Eden

Seven

Issue 581

60 TH ANNIVERSARY

2023

Red Cedar Review is an annual literary magazine published in the spring by Michigan State University undergraduates with support from the Michigan State University College of Arts and Letters and Department of English.

Cover and layout design by Victor Sawicki.

RED CEDAR REVIEW VOLUME 58.1 STAFF

Alexandra Allers

Anayeli Anguiano

Lily Ashburn

Sam Bourgeois

Tereze Camaj

Kalynna Davies

Laura Horan

MJ Lenk

Sydney Logsdon

Lex Parsell

Kasey Patrick

Prairie Skazalski

Matthias Steffke

Chloe Teunis

Kayla Wikaryasz

Jacob Yancho

Mary Zauel

CONTENTS

Editor's Note

RCR Editorial Staff

Three core values—growth, change, and resilience—guided us as we combed through sixty years of archival material to assemble this issue of Red Cedar Review, the longest-running undergraduate-managed literary magazine in the country. We wanted to celebrate this anniversary by compiling pieces that celebrate authentic, unique voices.

This edition encapsulates what our team hopes will be the future of the Red Cedar Review. We wanted to challenge the exclusive nature of publishing spaces and focus on promoting pieces of literature that indicate inclusivity—another value we hope will develop in our future issues. Expanding beyond undergraduate students to feature the works of all writers from around the country, Red Cedar Review will become a space for any emerging writer who wants their work to be seen.

While it may seem counterintuitive to reshape the direction of a magazine with an anniversary issue, we wanted to prove that the future of Red Cedar Review already exists within its past. Not only is this edition an homage to the creative works of bygone years; it also serves as a promise to new and upcoming contributors. As a team, we underwent a rigorous process to give new life to stories of the past and look forward to seeing others do the same, long into the future.

Artistry can be both a beautiful and fickle space in which to exist. As artists, writers, and curators of creative mediums, we have spent countless hours discussing how our small publication will exist within the larger framework of publishing spaces and how it will evolve into something indicative of our values. In order to reach this point, we relied on support from the Department of English and guidance from our professor, Dr. Kate Birdsall. None of this would have been possible without her or the work of each member of our team, who prompted us to think about the stories we tell, and the ways we weave them together.
We look forward to commemorating the past and embracing the future with you.

November, 2022

Blueberry Wine

Abbey Behan

Circles

Marcia Aldrich, 2003

Content Warning:
Sexual Abuse, Eating Disorder, Child Abuse, Relationship violence

She was not liking pink—her mother was furious. Ignoring her hating pink, her mother decorated the room in pink. Not just a dash of pink here and there—a swirling pattern of pink roses on a white blanket, a pink bud vase she might have stomached. No. Every inch of wood was lacquered the pinkest pink. Pink hangers and pink liners for pink drawers, a pink shoe case to hang from a pink closet door, pink light switches and pink doorknobs, a pink mirror and pink light-bulbs to bathe her in a pink glow. Even at night, from her window the stars seemed pink. She was avoiding her room, outside in the green, as much as possible; her mother wondered where she was. Down the alley, furrowed in weeds, in the fields, by the river, dropping from trees, she was away; her mother was furious. She was not liking dolls, especially the expensive Madame Alexander dolls given to her on her birthdays; she was wanting to put them in the oven and set the timer, she was wanting to bury them face down in the dirt; her mother was furious. She was being sent down to the bench for unladylike behavior and she was having her hands tied to her chair, her mouth was being taped shut; her mother was pleased. Her mother was pleased with the measures being taken by the first-grade teacher. Yes, indeed, that was the appropriate response. She was always getting into trouble; her mother sent her away to camp. She was never wanting to come home, she was running away through the woods where no one could find her; her mother was furious and found her. She was being locked in the car for the ride home and locked in her room for the rest of the long summer; her mother was pleased. She was where she belonged. She was hating ballet, she was hating Mrs. Fink and pink tutus, she was clumsy at the barre and flatfooted. She was hating piano lessons, practicing "The Typewriter" for two years without improvement. She was punching boys, hanging upside down, tearing her fancy dresses; her mother was furious. She was loving horses—the smell of them, the dirt of them, wanting always to keep the dirt with her; her mother was furious. Her mother hated stables, the smell, the dirt, the fugitive life, females in stables, and stayed away. Her father funded her; her mother was furious. She was making good grades, which no one ever noticed, was secretly playing strip poker on the weekends in the old smokehouse, was shooting a copperhead in a neighbor's backyard with a gun she learned how to use, was being molested by a friend's older brother. She was not telling anyone, was being shown pictures of nude women, was shooting a copperhead in the backyard, she was riding her bike down the driveway with her eyes closed. She was riding her bike down the driveway with her eyes closed and running into a tree. She was being shown pictures of nude women and she was always seeing the pictures of nude women even with her eyes closed and running into trees. She was being molested by a friend's older brother, she was breaking her leg and carrying her bike up the hill, she was not telling anyone; her mother was furious she had broken her leg. It would require attention she didn't want to give, explanations. When her father returned from business, he would take her to the hospital for X-rays. Things were always happening to her, she wasn't telling anyone. She was not always making good grades, but no one cared, her leg was not healing, more and more her mother was sending her away. Things were happening to her, things were being taken away from her against her will, she was not telling anyone. She was being silent, even when things were being taken away from her that wouldn't be hers again. She was being sent away. She was never wanting to go home again. She was having boyfriends whose names she was not remembering. She was pushing her plate away as her mother instructed, learning to live on less and less. She was getting involved. Someone told her parents. Her mother was furious. She was being raped by her friend's older brother, she was never telling anyone. Someone told her parents, they were not believing her. She was getting kicked out of college and she was getting married and moving away. She was being silent at the dinner table and other places; her husband was furious. Her husband was naming her. She was getting locked in her room. She was being threatenedand she was being choked and she was breaking away. She was taking a long walk on the beach. She wanted home to be a phone booth on a beach in Ireland where she heard the sound of waves and smelled of sea grit.

But home was never being there. She was leaving, moving farther away. Her mother was furious; her husband was furious. She took jobs and had many names. She lived in different cities and spoke from phone booths she called home. The authorities didn't know what to name her. She was gradually losing everything that had been given to her and she was glad. Her husband was having her annulled and she was glad. Her parents were having her annulled and she was glad. She was pleased with the measures being taken. Yes, indeed, that was the appropriate response. She went back to school, she paid for it. She changed her name to X. She paid for it. She did not have any more boyfriends whose names she did not remember. She said no all the time and she broke a lot of glasses, she was breaking a lot of dishes and it was feeling good. She was feeling angry. She was furious. She was telling people about it at dinner and other places. She loved feeling the anger come out of her even though many people found it unpleasant. She was not stopping. She bought more pink glasses and more pink dishes; they were replaceable. She was working and she was telling people about it even when they did not want to hear. Her mother was furious, but she didn't care. And she didn't care. And she didn't care.

Marty and Ann

Mimi Brodsky, 1971

Along a ledge,
high on a hill,
when trees were
blazing color,
we saw your names
carved on a rock
and touched them
with our fingers.

A squirrel skidded by.
Birds squawked in the weeds.
Fossils dotted stone.
We were quite alone.

Were you alone that day?
Not very long ago.
When you climbed the jagged rock
and hammered in your mark?

MARTY AND ANN
LOVE FOREVER
1942

The world was bleeding then.
Battles, bombs, dread.
Blackouts in the night.
Headlines screaming fright.

How long was forever?
How long did you love?
Did it last for a month?

Did it keep for a year?

What kind of day that day?
Bright with sun
spattering light through leaves?
Crisp with clean autumn air
sweeping down from the hills?
Rich with the fiery hues
of the dying season?
A day like today?

We stand beneath
layer upon layer
thin pancake folds
of rock
thrust up to sky
from floor of the sea.
Each layer an aeon.

Marty and Ann,
where are you now?
Where are we?
Where are we?
At least
you
carved love in stone.

Fetus

Laila Paskel, 2022

Pale Moon

David Sapp, 2008

When I was a child
the moon appeared only
in the night, in storybooks,
through a window and surrounded
by thick, inky black;
it was full, ripe,
and radiant in October,
setting the cornfields ablaze,
flaming seas of rippling, golden ribbon.

I would gaze at the moon's
scarred, pale expression
and wonder if its face
was ever smooth
like an unchipped china saucer
first brought down from
a high cupboard shelf.

I would squint through the telescope
on warm summer nights
for a glimpse
of the astronauts' craft buzzing
around the moon's head;
if the moon had arms
and quick hands,
it could swat
at the shiny, irksome fly.

I cannot recall when
I first noticed the moon
on an early morning,
and even now I'm distracted
by its thin, diaphanous
bit of fabric clinging
to pallid, blue skin
and slipping,
as the sun nears,
from the shoulders of the sky
to the floor of the horizon.

Killing Two Birds

Peter W. Fong, 1990

Ginny sat slumped in the passenger seat while Will drove them south from Boston. She tore a wedge from the lid of her take-out cup, and a thin warm mist of coffee rose up, clouding the windshield. She rubbed at the fog with the heel of her palm. The dawn was cold, even for November. She wished she had remembered a blanket to spread over her legs.

They had reservations on the morning ferry. This weekend on the island had originally been planned for Labor Day, as a sort of homecoming for Will, who had spent the summer gillnetting salmon in Alaska. Ginny's parents owned a house in Vineyard Haven, which they rented out during the tourist season. Behind the kitchen were two rooms with a separate entrance where Ginny and her friend Sue had waited out the warm months. The house would be empty now until spring.

"Marvin Hagler grew up here," Ginny said. She did not point to the sign which hung above the pavement like the blade of a guillotine. Short gusts of wind shook the car as she sipped.

"The former boxer," said Will, his hands following the wheel around a curve. He turned to face her but did not smile. "He used to be something else." The road slipped straight again. Will's fingers relaxed as he looked away.

Ginny felt the heat of the coffee churn upward into her cheeks. She cracked the window for a moment and let the cold air rinse her face. She could not have slept more than an hour or two last night. Will had looked so glad to see her at the airport that she had taken his forgiveness for granted. After all, if he had come home in September like they had planned, none of it would have happened. But he had wanted to stay another two weeks for silvers, then another month for crab fishing, and then the captain had offered to pay him to take the boat down to Seattle for the winter.

When he called from port in Vancouver, she told him she had done something that she regretted, but it was nothing, or not anything that he should worry about. She had been saving her tips–and that's what mattered. With the money from his fishing they could take a long slow trip, take their time about settling down. They had planned it together and it would still work. She told him all that and the line went quiet; his voice seemed to move far from the receiver, as if he had put the phone down and was now talking to the air.

Last April, when Will first mentioned Alaska, Ginny had cried. She was happy with their life in Boston, happy with their sunny rooms overlooking the Fenway, with their day jobs at the restaurant on Beacon Street. Will seemed to have no idea of what he would do there, or when he would be back. They were

walking across the Common, on their way to feed the ducks at the public garden. Ginny wanted Will to stop talking about moose and bear, about big money, about possibilities and long trips which didn't include her. She wanted him to say exactly why he was leaving, for that summer to mean something to their life together. He seemed aloof to her, embarrassed.

"How can I know what it means?" he said. "I don't have a crystal ball."

As they began to scatter lumps of bread, the ducks gathered round, quacking. The nearer birds, jostled by the throng, edged onto their shoe tops. A green-headed drake nipped her fingers. She threw her last crust at him, hard.

"Quack, quack," said Will. "We're out of bread."

He turned the paper bag upside down and shook out the crumbs. A few hens on the perimeter ambled off to sit beneath the willows, while others stood gamely on one leg, looking around indecisively.

"All gone," said Ginny.

But he was home now, finally, and she could pick up the loose threads of her life. Last night, Will had kicked and mumbled in his sleep. He kept reaching out for her until she found herself pinned against the cold wall of the room. Each time he grunted Ginny said, "I'm sorry," in a small, soft voice. But Will never made an answer which she could decipher. He might as well have been wide awake.

"I'm too tired to drive," she had told him as he shaved under his chin. "Let's take your car."

***

Will scratched the back of his head, then held out his hand for the coffee cup. Asphalt heaves rocked the car. Coffee dribbled down his chin and soaked into his lap.

"Did he look like me?" he asked.

"No," said Ginny.

They drove on for a time, listening to the hum of the tires. The suburban malls gave way to scrub forest. Ginny watched the trees slip past, mostly grey bark and bare branches. Only the oaks had managed to keep their leaves. His hair was black and his fingers trembled while he held at a fork. That much she remembered clearly. He was not tall like Will. There were black hairs on his shoulders. At the beach he wobbled unsteadily in the surf, back to the waves.

"He had two kids," she said.

The road became rough. More signs appeared, warning of construction crews ahead. Ginny's stomach contracted into a hard wreath of pain. Will's silence did not calm her. Before he left for Alaska, the same silence loomed. She had made promise after promise of love, while he had explained about seine nets, crew shares, and the weather in the North Pacific. He did not say that he wanted to meet someone new, and in the end grumbled that she could come too, if she liked. When she had

refused, the fault became hers.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Sue warned me not to tell you."

By now, the long line of cars heading south had slowed to a crawl. A flashing yellow light funnelled them into one lane near the shoulder.

"It's just as well," said Will.

He was married, she told him. He was married, he had two kids, both girls. The whole family had dinner every Thursday night at the Black Dog Café. On the Thursday before Labor Day, he had come back in alone. His name was also Will. When her shift ended, he was waiting outside. His eyes were bright, almost bulging. "If you'll drive me home," he said, "I'll show you the most beautiful spot on the island."

He lay low across the back seat as she picked her way through town. One by one he told her the things that he liked about her.

"I like the way your nose wrinkles when you smile," he said. "The way your toes turn out when you walk. Your thin calves below the hemline. I like the way your eyes close when you list the specials of the day."

"You shouldn't make fun of me," said Ginny, looking over her shoulder at him.

"Keep your eyes on the road," he said solemnly. "You'll blow our cover."

Ginny pulled up to a stop sign, laughing. When another car idled alongside, she set her face and looked straight ahead.

"That's better," he told her. "People will think you laugh at your own jokes. Turn right. We'll take this road up island. I'll tell you when to stop."

Later that night they lay on the hood of the car, watching mackerel clouds scud across a thin slice of moon. Ginny held his head in her lap.

"I was nineteen when the first man walked on that moon," he said.

"I was six, I think. I don't remember."

"Didn't you look for footprints?" he asked.

"Where?"

"Up there," he said. "On the moon."

***

Men in hard hats crowded the shoulder. A section of the road ahead had been blasted through a steep, short hill and rock walls rose straight on either side to the height of telephone poles. A pair of large black birds poked curiously at the ragged skeleton of a child's tennis shoe which lay trodden in the roadbed. As they neared the construction site, a flagman waved them to a stop.

"Couldn't you call him something else? William, or Bill maybe? I mean, if you have to talk about him."

"His name was Will," she said.

"You don't know that for sure. What did his wife call

him?"

"Daddy, I think."

The earth trembled under the tread of heavy equipment. The flagman stepped to the shoulder as a truckload of fill came rumbling through the cut, tires spitting dirt and gravel. The cab windows were so dark with grime that Ginny could not make out the driver. The smaller of the two birds ran shrieking and flapping to the side of the road, but the other moved its wings clumsily against the air. An oncoming wheel caught one black wing and rolled it underneath the dead weight of the load.

The flagman motioned for them to proceed. Once past the site, the pavement was black and blank as a seam of coal. No lines had been painted on it.

Ginny looked at Will. "A bird got run over," she said. "By that big truck."

"I'm sorry," Will said. "I must have missed it."

Ginny turned her face to the wind to hold the tears back. She wanted to crush her guilt like a paper cup and toss it over the side. As soon as Will had arrived in Alaska and netted a job, he began to send enthusiastic letters home, about his plans for the money he'd make, about missing her. Now he stood silent at the rail, his hands deep in the pockets of his coat.

Grey gulls flew up, wheeled raucously, dove again to the water. A school of bluefish worked the rip where two currents collided, confusing the sea. The bigger fish walled the bait up against the tide, then slashed through. Two fishermen, their small boat rocked by the ferry's passage, brought one to gaff. The sharp steel bit easily through the back of the fish and emerged dripping from the other side. Some passengers cheered and clapped. Ginny set her feet wide on the deck. She closed her eyes, felt the surge of the engines far down in the ship.

"That was a nice fish," Will said, turning from the rail.

Ginny put her hands to her cheeks. "Are they red?" she asked.

"It's cold," Will said, taking her arm. "Let's go below."

The stale breath of the cabin turned her stomach. Will brought two cans of beer at the counter, while Ginny found a seat in a corner booth. The summer flooded her thoughts. Over coffee the next morning, Sue had laughed at the whole affair. She called him the mysterious man-in-the-moon and pressed for an introduction.

Will finished his beer and started on hers. "He won't be there, will he?"

"I don't think so," she said. "They were summer people."

After leaving the ferry they drove by the café. Ginny poked her head into the kitchen, said hello to the cook, and joined Will at a table by the window. She sat with her back to

the harbor, wondering what she would do if he walked in right then, as they were having lunch. She took all the sugar packets out of the rack and began to build a little house. She smoothed the envelopes, with their watercolor images of seascapes, and stood them on edge, like playing cards.

During the rest of the Labor Day weekend, she had been afraid to answer the phone. On Tuesday, she drove by his house, unsure of what she hoped to see. On Thursday, she called in sick. The following Sunday, Sue fixed a pitcher of rum and orange juice to take to the beach. "Last chance for the sun," she said. "I want to get drunk and read the comics."

The waves washed a slow, steady beat into the sand. They lay with their backs to the water, sipping at straws. The two daughters sported matching striped bikinis. They ran up to show Ginny their shovels and pails. He wore mirrored sunglasses. Black hairs curled thickly around his navel. He sank to one knee, as if he were planning to stay and talk, while his wife continued along the beach.

"This must be your roommate," he said, nodding to Sue, who squinted over her shoulder at him.

Ginny rolled away from her newspaper, then sat up, propped on one arm. She looked hard at the sharp points of his brows, the tiny gaps between his teeth. All the charm seemed to have left his smile.

"I won't disturb you," he said, still smiling. "We'll see you next Thursday. As usual."

The girls ran shrieking to the waterline. Their father made a mock salute, then sauntered away.

"Who was that jerk?" asked Sue, taking a long pull at her drink.

"That's the guy," said Ginny. "That's him."

On Monday, Ginny and Sue cleaned out the refrigerator, latched the shutters, and boarded the ferry for the mainland. When they reached the far shore, Ginny drove up the ramp onto the dock. She sat blinking awhile in the sun, feeling as though she had just been disgorged from the belly of a whale.

When Ginny attempted to add another brick to the foundation, her sugar house collapsed. The packets fell with the sound of sifting sand. She drew the heap close to her chest and began to file them by color. Every now and then the screen door slammed behind a new customer, mostly locals who nodded to Ginny and then quietly took a seat. Will rested his elbows on the table.

"You know, I thought about this all summer," he said.

"You didn't trust me?"

"I trusted you," he said seriously. "I was thinking about coming here, just the two of us."

Two dark-haired girls stomped their feet by the door. An older man followed them in, but his hair was too grey, his shoes too well polished.

"I have to use the bathroom," said Ginny.

She pushed the lid down and sat on it until her stomach pains subsided. Then she combed her hair, which was knotted and tangled from the ferry trip. When she returned to the table, Will was stirring a bowl of chowder.

"I ordered the same for you," he said.

Ginny inspected her plate. "After we eat," she said, "let's drop our stuff off at the house and go for a drive. I want to show you around the island."

Will leaned forward and kissed her on the mouth. She slid into the chair next to him, and ate with her back to the door.

***

The road veered right and began to climb a low, wooded hill. Gravel crackled under the tires. From time to time Will turned to look at her face. She caught each glance like a ball thrown in her direction. He still wasn't talking, but she could live with that. She settled in behind the wheel and concentrated on steering gently through the ruts. They rounded the last bend and surveyed the western slope of the hill.

"This is it," said Ginny. "You have to walk up to the top."

"Where do we park?"

"I usually just pull over," she said. "We'll make a U-turn after."

Cold gusts rattled the trees, carried the report of car doors slamming out to sea. The ridge was hidden from the road by the bulk of the hill and a stand of oaks. A light swell rolled under the setting sun as she led Will up the trail. In the falling light she could imagine that she had never been there before. The climb was steep but short. When they reached the top, Ginny sat with her legs outstretched in the dry grass, winded.

Will walked to the edge of the clearing. He picked a crumpled beer can out of the grass and chucked it over the brink. Ginny lay on her back, sighting the sun through the tips of her shoes. She sniffed the faint salt scent of the Atlantic mingled with the almost dormant smell of autumn. When Will sat hunched over his knees beside her, she turned up her face to be kissed. The summer seemed far away. Ginny pulled him down, pillowed her head on his chest. She wished again that she had remembered a blanket.

"Where will we go?" she asked.

"Depends," said Will. "We have enough for Mexico. The Bahamas maybe."

"Would we work down there?"

"We might have to." Will's fingers were warm on her neck. "If I went back to Alaska next year, we could make it. South in the winter, north in the summer."

The sun shivered at the horizon, dipped into a thin line

of haze and lit the clouds with color. When the bird landed on his foot, Will flinched. Ginny caught her breath with a sound which was not quite a sob. The bird's yellow eyes shone close. She heard the rustle of the jet black wings as they folded.

"A crow," said Will, as the bird, with short jabs of its beak, began to untie his shoelace.

"A crow," she echoed. The bird continued to peck and pull at the shoe. Dark, glossy hackles feathered its neck.

"I don't believe this," said Will. The bird had begun sidestepping along his leg. The head bobbed up and down with a curious undulating motion. It dipped and wove like a snake or a prizefighter. Ginny watched Will's hand twitch in the grass, readying to make a grab.

"Don't," she said. "It's tame. It must belong to somebody."

The bird opened and closed its beak, then spread its wings without making any move to fly. It seemed to choke, and regurgitated a small stone, which bounced off Will's thigh and into the grass.

Ginny offered her index finger to the bird as a perch. "Here bird," she coaxed. The crow turned tail and hopped cautiously out of arm's reach. It lingered once more at Will's feet, feathers glistening black against the sunset, before venturing a suspicious, sideways leap onto her calf.

