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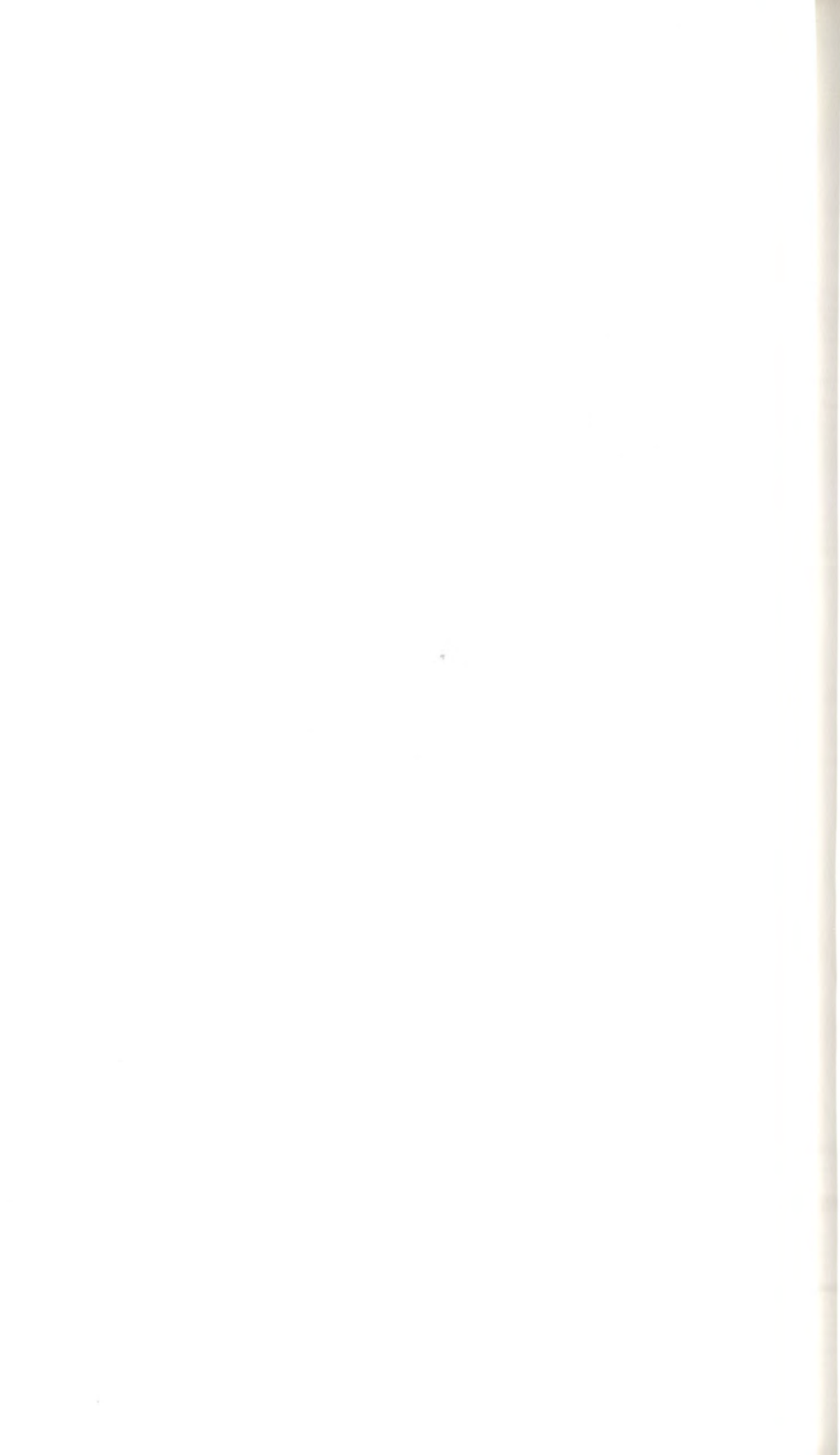
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Spring 20



the **L**ighter

Spring 2006

Volume fifty-one Issue two

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the**Lighter**

Spring 2006

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All submissions remain anonymous throughout the selection process. *The Lighter* welcomes submissions from all undergraduate, graduate, and law students of Valparaiso University, regardless of race, gender, religious creed, or sexual orientation. The editor assumes responsibility for the contents of this magazine. The views expressed in these works do not represent any official stance of Valparaiso University.

Front cover art taken from "CARNIVAL"
by Kristopher Robert Schuster.
Back cover art taken from "Ladonna"
by Melanie Schaap.

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Introduction

Walter Wangerin, Jr.

This is the start of significant literature—and a delight to read to boot.

I refer to the talent of the authors represented here, to their various purposes, and to the success of their efforts.

For Evan Scott Bryson, language dashes so swiftly and brightly, so jubilantly (and alarmingly) from his mind that it is good to see him put an artistic check to the rush. He can cut down trees with his chain-saw sentences; it would be easy to slip into (and stay within) that raw gift alone. But in each of his three stories he makes his language serve form and character.

"A General Theory of Relativity" catches the several voices of the characters who, essentially, present their own connected stories in dialogue before us—and whose talk, limber, street, or educated, does not bear the same tolling weight as does the singular voice of a true, anonymous "story teller" in "The Soft Pogrom." This latter story, by the piling-up of, and the light interweaving of, the experiences of three and four sets of people (count the praying taxidermist as a fourth set); by the piling up of extended sentences and the repetition of phrases and sounds and words; by the piling up, as well, of sacrificial action and of remarkable blessings delivered and received—this story builds through human suffering into the sort of memorial by which people alive might live in a dark world, yet with a sense of meaning: "The taxidermist would want this told."

Sarah Werner's "Silk" tends toward suppleness and subtlety, like the liquid image prominent in the title. Read it not roughly, demanding interpretation, but lightly, awaiting interpretation. And read "Rapunzel" again—since the author offers you several clues thereto, and the parallels with her own story are sweetly revealing: for love of a lettuce (a "rampion" or, in German, *rapunzel*) a mother must give her child away; for love of Rapunzel, the Prince will give his sight away. But even without the allusion at hand, "Silk" touches just the outside edges of an interior transformation. The story observes and reports and decorates with sensual imagery, but allows the reader to experience the transformation—the interpretation—with Raye.

Kimberly Bellware writes within a strict form: one event delivered from one point-of-view, every detail realistic. No leaps nor magic, no darkly brooding symbol. Yet this event is like the gyrocompass in an ocean-going vessel: though the change the narrator experiences seems

so small as to be hidden within her, it has broad consequence for her life and her sailing true north thereafter. Again, the story seeks relationship with the reader, whereby it is our business to make the move the narrator makes, to dance the dance *with* her.

Adam Ortman's "The Independence Center" is a *quiet* accomplishment. "Meaning" is never announced. (A common quality of all these works.) The story comes in three acts, none of which need comment on another (though, given the first person narrator, they might have); yet each casts light upon the others. On a second reading, see the encounter with Therese's father (act 3) in the light of her encounter with the fish (act 1). Note the narrator's guitar, once T's father's guitar (act 2). Play with the dependence confessed in the last lines of a story titled "Independence," and so begin to enjoy how (as, yes?—in real life when it's well and truly observed?) a not uncommon sequence of happenings bottoms into something of significance and depth after all.

Ralph Asher offers three poems. That each poem consists of two sonnet forms (sestet and octet stanzas, lines trimeter or tetrameter); and that the first and the third can be linked by image (moon, weather, darkness and light) and by story (it is a soldier in both that takes our attention) suggest that the poems are in a series, meant to be read together. The form makes them compact: please, then, read them more than once, allowing the events to echo one through the other, and the bitten images (*like* photos frozen, each with partial information) to form a fuller album. Intellectually, Asher is intense within a laconic tone, causing a fine tension. His more emotional effect builds through the whole.

By long lines and direct allusions to his poetry, Tracy Monson plays in Whitman's gardens. But by rhyming the lines, by introducing a woman narrator who nurses the wartime nurse, who cautions him regarding "free love," and yet whose personal state ("sleeveless, peeling onions") and whose stark, sensual imagery ("thick stems," "fearless roses," "savage, scarlet blooms") *does* suggest a breaking of conventions—a yearning to "creep onto the neighbor's grass"—Monson pulls the older poet over, to play in her own.

Sometimes a lyric is meant to do no more than invite the reader to enter the experience of the poet. If thought follows the experience, well and good. This comes of every reader's interaction with the experience vouchsafed to him and her. Thoughts may, then, vary wildly. But if thought doesn't follow, fine: it doesn't have to. Amanda Johnson, though writing to the "you" of her narrator's "dream," publishes "Knox Blox" in a public place, inviting us into the *narrator's* sleep and

into her (his?) dream. Two figures are worth the whole poem; they do in fact cause a reader to enter the visual experience of the dream: a green (a most specific green, "Chuck Taylors") so bright the rest is black and white ("brightly" and "white" setting up and closing that trope by the assonance); and the taut, concluding lines that blink the lights and the dream and the poem itself ... out.



Miss Valerie

Melanie Schaap

Interview: Mark Conway

Tracy Monson

Poet Mark Conway visited campus last fall to give a reading from his book *Any Holy City*, published in 2005 and recipient of the Gerald Cable Book Award.

Conway holds a Master of Fine Arts from Bennington College. His work has appeared in numerous publications, including *Agni*, *Bomb* and the *Gettysburg Review*. He has been honored by the Aldrich Poetry Competition, the Grolier Competition, and the McKnight Foundation, among others.

Any Holy City treats the delicacy and loveliness of human beings and their spirituality. Conway's meticulous attention to the art and power of sound, as well as his concern for the integrity of each individual poem are evident in the collection, with pleasing results. At times his poetry strains to fly off the page in the face of the reader; at other times the voice lulls and soothes. In the following interview he offers further insight into the role of poetry and the responsibility of the poet today.

TM: What do you think the role of the poet is or should be in society today?

MC: It takes so long for a writer to discover their true subject matter and how to explore it. That's really their first responsibility. Beyond that, the work will find its readers. It will reach people at different times, when it's important for them to read those things. I would turn it around and say that responsibility — external responsibility — actually begins within. The poet should be attentive to the internal and not worry about larger implications of where the work is going to go or what it's going to do. That's slightly distracting. Attending as closely as possible to the development of the poem is the best way to provide something that may be of value to somebody else.

TM: Do you see poetry's audience becoming more widespread or is it becoming more and more limited to an audience of other poets and professors?

MC: I tend to think of poetry rather broadly. I think it exists within song. We don't typically think of lyrics as poetry, and I'm not trying to appropriate that territory for poetry, but it is the same in that we use language in interesting ways to fill an imaginative part of our lives. Rhyme occurs there; you can look at the lyrics of a song and use poetic criticism to pick it apart. It's all the same kind of thing. So, it would be hard to say poetry is too academic. I think it's so lively right now, in hip-hop and rap and those places where it's pushed into music, where spoken word occurs to music, or just spoken word performances. Verse is so much a part of our psyche and so much a way that we meet the world. It's very vital.

TM: How important is it for a poet to pay attention to criticism? Do you find yourself making changes based on feedback or do you stick with personal preference?

MC: Writing, to me, implies that there is a responder, someone who is reading. So, I do care how it is received and it is valuable to have people I trust tell me how the poem connects with them. Often times as the writer you're not able to see some very simple things that you've never bothered to question. There's a certain notion about poetry, I think, that you have to write for yourself. I think that's true in part, but it's also meant to mean something to someone else. Having said that, that does not mean that you're constantly changing it because you want the widest audience. For me, I have trusted readers, people whose opinions

I do care about. But even then, sometimes, I'll feel a particular reader missed something, and for the integrity of the poem things have to remain the way that they are.

TM: Does that frustrate you? Is it hard to tell when the reader is missing the point and when you're just not being clear?

MC: It's hard to tell. So much of what I'm interested in is pushing language to its limit. I love the sounds of words, and the poetry that moves me is always right at the limit of my ability to understand it. That jump, that's the exhilaration, when you suddenly get this image that you can't pin down. You can't go back and say "this word with that one made this wonderful thing appear in my mind." That's the alchemy that I'm interested in both as a reader and as a writer. There is no recipe to make that happen, and even when I return and read a poem where that occurred, it's not always there. Often times you can get it back when you show it to someone else, and I think that's a really interesting aspect of a poem, that it will reveal different layers, that it's not always a predictable experience. There's something about getting a poem; when it connects with you, it makes you want to share it with someone else. That's a really crucial part of poetry that hasn't been much commented on: when you get it, you become one of the apostles; you want to spread the word.

TM: How much attention do you pay to sound? Is that one of the foremost things in your mind?

MC: I'm very interested in sound. I think there is a certain sense to it, impossible to analyze. It's not something you can represent with symbols or map throughout a poem to make certain things happen. People try to do that, try to say that certain motions come from the assonance of vowels and so forth. I can't possibly map all of that. One of the things I like to do is change the voicing of the poem, so there's a sharp, there's a flat, go behind the beat, go ahead of the beat. Use jazz techniques to fine tune the poem and really change the feeling just by making an "E" sound a longer "E."

TM: Your poems are in free verse. Do you find form constraining? How does free verse work for you?

MC: As I understand the rationale for form, in having a way to create a pattern it releases the poet's subconscious so that you're warring, subverting, playing around those borders, and it frees the imagination.

Since you're not creating everything, it activates the subversive elements of the mind. It doesn't work that way for me. I don't think that form is in and of itself constraining, but if it doesn't serve you, there's no requirement to do it. Instead I like to follow certain ways of constructing a poem that are often organic to that specific poem. This brings me to places that I probably wouldn't have gotten to on my own because it sets up certain expectations. These have more to do with repetition, or sometimes song, or length of line. Then, it's in the re-drafting. I'll write a poem a hundred times, and at that point I'm looking for the internal structure that moves it and makes it interesting to me, that allows me to know what belongs in the poem and what's extraneous by manipulating the organic form of that particular poem. Eventually it gets a line length and a kind of syntax that help me understand what the poem is truly about.

TM: Several of your poems deal with the separation of the soul from the body. Would you comment on this theme and why you find it particularly interesting?

MC: I think the reason I find it interesting is because I believe the exact opposite. I'm trying to find ways to unify and understand that the body and the soul are one. It's commentary; I'm not trying to create a theology for myself or a philosophy that others need to understand. I hope that my poems are part of the process of breaking down those ideas that are so deeply imbedded in the Western psyche, that the soul and body are separate. That's the way I was indoctrinated to understand the world, and I no longer believe it's a useful, or even a true way.

TM: How long have you been writing?

