



Crab Fat Magazine

Flash Fiction

Short Stories

Poetry

Art

Issue 2

ISSN 2374-2526

CRAB FAT LITERARY MAGAZINE, ISSUE 2
COPYRIGHT NOVEMBER 2014
ALL RIGHTS REMAIN WITH AUTHORS.
CASEYRENEE LOPEZ, EDITOR
ISSN 2374-2526

COVER: LADY IN RED BY: CLINTON VAN INMAN

CONTENTS

OKCUPID1 BY: ROBERT REID DRAKE	2
CONTEMPORARY STUDIES IN SHAKESPEARE: JULIET MONTAGUE BY: D.S. WEST	3
SYLLOGISMS BY: KATIA JOAN	4
NAKED IN THE CITY BY: CLINTON VAN INMAN	5
HONOR THY WIFE BY: EDWARD A. BOYLE	6
AUTOMESSIAH BY: DYLAN W. KRIEGER	14
ANXIOUS BLOOD BY: JEREMY BRUNGER	15
EXCERPT FROM CHIAROSCURO BY: ALANA I. CAPRIA	16
A PRIVATE EVANESCENT CONVERSATION WITH MY REAL SELF AFTER A BAD TRIP THROUGH PHANTASMAGORIA BY: DR. MEL WALDMAN	18
CLOCKS BY: TOBIAS OGGENFUSS	19
RUNNING WITH THE DEVIL RAT BY: MARC D. REGAN	20
THE CASUAL LOVER'S LANDSCAPE BY: NARDIA KELLY	27
LANDSCAPE WITH HEBREW BY: DMITRY BORSHCH	28
THE GYPSY BY: C.G. FEWSTON	29
NOT SUPPOSED TO BY: B	33
CHILDHOOD BY: ERIC BALAZ	34
NORA HELMER BY: DREW PISARRA	36
ANTLERS BY: GREGORY LETELLIER	37
DES MOINES BY: THOMAS MICHAEL MCDADE	38
DESIRE BY: MERLIN FLOWER	39
THE SAME BOAT BY: MITCH KELLAWAY	40
A SELECTION OF 10 POEMS FROM AWKWORDS BY: HOLLY PAINTER	42
TRAIN AFTER MIDNIGHT BY: ROBERT VIVIAN	47
CLOWNS WITH BIG FLOPPY SHOES BY: JAMES PARK	48
BEING THE MURDERED GIRL BY: CATHY S. ULRICH	53
ICE ON EARTH BY: NELS HANSON	54
SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BY: SOFIA DE JESUS	55
BANDIT NO MORE BY: STEPHEN OKAWA	56
KISSING BOYS IN THE BATHROOM BY: KYLE BEASINGER	57

OKCUPID 1

BY: ROBERT REID DRAKE

My Self-Summary

—Mostly a boy, and often soft. I'll send you a postcard of Mount Pleasant. If you want— I don't want to come off too strong. Your pictures are really cool. If we weren't so far apart I think we'd be friends. The Midwest seems great. I've always had one window facing the ocean. There's a lot to be grounded by in that, I think. Only one way away— west, or whatever. But not a million. Imagine the possibilities of Iowa. I bet some girls ride their bikes down the street there and never think to expect an ending; I bet some girls sit in a school somewhere and are told for the first time that they are landlocked; I bet some girls lean against their bedroom door even after their parents are in bed and listen for footsteps down the hall, wondering with their fingers if this is the year that their balls will finally drop.

CONTEMPORARY STUDIES IN SHAKESPEARE: JULIET MONTAGUE

BY: D.S. WEST

The friar opens his hand on his
greasy green syringe of 1-8-1 Trioxin.
“This shit’ll chill your teeth out. The pain
begins in your lips, but travels out, like you’re
eating yourself alive, one bite at a time.”
His eyebrows are high. It’s evocative.
“I’ve heard the sensation compared to nausea,
but not of the stomach. Your trachea will—”
Finger circles. “implode. You’re going to choke
on perfectly good air...”

“Go on.”

“That’s when the real imaginary dying begins.
Thereafter it’s agony at the pores. Your sex will
shrink into your body like a wounded kitten
[the friar doesn’t make the connection you just did, it’s
just an apt comparison]

as the lungs withdraw, pressure sealed around
any argon in your system at the time of play death.
We’ll have to make your body worse than dead
so it really believes it’s dead. If we can’t fool
yourself, we can’t fool anyone.”

Juliet reaches for the syringe--
“Give me! Give me! Tell me not of fear.”

The friar holds it over her, he isn’t done
being religious, needing to see her afraid.
“When Romeo arrives, I’ll administer eleven secret
crippling blows, the shock of which will harmonize
your ringing pressure points. On key, high pitch squeal
that reactivates your undead stuck-spoke chakra wheels.
Actually, waking up is going to be worse than—”

“Dude. Chill out.” Juliet lights a fresh joint.
Her favorite scene: the scene outside her window.
The lovely idiot as he crossed his ankles,
like a hanged man, as he said,
‘Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptized.’

She rolls up her sleeve. It’s sunny out.
“Shoot me up. I’m ready to ride again.”

SYLLOGISMS

BY: KATIA JOAN

look at me, wondering
about what the space
between us is made from.
if my heart is a circle,
then the diameter must be the distance
from me to you.

look, our syllogism is fucked up

by this unoccupied space.

look at it all. can i expect
to solve it? you?
euclid didn't prepare me
for this. you.
my heart is all variables,
a negative inside a radical.
divide me

by zero and i'm the same
as i've always been:
a nothing. my chest cleaves,
undefinable.

look at all my weird numbers;
have them. i'll be the problem
left on the board
to be solved for a prize.

i'll tell euclid nothing's
a given. look at me:
i've arrived at nothing.
my heart is a fucking circle,
archimedes.

and i've spent my entire life trying
to occupy this

NAKED IN THE CITY
BY: CLINTON VAN INMAN



Acrylic on canvas

HONOR THY WIFE

BY: EDWARD A. BOYLE

The caretaker tells me there are two dogs available, and I follow him down the long hallway to the kennel. He slips his key into the lock on the entry door and motions me forward with a flick of his head.

“It’s all yours, pal.” He pulls open the door and steps aside. “But make it snappy. I’m closing in ten minutes.”

“Thanks, again,” I nod and smile.

Inside the kennel, there’s a center hallway dividing two long rows of cages. All of the cages look empty. I stand still, listen, and look around. This place was built for easy cleaning efficiency: concrete floors, cement block walls, chain link gates. It’s strangely quiet and I pucker-up and make a few soft, kissing noises. A hopeful whimper answers me from one of the middle cages. I wander over, peek in, and smile at the shy blonde retriever pacing behind the chain link. I lift the latch on the gate and the nails on her paws click on the concrete when she scrambles out to the hallway. She wiggles her backside and bends her spine in the shape of a kidney bean around my legs.

“Hey there,” I say, and playfully scratch her rump. She warbles a high-pitched song and wiggles some more and my low laugh echoes in the hollow spaces.

I walk back to the end wall where there’s a chewed up wicker basket sitting on a chest-high shelf. The retriever nips my heels. Inside the basket, there are three worn out tennis balls and a length of twisted, colored rope. I grab the best of the tennis balls and set aside the basket on the floor.

“Fetch?” I turn and ask the retriever, and her pink mouth opens in a grin.

Each time I roll the ball down the hallway, the retriever brings it back to me. This beauty could play this game all day. After a while, I hold the ball close to her nose and lure her back inside her cage. When I close the gate behind her, she licks my hand through the chain link.

“Don’t go anywhere.” I point my finger at her and smile.

I walk to the far end of the hallway to see the second dog. There’s a boxer in the last cage. He’s sitting in the center of the cage. He’s as still and quiet as a lawn ornament. His coat is brushed suede, and his body-builder’s chest has a white spill on it shaped like Africa. Two of his paws look like they have tiptoed through melted ivory. He is lean and muscular, as if someone has chiseled him from a boulder made of hardened honey.

It is troubling to look at the boxer’s face and head. His right ear is mostly gone, and the scrap that remains is thick and jagged with blackened scar tissue. Inside the ear cavity, veins and tendons pulse like a palm full of earthworms. His right eye is a sky-blue marble floating in watery milk. He is square and blunt, and his muzzle and forehead are as swollen as a street fighter’s knuckles. If the boxer senses my unease, he does not let on. He stares straight ahead and does not look at me.

I lift the fork latch to his gate and swing it open. Nothing.

“You are supposed to react in this situation,” I softly remind him.

I hunch low in his doorway so he can see my face. He turns his head and stares at the side of his cage. I place the ball on the floor in front of me. It wobbles on the concrete, and he squirms and sneaks the slightest of glances at it.

“Want the ball?” I tempt him with my friendliest voice.

He still will not look at me. His face is kind and menacing, and it offers no hint to what is inside of him. How can a living thing wear a face that says so few and so many things?

I push off the floor to stand and the boxer springs to all fours, rushes forward, scoops the tennis ball into his mouth in a single motion. *He set me up...he waited until I stood up.* He bumps past my knees and his cigar stub of a tail wiggles as he canters down the hallway. He opens his mouth and drops the ball into the basket on the floor.

“What...?” I ask no one in particular.

He mouths the looped handle of the basket, lifts it squarely off the concrete, then springs up to a hind-leg stand, and sets the basket onto the shelf where I found it. He drops to all fours and trots back up the hallway. His padded feet make dust-broom slashes on the floor. When he gets to his pen he squirts around me, sits in the same place he just left, the same way. He still will not look at me.

At the end of the hallway, the door opens and I startle. The caretaker leans his head into the kennel.

“OK chief,” he looks down the hallway and says. “Time's up. Close the gate.”

I look at the boxer, then turn and tell the caretaker, “I'll take this one.”

I pull my car into my driveway. The boxer is sitting straight up in the front seat beside me, staring through the windshield. When I walked him from the kennel to my car, I expected him to be fearful; but he stepped into the passenger seat without complaint. On the drive home, I petted him along his neck and shoulder. His skin bristled and he turned and looked out his side window.

I turn off the car and smell the burning brush from my neighbor's slash pile. Soon, neighborhood kids will be splashing in piles of raked leaves or playing war games using fallen acorns as bullets and barrel covers as shields. I look at the boxer. While the caretaker was filling out the paperwork, I asked him what had happened to the dog.

“We don't do background checks,” he shrugged and said.

I open my car door. “Ready?” I ask the dog, but he stares straight ahead. I get out, walk around the car and open the passenger door, clip on the boxer's leash and lead him up onto the back screen porch. “Wait here,” I tell him. He sits.

I push through the back door into my cold and shadowy kitchen. My wife, Leanne, stands at the sink with her back toward me, a steam cloud rising from the hot water of the faucet. Tiny water droplets cluster on the bottom of the windowpane in front of her.

“I brought something home,” I say to her.

She turns off the water and faces me and my stomach plunges. The skin around her cheeks and temples is sinking into her face, and her eyes are hollow, dark, and far away. Not long ago, her eyes were impish and could catch the sun's light and twist it into a twinkle. It is mid-afternoon, and she is wearing a blue pajama top over baggy yellow bottoms. I want to walk across the kitchen and change her back to who she was six months ago. But I don't know how.

“I brought a dog home,” I tell her.

“You what?” She squints and I can see that it hurts her somewhere deep in the middle of her head.

I walk back to the door and open it.

“Come in, dog,” I say to the boxer.

He steps over the stoop and into the kitchen. His leash drags behind him like a flat snake that has bitten his neck and won't let go. He walks to the center of the kitchen and sits upright and soldierly on the tile floor. Leanne and the dog look at each other.

“Why does his face look all beat up like that?” She frowns. She looks up at me and the veins and tendons in her neck inflate.

“I'm not sure,” I tell her. “He's a smart dog, though.”

She nods. “Does he have a name?”

I shrug. “He was found on the street. Why don't you go ahead and name him?”

“I don't know how to name a dog.” She looks at me as if this is something I should know about her.

“There are no rules to naming a dog. You just name them,” I explain.

She studies him for a moment. “I don't know,” she says. “He looks a little like Ernest Borgnine.”

“Who?”

“You know. That gruff-looking actor from McHale's Navy?”

“Oh, right,” I say, even though I don't know who she means. “OK, then. Good job. Ernie is a perfect name for him. Really good job.”

“Harry wanted a dog for his eighth birthday. Do you remember?” She looks at me and asks.

“Yes. Of course I remember,” I whisper.

She walks past the dog and into the front room. She climbs the steps that lead to our bedroom. The dog turns his head and watches her, but stays sitting in the center of the kitchen floor.

It has been three days since I brought the dog home. Sometimes, I forget that we have him. He does not chew our furniture or go to the bathroom on our rugs. He does not nip our heels when we walk, or bark at noises that only he can hear. He sits in his corner of the front room and watches us. I have tried to get him to play fetch or pulling games with knotted ropes, but he has no interest. He eats and sleeps and when he has to, does his business outside. When I call him, he comes to me, but he does not respond when I stroke his fur. He is a robot dog. A zombie. He is as blank-faced as a Queen's Guard of Buckingham Palace. This morning, Leanne came downstairs and looked at him sitting in his corner. Her face folded into a question mark.

“Whose dog is that?” she turned and asked me.

I have not talked to Detective Golner yet today. He is heading up the investigation on Harry. I call him on the bedroom telephone. Earlier, out in the yard, I poured the seed from Leanne's bird feeders into a hole I dug in the ground. I told her that her feeders were empty and she had to refill them.

“I can't go outside. Will you do it?” She asked.

“No. I don't like the birds,” I lied.

She walked to the back door wearing pajamas. Her feet were bare. I stopped her and steered her into the front room. Kneeling on the floor in front of her, I shimmied the flannel pants down over her hips and legs where they lay in a crumpled pile around her ankles. I gently lifted each foot and slid the pajamas free. She stared blankly at the wall across the room as I helped her pull up a pair of jeans and thread her arms into the sleeves of a hooded sweatshirt. She sat on the couch and I unrolled socks over her feet, and then tied the laces of her sneakers in a neat double-knot.

In the bedroom, I cradle the phone to my ear and push aside the shade covering the window. Outside, Leanne is walking across the yard toward her feeders. She is holding a canister of birdseed. The dog is sitting on the corner of the driveway and quietly watching her. The phone clicks and Detective Golner and I greet each other.

“Is there any news on Harry?” I ask him.

The phone is silent for a moment.

“No sir, nothing,” he says.

“OK,” I say. I suppose I should be grateful that they're still looking after six months, but I'm not. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Nothing you haven't already done,” he says.

My head hurts. I sit on the bed and press the palm of my free hand into my closed eye. “What about flyers? Do you think it might help if I go out and post more of them?”

He sighs. “We've gotten some good news coverage, Mr. Creegan. I think the word is out there.”

I don't know what to say next, but I do not want to hang up. When I talk to Detective Golner, I know that Harry can sense me looking for him.

“You still there, Mr. Creegan?” he says into the silence.

“Yes,” I answer. “I'm still here.”

“How's your wife doing?” he asks in a soft voice.

I stand up, pace. “The same,” I tell him.

He stays silent. I know that I am making things awkward for him, but I can't help myself. If I stop talking, I am afraid that everybody will stop talking.

“Well...try to hang in there,” he finally says. “I’ll let you know if anything comes up.”

“Yes. Do that. Please,” I say.

We hang up.

I wake up. It’s dark, and I have fallen asleep on the couch again. The left side of my body is cramped and numb with pins and needles, but I’ve come to like the couch. It has grown confusing to lie in bed beside Leanne. Sometimes our feet and legs accidentally touch, and we quickly and silently move them apart.

I turn on my back and look straight up at the ceiling. Last summer, Harry and I were sitting on the shoreline of Russell's Pond. It was a sunny day and we set our fishing gear on the knuckled roots of a hanging maple tree and ate the peanut butter sandwiches that Leanne packed for us. Harry sprinkled some of his bread crust on the dirt so that the ants could eat. The sunlight bounced off the pond-water and made smoky swirls in Harry's green eyes. After we ate, Harry watched me thread a squirming earthworm to his hook and scrunched his freckled nose.

“Does it hurt him, Dad?”

“No. I don't think so.” I shook my head.

“Cause even though it's only a worm, I don't want to hurt him, right?”

I reached over and rubbed the back of my fingertips along Harry’s cheek. “Right,” I told him.

On the couch, I roll to my shoulder. The dog has left his place in the corner. He is sitting in the center of the room with his right side facing me. The light of the moon is leaking through the front window and it casts alloy streaks across the dog's face. I look at his ravaged ear, the eye that does not work, the blue marble floating in watery milk. His vapory blue eye is moving in the moonlight. It is watching me.

It has been almost two weeks since I brought the dog home. Every day, I feed him and fill his water bowl. I walk him outside. Today, I coax him out to our backyard. We stand on the grass at the top of the small hill on the back corner of my lot. In the winter, when Harry was little, he liked to sit in his snow saucer and spin down this hill. He pretended that he was flying.

