

*The
Sigma Tau Delta
Rectangle*

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Sigma Tau Delta is a member of the Association of College Honor Societies.

2008–2009 Writing Awards for *The Sigma Tau Delta Review* and *The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*

Frederic Fadner Critical Essay Award

Marion Quirici,

“‘Behind the Cotton Wool’: The Social
Unconscious in *Mrs. Dalloway*”

Eleanor B. North Poetry Award

Mary Bush,

“On the Comal (New Braunfels, Texas)”

Herbert Hughes Short Fiction Award

Stephen Janes,

“Earplugs”

Elizabeth Holtze Creative Nonfiction Award

Arshia Unk,

“Faded and Bronzed”

Judson Q. Owen Award for Best Piece Overall

Mary Bush,

“On the Comal (New Braunfels, Texas)”

Judge for Writing Awards

LISA RUSS SPAAR is the author of *Satin Cash* (Persea Books, 2008), *Blue Venus: Poems* (Persea Books, 2004) and *Glass Town: Poems* (Red Hen Press, 1999), for which she received a 2000 Rona Jaffe Award for Emerging Women Writers. She is also the author of two chapbooks of poems, *Blind Boy on Skates* (Trilobite/University of North Texas Press, 1988) and *Cellar* (Alderman Press/University of Virginia, 1983), and is the editor of *Acquainted with the Night: Insomnia Poems* (Columbia UP, 1999) and an anthology of London poems, *All That Mighty Heart: London Poems* (University of Virginia Press, 2008). Her work has appeared in many literary quarterlies and journals, including *The Kenyon Review*, *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, *Slate*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Yale Review*, and most recently in *Best American Poetry 2008*. Spaar is the Director of the Area Program in Poetry Writing at the University of Virginia, where she is Professor of English.

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Poetry

On the Comal

The Occurrence of Foxfire

Sneaking Bottles Far From My Aunt's House

A Carving

Canning Apricots with my Mother when I was 12

Portrait in the Park

First Kiss

In This Kentucky Rain

It was Winter

just like that

My Father's Back

Besondere Träume

Bone China

The Photograph in the Basement

Rote

Epilogue

On the Comal

| Mary Bush

I. The Springs

Did some German frontier burgher reach down
into the moss-lined breech, poke with a stick
to clear out snakes, listen for the low sound
of bees before lowering to take drink?
And before that, did the Spanish padre
slide his pale hands beneath the lacy ferns
and pull them back, part the leaves, press water
to his hot bare skin before he unlearned
all his lessons? Already forgotten,
the wolf communion of Tonkawa men—
who thrust their wolf faces to the spring, caught
in two worlds, still covered in their wolf skins.
Deep below, some heart, through some ancient vein,
beats. Sun heats wet stone. Some wheel turns again.

II. Girls Gone Wild

Three girls are languid on the dock, dangling
arms like willow branches over deep slow
currents, all ribs and bony knees. Hanging
close to the edge of the precipice, old
enough to jump but afraid of the deep
chill, the bone shock, the gasp torn from young throats,
the long plunge before soft furred moss stops feet
hitting bottom. They roll off the dock, float
up through pale green light, Ophelia's call
ignored, they are used to sun and want more,
more than water lapping at their hips, all
day they dream of it, how it was before
longing. When they dove for fish, glimpsed silver.
Turned away from the bend in the river.

III. The Float

No politics on the river! Sharp, shrill,
her voice flies over his head like a jay.
Slumping in the tube, cowed, he wants to kill
her. He pulls his cap down to hide his face.
He feels scorched. Why did he salute? Pump one
drunk fist at that boy soldier, with fresh blue
Eagle and Star, e pluribus unum?
They all believe. What penance can he do
for leading? His wife thinks he needs a float,
a sunny day, a beer, a kiss, to slip
under the current, wash away the smoke
sand blood fire sweat oil flesh. Not politics
that sent him there. He wanted to be strong.
He reaches for her hand. They drift along.

IV. Toobs

She kneels, swaying, beer in hand, neon TOOBS
painted in pink on black rubber, dizzy
with sun. It's my birthday, y'all! Giggles, moves
to a song in her head, flushed and pretty
in an unformed way, nineteen, feeling it,
feeling the boys who float under the trees
watching and waiting for ripe fruit, she dips
down and whispers, I want to show my titties!
No one dissuades her. And why shouldn't she?
They're hers to show. Trembling now, she unties
her straps, grins, raises arms to air and feels
that Texas sun caress her, dives off, glides
through water clear as bottle glass, icy cold.
Goddess of the spring at nineteen years old.

V. Last Public Exit

We come in Walmart suits, frayed jeans, flip-flops,
tattoos, coconut oil, pale winter skin;
we come with daughters, sons, mothers-in-law,
Labradors, inappropriate boyfriends;
we come to cool the heat. To drink. Release
the wire and string. We come to wash our feet
in this shallow bowl of soft stone, lime leached
smooth as cupped hands. To water, heavy beasts,
to water! We come by it honestly,
our Ancestral Gulf a brackish drifting sea,
a low tidal wash across Texas fault
lines. Below the surface, fist shatters bone
to sinkhole, leaving karst remains. The springs
are not eternal. Still, we come to play.

Mary Bush is pursuing doctoral studies with an emphasis on Creative Writing at the University of Texas. She lives in Celina, Texas.

The Occurrence of Foxfire

| Allen Berry

The man beside you is haunted.
Those hands that seem so strong
when they hold you close
shake sometimes
when you aren't looking.

He is yours,
has been from the start.
There is no lie upon his lips,
with regard to his fidelity.

If he is distant at times,
pay it no mind. He is
not holding someone else
in his mind. At least
no one corporeal.

If he should cry out
when a train passes
in the night,
do not fear.

Draw him closer,
steady the trembling,
that rocks his unyielding
frame, like wind through
chimes.

Should dreams tear a name
from his lips while he slumbers,
do not question him
come the first light of day.

It is the occurrence of Foxfire,
from the murky
depths of memory.
It is nothing at all
that will burn you.

Allen Berry is the current president of the Mu Upsilon chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, and is pursuing an M.A. in English at the University of Alabama-Huntsville. His poetry has been featured in What Remembers Us, an anthology featuring Alabama poets writing about their home state, and Poetworks Press anthologies: Passings and For Better or Worse. His proudest accomplishment is founding the Limestone Dust Poetry Festival, a group that he served as president until 2007.

Sneaking Bottles Far From My Aunt's House

| Luke Darby

From the bone-like branches gold has fallen
Like rain. Live oaks give up their pollen.
Grainy against new leaves as soft as flesh,
Patched like a worn quilt across the grass.

In the wisteria, so many bees
Stumble, drunk like us in the mid-day,
Slow with thick smell from those draped eaves,
Stumbling, whirling, trying to find their way.

Shadows across the sidewalk ebb and breed
Into each other under branches spread
Like waiting arms, trailing purple combs
Seducing bees and keeping them from home.

Until night, on the pollen you and I
Lie, drawing our breath down from the sky.

Luke Darby is an English major originally from Lafayette, LA graduating in 2009 from Millsaps College. His interests include journalism, film studies, and magic realism. Currently, he plans on doing social work after graduating.

A Carving

| Elise Doney

This is not a painting. It is
a burden
a black bottled womb
carved.

Exposed in the scraping
away. Away the paint curled
like dirt trailed behind worms
eating
the brown earth. A core carved
into a bottle. The bottle's curves a woman's
curves the slender
neck, a waist, hips
shades and stretch marks scratched to shape
dripping
sticky and wrinkled
cocoon, brains, the crevices,
and little unformed penises
the balls hanging like prunes, sagging.

In an abandoned bowling alley
parking lot, when the orange light
from the street lamps splays out
when I squint, I trip
over the cracks
in the pavement and you catch
me kneeling.
Your empty boy-lusts carved desperate
pull into the lot in a royal
blue Chevy that I will never
see again and never
forget looking up at my feet
planted on the ceiling of the back seat
the gray fabric ribbed and ripped,
the orange stuffing flaking out

with the rocking of the car
stinging my eyes.

This morning
I drank water from a glass
bottle and felt
the slobber
of morning. This morning feeling
like wet
tongue, like squishing
mud, like the gurgle of hunger,
shades of phlegm
in every breath.

The air damp
in our brown
studio apartment.
The blankets damp
and heavy with our night
sweats and our
sex.

The air sticky
with birds
this morning.

Canning Apricots with my Mother when I was 12

| Elise Doney

Buzz of citrus
buzz of California
air in the morning. Your coffee
tastes like tomatoes, tap-water
pulsing pulp and your pillows swelling
with fruit.

Walls painted apricot lined
with apricot jam, you say “Ah”-pricot jam,
you say eat some.

I say, but mother, there are slugs
between my toes sucking
the sugar of peaches and pears,
sinking into the buzz
of California earth, squishing
through the garden.

Apricot jam, air-sucked and sealed,
bottled half-fruits,
you say “Ah”-pricots
you say eat some.

I say, but mother, I’m walking
on fruit.

Portrait in the Park

| Meghan Engsberg

Motionless at the
root of a tree
green grass
enfolds me

I spy the
earthly woman
wrapped in a
gray wool sweater

hair swirling and
whipping as she
leans back
on the red picnic

table and
furrows her
thinly shaped
brows

focuses on her
sketch pad which curls
in the wind
as she rustles

her pencil
to make
smudges and lines
out of

the face that
watches her from
across the park
near the old oak tree

Meghan Engsberg is an English major with a minor in American Studies at St. Norbert College. She plans to attend graduate school for English in the Fall.

First Kiss

| Leon H. Leid

Around here the guns are blowing
icy, man-made snow,
while Breckenridge sports its soft powder,
like that February of five years
ago, four of us flown west
in search of better snow. Maybe the move out
of innocence was inevitable, with only one
extra bed and two bodies. Did you feel me
tremble as my mouth, untrained, found your throat?
Then it was warmth of parted lips, instinct
of desire pulling your tongue against mine,
surprised, I didn't have to
learn how. I remember the next day in fragments of you
turning to me on the ski-lift, behind a snow ridge,
and I even rode goofy (right foot first)
in order to face you, riding-blind while leaning
in, breathless for the taste of your lips, before
shoving away and swerving clear of the near-by trees.

Leon H. Leid is an English major, with a Spanish minor, at Messiah College. His passions include travelling and studying languages.

In This Kentucky Rain

| Dani R. Limos

I shouldn't have gone up that gravel road to fields of mud and hot fences, a barn where horses know your touch and saddles hang on pegs you knew as a child. Down lazy highways through flurries of snow in the old maroon mini van, we stopped for strawberry slushies, courted ghost trains on forgotten tracks of your favorite shortcuts

I shouldn't have drifted down the river, my kayak weightless and free in a tunnel of trees spreading birch bark fingers over calm water, reaching from farms and pastures that thrive for summer runs, thirsty for soaking feet up the brook bank. Down that channel past a rope swing to the underbelly of a bridge, we threw stones and wished the river was a portal

I shouldn't be sitting in this kitchen where jam jars are filled with orange juice and the oven's always on, always the perfect temperature. Kentucky rain is like Seattle rain—patters lamp posts and truck beds, green hills and naked trees. Breathe meatloaf, cinnamon candles, notice cracks in the wall and the creak of the chair. It's home that's never been home 'til now

Because the biscuits are risen, sweet tea is on the table, and I know which glass you want, know how you slept by the way you scratch your head, know you woke up at 6 A.M., stared at walls you painted in high school. Talk with your mom of books and futures and you, can't help but wonder if I'm too invested in this. Not lovers or siblings or soul mates. Just friends who share

a love for joint shadows, smeared ink on skin, and stories that will never be whole.

Dani R. Limos recently received a B.A. in Creative Writing from Pepperdine University. She was granted the Douglas Award for Creative Writing and has been published in Dash Literary Journal, The Rectangle, and Expressionists: Magazine of the Arts. Dani spent the year in Ghana and the Philippines working on her first novel before attending graduate school.

It was Winter

| Mackenzie Martin

We walked out of the studio
hours bent over the wood
and the smooth tools concluded
into dusk. An owl sprang up
gleaming from the ground near my car,
landing in a branch three feet above our heads.
We had never seen one so close.
We could have counted
every pinfeather while it ruffled its wings
and turned its head over shoulder toward us
when we laughed and kept speaking.
Its soft round face, tiny feathers a smooth
concave surface, puckered in the wind.
The same that blew tornadoes from home
north and east along the mountains.
The owl raised its wings,
holding them close to its body,
low and testing the world's sharp smell.

Mackenzie Martin is an Art and English double major. She values her experiences studying abroad in Italy as the gems of her education. She also values the convergence between her majors, the strength that her visual acuity lends to her poetry and the conceptual framework that her English education lends to her artwork.

just like that

| Lynne McEniry

it was to
be her last
night in the
hospital

one minute she
was rambling on
apologetic about debts
incurred and time
misspent and that
her dinner of
instant mashed potatoes
was too heavy
to spoon into
her own mouth

the next minute
she was helping
to plan the
annual family picnic
remember she said,
*Aunt Lil's a
vegetarian now and
Georgie likes his
hamburgers well done
with Swiss cheese*

one sister packed
the clothes as
the other helped
their mother into
the bed for
her breathing treatment
the brother thought
to himself that

their life would
be easier once
they got their
mother home tomorrow

the last brother
walked into the
room as their
mother lay back
for the drugs
to take effect
*like those potatoes
you didn't eat*
he told her
with a grin
*relief only takes
an instant*

the next morning
as they prepared
to meet the
undertaker with their
mother's favorite dress
the brothers and
sisters heard a
crash in the
kitchen and found
their father kneeling
in a heap
of glass shards
and fine grains
from a jar
of instant coffee

Lynne McEniry is a senior Writing major and works full time at the College of Saint Elizabeth. She writes poetry and creative non-fiction and is serving her fourth year as the editor for the College's literary journal, The Sector. McEniry's poetry struggles to find meaning and hold on to hope in the midst of loss and grief.

My Father's Back

| Sarah Moulton

It seems that he falls from the sky
like an injured pigeon, one-winged
and silent.

He comes back when he's run out
of rent, owes someone a ride,
and for most holidays.

He lugs a beat-up box on his hip.
While I cook ground beef and cabbage,
Polish golumpki, he asks for spanakopita.

After dinner, I watch him plant a snapshot
of Santorini, hid wedding band
and a Golden Nugget

casino chip in the garden. He wipes tears
from his eyes as he pats the ground
as if it were the top

of a child's head. I'm tired of him—
I think it's time for him to go, time to hitchhike.
He can stand at my steps,

thumb out, waiting. Wherever someone's
trucking, that's where he should go,
and where he should stay.

Sarah Moulton is a recent graduate of the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey where she received a B.A. in Literature with a track in Creative Writing and minors in Writing and Women's Studies. Sara is now attending the accelerated teaching program at Georgian Court University; she hopes to become a high school English teacher.

Besondere Träume

| Brooke Shafar

Sometimes I dream in
 German subtitles, my mind's
 end-of-day cognitive breakdown,
 a mishmash of places, people, and moments shuffled,
 manifest as a domestic foreign film,
 composed in an English-speaking brain
 impeccably fluent in German
 so long as it's 2 AM and I
 lie unconscious,
 unwitting writer and director in a
 language whose surface I have
 barely breached.

Characters from the daytime—professors, parents, friends—
 regulars in the ongoing serial
 are edited into Eisenstein's
 thesis, antithesis make synthesis
 with the Expressionistic black and white lighting
 and backdrops of Wiene's *Caligari*,
 juxtaposed to snippets of Fassbinder's
 theatrically-inspired staging of his stars
 in saturated seventies technicolor.

Kracauer's stationary camera takes hold
 to present realism
 in the reality of characters speaking
 a language they don't know in waking life.
 Bazin's lens sets the image in deep focus,
 acute visual clarity counterbalancing
 garbled verbal exchanges enhanced with
 projected words that maybe, maybe not
 confer the meaning of speech.

My dissonant English-German conglomeration
 flickers in the deep movie house recesses

situated somewhere in the vacant spaces of my cerebrum.
I'm sitting in the back row under the projection light,
Cesare the somnambulist awakening
with deep-set blackened eyes
as people on screen morph into elongated Nosferatus
and Fritz Lang's human-like machines just as the
Frauenfilme heroine of von Trotta fame
is dissected in extreme close-up.

I'm left with the ambiguous
Tom Tykwer ending, a silent
exchange of myself leaving myself behind
on the side of an interstate highway while
red-haired Lola (who's now a blonde) takes off
in the car with my other half instead of running,
and the movie screen cuts to black.

Brooke Shafar graduated in May 2008 with a degree in English and German from Western Kentucky University. She is currently spending a year abroad in Mainz, Germany as a Fulbright English teaching assistant.

Bone China

| Ruth Spalding

Thanksgiving Day we eat
 from imperial Japanese china,
 bone porcelain with silver rims.
 Held to the light, I see
 my fingers through it.

My aunt sips coffee from the frail cup,
 and thinks of the man who bought these dishes,
 a family set to lay in their cupboards, in their house.
 Without him, we eat
 yams and cranberry sauce
 off the thin ivory plates.

He fought in Vietnam, wanted to marry her.
 When he sent her the china
 he was thinking of a family
 gathering with relatives in wool sweaters
 and children dressed in fine clothes
 and patent leather shoes.

My aunt silently eats, purses her lips
 to blow the rising fog from the brown sea
 in her white cup, while we
 interrupt one another, mouths wide.
 She listens to tines
 scrape against her blanched dishes. No child
 dressed in a clip on bow tie or tulle dress.
 Instead her sister, nephew and niece
 fill their bellies together,
 aware the turkey meat is moist,
 the warm yams are soft
 between their tongues and teeth,
 but she knows the bone underneath.

Ruth Spalding is a Psychology and English double major at Albion College. She was Editor-in-Chief for the 2008 publication of The Albion Review.

The Photograph in the Basement

| Dayna Stein

It was the year of no birthday cakes, where food was a filthy word, and my father and I could only speak through Post-it notes and crossword puzzles. I still remember the weight of the camera. The ambulance was a time machine, the years had only been a month, and my father's face had changed. But I was brave—said *happy birthday* and through the lens I saw that my father had put on his favorite felt hat. Although he couldn't quite smile and the drugs had glazed his eyes so they couldn't quite shine, I snapped the picture anyway and smiled back.

Remembering is like laundry. A blue shirt weighing hard. Deep creased pants set in their ways. I place the picture to be lost once more among the sewing needles and spools of thread. Folding a pair of black socks inward.

Dayna Stein is a student at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania. She is majoring in English and minoring in Creative Writing, and she loves poetry more than most things.

Rote

| Caron Tate

The usher with the white white hair hands Miss May a fan
 Miss May has on her blue hat with feathers
 A song and then another
 something about Zion something with The Blood in it

announcementsannouncementsannouncements
 Please move your car lights are on in the fellowship
 hall will be the church anniversary is coming
 or something like that

The offering for the mission will help starving children
 in Africa who want the rest of my dinner and the
 assistant preacher prays over the money and maybe more money
 comes like loaves and fishes or why would he pray for it?

The usher with the white white hair hands Miss May a fan
 Miss May has on her white hat with the big bow ribbon

And then the scripture we read our part he reads his part we read
 our part something about David and mine enemies and me and my
 house if I had a house which I don't did pray for one. Didn't come.

Songs and then some songs "I don't feel noways tired"
 except I am very very tired and amen amen amen

The usher with the white white hair hands Miss May a fan
 Miss May has on her yellow hat with the sparkly veil
 It's new so she will certainly get the spirit

And the sermon about Godjesussavioremmanuelrockofages
 kingofkingslordoflordsbalmingilead
 What kind of balm? Will it take away the pain? Where's Gilead?
 Does the number 12 bus go there?

Do good be good give good hard earned money godjesuslord loves a
 cheerfulgiver trying to buy my seat in heaven
 but at these prices I'll be sitting in the second balcony
 won't be cheerful at all
 Miss May gets the spirit and ohlord ohgod ohyesJesusyes!
 But when her hat falls off the spirit politely leaves her
 so she can pick it up

And finally the minister opens the doors of the church
 welcome come on in if you need a place to lay your burden down
 join us here perfect place for a nap on Sunday afternoon
 but maybe he didn't say that

The usher with the white white hair hands Miss May a fan
 it is torn and tattered with a broken handle
 I'm sure her faith will make it whole

Caron Tate, an English major at the University of Illinois–Springfield, returned to school after a thirty year absence. Her work has been published in the Australian magazine Takahe, The Washington Post, The Alchemist, and Voices among others.

Epilogue

| Christina Zwilling

I remember the way their fingers looked,
Pale beneath the fluorescent lighting,
Rigid and frozen on the table,
Reaching into the stillness.

The silence would hum in my ears
As I examined the enlarged heart,
The shattered spine,
The collapsed lung.

We weren't supposed to look
Beneath the white sheet
That covered their faces;
But still, sometimes I would
Lift a corner of the fabric
To see a large crooked nose,
A wide, scarred forehead,
Or, once, small doll lips
In the shape of an "O."

Mostly, though, I looked at the fingers,
The way the white bones curled up
Like a dead spider's limbs;
And I would wonder what it was
They must have been reaching for
Right before their hearts gave way
And their backs were broken.

Short Fiction

Earplugs

The Dress

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Earplugs

| Stephen Janes

I pulled the blanket around my head. The blue fleece covered my ears. It was warm out, but I insisted he bring it anyway. I was wearing short pants with red and white stripes on them. I thought they looked funny, but Mom said they were for the holiday. Each time a firework exploded I pulled it tighter and leaned into my father. He was a big man. Not big in the way all dads look to their daughter, but big in a hulking massive way. I once heard him tell someone he weighed three hundred pounds.

His hair was short and oily. When I touched his cheeks I could feel the short hairs scratching out of his face. He told me that the invisible farmers who harvested his beard could not find him as easily ever since he left home. He always made up silly excuses for everything. I heard Mom say the same thing about him to her friend, except she used different words.

“Do you want one of them?” he asked. He was pointing at a man with a white beret wearing about a hundred glow-in-the-dark necklaces. He had on funny pants too except his were yellow with splatters of red paint.

“No. Mom says they run out after one night.”

He looked down at me. His chin got really big. “Did your mother tell you can put them in the freezer and they’ll last longer?” he asked. He put his hand over my ear right before when two loud blasts came.

“Well did she?”

“No,” I said.

He picked me up in the blanket and walked over to the man in the beret. I looked at the man’s face. It was covered in pock marks. He must have picked his entire face the way I did the one on my leg when I had chicken pox. He looked terrible. I turned my face into my dad. It was dark and he smelled like pine. It was like being in the forest at night.

“You know,” said my dad when we sat back down, “when you wear that necklace it will protect you from the fireworks.”

I knew he made that up too but I unwrapped myself from the blanket anyway. My dad took it and folded it twice into a square

and let me sit up on it. I had gotten sweaty and whenever I touched my arm to the metal of the grandstand it would stick to my arm. The fireworks started to go off so often that I no longer worried about being surprised.

“This is the grand finale,” he said. All of the other people were holding hands and staring up at the fireworks. I pulled my necklace into my mouth and rolled my tongue against it.

“Wow,” my father said. The fireworks looked like flowers only faster. The seed went into the air where it bloomed and, within a second, disappeared.

Getting out of the parking lot was difficult. A car had parked next to us and we had to wait for it to move before we could leave. We sat there for a minute in silence before he said, “So do you have school tomorrow?”

“Daddy, it’s summer,”

He smiled, “Oh yeah, that’s right. Do you have camp then?”

“No Daddy, I only do that for a week.”

The people finally came and moved their car. When we started moving he lowered the windows and put on the radio. It was the oldies station that Mom listens to. I knew all of the songs but did not sing along like I usually do.

It was clear out and I could see all the stars. “Daddy, don’t they look almost like the fireworks before they ‘splode?”

“Yes,” he said, “but I hope none of those explode.”

“They don’t do that Daddy,” I said but decided to keep my eyes on them just to make sure. One of the stars started to move. I shook but then realized it had just been a plane.

“Do you know what you need kiddo? You need some ice cream,” he said.

The car had a clock, so I knew it was past my bed time. I wanted ice cream so I did not remind him. I put my hand in my pocket and felt two coins. Mom had given me fifty cents if I needed to call her. I did not understand why since Dad had a cell phone.

We did not go to our usual store; instead he told me we were going somewhere new. “It’s by where I live now,” he said. This place didn’t have a big inflatable ice cream cone attached to the roof, but when I walked inside and saw they had chocolate I knew it would be okay.

I ordered chocolate ice cream with chocolate sprinkles. I always had the same thing, except this time Daddy told me to get it in a waffle bowl for specials. He didn't get anything. Usually he ordered a banana split with an extra scoop. He told me before I was born someone had dared him to eat three of them. He said he did it and could have even eaten a fourth. I didn't believe him at first, but mom told me she was there and it was true.

The table we sat at was already sticky, but neither of us cared. "So, are you excited about school coming up?" he asked.

"Daddy, school is forever away."

"Well, I mean, do you like school? I mean, the school you go to?" he asked.

"I get to take dance instead of gym there, and I get to see Emily so I like it."

I took a big scoop of chocolate ice cream and opened my mouth, but instead it fell on the red and white stripes of my new shorts Mom bought me for today. I just stared down where they fell. "She told me to be careful," I said.

"Well nobody can be perfect right?" he said.

He touched my chin.

"Right?" he said again

"Yes, Daddy."

"Listen, I'll go get some paper towels from the bathroom."

I thought about walking over to the phone to call Mommy and tell her what happened, but Daddy came back too quickly with a handful of wet towels.

He daubed and I daubed and it wasn't going to come out.

"Don't worry about it, your mom will just wash it out," he said.

"But she'll be so upset. She told me to be careful."

He told me he knew the store where she bought them from and if we left right away we could get there before it closed.

On the drive there I did not look up at the stars. They could have turned into fireworks, or flowers, or airplanes and I could have cared less. I just kept looking at my dad.

He parked right in front of the store without using a parking space. I got on his shoulders and we walked inside.

"We're about to close, sir," said a man in a blue shirt.

"I don't care," said my dad. "Do you see these pants that she's

wearing? We need to find them right now and we are not leaving until we do.”

The man in the blue shirt stepped back and pointed at an aisle. I knew my dad frightened him. At first we did not see my size, but he saw a different pair sticking out from underneath a pair of jeans. They were the right ones. I walked to the changing room and switched them.

The man at the register told us that they were closed and we could not buy them any longer. My dad set the stained shorts on the counter and put three five dollar bills on top of them and we walked out of the store.

My father was not afraid of anyone and knew how to fix everything. Back in the car he put on the radio and this time we both sang along. I was surprised that he knew the words too.

We started to drive back to my mom’s house. We drove over the bridge to get there. Mom never went this way. She said the back way was quicker, but I could see the face she made anytime she had to drive over any bridge. Dad just made sure he hit all of the notes and didn’t even notice the fact we were over the bay.

When we came a block away from where I lived he stopped the car and turned to look at me.

“Daddy, this isn’t where I live. Have you already forgotten?”

“No kiddo, I haven’t forgotten. I just wanted to talk to you about something before you went home.”

I thought he was going to tell me that he was sick and going to die. I started to cry.

“Hey,” he said. “It’s okay. It’s okay. It’s nothing bad.” He put his arm on my shoulder and pulled me closer to him, but the seat belt caught me before I had my head on his belly. “I was just wondering how you might feel about living with me for a while.”

“I live with Mommy though,” I said.

“Well, I thought you might want to try this out for awhile”

I put my hand into my pocket and flicked the coins against one another.

“I didn’t want to tell you like this,” he paused and looked at me. “Actually, I wish I didn’t have to tell you this at all, but I am moving.”

He added, “Not too far, not too far,” but my face had already

begun to crinkle on itself. This time he reached over and unclasped my belt. I started to blubber into his chest.

“It’s just a few hours away,” he said, “and that’s why I wanted to know if you’d come with me.”

“But this is where all my friends live and Mommy, Mommy lives here.”

He sighed. “Oh, I guess I forgot.” I looked up at him and I could see his second chin. He was pushing it down to look back at me.

