

The *Island Fox* Literary Journal
Volume 4.

FACULTY ADVISOR

Joan Peters

MANAGING EDITOR

Krista Wilbur

DESIGN EDITOR

Rachael Jordan

EDITORIAL BOARD MANAGER

Rachel Hadlock-Piltz

SOLICITATIONS MANAGERS

David Gonzalez & Julius Glover

FINANCE MANAGER

Ronnie Sullivan

SECRETARY

Kathy Pasha

EDITORIAL BOARD

Sean Carswell, Casey Chainee, Patty Lownes, Elise Moore

DESIGNED BY

Jocelyn Kornfeld

LETTING GO 9
by Krista Wilbur

THE COLORS OF PRISON 11
by Laura Gray

THE SEEDY UNDERBELLY 19
By Julie Fontes

MOMENTS 21
by Rachael Jordan

A FISH WITH LEGS 28
by Chris O'Neal

CELEBRITY BRIEF 29
by Maggie Westland

WHAT'S LEFT OF WHAT'S RIGHT? 31
by Ronnie Sullivan

SUNDAY MORNING SERMON 40
by Kathy Pasha

SMOKE 45
by Rachael Jordan

GARDENS 53
by Krista Wilbur

A GRAY HOPE 54
by Kathy Pasha

TO WISH OF YOU 69
by Vincent Torres

SILENCE 71
by Kathy Pasha

CRINGE 72
by Elise Moore

PEOPLE WATCHING 74

by Krista Wilbur

RANGER 75

by Maggie Westland

LA REALIDAD DE LAS ESTRELLAS EN LOS ANGELES 78

by Marissa Purcell

PAPHIOPEDILUM 79

by Elise Moore

THE UNEDITED UNDERGROUND 80

by Marissa Purcell

WINFORD RICE 84

by Kathy Pasha

UNTIL AMPUTATION 92

by Julie Fontes

THE MAN AT THE CROSS-ROADS 93

by Rachel Hadlock-Piltz

PRAIRIE GIRL 104

by George Morgan

FALL 112

by Julie Fontes

EQUATING COLLEGE 120

by Tamara Davis

FLAME 122

by Krista Wilbur

CRADLED 124

by Rachael Jordan

Foreward



*Message from Editorial Staff
and Designer, Jocelyn Kornfeld*

Nearly 100 submissions. That's what the editorial staff of the *Island Fox* had to choose from to create this year's journal. When we looked at the pieces collectively, we realized that each of them deals, in some way, with discovery, whether it's self-discovery, learning to cope with death, love, and depression, dealing with family, or becoming politically active. Each of us, as college students and human beings, can relate to all of these issues. Our hope is that as you read the *Island Fox*, you find something you can connect with.

The chosen pieces were submitted to our graphic designer, Jocelyn Kornfeld, who was given free range with design and layout. How you see things on the pages is all hers – she is the creative genius behind the scenes. The only caveat was that she keep the format of everything the same way it was when the pieces were originally submitted. Her task was tough: she had to see how the pieces were interconnected. The end result is this *Island Fox*, and we believe that it represents this year's submissions well.

Whether or not you have pieces in this year's journal, if you're going to be here next year, make sure you submit! It's a difficult task to narrow down the submissions into something that will fit into just over a hundred pages. Creativity comes in all shapes and colors, so next year's journal may be the perfect fit for your work. And no matter what, whether you submit or not, keep on writing. Do what you love.

Make it a good one,
The 2008 *Island Fox* Staff



Should you ever find your way to the Österreichische Galerie Belvedere make sure to take notice of Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*. *The Kiss*, Klimt's most famous work, has been interpreted in more ways than our minds can fathom. One person might describe it as "an eternal union of souls, locked in a moment that transcends time." Another person might look at it and say, "why is he wearing rectangles, this is wretched!" *You* might just be mesmerized by his masterful color work and have no opinion but rather a feeling of awe. No matter how you look at, there is a part of the piece that you will never and should not take special notice: The frame.

This is how I saw my work on this journal, as a simple frame. We've all heard the expression, "you can't judge a book by its cover" and there is a reason for that. The cover of this book, the layout of the pages, and the fonts chosen for these words is simply a frame displaying the work. I say "work" and not "works" because although each entry stands on its own as a piece of literature, collectively they are a single voice. It is the voice of all of us together, a unified whole trying to be heard, echoed in the pages of this journal. I'm proud to say that I am the framework for this voice, these expressions.

As always,
Jocelyn Kornfeld

Letting Go



Krista Wilbur

Her hospital rooms are always cold: like death
is cold, they say, a chill that crawls up your back,
tucking and folding into each vertebrae until it hurts
to wait any longer.

We put blankets on her legs, those
legs that once carried babies and paced across floors,
waiting for the key to turn in the lock, legs that crossed
and uncrossed at the ankles like a paper Lady.

We rub her arms and hands,
hands that knew the weight of a ripe melon and
the way to push a swing just right, hands that held other
hands in prayer on Sunday mornings, waiting for Redemption.

When she gives up, how will I let go? Will I release
her in a tempest of tears, choking on my cries, or
will I whisper to her to leave us, to go home,
or will I stare with blinded eyes at her Soul
rising out of the room?

I rest my fingers against her
collarbone, where a pulse still beats,
a silent song, and I bend over to kiss her,
giving her permission to
leave.

The Colors of Prison



Laura Gray

The yellow walls are meant to calm you. They never do. Instead, they are a constant reminder of the banana taffy I used to buy out on the Santa Barbara Pier. Perhaps that is what agitated me, the reminder of freedom. Down the hall I smell alcohol used to clean the deep self-inflicted wounds, with the mummy dressing to come. Some say I asked for it, that I ended up here in this cess-pool of a place not by accident, but on purpose. As I breathe in the filtered sunlight, knowing I won't be seeing much of it soon, the lady at the dusty old government issued 1970s era desk keeps asking questions. "Why are you here?" Why?! Because I'm in pain lady, a pain so deep you'll never connect with me. She was a cold insensitive one, with far too much perfume, a sophisticated scent on such an old mean woman. Yet I wanted to tell her to please hold my hand, that my Mom was gone, that I was scared. Instead I focused on the brown stains on the ceiling, undoubtedly from last years' rain, and contemplated that thought. Why was I here, at the Behavioral Health Center? What behavior? I was numb, and numb people don't have anything but stillness. My time was up, and the nice lady with the perfume admitted me. Into the tunnel of yellow walls I went, and I could hear them screaming already.

I fell down really, tripped on my mistakes, allowed myself to succumb to madness. I was in there, sinking from the weight

of my volatile past with no light visible. Everyone has a sort of madness inside, a demon waiting to explode but usually it's quiet and shy. The lid on my demon burst out and flew high into the air where insanity lies. I don't mean to be melodramatic, but that's how it happened. My brain attacked anyone in sight and they flew back from me in fear or disgust. It's so cold inside, when the bomb blasts and you sit alone wondering what went wrong, with no one around to recite the answers. This is just a chunk of my reality, the flipside to sanity, the place where earth meets universe and you flail in the darkness alone. That is what it's like really, a big mass of space and you're meant to choose the invisible thread to hold you up.

Since I never found that thread, I had to reside in the hospital for 3 weeks. What a fucking bore. The doctors shuffled through the hallways calming the schizophrenics, and the nurses with haggard faces and mean dispositions were ruthless about medication. It was like a horrible B movie, watching herds of the drugged catatonic waiting for the slaughter. Nothing to do, no semblance of normalcy, no cure for what was attacking me. It was a special form of hell, where the torture was in slow motion, burning you with lunacy, not fire. Those yellow walls changed from an irritating fear to an all-consuming rage and hate.

I will never forget some of the people in that place, like the preacher man. He wasn't praying to God, he was down on his knees that he was God. "Come children, follow me," he said. Down on his knees they got him. Oops-got the shot of Haldol. Poor guy. There was also a man I temporarily befriended named Ted. He was a normal person, but how normal could he be? He was a general contractor who had started drinking after work and then flipped out in a McDonalds. Apparently more than drunk,

the guy must have been nuts. He wore a calm demeanor, and was pretty pleasant. I liked him because he was caught up flying high like me, not knowing how or where to land. We understood each other.

In no way could I have been prepared to meet Jim. I was outside, pissed that the sun wasn't out, typical for Ventura, and I saw this man with wild disheveled hair approach me. He was my old and dear friend. I last saw him when I was twenty. Long hours of misery had changed him. He had been engulfed by some curse, and someone had used a voodoo doll on this guy. He said "Laura?" I said hi, with a tone of embarrassment, and we talked for 10 minutes or so. He wasn't coherent, snapping from one subject to the next. He was manic, and on heroin. Shit. At least I didn't make this crap worse for myself. I remembered gelling up his mohawk years ago, waiting to go to the next punk show. All those years ago, I was making my way through the maze-trying to figure out what was wrong with me. Jim in a very subtle way, told me we are all fucked up. The world isn't in this much pain. It's not possible. I said goodbye to him, an anti-climactic short wave, to such a good friend, now in obvious wrenching pain. I felt so bad for him; it was like watching the last person you will ever see again, walk out of your existence and lock the door. He was transferred that day. After the good doctors filled me with enough chemistry, I went home. This would kick off a succession of public humiliations and breakdowns. It's not too cool to have a broken brain.

It seems like someone else's life. No one could have lived it this way. Sometimes people throw up on their common decency, and I was one of them. Life would be more static. Perhaps I just had to damage myself enough to feel something brilliant, some flash of mania again, which had been dampened by all the

chemicals. So I stopped taking them. Every single one.

Mania is like climbing a mountain, jumping off the apex, and never touching bottom. You feel incredible amounts of energy with no directive and words and thoughts come so fast, with nowhere to go. I short-circuited, and was completely lost. Violence and euphoria rush through you, yet linger for a few days, not knowing how to rush out of you. Not so with depression. It's the space in the corner where you sit and cannot move. No, it's the space behind the corner. You are lost in the blackness, not even in a room, because you aren't a part of the world. For me, it was difficult to breathe because in doing so you admit you're alive, and life just isn't possible. It's like having your brain spill out toxic fluid and you keep slipping in it, poisoning yourself. There is no escape, no instant pill, except sleep. I slept for what seemed like 2 years, behind that corner, never coming out.

Surprisingly this passed too, like most seemingly inescapable feats in life. I was manic again, roughly pushing away the well-wishers and doctors. Picture a swirling lollipop, the big rainbow sort from the amusement park. When a manic person looks at such a thing, they don't know which color to follow first. All the colors come at once, and fast. It's like your eyes flicker in fast-forward, never hitting the play button. Even the movement of a falling leaf is part of the never-ending still frames rapidly assimilating into your brain. I remember once looking up at the clouds and climbing into them, becoming one with them and actually feeling what it's like to fly between the puffs of icy cotton. This is mania at its finest, and only medication can control this onslaught of stimulation, the strong winds which blow between the earth and the universe, colliding. So I made many irrational decisions, and one would change my life forever. It was when I met Jeff.

I can see him now, years ago with his damned cardigan sweater on. I had on a little blue dress with tiny flowers which cost practically nothing, but looked fantastic. I looked at him and pictured sex to be honest, but also saw him as an old man holding my hand, aging with me. He was the type of person who would observe from the corner of the room and decide who he wanted to converse with. We were in an English pub, and I had worked there for 8 years. It was a dark place, but I saw him staring. I knew his kind and still was drawn to him. He repeatedly knocked on my door, trying to buy his way in. I always said no, but in a night of mania I said yes. I sat with him and he told me he had been on vacation for 2 years. Then he laughed. The laugh was smug and in retrospect quite grating. Being manic, I went with it-no big deal. When you meet a person with a personality which envelopes you, completely surrounds you with a woven net of compliments and attention do you bite? Well that was Jeff's objective, to wrap me into his psyche. He had good looks, charm, and put my name in his heart immediately. We were soon becoming a "we," and I fell into that net which later would become my prison.

Soon I was 8 months pregnant. Life was good. Better than good, it was everything I needed for my bipolar mind, as it was fairly stable and we loved each other. I craved fruit with this pregnancy, didn't even care what kind, but the juicier the better. At that stage in our lives, stress was a major thing. Sometimes when you are ready for a baby you panic, feeling as if you have done the wrong thing, that you can't handle it. But that day I just wanted the damned fruit. I waited for over an hour, and there was a strong knock at the door. It was a Sherriff holding my car keys. "We arrested your boyfriend," they said. My breathing, in that single eternity of a second almost stopped. "He's wanted for bank robbery," they said. What does one say? What can you say when

the world you knew just rushed past you, twisted up your life and flew out toward the thoughts of baby, have to buy a crib, what do I do? Where's my damn watermelon? It didn't register really. So I got the keys. He was sentenced to live in a steel box for 6 years. I had a beautiful new baby, was off medications, and went back to the nut farm. This time it was for 3 days, just to get the pills going again. I really had to think, and quickly. Do I abandon him or do I wait? I decided to wait. My vision, like speech can be, was slurred. I couldn't make life decisions when I slipped back into a depression. How? So I did nothing. I was in dark dead-end tunnel, with a trickle of disgusting still water, and that is where I sat for 6 years. Sure I lived, but barely. Sometimes when something so devastating happens, you turn off. No amount of encouraging talk can break through the thought of how normal people live. Six years went by like waiting for a dandelion seed to fall in a windstorm. I've never done anything which equaled this. Eventually it ended. He came out and we moved into our apartment, the second prison of my life.

He always liked to drink Bombay Sapphire and tonic. I never thought much of it until it became all-consuming. He would drink at work, at lunch. Sometimes he'd come home at midnight and smack me around a bit. I felt like I was in that tunnel again, but this time he was coming after me. I had nowhere to go. There is nothing like being all alone. I had no friends left, as they wanted nothing to do with a criminal. I should have followed them, should have made that leap over my depression and run. This was worse than hell; this was like having needles stuck into your head all the while sobbing from the depths of your frightened gut. The first DUI he achieved left me with no hope. The second? I left. It was just as difficult as lying in that dark tunnel, but this time I came out running, furiously wanting my old life

back. Sure I had been in the hospital, but that was a long time ago. My demons were locked up again, lid tightly in place. I was more sane than any other time in my life.

So he was out of jail. Again. The old winds still swept through me, stirring up thoughts of inadequacy and sadness. My mind had gone through many car accidents, many train wrecks. It took some time to recover, but when I did I saw a different person, someone able to laugh at adversity, able to stare the demons right in the face, someone able to basically kick ass. I had shit in order, until the FBI agent came over. You never know how something like this can affect you until it stares at you, uninhibited and bold. His badge was three times the size of any normal cop, or so it seemed. As he sat down, he produced a picture of Jeff, at it again. Hitting up a teller. That old lollipop with the colors came back toward me and I couldn't choose which words were important. All I heard was "have you seen him?" Tears welled up in my eyes, not because I gave a damn about him, but because I also heard the phrase "three strikes." My daughter, oh my God, what's going to happen? Oh my god, please no. I know he's no father, but life in prison? Unfathomable. The agent asked me what color his girlfriend's car was. "Blue," I said. The color in the guy's face changed. "He was seen speeding from a bank in a blue car." Right then I gave up. This monster would never be anything to my daughter. He was gone. I pictured him flying backward at a great deal of speed and slamming into a brick wall. Should have pictured a steel wall, because that's where he was headed. Once again. A little box of shame, lies, abuse and self-destruction. He is still entering pleas, and is set for twenty-five years to life.

