Red Weather

SPRING 2008

Only, here and there, an old sailor,

Drunk and asleep in his boots,

Catches Tigers

In red weather.

– Wallace Stevens, "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock"

On our selection process: *Red Weather* calls for anonymous submissions twice a year. Each editorial board meets on its own and decides as a group what pieces to publish. All submissions are reviewed under pseudonyms.

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A Word from our Editors

This Spring, *Red Weather* poetry brings you – form! This semester's submissions provided us with an opportunity to chose from a wide range of forms of poetry, from the ballad stanza, a long tradition in English-language poetry ("The Perils of the Coinciding of Bath Time with the Witching Hour"), to the sestina, a form cultivated in medieval Italy, Spain, and France, characterized by a set of only six words the poet can end a line with ("Hot Tea"), to the Malaysian pantoum form, brought to European audiences by nineteenth century British and French poets, which takes one step forward, one step back, each stanza using the second and fourth lines of the stanza before it for its first and third lines ("A Mother's Pantoum"), to the glosa, a Spanish form which glosses, or "explains" four lines of another poet's poem, to the more contemporary "forms" of found poem, in which the poet uses words or phrases found in some text to create a poem ("Sex, a Found Poem"), and prose poem, in which the form of prose, in which line breaks are not planned by the writer but are only a constraint imposed by the width of the page, is used with poetic intentions (mixed with line-broken stanzas in "The Plow that Broke the Plains"). Google search the terms for more details, if you are curious! One poet used a "Magnetic Poetry" refrigerator magnet set to form her poem.

Strict formal constraints were, for a while in poetry, out of vogue. They were a vestige of the old days when poetry was always hedged into regular meter, line length, rhyme patterns, and often into set forms, like the sonnet or the ballad. Poets like, first Walt Whitman, then later the Beats and e. e. cummings, experimented with free verse, freeing their expression from the bounds which traditionally held poetry to a certain shape and style. This is not to say that these poems were without form, but that these poets invented their own rules about what shape a poem should take, rules which were often much more open than the rules earlier forms had established, and you'll also see many poems of this manner of style in this journal.

But you'll also see Hamilton poets, like many other contemporary poets, trying out traditional forms. I got the idea for this introductory letter from a film theorist mentioned in my avant-garde film class, but I think the idea is fairly universal: constriction fosters creativity. The reason why form is fun is because it

challenges the writer to see what they can do within the given constraints, and gives the readers the opportunity to marvel at what they've accomplished. Strict form is to poetry like the rules of the game are to any sport. A sport is fun because it makes an easy task (putting some kind of ball into some kind of goal, usually) difficult by stipulating that you can't use your hands, or you can only pass the ball backwards, or certain shots made from certain points on the court count more. Strict form is fun because it ups the ante - what can this person say elegantly, even with all the rules about what they *can't* do to express themselves. Enjoy our contributors' response to the challenge – maybe you'll be tempted to play ball yourself.

— Katie Naughton '08
Editor-in-Chief, Poetry

The process of establishing an art section in *Red Weather* presented its editorial board with many logistical and intellectual challenges. I was a new editor without directions; art last appeared in *Red Weather* as complementary illustrations for the literature. Unfortunately, condensing art and literature in this manner confused many readers and did neither the work of the writer nor artist justice.

As both an artist and a writer, I believe that just as words can paint pictures, pictures can tell stories. Art not only illustrates themes and concepts but also evokes emotion, elicits subconscious camaraderie and manipulates one's paradigm, as does narrative in literature. As an equal counterpart to poetry and fiction for the first time, it was imperative that this new art section appear as a seamless addition that would mesh with the written content both aesthetically and thematically.

The art editorial board reviewed nearly eighty pieces, all of which varied greatly in content, form, and style. The selection process proved to be a great opportunity for intellectual growth as we pondered the pieces along many lines of consideration. Each editor brought a fresh perspective to our lively debates. Some immediately focused on cultural relevance, some scanned for composition, color balance or other formal elements, while others expressed their emotional reactions.

This greatly varied discourse provided a strong foundation upon which we could collectively agree. What began as a chaotic mess of emails is now a finely combed collection of art that represents the diversity of perspective common to, but often taken for granted by humans.

This collection features work from all kinds of Hamilton students, many of whom concentrate in areas other than art. However, I'd like to thank the faculty and staff of the Art department for their help, advice, and support in establishing and presenting this year's collection.

Along with the new Visiting Artists series, I hope that the addition of art to Hamilton's "premier literary magazine" will bring much needed publicity and communal appreciation to one of the most underrepresented disciplines at Hamilton.

— Chiquita Paschal '10
Editor-in-Chief, Art

Red Weather adopted some exciting changes in the past year. In the last semester alone, the size of our staff has more than doubled from thirteen to twenty-eight editors. Twenty-eight sounds like a silly number for a small institution like Hamilton, but having such a large staff means we get to hear from a diverse group, which in turn pushes the publication to be as representative of the student body as possible. We've also included art this time around, in a small step towards building an integrated art and literary community.

As you can tell from our contributors, there exists a thriving community of writers – not that you'd know this by counting how many students show up for a fiction or poetry reading. In truth, not enough students attend readings. To help amend this, Katie and I interviewed (however awkwardly) all of the fantastic writers who read on-campus this semester: Chris Kennedy, Min Jin Lee, Peter Meinke, Kevin Moffett. In these interviews, the writers comment on many things, including getting published, the aesthetics of writing, and the current state of the literary world.

Red Weather does not have a formal mission statement, but I imagine that at its best, the magazine serves as a network of support for both visiting writers and our own student writers. This year, we sponsored a fiction reading by Kevin Moffett. We also hosted two magazine release readings, which celebrated the work of our contributors. We wanted to hold a series of writing workshops for both our editors and other students, too, but it seemed we were already stretched too thin. Maybe next time.

The goals of the publication transform as leadership changes, but I hope the future editorial board, whoever it may be, will continue this tradition of diverse representation and support. Perhaps at heart I'm a bit of a nerd or a hippie, but whether or not you believe literature serves a sociopolitical purpose, good literature certainly excites us, surprises us, pushes us to some better level of human understanding. And what purpose can literature serve if no one's reading? If no one's listening?

— Emily Tang '08
Editor-in-Chief, Fiction

Poetry

KAITY HILL

Sex, a Found Poem

For a good time, just follow these simple instructions:
Begin by unwrapping the present carefully.
Remember, this is a strong, full-bodied variety
with a touch of acidity. It has a pleasantly lingering taste,
but may present a choking hazard.
When you are ready to move on, be sure to explore all your options,
starting from the bottom up.
This package may contain: aspartame, acesulfame, love and pain
and is not meant for use with emergency exits.
Always refer to the manual for safety information,
but here are some troubleshooting tips:
Do not leave unattended while heating.
One size does not fit all.
Keep away from infants and small children.
Be sure to apply liberally day or night, but
vary your pleasures and please remember
to extinguish the flame after use.

MELANIE LEEDS

monkeys are wild for wiggle dances
(magnetic poetry poetry)

fabulous little davenport
will you be my friend?

pop hates me
moms the birthday girl

you went rapidly chocolate
I am the beefy sister

a bro is a bony toy
midnight love forever

KATIE NAUGHTON

It Takes a Village

It takes
  a hard time
    to love
      something
  this concrete
    establishment
      settled by the bank
        of a river
  and built
            up
    at dawn
      a woman at her washing
      gathering her skirts
  and rising

It takes
  a long place
    writhing and swirling inwards
      turning towerful
    and collected

It takes
  a country
    of stone
      ground
   into concrete
        concentrated
        contracted
It takes
  the whole
  of the land
  from the land

to raise
   a city.

KATIE NAUGHTON

A Mother's Pantoum

About such things we were never wrong,
though we thought it sometimes paranoia
that the pits of our stomachs
should be so wise.

Though we thought it sometimes paranoia,
it seemed unlikely that children
should be so wise
unless they planned betrayal.

It seemed unlikely that children
could grow up but remain our children
unless we planned betrayal
in the way we taught them the world.

"Grow up but remain our children!"
We wanted to shout to them every moment.
In the way we taught them the world,
We know we taught them to leave.

We wanted to shout to them every moment
that in the pits of our stomachs
we knew we taught them to leave.
About such things we were never wrong.

KATIE NAUGHTON

The Newspaper-Man
(a glosa of T.S. Eliot)

You think you read that he might feel
That same tight feeling in his chest.
The feel of air afraid to go
Either out or in, of perfect poems
Stuck somewhere between brain and pen
That would slip out if only he tried.
But instead he looks up, and leftward,
From a desk where he scratches away
Trite tracts that sell and pay the bills,
His soul stretched tight across the skies.

And once, you think, he thinks, it was here
That something whole and nourished lived
Something deep-rooted, solid, and old
That felt the sun and felt the rain
And saw the progression of each day
From morning light to midnight dark.
Those kinds of things have long been dead,
(Since time was damned up, pooling behind

The outer walls,) are now passing thoughts
That fade behind a city block,

That fade beneath the depths of water
That press his lungs from every side –
It's better here in the heavy dark
Despite the pressure – its womb-like safety,
Somnolent and floating, but cold,
(The slowness of his blood, that seep
Of it which once was warm and flowed.)
Where one can pass the decades blind,
Devoid of sight, but never seen
Or trampled by insistent feet

Or anxious tongues or hearts that press
Not steady weight but jabs and jabs
A minute here a minute here
Till all the day and all a life
Is spent in jabs and minutes, while
The world ambles on, the shock
Of finding much too late the error,
When the words are already in print,
And there are other souls to hock
At four and five and six o'clock.

CHRIS STEDMAN-PARMENTER

Cicadæ

Such sensuality as the night air.
The symphonics of trees, the green dark
that peirces through our walls, our ears
holds steady all the night; to-night.
Would you love the sound?
Holds steady as our lives, our lives
our hearts beating, live, alive:
And would you love me then? I swear--
in the cold we would not under-stand
and winter nights, the heat would not
        take you in her arms;
the green world after dark,
the autumn's cold will bring an end.
        Cicadæ, cicadæ,
cicadæ; cicadæ . . .
        would you love me,
in the feeling of the night's sea;
would you love me then?

CHRIS STEDMAN-PARMENTER

Clouds Like Mountains, Heading West

Like massifs, les nuages
or fields beneath the cloudscape,
rain has fallen o'er the Great Plains.
Like mountains or the wave's froth
salt hay or storm-front, light-with-thunder,

de la croix, de la croix,
        my Lord
dying on the cross,
if our souls are worth protecting,
our image cast like gods,

An altar for Dionysus
or augery of the clouds,
    passing before the Rockies
but the ancients did not know love . . .
Spirits high across the plains,
head west, uncertain god.
Nostrum spiritus, my love
    like spring;
and head into the western sun.

CHRIS STEDMAN-PARMENTER

Journey Into the Desert

I - San Bernadino, Sad Country

Windblown turbines
grey and brown
smoggy forms of factories
a rising pall; grey wall
    grey wall
blowing swiftly down the plains
Snowy mountains! Godly forms!
rendered into dust.

Tears, dirt, wind and sweat
salt-pan, smoke-stacks,
hands are dusty
heart says *must*:
must escape the sad country
of charred forms
where fires burn
and senses dull
this grey will spread
from land to land
until the grey is all

then fly to the sun,
and rising:
up a pass, into the cold.

II - High Desert

Borne into places
where the sand is life
I am overcome by
steel tower and the power line
broken mine-shafts;
in another time
the hills spilled borax,
or to say a desert bleeds
the oil of a country's need
in ramshackled homes
or a burial ground.

Clouds pour over distant forms
like grey, on white, on blue
high desert
where the clouds are myths
as mountains are mirages:
rising like a dream
of passing forms and fleeting lives
from some vague basin to a range.

III - Manzanar

I followed a river bed into a playa
    11 mi long, 3 mi wide
by whithered trees and freezing air
mountains hillsides bare
and the ground caked with salt.
    The memory of the Owens Lake
    the sun bake,
    Mulholland's grave
    empty river
    not to be saved;
and voices hard with salt.
"There it is; now take it."

Pall of the Sierra range
14,000 feet on either side
as snow melt falls and city draws
green to brown,
    the primitive gleam
of the ancient spirit
high on either range.
Listening to the gale:
there is something wrong
in the heart of man
where watch-towers rose
who would understand?
As the day grows dim
on a salty crust

beneath the mountain's pall
and the cities' lust.
Beaming off the clouds
and the sinking sun
shadows watch for cars
and the captives?--
        gone.

IV - Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

In the deserts of the mind
Prévot my friend, my only guide
I will march across this sand
in the red-orange land.
The truth is to
    refuse to sense
the distant lights,
of peircing night:

That life is sand, and snow,
of gods not dead, but watching.
    Mountain peak
whiteness added to the white
cactus towns, clusters of trees
in moors down grabens:

dream of the sea.

ANDREW PEART

Antonioni's Films

Yellow tabby cat in a handful of rain,
scudding the ledges and water troughs,
finding the nook in a passerby's sight,
and slinking over there.
Smoking your heart
out, finding what the cat found, needing her
then and feeling skin as common as the ground,
Blonde Minerva, you traipsed through doors,
tortured by the rising breath on cobblestones.
No one needs you more than he needs. Yet—
more of whom will tender the right proximity
now becomes a burning aperture in morning's gloom,
as fog, as then, exhales upon a dying heat.
Silent wisdom, look upon the ravages of time
and consequence, and be silent, still: watch
blank-eyed the iron tower recriminate,
solemn, another world. Think of the lover,
poor paralyzed lover, whose vows are fits
each compelling you, one way, and waiting
much too often.

What if everyone were people
from another legend? Holding your lover
as you hold a German novel, trembling
in dispassion, you wish the land itself
could travel. Clutter up the passageways
of your life, is not the sofa something
soft yet real—
The rain, the cat, the feline
side of you, apparent around corners only.
Whitewashed, washed-out blight assuaged
past a long anticipated past,
your adventure starts an agony of shame:
what the hunter hid within a tale of force
blinding the passionate source
striking deeper than the zebra's skin.
elephant's foot, or dog's howl as haste
overtakes a cement stair where no end takes
hold. So wear your blackface thin,
Bronze Goddess; distant mother of desire
opens her window on your call. For then…

You arrange a cocktail of daytime pains
flavored by a bedroom aroma you carry with
dirt on bare feet, water on a ring, aplomb.
Much you say on your behalf,
much more,
probably, you would: "The tram is slow
mornings, four o'clock or earlier.
Look! The station is a riot! Why

every man in hound's-tooth hounds the gate—

Symmetry offends us, obvious. Yet,
sole survivors of a headline's violence, we
cannot hide our faces from debris. Sure
of my brutish touch, angry for your softer glare,

Why, then, do I stay upon what isn't there?—
Come the evening, like a tide, or trickle
down on wearied stone, replacing
your return
        for winds on deserted eyes.

ANDREW PEART

The Kid's First Signature

The wind is heavy with your sigh.
A murmur is marking downbeats in your breath.
Holding you becomes a still before the quickness
of holding you, a thought before the signal.

I came out of doors to find you in the snow
running like the gust-gale of eloquent blood.
Your blood, I moaned, the season's harbinger
painting auguries in the flakes beneath our footfalls.

The herald silenced his trumpet. King and Queen
were one, beside themselves in a hush
that melts the frigid shell of thrush-cries.

And crystal etchings staid in the iris of night
dawned in red aurora.
                Pale glow fraught with fire,
you seize the royal chamber in your soundless surge.

ANDREW PEART

The Plow that Broke the Plains

breaks my heart. In Missouri, Miss'ip, Mantucka, Kankakee, and on, I am a swollen Cyrano. Swollen with pride, or lust's frustration. I come to you, Daisy May, with a heart like a riverbed, drained of its river, re-routed under a barren sky, shattered brown mockery of solid blue. My eyes are sore of crying. I descry:

> The only flower of the prairie
> Whose stalk and petal share a life,
> Demure, so pure; why allure
> My heart if just to wilt beneath its rain?

My name is Errol Flynn. I wear a crimson bandana about my neck. I am a tan, mustachioed, bandana-donning sawdust Casanova. My lips part when I speak; that's only natural. I am a natural male, born of the West, romancing the prairie. You are the prairie. Welcome to my body, stitched in cowhide, leather, buckskin, heat; Quake within my voice, a caravan trail of ravishing promises, hot. I am opera, my mask is tragicomic; don't look beneath it, my nose is like Pinocchio's.

> A barren land made fertile
> By my gun, trials of dusty prowess,
> You grow in greenery toward a robin's-egg sky,
> Pregnant with nascent wings of Olympian flight.

Daisy, do you remember the gun-slinging toddler extorting half-dollars at the Dodge City corral? Some-

thing in his talk and walk, his swagger, made him innocent. He's that character: I preside over the soul of this place, and I welcome you to it, fair wayfarer, with tacit cautious intimations of doom. Incidentally, I am of the height to peek beneath your skirts, ma'am, and long for the produce of your vegetating womb.

And when I die, God's wrath cracks when it should be thunder; it's a crime against mythology. And Errol Flynn wipes his brow with a crimson bandana, crimson-bright with rage, for as I came I now depart, in sorrow.

> For whom the mistress of the West descends
> Upon the gravel of a lawless town,
> If only to hold a mirror to its gleaming half,
> Is he who travels lonesome with the dust and weed.

The image of an embryo is a child in the heart of man. Unravel, West, unto your destined peak!

SPENCER PETTICREW-SHAWCROSS

Cornerstone

There was a pummeled glamour
to the cherubs and chipped roses
trimming the brownstone,
something voluptuary
like the late-night mugshot
of an ill-starred celebrity.

I tended to walk briskly
past the gilt-framed mirror
that overhung the fireplace
in the mahogany hall,
a Havisham's vault replete
with dust and deep shadows.

We lived on the top floor
in the old servants' quarters.
Reluctant to use heat
we hunched along in sweaters
when the winter chill leaked in
through the rotting windows.

It took me months
to sleep easily in that room;
my drifting off
was uncannily interrupted
by the braying of the floorboards
and curses from the street.

Becoming restive
in the silent indoor hours
after school
I began pottering around
the ragged corridors
that veined out from the stairwell;

I parted entire afternoons
between peering down
the dumbwaiter shaft
and watching light pass
through the cambers
of beveled glass,

wondering all the while,
with a cunning chill,
at the absence of tenants
opening the ash doors
or tramping
up and down the steps.

The building
I rent a room in now
has no secrets;
my loft is sanitized
converted factory space,
scrubbed weekly to its bones.

The gleam of chrome fixtures
makes me giddy with longing
for the house I grew up in,
the dash of mystery
in an otherwise
conventionally afflicted childhood

—father gone, mother overworked—
the place where I, having no heart
for the gruff routines of the street,
preferred many days
to loiter alone
learning to talk to ghosts.

DANIELLE RAULLI

Hot Tea

The American woman slices cake.
The Chinese woman lights a lantern
that is old but still a stunning red.
They both steep green tea
in blue china cups filled with water,
so hot it burns the tongue.

The American woman holds her tongue
and gives the Chinese woman a piece of cake
before soothing her mouth with a cool drink of water.
She stands to straighten the lantern
but knocks over the pot of water for the tea
onto the tablecloth that is bright red.

The American woman's face becomes red
and she makes a sly tongue
in cheek remark about spilling the tea.
She mops up the mess and slices more cake.
As soon as she's done fixing the lantern
she goes to the kitchen to boil more water.

The Chinese woman helps clean up the water
and smiles with lips that are cherry red.
She points to the lantern
and says something in a foreign tongue,
proceeding to take a slice of cake
while sweetly sipping tea.

She stirs yellow honey into the tea
and fondly remembers her mother's water
lilies in the pond. When she bites into the cake
the dimples in her cheeks become a rosy red
and you can see the crumbs roll around her tongue.
She lights up like the lantern.

The American woman admires the lantern
but purses her lips when she sips the tea,
she doesn't recognize the taste on her tongue.
On the table is a vase filled with water
that was supposed to hold her garden's red
roses. She realizes hosting is not a piece of cake.

They both silently eat cake and watch the lantern
bugs that are glowing red and buzzing around their tea
water, talking without using their tongues.

KATE SHERIDAN

A Lie

What's
in the notebook,
he asked and I said,
Nothing.
Nothing at all, and
grabbed it from him and
shoved it under the bed and
went to sleep.
And that
was a lie because obviously
I'd written in it and
what it said was,
Sometimes I just don't like you at all, and
so I guess
lying next to him all night
was the bigger lie
really.

EMILY TANG

City Life in the Second Gilded Age
(based on an issue of the *New York Times Magazine* by the same title)

I speed along the freeway towards
the far end of Brooklyn, aching to reach
Canarsie, my home of seventeen years.
For once the traffic traveling away
from the city hardly moves: headlights
in the opposite lane stood still, inching
forward as if New Yorkers were fleeing en masse,
horrified by a predatory dollar sign.

◇

Nearly fifty percent of New Yorkers believe
they overpay for what the boroughs offer.

◇

That was, anyway, something
I recently read off a glossy page,

a three-seconds' flip from portraits
and blurbs of those who fret
over the super-rich, experts paid to worry
so the rich need not: Mr. Zabel,
blue-eyed postnuptial lawyer
neat in his red bowtie, professional
who negotiates man and wife's worth;
Dr. Varn, poised like a superhero,
stethoscope about his neck,
a medical concierge who seeks
helipads for emergency evacuations;
Ms. Perry, family wealth counselor;
Dr. Klauer, off-the-menu nutritionist;
even Ms. Onet, children's party planner
who once rented a warehouse,
transformed it into a gluttony factory,
made wall and ceiling edible, for only a smidge
over half the price of a Brooklyn home.

◇

In the op-ed section, a *New York Times* reader
from La Crosse, WI, wrote in response:
"I still love to visit New York,
but if your New York issue represents
the ethos of the city now, I wouldn't
want to live there anymore. It's not my purse
that can't afford it, but my heart."

◇

For the record, my heart is just fine,
purse strings tight as ever.
The city's core has always resided
in bare-boned Canarsie,
neighborhood with neither
wine shop nor sushi bar nor
very many starving artist types
who fly rainbow flags. I do not
foresee a parade of croissants
and other pastries venturing
into this old Native American village,
dotted here and there
with now-bare synagogues.
For heaven's sake,
taxi and livery cabs retire
in driveways of two-family homes.
Canarsie's streets smell
of beef patties, lard and turmeric,
greasy-soft plantains. The men
stand on bodega corners;
a young regular announces
he'll smoke a blunt, sleep all day.

No yoga classes, no cafes
run by hip, green-eyed couples,
but the supermarket
across the street

from the housing projects
prepares for an invasion:
soy milk and organic options
scattered through the aisles, salads
that appear full of weeds,
steady stock of pomegranate juice,
experimental cheese – perhaps
the manager's thinking
white people
might come back,
save the neighborhood.

EMILY TANG

Naturalization

Before sunrise that morning,
before he left his sponsor's apartment
with forms N-400, G-325, G-325 B,
Minh embraced the television set,
caressed its screen with open palms, wept
over its technicolor beauty
as if it were some goddess
who would grant him English idioms,
presidents' names and years of office,
all the symbolism he could handle.

He whistled as he passed
a storefront tabernacle church
and a quarter-operated laundromat
populated by warm plastic chairs.
He stopped in front of a pet shop.
Three years ago when he first arrived
in this land of crisp air, snow and hail,
he recognized his name, or almost
his name, in a half-lit "GROOMING" sign,
a blinking MING – illuminated.

It was destiny, he'd decided then, America
had erected a welcome sign in his honor.

He arrived at INS two hours early,
stars and stripes personified:
courage-tinted knot at his throat,
starched purity-colored dress shirt,
pressed polyester justice-colored pants,
dressed in homage to Francis Scott Key.

Minh sat in a fluorescent waiting room,
surrounded by wannabe Americans,
most scanning an English handbook,
some counting along rosary beads.

Never during his interview
did Minh elaborate on the taste
of crusty French Indochina baguettes,
spiky fruit the size of watermelons,
refugee camps and catfish in shit ponds,
his journey like a dreadful children's story
filled with ships, pirates stripped
of black patches, wild-eyed,
no shiny hooks whatsoever.

TOM WILLIAMS

The Perils of the Coinciding of Bath Time with the Witching Hour

As Randolph gazed across the room,
The witch's voice rang clear;
The haunting echoes bidding him
To her cauldron draw near.

But flat against the wall he pressed,
"I will not!" he declared.
With banshee wail she screeched "You must!"
And beckoned with teeth bared.

Above the bubbling pot he saw
The wretched steam arise.
With all his strength he stood his ground,
And tight he squeezed his eyes.

But then to his distress he heard
The witch's final wail,
"Get in at once or no dessert!"
And Randolph's will did fail.

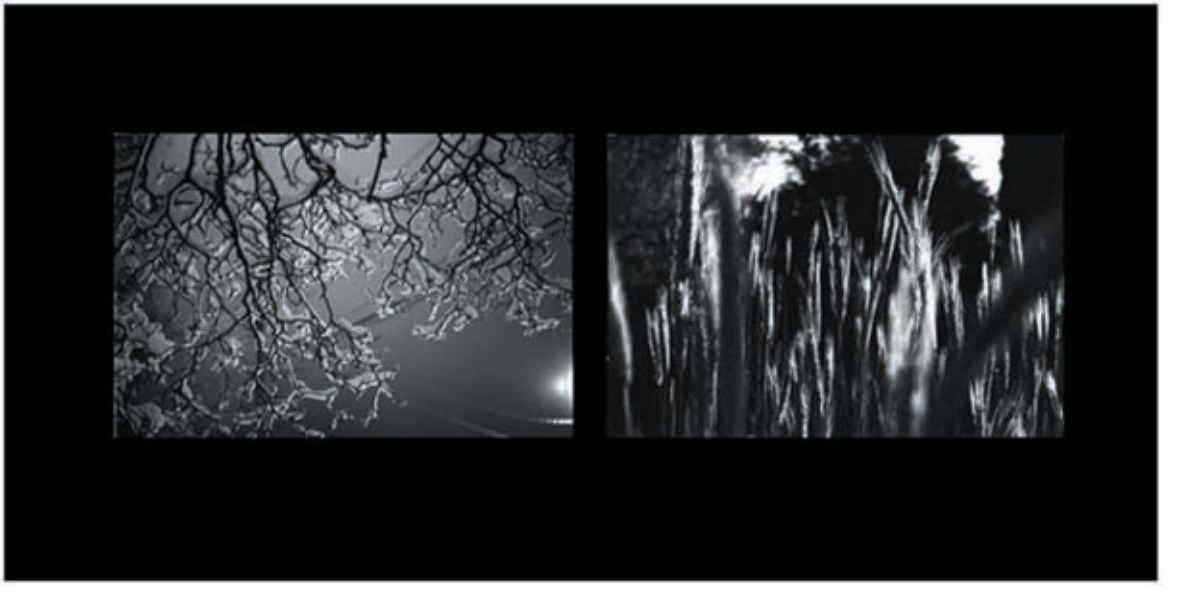
His head hung low, he came to her,
Too fearful of her wrath,
And with one last defiant grunt
He got into the bath.