“You should look at the stars, Daddy,” I said. “It makes your face prettier.”

“Promise you’ll let me visit.”

“Yes.”

“One more thing, I want to be the one that mentions this to Mommy. I just wanted you to know first, so for right now can this be our secret?”

“Like the pants?” I said.

“Like the pants.”

He drove the rest of the block to my house and Mommy was standing outside. She had on the same shorts that I had on. She walked up to the car to get me out.

“How were the fireworks?” she said.

“They were so cool, Mommy. Daddy got scared but I protected him.”

“Jane,” said Daddy. “Can you go inside for a moment so I can talk to your mother?”

“Okay.” I walked inside and up to my room.

I looked out my window and could see some people shooting off fireworks from their driveway. Inside the house they were not quite so loud or scary.

The Dress

| Hanna Howard

The dress had come with the winter season's new shipment of formal wear, and only in a few sizes. Like many of the winter dresses, this one was deep, satin-black, and was adorned with large, champagne-colored flowers. There was a sheer jacket to match—its effect was to set the gown apart from the junior prom dresses, making it more sophisticated, more mature, and ever so much more elegant.

When Edna Danse left the department store at the end of her Monday night shift, she could hardly get the dress out of her mind. The very picture of beauty, she had thought when she discovered it among all the other new dresses. And not so trendy that someone her age would be scandalized by wearing it. She had not tried it on, exactly, but she *had* noticed that in the few sizes they received, hers was among them. When she was sure there was no one looking, Edna held it up to herself in front of a mirror.

As she pulled her Buick into the driveway at home, she tried determinedly to put her silly fancies out of her head. Beautiful dresses were all well and good for imaginations, but real life was a different matter. The last thing Carl needed was for her to come home chasing some absurd idea.

"Hello, dear," she said as she came into the living room where her husband was sitting in his wheelchair watching *Andy Griffith* reruns.

"Hullo, Eddie. How was work?"

"Oh," she sighed, setting her purse down on the table, "Fine, I guess." A vision of the dress, hanging prettily on its rack in the middle of the formal wear section sprang suddenly into her mind, but one look at Carl in his wheelchair pushed it right back out again.

"It was just fine," she repeated. She patted Carl on the hand and asked, "Have you had any dinner?"

He looked up at her sheepishly. "I tried. I think I may have ruined some macaroni."

She raised her eyebrows and smiled. "Macaroni, Carl? That's a new low for you."

He began to wheel after her as she walked into the kitchen. "I'd better stick to the microwave when you're gone, I think, Eddie. I can't really reach the stove from my chair, and when it starts to boil over . . . well, you know."

She saw the white crust on the side of the oven where there had been an obvious overflow of boiling water. She cast her husband a worried glance. "Did you burn yourself?"

"Naw." He quickly stuffed his rheumatic hands into his jacket pocket.

"Carl," she sighed heavily. "You need to be more careful when I'm gone. I don't *have* to work—we'd be fine, you know . . ."

"But Eddie, I know how much you like that ladies' store. I'd never want you to have to quit."

"I'll quit if you don't start being more careful."

Edna tried to keep the sudden sharp edge of anger out of her voice, but it broke through all the same, and the realization made her all the more frustrated. Was she really so mad that Carl had burned himself?

It's not his fault he's sick, she told herself reproachfully. He'd change things if he could, faster than anybody.

Carl navigated himself out of the kitchen as she began to bang through the cabinet for a pot. She took several deep breaths to steady herself, then stood slowly back up.

As she straightened, she caught sight of an invitation she had put on the refrigerator the day before, and tightened her lips against what she feared was another deflation. The pot hanging loosely in her hand, she allowed herself to read the card once more.

Mr. and Mrs. Carl Danse

You are cordially invited to join in dinner and dancing at the Pinewood Country Club on Saturday the Eighth of November, to celebrate the fiftieth wedding anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. Newland Powell.

Attire is formal.

Again, Edna shook away the image of her dress. It would be perfect for the Powell's party, of course, but Carl had already told her he doubted he would feel up to it.

She filled the pot with water and placed it, as gently as she could, onto the stove top, silently cursing the tears that filled her eyes.

"Edna, are you and Carl planning to go to the Powell's anniversary dinner?"

Edna looked up from the register. Her friend Georgia, who worked in the makeup department, was leaning over the counter conspiratorially. Her dark-lidded eyes squinted with mischief, and her sparkling crimson fingernails framed her wrinkled face like nails stolen from a twenty year old.

Edna shook her head lightly, pretending to be absorbed in the computer screen. "Don't think so."

"Why on earth not?" Georgia demanded, flipping her head back indignantly and jamming her fists onto her hips.

"Well, I don't suppose I've got anything to wear," she answered truthfully.

At once, Georgia's face reassumed its scheming expression, and she leaned in again. "Oh really? Then come here."

She started to walk away, and beckoned for Edna to follow.

"I was just noticing a dress on my way over here, and—if you don't mind my saying so—I think you'd look just about sexy in it."

Edna rolled her eyes. Sexy had been a staple in Georgia's vocabulary ever since she had decided she was tired of getting old, and had gone about trying to stop it.

"Georgia, I don't think—"

With a flourish, her friend pulled out the black, flowered dress that had been dancing in Edna's imagination since its arrival three days previous. Edna felt her cheeks burn, and she turned away to hide it.

"Oh Georgia, *really!*" she said quickly, forcing a laugh. "I'm an old lady—I can't wear things like that!"

"Nonsense," Georgia snorted. "You can wear whatever you want. And with a figure like yours, you wouldn't even have to worry about looking fat."

"Georgia!"

With a petulant look, she conceded. “Alright. I’ll stop, but you really ought to think about it. Harry and I are going, and so are the Evanses. It’d just be peachy if you would come.”

Edna started back for her counter, her face still hot. “I’ll talk to Carl about it,” she said.

But she did not, not after she came home to find Carl sprawled on the floor of the hall, his wheelchair drifting onto the carpet like a ship-wrecked boat on the edge of an island. To Edna’s despair, the doctor informed her that Carl’s accident would leave him permanently crippled.

She skipped work the next two days. When she went back, she felt like an old balloon; one that has been gradually sinking and deflating for a long time, but unexpectedly receives the prick which sends it into accelerated decline and leaves it withered and lifeless on the floor.

She smiled at her customers, and tried to appease Georgia, but she could not escape herself, and she could not escape the dress. Every day it hung, glimmering, from across the aisle, and every day she felt like a schoolgirl in love, trying desperately to look anywhere *but* at the dress, only to find her gaze inexplicably drawn as if magnetized to the dark shimmer of fabric at the edge of her vision. Soon there was only one left—and it was in her size.

Edna became like a woman haunted, staring intently at anything just to keep from stealing glances at the dress that would never be hers. When she slept, she dreamed heartbreaking dreams in which Carl was well, and wanted to take her to the Powells’ dinner in her stunning black dress. He always complimented it, and danced with her just as passionately as when he had first begun to court her.

Sometimes these dreams became waking fantasies, and Edna repeatedly found herself shaken out of them by a curious or impatient customer. One of these, late one evening, was a young woman and her mother, the former looking rather downcast, the latter sturdily hopeful.

“Do you have a dressing room?” the mother asked with determined cheerfulness.

“Of course,” Edna replied, beckoning the two to follow her. They both clutched an armful of formal dresses, and Edna asked

what the occasion was.

“I was nominated to be on my school’s Homecoming Court,” the girl said in a tired voice. “And I have to wear a formal dress. We’ve been looking all day . . . I sure hope one of these works.”

Edna opened a room for them and hung the dresses inside. She noticed with a peculiar pang that they were her own size, and thought suddenly that Georgia was right. She *was* in pretty good shape for her age. “Well, I’d be glad to help you however I can.”

“Maybe you’d like to give us your opinion on these?” the mother asked hopefully, sinking into a chair outside her daughter’s dressing room.

Edna shrugged. It would at least keep her from drifting back into her miserable thoughts. “Of course,” she said, taking a seat herself.

One by one, the girl modeled the dresses, and each time it seemed there was some fatal inadequacy. Too low. Too short. Too tight here. Too loose there. The color isn’t right. The straps are too long. There’s a snag in the fabric.

And truly, Edna did not feel the young woman was too picky. None of the dresses was perfect, and she knew it wouldn’t do to settle for less than that. And with each presentation, the girl’s voice grew more tired, more despairing. They all knew the store was set to close soon, and the fact hovered at the edge of their conversation like a looming thundercloud.

Finally, irony struck at Edna in the form of a brilliant idea. “I have just the one,” she said getting hastily to her feet. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before.”

Leaving the mother and daughter to wonder, Edna hurried out of the dressing room and crossed straight to the rack displaying her beloved black, flowered dress. What a horribly perfect solution! she thought, with a sudden gurgle of laughter. A sensation that felt like the tightening of grief wound into her chest, but all she could do was giggle. She had to wipe away tears of mirth from the corners of her eyes before she returned to the dressing room.

“Try this one,” she said triumphantly, holding the dress before her like a rippling standard. “I think it will be perfect.” And, seeing the look of skepticism on the girl’s face, she quickly clarified, “You

don't have to wear the jacket."

The young woman took the dress and shut herself back in the stall. When she emerged, Edna smiled with a deep sigh. It looked like it had been tailored especially for her.

"Do you like it?" she asked somewhat bashfully.

"Oh, Elisabeth!" her mother cried, clasping her hands together and leaping up. "It's beautiful! You look stunning!"

The girl turned to Edna.

She nodded deeply. "Lovely. Perfectly lovely."

When she had rung them up and sent them happily out to their car with the dress, Edna sank down into her chair and let her head rest against her hand. She suddenly felt very tired.

Drawing in a deep breath, she rose on creaky legs and walked slowly out to her Buick to drive home.

Hanna Howard is an "imaginist," who loves both the natural world and the world of fiction and fancy. She just graduated as an English major at Oklahoma Baptist University last May and is enthralled to step out into the beckoning future, and see what new stories await her.

Ask Me

| Ashley D. Saari

Being beautiful is easy. It just is. People used to tell my father all the time, “What a beautiful daughter you have,” as though it’s real praise. It doesn’t mean anything, really. There’s no effort there.

My father wonders what happened to his pretty little girl. My friend Kate wonders why I don’t wear makeup anymore. Everyone asks why I cut my hair, when it was so pretty long. They’re asking the wrong questions.

It started with a bottle of nail polish. A pure, unadulterated red, like a fire truck, or an old-fashioned barn kind of red. Red was a special occasion nail polish. An adult color. I’d always thought so. Red was for that spicy red dress cut down to *here*, as if my dad would ever let me buy or wear such a thing.

It came in a pack of six, ranging from the palest of the pale pinks, to the red that goes with nothing but more red. Since I still thought of red as the special occasion polish, as the adult color, it remained unopened for a long, long time. I worked my way through the rest of the polish, methodically, lightest to darkest, waiting for the occasion to wear red.

By the time senior prom rolled around, I was shopping for a dress to match my nail polish, when all the other girls were doing it the other way around. The dress I eventually decided on wasn’t cut down to *here*, but it did have a slit *up* to *here*, which was some consolation, and more easily hidden from my father.

It cost a small fortune, but it did obscene things to my legs that made it worth it. “That’s hot,” my friend Kate had said. “Everyone is going to be drooling over you. Damn your figure!” she mourned, looking at her own frilly number, with strategically placed ruffles to hide her wide hips.

Kate is a girl displaced by time. The only thing wrong with her body type is that it has gone out of fashion since a couple of hundred years ago, when being pleasantly curved was desirable. Now, of course, to be desirable, you must be a size double zero and excuse yourself to the ladies room after a heavy meal. I traced my thin collarbones in the mirror, imagining my nails and lips were red to match the dress. I hated my collarbones. They were

disproportionately high to my breasts. I swept my long dark hair over them and twirled in front of the mirror like a little girl in her first Easter dress.

Beautiful people are supposed to be attracted to other beautiful people. It's a law. When people see two beautiful people walking together as a couple, they think nothing of it. When it is one beautiful person and the other is homely, they wonder at the taste of the attractive person. She could have anyone, they think. Why be with someone unattractive? They never say to themselves that the other half of the couple must be very funny, or charming, or have a great personality.

Why do they always ask the wrong questions?

Myles Zepintski wasn't the most attractive boy in school. He was on the football team, but wasn't the quarterback. He had dirty blonde hair and blue eyes, with acne scars on his chin. He had a charming wolfish smile, despite a chip in one of his front teeth. It looked like a displaced vampire fang.

He was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I spent weeks before prom trying to get him to ask me. I scouted obsessively for information on his preferences. He liked straight hair, one girl told me, and I ruthlessly suppressed my natural waves. He's a leg man, said another, and suddenly my wardrobe consisted of skirts, shorts and mini-dresses. I sat in front of him in U.S. History, sideways in my chair, legs in the aisle. I angled them so that only my toes and the ball of one foot touched the ground, one slender ankle crossed behind the other.

It was a hideously uncomfortable position to hold for fifty minutes, but I would sometimes slant a glance back at him, and catch him following the curve of my leg up to the hem of my skirt, and continue to follow the fabric. My concentration in U.S. History suffered terribly as I focused all of my mental energy into sending him telepathic signals. "*Ask me, ask me, ask me!*" He never did.

Kate and I ended up going to the dance together. Kate hadn't gotten any offers, and I had turned down two boys and sent Myles failed signals with my eyes. Kate and I endured my father taking the

ten thousand pictures, obligated by the overcompensation of a single father of one child. I figured that it was really only fair, considering the fact that he had dropped a king's ransom paying for hair, nails, dress, and shoes. He hadn't paid quite as much as Kate's parents, though, who had broken down and let her get a pair of strappy stilettos that had cost over a hundred dollars. I wondered what they would say when they found out the stilettos lasted until just after pictures, when Kate, whining about aching toes, switched them out for a pair of my worn out beach flip-flops.

"Shoe whore," I accused. "You just wanted to be able to say that you own a pair of stilettos."

"Who's the whore?" Kate had accused right back, pointing at my own thin heels. "It's not like you won't be kicking them off by the end of the night, just like everyone else." Kate waved her hand loftily, climbing into my car, arranging her multitude of ruffles. "Don't blame me for beating the rush."

Kate was wrong about that, though. The shoes were heinously uncomfortable, but I had picked these shoes with Myles in mind and was determined not to succumb and kick them off to dance.

Myles noticed me, all right. He did a double take, even. I gave him a look under smoky lids. He flashed his chipped tooth at me but didn't approach. He spent a lot of the dance standing next to the wall and staring at me, fingering the lip of his glass of punch as I danced with Kate. I even tried my hand at telepathy again. "*Ask me to dance, ask me, ask me!*" But he didn't.

It wasn't until the end of the dance, when a lot of people had already gone home, and Kate had shamelessly shoved her supposedly aching feet into the lap of Dane Mason, demanding that he rub them, that it happened. Myles slid up behind me, and whispered, breath hot against the delicate shell of my ear, "You look hot."

My heart fluttered crazily, but I just turned to him, cool and with just the perfect amount of condescension in my voice, replied, "But not hot enough to leave the punch bowl and come ask me to dance."

"Aw, come on, Mel. You know that I don't dance," he said, placing one hand on my hip, just above the slit, and drawing me back into him. He ran a finger past the flap of the slit and brushed my thigh. And even though I knew no such thing, I forgave him

instantly. He breathed in my ear, “Not this kind of dancing, anyways.”

And that was it. When he told me that he was going for a walk out by the football field, if I wanted to come, I spared a glance at Kate, giggling like someone had spiked the punch while Dane rubbed her feet, and decided that she was occupied enough not to miss me.

Sometimes I think of women of the past. Ancient Anglo women running out to face invaders with swaddled babies, as though to beg for mercy, only to produce a knife from the folds of cloth. Amazonian women cutting off their breasts to properly handle their bows. Joan of Arc cutting her hair and dressing like a man to lead the French army in the name of God at the age of seventeen. Kate and her beautiful displaced curves.

The more I think about it, the more I believe we have gone backwards in the past hundreds of years.

Kate had missed me, evidenced by the pissed off message that was left on my cell phone in the morning. She didn't stay mad long, though, because Dane had given her a ride home when she couldn't find me, and they had made out in his truck before he dropped her off. This was all related to me two days later, when Kate had broken down and forgiven me. She was too wrapped up in Dane Mason to ask what had happened with Myles, or to notice that I didn't offer any details.

In those two days, before Kate got done being pissed about being ditched at the dance, all I had was my red nail polish. After its first use, it seemed ruined to me, kind of like my dress, hung carefully in its bag in the closet, never to be worn again. Hell, why couldn't red be an everyday color, I thought, removing the perfect red polish carefully, erasing every hint of the color, until red-stained tissues littered my bed. I was adult enough to wear red, I thought, applying a fresh coat to each fingernail. I put globs on each nail, letting it run into my cuticles like each finger had disfiguring hangnails. I did my toes while I was waiting for my nails to dry, blowing on them, cheeks ballooning as I puffed like the Big Bad Wolf. Or, I thought, leaving a print in the polish as I checked if it was dry, was I Little

Red Riding Hood?

When the polish had dried enough, I chipped it off, attempting to peel the entire coat of polish off at once, like skinning an animal. I left the chippings in a small pile on my bedspread, a tiny, bloody mountain. I had scraped off a thin layer of nail in some places as well. My manicure was ruined.

Good.

I closed my eyes, allowing myself a smile.

“You never want to talk about boys anymore,” complained Kate one day, when I failed to become properly enthused now that Kate and Dane were officially going out, as though they hadn’t been on ten dates already.

“Maybe I don’t find them that interesting anymore, okay?” I complained back. “There’s more to life than boys, okay? Some things are more *important* than stupid boys.”

Kate crossed her arms. “So now what I want to talk about is stupid?”

“That’s not what I said!”

“You know, Melissa, you’re turning into a real drag. Just an absolute drag.”

“Yeah? Well, you can go screw yourself, Katherine Donally, and your stupid boyfriend, too!” I screamed at Kate’s huffy back and immediately felt ashamed.

I ran out of the red nail polish that day.

After the fight with Kate, I cut my hair. “Short,” I told the stylist. She asked four times if I was sure. When she finished, I stared at myself in the mirror, trying to imagine it without the styling gel. Without long hair to soften my face, I looked thinner, harder. My cheekbones were more prominent. I looked younger than seventeen and older at the same time.

I wonder if the same thing happened to Joan of Arc.

After the polish, it was red felt tip pens. I bought them for my journal and wrote with them, filling pages and pages with red pen, bleeding through the paper. Sometimes, I wrote his name, the boy that I had bought the dress for. Every time I did I always tore out

the page, and the one behind it, if it held an imprint of the ink, and I rendered them to pieces in a fury. The experience always left me exhausted and sweaty, gasping for breath, like I'd just run a sprint, or like I'd just had sex.

When I slid the journal back into my bookcase, it looked just like every other book on the shelf. I marveled at it. If you didn't know you wouldn't ever suspect it wasn't filled with even, black type. No one would ever guess that such an innocuous little book would be so filled with red. I supposed that was the nature of blending into a crowd.

A month and a half after the prom, I looked at the dress again. I even put it on and looked at myself in the mirror. It was a little looser fitting than when I bought it. My collarbones were even more prominent than they were, and I had no hair to hide them anymore. There is a small tear at the top of each high slit, those slits that I had been so proud of. Like slit throats, bleeding color out onto the dress. It still smelled like the dance. Like sweat and perfume and cologne.

I took it off and hung it up, back into its bag, covering red with white, like fall leaves covered with frost.

Fall leaves are already dead.

At night, I struggled with myself. Sometimes I would have to physically clamp my hand over my mouth and nose, hold my breath until my face was red and strained, and I would have to let go and gasp for breath. It's impossible to smother yourself. I read that somewhere.

Sometimes, though, it's the only thing that keeps me from screaming the horrible, terrible, condemning truth. My secret shame. Afterwards, sometimes I can say it quietly, letting it get swallowed by the dark. "I would have done it. I would have done anything he wanted, if he had just *asked me*."

Ashley D. Saari is a student at Franklin Pierce University. Her list of things to do before she dies include driving across the country without a map, learning to play the oboe (if only because it has a cool name), and building a personal library.

Melting

| Ashley D. Saari

I fell in love with a cold woman. Stoic, maybe I should say. Staid. She doesn't smile, doesn't giggle, never acts girlish or soft at all.

Other people get the attraction. Larissa is stunning. She has her hair cut in a severe bob at her chin, straight and sharp, as though she took a swipe at it with a razor. She has eyes that are the blue of Crayola Crayon blue. Pure, deep, and dark. And she's smart, too. Talented, charismatic, cool and confident, that's Larissa Manning.

No one knows how *I* got her attention. *I* don't even know how I got her attention. I personally think that I'm just so average I slipped in under her radar, and it didn't even hit her that we were dating until we were a firmly established couple.

So, like I said, they get the attraction. What they don't get is the love.

I met her at work, where they call her the Ice Queen where she might hear, and Ice Bitch when they think she can't. Not that she is. A bitch, that is. For all that she's cold—stoic, staid,—she's never said anything unduly harsh to anyone. She never really belittled anyone. Never uses profanity, either.

The closest I've ever come to hearing her swear was the first time I laid eyes on her. It was my first day on the job, and I entered the break room just as she was spilling coffee on herself.

"Crap!" she exclaimed, immediately wiping at her stained blouse. Then she looked up, saw me standing in the doorway, and went pink.

That was it for me, really. I mean, who gets embarrassed over saying something like that? It's not even a real swear. That's just Larissa.

I always like to joke that our relationship started over coffee. Larissa assumes that I'm talking about the numerous times we went out for coffee together during our lunch breaks. I know that I'm talking about that day, the first day that I saw her look flustered. I knew that I wanted to put that look on her face again.

People at work don't understand what I see in her. They wouldn't, of course, having never seen her go pink over spilled coffee and a mild swear.

They don't see her in the early morning, though, when she's finger combing her hair in front of her vanity, skin still warm from the shower (no trace of ice *at all*). She does it in the dark, with the very earliest rays of sunlight starting to creep in the windows, because she wants to let me sleep in that few extra minutes. That's as close to sentimental as she gets. They don't see that.

They also don't know that when she knows that I'm already awake, she lets me dry and comb her hair for her.

She doesn't ask for it. Never did. One day, she just noticed that I was awake, looking at her, and she came over to the bed and put her back to me, expectantly. I was fascinated with her hair from the start. So light and baby fine, the strands as thin as a whisper. I always picked out the tangles with a comb, first. It seems like going at them with the brush would break something fragile.

It's always in the morning. Larissa is softer in the morning, before she puts on her power suits and has her first cup of coffee. It's like the suits are made up of something more than cloth. Armor, maybe. An exoskeleton that she sheds at night, when I coax her out of it.

She may be—stoic—but she's not blind, or deaf. She hears what people call her, and knows what they think of her. She would never admit it, but it hurts her. On the days that are especially hard, I take her to bed in the late afternoon, stripping her of her power suits, laying her down so her hair fans out across the pillow like a halo, kissing away the pressure and hurts, easing the lines straining around her eyes. God forbid she should get a wrinkle. I stroke her back until she stops tensing. The lines fade away, and her shoulder blades no longer look like wings trying to break free through the skin. That's about as close to relaxed as Larissa gets.

"We should get a dog," I say after one such day. We are lying in bed, close enough that I can feel her warmth and smell her skin, but we're not touching. Larissa is not a cuddler.

"No we shouldn't," she says, sated and a little sleepy.

"You're not even going to think about it?" I ask, ghosting my hand over her side in a phantom caress, brushing my lips over her shoulder.

She snorts, pulling the sheet higher around her, putting an extra layer of cloth between my hand and her skin. "When you find a

little dog that doesn't need to be walked, fed, or watered, doesn't bark, shed, or jump on the furniture, then we can talk."

"We could have a kid," I reply, half seriously, risking life and limb to slide my hand down and splay my fingers on the depression of her smooth, flat stomach.

"Not without a ring on my finger, we couldn't," she mutters into her pillow.

"Would you accept one from me?" I ask, with another ghost kiss to her shoulder.

"No," she says, after the slightest of pauses. Then, after a slightly longer pause, she turns her head to me. "Was that a proposal? Because if it was, it was really lame."

I take my hand off of her stomach and roll onto my back, strangling a noise of frustration in my throat before it has a chance to escape. It comes out as nothing more than a huff of air, but even that is enough to make my opinion clear.

There is a silence, before Larissa grabs the blanket and sheet and drags them up over her body, tucking them around her shoulders like a cape.

"We can get a goldfish," she finally concedes, rolling over to place a single hand on my chest. I reach out and finger a few strands of her hair, and she doesn't object.

It took a while for me to notice. I don't really have any excuse, other than I'm a guy, and if guys don't notice when their girlfriend gets their hair cut, then they're not likely to notice it growing out. She had been growing it out a little longer than she normally let it, but when she came back from the stylist, all she'd gotten was a trim.

I let it go, even though she'd never changed her hairstyle—never changed anything, really—in the entire time that I'd known her. A month, two, then three went by, and still, she didn't get her hair cut.

"Are you growing your hair out?" I finally asked one Sunday while I was brushing it out, lines creasing the space between my eyebrows.

"What, you don't like it?" she asked, tilting her head back, looking at me with a tiny smirk playing about her lips. "You always say you wish I would."

"And you say no. You *always* say no." I tilted her head a little

farther back and kissed her forehead. “Not that your stubbornness isn’t incredibly endearing.” Larissa gave a pleased little hum and smiled at me before I let her go to blot her hair with a towel.

“Yeah, well, I’ve had this style forever.”

“I know. That’s usually your argument for why you won’t grow it out,” I groused, using a hair pick with a feather-light touch to sort through the tangles.

“Maybe I just wanted to give you something to play with in bed,” she said whimsically, as if she ever did anything for anybody.

I bared my teeth. It might have been a smile. If I were a shark. “Well, if we’re talking about toys . . .” I pulled her down, across my body, rolling over so that I was on top.

“You’re going to mess up my hair,” she said, trying to hide a smile pulling at her lips.

“That, my dear, is the point,” I growled, burying my face in her neck.

Afterwards, I savored the few moments that she liked to be cuddled—those right after sex. I stroked her hair, still damp from her shower. It would require brushing again.

“How long are you going to grow it?” I asked, playing with a few strands.

“Hm. I don’t know. Long,” she replied simply, leaning into my attentions like a needy cat.

“Past your shoulders?” I asked, hopefully. I’ve always been a sucker for long hair. “You would look nice with it long. You can do more with it.”

She considered a moment, then conceded. “Past my shoulders.”

“That’ll take maintenance you know,” I told her, even though I’m loath to tell her anything that will change her mind. “It takes longer to brush. A lot longer to dry.”

She doesn’t say anything for a moment, playing with my small diamond of chest hair. Larissa says more with her silences than anyone else I’ve ever encountered before.

“I know,” she finally admitted, pulling away and rolling over. “That’s why I’m doing it.”

One Night at Quincy's

| Ashley D. Saari

I like working the late night shift at Quincy's, after the kitchen is closed. It means that I'm dragging all the next day through classes, but it's usually quiet, and no one is going to rob a bar on a weeknight. Especially not a little sports bar like Quincy's, even if we aren't in the greatest part of town.

Like now. It's a Tuesday night, a half an hour before closing, and the only people around are Larry, who's putting off going home to his nagging wife, and a homeless guy who's been nursing the same mug for an hour, putting off going back out into the cold. The college kids have packed up from the pool tables, and the television over the bar is only on for background at this point. Larry and the homeless guy certainly aren't watching it.

Since I've already wiped down the bar and the tables, and refilled the napkin containers, I don't have to do anything but sit here and read my newspaper, waiting for Larry and the homeless guy to clear out so I can rinse their glasses and go home.

I pour Larry a cup of sobering coffee, preparing to call him a cab and steeling myself to kick out the poor homeless guy. Until then, I pour him a hot cup of coffee along with Larry's, on the house, on the excuse of finishing up the pot. Might as well send him off warm for once in his life, even if it's just with crappy coffee.

