died on my birthday. I was old enough to know better.

SAMMY. There was nothing more we could have done. We just had to... go on. Let's speak no more about it. Speak... no more.

We... remain.

TONY. (Abrupt) Where's my prop?

BECKY and SAMMY. WHA??

TONY. Where's my prop? My crutch? My prop? If I'm going to go on, I need my prop.

SAMMY. You are on. Look around you.

BECKY. On something.

TONY. (Upset) Becky has her book, you have your screwdriver, but

WHERE'S MY PROP? ANTONIA NEVER GOT HER PROP.

BECKY. Calm down, sweet nothing.

SAMMY. How now, brown cow?

Becky and Tony stare at her. None of them laugh. Sammy smiles a little.

TONY. (Not laughing) You always make me laugh, Sam. You make me laugh so hard.

BECKY. This has gotten out of hand.

SAMMY. Where do we go from here?

TONY. You could find me a PROP.

SAMMY. I hate to tell you, but we are your props, honey. Your two crutches. We're all you've got.

TONY. DEAR GOD NOOOOO.

BECKY. There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.

TONY. I told you to STOP! STOP WITH THE SHAKESPEARE!!!

SAMMY. You talk about Will like he's some boyfriend you broke up with.

TONY. It was a mistake, a terrible mistake, for us all to go the same college.

SAMMY. I couldn't agree more. Sisterhoods, colleges not a good mix.

TONY. After twelve years of living together, alone, we should have parted ways. Oh, I wallow in misery. I want to go to Moscow! Moscow!

Moscow! Moscow! Moscow!

SAMMY. To wallow in Moscow?

TONY. Tomorrow, to Moscow.

BECKY. Can there be misery loftier than hers?

SAMMY. *Endgame!* See? You did learn something from Mr. Beckett, after all.

BECKY. It's the end of the semester and I'm still learning? But that's so wrong!

TONY. Everything is wrong. It's gotten out of hand. And I can't for the life of me remember what we were arguing about. (*Defeated, hanging her head, etc.*) I'm going away now. (*She does not move*)

SAMMY. Fine then, go.

TONY. I'm going.

SAMMY. So go then.

TONY. Fine. Watch me.

SAMMY. We are. Go.

TONY. I can't go on. I'll go on. You . . . remain.

(*Exit Tony*)

SAMMY. Alone at last.

Becky is silent.

SAMMY. I said, "Alone at last."

BECKY. I heard you.

SAMMY. 'Samatter?

BECKY. Is it something that happens when you're older?

SAMMY. What?

BECKY. You get, like . . . like the way you are. Unfeeling. Detached.

SAMMY. Me? Neither. Never!
BECKY. But you treat Tony like you don't love her at all.
SAMMY. So do you.
BECKY. But it's different. I'm the youngest. You're supposed to know better, and I'm supposed to look up to you.
SAMMY. Tony's not exactly cuddly. She's so dramatic, and melancholy. Takes too many cues from Chekhov.
BECKY. That's no excuse. We love you, in spite of all your Beckett allusions.
SAMMY. Illusions. Love, for one.
BECKY. Love? An illusion?
SAMMY. Just as snow is white.
BECKY. I don't believe you.
SAMMY. You're young and naive.
BECKY. Don't you ever get tired of . . . this?
SAMMY. This what?
BECKY. This . . . word play. Our lives feel so scripted sometimes.
SAMMY. The play's the thing that catches our consciences.
BECKY. It's like it's a game you taught us. *(Pause)* Except I'm not having any fun anymore. All these... banalities.
SAMMY. Formalities. Form. It's key.
BECKY. It's not the only thing. Other things are just as important substance, feeling. Sammy, your word games are turning into mind games. You're the oldest sister. You were supposed to take care of us.
SAMMY. I was having too much fun.
BECKY. It's gotten out of hand. I'm so tired of saying that! I can't for the life of me *(frustrated)* I wish you would just go away!
SAMMY. Over my dead body.
(Pause)
BECKY. How exactly would that work?
SAMMY. Me? *(Slowly, thinking)* Go away, over my dead body?

(Explaining) Simple. My words'll die eventually. Words are all there is to me.
BECKY. Words, words, words.
SAMMY. You too, Becky. Hate to tell you, honey. Words and walls is all there is to the world. Words and walls and woe.
(Pause)
BECKY. I'm beginning to realize I'm the one you can't stand. Not Tony. There's too much of an age difference between you and me. You're the oldest, and I'm the youngest. And you two always associated me with Father dying.
SAMMY. I was first, you were last. It's like there's a whole century between us. What have 1 and 100 got in common?
BECKY. The number one.
SAMMY. Right. And the Number One thing I've taught you is that words are the most important thing. Dialogue.
BECKY. Dialogue, Sammy, not conversation. The 1 in 100 has two zeroes behind it. Two zeroes that's all Tony and I ever were to you. You were the one, I was the last zero, and Tony stood between us. We propped her up but weren't really doing her any good.
SAMMY. You're getting into numbers. That's not my realm. I'm an English major.
BECKY. I do my best to come up with metaphors for us, but I always fail. Where did we go wrong, Sammy?
SAMMY. As one of Will's characters once remarked, "Brevity is the soul of wit." And we weren't brief. Therein lies the problem, as they say.
BECKY. Brevity is the soul of wit. I'll remember that. You're still teaching me things, even when I'm so mad I can hardly look at you.
SAMMY. The word games got us somewhere, didn't they?
BECKY. Where?
SAMMY. Here. We wouldn't be here without them.
BECKY. I guess you're right.
SAMMY. I always am.

(Pause)

BECKY. I'm going back to Beckett. *(She does not move.)*

SAMMY. You do that.

BECKY. Watch me.

SAMMY. We are.

(Pause)

BECKY. I'm gone.

(Pause)

Exit Becky. Sammy sits alone on stage for a moment, emotionless. Then Tony enters, prepared for travel, suitcase in hand.

TONY. I'm leaving now, Sammy.

SAMMY. Go then.

(Pause)

TONY. I love you.

SAMMY. That hardly matters anymore.

Tony walks offstage. Sammy sits alone. Dim lights.

LOUISA V. HILL

AN AFTERNOON WITH AUNTIE PHIL

A Play in One Act

CHARACTERS:

AUNTIE PHIL, *A good ol' American woman*

LAURIE, *A nice young American girl*

CARMEN, *Laurie's "ethnic" friend who just doesn't understand the way things are supposed to be.*

SCENE: *Auntie Phil's cooking show set in her real American kitchen.*

TIME: *A pleasant American day in the present.*

SETTING: *A good ol' American kitchen is the setting for AUNTIE PHIL's cooking show.*

AT RISE: AUNTIE PHIL is at her kitchen counter with premeasured ingredients on the counter. To make it obvious that it is a cooking show, there might be a countdown to the air time and bright studio lights that come up on AUNTIE PHIL.

AUNTIE PHIL. First, to make my special cookies, I put some flour in the bowl. There's all this talk about whole wheat flour nowadays, but all of that fiber is really unnecessary and, honestly, quite unfeminine. Then you put in some baking soda and powder. I don't know why we have both, but there's always security in twos. Besides, they have very different purposes. I can't remember which one does what, but I know for sure that they are entirely different. And not interchangeable.

(beat)

At this point in the cooking process, I sometimes like to delicately stroke the mixture. I imagine walking barefoot in a big bowl of soft, silky whiteness, squishing between my toes like sand.

(beat)

Whole milk is best to use in cookies because it reminds me of my heritage and cooking should be about embracing your heritage. After all, if they hadn't eaten way back then, you wouldn't be able to eat now. Anyway, my father wasn't a dairy farmer or anything, but we always had a glass of

whole milk at dinner. Dinner was a time for family. Mashed potatoes. Thick slices of bread, oh the Wonder. Chicken-- white meat, of course. The world was so much better then. Now I've been told that family values have been replaced with the internet and penile sheaths. Well, we'll just have to see about that once you try these cookies!

(AUNTIE PHIL pours the milk in the bowl.)

AUNTIE PHIL. And now, my personal delight: a scoop of pure white sugar... Mmmmm.

(AUNTIE PHIL pours a scoop of sugar in the bowl and then savors a spoonful.)

AUNTIE PHIL. Then we put in a scrumptious nublet of butter. In fact, I like to add an extra one for good luck. There are all of these new diet recipes out there talking about cutting out the fat, but real women need fleshy bits to stuff into their pantyhose. I know I should be telling you the specific measurements of everything but I'm terrible at math, as I should be, so over the years I've just learned to "wing" it.

(chuckling)

Speaking of which, now it's time to put in the eggs. Cooking with eggs always makes me feel like a real woman. I imagine the mother chicken, for some reason I call her Elly, I guess because it was my first lover's name, and she had these skinny little legs. Also, the last time I saw her she was being taken away by people in white jackets. Like a flock of migrating chickens taking their eggs to the store. And so I always imagine Elly, Elly the chicken, brooding over her nest with the zeal of a mother's love. Perching with her little chicken legs. Locked in that coop for the sole purpose of giving life to these little droplets.

(She cracks an egg open.)

AUNTIE PHIL. Ahhhh... the treasures of the uterus. I like to imagine how this little egg could give life to a beautiful chicken, which will in turn continue the cycle again. Six one way, half a dozen the other. When I make cookies, I get a similar experience. I like to imagine that I've giving birth to my own children again. I imagine cracking my legs open and having cookies rain from my meatus into the mouths of my little darlings.

It's like they say, from the mouth of babes. Now that my mixing bowl has run dry of cookie dough, it's all I have to give.

(pause)

Be sure to stir it all very well. Conformity is what we strive for!

(She makes Lamaze breathing noises. LAURIE and CARMEN enter the room.)

LAURIE. Auntie Phil? Are you there?

AUNTIE PHIL. *(excitedly to the audience)* Oh, it looks like my little kitchen mouse has arrived! *(turning to see LAURIE, but then seeing CARMEN disdainfully)* With another little rodent!

LAURIE. Auntie Phil, this is my friend, Carmen.

AUNTIE PHIL. Karen?

CARMEN. Carmen.