I pull a tennis ball from my windbreaker pocket.

“Remember this?” I ask the dog.

I sit and place the ball on the ground between us. He looks at it. I flick the ball with the back of my hand. It bounces down the short hill and settles in the thin grass at the bottom.

“Fetch,” I point and say.

He does not move. I stand, stride to the bottom of the hill, and pick up the tennis ball.

“Fetch...this is fetch.” I show him the ball.

I plod back up the hill and sit again. I set the ball on the ground between us.

“Fetch?” I ask him, this time in a higher-pitched voice, and he stares at the ball. I roll it down the hill again.

“Go ahead,” I say, and point to the ball. “Go get it.”

He sits still.

"Maybe I should have picked the friendly dog at the kennel," I look at him and say, and then stand and walk down the hill, again. I pick up the ball, trudge back up the hill, and sit. On the trees that mark my property line, most of the leaves have turned bright colors. I make slits of my eyes and look at them. They become orange and yellow hanging quilts that rustle in the soft wind. I set the ball on the ground and look at the dog.

“You don’t want to fetch, suit yourself,” I shrug.

He lowers his head and nudges the ball with his nose. It rolls down the hill and rests at the bottom. This time, his lumpy face looks at me.

“You're the dog, not me.” I scold him. “Have you no shame?”

I stand up, walk down the hill, and get the ball. For a moment, the dog watches me; then he stands and wanders toward the house. I climb the hill and sit back down. I miss Harry.

This morning, I wake up and feed the dog, then check on Leanne. She's balled up in our bed, sleeping, and I let her be. I get dressed in some old clothes and go down into the cellar. I stack old paint cans that I've saved for touch-ups onto a wooden pallet. I wrap a rag around a broken broomstick and scoop spider webs from between the ceiling joists. While I work, I tell myself over-and-over that today is going to be a better day than yesterday. Maybe it will come true.

Mr. Carey called me from the plant last night. It must be hard for a supervisor to make such a call, especially a supervisor like Mr. Carey who makes it a point to try to appear hardnosed. He's the one who told me to try as hard as I could to make today better than yesterday. His voice cracked while he talked.

"I hate to mention this," he told me before we got off the phone, "but the vacation time the guys donated to you is dried up. You have to come back to work soon."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It hardly seemed like a week ago when Mr. Carey called and told me a group of the fellows pitched in their vacation days so I could keep looking for Harry.

"Before I come back, I have to make sure my Leanne is alright. Would that be okay?" I asked him.

He didn't answer right away. His breath sounded heavy and far away in the phone.

"I'll see what I can do." He finally told me.

In the cellar, I scoop a pile of musty dirt into a dustpan and toss it into the barrel. I turn off the lights and when I walk upstairs, Leanne is sitting at the kitchen table.

"Would you like me to cook for you?" I brush the spider webs out of my hair and ask her.

"No. I'm not hungry."

"You should eat," I tell her. "You are losing too much weight."

She does not answer me. I peek into the front room and the dog is sitting in his corner. He sees me, stands up, and walks across the room and into the kitchen. He moves to the far wall and sniffs in a circle along the floor, then sits.

"This is something different," I look at him and say.

Leanne turns and stares at him.

"Do you like the dog?" I ask her.

"Why doesn't he like to be petted? I saw you trying to pet him yesterday. All dogs like to be petted."

"Hmmm. All dogs except this dog," I say.

She turns away from the dog and looks at me. "Tell me again."

"Do you really think we should do this?" I ask her.

"Yes," she says softly.

I draw a deep breath. "We were in the produce section and Harry was being a pest," I tell her. "You asked me to watch him while you went to the Deli."

She frowns and closes her eyes. She rubs hard circles into her temples with the tips of her fingers.

"No, no...that's not right." She shakes her head. "Yesterday, you said that we were at the Deli first."

She starts to cry.

"Did I? I'm sorry. It's confusing for me, too," I say softly.

"And then what?" she pleads with me from her chair.

"Please...don't..." I whisper.

"Why weren't you watching him?" she sobs.

"I'm sorry. Please...forgive me." I say.

Saturday, I sleep late. When I finally wake, I sit up and swing my legs off the couch. It has become my nighttime sanctuary, the couch. I do not have to answer questions that have no answers, or move away my feet when they mistakenly brush Leanne's feet.

The dog is sitting across the room in his corner. He has been with us for almost three weeks and I sometimes wonder what he thinks of his new home. He is fed, housed, and let outside to do the things that dogs do. For a moment, I envy him. Maybe anything more than those things is too much.

I stand up, shake the nonsense from my head, and walk upstairs. Leanne is not in our bedroom and my stomach somersaults. I hurry into Harry's room and Leanne is covered with blankets and curled into a tight ball, asleep on his bed. I stand at the foot of the bed and watch her breathe, slow and regular. I feel along the top of the bedspread and find her ankle. I gently take hold of it through the blanket and wiggle it back and forth.

"It's late," I say to her.

She groans.

"You shouldn't sleep so much. Please, wake up." I shake her ankle some more.

Nothing.

"Leanne, please. Wake up!"

She bolts upright and draws a startled breath. Her eyes are wide, and for a moment, I see that once mischievous light in them. Then, slowly, she looks at me and her eyes turn dull.

"I want to know..." she pleads, then lowers back down to the pillow and pulls the blankets around her.

I drag myself downstairs and boil coffee. I open a can of dog food and empty it into his bowl against the far wall. The dog walks toward it and, as he passes me, I reach down.

"Hi, buddy," I greet him in my friendliest voice. I slide my hand over his shoulders, back, and he stares straight ahead, blank-faced.

"Forget I tried," I finally say to him, and he walks to his bowl and eats. I wait for him to finish and then take him out to the yard. I spend the day turning over the soil in the garden for next year's tomatoes and green beans. The dog sits across from me and watches the way I dig into the loam. Sometimes he tilts his head. It's a good feeling, my hands sinking in the dirt and thinking about simple things like next year's planting.

When the sun is low, I hang my gardening tools in the shed and walk back to the house. The dog follows behind at his own pace. I push through the back door and Leanne is sitting at the kitchen table, staring at the centerpiece of plastic flowers.

"Harry is going to need new winter boots," she looks up and says to me.

"Boots?" I ask.

She nods, turns back to the centerpiece. "You should pick up a size 6 for him next time you're in town."

There are times I forget how long the dog has been with us. I think, maybe, a month. Today, Tuesday, is the day of the week that Detective Golner and I usually meet. I drive to the Police Station and wait in the lobby until he comes downstairs to get me.

In his office, I sit across the desk from him and he hands me a list of people who are helping us look for Harry. They are neighboring police departments and state and national organizations that deal with these types of cases.

"You showed me a copy of this last week," I remind him.

"Oh, right," he says. He folds his hands together and studies me. "I've been meaning to go over that with you. Maybe we should start meeting every two weeks."

I let out a long breath and stare at him.

"I'm sorry Mr. Creegan," he stands up and shuffles some papers on his desk, "but we need an outside break here. We have nothing more to go on."

I nod and close my eyes. If I focus really hard I can sense Harry out there waiting for me to come and get him.

"Are you OK, Mr. Creegan?" Detective Golner asks me.

"Yes, I'm okay." I stand up. "I'll see you in two weeks, then," I tell him, and walk out of his office.

When I get home, it's dark. I climb the back steps of the porch and stop to watch a puff of wind send some fallen leaves chattering across the pavement of my driveway. I look up. The stars are small and lonely on the purple night sky. I find the brightest one and watch it blink Morse Code messages to its neighbor. I push open the back door into the kitchen. Through the doorway to the front room, I see Leanne kneeling before the television set.

“Have you hurt yourself?” I hurry across the kitchen floor.

She looks up and holds a disc in her hands. “What is this?” she asks.

“I don't know,” I tell her. “Where did you get it?”

“In the drawer of the end table,” she tells me.

The dog is sitting in his usual corner, and he looks at me but does not budge. Leanne slides the disc into the player and I help her to the couch where we sit. The picture on the television screen is soft blue fuzz, and then Harry's face appears. It is a video from last winter. Harry is bundled in a puffy jacket and mittens and sitting in his silver saucer on the snow covered hill in our backyard. He pushes off the ground with his feet and spins down the hill with both arms raised.

“I'm flying!” He screams and laughs.

There is a jostling on the screen as if the camera is being wrestled with, and then Leanne clicks into focus. She is hunched over and waiting at the bottom of the hill to catch Harry. The camera moves closer and captures Leanne laughing.

From his corner, the dog perks. He stands up, walks to the center of the room, and sits facing the television. On the screen, Leanne tilts her chin upward in a look of make-believe snobbery. She laughs at herself. “Stop,” she says, and holds out the palm of her hand to block the camera's eye. Then she is back in focus, helping Harry out of his saucer and running it back up the hill with Harry chasing her.

Beside me, on the couch, Leanne begins to cry. The dog hears it and looks over his shoulder. His bad eye is a blown fuse in his dented head. He pushes himself up on all fours, turns, and slowly crosses the room until he is standing in front of Leanne. She looks away from the screen and down at him. They are both still for a moment, and then the dog inches forward and lays his chin into Leanne's lap. She rolls her hands to the top of his head.

“I know,” she moans, and bends over to comfort him.

Last night, I slept in my bed beside Leanne. My feet moved near her feet. I kept them still and felt the warmth of her body. I listened to her breathing. It was soft and careful. She was awake.

This morning, the bed beside me is empty and I dress, go downstairs. The dog is not at his usual place in the front room corner and I move quietly to the kitchen doorway and rest against the doorjamb. Leanne is standing at the countertop with her back to me. She is spooning food into the dog's bowl and he is sitting on the floor beside her, looking up. Leanne picks up the bowl and takes it to the dog's place against the far wall. She places it squarely on the floor and steps aside. The dog walks to it, stands over it, lowers his head to eat. Leanne hunches down and reaches out to him.

“Good dog...” she coos softly, “good Ernie...” she says, and glides her open palm along his leathery length. His skin ripples and he leans his body into her; he offers himself to her touch.

Today was better than yesterday. Day was day and night was night. Leanne and I sat on the grass in our backyard and watched a quiet wind strip the branches of their remaining leaves. Ernie sat with us, and each time Leanne moved, Ernie moved. She looked at him once, sitting beside her on the blanket, and reached for him. He lay on his side, flat and calm, while she rubbed his head and shoulders.

In our bed, Leanne and I lie quietly together. The warmth of Leanne's body is trapped beneath the blankets, and it wraps around me. Our bodies are almost touching, and both of us lie still. The red numbers on the alarm clock glow like soft embers. Outside, the light from the streetlight filters through the maple tree in our front yard and casts bony shadows across our wall. I stare at the shadows in the quiet.

“You were at work, weren't you?” Leanne's soft voice asks me from the dark.

I slowly turn my head on the pillow, but there is not enough light to see her face.

“Yes,” I murmur.

She sighs. I know that she is searching for the right words to ease her burden.

“And it was me, alone with him in the supermarket,” she says sadly.

I want to reach over to help her, but I don't know how.

“It's OK to keep me there with you if that makes it easier,” I whisper.

She is silent for a long time. I lie still. Just when I think she has fallen asleep, she moves a little closer to me. And then she rolls to her side, faces me, and slides her soft, warm feet across the sheet, tangling them together with mine.

AUTOMESSIAH

BY: DYLAN W. KRIEGER

my sacrificial ram runs on batteries—a blessing in disgust—at the site of its own blasphemy—blasting off lickety-splat like botched sorcery—like bottle rockets popping open—he-goat’s horny head bone—because who else could dirty-talk in tongues of fire?—bellow *baa-baa* through the black smoke and really mean—*O woe is my adultery!*—woe is my eyelash solitary—in its cross hairs—exing out a hoary godhead—ghost-men perched on thorny glosses—posing naked *make-me-take-me*—this is where your rape dreams come from—christ in every hole gone crazy—saying *lay me down* and *eat me*—bloody sacrifice flecked sexy—by consent—that *as-you-wish*-style silence—minusing the manic embarrass—minus the staticky whine of the protest

=

a plastic virgin—cracking open—in the reeds

ANXIOUS BLOOD

BY: JEREMY BRUNGER

In the old South, the oldest South
where little scattered bourgeoisies
constructed their houses in the wilderness
and declared them good,
mulattos used to have a certain test
of extraction. They would place
their hands next to a brown paper bag
and compare the tint and hue of the two.

If they were darker,
they were denied entrance into that milieu
because they only needed one single drop
of black blood to be black.

The South has always loved its blood.
Blood myth abounds. Even today, in the age
of the digital international brainstem
gay men suffer for their blood. The one drop
need only have a few molecules, *or the scare of it*,
to deny one entrance into that milieu
of normal life,
such as it is if normal, indeed, exists.

Once I was at a liberal friend's house.
His parents smoked marijuana in front
of their twelve year old daughter
and declared it good.

I admitted my persuasion, my clean bill,
my despising of promiscuity and the HIV
of former decades. The mother looked at me
as if I were a younger version of Typhoid Mary
and stepped back a little.

EXCERPT FROM CHIAROSCURO

BY ALANA I. CAPRIA

Audrey Hepburn disappeared into the crowd at Times Square while you stood on the fringe, startled by bright lights. You watched her go, half-terrified that she was walking when she should be dead. She looked good for being gone about 21 years. She didn't look a day over 35. She was a lady who knew how to age. Her black turtleneck bobbed up and down before getting lost in beaming neon. Everything was blue, purple, and green. You shielded your eyes from the yellow and pink. The red gave you a headache. If you were epileptic, you'd be on the floor right now, seizing on a sewer grate. A mini Lady Liberty walked past you and you wanted to pull the torch from her fist. It was still summer but the air was as sticky as melted plastic draped over everyone's heads. You batted at the heat like you would water when swimming. Maybe that was where you should be, leaping headfirst into the East River and hoping you didn't hit a rock (or a bloated dolphin) on the way down. But maybe that was the Gowanus Canal you were thinking of. You got your bodies of water mixed up.

You didn't particularly like going into Brooklyn anyway. Hipster Nation scared you. Everyone looked too tight. They looked as melted as the air. What you wanted was a lukewarm hot dog swimming in bacteria, the tube meat nestled in a steamed bun and decorated with mustard, ketchup, and relish. If you were feeling a little adventurous, you would go for the fried onions as well but normally, you stuck with the old standby. It was easier to have a ritual than to make up tradition from scratch. But the hot dog carts were nowhere and even though you could smell the hot dog stench, you didn't know where it came from. Maybe up the block at the place merging hot dogs and fruit smoothies. If they had a drink featuring pineapple and coconut, then you would be all set. The world would watch you get your vitamins. You would chug that smoothie down, chase it with two hotdogs (three if your belly was acting larger than its size), then go burping all the way home.

It was too bad there weren't any yellow brick roads for you to follow to your downtown apartment. It would be better if there were a red brick road. You liked deviation. The howling dogs would meet you halfway, give you another whisper about what you were expected by the summer heat to do. [I swear, Times Square is the piss bowl of New York City.] someone said, jarring your arm as he walked past with a small crowd of people. He had more friends than you would know what to do with. And you already knew that they weren't all his friends, that at least half the group was vying for his position as group leader. Even social relationships got politicized in some way. You ordered four hot dogs to be on the safe side. You told the guy at the counter to pile up the toppings. I came in next to you and tapped my fingers against the counter, waiting impatiently for the counter attendant's attention to be drawn my way. When his eyes rested on me, I smiled brightly and ordered two hotdogs, plain. You wondered who ate their hot dogs with nothing on them but that was none of your business.

You wondered what it would be like if I got Botox on my lips, inflating them so that they looked like two curving balloons on my face. Would it change how our kisses went? Or would it be like making out with parallel lines of silicon? As a child, you squeezed cans looking for any signs of botulism but as an adult, you hoped and hoped that one day, a can would be so squishy, just pressing too hard would rupture the metal, sending the toxic bacteria into your face. These hot dogs might have had botulism but you doubted that. You were pretty sure the bacteria tended to favor canned foods. There were nitrates and sulfites and toxins galore in these tubes. The meat was raised in cages, possibly just to the left of a subway terminal reeking of shit and piss. There were many unwanted things in this meat but botulism wasn't among them.

You wanted to what? Drop acid in Times Square? Get to fucking at Rockefeller Center? Climb to the tip-top of the Triborough Bridge and threaten to cannonball into the water? You could do it all if you wanted, but remember that there were consequences. Dropping acid would make you think the lights had turned into demonic faces bent on swallowing you whole. Getting it in by the to-open-in-winter ice skating rink would get you arrested for indecency. Going to the bridge would get you 72 hours involuntarily stay at Mt. Sinai St. Luke's. Good luck with that. You would be better off going into the past and asking for a permanent stay at the

New York City Lunatic Asylum. Roosevelt Island by name, Roosevelt Island by design. If you were a good boy and did all your mental exercises, someone might even let you go fishing in the bay. You would be escorted, of course. The escorting would be more like guarding. You would be watched at all times. But you would be fishing. And wasn't that nice? Wasn't fishing something to be proud of? You would bait the hook, cast the line, and wait for a nibble. It was similar to what you did then, cruising up and down Broadway and 42nd street, waiting for the right body to cross your path. You weren't looking for a glow. You were searching for a smell, a distinctly pickled scent that would get into your nostrils, then fog up your head. That's when you would know.