It's hard to share such a convoluted mess. When you fly through life thinking that nothing matters because your own pain

is more important than others, it sets off an imbalance which destroys the universe in some tiny way. I'm reaching farther toward those invisible threads than ever before. I think I got one finally. Hell is jealous of me now, and the temptation to fall into its torture is drifting away.

The Seedy Underbelly



Julie Fontes

Ugh,
That I learned they of course
named each continent
with a 'feminine' name and etched
a map on each face
and explained our explosions
called us mother. 'Of Course,'
he says. 'My car she's
Shiela.' Speeds and shines oiled
upholstery. Admires her
underside.
'Of course, my bike, she's
Betty. I ride her pump her
tubes with spokes like
ribs and curves like tires.'
And he says 'No,
of course you're not
fat cause I can feel
your bones under there
and your badunka dunk.
He calls his wife
Earth and plants seeds
on Mars.
Ugh.
So I name my car George

and ram him into
poles and my rug is called

Paul where Spinner spits
hairballs. Then I
name his nuts Lucy and Ethyl.
They Play tricks
on his Ricky,
and, of course,
he says,
'Why can't you just
love me?'

Moments



Rachael Jordan

I want to make her something that she is not. I want to make her a metaphor that will take away her humanity, the reality. To make her into something that she is not causes everything to be a little easier. The words become protection against memories. But the reality is, she is not a metaphor.

She is my mother.

* * * *

There she was, sniffing, snot running down her puffy, red face. Her shoulders shaking, face contorted, she cried. My mother's body lying across the yellow linoleum floor of our kitchen. The kitchen chair knocked onto its side, leg hanging like a broken bone. A breeze came through the open back door, pushing the hairs that tried to remain plastered to her sweating forehead.

I should have been mad, should have hated her. I should have taken the phone she ripped out of my hands minutes before and thrown it at her – rather than letting her slam it to the ground. Instead, I stood there, my own tears running down my face, feeling sorry for her. I should have been yelling that I'm only ten years old. She is twenty nine and bigger than me.

Looking at my mother - that sad, lonely figure on the kitchen floor - I felt pity. She ruined her relationship with me, her only daughter, at the early age of ten. The air in that kitchen felt

full. Although her mouth was closed now, her screams were still swimming in my head, trying to find a way to escape their soundless limbo. I heard the windows creaking, the weight of my fear still pushing against them, wanting release.

An airplane flew overhead to land in the airport behind our yard, shaking the whole house with its force. Only moments before my mother had shaken our house with her force. I never realized how big our kitchen chairs were until I saw one flying towards my head, directed at me by the one person in life who was supposed to be my ultimate protector.

I wanted my Nana. That is why I had grabbed the phone and frantically punched in the numbers I knew so well. Upon the touch of that last key the phone was ripped from my hands. I couldn't call her now because the phone was in shards in the hallway. More than anything, I wanted to escape and hide in the folds of my nana's gypsy skirts and hear the clanking of her beaded bracelets in my ear as she stroked my hair.

It's not like this had never happened before. Looking at my mother's sobbing face took me back to only a few years before. To a time before I knew what it felt like to be hit by a hand that you thought only would love you, to the first time I ever felt what it was like to be the victim of the chemicals that waged war in my mother's mind.

The pounding on the door resounded off the walls. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. There was no specific time between each hit, but instead erratic, passion-filled fists of anger. The door itself was leaning underneath the weight. I had run into my room, back against that door as I pushed the white barrel of a lock into its safety latch on the wall. Now, it didn't look like that safety lock

would keep me safe for much longer. The pounding shook it, bent it, and I knew it wasn't long before it would come flying off. Desperate to escape the sound, I punched my television on and twisted the volume knob as far as it could go. With a leap, I was on the other side of my room, frantic to turn on the radio. One hit and Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" came blaring through the speakers. But my efforts were useless. The pounding could still be heard above the noise of the television and radio. Whitney's voice was no match for the strength and anger of my mother's fists.

I can't even remember what prompted this pounding on my door. Some fight between the two of us had ensued, and then there I was, standing in the middle of my room with no escape. I did have a window, but it had been broken for a few years now. Even with the greatest force, it could only be opened about five inches up, enough for me to stick a friendly troll doll beneath it, but not enough for me to fit through. The window was allowing me to see the outside world, a world in which I imagined there were homes where daughters and mothers tousled each other's hair into braids rather than grabbing at the strands as punishment. Where daughters and mothers laughed and played cards rather than yelled and played a game of tag in which the winner, always the mother, left a stained spot of red upon the cheek – or arm, leg, back – any part of skin that could be reddened with a smack. But that was not my world and my window reminded me of that.

Instead I stood there, not knowing what I would do if that lock broke against the continual pounding. Hold on! I pleaded with the lock. Ten years old and pleading with an inanimate object not capable of hearing or feeling, let alone of having the will

power to protect me from my mother. A commercial blared over the TV, Whitney's powerful voice reverberated in my speakers, and my mother's shrieks continued to fill in the spaces between each thud against the door. I was caught in the voice of my favorite singer mixed with the staggering curses of my mother. I just stood there in the middle of my hard wood floor. My toy horses were shining from their shelves in my door-less closet and books I had buried myself in for so many hours were on my floor. But I could not ride away on one of those horses and the heroines in my book were of no rescue to me now. My pink-walled room was now the phony façade of a perfection that didn't exist.

A wind chime I had painted in reds and oranges hung from my ceiling, clinking together with the shaking of the wall. One teardrop shape of a string of the wind chime snatched my eye and mind away from the present for just a moment. The sunlight from my window filtered into trembling orange, casting shapes of color onto the wall above my exposed closet. Hardly noticeable, the shapes were dancing, leaping up and down in flashes of color and light. My transfixion on their glowing rumba was interrupted by a loud CRACK. The lock had given way. The screws so tightly plunged into the wall had been pounded from it with a final, fatal blow. My mother charged into my room.

The only place I had to go was the bed. So, with a swift jump from the floor, I landed onto it and scurried under my Beauty and the Beast comforter. Beneath Belle's dress I hid, as my mother became the beast.

It was so much more than a sound now. The booming no longer resounded along my walls but now was muffled on the protection of the comforter. My mother used her hands as paddles to punish me for whatever it was we had been fighting

over. All I could do was fold in half under the blanket, cover my head with my arms, and pray that no neighbors could see in my window. I tried to push the sound out of my ears, tried to turn the booming into a muffled hum, and only focus on the orange darkness I created for myself.

I'm Anne of Green Gables, I thought, the book itself sprawled on my floor. Instead of my damp blonde hair sticking to my forehead I had red hair in pretty braids with ribbons floating in the wind. I was standing in the green field of the book cover instead of lying in a fetal position beneath a thin shield. In my mind, I tried to dive into those words on the pages where Anne experienced love and adventure. I wanted to blanket myself in the dark blacks of the text that formed her world. I squinted my eyes in hopes of transportation into the Green Gables and out of my heated orange covers.

As I ran through fields of grass in my mind, my mother must have been overcome with exhaustion because the thudding finally stopped. My covers ceased their shaking and my muscles fell into a retreat. I heard the slow flop of padded feet on the wooden floor, stumbling away. She was gone.

I waited a moment, let my body get used to the stillness of the covers. My breath was hot and matched the tears that dripped down my face. I couldn't fight the tears but there was no way I would let her hear me. I slowly peeled the covers away, like a band-aid coming off a fresh wound, and poked my head out. The house was so still that I could hear her sobbing from her room down the hall.

I knew what would come next and I only had a few minutes to prepare. Brushing my hair away from my eyes with my

swollen fingertips, I pulled it back into a disheveled ponytail. I ran my hands down my face in a frantic sweep to rid them of the burning tears.

“Stop it” I said aloud to myself, “Grow up.”

I scooted myself out of bed, body still shaking from the fear I had felt when my lock went flying across the room. I found it at my bare feet, its whiteness harsh against the brown stains of the floor. I picked it up and put it next to my TV as I turned it off. I slowly waded over to my stereo to turn off Whitney’s voice and then flopped myself into my bed once more. Just as I was pulling the wet covers up to my chin I heard my mother’s footsteps beginning down the hall in a slow even pace. I shut my eyes.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered. I imagined her standing in my broken door frame because her voice sounded far away but close enough to hear. I didn’t want her to know I could hear her, but once again, my ears defied me. If only I had an off button for them.

“I love you so much, you know that, right?” I didn’t want to open my eyes, didn’t want to look at the sad, brown almonds of her eyes or see the tears I knew were streaming down her own face. I didn’t want to see the redness that I knew was invading her cheeks or her bottom lip, the twin of mine, quivering in sadness. My eyes obeyed, but my ears alerted the sound of her feet across my floor. I began to wish that I hadn’t moved the lock. That she could have stepped on it and tripped, falling to the floor. How would she feel if I wailed on her while she was lying there helpless? All of my thoughts were stopped at once by a touch that was more painful than the hitting. She had begun to stroke my hair.

This was always the worst part because I didn't know what to do. Not more than five minutes before, I was being hit repeatedly, over and over again by the same hands that were now petting my face and pulling me closer to her body. This was even worse than the hits because the hits were only physical. The slaps only pained my skin, my body, but these strokes of "love" burnt deeper than that. Every time she would come in to cradle me, a slow fire would start burning in my chest. Nausea would invade my stomach and I would become dizzy with confusion. So there I laid, limp in her arms that were trying to heal what they had just damaged. "It's ok," I said.

A Fish With Legs



Chris O'Neal

She was a gale force and I could smell her brine-deep from a hundred feet away. All the boys' heads turned in unison like they were a school and we all saw her strut in on high-top reefs with stars hangin' from her ears. She had a sand-dollar smile, all gritty and pristine, buried in the mud an inch deep. Her bag hung from her like a kelp forest, playin' mother to countless bottom dwellers. Then there it was. Starin' up at me. A catfish with two gray-matter eyes, scales reflecting somethin' fierce like a gully disco, and I wanted it. That fish. Because it was sea-green and black and while those other boys were eyein' her tide, I was wantin' her wave. She had a salmon belly gaze, pale yellow and jaundiced pearls, but when she looked at me all I could see was that catfish hangin' from her shoulder, suckin' in air but getting nothing. Heaving and getting nothing.

Those guys came and went but they all wanted the catch of the day. Had to make sure. I tried to make sure to bring
in the high on time.

Gotta make sure she's on my line.

CELEBRITY BRIEF



Maggie Westland

She was just a fashion saucer
small enough to hide in makeup
striding down life's catwalk slower.
Not a mover
Not a shaker
disregarded by her teachers
lost upon the schoolyard bleachers.
Now we know what questions bartered
why she left us lurching forward.

Where the spotlight caught like knife edge
offers flooded on this daughter
daily beating different drummers
disenchantment came uncovered.
Now a dreamer
Now a mocker
Now a celebrated poser
grander than the past she ran from
she's a plate on fashion's billboard.

She was just a fashion saucer
smaller than her ghostly sisters
not a willowy tall walker.
Not a dancer
Not a stalker
disappointment to her mother
beaten daily by her father.
Now we find her pooled in answers
where the knife blade lost its shimmer.

What's Left of What's Right?



Ronnie Sullivan

Shawna York, twenty-four and unemployed, shot open one blue eye and twitched it upward before dropping her eyelid into a squint. The luminous white light from the fluorescent white tubes on the ceiling were just too much. She slowly, albeit reluctantly, opened the other eye and felt it adjust to the lighting. Along with the searing pain in her side, this was shaping up to be her worst experience waking up yet. She could only gurgle through her dry mouth, “Wha... What the fuck?”

An attentive woman looked to be dressed as a priest turned around and smiled warmly, greeting Shawna, “Good morning, dear. Welcome back to the world.”

Shawna’s eyes had adjusted to the white light and she lifted her head to have a look around the room. She looked to be in an infirmary, having been tipped off by the two parallel rows of sick beds lining the walls. But she couldn’t get over the priest standing over her, the idea of almost having her last rites read unnerved her and she quivered, “Who are you?”

The warm smile continued to beam and the attentive woman said, “I am Father Jack. I’m the nurse assigned to you. A few hours ago your condition was critical.”

“Critical?” asked Shawna, “What the hell happened?”

“According to the young man who brought you in said he accidentally jammed his knife blade into your side when you startled him. He also told me to apologize for everything,” Father Jack said.

“I startled him because he was mugging me!” yelled Shawna.

“Carter was mugging you?”

Shawna nodded, holding back tears as she relived the awful scene. Father Jack could only shake her head, “So that’s where he’s been getting his donation money.”

This annoyed Shawna and then led to her decision to just forget and change the subject. After looking over Father Jack’s garments, she asked, “How did you end up becoming a priest, Father?”

She felt herself having to stifle a giggle when she said that.

Father Jack’s smile dropped a tiny bit as she thought back to her past. After remembering the story in full, her smile returned to form and she began: “Well, I originally joined the church to become a nun. However, I filed my paperwork incorrectly and filled out my last name first. When they saw the man’s name on the application, they filed it with the other priests. Instead of Sister Samantha Jack, I’ve risen to Father Jack Samantha.”

Shawna sat in silence as she just stared. She was waiting for the punch line to drop at any moment. What she was hearing couldn’t possibly be correct. Finally, she meekly asked, “Well, didn’t you try to get it changed?”

Father Jack answered like she didn’t really hear Shawna, “The church is mostly right.”

Again, Shawna could only stare. This time, her question mixed with confusion to ask, “Mostly right-handed, correct, or politically conservative?”

And like she didn’t really hear her again, she answered, “Yes.”

The conversation wasn’t going to get much further and Shawna felt it. She sat up gingerly in her bed, wincing with every abdominal movement, and asked, “When will I be cleared to leave?”

Father Jack took a look over Shawna’s body from left to right and said, “You’re free to go whenever you feel healthy. Besides, you don’t even have health care coverage, so we can’t do anything else for you but dress the wound.”

Five minutes later, Shawna was standing on a curb, watching the current of traffic creep up and down Marin Street. She planted both feet on the curb’s edge and raised her right hand. A taxicab stopped abruptly in front of her, and she piled into it. As she settled in the bench, she said, “Take me to the Castro Bistro, Shattuck Avenue please.”

The driver nodded silently and then left the attention of the cab to return to the radio. It blared a conservative talk radio station, with Sean Hannity grumbling about the need for an electric fence across the United States/Mexican border. Shawna sat in the back, appalled that the taxi driver would have the testicular fortitude to listen to Right Radio in the middle of Berkeley.

Man 1: Excuse me, sir. Could you tell me how to get to Jiminy Street?

Man 2: Sure. You take a right on Carson, take a right on Hartford, followed by another right and then you’re on Jiminy.

Man 1: (Silence for a few seconds) Can’t I just go left on Jiminy?

Man 2: (Stern) I don't go left.

Announcer: Right Radio. The Right way of doing things.

Shawna listened to the commercial and fought back laughter. She barely held it all back, along with a painful groan from straining her abdominals. She really could have used the good laugh with the day she had been having, but she didn't want to offend her driver. The driver was really listening to Right Radio to piss his passengers off so much they would refuse to speak to him.

The taxi driver's plan worked flawlessly. Afraid she would have nothing in common with the man, she opted to just say nothing. He dropped her off in front of the Castro Bistro and tapped the fare counter. She ignored the tapping and just handed him five dollars, telling him to keep the change. He drove off without even thanking her and was around the corner before she entered the restaurant.

Once she opened the door, she was greeted with the smell of fresh coffee layered with the smell of eggs, spam, bell peppers, and refried beans. The dining room was empty, like usual.