"Here bird," she called again, feeling the prick of its toes through her jeans. "Here bird."

The crow cocked its head, training a bright eye on her beckoning hand. Ginny bent close. The bird bit her finger, just above the nail.

"Hey!" she said, examining her hand. "That hurt." She shook her fist at the crow.

Will waved his arms above his head. "That's enough," he said.

The bird unfurled its wings and set off down the hill, shining like a dark seam in the curtained sky.

Ginny hugged her knees to her chest and rocked silently back and forth. Will struggled to his feet, put his hands in his pockets. She picked up a twig and poked it into the grass. The small stone had disappeared.

Dusk descended. An evening chill slithered along the ground, rattling the dry leaves. The sun had long since dropped behind the sea.

"I'm cold," Ginny said aloud. "Let's go." She hooked one hand in Will's back pocket and hoisted herself to her feet. When she looked down again, only the rough outline of her rump remained printed in the grass. She dusted the seat of her pants.

They held hands all the way to the car. At the narrower spots on the trail, Ginny edged ahead, but as the path widened she would fall back again in step. She was the first to spot the

bird.

"On the hood," she said.

The crow turned to look at her.

"It's giving us the eye," said Will.

The trunks of the trees grew dim, swathed in shadow. Ginny strode up to the driver's side of the car.

"I'll drive," she said. "Goodbye bird. We're going now."

She climbed in. Will walked around the front of the car, while the bird inched along the hood, maintaining a fixed distance between them. From her seat behind the wheel, Ginny could track the bird easily, but the line of the windshield cut Will off at the shoulder blades. When he gained the passenger side, the latch moved, but the door did not open.

The crow cocked its head, threatened to fly. In the dull light, its wing quills reflected the dead grey sheen of gun metal. Ginny observed the tapered beak of the bird. When it pointed dangerously close to Will, she leaned across the seat and pushed the passenger door open.

Will yelped with surprise and pain. The sharp edge had caught him on the hip. He rubbed the spot.

"The bird," said Ginny. "It looked like it was going to attack."

Will sat down, swung his legs under the dash. The bird hopped onto the roof. Will pulled at the door. It thudded dully against the hem of his coat.

"You said it was tame," he said, clearing his coat from the door. "It's a tame crow."

"Sorry," said Ginny.

They heard the rasp of the crows feet on the roof. Will rolled down his window.

"Go home bird," he said, craning his neck out to get a better look.

"What's it doing?" Ginny asked. She put the key in the ignition.

Will gripped the edge of the roof, pulled himself higher. "It's gone," he said. "Must've flown off." As he slipped back down into the seat, his forehead thunked against the rain gutter.

"Let's go," he said.

Ginny started the engine, turned the wheel sharply, and backed into a small clump of saplings. When the bumper ground against the hillside, she cranked hard to the left, then eased onto the road. She flipped on the headlamps, and the broad beams cast long shadows into the woods. She drove cautiously, listening for a faint scrape from the roof. Not far from the main highway, the car began to shake as if the rear end had bottomed out. Ginny brought them clanking to a halt. She rested her chin on the wheel and sat tight. She heard the rustle of oak leaves, the muffled crash of the sea, a creak from the radiator, dissipating heat.

Will sighed. He fished under the seat and brought up a flashlight.

"I don't want to get out," said Ginny.

Will thumbed the switch back and forth. The beam shone white on the dashboard.

"You don't have to," he said. "Unless it's a flat."

She turned to watch his shadow move along the windows. Something had gone wrong again and the blame nearly stunned her. She saw the light flash up into the trees, down in a bright oval on the dirt, and then disappear behind the rear wheels. She felt two thuds as Will kicked the tires. A twig snapped under his feet. The light swung with the motion of his arm. He opened the door and peered inside.

"Just a stick," he said. "Nothing serious."

Ginny switched off the headlights. The moon had not yet risen. In the spaces between stars, the sky clung to blue. She followed Will to the back of the car. A forked branch, about the thickness of three fingers at the base, was wedged between the bumper and the right fender. The main stem had ploughed a long furrow in the roadbed.

"You must have backed over it when we turned around," said Will.

He gave the fork a few good yanks without loosening the branch. Then he jumped onto the bumper and rode up and down several times- with all his weight-but the wood was still green and did not break. Finally, by laying on his back in the road, and kicking at the base, he was able to dislodge it.

Ginny knelt to retrieve the branch. She grasped it by the tines with both hands, like a divining rod. Will turned the flashlight on the damaged fender and ran his finger over the dent.

"We were lucky," he said. "It could've been worse."

Real Things Men on Tinder have Told Me Behind the Protection of Their Computer Screens that Made Me Feel Cheap

Amber Salik, 2018

Good morning, lovely
It's nice to meet you
We matched so I had to say hi because cute girls like you are few
and far between
Thank God, I was wondering when I'd see a beautiful girl
You have a gorgeous smile
How's your weekend going?
You wanna eat cookie dough together sometime?
I would love to take you home baby
Lemme get your number.
I like you
If you were a triangle, you'd definitely be a cute one!
You're pretty cute for a black chick.
Are you Jamaican? Because you're Jamaican me horny.
Your mother must have been a beaver
Because DAMMMM girl
You know, I've never been with a black girl before
Tell me about yourself. Hopefully you're as interesting as your picture.
We should get to know each other. It only makes sense right?
Hey beautiful,
You know what goes really good with a marshmallow?
Chocolate–you look like a Nestlé girl. How much do you love nuts?
Or look, are you a pizza box?
Because I can't wait to get your top off!
Sorry, I'm not good with chat up lines.
Hey wait,
R u gonna answer me or what?
I've been messaging you I just want to talk–promise
It would be an honor to get to know you
Guess no lunchtime playtime for me today
Can I call you caramel? I love a lil caramel in the morning
Or are you more of a moca? Give me diabetis
Do you like gettin' eaten out?
What can I do to make you snap me tonight?
I'll literally make a fool out of myself.
I want to see you.
Show me dem titz
And then if you sit on my face
I'll eat my way to your heart
I don't know you, but I've never felt this way before
You seem different than the rest
Can we go out sometime please?
If you were a fruit, you'd be a fineapple
You trynna fuck tonight?
Because I can make you pornstar famous
Looks like we both did the RIGHT thing when we swiped
I'm tired of the games being single
I'm just a nice guy looking for a mean girl to corrupt me

I love having a beautiful woman around to try on.
Come cuddle babe
Let's get drunk and make out
We should definitely meet up sometime.

nospaces.com

Martin Galvin, 2007

He wanted always to live in the empty places
Between words, talked only so he could pause
And settle down in that easy chair of silence.
The bigger the novel, the more the houses
Where he could rest and work the puzzle.

And then he grew up and the world hurried down
The clueless street and into his house.
The internet jammed his time with addresses
That didn't have houses, that didn't have pauses,
Just hurry-up words that didn't make sense

If you loved spelling, if you loved spaces.
He dot-commed and googled, he sighed for his loss
But sighing took time and sighing took space
That meant little and less as it wandered around
With nothing to do but continue the flow

Which threatened, that flow, to fill up the world
That used to be filled with comfortable places
Where a boy could hide and a man could go
To escape the babble that filled up the spaces,
To ponder in silence and empty the puzzles.

Home

Alyssa Gauthier

The Goldilocks Syndrome

Peter A. Christensen, 1989

"Unusual behavior? Bizarre? No, not him. He's an observer. He watches, eyes twinkling, drink in hand, as the other guests at the party jump fully clothed into the pool. He keeps buttoned a tight collar of reserve, not on principle nor out of arrogance or pretense, that's just the way he is. He's not a player at the rougher sports; the quiet conversations are what come to him.

Well, maybe there was one thing that you might be interested in. He showed up one night, unexpected and unannounced, a Thursday I think it was, a month, six weeks ago. An odd night at an odd hour. Shows up at ten-thirty with a six-pack of beer, wanting to shoot the breeze. Hadn't been drinking or anything, just said he was in the neighborhood and thought he'd take a chance on stopping by, maybe catch us up and induce us to share his beer. Sure, we were glad to see him. Surprised, maybe even shoved a little off-balance, it was that out of character for him to show up like that. But, hell, we were just watching L.A. Law or something. Sure, come on in.

We sat in front of the T.V. gabbing, light informal chat about nothing in particular. Just old friends schmoozing while keeping an eye on the tube. Midway through the eleven o'clock news, he excuses himself to use the bathroom. Next thing we know, we hear the shower running. I mean he's in there taking a shower. Singing to himself, snatches of Rigoletto wafting out through the sound of the running water. Loud enough that Susan was afraid he'd wake the kids.

After a while, he comes out, his damp hair combed straight back off his forehead. He looks good. Revitalized. We have another beer, watch a little of the Carson show and he leaves. 'Tomorrow's a working day,' he says. 'I've kept you people up late enough.' Okay, we shook hands good night and promised to get together soon. Susan checked the bathroom out after he left. 'It's neat as a pin,' she said."

***

"We had just finished breakfast," the police report quoted one Mrs. Thomas Sullivan. "My husband had left for work, and I was in the foyer seeing the children off to school when a man appeared at the head of the stairway." The intruder, who was dressed in a dark business suit, proceeded down the stairs and out the front door.

"He wished us a 'good morning,'" Mrs. Sullivan reported, allowing that "he made a good appearance" and "seemed freshly groomed," having about him the aroma of newly applied after-shave. The intruder also carried "an expensive

looking leather portfolio of the kind that might belong to a successful attorney."

"It gave me a start," admitted Mrs. Sullivan, "but there was nothing threatening or self-conscious about his demeanor. He simply walked down the stairs and out of the house like a boarder going off to work. He was so at ease that I thought it might be one of my husband's friends or colleagues." As a result, Mrs. Sullivan delayed notifying the authorities and the trespasser was not, on that occasion, apprehended.

***

"What do you do for a living, Mr. Egner?"

"I'm an engineer."

"By whom are you employed?"

"Well, I'm not really a practicing engineer anymore, much is the pity, though I try to keep my hand in. I've taken on more of a management responsibility. I let the younger legs run the bases."

"And who do you work for?"

"Crown-Tiller Company. Here, I've got a card. Please take it. They gave me a box, has a thousand of them. I wouldn't use them up in ten years."

"You're a Vice-President and Senior Manager of Produce Development?"

"Yes. Well, actually Director of Research and Development. I was promoted last month. They've got a new card on order. I'll have to throw out all those unused old ones. Although, I never do. I save them. Use them as bookmarks."

"He was in the kitchen when I came back from my morning run. He had a pot of coffee up. Was boiling an egg and cooking some toast. Reading the paper. Scared the bejabbers out of me. I thought for a minute maybe I was in the wrong house."

"How did he react?"

"I shook him up a little. He didn't expect me to come in as I did. He said something like, 'My God, you're up early!' Yeah, and it's a good thing I am, I said."

"What happened then?"

"I asked him what the hell he was doing, or who the hell he thought he was. Put a real edge of irritation on my voice. I didn't know what to think. The way he was dressed he might have been a real estate solicitor or an insurance salesman, somebody come to pester us on some kind of business; barged in through the door I'd left unlocked when I went out to run. Some of these people have colossal brass. But it was so damn early, not even seven o'clock. And, fact is, he didn't really fit the part. He had a more upscale look, executive suite class, and he was plainly unsettled by my aggressive posture. He didn't try to talk his way around me. Once he saw I was angry he was anxious to go."

"He left then?"

"Oh yeah. I told him to get the hell out, and he went. Picked up his briefcase and left. Then I called the cops and checked on the wife and kids. Now, I'm thinking this guy's maybe a lunatic, who knows these days. I had a moment of anxiety for my family's well-being. Had a vision of a tabloid headline–The Custom Tailored Killer. They were all right, of course. All still sound asleep. But it was then I found that the guest room had been slept in. And the toweling in the guest bath had been used."

"Was there anything missing, any of your possessions not accounted for?"

"No, he didn't take anything. In fact, we found a fifty dollar bill under the pillow in the guest bed. I don't know what this guy was up to, but he was no thief."

***

"I don't understand it. It's clear he's having some kind of breakdown. What was he doing in those houses?"

"Apparently spending the night."

"It's ridiculous. My brother is a successful man, has a place of his own. He's not a homeless person who needs to take shelter by breaking and entering. He does not require the charity of strangers."

"Of course not."

***

"The first time? It was last month. One of the Board members is an alumnus of a little school in Minnesota. Good academic reputation, Division III football champs as well, about an hour's drive from Minneapolis. He asked me to participate in a convocation they were having, 'American Technology on the Brink of the Twenty-First Century'. Give a talk, sit in on a panel discussion, be available for a Q & A session with the students. He asked me to do it like it was a big favor, but in truth it's the kind of thing I'm only too happy to do. It makes a nice day away from the office.

This one was particularly convivial. It ended with a spaghetti dinner at the Dean's house. I stayed a little longer than I should have. By the time I left, there was a real chance I wouldn't make it back to Minneapolis in time for the plane. The Dean volunteered to put me up for the night, and I was tempted–not just for the convenience, hell, after the long day I had no zeal for the trip back to Newark, I wasn't due to get back home until after two in the morning–but no, it wasn't just avoiding the hassle but something else, the comfort I felt in the circumstances. The midwestern charm of the campus, the beautiful October day it had been, the earnest enthusiasm the university people–faculty and students alike–seemed to invest in their pursuits. The place had the quality of pastoral sanctuary. I didn't want to leave. Not just because I was going to have to scramble to make a flight that wouldn't get me home 'till after midnight, but because there was something there, on that

little campus in the middle of Minnesota farm country–in the middle of nowhere by the standards of the world I inhabit–that I wanted to be a part of.

But I had a meeting the next day, ten a.m. I had to get back. So I said good-bye, got behind the wheel of the rented Chevy, and promptly got lost. I couldn't find my way off the campus. Finally, a gas station attendant straightened me out and got me on the highway to the Twin Cities. But I'd lost fifteen, twenty minutes and after a while it was pretty clear that I wasn't going to make the flight. I should have just kept going, of course. Taken a room at one of the airport motels and gotten the first flight out in the morning. Instead, I turned around and drove back to the campus. I guess the plan was to go back and belatedly take up the Dean on his invitation. But by the time I got back the town was virtually shut down. An all-night gas station, a diner, a couple of bars were all that were open.

I tried to find the Dean's house. I drove off into a residential area that could have been his neighborhood. It was after eleven. Most of the houses were dark. The streets were shade tree lined, and the leaves had already turned and begun to fall. A wind was scattering them through the perspective of the headlights as I drove. I had an uncomfortable feeling of being left out, like a child coming home late and getting lost and suddenly sensing the world's magnitude and indifference, and panicking at the missed security of his parent's hearth.

I pulled up at a house that had on some downstairs lights and knocked at their door, hoping its occupants might direct me to the Dean's place. But no one answered. I pushed the bell and rapped at the face of the door. No response. I was then bold enough to peek in the windows, but saw no one. Perhaps from a kind of desperation I convinced myself that the lights were decoys, left on by the absent residents to give the appearance of occupancy. Maybe that's not what people do, or need to do, or think of doing in Minnesota, maybe that's an East Coast ploy–and a weak one at that–but the place looked empty to me. That was my intuition. On impulse, I tried the window. It was open. I had to pull on it some and it came up slowly, but it came up. And then I went inside.

At first I was anxious. I had a vision of myself encountering the owner, he pajama clad and toting a shotgun. I was cautious enough to take off my shoes and reconnoiter the site in stocking feet, like an errant husband returning home after a night out with the boys. First, I checked out the downstairs and then the second floor. There were three bedrooms, the master and two set up for kids, boy's room both, one a high schooler's, the other dominated by posters of baseball heroes and model airplanes.

Nobody was home. There was no mail in the box and no paper on the stoop. The thermostat was turned down to sixty. I figured, admittedly on scant evidence, that they were away

for a period of days, at least overnight. I gave no concern to the possibility a neighbor might wonder at my car out front, or spot my movements through the windows, and call the police. I was in some strange realm, an intersection of the psyche and spirit I hadn't passed through in years. I slept that night in the older boy's bedroom. Beneath his wall-hung collection of Big Ten school pennants. Beneath his poster of Eddie Van Halen. Across from his Commodore PC, his bookshelf of science fiction paperbacks, Stephen King gothics, and stacks of Sports Illustrated. And I slept soundly. Like being rocked in my mother's arms. I hadn't realized, until then, how thin and spotty my sleep had become.

The next morning I called the office and withdrew myself from the ten o'clock meeting. Called the airport and got myself on a noon flight back east. Then I indulged myself. Cooked a big country breakfast, eggs and sausage, pancakes on the side, and brewed a pot of coffee. I felt entirely at home. I tidied the place up and left fifty dollars under the sugar bowl. I walked out to my car with a smile on my face, whistling. I hadn't felt so good in years."

***

"I don't know why he never married. He was always one of those men who didn't seem to have time for a family. You know the type, it's on their agenda, something they intend to do, but just haven't gotten around to. I think he's really very shy of intimacy. It scares him. He's always been this very private man.

Our parents adored him. They thrived on his possibilities. His grades, his academic triumphs. Like misers compulsively sifting the stored coins of their wealth, they recounted the individual tokens of his gifts. Yes, he had gotten the highest scores on the aptitude tests given in high school. Yes, Miss Fisher, who had taught math in the junior high for twenty-five years, had told my mother that he was the most able student she'd ever had. Yes, he had, when still in grade school, amazed us all over one Thanksgiving dinner by multiplying numbers in his head faster than our cousin Richard who was home from his first semester at Lehigh, could do them on his slide rule.

They bragged on him. Shamelessly, embarrassingly. The naive dream-mongering of two innocent and discomfited people.

And we adored him too. His siblings. How could we not, at least early on. He lit such a light in our parents' eyes that we, for a long while, saw him only by that illumination. That all changed of course. He's not close to any of us now. There were resentments. Some hard feelings.

But what I saw that I think the others missed was that he had to work at it. Our parents' romantic view was that it was all God-given. The answers were whispered by divine voice directly in his ear. 'He doesn't have to crack a book,' my

father would say. Or 'He's got a photographic memory. He reads something through one time, he's got it, under lock and key.' Nonsense. The fact was he worked hard. Spent hours with the books. He logged more study time than the other three of us combined. He didn't spurn my parents' doting, he accepted the laurels all right, but he paid a price. At some point I realized he was carrying a hell of a burden. He was no demi-god, but just another working-man with a pick and shovel."

***

"When I came home from California I hitchhiked. Maybe I was playing the role a little but I had the look–long hair, a beard, thin as a poker. I was a newly-minted Ph.D. from Berkeley but I looked like a pilgrim on the road to Woodstock. Even had a denim jacket with a patch of the Zig-Zag man.

Turned out I was no Dean Moriarity. Took me ten days and it was a grind. But, you know, people took me in. Not hippies either but ordinary folks, people with haircuts and regular jobs. Guy in Cheyenne, coming back from the movies with his pregnant wife, pulls over in a pick-up truck. 'Hey, buddy,' he says, 'we seen you standin' there on our way to the theater two hours ago. Doesn't look like you're going to catch one tonight, and it's lookin' to me like rain.' They took me home, gave me a sandwich and a beer, and made up the fold-out bed in the den.

Another guy, an accountant, picks me up about forty miles north of Chicago. A Saturday night. He and his wife had another couple over for bridge. They let me use the shower, run my clothes through the washer. Sent out for pizza. In the morning, he drove me out to the access to Route 80 and gave me ten bucks. This was a regular guy, two kids, a house in the suburbs. I could have been anybody, just another spaced-out drifter, but he took me in. That was almost twenty years ago."

"Do you think society is less generous in its treatment of you now?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure. Listen, I have this recurring dream. My mother is pulling me by the hand, almost dragging me, up a hill to school. I am a small boy, angry and resisting, furious in the deep, violated way of children who are not given their way. I am yelling at her: 'I told you and told you, I don't want to go!' She ignores me, continues steadfastly up the hill while I persist, in vain, in struggling against her. I fight her all the way, the exertions active and intense enough to enter and disturb my sleep. It is an enduring effort, but after a time, near the top of the hill, I realize she is no longer pulling me. Alarmed and anxious, I turn around and see her standing by herself, far down the hill, watching me. As I look at her she waves, a long slow sad valedictory wave. And then she is gone, and there is no one on the hill but me."

"Mr. Egner, I don't understand. Why did you break into the Brownell home?"

"Don't you see, I had the best of reasons."

"And they were...?"

"It was cold outside and the wind was blowing. They seemed such a happy family. And it looked so warm and safe inside."

For Three Dead Astronauts

Peter Fiore, 1968

Perhaps because we don't count the dead and don't believe in death but tonight the television people couldn't even pronounce your names correctly and kept stumbling over their prepared lines and outside it kept on snowing and when I got drunk enough I jumped off the roof into a snowbank. The announcer spent about five minutes telling us how one of you was born in Michigan and another had once lived here, and President Johnson mentioned something about our hearts going out to you, like Richard II.

Because the moon's already been bombed and even lovers don't believe in it anymore. Only life can go boom but now there's no more cold beers after work and no more screwing, no more hot throb in your throats when you wake up and maybe if I could think of the moon as something other than another Super Bowl I wouldn't have to corner the maid in the cellar.

This brave new celebration for fatherless children's fathers. Buck Rogers.

Wait for Awhile (or Exactly a Semester)

Abbey Behan

Chick Sexing School or, How Our Dead Grandfather Summoned Us to Japan

Kyoko Yoshida, 2000–2001

List, list, O, list!
If thou didst ever thy dear father love–
–Hamlet

It was right after our grandfather died when my brother George suddenly started to resemble him. To be precise, George started to look like the portrait of Grandpa.

I never met my mother's father, Grandpa Taketora, while he was alive. I'd like to pretend, at least, he was in his coffin, pale and all wrinkled up when I finally saw his face in December 1959. I could tell you details as if I had been at the wake, like, his gray hair sticking out of his nostrils bothered me; the tails of his eyebrows were almost touching his closed eyelashes. He was so big for a Japanese man of his age that the undertakers had to bend his knees to fit him into an extra-large coffin, et cetera.