Heading in the direction of Canal Street, Katherine Hepburn stepped out of the shadows and looked at you disapprovingly. You wished she and Audrey were related but they were not. If they were sisters, you could use their corpses to make a tableau of the Virgin Mary greeting a sinner. You didn't know which Hepburn would be delegated to which role but if you thought of the scene without any faces, it was almost perfect. [Fuck off before I eat your mother.] you snarled at Katherine and she leaned back, defeated, her body too red while wrapped in a lacy nylon stocking. Should you go left or right? Up or down? North or South? Stick to the avenues or the boulevards? You didn't know what number you would rather hunt on. Sometimes the 40s made you happy. Other times, you wanted to get way up into the 80s, where you could see some beautiful Egyptian statues along the way. Maybe you could take your picture with a painting by Francis Bacon. You liked how he warped the faces. Your favorite image was of a man counting money beneath the splayed out redness of a butchered carcass. You wanted the man to be counting his own bones as he himself was splayed out in a similar image but you weren't the painter. You were only the devotee. You weren't certain where that painting was right now but you didn't know if it was so far uptown. You were probably close. It was probably in the mid-50s. When you thought of the street numbers, you thought of telling the weather. It was in the low-50s and sunny. It was in the high-40s and likely to rain. I brushed past you again in my rush to cross the Great White Way.

You could hunt that street with the same obsessive quality Ahab lent to the whale but you didn't know if there was a harpoon big enough. You stopped by Madame Tussauds Wax Museum and thought how nice it might be to make an ageless body in the same vein. You could plasticize flesh. You could read a book and learn how. There had to be some sort of manual—Wax Models for Dummies: How to Preserve Flesh so it's Always Young. If it weren't for all the photographs taken showing the wax model with its muse, you would think those wax figures were wax-coated corpses themselves. They looked real enough to breathe. You could get lost waiting for a vein to rise in the throat, for a cheek muscle to spasm automatically. And then what? Head to the grocery store, get yourself lost in the corner bodega? You saw various big-titted, big-assed starlets but you didn't know any of their names other than that they began with a K. Or was it an L? You didn't remember.

The starlets might as well be hanging upside down from streetlamps while peeling oranges with their tongues. And the oranges would have giant seeds, like a lemon or watermelon, that the starlets would gather in their cheeks, then spit out with the deadly accuracy of a BB gun. It was an organic pellet gun. You could have a giggle or two after getting shot by a seed right in the left ass cheek. You left the starlets to their shooting. Soon enough, they would be taking out baggies of heroin and dumping the powder on their tongues. Sometimes, you couldn't bother with intravenous jabbing, especially when upside down and not right side up. In your periphery, the starlets swung like monkeys. You wanted to offer them a hot dog. You wanted to stand underneath them and collect their miscarried drippings in a 48 oz. soda cup. You wondered if their blood would taste like Coca Cola. Most likely, it wouldn't. Maybe the blood would be heavy on the cinnamon, easy on the citrus. You were thinking of barking dogs. You were thinking of yowling cats. You were thinking of crumbling buildings. If you got trapped in the bottom, you would shriek an AMEN! It might not be directed to the heavens but at least you said it. You looked up until your neck ached and swore you saw a shooting star but the sky was blocked up by the Empire State Building's light pollution. Was the sky normally purple? Did it usually have a pinkish sheen this close to midnight? You scratched your forehead but you might as well have scratched your eyeballs.

A PRIVATE EVANESCENT CONVERSATION WITH MY REAL SELF AFTER A BAD TRIP THROUGH PHANTASMAGORIA

BY DR. MEL WALDMAN

Heavy eyes slowly emerge from the Void; surreal dark eyes open up like a black flower of unknown species, blossoming and spreading out with the forbidding wings of a mammoth bird, perhaps a vulture sailing the thanatognomonic skies, smelling the suffocative odor of death.

But this ominous ebony flower with gigantic wings is *really* me—my fugitive soulless eyes escaping from phantasmagoria after a *bad trip* more acidic and chimerical than a 1960's LSD journey.

I confess. I never took *acid*.

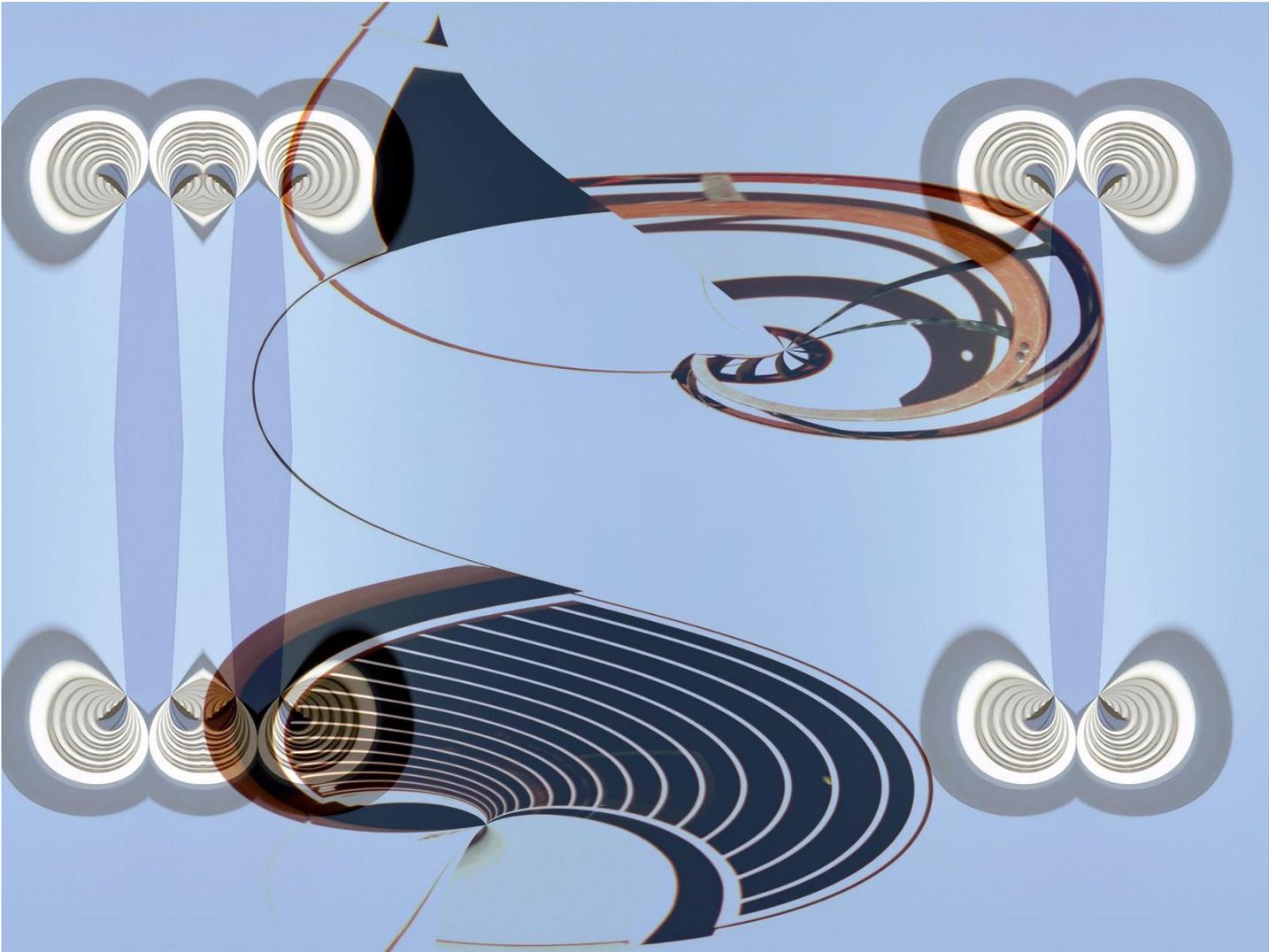
I reveal my truths. My *false self* smells like a foul cornucopia of rotting corpses piled high in the merciless streets of war. Yet my *real self* smells like hot hazelnut coffee wafting through the Heavens from far away, sailing toward me on a winter's night in a blizzard, above the deep snow. I taste its soothing scent.

And on occasion, my *true self* comes closer, fills and feeds my flesh in a flash when my sensuous tongue licks a large cone of Carvel vanilla custard on a summer day, evoking Proustian memories of my joyous child. The boy with the beautiful smile of Eros vanished with the turquoise zephyrs that touched my youth and brushed my soft olive cheeks.

Now, I open my apocalyptic eyes. And in a private evanescent conversation with my *real self*, I whisper, "Where are you?"

CLOCKS

BY: TOBIAS OGGENFUSS



Modified Photography

Running With the Devil Rat

By: Marc D. Regan

—Hey, Tommy. Will ya look't these trees?

—...

—Trees like this at yer auntie's house?

—...

—Her house's big though, right? Lotsa old stuff?

—Rat, give it a rest. This is my aunt and fuckin' uncle. Family.

—Aw, Tom. That hurts. Thought I was your family now.

—...

—Well, don't sweat your panties, T. I'll be cool, I *promise*. Alls I wanna know is, big house? And you know, stuff?

—Forget it, Rat. You hafta be cool.

—Right. Cool.

—Anyway, I told ya. I haven't been here in a long time.

—Whatever. But I mean, d'ya really think it's cool this way? I mean, you visitin's one thing. But me? I dunno. I ain't had me a shower, and, well, maybe I should just slip in later—

—No. Jesus, Rat.

—Tom. Nother one of them headache?

—Gimmee a minute. Just stay on the sidewalk. People *live* in these houses.

—Right. But, man. You can really feel it, huh?

—What?

—It's different once a guy hits New York. Even up state. Here.

—...

—Whole vibe, man. Not givin' rides. Provincial or whatnot.

—...

—Probly take us another week to hitch to Mass. Two to Rhode Island. Tommy?

—Yeah, Rat, yeah. Probably.

—After *four days* hitchin' from California. Up-fuckin-tight. Ask me the whole east coast oughta burn—

—I'll be back.

—Wait. You callin'?

—...

—Wait up. *This* I gotta hear.

—Rat. Back off, okay?

—Aw. C'mon. It'll help me to know what we're gettin into.

—That reminds me. What's your name?

—My...name? T. C'mon. You flakin out?

—Listen. I tell my aunt I'm with my friend *Rat*, she won't let us on the lawn.

—*Jesus H. Christ in a sunbonnet!* Don't a man got the right to choose—

—Hey!

—Sorry, Tommy. I'll be cool.

—You want me to call?

—Yeah, man. I said. See? I'm cool, an ice fuckin cube. *Jeece*.

—Rat. Your name.

—Alright. Robert.

—Robert?

—Robert, Rob, Rat. You're choice.

—Okay. Robert it is. Now. There's a pay phone. By that gas station we passed.

—Cool. But, T, these houses. An army could live in *one*, and so close together. Like elephants in a row. Treasure fuckin chests. Hey! Wait up, man. What, you mad or somethin?

—...

—It's a headache, ain't it?

—Listen. Rat. I'm gonna do this, I just gotta do it. *Without* the talk.

—Alright. Christ. Bite my head off. I knew you was gonna get all cranky on me, I woulda stayed behind. Back under those big trees. It's cool there.

—Hey, *Robert*. I'm droppin coins. Ya wanna shut up?

—...

—Ah, hello? Aunt Connie? This is Tommy. Hi. Yeah, I know. Too long. Actually, I'm here, in Albany. Yep. *Your* Albany. Well...I was wondering if you were gonna be around. Yeah. Stop by your house... I'm over in, what, I guess the west side? Well, yeah, I'd like that. I've missed you, too. Great, great...but...I'm on foot—it'll be a while. What? Drunk? *No*. Yes, honestly. *Nothing*. Yeah, well, mom exaggerates. I'm fine, Aunt Connie. Oh...living? Well, California. Actually, by bus. This is a...layover. Um, well, no. I'm with a friend. Robert. No. Aunt Connie, not Bobby. Actually that's the...I'm going to Bobby's graduation. Uh-huh. No, no. Because it's a surprise. So don't say anyth... Um...you will? That'd be great. But, you're *sure*? Okay. Umm...well, there's a liquor store. No. *No* drinking. Uh, okay. Wilson Liquors. Right. Yeah, I see it. The Hot Griddle? Fifteen minutes? Oh, um, okay. The old Torino, right. We'll just go inside, have some coffee. Yup, great. Okay. Bye.

—Hey, T. That sounded like good news.

—She's coming. Fifteen minutes. Said to wait in that diner. Over there. C'mon.

—Wow. Look at this house. Aunt Connie. Everything. Just the way I remember it.

—It's been a long time since you visited us, Thomas.

—Yup. But I'm here. Now.

—Robert. Would you like a drink?

—Oh, thank you, ma'am. Anything you got's fine.

—And you, Thomas?

—Oh. Uh. Water?

—Not water, dear. Our water's no good these days. We've been buying bottled water, but we're running low. How about a Coca Cola?

—Sure, Aunt Connie. Boy, this's great. Just incredible being here. I remember me and Bobby drinking cokes out in the backyard... Right out there. Climbing that tree.

—Would you like to take Robert outside to where you and your brother would play?

—Actually, ma'am. If it wouldn't be a burden, I'd love a shower.

—Oh, Ra—

—No, Thomas. It's fine. Robert, the bathroom is upstairs. Come. I'll show you.

—Yep. This's one beautiful home you've got here, ma'am.

—Why thank you, Robert. Now. It's... Right... Up... *Here*. Ooh. And will you look at me. Getting so old. Winded from the stairs. And uncivilized. Been here a half hour and I haven't even shown you boys your rooms.

—Aunt Connie. I mean. I could've. Shown Robert. The room. If I'd. Known. Which one.

—Nonsense, Thomas. I climb these stairs every day. This is my home.

—Oh, I didn't mean. Ah. Sure. That's fine. I just. I'm. Trying. To be. Helpful.

—Robert. Now, I'm sure you've noticed, but Thomas has always mumbled. His dad used to become so frustrated with him. Okay. Now, Thomas, I put you in the first room, the blue room. Robert, you get the green room. You'll have to excuse us old folks this funny habit. All the rooms are color-coded.

—Oh, ha. Guess it keeps a guy from gettin lost.

—Now, the bathroom is white. So, Robert, you make yourself at home. There are fresh towels and washcloths on the rack by the tub. Soap in the cabinet, over there. Now. Thomas. Will you come and talk to your old aunt, while Robert gets freshened?

—Oh. Yeah. Of course. Uh-huh.

—Dear, you're mumbling.

—Well, your mother's worried, dear.

—I know.

—Have you spoken with her?

—No.

—Then you cannot honestly say you know, dear.

—Okay. What I meant. Is. I can. Imagine. Her.

—It's hard to hear when you mumble, dear.

—...

—Wringing your hands won't help. So. Your friend is *quite* dirty.

—Oh. Well. Guess. It's been. A long. Trip.

—My hearing, dear. Now. Does Robert know your brother Robert?

—Ah. No. He doesn't. Know. Bobby. But. I.

—Are you going to stay with your mother?

—I don't know.

—The poor woman has no idea you're coming? Thomas?

—Aunt Connie. It's hard to explain—

—Louder, please.

—Sorry. Things between me'n mom are complicated. Since Dad, well, it's been hard.

—Do you mean to say that you've made some bad choices?

—I don't...

—Dear. I'm concerned. I'm your great aunt. Your *mother's* aunt. What do you expect? Family is important, Thomas. Your generation doesn't always understand this.

—I understand.

—Have you spoken with your grandfather?

—Not lately.

—Hm. Well, what have you been doing in California?

—Ah. Ha. Hm. Well...working...and...going to school.

—Both? And working where, dear?

—Um. At a Michelin shop. You know, tires?

—And they gave you time off to attend your brother's high school graduation?

—Sure. My boss, he's real nice. Cool—

—My hearing.

—Aunt Connie. Do you have any aspirin or Tylenol? I've got a killer headache.

—Scooba-la-dooba-la-doo.

—Oh. *Here* he is. Don! Thomas Jr. has come to visit!

—How's that now?

—Thomas, Marge's boy. He's here. At the table.

—At the? Thomas Romulus? Damn, boy! You're all grown up!

