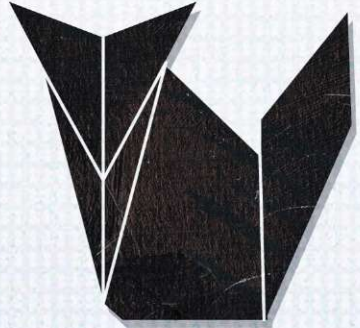


ISLAND FOX 11



READ RESPONSIBLY



2011

# THE ISLAND FOX

→ READ RESPONSIBLY

FICTION • POETRY • NON-FICTION ... *Featuring* THE STUDENTS OF CSUCI

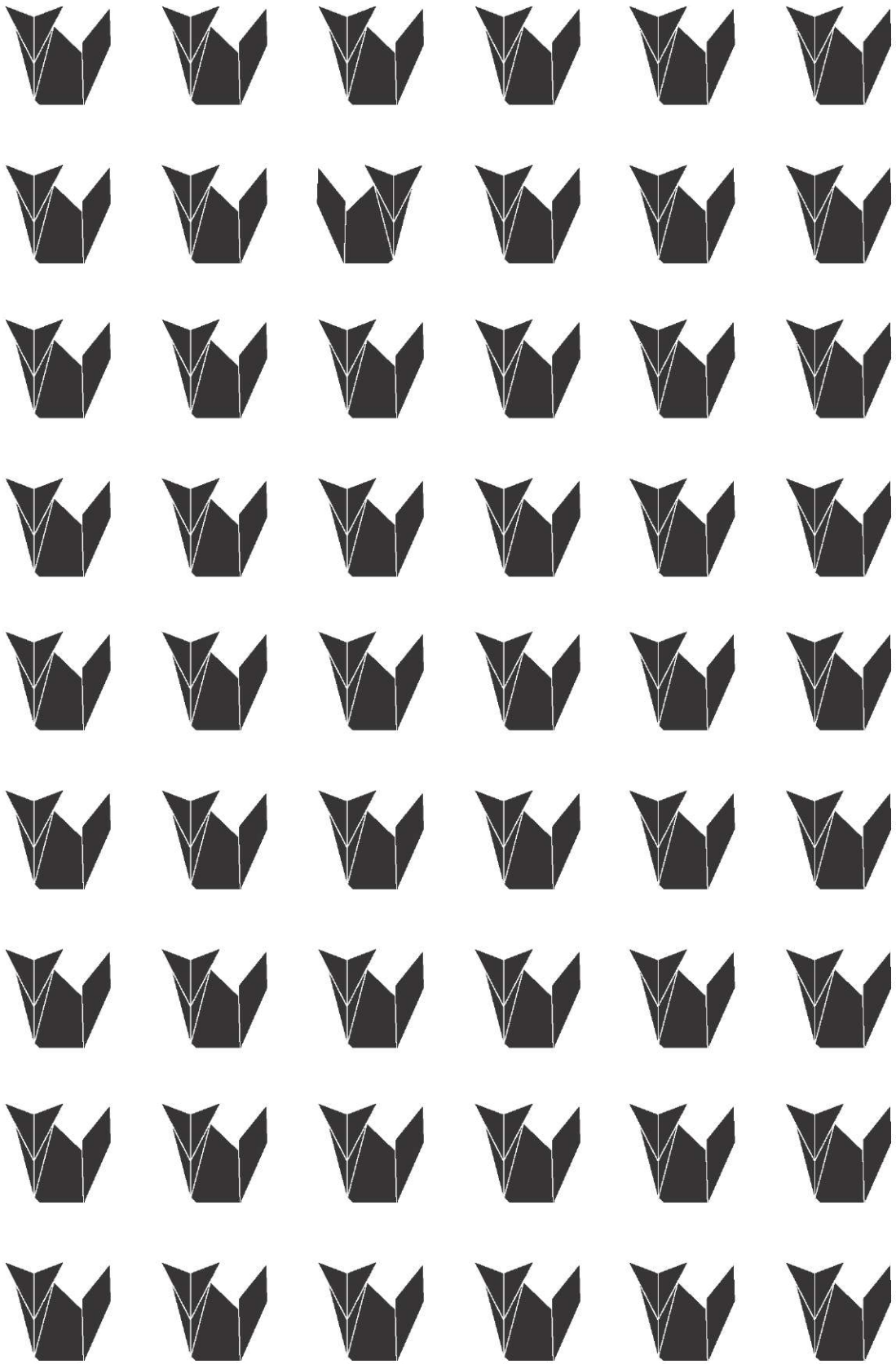


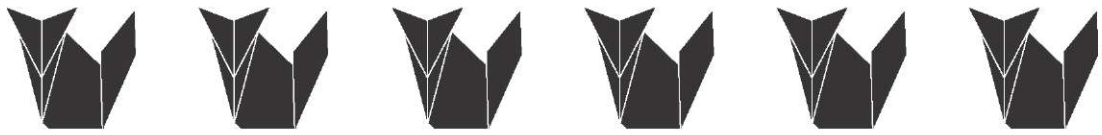
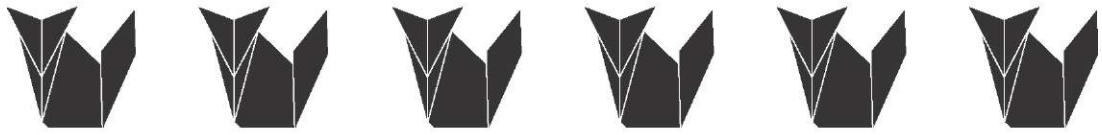
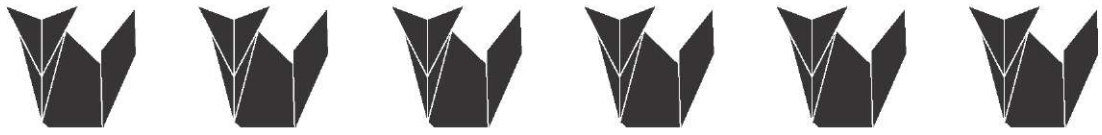
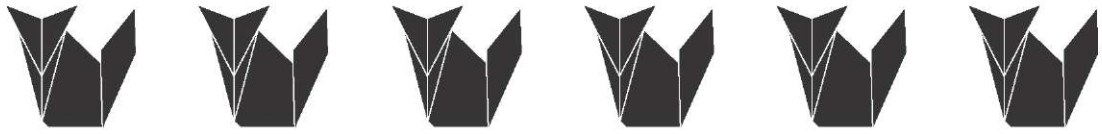
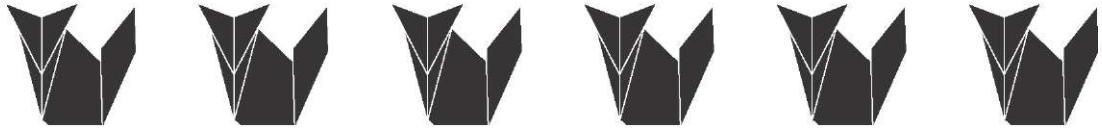
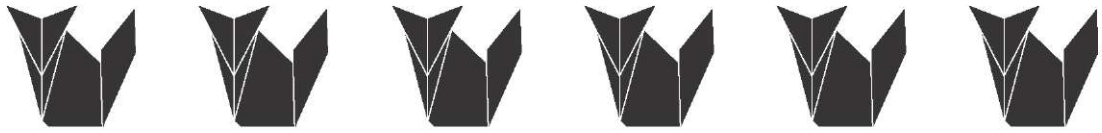
**ISLAND FOX 11**

**FEATURING**

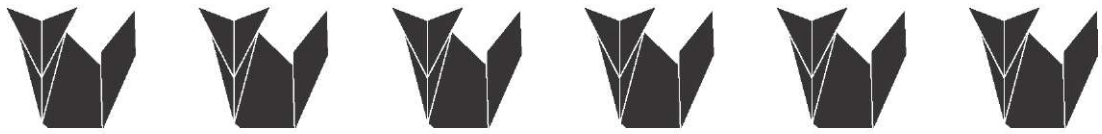
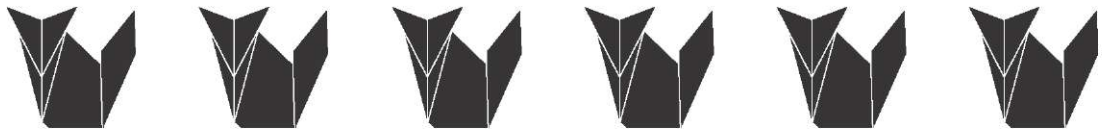
*Danielle Camacho*  
*Nick Crowe*  
*Gabriel Diaz De Leon*  
*Justin Formanek*  
*Alexandra Fuss*  
*Emily Gahan*  
*Amy Heiden*  
*Marissa Highsmith*  
*Brittany Hildebrandt*  
*Haley Hopkins*  
*Tessa Karbum*  
*Erin Leavitt*  
*Daniel Linton*  
*J T Lofton*  
*Emily Marciel*  
*Gabriella Massari*  
*Elliott Perez*  
*Victoria Primes*  
*Jessa Reed*  
*Nick Rester*  
*Sarah Sturgis*  
*Johnny Tsaur*  
*Mary Sagala Verleur*  
*Daniel Wilson*  
*Alexandra Woerner*

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# THE ISLAND FOX







Dear beloved reader,

We would like you to know that the production of this year's Island Fox was a long process, arduous, even. Many sacrifices were made throughout the year, including meeting outside of class time, planning deadlines, meeting deadlines, and reading each and every submission. We received something like 150 submissions which we had to read, grade, discuss, and edit. We went into this without a theme, hoping the writers would lead us to one, something that really speaks about our school and the students that attend classes here. In the end we still don't have a theme. It seems the diversity of the campus is so great that trying to pick one theme to speak for everyone would be ridiculous.

Because of this decision to avoid influencing the authors or readers, we struggled to create, and then vote, on a title, and we debated nearly every meeting until printing. The following are some of the titles that could have been: Slaughterhouse Fox, Quarterlife Crisis, The Fox Also Rises, Of Fox and Men, The Love song of J. Alfred Prufox, The Sound and the Fox, Frankenfox, The Fox of Wrath, PORN, Goodnight Fox, The Wizard of Fox, The Island Fox: A New Hope, The Golden Eagle, and Not Yet Rated. Eventually the fox puns ran out and we came to our senses and decided upon The Island Fox 11: Read Responsibly because really, our top concern is your safety.

The Island Fox is an excellent resource for aspiring students to get involved with publishing literature, and the end of the semester reading allows students and alumni (as well as family and friends) to build a community that supports young authors. With that in mind, we knew that we would have to spend a fair amount of funding on advertising

the event so, we concluded on a whim that free Toblerones ® for everyone would do the trick. For those uninterested in chocolate, we also concluded (due to our nostalgia for 80s television) that John Stamos would be the next best thing, and immediately looked into booking him for our reading. Unfortunately, we budgeted poorly, and the Toblerones ® drained our funds so we decided to invite John Stamos for free. Obviously that wouldn't work so we had to cancel on the Toblerones ® as well, because it's really not fair to people who might have allergies or a crippling fear of Swiss chocolate. Besides, we know this edition of The Island Fox won't really need any advertising, because it's JUST THAT GOOD.

Thank you for picking up the Island Fox and not tearing out the delicate pages and burning them for heat. Whatever manner in which you read this year's Island Fox, be it alone on the beach, together with a significant other, to your grandchildren in the future, or any of the other many cliché manners, we ask that you, please, Read Responsibly.

-The Island Fox 2011 Editorial Team



→ THE ISLAND FOX 11 EDITORS

*(The people that made this book)*



Here we have the editors of the Island Fox looking like pretentious literary snobs.

Up top is **Johnny Tsaor**, *Director of Submissions*.

From left to right is **Brittany Hildebrandt**, *Director of Submissions*,

**Daniel Wilson**, *Editorial Director*,

**Erin Leavitt**, *Budget Director*,

and **Nick Alimohammadi**, *Technical Director*.

On the bottom is **Gianina LoCelso**, *Managing Editor*,

and **Marissa Highsmith**, *Art Director*.

**Notable quote from this day:**

Nina: "*Alright, now lets take a silly one!*"

Johnny: "*I thought these were all silly ones.*"







**SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR COPY EDITORS:**

*Justin Formanek*

*Daniel Linton*

*Gabriella Massari*

*Sarah Sturgis*

**OUR FACULTY EDITORS:**

*Joan Peters*

*Renny Christopher*

**AS WELL AS OUR GRAPHIC DESIGNER:**

*Sarah Taylor*

We couldn't have done it without you guys.



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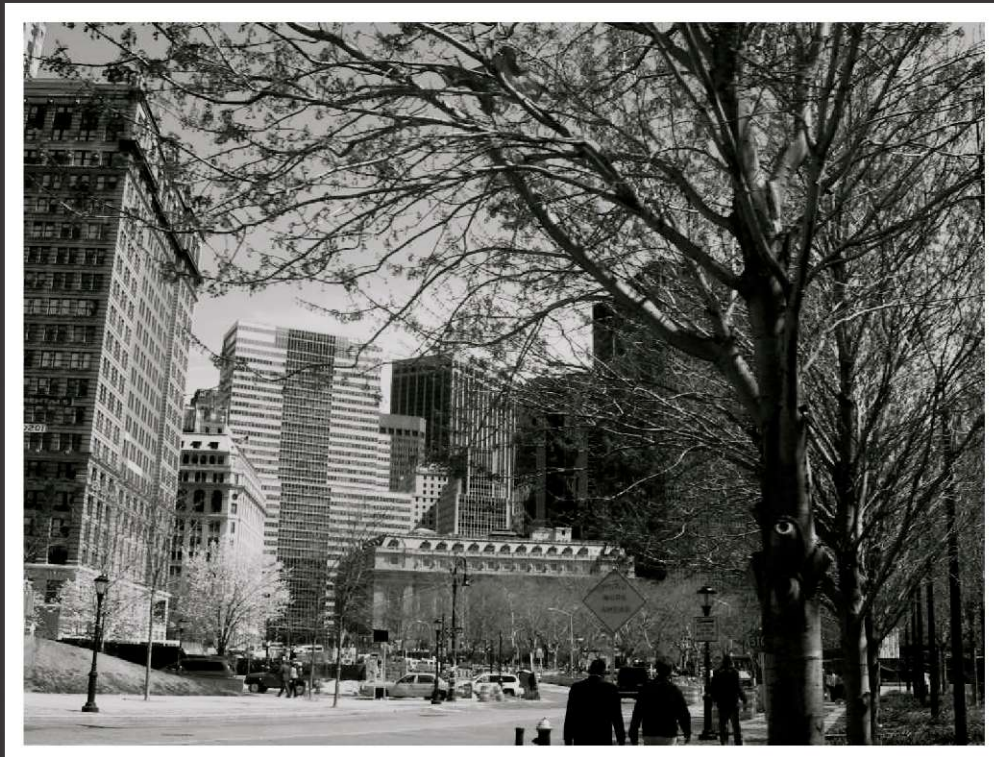
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**"A BAZAAR SOMEWHERE FAR AWAY"**

*Marissa Highsmith*



**"WORK AHEAD"**

*Erin Leavitt*



FINN



## FINGERS TYPING

*J T Lofton*

I sat down in the first chair that was offered to me. I looked down at my hands and the floor, trying to memorize the intricate pattern on the Berber carpet. I heard a squeak as someone sat in the chair next to me. The room was full of voices. They were low, toneless, afraid of being overheard. Snatches of conversation floated in the air.

"...I don't suppose suspension is in order..."

"...doesn't really look like a bad sort."

"...her golf instructor. I should have known all along.."

I snuck a peek. The room was a blur of power suits with an occasional brown sweater thrown in. One man in a crisp Gattan suit walked to all the couplets of conversation, sharing a word or two with each. The small discussions quickly broke up as the power suits walked to the front of the room, and the Brown Sweater to the back.

The suits sat at a long table made of some kind of dark wood, stained to look like some other kind of wood. On the front of the table, on the side facing me, a phrase was inscribed: Et Dominim Par Dominus. I had no idea what it meant, but I knew that I was supposed to know. It was the school motto, and it was inscribed on everything from the proscenium arch to the urinals.

The man at the middle of the table, the Gattan, cleared his throat, and all the conversations reached their expiration. I looked down at the floor again.

"Thank you everyone, for coming," he said. "Meetings such as these should never have to take place, but regretfully they do. We are here to be the mediators. We don't choose to be harsh, but fair. We don't choose to turn a blind eye, either, and that being said, we must

do only what is fair. I want everyone to remember that we are here first to listen, and then to judge."

The Berber looked black in this light, but I knew, from having been here once before, that it was really a navy blue. There were small circlets interwoven in the carpet, outlined by flecks of gold. Not real gold, just the color.

The Middle Man introduced the other men sitting at the long table. I tried to count the gold ringlets in the carpet. I looked up when he stopped the introductions. He looked around for a moment, knowing that none of the names would be remembered. He spoke again.

"We should hear first from Professor Zalar, and then we will listen to Mr. Davies. Mr. Zalar?"

I heard the Brown Sweater walking behind me. Even his footsteps sounded like a Brown Sweater, dusty and full of mothballs, as much a sound as a scent. He walked by me, brushing his leg against my arm. I looked up at him just as he passed, and caught a smirk at the end of his mouth, at the side that was turned away from the long table. It was reserved just for me, me alone.

I looked at the man sitting next to me. He didn't look at me, but only harrumphed once and shook his head wistfully, like trying to shoo away a fly.

Brown Sweater reached a chair at the front of the room. It made a right angle to the long desk and was arranged so that he could see both the table and me. He smiled like he had been called up to the front to win a prize.

Don't be so transparent, I thought. You're always so transparent.

The Middle Man asked him a couple questions. Basic things: name, age, how long he had been here, whether his record was clean of any incongruities, and then he asked him to tell a story. A story about me.

BS talked:

"Yes, I have known Mr. Davies for the last several months. Not an exceptionally bright boy. Inquisitive? Yes, but not very bright."

"Can you clarify?" MM said.

"His record is a clear representation. Fledgling marks all the way through the class. Absent often, late to class more often still. Not, humph, quite as salubrious as he appears to be today. Skated by, really. He has, what I think in the vernacular, they call 'street smarts', but not book smarts."

One of the men at the table pulled out a folder. He whispered something to MM.

"Can you tell us about the incident you had with Mr. Davies on October 18?"

BS smiled widely, and then checked himself quickly. It wouldn't do to let them know how much pleasure he was getting out of the proceedings. He spoke:

"I hate to have to document things, but this was extreme. He disrupted the class entirely, yelled at me, and insinuated quite lewd things."

"Did you say anything that might have provoked him?" MM said.

"Hardly, I think we were discussing educational opportunities with inner city youth. He seemed to take umbrage with the fact that I

said his place could be better used by a high school dropout, only theoretically speaking, he would add more to the diverse prospectus of the class, and that, in the end, is more valuable than mere intelligence or perfect SAT scores, which I was told Mr. Davies had. I documented all his comments there in the form."

MM said he could see them now. There was no need to digress and name them specifically.

"Well, let's get back on point. This last incident happened just over two weeks ago. Can you explain?"

"Yes, I believe it's documented quite thoroughly in the file, but I will try my best to recount it, though it is hard to do so." BS sighed deeply and dropped his shoulders. He looked down at the floor, too, though only I could see that he didn't really even look at the floor. His mouth was silently counting seconds, like he had been rehearsing this scene all night.

At three, he rose back up, a little quickly, and began to speak:

"The assignment was fairly simple and open ended. I love to give my students something at the end of the term that helps break the monotony of structured essays. I simply give them a theme and tell them to write ten pages on it, expand it, if you will. They can do this any way they choose: examples from their own life, history, things that we have even studied in class. They have a whole semester's worth of notes to harvest from. Most do so quite admirably. The theme this year was 'achievement.'"

BS paused to smile with sublime satisfaction and sway in his chair as though he was sitting on a bed vibrating with magic fingers.

"And oh, the essays I received! One girl wrote about her origins. 'From Plantation to Education', she called it. A boy wrote about



Neil Armstrong. Another, and I can take no credit for this, wrote about my influence in his multicultural multi-disciplinary development. To see the students take this simple theme, digest it, and shoot it out on the page something wholly different and wholly their own is something to behold."

The men on the long table all nodded their heads.

"Can you tell us about Mr. Davies' essay?"

"Yes, unfortunately I can." He took off his glasses and began to wipe them on his shirt. He shook his head slightly like he was dismayed even now, simply by the thought.

"The essay Mr. Davies handed in was excellent."

The men at the table looked at him.

"But unfortunately, not his own work."

"And you have evidence?" The middle man said.

"Yes, of course. I believe Mr. March is in possession of copies of all of Mr. Davies' essays from the entire semester. He can tell you as much as I can that the tone, the language, the play of words upon words, do not match anything like what he had written earlier in the semester."

A man at the far right end of the table nodded his head. My own head felt numb. I couldn't feel the connection between it and my body; like some inane bobble-head doll with my head hanging onto my body by a spindly wire that felt like it was fraying at both ends. My head lolled.

MM spoke again.

"Have you any other evidence? Did you find the same paper on the internet? Did you run it through our plagiarism system?"

"No, no, and yes."

"And?"

"Nothing, it said nothing. The only thing that was plagiarized in the entire paper was the phrase 'the end'".

"So, then."

"But that was according to a computer that checks only by rote! It looks for word and phrase, not for spirit and intonation!" BS put his glasses back on. He leaned forward in his seat. A speck of spittle had claimed a residence in the corner of his mouth.

"So, it is then, in your opinion, certain that Mr. Davies forged his end-of-term essay?"

"Regretfully, yes." BS sat back in the chair. He looked at the ground again. He propped his head on his hand and turned it side to side, finding time on one of the swings to wink at me.

The men at the table spoke in low voices to each other.

"Perhaps we should let the boy speak for himself, now."

MM looked right at me. What was I supposed to do? Was he like the sun? Was I not supposed to look directly into his eyes?

"Mr. Davies, Jeff, can you tell us what happened, why you plagiarized?"

Was I convicted already? No matter. I heard the words coming out of my mouth before I even began to think.

"Mr. Zalar is a rotten liar." I said. I looked down at the floor again.

I ignored the gasps reverberating around the room.

"Suppose," I began to speak again. "Suppose, that I'm a carpet seller and you come into my store one day asking about some carpet to buy. You want something dark, fancy, luxurious, something to impress visiting board members and boosters when they walk in.

You want their feet to sink into the carpet and leave a trail of money behind. So I, being a resourceful carpet seller, tell you what we have in stock. There is only one that you like, but it is Navy Blue. 'No,' you declare. 'It must be black, black or nothing.' I tell you that it will be no problem. We have the black in the exact style, with little flecks of gold like miniature coins scattered throughout, only it is not on display. It is in the back, being kept for a very special client like yourself. So you agree and we settle on the terms. The next week the carpet installers come to install the carpet, but they come at night. They work throughout the night and you come in to check on them. The lights are low and all you can see is a black mass of carpet with tiny flecks of gold reflecting in it, like little houses scattered across a great field seen from the sky. You're pleased, I've fulfilled my end of the bargain, and just in time for the board meeting the next day.

"You walk in to the board meeting the next day with the illustrious members, each one of them chauffeured from the entrance to the toilet to this room. You swing open the doors and look down at the brand new carpet, but your eyes widen. The carpet is not black, but the exact shade of Navy Blue that you yourself saw in the store. It seems I have tricked you. After the meeting is over you furiously tramp down to the carpet store and demand to see me.

"I ask you what color the carpet is, and you scream at me 'Blue! You inconsiderate moron, you knew it was blue!' I ask you what color the carpet was the first night that you saw them installing it. 'Well, it looked black then, under the dim light.' Well, I say, keep the light dim all the time and you shall have the black carpet you want."

I finished speaking and the table looked at me. MM looked at

me especially hard.

"Son, are you on any medication?"

I laughed, frivolously, because I saw their faces and their brows and knew that in a moment they would be unfurling them and looking at each other in astonishment.

"The carpet," I say, "is me, if you couldn't tell. It looks different depending on the kind of light that is shone down on it. Just as my essays are different when the topic is different. Mr. Zalar wanted perfunctory essays, and that is what I gave him. This assignment was creative, and instead of giving him what he wanted I gave him what I decided I wanted. Do you suppose that you could produce something digestible if you were asked to write a report on end cap financial redistribution in the Indian slums? I daresay men of intelligence could. But what if you were asked to write a topic that you actually wanted to write and there were no supposed bounds placed on you? I suppose it might look a little different then."

The men looked at each other, their brows were furrowed again, but this time they did not look puzzled. They looked angry.

They whispered back and forth and this time the phrase "no evidence" was heard floating around.

They told me to wait outside with some old wooden chairs that looked like they had only been sat in by people like me. I leaned forward on the chair, draping my arms over my knees. My fingers scraped the carpet.

I sat there for thirty minutes, during which I heard yelling, cursing, and what sounded like a poem by John Donne. But I wasn't too sure about the last one.

After thirty minutes, the door cracked open, and I saw one of the



Emasculated Assistants peek his head out. The EA told me I could come in. I stood up, feeling my back crack as I walked through the door. The air inside was tense, like before, but no one was talking. They stared at me as I walked the thirty odd paces into the room and sat in the same chair I had sat in before. I looked at BS who sat in the corner. His eyes were sweeping the gold flecked carpet.