Art

REBECCA FORNABY
Untitled | 8 x 10 | Silver Gelatin Print | 2007

XIAOXIN FENG

L'eau | 8 x 15 | Black and White Photograph | 2008



XIAOXIN FENG

Patterns | 8 x 15 | Black and White Photograph | 2008

MIRANDA RAIMONDI
Jagged Rocks and Water | Inkjet Color Photograph | 2006

AMANDA POOLER
Living Jacket | 18 x 24 | Scratchboard | 2008

JULIO MONTERROSA
Wooden Figure | Water Color and Pencil | 2008

NONNY CHIZEA
Steps | Color Photograph | 2007

LINDSEY PEARLMAN
Untitled | Silver Gelatin Print | 2007

MIRANDA RAIMONDI
A Spotlight in Rome | Black and White Inkjet Photograph | 2006

CHELSEA D'APRILE
Secrets | 8 x 10 | Silver Gelatin Print | 2007

OLIVIA WOLFGANG-SMITH
Untitled | 8.5 x 11 | Pencil | 2008

ALISON FISHER

To Distract Flies and Demons | 5 x 6.5 | Color Photograph | 2007

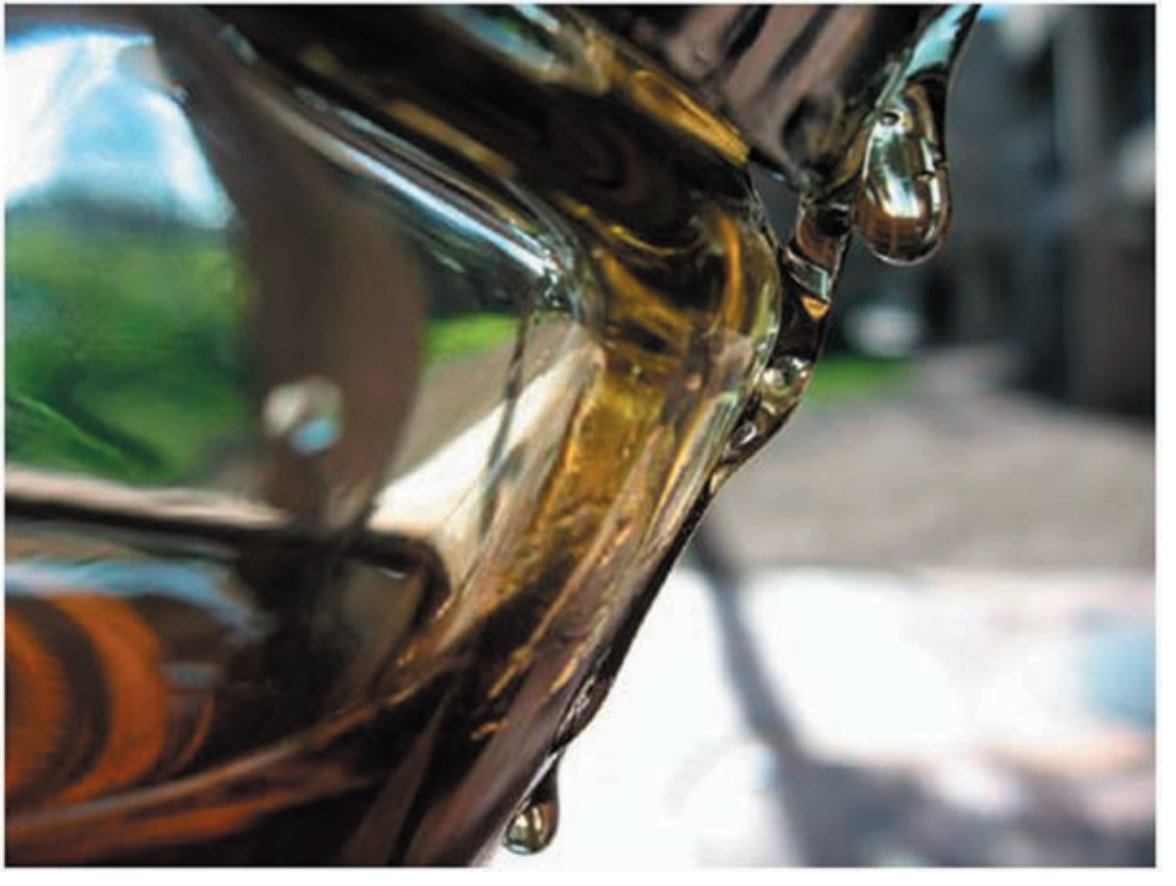
MADELEINE GUNTER

Rabbits | 16 x 12 | Oil on Canvas

NONNY CHIZEA
Tiny Dancer | Color Photograph | 2007

AMANDA POOLER

Disaster | 30 x 48 | Oil on Canvas | 2007



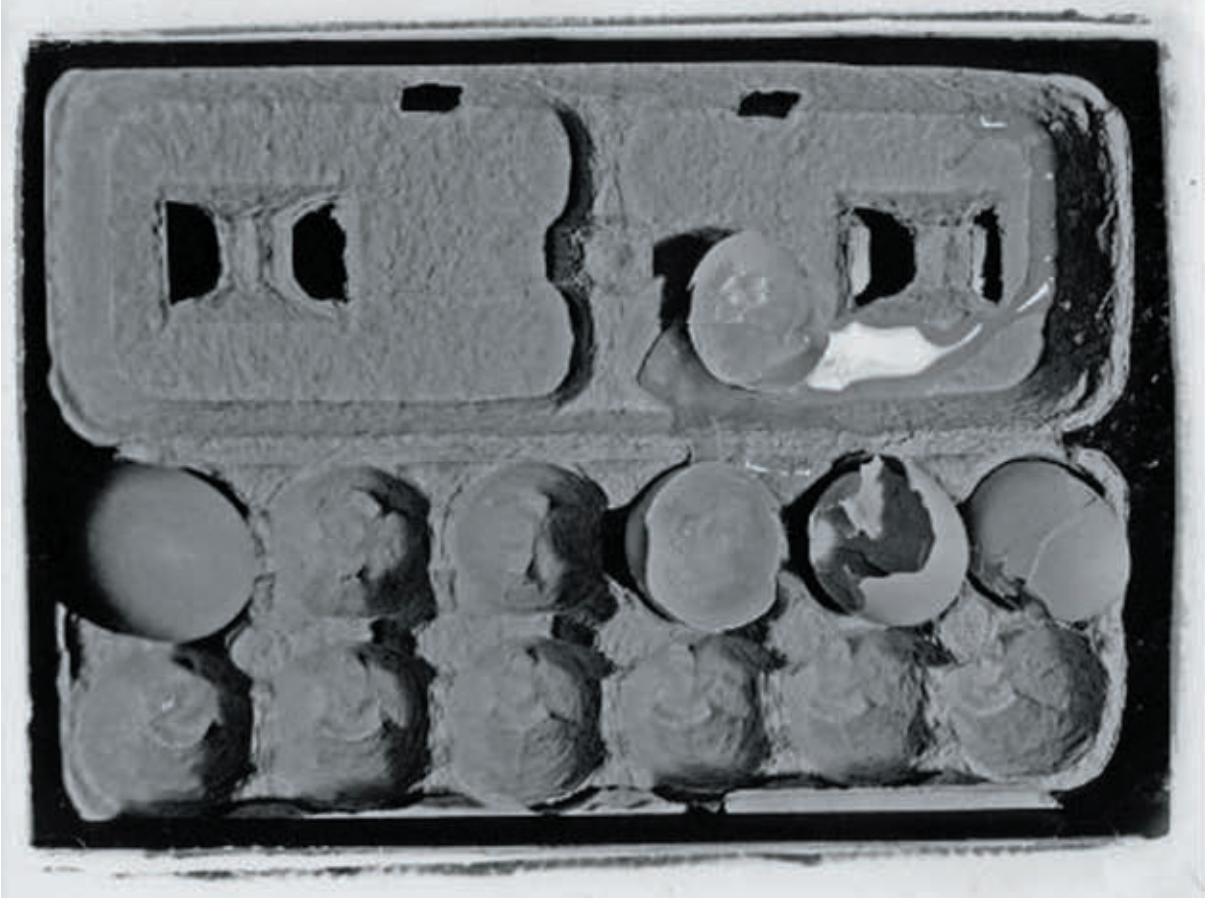
ISHA OHJA

Honey | 6.5 x 4.8 | Digital Color Photograph | 2007

KRISTIN EUGENIO
The El | Digital Color Photograph | 2007

REBECCA FORNABY
Untitled | 8 x 10 | Silver Gelatin Print | 2007

ERIN SHAPIRO
Untitled | 8 x 12 | Silver Gelatin Print | 2006



REBECCA FORNABY
Untitled | 8 x 10 | Silver Gelatin Print | 2007

Fiction

MICHAEL HARWICK

Yes and No

It'd look totally different if I loved her. As it stands, I think I only like her. Maybe. Can you even really like someone whose every movement grates on you like a muscle spasm? Even now she's rolling over on top of me and cooing. Her hair is in my face and up my nose, and those big red lacquered nails are pressed deep in my skin. First tender deep, then just plain old deep. I cry out. Don't mean to. She says you like that? Yes. I say to her. Yeah, come on. Do it again. She says okay.

She's one of those girls. We all know a few. Delicately, they're overeager. She was ready to impress me as soon as I asked her name. I could see it in her face. I'm great at reading faces. I ask her name and confusion lights up her cheeks a subtle maroon. She's not sure how to answer because she's not sure how far it's going to go between us. She says it's the music, what, and I repeat the question. She's not stupid, however she might look. She knows from my face I'm not the kind of guy to ask her name if I wasn't interested. And I know from her face she's interested in me. She hedges her bets, shouts some monosyllabic sorority moniker I never hear and I smile and say wanna dance, knowing the answer. She says it anyway. Yes.

Now here we are. She's scratching me like some goddamned cat, clawing at the tight wet skin of my thighs. Full to bursting. You know the feeling, I'm sure. Like a runner's high, only instead of coming down in those short stuttered gasps it's a long graceful sigh. Nearest I can get is it's like this one time I saw a ballet. One of the girls was a dancer, asked me to come along. She had some big important solo, she told me, only really it was a duet. There she was, frilled and ruffled beyond reason, far away on the edge of the stage. And on the other side, some tall Russian guy, maybe Czech. Lithuanian. Something. He took two steps forward and she leaped toward him and before I knew what she was in the air, horizontal, a living decrescendo, falling from her climax into the great broad arms of the Lithuanian guy. It's like that, gravity keeping time with music.

Only it was hard for me that time, then, to keep calm. You know? It was the Lithuanian guy. The way he held her, too close, even for a dance, even for theatre's sake. It's been said about me I have a taste for the theatrical. Me, I don't see it. All I see are all these little things, all the things people don't want for me or anyone else to see. I'm good with people. I'm good with faces. I can see things in their faces they don't want me to, things they try to keep hidden. And sometimes I can't let it go.

That's how it was for her. I liked her. I really did. I didn't love her either, not like Lizzie, but at least I liked her. More than I can say for some of these girls, some of these silly no-name girls. When I killed her, though, that was how she fell: the same way, I remember, into my arms, in a perfect curve, measure for measure, eyes open and dull, seeing even then, I knew, I knew, the Lithuanian man. Hers. I knew. I'm good with faces, even once the blood drains out the neck and onto the ground.

Back to this one. She's okay, but she's not great, nothing spectacular. She's got it in her mouth now. Predictably. It always comes to that. In the beginning, you know, I was happy for it. Now it's old hack, it's been done. It's harder for me to really get into it. She seems to notice, looks up at me and asks is everything okay? Yes, baby, yes, honey, keep going, keep it up and she goes back to it. It's amazing how far you can get without knowing their names. Baby. Honey. They don't need names, these girls, they don't want them. They don't ever want to be remembered for who they are, just what they do and how well they do it. Some of them do it pretty well. Better than some slut you've got to pay for at any rate, the touch of class that comes from not paying for your good times notwithstanding. She's still got her nails dug in, now in the backs of my calves, hard enough I can feel my pulse, and if it weren't for that I'd be happier. But I can't ask her to stop. That ruins the flow, that ruins the game. It's good enough, though, good enough it gets me thinking about Lizzie. She was the one who started it all, I think. She was different. She has a name to go with her face. She wanted to be remembered.

She wasn't the first one, either. It'd be a totally different story if she was the first. Being the first would make Lizzie the origin, the fucking apple, and I can tell you that she isn't. I don't know how many before her, when I first saw her with her friends across the room all those cities ago. Maybe five. Five sounds about right. That's not counting the ones I've had in my dreams. Five of these girls and five disappointments. And it gets harder each time. You start to doubt yourself, wonder if maybe you're going for the wrong type. It's just that they're so pretty, that's the thing, you know you're not wrong. Too many people make that mistake about pretty, that it's all in the face. But it isn't. It spreads like spidersilk over her whole

body. It's how her arms floated, how her hair swayed too slow to be real, like she moved through water. It's how the muscles in her neck shifted under her skin when she laughed. She says her name and I hear it. I hear it, this time. I'm curious because I'm hearing it. I realize, it's the z. Men get lost in a strange sound like a z. Lizzie. Lizzzzzzzzzzie.

Lizzie said she taught tenth grade English and I wondered why, why oh why, waste such grace rotting in the corner of a classroom. I want to say this, but I stop myself. It's what's in her face, how her eyes went wide and how her lips curled around the word teach, protecting it, coveting it, so I say how noble of you. She says she hardly thinks so and I ask why. She tells me that for a long time she just felt like she had to teach and that's all, like she was born to. She asks me if I felt like I was born to do something and I look down at the ground and say I think so. Maybe. But really I don't. I do what I do. And when I can't do it anymore, that's it and I'll die. Lizzie thinks there's a reason for her being. Her smile is lax and she brings her glass close in to her face. The dim lights and smoky haze hood her eyes like serpents, her lashes quivering. And I am entranced by her. She asks what do you do and –

Fuck! She gets up off me and looks panicked, she knows what she did, stupid no-name girl. Tears are leaping to her eyes and she's flushed and wiping her face and screaming I'm sorry, I'm sorry and when I look down it's bleeding. A red ooze like wine, thickened. Fucking bleeding on my fucking white sheets and I ask her what is her fucking problem, low and even and now her tears freeze and she's suddenly like the rest of them, when they all got scared. Something happens to their faces like they get hit with a cold gust of cyanide. The muscles in her neck tense and her lips twitch. I'm sorry. She says it. Quietly. She thinks I need to be calmed down. She's going about it the wrong way, though. They're never good with faces like I am, that's the problem. They're illiterate, anthropologically speaking. She knows how calm I am about my fucking bloody cock. She knows. That's what's got her so scared. I shouldn't be calm. I should be livid. I should be a mad howling dog but I'm not – I'm just quiet and ready and smiling now, smiling at her frozen face. Outside there's a siren and behind her eyes she gets to thinking maybe, just maybe, she's made a mistake.

She's just got bad luck is all. Lizzie and I got along great. For a while, I mean. I told her I was working for an architectural firm, even though that was a lie, sort of. I had just been downsized out of a job when I met Lizzie. But you need to know how to get them if you want them. And, make no mistake, I wanted Lizzie. Bad. So bad I felt it. Yes. That was it. I felt it in my cock how bad I wanted her. It's gotten harder

since Lizzie, to feel it there. It was hard enough before her. But now, now it's almost impossible. Well, not impossible. There's the matter of my bitten cock to attend to. But it's rare.

Lizzie and I danced and drank and then we went back to my place and fucked. She was great. She was better naked than I imagined. It's funny. I remember most what came before, how she walked over to the bed. When you watch a movie and it gets to that point where the leading man and his woman are going to fuck, the woman tries to walk over to the bed as sexily as she can. Sometimes, I guess it works. Never for me, but. For other guys. And other times, you know, no matter how good the actors are, that they're just playing their parts. That, in reality, if it came down to the matter of a fuck, neither would give a fuck. It wouldn't matter.

Lizzie had red hair. Did I say that already? No. Red hair like the Queen before her, but long, and straight, and glimmering. She walked out of the bathroom, but she didn't, because her feet barely touched the ground. She floated out, nude and white and red and put thousands of starlets to shame. This was how it was supposed to happen. I felt it. I felt it harder. I felt it harder than ever. Hardest of all. It was how she moved. They make the mistake of thinking only the face can be pretty. But a woman is a sculpture brought to life. The clay limbs they are assigned, moving, breathing a rough polluted chemical ocean, borne on, floating. She inhales and her lips part silently. Against the white room she is a streak of vivid red lightning. I feel my hair stand on end in her presence. I wait for the thunder. And it comes, it comes, it comes, slow and rolling, a graceful gliding, it comes a rumble in her step when she comes toward me.

She climbs on top of me and I climb on top of her and before I know it it's begun, the usual game. It happens with all of them. Yes and no. It's easy to play and easy to win. Because when it comes down to it, sex is all about the presentation. The feeling is pleasure. You expect it to be pleasurable. The feeling, then, is ancillary. What makes good sex good sex is what else you put into it. The colorations of the kneecaps as they flex, the enveloping dark of another body's hairless limbs. And the voices. Mechanical, but blazing chorus of voices from the darkest recesses of the primal brain, screaming together – YES YES YES YES YES YES YES until there is nothing left but a stain and a gasp and an echo of yes lost to the dark. Screaming together until you're lost and sleeping and the sound of the city can keep you once again.

And then there's no. We've almost gotten to no with this one. Now she's scared shitless and I wonder if she's not too easy. She hasn't moved from against the far wall, her limbs still crumpled and ineffectual. The beauty goes out of them when they're afraid – it's the tension, fills them with wild tics and hardens

their nails. It's probably because I've been so quiet remembering Lizzie. How many minutes has my face been slack but my eyes wide and riveted, stuck to her naked frame, unmoving? I ask her what was the problem, did you get hungry, indicating my bleeding chewed-on cock and she sort of shakes and whispers out no. That's when I know it's begun. She glances at my nightstand, sharp fluting motion of the eyes and neck, so you can see the carotid flutter as the skin stretches. I don't have a phone. I say it and she lets out a soft small cry and stops her looking. Not for long, though, just a split second. As soon as her mouth opens I am sitting up on my knees and waiting to see what she'll do, which is nothing.

But the look on her face makes me feel strange. It's a paradox. Every equation has its paradoxes. In terror an ugly body suddenly is transformed into something beautiful. Because, when she accepts what is about to happen as the inevitable, it's all over. She goes slack from the fading flow of adrenaline. And in the filtered night light of the city, her crumpled paper limbs excite me. I decide to give her one more chance.

I smile at her and ask her to suck it. She says what. So I repeat myself. This time she doesn't say anything. I can see she's trying. Her face is puckered around her eyes, those wide whole eyes and it makes her look like a beaver choking on its tongue. I can picture the beaver-girl scrambling up and over her dam and it makes me laugh. She says what are you laughing at and it makes me laugh harder and she says stop laughing but I interrupt her and I say what's the matter, I ask her, don't you want to suck me? I thought you were hungry, so I gave you my wood to gnaw on and I laugh harder and harder. She starts crying and saying oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck and buries her blonde hair in her cold twitching hands. When she looks back up, I'm already holding the knife.

I woke up the morning after and Lizzie was next to me, I remember, fair and fiery-fine and red. The little red light that shone through the curtains shot in a straight shaft, illuminating her right buttock. Already I am excited. She has survived the night and – vision out of a dream – still here she lays by me, now, there. I want to keep her here forever. I want to wake up and see her laying there, next to me, her breasts rising and falling as she sleeps. Her name rings in my mind like a gunshot in an empty forest, sign of life, portent of death, in my mind, the death now coming, red and rising like the sun, I felt, coming faster than I could expect. Who was I? I was alone in the dark with Lizzie and her bright red streak of hair next to me, solid, trapped lightning. How long did I have? How long can you keep a spark in a bottle before it escapes and shocks you and flits into the sky? I spoke the words aloud into the dark and she sighed a little

and turned away. I worried, then, pressing my fingers soft and tender one by one into the clay-cold small of her back, thinking. The clock says it's 7:00. I sit up, motionless, slide out of bed. I walk to the kitchen and reach under the sink.

What are you going to do with that, [the nameless girl] asks, and I say, nothing if I can help it. She tells me I should put it away and I tell her her lip is shaking and it's pretty and she cringes. She asks me what I want and I tell her I want her to suck it, I want her to taste her handiwork but by now the blood is a sticky brown crust on my thigh and I am excited again. She whispers no. So I say that's fine, I'm really in the mood now for a good fuck. I ask her to come up and join me in the bed and she says no no no. Three times fast, I say, Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck no no no, and she starts crying again. I think I'll tell her not to worry, that it'll be fine, that she can go. But of course I don't. I can't. She's blowing it. Quickly. The game is on, yes meets no, and I say instead get up here bitch get up here slut and suck my bleeding cock you cock-biting bitch. She sobs harder but she brushes the hair from her face and starts crawling like an insect across the floor. Mascara stains her fingertips a dull violet. It's amazing how far you can get without knowing their names.

Lizzie wakes up when I'm tying her feet together with a piece of plastic cord. I anticipated this, and when she opens her mouth I slip a dishrag between her parting rows of teeth and pull back so hard I can hear her neck creak and twin trickles of blood descend from the corners of her forced smile. She's making grunting noises and trying to arc her back deep enough to get her face out of the pillow, but I can't let her. I'm straddling her back and I start hitting her, hard, just around her bound hands in the small of her back and all of a sudden I'm crying. I'm saying I'm sorry over and over but I'm binding her mouth into that smile and sitting on top of her, my arms tense, the squirming S of her back electric beneath my thighs. I squeeze with my calves. She shudders, once, falls to crying. I lean down next to her and I'm still crying stroking her hair, her eyes dart rapid and wide and then her nostrils are flaring, her lower eyelids puckering in confusion upwards over the gems of her eyes when I touch her hair. Even scared, repulsed, she is beautiful. I say her name and she trembles. I'm crying and she's crying but she seems blind, lost in her Z, my Z, the S of her curving form. She can't see the love in my eyes she's in so deep, so lost. So I ask her, Lizzie, what do you see? And I run the knife through her hair and kiss her bloody cheek.

All I'm doing is reducing to the lowest common denominator. I'm simplifying things. People want to make sex so complicated. At the root, this is all there is. More or less. Pleasure or pain. Yes or no. Life or

death. Decisions, dichotomies. This I do believe. Believed, before Lizzie. Suddenly, unexplainably, in a lightning bolt she blurred the lines with static electricity. She was so beautiful it hurt. It ached. I lay there with her for a long time, all of it throbbing, thinking, and tracing the knife up and down her flowing tumble of hair, slowly across her back, up her arm, around the curve of her cheekbone. I expect her to keep crying in the unfair agony. But she's passing the test. I am watching her face, watching her arms, the muscles, our eyes locked and huge, seeking reasons that don't exist, that never will. I can feel her in me, and I am cold and tremble next to her. Her fear fades. She relaxes into nude repose. The knife tracing endlessly. I never break the skin, just tease her with the roving glinting tip, the hint of the blade, the boundary between life and death as thin as her perfect skin, paling now, breathing slowing. Her fingers, clench, relax, and her eyes close. She turns away as I sit up. Unconscious, she is beautiful. I am jealous. Unaware of everything outside, lost in the prison fortified by her roguish red hair. Forever. I pick up her body and feel the weight of her slender legs as they tumble over my arms, out of my hands. I move across the room and kiss her on the lips, just once, the taste of her like a shot of menthol to my mind. I open the closet door and sit her upright within and then I shut the door and begin to get ready for work, but then I remember that there is no work anymore and I wonder what I'm supposed to do. Her purse is on the counter from where she left it last night. I walk over to the counter and the clasp comes open with a faint tick.

I am holding her hair in my hand as the girl squirms yelling no no no no. But what can she do. I tell her it'll hurt less if she just stops but she bites me again, hard, on the arm, and I shake her. Her neck is flapping spastically back and forth and her tongue begins to slide out. I yell at her don't you see what I'm doing for you? Don't you see I'm giving you a chance? She gulps deep like a fish to get her breath back and falls to crying again. The knife is in my other hand I remember so I roll my eyes at her and say slut and cut her once across the thigh. She screams the loudest at the cut, from the slowness, I drag the knife slowly across her leg and watch her face the whole time. Choking, leaning back, arms extended. Pain, the beautiful contortion. Any body is made glorious by pain, I think, going back the other direction, the pain of pleasure, or just pain for pain's sake, the expressions, the attitudes are almost identical. It's just a matter of where you are in the game of yes and no. She's clutching at her bleeding leg and I force her down on the bed and spread her weakening limbs and touch her bleeding leg and she screams but I am watching the undulation of her pelvis as the blood spurts on my hand. It doesn't take long before I am in her and she's clutching at me, now, my back, confused. I've been through the paradox enough, one of those omnipres-

ents, the paradox of pleasure in pain. I know which face she makes when I am in her. I am good with faces, and that is the best of them.

When I open the closet door I have a plate of noodles in my hand and she squints in the sudden light. She's moved into the farthest corner and looks up at me with dull eyes. Then she realizes where she is and what is happening and she starts screaming again. Ribbons of drool are winding their way around the rag in her mouth. But I can't take my eyes off of her eyes, now wide and wild, the pupil constricting to a single point in a sea of green crushed velvet. I lower the plate down and take the knife out of my pocket. The light from the window glints off the blade and paints a streak across her gray face and she quiets down. I stoop down low in the closet and tell her that I'm going to untie her and that if she does anything stupid then I'll cut out her heart and step on it in front of her. She nods, slowly at first, then quickly once I start moving the knife toward her. I untie her mouth first. She's quiet, cold, but I can feel her blood simmering in her cheeks. Stares at me and squares her jaw, her hair everywhere and her naked form shivering despite her. I smile and pull my hands away. See? I say, it's better now, and then I lean down and untie her feet and her hands and the knife is always in view, always in the other hand, and my eyes never move from hers. What do you want from me, chokes, sputters, her mouth is dry. And I say I don't know. But I know I've never seen anyone so beautiful before in my life. So I want you. She tells me what they always do, that people will ask questions, that people will worry. I push the food toward her and sit in the doorway, blotting out the sunlight, so in the half-dark all I hear are the clicking of her nails against the plate and the pinprick lights living in her fixated gaze. When she's done with her meal, I bind her hands and feet and lock her lips in mine. Her tongue is dead and accusatory. But her skin is soft and her hair is fine. I put the rag in her mouth and shut the door.

This one's saying the same old thing to me now, now that the pleasure is subsiding and the horror is sinking back in. The knife's in my hand and her leg is still bleeding but she just won't shut up, she's going on and on about her friends, how they knew she was going to that bar, how they would figure it out sooner or later. I never mean to scare them more than I have to, but I say shut up and then I yell it again and she does. It's a stupid argument. She's like the rest of them. She doesn't see how it all works. For all intents and purposes, she's missing. She's single, though. For the first couple of days after she's dead, people will call her house and just think they keep missing her. I laugh. Some of them will get impatient, angry with her. They'll leave irritated messages on her answering machine, on her cell phone, long dead too, com-

plaining about what a bitch she's being. By the time anyone realizes a missing person is really gone and not just hard to get a hold of, their eyes have been poked at by the rats outside and I've already disappeared. I don't do this sort of thing very often. It's hard to find the right kind of girl. And getting harder every day. Every time. But each time, I hope. I tell her as much, while she's being so quiet. I say I had such high hopes for you. And she says no one last time. The knife slides in easily and she goes quiet.

The next time I open the door, I have left the knife behind. I have some Chinese food and a pair of chopsticks in a bag, and I say how are you doing and I laugh because I forgot about her mouth. Her eyes are half-lidded like she's been sleeping. Maybe for most of the day, for all I know. I put the bag of food down on the ground and start to untie her mouth and then her hands and then her feet and all of a sudden I wonder where the plate is. Then Lizzie tells me where it is. Out from under her foot one half of the china plate slides and skitters across the hardwood and then the other half is in my back and I'm screaming, screaming loud and hard because she's thrust it in there down so deep and for a minute I want to kill her, just take her right there with my bare hands. But then I look up and see her, triumphant, thinking so ferociously that she's won and my heart melts. She's driving the broken plate into my back and moving it in sharp jagged lines all over and scraping the flesh from my bones and the lightning is back in her face. She's smiling a smile I've smiled a thousand times and I think yes yes yes yes this this this is beauty this is rage this is the passion and this is the goddess woman.

Then it's over and she's getting up. I grab at her ankle. She falls, bangs her head against the edge of the doorframe. Blood is in her hair and I can just see the knife on the edge of the table. She's clawing herself up but I'm faster and I get on top of her bare back and start to choke her. My hands tighten around her neck. I feel her pulse quicken and it gets me excited. She's sputtering all over the ground and her pale slim arms are flailing and her legs are kicking me and once she brings her heel into the small of my back. Against the slices she's made it stings and I jump up and off of her swearing. But she's already seen the knife on the counter and she's running for it. I pick up the lamp from the bedside table and hurl it at her but she ducks and is screaming now and the glass is everywhere. And she's screaming what she hasn't screamed yet. She's screaming no no no no. And I have no choice.

The counter isn't far. It's in the bathroom. I left the knife too far and she's got a good chance at getting it. I don't want to have to kill her. But she's run a plate into my back about twenty times. I misjudged her. And that's the worst part. For a minute, as she's running for the bathroom, stumbling over pieces of bro-

ken glass and crying out as they lacerate her unblemished soles, I picture us together. The kids are coming home from school and they can smell the meat loaf she's cooking for dinner. Now I'm running after her, big bounding strides over the glass and little caveats of her blood in the rug. They're calling for mommy and daddy and we teach them to read and to always flush the toilet and at night after they're asleep I stay awake in bed and marvel at her and tell her how beautiful she is. The bathroom door now, flung open and the countertop just ahead of her. My arms outstretched. Every night I am enveloped in that hair, by those thighs, invited. The mystery made flesh, the art brought to life. Shaped by so fine a maker and so brilliant a technician and mine, all mine at last, forever. Happily ever after.

She's got her fingers at the edge of the counter when I dive. I slide across the floor. Glass cuts my stomach and I wince, but my hands clasp around her ankles. I hear a gasp from somewhere up above me when I pull backward. Her head hits the counter first. Her chin slams into the edge, and the crack tells me some of her teeth have come loose and are rolling in her mouth. She sputters, dazed, and then I pull back again, weeping openly now, saying, It hurts me! It hurts me! You are too beautiful and it hurts me more! This time she hits the floor face-first. A few seconds marked by my breathing. Then her hair grows. It grows in a sticky mass all over the white tile, spreading outward like a nebula, engulfing the universe at my feet. My footprints in the blood as I shape her body. I don't bother turning it over. People think beauty is all in the face. But I'm crying now, crying for her facelessness, crying because only living beauty is contained within the face. In death, she is beautiful, her body is beautiful. I arrange her limbs in a T. Her hair is blowing in some breeze that's gotten in through some crack. Then I back up and out of the room and get ready to leave. In my mind, she's still there, preserved on the crimson canvas of the floor.

It'd look totally different if I'd loved her. As it stands, I think I only liked her. Maybe. I don't even know what the fuck I think anymore. Can you even like someone once they're dead, and you're carrying them down the stairs and she's giving you muscle spasms? Even now she's rolling on top of me, limp, bleeding. Her hair is in my face and up my nose, and those big red lacquered nails are pressed deep in my skin. First tender deep, then just plain old deep. I cry out. Don't mean to. But I do. Always will. Because it's just another sad case, another non-Lizzie. Even when I've got her outside next to the building I'm thinking of how I should move her, how I should shape her, the clay of her dead limbs. This no-name non-Lizzie with friends she just wouldn't shut up about. I lay her on the ground and think about it for a minute. This baby, this honey, this bitch slut or whoever she is. I fold her into a question mark and leave her in the

alley next to the dumpster. It's been said that I have a taste for the theatrical. I don't see it. I only have a taste for the beautiful, the fine, the elegant. I don't mean to make symbols out of them. I only have ever had a taste for Lizzie. Lizzie living, Lizzie dead, didn't make a difference at the time. But sometimes I get to thinking. I'm good with faces. I ruined hers. And that's the saddest part of all. My art's incidental.

KAITY HILL

Just Julia

They lived in a small townhouse in the suburbs of a large city, near good schools and expensive grocery stores and eclectic restaurants. They bought a dog and they fought over who would take it out on walks. One of Joseph's clients came over for dinner and the dog peed on her expensive red shoes and barked up her skirt and she decided that she just had to have him. And so he gave the small dog to the client with a bottle of good wine and two weeks later he was promoted. His wife congratulated him with sex and smiles and pancakes. Then she was pregnant.

Julia blamed Joseph, Joseph blamed her. But they never told each other and they celebrated her growing stomach with ice cream. She decided to try every Ben and Jerry's flavor, and later, feeling guilty, ran on the treadmill to get rid of the spreading cellulite on the backs of her thighs. But now she couldn't even stand to look at her legs in the mirror, so she stopped shaving, instead started exfoliating her belly with vanilla scrub so that she could wear small tank tops that would reveal her baby and everyone would wonder at her glowing skin and sweet smell. The doctor told her to stop exercising so much, that it wasn't healthy for the baby. Julia asked, "The baby? What about for me?"

They sat in the living room of their little house, Julia's legs propped by several hard pillows under her knees, her arms spread to the side and her eyes closed. Joseph read women's magazines with thought-provoking articles about pregnancy and wondered what it would be like to carry life in his stomach. He drank another beer.

Do you love me? Yes. Still? Always.

Julia imagined sitting in a white wicker rocking chair shifting back and forth with her new baby in her arms, making everything better. The baby would be wrapped in pink. A girl, of course. With Joseph's nose, but not his eyes. She had never liked his eyes. They were too kind. He never had a bad word for

anyone, except for his mother and their peeping-tom neighbors whom he called ignorant sycophants. They were always bringing over muffins or cookies: "For the pretty lady," the husband said, and smiled too broadly.