—It's great to see you, Uncle Don.
 —Wow, boy. How old are ya?
 —Twenty-three, almost twenty-four.
 —Hey?
 —Thomas, Uncle Don's hearing is worse than mine.
 —Twenty-three.
 —And doin good?
 —Can't complain.
 —Thomas is working at a tire plant.
 —Pourin rubber?
 —No. I probably didn't explain... I *sell* tires. *After* they're made. Ah. Michelin.
 —Okay. Tires. Fair enough.
 —Don. Thomas is attending a university, too. In California.
 —Okay. Now you tell me, boy. Can you believe... they won't let me drive?
 —Don.
 —Hold it, Connie. They say I'm too old. A danger.
 —Don.
 —Do I even look eighty?
 —Ah. No way, Uncle Don. Not eighty.
 —That's what I say. What *they* all say is *Don's eighty and that's too old*. Hit a damned curb is what I did. *One* time. Everybody's entitled to a mistake, aren't they?
 —Let's hope, Uncle Don.
 —You ever made a mistake, Bobby?
 —Don, this is Thomas, Bobby's brother.
 —Oh right. Sorry. You kids always looked alike. So, how old are ya anyway?
 —Twenty-three.
 —Well, I just walked from the Stewart's. Remember them? Used to live next door?
 —I do. Uh-huh. Emily.
 —Your uncle Don's been doing some light carpentry work for them, Thomas.
 —Yeah. And their new place is four goddamn blocks.
 —Don.
 —Boy, believe me when I say, a short drive is a long walk.
 —Did you hear, Thomas? Emily got married.
 —No, Aunt Connie. I didn't.
 —Was it you, boy, had a crush on that girl?
 —Yeah, Uncle Don. That would've been me.
 —Thought so. You folks would show up and *boom*. You'd be off with that girl.
 —Yeah. Guess so.
 —Well, so I'm putting up some plywood walls in her folks' basement. Breaking the space into rooms. Big job, you wanna do it right. You a carpenter, Bobby?
 —I sell tires, Uncle Don.
 —Oh right. So how'd you get here, Bobby? I didn't see a car.
 —Thomas rode in on the Greyhound bus, Don.
 —Bus, huh. Thought all that business was for college students, these days. And immigrants. You a college student?
 —Don. Thomas is working *and* going to the university. He was just telling me...
 —Well, don't let me bother your conversation. I need to soak in the tub, anyhow.
 —Not now, Don.

—Huh?

—Don, Thomas's friend, Robert, is in the tub.

—Bobby?

—Don. Why don't you sit down? I'll get you a Coca Cola.

—A beer, goddamn it. Coca Cola...treats me like a boy in knee pants. So then, you came with Bobby?
Or Tommy? I think I'm confused.

—I'm Tommy, Uncle Don. My friend upstairs is named Robert. Like Bobby.

—And he's taking a bath?

—Well. We've been on the road, er, traveling. A few days.

—Eating exhaust, we used to call it.

—Here's your beer, Don. Now, do drink it slowly.

—See that? Treats me like a boy. Get Bobby a beer. He's not in grade school.

—Thomas? Would you like a beer?

—Oh no. Aunt Connie. Soda's fine.

—See, Don? Not everyone needs alcohol to socialize.

—It's got nothing to do with socializing, Connie. I've been *working*. What, boy, you don't drink?

—No, Uncle Don. I mean. Coke's fine.

—Ahh! Yessiree. Now *that* was nice. Refreshin as all get out. Feel like a new man. And, ma'am, your water pressure's to *die* for.

—Oh. Hey, Ra-Robert. Uncle Don. This's my friend Robert.

—Well, dear, I'm glad. You know what they say about cleanliness.

—Yes, ma'am. It beats stankin!

—Ra-Robert. I think—

—Bobby, your friend here's got a firm grip! Son, you want a beer?

—Sir, I'm Robert and a beer would be *heaven*.

—Well. I've got to start dinner. Thomas. Do you still like pork chops?

—Sure. But. Don't. Do anything. You. Wouldn't. I mean. Normally.

—Oh. I do need to change the battery in my hearing aid.

—Yeah, Pops. Can't beat a hot shower and a cold beer. *Any* old time of day!

—Damn tootin. These days, though, they call *me* old. Was a time, a guy saw eighty, he'd be revered, an elder. I look eighty?

—Eighty? Honestly, Pops, I don't believe it. I'd put ya at sixty, *tops*!

—Well, you're a liar and not a very good one. But that lie earns you a fresh beer. Drink up...was it Dick?

—Robert, sir. Call me Rob if you like.

—Ha. I knew a guy went by Rob, once. Now we're talking way back, probably fifty-five, fifty-six. Funny guy, that one. You done with that beer?

—Am now.

—Good man! Bobby. Get us a couple fresh beers from the kitchen fridge. And for chrissakes, have one yourself! You've got some catching up to do! We'll be on the porch. Should be a game on. What's tonight, Sunday? Monday?

—Don. Haven't you had enough?

—Connie, you know how *sick* I am of hearing that? Now grab us a couple beers.

—But, Don. It's late.

—What, I got work in the morning? You're tired, *you* go to bed. Christ, woman.

—She's right, Ra-Robert. *We* should turn in, huh? Get an early start tomorrow.

—*What, I got work in the morning?* That's rich, Pops! Mind I call you Pops?
 —You been calling me Pops for hours, why should I care now?
 —Sharp as tacks, Pops. That's you. Not a day past sixty. Too old? Hell. Just let the guy behind a wheel!
 Christ, you're a youngster at heart! But so, like I was sayin—*before I was so rudely interrupted*—this neighborhood's unbelievable! Beautiful! Huge minkin' houses!
 —Should've seen this goddamn town in the thirties! That's when...ah... Uh-oh.
 —Pops. Somethin' wrong?
 —Huh? Well... No. Hell no.
 —Oh. Oh *man*. Pops. I mean...*jeece*. I, ah. Hey! Tommy!
 —Yeah? You finally ready to...oh shit...Uncle Don... Aunt Connie!
 —Yes, dear—oh, Don! It's time for bed. Come now. Thomas, *please help*.
 —Okay. Aunt Connie. What can I do?
 —We need to get your uncle out of those wet pants...let's get him to the back bedroom. Oh, Don.
 —Oh *nothing*. We're fine here. Aren't we, Robby-boy?
 —Well, Pops. I mean, it *is* gettin' kinda late. But. Let me just finish this beer. Errp! 'Scuse me! Where you want all these empties to go, anyhoo?

—Well, *Robert*. That was just fantastic. Last night was a fucking gem.
 —Think your auntie knew we weren't really takin' the bus? And sellin' tires...T, that was genius.
 Thinkin' like a pro.
 —Yeah, a pro. You're a real fuckin' prize, Rat.
 —As in Cracker Jacks?
 —...
 —What?
 —'What'? You got the old man drunk. He wet his fucking pants!
 —Alright. Christ, you're a bent hanger. So the geezer got sloshed. Was a real pissar, haha. Seriously though, it happens, Tommy. So get off your high fuckin' horse.
 —...
 —What?
 —...
 —All I know, it's happened to me. You ever soak the jeans?
 —...
 —There you go. Way I see it, the geezer got what he wanted. Drinkin' like that. I just partook *with* him. As a guest. Sucks to drink alone, ya know. Auntie didn't drink, *obviously*. And like he said, he wasn't no boy.
 —No. He's an old man. Eighty. Jesus, Rat, what if he fell, hit his head...died.
 —Well, all *that's* over. And voila! we didn't hafta see either of the old fucks this a.m.. I always say, a bird eats worms and the fuckin' lion eats the bird. I, for one, am a lion.
 —And *I'm* gonna be dealing with repercussions. At my brother's graduation. God.
 —God...? Yeah, ha ha. Anyways, T...and this might not be the best time. But ta-da! Handy-dandy transistor radio! Whaddaya think...from the sixties?
 —*What?* Fuckin' Rat!
 —Hey. Take a breath. T, look. It's a relic, an antique. Just sittin', collectin' dust.
 —I *know* what it is. *Robert*. It's the radio my fuckin' uncle loves. He's had it for...ever. Listens to games on it. Christ sakes.
 —Listened. And, T, here's a plus. Good goddamn batteries. How often that happen? And look at this...
 —What the... Whose teeth're those?
 —Ha, ha! Look at your fuckin' face! They're falsies.
 —W-what's *that*?

—Oh. A few’a them towels. High quality—
—Is that...*blood*? Oh...Jesus, God...Rat—
—Listen. It’s behind us. So you get yer thumb out. Let’s get it way behind us.
—Rat...my *family*?
—Not no more. I’m your family now, I told ya. So you hitch. I’ll find some road tunes.
—No. Rat. *Fuck*. I mean, what’d you...*do*? I, oh, God...*fuck!*
—Aw, T. Here it is, you’re too fuckin’ serious, that’s why you get those headaches. Plus, they were *old!*
Miserable. So go hitch. Cause we *need* to skedaddle. I’ll get something on the radio—hey! How the fuck about that? It’s Van Halen! ‘Running With the Devil’. Fuckin song rocks!
—No. Rat. You pulled some shit before, but...that’s fuckin blood. What, what’re we—
— I’d say we’re skippin’ the graduation, for one. But okay, you just stand there. But, you know, T, nothin’s changin’ now...and the longer we wait. Translation—cops...?
—Oh my god...oh my god, oh my god...
—Attaboy, Tommy. Thumb nice’n high.

THE CASUAL LOVER'S LANDSCAPE

BY: NARDIA KELLY

Don't catch me writing about love,
Not in that pink and rose
flush-faced giggle of an emotion;
don't think you've been graced with that.

Don't think I spend my hours waiting for
your online messages—blunt and crude and oddly intriguing
as they are, I have better uses for my heartbeats.
Don't think you've been graced with that.

Don't breath into my ear when you hold me,
it just makes me want to inhale your rough voice and melting heat
into my skin as we slip into actions I'd better not speak of.
Don't make me feel like I want more of you.

Don't catch me shivering when we share a room
Because even from across the table you tear my body between
damned shyness and desire calculating its grievous completion.
Don't make me feel like I want more of you.

Don't make this out to be anything bigger than it is; we
don't kiss except to consolidate the transaction, we
don't give more than we can bear to lose. We
don't pretend we'd walk a thousand miles for each other with broken feet.

Don't ask me about how, when I'm alone, the thought of you sends a shock travelling up
through my bones, to the magnetic core that I have isolated with swathes of tundra,
the ghost of you still navigating my secrets long after I've stopped exploring you.
Don't make me doubt where the lines of lust blur.

Don't be exactly what I asked for, and exactly what I need.
Don't be sarcastic and self-aware, keen-eyed and brown-haired, when I am only
safe from love with partners who are too blind to know what love is, or isn't.
Don't make me doubt where the lines of lust blur.

Don't catch me writing about love;
I've locked my heart at the top of a skyscraper
and we are just fucking on the fourth floor.

LANDSCAPE WITH HEBREW

BY: DMITRY BORSHCH



2008, ink on paper, 19 x 21 inches

THE GYPSY

BY: C.G. FEWSTON

Aboard the *Thomas Leighton*, I thought of Mary, my wife who I had lost last year in May, as waves churned below the ferry and an island came into sight with its solitary hotel standing on a hill. Star Island with its two-mile radius off the coast of New Hampshire held a lone hotel from the eighteenth century and with all its antiquity and lack of modern facilities the three-story building rested against a grey, June sky as a fog horn, mocking my silent discontent, blew proud in the distance.

Each morning I would drag myself out of bed around 5 a.m. and slip into my jogging shoes to run along the rocky trails that fed themselves on the outskirts of the some forty acres or so of land. When my pace settled, my heart steadied, and my breathing smoothed to the sensation of sandpaper being worn down, I recited poetry to myself to keep the grave thoughts of Mary in the casket out of reach from the joy that came with revolving along on an island in the Atlantic. I recited "The Road Not Taken," "Taking off Emily Dickinson's Clothes," by Collins, "Fire and Ice," "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," and "The Gift," by Milosz. As I ran, the poems did not distract me. Instead, each one allowed my thoughts to roam just as my body seemed to soar through the narrow paths shaded by foliage. But there had to have been a distraction there somewhere, taking me away from Mary's tombstone covered by decaying roses and forget-me-nots. I knew one thing, however: a wedding ring could have no end, and I knew I could never really take my wedding ring off my finger. I was no circle. There were ends to me.

My job at a major bank in New York City turned obsolete overnight. No one wanted to hear the warnings. Countrywide and the market were making too much money. The day I was told by Gerald that I was no longer needed was one day before Dr. Schultz told Mary she had breast cancer. My wife turned to me in the doctor's office and gripped my hand. Our eyes met as they had done on our wedding day. Then she said, "Are you ready for this?"

I ran faster, up rocky inclines and around muddy indentations in the trail, and drove my memories further back into their minuscule cages while "From what I tasted of desire" etched itself from my coarse tongue and dried lips and the fleshless words glided out over East Rock and lost themselves to the depths of the ocean.

A few hours before I had to meet the other writers for the morning meeting, I had heard singing stretching from the chapel stationed on a slight hill next to the main hotel:

Cherish the hour.
Life is but a paper.
With a flick, it is gone.
With a flick, it is gone.

A silence came and thickened. A triangle was then tapped. The chime resonated through the closed-eyed audience and sieved out the noise of my grave stress.

Later that same day, a cloudy afternoon, I met the minister who had performed the service. Martha Burton was dipping a paintbrush into oils and painting with meticulous accuracy a cottage near the chapel. Her sixty-year-old skin and shaved head of silver were like the sun at the heat of day rippling across the water. She invited me to the Summer Solstice coming in two days. I thanked her and said I would be glad to join.

On the morning of June 21 at 6:13, I turned right at Gospel Hall, pounced up a slope, and joined the Arts group on a flat rock surface just outside the chapel. We all held hands in a circle and from within were two golden hula-hoops. Inside one hoop was a painting of a radiant sun; across the image of the sun were laid a few daises, a smooth rock the size of one's fist, and a tumbler filled with seawater. In the other hoop sat a woman with her long legs crossed, sitting as a shaman. She wore white canvas pants and a sleeveless shirt and her brown hair lay flat against her back like sun-waves on a clear day in the desert. A silver trumpet began to play "On the Sunny Side of the Street" and the group sang and swayed arms and hips in and out of the circle. The

sun goddess stood up and made rhythmic revolutions within and without the hula-hoop. The hula-hoop, aura of her energy, twirled around her waist, then spinning somehow around one arm to the next and back, faultless rotations of the hoop, never slowing, and finally with one leg raised, balancing herself with one foot planted in the rock surface, the hoop kept steady pace around her neck.

Martha the Minister was the one who told me the sun goddess was Romanian and that her name was Shiloh Kyszinsky. Dipping a brush into paint, eyeing a rock wall closely, Martha also informed me that Shiloh was twenty-eight (four years my junior) and that she was in a relationship. The goddess was mortal after all.

So, after the reading that night and during the social with my fellow writers which followed, I drank tumbler after tumbler of Jack trying to bring back the edge of courage that was razor sharp once upon a time to cut Mary into my life until I too felt like tumbling. In the middle of the drinking and the nonsensical speeches one writer made to another, I found my feet carrying me out into midnight and onto cliffs, the roar of the ocean massaging the land. I pulled from my back pocket, where I kept it, the last letter Mary had written to me before she died. The sealed envelope was thick several pages full, and I wanted to throw it into the ocean. Instead, I picked up a large rock and placed it back on the letter and that was when I heard a woman's laugh over to my right.

No. It came from above. Nude and glorious Shiloh twirled in the moonshine across the cliff rocks. A silver aura surrounded her bare limbs and her hair glowed bright as she swirled over the rocks.

Then naturally, I fell backwards. Crashing waves tossed me like a barn swallow in a hurricane. My muscles tensed from the icy waters and my spirit seemed to shoot out my fingers and toes all at once. And the strangest thing of all, I was happy that my pain was ending.

Hours later, I awoke, dry and perplexed, back on the cliff wall. My wife's letter was not where I had left it.

The next day after Shiloh's hula-hoop class, I confronted her on the front lawn of the hotel. She wore a wide-brim hat and sunglasses that gave the faintest hint of her eyes. A few writers indolently read books or chatted with one another in the rocking chairs above on the porch.

"You have something that belongs to me," I said. "I'd like it back."

"What I have," Shiloh said, "you threw away." I could see her soul staring into mine. I shook.

"Well, I want it back," I said.

"Well, you can't have it," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because it's mine," Shiloh said.

"You're right," I said, enchanted and mollified. "I don't want it anymore." I turned to walk away to the porch when Shiloh grabbed me.

"Do you want me to read you the letter?" She asked. "Mary wouldn't mind, Wes."

I nodded to her question and said, "You're right. Mary wouldn't mind. Not in the least."

Later that day I met Shiloh on the dock. The idea of an excursion to the uninhabited island, known as Sandpiper, was Shiloh's. A rustic man with a fine head of hair walked along the pier above and screamed at the top of his lungs,

"Boston! Boston!" the man shouted. "Boston! Boston!"

My return volley that this was not Boston went unheard.