MM cleared his throat and looked at me.

"Mr. Davies," MM said. "There's no need to prolong this. The case against you is excused. You're free to go."

There was a shuffling of paper as I stood up on my feet and turned to go, walking on the plush carpet, which, in this light, looked like dark plum.

Erin Leavitt

*Of course the bases are loaded and like always it's the ninth inning. The thought of winning makes his mouth water; but the letdown is threatening to consume him, breathing down his neck. It's guiding the sweat further down his back—no thanks to the scorching sun directly over him. He can't hide from the eyes in the multi-tiered venue. Worse is what he sees flashing in front of him, a triple threat of twos: two balls, two strikes, and two potential runs...for the other team. Too many times this has happened with a not-so-happy ending and for that reason he feels discouraged. "Just one more out, just play catch," he tells himself. But in this game anything can happen.*

*He squints, trying to make out the signal for the next pitch concealed between the catcher's legs. Slider? It doesn't matter. Sixty feet and six inches away, the only thing he sees now are the batter's eyes, genuinely ready for any pitch he throws. It's like a game of rock, paper, scissors; and he's losing to a mind reader. If only he could replicate this sprout's determination, but who was he kidding?*

He is just some overgrown kid chasing a dream. One that is turning into a nightmare. No, more like a daymare? Morningmare? Either way, Greg knows it isn't real. It's just a pastime burned into his being, trying to cancel his family vacation. He sighs at the alarm clock. Only nine minutes left until it goes off, until it's too late. Would nine minutes be enough time to explain his feelings? To tell his family why he wouldn't be joining them. What a cluster fuck. But really, to him, time isn't something to be wasted concerning much needed improvement; even, if that means training non-stop in the off-season. It would bring greater security to him. He could perform confidently; show everyone what he already knows: that he is, without a doubt, ready

for the professionals. He takes a minute to mull this over, but decidedly, his family's disappointment would be too painful if he canceled. He's barely present as it is.

Instead, he rubs his eyes, pressing hard and releasing them to a mass of gray flowers simultaneously exploding where his bedroom should appear. Blinking reveals the shadowy objects that are really there: his TV, something of a relic; a dresser, usually too stuffed to close; a mantel, cluttered with pictures and collectables; two suitcases, still open on the floor and waiting to be filled with last minute forgettables; and lastly his wife, Olivia. He kisses her and she automatically grabs for him. He catches her slender arms and says, "It's time to get up," while placing them back by her sides. A little whine escapes as she turns away and continues to sleep. He thinks about joining her, but then he might keep reliving those unpleasant memories or worse, actually give into them. Quickly and quietly, he makes his way to the door instead.

Down the hall he knocks loudly to resurrect the corpse inside. "Time to get up, pumpkin," he says. Waiting by the door, he hears his daughter, Alexis, stir and groan, probably at the moon still visible in the sky. He knows, all too well, that Alexis will cling to the comfort of her bed even if an earthquake decided to roll through. Just like her mother. He'll have to come back in a little while. Until then, it's back to his mental checklist:

- Wake up the girls V
- Feed/indulge the dog
- Brush teeth
- Shower
- Make sure the girls are up
- Finish packing
- Load the car

Broxton is already waiting for him just outside the garage door. Greg opens it and the bulldog welcomes the early morning company with a smile no human could possibly duplicate. Greg could literally spend hours trying to persuade that smile. It wouldn't take much: a belly rub or a game of fetch. Any and all undivided attention would do. Except they need to get a move on if they want to beat L.A. traffic, or at least try. But he can't resist giving Broxton's ears a stroke and play a little tug-a-rope with him.

Feed/indulge the dog V

Greg hears the alarm go off in his bedroom. It doesn't stop. He figures Olivia must be in the shower. Rushing back into the room, he forces the noise to end. His ears meet the sound of running water, but something else is still aggravating them. It's the muffled rock music coming from Alexis' room.

~~Make sure the girls are up~~

He takes this time to stretch, taking the bat from under his bed and bringing it behind his back. Then a couple practice swings, each one dangerously close to the lamp or wall. Olivia would be pitching a fit if she saw. He can hear her now. He shudders and puts the bat back, though he doesn't want to, then enters the steamy bathroom.

Brush teeth V

Greg looks at the man examining the affects of his life choices in the murky mirror. Twenty years ago, his high school buddies would have picked on him. Nowadays, baseball has transformed his body. It's in good shape; no doubt better than any of theirs, not that he really knew. For good measure, he flexes his muscles, forgetful of their splendor. Removing his shirt, he speculates the healing time of numerous bruises. Then, while deciding whether or not he should cut



his light brown hair, he stops to look at his brilliant, hazel eyes. His mother's eyes.

Like always a sense of joy and torment fill his being. It was she who let him stay up with her when baseball season came around. Together they would watch and root for the best players; and with every year, Greg's enthusiasm to join them grew. His mother signed him up for tee ball. She cheered him on every single game and was dubbed the cool mom, the one who brought the "good" snacks: the yummy, unhealthy variety complete with juice box. She'd capture all the times Greg was at bat or made a big play. She comforted him when he didn't make the high school team. Then, threw a big party when he did.

Once, she took the blame for a ball that was smashed into Mr. Hadley's window. The bitter old man no neighborhood child would dare mess with and no parent would purposefully anger. But Greg's mother was brave and stubborn. Even when she was diagnosed with cancer, she never let it get her down. Greg felt special to have such a dedicated mother. His father, on the other hand, wasn't interested in sports; in fact, he wasn't interested in much. It didn't bother Greg when he died because he only knew the man through her. She would provide the missing commentary of his despondent life. She did it all. Everything, for his dreams.

"Get out of your head, Greg," he says to the man in the mirror.

"What was that?" Olivia calls from the shower.

"Oh, nothing." He quickly shifts his eyes from himself to the pleasant distraction that is his wife, visible through the shower's glass door. He watches her shampoo and can't think of a sexier gesture. She lets the water hit her body, with head tilted back, and her arms

working slowly to massage her scalp. He isn't around much so this is a treat and it doesn't take long until he joins her.

Shower V

As pleasant as Olivia seems to Greg now, he always gets scared thinking about being with her on a daily basis, like a normal family. In his mind he is destined to forever travel this earth from dirt mound to dirt mound. According to the recruiters though, he wasn't ready for the majors, that premier mound of dirt. It's a perpetual worry for him, day after day: When would that time come? Would it ever? Can I really just walk away from years of dedication?

Bags packed and in the car ✓✓

They back out of the driveway. Comfort in his heart as the tires meet asphalt. They make it all the way to the second stop sign when they discover that the ticket printouts are missing. Greg turns around, parking behind his neighbor's Prowler, a small trailer with a doormat at its entrance. Olivia runs inside and the trailer's door swings open to his older neighbor stepping out in just a robe and slippers.

Greg rolls down his window, "Mr. Morgan, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize you were in there." He quickly turns the car's lights off.

"That's alright. I come out here when the old lady needs her space," he lowers his arm that was shielding his sight, "Are you guys heading out? You don't have to worry about Broxton and me. We're gonna get along nicely. And I'll have my grandsons over the next few days."

"That sounds great."

"Oh, good morning Arthur," says Olivia as she makes her way to the car.

"Yes and to you," he greets her and then to Greg, "I bet this one doesn't need her space," thumbing toward Olivia.

She gets in the car and shuts the door, giving Greg a puzzled look. They wave goodbye and start their second trip.

An hour into the ride they hit traffic. Greg looks over at Olivia who is concentrating on an article about Ewan McGregor. He catches a glimpse of Ewan's pristine blue eyes with jealousy. Not because Ewan is getting attention from his wife, but because he is getting attention at all. If Greg was big time he could be plastered in a newspaper or two, in the Sports section of course. Pitchers were always mentioned: good or bad.

He turns on the radio for a distraction, but settles on the sports channel.

"Hey dad?" Alexis says to no avail. She taps him on the shoulder, "Dad!"

"Yea, Alex?" he says from some far off place.

"Don't call me pumpkin.. please?" she asks.

"Uh h u h ." he says, waiting until her iPod earplugs are back in to finish with, ".pumpkin," then continues to navigate his way out of traffic. Inch by inch. Until at long last, they reach their desired exit.

**Nudes**

**Nudes**

**Nudes**

The big, flashy letters greet their eyes, as if to say, "This is what you've won for sitting through hell. Come claim your prize." It's a sign surely equating the presence of L.A. with shitty traffic and provocative entertainment. Greg always forgets about that sign. It's

similar to something you should never point out, like a sensitive woman's cankles — that bulbous mass of calf and ankle.

It brings a smile to Greg's face.

But that happiness disappears upon entering the confines of the huge airport. He makes his best effort not to get cut off by the mass of minivans, taxis, and buses, all without flipping anyone off. He fails. Twice. Finally parking the car, they gather the luggage to be hauled into a huge line just to check in. It's no Disneyland. After, "Here are your tickets, Mr. Foster, have a good flight," another line is designed to take their suitcases. And yet another one to strip them of all dignity by making them take off their shoes and coats, fumble through all pockets, and pass through a full body scanner or get groped by a TSA member. There's always the possibility of getting yelled at if they don't hold on to their tickets at all times. Afterward, they quickly assemble once more, but not as comfortable as before. Pushy people behind them try to help. It is simply chaotic; every person present, simultaneously rushing through the congestion and causing it. All that, just to sit around waiting to board for two hours. Sure, there is food to be had and random merchandise to look at, but that never seems to take up that much time. Not to Greg anyhow.

He is immediately abandoned by wife and child after taking three seats in their designated terminal. This allows him to people-watch. He sees the usual coffee addicts forming a line at Starbucks. He's surprised the fiends aren't shaking in caffeine-deprived anticipation, while stuttering out their mouthful-of-an-order. There are the other junkies getting their fix: the vertically challenged at McDonalds and husbands watching highlights of past games at the bar. He thinks again how he shouldn't be there. How he could still leave. He sees

that everyone else sitting down is just ignoring each other. Some have ear buds budding from their ears, others with laptops laying open on their laps, and most with books or magazines being read by their noses. *Isn't that the point of vacation: a getaway to happiness?* In his section he counts seven unhappy campers, all putting on a show just to get what they want out of the parental units. He also counts ten snow hoes — those adolescent California girls, who wear Ugg boots with a skirt or booty shorts, just to be "sexy."

He refuses to give Alexis even a pair of fuggs (the imitation "fake" Uggs) in fear she might follow this trend. Not that he knew what trends she followed. As far as he knew, she was a bit grungy, but still girly and hung out with a lot of guy friends. Greg made sure to fiddle with his bat collection anytime they were around.

"Flight 377 is now boarding passengers in section one," he hears one of the attendants say over loudspeaker. He sees Olivia and Alexis exit one of the shops, magazines and snacks in hand. Those privileged few in first class start to line up.

"Now boarding passengers in section four of Flight 377."

People, not necessarily in line, start to crowd around the women taking tickets. Greg is baffled as to how determined these people become just to board a flight, where they get to continue sitting, ignoring, listening to music, watching movies, and reading for five long hours. But when it's almost his family's turn, in section three, containing rows fifteen through twenty-five, he follows suit like a good, little sheep.

"There you are, enjoy your flight."

He gives a hushed "Thanks" to the woman and follows the tunnel attached to the aircraft. Moving through first class, he sees



the guy he figured to be a spy, trying to sell insurance to the couple seated next to him. The disappointment reminds him that he hates planes, especially their smell; as often as he travels he can never get used to it.

With nowhere to go but forward, Greg keeps traversing the aisle with his wife and daughter behind him, single file. However, a line of bodies has formed, all trying to get situated and those, who will be blocking the way in a few steps, getting irritated. Row 15: a woman takes out what looks like a makeup bag from her purse in the overhead storage, Row 17: some kid already feeling sick, is leaning his body out into the aisle, Row 21: a couple has the right idea of quickly taking their seats, but are failing in execution. Finally, Row 23, they find their designated seats, complete with pillow and wrapped headphones. Two seats are in the middle, which Olivia and Alexis take, leaving Greg separated by the aisle to the left of them. The seats next to him are still empty.

They store each carry-on, take their seats, and entertain themselves until take-off. Olivia with a Nicholas Sparks novel, Alexis with her music, and Greg with his Blackberry. He plays a quick game of bejeweled, followed by another, and then checks his email out of aggravation. His inbox is filled with mostly junk per usual, but scrolling through he finds an email from his agent. Before he can read it though, an elderly couple takes interest in the two empty seats.

The gentleman clears his throat with experience and says, "Excuse us, lad, I think we're parked right next to you."

Greg stares blankly up at him, pondering such an odd greeting. He shakes then nods his head, pockets the phone, unbuckles his seatbelt, puts his tray up, stands up, and leaves room for them to take

their seats.

"Could you be so kind to help us with the luggage?"

"Sure. No problem." But there was a problem.

Greg noticed these two earlier: one out of the five couples arguing as politely as publicly possible. They were the oldest pair, in their upper sixties, if he had to guess. The man had on a Hawaiian shirt under his brown suit, complete with Velcro shoes. Oversized glasses adorned his ears, which were surrounded by barely any white hair, and he was certainly overweight a long time ago. The wife, on the other hand, was slim, but oddly shaped. This was covered up with Bermuda shorts and a bright shirt. Their attire actually matched. She had a pleasant enough face and the man could be considered adorable, but older people just creeped Greg out. Each one seemed a bit reminiscent of Mr. Hadley.

He looks over at Olivia and then down at himself, wishing all the while never to become anything like them. *Maybe in the near future scientists could stop the aging process altogether* he reasons. That would make his life a whole lot easier. He sighs and puts his seatbelt on, then pulls the armrest down as to create a barrier between him and his hefty, single-serving friend. At this time, he remembers the email and immediately pulls out his Blackberry.

"I'm sorry, sir, could you please turn off your cell phone, we will be on our way shortly," an attendant spats.

"Of course," he says. He figures he can steal a glance at the message anyways, but she is only a short distance away, watching him peripherally. He shuts it off and turns his attention to the instructional video.

When they are up in the air, they announce the entertainment

for the flight: something called *My Life in Ruins*. A steward reads off the description, "A disillusioned tour director's life is transformed during one last excursion to Greece. With a little help from an elderly American traveler and an eccentric and hilarious tour group, she finds romance and rediscovers her love for her native land."

To Greg's left he hears, "It's that same girl from that Greek wedding one," the old woman says and nudges her husband.

"Oh, yea that one ugly chick," he answers, receiving a slap on the arm from her. To avoid any more abuse, the man promptly plugs his earphones in the armrest. Greg's armrest.

*This is going to be torture* Greg thinks. Without a plug for his headphones, he won't be able to avoid the sounds from the in-flight movie. It's like surround sound. Each passenger watching it has their volume loud enough that the noise still comes through. He cannot escape. He would be forced to watch. Not today!

He taps the old man once, but he guesses he would have to get through multiple layers to be noticed. He tries again a little harder, "Excuse me.. you're using the wrong." he tries tapping again.

The old man turns to him and says, "Aae?" with his earphones still on.

"You've got the wrong jack," Greg says and points down.

"What?!" he says a lot louder. Finally he frees one ear from the headphone's grasp.

The wife says, "YOU PUT IT IN THE WRONG HOLE!"

The old man looks at her in awe and then turns to Greg and winks.

Greg hears his daughter snicker. From his own mouth escapes a chuckle. And then suddenly he is laughing so hard he starts to cry.

Passengers around him are looking at him in confusion or distaste.

Greg wipes his tears and then closes his eyes.

*He is ten feet tall on top of that dirt mound. He can hear the enormous crowd, like one big party. His elbow is numb, but it would have to do. In his right hand, he feels where the stitches are outlined on the baseball. A pattern so familiar and adored by him, but he must throw it away. Throw it towards someone who wants to hit it, like it's everything he hates in life, all bound in this tiny world. But that is Greg's world and he would do anything to get it safely to his teammate. "Just play catch," he says, bringing his glove next to his mouth, the ball nestled warmly inside. He blows out the air accrued in his lungs. He rocks back, bringing his left leg up and sends the ball on a flight to life.*

## BORN YELLOW, MEAN GREENE AND DODGER BLUE

*Johnny Tsaour*

The day was September 17th, 1996. It was a Tuesday. I woke up too early to start getting ready for school and too late to go back to sleep. My older brother was still hibernating deeply in his covers as I got up. I looked at myself in the mirror, putting my hands on my face and running over the smoothness of my cheek with my fingertips as if I was trying to convince myself it was my own reflection. When did my skin get so yellow? I had always known that when people think of Asians, they think of them as yellow, but I had never quite seen it until this day. I felt like a Simpsons character. Well, I guess it wasn't that bad. My hair was black and matted, my eyes slanted. I was all of five foot six and a half and barely one hundred and thirty pounds. Skin and bones, but who could get fat on rice and fish cakes?

I heard the rustle from the hallway, which meant my parents were getting ready to wake me up for school. I was sixteen years old at the time and attending University High School right down the street from our apartment on Sawtelle. My father ran a restaurant, an udon noodle house just down the street. It was called Misawa, which just happened to be our last name. This thin yellow kid in the mirror is me. Robert Francis Misawa. My parents had immigrated to the United States at the start of the 60s, my father first, then my mother a year later. My mom always had a soft spot for the Kennedys, since they were all over the news when they first arrived in America. My dad often mused, "Don't ask me what I can do for you - ask me what you can do for me. This is my type of guy."

I put on a plain red shirt with a pocket over the chest and a pair of blue jeans, leaving the bedroom and my brother behind. I



turned to the small living space we all shared and the kitchenette in which my mom had just finished making me a lunch in a bento box. She handed it to me and I put it into my backpack. My dad was sitting at the table watching the news on our small TV, which was covering Tupac Shakur's recent death. I hardly ever saw my parents speak to one another, it's as if they both simply existed on different planes within the same space. My mother was a young looking woman for her age, black hair and a thin pale face. Her brown eyes had warmth to them. I rarely saw her in anything but the raggedy clothes she wore at home, even though I knew she had nicer things to wear, I suppose she never found a reason to wear them. My father, I wish I could tell you he wasn't the stereotypical Asian father, all expectations and not much else, a tsunami of disdain. He was the type of guy who was disappointed if he found out your blood type was only a B+. He never smiled at me, his face always expressionless behind his glasses and his bald head. He had been running the restaurant since he'd moved to America, and didn't have much time for anything else. The truly scary part about it all was that he had shown no warmth to me at all, but once he had told me that I was his favorite son, because I got good grades and did as he asked, as opposed to my brother John, so I could only imagine what it was like if he actually hated you.

I went to school and nothing interesting happened. The school was a very diverse place, but kids mostly stayed with those they grew up around. I was Japanese, so I hung out mostly with Japanese kids. Well, in all honesty, I hung out with mostly no one, as I was just a non-factor on the school radar. One class blended to another, English, History, PE, then my favorite class: lunch. I sat with the other Japanese kids just to have somewhere to sit, the rustle and bustle of

*Johnny Tsaour*

the cafeteria was loud like a busy street. It was like a small version of the world in there, people sitting around people like them, ignoring the other worlds that passed by in different languages. High school politics were on the agenda, there was a teenage power struggle occurring all around through fist warfare and the espionage of passing notes. I took a seat at the table and pulled out my bento box, opening it to reveal its contents: rice and fish cakes. My mom had shaped the fish cakes into a Snoopy with a raisin for a nose and a bit of seaweed for the ear. It made me smile before I heard a voice holler at me from a distance. "Hey Bobby!" I turned my head up and saw Yuji Ogawa. He was the most popular boy in our social circle, lived in Brentwood and drove a red brand new 1996 Acura Integra. He wore a black leather jacket and Levis 501s. He thought he was hot stuff; his hair gelled up as he stood there across from me. Most importantly, of all the things he had, he had a girlfriend, a Japanese girl that was thin and stylish, constantly under his arm. His mom and my mom were friends, which made us obligated to know one another.

"Hey, what's up?" I quickly asked, using my chopsticks to mess up my mom's fish cake Snoopy, embarrassed that he would make fun of me about it.

"People are coming over to my house tonight to watch the Dodgers game on our brand new big TV. Then we're gonna go to Diddy Riese after. You in or what?" He stood across from me and put his leg up on the seat of the table, one hand shoved into the pocket of his jacket as the other one was draped possessively over the girl.

"Tonight?" I asked weakly, as if I needed time to think about it. I would be working in the restaurant tonight, I knew it already.

"Yeah, tonight, man. Hideo Nomo is pitching!" He took his

hands out of his pockets and waved them in the air, as if it were absurd that I didn't know the Dodgers rotation and, more importantly, that Nomo was going to be taking the mound. He had been having a good year so far, and as a result had suddenly increased the interest in the major leagues in our neighborhood. Baseball had always been important to the neighborhood, but now that there was a Japanese pitcher tearing up the majors for our hometown team, the interest had peaked.

"I'll try to make it." I whispered as I went to my bento box, picking at the rice, fish cakes and vegetables. Yuji waved me off and left with his girlfriend. I wanted to go badly, but there just wasn't any way I could.

The rest of the day went by without much incident. I was a math tutor in an after school program. I had been assigned to be the personal tutor for DJ Greene, otherwise known around Uni as "Mean" Greene, the captain of the football team which had surged to popularity after he led them to the first regional championship in decades, last year. Mean Greene was a big guy, six foot four and more muscle than a bull. I pictured him as what John Henry looked like in those tall tales. It was absurd to think that he was still a teenager, as he clearly looked like a grown man amongst boys in the hallways. He swaggered into the room and sat down next to me, giving me a nod in greeting and a sideways "wassup" before he pulled his math book out of his backpack. He liked to chitchat with me, I assumed, not because he liked me, but because it was more interesting than doing Algebra II. He had a tight fro and was wearing a big puffy bomber jacket that was gray and baggy jeans. He leaned back in his chair as he looked me over. They bused him over to University from Lynwood to play

*Johnny Tsaour*

football. He needed to get a 2.0 GPA to be eligible, so that's where I came in.

"How'd you do on the quiz?" I looked over at him as he nodded and opened his book, pulling out his quiz from yesterday. There was a C+ circled across the top. "Nice." I said to him as he gave a nod of accomplishment, flipping the book open to the next section that we had learned earlier today.

"I think I got this down, you know." He spoke with his heavy lips and an infinite depth of confidence, continuing his slow nod and rocking motions as he looked to the book and then back to me. We started working on some problems and I watched him, his mouth slightly parted, his eyes scanning with a bit of panic as he worked it out step by step. I wouldn't say that we were friends, but he must have trusted me, as I doubt anyone had ever seen Mean Greene so vulnerable. Basketball, Football, Track - there wasn't a single thing that could touch him, but give him a two variable equation and suddenly he was sweating bullets. I just looked at him for a moment, imagining what my life would be like if we had switched bodies. I don't know what came over me when I asked what I asked.

"Hey, DJ. do you like being black?"

He turned his head up from his math and gave me an exaggerated sideways glance, as if I had confused him worse than any math problem could, as if I had asked him a trick question. "What 'chu mean?"

I shrugged as I doodled a little Snoopy on my page. "I don't know. Just, what's it like?"

He took a moment to think before he turned back to me and answered with his accent that included that slow nod. "It's a'ight. My boys and

I are running things as long as we keep winning in football, so I ain't got nothing to complain bout." He gave me a non-committal shrug before he looked at me, going quiet for a bit. I thought he was thinking about the algebra but I guess he really kept thinking about the question, since he started talking about it again out of nowhere a few minutes later. "I don't know, actually. I think people might think I'm dumb because I'm black and I'm big. Like I can't do nothin' else."

He got quiet and went back to his math problem. I felt better about his answer, knowing that there was more to being black than listening to The Fugees and doing slam dunks. It made me feel a little better about being yellow.

An hour or so later I went to my father's restaurant straight from school, which was just down the street. He was sitting by the cash register in the small space, only ten tables large but always seeming to be pretty busy. He made the noodles fresh in the back. Well, my brother, John, made them now, but it was his recipe. The menu was pretty standard, hot udon or cold soba, tempura, tofu squares. The menu was just combinations of excluding one thing and replacing it with another, but it had been that way, and was a success, for more than two decades, so who was I to question the menu? The TV in the restaurant was talking about Operation Desert Strike, which had recently just gotten underway. I didn't have a clue what they were fighting about, but the images of firing missiles and big ships in the ocean made it seem exotic. I walked over to my father, who was sitting at the cash register, just watching over things like a shaggy farm dog protecting a chicken coop. With his back straight and no expression, his eyes finally diverted a second from the restaurant to look at me as I stood there in front of him. I wasn't moving. I was busy trying



*Johnny Tsaour*

to muster up some courage to ask him to let me go watch the Dodger game at Yuji's place. "Dad - everyone is going to Yuji Ogawa's house to watch the Dodger game, they got a big new flat screen TV and everything! Nomo is pitching!"

He stayed silent for a moment before he gave a little nod and wrapped his arms around his chest, looking down to me as he spoke in his quiet tone. "Sure, go ahead."

My eyes were widened by how easy it all seemed. Looking around the busy restaurant for a moment, I turned back to him and had to double check that I had heard things correctly. "Really? I can go?"

He nodded once more as his previously undisturbed face suddenly turned to disdain. He reminded me of an M&M, but instead of a candy shell, there was a layer of nothingness, and instead of chocolate, there was pure disappointment. "Sure. Go ahead. Then you will really know what Nomo is like. Nomo restaurant means Nomo apartment to live in. Then you'll have Nomo life."