But this is not true. I couldn't see his real face, dead or alive. When I met Grandpa at last, he wasn't Matsuda Taketora anymore. He had been given a protracted, incomprehensible posthumous Buddhist name. He had been cremated, put into a ceramic urn, and placed in his family grave on a hill, which commands the Omura Bay.

I have never seen Grandpa Taketora's photograph, either. All I have seen is his oil portrait, which still hangs in our living room. He is in his mid-thirties in the portrait. I must admit, he is quite handsome. There he stands, flat against the velvety, gloomy background. He is lean and tall, wearing the Japanese Army's uniform, which doesn't exist on the earth anymore, thank goodness. Five decorations on his chest dully gleam in ocher. Grandpa Taketora's prominent features are his wise-looking forehead, lean, lofty nose, and the stubborn-looking thick black eyebrows above gold-rimmed round spectacles on his long, clean-shaven face. My mother doesn't look like him at all. She is a round-faced, button-nosed, short-limbed woman. I regret that I didn't benefit from atavism. Though I inherited none of my maternal side's features, I had been his favorite, his first grandchild.

My parents married against Grandpa Taketora's will. Since then, Grandpa Taketora had never sent her a word, even

a New Year's card. The official excuse was that he could not admit that Ma had chosen to stay in America and marry Pa, a second-generation Japanese—a degenerated Japanese, Grandpa might say—who dared to volunteer to fight against his own people in the war. This is not true, by the way. Pa fought against the Germans in Europe. I think Grandpa had been simply difficult because his daughter didn't come back to him. He insisted my mother's stay in America with her aunt was temporary, but technically speaking, she wasn't his daughter anymore.

Her mother passed away around 1920, leaving her and her three older siblings. Her father, Grandpa Taketora, was in service in Siberia and had no idea when he could come home. The Reds were so stubborn in Siberia. He had to give up his children to his relatives' care. Three relatives in Japan looked after the three older children, and my mother was sent to her aunt Satoko in San Francisco. Auntie Satoko, who had divorced an Irish-American man, adopted Ma right away before the Anti-Japanese Immigration Law passed in 1924. This made it difficult for Ma to go back to Japan. Although Ma admits that she hoped to remain in America for her own interest, it was not only her fault that she did not return.

As California became a difficult place to live for the Japanese, Auntie Satoko moved to Utah with Ma. I know they moved a couple of more times afterwards, but from then up until I was born, their stories suddenly get obscure. I don't want to ask what they don't want to talk about, so they still remain obscure. All I know is that Ma met Pa before he went to Europe, and after he came back, they moved to Tacoma, where we live now.

Grandpa didn't know my brother and I had been born until the war was over. I was two and my brother one when Grandpa learned that Japan lost the war against America, but that he gained two grandchildren in America. That's when he sent his portrait to his daughter in America. My mother remembered the portrait well. It had been hung on his drawing room wall when she was little, over the leather chair where Grandpa sat and smoked while waiting for his patients. In the spring of 1946, when Ma tore open the brown parcel paper and saw the ocher medals revealed, she realized right away that it was her father's sign that he would permit her marriage, her way of life, and accept the two of us as his grandchildren. She has treasured the portrait since then, and it will be my job to carry along the portrait in the future because my mother always tells me that my mere existence retrieved our extended family from our little diaspora.

We grew up hearing stories of Grandpa Taketora from Ma and Auntie Satoko. He was six foot four and could lift three hundred pounds. He swam across the Omura Bay when he was twelve. When he was a teenager, he used to dunk himself

into the Saigo River at five every morning, snow or rain, dredging the water for sweetwater clams for his family's breakfast. He won a national scholarship to study medicine at the Imperial University of Tokyo. He knew more than four thousand Chinese characters. He won two medals in the First World War and three in the Siberian Dispatch. But when we asked Ma and Auntie Satoko how he acquired those ocher medals, nobody knew. Ma and Auntie Satoko would assure me, whenever I asked, that Grandpa Taketora was an army surgeon, so he got the medals for saving people's lives, not for killing them. I sort of bought it, but my brother George didn't. He didn't say he didn't believe their stories, but I knew he suspected our Grandpa had killed at least a couple of pre-Nazi Germans and Red partisans in his years of service. Poor Germans and Russians, they had to play the role of expendable extras in our family epic. Grandpa Taketora was a mythic hero. All the more so for his bodily absence and his portrait presence in our house.

After the war was over, Grandpa Taketora wrote to us until he was hospitalized for cancer of the larynx. A few lines were devoted to his life in Omura: not only did he work in his clinic, he was the head of the municipal health center; we heard about vaccinations and nutrition education in his small town. His letters gave me an impression that Japan had a long way to go to improve its public hygiene.

I also learned things like this Japanese superstition: if you get poisoned by fugu, a poisonous blowfish, the Japanese will bury you alive with your head sticking out of the earth like a neglected winter squash. Grandpa had blowfish-poisoned patients a couple of times a year. Usually a stomach pump would save them, but once this poor middle-aged man, who illegally cooked blowfish that he fished himself, came too late to his clinic because he had been left in the dirt for half the day.

Besides his life in Japan, he spent many lines describing what he wanted George and me to become. That was the cream of his letters. He sounded quite authoritative, like any mythic hero. George would be a doctor, naturally, Grandpa Taketora asserted, and he had planned my life according to the years left in his life. In his old-fashioned imagination, he wanted me to do as much as a woman could do—which was not much—while he was still alive. After I finished my compulsory education, I would marry a good Japanese man on my sixteenth birthday—the legal age for a woman to marry in Japan—and bear his great-grandchild in nine months sharp. He would be seventy-eight by then. He would die, he wrote again and again, after he saw his first great-grandchild. He always wrote that he could wait only until I became sixteen.

Every time I thought of Grandpa's obsession, an imaginary scene came into my mind—he would pass away at the peak of his delight, lying spread-eagled on the runway, upon

seeing me descending the steps from the trans-Pacific airplane, landing on his soil with my newborn baby in my arms. "Grandpa! Grandpa!" My parents, George, and I would run up to him and jolt him, but his contented smile would be peacefully fixed on his long face. We would shoulder him back to the airport terminal, each of us holding a limb, since he was so big. I wouldn't be able to hold my baby in my arms while I'd support Grandpa's limb, so my baby would be laid on its belly on Grandpa's belly. Then I'd suddenly come back to reality, asking myself, where is the baby's father, where is my husband? He should be carrying my baby while I am taking part in the triumphant yet tragic end of our hero. Then I would finally realize how impossible the first premise of the scene was. How could I get married at sixteen? With whom? Frank? Takeshi? Or James? Can I scream?

In his letters, he always counted the years he had to wait. Every letter was a countdown. It sounded as if he couldn't wait for his last day. I have felt sorry for Grandpa because I have known all the time that his dream wouldn't come true. When I was ten, my dream was to become a head keeper of a zoo or an ostrich breeder. Even as a ten-year-old, I was aware that having a baby at the age of sixteen would be a great obstacle to my future career. My parents had their own expectations for me and George, and marrying me off at sixteen was not one of them. But Grandpa's count-down letters kept coming.

The letters were written in Japanese mixed with many knotty Chinese characters I had never seen. Even after Ma read them aloud for us, we needed some words rephrased or interpreted. Sometimes all of us got lost in the labyrinth of his old-fashioned Eastern rhetoric.

And today, I am still sorry and confused because he did wait until I became sixteen. He died a month before my seventeenth birthday. Long enough to have a baby. Was he serious about his plans? If so, what could I have done for him instead of just feeling guilty and telling him nothing?

***

Looking back on my past, I was always more concerned about my career than romance. I became acquainted with my first uninspiring date when I was fourteen, while I acquired my first chickens at the age of ten. Aspiring to be a top ostrich breeder, it was natural that I started with a smaller kind. I bought the chickens from the old Chinese man who used to bring chickens in baskets to our grade school. He was trying to sell chickens to school kids. Kids liked to finger the chickens, but they weren't selling well. Bringing a chicken back home was a different story from buying marbles on our way home from school. There were two baskets of chickens: one for hens and one for roosters. He sold a hen for a quarter and a cock for

a nickel. He would appear one or two times a month and squat at the edge of the yard lawn near the school entrance, smoking a long Chinese pipe. His chickens were busy tweeting and pushing each other. Sometimes they were so loud they sounded like rain falling upon a tin roof. Their feathers were different shades of chicken yellow: some were almost creamy white and some were sunny yellow, and there was every possible shade in between. Before spring break every year, his chickens were dyed pastel with food colors. Orange chickens, pink chickens, blue chickens. Once Easter was over, the chickens would go back to the normal gradations between ivory and yellow.

The first time I touched the chickens, brushing against the flock of them squeezed in the basket, I wish I could tell you, "Electricity thundered from the tips of my finger through my spine and limbs and I felt my hair bristle up; and right away I realized that it was a predestined encounter, me and chickens." But this is not true. My fingers stroking their feathers, I actually chuckled; the surface of the fidgeting bunch of warm down tickled me amusingly. Then the Chinese man grabbed one chicken and held it out to me. I offered my palms side by side. He put the chicken in the narrow ditch between my palms. I curved my palms and shaped two hemispheres to form a round cage for the chicken. The interior of my hand cage felt a scurrying sunny ball of fur, and I was still chuckling, feeling lemon-yellow airy feathers filling me up and warming me up. I put the chicken back into the girl basket and hurried home to persuade Ma and Pa.

This is how I obtained my first three chickens and how I got into the whole business about chickens. Before they were large enough to stay outside, they lived in our room. I kept them in a worn-out corrugated box. I held them in the round cage of my palms, one by one in turn. I could do it all day.

I called my chickens Chicken-one, Chicken-two, and Chicken-three, because as much as the feeling of those little yellow down balls in my hand, I liked the sound of "chicken" in my ears. The two jumpy sounds followed by the comforting grounding of a nasal sound pleased my tongue. Chicken, Chicken, Chicken. I kept repeating their names while I played with them. Chicken-one, Chicken-two, Chicken-three. I was very happy. But my mother found a need to intervene between me and my chickens. She didn't find Chicken an aesthetic name for chickens. She thought I was playing the role of an oppressive jailer with my chickens. "Eleanor, don't call your pets by numbers," she said. "They are not prisoners. They are your friends, Eleanor. Give them nice names." I tried, but I had to tell her I couldn't find any more suitable name than Chicken for them. "Okay," Ma said nonchalantly. "Let me name them for you." Then I realized she had been longing for this moment, and it was too late to stop her. She had their names in her mind already. She named Chicken-one, the white girl chick,

Tosca; Chicken-two, the only boy, Tristan; and Chicken-three, the yellowish girl chick, Isolde. Before I knew it, it became our family rule to name my chickens something like Aida and Ladames, Carmen and Don Jose, Rodolpho and Mimi, and Papageno and Papagena.

My mother always wanted to become an opera singer. That's why she didn't want to go back to Japan even after Grandpa Taketora came back from Siberia. She wanted to go to a music school in San Francisco. But soon it turned too difficult for her to pursue her dream for various reasons. I think it was a good idea that she gave up the prima donna thing because even if she had made it, what roles could she play as a prima? Not much choice. The frustrated Chinese empress who kills men and the neglected Japanese geisha who kills herself. That sounds like a monotonous prima life.

My love for chickens caused me some hardships, too. I was so much into my three chickens, I couldn't eat any kind of poultry anymore. At the dinner table, I would poke the bumpy skin with my fork, thinking of death and my chickens, until tears welled up in my eyes. This habit drove my parents crazy. The fuss snowballed as my thing infected George, who is a bit more sensitive than I. We wept in chorus, poking the plump poultry in pity for the poor birdie together until we were sent to bed in disgrace.

This symptom lasted for three months until I found twin baby owls in the woods in Washington Park. Two fat piles of gray down were cuddling together at the base of an oak tree. They must have fallen from their nest. They were too little to fly. I couldn't keep them as pets. Ambitious as I was, skipping from chickens to raptors was a leap too sudden. I asked Ma for help. She found a veterinarian in Forrest Creek who took care of injured big birds. We brought the baby owls to his clinic, which was full of big falcons, old kites, and grown-up owls, all sick and hurt. They were motionless and sullen in the cages. I smelt their wounds and diseases. I heard the air vibrating with shame, shame for their disgraceful scars.

"Let's see. Hum. The birdies are quite meek!" Dr. Cheyenne peeped into the box of owls we put on the counter. The baby owls were still stuck together like Siamese twins. "How come they are so down?" the doctor cheerfully said, rubbing his hands. "They are not hurt or anything. I wonder if they are hungry. Let's see." He opened the maple wood drawers under the counter in a businesslike manner. Standing behind Dr. Cheyenne, the contents of the drawers jumped into my eyes. The drawer was full of fluffy yellow things. They were freshly dead chickens. There were about thirty of them, cleanly dead, lying in the drawer, riveting my eyes. Seeing my paralyzed face, Ma's eyes reflected great regret. She must have thought, Oh no, this is the last blow; Eleanor won't eat chicken for the rest of her life; what should I do with the chicken left in the

refrigerator?

The doctor pinched out two chicken corpses, and put them under the owl's noses. The birds squeezed against each other even tighter. They didn't seem to understand the furry balls were their food. Dr. Cheyenne sniffed at this sight, whipped a knife out of his laboratory coat, and started to dress the tiny chickens. This made me weep. Ma touched my shoulders, but she was also amazed at my stupidity. The chickens didn't bleed. The doctor nimbly peeled the feathers and skin off, and I saw the tiny chicken breast flesh, about the size of my thumb, but otherwise the same fresh, skinned chicken breast I had seen in the market. I don't remember the details which followed that. I don't recall whether the owls ate the meat or not. I was devastated, yet the image of the tiny, pink chicken breast led me to come to terms with the relationship between man and chicken. The fragile chicken, cute to look at, nice to play with, good to eat. From that day, I resumed eating poultry. I could chew and swallow chicken again.

Meanwhile, my three chickens, Tosca, Tristan, and Isolde, had passed the cutest phase of their life and became ugly, angry adolescents. Their cream feathers were mixed with yellow down; their little cockscombs didn't match their baby faces. In short, they looked like vertically stretched chickens somebody created by mistake. And poor Isolde, she turned out to be a rooster!

The old Chinese man had told me she was a girl! Of course, I waited for him to reappear in front of the school and complained to him. He promptly apologized for his mistake. To my surprise, he said that this kind of mistake would happen sometimes, and gave me a newborn girl chicken, and a boy chicken in addition. He put a red rubber band around the girl chicken's leg. I timidly asked him if I had to return Isolde to him. He waved his hands and shook his head, repeating, "No. No." So I was very happy, getting two more chickens for free. I named them Romeo and Juliet on my way home. Romeo was a rooster and Juliet was a hen.

***

Two years passed. Carmen and Don Jose, Aida and Ladames, and Papageno and Papagena joined my flock of chickens. As I learned more about chickens, as chickens became a part of our family life, including the fresh eggs on our breakfast table every morning, my vision of becoming an ostrich breeder started to take a different shape, a more realistic shape. I couldn't say it aloud to anybody else. The more serious your dream becomes, the more fragile it appears. If I'd said it aloud, the spell would no longer be good, and the dream would never come true, I felt.

I frequented the science museum to see the chicken incubators. On weekdays, I would squat in front of them and watch the activities inside for hours without being disturbed.

They let me in for free because I sometimes brought in fertilized eggs for the incubators. No matter how many times I saw the scene at home or at the museum, the spectacle in the incubator overwhelmed me. The newly hatched chickens especially caught my attention. Their down still damp and bloody, exhausted from the tedious labor of coming out into the world, the baby chicks tottered along the glass walls, tweeting weakly. Due to their bloody appearance, they looked as if they were dying, instead of just having been born. And there were about two dozen other bloody chickens, reeling and staggering, or tweeting and pecking or lying and resting. The resting ones actually seemed quite dead. With their little chicken batteries dead, they were flat on the floor, their short legs and little wings sprawled in every way, their tiny tongues sticking out, their eyelids half-closed showing the whites of their eyeballs, with clotted blood all over the body. Gosh, they're dead, I first thought. Almost a quarter of them are dead; I didn't know they had to risk their lives to come out into life.

But I found out, after a while, in five minutes or so, those dead chickens rose up like zombies and started to waddle about to explore their little world as if nothing had happened. Meanwhile, those who had been toddling would pass away in a flash, boom, like drunken old hobos falling asleep in the gutters of graveled road.

This repetitive cycle of newborn chicks' life—tweet and toddle, boom, drunk dead, up, toddle and tweet—never bored me. These gory creatures were full of life! And they constantly reminded me of my father's father, Grandpa Tomizo, so-called Grandpa Tom, who died during my incubator years, when I was thirteen.

He showed his first sign of a drinking problem after he had moved into a hospital for nephritis complicated by gout, a half year before his death. Grandpa Tom had been drinking since he was twelve, but, mind you, always moderately. He had never caused trouble to others because of his love for liquor. If you could just listen, at his wake, how his friends and relatives praised the way Grandpa Tom used to drink! They would lament his death as they filled each other's glass with Grandpa Tom's favorite English vodka, calling his drinking style noble and humble at the same time. He was always quiet, smiling occasionally, sitting at the corner with his glass of vodka and a piece of fresh chili pepper in his hands. He would nibble the pepper and lick the liquor; lick the vodka and nibble the pepper. Thus he would sit for hours. His relatives talked and laughed at his funeral about the way Grandpa Tom had been happy as a clam during Prohibition with his handmade little distillery in the basement, making his own liquor from sweet potatoes.

But at the end of his life, Grandpa Tom behaved like a wicked alcoholic just because he had never lived in a place as

dry as the hospital, even during Prohibition. He really didn't know what to do. The nurses treated him like an alcoholic, and this made us really sad. We pleaded with his nurses to let him have a drop of vodka and he would be contented, but they would just nod and smile with their eyes saying, "Sure. That's what they always say." So finally one day, Grandpa Tom sneaked out of the hospital and toddled across the eight-lane boulevard on his gouty feet to a liquor shop. He bought a mini-bottle of vodka, and restraining his excitement, he toddled back across the eight lanes to the hospital. He later told Ma it had taken him an hour to cross the street twice. He waddled up the stairs and climbed up on his bed, again, on his seventy-six-year-old gouty feet. Now he put his hand into his bosom and took out his mini-bottle when a nurse came into his room.

When we heard this story from another nurse, we all blushed in shame and exclaimed in protest. "How dare you, tyrants! He's finishing his life! A drop will do him good, no harm!" The nurse gave us a dirty look as if we were grumbling nonsense, so we decided on our way home, the next time we would come visit him, we would bring him vodka in a coffee pot.

Grandpa Tom could not even finish a spoonful of vodka. Three drops were enough for him. He blushed like a bride and said thank you to us. After we talked a little about the weather, school and the nursery, he became drowsy so we left. He died two months after, and we managed to smuggle in the coffee pot every other week in his last months. Every time we walked into the hospital with his coffee pot hidden in the bottom of Ma's tote bag, I glanced back at the street where Grandpa had crossed twice for his vodka, and then I thought of the chickens in the incubators. If Grandpa Taketora is a titanic hero in our family epic, Grandpa Tom is an old friendly fairy in our family fables.

***

After Grandpa Tom died, I stopped visiting the incubators. I was not only busy with my ever-increasing chickens—now there were a dozen of them—but I had also started going out with this eighth grader, whose name I don't want to mention. Well, I didn't hate him or like him, but I went out with him only because that's what everybody was supposed to do, and he wasn't as bad as the rest of the herd. School had turned into a strange place when I became a seventh grader: suddenly, all the girls started to flirt like crazy. They were blinking their eyes harder than ever. I could hear them tweeting coquet, coquet, coquet. The boys appeared like half-grown chickens with their tiny cockscombs and their ill-proportioned, stretched bodies in mixed feathers. They were ugly and angry like my half-grown chickens. I wished I'd had a garbage lid at school to protect myself from those half-chicken, half-rooster boys.

That's what I used at home to shield myself from the young roosters.

Ma became frantic when she found out I had a date, not because she thought I shouldn't, but because my brother had none. She insisted that George must be secretly popular at school. I said no. Being such a short, ugly, clumsy, shy thing, how could he interest those half-chicken, half-coquette girls? Then Ma would accuse me of not introducing nice girlfriends of mine to him. "Since you are the big sister, Eleanor," Ma went on, "you have to take care of your little brother for the rest of your life. It's your duty to introduce him to nice girls. They must like him." The idea of taking care of my brother for the rest of my life depressed me.

Ma had her own theory. She insisted that George had no date because of his hearing problem. He had been hit by a Sunday school bus when he was six. I saw him tossed up like a volleyball on the bonnet. After the ambulance had carried him away, the neighbor kids who had been watching the accident from a distance rushed to me, their faces all glowing in excitement.

"Did he die? Did he die?" That's all they wanted to know. No, he didn't. He didn't even break his leg. But the shock to his head caused this hearing problem—he could not catch high-pitched tones very well, especially when the sound came from behind him. So according to Ma, George must be missing the pretty chicks tweeting behind him at school every day; the chicks must be desperately curious about him.

I knew that this was not the case, but I had no good counter-argument, so I just let her believe in her theory. I had no time to check the chicks tweeting behind my brother. I was already busy with my chickens: Romeo wanted to monopolize all the hens, and poor Don Jose was always getting beaten up by Romeo. Carmen would flirt with Romeo openly. I had to put Romeo into a separate cage before jealous Don Jose stabbed Carmen with a dagger or innocent Juliet stabbed herself.

There were more sexual confusions. When I was sixteen, Papageno turned out to be a hen and Papagena a rooster. Again, I thought about complaining to the Chinese man. They were the last chickens I bought from him. I actually went to see him. By then I knew where he lived. In his shack, I saw the same two willow baskets, one for girls and one for boys. Since he couldn't always keep an eye on the chickens, some of them would jump out of the baskets. He grabbed them and put them back, but sometimes he couldn't tell from which basket the chicken had sneaked out. And he had no way to tell whether the chicken was a boy or a girl. Only the chicken farmer could tell. The Chinese man just bought chickens from him.

I returned home without telling him what had happened to Papageno and Papagena. I couldn't tell whether Pa-

pageno was a boy or a girl, either, when (s)he was a baby chick. I had a lot more to learn about the creatures. On my way back, I became more determined about my future plan. Now I felt I was ready to tell my parents what I wanted to do. I wanted to go to college to become a veterinarian. I thought it was a matter of course.