AUNTIE PHIL. Karen?

CARMEN. Carmen.

AUNTIE PHIL. Oh! *(beat)* Add a bit of spice to the kitchen, now won't we!

LAURIE. We're working on a school project together, and I wanted to show Carmen the woman I spend all my time bragging about!

CARMEN. It's so nice to meet you. Thank you for having us on the show today. *(looking out to the camera, a little dazed)* Hi mom!

AUNTIE PHIL. Well, well. Why don't you girls wash your little paws so you can help me!

(CARMEN and LAURIE go wash their hands.)

AUNTIE PHIL. *(calling out to them)* Hot water! *(to the camera, a confidante)* Personally, I don't believe in spicy food. My late husband had the worst indigestion. At least that's what I told him. Honestly, I just don't think it's appropriate to stimulate a person like that. Too suggestive. And now all of these immigrants think they can just pollute our tastebuds with their fiery peppers. Really, it's an attack of good American values. They're trying to corrupt our moral affluence with their heathenous jalapeños. It's just rude. I mean, we came to this country first, fair and square. We weren't illegal, because there wasn't any law here before us. There was nothing before us.

We brought the law, peace, happiness, honesty, babies, and love. And have we ever received a thank you note? Thank you for not only saving us, but for warming our souls with your woolen blankets of love and sharing the giant bird of blessing with us?

(beat)

When I think of America, I like to think of sugar. Here we are, a big, sack of identical white molecules of sweetness. Just the way that God intended.

(She sticks her hand in the bag of sugar.)

AUNTIE PHIL. Mmm... American goodness. We came to purify the land, yes we did.

(beat)

Did you know that sprinkling sugar on your whites before washing them works as a stain remover? The sugar itself is destroyed, but of course the cause justifies the means. It's the selflessness that's needed to suck up all of the impurities of the outside world.

(AUNTIE PHIL makes a sucking noise and sticks her head in the bag of sugar. LAURIE and CARMEN return.)

LAURIE. *(tying on an apron)* So what are you cooking up today, Auntie Phil?

AUNTIE PHIL. Well, my darling, today we are roasting a chicken with a side of green bean casserole. But first, a lovely batch of cookies to get our juices bubbling!

CARMEN. It smells great in here.

AUNTIE PHIL. You must be pretty grateful to see a real home.

LAURIE. Auntie Phil prides herself on her home.

CARMEN. Oh. It's nice.

LAURIE. Auntie Phil, I just don't know how you balance it all, what with your clean house and your cooking.

AUNTIE PHIL. Well, it's like what I always say, Laurie, a woman can have it all!

LAURIE. *(smiling at CARMEN)* Auntie Phil is an inspiration to us all.

CARMEN. *(a bit confused)* Oh, yes. And what an interesting name you have!

AUNTIE PHIL. Well, thank you.

CARMEN. Is it short for something?

AUNTIE PHIL. Philip.

CARMEN. Filene?

AUNTIE PHIL. Philip

CARMEN. Oh!

AUNTIE PHIL. It was my husband's. My dear late husband.

CARMEN. Oh!

AUNTIE PHIL. It's a long, romantic, delicate story.

LAURIE. Auntie, please tell!

AUNTIE PHIL. (*c coyly*) Oh no...

LAURIE. Auntie, please!

AUNTIE PHIL. Well, dear, if you insist, I think you're old enough now to understand. It happened on our wedding night, as so many things do. I didn't sleep at all.

(*proudly*)

I was bound to my wedding task. There I was, not much older than you, nervous, unsure who I was, unsure what to do, only knowing what was expected, only knowing what was polite. Mention how much you love it, how you'll use it, so many purposes! My hand cramped up after the first few. I realized how little my mother had really taught me. They don't teach you about writing thank you notes in school. And as I stayed up that very night signing everything with Mr. and Mrs. Philip Whiteman, I decided to take on his whole name to fully consummate the virtues of my womanhood.

(*sighing happily*)

I finally had a name, an identity. I was...someone. Couverture, that blessed union. Oh, I still get shivers thinking about it!

LAURIE. Auntie! How romantic!

CARMEN. That's sweet?

AUNTIE PHIL. Oh, enough of this, I'm blushing like a schoolgirl. How about a snack?

CARMEN and LAURIE. Yes, please!

AUNTIE PHIL. (*pulling out a tray, speaking to the audience*) When having guests, a real woman should always serve them something that reflects her. This way you don't need to worry about contributing to the conversation. You're already the centerpiece! I always find it so comforting to be able to provide these simple moments of pleasure for my fellow females while their souls still retain the tenderizer of youth and innocence. Once they get older, of course, they will not be able to guiltlessly enjoy these delights because they will have to worry about their husband's cholesterol. I had to, after all. It's important to show fellow females this at a young age so they can understand the way things work. It all reminds me of cooking a tender, helpless baby veal in its own mother's milk before it gets viciously devoured. Mmm. One of my favorite dishes!

(*AUNTIE PHIL pulls out a tray of cheese triangles proudly punctured by American flags on toothpicks.*)

LAURIE. Cheese?

AUNTIE PHIL. Not just cheese. American cheese!

CARMEN. What an interesting hors d'oeuvre!

AUNTIE PHIL. I like to show my patriotism in a womanly way.

(*She salutes.*)

AUNTIE PHIL. And here, we call it a snack.

LAURIE. Auntie, she knows that.

AUNTIE PHIL. I'm sorry we don't have any nacho cheese for you. But I just don't think it's fair to make accommodations for you just because you're different.

CARMEN. Oh, that's no problem. Um, lactose intolerant.

AUNTIE PHIL. I guess we're all allowed our intolerances.

LAURIE. (*patting CARMEN's shoulder*) Don't feel bad because you're different, Carmen. It's what's inside that counts.

CARMEN. Oh, thanks?

AUNTIE PHIL. I welcome you with my blanket of love.

CARMEN. I'm fine, thank you.

AUNTIE PHIL. So you girls know each other from school?

LAURIE. Yes, Auntie. We're working on a project together.
AUNTIE PHIL. Hard to believe your education's winding down, right?
CARMEN. I know! This past year has been so busy with all of the applications, exams, extracurriculars...
LAURIE. High school has just flown by.
AUNTIE PHIL. Ah, just wait till college. Whoosh! The first two weeks went by in mere seconds.
CARMEN. But then it slowed down after those first two weeks?
AUNTIE PHIL. No. That was it. I got my degree.
CARMEN. You graduated in two weeks?
AUNTIE PHIL. Yes, luckily I was so well prepared that I was able to fulfill my degree requirements almost immediately.
CARMEN. Wow! You must have been so exceptional!
LAURIE. Auntie had all the right skills to excel.
CARMEN. I just can't believe it. A bachelor's in two weeks!
AUNTIE PHIL. Yes, I sure hooked him good. Snagged that bachelor, got my MRS. With honors, nonetheless.
CARMEN. Oh. You dropped out of college to get married?
AUNTIE PHIL. I didn't drop out of school; I was lifted. It's not dropping out if you have somewhere better to go. Besides, I was a very smart girl. I had had enough of schooling.
CARMEN. What about expanding your mind?
AUNTIE PHIL. Now Carmen, we wouldn't want to overwhelm a green bean casserole with too many Freedom-fried onions, would we?
CARMEN. No...
AUNTIE PHIL. And we wouldn't want to drown our little cookies in too many sprinkles, would we?
LAURIE. *(eager to participate)* No!
AUNTIE PHIL. *(smiling at LAURIE)* Education is a garnish. It's an aesthetic. But too much of it, like too many sprinkles or Freedom-fried onions, distracts us from the dish. And that's ultimately very unsatisfying, isn't it?
LAURIE. Yes!

CARMEN. Then why would you even bother going to school if there was no real purpose?
AUNTIE PHIL. Don't be so cynical, my dear. I use my education every day.
LAURIE. Auntie is very successful, Carmen.
AUNTIE PHIL. Laurie, name the classes you're taking.
LAURIE. Uh...English?
AUNTIE PHIL. How do I use my English education...I write terrific thank you notes. I mentioned that. What else?
LAURIE. Art history.
AUNTIE PHIL. Of course. I just finished a scholarly article on the aesthetics of springtime center pieces. This is fun! Give me another one.
LAURIE. Economics!
AUNTIE PHIL. *(puzzled)* Well. Well isn't that just interesting. That's a very important class, Laurie. Now, I just don't understand, Laurie, why a nice girl like you would be... Economics?
LAURIE. *(giggling)* Of the home!
AUNTIE PHIL. Oh Laurie, you had me for a second! That sense of humor is going to make you the most fun mother on the block. It's the feminine art. *(to CARMEN)* What's your elective?
CARMEN. Uh...well...
AUNTIE PHIL. Go on.
CARMEN. Women's studies.
AUNTIE PHIL. *(pausing in anticipation)* Of the home?
CARMEN. Um, not specifically, I mean I guess that's related, but it's more just like, you know, acknowledging women as human beings and including their experiences in the scope of human existence...
AUNTIE PHIL. *(taken aback with disgust)* And why would you elect to take a class like that?
CARMEN. *(timidly)* It's empowering?
AUNTIE PHIL. When I went to school, women didn't need to be a subject. Back in those days women knew they were women. Now they're just trying to turn you into men, that's what they're doing. All those

pants-wearing commies trying to be men. Well they probably are! They wouldn't wear pants unless they had something they needed to conceal. Pants-wearing commies!

(AUNTIE PHIL takes a pill and drinks dramatically from a glass.)

AUNTIE PHIL. Pinched nerve.

CARMEN. I'm sorry, ma'am. I shouldn't have criticized your choice. That was very impolite.

AUNTIE PHIL. *(taking a deep breath)* I won't judge you. The language barrier provokes a difficulty in polite conversation. And I understand that the concept of etiquette must be very foreign to you. Your mother must have been too busy all day long learning how to cook normal food and figuring out how work a dishwasher that she couldn't teach you manners.

CARMEN. Actually, I was in charge of the dishes.

AUNTIE PHIL. *(perking up)* Well, how about that! I respect a woman who starts her daughter's training early! Your biological clock has been set on time. Pat on the back to a real woman!

