

**This is Not a Journal**



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# *foreward*

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ISLAND FOX *Editorial Staff*

&amp;

JOHN LEE

During the process of accepting submissions for this semester's ISLAND FOX, our editorial staff collected, read, and numerically scored each piece. From this point all papers were made anonymous and distributed to writers who had submitted their own works. The feedback from the student body was amazing. Such a broad range of ideas were submitted and thrived in our multifaceted selection process. We did not wish to have one main theme for the creative literary expression of our campus, but wanted it to be an embodiment of multiple ideas and faces. With this design in mind and the help of CSUCI student designer John Lee, we have taken a left turn off the road that is average and turned things upside down. People are not average in their creativity and we never want anyone or any piece of literature to be looked upon as simply ordinary. So, on behalf of this semester's Island Fox staff, we present what we hope is a reflection of the creative diversity we celebrate in the CSUCI student body.

From those of us who are moving on and leaving this beautiful campus, we are sad to go, and happy to leave a small piece of everything on which we worked so hard. To those who will continue on here, thank you for your hard work and for giving us something to come back to one day. Keep writing.

\*\*\*

*This is not a journal.* The Staff and I decided that this time with the ISLAND FOX collection, in its third year of existence, it would undergo a different process of production. There was to a different process of curating the works, as well as designing them, from the text to the physical manifestation of the entire “journal” itself.

Why such particular theme? With the submissions presented and selected for this edition, it occurred to me how these entries, as a collection provided immense depth of content, from thematic references as well as the different various literary styles used throughout. The literature instantly became my muse, and my expectations as a designer were to present these works on an entirely different level than previous editions of the ISLAND FOX.

To quickly describe my involvement in this process, I was given the fortunate opportunity to freely curate these works. Having read all of the entries, I felt, despite the individuality that each written work possessed, as a whole it could also be a narrative—with content that dealt with themes including nostalgia, introspection, humor, life as well as death. In its physical manifestation, indeed the



island fox would just be a journal, but to categorize these works in its entirety, as a “journal”, I feel wouldn’t serve these works enough justice.

Rene Magritte’s painting, *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*, challenged the idea of human observation, as the work was not about pipe, but the treachery of images; it was simply a mere painting. Having been inspired by Magritte’s methodology, I have taken that and incorporated into this year’s edition as a small tribute. This is simply not just a journal, but an anthology of intriguing works of literature that have the ability to speak for themselves. I hope you, as a reader, will find these works profound, and that you will enjoy each of them as I have.



**I'm made of Highveld evenings. Let's sit around the campfire and burn marshmallows. I want brick walls, back marked with the rough labyrinth of grout lines. The half moon cradles the deep morning clouds. My abuelita wrapped my bones in flour tortillas. My first visit to the Tower of London was in the winter of 1536.**

**Continental Drift**  
**Breathe Here**  
**Vertical**  
**Bioluminescence**

# *Continental Drift*

...

CASEY CHAINEE

I'm made of Highveld evenings  
 that fall like a thick grey blanket.  
 Of warming school clothes before the coal stove  
 and mornings emerging at noon.

I am made of hot buttered toast  
 dipped into cups of steaming tea.  
 Of cream-thick milk boiling  
 and flame-licked roti breads.

Where winters before the womb  
 of a squat black coal stove  
 cocoon us from frosty flurries  
 that blow frozen dishcloths,  
 on a T-bar washing line.

I am made of the smell of burnt veld grass  
 where blackened tufts, dusted frost grey  
 poke through the earth's skin,  
 like hairy moles on an old lady's face.

I'm made of yellow nuggets in black earth  
 that become curried potatoes in warm wraps.  
 Of listening to "Inspector Carr Investigates"  
 and hot water bottles between flannel sheets.

I am made of Indian spices—  
of all their aromas and tastes,  
nurtured in Africa's embrace.

*Breathe Here*

...

MICHELLE O'BRIANT

Let's sit around  
the campfire and burn  
marshmallows  
let's run  
in the rain  
if  
it ever comes  
let's dance barefoot  
in the cabbage grass  
let's just go  
somewhere  
anywhere away from here  
we can toss out all  
our troubles and argue  
over baseball and bullshit

about what we think we know  
about the rules  
of sports  
or  
maybe  
take a breath and relax...  
and breathe here.  
and dream of places we can travel to together  
London Lisbon Sydney Shanghai  
all over everywhere anywhere but here  
not here  
craziness is here  
bullshit is here  
smog is here



let's go  
fuck it  
let's just stay here then  
lock our doors cover the windows  
turn the music up  
up  
up  
until  
we can't hear anyone outside  
anything  
outside  
then  
maybe  
we can take a breath and relax  
and...  
breathe here.

# *Vertical*

...

JESSY GOODMAN

I want brick walls,  
back marked  
with the rough labyrinth of grout lines.

\*\*\*

And the hood of a car  
still warm enough to singe your shins.

\*\*\*

Kitchen counters,  
wet hair and head  
banging against hanging pots and pans,  
composing my own soundtrack  
far away  
from feather beds and smooth jazz.

\*\*\*

Anything but smooth  
only jagged and approximate  
with lack of planning  
and nothing soft.

# *Bioluminescence*

...

RACHAEL JORDAN

The half moon cradles  
the deep morning clouds,  
dark as it watches you and I  
walk along the shoreline,  
creating our own midnight,  
hand in anticipating hand.

Our feet hit the sand,  
each compression sends  
sparks of light—  
stars mirrored in dry grains  
appear for a moment.  
They disappear until  
aroused again.

Arouse me now as my feet  
lift from the grains,  
find a new home within the water,  
where luminous bacteria swim,  
where *splashes* in the dark  
become bolts of light  
across the space  
between you and I.

Stars falling from the sky,  
leave traces on our naked skin  
in turquoise specks of ocean,  
dive into beaming waves,  
leave a streak behind,  
a momentary *trail*  
of your moment in the water.

Trace bright circles with dark hands,  
arouse the light,  
arouse the sparks.  
Give in to earthly stars.

# *La Cocina*

...

F. ALBERT SALINAS

My abuelita wrapped my bones in flour tortillas,  
shaped my cheeks from Manteca and stained my blood  
with chili that could put dark red hair on a woman's chest.

*She bounced her dentures off the table as I watched, jaw dropped  
and spilling papas con chorizo, while she passed me yesterday's news  
and tomorrow's coupons to wipe my mouth.*

I built castles in the grumbling refrigerator  
from Tupperware filled with leftovers that fed us through  
weeks when 16 hours days were not enough.

*I could scratch the cracked eggshell walls  
of her kitchen and smell the meals cooked  
on the yellow gas stove for three generations.*

# *The Queen's House*

...

JESSY GOODMAN

My first visit to the Tower of London was in the winter of 1536, the year that Anne Boleyn, King Henry VIII's second wife and perhaps the deepest stain on England's Tudor dynasty, was executed. At least that's what it felt like. All the dark life that had escaped from her body that day in that year took the place of air, and it was all I could do to breathe. The rains that have been steadily punishing that ancient city since and before then were still falling that morning, pressing the cold air in through stone doorways and over my skin. I felt damp inside.

No one that lived in London cared enough to brave the season and see something that was there for them always, so I was alone. Winter isn't a time for tourists in Britain. My parents had brought me to England because of my fascination—obsession—with the history of this powerful, primordial island, and those whose lives had weighed it down further into the sea over each desolate and desperate century. My parents were with me that day, but I don't remember their presence. I only recall myself, sneakers echoing strangely over stone floors that never

heard the sound of rubber soles until last century.

The Tower itself, in fact a tower of many towers, sat isolated against a sky as dense and heavy as a gravestone, like it was alone in England. I stretched to comprehend its magnitude, physical and invisible, as I stood outside of the high stone walls. Along the perimeter, the ground dropped away, leaving a moat of green grass. The manicured lawn didn't match the violent and passionate history I'd imagined for this place, but the battlements lining the tops of the walls spoke of different things, powerful things. I imagined a palace, and in a way, it was. A queen had lived and died here. That time and that place had put their magic into the Tower, even though I knew it was darker than that. There were no unicorns, no knights on white steeds here, but the memory of blood, and of royal betrayals.

To tell that younger self something, a fifteen-year-old away from home walking tentatively down the raised and enclosed stone path into the belly of the Tower, I would say only, "Remember yourself, and take a deep breath." When I met the Tower, I was overwhelmed, not just with the size of it, but with the sense of it, the knowledge of all that happened here. The grounds, both lawn and stone, stretched out of my line of vision, impeded here and there by imposing structures, buildings with angry pasts. It didn't feel enclosed, like I thought it would, but the enormity of its meaning did trap me. What a nasty trick, I thought. The people who had been interred here must have seen that land unfold like the rest of the city, but they knew they were caged by walls just beyond their vision. The smell of rain was everywhere, pressing and clammy, like wet dirt, and intruding. Above, the only opening not blocked by grave, grey stone was frustrated by sky that may

as well have been rock. Apart from its magic, it really is a prison.

My only living companions at that place were the ravens. How obvious, I thought, to be so ominous. But my attempt at bluster didn't sway their black eyes of polished stone. I was surprised at how big they were, and glad their wings were clipped so they couldn't take wing and circle in the sky. I felt their eyes on me; I was being watched by the past. They aren't allowed to leave the Tower grounds, because if they do, the kingdom will fall, or so it's said. I always think of them as guards. They do seem to own this place more than anyone else does, and have the most responsibility. That's unnerving in a bird, and they certainly unnerved me. Those black eyes watched me for all those that couldn't, whose punishments they had witnessed on those slippery grounds, wet with rain and the memory of blood.

The green beside them, in front of a low chapel with windows that looked like glittering slate, was a place of intense significance: once a burial ground, and more importantly, the place where Anne Boleyn lost her head. I was transfixed by the spot, reading the signpost relaying this information over and over, trying to grasp more than just the words of the events that took place where I was standing. I had read so much about these things, tried my best to learn them from books and always cut short of complete comprehension. Now that I was here, it was too much, and I gave up under the weight of all that my senses were trying to tell me. This is what she saw, I thought, as the blade came down over her head, and how is it that I came to see these same things? I was ensnared by the morbid glory of it all. The air must have tasted this way then, too, sharp and ice blue, on the May morning



she was granted private execution. In London, May is not far off from winter, and often with the same chill. I closed my eyes and breathed myself into 1536 for a brief, almost delicious moment, and tried to make myself hear the murmuring and gossip that must have surrounded such a day, to join the jagged wind that I really could feel in my ears. She would have deserved such a cold death, they would have whispered, the woman about whom many other things were said. She was a woman who couldn't give the king a son, who created a monster-child with her own brother out of sheer desperation for the power birthing an heir would give her, whose rumored sixth finger would have confirmed a bond with the Devil himself. It would have been convenient if a raven had crowed at that moment when I felt myself slipping in over my head, but they were silent, leaving me with my illusion of isolation from all but that young, dark queen, who had been a brunette, like me.

I wasn't alone, though, for the towers. There are 25 or so towers of varying size and importance and I saw many of them, but certain details of these places fade together, especially the walls. They felt so thick and they were cold. The word "inside" has a special meaning here, because of these walls, and the air tasted like stone. I wandered through these towers like a ghost, my palm trailing flat against the colorless walls, trying to soak something up. Rough and corroded in places, it felt like many people before me had tried the same thing, and had taken a part of it with them. I wanted that too. A few places, at eye level, are marked with the crude engravings of prisoners. One was a poem, about what besides the Devil I don't remember, but I do recall the letters in the words, Us instead of Vs and the like, the mark of writing

from this point in the history of the English language, examples of which I had seen before only in illustrations labeled "16<sup>th</sup> Century Woodcut" in my history books. I felt cheated that I couldn't run my hands over this, too, because it was covered over with Plexiglas to prevent people like me from taking away too much. The parts of the walls that had been repaired looked like white plaster, and I resented them for intruding on my fantasy. I lifted my hand when I passed over those places. The walls led to archways, arduous fortifications that made me hope that I would walk through them and come out in the past. I imagined knights in full armor clambering single-file through these openings to a dark purpose, raising torches high above their heads to light the way.

Often through these archways I would find staircases, narrow and winding and permanent. They were solid rock to the floor, and going up them was a trial for me. In front and above, and certainly below, all I could see were more steps. I felt like I should raise my arms and push upwards to reveal some escape from these vertical tunnels. A few times, I did put my hands on the steps above me, and climbed them like a ladder. As fascinated as I am with the steps here, I found myself climbing faster the longer I was in a stairwell, and when I got to the top, I would stand still for a moment and breathe. When I think of the Tower, I think of these stairways. They have a mystery about them. I thought it was the rain; I could feel its livid vibration in the walls and in my stomach. But I went again once, on a sunnier day, when light shone in beams through small, glassless windows, but still the lines of shadow seemed more important than the brief sunlight on an occasional step. The Tower feels like that: it can never be fully illuminated. What must climbing those

steps had been like, for those that had to every day, these halls and stairwells the home they had to make until the ends of their short lives, the metallic taste of blood always on their tongues?

Particular aspects of these towers, feelings each provoked and happenings I learned of within, I remember in accordance to which it belongs to, such is the significance to the place of these things. In the center of the compound's south wall is the Bloody Tower, which stands out, of course, because of its name. There are wide stone steps up the side of this tower, and I, more clearly than anything, remember ascending these in the rain. This, I read on the wall inside, is where the little Princes of the Tower were supposed to have been executed. These children, 13 and seven years old, died as pawns in one of countless epic battles for England's crown and throne. At the beginning of their internment, they had been as free to wander the tower grounds as the walls would let them, then slowly withdrew into inner apartments, and after a time of being seen less and less through barred windows, they ceased to appear at all, only remembered in their ghostly absence. At fifteen years old, I felt small and lost here, and to be a child, alone and threatened, doubly threatened to count the imposing presence of the Tower, is unimaginable. I felt smaller contemplating their fate and again closed my eyes, groping for a sign that they had been here, my thoughts ricocheting off the stone walls. They didn't speak to me as much as Anne had, but I left with the knowledge of their role in her final moments spinning through my brain, and my nostrils full of the musty smell of life kept inside too long. As I left the Bloody Tower, I looked over my shoulder to see who was looking back out at me.

What I remember specifically about another tower, firmly built in the center of the grounds, is more about the princes. Outside the White Tower, on rough wooden steps, consistent with the time of this tower but not in its style, I learned that when its original staircase was demolished in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a chest was unearthed, containing the skeletons of two children. The princes were the uncles of King Henry VIII, at whose orders Anne Boleyn was executed. The deaths of those boys, one who was to be king, spearheaded the turbulent, brutal, angry empire of the Tudor family, whose most famous member who sentenced more than one of his six wives to die in this terrible, incredible place. That knowledge cast its shadow on the massive White Tower, the most like a palace in this place. It isn't white in color, grey like everything else here, but I feel safe in saying that in status, it has a brilliance above the others. A rectangular building standing well above any other, its high turrets on each corner beg for royal standards, and I felt it must have been the keep of the Tower, the last stronghold in case of attack. Others must have felt the same, for inside, weapons line the walls. Here are the knights I imagined running through the corridors, and I felt the clank of the armor against hard floors built to echo. Guns cover every vertical surface on the lower floor, spiraling up the pillars holding up the next level, arranged in sunburst patterns along the walls. The glint of their polished wooden stocks was almost vicious. The English do find glory in their artillery.

More dangerous, but less obviously so, is Traitors' Gate, named for practice more than by any intention. I almost missed it; it sits below the Tower grounds, and seemed out-of-the-way, an afterthought. My breath was audible as it escaped my body when I saw it. Narrow steps

with no railings lead far down to low, opaque water, which serves as a tiny, enclosed harbor for boats which brought in those accused of treason from the River Thames. George Boleyn, accused and convicted of homosexuality and incest, was led up these steps, hands bound tightly behind his back, although his sister was not. Anne was the only person to be both tried and executed inside the Tower. The gate itself is what was striking, high and heavy, exactly resembling a cage, a wrought-iron birdcage surrounded by stone. Everything was shades of brown. I don't remember if there was a ceiling, but I felt one closing in on the place, and it cast a black shadow over the water at the base of the steps, of which I could see no bottom. I would have liked to go down those steps, to look back up and see the first view of the Tower as those with their hands bound must have, but that would have been disrespectful to history. So few ever walked back down to the water. The Gate affected me most. I was stuck by the finality of it.

This is a final place, as it was for many. As I slowly, reluctantly left, albeit with a sense of relief, I felt like I had seen all I had to see in this city and I was sad to leave the past behind. When I was off the grounds and turned to say goodbye, I took that deep breath, a breath of recovery. As I write this, my body recalls a shiver that my mind does not. Somewhere inconsequential on the Tower grounds are the rooms where Henry VIII's second wife was imprisoned. This thick-tapestried and relatively lavish cell was called the Queen's House. I felt that the soul of Anne Boleyn was not in these rooms, a weak recreation of all the desperation and fury that contributed to her death. This whole place, the entire Tower of London, is permeated by her significance in the sinister, sweeping history that

bleeds out to the rest of the city, once the most powerful  
in the world, from this palace of a prison.

**Vive y canta mi gente querida. Dusty  
plastic fruit. The pin cushion of your  
head, black thorns like cactus flesh.  
I took a taxi home with a picture of a  
buffalo taped to the dash. I fear writing  
this. Words fall gracefully from the  
mouths of others. Joshua tree slow.**

**La Raza**  
**California Orange**  
**My Beautiful Africa**  
**What I Thought About**  
**Faith**  
**Blocked**  
**Trickster**



# *La Raza*

...