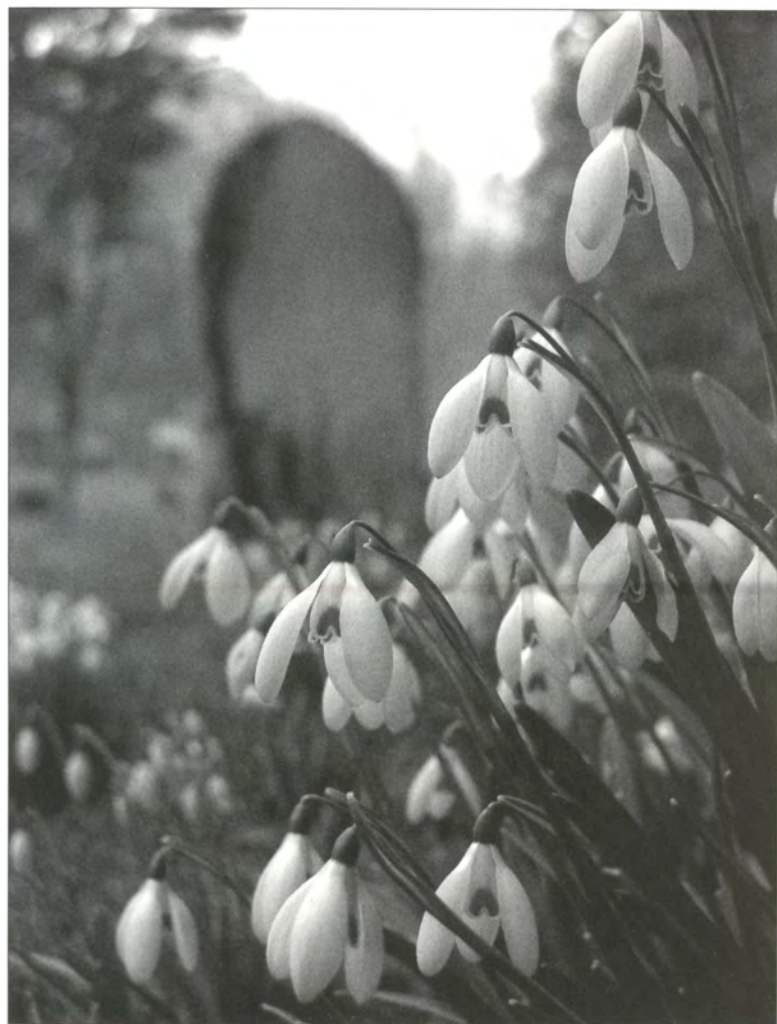
MC: I remember at one point in high school I decided I was going to be a writer; I was really going to go after it. I grabbed a notebook and went down to the Mississippi River, at a poetic kind of turn along the shore... and I couldn't write. I had created what I thought was supposed to be there and nothing happened. So I did that about three times, then thought, "Well, I'm not a writer." When I was a freshman in college, though, I read poetry about things I knew, about nature, sex and desire, rocks and birds and berries, and I was completely inspired. It gave me a way. The beginning of the path. I've thought of myself as a writer ever since.

TM: How do you write? Do you have a routine?

MC: The important teachers I had were students of Stanley Kunitz, and his view is that the life one leads is far more important than the poem. I think that's absolutely true, and stealing time from my children, wife, and people I love to put toward writing is just wrong for me. At the same time, of course, you need to have some boundaries and discipline, and the people who you love and who love you will hopefully respect that.

TM: What advice would you give to aspiring writers?

MC: Just keep picking up poems until you find the ones that really connect with you. They're out there. Sometimes it's the poets that you have difficulty with at first. One of the things I regret when I was first starting as a reader of poetry is that I'd find one poem that I loved by one poet and then I'd go and look for another poem just like that and I'd be disappointed and move on. So, read until you finally do connect, and then don't make the poets repeat themselves. Walt Whitman: when I first read him he completely boggled me. There was something there. He was offering me exactly what I most feared, most needed, most wanted, but I couldn't admit, couldn't quite see. Younger readers should know that that door of resistance is the one you should keep knocking on until it opens.



Madingley Church Cemetery

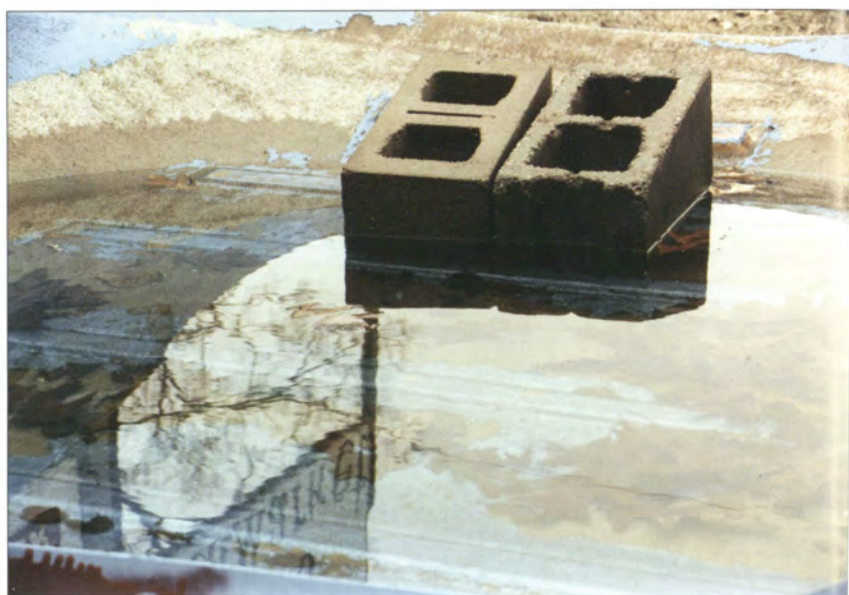
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Untitled
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Fabric softens the fall

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"hey linda, i just took your picture."

Matt Olin



Reflections of the Past
Erika Lusthoff

Upon Learning of My Brother's Death

Ralph Asher

I.

Long vanished as a vapor
is summer's heat and snow
blankets sparse green grass
and peppers buzz-cut hair.
My father grabs groceries
from the car's dimly-lit trunk.

Black clouds shimmer
as straining moonbeams thrash
through billows, and collapse.
High beam car lights scare
startled flakes of falling
white. Deep black emptiness
divides ivory spots, floating
from eternity to namelessness.

II.

A family photo album, opened
to yellowed pages, closed
for years with rotting air.
A scared boy from inside
a soldier stares in camouflage
as green fades into red and blue.

A few pages prior, the beach
commands a scene of family.
I shiver in a woolen sweater
as he, shirtless, builds castles
in the sand. Another picture:
he lies entombed to his neck
and smiles as hot wind scatters
grains and I stand, feet buried.

West River Theater

Sarah Werner

Ancient, empty city
movie theater,
royal red
dusked to rust-brown.
Dust motes glitter,
swirl like snow
around a lone man,
a stone carving in its center.

His pale, dry
brown eyes ride
soft-glowing
dustbeams
to age-spattered screen
where grey men steal
hearts of grey women
as they dance cheek-to-cheek
to heartdrum's beat
and rollicking crackle
of clogged speakers.

And to this rhythm
a prayer slowly gathers,
oiling over old, rusted parts,
calling forth a flood –
and crawling, naked,
from his eye,
mingles with frozen dust
and blurs the sharp edges
of silence
when he begins to weep.



Rainy Day Parade
Melanie Schaap

The Independence Center

Adam Ortman

Therese's nose is tiny as a rabbit's. Her teeth each have their own little margin and hang down wide as Chiclets, with a gap on the bottom row where a new tooth is slowly pushing its way up. It is an hour from dusk at the Wyandotte County Fair, and she blows her white-blond hair from her eyes to get a clear look at me.

"No kidding?" she asks.

"No kidding," I say.

She draws her lips into her mouth as if to consult with them. Therese is always careful to establish that I am serious before she spends herself over what I tell her. Frequently I am kidding.

"Well can I try it, then?"

"T, I just told you they always *win*. You wouldn't want to be seen losing to a *chicken*, would you?"

She gives me a look - her mouth gaping, her eyes rolling up and staring through her clenched eyebrows.

"Okay," I say. "Fine. But be careful when it gets that fierce look in its eyes. That's when it's making its move."

She nods, her eyes narrowing for battle, and we head toward the man with the chickens. When we pass the man spinning cotton candy and the woman who draws portraits, Therese stays quiet. We came yesterday and each ordered a large bag of cotton candy, which we ate while the woman drew our pictures. Halfway through the sitting, Therese caught sight of our portrait and gasped. She didn't say a word, but for the rest of the time she held her bag of cotton candy in front of her face and wouldn't move it for all the woman's pleading.

When the woman finished, I saw why Therese had gasped. We had heads as big as parade floats on top of tiny bodies, and Therese's front teeth were huge.

"She made my teeth look like plates," she had said. "How does a lady like that get a job drawing people's faces if she's going to make their teeth so big?"

The man with the chickens is cleaning his nails with a ride ticket when we approach him. A red hat rests high on his head, and he wears a pair of overalls with a black shirt underneath. Therese waits quietly for him to finish, then takes a step forward and holds out a folded dollar bill.

"You got a chicken that plays tic-tac-toe?" she says. Her voice is wary - as though I may have already enlisted this man in my elaborate ruse.

He takes the dollar from her and nods to a row of six aluminum boxes behind his chair. They are resting on a long, tall metal table that comes up to Therese's chest. The face of each box is divided into nine glass squares, and at the base of each square is a little metal lever. From inside the boxes come the scratching, flustered sounds of chickens. He points to a box at the end.

"Awright, you see these little switches here?"

She nods.

"Chicken's O's, you're X's. You flip the switch over to the side to make a box X, then the chicken goes. You're first."

She puts her face against the glass. "That's him in there?"

"That's her," the man says.

She takes her time looking in the box, making a blur on the glass with her breath.

"Go on, now. You start," he says.

"I know I do. Can't I look at him first?"

"Awright." He tips his hat at her and steps back.

"Rob?"

"Yeah," I say.

"I don't want you looking over my shoulder telling me where to play, okay? This one's my game." Her eyes are already scolding, warning me of the wrath to come should I make a suggestion.

"Okay, I'll stand over here."

"Well," she turns back toward me, "you can come watch. Just, you know, stay quiet."

She is all business when she turns back to the box. First, she slides the lever under the top right corner, leaving a red "X" over the square. I smile—her tic-tac-toe form comes from me anyway, so I don't have to say a thing.

Then there is a click, and something like a little pellet rattles in the box. I see the white chicken's head appear in the center pane and peck at a metal switch where the pellet rests, bringing a blue "O" across the glass. Therese scratches the top of her head and then flips the lever on the bottom left. The chicken counters with an "O" in the middle row, and Therese has to move to block. From then on, the chicken is on the offensive, but Therese blocks its every move. The game ends *cat*, and Therese puts her nose against the glass, looking in.

"How did you know?" she says, and then turns back to me. Her eyebrows are raised, and her lips form a smirk.

"Don't take it too hard. It's a really smart chicken," I say.

"I *tied*." She wags her finger at me. "You said they always win. It didn't. That game was *cat*."

"No, I said they never *lose*. For a chicken, *cat* games are the same as

winning."

"You said they always win." She is beginning to look irritated.

"Well, then I guess they don't. Are we good to go now that you've humiliated that man's chicken?"

She looks across the fairgrounds, holding her eyes on the portrait woman with the easel for a moment, her lips tight over her teeth, and says, "Yep." We head toward the parking lot.

When we arrive home, Aunt Jane is on the phone in the kitchen. Therese runs up to her and whispers, "Mom. Mom, I got cat against a chicken Rob said never lost." Jane doesn't respond, and so Therese adds, "Plus, when we rode the Ring of Fire the man let us stay on for a double ride, and when a boy barfed it got all over the people sitting behind him."

This isn't exactly true—it turned out to be just a spilled milkshake and not puke—but Jane isn't listening, anyway.

She cups her hand over the receiver and says, "Honey, take off your shoes. And hold on a sec, I'm talking to your Grandpa Erwin."

Therese kicks her shoes at the front door, where they hit with two knocks, and then stands on tiptoes next to her mother to listen.

Jane nods at me and I say, "T, come on, let's go wash your hands. You know the fair's got all kinds of diseases in it. For all we know you picked up bird flu from that chicken."

She ignores me, but I pull on her sleeve until she relents and follows me to the bathroom.

I turn the knob and feel the water until it's warm but not hot, and Therese washes her hands.

"You don't have to temperature my water for me anymore. I'm not going to burn myself."

This use of *temperature* is her own doing. No one has advised against it yet, and I can see no reason why it should be me.

"Well congratulations," I say. "Things are really starting to change around here now that you took care of that chicken."

She shakes her wet hands at the sink, speckling the mirror with drops, and briefly inspects her teeth. When she sees me notice, her lips close and she says, "I don't know. It was cat, like you said. I'm only halfway there. Next year maybe I'll win."

"Are you kidding? We're talking about a battle with nature, here. In this world, a cat's as good as a win. I was just jealous."

She smirks, and I hand her a towel.

Later, when Therese is in bed and I am in my room in the basement, absently plucking strings on an old acoustic guitar that had been

my uncle Craig's, Jane knocks at my door and I tell her to come in.

"He turned up," she says.

I consider this for a moment. "Craig? Where is he?"

"Guess."

I shrug. "The bottom of the Atlantic."

"Providence Medical Center." She dwells on each syllable, apparently satisfied with the answer.

"Is he all right?"

"It's a special part of the hospital just for drunks. The, uh, Independence Center I think it's called. Checked himself into inpatient care on Sunday."

"He checked *himself* in?"

"That's what Erwin tells me. He was just as surprised. Said it was too bad his daughter didn't figure it out to do the same."

I move my hand over the neck of the guitar, causing the strings to squeak.

"I'm sorry," she adds quickly. "Your mom tried a lot of—I didn't mean—"

"No, it's fine. He's right anyway. She should have."

Jane thins her lips out over her teeth.

"So are you going to go see him?" I say.

"Erwin and Pam already went once, and they say it wasn't a pretty sight. Besides, why should I? He's not my husband anymore. Why should I go see him?"

I'm not sure if this is legally the case, but I let it stand. "What about Therese?"

She watches my fingers press strings against the fret board. I don't strum them, but they buzz out a little bit of noise anyway.

"I haven't decided. I figure I have time. Erwin says the program goes six months—sometimes longer, depending on how he's doing. God knows how he's paying for all of that."

"I could take her," I say. "I mean, if you didn't want to go."

She doesn't respond right away, and so I strum a few chords.

Craig has been gone from the house and, we hear, from all of Kansas for more than a year. He disappeared late last July, and we eventually heard from one of his cousins that he had gone off to Arizona to live with a stripper he met on the internet. Before Craig finally left, I watched him follow roughly the same pattern my mother had gone through a few years before. Bottles of Ron Rico rum (and here it was different: my mother had drunk whatever vodka was on sale at the supermarket) would turn up stashed around the house—in kitchen cupboards, behind the living room couch, under the bathroom sink. He would carry a plastic thermos with him wherever he went, constantly

sipping at it. Checks started to bounce. A string of old bank statements and credit card summaries explained where he went to drink toward the end.

"Why do you need to go to bars?" Jane had yelled in desperation. "You carry that thermos around with you *everywhere*! You can drink yourself blind in the *basement*, just don't run us into debt for it!"

He hadn't always drunk so much, or so destructively. I was fourteen when I moved in with Craig and Jane. It was right after my mom died, and Craig had been friendly and buoyant whenever he came home. He drank then, of course, but it felt more like a celebration than a lament. I was pretty messed up at the time, and he would talk to me about my mom for hours, not really making sense of anything but talking it through until I didn't feel so cut off from everyone. We were close for a couple of years, but then when he started to drink more it became harder for us to connect. Maybe he felt guilty. In a few years, when I was about to graduate high school, his eyes were dark as spent matchsticks, his skin pale and swollen. Then, soon after the checks started to bounce, he disappeared without a trace. It didn't affect me as much as it might have, since in a lot of respects he had already gone.

Jane's eyes move from the guitar to my face. "We'll see," she says, and leaves the room.

It is the Sunday before Thanksgiving. Jane has finally let it slip to Therese that her father is in town. Therese went ballistic when she discovered that this had been hidden from her for nearly three months, and I watched as she alternated between refusing to talk to her mother in anger, and pestering her with an endless series of questions about him. Eventually, Therese's curiosity overwhelmed her and she wouldn't let the subject of her father go until it was established that she could visit him.

"What do you think he'll be like?" she says.

I shrug.

I am driving her to meet Craig at the Independence Center for an early Thanksgiving meal. She is wearing a purple jacket she got for her seventh birthday. It is too small for her by now, but she insisted on wearing it anyway, explaining that her father wouldn't recognize any of her newer coats.