***

So I told Ma and Pa that I wanted to go to college to become a vet right after I reached home.

"What?" Pa grimaced at my confession and lost his word. Ma interrupted him, "I'm sorry, Eleanor. We don't have money. I'm sorry. We can't even afford to go back to Japan. I mean, for the funeral. Grandpa Taketora died. We've just got a telegram."

***

It was a remote death. He was my mythic hero, but I didn't know his face, and I hadn't heard his voice. Somebody had died far away on the other side of the Earth. Somebody I knew only in stories and in letters. He had a big wish for me. But the wish was very remote from my real life. Ma was crying. I tried to cry not to be rude to her and dead Grandpa. But tears just didn't come. I had to give up crying. My eyes got tired from too much squinting.

A week later, I had to face a close death. Romeo died, having been bit by a weasel. I found him cold and stiff in the little comer behind Pa's lily greenhouse one morning.

Two weeks later, Tosca died. I suspect the December chill did it. My first chicken. Chicken-one. This time I didn't have to try to cry. It was disturbingly easy.

We sort of avoided talking about Grandpa Taketora. I noticed my parents were exchanging letters with Ma's relatives. But it was too sad to think about him and not to be able to go to his funeral, or his burial, or even to see his grave. We all tried to concentrate on our business, chickens and college in my case. Then good news came in. Some girl asked George to go out skating with her. My brother got a date! See, it wasn't because of his ears! We just needed some patience.

Ma was ecstatic. She had known the day would come, but she couldn't believe her eyes. Christmas came and my brother got presents from two girls he didn't even know. He was becoming popular. Now freed from the duty of introducing nice girls to my brother, which I never did actually, I focused on my future. I had to manage to go to college all by myself. I had to put my chickens into one of Pa's chrysanthemum greenhouses so that they wouldn't freeze to death. I had to go out with my date. I had to study, especially biology.

It was one afternoon before Valentine's Day when a book parcel arrived at our place. Pa had ordered the 1959 Directory of Japanese-Americans from the Daily Japanese-American Times in Los Angeles. It was as thick as Pa's hardcover

Bible. He paid the publisher to have his nursery's name in bold letters. I had just come home from school and, munching on toast, I watched him thumb through the directory. After checking Suzuki Nursery in bold both in English and Japanese and browsing other names like Auntie Satoko and other Japanese friends, he went back to the greenhouses. I reached for the Persian blue book to see what it was like and got bored right away because there were so many Chinese characters I couldn't read. I discovered there were many Suzukis all over America, even in a city called Boring, Oregon, where only three Japanese families lived.

My eyes stopped at the advertisement section in the middle of the book. They were full of photographs: banks, many Mount Fujis, Tokyo Tower, airlines, rich farms in California, exotic places in Japan, girls in kimonos, etc. There was a full-page photograph of President Eisenhower, too, with the title Supporter of the World Peace in Japanese. Then there was this photograph of diligent-looking young Japanese men and women, all dressed in white lab coats, with smiles on their faces. A man in the center was joyfully examining something blurry in his hand under a lamp. He seemed to be examining something very curious. Two women were smiling and watching him courteously on his sides. The caption screamed on the top, A Secure Future in a High Paying Job! Earn $50 to $150 a Day! That's a lot of money, I was surprised, but I couldn't tell what sort of job the three people in the photograph were performing. Smaller letters under the caption itemized the job's merits: "Job guaranteed upon graduation. Technicians are urgently needed. Servicing hatcheries in 42 states. Oldest & largest school. Write today for free catalog." Under the photograph the advertisement read, American Chick Sexing School, Long Beach, California.

I studied the black and white photograph closer. It was hard to distinguish against the man's white lab coat, but he was surely holding a chicken upside down, checking the underside of the chicken's tiny wings. I could barely see its pointy beak and dotty eye in the blurred photograph. Under the lamp was a large wooden box divided into partitions, whose insides the photograph didn't show much, but now I could recognize a couple of little fluffy nodules peeking out of the box.

I nervously searched through the book for more chick-sexing schools. There were at least four other schools listed in the directory, including the one in Washington. One of them put a small ad which explained that evaluating a chicken's sex was very critical to determine its market value, but sexing newborn chickens required a trained, professional eye. Only a certified "chick sexist" could tell hens from roosters from their appearance. This chick sexing technique had been originally developed and systematized in Japan, and the trained Japanese's observant eyes and delicate hands were in

great need in the chicken farming industry. The certified chick sexists were living proof of how Japanese immigrants could contribute to tomorrow's American society, etc.

My head was throbbing. I regretted that I grew up in a suburban nursery, not on a rural farm where I would have learned all about certified chick sexists. The scattered pieces of my future vision came to fit neatly together in my future perfect life. I could make my living by handling yellow, fluffy chickens every day. I would save the money and would go to a veterinary college, or I could even go to college while sexing chickens every day. This was what I wanted in life! To become a vet, sexing chickens. I had to tell my parents. But I had to calm down first. I had to choose the best time and place to propose my wonderful plan. No mistake was allowed. The mission must be accomplished with discretion and precision.

***

That night, I dreamt of myself sexing chickens in a chicken farm in the clouds. It had all the highlights of my life, my life with chickens. In the dream, I could somehow tell chickens' sex by gently holding each chicken in my palm. My palms sensed their sex intuitively through the sensation of the fluff's fidgeting in my hands. I grabbed the chickens one by one, exclaiming Chicken-one, Chicken-two, Chicken-three, and I could see at least a thousand chickens lining up to the edge of the cloud patiently waiting to have their sexes determined by me. This mere sight put me into total euphoria. Even the clouds, tinted sunny yellow with patches of creamy ivory, felt furry. I was putting chickens into a pink willow basket or a blue one, exclaiming, "Chicken-one! Girl! Tosca! Chicken-two! Boy! Tristan! Chicken-three! Girl! Isolde! Chicken-four! Boy! Romeo! Chicken-five! Boy again! Papageno!" and so on. The old Chinese man was smiling, squatting and smoking his long pipe by the two baskets. Behind him were ostriches curiously peeping into the baskets with their necks curved, wowing at my dexterity.

When I reached Chicken-ninety, I felt a new, yet familiar kind of sensation in my hands. I couldn't tell its sex. Gradually opening my palms to uncage the chicken, I saw its beady eyes on the yellow ball of down. It had a somewhat longish face for a chicken and strands of longer, whiter feathers above its ebony eyes. Our eyes met. "Hello," I said to the chicken, and the chicken replied, "We finally meet." Right then, I opened my eyes.

***

I walked into the living room in my pajamas, still in a dream state. What a happy dream. I hadn't had such a nice dream for more than a year. My footsteps were light. Maybe today is a good day to bring up my plan to Ma and Pa, I thought. The dream must be a good sign.

Passing through the living room to go to the kitchen for

breakfast (and notice how kitchen sounds similar to chicken! I said to myself), I glanced at George, saying good morning, which I don't do very often nowadays. He was standing in front of the fireplace, yawning and stretching. He nodded at me and relaxed himself, resting his right hand on his hip and looking outside through the lacy curtain. The pose looked familiar to me. I looked at him carefully again.

Oh my god, I said to myself, Oh my god. I stood gaping, quivering and trying to scream, but I was choked, and all I could do was let pitiable sirens of strange vowels out of my trembling throat.

George had accidentally posed the same way Grandpa Taketora does in his portrait hung above George's tousled head: the right hand on his hip, his face slightly averted. The two identical figures made me realize that they also had identical faces. Lean noses, thick eyebrows, long faces—if you'd take off Grandpa's glasses, pluck off several sprouts of hair from George's chin, smooth out his dark pimples all over his face and neatly comb his thick black hair, they would look like the same man in the future and the past. Furthermore, I realized that the last chicken, the ninetieth chicken in my dream, had the same face as well in a chicken sort of way. Now I knew why George had suddenly got dates after Grandpa's death. Looking back, I thought George's face had started to change slightly about three months ago—about the time Grandpa had died. Before that, George hadn't looked like Grandpa Taketora at all.

"Oh no," I said to myself, this time aloud, "Oh no. Grandpa's summoning us from the netherland. We are dead!"

"What are you talking about?" George cried.

Our parents came into the living room from the kitchen. "Enough, kids," Pa said. "My Eleanor!" Ma ran up to me. "What's wrong? You're so pale!"

I told them George looked like Grandpa. They looked at the portrait, George, and back at the portrait again. They seemed amazed at this discovery but didn't get what I meant. They took it as something wonderful: George was becoming a mature man. I had to add, still choking, "And I saw Grandpa Taketora in my dream this morning."

They fell silent. "You know what," Ma opened her mouth after a long silence, "It's been ninety days since Grandpa died." This fact chilled me even more, but she was smiling at me, sorrowfully, but smiling. I couldn't tell them about the details of my chick-sexing dream. How could I? So I suppose they imagined Grandpa Taketora in his shroud, standing on the cloud, beckoning the two of us to heaven.

"He's calling you two," Ma continued. "You've never met Grandpa, and he couldn't see you two, either. He must have longed to see your faces, don't you think?"

Grandpa Taketora always counted the days left before

I turned sixteen. Every letter was a countdown. He could wait only until he could see his great-grandchild. But he hadn't met me, either. He had to see me and George first before he saw his hypothetical great-grandchild. We were his first grandchildren.

Pa put his hands on our shoulders and said, "Do you want to visit Japan? Do you want to say hello to your grandfather in Omura?"

***

So we went to Japan, me and George. My parents could afford tickets only for the two of us. Everything went like a dream. The earth was curved in a smaller scale in Japan. Mountains, rivers, fields, houses—everything was steep and tiny. We were in a miniature country. My mother's cousins and siblings were gentle, but neither of us understood their dialect. We were clumsy, not knowing how to sit on the floor, to take off our shoes, or to use the toilet. Our Japanese was awkward. They watched us behaving like aliens with curious and persistent smiles. Grandpa's house smelled salty and smoky. We saw his leather chair above which his portrait had been hung before it came to our house. We didn't say anything about the portrait. I found many things surprisingly familiar and dear, but also many other things remote. Probably everyone finds any foreign land this way: familiar and odd.

The day we visited Grandpa's grave on the hill which commands Omura Bay, cherry trees were blossoming. Many folds of hills surrounding the bay had started to blush in pale pink. The bay, where Grandpa swam across as a twelve-year-old, formed a circle almost. It was much smaller than the titanic bay I had pictured when I had heard the epic. We heard the engines of fishing boats coming home. I couldn't see the boats because of the diffused reflections on the water. I could only hear the sound.

Excavation

Lowell Jaeger, 2009

They'd carved—
(this army of ants)
in the gravel—
an expressway!

My son and I stood watching
constant traffic.
Frenzied comings
and goings.

Aztecs. Egyptians.
Giant blocks heaved
shoulder to shoulder,
bits of leaf and bark.

The hive mounding,
grain by grain
proudly skyward.
Whatever their plan

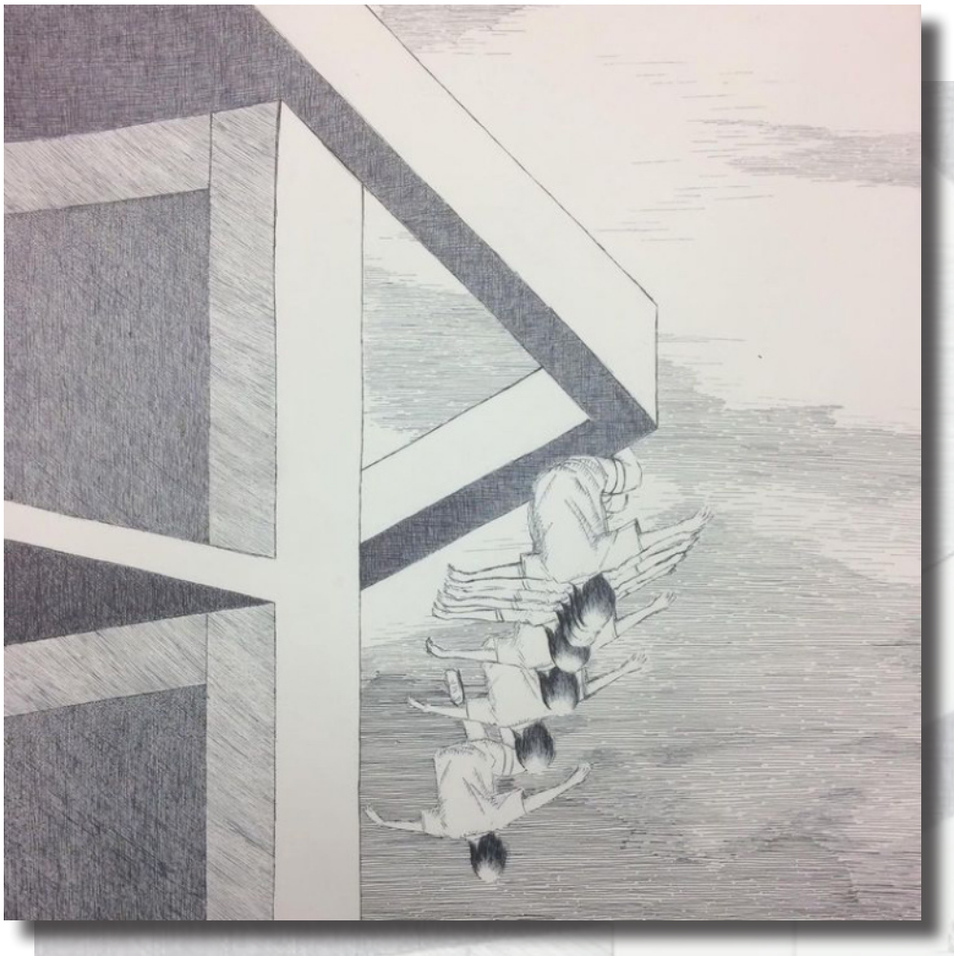
our lunchtime ended.
My son in the backhoe
and I with my spade
ripped the earth

beneath them. Another
civilization lost. Buried.
We laid a hundred
yards of crushed-rock

driveway that afternoon.
All the while, glancing
over our shoulders.
Feeling small.

Floating

Suzu Thomspon



Phalaenopsis[1]

Josefina Diaz, 2000–2001

The air swelled light
and water, like my mother's greenhouse.
An orchid
breathed, I strained
Her petals poured out
like milk in the morning,
the heart and juice of a young coconut.
They stretched and curled
on sepals, drooping,

curved lips red.
Red as the sash of the Spaniard
who ravished
my great-grandmother, the wound pulsing
from her bolo knife, the mud
on his grave.
Red as the bayonet
of the soldier from Japan, the one
that pierced my aunt's baby girl; red
as her own
hands and blade. Red as the mat
where an American smothered
the cries of my cousin, seized her. Red
as the sun pooling
in Manila Bay.

She's a product
of the tropics, the gardener offered. Exotic.
Snagged her
at a cheap price, he boasted.
She's easy, doesn't need much
water. This hybrid's been perfected
through generations of breeding.

The gardener's hands were chapped
and scarred. Black soil
lodged in every crease.

I know, I answered.
My mother grows them at home.

[1]*Phalaenopsis* is a genus of orchid that is native to the Philippines.

My Father's Voice

Sara Sword, 1999

I am waiting up for the 2 a.m. train,
I am imagining my father's voice.
He is always traveling, he is always in motion,
he is never still, he is never quiet, he is always quiet
when he speaks.

He was always talking to me,
he was always driving me back and forth
to Boston, to Washington, to Chicago.
He was always revealing his details,
details like his ink strokes on my pencil drawings:
flowerpots with Impatient Lucys or African Violets
on porches of my sketched houses.

I was always falling asleep in the car - his voice
puts me to sleep. He always stopped the car
in the gaps in Pennsylvania to peel away slivers
of mica in the rock highway walls, limestone,
quartz, all named and beautiful to him.

We stopped because he could not name
a mysterious wildflower at road's edge.
He had to photograph, to name, to say, to know.

His voice! It is too quiet. We have a bad connection
between here and overseas, no straight phone lines
matching our houses. He is counting the dollar fifty minutes
he speaks with me and he cuts it short, and besides,
there is a time delay.

I am trying to remember all the things he told me
in the car while smoke from his forbidden pipe
steamed out the window of the boxcar Volvo.

I am waiting because when I cannot sleep,
I love to imagine how he must have sounded
when he recited to(/the?) Torah at his Bar Mitzvah,
to remember how he sounded
when he read the Kaddish for his mother
in faded Hebrew.

I am listening for the hush of motion.
I am waiting for the 2 a.m. train
because it sounds like my father's voice.

From the Crooked Timber

Okla Elliot, 2008

Before the conductors checked our tickets and passports, I knew our train had crossed the border into the Kaliningrad oblast. It might have been all the minor shifts in landscape seeping into my unconscious—the ratty lean-tos I could barely see in the distance, the potholed service road running parallel to the train tracks, the leanness of livestock in the fields—but that's not how it felt; I just knew we were in a sadder place than we had been moments ago. I turned to Natalie and saw that she felt it too; the knowledge of it hung on her normally bright face. The Kaliningrad oblast is a place forever separated from itself—a part of Russia (oblast is Russian for enclave or province), though separated from the motherland by Lithuania and Latvia, or Lithuania and Belarus, depending on which route you take. And years of neglect after the collapse of the Soviet Union have only served to deepen its native sadness. Natalie and I were headed toward the heart of the Kaliningrad oblast, to the city of Kaliningrad, drawn by the thrill of such an unlikely destination.

She squeezed my hand, and I smiled, glad to be having this adventure with her. We'd dated the previous year when she had studied in America. Due to my having earlier studied in Germany, we communicated in an amalgam of English and German, making us at once foreign and familiar to each other, both exciting and comforting. Now that I was at the University of Wroclaw, in Poland, and she was back in Germany, she had come to visit. I was supposed to be her tour guide for Eastern Europe. Coming from Western Europe, she saw the East Bloc as exotic, romantic in its downtroddenness. And I'd chosen the Kaliningrad oblast as the subject for my semester project—a paper on the effects of poverty in post-Soviet society ranging from poor medical facilities to increases in drug addiction and STD rates.

Kaliningrad was founded as Königsberg in 1255 by the Teutonic Knights. It has an enviable ice-free port on the Baltic Sea, making it strategically useful for both military and commercial purposes. That's why, after WWI, Königsberg and East Prussia were separated from Germany by a redrawing of Poland's borders, the reunification of which Hitler gave as his primary reason for invading Poland. And that's why, after WWII, Russia annexed it. Russia turned Kaliningrad into a military outpost, housing thousands of soldiers and the massive Soviet Baltic Fleet. The Russification process required the mass deportation of the German-descended residents and changing the Germanic city names to Slavic ones (Tilsit to Sovetsk

and Rauschen to Svetlogorsk). Kaliningrad got its name from Mikhail Kalinin, the titular head of the Soviet state from 1919 to 1938, who distinguished himself by signing the order for the infamous Katyń Massacre, in which an estimated 21,000 prisoners of war were summarily liquidated.

Talking to a German about WWII is difficult, no matter how well-acquainted you are with her. I wanted to ask Natalie how she felt about being on land that had been, in living memory, German territory, where tens of thousands of Germans died fighting Russians (who lost many more), but I knew it would only make her uncomfortable and force her to search for something appropriate to be feeling. I'd heard that one of the beaches in the Kaliningrad oblast held thousands of human skeletons just beneath its sands, and that you could dig up a human femur or jawbone as a souvenir. Though the thought of taking home the knucklebone of some long dead soldier appalled me, I was sickly attracted to the idea of seeing the beach and uncovering the bones. I almost suggested to Natalie that we go there, but thought better of it.

We hadn't seen each other in months. And during those months, I hadn't realized how much I'd missed her—her calm and matter-of-fact personality, the way everything in the world dropped away when we were together, the rawness of our attraction. The previous night in my apartment in Wroclaw, we'd barely slept at all, and now, whenever the old Russian man who shared our car went to the train's small, smelly toilet, I ran my hand up Natalie's dress, and she smacked my arm, pretending to be offended.

That's the way she and I were, always stealing a few days, maybe a week, together whenever we were on the same continent, and it seemed that no rules applied to us. A few years later, long after our trip to Kaliningrad was over, she would be teaching German at Dillard University, in New Orleans, and I would tell my girlfriend—with whom I'd been living for nearly three years—that I was going to visit an old high school buddy, and fly down from North Carolina to visit her. (I did see my friend briefly, so my deception was not an outright lie, though even then I knew that excuse was pure bullshit.) My flight, which I'd booked months in advance, was scheduled for four days after 9/11, and my girlfriend suggested that I postpone my trip, considering the circumstances. But I got on the plane and made the risky flight to New Orleans for the tryst with Natalie, faithful as ever to our strange marriage. One of the nights I was there, another lecturer, whom she'd been dating, came to Natalie's door. He asked who I was and what I was doing in her apartment. "It is none of your concern," Natalie told him, her accent making the statement seem all the more cruel.

We got a thousand-ruble room at the Kaliningrad Hotel on Leninskiy Prospekt, a street busy with cars ranging

from small Fiats to BMWs and buses spitting black smoke. The woman at the counter spoke only a smattering of English and no German, so I used my broken Russian, stuffing Polish words in the cracks of sentences, hoping that the similarities between the languages would carry my meaning. Just as we were about to finish, another man came up, presumably the manager, who spoke flawless English. I was disappointed to get off so easily, robbed of the excitement of navigating choppy foreign waters. I was like that back then—any adventure or challenge arousing my interest.

In our hotel room we pulled at each other's clothes and kissed. Unbuttoning her dress, I realized that I hadn't brought condoms. By this point Natalie had undone my pants and was squeezing my stiffening penis. "Ich hab' keinen Präser," I said. "It's okay without one," she said and pulled her panties down, revealing her carefully trimmed pubic hair. I was shocked by her willingness—no, eagerness—to take the dual risk of unprotected sex. She was normally the more vigilant one, which I forced myself to be happy about. A part of me saw the use of condoms as mercenary, a way to make an intimate activity into a sterile business transaction in which lovers become safe arbiters of a mutual pleasure. But I had been raised in the '80s and '90s, the age of AIDS, and so had as hefty a paranoia about contracting the disease as anyone else. I've convinced myself several times that I had it, only to be tested and find myself

clean, another get-out-jail-free card offered to an undeserving criminal. So I hesitated, stood there with a silly erection pointing nowhere, until she pulled me to her and toppled us onto the bed.