CARMEN. Well she was at work all day.

AUNTIE PHIL. Retract! Retract that pat!

LAURIE. Auntie doesn't believe that a woman should work. It's just not the way things are supposed to be.

CARMEN. But your whole cooking show...aren't you working?

AUNTIE PHIL. Carmen, Carmen. I am a martyr. I am like the sugar on your stained traditional frocks. I am the sponge for your besmirched soul.

CARMEN. What?!

AUNTIE PHIL. Carmen, my body is a tool to be used as an example for other women. I am working to teach them it's bad for them to work. With my show, I'm not just teaching these women how to cook, but instead how to find a purpose in their everyday existence.

CARMEN. But why shouldn't women work?

AUNTIE PHIL. *(frustrated, and then, slowly)* There are differences between men and women. It's biological. There! Biology!

CARMEN. What differences?

AUNTIE PHIL. *(sighing, and then patiently)* Men have something that you

don't have. With one strong grip, they can hold all of their information and it gives them strength and power. And no matter how hard we try, we little girls will just never have them. They aren't meant to go with our outfits. Really, the only time a virtuous woman will even touch one is to wipe the dust off of it. But even that's a little too forward until your second year of matrimony. Philip had such a shiny one. What a lovely, lovely briefcase. Just like my father's.

(beat)

We're different, Carmen. It's just the way things are. Men have the briefcases, women have the dusters. You can't argue with biology.

CARMEN. Well, why shouldn't we embrace that which defines us as female instead of letting it handicap us?

AUNTIE PHIL. It's all just a matter of perspective. You see handicap, I see handicraft! Cookies need baking soda and baking powder. We can't have two servings of baking powder.

CARMEN. But it doesn't make sense that our potential for life should be marginalized by a factor we had no control over!

LAURIE. Well, women are good at things, too, Carmen. Just not the same ones that men are good at. It's like Auntie always says...

AUNTIE PHIL. *(smiling)* If you can tell that it's glass...

LAURIE. You should be spending more time dusting it!

AUNTIE PHIL. That little gem applies to windows and ceilings. Why feel like a victim when our lives are full of blessings? Women get to wear skirts and dresses. Men don't. You see marginalization, I see margarine.

Women get to eat margarine. Men don't.

CARMEN. How can you as a woman bear to enslave, to paralyze us with these sexual double standards? How can you subjugate yourself and your daughters? This is your life you're talking about!

AUNTIE PHIL. You know what? The world can be a very hard place.

Things don't always work out so nicely. Sometimes you can't get what you want. Sometimes you can't be with the people you love. Sometimes they're mean, really mean. Sometimes the sugar doesn't soak up all of the stains and everything is just destroyed, all destroyed.

(She takes a deep breath to regain her composure, and then calmly continues.)

AUNTIE PHIL. It's just how it is. I didn't write the law. You'll have to take it up with the Great Man in Charge.

(pause)

AUNTIE PHIL. His name is still George. Been that way since 1776. Why should other things change?

CARMEN. How can you be so shortsighted in a country prided for its progressiveness?

LAURIE. Well maybe things are done differently in your country.

CARMEN. I was born here! This is my country!

LAURIE. Well, Carmen, Auntie Phil has lived in this country a lot longer than you. If you don't like how this country works, then maybe it isn't the right one for you.

CARMEN. I'm an American just as much as you two are.

LAURIE. But you speak Mexican. I'm a real American and I don't speak Mexican. Therefore people who speak Mexican can't be real Americans, right, Auntie?

AUNTIE PHIL. *(breaking the news sympathetically to Carmen)* She's right. It's in the Bible. Why do you think that the tower of Babel fell apart? I'll give you a clue. Babble. We can't reach heaven if we don't speak the same language. That's what God was telling us. That's what this country's founded on. When Christopher Columbus came over, he knew what the rules were going to be. And he wrote in the Constitution that we should only speak English.

CARMEN. You mean Cristóbal Colón?

AUNTIE PHIL. No, he didn't have a crystal ball. And he didn't have cologne, either. He wasn't a gypsy or anything. Oh, I'm sorry if you wanted to hear about your people in today's history lesson. But that's just not how history works. Who wants to hear about people like you?

LAURIE. Not me!

(Suddenly the oven timer buzzes. Everyone freezes in cheery anticipation of the cookies like a 1950s kitchen appliance advertisement.)

AUNTIE PHIL happily pulls out the sheet of cookies, smiling maternally at the girls.)

AUNTIE PHIL. *(cheerfully, and almost tenderly, as she puts the cookies on a plate and pours the girls glasses of milk)* Carmen, I know your life is unfortunate, but you will only stay unhappy if you keep distracting yourself with trying to be a she-man. In life, it's easier just to focus on what you're good at. For me, it's baking cookies and having a uterus. It may be different for you. Maybe you will excel at the world of basket weaving. The world needs baskets, Carmen. You can't neglect all of those basket-deficient people. Now, isn't that more important than being able to run around with man money in your man pants?

(AUNTIE hands CARMEN a cookie, smiling. LAURIE has already begun to gobble the cookies excitedly. CARMEN pauses as she looks at the cookie handed to her and back to AUNTIE PHIL and LAURIE smiling eagerly.)

CARMEN. *(putting the uneaten cookie back on the plate)* As lovely as this all sounds, my raison d'être can't be raisin bread. And my joie de vivre will never be *The Joy of Cooking*.

(AUNTIE's smile turns into a grimace and she flinches at hearing the foreign words.)

AUNTIE PHIL. *(covering her ears)* Oh! What vulgarities! Protect yourself, Laurie!

LAURIE. *(making an 'x' with her arms in front of her face)* Get behind me, Satan! Don't convert me to Mexican!

CARMEN. Unfortunately, I've never been taught to lower my potential to fit expectations. Luckily, it looks like there's hope for you in this world, Laurie. But I'm sorry that I can't do this project with you if you don't know how to use your brain.

(CARMEN leaves. AUNTIE PHIL and LAURIE take a breath to regain their strength.)

AUNTIE PHIL. I wish I could have saved her, my dear. It was just too late. So long gone. Where do these creatures come from?

LAURIE. Well I think she's a heathen, honestly Auntie. Probably a

lesbian, too. I once saw her eating tofu.

AUNTIE PHIL. (*distraught*) I really tried my best, but there is only so much that I can do in this world. Some people are just too closed-minded. Laurie, you're all that's left. I have to pass on my legacy through you. You're the only hope of saving this world.

(*pause*)

AUNTIE PHIL. Here. Cook these.

(*She hands LAURIE two onions.*)

LAURIE. Really, Auntie? All by myself?

AUNTIE PHIL. (*to the audience*) I've lost my focus. Where was I? Ah, yes, how to roast a chicken. First. There is no first. Little chirping chicken. I sort of have this habit. I like to cradle the chicken and pretend it's our daughter. Elly's and mine, that is. With her skinny little legs covered in freckles and fine blond hair. Little chirping chicken.

(*snapping back to reality*)

This helps get the pores open to soak up the sauce.

(*tickling the chicken's feet*)

Coochee coochee coo. Wake up baby.

(*AUNTIE kisses the chicken.*)

AUNTIE PHIL. Elly had to have a special procedure. Kind of like fireflies in your nerves. Electric fireflies of the zeal of righteousness. And then she wasn't allowed to see me again. I understand because I had a lot of problems myself. I was a woman of sin. But then I had the purple pills and I had to be alone in a room for a long time. Real women don't need their lobes connected, anyway. I am virtuous now. Purple pills of virtue. Purple pills of womanhood.

(*AUNTIE takes a pill with a swig of wine.*)

AUNTIE PHIL. I pledge allegiance to the flag. (*singing softly*) You're a grand old flag, you're a high-flying flag. And forever in peace may you wave. (*meekly waving*) There are simple rules. Don't burn your bras over my flag. Shave your armpits. Keep your hands out of what belongs in your bathing suit. Get married. But don't get married if your bathing suits look the same. Make babies. It's simple. Lie back and think about the grocery

list. Can a green beans, can a corn, white bread, mayonnaise, and ding ding-- cookies done! Love your cookies. And pies. You can name them and have a tea party with them when the children are napping. Why suffer when you can be loved?

(*singing again*)

You're the emblem of the land I love. The home of the free and the brave. Every heart beats true for the—

LAURIE. (*interrupting*) Look, Auntie, I'm sautéing the onions!

AUNTIE PHIL. (*snaps back to reality, with intensity*) No! You are frying!

(*pours more oil in*)

Sautéing is French. This is America. Free of foreign infiltration. Who do you think you are talking that trash? Get out! Get out of my kitchen! I hate you, you little brat!

(*LAURIE runs out, terrified. AUNTIE ferociously throws cookies at her while continuing to scream.*)

AUNTIE PHIL. This is the land of purity, we are the chosen ones.

Damn French! How dare they threaten our way of life, how dare they corrupt our morals with their licentiousness... claiming license over the wiggling tongues...and those stupid frilly dogs...obnoxious vanilla...and those pretentious braids! Damn it all! Give me freedom fries or give me death!

END

BRENNA ROSENSTEIN

ASPHALT

A Screenplay

FADE IN:

INT. ATRIUM OF THE WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA ARBORETUM - DAY

Early afternoon. Sunlight streams through glass windows that extend from the floor to ceiling. A reception is set up. On one side of the room long tables are covered with trays of hors d'oeuvres and on the other side there's an open bar. About SEVENTY PEOPLE in formal wear mill around the space, eating, drinking, and conversing. CLASSICAL MUSIC PLAYS softly in the background and the space is filled with sound.

NELL CONNOR, a confident woman in her mid-twenties, floats through the room, comfortably conversing with the people she runs into. She approaches MR. RAMSEY, a self-important gentleman of sixty.

MR. RAMSEY. Nell! I didn't know you were going to be here.

He enfolds her in an embrace and gives her a genial kiss on the cheek.

NELL. Mr. Ramsey, it's good to see you. *(beat)* My father wanted me to say hello.

MR. RAMSEY. *(scanning the room)* He's not here?