For his part, Joseph showered Julia with gifts and small presents and thoughtful cards and flowers delivered to their door with a singing telegram while he was at work at his little suburban office thinking about promotions and layoffs at his mahogany desk. And Julia sat at home on the couch staring at her inflating breasts thinking about how in seventh grade she bought her first bra and her cup size didn't change for four years. It had been two months and already she had a closet full of bras in various sizes.

When they were in college, when Joseph lived across the hall from a beautiful and silly girl named Julia, all he wanted to do was touch her breasts. Of course he wanted to touch them. He knew what they felt like, he had thought about them before he went to sleep alone in his single bed in his single room, which was not dark because the light from the hallway always kept him awake. He thought about her during class when girls who were sweet, but not *that* sweet turned to him with questions - could I come over to your room tonight for help with this chapter? And do you have any beer? And he always said yes, because he didn't have Julia.

Julia's lips were pink and chapped when she sat drunkenly in the hallway laughing because that was how she was expected to act by the older boys who found her amusing and liked touching her. She was drunk and silly in the hallway and Joseph lay awake listening to her laughter and ramblings.

"Am I drunk?"

"Yes, Julia."

"But if I was drunk, I wouldn't be able to do this." Joseph heard her bedroom door close.

Now she drank soda instead of beer and read *People* instead of *Great Expectations*. She had graduated with honors and not found a job. Joseph went to law school. She stayed home and watched television. He made enough money to buy a large one. Julia cradled her stomach, watching *Jerry Springer* with her feet propped up on the Ikea coffee table. She liked watching bad television in the middle of the afternoon. It made her feel that, for just a moment, she could not live, but just exist in her own body – she was, after all, gestating a child. She imagined a plant growing in her belly and the Ben and Jerry's ice cream in her hand as the fertilizer. Something extra, something sweet. She hoped the baby was a girl. She wanted to name it Madeline and call her Maddie. Or maybe Mads. Julia pulled grey knitted socks over her feet, swollen

from her run, and looked at her legs, which had not been shaved in quite a while. "Up next, what do you do when your wife cheats on you – with her own father?" Jerry was asking. Julia didn't know.

When he came home from work, Joseph made her pasta with cheese and mushrooms and watched her pink lips suck up the noodles. The overhead lighting shadowed her face in hair. He loved how beautiful she was. He touched her cheek that night and kissed her nose and fell asleep on his side, taking care to give her room so that she wouldn't be too hot. Julia lay there quiet and cold and wanting him. The clock ticked. The alarm went off. Joseph went to work. I love you.

Julia had liked Joseph for the same reason all the other girls liked Joseph – he was kind. He really meant it when he said, "Come by later and I'll help you with your homework." He really meant it when he said "I'll call you." Julia found boys that liked her silly but didn't like her serious. Juila found boys that liked her taking off her bra but not formulating a thesis for her Shakespeare class. Julia had found lots of boys. And then she found Joseph. Joseph who lived across the hall and had expensive beer in his refrigerator. He taught her that alcohol was meant to be enjoyed and about supply and demand graphs and international trade laws. His kindness let him put up with her.

When the winter came in their third year of college, Joseph had pulled her out of her hibernation into the snow to lie in the white and talk to him about her small existence and everything existential and he pulled her close into his body and made her warm. She kissed him quietly where his jaw met his ear, just where he had wanted it, just how he had imagined it, and she could not believe she had done such a thing and I'm sorry. No, girl, come here. And they kissed until she no longer regretted it.

Because the winter had come, they did not go outside unless they had to, and one night he took her into his room where before they had only talked, and took off all her clothes and she took off his and she thought is that all? I love you. Another night she brought a second toothbrush in his room because she lived on the other side of campus now and she liked clean teeth. She wished she had known him earlier.

Julia was slowly discovering how difficult it was to fill her time at home. The cellulite was growing as quickly as her stomach. So were her ankles. She did not feel like a glowing princess. So she pushed the folding treadmill back into its place under the bed where it stayed next to her box of elementary school love letters.

When he got home from work, Joseph took Julia into the yard where he had set up lawn chairs and a picnic dinner. He drank sparkling cider with her because he didn't want her to feel left out. She held his

hand until he wasn't sure which fingers were his because the light was fading over the white fence and the sunset turned her unshaved legs orange. She picked at her food with a silver fork and smiled at him, her husband who loved her so much and who had made her dinner and bought her flowers and given her the baby she hadn't wanted but now loved, very much. She felt her stomach and placed her plate on top.

When Julia had moved back into her parent's house after graduation, Joseph lectured her on the phone for being immature and scared. She broke up with him and called him fifteen and a half minutes later to tell him that she couldn't live without him and would he please move in with her? She would cook him all his meals and do his laundry and why don't we get a dog. They rented a small apartment near his law school and drank coffee on the fire escape during the fall. She danced to loud music when she folded clothes in the bedroom while he tried to read. He didn't mind because he had her now.

Julia sat at the kitchen table eating strawberry yogurt and a bagel. She had thrown out the Ben and Jerry's, all four pints of it. Outside there were squirrels chasing each other up and down a tree. She wondered at how they moved so quickly, never seeming to move their feet and gripping the tree so tightly, never letting go, never falling. She put her hand on her belly and looked down at the yogurt which was beginning to smell rancid. The world spun and she clutched her child. Rockabye, baby.

The television glowed blue at three in the morning in the living room of their townhouse. Julia was sitting in the middle of the couch on the center orange cushion with her feet on the coffee table. Julia? The room burned curelean with the flash of a horror movie trailer. Come to bed. Julia didn't move. She said she was fine. She couldn't sleep, the baby was awake, she was awake, the television was awake, wish we still had that dog that you gave away. Joseph didn't know that she had even really noticed. He took a warm red blanket from the hall linen closet and tucked it around her, propping a pillow behind her head. Her middle was swollen so that the blanket around her stomach looked like a small beach ball. He had a sudden frightening urge to kick it, for keeping his wife out of his bed, for so many things, but instead he just kissed her mouth. His kiss left a dent on her chapped pink lower lip, which was sticking out slightly underneath her white teeth. She grunted a response – something about the baby.

In the morning when the alarm went off and after he took his shower and dressed in his clean suit, he found Julia half-asleep on the couch, still covered with the blanket on the same cushion. The dent had stayed in her perfect lips, even with her warm breath moving softly in and out. The television was still on – *Live with Regis and Kelly*. Joseph made himself breakfast and watched the back of his wife's blonde

head, rigid and focused. "Oh, Regis," Kelly said.

"I'm making a baby," Julia had said to him one night in bed a month after she began to show. "I'm making a baby," she had repeated.

"Yes you are," he had replied. "But you're all I need."

Joseph left for work with the television still on and his wife's teeth unbrushed, her pregnant stomach rising and falling under the red blanket to the tinny sounds of sitcom. He was worried about her sitting on the couch, with her swollen ankles and expressionless face. This was not his Julia. Not at all. And Julia sat on the couch and imagined holding her baby with small wet pink lips and little drops of spit reflecting the light of the television. There would be a chorus of cooing and even the neighbors would join in. She saw them sometimes sunning outside with no clothes on. Their bodies were wrinkled and the wife's legs were purple from varicose veins and Julia wondered how many children she had.

When Joseph came home, his outline blocked the view of the television where she was learning about polar bears in the wild. It was better than a book. Joseph said her name. Julia. Julia. She felt the cushion underneath her, soggy and wet, her crotch sticky with something that was not water and was not urine. Oh, Joseph. He felt every organ in his body drop to his knees.

He carried her to the tub, the big deep one with the jets that she had wanted so badly, and washed her in the warm water with her head lolled back, the cold tile against her neck rough and wet. She loved his hands on her forearms and the metallic faucet against her toes. She could smell soap. He loved her so much. He wrapped her hair in a towel and carried her to the bed and there were low voices on the phone. On her back, she could feel the wetness from the bathtub soaking in her skin between her thighs and the warm terrycloth robe brushing on her stomach, where there was a baby inside. There was a baby. A baby. And Joseph was holding her hand, he had his cheek on her forehead and Julia smiled at him. She couldn't see if he was smiling back. She felt her eyes closing, she felt her body closing for sleep. There was someone at the front door.

In the white sterile room, a clock with roman numerals—the four said IIII instead of IV and it bothered her. She had taken Latin in college. Why was the clock wrong? Joseph came in and out of the room, always leaving the imprint of his fingers in her palm. Once he fed her bits of a Milky Way bar, flaking away the outside chocolate peel the way she liked it. I love you, I need you, I love you. With the deep dent of Joseph's fingernails in her palm, she put her hand on her stomach and felt her own heartbeat.

When Joseph proposed to Julia, he got down on one knee at a fancy restaurant with candles and flowers and looked up at her face past her cleavage, which was pressed up by the black corset of her dress. Do you love me? I do. He kissed her hand and put the ring on the wrong finger because he was nervous. It didn't fit, but she laughed and was silly, the way he wanted her. Her toes were painted pink with silver dots along the edges in her tall strappy sandals. She was vain and that was why he loved her. She knew these things. He kissed her hand and told her that she was all he needed. Just you, babe. Just you.

SARAH PEACOCK

American Goldfinch

Most of the leaves have already fallen.

The frost that traced the windowpane has burned away with the afternoon sun, but the inside surface is still cold and damp to the touch. I'm closing my eyes, clutching the windowsill and resting my forehead on the glass. Sunlight is bathing my eyelids, and for a moment my world becomes a soft pink glow. Out there, branches are tracing patterns on a sky as crisp as silk. It's like a spiderweb, waiting to catch and hold anything that thinks it can hide. There are no birds today. The feeder that rests on the deck stands empty and alone in air that has stripped itself cold to prepare for winter. Nothing is blurred today, nothing hidden.

I can hear them laughing in the next room. I'm clinging to the wood more tightly now, feeling my heart race and my stomach constrict. I'm trying not to let memories take over, but there are so many of them that it's hard. Two little girls are marching around the deck in front of me. I'm squeezing my eyes shut harder, but pink shawls hang from their shoulders and tiny feet shuffle in high-heeled shoes and I'm helpless to stop it. I'm forcing myself to look away, to think of other things and make them disappear.

Come on, Cinderella. You're going to be late for the ball. The prince is waiting.

Tomorrow, the smell of roasted turkey will saturate every room. Seventeen people will pack themselves around two tables. The anticipation of something real steadies me and makes me sick at the same time.

We'll see laughter and tears, questions and stories, fake smiles and real ones. Children who used to run with chocolate stains on their lips will sit politely and talk about sports and boys and plans for the future. Older men who used to lift us up by the ankles will talk football and politics while women sit around and reevaluate each other. Grandma Rossalie will pass each dish around the table again and again until long after anyone is taking food. It will make us dizzy watching the bowls circle the crowd.

Do you really think it's tragic, Grandma?

Well…any deviation from normal can be tragic, don't you think?

I need to stop doing this. She isn't going to get here until tomorrow, and I'm only stalling for time. People in the next room are laughing; my heart is beating faster. If I hadn't passed this window nearly every day for eighteen years, I would beg to go home.

A small clay sculpture of two orioles on a branch has been sitting on the windowsill for years. Even without color, you can tell they're both female. Mom named it "Mary and Martha," but I think she only did that because people wouldn't understand "Jaime and Helena." One of them is spreading her wings, the tips of her feet barely touching the bark and her head pointed away. Her eyes never quite look at you even if you stand in front of them because something behind your back is more interesting. Another bird maybe, a mate or a rival. Food or supplies to bring home. Something important. The other one barely moves; she's quiet and secure and deep in thought. If you stand in the right place, she can even see you. On a good day she may tell you her dreams. Some days, she smiles, but on others her gaze is mournful and defeated. I don't think she has any eggs.

Are you really wearing that to the party?

Helena was ten years old when she had her first boyfriend. They held hands on the playground and she begged me not to tell mom and dad. Meanwhile, the seventh grade boys never glanced in my direction and I wondered why it had never occurred to me to be upset.

Have you even been *to a party before?*

After me, people expect another mouse, but Helena could choose her boyfriends by drawing names from a hat. You wouldn't know we'd ever met until you realized we share a house.

But he's so cute! Don't you think so?

Maybe if I keep standing here this will all go away. I will suddenly have already done it. Or, better yet, I won't have to anymore.

As I open my eyes, a female American Goldfinch lands on the feeder. One black eye regards the introvert in the window before the yellow-brown head turns in that sharp, birdlike jerk and I'm forgotten.

Lovely lady at lunch, I'm thinking with a trace of smile. I would love to be so small. Living in a world so simple that social norms mean nothing must be wonderful. The beauty of rising into flight, the freedom that comes with moving in three dimensions instead of two, the ability to leave worldly confines below and

behind: for that, I would give nearly anything.

Look, Jaime, mom always said when I was little, *There she is. Our lovely lady at lunch.* She would stand behind me at the window, back in the days when my head rested against the flat of her stomach. We would stay as still as stone, a tree with four branches, watching her eat. Breathing could scare her away.

Why aren't her colors bright like the boy birds?

Because they don't need to be. The males use handsome, colorful feathers to impress her, and she picks whichever one she likes best to be her mate.

More laughter. I think I'm going to be sick.

A male goldfinch, neon yellow and practically glowing against the bare gray and blue behind him, lands on the other side of the feeder. I'm closing my eyes again, defeated already.

Helena, when you hug your boyfriend, do you feel like you're hugging a brother?

It's a toss-up which of us is the mailman's kid.

The scene would look beautiful on canvas. Beautiful and delicate and exciting in every conventional way. *Courtship at the Feeder. Hearts of Gold.* Nature lovers fall over themselves for pieces like that.

I was in preschool when mom first showed me how to work with clay. I remember thinking how much fun it would be to take a lump of something lifeless and liberate the creature inside. *Find the art waiting to happen and set it free*, she always said. But I didn't like the feeling of sticky gray stuff hardening under my nails. It had fingerprints instead of wings and the eyes couldn't see me the way hers always did. I never really felt anything until after we baked it, and I was allowed to paint the feathers. The next day our refrigerator gave home to a blob of pink and brown paint on paper. My first grosbeak.

Pieces of conversation continue to float from the next room as if on one of the breezes. They seem so happy. What right do I have to disrupt that?

I'm looking at the band on my wrist, a makeshift bracelet with hemp and yellow beads. Neither elegant nor expensive-looking, its hand-made beauty gives me strength. Its roughness brings to my mind's eye the image of a face – beautiful and tan and full of mischief – and the dark curls that frame it. Sparkling green eyes without fear and a cunning smile give me courage where I would have none.

Any deviation from normal can be tragic.

My dad has always defended Grandma Rossalie. She's old, he says. A classic excuse. She lived through the fifties, the *thirties* for that matter. She grew up when life was a template for every red-blooded Ameri-

can man to fill. Change has never been part of the equation.

My dad looks more like Helena than me. Maybe that makes me the mailman's kid. Yet at two, she was saying more words in a minute than he was in a day. In conversation, he always sounds like he's doing the reading in church or making some kind of speech. Sometimes it's good and sometimes it embarrasses him. Either way, sometimes it makes me feel less alone.

Daddy? Does God make mistakes?

Sitting on his shoulders, I used to alternate between pretending I was the tallest tree in the world and pretending I was an oriole perched and anticipating her next flight. The return to earth was always a let down. My legs would feel like jelly until I reminded them how to walk again.

It seems like that sometimes, doesn't it? God made everyone exactly the way He wanted them to be, even though sometimes we may not know why. Every one of his children is a little bit different from everybody else, and that's what makes us special.

Up until a few years ago, he always had an answer for everything. Dads can do that when you're little. Then one day colors start to mix, the world slides out of focus and you realize that not everything happens in lines.

We don't turn down black couples or Asian couples, do we?

Of course not. But that's different.

How so?

I don't know, Jaime. It's just different.

Dads have more trouble with gray areas.

"I hope this doesn't take too long," Helena is saying. "I have a party to go to tonight, and I need time to get ready."

My heart is pounding harder than ever. I'm still stalling for time. Standing here, clutching the windowsill like a coward, as though the cool of the glass and the warmth of the setting sun are going to help any.

Another male goldfinch is settling on the railing next to the feeder. He is slightly bigger than his predecessor. You can tell they're watching her, but the female isn't paying attention to either of her suitors.

Come on, Cinderella. You'll be late for the ball. The prince is waiting.

An image of my family hiking on vacation some ten years ago is flashing in front of me and there's

nothing I can do to stop it. I'm fighting tears now. It's been so long.

Do you feel like you're hugging a brother?

Um…no. Why? Do you?

Dizzy, I swallow a gulp of air. If I look down, I'll see my fingers trembling despite their grip, so I do what's easy and close my eyes again. I imagine myself flying: a six year old fledgling with nowhere to be and no rules to follow. Martha the bird has long since flown away, and since all the males flock to her I have no one to disturb my peace. No turkey for me, thank you.

When I open my eyes, the goldfinches have gone. In their place, a single female purple finch is pecking at the loose seeds. Now this, I would love to paint. The goldfinches were never my favorite anyway. I like them, but I always found the purple ones much prettier. A female grosbeak is landing on the other side of the feeder. The purple finch looks up for a second, and I swear they're making eye contact with each other. A strange, determined calm is washing over me, and as I let go of the windowsill, the two birds look down and keep eating.

DANTE RASERA

Applied Math

Terence Euclid Hobbes Jr., out having lunch with his best friend, David Shelley, looked like he hadn't slept or showered in a month. Black bags sagged beneath his eyes, stubble grew in patchily, and his dark hair shone clumpy and greasy. Teetering over his coffee, he thrust out his right hand and clung desperately to the cup like a drowning man trying to grab on to some – any – bit of flotsam. He took a sip, shuddered, and put the cup back down. He set his chin on the palm of his hand. David eyed Terence from under a furrowed brow. He snorted sharply.

"You're a wreck," he said. "Someone still whistling outside your apartment window every morning?"

Terence managed to nod. At the bottom of the downward stroke of the nod, he hesitated, and David wondered if Terence would ever lift his head again. But he did – and moaned, "Past two weeks straight."

"Still 'Total Eclipse of the Heart?'"

"Yep. And still at six a.m. And now it's stuck in my head."

"Well, it was bound to happen. You've always been a hopeless romantic, Euclid."

Terence's eyes cleared and locked on David's. Terence's lips drew in. His brow flexed.

"Don't call me Euclid."

Terence (Euclid) Hobbes Jr.'s parents loved mathematics so intensely it could only have resulted in frustration – which it did, when they discovered they had limits and they had reached them.

Just after this mutual slamming-of-forehead-to-ceiling experience, the Hobbeses met. They found, now that they had proven themselves qua themselves useless to the mathematical community, they shared a similar goal: to marry an equally mathematically-inclined person and to produce, by combination of DNA, an über-mathematically-inclined baby.

So Terence's older brother Frank flopped into the world, hairless and whimpering. They read him

formula after formula, demonstrated for him proof after proof, sketched for him graph after graph, all to no avail. Frank, once old enough to understand such things, understood he wanted to – understood he *would* – study French, French Culture, French Film, French Literature, the French People. He tried to explain his fascination to his parents. He loved it, he said. He loved it *so much*. But his parents refused to listen. In their rage and disappointment they fled to their room, slammed the door, locked it, and conceived Terence.

The time came to decide what to name the incubating Terence, now ballooning in his mother's belly. Mrs. Hobbes, looking up from a math journal, turned gravely to Mr. Hobbes.

"I think I know how we went wrong with Frank," she said.

"How?" asked Mr. Hobbes, lowering his math journal, similarly solemn.

"It's not a flaw in his nature. He's a born mathematician. He must be. Look at us. And it's not a flaw in his nurture. We filled him with math from the day he was born. Therefore…"

"Therefore?"

"A tiny oversight." Mrs. Hobbes paused. "His name. It must be his name. Frank loves French."

And so the Hobbeses, in order to prevent another such error, bestowed upon their second son the first name of his mathematically-inclined father and the middle name of the ancient geometrician Euclid, praying one day it would inspire him to study "the most noble of the sciences."

But despite showing early promise, Terence deviated from his parents' prescribed course. David often liked to joke that Terence had inadvertently selected to study, and later to teach, "the most mathematical of the humanities." History.

"Why not?" asked David.

"I don't like it," said Terence. "I don't like the sound of Euclid."

"Never underestimate the allure of a famous name."

Terence understood David's allusion. David shared last names with a famous poet. He often used this to his advantage, telling prospective mates about his "Great-Great-Great-Great Grandfather Percy."

"But I'm not a mathematician," said Terence.

"And I'm not a poet," said David.

"You're poetic."

David frowned.

"With women, I mean," explained Terence.

"And you're mathematical," said David. "With women, I mean. You're boring – and you do more dividing from them than multiplying with them."

Terence sighed.

"Of course I'm boring," he said. "What do they care about Restoration England?"

"As little as I do, but we do okay together."

Terence considered. Then he put his finger on the problem.

"But I'm not trying to poke you," he said.

"'Poke' me? Listen, Terence, it's Friday. Come out with me, call yourself Euclid, do some quick proofs – make them up if you have to – let me tell my story about being related to Shelley, and I promise we'll find ourselves two butt-grabbingly gorgeous women. What do you say?"

◇

Once Terence had agreed, David said he thought The Full Moon, a club near the center of the city, the best place. When Terence asked why, David explained that every Friday and Saturday night The Full Moon positively hopped. Terence quieted and David thought him satisfied, but really Terence had begun to worry about all the hopping. He worried it would exhaust him. After all, he considered, he hadn't slept well in two weeks, and he hadn't exercised or gone to a gym in – wait, he paused in his thinking. He had never gone to a gym and he couldn't remember the last time he had exercised.

David told Terence to meet him at The Full Moon at nine. Terence offered to drive, but David refused the courtesy. When Terence looked confused, David explained: "What would we do if we both wanted to skedaddle with a chiquita and only had one car betwixt us?" Terence satisfied David by pronouncing the consequences too horrible to contemplate.

So, The Full Moon.

If Terence could only use two words to describe The Full Moon he would have selected hot and loud. If permitted a third, he would have added dark. (A fourth? Stinky.) At any rate, he supposed the darkness for the best. Perhaps he would have a chance after all, he thought, sourly, if he kept his sights modestly low and never allowed his targets to see him clearly.

But wandering around, bumping blindly into people, apologizing, Terence began to lose even modest

faith in himself. He felt conspicuous, out of place, lost. Where was David? The prospect of entering the sea of humanity churning to the incessant, deafening beat in order to seek out David terrified him. He definitely preferred his quiet study to this. Why had he come at all?

Maybe – yes, maybe he should run. He hadn't committed yet. David hadn't seen him. He could say he had had a last minute change of heart. No, better yet, he could say something had come up and he hadn't made it to the club at all. Yes! He had heard his mother had gone to the hospital (but felt much better now; don't worry, David), or, simpler, less messy, his car had broken down –

A strong hand clasped his arm and sent a tingle of panic up his spine. He turned and, looking down, followed the hand to its connecting arm, the arm to its torso, and the torso to its head – a head with a remarkably familiar face – David!

Terence noticed, astonished, that two women flanked David. Terence's eyes pouted, How? David's eyes glowed.

"Euclid," said David, "I'd like you to meet Emily and Melissa."

Melissa and Terence's eyes locked. She had short brown hair that ended abruptly just above the shoulders and bore on her face a dazzlingly blank expression – now a dazzlingly blank smile. Terence thought the whole picture simple but charming.

David grinned and placed a hand on the small of Emily's back.

Terence thought that Emily, with hair approaching pure black, had a distinctly dark aspect – or aura – or *something* – something sulky perhaps, or seductive. Her fair complexion – white face and light green eyes – contrasted her darker qualities, threw them into relief, accented them. And her expression too. And the odd, half-turned way she held herself. She seemed – hairstyle, outfit, expression, posture – one long, slender, sweeping dark figure.

"Let's get a table and have a drink," said David.

Winding, black stairs led up to The Full Moon's sitting area, which overlooked the dance floor. The narrowness of the steps forced the foursome to walk in pairs. David asserted himself and stepped beside Emily. Terence followed with Melissa.

"You were really great out there, David," said Melissa. "Wasn't he, Em?"

"Yeah," said Emily.

They sat in a booth near the railing so they could watch the dancers gyrating below. David slid in after

Emily; Terence, Melissa.

Above them, covering nearly the entire ceiling, an enormous, sparkling decoration depicted the full moon with several stars and one mangy wolf having a good howl.

Melissa caught Terence staring upwards.

"First time here?"

"Yeah."

"Really? It's the best club around."

"Ah. Yeah."

"Not into clubs?"

"Yeah, no…"

"I don't really have time for them either with work."

"What do you do?"

"I work nights as a waitress at Wayne Gibson's – the bar, you know – but that's only temporary. I'm a student."

"A student?"

"Yeah. I'm getting my teacher's license."

"Really? What subject?"

"Funny you should ask, Euclid…"

Terence had forgotten about the famous name nonsense. He tried to glare at David, but instead discovered he had slipped away.

When Terence didn't respond, Melissa continued, "Anyway, yeah, math's the subject. Not sure if you caught that."

"Sorry," said Terence. "I did. I was just – I'm a teacher too actually."

"Oh cool. What subject?"

David returned with four beers and everyone took one. He made himself cozy beside Emily.

Melissa took a sip of her beer then set it down on the table. She fingered the condensation around the base of the neck.

"Sorry," she said, "I didn't catch what subject you said you teach."

Terence saw David slap on a fierce expression as if to say, Maintain the lie. Your name is Euclid. She

likes that. She's a mathematician. Tie it together. You're a mathematician. You teach math.

Terence took a long sip of his beer while he mulled over what to do. Finally, setting down the bottle, he forced a little smile and said, almost grunting, "Math."

"Of course!" cried Melissa. Terence glanced away and caught Emily staring at him. She looked away.

"I knew it," continued Melissa. "I can read people, I really can. I said to myself, 'He's a mathematician, absolutely.' And you are. And your name's Euclid! Unbelievable. Do you think there's such a thing as fate?"

Terence didn't believe in fate; he didn't believe in anything. Well, not really. He believed primarily in the past, secondarily in primary sources, and tertiarily in secondary sources.

David shot another searing glance that seemed to say, For God's sake! You've gotten this far. She clearly believes in fate, *ergo* you believe in fate.

"Yes," said Terence, his voice a little high and off-pitch.

"You do? Me too! Do you think you were fated to be a mathematician named Euclid, and I was fated to be a mathematician named Melissa, and we were both fated to meet?"

Another stern glance from David.

Terence squeezed out another, "Yes."

Melissa smiled.

"You're cute," she said. "You're a good listener."

"He's the best," interjected David, readjusting in his seat. Emily glanced up at Terence, then back down into her lap.

"He's cute," said Melissa.

"Yeah," confirmed David. "Especially when he stops thinking about math for two seconds. Right, Euclid? – Quiet tonight, though. What's the matter, man?"

Very subtly, mostly in the eyes, Terence glowered.

"Just soaking it all up, man."

Melissa turned toward David and bounced contentedly. Emily stopped staring into her lap for a moment and looked up at Terence.

David smiled tautly. The tautness of the smile contained a coded message: You're close. You're very close. Don't blow it with your shit negative attitude.

Terence softened. He glanced at the four empty bottles on the table.

"Another round?"

"Sure!" cried Melissa.

◇

Several drinks later, Terence blew a puff of air, nodded once as if having just made up his mind, leaned forward, and tapped his fingers on the edge of the table.

"It's been great meeting you, Melissa, Emily," he said. Melissa smiled. Emily's eyes flashed. Terence paused.

"But," he continued, "I'm tired – exhausted actually – so I'm gonna go."

"You're sure, man?" said David.

"Yeah," seconded Melissa, looking first at David then at Terence. "You're sure?" With a seductive grin, involving a moist slide of the tongue, she added, "I couldn't persuade you to stay a little longer?"

"Sorry," said Terence. "I've really got to go. Sorry."

Terence started climbing out of the booth. Melissa's hand seized his wrist.

"Wait!" she cried.

A pained look overcame Terence's brow. He sighed at the winding, black stairs.

"Here's my number. Call me sometime."

Terence turned and saw Melissa scribbling on a tiny scrap of paper. She handed the scrap up to him.

"Uh, thanks. Bye."

Melissa watched Terence disappear down the stairs, then snapped her head back toward David and Emily. Her cropped hair twisted and flopped.

David's lips parted. Melissa's mouth opened, moved, formed words. Nothing came out. David drifted from Emily. Emily, still staring at the dancers below, failed to notice.

"David?" said Melissa. "You okay?"

"Sorry?" said David.

Melissa smiled.

"I asked if your friend's all right. It's not even midnight."

Emily pricked up her ears.

"He's fine," said David. "Just tired. Someone's been whistling outside his apartment every morning."

"What?" laughed Emily.

"I know. Every morning at six a.m."

Melissa's smile faded. She spoke with a note of concern in her voice.

"Did he, uh," she said, "did he happen to mention what? – I mean, like, what song?"

David grinned.

"'Total Eclipse of the Heart.'"

Melissa looked horrified.

"What?" said David.

"I go jogging every morning around five-thirty. Two weeks ago I started a new route. Where does Euclid live?"

David described it.

"Yep," said Melissa. "That's it. I stop there for a break at six."

"And you whistle?" said Emily.

"Sometimes I hum, sometimes I whistle. Or sing. But yeah, mostly I whistle I guess. But I'll stop! I'll whistle elsewhere."

"I'm sure Euclid would appreciate that," said David.

Emily broke the ensuing silence.

"And he's really a math teacher? I thought he seemed more the history type."

RACHEL RICHARDSON

Charles, King Of Alabama

We get to running about dusktime, right when the porchlights start turning on and the old grandpas sit out and rock in their chairs, chewing gum, or smoking cigars if the grammys will let them. The little ones lag behind, 'course, because they're littler, and the girls get to complaining and hollering after us, except for Bobbi, but she hardly counts because she called a cop a pig to his face one time and she'll show you her bra strap for a dollar. It doesn't look right, that skinny white strip going over her freckly shoulder underneath her baseball shirt, and it almost made me wish I'd kept my dollar and gotten a Milky Way instead. Mikey said he one time asked if he could touch it, and that Bobbi'd started laughing until a cough got her. But anyway, we get to running and the girls fall behind and then they start screaming, cussing at us and calling us dirty mutts and mean old bugs, and I know they're just mad because they got their socks all dirty and that's the third pair of socks they've ruined this week on account of us. My ma doesn't care about my socks because I wash them myself in the big steel tub out back with the big pink bar of Zote soap, but if the other guys knew that they'd probably call me a fagrag like Mr. Wilson up the road who plays violin every morning until the neighbors start nagging. I don't mind the music, neither. Beats the babies always yelling and the little ones banging on the pots and pans in the kitchen, thinking they're some kind of Ringo or something.