***

That first afternoon in Kaliningrad Hotel, while taking a shower, we discussed what we wanted to do that evening. Natalie washed her hair as I suggested a visit to the Immanuel Kant Museum. I was double-majoring in German and philosophy, so seeing Kant's manuscripts and personal belongings was akin to a teenager in a rock band going to Père Lachaise Cemetery to graffiti Jim Morrison's grave.

Immanuel Kant lived in Königsberg his whole life, leaving only once in order to attend his father's funeral. Somehow this grand Germanic figure survived the Soviet ideological cleansing, and in recent decades, Kant has come to be a major point of pride for the people of Kaliningrad. Kaliningrad University has been renamed Kant State University, and the cathedral that houses the museum dedicated to his life and works is perhaps the best-kept building in the entire oblast.

Kaliningrad is not like the famous Eastern European cities. It lacks the regal lion-headed façades and beautifully crafted bridges of Prague; can't boast the bohemian charms of Krakow's street musicians and gypsy palm readers—no Danube Promenade of Budapest. I don't mean to suggest that the

city is entirely without charm. Kaliningrad has its share of verdigrisy statues and cobblestone pathways, but it truly distinguishes itself from its neighbors in unexpected and unenviable ways.

Firstly, the Kaliningrad oblast is the world's largest producer of amber. In shops everywhere you can find amber necklaces, brooches studded with amber, rings sporting oversized chunks of the yellowy-brown stuff. (I confess to buying a silver chain necklace with one delicately cut piece of amber for Natalie, a memento of our time together.) The amber mines, along with the export of the substance, account for much of the employment in this depressed region. To this day, when I see a piece of amber at a jewelry shop I nearly buy it, hoping in the pitying way of the privileged that some portion of my money will make it back to Kaliningrad and improve the lives of the people there.

The Kaliningrad oblast also boasts the fastest growing rate of AIDS in Europe. It is hard for Americans to understand the ignorance many Eastern Europeans show on the subject. This is because, as usual, we are taking for granted the privilege—both in terms of economic and informational wealth—in which we live. When, during the '80s and '90s, the American Congress okayed billions of dollars in AIDS awareness and prevention programs, when our celebrity actors, authors, and musicians were doing benefits to raise national understanding of the disease, the Soviet Union fought to cover up the existence of the disease, worried that it would cause too much unrest in an already failing state. And since the fall of the Soviet empire, with the attendant economic collapse, there has been little improvement in the situation.

But walking in the Kant Museum, you can almost pretend that the dirtier outside world isn't there. The spotless, white walls and the intricately carved bust of Kant stand in belligerent relief against the backdrop of Kaliningrad. Natalie and I walked around the museum, pausing to take in a painting of Kant or a glass-covered manuscript of his. Natalie walked beside me, holding my hand. Seeing the sway of her dress made me wonder whether there was a secluded bathroom somewhere in the museum—but I squelched the thought, the way a devout Christian might refuse to have sex in a cathedral.

Kant made many contributions to the world of philosophy, but perhaps his most famous was the ethical proposition known as the categorical imperative, which states, roughly, that one ought to act in any given situation only in such a way that one would be willing to see that way of acting become universal law. It invites the question of whether it would be permissible for everyone to act in such a way. It seems clear that, according to Kant's ethics, engaging in unprotected sex (except in purely monogamous relationships) is unethical. If

100 percent of people practiced unsafe sex 100 percent of the time, the social and personal repercussions would be catastrophic. And so, thus does the patron philosopher of Kaliningrad condemn us from the grave.

How many times have I had unprotected sex? It's an uncomfortable question. Especially if you were raised hearing Magic Johnson warn that it only takes once to get AIDS and that you're sleeping with everyone your partner has ever slept with (which always brought forth orgiastic images for me I'm sure he did not intend). Engaging in unprotected sex is an act akin to drunk driving, sharing needles, playing Russian roulette—we all agree that it's dangerous and, if we take the Kantian view, unethical as well. But, just like drunk driving (if not sharing needles and playing Russian roulette), far too many of us do it.

According to the Santa Cruz-based public health research organization ETR, 48 percent of sexually active teens do not use condoms; that's here in America, the country where billions are spent in awareness and prevention, the nation of Magic Johnson and AIDS awareness concerts. And the BBC in 2001 reported that 43 percent of Britons used no form of protection, a percentage not much different than most Western European countries. Just try to imagine how such statistics would read (if reliable ones were to exist) on the citizens of Russia—where the very existence of AIDS was covered up and, later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was little money for awareness programs. There are cases of HIV-positive Russians continuing to have unprotected sex because they believed that needles were the only way to contract the disease; or just the opposite, continuing to share needles thinking that it was entirely safe, but rigorously wearing condoms to protect uninfected partners.

To properly illustrate the rampant lack of public information on the subject of AIDS in Russia, all we have to do is look at the Clinical Hospital for Infectious Diseases at Ust-Izhora, just outside of St. Petersburg. There were numerous articles published in St. Petersburg newspapers in the early '90s demanding that the hospital be relocated to distant Siberia. Claims that everyone in nearby neighborhoods of St. Petersburg would be infected were rampant and led to the temporary closure of the hospital.

And one more case, an unimaginably sad one: In the Kaliningrad General Hospital, in 1998, an entire infant ward was infected with HIV because the nurses reused the same needle to administer basic vaccinations. The lack of resources the medical professionals were (and still are) forced to endure, along with a general cultural failure to recognize the dangers of HIV / AIDS led to this dark chapter in Kaliningrad's history.

Natalie and I were having a merry time of it. We dined on pashtet (liver paté) and osetrina po-russki (sturgeon in

tomato and mushroom sauce), along with other delicacies at what seemed to us humorously low prices. We drank brandy and lemon-infused vodka. We also, in order to have an authentic regional experience, smoked Russian cigarettes that tasted like burnt cardboard mixed with dirt and drank cheap vodka that tasted like distilled boot polish, both purchased at a kiosk replete with newspapers, pornographic magazines, and half-rotten fruit.

Our three days in Kaliningrad were much the same. After a night of dinner and drinks, followed by dancing at a club where kids bought and sold black opium in the bathrooms, we'd end up back in our hotel room drunk, sloppily taking each other's clothes off and engaging in an act that we were educated enough to know the dangers of. But each time I entered her and felt her warm pressure against me, whatever worries I had were perfectly absent.

We didn't discuss what we were doing. Maybe we were… who knows? I almost wrote that we were trying to be closer, maybe even trying to get pregnant in order to have an excuse to end up together—which I suspect we both secretly wanted—but that would be projecting a present-day explanation on the inexplicable past. I won't pretend to know what was happening unconsciously.

We can almost absolve Russians of their careless behavior due to their lack of information on the subject of STDs (though I would point out that Soviet propaganda never tried to convince them that unprotected sex didn't lead to unwanted pregnancies). We westerners, however, with our awareness programs and comparatively free media have no excuse. So why do roughly 50 percent of sexually active westerners use no form of protection (and I imagine that much of the other 50 percent surely slips up from time to time)? At first glance, there seem to be two main reasons—the conscious seeking of a more pleasurable experience and the delusional belief that it won't happen to us. But that can't be all there is to it. Do we humans, no matter our social or political situation, love transgression to the point that we'll risk our lives for its sake? Is it that without risk, there can't be any meaning in an action? But all that strikes me as too blithe to be fully true. There has to be more, doesn't there?

I'm reminded again of Kant, of perhaps his most famous quote: From the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing has ever been made. That's as close as we'll get to an explanation.

The train ride back to Wroclaw was relaxing. Natalie fell asleep against my shoulder as I stared out the window, thinking of nothing in particular, but mulling over all we'd seen and done in the past few days. I touched the cool glass of the window and tingling gooseflesh raised up on my arms. I felt close to Natalie and—as was my wont at that time in my life, a time

filled with travel and adventure-seeking—let myself become self-absorbed, solemn, and pensive. Here I was in a train coming back from a part of Russia none of my American friends had even heard of, with a German girl with whom I might be in love leaning her body against mine. I looked out the window as we careened past dusk-hued buildings and calligraphic trees, and savored the press of Natalie's breasts against my side.

Back in Wroclaw, we fell directly asleep, exhausted from the travel, but in the morning, I woke to Natalie kissing my face. As we kissed—our hair tangled and our breath thick with sleep—I felt like a primitive man, in the cave of my room, and I'd found my mate and the outside world didn't mean a thing. But as I rolled on top of her, I remembered the condoms in my desk drawer. I didn't want to wear one, but I knew they were within reach; and out of respect for Natalie, or some unproud sense of chivalry, I grabbed one. She didn't stop me from putting it on, but the eagerness left her face as I tore open the wrapper. The latex was a separating barrier as I slid inside her. When we were done, I threw the filled condom in the trash, where it lay like the carcass of some alien or undersea creature, or the discarded skin of a reptile.

I cooked breakfast, which we ate at the kitchen table, wearing only t-shirts and underwear. As I placed the food on the table, I looked at Natalie's bare legs, sloppy shirt, mussed hair, and I was able to recapture some of the joy I felt while we were in Kaliningrad. We ate fried eggs and kielbasa cooked in onions and cabbage and washed it all down with large glasses of milk. It wasn't the rich cuisine we'd stuffed ourselves on in Kaliningrad, but it was hearty and comforting, a more practical continuation of our gluttony.

Her train left that afternoon, and we felt the weight of her departure already; everything we said and did suffer under its inevitability. We went into town and looked in shop windows, stopped for coffee two or three times just for something to do. I told her I had a break coming up and even though I didn't really have the money, I'd try to make it to Stuttgart to visit her. We reminisced about how we'd met in Greensboro, North Carolina, of all places, and how we used to dance to bad hip-hop music at a local bar. "I was surprised," she said. "You didn't look like the kind of person who would dance." Talking about how we met, years earlier, reminded me that we likely wouldn't see each other again for years.

We didn't talk about the possible consequences of our time in Kaliningrad, didn't discuss what we would do if she was pregnant, didn't question our assumption that neither of us was diseased. (Luck would privilege us, and there would be no pregnancy and no diseases, but luck is no absolution.)

When it was finally time for her to leave, I walked her to the train. We hugged goodbye. Her train pulled slowly out

of the station with a creak of cold metal. I walked the two miles back to my apartment instead of taking the tram. I tried to think of my semester project, but every thought of Kaliningrad led to thoughts of Natalie. I wish I could report that I was thinking about how stupid we'd been, or that I felt guilty for our carelessness, but all I could think was how empty my apartment was going to be without her, and that I regretted that morning, regretted ending our reckless honeymoon.

Content Warning:
Miscarriage

Susan's Week

Cezarija Abartis, 1996–1997

SUNDAY

I keep a sanitary pad in my purse wherever I go. I can feel the paper wrapper getting tatty and splitting open.

Tomorrow or very soon I will go to Kmart and buy a pregnancy kit, read the instructions, and do the test. I haven't tried it before because I hoped my period would start, because it's embarrassing, because the weather has been muggy, because I've been busy, because I haven't had the time, because I've been afraid.

Even if I do the test and I'm not pregnant, I won't believe it. I won't believe it unless it gives bad news.

I will go up to Wallace as he's reading some anthropology text about the kinship relations of the Trobrianders and say, "Wallace, I'm pregnant." He'll say, "Shit." I'll tell Nora over a bowl of soup and she'll say, in one of her very rational, schoolmarm pronouncements, "Of course the most important thing is to figure out what you want to do and how to control the situation." I'll tell Jeff, and he'll be solicitous and self-sacrificing. I won't tell Mother.

Wallace will say in a generous and matter-of-fact voice, "I'll pay for the abortion." His fine, kind eyes will be focused

on the faraway. I wish I could imagine him saying something beautiful and transforming. We cannot make each other fit our separate dreams.

He represents the effortless perfection of America—or what I think that is—smooth skin, straight bones, regular teeth, the heritage of good nutrition and of the affordability of medical miracles. My own mother, the daughter of two Polish engineers, has broad hands and a mole on her forehead. She told me she was relieved that I favored my small-boned American father.

Wallace said once he believed in ecstasy but not happiness. I replied that his arrogant expectations were due to his privileged upbringing, that people who were not children of corporate lawyers did not expect ecstasy. "You misunderstand me," he said, not even raising his voice. "I meant that happiness does not exist except as an occasional spurt of dopamine." I felt sorry for the poor little rich boy then.

Wallace plays tennis well. That's a game which, when I was growing up, was a bus ticket and a transfer away. He wears Ralph Lauren eyeglasses, not the discount-store contact lenses that Jeff wears. What is most shameful about me is that I like Jeff's adoration. I should just tell him to leave. Nora said, "Your problem, Susan, is you want it both ways—you'll have to let one go." Easy for Nora, who is radical, not divided. Wallace knows that Jeff carries a torch for me, and he feels sorry for Jeff. Sublime lack of jealousy or self-confidence or trust in me or something. Not indifference, I think. Not that.

Yesterday Wallace wore the sky-blue shirt I had given him. He stood against the square of my window, with the light and melting humidity behind him. The July heat had softened the six candles on the sill into arcs that bowed toward him. He gleamed as if he came out of the sun-soaked sea, a halo surrounding him, spangling him with dew drops, pearl drops, tear drops. Oh, Wallace, Wallace, Wallace. I want you to be my knight in shining armor, my lover who cancels Time and Space, my prince of men who promises eternity and delivers, who strides through this world untouched and always excellent, but I don't think it's the you of wry speculation and Armani socks with holes in them, of surprised eyes and sweaty palms on airplane flights I'm attached to, I doubt that I love you, I don't think I love you, I know I don't love you.

You so obviously jump off that pedestal I constructed. Even that is graceful, though.

MONDAY

Jeff was making calf-eyes at me during the Ethics of News Reporting seminar, and when he saw I noticed him, he quickly put on a neutral face, and that sweetness cut me, his concern for my comfort. I kept running my fingertips over the initials and lopsided hearts incised on the old oak table while

Schultzie droned on about participatory journalism. I could not concentrate on the oral reports, but listened to the whine of the lawnmowers outside and, farther off, the sawing down of a diseased elm. Jeff struggled to open a jammed window; the clover smelled dense and green on the stagnant air.

Right after the seminar, Nora and I walked over to the cafeteria. We had salty chicken soup, which I gulped down. She wanted to talk, to tell me she loves the new TV she bought with the money she got for house-sitting, to tell me she received the packet of information about the Peace Corps, to tell me her father is okay. I wanted to wail at her that my problem is much worse and I don't have sympathy to spare.

Nora's father does not have prostate cancer. She was still wound up, happy and intense. "I don't know which is worse, the waiting or the cancer."

Yeah, I said.

Nora chattered away about her house-sitting job, that she had to do some final house cleaning before her professor returns from Europe next week. "I'll miss working in the garden," she said. "I never realized how much I'd enjoy planting flowers."

Nora mocks my bourgeois triangle. She has no use for Wallace and no affection for Jeff. I told her I was trying to recruit for her cause. Laughing, she patted my back and said, "Come the revolution, I'll put in a good word for you."

My birthday is next week. I'm worried that my graduate assistantship won't be renewed after this year. I'm embarrassed about having to ask Schultz for an extension to complete my seminar paper. I'm behind on grading the exams for my professor. And I'm deathly afraid I'm pregnant.

I'm not superstitious, but I thought to myself, I'll wear my expensive white linen shorts, that will make my period happen.

What would I offer to reverse this? Money? An earlobe? A finger? A memory of Wallace? Eventually I'll have to give a clot. I'm stingy. Even now I'm unwilling to give very much. I want to extricate myself lightly, glide through this easily.

The news was on the radio in the lobby as Nora and I left the student center. Locally, Melissa Hanson reported that there was a trend toward threes in window signs—earrings! earrings! earrings! hats! hats! hats!

"Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!" Nora said, as she stopped to light a cigarette in front of the No Smoking sign. Then she shook her head. "Nothing about community involvement and social issues. I'm disgusted. I'd even rather listen to soft rock." After a singing commercial for home insurance, the news came on with the reminder of the national debt, the conflict in Bosnia, a story about the pollution of a river in New York State.

In a world of torture, death, betrayal, where people disguise their faces, where the valve in my father's heart was

defective, and my cousin was born with an unconnected nervous system, I hope and imagine to get off scot-free.

Why do I imagine I'm special, that I'll escape?

TUESDAY

Wallace prepared eggs Benedict for breakfast. Neither of us had another bite after I told him I might be pregnant. As I tipped my cup, the coffee grounds slid into the shape of a uterus. With the slightest swirl it disappeared.

Now when we run into each other in the graduate office or the Snack Shop or the library, I can see the intensity on Wallace's face as if there were stones beneath his stretched skin. I want to calm him in my most maternal fashion, to lie to him, to tell him I'm not pregnant.

I told Wallace I just needed to put clean sheets on the bed for my period to start. He made a stiff smile. We saw each other a hundred times after classes and he tried not to ask, I could tell.

I feel anxious and edgy. I am a timid person. I worry if there's somebody behind the telephone pole or in the alley when I walk home from the library. I'm afraid of breast cancer—one in nine odds. I worry about shelling in Bosnia, child abuse in California, flooding in Iowa. But I don't do anything about any of it. And most of all I'm worried I'm pregnant. And then I don't worry about anything.

The Operation Rescue organization will be picketing clinics in Cleveland next week and here after that. I don't even hate them, but I'm afraid of a scene. Nora despises them, calls them Nazis. I just don't want to be embarrassed.

WEDNESDAY

I should call my mother because I haven't called her in two weeks, but I cannot bear to hear her loving, tyrannical voice asking me what I want for my birthday. She will be falsely jolly. She will insist that I'm not eating enough, will interrogate and praise me for my few good grades, ask about the Incompletes on my transcript, hector me about deadlines, will not say how much she still misses Dad.

When I was alone in the Office Trailer, Jeff sidled in clutching a bouquet of daisies wrapped in a cone of newspaper limp from the humidity. "An early birthday present," he said. The air conditioner burbled noisily and I was feeling sorry for myself, listlessly leafing through the papers and exams on my desk. It had been exactly a year since we met in Griffin's seminar on Mass Media and Social Institutions and Jeff transferred into the class late. He extended the bouquet toward me. "I'm not asking you for a date," he said. "I'm happy to see you, that's all."

I had tears in my eyes, and he started singing in his thin tenor, "Oh, Susannah, now don't you cry for me… The sun so

hot I froze to death, the weather it was fine." I laughed and said that was wrong, he'd gotten it wrong.

His devotion makes it worse. He's not even asking me out anymore. He stares at me and smiles. Last month he said he wouldn't ask me to marry him if I would just let him be around me. We can't control our desires. If I could, I would love Jeff for his sappy admiration.

Outside the trailer the train roared by and rattled the tin roof. We didn't have anything to talk about, so we talked about the three kittens in his garage. One is a white male and deaf. What a bad mother she was to abandon them, I joke lamely. Jeff doesn't know what to do because the landlady does not allow pets. He's hand-feeding them and sitting perfectly still on the cement floor as they come to sniff him. They romp around him, chasing leaves, pouncing on his toes, mewing at him in their treble tones, demanding and dispensing affection.

THURSDAY

I bought a pregnancy detection kit. This one had two tests in it. Do I expect to get pregnant again? Why did I do that? It's called First Response ("Easy," "1-step," "three minutes"), as if it were baby's first words, or a missile launch. There were five or six different kinds at Walgreens, in monochrome narrow boxes with serious words on them and no pictures of fluffy-haired happy blondes.

The checkout clerk, a lady with bifocals, was arthritically putting into a white plastic bag the candy bars, balloons, card, and birthday candles of the grandmother in front of me.

"I can take care of someone here," the high-school kid said behind me from the counter where you leave off film to be developed. I'm thinking if I should pretend I haven't heard. I could see out of the corner of my eye that he'd leaned forward. He'd say it again, I knew, only louder.

I turned away from the grandmother and her shopping cart full of presents for children.

His skinny neck and short hair and big ears made him look even younger. As soon as I handed him the package, he hurriedly dropped it into a bag and didn't meet my eyes. I felt sorry for embarrassing him.

At home I read the instructions a hundred times. The detector was a rectangular plastic rod the thickness of a few popsicle sticks, with a pair of windows smaller than fingernails cut into it. I was supposed to pee on this, hold it in the urine stream for five seconds, hold it vertically and not splash on the windows. My heart hammered as I tried to manage all this.

I blinked and two lines appeared in the windows. It wasn't even the stipulated three minutes.

Shit. I was pregnant.

FRIDAY

I told Wallace about the test. He took a breath. His eyes scooted away. And finally he asked what I wanted to do. (I know what I want, but not what to do. I want time to run backwards, that's what I want. I want the sun to stand still, the wind to be soft, people to be kind, me to be kind.)

I will call my doctor, make an appointment. I'm glad it's the weekend and I don't have to do anything. I'm heavy, lethargic, as if I were deeply pregnant. It's my mind playing tricks. I feel nauseated, hot, woozy. A sharp, cutting pain in my stomach rises and arcs acutely; my stomach is having sympathy pains with my uterus. What a good buddy. The Tummy, your friend. Back at Saint Casimir's Grade School everything from collarbone down was Your Tummy. I have learned better since.

And of course I endlessly analyze the future: I could get married; I could have the baby; I could give it up for adoption; I could not have the baby; I could drop out of school; I could marry Wallace; I could marry Jeff… That's as far as my imagination stretches. No—be imaginative. I could go to the moon; I could buy leopard-print tights and become a rock star. I have an infinite world of choices. I could kill myself.

Not funny, Susan.

This is not the year to become a mother.

I'm a modern woman. I don't have a pinpoint of guilt about it. What is this malaise? That I am making a decision for forever? That I will never have a son or daughter? That this decision will be like every other: little by little, forever. But it's not true. I can always have a baby later.

Wallace and I have talked about marriage obliquely, but we don't really love each other. We are both clear on this, which is miraculous: 1) that we should be certain (when we're uncertain about advisors, about dissertations and prelims, about where to live and so many other things) and 2) that we should both agree.