NELL. A previous engagement, so he sent me instead.

MR. RAMSEY. Isn't it wonderful? So much interest generated in our little arboretum?

NELL. Well, a bonsai exhibit is certainly unique.

MR. RAMSEY. *(looking over Nell's shoulder)* Oh, there's Libby Obermeyer. *Nell turns to look and waves at LIBBY OBERMEYER, a wealthy woman in her fifties, who waves back.*

MR. RAMSEY. If you'll excuse me?

NELL. Of course.

Nell watches Mr. Ramsey and then scans the room, trying to decide what to do next. Her gaze rests on the bar and she moves toward it. GREG CONNOR, an exuberant man in his mid-twenties, stands near the bar, talking to a GROUP OF PEOPLE. Nell glances at him, taking note because he's the youngest man in the room. At the bar, a BARTENDER turns to greet her.

BARTENDER. What can I get you?

NELL. White wine?

BARTENDER. Sure.

The bartender pours her a glass of wine. She takes it and leans against the bar to survey the milling people in the room. Next to her, Greg shakes hands with the members of his audience as they dissipate and leave. When they're gone, he turns to Nell.

GREG. Having a nice time?

She looks at him and smiles.

NELL. The wine's good.

GREG. *(good naturedly)* Ouch.

NELL. *(extending her hand)* Nell Baker.

GREG. *(taking her hand)* Greg Connor.

NELL. So, are you a bonsai fan?

GREG. I work for the firm that planned the event.

NELL. *(laughs)* I guess I already blew my first impression.

GREG. No. It's okay.

Nell turns toward him.

NELL. It's just I feel like I've been to a million of these things.

GREG. *(teasing)* I see, so this is just like every other event. *(beat)* What about the bonsai?

Nell is entertained by Greg's teasing, but has a serious opinion about the bonsai.

NELL. They're not very representational of Western North Carolina.

(extending her hand towards the large windows and outside beyond them) That's Western North Carolina. I just think money would be better spent highlighting that.

GREG. Show me?

NELL. What? *(beat)* Outside? Are you sure you're allowed to leave the party?

GREG. If it's just a few minutes I'll be fine.

Nell leads the way to the front door, weaving through the mingling crowd, and Greg follows her.

EXT. ARBORETUM OF WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA - CONT.

Nell and Greg step out the front doors and onto the stone patio that spreads out from the front entrance. It's a warm spring afternoon. There is a BABBLING FOUNTAIN to their right, down a flight of flagstone stairs. Nell's interested in the view. She moves to the

edge of the top step of the flight of stairs and beckons Greg to stand next to her.

NELL. There it is.

She gazes lovingly at the landscape spreading out below. Greg stands behind her, looking over her shoulder, impressed by the scene before him.

GREG. It's beautiful.

Nell looks at him with approval.

The arboretum is built on a mountainside, overlooking the landscape below. In the distance, there is a cityscape and winding roads line the valley.

EXT. JENKINS VALLEY ROAD - DAY

Afternoon on a warm spring day. A winding country road. There aren't many buildings along this road, only the Macedonia Baptist Church with a small parking lot in front and a marquee set near the road.

There is a ROAD CREW repaving the road and a short line of cars backed up behind a CONSTRUCTION WORKER holding a stop sign.

INT. MAGGIE'S CAR - DAY

A beat-up Honda sedan. In the backseat, CARTER ADAMSKI, a sensitive and inquisitive boy of seven, kicks the back of the front passenger seat absent-mindedly. His mother, MAGGIE SLUDER, a woman in her early-thirties with an air of sadness, drives the car. They're held up in the line on Jenkins Valley Road.

Maggie looks in her rearview mirror at Carter.

MAGGIE. Honey, don't kick the seat; it's not good for it.

Carter stops and sighs, bored. Maggie turns around in her seat and gives his leg, right above the knee, a playful squeeze, which makes him jump and giggle in protest.

MAGGIE. We're almost there, baby.

Maggie looks out the front windshield. The cars in front of her have begun to move.

EXT. THE SLUDER'S HOME - DAY

Maggie's Honda pulls into the driveway of her parents' home. A small, one-story, white cottage sits in the middle of a half acre, dwarfed by tall oaks that surround it. A blue-grey trailer, with a shoddy wooden stoop extending from its front door, is plopped in the front yard, a blemish on an otherwise pristine rural landscape. Rolling fields spread out around the property, some of them dotted with Angus cows. Even further out, purple-blue mountains line the horizon.

Maggie slams the car door as she gets out. Carter exits the car too. He walks to his mother and stands beside her as she surveys the scene.

EXT. FRONT PORCH OF THE SLUDERS' HOME - DUSK

Maggie and her parents, MR. AND MRS. SLUDER, a couple in their mid-sixties and both heavy smokers, sit on faded lawn chairs on the concrete porch, which is ground level. They are watching Carter play in the front yard. Empty moving boxes are broken down and resting in the grass next to the trailer.

MAGGIE. It will only be for a little while, until we get back onto our feet.

MRS. SLUDER. (taking a puff of her cigarette) We're happy to have you stay as long as you need. We like having our grandson around.

MAGGIE. I know, but once the child support kicks in and I find a new job, I want to get a home of our own.

MRS. SLUDER. Just don't go too far away.

EXT. MOUNTAIN PRECIPICE OVERLOOKING A VALLEY - DAY

A typical fall afternoon in Western North Carolina, there's a chill in the air, but the sun shines brightly, cutting through the cold. The sky is a clear azure. Nell stands near the edge of a rock overhang, surveying the view below her: the tight-knit trees coating the mountains have begun to change color, their leaves tinged ochre, orange, crimson, and yellow. The mountains sink into a valley with a large lake like an oil slick spreading out over the landscape.

Behind Nell, Greg scrambles onto the precipice. He's crouching low, trying to keep his balance, clearly uncomfortable. He backs away from the edge and sits down on the rock, anchoring himself with his feet and hands. Nell turns to look at him and then joins him, sitting on the rock.

GREG Aren't you going to miss this?

NELL. Of course. *(nudging him with her shoulder)* But, I kind of like you, so I guess the move to Atlanta won't be that bad.

GREG. *(rubbing his shoulder playfully)* Easy there, you just about sent me over the edge.

NELL. And let you weasel out of marrying me? Never! She nudges him again and this time he nudges her back.

INT. DINING ROOM/KITCHEN OF THE SLUDERS' TRAILER - DUSK

Maggie sits at a rickety table, paying bills. She sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose as she punches numbers into a calculator. CARTER, now about ten, bursts through the front door, letting it SLAM behind him. He's out of breath and has clearly been running.

CARTER. Mom! There was this big 'ole snake just sitting in the driveway and I thought maybe it was a copperhead or a rattler. *(ending rather lamely)* But Grandpa looked at it and said it was just a rat snake that wouldn't ever hurt me. He said they keep the other bad snakes away.

Maggie looks up.

MAGGIE. Carter, baby, could you be a little quieter? I'm trying to work. *Carter looks disappointed that his mother isn't more impressed by his activities, but he moves quietly to sit on the couch in adjoining living room.*

EXT. FRONT YARD OF THE CONNORS' WEEKEND HOME - DAY

A Mercedes CRUNCHES into the gravel driveway in front of a two-story, log house with a wrap-around deck on the second level. The house is perched on a mountainside and encompassed by tall oaks. Nell and Greg get out of the car. Nell surveys the house.

NELL. It's perfect.

GREG. *(gesturing enthusiastically)* Now we can come to the mountains

whenever you want. There's plenty of yard for the kids to play around in, when we have them. *(smiling expectantly at Nell)* And I thought we could build a tree house, there; those lower branches would make perfect supports. Just imagine: you, me, the kids, snuggled up on a warm summer night, watching the stars.

Greg pauses, giving Nell time to imagine and then he grabs her hand and starts dragging her towards the house.

GREG. Come on, I'll show you the inside.

They walk up the steps to the deck.

EXT. DECK OF THE CONNORS' WEEKEND HOME - CONT.

As they step onto the deck, Greg tries to pull Nell into the house, but she stops a moment, letting go of his hand and steps up to the edge of the deck. She places her hands on the railing. From the deck there's a 180-degree view of the horizon, which is lined with mountains, like the ridges along a cat's spine.

NELL. How did you find this place?

Greg steps up behind her and gazes out at the mountains.

GREG. Lots of looking.

Nell grabs his hand.

NELL. Come on, I want to see this fireplace you've been raving about.

INT. DINING ROOM/KITCHEN OF THE SLUDERS' TRAILER - DAY

CARTER, now a boy of fourteen, sits at the table doing his homework. Maggie emerges from one end of the trailer, walking toward him, a packet of cigarettes clasped in her hand. She throws the packet at him.

MAGGIE. You're smoking?

Carter looks up, but cannot lie to his mother.

MAGGIE. After you know what it's done to your grandparents? Do you want to look like them when you grow up? Do you want to sound like them? Do you want to have to stop and catch your breath every time you take more than five steps? *(pauses, waiting for an answer)* Answer me!

CARTER. Mom, *(beat)* I'm sorry.

Maggie lunges at Carter and pulls him up from his chair. She stares him down and then drags him to the front door. She opens it and pushes Carter out the door.

MAGGIE. I can't look at you right now.

She slams the door in his face.

EXT. FRONT STOOP OF THE SLUDERS' TRAILER - CONT.

Carter stands, facing the door, which has just been slammed in his face. He can hear Maggie pacing on the other side. He sits down on the stoop, his back resting against the side of the trailer.

EXT. FRONT STOOP OF THE SLUDERS' TRAILER - LATER

Dusk. Fireflies twinkle across the yard. Carter sits in the same spot, watching them. Behind him, Maggie opens the door. He turns at the sound and stands up. They stand looking at each other for a moment. Maggie's face is tear-stained. Carter hugs his mother and she hugs him back.

CARTER. I'm sorry.

MAGGIE. *(bugging him tighter)* Don't you ever let me catch you doing something stupid like that again.

CARTER. I won't.

They step into the trailer together.