Her blue eyes jumped around the room until they caught a thin, tall man with a stereotypical French moustache. He strolled up to her and raised an eyebrow, "What're you doing here at this hour, honey. It isn't time for you to come around here, digging for evening scraps."

"Nothing gets past you, English Muffin," said Shawna with her sarcasm drooling off her lip.

"Fuck me in the ass, all right? Whaddya want?"

She shuddered, "Jesus, Muffin, you're so damn crude."

"I'm also so damn busy." He had crossed his arms. He was

clearly not busy.

A more portly Italian man with curly, black long hair and a beard of stubble wrapped his arms around English Muffin and softly said, “Aww, c’mon dear, she looks like it’s been rough for her today. Take it easy.”

“Thank you, French Toast. It has been rough on me.” Shawna lifted her small t-shirt and revealed her bandage. Both men gasped, with English Muffin stepping forward, “I’m so sorry, Shawna. What the fuck happened?”

“I was mugged, then stabbed for some reason, then brought to a church by the robber, and left for dead with nothing to show for it but a nice bandaging job.”

French Toast eased the grip of his arms around English Muffin, he was amazed at her rather brief story and asked, “No medicine at all?”

“Not even some Advil.”

The right eyebrow of English Muffin perked up again and he stepped to the side, breaking himself of French Toast’s hold, “This can’t stand. I gotcha, girl.”

English Muffin ran into the back and returned a minute later with a glass of water and a prescription bottle of pills. He handed her a pill and the water and she immediately took it without question. He finally held up the bottle, rattling the remaining four pills inside and offered a coy smile, “This is Vicodin. I’ll give you the other four only 25 bucks.”

Shawna sighed, her eyes fixated on the orange bottle. She tapped her front pocket and felt the small collection of bills that had miraculously not been stolen by her assailant. However, she attempted to play off like she had been cleaned out.

“But Muffin, I was robbed today...”

“Muff-Muff, our little Shawnie’s poooooor,” whined

French Toast.

“No dice. I can see the shape in your pocket,” said English Muffin.

All eyes went to Shawna’s thigh. French Toast studied it until he finally saw the faint outlining of a small wad of bills folded in half. His eyes widened and he squealed, “She tried to dupe us, darling!”

“That’s why I handle the dealing, my little toaster. Druggies are a desperate lot, so you gotta expect them to lie. A lot,” said English Muffin, staring coldly into Shawna’s eyes. His face was plastered with a smug, confident smile.

Shawna blinked, caught, and silently forked over the 25 dollars.

After counting his money, English Muffin reached into his gray sport coat and pulled out an envelope. Her heart dropped when she saw the handwriting. She recognized the near-perfect handwriting, the unclosed O in the cursive, the missile shape of the lower-case L. It was unmistakable.

“A letter came for you today,” teased English Muffin. By the look spread across both his and French Toast’s faces, she knew they had already figured it out. She reached out and grabbed the envelope, tearing into it and pulling out the small stationary. Without any signature, it ominously read: “I still love you, though, New York.”

French Toast sighed, burying his face in English Muffin’s shoulder, “I love that song. What does it mean?”

Shawna looked to French Toast, “It’s my middle name. My dad never thought this Mexican movement would actually happen, so he felt safe in giving me the middle name Nueva. Shawna Nueva York.”

English Muffin bluntly explained the situation and said,

“It’s the jackassery of Cornelius Boston.”

French Toast kept his face buried; embarrassed and feeling slow. English Muffin just shook his head, watching Shawna’s eyes remained still, staring forward with a blank expression. He finally said, “Honey, Toaster and I will be issued a marriage license in California before you finally scoop up that smitten boy.”

“Eh,” was all Shawna could muster.

“Eh?! Girl, the man is ...” started English Muffin before Shawna interrupted with, “... a borderline stalker.”

“Ohmigod, Shawna! You can’t leave his ass in limbo. If you’re so worried, why don’t you get a restraining order and let the Po-po deal with him!”

Shawna fired back, “What kind of hypocrite would that make me? I won’t let a harmless man sneak a peak at my everyday life, but I’ll pay AT&T to record my phone calls to my parents?”

English Muffin leaned his head forward to reply, but pulled back and remained silent. French Toast reemerged from his self-exile and muttered, “But little notes like that are so romantic.”

“They’re unoriginal,” snapped Shawna, “Besides, his name is Boston and mine makes New York. If ever destiny screamed, ‘Not this one!’ the relationship of Cornelius and I would be it. Cornelius Boston and I just aren’t compatible.”

English Muffin was in an ornery mood and decided to see how long Shawna could resist the onslaught of questions, “And how did you come to determine this?”

“We failed a quiz in *Cosmo*. Then we found an online dating service, took the compatibility quiz and weren’t compatible. Nothing worked for us.” She surprised herself with each elaborate lie.

Both French Toast and English Muffin sighed, looked at

each other and then back at Shawna. English Muffin asked, “So that was it, huh? You’re gonna let Cosmo tell you how to live your life?”

“They’re the experts.”

“You’re ridiculous, Shawna. That man is going to die waiting for you,” fired English Muffin, “You’re a Goddamn fool.”

Shawna’s eyes hollowed out after hearing it. All of this thinking about Cornelius was beginning to get to her. She finally gave up fighting against the dynamic duo, and changed the subject, “Whatever. Would it still be all right if I came by later for the scraps?”

English Muffin sighed and was immediately jabbed in his rib by French Toast’s elbow. After a light “oof,” English Muffin said, “Yeah. Come on by at nine.”

Shawna nodded and moped out of the restaurant. The gay lovers watched her as she headed for the door and then started walking around the restaurant again.

Her mind began clearing back into more pleasant thoughts with the concentration-breaking sound of traffic in front of her. Brakes were squealing up and down Shattuck Avenue and she hailed a cab. She had already opened the door before the cab stopped and was inside just as quickly. Her blue eyes glassed over with tears as she looked over the inside of the Castro Bistro for a few seconds; seeing that everything had just gone back to normal like she wasn’t there.

Finally, she muttered, “Quinn Cemetery.” The taxi took off and melted back into the slow flow of traffic. Slowly, the bistro began to disappear behind them until Shawna could see it no more. She had managed to remain strong enough to only shed a single tear. She was saving the rest for her visit.

Shawna had resisted going at all, but the incessant ques-

tioning from English Muffin placed her in front of a tombstone fifteen minutes and ten dollars later. This time, not nearly as strong, her eyes watered and released a torrent of tears. She pulled from her pocket the note supposedly from Cornelius and wrote with a pen, "He may ride forever, 'neath the streets of Boston. He's the man who never returned."

The note was written with the same unclosed O's, the same missile-shaped L's, and the same near-perfect handwriting.

She let the paper sway and float from her fingers and to the mound of fresh, buried dirt in front of the tombstone that read, "Cornelius Boston, 1984-2008; Died defending his country in Iraq."

Her fingers delicately brushed along the defined engraving of Cornelius' name as she whispered, "I walked into a knife today, trying to get back to you. Then I had to face this fake letter I wrote from you. I only write them to remember you and the corny things you did for me. Why won't you just let me die?"

She didn't know whom she was talking to. She didn't believe in God or an afterlife, so she was speaking to a slab of stone and air. A sigh left her lips and joined with the wind as she glanced once more at the tombstone and turned around, "Tomorrow is another day. Maybe you'll let me die tomorrow."

She started for the exit and popped another Vicodin. As the pill slid to her throat and then down her gullet, she began planning other ways to attempt and ultimately fail killing herself.

Sunday Morning Sermon



Kathy Pasha

I had a conversation once
with some guy while I was tending bar,
blending margaritas so that
he had to yell over the sound of the motor.
It sounded like a sales pitch,
he told me that one day I'd be famous, rich
and though now I may be a liberal voter
I'd somehow make the switch:

I would become a Republican.

And in the next few breaths
he expressed that homosexuality
was some kind of mental abnormality.
His proof?
Jesus hated gays,
thought they were an abomination,
and this nation which is supposed to be free,
was not free to them, nor was eternal salvation.
He quoted Leviticus and missed the irony of
the ham and cheese sandwich he was eating.
With a thundering voice and clenched fist,
he quoted Leviticus as if Jesus was even in the Old Testament.

He quoted Leviticus as if this was not totally amiss:
Is it God's grace to get shit-faced after church on Sunday morning?

Then without warning, his mind wandered off
to the war in Iraq, the lost lives
(now 3,985)
squandered on the butcher's block
in this useless sequel to Desert Storm.
He said we were bringing reform to the land,
as if they'd all be equal and holding hands.
And he didn't understand my frustrations while he claimed
that the lives broken, stolen, and maimed by this administration
were not lost in vain.
Unashamed as he maintained
that the dead would be seen as martyrs
in this war between two gods.

My rage could barely be contained.

Because one Sunday I had a conversation with a drunk
who argued as I poured his cabernet,
and I tried not to shudder as—
over the blaring of sports I've always ignored—
I heard him say
that if I ever got rich I wouldn't feel like I do today.
Floored as he said that my young idealism would fade,
that empathy for the poor was reserved
for those who couldn't afford lavish rewards.

So I smiled nice,
because that's why I get paid,
knowing that if in a decade I had enough money
for a butler and maid
I'd rather slice my throat open with a knife blade
than to
 ever
 vote Republican.

The image features a dark, monochromatic background with a complex, layered texture. The texture consists of various shades of gray and black, with some areas appearing more grainy or fibrous than others. A prominent feature is a large, central rectangular area that is slightly lighter and has a more uniform, fine-grained texture. This central area is framed by darker, more textured borders. In the center of this lighter area, the words "Phase 2" are written in a white, elegant, cursive script. The overall composition is balanced and visually striking due to the contrast between the dark background and the white text.

Phase 2

Volume 2



Smoke



Rachael Jordan

Rae lit her cigarette and continued to talk. It's amazing the things this woman could do with a cigarette in her mouth. By this point, I wasn't listening to the words she was speaking but watched the cigarette dance with every movement, stains of red from her lipstick starting to curl around the edge. I've never been brave enough to wear lipstick.

"... and that's the beauty of climbing trees," she said with a puff of smoke to my face. That was my hint to start listening. I removed my stare from her lips. She tilted her head to the side as she looked back at me with her gray eyes and a faint smile began to form at the corner of her stained lips, but didn't fully reveal itself. The waitress approached our table in her pink, ruffled uniform, buttons about to burst from her chest.

"It's really slow right now, gals, so I just went ahead and separated the check for ya," she said, fake Wal-Mart nails clacking on the two pieces of paper she set on the table. She walked away, varicose veins pulsing in her calves. I was collecting both checks to take them to the counter when Rae swung away from the window and crushed her cigarette into the ashtray.

"Rae, don't..." I said, trying to grab her arm as she pushed off the table.

"No, Sam, you don't," she said, gray eyes shining. No more "Samantha" for me, I was back to "Sam" again, which meant Rae was on the prowl.

Our waitress was making a milk shake as Rae walked up to her. At five foot nine, Rae towered over our pudgy food server. I grabbed my purse and began to get up, hoping to grab Rae, slam some money on the counter, and hop into my truck before she could spit out another word. But she caught me. She always does.

“Sit down, Sam,” she said, eyes still on the waitress.

“It’s not a big deal,” I said. I wanted to continue, but I saw Rae’s arm muscles tense – a sign that told me she was ready to go for it and any attempt to stop her would be pointless. It was the same muscle twitch I saw right before she dumped a beer on the head of a guy in a bar we were at when he offered to buy me a drink.

“Excuse me... Betsy,” I heard Rae say. The waitress spun around, the mustard-stained “Betsy” in block letters across her breast. I could hear her fingernails clicking on the counter from where I sat slumped on the green cushions of the booth. I sank so low that I saw the pieces of recycled gum hanging from beneath the table. Even this view was better than watching Rae go on one of her tirades.

“Yes, darlin’?” she said. The clacking paused.

“Why did you split our bill?” Rae said.

“Cause I thought you ladies were –” Betsy began.

“I’m just wondering because you wouldn’t just automatically split the bill of a man and a woman, would you?” Rae said. An older couple sitting at the counter swiveled to look at Rae. I averted my gaze back to the forest of gum beneath the table.

“Why you gettin’ so fired up, darlin’?” the waitress said.

“Because I’m tired of people’s damn assumptions!”

The older woman jumped in her seat.

“She, that woman over there, is my girlfriend – not a friend – but a girlfriend, and we only need one goddamn bill,”

Rae said, slamming her hand on the counter and making the half-filled milkshake jump in Betsy's hand. Any sound of silverware hitting plates, loud slurping of drinks, or ringing of the cash register had stopped. Rae held the waitress's shocked stare as I slid out of the booth. You could almost hear the sound of my twenty dollar bill sliding across the counter. I put my fingers on the inside of Rae's wrist to try and guide her outside, but before I could even give a tug she threw her arm back and stomped out of the diner. I followed, apologies limp off my tongue.

Kicking the curb as we walked into the parking lot, Rae let out a screech. "Fucking bitch," she said. Gravel tossed up as she charged into the parking lot.

"That's a little harsh, Rae," I said. The gravel crunching stopped. I turned to look at her and was met with a harsh glare. The look that tells it all. I first saw that look when Rae asked if she could meet my parents and I told her no. Rae finally removed her glare and began searching for cigarettes in her jacket pockets.

I opened her side of my truck and she eased in, focused on her nicotine search. By the time I climbed into the driver's seat, she had already lit up a cigarette. Turning the glowing end towards herself, she let the smoke roll out of her mouth. I put my truck into gear and pulled out of the parking lot. I glanced at Rae, her head against the window now, the tips of her hair shaking on her shoulder from the bumps in the road.

She just sat there, spinning her cigarette in between her fingers and occasionally placing it between her lips, now dull from our dinner. I pulled my hand off the wheel and flipped the knob on the radio, praying it would be a song that Rae actually liked. It was.

"I love this song," she said, putting out her cigarette in a Bob's Big Boy cup in one of my cup holders. "She's every lover

that I ever had, she's every lover that I never had," she sang along as she popped her seatbelt and slid over to the middle of the seat, both jeaned legs straddling the shifter.

"Samantha," she said, her smile showing the whites of her teeth. God, her smile can be gorgeous when she really lets it out. I turned to look at her dancing eyes as she slid her hand up my thigh.

"Feeling better I take it?" I said, placing my hand over hers and turning back to the road.

"Much," she said, using her other hand to move my hair away from my face and kiss my neck just below my ear. Chills ran down my back and I knew she could see my skin rising into goosebumps.

"Rae, I'm driving," I said, nudging her away with my head.

"That's what makes it fun," she said, moving her hand from under mine and further up my thigh. I replaced my hand on the steering wheel.

"Rae," I said. Trying to keep my gaze on the road in front of me rather than on Rae's eyes, or worse – her lips, was becoming quite a challenge. I leaned to the side and swept my lips across hers.

"Enough," I said.

"Fine." She slid back to her side. Placing one foot up on the dashboard, she put her chin on her knee.

"You know, Sam," she said, looking at me, "You used to be fun."

Fun. That's the beauty of climbing trees – because it's fun. That's what Rae was saying earlier between smoke-filled breaths. Trees are the reason Rae and I ever met. I walked through our university's main quad every Thursday of every week and Rae climbed trees every day. I'd never seen her before, not until the day she finally talked to me.