I know that neither of them will leave until I'm ready to lock up, so I make myself comfortable and spread a newspaper on the bar, reading an article about gang activity in the area while I sip my own cup of coffee.

That's when it happens. The door opens, and I look up, half in surprise—no one comes in this late, not on a weeknight. The guy coming through the door isn't a general customer of Quincy's. Definitely not a baseball fan. His head is shaved, and without a cap, despite the cold. He has piercings through his ears, and in the middle of his nose, like a bull. On his thick neck there is a twisty tattoo of a snake, curling up so the head rests near his ear. He's huge—not fat, just big. Slung over his shoulder was a leather pack. It was pretty big. Big enough, I think, to hold a gun.

I move to the side of the bar that hides the gun that Quincy keeps under the bar, and has ever since the place was robbed last

year. But not on a Tuesday, and not right before closing, so lucky me, I suppose. I rest my hand on the case with the gun, and say, as evenly as possible, "Anything I can get you, sir?"

Skinhead clutches the leather case tighter and looks at me, licking his lips. "I just need—"

Whatever he needs, I can guarantee that Quincy didn't sell it, not even out of the back room. I feel my face close, my eyes shutter like windows. I can't be that intimidating. I'm on the short side of average height, and this guy, like I said, is huge.

Skinhead looks at Larry, and at the homeless guy, and then back at me, clutching the case. My hands feel slick, and a film of sweat beads on my upper lip, bitter and salty. I check out Larry and homeless guy. Homeless guy is too busy staring into his cup of coffee like he sees the image of the Holy Virgin in his milk swirls to care much about a would-be robber. Of course, he isn't likely to get robbed of anything. Larry is eyeing him, though. But it's more in the way that the older generation views anyone with a piercing than in mortal terror.

"Pull up a seat, pal," Larry finally says, slapping the stool next to him. Everyone is Larry's pal. "Joe, my man, what does our new friend here look like he'd enjoy?" Larry asks me, deciding that if making me pour some old Dutch courage down some psycho's throat before he shoots up the place would keep me open a few extra minutes, then he's all for it. Homeless guy doesn't seem to mind at all either. "What's your name, kid?"

Skinhead has freckles. They sort of fade into his skin as he turns red at the attention.

"Mitchell," he says eventually, sounding a little strangled. I almost laugh it's so incongruous.

Larry seems delighted. "What's your poison, Mitch?"

Skinhead seems as baffled by Larry as I am. "It's not . . ." at the last moment, he decides against correcting him. It's a losing battle anyway, I could tell him that. "I just need—" he breaks himself off again, and a red tinge crept up his neck, mingling with the red tips of his ears and cheeks, already chapped with cold. Even the snake on his neck looks like it's blushing.

"Here, Joe, pour him some whisky or something, would ya? That'll put a fire in you," he tells the skinhead cheerfully. I don't

bother to move away from the gun case, nor bother to tell Larry that my name isn't Joe. Like Skinhead—*Mitchell*—I know there's not much use in it. Larry calls all of the bartenders that work at Quincy's Joe. I don't know if that's because the weekend bartender's name really is Joe and Larry can't be bothered to keep us straight, or if he just thinks that every bartender is named Joe as a matter of course. He's been in enough bars to know, I suppose.

Fifteen minutes to closing. Not even that, now. Jesus. I don't want to deal with this guy, I want to tell Larry. I just want to put Larry in his cab, give the homeless guy five bucks so he can go find some 24-hour dive and nurse a couple of coffees for a few more hours. Then I want to go home and go to bed and not have even the slightest possibility of some cracked out guy shoot me through the eyes. Especially not one who doesn't even have enough sense to wear more than an undershirt under his jacket when it's practically in the negative numbers outside.

"I don't want any whisky," he finally manages to get out, keeping his eyes on the floor, strewn with peanut shells and only God knows what else. He scuffs a dusty black boot against the ground, and I am struck with this bizarre image of what he must have been like as a kid, getting his nose wiped by his mother. She must have had to be careful of his nose ring. "It's just, you're the only place open on the whole street, and I know that it's a long shot anyway, but, do you have any milk?"

I'm so shocked, I actually take my hand off the gun box to run it through my hair, staring at him. "Milk."

The color became more pronounced on his face. Larry busts out laughing like this was the funniest thing he'd ever heard in his life. Though, for Larry, asking for milk in a bar probably is one of the funniest things that he's ever heard of.

Larry lives a simple life.

"You do realize this is a bar, don't you, sonny?" he cackles, swigging his coffee.

We do have milk, actually, for the coffee, which Larry well knows, because he takes milk. When I tell him this, his face loosens, and his body slumps, as though he were a puppet whose strings had suddenly been slackened. His face shows naked relief.

Was there a drug that made you crave milk? Nothing that I had

ever heard of.

I'm not sure if I'm supposed to serve just the milk—no one's ever asked for it, before. We certainly don't have it priced. Quincy will just have to deal with it, though. I'm not going to take any chances. Shrugging, I pull out a glass, which makes Skinhead immediately nervous again.

"Actually, I was wondering if I could have it in a saucer."

Larry thinks this is funny as all get out, but I am less amused. "What?"

Skinhead looks hideously embarrassed. He flips open the leather case, and my eyes zoom in, my fist clenching under the counter. But all I see is where his over shirt and cap have gone. The shirt lines the bottom of the bag, and in the cap is a tiny black and white kitten, eyes still sealed shut. "It's for a cat, all right?" he finally admits, glowing like a bonfire. "I found it in a box on the street. It was the only one left, and . . . I couldn't just leave it there."

Homeless Guy actually looks up from his coffee for this, sliding over from his stool to take a closer look.

"You can't have animals in here," Larry tells him, which makes Skinhead look distressed again. "Joe, tell him he can't have a cat in here."

"Quincy ain't got no policy against cats that I've ever heard about," the homeless guy chimes in, peering at the kitten. Mitch picks it up, lifting it out of his cap and holds it protectively against his barrel chest with his massive hands, like the homeless guy was going to snatch it from him. The tiny thing looks lost amongst his fingers.

"Oh, come on, Georgie, he ain't got a policy against pissing in the coffee, either, but I'm sure he wouldn't appreciate it." Color me unsurprised that Larry knows homeless guy by name. Even if he probably prefers to go by George.

We're not supposed to let in dogs, even small ones, unless they're an aid dog for a handicapped person, but Quincy has never once mentioned cats. I decided to let it go.

"He never mentioned any policy about cats to me," I confirm to Larry. Larry looks a little exasperated, but just goes back to his coffee.

"The saucer won't work, though," the homeless guy was saying.

“Look how tiny it is. Won’t be able to drink for itself. Could you warm up that milk? You got a microwave or something?” he asks me, reaching out to stroke the kitten’s nose with one gnarled finger. The kitten squeaked and the skinhead looked alarmed.

I shake my head at having to play nursemaid to a kitten, moving back into the kitchen. I bite back the urge to say that the grill closed at ten, and just dig out a pan and flip it on. I pour a small amount of milk into the pan and dip my finger periodically until the milk is no longer cold.

Homeless Guy suggests an eyedropper to get the milk into the kitten, but that’s one thing that I don’t have, so I give them a clean rag, and homeless guy coaches the skinhead on how to get the kitten to suck on it, dribbling milk into its mouth as I refresh Larry’s coffee. Mitch is fascinated with the whole process, but looks half-terrified, too. You can tell he’s never had a pet in his entire life. I watch it all from behind the kitchen counter, rinsing the pan and the mugs.

“It’s too young to survive without its mother,” homeless guy is saying. “You should make sure to feed it every four hours or so. You got an eyedropper at home?”

“Me? I mean, I thought maybe, a shelter, or something” Even as he says it, he cuddles the kitten closer, and there isn’t anyone in the bar who buys for a second that he’d ever give the thing away. The fact that he’s hanging on homeless guy’s every word on kitten-rearing isn’t very convincing either.

“Yeah, sure,” says Larry. “Whatchya gonna call it?”

It’s closer to one than twelve-thirty by the time I manage to kick the three of them out. Larry’s a little more sober than he would like, but I call him a cab anyway. He offers to share it with the homeless guy. “Come on, Georgie, I’ll give you a lift. Where to? The park? Ha!” Georgie doesn’t seem to mind that Larry’s a prick and climbs in.

Mitch settles the kitten back into his bag before heading out the door. I lock up behind them, flipping the lights. As I’m unlocking my car, I watch Skinhead exit the parking lot, holding his pack steady. Every once in awhile, he lifts the lid to check his precious cargo.

Shelter, my ass.

The Monster in the Closet

| Mary Ann Sleasman

Dave Hugya accidentally sold his grandfather's ashes in the annual Braddock Avenue block sale. In retrospect, the loss of Ralph Hugya Sr.'s remains would have been of no great and immediate concern to the rest of the family. There would have been little, if any, controversy surrounding the loss of the patriarch. There was the distinct possibility that Dave would even find himself esteemed as some secret family hero. The only reason Dave had the ashes in the first place was that no one else in the Hugya family wanted to spend the rest of their lives looking at the remains of the meanest bastard to grace this little blue planet. Dave was eighteen when Ralph Sr. finally kicked it. The funeral was full of awkward glances among the three offspring of Ralph and Pricilla Hugya, each hoping another would step up and claim the remains. Dave ultimately stepped forward, thinking the plain black urn would make a wicked addition to the décor of his freshman dormitory.

In the seventeen years since Ralph Sr.'s death, he spent two of them on Dave's desk in Hutton Hall, followed by two more years on the mantle of honor in the living room of the Sigma Tau Gamma fraternity house. The house was just off campus, sharing an intersection with a Sunoco and a Dunkin Donuts. Dave shared the house with five other brothers, and during rush week they would pull the urn down and pass it around to all the pledges. With absolute solemnity they stated that the urn held the remnants of one "Billy Stone," a founder of their chapter. His death came under mysterious circumstances during his senior year and his parents donated the ashes to the fraternity their son founded.

A quick glance at the charter would reveal that the older brothers were full of shit. Dave was certain that at least *one* young pledge *had* to have uncovered the truth. The members of Sig Tau made little attempt to keep the charade going after rush week. Half the residents of the house were present the day Dave moved in, standing in the middle of the kitchen, holding the urn awkwardly as he thought about what to do with it. The novelty of morbidity had worn off and he was hesitant to put the monument back on his desk. Someone finally recommended the mantle and the story grew from there. No one ever challenged the legitimacy of the

urn's history, not even on the day Dave snatched the ugly thing off the mantle and threw it in a box on the day he finally moved out. Everyone wants to be the keeper of a legend.

It must have been Keith, Dave thought, who put the urn on the table. Since their move to Braddock Avenue, Ralph had spent the majority of his eternity in a box in the closet. The house was airy and bright with a big picture window and a daffodil colored living room. The dining room was blue and Dave's office: a deep burnt orange. He rationalized, tucking Ralph's remains away in the hallway closet, that the morbid relic just didn't have a place anywhere in the new house. It wasn't like he was throwing the urn away, though no one would care either way if he *did*. His continued possession of the urn was brought up only in passing with every change of address and maybe a Thanksgiving or two. Dave's father would ask, "You still have Pop's ashes?" and Dave would nod the affirmative and that was the end of it.

The slight pang of guilt Dave felt then, watching the rail-thin girl hand Keith a five, was more disconcerting in the shock of its existence than in the actual churning of his stomach. Keith handed the girl a wad of bills and offered her a Giant Eagle bag. She shook her head and held the container close to her chest. Dave's mind worked in a calm rush of potentially frantic thoughts as he watched her shuffle to the end of the driveway. The bile in his stomach rose to form a lump in his throat.

Once, when Dave was seven, Ralph stormed into the kitchen covered in grease with some heavy metal component clutched in his meaty hands. He wore blue work overalls and smelled sour, like an unwashed armpit and beer. Dave was at the table coloring while Pricilla was on her hands and knees scrubbing the inside of the oven. Dave was perched in the chair closest to the door, scribbling a blue ear onto a green puppy.

"Move it, boy." Ralph didn't wait for the young Dave to relocate. He slid into the chair with a shove and sat the dirty lump of metal upon Dave's coloring book.

At that point in his life, Dave knew better than to cry.

Dave watched the girl turn right, headed towards Wilkinsburg.

It wasn't too late to stop her. He could call after her, explain the mistake, and refund her spent dollar. She passed the neighbor's yard; sidestepped a girl on a second-hand three-wheeler. He could run after her. He could tell Keith he'd be gone but a moment and, in a short jog, be face to face with the new keeper of his kin.

At twelve, Dave argued with his parents over going to his grandparent's house for Christmas dinner. It was always a solemn affair. Ralph drank too much and watched *Lawrence Welk* reruns. The children sat on the floor while the adults attempted to engage the patriarch in conversation. Loud children were met with the shove of a steel toe. Parents received grunts and not a soul attempted to argue for anything different. Dave's Aunt Connie hadn't worn short sleeves since she was fifteen. She said nothing the entire evening and kept her two daughters in her sight at all times. She walked them to the bathroom, even when they were old enough to take themselves.

The girl was finally out of sight, but there was nowhere to go but the end of block and her presence lingered, tearing Dave into two distinct pieces. He observed the warring factions; took his time pushing the lawn chair beneath the table. He chugged the rest of his Dr. Pepper and placed it in the recycling bin. Finally, he gathered up the money box and handed it to Keith. The girl would probably be down to the BP by now. Dave could still catch her if he took the car. He fished in his pockets for the keys. Keith stood.

"Where—."

"Milk."

"We don't need—."

"I'll be right back."

She was in line to pay for a cherry slushy with the urn tucked beneath one arm. The straw jutted out of the corner of her mouth and she frowned slightly, digging in her wallet for the dollar and change to pay. Dave watched from the car as she strolled out, still chewing on the straw.

"Excuse me!" He called out. She ignored him and he called again, "Excuse me! Girl with the urn!"

She turned. The straw hung out of her mouth like an afterthought though she was tense and alert, her eyes fixated on the

man in the car. She was ready to run if need be.

“It’s alright.” Dave opened the door and approached with caution, the way his dad went up to moody horses and cattle. He gestured at the urn. “You bought that at my house.”

Realization dawned on her face. “Yes. Yeah. For a dollar. I offered the guy more. It’s a neat little pot.”

“My—” Dave winced at the word he almost used. It conjured up images of warm men in spectacles, Ice Cream Joe: the founder of Valley Dairy, and Santa Claus. These things had no place in Dave’s visualization of the concept, “My grandfather is in there.”

The girl took a long sip from her drink; absorbing Dave’s words with the sweet syrup and bits of ice. “What was he doing on the sale table?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

The girl nodded, shifted, and held the urn out with one hand. “Do you want him back?”

It was the question Dave Hugya feared she would ask. He had a dollar in his pocket for the very purpose of taking the old son-of-a-bitch back. It was folded in his pocket, crisply waiting to change hands.

“I honestly don’t know *that* either.”

“That’s a little weird.” The girl said and stepped forward. “If I sold my grandpa, my parents would be pissed.”

Dave nodded, “Well, my grandpa wasn’t a very nice man.”

“Alcoholic?”

Dave blinked. The topic wasn’t discussed in the Hugya family very often. There was so much more to it than that and by the time anyone thought to do anything, the children were mostly grown up and Pricilla was broken into complacency. Their solace came in the fact that she peacefully outlived Ralph by almost three years.

The girl caught the look and nodded, “The mean ones are *always* alcoholics. I’m Grace, by the way. I’ll keep him if you want.”

“What, like a pet?”

Grace shook her head, “Not quite.” She sat her drink down on the sidewalk and struggled to remove the lid. There was a soft “pop” and it came away. She peered inside and offered a glance to Dave. He shook his head. She reached a hand inside and pulled a small fistful of the dust out.

“What are you doing?”

“Letting him out.”

“Here?”

The BP was one of the older in the area. The parking lot was too small to accommodate the traffic and the signage wasn't yet replaced with the new, sleek, flower design. Everything that was once white was yellowed, blending with the *actual* yellow. A crack in the glass door was repaired with masking tape. The dominating smell was that of gasoline and French fries from the McDonald's across the street. Ralph Sr. would have hated the loud intersection, the high minority population, and the squat red-brick apartment buildings nestled behind the convenience store. Some sinister part of Dave's mind thought Grace was brilliant and ached for her to open her fist.

“This actually isn't the strangest place I've let someone out.”

Grace smirked. “When I was in high school, I swiped my aunt Lucy and took her to Kennywood. I let a little go on the Phantom, a little on the Jack Rabbit, and the rest on the Pitt Fall as the sun was setting.”

“That's very nice.”

“My uncle was mad at first, but he came around.”

“Do you do this often?” Dave gestured towards the urn and her still-clenched fist. “Just go around emptying urns?”

“Aunt Lucy was the first. Then I bought an urn at a flea market except I didn't realize it was an urn at the time. I make pottery, you see. I'm always looking for interesting pieces. The lid came off when I was studying it. I took it back to the vendor, but he had gotten it from *another* vendor when he was on vacation and the woman hadn't said anything about the contents.”

“And now you just go around buying up dead people and taking them on roller coasters.”

“Pretty much.”

The duo stood in thoughtful silence for several moments. Dave weighing his options. Grace squinting in the sunlight and rubbing her thumb against her index finger in anticipation or nervousness. She spoke first, “What'll it be?” She lifted the closed hand. “I can put him back. Give him back. He can haunt your closet for another couple of years.”

Haunt.

That was the word. That was the word the family had been avoiding for years. The old man was dead, but his specter lingered on desks, mantles, and refrigerators. He was the monster in the closet.

Dave's only regret was that the rest of the family wasn't there.
"Go ahead."

his mother was a good woman

| Jessica Snavlin

Born 1983, age twenty-four, Kevin Price faced the New Year tripping, shivering with potentiality. He held a martini between his left index and middle finger and a beer balanced in his right hand. Lips pursed and shirt falling over his bony, tattooed shoulders, Kevin found himself frozen underneath his neighbor's quite fetching arbor. Literally.

Inches before the commencement of adultery, rigor mortis settled permanently into Kevin's body. He'd become a manikin of fine taste—flannel shirt and low-slung khakis—and though *he* did not move, these pieces of clothing snapped around his bony body wanton, rhythmic. The chill of the day moved as well. It burrowed and dug through the marrow in his forearms and found comfort somewhere between thigh and spinal chord. The letters in bold on his left shoulder,

M O M,

would move on occasion as well, in the imperceptible way the skin moves when the blood pumps.

After ascertaining his faculties were with him—yes, he had not consumed illicit drugs, and yes, he indeed was still conscious—he marveled at being caught between one second and the next. He counted the pieces of skin chipped from Florence's spotty chap—stick job and was that dandruff clinging to the edges of her temples . . . ?

Her breath smelled faintly of his wife's tofu dogs.

Miraculous!

Julia flipped the tofu dogs with a pink spatula with a white iconographic cat. "That shit, you've always got some of that crap lying around, don't you?" Kevin's laughter was muffled by cigarette smoke.

Julia snorted. "She's cute. The little ribbon, like, here." She tapped her temple, lifted her eyes to match his mocking gaze through her lashes.

He stole her beer, kissed (with laughably vague intentions) the spot her finger had indicated, then sauntered towards their neighbor's fetching arbor.

As for the fetching arbor:

Already tired of continuity's continued farces, it'd taken to moving in reverse. It shook its leaves off from a back-flip of the current breeze only to grow them back in successively spottier and spottier coverage. It lost several pounds along its middle, performed a celebratory quarter-shimmy upon each inch, and the complication of its winding branch's pattern diminished with each full shiver. When it had become a sapling once more, it lifted itself—roots and all—and floated away, leaving a gaping hole that was soon filled then topped with a sprinkling of sparse grass and weeds.

It was fun while it lasted.

Non-existence promptly became boring, and the arbor's epiphany of said boringness, a hole appeared and was soon filled by the sapling, floating back from its tryst with nihilism.

Only to repeat: again,

again,

again.

She lifted his cigarette from the night-stand and set it into a iconographic cat's pink marbled ash-tray. She laughed. Julia's laugh was always watery like bronchitis, sneaking through her lungs and threatening to snot its way out her nostrils—a humorous, mucus disease. “Yeah.” She snorted, fell to her back, outlined her naked body with every slat of moon and street light she could. Toyed with the mini-blinds. Ran the finger taught about her finger.

Tighter, tighter around her finger. “Yeah, you're sort of stuck with me.”

He'd only just begun to theorize the whys of this new, abominable sticking when he became hungry, thirsty, and generally unable to keep his buzz. Though it hadn't yet occurred to him that if he were hungry he perhaps could starve in the delicate limbo, the mystery *had* become dire.

He realized he was listlessly stuck in space/time with a hangover. All moral implications of a space/time-induced hangover/starvation aside, he'd built a list of his top complaints.

1. His pants couldn't be hiked up.

2. His eyes were bone-dry. All attempts to blink were met with a sharp twitch of a pain along his brow-line.

3. An unbearable chill had wormed itself into his rib-cage.

4. His stomach growled in increasingly closer intervals.

5. His throat, parched, scratched and ached.

6. He had a hangover.

7. The arbor was pissing him off.

At current, whenever that would've been, the arbor was forward-thinking. It was a teenager, barely capable of protecting Kevin from the first few flakes of a light snow-fall, and teetered in adolescent fits of unrequited identity.

If it weren't for the snow (or the tree's existentialist angst) Kevin would've fallen back on the comfortable clichés of stressed humanity: it was all a dream, he'd had a bad row with the tofu, he was dead, he was dying, his wife had cursed him . . . ?

Regardless, the tree and the snow and the hunger and most importantly the hang-over had broken all comfortable illusions and excuses. He'd decided what was happening was certainly and derisively and decidedly happening.

So now it was that he tried to apply reason to his predicament. He developed four causes, all of which weren't really different at all:

1) God was angry, and

2) He was really fucked up, and

3) Though the possibility hadn't occurred to him before, now he thought that he might have died and been put in purgatory. Perhaps if he remembered very hard, he could remember his whole life after this moment of debauchery and that whole life would add up to the reason why this moment in particular was picked, so . . .

4) God was really fucking angry.

Despite being entirely wrong, the list itself was comforting.

Florence set her foot along his inner thigh.

A respectably pretty woman, he'd known her and her bad chapstick since he was five. This somehow made her more acceptable, more safe, more reasonable, more something than Julia. More—he watched her through hooded eyes, bit into the whole wheat pasta, and: “It’s such a fucking strange winter, fifty in December.”

“Yeah, you’re not the only one who thinks that way.”

Her toes curled away, and the ball of her foot rubbed, twice.

Kevin’s second question boiled down to “am I the only one stuck?”

Considering the options, he determined that both being uniquely stuck and being stuck-in-conformity might be separate but equally advantageous (and separate but equally damaging.) Should he be the only one stuck, there was the chance that Florence would divert her peeling-lipped, dandruff-templed kiss and he would be adultery-free. Extending this scenario pointed out that if everyone (excepting him) were thawed so too was his wife, who would be free to arrive at any moment in the clock-ticking world and notice that Kevin was stuck preparing to kiss something that wasn’t the cycling but still fetching arbor. Shit.

On the other hand, being stuck-in-conformity would afford him the opportunity to change his fortunes once unstuck. The downside to such a circumstance was that if he were hung-over and contemplating the state of reality himself, it meant that *others* were stuck-in-conformity doing the same, and that he would not be the only one aware of a massive cease-function to movement and global time construction. Obviously, this would greatly damage any existing relations he had, and, of course, there was no telling how “conformist” the conformity was. Was it just he and Florence? If they were both stuck and no one else

However, all tests he devised to determine between either option failed.

The hangover gave way to a sharp pang of true starvation.

The fetching arbor killed itself all over again.

“Florence’s moving in next door.”

Kevin dropped the plastic cup into the sink. “Kidding?”

“No.” Julia’s laugh was hoarse like tuberculosis, scratched

through her straight white teeth and straightened black hair with fungus laden nails. “No, I’m not, kind of cool, right? Coincidence, sorta.”

He watched the spilt beer spiral down the drain, smiled a smile to himself, smiled (with vague intentions) a smaller one at Julia. “It’s badass. We should invite her over for dinner.”

“It’d be nice to have dinner parties.” Julia’s hand set on his shoulder, her lips grazed his stubbly cheek. “But first we have to clean. I’m sure Florence wants to see your boxers.”

“Sure she does!”

“Asshole.” Julia’s laugh is like—

Now that hunger began to eat at the edges of Kevin’s psyche, thirst tear at his esophagus, blindness encroach on his wind-worn eyes, cold seep through his snow-laden skin, he began to seriously take up the notion he was in some form of Hell. Punished for his act with Florence, he would forever remain unmoved, unchanged, and suffering. He would live through these pains and more, until he was consciously aware of his skin falling in maggot-ridden strips to his feet.

Though wrong, the idea at least forced Kevin to fully analyze his surroundings with an unselfconscious air. Who was he kidding, out here on a cold night in nothing but sagging khakis and a flannel overlay? Two-fisting? Shit, had he really gone that far? He’d not intended to marry Julia, but had that meant finding himself in Coors of all things? He’d always pretended to hate that sort of guy.

Further, Florence had dandruff. Her lips were chapped. Her stomach hung out over the edge of her too small jeans. Her breath smelled like tofu dogs—another vegetarian, and Kevin’s opinion was they made bad women—and her teeth were un-brushed, coated in a small film of something yellow and sticky. When was the last time his new wife had cooked him a steak? It was almost scandalous to a man raised in Brooklyn.

Julia.

She’d been a mistake.

If he got unstuck he’d apologize and leave her forthwith, so she could find someone who loved her and their child.

That’s what he’ll do.

“If you’re knocked up, right?” He calls from the doorway, half-naked, watched her take all the light onto her breasts and stomach. Watches the mini-blinds split moon and streetlight along her thighs. “If you’re knocked up, babe’s gotta have a daddy, right?” He set the cup on the nightstand. “Yeah, so, we’ll just hitch it.”

He set his cigarette on the nightstand, without an ashtray, and it burns through the linoleum.

Julia was a vegetarian. She’d tried to be vegan more than once, but her commitment to Kevin had left her in a battle between “love” and “will-power.” The presence of cheese in her home had stopped her with the addictive casein.

This had left her breaking the compromise of acceptance. Rather than become a de facto Omnivore? She’d left Kevin without his steak and removed every inch of meat from their domicile.

This had been the first offense.

The second had been on their second date, a retroactive offense, a rewind offense—she’d worn leather shoes. Later he’d figured out that they were hand-me-downs, something that those strange animal rights people didn’t fight so much or something or something else, but he’d thought, if there’s no steak in the house, there’s—

He’s thinking something, right?

The ashtray is pink, marbled. Iconographic cat on the spatula.

“Yeah, guess you’re stuck with me.”

“If you’re knocked up”

Florence’s toes curled under.

Florence was a vegetarian. She’d tried to give it up, but she’d gotten sick every time. Raised that way by her mother, Kevin liked her better by some sycophantic default. Now that he has her face indelibly burned into his mind he realizes he will like no one better.

Julia will not get the black smudge out. He’d watched her scrub all day.

She takes a knife and will chip at the surface, and tears had welled at the corners of her eyes, and he laughs.

“It’s not that bad.”

“We can’t have anything nice!”

He liked no one better. The arbor was born again. People were things that just existed in some pathetic waste of time, right? Vegetarians are bad women and omnivores are bad men and Coors will always be bad beer. Hadn’t he developed this idea of living by living amongst these things? The time dependent, the eating now, the not eating now? This is his Hell, he knew, but shouldn’t he be rewarded for epiphany?

There will be nothing to like about anything. Not himself, not anyone. The ashtray will have the cat on it. The tofu dogs were on her breath. She has dandruff.

Chapped lips.

Curled toes.

He’ll know her since he was five, and he hates her. Above him he is certain the sky was blue and the snow had melted into his ashen skin but he can’t remember if there will be snow and the tree has *fucking killed itself already* and the ashtray, the ashtray, the ashtray! and offense number two had happened will happen was happening when they were dating and offense number one has happened with the tofu—

Always the tofu. It was like vegetarians didn’t want real men. It was like real men didn’t want vegetarians. It was like real men didn’t want reality.