FRIDAY EVENING

As I was getting ready for bed, I had a cramp that seemed to start in the root of my scalp and shoot out of me to the walls of the room.

The spasm passed, I put on my nightgown, I finished getting ready for bed. There was a warm, stringy blood clot, for a moment in the shape of a thorn in the toilet. I knew what it was. My womb expelled the zygote. This wretched tissue, my exhausting, humiliating interior self has finally been extruded and expelled. But I don't feel celebratory.

I'm very tired.

SATURDAY

Nora is sleeping in my bedroom, and I'm sleeping on

the couch. While she was staying at her advisor's house, on the night before he came home from Switzerland, a burglar broke into Nora's empty apartment and took her Sears TV, her CD player, even her cheap Japanese guitar. When I drove over to pick her up, her skin felt clammy and she looked flat, the way a frightened animal will collapse, hoping the predator will have mercy this time. She's afraid to go back to her apartment. "Just superstition," she said. "And normal terror."

SUNDAY

In the middle of the night, I woke up with the heavy thought on my tongue—I will die in twenty years. I don't believe it, of course, but I'm drawn to analyze it. My subconscious is perhaps guilty about the spontaneous abortion because I wished it; or my life feels chaotic and I'm depressed; or I'm ill and tomorrow is my birthday and I don't want to telephone my mother or wait for her call. The rational part of me is not superstitious and does not believe in this message from the dark, the knotted sleepy self. This is not guilt, just normal terror.

Sketch

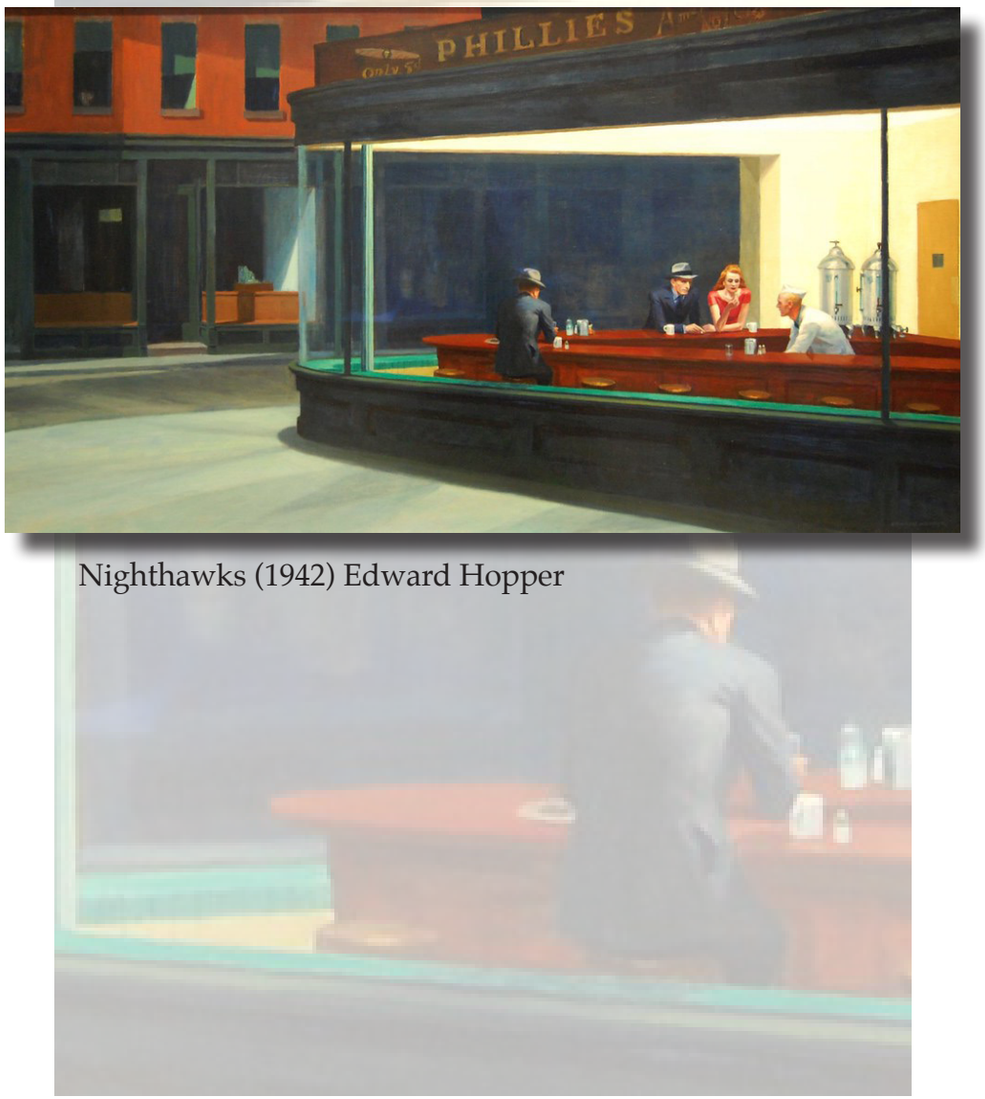
Alyssa Gauthier

Hawks

Laura Albrecht, 1996–1997

We sit behind our vague
Cold faces, arms crooked
On the counter top, fingers
Rolling cigarettes up, down.
Fluorescent lights line
The low paneled ceiling,
Bleaching until our faces
Blur, take on the round,
Dulled reflection of ten
Year old dimes heads up.
We don't look like much
In our dark creased jackets
And scuffed up shoes,
Mumbling back and forth
Into each other's ears,
Slouched over steamy cups.
The tail end of the night
Presses in against
The restaurant's pane
Glass windows, temperature
Falling off a few degrees
Anticipating the split
White warmth of morning.
Between breaths, we hear
Neon buzz, frost spread.
The few people scattered
Close, the jouncing waitress,
The unseen cook, none hear
The choppy stories we tell
Over each other's shoulders.
No one notices how

Aluminum sometimes flashes
Up, tinny and high,
In your dark eyes,
How ink, between blinks,
Occasionally splatters in mine.



Nighthawks (1942) Edward Hopper

Seven Views of a Circle

Barbara Van Noord, 2003

The orange on the window sill,
its beveled navel, the green sprigs
clinging to the plucked twig.

The whole moon on a batten of cloud,
scrimshaw presented on plush black nap,
the sky hinged open.

Your arms around me,
your earlobe, my nose.

Ezekiel's wheels, haloes, glories, sun spots,
a dewdrop dissecting the spectrum,
one day revolving into another.

Your forefinger touching your thumb,
a signal from the driveway that all's well.

That terrible painting called The Scream.
The sound of sound departing,
bubbles of agony.

History, the spiral of discard
and rediscovery, the thought
that there is nothing new under the sun.

The Man Who Made Teeth

Maria Bruno, 1988

It was at a party that I met the man who made teeth. He was standing in a dark corner, wearing shaded glasses. I could not see his eyes. But I saw his teeth. White and clean and perfect–gleaming like diamonds in the darkness. I stepped closer to him, seeing my reflection in the black glass that covered his eyes. I smiled. He smiled. I looked at his teeth. They were like nothing I had ever seen before. I always remembered teeth. Like Billy Xavier's in fifth hour high school French. His teeth wore little yellow cardigans, each and every one. When he turned around to face me, his pimpled nose scrubbed raw, his thin, purple lips slanted over his yellow mouth, he'd say something he thought was particularly pithy, like "voulez-vous couchez avec moi?" and I'd frown, and think how I'd like to get into that mouth with some of those Playtex rubber gloves, unbutton those sweaters with a stiff wire brush, and set his teeth free, but of course I didn't, on account of I was always thinking of something equally pithy to say back to him in French, like "I'd rather sleep with cow dung," only I never could find the word dung in my French/English/English/French dictionary

fast enough. And I remember Mindy Marinelli's teeth from my early years playing on the Detroit streets. The boys would tease her and call her dog mouth. Her teeth were all jagged and misshapen and hung like mottled stalactites from her swollen gums. She would never smile, on account of the boys would bank when she walked by, and she would grip her teeth together like a workman's vise. And I told her when she grew up she would have new teeth and no one would laugh at her, but she would laugh, a rich full laugh, with her mouth wide open. And then I thought of my lover Richard's teeth. He was still wearing braces at thirty years of age, braces he would have tightened every week, braces that would trap strands of my long hair, that would cut into my tongue, make me bleed.

"I can't see your eyes," I said, staring at his silver hair instead.

"That's the way I like it," he said and sipped slowly on his drink.

I really wanted to ask if they were real and all, his teeth, if he had made them himself to sit so perfectly like white knights in his mouth, but I didn't. I talked other teeth instead. I told him how I didn't have a cavity until I was twenty-seven, how my dentist had told me I had "masculine bicuspids" and then proceeded to file them away with his drill, letting the shattered bone jet from my mouth like demons, until he had whittled them into "feminine bicuspids"; rounder, smoother,

the teeth of complacent Polynesian goddesses. I told him about how I saw George Washington's teeth, all wooden and disfigured, sitting in a glass case at Mount Vernon, how I liked to watch Richard slip the tiny rubber bands onto the hooks of his braces, how Billy Xavier's yellow mouth was right out of Les Miserables, how I hoped Mindy Marinelli's teeth had turned out all right.

"I could fix her teeth," he said, smiling again. "I'm very good at what I do."

He talked teeth too. He told me he could make anything for anybody. Porcelain teeth, like your toilet bowl, he chuckled. Teeth with diamonds, teeth with gold, teeth the color of eggshells or warm cream or tusks. He smiled.

I imagined him biting into my neck as if it were a piece of delicious cake.

He talked about Consuelo from Caracas, the prostitute he hired when he was in Venezuela making teeth for a prince. She could do a backbend, he said, while she was screwing, a regular Nadia Comenici, with a perfect score of 10. She could go on TV, he said, eat wheaties, smile for the camera. And when he looked into her mouth, he whispered, "Gold crowns. A high priced whore." I envisioned myself doing a coital backbend, my tapioca thighs locked in some primal battle with gravity and age, my unexceptional third molars bruxing together like knives. I thought of how my back might go out,

or I'd be screaming for Jesus, or my boyfriend, who was convinced that the male-superior position was the only game in town, would pout, letting his pink swollen lips press into his braces and maybe he'd even flick a few used rubber bands at me, calling me a whore too.

The man who made teeth told me how he did it with the Roma triplets, Vene, Vidi and Vici, all at once. He told me how they would each take turns doing the tarantella on his back, sharp toenails etching his skin, and how they nibbled his smooth buns like little rats with their ninety-six perfect teeth nurtured all their lives on wine and pasta. And he told me about the seventy-five women, read my lips, seventy-five, he said, he had had in the last ten years, some with chipped teeth, impinging overbites, discolored teeth from well water and antibiotics, women with periodontal disease, retruded mandibles, pegged laterals.

"David's car is in the fast lane," said my friend John, sliding into the darkness next to me. I watched the man who made teeth move through the shadows toward another woman.

"So?" I asked.

"Yours is parked on the shoulder waiting for a tow truck," he said, laughing at the brilliance of his metaphor. He had long brown hair that fell over his ears, and his Albanian-wide face wrinkled as he smiled. He was protecting me,

I knew. He looked like a Buddha standing there all plump and swollen with beer.

"Oh, real funny," I said. "I was just talking to him."

"You wear your heart on your sleeve," he said, pushing his wire rims up off his small nose, taking a sip of his beer. "And men, more often than not, come round and wipe their noses on it."

"John, it's okay. I'm all grown up. He didn't misrepresent himself. He's a wild boy, plain and simple."

"It's a defense," he said, "like anything else."

"Don't worry about me, Johnny," I said, hugging him. "I'm very good at reading between the lines."

That night Richard slept inside of me. I could feel his full weight on top of me, like one of those crushers you see in action movies ready to flatten the hero who struggles to push free. I could not breathe. I felt like a beached baby whale suffocating under a human protector that only wanted to save me. Making love to Richard had no sound to it. He didn't like to make any noise. He explained it to me once, how he always thought of a certain sequence of images to achieve orgasm. I never knew the precise order, but he somehow always had to think of the eating scene in the Tom Jones movie, black net lace against moist skin, the Stones singing "Under My Thumb," split figs, kiwis, avocados, and Catherine the Great riding her equine pal, Trigger, and if I even said something as muted as

a "Yes. Yes," or an "I'm coming, I'm coming," I'd destroy his concentration and he'd have to start all over again envisioning a wine-sogged Albert Finney sucking on a chicken thigh. I felt, for the most part, that I didn't have to be there, like it could be anyone lying next to him, anyone who silently mirrored his rhythms.

Listening to Richard's heavy breathing, I thought of the man who made teeth, and I was suddenly in Venezuela, the clacking of castanets somewhere in the background; and I was doing somersaults, double axles, and silky backbends, as he urged me on, until I became a regular Mary Lou Retton, going for the Olympic gold, pirouetting in the air with my lover by my side, urging me to scream, to bite, with my still pointed bicuspids, into his neck which tasted rich and moist like a guava or a mango.

"Are you awake?" asked Richard, as he lithely removed himself.

"Hmmm," I said.

"I love you," he whispered, kissing me.

"Me too," I replied. And then I felt the silence, the inextricable silence before you ask the question, "What's wrong with this picture?"

A few days later I had lunch with an old high school friend, LaWanda Peters. LaWanda and I had been lab partners our senior year in high school and we had worked diligently dissecting a male cat that we christened Duane, after her ex-boyfriend. Boys were a mystery to both of us then—it seemed like we did everything in our power to win their approval. I ironed my kinky curls with a steam 'n' press to wear my hair in a smooth pageboy, pinking my nose, scorching my cheeks. I bought those pointy cotton bras at Kresge's that all the fast girls wore to make my breasts perkier, like iced cupcakes. I bought Passion Fruit lipstick, Maybelline everything, and I lisped on every date to appear more vulnerable. LaWanda learned to blow smoke rings through her thick lips so the boys who owned motorcycles would exclaim "Bitchen"; she inhaled and exhaled allowing her padded chest to expand like chimney bellows. She said she knew a special way to French kiss that would make the boys think they had died and gone to heaven, ratted her hair into black flames that spiraled from her head, and wore those leather mini skirts like Gracie Slick and Marianne Faithful. Her boyfriend Duane had gotten a girl at the Catholic school pregnant, and he had to quit school and work in the Vlasic pickle factory. LaWanda had wanted to name our cat Duane, because she wanted the pleasure of dissecting him, piece by piece.

When I looked at Duane's retractable penis, all flaccid and the color of snot, I was reminded of the sea lampreys pictured on page 257 of our text, You and the Universe. I imagined a boy's penis to be like the blind lamprey, sheathed in a

phlegmy skin, groping for some aquatic cavern of light. "I've got news for you," I remembered LaWanda telling me. "Someday you'll have to touch one of those." "We have to touch it?" It really hadn't occurred to me. I suddenly felt queasy.

"And if you're real good," she whispered, "you'll have to..." and she pointed to her mouth with her lacquered fingernail.

"Gross," I exclaimed. "You cut today."

So that day at lunch, I told her about Richard and about how I knew he loved me but how I felt I couldn't breathe, and then I told her about the man who made teeth, and about Consuelo and her gold crowns, the Roma triumvirate, the seventy-five women, and my Mary Lou Retton Olympic fantasy of flight. I also mentioned I felt the man who made teeth was imbued with a certain power, a certain mystery.

"The only thing that a boy is imbued with is a dick, Rosalie," she said, still blowing perfect smoke rings into the air. "He sounds like a 'Fuck and Run' to me."

LaWanda had several categories for men. She placed them in neat little boxes, like the "Fuck and Runs," the "Love Me, Love My Dicks," the "Vacillators," and the "Ambivalents," and the "Possible Significant Others." It was a way to protect herself, I guess, and besides, she said, men do that to us all the time. "They've got their basic Bitch, Whore, Virgin, Ball-Buster," she told me once. "And then they say they can turn us all upside down and we all look alike to them. Hah!"

"What am I?" I asked at the end of our lunch. "What category do men put me in?"

"You're real, Rosalie. You expect too much," she said. "You cost way too much for most men."

Making love to him, how can I explain it? It's like being in the jungles of Venezuela with Robert DeNiro. DeNiro's in a white suit. You're doing the fandango. There's all this green–large leafed trees, hot crimson flowers that splay open, tendrils of vines scrape your neck, DeNiro dips you, you shout "Yes," and you roll together in the lush weeds, dodging snakes and lizards. There's always a danger, a darkness, and it's never really over.

"Who are you?" I asked the man who made teeth after we made love.

"You'll never meet anyone like me," he said, turning toward me, his dark glasses still placed steadily on his nose.

"That doesn't answer my question," I said.

"Who are you?" he asked, smiling.

"Rosalie. My name is Rosalie. I bet you didn't even know that."

"I know everything I need to know about you," he said, as he pulled me towards him. I could not see his eyes, but his teeth, I could see them in the darkness, and he bit into my neck as if it was sweet dough before the hot oil.

"Why don't you take them off?" I asked him after we made love again. There was a silence. "Why do you wear them anyway?"

"A defense," he said, "like anything else."

"Or something like, if you can't see me, you can't hurt me? That sort of thing?"

"If you want to think so," he said. "But everything doesn't always fit so neatly into categories."

"Do you take them off for any of the women you're with?"

"Once. Maybe twice. There have been times."

"What does it take?"

He turned towards me and I removed his glasses to reveal very ordinary blue eyes. He pulled me on top of him and wrapped his legs around me as if he wanted to squeeze the life from me and make it his own. "David," I said. It was the first time I had ever spoken his name. "I feel you have given me something."

"I haven't given you anything, Rosalie," he said, stroking my hair. "You've had it all along."

I had this dream. I was in the jungles of Venezuela again only Robert DeNiro was doing the fandango with Consuelo who was wearing three Olympic gold medals. Billy Xavier had grown up, he still had his sweatered teeth and he still wanted to "...couchez avec moi," but I was too busy standing there braless, wearing Passion Fruit lipstick, my hair in ringlets, communicating with the iguanas and the rubber trees. Richard was in the corner of the dream, braces gleaming in the tropical sun, standing with a muzzled horse and a black negligeed woman who looked an awful lot like Catherine the Great. Richard was sucking on a chicken thigh, motioning to the Roma triplets to join him. David appeared, silver hair springing from his head like an aura, his glasses were off, his blue eyes shining. He said he had two porcelain central incisors that would make me look like Farrah Fawcett or Christie Brinkley or Jacqueline Bisset. I declined. He understood. And right when David was telling me to quit making men into such mysteries, I could hear the sound of castanets, the ticking of lizard's tongues, wild petals silking against soft bark, sea lampreys winding through the clear pools of water, and I could hear, at last, my own rhythms, strong and fluid like the Amazon River. In the distance La-Wanda came towards me bringing a resurrected Duane as an offering, and further on I could see Mindy Marinelli, laughing, a rich full laugh, with her mouth wide open.

"Are you sleeping?" David asked.

"You'll never meet anyone like me," I said, and turned towards him.

The Dance Party

Abbey Behan

Sea Level

Gary LeFemina, 1959

Because the body is mostly water we suffer gravity:
a pregnant woman's ankles swell
when standing long; the wounded man in the alley bleeds;
we experience tides as if the moon
dictated more than the sea's
insatiable taste for sand.

And use my knuckles as an abacus to count
my visits to the ocean—
I blame myself not Freddy Clark in his dad's four door Chrysler
driving some girl to a state park
after closing
Friday nights.
Saturday's stories:
All the same.
He's still telling them,

and I'm still listening, the words remaining long in the hollow shells of mornings
after I cursed him—
seeing a woman I wrote poems for
in his back seat.

That night I climbed the ladder of a lifeguard chair and chose
the maudlin canvas the constellations painted on the waves.
Two hours later I was naked and treading water,
Wading…
How common.
More often I rise above sea level,
shedding myself of the undertow. At five,

I raced my building's elevator to the eighth floor,
up one more team of stairs to the roof. Hide-and-seek
among its congregation of aerial antennae,
behind the ventilation shafts. We played everyday;

From that height, I could watch the street:
stickball, mail deliveries, Loretta
walking the block to join me for a game of super hero-
and-the-saved. Our curiosity a kind of desire.
.
In school I'd sneak to the roof,
and study trigonometry in the sine curve pattern
a Super Ball thrown to the street would make:

bouncing skyward, a bright rubber sphere, the way the sun caught it
with a glove of brilliance... I'd lose it
high above Eighteenth Street on clear days

tobacco smoke rallying its upward spiral:
a spirit like the ghosts of word problems
erased from the board: *If sea level increases*
one foot per day...
.
Because the body is mostly water a man falling fourteen stories
strikes the sidewalk like a wet sponge, bouncing once,
twice on the concrete.
That's me gawking from the street. Seventeen.
I hadn't heard a thing but had to explain
to the police why my head was down
while I walked,
Why I wasn't in school.
One cop laughed,
All you kids,
depressed and tough.
Stupid.
I bet you wish you were that stiff:

Shit, he was twice your age.
You kids: all dopes.

Shaking the Coke can in his hand,
he scanned my answers one last time
before telling me to beat it. He must be a detective by now
or retired.

Or dead—
some stray bullet while enjoying the ripe gallery of family life
with a day off at Rockaway Beach
when three guys got into a fight over a woman or a remark.
Which one had the gun...
.
On yesterday's news flood victims rowed boats
along Oak Street, Stuart Avenue. Volunteers
with sandbags by the river bank.
A morning later: silence

followed by the shine of a sump pump running, the slosh of boots
and damp jeans through ankle-deep living rooms, the occasional expletive

while the river sleeps with the unease of a newborn.
.
Somewhere someone is drowning
and someone else is breaking surface. It's coming up for air

I remember. Three, maybe four,
I'd been jumped from behind
by the tide;

I would have given a pocketful of sand dollars,
my imagined pirate's gold,
to stand with the breakers bowing at my ankles:
Toddler Neptune.

Instead, I crawled the linoleum of broken shells
coughing salt water; crawled past a construction crew of brothers
excavating tunnels for their cars,
young hands steering them through sandy highways; crawled

The brunette girl who could have been Loretta,
her ponytail damp, stringy, and barnacled to her back.
She stared and hugged her Barbie close.
.
Even these are acts of love:

I wanted to dive into the bay after a woman said no.
I was tying my wrists together when I was discovered
on the docks by Battery Park;
I once climbed seven stories
by fire escape onto the roof of a walk-up because of yes.