“Hey, you,” I heard a voice say. Startled, I turned in the direction of the voice and saw a Converse shoe dangling against the trunk of a tree. Suddenly, the foot jerked up and a body hopped down from one of the branches. A flash of red flew by the bark and then a girl was standing there. She leaned against the tree – a branch herself. I just stood there, silent. A few moments passed and all I could hear were the leaves rustling above our heads.

“You talk?” she said, one toe of her shoes locked under a root.

“Uh,” I said. I kicked at some grass with a sandaled foot and put my head down. All I could see was grass.

“A sound will do,” she said, pushing away from the tree. Her shoelace came into my line of view. She laced them backwards.

“Samantha, right?” she said.

I looked up, directly into her face.

“Walk with me,” she said, smiling.

I followed.

We walked beneath the trees. Rae mostly talked while I listened, not saying much, but watching her every move. Rae would touch almost every tree -- with a finger, a hand -- some sort of contact with the trunks or branches. For some of the smaller trees, she would swing around the trunk like an old movie star around a streetlamp. With every spin she left a trail of her perfume. That scent gave me the same feeling as the first time I ever snuck out at night to meet a guy. He and I hid in the darkness of the trees behind my house and I had my first kiss. It was that feeling now, a mix of the moon, adrenaline, and a wetness so cool that the chills almost warm you. On one downward swoop her hand grazed my arm. With that touch my ears got hot and my heart dropped to my stomach. That was a surprise.

An hour later we were sitting on a helicopter pad on top of one of the hills that surrounded our school. Rae plopped down on one corner of the big cement square and dangled her foot off the edge. I stood with my back to her and looked out at the fields that were just beyond the buildings of our university. The sun was halfway down the sky and gave everything an orange glow. I heard Rae's lighter flick behind me. That's always been Rae – fire, cigarettes, red lip stains, smoke.

“Mind if I smoke?” she said. Her tongue ran over her lips.

“No,” I said as I turned towards her. She lit up, sucking the end of the filter. The smoke floated out over the hill and disappeared. With a twirl of her cigarette she looked up at me.

“Good. I could never be with a girl who didn't let me smoke,” she said. She placed the cigarette back in between her lips. She took a long drag and released the smoke over the opposite side of the hill.

“Oh, but I'm not...” I couldn't finish. I thought about our moment in the trees, that fascination, that warmth. I began to scratch my nose – a nervous habit from childhood. Rae laughed, lying back onto the helipad, cigaretteless hand behind her head.

“I don't jump outta trees for just anyone,” she said. She turned her face toward me. A small part of her stomach showed right above her jeans. The outline of a black tattoo barely poked out from beneath one of the belt loops. She tilted her head back, her neck long, hair spilling away from her shoulders and exposing her skin. Her eyelashes curled out and her nose sloped perfectly away from her face. She was gorgeous. All I could do was just look at her, my face growing warmer despite the cold air around us.

“It's just that... I, uh...” I said.

Her red lips lifted into a smile.

“...have never been attracted to a girl,” she finished.

She was right. Until Rae, no other girl – no other person – had made me feel such an intense initial reaction. The reaction was addictive. For that, Rae and I continued to have our long walks. Every Thursday we walked among the trees and up to the helipad.

One Thursday it was exceptionally cold. The smoke of my breath mixed with the smoke of Rae's cigarettes out over the hill. All the leaves had fallen off the trees below, their branches making patterns on the grass. Stars poked through the sky and winked at our figures on the helipad. The only light was from the buildings behind us, their glow attempting to creep up the side of the hill. Cigarette butts, crushed into cracks of the cement, lay at Rae's side and I sat on the other, beside her.

"Three months. Believe that?" she said. She set her hand on one of my crossed legs and pulled closer to me -- so close I could smell the left over scent of shampoo in her hair. I touched her, took her long, soft fingers into my hands.

"Crazy," I said. I put my head down, letting my hair hide my face. She still made me nervous. I felt her shift by my side and her free hand reached for my hair, sweeping it away. My face got hot. She leaned in, a mix of perfume, cigarette smoke, and shampoo. I released my hold on her hand -- she lifted up my chin.

"Hey you," she said.

My eyes rose to meet hers.

"You talk?" She smiled, her gorgeous, full smile. I wrapped my arms around her. She felt so small like that. She ran her fingers along my back, stroking the ends of my hair that fell in her path. She turned to kiss my cheek, my neck, and I pulled back far enough for her to reach my lips. In these moments, everything about Rae was so soft. She would touch the side of my face and place her hand on the small of my back to pull me closer. Rae

never pushed it, never forced it. Not like it had been in the past – tongue shoved down my throat, spit dripping down his face, everything hard, fast, anxious. Insertion. Thrust. Done. Lying in a cold bed. Not Rae though, she was never eager, never hard, only gentle and guiding.

This night was just like that, but I could feel something different quiver behind her lips. They were flames on my skin, left steaming tracks as they began to move away from my lips, away from my neck, and lower. They swept down my stomach and I could do nothing but lie back on the hard ground. The night was no longer cold, but I trembled. I almost sat up, but Rae's hand interlocked with mine, she held my hand as her other one began to explore. All I could feel was heat. The sound of a zipper coming undone. Heat. The ground softened beneath me and my grip on Rae's hand grew tighter. Heat. That's all there was, heat, twirling, red lip stains, fire... smoke.

Heavy breathing. Rae was by my side now, lying next to me, under winking stars. I felt her long, soft fingers in my hand. I turned towards her face and she was smiling. I opened my mouth but nothing came out. All I could do was just squeeze her hand and shiver as the cool breeze hit my hot skin.

Gardens



Krista Wilbur

All people are great dreamers,
and we plant the seeds deep inside; water them with
winters and springs; fertilize them with laughter, with
tears of mourning; transplant them into new terrain, the
babies that come and the in-laws that overstay their
welcome; prune them with years and books and black and
white photographs hung down the hallways of our grandparents'
homes; weed them with china patterns and holiday suppers
and new cars. No dreams die – we merely give
them life, and allow them to take root.

A Gray Hope



Kathy Pasha

“Hey, you’ve reached Josh. If you don’t already know the deal, I’m not about to explain it to you.”

Beep.

“Hey, Josh, its me. Answer the phone if you’re there... Josh? Hello? Uh... Listen, if you’re there and listening to this, I just want to say sorry. I’m so, so sorry. I know I have no right to expect you to forgive me, but I have to say it. You hear me, Josh? I’m sorry. Please take me back into your life. Just answer the phone.”

I pulled back the curtain as I waited for a couple seconds. The overcast sky was turning a deep gray as the sun set behind the high rise buildings.

“Goddamnit. I guess you’re not there. I dunno. I love you, Josh. Please call me.”

Pink

I was almost 18 when I found out I was pregnant. I drove across two counties to a drugstore where no one could possibly know me to buy the pregnancy test. I was so nervous that I took the test before I even left the building. My knees felt like jelly as I tried to squat over the toilet in the public restroom, steadying

myself by leaning my weight against the cold steel of the cramped stall. Though I could feel the pressure of my full bladder, my pee would only come out in anxious little spurts, and I got far less of it on the narrow stick than I did on the hand that I was using to hold it between my legs.

The test I bought took four minutes. It sounds dumb to say that was the longest four minutes of my life. Four minutes is four minutes, after all. Still, I felt myself growing older in that time, thinking about what it might be like to have a baby. I would have to give up my acceptance to NYU. I would have to give up a lot of things.

When I looked down and saw the faint pink lines, I knew I couldn't have the baby. Growing up, I'd had one older brother and no young relatives; I'd never even babysat, for god's sake. What the hell did I know about raising children?

So, as I sat in that drafty little bathroom, ass numb from sitting on the toilet too long, I decided that I had to get rid of It, and that no one was going to stop me.

Gray

"So, you haven't heard from him yet?"

"No," I said, mesmerized by the way she pumped her forefinger to spin the silver band on her thumb. "I keep calling, but I just get the machine. I think he's screening." The steel colored sky finally broke and I could hear the first raindrops hit the stony asphalt and rooftops; a damp rain smell came in through the café door with each entering person.

"Just give him some time. It's still really new."

"I am giving him time, Lena, but he has to understand that this didn't just happen to him. I'm in pain, too. We need each

other now more than ever.”

“Hey. I know.” She stopped twirling her ring and brought her chin down to my level to look me straight in the eye. “Josh does, too, I think. But things like this—you just can’t push it. Everyone’s got their own pace.”

She paused. “Are you alright? I know you’re upset, but you just seem—”

I took the last sip of my tepid coffee, pushed my plates aside, and slapped two twenties down on the table. “I got this one,” I said, pulling on my charcoal peacoat as I started to get up. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

Pink

Lena drove me to the procedure. I wasn’t allowed to drive afterward and she was the only person I had told about It. I’d made an appointment at the Planned Parenthood in the same county where I’d bought the test, just a couple blocks away from the drugstore. For some reason, it seemed appropriate that the whole mess should start and end in the same place.

I cried through the whole thing. From the moment I felt the searing chill of the stirrups against the backs of my bare calves until I walked back into the lobby on wobbly legs, I cried. I knew it was the right thing to do, for me and for It, but I couldn’t help feeling like I’d just lost myself.

The whole way home, we listened to Blood Flowers by The Cure, and when the album ended, I started it over from the beginning. I wanted to wallow in it. Aside from the tortured crooning of Robert Smith’s voice and my sniffing, the entire car ride remained silent until we neared my neighborhood.

Lena fingered the volume switch and the music softened.

“Listen, what are you going to do? Your parents are going to notice you’re in a funk.”

“I can play it up.” I avoided eye contact by concentrating on the decorative mailboxes that adorned most of the yards on my block. In the last few months, miniature replicas of homes started to appear on the lawns of the more influential families in the community. That started a trend that spread through the rest of the town like wildfire through chaparral, until it was far rarer to see the standard post office box than a custom one.

“I’m not so sure. You look like someone ran over your puppy and then hit you with a truck.”

“Thanks.”

“You know what I mean. They’re gonna know something’s up.”

“I’ve lived in that house every day of my life—trust me, I can fake it enough to get by.”

“Well,” she said, rummaging through her center console for a pack of cigarettes. “Just in case, you know you can stay with me until we leave.”

“I know. I’ll get through it.”

“Only two more months,” she said, knowing that that golden nugget of promise was the only thing holding me over these days.

“Not even,” I said, turning to look at her for the first time since I’d come out of my appointment. “Forty-nine days.”

“Well, there you go.”

We pulled up in front of my house and neither of my parents’ cars were in the driveway yet. I took that as a miracle delivered to me by cherubs playing those tiny harps and felt the gentle ripple of the muscles in my body as they released some tension. Lena’s sapphire gaze searched mine for clues and I looked away,

my eyes focusing on the doll house that stood on top of a brick column.

It took my parents weeks to make it, but they insisted on doing it themselves. My father burrowed through the garage to find the old cans of exterior paint so he could paint it the exact pale pink of our home. My mother dragged me to the fabric store, holding the dusty mauve curtains she had unhooked from the front windows, and quizzed me on which bolt of fabric would match the closest. The house was perfect when they finished—much more detailed and beautiful than the ones our neighbors had someone else build—and even I had to admit that it wasn't as stupid as I had been saying all along. That is, until they stabbed a cross into the fake front lawn of our mini house before mounting it out front.

I shook my head at the memory. “God, I can't wait to get outta here. I swear, I keep expecting to pull up one day and find a giant cross in our lawn to match the one on the mailbox. I am just done with these fucking people.”

“Even your brother? I thought you guys got along.”

“Nah, I'm gonna miss him, for sure. I feel bad leaving him here to deal with fuckin' Abraham and Sarah. Who knows, they might take him up to a mountain top and try to sacrifice him or something.”

“C'mon, they're not that bad.”

“I know, but I still feel sorry for him.”

“Sorry enough to pass up NYU?”

“Lena,” I said, as I gathered up my stuff and checked the vanity mirror for eye puffiness. “I think, considering the circumstances, that its fairly obvious that I'm not about to pass up NYU for anything.”

It turned out that I had only two days left at home. A couple nights later, I got home from my serving shift at Big Beef Burgers, and my parents were waiting at the kitchen table for me. My mother had the fuchsia aftercare sheet the clinic had given me spread out before her on the table. My father was so red from anger that he looked like a caricature of the Devil. I should have expected this. No matter where I hid things, my mother—or Mommy P.I., as my brother and I called her—had a bloodhound’s nose for things she wasn’t supposed to see.

“What the hell is this?” My mom brandished the paper like a whip.

Then without giving me any chance to answer, my father added, “What are you, some kind of whore?”

I’d learned from years of confrontations about my hidden sins that the last thing to ask was why she was going through my room. The same with my father’s impulsive name-calling. Talking back would only make things worse, so I kept my mouth shut.

“We certainly didn’t raise our daughter to go off sleeping around and aborting babies all over the place.” His fist slammed onto the kitchen counter on every third or fourth word. “What the hell is wrong with you? What on earth were you thinking?”

“I... I, uh.” I had no answer. The blood started to rush to my face and I could feel myself going pink. I felt trapped and they knew it, thanks to the genes I had inherited from my father.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” my mother said. “If people at church found out—”

I rolled my eyes.

My mom caught me. “Oh, you think this is funny, do you? Well let me tell you something, missy, this is a small town and news travels fast. Maybe you don’t care about your reputa-

tion, but I don't want people thinking that we brought up some kind of Jezebel."

"That's what you guys are really worried about, isn't it?" I said, finding my voice. No matter how hard I tried not to, I always rose to my mother's bait. "You don't care about me, you're just worried that your stupid little church friends might find out that your daughter has sex just like any other normal human being."

"Human being?" My mother's blue eyes were like glaciers on her pale white face. "You think a human being would just murder an innocent child like that?"

I chuckled because I knew how seriously she was taking this and I just didn't care anymore. Lena's couch was in my near future. "Oh, please. Murder? C'mon. You can't honestly believe that."

"As a matter of fact, I do. You would, too, if you actually went to church once in a while."

"Oh, yeah, that's what I need in my life. More Jesus. I don't get enough of it around here," I said, and watched as the sarcasm slapped my mother in the face.

"That's it!" my father said, his voice booming so loud and deep that I could feel the vibrations in my chest. "You are out of this house! Pack your bags. I want you out of here!"

"You know what? Fine! It would be my fucking pleasure."

I crashed through the kitchen door and headed upstairs. An hour later, with the last of the stuff I couldn't bear to part with packed into my dinky Honda, I pulled out of my parent's driveway for the last time. I took a deep breath as I drove off, trying to release the pressure that had been building as long as I could remember feeling it diffuse into the air along with the smoke from my exhaust.

Gray

"...its just off Bleeker Street. Anyway, it should be fun. Call me if you guys wanna come."

The robotic female voice recounted what would have been the date and time of the message, if Lena had ever bothered to set the clock before she threw away the manual. Thunder clapped outside and the rain came down sideways, hitting the windows with the intensity of a full storm. A faint glow from the room across the way was the only light coming through the window and it cast the whole apartment in long gray shadows. I lit a cigarette and rifled through the refrigerator looking for something to eat.

"Hey," said the voice coming out of the answering machine.

I stopped dead at the sound of his voice.

"It's Josh. I haven't been home for awhile. I just had to get away and think about things. I called to check the machine and got your thousand messages. You're right. We do have to talk. I'm on the road, so I don't have a number you can reach me at. I'll call you again later."

There was no way of knowing what time he'd called. It could have been just minutes before I walked in the door. I was so mad at myself for leaving, I wanted to throw the answering machine against the wall. At least then I could buy Lena a new one and set the damn thing up.