Anyway, we get to running, like we usually do when it's too dark to play stickball anymore but not late enough that the skeeters are out and biting, and it's just like any other twilight time when we're running except it's my birthday, July the 2nd, and I'm twelve years old and wearing brand new Chuck Taylor All-Star Converse sneakers, white with red and blue trim, and I'm pretty sure I'm about to take off like a moonman. My ma was real nice about giving them to me at my birthday breakfast, which was just plain old flapjacks and scrambly eggs. I thought she'd forgotten what day it was since there weren't any chocolate chips in the

flapjacks, but then she brought out this shoebox wrapped in the Sunday funnies, and she'd written right above Dagwood's crazy hair, *For my own Chuck*. She'd written *little*, too, but she crossed it out, because I'm not so little no more, I guess. And she didn't say nothing, but I was pretty sure my new sneakers had something to do with the flapjacks being just regular, because candy costs something miserable now that Dad's laid off and Grammy moved in. Grammy sleeps in Cynthia's room since Cynthia took off for beauty school in Birmingham a couple weeks back. We got a right stuffed house these days.

So I'm running and feeling that happy slap-slap of my new Chucks against the street rattling all the way up my knees, and up in the sky there's skyrockets whizzing and popping as all the older kids – those dagnabit hooligans as Grammy says though it comes out all gobbledygook when she takes her teeth out and the babies get to crying – anyway, the older kids like Lonny and Chance are readying for the Independence Day parties. I bet they got their own girls fussing at them, saying they're gonna put an eye out and to save the show for the real holiday, but I don't really care because my shoes are so fast and so great and as I'm zip-zapping along, zig-zagging past the fat magnolias and the parked, rusted-out Packards with cats crouching underneath, I decide that today I have become Charles.

Dad's name is Charles, too, but everybody calls him Les, and that's what was sewn on the front pocket of the worker's suit he'd wear to the factory plant. He never really explained what he did, said it involved whirligigs and dojiggers and go ask yer Ma if she needs help with the dishes quit being so nosy, and then Grammy would say Charlieboy, run along and don't listen to your grumpy old pop, but everybody was all smiles and I'd say all right and go play with Elba and her blocks, letting her knock down all the little buildings I'd make with her fat baby fists. Unless Elba was stinking – then I'd go tell Ma and pretend to do the dishes while she pinned a new diaper on Elba. Now Dad takes care of Elba a lot, holds her while she's sleeping and then he gets to sleeping too on the old blue armchair even before Ed Sullivan comes on.

I guess I'd always guessed I turn into Charles someday, but I didn't know it would happen when I was sprinting down Tuskeegee Street and the whole idea of it just slammed the air straight out of me and I thought I was dying right when I'd started being alive. My shoes kept me running until I reached the old schoolyard, though, and then I just collapsed and the stars were all whirly and I could hear the fireworks whistling and then somebody made some scared noise and next thing I know somebody's on top of me.

I think we must be fighting, so I'm swinging and wriggling, punching at the dark and whoever this guy is, hitting myself more than anything because I'm pinned between somebody's knees and he's squeezing my

ribs like a stallion. After a minute or maybe a dozen with the grit of the blacktop pinching at my back and my breath finally coming back to me, I wise up and realize this isn't warring but loving, and it's not Timmy with the busted tooth or Harrison's double-jointed legs around my waist but Bobbi Anne Fuller and her spit-gluey mouth, sloppy tongue tasting like Milk Duds and maybe a Marlboro sneaky-smoked in her attic after supper.

We don't do much, at least not in terms of the mess my sister Cynthia got herself into with Lonny before she ran off, because my Ma said it was beauty school but everybody knows that's what the grown folks say when a girl gets herself too hussied up for her own good and ends up bigger than a house and Bobbi and I were as far from that kind of to-do as Mr. Wilson was from finding a wife who liked his violin-playing. But there was something happening between us with my new shoes on my feet and Bobbi's bra, coconut-white in the nighttime, looking at me like I knew what to do. About that time Bobbi decided she'd had enough and got real low, hissing if I ever told anybody she'd take her Swiss Army knife and make sure I couldn't do nothing with anybody ever again, at least not down there, and I said yes ma'am and watched her button her brother's gingham shirt back up.

I wanted to tell her, right there and then while she was working on her buttons and I'd all but forgotten about my brand new shoes, that I was Charles now and she couldn't tell me to shut the fuck up Chuck anymore, but I must've left the words in her mouth and she was squashing my crotch from sitting on it and I was sure if I said anything it'd come out creaky as a screen door. So she said she was just trying to save my life was all, she saw me take that spill and was pretty sure I'd up and died, so she was giving me CPR the way she'd learned it at Girl Scouts before they kicked her out for cutting Mandy Marble's hair while she slept, and I just nodded, dumb as a post.

I helped myself up when she got off me, knocking the gravel out of my hair and hoping it hadn't got too late, and she said aren't you gonna say something – and I didn't know what she was looking for, maybe thank you, maybe sorry, so I said I got new shoes.

I thought you did, she said. I can't see too good though. Doc Jones says I gotta get glasses.

I started talking, but had to swallow real hard, because I could see she'd missed a button and her shirt hem was all crooked, and I was suddenly sadder than I'd been since Elba accidentally chewed up my favorite Ticonderoga pencil, one I'd been saving since kindergarten because I was going to be a reporter man someday, maybe find myself a Lois. But it was a different kind of sadness, the sadness I saw when my

Ma brought out my plain flapjack breakfast, how Grammy got when she talked about keeping up Grandpa's graveplot, when Dad looked at Elba sucking on his thumb.

I think you'll look real good in glasses Bobbi, I finally said.

And then she socked me on the shoulder, hard enough so it hurt though she didn't mean it to, and we walked back into the neighborhood right as the lightning bugs came out, blinking and looping like they were lost.

RACHEL RICHARDSON

Primavera

Palermo

The girls take their tops off once Mr. Braunschweig has gone hiking with Michael, the only boy on the trip, leaving the girls alone on the rocky beach. The Mediterranean is jade in the June summer sun, the rocks heated to scalding. Around them, Europeans seek the light: an Austrian baby babbles in German as her mother chases her with a wide-brimmed bonnet, while an Italian grandfather, copper-skinned and bare-chested, struts without sunglasses. Safe on her island of a towel, Blythe lathers sunscreen on her Wisconsin-pale, dairy-soft body; even though she reaches as far as she can, she knows there's a diamond-shaped spot between her shoulder blades that will inevitably burn.

A few towels away, the Clark twins have returned from the bodega with cigarettes and wine coolers. Blythe runs her greasy hands over her bald knees, painting them white, watching Anna Clark open a bottle with her teeth and spit the cap like tobacco. The girls clink bottles and pluck cigarettes from the communal pack before realizing there is no lighter among them. Maggi Clark, the darker twin, must have left hers on the bus, as she pats down her gold bikini and shrugs. Nina Turner stands up, tugging her tie-dyed swimsuit from behind, and approaches two Portuguese teenagers with overgrown mohawks. They give her a matchbook and a hit off their joint.

Blythe smears sunscreen under her eyes like war paint, making her glasses slip down her nose. She wonders what it's like to take drugs as Nina hops from towel to towel, back to the just-graduated girls of Appleton Regional High, Class of 2006. A cloud of smoke hovers in the hot air over their sea-salted hair. Blythe squirts sunscreen onto the tops of her feet, rubbing between her toes. She watches as her tripmates smoke and drink, lying like lizards under the Sicilian sun, and bites her lips against her braces.

Nina, sitting up, slips her bikini top over her head and reclines again, face up, breasts splayed. The

Clark girls do the same. Soon they are all topless, a line of half-naked American girls, and the Portuguese boys are staring. One of them squints at Blythe, his mohawk flopped over his forehead. Blythe stands, brushing off the rocks stuck to the back of her thighs. She heads towards the water, already feeling the film of her sunscreen as it washes away in the surf.

On the bus back to their hotel, Mr. Braunschweig discusses the topography with their hired bus driver in a broken mix of English and Italian, oblivious to the rest of the bus. Blythe can feel her hair crusting as it dries and wonders whether ocean water will tint the blonde green, the way pool water does.

"You taste like salt," Michael says to Nina in the seat behind her. Blythe has long since gone deaf to the sloppy, sucking noises of their relationship.

"You taste like sweat," says Nina. Sicily whirrs by the bus windows in blues and golds, and Blythe turns only slightly when Michael's hand grips the back of her seat as Nina's hand grips him.

Blythe scrunches down and props her knees against the seat in front of her, making a desk of her lap, grabbing one of the postcards she bought in Palermo. A cat peers from green shutters in a candy-colored villa; it looks like any cat in any window. Chewing on the complimentary hotel pen, Blythe jams the cap against the wires on her teeth and writes:

Dear Mom— Italy is great. We went to a beach in Sicily, but I think I got sunburned. We're going to Florence next and then we'll leave from Rome. The new camisoles are great. Thanks for

Blythe stops, scrutinizing her handwriting. She listens to Nina and Michael behind her, dating since the week before graduation, and her pen slips into the neck of her camisole. Her mother bought the shirts in bulk—six in all, a three-pack of pastels and three in demure shades of gray—with adjustable straps, a built-in shelf bra. When she saw Blythe wearing them, her mother grinned, exclaiming, "Oh honey, you won't even need support!" Blythe has a list of words she knows are code for pathetic: *modest, humble, meager*. She isn't flat—just *poorly proportioned*, or so her mother says. Blythe bangs her hips when she walks down the aisle of the bus, and her roomy lap spreads across the seat, but when she looks down, a pale plane of clavicle and sternum looks back. She considered buying a new swimsuit for the trip, but the top was always too big for the bottom, or the bottom too small for the top. A two-piece was out of the question. At least she wasn't the other way around, consoled her mother, with back problems and chicken legs. There were some things to be grateful for.

Blythe knows she shouldn't even be on this trip. The others students had all taken Introductory Ital-

ian with ancient Ms. Greenley; Blythe was a diligent student of Russian. After the group was chosen from a scant pool of applicants, they met with Mr. Braunschweig, the senior English teacher and trip chaperone, on Thursdays after school, delivering Roman history presentations and learning how to pack only a carry-on for a two-week stay. All Blythe remembers from these mandatory sessions are the Italian gelato flavors—*fragola, zabaglione, stracciatella*—and the tense, twisted feeling in her stomach when her mother drove her home afterwards. When she cried in the Outagamie Regional Airport, her mother didn't understand, but she couldn't—she was a former homecoming queen who married the latest beau who proposed, a realtor from Chicago, the farthest place anyone in the family had ever been—Italy was distant and wild, her classmates were fluent strangers, and Blythe was eighteen in braces and glasses with a wheeled suitcase full of camisoles. Blythe couldn't explain it either, sniffling and whimpering as her mother patted her and brushed away her daughter's hot tears that fell like torpedoes onto the terminal floor.

Something was supposed to happen this summer. Blythe was Salutatorian of her class, second only to Amy Li, who ate lunch alone with her violin case and Calc II books just outside the Chemistry classroom. Amy got into MIT, but she didn't get into U Chicago, where Blythe was enrolling in September. Blythe didn't go to prom because she'd felt feverish that night, and her pale pink dress still waits in its garment bag in her closet; no one was nervous at the bottom of the stairs with a carnation corsage, anyway. The afterparty at Nina's got busted within an hour, after everyone had drained several 32 oz. KwikTrip cups of cherry cola and Bacardi. At school on the following Monday, the pre-class chatter was a little bit louder, a little bit racier, and Blythe drowned herself in Russian conjugations.

Mr. Braunschweig never admitted he'd handpicked Blythe for the trip, but she knew he had. She sat in the front row of his Senior English class, her pen scorching across her notebook; in other classes, her notes were buffeted by Cyrillic, but for all of fifth period, she strove to quiet her own hopping thoughts so she could hear everything Mr. B had to say. He peppered his lectures with maddening glimpses into his personal life: he first read *Wuthering Heights* between milking the cows on his boyhood farm, he left graduate school to "rent a house and read books for six months," and he always took the bus home from school, smoking as he walked to the stop. He keeps a battered black journal, rife with his cramped penmanship. Blythe often daydreams about what secrets are in it.

On the bus, the day is painfully bright, Mr. Braunschweig is still babbling with the bus driver, and Michael has reached around to stroke the hairs at the base of Blythe's neck as Blythe realizes she's been

dragging her pen up and down the crease of her cleavage, but it's all over before Blythe can react.

Nina sighs, wipes her hand on the seat, and says, "You owe me big-time, buster."

Blythe cowers into her seat, feeling a flush hotter than her sunburn creep across her salty skin.

Messina

When they reach the hotel that night, the girls force Blythe from her hostel room as they dump the contents of their makeup bags onto her bed and prep for a night clubbing. Aimlessly, Blythe heads for the roof, her feet bare and blistered against the tiled hallway floor. It could be any hallway, any staircase, in any building, but as she pushes the roof door open, the city of Messina lies in prickling lights, black and abyssal where the sea starts. The strange dread and delight seeps over her again as she remembers that this is not home, this is another world, another galaxy. She doesn't know what that makes her—if Blythe on the roof of a hostel in Sicily is someone different from Blythe at the Dairy Queen in Appleton, from the waiting undergraduate in her dorm room in Hyde Park.

The roof is dark to Blythe's unadjusted eyes, but she sees a shadowy column talking on a glowing blue cell phone and pulling on an orange-hot cigarette, and she turns into a statue as the conversation drifts towards her.

"Doris—no. This call is costing a fortune, you know I'm in Sicily with the kids—what? No, I don't know where they are, they're eighteen, they'll look out for—Doris. Doris. *Doris*. No, of course I haven't been drinking, though I wish I had been. Why, have you? Is—is that Bill?"

The figure paces as he speaks, and Blythe wills herself to vanish, to erode like all the ruins they've visited, as she realizes Mr. Braunschweig is talking to his wife back in Wisconsin. Or maybe she's his ex-wife now—Blythe can't remember if the divorce went through, though Mr. B did seem a little overly-affected when they read *Madame Bovary* in the spring.

"It is Bill. Don't lie to me, Doris. You tell that sorry sonofabitch—Christ. Fine. You called me, you know. Look, remember to let the dog out for the night, you know he hates—hello? Doris?"

The cell phone snaps shut. Mr. Braunschweig swears under his breath and scratches at his five-day stubble. Blythe thinks maybe she can scuttle back into the hostel on feet silent as moccasins if only he'd turn back towards the roof railing, but he swings around and strides towards her. Panicking, she scampers to a deck chair and plants herself, frantically drafting lies, maybe feigning a set of headphones, just to show

she hadn't heard, but Mr. B's sandals pass her completely as he bolts from the roof, slamming the door behind him.

Alone on the roof, Blythe exhales.

When she told her best friend Jamie about Mr. B's "special treat" for her, his eyes flew wide and he clutched at Blythe's doughy arm. Jamie and Blythe lived on neighboring farms and, as children, they took turns playing House in their family barns; he'd finally come out in the past year, and Blythe, along with everyone else, had been relieved. It explained a lot of things—why Jamie always wanted to be the Mommy, for instance, and why he was so invested in Blythe's wardrobe. "More plaid?" he would say, half pitying, half aggravated. "You could at least *dress* like you're not from a farm." Jamie apologized when he told her he was gay, but they both had to admit their future children wouldn't have been much to look at.

"You know what that *means*—" Jamie had said breathlessly when Blythe broke the news. His strawberry-blond hair was elegantly swooped back, like a rockabilly king. "You're going on a *date* with Mr. B!"

"Don't be stupid," said Blythe. "I did really well on that Shelley and Keats exam, and there's some museum in Rome about them. Nobody else would want to go, anyway. It's just a—I don't know, a reward."

"Please," said Jamie. "Going to Italy period is a reward. This has to be something else. Plus, didn't he tell you he'd already been to the museum before? Like, a hundred times or something?"

"Not a hundred. A few."

"Oh, you're so *lucky*." Jamie had sighed, leaning back against the row of lockers where they ate lunch together everyday. "I'd kill for a date with Mr. B. He's such a dreamboat."

"Who says *dreamboat* anymore?"

"*I* do," said Jamie, and he turned and regarded her, hunched over her crustless sandwich, her glasses crooked. "Your kids will be so smart."

"I swear, Jamie—"

"Hold on a second, honey, you've got an eyelash on your cheek."

Blythe stifles a yawn on the roof in Messina and wraps her arms around her middle, squeezing her sides as her sun-pinked arms bristle in a shiver. When she gets home, Jamie will hound her for details, embellishing for her where the truth falls flat and sad. This is their last summer together; Jamie is tentatively leaving for L.A. in August after saving up his money from all-night shifts at the Dairy Queen, to mingle with celebrities and become a beautician. Blythe knows he hides his sense of betrayal—she's squandering these

two weeks in Italy when she could be listening to records with him, driving in his mom's minivan towards no destination worth pursuing, but he'll understand. Maybe she will lie for his sake. Maybe she won't have to.

The lights of the town begin to blur as Blythe's eyes water with yawning. She rubs the wet away with balled-up fists and imagines Jamie vaulting over the roof railing to meet her, looking dapper in a half-buttoned shirt and white pants, and asking her why she's crying, convincing her she is.

Blythe pretends to be asleep when she hears the scratching of keys in the lock and the hostel door wrench opens. Wrapped in a cocoon of sheets, she's spent the past hours waiting for the girls to come back and trying to ignore the dull scream of her sunburn; she doesn't know where to buy aloe vera in Italy, if Italians ever get sunburned.

Over the train-engine of her heartbeat, thudding all along her scorched skin, Blythe hears the intruder stumble over luggage and mutter, "Shit." The voice is male—it must be Michael, and Nina can't be far behind. Dread momentarily distracts her; Nina and Michael will have sex, she is sure, on the bunk all of two feet from where she's sleeping.

But the door shuts without anyone else coming in, and Blythe hears the rustle of clothing, the rattle of keys dropped on the floor. "Shit," he says again, and Blythe hesitates before turning over, still shut-eyed, clutching her pillow like a teddy bear. She dares one eye open; everything is fuzzy without her glasses, but the shaggy brown hair is obviously Michael's. She recognizes his chest, too. Shirtless, he is lean, the champion of the cross-country team. And, as much as her broken eyesight can show her, he's returning her squint with a stare. For a moment, they're stuck, Blythe with the terrible urge to throw off the rough sheets, the pain of her sunburn suddenly unbearable, Michael swaying on his feet.

Blythe breaks, blurting, "Where's Nina?"

"Fuck if I know," says Michael. "Smoking pot and making out with some—I don't know, Taiwanese jackass. Maybe Korean. I don't fucking care." He crosses his arms. "Fuck her."

It's more information than Blythe wants, but Michael doesn't seem to be leaving, so she sits up, scoots against the wall, wraps the sheet around her torso. Michael slumps onto the corner of her bed.

"She's a slut, that's what she is," says Michael. His mud brown hair stands in sweaty tufts, flying from his scalp. "Fucking bitch and a slut. Said she gave some guy head today. On the beach or something, when

Mr. B and I were off hiking. You know anything about that?"

Blythe tucks her hair behind her ears and shakes her head. She spent the afternoon swimming blind, trying to unfocus her eyes so the blue of the sky met the blue of the sea, but the hues were never quite right.

"I don't know how you stand those bitches anyway. Fucking whores. All they want to do is party and get laid. We're in fucking Italy, and all they care about is—I don't know. You know what I mean."

Blythe says nothing, remembering the rhythms in the seat behind her on the bus, the shiver down her spine—she wonders if Michael remembers, and a flutter of something, terror or thrill, lightnings up from her stomach.

"Where are we going tomorrow—Florence?"

"Yeah," says Blythe. Michael looks at the tent of her foot under the sheet. Tentatively, he touches her toes, watching his hand as if it weren't attached to the rest of him.

"Turn the light off," he mumbles.

"Why?" His hand, as if on its own, wraps around her ankle. She remembers she hasn't shaved since they arrived, as the hairs along her leg bristle. "Is that what you're supposed to do?"

"You don't have to," he says. "I don't know. Do you want to?"

Blythe reaches for her glasses, folded on the bedpost.

"No—leave them off," says Michael, the words lazy in his mouth, the sour smell of alcohol on his breath and skin. She's picturing his tongue, fat and loose with liquor, when he crawls towards her and his kiss misses her mouth, landing wet and soft on her cheek.

She remembers Jamie's instructions as Michael's face collides into hers, unsolicited advice he offered one afternoon in his mother's minivan. "You open your lips," he'd said, "but don't *ram* your tongue in. That's amateur."

"What about teeth?" Blythe asked. She ran her tongue over the brackets of her braces. "Don't they get in the way?"

"Depends."

Michael doesn't seem to mind as he takes inventory of her mouth, his hand returning to the base of her neck. Blythe's thoughts are louder, trying to overcome the snorting of their thick breath, the lapping sound of spit passing between them. Her hands tentatively hold his neck, until she remembers Jamie's wisdom: "Get your hands in his hair. Boys *melt* over that."

Blythe can't help thinking Michael could benefit from an afternoon with Jamie as his weight compels her to lay flat, leaving only the sheet and sunburn between them.

"What do you mean, *depends*?" Blythe had asked. The van was stalled outside Bud's Beer Emporium and she and Jamie were still inside, waiting on the tow truck.

"I mean *some* boys may like it."

"Like what?"

"Toothiness. Biting and stuff." Jamie abruptly unbuckled and dove into the back of the van. Unasked, Blythe did the same. The following demonstration had been Blythe's lone foray into the realm of fooling around in all her high school career.

That had been far different from what was going on now in a too-small hostel bed in Messina. Jamie had been delicate about it; grazing her face, light and orderly, and though she'd tried to keep the physics of it all in the foreground—tilt your head this way, touch that, shift here—she eventually felt lost, certain she never wanted to come back. Now, she was struggling not to vanish entirely, not to push Michael's frantic mouth away from hers, and if she was breathing hard, it wasn't from passion but suffocation. She felt consumed.

When they blast into the hostel room at six that morning, the girls are too drunk to notice Michael, face-down and passed-out on Blythe's bed, or Blythe, curled into a question mark and sleeping in the next bed over.

Florence

While the girls are napping on benches and Mr. Braunschweig hounds the curator, Blythe lingers in front of *Primavera* in the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence. She sees herself in Venus and her dead eyes, the terrified nymph already lost to cloying, blue-skinned arms of the lusty zephyr god, the Graces in gauze dancing lazily with fingers intertwined. Most of all, Blythe sees herself in Flora, her gold-yellow hair littered with petals and leaves, her gown a greenhouse catalogue. She's smiling with her lips barely parted, like she knows something sinister, like all Blythe's secrets are as obvious as her pink skin. It doesn't help that Mercury could be Michael in a red bed sheet.

After the third bout of Japanese tourists swarm around her, Blythe finally collapses on a church pew bench with her feet in front of her. She decides Botticelli is overrated, as are the rest of the Biblical scenes

mounted on the gallery walls. Baby Jesus is always an elongated mannequin or a squashed alien, Mary's forehead is too high or her breasts crooked; the sheep in the manger look more realistic than the Holy Family. Blythe wonders if anyone ever saw each other naked half a millennium ago.

"He had such a grasp on depicting appendages," murmurs a frumpy Englishwoman sitting nearby, as if talking to the painting itself. "Certainly knew how to paint a foot. Even if it was the same foot."

Blythe looks at her own swollen feet, her toes like fat caterpillars. She once read that toes were one of the most sensitive areas of the body, which is why the blister on her smallest toe aches so badly, and why she swallowed a scream when Michael decided to give her feet the attention he'd been giving to her mouth.

Blythe knew what had passed between her and Michael was the stuff of kindergartener's romance compared to what the other girls had done. She and Michael hadn't graduated that night, certainly, but Blythe had a hard time focusing on the deformed torsos of crucified Jesus when the weight of Michael's own flawless chest ironed onto hers was still as fresh as the fruit they'd had for lunch. Two days afterwards, she wanted only to be alone, to grind the memory out completely or relive it, slower this time, supplanting reality with what should have happened. Michael wouldn't suddenly collapse with his head on her stomach, the alcohol finally netting him into sleep. She wouldn't disentangle herself from under him and creep, half-dressed, still painfully sunburned, into what was supposed to be his bed. And when they boarded the boat for the mainland from Sicily, Blythe wouldn't walk in on Nina and Michael making out furiously in a bathroom stall with Nina's skirt hiked around her waist.

She thought about writing a postcard to Jamie: *Dear Jamie, Italy is fine, Michael Bloomquist doesn't kiss well at all and I think I'm in love with you by proxy. Mr. B is ignoring me, but I'm sure you'd say that's proof of something. God I wish you were here.*

"Doesn't do it for you, love?"

Blythe starts, turning to see the Englishwoman peering at her. Her blouse is low-cut, revealing sad, freckled cleavage and a long string of marble-sized beads. She's teased her white hair until it floats like a stray cloud around her head, a cumulus halo. Maybe this is the holy Mary, post-retirement.

"No," says Blythe, standing before the woman can take Blythe's silence as invitation, her feet agonizing. "Guess not."

Blythe doesn't realize she's limping until Mr. Braunschweig says something on the steps of Il Duomo.

Pigeons, vendors, and tourists flood the steps, flapping and selling and photo-taking. At the door of the giant church, after taking the steps one-by-one, Mr. Braunschweig pulls her aside.

"Are you doing all right, Blythe? You're lagging a bit."

His hand on her shoulder is paternal, pedagogic, but she's wearing the black camisole and feels the internal cringe of shame and thrill as she nods.

"Dehydrated, I guess. Sunburned," she says. "A little tired."

"Well, I was going to lead everybody to the top of the Dome—you can see all of Florence from up there—but if you're not up to it—"

"Oh—sure. Thanks. I mean, I'll just stick around here, write a postcard or something. If that's okay."

Blythe idly daydreams of Mr. B's finger slipping under her camisole strap. She looks down.

"Of course. We'll all be back in half an hour or so—rest up, we've got a lot waiting for us in Rome!" He winks before abandoning her to the throngs on the steps.

Her foot aching, Blythe slowly picks her way through the clumps of people harboring in the shade. Snatches of international conversations fall on her ears, a cacophony of dialects. She recognizes the sound of some Russians, but their words blur together and she doesn't stop to listen.

Jamie is right about Mr. B. Jamie is too right about Mr. B. If she hadn't already drafted a hundred depressing postcards to him in her head already, Blythe would actually write one to him back in Appleton, starting with those thoughts. Mr. B was a dreamboat, even if he smoked and didn't shave as often as he should and the beginnings of gray were peeking into his bark-brown hair. He was well-read, enigmatic, and made Blythe feel, for a moment, like it didn't matter that she had braces and glasses, skin that turned neon on even a cloudy day. He made her think that this too would pass, that whatever was wrong with her was actually right.

"Americano!"

Turning, Blythe has to shade her eyes to see the rotund Italian man shouting at her. He could be a Mafioso, hair like steel wool tufting from the neck of his collared shirt. He stands before a table littered with shiny cheap things: fake turquoise jewelry, rainbow PACE flags, and skirts like the one he holds out to her.

"*Si, si,* you! A pretty *vestito* for a pretty lady—only 15 Euro!"

"No—*grazie*—"

"Americano, no? For you, only 10 Euro. A bargain!"

Unknowingly leaning her weight on her right foot, Blythe looks at the skirt: a gauzy thing that would dust the floor, probably made in a sweatshop in Polynesia by some blind child – but the colors are bright, tropical in the sunlight, hibiscus red and stormy purple, spangled with sequins running in loops along the hem. A skirt for a horse-riding star of the circus, a gypsy's skirt, meant for long-legged women with copper skin and night dark hair. Blythe reaches for her purse.

Looping the skirt around her purse strap, Blythe shuffles back to the shade of the steps, not hearing the vendor as he bids her *ciao*, calls her *bella*.

Rome

They reach Rome by sunset, take a scrambling tour around the city as night falls, zipping past the Roman forum, the Pantheon, the Colosseum. Everywhere there are sleek Italians—dashing men in tailored suits, tall women in designer dresses. Even the children are beautiful with wet brown eyes and cinnamon skin.

They linger in front of the Trevi Fountain, Mr. B corralling the students for a group picture while the Clark twins lean on each other on the fountain ledge. Nina and Michael have disappeared. Before he takes the photo, Mr. B shouts over the water's rushing and the gaggle of tourists swarming around them. Lost in the group and the swiftly vanishing light, Blythe freely stares at Mr. B, noting the progress of his stubble, the fit of his button-down shirt with the sleeves pushed to his elbows, the shape of his exposed forearms.

"You have to throw a coin over your shoulder!" he shouts. Absolutely no one is listening. "It means you'll come back to Italia someday!"

Blythe scours the lining of her purse but finds only bills, Euros that look like Monopoly money and a few leftover dollars from home. Frenzied, Blythe is about to dump the contents of her purse onto the ground and sift through all her blank postcards, the crumpled photocopy of her passport, when Mr. B offers her a penny, half the size of an American one, barely as big as her smallest fingernail.

"You should kiss it first," he says. "For extra luck. At least, that's what I always do."

When he walks away, Blythe slips the coin completely into her mouth, tasting metal, sliding it around her bracketed teeth and holding it under her tongue. She pulls out the penny and shuts her eyes, tosses it over her shoulder and waits for the splash.

In the bathroom of her hotel room in Rome, Blythe huddles on the edge of the toilet with her feet firmly planted inside the running bidet. Mr. B, after seeing Maggi Clark vomit on the street, has strictly forbidden them to leave, since they have a busy day tomorrow, their last in Italy before they fly home, and they've clearly been bending the rules of the sobriety agreement they signed back in Wisconsin. Regardless, the girls have managed to find two jugs of red wine, and Blythe can hear them down the hall, toasting and shrieking.

Blythe's left foot has swollen to twice the size of her right, and she's spent the past half hour draining the bidet and filling it again with warmer water, willing the ache to disappear, wondering how she possibly hurt herself so badly. She wishes Jamie could see her, knowing he would crumple in hysterics at the sight, proposing that she was the first to use a bidet that way. He'd put his arm around her, too, lightly so her sunburn wouldn't scorch. Or more, he'd bring aloe vera, the blue kind that tingled, and promise not to laugh when she took off her shirt so he could get her back.

Blythe lays her cheek on her knees, staring at her mismatched feet and waiting for a knock on the locked bathroom door, for Jamie to come striding in, when the hotel room door does open and just as suddenly slams.