My eyes squinted at his pun filled attack on me before I caught his drift. I gave him a half snarl before I walked to the back and put my apron on, tying it around my neck and waist over my clothes. I walked back outside to make a second attempt at pleading, but I felt like, with the cards I had been dealt, maybe surrender was a better plan. "Can we at least turn the TV to the game?"

His stoic stare continued. I felt like Indiana Jones right after he took the small idol, like a giant rock was rolling straight for me and I didn't know where to go. The clouds must have parted because my plea had worked. He nodded and reached for the remote in front of him and turned it to the baseball game. I felt like, somewhere deep

inside of him, he wanted to watch Nomo too, feeling the pride which our whole neighborhood felt. The television was still on the pre-game show, in which two former players in suits were talking about the opponent that night, the Colorado Rockies, and that this would most likely be Nomo's toughest start to date. The game had been delayed due to rain, and with a wet pitching mound, the high altitude, and the lack of a foul ball territory, the chips were stacked against him.

The restaurant was pretty busy for a Tuesday night. Our location was on the corner of Sawtelle and Olympic, so our clientele was mostly local Japanese and businessmen from Westwood looking for somewhere exotic to eat, in a search of something authentic. I was one of two servers, and the job was pretty simple: give them the menus, and then translate them. Shichimi? That is like, a pepper seasoning. Tempura? That's like, it's like fried vegetables and shrimp. Mochi? It's like rice, but it's sticky? Ours has peanut paste inside, it's a dessert. No, no sir, it's good, very good. It's all very good.

The game started and I had barely noticed that time had flown by. I was so busy with customers that I hardly thought about the game. It was already the bottom of the sixth, Dodgers up 4-0. Nomo had adapted his game to pitch from a stretching position, as opposed to his usual tornado wind up stance, and it was paying off. Seventeen up, seventeen down. Make that eighteen now.

A white man with wavy brown hair entered the restaurant with his blonde wife. They looked like a Ralph Lauren commercial, the way they talked and moved with an air of grace to them. I walked over to the two and welcomed them to Misawa, with a smile, and handed them menus before I gave them a few minutes to look them over. I gave them the same old routine, explaining what each item

*Johnny Tsaour*

was before, suddenly, the man responded with a questioning tone. "Do you guys have a sushi menu?"

I was surprised; looking at him before giving him the smile you gave a customer. "No, sir, we don't sell sushi here. This is an udon house."

He gave me a sideways glance and a bit of gruff as he uttered a soft laugh and pushed his hair out of his face. "But I thought this was a Japanese restaurant."

I didn't know what to say. I stood there for a moment, in silence, before he guffawed once more and nodded to his wife and they left. The whole matter only lasted less than a minute, but it stayed with me. Who was this guy coming in to tell me what's Japanese? I am Japanese. I see it every day in the mirror. I lived it every day. My father saw the whole thing happening and he sent me to the back to eat dinner and give me a break. John was in the back room making the noodles, and he made me a bowl of udon. I sat in the back room and just stared at the bowl of soup, the thick noodles and the vegetables floating about in that light caramel tinted broth, the fish cake white with its pink trim, aimlessly wandering on the surface. I was sick of fish cakes. I was sick of udon and bento boxes. I was sick of living in a crummy apartment while Yuji Ogawa drove around in his red Integra and ate hamburgers and ice cream sandwiches. I was sick of being good at math and sick of being too short and too thin to play sports. I was sick of being invisible, and most of all, I was sick to death of being yellow.

I finished my dinner but was still steaming, all that hot soup inside of my stomach probably only made things worse, but then I looked up at the Dodgers game once more. Nomo was standing on

the plate, delivering one last forkball in the bottom of the ninth inning. The Dodgers won 9-0. He raised his arms as it was called for a strike and Mike Piazza ran out to greet him on the mound, followed by the rest of the team, jumping on Nomo and raising him up. He was the first to ever throw a no-hitter in Coors Field. He had seen the world raised up against him and he just kept throwing as hard as he could. He had been etched in Dodgers history; someone like me defied the odds and was a hero for a day.

Stupid as it may sound, that baseball game relieved the sickness I had inside of me. Seeing a Japanese immortalized in Dodger blue was something that changed my life. They had Sandy Koufax. They had Jackie Robinson. They had Fernandomania. It was always *they*, but now, *we*. We had Hideo Nomo. If Nomo could do that, then hell, so could I.

## A GLASS OF WATER

*Sarah Sturgis*

By the time I realize I don't have underwear on we're already halfway to the church. My sister is driving and this inevitably means the top is down. Kim's got stick straight hair flying around in every direction. The wind is loud but she doesn't blink as her blonde locks lash across her eyes. She is managing to smoke a Parliament while pushing 70 on the highway. Oldest children are always multitasking. She looks calm, as she always does with a cigarette between two thin fingers. So calm that it is impossible for me to swallow the fact that in three hours she will be married.

I almost forget how she'd been honking the horn at me from the driveway only ten minutes ago to *'hurry the fuck up!'* It's always the same. I'm always late, or cutting it close. I always rush out of the house juggling keys and phone, wallet and chapstick, this morning clutching a spiral notebook as well. I always slam the door too loud behind me, the dog always barks from inside as I lock it, and it's always the finality of the movement, or perhaps the sound, of jamming the key in and turning the deadbolt closed that the notion taunts me: you forgot something. And, 99.9% of the time, I have. Take today, for example. I momentarily consider just how pissed my mom would be if she found out I was freeballing. She won't, though.

I debate whether or not to tell Kim. I'm trying to decide if she'll be upset or not, call me irresponsible probably. That I can take. I'm making a huge effort to avoid any conflict with her today, of all days. Which is hard since she still hasn't asked me what I think of the idea of she and Mike getting married in the same church that our mother did.



She pinches her filter and passes the last quarter of the cigarette in my direction but I hold my hand out in a high five. I've quit. She knows. She holds her hand up high and releases the butt. It lands in the lane left of us. Her blonde hair whips against my brown, contrasting.

"What" she asks. It's more of a statement.

". I didn't say anything."

"You're chewing your lip; what is it."

"Nothin."

This twenty-minute drive is something I've done so many times I would be lying if I said I didn't take it for granted. We live on the west side of Lake Arrowhead; First United Methodist is situated on the east. The route to get there really is absolutely beautiful - some even go as far to say 'breathtaking'. The landscape is green, today, but in winter there is a heavy blanket of white. Top-down in the Mustang the wind roars, seeming to contradict the movement of the pine trees outside of the car, as they only gently sway. The 10am sun has risen just enough so that its rays, now shining out of breaks in the clouds, glaze the surface of the lake in an icy blue. It looks unnatural, both the color and consistency. Like you could walk out on top of it.

Kim glances down at her phone and I know without asking that it's him. Mike. Two inches taller and two months younger. Two other women and too fucking many 'I-forgive-you's. She hands me the phone and tells me verbatim what to message him back. She knows I get nervous when she texts and simultaneously steers with her knees.

A year and a half ago Kim and I were at Nordstrom with our mom. One of the only perks of having an older sister in an unstable

*Sarah Sturgis*

relationship: Retail therapy. Kim was slapping through the hangers on the sale rack, loudly. You would think they had done something to deserve it.

"All I ask him to do is call, you know? I don't care that he still hangs out with his stupid frat brothers - or even the raves. But calling me? When my boyfriend's in Vegas I need to know that I'm on his mind and that a Pamela Anderson look-alike isn't on his jock."

My mom shifted weight from left foot to right, draping several pairs of pants at the elbow of a bent arm. She rested her free hand on her hip, looking at Kim with contemplation. She was always trying to get in her head.

"It wouldn't seem like such a big deal if this were the first time, huh?"

"Well, no, it wouldn't, and that's the thing, I let him do whatever he wants and he just doesn't think about anyone but himself. I'm his girlfriend. My say should matter. I am one half of this relationship."

"Maybe you two need some space, some time apart?" Bingo.

"No, that's not it. He gets me. He's been there and he'll always be there. You don't just dismiss five years because your boyfriend doesn't call you back."

Mom nodded her head.

"Sis? You like?" I held up a hanger, dangling a green off-the-shoulder sweater in Kim's direction.

"Green, Anna? Really? No."

Softly smiling, my mom gave me those don't-mind-your-sister-it-has-nothing-to-do-with-you eyes. Eyes that I have to give myself now.

I look in the side-view mirror. I stare at myself until my brown eyes unfocus. Kim slows, the engine quieter, as we approach the church. I refocus on the small white writing: OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR.

As we pull into First United Methodist's parking lot I look past myself in the rear-view mirror and see a white polo-clad Travis, behind him, bluing sky. Even though now I have to look up at him to talk, to me he will always be my little brother. We exchange stares and half-smiles. I can never tell what the kid is thinking, but I always know exactly what he is feeling. We are the only two who speak this language. Kim puts the car in park, cuts the engine and starts emptying out the contents of the brown leather purse she's been using for awhile into another smaller white one. I get out of the car and slap the door shut.

"Hey buddy."

"Hey."

"Did you drive here with Dad?"

"No. He should be here soon."

I grab his hand, squeezing. I wish she were here too.

He squeezes back.

The doctors had told us that it was a risky surgery. They hadn't used that exact word, no, but more than one surgeon warned us of the potential complications. Only, it had seemed like nothing would have ever gone wrong. But after it had, after Kim had announced the engagement two weeks later, it was apparent to me that she was trying to hold onto someone who knew our mother, someone who would understand exactly what it was she'd been through.

It was kind of like when weathermen fuck up the forecast.

*Sarah Sturgis*

You've only brought a sweater, you think, as the sky begins to down-pour.

As I let go of Travis' hand, it flies almost directly to his mouth. He chews on a nail. He looks more like my mom than Kim or I do, and he looks the most like her in small glimpses, like now, as he's thinking. His hand suddenly leaves his mouth and lands in his cargos' pocket. He pulls out my mom's old cell phone. I forgot that he'd asked my dad if he could hold onto it, after she got too sick to use it. My dad had kept her number in service because, for some reason, a monthly family plan for five was cheaper than a plan for a family of four.

"People still text her."

He glances at my eyes and then away. I look at him and think of how much shit he's had to go through in the last couple years. He's only 16. He's so mature, so much wiser than I had been at his age, six years ago.

"Like Aunt Kathy. A couple of times." He pauses. "Do you think I should text back?"

My little brother.

"I don't think people expect a response, Trav. I think they might just need to say things to her, and don't know any other way how to."

"I know. It's just sad, you know."

I try to smile. Travis says something about going inside, slips the phone back into his pants then leaves.

Hot air rises from the lot's black asphalt as I help Kim unload her dress and makeup bag out of the trunk. You can feel the sun's heat even though it is still trying to break through. Looking at my

phone I notice we're early. Beth Hemlock, First United Methodist's minister is heading towards us, and us toward her. Beth is a fifty-something petite woman with wispy hair and a throaty voice. She has already donned her gown. All she needs is the cap and she'll be looking ready to graduate. We're far enough apart so that if I talk low and fast, she won't hear. This is my prime opportunity-

"I forgot to put on underwear." I stare ahead blankly at Beth, feigning a grin.

I feel Kim half-looking at me incredulously. "Shit, Anna! Are you kidding me?"

"Nope. But what kind of underwear do you think Beth has on?"

Kim tries not to laugh.

"Kim."

"Beth!" Kim's voice always gets higher when she small talks - or lies.

To me, Beth looks the same as she did in the pictures of my christening. The last time I saw her was at the funeral. It's strange to think how she's been there for the best and the worst; now she's here for whatever this wedding is supposed to be.

Beth jots down something on a small notepad, looks up, lips pursed in a sentimental smirk, "So. Kim. How are you feeling?"

"I'm good!" She's almost squeaking. "Hair and makeup and I'll be set!"

Beth beams at my sister. Then, there's this slight shift and she looks all of a sudden less proud, more so concerned.

I can feel the words before Beth knows she's going to say them. It's all in the eyes. Eyes can soften, and harden; the color can even change depending on the topic. If you look hard enough at a

*Sarah Sturgis*

person during conversation, you can actually see them taking what they want to remember and omitting the rest of what you say, what you really mean. Beth's eyes weren't hard and the small frames resting on her face did their best to hide the words she knew would never be enough. Eight words people use, a sort of combination between best wishes and because they don't know what else to say, eight words that cut deeper every time.

"Your mother would be so proud of you."

As they exchange a few more words I begin to walk away from them, towards the church's side entrance. I look up at the sky. Its clouds are moving over me, past me. Directly overhead, these small clouds are spaced out and are taking the grey away with them, almost like erasers on a chalkboard, cleaning up, clearing space. I don't know how fast the clouds are actually moving over me, or if my forward motion only makes them seem to be.

I head up the stairs and into the bride's dressing room. The room is cool and bright even though I can't see out of the stained glass windows that the sunlight is coming through.

Before we outgrew it, a swing-set stood in our backyard, towering miles, it seemed, over the lawn. Kim always used the rings; two metal handles attached to three feet of chain, dangling shoulder height over the grass. Without a single lesson, Kim taught herself to do flips like the best of 9-year-old gymnasts. She could even hang upside-down, from her ankles, her straight sweat-matted hair just barely brushing the grass. Travis was always more drawn to the swing. He mastered the art before most kids learn how to walk. It was one thing he always loved, I think because it was something he could enjoy amongst other things, things like listening to his sisters,



thinking, or singing softly, alone.

There were three steps up the wooden ladder to reach the top of the yellow slide. When playing outside, this is where I found myself most often. My mom used to stand, facing me, waiting. Once I reached the bottom she would scoop me up and, with a pat on the backside, send me back around to climb up the ladder again. Before we had the swing-set installed, there was a huge tree that had to be uprooted. Its absence left a pothole but grass soon grew over it. So as I grew older, and when Mom wasn't there, there was this perfect basin at the base of the slide, to catch me.

I'm standing in the dressing room looking at photographs of brides I have never met. Some are shorter than others, some light haired, some rosy-cheeked, but for the most part these Methodist brides are mostly white women in mostly white dresses holding mostly white flowers. My mom isn't one of them. How do you get your picture up there, I wonder? I sit down. I imagine myself post-slide laying in the dip in the grass. I want to run all the way back home and try and find where the pothole once had been.

Christmas was only three months ago - how much things can change in one season. Winter, things are supposed to freeze in its cold. Animals hibernate and come out feeling refreshed, anew. But for our family, last winter everything had slowly melted. Apart. And now all of it is still in this puddle, stagnant, trying to gain shape, any shape, as long as it's solid.

"I need a glass of water," I hear Kim from behind me. I look up at her from the carpet. Her face is pale. I don't say anything.

I don't remember any words, spoken or heard, after the surgeon walked away from us. All that is painfully clear in my memory

*Sarah Sturgis*

is Kim, Travis and I on the hospital floor. Kim had either arm around Travis and me. We clung to her. Her hand gripped my shoulder so hard I could see my skin turn white in the shape of her fingers.

"I'll be right back." I pick up my notebook and leave the dressing room. Each step feels somewhat heavier than the one before. I walk into a restroom and bolt the door behind me. In here there is only a mirror above a sink, soap, and a paper towel dispenser. It's more of a powder room; the toilet is behind another door. I sit down on the carpet and turn the cover of the spiral notebook, exposing everything I'd written last night. An attempt at a toast. My eyes permeate the scribbled words and rest on the last line: Kim no matter what, I love you. I jam the notebook under my armpit and walk out.

All of a sudden I remember our old porch, painted red. So red that my mom felt she had to counterbalance its color by planting an array of different white flowers around its steps. Most of them died within a month. In fact the only flowers that didn't were the tiny white ones that had bloomed from a single jasmine plant. The plant grew so wide and upward, stretching up the beam and creeping along the roof, that soon its vines had nowhere to expand. My mom never trimmed it. Instead she would wrap her arms around its width, and squat down, pulling the plant with her. This would bring it closer to the soil. This would give it room to grow. It always looked so awkward, that jasmine hug. The flowers seemed to be suffocating. I used to watch her and think there just had to be a better way.

I walk into Beth's office and see a case of Kirkland water bottles on the ground. Two seconds later, there is one in my hand and I am walking back to the dressing room.

Turning the corner, I see Kim sitting in a vintage patterned

chair. The dress is on, but unzipped. Its modest white beads reflect gently the sunlight. Her head is resting on the wall behind the chair, her gaze fixed on the stained glass window. It is one of those private moments when you're not expecting anyone to see you, like that. Feeling me, she turns her head to the doorway. As I walk toward her I unscrew the lid, breaking its plastic. I hand her the bottle. I put my arms around her, all of her, and hers stay at her sides.

## FALLING

*Victoria Primes*

The cold is seeping into the soles of Emma's shoes and she thinks of how often her father preached that money can't buy happiness. If it could, these shoes should be her ticket to the funhouse, seeing as how she can't properly pronounce the designer's name (it's something French with a long O and the ending where you have to pinch your lips) and they cost enough to feed her for weeks. But now all she can think about is how they pinch her toes and how hard this Los Angeles sidewalk is. It makes her wonder how long she has to stand here. Unnoticed and unattended.

Adam brought the shoes home four days ago, knelt before her at her desk and slipped them on. She knew that she should have felt like Cinderella, all breathless and overwhelmed, but instead it felt like a noose around her neck. Eight hundred dollar shoes were the final nail in the coffin of their old life. The point he was trying to make was clear, slipping them on with one hand on her ankle, the other wrapped around the black leather. He wanted her to fit into this world that they were living in now. She'd never joined a sorority in college (She was too "alternative" for them) but she understood about initiation rites and the weight that comes with them. These were the "right" shoes for the girlfriend of a new hotshot entrepreneur to be wearing. When he waltzed her around the living room she catches a glimpse of the man she fell in love with, her knight in shining armor. Or maybe it was just a trick of the light, because now she's standing on a Los Angeles sidewalk in front of an award winning restaurant and it's already past midnight and the prince hasn't showed his face. Her coach has long ago turned into a pumpkin.

Adam's on his cell phone again, exchanging sharp words with a disembodied voice floating through the speaker of his Blackberry. Funny how far words can travel. She wonders if his conversation partner is in Tokyo or Singapore or New York, how many miles separate the anger that's running through both men on both lines. How different this exchange would be if it were happening in person, because even from where she's standing Emma can hear the venom, the snap in Adam's voice.

*Take a step too far Little Red and the wolf will have your head before you can even scream.*

She's learned to leave him alone during these tirades. Business is business in Adam's world and interrupting a merger, or a deal, or a whatever it is will only make this night worse than it has been. She tips her head back, no longer mindful of the elaborate updo it took two hours for her hairdresser to craft. It doesn't matter now. Adam's no longer looking, casting adoring glances at the curve her neck or the dip of her collarbone. Eyes closed she breathes.

*In. Out. Deeply. Slowly. In. Out.*

If she can focus on this one task she can drown it all out.

*Lean back further. It's almost like floating. It's almost like falling.*

Only this time there's no hand to reach out and catch her. She never thought she'd become the damsel in distress, but a guy has a nice smile, good teeth, a strong jawbone and suddenly your resolve has flown out the window no matter how disciplined you thought you were. It wasn't the fancy cars or the shiny watches or even the well tailored suits. She was done in by a nice smile and a voice that had the slightest tinge of an accent. Emma's always been a sucker for a good accent. Not anything with a twang or the kind where you

sound like you're gargling your vowels, but a clean, crisp one? She fell. Hard and fast. Or maybe those were the vodka cranberries. It doesn't matter now. Their creation myth wrote itself four years ago and lately it seems that she's just been waiting for the ending. Because all good stories are supposed to come equipped with one but Emma thinks she's been waiting for too long and maybe this is one of those bad made for TV movies where everything just sort of stops and you sit there for thirty minutes going "Really? Really? That was it?!"

No one tells you that after "happily ever after" there's real life and no, it's nothing like in the storybooks. You can only live a fairy tale for so long. And that's why it has to end. They're racing towards some finish line that she can't quite make out yet, but she can sense it waiting there. Something or someone on the horizon beckoning for her. *Come in and taste my sweets little girl.* Too bad she forgot to leave bread crumbs on the way here. She wonders if she'll ever get back, or if the snake slithered into their Eden the day Adam got the phone call that he got the job, and the six figure salary that went with it. It all seems poisoned now, striking too fast for her to anticipate.

It was never about the money then, even though he had it. But now there's something twisted in the way he whips out his leather wallet and fiddles with his designer watch. He's showing off. And it's not for her any more. Instead of doing silly voices when he orders in drive thrus, Adam's speech is gaining back the refined edge that his hometown across the pond affords him. Subtle things, the changes only a lover would notice. Only he's skewing the image she had of him, trying to rewrite the version in her head and it's throwing her off. She feels lost. Limbo isn't so bad once you get used to it, but it's cold and impersonal and she feels like maybe in losing him she's



starting to lose a little piece of herself as well. And Emma can't decide if she can justify that or not. So she waits.

She tries to guess how long she can stand like this, head craned back, feet aching, slim shoulders freezing, before anyone will notice. She can become a statue. Sleeping Beauty locked in a tower for 100 years waiting for her prince. Sisyphus continually pushing his ball up the hill. Only instead of a ball, Emma has a boyfriend with a Blackberry permanently attached to his ear and a gaze that always seems to be hitting the point right behind her left shoulder. Emma only has Adam and even then, that's not saying much. She thinks of how often she's woken in the embrace of sheets rather than his arms, held like a lover in Egyptian cotton rather than in muscle and skin.

He has a freckle on the inside of his elbow. If the sun hits his eyes in just the right spot they look caramel rather than their normal brown. She keeps these tiny facts locked away inside of her, savoring them on those cold mornings when she's alone. Mornings that have started to grow in number since they moved down here from San Francisco three months before.

*In. Out. Slow. Easy.*

She has to remember the good things before they're replaced by the "big things". Big things. Big things are happening. He says it so often it's becoming an anthem, a chant to some distant god that she doesn't believe in and she can't visualize. The words run together and Emma begins to think he sees it as some kind of prayer, that "believe and you can achieve" bullshit that people like Dr. Phil push. It doesn't matter that she prefers the little things. She's supposed to be happy. Feigning encouragement is harder after your third glass of merlot. And when your pinky toe starts to lose all feeling? Then you

know you're a goner. No actress in the world can eke out a believable performance against that kind of pain.

*In. Out.*

If you try hard enough sometimes you can make it seem like you're not breathing, like you've left this plane of existence. She wonders if she can enter another one. One where there's no conference calls at six AM or business trips that last a week. One where her and Adam finally sit down and agree on a color for the bathroom walls and where to hang her Monet print. For now, she's decided on the living room wall, but it looks out of place next to the behemoth "entertainment" system he brought home last week because every other guy in the office had one and he didn't want to feel left out. Emma thinks of their old studio apartment, how she never would have pictured them in a penthouse with windows taking over the walls. How no one ever puts stock in the idiom that your whole life can change in an instant until it's too late and suddenly you'd give anything to go back to waffle Sundays or dumpling Wednesdays. Now she's eating four course dinners off of fine china and sometimes rich food sticks in your throat in a way you never would have expected. They used to walk everywhere. She remembers that fondly, a relic of a simpler time. Adam had a bus pass. Emma could use that kind of information as ammo now, a way to embarrass him in front of the "boys" at the office, who all drive cars that cost enough each month to feed a small country. Now he zips her down the winding roads of a different city in a car out of a James Bond film. He'll never kiss her on a trolley car again; they won't stumble down Lombard Street drunk from too many cheap Bloody Marys, Emma ripping her tights when she falls. Now she's pristine, put together, a picture perfect girlfriend.

But she doesn't feel real. It's a pretty picture, it's an elegant shade. It's a lie and they both know it but neither will say a thing.

*In. Out. Slow. Deep.* Head back. It could feel like falling. Doesn't it take an impact to wake you from a dream?

Only this is reality, because she can still hear Adam's voice three feet away and isn't distance the funniest thing? They moved miles upon miles for his job. He crosses an ocean monthly for business trips, and standing three feet away it's the farthest they've been all night because his back is to her and his shoulders are hunched up around his ears and it doesn't take a genius to read the signs here. Yet Emma stays planted on the spot, wrapping her sweater tighter around her and shifting from foot to foot. She wants to touch him, to reignite whatever it is they had when this all started, but those three steps seem like a gorge and there's no point because he'll just brush her off anyways and she's still a woman so rejection is not high on her list of desirable feelings.

They met on a Saturday, at a karaoke bar. It wasn't love but it was lust, because he had broad shoulders and a perfect jaw with just the right amount of five o'clock shadow. And his voice. Emma would have gone to bed with that *voice*, and it was an added bonus the man attached to it was attractive too. The moral of this story is don't drink so many vodka cranberries so that you can't think straight and then try to sing Blondie. You will butcher "Heart of Glass" and the crowd will laugh and you will too, but mostly you'll be watching his reaction because the way he's looking at you hits a certain point right in your stomach and you like it a little too much. Because the next morning you'll wake up in a stranger's bed and everyone knows how that feels. But never fear, this story has a happy ending. Or rather,

a happy beginning. The stranger will offer to make you waffles and a beautiful tradition will be born. "Come into my parlor," said the spider to the fly, and you better recognize when you're the fly because it will change your life. You will get stuck, and maybe you'll want it at first. He spins a web of love, of warmth, of promises of home and happiness. But promises can be broken. Arms that cradled you in bed at night can turn into the bars of a prison and yet he'll still spin the web tighter, stronger. The promises will stack up and you'll begin to forget the first ones. The most important ones. Promises that sound like "I love you" and "I want you" and "You're perfect". Those start to lose their power because he spins a web of expensive shoes and an apartment with two master bedrooms even though it's just the two of you and you're feeling more trapped than you ever have, even though you're a grown woman and shouldn't it be easy to say no? To leave? Except you said 'yes' once upon a time and that was a promise too and you're not sure how to break your own.