Shiloh wrinkled her nose and spun in a tight circle. "We shall go to Boston someday," she said.

I paid a young man with Dean on the nametag twenty dollars and he steadied the dinghy as Shiloh stepped to the back and I in the center. Dean pushed the small boat out away from the dock while I adjusted the oars into the rings and locked them into place with the small latch pins.

There was a slight breeze, it licked at Shiloh's hair, and she would lift a hand and clear a strand from her mouth. She ignored me and watched a sailboat gliding in the distance in front of a tiny lighthouse.

"Where are you from?" I asked, my arms working the oars in a steady pace and realizing I knew relatively nothing of this woman or how to row a boat for that matter.

"This dinghy," she said.

“No,” I said. “Where’s home?”

“This boat *is* my home.”

“Are you serious?”

“I’m a gypsy,” Shiloh said. I had never met one of those. But as I detailed every article of her being, I understood that my Shiloh was Esmeralda from Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris*. But this gypsy had white skin and tiny hairs, cute curly cues of femininity, on her legs. She was more like Sarah from the novel *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* by Fowles. The gypsy had stepped from the pages of a book.

“I see,” I said.

“I’m not the woman for you,” she said. I tightened my grip around the two oars and rowed in larger swinging motions through the sea. The gypsy could read minds.

“I know,” I told her.

She turned her head away from me as if she knew I would say such a thing and it had always been known.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean—”

“I know what you meant,” Shiloh said. She crossed her arms from the cold and her hair continued to flap in the wind.

All I could think of was how Shiloh’s copper-toned voice settled along the syllables like firebugs flicking on-and-off at twilight as she read my wife’s letter. When she finished reading she placed page by page, thirteen pages in all, on the rolling sea and I saw how paper melted into itself. I laughed like a lunatic at this, not sure I believed in any of it.

A little while after that, hand-in-hand we walked up the embankment of Sandpiper Island. Her eyes absorbed the simplicity of her surroundings as if this was home and she was privy to a heathen conversation of land and sea. Then it began to rain.

We charged through sheets of rain and jagged brush, under seagulls balancing wings on invisible currents of air driving the storm upon us. In a matter of moments, Shiloh led me to a shanty that stood without doors or window glass. As I entered the dwelling, she wasn’t facing me. I came close behind her and kissed her shoulders and her head bent to the side my lips chose.

I was like a lost boy of Pan. Not sure of how I had gotten to this island of eternal youth and joy. Not sure of how of anything. Who was I? Who was she? Where were we?

Shiloh dropped to her knees, letting her shirt fall to the earthen floor. I did the same. I placed my left arm under her neck and continued to kiss those lips that had once been a prison to me. A prison in the way all things are impossible to get at until they are got.

Shiloh leaned up to my ear and asked, “Are you ready for this?”

The next morning on Star Island I searched for Shiloh. She was not out on the front lawn for her usual hula-hoop class. From the porch I could also see down to the pier and dock that she was not there. The chapel proved empty. When I found Martha she was painting the sky behind the obelisk on the east side of the island. I asked her as to where one might find Shiloh. The minister regarded me quizzically and said, “Try Cornelia.”

“What? Who?” I could feel the earth spinning and I was about to be sick.

“Cornelia knows everyone,” Martha said, dipping, yet again, always dipping with this woman, a brush into cerulean blue. “She’s the one in the wheelchair out on the porch. She might know a thing or two about your gypsy.”

I had no time for games islanders play to occupy their days. I rushed to the porch and found Cornelia watching the sun setting out over the water. She was frail, covered in a quilt. I pulled a rocking chair close to her and leaned closer in. I inquired of the gypsy, of my Shiloh.

“I know her,” Cornelia replied.

What joy! I was not all madness.

“Shiloh Kyszinsky, you say?”

I did. Yes. A thousand times I said it. Tell me. Where?

“Over there,” Cornelia said, pointing to Sandpiper Island. “She lived atop that hill to the east.” This old woman still had her wits about her. Thank the gods!

“Yes,” I said. “Her home—”

“Shiloh died there in 1932,” Cornelia said. “My mother, Francine, used to tell us stories about that crazy gypsy woman. Strange happenings. One time—”

“No,” I said. Not possible. Not likely.

“Her husband went to sea and never returned,” Cornelia said. “Some said she went mad with grief and jumped from the cliffs. Others said she was captured by pirates during a storm. Who is to know what happened to her.” The old woman was as crazed as I was becoming. A fog drifted in as if it were going to consume the island and lift it into the heavens. “But my mother told me...” Cornelia drifted off into a deep thought.

Yes. Go on. Please do go on.

“My mother told me the gypsy woman hung herself in her home one night. And there her home still stands.”

I thanked the old crone for her time, and continued my search throughout the evening and into the next day, asking the staff, demanding answers from one Martha Burton and the others in her congregation, rowing to Sandpiper Island, twice, and finally shaking Cornelia’s wheelchair and scaring the poor woman to come out with the truth.

If the old woman knew anything, she never broke. I was a madman and I ended up with nothing more than an exhausted mind and more enemies anyone wants on an island thirteen miles from the mainland.

On the last night of the conference I walked soberly to the edge of the same cliff the night I had seen my Shiloh dancing. The moon was raked behind silver wisps of clouds moving over the backs of stars.

Waves crashed against the bottom of the cliff as they had done for a thousand years and would do for thousands more. I stepped forward. The air was cold and smelled of rain. Smelled of Shiloh. I looked down at the sea far below and at the ocean that ended in a straight line of charcoal.

Then I heard a voice. Her voice. It was the light of my dreams, the passion of my madness. Shiloh’s voice spoke again, much closer and much clearer than before. And I laughed to myself. When I turned and took a step back, I heard Shiloh say for the last time,

“Are you ready for this?”

NOT SUPPOSED TO

BY: B

It wasn't supposed to happen.
I wasn't supposed to find this maybe-maybe not unrequited love,
Not here, not in you.
Your warm, melty, honest brown eyes
Are not supposed to draw me in.
Your thick, dark hair
Is not supposed to be so alluring.
I shouldn't be enraptured
By the way you smell, the way your skin feels,
Or by your wit sharper than any knife I've encountered before you.
The way you kissed me wasn't ever supposed to be.
But now, you hold my heart without even knowing it.
And none of it was supposed to happen.
Because you are a girl,
Just like me.

CHILDHOOD

BY: ERIC BALAZ

XI. That summer we were covered in rashes and our ears stayed infected. We lived where the Niagara bent and collected run-off and debris. We swam at the site of an abandoned marina; its skeletal structure collapsed on land and spilled into the water. Oil tankers slid through the water to head out into the great lakes, rushing off to better cities.

XIV. I lost my virginity in a dark room, the only light came from the TV. The local news broadcast accompanied my rhythmless thrusting.

Young boy shot dead today on the East Side.

Chemical fire causes millions in property damage.

We're out of the playoffs. There's always next time.

I tried not to think of my best friend as he masturbated in the corner.

XVI. I felt nauseous going to math class junior year. I saw two male classmates making out in their car. My nausea was from excitement. I held my hand to my mouth and vomited. I continued vomiting and the pressure built until it started to squirt out between my fingers. I washed my hands in the drinking fountain and went to class.

XI. We wouldn't scratch at our rashes, allowing the itch to take over our thoughts. When it got to be too much we would rub our bodies together, young boys and girls. Sharing our suffering, we found relief. And while the act wasn't sexual, at different intervals we individually, young boys and girls, would hide under overpasses or behind rocks or in the thick weeds and pleasure ourselves to the memory.

XIV. I woke up the next morning with blood clumped and smeared around the shaft of my penis. I found great satisfaction peeling it from my scant pubic hair. I ate a sloppy Popsicle and played WWF SMACKDOWN! on my PlayStation as she searched for her panties.

Jockeying for position.

He missed! HE missed!

1... 2... 3 ding! ding! ding!

Shrugging her shoulders, she pulled on her pants without them. I found her panties the next day, leopard print and bikini cut, shredded in my dog's mouth

XVI. During lunch I went to the bathroom by the gym. This kid I knew was standing there in boxers, his leg perched up on the sink. He was shaving the leg with a pink disposable razor. Later, I sat in the cafeteria and felt uncomfortably aroused thinking about it as I mixed mayonnaise and ketchup together with a French fry.

XI. Our ears oozed and we compared the different colors. It was jewelry, strange adornments for the kings and queens of the neighborhood. We stumbled everywhere we went, our balance destroyed by the infections. The police chased us and we made daring escapes. Our thrones in constant danger of usurpers, we welcomed all challengers.

XIV. I saw her next at the park. She was with her friend who was my age and in my class, unlike my girlfriend, who was several years older than I was. We all undressed. Her friend wore soft white panties and bra and held herself with her arms, collapsing inward. My girlfriend was completely naked; the wet ground squelched between her toes. We started while standing but quickly fell to the ground.

Bark, woof, ruff.

“Where’s the ball?”

“Sit, roll over, play dead.”

I laid between them, our small bodies intertwined and covered in mud and sweat and semen and grass and leaves.

XVI. Eighth period was English class where we sat in groups, the day simultaneously about to end and begin. Instead of watching *The Great Gatsby*, this girl and I created a narrative under the desk. We achieved mutual orgasm during the scene of Gatsby floating dead in his pool.

XI. Fall came and we still jumped out into the water. We would huddle together while on the edges of the mighty Niagara, lips blue and rashes purple. As some retreated we knew it was near the end. There was only a small cadre left that last day as we watched one of our friends in the water, ice forming around his unsubmerged edges, dead.

XIV. The next time we had sex was in the basement. It was during a party. The flower pattern of the cushions I put down for comfort, pulled of the family couch, were stark in contrast against the dirt grey of the basement floor. She took me in her arms and laid me down on the cushions. Our friends stood in a circle around us. They talked loudly amongst each other.

“I hear she’s going to break up with him.”

“Why?”

“Just because... no reason... maybe because she finds it funny.”

As I neared climax she whispered into my ear that she never wanted to see me again. My orgasm was total and complete. I pulled out and ejaculated until I was empty and it felt as if parts of my soul were being torn out and shot, fading on her skin to be scraped away at a later time.

XVI. Gym class, we would play in the large fields surrounding the school. I, and others, would sit with our backs against the outside wall of the cafeteria. I smoked cigarettes in an act of rebellion against the regime. Two girls promised to kiss if I did the same with the boy next to me. I hid my arousal with my damp shirt. I was not sure why, but I burned the cafeteria down a few days later.

NORA HELMER

BY: DREW PISARRA

You're sitting in a cavernous theater.
The house is empty. The lights are out.
Beside you, a tame rat with a toupee
snickers while eating macaroons.
You're there to pick a leading lady for
A Doll's House. He's there to help.

The first actress to audition? A peroxide
blonde transvestite in a micro-mini that
barely conceals her candy. When she
coos lines like "What if the wonderful thing
doesn't happen," you wonder, is this a play
by Ibsen or Jacqueline Susann? Not bad.

Option 2 is a disheveled actress who reads
the stage directions as if it were dialogue.
"She laughs," she says then laughs.
"She cries," she says then cries. She stops.
"This room rocking like a boat," she states.
The rat chases her offstage. They're gone.

Third choice: A Bavarian chanteuse who
confides that she's been dying to play Nora
for 40 years. She insists, she'll bring something
new to the role. Is that something new being
old? As she rambles, the spotlight shrinks
then fades to black. Silence. You are alone.

You shuffle the headshots on a makeshift
table as if you were a two-bit, street hustler
perfecting his game of Three Card Monty.
You move the cards fast so the profiles
merge into one generic face. You feel
a shiver up your spine. The rat is back.

He puts down a crisp \$3 bill then points
emphatically with his crummy paw,
its five nails painted copper, nails that
tappity tap on the table as he too waits
for the wonderful thing to happen as if
you could somehow make it happen for him.

ANTLERS

BY: GREGORY LETELLIER

One morning, Joe Benson woke up with antlers. Yes, antlers, as in two awkward, wooden protrusions, springing from his head. He was a deer man. He looked in the mirror, touched them gently, and screamed. He made the situation real by nervously putting it into words: “I’m some kind of fucking deer man now.”

But he knew it wasn’t natural. It made him question a lot of things. He called his mother in Bangor and asked if his father—who he tenderly referred to as “that sperm donor you once humped”—was, you know, a deer. Or a moose. But she just laughed into the phone. So he hung up and questioned the existence of God. He pulled out the Bible, clutching his antlers, and poked at Genesis and said, “Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.”

About ten fuck you’s later, he called his girlfriend Josephine, a gorgeous Philosophy major who didn’t feel comfortable enough with Joe to let him see her naked. He wanted her sex so badly, especially in the long, wine-soaked college evenings, but she said she was too self-conscious to go there. Plus, Joe felt he was falling deeply for her, and didn’t want to screw things up.

“Baby,” he said, his voice swallowing itself. “Babes, listen. Today has been a weird day.”

“Is it a rash?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “Worse. Much worse.”

Fifteen minutes later, Josephine burst into Joe’s apartment, hand on hip, displeased to find out that Joe had not relayed to whole truth to her.

“You are so full of it,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

She tossed her purse and keys onto Joe’s kitchen table. “You’re not dying or anything. You just got some weird-ass antlers.”

Joe stood there blinking. Josephine continued:

“You just need to be careful. Wear an orange vest if you go in the woods.”

“I’m not concerned with bullets,” Joe said. “I don’t want the scorn. I have class tomorrow. I have a job.”

Josephine laughed, showing her big toothy grin. “Just tell them you have lupus,” she said.

In a huff, Joe shuffled to the freezer, pulled out a handle of gin, and swigged. He didn’t offer Josephine anything, but she moseyed over and pulled out a beer anyway. They both sat on Joe’s couch, drinking in gulps, and before Joe could even let out a sigh, Josephine initiated, for the first time, the dirty deed. She stuck a hand down Joe’s pants.

“I know this is strange,” she said. “But I think I want it.”

Joe set down the gin. He almost blurted, Really? but decided against it. If the antlers were working to assuage some strange fetish of Josephine’s, then so be it. He just said, “Ok baby,” and grabbed her hand. He led her into his bedroom, put on some Al Green, and laid her on his bed.

Joe began by undressing for Josephine and dancing to the music. She lay on the bed, watching him, quivering with desire. He slid out of his skinny jeans with finesse, but struggled to get his t-shirt off with the antlers. Then he ripped off his socks, and tossed them carelessly onto his mountain of laundry. Finally, he slipped off his boxers.

“No your turn,” he said, sliding into bed.

Josephine stood. One by one, she plucked open the buttons of her blouse, and let it fall by her ankles. She unhooked her bra and tossed it aside. Before going for the zipper of her jeans, Josephine hesitated, cupping her breasts with her perfectly manicured, blood red fingers. With her fingertips, she rubbed her perky nipples. Joe wanted Josephine so badly in that moment—wanted to kiss her fine breasts, work his way to her soft neck. But as Josephine slid out of her jeans, Joe saw something more beautiful than anything he had seen before, a freakish grace but grace nonetheless: Josephine’s thighs—so perfect in their musculature—were infested with horsehair.