God is really fucking angry, his stomach hurt, and he will forget the hangover some iota of indistinct a while ago.

The pigeons sat on Kevin’s head. Julia thought the image was funny, fumbling with his frozen finger to loose his gold wedding band. She’d brought out a jacket when she’d finally noticed he was breathing, but she didn’t know what else to do. His mouth wasn’t open so

The line for entry had already begun. Florence sold the tickets at a rate based on the size of the arbor. Julia collected the profits and split it between each other at a rate based on Kevin’s martini. They had fun playing chances with time like this only because the amount of money they made daily assured that if one day Florence got “too much” Julia’d still be able to afford her new penthouse.

. . . they didn't notice when he stopped breathing, but Kevin does, did, didn't, will.

Jessica "Snapple" Snavlin is a Creative Writing major and Linguistics minor at Metropolitan State College of Denver, hoping to attend graduate school in the fall for her M.F.A. She's not as angry at infidelity as you think, and hopes that you are having a wonderful day today.

The Snake

| Lauren Stranahan

“I think it’s dead,” said Lilly, staring down at the snake she and her friends had found in the dirt path. They didn’t know what had gotten it, but the back quarter of the small black S in the dirt had been slit open down its side, and slimy grey and pink things oozed from the wound. They stared down at the seemingly lifeless creature, but then the body grew to twice its original size in a heaving breath, and contracted again.

“Not yet,” said JP, who stood across the circle from Lilly, separated by Travis on one side, Molly on the other. They were an amalgam of denim and plaid flannel over filthy T-shirts. The tattered group watched the doomed creature, exhausted from their week of camping in the wilderness of western Massachusetts.

Lilly felt for the joint in her jeans pocket—the last remaining pot left over from the bags and bags they’d collected in preparation for their trip. She worried that going through two ounces in a week made them worse pot-heads than she wanted to admit but convinced herself again that it was just a special occasion. Plus there were four of them, and a week of hazy eyes and slow motions was only appropriate for this sort of vacation. But, oh, how she needed that joint now—to be distracted again by the hands and the leaves and all the other little details she never had time for—anything but those grey eyes and open mouth—death, and dying.

They had to kill it. She knew. She imagined what would happen. JP would use his knife—the one that had probably saved all of their lives this weekend. The group had prepared so little for their trip, and so this knife, a relic from his Boy Scout days, had served as their weapon, skewer, first aid, and can opener, in addition to its more conventional uses. He would take it out of his back pocket, flip out the four-inch blade from the plastic handle, crouch down behind the snake and chop down at its neck—as quick and painless as possible. Lilly watched his hands. They rested at his thighs, held up by the thumbs stuck snug in his front pockets. His body bounced slightly, up and down, forward and back, as his feet rolled from heel to toe and back again.

“So,” Molly’s voice was deeper than Lilly’s—coarse, and strong; it made Lilly feel safe somehow—a man’s voice almost, which fit

Molly fine, as she was not interested in resembling a girl—she was the butch one, and her girlfriend, Emma, was the femme. “How should we do it?” JP’s right hand was in his back pocket before she finished her question, and the black plastic came into view. Lilly wanted to reach across—over the scales and ooze—and cup his hands in hers, just feel his skin again. Of course, she couldn’t do that, not anymore. Not since last night.

Before that, on the first night she kept trying to hold on to, they had sat in what Lilly had come to think of as “their spot”—a large grey rock overlooking a small green lake. She’d only seen the spot in the light once, when she and JP were out collecting firewood the first day of the trip. After that they’d had to wait until almost four in the morning, after Molly and Travis had fallen asleep. She thought it would be worth it. It *had* been worth it. Those past five nights of everything she’d dreamt of since the first day, no minute, no *second* that she’d met him near the end of their freshman year. She had never believed in love at first sight until then. She thought, at first, that it was just a crush. But as she learned more about him every day—his love for the same authors and musicians as her, his own writing, stories, poems, songs—she couldn’t help but hope that one day he would realize that Shannon was not right for him, and after breaking up with her would come to Lilly, let her hold him. She’d thought that the past week had made that happen. They would go back to school and he would break up with Shannon, she would cut off the meaningless *whatever* that was going on between her and the cute art major she’d been dating for no more than two or three weeks—she couldn’t remember; she didn’t care. He was just another replacement for JP.

She was wrong though, and she knew it before he said anything. She knew when he looked at her with those guilty, scared eyes that almost let a layer of saltwater rest on their lower lids. They were the same eyes that he looked with now as he bent down behind the snake and lowered his wrist, hand, knife toward its neck.

“One. Twooo. Three!” Lilly watched through her left eye only, through her right hand’s pinky and ring fingers, and clenched in horror when the knife didn’t cut, but more squished the scales just behind the head. The snake snapped backward as best it could. “SHIT!” yelled JP, as he jumped up and to the side, which put him

between Lilly and Travis.

“Oh God!” Lilly covered her mouth.

“The scales are too rough. With that knife he’d have to saw through it. That’d be worse than just letting it bleed to death.”

“Okay Travis, so then what do you propose we do instead?” JP’s eyes twisted toward anger, but softened again.

“I’ll be right back.” Travis wandered back into the woods.

“What’s he doing?” Lilly’s voice squeaked a little. She looked to JP for an answer, but he only shrugged. They heard Travis returning, leaves and twigs crunching, snapping, breaking. Molly turned to see him.

“I don’t think you’re gonna like it chicky.” Molly pointed to Travis, and Lilly and JP turned their heads, chins lifting, eyes drifting together, like synchronized swimmers in a slow turn through the ripples. Travis broke through the final patch of trees and Lilly saw it: a rock the size of her head in his right hand, and she knew again, but this time she knew it would work. She flinched, closed her eyes tight, even though there was nothing to see yet. She felt a hand on her shoulder and flinched again, then recognized the hand and in a flash remembered everything those hands had done, felt, touched, held, meant in the past six days.

That first night, when she followed him back to the rock and the lake, and he’d noticed her on the way, she was sure, so she sat down next to him, their feet dangling over the edge, her flip-flops toying with ideas of suicide—a blissful flutter-fall into the cold, dark water. She shivered and he put his arm around her. She stared at the somewhere-near half moon and he said, “Cool, huh?” She turned her head toward his and he kissed her. *He kissed her*. Didn’t that mean anything? It was just a peck, short and oh-so-sweet, but on the lips! Those soft, thin lips she’d kissed so many times in the form of a picture or pillow or her stuffed bear (named PJ, long before she’d ever met JP). She regretted not bringing her chap stick.

And then the second night, when he looked at her across the fire as Molly and Travis poured whiskey down their throats. Then, in the guise of passing a joint he whispered in her ear, “stay awake, they’ll be passed out soon.” He was right, of course, and as soon as the other two were snoring in their makeshift sleeping bags (really

just all the blankets they could find in Molly's parent's house). JP took her hand and lead her back to the rock, their rock. He kissed her again and it was longer, softer, and open-mouthed. OH that tongue! PJ the bear did *not* have a tongue. And if he had it probably wouldn't have been so curious, so exploratory. They spent so long with each other's mouths that, by the time they stopped, the sky was showing the first hints of sun—grays and purples lifting slowly over silhouetted mountains, and they had to hurry back to camp and snuggle into blankets next to whiskey scented snores.

Then the third night—three had always been Lilly's lucky number—when, despite the cold (JP had, at least, thought to bring a blanket) they'd shed their sweaty flannel and let their bare skin do the exploring. She'd seen him naked before. Late night skinny-dipping and games of strip-poker had made their group the closest of friends over the past three years. She wasn't new to the broad shoulders or the thin waist, or even the thigh muscles—the right just a little tighter than the left, the physique of an outdoorsman, runner, former lacrosse player. This time though, she was allowed to touch and feel and kiss every inch of his pale, cool skin. They made love, and she whispered 'I love you's into his ears and mouth and belly button. The fourth and the fifth nights had followed similarly.

But then that last night. She had known something wasn't right when he kept his hands in his pockets, his eyes straight ahead, focused until they'd reached their rock. Then he sat far enough away that she couldn't hold his hand, and when she tried to move closer he'd turned, knees bent, so that his feet and legs protected his body from her.

"What's wrong?" She'd asked.

"I love Shannon." He said. Then he stood, stepped closer, bent down and kissed her on her forehead—their last kiss—and turned back to camp. Lilly stayed, she didn't know for how long, laying on her back, looking up at the sky and a few scattered stars between clouds. She cried. She envisioned the two of them looking at a clear sky. She pictured herself with JP. She masturbated. She cried more. The cold was more piercing than she could remember it being the nights before—she felt numb—and so she decided to make her way back to camp. When she got there JP was still up, waiting for her, making sure she got back safe. When he saw her he put down the

piece of wood he'd been carving and crawled into the makeshift tent for the last time—they would disassemble it in the morning—and Lilly followed, although this night she snuggled with Molly.

When Lilly opened her eyes tears filled them, and JP moved his hand back to his pocket. Travis made his way across the path, behind the snake, and held the rock out to JP, who looked back at him with disbelieving eyes—eyebrows raised, upper nose crinkled.

“Well I don’t wanna do it, man.” Travis came as close as Lilly had seen him to pleading. JP took the rock, then looked at Lilly. She didn’t want to see him kill it.

“Molly . . . ?”

“No way, Chicky. I’m not *that* butch.”

“It’s okay, Lilly. I’ll do it. It was my stupid knife idea. I owe it to the thing.”

The tears breached Lilly’s eyelid walls, over then down, down. Silent tears, as she watched Travis find two long sticks and use them like chopsticks to pick up the snake and move it to the side of the path. JP followed and crouched again behind the snake, placing himself between the thing and Lilly so she couldn’t see. Molly was suddenly at her side, turning her toward the trees, and guiding her down until her butt thumped on the dirt. Her pack slid off of her shoulders and she hunched forward. More tears, and they dropped onto the dirt, a light film covering each after their fall between her bent knees; two puddles beginning to form as the drops sucked together, incorporating themselves into a bigger whole. Molly put a surprisingly tender arm around her back.

“It’s okay, Lilly. It’s just a snake.”

THUMP. Lilly’s body tensed. Her hands gripped her knees and her toes curled inside her sneakers. Molly’s grip around her tightened and she could hear Travis whisper.

“One more time, just to make sure.” Lilly braced herself this time.

Thump. More clenching. They were silent. Lilly’s head drooped almost between her knees, and she swiped at her face in attempts to make the tears go away. She lifted her head, and turned inward toward Molly until her body twisted enough that she could see JP and Travis.

“Is it over?” Her eyes looked up at them, hopeful. The tears had stopped, but the stains of clean skin where dirt had washed away remained.

“Yeah Lilly,” JP said. “It’s over.” Molly stood and offered a hand to Lilly.

“C’mon, Chicky, it’s been a long week. Let’s go.” Lilly nodded her head, then reached her arm up and clasped the rough, large hand hovering near her face. Molly pulled and Lilly sprung half a foot off the ground. Once she landed she turned and picked up her pack. By the time she got it situated on her shoulders the guys were a few yards ahead, so she and Molly half-jogged to catch up. They group walked two-by-two down the path, toward the van somewhere around the base of the mountain. Lilly turned back to see, an instinct she couldn’t resist, but they had walked far enough already that all she could see was the large grey rock with sticky stains of the euthanized creature.

Lauren Stranahan graduated May 2008 from Washington College with a major in English and minors in Creative Writing and Art. She recently submitted her Bachelor’s thesis, “I may neither choose who I would, nor who I dislike’: The Father’s Role in the Marriages in Daughters in Shakespeare’s Plays.” She is a member of the honors societies Phi Beta Kappa, Sigma Tau Delta, and Pi Lambda Theta, and she intends to pursue a career in writing and publishing after graduation.

Jarek

| Matthew Townsley

On the night I first met him, he was slipping across the toilet-room floor in my building, his boots dodging and splashing puddles of muddy water and piss. He laughed as he slurred the Polski anthem in the stall next to me. I knew the song, and I was laughing too, at the piss and the dizziness and how good it was to piss in Denmark, away from my family, and still drink myself stupid on Polski vodka.

After many shots of Zubrówka and so much English in the room of my American friend, named Nate, I returned to the toilets for a goodnight piss. This guy's legs were halfway out under the stall, lying limply on the filthy floor. I called to him, and I ran to push open the door, because I was feeling talkative and smart from the vodka and the English. He was dreaming his skinny head away next to the iron floor drain. "Kurwa, fuck man, k'mohn," I shouted. But he was so far gone then.

I took the papers from his back pocket, but then I saw it was Union bullshit from the government, and I tore them to pieces over the toilet and flushed them down. The papers were soaked, and they were hard to rip, and I remember flicking little wet pieces to the inside walls of the toilet. I took out his chain wallet, but he laid there still. He had a tattered photograph of an old lady handing cookies to a boy; now I know that it was his babunia—his granma—and him. On his dowód, I read that he was from the city of Kraków, and that his name was Jarek Kwiatkowski. Because I am from near Zakopane, out in the hills, I took a piss, then I took his one hundred złotych, and then I laughed off, with hiccups, to my pillow for a dream of my own.

About a week later, when I saw him during open stage night at Dexter's Jazz Club in Centrum of Odense, I was with a Canadian named Louisa who I met at the technical school. She knew a little Polski, but we talked mostly in English, and because I was only learning the language at the time, I hardly spoke at all. I heard her say *bread* and some French words, but I could not listen, only smile and push her along; he was there, on a barstool with his back turned to the band. Light from the ceiling flashed from his shiny head.

I moved Louisa and myself into the opposite corner, so he would never think to see me, but I am so stupid sometimes. I took off my hoodie because it was warm inside from the people and the girl and the beer, and before I knew it, he was pointing and smiling at the Polsat logo on my T-shirt from across the stage. What could I do? From his size and his look, I knew he was one of those skinheads. He walked over to me and started to cheer in Polski. I sat him down and calmed him before anybody told us to go. Denmark has a special society, and I did not want to have to leave because of a loudmouth punk. He shook my hand and laughed, showing me his tiny teeth, and began to talk.

He told me his name was Jarek, from Kraków, and so to feel better, I bought three Giraf beers, and told him that its high price paid for the giraffe food at the zoo. But the girl is there, so I tried to tell him in English.

“The giraffes? Kurwa, fuck your English,” he said, licking his upper lip. “No—Polski. K’mohn. Polski is the language of the people. Zyrafa!”

We both laughed in agreement, and Louisa laughed too, happy to hear her Polish friends speaking English again. She made many mistakes before saying *Jarek* right while he smiled all the time at her. Embarrassed, she asked about his coming to Denmark.

“I come on Friday, of the last month. August,” he said, leaning toward me and twisting the bottle in his palm. He was very close, and I saw that his teeth were even smaller than I had thought. They were very clean, which made me feel safer, but still, they were crooked and sharp, like his dentist needed an eye doctor and a file.

“Did you come to study at the university?” she asked him.

“No, no—kurwa, fuck no. I live in Bartek’s room.”

“I don’t know—Bahdit? Bar-dik. No? *Bar-tick*,” she said, eying his lips and tiny teeth. “Anyway, I don’t know him yet. There are so many of you! I mean, there are a lot of Polish men at Teknisk.”

“Yes, there are a few true Polish. But you do not know him? From Kraków, like me. He plays saxophone now, with this band,” he said, pointing toward the stage and then turning to Louisa. “No, no. I am, how do you say . . . handyman. You need hand, I give you hand, see?” he winked at both of us. “So, do you need hand?”

Louisa sucked in her cheeks and shook her head. I was thinking

she was disgusted.

“Kurwa, shit man, you know?” he continued, rubbing his smooth head as he leaned toward me again and chuckled. “Now that I am free, free in Denmark, free from jail, free from grandma, free from Polska—the girls, they don’t want me. Maybe this girl,” he said, “she will have a good time with me. A good, fun time.”

I laughed at his laughter and tipped my bottle to him for cheers, but he had already started to chug his beer. Louisa arched her neck away from us to get a better view of the band. I tried to talk with the little English I knew, making sure Louisa did not feel strange, even though now I believe that she did not want to be near Jarek or me.

“Polska—you are right—Polska is prison,” I said.

“The prisons in Polska,” he said. “They are shit, but Polska is greatest. Denmark is not bad. It is fairy tale, the same as this funny man, Andersen. You know?”

“Funny man with hat and nose, I know,” I said. “Tall.”

“But in Polska,” Jarek continued, twisting his arm outward to stretch his muscles and then yawning a little. “The prisons: shit. Big man, you know, take you for little girls. I was there two months, only, for, you know, stealing from a Chinaman—it is bullshit, I know, a Chinaman in Polska!—but I am out now, and Babunia is safe in hospital, and I am escape to Denmark, to make big money, like fairy tales. Like gangstas. I will be like this funny man, Andersen, and make the money, you know, stealing bicycles. Selling the hash. Good, no?”

I chuckled, ready to cheers again, but a windblown man with glasses and frosted, spiky hair tapped on his shoulder, pointing him to stage.

“Now I go, he said. “To rock out, on the drums, with Bartek. But you know, have some beer, and enjoy—kurwa, man, you really are a Polak! This is cool, you must see me again, so stop by my room. Four one one one, in Teknisk, yeah. We smoke joint. Two maybe, if you say prayer for Polska.”

He put his palms together at his chest, bowed his naked head, and smiled, again with his baby teeth. He shook my hand, patted Louisa on the head as if she were a hot oven, and left for the stage. She said she did not want to stay, and so we ducked out of the club to escape him. We walked down the drippy stone streets of

night without a sound between us but the swoosh of wind and the tinkling of rain.

Like Jarek, Polska was the reason why I came to Denmark, to the island of Fyn, away from everything. Polska is poor, Polska is a mess, and Polska is stupid for joining the Union. No one goes to Polska, except to see the ruins at Oswiecim—Auschwitz—or for cheap hookers and vodka. Then, if these tourists are smart, they leave. No one in Polska is making babies anymore, all of the people are leaving, and many have already left. Some went to London, some went to Dublin, but I came to Denmark, to Odense. Here the people are free and rich and give money to everyone. Every doctor is free, as long you have been registered for six weeks, and the Danes are strong and healthy and make good sense. Here I can drink water from the faucet, the air is fresh, and even the hobos on the corner seem to have the happiness and the grace of the swans in the water. They are full of love and pride for Hans Christian Andersen, the writer, who they call H. C. They even put his picture on the crosswalk lights. I had read some of his stories at the time, in English, too, about the ugly duckling and “Big Claus and Little Claus”—that one is still my favorite; the clever Little Claus makes a fool of the greedy Big Claus. The Danes like the story too, and that is why I stayed in Denmark. Well, you know, all of the girls in Odense have bodies like the stars of porno, and that is good too.

But if all Jarek wanted to do was fuck and make money, he did not have to travel all the way to Odense. He could have stayed in Polska, made babies with a Polski girl, and collected the zlotych for the child’s head—becikowe, they call it. It did not make sense that a skinhead would leave his homeland. I guess all skinheads are really queers in their hearts, and anyway, I would not wish anyone’s return to Polska, even if he was a fugitive and a punk. But still, I knew all skinheads from Polska would give their lives for their country. How could Jarek have run away from his beloved Polska? I knew he had to be lying to me, or at least not telling the whole story. Of course, he did not know my story either, or the lies I had told during my first four weeks in Odense. I believed that my lies would disguise my old life to the faces of my new country. I did not want to know the whole story of Jarek, and I did not want him to know my lies. Plus,

both times I had seen him, he had reminded me of Polska and of its misplaced pride and hopeless dreams.

So, for good reasons, I did not want to see Jarek again, and I did not see him for some time. Or at least he did not see me. From my window, a week later, I saw him pushing three muddy bicycles, probably from the dock, into the building. He really was trying to make the big money by stealing bicycles! And you know, why not? Stealing bicycles is a pastime of fun in Denmark; it is one of the few reasons why Denmark has Politi. There are many people from other countries, like the Americans, who buy piece of shit bicycles as if they were new, maybe for four-hundred or five-hundred kroner. But just because Jarek stole too did not mean we had something in common. After all, I had stolen from him, my passed-out countryman, and was very drunk when I did it, and because I am stupid sometimes, I could have said something about it accidentally, or said something about his skinhead. And I had already exchanged the one-hundred zlotych into kroner and bought two bottles of vodka. Worst of all, I was worried he would find out that I had ripped his papers. He would kill me and take my identity. Many skinheads are arrested in Polska for assault or murder. Most of them had strangled an immigrant or a queer with chains. And more skinheads come out of the prisons than had gone in because they are like mold. If it gets on one, sooner or later, it will get on the others.

One late night, I heard Bartek screaming his name and shouting, “Kurwa, fuck no, Jarek, I won’t do it!” from my window below them. It was followed by thuds of furniture crashing into the walls. I am Polski and always of Polski blood, but it was hard to know what Jarek would do, even to a countryman.

I kept busy with my projects at the technical school, and I avoided every one in my building who Jarek might come to see, including all of the new Polacy—Mateusz, Adrian, Andrusz—as well as Louisa. In fact, I saw Louisa only now and then in the hall, and we only exchanged foreign smiles and speedy hejs. I even stopped looking for the hash-dealing Chechnyan, who everyone called the Little Pope (he was short and dressed all in white and hated the

Church) because I thought maybe Jarek planned to be his partner in the hash trade. Even though the American, Nate, lived on the fourth floor, at the other end of the hall from Bartek and Jarek, I spent a lot of time with him, drinking Polski vodka and watching American movies safe in his room with the American boys and girls and pissing in the toilets on the third floor. I did not want to run into Jarek, especially not in the toilet. Something about his tiny teeth, his shiny scalp, and the awkward size of his thin head had caught me off guard both times I had seen him, and it distracted me, especially when I was trying to dream at night. One night, after a night when I did not sleep at all, I worried about Jarek and me for two hours. Only after I drank half of one of the vodkas did it stop. That way, I passed out and did not have to dream at all.

The next night—it was a Thursday—Nate, the American, broke my bicycle on our way to study at Syddansk, the university. He was looking at the blonde girls in the night, and I was too, but when I stopped at a red light, he crashed into my tire and kurwa. It could not even roll through the frame. Nate offered to walk back with me, because we were not far from the building, but I told him he should go, that I would hurry.

While walking back to the building, carrying my bicycle the whole way, I knew I would have to steal a tire from one of the bicycles in my building. It would have cost hundreds of kroner to get a new one from a store, and even if I could find a bicycle with tires of the right size in the streets, I did not want to get crazy and caught by the Politi for a stupid tire. They would find out that I was a Polak and embarrass me. And the other students would see me if I stole from the bicycle rack in front of the building. So I quickly hauled my piece of shit bicycle down into the dark basement, and felt around for a light switch and a tire of the right size.

There was only one light bulb, dangling from the ceiling at the bottom of the staircase, and that was perfect. The room was dark enough so that I could hide if I heard someone come down the stairs, but it lit the basement well enough so that I could find the right tire and could feel the floor for the right wrench.

Out of maybe forty bicycles, the only bicycle that could work was a Centurion with more rust than mine, and it had no kickstand.

But the tires were the same, and it had no lock on the front tire, and it would be easy to get away with. I held the frame well enough to take off the first nut, but the second nut was stuck with rust, and I did not have the muscle to loosen it while holding the bicycle too. Kurwa.

So with both bicycles upside down on their seats in the middle of the room, I got the tight nut off of the one, after much heaving, as well as the broken tire from my bicycle. But I was rushing, from the hormones, and both bicycles fell to the floor. I lifted mine, and made sure it was steady on its seat. I reached for the other when the light changed. I looked up and saw the light bulb beaming behind Jarek's shiny head. Both bicycles fell again to the floor.

"Kurwa, Sergiusz," he said, and for the first time I heard his city Polski. "What are you doing in the dark? I thought I would never see you again."

"Jarek," I said, picking up my bicycle. "I didn't hear you come down the stairs."

"I was lifting weights next door, and I heard the crash."

"Oh, it was just these bicycles, you know. They have no kickstands."

"So, now you need hand?" he asked, moving out of the light and toward the bicycles. I saw he was smiling, with those tiny, tiny teeth. The faded crucifix tattoo on his chest was wet from sweat.

"C'mon, man," he said. "We are Polski, remember? Let's work together."

"No, no," I said. "I am almost done. Big hurry, you know. Thanks, though."

"Switching the tires? You are my kind of man, Sergiusz, but then, you are Polski."

He laughed, and I smiled, trying to not look at his tattoo, and almost asked him to pick up the other bicycle, but he kept talking.

"Bicycles are making me rich here in Denmark," he said, briefly fussing with the chain of his wallet. He rubbed his smooth head. "But it is Babunia. The hospital returned my e-mail, and said she is very sick, and her liver is in terrible pain."

He fussed with the chain again and unclasped it from his belt loop. "We do not have the money for the treatment, and she needs the pills, and, well, I cannot register with the government to get free

medicine because I am illegal here, like I am in Polska.”

He slid a key from the clasp of his chain and sighed. I told him I was sorry to hear about his babunia. He picked up the other bike, steadied it on its seat with his foot and shook the key in my face.

“How long have you been in Denmark, Sergiusz?”

“About a month and a half. It’s great, right? The beer. The girls. The trains are on time. The leisure.”

“Kurwa, fucking great,” he said, reaching for the lock of the other bicycle. “Even if I was not illegal here, I would have to stay in Denmark for six weeks before I could get it. And that is too long. Much too long. And I will be illegal for even longer.”

He fit his key into the lock and pulled it from the tire. My heart fell into my belly. It was Jarek’s bicycle. I tried not to flinch or gulp, for my chest felt like a cave, but I could not help it.

“But you, Sergiusz, you have been here long enough. You could get the medicine for me.”

“And lie to the doctors?” I asked, standing my ground but staring at the bicycles. “Even then, it would take longer than you think.”

“You don’t want to lie to the doctors,” he said, sighing, mocking me. He gripped the lock with his fists, tightened it across his knuckles, and pulled it taut before his stomach. “What I think is that you could go tomorrow, to a doctor, and get it for me, and I could get it to Polska by next week. It is only a little lie, and stealing a little from Denmark for the good of Polska is nothing. You know that. And you can lie. We both know that.”

He rubbed the lock across his skull, and smiled, and turned around, displaying his strong back. I was silent and searching for the right thing to say when he burst out with mock laughter and spun around to face me.

“Sergiusz. Sergiusz!” he shouted, clenching his bicycle and jamming it to the floor. “They are rich here. Have you not seen their beautiful gardens? And their shoes and hats? Their banks and banks? They are rich because they have stolen from the world. They have stolen from Polska and given it to their fucking little blonde boys and girls. And kurwa man—for what? For fine food, and wine, and toys for themselves and these fucking bicycles. Is that right? Are we wrong to steal from them? Stealing from thieves is the right way, it is the way of the world. But look,” he said, spinning the tire of his

bicycle. "You already know that."

He handed the lock to me.

"And no one wants anyone to die, Sergiusz," he said, staring in my eyes. "Not Babunia, not me, not you, nobody. And it is so easy."

He kept staring with so much fever that I could not take my eyes from his. What could I do, full of guilt and so stupid? I said, "Yeah."

I agreed to find him when I had the medicine, and he struck my shoulder, latching on with a firm pinch, still staring at my eyes.

"There you go," he said, cocking his head a little to the side. He was smiling, and he tapped his teeth together several times before letting go. Then he left, saying, "For Polska. For Babunia."

What could I do? Say that it was not me stealing from him, stealing his stupid tire from his rusty, stolen piece of shit? I kicked over both bicycles, cursing my stupidity. Then I returned to my senses, picked up Jarek's bicycle, and put Jarek's tire back in its place, one nut after the other.

Nate, the American, and I drank the other bottle of vodka that night, but I said nothing to him, and was too drunk and too worried to listen to his talking and talking, on and on. I could not be by myself then, or could I be with anyone else. I just hoped Nate would never know what I had done or was going to do for Jarek.