MONICA YESENIA ZEPEDA

VIVE y canta mi gente querida  
 INEVITABLEMENTE está más unida.  
 VIENEN de lejos a trabajar aquí y  
 A sus familias poder mantener así.

MANY people come to the United States  
 ILLEGALLY if they can cross by no other way.

LIBERTAD y una vida mejor quieren  
 INTENTAN trabajar en lo que pueden.  
 NADIE puede impedir que dejen de venir  
 DÍA y noche de allá van a partir  
 AND they soon make their way here.

RIQUEZA algunos buscan aquí  
 AND they don't really find it  
 ZEALOUSLY they work hard every day  
 A ver si así de la pobreza salen.

# *California Orange*

...

SHERIAN BUCZKOWSKI

Dusty plastic fruit  
adorns the table  
of those too busy  
to pick fresh  
from their own backyard

*My Beautiful Africa*

...

CASEY CHAINEE

the pin cushion of your head  
 black thorns like cactus flesh  
 thrust from the womb's dark continent  
 blue then pink, your wail of life

rosebud mouth, puckered in placidity  
 like little Hans and the dike  
 your thumb plugs the Victoria Falls  
 of words, vast from one so small

your smile wide as Africa's plains  
 pales the fynbos and protea where  
 naptime bottlebrushes petal-pink  
 your golden mocha skin

you run tirelessly in home veld  
 pumping legs and arms  
 where African genes  
 mirror Khoi-San in Namib

# *What I Thought About*

...

TANYA QUIN

I took a taxi home with a picture of a buffalo taped to the dash.  
I don't know what it means. The driver kept coughing.

Rows of bare trees whip past the sky's  
clean dish of vodka. Birds drink water  
from an old cup on our doorstep,  
so that coming home sounds like  
startled wings.

Earlier, I wrote a letter about the weather,  
A flood happens when it rains too much,  
but couldn't mail it because it's lame.

Inside our apartment we perform the scene  
from movies about couples who hate each other.  
I am a woman, therefore, insane. I throw  
a plate at the wall. You raise your voice,  
like every man, and say stuff.

Somewhere, though, buffalo are grazing.  
So many buffalo.  
They flood the fields like muddy water.

# *Faith*

...

RACHAEL JORDAN

I fear writing this,  
fear putting the ink to paper  
staining, sweeping across the page,  
giving permanence to abstract thought,  
making concrete something imagined,  
questioning something pounded into my head.  
The hammer of the Bible smashed into my mind  
through my eyes, nostrils, nose,  
any orifice that crucifix-studded school of childhood  
could find.

Where have you gone?  
I find myself missing you.  
It cannot be that you are only within the stone walls  
of churches laced with corruption  
of stale bread and bitter wine  
stuck between pages of a tattered book tainted by man,  
hung in the words escaping from the mouths of ancient  
male monoliths,  
trapped within the painted glass of high ceilings hot from  
the sun.

Where have you gone?  
I find myself forgetting you.  
It cannot be that you left my heart  
without a sound of passing

without a hint of pain,  
placed a chasm within one atrium,  
stabbed a spike into my brain releasing the sheltered data,  
flung knowledge into my life like a chaotic, raging bull.

Where have you gone?  
I find myself saying your name.  
It cannot be that the words don't reach you.  
With hope they flew to heaven,  
with disappointment they crashed to the ground,  
tangled messages into prayers deferred,  
laced good intentions with temptation and desire,  
confused faith into a war of ideals and experience.

I fear writing this,  
I fear putting pen to paper  
For it will remind me of your presence.  
Through my eyes, nostrils, nose  
I will breathe you out and  
I will breathe you in again  
Giving permanence to my hope in you.  
I will look at the crucifix and see your only son,  
I will remember.

# *Blocked*

...

SHERIAN BUCZKOWSKI

Words  
fall  
gracefully  
from the mouths  
of others  
while I wait  
for some  
to appear  
in my head.

# Trickster

...

TANYA QUIN

Joshua tree slow.  
I'm already dead when this seed flowers  
its discrete white flowers  
under the moon's knife,  
moths trembling.

Levitating face up through  
creosote bush into the next world,  
the projector plays scenes  
from my own life, which is  
another way of saying I'm driving  
through the desert half-asleep.

*If your power animal is a coyote,  
it's probably from lack of imagination.  
What about quail or kangaroo rat?  
Amoeba?, I ask my friend. He's gotten  
back from a "spiritual journey," which is  
another way of saying he walked  
into the desert drunk.*



I'm hiking in the mountains,  
Bunch grasses shake their silver flames  
in the wind when I see a pack of coyote.  
Their hair shines like the grasses' fire shine,  
fat too. First, they scratch the dirt with hind legs  
and then trot by me, leisurely,  
as if to say, *Look, Sister,*  
*today we've let you live.*



**First off, let me just say that I am a crazy person magnet. Kraus, I loved him. The wizard glanced over the form. “I’m afraid you’ve omitted something.” A barista stands at the counter of a local Starbucks.**

**Crazy Magnet**  
**Cup Holders**  
**Witch's Pet**  
**A Day in the Life of a Barista**

# Crazy Magnet

...

KATHY PASHA

First off, let me just say that I am a crazy person magnet. I don't know what it is, but insanity seems to be attracted to me like ants swarming to collect the remaining crumbs of a picnic. If I am standing in a group of people and some nutcase walks by, he will inexplicably seek *me* out to harass rather than any of my other friends. I have no idea where this unsettling ability comes from, so if you are looking for an explanation, stop reading now because you're not going to get one; I still haven't.

And I know what you're thinking: "Everybody has an encounter with a crazy bum yelling at them on the street corner once in a while."

This isn't a once-in-a-while type situation.

And it isn't some guy just yelling random crap at you for walking by without putting any change in his cup.

This is a major problem.

Let me give you an example. A couple summers ago my friend Matt and I went to New York for vacation. For those of you out there who have never been, Manhattan is a choice location to settle if you are a complete nut.

So we were walking around Times Square one day, where the streets are covered with thousands of discarded flyers advertising hot dog joints or trendy hotspots. I admit I am a bit of a tree-hugger, so when offered I usually decline politely as my way of lending Mother Earth a helping hand.

As we walked I noticed that we were approaching a flyer guy, and I watched as he extended his flyer out to numerous people who either ignored him completely, or waved him off with their hands. We got within a few feet of him, and he slowly started to offer one to me, but I quietly said, "No, thank you."

And then he hissed at me. Hissed! Like a fucking cat. He didn't hiss at any of the previous people, but for me he opened his mouth wide, bared his sharp yellow teeth coated in plaque so thick that you could carve your initials in it, and hissed.

This was all happening as we were walking along, and Matt started laughing hysterically. He loves it when this shit happens to me, the bastard.

I turned back to Matt as we walked, to give him the what-the-fuck-was-that look and before I knew it, I was falling. I tripped because this guy cut in front of me and didn't allow room for one of those obnoxious briefcases on wheels he was carting around behind him.

"Oh my God! I am so sorry," I said, even though it was obviously his fault.

"Fuck you, you fucking bitch."

I shit you not. That's what he said.

Mind you, this all happened in a 30, maybe 45-second time span.

This is my life.

But there's more.

This gift—if you can call it that—has been passed on to my best friend, Rochelle.

Or maybe she gave it to me.

Good God, I hope it's not contagious.

And whenever the two of us get together, this effect is compounded exponentially. It creates some sort of force field around us, and every crazy person in a three mile radius is magnetically attracted to our location. We're like the Power Rangers; alone we can do a little damage, but together there is no stopping us. Who knows why? All I can do is suggest two pseudo-scientific hypotheses:

#1. It's a simple matter of probability, really. I'm a crazy magnet and so is she, so why wouldn't we join forces and attract ridiculous situations?

-or-

#2. Each of us emits a unique and opposite psycho-electrical charge which is powerful on its own. Rochelle, who is infectiously charming and impossible not to love, is positively charged. I, on the other hand, being the sarcastic wallflower type, am negatively charged. Together each pole, if you will, counteracts the other and creates a magnetic force which mysteriously exerts a pull on any and all freaks in the surrounding areas.

This is why I am really beating you over the head with all these magnet metaphors.

But how can I convey the severity? How can I get you to understand that this is not just a random string of coincidental run-ins with semi-weirdos? In almost fifteen

years of friendship with Rochelle, there are countless stories to choose from. Hundreds. Which one is *the* crazy magnet story?

Like, I could tell you about the time that me and Roach were sitting on the Venice boardwalk on acid at four in the morning and met a meth-addicted bum named Hawk, who pulled out his backpack filled with '80s butt-rock tapes and announced loudly to the sleepy neighborhood: "You guys are dosin' man, you're dosin'!"

But I'm not going to. This is not that story.

Then there was the time that we were at a bar watching our friend's band play, and the gayest guy in the place started to hit on Rochelle. Sipping on a Cosmopolitan, he wore a purple Hugh Hefner smoking jacket, bright orange shoes that curled up at the toes like an elf's, and spoke with a heavy lisp when he told us that he hated San Francisco because there were "too many fags" there.

But that wouldn't really drive the point home, either.

Or I could tell you about the time that we were driving home one night through the Chatsworth pass. At the last stop sign, this random teenager came out of the bushes, pulled down his pants, and humped the front of Roach's car. And how Rochelle, not knowing what to do, threw the car into reverse with him still mounted on it.

That still doesn't do it for me, though. So here's what I'm going to do. I am going to give you the so-called cream of the crop.

You ready?

I must have been fourteen or fifteen, which would have made Rochelle somewhere around sixteen. As usual, I was spending the weekend at her house in Marina Del Rey because of the utter lack of parental supervision there. Elena was there with me, she was older than us, and even



though she still wasn't of age, she somehow scored the pack of Marlboros we all shared that weekend.

We sat at the bus-stop that would take us to the 3rd Street Promenade from the Venice turnabout, surrounded by a myriad of homeless people and all sorts of other shady characters that gather in that area near dusk. Rochelle and Elena had one bus bench to themselves, and I was sitting facing them on the other one alone. We were smoking our asses off—because when you're that age, you want any and everyone to see you and think you are all grown up—and chattering away. Who knows what about; probably nothing.

Then Rochelle and Elena grew silent and, looking past me, indicated that there was someone behind me. Trying not to look obvious, I slowly shifted back into a forward position and looked to my right.

I was greeted by a dark face barely four inches from my own, whose bloodshot and glazed-over eyes were staring right into mine. Looking down, I noticed that the mouth was cracked into an eerily wide and over-exaggerated smile almost like the ones from the "Black Hole Sun" video, but with far fewer teeth.

I looked back at Elena and Rochelle, who were trying unsuccessfully to hold in their fits of the giggles. No help there. I'm telling you, my friends delight in my misery.

When I risked turning back, the bum who had been staring at me was looking at the turnabout on his other side and mumbling to himself. Taking this as a good sign, I turned back to Roach and Elena—still giggling—and tried to resume normalcy until either the bus came or the bum went away.

But then I heard him announce defiantly to the empty air beside him, "Us black people gotta stick

together!”

I lost it. It was my own fault; I accept it.

My barely stifled laughter once again gained his attention, and before I knew it, he had his arms around my shoulders.

“I’m in with the gurrrrls now!” He said while shaking me by the shoulder. He once again had the Cheshire-like grin on his face and I noticed that along with the half-rotten away ones, there was also one silver tooth in his mouth. Not knowing what to do, I just sat there with an unconvincing smile on my face, hoping beyond hope that he would let me go soon.

I just sat there. What the hell was wrong with me?

Well, I guess since he was “in with the girls” and all, he decided that he wanted to give me a gift: a token of his appreciation for acceptance into our little teenage clique.

Shifting his weight onto his right side, he rested his left leg on top of mine, much like my brother used to do when we were stuck in the backseat together on long trips to my uncle’s house, and laid one on me.

For those of you out there who may not have heard that expression before, it means he farted.

Cut the cheese.

Squeezed out an ass grenade.

Let one rip.

Well, not one. To be precise, it was two.

I actually sat there long enough to give him the opportunity to fart on me not once, but *twice*.

Once again I ask: what the hell was wrong with me?

And I’d like to say that it smelled horrible; to use all kinds of figurative language to describe the odor as being putrid and comparable to the deepest reaches of the underworld and all that. But the truth is, if it *did* smell,

it wasn't able to penetrate the intense funk the guy was already carrying around with him.

So, maybe you're asking yourself what Rochelle and Elena were doing while all this flatulence was going on. Here's the answer: they had gotten up and ran into the nearest storefront, leaving me there to get farted on the second time.

Hey, I understand. These are every-man-for-themselves situations.

Besides, I don't think they wanted to steal the limelight from me. Real givers, those two. And that's really all there is. I mean, I could tell you about how he followed us on to the bus and proposed marriage to me with the tin, quarter-machine ring he was trying to fit on over his mittens. But for me the story really stops there. What is there left to say? How do you top that?

So now when people try to tell me that they have had some crazy experiences, too—that everyone does—I just look at them. Just look them right in the eye for a little while, as if sizing them up, and then say challengingly, “Yeah, but have *you* ever been farted on by a bum?”

# *Cup Holders*

...

GREG CLAESSENS

Kraus, I loved him. How could I not? He was my first car. However, there were many times that Kraus did not love me back.

I got Kraus my junior year of high school. He was awesome in that way that only the proud young owner of this, his first, car could appreciate. He had his flaws, but I overlooked them. The paint that faded from black to a sun bleached gray only looked venerable to me. Sure, portions of the interior were inexplicably torn to shreds while the other parts looked immaculate, but I didn't care.

Then there was the "everything is ok" light. It was actually the check engine light, but during the entire five years that I owned Kraus it never stopped flashing. I just told myself that this was the "everything is ok" light and that should it cease to blink something must be wrong.

I drove Kraus with pride to school every morning and offered rides to anyone who would join me and Kraus on our morning adventures. He got me where I needed to be and I did my best to take care of him. Things were great, but soon Kraus became needy.

It started with the CD player. Kraus was German,

an Audi to be exact, and there were some parts of him that just did not make sense. For instance, he had no cup holders. Not a one. Not even a little compartment that you could rig as a cup holder. This does not seem like a big deal, but it was. Kraus had a manual transmission. Shifting, steering, and drinking a cup of coffee is a difficult dance to learn. Though the mystery of why a car would be made without cup holders has long baffled me, it did not compare to the great mystery of the CD player security code.

One day the music stopped and Kraus demanded a security code... in German. I mashed buttons during the months of agonizing silence. I think Kraus decided that I needed some quiet time; he also decided when that time was over.

The first winter with Kraus passed rather uneventfully, but he had plans for the summer. I always admired him for his incredible air conditioning. It worked, and it worked well. Then the thumping started. As soon as I would start the fan I could hear it thumping an incredibly fast and deafening beat from inside the dash.

After hours of surgery, my dad and I got to the broken fan. It was removed, and little did I know that it would never be replaced. Over the next several months we tried new part after new part but it was all in vain. None of the replacement fans ever worked right.

"Not a problem," I said. "I like driving with the windows down anyway." Kraus just laughed. Within days of the fan breaking, the driver's side window stopped working. It would slowly fall as I drove. I soon mastered the technique of pushing it up with my hands, a technique that always left the prints of aggravating misfortune on the window next to me. Yes, Kraus was starting to suck.

A broken fan is a bigger problem than one might realize. The car's climate was easy to overcome. If it was cold wear a jacket, hot roll the working windows down. What many passengers didn't realize until they rode with me at night or in the early morning is that the fan is also responsible for the defroster. Without a fan you have no defroster. I kept a constant supply of Bounty disposable defrosters in the car at all times. It seems that the "quilted quicker picker upper" had just the absorbency I needed to get me started on my busy day.

Taking a ride with Kraus was becoming quite a process. First I would get in the car and try to balance my coffee wherever I could find a place, usually the dashboard. Bad idea. Then I would push my window up, a technique of which I was truly a master unless the window was damp, in which case the slipperiness made for extreme frustration. Then I would wipe down the window so I could attempt to pilot this contraption down the road. Finally, when "the everything is ok" light gave me its constant flashing approval, I could embark on the day's journey.

All of these problems were trifles, compared to the future to come. Mere inconveniences were one thing, and then the real problems started.

During one of my father's and my attempts to transplant a new fan into the car we damaged some wires underneath the dash. In order to get to the area where the fan lived we needed to remove the glove box. After repeatedly doing this, the glove box stopped fitting in its place. I would never have a place to keep my gloves again. The absence of the glove box left many wires exposed. As it turns out, cars are not made with unnecessary wires. There were two that would dangle just above the feet of

any soul brave enough to ride shotgun. They did more than dangle though; occasionally they sparked. It also seems that these wires were responsible for the console lights. Once the sparks started, the console lights were gone forever but everything was still ok, the light told me so. I guess the "everything is ok" light had separate wires. I never knew how fast I was going or how much fuel I had, but I always knew that "everything was ok."

I was running late for class one morning. I screeched into the parking lot, grabbed my bag, and attempted to bolt out of the car when I heard a pop. The inside handle for the driver's side door went limp. I tried in vain to escape Kraus. I unlocked the door over and over again but it still wouldn't open. The mechanism that unlatched the door had broken. I was never again able to open the driver's side door from the inside. Frustrated does not begin to describe how I felt.