"You're drunk," says Michael, his words sharp through the thin wood of the door. For the umpteenth time on the trip, Blythe doesn't move, praying she won't be discovered. "We can't do this now—"

"Thaz probly what you said to *her*," slurs Nina. Blythe hears her colliding into the furniture, opening the wardrobe doors and slamming them shut. "You—you—you *fuck*."

"Look, babe, I was completely fucking wasted—it was an accident. I wouldn't have told you but I just fucking remembered—it just popped out. And we didn't even do anything, I swear."

"That you *'member*!" shouts Nina. "You coulda done *anything*! How many times have we done it and then forgot about it—like a *million*. I gave you a fucking *H J* on a fucking *bus!* What kinda girl would do that? One that *loves* you—"

"Jesus, Nina, shut up. That's bullshit. You fucking went down on a fucking stranger on a beach, you were sucking face with that Chinese dude in Messina—you're a slut, Nina."

"*I'm* the slut?" Something crashes against the wall. "*I'm* the slut? *You're* the one who fucking slept with *Blythe*!" The door slams so hard it bounces back open, and Michael runs after, his footsteps fading down

the carpeted hall.

In the bathroom, Blythe goes cold.

"But we didn't," she whispers to her knees, to her broken feet, to Jamie. "We didn't do anything." Holding herself and rocking only gently back and forth on the toilet seat, Blythe slowly starts to cry.

Blythe and Mr. B descend to the subway station in silence. Blythe stares at her feet, still swollen and peeking out from under the hem of the Italian skirt while Mr. B dashes into a drug store to buy a pack of cigarettes before they board. On the subway, Blythe keeps her hands in her lap, smoothing the Florence skirt over her ample thighs, feeling just how sheer the fabric is. Her hair is brushed, her skin back to a normal shade of pink, down from the cherry red of the entire week, but she forces her face to stay placid, the choking sensation of last night's tears still lingering in her throat. Her thoughts argue with each other as the subway rattles under Rome, and she looks at her knee, at Mr. B's knee, and holds her hands together more tightly.

"Rome's subway system is one of the most complicated in the world," says Mr. B as they return into daylight, moments from the museum. "Every time they started digging, they kept finding Ancient Rome."

Blythe can only smile a little, fighting to feign a logical reaction over the angry streaks of pain shooting up her left leg every time she steps, over the cacophony in her mind: the memory of Michael's hot breath on her face and the noise of Nina's drunken sobbing mixing with the perfect breasts of the Clark twins on the beach in Sicily, the pressure of Jamie's hand holding hers. She barely sees the broad Spanish Steps and the men selling roses, hardly hears the trickle of the fountain in the piazza.

The museum is right on the Steps themselves, dark and cool and empty inside. Blythe fumbles through her purse to pay for her ticket, but Mr. B shakes his head and forks over a twenty. The woman behind the counter hands him two tickets, her dark eyes darting from teacher to student, father to daughter, lover to lover, giving him a receipt and no change.

"Really, I can pay—it's not a problem," says Blythe as they are ushered down a hallway, the hubbub of the piazza silenced as they go.

"Last time I checked, U Chicago wasn't so cheap," he responds, winking. "It's my treat."

Blythe mutters a thank you and hopes the chasm beginning in her chest doesn't grow any wider.

"It isn't a very big museum," says Mr. B. "But it's got a heck of a lot—I'm going to step outside for a minute, but I'll be right back."

As soon as he leaves the room, undoubtedly to smoke, Blythe hobbles to the nearest chair and nearly falls over. Her breath shudders and her eyes smart, solely from the pain of her foot, which has reached levels she's never experienced in eighteen years of life, progressing now to something undeniable, unbearable.

And she has no idea what exactly is happening, why Mr. B has decided to bring her to this museum while the rest of the students have the day off, most of them sleeping away hangovers in the hotel. Out of obligation more than anything, to herself and to Mr. B's liberal wallet, which she knows he can't afford as a high school English teacher in Wisconsin, Blythe hefts herself up and limps, sporadically and obviously, over to a glass case crammed with correspondence between Percy and Mary Shelley.

She realizes she doesn't even really like Romanticism as she stumbles to the next case over, displaying Keats's personal artifacts, a lock of his pale blond hair. To her, it was all a lot of gawking at nature, going on long, self-important walks through woods and over moors, lofty lyrics about the weather. She prefers the absurdity of Russians, stories about overgrown noses and runaway coats, or the awful reality of the gulag, dinners of gruel and stale bread. She dreams about opening Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy, reading something longer than a paragraph in a high school workbook, something real, without a Cyrillic dictionary planted at her side. Complicated, extensive books about war and crime where all the men wear high-collared uniforms and carry long-barreled pistols or sabers at all times.

Even so, she lingers in Keats's bedroom, the tiny bed where he coughed his last, preserved as it was on the day he died. On the nightstand, his favorite vase, maybe the actual Grecian urn he was so smitten with. She wonders if the whole ridiculous Romantic crew was there, watching him perish and taking notes for the odes that would follow: Lord Byron with his eyes on Mary Shelley, wearing only a dressing robe and smoking a pipe while Percy dreamt out the window, oblivious. Keats's own beloved Fanny nowhere in sight, pledged to chastity in order to validate Keats's suffering. Maybe they shipped over Wordsworth, too, who would loudly complain that the umbrella-shaped pines in Italy weren't nearly as compelling as the thickets of England, while Coleridge, doped on opium, mumbled to himself in a corner.

Blythe leans heavily on a freestanding information podium that she hasn't even read when Mr. B returns, the scent of cigarettes preceding him into the room.

"You found my favorite quotation, I see," he says.

Blythe steps back, her left leg nearly collapsing as she puts her weight on it, and smiles, her palms suddenly sweaty. She's stood this close to Mr. B before, but he was always seated at a desk surrounded by essays, or herding the group into the nearest tourist attraction. The ghosts of Keats's friends slip back into the wallpaper as she glances around the room, realizing she hasn't seen a single visitor besides the two of them.

"Here," he says, and he places a hand on the small of her back, guides her to the podium. His hand doesn't move. Blythe balances on one foot, knowing the other has become completely useless in pain, clutching the podium and trying not to think of Mr. B's palm against her spine, trying to hear the babble of the fountain outside and not her thundering pulse. The scent of smoke is heady and thick in the room.

"'The creature has a purpose and its eyes are bright with it'," he reads.

"It's nice," she says, and she tentatively puts her left foot on the floor, jerking it back up immediately as she nearly falls, Mr. B's hand a necessity now, keeping her standing.

"Very," he says. He looks at the words, and Blythe looks at his profile. He must be at least 40, she thinks, with wrinkles around his temples, half his whiskers silvered. Still, she gathers some of her skirt in her free fingers out of anxiety, clutches the podium, feels her breath come heavy and hard. Somewhere in her cluttered mind, a voice starts chanting how this cannot be happening.

"I wanted you to see this place," he begins, and Blythe can hardly hear for the buzzing in her ears, "to see this spot, exactly, so you know not to take anything for granted. Keats was one of the greatest minds of the past millennium, but he died having written hardly anything, comparatively wasting his youth. You have a great gift, Blythe, whether you know it or not—be aware of yourself. You're going to be scared in college, of course—everyone is. Hell, I was, certainly. I'm scared even now. But every now and again a student comes along who—"

Blythe didn't hear what he had to say. He'd turned her towards him, his hands resting like perching birds on both her shoulders, and Blythe, already watching his mouth, already sick with the smell of smoke, already feeling his teacher's lips pressing onto hers, already imagining things that never actually happened and that never actually would happen, had stepped back, set down her left foot, and fallen to the floor, as Keats's favorite vase came tumbling down with her and shattered against her unconscious head.

The girls fall asleep immediately when the lights go off on the plane back to Wisconsin. Mr. Braunschweig sits in the next row over, his mouth open and snoring, peanut bags littering his tray table, his little

black journal stowed in his carry-on. In row 22, seats A and B, Michael and Blythe pretend to be sleeping. In reality, Michael is completely awake inside of his hoodie and Blythe stares out the window at the darkened Atlantic below. Her left foot is completely bound in a tight, flesh-colored bandage, wound around her leg by Mr. B himself as she lay, helpless and weeping, on the Spanish Steps in Rome.

She came to in Mr. Braunschweig's arms as he carried her out of the museum. Her skirt hung over her legs like a tent and she dully recognized the sensation of his skin against hers, his bare arms beneath her bare knees, her head against his chest like a child being taken to bed after dozing off during storytime. She murmured, but Mr. B had shushed her, and she felt so woozy, her head throbbing where the vase had hit her, that she snuggled back into his shirt and gladly blacked out again.

When she woke up again she was propped against the fountain in the piazza, water running down her face and Mr. B at her feet, knotting the ends of the bandage together. An Italian woman knelt beside Blythe, wiping her sopping hair from her forehead. The woman dipped her hands in the fountain and ran her wet fingers over Blythe's face, and Blythe groped to find the hands and hold them to her mouth, her thirst suddenly lethal.

"*Acqua,*" said the woman, and Mr. B scrambled to Blythe's side, gave orders in quick, simple Italian to the woman, who darted away down a nearby street.

"She's going to get you water," said Mr. B. Blythe nodded, dumbly, gingerly touching the lump on her forehead. "You're dehydrated," he said. "And you took a pretty bad spill back there in the museum. And something's very wrong with your foot. Why didn't you say anything beforehand?"

Blythe, who was slowly returning to reality as Mr. B spoke, wished she'd stayed in her dark, dizzy world, as her eyes began to well over and hot, humiliating tears slipped down her cheeks.

"Oh—oh no, Blythe," said Mr. B, and his face, so close, his expression so worried and fatherly and how did she ever think he wanted her in that way—she cried openly, shoulders shaking and chest heaving, while Mr. B fished in his pockets for a handkerchief. "I'm sorry—just—you have to tell people these things. I would have never noticed. Don't be upset."

Blythe blew her nose in Mr. B's handkerchief and wiped her dripping eyes.

"On the bright side," he'd said, sounding like he was straining to actually see a bright side, "the vase was a replica. So no worries about that. You've got a hard head there, kid."

As he called her 'kid,' Blythe's world suddenly settled into actuality, into a slowness and numbness that

would follow her onto the plane. When the woman came back with a water bottle, Blythe gulped it down, not caring that it was full of bubbles and tasted terrible, and Mr. B helped her to her feet, supporting her weight with his own.

"Let's get you home," he'd said.

On the plane, Blythe has to laugh a little, imagining Jamie's guffaw as she tells him the whole absurd mess. But her smile is fast fading as she falls back into her thoughts, shame burning across her cheeks, embarrassment and disgrace thickening in her throat. She presses her forehead to the window, too aware of how the plane is a tiny vessel trapped above an endless ocean, how there is nowhere to go but down.

Michael stirs in the seat next to her, yanks back the hood of his sweatshirt and uncrosses his arms.

"I can't sleep," he says.

"Me neither," says Blythe.

Michael sighs and stretches. "Fucking American flights. At least in Europe, you could drink yourself to sleep."

Blythe snorts. "You'd know, I guess."

For a moment, she's certain Michael is going to hit her, but instead he shoves his hands in the kangaroo pocket of his sweatshirt and says, "You know, Blythe, everyone knows you're fucking smart, but after this whole disaster of a trip, I don't need anyone rubbing it in my face that I'm a fuck-up, all right? So I'm not going to some fancy school, so fucking what. So I'm not going to school at all, big fucking deal. But I don't need it, and least of all I do not need it from you. I've had it with bitches giving me shit for no fucking reason. So just lay off, all right?"

Startled by the onslaught, Blythe sits on her hands, her skin hot again though her sunburn has already begun to peel.

"I just meant—" she starts, but she bites her lip against her braces, afraid and ashamed. "That night. You know. You passed out. We—we didn't actually get anywhere. Do anything. You know."

Michael is silent in the dark of the plane, his hands still wadded in his pocket.

"I know you forgot," says Blythe. "I was in the bathroom—I heard you and Nina fighting. I'm sorry."

Michael exhales, as if he'd been holding his breath since Blythe started speaking.

"It's all right," he says, looking down at their high school's logo on the sweatshirt, avoiding Blythe's eyes. "She's going to UW in the fall anyway. We wouldn't've stuck it out." He laughs to himself. "At least

you tell the truth."

They're silent for a moment, suspended in the atmosphere, hurdling at hundreds of miles towards nowhere they know.

"So what are you gonna do in the fall?" asks Blythe, trying to lighten the silence impending around them.

"Hell, I don't know. Probably just dick around until my parents kick me out. Maybe go work in my dad's car shop for a while, if they'll take me. Anything but the Dairy Queen."

"But what do you want to do?"

"I don't know," he says. "I don't know if I'll ever know."

Blythe leans back in her seat. "Yeah."

After a moment, Michael speaks. "You sleepy yet?"

"Not at all. Are you?"

"No." Michael pulls his hood back up.

"I'll probably come crashing into you when I do fall asleep, though," says Blythe, laughing a little desperately, because she'd stuck her tongue in this boy's mouth, because he had sucked on her toes, because it was all vanishing fast behind them.

"That's okay," says Michael, a seriousness in his voice. She can tell his eyes are shut inside the hood. "I don't mind."

The plane zooms onwards, chasing time, warping chronology and bending moments. Mr. B snores, still unshaven. Nina sleeps with her chin on her chest between the Clark twins, collapsed on one another. And Blythe, still wide awake, lifts the armrest between the seats and burrows into Michael's shoulder until he lifts his arm, pulls her to him, and they both go tumbling into their dreams.

CHRISTINE SCOTT

The Story of Erik

My hands were freezing even though Erik had lent me his fleecy hand warmer. I had almost given up on the prospect of ever catching a fish, when all of a sudden I saw an orange flag pop up out of the corner of my eye.

"Oh my God!" I screamed, overwhelmed with excitement. I had never been ice fishing before.

Erik and I ran over to where his dad stood by the small perfectly round hole cut into the ice, my orange flag standing up straight next to it, signifying a bite.

"It's your fish, Christine. Get it!"

I shakily located the line on the snowy surface of the reservoir and took hold of it. Slowly, I pulled it up out of the black water to reveal a small shiny perch. The thrill was indescribable.

"That one's pretty good," Erik said to me with a smile, his silver fillings gleaming in the sunlight. Erik had horrible teeth. He was a good four inches shorter than me, with a yellow-blonde mushroom cut and skinny frame. We were always polar opposites; I was tall for our age and stocky. I had dark brown hair and perfect teeth, even at nine years old. And I was a girl.

I turned to pose, holding my fish in one hand, my other arm draped across my best friend's shoulder, as his dad snapped a picture of us with my disposable camera. We were in the same third grade class then, and that picture is still tacked to my corkboard today.

Though Erik is still shorter than me, and he still has light blonde hair and terrible cavity-prone teeth, nothing else has been the same since that day.

"Do you think Caitlin likes me?" he asked me once, during the previous winter, as we sat in my tree house molding snowballs and piling them up into the corner. The project's purpose was two-fold. First,

after a big snowstorm we had to clear the snow off the floor of the tree house, so that the planks wouldn't rot too much and we could have a dry surface to sit on. The tree house was our sanctuary. We spent hours in it every time Erik came over after school. Second, we used the snowballs to throw at passing cars, one of our favorite winter afternoon activities.

Caitlin was a girl in our class I was actually quite fond of. She played soccer at recess with us, and she laughed at all of my jokes. Because I liked her I decided it was OK for Erik to like her, too.

I said, "She might. Do you want me to ask her?"

"If you don't act weird," he answered.

That was fair, I thought. We heard the sound of a car coming around the corner. Armed and positioned next to the snowball artillery, we stood up and peered over the wall of our tree house. The red Nissan drove ever so slowly down the road coming closer and closer, until we finally pelted it mercilessly. We dove to the floor before the driver could know where the blows had come from.

We laughed and shrieked uncontrollably, as we always did following each attack.

"That was awesome!" Erik said. "It was probably an old woman driving…the car was going so wimpy and slow."

I nodded and made more snowballs to restock the pile. Erik started to climb above the tree house walls to the trunk of the huge elm, his light blue snow pants standing out against the gray wet bark. He was a monkey; always swinging his tiny body off of branches and banisters, and jumping from miraculous heights, always managing to land flawlessly. I thought that he should become a gymnast, which Erik admitted he'd do if it wasn't so girly, and therefore out of the question. This I understood completely.

Winter changed to spring, and instead of throwing snowballs we moved on to other pastimes. We played "pirate ship," a game that consisted of making "telescopes" out of paper towel rolls and saran wrap. We'd stand on my stone wall and use them to survey the yard. Through the clear circles we would spot my yellow lab Zoe lying underneath a tree taking a nap, or my mom working in her garden pruning beautiful flowers. If we didn't go to my house after school we went to his, where we entertained ourselves with a four-wheeler (which I never told my mom about as she would surely have forbidden it) and video games like Sonic The Hedgehog (also off-limits at my house).

"My dad thinks its weird that you're my best friend," Erik said to me as we lay on the ground in his

back yard, exhausted from playing one-on-one soccer. It was summer now and without school we had total freedom. We could lay in the sun all day if we wanted to, and that day the sun was hot; it was the kind of day that makes you want to nap in the grass.

"Why?"

I felt a lump in my throat and my stomach hurt a little. I thought George liked me. George and Jana were Erik's parents. Jana adored me. She had been gypped out of a daughter, so she spoiled me rotten every chance she got.

"Because you're a girl," Erik said.

"Well I'm much cooler than most of the boys we know," I answered. George had never seemed to care that I was a girl before.

"I know, don't worry. I'm glad you're my best friend. I don't get my dad."

None of us really got Erik's dad. He was quiet and withdrawn most of the time, unless he was outside doing something he loved, like fishing or hunting. When he came home from work he was often crabby, and would sit in front of the T.V. or escape to his room, leaving himself out of whatever Erik and Jana and I were doing. The only other time I saw George open up a bit and smile was when my mom invited him in for a drink when he came to pick up Erik from my house. Erik and I liked that they were friendly with each other because it meant we could always count on another half-hour together after George arrived.

My mother didn't have many friends. She and I lived together in our little house and my brother lived with my dad in Pennsylvania. She was sad a lot of the time, but mostly she was just tired. She worked all day and I went to school all day and after we ate dinner and played Gin Rummy, we went to bed. Then we'd get up and do the same thing over again. I was happy to see her talk to other adults like George. I knew she missed my dad, and I also knew my dad was a jerk.

"Why did George look so mad?" I asked my mom one evening, as I looked out the window and watched Erik and his dad getting into their car.

It was winter again and Erik had been over that day after school. We had been downstairs in the basement, taking turns doing flips off of my couch into a pile of blankets and pillows on the floor when George barged in and told Erik to get his stuff quickly; they had to go. He looked strange, like maybe he was angry, or maybe he'd been crying. This freaked me out. Adults weren't supposed to cry.

What had my mother said to make George look and act that way? I was sure they had argued about politics. "Politics" was this boring topic of conversation that my mom and other adults always insisted on discussing. It was about different guys and who was better at doing what things; that was all I knew. My mother once made me watch a couple of them argue on T.V. Politics always seemed to make adults mad at each other, or at the very least, squeamish.

My mom sighed as she poured out the remnants of her and George's wine glasses and asked me if I wanted chicken and rice for dinner.

"Why won't you tell me? What happened?"

"Nothing happened. We were talking about grown up stuff."

"About us? Me and Erik?"

"*Erik and I*," she corrected. "And no, not this time." I noticed that my mom moved as though she were exhausted from something.

"Politics?" I asked, with a dramatic yawn.

She smiled. "Yes. Politics. Chicken?"

A week later Erik and George and I were driving home from our ice fishing excursion. After waiting around in the cold for hours with no bites and finally catching that fish, I was elated. Whatever had happened at my house between George and my mom seemed to have been nothing, which couldn't make me any happier. The three of us drove back to Erik's in the front seat of the pick up truck. I'd sleep over that night, and Erik and I would make ice cream sundaes for desert and watch a movie we'd rented earlier with Jana.

"What's it about again?" I asked Erik.

"It's about a kid who knows how to skateboard and then his skateboard comes alive and makes him do things he can't do on his own."

"Sounds stupid," I said. Even though we all knew that skateboards were probably the coolest and most impressive thing on the planet, the idea of one coming to life seemed dumb.

"It does sound kind of stupid," George said with a smile, playfully punching Erik in the arm.

When we walked through the front door I opened my mouth to tell Jana about my fish, but decided against it when I got that first glimpse of her face. She sat on the staircase in front of the door, as if she had

been waiting for us to come home. My overnight backpack lay at her feet, and her face was pale.

"What?" Erik asked.

George didn't say anything. He just looked at her and she just looked at him. They looked at each other until Erik seemed embarrassed and ran up the stairs towards his room. I started to run after him but stopped when Jana spoke to me, without taking her eyes off of George.

"Christine, I'm sorry, but I have to take you home now."

"I'm not sleeping over?"

"No. I have to take you home."

I heard Erik start to cry at the top of the stairs.

"Mom, why?" he yelled. "This is so unfair!"

I knew better than to argue with adults who weren't my mom, so I picked up my backpack and stood next to Jana, waiting for her. She started towards the door without saying anything to George, and I followed. Maybe Erik had gotten into trouble but Jana didn't want to tell me what he had done. Sometimes when I got in trouble I wasn't allowed to have him to my house. I'd talk to him the following day at school when everything was back to normal.

The ten-minute car ride from Erik's house to mine was silent until we pulled onto my road. Jana slowed down and came to a complete stop a few feet before turning into my driveway. The color of her face resembled that of Elmer's glue, and her blonde hair stuck up everywhere. She looked like she was going crazy. I realized for the first time that she wasn't beautiful like my mom. I didn't want to look her in the eye, but I knew that she wouldn't start talking to me until I did.

"You and Erik can no longer be friends," she said. She spoke the words slowly and clearly, but it seemed like she was shaking inside.

"What do you mean?" I had a ringing in my ears.

"You and Erik have to stop being friends, sweetheart."

When she called me sweetheart I wanted to punch her in the face.

"Why? What did he do?"

"Your mother is a whore." She spoke these words slowly and clearly as well.

I didn't know what a whore was and I didn't know what my mom had to do with any of this. I just

wanted her to tell me why I couldn't be friends with Erik anymore.

"Why? Why, why, why, what do you mean?"

I was yelling now.

"What did Erik do wrong?"

"It wasn't him. She's a whore."

I still didn't know what a whore was and I still didn't care. I got out of the car and I sprinted to my house, sobbing.

"Do you want to play Gin Rummy?" my mom asked me after dinner.

I didn't want to play cards and I didn't want to eat anything and I didn't want to talk to her and I didn't want to go to the stupid private school she said I had to attend now. I didn't want to be confused but I didn't want any answers. I didn't want to talk to any adults. I wanted to talk to Erik, but I knew – without any real explanation – that this was out of the question.

"I'm going to bed."

Whore, I thought. What was a whore?

"Brush your teeth," she said.

I started up the stairs and stopped at the top of them to peer down at my mom. She sat there shuffling our deck of cards over and over again, until finally I saw her dark curly head of hair fall onto her hands on the kitchen table. I watched her silently weep. Five minutes later she picked the cards back up and began laying them out for a game of solitaire.

I forgave my mother for everything I didn't know enough to be mad at her for. I forgave her in that moment; I forgave her *everything*. And today, even though I understand, I still forgive her.

Sometimes I see Erik in passing. He works at a sporting goods shop in town and I hear he lives not far away from his mom, whom I have never seen again. When I run into Erik we smile politely and nod towards each other. It's been over a decade since we went ice fishing. Maybe we were helping our parents, or maybe we were helping ourselves by never discussing the situation. I wonder if maybe when a person is nine years old, they have it right. Maybe Erik was the best friend I will have ever had. Maybe we'd still be best friends today if it weren't for our parents. We might have gone our separate ways eventually, for one

reason or another. But all I can do as I look at the image on the corkboard – at our smiling faces, our arms around each other, that fish hanging from its thread – is wonder.

ELIZA TIMPSON

Bittersweet

The kitchen was snowing coconut. Not the actual fruit, but the small white flakes they sold in bags at the grocery store. The counters were covered in the white stuff, and it appeared as though the Florida heat had found itself in the middle of a blizzard.

"Come on in, sweetie, I'm making coconut cake."

Samantha paused and stared at her mother's eyes, carefully inspecting for a glazed, red look. She scanned the kitchen and spotted a wine glass by the stove.

"Classy for cooking," as her mother would say.

"What's going on?" Sam said.

"Babycakes, I'm making a cake of course." Sam surveyed the scene again, waiting for the sweetness to clear from her nostrils so she could locate the kitchen's usual stale scent.

"I'm going to the library. You have coconut in your hair."

"Fine, be a party pooper! I'm going to bake until this house turns so wholesome we don't know what to do with ourselves." At that Sam's mom laughed and shook back her head, sending waves of highlighted hair swimming in the overhead light.

"I'll be back at eight."

"I'll be onto onion casserole by that time."

"What are we celebrating?"

"Your sister is coming tomorrow! She's bringing her boyfriend—although those kids will probably just want to drink and do it—god knows if it was my spring break—"

"Callie's coming home?"

"Of course, honey, they have off for the week. Now don't hurt those pretty eyes of yours reading. How

are you supposed to meet all the cuties if you have glasses? Plus, I'm not paying for those eye doctor's appointments."

She was still laughing as Samantha walked out the screen door.

For two years, Callie hadn't come home for any break besides Christmas, and Samantha suspected the school had made her come home for this Christmas. Callie did not do any more holidays after their mother, Terry, had decided to skip out on Thanksgiving during Callie's first visit home since she had left for college. Terry had left without a word somewhere between watching on telivision an off-Broadway performance and Santa Claus's annual debut on the Macy's Day Parade. Samantha and Callie had finished watching the program, and, realizing Terry had not returned, stayed in front of the television and watched football until the outside streetlamps turned on. Samantha had gotten up once to make popcorn. Callie refused to eat it and left for bed. Samantha had placed every last kernel in her mouth as she followed the burly, uniformed men across the screen. She imagined that in millions of other houses families were doing the same thing.

Terry had returned the following morning with red-rimmed eyes and shopping bags of newly, on-sale supplies for a Thanksgiving dinner. Callie had told her not to bother and that she had changed her plane reservations.

They had fought. Terry left again. Samantha made Callie a pumpkin pie from a can mix in the grocery bags. Callie had tried. Tried the thick filling, tried a smile for Sam, tried to enjoy their barefoot walk on the beach before the taxi took her to the airport. In the end, she left anyways. Sam understood.

The day Callie had left for her first year at college, Samantha had watched her zip the faded suitcases from the doorway of their bedroom. There had not been much to pack since Callie's scholarship promised to provide most of the essentials for dormitory living. Callie had taken a taxi to the airport since Terry claimed she needed the car for her new job. Samantha had driven with her, and when Callie disappeared through security, Sam had told the taxi just to drive wherever he wanted. For awhile, she pretended that she was going somewhere too.

Callie didn't call much. When she did, it was always after ten, always after Terry would be out. The distance over the phone was bitter, like the sting of ocean salt in your nose. Sam asked questions until the guilt in Callie's voice drowned out her answers. Callie didn't ask questions. What was there to ask that they

both did not already know?

Now, the payphone hummed in Sam's hand. Callie was close; she was coming back, and she had been packing when Sam called. Her voice on the other end of the phone had at first sounded refreshed, untainted. Now it was changing. The distance was creeping up her throat and making the noise too soft – too frantic.

"Please, Sam, make her be good."

"When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow. We're taking the 7:20 a.m. flight. He's paying."

"Wow. That must be expensive."

There was a pause on the line. Callie began, "I'm really excited to see you Sammy."

"Don't lie, Callie. This is torture for you."

"Sam, that's not fair."

"Why are you bringing him here?"

"He wants to come, I don't know. Sam, just promise?"

"What's he like?"

"He's from Boston. His parents are doctors. He's handsome. He bought me the most beautiful necklace for my birthday, and—"

"And you're bringing him here? Hah. She's going to hit on him."

"Oh my god, I can't do this. He wants to meet my family. He says he hates his family too; he's a rich boy, Sam. What the hell does he expect? He's going to have no idea what to do with us."

"Thanks, Cal."

"You know I'm not talking about you."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Just promise she'll be good."

"Yeah, I promise. Like that means anything around here anyway."

Then Callie had to go because she had class and friends and pine trees. So they hung up.

Jake met Callie over Thanksgiving break during her second year at a prestigious liberal arts college.

They had been the only ones to stay in the dorm for the holiday. He had called home citing work as an excuse for his inability to make it home for yet another family event. Being alone was boring, but it was far better then the daunting prospect of the family dinners with the ironed linen napkins and the invisible arguments that weaved themselves into the dinner table.

Callie had been watching "It's a Wonderful Life" in the common room. Jake had been walking through, but he was lonely in the empty hallways so he sat beside her. She had told him when little Susie cries because the petals fall off her flower, it reminded her of her own little sister. One time, she said, her sister had cried because all the coconuts kept falling off the trees and rotting in the lot by their house. Their mother had suggested they bury the coconuts, so that way, they wouldn't rot but grow into a forest of palm trees covering the entire street. Jake hadn't known what to say, so they watched the rest of the movie in silence and said goodnight.

That night he dreamed about his own mother and father sitting at the heads of their dining room table as he served them coconuts, but even as they ate, they never looked at him or the sweet milk that dripped from the shells, as they chewed. The next day he knocked on Callie's door and asked her to pizza. The next day he kissed her. The next day the campus filled. The next day they had sex. The next day they made love. The next day he asked her for another story, but she couldn't give him one, so he stopped asking.

Callie and Jake were already waiting when Terry swerved in front of the airport security van for the last parking place. The first thing Sam noticed was Callie's new hair. The once dirty-blond strands now swung around her shoulders in rich brown curls.

"Sorry officer," Terry yelled while climbing out of the car, "You gotta understand, I haven't seen this cutie in months." The officer's grimace turned into a smile as he watched Terry grab Callie's shoulders and pull her into a hug. "Damn, Cal," Terry continued, "Where did you get the cash for that fancy shirt?" She didn't wait for a reply. "Oh! This must be the boy."

"Hello Ms. Cuttingham, I'm Jake," the boy stuck out his hand, but she didn't take it. Sam watched as Callie cringed.

"Aw, what's this? Call me Terry sweetie, and this is the Samantha—but Sam for short, 'cause she doesn't mess around." Terry laughed.

The introductions continued. Terry insisted Jake sit up front with her so they could "bond" while Cal-

lie and Sam sat in the back.

"Has she been drinking?"

"Yeah Cal, I made sure she had a few screwdrivers before we left the house. How's school?"

"I can't do this." Callie turned her head, so Sam closed her eyes, pretending that it was like when they were younger, and they both had dirty-blond curls like all the other little girls in Florida.