The next afternoon, I e-mailed my professor, told him I was sick, and walked several blocks down Læssøgade to the doctor with the form for Jarek's medicine in my hand. The writing was careless, I was very much hungover, and to sit even for ten minutes in the tidy waiting room was torture. The forms to fill out kept coming and coming from the bossy nurse, one after another, and all of the Danish words and the bullshit I was writing kept my brain sliding forward and back like weights in a clock. Every rustle and cough from this waiting woman and her magazine made me nauseous, and the smart nurse had to say my name twice before I heard that Doctor Moos was waiting to see me.

My first thought was that he looked like American Saint Nicholas. He was a very white man, in his white coat and with his well-trimmed, white beard, but he was not so happy. At times, the light reflected from his little round spectacles straight into my eyes, and I think he knew it, too. He frowned at my CPR card for many

moments. I never took my eyes from his.

“You are from Poland, Sergiusz?”

“Polska, yeah.”

“Which doctor diagnosed you with jaundice?”

I didn’t understand, so I looked at the form in front of him, and mumbled.

“Oh, excuse me,” he said. “It is here. How do you pronounce it? Dr. Otlowski? Yeah, yeah. Well, I cannot give you this medicine until I see that you really have jaundice. You must come back next week. Karen will give you a number and a day. Do not drink before then. You know, no alcohol.”

“No alcohol? OK,” I said. “Why no medicine?”

“Because you have not been examined by a doctor here, in Denmark. It is policy. For every patient.” He straightened his paperwork and looked at his wristwatch. “So I will see you next week,” he said, smiling slightly and adjusting his head as if to blind me with his spectacles again.

“Kurwa,” I said.

“Pardon?” he asked.

“Oh, it is fucking shit,” I said, and he scratched his beard.

I nodded, and took the form from him and shook his hand for a long time, like an idiot, and thanked him very much. I wanted to die there in his office, and when I didn’t, I left without an appointment for next week. I walked out into the bright afternoon streets of Odense until the sun went down, and then headed to the station, where I sat watching the trains come and go until I fell asleep on a bench.

I dreamed I was a dog, tied to a stake in a yard somewhere, and that I could not get out of the sun. The more I struggled, the tighter the rope became around my neck, and I could only pant.

I did not leave my room for three days and never would have. But on the third night, while I was rolling in my bed, a rock smashed through my window. I jumped from my bed, heart pounding and shirtless, and rattled open the broken window to see Jarek standing in the middle of the foggy street.

“Kurwa, Sergiusz!” he called. “Let me in.”

I quickly ducked down, thinking he might go away if I hid long

enough.

“Serguisz, please! Where are you? What are you doing? Open the fucking door.”

Realizing my foolishness and what he might be thinking of me, I stood up and leaned out the window. “Kurwa fuck man, are you crazy?” I said, trying to whisper.

“Babunia—she is dead,” he called. “Let me in, Sergiusz. I lost my key. Nothing matters anymore. Open the door.”

I peered out to the left and to the right of my building, and feeling the cold air on my chest, I knew that he couldn’t stay in the street all night and that only I could help him. And though it was great relief to me, his babunia had just died, if he was telling the truth, and maybe after letting him in, I would be able to sleep for the first time in days without worry. So I grabbed my hoodie and tramped down the stairs to let in Jarek.

It was true, as far as I could see. His eyes were wet, and he insisted that it was from the little rain outside, and because I was feeling happy that his babunia had died and that now the medicine did not matter, I did not argue with him but tried to console him with so much false expression while hiding my new joy. I followed him to his room, hoping that after fifteen minutes of talking, he would want to be alone with his thoughts, and with no more ties to him and my fear of him unknown to anybody except myself, I could sleep at last and from then only be a foreign smile to Jarek.

“Fuck Polska,” he said to me in the dark of his room. Bartek snored on a mattress beneath a tattered poster of John Coltrane. “Kurwa, Sergiusz. Fuck it. It is so stupid, and it doesn’t matter.”

I sat there, very restless, and to be honest, at the time, I was very bored with the whole mess around Jarek. But how could I let Jarek know that? A broken man can be broken more, as I now know; but then, listening to Bartek’s snores only made me want to sleep. So again, I thought of something useless to talk about, hoping he would become as bored with me as I was with him and his love affair with the Polacy.

“Well, I am sorry,” I said. “Did she die in her sleep?”

“Fuck, Sergiusz,” he said, moving to his feet and disturbing Bartek’s rhythm. “How could I know? Do you know how the hospital told me? Do you have any idea? E-mail. I turn on my

computer, I open the letter, and boom, Babunia is dead.” His little teeth glistened with spit, and strings of it caught the electric light from the street. “Fuck this Denmark, and fuck Polska. She died by herself in that country because I wasn’t there, and I have to get back for her funeral. I have three days, and no one else will go but me.” His skinny head dropped into his trembling hands.

“How can you go back? The police, and your pap—I mean, you are illegal, right?”

He sat down on his mattress and looked out the window for a long time. So long that I looked out the window too until I became bored and began to look around Bartek’s room. It was filthy. The smoke detector hung by a wire from the ceiling. Chips of the wall lined the edges of the dirty floor, there were spliff butts here and there, and my sandals kept sticking to spots on the tiles. Now that I think about it, it was probably spit from Bartek’s saxophone. The clock glowed red. It was 1:14 in the morning.

“I’ll have to leave it to God,” he said, turning to me. “Fuck Polska, yes, but Babunia? No. I can’t. I can’t leave her again.”

“But the cops will get you, and not in Denmark either. It will be in Polska, and you’ll be back in the shit. You know, the prisons. Shit, right?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “Fuck it. Bartek. Kurwa—Bartek. Wake up.”

“Kurwa what now?” Bartek said, rolling over toward the wall.

“Babunia is dead. I am going to Polska. For her funeral. I need your suit.”

“Suit? Asshole. You burned my suit, and you are an asshole,” Bartek said. “And for what? Because it was a Danish suit. So shut up and let me sleep.”

Jarek grabbed a boot from the floor and groaning, threw it at Bartek’s head.

“Kurwa, you asshole. I will kill you,” Bartek said. “Nothing but rape and murder with you. Why don’t you go steal a suit, like you steal everything else?”

“I am sorry to hear that Babunia has passed,” I said quickly. “But I am very tired and am going to sleep. Good night.”

“Sergiusz—wait,” Jarek said. “Bartek—how can I steal a suit?”

“I don’t know, Jarek. Jesus, go to sleep. You steal everything;

you'll find a way to steal a suit."

Jarek stood up, and without thought, he rammed his knee into Bartek's spine. I remember hearing Bartek make noises of pain through clenched teeth and swearing in Polski while Jarek stood there waiting for Bartek to say one more word to provoke him. When he didn't, Jarek moved as to get both Bartek and me in his vision. Electric light from the street shone around his figure, and he spoke to us.

"Tomorrow, we—me, you, and you—tomorrow, we are going into Centrum to buy a suit for me."

I wanted to ask why we had to go with him, but my spine already hurt from sleeplessness. Sleep was all I wanted, and so I went along with it, just like Bartek except without the bullying. Finally, the fifteen minutes were done, and Jarek announced that we should all go to sleep. I left the room so quickly that I did not say good night.

It did not take long for me to pass out in my bed downstairs, but before I did, I heard noises of furniture scraping the floor above me and sad, painful moans of who, at the time, I thought was Bartek, but now I know it must have been Jarek.

Out of the door, through the green park, and across the bridges we walked, me and Bartek in front and apart and Jarek behind us the whole way, like a cop or a hunter. I looked back once we had crossed Ny Vestergade, and he was there, nodding me toward Centrum. The streets in the morning had more people than I thought would be there on a Tuesday, but Jarek whispered to Bartek that all the people would give us an easy way to escape. He described how we would dodge and disturb the people shopping and selling and banking and biking and disappear into the industry near the edge of Odense or the docks or the woods.

"They will trip us and beat us to the street," Bartek said. "There are too many of them. There are too many witnesses and heroes here, and they will all help the Politi until we are in handcuffs. This is Denmark, not Polska. Kurwa idiot."

"Their handcuffs are not expecting me," Jarek said, stopping at the corner to face Bartek and me. "I am the handyman; I will break them if I have to. They will not be your hands in their Danish chains anyway," he said, pulling Bartek's head to his breast. "Ah,

Bartek, Bartek, Bartek.”

But Bartek pushed him away. “Why are we here for you now, about to rob a suit for you?” he asked, looking back and forth at me and Jarek. “We are not thieves.”

“Ah, but you are,” Jarek said. “You are. You have stolen my hash, Bartek, for your dreams of jazz, and you took my bike, Sergiusz, until I found you. You are awesome thieves, cool and clean, but I am better.”

“So sell more hash. Steal more bikes. Make more money until you can buy the suit, like a true Polak,” Bartek said.

“There is no time to sell more hash,” Jarek said, laughing at the idea. “Do not worry, Bartek. I will steal the suit, and you two will distract the clerks.” He looked over the people in the street and across Vestergade. “Do you see the store Dressmann? Pester them with boring questions, and use your Polski accents to speak your horrible English. They already think that the Polak is stupid, so be stupid. You are good at that. The dressing rooms are upstairs, near a window that goes to the roof. Bother them with stupid questions for five minutes so I can get the suit and run away.”

“Try the suit first,” I said, scratching the back of my neck.

“You are a worse thief than I thought,” Jarek said. “That will take too much time.”

“And if you walk down the street carrying the suit without a bag,” I said. “And in the clothes they saw you wearing. You know we will only do so much for you, Jarek.”

“Don’t encourage him,” Bartek said.

Jarek put his hand on my shoulder and smiled.

“And what if it doesn’t fit, Jarek?” I said. “What dishonor to Babunia.”

“You,” he said, smiling with those baby teeth and still clutching my shoulder. “And if I walk down the street in a suit, like the Danish, they will not think twice that I am innocent. Wait here for five minutes so we are not seen together in the store. And then pester them for ten minutes and leave. I will see you back at Teknisk in an hour, with the suit. Hej hej, my friends,” he said. Then he walked across the street and into the crowd.

“You do not know Jarek like I do,” Bartek said. “He is crazy, and if you don’t give him enough, he will take the rest of what you have

and leave you with nothing.”

“I know Jarek,” I said.

We waited like fools on the corner in the grey September noon, rolling our heads and staring at girls. I saw a hot one, but in my idiot gaze, I did not see that it was Louisa, and then she walked over to me. Nate was with her, carrying some books.

“Sergiusz! I haven’t seen you in weeks!” she cried. “Hi, I’m Louisa,” she said to Bartek, who shook her hand and looked at me, not hiding the fact that he did not care about Louisa and that I should not care, too.

“He is Bartek,” I said. “The friend of Jarek.”

“Oh, I’ve heard about you. What happened to your head?”

“Last night,” I said before Bartek could speak. I explained what happened with my hands, making nonsense language and pointing to his bruises.

“Well, anyway, it looks like it hurts. So, what are you guys doing?”

“What’s up, Nate? Oh, we are bad hangover,” I said. “But, we are Polish, and so, we do what we do, act stupid.”

Without pausing to hear more, Louisa laughed. She laughed harder than I had seen her laugh before and said good-bye. She understood the joke completely, and of course, she believed it too.

Once inside Dressmann, Bartek did a horrible job being stupid. He asked questions, but only five of them and over and over again, like a drug addict. It did not matter to me. Jarek was out of sight in the dressing room. From there, he could not see me throw off my mask and walk to the clerk.

“The man,” I said, trying to remember English. “In the dressing room . . . help?”

“Yes, that will not be a problem,” he said as he clicked a mouse and jingled his keys. I turned and watched him advance to the stairs and started to sweat as I looked for Bartek, who was still trying to get answers from the other clerk.

Then, in a black suit and with no undershirt, Jarek descended. As he stepped sideways down the stairs, he looked at me with sharp, hard eyes for a long moment. I had to back up to a shelf of sweaters and hide. So I am stupid for trying to get rid of Jarek, stupid and

proud, and my heart fell into my belly again.

“Sir,” he said. “The suit is small.”

“Yes, well, normally this would not be a problem,” said the clerk. “However, your size is very popular. I’ve checked, and there is nothing else in your range, and in black, which must do for the occasion.”

Jarek peered around the store to make sure that I was still there, stupid and ashamed and fumbling with price tags, as I was. He looked at Bartek, playing a poor actor, and bowed his shiny head like he was swallowing. He looked at the other clothes, and me again, and I remember thinking I was a jury member of a guilty man.

“I need a shirt,” he said. “For under the suit.”

“Yes, I’ve chosen some white shirts that will fit the suit,” the clerk said. “Please let me know if I can help you further.”

“Here?” asked Jarek, with one hand unbuttoning the jacket and the other outstretched toward the clerk. “If you insist,” he said, smiling with his miniature teeth, “I insist,” and he laid the black jacket over a chair as he stepped onto the platform in the center of the room.

“Oh, please,” said the clerk. “This is not necessary. Our dressing rooms will do.”

“My jacket is off,” he said, “and the gentlemen here, they do not care.” The clerk looked at me, but I did not move. Jarek’s tattoo looked pale in the store lights, and he said “So,” rubbing his thumb and first finger like he was counting zlotych, “a shirt for me.”

There were no other customers, except Bartek and me. The automatic doors opened now and then, but the people outside let in open and never came in. The clerk handed a shirt to Jarek.

He put it on slowly, and I saw him look at both ends of the row of buttons to make sure that each button was in the right hole. He flexed his arms away from his body, and moved to put on the jacket.

“OK, well, the suit looks much bigger with the collar, yes,” the clerk said, stepping to the platform. “It will do. Your buttons, though. Let’s get that top one.” He faced Jarek, and pinched the collar tightly around his neck.

I felt I could move again. I walked to the table of neckties between the sweaters and the doors. Somebody outside made them

open, and Jarek shot his head around and looked at me.

“It’s only the doors,” said the clerk. “You must keep your head straight ahead, on the mirror.”

“*Babunia*,” Jarek mouthed to me before moving his head straight ahead. Then, in a whisper, he said it aloud, like he was talking to the clerk.

Bartek came to the front of the store then, still muttering nonsense Polski and English like a crazy drug addict customer. He looked up at Jarek as he walked to me, throwing his arms up in the air before thanking the clerk like an idiot and walking out the door.

“Bartek!” Jarek shouted toward the door before the clerk righted Jarek’s head again.

“Too tight,” Jarek said to the clerk. “Kurwa, my neck, man!”

“I am sorry,” said the clerk. “Just try to take it like a man, please, sir.”

I turned to walk out of the store.

“Sergiusz!” he cried pleading. “Now where are you going?”

I stopped a little but never turned around, and I walked through the doors. I stopped when I was outside and looked up and down the street before I heard the doors shut and walked right a little faster than usual.

After Bartek and I sold the bikes to the hash-dealing Chechnyan, we bought return tickets for Gdansk, back in Polska, out of fear. Where could Jarek never go and never find us? There, we exchanged some kroner, bought a small room and a hooker and stayed one night drinking Zubrówka and one night walking around the city. When we were back in Odense, Jarek was not there.

“Oh, you know, they came and got him, just like that and bam, man, he was down on the dirty floor up there, yeah, near your room, man,” the Chechnyan said to Bartek and me on the next day.

“They took him in that suit that he took from them,” he said.

Born in Nashville, Tennessee, Matthew Townsley is currently studying English and History at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. He also works there as a fiction editor for Sphere, the undergraduate literary magazine. “Jarek” (yah dik) explores the relationship of possession and theft, paranoia and manipulation, and country and identity between Polish immigrants living in Denmark.

Footsteps in the Snow

| Christina Zwilling

Randy was a large man whose figure generally resembled the shape of an oval. His legs were short and peculiarly skinny, and I often wondered how they had the strength to hold up his enormous midsection. His belly sat like a large bulb on the stem of his legs, and it protruded through every shirt I'd ever seen him wear. He worked at a small shop downtown, by the pier. He sold hooks and lures to the fisherman, and ran the place pretty much on his own.

I would go down to Randy's store once a week when I was nine to buy bait for my dad. I didn't like the suffocating smell of fish or the chill of the little shop, but I reveled in the opportunity to have responsibility. He always looked up at me with the same slow, empty grin when the door squeaked open. A dirty blue baseball hat would be perched on the top of his bald head, and it was the running joke around town to try and figure out which team it was. The years had faded it, and little holes were beginning to erupt in the cloth like chicken pox. I doubted if even Randy himself knew where it was from.

It was almost December, and the snow had started falling early that year. I ran all the way to Randy's store because I had forgotten my coat at a friend's house. The door squeaked when I opened it, and I bent over inside the doorway, clutching my side, trying to catch my breath. I looked up and there was Randy behind the desk, smiling at me with his dull eyes and crooked yellow teeth. His baseball cap was tilted sideways, and he held a beer in one of his cracked, thick hands.

"How ya doin', darlin'?" He let out a low, croaky laugh. "Gettin' a bit outta shape, are yeh?"

I smiled politely and made my way to the front desk. I held out my five-dollar bill and he went to the back room to get my worms. He plopped them down in front of me so that their slimy little bodies were at eye level. I watched them squirm and fold around each other, lifting their little heads or tails to peek out the sides of the cup. He grunted and motioned for the money. I held out my hand and he took the bill slowly, his gnarled fingers brushing my hand for a second before they moved away. I looked up at him, but

he was already turning towards the cash register. The back of his shirt was stained with sweat, and his pants drooped low enough that I had to look away in embarrassment.

I heard the door squeak as Randy was getting my change, and I turned to see a tall, pale-faced man enter the fishing store. He had a toothpick between his teeth, and his face was so spotted with whiskers that it looked as if someone had taken a pepper shaker to it. Randy's red, splotchy face drained completely of color when he saw the man. He threw my change on the counter and slammed his fist down on the surface, causing his beer to tip over and splash onto my shirt.

"What the hell d'you want, Doug?" Randy growled, the color coming back into his cheeks so fast that he soon resembled a cherry ripe for picking. The lanky man just strolled over to the counter, wiggling the toothpick between his thin lips.

"Come to get me some fishing line," Doug drawled. He walked over to the counter where I stood, paralyzed, and put his hand on my shoulder. "Now, ain't you just the prettiest little thing?" He ran his fingers through my blonde curls before turning back to Randy.

"And hurry it up, will ya? I got my woman to attend to back home." Doug let out a laugh that gave me the chills faster than the snow outside. He slapped his knee, and the echo of his cold, hard voice bounced around the walls of the little store.

Randy's left eye twitched for a moment while he stood, deciding what to do. It was evident that he'd been offended, but he could not think fast enough to defend his honor. Slowly, he reached underneath the counter and pulled out a pistol. Doug's gloating smile melted from his face like butter. Randy pointed the gun at Doug's forehead, breathing hard, beads of sweat bursting out on his eyebrows.

Everything was silent for a moment. I couldn't move. I only stared at the two men and the pistol, waiting for one or the other to do something. The stench of beer filled my nostrils and my shirt stuck to my stomach. The silence became so loud that it hummed in my ears until I thought I would go deaf. Finally, Doug took a step back.

"Cool it, will ya?" He nervously ran his fingers through his greasy brown hair.

“Get the hell outta my store,” Randy held the pistol tightly, and his face was turning white again. Doug walked backwards slowly, staring at the gun. Both men seemed to have forgotten my presence. There was some element of the grown-up world that I could not yet comprehend going on. The door squeaked and Doug was gone. Randy looked at the gun in his hands and lowered it slowly to the counter. The worms still squirmed in their cup, and his overturned beer was rolling from side to side.

I said nothing, just scooped up my worms and made my way out. Before I opened the door, I turned to look at Randy. He was still staring at the gun, his face blank and pale. His stomach hung out over his belt and his baseball cap was almost falling off. The look in his eyes made me queasy. I felt like the worms I held in my hand were squirming around inside of me, wriggling up my intestines, settling in the crook of my heart.

The next week, I returned to get bait for my dad’s last fishing trip of the season. It was early in the morning, and the sun had only begun to rise. I walked slowly through the snowdrifts, turning to look at how my footsteps ruined the perfect, untouched snow. My pink boots made large holes in the fluffy banks, and I wondered when other footsteps would join them in ruining the pure snow. The ground glittered in front of me, and I had already forgotten about last week’s incident.

Randy was sleeping with his head dropped down on the counter when I entered. He didn’t hear the squeak of the door, so I went up to him with my five-dollar bill in hand. A small string of drool was dripping from the side of his open mouth, and he sounded like he was growling rather than snoring. I was too afraid to touch him, so I softly cleared my throat, the way my mother sometimes did to get a person’s attention. Randy’s eyes rolled upwards for a second, then dropped again. I tentatively stuck out a finger and poked his arm. His flesh was warm and squishy, and it reminded me of the cup of worms.

His beady brown eyes opened, and in them I saw a strange look of exhaustion. He wiped his mouth with his large, hairy arm and straightened his baseball cap. I held out my five-dollar bill.

He looked at it dumbly for a moment, as though he couldn’t

remember exactly what it was. Then he gave me that same dull grin of yellow teeth, and reached his hand out over the counter. Instead of grabbing the money, his hand hovered just over my head for a moment. He touched my short blonde curls, wrapping one around his finger. His mouth hung open and I could smell the tobacco and beer on his breath. He put his other hand on my cheek, and I felt his cracked knuckles stroke my skin.

I stepped back, confused. He saw the disgust on my face and his cheeks burned red. He pulled something out from under the counter and put it in his back pocket. I still held the five-dollar bill out in front of me, numbly. Randy wiped his nose with his hand and pulled his pants up to meet his fat, sloshing belly.

"I've got yer worms," he mumbled, "but they's in a different place." He stepped out from behind the counter and started for the door. He turned and motioned for me to follow. I felt like I was in a dream. I couldn't scream, or talk, or move. The five-dollar bill was still in my hand, but it felt like water as it slipped through my fingers and floated to the floor. I knew what Randy had in his back pocket. He looked at me with a kind of vulnerable, paralyzed fear, and I followed. I think that even then, I knew what he was going to do.

The door squeaked as we left the store and trudged out into the soft, glistening snow. Huge flakes were falling from the sky, and the rising sun shone on them so brightly that they almost blinded me. Randy looked behind him as we walked, but instead of looking for me, I saw him glance at his footsteps in the snow, watching the way his path broke through the drifts.

"Me and my brother, we would always watch the paths people made in the snow," he said, stopping for a moment. I stared at him, confused.

"We'd go out and follow their tracks, like we was goin' huntin'. We'd try and find people, me and him. 'You follow people, Randy' he says to me, 'and you figure out who they are.' Wasn't never easy, ain't that the truth." He sighed. He was looking at me, but seeing someone else. His eyes wandered to the snow, to the tracks his feet had made.

"I been followin' people all my life. Ain't never been easy. I been watchin', and tryin', and waitin' my turn, and it ain't never come. Thought maybe it did once, but it's gone. Truth is, I ain't never

known how to be with people.”

I said nothing, only stared at Randy with wide eyes, clasping my hands together and wishing I were somewhere else. My mind would not function; I felt like the snow was swirling around inside of me, numbing my insides.

“It’s snowin’ harder,” Randy noted, looking towards the heavens. “These footsteps, they be filled up in no time, and ain’t nobody gonna know we was here.”

Abruptly he began to walk again, and this time, he stared straight ahead. We were going towards the pier, but around to the side, behind the store, where no one liked to fish. I looked around for some adult to tell me what to do, but there was only Randy. He strode with such a purpose that I found myself running along behind him to keep up. He walked like an enchanted person, his feet plowing through the snow, staring straight ahead at the lake. I began to cry; I wished I could just return home, instead of following Randy to the lake, where I was sure there were no worms.

We reached the edge of the snow, where the lake hung several feet below us, gray and dirty. It crashed into the wall by the pier and Randy stared at it, his mouth hanging open, breathing heavily. His left eyelid twitched and he turned to face me slowly. I saw his belly as it stuck out through the bottom of his T-shirt.

I felt the cold swirl around me, but it didn’t touch me. I felt as though I were watching a scene in a movie, safe in my bubble, unable to be touched by anything that happened. Randy pulled the pistol out of his back pocket and stared at it, and then at me. His eyes were bright and shining, and I watched as the snowflakes fell on his thin, rubbery lips.

“Didn’t want t’ be alone is all,” he muttered, his left eyelid twitching faster. “Can’t stand t’ be alone.”

The noise wasn’t as loud as I’d expected, but it did its job well enough. Randy’s blood spurted out over the pristine snow, dotting it with red. His body fell backwards into the lake, and I heard the dull thud when he hit the wall before splashing back into the water. He left a canvas splattered with red paint before me, like the flicking of a paintbrush on an immaculate white backdrop.

The snowflakes caught in my hair and chilled my bones. I watched the sun rise fully into the sky before I turned around, my

face burning from the cold. I counted the steps I took as I walked numbly back to my house, careful not to walk in any of Randy's prints. The snow fell harder, and newer, fresher flakes quickly filled in the path he had made. I looked behind me at the footsteps. Two sets of them walked towards the lake, and only mine walked back. I remembered what Randy had said. The snow kept falling, and I held myself tighter as I made my way back home.

Creative Non-Fiction

Faded and Bronzed

A Dirt Road to the Sun

My Education

Octopus-Ride

A Small Piece of Pavement

Spanish Fiasco

Hat

My Father's Hands

Taxicab Dreams

A Different Kind of Ink

Faded and Bronzed

| Arshia Unk

For the first six years of my life, I lived in a dusty cement building in a small, dusty village in Northern Pakistan. There, date trees scrape the skies and men herd cattle and goats through muddy scribbles on the earth that pass for roads. Children covet tiny plastic animals found in gritty cracker boxes. Familial meadows are a refuge from the scorching silver ball of sun.

Broken bits of memories lodge in the current of reminiscence stirred daily by my mother and aunts and uncles. They sit and talk of who has died, married, birthed. Their affairs focus on gold and land and stake and slight. I let their talk wash over me. It has all the pathos of a Greek tragedy, and in their words I see the flitting of years and the suns swallowed and moons released.

I remember little, and yet it is everything. A dune colored blanket edged in black, the blazing white of my grandfather's *kurta*, his crinkly, textured beard wagging around cheeks like apples. My grandmother, tall, gaunt, and silent, perpetually a silhouette with a broom constructed of dried fronds, generating great clouds as she swept an eternal sea of sand. A soothing liver-spotted hand and a cup full of warm milk.

They discuss my grandfather in all his glory, authority and capriciousness. He indulged select fantasies. Brought my youngest aunt an exquisite doll from Arabia, and caused little girls all over the land to simply *expire* from envy. Covered his ears while my uncles, then a tumble of scrawny elbows and scabby knees, set off firecrackers on the roof. He demanded their obedience. Music and foolish delights, nail polish and magazines, were forbidden. Meals were to be served promptly, dishes scrubbed thoroughly, clothes beaten exhaustively.

And yet, I hear, my grandfather snuck his first cigarette when he was twelve. Now at the grand age of seventy-six, he sucked slowly on a golden hookah. Clouds of blue-grey steam floated above his head, danced in a pale, heated joy, tendrils of smoke wisped and furled with a sinuous grace. It was our servant's job to load the hookah, and slowly stoke the embers, blasting them with a powerful breath until they were blazing. The gleaming pipe was heavy, burdensome, and beautiful. It squatted on splayed legs, a Polyphemic tyrant. Bubbling and belching, it wheezed the asthmatic gurgle of a phlegm-coated

throat. Carved with loops and swirls, etched black by smoke and time, it had the density of dark matter, and required a fearsome grunt and a great wrenching motion to move. With a little coughing, and much sweating, I would crouch close, and watch my grandfather puff away, floating in a marvelous cloud of nicotine and habit, with a feeling that I was receiving an infusion of the narcotic myself. This was routine, and comfort and safety.

I could set my watch, had I possessed such a wondrous amenity at the time, to my grandfather's smoking. I was soothed by the rough smoke and sharp smell of tobacco. Sticky fingered with syrup or spice, alternately, depending on whether I had managed to coax my grandfather into slipping me a shiny coin to use at the local sweet shop or been forced to eat my dinner without the tooth-rotting goodness of fried dough. In reality, my coaxing had little to do with whether I got a treat or not. I was a little dancing imp, and my grandfather was perpetually ready to yield, his hand already on the coin in his pocket.