I am 6 feet, 4 inches tall; do you know how funny it is to see a man of my stature attempt to climb over a stick shift center console in a small European car? It is hilarious. I didn't climb over the stick that many times before I learned a new technique. If I rolled down the back window on driver's side I could stick my arm out of that window and open the door from the outside.

Luckily for me my arms are long enough to execute such a maneuver. It doesn't make for a quick or fashionable exit but at least I found a way to get out of the car that didn't involve a rude awakening from a perverted shifter knob.

The ceiling liner was beginning to sag. I ignored this problem for a long time. It was only an aesthetic flaw, but eventually it sagged so much that I could no longer see out the back window. I had to cut it free from the ceiling. If

you are not familiar with what a car's ceiling is like without a liner, consider yourself lucky. It seems that automakers use crumbs of orange foam to adhere the liner to the ceiling. Once the liner was gone, the crumbs never ceased raining on me. I had the car for almost a year after that and they still didn't stop raining.

The next thing to go was the passenger seatbelt. One might think that the lack of a seatbelt and the eminent danger of live electrical wires might deter passengers from calling "shotgun," but there were still several brave enough to risk all and sit up front. One day shortly after the seatbelt broke I was pulled over with two passengers, one of whom was sitting up front. I pulled over, stopped, and sat dreading the officer's approach. He came up to my window and that's when the fun started.

"Roll down your window," he said.

"Uh, I can't," I replied.

"Well then open the door," he said.

I sighed, rolled down the back driver's side window, and asked, "Could you open my door? It only opens from the outside." He was a nice officer, he opened my door and I think he took pity on me because he let me off with a warning. During the entire event I was worried the officer would notice the broken passenger side seatbelt. Fortunately for me, my friend Mat, who was sitting up front, is a very intelligent guy and he had the foresight to pull the seatbelt down and make it look as though it was fastened. We drove off and I attempted to go the speed limit but this was quite difficult since I had to guess how fast I was going.

The engine had not been running smoothly for some time. During the last couple of months Kraus would boil out his radiator fluid every trip. Each time I left on



a drive I would have to replace the water and each time Kraus would spit it right back out. This did not last long because my parents decided it was time for me to get a new car. I looked over many replacements with an eye that was now keen to potential hazards. Cup holders and a ceiling lining were among my top priorities for Kraus' replacement. I found a new car. "Connie the Contour," I call her.

It was a sad day when I left Kraus. Sure, he was one of the biggest pains in the ass I have ever dealt with, but he was mine; he was my first car. We couldn't ethically sell him to anyone so we sent him to a junk yard. My beloved car was sold for fifty dollars, an amount that still stings when I consider the value he held to me.

I see teenagers driving brand new BMWs and other fancy cars, and I wonder how much they can appreciate such luxury? Is it possible to not know what it is like to have to deal with real inconveniences? I am glad I had Kraus. He taught me respect and appreciation. I take excellent care of Connie and cherish her CD player, working windows, and, of course, cup holders. I still miss Kraus from time to time, but I know that somewhere in some forgotten heap of a junk yard he rests and flashes his light saying, "everything is ok."

## *Witch's Pet*

...

RACHEL HADLOCK-PILTZ

The wizard glanced over the form. "I'm afraid you've omitted something. Down here where it says 'Pets' you've forgotten to write in the necessary information. If you'll just fill in the species—"

"I don't have a pet," said Moyra, flushing a little.

"Oh," said the wizard, looking surprised. "Well, I can't process the forms for your witching license until you get one."

"Why not?" Moyra asked. At this the wizard looked mildly shocked.

"Why, why...because it's necessary. The Witches Council won't approve you without a pet."

"Why?" asked Moyra. The wizard's face started to redden and Moyra began to regret having asked. Still, she didn't have a pet and didn't want one if it wasn't absolutely necessary. She'd never had any luck with pets and didn't want to have to explain this to a stranger.

"How would it look, a witch with no cat? It's... it's... it's like a witch with no flying broomstick!" He eyed her skeptically. "Are you sure you're not here to apply for a fishing license?"

"Yes, I'm sure I'm not here to apply for a fishing license," Moyra mimicked.

"Well I can't process your application for a witching license if you don't have a pet. The Council would not approve it. It's a technicality, but it proves that you are a fully accredited, legitimate witch to whomever seeks your services. It separates the true and legal witch from the back-alley soothsayer. Whoever heard of a witch or wizard with no cat—though wizards are more partial to owls than cats? The idea is ludicrous. Besides witch, I mean...which, it's the *law*." The wizard ended with a tone of deep conviction.

"I get your point," sighed Moyra resignedly. "Where do I find a pet?"

"At a pet store," frowned the wizard. "And then come back and finish filling out this form." The wizard turned away to file the form in an overstuffed cabinet marked 'Incomplete' and Moyra cleared her throat several times, loudly. The wizard turned around.

"What now?" he snapped. Moyra took a deep breath to brace her nerve.

"I'm, I'm allergic." Moyra stammered. "I'm allergic to cats." Back when she was training to pass her magic tests the other students had made fun of her. After all, who ever heard of a witch being allergic to cats? She'd passed all her tests (none of them had tested her for allergies) but Moyra was still self-conscious about her allergy. The wizard's lack of response surprised her.

"Oh, well that's no problem. There are other approved species on the qualified pets list besides cats," he said. "Let me get you the list." The wizard fuddled around under the desk awhile and popped back up with a long parchment on which were listed a great number

of animals.

"How do I know which one I should get?" Moyra asked after glancing from Albatross all the way down to Zebra.

"We do have a lending zoo if you're having trouble deciding," said the wizard. "If you just fill out the card you may borrow up to twelve pets a week. We're all out of cats at the moment, but as you're allergic to them it doesn't matter." The wizard looked Moyra up and down critically. "I'll start you off with a toad. It's more appropriate for witches than an owl and not so uncommon that the Council would notice anything." He disappeared in a puff of smoke after handing Moyra a blank card out of thin air.

Moyra filled out the card, choking a little on the smoke. In a little while the wizard re-appeared (no smoke this time, just a flash of light and a roll of thunder) with a large toad in his hand. He handed the toad to Moyra and rummaged around in his desk again.

"Here's a list of care and feeding instructions." Moyra reached out for the paper and gasped. Her hand was covered in large red warts and some of them were starting to grow thick hairs. Even the wizard looked more than mildly surprised.

"That's the quickest I've ever seen that happen," he said. "No matter. Warts are good for a witch. They lend instant credibility."

"Bu vey aw aw ovej me. Evem im my mowf," mumbled Moyra.

"What?"

"Vey im my mowf! My mowf!"

"Boy, you *are* allergic, aren't you?" grumbled the wizard, crossing toads off the list and taking back the toad from Moyra's outstretched, warty hand. "Don't bother having those removed," he gestured at the warts.

"It'd cost a fortune. They'll go away by themselves in a few days anyway." He sighed. "I'll get you an owl; it's not very witchly, but at least it's common." He disappeared in another puff of smoke before Moyra could ask him to kindly not smoke indoors because of her asthma.

He reappeared wearing a leather glove, on which perched a large gray owl. He handed a glove and another sheet of care and feeding instructions to Moyra. After she put the glove on, the owl was transferred to her. It sat calmly on its human perch, looking drowsy.

That's not so bad, thought Moyra, and I don't think I'm allergic to it. She smiled. The wizard smiled back in satisfaction.

"I have an owl myself," he said. "They make excellent pets, and they're not as pushy or demanding as cats." He copied down the information from the lending card on a ledger, along with the date and the owl's identification number, and handed the card back to Moyra. Moyra mumbled goodbye and left with the owl.

Everything went well that afternoon and evening. Looking at the list of care and feeding instructions, Moyra discovered she didn't need to buy much. There were plenty of mice living in the walls for the owl to eat, and she set out a dish of fresh water from the well for the owl to drink. She even bought a parrot perch off an old pirate in exchange for an egg from her prophetic-chickens coop. The owl settled right in on the perch and fell asleep.

Moyra had trouble settling down because of the warts, but found Bunsen, the geriatric salamander she'd inherited (along with the old stone house by the sea and the prophetic chickens) from her grandparents. After three tries he'd lit a fire and settled in its embers while Moyra dozed in front of it.

She awoke with a start at a loud screeching and skittering. A large gray blur was crashing about the room and scratching at the walls. It went on all night as the owl tried to hunt the mice that were skittering around inside the walls. Normally quiet hunters, the owl had grown frustrated and began screeching. The hungrier and more frustrated it became, the louder it screeched. Moyra wouldn't let it outside to hunt mice in the fields for fear that it would fly away and never come back; she slept very little that night.

The next morning she went to the licensing office and was informed that the owl would, indeed, come back after being let outside to hunt. Still, nighttime wasn't quiet with the owl around. It would go out to hunt but came back to eat. And since it did this several times a night it woke up Moyra with its loud screeches to be let out and then back in. At the end of the week Moyra was beginning to fall asleep at her chores and was glad (and tired) when she returned the owl to the wizard.

"What happened to you? Mixed up the sleeping potion with your coffee?"

"The owl doesn't work." Moyra grumbled. "I'll have a pest, I mean pet, but who'd buy a wake-up potion from a witch who can't stay awake?"

The wizard crossed owl off the list and stared at it thoughtfully.

"All the remaining animals are far less common than cats, toads and owls, but they *are* on the list... How about bats?"

Moyra shook her head, no. They used echolocation to hunt and that would be almost as bad as the owl. Besides, many potions called for parts of bats and she wouldn't feel right stewing her pets' relatives in a

cauldron while they watched.

"I see your point. Bats are atmospheric, but hardly good pets. I once got a nasty bite on the neck and haven't been able to eat anything with garlic since. Bats have a way of turning against one. I'll find something else... How about a talking pig?"

He brought out the talking pig and it seemed as if everything was going well during the interview, but then the pig inquired about mud.

"I'm afraid there isn't much mud where I live; mostly sand and rocks."

"Those are hardly five star accommodations," huffed the pig. "No sty, you said? Really. I'd also like to be lent to a large family with lots of children. Children waste food, so the quality of the swill is better."

"I don't have any mud or sties or children," said Moyra, "but I'm willing to waste food if that's what it takes."

"No thank you," said the pig. Moyra could hear the pig muttering about sties under her breath before she disappeared with a 'pop.'

"We've had trouble lending *her* out," said the wizard, "but perhaps it's for the best; talking pigs aren't popular with the Council."

Moyra was allergic to the griffin; golden cows, sliver stags, unicorns and zebras were all too big to fit in Moyra's cottage. A small goat could eat the sea grass that grew around the cottage but the only goat the zoo had was a scapegoat, which was for reference only and couldn't be lent to anybody.

"How about mice? I've got plenty of mice," said Moyra, thinking of her scratched-up walls.

"They aren't on the list," said the wizard, "and the Council isn't kindly disposed towards mice. They all have

cats and owls, so of course you can understand how they feel about mice." Moyra gulped, thinking about it.

"There are still some animals left on the list," said the wizard. "Look. I've crossed off 'toads' but 'frogs' is still blank. Frogs ought to be safe; no one has yet been known to have caught warts from a frog."

"Could I possibly take another animal as well?" Moyra asked. "I'd hoped to have my license by now, and it's getting harder to pay the bills."

"Of course, of course, hurry things along. Two at once oughtn't to be bad as long as you don't mix up their diets. Would a rat do?"

"Alright," sighed Moyra when she was handed the rat and the frog. "Hopefully one of these pets will be the right one." She left for home with the frog in her pocket and the rat on her shoulder.

The rat, being nocturnal, wasn't very sociable and mostly slunk around in dark corners; the frog was more pleasant. It liked to hop among the rocks and sea grasses and 'chirruped' a high, pleasant frog song at evening.

Towards the end of the week, overjoyed at having at last found a tolerable pet, Moyra began thinking up names for the frog and speaking to it.

"I'm lucky I found you," she said on the evening before it was due back at the zoo. "Goodnight, little froggy," and she kissed it goodnight on its green little damp head. The frog immediately disappeared in a puff of green smoke. In its place stood a well-dressed man with good posture.

Choking on the smoke and thinking she'd never disappear in such an inconsiderate manner, Moyra glared at the stranger who'd replaced her pet.

"Oh thank you! Thank you!" said the man stepping



forward and kissing her hand, which Moyra quickly pulled away, for fear of disappearing herself. "I once was a prince, enchanted into a frog by an evil—"

"Skip the story," interrupted Moyra, vexed at having lost her pet. "I'm a witch, well, almost-witch, and I'm turning you back. I'm not letting you ruin my chances of getting a license by turning out to be a prince." The prince stared flabbergasted for a second, then leaped out the door as quick as a frog can hop.

"Come back! You owe me!" Moyra called out the door. "It'll only be temporary until I get my license!" But it was too late, the prince was gone.

That night, frogless and princeless, Moyra heard the rat scurrying under the door. "Oh great," she muttered to herself. "It's probably running away. Not that I blame it."

But the next morning the rat was there, nibbling grain in the grain-bin.

"At least *something* has gone right," Moyra sighed, picking up the rat from its repast. She trudged to the licensing office slowly, trying to think up what to say about the missing frog.

"Um, about the frog..." she began, handing the rat over to the wizard.

"Not qualified," he interrupted. "Enchanted princes aren't qualified as pets, and it was highly unscrupulous of you to try to change him back after breaking the enchantment. Since you didn't succeed at illegally re-enchanting the prince without a license, and since no laws were broken, I see no reason to prosecute you."

"How do *you* know what happened?" Moyra asked incredulously.

"I received information from an unimpeachable source." At this the rat leapt up onto the wizard's shoulder

and whispered in his ear. The wizard snickered.

"You rat!" shouted Moyra. "To think that I fed you brie, *brie*, and let you eat out of my grain bin, and you *still* ratted me out! You dirty no good rat!"

"It's not the rat's fault," said the wizard.

"It's in their nature."

"In that case I'm certainly not keeping one for a pet," huffed Moyra.

"Wise choice," the wizard agreed. "What pet would you like to be lent next?"

"Wait a minute, what about that prince? How did he get in there?"

The wizard shrugged. "I have no idea. Someone must have returned the wrong frog by mistake. If that's the case, some princess is in for an unpleasant surprise. Would you like to try another frog?"

"No thank you," said Moyra. "I'd rather have a pet I can keep better track of. I wouldn't want to make the same mistake that other witch made. Also, frogs attract princesses. Princesses aren't good business for a witch, at least not if all they want is to stand around kissing frogs."

"The only animal we have left is the albatross, and you have to wear it around your neck."

"For luck?"

"You wish. There are other animals on the list, but we don't carry them at the lending zoo: no demand. Here's a copy of the list. The remaining animals aren't crossed off. Good luck finding them."

"Thanks." Moyra took the list and went home. There weren't many species left to choose from and none of them seemed practical. At the rate she was going it would take a year to decide. Her stomach growled as she sat before the fire that Bunsen had helped make. She'd

probably starve and wind up *eating* the animals she found. If she could find any of them. Before she starved any further just thinking about it, she picked up her bait, tackle and fishing pole and headed to the dock where her rowboat was tied.

Moyra rowed way out onto the sea and cast her line. She could already smell fish frying in a Bunsen-heated frying pan. After a little while she was awakened from this vision by a tug on the line. Pulling it up, she saw it was an enormous goldfish, caught on the end of her hook.

"Oh please!" begged the goldfish. "Please, kind woman, I am a magic fish. If you let me swim away I will grant you three wishes," and it looked up at her with its big black eyes.

"How do I know you won't just swim away and not grant me anything?" Moyra asked.

"We'll make a deal. One wish now, the second and third when you let me go," said the fish.

"Two up front, and the third when I let you go."

"Deal."

"Okay, I wish for a large goldfish bowl to appear, filled with water, on the front desk at the licensing office."

"That's a strange wish," said the goldfish, staring fish-eyed at Moyra.

"We made a deal," said Moyra. The fish blinked.

"I thought fish couldn't blink."

"I told you I'm a magic fish," said the fish. "When I blinked just now your wish came true."

"My second wish is for a large, talking, wish-granting goldfish to appear inside the large goldfish bowl on the front desk of the licensing office."

"Gran—" started the fish, blinking before it had time to think it over, and it disappeared in a spray of foam.

Moyra quickly rowed to shore and as quickly ran down to the licensing office. The wizard was there, filing some papers at the front desk, right next to the wish-granting goldfish in its bowl.

"Does this fish I caught count as a pet?" she asked, a little winded from all that rowing and running.

"That's *your* fish?" asked the wizard. "I thought management put it here for a calming ambiance while people waited to be served."

"I wasn't caught, I was tricked!" shouted the fish, sticking its head above the water.

"Are you one of those wish-granting goldfish?" asked the wizard.

"Yep," said the fish, "and I'll grant you three wishes if you let me go free."

"Hey! We had a deal!" Moyra whined. "You still owe *me* one more wish!"

"A deal's a deal, but I can't approve this goldfish without proof that it was legally caught—"

"Tricked!" the fish interrupted.

"You *do* have a fishing license, don't you?" asked the wizard.

"Drat! I *knew* I should have applied for one when I was here last time."

"What about your wish?" asked the impatient fish.

"Oh, I wish you'd return to where I found you," Moyra pouted. The fish disappeared in another spray of foam.

"About that fishing license..." began the wizard, wiping foam flecks from his beard as he gathered up the necessary paperwork. There was very little of it and soon Moyra was back fishing for her dinner. She found a sea serpent, but when she tried to put a pet collar around its

neck it overturned her boat and swam away.