"Do you think he's changed? Do you think he'll think I've changed?"

Therese is carrying a card she made for him on her lap. She worked on it all week—ever since she learned that he was back and was able to convince Jane to let her go visit. This is the fourth version of the card. Therese crumpled the first three attempts, and was looking critically on

her fourth when her mother took the extra paper, glue, and markers away and declared the card finished. On the front, she had traced her hand and glued on feathers to make a turkey.

When I shrug again, Therese stares out her window. The leaves are all thick and brown on the ground like dirty water searching for a drain. Without anything to cover them up the trees are just a bunch of skinny sticks, and the bird nests are plain as day in the crooks of branches. I consider Therese's question and realize, with a start, that Craig may have changed in any number of ways since we last saw him.

We arrive at the Independence Center just before noon. It is a bleak, square building pressed up against the rest of the hospital, and a constellation of flattened cigarette butts is scattered around the front door like bird crap.

Before we step inside, Therese touches my arm and says, "Rob?"

I stop and look down at her. "Yeah?"

"You know I get shy sometimes. If I can't think of anything to say, you'll talk to him, okay?"

"Sure," I say.

"Good."

When we walk inside, I realize the weight this charge has placed on my shoulders. I am to make things go smoothly. This, I had hoped, would be Therese's job at the meal, but I was wrong. What will I say to him? "*So, Craig, how's life? Those Arizona teams are a bit of a let-down, huh? Stripper move back to K.C., too, or did you come back alone?*"

Before I can think of anything suitable, though, Craig is standing right there in the front lobby. I wonder, briefly, if he had been watching us through the front window. He gives a smile and walks toward us. I smile, too, and attempt to harmonize this man with the one I knew a little over a year ago. He is just as tall and lanky as he had always been, but his face is drawn down a bit more, as though he had been holding something heavy in his mouth the whole year. The arms of a too-large grey sweatshirt are pulled up around his elbows.

"Hey, hey," he says, and walks up to the two of us. He looks at Therese and his shoulders dip for just a moment, preparing to hug, but she looks back up at him with such wide eyes that he appears to think better of it and pats her on the back instead. I figure she must have noticed how oddly pulled his face looks, like taffy, and was unable to hide her surprise.

"Reesey, it's so good to see you," he says.

She looks down at her feet and says, softly, "It's Therese, now."

"Oh," he says, and looks down at the card in her hands. "Did you make this for me?"

She nods, her lips curling into a smile, and hands it up to him. He

looks at it for a moment and then grins down at her. "Marvelous." Then he looks at me, his voice going low. "And Rob, how is, uh—"

"Work," I say. "I did a year at the community college, but I'm at Jiffy Lube right now. We needed the money."

"Oh, well, that's great. I'm sure they think you're great," he says.

I nod, and we all stand silently for a moment. Then he says, "I'll bet you're hungry. Let's go get something to eat," and motions toward double doors at the back of the lobby with Therese's card. When he brings it down, a feather comes unglued and floats to the carpet. He turns his back to lead us out of the lobby, and Therese picks up the feather and sticks it in her pocket. Then we follow him through a couple of halls and take the elevator down to the cafeteria.

"Grab anything you want," he says. "Turkey, gravy, stuffing—they've got a lot of different kinds of pie you should check out, too, Reese," he says. "It's our Thanksgiving meal, so don't hold back!"

Therese is about to pick up a hamburger when Craig notices and insists that she eat turkey. He takes her tray and starts adding things—potatoes, corn, stuffing, and cranberries. Then several dinner rolls, a bean casserole, yams, and two different kinds of pie. It is more than the three of us could eat together, and he has to carry it to the register for Therese, because she complains that it is too heavy. I grab a couple of slices of turkey and an apple.

We find a small square table in the middle of the cafeteria and sit. Craig reaches over to help Therese take off her coat, but she resists.

"Aren't you hot in that thing?" he asks. She shakes her head no, and he gives up.

Once we're all sitting, he grins at Therese and me and sets both of his hands, palms up, on the table. "Okay, who wants to pray? Rob?"

Therese and I share a look, but don't say anything. I can tell she is wondering the same thing I am. Since when does Craig pray before a meal? Or pray at all?

"I'll pray," he says, and nods towards his hands. Therese and I both put our palms on his. His hand is hot and wet. "I'll leave a spot at the end if either of you wants to add something." He whispers a short prayer of thanks for family and food, something I vaguely remember hearing at family gatherings over the holidays when I was much younger. When he finishes, he does not say *Amen*. Instead, he pauses and squeezes my hand a little—waiting, apparently, for Therese or me to say something as well. After a few seconds, I open one eye a bit and see Therese doing the same thing. We make eye contact with our single eyes, and then notice Craig's lids sliding up just slightly. For a moment, the three of us look at one another, motionless.

"Amen," Therese says quickly, and we all take our hands back and

reach for our silverware.

I try not to think about how odd Therese's mountain of food must look next to my bare tray, only a couple of its compartments filled. She spoons around in it, as though playing in an overfull sandbox, and then eats a little bite of cranberry sauce.

Craig asks Therese a few questions about school, but each time she mumbles a response that is nearly inaudible. He nods, though, pretending to understand.

I want to ask Craig what, exactly, he has been doing for the past year. Has he been working? Has that stripper been supporting him with her earnings, sending him off to buy groceries with a wad of dollar bills? Instead, I say, "So, ah, six months in this place. It's got to be pretty expensive, right?"

"Grandpa Erwin and Grandma Pam are covering it," he says. "Until I can pay them back." He focuses down on his food, pushing corn up into his potatoes. "They offered, I didn't ask them to or anything. Said they were happy to do it, that they had learned their mistake with Kate."

Before he can elaborate much about my mother, I say, "Is it working?"

Therese flits her eyes up from her tray and quickly puts them back down.

Craig smiles sourly before he answers. I can tell he would have been happy to avoid the subject entirely. "I suppose they know what they're doing. There's this psychologist here that really gets on my nerves, though. Drives me nuts. He does this thing where he'll say *hm* instead of cursing. He'll say, 'Sometimes a guy'll want to shout "Go *hm* yourself" or "You're full of *hm*," or whatever. I told him he could stick it up his *hm*. He can say *shit* if he means to say *shit*, you know?" Craig glances over at Therese, who is staring down at all her food like she is searching it for an exit, and says, "Sorry, hon'. I get a little carried away."

In no time I am finished with my meal and can only watch on while Craig and Therese eat. Awkward with an empty plate, I lift a piece of cherry pie from Therese's tray and slowly poke at it with my fork, determined to make it last. Surveying the tables around us, I watch as a few other groups of people—probably families, too—crowd around the little tables to eat their Thanksgiving meal. Therese's face is glowing red, and her lips are pulled in. Her food looks like it has barely been touched.

"Well, is everyone here that bad? It's sort of a long time to spend if you don't make a couple of friends," I say.

"Eh," he says, and wipes his mouth with a napkin. "It's tough on

everyone here, I suppose. We're a bunch of dry drunks, is how they say it." He looks over at Therese. "Reese, your food's going to get cold." Then he looks back at me. "When I got here, I couldn't help but think about how Kate used to act when she was pregnant with you, Rob. She had this terrible temper—smashed half her plates for one reason or another, swore all the time, was always arguing with your Grandma Pam over something, and that wasn't usually like her. At the time I figured it was just normal pregnancy stuff—plus, you know, she was under a lot of stress trying to track down the guy who'd knocked her up."

I flinch—Craig has a great way of bringing up my dad.

"But now I think the short fuse came from staying off the booze the whole time she was pregnant with you. People act just like that here. I think we'd all be easier to live with if we were single and pregnant instead."

He pauses, apparently waiting for a laugh. I glance at Therese, who appears to be sucking on an empty spoon. When she sees me watching, she quickly pulls it out.

"Why do you think they give us these plastic trays to eat off and not plates?" He taps his tray with his fork. "They think we're gonna go and—Reese!"

I look across the table just in time to watch Therese heave out a great flow of puke all over her tray. She finishes with an "Ack," and spits out a few remaining bits of turkey. We all wait for a moment to see if anything more will come, but it doesn't.

"I—I'm sorry," she says, and immediately I reach over with a napkin to wipe any pieces of food off her coat, but am surprised to find her spotless. Most of it landed in her tray, and a little had spilled onto the table.

"Well, so I suppose we're done, then?" Craig says with a chuckle, although I can see that he is gritting his teeth.

Therese takes a drink of her water and nods. "I think it was the yams," she says. "They were a little cold."

I stack her tray on top of mine and Craig's, which are nearly clean, dump the mass of food and vomit into a nearby garbage can, and set the three trays on a rack while Craig wipes the table off with some napkins.

As we walk out of the cafeteria, Craig says, "So do you want to come see my room? It's kind of small but I think we could all fit if—"

"Rob? Can we go?" Therese is looking up at me. "I'm really still not feeling very good."

I look over at Craig. His face is blank.

"I suppose we can. Are you sure?"

She nods.

"All right," Craig says. "Well how about I walk you up to the front door, then?"

We take the elevator up a floor and walk to the lobby in silence. When we reach the front door, Craig thanks us for coming.

"Happy Thanksgiving," I say.

"Yeah," Therese says. She offers up a short smile, but keeps her lips tight over her teeth.

The three of us stand in front of the door for a moment, and then Craig leans over to pat Therese on the back and shake my hand. When we leave and cross the parking lot, a wind picks up and blows dry leaves across the asphalt. The sky looks like mashed potatoes, and I wince to think of Therese's plate, steeped in vomit. We get in the car and sit quietly for a moment.

"You okay?" I say.

She reaches into her pocket and takes out the feather that had fallen from her card in the lobby, inspecting it. "Did he seem the same to you?" she says. "I mean, was he like you remembered him?"

"I don't know. Maybe a little different."

She spins the feather around in her fingers. "He seemed different to me. A lot."

The outside wind gusts and causes the car to shiver. "But better, though, right? Didn't he seem better? With the praying and all?"

She nods once, but keeps her eyes down. An old white Plymouth pulls up next to us and shuts off. A gray-haired woman steps out and fastens a scarf around her neck. Her car door slams with a quick bark, rousing Therese.

"Rob?" she says. "How did your mom die?"

I watch as the old woman walks against the wind towards the Independence Center, her scarf flapping against her shoulder. "You know how," I say. "A car accident. She hit a tree on her way home one night."

Therese looks up from the feather. "But, I mean, it was because she was a drunk, wasn't it? That she died?"

"She had been drinking."

"Hm." She lifts the feather up to her lips and runs it across them a few times, then draws the end of it into her mouth.

"T, your dad's going to get better. That's why he's here."

"I know. I know that," she says. "But if I ever come back here again I want you to come with."

"Okay," I say. "Same goes for me then."

I turn the key in the ignition and the car rumbles to a start. Slowly, we pull out of the parking lot and I drive us home.

Why The Hell Are You In That Tree, Walt Whitman

Tracy Mons

Why the hell are you in that tree, perched like an inquisitive swallow or a peering, wide-eyed owl? You'll rip your dusty trousers, old man, snag your beard on sly branches, dirty your shoes. Climb down, follow me to my house where I'll pull stubborn splinters from your hands with clean tweezers. I see your nails are snagged and there is dirt caked in those torn pores. You may bathe, but remember, I've heard gossip of your habits, and this, Sir, is a monogamous home. My husband is late again, but he will be here soon, so keep to yourself any notions of free love

I'm sleeveless in the kitchen, peeling onions, drinking clear, sweet iced tea. There are chores to be done, though; we should fill perfume bottles in room and stuff knick-knacks on shelves. Draw the patterned drapes so I can't see the thick stems of my fearless roses topped with savage, scarlet blooms.

Before dinner gets cold, you can gather your grieving lilacs into a basket and help me trim my rose bushes lest they creep onto the neighbor's grass.



40 Years of Service
Kristopher Robert Schuster



Untitled
Rachael Button



Red Hot Stairs
Kaht North



on the passing of childhood

Matt Olin



Untitled
Danielle Guerra



Kickoff
Matt Schaefer



Light-threefaces
Windhoek, Namibia
Dan Beirne



William Wilson: Act I
Lauren Schreiber



William Wilson: The Seducer

Lauren Schreiber



Untitled: Near Lake Michigan

Melanie Schaap

The Unknowables

Evan Scott Bryson

1:1

THESE ARE ALL THINGS YOU HATE ABOUT YOURSELF she wrote on the rearview mirror in her blue Isuzu pickup truck. She wrote this so small at first no one would ever see it, but on the days leading up to her suicide, she would smudge away the eyeliner and write bigger and bigger, until the glass was filled with the words, and the words were near illegible because of the dark brown smudge from all the other words before. The world behind the mirror could not be reflected through the murk. She snapped off the dome light.

She owned an arboretum in the city and a nursery in the country. The arboretum was mostly old growth forest of trees native to the Midwest. Few additional plants were allowed and gifted exotic species were especially not welcome. She inherited the five hundred acres from her father. He mowed the thin trails, painted the sleigh for the winter rides, and made sure the visitor center's beehive was buzzing. When he died of cancer she understood the many complications managing an arboretum contains. She was smart not only with the upkeep but also the land developers wanting to lop acreage for strip malls and gas stations. Her nursery sold mostly conifers and wild flower seeds. Kids say the apple trees on the property withered and died when her husband left. They did. She poisoned them.

Kids called her the pumpkin lady. Every October for as long as they could remember, she brought pumpkins from her nursery to the lawn of her father's house, a white farm manor right off of US 27. She spread the pumpkins across the barn lot, roosting them atop white fence posts, piling them with gnarled gourds and festive Indian corn, and organizing them into families of size. The largest, most luminous and sleek pumpkins were fixed at the top of the barn lot's incline, with the smallest pumpkins, some under-color or squishy, shaking at the edge of the drive. In this way, no profit loss when minivans made too wide of park jobs. She savored this order. She saw pumpkins as plebs and emperors. This fancy may be the precedent for the ride back to the nursery when she first scribbled THESE ARE ALL THINGS YOU HATE ABOUT YOURSELF.

Her wrist had moved across the mirror and it was over with. Right there. In front of her eyes. Her eyes still swept back and forth searching

for what was writ. The handwriting was so small she squinted. When at last she grasped what her own fingers wrote she gasped in surprise. She thought perhaps she would be hurt, that she hurt herself writing those words down, but the longer she stared at the words and repeated the phrase inside her mind the more she quite agreed.

It was stupid really, she tried to convinced herself the morning after. She felt artistic when she wrote the words again, she felt like the expression had a profound impact on her concept of her surroundings. She felt like an artist. When she got home that first night she waded around her kitchen inspecting the grout between tiles, she articulated her distaste with the carpets to the brown beetles gathering in the ceiling corners, she smelled inside the VCR because it made her remember the movies she watched with her husband. She masturbated in the shower and in the bedroom and in the basement laundry room in front of her cats, and they stared at her, and wild-eyed she stared back at them, and afterwards she trimmed her still-wet fingernails down to the quick and sucked the pain out of them. The Pumpkin Lady, she chorused around her back yard, sticking her finger into the cold, hard ground, getting worms and root and fungus and larvae into her blood. Her blue flannel sleeping-gown gathered twigs and red leaves along its hem. The Pumpkin Lady, she screamed as she turned on her husband's power tools and saws in the garage. She wanted to be heard over his debris. When her vocal chords tired and a fuse busted she crawled into the living room and looked at pictures of her dead father. She told him she was The Pumpkin Lady.

The mornings after were each more vivid and beautiful than the last. Each voyage to The Pumpkin Patch promised a harmony with the land, a determination for success, and a motivation above and beyond recall of duty. She did, after all, only sell pumpkins, she told herself. And she was plain faced with wispy brown hair, why she carried eyeliner around was insulting. But she did. And because she carried it around with her the anticipation of writing THESE ARE ALL THINGS YOU HATE ABOUT YOURSELF never diminished but intensified and became lust.