I knew with as much certainty as I did that I would wake up with a fresh mosquito bite on my leg, no matter how tightly I had wrapped the blanket around me the night before, or that my mom would force a comb through my knotted hair, or my cousin and I would squabble over ballpoint pens and rubber-bands, that my grandfather would smoke his hookah in the shade after we had eaten. The hookah was an anchor and a post around which I darted, absorbed in my childish amusements, having little to question, and much to explore. I was wise and old, the hookah older still, and my grandfather eternal.

I returned to Pakistan twelve years later, and a few feet taller. My grandmother, skeletal arms thrusting long from a faded sleeve, drags the faded, bronzed hookah across a dusty floor to my grandfather's bedside. He sits wearied and dark-eyed. Her stooped form etched in frieze, legs braced and taunted, back hunched, angles and planes in contest with metal and gravity, tiny scraping sounds in lurches and leaps. She is moving, and frozen, only the winds puff grainy clouds around her feet.

Their laughter a jagged piece caught in an eddy, spun in a dark current, breaks apart and tinges a color I cannot quite place. A purple bitterness, a pale fondness, like remembering a wiry old rooster that no longer dots fingers with angry bloodspots. Plumed feathers gone

limp, bald patches, and straggling ends. They served so I would not have to. A love as amorphous as the blue vapor. I cannot begin to categorize, solidify, judge. My grandparents sit on parallel rectangular beds a few feet apart. An equal sign in bird's eye, and I a fly on the ceiling watch the smoke and the fan spin lazily, blades cutting through the hazy air, the two side by side wading through the hours.

At present, Arshia Unk is an undergraduate English major at Marymount University. Currently, she is preparing for law school. When she grows up, she wants to be an author.

A Dirt Road to the Sun

| Cazz Brindis

There was a dead current in the air the morning I aimed myself through the desert. A two-lane road stretched to an endless point on a flat horizon where mountains seemed to float instead of clouds, and on my immediate peripherals were little more than dried bushes, rocks, and rusted mileposts. Not much moved in the desert either. Not the thirsty flora, not the hot life, not even time.

But I tried to move nonetheless.

The trip started at about 9:30; home sat 355 miles off in the distance and the Shell Station, as it was a more important objective, sat about 240 miles away. I guesstimated the math for the mileage—ever since the trip, clocking my mileage and rechecking numbers has become as instinctive as paddling is for a duck—and as it was, the white Corolla had a hair more gas than was needed to get to the station.

And so I drove.

Songs played through at a coy pace, leaving a nostalgic air circulating the cabin. The scene would have looked profoundly stale from the outside, but it fit with the forsaken land surrounding. I sweat on the soccer field again in the heat of the summer. I trumped on a small stage with my old band as my ocean-quilted guitar and lips danced. I drank too much at the after parties again. I laughed. Loved. I didn't cry again, but that's only because you don't cry in the desert; it's a mutual agreement.

You don't doubt in the desert either, and that's something I learned during the Arizona summer of my tenth year.

That August marked my sister's fourth birthday, and on her day she opened up a special gift: a big wooden toy chest. Sturdy framed, thick hinged, naturally stained . . . it was an object of simple elegance made for objects of simple pleasure. The toys soon overwhelmed the fresh scent of wood, and inside permeated a sensation—and it's not quite a smell, though easily mistaken as such; it's that certain air which carries a whit of young innocence and fun shed by the tear and the drool. I noticed the sensation immediately when I stuck my head inside to help her find a toy that was buried deep within. Before long we were both engulfed in the search, though because of her height, she was merely resting her chin on

the edge and trying to peer inside with a blind hand. Needless to say I didn't find her toy, for in what can be best described as a split-second, my arm shot up out of the chest and halted the heavy lid.

Mid-fall, centimeters from her skull.

It took a few moments for me to understand what had occurred. My little sister remained oblivious to the miracle and soon moved on to other games. I didn't get over the incident as easily, and to this day I still don't understand how it happened, how I had anticipated the drop. I saw no shadow, heard no creak. The lid had no reason to fall, and I, lost in a tunnel-vision search, had no reason to notice its chosen course. But my hand did shoot up and it did stop the lid. And my sister's skull—even, perhaps, her life—was saved that day.

Many say that there was obviously a cue given off by the lid; that I simply subconsciously perceived it and thus don't remember. But I know it was something else. It was another dimension of being, another realm of reality folded within humanity's physical state that happened to glitch . . . a lapse in the two planes of awareness and actual being; I simply happened to experience the metaphysical plane of emotion and awareness before the action came to pass (I oft relate the concept to an out-of-sync movie in which you hear the words before you see the actor speak them). There are actually studies which show that the activity levels of human brains can and do spike just before a person witnesses a tragic, dangerous, or gruesome experience through visual means. There is no explanation but a faith in infinite possibilities; a blind faith just like a young girl's blind hand.

And so you don't doubt and you don't cry in the desert.

The sun was high when I pulled off the highway to gas up at the Shell Station which conveniently marked the start of the westerly portion of my trip as opposed to the southerly. I took the dirt road slowly, wanting to keep my tires safe for the remainder of the trip. As the station came into view, however, so did the yellow tape that stretched around all eight of the pumps. It read "caution."

I inched my way closer, maneuvering throughout the station. Everything was closed and the yellow tape remained tied in place no matter how many times I circled the pumps. And I closed my eyes and punched my wheel three times, but when I opened up,

squinting into the fire sky, I wasn't home. I wasn't in Kansas, either, and there was no little dog or flying monkeys to come and clean my windshield and sing whimsical songs. No poppies either. Just dust and yellow tape in a Godforsaken town.

I parked my car beside the station and looked at the mileage. My gas light hadn't come on but the needle was nearing its death. She had between one and two gallons left to her name at best. Not familiar with the area, I looked up gas stations on my GPS. Nothing came up besides the dead Shell Station and another one nestled coyly in the opposite direction of my route, far away. Across the street was a small diner with a few old cars parked out front, and in a town with a population of about four permanents—unless of course the rest of the town has slowly become nocturnal on account of the crippling afternoon heat; and as I said, you can't doubt such notions in the desert—any human contact is better than none.

I walked sweating into the small diner.

An elderly woman was eating alone in the corner, a chef was banging metal somewhere in the back, and a waitress stood behind a counter to my right. I approached her candidly, too preoccupied and dazed to size her up. Had it been a normal day, I wouldn't have been able to keep myself from judging her, wrong as it may be, and I would have noted her sour face and hardened appearance and thought her an unpleasant lady. My assumptions would have turned me off, but I would have been right.

She raised an impatient eyebrow as I approached.

"So . . . the gas station," I said dryly.

She didn't have to look out the window. "Yep. Nearest one's twenty-five miles back that way," and she tilted her arid blonde hair in the direction I had just been driving for three and a half hours, "or fifty that way," and nodded to the west.

Fifty miles was a hell of a stretch, but it was in the direction I needed to go.

"Right. Thanks." I got what I needed from her and didn't have the slightest desire to be on the receiving end of any more negativity. I walked back to my car and got in, keeping the door open to minimize the heat. I didn't want to waste any gas starting the engine and using the air, so I just sat and thought, alone in the world with the sun. *Twenty-five miles backtracking would turn into fifty and thus*

take about an hour. But on the other hand, fifty miles on my original route could become a nightmare with potentially no cell service and miles of wry nothingness. I could have found a way to call my mom right then, but she would have had no additional insight; it would have only been a worry and a scare. I decided it best to spare her for the time being and instead look around for another local to talk to.

A few yards down from my car was a weathered post office with big glass windows, and by the looks of it I wouldn't have been surprised if it, too, was closed. There was an old Chevy parked outside so I gave it a shot. Through the window I saw an old man with salt-and-pepper hair and a grizzly beard. He seemed approachable.

"Do you know of any other gas stations nearby?" I asked after entering.

"Well, where you headed?"

I told him my town. He knew it and the way I'd have to go to get there.

"If you—" he stopped. "How much gas you have left?" he asked as if he had just read a briefing of my situation in a letter that had just come for him in the post office.

"Ha . . . I should be able to get fifty. Maybe."

He fondled his beard, thinking. "You wanna get back on the Five and keep west. Toward Blythe. And there should be two stations on an exit about, oh, forty miles down."

I followed his words as they escaped his mouth and evaporated in the air. I wanted to grab them and lock them up in my glove box, perhaps for a rainy day.

But there are no rainy days in the desert.

"Then you can catch the 95 right from there, you know," he said.

"Yeah. Yeah, that's perfect."

He looked back to his fistful of mail.

"Preciate it, sir" I said.

He nodded and gave me a quick wink, and I opened the door for the both of us.

I lingered on the post office porch, secretly watching the Old Man. I assumed he would get in the old Chevy and drive off to the highway, and that as he backed up he'd see me and we'd both give a final wave—something cliché yet fitting for such an epic meeting;

maybe I'd mouth the word 'thanks' one last time and the Old Man would roll down his window and spit out some profound line of dialogue that would have served well as the basis for this story. But he didn't get into the car, and he didn't say anything at all. He just hobbled down the dirt path toward the burning mountains on the horizon.

I watched him for what seemed like minutes, not noticing the beads of sweat that formed on my face until they hit my mouth and made my lips twitch. Who was this Old Man, that he could lay my path out and give me hope with but a few words and a wink? I thought it best to walk away with the image of his awe-filled skeleton heading aimlessly down the dirt road into the fierce sun. Perhaps, I said to myself, I would paint the scene and write a song about the Old Man when I got home.

After I had driven eighteen miles with no air conditioner, my gas light clicked on. After twenty, my GPS picked up the gas station's signals and read that the exit would be just twenty-one miles ahead. That instant carried with it more relief than I have potentially ever experienced, though I am aware that the apprehension and heat added to the overall effect.

I made it to the station and gave my car a nice, long drink—the desert had left her thirsty. At some point during the final stretch of my trip I got cell phone service and called my mom, relaying to her a censored version of the prior incident.

It was only after I was able to run my air conditioner again and grow comfortable in my polyester seat that I was able to realize that the desert is an unholy place. It is an unholy place where the sun rules the scene and damns life to fevered dirt. It's a place where importance is not on family or friends or money or food, but rather on storage:

Cacti will only flourish if they can store enough water. Animals live only if they can store excess food when the season deems it available. Offspring must be stored underground and hidden from the havoc of heat. And in those chosen areas populated for unexplainable reasons by humans, garages must be built bigger in order to store cars away from sun damage and keep boats ready for the

water. And cars will only make it through alive if they can store enough gas.

That's why I spent the last two-and-a-half hours of my trip wishing that the sun, God of the desert, would grant the Old Man, wherever it was he was headed, all the storage that he would ever need.

With a simple finger, he had pointed me in a direction of safety. We exchanged a handful of words by sheer coincidence in an old glass room, but the memory of him will far outlast the infinite mail which runs through the post office. Because once he spoke, I had no choice but to follow the Old Man's quick advice with a blind faith.

Because you don't doubt in the desert.

Cazz Brindis was born in Boston but spent his growing years in the desert of Arizona. As an independent singer/songwriter, he has felt music weave its way into every aspect of his life—including his writing. Pleasing sounds, rhythms, and words have changed him; perhaps, he hopes, they will change another.

My Education

| Jacob E. Glackman

“Hey chooch, you wrap sandwich like that?” Tony, the owner of the pizza shop I worked at just after high school berated me in this manner on the good days; on the bad days he would scream, shake, and turn bright red—but had the wherewithal to send me home early before things really got out of hand. To this day, I don’t know if he knew my name. He addressed me as blockhead, Polack, and chooch (idiot or donkey in Italian). This was my cooking school. With the skills I acquired at Tony’s pizza shop, I was able to work my way up in five of the top kitchens in Philadelphia.

In these high-end kitchens I learned to braise veal cheeks, clarify consommé, cook cock’s combs, and make brightly colored foam sauces with intense flavors. But it was Tony who taught me the most valuable lesson of the kitchen: learn not to hear. The chefs I cooked for screamed and cursed at everyone and everything.

I worked in kitchens not because I have a great passion for food, but for the lack of better options. I felt stagnant spending my days sitting down in college classrooms. At eighteen years of age, I felt the need for a more physically active life than a full course load of college courses permitted. As far as work, restaurant work was all I knew; it challenged me both mentally and physically. I liked the fast-pace of line cooking. The rapid flowing precise movements reminded me of playing a sport. We did not save lives; we fed rich people capable of feeding themselves. To do my job right I had to act with a sense of urgency, to pretend more was at stake than the quality of someone’s meal.

The abusive nature of the kitchen environment is something I learned to cope with, yet never an aspect of restaurant cooking I embraced. The intense environment added meaning to the work. I felt my job must be important if a legendary chef was willing to throw a tantrum like a child over a minor mistake I had made.

I never cooked for the guests who consumed my food and paid exorbitant prices for their meals. I cooked for myself, my fellow cooks and for my chefs. A plate sent back to the kitchen by a displeased guest meant nothing in itself. The chef’s reaction to the plate meant everything. In one instance, a female client sent back a plate of perfectly cooked scallops. First the chef criticized how

she ate: “like an animal.” Then he took her medium rare scallops and threw them like baseballs onto the stove and cooked them to a rubbery texture. On another occasion, a chicken entrée came back because the guest felt it was overcooked, the chef concurred. He took the dish, fifty dollar china plate and all, hurled it like a Frisbee against the wall, shards of china and over-roasted chicken flew everywhere.

Instead of staying at a particular restaurant when I was in position to be promoted from cook to sous chef, I moved to different more challenging kitchens. I did not have the patience to manage other people, nor did I have it in my heart to abuse those under me.

Abuse was not only verbal. In each kitchen I worked, I suffered and witnessed physical abuse at the hands of my chefs. The first time a sous chef reprimanded me physically I was incensed not only because I was slammed against a stove, but because I had done nothing but throw out a fifty cent order of pasta at the direction of the chef's own brother.

The next time I was struck by a sous chef I was working on the fish station at a five-star restaurant. I was filleting a Dover sole when I heard my sous chef, Jerome, bellow, “*merde pootan*” and felt him punch me in the back of my shoulder. I turned around to see what the commotion was about and saw sauces boiling too hard. At this point in my career, my chef punching me fazed me little more than him screaming and cursing at me. I hardly felt the actual blow until I awoke the next morning with an arm that hurt to raise even chest high. The punch was a minor distraction in that kitchen where dinner service proved frenzied, excruciatingly hot, and out of control.

The day to day life of a restaurant chef, even at the top of the profession is frustrating, if not downright miserable. The analogy for a fine dining restaurant I like best is that it is like a duck on a pond. Picture a duck floating peacefully on the water: this is the dining room, then picture the duck's legs moving rapidly, almost frantically to keep the duck afloat: this is the kitchen. Hopefully, as I write this account, I have finally separated myself from this mad subculture for the last time. During my time in the kitchen I lost the belief I had as a child, that adults generally treated each other

with respect and dignity. This was the last lesson of my childhood, or maybe the first lesson of my adulthood.

Jacob E. Glackman graduated from Saint Joseph's University in May, 2008. He plans on continuing to study English Literature in graduate school. After over 10 years in the kitchen, he now finds himself in a windowless office, parked in front of a computer, and with dead air all around him. The kitchen may not be the life for him, but neither is the office.

Octopus—Ride

| Catherine Grell

*Trip to, heave and ho, up down, to and fro. Alone at home, you hide.
Close our eyes to the octopus ride!*

“Larval Mass,” a member of the online communication blog Tonmo, wants a cuttlefish, so Mass is thinking about buying a pet octopus. But, she’s got a case of that common curiosity—ya know, the kind any prospective octopus buyer would run into: what’s the market’s latest species availability? What’s the life expectancy of these sea creatures? What’s the price tag—the stringed paper tied around some tentacle—(She’s not willing to spend a ton of money for initial set-up.)? And, come again—the possible pitfalls?

But, please pardon her ignorance—albeit the fact that she’s never before maintained a saltwater home—she knows quite a bit about octopus biology. What’s more: Mass is willing to put necessary time and effort into her emerging hobby.

“JJ” dishes out post number 34: “Bimac’s are probably one of the most common species for sale. They are not too expensive – around \$30 to \$50. You can expect them to live, if cared for, about 1 year—possibly a little longer if kept around 68 degrees Fahrenheit.”

“Pacific Blue,” is an expert when it comes to octopus breeding—I mean, he is blogging from Canada. Apparently, salt water chemistry is more complex than that of fresh water fish due to their anatomy. Maintenance of a saltwater tank can be relatively cheap—a simple canister under-gravel filter will do, but only if water changes are done 2–3 times a week. Blue advises Mass to go for the largest tank possible, with the least amount of fish.

“I would suggest spending \$20–\$40 and picking up a ‘Salt Water Fish For Dummies,’” he blogs. “The number one pitfall for beginners is over-stocking the tank before it has a chance to cycle. An octopus is a great pet.”

Next post: score! Mass got a connection—JJ let her in on some trade secrets, the octo-hook-up, if you will: search eBay and the classifieds—they offer great pusses for an aquarist with a budget. But, one thing the “octperts” forgot to fill Mass in on: the don’ts about species choosing. Mass has got to visit the Metafilter Community Weblog—otherwise, it may be too late for her—hey, ho, huff to a certain genus.

It's about the size of a golf ball. It is shockingly deadly. It has enough poison to kill 26 humans in minutes. If you see its blue rings, it may already be too late. You will stop breathing. You will go blind. And the only way you will survive it is through hours of artificial respiration and heart massage until the poison has worked its way out of your system. It is the blue-ringed octopus. Watch out Mass: This is *octo*-taboo in the making.

Thailand got the memo, but I guess they want to live 007 style (The sea creature makes a cameo appearance in the James Bond film "Octopussy."). The eight-tentacle beauty has emerged as a trend—the ping-pong pussy is more popular in Bangkok than beer pong drunks in Newark. Buyers are not frightened by the publicly-proclaimed warning notice—there remains no cure for their new pet's lethal venom. Thai poison is "so it" right now—it comes from the bottom of the sea floor. *Octo*-revolution, if you will: the up and coming secret agent Thai subculture vs. the prevailing public agent Thai authorities. The powers that be have allegedly summoned deadly blue-ring octopus owners to admit defeat; that is, to surrender their cephalopod over safety fears.

The man wins round two—a recent ban was imposed on sheltering the Madagascan hissing cockroach. Yet again, we see the Thai people's infatuation with Hollywood: the "Hissing roach" has become one of the most popular insects in pop media. In the 1975 movie "Bug," the roaches somehow amassed a divine power—they could set fires by rubbing their 8 legs together! Oh, and then, there aired that Cycle 6 episode of "America's Next Top Model." Modeling a fashion show for designer Vivienne Westwood, the women were instructed to accessorize—with gemmed hissers. Gina Choe had to outdo Jade Cole, her arch nemesis: What ever could she do? Better question: What did she do? The fashionista sealed her final pose at the end of the runway—with a roachy kiss (Sadly, The hisser didn't get any tongue action).

The cock's talents led it to become somewhat of an entrepreneur: In Sept. 2006, Six Flags Great America amused its park visitors, not with clown blow up animals, guess my weight games, roller casters or cotton candy, but with line-jumping privileges for all rides to anyone who consumed a squirming Madi-hissing-roach—without ketchup, salt, toast, whatever. Did the Halloween-themed Fright

Fest masterminds know a certain mite species lives on the 4–5 inch insect bumming off its host’s food? And what about the chompers—were they aware of what caused the *crickety crack crickety crack* echo. The trade off: *Gromphadorholaelaps schaeferi*—the mite species’ ridiculous scientific name that .25 percent of the population can correctly pronounce (if that)—ingestion for the long-line purging. What a deal, what a deal! Oh, and the prize of four free season passes for anyone who beat the previous world record—eating 36 cockroaches in 1 minute; that is, .60 cockroaches per second or approximately 2.7 inches of roach per second.

Thai people may be awed by the mite-cloaked roaches and the sky-hued halo cuttlefishes, but that’s the Asian trend. Europe has different ideals. Thousands and thousands of miles away from Bangkok laid Mark Vogel, 30, dead on his Dortmund, Germany apartment sofa. His body wasn’t fortunate enough to habitat Charlotte and her web. Instead, Vogel’s corpse lolls swathed in sticky spider webs and more than 200 arachnids, thousands of termites, heaping snakes and a sole gecko: pets now predators, thoughts now food. The poisonous frogs’ whereabouts unknown, the lizards roaming aimlessly, the boa constrictor crawling upstairs—other animals are number one.

No one, save his non-human roommates, was allowed to cross the threshold into his “jungle.” But neighbors need not cross the threshold—a horrendous stench exuded from Vogel’s “zoo.” Police arrived at the scene. The belief: “Bettina” murdered the man. Perhaps she was sick of being caged, perhaps she was jealous of the slithering roomie or perhaps she wanted to go back to her natural outdoor habitat.

Whatever the case, Bettina got her revenge in August 2007: it was her that administered the fatal black widow gnaw. Evidently, the widow led the creepy crawlies army—for one, possibly two, weeks, Bettina’s allies initiated a blitzkrieg on the human tenant’s corpse. Spiders emerged from his nose and mouth, lizards tore off large pieces of flesh, tarantulas and other bird-eating spiders munched on smaller skin slices. The world of reptiles, arachnids, amphibians and insects met at a common ground—they were vacationing Caribbean-style on the social hermit’s carcass.

Spiders have never been a man’s best friend. Did Vogel really

think he could turn the whole human social system into a bestial facsimile and make it out alive?

And, well, *geez*, I would assume he saw “Arachnophobia.” Bettina and he probably watched it on the same couch every night—with popcorn, pizza, flies and mosquitoes all delicately served on a spider-shaped food platter. News flash Vogel: the humans didn’t even survive in the fiction version. Did you think you were different; did you think she loved you? Well, the course of love never did run smooth. But, I mean, most tragedy ends up with suicide—think Romeo and Juliet. You, my friend, were murdered by a deceiving widow. She strung you into her web, and then laughed about it with her posse for approximately 12 days straight. Ah, at least her cousins cleaned the snot out of his nose.

Spiders sneak inside flesh openings—if insects amiss—they creep around human organs hunting for the perfect place to mate. Amphibians dine with slashed membrane. But, give them a break: felines, ursine, ungulates and lupines don’t gobble on humble pie either.

When kept in the wild, humans are less likely to become a bear’s breakfast. When exiled from their natural environment, pet owners are befit for an ideal banquet: raw arms, legs, fingers—yummy in the tummy. The “Berenstain Bears,” now they wouldn’t dare think to eat a human neighbor’s limb, but the family was fictional—boo. It is becoming increasingly popular to own bears as pets; trends indicate that grizzlies, American blacks, Asiatic blacks, spectacled and sun bears are “all the rage” right now—well, at least in comparison to the polars (White is “so last year”).

But—People, people—just for a moment, let’s put animal-fashion aside. The Captive Wild Animal Protection Coalition has documented multiple incidents of injury and escape that have resulted from bears being kept as pets: A two-year-old Ohioan boy was bitten and clawed by his grandfather’s pet black bear, an 8-year-old Oklahoman girl suffered a broken arm and other injuries when she tried to pet her neighbor’s 6-foot-tall, 300-pound pet black bear, a 600-pound housebound black bear kept in a 15 x 15 foot cage in Missouri gnawed and nearly severed the hand of a 6-year-old boy when he tried to pet it.

Well, that all sucks, and it sure as hell validates the tin man:

“Lions and tigers and bears—oh my!” And, “oh my” indeed. But—no, no—I’m not even trying to talk about *The Wizard of Oz* here. Think whimsically. Think Simba, Nala and Mufasa: ya know, those billionaire lions—well, at least if they existed or—better yet—at least if they were humans. Quadrupeds they be, but their mentalities paralleled that of the bipedal: the movie production carried on themes—human themes: the transformation of love, confusion, death and identity loss to hate, birth and selfhood. They purred; they cuddled; they cried. What’s more, the mammal royalty anticipated—no, they wanted, they needed—realization, and once they got it; that is, once Simba learned his uncle’s regicide plot, the cub anticipated—no, he wanted, he needed—that same expectation back.

Like all Disney productions, *The Lion King* ends happily. But, I’m not asking you to start sobbing tears of joy (But feel free to; I mean, everyone agrees that Disney’s works are so very deep—no, deeper than deep: they’re the deepest for sure). All I know is that there aren’t too many lion owners nowadays. It’s rather frustrating; you see this kick-ass movie about these golden-eyed, yellow felons, but you can’t seem to ever get your hands on one! Simbas are as rare as a frat-boy staying sober and eating celery sticks while watching *The Notebook* on a Friday night.

But long before the lion’s tale hit theatres, we had *The Jungle Book* and Shere Khan—the tiger who arrogantly and aggressively believes he embodies the divine right to rise as lord of the jungle. No one—albeit the cowardly and despised jackal—agrees with him. Feeding time: like any other predatory feline, Khan wants to gorge into some raw meat. Although the tiger fails at his attempt to capture a “human cub,” he succeeds in separating the human baby from his kind. Furious at losing his meal, Khan avows to abduct the child—now living amid a world foreign to humanity—in order to revengefully sink his teeth into the flesh that hoodwinked.

And, man oh man does Khan love killing humans; and, usually, he’s not murdering with an appetite. It’s the tiger’s number one hobby—soft tissue charges him with energy. Can’t he just chug a Red Bull?

The Jungle Book portrays tigers as malicious human-slaying carnivores. Khan needs some prophetic therapy; he needs a teacher

that plays chess instead of skin slice tic-tac-toe—what he needs is a lion!

Khan, a wicked tiger by nature, meets with Simba. The session ends within 5 minutes: Khan got caught in the whirlpool, spun out of his tree-bark sofa. Within 30 seconds, he slashed more meat than an obsessive compulsive pork-cutting butcher could knife in 3 days. Seven minutes prior Khan was licking Simba's fur. Gosh, tigers are unpredictable.

But—it's for damn sure—humans are just as random. Philip Bethge, in his article "Trespassers Will Be Eaten," states statistics which reveal that eccentric private citizens in the United States own more tigers than exist in the wild worldwide.

"Welcome to America, the land of predator," Bethge says. "There are more tigers living in the United States than anywhere else in the world. Estimates range from 10,000 to 15,000 animals. By comparison, experts believe that there are at most 7,000 tigers living in the wild worldwide. According to the International Fund for Animal Welfare, five people have been killed by big cats since 2003 in the US alone. More than 40 others have been injured, some severely. In many cases it is the supposed cat experts who become victims."

A sign on the heavy metal gate of Steven Sipek's Florida estate says it all: "Beware of Dogs?" —Ah, wishful thinking—but, no: "Trespassers will be eaten." I can picture that sign hanging on the wall of some college kid's dorm, but Sipek's for real. The 64-year-old actor, who once played Tarzan, transformed his entire house into a cage for big cats.

But, the man doesn't just own tigers as pets—he literally lives, sleeps and cuddles with them—*umm, come again?* Well, in his eyes, the species saved his life: After a lion chained to his arm pulled him out of a burning film set, he knew God specifically chose him to rise as lord of a big cat manor.

"Touching a tiger is like touching the face of God," says Sipek.

Since Sipek's Great Awakening, he has rescued over 100 big cats from cage life—and, what a guy, the jungle king even lets them use the pool.

Amid Sipek's handiwork in West Palm Beach, Robert Baudy works in Central Hill; in a fashion similar to Sipek, Baudy also

imparts heavy surges of God-driven adrenaline to empathizers. The 83-year-old has spent the past 30 years of his life rearing thousands of big cats on “Savage Kingdom”—his appropriately dubbed Central Hill, Florida farm. Currently, Baudy owns 17 big cats and two pregnant tigers. But not only is the cultivator raising tigers, lions, pumas and leopards—he’s been selling them too. Gloria Johnson, 51, bought her one-and-a-half-year-old white tiger Casanova from Baudy for a special price of \$5,000 (A white baby tiger, Johnson says, normally goes for \$15,000.)

But this time, Baudy won’t be selling the baby tigers. His employee Vincent Lowe, 49, was pinned to the ground when a 500-pound tiger crashed through the brittle wire of its cage. Another broken neck case, and although Baudy considers the death of Lowe as little more than a workplace accident, consequences resulted: the big game hunter has lost his license.

