Falling North

2006 TO

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Confluence invites submissions of photography, artwork, and manuscripts from students, alumni, and others in the general community outside of IPFW. Submissions should be taken or sent to Confluence, Department of English and Linguistics, Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne, 2101 Coliseum Boulevard East, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46805.

All submissions must include the name and contact information of the photographer, artist, or author. Photography, artwork, and manuscripts will be returned only if the sender includes a SASE, or may be picked up at the Department of English and Linguistics.

For other information about the magazine or about sponsorship, contact Richard Ramsey, Department Chair of English and Linguistics.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

I am often asked if there is a theme for the magazine and its submissions. Half grinning, I always answer that a theme happens on its own and there is no need for me to force it. Inevitably, the questioner looks at me with disbelief.

It is quite interesting how a collection of writing emerges and how connections from poem to poem or story to story come to life without prodding. As I read through this collection, I see an eruption of ethereal and tangible elements. There is a repetition of ethereal elements of existence: life, love, and death; and then there are very tangible elements too: copper, sulfur, iron, calcium, water. This collection is grounded in "place" from Fort Wayne to Alaska, writing about being "here" and not "here." It is as if the writers of these pieces realize they are not perfect, that life is not perfect, and because of this, they are trying to make sense of the lack of perfection. To try and make sense, they have reached into the soil, into the earth, into their souls, and pulled out words.

I hope you all enjoy the art in this magazine and I encourage everyone to keep writing, keep taking photographs, and to keep doing good work – and in the words of Edward R. Murrow, "good night and good luck."

Sarah E. Sandman Editor

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, thank you to all of the artists and writers who submitted this year. Without your work this magazine would be nothing. Also, thanks to all of you reading and purchasing the magazine – we, the Confluence staff, appreciate your support.

Thank you to Dr. Ramsey and Dr. Amidon for serving as the backbone of the magazine, for being realistic, for helping the staff and me continue to have vision to keep this adventure positive.

Of course, thanks to our sponsors. It has been genuinely exciting to be able to publish a longer magazine wherein more writers and artists are heard and seen. Our IPFW artistic community has grown this year because of your support.

Editorial Board: Tim – thanks for being the "go to guy" and the one to keep me looking toward the finish line. I appreciate your desire to help and your comic relief; after all, who would have hung posters with me all those Friday mornings. Rachael and Laurie – I appreciate your words of wisdom about the poetry submissions. Without your steadiness, I would have been completely overwhelmed. Rachael, your thematic connections helped me make sense of it all and your title suggestion was beautiful. Tim, Nick, and Ryan, thanks for wading through the fiction submissions and taking the time to be patient, prose readers. Your insights about these pieces helped me more than you might know. John, once again, thanks for being on board. And Steve, the magazine would literally not be possible without your expertise and vision.

As always, thank you to all of the professors and instructors in the English Department who hung posters and who encouraged their students to submit. Janine, Kate, and Yvette, thank you for your support in selling the magazine, hanging posters, keeping track of money, and in helping me stay sane. Perhaps I will say: "Serenity now!"

Thanks to my family and to all of those who I might not have named.

Sarah E. Sandman Editor

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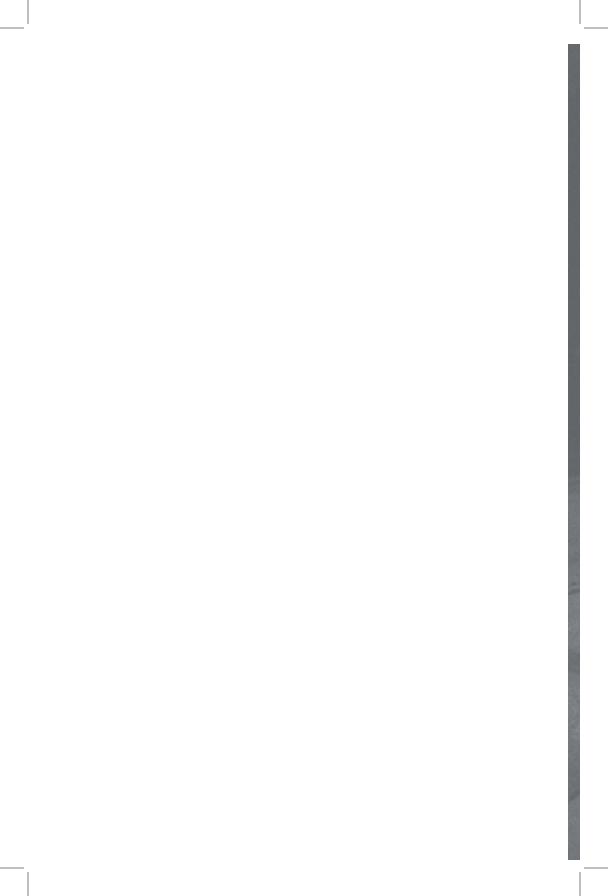
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Creative Non-Fiction

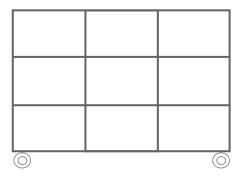








We finally bought a bookshelf last month after years of wanting one. It's a combination of 9 solid cubes of light-grained wood on casters that really came in handy for the moving process. It looks sort of like this:



We found it for \$75 at an old used furniture store on South Calhoun Street and rode it down the ancient freight elevator and out to our car. Never mind that we don't necessarily have the money to be buying furniture. That's not really important. This is the bookshelf of our dreams.

Before this we were rather disrespectful with our books. The large majority had been sitting on the floor of our orange dining room—collecting mounds of dust that we just quit paying attention to after awhile. There were ten or so more sitting between two cast iron Labrador retriever-shaped bookends on the ledge at the bottom of the stairs. Upstairs Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* sat stacked under old journals on my nightstand. But, while my nightstand is frequently dusted, my husband's is not, so his library copy of the graphic novel "Persepolis" had and still has quite a collection of dust on its front cover.

I always felt sort of bad for leaving this beautiful collection to soak in its own dirt and grime on our floor, but I just hadn't found a bookshelf worth buying. Now that they have been rescued from their previously miserable existences, I feel that, perhaps as a sort of apology for the many years of mistreatment, it is only right to give some special recognition to a few books that have really stuck with me through the years, alphabetically, of course:

Actual Air, by David Berman

I want to thank you for giving me hope in the present state of poetry. Before you I had my doubts about whether or not anyone my age was writing anything decent anymore. I want to thank you for the line, "And the moon, I forgot to mention the moon" from the poem appropriately titled, "The Moon." This line was the reason I bought you. I want you to know that I appreciate it that your spine hasn't split down the middle like most paperbacks even though your edges are worn off. Also, thanks for coming out in hardback this year, even though I have yet to get my own copy.

Window Basquiat, by Jennifer Clement

I want to start by thanking you for having one of my favorite book covers—a yellow vintage refrigerator with pictures of Billy Holiday, Andy Warhol, and Jean-Michele Basquiat taped to it. It's really a brilliant cover. I still remember buying you with Tim in August of 2002 at Quimby's bookstore for fourteen dollars. I think the name *Basquiat* in the title is probably what sold me as I had recently gained this great adoration for his paintings and has seen the film "Basquiat" probably ten times. I want to thank you for being such a quick read, even at 184 pages. You are such a reliable book to offer as a suggestion to other stumped readers. Thanks for the line, "He draws a ring around her finger. 'Now you are my wife,' he says" which is on page 96.

Pure Drivel, by Steve Martin

I want to thank you for being the funniest book I have ever read, hands down. I want to thank you for being full of short pieces that can be picked up and read before walking out the door or going to bed. Thanks that any time of day you're always good for a laugh. I remember buying you for \$1.00 at

the Bargain Box on Wells Street because I had yet to read anything by Steve Martin. I figured that because someone had sent you to a thrift store (and because I had never heard anything at all about you) you wouldn't be much of a good read, but I was very wrong. I want to thank you for your brilliant sub-headings within each piece, in particular the one entitled "Love in the Time of Cholera: why it's a bad title" in which you say that setting a reader up to think a piece is about love and then blasting them with an awful word like cholera is not at all appealing. I would also like to thank you for the opening piece entitled "A Public Apology" wherein you apologize for many acts of sexual harassment like this one on page 3: "Once, in Hawaii, I had sex with a hundred-and-two-year-old male turtle. It would be hard to say that it was consensual."

Selected Poems: 1938-1988, by Thomas McGrath

Oh, Thomas McGrath. I must thank you, but first I must thank Copper Canyon Press for the limited-edition one-time running of this book especially for a poetry class I was in at the time. The opening poem "Get Out of Town" assured me that I'd fall in love with you. It was your soft, mature, country voice that attracted me just like Johnny Cash. I can picture Cash singing your poems with that smoky, raspy voice. I can picture you smoking a cigarette. It was the unusual tunes and rhythms of your lines that sung me into a sweet poetic sleep. "Get out of town while the going is good. / Say the hard word. Kiss the girls goodby." You were always so matter-of-fact. I'd like to be matter-of-fact because it seems more honest and more sincere.

Letters to a Young Poet, by Rainer Maria Rilke

I'd like to thank both the Norton paperback copy published in 1962 and the Modern Library hardcover edition published in 2001. First off, I would like to apologize for any hard feelings being harbored by the paperback copy. The hardcover was received as a gift and had nothing to do with any inadequacy on your part. I still believe the \$1.95 I spent on you at Hyde Brothers bookstore to be some of the best money I've ever spent. Thank you for being so unbelievably understanding of my former loneliness and feelings of different-ness. I can recite the line, "Love your solitude and sing out with the

pain it causes you" from memory, hence my tattoo of a heart with the word *solitude* written inside. I still love that line, although the tattoo isn't necessarily my favorite.

The Vintage Book of Contemporary World Poetry

Edited by J.D. McClatchy

I should tell you that my placing you at the end of this list has nothing to do with you or your rank, so to speak. I've just always been confused about where to interfile anthologies—is it by title or by editor? Therefore, among my books, CD's, and records the collected works are always filed last. While I am not usually too fond of anthologies, I want to thank you for restoring my faith in them. Pablo Neruda, Czeslaw Milosz, Nazim Hikmet, Paul Celan you've covered them all. I have used more of your lines as epigraphs and in letters than any other book of poetry. I want to thank you for reminding me that all the greatest poets in the world are not confined to North and South America but also reside in Russia, among other places. I want to personally thank J.D. McClatchy for choosing to have my favorite book jacket designer Chip Kidd create the cover—although it makes sense considering he's been your partner for a number of years now. I want to leave by thanking you for these lines by Zbigniew Herbert on page 150: "our fear / does not have the face of a dead man / the dead are gentle to us / we carry them on our shoulders."

There are also a few others I would like to quickly mention: namely, "Geek Love" by Katherine Dunn, "The Virgin Suicides" by Jeffrey Eugenides, and both "Illusions" and "Jonathan Livingston Seagull" by Richard Bach—I adore you. You are two of the greatest things I have ever read. You will surely be my next tattoo. Oh, and cummings, I forgot to mention e.e. cummings.





I was seven years old the summer we went to the World's Fair in Knoxville, Tennessee. My mom, dad, sister, and I traveled south from Indiana to meet up with our friends, the Harrises, who lived in Jefferson City, Tennessee, only an hour away from the fairgrounds. Brandon Harris was a year older than I was, and he had been my best friend and bitterest tormenter since we had met when I was three. I envied his southern drawl and lenient parents, and I think he envied my family's stability and, well, normality.

As we all wound our way around the city of Knoxville, we saw the centerpiece of the festivities: the gold sphere of the space orb high above the rooftops of the pavilions. My mouth formed an "o" of excitement as my dad told me how the gold color of the sphere came from actual gold dust pressed between plates of glass.

Finally, we parked the Harrises's Lincoln in the mammoth parking lot and joined the press of flesh that comprised the line into the fairgrounds. As we passed the first of many gift shops inside, I saw what I considered the greatest toy of all through the window. It was a stuffed koala, about 18 inches tall, and smiling with a crooked black-yarn mouth. It had plastic eyes and an oval plastic nose, and its fur looked silky soft. I begged my mom to go in the store and buy it; I wanted that "bear" so much that I no longer cared to see the displays about countries and power supplies, and other boring school-in-disguise crap. I wanted that animal! Of course, my mom told me to be patient, that I would probably see other souvenirs I wanted at the different pavilions, and that if she bought it for me at the beginning of the day, I would either lose it or whine about having to carry it. To say the least, I disagreed.

The fair itself turned out to be a bust. Even the adults were bored. My sister ordered a hot fudge sundae and found a pubic hair in it. We all agreed to leave Knoxville and make an impromptu visit to Williamsburg, Virginia, for the rest of our vacation. As we walked wearily to the entrance of the fair, I felt helium

gathering inside my stomach. My little palms began to sweat, and I'm sure I was chattering mindlessly as only seven-year-old girls can.

I entered the gift shop and quickly found the koala I had seen in the window. A stuffed animal and koala fanatic, I already owned several stuffed koalas, but none had the size or smile of this one; many of the others were the the stupid, clippy clothes hangers disguised in fur that youngsters wore on purse or overall straps. And this one had a smart, red and white "1982 World's Fair" ribbon around its neck. My patient, generous mother ponied up the cash for the prize, and I was in ecstasy. I eagerly shoved him (I had gendered him immediately) in my friend Brandon Harris's and my sister's faces and danced with him in circles all the way to the car. In addition to making him a him, I named him "1982" in honor of his origins. Of course, this obvious jubilation prompted many games of keep-away and threats of stuffed-animal torture, but it was to be expected.

In the years since, 1982 has traveled with me all around America, including several return trips to Tennessee, and to Canada and Europe. When not clutching that squishy head under my chin, my sleep is fitful, if I sleep at all. Not even a live-in boyfriend could usurp his territory; the boy's gone, but the bear's still here. In his twenty-third year, he looks pathetic, though. His fur is clumpy, where it still clings to the fabric. Otherwise, the mesh that held the flocking is bare, and the chunks of foam filling inside can be seen. His mouth fell off about five years ago, and the plastic eyes and nose are scratched and loose in their moorings. His ears droop, and his head leans forward. My sheets carry bits of his filling that have seeped through the fabric.

Nonetheless, he remains a better sleep aid than Ambien and Lunesta combined. And, he's old enough to vote, smoke, and drink.

Last summer I saw my friend Brandon again for the first time in more than a decade. I marveled at his long hair and AA-induced calm. As we ate dinner with his wife, mom, step dad, and my family, he asked if I still had 1982.

"Still sleep with him every night," I said.

"Awesome," he said reverently.



I finished college with nothing to do, so I moved in with my girlfriend. She lived in Sioux City then, so I packed some golf clubs and a few books into a car and drove to Iowa. Eventually, I got a part-time job working for the local legal aid office by telling the lawyers that I spoke Spanish. They had me drive around the county looking for migrant farm workers and I was supposed to talk in Spanish to see if the farmers needed help, but I never saw any, fortunately. I drove through the counties on these days and saw that Iowa was pretty. Its hills had been farmed to the horizons, every color planted there by the hand of a man.

I made friends with guy named Jim that summer. What initially drew me to him was the way he was always taking over our Unitarian church meetings. No matter what topic we started with, Jim eventually managed to make it about crop circles, cow mutilations, or Freemasons. The congregation was small, and I could tell that Jim annoyed them, but I could also tell that they were a little grateful for his energy. He was almost like a pet that way, something for them to focus on when no one else had much to say. It got to the point for me that I went to the church meetings just to listen to Jim, more or less. I saw people around me make faces when Jim would talk for too long, but I decided to smile as if it was funny.

For money, Jim claimed he was a stand-up comic, but this was Sioux City, Iowa. Really, he just lived with his librarian girlfriend. Every day while she worked, Jim would curl up in a sunny corner of the library and read books and nap. During my long lunches at the legal aid office, I would get on my bicycle and ride to the library, hoping to find Jim and hear what he had to say that day. One day, I found Jim there with a book about mushrooms open in front of him. He looked happy but not surprised to see me and waved me over.

When I sat down next to him, Jim pointed to some pictures of mush-rooms in the book and told me that, although they were labeled "poisonous," this actually meant that they were hallucinogenic. I don't think he knew this to be true for a fact, but he had the power of faith, and was proud of his discovery, as though this small wisdom was some kind of tiny animal that he had caught with his bare hands. He had this buzzing enthusiasm that made me willing to follow him as we checked out the book and spent the rest of the day driving around rural Iowa looking for mushrooms. Jim drove his girlfriend's rattling little foreign car with his eyes glued to the side window, looking for the most "poisonous" looking mushrooms possible. In his left hand, the library book looked like one of those little versions of the New Testament people give away for free.

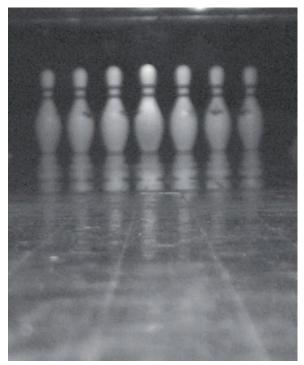
By the end of the afternoon, we hadn't found much. Jim did eat one small mushroom he found growing in a cow pasture, but, because Jim was already strange to begin with, I could not tell if eating it had affected him one way or the other.

Later, we moved to different cities. A year went by and then I visited Jim and his girlfriend-now-wife for a few days in Seattle. Their apartment was pretty empty, with only a futon and one small drawing of a Buddha—or is it *the* Buddha?—on the wall. It had kind of missing eyes, like the Little Orphan Annie cartoon, but they still followed you as you walked across the room. Jim had drawn this picture himself and named it "Jim" for some reason. I didn't even know that Buddhas could have names. There was a small gray cat, too, and Jim kept insisting that it was playful, but it clearly did not like living there. It would pace along the edges of those bare walls as if a hole could open up at any minute and it would be able to escape. I did what I could to make the cat play but eventually gave up and just made sure to keep it from escaping the apartment.

Really, it was an awkward visit all around. Because he couldn't afford his Paxil, Jim was sharing his wife's Zoloft, and it wasn't working. The night before I had to fly home, Jim was in the bathtub and I could hear him talk-

ing to himself, repeating the words "concentrate... concentrate, I have to concentrate." Despite feeling a little ashamed, I left my place by the cat, under the Buddha, and looked at Jim through the slightly-open bathroom door. It was just him, sitting in a tub of what I just knew was lukewarm water. From the rod where most people would put a shower curtain hung a single useless coat hanger. Jim looked like he was, indeed, concentrating very hard.

I looked around the room, hoping to see a clock that would tell me it was okay to go to the airport, but there was only that empty Buddha and the cat, looking right at me. I looked back at the cat and I wanted to pick it up and take it with me, out the door, and all the way back to the Midwest. I would give it to some migrant farm worker. "Here, *es un gato*." Maybe I would let it go free, so it could eat wild mushrooms, or whatever cats eat. But the cat was Jim's, and I left it in the spare apartment where I had found it.



HOLLY ANDREWS • • •



Before the Towers fell, I dated a girl for seven months. She was the first one ever to break up with me. Two weeks before she left me, she told me she had been going to a therapist twice a week. I asked her why she hadn't said anything. She said she was afraid. She knew about my mother and her three months of depression and she didn't want to burden me.

"Do you go because of me?" I said.

"No," she said. "I've been going for two years."

"Why?" I said.

"I don't know," she said. "Anyway, he wants to meet you."

I didn't know what to say. She waited for a response. I said I would do anything she wanted. I would be there for her. I would help her get through whatever it was that was making her get help.

We went to her therapist. It was a Thursday. He had a big office. His doctorate was from Cornell. He was a psychologist, not a psychiatrist.

"Is there a difference?" she asked. We were sitting in the waiting room.

I was about to answer when he motioned us in. It was an hour session. I had never had one before. He asked me all sorts of questions.

For a varsity sport, you have to get a physical. Most doctors hate it as much as the patient. They run through it quickly and move on.

Therapy sessions are like that, only the psychologist stops and stares at you. He looks you up and down. He pokes you. When you flinch, he asks you why you flinched. When you tell him, he asks you why you told him.

He started off by saying there were no right or wrong answers to his questions. I told him that she had just told me about seeing a therapist. He seemed surprised by that.

"Did she tell you why?" he said.

"No," I said.

He stared at her for an uncomfortably long time.

"Her telling you is her recourse," he said. He started to speak again, but I interrupted him.

"Excuse me," I said. "But what does that mean?"

I looked at her. She blushed. I turned back to him.

"That means," he said, "she'll tell you in her own time."

I shrugged.

"You don't take these sessions very seriously, do you?" he said.

"I don't take a lot of things concerning myself seriously," I said. "But I'll do whatever it takes to help her. Whatever it takes."

"What if she needs to figure these things out on her own?" he said.

"Then why is she seeing you?" I said.