Despite her great care and considerations for the arboretum it lost money. No one wanted to pay to enter woods. The State Parks were scraping by for the same mentality, and with the free city parks, her arboretum became all the more redundant. Teenagers climbed over the fencing and carved their names into the black oaks. Mothers clipped the fencing with their husband's industrial sheers to journey into the heart

of the arboretum, its wetlands, to claim swamp rose. Grandfathers prayed in the grove of sycamores along the river and placed their hands upon the fallen leaves, leaves larger still than the gnarled hands placed side by side. The aged got in free.

Eastern deciduous forest biomes compete with tallgrass prairie. Ghost wood finds its way into the plain states by following rivers. The riparian forests created are talons within the geography. She liked remembering these bits, semi-jargon to naturalists and graduates of forestry. She never went to college but she could talk circles around her friends when they asked about plants. She liked folklore, too. When she signed away thirty acres to developers and watched the first bulldozers arrive and men with chainsaws step out, she recalled a tale her father told about an outing into Pepper Town.

He was driving in his work van and it was dusk. The sun was behind bruise-colored clouds slouching on hilltops. He was winding down a pass with a river to his left and crags to his right. The road was backwoods for certain, no towns breaking into the pine covered hills for miles. Around a bend a woman walked on the edge of the road and his car illuminated her features. His cautious speed settled the details. He noted the gray rags she wore for a dress, her nearly bare shoulders. He wondered if what held up the dress was bailing twine, it became so dirty and ragged near her neck. Long black hair obscured her face, falling in clumps across her eyes, greasy along the hinted slopes of breasts and nearly to her knees. Her feet in high black boots hovered above the ground.

She remembered how her father would take deep breaths when he told this story. He told this story on holidays, on Christmas especially, late at night with empty mugs of rum eggnog surrounding them surrounding the fire. This was when her brother was still alive. Her brother died on his seventeenth birthday. Automobile crash. She vaguely resented him for dying in his prime, at such a sublime age. He died in eternal summers, the crack of bats hitting baseballs, the first time he made love to a girl. She never knew her mother.

The Pepper Town Witch is what her father called the lady in rags. She was not a ghost, she was not a demon, she was simply a witch. A woman wrapped in black magic, a woman marauding the dark roads, a woman known for luring foolish men back to her cave hovel in the abandoned quarry and devouring their souls. When he neared her she floated to the level of his seat so when his open window passed she

could have kissed him, or filled every mirror on the work van with her sable eyes. The air chilled and smelled of burned hair. Then she was gone. Disappeared. He coughed and looked in his mirrors again. He only saw a pair of boots, wasted on the gravel, growing smaller and smaller in the green evening light.

THESE ARE ALL THINGS YOU HATE ABOUT YOURSELF recognized her most disgusting secrets. She loved the amount of money she got for the land. Thirty-million dollars was nothing to scoff at. She had never seen thirty-thousand dollars. The handsome sum would secure the land for generations to come. And legislation for further national forestry protection was guaranteeing that the sacrifice of thirty acres was not in vain. She had money enough to rent a governess, and was she not determined to die within the week she probably would have bought a stately manor in the sticks of some remote county and nestled in with a butler. Such lavishes she felt were deserved. She could not qualify why, but she decided, yes, she was worth war spoils. On the drive home she half expected to see her father's witch hovering in her truck bed, luring her to quarries and then killing her. She looked in her rearview mirror and remembered things about the land that made her heart hurt, and she saw nothing but the large swoops of letters, gilded in a color like shit. My life, she conceded, is absolutely shit.

She drove her pickup into the garage. She turned off the ignition. The engine knocked. She got out of the truck and rummaged around the garage for an old sweater in the rag bin. She pulled one free, a green one. She clicked the garage door opener and the garage door creaked shut. She got back in the trunk and turned the key in the ignition. She rolled down the windows. She remembered the cats in the basement. She put the sweater over the steering wheel for when she returned. She unlocked the basement door and the front door and summoned the cats to her. She ripped open a bag of cat food and showered it down upon her pets. They slinked back and forth around her ankles and dry cat food dust settled into the delicate hairs inside their ears. She kicked a pumpkin off her front porch and went back into the garage, cloudy with blue exhaust. She rested her head on the sweater-covered steering wheel. She breathed deeply. She coughed some then fell asleep. Then she died.

1:½

We decided first about the mirror. What she wrote on it. Hal and Johnson listened to sappy emo songs too often and got stoned listening

to The Smiths and Brand New and The Stranglers. Someone, probably Ronnie's girlfriend, wrote him really gay love letters with her make-up. She even kissed them with purple lipstick after she'd folded them into a billion angles. You had to tear those fuckers open, we could never figure out the one corner that would unfold the paper. Japanese folds. Something. Sometimes she put sparkles inside of them, so you had to open them in the backseat. We stole six of Sadie's love letters because we knew Ronnie's locker combination. Johnson kept them because he'd always wanted Sadie and Matt made a big deal about it too, because he just thought it was wrong. When he argued about it with Johnson one time, about giving them back to Ronnie when him and Sadie were going through a rough patch when they were sophomores, Johnson said something real nasty that made Matt totally pissed as hell, so he told Johnson that he only collected the letters because they reminded him of what he hated about himself, that he was crook and a liar and really lonely. And when Hal and Johnson were listening to sappy emo songs junior year, they remembered this, and the pumpkin lady, and her suicide, and they decided this is how she knew she wasn't going to make it out alive.

Other tidbits were incidental, we added them at every passing of the story. We needed it told in a certain drawl, circumspect to reality as we knew, but parallel, somehow without our knowing, to the malaise we suffered into our senior years of high school and which stretched into Freshman year of college and ended, one night, in November. We knew her since elementary school, some us before it. And yet we knew nothing about her. Her father did die of cancer, this we knew. The arboretum, we added that. We knew she had a nursery but nothing about a nursery assures suicide. Just a bunch of plants in rows. With the arboretum there was a financial burden and burgeoning schism between city politics and country sensibilities, plus when we came back from college our freshman year, there it was, thirty acres of the arboretum lopped to make room for a Walgreen's on the corner, an Olive Garden away from the main highway, and a Kohl's with ample parking for all those mothers wanting inexpensive blue jeans. The brothers in charge of the arboretum had screwed themselves into dire straits, so they sold thirty acres. Easy. That land had been their father's and his father's and his father's father's father's, all the way back when we still had bobcats and red wolves in the region, and some bears. Tecumseh and Bluejacket. The pumpkin lady, as far as we know, never stepped foot into the arboretum. We've only been there on school field trips.

Every October for as long as we can remember she was always there.

When we heard about her suicide, the impact should've been silly. When our middle school home-ec teacher's husband hung himself in the barn, we made jokes. We still make jokes. About hanging wall decorations. But the pumpkin lady came as a blow to the fantasy constructions of our childhoods. She inhabited a glacial landscape, crisp and slow to catch hold of the earth—but immeasurably powerful and majestic. Her obliteration unhinged our dizzying panorama of jack-o-lanterns and shaving cream, kisses on tennis courts dressed as demons while our grandmothers waited on front porches for their princesses and mutilated prom queens to come home before being turned into, well, a pumpkin.

Somewhere we picked up guns and we picked up drugs and we fucked around. The pumpkin lady didn't have anything to do with that, it was only the small town. Well, considering the many upstanding privateers that came out alive, maybe it wasn't the small town—maybe it was just something inside each of us, something disembodied but waiting until we got hair under our pits. After we'd read enough by reading as little as possible to pull off the grades to get out of this big shithole. We added the stuff about being an artist, about sniffing inside the VCR after we'd been on our own hands and knees sniffing the inside of a VCR, we don't remember why. Masturbating in front of cats—that was from when Marcus was in middle school and bought pumpkins for his kid brother, and his kid brother noticed cat fur on the pumpkin lady's ass, and asked her about it, and she blushed and told him that she had four cats and they got fur everywhere. And on the drive home in the back seat, Marcus told his kid brother, Danny, "That cat fur, you know?" "Yeah?" said his kid brother. "She strokes her clit over those cats, she sticks their paws inside of her and gets off on their tails swishing across her tits." His kid brother stared horrified at the passing field, the dead corn stalks scratching dead corn stalks in the wind made him think of praying mantises. "Does she really?" asked Danny. "Bet ten she does," said Marcus, "and I bet she hits them around so they hiss and scratch her too." At this point his little brother began to cry and Marcus's mom freaked out because Danny wouldn't tell her what was wrong except that the pumpkin lady was mean to her pets. We thought this was so awesome and so stupid that we had to add it to the lore.

We looked up forestry. We looked up flowers and bees. We helped our moms in the summer with their gardens, we weren't ashamed to hop on the tractor to help our dads bring in the crop. We knew the seasons and what the seasons held. We needed to know what the pumpkin lady would have known. We visited nurseries—not hers, we never knew

where it was. Near Centerville? Near Alquina? Philomath, Richmond, Winchester? When she was dead and we had our licenses we drove to the haunted orchards and paid good money to get spooked in pole barns by kids our own ages in rags and wielding unchained chainsaws. Our girlfriends held their hands into back-pockets wandering through the dark plywood mazes, their hot breath wetted the backs of our necks, and sometimes we told them we loved them. Tamara gave Johnson a blowjob inside one, and Ronnie brought a knife because he always got so scared. We ate fruits and vegetables, we cooked gourds, we put Christmas lights on the trees in below-zero temperatures because there was so much to know about the pumpkin lady and there was so much that we could never know, so much that was maddeningly unknowable. When we went inside to get warm, our fathers told us their best ghost stories. We gave these to the pumpkin lady. When Danny died the first time he ever drove with a license, we gave that to the pumpkin lady, too.

A lot of our fathers left because their wives would have left them. And the factory in town closed up and the police force demoted several officers to volunteer status because the county just couldn't pay for them. We thought of the pumpkin lady when some of us went off to college. Matt went away and so did Mercer and Tamara, so Johnson stuck around and huffed gas at the station, and Sadie went to community college in a bigger town, she commuted every morning and came back by seven because Ronnie called her every night from some far off state school. When we all came back we started fights with each other because we dressed different and spoke new phrases and dropped our jowls at different ladies, chaffing the chaws of our old maids, and Hal was blowing his wad into a Connersville whore, which we forgave because he got her pregnant. The pumpkin lady, the scale, her burdens, pages into rough drafts, whittled down to the most essential, all that you could need to know before you got so drunk you'd never remember it any better or hold it any longer.

Came down to hands. Sadie's hands bleeding above the pavement. Then Sadie's hands white as her bandana floated like an angel feather and covered the blood and Marcus mumbled something about that, Tamara told Joyce. "Marcus coughed and then he said, 'so fuckin sick,' but it was his gun, his gun," repeated Tamara, after, on the drive home. Matt stood in the middle of the road looking for a car to just run him into the pavement, he wanted to die looking at the back of Sadie's head, the hole, the smell. How his friends looked at him in that moment like

how Sadie would have looked at him. "She sayin anything?" he asked. "Did she say somethin?" Not that Sadie ever talked that much, but her blonde hair was black with blood in the night and her hands filled with blood and Matt would have paid Ronnie anything to take back the gun and take back the bullet to take back everything if it meant Sadie would say anything at all again. Marcus said, "Dude, we gotta roll before the cops show." And Matt looked at his own hands, in one a joint and in the other a pistol and he thought to laugh for a second—he felt really good as much as he felt really bad, just awful, the time his mom got carted off for stealing a car came to mind, but this was his and he didn't know how to break it apart. "She sayin anything?" he asked again, no one, the dark bushes, the moon, wires crossing over their heads. "She can't say shit cuz she's dead," said Tamara. Matt crossed his arms. "How do I break it apart?" he asked Joyce and she shook her head at him and she had this crazy grin on her face and when Matt looked back at Sadie she fell over onto the sidewalk and the blood in her head leaked and leaked making a sludge all around her ear and now-broken nose.

B. Kite describes "the hard struggle of trying to discover how much pain of others we can integrat into ourselves," which is something Marcus told us after he'd read enough to fill Tupperware with solipsistic—his word—drivel from going to college. But we really did believe that because it wasn't Ayn Rand nonsense and it wasn't Herman Hesse mysticism or Pynchon metafiction. We really could only fill ourselves with her disgrace—if that was what it was, and that is what our congregations said, and this is what we could not understand. The whole community knew about it. Who they'd bought pumpkins from for twenty years had committed suicide and no one could tell their sons and daughters why, so we made it up. We made it up so much the story stuck in our ears like batter on a spoon, dried over then crusted into imperfect semblances of a reality we couldn't miss, not miss like we'd lost something, but lose. There came the time when the story never seemed to end and stretched out a cold purple hand to our own hearts, like the garage door didn't close all the way. Maybe it didn't.

We couldn't believe in god anymore because it was so stupid, so trivial. She died at the fulcrum of cool, on the eighth grade's lip, where we were too embarrassed to attend youth fellowship nights or ask our friends to sleepover—it was now campouts and sitting around the fire with stolen whiskey. This lore infests the mind more than the Bible. And when our fathers left what did we have left of them? We had only their spirits, only the angry ghosts and witches and curses milling

around shaded drives, deserted quarries and half-burned down houses, made from strange tales told late at night on holidays while mothers settled into bed early without kissing us on the foreheads before bed. So maybe the pumpkin lady's garage door creaked open a foot or so and the light splashing on the gravel drive was enough to guide any of us lost enough to the oil-stained cement floor beyond, to lean through the rolled-down window of her blue pick-up and rest our heads on the green sweater right next to hers.

Electric Sizzle

Ralph Asher

I.

Lights dim and surge within
the tiny one-bedroom flat —
Shouts, mute and muffled,
emanate from above. I don
earmuffs and change the bulb
that sizzles and pops as smoke
fills my bedroom. Angry fumes,
curls and rings, whisper secrets.

Tears flow like charge on wire.
A lamp crashes on my ceiling
and vicious sparks diffuse.
The ceiling fan, once dormant,
springs alive with violent
intensity, spinning unbridled.

II.

A door slams forcefully above —
I duck my head into the hall.
Static energy crackles, surrounds
my body as the hallway's lone
bulb sways on a vinyl string.
It bursts, showering glass.

She descends the staircase,
pupils red and hands maroon.
My mouth agape, I wonder
at her flowing skirt and blouse,
incandescent and billowing.
I consider inviting her in
but she wordlessly passes, eyes
empty. The town goes black.



Vanity
Melanie Schaap

Silk

Sarah Werner

The book of fairy tales lays open on her pillow, which is pink and edged with a ruffle, and mildly off-white with age. The hair on the pillow shines black as ebony silk; it flows as a river down the side of the bed. It almost touches the floor.

She lies unmoving with her head resting on a pale, crooked arm just below the pillow, eyes vague, perhaps lost in thought. "Locked her up, locked away, they threw away the key," she murmurs rhythmically, barely moving her thin lips. A tiny black kitten mews in fuzzy excitement at the foot of her bed, batting at her hair.

Clumsy movement in the kitchen downstairs rumbles and echoes through the wooden interior of the old house. She blinks back into the tangible world and moves a hand over her pillow until it touches the book. A hangnail corner of a page flakes off as she pulls it closer and begins to read. The pages leave a faint dust on her fingertips, almost as if they decay as her eyes light upon each word. The room grows slowly darker.

Eventually a small gold alarm clock convinces her that it is dinner-time. Sit up, place the book on the nightstand, sweep hair into a ponytail, exit into the hallway. Look at and talk to family.