When he had imagined Florida, he had imagined the ocean and green waves crashing across white sand, flamingos dancing across Disney World, alligators in popped pink collars.

There was a pool, but it didn't have any alligators. It had big black bugs that floated belly up across its surface. There was pink paint, but it was chipped. There was a guest bedroom, but it had two twin beds, and he shared it with both sisters. There was a dinner table, but it was brimming with plastic cutlery, boxes of jello, and diet cokes with rum. Callie had warned him. She had called it tacky. She had dismissed so many questions that all he had to go on was the image of a palm tree forest floating above him as he sat amongst the three women at their feast.

Callie and Jake slept in the bed across from Sam. Jake's large body faced her, and she could feel the weight of his breath on her cheeks. It was scented with onions, no doubt from Terry's casserole. He had choked down bits of the dull green substance with an air of politeness that finely complimented the collar of his polo shirt. Now his body sprawled out towards her. In the dim light she watched his lips shutter softly as he inhaled. It was odd for her to watch him sleep; it seemed wrong that she was the only witness to this event. The thought made the small hairs on the back of her neck tingle. From behind his torso came Callie's thin finger tips, resting gently on the skin just above his belly button. Other than that hand, Sam was alone with this stranger. This outsider and everything that came with him— his manners, his large hands that held Callie's suitcases, his questions about her classes and her sports teams—in this moment, they were hers.

Callie always slept. Samantha never did. Even in that basic function, Sam was always left behind. Drumming: the sound of keyboard notes on eyelids, delicate fingers pressing, making the sound of petal stems that dropped on rows of wood across her back, like beads of sweat she tried to hide from the boys in her gym class who laughed when she ran because her breasts jiggled less than any of the other girls in the

tenth grade and so she ran faster or slower or in between whatever pace was good enough to equal the sum of nothing, the quotient of invisible, a state that would float her up and above the highest florescent lights of the Elm Wood library, higher even than all the books of war that she didn't care for and sex that she was too embarrassed to read. That was Samantha's insomnia.

"Can't sleep?"

Sam hiccupped. She had heard him walk down the hall, listened as the thud of his bare feet hit the tiled floor, and right before he had flicked on the kitchen light, she had hoped he would stop and turn around. But he was here now. So she nodded to his question.

"Yeah, me neither. I don't sleep that well anyways, and new houses—"

"Plus, it's so hot," she commented as he carefully stepped over to the table and pulled out a chair for himself.

"Well, yeah, that's unbelievable that the air-conditioning company is on strike. You would think they'd be working harder to fix that."

"The air-conditioning company isn't on strike. My mom was lying. We just don't get air-conditioning. It's too expensive."

"Oh. Right. I'm sorry. I mean, it really isn't that hot."

"Are you always like that?"

"Like what?"

"Polite, nice, I don't know."

"I'm not—"

"What about an insomniac? Could you always never sleep or is it just because you don't like this house?"

"What do you know about insomnia?"

"You can't stop it."

He looked at her. She was wearing an old t-shirt and boxers. Her eyes were wide, and she stared at him so intently that it was difficult for him to return the gaze.

"Yeah, I guess sometimes I can't sleep."

"I'm glad you brought her. It's funny thinking about this heat now. Callie and I, we used to put on

as many pieces of clothing as we could and pretend we were running away. We were going to change our names and become dolphin trainers at the water park. We used to get so hot before we even left the house, because Cal would always make me take two sweatshirts. I guess she thought it was responsible."

As Sam talked, she slid her chair closer to the table. Then suddenly, as if changing her mind, she pulled back. "I'm going to go back to bed. Night, Jake. Leave the light on in here when you go. She won't be home for awhile."

She walked past him, and he was left staring at the digital stove clock. The red numbers flickered: 3:22. It took him until 3:27 to realize that Sam wasn't coming back to the kitchen, and it was three more minutes before he understood that he wanted her to come back and tell him more.

In the morning they went to the beach. He watched her more closely this time. Even when Callie sat in his lap, and their mother stripped down into her metallic gold bikini, he watched her. She did not mention the night before, and he tried not to feel insulted. When she went to buy French fries, he offered to help. He would wait until she told him stories – told him about insomnia or feeling or not feeling. She hadn't left yet, and apparently she could tell him what Callie had forgotten.

Jake picked Samantha up from school on Friday afternoon. Since the station wagon was already in the parking lot when she left the building, Sam's first thoughts were laced with panic. When she got into the front seat, she realized the only reason her ride was on time was the driver.

"Your mom wanted to get pedicures with your sister so I offered to pick you up," he hurriedly explained.

"Oh. Thanks."

"Your mom's pretty crazy, huh?"

"Why?"

"She practically dragged us to the water park today. I always wanted to go to one of those when I was little. My mom never let me. I looked for the dolphins," he commented with a laugh. Samantha noticed the newly reddish tint that covered his arms: the unavoidable New England sunburn. She could already see Callie; new brown hair or not, her skin would already be a dusty copper.

"She didn't always used to be like that. What does Callie say?"

"She doesn't really talk about—well I mean she talks about you, but—"

"Don't lie. Callie doesn't like the fact that our mother is an alcoholic."

Jake shifted his weight in the driver's seat.

"Are you always this polite to houseguests?"

"Are you making fun of me?"

"I mean, Sam, how old are you? Fifteen? Sixteen?"

"Sixteen."

"Exactly. You would never know. The things you talk about. You're so blunt. Callie said you were that way."

"Jake, she is an alcoholic. She's my mom. Just because Callie can't deal with it, doesn't mean I'm just going sit here in denial. Plus, I'm going to go to State soon—maybe even next year if I can get some extra credits to graduate early—"

"So you're going to stay in Florida?"

"I have to."

"Sam, I know it's not my business, but you don't have to. You could get a scholarship like Callie."

"And then who would stay with *her*?"

They were silent.

"I think Callie really misses you at school. You're the only reason she let me come here."

"Why did you want to come here?"

"I hate going home."

She laughed; the sound was cruel, and it echoed off of the leather seats.

"You don't know everything, Sam." He replied. His voice was as cold as her laugh, and she refused to respond to the remark. The silence was heavy, heavier then anything he had ever said to his parents or to Callie, and yet the feeling of that weight was a relief.

The next night he was there before her, and when she saw him, he tried not to feel embarrassed.

He began, "I haven't slept more then three hours in a row since I was younger then you."

"Do you want to go steal grapefruits?"

"Sorry?"

"I mean it's okay if you don't, I just thought, you know if we both can't sleep and it's kind of fun you know, kind of a rush –

"No, no I mean – steal grapefruits? From the store?"

"No, up the road from here. Callie and I used to do it, all these big houses have grapefruit trees, but the rich people are usually gone by now. It's too hot; they go up north. You just have to run across the lawn and grab the ones that fall."

"Do they get mad?"

"It still smells like coconut in here; it's disgusting."

"Okay, let's go."

A breeze was waiting on the front steps. They walked until his bare feet numbed, and the lights around them grew bright and the houses' paint no longer chipped.

She was running across the lawns, out and across the spotlights, hair streaming out behind her. She lost a flip-flop but still her legs kept moving until she reached the trees. She stuffed grapefruits into the canopy of her outstretched shirt. She ran back trying to keep them contained, trying to hold them all even as they began to fall and thump beside her in the wet grass. She needed help. He jogged over to her and picked up the ones she had dropped. The lights in the house turned on, and he let out a yell. She glared at him.

"Shut-up!"

He almost laughed at her. Her raised shirt exposed a thin line of skin underneath. It was almost too dark to tell what was skin and what was not.

"Come on." He followed her back onto the pavement, her one shoe slapping onto the asphalt. She was harder to catch then he had expected, and his breath came on strong. They went on for minutes.

"Where are we going?" He had caught up to her, her body becoming bigger as he came closer so that she too grew older.

"Here."

She dropped onto the lawn of a darkened house and let the fruit spread out on the ground. Handing him a grapefruit, she took off her only shoe and threw it into the bushes. He watched but didn't say anything.

"Peel it."

He tried to stick his nail into the skin. The stub wasn't sharp enough and it barely made a dent.

"Here, I'll do it." She took it from him. Under her fingers the white lines stretched and broke. She worked fast, splitting the ball in two, and handed him back his share of the slices.

"Taste it."

He bit, chewed, swallowed. "I've never had them without sugar. It's good," he managed to say before he had to bring his hand to wipe the juice from his chin. She smiled and spit a seed across the grass.

"The best."

The call came in the afternoon. Callie and Jake had been by the pool when Sam had answered the phone.

"Hey Samantha, it's Bert, down at Cricket's. How ya doin' kid?"

"Where is she?"

"Well, she came in early today, she was talking about Callie – real excited about her coming back and everything, but then I guess one of my new guys here let her keep drinking, he doesn't really know the ropes yet so–"

"Where is she, Bert?"

"She's here, but she's going to need someone to come pick her up. She just needs a little T.L.C., if you know what I mean–"

"I'm coming."

"Sorry about this kid–"

"No, I'm sorry. I'll be there soon."

Jake drove. Callie cried. Sam sat in the backseat with the sleeping Terry, watching her closed eyelids with envy. Terry didn't wake until the sky had grown dark. When she entered the kitchen, no one but Jake looked up from the television.

"You're up." He attempted.

"Damn straight honey, just have to get in that beauty rest once in awhile. Now has anyone seen my purse?"

"You left it at Cricket's," Callie replied.

"I've got an idea loves! Jake, honey, want to go to dinner? My treat!"

"With what money?"

"Callie, will you stop doing this to me? What am I to you? Dirt? I apologize. I offer to take you to dinner and this is what I get?"

Sam stopped her, "Let's go. I want to go to dinner."

"Now there's the attitude we're looking for, right Jake? Come on, we can go to Becky's, best burgers in Clearwater."

No one talked as they drove to the diner. No one talked when they were seated and Terry lit up and the smoke made Jake dizzy and Callie cry and Samantha feel as though she would fall through the linoleum seat, down, down, down into the ground until the ocean waves hit her ears and covered her hair and her eyes and her toes.

She was attempting sleep.

She couldn't tell what was real or not. Old conversations and phone calls and dreams turning into capital letters, periods, sentences, rambling disregarded, echoing the image of a rusted kitchen trash can filled with the leftovers of her dinner that Terry had insisted they keep and Callie's used condom – wrapped in toilet paper like a present so that no one would know that they had fucked on the lawn chair by the pool – that the wrapper was still in his pocket – that she knew if she would just open her eyes she could see the silver casing protruding from his jeans.

There was no smell here. She would have taken anything: coconut, onion, days and hours of nauseating aromas that chained her to this pink house, on this road, with the trucks and plastic flamingos. Days measured in time, measured by hunger, and sleep, and the pressure of a full bladder, and the relief.

"Sam?" He was touching her cheek; his arm was reaching from across the beds. "I'm sorry—you're asleep?"

"No, no. I'm not."

"Want to go?"

"Yeah."

They ran from the moment they left the house, past the grapefruit trees and the paint and the homes

that knew about clean dinner tables that talked back. He followed her, and she followed him until they were both lost. They couldn't talk when they collapsed on the grass.

Even so, he told her, "I'm sorry we have to leave you here."

She caught him and held his tongue captive between the toothpaste and sweat that coated his lips. Once, in the first grade, Callie had been invited to sleep at a friend's house. Sam knew, that night, she would have to sleep alone. Before leaving school she had licked the side of the swing set just like they tell you not to when it is cold or else your tongue will freeze and stick. But it never was cold, so her tongue never stuck. Instead, metal filled her mouth, and she had no reason not to go home.

The lights were on when they returned. Callie was standing in the kitchen. Her newly polished toes gleamed peachy-plum.

"Where were you guys?"

"We were stealing grapefruits," Sam quickly cut in.

Callie looked at the two of them. Her shiny brown hair had frizzed in the humidity and looked like a crown atop her head. Her disheveled appearance emptied itself into her voice, "Where are your shoes, Jake?"

Jake stood, caught. "I don't—Sam said we didn't need them." He was holding the taste of her underneath his tongue; the bittersweet aroma of grapefruits was swallowing his senses.

"Sam is sixteen, Jake. Please. You are the only connection to sanity I have around here."

"Do you remember stealing grapefruits when we were little?" Sam asked.

Callie glanced in Sam's direction. She let out a long sigh. "Remember what?"

Sam began to explain, but realized she did not know how.

"Let's go, Jake," Callie called.

Jake remained stationary next to Samantha for a moment; and then without looking back walked towards Callie. Before the two disappeared down the hallway, he took the three stolen grapefruits from his pockets and placed them on the kitchen table. Sam was left alone in the lit kitchen. She sat down at the table and began to peel the fruits. There was a small cut on her ring finger, and when the juice spilled from the inside, it stung her skin. She took out a bowl from underneath the sink and began to press on the slices of grapefruit with clenched fists. The fruit became empty shells, and the bowl was filled with liquid pulp.

Then she raised the bowl to her lips like a cup and poured the juice down, down, down. Her eyes began to tear, but she kept drinking until her tongue was so full of the overwhelming flavor that she thought its taste would never leave her.

The next morning they left. Callie and Jake had places to go; they had dining halls with laughing dinner tables and dorm rooms with different roommates to attend to. Sam was not invited into their airport taxi, and Terry had given quick hugs and left for the day without explanation. When the house was empty, Sam went back to her room where her sheets lay in a crumpled mess on top of her bed. She lay down on Callie's bed. Jake had made it that morning; Sam had watched him carefully fold and tuck the blankets into the mattress. Now, she put her head on Callie's pillow—or was it his?—and forced herself to look for the smell of grapefruits. She closed her eyes until every sense was consumed with the search for bittersweet remains. Finally, she slept.

Later—when Terry tried making coconut casserole, and Sam found herself back amongst the shelves of library books, and the Florida heat grew into a boil—later, Callie called.

They had broken up. She was upset, but she would be fine. She said Jake had told her that she did not visit enough. She agreed and made promises of future holiday visits and cheerful phone calls. She talked, but Sam couldn't hear her, because Sam was dreaming.

JENNIFER VANO

Iron Filings

I. Everything Is Crystal When You are Gone (and Look Back at What You Left)

She was a child and:

God amongst 12-yr old apostles;
Athena with blindingly perfect form;
Everest, its snow-caps melting glistening fiction
onto the blacktop where she stood telling stories
to worshiping classmates that sat cross-legged around her.

I was a child and:

Bursting at the seams.
Afraid to say "I'm scared, somebody. Somebody tell me what will be."
Sad, as my shiny fiction drowned the blacktop where I stood amongst awestruck classmates who waited, breathless, for my next chapter: "A day in the life of—."
They thought they knew who I was but I was a liar. And I know why (now) I think, and I didn't think I'd ever change, or even want to. Then: I wanted you to say that you were my friends. (Please, please, please? Forever ever ever?) *To say that you'd always like my stories, that they made your blood rush, that they made you feel like you were a part of something that should be kept far away in some box in some universe away from that blacktop and that school and the everything that should have been enough to make me able to say despite anything: "I love me." And: "I'm missing something big but I think I know how to*

be okay."

II. The Story(s) and Why, Why, Why (Not)

"Okay, so, my dad hit a squirrel yesterday. I didn't cry, just stared out the window. Like this, see? My dad said: 'what are you staring at? That ain't nothing but a piece of shit, anyway.' I wanted to say 'Dad, shit sometimes has kids; what about that shit's kids, Dad?' but instead I didn't say nothing and watched the thing die there out the window. He turned around, smacked me straight across the face. He said, 'you answer me when I ask you something. You listening to me or what?'"

Magdalena Paige always tells her classmates stories about her father: ice, abuse, lack-of-love should-be-role-model. He loves her and is none of the things she makes him out to be (he is the ideal go-to-every-soccer-game dad's dad) but she likes to lie about him: "He beat me—look at this bruise!" she says as she points to a rosy cheek—red from the cold wind, not her father's palm—or her broken pointer finger or scraped forearm (a bicycle accident). She collects her friend's shocked *ooohs* and *aahs* like gold, tucks them into the deep pockets of her need-for-acceptance or strings them like pearls around her neck.

My dad loves me a lot but I always tell kids stories about how he hits me hard every single day for every single little thing I can think of. Like: I look too much out the window. Like: my head's in the clouds. I go to school—uh—not every day I do this but sometimes, a lot of times—I come to school and point to a scrape or something I got tripping-and-falling real innocent, right? Falling off a bike or playing with my puppies outside or something and I point to it and say my dad hit me hard. Sometimes, even, I pinch my cheeks—like this, look!—I pinch 'em till they turn bright red and I come in and tell ev'body that my dad, ya know, slapped me, slapped me, slapped me for, like, not tying my shoes right or something real stupid like that. Why do I do it? You wanna know why? I dunno. Well. Yea. I don't know. I like the way ev'body crowds around me out there, asking me about it and stuff. I stand up real straight and ev'body stares at me and listens to me for as long as I wanna talk about it. I can tell them anything and it's okay.

"My dad hit me last night," Magdalena says, brushing a wisp of blonde hair from her hazel eyes and pushing it behind her ear.

"Why, Maggie? Why'd he do that for?" a younger girl asks, her heart beating anxiously.

"I wouldn't eat my dinner."

"Why?"

"I threw it away because I was done. Mac and cheese. I didn't want anymore so I threw it away. He told me to eat it out of the garbage."

"Oh…"

"He said t'me: Magdalena Paige, you have 10 seconds to eat that macaroni and cheese out of the trash and if you don't you better run."

"You didn't eat it," the girl says. She doesn't ask because she knows the answer. There is an inescapable steadiness to Magdalena's tone that makes her words truths to the unbiased ears they fall upon, make her seem divine amongst the others.

I always practice my stories over and over and over again until they're like perfect. *I whisper them to myself so my dad won't hear 'em. I tell him I'm doing homework or something and lock the door and make sure they're all ready to get told the next day so that ev'body will believe 'em. I used to wanna laugh, ya know, the first time I did it. But now, it's so easy. Like I'm telling the truth. Sometimes I think it's easier to say what I'm saying than to tell the truth, anyway. I always have a plan, you know? It's not me but the pretend Magdalena Paige who they're looking at.*

"I didn't eat it. And before I could turn to run he hit me so hard my knees buckled and I fell. He hit me harder than he ever hit me. Once in the stomach, once in the face. He hit me so hard I couldn't breathe and I fell and smacked my knees on the ground. You can't see bruises now because my stockings are coverin 'em but they're huge. He said: you piss me off one more fucking time, Magdalena Paige, and I'll kill you, I swear to God, I will."

III. Things Worth Believing

How come nobody ever tells my stories to the teachers? I dunno, really. Prolly 'cause the last time anybody told blacktop secrets to a teacher—I think Billy told Ms. Phillips Jenna smoked cigarettes or something—Jenna got in a lot of trouble. A lot a lot. Ms. Phillips called her into her office and Jenna left crying a lot. And then we heard that Jenna's parents punished her for like months *after that. And, worst thing of all, nobody talks to Billy anymore because nobody likes a stupid tattle-tale. Ev'body likes Jenna but nobody likes Billy. Not anymore, at least. He shouldn'tah said anything. I don't think anybody will ever tell my stories to anybody else. They like 'em too much. Plus nobody else'd ever talk to the person who told ever again.*

IV. Twelve (and Ten and Eleven) Year-old Apostles

Everybody loves Magdalena, but nobody knows her. They love that she always has something to say. And she is so brave, so strong. Her life is more exciting than their own, and they yearn to glean from her experiences tactics for stirring up their own lives in the same way, to make 5th grade—and 6th and 4th and 7 th —worthwhile. Pain, bruises—these things are of no concern to Magdalena's followers. These things which make her so special are mere shadows of some distant consequence of the other-worldly life Magdalena is privileged enough to live. Recess belongs to her. Her altar: sometimes a clean stretch of tar-black ground, sometimes the top of a slide. She owns the playground with her words, and when she isn't speaking, the rest of them speak about her.

I have a lot of friends. I'm like the most popular kid in fifth grade. The fourth graders and the sixth graders like me, too. When I stand on the swing set ready to tell 'em about my dad, they can't wait and make sure ev'body else is listening, too. When I tell my stories they come up to me and say "Maggie, you are so brave! Maggie, you are so strong!" They love me. I love 'em too. They think I'm special. "You're special, Maggie. How can we be like you?"

V. What Goes Up (Must Shatter into a Million Little Pieces on the Blacktop)

"Where is Maggie today?" a usually shy 5th grade boy asks a group of 6th grade girls that loiter by the swing set. It's November. The cold air is unusually piercing even for the season, and though it is only noon, the sun seems to be setting in the purple-grey sky. The lone teacher, who leans uncomfortably against the chain-link fence, arms crossed, one foot propped on the yellow concrete marker of a parking space, closes her eyes as the wind accosts her cheeks and the tip of her nose.

"Where's Maggie?" the boy repeats. The urgency of his question lingers perilously in the atmosphere. The voices of the girls who answer him—"She's not here"—seem to cling to the shadow of his, grasping for some tangible explanation:

"What? Why?"

"Nobody knows why."

"She's inside, with a teacher, maybe?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

"She's not here. She never came."

"Was she here yesterday?" the boy asks.

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Yes." The girls' words disintegrate into the unmoved cold.

"Yesterday she said something about her dad hitting her harder than he usually does. He said he'd kill her. You think—"

"She didn't get a good grade on the Math quiz. Maybe he found out, maybe he hit her again, harder than before—"

"Maybe she wouldn't eat her dinner again or she rolled her eyes at him or slammed the door or didn't answer when he asked her a question—"

Stories spin effortlessly from the minds and mouths of the students. Soon, even they will have forgotten that their strung-together words are merely speculation, and "what might have happened to Maggie" will become "Maggie is absent today *precisely* because—"

"She brought her quiz home today. She got a C. She told me about it; she was crying and saying 'my Dad *cannot* see this or he'll for sure, I promise, he'll kill me!'" a girl who takes the lead says as she adjusts the red wool scarf around her neck.

"She didn't show her dad, but the quiz must have fallen out of her backpack, stuck out of her folder or something. Because he saw the C," the girl continues.

Slowly, more and more 4th and 5th and 6th graders gather, and those who had once been admirers of the brave leader, *The* Magdalena Paige, become mourners of the poor, abused, never-to-be-seen-again, martyr Maggie.

The teacher leaning against the fence opens her eyes and watches as the children, like iron filings to a magnet, are pulled to the red-scarfed girl. The teacher inches closer until she can just barely hear what is being said.

"Maggie's father saw her C and slapped her across the face. She didn't want to show him she was crying, but it hurt so bad she couldn't help it and she sunk into a chair and covered her face in her hands. He pulled her arm and said 'Get up, you whiny bitch!' But he pulled so hard he twisted her wrist and she

screamed. He took her to the hospital and said she fell off her bike. He called the school and told them she was sick and wouldn't be back in school for a long time."

The teacher's heart sinks. "No. No. No. That can't be," she thinks. The prospect is so surreal that her heavy thoughts seem to fall from her like dead fish onto a sailboat's deck, only to be picked up and examined by a curious fisherman asking himself: now what do I do with these?

VI. How Truth Sounds

I didn't go to school on Thursday because I had the sniffles. Daddy made me warm chicken soup with little stars and carrots. I love carrots. He brought me pink and green fuzzy socks with white sheep on 'em to keep my toes warm, and put sheets and big, fluffy blankets on the couch in the den so I could watch cartoons. He got me the special tissues in the princess box. I love my Dad. Sometimes I wish I see what he sees. But something about me gives me the heebie-jeebies. It's not my hair, I don't think. No, my hair is okay. It's thin and blonde and sometimes the wind makes it look crazy, but it's ok. Maybe it's my cheeks. They're probably too chubby for my age. Grandma says I never lost my baby fat. Yea, it's my cheeks. And my big blue eyes are too blue and too big. Something about me just gives me the heebie-jeebies. Daddy loves me. I love him too. But how come there's all these goosebumpies on my arms?

When Magdalena Paige's mother died last year, Magdalena told no one. She should have allowed the despair to land gently in the laps of those around her, to ease the pain she, perhaps, was not yet wise enough to recognize, and help her understand why, why, why (at least a little).

Instead, she first turned it in (*I hate me.* But really: *I hate that my Mommy is gone forever but that won't change anything. I hate that I don't know what to do and that Daddy loves me and I love him but that's still not enough. I hate that nobody would understand, I don't think, because I don't even understand, and more how can I even say it?*) and then pushed it out in the form of fiction, crafted stories to live within so that she could maybe, at least for a moment or two, forget the reality which relentlessly dragged her heart across the ground. She had all the words in the world to captivate listeners whose incredulous faces and innocent eyes begged for sequels, but didn't know how to say to anyone, "I'm sad. Very, very sad."

VII. The End (or the Beginning) of Everything

One phone call and Magdalena Paige's secret spills like cold dead fish from a dirt-smeared bucket onto

the lukewarm concrete.

"Uh, hello, Mr. Janson. Yes…well…I'm calling about some rather disturbing stories overheard on the playground today."

They found me. My teacher called my dad today and told him everything and when she called I spilled my soup all over that special green and purple blanket that's real fuzzy and thick that Mommy brought home from me that time when she went to Arizona to visit Aunt July and that Daddy keeps in his room now. There were little stars and carrots all over the blanket and I didn't know what to do but Daddy didn't yell at me. He just hugged me and told me that the pretend Magdalena Paige has to go away. What will all the other kids think about me, me, uh, what will all of them think now? Ok, but at least I'm not a tattle-tale. I'm not a tattle-tale. I'm not a tattle-tale. Right?

She'll know soon enough that it takes running away from one place to get to any other quickly enough to not forget why you left in the first place. She'll know that though she may not know why, life on the ground is better than on some piece of paper or floating out into the atmosphere from the mouth of a little girl just looking to replace something that, yes, is gone forever. But the end? The end (and also: launch, fire: blank pages and fresh beginnings). And she will (one day) be: Athena rising into the sky—*and* secured firmly to the ground.

OLIVIA WOLFGANG-SMITH

Wasted Time

When I come home from work on Friday afternoon, my sister is still sprawled on the couch, head wreathed in cigarette smoke. Exactly the way I left her that morning. The end of her relationship with Dylan coincided almost perfectly with the start of February vacation at the school, so without any five-year-olds to keep in line she's been free to dedicate almost all of her time to wallowing. At the sound of my key in the lock she calls out without turning, "Dani?"

"Yeah. Holding down the fort?" I ask, testing the water, and she turns her listless gaze slowly from the TV screen to me. It's so melodramatic I can hardly stand it.

Heather and I have technically shared this apartment for almost five years now, since she graduated from college and decided to follow her big sister out to nowhere, Massachusetts. But almost from the beginning her life here has been interrupted, as she dates and moves in with man after man. There was Brian, an art conservationist who dressed and spoke with a meticulousness that I suppose was suited to his line of work. Then Chris, a man of suspiciously vague employment who drove a 'soccer-mom beige' station wagon and had the audacity to call my sister "Babe." And they were just the beginning. One by one they came and went, and Heather would be back here in the interim for me to pick up the pieces. She's more of a houseguest than a roommate at this point, and every time she turns up again I'm a little less sure if I should expect her to start paying half of the rent.

Heather exhales twin streams of smoke from her nostrils and turns backwards on the couch, hands folded under her chin. "How was work?" she asks. She's trying to be sociable, and I melt a little at it. I know she isn't really interested in my job – to be honest, I don't know why *I* am – but I oblige her while I hang up my jacket.

"Oh, you know. Hiring, firing. Judgment. Manipulation. The second floor water cooler sprung a leak,

so that was exciting."

I work in human resources, which to Heather is a cold and calculating profession. I suppose it's true that my room isn't wallpapered with heartfelt, chunky small-child drawings the way hers is. But then again, that may not be standard practice even for a kindergarten teacher. Heather wants kids of her own so badly that every month instead of PMS she goes through a miniature mourning period for lost potential. She measures her life in increments of wasted time. In the end it's this that drives all her boyfriends away – not the need itself, but the way she bottles it up before springing it on them more or less without warning a few months after moving in, on some randomly chosen day of unveiling. It's a sudden way to realize that you're involved with a total stranger, and I don't blame them for ending it, really. I know that it won't be long before she resumes the process, gathers her hopes together once again. But I hate coming home to her like this, depressed and apathetic, with ashtrays filling and refilling with cigarette butts piled like bodies.

I try to think of something else to say about work, but all that comes to mind is that Julie decided on names for her twins. Not a good subject. "Have you eaten?" I say instead, playing hostess.

"Um," Heather says, "Sort of. I had an apple. You don't really have much food."

I don't know why this insults me, but it does. "Oh, sure I do," I say, crossing the threshold into the kitchen. My heels click on the linoleum the way our teachers' did on the tile floors in high school, and I feel old. Too old.

I open the fridge and take a quick inventory. Heather is kind of right. Ryan – now no more than a name on the list – taught her to cook, and since then she's been accustomed to a standard I can't deliver or afford. There's some pizza and assorted crusty-looking condiments in the fridge, plus some tuna salad that smells mostly ok. The cupboards are empty except for hot dog buns and granola bars.

"What do you want?" I yell out, poised in front of the open doors, and wait expectantly. It feels strange to have someone else in the apartment. I'm not sure when it happened, but somewhere I blinked and it suddenly looked exactly like our mother's house. Christ, I think I even bought the same lampshades.

There's just enough pause for me to wonder if she heard me before she question-answers, "Toast?" Trying to pick something easy. It's almost with regret that I clip-clop back to the safety of the carpeted floor and plunk down the hot dog buns on the arm of the couch. She looks at them, then me, one eyebrow raised.

I look her over. No post-dumping PJs for this one. She looks dressed for a date, as if at any moment Dylan might come back saying he's changed his mind. I wonder if that's what she's hoping for.

"I don't know how to fit them in the toaster," I say somewhat rudely. "Maybe we could get the fireplace going or turn up the radiator."

Heather scowls and flops down on the couch, rolling onto her side. "Well, I'm not eating that white bread crap," she says to the bookshelf. "It's full of chemicals and—hey, what's that?" She snakes out one long, lanky arm and snags the corner of a leather-bound book, worrying it out of its place on the shelf. I feel my cheeks flush a bit, but barely. It's gone by the time she looks up from reading the title.

"*Proust*?" she laughs, drawing out the long, scooped syllable, "You've read *Proust*?" I take it from her with curiosity, saying that I think Joel gave it to me a long time ago, before he knew me well enough to know I'd never read it. What I don't say is that I have all six other volumes, hidden away in separate places of the house. That I bought them for myself, to impress Joel the first time we came back here together. That he laughed at their obvious newness and prominence in the room. I don't suppose I'll ever see Joel again now, but I'll go on being embarrassed about those books for some time to come. I make a show of flipping through the book and chuckling, adding a headshake for good measure. When I look up, my audience is busy molding a tiny barn and silo out of the hot dog buns.