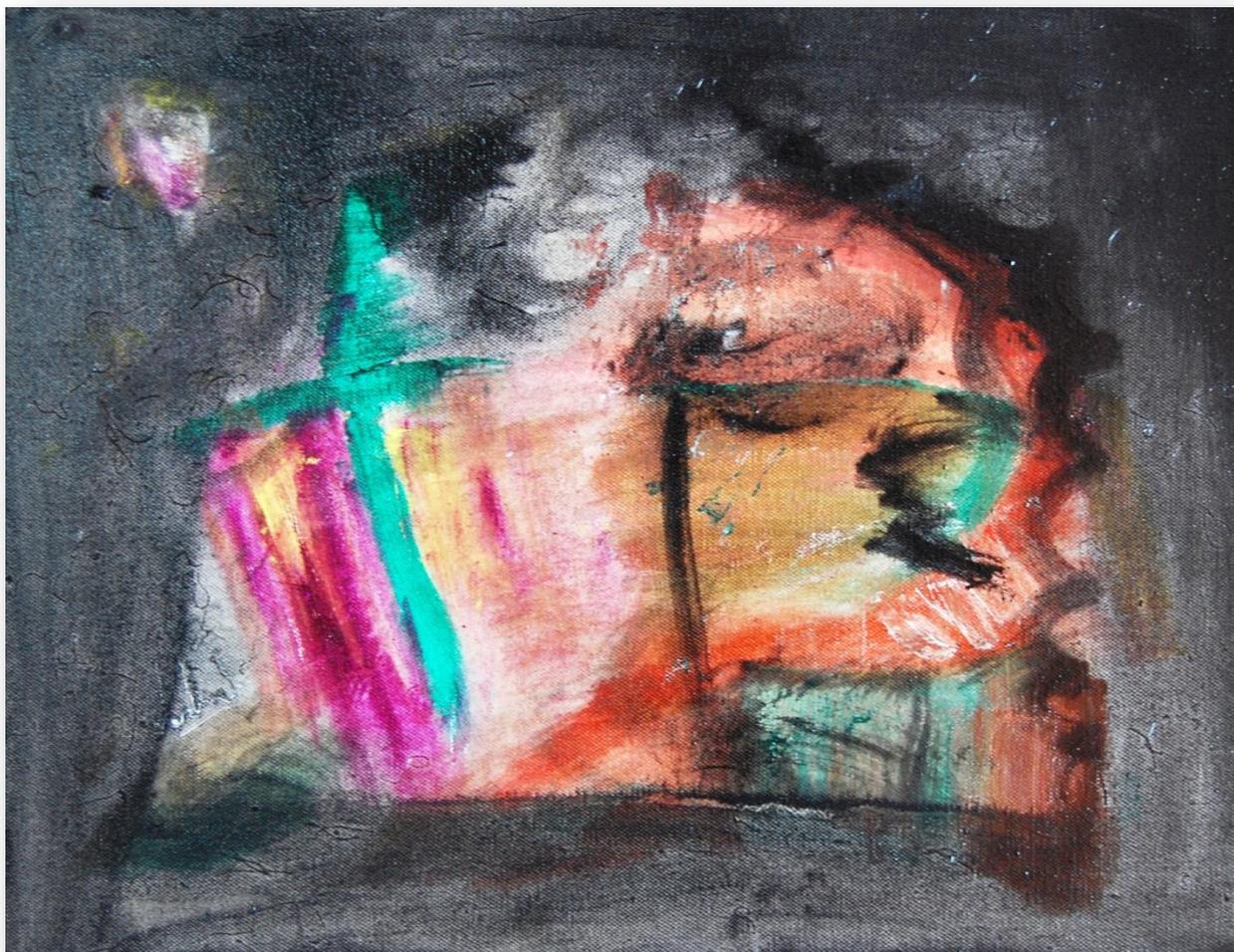
DES MOINES

BY: THOMAS MICHAEL MCDADE

In my ramshackle Ford, the '67 trip from Providence
to Boulder was so scary that much was suppressed or suffered
the youthful affliction that all thoughts and deeds
remain pulverized in mind, duration accessible
like the first piece of ass. The grub I ate along the pikes
would have been the least of my spirit's recording worries
but it strikes me I might have favored ham or egg salad.
No wedges of apple pie, simple or a la mode
and there are no flashbacks to hot diner coffee
following the tow out of the snowdrift
or the first chorus of knocking rods.
That dessert had no significance. I had yet to read
Kerouac. "Nutritious and it was delicious of course,"
he noted, *On the Road* early, later he noted that
"...deeper into Iowa, the pie bigger, the ice cream richer."
Forty-six-years down the blacktop and still driving
a car with in questionable health, pie was paramount,
as I rolled along a portion of my daring youthful trek.
I didn't make Des Moines as I did in '67.
"The prettiest girls in the world" inhabit
that burg according to Jack: 'Bevies' of them
"and apple pie and ice cream-it was getting better."
I attempted Beat nutrition at a PA truck stop
but the script the waitress, older than me
spewed included no apple, not even cherry,
Jack's Nebraska choice – imagine!
In Ohio, I won at a shiny diner,
but the serving was nothing to write
your first piece of ass about.
I imagined it delicately propped on ice
in a Styrofoam cooler and crossing
the Iowa border the lid popping off
due to the fabled dessert aping bread
and fishes and my plain and worn
waitress young, stunning,
delicious and famous
for digging older men.

DESIRE

BY: MERLIN FLOWER



Acrylic on canvas

THE SAME BOAT

BY: MITCH KELLAWAY

The sun did its thing, bouncing across all those glass faces downtown, the ones I used to tease were mirrors just for you. My pretty man.

You and I were making our way to the ferry dock, you dragging one of those big purple suitcases you had, that old swing in your hips, and me barely weighted with my little athletic bag. From a distance I'd spotted that tiny ticket window embedded into the side of that huge concrete building--you remember the one? I think we didn't have to say out loud how boring it looked next to the shiny sea.

"We'd like two round-trip tickets," you called out--so breezy, I remember thinking. Next to the bored-looking ticket girl I was smiling, even when your bag made that scraping sound that went straight up my spine. Or when you held out our credit card and I noticed the girl's face was a blank. You know how I hate blanks, gives me the willies.

"We have a rough seas warning today," she says. And her eyes did that thing folks' did then, you know? Darted to me, darted back, but not making up their mind?

So she focused on you. "We got ginger pops for \$2," she says. "Help with seasickness."

You pulled that face, shook your head just so. "I think I'll be fine," you say. "Might be fun, actually, like a roller coaster."

I wasn't sure if I'd need one—I couldn't remember the last time I'd been on a boat, or even a bumpy airplane ride—but I didn't trust my voice. Not anytime, but especially not after that raw look she'd gave me. I was familiar with all those questions it asked, and I've never jumped to give those answers. You—you probably don't remember those looks at all. I think you must've been born with that beard already on your face!

Anyhow, I shook my head no. You started scooting your bag towards the end of a long line of pale people, wearing sunglasses and sunhats, all their little dogs or bikes or children in their hands. We pitied them, I think. But you and I are bigger men now than we used to be. Nowadays, I don't give a damn what anyone else is doing; only time I have left I'm spending it looking at you. But, let me think. What happened next?

Yes, the crowd was humming. I remember that. That low, polite talk, good for a boat, and good for a tame vacation like we'd planned for, just 'cause I wanted it that way. You'd given in to me, unlike all those wild cruises you insisted on when we were young. I know you keep telling me how little I could handle—how fragile, "like a bird wing," is it?—back then with me being so new on the T.

Right now, I can barely put my mind back in that place, would you believe? And not even because it hurts too much, it's just that I can't recall the feeling. I don't know how, really. Just life is all, I guess, moving forward like it does.

Or I'm getting old.

But, oh! I remember what it was I started telling you. Maybe I should be testing your memory, hm? Your old head's as cracked as mine, most likely. But I guess we got all day to try to remember.

Anyway, I was telling you there's one moment I wished we'd shared that we hadn't. And you can't laugh at me now, ok? 'Cause it's not all romantic, probably like if you'd've picked it. Just is what it is.

Man took our tickets and we got on the boat. You bee-lined for a seat at the back of the top deck, like always—I know you would've gone to the very front, nearest the "the adventure" if they'd let you and into a seat in the middle.

"I don't know about you, but waking up at 7am beats the hell outta me," you say. "I'm going to try to get some beauty sleep." I gave my shrug—didn't need to say out loud, either, how beautiful you were, seeing as I say it every morning and night—you took off your favorite pair of gold sunglasses, flipped that little newsboy cap low over your eyes like you do, and dropped right asleep.

I dug into my bag for one of the books I'd never had enough time to read. Probably never did finish it either, even after all these years, because guess what—I fell asleep too, just like that. It's like my body just follows suit because we'd been together so damn long.

I couldn't tell how much time passed when I felt the floor jump. I was asleep one second and the next I'm jerking straight up and clinging to my seat. It was one of those blurry moments where you wonder where you are. Nothing in the world's the same—you went to bed here and woke up in Kalamazoo.

Then I remembered. *Rough seas*, that's what the girl had said. *Rough seas*. The words sounded funny and not real, like where your mind's so addled it all loses meaning. And just like that I couldn't get them outta my head. You would've laughed to be inside my noggin. *Rough seas. Rough seas.*

RoughseasRoughseasRoughseas, like some kinda drumbeat.

It kept me steady though because the deck was just rolling and quaking. I was gripping the seat like death, looking around, and what do you know? Some children across from us began bouncing around and giggling, like it was nothing, like we weren't even on the same boat. I felt like I was all alone on some shaky, unmarked island. Does that make sense?

I looked around and all the tourists were still staring off, like a dream, out over the side of the boat at the shore getting smaller. I looked over at you still snoring away, and had this crazy, wild thought to check your breathing--my mind, I'm saying, was just on some other planet then--but I knew I could never wake you once you set your mind to it. Not dead, just dreaming.

See? I can say that now, no sweat, after all these years. But back then I know I could've swore thoughts like that would jinx us.

Damn, my head was just a little balloon ready to pop in those days, wasn't it?

Anyhow, I was glancing around me repeatedly like, "how come no one notices we're getting tossed around out here?" It was sharp and kinda violent, the way those waves were rocking me—I felt it in my chest and stomach, everything up in my throat and not settling. And I thought, *Dammit, RJ! You should've sucked it up and gotten that ginger pop! You thought you were being a man, but look at you now: a little baby wanting his mama.*

All of a sudden, I was glad you weren't awake; in fact, I thanked Heaven because I felt so...weak, so weak, and small. I couldn't think on it too long though because I had to get to the side of the boat before I hurled. Time slowed down, like being underwater. I was clutching my guts and stumbling. It's just dumb luck I didn't have to get physical and shove someone out my way because my insides were coming up, saying hi—whether I liked it or not. I somehow made it to the guardrail. Not a moment too soon, either. And I felt it all flowing up fast, like gravity didn't even matter. Burning.

Now, I don't mean to get all graphic on you, but I don't think I'd ever seen so much of it. I was in shock. It just poured outta me. And I was just standing there, letting it happen. I felt like I was watching myself, this alien creature, or something, with this never-ending crud spewing out of his mouth, you know? Eyes all bugged and hunched over. I was watching the ocean too, at the same time, as it carried all my puke away. As soon as the waves took it, it was back in my stomach again, and I was right back to hurling it. Over and over and over.

Meanwhile, nobody was saying nothing. I think they all saw though, not sure they couldn't. But nobody was looking my way, nobody even glanced over. I know—it was probably that they were too polite, and those kids weren't paying attention to nothing but themselves. It was the strangest thing—as soon as all the sickness was gone I couldn't be sure it had even happened. It was just you and me, you were asleep, and we were on vacation.

A SELECTION OF 10 POEMS FROM *AWKWORDS*

BY: HOLLY PAINTER

CAVALRY

It usually takes me three tries to get
this word right, and by then, I've already
tried Alberta province's largest metropolis
and the site where, allegedly,

our Lord was crucified. The phrase "Send
in the cavalry!" doesn't have as much
effect when the final word is distended
by my tortured attempts not to fuck

it up. You'd think the term would've died out as
militaries phased out their horses (whose
French name supplied the root for this morass),
but now some armored machine units choose

to call themselves cavalry units, claiming
the title without a horse to their name.

COITUS

There's heaps to make me uncomfortable
about this word: the oi sound, phrases like
coitus interruptus (aka pulling
out), the cold, correct, clinical preciseness.

Now add the dictionary definition
from Random House: "sexual intercourse,
especially between a man and a woman."
American Heritage uses more force,

claiming it only applies to penis-
vagina penetration, and I wonder
if I've ever experienced coitus.
Apparently not. Here I was blundering

about, being touched and licked and kissed,
and it turns out gay coitus doesn't exist.

CREVICE

A crevice should be such an innocent thing. Even a “moist crevice” could refer to a dank, dripping cave with a slight rent in the wall. And if a geologist were to use that phrase, I would assume that his intentions were entirely scientific. But anyone else, not a chance. Crevice is a schoolboy’s dirty word, specifically

the kind of schoolboy who writes pen fifteen on other people’s tests, and understands that “it” always means sex, and draws porn scenes and giant cocks all over his desk, and

would never use a word like crevice unless he had something truly filthy to express.

FECUND

I thought I was on to something. I’d asked myself why the word fecund brought with it a wave of discomfort and a faint nasty smell. My explanation was bullshit.

Or any kind of shit, really – fecund just made me think of feces. Was the shared first syllable coincidence? I wondered. Fecund means fertile, and feces are

often used as fertilizer. Maybe they spring from a common root. But alas, fecund comes from the Latin *fecundus*, related to *fetus* (or offspring), whereas

feces derives from *faeces* (Latin for dregs) and the latter just sullies the former.

FRACK

Even if you never watched *Battlestar Galactica*, even if you never saw Starbuck and Lee chatting at the bar then fracking in a field, finally together,

you know what it means. Technically, to frack is to inject a pressurized liquid into a rock layer, creating cracks to help extract natural gases and hidden

hydrocarbons from deep underground – it's short for fracture. But frack's not a word for killing the planet. Frack is just like it sounds: an F and a K, an outburst you've heard

a thousand times. A fictional way of expressing pain, or better, of making love.

FROTHY

I'll admit it. I can't say frothy without thinking of Rick Santorum's Google problem. After the senator sounded off about the evils of gay sex, Dan Savage dubbed

“the frothy mixture of lube and fecal matter that is sometimes the by-product of anal sex” *santorum*, a label that quickly spread across the web and stuck.

It topped the internet search results for the word Santorum, beating out his own congressional website for years. Before he ran for president, Rick had a moan

at Google to fix it so his frothiness wouldn't keep him from the Oval Office.

PEON

There is so much awkward about this one. Start with the obvious: it's pronounced "pee on," which dovetails nicely with its definition: a menial worker or other person

of low social status. Basically, the only people you could even maybe get away with peeing on. Actually, there's another group that society

would probably allow you to urinate on: pedophiles. That word originates from the Greek for child, *pedo*. To its great misfortune, peon also emanates

from *pedō*, but the Latin one meaning walker. As if peons need more demeaning.

PUBERTY

I suppose an awkward time deserves an awkward name, but puberty's taking it a bit far, I think. The trouble began when the English language started to admit

puberty's many offspring, including pubescent, and worse, pubic, which soon came to refer mainly to the hair intruding on the genital area. That same

usage was shortened to pube and very soon, any word containing that syllable prompted giggles and jokes about hairy balls. Eventually, it came full circle:

Puberty indirectly birthed pube, a word so sharply crass it makes puberty awkward.

QUAFF

Of course, I know it simply means to drink,
usually booze and usually lots,
but I can't be the only one who thinks
it looks like something a Shakespearean sot

might say in place of a more specific
or vulgar term for certain lady parts.
If I told you I had a terrific
time last night in some woman's quaff, you'd hardly

miss my meaning, would you? And then there's
that slang word for vaginal flatulence.
If my grade school memory serves, the pair
belong in the same word family since

only a vowel sound separates them.
Alas, they weren't on my first grade exam.

UVULA

No, look again. It's not what you were thinking.
An easy mistake. But the uvula
is that punching bag or bell clapper ringing
in the back of your throat. When you were a

small child, you tried to touch it but found that
you usually gagged first or it retracted
to where you couldn't get it. You sat
around wondering what it did exactly

and why it had such a silly name.
Uvula. Uuuvula. Uuuuvula. Each
time stretching it further, until it became
infinitely long, a word that could reach

all the way down your throat and dangle there,
a well-mannered snake just waiting in its lair.

TRAIN AFTER MIDNIGHT

BY: ROBERT VIVIAN

Calling for me, calling for you, calling for no one and though I hear you at the edge of sleep I know you are already going away even as I am going away, always, always, and what you carry is lost to me and everyone who hears you, coal cars with graffiti large as funhouse mirrors in the pastel colors of comic books, rainbows, Neapolitan ice cream and I hear you calling over the fields, oh, a life time away that is also a secret part of me where I breathe in the dark listening for you and for myself and what is distance, what are miles but a way to stretch out across a continent in vast, uncontainable longing—I know it because it's also inside me, also my voice—and small towns like Alma, Alma because it is soul, Alma because it sounds like a wound or an ache that will not heal or when someone says goodbye for the last time and when you wail I hear it inside me like a call to rise once more and moan and wail and sing myself, oh, as if for the very first time in threadbare utterance or get on my knees and pray and what moon are you traveling to, what stars and radio stations that play your voice deep in the night as you travel across the country into the gaping wound of a nation that doesn't know how hungry it is for mystical connection to speed bumps, road kill, rusting grain elevators and their towers of glittering dust and anything, anything as I hear you speaking somehow for me and for all who are lyrically lost in our own small, tattered poems that also want to sing, want to groan and moan and wail as you take your voice across the heartland to Chicago, Memphis, Wichita and the dog food factories along the way and the Wal*Marts, the Burger Kings and all the brightly lit cubicles that have never loved anyone and beneath the rocking underpasses of bridges where the homeless and the runaways try to sleep until your voice is heard by all who know what emptiness is and hurt and the great yearning for movement that will never end, taking us to that place where every voice is heard.

CLOWNS WITH BIG FLOPPY SHOES

BY: JAMES PARK

Dave Dublanica, utterly embarrassed to have soiled his trousers with drops of urine, held the composure of a sweaty ball of nerve endings. He exuded paranoia and carried himself as an absolute wreck. The sensation of warm breath on the back of his neck did nothing to sooth the situation; Dave knew better than to turn around and face them. It was safer to just finish his business, flush the urinal, and avoid eye contact on his way to the sink. If Dave was lucky, he might even manage to pass by without tripping over their big floppy shoes.