INT. THE CONNORS' CAR - DAY

Nell sits in the passenger seat and Greg drives. Both of them wear strained looks on their faces. They're sitting in backed-up traffic on I-85 in Atlanta. Ahead, a ROAD CREW is working on a section of the road and cars are being redirected into the right lanes.

GREG. We're almost home.

Nell is looking out the window and doesn't respond. Greg reaches out to gently touch her knee. She looks at him and smiles weakly.

GREG. The doctors say there's nothing wrong. We can try again. Or

we can start looking at our adoption options.

NELL. I know.

She looks back out the window. Then she rolls down her window, the wind blowing in her face. Greg looks at her and readjusts the A/C vent. GREG. The A/C's on. Do you need it higher?

Nell rolls up her window.

NELL. I can't get cool. It's so stuffy. *(brightening and turning to Greg)* Let's go to the mountains. Let's get away.

Greg looks disappointed.

GREG. We have a restaurant opening this week. I won't be able to get away until the weekend.

NELL. Maybe I'll go myself.

Greg nods. Nell reaches out and squeezes his hand, which is resting on the shift stick.

NELL. You'll join me later?

GREG. Of course.

INT. NELL AND GREG'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

A suitcase lays open on the bed and next to it are piles of neatly folded clothes. Nell places the clothes in the suitcase.

INT. GREG'S STUDY - NIGHT

Greg sits at his desk. A small lamp illuminates the room. He cradles his head in one hand and the other hand rests on the open and empty pages of a baby book.

EXT. RED DIRT ROAD - DAY

Carter strides down a steep red dirt road. Deep grooves run down the length of road, caused by heavy rain. He's got a book-bag slung over his shoulder. Ahead of him he hears a girl yelp.

CARTER. *(yelling)* Marla?

The yelp increases to a higher-pitched squeal-like cry. Carter grips his bag firmly and

begins to jog down the road. He almost runs right into a swarm of hornets but jumps back just in time.

CARTER (*swatting at his head*) Shit!

He assesses his surroundings and notices a grey paper hornet's nest in a squat pine tree on the side of the road. In front of him, where the end of the road runs out into a field of knee-high grass, he sees his girlfriend, MARLA, a serious girl of fourteen, sitting in the grass, tears running down her cheeks. Beyond her is an old barn with two-stories, the wood of its walls grey with age, and a rusted tin roof. There is an opening in the lower level to enter through and then a wide opening in the loft level, which looks out over the field below.

Marla looks up at Carter.

MARLA. I forgot about the hornets.

CARTER. (*calling down to Marla*) I'll be right there.

He assesses his situation and hornets, and eventually moves cautiously towards Marla, giving the nest and hornets a wide berth. When he reaches Marla he sits down next to her and begins to rummage through his bag.

MARLA. Shit. Those buggers really hurt.

Marla uses the back of her hand to wipe her nose and then begins inspecting her stings.

Carter extracts a pack of cigarettes from his bag. He takes one from the package and slits it open, spreading the dried tobacco out on his palm.

MARLA. I thought you quit.

CARTER. I forgot to throw this pack away. Come here.

Marla scoots toward Carter, who pinches together a bit of the tobacco and wets it with his saliva.

CARTER. Where'd they get you? Marla points out the bites and gently Carter puts the tobacco on them.

CARTER. Better?

Marla nods.

MARLA. You'd better get rid of the rest of those cigarettes.

EXT. FRONT YARD OF THE CONNORS' WEEKEND HOME - DAY

Nell slams the door of her Lexus SUV and carrying her suitcase in one hand, walks toward the steps up to the deck. Before heading up she stops and looks up at an oak tree. A platform has been built, spreading out over the lower limbs of the tree. A ladder leans against the trunk of the tree and a pile of grey lumber lies next to the tree. It's the beginnings of a tree house. Her face tightens and she turns away, walking up the steps.

INT. HALLWAY OF THE CONNORS' WEEKEND HOME - DAY

Nell walks down the hallway, carrying her suitcase. At the end, there are two doors on opposite sides. She stops in front of them. One door leads into a room with no furniture. The room is painted light blue with fluffy clouds on the walls, it is an unfurnished baby room. Nell shuts the door without even looking in the room. She enters through the other door, leading to the master bedroom.

INT. LOFT OF THE BARN - DAY

Carter lies on his back on the rough wooden floor. He's reading The Heart is a Lonely Hunter. Next to him, Marla sits with her legs crossed, reading the same book. He turns the page and then snorts in frustration and lays the book across his chest. Marla looks over at him.

MARLA. What?

CARTER. This book is crap.

MARLA. It's a classic. You just don't like it because it's a girl book. Last year we had to read Huck Finn; it's only fair we read something like this now.

CARTER. Yeah, but you liked Huck Finn. Do you really like this book?

MARLA. It's not my favorite.

CARTER. (*picking his book back up to read*) Just so we agree that it's crap.

MARLA. (*laughing*) Fine, it's crap. Would you just shut up and read?

CARTER. (*makes a flourish to bury his nose in his book*) Do you mind? I'm trying to read.

Marla swats at him playfully with her book. He rolls over to avoid her and then swats her with his book. The book just grazes her leg, where the tobacco on one of the hornet

stings is beginning to flake off.

MARLA. Ouch.

Carter sits up and scoots towards Marla. He's realized he's disturbed one of the stings.

CARTER. Sorry. I forgot.

Gently he places his fingertips on her leg next to the sting.

MARLA. It's okay. I was more startled than hurt.

CARTER. *(teasing)* Let me kiss it and make it better.

He takes his fingers off Marla's legs, and kisses the tips of them and then places them momentarily back on Marla's leg near the sting. They are sitting quite close to each other and don't seem to know what to do. Carter leans in every so slightly, it's almost imperceptible, as if he's going to kiss Marla, and then he hesitates. Marla stands up abruptly. Carter follows her lead, startled.

MARLA. I think I've had enough studying for today. I'm going to head home.

She bends down and gathers her things.

CARTER. Um, okay.

Marla slings her bag over her shoulder.

CARTER. Can I come by later and see you?

Marla considers this.

MARLA. *(nods)* After dinner.

She's already heading out of the loft and down the stairs. Carter calls after her retreating form.

CARTER. Okay, see you later.

MARLA. *(calling back)* Bye.

Carter moves to the edge of the loft and watches Marla walk briskly back up the red dirt road. Before she's out of sight she turns and waves to him. He waves back. Soon she turns a bend in the road and is enveloped by dark pine trees.

In frustration, Carter scuffs the loft floor with his shoe, kicking a small stick, which tumbles across the floor. He moves toward it, picks it up, and throws it out of the loft as hard as he can. He watches its trajectory over the field spreading out between him and the mountains on the horizon.

Over the mountains, white cumulous clouds are rising.

EXT. DECK OF THE CONNORS' WEEKEND HOME - DAY

Nell sits in a deck chair, holding a sweating glass of ice water in her hand. In the cornice of the roof overhang above her, a carpenter bee lazily bores a hole, sawdust filtering down past the end of her nose, landing on her shirt. She sets the glass down and standing up, moves restlessly across the deck. Her foot scuffs the wooden planks.

NELL. Damn!

Nell picks her foot up and looks down at it. A splinter is just below the surface of the skin. She sits down on the deck and uses the nail on her forefinger and thumb to squeeze the splinter to the surface and remove it.

INT. KITCHEN OF THE SLUDERS' TRAILER - DAY

Carter stands at the sink washing lettuce. His mother is at the stove stirring a pot of spaghetti sauce.

MAGGIE. You're quiet this afternoon. Everything okay at school?

Carter shrugs his shoulders and puts the lettuce in a salad spinner on the kitchen counter. He begins to spin the lettuce.

MAGGIE. I remember when you used to walk me through every detail of your day.

CARTER. When I was five.

MAGGIE. It doesn't seem that long ago to me. Now you're growing up to be a handsome, bright, young man.

Maggie steps behind her son and gives him a tight hug.

CARTER. Mom!

MAGGIE. Oh, get over yourself; no one saw. You can still love your mother when no one's around.

Carter finishes spinning the lettuce. He looks out the window over the sink and sees his grandfather sitting on the front porch of his house.

CARTER. I'm going to go see Grandpa. Call me for dinner?

MAGGIE. It'll be another fifteen minutes.

Carter hurries for the door. He's halfway out.

MAGGIE. *(calling after Carter)* Don't let the door slam.
Carter doesn't hear her in time and the door SLAMS behind him. Immediately he reopens the door and sticks his head through.
CARTER. Sorry.
Maggie smiles lovingly at him as he exits again, this time gently closing the door.

EXT. THE SLUDERS' FRONT PORCH - DAY

Carter walks up to his Grandpa, who is sitting and smoking in a lawn chair. Carter sits next to him in an identical chair. They don't say anything for a moment. Both of them gaze at the horizon.
MR. SLUDER. *(indicating the skyline)* It's going to storm tonight. Those clouds will topple over when they reach a peak and then we'll have a whopper of a storm.
Carter nods in comprehension. Mr. Sluder finishes his cigarette and stamps the stub out in an ashtray sitting on the ground next to his feet. Then he turns to Carter.
MR. SLUDER. What's your mom making for dinner?
CARTER. Spaghetti.
Mr. Sluder nods and lights another cigarette, which he takes a long drag of. Carter shifts in his seat and Mr. Sluder gives him an appraising look.
MR. SLUDER. Something on you mind, Kiddo?
Carter shrugs in a non-committal manner.
MR. SLUDER. *(teasing)* Not in the mood for spags?
Carter shoots his grandfather a look, not amused. Mr. Sluder coughs, wiggles his shoulders, and sits up straighter in his chair.
MR. SLUDER. Okay. I'm ready, I've got my serious grandpa hat on.
CARTER. It's just...I feel stupid.
MR. SLUDER. *(nodding knowingly)* This wouldn't have anything to do with Marla?
Carter doesn't look at his grandfather, clearly uncomfortable, and Mr. Sluder takes this as a yes.
MR. SLUDER. She's a nice girl. Really likes you.
CARTER. *(turning to his grandfather)* How can you tell?