"Ok," I say suddenly, grabbing my keys from the cup by the door, "I'm going to the supermarket. Be right back."

The air outside is frigid, and there's a punishing wind that has my fingers and eyelashes frozen before I even get to the car. It's a relief to step into the industrially cozy controlled climate of the Foodway. My glasses fog up immediately, and as I clean them I admire the colorful blur of the aisles around me.

Heather measures a food's worth not by taste but by the size of its ingredients. She only buys bread, cereal, or granola bars if she can see the individual seeds and oats. She's jumped onto the organic bandwagon with gusto bordering on obsession, and I'll admit that I can understand it in principle. There's an assurance of knowing what you're getting that can be difficult to find elsewhere in life.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of these health nuts who, whatever their motivation, feel the same way Heather does about food. The organic section is an endless, fluorescently-lit labyrinth that I seem doomed never to even accidentally wander out of. I stroll absentmindedly up and down the aisles, stopping to guess

about what I think she'll approve. How does someone like me, a devotee of the frozen dinner aisle, shop for a chronic food snob?

There's a giant display of mussels in the seafood section, and as I walk by I try to figure out how long it's been since I've had shellfish. It feels strange to still be keeping kosher. There was no Judaism in my life before I met Joel. It was the religion of Us, and we died when we were eighteen months old. Now, still having separate dishes for meat and milk feels like hanging on to a part of Joel.

I walk by the mussels without stopping.

As I approach the checkout area I notice that one of the registers is being manned by Patrick, my neighbor. He rents the apartment down the hall, and is something of a recluse. He has bizarre hobbies with the potential to be interesting – this time of year I see him leaving early in the morning while I'm getting ready for work, heading out across the parking lot with ice fishing-pole in hand – but he has worked his way up through the ranks to be the manager here at the Foodway – a job recommended by leading experts as a cure for individuality. He has so many extra Foodway uniform shirts that it's all I ever see him in around the building, apart from the occasional ratty Smashing Pumpkins T-shirt that still fits him because he probably hasn't grown since high school. We're both too introverted to have been very good neighbors to each other, and I instinctively head towards the other register to avoid the awkward silence I know is coming.

As I'm about to put my food on the belt, a woman with enormous silver earrings and an unlit cigarette dangling from her lower lip clomps right in front of me, pushing a cart full to the brim. "Excuse me," she says, as though it makes a difference. The cigarette bounces as she speaks.

I look back over at Patrick. The last time I talked to him – a forced conversation in the hall between our apartments – it was to find out that his father was dying. I'd met him once, the day Patrick moved in. His whole family had come, and I remember thinking how nice it must be to have just graduated from college and to have so much ahead of you. But in my memory Patrick's father is just a blur, overshadowed by caricatures of a mother with a bawdy laugh and a bossily protective older sister. I don't want to have to talk to Patrick again, to address the issue – or worse, to dance around it endlessly.

But the earring and cigarette woman is taking forever, arguing with the cashier about writing a check, so begrudgingly I drag my feet over to Patrick's register.

"Hey there," I say, offering a disgustingly neighborly wave, and he smiles tightly. We're silent for a

long moment while he deftly slides each item over the scanner. It occurs to me that he probably knows me, or at least my Foodway shopping habits, well enough to realize that this food – whole-grain, grass-fed, hormone-free – is nothing I would ever buy for myself.

"Heather's back," I say, by way of explanation.

"Oh, cool," he says, his eye contact fleeting. "Maybe I'll see you guys around."

Either because I have no respect for my sister's privacy or because I can tell he's curious, I say "This one's name was Dylan."

Patrick offers the tiniest hint of a smile. I know that he's remembering last year's Christmas party in our building, which Heather crashed in drunken, weepy glory. That was quite an evening, which for me started with large quantities of cheap beer and ended with damage control post-Ray the cooking instructor.

I know that Patrick and I have filled our quota of conversation, that nothing more needs to be said, but before I know it I've opened my mouth and the words are tripping over each other as though falling down the stairs.

"Yeah, he wrote a 'local music' column for the *Journal*. I only met him a few times, but he was always philosophizing about the meaning of punk, or talking about how he knew guys with foot-long Mohawks held up with Elmer's glue. Pretty out there". *Shut up shut up shut up*, I think, and thankfully I do. Patrick looks shocked, and I give myself the benefit of the doubt. I assume that he's reacting to what I said rather than the fact that I spoke at all. *Elmer's? Really?*

He's finished with the groceries, but we both stand there limply for a moment before I notice and, taking a paper bag in each arm, head for the exit.

"See you around," he calls from behind me, and I turn and give an awkward, T-rex wave around the bags with my forearm. Jesus.

When I get back to the apartment Heather is nowhere to be found. This is such a deviation from the script – she never goes out after a breakup, it's always me who makes the first suggestion and drags her along somewhere – that for a while I'm in denial, looking even in the bathtub and in both of our closets. But she's gone, who knows where, and eventually I take off my jacket and settle in to wait. I try to burn my way through some paperwork for next week, but before long my mind starts to wander and I wonder where she went. I'm afraid it's to Dylan's.

I didn't ever see enough of Dylan to get to know him well, but he made me uneasy from the start. He

had a wide, crooked smile, as though he was wearing even his face at a jaunty angle. His voice, charming and confident, masked his generic appearance. Every time I heard it I saw him as someone else; someone daring. Maybe the proprietor of a 30's speakeasy, with a three piece suit and a pocket watch. Definitely a good liar. Definitely nobody you'd want your baby sister to date.

I try Heather's cell phone, but it goes straight to voicemail. My brow is still furrowed in maternal worry when I bed down on the couch for the night.

It's almost five in the morning when Heather bangs her way in the door, sniffling, cheeks flushed with the cold. The clumsy entry wakes me up, and I'm immediately alert and ready for action. "Where the hell have you been?" I challenge, propping myself up on my elbows.

"Um," she says, and I know she was with Dylan.

"Heather! What were you thinking?"

She walks stiffly by me towards her room, talking as she goes. "I was thinking that there were still things to say."

"What could there possibly be to say?"

"Nothing that's any of your business, that's for sure." She tries to shut her door behind her, but I force my way in.

"Heather, I can't believe you just did this." She is ignoring me, moving around her room, hanging up her scarf and gloves. She turns out her light and climbs into bed. I can hear her curling up under the blankets, arming herself against the dark. "Please don't tell me that you're back together with him. Heather, you need to grow up. I have a life. I can't keep doing this for you."

There is silence, and I realize with a lurch in my stomach that I've played the guilt card without meaning to. I try to think of a way to backpedal as Heather's mounting anger balloons to fill the corners of the room. I struggle against the tightness of my throat, an allergic reaction to what I'm about to say.

"Did...did things work out? Are you guys gonna work through it?" It rings false and tinny even to my ears.

There is a long pause. Then Heather clicks the light back on again, so suddenly it startles me, and jams her feet into her sneakers.

"No, but thanks for asking, Dani. I'm sorry, I didn't realize. I'm just going to let you get back to your

life." She speaks slowly, hurt, but hisses out the last word. Then she's striding purposefully for the door, and we're out in the hallway, me chasing her, babbling everything I can think of on the chance that I'll stumble on something *right*, something that'll keep her from ringing Dylan's doorbell again today.

As we round the corner we almost bowl over Patrick, leaving his apartment. His eyes widen in almost comical fear as he sees us coming towards him, and he turns the doorknob in panic before realizing that he's already locked it behind him.

"Patrick!" I shout shrilly, grabbing Heather's arm. "Are you going fishing?"

His eyes flick with mine to the pole leaning against the wall next to the door. "Uh," he says, trying to find a way out of the answer, "Yeah. Yes. I am."

"Can we come?"

Patrick looks taken aback, and I can almost hear him wondering why oh why he didn't leave his apartment five minutes later. But eventually, blessedly, he's nice enough and un-confrontational enough to give in.

"Well…yeah, I guess so. I'll get the other pole." He jingles through his keys and disappears back into the apartment.

When I turn to look at Heather she is staring at me openmouthed, too shocked to be angry.

"I can't believe you just did that," she echoes me from a few minutes before. I shrug, and my heart leaps to see a smile tug at the corner of her mouth. For the first time in years I'm thankful for Heather's childishly quick forgiveness. "He thinks we're crazy."

"Probably. But what does he know, he ice fishes for fun."

She smiles and snorts. "So do we, now."

The sun is barely up when the three of us crunch fully bundled out onto the ice, but there are already other fishermen spread out across the lake. Most of them look as posed and motionless as a postcard. They are tiny figures against a field of white, tinted a dim blue by the earliness of the hour. Not too far away one man slouches in a lawn chair, a dog sitting upright at his side. He looks like he just escaped from a Norman Rockwell painting. I can't see from here, but I hope with all my heart that his hat has earflaps.

Heather watches with interest as Patrick takes out a spiral auger and places its tip carefully against the ice. He turns the handle jerkily counterclockwise, his elbows stuck out at sharp angles and his hair bouncing. It makes a sharp grating noise until he pulls it up and, with a gentle sploosh, water spills over the

edges of a small, perfectly circular patch of dark water. He looks up, triumphant, a lopsided grin plastered on his face. I can't believe that even in this most uncomfortable of situations he is still happier than I have ever seen him at the Foodway or around the apartment. I wonder what it must be like to live such a great percentage of your life completely out of your element.

"And now…we wait!" he says grandly, as though announcing the main event at a state fair. Heather gives a short chuckle before sportingly pulling up one of the milk crates from the back of Patrick's car. She is genuinely enthused, ready for a new experience, to forget other things for awhile. That same back-on-her-feet spirit shines through again, and it's nice to see it put to good use.

There is only one pair of really active ice fishermen. The two men are far away, standing a few yards apart from each other on the ice. They are gesturing widely in that way that can only accompany words spoken with great volume and passion. Arguing about where to punch their hole in the ice, they look like cartoon characters – their every move somehow amplified by their fluorescent orange hats and gloves. Clouds of breath puff in the air between them. They are determined, high-traction boot soles firmly planted.

Patrick smirks quietly at their argument and treats us to a theatrical eye roll. I've never seen him so animated. "They're old buddies," he says, "I see them all the time. I've camped with them on the Cape. They do the same thing with campfire sites."

Heather laughs again, a beautiful peal of a laugh this time, and Patrick looks at her, eyebrows raised in surprise. A slow smile creeps over his face too, and stays there long after he's turned back to the hole. We sit there, the three of us, peering into the dark unknown beyond the fishing line. And we wait.


Interviews

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Christopher Kennedy

Christopher Kennedy gave a poetry reading in the Glen House at Hamilton College April 4, 2008 at 4:10 pm. He is a visiting professor on campus this Spring 2008 semester. His most recent book, *Encouragement for a Man Falling to His Death*, is the winner of the Isabella Gardner Poetry Award for 2008. He has two other full-length books of poetry, *Trouble with the Machine* and *Nietzsche's Horse*. He met with *Red Weather* editor Katie Naughton to discuss fantasy, humor, form, Eastern European poetry, and becoming established as a writer.

RED WEATHER: The poems you write are often composed of fantastical elements. Where do you get your inspiration? What, if any, is the relationship between the fantasy and the real world?

CHRISTOPHER KENNEDY: That's a good question. A lot of what I do comes from getting a line, or phrase, stuck in my head and then trying to write off of that line, trusting that that must be important, or it wouldn't be stuck, it would just come and go. And then working something out that tends to be a metaphor of some kind that I'm trying to follow through to the logical conclusion. And then in the revision process, I try to figure out what it means to me, and then if I think it means something then I try to figure out what I can do to make it mean something to other people, hopefully. So, maybe, the weird thing in my head which does not make a lot of sense to me initially, how do I get that, through the process of revising, to be something that people in the world can read and relate to on some level, even if its just understanding the metaphor as it applies to something in their lives, or something in my life that then speaks to them in a way that they understand. I mean, hopefully, it gets to the point where there's a certain level of clarity so that people can understand what the metaphor represents.

RW: Yeah. And I think someone at the reading asked a sort of similar question, wondering if there was a meaning behind the work, so I think that people do get the sense that through the fantasy there is some sort of ...

CK: Yeah, I want it to be something besides what's in my head. I want it to relate to some sort of truth. That tends to be my litmus test for whether or not it works. If I show enough people whom I respect as readers and they get it, then I figure maybe a majority of people out in the poetry-reading world will understand it. And if not understand it exactly the way I intended it, at least understand some aspect of it that is just entertaining to them, it doesn't necessarily have to be this profound experience in the world. I mean, I'd like it to be, but you can't sit there with someone and explain what they're supposed to get.

RW: So the title poem of your most recent collection, "Encouragement for a Man Falling to His Death," I found was funny in a dark sort of way because it treats this unavoidable situation as though it were a choice, and the last line, where you address the character, saying "obsessed as you are with the physics of north and south" to describe the way he's freefalling without much choice in the matter is an example of that for me. So, what is attractive to you about using this kind of dark humor to get across your points?

CK: Well, I like people to see the humor and then see that there's something more behind the humor, and also, when you're addressing issues of mortality, which that poem really addresses, I think, I'd rather not make people feel any worse than they do about it. You know, [I want] them to get out of themselves a little bit and I think the humorous context when you're dealing with something that is fairly dark is a way to get people to [do this]. Like, why do people make jokes about plane crashes? Because it's the only way sometimes you can actually process the information in some way. For me, it's a similar thing, of how do you make something humorous, but not so irreverently that its making fun of something, but maybe that its making you laugh at your own mortality or something about your own existence that you might not, on a day to day basis, think about as particularly funny, but that in the right context, you might take a step back from your ego a little bit and see that there is something comic about existence. Some of my favorite poets are Eastern European poets who wrote during the Soviet regime and there was a lot of censorship. They had to write things that were funny on the surface that were actually about very serious things as a way of getting past the censors sometimes. I really like the idea of using humor as a way of disarming people, instead of preparing someone for the seriousness of something make them think, oh, this is going to be light and funny and then have the seriousness blind-side them a little bit.

RW: Sugar with the medicine.

CK: Yeah, and hopefully it does it in a way that's not off-putting, that's not like, oh, I got set up.

RW: Can you tell us any of the names of the eastern European poets you like?

CK: Yeah, I teach a class in eastern European poets in the MFA program [at Syracuse University] every couple of years…Um…you're really going to need me spell everything out for you, these are really difficult names…one of my favorite poets is a Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert. A really serious poet [who uses] humor. He's not the funniest poet in the world, but there's a lot of ways in which he uses images and metaphors, and uses myth and folktale to talk about contemporary issues and does use some humor in the midst of doing that. A Romanian poet named Marin Sorescu, a very funny poet, but was a very political poet as well. Miroslav Holub, a Czech poet, who was also a scientist. He used a lot of medical and scientific language in ways that were kind of playing off of the more poetic language so that there was a tension between using these long, complicated terms, but doing it in a humorous way, or also, just a way of showing that science and poetry could have some connection. Really interesting writer. Vasko Popa, another poet who's really a wonderful writer. When I say humor I mean they are almost like fairy tales, they're very child-like in the voice and I think because of that, much easier to translate in some ways, than some other poets. Simplicity of language, very accessible, but very well-crafted in writing about things that seem on the surface very simple and then are very complicated, very serious things. So I just was drawn to that when I was in graduate school and started trying to imitate those writers, and then didn't write that way for a long time, because I thought, what good is this going to do, you know, I'm not an eastern European poet in the Soviet regime, so I didn't really see the point. But then I started thinking, as I went back to it, well, its really just an interesting way to write, regardless of what your political circumstances are. And we're in a political era now in this country where I think that kind of absurdism and humor in dealing with our issues is predominant. You watch the Daily Show, right, and it's just making fun of really serious things.

RW: It almost seems that people are more willing to watch that than the news. You get the same information but…

CK: I have friends who tell me that they don't get their news from any other source except the Daily Show and the Colbert Report because it's the same

information, its just being given to you in a way that is less uncomfortable. Which is really what I hope I do with my work, trying to deal with those same kinds of issues only in a way that makes people entertained a little bit as well as educated, in a way.

RW: This sort of leads into my next question, which is about your form, the types of poems you write. You mentioned at the reading you don't consider them exactly prose poetry...

CK: Yeah it depends, its hard to say in some cases. If you read the book, you see that some of the poems look like poems, and they are poems, and others look more like paragraphs on the page. I think, though, that they probably aren't that different from each other, it's just kind of an intuitive thing, which ones I like to have the reader get in a more relaxed way. You know, you can read it in the way you would read a story or a newspaper article. Whereas the other ones, there would be a little more tension between the lines, maybe focus more on the language rather than the content.

RW: The ones that you do want to read more like little stories, why, for you, do you choose that length as opposed to something longer?

CK: I do have longer ones but the longer stuff, for me it's hard to sustain my own interest and to try to keep the lyricism that I'm shooting for, to make it seem somewhat poetic, it's harder to sustain that for any length. I mean, I do have some things that are a page or two or three, which I'm hoping to put into another collection at some point. It just takes me longer to work on because I try to be as particular with the language in those as I would be if I was just writing a poem. It takes a while.

RW: Yeah, and it takes a lot out of the reader, too, probably.

CK: Yeah, it does, because you really have to concentrate for an extended period of time.

RW: If you were reading something at the level of detail and attention to the language that you write with, that was a novel-sized length, it would be a project.

CK: Yeah, it's hard. I know. Believe me, I made one unsuccessful attempt at that.

RW: Could you talk a little bit about your experience as a young writer, how you came to be a person who had published books and who people read?

CK: You know it took me a long time because I started late, I started when I was in my mid-twenties, really writing seriously. I didn't have an undergraduate degree, I went back to school and got my undergraduate degree and then went into the Syracuse program, when it was an M.A. program, and still was fairly new at it and was lucky to be in that program, and I just happened to have had good teachers and good peers in the workshops that I took. I just really went in trying to figure out where I stood and listened to what other people did and paid attention to them and tried to read the people that they were reading. My teachers would expose me to poets' work that I didn't know. That's where I started getting interested in those Eastern European poets. But I was in my late twenties when I graduated from the master's program and I didn't have a book published or anything and I had a thesis I had finished, and I just kept working on that and sending it out and getting rejections and eventually completely changed the way I was writing. It took me a long time, mainly because, you know, I read a lot when I was younger and I was interested in writing but I just never thought it was something I could do, for one thing, and I just didn't have a lot of encouragement. There wasn't any teacher in school who took me aside and said, "Wow, you're really talented." That never happened to me. I'm still waiting for that to happen, actually. I just sort of kept at it on my own, mostly just jotting things down, not really thinking of them as anything. It wasn't until I was in my mid-twenties that I really started thinking, "I sort of do this; maybe I should try to do it seriously," and I started writing poems and reading a lot of contemporary American poets and I took a class through the adult extension site at Syracuse University and the person who was teaching the class was someone who really encouraged me, his name is Michael Burkhart, and he's actually on the faculty at Syracuse now, you know, he just kind of stayed in touch with me, and told me that there was a Creative Writing program at Syracuse and that's when I decided to go back and get my graduate degree and pursue that. So he was actually the person who really did take me aside and say, "You could probably do this."

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Min Jin Lee

Though *Red Weather* did not have the opportunity to formally interview Min Jin Lee, I did get to chat with her during an informal coffee hour in the fourth floor attic of Root Hall. Hardly anyone gathers in that space (something about its being haunted or just plain creepy), but on February 27, creative writing professor Tina Hall and a few students discussed with Lee the art of writing.

I'd expected we'd spend the hour asking her questions about her work, her inspiration, general advice for aspiring writers. Instead, she wanted to focus on the students in the room and asked what, exactly, the other two students and I were writing. Based on how we described our work, she offered advice about directions our stories might take, pushed us to think more deeply about our characters (she'd said we should know our characters' full history, including where they went to pre-school), and suggested we read existing models for the kinds of stories we wanted to write.

One student noted her frustrations with the reactions she'd received from her classmates in an introductory creative writing workshop. In response, Lee simply said, "No one has the right to tell you you're a bad writer." In fact, while completing her undergraduate degree at Yale, Lee herself was told her writing did not merit taking upper-level creative writing courses. She took them anyway, published in campus magazines, and went on to receive the college's Henry Wright Prize for Nonfiction and the James Ashmun Veech Prize for Fiction. Afterwards, she attended law school at Georgetown University and practiced corporate law in New York City for several years before pursuing writing full-time.

No doubt, Lee has enjoyed great success in the past year. She has received the NYFA Fellowship for Fiction, the Peden Prize from *The Missouri Review* for Best Story and the Narrative Prize for New and Emerging Writer. Her work has appeared on NPR's Selected Shorts and *Vogue*, among other esteemed outlets. Her debut novel *Free Food for Millionaires* topped many "Best of 2007" lists.

In part, her success arises from her own persistence. She spent five years writing *Free Food for Millionaires*, which was her fourth attempt at

a novel. As for her writing process, Lee admits that initially, she's very nice to herself. She'd say, "You're Tolstoy! You're Dostoyevsky!" as she tackles the blank space in a word processor. In revisions, however, she turns into "a mean lawyer" who makes sure that every paragraph, every sentence, presents a conflict. Lee also believes writers must figure out and explain the complicated things. She stresses the importance of talking about taboos and values conducting research for her novels. While writing *Free Food*, for instance, she'd interviewed forty people – mostly men – and asked them what they thought of threesomes. Currently, she lives in Tokyo and is working on her second novel, *Pachinko*.

— Emily Tang

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Peter Meinke

Peter Meinke, a 1955 Hamilton graduate, returned to the Hill this February as this year's writer-in-residence. During his time on campus, he met with senior Creative Writing majors about their work, visited classes, and gave a reading on February 12. Meinke has published seven books of poetry, his most recent being *The Contracted World* (2006), and two collections of stories, including *Unheard Music* (2007). Meinke has been the recipient of many awards including the Olivet Prize, the Paumanok Award, three Poetry Society of America Awards, the Flannery O'Connor Award, and two NEA Fellowships. Meinke lives in Florida, where, prior to retirement, he was a creative writing professor at Eckerd College and Old Dominion University. He met with *Red Weather* editors Emily Tang and Katie Naughton to discuss his work and process, the economics of poetry, and life at Hamilton in the good old days.

RED WEATHER: Could you talk a bit about what Hamilton was like when you were here – what daily life was like or particularly memorable events.

PETER MEINKE: I loved Hamilton when I was here and I lived in the north dorm. It was an all boys' school at that time, and I think life was pretty primitive – I think we were pretty primitive. I was in the DKE house and, you know, the DKE house always smelled faintly of beer and we partied pretty heavily, except that we did our homework, too. My memory of it is that, well, I wouldn't vote for the fraternity system, to have fraternities because I think I would have studied more, even, but I had a wonderful time here.

And we did constantly argue about our classes and we'd stay up at night and talk about our philosophy. We tended to take the same classes. Friends of mine took the literature classes. The teachers were wonderful – Bobo Rudd and Nesbitt and Johnston and Barrett – they were very important to me. I began showing some of them my poetry, which I had pretty much been doing secretly, having grown up in Brooklyn. And they didn't have creative writing classes, so I never actually worked on poetry in the creative writing sort of way, but they would suggest books for me to read, and one of the best ones – I

think it was Bobo Rudd – said, "Young man, go out and buy the select poems of John Donne."

And the day that I did that I still remember today. He was so right; I was ready for John Donne for whatever reason. He must have seen something about it in my writing and knew I would. I stayed up and I had two roommates, one of whom was Vietnamese, named Lam Ngoc Bien – he probably couldn't understand it at all and I was just reading it [aloud]. I said, "Listen to this." It was a big time for me because I didn't do anything formal, but I think I decided during that week or so – I was a junior, I suppose – I think I decided this is the kind of poetry I like. It was serious poetry, but poetry that was also funny, and it was also formal. And those were traits that I didn't realize were sort of odd - the Beats were just happening. I was totally unaware of them until a couple years in. I knew who they were, but I didn't read Howl until a couple of years until after it came out.

Anyway, Hamilton got me a basic English education and got me started in a kind of habitual writing. I wrote pretty much 5-6 times a week when I was at Hamilton, usually staying up very, very late -- writing at night and writing dark and pretty silly things, I think, but after I graduated, I found that I had developed this habit of writing. So that [when] I was in the Army I used to write. I'd get in trouble, you know, trying to write in semi-darkness. They'd find scattered pages on my floor. I wasn't neat enough. But fortunately, I got sent over to Germany and they didn't care much about anything while I was there.

So, in short, I had a lot of fun [at Hamilton]. We had a lot of rascally friends, and we thought nothing of hiking down to the village and have some beers and walking back. And then going to read our books and then stay up late writing. It must have been very unhealthy, in a certain way, because we stayed up so late. And when we had to make classes we were always tired.

RW: Well, that hasn't changed much.

PM: But anyway, I got a serious education here and developed steady habits that I didn't have any idea at the time I was here that I would use, that helped me be a writer. One thing they didn't have, or that I was aware of – it must be far different now – I must have had advisors, but I don't remember them at all. No one ever said, "Go to graduate school." I mean, I came out of a blue collar background, never thought of it – I didn't know anyone in graduate school. I didn't know anyone, in the beginning, in college. And so I had no thought of it, even though in the end, I got the English award here and still no ever said, "Graduate school." What we all did was we went in the Army. I expected that, and I did it.

But all the things that I learned at Hamilton stayed so that as I began my life after the Army, I kept heading towards something more serious, more literary. I went from working a regular job with my wife's father into teaching high school, into going to graduate school, went to teaching college, and then being a writer who taught writing at universities. That was sort of a slow buildup. And it all began, I think, here. And I'm thankful for it.

RW: We were wondering if there was anything – themes, styles – that you were doing in your writing when you were twenty that you no longer do now. Or likewise, something that you're writing about now that you never thought to write about when you were twenty.

PM: I think now, I'm much more politically aware This has been in my writing for quite a time. But when I was starting here, I think I wrote often a love-struck idiot, you know, romantic, sometimes sort of symbolic love poetry or very formal. Some of it I published in the equivalent of *Red Weather* – I think it was called *The Continental*. Nothing that I would ever include in my books or anything, because I didn't know anybody else who wrote – I just wrote by myself. And by the time I learned – from John Donne and others – that I could write more complex things, things with humor, I had moved on from Hamilton, but it was here where I got the beginning of a kind of real style. It wasn't till after the Army and I went to the University of Michigan, and I began to read more contemporary poetry, and eventually, a lot of it – that I sort of came into a voice that I have today. I'm more interested in lots of things I was pretty unaware of as a Hamilton undergraduate. I think I was typical in that [my classmates and I] were not politically aware. We were vaguely for Adley Stevenson and that sort of thing, but not in the way that we became, let's say in the 60s, which was about 8 years later, about when Kennedy came along. Then I started moving out to writing more about events in the world, and I think that makes it a lot more interesting than just writing about one's own personal feelings.

RW: Seeing as you write both poetry and fiction, we were wondering about the differences between how a poem starts for you, how a story starts for you. What you think the strengths of each genre are. What you can do in poetry that you can't do in fiction. And what each genre requires of you as a writer.

PM: I think of myself as a poet so that I'm always working on some poems. In the 1970s I'd published a book of poems. Partially from my travel, I began hearing stories, particularly overseas – in Africa, in

Poland – stories that you might consider a plot. I mean, I didn't just copy the story, but I had long things to tell with conversations that I had in cafes in London or in Warsaw. So I began writing them down. Plots don't come easily to me – I've been writing for 50 years, pretty much since I graduated from Hamilton, writing very seriously. I've only done two complete books of fiction – one was in '86 and the one that just came out this year. But I think writing poetry is a really good help because by this time, I wrote the stories very slowly and very carefully, the way I write my poems. I rewrote them a lot. I was very careful about the way my fiction writing sounded. I think that's why, on my first try, without knowing a lot about it – I didn't have an agent, I didn't do anything – I just entered a contest, and the first contest I entered was a big one called the Flannery O'Connor and I won it. People said, "You should do this all the time." But I didn't. I just kept doing it the same way, writing one or two stories a year. I think it's sort of selfish in a way. I just enjoy writing poetry. I seem pulled to it; there's no explanation for it. I liked it when I was a little kid and I still like it today. So if I'm in the middle of [writing] a story, and I'm walking along this campus, and the snow's coming down like this, in a way that I haven't seen in years, I'll put it in my little notebook, my observations, and if I can think of a poem, I'll start working on that and leave the story alone. It's just the way I've always worked, and I think I'm not gonna change.

I tried briefly – because people asked me – agents would call me because my stories were in the O. Henry and the Best American now and then, they'd say, "Write a novel. Make some money." So I would start writing it. Some of my longer stories, like "Cucumber Season" and "Uncle George and Uncle Stefan" began what I thought might be novels, but typical of my writing, on page forty or so, the ending would happen. Something terrible would occur, and it seemed like a good place to stop, which is sort of the way I write poems. I didn't change my approach very much.

RW: When you are compelled to write a story, what sort of things spark that?

PM: I'm often compelled when I think of a plot that is very strong somehow. In Africa, I'd heard this story of this language teacher's wife – he was a very famous Austrian fellow – he came to study the Nigerian language and his wife ran off with a Nigerian prince or something like that, chief of a village, big scandal. It was just a story I'd heard. And I said, "That's interesting." Then we saw her house, where she lived, and the house had been abandoned. It was built by the Dutch – a big, solid house – it was still up. And there were monkeys coming out of the

windows. I loved the house. That's the kind of thing that catches me – catches me in poems, too – this house must have been cleared out at one time, but now it was just in the woods with the monkeys all over the place. And I wrote descriptions of that. Then, later on in a different kind of museum, we saw a very beautiful bracelet – it was a bracelet for a Nigerian queen, princess or some sort of high-ranking woman. It was just a bracelet that really caught my attention. I thought it was beautiful and I wrote a description of that. These things come together. What I eventually did was I imagined a woman studying archaeology and finding this bracelet herself, putting it on and thinking of herself as an African queen, though she was an archaeologist from the University of Minnesota. As in the story I had heard, but not all in the same way, she meets a real African chieftain and does take up with him. Anyway, a whole plot came out of that house, with the monkeys, the story that I had heard, and the bracelet that I saw. Normally I would write separate little poems, but when I see a bunch of these working together it stretches out for me into the story. This has happened lots of ways: I hear a kind-of story and I remember it and then I see things that somehow will fit into a story, that general kind of thing. The stories that I write are seldom entirely made up; but rather they're take-offs on something that I heard and then saw a completely different thing that I was able to relate to it and use it as a way to get started. I like doing that and find that I can do it. Once I get about four or five things together, then I start stringing them [together].