They used to fuck in the bathroom of the bar, rip each other's clothes off the minute they got home, lay in bed all day on Saturdays, bodies draped over each other like puppies. They used to touch nonstop. Holding hands, arms linked, some part of her body always in contact with his. Only now he leads her through the city like Orpheus, never daring to look back. She wishes he would. Maybe he'll banish her back. Maybe it's not a punishment this time.

There's so much to be said with a hand on a shoulder - she's tempted to take the leap. It's the falling part that leaves her rooted to the ground. He's not going to catch her if she falls. Their relationship has reached that point and Emma still has her pride to consider.

So she breathes, stuck in her spot. In and out, the only thing

you can do when you don't know what else to do.

Adam turns sharply and suddenly her step falters, her steady breath catching in her throat. She chokes on the air that earlier had been calming her. The allegory is not lost on her.

"Careful. If you scuff the bottom of those shoes there's barely any point to them." Emma wonders where he learned that, who told him, if a snobby salesgirl handed the shoes over and intoned the words he just snapped at her, if he thanked her. Who would thank someone for essentially telling you to not wear your shoes? For a split second she considers taking them off and throwing the damn things back in his face. Or shuffling her feet so hard against the pavement the red on the bottom becomes nothing more than a distant memory. But courage and action are neigh impossible when your fingers are starting to get numb and weariness is setting in.

So she counters with "Then why wear them at all?" And receives little more than a sneer at best and pity at worst.

"Because they're shoes. What else are you supposed to do with them?"

It's a fruitless battle and they both know it. Too tired, too full, too stagnant. The argument could travel in circles till the cows finally arrived back from wherever the fuck they are, and still neither would be satisfied. Instead he places a hand on the small of her back and directs her to the waiting valet. It's not a loving touch. It's not even helpful. She's a commodity now and he's preserving his assets.

*Get in the car. Buckle up. Wouldn't want to lose his showpiece.*

It's not that she's devastatingly beautiful. Emma's secure enough to know that. He's schmoozing with supermodels and actresses now. He could upgrade, toss her back into the sea to turn to

foam. But she's got one of those classically beautiful faces, the one that older men seem to treasure so much more than her peers. So she looks sophisticated, and it helps that she's educated, that she has a degree in something other than silicone and stilettos. Men in Adam's position would kill to have such a girlfriend, but the question still remains if he would do so any longer. When the passion burns out, you're left with a mouth that tastes like ashes and a different kind of ache in your stomach, but one that you still can't name. She wonders if they'll ever get it back, or if like age and naiveté, it's one of those one time only vouchers. You cash it in and you're done.

She tips her head back again as they race through the lights of downtown Los Angeles. She presses her fingers to the cold glass, for the moment ignoring the dirty look it gains her.

*In. Out. Breathe. Fall. Like Alice down the rabbit hole.*

You have to walk through fire to come through a different person. Fall down a hole and learn something new. When you come back the world is a different place. The colors flashing past her are brighter, colder than before, but they electrify. They're giving her back her breath, pulsing strength into her bones. Emma stares straight ahead as he curves into a turn, their profiles mirror images. Only her's is obviously starting to crack and even she's not sure what's waiting on the other side.

"Are you happy?"

Of course he doesn't look at her but she sees it. The question sinks in, the arrow finds its mark. It's the subtle way he clenches his jaw, how his fingers tighten on the wheel. It's a tiny victory and it probably shouldn't feel so good.

"Why wouldn't I be?"



She thinks of turning this into twenty questions, of asking him if he misses it, if this is better, a thousand more questions that she could and probably should ask. But she's geared up for the kill and if she turns back now she may never return.

"Because everything's wrong here. Because you're turning into a mindless automaton. Because we're broken and I don't know how to fix it."

She pauses, gathering breath for the next one. For the one that will hurt.

"And because I'm not sure I want to."

It's so quiet she can hear them both breathe. It's out of sync, and she takes it as a sign, because everything tonight has stood for something else and because of the way he's still so calm, in out, slow and deep, is a direct contrast to her quickened breathing, to how her breath catches in her throat, and she knows that they are irrevocably, undoubtedly fucked. If the shoes killed who they were then her words have killed who they are, who they could be, who they were going to be. There's no blood but she hit a vein and they're bleeding out and it'll be no less messy than if there were. And all she can do is look forward and breathe, try to catch her breath.

"You really think that?" He pauses, shifting into another turn. All business. He still hasn't looked at her and that's the only answer she needs. The realization that this is the end hits hard and she can't breathe for a second. Tears come unbidden.

*So this is what the end really feels like, the end without fanfare and white wedding dresses and rose petals raining down from woodland creatures.*

There's no kiss to wake her up. This is the wake up call, the

slow build of pain as she realizes it's over. She's been trying so hard to put together a puzzle with mismatched pieces for too long and it won't fit.

"You believe everything you just said?" This time it's more insistent. He's expecting an answer because, for once, she seems to have them, as opposed to when he asks her where she wants to go for dinner, what she wants to do on his day off, if she likes his tie. She's finally the one in charge and it's scary because she's been used to him - him leading them around the city, holding onto her arm to show her off, him making conversation while she laughs or nods at the right times. She's become Pinocchio in his arms, a marionette, and all of a sudden she's morphing into a real girl. He looks at her finally, out of the corner of his eye, watching her for an answer, although his foot never leaves the gas, they're still racing through the canyons, and she wonders for a brief second if she really should have done this here.

"It's just something that I feel. Have been feeling. It's not the same Adam, you have to know that too."

"That doesn't mean it's not working."

She'd never have pegged him to argue, to get defensive. He's too analytical for that. He doesn't care, or shouldn't care. Either way, she doesn't expect the way he lets go of the steering wheel and reaches for her hand. Adam squeezes, trying to hold on, trying to convey some sort of meaning. It's sad that she no longer knows exactly what his skin is trying to say to her own. She lets him run his thumb over her pulse, jumping at her wrist and, while there's a spark of something, it's not enough to ignite what's already gone out. He continues and they sit like that for a moment, her hand in his, both trying to decide what's best. Adam opens his mouth to speak and then shakes

his head, clutching her hand a little harder. Emma sees a flash of the man she fell in love with as his resolve cracks, like looking through a mirror to a faraway time and she wishes she could go back. One wish and it could all be fixed. If she could turn back the clock she would. She would go back to a time where her hand in his meant something other than an arbitrary movement, something you do when you want to hold on, but no longer can. He's clutching her tightly, but it doesn't make any difference.

It's not a lifeline. She wanted it two minutes ago, two hours ago, two weeks ago, two months ago. She wanted something. He could have shown her something, anything. Instead he grabbed her hand at the last possible second and now it's nothing more than an anchor, holding her down and she thinks how she wants to fall.

"Yes it does. It's not working. I can't do this. You know it." She slides her hand out from his, still staring forward. That horizon is coming up fast and she still can't tell what's waiting, but she's letting go and she's falling and she's not as scared as she was. Maybe she stopped loving him the day he led her over the threshold of their new house. Maybe she stopped loving him the day they pulled the tape over the last box in their studio apartment, her crying and him stony faced. Or maybe she still loves him. But it's different and that's what hurts the most. He didn't even say goodbye to the spider plant they left hanging in the window of their old apartment, instead telling her they could get a new one once they reached LA. Emma thinks he's outgrown her as well, in a way that neither wants to address but that can't be ignored any longer. It hurts. She's swallowing over a lump in her throat and her chest is burning with the tears she knows she'll cry when she gets away from him, when she has a second alone

to think about what this really is, what she's really doing. But she knows if she doesn't do it now she'll be continually stuck and that scares her more than letting him go.

There's no fairy godmother to wave her magic wand and fix their problems. Emma left her glass slipper in their old life and she should have known that when he didn't retrieve it they weren't going to last. He's charming, but not a prince. The clock struck midnight twenty minutes ago and she thinks of what a fool she was to not notice that it was a pumpkin picking her up, not a coach. What a fool she was to agree to any of this. Adam shakes his head, his voice cutting through the silence like a dragon spewing fire.

"You don't mean that. Just wait until we get home. Jesus Christ Emma, just wait 'til we can talk about this. You're being irrational. We can work on this." He beats the steering wheel with gutso as he speaks, staring straight at the road. Emma just shakes her head, leaning against the window again and closing her eyes.

"It's over. We're over." She speaks the words loudly, too loud for the cramped car but she wants to get them out, to let them exist in a place other than her head. She wants to shoo off the "happily ever after" Adam is trying to promise because she is calling this the end.

## MESTIZO

*Elliott Perez*

Eddie leaned his head back against the headboard, still thinking of the red soil, the red dust. He thought about a memory of his mother, one of the only ones he still could recall. Sadly, it was so vague now that he couldn't remember if it was real or a dream that his mind conjured up. It was sunset and his mother stood out on the porch staring out into the sky. The fields lay lower and the mountains farther on the horizon. The sun fell behind low clouds that hung around the mountains, with a red-orange hue that only nature's serenity could produce.

A light wind danced through the air and picked at his mother's off-white dress. Her hair, long and black, surrendered to the wind that whipped through it like a leaf clinging to its tree. As the red dust flew all around her, she stood there looking out unto the fields and the farther Southern horizon. Eddie, young, maybe 5 or 6 years old, had just awoken from a nap, and drearly was making his way to the kitchen when he saw her standing there transfixed against the glowing amber of the setting sun and red dust. She was saying something low under her breath as Eddie's feet slowly came closer. He realized, drawing closer, that she was singing a lullaby. It was a lullaby he had not heard in 2 years, but one that he remembered her singing to him as a baby boy.

Eddie was moving ever closer, step-by-step, but always staying a step behind her as she moved away from him. As she started to walk through the haze of red, blurring and blanketing everything around her, Eddie's hurried feet became engulfed in red cement and he could no longer catch up. He yelled to her with tears

slowly drawing from his youthful well, "M a m a . M a m a P l e a s e !" But she never turned around. Instead walked straight out onto the Mesa, leaving behind wisps of her black hair as it flowed through the air like her notes in the song. Then, just before the dust has concealed her beyond visibility, a great shadow appears overhead. As she slowly turns to look at him, it is no longer her. It is Eddie himself.

## WITHDRAWAL

*Justin Formanek*

I forgot to take my pills again.

It's been three days now and I can feel the anxiety building up inside. It feels like a thousand little ants crawling just beneath my skin, up my spine and spreading out across my shoulders. I resist the urge to swat at them, to cease their endless march. At least in public. Such retaliation, if witnessed, would seem overtly crazy. The shocks don't help either. Short, quick zaps -- the only way I can describe them -- that start at the back of my head and complete their circuit just behind my eyes. They're not constant, not like the ants. They only happen when I turn my head too quickly or shift my vision without blinking first. It makes concentration difficult and adds to the overall sense of agitation. I don't want to take my pills tonight because I'm supposed to take them in the morning. If I move to catch up now, I'll just throw off my entire schedule. Of course, it is this same flawed logic that has caused me to miss the past two doses. But the withdrawal has started and I know, this time, it will serve as a reminder in the morning. For now the discomfort of it simply fuels my contempt for Rusty's antics.

He's a big guy, Rusty, in both directions. A head or two taller than I am and ample around the middle and the chest. Thick. He's the sort that maintains a bulkiness that cannot be considered fat or muscular. He's not defined, but he doesn't seem prone to excess jiggling either. His build is best described with some obscure adjective, one that I'm unfamiliar with. This bothers me. I try to focus on the book in front of me and get my reading done, but Rusty isn't having it. He simply won't shut up. He just keeps jabbering on and on with a voice



that seems too high-pitched for his body. I notice he speaks at the same volume no matter his distance from the person he is speaking to: loud.

His shortish, messy, sandy blonde hair -- and matching mustache that doesn't quite meet in the middle -- is matted down with sweat. (This is why I call him Rusty. I don't know his real name, and never have I ever met anyone named Rusty. But if I did, I'm sure they'd look just like him.) His face is flushed bright red and the sweat keeps oozing out of his forehead so much that tiny droplets break free when he turns and splatter on the tabletops nearby. No one else notices this. The person making their way across the cafeteria with a damp rag has already finished the area that Rusty and his gang have settled in to.

I wince -- I want to gag.

I just know that tomorrow morning, when the cafeteria re-opens and I'm catching up on my meds, someone is going to sit at one of these tables for a cup of weak coffee and over-priced pastry. They're going to touch one of the spots where Rusty's fluid has landed and it's going to adhere itself to their hands like some invisible parasite. It will be on them for only a moment, of course, because when they go to shove some raspberry danish into their heads it's going to transfer to the danish and then they'll eat it. They'll chew it up, not noticing that extra hint of saltiness, and wash it all down with a slurp of coffee. Then Rusty will be in them.

I shudder and swallow the excess saliva building up in my mouth. My leg won't stop dancing beneath the table. Every thirty seconds or so I become acutely aware of it and have to stop the methodical chipping of polish from my nails. I put my hand on my knee and rub it, calming my leg as though it was Mr. Bumpkins, my mother's

long dead Yorkie who would panic and uncontrollably dispense urine during thunderstorms. At some point - probably as soon as it's left unattended - my leg starts hammering again because I have to keep stopping to stop it. I glance at the clock on the far wall. Only half an hour left until my oceanography class. I thought it was going to be an easy way to complete all the extra bullshit classes I have to take to meet the bizarre general education requirements here. It is easy, but the professor keeps talking about how the ocean currents make the climate so wonderfully perfect here and I can hear the mockery in his tone when he talks about the semidiurnal tides back home as though it were someplace foreign, where all the people there were so strange and backwards that you either laughed at or felt pity for them. He doesn't understand that it's here that everything is wrong. Nothing changes. The days are so similar that one just blends into the next, over and over again. Holidays sneak up on you because there's nothing to tell the time by, no ebb and flow between the seasons. I think that's why everyone is so disgustingly pleasant.

There must be something in the water.

~ ~ ~

"Aren't you going to eat your pizza?" Jim said.

"This isn't pizza. Someone spilled Chef Boyardee on a pita."

Jim is the one to blame for my sentence to Southern California.

That's not really true. If you want to get technical, it's my mother's fault. Jim (I'm not calling him "Jimbo" though she keeps insisting I do) simply agreed to become husband number five. My mother has this thing with falling in love, which isn't particularly marvelous when paired with her bizarre attraction to alcoholics thing.

"Char," she said, though it sounds more like Shawr with her

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accent. "Don't be rude."

"Sorry," I said, pushing my plate away. "I think I'm good with the salad bar. Besides, the cilantro fairies got to it first." I can't handle the taste of cilantro. It tastes like the little pastel flower-shaped soaps my mom used to keep in a little wicker basket on the counter in the bathroom. Not that I, for whatever reason, tasted those. It's a smell/taste thing. It tastes like soap smells, and I swear it gets snuck into every bit of food I order around here. It's absolutely maddening.

"C'mon Char, Jimbo got half pepperoni just for you. Just pick around it."

"I can't, it's everywhere. Even if I pick it off there will be residue."

"It's alright Sheila," Jim laughed. "I'll just take it to work tomorrow."

Jim works at a nearby avocado company. Something in management that earns a salary big enough to move his new wife, and her darling twenty-three year old daughter, across the country. He was at an avocado conference when they met at the Whole Foods in midtown. They both reached for the same ladle of Paneer Makhani and instantly fell in love. At least that's how the story I've been subjected to some five thousand times goes.

I want to dislike Jim and his affinity for vegetarian Indian food. Without him, or it, I'd still be back home. Instead I'm stuck in bizarro land with clawless lobsters, squirrels with flat tails, palm trees and a population of people who act like they're hopped up on Prozac (don't even get me started on the pizza subject). Unfortunately, Jim is sweet to my mother, has a steady job and he doesn't drink. I almost start to like him, but then I realize that the more likable he is, the

longer marriage number five will last, and I'll be stuck out here until I finish school. He did give me his aunt's old Sentra (though the interior smells vaguely of pickles). That was pretty decent. I've resigned myself to calling it a draw.

I was hungry after not eating the soap dusted pizza pita, so after mom and Jim split I went to the grocery store on a quest for cherry-frosted Pop Tarts. Some girl, in her supermarket uniform complete with her navy blue smock and a name tag dotted with glittering heart stickers that read "Skylar", crept up on me and asked me if I needed any help finding anything. I must've jumped, because her eyes got a little wide and she stepped back outside my personal space. I told her I didn't need anything in a tone that expressed my desire to be left alone. It didn't compute.

"Are you sure," she asked. "Maybe I can help you find what you're looking for."

"Yeah," I said and continued down the cereal aisle as quick as I could without breaking into a run. I figured she thought I was going to steal something. At the checkout, the helpfulness was much more oppressive. After I paid the \$3.26 required for my Pop Tarts, the guy who had jammed them into a plastic bag looked at me with a big, dopey grin.

"You need any help out?"

I just stood there stunned for a moment.

"What?" I finally asked.

"You need any help out?"

I looked down at the bag and then back to him.

"With what?"

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"You need any help out with your bags," he clarified.

I resisted the urge to point out that it was only one bag, not bags, but the question in itself seemed so absurd that I figured a quick lesson in semantics was futile.

"I think I can manage."

"Have a nice day."

He just kept on smiling and turned his attention back up the belt that was shuttling a selection of fresh produce his way. I didn't return the sentiment -- I just got the hell out of there. The entire experience was unsettling.

No one smokes here either. It's the one thing I can do that can counter the perpetual pleasantness that everyone seems infected with. All I have to do is light up and all (previously jovial) expressions in a twenty foot radius turn to ones of disgust. If coughing and melodramatic waves of hands to clear the air don't follow, occasionally I'll catch a sneer or two. I might as well be standing there in front of them doing something horrible, like drizzling acid into a bucket of kittens I keep at my feet. Sometimes someone will say, "ohmygod she's smoking" or "don't you know those things are bad for you?" But, every now and then, someone will come up and ask me if they can bum one or buy one for a quarter. It's always guys who ask and for a while I couldn't find the nerve to say no. That was until this one rolled up to me on his skateboard and skidded to a stop.

"Got an extra cigarette?"

"No, my pack only came with twenty," was what I wanted to say. Instead I said, "Sure, hold this." I handed him my notebook while I delved into my bag for my cigarettes.

"Thanks," he said. He pulled a lighter from his pocket - apparently he could afford that, but not his own pack. He lit up and took a lengthy drag, letting some of the smoke spill from between his lips before sucking it up through his nostrils.

"So what's your name?" he added, handing me back my notebook.

Again, my sarcasm synapse failed to fire. Instead of spitting out a snarky response that more or less told him - in a far less cordial fashion - to go away, I simply stuttered.

"Ch... Charlotte."

He smiled and I found myself thinking he was actually kind of cute in a lost puppy dog, Keanu Reeves sort of way (the Speed version. You know, not quite as goofy as the Bill & Ted's version, but not the pseudo-serious and laughably inept The Day the Earth Stood Still version). His dark hair and light blue eyes gave him a sort of distant look that, I admit, I'm a fool for. He had enough going in his favor that I was willing to forgive the board shorts, sandals and leather-thonged tiger shell necklace - the unbearably stereotypical beach bum ensemble.

I smiled back. "So . um... what's yours?"

"Skylar."

The theme from the Twilight Zone blared in my head so loud I couldn't hear myself blurt out "ohmygodI'mgonnabelateforclasseeeya bye" as I darted off in the other direction. This was just way too weird that - distant doggy eyes or no - I just couldn't handle it.

Yes Charlotte, there is a place called Hell. and it lies west of the Continental Divide.

It wasn't until I was in class, and had shaken off most of the

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heebie-jeebies, that I realized Skylar (the butt bumming skateboard Skylar, not the space-invading Pop Tart troll) had written his phone number on the cover of my notebook. I was furious. It took me three hours to copy all my notes into a new one that hadn't been defiled. From that point on, anytime someone asked I'd just mumble that it was my last one and continue walking. Mostly I just watch the expressions. Those that don't turn to disgust immediately are potential beggars.

I do my best to avoid them.

~ ~ ~

I begin again the paragraph on tsunamis that I've been reading and rereading since I sat down at the table in the corner. The air in the cafeteria is heavy with that universal cafeteria smell that also haunts buffets and retirement homes; an amalgam of mixed vegetables, sloppy joes and mashed potatoes. It's always that same combination of smells, even if none of those items are on the menu.

Rusty is still carrying on, screeching and sweating. His glasses keep slipping down his nose. Each time I notice him push them back up I do the same, even though mine haven't moved. His shirt is gray and printed with Snoopy standing in front of an Irish flag. Snoopy's arms are crossed and he's wearing dark sunglasses. He looks as tough as Snoopy can, but I worry for him. As Rusty's shirt sucks up more and more of his sweat, dark stains creep from his collar and his underarms; hot, sticky shadows that will soon devour both flag and beagle.

Poor Snoopy.

Rusty and a young boy are engaged in a game of catch. The boy is ten or twelve, I can't really tell. But he's small and scrawny



and dark-haired. I decide that he cannot be related to Rusty, nor to the woman seated at the table next to them who is typing furiously away on her laptop. She's large, more so than Rusty, and has somehow managed to shove herself into an undersized green tank top and a denim skirt. A lump of reddish flesh is bunched up in the middle where the top and skirt do not meet. It droops out, reaching for the floor. I think it means to flee her body. Her stumpy legs end in a pair of tall, brown sheepskin boots that everyone had to have back home last winter. Here everyone seems to wear them even though it's always at least seventy degrees and sunny, and this lady is no exception. She looks like a portly Norwegian prostitute. Her hair is lighter than Rusty's, but their complexions match. She might be his mother. The boy remains a mystery. He looks nothing like the other two and because of this, I cannot figure out what he's doing here.

As I watch, somewhat perplexed, I realize that what he and Rusty are doing is not playing catch. They are merely hurling a small, black and green foam football at one another. Rusty's voice is shrill as he slings both football and poorly thought out insults at the boy. His voice cracks on words that end in vowels. He keeps calling the boy "Dick", but he does this in a tone that leaves me doubtful that the boy's name is actually Richard.

More droplets fly from Rusty. More possible ingestions. I feel sick all over again and decide that my reading is a lost cause. I close the book and set it neatly atop my notebook. The hurling continues and the boy throws a winner, catching Rusty below his belt. He shrieks.

It's so loud.

It echoes in the otherwise empty cafeteria and I want to stand

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and tear down one of the posters of "Cafeteria Rules". I want to scream into Rusty's slimy face and vent my frustration for his blatant disregard of bullet points two through seven. Instead, I sit. Watching and picking at polish, with my leg tapping feverishly and getting zapped behind my eyes as I follow the football back and forth.

The boy cackles at Rusty. "Got you, you fucker," he says with alarming ease. I've noticed that profanities tend to sound awkward and can only stumble from the mouths of little kids. But this boy is practiced. He says it with the right emphasis, he says it with authority. I stop rooting for him. I hope that Rusty pegs him in the face. He'll cry. He's still a little boy, after all. That'll end the game and maybe they'll settle down. Failing that - and this is more likely as Rusty's aim is worse than mine - I hope an errant throw will roll my way. Then I can snatch it up, grab my Bic from my purse and light the stupid thing on fire. After I cackle madly I'll thrust it into the nearest trashcan and both Rusty and the boy will look at me with disbelief, not knowing what to say. They'll just stand there, wide-eyed with mouths partially open and I'll storm out before they can decide whether to question me about my problem or to simply rescue their toy from the garbage.

But the ball never comes. I do not get to release my frustration. Instead, I slap my own shoulder, swatting at the ants. Mortified by this lapse of composure, I gather up my books and slink out of the cafeteria. I glance back at the clock before I disappear. Five minutes.

Enough time have a cigarette before class.

I need to be on my guard.



**"HOLY HAND"**

*Sarah Taylor*



POETRY

## THE GUIDE TO WRITING A 3,000 WORD ASSIGNMENT

*Brittany Hildebrandt*

Start 2 days before it's due. Don't start until 3 p.m.

Write 127 words in 60 minutes. Stop. Contemplate progress.

Receive distracting text messages.

Convince yourself your home environment is not one for productivity.

Try to convince yourself otherwise.

Contemplate benefits of third person limited vs. first person.

Choose third person limited. Rewrite.

Word count: 267 at 9:30 p.m.

Realize third person limited was probably a stupid decision. Go with it anyway.

Note time: 12:45 a.m. Stare at word processor. Scrap assignment.

Rewrite.

Pass out at 4:30 a.m. Word count: 380.

Wake up at 2 p.m. Curse existence.

Grab sushi and soda--breakfast of champions. Eat sushi with hands.

Note class.

Edit. Word count: 484. Time: 2:43 p.m. Contemplate coffee.

Contemplate point of view again. Try first person again. Scrap efforts.

Find music to listen to. Go with Hall & Oates, the very best of.

Worry this piece isn't going to be your best piece. Try to accept that.