I didn't leave the house at all for the rest of the night, but Josh never called back. The next morning, I even took the cordless into the bathroom with me while I showered, but it never rang.

Two days later, he called again. Lena brought me the phone while I was napping.

“Hullo,” I said, fighting to unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth.

“I’m at the café on the corner. Meet me in fifteen minutes.”

He hung up the phone before I could say anything.

It took a second to sink in, but then I shot out of bed and zipped around the room like a hummingbird, grabbing things from the floor, out of drawers, and off the shelves in no particular order. I burrowed through the room looking for my makeup bag, tossing sweaters and day old socks out of the way. I realized with a jolt that it was still in my packed suitcase. That meant I hadn’t worn makeup in three whole weeks. Had it already been that long? The stone living in my chest grew bigger with the rush of grief that swept over me. I shook my head to clear my thoughts and focused on getting ready.

It actually took me about twenty-five minutes to get down to the corner: fifteen to get my makeup right—I didn’t feel like I could see him looking like the wreck I’d been—and ten taking deep breaths while Lena convinced me that I could face him.

The rain was still falling when I left the apartment, though I could walk without an umbrella now and not feel like I was being pelted by pennies. I walked through the door of the café, brushed off the rain that had not soaked into my coat, and saw him immediately. His 6’4” frame stood out anywhere. He was sitting at a table in the corner, back hunched over, reading a book with his face just inches away from the page. For the moment before he looked up and saw me, I just stood there and took him in. I’d thought about this scenario a million times, each with a different outcome, and I had no idea which was going to come true.

We made eye contact and his amber eyes followed me as I crossed the room and made my way to the table where he was sitting. He didn't get up to hug me, so I just slid into the booth across from him. I saw the book that he was reading was the copy of *Anthem* by Ayn Rand that I'd bought him years ago.

"Hey," I said.

It was silent for a few minutes while he looked me over. I could feel my ears burning as he searched my face, eyes with flecks of gold squinting from whatever knowledge he gleaned from my expression. The waitress came over and I ordered the same beer that Josh was drinking.

"Five years," he said, at last.

"Five years."

"You look the same."

"So do you. Older, I guess," I said. "Um. How did you get here?"

"Drove."

"All the way?"

"I never realized how much you look like Mom," he said, ignoring my question.

"Josh—"

"No, I don't want to hear it. I know you're sorry. You left me 648 messages saying that."

"They wanted me out. What the hell was I supposed to do?"

He'd been expecting that defense. Even after all these years, I could still read his face. It was the same face he'd given me when he was seven and I was five and told him that Petunia, my imaginary friend, had been the one who actually busted his

telescope, and that I was trying to stop her the whole time.

“I didn’t want you out. I just came home one night, Mom was crying, and you were gone.” He hesitated for a second before going on. “They didn’t stay mad for very long. I mean, they were disappointed, I guess—”

“Ugh. See? That’s just it: I couldn’t take their goddamn righteous disappointment any longer.”

“*For God’s sake!*” His voice shook the entire room. All the other diners went quiet and looked in our direction, but he waved off the attention with his spiny hand. “They’re dead. Have some fucking respect.”

The waitress came over, dropped off my beer, and scurried out of the way of our argument without a word. I looked down at the table and tried to scratch off the years of grime that had built up on the wooden surface with my jagged fingernail.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my eyes focused on the almost-black residue that collected under my nail.

“Yeah, you’ve been saying that a lot lately.”

“Well, I am.” I could feel the tight burning at the back of my throat as tears started to well up in my eyes. I took a sip of my beer and tried to force them back down.

“You could’ve come to the funeral. For me, at least.”

“I know, I know. I should’ve. For you and for them. I wanted to. I had my ticket and I even packed my bags—they’re still packed—but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it.”

“You have no idea what it was like having to go to the morgue to identify their bodies. They were all mangled and broken from the accident, and—” He stopped and thought for a second before shaking his head as if trying to scatter the memory. “It was just so fucked up. I needed you and I had to do it all alone. I sat up there on the family pew all alone at the funeral until Uncle

Albert made a big display of sitting next me and trying to get me to cry into his shoulder. I felt like an idiot. You didn't even give me the option of having the at-least-one-good-thing-came-out-of-this reunion in front of all those fuckin' people, even if it wasn't a real one and you were just going to disappear again afterwards."

"Josh, you know I would never have disappeared from you."

"Why not? You've already done it once. I haven't heard from you in five years. Five fucking years. What the hell did I do?"

"I was afraid if I contacted you that Mom would get it out of you. You know how she was."

"Yeah." His eyes misted over, making them shine like topaz. "Mommy, P.I."

I hadn't thought about that since the night I left home. I started to miss her more than ever and I gasped as the rock in my chest grew again, shoving the air out of my throat. The tears came and I couldn't breathe except in tiny hiccups between sobs. Other people in the restaurant were looking at us and for a second I wanted to clarify that Josh wasn't being mean to me, that it was me who was in the wrong, but I realized how futile trying to explain that to complete strangers would be.

He slid the napkin out from under his silverware, handed it to me, and waited until I started sucking in air for deep breaths before he started talking again. "I just really missed you. I mean, its been hard living without you this whole time, but these past three weeks—it feels like I am going to shatter at any moment."

It was a chore to steady my breathing. "I dunno, Josh. I'm sorry. Really. I am. I don't know what else to say."

"I just don't understand how you can leave your life one day and never look back. It was like you never existed. None of your friends knew how to get a hold of you. Even Lena's family

wouldn't give us any information."

"I know."

"I know you know. But you continued to tell them to keep it a secret. Didn't you want to see us ever again?"

"Of course, Josh, but I was angry and it took me a long time to get over that. And I didn't trust that they really missed me. It's stupid, I know."

"Yeah, it is. They were your parents. Of course they missed you. And worried. Constantly."

"I was gonna send graduation announcements in May to feel things out, I swear." I paused and looked out the window at the puddles in the asphalt, tears welling up in my eyes. "I guess it's too late for that now."

My eyes exploded again. I felt like any moment someone from management would come and tell us that we had to leave because we were disrupting other people. No one came over, though. Public breakdowns aren't all that uncommon in Greenwich Village.

Somewhere in the midst of my bawling, I felt bony fingers clasp around the hand I had wrapped around my beer. I gulped down some air and looked straight into the golden eyes I'd always wished I'd inherited from our father.

"I lost something that day." I could barely hold back the tears enough to speak. "The abortion. And then when they kicked me out, I lost something else. You know, pieces of myself. And I keep losing more and more until now I just feel so empty inside. Josh, I wanted to come back for the funeral, I did, but something stopped me. I felt like a fraud. Like you, mom and dad, and God and everyone would know that I didn't belong in that church."

"But that's not true."

"It is. Or it's how I feel, anyway. Empty. I'm just empty."

The hard lines that had been burrowed into his forehead softened a bit, and I felt warmth flowing into my hand from his. “You’re not empty. You’re just lost. You probably need Jesus.” He snickered at me like he used to when our Sunday school teacher turned her back.

I tried to smile at this. I knew the sarcasm was a peace offering, but the cold stone in my chest stopped me from embracing it. “I just feel like I don’t know who I am anymore.”

He intertwined my fingers with his; mine looked like little tree stumps compared to the Daddy Long Legs ones he had.

“I still do.”

“Pff,” I said, making the same sound my mom used to make when she thought something was stupid.

“It’s true. You do, too. You just need me to remind you,” he said, his smirk turning into the first real smile I’d seen from him in five years. It was my father’s smile.

“I guess so,” I said, my lips parting just enough to show my teeth.

“Well, here you go then: You are my baby sister. I was twenty-one months when they brought you home from the hospital and so jealous of a new baby that I told them to take you back. You failed the drivers test three times and came home hysterical each time. You ate Playdoh until you were ten. You used to pick our neighbors flowers, string them together, and then try to sell the bouquets to the same neighbors. You were so bad at acting that in your first grade play, they cast you as a tree in the background and you still sang along and swayed to the music even though you were supposed stand still. You are the only daughter of Denise and John Roberts, who loved you no matter what you think.”

His voice cracked a little as he stressed the last part of

the sentence with a squeeze of my hand. Outside, the sun broke free of the clouds and its light glared on the all the water on the ground and windows that lined the street, filling the café with a brilliant golden glow that matched my brother's eyes. I felt warm from the inside out for the first time in years.

“And you were a tough pregnancy. Mom and Dad weren't sure if you'd make it all the way, so that's why when you were born nice and healthy, they named you Hope.”

To Wish of You



Vincent Torres

To wish of you
Beneath these falling stars.
Kissing you,
Carbon made,
These flames ignite the sky.
And Me, Mercury,
Exploring your horizon
A Mars body of red-hot,
Rock hard,
Planetary
With a total eclipse of the heart.

Lighten darkened landscapes
Of the rise and falling sea
Your Sirius B connection keeps
Beg, beg beckoning me
To be
Brighter than the tidal moon,
Faster than a cannon ball,
Guiding my way through
Guiding my way into your dirty blue hues.

And soften my sun-spot
Into submission
Against yours
Against your rising flesh.
Anticipating
My navigation into your
Holy constellation.

Celestine movements
Of upward elation,
Delicate direction
As our skyward procession
Begins it's final ascension-
Climbing stars and Jupiter,
Surpassing any Venus
As I reach my Zenith
With your Champagne Supernova
In the sky...

Two heavenly bodies
Orbiting the truth
Binary
Breathless
Legs not working
World stops turning
As you pull out
Of my hydrogen cloud
Earth bound and gravity stricken
This little light you've left inside
It just guides me to my knees.

Silence



Kathy Pasha

When I was a child, she worked three jobs.
The silence of her absence grew louder
until it reached a crescendo of off-
colored horns crashing in our skulls
so that we couldn't sleep.
It was only when she walked in the door,
eyelids heavy and feet sore, that the
dissonant chorus would halt.

Somehow she managed,
by crawling or dragging herself
into the room where we were pretending
to sleep. Too late for us to be up, she said.
But how could we doze with the cymbals
booming in our head? The silence,
ever so deafening, had only just ceased.

She urged her body down to the floor
between our twin beds
and sang us a song so loud
that we could hardly hear her.

Cringe



Elise Moore

Sweep, I
sweep past your
sweet gaze
to clean up sticky
crunch of candied cherries
you leave
as an apology
when you can't
make this easy.

Easy, I
ease into rhythms,
easy ignorance
ignoring time and again
your ashen miss-steps,
faltering offers
of more than
small change, better:
a modern you.

You, I
use to ex-
cuse my faults,
though they
stem from cruel nights
of imperfect, false fears
that you
won't understand grey
in worlds black
and shining white.

White, I
wait in corners,
white with worry
with tears
I swallow from pages
of your yellowed books
that land,
soft as sparrows,
where you may
find my anger.

People Watching



Krista Wilbur

You're always people watching, Becky said.
Like whale watching, but beached and dry. Whenever
you watch, your eyes flicker and I see thoughts
float above your head, words
drifting for sheets of cleaned, lined paper. You want to
stain the white, to bleed quick and dark
over neat blue rows. You want to
make those people walk and dance but it never happens because
you forget them when they're gone. You end up losing
a lot of blood while you wait. You should carry a notebook.

RANGER



Maggie Westland

Spider walks our hills
picks up the detritus
of Friday nights
old condoms
cans of beer
butts of cigarettes
that could have
lit the brush.

Some days it's underwear
or Big Mac packs
with ketchup
oozing out
of plastic
bags.

Glass fragments dot the rocks
so she must take care
not to catch her skin
on sharp shards
or to stick
her arms
on cactus
spines.



Elegant



Phase 3

La realidad de las estrellas en Los Angeles



Marissa Purcell

*Naïve you are, child--
To believe in stories.
To dwell in fantasy.*

I cannot see the stars in this city,
They are invisible to the eye.
Truths obscured by a toxic haze,

I wait to escape this endless line
Stuck to the highway, pondering the sight of mislabeled jelly jars,
Sweetened or Fermented by the one celestial body they know

Time moves them into towers that scrape the tips of their dreams
And they continue to build heaven, though they cannot see
clearly.

We exist in this delusion.

Paphiopedilum



Elise Moore

It's not an effort to hum
through spring breezes to land
on perfection; each opening
welcomes with subtle perfumes.

I slip in, dark soft pocket,
breathe, dust my feet against
powdered pistils, wonder if resting
here would be an option.

The slender stem trembles
beneath my feet, a reminder—
seasons don't last lifetimes.

I whisper thanks
knowing that this
is all mutual until

I'm off.

The Unedited Underground



Marissa Purcell

(1)

Let us not be obvious. Digging here in this space.

Shovel in hand, piercing the earth's soil

Underground.

What lies there you ask?

Slimy creatures, slaking through, rotting swamp smells
of sludge and muck.

Beneath the ocean's floor;

A submarine dives.

Down, down, down.

You cannot feel the water in a submarine,
But it gets colder and colder, the further you go-
The pressure builds until your ears pop. In fact,
I believe they would explode if you were not in a
chamber.

Like a Nautilus.

They have been here all along. . . These MICRO organisms.
Some bacteria. Some- - I am not even sure if they have been prop-
erly named.

But they appear, . . . in their invisibility.
Like translucent copepods.

Then there are those predators, whom you do not want . . . to touch.

For your eyes to see them would be enough to unearth your comfort
of sitting in a chair— going nowhere, but in your mind
These wormlike invertebrates, keep digging.

(2)

Do you want to show the world that fish with one eye, jaws open,
ready to bite

Light on it's head, so it can see in the dark?

You know of it—for It is

Fascinating-

It exists as much as our flesh—and yet we talk

About ... our selves.

And ... *The Puzzle.*

Why?

You feel

the same?

Forgotten, anyhow is

All will end

up?

Darkness hides so much.

But it is there-Swimming with the worms.

Living- breathing -heartbeating -alive- just as i-

I just want to make noises sometimes

like raaaaar and grrrrrr and hissssss

And I do.

But it is not as easy

in "human language"

For our minds have built an industry, for our selves. And we

multiply, like rabbits—the rabbits do to—and I suppose

we want to help them- to stop thinking about sex.

Fact is. They don't.

They do this

to survive.

To not be forgotten.

They are known for it.

But they are miraculous creatures as well.

I do not know of the birds in their mind—their hopes and dreams.

They do not make money. They run and eat grass.

But- They have big ears.

So, I am sure they are aware of what everyone is saying about them.

I have never done drugs. But I feel that I live in a wonderland.

Of Cobwebs and spiders waiting for a fly-
to wrap in it's web, and suck of it all the blood that once ran
through its body.

And this is my brain on poetry.
This is not as deep as I can dig.

(3)

Freud is my father, Somehow.
He spends his days with minds
that have been fried like eggs—so they see The world
differently than you and I. or
at least they can verbalize things that are in their mind,
Without fear-
But they fear.
They are being watched by Hitler and Jesus. And not only that-
They fear they are Hilter and Jesus.
And they rob banks, they commit crimes.
So they live all day in cells.
On medication, to behave normally

But the curious inch of my mind says "Wait". One moment-

I recently spoke with him about a young boy that I met.
He told me, he wanted to kill himself;
A child.
It made me so sad to think of a child dying.
And I thought of myself, (For that is what I do)
How interesting
That so many of us have killed this child.

I think in these metaphors. And,
I am afraid of a child.
If he is willing to kill himself,

then he would be willing to kill me.

And that might be what it comes down to. I don't know.

You see.

This is where we travel with this metal shovel.

It is dark

and sometimes dirty because it gets all over—but it is

Our world.