RW: Do you have any sort of regimen or schedule behind your writing, some sort of structure for getting yourself to write?

PM: I have a sort of habit for writing, and I think structure is important, and as I said, I started writing very late at night at Hamilton. I wrote late at night in the army, so I was a night-time writer and probably, even though I don't write particularly at night now, I think I'm a sort of insomniac from that long habit. My first book is called *The Night Train and the Golden Bird*. They are very dark poems, and I think it's because so many were written late at night. After I got married, I still had this habit, and particularly when I started to go to grad school. So I'm teaching, I'm going to grad school, and one by one we were having children, so imagine, we had four little children, so I had, in a basic way, no time. But I did have discipline – this is one thing I can say, I don't know what everyone's opinion of the writing is – but I was disciplined about it. I tended to write at the same time, so I would write starting at 11 o'clock at night or something like that. Gradually as I moved up through the college ranks and

before I killed myself doing this kind of low-sleep schedule, I began changing into working earlier and for quite a while now, I've written pretty much in the morning. I used to have to get up early, which I didn't enjoy very much, but now, I don't even get up early, I get up at 7 like anybody else and then have a nice breakfast. Because I'm semi-retired, I'll write from basically 8 to 12. That would be my schedule now, except with interruptions here and there. I will use afternoons to do letters and business and regular living. The thing that's nice about poems is you can carry them around, so I would still, if I woke up at night, I might get up, and if I could do it quietly, I'd write again. But I always have a block out, and now, my block is the morning.

RW: So when you were a student was it an intentional choice to write every day, or was it just something that you sort of ended up doing?

PM: I had an itch to do it. It was almost a habit. I would go out to parties. We only drank beer those days, unless we drank milk punch, that was a favorite thing. It was whiskey and milk and sugar, and it was a bizarre drink. We actually used to go out and sit in the cemetery. I'm sure that's forbidden now. I used to sit, if I remember, on Melangthon Woolsey Stryker. We all had our gravestones. We would talk and argue, and we would sing, and I'd come home from this and sit up at the desk. I would do some writing and I never really kept a journal. It wasn't saying, "Hey, today we had a party in the cemetery," and I would be writing some romantic, rhymed poem about someone I saw on the weekend or something like that. We dated girls at other schools, but only on weekends. We would travel out to Syracuse, which is where I met my wife, right before I graduated. We went all around, all the way up to Cornell, Ithaca. We danced, too, in those days, we danced to Dixieland, the Charleston. We loved Dixieland, and our favorite band was one called "The Firehouse Five Plus One" and they played all around the schools and we would follow them. We didn't have cars in those days, particularly, but there was always somebody that we knew who had a car. We would pay for the gas and go follow the Firehouse Five.

RW: Are there any bad writing habits you've had to overcome?

PM: Yes, and I haven't overcome them all, either, partially because in some ways I'm a little shy, not wildly so, but a little, and I never took a writing workshop class, because they didn't have them. So I never shared my writing. A lot of writers go back and forth, and they have, you know, café societies. I've always felt my writing was personal to me and

I've always felt my writing was personal to me. I would work on it until I was satisfied, I didn't want anybody's input, and I still work that way, basically. The first person who sees my writing, with the occasional exception of my wife who might just peer over my shoulder, would be a magazine editor that I sent it to. Then I often go back and forth with them and that sort of thing, but I've never done that step of showing my writing.

But I would advise young writers to find someone that they might want to share and get early criticism. I had to find things out pretty slowly by myself, which is not a bad way to do it, but it wouldn't be very good if you, like, died at 25 or something. It's a very slow way of learning. I started getting accepted by good magazines – it wasn't until I was 27 or 28 – didn't publish a book 'til I was 34 or 35 and didn't get into the Pitt Series, which is where I've stayed since I was about 38 or 39. So it was not a fast process.

Someone said to me, once you've got a book, how did that change your life? And I thought about it, and just as I implied, it didn't change it at all, I do the same thing. I try to write regularly because if I skip writing, I feel bad. Its like a runner who skips a day of running. Same thing. I've done running, too. I have that same kind of itch to write. It's a kind of bad habit, or good habit, depending on how you look at it.

Something that I've done right, at least for most of the time, is that I've always believed in re-writing. In the beginning, you know, I didn't know what to rewrite, but I recognized that if I waited a little bit, I would think of better lines. I knew that very early on. Then, I got better at rewriting. I got better at understanding what I wanted from a poem and I found out that I could put humor in my poems, just as it is in our daily life, and that was a big help to me. It's something I didn't have much in my poems from my Hamilton days; they were all very serious. I would advise people to be more open about their poetry. But there are others like me. Josephine Jacobson said "I wouldn't think of showing my poems to anyone 'till I'm finished. It's too personal." I feel a little like that.

RW: You spoke about this next question a little bit already. It seems to me that from reading *The Contracted World*, that you sort of have two prevailing aesthetics, there's the sort of funny poems and there's the more serious, reverent ones. I don't know if you would split your work into those two categories, or if you think there are more categories, or if you don't think about categories.

PM: That's a good question. Sometimes they do just come out as funny poems. I think often in good poems that I have both things. I have a long sequence,

not in that collection, which alternates with humor and seriousness. I like it when it's mixed. But I don't start with any particular idea. They almost always start with a line that comes to me that has to do with something that I've seen. I go from a small notebook to a large notebook and then onto the computer, which is much easier, now that I've finally...I don't like the computer very much but it is easier, so I think why I don't begin on a computer is I feel a kind of anxiety. I *loved* my typewriter. I had an old Corona for years and years and years. Then I went to electric ones and that was still fine, and they never scared me. But the computer, I'm always nervous, I think I don't relax, so that's why I like to start in a notebook, and then I put it on the computer, and then I'm more relaxed about it, I feel. I can work on this now that I've got the major idea down, now I can work on it. Then I do all kinds of rewriting and revision.

RW: So a mix, sort of striking a balance between funny and meditation.

PM: Yeah I think I like to have a balance in there. I haven't done it any coordinated way, but I like that in life, too. I think in reading any book of mine you get a fairly good idea of what my general beliefs are, even though I don't set out and say "This is what I think." Of course, in *Contracted World*, there's a little more political stuff. I've gotten [more political] since Vietnam. I was one of the first writers who protested against Vietnam, not through any virture on my part, but I lived, at the time, in St. Paul. Robert Bly, who began the anti-war movement in poetry, was in Minneapolis. So he organized the poets there. So as early as '63, '64, way before the country was sort of worried about this, or thinking about it, I was reading poems with Robert Bly and Galway Kinnell and James Wright, people like that. That was very helpful to me, to meet them, to feel how patriotic they were and it was an exciting time. I kept that up ever since. And of course now, with the Iraq war, there's more of that. I don't write about it specifically, but in the background in the poems, the darkness of tone is behind the *Contracted World*, that's one of the contractions.

RW: I think you can feel the difference between the tone in the poem "Rage" and "The Rat Poems."

PM: The funny thing is the first rat poem was very serious. The first one was the one about the rat biting the fellow's hand, and I'm taking the rat to a vet because he just bit a kid, and this is from a true incident, and I'd made it, you know, our own child, which it wasn't, but what I did do, was I did take this rat, who had almost been cut in half the night before with a shovel, he had been found on

the property, he had been thrown in a garbage pail [overnight], and the next day, the kid, this is not in the poem, put his hand in the garbage pail and the rat was hanging onto this little boy's hand. So then they killed the rat again, right, put it in a paper bag, and I'm taking it, it's Sunday, I'm taking it to the vet's to see if it had rabies, to make sure the child is alright. As I drove along, all of a sudden I hear [crinkling scratching sound], and it's this rat, still alive. And so that's this first poem. It's much shorter, and it's changed, but that's the basic story. I sat down and I said, nothing can kill this rat. And this editor liked this, he said "Nice rat poem," he said, "send me another rat poem." And I began writing them, and of course, many of them turned humorous as I'm fiddling along with them. "Rage" I wrote here at Hamilton College.

RW: When you were a student?

PM: No! I wrote that in 1980-something. I came back for a winter-term, back when they had these winter terms, and I lived (Professor Barrett, who taught drama, had taken a group of students to London) and so we stayed in his house. He had been one of my teachers. The house is, as you go down the hill, right at the bottom of the hill, it's off to the right, and it's kind of by itself – a big white house. He had a big cat we took care of. One morning, I was in a perfectly good mood, and I'm sitting at the dining room table at Barrett's house, and they had a big storm. We missed a whole week of school. It was '80, '81, I can't remember. His cat was there and I began writing this poem about the cat, and there was this suet. The cat was after the birds, and while I started writing sort of nicely, I realized that, as I began writing it, everything was trying to kill everything else, and the suet was dead something and the cat wanted to kill the birds and the birds were after something to eat, pecking on the suet, and someone had cut down the big tree that was in the backyard, and the poem got darker and darker as I wrote and re-wrote it. That was another thing I liked Hamilton for, that was the first time I was in *The New Yorker*. That was a kind of formal poem. Also, it was what I call – I wrote a few of them in those days – a free-verse sonnet, fourteen lines, you know, and an octet and a sestet, but not even in blank verse. It had some rhyme in it, but random, and not all rhymed at all, so I was already fiddling with the sonnet, which I had learned to love at Hamilton, and I still do.

RW: Who do you see as the audience or ideal reader of your work? Do you write for other writers, do you write for anyone who's willing to pick up a book of poetry?

PM: Well, I know that I picture my reader as an intelligent person who likes to read and I don't picture my audience as poets. Indeed, I've often found that among the fans that I have, I have a lot of novelists and fiction-writers like my poems. I think maybe its because I prefer clear poems to, say, Ashbery style, I like much of [John] Ashbery, but I don't want to write like that. I'm not interested in that, and I like poems that tell stories, so I like poems like Richard Wilbur's, or Maxine Kumin's, William Meredith's. They're kind of writers I look up to; I like to think of them when I write. But in the beginning, I don't think about that. It's when I'm rewriting that I'm thinking about "I don't want to be show-offy" and "I don't want to be sentimental." You know, I'll say, "Well, this fellow wouldn't like sentimental," and "Edward Field, a good friend of ours in New York, he would like this." I think things like that, "He'll like that line." But first, I just write because I'm interested in it, and then –

RW: So your first intended audience is yourself.

PM: Yes, certainly. And I wait 'til it catches my interest. I think of it like a car's wheels spinning. When I'm writing, I write lots, and I have piles and piles of notebooks. And I have lots of 2 lines, 3 lines, 4 lines. Then usually in the day, not many days go by without all of a sudden I pop into, you know, 6,7,8 lines and it gets some traction. I think, "Oh, ok, I know where I can take this," and then I start working on it. It's a nice feeling when that happens. But I'm not thinking of the audience until further down the line.

RW: We were wondering if you had any feelings about the relationship between writing and the marketplace. You've talked about how novels would make you money but you aren't writing them anyway. I mean, poetry isn't really valued by the marketplace –

PM: I have a story called "The Expert Witness" where a poet is hired, this happened to me, to evaluate how much a dead-man's poems are worth. The guy in the story says, "Ain't worth diddly," financially speaking. I think it's too bad that poetry doesn't work in the marketplace. I think it's poorly taught, and people are afraid of it, and indeed, for some reason, somewhere along the line, particularly American poetry decided, "Well, no one's going to read us, so I won't write anything that they're interested in anyway, I'll just write for my really brilliant friends and we'll share this." And then their really brilliant critics say, "Ok, we'll publish this," and they sell a few copies. So I was very happy to find some popular poets getting a grip. Billy Collins would be one, Ted Kooser a little bit like that.

But I have a double feeling about it, and I have the double feeling because I haven't starved to death, but decided, well, I enjoy teaching, I'm one of the writers who do. You know, I don't want to work too hard and use up all my energy, but I have always enjoyed meeting students and I liked teaching once I got a fairly reasonable schedule, and I like to be in a college atmosphere with books, and people who are serious, and they're interested in the arts, and that sort of thing. Anyway, I think that poetry has a kind of purity to it, just because it's not connected to the marketplace. I think because one doesn't write for money, it sort of frees you up a little bit, and that's good.

I tell my students, "You can make a living as a poet, but not in selling your books, but go around," a little like I'm doing here. You give readings – now that takes a certain amount of energy. You need to be able to read reasonably well, but a lot of poets go around and they can make a decent living by giving fifty readings a year or something like that, and so once I got reasonably well-known, I didn't worry about how many books I sold because I could make enough money just giving readings. That's a freeing thought.

I didn't have to worry that I didn't say anything. I could write really nasty poems about politics, and I don't really worry about anything. I can use bad words, I don't use them as much as some people, but whenever it's called for, I'm not censored. I wish that I and other American poets were read more, but our very wealthy country likes things done fast. That's very American. TV is the opposite of poetry. In TV, things are happening fast, but poetry is something you have to really go slow at. You're not reading for plot, you're not reading to find out who died or anything, you're reading because of the sound of it and the way it works. My actual experience is that, when people give it a fair shot, when it's a reasonably intelligent person and it's presented right, they love it. I don't know how many times in my life someone has said, "I've never been to a poetry reading before. I was so moved – it was wonderful." It sort of changes your life. I think it should be more common, it shouldn't be such a big surprise, in the year 2008. It's changing a little bit, colleges like Hamilton are changing it. They're bringing in poets and they're building a kind of audience. It's certainly better taught than it used to be and a lot of the people who are interested in poetry are ones like yourselves who have tried it, now, who have taken writing workshops and have some experience and some skill which is not taught, in reading poems that are not directly clear at first glance, perhaps.

I don't really mind the fact that poetry is far from the marketplace, though I have to tell you when I was 28 and 29 and get a poem excepted and

Jeanne would say, "Oh good, what'd you get for it," and I'd say, "Three free copies." One of our funny stories about money though, and this can happen in poetry... Early on, I'd say it'd have to be in the early '70s, before I published a book even, and had a really low salary, I was a college instructor, with our four children, and our refrigerator broke. And we looked at each other in despair, you know, what are we gonna do, sell something to buy a refrigerator? Borrow money, and all that? And on the next day, the very next day, it could have even been the same day, I can't remember now, but before we had to do anything about it, I got a letter from the Poetry Society of American and I had entered a sonnet contest. It was a sonnet sequence, and Joyce Carol Oates had been the judge and she had picked my poem, called "Mendel's Laws" to win the Gustav Davidson Memorial Award. Five-hundred dollars. It was just what a refrigerator cost. We took the check, we went out, and we bought a refrigerator. All our friends were really jealous, because we were the only ones in the whole neighborhood, or anyone they had ever heard, we had a named refrigerator, and we called it the Gustav Davidson Memorial Refrigerator and we made a little plaque. We were very proud of that. So occasionally poetry does come through, in that way.

RW: You've mentioned quite a few writers over the course of the interview. Do you have any favorites? Maybe a chronology of favorites?

PM: Well, I've liked a lot, and many I started at Hamilton. I liked, and I still do like, Chaucer. Then of course, I loved Donne, and the Romantic poets. Today my affections have switched more from say Keats, who was probably the first one I liked, to the older Wordsworth. I love the Wordsworth poems, and partially, because we have a home and I often have subjects like Wordsworth's now. You know, he wrote about daffodils, but I write about azaleas – I understand the impulse there. I love the early T.S. Eliot, I used to memorize those. I like some poets that I don't think have been praised enough, though, like Edna St. Vincent Millay. I really like her, partially because she wrote sonnets and I like her sonnets. I liked William Carlos Williams. I was not fond of Ezra Pound, who went here. You know, obviously he did some good things, but I look at the *Cantos* and I say, "I don't really...", you know I've read them, I had to read them so I could teach Ezra Pound, but I never did really like them. But I love today, Richard Wilbur, as I said, and Maxine Cumin. I loved William Meredith, there's a very funny poet named Denise Duhamel down in Florida, very satirical, very good. I think Thomas Lux is wonderful. Edward Field is an outrageously gay poet in New York. He'll say anything, he's very smart and

very bright, and his poems I think are really terrific. I tend to like poems when I find a new book of poems, I have a sort of sliding [taste], but I have a sort of big collection, so I'll often go through them. I'll go browse through – some of them I haven't read in a while – Henry Taylor, maybe, and it's still a joy for me. I don't know why, I always like poetry. And my taste is just, as long as I can semi-understand it, I'm alright with it. I'm impatient if it's too murky, hence Pound. Still, the actual reading of poetry is something I spend a lot of time doing. Probably not as much as I should, however. But I do.

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Kevin Moffett

Kevin Moffett boasts an incredible list of literary credentials. His short stories collection, *Permanent Visitors*, has received the John Simmons Short Fiction Award from the University of Iowa Press. He has also received the Nelson Algren Award and the Pushcart Prize. Moffett's stories have appeared in various outlets, including *McSweeney's*, *Tin House*, *Land-Grant College Review*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and *The Best American Short Stories 2006*. He also edited and wrote for *Funworld*, the official magazine of the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions. For *The Believer*, he rode different rollercoasters in theme parks throughout the country. Currently, he teaches creative writing at Cal State University, San Bernadino.

The day before Moffett's reading, Katie and I picked him up from the airport. While waiting for him to make his way to the car, I wondered what we could possibly say to him. Creative writing types are seldom known for being socially agile. To start, I answered one of Moffett's questions with an incoherent mumbling, after which he graciously turned from the passenger seat and waited for me to expand on my point, whatever it was. I thought: we should have prepared better for this hour-long car ride. We should have constructed a list of conversation starters and back-up questions. But Moffett's personality puts you at ease. In his spare time, he surfs and frequents skate parks.

On April 10, Moffett met students for lunch, and he seemed more interested in talking about their personal experiences than anything else. Later in the day, he discussed with a few *Red Weather* editors and contributors their own fiction pieces. When asked what it was like to interview Dolly Parton, Moffett said he was told that he'd have only five minutes with her. She granted him eight minutes and ended the interview with, "Thanks, Kevin. You're a real nice guy."

— Emily Tang

RED WEATHER: Many of your characters in *Permanent Visitors* are quirky individuals who each carry their sadness in tragic, comic ways. What inspires this?

KEVIN MOFFETT: I think each story makes its own demands. Each story is inspired by its own sort of limitations and possibilities brought about by the characters, but there's a reason I keep writing about these people again and again. Part of it has to do with the place, the state of Florida, where the stories are set. I think that makes the stories' obsessions very similar. I didn't notice any similar themes developing in the stories really until I'd written about five of them and then I had to stand back and see certain themes start to develop. I was just writing about the same sorts of characters then and when I was onto that, I could either defy that and get away from it or really embrace it. These are the people I'm interested in – that's the shortest answer – the people who are kind of bemused (because I am), whether or not they want to admit it about themselves in some sort of way. Florida is a perfect stomping ground for these kinds of people because everybody, it seems, is in one weird stage of either renewal or decay, whether they're old or young.

RW: Do you find you put yourself within these characters you construct?

KM: Yeah. While I'm writing the story, definitely, but part of the difficulty – and part of the fun and the exhilaration – of writing a story is inhabiting your story through your characters and inhabiting that world through them and not your world through them. You know, not walking around with character helmets on, but while you're working on a story really seeing that world through your characters. It is a weird sort of schizophrenia, but yeah, I think so.

RW: What considerations went into deciding how you would arrange *Permanent Visitors*?

KM: I was thinking of it as a mixtape. You want there to be some sort of trajectory. I wanted to hide one story – there's one story that I was still not terribly happy with – so I wanted to hide that in the upper-middle to lower-middle. I wanted to bookend with stories I thought were both strong and have some sort of progression from the first to the last. I wanted the last one to be sort of a more hopeful story.

RW: It does strike me as more hopeful. You start off with disappointment in "Tattooizm" and move towards hope for sex and love in "The Newcomer."

KM: Yeah, it might be cheap, but I wanted to end a bit more loftily. Something of a saber rattling at the end. I also alternated stories I thought had varying energy levels both in the prose and the voice of the story. I fooled with it a lot. I spent a lot of time going back and forth in really trying to figure out an order that made sense. I say this, but I'm somebody

who picks up a story collection and never reads them in order. Never. I always pick around. Sometimes I start in the middle. Sometimes length is a consideration.

RW: For *The Believer*, you set about reading Donald Barthelme's Top 81. What's your favorite book from that list? Writers you admire?

KM: Writers specifically from that list that would've taken me a long time to run into: Leonard Michaels, who's a short story writer. He died about five years ago and his books are being reissued. They went out of print in his lifetime – it's a shame that it took his death to make that happen. He's a short story writer who I was drawn to, very distinctive – evolved through his career, too. Started off in the early 70s with very oblique, very punishing, declarative sentences, strange stories. Then as he grew older, he dealt with a much more classic narrative style, telling very traditional stories with a really good ear for language. Other writers who were on the list who I'd already known about: Flannery O'Connor, Joy Williams. I still go back to all those people. I go back to O'Connor all the time.

RW: Do you have any bad writing habits? Things you try to avoid? I read somewhere that there are certain words you don't use.

KM: The sentence patterns I get into, that I will just naturally hear – certain subordinate or ordinate clauses. I don't know what this is called, but say: "He walked into the room, skipping as he went." Where it's he did something and then a gerund clause – there are certain sentence patterns that I'll try repeatedly to break myself from. For the rough draft I don't really get tortured over the prose until I start revising, but I notice repeated things. And they're not bad habits now that I'm aware of them; they're just habits.

Writing about the same kinds of characters because I feel like it's the kind of character I'd write about. Part of the luxury and loveliness of writing stories is starting off with something unfamiliar to you, strange to you, and really starting to make it familiar to you, really starting to know the world of your story, of your characters. Something I've repeatedly tried to break myself of is not just continuing a story, not starting a story because I feel familiarity with the characters. Part of the loveliness is not feeling that familiarity – starting off and it's strange and you don't know where the story's going, you don't know how it's going to end, you don't know if it's even going to be a story – I have to run toward that.

I'm doing that now, actually. I'm working on a collection of stories that's maybe more like a novel than I want to admit, but it's a collection of very

interlocked stories. And it starts with Florida, but I'm writing in a totally different mode. I'm using more historical detail than I'd used. A lot of the stories are set in the fairly distant past, so I'm challenging myself. Every story should be some kind of challenge.

I hear my friends say all the time, "Man, I saw something the other day. It's a total Kevin Moffett story." And it's cool, but it's also a little bit off-putting because there's this certain mold of things. A friend of mine is in a voice-over class where he's auditioning to do voiceovers – commercials, different ads – and all the people there are various types that he would find in a story of mine. You know, the tragic ex-actress and her ex-husband who still comes around and stuff like that, so I take that with a grain of salt.

RW: How do you feel your writing has evolved over the past twelve years?

KM: If you look at it from beginning to end, it's changed a whole lot. Lately, it has leveled off. I wish I knew the mathematical term for that. I found a mode of story-telling that I'm comfortable with. I'm really comfortable writing short stories. In the last two years, I've admitted that. It's a form that I'm at home with, that I really want to continue to manipulate. After the collection of stories came out, I really wanted to write a novel. In fact, there was a great review of the book in the *New York Times* – and it was all positive – but the last sentence was "we look forward to a novel from him." So it's kind of like this dare, this invitation, but this thing that I was really flummoxed by. It's hard to read that and not see a marginalization of the short story form, of the short story collection. I mean, the whole thrust of the review was, "It's really hard to market and sell a book of short stories." I'm at the point now where I don't much care. My evolution as a writer has become: me as a short story writer. And I'm fine with that. Within the form of the short story, I'm finding exciting ways to explore it.

RW: How do you feel about the non-fiction genre? I've read that it took you six years to publish your first short story, but then you started sending out your non-fiction –

KM: And that got published almost instantly. That to me seems like a fluke more than anything because my non-fiction wasn't very good. It was very impressionistic and not rigorous at all. The Donald Barthelme list was the first thing I'd published. It was just an essay about a reading list – it took me about three days to write and it was published immediately. Whereas with my stories, I was sending them out for six months; I was laboring over them.

I was sending them out and getting rejection after rejection. But after a while, people just decided it was okay to publish. Everyone at once cosmically decided that.

I don't think the short story is imperiled – I think financially or economically it is – but I don't care about that. Aesthetically, no. Just pick up any anthology – *Best American*, *O. Henry*, *Best Non-Required Reading* – and people are still doing exciting, really energizing things. I hate to think that I could write a mediocre novel and sell it, as opposed to a really strong collection of stories and not sell it. But I think that's the reality of it. You could write a novel with a lot of narrative flaws, just a lot of holes in it – because it's marketable. Somebody at some publishing house can look at it and say, "Okay, here's how I can sell this to people in airports" or whatever. I think the story can sell. I think it's the perfect form for people who don't have much time to sit down and read something. Maybe they're just not marketing it right. That's their fault [laughs].

RW: Do you think it's true that people are just more attracted to novels?

KM: I can see an argument for why. With a novel, you could spend more time with it. It's like an old friend you can keep picking up off the nightstand – I love novels – I think it's a conducive form to having this ongoing relationship with a piece of writing.

RW: Why do you find yourself gravitating more towards the short story?

KM: My own limitations. I've tried and failed and tried and failed. One day I'll try and not fail to write a novel. I like that as you're beginning a story, you're already setting up ways of getting out of the short story. You're already figuring out the end of that maze that you're setting up for yourself. I really like the form, the time you spend on each story. I think whatever space of time you allot to a story makes sense to me and someday the novel will make sense. I have a lot of friends I went to grad school with, who, four years later, are still working on the novels they were writing in grad school. That to me seems like a punishment. I didn't come into this to be punished by my own work. I've got probably a dozen different novel beginnings on my computer that one day will grow and turn into something, but not yet.

RW: Could you talk a bit about your formal writing education? What are your thoughts on MFA programs?

KM: I'm a firm advocate of MFA programs. I'm a product of one. I came around to writing stories in

a workshop. I was an architecture major as an undergraduate and I was taking a poetry workshop as an elective. I didn't know anything about this whole workshop model. I'd always been in class with this one-way feedback loop starting from the front of the class and going outward to the students. I never realized how cowed and put off by that I was until I got into a workshop, which was this sort of circular loop of information. I really, really liked it. I stuck around architecture for another year or so.

I got a terrific graduate student who was in the University of Florida MFA program whose name was Mike Midwood. He almost was like a proselytizer – he was trying to save our souls from careers that we didn't want to be in. He really made me switch majors to creative writing, and it was no small thing because I was putting myself through school and I thought you had to get a degree you could turn into a job afterwards. I knew that by taking the creative writing major, I was sacrificing some kind of practicality, but I didn't care. I was really lucky to have brilliant instructors at Florida. I applied to graduate school, got rejected to everywhere I'd applied, and decided I wanted to go study with this writer in Mississippi, Barry Hannah. I studied with him for a year, was out of school for a while, got a real job.

RW: What did you do?

KM: I wrote about amusement parks for a trade publication in Washington. I also washed dishes, made salads, worked all kinds of odd jobs. I wanted to go back [to school], and I was older than everybody and I thought I was ready so I applied to Iowa, got in, and went there for two years when I was thirty. I'd always gotten the advice – wait a few years, don't apply right out of undergrad. I give that advice now, but I didn't take that advice at the time because I just wanted to stay in school. I liked instruction, I liked deadlines, but the real work was between undergraduate and graduate school. It was six years in between when I graduated and when I began graduate school. I figured out how to make this work while working a forty-hour job because most people do. Most people have to work real jobs while they're writing. Most people have to go to an office and sneak time in. All my friends did. It's true that the real world and the world of college are different – they make different demands on you.

RW: Between undergraduate and graduate, did you structure your writing time?

KM: Yeah, I had to be very deliberate about it, whereas when I was in undergraduate, I did five hours here, four hours there. I had time. I was lucky enough to have a job where I could actually write while I was at the job. I would go into work at nine

and I would write until noon and then I'd take a lunch and I'd do their work for four hours. Hopefully they won't read this interview and demand some recompense. So I had a structured schedule there, where I knew if I didn't get any work done before noon, it wasn't going to happen. And then the lovely thing happened – my wife had a child. I could squeeze in time when he was napping, I could squeeze in time when he was at preschool or was asleep for the night. But I had to really make it happen with the time I had. You have to find the most fruitful time to write and then say, "Okay, I'll give myself three hours or four hours." Then leave it open if the magic is happening.

RW: Tell me a bit about your writing process. How do you start a story? What do you consider a way in?

KM: It's still so elusive. It's always gone best when it's totally intuitive, when I've not questioned it too much, when I've started with either a line, a character, or an idea and just gone like a bloodhound, sensing out the story, going through it. That's the process. I've had runs of great luck where I've pretty much finished every story I've started, and I've had runs of just awful luck. I still look at it as luck. To me, it's not an academic endeavor. It's really a kind of intuitive, sense-based thing. It always starts out of nowhere.

RW: Do you keep an image journal of some sort?

KM: No, I don't. I used to, but now I jot things down. I keep a reading journal. I'm much more focused in my reading than I am on what I'm working on in my writing. In my reading, I feel like that's where I can be really analytical and untangle things.

RW: What's in your reading journal right now?

KM: Usually it's notes on each book that I'm reading. And a big long word list because my vocabulary is woefully limited. When I'm reading writers like Nabakov or Martin Amis, I have to go back and really look at the language. I usually keep a detailed list of what I'm working on and my impressions of it because in your old age, you find that one book will run to another and you'll imagine a scene from a book and you'll think: "Did I dream that? Did I read that? Did I see that in a movie? Or did I actually experience that?" And then you have to untangle that and figure out, "Okay, yeah, it was actually something I read."

RW: Do you find that when you're reading something you start adapting that writer's voice or style?

KM: I did at first, but I've moved past that. Well, you can't move totally past it – you still find your-

self tilted and inclined. I find when I'm reading, I'll adopt a writer's rhetorical tics all the time. When I first started writing, it was almost unbearable. I would have to actually stop reading certain writers like Faulkner, Hemingway – any of the great stylists. I would just adopt their mode of telling a story because it seemed inarguable and right, the only way you could possibly write a story. When I started writing, I'd read an irresponsibly small group of books and everything I read seemed like nothing that had come before it. Once I started reading a whole bunch, it all maybe ran together into a nice little paste that I could disguise what I was doing a little bit better.

I tell my students this: the two things that they're trying to do is what I was trying to do as an undergraduate. Find your voice and sharpen your vision. You find your voice by writing; you sharpen your vision by reading. It took me a long time to find my voice, to start writing the kinds of stories that I wanted to read.