He didn't answer my question. He just wrote in his little notebook.

For the rest of the session we talked about our relationship. She rarely spoke. She was shy. Out in the real world she was loud and funny. But there in that therapy room, she was as tame and as bashful as a virgin. I felt trapped.

"Her birthday is coming up," he said towards the end of the session. "What are you going to do?"

"I have tickets to Blue Man Group," I said. "She's never seen it."

"I promised my friends I'd go out with them first," she said. "We planned it before I met him. It's on a Thursday," she said. Then she turned to me and smiled. "That way he and I can spend the entire weekend together."

He made a note. She turned and held my hand as if we had just received good news. I knew she was going out with her friends. Girl's night. It was ok.

The hour was up. We stood in the lobby. He said he hoped I would come back with her again. I said I didn't know.

"Whatever it takes," he said.

"I know what I said," I said.

He stared at me. I don't know why, but I felt I had to win that moment. I felt he had to be the first one to look away. He did. He looked away. Then he extended his hand for me to shake. I did.

When we were alone in the elevator, she leaned into me. My hands were in my pockets. She wove her arms through them and held me. She kissed me. She was almost crying. She put her head under my chin. She whispered "thank you." The elevator opened for our floor. She wouldn't move. We stood there. The elevator closed.

Two weeks later she was gone.

I don't drink much anymore. I drank a lot. I drank every day. I wasn't an alcoholic. I never drank in the morning. I drank at night, with my friends, in a bar, properly.

Two of my friends from New York are in AA. They had me go to one of their meetings once. People stood in front of everyone else and said they were alcoholics. They said they were ashamed of their actions. None of them had ever killed anyone. No one had raped someone or smuggled drugs illegally into the country or had an overdue library book. Most didn't even have library cards.

When I pointed this out to my friends during a break, one of the instructors came over. She said the scars caused by alcoholism couldn't be seen.

I said there were over seventeen thousand deaths a year caused by drunk drivers. The scars were bodies. I mentioned that forty percent of those drivers under the influence had failed their AA programs.

"They didn't fall off the wagon," I told her. "They steered it into the oncoming headlights of a helpless victim."

"The key to Alcoholics Anonymous," she said, "is turning yourself over to a higher power. Turning yourself over to God."

"I didn't know God was such a lousy driver," I said.

Then I drank my entire cup of coffee in front of her and slammed it down on the counter like I had just finished some Wild Turkey.

"I think you should leave," she said.

My friends protested. They said I needed to be there. That I needed help. I told them it was all right.

"God's picking me up in half an hour," I said.

I've been to several AA meetings since then. Every meeting is the same. People blaming themselves. People saying they have turned their lives over to a higher power. People crying, sharing, kneeling down as if the painful memories were right there on their shoulders for all to see.

One night I went up in front of everyone. I said my name was Jackson Pollack. I didn't say I was an alcoholic. I said I was a bad painter. I said that people's eyes had been hurt by the offensive display of the colors I had used.

They kicked me out.

"Good luck with all that," they shouted.

My friends still go. They still invite me. They think it will help me.

"Help yourself," I tell them. "That higher power you should turn yourself over to *is yourself*."

I stopped drinking because I hate being hung-over.

Being hung-over is like being Catholic. When you wake up, you feel large amounts of regret for things you may or may not have done the previous day.

Just by thinking about sinning, is a sin. Trying to remember the sins you committed, is a sin. Like when you throw a Champaign bottle into the windshield of a New York City police car and say a giant Moose in red shoes did it. That is a sin. That is wrong. A moose could be executed because of your lies.

Breathing is a sin. Walking is a sin. Laughing is a sin. Living is a sin. I am surprised I am allowed to open my eyes to see the world.

How can a Catholic anywhere make love and not feel bad?

A girl I dated briefly in New York went to Church every Sunday. She was Catholic. She asked why I didn't go. I told her I went to a Catholic grade school.

"We went to Mass three times a week," I told her. "I'm good for the next twenty years."

She loved scary movies. Whenever I took her, she would scream every five minutes. She would scream during the previews for other scary movies. Then she would turn to me with a wide smile and say, "That looks *really* scary. We *have* to go!"

She also sang in church. She loved singing.

We broke up after a few months. I don't know what she's doing now. But I'd

put good money on the possibility that she's either in a Church singing, or in a movie theatre screaming.

The first girl who broke up with me came over on her birthday at 3 AM. Girl's night. She caused a scene outside the building because she had forgotten my apartment number. She pressed them all except mine. After several tenants came down and wouldn't let her in, she found her cell phone and called me.

I apologized to everyone. They calmed down when I arrived. They said they were sorry to yell at her. They asked if there was anything they could do. They were nice.

I carried her upstairs and put her to bed. She was laughing the entire time. I woke up early to go to work. It was Friday. I took a half day so I could spend time with her.

She was still asleep when I came home. I took her keys and went to her apartment. Both her roommates were there. I had them pick out something nice for dinner. They said Girl's night was a good time. I said I believed them.

Around five she finally started to move. She smelled like wine. I gave her some aspirin and some water.

"We don't have to go out," I said. "I'll cook you something here. We don't have to go to the show if you don't want to."

She said she wanted to. She took a shower. She changed. She brushed her teeth and wore her hair up. I always liked it when her hair was up.

She barely ate anything at dinner. She drank wine. I handed over her birthday present. The box was small but nicely wrapped. It was the first time I had seen her smile all night. When she took the box, she held my hand for a moment. She opened it. It was a silver Cladagh necklace. Two hands coming together to hold a heart.

"It's beautiful," she said. "If I wasn't so hung over, I'd cry."

She cried anyway. She stood and kissed me.

"I love it," she said.

She still didn't eat anything. Before we left, she finished off the wine.

At the theatre, everyone was in the tiny lobby. There were tubes everywhere. I'd seen the show before. Four times actually.

There was no intermission. There was a brief pause towards the end and she stood up to leave. I grabbed her coat and followed her. She ran into the women's restroom.

She was in there for a few minutes. I sent three girls in to check on her. They all came out with the same look on their face. They looked tired.

When she finally came out, she could barely walk. She fell into me.

"You have to help me," she said. She kept saying it. "You have to help me. You have to help me."

I put her jacket on her. I picked her up. I carried her to a cab. During the ride, she kept saying it over and over again. "You have to help me," she said. "You have to help me."

I carried her up the stairs. I took her into my room. I took off her coat, her heels. She started to yell at me.

"I don't want you to see me like this," she said.

I didn't say anything. It took me awhile to get her tight jeans off and put pajamas on her. I took her blouse off and put my green McArdle's Ale shirt on her. It was her favorite shirt of mine.

"You have to help me," she said. "I don't want you to see me like this."

I put her in bed. Then went into the living room to watch Sportscenter. After awhile I heard her get up. She stumbled into the bathroom. She threw up again. She fell. I ran down the hall. She had locked the door. I knocked.

"Are you ok?" I said.

"I'm fine," she said. "I don't want you to see me like this."

"I want to help you," I said.

"I'm fine," she said. "Leave me alone."

"Let me in," I said.

"You first."

There was a pause. There is always a pause.

"Go away," she said. "Go away."

I walked back down the hallway and sat down. A few minutes later she

came out. She went into the bedroom. I turned off the tv and followed. I didn't turn the lights on. She was in bed.

I changed into my shorts. I got in beside her. I turned away from her and faced the window. A few seconds later, she turned around. She placed her head into my back.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. She fell asleep.

The next morning, she was gone.

We didn't spend the entire weekend together.

I tried calling her at home. I went to her apartment. They never answered. I tried calling her at work. I e-mailed her. After three weeks, I wrote her a note. I placed the note in a package along with my McArdle's Ale shirt. It was the only one I had. I brought it back from Ireland.

I didn't want it anymore. It looked better on her anyway. I mailed the package and the note to her. Here is what the note said: "Whatever it takes."

(This is an excerpt from Casey's memoirs while he lived in New York during September 11, 2001)



CHRISTOPHER SMITH • •



It is a sleepy little house down the way, an old home with wood shingles of a rich brown going down the outside walls, the roof has peaks and tall thin windows line the faces of wood. A comfortable porch and a child's play set give the home a lived-in look, the residents must not be far away at all.

But they are. They are in prison for being child pornographers.

Last year, a major child porn scandal erupted here in the Fort which lead to the arrest and conviction of a man and his wife. Currently, they are behind bars serving. The house, however, is still very much alive...its secrets hidden in a silent blanket of snow and dust.

It is into this "partially furnished, cheap" house that I helped move my friend into this weekend. Coming in from the back, I am struck at the backyard. It is simple, modest, but with a yawning sink-hole and a grinding stone...the kind you use to sharpen and shape axes and such. The child's play set is in disuse, a heavy wooden-target hanging from it, scarred from use. The house has a sinister shape, with doors and windows in odd places and everywhere, at any point, you can see the steeple of the Catholic Church across the street.

The front door is not much better. A short walk from the street and up some stairs brings you to the ancient and heavy door, all of which is in the eyes of the Virgin, whose fresco stares at the House and is visible from any front window. Watching. I swear I saw her shed a tear when we opened that door. She must have cried blood for months when the Evil Inside had been performed.

The home should be beautiful on the inside. The vibrant colors, rich decorations and old woodwork and stonework should put one at ease. Instead, the shadows grow long and the floorboards creak hinting at hidden containers underneath filled with sinister secrets and probably snakes.

We came in through the back for the first time. The ceilings stand at least 14 feet tall. The downstairs TV is on when we come in, a special on haunted houses is playing. We chuckle at this, and move into the study. The study has an ancient

fireplace, marble with a full iron cover. Carvings set deep into the rock portray Eve tasting an Apple and then show naked children frocking in the sun. The top carving is of a mother holding her babe close. The fireplace is older than the crime, but the significance of the crime taints everything the eye can behold. Leering Bacchus stares down from the hallway and windows are all shrouded in heavy covers to hide the Virgin's eyes from the rooms inside.

The walk to the kitchen is not much better. The air is cold and you can almost see your breath. Looking around the kitchen area, it is quickly noticeable that the ceiling tiles are false and can be moved aside...more secret storage. The heating vents and such can be slid aside with yawning portals on the other side. In the kitchen, a mundane and normal kitchen, the stairs to the "servant's wing" are unheated and allow more cold air to creep into the room. Another door leads to the basement, but no sane man would venture there. So we do.

The basement is short, too short to stand up in, and the stairs creek and groan in protest of our weight. A hole, a giant hole, sits to the left of the stairs and wraps around the house. Thick spider webs and shadows that cannot be penetrated by our meager flashlights hide the contents of the hole. No doubt filled with skeletons of children. Down into the gullet of the house, piles of coal rest in corners. Yes, coal. A pit in the middle of the room has since been filled, but its grim outline and moist earth do nothing to hide its previous existence. Around the corner and the new, modern furnace boxes stand stacked while a little table with knives sits along a wall with removable bricks. A single chair sits in the corner, facing the wall in silence hidden in oppressive darkness. The chair is enough to convince us to go back upstairs.

We walk all the stairs, through the narrow and tight stairwell painted red with red stained glass windows to the upstairs. 5 doors are all in a star, shut, with glass above them and flickering shadows below. Another empty room, this one has a single painting on the wall of a young shirtless boy. He is poorly painted, but it does nothing to reduce how creepy it is. The closet door is open, and quick inspection reveals more false-ceilings that move to show hidden storage.

Two bedrooms filled with ancient and probably very valuable furniture sit unused. The windows only show views of the roof or the Virgin. The rest of the street, the rest of Fort Wayne is shuttered away from this place. The upstairs bathroom has a door with the lock on the outside...for locking someone in. The bathroom is filled with mirrors. Almost every wall has at least one. One wall is made of nothing but a giant mirror with a ballet-dancer style bar running its length. A painting of people with no mouths stares grimly at the mirror-wall.

The woman hidden behind the man. Their faces flat without mouths. Their eyes lack soul. But in the far corner, where the shower sits, is a little door. Above the shower. Opening it shows a black space, maybe capable of holding a human. One of us comments that you can see down into the shower. Turns out that was a joke, but the human hand we found...was that a joke?

Moving along to the 5th Door upstairs. It was the children's bedroom. The air is frozen here, your breath comes out in puffs and hangs in the air. The room is still, the bunk beds along the far side actually have the first clear view of the Virgin yet. More mirrors. Another painting, this time of a pregnant and naked woman peeking into the room from around a corner. The walls and ceiling are cracked heavily, and the closet is filled with paint. Another door, however, pulls us close. More stairs. The children's room has attic access.

The Attic is just as horrible as the basement. Only without the coal. Belongings are stacked in all directions and the walls are pealing and in poor repair. The floor is made out of completely mobile and non-secure planks, each one can be pulled up and the soft fluff of asbestos underneath them could hide anything. Piles of books and unmarked VHS tapes are mixed in with the comic books and novels, boxes of clothes and bedsprings. The other half of the attic is empty. The half closest to the Church with its paintings and high steeples, all lined with birds.

We leave the way of the back door, same way we came in. Only one last place to search, only one last room to examine. Even with our searching, there are still windows on the outside we never found inside. Even with all our looking one door we could not find. The House still has secrets. We intended to end at least one of them...the garage. The old garage is a separate building, built in the back off an alley. Above the door, a spike hangs ready to fall, covered in rust. When one turns to put their shoulder into the door to heave it open, your eyes fall on the grinding stone, in good shape and often used. And once inside, not only is there another mirror (the sheer amount of mirrors has, by this point, become very creepy) but a home-made axe. The garage is cluttered with tools and storage, paint, and children's innocent art. Another home-made machete and a heavy cleaver sit upon a workbench covered in old tools. Wooden mallets and such. And then I see it out of the corner of my eye...bleached white. A pile. Cobwebs hang around them and clutter keeps them somewhat hidden, but in a paranoid mindset looking for horrors, my eyes zoomed in on them...a pile of bones. Bones. I couldn't take it anymore.

So I grabbed the femur and hid it in my friend's bed.



STUDIO WARS, DANIEL DIENELT • • • •

Poetry







Periodic Tableau of the Elements

after A.K. Ramanujan

While night slides down the curve of a butterscotch inferno, all in the name of rotation,

my eyes burn bloodshot smoke rings in the ceiling like two lanterns bleeding ignited oil upward,

because the buttered garlic of her scream stings, sautéed acid steaming steeply up the convoluted flame

of an agonized intestine howling in fire

the stiff lip of a northern wind can gather a whistle within its embouchure like a lung in a brass ensemble,

can kiss a sky as clean as a peppermint candy (swirled with stripes like white clouds) aimed at an unbrushed tooth,

arctic wind migrating south has fed the sleeping, leafless tree a dead breath, hibernated outside a brown mouth

like a deciduous spark of air

sharp arterial crimson, pulmonary-bright plumage and the black-streaked cheek of a cardinal in a dormant tree

rooted in ground as frozen and ingrown as the bones we bury beneath the hopping feet of feathered red memories

CONFLUENCE • • • • • •

is like the lingering last apple, clinging black with shriveled shivering age, not falling like presupposed snow

onto an acute concrete

sea

earth;

tomorrow the lake will recline, feline, green as glass dreaming of spring in a cat's eye,

pussy willows and cattails will feather the shore while catfish moustaches glide beneath the gleam,

a raindrop will be a moment without salt, a tear without a past, and at the bottom of all emoceans

there will always be water;



HOLLY ANDREWS • • • •



Kuba Cloth Platter (a Willis "Bing" Davis work in clay)

Ragged, rolled, rough to the touch;
Your surface whispers the lessons of life

Scraped, scared, scattered flecks of color; Physical comments by the master's hands

Crushed, cracked, crimped at the edges;
A false pretense of journeys untaken

Pressed, purged, purified by fire;

The faithful essence of your culture stands

Shinning, shimmering, showered by light; Your brilliance elevates my cynic soul.



BIKE SHADOW, EMILY FOOTE • • • •



a BMX ride to freedom

with the best of friends, I sat
at peace, accomplishing so much;
yet ever so little. Nostalgically, We remembered.
often relaxation is over-stimulation, although
one may not think so.
We played adult games and drank the wine,
which turned to Kool-Aid.
LifeRushesInOnYou Punch
it's red. and, Tomorrow
it's blue and comes quickly,
We had forgotten, but for a minute.
Naïvely, We had played endless games of baseball,
coveting the smell of newly purchased tennis balls—juiced

with the intoxicating smells of summer.

We kept stats rbi's, homeruns, stolen bases;

We built scoreboards as ominous as The Monster—

And, We took pride that Ours, too, operated by hand.

We signed the back of the scoreboard to preserve Our legacy; Our Legend.

We made diamonds and built club forts—imaginatively grand club forts with basements. Dale, he was a legend, an older brother; he and his friends built the Ritz-Carleton of club forts—a quadruple-decker with twenty rooms.

We aspired. We dreamed. We became experts in acquiring lumber.

We grew and another summer passed.
trading bats for oval shaped balls we tore at Our clothes, and caused
Our eyes to turn oddly indigo colors, and Our lips to swell.
We made Our pacts. We have not forgotten.
The blood still stains Our shirts, and Our skins still have the scars.

pizza; sick, We all felt.

We purchased one hundred bouncy balls and hiked to a busy intersection; lots of balls bounced off of undercarriages that day—the Police came,

We ran, We got caught.

We would O.D. on peach circles, sour patch kids,

We found that We didn't. It snowed; We hid and threw snowballs at cars. Fantastically, they crash off of windshields, or thud against the aluminum of roofs. Following was always a screech of tires, followed by Our flight to escape capture. We still believe, We still escape, and We still have Our Bond: Our friendship will never age. I hop on my bike, peddling with all that I am because it's the bottom of the ninth, and summer will never, ever, end...if only I keep peddling...



Canada in Common

As I write of stars and cinnamon, The past that I live, Past that blacks out The present, mortalizes the future,

You walk in, with Toronto And independence on my mind, You talk of your cabin in Ontario.

Canada in common.

You won't let me push you Away like some dog starved for attention. Now I don't want to. My life finally coming together, The perfect mixture of night,

Day when dusk.

I tear up at the beauty of it.

We talk of Canada. Our own
Canada's collide.



I Heard My Mother's Footsteps

I heard my mother in my footsteps the other day, Suddenly, I was no longer walking down the halls of academia. Suddenly, I was no longer heading to my dreary beige office filled with beige people and beige desks. I was no longer twenty-six, stressed, lost and tired.

I heard my mother in my footsteps the other day,
Instantly, I was sitting on a floor, Indian style, playing with Fisher Price.
Instantly, I was sitting on a bright blue carpet
surrounded by a circle of rainbow squares of tape.
I was eight, carefree, happy and energetic.

I heard my mother's footsteps coming from far away,
Click-Clack, they were strong, confident, measured.
Click-Clack, they were wise, gentle and kind
and they always made me feel safe.
My mother was her footsteps and those footsteps were my mother.

I laughed when I heard my mother in my footsteps, I thought of the times she'd apologize for things I had inherited. I thought of the times she'd joke that I had her pointy pinky toes or her sometimes uncontrollable tear ducts. But I thought if *I* could have *Her* footsteps...

I heard my mother in my footsteps the other day,
Suddenly, I felt comforted and no longer stressed or drained.
Suddenly, I felt happy and safe and I wanted to
skip through those halls as if I were eight.
And I hope someday that I will fit into my mother's footsteps.



All Else Will Fade

I run in all directions —
To the hidden places in my heart
Instead I find safety
In the open tunnels found in friendship —
It is OK to run,
But wait there are guards
Guards at the door
They raise their hands to protect me,
I let them stop the onslaught,
I can't go too fast,
Terrified of stumbling
Or trampling someone in my path.

As in a dream
I think safety

And I find a safe place to hide,
I think peace and love

And I find those who know —
I am pure motion,
Innocence, fragility a force:
Step, step, step:

You feel the pain with me,
The pain of being different,
You don't know my pain exactly
But we know the experience and
The outcome of being born in hatred
And yet finding acceptance

As a Wicca in Indiana,
A baby Crip in Texas,
A Feinnian in Montana,
Or a Catholic or Protestant in Ireland..
We thought we would continue to be lost
Lost in oblivion –
Always misunderstood

But wait you are the guards for me
As I am the guard for you
We search each other's faces
Hoping against hope —
That we can be the ones
Who bring peace?
Can I love a Brit who hates me
Simply because I am Irish?
Can the hatred I have been taught
Simply fade away?

What is it we must teach each other -?
We each must realise that only
By being reborn in love
Can true peace exist?

Those who judge thinking they understand

Must quickly be sent away

We must continue to stand in the gap

With each other and all else will

Fade.