Returning home wet and despondent, Moyra sat in front of the fire and had Bunsen heat her a mug of hot tea. "Oh, Bunsen," she sighed, "I wish I could find a pet. If I don't get my license soon we'll be out in the cold... well, *I'll* be out in the cold. You'll be..." Moyra stopped. She stared. "Bunsen! That's it! You're brilliant!" Indeed Bunsen was, for he was glowing brightly in-between the embers.

Early the next morning Moyra hurried down to the licensing office.

"Look!" she shouted, holding a little red lizard in front of the wizard's nose.

"What the-wicked-witch-of-the-west is it?" sputtered the wizard.

"Bunsen, my pet salamander!" declared Moyra. The wizard's face began changing. First he looked disgusted, then constipated, then amused, and then he began laughing.

"What's so funny?" she demanded.

"*That* is not a pet," the wizard laughed, pointing at Bunsen.

"Why not? He's mine and he has a name."

"A salamander isn't a pet, it's an... an *appliance*; A living can of lighter fluid. Is Bunsen its brand name or did you make it up?" The wizard picked up Bunsen and tried to light a cigarette he pulled out of Moyra's ear, but Bunsen still wasn't working after several tries. "What's wrong with this thing?" he demanded, studying the salamander.

"He's rather old," said Moyra. "He used to be my grandfather's."

"Have you thought about trading it in for a new one?"

I've got one that's never been used, and I'd pay the full market value for this one, because I like the color. I won't even ask how many lights it's got on it."

"Too many to count, and no thanks, I'm not interested."

"An antique, eh? No wonder I didn't recognize the name. I collect these things. It's a hobby. Oh well, suit yourself. Come back if you change your mind." He returned the salamander.

"Wait! Do prophetic chickens count as pets?"

"What kind?"

"Regular. They mostly foretell the weather, although they sometimes lay little slips of paper with fortunes written on them in their eggs."

"Good fortunes?"

"Well, nothing too specific."

"Sorry, I'm afraid that's not magical enough. If they start talking in riddles and lay golden eggs, come tell me. Now if you'll excuse me, you're holding up the line." He beckoned to a pirate waiting with a molting parrot on his shoulder.

Moyra walked down to the docks and stared down into the water. She thought about drowning herself, then remembered it wouldn't work. She looked down the pilings at the muscles, barnacles, and various other marine-life, but none of them counted as pets.

"Excuse me," someone said, tapping Moyra on the shoulder. She turned around and found herself facing the smelly pirate and his molting parrot she had seen in the licensing office. "I couldn't help but overhear you say somethin' 'bout prophetic chickens predictin' the weather when I was waitin' for my piracy license."

"You need a license for piracy?" asked Moyra.

"Heck, you need a license to *kill*. Now about those chickens; would you be willin' to trade for 'em?"

"Would you be willing to trade for that parrot?"

"Sorry. I need Polly if I want to keep my license. Rats give me plague."

"Do you have any other animals? I really need one if I'm to get my witching license."

"Well... I have a foreign goose on board."

"Does it lay golden eggs?"

"Course not! Would you trade it for a bunch of weather-predictin' chickens if it did?"

"They also lay fortunes, sometimes. So what's so remarkable about this goose?"

"Well...when it gets drunk it sings."

"Are you sure *you* aren't drunk when it sings?"

"Sure I'm sure! I can't sing in Russian. It's a talking goose." The pirate went up to the ship and brought back the goose in an open-slat crate.

"Are you a talking goose?" Moyra asked the big black incarcerated waterfowl.

"No. I am a not talking goose. I am black swan," said the swan. "My name is Vladimir; I am political refugee."

"Are you sure you're not a prince that's been turned into a swan?" At this question the bird flew into a rage, flapping its wings and honking and shouting in Russian.

"What did I say?" asked Moyra, startled.

"You think I am monarchy?" the swan squawked in indignation.

"Well, if you're not a prince but an ordinary swan, how did you learn to talk?" asked Moyra.

"I live peaceful life in lake in Russia, yes? No worry; jus' swim, eat fish, preen. Then one day, out of sky, come big flock of swans. They say they are the princes - turned into swans by evil stepmother. They teach me to speak like persons. I am happy. Have friends.

"Then princesses come," here the swan made a honk of fear and disgust. "They turn my friends into princes; they kiss me all over, but I do not turn into anything. I am jus' me. So princes say 'He is no prince like we thought. Let us eat him and have a big feast to celebrate being princes again.' So I fly away, become political refugee. It takes me *whole month* preening to get princesses' lipstick out of feathers. *Five weeks!* I am no prince!"

"Can I kiss you to make sure?"

"Can I peck your eye out?"

Moyra traded her prophetic chickens for Vladimir the talking swan (she was glad to see the chickens go; they always predicted vague warnings of bad fortune and she was sick of having to pick bits of paper out of her omelets) and headed back to the licensing office.

"You're sure he's not a prince?" asked the wizard skeptically.

"Check for yourself," said Moyra. The wizard bent down to kiss the swan...

"I'll take your word for it," he said, conjuring a bandage for his bleeding nose. "No true prince would cuss like that and threaten to destroy all tools of feudalism."

"Is he an approved pet?" Moyra asked.

"He's on the list," said the wizard. "And he is black. The Council likes animals to be black. But," he added, looking down his injured nose at the bird, "I'm not so sure they'd agree with his politics. Still..." the wizard sighed. "I see no reason not to approve him as a pet." He handed Moyra the form. She filled out 'black swan' and handed it back.

"Thank you. You can expect your license in the mail."

A few weeks later Moyra's witching license arrived. Vladimir tried to get Bunsen to burn it because he felt



it was a tool of the oppressor, but Moyra stopped him. Bunsen wasn't working anymore anyway, except to heat up mugs of tea for Moyra to drink as she sat in front of the fire, admiring her license framed over the mantelpiece.

# *A Day in the Life of a Barista*

...

SCOTT COHEA

*Stage - Counter is set at a 45 degree angle with the customers walking toward the audience*

*A barista stands at the counter of a local Starbucks. The barista is waiting on a customer (CUSTOMER I) who has a curious look on his face as he looks to the menu boards that hang on the wall just behind and above the barista. Behind the customer are two other people in line. The next customer (CUSTOMER II) is deep in conversation on a cell phone, While the person last in line (CUSTOMER III) is looking around the coffee shop and scoffing at everything.*

*Whole stage is dark, spotlight comes on, focused on CUSTOMER III. The spotlight falls on each customer as they speak their line, then comes up on CUSTOMER I and BARISTA.*

CUSTOMER III:

I don't know why people come into these high priced corporate controlled shops.

CUSTOMER II:

Oh my God, did he really wear that? Oh, he sooo needs to be in the gym doing cardio kickboxing and the jazzercise dance classes.

BARISTA:

*(standing at the counter annoyed but trying to look happy, turns to address the audience)*

Here is the kind of guy I get every now and again. He can never figure out what he wants or how he wants it. He has a million and one questions and believes I have every answer for him.

*(Turns back to the customer)*

CUSTOMER I:

*(still looking at the menu board and confused)*

Hhhuuummm?

BARISTA:

So have you decided on a drink?

CUSTOMER I:

What's in a caramel Mach-i-ado?

BARISTA:

You mean a caramel Macchiato. Vanilla syrup, steamed milk, espresso, and caramel sauce drizzled on top. Would you like one today?

CUSTOMER II:

Oh my God, he did not say that. Only he would say that. *(laughs)*

CUSTOMER I:

*(still looking at the menu board and still confused)*

No...no. What's in a frapa-khino?

BARISTA:

A Frappuccino. Well, it's a shake with coffee in it.

CUSTOMER I:

Well..... no not that either. I don't know what to get.

Hhhmmm...

BARISTA:

Well, can I recommend anything?

CUSTOMER I:

No..... well, how about I just get a tall cup of coffee.

BARISTA:

Sure.

*(getting a little irritated turns and gets a small cup of coffee, then turns to look and address the audience. Lights fade out. Spotlight on barista. The rest of cast stops moving.)*

BARISTA:

You know, I really get annoyed at these people who walk in here and know exactly what they want but decide to take up an hour of your time just to ask a thousand questions. If you walked in knowing you wanted a cup of coffee then order a cup of coffee! Some people just need to realize that they are wasting your time, and draining the patience out people. They just need to move on and stop bugging everyone  
*(turns back to the customer with a cup of coffee and hands it*

*off, all the time smiling)*  
Here you go, sir.

CUSTOMER I:

*(he stares at the cup with a upset look)*  
This isn't a large cup of coffee.

BARISTA:

No sir, our tall is our small and our venti is our large size. Would you like a venti cup instead?

CUSTOMER I:

*(getting upset)*  
You guys need to get your sizes right and stop trying to confuse everyone. When I think a tall cup I think of the big one.  
*(very sarcastic tone)*  
So yes I want a large, I mean venti, cup of coffee.

BARISTA:

So a venti drip, sir.

CUSTOMER I:

*(Angry look)*  
What did you call me?!?

BARISTA:

*(shocked look)*  
No, no, I mean coffee! We call our cups of coffee drips. As in "drip coffee."

CUSTOMER I:

So are you calling me an idiot because I don't know

what kind of coffee I want?!

BARISTA:

No, sir, I just—

CUSTOMER I:

I hate you people who think you are so smart.  
Flashing around your coffee knowledge and treating  
us regular people like idiots. Well, I am not an idiot!  
And if you are just going to stand there and make me  
feel like a moron then we are going to have more than  
just words.

*(shakes a fist at the barista)*

BARISTA:

*(Barista puts his hands up with his palms facing the  
customer)*

Sir, sir, sir I did not mean anything bad by it. I  
was just trying to tell you what we call the sizes of  
our cups.

*(grabs a cup and holds it in front of customer)*

CUSTOMER I:

Oh...

*(lowers fist)*

You guys need to get your names straight and stop  
trying to screw with everyone by changing the names  
of everything. Is that a corporate policy? To piss off  
your customers by making them feel stupid?!

BARISTA:

*(shocked look)*

I'm sorry sir, I'm not trying to make you upset. This

is what Starbucks has set up as our drink selection.  
But we still understand small, medium, and large.

CUSTOMER I:

*(grabs his coffee)*

I hope so.

*(Slams the money for the coffee down on the counter  
and storms off)*

BARISTA:

Wow, that was an interesting one.

*(takes money off counter and puts it in the drawer,  
then looks to the next customer, who comes walking  
up while talking on a cell phone.)*

BARISTA:

Hello how ar—

CUSTOMER II:

*(puts up a finger to tell the barista to be quite while  
they are on the phone and keeps the phone  
conversation going.)*

BARISTA:

*(Looking very annoyed, stands looking at the  
customer waiting for them to finish on the phone.  
He turns to the audience. Lights fade spotlight on  
BARISTA, rest of cast stops moving.)*

This is a person who I see day in and day out and  
they fucking drive me nuts. Always too busy to deal  
with the little people. We are all here to serve their  
needs, their only job it to look good and make us  
all feel minor.

*(Lights come back up)*

CUSTOMER II:

*(puts phone to her shoulder)*

Sorry, I'm on my way to the gym and had to stop for my cup coffee. I really need it today.

BARISTA:

Well that's what we're here for, to help you get your day going. So what will be your poison?  
I mean, drink?

CUSTOMER II:

*(gets back on the phone)*

Huh... huh...

*(puts phone back on shoulder)*

Oh, I'll go with the same I always get, a venti strawberries and cream Frap.

CUSTOMER III:

*(Standing in line still looking over the entire store shaking his head)*

Fucking Corporate America.

BARISTA:

*(a confused look)*

Miss, you know there is no coffee in that drink, right? It's basically a strawberry shake.

CUSTOMER III:

*(looking at the CDs that are for sale)*

What, now they're trying to corner the music industry too?



CUSTOMER II:

No, there is coffee in it. I have it every morning on my way to the gym.

*(gets back on the phone)*

Oh no he didn't! Oh my gosh!..

*(gets off the phone again)*

Besides, I know a guy whose brother's sister's cousin's best friend's old college roommate is a high-up person in Starbucks and they said that this is the drink that has the most caffeine in it.

BARISTA:

I'm sorry but there is not coffee in that one. Unless you want me to add a shot of espresso to it. That also doesn't have caffeine, but it does have the highest calorie intake.

CUSTOMER II:

*(very annoyed look)*

Ugh, no, I hate the taste of espresso. And it's low in calories because my friend told me so.

*(gets back on the phone)*

Oh my God, I hate it when people try to talk to you while you're on the phone. It's soooooo annoying.

BARISTA:

*(looks to the audience, with a smug look, then turns back to the customer)*

CUSTOMER II:

I just hate those people...

*(put phone back to her shoulder)*

Why would I have it if I'm going to the gym?

Especially if it's high in calories? You just don't know what the hell you're talking about. How long have you worked here?

BARISTA:

*(looking very apologetic)*

About three years and I'm sorry to question your vast knowledge of Starbucks Coffee. Would you still like to get your venti frap still?

CUSTOMER II:

*(a look of triumph)*

Yes, make it fast I'm in a hurry. My spin class starts in a few minutes and I have to do my stretching.

*(gets back on her phone)*

Some people are just so slow...

BARISTA:

*(Turns away from customer to make the drink and again addresses the audience while gesturing the motions of making a drink)*

Ok, these people really piss me off to no end. Who do they think they are that the whole has to stop for their fucking phone call? And who the heck are you, lady, to tell me about Starbucks drinks! Did you go to Starbucks boot camp training and listen to all of those lame ass videos on what makes an fine cup of coffee? Or how to make the customer feel at home and cozy in this shit hole? I have your home right here, you stuck up ninny! Well, since you know so much about my fucking job, a few extra shots of espresso won't hurt at all.

*(adds a few extra shots of espresso to the drink and turns*

*and hands off the drink smiling to the customer)*

BARISTA:

Here you go miss.  
I hope it tastes just the way you like it.

CUSTOMER II:

It's fine.  
*(Slams money for the drink down on the counter and  
grabs the Frap speeding away in a power walk, the  
whole time still talking on her phone)*  
Oh my gosh, what are the hiring standards at  
Starbucks these days?

BARISTA:

*(Talking to him self in disbelief)*  
Man what is up with these people today?

*(The next customer comes walking up looking around the store,  
still scoffing at all of his surroundings.)*

BARISTA:

Hello how may I...

CUSTOMER III:

Don't waste your corporate answer on me. I'm sick of  
hearing it.

BARISTA:

*(Turns to address the audience, lights fade on all but  
BARISTA)*

He is the once-in-a-blue-moon customer that drives me up the fucking wall. They come strolling in here with their nose so far up in the fucking air, I swear they are going to get a nose bleed. They believe that their shit doesn't stink and they are on a whole different coffee field than everyone else. They understand what a real cup of coffee slop is suppose to fucking taste like and that I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing. They try to hit me with tons of witty sarcasm and comebacks, to make themselves feel smart and above us shitty little peons. The only thing he is actually doing is making himself look like a horse's ass, for buying this over priced roasted shitty ass coffee crap.

*(Turns back to the customer, lights come back up)*

I'm sorry; would you like to have a grande drip today?

CUSTOMER III:

I hate your company and how it's trying to change the name of cup sizes to match their corporate agenda. You know the only reason they did that was to see if their influence would convert people into calling small, medium, large tall, grand, venti.

BARISTA:

*(Getting annoyed but trying to stay polite)*

Sir the reason for the cup names is because we are trying to stay with our roots, which are in Italy. That's why we use a little bit of Italian to name the cups.

CUSTOMER III:

Ha, if you want to stay with your roots then you should charge people 50 cents for a cup of coffee

and not four bucks. For that much I should at least get a refill. But no, that would hurt your profit margin and in turn your establishment would have to raise its prices so you could meet your quarterly quota. And when did tall become Italian?

BARISTA:

*(Turns to the audience and mumbles)*

Where is the sign that says "idiots please come in today?"

CUSTOMER III:

What did you say?!?

BARISTA:

Oh, nothing. Would you like me to get something started for you today?

CUSTOMER III:

Don't rush me! I don't even like your high money slosh. I can go down the street to Denny's and get a cup of coffee with unlimited re-fills for \$1.25. At least there they encourage you to stay and enjoy the ambiance of their institution.

BARISTA:

Well, sir, that is your choice to make.

CUSTOMER III:

That's right!! My choice, not Starbucks'! What's with all of the Starbucks Coffee shops on every street? Are they are trying gain a monopoly by eliminating all of my choices by cornering the coffee market?

Flooding the streets with their corporate roasted coffee beans? I wouldn't be surprised if you were slipping something into the coffee that made your customers addicted to it.

BARISTA:

*(Being a smart ass)*

Sir, that would be caffeine. That would be the addictive ingredient.

CUSTOMER III:

I know what caffeine is! Now you're calling your customers dumb or is that just corporate policy?

BARISTA:

Sir, is there anything I can get for you today?

CUSTOMER III:

Well, fine. I will succumb to the corporate trappings. Can I get a venti latte with four shots caramel sauce, two pumps of hazelnut, and three pumps of raspberry. And add another twenty dollars to my Starbucks card.