“I think this guy’s goin’ for the gold,” Klumpy said with a sigh. “C’mon buddy, would ya’ hurry up already.”

“Don’t rush him,” Dumpy protested. “I think the kid is doing just fine.”

Dave didn’t consider himself lucky on this particular day. The large quantity of water that he was prone to drink at work was having an adverse effect on his bladder. There was no telling when his fountain hose would stop flowing, and his attempt to ignore the clowns proved futile. Their presence was endlessly reiterated by the tick of their oversized stopwatch. It didn’t just reverberate throughout the restroom, but crept inside Dave’s head and tickled at his eardrums.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock.

He’d known Klumpy and Dumpy for years; more accurately, he’d noticed them for years. But their habit of following him to the restroom to time his durations at the urinal was a relatively new pastime. Until recently, they rarely crossed paths, and when they did it tended to be at Jungle Jim-Bob-Wee’s Racetrack and Fortunetelling Emporium. Klumpy and Dumpy were fond of calculating odds that were inextricably stacked against them, and they loved to bet everything they owned on a single race. They redundantly lost large sums of money before embarking on rampages that included dropping anvils on each other’s feet as they pointed fingers, shouted obscenities, and exchanged blame.

Their behavior in the restroom proved much more civilized. Dave noticed that when one of them lost, the other won, and this bizarre paradigm shift diluted the traumatizing impact of their sordid behavior.

“It’s about time,” Klumpy declared, displeased with the amount of money he’d lost. “Pull up the zipper a lil’ sooner next time and maybe I’ll have some change left over for the meter.”

Dave, bug-eyed and sweating profusely, buttoned the top of his trousers. He then turned around and stumbled over their big floppy shoes, but managed to reach the sink without falling flat on his face.

“Would ya’ take a look at this guy, Dumpy. Real class act we got ourselves here, ain’t he?”

Dumpy merely sighed.

It made little difference where Dave stopped for lunch on any given day; they followed him to the restroom, always. The pitter-patter of their big floppy shoes seemed to materialize out of nowhere, as if the simple act of selecting a restaurant allowed them to emerge from thin air. Honk, honk!

Dave looked over his shoulder numerous times on his way from the restroom to the food line. The patrons stopped making balloon animals and gave him dirty looks. They were staring, all of them, every last one. Even the clowns hiding behind bulbous sunglasses peered at Dave through dark lenses; he could feel the weight of their concealed eyes. Couples on dates stopped in mid-sentence—abruptly—just to gawk. Wrinkling their brows in disgust, the indentations in their foreheads caused streaks to form in their makeup.

The lunch line was never short, and the clowns on either side of Dave maintained more than just a casual distance. Orders were placed at a painstakingly slow pace, for the customers were preoccupied with knock-knock jokes and random gags. No one could resist the temptation to reach out and squeeze the cashier’s big round nose. And there wasn’t anything unusual about patrons attempting to pay with Monopoly money. Regardless of the number of times the prank was pulled, echoes of roaring laughter always ensued. Honk, honk!

Customers who had called ahead with takeout orders were permitted to proceed directly to the front, a practice that caused the line to move slower than a snail. In the past, Dave had attempted to take advantage of

this custom, hoping to grab a quick bite for him to carry back to Uncle Fro-Fro's Slaughter House and Petting Zoo. He much preferred eating alone, savoring every last ounce of solitude before the whistle sounded and work resumed. Cleaning up the corpses of headless chickens is no easy task, and some relaxation mid-shift seemed sensible. But Dave's attempt at following carryout protocol proved unsuccessful.

"Don't you know where the line starts?" the short portly clown standing beside the purple cash register shouted.

The collection of stares resulting from this bold move was more than just disapproving; it was unsettling. So Dave moved to the back—pulse racing, brow-dripping beads of perspiration—as the wide-eyed clowns stared him up and down. As he waited—like everyone else—a parade of clowns sauntered through the door, big red shoes flopping their way up to the front.

C'mon, smell my flower kid, smell my flower.

The short portly cashier laughed obnoxiously at all of their jokes, her head tilting back far enough to provide an unsightly view up the large canals of her snout. Laughter seemed to rise from the pit of her gargantuan belly, and was accompanied by the sound of phlegm breaking loose in her throat. Honk, honk!

When Dave finally reached the front of the line, she turned cold, her eyes large and penetrating. Bark, bark, bark! Bark, bark, bark!

Dave never ordered takeout again, preferring to wait in long lines with the dine-in customers, all the while watching a myriad of blue, green, and orange-haired patrons receive expedited service.

Today, like any other day, Dave placed his order as the short portly clown barked like a pit bull, and then sat alone at the only empty seat in the dining room. The table was small and possessed a foul odor, as though it had been retrieved from the dumpster outside of Buzz-Bob-Joe's Elementary School and Academy for Teaching Pedophiles to Umpire Softball and Play Santa Clause at the Mall. Even though he sat at an awkward angle, Dave's knees pressed firmly against the underside of the table. The same uncomfortable predicament occurred daily, regardless of the restaurant he patronized. But today other issues were bouncing around Dave's paranoid mind. He couldn't ascertain why his Italian submarine was unbelievably spicy. The first bite traveled through his digestive track with ease, only to send an intense burning sensation racing back up into his mouth. Quickly, he reached for his soda, and discovered that his drink was equally spicy. Redness beamed from his face as laughter permeated all around. The patrons set down their balloon animals and flasks of whisky as genuine smiles blossomed beneath painted-on grins. Their undivided attention was plastered on Dave. Klumpy and Dumpy rushed to his aid, offering colossal glasses of water with hopes that he'd make a second trip to the restroom before the lunch hour ended.

If not for this prank, one of a slightly different variation would have ensued. Dave had experienced it all: too much salt, too much pepper, meat still raw, cheese blue with mold, bun incredibly soggy, big ball of mucus resting on top of the lettuce. Honk, honk! And everybody, save for Dave, enjoyed a good dose of laughter.

He could have selected any of the dozens of restaurants along the strip. It made little difference. The pranks followed him everywhere, as did the short stocky cashier, her big purple cash register, and her incredibly offensive snout.

Dave gulped down the colossal glass of water and then rose to his feet. He neglected to make a second trip to the restroom, choosing instead to weave in and out of the assortment of big floppy shoes on his way to the exit.

Outside, it was the same as every other day. Hobo clowns wearing soleless shoes and suits smelling of sardines panhandled for change. They spit at Dave as he passed by.

A big green moving truck was parked outside of Stu-Stu's Apartment Complex for Swingers and Venue of Live Sex Shows. The movers, dressed in their patched-up overalls and floppy red shoes, were trapped in a Sisyphusian nightmare, for every time Dave passed by they were trying to get the same broad couch up the narrow flight of stairs. They too stopped what they were doing and spit.

Across the street JoBo's Bank and House of Mysteriously Rising Interest Rates was being robbed, again. Dave spotted the same getaway mobile parked outside every day, with big amorphous clouds of exhaust purging from the pink tailpipe, and the engine growling like it had just returned from battle.

Police Officer Kro-Kro came marching down the street, oversized Billy club in hand. Standing six-feet-plus and adorned entirely in black—save for splotches of white face paint, shiny gold badge, and a pair of nylon white gloves—the officer beat the club over and over again into his open palm.

“You walk down this street every day?” he questioned, giving Dave a curious stare.

“I . . . um . . . I . . . I'm just on my way back from lunch.” Dave's pulse accelerated. Every time Police Officer Kro-Kro pounded the Billy club into his gloved hand Dave's heartbeat took a temporary hiatus.

“Walking back from lunch, 'eh. Do you know how many times the average clown walks down this street in a year?”

Beads of sweat were congregating on Dave's forehead. “Um, let's see, I . . . I . . . I think it's forty-five . . . that's what you told me yesterday.”

“Forty-five times,” Police Officer Kro-Kro declared, his tone of voice implying that Dave didn't already know the answer. “And I see you walking down this street at this time every day.” He pounded the massive Billy club into his open palm. “You casin' the joint or somethin'?”

Before Dave could answer, the getaway mobile pulled out from the bank. Its engine dispelled garbled clatter as the car clunked past them at a pitifully slow pace, leaving in its wake clouds of exhaust and a collection of lavender bills fluttering in the air. A clown stuck his head out of the backseat window and pointed a revolver at Dave. When he fired a red flag with the word Bang! scribbled across it fell from the twenty-four inch barrel.

Police Officer Kro-Kro chuckled, and then reassumed a stern demeanor with his menacing eyes cast on Dave. “Seriously, you casin' the joint?”

“Um . . . um . . . um . . .” It made no difference how Dave responded. He was guilty. They'd suspended his driver's license years ago, citing him for operating a motor vehicle that wasn't shaped like a gigantic mouse, and as a result he'd been sentenced to a lifetime of getting around by foot. The chore was nevertheless accompanied by endless fines and citations.

“Loitering, that's what you're doin'.” Police Officer Kro-Kro secured the Billy club to his belt and then pulled out a pad of paper and a large Crayola crayon. He scribbled down the offense, ripped off the piece of paper, and handed it to Dave. “That's gonna be two-gazillion clams, and if I catch ya' doin' it again, the fines gonna be even steeper.”

It was the same offense every day, but over time the size of the fine had escalated to unwieldy proportions. Dave's only means of keeping himself out of the slammer was to apply for an open line of credit at JoBo's Bank and House of Mysteriously Rising Interest Rates. The quick cash permitted him to pay off his debts to society, but at a floating interest rate that somehow skyrocketed to 47.39% overnight, not even a lifetime's worth of work at Uncle Fro-Fro's Slaughter House and Petting Zoo would put him back in the green.

Dave foresaw the tragedy residing in his future. Nobody scammed JoBo. Nobody! It was only a matter of time until the gangster mimes came looking for him. It would happen at night, he was certain, in quiet darkness when no one was around to take oversized Polaroids. He wouldn't hear it coming. The gun would be silenced, loaded with bullets, and stripped of its Bang! flag. His body would be left behind as an example, becoming front-page news in Step-Father Enzo's Daily Gazette.

This premonition added additional anxiety to the fear and paranoia that accompanied Dave's daily life. It's caused him to stutter when he spoke, to sweat profusely, and to get nervous, soiling his trousers as clowns timed him at the urinal. This premonition also led Dave Dublanica to load the chamber of his trusty firearm upon returning home that evening.

He gazed blankly into the mirror as time seemingly stood still. The face that stared back had been made a mockery of, repeatedly, ridiculed by the society of clowns. Adorned with soft tan flesh and baby blue eyes, the chiseled features resting beneath his head of sandy blond hair were well defined. Like the monster of Dr.

Frankenstein, all he'd ever wanted was a companion, someone like him. But even the pointy-toothed geeks at Uncle Fro-Fro's Slaughter House and Petting Zoo were too proud to grant the likes of Dave Dublanica admission to their social circle.

In a state of forlorn despair, Dave smoked his last cigarette and nursed his final glass of bourbon, then fired a shot into his mouth, causing blood and brains to burst out the back. Stains were left on the wall behind him. Honk, honk!

Several weeks passed before Hob-Bob's Funeral Parlor and Preternatural Taxidermy Services sent a car to retrieve the body. No one had taken notice of Dave's disappearance until neighbors complained about the smell.

The funeral was plain and unextravagant, attended only by a small gathering of clowns. The short portly cashier came to poke the faceless body with a stick, refusing to leave until satisfied that Dave was indeed deceased.

Police Officer Kro-Kro came dressed in uniform. Dave's body appeared as though it would be loitering for an extended period. He retrieved his pad of paper and large Crayola crayon. The corpse was fined five-hundred-and-seventy-one-gazillion clams. Police Officer Kro-Kro felt that this amount would be sufficient.

Aside from the casual assortment of mimes and jugglers, and a number of schizophrenic clowns who liked to frequent random funerals, no one else attended. Klumpy and Dumpy neglected to make an appearance.

Later that day the corpse was driven out to the Imaginary Cemetery of Urban Legends. The spot reserved for Dave Dublanica was quite honorable, not because there was anything particularly remarkable about the suicidal chicken mortician, but because new lots were opening in the fall, and the hodge-podge of empty graves needed to be filled with random bodies before expansion commenced.

To the right of Dave's grave rested the urban legend who at one time believed himself to be a glass of orange juice. He was known to wear a straightjacket and cower in the corner of his room at Father Steam Punk's Insane Asylum and Recreational Pharmacy, terrified that some clown might stick a straw in him and take a sip. Rumor had it that the urban legend was returning home from a drug dealer's apartment one afternoon with a loose sheet of blotter paper in his pocket. Traveling by skateboard on an exceptionally humid afternoon, the young clown soon worked up a heavy sweat. Consequentially, the LSD seeped through his flesh and into the bloodstream, filling his body with a dose many times larger than any clown should ingest. The result was insanity; he lost grasp with everything that even mimicked normalcy, but was compensated with a state paid vacation at the funny farm. This young clown, of course, never actually existed.

Residing to the other side of Dave's grave was the badly decayed corpse of the munchkin who committed suicide just after the Wicked Witch of the West attempted to burn Scarecrow to a crisp with a flaming ball of fire. Rumors had run amuck about this munchkin, at first purporting that the dangling body actually belonged to a stagehand that accidentally fell. With time, the rumors became more plausible, at first suggesting that the hanging corpse belonged to a munchkin that failed to secure the part he desired, but later insinuating that the deceased had been in love and ended his own life in a fit of unrequited passion. The society of clowns much preferred the love story, and so this version of the urban legend became inducted into fact.

Like the clown believing himself to be a glass of orange juice, this particular munchkin never actually existed. But the society of clowns clung dearly to the urban legend and frequently visited the grave after he was laid to rest.

Some believe that the corpse of Dr. Paul Joseph Goebbels resides somewhere deep inside the Imaginary Cemetery of Urban Legends. Though the clown himself is not an urban legend—he at one time actually walked the face of the Earth—the far-fetched fallacies of his propaganda have earned him an honorary induction into the coveted make-believe cemetery. Being that this particular burial ground is imaginary, no one has bothered to plant flowers on the tombstone.

In actuality, none of the tombstones have flowers—ever—and many go year-round completely void of visitors. The fact that Klumpy and Dumpy eventually troubled themselves to visit the burial site of Dave Dublanica should be viewed as a gesture of great respect. They came on unicycles, with large clumps of emerald green hair blowing in the wind as they weaved in and out of tombstones. With tears running down their

cheeks, leaving vertical streaks in their makeup, they unzipped their baggy polka-dotted pants and timed one another as they whizzed on the tombstone of their long lost friend. Honk, honk!

Money exchanged hands, and the clowns glared at one another like a couple of chimps preparing to throw feces. Deep within the eyes of Klumpy rested the disparaging look of defeat; a profound effect that racetracks and friendly bets are bound to leave on those who suffer from the gambling fever. Discouraged, he dropped an anvil on Dumpy's right foot and immediately felt better.

Then, with the sun setting melancholy over green pastures that surrounded the imaginary cemetery, they rode off on their unicycles, both being careful not to get their big floppy shoes caught in the spokes.

BEING THE MURDERED GIRL

BY: CATHY S. ULRICH

The thing about being the murdered girl is you set the plot in motion.

Your boyfriend and your best friend are going to fall in love. Your parents' marriage is going to fall apart. The neighbors will watch it happen, at awkward back-yard barbecues. Their own daughters haven't been murdered, but they'll all compare themselves to you.

You'll be a saint. You'll be a whore. You'll be the murdered girl, the first any of them have known, except the detective with a dark past who will investigate your murder. He's known tons of murdered girls. He's had his fill of them. You're nothing special to him. Except maybe you remind him of his own daughter. It's the way you're smiling in the photograph your parents give him. They'll argue over which photo to use. The detective can tell their marriage is falling apart. It happens to the parents of murdered girls.

They'll put your picture in the entry at your school, where your classmates can go past and feel the weight of your murder. It's very heavy. Your classmates will slouch and say it's because their textbooks are too thick. They'll complain about the endless assignments on loss. Even the math teacher will focus only on subtraction for a week after your murder.

Your best friend will cry during literature class. Your boyfriend will see her crying and realize that she's beautiful. Your best friend and your boyfriend will kiss, for the first time, behind the school, waiting for the bus to come. They'll be the prom king and queen. They'll say she'd have wanted us to be happy. They'll come together while your parents are coming apart.

Your mother will wash dishes and cry and your father will retreat into silence. If your mother speaks to him, he'll only reply in grunts. The neighbors will bring casseroles. The neighbors will want for things to get back to normal. The neighbors will feel guilty about their own daughters parading around with bare shoulders and short skirts, and lock them in their bedrooms.

The neighbors' daughters will communicate with each other through a complicated series of smoke signals. One of them will have found the pack of cigarettes you used to hide down the street from the bus stop, in Mrs. Barneyback's bushes, and they'll each take cigarettes from the pack to send each other messages from their windows. The neighborhood will be filled with smoke for days.

Looks like rain, the adults will remark. Looks like rain.