This way of life, invigorated by a peculiar blend of adrenaline, dried feline piss and the somewhat bitter aroma of the fresh protein tigers devour in bulk day after day, prevails in Florida. But, big cat-seekers, don’t you worry: there is no need to pack up and move just yet—pet tigers dwell in homes across the country—take North Carolina, for example.

A ten-year-old boy was chilling with his Aunt and Uncle’s pet tiger—nothing unusual. And *then*—a broken neck, through some industrial accident. The tiger dragged the boy under the chain link fence that made up part of the tiger’s cage in the backyard of its owners’ home. *A gosh, golly, gee wiz* reaction from the aunt and uncle: Newsobserver.com reported the family’s surprise to the incident—their tiger “wasn’t vicious.”

Tigers are stale jokes for others—too typical, too boring. Moreover, carnivores eat you—herbivores will not. You want an animal you can bond with, right? Well, if you’re into spitting, a camel may be the optimum pet of choice. On her 60th birthday, an Australian woman, because of her love for exotic pets, unwrapped a moving present: A pet camel! Yippee! They were best buddies—well, at least until the camel realized he was an official pet. You see, young camels are not normally aggressive but can become more threatening if treated and raised as pets. The friendship ended, and the woman apparently became the object of the male camel’s desire.

It knocked her to the ground, lay on top of her and displayed what the police delicately described as possible mating behavior. The camel wanted sex; she wouldn't have it, so the pet killed her—an atypical rape case indeed.

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A Small Piece of Pavement

| C. M. Griffin

Hoboken has changed so much since we jerked around there. I guess some people might not notice the difference in the old neighborhood. But I do. It's just not the same anymore. It's not that you can tell from the buildings—those old brownstones will probably outlast civilization itself. No, they look just about the same as they did when they were built, about the same as when you and I ran these streets and played stick ball and the fire hydrant was home plate, and the yard across the way was a single, the second story a double, all the way on up. Remember that. You and Tommy used to slam it up there every time. Boom, HOME RUN. Boom, HOME RUN. One after another. Then I'd get so pissed because you threw those goddam curve balls that I couldn't hit. But you could tell it's changed now because the kids aren't out. They should be out. It's summer and all.

Now the yuppies walk down the street with fancy coffee cups from fancy coffee shops. You think they go to the local digs. Hell no. They're always walking these dogs, too, that look like they just came from that TV show, the one with all the fancy dogs. The chicks got manicured hands, arms crawling out of designer sweats. It takes money to look like you just rolled out of bed and headed down the corner for a paper. Back in our day, though, that's what people actually did: it was muumuus instead of the sweats, those blue coffee cups with the columns from Donna's, where they gave you two sugars and cream when you said "regular" and more cream when you said "light." Well, such is life and all that.

I took the old route to the courts last Saturday morning, down around the corner by Jimmy's old place. I passed the house where they used to grow those big-ass sun flowers in the summer, big like a human head and that kind of dirty yellow—like canaries in the mine kind of yellow: bright but sooty. The owners must be dead now, or quit growing the things, 'cause they weren't there. It's too bad. They always made me smirk as they sat there, curiously out of place sandwiched between a wrought-iron fence and a brick building. It's still brick pavers along that stretch, though. It's nice. It still gave me the feeling that I had left the city and headed somewhere else. Somewhere quieter and cleaner, mostly. Maybe with the sunflowers,

you got the idea that you had left the city behind, if only for a moment.

The corner lot where that old guy had that garden, that's gone too. It's a parking lot now. It always was the oddest thing to have a garden in the middle of a bunch of concrete. Out in the open no less. Come to think of it, it would have been a pretty neighborhood if you could have kept the streets clean with soap and water. It's more like that now, but without the garden and the flowers so it doesn't seem to matter anymore. It's funny how those things separated our neighborhood from all the others and made it kind of different. But I guess every one feels that way about the place they grew up.

I turned right on to Jimmy's block. I stopped bouncing my old leather ball up and down even though my fingers were just warming up, just starting to blacken in the creases and get that glazed sheen. It was quiet, just like it used to be. Sometimes that street was so still I felt like I was walking down the aisle of a church. The big kind. The trees were pillars and their leaves the vaulted ceiling. The shade was always sort of variegated, mottled with light, just like if it was sifting through stained-glass scenes of Bible life. It's like the sun never really reached the street and sidewalk, never burned the lethargy of last night, as if the people weren't ready to be bothered with the din of normal city life. It's still like that, Jimmy's block, demanding quiet.

I passed his house—225—and gave a little nod as I went by. Right where I busted my arm back in sixth grade when you wouldn't pass me the ball and I chased you around until I bit it on the pipe fitting that stuck up from the concrete. Who could've known we'd still be friends. It seems so long ago now. Even if it never has rightly healed, I forgive you, anyway. There were other good times.

Just like those summers decades back, I got to the courts before almost everyone. I tightened my laces and hit a few lay ups in honor of you, then settled back into my groove from the outside. I wish I could say that it was pretty, but it wasn't. I guess it makes it that much harder, trying to come back to something knowing you used to be good. It's easier to suck at something new: you have an excuse. Coming back though, even after more than ten years, it hurts deep down, because you know what you should be doing but just can't

seem to make anything happen. Once it was easy and now it isn't. That's what hurt the most I think—having been good. Now, I'm just that over-weight, old white guy with jacked up sneakers that have been worn far too long.

Other players started coming on the court and shooting with me, all decked out in their jump suits and bright blue and white crisp sneakers like we once wore. They bullshitted together and got ready to settle into a morning of play just like when we knew most of the guys out there and they would say what's up to us. Back then we were a part of them—they knew we were two of the white kids who could hoop it up a little. They didn't know me anymore, but asked me if I wanted to run anyway 'cause they had ten, and a game, with me. I just wanted to feel the leather get warm under my fingertips and feel the love again. I needed to feel a part of something and I didn't care if it felt a part of me. That's the beauty of pick-up games. It's like they're one of the last community events, the final places where strangers can come together and get a groove on no matter what they do in the hot summer nights. They just arrive, by ones and twos, onto a concrete slab, and share the elation of winning and the sorrow of harsh defeat. Then they leave it there and the sweat and afternoon rain wash it away so that the next time is fresh and clean again.

The high fences still hold the court and the ball in and shield the players from the spectators, those who are not there to lay it down. The fences contain the contestants whose cries of triumph and frustration carry over and through the enclosure and into the park's paths and the city's streets. (There is still that warm-up half-court to the side, in from the street a little, where the park's trees hang over). The backboards are still dull metal and the rims a little off from too many dunks; the nets have been stripped since back when. Even the best of them sail quietly through the hoop's opening, thudding to the ground, and play is continued without the flashing lights or cheers of the arena. There is no instant replay here. For those that come, it is about being there. Winning is best because you hold the court. That is the prize. Forget the bullshit you see on TV.

Running back and forth, sweating it out, I forgot about the old days. I forgot about everything except the next pass, the jostling for a rebound; I forgot about my knee and the slow red trickle

that accumulated at the top of my white sock and crusted there. Everything was the game. I ran the entire morning, wet and fatigued, sitting out when we lost. I made my share, not like then, but enough. I went to play, and remember what it was like to play for its own sake, not to call fouls and jump balls like they did in my high school and college days. I sweated out everything except a love of playing it out on a morning and leaving it there on the court—just like we used to do.

I went back to our roots that day, to the black top where the true champions of the game come. This is where the multitudes come to participate; this is where the spectator becomes a player—if only of a weekend morning and if only for a few hours. The triumphs here seem greater because they are an end, not a means. There is no need or want of trophies and banners, only to be able to walk away, limping and sore: and to come back again next Saturday.

The afternoon games I left to others, younger ones who slept in and were ready to come to the game themselves. More would follow in the evening. When the heat once again began to dissipate and the court lights came on these newcomers would trample the blood and sweat of those who of us who came before. But these games were not my games. I crossed the street, looking on from behind a chain link fence as this next batch of giants fought over a small piece of pavement in the middle of a hot and humid cityscape.

Spanish Fiasco

| Marcy Jordan

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. I always do this! Where did the time go? Didn't I just get home from school? I couldn't have possibly wasted over eight hours. All I did was play several hundred games of Snood, create world's greatest amusement park in RollerCoaster Tycoon, properly stalk everyone possible on Facebook, put up a witty away message on AIM, and try my hand at Mindsweeper (which, believe it or not, there is a method to, not just random, haphazard clickings of the mouse). There is no way that could've taken that long. I grabbed my backpack, gutted it out of all my notebooks and loose handouts, and started to throw in clothes . . .

I was once told I was an arrogant New Yorker. But I was also told this by some girl from Boston who, in the same conversation tried to tell me the A, B, C's of why the Red Sox are better than the Yankees, so clearly her opinion had no validity whatsoever. Nonetheless, I'm just going to toy with the idea for a second, just for argument's sake, that maybe New York City isn't the greatest place on earth (Sorry Barnum, sorry Bailey) and producer of all things superior (like pizza, bagels and any other object, animate or inanimate). But if there's one thing you gotta give me, it's that being born and raised on the Lower East Side will make you street smart, hands down. There's definitely no arguing with that. And for all you who don't know where that is (Sigh), go watch *RENT*. I mean, the movie is supposed to take place some years ago, so there are a few less crack heads nowadays and the number of HIV-positive individuals breaking out into song and dance at the point of a crucial word in a conversation, like "love," "money" or "the" has dwindled down to about one or two. But you'll get the gist of it. Bottom line, though, the area is tough. I didn't hang outside by myself until I was about fifteen, but even so, I didn't hang out in my neighborhood, period. The unwritten rule with my parents was I could be anywhere else—I wasn't to be in LES unless I was just passing through, keeping my head down and avoiding eye contact, just trying to make it to the cleaner cement on the other side.

Don't do it, a watched pot doesn't boil. After I had run the six blocks

to the train station and was still feverishly panting on the platform, I was fighting the urge to walk to the edge, peer anxiously into the tunnel, awaiting the glorious sight of two headlights. Reason lost, and I stepped to the edge and stared down into the helplessly dark tunnel. Come on, come on, come on! I thought. Molly and Emily are gonna kill me if I don't get there like . . . I looked at my watch . . . five minutes ago. And that's when I started pacing. Back and forth, back and forth, to the ledge and back to the wall, several hundred times. At least! And let me tell you, putting emphasis on time is a sure way to stick out in Spain because it's just not important. Hell, they still siesta, which basically means the entire country shuts down and sleeps, which if it wasn't past 11:00 at night, I would've thought had happened here in the train station. I eventually took off my backpack, which had me looking like Quasi Modo, and I propped it up against the wall and sat on it, situating my purse full of all the necessities on my lap. That's when I noticed the handful of Spaniards staring at me a few feet away. They were standing loosely together, which made me think they didn't really know each other at all, but rather were huddling together for protection from this weird pacing animal . . . clearly American.

The first lesson we got on being street smart came from a student who had just come back from studying abroad in Madrid, and she was telling us future Madrileños that we could never be too careful. She went through some long-winded story that ended with her saying "and then, like, we look down and like, my whole entire hobo bag was gone. Like, gone. And, you know, it's like this big, white bag, and like, someone just . . . took it!" Now, my first reaction was no shit! Because if you, like, have no like street smarts, and like, can't even keep your eyes on your purse, like, you deserve to have it taken from you! Her story elicited zero sympathy from me, because really, there's no excuse for not watching your stuff.

Not everyone is street smart. I learned this the hard way. But I was really shocked when I first discovered this. *You mean you wear both of your headphones when you're walking in the street? What if someone is quickly approaching, how the hell would you hear them? Wait, your bag really doesn't have a zipper? What if you're on the L train, it's packed, and you've got generic creeper, that I always mentally call Stu, considering whether to steal your wallet at the third avenue stop or Union*

Square? What the hell do you mean you don't have eyes on the back of your head?!

I felt cursed to be on a trip with Suburbanites, kids who I pitied before something even happened to them because I *knew* something would happen to them. The way they walked with their heads in the clouds, hell, I would pick them out from a crowd and probably rob them too.

I probably wouldn't have thought that if I knew that at that very second that I was thinking that, standing in the bus station, waiting to take my overnight trip to Barcelona, someone was stalking *me* out.

Here is the short but bittersweet version of what happened, or at least what I have concluded must have happened. I had to use the bathroom, I placed my backpack down, then my purse on top of everyone's belongings in plain sight, went to the bathroom, came back, heard two of my friends murmuring about some weirdo asking if they needed a taxi, went to reach for my purse . . . and it was gone.

Let me tell you, that disbelief is fuel. Fuel for the killing machine you start to hulk into once the anger devours those initial feelings of utter confusion and you know, you just *know*, that the guy is somewhere in the bathroom stall, holding your purse hostage, tossing out unnecessary tampons but pocketing the brand new video iPod (your first ever, which is just another crime in itself, since you were the last kid on, oh *Earth*, to get one). At least this is what I accepted as fact when I blindly pushed past my friends, who were still doing the "but what? Huh? How?" dance around their stuff, which, if you haven't seen it, looks an awful lot like the "let's protect our bags so we don't end up like this poor girl!" dance (bastards . . .). I walked furiously, looking up in vain for a sign that said "bathrooms," realized I had to look for the damn word in Spanish, turned back around, and walked into the men's *aseos*.

I know what you're thinking, which maybe I should've, but I was too busy contemplating some great one-liner to spit at the guy once I retrieved my purse, still intact: this guy most likely has some kind of weapon on him and/or has no qualms with beating the shit out of a girl. But, you don't have to worry about that because, aside from the gazillion fights I've been in with my siblings, I won the only real fight I've ever gotten into. I'm not sure whether this is to my benefit or not to mention, but it was against this mentally handicapped kid

back in elementary school. Apparently, to all the witnesses in the schoolyard, he accidentally knocked into me but I hold firm that he pushed me, which I did to him a couple of times until his student aid came over and pulled me away. I mean, if they don't defend themselves, that still counts as a fight though, right?

Regardless, I was fuming. I was on a mission. I was going to prove to everyone that you just don't mess with me. So I stalked into the bathroom, and I got smacked in the face. Hard. The rancid smell of . . . *piss* almost knocked me off my feet, and for two split seconds I thought *oh well, I tried*. To say the bathroom was filthy would be putting it nicely. But the smell was even worse, and I could tell that if I were in there another thirty seconds, I would start to gag. But as the stench started to sting my eyelids and burn through my nostrils, I put one foot in front of the other and was on the hunt once again.

There were five stalls. The first three were wide open, and the fourth was as well, except it had no choice since the whole door was missing. But the fifth stall was ominously closed and I felt my breath catch in my throat. My heartbeat was slamming against my rib cage, forcing me to feel its warning in any and every part of my body. But I felt possessed, and I knew that I would never forgive myself if I didn't at least try to do something to get my purse back. So, with the symphony of flies buzzing all around the toilets, and the filthy urinals that were precariously holding on to the wall for dear life, as if one more drop of urine would send it crashing to the floor, I took one step cautiously forward, another, and then a few more until I was standing in front of the stall. I felt my body bristle with renewed courage and I pushed open the door.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing, but another shit-stained toilet. The door slammed against the wall and bounced back shut. I kicked it open again with my sneaker, unable to believe that there wasn't some guy atop the toilet, cradling my purse with a guilty look on his face. I wasn't going to beat somebody up. I wasn't going to retrieve my purse. It was over.

I don't know when the realization actually hits a person, but once it does, it's almost as if one has had the wind knocked out of them and there's no hope of ever having another easy breath again. I had to succumb to the fact that my purse was, in fact, gone. And

by gone, I mean never to be seen again. I got the wild idea in my head that maybe it was stashed in a garbage can somewhere, maybe at least just the purse, but I was void of hope. I felt my knees dissolve and I knew that in .2 seconds my face would hit the floor. Luckily, so did Pedro, who was the security guard that jogged over from his post by the escalators and took my arm in his hand. He was talking to me, and even though at the time I couldn't get my brain together to translate his words, the look of panic and sorrow on his face was international. I knew that look from my parents when I would scrape my knee as a girl, lose a softball game, wasn't accepted to LaGuardia High School. And that's when I knew it was okay to cry. My entire face crumbled and I felt all of my features collapse into distorted shapes as I was drenched in my own tears. Pedro didn't even see it coming. Somehow, between my hiccups and blubbering he pieced together what had happened, even though I knew my conjugations were all over the place, and I was using the Puerto Rican word for purse, which only meant wallet in Spain. So, of course, he starts telling me it could've been worse, the guy could've made off with my whole purse, he finishes with a laugh. And that's when I started wailing, mixing between Spanish and English because my brain was exhausted. The utter frustration of trying to express myself was crippling. Nobody is ever eloquent in a time of mass hysteria, so imagine trying to do it in another language. Yes, yes, he *did* make off with my whole bag! I motioned with my hands, *sí*, my purse! I had tuned him out by this point, but I understood the silent "oh" he made with his mouth. He launched into the whole at-least-you-weren't-hurt speech, which is really what anyone ever says in a time like that (and it is something to be grateful for), but at the time I thought it the feeblest attempts to make me see the light, the wonderful advantage I had overlooked in the midst of having lost almost everything necessary to maintain this trip.

As if Pedro *Piss-Me-Off* wasn't bad enough, another security guard came over that could've actually made a better career out of being a Charo look alike. Because, for starters, she flat out said "*son cosas que pasan*," which loosely translates into "Shit happens." And as I stood there, tears still streaming down my face, I found myself wondering how she could put on a uniform and a badge in the morning, followed with neon pink lipstick on her bulbous

lips, silvery glitter over her eyelids and up to her eyebrows, and a sequined butterfly clip to hold up her large, frizzy, #35 blonde-in-a-box hair. Don't they have rules on your appearance, some clause about maintaining a professional exterior, along with your demeanor?

So here's the damage: my favorite (and only) purse, my brand new video iPod, my sister's digital camera, my monthly train pass including metro I.D. card, international cell phone, my new wallet with over 200 euros, my credit and debit card, my international student I.D. card, my bus ticket to Barcelona and my brand new book from my best friend. Oh yeah, and a Granny Smith apple. Some quick calculating once I got home after one in the morning, scared the crap out of my señora, and cried for the hundredth time, I figured out I was over 1000 dollars in the hole. The kicker? I wasn't even two weeks into my trip. But as I sat numbly on my bed and considered whether I should just jump out my five story window, something neon-green caught my eye. I yanked open my desk drawer and saw my passport glaring up at me, and I had never been so happy to flip it open and see my heinous photo grinning back at me.

I remember taking that photo, in the back of the Walgreen's on Union Square. The guy who snapped the photo told me I looked like I had slept with a hanger in my mouth, and I remember because I couldn't believe I was going to study abroad. I had never left the country, and the idea that I was going to actually live in Spain for four and a half months had been unfathomable. And yet, there I was, sitting on my Spanish bed, cursing everything to do with the whole damn country and wondering how much it would really hurt me to take a leave of absence for the semester.

I'm not going to sit here and tell you I had some kind of epiphany, that God parted the clouds, smiled, waved, and told me it would be smooth sailing from there on out. If there's one thing I learned from the trip, it was that nothing is ever guaranteed; there's no such thing as a sure thing. The one thing that I relied on, the fact that I was a New Yorker and would coast through the trip unharmed, had been ruptured. So I convinced myself of two things—one, that the very next day I was going to purchase one of those dorky under-the-clothing money belts and that two, I'd have my

mom send some money so I'd actually have something to put into it. And as much as I wanted to point my finger and blame my non street smart friends, I couldn't. As I learned the hard way, there's really no excuse for not watching your stuff.

Marcy Jordan is a recent college graduate, racing back to her one true love—New York City. She loves writing, both fiction and non-fiction, and peppers her work with her bizarre experiences and dry humor. Spanish Fiasco was written for a non-Fiction Workshop at Marist College.

Hat

| Kurtis B. King

The grey-before-his-time store clerk glared at me from beneath his unkempt brow, but my eyes were transfixed by my own image in the full-length mirror. I postured for my own amusement. Oblivious. Fingering my wallet through a hole in my jeans, I looked past my disheveled appearance. Past my Dead Kennedys T-shirt and the dog chain secured around my neck with a brass luggage lock. I hid, mysterious beneath a new hat brim. I was a Goodfella, on the lam from the Untouchables. Damn, I looked good.

The hat was medium grey wool and had a black grosgrain band holding an absurd collection of pheasant and fake red feathers in place on the left side. Matt and Danny had lost patience and retired to a prime girl-watching bench in the causeway of the East Ridge Mall. I stood with the brim snapped down over my forehead and the crown cocked slightly to the right. I could not get over this fedora—a Dorfman Pacific. I pinched the crown and my index finger dipped into the posh felt. A long slow breath escaped me as I placed the treasure back on the rack.

My high school buddies and I had made the two hundred mile trip from Riverton to Casper, Wyoming, in search of culture—and so I could purchase the hat I had seen weeks earlier. The fedora I could not forget. This time I had the thirty dollars. Still, I was hesitant. This was a two-CD or hamburgers-for-a-month type of decision. This hat meant sacrifice.

The clerk grew impatient: the hat and I had burned nearly a half hour of his time. “Are ya gonna buy it or just dirty it up?” he queried disdainfully.

I turned my eyes to the floor and then toward the door. My friends had abandoned their perch. I knew I had to locate them or I would be left to find my own ride home.

As I look at that hat now—its fibers worn by years of weather—I finally understand what made me buy my first *real* hat: Love. The truth is I am infatuated with hats because I saw my father wear so many. And I loved that about him (I still do).

Just before I reached driving age, I remember my father standing near the front door, a battered Stanley coffee thermos in hand and

a desert-sand leather jacket tucked beneath his arm. He pulled his Pendleton hat low in an act of equanimity, but could not hide his frustration. He waited. My brother and I were perpetually tardy. On those mornings we were all headed to the same place: high school. The same school my brother and I considered a dungeon, must have looked much different to my father. I practically wore a dunce cap to school each day, but my father wore a dark green hat that made him look like a wildlife biologist (or conservationist). He was always a careful student of the natural world, but when he removed his hat and entered through the doorway of Riverton High, he was a teacher.

My father never stopped teaching. He would arrive home after the school day, shuffle open the sliding doors of the entryway closet, remove his hat, and neatly place it next to the others out of reach on the top shelf. “Never wear a hat indoors,” he lectured me. “It’s rude and disrespectful.” Many of my first lessons in chivalry were delivered in this manner, passing from one point to another, my father on his way to the next task. I did not realize it at the time, but his stoic lessons would form the basis for what I consider my greatest character traits: courtesy, loyalty and honor. Each time I tip my favorite grey fedora to a woman on the street or take my hat off before entering a classroom, I think of my father.

I can still see my father’s face shaded by the brim of a dingy fieldwork hat—stained with summer sweat—on our numerous expeditions to Sinks Canyon and Worthen Lake. We clunked along in his ‘73 Chevy three-quarter-ton truck, up narrow canyon roads in search of plant specimens for his advanced biology class. Aaron, the youngest brother, occupied the single butt-cheek middle of the beltless bench seat while Devon and I fought to be near the window.

My brothers and I were stair steps, both in age—two years apart—and hat size. I held my favorite Michigan Wolverines hat secure with one hand as I dog-leaned out the window, straining for a glimpse of Wind River wildlife. We were eager and full of wonder. Our questions were limitless and my father had an answer for every one. My brothers and I were students, his students, and the great blue dome of canyon sky was the ceiling of our endless classroom.

My role as eldest brother required poise. I acted cool, calm. I stood back while my brothers splashed in the creek, their hands

hunting through the brisk mountain water for slimy substances and exciting creatures. The flash of a trout or the rattle of a snake often betrayed my façade: my eyes widened in amazement. Fortunately, my hat could be counted on for cool. I simply pulled the brim down low and hoped the shine in my eyes would not escape the shadow. My father knew my game. It was the excitement I saw in his face that helped me to realize it was okay to show mine. Hats could be useful for hiding emotions, but my father taught me that joy, that an interest in life, should never be concealed.

My father has a hat for every purpose: wide brims for work, and leather Denver Broncos cap for the weekend sun. My hat is mostly for winter weather. On the coldest days, I pull the warm wool felt down near the crests of my ears. Sometimes, while I struggle to muscle the night's snow off my car or chisel a layer of ice from the windshield, I think of how much colder I would be if it were not for my hat.

I have committed the advice of my father to heart. He used to tell me, "90 percent of your body-heat escapes through the head, but yours is all there, locked in, because you are smart enough to wear a hat." My father's counsel has never let me down. Never left me stranded in the cold without a hat.

The image in that mall mirror is still lodged in my mind. I carry it with me each time I don my favorite grey fedora. I have been accused of trying to look older, of trying to resurrect a lost style, but I don't think about those things. I am not interested in fashion. I check my reflection in puddles and store windows and the sight of my hat transforms me. My hat reminds me to straighten my back and lift my chin. In that hat I am electric. Dignified. I bounce with the confidence and pride typically reserved for the vain. I truly feel special beneath the hat I nearly left on the rack.

I now know why I was hesitant to buy the hat. It wasn't the money, or concern for the way others would view me; it was the incredible expectations I unconsciously associated with the hat. I thought I merely wanted to look like my heroes, but that hat meant more to me than I was willing to admit. The hat meant achievement, meant status; meant that I was ready to live up to the high bar set by my father. In that hat I was not like Charlie Parker or Frank Sinatra, I was like my father.

My father taught me what it means to be respected, to work hard and earn my way through life. But mostly what it takes to be a great father.

Now I am waiting like my father at the front door. Poised and confident under my grey fedora. The birth of my first child is only months away. And I posture in my hat. I am my father. Soon my son will be old enough to wait for me at the front door. I hope he will watch—the way I watched my father—as I carefully place my hat just out of reach.

My Father's Hands

| Joseph Marsico

Twilight comes late in mid-August. The last light lingers and flares up over the dimming horizon in the west. My brothers and I complain that we're being put to bed already. We can still hear the cries of older kids playing in their yards, neighbors riding their bikes up and down the sidewalk, people tossing a baseball in the park across the street, but we've been snatched out of the mild night and tucked into our dusk-lit bedroom. Nick pleads, Mikey sulks, and I curl up and pout and suck my thumb.

Mom draws the blinds and shuts out the dying sunlight of the evening. She is exasperated, exhausted, totally spent after a day at home with three little boys. We're left silent in our shadowy attic room, and I can hear my brothers breathing softly in their beds in the corners of the room opposite me. Oily black shapes float across the walls as a streetlight outside ignites to replace the fallen sun. My eyelids quiver and fall shut.

They shoot open when Dad's pickup truck rolls into the driveway, its old engine groaning and sputtering. We see the headlights only as a muted glow from our spot on the second floor, but it's enough for us all to sit up, rub our tired eyes, and then throw off the blankets and dash from the dark room to make for the stairs. We take two steps at a time, the three of us pushing each other aside and racing to meet him at the door.

Mom scolds us for leaving our beds, but her protest is futile in the face of three wound-up boys celebrating the return of their hero. We're there in the living room to pull at his arm and steal his lunchbox away the moment the storm door swings open. He lifts one of his heavy, broad-fingered hands and pats me on the head, and he ushers us back upstairs so he can have a late dinner and read the paper.

Early in June, the sky is mercilessly barren of clouds and the browning earth is scorched. Though the sun nears the western end of its day-long transit, there's still ample light and ample heat. Nick and I wrestle in an empty four-foot swimming pool that's just been erected in our backyard. We play around for a while, but he hits me too hard, probably accidentally, and I go after him with all my fury.

I tackle my older brother to the blue plastic-lined pool floor and pummel him in the ribs as he covers his face.

The back of the garage forms one boundary of the closed-in yard, and my dad is in the garage putting his tools away when he hears us. He comes out. His navy T-shirt drips with sweat after he spent the ninety-degree day setting up a new swimming pool for his three sons. “What the hell’re ya doin’?” he shouts in his incredible, booming, New York-accented voice.

I freeze. Nick gets a last free punch and then does the same. “He hit me first!” I shout, probably looking every bit the proverbial deer in the headlights, terrified that I might be thought the instigator.