By then I knew the difference
between love and desire,
knew the two met somewhere:
a hormonal horizon that I can't see even with hindsight.
.
When the water bursts, it's time.

And to water we'll return
go under and feel the pressure in our lungs,
almost libidinal. Listen to the sea:
I want. I want. I want....

In bathrooms all over the country salt water
gossip echoes in conch shells; even far from the coast
they know the stories: the dead lovers forever dancing on the ballroom

of the Titanic. She wears a gown of sea weed,
                                and his eyes glow
phosphorous as innuendo,
                        and intentions.

The sun fires just beyond the horizon. First light
far to the East because the earth is mostly water.
High tide and low tide exchange shifts;

already old men with metal detectors clutter the shore
seeking some pirate treasure that's slipped through the pockets
of the sea,a declasped bracelet or an excommunicated earring,
but they're luckyif they find dimes from the years of their
birth. Look,one of them is now on his knees. I can't see
what he lifts to this infantile sunlight
before surrendering it, indifferent.
                        Only memories.
Those bottle cap and quarter beeps.

[untitled]

Martha Aldenbrand, 1966

This is a crazy game of tenderness,
talk softly, rock back and forth,
laugh long and quietly, say
I am schizophrenic but
you can come in, let's play
this quiet game, pretend
we're squeezing grapes with our tongues
and tasting the juices dripping down.
We're in a yellow attic,
I will show you the clothes
of the period, I have a muff.
Do you love me for that,
for showing you something
that is only us? Baby,
slip on this shaggy coat
and we'll walk out through the rafters.

Sonnet I

Joseph D. Lockwood, 1964

Some feel they see between the sea and sky
A rule drawn deep with water or with air,
Which proves no sea birds swim nor fishes fly
Nor at this line the teeth and talons tear.
I saw those fresh and shiny scales that fall
From heaven, white and screeching in the heat,
And darkening oceans in their mid-day lull
Float soft white feathers red with bits of meat.

Is it a night to trap the sound of seas
In glassy pools of only crystal tone;
Or dream the song of painful prophesies,
When I but live one limp long life alone?
Within a dark and silent shell of mirrors,
I sit and grow a hardness round my years.

The Refugee

Content Warning:
Graphic Depiction of Suicide

Philip Russell, 2000

I've given up sleep now, like everyone else, traded blankets for books and pillows for papers—flow charts and flash cards, diagrams and drawings. Through my window the moon is setting; it's past two in the morning but still I'm cramming, trying to memorize the Krebs Cycle now, the biochemistry of human energy. That sounds interesting, even metaphysical, but actually it isn't. It's just phosphates. ADP. ATP. An hour ago it was clotting factors, and an hour from now it will be something else, if I can stay awake—bacteriology perhaps, or maybe some pharmacology. But it's not just tomorrow's comps.

I can't stand my dreams anymore. Too many times Daniel has come back, the boy I knew like a brother, the man I didn't know at all. The dreams have no boundaries. Sometimes I glimpse the person he will never become now, and sometimes I dream of Daniel as he was, long before I ever knew him. I see him at five or six, sneaking into his father's bedroom. I watch him open a bureau drawer, take out a belt, run the dark leather through his hands. He looks puzzled, as if he were trying to understand. The belt is as wide as his fingers and supple as a snake, although the brass buckle is already pitted with greenish corrosion. He raises the leather to his nose and inhales

deeply. His eyes are closed, and his forehead is as wrinkled as an old man's.

I'm tired of this. Exhausted really, bone weary, thoroughly sick of everything—anatomy and histology and microbiology, the life cycles of pathogens and the natural history of disease. Outside my window, I can smell the late spring, the cool moonlit night. A gentle wind rustles perfectly formed pale green leaves against the screen. I push my papers aside, and I can't get Daniel out of my head, and as usual everything else feels pointless. Stupid.

What I'll never understand is why he needed to kill himself. Came back to Connecticut on the cusp of salvation only to follow his father's path, to hang himself in his childhood bedroom. The room we shared in high school, still full of the shelves we built, bricks and boards collected from the dump at Brooksvale Park, stocked with books and bones and the music we listened to. A place of ideas and sharing, Richard and Daniel, one mind touching another. Emerson and Thoreau. Self Reliance. Walden Pond. Where once I thought we could create our own selves. Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.

His sister found him. Spinning at the end of whatever it was—a rope, a wire, his father's belt. I don't know. There are some questions I can never ask. In my dreams, I've seen his toes trying to reach the chair just kicked away, his fingers trying to get under the thing at his neck, that dark line twisting into his flesh, cutting off his air. Black tongue swollen and distended. Pants full of urine and feces and semen. I don't need to ever dream the details again. In most of my dreams, Daniel uses his father's belt.

His father committed suicide when Daniel and Sarah were still in grammar school. Hung himself also, showing his son the way. I will make the focus of my graduation thesis depression and despair. Alcoholism. Suicide. There is a responsibility to the people we haven't become yet.

In the daytime, hustling through the clinics, there is no time to think. There's too much to do and you're always on the defensive, open to challenges from anyone, everyone—fifth and sixth year students and the residents and staff physicians and attendings. They think it's their job; they consider it teaching. There's too much to remember. All the different signs and symptoms, the tests and normal values, the drugs and the glittering machines. And although it's true that a lot of this stuff works, unfortunately it depends on what you're starting with.

It was so raw in Pensacola, detox units primitive everywhere, physical and pharmacological restraints, and the beds filled with people screaming at horrors only they could see. We call them delirium tremens, but actually, the hallucinations are their own history; the snakes and rats they can't throw off are bits of their own past sucking at them like leeches. Memo-

ry crawling under closed doors, desire slithering out of every closet and bureau, the patients sweating behind their rope nets. It might have been Victorian London, the hospital at Bedlam. It made me want to give up drinking myself.

Still, Daniel came through all that. And when he returned last winter, I was full of hope—I thought he was saved. I thought I had saved him.

Winter is over now, and Daniel is gone. Although everything else just continues as usual, as if nothing of consequence ever happened. Daniel has journeyed from life to death, and I'm still sitting in the same chair I was in when he telephoned me last January. Three in the morning the night before our mid-year exams, Daniel calling to report he was about to commit suicide. The first time he'd called in years. He talked about childhood, and he talked about his father—fishing with him on a river somewhere, the dark green canoe and the bright shiny lures. How once when he was five or six and terrified after watching a horror movie, his father came up to tuck him into bed and brought him a stuffed animal even though he was too old for stuffed animals. But he also talked about all the dinners his father missed, and the fighting that woke him at night. The birthdays and vacations that never happened. He talked in a rush, and he made no sense, and when he hung up, I tried to call back, but he didn't answer. So I called the Pensacola police, and they gave me a hotline number for their local crisis group,

and the dispatcher there said she'd send someone out. Then, I called his family in Connecticut, but I couldn't wake anyone at Sarah's house, even though I let the telephone ring and ring—Sarah and her mother were always luxurious sleepers, jealous and guarded.

I packed a bag and called the airlines and wrote a note to the dean explaining why I was going to miss my mid-years, our most important exams except for the two-year comps, and then I was driving south through the winter night to Logan International, still two hours away. It snowed lightly the whole way down, and the roads were greasy and slow.

Over the last few years, Daniel and I had grown as distant as people can get, and it wasn't simply geography, the thousand miles of American east coast. It wasn't the bootcamp mentality of medical school either, the way every minute of my life was spoken for, planned out, co-opted by someone else. No. It was more like Daniel was evaporating somehow, slowly disappearing, like he was burrowing deeper and deeper into a place where you couldn't really follow him. I think he was fundamentally embarrassed, that his failures had raised a wall between us. And I think he was scared; I think now he must have been aware every minute of the legacy from his father.

Daniel never finished his first year of college. He stopped going to classes, and he didn't show up for any of his finals—in fact, he was still holed up in his dorm room after the

semester closed and everyone else left for the summer. He'd spent that whole year drinking, doing drugs, building these elegant bookcases. I'd seen some early ones. They were beautiful things, tall and graceful, all bird's eye maple with mahogany accents. I wonder where they are now. I was a senior in high school then, and we spent that whole visit staying drunk, even though drinking was already starting to frighten me, the way you woke up sick the next morning and despite all the nausea and your brain split open, still, all you could think about was the next drink. Daniel taught me about the hair of the dog. But later it seemed he'd just wanted a drinking buddy, any old drinking buddy, good buddy. That he'd forgotten me as a friend. And he never came north again, except that last time. Maybe he realized returning would close the circle too tightly. Year passed into year.

Now, I think Daniel was trying to achieve perfect drunkenness, and I guess you could say he made that his life's work. I think he wanted to be drunk forever, permanently stopped at that moment on the curve when everything seemed ideal, that space between the nagging worry of alcoholism and absolute dumb narcosis.

I called his place again when I landed in Pensacola, but there still wasn't any answer, and it occurred to me the number I had might be out of date, that the address could be wrong, as well, and I considered calling Sarah then, but it seemed better to have some answers first, so I called information instead, confirmed the number and address, then I got a cab and drove out to his place.

His door was locked, and I knocked loudly and for a long time, but there was no response except from a neighbor. I went around the unit looking in the windows until I saw Daniel lying on the floor in the corner of the living room, curled up on the rug like a dog before a fireplace. But this was Florida;, there was no fireplace, just air conditioning and wall-to-wall carpeting and, in Daniel's case, wall-to-wall vomit and empty whiskey bottles and white plastic pill bottles and ashtrays spilling cigarette butts. I banged on the window, but there wasn't any response, so I cut the screen with my jackknife and forced the window up, and I climbed into his house and went over to him.

The vomit was a good sign. Daniel was still breathing, and his pulse was steady, although not very strong. I tried to shake him into consciousness, calling his name, but I couldn't rouse him. I made the neighbor call an ambulance, and I washed Daniel's face with cold water, then I collected the pill bottles and sat down next to him to wait for the EMTs. I thought about calling Sarah and her mother, but I decided to wait until I knew something.

I spent the rest of that morning waiting on the wrong side of doors in the Pensacola Hospital, first outside the ER as

they pumped Daniel's stomach and gave him narcotic antagonists, then at the nurse's station in the ICU while they put in IVs and hooked him up to different monitors. I spent a lot of time filling out forms and signing papers, making financial arrangements, offering myself as a guarantor. I gave Daniel's history to several doctors. Finally, they sent me home, suggesting I not return until tomorrow.

I fell asleep in the cab on the way back, and when I got to Daniel's condominium complex, I was disoriented, and I couldn't remember his number. The driver must have thought I was some nodding junkie, because I couldn't find Daniel's unit, but the places were all identical, white concrete slabs set down on artificial grass like giant mausoleums. I wondered how he ever found his way home when he was drunk. Finally, I identified his place as the one with the cut screen.

I called Sarah, a number I knew by heart, and this time she answered immediately, and when I told her everything that had happened, she insisted on coming straight down. I said she didn't have to, I told her, "There's nothing you can do here. He's in the ICU now. Nobody can see him. They kicked me out an hour ago."

"It doesn't matter."

"Why don't you come down after he's released—that's when he'll really need you. He's okay right now." I thought for a moment. "But I don't know how long they're going to take

care of him. You should be here for him when he gets out."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Doesn't what?"

"What if he doesn't make it?"

"He'll make it. He's stable now." Which wasn't really true; that's why they put him in the ICU.

"I'll meet you this afternoon," she said, then she hung up.

Next, I called the dean at UNEMC, but I could only leave a message with his secretary. Then, I cleaned up Daniel's apartment before Sarah could see it. I kept looking for some evidence of our past, some link back to the people we once were together, even the smallest thing—a book, some music, a picture. But Daniel's apartment could have been anyone's—there was nothing of Daniel in it at all, no sign of the person he used to be, no sign of the person he was now. It was hard to believe he'd lived there for years. His home was like a hotel room, but without the cleaning staff. What I still don't understand is why Daniel would settle down into that isolation, that place with no one so far from home. The refugee. Washed up like debris in a strange sterile land.

I spent the rest of the afternoon waiting for Sarah. And as the day dragged on, it occurred to me that's all I'd ever done, I'd waited far too long where Sarah was concerned, I'd waited until it was too late. For years, I'd thought of her

as a sister, and once, she seemed like my lover. But then she announced she would marry, and I suddenly felt a future I'd never considered before forever closed to me. And with that closure came a comprehension I didn't want, and a longing that would grow all through the winter and the spring. An emptiness would form that would somehow be connected to the loss of Daniel, but would include and then become the loss of Sarah herself.

It was late in the evening when the cab brought Sarah to Daniel's condominium. We went out for dinner, but neither of us really ate anything. That night, Sarah slept in Daniel's bed. I slept on the couch in the living room, and I had bad dreams there. Daniel's dreams, dreams of the refugee. A tunnel without lights. Black loneliness and despair.

Early the next morning, we went to see Daniel, and learned he'd been moved out of the ICU. We went up to the detox unit, and they let us onto that ward almost without caring. When the ambulance brought him in yesterday, nothing I could say could get me past the front desk—not that I was Daniel's friend, or that I rode in with him, or was his brother (which was almost true). When I told a nurse I was a medical student at UNEMC, she laughed.

We walked down a broad hallway separating private rooms. The place was overrun with staff, the orderlies and nurses and aides almost all men. The patients were mostly men too, various ages; they all looked old. I glimpsed one man in heavy restraint sobbing before his door was closed from within. There was one woman I heard screaming through a closed door, just inarticulate terror. People in mauve and teal went in and out of her room, but they couldn't make her stop. In Daniel's room, a heavy screen covered a narrow window that looked down several stories onto a parking lot and a golf course beyond. There was a television and some magazines, two copies of impressionist paintings, and a rope net surrounding the bed, thick nylon strung between sturdy tracks bolted to the ceiling and the bedframe. Daniel's skin was wet and pasty. He groaned and turned away.

"Jesus," I said. I looked at Sarah. Her eyes were wet, but her mouth was grim. I got an orderly to unlock the net and slide it back against the wall. "Daniel," I said. I touched his shoulder. "It's me, Richard. And Sarah."

Daniel blinked his eyes. His face looked swollen and thick, and I wished Sarah hadn't come. She sat on the edge of the bed and took Daniel's hand in hers. I couldn't think of anything to say.

Daniel coughed and motioned for water, and I got him some. "Thanks," he said finally. His voice was wooden.

"How are you feeling?" I asked. He shook his head and closed his eyes.

"Do you remember yesterday?"

But Daniel didn't answer. We sat in silence for a long time. Eventually, a nurse came in and told us we should go and let Daniel get some rest. She gave him some pills and said we had about five more minutes. Daniel looked ashen against the white bedclothes. His breathing was gentle and regular. He didn't stir when Sarah let go of his hand. She rose from the bed and went to the bathroom to wash her face. I was about to leave myself when Daniel slowly opened his eyes, focused on me with an effort, and said, "Do you remember the first time?" He looked like he was going to cry. "You took care of me." I squeezed his hand. "It was like magic," he said. "Then it was gone." He closed his eyes again. "Magic," he murmured. Then, he was asleep.

I'm not sure what they gave him, but for the first time, Daniel looked peaceful, and I was thankful for that, whatever the pharmacology was. In his sleep, he was smiling now, and I wished him a long rest, untroubled by dreams. Who needs dreams anyway? Daniel had his memories. Let him write his own history, create his own past. We all make up the truths we need to survive.

"Magic," the nurse sniffed behind me. I swung around, scowling, but she just stared right back, that purulent look I'd been noticing recently, disdain for doctors seeping out everywhere. She was right though, and she knew it; finally, I was the one who had to look away. It wasn't magic Daniel remembered—it was just shape-shifting, transient as smoke, not real at all. I turned back to the bed.

This was real. This gray boy—man on the white sheets, the twilight half-life that brought him here. You took care of me Richard. But I couldn't remember that. In my whole life, I don't think I ever took care of Daniel—it was always the other way around. His was the older brother's role.

In high school, they called him Prince Daniel, after the time a girl stumbled out of the main entrance and fell down the front stairs. She was high as a kite, and she bounced on her ass all the way to the sidewalk, scattering her books and papers behind her and jamming her skirt way up past her hips. Then, she just sat there next to the buses, dazed and confused, stoned out of her mind, her legs spread wide, and anyone could see she wore no underwear. Everybody stood around laughing and staring. Except for Daniel. He ran over to help her, shaming the others to silence; he covered the girl with his jacket and made me gather her things. She was shaking hard as he helped her to her feet, and he had to support her by the waist as he walked her past the others to his car. Prince Daniel. But they never forgot the way he made them feel, and the name was always tinged with contempt.

Do you remember the first time? I remembered the bulletproof feeling clearly enough, and the way time started sliding around. Being late for school and leading Daniel up those

same granite steps on a leash. How quiet it was inside at first, everyone already in class, the empty hallways stretching away on either side like dim and dusty tunnels. The school felt old to me as it never had before, ancient, almost archeological, and I wanted to linger there and understand that, but Mr. Pfnausch came roiling out of his office then, and he changed everything. Then, we were running, and some others started running, and by the time we ducked into the empty auditorium, five grown men were chasing us. Daniel opened an emergency door, and we ran across the parking lot and the football field; we ran all the way up the hill on the other side before we stopped to look back. The alarms going off and Daniel still on his leash.

I remembered how inviting my school looked from that perspective, the broad expanse of sunny brick long and low and warm, and how small Mr. Pfnausch seemed in the doorway. If only he'd been calmer. His distant shouts, the tiny figures at his side. They could have been us.

It was like magic. A perfect morning and a perfect escape, right out of the books. The sun-drenched hilltop in the clear spring light. Daniel pulled off his collar, saying, "Thanks. I won't need this anymore." I stood next to him with my arm around his shoulders. The day was just beginning, and life seemed limitless.

Of course, there was a following day, the appointment in Mr. Pfnausch's office. There would always be following days. Mornings after. One tomorrow after another stacking up beyond belief, beyond endurance. I touched Daniel's shoulder under the crisp white sheet, but it felt bony and cold.

You spent your whole life looking for magic, going back over and over, trying to find that place again, that hilltop in the sun, that moment before tomorrows when everything seemed perfect. And all the time your life kept moving forward, while you kept going back, until what you finally found was just yourself for a moment, lying at a crossroads, true and gray against bleached hospital sheets. Daniel.

Drinking was the great expansion, where all the rules were suspended, and nothing could ever go wrong. I came to believe it was like sex, always there just under the surface, silently organizing everything and everybody. The want that could not be satisfied, the voice that would not be stilled—whispering to you endlessly with its promise and its power. Promising everything, conscious and unconscious desire, waiting for you forever. But the promise was always the greatest part, and always disappointing in the end. No one could keep promises like that.

But more than broken promises, I think the tomorrows finally overwhelmed Daniel. The immensity of them stretching away. When I picture him now, I see him exhausted, I see him scared. Scared for a long time, a lifetime. I don't think he was ever able to face his fears. Except maybe at the end—and may-

be that's what killed him. Perhaps he always knew it would—perhaps he spent a lifetime sobering up to terror. Self-loathing and defeat and the knowledge of his father's death. The knowledge that this thing was his inheritance, his birthright, greater than he was, and maybe from the start he knew he was doomed. Maybe from the very beginning he could see all the way to the end, the dangling belt.

Here, we learn the most basic things—electron orbitals, positive and negative valences, the way atoms combine to form simple molecules. We proceed step by step biochemically—through sugars and fats to proteins and nucleic acids. Then, microscopically, histologically, anatomically—cells to tissues to organs to organ systems. Finally, we consider the human organism. It's very thorough.

But no one ever asks why. No one even remembers.

Here, we understand nothing. Not even simple physics, the second law of thermodynamics. We forget that chaos is the natural order of things. That ultimately everything comes apart. Life is futile beyond words, a puny holding action against the inexorable scraping of the universe.

We're nothing but a collection of molecules, spinning through the void—atoms linked for a moment by shared electrons, seeking balance and stability. Driven by positive and negative forces, trying to equalize opposite charges, always looking for the perfect match. Is that the same as loneliness?

I think of Sarah a lot. I was the one who gave her away when she married last week. She asked me to walk up the aisle with her, and I couldn't refuse—I took her father's place, her brother's place. But across this long spring, I've come to realize that I wanted to take the groom's place, I wanted to be the one to walk down the aisle with her. I wanted to start a life with Sarah, not mark the end of one. There are too many endings here.

Once, Daniel was like a brother, showing me the way. But I'm not sure I want to continue anymore. Four more years here and residencies after that and anything that matters just sort of tacked on later as an afterthought. Love and marriage. Or not marriage. Eventual children. A friend's suicide. What's the point of going forward? I want to go back, start over, find the wrong turns and make the right ones.

My first mentor, Skip, tried to teach me to get used to the idea of dying, death. But personally, I don't think you can ever do that. Sometimes I think hope is all we have, and the loss of that is unbearable. But hope is just ignorance; knowledge reveals that.

I wish for a return to simplicity. A hilltop in the sun. I'm sick of thinking. Remembering and dreaming. I want to find those memory links and break all the connections, clog the receptor sites, flood the synaptic spaces with some kind of useless analog. I want to forget.

I am so weary. ADP, ATP—there is no energy left. Tomorrow at eight, we start our two-year comps, the exams they use to determine who gets to continue. Right now, all I want to do is get drunk. It's a desperate feeling. Scary. Where a phosphate ion ought to be binding with adenosine diphosphate, I just see ethyl alcohol. A much simpler molecule.

Dahlias

Shreya Balla, 2021

A Poem, or Something

Jim Cash, 1965

In a black cold alley
A clown wept a moment,
Then shattered his
Laughing face
With a brick from a broken edifice.
But I have known men
Who sip tea in parlors,
And chat politely without offense,
And chuckle at some small grim joke.

A tree of night
Ooozed black blood and tears,
And a dwarf in the
Upper branches
Crouched like a toad and tried to fly.
But I have known men
Who sip tea in parlors,
And chat politely without offense,
And chuckle at some small grim joke.

A broken man
With dull white eyes
Hunched his shoulders
From a sidestreet wind,
And held out his palm to nobody there.
But I have known men
Who sip tea in parlors,
And chat politely without offense,
And chuckle at some small grim joke.