Word count: 647. Time: 3:48 p.m. Grab coffee with extra shot.

Press strange combination of buttons on computer.

Freak out. Cry. Spend next 10 minutes trying to get rid of little paragraph icon.

Word count: 755. Time: 5:24 p.m.

Go into the living room. Go back into room.  
Go into living room. Go back into room. Pace room.  
Contemplate new subject. Stick with subject.  
Word count: 1,023. Time: 6:34 p.m.  
Face palm.  
Run DMC.  
Word count: 1,346. Time: 7:56 p.m.  
Wonder if maybe that coffee with an extra shot was a bad idea.  
Really regret extra shot in coffee.  
Stand on chair. Sing "It's Tricky."  
Lose it. Take off shirt. Stand on bed. Put on sunglasses. Dance.  
Laugh UNCONTROLLABLY. Text inappropriately.  
Write another paragraph. Word count: 1,517. Time: 10:01 p.m.  
Oh shit.  
Write quickly before inevitable caffeine crash.  
Caffeine, meet sugar.  
Oh shit.  
10:55 p.m. Crash. Word count: 1,652.  
Panic. Get act together.  
Begin to wrap up story. Regain confidence in piece.  
Edit. Save. Word count: 2,546. Time: 2:40 a.m.

## LSS 504: HARMONICA

*Gabriella Massari*

On the outside, I am a bullet of black plastic.  
My parts are cylindrical, smooth and soft, even  
where I open. Just a slight disturbance  
if your fingers can pick up on the broken line  
that goes all the way 'round.  
Above it: says I am lip-smacking fun.  
That's still my outside.

I try to remember the white words  
that have been smudged by the fingers  
that open my tube.  
And close it,  
And open it,  
And close it.  
Nervousness marked by the clicking of  
my parts meeting. Sometimes,  
it wears me out.

Today you are going somewhere, I don't know.  
I feel the canyons of your palm and know I am going,  
too.

On the inside,  
WAIT. I'm not that easy. Take off my shell,  
and I'm hiding. Now I'll need your full  
attention. It's not that hard.



Just twist my body.

Open me like the mollusk I am. My innards  
are the stuff of bees and Brazilian palms.

I'm a rosy pink and smell like your mother's liquid makeup  
and could use some perfume but at least Mica  
makes my cream glitter.

Smush me and I'll flatten like room-temperature butter  
between your fingers. Instead, I meet your lips  
and I can feel the aloe already there. Last time,  
I got stuck between your cracks.

I'm sealed and thrown into your crocheted purse,  
your uneven steps rattling my body. Finally,  
I hit the ground and hear the sound of muffled waves  
crashing in the background.

Sand creeps in through the holes with the sunlight and  
clings to the tampered part of my sticker and I wonder,

Will you toss me into the sea?

## BEAR VALLEY 1988

*Danielle Camacho*

When I was 8 years old,  
camping was dust  
and a cracked gold valley —  
raccoons scavenging  
3am trashcan leftovers.  
Sleeping bags were blankets for  
lawn chair beds— we,  
the summer sleepers,  
under a parched August night.

I don't remember  
what the tents were for —  
an ode to fragile  
and abandoned homes.

Other families slept in  
newly-renovated 1988  
timeshares; schedules  
like disjointed desires,  
pinned to empty oak cabinets.

I don't remember  
wanting to fill time —  
always busy with  
styrofoam hot chocolate,  
my brother's mischief,

and my mother's  
undivided attention.

We ventured to  
the community pool,  
its neon blurs of children  
squeals and cackles  
"No running!" and  
"Wait 30 minutes".

I don't remember  
loneliness —  
bobbing free,  
ill-fitted inner tube,  
toes petting the lake's  
mossy barriers  
so open to small drifters.

Night was when stars  
flaunted their heat  
against the dull fluorescence nearby.  
Lawn chair angled towards  
the stars, I tried to count  
myself into the sky with them,  
introduce myself, and know their stories.

I want to remember  
what it felt like —  
when I didn't mind being outside  
of everything;  
when an 8 year old's  
memory didn't know,  
22 years later,  
that it was the only  
camping trip  
we'd ever take.

## GRAVEYARD

*Danielle Camacho*

She wants to prove something,  
at the end  
of a rusted shovel  
splintered grip  
digging weeds  
she can call her own.

I want to tell her  
not to water —  
that nothing new grows  
here, from her  
mother's ashes,  
that she needs to remember  
before forgetting.

Then, I can  
throw away  
the shovel, the hose,  
and cry, but  
no longer feel guilty.

## HER MOTHER-OF PEARL

*Jessa Reed*

her mother-of-pearl  
was broken  
but it was Sunday  
--a time to rest with the tangerine earth  
between the breast  
                  a bible  
between the beast  
                  her husband  
--amalgamations of gravel and dirt

she smiled  
little love crumb skies  
and clothed in sand-lace;  
living in history  
before he got to her  
and did not know  
nothin worse

he was a man  
with his good and his danger  
haunted by her exotic;  
sure of her big eyes  
life closed in history  
more beautiful, more deep  
more Other

come now, waste away me  
light bread and white shadow  
*look how she's right*  
*and listen how she speaks*  
etceteraetcetera

come now, waste away you  
braidless and Indian blind  
*look how she prisons*  
*and listen how she lies*  
etceteraetcetera

stone past line  
she lives in false-prairies  
clothed in quiet beads;  
how her hair lifts up  
when she dresses  
--maximum fracture of land skulls  
used up in her taken-love  
    blood-love  
        whitemanlove

in scratchy shoes  
i walked that sugar-cubed  
street  
lost in the reason of  
bloodied-lips,

the burnt flavor of  
a woman's problem  
in the pale-curve  
of what's truth  
--and the curse of not  
being enough

like this  
i lived you;  
lies on a string  
a sad-sad not worth a-thing

you were just a  
man  
made from false-lips  
-- a harvest of wrong direction  
violent by your metal-heart

i loved you  
with the Color  
of skin  
that's not there



## COLOR OF MY HOME

*Daniel Wilson*

Down the streets, meaningless  
footsteps, a tasteless bridge, no savor  
in the saltwater, no scent.

I walk through the door, and  
mother hugs me, a  
long, firm squeeze, and  
sisters level eyes at me, and  
look genuine love, and  
I realize how much I've forgotten  
about myself, and  
about my home.

Autumn houses  
hum, feet  
drum, a deep  
pulse - this side of the river.

A bridge, aloof, tastes like peanut butter and jelly, and  
chocolate milk, and  
young lips, feels  
like tender hips.

Rocks split river  
water, ripples form  
melodies of confidence, and  
absolute truth.

Crisp river aroma of  
dreams, and  
faith, and  
hope.

Brown walls hide mysteries, a  
red brick runway, yellow leaves gather in  
corners, people stand, and  
laugh, and  
chatter, and altogether  
hum.

Underneath everything, an ethereal  
lace. A pacifying, preternatural blanket. A  
lullaby, an  
omnipresent hue, an  
invisible green.  
The color of my home.

## I KNOW THAT YOU HAVEN'T SEEN

*Daniel Wilson*

I know that you haven't seen  
the other side of that wall.  
It's out of the way, and you usually  
wouldn't look at it from that side, but  
behind it there is orange paint  
and I know that you don't like orange  
because you don't like the taste of pumpkins  
and it's the color that inmates wear in prison  
and you hate the sound of Garfield's voice, but  
once I show you how good orange can look  
in contrast with everything else

you will love orange  
and when I show you the other side of that wall  
you will say

This is beautiful, and  
I have never seen this, and  
I have been missing this

## SHOULDA BEEN A COWBOY

*Emily Marciel*

Sometimes I wish I could be a man  
but not just any man  
I would wear a bandana tied around my neck  
and it would sit proudly soaked with the stench of my sweat

I would be tough and bare-chested  
I could even be fat and bare-chested and no one would say a thing  
they would just look to my dirt covered face  
find my eyes  
then turn away speechless at my foggy scowl  
my boots would scuff tiredly against the pure wooden floor  
because today I just don't give a shit

I would find a chair  
grab its delicate neck and spin it backwards  
and throw myself down for a beer  
some whiskey  
and maybe rum too

I would drink without worry  
I would drink without tasting  
and I would even drink alone if I wanted

But instead I am here  
towel clad on an island  
with my pink slipper feet resting upon my desk

knowing I will have to wait  
yet again  
for you

so we can go out to do the same damn thing

I lean back in my chair  
because what's the rush in getting all pretty just to sit around and  
wait  
I watch water drip from the ends of my long wet hair  
In this state it lays sprawled  
plastered against my skin without shame  
and content with being wild  
it sits with me as it too  
listens to a voice that makes me long for  
another life  
another world  
another way of being

the song ends  
my feet drop down to the floor as the chair clamps forward  
I adjust my towel  
push my hair behind my shoulder  
and I swear I can hear it sigh

## SPRING

*Mary Sagala Verleur*

There was a gentle sound  
like water down a hillside,  
it made me think of the steep trail  
we took last spring, the deer  
behind the veil of soft, green leaves,  
both of us frozen to the moment  
the ethereal Green of the buds on the branch  
you touched them  
smiled at me as if  
you discovered spring,  
filtered sunlight,  
this muddy, narrow trail.

Shoes click down long linoleum hall  
hypnotic, sterile solo  
*"Click, click, click, click,"*  
a doctor stands over me  
mumbles ugly words  
that have no music or meaning,  
I notice his stained cuffs,  
hardened eyes that have seen too much,  
I pity him,  
wonder if he's  
ever looked into a lover's eyes  
or the deer's momentary gaze,  
closed his eyes and listened to

the sound of water  
gurgling down a hillside  
beneath a canopy of green,  
under the filtered sunlight of  
the forest floor in spring.

## A DRIVE



*Nick Crowe*

Green deserts  
complicate our  
Wednesday drive  
toward Portland.  
Our irreducible  
speed caters to  
the zeal we feel  
for the promise of  
five days in a  
frozen, urban  
common land.  
Blood won't  
transmit to my legs.  
The cold anticipated  
and capitalized on  
the lack of  
circulation in my  
veins. No one else is cold.  
The skin on my hands  
breaks and fissures;  
they're discolored  
from the rest of me.

An immutable dragon  
rests on the  
side of the freeway



thirty minutes  
shy of the border.  
He is menacing, boastful,  
and maybe pensive,  
maybe sullen- an  
emotion strangely qualified-  
maybe the guardian, arbiter,  
or soul of a  
dogmatic order  
sent to squat and  
squander his transient deity.

We eat far too much.  
Something about driving  
imbues us with a  
temerity toward health.  
Chains are required  
where there is no  
evidence of the necessity,  
but one mile further  
we're assaulted  
by solid rain  
falling  
from the atmospheric tree  
above like  
dead leaves  
of Autumnal memory.

The chains  
crush and mangle sheets  
of perfectly lain snow.  
Real Christmas trees  
cradle the weather  
on their pine branches;  
all that is missing  
are the lights.

Tremors invade  
my solid frame  
and I shake  
while sleeping.  
I forgot

my thermals.

*Nick Rester*

RE: "I need pics of young teens with HUGE tits."

Dear John.noreply@teensex.us,  
Why do you need pics of young teens with huge tits?  
Why is "huge" all in caps, are you yelling?  
Why do you yell the word "huge" and nothing else?  
Surely, you carefully chose which word to exclaim.

Perhaps "huge" was such a necessity,  
you were afraid it would be taken lightly lowercase.  
People might think you wanted pics of young teens  
with any sized tits.

Not to put you on the spot, but you did email me.  
You have been emailing me for four years now.  
Every once in a while, you check in.  
Always wanting these pictures.

But you don't want anything, do you?  
You need these pics.  
You need the teens, and incest, and traps, and ebony threesomes  
that you inquire for on a weekly basis.

These are taken from any plethora of fetishdoms on the internet.  
18 billion results on Google for three words:  
"teens huge tits"

Precise as you were with the size of their breasts,  
you didn't even specify the age of the teen,  
nor the boob's authenticity.  
Do you mind if they're fake?  
Do you care if the teen is underage  
or a forty-year old with a good plastic surgeon?  
I assume since this wasn't included in your subject line,  
and none of it was in caps, you don't care.

John.NoReply—I'll call you John.  
John is my father's name,  
and the animated .GIF in your email  
of the farmer having sex with the cowgirl  
reminds me of my family farm in Kansas.

It's been years since I went back there,  
the only memories I have of childhood  
are of Charlie Chaplin,  
the Twilight Zone,  
the Wizard of Oz.

It isn't that we were raised on TV,  
it's that farm folk are simple.  
My father wasn't educated,  
we didn't speak much

I hope this email isn't getting too personal, John  
We just met, but I feel sincerity from you.

*Nick Rester*

This is why I'm finally replying after all these years.  
You're so open about what gets you off,  
and I think that's grounds for a great friendship.

Sure, you're probably just a bot sending entire mailrooms,  
company lists, school faculty contact books,  
church groups  
your Trojan horse  
your cry for smut  
your badly translated ads

and when I click reply  
my email will streamline  
to a server room in South Korea  
then forwarded to the NoReply Deathbot  
who never sees the light from an open window  
who scours the air-conditioned servers  
for an IP address to haunt  
or a suck fish's credit card number

yes, my inbox will flood  
with spam,  
sick with viruses,  
vomiting HTML bile.  
My carefully saved contacts  
my archived messages  
my backed up files  
my work calendar, gone

When I answer your request, John  
the thoughtless hivemind of your bot brain  
will sell my address for a quarter of a penny  
and the final CAPTCHA  
verifying the deletion of my account  
will show that you've won.

But perhaps John, the NoReply Deathbot  
who revels in fools like me  
who steals my name  
who excretes porn  
and advertisements  
and coupons  
and tosses this message into the trash

just might find it peculiar  
that among the hundreds of thousands  
of businessmen and teachers and parents  
who reply to your company  
asking to be removed from the spam list  
that this one email contains  
attached pictures

## PARTICLE

*Daniel Linton*

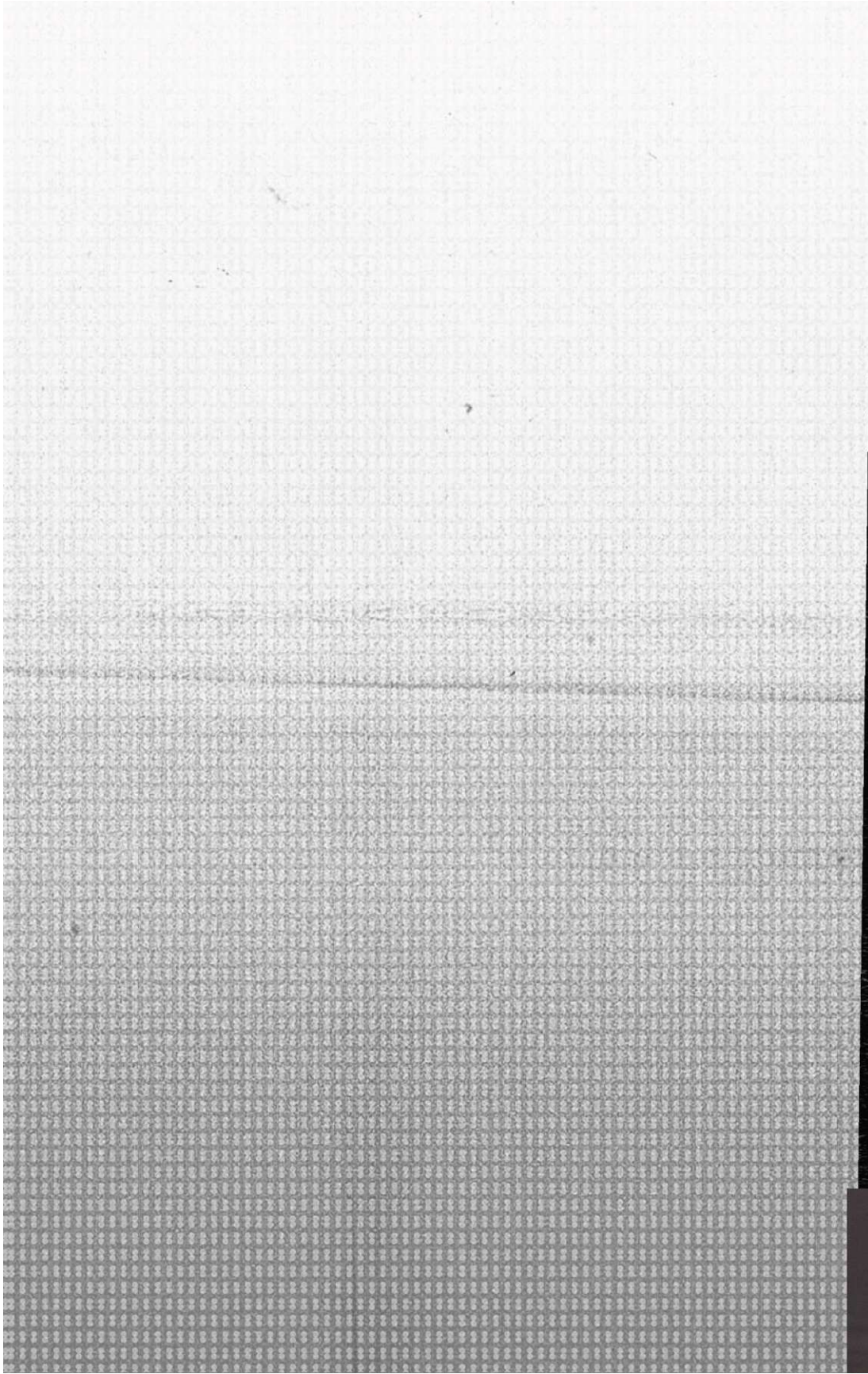
I looked at the stars  
and measured the distance  
between each one  
against the silence  
that separated them  
and finally  
with nothing  
from which to issue  
entered an echo  
of flawless extent  
adorned in the  
untethered  
skin of just  
so little  
a  
thing



**"HOUSE AT SEA"**

*Lindsay Grace Kubit*





NON FICTION



## COCKSHOTS: FRIEND OR FOE? YOU DECIDE

*Alexandra Fuss*

Following Brett Favre's recent (ahem) photo shoot of underwhelming proportions, I found myself pondering this newfound inclination among men to capture a snapshot of their penis in all of its glory, and then play show and tell via picture mail. Boys, less show more tell. I think I can speak for the majority of women out there when I say that we very much appreciate what your penis can do, but you need to keep it in your pants, and out of frame, until instructed otherwise. To be clear, I strongly encourage a person's freedom of expression, particularly in a sexual nature. As I too share in Bill Maher's concern that this country is rapidly becoming Utah. However, I can only assume this act is intended as a form of flirtation with hopes of reciprocation. Dude, no. Look what happened to Favre. He's an American hero. Who hasn't watched him run around in those tight little pants, all the while wondering what lies beneath? And yet, all hail pictures of Brett Favre's flaccid penis? Not so much.

Guys, when a woman takes the time to pose for a come-hither picture of herself, it is intended as a little something to get you going-- a tease, if you will. There should be an air of mystery and anticipation. Whereas, cockshots are not refreshing. They are not mysterious. They certainly are not sexy. And thanks to Favre, they're not even original. Unless of course you have a colorful way of displaying your friend, say, in a little outfit of some kind along with a choreographed interpretative dance. After all, women love a man in uniform. But honestly, once you've sent a girl a picture of your dick, where do you go from there?

And so, I began to wonder: if man candy of Brett Favre's

caliber has resorted to flashing his underwhelming genitals at women for attention whilst under the mistaken impression that she will respond favorably, it must be the result of some repressed mating ritual that can now be perpetuated by technological advancements. Yet another reason not to buy an iPhone. Though, to be fair to Mr. Favre, this happens more often than one might think. Kanye West (a man of unquestionable moral character) admitted recently, and I quote, "I sent this bitch a picture of my dick. I don't know what it is with females, but I'm not too good at that shit." Huh, I can't imagine why. Though, in all seriousness, a man of even average intelligence has to realize that these actions will not likely garner the positive outcome for which he is grappling. Either the goal was to sexually excite your intended recipient, which (chances are) you did not. Or, it is intended as some degrading insult, in which case, you lose-- she just showed your boner to all her friends. Either way, it's not great. And so, I feel the need to share in one of my more recent experiences on this subject in order to demonstrate the inevitable downside of texting an unsuspecting woman a glamour shot of one's junk.

Last night, at 3am, I was awoken by the gentle "bing" of my cell, notifying me that a new text message had arrived. As the cell phone is no friend of mine, especially at three in the morning, I ignored its summons. Shortly thereafter, the phone began to ring and gyrate about my nightstand. Again, I ignored it. Upon awakening the following morning, I checked my inbox expecting to receive a notification with some semblance of importance. After all, the call was placed at 3 am; someone could have died. However, to my everlasting surprise, I was confronted with an amateur photograph of a fully erect penis. I have to admit: I was quite amused. I had assumed one of

my friends had drunkenly and/or boldly decided to expose himself to me, as those who know me well are fully aware that dick jokes are my very favorite form of entertainment. Unfortunately, upon further inspection this portrait was sent to me from an unknown number, from an unknown man, and his unknown penis. Utterly confused, I finally remembered that he had called as well. Perhaps, I thought, he left a voicemail and had revealed himself, or rather, his identity. Instead, all I got was an uneventful recording lasting five seconds in length: beginning with a three second pause, and ending in a two second guttural grunt.

I sat in bed, slightly dumbfounded, wondering whether or not I should share this gem of a spectacle with my husband. I had to outweigh the benefits of protection and concern over the downside of having to answer as to why strange men were flirting with me via glamour shots of their genitals. I opted to share, mostly because I wanted to see the look on his face when he too had the pleasure of beholding this majestic image. Sensing I was more amused than troubled, he laughed as I relayed my experience.

"Cute," he said, as he turned the phone this way and that to get a better glimpse of my present. Then suddenly, "Did you ever change your voicemail greeting?"

What a weird question, I thought. Is he concerned as to whether or not I politely greeted my pervert? "Why?" I inquired.

"Peggy." He said simply.

He was referring to my most recent obsession: Peggy the Discover Card spokesman. During the college football season, ESPN had frequently aired an ad campaign depicting Peggy, a chunky Ukrainian man sporting a Bill Cosby-esque Coogie sweater and an afro

perm, who would declare in his feminine yet robust foreign accent, "Allo! Zis is Peggy!" For those of you who are not familiar, Peggy is the epitome of sexy. The commercial intended to satirize the corporate trend of outsourcing customer service calls to foreign countries, requiring representatives to assume Americanized names to better relate to their customer base. The best part was the priceless look of bewilderment on the disgruntled caller's face who would hesitantly respond, "Peggy? Yeah, okay." I was so taken with Peggy and the dazzling effects he had on his callers, that I tried to emulate him. Following a night of drunken debauchery, I performed and recorded my best rendition of Peggy as my voicemail greeting-- and naturally, forgot all about it.

Imagine my exhibitionist's unpleasant surprise when expecting to awaken a lingerie-clad young woman whispering a timid, husky, "Hello? Who's this?" which surely would have made his pervert night --when instead-- he got an earful of Peggy. Life's a bitch, ain't it?

Peggy: 1. Pervert: 0.

Here is where these seemingly unrelated unfortunate events share a common thread. This 'sexting' phenomenon is what sparked this debate to begin with: Brett Favre took a picture of his junk with his camera phone, then texted it to a woman, who forwarded it to a tabloid, who then plastered it all over the internet, which was picked up by the television news networks, which broadcasted high priority coverage of Brett Favre's cockshots during what should be an informative news broadcast, which was viewed by the masses, who then took to their cell phones to emulate their role model, and somewhere down the road some random dude decided to choose my phone to call and text a picture of his penis to, only to be rejected by Peggy,

who hails from television advertising. And, we've come full circle.

Do you see where I'm going with this? In the interest of full disclosure, I would be lost without electricity and most of its beneficiaries. But, there is a line. And this is where I draw mine. We insist on carrying around a plethora of electronic items to keep us connected to one another, and yet, there is a disconnect—yielding a certain lack of sex appeal to a text, an email, or a luminescent cockshot. Where is the intimacy? Where is the authenticity? Where is the effort? Because, believe it or not, the radiant dancing pixels of a penis that glows up at me from the backlit screen of a cellular telephone somehow loses its charm.

We have had a good run with this notion of instant gratification, but honestly, enough is enough. Texting, sexting, blogging, tweeting (twatting? twittering?), email, status updates, instant messaging, social networking, and now--cockshots. Really, people? Really? We're now no better than that monkey who exuberantly whacks off at the zoo. We're devolving. Back in the day, we would be so bold as to write our innermost thoughts into a bound notebook, which we'd guard with our lives for fear of someone seeing it. We would fold photographs of ourselves and loved one's safely into a little trinket box, which we would bury in our rooms to keep from prying eyes. Since when did we begin to embrace the prying eyes? When did privacy lose its luster? What happened to leaving something to the imagination?

Trust me when I say that there should be an element of surprise when unveiling the pork-sword. By surprise, I am not referring to: "Surprise! Here's a picture of my dick.." Be a gentleman. Pick a flower. Cook a meal. Have a conversation. Then,

*Alexandra Fuss*

by all means-- whip it out. But guys, please do not, under any circumstances, send someone a cockshot. If you simply cannot help yourself, then know this: Peggy judges you.