MR. SLUDER. The way she acts around you.
CARTER. How does she act?
MR. SLUDER. *(scratching his chin and clearing his throat)* You know, watching you, listening when you talk. And she's really nice to your mom.
CARTER. That doesn't mean anything. She's just polite.
MR. SLUDER. I've seen plenty of girls your age who don't give a flying hoot what parents think of them; think it makes them hot stuff if they're rude. But not your Marla; she's real sweet, can tell your family's important to you.
CARTER. Well, if she likes me so much why won't she kiss me?
Mr. Sluder's cigarette has burned down to the nub and he stamps it out. He rubs his chin and looks out at the sky. Mr. Sluder coughs, clearing the smoker's phlegm from his throat.
MR. SLUDER. Hmm. There's a lot of pressure in that first kiss. *(beat)* Have you asked her why she won't?
CARTER. No.
MR. SLUDER. *(nods)* Have you asked if she wants to?
CARTER. No.
MR. SLUDER. Well, you have to ask her.
CARTER. What? Like: "Do you want to kiss me?"
MR. SLUDER. That works. Or, "Can I kiss you?" Anything like that.
The asking is important; it shows that you respect how she feels.
CARTER. What if she says no?
MR. SLUDER. Then you wait until she's ready. She wants to kiss you; she just might not be ready to do it right now.
CARTER. What if I don't want to wait a really long time?
MR. SLUDER. Do you like her?
CARTER. Yes.
MR. SLUDER. Then you wait.
Carter takes a deep breath and looks away from his grandfather to the mountains in the distance. On the horizon the cumulous nimbus clouds have begun to flatten out and get darker. Mr. Sluder watches his grandson. They both turn to the trailer as the front door opens and Maggie sticks her head out to shout at them.
MAGGIE. Dinner's ready.

Maggie reenters the trailer and Carter gets up.

MR. SLUDER. See you, Kiddo.

Carter nods and walks back to the trailer. Mr. Sluder lights up another cigarette and watches Carter go.

EXT. DECK OF THE CONNORS' WEEKEND HOME - DAY

Nell leans over the railing of the deck. She is staring, unblinkingly, at the beginning of the tree house in front of her. She is suddenly seized by a wave of energy. She snaps out of her reverie and bounds down the stairs of the deck into the front yard.

EXT. SHED IN THE BACK YARD OF THE CONNORS' WEEKEND HOME - DAY

Nell approaches the white shed, removes the combination lock holding the door shut, and swings the large door open.

INT. SHED - CONT.

Nell steps inside the shed. It's dark and musty. There are spider webs in the corners of the ceiling. A couple sawhorses stand against one of the walls. There is a push lawn mower and a gas can on the other side of the shed. All types of gardening and carpentry tools are scattered throughout the space.

Nell closes her eyes and opens her mouth, breathing the smell in deeply. Then she looks around, locating the carpentry tools she's looking for. She lifts a handsaw from the ground and jumps back as disturbed bugs scatter in all directions.

NEXT. FRONT YARD OF THE CONNORS' WEEKEND HOME - DAY

Nell walks from the shed to the oak tree in the front yard. She's weighed down by one of the sawhorses which she half drags, half carries. She reaches the tree and sets it down. A pile of tools and the other sawhorse are already at the base of the tree.

She spreads the legs of the ladder wide and makes sure that it's steady and then begins to

climb the ladder to the platform.

EXT. PLATFORM OF THE TREEHOUSE - CONT.

Nell reaches the top of the ladder. She inches onto the platform, testing how it will hold her weight. Once she's convinced it's steady, she moves completely onto it and then stands up. The space is quite small and really comfortably could only hold small children. She surveys the scene around her. She has a complete 360-degree view of the landscape. She sits down and draws her knees into her chest.

INT. DINING ROOM/KITCHEN OF THE SLUDERS' TRAILER - DUSK

Maggie is washing dinner dishes at the sink and handing them to Carter to dry. Every time Carter takes a dish, he leans over and looks out the window over the sink. The clouds are getting darker and spreading out over the sky. He dries the same plate over and over, continuing to stare out the window. Maggie has stopped washing the dishes and is watching Carter. She smiles to herself. Carter starts when he realizes his mother is staring at him.

MAGGIE. It looks like it's going to storm.

CARTER. Yeah.

MAGGIE. You seem pretty interested in the weather.

CARTER. I told Marla I was coming over tonight and I don't want to get caught in the rain.

THUNDER RUMBLES. *A look of dismay crosses Carter's face as he glances at the stack of pots and pans that still have to be washed.*

MAGGIE. Go ahead and go. I'll finish up.

CARTER. Really?

Maggie nods. Carter throws the dishrag on the counter and leaps towards the door.

CARTER. Thanks!

MAGGIE. Wait just a second, young man.

Carter turns back.

CARTER. What?

MAGGIE. You better not run out of here without giving me a kiss.

Sheepishly Carter approaches his mother and tentatively gives her a peck on the cheek.

She kisses him back and he grimaces playfully. Then he turns around and runs towards the door.

CARTER. See you later!

MAGGIE. Don't let the door slam!

But it's too late and the DOOR SLAMS behind Carter. Maggie shakes her head and turns back to the dishes. She watches Carter jog across the yard from the window over the sink.

THUNDER RUMBLES.

EXT. JENKINS VALLEY ROAD - DUSK

Carter walks swiftly down the road. The wind whips up, tugging at his shirt. The air is an eerie yellow color and THUNDER RUMBLES every few minutes.

As he continues down the road he approaches the Macedonia Baptist Church. Its marquee reads: "To belittle is to be little."

He goes a couple more yards and then takes a right turn down Old Macedonia Road, which is roughly paved and can only fit one car comfortably. There are large, grassy shoulders along each side of the road to allow cars to pass each other.

Carter apprehensively glances up at the sky. The wind lashes through the trees, ripping leaves from the branches. Carter begins to jog down the road as leaves fall around him.

EXT. FRONT DOOR OF MARLA'S HOME - DUSK

Carter jogs down the walkway leading to the front door, stopping once he's on the front stoop. He's breathing heavily and bangs on the door. Marla opens it.

CARTER. Let's go to the barn.

Marla looks out the door up at the sky. It's an ominous black and the branches of the trees jerk in the wind.

MARLA. We're going to get caught in the storm.

CARTER. Not if we hurry. It'll be cool to watch from the loft.

Marla looks skeptically back at the sky and then turns to face the inside of the house.

MARLA. *(calling inside)* Mom, Carter and I are going to the barn to watch

the storm.

Marla steps onto the front stoop and closes the door. She and Carter step into the front yard and head toward the barn.

EXT. FRONT YARD OF THE CONNORS' WEEKEND HOME - DUSK

Nell stands under the limbs of the oak tree. She has set up the sawhorses parallel to each other and a board of wood is laid across them. She's wearing protective goggles and using the handsaw to saw the board. The sky is a steely grey and THUNDER RUMBLES, Nell seems completely unaware of the impending storm. Between her concentration, the SOUND OF THE SAW, and the THUNDER, she doesn't notice Greg's car pulling into the driveway behind her.

The car stops and Greg slams the door as he gets out. The sound startles Nell and she turns around. Greg strides towards her.

NELL. *(setting down the saw and removing the goggles)* I thought you had to work.

GREG. This was more important.

NELL. *(gesturing at the work she's been doing)* Do you like what I've done?

Greg surveys the scene, taking in the pile of sawdust under the sawhorses and the scattered boards.

GREG. What have you done?

NELL. I'm finishing the tree house...so we can have a sleep out.

GREG. *(incredulously)* You want to spend the night in that tiny tree house?

NELL. *(looking Greg in the eyes)* I want to adopt.

Greg is speechless. His eyes fill with tears and Nell steps closer to him. Suddenly the sky opens up above them and a sheet of rain falls, dime-sized droplets drench them. Nell shrieks in laughter and starts to pick up the discarded tools at the base of the tree. Greg grabs her hand.

GREG. Leave them!

They rush to the stairs of the deck and up them.

EXT. DECK OF THE CONNORS' WEEKEND HOME - CONT.

Nell and Greg run up the stairs onto the deck. Their clothes are soaked through.

Lightning flashes across the sky, illuminating the yard for a moment in an electrical grey light. Nell starts when a clap of thunder, like the report of a shotgun, immediately follows the flash. Greg opens the front door and pulls Nell through it.

INT. KITCHEN OF THE CONNORS' WEEKEND HOME - CONT.

Greg and Nell burst through the door and stand facing each other, panting and dripping. A puddle of water spreads out around their feet. Nell squeezes the water out of her hair and it falls to the floor, adding to the puddle. Greg brushes back the wet hair plastered against his forehead. Nell is looking down, examining her wet clothes. Greg is watching her. She looks up and beams at him. He smiles back and wipes away a drop of water that's collected on the tip of his nose.

EXT. RED DIRT ROAD - DUSK

Carter and Marla jog down the red dirt road. It's difficult because it has a steep slope. They can see the barn in front of them and then it begins to pour rain. A CLAP OF THUNDER loud enough to shake one's bones startles Marla into a short scream.

Carter takes her hand and they break into a run. They dash under the awning of the barn.

EXT. LOFT OF THE BARN - DUSK

Carter and Marla trump up the stairs into the loft. The RAIN POUNDS on the tin roof. MARLA. I told you we weren't going to make it.

She moves to the opening in the loft and looks out at the storm. The wind ripples across the field stretching out between the barn and forest. Marla brushes the water off her bare arms and then runs her forearm across her forehead where a drip of water has begun to creep down toward her eyebrows. Behind her, Carter is wringing out his shirt. She steps closer to the opening in the loft and looks out over the field below.

MARLA. It looks like the ocean.

Carter walks up behind Marla. He gazes out over Marla's shoulder.

CARTER. The storm won't last long at this rate.

Marla nods in agreement. They stand in silence, content just to watch the storm.

THUNDER CONTINUES TO RUMBLE. Carter moves closer to Marla so his body is almost pressed up against her back, but he doesn't get close enough to touch her. Water droplets drip down his forehead and he brushes them away.