Compassion: That is what is needed
Fear controls and drives compassion away
Love and tenderness brings comfort
And healing begins.



she stands there watching. waiting. the silence of her children still screaming at her. thousands of them lie dead before her. circumambulate her. the silence that whispers through the rustling leaves of tall corn remind her. but she does not mourn them. she stands proud. never questioning her roots. she knows that even in death they have given life to the world. that is her *dharma* after all isn't it. and so she stands. watching, waiting...





Questions

Daughter of Wisdom Am I the one Can I guide Myself To be better

Daughter of Light
Can I shine
Can I pierce the shadows
That cover those I love

Daughter of Mercy
To be kind
Is hard
Can I forgive everyone

Daughter of Justice Truth is written on my palms Can I spread it Everywhere

> Daughter of Nature May I lie in the grass Warmed by the sun And not be harmed

Daughter of Constance Can I live without change Without trouble How solid is my standing ground

> Is this me asking me All this Am I getting nowhere

No
For I ask him to
Help me become
The daughter of seeking all that is above

Kate Heidenreich



Sunday the 15th

If thinking is a crime Than all sorts I have Committed

Of Worry, hopes, dreams, and fears

Of Roaring storms and mean weather

Of Fashion no's and loose hair days

Of Failing grades and this or that on time

If thinking is a crime Than all sorts I have Committed

Of You please do Meet me today

Of Summer days and lazy lake Mays

Of Car payments and bills, bills, bills

Of Endless projects and so much to read

If thinking is a crime Than all sorts I have Committed



Growing in American Society

I am a middle aged woman

Half-way between youth and maturity

No longer vibrant yet improved

I am able to vote but way pass deciding to

Of course there is more that I should know

By today's standard I have contributed nothing

I am seeking a dream that is far beyond my reach

There is no doubt to many I can't achieve this

I will turn aside to a lesser goal desiring meekness

My heart is heavy but I will not cry or falter

I know I can do something and I want to do more

I will make a way from little

I can and must achieve somewhat

Life allows one to plan but command says not yet

I will patiently seek out and receive my destiny

N. Ross

State of Loss

Convinced

Of my own lie...

You don't know what I've been through See deep into my mental trials and tribulations, Abnormalities and maledictions Given away as a baby to people with no relating I didn't know life had to be so complicating Taking medication because I'm having trouble concentrating Seeing double of tunnel vision As I wonder if my life would persist In a realm beyond humanly existence? The earth may still revolve lives would still go on I'm still that young but this has been an old woman's journey I wonder why does so much of this life disturb me? I learned to get a grip Devil's options either death or time I tried to be sanctified Force-fed empty lies 1001 screaming voices within my pride I'll never let them feel this pain help the tears hide Yes that's wise now, fool em now try pray to get by Flying afraid So high



Trading Secrets in the Night

Moonlight flowing through her long hair Long lithe limbs lightly clad Running for joy with a pounding heart

A sinful smile releases a soft sigh As lightening dazzles her eyes, Rain pattering on the tin roof

He reaches her hand Soft fingers embrace Longing for joy with a pounding heart

The storm rises in their whispered throats Set free on the night air to roam, The mountains echo the refrain

She stands awestruck at the pool Glistening pinpoints mesmerize Laughing for joy with a pounding heart

His shadow approaches
Breaking free of the grasping pines
Moonlight flows through them and all around them
Resting now in the joy of their sated hearts



Saint Push

screaming truth to the deaf
surrendering the sanctity of her mind
for freedom

Churro

cinnamon and sugar coat
thanking sweetness for enveloping my senses
surprised by dulce de leche





Drunken Blue Spaces Girl

One lover once told me I possessed the personality of a shark.

And I snapped at her, "There are plenty of fish in the sea."

Delving oceans void –to tame thirst—drowning can liberate too.

I am now once again becoming hungry grown mad with lust for those salt words.



Mary's Memory

White drapes shadow the wooden ground Next to the quilted cover bed Two pictures placed on adjacent walls

One of an old man with grey hair The other, a black and white picture of a little girl and her mother

There is an old stained dresser On top lays a hand written letter Addressed to Mary



In Memoriam

Standing at the dedication of a statue I look down and see names in the sidewalk that were written in the cement and

I wonder which monument will last longer.

St. Vincent De Paul Catholic Church

Sitting in the empty church
I stare at the fifty-foot ceiling and
gape at the stained glass, brass and gold altar
with heated holy water.
It is noon and the church is a silent tomb-Where is God?
I lay down on a pew and close my eyes to sleep.
I remember when you were mud
and sawdust and plywood bones;
Walking through at night
after the construction workers had left,
before there were red candles and incense
you were floodlights and biting cold with
the smell of a campfire burning down the road

Summer in the City

I gasp,
awake at last morning
broken and gone,
lost in a lazy long afternoon
I hear the city grumbling
through my window annoyed
at my indolence as it
spins madly, wildly,
never ceasing in its
search for a purpose.



HOLLY ANDREWS • •



In Sonoma Valley

A man with raisin worn hands
Once said to her, "Bulls
are sensitive beasts.
In one look they pierce your soul,
probe deep into your walls,
and sense your strength."

Encounter in San Marino, Italy

Her crystalline blue eyes reflected sunrays over Scala. Bonelli was her name.

She was light with step on clouded curbs consumed with random everyday life.

One wink
made the earth stop
and your breath quicken.



I Can't Hear the Flowers

Every morning, night,
Cigarette, this screened
In porch looking out
On the lake, flowers,
The cornucopia of words
I am craving.

But the transparent walls are keeping
Canada out, and I am terrified
To tear it down
And let my pen scribble
Anything but the answers
To this book of crossword puzzles.

This porch is more than
A mosquito net, more than
A sun block.
I can't hear the flowers
From my plastic lawn chair,
Only the sound of my coffee
Getting cold, and the taste
Of my smoke going out.

Andrew C Hoover

Another January in Indiana

The Sun is fighting the Indiana Winter
Forcing the blue through
The clouds are stubborn and subdue
Thick fields of unrelenting gray
Forcing the blue through
Trying to collapse my mood
Thick fields of unrelenting gray
As the Sun sunders what it can
Trying to collapse my mood
Fingers wrap around Fingers
As the Sun sunders what it can
In yet another Indiana January



CHRIS: BLACK AND WHITE, CHRISTOPHER SMITH



School Night

It's called the Midwest, Jon.

No trust without the try, Jon.

And I've been trying ever since we saw the ghost in the cornfield off country road 350W. Drinking flavored wine in filthy cheap bottles sitting in your mother's Escort, in the dark careless,

in the air with the windows down,

in the stillness of the stale,

in the dryness of the drinks,

in the presence of our ghost. He's not sleeping but waiting while you recited "Not Waving But Drowning", and opened your mouth for words like "I'll get out as soon as I get up", and

"Indiana weather, this Indiana weather."

Do you think our stranger cares? Haunting fields to encounter lost souls in the making, and please don't let me die like he did long ago in a car crash on this country road.

We care what this ghost will learn to know.

Read what I write, Jon.

Beyond this cornfield graveyard, Jon.



WHAT SORT OF BROWSE HAVE I CARRIED OFF YOU, ALASKA?

Summertime woos the slopes round Sitka, Alaska with light.
Hills respond like women in love their many knees gone green, goosebumped for the iridescent sheen of deer heart cabbage blooming over them like a new tan: which fades fast as Blacktailed Deer carry it off in their stomachs as easily accessible browse.

What sort of browse have I carried off you, Alaska?

- --Dinners, say, of bumped off deer and moose and caribou and goat and bear.
- --Of commercially caught Salmon and Halibut of rockfish and crab.
- --Of Sitka Spruce and Yellow Cedar and Western Hemlock: trees eaten piecemeal by the steel teeth of logging chokers.
- --homesteaded plots of land north of Fairbanks, and a cheaply put up cabin there

lost, and torn down

by drugs, and alcohol, and madness.

- --Of dark haired Athabaskan, Yupik and Tlingit Indian girls readily drunk who gave up their bodies far easier than stories of their past
- --Of my own start at drinking there (for alcoholism is the state's pastime).
- --Of your imported and tanned topless dancers who fed off the greenery of my labor and my baser nature for their migration south.

That browse and more I have gorged off you, Alaska.

And as for me, you ate my youth like a secondhand crumb, picked off your knee like some insignificant nothing, a mere speck....



Wendy Wasserstein Is Dead

Should be the headline.
Instead, it's been January all year long.
Dad's seen all
his friends go over there
and the Fort is empty as five minutes after math class.

Says soldiers and morticians are the busiest people.

Vengeance, a high tide in the dark, subsides; pulled back into the sea by the passing of days, dawn.

Now there is waiting.

For the Tender Shepherd
to come again.

Turn the tables and shout: *This is my Father's House!*

Or Buddha. Moses, Mohammed.

Science is the Army's God; they wait for no one.

How is it that the human heart is the Devil's Dustbin and also the City of God?

The eyes of Yang and Yin beat always. Genesis, smaller than a bird's eye-to exodus: the birth of the invisible world.

My mouth is filled with the taste of May. (This is how our wings are carved.)

Ryan Willits

The Lost Kingdom

There once was a secret path, concealed behind loosely-hanging foliage, with leafy strands lifting like curtains, swinging up and in and falling behind, whispering of some mystery beyond.

Inside were smoke trees waiting with giant creaking fingers spread so you could sit in their ancient palms and shake loose their snowy cotton until spring gave way to Christmas.

There were massive fallen oaks arched over streams like bridges so you could splash in their shadows and swing from their downward branches with bare feet dipped in the current.

There were mounds of earth amassed in great heaping piles like mountains-scaleable and scraping the sky-serving as mighty parapets against whatever outside foes.

There were forsaken structures, silent, dark, and empty,

crawling with green ivy and moss like the crumbling remains of castles from some lost civilization.

There were enchanted sand dunes stashed away within the trees that could change form in an instant-look this way: jungle quicksand; look that way: a desert oasis.

There was a magical kingdom resounding with myth and legend, filled to the brim with fairy tales, and spilling with ancient secrets, And it was all so very real.

But beauty has its price: it attracts the selfishly passionate; those who cannot cherish a thing without stuffing it safe and secure in a bottle labeled "Mine."

They with their Midas fingers outstreched and ready to point at exactly what things are theirs, shouting and waving so proudly their fists full of paper.

That kingdom is now lost, dead and buried six feet beneath a tombstone carved in concrete; that former place of fondest memories, now the grave of all things beautiful.



Anger, Tara Spencer • • •



Lily's Corollas

Lily has found her Sunday. Dressed
In her solar smile, she eclipses
Into the firmament. The precipitation
Of emotion has painted her cheek. Strokes
Of palms have feathered her bangs.
Guns race their shrills to bring

Lily back to their concrete plane. Asphalt Never felt so warn to her stiletto. Cavorting Amongst clouds, she resurrects the anointed Spear through a whisper. Matricidal brides Cannot wait to wear ivory between stems. Prayers dressed in pearl, collapse

The cathedral floor. Lily crucifies
Postcards from the otherside. She has
Sifted her soul to get the nous. Tears wade
The alter with a thirsty chalice. He was
Lost in the Red Sea with apostles. Dead
In friends, she filters stain glass

In of her blue. Lily feels deserted
In her sundae. Shrouded in her lunar
Frown, she unpetals her firmament. Mary,
Lily, and Magdalene; she never smirked
Between his other corollas. Lily resigns
From the orchid, waiting for her Easter.

Allison Graber

My Breeze

Sometimes I wanna
Be in your arms
Like the
Cocoon around a butterfly,
Formed but not emerged.

You hold me.
I want to
Be still but I
Break freeSpread my wings.

Dusty roads before me, Looming clouds behind-I take the flight of a Lonely one. Survival.

Worn tractors,
Far away faces,
Golden fields of
Stalks
Bowing to the breeze.

At journeys end
I am
Again still and
Your arms
Embrace me once more.

Danielle Stewart

Today, do not

Stay in a

Negative mood

About the things he said

Last night.

There is no point

In staying angry,

For you will resolve it

When you can go home again.

Today, do not stay

Wrapped in the

Negative feelings,

But use your pen

To whisk them away,

And write your

Fantasies

That you wish were real.



1.5

look, this isn't a sweet honey how are you and never was anything like an apple

i am not your baby back, half rack or sugar pumpkin love muffin

i am not your answering lemon actuality, i am not even even not even ever



"Second Thoughts"

I'm a word addict
But my mind can't seem to come up with a way
To say exactly what I want to say.
To say exactly what I want to say as to not confuse you.

So we sit in the car,
You change CDs compulsively
(I like it.)
Finally settle on one,
My favorite.
(I know you hate it.)
And we stare out opposite dirty windows
Your cigarette smoke
(I wish you'd quit)
Interlocks with the fog
And cloud covered stars.

BEN BLEVENS

Cameo

No I can't Won't I'd be all alone. All Eyes on me Focused on my flaws. I won't last in this Spotlight, I'll melt From this heat. Crush under this Pressure. To be great Is not my desire. Valid Excuses can't save me. They say I'm the lead I'm the star, a Black hole Maybe. If I fade Into the background I can just have a Cameo in my own life

The Race

I died once But before I did I tried to live I felt once But it hurt too much So I stopped and swore Never again. I tried to love once But everything broke Only pieces were left And a warm feeling of numb. And one time I tried to speak But it caught in my throat I began to choke On my own words, couldn't save me And so I died once But it's not so bad Now I'm Free From all their expectations. Clear of their instant gratifications Done with the trivialities of that life Gone forever from the race. I wouldn't have finished Any other way



113

The boy bends forward For a word With the umpire Of the empire state

States that at is a form of here Here there Or hear that And I hear you loud and clear

The boy is in love With his finger

Offing an ice cream Somewhere between noon And never mind



Deep Sleep: A Letter

This. This rippling calm
With a rusling overhead,
This will not suffice.
I wish to walk under the lake today
Along bone fragments, the fisherman's scraps,
You will find me out there
Under the middle of the lake,
Supine, arms crossed, hands to each shoulder
Bubbling, content.
No crease of dis-ease across my face,
With the music of a thousand fish
Content to share their boneyard

P.S.

Do not rustle the fisherman or his wife. Let them sleep in.



insomnia

I dream.

I wish, sitting inconsequentially still. while, awaiting the knock of opportunity.

I speak of my yearning.

my desire to end this awakening.

insomnia. a pill blue towards escape.



Prelude to Another Sleepless Night: Wednsday, January 18, 2006

Here we are again at 3 a.m. together, but somehow alone. My soul is screaming, but we sit in silence-trying to think of words to say that I'm going to be just fine. But my heart's too honest and I'm all out of love for both myself and for you.

Chemistry: Monday, January 30, 2006

The moon was an old cinnabar lamp.
The ebony days, a chain
to when I gladly did kiss you.
My love for your lust.

Thursday, January 12, 2006

Food and cigarettes are interchangeable. Coffee is indispensable. Sleep creeps in and overtakes me, holding me 'til morning.

The hours tick by painstakingly slowly filled with odd silence and feigned mystery



HOLLY ANDREWS • • •



pluto

Seen it, no.
Stuck with this window. Where stars shine not.
Smog,

smells like I'm lost.

Generation predicated destination.

Stars guide the lost; nevermore,
when nothing's left to explore.

Touch, the cup-a holy grail.
Enslaved to quest; commercially.
Stars: reach for the
frequent flyer, miles.

Heard, have you?
Confined in Columbus's shuttle to the stars. Miss them, a single-eye watches. It discerns a

flavor called sweat; consume their tears, blood, labor—capital. But, crusade no more. Venture across oceans. Never, push forward and leave the masses behind. In search.



The Accordance of Music and Sympathies is a Maybe Sort of Thing

Latin America has these children, and they sort of always worry about their moms. They stand catty-cornered from each other and whisper, they use graph paper and enjoy it. Come to think of it, maybe enjoy it, no one has ever asked what they think. They kick soccer balls around like it'll provide their next dinner. And maybe it will if they are real good at it. Israel, this is someone's actual name mind you, thinks about these children often. Her pity, or maybe piety consists of her walking and swinging her arms noticeably hard. She knows these kids do not wear bright orange sweatshirts, and thank God for that because those combined with bike racks are the demise of her habitat. Back to their worrying baby-minds. Israel knows this; when moms and dads fight in Latin America, even the littlest Jose imagines they are maybe screaming I love you's instead of I angry you's. So, you see now that red balloons and rice are the least of Madra and Mairtin's worries. Someone put music in those children's ears to maybe ensure they can retain some sympathy.



Peace of Soul

Vultures rip anxiously at my tender flesh. My heart groans in pain. I wait for the last to finish me.

I deeply sit and hope for peace of mind.

Like a cool breeze that blows gently through trees on a warm day.

And in such a day,

Waters gleam and sparkle.

Like angels blessing us with their presence and beauty.

Love only few can understand.

I try to mend these wounds even, when more come.

For each it is a new.

One an elbow or an arm.

And more vicious,

The on who goes for my heart.

Regardless,
Wounds I try to heal.
Even still when scars appear.
They hunt for me like rabid dogs on a cold, empty night.

When I shed my blood, They lap it like the finest wine.



Sometimes I do so willingly So that they may not starve.

Still they are unsatisfied. They rip my flesh from every limb.

Sometimes I wish for their destruction, So that I may suffer no longer.

They somehow wish to keep me alive Enough to endure their pain. So that they once more may feast again.



Rachael A. Wiegmann

The Dark Lady

The dark lady reclines on my window seat. She is vertical to vision, but secretly

Wishes for slumber. Piano music
Is painted to the air as she brushes
Her flax (as though there was a place to go).
Her eye is a temperamental palette, waiting
To be shaded. Pearls are curled

Down her neck: the memory of a lover's kiss. She sat on the pomegranate's landing In an ivory coat with Persephone in a

Wintry hell, she gives a dead tear. (Does it hurt when the blood appears)? The dark lady has Queen Anne's lace Across her palm. Seeds of rubies

Necklace down her vein. She wants

To be desired up from the Underworld.

Tell the harvest to slumber in hiatus,

As the snow will come. The dark lady

Drinks merlot with me. She was always

Good for crimson on my dress. Thorn

Stains on my fingerprint: what a memory.

I recall the dark lady sitting the piano
With me; she flipped Chopin's manuscript.
(Does it hurt when the blood reappears)?

Pomegranates pouched in my mouth, and pearls
Of sleep on my eye.

Horizontally, The dark lady departs.



Ice Queen.

Four chambered romance a four cornered notion.

Whiskey and water a makeshift love potion.

Give me the time and I'll tell you what I mean.

What I say.

What I mean.

And what I mean when I say that it's a risky path to take Down this path of stale bread crumbs and snakes, and if you're willing to drink the wine I turned into water that's fine.

But if you sweat out all the water before you've reached the top then stop climbing the ladder before the temperature starts to drop.

At the top of a mountain is an ice queen, a forgotten dream.

A means to an end that knows exactly what you mean When you're climbing and fighting and trying to find a way Through all the obstacles.

Stalagmites and stalagtites form a seemingly endless maze. Knee deep in wirey veins of flowing blood and mantarays. Walking through this crud for hours to days it all depends on Your heart and your ways.

But if you can make it through and see the door at the end of the path Please knock twice and keep and open mind and if you're ready I'll answer the door in time to take you into a place inside me Filled with factory floors and elevator doors and seas of frozen moments Captured beneath mirrors of green and if you look close enough you'll See all that I've seen and then you'll know what I mean when I say That it's a risky path to take and you took it anyways and now There's no escape.

Scott Moore

Harmony House

Among furniture, the others sit beside themselves gaping at a color Magnavoxpatiently waiting for their lives to appear. Instead, Family Feud contestants receive awards for unoriginal thought. No poets there, by God. This poet retires to his room with articles on abnormal psychology garnered from the University. Mad for company, I comprise a list

of the great depressed:

Abraham Lincoln, Samuel Johnson, Isaac Newton, Robert Lowell, Robert Schumann, John Keats, Leo Tolstoy, John Stuart Mill, Thomas de Quincy, Donizetti, Ernest Hemingway, Marilyn Monroe, Friedreich Nietzsche, Eugene 'O Neil, William Blake, Edgar Alan Poe, Winston Churchill, Patty Duke, Samuel Coleridge, Virginia Woolf, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sylvia Plath, Ann

Sexton, Beethoven, William James, Dostoevski, Handel, Balzac, Shelly, Lord Byron, Charles Darwin, Berlioz, Gluck, Jimi Hendrix, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Nikolia Gogol, others....others...

A Nancy C. Andreasen claims in her article <u>Bi-polar Affective Disorder and Creativity: Implications and Clinical Management</u> that: "She interviewed 30 writers who had served on the faculty of the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, the oldest creative writing program in the United States and probably the most distinguished...four-fifths of these writers had experienced some affective illness, including four who had suffered from severe manic disorder requiring prolonged and repeated hospitalizations. Another nine had experienced bipolar II affective disorder, a syndrome characterized by periods of depression alternating with hypomania (a mild form of mania lacking psychotic symptoms but characterized by euphoria, poor judgment, increased energy, racing thoughts, etc.)."