## THE COLLECTIVE

*Tessa Karbum*

Well, we're on the road again. Broken and bruised we make our way back to reality. The reality of school, work, business, apathy, and boredom; though, I don't want to call that reality because what I — what we — experienced is what is real. Sleeping in cars, on floors, dressed as animals, drinking, smoking, eating, tasting, trusting, driving away, driving towards the edge of the horizon, chasing the sunset, sunshine, rising with the moon, living, loving, lying, lie-ing, dressing up, dancing down and coming undone while we come together. The collective.

I never want to lose the adventure and I can't picture adventuring with anyone else. When we are together we are home ("cause home is wherever I'm with you") and together we adventure in the prime of our lives. I know we can't live like this forever but we can always be happy, right? Right now we are 18, 19, 20 and we can never die. We are invincible, we sleep 3 hours every night, wake up at 8, help others, work out, chill out, start the party. What we have going right now will never be again. So live now, live well, be happy, be desirous, win, Adventure.



## A TACO TRUCK IN OAKLAND

*Brittany Hildebrandt*

It was a Saturday night in September. Two eighteen year old girls were standing outside a taco truck in the middle of Oakland with two white guys who were horny, drunk, stoned, and nearing thirty. Sketchy customers were pulling up onto the goddamn sidewalk in beaten old Chevys and grabbing a bag of tacos to go. It was cold. The fog was beginning to roll in. In the distance I could see Lake Merritt and the twinkling lights that outline it. I could see freedom—the road that leads to a freeway onramp that moves south. Six empty lanes that would direct me home.

I stood watching the array of customers walk up to the plump older lady standing in that taco truck, vaguely listening to a Doug Funnie look-alike go on and on about avocados being used as mayonnaise and his spear fishing trips in San Diego. He was wearing khaki shorts and a green sweater with a Pet Sounds shirt thrown over it and if it weren't for his butterscotch hair, I'd say he looks more like Steve from Blue's Clues. Despite my snide remarks and obvious rolling of the eyes, the man would not stop inching closer to me. I immediately learned Doug Funnie forgot to put on deodorant. He smelled as bad as he looked.

I stole a glance over at my friend who was with the Ron Livingston look-alike. I notice they had drifted. I envied her. She got the better looking one with a job and education while I was lumped with the poor schmuck still going to Laney College (visible in the distance) and works for a nonprofit. I watched them for a while, her body language meant to signal some sort of flirtatious charm. Her blue dress

seemed shorter; she stood taller. The two leaned close to one another yet despite physical attraction, their mouths ceased to move. Conversation looked stagnant.

This was meant to be a girl's night out. The boy I had been smitten with offered me two free tickets to see Brian Wilson at the Paramount Theater, a show he was helping set up that night. Hungry for any contact with him, I agreed and met him at a Carl's Jr. earlier to pick the tickets up. I called Colette to arrange the plans and started getting ready. But a girl's night out only means two things: Wear a "titty shirt" and I'm designated the socially awkward wingman.

We met the two guys during intermission. A comment about the warning bells was made. Something simple like, "How 'bout those bells?" Confused as all hell, we entered conversation with them. Ron asked us how we were enjoying the show. Colette took no time to explain she doesn't like Brian Wilson at all. The two were horrified, having each paid over a hundred dollars for their tickets. Doug asked what she was into and she rambled off a list of old R&B artists. Doug made a wisecrack and she became offended. I played devil's advocate, cutting into the conversation and claiming I don't mind the Beach Boys all that much. Soon after, we parted ways, going back to our respected seats to watch the 60 something year old sit at a desk and sing lyrics off of a computer screen. It wasn't until I later tried to calm Colette down and inform her that the two were trying to hit on us that she perked up a bit and tried to find the two in the crowd.

Before Ron could catch me staring, I turned back to Doug and

*Brittany Hildebrandt*

his sub par conversation. He asked me some sort of question.

"What?"

"Did you see that movie, Jumper?"

"The one with Hayden Christensen?"

"Yeah, where he can like jump through time or something."

"No."

"Oh, it's a good movie. You should see it sometime. It's cool. I mean he can jump to anywhere."

"Yeah."

"Where would you go?"

"What?"

"If you could jump somewhere."

"I don't know. Europe. Where would you go?"

"The Swiss Alps."

"The Swiss Alps?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Like, okay. So I'm skiing and instead of having to take the ski lift back to the top of the mountain I can just jump."

"Why?"

"Those things take forever."

"So, wait. You have the power to jump to anywhere in the world and you would just jump from the bottom of a mountain in the Swiss Alps to the top."

"Yeah. I mean... saves time."

"Would you go anywhere else?"

"No."

He started to pet my arm. Christ. I should have known this

would be a long night when we bumped into the guys leaning against a wall after the show. Doug was talking to what appeared to be a homeless man holding up a Pet Sounds sweatshirt he wanted to give to his daughter. Doug reassured him it would be a great gift—not something you can get at Target. He nudged the stranger, pointed at my breasts and said, "You can't buy those at Target either." The stranger gave Doug a smug look and a thumbs up and went on his merry way.

Ron noticed we had drifted. Thank god. The group merged again and conversation was tossed lightly around. Something about video games and old school Nintendo. It had been an hour and Doug was still holding his food in a bag, now cold. Ron held an empty bottle of Coke; no doubt to show off to Colette that he was somewhat capable of making healthy decisions and took Oprah's advice to heart (don't eat after 8 p.m.). Ron attempted to move us away from the closing taco truck, inviting us to a piano bar that's just down the street. Colette nodded in agreement and looked over at me for approval. I vaguely remembered Doug mentioning he lived down the street, and with the way these two were looking at one another I started to fear this might also be a code to take us somewhere else. The taco truck turned out to be real sure enough but a piano bar? That could mean anything. Not to mention we weren't exactly old enough to drink—although those two fellas weren't privy to that information anyway.

My car stood directly behind us, close enough for us to run to and get away quickly. I was beginning to get nervous. I frantically texted Colette to tell her we have to get out of here. It was late enough as is. I saw her reach into her purse to grab her phone, read my text

*Brittany Hildebrandt*

message and ignore it. She put her phone back into her purse. I was mortified. I got the hint she was into her guy and didn't want to leave his company just yet, but if I didn't get her home to her protective as hell parents, we were both in some serious shit.

Teeth clenched, I told the guys we had plans, explaining we absolutely must get to a party that was underway at a friend's place in San Jose. Colette gave me the evil eye. I reasoned talking to a stoned Doug Funnie for an hour in the middle of fucking Oakland wasn't in my wingman contract. The guys weren't buying it, but accepted the rejection regardless. I started to inch my way towards my car across the street but Doug pulled me back.

"So, wait. How do we do this? Should we exchange numbers?" He looked over at Ron and the two of them smirked at one another. Doug leaned towards me and asked me for my number, prefacing he would call it to make sure I get his too. I grudgingly handed it over and picked my phone out of my purse to silence it. I recited his number back to him and he smiled arrogantly.

"I'm going to call you later tonight."

"Okay."

"I'm going to call you at exactly 1:15."

"Okay."

"I'm going to set an alarm! I'm going to make sure I call you! You better answer!"

"Alright!"

Colette and I make our way back to my car. She was seething. I knew what was coming. "A PARTY?" I sighed. I knew it was a clichéd excuse, but I explained I wasn't interested in hooking up with a man who resembles a cartoon character from the 90s. Not Doug

anyway. Give me Captain Planet and we're in business. We slowly trudged along I-680 to the other side of the East Bay, both of us childishly analyzing the night's events and wondering whether we would ever hear from those guys again. Colette was certain she wouldn't ever hear from Ron again and I spent the twenty-minute drive home convincing her otherwise. I was beginning to dread the turning of the hour and a phone call from Doug. She tried to reassure me he wouldn't call, which I uncomfortably accepted.

After I dropped her off, I pulled into the driveway of an empty house a little after one in the morning—my dad was no doubt sleeping over at his girlfriend du jour's place. I broke into his liquor cabinet and made myself a rum and coke. I slowly started to unwind, stripping away my shoes and jacket. As I sunk into the couch, I heard my phone ring. 510 area code.

Shit.

## STREETLIGHTS AND MARKERS

*Gabriel Diaz De Leon*

He ran from no one. He ran from streetlights, sprinklers and his own imagination. Another stencil on another stop sign. He moved on. His arms were shaking from the cold and nerves. Streetlight spotlights. He avoided them, walking through wet grass and hedges, throwing away the markers when a car passed. He picked them up and put them in his pocket again and again. He was blocks away from home.

No one will suspect me this far, he would think to himself. This should be ok.

He wasn't sure, though. His chest was tight. Thoughts of cop cars, the lights, cuffs. An authoritative voice shaming him. Why was he doing this to his fellow neighbors? Ignoring his thoughts, he proceeded. He was driven to tear down walls, not just for himself but for his neighbors. He was just as much a service as the cops themselves. They just didn't know it. This was the mantra he kept.

More stop signs.

He imagined everyone coming out to admire or reproach the new scenery, stirring smething up inside of them. Contemplating their lives. He knew they wouldn't. It would only result in a phone call and a paint job. An octagonal piece of sheet metal and a few bolts to let the dream continue.

I have to try. It's cold but I have to try.

Headlights and another toss of the markers. Finding them, he continued. Each letter quick and bold.



## MATANZAS

*Gabriel Diaz De Leon*

In Mexico, I stand at the top of a cliff in the town of Matanzas. The Massacre. A place where many have died before me, before my time. Their blood seeped into the creek and colored and cracked the rocks. They are a part of this land and I stand on their shoulders, looking at all they have left. Miles of hard clay stretch into the mountains on the horizon. There is a cemetery below me that grows slowly. The last of this town are beginning to populate the last green corners of it. I climb down to the cemetery and find refuge in the cement and plaster mausoleum from the wind and rain that suddenly arose. On a bench I sit and look at the artifacts relatives leave for their loved ones. There is no doubt that they are my blood in some way too. There are paintings of Mary and long melted candles on the wall. Oily pools of cold wax on the ground. There are names of people I do not know but I imagine them in there with me. They are just standing by me, not saying anything, only watching. So I try to be reverent, respectful. And I hope they approve. They had their time on this earth, in this place, and I wonder how it was spent - In the fields with horses, with families or maybe all alone. Maybe in a different world to help those in the old one. I don't know and soon there will be no one to ask.





## PIERCED

*Marissa Highsmith*

It was completely whimsical when the idea came to me. I was getting dressed after having just come out of the shower and thought: huh, it would be cool if I pierced my bellybutton. I continued with this notion, which was still completely theoretical. I'd just lost a little weight so I wouldn't be self-conscious about showing it off.

I laughed to myself as I pulled on a shirt. Like that would ever happen, little miss honor role deviating from her oh-so-meticulously-planned schedule and getting a navel piercing. Then I stopped, one arm halfway through the sleeve.

Why the hell not?

It was completely do-able. There was a tattoo shop in old town not even a block away from the train station and a quick Google search found me their hours and prices. I was over the age of consent (barely), so there was absolutely nothing stopping me.

It would be something completely spontaneous, something that I wouldn't have planned and anticipated weeks in advance. The events of the previous semester had made me a creature of habit in this way, juggling my responsibilities to both my education and my family. Painstakingly arranged schedules made it possible to get my more-than-demanding schoolwork done while traveling 200 miles home every weekend to help my family deal with the tragedy. As it was, I still planned everything down to the minute detail.

A couple of days later I was getting my things ready to leave. I wore my favorite jeans and my most comfortable shirt, a forest green men's thermal with a scull on the chest that I'd managed to find in a size that would fit my petite frame. It was strange that I felt the need

to be comfy while I paid someone to hurt me.

I shoved my black skull and crossbones hankie into my back pocket. It had served me well these last few months. I'd only had it for a few weeks before Dad was diagnosed with cancer last September, after which it had become indispensable. I had just finished my Spanish exam when I found the voicemail on my phone. As I passed under the arch at the entrance of the bell tower I listened as my dad's voice told me that he had cancer. They hadn't caught it in time. He wouldn't live to see me graduate. He wouldn't walk me down the aisle of my wedding. My theoretical children would never meet their grandpa. He would make my beautiful mother a widow before she was forty-five.

It couldn't be happening. Except that it was.

I'd crumbled onto the seat of a rickety bench by the basketball court used by the smokers. I'd wiped at the tears on my face and my hand came away black in the dim streetlight. At the time I didn't think that rocking the Alice Cooper look would be a good idea so I rummaged through my bag and found the red and black bandana I'd bought at Hot Topic and forgotten about.

That cold night on the quad was one of the first times I'd used my hankie and it hadn't left my person during the following days spent loitering around the dingy hospital. I remembered how my mom had gone through at least three boxes of generic hospital tissues while I relied on my handkerchief. Not only was it practical, it was evidently eco-friendly too. Who knew?

I don't know how my mother made it through that hellish week. She and my dad had been together since they were fifteen. Soul mates, just like in the stories.

*Marissa Highsmith*

Hanky safely stowed away, I left my dorm room and set out across campus to the bus stop, my head phones in my ears, listening to heavy metal to chase away the jitters, the electric base has an oddly calming affect on me. I used my old bus pass to get on the bus. I hadn't actually paid to update it that semester but I still had the pass and they worked so infrequently that when the reader flashed that an error had occurred, the driver just waved me on. It was a little scam I'd pulled a couple times, don't tell anyone.

I let out a sigh as I sank into the hideously upholstered seat behind the driver. There was no turning back now.

I hadn't told my roommate Syd that I was getting it done this weekend. I'd told her that I was thinking about it and she'd offered to take me, but I'd given her a noncommittal answer and waited until she went home for the weekend. It's not that I had any scruples about her helping me; this was just something I needed to do by myself. For myself.

The two of us were closer than I was to a lot of the people that I considered to be my best friends. I guess sharing a roughly nine by thirteen foot beige box that the school called a dorm room for two years does that to people. I owed Syd a debt that I could probably never repay, but intended to spend the next several years attempting to. She'd done so much for me. After recovering from the initial shock of telling her that my Dad had cancer, (when I'd come back to our room in the middle of the night freezing and stiff, my makeup scrubbed away by tears and my trusty handkerchief) she'd acted completely normal. She didn't mention it unless it was relevant, drove me to and from the train station nearly every weekend, and pretended not to notice when I cried myself to sleep at night even though my

bed was three feet from hers. When I was here with her it was like my problems at home didn't exist, and it was exactly what I'd needed at the time.

I'd sunk into the dark waters of depression in the following months after the diagnosis. When my artistic brain thought about the experience it always came up with very wet imagery, like drowning. It felt like I was being pulled deeper and deeper into black water, and the smell of the commuter train, the sickly yellow taint of my father's skin, the missing assignments, and a rocky long distance relationship were like weights that sank me. Syd was like a port of harbor in the storm, a small but dry patch of land amidst an amethyst ocean. Normal was my coping mechanism and she had made sure that things were as normal as they could be.

It made me feel selfish thinking back on it. Like when I'd spent her much anticipated birthday in a hospital 200 miles away. I can't even remember if I sent her a happy birthday text. I hope that I did. I didn't find out how hard all of it had hit her until later when I was talking to her mom who told me that she'd requested nothing but a quiet family dinner for the occasion. My guilty conscious had gone to several probably less-than-subtle lengths to make sure that the next one was fun. I baked a cake and everything.

I rode the bus to the train station, trying to ignore the grungy man across the isle that spent the drive talking to himself before he got off at the halfway house next to the school. Walking up the main (only) street in old town Camarillo, the garish lilac tattoo shop immersed all too quickly. The sign said Bone Deep in dripping black lettering.

Let's hope not.

Marissa Highsmith

I held my breath and pulled open the heavy door. After a nerve wracking wait I was handed a questionnaire on a clipboard with no pen. I fished a ballpoint out of my pocket and began filling it out. Most of it was mundane stuff, making sure I was over 18 and that I didn't have any metal allergies. The last question was how I'd heard about their shop. My pen hesitated for a second over the paper, but in the end I couldn't help myself. *I saw it from the street. It's fucking Purple!*

The only guy in the front room was working on a tattoo so another one came to help me from the back. He was tall and lean with swirling black tattoos on both calves and biceps and he was, in the college coed terms that I'd recently come to be acquainted with, "majorly cute." His pale skin shone like ivory beneath the thin veil of a wife beater tank top and I vaguely wondered if he had any other tattoos that I couldn't see. I felt myself blush.

Shit. Wasn't there supposed to be some big scary biker for this kind of thing?

The cute guy, whose name to this day I can't remember, led me back to a rather intimidating black leather chair. He went about gathering equipment; slipping on black latex gloves and pulling out both a clamp and a large curved needle from sterilized packaging. It was fascinating to watch the muscles of his arms move beneath his tattoos. I might've been in a committed relationship, but I'm still human. After sterilizing my skin with some kind of icy cold liquid and accidentally tickling me at least twice, he attached the clamp and painfully pinched the skin above my navel. I had half a second to think that if the clamp hurt then what would the needle feel like? before Cutie lowered the back of the chair so that I couldn't see my

stomach. I vaguely recall him telling me that I'd feel a little pinch before an all-consuming pain ripped through my stomach and radiated out throughout the rest of my body.

A little pinch, my ass.

I knew from previous experience that I wasn't a wuss, but god damn did it hurt. Then after about 30 seconds of agony it abruptly stopped. It was suddenly just gone. Poof. Once the clamp was removed and Cutie helped me up from the chair all that remained was a dull throbbing that I hardly noticed.

I stood in front of the mirror that took up most of the south wall of the little shop and lifted my shirt. There was a glittering silver stud (well, technically it was surgical steel) with a rhinestone setting at each end. I smiled; this was way cooler than I thought it would be.

I paid Cutie and left him a tip before walking out into the sunlight. It was glaringly bright outside compared to the fluorescent dimness of the shop and I had to blink several times before my sensitive eyes adjusted to the light. I walked back to the train station in a daze and arrived at the platform just as my bus was pulling in. Had it really only been a half an hour?

The bus driver grinned at me as I boarded his bus again. "Back already?"

I gave him a polite smile and bit back the sarcastic remark that lingered in the back of my mind. "Yep, just had to go up the street and take care of something," I said before taking the seat behind him again.

The piercing began to ache, so in the relative privacy of the nearly empty bus I lifted the hem of my shirt just enough to inspect the wound. Flaky dark blood stood out garishly against my white

*Marissa Highsmith*

skin. It was a rare sight for me. I, for some yet to be determined reason, almost never bled. The last time I remembered bleeding was at the annual campus Chalk Walk when I'd been assigned a really crappy slab of cement. Two and a half hours later I'd noticed the liquid bubbling on two of my filthy fingers. I'd been blending blue tones and the blood came out purple.

I'd always thought that the phenomenon was strange. My dad bled like a faucet, especially after he'd started chemo. The smallest scratch required a Band-Aid. I had a whimsical theory that my blood was the consistency of pancake syrup and that it oozed lazily through my veins, as though it could take on my own couch potato persona. But realistically it was probably just thick skin, which was valuable in more ways than one. I'd always carried myself like a tough guy, but it wasn't until the metaphorical shit hit the fan the previous year that I'd had to prove it.

I settled back into my seat for the short drive back to the school and asked myself the yet to be answered question.

Why?

Why had I done it? I didn't have an answer. Was it to boost my self esteem? Ha, as if a stereotypically arrogant artist like myself would ever need a confidence booster. I was able to show off my paintings and strut around in skin tight jeans for a reason.

So what was it then? A belated teenage rebellion? It was feasible, but unlikely. It's not like I was breaking any rules and it's not as though my parents would blow a gasket or anything when I told them. Well, at least I hoped not.

The truest answer was that it was liberating. It served as an outlet for the stress that had been building while dealing with college,

a struggling relationship and Dad's sudden diagnosis. Like popping a balloon with a pin, the building pressure found a sudden release. Only I did it with a piercing needle. It was exactly the kick in the ass that I'd needed to wash away the faint, lingering tendrils of depression.

Huh, that makes me kind of a masochist doesn't it?

When it was all said and done, I was pretty happy with my spur of the moment decision. I couldn't sleep on my stomach for five days afterwards, which really sucked, but after the bruising faded I cropped an old tank top to show off the sparkling little stud.

The day-in, day-out care for a body piercing proved to be a great source of tedium, but was also almost like its own little stress outlet. It wasn't like writing papers which I did to maintain my GPA, or flossing to appease my dentist, it was something that I did solely for myself and even though I rarely showed it off, the little glittering gem in my navel brought me a strange sense of contentment.

I didn't tell my Mom until about two weeks later when I saw her in person. I met her in the parking lot above the platform of the Solana Beach train station which was a few blocks away from the bank where she worked. She greeted me with a hug and a kiss and we made our way across the busy parking lot to her little grey Prius. This was a well established routine from the previous semester.

We settled in for the lengthy drive making mostly small talk. Work, school, Dad's chemo, the cat's weight issues, and then I just blurted it out.

"I got my bellybutton pierced."

"Really? Let me see it." She didn't sound particularly happy, nor did she sound upset, and she didn't sound the least bit surprised.



*Marissa Highsmith*

My mother and I look nothing alike. She's half Taiwanese and looks it with her dark brunette hair that some people mistake for black and her brown almond eyes. The only physical features I got from her were my skin, diminutive stature and lactose intolerance, but mentally we had a lot in common and when she looked at me I think she understood why I did it, even if I didn't completely understand it myself.

I expected her to just shout it right out when we entered the house as sort of a "look at what your daughter did," but she didn't. Our fat three legged cat loped down the hallway to greet me as I hoisted my red duffel bag into the living room. Other than the standard train/school/chemo small talk not a lot was said.

She spilled the beans to my dad later that night. I was reading in my room when I heard a shocked "she did what?!" from down the hall.

I got up and made my way to their bedroom and found them halted in the process of getting ready for bed. Dad was shirtless and the six-month-old surgery scars were plainly visible on his stomach. I showed him the piercing and after the initial shock he seemed perfectly fine with it. He did make a point of telling me not to get any tattoos, especially stupid ones with unicorns and other such nonsense, but it turned out to be a nice conversation. I was a little surprised.

My piercing has fully healed now and I've grown accustomed to its constant presence. I don't show it off, most people don't even know I have it, but the little stud is a consistent pick-me-up whenever I catch sight of it. Life has grown steadily harder to cope with, but I've dealt with my depression and found that, even beneath all the layers of shit, I'm truly happy in the niche that I've carved out for myself.

It's cliché to say that enjoying the little things in life is what gets us by. But the private victories, like the sparkling jewel beneath my shirt, have kept me balanced and reminded me that there's nothing that I can't achieve.

In Loving Memory of Dave Highsmith (1967- 2011)

*Amy Heiden*

"Connor still wets the bed," my friend told me over the phone. "He is eight years old and still wears diapers, it's disgusting. He gets embarrassed and tries to hide it from me."

"Well yeah, wouldn't you be embarrassed too?" I asked her.

"If he is so embarrassed about it, then he knows it's wrong and he should just stop doing it."

"I think he would if he could. It's just hard for some kids."

I was a bedwetter. And an occasional daytime pantswetter. I pooped my pants once at Knott's Berry Farm, but I'm pretty sure that was a fluke. As for the bedwetting, it took a few good years of dry sheets to move on, but now I can put it behind me. I can laugh about the fact that every member of my family referred to my bed as "Lake Amy." And about that time my mom had to bring me extra clothes at school because I peed while on stage rehearsing for the second grade musical performance. It didn't happen because I was scared or nervous, it happened because I thought I could hold it. By the time I realized I couldn't hold it, I was too late. It doesn't bother me anymore. It's like that time I went to camp with a secret stash of diapers in my suitcase never happened. It's like every sleepover I ever went to at one of my friends' houses *didn't* end with that friend's mom sending me home with borrowed clothes and my wet jammies in a plastic grocery bag. I'm completely over it.

My parents never let me have anything to drink after dinner. They forced me to sit on the toilet before bed every night until I went. But I would still wet the bed. I never knew why, and I still don't.

I attribute it to having a serious case of Middle Child Syndrome, a chronic disorder that affects approximately one-third of all people.

I was a sassy, loud-mouthed little girl who did everything in her power to be the center of attention. I once dumped an entire Squeeze-It over my mom's head just to see what everyone would do. No one was amused and I received a public spanking and verbal lashing. Another time I woke up before my parents (probably due to the discomfort of being wet and cold) and I hid under the couch to see if they would look for me. They looked, and looked. They shouted for me to come out. I didn't reveal my hiding place until panic had ensued and they were about to call the police. My dad was pretty upset about that one.

I acted out in ways that I am not proud of, and bedwetting may have been one of them. Perhaps my subconscious was as attention-starved as my conscious, and it was to blame for my night-time accidents. Every time I woke up with my cold, damp clothes clinging to me, I thought *not again!* I wanted more than anything to stop wetting the bed, but I couldn't. I'd had enough with my sisters warning everyone who walked through the door of our bedroom: "Do not go near Lake Amy." I'd had enough of waking up before my mom, and throwing my sheets in the washer before she even had to ask: "Wet pants or dry pants?"

Bribery was the only thing that my bladder recognized as an ally. My dad told me that if I went an entire month with dry pants, he would have a special surprise for me. I kept scrupulous notes on a Hello Kitty calendar taped to the inside of my closet, marking each day either 'WP' for wet pants, or 'DP' for dry pants. The squares marked with DP were decorated vibrantly with exclamation points,

Amy Heiden

smiley faces, and glitter-flecked stickers. Each WP marked a day where I would have to start the whole month over, and in those boxes I wrote the words, "try again."