INT. MASTER BEDROOM OF THE CONNORS' WEEKEND HOME - DUSK

Nell sits on the edge of the bed, drying her hair with a towel. Greg is pulling on a pair of pants; he's already got a clean shirt on.

GREG. I started researching a while ago, so we've got a lot of information to get started with. And a colleague of mine, he and his wife adopted a couple years ago, so we could sit down and talk with them about the process if we wanted to.

Nell stops drying her hair and gets up from the bed, leaving the towel lying on the bedspread. She walks to Greg and wraps her arms around him.

NELL. Thank you.

Greg tightly hugs her back. They stand like that for a long moment.

INT. LOFT OF THE BARN - NIGHT

The rain has started to lighten up and it's gotten quite dark. Carter and Marla stand watching the rain. Marla fidgets and then walks away from the opening in the loft.

MARLA. It's late.

Carter follows her.

CARTER. It's just about to stop.

They stand listening to the sound of the rain, which is only a faint patter on the roof.

The rain gets lighter and lighter until the only sound is the STEADY DRIP of water from some hole in the roof to the floor below. Carter steps closer to Marla. He clears his throat nervously.

CARTER. Can I kiss you?

Marla takes a step back from Carter and squints at him through the dimness.

He waits expectantly.

MARLA. Yes.

Carter takes a tentative step closer to her. Marla doesn't move, unsure of what she should

do. Carter stands very close to Marla and leans his face in towards hers. He pauses and then awkwardly gives her a peck on the lips. He pulls away and studies Marla's face for a moment. She smiles shyly at him and he takes this as an invitation to kiss her again. He kisses her a little longer. When she doesn't pull away, he opens his mouth in an attempt to French kiss her. Abruptly she jerks away.

CARTER. What?

MARLA. I didn't say we could French.

CARTER. That's how everyone kisses.

MARLA. How would you know?

CARTER. *(defensively)* What do you mean?

MARLA. Well, how much kissing have you done?

Carter begins to storm out of the loft. As he heads down the stairs, he calls back up to Marla without looking at her.

CARTER. If you don't really like me, maybe we should break up.

Carter is completely out of Marla's sight. She hurriedly begins to follow him.

MARLA. Wait, Carter! That's not what I said.

INT. LIVING ROOM OF THE CONNORS' WEEKEND HOME - NIGHT

Nell and Greg are sitting on the couch, which faces the fireplace; its stone chimney extends up into the ceiling. Greg has his arm draped around Nell's shoulders and she's snuggled down into the crook of his body.

GREG. We're going to have to do the dinner dishes eventually.

NELL. *(lazily)* Yeah.

GREG. You have no intention of moving, do you?

NELL. *(contentedly)* Nope.

Greg smiles to himself and they snuggle closer. There's a moment of silence while they watch the empty fireplace.

GREG. There's only one thing that could make this better.

Nell shifts to look at him.

GREG. Ice cream.

NELL. Sorry, buddy, we don't have any. *(craftily)* But I'll make you a deal.

Greg raises an eyebrow, playing along.

NELL. I'll go get ice cream, if...*(pauses for effect)* You do the dishes. Greg contemplates.

GREG. *(teasing)* Somehow I feel I'm getting the raw end of this deal. *Nell gets off the couch.*

NELL. I'd never take advantage of you.

Greg gets up too and they both walk to the kitchen, Greg to the sink and Nell to the front door, where she grabs her car keys. Greg puts on yellow dish gloves, which are resting on the edge of the sink. Nell steps back from the door, keys in hand, and walks over to Greg. She gives him a kiss, which he returns. Then she moves back to the door.

GREG. Don't be long.

NELL. *(her hand on the door knob)* Back in a flash.

Nell exits and Greg watches her walk down the steps of the deck.

EXT. JENKINS VALLEY ROAD - NIGHT

Marla and Carter are walking down the road, Marla behind Carter, but catching up to him. Carter turns around and sees her, almost caught up. He looks up and down the road and then crosses, leaving Marla on the other side.

MARLA. Slow down. *(beat)* Will you just let me talk to you?

Carter steals a glance at Marla out of the corner of his eye, but doesn't turn his head to acknowledge her. He can tell he's got her where he wants her.

MARLA. I don't want to break up.

Carter keeps walking, his back erect and nose pointed slightly up.

INT. NELL'S CAR - NIGHT

Nell's face is illuminated by the faint green light from the dashboard. She looks intently at the road ahead of her. The rain has turned it a slick black. It's curvy, twisting and turning in front of her. There are no streetlights. A wispy mist is curling up from the pavement. She turns her headlights up to the highest setting, but the light reflects off of the mist making it more difficult to see, so she turns them down again.

Nell comes to a stop at a stop sign and turns onto Jenkins Valley Road.

EXT. JENKINS VALLEY ROAD - NIGHT

Carter and Marla have stopped walking and are standing in front of the Macedonia Church. Marla stands next to the marquee, illuminated by its fluorescent light. Carter is across the road, his arms folded across his chest. He is looking up the road and Marla is facing him.

CARTER. We're not kids anymore.

MARLA. I know that. I just don't want to be like all of our friends.

CARTER. Neither do I. *(pauses and turns to Marla)* Look, either we're friends or we're more than that. I like you more than just a friend that's why I want to kiss you. I thought you liked me too.

MARLA. I do!

CARTER. Do you want to kiss me?

Marla doesn't answer.

CARTER. Do you?

MARLA. Yeah, okay, I want to kiss you.

CARTER. Okay. So let's try again.

MARLA. *(begrudgingly)* Fine.

CARTER. I'm coming across the street.

Marla's smiling slightly now.

MARLA. I guess you'd have to.

Carter looks both ways and then moves as if to start across the street, but he stops and moves back.

CARTER. I hear a car.

INT. NELL'S CAR - NIGHT

Nell rounds a corner and she sees the Macedonia Baptist Church ahead of her on the left side of the road. She sees a figure standing near the marquee. Then she looks past the figure, focusing on what's written on the marquee instead of watching the road. She chuckles at its quaint saying: "To belittle is to be little."

Her hand has relaxed on the steering wheel and her car goes slightly off the right side of the road and almost simultaneously the right front side bumper of the car hits a dark figure

in front of Nell. Nell screams and loses control of the car. The car keeps moving until its front crumples against a tree off the edge of the road.

As the car hits the tree, the air bag inflates, slamming against Nell's body, which has been thrown forward by the impact. Immediately the airbag begins to deflate. Nell sits for a long moment in the front seat of the car, holding her breath. When she finally releases it, it is a groan of pain.

She reaches across her lap, unbuckles her seatbelt, and then opens the door of her car. She slides gingerly out the door.

EXT. JENKINS VALLEY ROAD - CONT.

Shakily Nell steps out of the car. Behind her Marla is screaming. Nell turns around and sees Marla already on Carter's side of the road.

MARLA. Oh my god! Oh my god!

Marla kneels in the wet grass. Nell slowly walks over to Marla and stands over her, looking down at Carter, sprawled on the ground. His eyes are open and he looks up at Nell. His chest rises and falls rapidly. One of his legs sticks out from his body at a strange angle. Marla is crying. She turns to look at Nell.

MARLA. You hit him.

Nell sinks to the ground beside Marla. Marla is looking at Carter again, she's not sure whether she should touch him or not. Nell tries to speak but can't. She coughs and tries again.

NELL. You have to go for help. I can't drive my car.

Marla hesitates. Nell looks her straight in the eyes.

NELL. You need to find a house and call 911 and then you need to come back here. Do you understand?

Marla nods dumbly.

NELL. I'll be here when you get back.

Marla still doesn't move.

NELL. Go!

Startled into action, Marla gets up and starts running up the road. Nell watches her go until she disappears around a bend in the road. Then she turns back to Carter. They stare at each other for a long moment. Then Nell reaches out her hand and gently brushes the hair

from his forehead.

NELL. Hi.

EXT. FRONT YARD OF THE CONNORS' WEEKEND HOME - DAY

There are no cars in the driveway and the house is dark. A pile of grey lumber lies at the base of the oak tree in the front yard. In the branches of the tree is the platform of the tree house. Nothing else has been done to it.

EXT. JENKINS VALLEY ROAD - NIGHT

Nell moves closer to Carter and sits down in the wet grass.

Tears start to roll down her face. Carter looks concerned and tries to reach out to her.

Nell shakes her head.

NELL. No, don't move. I'm okay.

INT. LOFT OF THE BARN - DAY

Sun filters into the loft. Mud wasps DRONE in the rafters. A fresh layer of hay is spread across the floor. A slight breeze blows through the barn and outside on the trees the LEAVES RUSTLE.

EXT. JENKINS VALLEY ROAD - NIGHT

Nell and Carter wait in silence on the side of the road, eerily illuminated by the fluorescent lights from the church's marquee. Nell reaches out again and brushes the hair on Carter's forehead. They shyly smile at each other.

FADE OUT

THE END

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

Kyla Berry is a student at Spelman College. She is originally from Dorchester, MA, but now lives in Maine where she finds new ways each day to be bored. For fun, Kyla enjoys making CDs for friends and answering the phone as Louis Armstrong. "I Remember Savannah" is a true story.

Eric Betts is a sophomore creative writing and journalism student at Emory University. He is from Eufaula, Alabama.

Jenn Blair is from Yakima, WA. A graduate of St. Andrews University and Hollins University, she is currently a PHD student and teaching assistant at the University of Georgia in Athens. She has published in *The Penwood Review*, *Christian Century*, *Fairfield Review*, and has work forthcoming in *Sow's Ear* and *Melus*.

Christopher Bundy is pursuing a PhD at Georgia State University, where he is also editor for *GSU Review*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Glimmer Train Stories*, *Terminus Magazine*, *The Sunday Reader*, *Creative Loafing*, *The Beacon Street Review*, and the anthology, *Where Love is Found: 24 Tales of Connection*.

Ian Davisson is a third year undergraduate at the University of Georgia. He is majoring in English and Psychology. He eventually wants to pursue an MFA or PhD in creative writing or English literature. He is 21 years old and unpublished.