Winford Rice



Kathy Pasha

Dearest Cici,

Thank you for your beautiful letter and continued interest in my published work. I genuinely appreciate the faith and dedication of all my readers, from each corner the world. Receiving letters from my fans is very important to me, and I assure you that you are in my heart. Thanks for your continued support and don't forget to look out for Jonnie Bullett's newest adventure, *Run for Your Life*, coming to bookstores in February 2008!

Best Wishes and good luck on your Master's Thesis!

Winford Rice

P.S.

That is the automated response we are supposed to use for all fan mail (plus a few slight adjustments). Still, I must admit that when I printed it out and attempted to stuff it in the envelope, my fingers fought against me, joints stiffened and felt heavy with mutiny as they were unable—or unwilling—to finish their task. What was happening? The realization came to me like the shock of a searing hot seat belt buckle on bare skin: The letter you wrote, as brief as it was, had reached down into the very core of

my soul and kindled a fire I didn't even know existed. The brevity of the note was only accentuated by your precise diction and distinct voice. Your tone, well-informed yet unassuming, was refreshing compared to the typical I-love-you-you're-so-great-can-I-have-your-baby pieces of fan mail we usually receive here at the office (It is an office, by the way. You seemed to be under the impression that you were writing to Mr. Rice at home. I assure you, however, that Mr. Rice would never allow his private address to be known to the public).

What I'm trying to say is: in the five brief paragraphs of your letter, I got more of a sense of you than I ever have of anyone in the four years I have been writing responses for Mr. Rice. I decided that you deserved a personal letter—in fact, you had earned it.

As he "says" in the generated letter (I actually wrote it), Mr. Rice thinks that fan mail is of utmost importance: he insists that every letter we receive at the office is actually read by someone, even if that someone isn't him. "There is nothing more depressing to me than a letter that never sees a pair of eyes," he said to me on one of the few occasions we have met face to face. I assured him that I would indeed read each and every letter.

You might be thinking, if everyone gets an automated response, why do I go to all the trouble of reading each piece of mail? Is there anyone checking on me? The answer is no, I could burn them all and no one would ever know. However, I'm afraid that this is one thing that Mr. Rice and myself agree on: a dead letter is a great symbol of sadness. The emotions, love, and hope that are expressed in these letters would be snuffed out if they were never read. I have not only made it my duty to read each one, but to also add a personal something that shows that the fan mail was read by a real live human being. But how does "good luck on

your Master's Thesis" even begin to tell you how much your letter touched me? So here I am, sending you a very personalized response of my own. I do apologize that I am not actually Winford Rice, but seeing as he has not read your letter, I guess you'll have to settle for me.

Anyway, I doubt that "Winford Rice" is even his real name. It sounds like something you would make up if you wanted to sound like a formidable author.

My name, however, is Bryan. Regular ol' Bryan with a "y".

And your name is Cici, though I must admit that while I was reading your letter, I kept wondering if Cici was your given name or if you shortened it down from something. Perhaps it stands for your first and middle initials? I like to imagine that it was something so off the wall that you were embarrassed by it as a child and created this nickname so that no one would know. Something like "Chastity Collette," "Charlie Chaparral," or "Christian Crusader," although I am not sure why anyone would name their little girl any of those.

My apologies if one of those is actually your name.

The point is: I like Cici. It leaves something up to the imagination. It gives you an air of mystery, though that probably sounds funny coming out of someone who doesn't know anything about you other than what you wrote in your letter.

Speaking of your letter, it occurs to me that you might be single. Forgive me if that sounds forward; I am not making a pass at you. I'm only curious about the person outside of the impeccable diction and methodical, uniform lines of your lettering (What a treat, by the way, to receive a handwritten correspondence. We rarely get those anymore). I just noticed that you speak of a younger sister, a mother and father, but not a boyfriend

or husband. I guess that's understandable; I've gone through a graduate program in English myself, and I hardly had time for dating, either. I'm rather surprised that you even have the time to read anything outside of the research for your thesis, yet you mentioned that you "read the Jonnie Bullett series religiously." But I guess a *Winford Rice* novel doesn't take much time to read at all, does it?

By the way, it seems as if we have something in common: I, too, wrote my Master's Thesis on Tolstoy. In it, I explored the secondary influence of Tolstoy on Tchaikovsky's *Fifth Symphony* via the later works of Fyodor Dostoevsky. It may sound weighty, but as I'm sure you well know, when you love Russian novelists, it becomes quite easy to get lost in the pages of their collected works. Back then, I would spend hours in front of my computer listening to the *Fifth*, its moody cellos and lofty violins caressed my body like a lace curtain in the summer breeze. I banged the keyboard to the rhythm of the rumbling timpanies, sweat dripping from my brow as I knocked out page after page. God, I miss that feeling. Come to think of it, I can't remember the last time I listened to that symphony. Nowadays it seems like I spend more time lying around, listening to Radiohead's "How to Disappear Completely," and watching my calico kitten lick her tummy. Her name is Ekaterina.

Get it? Kitty for short, just like in *Anna Karenina*.

Ha, ha. That's my little Tolstoy joke. Funny, huh?

Can I tell you what I haven't been able to figure out since I first read your letter? The notion started off as this little itch at the base of my neck and spread into my brain like ice cold water trickling against gravity up my spine. I just couldn't stand not

knowing anymore. It might actually be what froze my fingers and made me write you this letter:

How on earth can you read Winford Rice? The more I think about your research and dedication to Tolstoy's work, the more I find myself wondering how you can stomach such formulaic novels. You seem like a smart girl. Your vocabulary is impressive at the very least, and it's not as if Tolstoy is easy to understand. But Rice's work—if you can actually call it work when it only takes three months to pump out—is nothing but soulless drivel written for the masses with IQ's under a hundred. I mean, Jonnie Bullett? With two T's! How can you even stand it?

I hope you don't think that I am judging you—not at all. I'm just curious, is all. You probably read his stuff to blow off steam more than anything, and I can understand that. I guess we all have our guilty pleasures.

Mine is eavesdropping on other people's conversations on the patio at my local Starbucks. And reading your letter.

To date, I have read it 43 times.

I've just reread my letter and it occurs to me that if Mr. Rice ever got wind of it, I would undoubtedly be fired. Although, if you sent a complaint note, I'd probably be the one to read it and, through the cavernous channels of publicists, literary agents, secretaries, and personal assistants, I would have to make it my duty that your complaint found its way into Mr. Rice's hands in whatever fort or private island he is living on now.

I think it goes without saying that I probably wouldn't do that. Although, maybe I would. I guess it just depends on what kind of day I was having. Besides, who knows if Mr. Rice is even lucid enough to read his own personal mail or if I have a live-in equivalent out there somewhere.

Have I not mentioned that yet? Mr. Rice has, as they say, "gone off the deep end."

I probably shouldn't be saying any of this. Anyway.

From what I've heard, he has secluded himself somewhere and only sends manuscripts in to the publisher through FedEx; no one has actually seen him in a year and a half. The last time anyone did see him was when his literary agent tracked him down, knocked on his door, and was attacked upon sight by Rice himself, who apparently took a big fleshy bite out of the agent's ankle as he was trying to escape. Rice relocated again immediately following that crazy debacle, and as you can probably imagine, no one has tried to find him since.

What I mean to say, my little Christian Crusader, is that there is no real Winford Rice to speak of anymore. There is the "Winford Rice Group," which goes about publishing and promoting that nonsense, but the man behind the name is practically a ghost. For all I know, he could have killed himself months ago and been replaced by a computer program that plugs in different character names and location variables to write the novels for him.

Are the newer ones any better?

I, myself, am working on a novel. It's a psychological journey into the nature of madness and sexual taboo in Reagan's neo-conservative Christian America. It's really nothing at all like the Jonnie Bullett series. Still, I like to entertain myself with the idea that you would read it and send me some fan mail one day. Of course, I would answer all of my own mail personally and if you ever wrote me, I would recognize your immaculate handwriting immediately. Knowing the letter was from you, I would take my time with the envelope to keep it intact, not rip through it as I

did when I opened your letter to Rice. My finger would slide into the folds of the envelope gently and I would take my time running it across the delicate paper. I would wait with bated breath as I spread the letter open wide.

I don't even want to imagine what that letter would say. I know that whatever you wrote would be far more meaningful than anything could ever fantasize. I shudder just thinking about it.

It seems I have gotten myself all worked up. That's been happening a lot lately.

For instance, I've just read your letter for the 44th time and, upon finishing it, discovered that I had an erection. This is not the first time that has happened, but I don't want you to think that it happens every time I read it. Not at all. That would be a lot of erections in a very short span of time and I'm not sure if I am up to all that (no pun intended). To be honest—and I haven't told anyone this for fear that they would laugh at me, but I know you would never do that—it has been exactly 1,013 days since the last time I had sex.

That breaks down to a little over two years and nine months, just in case you were thinking about whipping out your calculator.

I guess at this point I might as well say it: if I could have sex with you, I would gladly wait another 1,013 days.

Well, then. Now I've said it.

Since I am letting it all out, let me also say this: I think I might be in love with you. I'm sure that probably sounds weird, but I am a firm believer in love at first sight. Never mind the fact that we have not met face to face. I don't need to see your face, your letter was all I needed to know that you and I were made

for each other. In some ways it feels like you knew that I would be the one reading your letter and not Rice. I like to think that your intuition made you write your letter, just as mine made me send you this response.

Well, that's it, my darling Christian Crusader (I have decided on that name because you really don't seem like a Charlie, and of the two of us, I would probably be the one named Chastity, wouldn't I?) As soon as I sign off to you, I am going to head down to the post office and mail this without reading it over, for fear that I will chicken out and not send it. Obviously, I can't let that happen. Destiny needs a helping hand sometimes.

All my love,

Bryan

P.P.S.

I am including a copy of the manuscript of my book. Please respond with a piece of fan mail if you like it. Until then, I will continue reading the letter I already have and counting down the next 1,013 days.

Until Amputation



Julie Fontes

I have nicorette nails, but
my fingers are smokes,
and my jacket's a
patch that expired last year.
Too tired to pump iron, so
my muscles are liars,
and my ipod just sits as I sip
caucasians and coffee cause look
at my toes!

My Market's an onion
and my Stayed Home's an olive
and Roast Beef's a lime dipped in salt.
Straight and narrow shedding
vices till digits mock
me, and failure
really isn't my fault.

Man at the Crossroads



Rachel Hadlock-Piltz

Scene: Diego Rivera is painting his mural *Man at the Crossroads* on a wall inside Rockefeller Center.

Nelson Rockefeller is standing watching him work.

There is a chair in the room.

The wall should have an image of *Man, Controller of the Universe*, which is Rivera's re-do of the piece... only we don't have that mural either, so just imagine this:

On the right-hand side of the mural are the fathers of the Socialist Revolution: Marx, Engels, Trotsky and Lenin. At the top of the right-hand side are women and men waving red flags and marching on Moscow – the Red Army! A ragtag bunch of proletariats. Some of the guys in the back have bayonets.

On the other side of the mural, soldiers in fatigues and World War I helmets, wearing gas masks, and waving bigger, shinier bayonets, oppose them.

Lower down, U.S. policemen beat up picketers trying to distribute socialist newspapers.

Even lower down are some middle-class people sitting around, watching and waiting to see what's going to happen – a lot like you folks out there in the audience.

Towards the center of the mural, right across from Lenin, are flappers, playing cards and smoking with laze-faire industrialists and capitalists.

And can you guess who's in the middle of the mural? Right between the opposing armies?

That's right, the *Man at the Crossroads*! He looks worried.

ROCKEFELLER. If you're bored, I have a bunch of Gerald Ford jokes.

RIVERA. Why do I bother working for capitalists?
(*Suddenly, around lunchtime, Lenin steps out of the mural. NOBODY expected this.*)

LENIN. Good question. Why do you work for this guy?

ROCKEFELLER and RIVERA. (*Together*) Lenin!

ROCKEFELLER. What are you doing?! You can't just step out of the picture!

LENIN. Why not?

ROCKEFELLER. Well for one, you're breaking the fourth wall.

LENIN. I was two-dimensional anyway. (*To Rivera*) No thanks to you. Jeez, it was cramped up there.

RIVERA. But that's my style. I'm applying a Mesoamerican dialectic to modernist subjects.

LENIN. All I know is your style was cramping my style. Did you have to shove those American bourgeois up there with me?

(*He points at the people sitting down in the mural*)

ROCKEFELLER. I knew something like this would happen! I should never have hired cut-rate Mexican labor. The best Impressionists, I said, are French. But no. They told me you were more affordable.

RIVERA. Your wage problem doesn't concern me. Lenin just walked off the job! Lenin, what bourgeois are you talking about? Those people have solidarity with the workers. You yourself said the middle class is most inclined to revolt.

LENIN. But they're just sitting around! Those people with the guns aren't even using them! I can't tell if our side is winning.

RIVERA. That's why it's called Man at the Crossroads.

LENIN . What kind of propaganda is that?

ROCKEFELLER. Now wait just a minute! I commissioned this mural, and I didn't ask you to be in it. Rivera, this is your fault. I want him out. Paint him over.

RIVERA. I can't do that, señor.

ROCKEFELLER. Why not? I'm paying you aren't I?

LENIN. You're not taking money from this pig?

RIVERA. Lenin is a part of my vision for this piece, to show the continuity of revolutionary thought from historic times to the present day. He represents the emancipation and enfranchisement of labor from a global perspective. Furthermore, I can't take him off the mural when he isn't even up there anymore.

LENIN. As you Yanks say, damn straight!

ROCKEFELLER. You keep out of this. You're just a representation.

LENIN. So are you.

ROCKEFELLER. Get him back up there so you can paint him out!

RIVERA. I can't do that. It would compromise my artistic integrity.

ROCKEFELLER. Oh. Now I get what this is about. You just don't want to look like a sell-out in front of your Bauhaus friends here. Isn't that it?

RIVERA. Bauhaus?

LENIN. I think he means Montparnass.

RIVERA. That's got nothing to do with it, Mr. Rockefeller.

LENIN. Yes. If Rivera did care about his credibility with the proletariat, why agree to this mural in the first place?

RIVERA. Como?

LENIN. Diego, you know my position on compromise

with the bourgeoisie. I came down here because I don't want anything to do with it. Imagine me, Lenin, in a picture paid for by a robber baron!

ROCKEFELLER. Who are you calling a robber baron you Red? You're not even here! You're in Moscow!

RIVERA. But Lenin, I admire you. I believe in the Revolution. That's why I put you up there. I can use my art to advance the cause, not just a gun.

LENIN. That's the kind of half-measures that would've got you kicked out of the Third International. I can't see what Trotsky sees in you. Speaking of Trotsky, how's he doing? I heard he was in Mexico.

RIVERA. He's not.

ROCKEFELLER. Am I talking to myself? Rivera, I have a business to run-

LENIN. Not for long!

ROCKEFELLER. -so I'll leave you to deal with this mess. But if he's not up there and gone by the time I get back, I'm calling security and letting in the mob, with TURPENTINE!

(Exit Rockefeller)

RIVERA. You heard him. You'd better get back up there. I'll think of a way for you to stay. He's not really such a bad guy. It's just that he doesn't see how you fit in yet.

LENIN. I've already told you. I do not want to be in your mural.

RIVERA. But it's good PR for the cause!

(Enter Frida Kahlo, with a brown paper lunch bag)

KAHLO. Diego, I've brought you your lunch. Oh. Is this your model?