BARISTA:

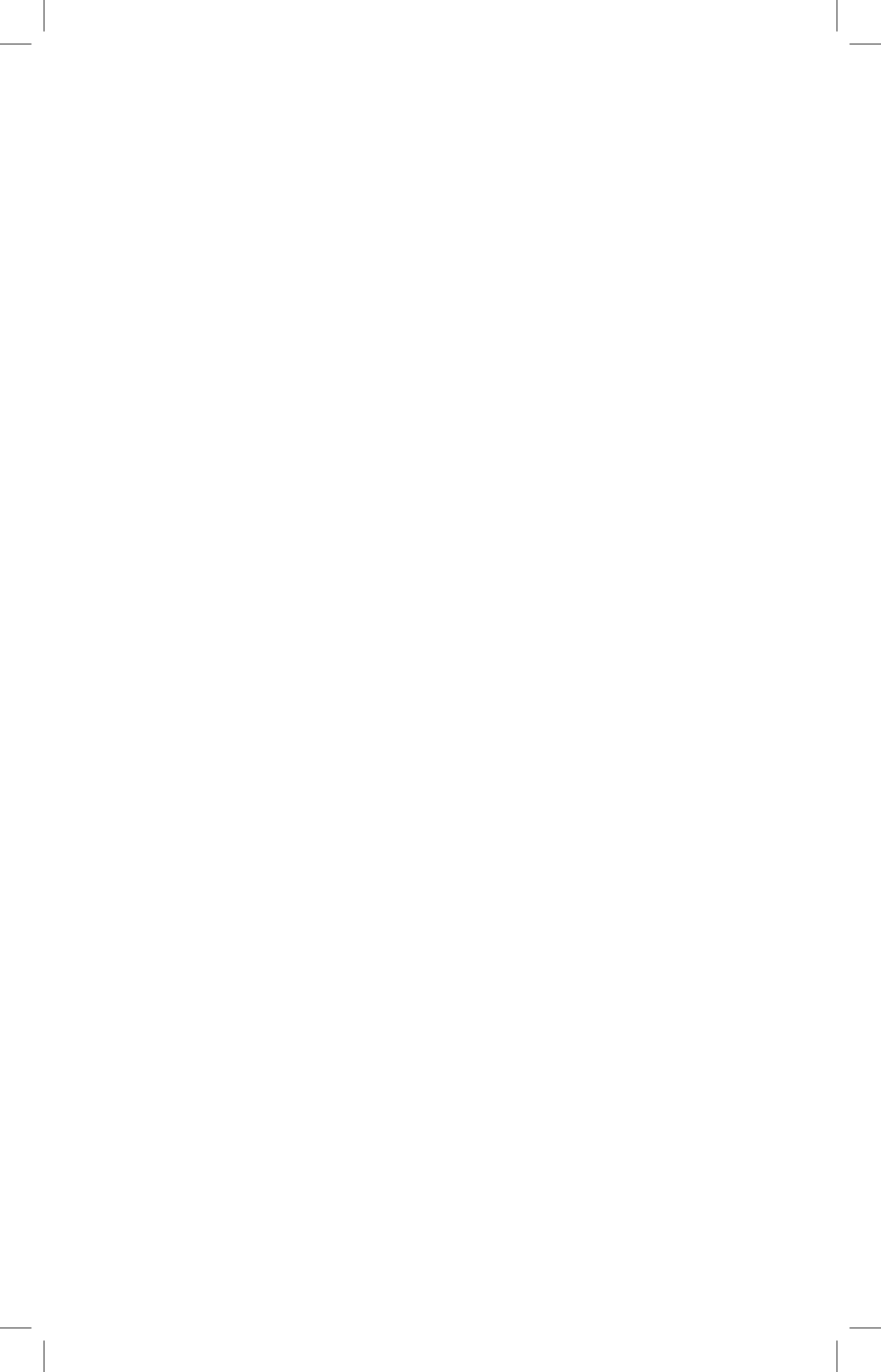
*(Starts to take off his Starbucks apron)*

You know what buddy? I'm fucking sick of you dumb shits who have nothing better to do then come in here and bug the shit out of me. You know what asshole? You like this corporate shit so much? You get your prissy ass over here and make this shit your fucking self. You ass clown!

*(Throws the apron at CUSTOMER III, then storms off stage)*

*past the customers cursing.)*

*(End Scene)*





**That's you in the mirror. Prove it. Shy, stiff-backed and fidgety. It's so raw. It's messy, it's filthy. In my Shakespeare class, Al Pacino talked.**

**Proof  
Multiple Personalities  
Human Again  
Power**

# *Proof*

...

ELISE MOORE

*That's you in the mirror,*

Prove it.

*And again, in the photo on the fridge.*

Not me.

*Here with your mom—*

You're taking this literally. Those mean  
nothing.

*And with the Thanksgiving turkey—*

N

**ISLAND FOX**

o

*Don't be so stubborn!*

*Just look, recognize...*

*Where are you then?*

*Don't give me that. I recognize you, your bullshit  
ambiguity.*

*You're always belligerent. Like this since the first.*

*Of you, perhaps. This photo is a real representation of  
you, of your life.*

*Here it is, in my hand.*

*Clearly not. This was a year ago.*

*Older, perhaps, but exactly you.*

*Instinct is what separates animals from humans.*

*I don't want you to be her. I don't want you to be you.*

You're wrong.

I'm not there.

Nearby, elsewhere.

How can you recognize me?

Since you never watched, it's impossible to expect more.

It doesn't exist, not truly.

But is the moment here?

People change in an instant. I know that's not me.

Never exactly. I change too much, it's instinctive.

Am I an animal? You told me that I was the girl in the  
mirror.

# *Multiple Personalities*

...

KATHY PASHA

SHY,  
stiff-backed and fidgety,  
she stares at the ground as it swells, distorts,  
the aperture of her eyes widen  
in and out of focus,  
the carpet swirls in time  
to conversations around her.  
Tendrils reach her ears,  
amputated shards, idiocy  
from Chatty Princess,  
    Know-it-all,  
and Outspoken Idiot.  
Shy rolls her earthy eyes.



TEMPER,  
first docile and drugged,  
comes with the ring of the phone,  
shrill souvenir of the outside world;  
she sits wrapped in  
the ubiquitous cloak of seclusion,  
ponders the silence.  
Again it rings,  
diffusing thoughts, muted contemplations  
into the air like  
    the exhaust  
from the morning's tailpipe.  
Temper screams and throws a book at the wall.

HUMOR,  
eyes steamed and stomach sore,  
she uses her cunning as  
she dodges verbal assaults and  
the occasional 'yo mama' joke  
in favor of a strategically placed  
bit of sarcasm.  
There with friends  
who joke without worries of  
stereotypes,  
          taboos,  
                  or political correctness.  
Humor laughs a quiet throaty wheeze.

ME,  
a scientific experiment,  
combining all three,  
constantly shifting and evolving  
with ratios that are never stagnant,  
not predictable or algebraic,  
even to me.  
These three girls,  
each one of them me as I am them:  
SHY,  
    TEMPER,  
        and HUMOR.  
I begin to find a balance.

# *Human Again*

...

CHRIS GIBSON

It's so raw.  
It's messy, it's filthy.  
It's fucking brilliant.  
She screams so beautiful  
and shakes uncontrollable  
and fucks me until it hurts.  
I breathe so fast  
I think I could die.  
What makes sex good  
is the love in her eyes.  
I feel like a human  
wet and tangled.  
Sights, sounds, smells, and  
I know her taste.  
Repetition of earthquakes  
until I can cum no more.

# *Power*

...

KRISTA WILBUR

In my Shakespeare class, Al Pacino talked,  
heated, passionate, and suddenly he dropped

Fuck

on the ground.

It bounced, broke into twenty pieces,  
and we all held it in our hands, this  
more-than-a-word-just-a-word word.

My shard I tucked into my pocket,

Feeling

the pierce of it against my leg, and

I swallowed sudden pain with a  
pleasure I didn't understand, a

joy that I should be

ashamed to admit I felt.

In American Lit our professor found

Fuck

and

Fucker

while searching for smite. We learned  
the history, and while she lectured, I watched the rash  
of fluster rise on her face. "I'm  
blushing," she said,  
but I wonder:

Does the stain on her skin come  
from the embarrassment  
of this Illicit Apple, or  
from the pleasure that erupts  
when the word slides smoothly  
out of her mouth?

This Fuck doesn't  
break—it hovers, an identified enemy, and  
my face fills with heat as I  
hold near my heart my  
shard of beautiful glass, such  
great and frightening beauty.

**Aztec warriors in bandanas and Dodger blue, she spoke like she was presenting me with something precious. She sat on the end of her bed, cross-legged, rubbing her right foot. Your forest eyes grabbed me. Wrapped up neatly, tightly—the writer inside exists at the core of me.**

**Borrowed Time**  
**The Gift**  
**Dark Eden**  
**Collision**  
**Undressing the Writer**



# *Borrowed Time*

...

F. ALBERT SALINAS

Aztec warriors  
in bandanas and Dodger blue  
chanted mantras,  
waved knives and guns  
over tattooed tears,  
and told us of time spent  
beating a man until he lied and  
denied that he was witness to a recent homicide.  
They boasted about how wasted they got before  
hustling, slinging, robbing, stabbing, shooting, breaking,  
taking whatever they wanted, making  
one man pull the cord strung  
across the bus because  
there were 12 of them and only 4 of us  
and he just wanted to get off anywhere they weren't.

Brakes screeched first, then  
a boy dragged by his blonde hair.  
He grabbed at anything he could reach to  
keep from being pulled off onto  
their street and into their city.  
I heard a veterano say,  
“Nice watch, ese,” and  
sure enough the boy had time  
wrapped around his wrist like he owned it.

Yeah, I heard the boy screaming  
but when the bus jerked away  
I wasn't about to jump into his grave  
so I tossed the first fistful  
of dirt onto his coffin like anyone would and  
turned away 'cause it was probably just his time go and  
that watch, only worth about fifty,  
was worth more than anything I've ever owned,  
except for my life.

# *The Gift*

...

JESSY GOODMAN

She spoke  
like she was presenting me with something precious.  
With a delicate, generous touch  
arms and syllables lengthened with sharp-scissored grace,  
she bestowed something I did not want  
all wrapped in satin-slippery ribbon.  
If she were to open it herself  
she'd fumble with the bright wrapping;  
paper cuts of what she doesn't understand  
about giving.  
An empty cardboard box inside.

She spoke  
but spoke of tissue-paper nothing  
and acted like it was something I needed.

# *Dark Eden*

...

ELISE MOORE

She sat on the end of her bed, cross-legged, rubbing her right foot. Her days at the hospital were long, and she was exhausted.

She switched off her small bedside lamp and padded over to the window, pushing away the heavy blackout curtains and lifting the sash. Cool night air, scented with the heady aroma of jasmine, wept over her bare shoulder. The moon was unnaturally bright, lighting up her small back garden in an ethereal light. She pulled on her worn dark robe, and walked through her dark bungalow and out into the yard.

Her feet delighted in the dark dewy grass, her face refreshed in the cool air. Each petal, each leaf, was outlined in the silver of the moon's glow. Her son's red and white tricycle rested on its side, shining in the white light.

The calm in the darkness filled her with a peace that she had not felt in a long while. She remembered a night, years ago, which resembled this calm, before the war. Her husband held her against his chest, the first night in their new home. Five years later, she still remembered the way

his stubbled chin rubbed against her ear, the way he held the nape of her neck when they kissed, fingers locked in her hair.

A cough broke through her quiet, coming from the other side of the cinderblock wall dividing the properties. Her thoughts dissipated as irritation rose; someone else penetrated her perfect night, disrupting her privacy.

It was still for a moment, until a male voice drifted over the wall.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

She paused for a minute. "Yes."

Her anger disappeared, replaced with a strange sense of amity towards him. He understood why she stood out there, alone in the night.

"I guess the moon attracted me out here. I was inside working on some things, but I was fascinated with the light. I've never seen a night quite like this one, not lit up like this."

"I know what you mean," she replied. "I should be in bed myself, but I couldn't miss it."

"How long have you been out here?"

"Oh, I don't know. Time kind of gets away from me." She leaned against the white pole holding up the overhang, hands deep in her pockets and felt for her pack of cigarettes, fidgeting with it.

"It's easy to lose track of time out here. Like dreaming—when you lie down for a quick nap, and dream something, what seems like only five minutes turns out to be a half an hour."

She laughed a little. "That's a nice way of putting it."

She heard his screen door squeal open and shut, echoing in the yard. He came back out a few moments later, and offered her a cigarette.

"No, thanks," she replied, pulling her own out of the box. "I have some."

Both were silent for a moment, each lighting their cigarettes. The orange flares of the matches distorted the light, briefly illuminating their faces with a hot glow. She inhaled deeply, and shivered. A cloud of blue smoke blew out from her parted lips, shining silvery pink in the moonlight.

"I never smoked until about a year ago," she commented. "The war and everything... I tensed up. The other nurses at the hospital gave me cigarettes, telling me they'd calm me down." Her thumb toyed with the end of her cigarette as she stared off into the darkness.

"You work at Holy Cross?" he asked.

"Yes, I've been working there for about three years." She walked over to the dividing fence, her eye caught by an early rose.

"The stress there must be overwhelming."

"Sure, at times. Some days I look forward to coming home and dealing with my mother and the tantrums my five year old throws." They both laughed.

"I think I saw your kid this morning, playing out in the yard. He's real friendly."

"He takes after his father. He's charming in front of strangers, and anyone he wants to impress, but as soon as he's alone with me or my mom, he can have the worst temper," she replied, smiling.

"My dad was like that. His temper turned on a dime. My mom had an amazing ability to calm him down though. Did you know her? She lived here, next door to you."

"Of course I knew her. After my husband... after he died, she came over every night with dinner for my son and me, until my mom moved in. I was truly upset to hear

that she passed away.”

“Yeah. She was a great lady.” He cleared his throat. “Were you at the funeral yesterday?”

“Yes. I couldn’t stay for the reception though, because I had to go to work. I wanted to meet you, tell you how sorry I was, but I didn’t have the time.”

“Did you have a grey wool coat on, with a pretty jet pin?” he asked, abruptly.

“Yes.” She lit another cigarette. “Why do you ask?” The smoke curled and danced into the night sky, drifting over the fence.

“I noticed you, that’s all. You were the only person I didn’t know there at the funeral. You were more upset than some of my family was, and I wanted to know why.” He coughed, interrupting the flow of thoughts. “And before I could introduce myself, you left and didn’t come to the reception.”

Her voice was soft. “I’m surprised you noticed me. You even remembered what I wore.”

“Journalists notice all kinds of things. We tend to remember details others forget.”

“Did you... did you notice anything else?” She was curious. Normally, she believed in keeping her mouth shut, but this night overwhelmed common sense.

“Little things. Your hands kept twisting your handkerchief, and you have pretty brown eyes.”

She felt her face grow warm in the cool darkness. She drew a breath from her cigarette, and her other hand stilled in her pocket. She laughed, nervously.

“It’s odd, hearing things like that from a stranger.” She patted her hair, tucking stray strands behind her ears, and cleared her throat. “So, you’re a journalist?”

“Yeah. Well, I was, anyway. I worked for the

Chicago Tribune.”

“Was?”

“I’m shipping out tomorrow. Training for six weeks down south, then heading off to the front.”

He paused, waiting for a response. “I wasn’t the best journalist anyhow.”

She knelt down low, arms clutching her knees. Her hand lifted the end of her cigarette, trembling a little as she took the last drag. “Were you drafted?” Her voice was quiet, barely reaching over the wall. She ground the stub of her cigarette into the grass.

“Yeah. I wasn’t going to join voluntarily, but they need more men out there. I’m hoping I get to go to Europe. Always wanted to go overseas, but never had the money.”

He chuckled. “At least this way I go free.”

She stood up, slowly.

“It’s not free. You’re bartering your life for the trip, and you don’t get anything in return.”

“Did you lose someone?”

She tried to hold back tears, swallowing hard. “My husband.” Her voice was hoarse. “His plane was shot down over Germany.”

He was quiet, searching for words. “I’m sorry.”

A few tears fell down her cheek—she didn’t wipe them away. “No. Don’t say that.” Her voice grew louder. “It never makes it better. No number of apologies will ever change what happened.” She dug her hand into the pocket of her robe and the box of cigarettes slipped into the grass. “It doesn’t help me.”

He was quiet for a moment, searching for a response. “I knew I shouldn’t have said that. People have been saying that to me for too long. And no matter how many times I



hear it, I don't feel any better."

Her heart pounded in her chest. Her face grew warm, hands cold. Her head lifted, and the moon illuminated her face. "Thank you."

The moon seemed to grow even brighter then, for a moment. She could see the delicate branches on the eucalyptus trees and the soft petals on the rose by the fence in sharp clarity. And, for a brief flash, she glimpsed his dark silhouette against his white bungalow.

They were still, for a while, uninterrupted by any sound or thought. It was a comfortable silence, alone together in the darkness.

The peace was broken as reality set in. "What time do you leave tomorrow?"

"I have to be at the train station in the morning, 'round 7 a.m."

"I guess I won't see you then, before you leave. My shift starts at 6:30."

"It would be too hard. You need to get some sleep, anyway." He lit another cigarette. She could see the smoke rising behind the wall.

"Probably. I need to head inside anyway. It's getting chilly." She turned to go back into the house.

"Wait..." his voice stopped her, but she didn't turn around.

"Yes?"

"Can I write to you, while I'm over there?"

She hugged herself tightly.

"No."

"I was pretty sure you were going to say that."