A Massachusetts native, **Katie Fesuk** lives and teaches in Marietta. She is a doctoral student in English and Creative Writing at Georgia State University and Poet in Residence at The Walker School. In 2004, she served as Creative Writer in Residence at the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project, and her poems can be found in *Water~Stone*, *Rock & Sling*, *No Tell Motel*, *Atlanta Review*, *Kennesaw Review*, and *Wicked Alice*, among other journals. Her chapbook, *If Not an Apple*, was released in 2006 by *La Vita Poetica Press*.

Amanda Furness is an Associated Press award-winning journalist who returned to college in 2004. She is a CNN News Radio Intern, STAND Scholar and WAND/WILL Students Taking Action for Real Security (STARS) award recipient, who has studied abroad in The Gambia and Senegal. Furness has also been awarded the Benjamin Gilman Scholarship by the Institute for International Education, the Agnes Scott College Karen Green Human Relations Award, the Maude Padgett Travel Grant and the Elizabeth Boyt Student Development Award. Most recently, she co-authored a Working Paper presented to the United Nations Sub-Commission on Human Rights which explores quality of life issues affecting the descendants of African slaves in the Western Hemisphere. Her primary areas of academic research include African/Afrodescendant Issues, Post-Colonial Studies, Islamic Studies with an emphasis on Sharia, Warfare & Human Rights and Race Relations. Furness plans to pursue graduate studies and to work for an NGO or Human Rights organ upon graduation from Agnes Scott College in 2008.

Corey Green has lived in England and China, and is studying poetry at Georgia State University. However, he was born and raised in one of the smallest towns imaginable—Bee Branch, Arkansas, and during breaks from school has had three assembly jobs at factories and a rather lengthy stint in a feed mill. His poetry has been nominated for two Pushcart prizes and been published in *can we have our ball back?*, *Diner*, *Poetry Motel*, *RedActions*, *Segue*, *Staccato*, *Story South* and several other journals.

After falling out of an airplane (long story), **Jessica D. Hand** realized her passion for poetry would, indeed, define her life because as she plummeted with a failing parachute, she was as concerned with the possible metaphor of the situation as she was with fixing the chute's problems before critical altitude. Jessica (call her Jess) completed an honors B.A. in Creative Writing at Carnegie Mellon University, and she loved Pittsburgh, but the cold finally drove her back to her native and sunny Georgia. Soon after her return, she was electrocuted (you might call her

accident-prone) in her dominant arm, but she keeps writing poetry, even if she has to write it with her toes (that's an exaggeration—she is learning to write left-handed). She is now in the MFA poetry program at Georgia State University.

Isabel Harding is a sophomore English Literature major at Agnes Scott College. *Word Play* first appeared as part of the college's Ten-Minute Play Festival, Spring 2006.

Kelli Harris is a senior political science major at Agnes Scott.

Alison Hennessee is a junior at Agnes Scott College. Though she has lived in Atlanta for several years, she grew up in Baltimore, where they say urshsters when they mean oysters. She has a mother who coined the word earballs, a father who buys gas from Citgo in order to support Hugo Chavez, a brother who wears purple and gold wingtips and another brother who recites his lineage on voicemail messages. She also has a cat who pulls her water bowl to the bathroom, a dog who barks at Yoplait yogurt containers and a rabbit who ate half a tube of Neosporin, but seems none the worse for it, just more antibacterial. She used to have a snake named Houdini, but the snake was given to a new family who changed his name to Puddintater.

Kerry Hill was born and raised in Decatur, Georgia. She is a sophomore at Agnes Scott College and she will probably major in both Art History and Creative Writing. Her favorite writers are Vladimir Nabokov, Virginia Woolf, and John Berryman. Her favorite book is her Roget's Thesaurus.

Louisa Hill is a theatre major at Agnes Scott College. She is from Philadelphia and is currently studying abroad in Besançon, France. At Agnes Scott, Louisa is a tutor at the Writing Center, a member of the cross country team, and involved in the Blackfriars's theatre productions. Last summer she was chosen as one of Horizon Theatre's New South Young

Playwrights. Inspired by a guest speaker at Agnes Scott, Louisa wrote the first draft of *An Afternoon with Auntie Phil* for the 24 hour play festival during SpARC last year.

Kristen Iskandrian was born and raised in Philadelphia and currently lives in Crawford, Georgia. Her work has appeared in *Action Yes*, *Spork*, *Pindelyboz*, and *Alice Blue Review*, and is forthcoming from *Gulf Coast*. She is working toward her PhD in English and creative writing at University of Georgia, where she teaches composition as well as creative writing. Her blog is kristeniskandrian.blogspot.com.

24-year-old **Kim Karris** has just recently graduated this past December from Agnes Scott College with a major in Women's Studies and a minor in Creative Writing. "karris" as she prefers to be called, is native to Miami, Florida where she was born and raised but finds her home (at least for the past five years) in Atlanta, Georgia. A self-defined wandering gypsy, circus performer activist, karris has interests that range from her travels through the islands of Hawaii working on organic farms and with the Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement to her work in the local anti-nuclear, peace movement in Atlanta. She has just recently finished an independent study on eco-feminism and environmental justice, still, her passion finds its home in writing. Inspired by the rhythm and beats of spoken word and hip-hop music, the audible beauties and possibilities of words and language drive her poetry. Interestingly, karris is looking toward a career that combines social justice work with non-fiction writing/journalism, as well as fire dancing performances somewhere in between.

A senior at Agnes Scott College, **Liz Ott** is an unpublished optimist. She grew up in Birmingham, Alabama and hopes to grow old there as well.

Brenna Rosenstein was born in Asheville, North Carolina. Currently she is a senior at Agnes Scott College double majoring in Creative Writing/English Literature and Political Science. She combats her home-

sickness by writing about the landscape and people of Western North Carolina.

Sarah Scoles is a senior at Agnes Scott College, where she is majoring in Astrophysics. Her favorite astronomical term is "cataclysmic variable," and she hopes that someday she can work it into a story. Sarah has only taken two Creative Writing courses and is not used to entering "the humanities building," but she welcomes the opportunity to activate different parts of her brain. Sarah enjoys creative acronyms, urban bike rides, air hockey, and the cosmic microwave background radiation. This is her first literary publication, and she hopes that too many people will not ask for her autograph. She grew up in Central Florida, but her family now lives in Noblesville, Indiana. Sarah cannot visit them without remarking that the city's name supports the feudal system.

Austin Segrest is studying for his MFA in poetry at Georgia State University. His work has recently appeared in *The Bitter Oleander*, *storySouth*, and *Birmingham Arts Journal*.

Federica Zanet Wilhelm was born in Italy. She moved to the United States in 2002 and began studying at Berry College a year later. She has been awarded the Gordon Barber Memorial Poetry Prize, the Hammond Poetry Award and has been nominated for The Association of Writers and Writing Programs Intro Awards.

WRITERS' FESTIVAL

Previous Guests

- | | | | |
|------|---|------|---|
| 1972 | May Sarton, Michael Mott, Marion Montgomery | 1992 | Rita Dove, Robert Coover, Greg Johnson, John Stone, Memye Curtis Tucker |
| 1973 | Robert Penn Warren, George Garrett | 1993 | Jorie Graham, Charles Johnson, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Memye Curtis Tucker |
| 1974 | Hollis Summers, Larry Rubin | 1994 | Carolyn Forché, Melissa Fay Greene, Lee Abbott, Mary Kratt |
| 1975 | Richard Eberhardt, Josephine Jacobsen | 1995 | Michael Harper, Peter Carey, Julie Kalendek, Memye Curtis Tucker |
| 1976 | Reynolds Price, Michael Mott, Nathalie Fitzsimmons Anderson | 1996 | Alicia Ostriker, Philip Lopate, Joy Williams, Sally Ann Stevens |
| 1977 | Eudora Welty, Guy Davenport, Josephine Jacobsen | 1997 | Jane Smiley, Katha Pollitt, Pearl Cleage, Anjail Rashida Ahmad |
| 1978 | John Young, Larry Rubin, Josephine Jacobsen | 1998 | Jamaica Kincaid, Thylia Moss, Sherman Yellen |
| 1979 | Harry Crews, Donald Davis, Josephine Jacobsen | 1999 | Tim O'Brien, Eavan Boland, Frank Manley, Memye Curtis Tucker |
| 1980 | Howard Nemerov, Josephine Jacobsen | 2000 | Joyce Carol Oates, Li-Young Lee, Jim Grimsley, Robert Earl Price |
| 1981 | James Merrill, Theodore Weiss, Josephine Jacobsen | 2001 | John Updike, Marsha Norman, Sharon Olds, Anjail Rashida Ahmad |
| 1982 | Margaret Atwood, Doris Betts, Josephine Jacobsen | 2002 | Marilyn Nelson, Bapsi Sidhwa, Scott Russell Sanders |
| 1983 | Donald Justice, Josephine Jacobsen, Gretchen Schultz | 2003 | Julia Alvarez, Greg Williamson, Cary Bynum |
| 1984 | Richard Wilbur, Linda Pastan, Gretchen Schultz, Kay Stevenson | 2004 | Chitra Divakaruni, Bo Ball |
| 1985 | Maxine Kumin, Greg Johnson, Gretchen Schultz | 2005 | Oliver Sacks, Linda Hogan |
| 1986 | Denise Levertov, Andrew Lytle, Memye Curtis Tucker | 2006 | Paul Muldoon, Percival Everett, Nathalie Fitzsimmons Anderson |
| 1987 | Tillie Olsen, Memye Curtis Tucker, Jane Zanca | 2007 | Suzan-Lori Parks, Yusef Komunyakaa, Beatriz Rivera-Barnes |
| 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 | | |



Kyla Berry

Eric Betts

Jenn Blair

Christopher Bundy

Ian Davisson

Katie Fesuk

Amanda Furness

Corey Green

Jessica D. Hand

Isabel Harding

Kelli Harris

Alison Hennessee

Kerry Hill

Louisa Hill

Kristen Iskandrian

Kim Karris

Elizabeth Ott

Brenna Rosenstein

Sarah Scoles

Austin Segrest

Federica

Zanet Wilhelm