Dad looks around for the hose, and he finds it bunched next to the garage door. In a single motion, he pulls the nozzle out of the tangle, aims it over the lip of the pool, and spins the rusty wheel on the spigot with one of his giant paws. The hose coughs and spits out a burst of cold mist before it starts to drip. In a moment it begins to spill a clear rope of water onto the floor. “I swear t’Christ,” he hollers, “get the Hell outta the pool now or you two can drown for all I care.” I don’t know how he can scream so loud, but I witness again how his voice can actually cause physical pain and nearly bursts my eardrums, so I shoot up, pull Nick to his feet, and we scamper up the ladder and out of the pool.

“God dammit,” he says to himself as we scuttle past him to the garage. He swipes at me half-heartedly with his free hand, but I dodge and quickly follow Nick out of there. “Bustin’ my ass six days a week for these goddamn kids, and then I bust my ass on Sunday so they can have a goddamn swimmin’ pool, and all they do is fight. Boy, I’ll tell ya . . .” He trails off, muttering something to himself, but I can catch a remnant of his voice as I escape through the garage—even his muttering is loud.

It’s Friday night and, suddenly, my cell phone lights up and vibrates itself right off the arm of the sofa. The black room, formerly illuminated only by the flashing TV screen, becomes partially revealed as my phone throws out a disc of blue light from its spot on the carpet. I grab the phone and answer. “OK, be out in a second,” I say, before stuffing my feet into my sneakers, turning off the TV, and bounding out of my room and down the stairs.

When I'm in the kitchen grabbing a bottle of Gatorade from the fridge, Dad sees me from the living room. I'd figured he was still at work, because I didn't hear him come in. Like most days, I probably wouldn't have seen him at all if I didn't catch him in the short moment between his return from work and his nightly, to-the-minute 11 o'clock bedtime.

He's got one leg crossed over the other, newspaper in hand, navy undershirt stained at the neck and the armpits, Dickies and boots still on after coming home from the warehouse. He hears me and looks up over the rim of his reading glasses. "Where ya goin'?"

"Just to a movie," I say.

"Who with?"

"Andrew's driving, plus Jesse, Dylan, and I dunno who else."

"Need money?"

I'm reminded to grab my wallet off the counter. I don't have my license yet, so I just pull a couple bills out and stuff them in my pocket and throw the black wallet back in its spot. "Nah, I think I got it."

He folds the newspaper and shifts to reach his wallet in his right back pocket. "Here, how much ya need?" he asks.

"Don't worry," I insist, "I got it. Just got paid yesterday."

"Buy popcorn or something," he says, plucking a ten out of the weathered billfold in a careful motion that is inconsistent with his thick, browned hands.

"Yeah, like ten is enough to buy popcorn at a movie theater," I joke.

"Here, take twenty," he offers.

"No, Dad, I was just kidding." There's a car horn from outside. "Gotta go, see ya later."

"Alright," he says, but I'm already out the door.

I feel like I never *knew* my dad until I was well into my teenage years. Looking back before then, I seem to have only known him as a member of some simplified archetype. In my childhood he was a hero, arriving home triumphantly from work to rescue his three sons from their tyrannical mother who—gasp!—put them to bed at a reasonable hour. As I grew and more frequently stepped out of

line, he was the necessary villain, enforcing the house rules when Mom's kind voice and always-loving disposition did not allow her to. Finally, when my brothers and I were well into adolescence and we were mature enough to act with even the barest forethought, his role as enforcer became obsolete; when we did mess up, he usually didn't even hear about it—either we were out with friends or he was at work.

Sure, he was no stranger, and he was hardly a disinterested father. We all had our relationships with him. Nick was his weekend partner, spending six or seven Fridays and Saturdays every fall at Rutgers Stadium for football games. Mikey found his biggest fan for his burgeoning love of art, and Dad was even a sometimes-patron, throwing my little brother a few dollars here and there to sketch something he wanted to see. I found a kindred spirit when I became something of a wrestling star in high school (though, to be fair, I went to a tiny high school, and stardom is relative); my dad scanned the paper nightly and picked out scores and match outcomes to show me. "I keep seeing this kid winning matches," he'd tell me, one of his chubby, dirty-nailed fingers pointing at a tiny black squiggle squeezed into a block of text in the sports section. "You don't wrestle his school during the season, but you might see him in the districts or the regions." Or, "This kid's team comes to Emerson next month, you better get off your ass and start taking practice seriously." He'd add with impish smile—always funny to see on his deep-lined, scruffy face—"Or you better hope he breaks his leg or something."

He was never overbearing, and he was rarely even especially vocal, but I never questioned his love for my brothers and me. Even though, to this day, I have never heard those three words. I'm perfectly happy with it this way, I'm sure—I can't imagine how I would or should react if he spontaneously said it. When I was on my back for a month with mono in senior year, or nearly dead years earlier with meningitis, he didn't even approach the words; when I was lucky to win the district wrestling tournament only weeks after recovering from the former illness, he didn't make any sort of sentimental gesture. When I'm sick, it's always been "How ya feelin', Bud?" If I won a match, only "Good win, Bud." His encouraging words are rare and cautiously chosen, but their significance is so

much deeper to my ears. I've settled on a simple reality: they are his careful, discreet way of saying I Love You.

Mom is his opposite, and I can't remember a day that's gone by when she hasn't told my brothers and I how special we are to her. So, I understand why she can't appreciate her husband's method. "Your father loves you, you know," she's told me. "And he's proud of you."

Of course I know. Maybe I was too starry-eyed a little boy to recognize that Dad was more than some red-caped superhero. Maybe I was too bratty a child to recognize that he was more than a tyrant set on punishing my brothers and I. Maybe I was too self-absorbed a teenager to recognize that he was more than some guy who stumbled home dead-tired every day and handed out money for my carefree nights out with friends. But I am not too blind a man to see that my father has profound love for each of his boys. He could never put it into those words, so easily and freely spoken by my mother, but he's said it just as loudly and just as clearly since the day I was born.

He could never take two seconds to say "I love you," but he often took two hours at the kitchen table with my mother to pore over tax records and paychecks, agonizing over how he would pay for the three of us to go to school. Nick was a year away, I was two, and Mikey had still four years in high school, but it had already become his greatest worry in life. Not outwardly, of course - he took every opportunity to ask, with great enthusiasm, how our admissions were going, where our friends were applying, if Nick wanted to start a radio show or what type of art Mikey wanted to major in or whether I planned to go out for a sports team. "You're too short to play goalie anywhere," he'd snicker, "but maybe you can wrestle somewhere." Whatever his question was, it was never "How are we going to pay for this?"

He never misses a chance to remark how important college is. "Don't wanna quit school and work in a warehouse the rest of your life," he'll joke, in spite of the steel-toed boots and short-sleeved, powder blue button-down work shirt he's wearing. "Get an education, get a real job. Someone like me'll have you for a boss one day, and that's better than getting up at five in the morning and listening to the boss for fourteen hours." He laughs at what

he's become, at the powder blue shirt with the company logo, but I'm sure he can't be satisfied with what he has. There must be some regret beneath the surface, under the steel-strong armor of his square chin and invincible confidence.

There must be. He tells me that he went to college once, that he played baseball at William Paterson and he was an English major and he loved Chaucer. It's nothing like the man I know—he reads a lot, sure, but more politics and sports than literature. His huge hands one day gripped a tar-smearred baseball bat, cradled *The Canterbury Tales*, plunked away at a typewriter to compose a term paper. But now they are heavy and shelled in hard calluses. He dropped out after less than a year.

Every day I must contemplate that I live my comfortable life because there is a man in New Jersey, innocent of any crime, who is fated with the daily Hell of a sweltering warehouse just to support three kids in college. Every time I return home I glimpse his dirty time sheet, pinned to a corkboard in the kitchen, with his eighty hours per week penciled into the columns in my mother's careful script. (His hands are clumsy with a pencil).

Simply, my life is what it is because of him. Perhaps it is the unavoidable consequence of his genetic inheritance: even though he and I are nearly identical in size, his hands dwarf mine. They're the hands of a laborer. My mom can do her part in an air-conditioned office, she could somehow spin her lack of a college degree into a white-collar job, but Dad would falter outside of the sweaty labor he's known for decades. He knows his lot, has accepted it, and can even take it on with a light-hearted resignation. It's the easiest way for him to speak the three hardest words he knows.

The sun has risen high in the late August sky. Even at mid-morning it is at full strength, and I dread the long day before it will set. It turns my nervousness to hatred for the erratic seasons, clinging too long to the summer heat. Only the sight of the brilliant glittering Hudson in the distance can cool my temper.

We arrive in Leo Hall, Mom and Dad and I, to find one of my roommates and his parents already stretching sheets onto his mattress. "Hey," I say, getting their attention as we enter the room. "I'm Buddy, one of your roommates I guess." My roommate and

his parents introduce themselves, and the six of us shake hands and chat. Our moms joke about finally getting a boy out of the house, our dads commiserate over the terrible traffic on campus.

After the crates have been delivered and everything has been put in place for me to organize more carefully later, there is a sudden and solemn silence. Mom's eyes become shiny, and she hugs me tight and makes me promise to call her that night. She clasps my arms, meets eyes with me, and declares, "I love you, Buddy." She steps aside, out of the room.

"Tiny room," my dad says. "Gonna be a pain when the third guy shows up."

"Sure," I agree. "Not five stars, but I like it a lot," I tell him.

A second heavy silence. "Well," he finally says, "gotta get back to Jersey. Mikey needs the car tonight to get to work."

"You got it." I clap him hard on the arm, and he shoots a false-angry sneer.

"Talk to ya soon." He extends his hand. I give him mine, which immediately disappears in his mighty paw. We shake once, firm.

Taxicab Dreams

| Jessica R. McCallister

It was my first introduction to American taxis; I'd seen a few in Britain—shiny, polished hearse-like mobiles—but nothing that came close to my preconceived notions of the New York kind. We had just departed the train, pushed through hoards of smelly tourists to retrieve our bags, and walked into the beaming sunlight of Manhattan. I was somehow first in line at the taxi queue, a virgin to the ways of the hired drivers. A uniformed man, hat and all, loaded luggage into the back of the waiting taxi and I slid inside over the sticky faux leather seats, meekly handed an address to the driver through the window, and sat back for a relaxing ride. As the trunk lid slammed down, he drove away, rammed the gas pedal to the floorboard directly into the congestion of cars beside us, but somehow made room. To each side of the car were inches of space. The gas and brake pedals were either slammed or untouched; there was no in between. He sped along with precision, turning onto back streets, sliding into spaces I surely thought were impossible. I slid on the seats and had to make a concentrated effort to stay in one place. Red lights were mere suggestions, although we only ran a few. Pedestrians were honked at and given an occasional gesture as bicycle riders (both those riding for pleasure and for work) bravely—or perhaps stupidly—dodged waves of yellow to get from place to place. We made it to our destination after a very short ride. At the point of drop-off, however, I had no clue the actual distance we'd traveled.

Stepping onto the curb, I felt immersed into New York culture. It was my first visit to the city that never sleeps. On a Sunday afternoon, hotter than average, people littered the streets, most of them walking alone. I looked around, unable to grasp my bearings because nothing was familiar. The taxi drove away, my only familiarity. As I waited for other friends to join me, I watched the speeding cars and pedestrians. I stood on the street corner with my heavy luggage and my first observation was that of the peeling taxi cab. After my stressful first experience with American taxis, I yearned for some sort of comfort, but all I received was a visual overflow of bumped and dented taxis speeding past me.

I realized within a few moments that taxi cabs in New York

are one of two things: either pristine with glossy yellow paint, or peeling and dented. The former is a common sight. The latter, however, is much more common, an odd observance because taxis are not allowed to be driven longer than five years.¹ Just how much damage can be done to a car in five years? And more importantly, I wondered, why were there so many of the peeling cabs? The so-called peeling cabs, with their front, rectangular bumper stops resembling bulls' horns, have voids in the paint on front and rear bumpers. They look decrepit in a way, slowly deteriorating with each mile. But then again, in a way, they look strong and seasoned, well versed in the cutthroat world of cab fares, passengers, and traffic.

The vision of peeling cabs forced me into a reflection on the drivers themselves. The cars can't very well cause damage on their own. Perhaps, I thought, being a taxi driver in New York is much more complex than what I'd originally imagined. An anonymous New York City policeman once said, "The thing I can't tell is whether cab drivers yield to each other out of fear or respect." As humorous as the quote may be, it offers insight into the world of the taxi driver. Yes, they are brazen. Yes, they are forceful. But why?

My first impression of the New York City taxicab and their drivers was that of dominating figures. They all seemed to be fighting for something: passengers, fares, first in line at the red light. The peeling taxi cabs were unable to be fazed. No matter what, they were going to make their way through the crowd of cars and people.

Watching the drivers—the vast majority of whom are immigrants—they all have an insatiable drive (pun somewhat intended). Red lights are suggestions because the drivers' lives depend on whether or not the passenger gets to their destination on time. It's a pure example of the American dream. It takes hard work and diligence to become a successful cab driver and with the New York Taxi and Livery Commission's strict guidelines, becoming successful driving a taxicab means conquering the toughest city in the world.

To be a taxi driver in New York means having thousands of co-workers all striving for the same dream. Residents know to yield, mostly out of fear, I'm sure. Visitors yield out of complete and

¹ Daniel W. E. Holt, *Subcontracting in the New York City Taxicab Industry*.

utter fear; their impending death is a big factor. And so, other drivers must yield out of respect for their common goal. The more bumps and bruises on the cab, the better a fighter the driver is. Operating taxicabs is strict business. Although outsiders think of drivers having their own cabs, it is becoming increasingly difficult for single people to own taxis and all that owning one requires. It is a constant struggle to become successful in a career many see as dead-end. Mayor La Guardia introduced a system of taxi medallions in 1937, hoping to ensure the quality of taxi rides for both driver and passenger. Each licensed taxicab has a medallion on its hood. A finite number of medallions were distributed and sold in 1937, which meant that although the pieces were inexpensive at their first distribution, rarity drove up the average worth, some selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars. In 1996, the city auctioned off new medallions. The average cost of a single medallion is upwards of \$300,000, making it nearly impossible for a new immigrant to purchase their own car and medallion. Sixty percent of drivers hope to own their own medallions; five percent actually reach it.²

It's these statistics that make the rough life of a taxi driver so tangible. They work six days per week, twelve hours per day, and make \$60,000 on a good year. They can't afford to live in Manhattan, often can't afford their own taxis, and rarely own medallions. Many beginning drivers work for taxi companies and can only hope to become their own bosses. To succeed as a taxi and taxi medallion owner is to conquer an impressive feat. Immigrants new to taxi driving realize the statistics, including their projected incomes and likely failure to reach their goal, and yet they work towards the dream anyway. Although it isn't the typical American citizen's version of the American dream, it still requires a fight to move up in society. And although the fight to achieve the American dream is prevalent with taxi drivers, the passengers themselves stand as reminders of the dream.

Walking the streets after emerging from dingy subway stations, I began to notice the demographics of the taxi hailers themselves, and how riding in a taxi is just as much a part of the American dream as is driving one. The whole time I was in New York—four weeks—I

² Daniel W. E. Holt, *Subcontracting in the New York City Taxicab Industry*.

only rode in taxis twice, once from Penn Station to my Washington Square home and the second back to the station. Why? For one, it was expensive: \$8 for a one and a half mile drive. Whereas the immigrant taxi drivers strive for their version of the American dream, New Yorkers riding in back seats strive for the same goal. To take taxis—religiously or on occasion—requires a serious amount of money. I began to wonder if the ability to ride in them is a mark of distinction. During my last taxi ride in New York I thought of these things. I watched the pedestrians carrying heavy plastic shopping bags, watched them stopping for water at sidewalk carts, watched them turn and walk down subway entrances. I saw them waiting at crosswalks as they stared off into space. I rarely saw people with their hands in the air hoping a taxi would come. I thought of the times I'd made mental notes of taxi hailers. They seemed to always be holding shopping bags or briefcases, always wearing tailored business suits or effortlessly fashionable outfits, always gracefully and without hesitation sticking their arms in the air to hail a cab, without even a thought to the money they were about to spend.

A man near Astor Place contorted his right shoulder, perching his sleek phone between his ear and collar bone, held his alligator briefcase in his left hand and used his right arm to stop a cab. It looked painful, yet elegant. He'd done it before, knew just how to move his body so that his phone and briefcase were safe from thieves, or more importantly, the pitted and grimy sidewalk. It took practice and diligence to make it so effortless, and to him it was probably a redundant task. He'd obviously made his way in New York, been financially stable enough (or in far enough in debt) to afford a common ride in a taxi.

One humid afternoon I walked from the subway station at 77th and Lexington Avenue to the Whitney Museum. Waiting for the signal to change at the corner of Madison Avenue, I watched a young girl help her grandmother. They were gathering things: a suitcase, the dog carrier, bags from various stores. The girl, maybe ten, wearing a plush jump suit and a Tiffany bangle bracelet, cupped her dog—a miniature Chihuahua—under one arm and used the other to hail a cab. The grandmother didn't watch; she was too busy surveying their luggage. The girl spotted a taxi, threw up her arm in an instant, knew somehow that the driver would stop, and turned to

help her grandmother. My light changed promising a safe crossing and I left, but I soon turned back to see the girl's head at the taxi's window (presumably to give the driver their destination) before she loaded the remaining packages into the trunk. The taxi sped off once the back door closed, leaving me to marvel at the scene of a young girl nonchalantly doing what I was scared to do. She'd been bred for it. Her ten years of life included instruction on taxi hailing and Madison Avenue shopping.

That same day, walking back to the subway, I watched a young woman hail a taxi on Park Avenue. She was a stereotypical model—tall and blonde, wearing death-defying high heels that further accentuated her height. I was reminded of a friend's observation: "You can tell which women have money for cabs because they wear heels. They don't have to walk anywhere." A phone in one hand, she threw up the other, and cabs seemed to stop instantly. The vision reminded me of Claudette Colbert's famous leg-baring scene in *It Happened One Night*. Attention was diverted to her at once. She chose her carriage, slithered inside, and continued uptown.

The successful businessman, the young girl bred for Manhattan, the model stopping taxis in their tracks: they were all versions of an accomplished American dream. They all hailed taxis with practiced precision, their daily task a luxury to many New Yorkers striving to conquer the city.

After having personal experience with New York City taxicabs, the operation of them becomes much more admirable. The fight to obtain the American dream of wealth and success remains strong on both sides of the car divider. Without one, there would be no other. Money in New York—as much of it as there is—flows from person to person, from accomplished Manhattanite to fighting immigrant. It makes New York that much more fascinating. The yellow taxicab—what can be argued as a symbol of New York City—stands as a moving symbol of the American dream. To drive one means to strive for success, while riding in one implies accomplishment.

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A Different Kind of Ink

| Olivia Traczyk

Modern love is like this: tattoos on the ankle. A solid circle with each other's zodiac signs in the middle. Cancer and Gemini. A proclamation. A statement. A contract.

Sarah-Yi pulls up her pant leg. We're in St. Paul, at the Tea Garden, our annual meeting spot. I set my Bubble Tea on the table and touch her ankle. "We don't do these kinds of things in Wisconsin," I joke.

What I really mean is that we'll never have an open gay community at my small, Catholic college.

"Whatever," she says, and continues telling me about the tattoos and her eventual break up with Madison, the girl she dated for over a year.

"It really hurt, Ann, almost as much as what happened with Steve."

I lean back on the sofa. This is serious.

I listen to her describe the details of her trip with Madison to California last summer—a sort of final-hoorah before senior year. It was all love and no money. It was wild hair in the wind on motorcycles without helmets. It was the "to hell with it" attitude Sarah-Yi has always had.

Growing up as a second generation was difficult for Sarah-Yi. She rebelled religiously against her strict curfew, traditional Chinese dress code, and cultural attitude towards females.

Out of necessity, she's a walking contradiction.

Senior year of high school, when Sarah-Yi was working at Abercrombie and Fitch and stealing merchandise on the side (just for the thrill of it), we'd pull out our elementary year book and laugh at how she looked more like a porcelain doll in her pink lacy dresses and jade jewelry than a real person.

It was understood when Sarah-Yi didn't make it to softball practice that she had been called in to work at the family restaurant. It was a job she never complained about, even though she never got to keep the money she made.

It was family. And Chinese families stick together. The end.

And yet, more nights than not, she'd lie to her dad and say she was at my house when really she was with her boyfriend of

the month. Sarah-Yi made it her goal to disobey every family rule and defy the cultural norms that defined being a Chinese woman. Which is why, freshman year of college, I wrote her bisexuality off as just another rebellious phase.

But now, three years later, it's clear that her sexual orientation has become as permanent as the ink on her skin. And it's becoming increasingly more difficult for her to hide it from her family.

Sarah-Yi retraces the key points of her relationship with Madison: how Madison was her best friend and then suddenly, her only friend. Something had changed and she didn't understand why, until she found out Madison was cheating on her. A lot. Suddenly, everything her friends had said about Madison's controlling power and selfishness slapped her in the face.

"It was worse than when Steve cheated. At least his was a dumb drunk mistake, and he regretted it," Sarah-Yi talks slowly as she relives the past year. "Madison admitted it, but she never apologized. God, what a bitch."

The story is too glossed over for me to say anything really meaningful, so I just nod and agree.

She continues, as though the memories don't hurt her, telling me now about her new girlfriend, Jenny, who surprisingly—or not so surprisingly—("we have been friends forever, Ann") reminds her of me. Jenny's an artist in her off time, a social justice guru full-time. She's got curly hair, too, and great dimples. She's everybody's friend and no one ever believes she's gay.

"She's just left for a J-term in Africa. Just like you," Sarah-Yi says, "Didn't you go to Costa Rica last semester?"

Ecuador, I say, oddly flattered by the comparisons to Jenny.

Then it's my turn. Sarah-Yi asks about my life since being back. In a few sentences I tell her about how, while studying abroad, I became what I like to call "technologically intimate" with the guy I was dating. We'd write e-mails every day, Facebook little inside jokes and secrets to each other, talk with Webcam every Sunday, remind ourselves of all things we'd do when I got back.

"Yeah, it was great," I say, "Until I really did come home. Then suddenly it was scary for him, you know, to actually really be intimate and not have a computer screen between us. We broke up a month later. Basically over the phone."

“What a tool.”

Maybe I should try the lesbian world, I joke.

Sarah-Yi laughs and says she doesn’t think I’d like it.

“Well, you didn’t think you’d like it either.”

She laughs again. Sarah-Yi dated more guys in high school than all of our softball team combined.

Half-way through our freshman year, Sarah-Yi called me, asking if I thought it’d be possible for her to be bisexual. I wrote her off—

Sarah-Yi? Bisexual? Yeah right. “There’s no chance you’re gay,” I said, “You’re gay crazy!” Which she had admitted was true. “And you’re dating Steve!”

Steve had just come home from a year in Iraq, but he came back paying child support to a woman he slept with when Sarah-Yi and he were on one of their “breaks.” It was just as much a surprise to Sarah-Yi as it was to Steve.

And that was the end of their rocky relationship.

By the time freshman year ended, Sarah-Yi changed the way she viewed the world. And the way she wore her hair. That summer she buzzed her long silky hair into a Mohawk. Cliché, I know, but she did. I remember the expression on my mom’s face the first time she came to my house that summer.

“Sarah-Yi! Oh my gosh, your hair! It’s so, so . . . different? (The Midwestern way of saying “What the *hell!*”) What do your parents think?”

Sarah-Yi merely shrugged her shoulders. “My mom hates it. And my dad wouldn’t talk to me for a month.”

My mom never asked me why Sarah-Yi cut her hair, or why she suddenly traded her car for a motorcycle—which was fine with me, Sarah-Yi’s a walking taboo anyway.

For the past three years Sarah-Yi’s parents have ignored these changes as well. But nothing needs to be said; Sarah-Yi knows the score. Wang, her cousin in New York, set the precedent when he came out last year. Sarah-Yi has been merely bidding her time ever since.

But, with only one semester of college left, I know she has a serious decision to make. I ask her what she’s going to do when she graduates.

“I have to break it off with Jenny,” Sarah-Yi says, “I don’t have a choice.”

She’ll eventually marry a guy, she says, and put this part of her identity aside.

“I don’t think you understand, Ann, no one talks about Wang anymore. My family disowned him. I don’t think I could do that.”

She absent mindedly rubs her tattoo.

“Do you ever talk to Madison or see her around?” I ask, moved by her struggle to be true to both herself and her family.

“Not since she texted me about a post I wrote last week. You have to read it, Ann. It was quite poetic, if I do say so myself.”

She tells me that last week she MySpaced a post about the “tattoo episode.” At least that’s what Sarah-Yi tells me it was about. Really, the blog is more about all the people in her life she’d like to forget, and all the individuals who, in classic Sarah-Yi dramatics, are worthy of keeping around.

She recites parts of the post she remembers:

Her mood: Drained.

The title: “Conglomeration of My Cardio and My Cerebrum Experience.”

Best line: The one devoted to Madison, a “fresh old best friend.”

Sarah-Yi’s eyes light up and her voice takes on various inflections as she tells me all about the subtle jabs she made at Madison.

“Oh man, you have to read it! I’ll Facebook you the link when I get home.” She marvels at her literary ability. “There’s even a part about you.”

AFTER the Tea Garden I drive home. I eat dinner as I check my e-mails. Sarah-Yi’s already sent me the link to her MySpace blog and texted me, telling me to check it out. I do, and smile at how melodramatic it is. A few lines are really savvy, I admit, and I jot them down for my own writing material.

I especially love the end of her commemoration to Madison: “I still think I was right about getting the tattoos. They are memories I keep in my heart . . . and the ending of our friendship will be faint in my mind. Almost as if it didn’t happen”

I laugh. Subtle jab?

I go back to Sarah-Yi’s Facebook profile. Jenny, her new

girlfriend, has already posted on her wall. Twice. I smile thinking about how concerned she had been about not communicating with Jenny while she was in Africa.

Which makes me think of my time abroad again, and how scared I was about the distance. I search his name, Curt Phillips, on Facebook. Out of habit I check his “mini-feed” and click through his pictures, thinking about all the things I didn’t tell Sarah-Yi.

The indirect talks we’d had about moving in together after graduation. The apartment he has in Minneapolis because of it (“*Is it weird that I can see you here with me, Ann?*”). How strange it is that, although we broke up months ago, I have the same access to him now as I did when we were together—2,000 miles apart. Or, at least it feels that way sometimes.

I stare at my computer screen and bring Sarah-Yi’s post back up. There’s a sharp pang in my chest as I reread it—especially the part about how Madison, clutching Sarah-Yi’s waist, yells, “But what if we aren’t even friends later in life?” and Sarah-Yi screams back, “Then we’ll always have this to remind us of the good times!”

I realize the pain I feel is loss. Not just for my friend or for my own failed relationship, but for all of us Millennials trying to re-negotiate that sacred promise that forever really means forever—not just until the money runs out or somebody better comes along.

It strikes me that, in a time when divorces are as common as lasting partnerships, maybe we’re all like Sarah-Yi, grasping those handle bars, desperate to sign that “I-do” contract with a different kind of ink.

Olivia Traczyk graduated from St. Norbert College in May 2008 with degrees in Creative Writing and American Studies. She currently resides in Washington D.C. where she works as Program Coordinator for the study abroad organization, Youth for Understanding. A while back, the “Modern Love” section of the New York Times posed the question, “What is love, in the age of 24/7 communication, blurred gender roles and new ideas about sex and dating?” This essay responds to their prompt.

Jurors

Faith Barrett earned an M.F.A. in Poetry from the University of Iowa and a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from University of California—Berkeley. With Cristanne Miller, she coedited *Words for the Hour: A New Anthology of American Civil War Poetry* (U Mass, 2005). She has published articles on Civil War poetry by Whitman, Melville, and Dickinson, and she is currently completing a book manuscript that analyzes American poetry of the Civil War era. She teaches courses in American literature and creative writing at Lawrence University.

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