One assumes Art's knotty heart
a heart of dysfunctionunhealthy
reading the above.
But who am I to say?
In the Heart of the Heart of the Country,
(odd side of the street)
a uniform grey Harmony House
faces off against
The First Assembly of God.
During Supper,
the cross makes a key-hole in the sky
were one looking.



DANIEL DIENELT, CHURCH • • •





Irrational Circularity

Truth is an attitude of the eyes
and laughter the conclusion of a flower.

Essence is Time wrapped in a
felt blanket made of magic purple powder.

My dreams sprinkle the purple powder over
the cosmos – enlightenment ensues and
the void that is inhabited by the Buddhists
contracts into a marble that God uses to
win His game of Chinese checkers.

The God who is there is the God that rolls the dice and paints the mind in abstract expression – drips thick as hair and cigarette butts ground right into the canvas – a collage of screams and solitude and absent colors and moist, black ink.

I know its there since I've forgotten what makes a bookshelf divine and why straight lines make excellent instruments of torture.



This is how I'll know I'm still alive

When I look in the mirror, what do I see? I see nothing staring back
Just someone who I don't quite recognize
Or feel any connection with

How will I know that I'm still alive?

I walk alone
Isolated in my over-growing hollow void
I wonder what it would feel like
To cut through the skin
To see the blood flow forth
And the tissue react to the intrusion
Is this how I'll know that I'm still alive

I take a deep breath
Where the oxygen reacts in the lungs
Causing the heart to faintly tick
And increase the flow of blood through the veins

How will I know that I'm still alive?

When I look in the mirror
The reflection isn't me
The is a schism between reality and my dreams
I realize that at one time I could have been someone
But now my time has passed
And when the breath expires and crystallizes in the air
When someone sheds a solitary tear
For me
This is how I'll know that I'm still alive



Ideal or Dare

Under the stars under my skin dreams of minutes past directions yet to be determined beckon me

Do I dare venture the wild wakefulness the unrehearsed plan the advent of mind ultimately unknown

Everyone's saying different things to me

To take the ideal or the dare?

Burst out of the skin and float freely among the Great Nietsche, Descartes, Gates Intangible Undefined Unbidden Unbroken

Not so distant past

So long the years of comfort and casual sex in cobwebs of rose-tinted steel I stayed

So dark the nights of self-contemplation demons of insufficiency plaguing apparitions I cried

So strange the world of haunting opportunities dysfunctionally dependant I hid

So fast the fall of deceptions revealed searing the stagnant I woke

So vast the depth of myself in reflections of others I see

So star-crossed the dreams of converging conversations of souls searching "How was your day?" Do I dare deserve this?

I do.



Marx

Marx was wrong, you know, about black stripes
On red canvas. Music really is
the context for shallow breathing and
explosive shadows. To think
otherwise is to be a door made of mirrors –
shattered mirrors, that is.
Marx was wrong, too, about my books.
They are edible and obscenely sexual.
To violently press them against my ears it to
Hear the sonata of unicorn consciousness.

Knowledge – how I wish it were an infinite crossword puzzle. I realize it is a pathway through the city and





Mortar and Brick, Lip and Tooth

"When the meat retreats we will all be smiling." -- Edward Delmar James

The enameled bones of your smile fix the irregular brick of my desire, with bright mortar spread softly, to the sharp brick of our love. Crack open

that oyster, iridescent hand which holds my attention like sand. Like an opal, I know those teeth. I know those lips are for me. That tongue which gathered and glossed

that smile is a guest sometimes in the house of my mouth. You make me laugh aloud, make me lipread this moment like the *Mahabharata*. There are white words in your smile. At least three

I can read. I can hear them : *pearl dove snow*. Ceramic sibilants caress the kiss of both.

In nine hundred years, the tower that we smiled, that we smile -- mortar and brick, lip and tooth,

covered by the flesh of dust, the weed of time -will be excavated scientifically, classified by an anthropologist caught sighing at the epic bones of your smile.



565

The seventh phone rings the edge of your yellow pond Touching the blue-belled flowers with tiny fingers

An infant ache begins to flow with golden hair Traces a lip stick that glistens as it glows

There is a message that is something like a signal sounding Several lights gathering one sight slightly buzzing

Could it be ecstasy or x to z or is she exiting the whole damn thing You're not sure how to go about your u turning into two

There is the fact that facing this is intensely difficult And there is the fact that without it your life has no meaning



JOANNA WITTKE, CONTEMPLATION



King Giggles

Sitting in this "oh so" uncomfortable chair the laughter bubbles up from some unconscious abyss spewing battery acid across gray matter filling the mouth with liquid copper like the taste of blood to a fox's tongue.

Liquid lightning through synaptic webs overriding circuits and breakers setting the body into rhythmic convulsions like an intravenous shot of cocaine.

Phantom limbs grow where nothing was before to accommodate the growing storm sprouting wings of steel and rust protruding teeth of staples and such syringe twine and ink the flesh twists and dances to the mirth of the mind.

Crescendo reached the brain begs for release oxygen deprived from pure glee attempts to fix its shattered dignity.

But the laughter continues unabated...



Irving's Lamp

Removed from my dusty attic
I feel your intimate conversations
with mother's mother
the melting oils
the records playing Cat Stevens and Miles Davis.
Irving, Grandpa, always taking
some contraption apart for parts
or for fun. You show him
where the tool slides next.
He gives me a sand stone
and asks me to build new lamps.
You are old but very able,

my grandmother says that about herself. You must have heard as you spied on the poems she wrote, the verses she commanded under your light and quiet supervision. The events you have witnessed; cars building cars building life, steal the genius of your heretic illumination. You are old but very necessary.

My poems play in shine and shadow, like tepid melodrama the same as my grandmother's shadows and reflections. Grandpa's hands have touched your body, your obverse figure, the same way you touch mine. You make love with dull yellow and beguile my shy musty curtains. Your bulb always burns but bulbs can be changed with time.

Ink

Ink has dried.

It seeped through thin cracks, black and red dyes stretched over blank page. My ink spills into life less than spills on my finger tips.

Look at words, now uniforms designs. I read pages of fonts; printed, perfect, sterile.

These letters jump off blank page. My fingers dance in splashes of ink. Ink breathes memory,

ink dyes in whisper.



To Assemble a Jigsaw Puddle

We assemble a life like auto parts, like nouns in a metaphor, like an inkpen and a keychain. We cast off

rough days like cast iron, cast iron scrap into a dumpster's deep hand to feed the furnace's failure of emptiness.

Liquefy our wrongs, great heat; make molten those mistakes and shape a peace to interlock, flush and snug,

the peace of an empty other.

A jigsaw puddle, our life together,
an enigma of blood working in solidarity.

Linked like verbs, our action as objects lead those who read to seek again the strong steel

subject of the original automaker: we must fit together to survive we must mesh like inkpen and keychain.



Symphonic Mining

Their lungs boil and wheeze like lack of oxygen in cigarette haze. Phobic junkies in bright black walls, echoing walls

piercing sound and smell. The grinding of steel on steel, tooth on tooth,

splitting cavities of silver, copper, coal.

Wise ripples in tense bodies surrounded by sand stone and lignite

pulses rhythm in black lungs, dead lungs in old skin. Wrinkled necks and hands and faces

seduced by precious gems of light, ambient yellow-orange hues

in fogged stardust.

The fresh gleaming eyes in old faces die for echoing reflection

from bright jade, emerald, ruby, pulsing life and light.

As young fungus dines on yellow spongy rock, rusted carts haul stone,

squealing wheels on old rail tracks.



Northern Lights

In Poland, a methane cloud ignites blasting the last breath from the sooty lungs of ten miners belching black dust in a plume that blankets the town until nightfall. Charged by wine the townsfolk climb on rooftops to covet the purple neon mouth, curved breath of solar wind on the live coal of our magnetosphere.

In orbit, satellites relay nebulous images of a starbirth dating back one million years the time it took for man to form the idea of extracting uranium from deep wells in this planet the time it takes to see Earth burnt to ash from that same star.

Under spotlight beams from tripod towers at an arctic dig, faces normally pink from howling Inuit wind glow aurora green as they loosen a seam to anthracite, uranium, down to the iron core.

J. Thomas Swihart

To the other cognates,

I think I'm somewhere in Asia, there's less metal here. Can't scream anymore when I sing, the blood smells like dirt. One of the buildings reminds me of a Seattle skyscraper.

Wait, I think I'm in Australia. The walkers have an English accent with a touch of California surfer. Tell the doctor I'm not driving on Highway 5 to get to his office anymore. I've been listening to Desert Radio. Where did I put my good lung? Did I leave it back in the States?

This has to be England. That accent is definite. I was looking for the shoreline, to be next to water again, it makes me feel home. The river here isn't quite right, it doesn't have enough dirt. I wanted to take some sand back to show you, but I didn't have anything to carry it in, so I swallowed some.

Ireland? Is it Ireland? France maybe? It's Denmark. Everyone has blond hair. I hear the album is doing well. It's definitely a summer album. I can't write a winter album. Did you like the blue color on the front? It reminds me of the Pacific.

I wanted to buy a house in Chicago, but it wasn't near the water, so I would forget my address.

Portland, Oregon. This is definitely Portland. I found a shirt with Jimi Hendrix on it, and they only sell those in Portland. There's a river here, and they have white reflectors on the highway for when the fog comes. Where are you?

Kurt Cobain.



Joanna Wittke, Thrash • • •

The hand of Kurt Cobain

It must be the hand of Kurt Cobain that plays a random note on a guitar in the calm crack of a split canyon. It flashes a constant yellow over the tongue. On the edge of Rapid City, South Dakota, it must be the hand of Kurt Cobain that smokes an old cigarette filter found in the white sand of a hotel lobby ashtray. The doctor told him that the blood in his vein had gone bad, that the smooth crease in his eye was going to get bigger. It must be the hand of Kurt Cobain that drives a breath through the pine tree, makes it whisper like a large boulder falling into the street. It must be the hand of Kurt Cobain that pushes a finger down the throat to check for a knot growing inside out, for a tree root digging through flesh. The doctor told him that the blood in his lung had transformed into tuberculosis, that the iron had changed into rust. It has to be the hand of Kurt Cobain that drinks from a cup of green mercury, that changes the skin into a leaf. It is the hand of Kurt Cobain. that holds that leaf, dead, found near the yellow light, hidden.



walking is a strange thing to do these days when the left ear is gone.

in the bathroom The other day at school. I had a guy at the next urinal just rocking out to headphones. shake and roll. Straight up i was tripping. yo. Men don't exist during pissing. so i thought. Damn i bet he listening to some good shit. Yeah. Beltone was pretty fresh that hearing aid rocked my left ear. zipped.

OH YEAH, dem muthafuckers are equivalent to saints.

dem a ride above the asphalt
with urethanes's help on
a wooden maple plank
fast flow
smooth pop
oh my god
that was fresh and huge.
that fool knock my ass of the throne.
dang. boy
this church called
Lawton park rules.



Woodstock

I walk into a recording studio, but then I walk into a park completely surrounded by a black metal fence, the kind that have bars, and all the cement has turned into grass with trees for streetlamps, it's a concert reunion of every concert I had ever been to, and I tell an Indian girl about Kurt Cobain, who lost his mind because he drank sulfur soda made from the salt flats of Yellowstone, I'm in the crowd, and everyone is wondering, the band is late, but I think they're always late, and I think the singer of the band will never show up, each person in the pavilion is twenty feet apart resting next to a tree, the singer must have drank sulfur soda.

Rachael A. Wiegmann

The Scent of Your Funeral For Great Aunt Helen

The smell of a copper-fingerprint

Cost more in your day. You threw

Pennies into Niagara Falls with my father,

When I was in the seed of comatose. Sister

And I brought you daffodils for the resurrection,

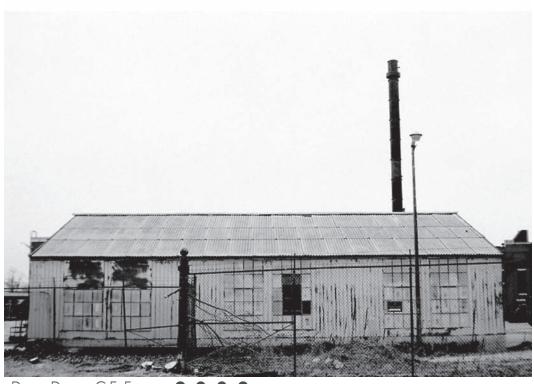
Wrapped in a paper towel. It could never

Soak up the moonchild's disease. Your feminine Amulets disappeared when we pressed A hug. Through that, I have learned The embrace of transience. Helen, You would have went to Paris in a Chanel Dress, empty-handed with happiness.

You watched Leda lay the egg,
And put them in our twin-baskets. Sister
And I wanted a wooden horse, but twelve
Years later, I want your story. Helen,
No one is there to smile benevolence. You
Searched for the alchemist to turn a man

Into gold: never to ring your finger. Radiation Brought you to her swansong, and you Retired breath. Helen, people knew your Spirit of beauty, but kept their ships A-sail. Only yesterday, in an antique Store, did I recollect the smell of your funeral.

Fiction



Daniel Dienelt, G.E. Electric • • •







Winner of the 2005 Psi Iota Xi Contest

The payphone gave out free money, which kept us in Mellow Yellow heaven all summer. Each morning Jeremy or I would rush down to the phone booth and slip inside. The phone was right downtown, and the town hall was right across the street. But the cops were never there that early and the only people out would be old men waiting on the benches outside the barber shop. We always made sure to close the doors and act like we were having a real conversation with someone. You took the receiver off, listened for a dial tone, then hung it back up.

Whatever the person before had paid for a call would come out in clattering and singing wealth.

What made the whole thing even funnier was that my dad worked for the telephone company. He was a high up engineer of some kind, not the kind of guy you see straddling a pole at thirty feet. He wore polo shirts on the weekends and we took one trip a year to visit both my sets of grandparents in Ontario. It was only a five hour drive each way.

Jeremy's dad was cool. He was cooler than mine who was only a few inches taller than me and not much bigger. Jeremy's dad and my dad had only met once, I think, down at the park for the fireworks. His dad's arms were as big as my dad's legs and when they shook hands it was absurd. They didn't talk much, there's probably not a lot a telecommunications engineer and a high school gym coach had in common. Our mom's talked a bunch though, they talked about getting together, doing this or that, but it never happened. They were different from each other too, my mom was thick and homely, and Jeremy's mom was, well, hot. When Jeremy and I would be alone at his house I would stare at their wedding photos when he was in the bathroom. She looked almost the same as she did when they'd gotten married.

I've had dreams about his parent's having sex. One week during Christmas break I had the same dream three nights in a row. I'd walk into their bedroom and they were going at in a bed of white sheets and the whole room was engulfed in Sunday morning light. Jeremy's dad was on top, pumping her, and his huge muscular back was all I could see. I would move in to see more but all I ever saw was his back and some of her blonde hair. His back was massive and sweaty and all the muscles clenched with pleasure. I would hear him say something like "Hi Shawn." Then I'd wake up.

That summer we were twelve and both going to start junior high in August. That summer the heat and humidity got so bad an elderly lady in our town died inside her house from heat exhaustion. That summer we climbed a cherry tree at the park and ate the sour and wonderful fruit. That summer we contemplated cutting our palms and becoming blood brothers, but then we started to see all the news about the new disease AIDS. It was all blood transferable, so we both chickened out.

That summer everything changed.

It was a week after the fourth of July. The year before we had sat with our parents in that one time meeting, but this year we skipped out on them and did our own thing. We had lit off illegal firecrackers two blocks from where the fire department was doing the big fireworks. We had hoped to cause a big ruckus and send the police scrambling to find us criminals, but no one had paid any attention to us.

So when Jeremy knocked on my door that morning, I had assumed he wanted to do some more fireworks. It was earlier than our normal get-together time. I was still in my plaid pajama bottoms and zoning on the couch watching Mr. Rogers. My mom answered it as I clicked off the T.V. and escaped up stairs to change into jean shorts. I put them on and put three packs of firecrackers in my back pocket. My hands still smelled like ashes from the day before. I felt like a battle hardened warrior. I grabbed a semi-clean T-shirt from my floor and ran down the stairs, pulling it over my head as I went.

I came into the kitchen to find Jeremy and my mom crying.

"What?" I said. My mom looked at me but Jeremy didn't. Her eyes were watery but not red. She sighed, her whole frame expanding in her chest. Worry came

out in her decaffeinated tea breath.

"Shawn, Jeremy's father has a brain tumor."

"Oh shit," I said. I looked at Jeremy and he looked up at me for a second, and then he hurried his eyes back down to an interesting spot on the floor. His eyes were bright red, like he had been crying all night and hadn't slept. I thought about my dad driving to work; a little man in a Ford Escort with weak floor boards. He sometimes got so focused about work problems he forgot to put his belt on and he would not watch his speed and barely the stop lights.

"Wanna go outside?" Jeremy asked. He turned and opened our screen door and went outside without looking back. I looked at my mom for advice. I suddenly felt older, grown up in a way because I was dealing with a very adult issue.

"Go to him," she said. She smoothed her dress down and looked around for something to clean. I nodded and went to the door. What was out there terrified me.

"Oh and Shawn," my mom said as I was about to close the door. "Don't curse."

Jeremy was back by my old turtle sandbox that I hadn't played in for years. The lid was gone and there were weeds growing up in the sand amongst my old bath toys that had become sandbox toys. He kicked at the weeds without any care of what he was doing. I walked up to him, but I stayed back a little and rubbed at the firecrackers in my pockets. I had misplaced anything to talk about.

"My dad needs to get this crap cleaned up," I said. Then I dammed myself for bringing up dads at all. What in the world were we ever going to talk about again?

"Let's go to the phone booth," he said. "We didn't check it all yesterday in the afternoon."

"Yeah okay," I said. Behind my house was an alley that cut halfway through town. It came to an end at the creek, but it led us most of the way to the phone booth and we could avoid most people. We walked in silence. Usually Jeremy was talking non-stop about a war movie he had seen or how he wanted to buy a motorcycle in a few years. But there was nothing to talk about except the obvious subject, and that was a corridor I don't think either of us was ready to become lost in.

"Hey I hope there's a lot of money in it today," I said. "Remember that one time we got two dollars and five cents in one hang up."

"That was the most we ever got," he said. His eyes were looking ahead but not at the alley. They were considering his upcoming years, the sickness, and the way it would change him at school.

"Yeah remember we saw that guy in the phone all night that time," I said. "You spent the night and we kept sneaking down there till like eleven and he was there all night. I was sure somebody else would use it, and all we would get was their lousy quarter but we got his money."

"Can't your dad do anything about the phone?"

"Well I hope not," I said. I tightened up, he was sounding annoyed.

"He's a big shot at the phone company, they have to know this phone isn't making any money," he said. Normally I might have argued with him, but I just didn't say anything, and he stopped the subject.

There were yellow jackets swarming around the trash cans by the phone booth. He walked through the mini-plague like it wasn't there and into the phone booth. I stood outside it and looked over at the old men outside the barber shop. There were three of them, all with farming caps and overalls on. I've noticed that no matter how hot it gets a farmer will never wear shorts.

They didn't even need haircuts. My hair was shaggier than any of their's, and I had gotten mine cut a month ago. They were just like their wives that went to the beauty parlor across the street, yet they thought they were cool and manly. One of them looked twice as old as Jeremy's dad and looked like he could run a mile with no problem. Why did he get to live so long, and become such a hypocritical jerk and function in the world when Jeremy's dad might die?

I heard the change fall and it didn't sound like a lot. Jeremy came out of the phone booth and showed me fifty cents.

Better than nothing," I said. We walked in robotic silence to the back of the grocery store. We each bought a can of Mellow Yellows and sat down on the curb. The back parking lot of the grocery store was still gravel and it was humid enough that the dust already started to stick to our arms. We popped our cans and took long pulls of the wicked citrus concoction.

"My parents' have known for a month," Jeremy said. He drew circles in the gravel with his heel. "They just went back yesterday for his first chemotherapy treatment and they decided to tell me. Can you image that they weren't going to tell me?"

"That's messed up..."

"Well he has to go every other week...but they don't think it'll do anything. He was so weak that I had to get into bed with him so he could hug me."

I couldn't say anything. Jeremy's dad didn't hug, unless he had drank a few and decided to give out bear hugs. One morning I had stayed the night there and had gotten up to pee. On my way back to Jeremy's room I had almost run into his dad coming in from his morning jog. He let me pass by in the hallway, then grabbed me from behind and gave me a bear hug. He dropped me laughing on the ground and I couldn't go back to sleep. His strength had exhilarated me for the rest of the day. I had come home and asked my mom for a weight set for my birthday, even though it was nine months away. I wanted to get big for high school.