"Mom!" The single word is shouted, drawn out into a happy yodel. Two pairs of arms are flung around her waist, squeezing with the thin-armed feebleness of children.

"Hey, hon," draws a familiar deep voice. "You didn't look like you were feeling too well when I left this morning, so I made dinner."

She raises her eyebrows and smiles wanly in acknowledgement, and sits down to a meal of Rice-a-Roni and canned peaches on cottage cheese. She chokes down a few small sips of the rich blackberry wine and manages to engage her husband in a conversation about the business trip from which he'd returned the day before. She nods, smiles, agrees. She is his wife.

Finally, "Hey, kids, why don't you go upstairs and play a while? Your mother and I have some adult talking to do." They thunder upstairs, shouting of dinosaurs and video games.

Husband and wife both stand and he sweeps her into a strong-armed hug, kissing her forehead warmly. "Sweetie, what's wrong?" He rocks her back and forth soothingly. "You don't look yourself at all. Did you get sick while I was gone?"

"No," she whispers, looking over his shoulder, breathing in his familiar musky scent, carrying a hint of Ivory soap. She has no voice

with which to speak aloud. "It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

"Oh, come on... Something's bothering you." His chest is familiar and strong and fits with her slender figure perfectly. He sways with her in a comforting dance.

She shakes her head abruptly, eyes burning. "Nothing," she whispers again, still unable to engage her voice.

She feels him nod slowly over her head. "All right, Raye. Why don't you go lie down? I'll do the dishes." He kisses the top of her head. "I love you, sweetie."

She bows her head and whispers, "I know." He throat is gaining layers of heat, quivering under the pressure of her shuddering lungs. She takes a deep breath and holds it. "I love you too, David," she finally whispers, squeezing his middle as hard as she can. She feels him kiss the top of her head again and then his warmth is gone as he strides across the kitchen to the sink full of dishes.

Raye exhales and walks to the bedroom she shares with her husband. She lies down but the new linen sheets are cold and she knows she will not sleep.

*

She creeps back up to the attic room later that night, after David is asleep, and switches on her little reading lamp, which creates a soft golden halo of light. She nestles herself into the thick pink comforter and opens the book of fairy tales once again, this time rifling through the age-softened pages to pore over the detailed woodcut illustrations. There is Koschei the Deathless in chains, Jack's giantess atop the beanstalk, Kari Woodengown on her dapple-grey steed. Baba Yaga's chicken-legged house and Rapunzel's long, thick tresses, up which a dashing mustachioed man climbs with youthful vigor. Raye's eyes flicker toward the single attic window and she feels her throat begin to burn once again.

She hears one of her sons cry out in his sleep and closes the book softly, turning off the lamp and floating like a sleepwalker down the attic stairs.

*

The alarm clock shrieks when its red digits click to 6:30 the next morning. David mumbles a sleepy curse and kisses her cheek before stumbling to the bathroom. Raye stares at the dark ceiling through her hair as the minutes pass. When he returns his gentle, smooth forehead is furrowed in a frown.

"Raye, sweetie, have you seen my red tie?" He holds a tie out for her inspection in the semi-darkness. "I thought this was it—it was lying on the closet floor—but I don't think this one is mine." He tosses the long, silk material into a gentle heap near her feet. "Is that one of the boys'?"

Her mouth is dry. Her eyes flit upward and settle back down on her husband's face. The faint scent of an expensive aftershave caught in the red silk overpowers her senses.

"Raye, are you all right? Are you still sick?"

Her feet shrink back under the covers away from the tie. She is silent for a long time as her throat dries and burns. Her husband stands still, confused but patient.

Finally, she sits up slowly in bed, her black hair falling all around her like streaming water. She holds eye contact with her husband as she silently slides from the bed and stands in one fluid movement. She picks up the tie with delicate, slender fingers and it slithers like oil over her fingers.

Then she bursts into a run and scrambles up to the attic like a frightened child, slamming the thin wooden door on her way.

Her husband does not follow her.

*

Her heart races as she flops down onto the creaking bed in the attic. She knows she is being childish but she cannot help it. Her heart races, pumping with increasing intensity, as she lies there trying to make sense of the flood of thoughts coursing through her brain.

Her thin fingers trace the dark red cover of the book of fairy tales and part of the cracked leather crumbles onto her fingertips. She opens the book and a page sifts out and flutters to the ground. She snatches it from the kitten's nearing claws and squints at it in the grey predawn light. Rough, dark forms etched in ink—a picture. The kitten mews in frustration and battles the tendrils of hair that dangle inches above the floor.

She stares at the picture for several minutes as her eyes adjust to the light.

Then she carefully tucks the page back into the book and places it on the nightstand. She stands up from the bed and pads softly to the desk near the window, ducking at the slope of the ceiling. She opens the top drawer and fumbles through its contents and, dissatisfied, opens the one below it as well. Her hand emerges grasping a large pair of scissors and she carries them back with her to the bed.

She takes a fistful of her shining black hair and closes her eyes and

imagines cutting—hacking—through it. It falls silently through her mind, landing in whorls on the pink ruffled bedspread, and is quickly joined by more and more and more. She tosses the scissors down on top of the dark, broken strands and springs up, light as a feather, and runs to David like the woman she had seen in the picture.

But when she opens her eyes she is not running. She is still sitting on the bed holding a fistful of hair. The tie lays crumpled on the pillow beside her and fills her vision. She releases the hair, tucks it behind her ear, and picks up the red silk instead. The scissors whisper as she cuts slowly through it. Thin ribbons run like oil onto the bedspread and flow as a river, a shining river.

She stares dispassionately at the silken strips and runs a hand over her long black hair.

She stands and feels lighter, much lighter, than she has in many years.

Raye walks to the staircase and goes down the stairs. She opens the door at the bottom and speaks her husband's name into the fading darkness with a clear, steady voice:

“David.”

Before We Died of Starvation

Evan Scott Bryson

THE SOFT POGROM

Neda would want told how she hid in the cellar with her son Lutjvak, she shaking and sweating under reeking canvas, her lips blue from the cold this night. Earlier that evening the pogrom announced its arrival with a door-knocking plume of diesel fuel smoke rising above dense pines to the east. (Lutjvak slept. He was four years old. His father and his mother often, after singing him to sleep Croatian folklore, would take their fingers and touch his golden hair and his golden curling V and they would be so proud. Lutjvak would want this told.)

The city of Kolo was exterminated now (except for survivors, always survivors; which the soldiers saw as rats surfacing to endure the debris of their lives again), and bodies moldered in roadside ditches or smoldered in deep pits with red-soil sides, dead grins widening as lips burned off. (Neda did not know this, but she would want it told.) These grins turned into sneers and when the teeth fell out they were hidden back in the earth from heavy rains the month following. God spread wildflowers over the mass grave but Kolo was empty, the land haunted beyond repair. All mothers became barren from many salts in their tears, their wombs filled up and the ovaries crackled dry. None produced sons to cross the garden nourished on grandfather-ash, father-ash, husband-ash, bachelor-ash, boy-of-fighting-age-ash, boy-ash.

Kolo was warned by the same easterly plume, but the citizens ignored this and instead prayed. It was a Sunday. A few believed nothing would seize them on a Sunday, even were that plume to blow over the village and enter their houses and coat their skittish goats with something smelling distinctly – burning hair, bubbling fat, twill doused in oil – familiar, but the familiar smells arranged in a way that made them new and foreboding. Others remembered the smells from long ago. Death came by smoke signal, it stayed by gunfire, and left by another smoke signal. And Neda would want told how in the darkness under the reeking canvas, she held her son's throat so tight when Milosevic's foot soldiers entered their village, Uresevovic, and knocked on her home's door with their rifles (and what a meager home it was, barely a room with four walls, and a roof patched with discarded newspapers from trash bundles salvaged from the River Uresovik).

She did not want her son to scream out and be taken into the forest to be hung in a sycamore, so she held his throat so tight and he slept and did not fight, and here Lutjvak would want told how he dreamed of his father, his brave father, his strong father the taxidermist with

fingers that had not touched the guts of an animal in many many months, not since the cleansing of ethnic Albanians was just a rumor but all the animals, the good animals, had fled in fear. And in Lutjvak's dream the animals came back. His father's hands returned to his golden curling V at night after the soft songs with blood under the nails because business was so good.

Neda would want told how the foot soldiers with their tanks and their guns and their bombs trespassed into the basement, opening the door so the moonlight glimmered the faintest blue on the frosted stairs, and the heavy smell of beets and peaty earth was replaced by the stench of extermination and confusion and degradation (what Mother Porlikzchevo of the village Farakja called a "soft pogrom" though she would not want this told, because she would feel shame as eventually the soldiers turned around and raped then killed the women and even ate parts of them). So Neda watched from a rip in the tarp the boots, the ill-fitting boots on the ignorant soldiers on the blood-hungry soldiers on the stupid men, and they called softly to one another like children afraid of ghosts "do you see what I see?" "no I see nothing it is so dark" "do not trip on the second to last stair" "shush they will run!" "they cannot run they are terrified" "shush they can run they are mad animals now!" "what are we?" "we are here we are only here," and she watched the laces hanging in poor knots in the dark illuminated by sporadic flashes from torches some knots ripped by the pleading Kosovar fingernails that ripped from bleeding fingers, she watched the pants tucked into the tops carefully much too carefully in the dark puffy in the dark what she understood as pants tucked into the tops much too carefully and puffing out the tops of those laces.

She held Lutjvak's throat so tight because she wanted to scream then she wanted to call out for her husband who was hiding in the forest in the sycamores on his knees praying for the safety of his wife and son. (He would want told he prayed to God "God I believe in You God take me and not my family God choose Your people God for once be on our side." He would want told that when he stopped believing in God is when he was in Paradise and saw his son and his wife die—his son choked to death, his wife burned alive when their home was set ablaze—but he was God's then, and the fall would be too long in reaching his son and his wife and so in Paradise he sat. He sat and he hated God but he repeated the prayer to convince God he had not seen God's awful face made of awful lies.)

THE BOYS IN THE FOREST

Their fathers dead, they would want told how they met behind the mosque at night beginning in the fall, and how in the daylight they

took turns raking the path so their feet would not crunch fallen leaves or tinder, but also so on new moons the path was visible by the meager stars glowing. Though menial, their proud fathers told them they were diligent young men, that the paths to the mosque were never so clean or wide, and the dignity this lent was felt by all the community.

"Halifa," said his father, a slight man with dark hair who stooped, "it is not asked of you and still you tend the grounds and transplant saplings and lay stones. Why are you so good?"

"I do it for love," replied Halifa, only half-lying. This son was slight too, but lean and intelligent, his hair also dark and eyes like fish scales. He studied arithmetic because the numbers never lied. Only fifteen, he was unsure he knew what love meant. All told, a more accurate reply to his father would be: *I do it for Kevo whom I believe I love.*

"Kevo," said his father, a tall man with broad shoulders and light hair, "even all the chores in your day will not prevent you from serving the mosque, from burying roots and anchoring the paths to turning the weeds. Why are you so good?"

"I do it for love," replied Kevo. This son was tall with broad shoulders too, strong but humorous, his hair also light and eyes like raven feathers. He wrestled in the fields and in the roads because strength was truth. Only fifteen, he was unsure he knew what love meant. All told, a more accurate reply to his father would be: *I do it for Halifa whom I believe I love.*

Halifa would want told how he hid on top of the mosque, and how he dragged the ladder with him, and fashioned it to the reaching branches of a tree, and how in the night he crawled across the horizontal rungs over the place where he first held Kevo's strong hand, the night when they compared calluses. How Kevo's palms were blistered from swinging a pipe! And how the flesh was knotted thick and hardened against burns. Kevo took Halifa's palm and after searching with his warm fingers found nothing, the nails conspicuously clean. (Kevo would want told how before arriving on this third meeting, he had scoured his hands with cool water and his mother's creams and when rust and soil still clung to the insides, he cleaned with his teeth and his tongue until nothing but his human self lay under the nails).

Kevo laughed a little at Halifa's uncallused palms. "You must be lazy and weak," he said. "Do you only smirk all day?" But Halifa only shrugged and boldly grabbed Kevo's fingers and placed them between his fingers, and Kevo felt the sick calluses where Halifa's pencil worked arithmetic.

Halifa lying facedown on the ladder listened to the fire eat the mosque. The fire gathered angry breaths to take bigger faster bites. Halifa watched the paramilitary police break the windows and ignite

the Koran in the street. They kicked it so its cloth pages burst from the binding and seemed to beg before the wind took them far from home, before the wind turned the pages to trash. Halifa would want told how he wanted nothing more than to descend the ladder and scoop up the pages, even those on fire, and put them back in the Koran, even at the risk of summary execution. Earlier on the roof of the mosque, in the dim haze of an evening promising a month's rain (a cool mist itched the sides of his nose), he had seen his father beaten in the street with other men and boys. Then they were lined up. His father was on his knees when a soldier shot him in the neck with a rifle. Halifa knew the bullet to be hollow-point, for the hole, even in the diminishing green light, gaped and spurted very much red blood. It did not make sense to Halifa. Nothing added up. Nothing counted. He could not even divide the blood and his father and the soldiers and the gun.

Halifa remembered how Kevo and he held hands for many minutes but did not say anything and did not do anything other than hold hands. They would want told how neither knew what was next. They could not imagine what was next to do. They closed their eyes. They did not even enjoy the simple assuring sounds of each other's breathing. They thought of their fathers and their fathers' faces filled the silence with an awkward tenderness both boys felt as shame.

Kevo hid in the forest. He heard before this night of the two hundred deaths in Djakovica. He saw the smoke rising in the east. His mouth dried and he thought how his family would find safety. His father sent his three sisters and mother ahead to Pristina to catch a train to Albania or Croatia or Macedonia — "Wherever! But do not speak! Do not grimace! Do not kill yourselves with your young hope!" — and Kevo's three older brothers (sixteen, eighteen, nineteen) forced him into the brush when he said he would stay and fight. His father refused him come back — "You will carry our name my champion." — and Kevo could not carry the name and he thirsted for Halifa now and his mouth was dry. Kevo would want this told.

Please wound in the streets and muted in the forest. Kevo bit on his fingernails and when Halifa crossed his path both boys nearly stabbed each other. When they saw each other's eyes, Kevo tackled Halifa to the ground and hugged him fiercely and Halifa tucked his freezing hands beneath Kevo's many coats and counted the notches of his spine until he reached negative two.

"It's over," whispered Kevo into Halifa's ear.

"Then let's go," said Halifa, counting again, moving his palms against Kevo's muscled back, remembering where moles were, fingering the lightest of hairs at the base of his spine.

"There's no place to go," whispered Kevo. He slipped his hand up to Halifa's heart. The ventricles housed so much anger and fear and sadness. It was beating so fast.

"They'll set the forest on fire."

"They wouldn't, they've killed enough. They're done killing."

"You smell that, don't you?" hissed Halifa, raking his nails on Kevo's shoulders. "They are never done." He wanted and did not want to get up. He wanted to put Kevo's weight under his fingernails and keep it forever, he wanted to run away into a white void. "This is what we deserve." (Halifa would want told how he was certain he did not deserve this.)

Kevo considered Halifa's hurtful words and dismissed them. "We will leave and start a family," he said, uncertain. Neither boy knew if this was possible.

"A family to die in the next annihilation?"

"Maybe so," said Kevo, "and maybe not. What if maybe not?"

Dogs barked.

"I can hear the dogs," said Halifa.