LENIN. I am not a model. I am a representation of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov Lenin, former Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars in the United Soviet Socialist Republic.

KAHLO. Diego?

RIVERA. He stepped out of my mural. I couldn't stop him. It was amazing to watch really, because I didn't paint him any legs.

KAHLO. And they say you aren't a Realist painter! Shows what the art critics know. Mucho gusto conocerle, Mr. Lenin, comrade. My husband is a big fan!

LENIN. I'm glad to hear it, but I wish he'd be more faithful.

KAHLO. So do I.

LENIN. I mean to the Revolution. He could have made me three-dimensional for one.

KAHLO. Oh. Is that why you're down here, because you don't like Diego's style?

LENIN. No. I'm down here because your husband doesn't realize he isn't helping the Revolution by accepting the slave wages of capital. He needs to recognize the proletariat artist cannot overthrow the system while accepting the yoke of the oppressor in the form of a cash fetish.

KAHLO. You got something against fetishes? Well, I understand you anyway. I didn't want to come to New York either. All this walking is killing my back. Mind if I sit?

RIVERA. But Frida, I thought you believed in my work!

KAHLO. I do darling, but I also believe in my poor spine.

(*She sits*)

LENIN. Can you talk some sense into your husband madam?

KAHLO. Him? Ha!

(*Rivera moves downstage and flirts with any pretty women in the audience while Kahlo and Lenin talk*)

LENIN. Well can you tell me where I can find Trotsky? Maybe he can say something-

KAHLO. Shhh!

LENIN. Shhhh why?

KAHLO. Don't mention that name. Diego is a very jealous man.

LENIN. Something between you?

KAHLO. Nothing serious. Not yet. But Diego is going to be broken up about it.

LENIN. When?

KAHLO. In a few years, when he kicks Trotsky out of the house and (*makes sound and sign of knife across neck*)

LENIN. How do you know all this?

KAHLO. I've had an artistic vision.

LENIN. Ah. Is it the counterrevolutionaries?

KAHLO. Stalin.

LENIN. THAT bureaucrat?

KAHLO. Shhhh! It's not something we talk about. It interferes with his work.

LENIN. But how are we going to convince him to stop

this mural?

RIVERA. I can hear you, you know. So can all of them
(*gestures at audience*).

KAHLO. Diego, don't you ever quit?

LENIN. Shouldn't you be thinking up a plan? That
oppressor of the masses said he was coming back soon. I say we
teach him a lesson. The Revolution is won with war, not paint!

RIVERA. I disagree. We need more of both.

LENIN. You're starting to sound like Trotsky. He always
was a complainer. Didn't like my secret police. But it was WAR
dammit! Surely you can appreciate that! Remember 1910! When
he comes back, show him the power of the worker. Capital must
not dictate to Art! Why are there so many guns in your murals if
you never use them?

KAHLO. You're talking to the wrong man, Lenin. He's a
lover, not a fighter.

(*The sound of a mob begins outside the building*)

LENIN. Reactionaries!

(*Rockefeller enters, accompanied by a security guard*)

ROCKEFELLER. I'm back and HE'S not gone. I'm all
for the arts, but this is loony. Unless you put him back up there
right now, I'm letting them in! That's the American people and
they won't stand for communist subversion!

LENIN. Are you sure you want to call a mob? Your
daddy didn't have a great success after Ludlow.

ROCKEFELLER. Leave my father out of this!

LENIN. Hey, Rivera, do those guys getting coshed on the head up there remind you of anybody?

(Lenin points at the left-hand area of the mural where the police are beating proletariats)

RIVERA. Nothing like this ever happened in Paris. Even to Van Gogh! Do you want to know the truth? I was too weak for the revolution. I lied about riding with Zapata! To my own biographer! I was afraid I could never live up to the reputation of the true revolutionaries. They spilled their blood for Mexico! All I ever spilled was paint! Lenin, I don't deserve to paint you!

(Rivera falls to his knees. Kahlo rushes to his side)

KAHLO. Darling, no! Don't let them compromise your artistic self worth. You're a world famous muralist! You're just tired of everyone making unreasonable demands on you. This isn't the Diego Rivera I know. Buck up.

RIVERA. You're too good to me Frida.

KAHLO. I love you. *(She rummages inside the lunch bag)* Here, eat your jalapeño bagel. You're hungry, that's why you talk this way.

(Rivera takes the proffered bagel)

KAHLO. Can't you both just leave him alone?

ROCKEFELLER. Sure I'll leave him alone. Just as soon as I get rid of Lenin. *(To Guard)* Go on, throw him out.

LENIN. You can't throw me out!

ROCKEFELLER. Yes I can. You're trespassing.

LENIN. I am not! I was painted right here! I BELONG here! How can I be trespassing when I haven't come from somewhere else?

ROCKEFELLER. (*To Guard*) Go on! What are you waiting for?

GUARD. I've never thrown out a work of art before. It's like ... defacing property or something.

ROCKEFELLER. Well he's my property, even if it disgusts me to admit it, and I give you permission to throw him out.

(*Guard moves to grab Lenin. Rivera stands up*)

RIVERA. WAIT! You may have commissioned him, but he's my intellectual property! I didn't sign away my rights as an artist when you paid me to paint your mural. I haven't even finished it yet and the contract isn't fulfilled until I finish it! He's not yours until then!

ROCKEFELLER. Are you saying I can't throw him out because you haven't completed your end of the contract?

RIVERA. Yes!

ROCKEFELLER. But that's impossible! You can't finish it if he isn't up there!

RIVERA. Exactly.

ROCKEFELLER. If you don't finish the mural, with him or without him, you'll be in breach, and you seriously don't want that. Not in New York. I'm Nelson Rockefeller. I own New York.

KAHLO. Don't let him threaten you!

RIVERA. You may destroy my property, but not my rights. I have as much right to sue you, as you have to sue me. I could get you for unlawful and damaging misuse of a copyrighted image. You won't get your mural, but you won't get Lenin either.

Ha! I could make more Lenins! A million Lenins! You can't destroy him! He's mine!

ROCKEFELLER. I paid for him and that makes him mine!

LENIN. AUGGHHHH! STOP IT! STOP IT! I can see it now. Me. In every square in Eastern Europe. In every single town square. They've named great cities after me. Cities full of dull people. Full of dull artists making copies of copies of me. Not even original poses or a young me, but the same pointy beard and bald head over and over and over. Pigeons shitting on me. Me. A waxworks. A dinosaur preserved in amber. Living like a marionette. Dancing to the tune of politicians, forever and ever and ever! No. I will choose a different path... Hey! I like the sound of that. I will choose a different path.

(Lenin runs off, and the sound of the mob crescendos as they seize him and splash him with turpentine!)

RIVERA. NO LENIN! THE MOB! *(The sound of the mob dies as Lenin is reduced to a puddle of turpentine and paint)* No. My creation. I gave you life. I gave you purpose. Why wouldn't you listen to me? You could have stayed safe up there forever.

KAHLO. You put too much revolutionary spirit into him, Diego. He wouldn't have wanted to stay up there forever. Now, the People have him. Probably all over their shoes.

ROCKEFELLER. Now that that's done with, are you going to finish my mural?

RIVERA. Paint your own damn mural. Come Frida; let's go to lunch. We'll take a cab.

(Exit Rivera and Kahlo, arm in arm)

ROCKEFELLER. Well that's gratitude. You see? This is why we can't get funding for the arts past the Senate, and frankly, I don't blame them.

(Exit Rockefeller)

(Guard looks at the Man at the Crossroads. The Man at the Crossroads still looks worried, and maybe a little confused)

GUARD. You and me both, buddy. You and me both.

(Curtain)

Prairie Girl



George Morgan

Unsympathetic bankers, a hardscrabble land, and a growing season shorter than a John Deere brake shoe had for years combined themselves into a conspiracy of execution. It was here in a far corner of North Dakota the dreams of European immigrants came to die.

Undulating plains of grass extended in all directions to the horizon. To the south a retreating gray mass of falling mist from some distant storm roared onward. Cutting the grassy plain in two, like a finger run through fresh paint, was a road. In summer the road was hard dirt. But this was late November, and after two days of rain it had become greased with the slimy mud of Dakota farm country. Pitted with water-filled ruts, and combed with gouges from old tractors, car tires were known to disappear into this muck at random. Fortunately the driver of the 1930 Chrysler had been here before, and knew where the soft spots were.

The Sherman farm soon came into view, its half-finished little spit of a house hardly bigger than a tool shed. It sat there waiting atop its meager ten acre plot, a fading brown memory waiting for time to finish its work. The bone white paint that once adorned the structure had long since been blasted away by the Canadian winters, their winds unsympathetic to man's imagi-

nary borders, blowing ever southward through the flatlands like giant walls of sandpaper.

As the Chrysler approached, its passenger could detect a new sound wafting up along the air currents. It was the rhythmic creek of metal hinges, endlessly complaining about the farmer's refusal to oil them. Beatrice Manning, a supervisor with Ray County Social Services, turned to look out the rear window, making certain the horse trailer was still attached.

The Sherman farm had once been encircled by a wooden fence, but it had collapsed long ago. Only the gate remained – a lone sarcastic sentry protecting nothing from nothing. The Chrysler arrived and the driver, Sheriff Knowles, pushed the gate open with a gentle nudge from the car's chrome bumper.

Ten feet from the front porch the sheriff cut the engine. He looked out his window to examine the front tire, now sunk a full hand-width into the wet sludge.

“Thirty miles from town is no place to get stuck.”

The “town” was Ray, a rail stop along State Highway 2 that held a population of three hundred hardy souls (seventy years later the population would still be three hundred). Though small by any standard, it nevertheless managed to find itself elevated to the calling of County Seat.

Beatrice opened her door and stepped out. “Rain or no we have a job to do.” She headed toward the farmhouse porch. It took only two steps for the mud to swallow one of her shoes.

“Shit.”

“I'll get it.” Sheriff Knowles retrieved the shoe, then helped her to the porch.

Beatrice was about to knock when she was distracted by a movement through the window. A young girl had been watching

them, stepping out of view once she realized she might be spotted.

“Mary? Is that you in there?”

But there was no answer.

“Do you have the papers?” the sheriff asked.

Beatrice nodded, pulling them from a deep pocket in her dress. “Do you have the handcuffs?”

He indicated where they were clipped to his belt.

“If he’s been drinking it might get nasty.” She raised her fist to the split pine door and knocked loudly.

“Mister Sherman,” she called out. “It’s Beatrice Manning from Social Services.”

The sheriff leaned to one side to peek through the window. “He’s sitting in a chair. Asleep – or passed out.”

Beatrice knocked again. “Mister Sherman – please open the door.”

They waited, but when the door remained shut the sheriff reached out, turned the knob, and pushed the door open.

“Mike?”

Michael Sherman was hunched forward in a wooden chair, drunk and still. Around the chair like a protective circle of wagons lay a ring of empty wine bottles. At the far side of the room nine year-old Mary stood alone, pale and quiet.

“My dad’s asleep.”

Sheriff Knowles shook the man’s shoulder. “Mike – wake up. Come on, Mike.”

A single eye opened – then the other. He robotically turned and tilted his head to address his rouser.

“Jeff? Whatta you doin’ here?”

“I’m afraid I’m going to arrest you if you don’t start obeying the law.”

Mike noticed there was a second person in the room. He turned slightly to see who it was.

“Oh. You.”

Beatrice stepped forward. “Mister Sherman – your daughter still is not attending school. She is nine years old – more than two years behind her peers. If you do not enroll her today you will be arrested.”

“I need her to clean the creamer.”

“Mary needs to be in school, sir.”

“This is a farm – we have chores.”

“This is a country – we have laws.”

Michael turned his head and spat at an insect that had crept in through the floorboards.

“How’s she gonna get across the river?”

“We’ve already been over this, Mister Sherman. The State of North Dakota will provide a horse she can use to get across the river to the schoolhouse.”

The Sheriff crouched down to talk to Michael face to face. “Mike – Mary needs to be in school.”

“They took everybody. All my kids; Elaine, the boys – everyone’s off to school.” He pronounced the word ‘school’ with a deep drawl of disdain. “I need somebody to help me, Jeff. All I got is Mary.”

The sheriff reached out to Beatrice who handed him a sheaf of papers. “It’s not just the law, Mike. It’s what’s right. It’s what’s right for your daughter.”

Michael took the papers. The sheriff removed a pen from his crisp uniform pocket, clicked it into firing position, and offered it up. As his eyes became adjusted to the dark room Sheriff Knowles could better see the worn-out man sitting before him; the whiskery face and reddened skin, the unkempt hair, the half-

open eyes peering through clouds of glaucoma and alcohol.

Michael managed to find the pen, took it, and affixed his signature.

“Now who’s gonna clean the creamer?”

Beatrice took the signed forms. “Why don’t you give it a try, Mister Sherman.”

She stepped farther into the room so Mary – hiding behind a small table – could see her.

“Mary. My name is Mrs. Manning. “Do you remember me?”

The young girl nodded quietly, and Beatrice stepped closer.

“Would you like to go to school? Right now? There’s lots of other kids waiting to meet you.”

Mary glanced at her father to see his reaction, then turned back and nodded her head.

“Come on,” said Beatrice, offering her hand. “I have a surprise for you.”

Mary stepped forward and entered a ray of sunlight which poured in through a cracked window. She wore a threadbare print dress, but no shoes. Her face was sully, her hands filthy. Her hair was scraggly and oily, and seemed to have attracted two flies in orbit. Sinfully near-sighted, her eyelids were affixed in a near permanent squint.

Mary took the woman’s outstretched hand and followed her to the door. She stopped next to her father.

“Daddy – may I go outside?”

Michael said nothing for several moments. He finally broke the suspense with a single word.

“Go.”

“Come on,” whispered Beatrice.

As the sheriff signaled he would stay with Michael, Beatrice led the young girl outdoors.

Most of the storm clouds had moved on, leaving a brilliant mid-day sun to brighten the Dakota prairie. A slight breeze blew, creating waves along the tops of the grasses and pulling with it the dreams of young girls.

“Do you like horses?”

Mary nodded.

“Would you like one for your very own?” Beatrice walked to the back of the trailer with the girl in tow. Mary could hear the animal’s huge lungs breathing in and out as the woman opened the rear trailer door.

“Come on, boy.” She pulled out a short aluminum ramp and led the horse down to the muddy ground.

“What’s his name?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you give him a name?”

Mary thought a while, looking around the farm as if for some sign of inspiration.

“I’m going to name him Star.”

“Star?”

“Every night I like to come out here and look up at the planets and the stars. I like to watch them move across the sky. I’m going to name him Star.”

“Then that’s his name.”

“Am I going to ride him to school?”

“Not for a while, honey. We need to get you some riding lessons first. For the next few days Sheriff Knowles will be driving you to school. A horse is a big responsibility. Once you know how to ride him – and take care of him - Star will be all yours.”

Beatrice tied the horse up to the lonely gate. The sheriff came out of the house, removed two bags of feed from the trailer, and set them on the porch. Then he opened the rear door of the Chrysler.

“Ready to meet your new classmates?”

They got into the car and the sheriff started the engine. He pulled the car around and headed back toward the highway.

The two lane road followed every rise, descent, ridge and rill of the landscape, its engineers having made no attempt to straighten out Mother Nature’s handiwork. Beatrice glanced back to see how her charge was handling the ride.

“When we get to the school we’ll clean you up a bit. Before we introduce you. Okay?”

Again Mary quietly nodded.