"But..." She paused, checking her words. "Come see me, after you get back."

"I was planning to."

She smiled softly into the blackness, and returned to her bed.

# Collision

...

RACHAEL JORDAN

Your forest eyes grabbed me  
with their brown spotted branches.  
The first time I noticed your wooden gaze  
from across the room,  
the small of my neck danced in a shiver,  
leaves shook in the wind down my spine.

I wanted nothing more than to be held  
by those branches, rocked in the soft, green  
leaves of your eyes, held beneath  
the sturdy wood.

Mondays meant entering your forest,  
but only in my mind  
and in slight glances from you.

Six weeks later,  
freed from the room and lying in heavy air,  
on our backs searching for satellites among stars,  
I felt the first touch of that moment,  
your forest eyes black in the darkness,  
your fingers tracing lines in my palm  
with grains of sand.

Away from the stars and into my honey eyes you went,  
the humid air locking us together,  
limbs entwined like a gnarled tree,  
leaves all over now, shaking, pulsing,  
the forest meets the beach  
as sand combines with the softening wood of your forest  
and dew drips silently from our bodies.

The moment is over.

The forest returns to your eyes,  
the honey to mine.

Over is a moment that was only a dream,  
and now lies dead in the sand,  
slowly corroding away with the rhythm of the tide.  
The dream rolls and sinks deep into the waves,  
a memory of a collision beneath stars.

# *Undressing the Writer*

...

KELLY CRISPIN

Wrapped up neatly, tightly—the writer inside exists at the core of me. Often I am unaware that she is there beneath all these layers, stifled by the monotony of this material life. It isn't until I delve into the writing process: the intermingling of phases and layers of planning, translating, revising, and so on does the writer inside emerge to reveal the deepest part of me. As each layer is stripped and each phase is lifted, I am left exposed and open; naked. In this way, writing is much like the act of undressing.

There are those times when I undress myself for no other reason than to shed myself from the day's garb; to rid myself of the weight of draping fabric so that I can exist freely amidst the open air. In a heap of haphazard motion the process is quick and messy, yet ever so uplifting. In this private liberation there are no onlookers, no one to please, nothing to live up to. There is no need for censorship, no will for structure. There is simply the desire to discard and the pleasure found in the release.

Much like undressing in the dark, writing can feel

disorientating and even slightly frightening. However, like the familiar bed post which aides me in my effort to disrobe, I remember those things which help to guide me through. Alone in the dark, I seek out against those impediments which would typically hinder me and I find that familiar switch, and on goes the closet's light, illuminating my nearly naked soul.

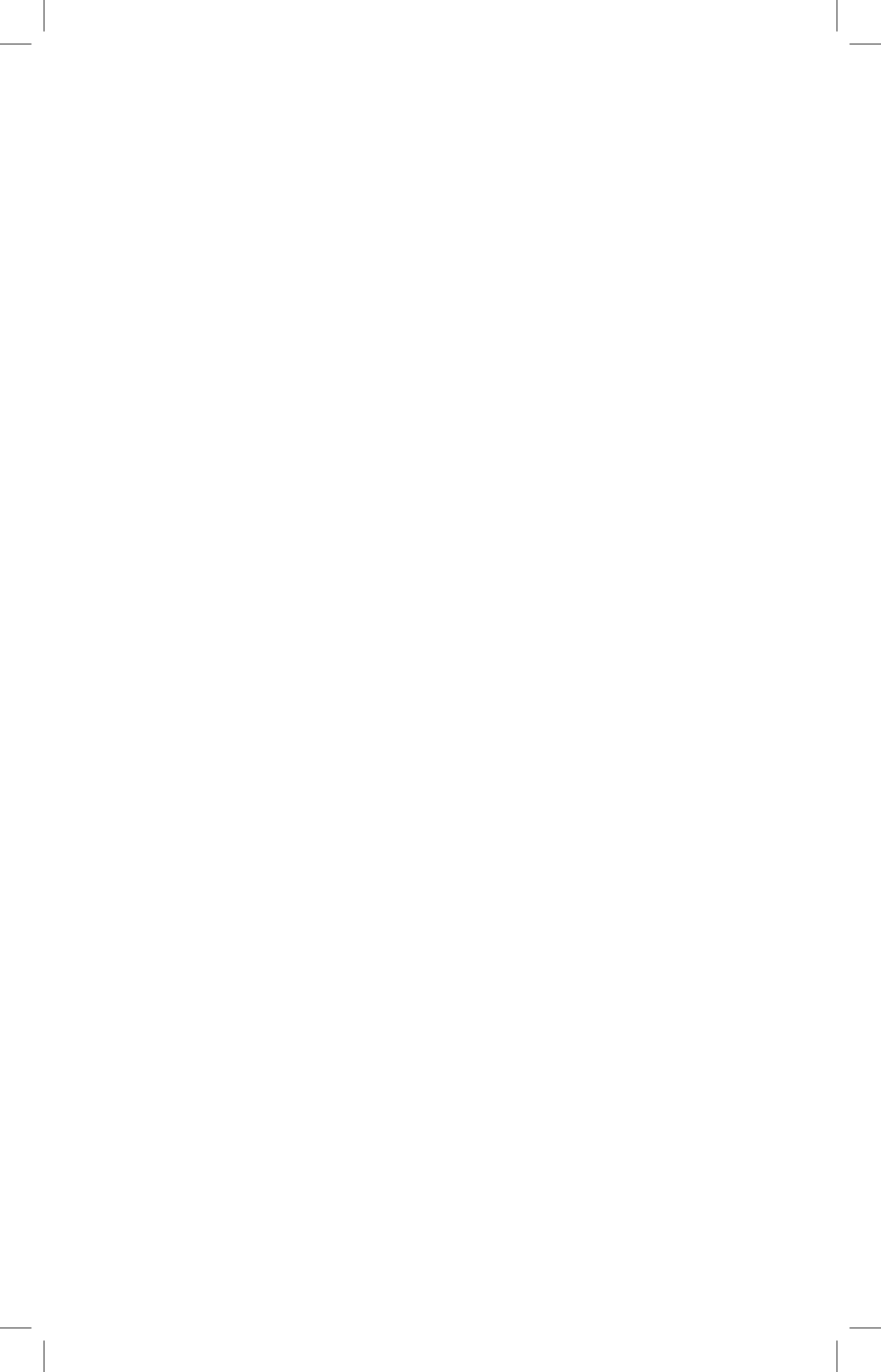
Sometimes writing, like undressing, is done to examine myself. There before an unflattering mirror, I look at my body. I study some lines and cringe at others; I flex certain muscles and suck in those areas which fail to be firm. I squint and I stare and I make notes; I decide then and there what needs to be revised, what needs to change. There upon my reflection, with the bareness of my being staring back at me, I marvel at who it is I am and who it is I am not.

There are those moments when writing can feel like undressing before a lover for the first time. The swelling of nervous anticipation inhibits me, strikes within me a cord of modesty. Bashful and hesitant and extremely aware of my audience, I unzip and remove those items which conceal me. I put myself out there. I let it all out and I wait quietly for the slightest reaction. And despite my exposed and vulnerable offering, I feel exhilarated by the prospect that he will like what he sees, what he reads.

On a more developed level, writing can feel like undressing before a lover of many years. I know what he likes and how I should go about it. I know how to keep his interest and how I can lose it. I feel safe and comfortable as I slip out of my dress; he knows already what to expect. Here, I am confident and more able to effectively connect with my audience—the dotting eyes of a familiar spectator. I know exactly how to draw him in. This atmosphere of

ease lends itself to flexibility. I am able to toy with my ideas, with my devices. I can become more daring, more creative. On the other hand, I can get too comfortable undressing before this lover of mine. I have to be careful not to tire of the process. I have to keep it interesting—engaging. I need be aware of his interests while remaining true to mine; I can't let myself become redundant or faded or selfishly jaded. I must keep the fire alive, the process fresh, the feeling pure and genuinely intense.

And so it is, the process of writing is so much like the act of undressing, so much like the unveiling—the unraveling of clothes. I undress to expose myself, repose myself. I undress to remind myself and unwind myself. I undress to be free—to see me for me. Like the process of a writer, I undress to reunite with myself, to even offer myself. I write for the same purpose as I undress: to feel the open air of which I call liberty on the nape of my neck or the tip of my tongue or the curve of my waste—and all of it at the *push* or *pull* of my thumb.





**I visited my grandmother once, two years ago. In Heaven you will have no scars. Nina looked just like Nina. In my ear—loitering, I smell him mealy mouthed, a void in my heart that bleeds to the tune of a song about love; I sat there, deadpan, as he told me he wasn't like his father, That was our secret, and I held it inside of me. Everything around him was white, bright white.**

**A Beautiful Place Out in the Country**

**Firestorm**

**Shed Died at 8:20**

**Creep**

**Silence**

**Meth**

**Termination**

**A Halo of Red Tape**

# *A Beautiful Place Out in the Country*

...

CHRIS O'NEAL

There was thunder  
There was lightning  
Then the stars went out  
And the moon fell from the sky  
It rained mackerel  
It rained trout  
And the great day of wrath has come  
And here's mud in your big red eye  
The poker's in the fire  
And the locusts take the sky  
And the earth died screaming  
While I lay dreaming of you

- Tom Waits

A *Biohazard Level 1* outbreak consists of the following: *Bacillus subtilis*, canine hepatitis, E. Coli, varicella (also known as Chicken Pox), and some non-infectious bacteria. In the event of a *Biohazard Level 1* outbreak, it is recommended that one disposes of material relating to the infection and thoroughly wash hands.

I visited my grandmother once, two years ago, in an old folk's home in Midland, Texas where my mom works to this day. The very same building in which I held my first job that paid cash. She was old and frail, lying on a less-than-comfortable bed, clear tubes running from her nose and arms into a lifeless machine watching over her like a sentinel guarding Troy.

"It's so nice to see you," she said, and I smiled and hugged her as tight as I could without harming her, and then we took a picture together.

I meant to see her this past Christmas, at least in the weeks following, because I was closer to her then than I am now. East Texas is not a simple drive from the coast of California; it's not even a simple drive from Dallas, where my friend had taken me in for the week. But it seemed that greater powers were at work to keep me there in his cramped room instead of on the road towards her beautiful country home surrounded by wooded mysticism. An ice storm came and stayed, leaving the roads covered in a glistening death that tore through the green and left only white.

Not to mention the virus.

My ride was sick. Coughing and hacking, bodily fluids coming forth, spilling onto the floor and into the toilet. I made the decision not to go.

For everywhere I went after that I would bring with me a horse named Pestilence, and upon that horse would be a pale rider, to whom sympathy is a mortal trait. Looking out of the second story window from my vantage point on the sick bed, across the way from an unfinished pool with a foot of lime green stagnant water resting in the recess, came a galloping horse to the soundtrack of a sunny day.

Snowflakes fall in random intervals, each as

insignificant as the other, with absolutely no order or control of themselves or the position in which they will land. Dependent solely on the conditions in which they are created, a snowflake will twist and turn on its way to earth, sometimes gliding, some times spiraling downward, but mostly symbolizing beautiful ruin.

Our body is like the fall of a snowflake, constantly at war with itself to determine in which way to go, in what way to behave, but most of all how to comprehend subtle changes in the atmosphere. After all, a snowflake by any other name – say, nasopharyngitis – is still a snowflake.

Accumulation seems to favor the vertical, with mounds forming in rolling hills pressed against minor boundaries such as a fence, while a thin layer acts as a blanket of assurance that no spot will go untouched. In a way, it is very similar to that of the traveling businessman. With a simple cough, he blankets an entire airline compartment, and those directly to his side, whether vertical or horizontally inclined, are bombarded with the majority of these 'flakes' that for reasons beyond our comprehension tend to be found together.

I watch these snowflakes congregate like an army without a general outside of the window. Several land on the window sill, quivering slightly before melting before my eyes. I wondered if they knew that inside was their distant cousin, the one with a conscious that knew where to fall and whom to blanket.

Derek jerked suddenly in a fit of coughing. I looked over for a moment and sighed with my palm over my mouth, taking a deep breath of the stagnant air, and the pale rider simply tapped his fingers on the skull of his horse in boredom.

A *Biohazard Level 2* outbreak consists of the following: Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, influenza, Lyme disease, salmonella, HIV, and scrapie (believed to be non-transmutable to humans). When handling any live agent, scientists are required to follow all of the procedures outlined for *Biohazard Level 1*, as well as making use of biohazard safety cabinets, which offer a safe working environment when dealing with open containers. Those inside of a laboratory in which any container is in use must wear extra protective gear, such as gloves and visors.

The year was 2003 when severe acute respiratory syndrome became the news that gripped a nation. The previous year it was Tickle Me Elmo, if I remember correctly. Ireland, Spain, Romania, Bulgaria, Switzerland, South Africa, Kuwait, India, and Indonesia claimed that only one of their citizens had become ill with the virus.

"I don't believe that only one person came down with it in all of those countries," Derek said as we drank coffee at the Denny's. His diet of crackers and water seemed to have no effect on him but to impassion his hunger, which he had no control over, and thus a plate of miniature hamburgers were on the way for us to share. "Aren't most of these places third world?"

"Wouldn't know," I said honestly. "Perhaps Kuwait, maybe Indonesia."

"What about Canada?"

"Far from it," I replied.

"Then what about them? Twenty deaths already."

The U.S./Canada border lay roughly 1600 miles to the North and yet I could feel the pressure. Twenty

deaths from a virus that had noticeably ignored other countries that we as Americans have deemed inferior seemed steep. Twenty deaths, and how many more went unaccounted for? Was Canada the new China? How many had been unreported, unseen, unheard of; how many died in their beds peacefully with a severe cough and a fever? How many were told to go home and sweat it out, drink orange juice, and avoid strenuous activity? How many Grandmothers passed away in a restless dream? A nightmare of a gargantuan wave of red brought upon them by a guest?

I stared at him for a moment, and then noticed the waitress strolling towards us, a plate in one hand while the sleeve of the other found her nose and rubbed methodically, leaving a shimmering wet trail behind. As she passed a couple on her right, a man began coughing without covering himself, and we made eye contact for a brief moment before he cut into his ham steak courteously with a knife and fork.

Peering through squinting, judgmental eyes, I witnessed the birthing of a new life form erupting from our waitresses' sleeve. With a pink head and a red body, the organism flew about her head in an infinity before swooping down between her legs and then multiplying several hundred times, filling the air with a red infection as she moved closer and closer. I rubbed my eyes with my knuckles and watched as they disappeared underneath the buns of our hamburgers.

"Everything okay here?" the waitress asked, and I told her honestly that water would be enough for me.

"I'm not going to be able to make it today," I said to my grandma, whom for the past twenty-two years I have called Cawkins. A simple mistranslation of the word

'cookie' made for an enduring name that stuck. I could hear her disappointment through the receiver which translated into depression in my mind. Derek's coughing hadn't subsided, and just as I said my good-bye's he began again, hacking away at an already abused esophagus.

A boney woman appeared on the television – flat screen, 30"; a gift from Derek's father – and informed us that the roads between Dallas and Ft. Worth were completely shut down – i.e., non-functional. Her cheeks were puffy and she wore too much make up. She held back a sneeze as the camera moved off of her.

"We couldn't go if we wanted to," Derek said as he brought his clenched fist to his mouth just as he changed the channel and, finding nothing on, turned it off.

'Couldn't go if we wanted to,' I said to myself. The point wasn't that I didn't want to go – it was a mere 200 miles away – it was what it would entail, or better, what would result in me traversing this frozen land. So I closed my eyes and drifted into a different world altogether, one in which I had risked travel.

Wooden, brown, and a bit worn from age with a small peephole that over looked a small road and tall woods, her door stood omniscient over the entire country side. The boards creaked at my arrival as I stepped up onto the porch, and I watched my feet crunch into the newly fallen snow. I knocked, and the sound reverberated off of the poles holding in the small fence, sending a cat running from underneath my car.

The door knob shook slightly and turned slowly as a smile appeared on my face, and the old visage of my grandmother stood at the fissure, smiling back at me. I stared at her for a moment, letting my arrival soak in before saying 'hello, nice to see you.' To which she



replied, 'hello, nice to see you as well.' With that, I placed my open palm on the door and attempted to enter. I watched as the lenses on her glasses fogged over, her demeanor changed as if she were backed into a corner with sharp lighting contrasting her every wrinkle into a deep canyon of shadow, and I found that the door would budge no further against her frail form.

"It's not you," she said, averting her eyes over my shoulder. I turned – slower than normal, it seemed, as I watched a new snow fall and detailed each individual snowflake on it's way to meet it's brothers and sisters – and noticed that Derek was no where to be seen, but a figure became clear slowly, and I could make out a man on horseback approaching me silently with a calculating gaze that could be felt through the thin veil of winter and it's bone chill breeze; then the distinct sound of a door shutting caught my attention and the man offered me a ride home with an extended palm.

*A Biohazard Level 3 outbreak consists of the following: Anthrax, BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, commonly known as Mad Cow Disease), mumps, West Nile Virus, SARS, smallpox, tuberculosis, typhus, and yellow fever. All personnel must be accompanied by experienced scientists when handling these potentially lethal agents. In a Biohazard Level 3 laboratory, special engineering designs have been implemented – such as double entrance doors and filtered exhaust vents.*

Birds fall out of the sky in Chatsworth, apparently, and some even walk into the street in a strange avian suicide. This is all because of H5N1, not the result of

some hypnotist's filthy parlor tricks. All of this, according to my girlfriend's father, is what he has witnessed, and which is why he believes that the panic surrounding the so-called 'pandemic' is overblown. After all, if the birds already had it, why had there been no human infections? Ireland, Spain, Romania, Bulgaria, Switzerland, South Africa, Kuwait, India, and Indonesia had at least one – of SARS, that is – thus the question: where is our one?