Kevo rose and helped Halifa stand. Halifa took Kevo's hand and led him through the forest. When they came upon the taxidermist he was on his knees like they had seen their fathers on their knees and they thought maybe he was dead, maybe he had been knifed and was stiff. But the taxidermist nodded in his prayers and the boys went on with his blessing. They would want told how the taxidermist saw them in the moonlight holding hands, and however he interpreted this, he tied a length of twine (a mysterious article found beneath the pine needles and sycamore leaves) around their wrists and prayed they protect each other and be never torn asunder. And they went west, to the massacres in the west. They would want told how they were buried together in Ljubenic still tied at the wrist, still holding hands, knowing the others' calluses but not knowing what was next.

THE WAVE OF THE FIRE-FISTS

The mute boy would want nothing told. He would rather point or gaze at birds, roll in the new grass. He would want to pick his small red nose with his small pink fingers and blink infrequently with his small orange eyes, eyes like embers hit with a heavy wind. His father, Ibrahim, would want told how he left Uresevovic soon after his wife fled. And though he promised to hold their home, when the paramilitary police called on their bullhorns for all males to fill the main street, Ibrahim hurriedly filled his roofer's bag (he hadn't bother to remove those implements already filling it) and tucked his small son under his coat and his son clung to his father like a marsupial over-

grown its birth stead.

Behind Ibrahim's home were two other shacks where the Pulotels and Sarajes lived, and the men stood outside illuminated in the mosque fire and were not trembling like Ibrahim. "Bring your boy out from under your coats," said Igor Sarajes, "and let him see our destiny."

"He would not understand it," wheezed Ibrahim, holding his child to his chest.

"He is mute but not stupid," said Vladdi Pulotel, as he began walking past the gardens and towards the main street. "He will come to know this too shall pass."

But Ibrahim would not have it. He marched forward, into the forest. His child held his father to his chest. Ibrahim turned around to see one last time his home. He thought he might see his wife then, running up the hills, her blue shoes struggling through the grass but at last her making it to dawn. Nothing was to be seen. It was nearly night. Up the street men were on fire. His son poked his head from his father's many coats. "Uri, keep hidden," whispered his father.

The boy pointed at the men burning, the only points of light along the road (the few streetlights were shot to pieces) and began to make the only sounds he could, a feral cry, guttural and what his father felt as a painful rupturing inside his son's throat. Ibrahim clasped his hands tight around his son's mouth and his son wrapped his small arms around his father's neck and touched where Ibrahim's dark hair stopped just below the collars of his many coats. (Ibrahim would not want told how his neck was weak, how he was not a strong father. He ate only enough to live on, so as his child and wife would enjoy his portions. He was gaunt.)

A soldier heard the cry, something alien to him but altogether signifying life, and snuck up on Ibrahim. The soldier unsheathed his knife and told Ibrahim to stop and turn around. Trembling, Ibrahim did and as he turned around he moved his son to the other side of his coat.

The soldier asked for Ibrahim's name, though he knew Uresovevic to be entirely ethnic. Ibrahim stuttered out his name. Satisfied, the soldier rushed Ibrahim and gutted his stomach, artfully taking his knife from one axis on Ibrahim's torso and arcing it to the other. His skin flapped. He held his guts in with his hands. There was no pain, no sound but the slick pressure flowing over his navel and the torn fabric of his shirts spilling their buttons onto leave-strewn ground. The soldier scurried away and Ibrahim wondered if when he died he would fall backwards and crush his small son.

But Ibrahim did not die then or fall backwards and fell his son. And his son did not make noise because he had gone to sleep just behind his father, lying on the ground. Ibrahim gently kicked his son awake. His

son began to cry but made no sounds. The Mosque fire flowed into Uri's orange eyes. (The brightness of the tears is indeterminable.) His son rose and pressed himself to his father, his head pushing into his father's bursting guts. He bounced on one foot for his father to pick him up. Ibrahim obliged, and with one hand lifted his son's arm around his neck, and the weight of Uri's small body against Ibrahim's stomach stayed the father's insides. (Ibrahim would want told how this felt immeasurably painful but not because of pain.) The son wept and the father bled. They turned deeper into the forest.

They came upon the taxidermist. The taxidermist was praying and was mystically illuminated by moonlight. He opened his eyes when Ibrahim shook his shoulder. "I need you to sew me together," said Ibrahim.

"I am not a doctor," said the taxidermist.

Ibrahim opened his coat and asked his son to let go. His son slipped down (the front of Uri was drenched in blood) and Ibrahim kept his hands against his stomach. He opened his torn shirts and showed the taxidermist the wound. "I see nothing," said the taxidermist. Ibrahim moved from under the shadows into the taxidermist's moonlight. "I see now," said the taxidermist, grimacing, "but I have no tools."

"Staple me," said Ibrahim, motioning with his head to his pack. The taxidermist gingerly removed it from Ibrahim's shoulder. "There are staples in there and also pliers." The taxidermist removed both items.

"And what am I to do of the boy? He will not see his father patched so. You should sooner die."

"And have my son starve to death?" asked Ibrahim. "Never." He coughed and grabbed his stomach to stay his guts. "Do this now, taxidermist. Uri, come here. Open your hands."

Uri came forth in the dark. His father knew his hands were open. The boy's eyes caught the moonlight and glowed. "Pour rubbing alcohol on his hands, taxidermist, and ignite it. Both items are in the bag. Then staple me."

The taxidermist rolled up the mute boy's many sleeves and poured the rubbing alcohol on the boy's small hands. "This is magic," he told the boy, and Ibrahim nodded. His son nodded back. "This will not hurt you." The taxidermist ignited the boy's hands and turned to staple Ibrahim who was already lying on the ground with his shirt open.

"I have sewn an eagle," began the taxidermist. "I have sewn a deer and a lynx. I have stapled a lion and once a leopard and a bear." The mute boy only stared at his hands. He waved them in the air. He kept them far from the rest of his body. He followed them over the moon, under the gnarled silhouette branches of trees. "I have stuffed a mar-

moset and a monkey and many otters," said the taxidermist. He looked at the boy, briefly, when Ibrahim's crying would not stop. "I have stuffed a phoenix," he said, "but I left it to dry and even in death, it burnt out its orange marble eyes and I was never compensated for the work." The boy grinned in the darkness, his palms done blazing. He remembered the men in the street burning. They were magic. They were still alive, he understood. He looked down upon his father and watched without interest the taxidermist finish the last five staples.

"These will hold for three days," said the taxidermist. "Then the skin of your stomach and abdomen will give way and your guts will spill upon the earth. Are you going to the trains?"

"Yes," said Ibrahim, rising, still holding himself. "We are to meet my wife in Posto Selo."

"Then you will just make it. But you must hurry." The taxidermist lowered himself to his knees again and began to pray.

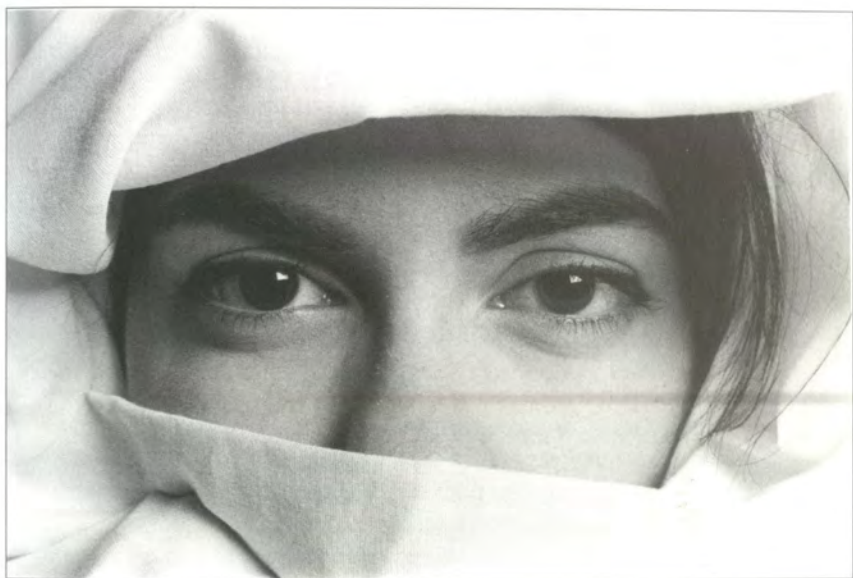
Uri bounced on one foot and Ibrahim scooped him up. Ibrahim thanked the taxidermist and left him in the dark with a wave from his son.

And when they were intercepted at the Station, when Uri was safely in his mother's arms, his father was asked off the train. Uri protested. "Business as usual," said his father. Ibrahim only had hours to live anyway, he understood. He hobbled down the iron steps. He stood on the platform in the rain. Soldiers inspected his tattered shirt, his bloody coat. They lifted the tatters to see his grotesque wound, to see the staples coming undone. They poured kerosene on Ibrahim and Uri watched from a window as the train began to move, he watched the soldiers laugh and ignite his father's stomach. And Uri smiled because it was magic, it was a phoenix, his father was a phoenix, he smiled because his father was a magic phoenix.

THE TAXIDERMIST'S PRAYER

You smashed it down You smashed it down You smashed it down You have forgotten the End make the End surely we will End before You smashed it down but nothing Ended and You smashed it down and I pray before they find us they find You and You poke them into the sand like so many cigarettes in a bowl for smashing it down, over and over told the taxidermist to the evening sky as he left his home and entered the forest. He would want told how God smashed love. I kiss the ground You gave me. He kissed the ground. I kissed my wife away that You gave me and kissed my son too, who You also gave me. I sang lullabies that You taught me with a voice that You gave me. Ibrahim and his mute son approached then left after some time. I would sing them now but they would smash me down they would gut me open or shoot me and I pray You bless my house and save my wife and son and

I pray my son carry the lullabies that You gave me that I gave him and I pray his home be full of music. The taxidermist would want told how he hummed himself into a trance and became silent, waking when Halifa and Kevo approached then left after some time. Be no life divided in atrocity in a state there is no shari'a no mujihadeen to fight for our freedom for those who suffer they suffer in the woods. Dogs barked attracted to the smell of Ibrahim's blood. God I believe in You God take me and not my family God choose Your people God for once be on our side, he whispered as the sound of the dogs grew closer. God I believe in You God take me and not my family God choose Your people God for once be on our side. He heard boots. God I believe in You God take me and not my family God choose Your people God for once be on our side. Was this his sacrifice? He believed this to be truth. God I believe in You God take me and not my family God choose Your people God for once be on our side. The boots. The dogs. A gun and a knife, nothing was matter, nothing was substance, nothing to cut him with nothing to cut and no bullet to fly with no air to fly in. God I believe in You God take me and not my family God choose Your people God for once be on our side. The dog that bit his face passed into a black hole. The taxidermist would want this told.



Ladonna
Melanie Schaap

Nantucket Sleigh Ride

Kim Bellware

"Thank you ma'am—put your coat where you want, kick your shoes off where you will and find any seat that's not taken!"

I thanked the man in the red and black checkered shirt and silently took my ticket stub, wondering if this was all a mistake.

It was a biting cold night and like most Fridays—and Saturdays, and Tuesdays and every other day of the week—Goshen was small and sleepy, the town dark and as quiet as the snow falling outside.

Inside, the air was stale, shut up in the gymnasium of the small Methodist church that had awakened tonight for the throng dancers.

Ben had insisted I go, and he, with Kelly, promised me a lively evening as they would share with me their favorite steps, and I would dance among their friends. This was all before Ben came down with a temperature and Kelly, not much healthier herself, stayed behind as caretaker.

I reached in my pocket and touched the directions to the church that Ben had written out for me, wishing that I shared in the ease and familiarity of the dancers in the room. The gym was bustling before my eyes and crowded like a country fair. A tangle of arms caught my attention as women in pin curls, their handkerchiefs still wrapped over their hair, arranged pies on a card table, each jockeying for an empty patch. Men unfolded chairs to line the walls, pulling at the seats with quick grunts. Others were peeling off their socks, lining up shoes against the stage as the band tuned up, the odd twangs and dings of their instruments melding with the dizzied chaos of the room.

I found a space in the corner near the emergency doors and began to untie my shoes as I searched the room for someone who might dance with me. The prospect of meeting a dance partner sent a shiver through my limbs, though I could not immediately tell if it was out of excitement or terror. Maybe he would be soft-spoken and tall, boyishly handsome, and he would dance only a little better than me. At the end of the night he would be a gentleman and help me with my coat.

"Please! Please, we're about to start!" called a cheery voice. "My name is Duncan, I'm your caller this evening, and I think the band is just about ready!"

The band fiddled their strings dramatically. "Partners!"

"Would you like to dance with me?" A short man, maybe mid forty-ish with a bulbous red-tipped nose and eerily light blue eyes held out his small hand to me. He wasn't as young as I had hoped for, but as I glanced around the room, I didn't see many choices. The average age

of the dancers, men and women, was nearly fifty.

"Sure," I said, smiling as politely as I could. I was in bare feet but the man had kept his socks on, blue with a red stripe near the toes; the same blue as his eyes and his shirt and the waves of the water on the small handkerchief embroidered with a sailboat that he wore tucked into his waistband.

The band's mandolin player stuck two quick notes back and forth and then the band joined in. The room streamlined, the men and women snapping into position like pegs in a board.

"*Bow to your partner and allemande right!*" called Duncan in a sing-songy voice that kept in rhythm with the band's strumming.

"I'm Daniel," said my partner evenly, holding up his right hand and pressing it firmly against my raised hand for an allemande.

Daniel proved to be a very good dancer, deliberate and precise with his movements. He did not coddle me or try to engage me though, I was simply an accessory to his dancing.

"Now you want to place your hand right here," he said placing his hand over mine, behind my back. "It makes the butterfly whirl and the curtsy turn easier."

My learning was slow and after several new steps, I wasn't having much fun and I felt a terrible awkwardness any time I turned the wrong way or missed a step. Daniel probably deserved a better partner, but he seemed content to keep correcting my missteps as I dragged along.

"*Ladies, chain across!*"

Every few turns or so I would dance with a new partner for a step until the next was called and everyone found their original partners again. The women were mostly in skirts, some barefooted, others in stockings, each one seemingly bashful or delighted with each do-si-do and spin-and-twirl. They were smiling, reflecting the happy grins of their partners, the men who were themselves dressed casually, pleased with the music and surprisingly good on their feet. Some were tall, some were bald, most wore glasses and a few had jowly necks like a turkey.

"*Roll away with a half sashay!*"

"I'm sorry, I'm not very good," I said to Daniel.

"That's fine. Keep your eyes focused on me," he said, pointing to his own, "that way when you turn you won't get dizzy. Or just find a spot to fix your eyes on." He allemanded right and then twirled.

"*Time to say goodbye! Bow to your partner and shake that hand!*"

After about thirty minutes I was beginning to feel more at ease with some of the dance steps. I thanked Daniel and went to find a different partner, slightly bolder now with my freshly-learned steps.

I tapped a younger man on the shoulder whose wife was resting

her feet. His wife smiled and nodded and waved him away to dance.

"Turn alone and star through!"

I made more small chatter with my new partner, Chip, and began to relax, free of Daniel's oddly intense stare and grip. I felt looseness, a warmth set in, and I began to step with confidence and twirl harder, taxing my knees, my joints, the balls of my feet.

After a few dozen steps and formations, I saw out of the corner of my eye a small group of people shuffle into the entrance at the far side of the gym. I watched over Chip's shoulder as they paid and found a place to lay their belongings. I sized up the tiny crowd: a few girls with braids in their hair and long skirts, hand-dyed and wrinkly. Some wore them over jeans or with thick socks. There was a fattish teenage boy wearing a black T-shirt, a little child still in his coat, and one young man who looked like the dance partner I came to find. He was skinny as a stick and wore long blue jeans that covered his feet, a flimsy plaid shirt and a silky cloud of buoyant brown hair.

The group scattered, and they joined pairs and quartets dancing, the little boy darting over to the table of pies, the fat teenager leaning against the wall as he watched.