Thirty consecutive dry days seemed like an impossibility. The worst part was feeling like the accidents were out of my control. On wet days I felt that I had failed. On dry days, it didn't feel like I had actually accomplished anything, but that I had been the recipient of some unearned luck.

Finally, after many months had passed, I brought the calendar to my dad, and showed him the thirty sparkling squares all in a row. After about a week, he had organized my special surprise, and he and I drove out to a place I had never been. Dad told me it was an airport, but I had never been to an airport so small. Plus we hadn't packed any bags. He introduced me to his friend Roland, who I had never met before, and Roland showed me his tiny little airplane. There were so many buttons and controls. I was impressed by anyone who could operate them all. Touring the airport and seeing the plane seemed like the kind of field trips my class had taken to the fire department and the back kitchen at Pizza Hut. It was turning out to be a great surprise. I had no idea my dad knew a pilot!

"Are you ready to go for a ride?" Roland had asked. I looked skeptically toward my dad, as if to ask *is this part of the plan?* My dad told Roland that we were ready, and we got inside the little four-seater aircraft. I was floored that my dad had planned such an extravagant surprise for me. Roland gave me a headset and strapped me into the back seat. It was more narrow inside than the back of my mom's Volkswagen. My dad and Roland sat up front, and within minutes we were up in the air. I wasn't scared, but I was aware of every tiny gust

of wind, and the smallest movements in the pilot's steering. My dad spoke to me over the headset. He pointed out our house, my school, Grandma's house, and Angels Stadium.

After less than an hour exploring our stomping grounds from above, I said quietly, "Dad? Can we go back now?"

"Why? This is awesome!" This was as much a field trip for him as it was for me. I felt horrible for having to end it so soon.

"I, um, have... to go to the bathroom."



*Alexandra Woerner*

It was an accident. No one goes out wanting fluorescent orange hair. We paid my tutor at the time a hefty sum of money to give me a pretty strawberry blonde hue á la Kate Hudson, but after two hours of sitting with a stinging scalp, we were horrified to find that I resembled a highlighter. And not one of the pretty colors either. Needless to say, we never called that tutor again after that night.

I was mortified. I refused to look at myself in the mirror. No sophomore should look like this, I thought. I cried and cried and my dad even held me in his favorite leather armchair, something he hadn't done since I was a little girl. When I begged my parents to let me stay home from school the next day, they refused, not viewing a drastic change in hair color as a good enough excuse to miss even a day of the 10th grade.

I walked into class the next morning expecting muffled laughs from all around the room. Much to my surprise, I got compliments and, for the most part, people didn't even notice. Thank God. I managed a giant sigh of relief. However, I still had a heavy heart. I couldn't get myself over the fact that I thought my hair glowed in the dark.

Over the next few weeks, my orange locks lost the obnoxious shine of freshly dyed hair, and began to look a little better. Not natural, definitely not natural, but better. My roots started growing in a bit and I decided that instead of living in fear of the hair on top of my head, I'd embrace it and rock the look as best as I could. I had to wait a certain period of time before I could go back to fix it, so I knew that instead of shying away from the atrocity on top of my head, I should

stand tall and let my orange hair speak for itself.

Much to my surprise, Joe, the boy I had been lusting after, finally started talking to me. He was a senior, tall, green-eyed and had a bad habit of partying too hard. He was a dreamy barista at the local Starbucks and I had been not-so-secretly in love with him since the first day of school. His long, brown hair would fall into his eyes and he'd blow it out of the way. He wore Converse and blazers and smoked too much weed. My 15-year-old self thought it was destiny for him and I to be together.

In the beginning of the school year, he would talk to me only when he had to. He didn't bother getting to know me. I was quiet and shy, intimidated by this older boy who I was hopelessly crazy about. With my newfound confidence and my golden locks, I started talking to him more. He started IM-ing me late at night. Eventually, he gave me his number one night when I went in for my coffee fix, writing his digits on the back of a Starbucks receipt.

I was over the moon. He complimented me, flirted with me and wrapped his arm around me in class followed by a cheesy pick-up line. It didn't matter that his partying habits had gotten worse and worse, I was just excited that he was paying attention to me. I was finally the girl who he brought a coffee to during passing period. I was on top of the world. He didn't care what my hair color was; he just noticed that I was becoming more of myself. I had become more of myself with bright orange hair than I had ever been when it was mousy brown.

There was a party, my first in High School. I was excited; I wore a pink shirt under my favorite sweater. My friend had invited me, since the last person she took to a party pretended to be drunk



and annoyed everyone there. She was instructed to bring someone bearable, so she took me. I had never been drunk and had never been around anything "bad". I lied to my parents and told them I was spending the night at her house. They believed me. What they didn't know wouldn't kill them.

I held my own at the party, with my friend gallivanting off with the boy she claimed to have a crush on. A college kid, a guy named Andy, came up to me and after talking to me for a little while, reached for a curly chunk of hair resting on the side of my face.

"I really like your hair."

I thought he was referring to my curls. It's was usually what people commented on.

"Thanks," I said with a smile.

"Not many girls have the guts to pull off a color like that."

My stomach dropped. Oh, crap. He was talking about how orange my hair was. I wanted to hide. No one had ever really complimented the color before.

He asked me to take it out of my ponytail so he could look at it. I pulled the elastic from the messy bun I had concocted and shook out my orange curls.

"It's really cool!" He smiled at me and I smiled back.

I was ecstatic. So the orange disaster on my head wasn't as bad as I thought after all! Andy sat with me for a while, obviously into the conversation. He lost all my attention as soon as I saw that Joe had walked into the room. There he was, surrounded by his friends, and he was watching me. I smiled at him and he smiled back, walking away from his cronies and setting himself in between Andy and me. I felt my pulse race as he leaned in, his lips practically touching my

ear, as he whispered, "Come do a shot with me..." I declined of course, I wasn't one for hard alcohol and I had an acting class the next day. No way was I going to risk going to that hung over.

I shook my head no, but told him I'd go with him. His head lingered next to my ear. I could feel Andy on the other side of him, watching us closely. Joe got up, grabbed my hand and led me to the table, which was covered in every alcoholic beverage known to man. Watching him throw back shots like a practiced veteran, I was tempted to try vodka for the first time. But stood strong and said no when he kept on asking, even insisting, that I try some. Slowly but surely, the boy of my dreams was getting drunk.

He went upstairs to the music room and I hung out downstairs, afraid to venture up to see him. I hung out with a friend from class, Michael, who taught me how to use a lighter. He made me sit on his lap while he demonstrated. He kept holding my hands, but I didn't pay attention to the moves he was trying to make. The Christmas tree was next to us and we almost set it on fire. We wound up just sitting there talking, his arms wrapped around my waist. Suddenly, music broke through the entire house. It was coming from upstairs and I knew who was making it. Michael motioned for me to go check it out. I did.

I walked up the stairs, slowly, nervously. I went into the room, it was decked out in every instrument imaginable. Joe was standing there, shirtless, with a guitar strapped to his naked torso, trying his best to imitate Hendrix. I stood there, leaning against the doorframe, watching his muscular body pulse with the chords that he was urging out of the guitar. I was hooked. Some others were in the room, playing with instruments, but I only had my eyes on the drunken

*Alexandra Woerner*

guitarist. He motioned for me to approach him. I moved towards him slowly, scared to get too close.

He stopped playing and pulled me close to him with his hand, cementing our proximity by enclosing me between his body and the guitar. He taught me a chord, speaking slowly, drunkenly, into my ear. His hands were on top of mine, moving them to where they had to be, and he helped me create music that was amplified throughout the room. The others who had been playing instruments realized Joe wanted his privacy, and they all left, winking to us as they walked out of the room.

We were all alone. Joe was drunk and half-naked. I was nervous, 15, and had never been kissed. I was freaking out. Joe moved closer, I could feel his breath on my face. The heat from his body was keeping me warm and yet I still shivered, unsure if I wanted what was about to happen. He closed his eyes and leaned in even closer. I didn't know what to do. I was stuck there. He leaned close enough for there to be a kiss if we wanted, but I pulled back.

"No." I said. He looked surprised. "Not here, not now. You're drunk. I want you to remember it."

That and I didn't want to waste my first kiss on a boy who would be puking out his innards in a matter of time.

"Allie, I swear, I'll remember." He tried to convince me. He kept trying to kiss me, but I kept avoiding his puckered lips as best as I could. The next thing I knew, he couldn't stand up straight. I pulled the guitar from around our bodies, trying to steady it on the stand while trying to support the boy who was leaning on me to keep himself from falling. I was having trouble keeping him up; he was too heavy, dead weight. A guy walked past the room and I hollered

at him to get his attention. He saw my distress and came in the room, grabbing Joe's other arm, and together we pulled him into the bathroom.

Joe was delirious. He couldn't form words and couldn't stand on his own two feet. He kept passing out; making me very thankful I didn't have a sip to drink. We turned the shower on, stripped Joe to his boxers and put him under the stream of water to try and revive him. He held my hand and I held his.

Others came into the bathroom and I decided I had done enough and left. I didn't want to see him like that. I went back downstairs, catching Michael's eye. I joined him at the piano, where we played a few songs, and then made our way into the kitchen where the two of us spent the rest of the night eating applesauce, talking. My friend came and found me soon after, informing me that it was time to go. I said good-bye to all the new people I had met, hugging those I had known before, and getting numbers from others. We went back to her house where we crashed as soon as we hit her mattress.

My hair wasn't orange for much longer. I made an appointment a few weeks later and my hair stylist and I transformed me into a brunette. The dark replaced the light and much changed after that, but many of the things I learned while having orange hair have remained with me to this day. I blame the orange hair for being the thing that pulled me out of my shell, the reason I learned how to express myself through clothing and music and how I learned to talk to boys. As much as I hated the coppery, orange color I had had, it was what I needed at the time. It was the first wake-up call for my life to start; the beginning of something grand. I was finally *myself* for the first time in my life. All thanks to an awful hair color. I'll never say it

*Alexandra Woerner*

out loud, but I'm almost grateful that my tutor royally screwed up.



Erin Leavitt

### What is it?

"She has *Hyperweirdoism*," Kyle tries to explain.

"Wait, wait...what?" his friend, Jordan, exclaims.

"It's called Hyperthyroidism. It just messes with my whole system," I say as my hand gestures up and down my body, "It means I have an overactive thyroid." I clutch the bottom of my neck.

### Can it be prevented?

No, it usually runs in the family. Like names. Consider the poet and the physician, first cousins once removed, who shared the same name of Robert Graves. Both lived to serve it well.

The poet founded a press, briefly published a literary journal, and was also known for being a mythographer, critic, classicist, novelist, and historian. He wrote over 130 books, the most famous being *Good-bye to All That* (1929), but poetry remained his passion:

His eyes are quickened so with grief,  
He can watch a grass or leaf  
Every instant grow; he can  
Clearly through a flint wall see,  
Or watch the startled spirit flee  
From the throat of a dead man.

—"Lost Love," lines 1-6, from *Treasure Box* (1919)

Robert Graves, the physician, had many talents too. He painted, he taught, he discovered. He was a founder of the *Dublin Journal of Medical and Chemical Science*, serving as one of the journal's editors until his death. He also aided to today's protocol for doctors,

making sure to take note of every patient's pulse. His research concluded with a disease named after him. He was also the first to give food and liquids to patients with a fever instead of withholding nourishment, which was the common practice at that time.

Dr. Graves jokingly wanted inscribed on his epitaph: "He fed fevers."

### **What are the symptoms?**

- *You may feel nervous or moody, depressed, or agitated.*

I'm at the happiest place on earth and I'm not happy. I have not received the medication refill from my doctor, something called Methamazole — a five milligram, white tablet with a horrible taste. Whoever named it that got it right because when I don't take them I feel just like a meth addict. I'm depressed and antsy, tired from tossing and turning the night before, hungry to the point of blacking out, and craving my fix since that's the only way I'll feel normal again.

Kyle and I decide to go on the Jungle Cruise, something calming so that I can chill out. We enter the boat. "Were you guys looking for some *Danger* on this ride?" our boat driver asks. No one answers. "Well there it is!" he says while pointing to a box with the label *Danger* on it. He gets a few chuckles. We come to the Bengal tiger, which can jump thirty feet, but luckily the boat is twenty feet away. "This here is Rock, say 'Hi Rock,' and this is a Hard Place," he motions toward the two African elephants we pass, one on the left shore and the other on the right. The rest of the ride is filled with these silly jokes. Most of the boat-dwellers will get off soon, a little more light-hearted. I will get off with my heart skipping beats, trying to catch up with who knows what.

- *You may experience insomnia, muscle weakness, or restlessness.*

I consider myself lucky if the bloodsuckers' office isn't busy. No death rattles or screaming babies to deal with, only a couple of puzzling eyes aimed in my direction. *Please, oh please?* I just want to get on with my life.

"Erin? Come on back," one of the phlebotomists says. I'm always glad when I'm not called out by a number — the one I signed my name next to when I walked in.

I follow them back, taking the plastic seat that reminds me of high school, and hold out my left arm. I know the routine all too well. They put down the armrest and strap a blue piece of rubber around my bicep. I automatically make a fist. They take out a wipe to sterilize the antecubital region. Then they wipe it again with some gauze and place it next to my arm. They hunch over and feel for my vein with two fingers. Delicately, the needle goes in. Then the tube is pushed down, releasing the blood—a teaspoon of my life. As the cylinder fills, they free my arm from the blue strap's hold. Then the tube is removed and given a shake. The needle is taken out and quickly replaced by the gauze. I apply pressure while they give my blood the proper label. Finally, tape is stuck over the cotton. And I thank them as I leave a part of myself behind. Just like each and every time. The only thing I am grateful for are those times when it isn't busy.

After, I just hope there isn't a huge line for coffee.

- *You may have problems breathing, memory lapses, or a diminished attention span.*

I walk into the tiny office of my endocrinologist (just a special



name for "specialist in glands"). He shares the place with two or three other doctors. It's always crowded with old people. *Ugh.* I sign in and take the first available seat, which I quickly sink into. *Would I have to stand if anyone else showed up?* I hope not and yet at the same time I wouldn't mind getting away from the lady next to me. She has a smell. Definitely not the grandmother smell I am used to.

"Ann?" a nurse calls from the entryway.

"Luanne?" my new friend asks.

The nurse looks confused and goes back to the charts.

"I hope that's me, I have been waiting over an hour," Luanne informs me.

The nurse comes back, "Erin?"

I get up with my head looking down as I follow her back.

She takes my weight, blood pressure, pulse (thanks Graves), and has me sit in my doctor's designated room. It looks like it's from the 1940s. The pin-stripe wallpaper and old Braun medical supply poster outrank the newer examination table, which I take a seat on. My eyes wander to a model of the larynx with four different thyroids showing what the gland looks like normally, as compared to Hashimoto's Thyroiditis or perhaps Papillary Carcinoma. I really want to play with it, but it just sits there collecting dust.

My doctor eventually comes in. We go over the blood results. He rambles off the numbers, new and old. They don't mean much to me. He asks me the same questions. Questions I hardly knew the answers to when this all started: "Are you taking your pills faithfully? How are you sleeping? How's your menstrual cycle? Do you need another prescription?"

*I think so.*

He has me hold out my hands to see if they hold steady. He checks my lungs with his stethoscope. He feels my thyroid as if it were a breast exam. Then he gets to the talk I don't want to hear: "Let's see, you have done the radioactive iodine twice." He flips through my growing chart. "Now it's not uncommon for patients to have to do it multiple times, but usually the once knocks it out. Doing it a third wouldn't be a problem; it's a low dose of radiation."

"I'll have to talk to my parents about it. It would probably have to be done during the summer anyway." I shudder at the idea.

- ***You may experience weight loss, even though you eat the same or more than usual; more bowel movements than usual; or an irregular or reduced menstrual cycle.***

The first day you go in and they talk you through the procedure. You swallow a radiotracer so they can take pictures. You better not be pregnant.

They have you lie down on an examination table. A gamma camera is above and below you, remote controlled. Don't move. They start at your neck, tilted up with your head back, and end with your thigh. *Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.* It isn't quick as the computer records your data. The size, structure, and function of your thyroid gland are exposed.

Stop eating at eight that night. Don't even think about food. You should try to adjust your eating habits anyway. Your body won't metabolize like it used to.

Go back the next day and simply pop a pill. It was designed specially for you. But you must avoid prolonged contact with others, especially children and pregnant women. Do not share food, utensils,

drinks, etc. (better use paper and plastic), and drink lots of liquids, but flush twice.

Just stay in your room. They are just going to tease you. You are bored after the first hour, your second book, all the re-runs. You can chat with the outside world, but they don't understand you. You don't even feel sick, yet you are quarantined.

And think: *if* this treatment works, you have to take a thyroid hormone replacement pill for the rest of your life, but if it *doesn't*, then you're back on the same pills day after day.

- ***You may have excessive sweating and heat intolerance.***

I feel like running out of classrooms because I need some space to collect myself or scream. My heart wants to jump out if I even think about participating. The evidence, if you couldn't hear it, is visible under my arms. It's worse than claustrophobia. *I don't belong*; at least, that is what my brain tells me.

In high school (as if I didn't belong already), I would have to go into the nurse's office during lunch just to take my pills. They need to be taken around the same time every day. Back then I was on Propylthiouracil (PTU), taking two pills, three times a day. Plus, another two tablets of Propranolol, a beta-blocker, but twice a day. Ten pills a day for a fifteen-year-old is hard.

I felt like a druggie, popping so many pills, in fact, I was experimenting with drugs too. *Rebellion was allowed, right?* My extra pill bottles were recycled as weed receptacles. I even went stoned to the bloodsuckers' once—I don't recommend it. Paranoia and needles do not mix. *Ever*. But how was I supposed to live my life?

Every time I got sick there was potential of having a low white

blood cell count (agranulocytosis) while on the PTU. More needles, more waiting. There were also the side effects to worry about: rash, itching, hives, abnormal hair loss, skin pigmentation, swelling, nausea, vomiting, heartburn, loss of taste, joint or muscle aches, numbness and headaches.

But the only thing I experienced was the last.

### **What causes it?**

Kenny Fields was my first real boyfriend. I blame him. It was 2005, our sophomore year of high school when he caught Mononucleosis. Nothing too out of the ordinary.

Only, while he stayed home, I had to stand idle during class breaks with my friends, all guys. I grew up with them, but it just wasn't the same without Kenny. I had to use my mouth and tongue to communicate words. And I could only contribute so much on subjects like videogames, cars, and boobs. Instead, I would text my missing companion.

That's how I found out he had mono. I asked if he thought I had caught it. After all, it is the "kissing disease." The little screen flashed, "Well you might have." Needless to say, that didn't ease my loneliness. "I wanna kiss you so bad," he writes, "but no, I have to catch a stupid disease," as if his pleasant threats of getting me sick would bring us closer. Certainly not after the undesirable affects of:

*High fever..* .the kind where you still feel cold.

*Weakness.*I barely left the couch/bed.

*Fatigue.*always.

*Severe sore throat..* .you know when a cat tongues stubble, sort of like that.

*Swollen glands and tonsils.well*, my tonsils are always ginormous, but wait.

I looked in the mirror and, before my very eyes, I could swear the lower portion of my neck swelled to three times its normal size.

"You know, now that I think about it, she may have Graves' Disease," my primary, Dr. Geryali, said during my checkup. She informed my mom, "With Graves', the thyroid usually becomes enlarged and the eyes tend to bulge." They both examined me.

"I'm going to write up a blood order. They will be testing her T3 and T4 levels. Those are the hormones that regulate the thyroid. If they are elevated, we can start her on antithyroid medication." She looked at me again, like she should have known it all along: that puberty would start my Graves' disease, which would in turn cause my Hyperthyroidism, all thanks to my first love, Kenny Fields, and his kissing disease.

### **How is it treated?**

1. Indefinitely. Until I die. And no treatment isn't an option.
2. If I were to stop the meds I could develop osteoporosis, pulmonary conditions, even cystic acne, or some type of diabetes. I may experience heart attacks, strokes, and migraines as a result of hypertension. My kidneys could fail. In the long run, I would have mental confusion, psychosis (hallucinations and delusions), then severe vomiting, unusual behaviors, a sudden high fever, and heart arrhythmias. These can progress to cardiac arrest and fainting spells, followed by a coma.
3. It can seriously affect one's ability to function and live a full life if left untreated indefinitely.

**Patient Discussions:**

Every day I'm reminded by the label of my pill bottle: DO NOT USE IF PREGNANT OR SUSPECT YOU ARE PREGNANT OR ARE BREAST FEEDING. When the time comes, it might be hard for me to even get pregnant. Even if I do, my *hyperweirdoism* will get passed on. My offspring might not have to deal with it personally, but it will affect someone down the line.

Then there is health care. When I find a real world job, how will all my blood tests and drugs get covered? It's a miracle I didn't need braces. (My poor parents.) All the co-payments have surely made up for it. And, all the coffee added up, a habit started by my mom who treated me to ice-blended mochas after my medical errands.

Coffee and I are like chocolate and a diabetic..not ideal. It doesn't help my already over-stimulated heart. The beta-blocker helped; though, that was probably due to the fact that I also stopped drinking soda and eventually gave up cigarettes. But still, I made my body adjust to the coffee and meds.

Nothing is ever ideal.

**What can you do at home to manage it?**

I try to get free. Kyle's arms are wrapped around me and I want to fall asleep as easily as he just did. But no, I can't sleep because I am thinking about writing a school paper. And, if I don't write my thoughts down now, they won't be the same later.

I must wiggle my way out of his heavy hold. But the wiggling wakes him up and he says, "*Sh. Sh.* Come here," and grabs

hold of me.

But I don't want to, and now I'm trapped again, forced to just keep going over my thoughts until they are infused, forever in my mind. *This isn't working!* I try to get free again and manage to slither off the bed to my phone. I dim the brightness and open the app called Notes. I type frantically while stupidly lying down again. I wake Kyle trying to put my phone back on the night stand. This time I grab hold of him.

*Now sleep.* I close my eyes, but it's no use.

*Go away thoughts!*

These are the only nights I have trouble sleeping. Before meds, I had random sleeping hours and weird habits. I snored like my father, I would grind my teeth like a horse, and my eyes would even stay open sometimes. I was more of a pain for sleeping companions. Trust me, the stories make for embarrassing pastimes. I bit my cousin once. I have slapped and kicked many more. I have even tried kissing a friend.

### **When should you contact the doctor?**

That's not the problem. Sometimes it takes up to a month to finally get a hold of him. That is, after I have left a dozen messages with his office: *What does my blood say?* The worst is when I run out of my medication and the pharmacy can't get a hold of him. I know the affects of that: I don't want to be around anyone. I mentally give up. I could just get my thyroid removed, slice out the problem.

But that's not the problem. I would still have to take hormone replacement pills. And, I shouldn't even be stressing over this.

Stress can cause thyroid storm, a bombardment of all my symptoms ten-fold.

But that's not the problem. I just don't care anymore. I don't care what the doctors or their numbers say. I don't care how many pills I have left. I feel my thyroid. I know it well. Its butterfly shape surrounds my Adam's apple and it feels like just a dying-if not already dead- lump.



*Emily Gahan*

On the last night I saw you I tried to look past your vanilla milk shake to check your arm for track marks. I couldn't see anything but your tattoos.

"So you're getting married?" I asked you.

"Yeah, I want you to meet her someday," you said in a shaky voice, like you didn't really mean it. I guess that's just one of those things you're supposed to say.

"Date set?" I asked.

"Not yet."

"Have you met her family?"

"Well, no-"

You've been engaged three times in the past four years but never married. That's not a good track record.

"How long have you even known her for?"

"Two months."

"Two months? That's not long enough to know someone. Why are you always rushing into everything?"

"Don't rain on my parade." You laughed.

"I just want you to be realistic; you can't marry someone you don't even know. Is she an addict too?"

"I didn't want to see you so I could get your approval."

You sounded angry so I dropped it.

"She's amazing, she loves me, and she loves the same things I do, we love all the same bands and music."

You sounded so hopeful but I know it won't last. It never lasts for you. You have a way of making sure your heart gets broken. You

love the pain. You collect sympathy like it's in short supply. Do you think it'll run out someday? It's like heartbreak is the goal of falling in love.

I looked around and the diner was empty. It was late and our waitress kept circling by, like she wanted us to leave, "Can I get you anything else?" she asked. She wore a pink blouse with puffy sleeves that looked out of place on a woman of fifty. I felt sorry for her, but I think she felt sorrier for us. She gave us looks of pity, but maybe I was just reading too much into it.

I scanned your arms to see where our time together ends and your life after me began. I think we left off around the koi that swims up your right arm. I didn't recognize the waves above your elbow, or the rifle firing on your left arm. You were still branded with a triple x on your neck, a symbol of straight edge, that's laughable now.

You interrupted my mapping of your life in ink, "Are you still with Liam?"

"Nope, but we're still friends."

You looked down at your hands. I think you were disappointed. Maybe if it had been true love our betrayal would be better.

"Where are you living now?" I changed the subject.

"Natalie and I are staying with some friends for a few days, and then we're moving to Washington, she has some friends up there."