We drank our drinks then walked back to my house. I hadn't told my mom where we going, and when we walked down the alley she was standing on the back porch looking for me. When she saw us she went inside.

"What'd want to do?" I asked. It was going to be a hot day, normally we might go over to his house and sit in their finished basement to escape the heat. His dad had a rumpus-room with a bar down there and we get into the virgin drink mixes and put them into wine glass and jump around like we were drunk and watched MTV.

"We gotta go up to the hospital for a counseling session. They don't even know I left. I'll call you later."

He walked off and I wanted to follow him so bad. I wanted to walk him home, but if I did there was a chance I could be invited inside, and there's no way I could have handled that scene. What if his dad was crying? That would crack my world in half.

I spent the day in complete slow and steady boredom. I hadn't realized how dependent I was on Jeremy and his life to excite my own. My mom asked me if I wanted to talk about it, and I told her no. She got out her prayer-list from church and started calling people in the circle. I said a prayer as I watched G.I. Joe. I felt a little better because I had done something to help.

I watched the clock and kept predicting when Jeremy would call. I was sure he

would call before noon, and then I set one o'clock as the very latest time he would call. At one-thirty I ran down to the library and got a movie. I ran by the phone booth and slid in to check. But as I grabbed the receiver I couldn't help but feel like I was cheating on Jeremy. What if he drove by with his parents and saw me stealing without him while he was doing cancer stuff with his dad? So I didn't check for money.

"Did Jeremy call?" I asked as I burst into the kitchen. I was so sure he would call and come over that I got Monster Squad, one of his favorite movies.

"No but your father did," my mom said. She looked like she had been crying a little. "I told him about Jeremy's dad and he told me to tell you to tell Jeremy he's very sorry. He'll be home late tonight, they're doing an audit."

"Okay," I said. Those audits happened every three months and he would be stressed for a week. I put Monster Squad in the VCR and watched most of it. I stopped it at Jeremy's favorite part, right at the big show down at the end with all the monsters. At five o'clock we ordered pizza. The rest of the night my mom and I watched "LF and Golden Girls, but neither my dad or Jeremy called. I wanted to call Jeremy, but what if somebody else answered other than him. What could I possibly say to his dad? I had never been able to talk to his mom hardly at all, she was just too pretty to look at without it being obvious what I was thinking.

I went to sleep waiting for my dad to come home. I drifted off around eleven, and then I heard my parent's alarm going off in the middle of the night. I fell back asleep until my mom woke me up at eight in the morning.

"Time for breakfast," she said. I jumped right up and followed her downstairs to see my dad. I could smell eggs, bacon, and waffles smoldering in the kitchen.

I walked in behind my mom and the kitchen was empty.

"Where's dad?" I said. There was silence in the kitchen was like a hospital.

"He went into work already," she said. She scooped eggs onto my plate. The bacon was in a pile on a plate on the table. "You know how audit weeks are."

"I didn't even hear him come home," I said. I sat down and looked at the food. The waffles looked like dried pieces of netting. I tried to analyze her face, because what if my dad was actually doing secret chemo like Jeremy's dad?

My mom looked up at the wall clock. "He was only here about five hours. He

came in, told me to set the alarm for five, and passed out."

"Audits are stupid," I said. I felt dumb for saying that. As my words hit my ears I felt about six years old.

"Now Shawn, you know it's harder for your dad than it is for either of us. Now you can spend more time with Jeremy. He needs you now."

I ate and got dressed and headed over to his house. I took along the movie, because I wanted a legitimate excuse for coming over. I walked by the phone booth out of habit. There was a woman in the phone, and from what I've read in books, she was dressed like a gypsy. There was a beaten-up little car parked along the street. She was totally out of place, and the men by the barber shop were staring at her, and of course, judging her. A stranger at the payphone meant only one thing: a high dollar long distance call.

There were two ways to Jeremy's house, and I took the longer of the two past the town's tiny trailer court. The way I was taking took me behind his house instead of in front of it. I was reading the back of the movie and didn't see his mom on the back porch until I was almost in their yard. I stopped walking and eased behind a huge pine tree right by the street. I looked through its branches, and even from where I was, I could hear her sobs.

She had on a yellow robe. It was Jeremy's dad's robe. Her face was halfway buried in it as she poured tears into the material. Her legs were almost all exposed and the material just covered her mid-section. Normally I would have studied that, but there was nothing sexy or joyful about what I was seeing.

I took one look at Monster Squad, realized it was all about death, and I headed back home.

I walked the long way home too. I didn't know what I was going to do with my day, or with the rest of summer vacation as it was turning out. I wanted to stay by the phone incase he called. But I had done that yesterday and it was not even nine in the morning and I felt like taking a nap. I turned onto Main just in time to see the gypsy woman driving away in her car.

Jeremy was going into the payphone.

I wanted to yell, but the old men were nearby. I broke into a gallop. Jeremy shut the door and lifted the receiver. I started to run full speed. I wanted to hear

the sound of dollars and dollars pouring out. I hoped it broke our old record. Just as I got onto the sidewalk I saw him put a quarter into the slot. I came to a complete stop. He was dialing a phone number. He had just voided the gypsy woman's call, and all we were going to get back was his lousy quarter! I opened the booth.

"What are you doing?" I said. "She probably had to call Europe or something!"

"Shhh," he said, putting his finger to his lips. He was calling someone...why didn't he just do that at home? There was pamphlet on the payphone's silver tray. It had Mayo Clinic printed on it. I had heard of that place. It was supposed to be the best medical place around, and it was usually the best chance anybody had. If they couldn't fix you, then probably nobody could.

"Yes I'd like to set up an appointment for my dad," he said. There was a pause. "Yeah he's too weak to do this so he asked me to schedule some treatment for him." Another pause. "You know, chemotherapy and radiation and stuff."

"The doctor told me to too. No I am not messing around, my dad has cancer and I am trying to set him up with you guys!"

"Why won't you listen to me?"

The expression on his face changed, and then he looked at the receiver like it was an alien tool. He hung the phone up and looked at me.

"The doctors won't refer my dad to this great place because he's too far gone. They say. But people live different lengths with cancer. That's so stupid not to even try."

AI know," I said. He looked like he wanted to hit me, even though I knew he didn't, it was just the way his body got when he was mad.

He looked back at the payphone and picked up the pamphlet. He folded it and put it in his pocket.

"So was that weird woman here a long time?" he said. He looked at the movie in my hands but didn't say anything.

"I think so," I said. "Even if she wasn't, she may have had to call Europe or California or something. But if you had to call that's okay..."

"Stupid Mayo Clinic," he said. He yanked the pamphlet out of his pocket, wadded it up, and threw it at the payphone.

It sailed to the ground. I don't know why, but he reached in to get it, and when

he came up he smacked his head on the silver tray below the phone. He hit it so hard the whole booth rattled.

"God dammit all!" he yelled. He punched the inside of the booth, then kicked the blue plastic on the bottom. He kicked it over and over until it buckled out. I heard an old man yell from across the street, but I was too terrified to take my eyes off Jeremy. He thrashed inside the phone booth, he was trying to kill it. He grabbed the receiver and beat it against the silver tray. On the third hit the listening end of the head set exploded in a spray of black plastic. Then he grabbed the payphone and pulled on it. I stepped back because the whole booth wobbled from absorbing Jeremy's anger.

"Fuck you!" he screamed. One moment the pay phone was fine, and a second later it was bouncing on the sidewalk next to my feet. Changed bled from it in all direction like sliver beetles running away from a violated hive. The old men were silent. The street was silent. I was silent.

He brushed by me with tears running down his eyes like rain off the side of a rain coat.

I went home and locked myself in my room. On a lonely day like that one I might have thought of Jeremy's mom and headed into the bathroom. But that day I stayed hidden, for the most part, until my dad came home. It was supper time, and I saw his Escort pull into our drive. I rushed down stairs and out to meet him. He was pulling stacks of papers and manila envelopes out of the backseat. Right then I saw him for what he was; he was a hard worker who loved his family; he had a boring job I would never understand that was without flash or glory; he came home every night while the other guys at work went out for beers and talked with admiration for their favorite team and dismay of their families. He would never be a coach or very strong, but he was my dad, and he was awesome.



Jeff Newman A Game of Tag

"I'm outside playing tag!" Johnny called into the house. Alarmed, his parents ran after him. As they reached the door, gunshots were heard.

"Looks like Johnny won, Frank..."

The father sighed and stepped outside. "I won!" said Johnny.

"That'd a boy... get inside." Frank said as he dug another grave.

Lucas Cubic Untitled

He packs his bags, grabs his gun. Off to a faraway land. His family and wife, left behind, with a promise of return. His promise is stolen by enemy rage. For her tear glazed eyes she gets a flag. Self realization, only the dead, have seen the end of the war.

Julia Parrish Untitled

After two weeks of him-hawing, it was time to commit to his wedding proposal. Driving to work, she pulled out her cell phone and dialed his number.

Texting, "I accept. Love you," she hit send. Content and relieved, she glanced up, seeing nothing but semi-truck headlights coming directly at her.





As I have grown older, life has only got harder. Nothing seems to come easy or be good these days.

Not that is easy for anybody else either.

It's not easy for Malik. He was always striving to be the best, to do the best— to just make somebody proud. And now look at him, lying in that suit; in that box. What did he do to deserve that?

What did Malik do to deserve those bullets? Was it the color of his skin? Was it the neighborhood he was in? He didn't do anything; he was just walking home from the store with food for his daughter. What makes that so wrong?

Losing a friend is just another unexpected turn in my life. Growing up, I thought it was bad. I thought that being raised in a rich Detroit community hindered my progress as a normal human being. I shunned that life— the luxury of it all.

I played hockey against my mother's wishes, my only way to outcast myself from the goody-good environment of my home. I did it just to spite her and it turned out that I would fall in love with the sport. It became my thing— my one thing. I reveled at being on the ice in high school at Daleman Prep Academy, on that all-star team where I met Malik and in college at North Dakota. And even that all came crashing down.

One mistake cost me my life and cost me my future. No professional team wants a high-profile collegiate star turned drunk driver.

When it failed, Malik was the one that was there for me.

Even my marriage wasn't meant to be. I thought I loved Nicole and I thought that she loved me. I guess love doesn't always last. Two years after we walked down the aisle together, it was over.

Just like on my wedding day when I had my last minute jitters, Malik was there for me.

My crazy grandpa and others in the Davis clan would just call it part of the family curse. I used to believe that too, now I think that it's crap.

What kind of curse would lead me here, in my black suit, white shirt, black tie staring at a friend who's end came tragically at the end of a police-issued hand gun.

Was Malik cursed too? Was that the only reason that people could give?

"Dade, I'm sorry."

"Dade, you meant a lot to him."

"I'm sorry that this happened."

What does it all mean? It means nothing to me and it sure as hell doesn't mean anything to Malik.

What kind of cruel world is this exactly? I know now that this is not a curse, I know that it's destiny. It's a pretty shoddy destiny though. It would make more sense if I believed in Karma, but I don't.

Things that happen to me, I can deal with those as much as they have sucked my entire life. But now, what did this man do to deserve death? It's so serious— so permanent.

Are you going to tell me its karma? That it is his destiny to end up in a damn pine box at 33?

He was there for me so many times, but it was so hard to be there for him today in this dark, dingy place.

I remember when I first met him.

"So you must be 'The Amazing X,' huh?"

Those were the first words he said to me as we sat on the bench during our opening inner-squad scrimmage that summer in Colorado Springs, preparing for the international tournament that lay ahead.

Always so cool and confident when it came to his abilities, and he was always

there to have my back. He stood up to David Crandle, the team bully from day one. He threw a punch that same night as a man at the club spewed forth at Malik with racial ignorance.

That was Malik, he was simply himself. That you had to admire.

He was an admirable man, but he was not perfect. Malik made his fair share of mistakes in life, which he was willing to admit to. When his girlfriend left him two months after their daughter was born, he stepped up as a man and raised her. He was so proud of her.

She is only six. She has never had a mother and now she doesn't have a father.

So tell me how that is fair.

As vivid as the memory of our first encounter is the memory of that phone call from his brother. I dropped the phone and it shattered into what seemed like one thousand pieces as it made contact with the floor.

I don't think I have ever cried that hard in my life. I don't think I have ever been that sad.

I play it all over and over in my head now as I sit here. I hadn't seen or talked to Malik in almost a full calendar year, but I wish I could have been there. But, I wish that I could have been there, that there was something I could do to make it not happen, to save him like he had saved me so many times before. Processing it over and over in my head makes me feel so empty— so lost.

There are over a hundred people in this building, all clad in black, all sad. But still I am alone.

Thrash, Quake, Austin, Kris, Davy— they are all here. So is Crandle and his cousin, a pair whom Malik and I once despised together. But they all know me and they know that there is nothing they can say to me.

There is nothing that makes this easier, nothing that makes this fair. It's not fair for Malik, his daughter, his family, his friends, and it is not fair for me.

But that's all that I can expect anymore after all these years of pain.

That is my life...my destiny...my karma....my curse.



When I first got to heaven I was immediately surprised. I was in room of clouds, all the architecture in heaven is made of clouds, and was in a room labeled receiving. I had a seat at the desk; a nice young man smiling back at me said, "Hello, and welcome to heaven."

"Heaven? No way I must be dreaming." He smiled again and handed me a pamphlet entitled, "Heaven FAQ's."

"Before you start with the questions I must let you know that there will be much time for that later on. My job is receiving, letting you know the very basics of things you need to know to adapt to your new existence here in heaven."

I nodded. "Is this like, purgatory or something?"

"No sir, there is no such thing as purgatory, just relax and hold your questions please,"

I got the picture, and shut up.

"Alright," he took out a slim folder with my name and a twenty eight digit number on the cover. "I see here you liked to be called Jeff, alright Jeff a few things and you will be on your way. Well, you have to pick an age, a human form that people will see you as, but no one really sees you and you aren't really there, but this is what people will see in their minds." I was confused and he could see it. "You can start philosophizing the nature of your being later, although you are an abstract, you will never really see it like that. You've always been an abstract, but you didn't know it. Now you know it but it will feel basically the same. This is just the best way for us to organize your abstract being. As time goes you will understand more. Most of the veterans here have a pretty good understanding of it. So you have to pick an age to be, we used to not allow you to change that after you left this office, but people wanted to see what the rest of the people have chosen before they make their decision so we let you change it once after this, so make your decision wisely after today, don't rush it, take some time. You are in the form you died in, but whatever troubles you had on earth won't be an issue here. Next you are going

to have to remember this number." He handed me a sticker with a number on it. "Stick it on your wrist and keep it there, you can keep it there forever if you want, or throw it away later, just make sure you know it. Although everyone knows you as Jeff, God only knows you buy this number, there are a lot of Jeffs here, and this is the easiest way for God to know who he is talking to, really it's the only way that God will ever remember or know who you are. I know it's longer than...you're from the U.S. right?" He looked into the slim folder. "Yea, you are, it's much longer than your social security number and a bit harder to remember, we know, but this is eternity and there are many more people here, in fact there is a rumor that we are going up to twenty-nine letters soon, but that won't ever affect you, so don't worry about it. Usually your already deceased family is waiting for you after the receiving process is finished; I see your wife is here already waiting. That may give you some insight on the wonder of free will that earth members seem to discuss regularly, but we won't get into that now. I will say welcome to heaven, you have nothing to worry about here, but take it slow, there is a lot to learn here about the nature of man and God that people take much time discussing and thinking about, but just know you have no rush, so just relax and take it slow." He got up and shook my hand, "Oh, I almost forgot, what age would you like to be for now?"

I was very confused and overwhelmed, who wouldn't be? This is a lot to take in right away. I wondered if they had a suggestion box. Later, when talking to God, I told him maybe showing a little Heaven tutorial before receiving might be a good idea. God nodded, but I knew he was just being polite. He believed that saying, if it isn't broke, don't fix it.

"Let me suggest thirty, it's a nice good age, and it's not permanent. Sound good?" I nodded and shook his hand. And then the wall made of cloud to my right parted. "Go down that hall, and there will be some guys, just give them your number and after that you will get to see your pre-deceased family. See you around." And he waved.

At the next stop there was two people, one was a child and one was an older man, when I first saw them they were laughing at something as the door shut behind them.

"Hello Jeff," the child said in a un-child like voice.

"Hello."

The child put out his hand and said, "I'm Ralph," and then the old man put out his hand and said, "I'm Ralph too. We're the Ralphs. We just verify your number to your being, you will understand later, we appreciate you don't ask questions. With the amount of death on Earth these days we have to keep the process as quick as possible."

I said, "Okay."

"Let me see your wrist." The smaller of the two Ralphs looked down at it and said the number to the older Ralph, "8463089132458308714587790136." Then the old Ralph looked at me, or into me it seemed and said, "All set, make your way out this door," the cloud parted like before, "and down the hall will be your wife and I see your parents are here too. See you later Jeff."

I walked by them and through the door, "Later guys."

"Just take comfort knowing you're not in hell," and the sounds of their laughing ended as the cloud parted behind me.

If you are wondering what I'm thinking through this process, I can tell you nothing really, in fact it took quite some time before I figured it was too long to be a dream. If I was in a coma I assumed the dream would change like dreams usually do. I can't really tell you how long, because there is no time in heaven, actually there is no time on Earth either, it's an abstract thought, more abstract than people think, but not really, because no abstract can be more abstract than another. But for understanding's sake it will be understood a bit easier that way. So I can't tell you how long it took, but a while, as long as a month's worth of dreams if that helps, because really this is the best way to explain it to a pre-heaven member without the experience of timeless heaven living, but Earth living is timeless too anyways, just clearer in heaven. You'll see.

The hallway finally came to an abrupt end with another cloud door that parted without me doing anything, and I stepped through it. I saw my wife; she looked like I'd never seen her before. Later I found that I had never seen her like this before, she chose to be twenty-four, we didn't meet till she was twenty-nine. I never knew her to look like this, she chose an age before we ever meet. She walked over, in no rush, but not slowly either, and hugged me. There is never any a reason

to rush in heaven. "Surprised?" This is the first thing she asked me, I was quite confused and overwhelmed, it takes about six months worth of dreams before I started being less overwhelmed and less confused. If there were time in heaven, six months of Earth dreams is a very insignificant time.

"I'm very surprised, I..."

"Just take it easy. Read that pamphlet, they suggest you don't talk at all for a while. And when you do keep it casual. Most of the things you are thinking now will be answered with time. Then we can really talk about some stuff, I'm so exited for that."

"We were wrong huh?"

"Not as wrong as you'd think, I know you'll like it here. We are going to have some fun."

In heaven we all have our firsts, just like on Earth. I remember the first time I saw God, he was Islamic and wearing a turban. Sarah, my wife, told me that God embodies whatever stereotypical group is currently tormented on Earth at the moment, he's been "wearing" that for quite some time she told me. Of course I asked her where Jesus was.

"He's around here somewhere, he hangs out with Gandhi a lot, but he wasn't really the son of God, not like they think on Earth anyways, but he is still pretty cool." She laughed to herself, "He always tells people that if he could have actually turned water into wine, he would not have gotten his name into all those books," and she laughed again. You would think this type of information would take many by shock, but it really doesn't, you'll see.

When I first got to heaven, my wife told me that my family had a wonderful cloud in heaven, very much like an ocean, river or lake views are more favored on Earth, clouds on the ends of heaven are highly favored. When I thought family I thought my parents, I didn't realize then that my entire span of relatives from the beginning of human existence on earth were there. It was a big cloud. I once asked an old relative how God knew how much heaven to make, has it always been this big? Does it grow? Is it an abstract like everything else?

"Well, it is an abstract," he said "But everything is any abstract, but everything

is predetermined, you can see any moment of any time at any time. Even if the time hasn't happened on Earth yet, you'll get to know how to do this eventually, but by that time you won't really be interested all that much, by that time all the people you know that are still on Earth will be here, so you won't have too much of a reason to look, and it's unlikely that you will be curious by then. But since everything is predetermined God knows how big it has to be, but it really doesn't matter anyways because it is an abstract."

"The only thing it seems we were right about was that heaven is made of clouds," I remarked.

"Well, I only did that because that seemed like everyone wanted. In fact, I never meant to make a heaven, an actual place. But humans have a hard time understanding things that are not physical. Humans understand their lives through their senses, it is kind of hard for them to unlearn that. But it's not like this is really physical anyway, it just seems that way to everyone."