This of course is the cry of the befouled; those who had been burned by several other scares, of them all the biggest of course was the Cold War. If it were to strike, why hadn't it?

Derek coughed the entirety of the first night, the second, and the third – then on the fourth, he appeared to feel better.

"You're better now, on the day I have to leave," I said, giving him more grief than I had intended to. But he apologized repeatedly, which is his nature, and took me out for a departing drink. I boarded a plane at approximately one o'clock, beginning with only one carry-on but ending up with two after coming in eight pounds over the checked baggage limit. I sat next to a middle-aged man who appeared worn and gruesome with oily skin. In his hand, an open copy of Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain*, about three quarters of the way through. I wondered if he was being ironic and pulled out my own novel – *At the Mountains of Madness*.

Dallas would be a distant memory in a few moments, and I considered my luck. Spending a week in cramped quarters with a victim of illness and suffering, I hadn't the slightest headache. My nose took in the circulated and filtered air, and my throat – while a bit dry – welcomed the provided soda. So it was that I would waste the time

away inside the imaginary world of H.P. Lovecraft.

Until I noticed a rotund man sit down next to the Crichton reader wearing a surgical mask. I placed my head back against the seat, only to jerk away suddenly after realizing that I hadn't been the only passenger to ever rest my head against the less-than-comfortable built-in pillow, by the window, over looking the wing that shook ever so slightly. I felt as though I should ask the pilot what his precautions were to prevent a Biosafety Level 4 outbreak aboard his plane, or why the man reading beside me hadn't bothered to wash his filthy, abrasive face, or why the surgical mask wasn't accompanied by proper gloves and a visor. I quickly motioned for a stewardess, who had been roaming the aisles checking for inane safety precautions such as buckling one's seatbelt (instead of inspecting the air filters). I was asked if there was anything she could do for me, such as offer me peanuts or turn on the air, and I scoffed at her peanuts and made her aware that I could function the air myself. I simply took a deep breath and shook my head, and she retreated into the back. I might have asked to be moved out of sight of the man in the corner and his horse, but it seemed as though there wasn't a seat in the house that escaped his peering eyes.

I've often considered taking an entire summer off from my responsibilities and obligations and traveling to certain places in the lower forty eight. Bringing only cash and enough clothes to last me a week, I would venture to such places as Fort Detrick, Bethesda, and Rockville, Maryland; Atlanta, Georgia; Hamilton, Montana; San Antonio and Galveston, Texas; Richmond, Virginia; and Stillwater, Oklahoma. I would pick up a postcard from either a gas station or a tourist information desk, address

it to Derek back in Dallas, and write simply: Wish you were here, for study. Then send it off with only a stamp and no return address.

I sat on his bed on the third night watching the sky give birth to snow. Each individual flake couldn't have possibly had a planned route to earth, and so I basked in the randomness of it all. Then, just as I began to drift away, he began coughing again. I turned slowly towards him and through peering eyes witnessed his mouth give birth to thousands of individual molecules, each with a distinct route planned to the nearest warm body.

I had a vision of visiting my grandmother three years from today. Stepping onto her porch I notice no sound as my feet break through ice and snow. The limbs of the trees, covered in the newly fallen freeze, shake slowly in utter silence as I don a smile and push open the old wooden door. I step in and onto the worn gray carpet, a distinct aroma of musk and decay in the air, and a fire roaring in the hearth. The dim light from the fire illuminates the room and draws my attention to an open door across the way, where I can see that a window is open and a cool breeze comes through. I cross the room and as my feet crunch the carpet I notice it turn from the whitest snow to the deepest red, and I continue to smile as I push on, until I reach the door and enter, only to find a bespectacled woman and a pale man, side by side, reading a book on equestrian care.

*A Biohazard Level 4* outbreak consists of the following: Bolivian fever, Dengue fever, Marburg virus, Ebola, Hanta virus, Lassa virus, and other diseases in which a large quantity of blood escapes the body. Such classification exists to label diseases

and viruses that have a death rate between 50 – 100%. Scientists are required to, and keep on hand, suits in which entry by any unwanted molecule is impossible. At this point I wonder if during the event of an outbreak a compartment will unexpectedly open, and inside will be a personal biohazard suit and instructions on how to use it and directions to the local laboratory, or if the only suits available belong to those who would unleash it upon us.

# *Firestorm*

...

KRISTA WILBUR

In Heaven you will have no scars. When you got there, and they let you in, you can look at your arms: the skin will be smooth from your shoulder down to your fingers; other than the freckles that skip their way across your skin, there will be nothing there. Just soft flesh, not angry red from a livid sun, not pale from dark, fast winds, and not lined from sharp steel. Just you, your still arms, and the promise of forgiveness.

\* \* \*

“Oh god, no,” she groaned into the fluff of her pillow. The alarm pealed above her head, and she twisted around to turn it off, stretching across the gulf of the bed. Sheets coiled around her ankles, and as she tried to move in two directions at once, one hand reaching for the alarm clock, her knees knocking together as she attempted to untangle her feet, she rolled too close to the edge and hit the floor. As she dropped off the bed, she was able to grab the cord of the white clock, its numbers red on black. Poor people’s colors, she thought. They match everything.

This is Rachel. Rachel has clumsy feet but fast hands, so fast most people don't see them as they fly in front of her when she stands with her friends and gestures as she speaks. Her hands are wild, her own sign language that no one quite comprehends, the meanings of her movements in flux. Her fingers tangle in her dark curls; they twist the white gold hoops in her ears. Sometimes, she reaches out and puts those fast hands on a shoulder or an arm, once in a while on a cheek, and laughs, and those flying fingers somehow conduct her laughter like electricity moves through water. Her words are sparks, but those hands: they're like water, liquid, fluid, shape shifters. Her hands move like water, smoothly, and they leave ripples in the air. Rachel hates those hands, though, and the arms they are part of. Rachel's hands are fast, but her mouth is faster, so even if her hands slow down long enough to be seen, no one notices them because they're too busy watching the words overflow from her lips, the fricatives and nasals and affricatives and approximates and plosives moving over her teeth and her lips and that quiet, husky spot at the base of her throat, spilling from the well of her mouth.

Finally, when she turned off the clock, she stood up and shoved the sheets and comforter back on the bed. The pile of white pillows stood out against the green of the duvet, and for a moment she debated folding everything back into its proper place. Then she smelled her coffee, and knew that the rumpled sheets would still be there when she came home from school, but the coffee would be cold. She grabbed a pair of pajama bottoms lying, crumpled, on the floor, and slipped them on as she walked through the part of her studio she called The Bedroom into the kitchen. Her coffee mug was right

where she left it last night, under the single cup drip, filling slowly.

Rachel drinks her coffee black. She likes the bite, the burn it leaves in her mouth, the fire it sends through her body as she swallows. She loves the way it fills her belly when she's had an entire cup. It's strong, and the taste of milk and sugar muddle the flavors in her mouth, leaving her yearning for more. Rachel is like her black coffee. She leaves a bite and a sting, and she burns when she's gone. She sets the world on fire. When she drinks her black coffee in the morning, holding the cup tightly in her fast hands and taking big swallows of the dark liquid (liquid like her hands, smooth and flowing like water), she forgets that she hates her hands, her flowing fast hands, and she just is. She is Rachel, and she drinks her dark coffee, black with no sugar and no milk.

After she had her morning coffee, she yawned and moved back through The Bedroom into the bathroom. She turned the shower on and brushed her teeth while the water warmed up. When the steam rose over the shower doors, and the air was damp and hard to breathe, she slid the doors open and lifted herself inside. The water scalded her skin, but she didn't move as it ran down her body, hot on skin so cold.

Rachel showers in water as hot as possible. When the water is hot, and she moves her hands (hands like water, like water hot from the shower, like liquid fire) through her dark, tangled hair, Rachel forgets for a moment that she hates her shape shifting hands. She stands as the waterfall of fire comes tumbling out of showerhead, raising red on her shoulders, her eyes closed and her head tilted back. She feels the inferno of fluid movement, and she feels alive. Rachel can't remember the last time



she showered in water that didn't hurt. When she sets the world on fire, when her hands fly past her face and her fingers reach out to touch others, Rachel remembers the water so hot it steals from her body, and she is content.

After she showered, she got dressed. "What today?" she mumbled, looking into the closet. A pair of blue jeans, soft with too many washes on hot, tight with too many dries, but perfectly formed to fit perfect hips, hung down on a white plastic hanger. She grabbed the jeans and shimmied into them, the denim cool against her warmed body. To the right of her pants hung a button up shirt, long-sleeved but thin, cotton to cool her off during the hottest parts of the day. She slid her arms into it, and smiled as the cold fabric met her skin. She worked the buttons quickly, and slid on a pair of boots.

Rachel's got what everyone else wants. She's lovely to look at her: she has pale skin and dark curls and eyes so blue you would swear she wore color contacts, and she is so tall and thin you would swear she's ill, but this is Rachel. She is intense and powerful, and she moves passionately, swaying and flowing through groups of people. She is the tide of the ocean and the pull of a river, and she swims her own waters, those fast flying hands (hands like fire, like an inferno of electricity, hands that conduct sparks) moving so fast to keep her above the crest of the waves.

After she dressed, she went to school, where people talked to her and she answered questions and wrote essays and used the restroom and ate lunch and acted like a regular person. She told jokes and laughed with her friends, but she also slipped into the bathroom and ran her fingers down the folds of her shirt, wincing when she slid over a tender spot. When she walked back into her

group of friends, though, she always had a smile. Always smiled like she was the Girl Who Had It All.

This is Rachel, fast handed, fire fingered, flowing like liquid and racing like an inferno. This is Rachel, rapid mouthed, her words banging together like rocks as they roll down a river, breaking apart into sand, growing finer and finer into grains so small and so pale that you can't see them move anymore by the time they've reached the sea. She moves so fast, so fast, her hands on fire near her face, and when she touches you, the sparks that move through you make you forget to look at what she never shows. She talks so fast, so fast, trying to fill the room with enough words to breathe that you don't notice her hands distracting you, moving as she torches her own body with a fast moving, ferocious flame. She hides her flames under the sleeves of her shirts, and no one ever notices them because she moves so fucking fast that all they see is a blur.

Oh, certainly in Heaven there will be no scars. In Heaven, those scarred moments will all be gone. You will walk down streets and hold your body still and tight against the people, against the world, and your arms and shoulders, hands and fingers, will glow in the sunlight. I know it. They will glow like a candle flame, bright and clean, and they will move like a stream, gentle and slow, and no one will fish the scars up again.

# *She Died at 8:20*

...

PAUL GILBERT GRAHAM

## IN WEEK-OLD DEATH

The hibiscus looked like a discarded Taco Bell wrapper.  
The tabby cat looked like a partly split open bag of wood chips.  
Nina looked just like Nina.

## SHE WAS EMBALMED TO LOOK

Somehow to be in a coma.  
Somewhere between living and dead.  
Someday able to claw at the lid of her coffin.

## THREE HOURS AFTER DEATH

Skin loses color  
Blood pools to the earlobes  
Vitality comes to a halt

It's easier to remember her in the mourning

# Creep

...

SHANNAN SMITH

In my ear—loitering  
 I smell him mealy mouthed,  
 across the floor I cough him out, a bug  
 discord.  
 cacophony.  
 smoke clears and the body responds—  
 dancing

Evil has escaped me  
 Howl now.

Something's parading at my feet  
 by the door, he stumbles carrying the spoil he packed  
 Drool in my mouth, drips from the ear  
 My body talks to its extremities, conversations with  
 movement.  
 Evil drank me down; spit it up  
 I get heavy hands.  
 Doesn't moan my way anymore, turned mute.

I felt you go  
 I smell you, as you go.  
 Worm with such an irking reek, if I could only send you  
 into the sea  
 You're out wandering, slipping into another's side  
 Sucking on need.

Evil, bare-chested without a head,  
Discreet when you enter, wailing when you leave  
Feeble insect teeming with panic, when I hurled you up  
Uttering such a dismal rite. Eventually settling in the cracks  
Pushing up daises in the floorboards, pushing up daises  
where you expire.

# *Silence*

...

TAMARA GERSHATER

Your death has left  
a void in my heart  
that bleeds to the tune  
of a song about love;  
you strummed this song  
on a guitar which now  
waits patiently,  
strings ready for you  
to come back and play.

Your empty room  
still smells of you,  
burning my nostrils  
when I enter alone.  
Since you have gone  
I breathe more slowly  
and at night I shake  
the pain of your death  
out of my body  
so no one will hear.

I write you letters  
and leave them in  
places where I know  
you will look.

Words are useless  
but my bleeding heart  
still beats in hope  
of your return.

*Meth*

...

KATHY PASHA

I sat there, deadpan,  
as he told me he wasn't  
like his father, wasn't  
an addict, wasn't  
what everyone thought,  
wasn't what everyone said.

Then he spouted off the  
"its no big deal" speech  
I've seen on  
after school specials  
and movies of the week.  
I can hear his feet  
tap under the table  
know it's not a sugar rush,  
know the dry skin flaking on his nose  
is not from a sunburn,  
know the stale body odor  
is because when he does sleep,  
he sweats in cascades.



But he just sits there  
self satisfied,  
as if he were fooling me  
and I couldn't decide  
what pissed me off more:  
that he was lying to my face  
or that he thought I was stupid enough to buy it.

Bile backed up my throat,  
burning its way through me as I tried  
to swallow down his bitter lies  
as if they were honey, tried  
to force the words to have  
some meaning, tried  
to send my doubts back  
into the pit of my stomach  
where they belong, and tried,  
though I knew he was gone,  
to see the man I once knew.  
of your return.

# Termination

...

KRISTA WILBUR

That was our secret, and I held it inside of me, in my belly, where it was hidden and dark and warm, until I had one that didn't make me vomit every morning. It grew, round, pressing out of my skin until I thought everyone they couldn't see into my hollows. We held onto our when it was colder inside the walls made of tears and sticks than it would ever be outside. I shivered against the beneath me, feeling the rough, scratchy fabric of my next to me, waited, hummed, drummed his fingers on the chair, sending waves of motion through my body. When I waited for me, still and dead, and they took me into a shook in the frosty space between those with MDs and me, whose eyes were red

(and they wondered if I was still stoned, or if I wanted to my tears, if I was as tired as the rest of us who didn't make pierced somewhere inside, in a dark place, a place most imagine.)

Someone's icy hands parted my legs, like clumsy fingers paper in two, and I saw the fingers stain the paper, rich was my secret: I was an earthquake, erupting in some over, I still shook, little aftershocks running through me. the needles of hot water, wetting my shoulders, they kept under tables made of worn cotton. But the aftershocks now it wasn't our secret anymore, it was mine, and weeks from my fist, waves of smoke that dispersed as they moved my eyes, at last,

or the air around me,  
void of clouds.

a new secret,  
hard and  
would know but  
secret, until January 23rd,  
with two pink lines  
hardness of the seat  
sweats. He sat  
arm of his  
left the room, he just  
room where my body seized,  
an honor student

let go of all  
a sound until the needle  
girls didn't see but could

tearing a piece of white  
and dark, at the fault line. This  
stranger's hands, and when it was  
Days later as I stood under  
coming to me, forcing me to hide  
meant I alive, splintered but fixable, and  
later I watched him as he rose  
higher, higher, into a sky so blue I couldn't tell what was bluer:

# *A Halo of Red Tape*

...

RONNIE SULLIVAN

Preston Atwood opened his eyes and looked around, confused. Everything around him was white, bright white. Staring confused into the white abyss, he began turning his eyes from side to side hoping for answers as to where he was. On either side of him were doors. The door on his right had a sign that read, "Hell." The door on his left had a sign that read, "Heaven." He sighed and looked up into more white. "Jesus Christ, I'm dead," he said.

"Actually, Jesus doesn't answer his own prayers. I believe Saint Augustine does that for him."

Preston was startled by another voice in the white and he looked up again with concern and asked aloud, "God?"

"Jesus answers to God. God is busier than Jesus..."

Preston continued to stare into the infinite white above him and he finally asked, "Then who are you?"

He flinched quickly, feeling a tapping of two fingers on his back and turned around, flustered. Behind Preston was a man, or so he thought, wearing a white robe and a smile. Before Preston could open his mouth, the other person said, "Yes, Preston, you are dead. And you're currently in Purgatory for your judgment."

Preston threw his arms in the air and frantically yelled, "Dead?! Dead?! How?! Who in Hell are you, then?! Jesus Christ, I'm dead?!"

"Once again, Jesus can't hear you. I actually think he's in a meeting right now. This isn't Hell, I told you, it's Purgatory and my name is Jack. I'm an angel. You are dead, yes and you died of a heart attack in your office."

Preston calmed down for a moment. Jack had explained everything in a calm demeanor and Preston allowed everything to sink in. He felt like there were a million things going on through his mind but only one stuck out. "Your name is Jack and you're an angel? I thought angels all had religious names like Gabriel and Abe," he said.