You crossed your arms on the table but they weren't arms anymore, only bones wrapped in skin. You're like a ghost, your skin is almost grey. Your hair is dirty and it looks like you haven't showered in days. Your eyes are hollow and sunken in. You suddenly disgust me.

*Emily Gahan*

"I better go, I'm only in town today," I lied.

"Okay, I'll send you an invitation."

That was the last time I saw you.



## 4 YAWKEY WAY

*Johnny Tsaour*

Whether you think you know or don't know what stands at the address of 4 Yawkey Way, you most definitely do. It is the cathedral of Boston, Massachusetts. With its red brick face and its ivy veins, it's known to most Americans as Fenway Park, but if you ever ask anyone off the street of 4 Yawkey Way, it's most definitely Fenway Pah-k.

It is the cave in which the green monster sleeps. In the grandstand right behind Pesky's Pole on a warm summer day, a guy can get confused if he's dreaming or not. It would be an understatement to call Fenway just a ballpark, because it's so much more than that - it's a place of worship. The sacred green field is taken by the hometown Sox, on top of the world after eighty-six years of disappointment. Those who know me will ask what a California boy such as myself is doing in the grandstand of Fenway Park, and like most stories, hell, maybe all stories, it's because of a girl.

I had met her the night before at a bar in Hah-vahd square, at a place called Grendel's Den. It was a dimly lit place with no windows; she was with her friends but had gone to the bar to get a pitcher when I made my move. I was already at the bar, sitting beside my good friend Grant, a brown haired thin all-American boy with a patchy goatee, talking about the time that'd passed since he moved from California to Boston. Friends moving to new cities always made perfect excuses to visit, so there I was, in the mix of Harvard Square. She had come to the bar and pushed up against me, squeezing to get to the bar as she looked over and gave me a soft smile, just being polite. With the liquid courage and a freight train of confidence, I spoke.

"Hi, I'm Johnny. I'm here because I've read Beowulf." She laughed at first but then immediately responded, "I'm Danielle, and I'm here because I go to Harvard."

J.D. Drew was up to plate, he had failed me many times as a Dodger, and was now making his disappointment tour a bi-coastal affair as a member of the Sox now that he had struck out to signal the end of the eighth inning. The wooden seats of the grandstand creaked with their age, a century of use and enjoyment. She was sitting to my right, she had maple syrup brown hair and sugar white skin, as you'd expect from a native of Vermont. Her eyes were an emerald green and a heart shaped face wearing a summertime smile. Her soft chest read RED SOX across it in that styled red font, with a C over her collarbone and VERITEK across the back. A playful piano and trumpet tune played as she stood up beside me, given a heavenly glow streaked with rays from the sun and her warming smile, I thought it had been all in my head before she grasped onto my hand and stood up, putting her arm around me and pulling me in tight. "Do you know the words?"

*Where it began, I can't begin to know when  
But then I know it's growing strong  
Oh, wasn't the spring  
And spring became the summer  
Who would believe you'd come along  
Hands, touching hands, reaching out  
Touching me, touching you  
Sweet Caroline, good times never seemed so good  
I've been inclined, to believe they never would.*

The song was much more than a song; it had a way of sweeping you into Red Sox lore, being a part of the nightly singing of Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline" before the bottom of the 8th. It feels like becoming part of something greater, a tradition spanning centuries. I had never seen the Red Sox play in Fenway Park before that afternoon, but I felt like I had always been there. I was there when Babe Ruth was sold to the Yankees. I was there for Carlton Fisk's home run in 1975. I was there for the heartbreak of Bill Buckner's error in 1986. I was there for the redemption that took 86 years to achieve in 2004, and again in 2007. I was indoctrinated in two minutes.

The Red Sox won that afternoon against the Cleveland Indians and we went back across Harvard Bridge to her apartment. It was a small nice place, narrow and tall, as if they cut one floor to three and stacked them up atop of one another like pancakes. I had texted Grant while we were on the train to see where he was, but he hadn't gotten back to me quite yet. My hands in my pockets, I stood in her kitchen looking out the window while she had gone upstairs to change. She was no longer Red Sox Danielle - she was normal Danielle. A plain gray hooded sweatshirt was zipped up over her torso, her hair still tied back in that cute perky tail, bouncing with her step as she came up and stood beside me, taking a look out the window as well. "What're you looking at?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking, I'm having a lot of fun." I smiled as she turns to look at me, our faces just inches apart, I felt the warmth of her breath against the side of my neck.

"I'm having fun too. It's fun to have someone to show around, I guess I haven't been excited about Boston for a while now. I usually am too busy to do fun stuff like go to games and stuff." She smiled

*Johnny Tsaour*

her sweet smile as she played with some of the stray strands of hair in her face.

I laughed in response, "I'm your excuse to do fun stuff?"

She gently patted her fingers flat against my cheek as she spoke once more. "You're my staycation."

The playful banter makes it hard to believe that I've only known this girl for less than 48 hours, and it reminded me that I eventually have to go home. I tried to think of something else before my cell phone rings. It's Grant, finally responding to my text message, also giving me playful banter, but I've known him my whole life. "Grant wants to know if we're all going out tonight."

She thought for a moment with her finger pressed up against the corner of her lip, looking idly towards the ceiling before she spoke with her energetic tone. "I know a place. Ask him if he knows the Miracle of Science Bar."

We spent an hour and a half talking on her couch about nothing in particular, just ideas we've had about things we've read, thoughts that have stewed in our minds for a good long time and now were just ripe enough to fall out of our mouths.

We met Grant at the Miracle of Science Bar, which is themed like a science classroom. There is a wide chalkboard along the side of the wall with the menu written up like the periodic table across it. Cs - it's short for chicken sandwich. It has an atomic mass of eight dollars. Grant arrived with his girlfriend Willa, a pale skinned girl from Virginia with curly black hair. We had dinner and a beer or two, and the night goes by without much of a hitch. We laugh, we drink, we drink some more, and we leave. I go back to Danielle's apartment. I slept on the floor.

I woke up to the sounds of her feet pattering on the carpet floor. My eyes slowly parted awake and I begin to hear the water running in the bathroom as I lay on my side, eye level with the light that slips from beneath the door. In perfect timing my phone began to buzz. It's Grant, double checking that I hadn't been murdered the night before, making sure that no knife has slit through my skin and occupied itself against my intestines. He then asked if I had done any penetrating of my own before telling me to keep myself busy for the day, that he decided it was for the best not to skip out on class, especially if I was occupied mentally elsewhere.

My mind was elsewhere. The door opened to reveal normal Danielle once more, in blue jeans and a plain gray t-shirt hanging loose off her slender frame as she was running a towel against her hair, falling in dripping swirls over the pale tint of her face. She looked down at me, sprawled out on blankets, cocooned in my own warmth as my sleepy eyes stared up at her. "Are you going to get up now? There are places to go, things to see."

I got up and we went to Grant's house, which luckily, Willa was there to open the door for me to get clothes and take a shower. After I took a shower and climbed into fresh clothes: a pair of blue jeans and a plaid shirt, a hooded sweatshirt with another jacket over it. Willa and Danielle were sitting in the kitchen talking over coffee, giving me the silence that you give someone when you were talking about them before they entered the room. I looked back and forth between the two of them before I sensed it. "What're you guys talking about?"

Willa looked at me with a secretive smirk before she whispered out with a feminine inflection into her cup of coffee, "Girl



*Johnny Tsaour*

stuff." She took a second glance over toward Danielle before she looked back at me, changing the subject. "What're you guys doing today?"

Danielle perked up at her turn to speak, sitting on a stool with her brown boots tapping lightly on the tile floor. "We're going to the commons. Paul Revere house. You know, that kind of stuff."

Willa nodded knowingly before she looked at me with a hand placed on her hip, speaking with a streak of sarcasm to her voice. "I don't know how you do it. Convince girls to hang out with you. You're not even good looking."

I looked at myself in the mirror and run my fingertips over my cheeks before I replied to her facing my reflection, joking in reply. "Still? I've had some work done."

Willa shook her head and sent us off with a sarcastic "Have fun you two."

We took a trolley to the commons. It is just a park. We went to the Paul Revere house. It is just a building. We had lunch at a restaurant famous for its chowda. It is a work of art. Big chunks of clam drown in thick white cream, warm bread dipped and suffocating in its warmth. I pushed the beige pieces around, getting them lost in the viscous expanse of the white soup. A question had been lingering in my throat for some time now, but my mind had been too weak to pull the trigger for fear of it ruining things. It suddenly comes out. "So, why are you hanging out with me?"

Danielle was eating a green Caesar salad and was mid bite, taking time to chew and think of an appropriate response. "I guess you just seemed like a fun guy."

I stole her tactics and used the soup as a way of thinking out

the next plan of questioning. "So you just spend two days straight with anyone that seems fun?"

She raised her eyebrows, for the first time since I've known her, she seemed tense. "I don't know. You just came at the right time I guess. I guess when you go to Harvard people expect a lot from you. I needed a break." She went back to pushing around the greens on her plate.

"So we're just having fun?" I asked not so gracefully with a mouth full of chowder.

She nodded before she answered. "We're just having fun."

It isn't the answer I wanted. It doesn't feel like the answer I deserved. We spent the rest of the day walking around and looking at old things that I'm not all that interested in, and then meet some of her friends at a bar to watch the Red Sox game. We laugh, we drink, we drink some more, and the Sox win. I go back to Danielle's apartment. I slept in her bed.

She's already left for class before I woke up. I picked up the pieces of myself I left on the floor the night before as I left to get back to Grant's place. We occupied ourselves at a bookstore and a coffee shop, talking about old times before we go to Fenway Park. Boston Red Sox. New York Yankees. The rivalry to end all rivalries. A poor sap will pay 35 bucks to stand the whole game in a tiny box and we were a pair of those poor saps. This was the reason for the whole trip, to take a piece of baseball history home with you, a memory, a time-stamp of taking sides in a hatred that's lasted over a century.

It was an emotional roller coaster to say the least. End of the first, Yanks 3-1. End of the second, Yanks 3-2. End of the fourth, Yanks 7-3. The prayers of Fenway Park are answered, and the Red Sox dig

*Johnny Tsaur*

deep and come back in the game at the top of the fifth, Sox are up 9-7. They shit it away at the bottom of the fifth. Yankees were up 11-9. It was the top of the eighth. Fingers are clutched together in prayer. People would be willing to sell their soul to the devil for a comeback tonight.

I was standing in the standing room only section of atop of the green monster. Grant was beside me, bundled up since the wind that blows makes a tunnel to freeze the standing room only folk. His arms crossed over his chest as we leaned against the railing. The natives are restless. They had come to see their champions leave victorious, and they do nothing of the sort. The Red Sox got blanked in the top of the eighth. They play Sweet Caroline and it reminds me of Danielle.

"So what's the deal with your honeymoon?" Grant's voice broke through the frustrated buzz of the crowd as Alex Rodriguez came up to plate.

"What do you mean?" I played dumb; my eyes were fixated on Rodriguez, the hundred million dollar man.

"You spent the last two days with a complete stranger. You must have something to say about it." He dug into his pockets as the crack of Rodriguez's bat echoed through the stadium. He got to first base to a chorus of boos.

"I don't know, she keeps saying it's just for fun." Derek Jeter came up to the plate. The chorus of boos became a symphony of discontent.

"That sounds risky." Grant looked at me as his fingers ran through his patchy facial hair for a moment, then up and back down against the railing. The bat cracked again. Jeter to first, Rodriguez to second.

"I don't know. I've known her for like, what, three days max? How attached can you possibly get?" Johnny Damon came to plate and I realized I'm practically screaming to get the words to Grant's ear, just inches away from my face. Johnny Damon is booed mercilessly, now with a short hair cut and wearing the pinstripes instead of the stylized B of the Red Sox - he has become Judas. A man beside Grant and I went into a tirade with Nagasaki sized F-bombs dropping every other word. "This fucking guy. The son of a bitch. Good fucking riddance." The feeling was mutual throughout the Fenway faithful.

Grant looked at me with his knowing stare, feeling the emptiness I have without her around. He rolled his eyes before he muttered. "I don't know how you get yourself in this kind of trouble all the time."

Johnny Damon's bat cracked as well, and the bases were loaded. As if losing to the Yankees weren't bad enough, the Yanks are out for blood tonight. Jorge Posada came up to the plate and drilled it to right field. Rodriguez and Jeter scored. Jason Giambi got to the batters box and cleaned up the rest. Yankees 15 - Red Sox 9. The man with the profanity arsenal was not going down without a fight. The fans were flooding towards the exits. The man pulls his cap down lower and mutters. "Fucking Sox. They'll rip your heart out." I understood completely. I understood how painful just a game, just something fun, could be.

I had three days left in Boston. I tried to hang out with Danielle, but now it feels like we're too busy counting down the time before I leave to enjoy the minutes we have left. We played board games with Grant and Willa, take it easy, and wind it down. It's three days

*Johnny Tsaour*

of potlucks and nothing special, and before I know it I'm at Grant's place ready to leave on a jet plane.

"We'll keep in touch." She said. We probably won't.

"Yeah for sure." I said. It's also a lie.

Her hands curled around my body and we gave each other one last hug and hurrah. Hands touching hands, reaching out, touching me, touching you. Good times never seemed so good, and I'd be inclined to believe they never would. She laughs. I don't. I need a drink. I leave. I go to the airport. I slept on the airplane alone.

*Haley Hopkins*

I sit quietly in the car, my head leaning against the passenger window. The beat of the music vibrates the glass, sending dull pulses through my skull.

It probably wasn't a good idea to come.

"If you're not going to have fun, or you don't want to go, then don't waste the ticket. I'll invite one of my friends," Sam told me last week. I glanced at the Clippers ticket in his hand. "I wanna go!" I replied defensively. I've never been to LA or the Staples Center. It'd be nice to see the professionals play.

Sitting in the car now, I'm wondering if my decision was too selfish. Maybe Sam would've liked this to be a guy's night; maybe he didn't expect me to say yes. To be honest, I know shit about basketball and even less about the Clippers. Should I have said no? Oh well, I'm here now. I might as well enjoy it.

I sit up, stretch, and gaze at Sam in the driver's seat. At 6'4, he's a basketball player by nature. His long arms and legs allow him to move across the court quickly and gracefully. Dancing around the other players, he guides the basketball effortlessly between his legs, around his guard, and up through the net. I notice a flicker of satisfaction spread across his face as he low fives his other teammates, but it quickly vanishes. He concentrates on the game, on his next move, and plows through. Even on his "off" nights, Sam plays better than most guys.

Sam's athletic body seems out of place now, crammed into his Toyota Camry. He notices me staring at him and smiles, sliding his hand on my leg. I wish he knew what I saw in him. I wish he knew

how his blue eyes and smile cut through me; I wish he knew how much I liked running my fingers through his copper hair. I'm his girlfriend; I should be comfortable giving him compliments. I need to be more verbal.

"Do you still wanna stop at the dispensary?" Carter's voice bellows from behind me. I glance back at him; our eyes meet briefly and he shoots me a polite smile. I almost forgot he was there. "Yeah, that's where we're headed," Sam replies. We merge off of the freeway and into the streets of Topanga. Our car pulls around the side of a building and parks in the back lot. I watch Sam and Carter get out of the car. I wait.

I'm glad I was never attracted to Carter, I think to myself as I watch them approach the door of the dispensary. Besides the fact that an attraction to my boyfriend's roommate would be problematic, I've also discovered that many of the girls I know have spent the night with Carter. I understand why girls find him appealing—his strong jaw, long chocolate hair, and a wide, glamorous smile make most girls weak at the knees. His charm is natural and his style is impeccable. Girls fall for him like timber in a forest and he doesn't hesitate to catch them.

But, like popsicles, there are just certain things I don't like sharing. I'm choosy; he's not. Instant indifference.

I shake the thought out of my head as a song by Dr. Dre comes on through the speakers. I get lost in the beat.

Moments later, the boys return with subtle grins on their faces and small, white paper bags. They climb into the car and show their goodies to me: several containers filled with different kinds of medical marijuana, a few hubby bars, and two free t-shirts. It must be the

20th. Patients at this dispensary always get a free gift on the 20th.

We are driving on the freeway again when Sam starts to unwrap his hubby bar. He takes a few bites and motions it towards me, raising his eyebrows. I shrug and allow myself a small bite. It looks like a normal chocolate bar and tastes like a normal chocolate bar. I've only tried edibles a couple times, but they have never affected me much. I don't know how strong this will be, and I don't recognize the name "hubby bar"... but it's only one bite. Totally safe. Hopefully it'll help me relax. Sam finishes the rest of the hubby bar; we split the last small bite.

Several minutes later, the lights of the city come into view. I've seen the city lights of London and Paris before, but never LA. It's incomparable. The glass and steel towers loom above the chaos of the crowds; the city breathes and thrives within its own culture. Our car is one of many on the highway to this magnificent place: a place of grunge and glamour, a place of fame and fortune.

Even though I'm in LA, the song Empire State of Mind plays in my head.

*"Concrete jungle where dreams are made of, there's nothing you can't do..."*

We follow the freeway through the heart of LA and up close into the city. My eyes scan the shapes of the buildings and the lights they expel. I feel like a high roller — like I should be in a limo, champagne in hand, dressed fashionably, ready to take on the night.

*"These streets will make you feel brand new, the lights will inspire you..."*

I'm a small town girl in the city for the first time; I laugh at my own absurdity.



Before we can go to the Staples Center, we need to swing by UCLA to pick up Carter's friend. Once we find our way there, an Indian dude jumps in the car and introduces himself as Hardeep.

Hardeep?

"Yeah, like hard and deep," says Carter. We laugh.

I will never forget his name.

Our car becomes more talkative as we venture to the Staples Center and search for parking. We have to walk a few blocks from the car to the stadium, but I don't mind. The walk is refreshing. I'm enjoying the crisp night air and the city lights.

The Staples Center is bigger than I had expected. Strings of white lights lace the trees in front of the building, lighting the pathway to the front door. As we approach, I feel instantly light headed — unbalanced. I realize my eyes feel sunken into their sockets; they hum with heat, like after a day of tanning at the lake. My arms hang dead at my sides. I am tired.

No, I'm not tired.

Shit! I'm stoned. And everyone is looking. I take Sam's hand and glance up at his eyes. Yep, they're red. They've looked worse though. He smiles at me and hands me my ticket. The four of us approach the doors and a lady takes my ticket. Can she tell? My heart beats a little faster. I force a smile and a "thank you."

We take the escalator up to somewhere and I look down upon the people below. Pretty cool. We wander around, looking at the signs in puzzlement. Where are our seats? Finally we ask somebody. Of course, our seats are on the other side of the stadium. We walk for a ways, passing by suites and several dozen people, until we find our section. A man in a uniform asks to see our tickets and tells us to

proceed. I feel fancy.

We take our seats in the front row of our section. The view is surprisingly decent. I look at the bright court and notice we're in the 2nd quarter already. I glance up behind me, looking at the rows and rows of people. "LATE!" scream the faces of the people directly behind us. I'm sure they're wondering, "who do these kids think they are, using daddy's tickets and arriving late?" I find my seat number in a hurry and sit down awkwardly.

My body feels heavy and I sink into myself. I am now one with my chair, an extension of its entity. An accessory. If I need to stand up, the chair will have to go with me.

But I can't stand up. I couldn't move now if I wanted to.

As I think of this, I realize my eyes have been on the court but I haven't been watching the game. Where have I been? The 2nd quarter is almost over. I shift my attention back on the ball, back on the players, back on Blake Griffin—just in time to see him steal the ball, race across the court, and dunk it. So effortless, so inhuman, and with such speed and agility! Sam, Carter, and Hard-n-Deep all jump a few feet in their seats, applauding and yelling. The stadium roars with them.

Why didn't I roar? Do people notice that I'm sitting still? I put my hands together and force a clap. It feels wrong. The whole idea of clapping, slapping the centers of my hands together to show my liking of something, feels barbaric. I look around the stadium—so many people! So many people slapping their arms together like seals. I imagine the bark of a seal coming from their mouths. it's not much different than what I'm hearing and seeing now. The glamor of the stadium disappears. I am filled with disgust.

Haley Hopkins

If I weren't a human, how animalistic and idiotic would this scene look to me? An obscene amount of people, crammed into a circular building, yelling their hearts out and flinging their arms about, all because a few people are passing around a ball. This idea makes me nervous. I begin to feel claustrophobic. My heart beats faster.

FUCK, pull yourself together!

Deep breath. Breathe in, breathe out. Again: in, out. I don't want a panic attack. I am in control.

My thoughts speed up. I glance down at my hands and my arms; I follow them up to the rest of my body. I am a creature. I am a living being that needs to eat, sleep, shit, and breathe to stay alive, and one day I will die. I will simply no longer exist. My kid's kid's kids will forget about me, just as I have forgotten my ancestors. My name, my existence will not be known to those who will be alive. Fuck the circle of life! How crazy is this?! One day I'm alive, the next day I'm not. Like a flame, I'll flicker on and flicker off. That's it. I'll never know the difference when I'm dead.

I'll never know.

The crowd begins to roar again, their bodies expelling sound and sweat and heat and dead skin. The sound of their screams creates a tension, a heaviness in the air; it presses against the walls of the stadium.

*Get out, it's going to explode!*

I've never actually seen a whole Arnold Schwarzenegger movie, but his voice rings in my head with precision.

Okay, you need to snap back to reality.

*Snap back to reality, oh there goes gravity, oh something*

*something. ..*

Eminem will die someday too, along with the governor, and me, and my boyfriend, and my mom, and every person who is alive today.

Where will they put all of our dead bodies? The entire earth will be a cemetery. Our streets and buildings will have to look like the world in the Fifth Element: buildings raised so high above the ground, we will need hover cars to navigate our city.

I need to control my thoughts. The gears in my mind are moving too fast; I'm making myself nervous and I'm starting to feel crazy. Deep breaths...

The air is thin and hot. I realize that my chest is tight. My breath is short. Is my inhaler in my bag? Did I bring my bag? I should look down and check. but I don't. I am still one with my chair. I remain motionless.

"Babe, you okay?" My head snaps to the right as I hear these words and feel a hand on my thigh. Sam is looking at me. I nod and muster a "yeah". He smiles and turns his attention back on the game. I wish I could tell him how freaked out I am. but he's in the zone. He's one of the creatures, making noise and slapping his hands together. And he loves it. I won't bother him, not that I could find the words anyway.

I decide to focus on breathing. I slow down my breaths and breathe in deeply, breathe out deeply. I do it again and again, but I'm not feeling better. The air is too thin. Soon, I begin to feel that if I stop paying attention to every breath, I'll stop breathing altogether. I feel more light-headed, trapped, panicked. Who could help me? What should I do? The tension in the stadium grows.

*Haley Hopkins*

A buzzer goes off somewhere far away. I'm still breathing. I feel Sam's hand on my leg again. "Ready?" he asks me. I look to my left to see Carter and Hard-n-Deep stretching. They stand up.

Oh. Is the game over? I glance around at other people sitting near us. They are leaving or have left already. Damn. The game went by fast.

Sam helps me up and we file out of our seats, taking our places in line behind the others. It feels strange to stand and I'm very light-headed at first, but at least I found the strength to move at all. We make our way through the stadium and back into the main lobby, but we get stuck outside of the entrance of the Staples Center.

Stampede!

Everyone is waddling like penguins, trying to leave as quickly as possible. I bump shoulders with the people around me and glance beyond them only to see hundreds of people stuck in the same crowd. Claustrophobia hits me again. I wish I were anywhere else but here in this sea of creatures, this wave of mayhem, this fucking stampede. I make sure to stay close to Sam.

Finally, we break free. As we continue to walk, the number of people around us continues to dwindle. I can breathe again. The cold air and the open space awaken my senses and I feel more like myself again.

I take Sam's hand in mine and squeeze it. "Did you have fun?" he asks. "Yeah, I did," I say and I smile. Maybe I wouldn't define my time here as "fun" per say—I was too high to have fun, but now I know what the city looks like. Now I can say I've been to the Staples Center, too. I got to see a new part of the world from a different state of mind.

We are almost at the car now.

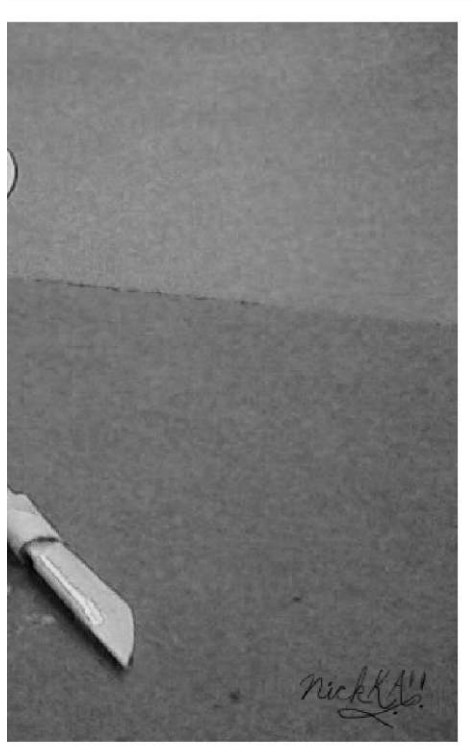
The farther away I am from the Staples Center, the closer I am to home.

Home.

I'm going home.

Note: some names have been changed for privacy reasons. Hardeep is real.





**"SAMURAI"**

*Nick Kia Alimohammadi*