ICE ON EARTH

BY: NELS HANSON

Half the water we taste is older
than the Sun, that's over five and
a half billion years, more ancient

than our Earth and solar system.
The different rain from another
sky began as distant ice, portion

of a freezing cloud of molecules
Earth, Sun, all planets and stars,
snowy comets and asteroids that

struck our world, were made of.
Full to the brim, each beaded cup
is half H₃O, containing deuterium,

melted "heavy hydrogen" with an
extra neutron. Sweetest water we
drink, rivers, lakes, seven oceans

we named are hybrid, part thawed
blue frost from frozen outer space.
Our body also is alien, two-thirds

fluid, stranger with flowing veins
and arteries conducting starry ice,
our red blood half foreign to Earth.

SHOULD HAVE KNOWN

BY: SOFIA DE JESUS

I once had sex with this guy,
I'll call him my lover,
and he pulled my hair so hard
my head started to hurt,
but I wasn't sure if that was
from him
or the alcohol.

We had been downing
whiskey and coke
and taking shots of
tequila.
I liked him though.
That's what mattered,
and we always tried
new things together.

He told me when a female
is truly aroused
and climaxing
she feels no pain

and so he fucked me good
and left me.

BANDIT NO MORE

BY: STEPHEN OKAWA

burt reynolds
in bowling shirt
in boogie nights –

that is who
can mount me,
me who

is not gay
but comfortable
being honest

about feelings
about pressures
in my body.

i see burt
telling jokes
reliving a troubled

life. vividly
and solemnly
each moment

connected and
reconnected
but

maybe,
i think,
it's all he has

but still
good enough
sexy enough

to want him
laying beside
me whispering

with granite chin
on my neck bristling
like a father's.

KISSING BOYS IN THE BATHROOM

BY: KYLE BEASINGER

The eighth grade hall at Sienna Middle School was mostly empty save for some essays and snowmen made out of construction paper tacked to the wall.

It was quiet.

Students were learning how to use matrices, fixing their compound sentences, and making predictions for their class rocket made from an old two-liter Pepsi bottle. All were deep in study, except for the girls in the bathroom at the end of the hall.

Michelle was perched on the sink next to the hand-dryer with a foot tucked under her thigh. Lola stood by the door, twirling a braided lock of hair with her finger. Akemi and Natasha sat in the first two stalls with the doors open, each with their head perched in their hand. And Ashley was in the back of the bathroom, away from the other girls, trying to convince Terri to stay.

Ashley put her hand on Terri's shoulder, "We really need you. We can't do this without you."

"You have Akemi and Natasha. I just don't want to do this anymore."

"Akemi and Natasha aren't enough. It only works when we have all three of you. Please, stay."

"This is stupid."

"It's not stupid. Come on, you're my friend, right?"

Someone knocked at the door and Lola opened it a crack. There was a muffled conversation, and then she swung the door open and let a short boy with a plaid shirt into the bathroom. He gave the girls a little nod and handed a dollar to Michelle.

Michelle pocketed the dollar and pointed to the stalls. "The first one."

The boy walked into the stall with Akemi and locked the door behind him. Michelle turned the dial on an egg timer that sat on the sill of the mirror. "Thirty seconds. Go," she said.

Ashley and Terri went back to their conversation. "If you think I'm going to tell someone," Terri brushed aside her bangs, "I'm not."

Ashley put her hands on her hips and cocked them to the side. "We're so close, Terri. Please. Just until we have enough."

Terri bit her lip and put a hand in her pocket. She flicked around some change with her fingertips and ran a hand across her forehead, sweeping her bangs.

The egg timer buzzed.

The plaid shirt boy emerged from the first stall. He wiped his mouth and looked back at Akemi, "Thank you." He took a stick of gum out of his pocket and threw the wrapper in the trash before leaving the girl's bathroom.

Terri looked at herself in the mirror and wondered if she had wasted her first kiss.

"Well...?" Ashley said.

"Come on, Terri," Michelle chimed in. "Don't be a bitch."

Terri glared at Michelle and curled a corner of her lip up. Ashley put her hand back on Terri's shoulder and arched her eyebrows.

"How much more do we need?" Terri said.

"Almost there," Ashley smiled and slapped her on the back, "now go get in there."

At a family dinner several years ago, Terri encountered a moment with her uncle that she would have liked to forget. Her mother was busy in the kitchen, basting a turkey and finishing the mashed potatoes. Her father stood in front of the TV with a glass half-full of eggnog, shouting at the little men running across the screen. Terri was helping her brother set the table.

She put the knives on the left side of the plates and made sure everyone had a spoon, fork, and butter knife. Her brother, Taylor, finished placing the wineglasses at the adult's place settings when he was called over by

his father. Taylor was asked to get some firewood from the backyard and to do so quickly for the commercial break would not be very long.

Terri went into the kitchen and asked her mother if she needed any help. She said that she didn't and told her to ask her father or Uncle Stuart if they needed anything.

Uncle Stuart was her mother's brother and always came over for Thanksgiving dinner. He had never married and some would say that he was an off-putting man. He was always nice to the children and gave them twenty dollars each, whenever he saw them.

Terri's father was still standing in front of the TV and Uncle Stuart was sitting in the recliner next to the fireplace. Terri tugged on her father's sleeve, "Do you need anything, Dad?"

Her father's eyes never left the television, "Uh...oh, man!" He turned to Uncle Stuart, "Did you see that? Stopped them by inches." Terri's father looked down to see her gazing up at him, still waiting for a response. "I'm okay, sweetheart. But why don't you get your uncle another drink."

Taylor walked in with an armful of wood, dusted with snow. He stomped his feet at the door and walked over to the fireplace. He piled the wood in and started arranging the pieces.

Terri shuffled by her brother and to the side of the chair her uncle was sitting at. "What would you like to drink, Uncle?"

Uncle Stuart rubbed the thick bristles on his chin and pursed his lips. "Can you make a Vodka-Cranberry?" "I don't know what that is."

"Go tell your mom. She'll know what it is."

Terri's mom slid the turkey back into the oven, "This is going to take forever to cook."

Terri jumped up onto one of the tall chairs at the kitchen counter. She put her hands on the table and spread her palms on the cool granite. "Mom, how do you make a Vodka-Cranberry?"

"A what?"

"Vodka-Cranberry. Uncle Stuart wants one."

"I'll make it, give me a second."

Terri's mother wiped her brow with her forearm and pressed a few buttons on the stove. She opened the fridge and pulled out a container of cranberry juice. With the other hand she opened the freezer and pulled out a glass bottle that appeared to be filled with water. But why wasn't it frozen like ice? Terri thought. Terri's mother poured both ingredients into a glass and dropped a few ice cubes in.

"Here," said Terri's mom, pushing the glass towards her.

"Thanks, Mom."

When Terri got back into the living room the fire was at full blast and made shadows dance all over the room. Her uncle looked like an evil genius sitting next to the fire. All he needed was a monocle and a small cat to pet, she thought.

She gave her uncle the drink her mother had made and he thanked her. He took a sip, squinted, pursed his lips, and made an odd sucking noise, cocking his head to the side. "Good one," he said.

Taylor was sitting in front of the fire and Terri decided to join him. With each crack and pop of the fire, Taylor pretended to shoot everyone in the room with his fingers. When he shot Uncle Stuart he would grab his gut and put his head back and close his eyes, making Taylor laugh. His father still had his focus keenly fixed on the game, making no motions of ever being shot.

Terri's mother came into the room, put her hands on her hips, and sighed. Everyone stopped to look. "Dinner will be ready soon, I guess," she said. "The turkey's giving me a little trouble." She sat on the arm of the couch and pulled at her collar, "It's hot in this room."

Taking note of her mother's comment, Terri ran her fingertips down her temples. With her fingers slick with perspiration, she decided to lose a layer. She grabbed her sweater at the bottom and pulled it over her head. Her undershirt clung to her body from a mixture of static and sweat.

"Whoa," Uncle Stuart said. "You're growing up fast."

With arched brow and wrinkled up nose, Terri looked at her brother and then back to her uncle.

Uncle Stuart pointed to her chest and said, “Headlights.”

With her legs crossed, sitting in the third stall of the girl’s bathroom, looking down her low-cut shirt, Terri realized she *was* growing up fast. Her chest stuck out more than the other girls did and that’s why she sat in the third stall. She was the highest tier in their program and boys paid extra for her sessions.

Michelle lit a cigarette and Terri thought for sure they would get caught, now. Ashley yanked the cigarette from Michelle’s mouth and tossed it down the sink. “Don’t be stupid,” she said. “And when did you start smoking anyway?”

“I’ve always smoked. Don’t be such a fucking baby.”

A knock came at the door. All the girls became quiet and hushed each other.

“I told you, you bitch,” Ashley said. “Now we’re busted.”

“Don’t blame me, you--”

“Shhh.”

Lola opened the door a crack and everyone took a sigh of relief when a boy with small-framed glasses and jean shorts came into the bathroom. “It smells like smoke,” he said.

“Fuck off,” Michelle said.

“I won’t tell. I won’t.”

Ashley gazed at the other girls, then fixated on Michelle, and gave a nod.

Michelle held out her hand, “Money.”

“How much is it?”

“Akemi is a dollar, Natasha is two, and Terri is three. You get thirty seconds for the make-out session and no longer. Go over time and Ashley will beat you.”

Ashley rubbed her fist in the palm of her hand.

The boy swallowed the lump in his throat, “Can I use my tongue?”

The girls looked around at each other. Michelle shrugged and then all focus went to Ashley. “That’s an extra buck,” she said.

The boy put his head down and hands in his pockets. He pinched up his eyebrows and licked his lips. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll take Natasha with tongue.”

“Three bucks,” said Michelle.

The boy gave the money to Michelle, walked into the stall with Natasha, and Michelle set the egg timer.

The girls listened closely. No one made a sound. They stood on their toes and took as little breath as possible. Soft, wet smacks echoed faintly in the bathroom with the occasional sneaker squeak.

Michelle looked at Ashley. With her eyes wide and mouth pulled down at the corners, she shrugged.

In the next stall, Terri pressed her ear up to the partition. She put a hand on “MAGGIE’S A SLUT” and pressed her shoulder against “LUCAS HAS A SMALL PECKER.” She tilted her head up, slightly, and held her breath. The timer buzzed. No one moved.

The stall door opened and out stepped the boy. He adjusted his glasses, and looked at the girls, who had all turned their attention to him.

“See you,” he said, and walked out.

Natasha stood in the doorway of the stall and put a hand on the door. She wiped her mouth and spit on the floor. “Does anyone have any gum? He tasted like fish sticks.”

The girls chuckled and Ashley grabbed her purse from underneath the sink. She pulled out a mint and gave it to Natasha. “How was it? Gross?”

Natasha popped the mint into her mouth and sucked on it for a moment, swishing it from side to side. “He kept putting his tongue in and out of my mouth. It was like kissing a dog.”

Natasha smiled and the girls laughed. The bell rang and they quickly gathered their things.

“Alright,” Ashley said. “Meet here after lunch.” The girls nodded and filed out of the bathroom.

Terri walked slower than the others did. She kept her head down and counted the tiles to her class. She ignored the boys’ passing comments and hoped that she wouldn’t have to start kissing with her tongue.

The bell rang when Terri entered Ms. Clive's history class. She walked to the back of the room, placed her backpack next to her desk, and sat down.

I don't even know how to kiss with my tongue, she thought.

She pulled a notebook out of her backpack and placed it on her desk. She turned the pages slowly, one by one, until she reached a blank page.

Ms. Clive took attendance and started her lecture.

Terri pulled out a pen, wrote "HISTORY NOTES" at the top of the page, and thumped her pen against the notepad. She made a bullet and wrote "EGYPT." She wrote, "PYRAMID," "SLAVES," "SARCOPHAGUS," "PHARAOH" and "CONCUBINES" by dashes on the page. She laid her pen on the notepad and looked out the window. She hoped that, after today, she wouldn't have to kiss boys in the bathroom anymore.

The sun made it look warmer than it actually was outside. Frost still hugged the corners of the window and shrunken, half-melted snowmen still stood in some front yards.

When Terri looked back to her notebook there was a folded piece of paper sitting on top of her pen. She looked at her fellow classmates, but no one seemed to be paying her any attention. She opened it silently. It read: "CAN I MAKE AN APPOINTMENT WITH YOU?"

Lunch came and went and now Terri sat in the third stall wondering who wrote her that note.

He might be cute, she thought. But from the history of who had come in the bathroom and used their services, she knew that couldn't be true.

Terri looked at her Hello Kitty watch. The bell would ring in five minutes. No one had come in after lunch. Maybe her mystery boy wasn't going to show? Maybe the boys had gotten tired of paying for kisses, or they ran out of money.

Terri started to get up when someone knocked at the door. Lola went home early so Ashley was manning the front. She opened the door a crack. After a short, hushed conversation, she let the boy in. He was tall, skinny, and his pants stopped just above the ankles. He had his hair combed to the side and didn't make eye contact with anyone. He stood in the middle of the bathroom like a giraffe at the zoo. All eyes were on him, but he stared at the ground.

"I'd like Terri," he said.

Terri popped her head out of her stall. The boy looked up and locked eyes with her.

"Three bucks, slim," said Michelle. "A buck extra if you want tongue."

Terri had a lump in her throat and couldn't swallow. She rubbed her palms on her thighs. Please don't ask for tongue, she thought.

"How about..." the boy said. He shifted his weight back and forth. With a boney fist to his mouth, he cleared his throat.

"About what?" Michelle said.

The boy leaned over to Michelle and whispered in her ear. Terri leaned in closer, hoping to catch what was being said.

Michelle's eyes widened like an owl's. She took a deep breath and shook her head.

"What?" Terri said.

Michelle waved Ashley over. She cupped her hand around Ashley's ear and whispered.

"What is it? Tell me." said Terri.

Michelle pulled back and looked at Ashley. Ashley squinted at the boy, and then turned her gaze to Terri. She bit her lip. She put her hands on her hips and cocked them to the side.

"Twenty," Ashley said. "A flat twenty bucks."

"For what?" Terri said.

Ashley walked over to the tall boy and looked him in the eyes. "Under the shirt, but over the bra for twenty bucks."

That was twenty-one years ago.

Now, Terri spends most of her afternoons at the corner Richards St. and Fulton Parkway of the cold, downtown city. Foundation covers her frown lines and crows feet. Ruby-red lipstick accentuates her mouth like a Muppet. With her hair is pulled back tight into a bun, she still has bangs which she has to occasionally brush out of her eyes. Her knee-high boots hug her legs like second skin. She pulls her jacket tight as cars whiz by.

Layers would have been nice on a day like today.

People pass her by, walking briskly to get to their destination. Terri rubs her hands together and blows into them.

The doors of the building behind her burst open and people flood the streets. Children grasp the hands of their parents and hop down the steps to the sidewalk. Terri stands alone at the corner, watching the families go this way and that. Terri pulls the sleeve of her jacket back and checks the time. And it's the Hello Kitty staring back that takes her to the third stall of Sienna Middle School.

She sat alone, long after the bell had rung, and the tall boy had left. He had said nothing when the egg timer buzzed. He just gave her a nod and walked out.

With a handful of toilet paper, she buried her face into her palms.

The bathroom door squeaked open and someone shuffled over to the third stall. Terri snapped the door locked and held her breath.

A hand slid a note and a twenty-dollar bill under the door.

The feet stayed for a moment, and then shuffled back out of the bathroom.

Terri bent down and peered under the stall. She was alone, once again.

She sniffled and picked up the note and money. She blew her nose in the toilet paper and unfolded the note. She took a deep breath and read: "YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO THIS ANYMORE-- ASHLEY."

A note she has kept to this day.

Terri slides her jacket sleeve back down and her face lights up when she looks back at the door.

A small girl with pigtails comes bouncing down the stairs. She looks at Terri and she smiles wide, the corners of her mouth pinched at the cheeks. She pushes her tongue through a hole where her front teeth should be.

Terri squats and opens her arms. "You lost the other one."

The little girl dives into Terri's chest for a big hug. "The teacher put it in a bag in my backpack," the little girl says.

Terri stands and holds the little girl's hand. "We'll have to show Dad when we get home."

The two walk down the sidewalk, stepping over cracks, and pass a man walking his dog.

"How was school?" says Terri.

"Good."

"Just good?"

"Yes."

They cross the street and Terri lifts her daughter over a puddle, making her giggle.

"Where's Japan, Mommy?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Greta said that her mom and dad met in Japan."

"Well," Terri blows into her hand and maneuvers by a hotdog stand, "it's very far away. We'd have to take a plane to get there."

"Is that where you met Daddy?"

Terri took a deep breath and let it out. Her breath made a stream in the cold air. They turned the corner and continued walking. "I met your Daddy when we were in middle school."

Terri thought that this would be better than telling her everything; that she had met her father in the girl's bathroom and charged him twenty dollars to grab her chest.