Seven dusty men
Sipped tea in a parlor;
And one slid from his chair
And died;
While the others chuckled at the small grim joke.
But I have known men
Who reach out of their skins,
And touch a shaking shoulder;
Then blow away the dust of decay
Of this dusty decaying age.

Catch-22 (The Poem)

Nyeree Boydajain, 2018

It was months after the promise that we would be able to go home,
She sent me pictures in the mail,
But it was her voice that helped me sleep
In the middle of Milwaukee when it was hard because of all the
crickets.
Now it's gunshots keeping me awake.

I'm leveling out my blood with nicotine in the hopes
That my lungs fail and I'm no longer useful.

Either way, when I get home eventually,
It won't be the same.

A home where my dreams are filled with the faces I've never spoken
to,
But improved as God and ended their life because the government told
me to.
The government who uses me as a prop,
Makes me believe I'm defending my country,
When I'm helping people I do not love
Just to help them receive more money.

I have taken more lives than a death row inmate,
Collected more bones than orthopedic cancer.

Think of all the places I could've been instead,
Like a college classroom,
Or in bed,
With you.

Splash

Hunter Thomsen

Cold

Josh Hall

"It's so cold, my hands are on fire," Montana said as he watched his voice vanish into the January air. We were following a trail marked by deer that led down to the creek where the ice had not quite frozen over. The watering hole had been recently visited since the tracks were visible and there had been snowfall the night before. The evening sun gave no heat as we tracked west back to the cabin. I had been walking away from the idea of warmth since sunset and I knew Montana had been chasing it; however his words were as crisp as the morning frost and right now I needed that kind of comfort. "With all hope, Montana, we shall arrive before the sun," I replied.

That morning's headlines read "Winter to be Warmer." It was November and I could've sworn the leaves had not yet changed colors. I've never worn red in my life and the heat from the crimson leaves may have had my blood boiling. I searched the paper for an explanation.

Higher temperature is what makes us pleasant.
A growth that soon will swallow the birds.
An average earth has been changing.
On the ground we are vegetation.

Seven years until spring arrives.
Pollution is the adaptation.
Turning are the scientists.
Dropping while we are
A couple of inches
Looking forward.
Solstice lost
Forgotten
Cold.

Montana was born and raised in southern California. His parents named him Montana

somewhere in the trend of naming children after states—stream of Dakotas and

Carolinas. He had never been to that particular state and had never been anywhere cold

for that matter. In other words, the color white described the beach sand, the clouds, hot

in the southern sun. That's why we went on this exploration; it was an opportunity to show him my understanding—my acquaintance—with the color white.

"So how far away is the cabin?" asked Montana, resting under an evergreen half buried in snow. I mentioned to him when we met that I knew a place, by a cabin, that resembled the sublimity of the white California. The awful beauty, nested

in the north, halfway across the country. Yet, temperature has nothing to do with the visual; one cannot feel cold or hot in the breeze of scenic emotion. "I feel it's this way," I said, standing on a rock, covered in a cloud of snow.

The National Academy of Sciences has declared that the Earth's surface temperature has risen about 1 degree Fahrenheit in the past century. The evidence is getting stronger that most of the warming in the past fifty years is attributable to human activities. Such activities have altered the chemical composition of the atmosphere through the buildup of greenhouse gases.

Energy from the sun beats the surface of the earth, controlling the weather and climate; all the while, the earth takes that energy and radiates it back into space. Atmospheric greenhouse gases such as water vapor and carbon dioxide trap the outgoing energy retaining beat, working the same way as glass panels do in a greenhouse. However, without this natural greenhouse effect, the temperatures would drop and life as we know it would not exist nor be possible.

-U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

"The sea is cold, but contains the hottest blood of all."

-Captain Bligh, Cold Sea 1789

Said to have been the words he spoke to his castaways

while on a voyage across the South Pacific Ocean, Bligh and seventeen others traveled 3,000 miles trying to survive in a twenty-foot open boat.

When Montana gets nervous he does the most extraordinary thing. He had every right to be nervous: it was well past sundown and we still had a long way to go, that is, if we were going in the right direction. Montana starts talking completely in the past tense, as if the future had already happened.

"The water seemed colder in autumn; the waves looked smaller from the cabin." It's hard to notice at first as he speaks mostly about the weather earlier in the day. "The snow just never stopped falling; the wind just never let up."

Surely enough, it was colder now, but it's interesting how we felt warmer, either through our frustration or the thickness of the trees, it seems like the past tense was all we had. We were going nowhere, and all the while Montana had felt that we had already been. That's why I brought him along, to make time feel like it doesn't exist. We had already arrived at the cabin; we had already gone over the hill in front of us; life had already happened.

White, while searching endlessly, is as cold as the arctic air. Only we weren't near the arctic, we were on the eastern coast of Lake Michigan. The sun had gone down and there still was no color. I remember wondering in early November if I was ever going to see a white ground again. White changes surfaces. White is flame. White can turn sand into glass: it is so cold that it's hot. White are the beaches where Montana was born. White reflects the sun as it had all day long up until this very moment. Yet, white does not reflect time nor place; Montana knew that. It was the one thing that couldn't have happened yet.

Was the cabin still the way I remembered it? Fifteen years will change your memory and at the same time, it will change what is being remembered. The cabin was made of dark wood; logs around a foot wide, stacked from the foundation to nearly twelve feet high. The logs were worn from the wind and snow, creating a curvature around the diagonally cut corners. The roof had been made of wooden shingles, and the frost that gathered gave it a sparkling image, always twinkling in the distance, iced over from afar. I had spent most of my time on the porch, three long steps to an unleveled surface with one bench made of two stumps and woven branches. The view from this perch was the dark lake, forever scattered with whitecaps. The rocky beach was glazed in the process of wet snow freezing. I often felt that I was above the clouds looking down upon mountains, except that they were moving, waves distant in the deep.

I have never been inside the cabin and I had never wanted to. My destination was the lake beyond and had always been. I don't know who lived there nor have I ever seen a

light on. The lights were the roof, and the porch was my vision. Montana did not know this, and I knew he longed for a fire. I knew he didn't expect to view the lake from the shore, in the cold, as I once viewed the Pacific with him, feet in the warm water, hot as I'd ever been. I hated that I had tricked him, I hated how he would miss the similarities of our lives.

It is expected of me to bathe in the warmth of summer; or to keep my toes hovering above the fire. I should always be separated from the wind by a pane of glass; covered up to prevent winter from whispering down the neck of my sweater—the ends of my sleeves. Yet, goose bumps to me are like rays of sun to you. Visiting the southern states isn't a vacation; it is the equivalent of you getting locked out of your house on a cold January night. Montana was starting to shiver—he had been locked out.

Not until this moment did I realize that my life was changing, the world around me longed for color—a balance. Before, I had only wanted to feel the icy liquid of the lake and breathe in the crisp colorless wind. The subzero temperature had no effect on me, as it never had. But something was different. The blood in my veins was getting warmer, and in my mind, the lake began to boil. A new feeling came over me and I hoped the cabin was near, I think I remembered a chimney, stretching out into space.

Sleep for C.G. Jung

John F. O'Brien, 1974

1.
Upon getting into bed
i feel the covers close
around me

and i watch the dark
open in patterns

i ask myself if i
want to do this

2.
Sleep buoys up my body
like a boat at a dock
when the waves rise

melting ridges of
the unconscious

i ask myself if i
want to do this

3.
For sleep may be death
not knowing herself
each night a child
of death

the sinking

when the dock

the dream disappears

and even the sails
know the touch of
the waters

Poem on Two Paintings of Van Gogh

John Thompson, 1964

In the shattered fire of the dawn
The charred blue noon
Already whispers;
Dark gods point
From the awakening cobblestones
And the still white palm of the corn;
Unknown birds rustle in the palette.

The flesh is cast down on the road,
A black shadow,
But sailing, blacker
And more swift than the sun;
The pack is full of stars.

The sun knows but cannot
Escape the blue stride full of eyes,
Voracious, intent
On their starry burden,
Their bright death.

The day blooms into storm;
The skies give up their dead
From flashing shreds of shroud;
The earth in fear unleashes
Its atrocious abundance:

The fruit is a glittering beak,
The corn a clamor of wings –
Dark harvest!
Through the blue distances,
Over the drunken fields,
Sail the sun-devouring birds:
The hand becomes a twisted cypress leaf,
The heart in mid-stride
Welcomes the gentle claw.

Wheatfield with Crows (1890) Vincent Van Gogh

The Artist on the Road to Tarascon (1888) Gogh

Spaceman

Kit Haggard, 2014

Content Warning:
Possible Suicidal Themes/Allegory

He woke up every morning in the windowless dark, with the pale earth perpetually on the rise over his bed. It was not the famous Apollo photograph, in glossy color, the inverted globe hanging like a blue marble in the velvety black amniotic fluid of the universe. It was twenty-six years older; the grainy black and white photo showing the slight curvature of the earth around California, and one triangle of space's total darkness, taken on a 35-millimeter camera strapped to a rocket designed by the Nazis. Other than the cover of Coltrane's Blue Train, beside the kitchen sink, it was the only thing hanging on his walls.

His alarm broke the white noise of pipes and radiators. He ran eight miles before the streetlights had gone off, his breath milky in the cold. In the suburbs, dew still clung to the flowerbeds, mist congregated in the cul-de-sacs, cars sat in front of the two-door garages like Jurassic hulks in the dark with frost clouding the edges of their windows. Through the steam from the shower, in his yellow bathroom, he looked at the changes to his body—the leanness of his legs, his arms, the skin of his face beginning to show the shapes of bones underneath. He pulled on his blue coveralls and knotted the sleeves around his waist before cooking a yokeless omelet under the mournful gaze of John Coltrane.

In the parking lot of the apartment building, sixteen floors down, behind the dumpsters, he left out food for the stray cat who rubbed against his legs and stalked him through the industrial park and the gardens of dark houses, halfway to the bus stop. She paused at the invisible edge of her territory, one paw lifted in a lavender bed, and appeared to grow bored. He caught the number 32 and sat in the white fluorescent light while the sun pushed a watery dawn through the cloud cover.

At the factory, men stood smoking their cigarettes in the cold. Their coveralls were grease-stained and knotted around their waists. They wore bomber jackets or faded Levis that belonged to their grandfathers. They carried thermoses and brown paper bags. They looked tired.

"It's the Spaceman," one said.

"Hey, Spaceman. What'd you do with the truck?"

"Sold it," he said.

"Hey—the '65 Chevy?"

"Chrome fenders, original wheels and hubcaps, plush interior," one recited, with the reverence they reserved for car parts, boxing matches, and the Bible. "Good condition."

"Sold."

"For how much?"

"A thousand."

"A thousand? Fucking Christ, Spaceman, did you think maybe one of us would have wanted it if you were giving it away?"

The man called Shepard turned back to them, heaving smoke like an engine. "Why'd you sell it?"

"Don't need it anymore," he said.

From 8:00 a.m. to 10:30, he fit electronic consoles into the plastic arms of airplane seats. At 10:30, they stood in the cold with their cigarettes and coffee. The Spaceman didn't smoke, he drank decaf from the vending machine in the lobby; he didn't say much.

12:30 was lunch. The men filed away from their stations and ate sandwiches their wives had packed. They talked too loud in the dry, industrial heat of the canteen. The Spaceman didn't eat lunch; he went out behind the factory, where the boys had built a bar to see if anyone could do more chin-ups than the Spaceman. The metal was icy beneath his bare hands, the kind of chill that crawled along his bones and through his joints and down to the base of his spine. His bear trap ribs closed tight on his stomach. They watched him through the windows of the canteen, down in the cold, at the back of the yard, among spare parts and the discarded airplane seats.

"It's cold as fuck out there."

"What's he doing?"

"Training."

"For what?"

"Mars."

"Bullshit."

"Nah, he's really doing it."

"Can they do that?"

"Some special program. They've got a place out in Arizona, he says."

"I heard something about that."

"I thought it was called off."

"Bullshit. He's going to Mars?"

"He seems to think so."

"Hey—why do you think we call him the Spaceman?"

Outside, he counted to ten, paused, then began again.

In the afternoons, he practiced thinking about nothing. He had gotten very, very good at the blankness, repeating words over and over until they didn't seem to mean anything anymore. Phillips-head. Bolt housing. Audio/visual display.

At 5:00 the last bell rang and movement stopped. It got quiet on the floor, the heavy breathing of the machines falling silent as, one by one, the engines drew rattling death gasps and their belts and cogs juddered to a halt. It was already dark as an oil stain outside, the winter sun slipping away in the middle of the afternoon. You could find me by the orange lights of their cigarettes in the dark.

"'Night Spaceman," someone called.

He raised one hand without looking back.

It was cold in the flat on the sixteenth floor. The radiator in the kitchen rattled and hissed, but never seemed to warm the room. Wind pushed through the gaps between the window and the sill above the sink. He cooked eggs, beans and spinach, huddling close to the warm burner. He nibbled on a tiny piece of a dark chocolate bar. The sugar made him feel sick. He did pull-ups on the bar in the doorway of the living room, under the blue eye of the television.

***

On Thursday, twenty-five minutes before the afternoon break, the Spaceman collapsed on the factory floor. It took almost fifteen minutes for someone to notice that audio/visual panels were not being fitted into their plastic polyurethane housings, and by that time, he was beginning to come around.

"Hey, should we call someone?"

"Yeah, you okay, Spaceman?"

"I'm fine," he said. "Just got lightheaded."

"You need a hand?"

"Someone get the Spaceman some food."

"No, no. I'm okay. Really, I don't need anything."

The manager sent the rest of the men early to their break and took the Spaceman into the glass office on the factory floor. The light was yellow; the room was covered in papers and the warm smell of grease. He sat in a folding chair while the anvil-mouthed manager leaned against the desk.

"Look," he said, "I don't want to believe everything the boys say out there. They're full of shit most of the time. But I keep hearing them say that you think you're going to Mars. Is this true?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes you are, or yes you think you are?"

"Yes, I am."

"Is that even possible?"

"Yes, sir. A private company's arranging it."

"And they've been in contact with you?"

"I have a letter from them."

"Does this have something to do with why you haven't been eating? Why you passed out on my floor?"

"I'm about to lose bone and muscle density. I'm trying to prepare."

"Well, I can't have you skipping meals and keeling over. What if you had been operating the drill press? You've got to eat."

"Actually, sir," he said, playing with a ragged hole in his coveralls, small as a cigarette burn, "I'd like to give my two weeks' notice."

***

The white, static earth, pockmarked with grainy storm fronts, rose over his bed.

He lay perfectly still in the wake of his alarm, staring up at the ceiling. He ran eight miles in the predawn flicker between darkness and the orange circles of streetlights. At home he peered at himself through the yellow steam in the bathroom.

Instead of breakfast, he looked at the letter again. It had been printed on heavy cardstock, as though the weight of the contents had leached into the paper. The logo, the red orb of Mars, was printed at the top. He had read it enough times to know what it said by heart. Once, the promise had gone through him like a drill press, rattling his ribs and lungs, but now, his chest felt too hollow for anything to resonate right. He folded the letter, put it in the pocket of his coveralls, and went to sit with the black cat behind the dumpster in the parking lot. The ground was freezing, frosted in a thin layer of ice.

"You're looking a little fat," he said softly. He pulled her into his lap and felt her stomach, distended around a handful of globes like walnuts, moving slowly with her heartbeat. His fingers froze in her soft heat. He stood up quickly. "Fucking cat," he said, and when she tried to follow him to the bus stop, he clapped at her until she backed away.

At the factory, it looked as though the men had not moved. Their bodies, like the heavy machinery, seemed bolted to the floor.

"Hey, Spaceman."

"You feeling better?"

"Yes—thanks."

"Is it true you're quitting?"

"I turned in my two weeks yesterday."

"Wow," one of them said, the vowel stretching out into several words. "Wow."

"Is it because of Mars?"

He nodded. "I'm leaving soon."

"Shit, Spaceman."

"When will you be back?"

The Spaceman looked away, toward a carbon monoxide dawn that was white and blank and strangled in the clouds. "I don't think I will be," he said.

Before the first bell, he took the letter to the manager, who worked his jaw as he read it, as though the words had to be struck down and beaten flat before he could swallow them. His eyes snagged on the smeared ink of certain letters, dark halos around words like, "permanent settlement," and "food supply."

"You've read the terms of this waiver they talk about?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"It says, 'Due to the low gravitational field, changes may be rendered to muscle and bone density that are effectively irreversible, making a return to earth impossible.'"

"I said I've read them."

The manager set the letter on his desk and pinched the bridge of his nose, where the skin was heavy and tired. "Do you have any family?"

"No, sir."

"Any close friends?"

"No, sir."

"And you believe this is real?"

"I know it, sir."

"And you're sure about it?"

"Very sure." The first bell echoed out of the belly of the building, and he stood up. "Unless there's anything else—?"

"Be careful, and let me know if there's anything I can do."

"Thank you, sir."

The Spaceman repeated the same words over and over. He fit audio/visual panels into the dark guts of airplane seats between the intestinal maze of wires and the steel bones of armrests. He did his chin-ups in the cold and drank decaf coffee on the afternoon break. He walked to the bus stop, shivering, feeling the letter burn a hole through the front of his blue coveralls.

***

He reduced his ration of eggs and went for a run. He paused in the suburban dark to catch his breath against a lamppost then collapsed. He woke up on the ground. The winter sun glared in his eyes. He was covered in morning dew, and was bleeding weakly from his forehead. Quick footsteps approached him and a woman in a purple tracksuit leaned over him. "Should I call someone?" she asked.

"No, no, I'm fine," he said. "Just training too hard."

The Spaceman began to erase himself from the apartment on the sixteenth floor—leaving his TV and the John Coltrane poster for a man downstairs. He folded up the photograph of earth and his spare coveralls and left them in the center of the bare bed. That morning, he looked around for the cat, but she was gone. He had nothing left to feed her anyway. His replacement at the factory was a new man, Armstrong, whom they began calling Prettyboy for his baby face and small, delicate hands. He smoked with them all the same. At the end of his first day on the job, his wife showed up in XK-E Jag, leather interior, six-cylinder engine, about five miles of leg below the hem of her flight attendant's uniform, and they started calling him Armstrong again.

One day, as the men ate their lunches in the canteen, Spaceman came up in the conversation.

"Spaceman?" Armstrong said. "Weird nickname."

"He leaves for Mars this week."

"No."

"Yeah, program in New Mexico or something."

"Arizona."

"I heard he eats nothing but one egg a day."

"It's training."

Armstrong looked out the window of the canteen at Spaceman, thin and shivering against the fence, too weak for chin-ups. "Well, shit," he said, putting out his cigarette and turning away, walking with the rest of them to the line of machines. "Shit."

The Spaceman knew that he had begun to fall into the space between memories, wide and dark as the distance between stars. He walked away from the factory that evening, breathing weakly, with an empty duffle over his shoulder. One voice called out, "Hey, 'night Spaceman," from the spangled dark, and then he was gone.

Poem For The Mad Letter Writer Not With Me, Who May Not Even Be

Lyn Lifshin, 1964

He woke up every morning in the windowless dark, with the pale earth perpetually on the rise over his bed. It was not the famous Apollo photograph, in glossy color, the inverted globe hanging like a blue marble in the velvety black amniotic fluid of the universe. It was twenty-six years older; the grainy black and white photo showing the slight curvature of the earth around California, and one triangle of space's total darkness, taken on a 35-millimeter camera strapped to a rocket designed by the Nazis. Other than the cover of Coltrane's Blue Train, beside the kitchen sink, it was the only thing hanging on his walls.

His alarm broke the white noise of pipes and radiators. He ran eight miles before the streetlights had gone off, his breath milky in the cold. In the suburbs, dew still clung to the flowerbeds, mist congregated in the cul-de-sacs, cars sat in front of the two-door garages like Jurassic hulks in the dark with frost clouding the edges of their windows. Through the steam from the shower, in his yellow bathroom, he looked at the changes to his body—the leanness of his legs, his arms, the skin of his face beginning to show the shapes of bones underneath. He pulled on his blue coveralls and knotted the sleeves around his waist before cooking a yokeless omelet under the mournful

gaze of John Coltrane.
In the parking lot of the apartment building, sixteen floors down, behind the dumpsters, he left out food for the stray cat who rubbed against his legs and stalked him through the industrial park and the gardens of dark houses, halfway to the bus stop. She paused at the invisible edge of her territory, one paw lifted in a lavender bed, and appeared to grow bored. He caught the number 32 and sat in the white fluorescent light while the sun pushed a watery dawn through the cloud cover. At the factory, men stood smoking their cigarettes in the cold. Their coveralls were grease-stained and knotted around their waists. They wore bomber jackets or faded Levis that belonged to their grandfathers. They carried thermoses and brown paper bags. They looked tired.
"It's the Spaceman," one said.
"Hey, Spaceman. What'd you do with the truck?"
"Sold it," he said.
"Hey—the '65 Chevy?"
"Chrome fenders, original wheels and hubcaps, plush interior," one recited, with the reverence they reserved for car parts, boxing matches, and the Bible. "Good condition."
"Sold."
"For how much?"
"A thousand."
"A thousand? Fucking Christ, Spaceman, did you think maybe one of us would have wanted it if you were giving it away?"
The man called Shepard turned back to them, heaving smoke like an engine. "Why'd you sell it?"
"Don't need it anymore," he said.
From 8:00 a.m. to 10:30, he fit electronic consoles into the plastic arms of airplane seats. At 10:30, they stood in the cold with their cigarettes and coffee. The Spaceman didn't smoke, he drank decaf from the vending machine in the lobby; he didn't say much.
12:30 was lunch. The men filed away from their stations and ate sandwiches their wives had packed. They talked too loud in the dry, industrial heat of the canteen. The Spaceman didn't eat lunch; he went out behind the factory, where the boys had built a bar to see if anyone could do more chin-ups than the Spaceman. The metal was icy beneath his bare hands, the kind of chill that crawled along his bones and through his joints and down to the base of his spine. His bear trap ribs closed tight on his stomach. They watched him through the windows of the canteen, down in the cold, at the back of the yard, among spare parts and the discarded airplane seats.
"It's cold as fuck out there."

Death Valley (Starway)

Laila Paskel, 2019