Jack scowled at him and attempted to remain calm. He replied, "I'm new... Hence why I'm working in Purgatory and leading the newly dead to their judgments."

For a newly dead man, Preston was incredibly calm, almost comforted. Sure, there were the regrets that he never had a chance to say goodbye to some people and he forgot to tell his mother that he loved her a few days before, but these were all things he could cope with living it up in Heaven. Of course, he assumed that he would be saved. He believed in Jesus throughout his life. And according to the Bible, if one believes in Jesus, they'll be saved. At least that's what he was taught in Catechism when he was a kid.

Feeling smug about his chances, he looked to Jack and smiled. "Well, you're doing a magnificent job. Shall we go?"

Jack rolled his eyes and started walking toward the abyss of white and Preston began to follow. They walked for a few minutes in silence. Preston walked the entire way

trying to imagine all of the wonderful things that Heaven would be able to offer him. As he was thinking about the possibility of sleeping with an angel like the angel stripper he had encountered a few weeks before dying, Jack suddenly stopped and Preston walked straight into a white wall.

“Goddammit!” he yelled. “Why’d you stop like that?”

“First of all, I stopped because this is the door and I didn’t want to walk into the wall. Secondly, God doesn’t damn things anymore. That whole Noah thing took it out of him. Now he sends things through committee. I’ll be sure to put this door on the next agenda for the God Damning Committee.”

Preston wanted to laugh but decided against it when he noticed that Jack was completely serious. Committees, meetings, Jesus not answering his own prayers; it was all familiar to Preston. On Earth, he had worked for the Everstar Toy Corporation. Normally, he spent his days inside of a cubicle looking over and proofreading documents but he had aspired to create a toy that would propel him from the mundane day job he loathed and into the higher offices, where the designers worked.

Jack grabbed the white wall and pulled, revealing a drawer with files inside. He knew exactly where to thumb through and he picked up a file and looked back to Preston.

“Are you ready?”

Preston nodded and Jack proceeded to push on the wall, which did open like a door and they passed through. Inside of the door were a number of people sitting in chairs, looking bored, annoyed, or a combination of the two. Beyond the people in chairs, there were desks and counters with people behind them working diligently. The volume in the white room was low as the people in chairs

either were silent or talking quietly amongst themselves. Preston was once again taken by surprise by how earthly the afterworld really was. He groaned knowing that he was going to have to wait for his admittance into Heaven the way he waited to change his address at the common DMV.

He continued to follow Jack and they stopped at the front desk. The younger-looking, attractive female angel smiled at the two of them and cheerfully greeted Jack. "Hello, Jack! What can I do for you?"

"Celeste, I have another one for the Judgment Committee. This is Preston. Here's his file."

Preston was astonished as he watched Jack give the file folder to Celeste. Jack seemed unfazed by not only the beauty of Celeste, but also the flirtatious and bubbly aura about her. Jack rested his elbows on the counter and waited patiently while Celeste looked through Preston's file. All the while, Preston was remembering his angelic stripper fantasy and placed Celeste in place of his original, random girl. He smiled to himself, looked down at Celeste, and thought, *Dibs*.

Celeste stood up and placed the file in a box on the desk behind her. Immediately, the male angel sitting behind it grabbed it and placed it in a box behind his desk. Preston watched as this process repeated four times before reaching the back and the last person stood up and hastily walked into another room. Looking back at Celeste and Jack, he asked, "What now?"

Jack answered, "Well, the Selection Committee will read your file individually and then meet, talk about it, debate, and put it up for vote."

"And I'll know after that?"

Jack laughed at the naivety Preston showed to the process in Purgatory. "Of course not. The Selection

Committee is the first line. After that, it goes before the Life Committee. Each member will do extensive research on your life to make sure that everything logged in your file is true. Then they'll discuss, debate, and vote."

"And that's it?"

Celeste began laughing as well and she chimed in, "Then it goes before the Judgment Committee. They look over everything that the Selection and Life Committees have done and double check their work. Then they too will discuss, debate, and vote."

"And then I'm judged, correct?"

Both Celeste and Jack nodded. Jack said, "Yes, sir. Then it's appealed in order to make sure that the Judgment Committee were fair and unbiased toward you, in which the Appeals Committee will themselves look over the information presented by the Selection and Life committees and hear testimony from the Judgment Committee, followed by discussion, debate, and voting. After that, they'll send their decision back here where a little paperwork will be done by the staff here to update your file and you'll be set in place with your judgment."

Preston was once again overwhelmed by the similarities of his former life and the one he was going into. The process sounded to be much longer than any trip to a DMV he had ever taken. He studied the smiles on Jack's and Celeste's faces and asked, "How long does this normally take?"

Without hesitation or a change in attitude, Jack answered, "Four to six months in terms of your former earthly timing."

Preston continued to stare blankly at Jack and Celeste and he shook his head. "You're joking, right?"

Celeste and Jack both seemed slightly offended by



the question at hand and Jack shook his head. "Indeed, I am not!"

"Four to six months?! What am I supposed to do for four to six months?" shrieked Preston. He had caused a commotion around the waiting area. The people scattered around the room were looking up and watching the scene between Preston and the two angels, attempting to distract themselves from their own lengthy waits.

Jack placed a hand on Preston's shoulder and calmly said, "You're going to take a number from Celeste and sit down and wait like the rest of these people. It's really rather simple."

Preston looked over to Celeste who was holding a ticket. He looked at the number and memorized it: 1019. He moved his eyes to the counter above Celeste and read aloud, "203?! Fuck this, I want to see God himself!"

Celeste looked worried and she quickly said, "God is in Heaven. This is Purgatory. It can't be done without judgment into Heaven."

Preston continued to speak loudly and angrily. "But God, and God alone, has the power to judge me as a sinner. I learned that in Catechism. I think it's even in the Bible."

Jack intervened. "That may be true. But I think that judgment went on to Jesus after he ascended here. God figured that it was only fair to the other angels and saints that Jesus take such a mundane task, in order to not show favoritism for his own son. But Jesus worked for his respect and before long he ousted some of the seraphim to become God's right-hand man. Since then, through careful delegation and planning, judgment has become the responsibility of Purgatory and the respected committees."

Preston was becoming annoyed at Jack and the ideals of Purgatory, judgment and the idea of the afterlife. He sighed and looked to Celeste. "Who can I see about this?"

"It's possible that you might be able to speak to Micah," answered Celeste.

"Fine, let me see Micah, then."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"An appointment? I just got here, how can I have an appointment?"

"That's not my problem. I check files and make sure that all requests for meetings are met with their proper appointment."

"Jesus Christ, this is ridiculous."

Jack shook his head again. "She's not Jesus Christ. I already told you that he's in a meeting."

Celeste looked over her paper and added, "Revelations Committee Meeting to be exact."

Preston had finally broken into complete frustration and asked, "When is Micah available?"

Celeste looked over her paper and said, "I have an opening in three months in your earthly time."

The color left Preston's face. He was in a hurry to start his sexual journey of angels through Heaven. He didn't need to wait four to six months in order for some idiotic committee to tell him what he already knew: that he was saved. His heart was racing and he gritted his teeth, frustrated, and asked, "Is there anyone else that I can see immediately?"

"No, sir. Micah has the earliest opening."

"Then who is in charge here?"

Jack and Celeste looked at each other inquisitively and they both shrugged. "Probably the chair of the Judgment Committee," said Jack finally.

Preston looked back to Celeste and asked, "When are they next available?"

"I don't know, that isn't my department. I believe Dane is in charge of the Judgment Division. Would you like to go check?"

"Absolutely. Where do I go?"

Celeste smiled and pointed behind her toward the white wall near the last desk in the line and she said, "Down there, through the door and down the hall. The director's name is Dane, remember that."

Preston looked to Jack and began to feel a little more relaxed and calm. "Shall we go?"

Before Jack could respond, Celeste asked, "Do you have the Form of Admission?"

Preston slowly turned to Celeste and gritted his teeth once again, shaking slightly. "No."

"You need to fill one out before I can let you pass."

She pulled out a stack of papers and placed them in front of Preston, smiling in her bubbly fashion. Preston attempted to smile back in vain and looked down at the papers. Reading over the small print, he began to sigh and thought to himself, I've earned a threesome when I get into Heaven.

Forty-five minutes later Preston and Jack were walking down a long white hallway. Preston was still cooling down from the anger he successfully suppressed while filling out the admission form. Jack looked to Preston and asked, "What were you going to do for Jesus' birthday tomorrow?"

All of Preston's anger and bad thoughts were immediately wiped away and he remembered that the next day on Earth was actually going to be Christmas. He had plans that consisted of doing whatever right after he

finished his work. He had been in the office on Christmas Eve when he died. He looked to Jack and smiled nervously and began spouting, "I was going to attend church, of course. Celebrate the day my Lord and Savior came to Earth! Heh heh."

Jack smiled and asked, "No presents for other people?"

Preston was taken back. He didn't expect to be asked such a question, especially by an angel. He looked over to Jack and quickly remembered that he was new, so he most likely understood the commercialized Christmas back on Earth. He nodded, "Yeah. And I was going to go to my parent's house and visit with my family." He became somber. "But I guess not any longer."

Jack smiled and nodded. "I guess not. I'm going back to Heaven tonight to be with my loved ones, too."

Preston became confused and asked, "You celebrate Christmas in Heaven?"

"Absolutely. Jesus is the only one from Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory to return to Earth in mortal form. We all celebrate the day his soul came into flesh. And a few hundred years ago, one of the angels told him of the marvelous idea that the mortals had of sharing gifts with one another. Jesus became so excited that he wanted Heaven to follow suit. I'm excited because I was able to get my hands on this year's top item."

"Which is?"

"A Christmas Eve doll for my daughter."

"Is there a Christmas Adam doll, too?" joked Preston.

"Yes... but Adam dolls aren't nearly as popular as Eve dolls."

"You mean to tell me that Adam and Eve are dolls here?"

Jack nodded and said, "Indeed. Adam and Eve were the first mortals and that alone is huge for their

popularity. They're the closest thing to celebrities we have in Heaven."

"I'll be damned..."

"That's for the Judgment Committee to decide."

Preston cringed and decided to change the subject. He asked, "Do you celebrate Easter, too?"

"Easter? What is Easter?" asked Jack.

"It's the Sunday that Jesus died."

"Oh yeah... Celebrating the day he rose again from mortal death. I had forgotten how many reasons mortals gave themselves to celebrate amongst one another."

As Preston and Jack stopped at a white wall, Preston made a mental note to watch what he said in order to stop being taken so literally. On the inside of the door, there was another room full of desks like the previous one, except there was no waiting area. As they entered, they stopped at the desk and looked at the male angel sitting, reading a document. He looked up and smiled, "What can I do for you?"

"We're here to see Dane," answered Jack.

"Do you have an appointment?"

Preston felt his cooled blood begin to boil once more. He gently bit his tongue to alleviate some of the anger while Jack answered, "No. When is the next available?"

The male Angel looked over his documents and then smiled, "You're in luck. He's available in one month's time."

Preston exploded in anger and began yelling again, "Is there anybody available to see about my Judgment?!"

"Probably the chair of the Judgment Committee," replied the male Angel, much like Jack had done in the previous room.

"Who is the chair of the Judgment Committee?"

"That would be Saint Dismas," replied the male Angel knowingly.

"Can I see him?"

"He's out of office for the time being. The committee has disbanded for the birthday celebrations."

"Is there anyone who I can talk to now?!" shrieked Preston.

Once again the male angel looked down at his documents. After shuffling a few papers, and reading over a new sheet, he looked up and smiled. "There is one person who won't be leaving for the birthday celebrations."

"Can I see that person?"

The male Angel shook his head, "I'm not in charge of setting meetings."

He pointed behind him through the row of desks and toward the white-walled door at the end and said, "Down there, through the door and down the hall. At the desk, ask for Bub. He'll know who you want to see."

As Preston and Jack began to advance toward the desks, the male Angel held up a hand to stop them and asked, "Do you have admission clearance?"

Another forty-five minutes later, Preston and Jack found themselves in another white room with more desks, just like the other two rooms prior. Preston was beginning to see a pattern within Purgatory and wondered if his whole experience was going to end up in failure, just like everytime he attempted to call his insurance agent.

To his surprise, the desk was empty and he looked to Jack and asked, "Is this normal that this desk is unattended?"

Jack shook his head, surprised as well. "No, this means that the desk assistant was sent to do something really important."

A door on the side wall, which was a new twist for

Preston to attempt to fathom, opened. Celeste walked out, holding a pad of paper and feverishly scribbling notes. Distant mumbling became more audible as whoever was following her was catching up and still talking to her. Finally, emerged a tall, bearded man wrapped in a white and gold robe. The man gently placed a hand on Celeste's shoulder and asked, "Did you get that?"

Celeste smiled and in her bubbly tone answered, "Yes, sir!"

Preston's mouth dropped. He made the connection after a second of looking over the bearded man. He was in the presence of Jesus Christ Himself. He was unsure of how to act and looked to Jack, who, once again, seemed unfazed. Preston looked back to Jesus and watched his movements in awe.

"Thanks, Celeste. Thanks for the hard work," said Jesus as he began walking parallel to the wall and walking toward the door that Preston and Jack had just entered. He stopped and turned around, looking like he had forgotten something and asked, "Could you keep the horsemen entertained? I need to use the little Savior's room before we reconvene."

Celeste nodded. Preston had his confirmation that the bearded man was, in fact, Jesus Christ and he couldn't help himself from gasping, "Holy shit."

Jesus looked to Preston and smiled. "Not exactly how I would've put it, Brother Preston, but that's the idea."

He hastily moved toward the door and pushed it open, filing out quickly. Celeste walked over to the unattended desk and sat down, marking her notes with a few more scribbles and then placing the paper in the box behind her, which sparked the same chain which Preston's file had initially gone through. She looked up at Jack and

Preston and smiled. "Back so soon?"

Preston was both shocked and awed by the scene that had just taken place. Not only had Jesus known his name, but the Son of God actually defecated. So much for the rumor that shitting is a sin. Jack noticed the pale shock on Preston's face and quickly answered, "We've been sent to see Bub. We've been told we can meet with the one he represents."

Celeste nodded and looked through her documents and then back to Jack and Preston. She shrugged, "I'm sorry. If I would've known, I could've referred you to him much sooner. Allow me to summon Bub."

Preston's color was beginning to fade back in while Celeste made the note for summons. Once the note was off for delivery, Celeste pointed to the chairs in the room and said, "Please have a seat, it should only be a moment."

Jack and Preston sat for twenty minutes in silence until the white wall Jesus and Celeste had walked out of opened. An angry-looking cherub walked slowly to Celeste's table and his deep voice quietly boomed, "There are people here to see me?"

Celeste pointed in the direction of Jack and Preston and said, "They're looking to meet with the one you represent. His schedule shows that he's available because he's not leaving for the birthday celebrations."

The Cherub rolled his eyes, nodded and turned around, motioning for Preston and Jack to follow him. As Preston approached, the cherub's hand extended and he smiled. "Hello there, Preston, I'm Bub. I'll be taking you to see the seraph you seek."

Bub and Preston started for the door in the wall when Jack stopped and said, "Good luck, Preston. I'll be here waiting when you're done."



Preston was confused that his only friend in Purgatory would abandon him at such a time but he could do nothing but nod and continue walking. As Bub and Preston walked through the doorway, it closed and Preston looked over Bub and asked, "Is that sword on fire?"

Bub nodded without a word or turning to Preston; he simply kept walking.

After a moment of awkward silence, Preston again turned to Bub and asked, "What kind of angel are you?"

Bub raised an eyebrow and thought for a moment. His eyes opened wider and he smiled lightly, "Right, angel... Heh... I'm a cherub. In the hierarchy of angels, my kind would be third in command behind God and the seraphim."

"And I'm going to see one of these seraphim?"

"Not just one of them. *The* seraph. He's definitely the most influential being here. I know I'd follow him to end of Heaven."

With that he let out the kind of laugh one makes when thinking of an inside joke. Preston was altogether confused but decided it would most likely be complicated and he wouldn't find it amusing anyway. The hallway was short and they walked into another white room with only a few desks but a number of angels running around, frantically.

Preston watched, amazed. It was the first time since arriving in the afterlife that he saw disorder. Bub seemed unfazed, much like Jack had been most of the time. After a moment of watching the crazed scene, Preston finally said softly, "Wow. It sure is pandemonium in here."

Bub let out a roar of laughter. "You can sure say that again!"

Preston joined in on the laughter but really had no

idea what was so funny about what he had said. After Bub's hearty laugh quieted down, he asked through breaths, "So, you... you want to see him now?"

"Very much so. Please tell me there's no paperwork."

Bub shook his head and said, "Not a chance in Hell. Go on ahead through that door right there. He stepped out for a few minutes but he'll be back."

Preston followed Bub's directions and walked to the white wall, pushing open the door and stepping inside. He looked around the room as the door closed behind him. There was just a chair for him to sit on in front of a desk and its large, comfortable-looking chair. He marveled over the large portrait of the seraph. The six large wings made for an impressive presence and his angry scowl made him intimidating. He understood by picture alone why he was so respected and was a leader. Finally, Preston looked on the desk at the nameplate and read it aloud, "Lucifer."

*Hmm, he thought. The name sounds familiar. Well, if I think I know it, he must be one Hell of an Angel.*

As he waited, he began thinking about his future sexual romps in Heaven not truly knowing just how correct his thought about Lucifer, the seraph, was.