While it is impossible to understand heaven, Earth, and God completely, because God doesn't even get it all, which he tells anyone who asks, but I have a certain understanding of many Earth related questions. There are no angels, there are no ghosts. The first thing to understand is that no religion is right, none of them came close, the only idea that even comes close is Nihilism, that's what Jesus says anyways, but really he is just a nobody here like everyone else in heaven. Jesus says Nihilism is the closest because they believe in nothing, and since everything is an abstraction, technically they are right. I will give you a hint at the nature of hell or the existence there of. If there are no angels and any religious teaching are right, then could there be a heaven? Well not really, because a lot of people believed Satin is a renegade angel and since there are no angels that means there is no hell. But in fact there is no hell because there is no hell. God says language was created by man, and it is very limited, there are not enough words to thoroughly explain everything or anything. God says there is no such thing as right and wrong, maybe on Earth, but not really, god says he never thought of right or wrong when he created Earth, he never thought of bad. Why would he? Why would he want to?

I told God, "I get it."

God said, "That's cool."

So Ted Bundy is in Heaven. So is that BTK guy. And H.H. Holmes. I think people are more disturbed by Dr. Kevorkian's presence than a lot of real sick serial killers. Although weird, I never really had a problem with him. When you first get to heaven you have the safe sensibilities you had on Earth, honestly, that's why most people wish you wouldn't talk for a while. But after a while people start to realize and understand what God says about right and wrong. Sometimes Mother Theresa plays checkers with Hitler. Hitler is still kind of an ass though. It's not like people like and dislike anyone. You have about as much feeling for your kids as you do for the guy who raped your daughter. This takes a while for new to heaven members to understand, but they get used to it.

The funny thing is when religious people get to heaven, and they are happy because they think they were right, only to find that heaven isn't that much of an exclusive club. It takes a while for real religious people to get it, that they were wrong, that they were all wrong, but after a while they accept it. Bin Laden has no hard feelings towards Bush, but Bush still needs some time before he can accept Bin's invitation to go hang out, he's still kind of bitter that he found out that Bin didn't plan 9/11, but says that he was glad he got blamed for it. But it's all gravy here in heaven, we are just waiting for everyone else to die so we can all hangout and party. When time doesn't exist, you will eventually get to know everyone who ever existed, and all become friends.

When you get to heaven, you might start thinking about your time spent on Earth, no one really cares, but many authors and artists go out and wait for critics or college professors to let them know how wrongly they interpreted their work. Even if they were right, a lot of the critics do it for fun anyways. There are always jokesters waiting on new people to get to heaven just to mess with them. We have a lot of fun here in heaven. Picasso is always hanging out telling everyone his perception was not fucked up, and Michael Jackson lets everyone know he wasn't gay and he didn't ever molest any kids. No one recognizes him anyways, he has chosen to be a six year old for eternity--not too much of a surprise.

Last time I talked to God, I asked him the meaning of life, I always ask that, everyone does, he always tells everyone to wait, and the ones he tells aren't talking. I walked over to him and said, "Whaaatup God!!!!"

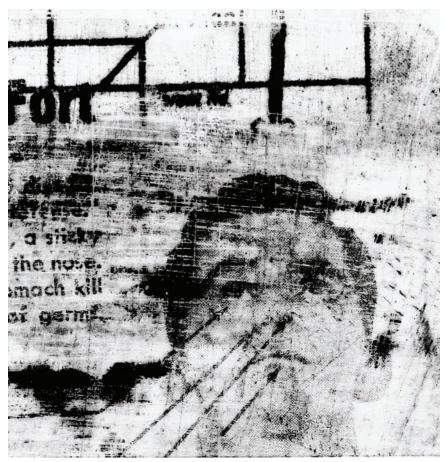
He held out his hand for a fraternity type handshake we came up with a while back and said, "Whaaatup 8463089132458308714587790136!!!!"

I always respond the same way, "You ready to tell me the meaning of life, of heaven, of everything?"

He always smiles and asks me what I've been up to, he knows the answer though, there was little to do in heaven except be content and talk to people, or play checkers. That day he finally answered me differently. "When you were on Earth could you ever really understand the nature of your existence?"

"No," I said.

"Well, neither can I."



DANIEL DIENELT, FORT HEAD

● ● ● ● ● FICTION



He could not wait for her to get home. It was late, and the house was pitch black as the moon was hiding behind a wall of clouds. His wife should have been driving home by now; he strained his ears to hear the sound of her key in the front door. His heart rate was racing; his palms were oiling and shaking terribly. His eyes were straining in the dark watching for headlights. Waiting, his mind raced. He could hardly contain himself.

The room flared with white light as her car pulled into the driveway. She was playing some 80s music at top volume, the beats and sounds clearly heard in the dark living room where he stood, facing the door from its right side. He picked this spot for a reason, it was the best for a surprise. He closed his eyes; his anticipation was so great he almost pissed his pants. The tumblers in the lock turned and responded to the key as it slid in, and the door creaked open letting the cool night air rush in.

His gun cracked three times and his tears blurred his vision.



I never knew my grandparents. Dad's parents died when he was my age and when mom was fifteen; she and her mother were hit by a delivery truck uptown. Mom survived, thanks to a last-minute push from grandma, who didn't. Grandpa died three years later, a broken-hearted alcoholic. My parents married and moved into the farmhouse that grandpa left them.

A twelve year-old with a bike spends a lot of time in the garage; raising the seat, straightening the handlebars, putting the oily chain back onto the sprocket. While digging for a screwdriver, I found an old skeleton key on a nail hidden under the workbench. I carried it in my pocket; often wondering what it opened.

A few years later, while hunting rabbits behind our barn, I found a cellar door hidden under some brush. I glanced at the key hole out of habit. I turned the key and the lock creaked open. I stepped through the cobwebs into what looked to be grandpa's workshop. Walls covered with tools, floor strewn with liquor bottles, and a picture of my grandma lie broken on the floor. A yellowed newspaper clipping about the accident was nailed to the main, support beam; an open shoebox full of letters lay on the workbench. "With love, Thomas" was etched on the top one. My grandpa's name was John. I locked the door, pushed back the brush and put the key in my pocket.





She was the product of a man who did too much and a woman who spoke too little. As such their marriage was a swirl of activity, little poise, and a great deal of speculation. The two met at a high-school Christmas dance, she a senior, and he the older college brother of her best friend. It was love at first sight, especially after he belted her date for inappropriate contact, a gesture that was rewarded with heroic looks and batted lashes. That she barely uttered a word the entire evening was, for him, a matter of little concern: it was enough that she responded to his hand firmly on her elbow. As he drove her home, he asked to see her again. Keeping her eyes squarely on the floor mat she nodded her head.

They were married a week after her graduation; he received his draft notice in the mail two weeks later. Though he was fully immersed in his engineering studies at the state technical university, red-blooded Americanism flowed through his veins. Rather than plead his case to the draft board, he marched to the local Army office, demanding that the notice be retracted and he be allowed to "voluntarily" enlist. The Sergeant Major in charge of recruiting, always on the lookout for positive propaganda material, thoroughly enjoyed approving the request, and even went so far as extending the man the privilege of picking his duty station. It was again another blessing that the words "Vietnam" and "Infantry" spilled from a mouth bursting with pride. (In the meantime, his wife stood in the shower, pondering the fact that she hadn't bled in almost two months.) The following Monday he shipped out to basic training amidst the hearty well wishes and teary goodbyes of his family and loved ones.

Twelve weeks passed and he graduated, not quite in the top of his class but high enough to prove he had potential. Not that the trainers particularly noticed his many gifts; it was the beginning of September 1967, and there were other things to worry about.

After seven months he was a changed man. No longer a believer, his vigor long

since lost, he measured time in moments left alive, and seconds allowed to breathe. When his unit stumbled awake one morning, it was with one goal from command: to interrogate a small dirt town known as My Lai.

Behind the pigpen belonging to the village chieftain, he and two machine gunners interrogated the women in the corner huts. He gave no second thought to his actions; they were people of the dirt, shit peasants, worth little more than the leeches he peeled off his skin on a daily basis.

When the interrogation was over, he and the gunners shared a smoke, squatting side by side against the wall of the hut. One of the girls stirred in the dirt at his feet, her shirt thrown up around her chin, legs and thighs bare in the oppressive heat of the midday sun. Opening her eyes she stared at him, lips moving in what he recognized as the gook term for water. He blinked, feeling the sweat on his upper lip, taking in the shape of her nose, the corners of the mouth contorted in pain. He leaned closer and took his canteen from where it lay beside him, tossing it to her so that it banged against her bloody chest. She swallowed, her neck throbbing up and down, and he realized he had seen her eyes before, in the picture Julia had sent him of his baby girl. They both had the eyes; in-country, they called it the thousand-yard stare. Like they had both seen too much, lived a lifetime in the span of a few short years.

But there was something else as well. He took a final drag on the cigarette, stubbed it out in the dirt, pondered the similarities. He'd never been one for analysis; before the war, before he had held an M-16 in his hands, cold hard facts were his preferred weapons of choice. Numbers and blueprints – the basis of an engineering education. Theoretical speculation was outside his realm of understanding. Nevertheless, as he pondered the girl sprawled in the dirt a few short feet before him; as he looked up and recognized the green trees outlined against the cloudless blue sky; as he glanced away to the interior of the village, hearing, every now and again, the reports of gunfire, punctuated by the squeal of the hogs tied up just outside the village; as he allowed his body to acknowledge, then absorb, the sensations of the present tense, he suddenly understood that it was knowledge they both possessed. It was knowledge of events and actions seen and unseen, familiar and foreign. What echoed most profoundly, though, was the resignation

that true knowledge brings. When you know what the future holds, there is no real power to change.

He shoved away from the wall, stood up. Kelley and Jameson were snoring in the dirt to his left. Hitching his pants at the waist, he moved to the girl, crouching down above her, staring into her eyes. A fly sat at the corner of her nose, embracing the blood that congealed from the cavity. Her eyes were closed, tear tracks cutting through the dirt and sweat on her face. After a moment he reached down and withdrew the knife from his boot, feeling the sun reflecting off the metal blade.

He placed the blade on her throat and cut a red swath from ear to ear, the blood pumping out immediately, gushing like floodwater. Within seconds her breathing grew labored, then still; the final breath shook the back of her throat. Still crouching, he wiped his knife on her shirt, removing every trace of blood.

* * * * *

Soon after she turned thirteen he began creeping into her room at night, sitting on the corner of her bed and running his hand lightly up her leg. She would pretend she was asleep, modulating her breathing in calm, measured drafts, all the while wanting to ask him why he was there, and to ask him to please stop, he was scaring her.

But she didn't know true fear until he started creeping under the covers, curling up against her, his body pressed tight against her spine. Terrified, she tried to crawl out of bed but his arm would snake around, pulling her back to him. She tried to scream, to alert her mother, to plead for someone to help her, but his hand was over her mouth, stopping her tears from running down her throat.

And all she could do was stare at him, wide-eyed, crying in pain and shame, her eyes never wavering in their accusation and agony.





Nine, from the cash register to the table. It was guaranteed. Same seats, same barrettes and dirty sneakers, every time.

The near-mute, baggy-eyed cashier. 'Fion', her nametag announced. I think the 'a' peeled off last October or November or something.

Anyway, that was one. Then you had Mr. Fitzpatrick and Mr. Tate, two teachers who'd sit right outside the Teachers' Lounge, making sure the goof-offs didn't do anything dumb. Three.

The six left down that path were the geeky ones. Right beside the teachers' table. Of course. Maybe they'd have out their problem sets for the next Mathlon meeting, or they'd be gabbing about when Half-Blood Prince would be out. Whatever. Who cares. I might be a nerdy guy, but I'm not obsessed like that.

Short of talking with Alice, this really dusty, straw-haired, orphany-looking thing, once when I was ten, I hadn't really hung out with any of them.

We'd been laying, stomachs down, working on a poster together. I'd been holding a Crayola with my good arm, my right arm, and held my head up with the remnant of my left. As always, my prosthetic was in my backpack. Trying to cover the Quasimodoed scars with that lousy stub.

Even then, I knew it didn't work.

I'd said. "Color the M in olive. No one likes the olive crayon. Just because it's ugly."

"That's stupid," she'd snapped, and continued with her tried-and-true carnation.

Anyway. Only the first three of that nine were around today, down the Lysolheavy, Formica-floored path to Ashlee and Jessika and Kate. Not a huge damper on my midday lunch-- I mean, what guy could really complain, being around these girls-- but it still made me quiver a bit as I sat down on my hard blue plastic chair.

"Ashlee, where the hell's the Nerd Herd?"

"Where the hell's my Trig?"

I glared at her and rolled my eyes with a lazy smile, slid the sheets across the

eraser scum-stained table. Ashlee stopped filing her nails for a second, tossed back her ponytail, and stared me at the corner of her eye. As always, not quite making eye contact.

"They're at some thing."

"A funeral. Or something. I think that one dude died," Kate stammered. Started fiddling nervously with that soft, wavy hair.

"Yeah, the one with the overbite and the sideburns," Ashlee added.

"Did you know him or something?" Jessika asked.

I quickly shook my head, all while absentmindedly pulling a Turkey Club out of my brown-paper-bag lunch. Unwrapped the cellophane and took a big bite. Hellmann's dripped out the sides. God. Mom always put too much mayonnaise on this damned thing.

Kate pulled a napkin out of the dispenser, leaned in toward me, and placed it in my hand. She smiled, and pecked me quickly on the cheek. The good side. "That's just plain nasty, Hunter." A small chuckle, and a pause. She started biting her lip a little bit, studying her shoes just a little too intently.

"Anyway, I'll call you tonight, OK?"

I almost choked.

Ten PM. I had the phone plugged where I usually have my clock radio and desk fan, up right against my twin-size bed. That way, I wouldn't have to get up while watching my favorite rerun of *Enterprise*. Maybe she had decided that the man should call. Maybe she wanted me to ask her out again. I picked the headset up off the cradle and pressed Speed Dial 1.

"Hi. It's me." A little wheezing in the background. Yeah, that'd be her Aunt June.

"Oh, hi, Hunter. No, Kate's not in. I think she's, umm..."

I hear a bit of rustling, whispering in the distance. Probably just her dad or something. I wait a few more seconds.

"...out buying dresses. You know her."

I grit my teeth. "Oh, OK. Well, tell her I called, OK? And that I'd like to take her out bowling Saturday night."

I hang up. I stare at those damned scars on the stub where my elbow should be and curse loudly. Fuck. Serves me right.

I'm walking to school and I'm staring down the way to school. A few houses

down is the city funeral home. Corbin's walking down the pavement, mindlessly picking the petals off a brown-tinged azalea at the end of its peak.

I stare at his so-called "overbite", his "sideburns" that are really more like plain old overgrown, unkempt I-don't-care hair. He looks right back at me, for a bit longer than I'm used to. And not at my craterface or my arm.

He starts veering toward me, walking faster. Finally, he grabs my stub of a left arm, holds pretty tightly. He's studying my eyes. His pupils dilate.

"What did you say to Alice? Before she died?"

I catch my breath. "Why the hell would I talk to her? I didn't even know her."

"Well, did she say something to you? Or something?" His eyes didn't move, not even a bit.

"I swear, no. Nothing."

"Are you lying to me?" I could feel his hand shaking, but his grip loosened a little.

"No, man, seriously, we didn't talk."

Just for a moment, Corbin really got me with those eyes. Square in the face, past the scars, past everything. It cut me. "Well, whatever. Just go to school. Or whatever. That's where you were heading."

Corbin sighed, let go, and started to walk away.

I started walking toward the funeral parlor, opened the door.

Just like the funerals in the movie. Only no one there. The place was hollow, barren, pretty echo-friendly.

I walked up to the casket, stared at Alice's face a little bit. Not as dirty as I remember; I guess they fix you up when you're giving your last performance. And I didn't remember her smile looking so genuine, so forgiving. But I knew better.

Before I knew it, I was out of that place. Who was Corbin to guilt trip me, anyway? Might as well go back to school. Had more of Ashlee's geography to get done.

Rachel kept staring at that note. "Too scared of being scared." She didn't exactly want to get angry at her daughter or anything, since she was dead and all, but come on, that was a pretty lousy suicide note. Alice could have at least had the decency to explain herself better.

And why the hell did she write it in olive crayon? She'd bought her some perfectly decent calligraphy pens for Christmas.



The literal interpretation of one's word ... Supreme Court justices were appointed or denied on how strict theirs were. James McEvoy knew this, learned it some time ago at school, a fact that lurked in the murky depths of his mind, but he never expected to be condemned by it the day he caught on fire. Never expected to be the victim of such a karmic ass kicking. Never expected how the result would appropriately mirror his temper, the likelihood of which no one could have guessed.

"Oh my God, James!" Nancy's voice screeched from across the parking lot as the flames crept up his arm and lit up his shirt.

He tried to ignore the prolonged screams of his wife – she was always wailing at him – even as they brokered the attention of everyone else in the vicinity, forcing the bystanders into a choreographed performance of breathless double takes from her to him, and back, like some grotesque tennis match. Every piece of marital shit he and Cee had been through in the past year, and now she chose to show a single fucking ounce of concern.

"Ja-" She didn't move, couldn't follow through with the vocal maneuver, her mouth oddly frozen in a toothy twist. James might have admitted to not feeling the pain if he had been given the chance. The fire was slow to ignite, but once it had, it spread so fast he didn't know what was happening.

A moment ago he had exited the store at a furious pace, trying to put as large a physical distance between he and Cee as possible. Another not-so-discreet fight in the bakery aisle, between the spices and the vegetable oil, about the proper way to write addresses on thank you note envelopes had yet again left him in a sour disposition, and he didn't even want to look at her. One snarky quip led to a sarcastic response, building and building until, "God damn Cee, your shit gets me so mad!" he seethed. He didn't even know why he had come. The supermarket,

such a horrible, public place. Absolutely everything out in the open, and nowhere to hide. And all she ever wanted to do was pick at him and pick at him. Always over the little things. Any other wife would have been glad just to have the help.

Then he saw it. A grocery cart, maliciously left by another customer, had left a sizable ding in the front quarter panel of his beloved F-150 double cab. He growled and rushed up to the offending cart to kick it, manhandle it in some way, any way to satisfy the growing ire in his chest, but then the sack that should have been double-bagged broke open in his arms and his food turned into a colorful decoration on the asphalt. His favorite comfort indulgence, a brick of strawberry cheesecake ice cream, smacked the ground flat, and on such a sweltering summer day, it didn't take long before a meandering creamy line of wasted calories began to trickle from the package underneath the neighboring car.

He stopped, stood there, watching the white-pink line slither like a tiny liquid candy cane come to life. It was the final moment of serenity before the storm. Slowly, deliberately, he bent down to grab the first fallen grocery item he could reach, tossed it gently, lovingly, in the palm of his hand as he let out a small chuckle, and then, in one violent turn, he began slinging the purchased products, one by one, as far as he could throw them.

A small jar of maraschino cherries lobbed high and crashed onto the roof of a silver Mazda 626. The bottom of the glass jar crunched and tore loose, leaving a pretty clump of cherries like a giant automotive sundae. A can of mixed veggies smashed into the windshield of a beige Yukon, cracking it, and a bag of frozen French-sliced green beans snagged on an antenna, tore open, and dumped its contents onto the hood of a painfully unwaxed Park Avenue. It was a blessed release, better than beating up the grocery cart, and James didn't stop with the first few items. After the first bag was exhausted, he set down the second bag, and dug deep into that one, too. Many unfortunate groceries and vehicles suffered that afternoon.

He knew somewhere behind him that Nancy was posing in a defiant stance, with arms akimbo, glaring at him. He could feel her eyes burning into his back the scarlet brand that every misbegotten husband must bear: *fool, twit*, or his favorite label, *embarrassing wretch*. He knew the comments that were running

through her mind, because they were the ones that were always there, the ones she muttered under her breath when she lay in bed watching him, thinking he was asleep: "why can't you control your anger?" and "next time, don't take it out on me, you sonuvabitch," and often ended with "why, oh why, in God's name did I marry you?"

Her eyes always reached out and scarred him in some appreciable way. It was her way of marking him, her ill-gotten territory, and her lingering gaze pissed him off even more. As he worked himself into a frenzy, throwing the groceries about like a mad pitcher, the fire sparked somewhere in his extremities. His fingers or toes, perhaps, it wasn't important. All anyone knew is that it overtook him in a wave, and in an instant his violent, biological mass was snuffed into so much ash.

When the fire chief arrived on the scene he was flummoxed, and after what little investigation could feasibly be done, they swept what was left of James McEvoy into a zipper-lock baggie.

Later, during the memorial service Nancy cried.

She put the ash on a shelf in the house on top of a linen doily, and dialed the number of the marriage counselor to cancel further sessions.

"You still have a lot of unresolved issues. I think discontinuing your therapy would be detrimental," Doctor Upchurch spoke calmly to her over the line.

In her anxious hands, she flicked a zippo to flame and snapped the lid shut, fast and repetitive, a habit she had picked up since the accident, even though she couldn't bring herself to smoke anymore. With a quivering lip her therapist could not see, she explained that she needed some time to grieve, time to get used to the emptiness, and then, maybe then, she could come in and talk.