The room grew hotter and people were beginning to dress down, balling up sweaters and flinging them across the room to the sides of the gym where the chairs waited patiently for tired dancers. I wiped the sweat that had beaded on my forehead with a bare arm as I thanked my third new partner and threw a confident wave to the hard-working band.

With each new step, each new partner, I smiled broader and laughed harder in between heavy breaths. I would puff out my cheeks and blow a stray piece of hair off my face, and my partners would shrug or chuckle and wipe sweat from their neck.

The air was thick with the heat of movement, and the spirit in the room was lively but relaxed, the dancers motioning around the room like currents of warm water circling in a pool.

"Now let's bring it in and share a dance! Everybody in and form a hall!"

The room shuffled for a moment, then neatly parted like the Red Sea, the first couple dancing from the far end.

"Dixie twirl and everybody clap!"

After each passing couple danced along, I kept my eye on the skinny young man. He was a few people behind me on the other line. I would miss him by two dancers.

"Next of the pairs go down through the hall!"

I locked hands with a man I had danced with earlier named Neil, and we took off, galloping down the hall, tiny beads of sweat flying from the hair that was matted and soft on his neck. My curls bounced

and skimmed my cheeks as we pounded over the floor.

When each side of the hall had passed several times, Duncan scurried up to the mic and announced a short break. The band ceased and began shaking their limbs and taking long drinks of water from the thin plastic cups set on the stage edge behind them.

I found a seat and helped one of the other younger women fix her braid. We stared at our feet, black on the soles, white with dust along the sides, looking as if we had stepped in flour. I chatted and fanned myself, my tired legs massaged by warmth of the room and the murmur of the crowd's voices. After a few minutes, the music began again.

While dancing a half-hey, I touched my forehead with my free hand, feeling the warmth of my skin, smooth and damp. I thought of Ben and Kelly and wondered if they were still awake at home. I pictured Kelly, asleep on Ben's shoulder, the two of them gently dozing before an old movie on TV.

"Down the hall, four in line!"

I moved quickly among groups, touching new hands, grabbing a different shoulder, feeling varying tensions of my palm or my waist with the tenderness or force of each different partner. The skinny young man was in my group now. We paired up for a Pentronella Turn and did not touch. I smiled at him, not knowing if I was making eyes. He seemed shy, and when he had to hold my waist and take my hand he did so with the lightest touch as if afraid to move me. We passed out of the step and danced away from each other.

When a new step was called, the women with the braid I had fixed patted her tightly woven hair and then pointed to me. The chubby teenage boy, without saying a word, grabbed my hand and swept me into the next dance.

He was a bit shorter than I with closely cut brown hair that smelled of salt and lemon. He was strong, and when he spun me I felt like I was flying. He supported all my weight with each balance, each allemande, each turn and star. I was delighting in him and I wanted him to know, but he was too intently focused on moving expertly through the steps.

"Turn as a couple and promenade!"

We turned to our sides and marched in a small circle, good-naturedly preening and puffing out our chests for onlookers.

I was sorry to see the step end so soon, and I leaned in and hugged the boy, my arms sinking into his soft sides. He returned my gesture, giving me a triumphant smile.

"One last dance and let's make it good!"

Then, breaking rhythm Duncan shouted, *"Now we diiive into the unknown – we're all here to catch you!"* It must have been something often said as the room bubbled over in knowing laughter and everyone

quickly searched for someone they had not yet danced with that night.

"Little miss, care to dance?" A tall, lightly freckled and red-faced man with white hair and bristly white beard put a thick, gentle paw on my shoulder. "That there's my wife, Addie, and she says I oughtta find myself a partner 'fore they're all gone!" he laughed. Addie waved to me from a chair along the wall and held up her feet, wiggling her toes as if to encourage me with them.

"I'd love to!" I said. He introduced himself as Greg and he crooked his arm as I lightly grabbed the bend in his elbow. He was round like a balloon and wore a white nylon shirt that looked it had been made out of a parachute. He had a stretch-band gold watch on his meaty wrist, the links pulled to their limit, exposing the reddish burnt arm beneath. Because of his ample stomach, for each balance and shuffle I had to lean my shoulders into him, curving my torso into a "C" to accommodate his big belly. I laughed as he hummed to himself a completely different rhythm than the one played by the band. I gripped his hand tightly for a swing and I felt like he could throw me to the ceiling. Like the chubby teenager, he was strong and sure-footed. The room blended into a swirl of light and sound as he would twirl me or swing. He was so tall my feet barely touched the floor, and when I would land, I would skip lightly, jumping every few steps to keep up with him. He continued to hum and a quick "hep!" or "ho!" would escape when he picked me up or skipped his feet. He smelled like good, clean sweat and I imagined him dancing with equal furor during a time in years past when his belly might have been flat and Addie's feet didn't hurt.

"Ones hand cast off around the Twos!"

Greg let go of my hand and danced in a circle, tapping his thick fingers lightly against his palm.

"Now ride the waves of this Nantucket sleigh ride!"

The dancers cheered and spun faster, swinging higher, their excitement swelling like a bubble, ready to burst or float away.

The music faded and everyone clapped, their faces red and shining.

I perched on one foot like a crane and gave Greg a quick kiss on the cheek. He smiled at me and I waved a goodbye.

By the time I had woven my way through the crowd of people swarming around the pie table, most of the younger dancers had left. Along the wall a tall girl with a willowy purple skirt was dabbing a bloody spot on her foot with a stocking. Another stretched out her arms and then covered a yawn. It was late. But there were no others from the small group I had seen come in.

I searched for my shoes, which had been moved from their original spot. As I saw groups of friends smiling and talking and leaving together, I for a moment felt a twinge of sadness I that would be going home

alone, not following a group to someone's cozy house where we would sit around the table and wait for the coffee to percolate. Once I had my coat, I looked for my chubby teenager, or Chip and his wife, the skinny young man or even Daniel—anyone, anyone to thank, anyone to wish good-night or goodbye to. They had left, so I filed out the door and the murmur of the crowd floated above my head. I squeezed past bodies in the crowd and brushed up against a thin plaid shirt before stopping to notice. The handsome young man I had hoped to dance with twisted around to look. He gave a friendly smile and I smiled back, as natural as I could manage. The crowd, lodged in the doorway, moved again, and people began walking forward, spilling out into the night. I ducked my head and slipped out into the quiet dark. I listened to the snow crunch beneath my shoes as I touched my cheek, still warm with the memory of the dancing. I rubbed the skin, sweaty and taut, and spread my fingers over my mouth like a fan, touching my chin, my teeth, feeling the evening's smile firmly in place.

A GENERAL THEORY OF RELATIVITY

Evan Scott Bryson

THURSDAY, 11:48 PM

"I ain't got many friends left to talk to."

"That's a lie. You have all sorts of little rockstars nipping at your heels."

"But there's nowhere to run when I'm in trouble."

"Arcadia. Pasadena. Laguna."

"You know I'd do anything for you—"

"O my God, Jimmy. You've only been speaking lyrics from 'Your Love.'"

"I thought you'd notice after I said, 'Josie's on a vacation far away.'"

"Josie is in *Vancouver*—how should I know you were butchering *The Outfield*?"

"Actually, it's *Midtown's* cover. Nancy, I don't want to lose your love. Tonight."

"I'm sorta with Astor."

"That's not what your blog says."

"Don't read my blog."

"Let's talk Israel, let's talk Palestine."

WEDNESDAY, 2:45 AM

Troy Jones picked up his phone. "Sorry to wake you up," sighed a man's voice.

"Nah, no. Not at all, I had just finished reading."

"Good then. Say, Jones, Tony and I got ourselves into a bit of a jam."

"You need me to call a cab?" asked Troy with immediate alarm. He swung his legs out of bed.

"No no, nothing fancy. Say, we're in some trouble with the law. We got set-up in a cocaine heist."

"What?" Troy stopped mashing his feet into his Hushpuppies.

"We got setup buying pharmaceutical cocaine."

"What?" cried Troy. His voice tightened with indignation. "Were you going to use the cocaine?"

"Sure. Some of it."

"What were you planning on doing with the rest of it?"

"Cutting it, Jones, and selling it. Listen, this shit's not your typical

blow. Merck makes it special as bait for the DEA." A long pause. The caller became uncomfortable. "Shit, Pfizer uses their blow on monkey—for those documentaries...."

"You got caught by the DEA buying Merck's cocaine!" shouted Troy. "You got caught by the bait—and you knew it was bait?"

"Well, when you say it like that it makes Tony and me sound real low, but this shit floats around sometimes. Our contact—you know Jimmy—"

"Jimmy sells cocaine?"

"Jones, stay with me."

"Jesus Christ, are you guys fucking Robert Evans?"

"No. What? Be cool, be—"

"Does Jimmy do cocaine, too?" Troy's mouth had gone dry. He looked at himself in the bureau mirror. For an executive he sure looked haggard.

"Everyone does cocaine, Jones. Your fucking carpenter does cocaine. How do you think you got that shed put up in an afternoon?"

"Well.... I don't do cocaine."

"You can't dance either; goes hand in hand. But look, Jones, that's neither here nor there. I just wanted to let you know before you see it in the morning papers or whatnot, and to tell you we'll catch up to you real soon."

"How soon? Like, in three-to-four months soon?"

"Ah c'mon, Jones, please: it's the DEA we're talking about."

"I know. Isn't that—"

"Jones, I got two more quarters and I promised to call my ma, it's her birthday and all. We left a package in a dumpster behind Finnegan's, off the corner of 28th and Lucero. When you get the time, say tomorrow morning on your jog, could you collect the package for us and return it to Jimmy."

"What? I—I mean, sure. What's in the package?"

"Jones, how about you don't worry about that. Me and Tony don't want you to worry about nothing, so just get the package and give it to Jimmy."

"O. Okay. No problem."

"Alright. Good kid, Jones, knew we could count on you. You get some sleep now."

"Will do. Uh. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Jones."

Troy turned back into bed, put his gnarled toes under the covers. He needed to get some sleep.

TUESDAY, 7:30 AM

Astor and Lou were seated for breakfast, chewing on soggy flakes.

Ben came down the stairs in a blue bathrobe.

"I noticed Drake slept over last night," said Astor.

"Yeah," said Ben, searching the cupboard for oatmeal.

"How'd it go?" asked Astor.

"Let's just say Drake and I exhausted the infinite moral capacity of the universe. My ass sure hurts."

Lou choked on his cereal and said "sick faggot" under his breath.

"What?" asked Ben, punching Lou in the neck.

Lou collapsed to the floor with his tongue red and milk-slippery hanging from the side of his mouth.

Ben checked his pulse and said, "Yessir."

Astor took seventy dollars from Lou's wallet he was going to ask to borrow anyway. "The way you'd betray someone you fuck is the way you'd betray a friend, am I right?" he asked, and Ben gave him a high-five. "You see the paper?"

"I saw Jimmy's fucking step-dad looking like someone asked him to eat a dog turd," replied Ben.

"Big sloppy dog turd," agreed Astor. "Well... it was his wife's funeral."

"Gnarly," said Ben. "You call Jimmy?"

"Nope." Astor pulled his backpack on, eyed himself in the toaster.

"See me in the Burberry spread?" he asked. He pursed his lips. His distorted face in the toaster was still somehow beautiful and this fascinated him.

"Hell, I jacked-off on it," said Ben as he scratched himself through the bathrobe. "Will you talk to Jimmy today anytime?"

"Maybe..." breathed Astor. He tucked in his shirt and popped the collar. He un-tucked his shirt and smoothed back down the collar. He repeated these actions until Drake came down the stairs in a pair of plaid boxers.

"Whoa!" said Drake, lightly batting Lou's cheek with a bare foot. "You gonna roll him over in case he pukes?"

Astor and Ben both shook their heads, no. Drake took this to mean Lou would be fine.

"Listen, Astor—"

"I am," said Astor not quite ignoring Ben. He began to walk out the door. He wondered if his Adonis lines were less pronounced than Drake's but than rejected this as fanciful. Drake wasn't in *Details*, *Homme*, *GQ*, or *Vanity Fair*—to name just a few.

"If you see Jimmy tell him we're good about Friday night.... And we need four grams."

"No prob," said Astor and he disappeared into the morning.

Ben sat to eat his oatmeal and Drake hovered over his shoulder.

"No," said Ben. "I'm not going to nurse your hard-on while I'm eating breakfast."

"Fuck you," said Drake. "Whatever happened to, 'Good morning'?"

"No," repeated Ben, flatly.

Drake went upstairs, dressed, came back down and left without saying anything.

When Lou came to the house was empty.

TUESDAY, 2:15 PM

"This system is non-operational," mumbled Ben as he sat down to a late lunch. Somebody, maybe Nancy, drew a book away from the bridge of her nose, asked him why he was pulling out At the Drive-In lyrics. Ben was miffed she knew. He mongered bands. He hated it when what he considered to be automatons knew what he was singing.

"Is it because of the chicken?" she pressed. Daniel and Tory snickered. Ben must have missed a chicken inside joke. His mind, against his own resentments, raced to find a link between these troglodytes and himself and chicken. He shrugged it off.

"Are you passing yet?" asked Daniel.

"*Are you passing yet?*" Ben mimed back, pulling his backpack around his chair and removing his copy of Proust.

"O *Proost*," said Daniel.

Ben wondered if he was more pissed he was failing an elective or if Daniel was blow-hard enough to emphasize the *oost* in Proust.

"*Proost*, Danny-boy? Granted the campus is liberal arts, but we aren't attending UC fucking Berkeley. This isn't fucking Brown, Danny-boy. We're not in the lesbian swagger lands."

"Is Ben pissed that Daniel won't put out?"

"O Tory, nice of you to stop picking your face long enough to say something," replied Ben. "Here's me giving a wave to both of you chodes." He flipped them off. "Don't you both need to, uh, like, go touch each other in the darkroom or something?"

Ben put Proust back into his pack. He chewed on a French fry. Granted, he desperately wanted to bed Daniel. Art majors, he thought, fucking art majors. He was thinking striped boxers when Nancy batted his elbow.

"Fifteen Pager?" she asked. In Ben's mind he was still slinking down Daniel's jeans.

Red and white stripes, he thought, I can dig. She batted his elbow some more.

"Let this loser down hard," said Ben. "I was thinking about Danny-

boy's pubic bone."

"What's new," said Daniel and he pulled his shirt up a little.

Ben snarled but he did not avert his eyes. He was greedy to catch any trace of Danny-boy's abs.

Tory moved her index finger along her hairline. She scraped away the tiny pimples and wiped the traces of pus and blood and scabs onto a napkin. It's just a nervous habit, she thought.

"Yes, ten pages," said Ben, finally settling in. He needed something to take the edge off the day. "Does anyone know if Astor talked to Jimmy?"

"About what?" asked Tory.

"Can someone get Tory a band-aid," asked Daniel, "or another Selexa, I dunno—I may have something."

"I need four ounces or eight pounds or something by this Friday night," said Ben.

"Party?" asked Nancy. She raised her book over her face again. Ben thought she was hiding a yawn.

"No," said Ben, gathering mystery, "not quite."

"You owe someone money again?" asked Nancy. Ben studied her forehead. It rose above her copy of *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

She is yawning, thought Ben. "Look," he said, "I don't want you guys to get too involved—"

"We won't," said Nancy.

"—But I might need to borrow Daniel's car. And this is about Jimmy, not me."

Daniel noticeably perked up at this. He stopped rummaging in a Cinnamon Altoids tin and gave Ben a look that suggested dire apprehension. He dropped his face when he imagined Ben taking his severity for smoldering. Why do I only hang out with sluts? he asked himself. He slid two Valiums to Tory. She gobbled them up like Tic Tacs. "Do be realistic," he said.