Beatrice turned and watched the road ahead. She had no way of knowing the historic effect the young girl behind her would have. Mary was just another neglected kid that needed to get out of the farmhouse and into the schoolhouse. Beatrice handled at least two dozen such cases every year – nothing special about this one.

The “War To End All Wars” had been over for more than a decade. Yes, the Great Depression was in full force, but Ray, North Dakota was hardly Detroit or New York; the woes of Wall Street were barely felt in the northern frontier. Here on the Dakota prairie economic depressions neither arrived nor left. At least the world was at peace. Yet even now there were rumblings in Europe - the humiliation of Germany having been a gag in the throat of its people. Soon the land of Prussia would be home to great factories building secret and mysterious weapons – weapons that would spread fear to every country. One of those weapons would evolve into the seed of a future space race between the world’s two most powerful nations.

Mrs. Manning had no way of knowing, of course, that the scrawny and scraggily nine year-old girl seated behind her would play a major role in that race. She had no way of knowing

that a second world war was in the offing; that the unwashed little urchin she was now escorting to school would one day contribute to the war effort as a chemist in a weapons factory. Or that she would play a pivotal role in the coming space race. Or that she would one day rise to become America's first female rocket scientist.

Or that she would become a champion bridge player.

Beatrice Manning could know none of this, all of it being too far ahead to see. Little Mary Sherman was just a child – a face - a name. A name like Jennifer, or Susan, or Elizabeth, or Star. A name on a very long list of names.

The one-room schoolhouse came into view over a low rise. Beatrice Manning – dedicated social service worker with Ray County, North Dakota - opened her briefcase and pulled out her next assignment.

Fall



Julie Fontes

I watch my daughter fold her yellow and green gym clothes. I remember the stale florescent lights and cold steel of the locker room setting a stage where real girls develop skill in keeping every bit of flesh covered while slipping out of one piece of covering and into another. It seems nonsensical that along with the development of alien body parts, girls are suddenly thrust into an environment in which they must bare all to each other. A small amount are not ashamed, which seems healthiest, but we can't all be so healthy. Breanna will see her first locker room today. Her choppy hair hangs over her downcast eyes tickling her cheeks as she stuffs the offensive school's cotton into her backpack.

"Are you nervous?" My keychain whirls around my middle finger as I observe her preparations from the entrance of her room.

She twists her face into a grimace. "I just don't understand why I can't do independent studies. Madison's mom has a PhD. I bet the teachers at Washington never even graduated high school." With this she zips up her backpack and remains silent, waiting for her provocation to elicit a new response in me.

I'm sucked dry and fall back on the familiar words which every parent keeps ready for these occasions. I remind her of our conversation last night and the night before. She is my daughter and not in the same situation as Madison. The feeling of being

despised by my own child is new to me. I've been preparing for this for the last twelve years. I've tried to foster her growth and show her that I'm on her side. For almost the first year of her life, I was wary of strollers and any object which would separate us. I was proud to keep her in my arms, at eye level with the world, where strangers would stop and remark at her silent observance. I spanked her once when she was eighteen months and never again. My uncle and mother had coerced me into changing my mind on the importance of this method for enforcing the right behavior in life or death situations. I spanked her when she began trying to climb a precariously constructed shelf which was being used as a temporary stand for the microwave. It caught her off guard and I will never forget the look of silent horror that she gave me before bursting into tears. That look remains in my memory as one of life's important snapshots. My family accused me of being melodramatic when I cried with her. I felt stupid for shocking that little being into tears for the purpose of a "lesson."

This morning the sun is brilliant with the smudges on my windshield. Breanna has her iPod earpieces inserted so that she doesn't have to suffer the morning news with me. She eats the last bite of her sausage and egg sandwich as we pull up in front of the school.

"C'mon Bree, don't lick your fingers. They gave us twelve flippin' napkins." I pull the stack of brown napkins out of the bag and hand them to her. She rolls her eyes and wipes her hands before leaving the car. "I love you, baby. Have a good day."

"Please mom! Please! I don't want to go. Look at that paint! This school's falling apart. They probably still have chalkboards."

"Stop. Just go in."

"You must really love me." She mumbles this almost

inaudibly. I watch her large frame walk slowly toward the double doors of Washington Jr. High. Her shoulders slouch forward slightly as they have ever since her chest started developing. Two boys sit on the retaining walls of either side of the staircase and shout back and forth at each other. They are waspy and confident, like they could grow up to be CEOs after they finish date-raping sororities. *I would be cut open and keep you inside my heart forever if I could.* I can't stop the protective instinct from whispering to me that this is wrong-that I'm sending her to the citizen factory. People protest the idea of home-schooling because it fails to properly "socialize" the child, but some of the most disturbed people I know were socialized in public schools. When I was in school, a kid actually hung himself from the catwalk above the theater stage. Bree turns around as she opens the door and looks back at me. I don't know what she's thinking, but the look on her face reminds me of a feeling I once had. I sink the accelerator and leave her.

A week later I get a call from the school. "Ahem, this is Beverly Showers from Washington Middle School. We have a concern about your daughter."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Well, she's been absent from third period for the past week, and she's missed a few other classes. We haven't been notified of any illness or appointment by you, so..." She let her voice trail off. She's waiting for me to finish her sentence. She's expecting me to affirm whatever it is that she suspects or to become indignant, or tell her I just got a divorce, our cat died, my dad died,

I work two jobs and have plants growing out of my ears. She's waiting.

I drop Breanna off and watch her disappear behind those double doors every morning. My mother-in-law picks her up at three fifteen every day. She wanders from room to room under my roof, watches MTV and American Idol. She's *normal*. Last night, she looked me in the eye over her bite of ravioli and told me everything at school was fine. Fine.

"No, I'm sorry. You're going to have to check your records. There must be some clerical error because she is an honor student. I mean, she won the spelling bee at her elementary school last year. She wouldn't just not go to class." What the hell is wrong with this school where they can't keep track of who comes and goes? Breanna flosses twice a day. Someone with that kind of dedication doesn't just forget to go to class. "I dropped her off this morning. Is she there now?"

"Well, she's been marked absent from first period, so far. I don't have the attendance sheet from her second period class, but my guess is that she's not there, either. I've just talked with the gym instructor and she says Breanna never showed up again after the first day."

I pause and let this sink in. "So where is she?" I flail. Mrs. Showers cannot answer this question, but she says I can come down to the school and talk to Ms. Frank, the guidance counselor. I decide to leave work. I tell my boss that I'm ill, which isn't far from the truth.

I call Missy, my Mother-in-law, and tell her that Breanna is sick and she won't have to pick her up today. She asks if I'm sure and assures me that she can take care of Bree, but I insist. We both insist. It's a cacophony of insistence, which I win.

At her school, I sit in the office with the guidance counselor where we speculate on the cause of my daughter's behavior. An office summons is sent to Breanna's fourth period class, so we

are left to talk and wait.

“Is there anything going on at home?”

‘When is there not something going on at home?’ I think. Yesterday, my brother must have thrown a partially lit joint in our trash bin and the house almost caught fire. He won’t admit it, but the neighbor told me he smelled marijuana and twenty minutes later the neighborhood filled with smoke. Does that qualify as something going on? I wonder what’s going on in Ms. Frank’s home. She looks like she is around sixty and wears a sweater vest and no jewelry. When I was in school, every guidance counselor and gym teacher was determined to be gay. I wonder if Ms. Frank is gay.

“Well, she was set against attending school this year. Her best friend was in a horrible accident this year and wound up paralyzed from the waist down.” I hate telling people this. It does something weird to hear of someone else’s tragedies. I’d rather tell her that the soap scum is building up on my shower nozzle and Breanna is terrified of it, or that the number three is a horrible omen in our family and Bree has never been able to function at three o’clock, or be third in line or exist in the whole month of March. “Madison’s gone into independent studies and Breanna wants to do that instead of traditional school. We fought about it all summer, but I told her that certain skills are developed only in traditional school, and she wouldn’t want to miss out on it.”

“I don’t blame ya. When it comes down to it, the parent has to have the last word. It’s such a tough age, and with such tragedy for her friend. Oh that poor girl. That’s terrible.”

“Yes it is.” I nod. I’m grateful when I hear the door being opened. Breanna walks into the office and upon seeing me her surprise was apparent as she falters mid-step. We are precipitators of an impromptu ambush, and Breanna is caught off guard.

She skulks into the room and sits in the chair next to me.

“Hi mom.” Her eyes avoid me, and she stares straight ahead at Ms. Frank as she folds the pink office summons in half, and then quarters and eighths.

“Do you know why you’re here, Breanna?” Mrs. Frank asks.

“Missing class.” Breanna mumbles this under her breath as though she is telling a secret to a little monster in her shirt pocket.

“What’s going on Breanna? Your mom told me about your friend. You must be having a tough time dealing with that.”

Bree whispers to her pocket-friend again. “I guess.” She shoots me a questioning look. I suppose it is my turn to discipline or counsel or do whatever it is that will at once please Ms. Frank and protect Breanna. I know she is not going to say anything between me and this stranger. These offices are not the places where things are fixed. Ms. Frank has a picture of a Jack Russell Terrier on her desk. I don’t feel the anger that might be expected from a parent in this situation. I don’t tell her about college admissions and her future. What I want to know is where she went and when she decided to go.

“Were you alone?” I ask her.

“Why?”

“Where’d you go?”

“Nowhere”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, it sounds like you may as well have been at school.” Ms. Frank interjects. “The trouble here is that whether you’re having problems or not, we are going to have to suspend you for two days. Truancy is always subject to suspension, and if we let you get away with it now, you’ll probably do it again, don’t you

think?” The counselor stares at her and waits.

“Did you want her to answer that?” The silence is irritating, and I have to interrupt. “It sounded kinda rhetorical.”

“Oh, well I guess it was in a way.”

On the way home I ask Bree why she wasn’t going to class.

“I was waiting for my locker assignment in the gym. I had my clothes and my lock with a bunch of girls I’d just met, and I was really nervous about changing clothes. I went to put my shorts on under my skirt.” Her bottom lids rim with tears as she speaks. “The shorts don’t fit me mom. They’re size extra extra large. I didn’t want to go to the gym teacher and ask for bigger shorts, so I just left.”

I’ve failed her. I’ve failed her. I should have put her in gymnastics. I should have put her in a sport and bought vegetables and cleaned my fridge and polished my shower nozzle, and taken nature walks, but I didn’t. “I’m sorry that happened to you, but why didn’t you say anything? And what about the other classes? Why didn’t you go to those? I’m sorry honey. I don’t understand why you’re not talking to me. If you have a problem, you should tell me.”

She stares out the window as a tear rolls down her cheek and over the crease between her chin and neck. “You always tell me I’m beautiful mom. You always tell me I’m something I’m not! Why do you think I’ll believe you? Don’t you know? Don’t you notice I have to wear these huge t-shirts while everyone at school wears little tops? You drop me off everyday. I’m bigger than anyone else at school, but you still tell me I’m beautiful. You think I can go to school and be normal and that all the skinny girls will be my friends because I’m soo great, but no one talks to me! No one talks to me mom, but I don’t care because I hate

them. I don't even want them to talk to me. They're so stupid! I just want to be alone."

I want to give her anything she wants and tell her she never has to return to school again, and that she's right that they are stupid. I want to tell her that those kids can drink out of toilet bowl as far as we're concerned, but I can't. This is socialization. It's painful, but I know she'll make friends. I remember that this is battle, and as the parent it is my duty not to concede. "I'll talk to your gym teacher and see if we can get you some shorts that fit you, and after these two days off, you are going to every class, okay? I don't want to talk to any more counselors. I really mean that." I nearly rear-end the Beamer in front of me as I turn my stern look back to the road ahead.

"I'm sorry about the shorts, but I'm still disappointed in the way you handled it."

Silence.

"It was dishonest to pretend to go to school and then not go to class. That's no way to get out of things." The thought of her suspension contradicts that one.

"I'm very disappointed in you." I sound ludicrous. I'm disappointed beyond Bree. I do want to make her fit for this world, and wish I would have brought her into one that was more fit for her.

She sighs and stares ahead, still smearing tears across her cheeks. "I'm sorry, mom."

We sit in silence for the rest of the drive home. When we arrive I wrap my arms around her across the center console, and squeeze her tight as she goes limp. I can't stop myself from whispering to her. "My beautiful baby."

Equating College



Tamara Davis

Appreciating allegory and alliteration

+

Better than work (“Honey, I can’t work: I’m *still* in school,
finishing my 3rd doctorate!”)

+

Coffee required

-

Deadlines haunt me

+

Edit, Find (what a timesaver!)

x

Feeling a sense of accomplishment after finishing an “impossible”
assignment

+

Giving a speech, sitting down, and not knowing what the hell I
just said

+

Having intellectual orgasms

+

Intuiting the difference between required and optional

x

Just pronounce it correctly: Tuh-MARE-uh, *not* Tam-A-ruh or
Tuh-maRR-uh!

-

Knowing the differences between MLA and APA

+
Learning to define, use, and pronounce words like pedagogical,
hegemony, bourgeois, and Scheherazade

+
Might I find an available computer at the library?

-
Not today

+
One-inch margins

/
Proving myself (to myself)

+
Questioning relevance

/
Realizing what I meant to say two hours too late

+
Sitting for twelve hours and only finishing half a reading
assignment

-
Thinking, “this will be the best paper the teacher has ever read,”
getting to class and realizing the student sitting next to me wrote
a better paper, and the person in front of him – an even better one

+
U bet I know what Rebus Writing is!

+
Very unlikely I’ll get to the gym, beach, bar, or anywhere else
other than my desk

-
Wouldn’t be caught dead in my homework garb – sweats,
crumbs, coffee stains ... paper cuts

+
Xenophobia overcome: All friends welcome

x
Yikes, Lit’ Theory!

=
Zany students zealously seeking graduation

Flame



Krista Wilbur

You danced alone at first, reaching for my body.
You taught me to move my hips,
you shifted my arms back,
 one shoulder higher than the other.

You and I: we danced in a smoky
room, we spun in whiskey circles,
my breasts pressed to your chest,
you hands pressed to my backside,
and I breathed in your fire –
 I breathed in your fire.

We,
you
and
me
divided: a cancer,
love's angry growth, dividing until we no longer
felt the other, until you only
touched me when your hand swung, like

a mallet, against my face, until you
only touched me to push me, to send
me stumbling, to watch me rise with
gravel in my knees and dark blood
running down my shins. But you
watched me –

You watched me rise.

I dance alone, in a crowded room, in
smoke and haze and a flame that singes
my hair, and I spin, 'round on the
balls of my feet, in circles so fast until I
can barely breath, until I ignite
the room, until my flame burns you
up, until my flame burns me
clean –

The flame burns me clean.

Cradled



Rachael Jordan

I am made of the twisted tree
of my Nana's front yard,
Where the curled branches make a nest,
And life from the roots flows through my body,
The Southern California sky
pokes blue holes among the leaves
that fall to the bushy grass at its sturdy base.
My tree grows not up,
But on a sideways slant,
Caressing the leaves of the Jasmine bush
that gates the house with white blossoms
quivering in the ocean's breeze -
The smell of salt tickles the twigs
that lie beneath my weight.
Tiny ants falter along broken lines
Of the old tree that grows more slanted

With passing years and more grandchildren
To climb within its weakening arms.
But the tree held me first -
I was the first to see the sandy sidewalk beneath me,
The selfish seagulls above, and feel
The knots along my back
as its brown arms rocked me to sleep
in an ocean's wind.