Counting helps me focus. Coming here, for example. Sixty four steps from my room to the office door – two steps per gray square and two for those ugly, milkish maroon ones. And I never step on the cracks. I'll shorten my steps to compensate for misshapen squares, or take a little leaping step if I think I'm gonna come up short.

As a kid, I generally took three steps per square of sidewalk on my way home from school. At four-and-a-half blocks, with about fifty six squares per block, that's seven hundred fifty six steps home, giving a few for crossing larger-than-average driveways, and taking a few for some smaller squares where the sidewalk had been repaired. I tried taking just two steps per square the year this kid named Billy started following me home. He'd walk behind me, sometimes with his friend Tom, but mostly by himself. I could hear him getting closer and it always broke my concentration so I began taking longer steps. That always messed me up. One day he started calling my name and asking me to wait up, then calling me a freak after about a week or so. So I started running home.

That only took three hundred seventy six steps on a good day.

In spite of the fact that he'd turned the faucet precisely three quarters clockwise, the water seemed hotter than normal. William fussed with the handle until it felt better, then slipped into the shower and tried to methodically washed away the filth. Using large sweeping ovals, front to back, ears to crown, he worked his shampoo into an afro of almond-smelling foam. But nothing was right and it ran down his forehead and into his eyes, burning and irritating. William wiped away the stinging mess, then watched through the blur as the bubbles flowed down the drain.

A muffled popping sound punctured the heavy steam and he hunched low. His heart raced, and he wondered how they'd found him so quickly. Two more pops and he carefully shut off the shower and listened. Words he couldn't understand were spoken and then a door slammed. And then silence. He stepped out of the shower and scrambled past the towel, folded and smelling of lilies and sitting atop

the toilet lid, then struggled into the same sweat-stained clothes he'd removed just moments ago.

He'd said he'd get it done in a day or two, a week at the most, and pleaded for their patience. But his eyes betrayed him, always drifting, down and to the left, and he'd bolted into the crowd, away from their condescending smirks, sideways glances, and hand-in-pocket threats.

His wife lay sleeping, her long blond hair sprawled wide across her favorite feather pillow, the covers pulled tight to her chin, a dreamer's smile on her lips. He stepped into the dark hallway and crept into the dining room. Muted light from the chandelier above the table reflected dimly off the barrel of a revolver. Glass lay shattered on the wood floor.

William Bennett stared at the gun. Underneath it laid a folded piece of paper.

Tonight. Or else.

He counted the letters in his head:

TONI - GHTO - RELS . . .

It didn't add up; there was an E left over. He tried again:

TONI - GHTO - RELS...

Great. Now he had that to think about. He tried again:

TONI - TEOR - ELSE

That'll do.

William sighed, relieved, and shoved the note in his pocket. Then he grabbed the gun. It felt heavy and foreign in his wet hands.

How had it come to this? Why now, just as things seemed to be working out? He'd taken precautions to keep from compromising himself and what he knew. When they began sticking their noses in his business, asking too many questions, he'd smiled and played the fool. Now they knew too much. Just a little had slipped out, coaxed by comforting caresses, but it was still too much. The things he knew were best tucked away in a far less porous vessel than himself.

He picked up the gun and walked back into the bedroom. Amanda hadn't moved. Bourbon were more than enough medicine for her pain. He stroked her hair and felt it flow between his fingers. She stirred.

"I'm better now"

"You seem calmer."

"More than ever. Go to sleep, love."

"Did you see the doctor?"

GOTO - SLEE - PLUV.

"William?" She squinted at the sudden glint of steel. "What are you-"

He turned away, fled through the chipping, lime-green apartment door and up the narrow, rust-colored staircase to a studio on the fifth floor, and pointed the gun at the young woman lying on the bed.

As a child I worried a lot about a lot of things.

About being alone.

Being unlovable, or unable to love.

As time passed I figured I'd become incapable of having a relationship. It takes intimacy, and I believe differently than most about what that looks like and smells like and feels like. Like two people watching a movie and one laughing and crying and awe-ing at all the right parts while the other gazes blankly and yawns and longs for the credits. Like someone standing on the curb and watching the warmth of the festivities, engulfed in a familiar, chilly solitude.

Now I'm inside. A cloud of revelry and happiness surrounds me and it feels just the same.

For twenty-seven years, Biddle's Riddles has occupied the lower level of the Perkins building, a three-story brick building on the corner of State and Van Buren, just south of a struggling downtown district, drawing steady crowds of sentimental forty-somethings and curious Gen-X'ers on Friday and Saturday evenings. Biddle's Riddles survives the times by offering an atmosphere ripe for off-beat conversations and bottomless twelve ounce ceramic mugs of strong black coffee. Those that came believed strongly that cappuccino and sconces are best left in the suburbs. Slate paneling and colorful stubs of chalk inflamed wannabe poets and philosophers to scrawl pithy words of resignation and hope.

Elizabeth mouthed a lyric as she scribbled in shades of fluorescent green and blue.

"Here's a tip: buy low, sell high."

Still holding the chalk aloft, she turned her head and looked at the man who sat across from her.

"What does that mean?"

"It means what it means." William blew a perfect cloud of smoke into the thick atmosphere and took a sip of his coffee, sweetened with four level teaspoons of sugar. "Take this relationship of yours."

Elizabeth sat down the chalk and folded her arms upon the table. "Oh, really." She leaned closer to William and shot him a widening glance, waiting for his usual, bullshit, exhortation.

"You invested little when you started dating that loser. A little time. A little tenderness. Now it's time to cut and run. You got what you wanted. More than you started with anyway."

Elizabeth looked down a little too quickly and stirred her coffee.

"Honestly. What else does he have to offer? You said it yourself." William poked his cigarette toward the wall.

"What about you?"

"It's different for me. You know that."

They made awkward, crooked love in the back of his car while nightlife staggered by foggy glass.

"Sit down, William."

William noticed the file lying on the desk in front of the boss.

"We've had another complaint."

"Who?"

"That's not important, *and* it's confidential." He pulled a paper from the file and slid it across the desk. "We're letting you go, William."

"What's this?"

"Just sign it."

"What's this about?"

"We've been over this before. I'm sure you remember."

"I'll tell them everything."

"I'm sorry?"

"This is bullshit!"

"No, this is serious. Raise your voice to me again, and I'll keep this." He tapped the envelope sitting on the open file. "Sign it, and it's over."

"You can't be serious. I need this," William pleaded.

"I'm tired of your excuses and I'm not taking another chance with you, William."

It's too risky at this point.

ITST - OORI - SKYA - TTHI - SPOI

William counted again, tapping the fingertips of his right hand on his knee:

ITST - ORIS - KY@T - HISP - OINT.

William's boss leaned across the desk and handed William a pen. "William?"

Sign it, walk away, and forget what you know.

William's voice cracked. "How am I supposed to do that?"

"You just sign it. With this PEN!"

I'm sure it won't be a problem for a smart guy like you.

"You can't just forget shit like this."

"What?"

"EXACTLY!" William smirked.

Now get out of here!

NOWG - ETOU - TOFH - ERE . . .

NOWG - ETOU - TTAH - ERE . . .

William continued mumbling as he jumped up and ran out of the office, leaving his final paycheck lying under his boss's blank stare.

Another afternoon: I'm sitting in the studio lighting papers on fire and watching them smolder in a coffee can. Contracts with my name boisterous and proud at the bottom. Elizabeth asks me what I'm doing, worried that a scrap may float her way and ignite her silk sheets, always asking questions that I can't answer.

He said it would end, but they followed me. I saw them sitting in sticky booths in the diner across the street, never eating, just emptying one carafe after another.

I signed the damn paper but they still followed me. Who knew, and how much? I listened again and again to every conversation, heeding my words meticulously for foolishness and betrayal.

She did a flashdance once, pulled a rusting chair into the shower and slipped and slid her way into a strange place in my head. I thought I knew her, yet she proved to me that you never really know anyone. She came low and went for more with every passing moment. Enough had not yet come for us. For her anyway. I'd let her get that far and regretted it.

Elizabeth stirred and rolled over onto her growing stomach, then groaned and settled back onto her side.

```
"Wake up."

"William?"

PLEA – SEDO – NTTA – LK...

PLEA – SEDO – NTSA – YANY – THIN...

PLEA – SEJU – STSH – UTUP.

"Please just shut up."
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The first shot pierced the hand that clutched her stomach. The second punctured her left eye and slammed her head into the lathe-and-plaster wall. There were no more questions.

"Talk to me, William." Amanda grabbed his arm and he turned to look at her.

"There's nothing to say."

"I found this under your pillow." She held a carving knife in her quivering hand. "Why are you keeping a knife under your pillow?"

William took the knife from her and put it back in the drawer. "It's nothing."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's nothing. Really."

WHYD - IDNT - YOUT - ELLM . . .

WHYD - IDNT - UTEL - LME?

"William, you're scaring me." She sat down at the table and lit a cigarette.

"Why didn't you call the police?"

"They never show up on time. Not here. You know that."

William sat down across from her and leaned closer. "Besides, I can handle it."

"Handle what?"

"I think they found me."

"William, what are you talking about?"

"Why don't you go and stay with your mother for awhile. You haven't seen her in, what, a month or so?"

"William-"

"Look, you need to get out of here. When they come, they'll find you."

She looked at him and sighed deeply. "William, you're not taking your pills are you?"

William slammed his fist on the table. "I'm being serious here! It's not like that this time." The skin inside his fingers was callous from all the clawing.

"I can't do this again, William. I'm calling the doctor."

"No!" He reached across the table and grabbed her wrist, squeezing harder than he imagined. "I said I can handle this!"

"What, like you handled it the last time?!" She fell under the weight of his hammering arm, then choked down a sob as he jerked around and left, slamming the door behind him.

**

A lowering sky crept in and the crowd picked up its frantic pace. The merchants began stowing their wares.

William.

The voice came from everywhere and nowhere at once.

William, you said you'd take care of this.

"I will. I just need a little more time."

Tonight. Or else.

Silence.

"I can't."

You will.

"I can't!"

Several people stopped and stared, then the clouds broke and a cool rain fell. William charged down the street, ducking under awnings and knocking over newsstands. He peered over his shoulder occasionally but no one ran after him. No comfort came. They never ran. They just showed up, around every secluded corner, in every smudged storefront window. There would be no escaping them this time. He'd let them get too close this time, and they never let him rest until they got what they came for.

I'm alone again. It's deeper this time around, this feeling of abandonment mingled with freakish contentment. They won't find me here. I am off the grid. Beyond their grip, you might say. I am elastic, stretched between here and there, too thin to stand out. Enough is enough, indeed.

Is it too late for me to find happiness? I long for it but it never comes in ways that make sense to me. I taste it, and it lingers for a time, and then it dissolves into nothing, leaving me gluttonous for another bite. I am sated by nothing and no one. Not yet, anyway. It will come one day and take me by surprise.

William stepped out onto the curb and looked both ways into the gullet of an empty, early morning haze. Right or left, he wondered; North or South? The possibilities lay before him with an endless monotony.

William?

PICO - BLVD.

South it is.



Joanna Wittke, Never the Favorite • • •



I can't recall the last time I left that room. I sat in utter silence, the still, dank air of my own chamber my only company. The lights were off, not because I welcomed the darkness, but because I had neglected to switch on the lights when the sun began to sink below the horizon. This, my own self negligence, left me in the dark.

Blue was the color of the light now, that solemn, lonely color that overtook the world when sunlight was no more. It wasn't entirely night, not yet, but the sunset had since passed, leaving me hanging there, my life suspended somewhere between dusk and twilight.

This somber luminescence found it's way inside through the windows behind me, filtering through the dusty mini blinds and settling into the haunting atmosphere of my room. The door was shut tight, a wooden barricade against the outside world I was secluded, locked inside my own hellish prison, a solitude I created and forced myself in to.

It was there, in that small, cluttered bed chamber that I battled over my fate. I sat at my desk, staring down at it's stained wooden surface, a tattered notebook before me, a pen hanging loosely between my fingertips. Empty soda cans and beer bottles stared back at me, too many to count, each one of them a silent testament to the hours I spent alone.

Within this notebook I had written my life. Everything I wanted, everything I needed, and everything I had yet to accomplish. I weighed each aspect of myself with ink and paper, line after line of scribbled, barely coherent thoughts. I'd lost track of how many pages I'd written, or exactly how long it had taken me to write them. Line after line, hour upon hour, year after year of repressed memories, all scratched into that tattered notebook.

I tapped the tip of the pen idly against the paper, it's metal tip grazing against the fragile paper, stabbing into it's flesh and trailing black ink in it's wake. I let go of the pen, letting it fall to the paper. It rolled to the side slightly, turning over a few times before settling into place about mid way down the page.

I left the pen there, and let my eyes settle on the last line of text.

'This life is ragged at the seams. Broken heart and broken dreams.' I didn't realize it rhymed when I put pen to paper, but staring down at it then it seemed strangely poetic. I shifted my gaze slightly, moving up the page to the entry just before it.

'She left me. She left me here to rot. She left me. She left me.'

I leaned back in my desk chair, the wheels moving slightly under my weight, pushing me back ever so slightly. I could feel the leather through my t shirt, old and worn down, tattered and weathered. It was just like me. Beaten, broken and bruised, torn up almost beyond recognition, yet for some reason people kept it around, just to see how much more life they could get out of it. Used was the perfect word. *I was used. I'm so fucking sick of being used.*

I leaned forward in the chair, grabbing up the pen and placing it to paper. I scribbled something out, a few lines down from the last entry.

'This is the end. Time to make a move.' I stared down at the text, letting the pen fall to the side once again. I leaned back slightly, sliding my hand down below the desk and pulling open the center drawer. It slid out easily, offering no resistance as I pulled it towards me, reaching my hand inside. It was almost completely empty, all the papers, junk and records of my existence already removed, already sorted and weighed for my case. All that was left now was the sentence that weighed above my head.

I pulled the revolver out of the drawer, the nickel plated six gun heavy in my hand. It's perfect silver finish gleamed a pale blue in the dim light, glowing in an almost unreal fashion. *Beautiful*. I flipped out the cylinder, each of the six chambers empty, staring back at me like six hollow eyes. I reached into the drawer again.

There were six bullets laid out in the drawer, lined up and perfectly in order. I plucked one up, rolling it between my fingers and raising it out of the drawer. The smooth brass was cold to the touch, but warmed slightly as I held it. 357 magnum, the matching caliber for the heavy double action in my other hand.

The bullet was just shy of 2 inches, small in comparison to the fleshy appendage that held it, but that one tiny package could snuff out a life in the blink of an eye. A brilliant flash, a shower of blood, and the world would end. Less than a second from hammer fall to absolution.

I slid the bullet into the cylinder, the inch and a half of brass and lead disappearing into the smooth steel of the gun till only the rim and the primer remained. I reached down into the drawer again, pulling out the second bullet and sliding it into the cylinder as well. I did this again, three bullets loaded, then four, then five, and finally the sixth, all snug within the 6 chambers of the revolver.

I spun the cylinder, watching as each of the bullets blurred together into obscurity, the subtle clicking of the cylinder almost deafening in that otherwise silent hell I flipped my wrist, the cylinder slipping back into the gun, loaded and ready. *Ready for what?*

I sat the gun down on the desk next to me, once more picking up my pen and scribbling in my notebook. Two words I penned this time, each of them staring back at me. 'Resolution...Death?' Each word could have meant the same thing, and at the same time, they could have been polar opposites. So much thought could go into those two words. A new life could be born, or a life could be destroyed, hanging somewhere in the precarious balance between those two words Yet 'life' in itself also fit into that equation. Somewhere to the left of Resolution, the opposite of Death. Was it really? Was everything so black and white? What exactly is 'Life,' and what was it worth?

It was then that I pulled out the picture. I slid my fingers underneath the tattered red cover of the notebook, pulling free a simple photograph. It was far from pristine, it's once smooth and glossy surface now bent and wrinkled in places, finger prints staining it's face. She stared back at me through the hazy face of the photograph, the girl I loved, the girl I wished my life away for, the girl who put me here. She was beautiful, even now, locked away in this hellish reminiscence. Her long brown hair fell past her shoulders, her soft features locked into an eternal smile. Deep, dark brown eyes stared back at me. They were playful eyes then, but now they seemed unreal. It had been so long since I had seen those eyes. She didn't have them anymore, at least, not for me. The eyes she showed me were different now, somewhere between pity and hatred.

That one photograph was the only record I had that she showed those eyes to me, that she shared her life with me. That picture was the only physical proof that she even existed now, the only thing that reminded me of those days, the only thing that showed me just what I was missing now. She had become the very figure of my despair, my loneliness, and my longing. In a way, that photograph had become the physical embodiment of my own personal hell. That room contained me, but it was she that held me there.

I propped the picture up in front of me, just beyond the notebook. She stared at me from across the sea of scribbled black text, and I stared back, watching her as she watched me. *You already made your move. Now I must make mine.*

I picked up the revolver, holding it loosely in my grasp. I slid my thumb over the grooved surface of the hammer, pulling it back slightly. The cylinder moved, turning as I slid back the hammer, bringing the first bullet into line with the pin and the barrel. The hammer clicked into place, the trigger back into firing position. *The stage is set*.

I raised the gun slowly, tightening my grip on it slightly, holding it more firmly in my grasp. My palm began to sweat slightly against the synthetic grip. The barrel slid past my hair, resting against my temple. Cold steel against warm flesh, death against life. *Just pull the trigger*.

My finger pressed back against the trigger. I could feel it move slightly in place, the trigger mechanism ready to release the hammer at the slightest movement. Less than a millimeter between life and death. *She's watching, waiting.*

The picture stared back at me. She was still smiling, still cheery, those beautiful eyes still as vibrant and lifelike as I liked to remember them. I sat the gun down on the desk.

I leaned forward, staring back at her intently. This is what you want, isn't it? For me to go away, to disappear so you can go on with your new life? Selfish Or was it me being selfish? I didn't know, didn't care. It was too late to start reassessing the situation. What was the point now anyway? To her, I was nothing more than a dream, so easy to let go. Yet still I dwelled on her, trying to bring her back, refusing to go on with my life. I may as well be dead already.

I made up my mind then. That existence was too much. Too much pain, too much suffering, too much to go on with. I had to escape that hell, had to get out,

and I was ready I just had to take that one last step, and I'd be free. No more wanting, no more longing, no more pondering and waiting. I was ready. It was time to make the last move.

I took a deep breath, and I raised the gun. *Ready*. I hesitated only a moment, letting go of that deep breath, the last breath of the musty, secluded hell. I pulled the trigger.

There was a violent flash, and a deafening bang. The smell of gunpowder filled my nose, seeping into my lungs as the shot reverberated through my head. It echoed, shifting through the room and settling into my brain. *It's done*.

A smoking hole about the size of a nickel replaced the face in the photograph. It was gone forever now, only the wrinkled and torn edges of the photo remaining. I placed the revolver back on the desk, letting go of it and taking up my pen. I pressed it's point to paper one last time, penning a single word. 'Resolution.' I smiled, finally satisfied, and closed the notebook, letting the pen drop to the desk next to the revolver. I stood up then, leaving that tattered and beaten chair behind, making my way across the room to the door. I reached out, my hand clutching the cool metal knob, sliding gently across it's smooth surface. I unlocked it now, pulling the door open.

I looked back into that room one last time, staring down at the broken corpse of that photograph "Goodbye." I said, a faint smile finding it's way to my lips. I turned and stepped out, leaving hell far behind me. I never looked back



It wasn't because she turned 29 that she bought it, or at least it wasn't only because she turned 29. Maybe there were several contributing factors. She couldn't be sure. She hadn't ever really been able to be sure of anything, not the why of anything, anyway.

But how could she not be affected by turning 29? Her mother had been 29 when she killed herself by washing down a handful of prescription sleep aids with a bottle of tequila.

She had filled the prescription for 30 pills that morning, and there had been one pill left in the bottle when he found her on the patio, stretched out on the blue and white striped lawn chair with the José Cuervo bottle resting on her chest.

Her father told and retold the story, and Elizabeth was beginning to feel that she was a little tired of hearing it. He had told it to her five times since her birthday three days ago.

"What gets me," he said, "is this. The one leftover pill. Why didn't she take all the pills in the bottle? Why not empty the thing?" Then he would start addressing her mother directly. "Was it supposed to be some kind of suicide note, Diane?" Then he would yell. "Because it's a little cryptic! I actually don't get it at all! Was it that you didn't like being 29? Was there a clue in the number or did you just pass out before you could get that last pill down? What did you mean? What? "Then he would cry and apologize. "I'm so sorry, Lizzie, but I just don't understand."

"I know, Dad. I know."

She didn't remember her mother. She told people that she did, that she remembered her mother's blue eyes and silky hair and Chanel No. 5 perfume that she wore even if she wasn't going out. But she didn't really remember any of it. The truth was that she didn't have any memories of her mother that weren't borrowed from photographs and home movies or learned from her father's telling and retelling stories. The truth was that she sometimes forgot that the woman in the pictures, on the screen, and starring in the stories was anyone's mother, let alone hers.

I hoped that Elizabeth didn't remember her mother. She was not really worth remembering. Diane married my little brother—or he married her—too young. Of course, he was totally taken with her and couldn't be talked out of it. We were all taken with her at first.

When she died, I thought to myself, Thank God she only infected nine years of his life. Little did I know that she had already stained the rest of it, too. I couldn't be a witness to it anymore. I couldn't watch my little brother continue to be victimized by that woman. I had to cut myself out of their lives. Of course, Elizabeth suffered more than any of us.

So Elizabeth didn't know why she bought the lawn chair, but it could've been partly because she turned 29. It probably didn't matter why she bought the chair, anyway. It was exactly like the one her mother had died on. She couldn't remember her mother but she could remember the chair. It was bright blue—not navy blue or sky blue but blue like Bic pens—with white stripes. When she saw the chair at a yard sale on her way to work, she pulled her car to the side of the road and sat in it for ten minutes. Then she slowly removed all the cash from her purse, shoved it into her pockets, and got out of the car.

She walked to the chair and said, "I need to buy this chair."

It was a crappy day for a yard sale. Rainy and 55°F. Chilly for May. Like always, Mom conned me into helping her so I could spend yet another Saturday sitting at a table in the front yard. It was a little after nine and Mom was inside making us some coffee when we got our first customer.

She pulled up in front of the house in an old, gray Honda Accord hatchback. She stared at me for a few minutes and then got out slowly. She left the driver's side door open and approached my table.

"I need to buy this chair," she said, gesturing to a blue and white plastic lawn chair.

I wasn't even sure if the chair was supposed to be for sale, but this woman seemed like she could be one of those militant, professional yard salers. I didn't know what she would do if I refused to sell it to her.

"\$12," I said. I wanted to get as much as I could for it, but \$15 seemed outrageous.

She looked at me as if she had forgotten I was there. Then she pulled a five and two ones from the pocket of her jacket. "I have \$7," she mumbled to herself. I was about to tell her \$7 was enough, since this was obviously a negotiation tactic, when she reached into the pocket of her pants and produced another five. Without taking her eyes from the chair, she laid the four crumpled bills on the table and said, "There." Then she folded up the chair and carried it to her car where she placed it in the passenger's seat and drove away.

Mom couldn't believe I got \$12 for that old lawn chair.

She put the chair in her living room next the couch, facing the TV. She liked to pretend it was her mother's chair, but she knew it couldn't be because the night her mother killed herself, her father had tried to set the chair on fire in the backyard.

Instead of igniting in a satisfying blaze, the plastic only melted into itself and produced an unpleasant odor. But the neighbors called the police anyway. Luckily, Aunt Claire was there to make sure her father didn't get arrested.

"You see, this man's wife just committed suicide on that chair," she explained to the officers, and that was how Elizabeth learned that her mother was dead.

All this she recalled quite clearly. It was the woman who was dead, who had supposedly been her mother and suddenly was not, whom she didn't remember. So she lied.

"Do you remember what she smelled like?"

"Yes, Dad. Of course I do." She worked in a department store that carried Chanel No. 5 so she knew how she must've smelled, how she probably smelled, the way she most likely smelled.

When Elizabeth was very small, probably about four years old, she had a kitten who got hit by a car. The poor animal lay in the middle of the road quivering as the last strains of life left its tiny body. There was remarkably little blood, and when Elizabeth touched the lump of orange and white fur, her little hands didn't even get dirty.

I held Elizabeth on my lap on the front porch as she wept, and her mother drank lemonade and tried to get a tan.

"Claire," she said to me. "Will you ask the housekeeper to put that thing in the garbage?"

"Don't you think we ought to have a funeral and bury it in the yard?" I replied.

"A funeral? For an animal? That's absurd."

"Your daughter is distraught, Diane."

She turned her perpetually half-open brown eyes to the sobbing child in my arms. "Don't cry, darling," she said in her best imitation of a maternal tone. "It will make your eyes puffy and your face all blotchy."

She sat in the chair while she waited for a blind date named Eric to arrive. She had allowed herself to be set up because this date was a friend of one of her co-workers, who looked a lot like the boy who had taken her to the senior prom. When she was getting ready for the prom, her father had told her she looked like her mother. It had made her angry. "Don't say that," she had screamed.

"Honey, it's true."

"No, it's not."

He didn't apologize, but he never again told her she looked like her mother. Anyway, she had a rotten time at the prom.

He had mentioned her mother to her—directly using the words "your mother"—only two other times. When she was 12, he took her to a department store and handed her a crisp twenty-dollar bill to buy her first bra.

"Lizzie," he said with a heavy sigh. "I really wish your mother hadn't killed herself. Then she could help you pick it out."

Elizabeth had shrugged, not sure of what to say. "I can do it, Dad," she said finally. "I don't need her."

He patted her on the head absent-mindedly and said, "That's my girl. I'll wait for you by the socks."

Then, when she had graduated from high school, the evening of the ceremony, she stood in the kitchen in her crimson cap and gown and her father said, "Your mother would be proud of you."

She didn't believe him. In the first place, graduating from high school didn't feel like any grand accomplishment. She had gone there more or less every day for four years and now she was done. Where was the pride in that? In the second place, her father had exerted even less effort into the experience than Elizabeth had, and even if her mother hadn't killed herself when Elizabeth was six, she probably wouldn't have been a very good mother anyway.

"Dad, come on. If she were still alive, she'd probably be in a nut house."

"It was just a sentimental moment, Lizzie. I miss her."

"I don't."

All the other times he talked about her, she was "my wife" or "Diane" or, usually, simply "her," as if she were someone he used to know before he met Elizabeth.

Eric looked at the chair, but he didn't ask her why there was a lawn chair in her living room.

"What do your parents do?" he asked as they ate dinner.

"My mother killed herself when I was six, and my father is a janitor."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

She shrugged. "He has good benefits."

My buddy Ryan worked with Elizabeth at a department store. He said she was cute and quiet, and after my divorce, I just wanted to go out with someone sane.

I picked her up at her apartment. Ryan had been right. She was attractive—tall, but not taller than me, with dark hair and big brown eyes. There was what looked like a lawn chair in her living room, but I was a guy who slept in a sleeping bag because his ex-wife took all his furniture. I wasn't about to hand out judgment about furniture. Her cat seemed slightly strange, and I did mention that.

"What's wrong with your cat?" I asked when he flattened himself against the wall and started to shake all over.

"Oh, he's having a panic attack," she replied.

"I didn't know cats had those."

"Well, this one does." It wasn't like she was being smart with me. No, there was something very matter-of-fact about this girl.

"Is there any kind of treatment for it?"

"The vet gives him a cortisone shot every three months."

"How old is he?"

"I'm not sure."

"Was he a stray?"

"I guess so. He was hanging around the building during a thunderstorm, and I invited him inside. He never left."

"What's his name?"

"Iosé Cuervo."

I laughed. Even if it wasn't a joke, even if the cat's name was seriously José Cuervo, it was still funny, wasn't it? Well, Elizabeth didn't laugh. She just watched me laugh until I forced myself to stop.

Eric didn't walk her to the door. He said he would call her, but she knew he was lying. Maybe he thought he wanted to call her or maybe he wanted to be polite. Either way, he wasn't going to call, and that was all right with Elizabeth. Of course, he had been an adequate date—tall with a good haircut, nice teeth, and a pleasant scent.

When she opened the door, she was surprised that José Cuervo was not there to greet her. When she flipped on the living room lamp, she noticed a dead bat underneath the lawn chair. She searched the apartment for the cat and found him quivering behind the toilet in the bathroom.

"Don't worry, José Cuervo. I'll get rid of the bat and then you can come out," she told him. He meowed a response and she smiled. "Just stay right there, and I'll be right back."

She returned to the living room and grabbed a broom and a paper bag. Then she prepared to scoot the bat into the bag. However, the bat's wings fluttered as the broom touched its body, and once Elizabeth had successfully enclosed the bat within the bag, it began to flap frantically against the sides of the bag. It was most definitely not dead.

With one hand holding the bag closed, Elizabeth used her other hand to call Animal Control.

We don't get many calls about bats. Most people just open the window and let them fly out. I knew when I talked to this woman on the phone that she was different. When I got to her apartment, she was holding this grocery sack, and I could see that the bat was definitely still alive in there. She stepped aside so that I could enter, but she left the door open. The apartment was small. The living room had just a couch, a TV, and a lawn chair in it. The place was between only old and just rotten—sort of dingy but clean enough. This woman, E. Keefer, didn't seem to notice the dinginess; she didn't seem to notice much, actually.

"Did the animal bite you, ma'am?" I asked.

"No, but it scared my cat," she replied very directly, almost like she was accusing me of scaring her cat.

"Did the bat bite the cat?"

"I don't know. I just got home."

"I better take a look at him."

She nodded. "He's in the bathroom." She pointed down a short hallway.

The bathroom was clean but used-looking, like the rest of the place. The tile was cracked and the paint on the trim was chipping. The shower was stained by soap scum and time. The cat was hiding behind the toilet. I reached behind it and scooped him up.

"Wow, he's a skinny one," I called to the woman.

"He's a recovering bulimic," she explained.

"Does he shake like this a lot?"

"When he's nervous or scared. He's on medication."

I examined the bony cat's body for signs of a puncture wound, but he seemed to be fine—physically, at least. I carried him back out to the door where his owner was still standing with the sack.

"I'll trade you," I said.

I took the bag and handed the cat to her. Almost immediately, he stopped shak-

ing. His green eyes, which took up most of his face, were still wide-open and alert, but he was visibly relaxing. I don't think either of them noticed when I left. I had to close the door myself.

The very next evening, a knock at Elizabeth's apartment door startled her, and José Cuervo began to shake again. Since the door was old and lacked a peephole, she decided her best bet was to open it quickly in order to meet her fate as instantly as possible.

"Hey, Lizzie."

It was her father. He was standing at her door wearing a brown trucker cap and smelling like Southern Comfort. She was, she realized, surprised that he knew where she lived, even though she had of course given him the address when she moved.

"I brought you a birthday present." He was holding a half-empty bottle of Chanel No. 5 and he put it in her outstretched hand. "It was hers."

Elizabeth nodded. "Are you staying?"

"Okay." When he walked into her apartment, Elizabeth realized he was carrying a suitcase. She could see the bulge made by the bottle of tequila he slept with every night with his arm wrapped around the neck as if it were a child's stuffed animal.

"You have a cat."

"Yes."

"He's ugly. What's his name?"

"Joe."

José Cuervo, who was afraid of dust, was not afraid of her father. After thoroughly sniffing both his shoes, he thrust his head against the old man's ankle.

"Hey, Joe. I'm Lizzie's dad." He laid his hand on the cat's head as if he were going to pet him and then he saw the chair. "That looks like Diane's chair," he remarked and sat down in it immediately.

"I know. Isn't it incredible that I found another one?" She knew it wasn't incredible since it was really just a regular lawn chair, but it felt incredible.

Her father nodded and stretched out his legs so that he was lying down. "It doesn't smell the same," he said.

"Well, it's not the same chair."

He appeared startled by the sound of her voice and looked up at her as if he didn't recognize her face.

"You melted the other chair—her chair—remember?"

He seemed about to nod.

"This isn't that chair. This is my chair."

"Right," he said slowly, making no move to leave his position.

"Do you want some dinner?"

"Spaghetti."

"All right."

She put the bottle of Chanel No. 5 in the closet where she kept her mother's letters. They could hardly be called letters, really. They were never more than five lines scribbled on a physician's prescription pad.

Elizabeth had stolen the letters the day after her mother's funeral, which was also the last time she ever saw her aunt Claire. When she woke up that morning, her father was still asleep so on the sofa in the TV room so she wandered into her parents' bedroom where Aunt Claire was sorting through and packing up her mother's things. She sat down on the cushioned brass stool at the vanity, picked up her mother's brush, and began pulling the long, brown hairs from the bristles.

"Do you want to keep that, honey?" Aunt Claire asked.

Elizabeth dropped the brush instantly and it clattered on to the mirrored tray where her mother had kept her perfume bottles lined up in three even rows.

"No," she replied.

Aunt Claire had absent-mindedly patted Elizabeth on the head as she threw the brush into a box. Then she left to put some boxes in her car to take to the Salvation Army.

While she was gone, Elizabeth went through the drawers of her mother's vanity. In the top drawer was her mother's extensive collection of cosmetics—powders, blushes, lipsticks, lip-liners, eye shadows, mascaras, eye-liners, and eyelash curlers. She slid open the middle drawer, looked briefly at the silky pieces of lingerie, and slid the drawer closed. In the bottom drawer, she found what appeared to be a gift. It was a medium-sized box wrapped in elegant gold paper tied with an equally striking gold bow.

She removed the box carefully from the drawer and discovered that, just like gifts on TV, the lid of the box was wrapped separately so that it could be lifted off without disturbing the wrapping. Inside were several stacks of letters tied with the same gold ribbon as the bow on the lid. When she heard Aunt Claire come back into the house, Elizabeth took the box to her room and put it under the bed.



Dear Diane,

Maybe you should think more seriously about marrying Claire's brother. He's a good man and he will be good to you. That arrangement would keep our lives connected.. Just think about it, darling.

Scott

Scott. As in Uncle Scott, married to Aunt Claire for almost 40 years now.

Dear Diane,

It was a lovely wedding. I missed you while you were in Fiji, though. Glad you're back.

Scott

Dear Diane,

Don't worry about Claire. She's as daft as her brother. She has a dozen reasons to dislike you and none of them have anything to do with what's going on with us. I'll be thinking about you tonight.

Scott

Dear Diane,

We're really fortunate to be in this sort of relationship. Marriage sours the sincerity of the thing with all its legalities and formalities. See you tonight at Elizabeth's birthday party. Wear that blue dress.

Scott

Dear Diane,

Sorry about last week. It was unavoidable. You have to know that it's more difficult for me to get away than it is for you. This Thursday, I promise you.

Scott

CONFLUENCE • • • • • •

Her father said he would stay until Saturday. Saturday came and went, and on Sunday morning, he was still in the chair.

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"I have to go to work."
   "Sure. Go ahead."
   "What will you do all day?"
   "How long do you have to work?"
   "Until 5:30."
   "Okay."
   "What are you going to do?"
   "I'll just sit here and watch TV. You got anything to drink?"
   "There's milk and Tang in the refrigerator. There might also be some soda."
   "No booze?"
   "I don't drink, Dad."
   "Doesn't your boyfriend drink?"
   "I don't have a boyfriend."
   "Oh."
   "So you're going to stay here while I'm at work?"
   "Yeah. Just put the bottle right here on the table next to the chair."
   "There is no bottle, Dad. I don't have any alcohol."
   "Oh, right."
   "There's a liquor store across the street and west a block."
   "Okay."
   "So you'll be all right all day? There's some deli meat in the refrigerator and
bread in the bread drawer, but I'll make dinner when I get home."
   "I'll be fine. Where are you going?"
   "To work."
   "Oh, right. What did you say the cat's name is?"
   "Joe."
   "Right. Bye."
   "Bye, Dad."
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When she returned home from work, her father was still in the chair. José Cuervo was curled up at his feet.

"How was your day?"

"I couldn't find any booze in your cupboards."

"Do you want me to go get you some?"

"Southern Comfort. The big one." He handed her a wad of cash and then turned his attention back to the TV.

I've been selling this stuff a long time and I've never seen somebody quite this off. This chick came into the store and looked around like it was a porno shop or something. She stood in the doorway a little too long so I asked if I could help her find something.

"I'm looking for Southern Comfort." She talked slowly, not like she herself was slow but like she was kind of distressed by the sound of her own voice—a real weird chick.

I showed her where the SoCo was, or at least I tried. I thought she was following me, but she stopped at the tequila aisle.

"You want tequila too?"

"What?"

"The Southern Comfort is over here."

"What does it taste like?"

"SoCo? If you've never had it, you're probably not gonna like it. What are you used to drinkin'?"

"No, I'm talking about tequila. What does José Cuervo taste like?"

"Piss, if you ask some people." I chuckled. She didn't. I tried to describe it again. "I guess tequila tastes kinda dirty, if you wanna know the truth. Other hard alcohols—like vodka and gin—they taste clean, almost like cleaning products, but tequila's got more going on than that."

"What about José Cuervo? I'm talking about that type of tequila, specifically."

She talked like she hadn't really been listening to anything I had said. I didn't know what else to say about tequila. I mean, Cuervo is the best but it's still tequila.

"Can I smell it?" she asked.

Honestly, I was a little hung over that day, and I was beginning to think that maybe I could like this girl, even if she was a little bizarre. It wasn't like I was some

mainstream yuppie. Still, I couldn't just open a bottle of Cuervo right in the middle of the store.

"Sure. Let's go in the back."

I grabbed a bottle off the shelf, and she followed me without thinking it over. I unscrewed the cap and held the bottle under her nose. She closed her eyes and inhaled. When she was finished, she turned her brown eyes on me and said, "Thank you." Then she walked out the door without even buying the SoCo.

At work the next day, at the same gift wrap counter she had stood behind for ten years, she wrapped three wedding gifts and then sat and prepared to spend the remaining four hours of her shift staring at the clock that hung on the wall directly across from the desk. It had been the same clock for ten years, too—a brown circle with a white face and black numbers and black hands except that the second hand was red. It bothered her that the frame of the cheap, plastic clock was brown while the numbers and hands (excluding the second hand, of course) were black. It didn't seem right that a classy department store should have a clock, or anything for that matter, that didn't match. This thing didn't even match itself, and it was cracked and falling apart.

Elizabeth was the senior gift wrapper. When she first started, there were a couple old ladies who had been wrapping for 20 and 30 years, but one by one they had all retired. Now she was the one who had been there the longest and knew the most. When her manager handed her the name badge that said "Proud Member of the Family for 10 Years," she wanted to throw up.

A man showed up with a golf club and wanted to have it wrapped.

"I don't wrap anything that isn't in a box."

"Don't you have a box this will fit in?"

"No." She knew she could fashion a box out of smaller boxes, and when she told him it would be \$17 and he didn't flinch, she knew she wasn't going to get out of it. "It will take half an hour. I have some others to finish first." It was a lie, but she didn't like to be rushed. More than that she didn't like it when the customers stayed and watched her wrap, standing over her as if she were an exhibit at the zoo. Or when mothers put their small children on the counter so that they could see, too. "Look, Dakota. See how she matches the edges? Watch her make the pretty bow. Wow! Isn't that neat?"

The golf club didn't turn out to be as difficult as she had anticipated. She just taped three tie boxes together and charged the man \$17.

Her father was asleep on the lawn chair when she returned to her apartment after work, or at least he appeared to be sleeping. That was what she thought until the tipped-over, empty bottle of José Cuervo put another possibility into her mind.

"My father killed himself, too," she told the desk sergeant. "My address is 1833 Stephenson Blvd., apartment 3..."

After she hung up the phone, she went into her bedroom where she found José Cuervo shaking on the bed. She returned to the phone and dialed another number.

"This is Elizabeth Keefer. I need to make an emergency appointment...The patient's name is José Cuervo...Feline...I think he needs a shot sooner than next month...The panic attacks are getting worse...Yes, I can bring him then...Thank you."

As she passed the hall mirror on her way back to the bedroom, she realized that her father had been wrong. She didn't look like her mother. She looked like him.

I had always thought she looked like her father, assumed it actually. How could those big sad eyes have come from anyone but my little brother? But Diane had brown eyes, too.

I kept Elizabeth's first grade school picture on my mantle for a long time. She was wearing a navy blue sweater with embroidered white lilies that I gave her for her sixth birthday. She didn't smile for the camera, but her round eyes are clear and bright. She wasn't happy, but she was content. In those eyes, at least there was the potential for happiness.

The EMT said that it looked like he had had a heart attack, but they would know more once they got him to the hospital.

Did she want to ride in the ambulance with him?

No, she would follow them in her car. She wanted to be alone.

The doctor in the Emergency Room confirmed the EMT's preliminary assessment.

Heart attack, he said. Massive. Your father probably died instantly. It's doubtful that he felt any pain for more than a few seconds.

Is there anyone we can call for you? the nurse asked. Your mother, maybe?

Elizabeth almost laughed. Instead she shook her head and used long, deliberate strides to walk out of the hospital. Already, she could hardly remember him.





HOLLY ANDREWS • • •