"If not the Porsche, then at least the Jaguar. Unless, supernaturally, you need *both* on Friday night."

"Actually, I do," sighed Daniel. "Kabala has taught me to... I dunno, do something mystical where I can now drive two cars at once." His blue eyes swam into fantasy. "I bet my percentage of roadhead is going to double now."

"You can't double zero percent," said Nancy.

"What if Ben rides shotgun?" added Tory.

"Why haven't you died of a staph infection yet?" barked Ben. He turned back to Daniel. "Listen, stop feeding me bullshit. Since Sophomore year you've skimmed about six ounces off the top. Not only have you never given me any money for that, and absolutely no sex, the

least you can do is let me take the Jaguar for a spin." Ben felt like an ass for breathing so hard.

Daniel sighed. "This is UC fucking Davis, Bender. I could understand gunfights at UC fucking Santa Cruz, or, *hello*, a community college – but Jesus Christ! You are totally stressing me to the max. If things get nasty and my plates come back to me with shotgun holes..." he lingered. Panting, he exclaimed, "I could get my diving scholarship revoked!"

"O, like any shots will go down," said Ben. He honestly didn't believe any guns would be involved. He was correct.

"Fine," said Daniel.

"Good," said Ben.

"Where you taking it?" asked Nancy.

"Into the city," said Ben coolly.

"O no," said Daniel.

"Yessir," said Ben. "This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but a simper."

"Mmm," said Tory.

THURSDAY, 10:33 PM

Nancy's mobile rang. She put away her Chemistry books. The mobile continued to ring as she stared at her roommate sucking face with a Freshman. Her mobile rang as she put on Airwalk tennis shoes and left the room.

"I thought you were going to send me to voicemail," said a twenty-something's voice.

She said, "Not so lucky,"

"How's Bernice?"

"Her and Frankie are studying really really hard."

Nancy checked her watch and patted her pockets for keys. "What's up, Jimmy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, what's up?"

"Like, what have I been up to?"

Nancy pushed for the elevator but decided to take the stairs. "Yeah. What'd you do last night."

Jimmy took a deep breath that crackled into the receiver. "After a macchiato at Rabini's went to Mätrö and met the director Alex Proyas. Of the urbanite Chilean-inspired discoteques, this one I can tolerate. Mätrö is generally too dark to tell who anyone is or distinguish between sexes (a matter further complicated by the increasing amount of faggots and trannies flocking to these Laguna clubs). The blacks become tribal

contortions of Prada and Dior."

"Are you in the Valley?" asked Nancy. She had walked down the stairs. She was outside, without my Mace, she thought.

"Alex has a habit of standing in the light so the ease in connecting with him disquieted me. We discussed his recent film and I assured him "Dark City" was still his pinnacle achievement, so if he wants to win back the silk wipe of the critics' hands he needs to deliver another "Dark City." He agreed. Someone asked him if he was the director of "Gattaca" but he was on crystal meth, I think, so he told this someone, "Yes, I directed "Gattaca."" He seemed genuinely proud. When this someone realized the mistake, he-slash-she blushed under the black lights and walked away mumbling, "Fucking Hollywood prick."

"Are you on... what are you on right now?" she asked, not too worried. "Jimmy, are you driving on mescaline?"

"Then we left the now cash-bar, and danced on the too-small floor with two chicks with too-small tits," continued Jimmy, seemingly ignorant Nancy was still on the other end. "Bodies inescapably warped then collided. We ditched the two chicks (probably dykes—or, worse, waitresses). After we danced some more we went back to my place and fucked around and he gave me a personal commentary for "I, Robot." Can you believe it? I got a fucking personal commentary for "I, Robot" and a passable hand-job from Alex Proyas!"

"That's pretty classy, Jimmy," agreed Nancy. She smiled. She really liked Jimmy, even if he was self-absorbed and dirty.

"And get this!"

"Get what!" she played along.

"He left his watch on my coffee table, some guh-billion dollar Guess?—and I'm wearing it right now."

"Ooo," she murmured into her mobile. "He's gonna miss that."

"You think?"

"I guess so."

"Is that a pun?" asked Jimmy.

"Not really," said Nancy, confused.

"Do you love me, Nancy?" asked Jimmy.

"Maybe if you weren't a homophobic hypocrite, just maybe."

"Since when was I a homophobic hypocrite?" asked Jimmy, hurt.

Nancy liked that about Jimmy too: he was such a sap, so sensitive. Nancy liked that she understood his sincerity. She liked that she alone cared for such a wretch. She swelled with charity every time he called. She had forgotten she did this.

"You made that crack at the benefit."

"But it was true—it was a total gay singles buffet!"

"But you also said the food poisoning was AIDS."

"It was an HIV gala!"

"Am I supposed to laugh now?"

"Yes! It's a hysterical observation!"

"My brother is... nevermind." Nancy sat down on a bench. She wished she'd brought a sweater outside. "You can't use monikers like *faggot* and then get a hand-job from Alex Proyas."

"Two things: I don't know what a *moniker* is and Alex is a *director*. And my step-dad sent me."

"O my God," conceded Nancy.

"Did you even see 'Dark fucking City?'"

"Yes, yes I did."

"Did you love it?"

"Every *noir* minute of it."

"And you know Roger Ebert did a frame-by-frame of it at Champagne-Urbana this Fall at his Overlooked Film Festival."

"You just told me. So now I do."

"Do you love Ebert? I mean, he's got a *Pulitzer*."

"I love Ebert," admitted Nancy. She got up from the bench when a pack of Asian smokers came over to wait for the bus. She loathed cigarette smoke. That Jimmy smoked was inconsequential. "The French have not won good war since Napoleon," said one Asian. "Horrors of World War Two made man ask question: Why put human being oven?" Nancy thought about staying close to enjoy the broken English, but she didn't want to be like that. She pulled her iPod Nano out of her shirt. She searched for Stars' *Set Yourself On Fire*. She wondered if she could pay attention to Jimmy and "Celebration Guns." She decided on Stereophonics' "Handbags and Gladrags."

Jimmy asked again, "Do you love me?"

"I don't know," she answered. Truthfully, she didn't know.

"Prove it," he said.

"How?"

"I dunno how."

"Are you okay, Jimmy. I heard about your mom."

"I'm fine. It was no biggie. We weren't that close anyway."

Nancy knew it was a big deal but left the topic at that.

"Say, you wanna come down and, I dunno, mess around or something?"

Nancy hung up.

FRIDAY, 7:00 PM

Astor and Ben got into Daniel's black Jaguar. "I feel like I'm in 'Night

Rider," said Astor.

"Wait until we're in 'Night Court,'" said Ben as he turned the ignition.

"Bummer," said Astor.

"Gnarly," agreed Ben. "But, if we play it cool, if we don't get too wrapped up, and if we learn from our mistakes, I know in my heart that the Lord above loves me no matter what."

"In the name of Hashem, God of Israel, may Michael be at my right, Gabriel at my left, Uriel before me, and Raphael behind me, and above my head the abiding presence of the Lord."

Ben briefly glanced at Astor in dismay. "What... what was that?"

Astor was staring at himself in a hand mirror. "The Bedtime Shema," he answered. He felt Ben's awe and became uncomfortable.

"Oy gevalt, Astor! I didn't know you were Jewish."

"What? O—I... I'm not. My, uh, mom's nanny taught it to her and Mom taught it to me."

"Your mom had a Jewish nanny?"

"She grew up in Connecticut," replied Astor. He pushed a chunk of his blonde bangs behind his ear.

Ben concentrated on the road. The car reeked of Daniel. The smell was opulent, woodsy and chlorinated, a jock smell, a carnivore smell. In the back seat, somewhere, were Chemistry books and a set of oil paints. Daniel's intellect made Ben's stomach turn; Daniel's talent as a painter gave Ben an erection. Art Major Diving Scholars with Chemistry, my fucking luck, thought Ben, thinking about Daniel in Speedos. He remembered Drake and never calling him back. Buzzkill.

"Religion convinces me that there is something very very happening out there that we cannot touch just yet while we are alive," said Ben, forfeiting the silence, forfeiting Daniel.

"But that's why we shouldn't kill each other over it," agreed Astor, snapping shut his hand mirror.

"And because there are so many religions to be respected," continued Ben.

"Yeah," agreed Astor, "it's pretty diverse, I mean it's like environmentalists think it's not pointless to recycle. But others think Jesus will come before the world ends.... So litter it up!"

"I kinda see religion as humans over centuries constantly refining a truth we might have had at the beginning of this all... but kinda dropped along the way. But yeah... haha, litter it up." Ben bit at his fingernail. He and Astor had been housemates for a semester and Astor's grasp of nuance never ceased to amaze him. "Jesus won't care that his Kingdom is a reeking pile of shit."

"Exactly," murmured Astor.

"Or, religion is humans collectively trying to convince ourselves that we matter to anything else... even comets. Like, what if a huge comet hit us? And everyone died except like eight people, what would they say? 'I guess God chose *us* to reproduce and refill the Earth?' I mean, c'mon."

"Haha, c'mon people!" agreed Astor. "If that big a comment hit us! I mean, what could someone say that had that big an effect? That'd have to be a hell of a comment or something for everyone to die. I mean, hello, Twin Towers!"

"Alright, so this conversation is ending."

"Right, because I'm getting a call." Astor looked down at his mobile vibrating in his lap. "It's Miranda," he whispered to Ben. Ben nodded.

FRIDAY, 7:04

Karla and Miranda hung up the phone and howled with laughter.

FRIDAY, 7:04

"She said something to me that sounded like a movie quote," said Astor, miffed. "I'm so calling them back to figure out what it was."

FRIDAY, 7:05

Karla stopped laughing abruptly and said to Miranda, "Is your phone ringing?"

Miranda stopped laughing. She pulled her phone off the bureau.

"Holy shit, he's calling us back."

"Answer it."

Miranda obliged. "Like, what?"

"What?" asked Astor.

"What," said Miranda.

"What's he saying?" asked Karla. Miranda waved this question off.

"What did you just call and say to me—was it a movie quote?"

Miranda gave Karla google eyes.

Karla opened them up and yawned and glued them onto the sock puppets they were making.

"I said to you, 'Don't lose your blob.' It's from 'Billy Elliot.'"

"Eff you!" roared Astor. "I'll lose whatever I want!"

Astor snapped close his mobile. "She said to me, 'Don't lose your blob.'"

Ben smiled. "'Billy Elliot.' J'adore."

"What. Who is this guy? Is he effing my ex-girlfriend?"

Ben grimaced. "Uh," he said, "that wouldn't be possible. That's a movie with Jamie Bell."

"I *knew* it was a movie quote! *Fuck.*"

"I was what... in the Sixth Grade when that came out. The beginning of a long celebrity crush."

"Right on," said Astor. Astor began to think about Miranda's nipples, her teardrop breasts, and the slight implant scars tucked carefully under the tan slopes.

"And he's only matured since," continued Ben. "He did that scary movie that I can't get off of Amazon.com, something about World War One—trenches, the devil. He was in 'Nikolas Nickleby' where he played a cripple and somehow still wasn't dwarfed by Charlie Hunnam, even during the flogging scene. Then he was in his tighty whities in David Gordon Greene's 'Undertow,' in boxers in 'The Chumsclubber.' Recently released on DVD was 'Dear Wendy,' a film penned by Lars von Trier—but not part of his American Trilogy, because Lars didn't direct it." Ben sighed. "He was Jimmy in 'King Kong.'"

"Hey, whaddaya know? We also know a Jimmy."

"Yessir," sighed Ben. "Jamie Bell is doing some other stuff, too. I think he had a spread in *Details* over the summer and has been featured in—"

"Me too," said Astor. "I also had a spread in *Details* over the summer."

"Yessir," said Ben. "Full circle."

The two sat in silence for a time. "Why didn't you get the Porsche?" offered Astor.

"Um, maybe because a Jaguar is conspicuous enough," said Ben.

"We could've taken my Hummer."

"Right—and when we needed a quick getaway, all those gas stops would come in handy."

"What'd ya mean?" asked Astor. Ben became aware of how many times everyone around him, including himself, refined what they meant when they talked. I mean, you mean, we mean, they mean, he thought.

"Where are we going again?" asked Astor.

"Into the city," said Ben.

A dog barked in the trunk.

THURSDAY, 10:55 PM

Jimmy pulled the car to the shoulder. He looked into the night; the Valley was illuminated by oil refinery fires and prison searchlights and myriad crashing cars. He wondered if he should make any more phone calls on as many drugs as he was, but then he thought, fuck it, he wasn't any worse than normal. He thought about that morning, the intense embarrassment he felt seeing his step-dad at the drop. He got over that, too. Nothing unusual occurred. Even what he was seeing now, breathing hard behind the dash, trying not to cry, was either real or fake, real or fake, real or fake. He thought this over again, and decided they were about the same. He picked up his phone.

"Hey," he said. "You still up?"

"We were just talking," said Nancy.

"This one time," said Jimmy, "this black girl, Valencia Bradford (who did cocaine all summer and lost a lot of weight so we made up a diet called the Bradford diet in her honor, and if anyone lost a lot of weight for various reasons, we concluded they were on the Bradford diet), she said I looked like Boy Genius Jimmy Nuetron. She asked me who I reminded her of and I thought for several seconds and then told her, 'Harriet Tubman.'"

"What the fuck is your problem, Jimmy?"

"What the fuck is your problem, Nancy? She was an abolitionist for crying out loud! She made nineteen trips over the Mason-Dixon and freed over three hundred slaves!"

"That's not what I meant and you know it," sighed Nancy.

Jimmy put a stick of gum in his mouth. He chewed obnoxiously.

"Did you call again to, I dunno, just chew gum into the receiver?"

Jimmy thought about this. Unconvincingly, he said, "Nuh-uh." He paused to think. "I called to tell you how much I like you."

"Well ain't you sweet."

"Yes, yes, thank you," he beamed.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Anything, Nancy." Jimmy liked saying Nancy's name because it made him feel like he was talking to a thirty-eight-year-old bank receptionist.

"Are you using Ben as a drug mule?" Nancy sounded genuinely concerned.

"No way," said Jimmy. He meant it.

"Then what did you kids do this afternoon."

"Went to the pet store to buy a drug mule."

"Where at?" asked Nancy. Relieved now, she sounded more

curious than judgmental.

"Chimir's Celeb Pets."

"In the Valley?"

"Kinda kinda kinda." Jimmy popped two or three pills into his mouth and washed these down with a swig of Stoli. "Chimir is from Papua New Guinea and looks like an absolute savage. When people talk about pets to her she always says, 'I don't keep pets, I wear them.' Which is... weird... because she owns a pet store. Makes me wonder what she does with a Shi Tzu that never sells."

"Am I supposed to laugh at that?"

"Honey, she's an absolute mongrel." Jimmy debated on starting up his car again. "Ben agrees."

"You both are racist, xenophobic, and homophobic."

"Ben can't be homophobic—he is *flaming*."

"Ben's disgusted with himself." Nancy paused, searching for something. Jimmy imagined her hazel eyes searching the stars that would complete his face in a constellation. Nancy added: "Ben also hates women."

"Everyone hates women. They're so *mean*." Jimmy felt like being cute: "Just like you!"

"When the fuck was chauvinism supposed to turn me on? Your cuteness and irony are only contributing to this age of desensitization. American race and ethnic barriers are being built back up because of retards like you."

"And like *retards* is so PC." Giraffes were lurching their lemon-cream ways through Roman Candle sparks across the highway. What am I on? asked Jimmy, absolutely in love with how tall the animals were, how innocent and batting eyelashes big-eyed. "We're just observant," he concluded.

"Awesome," hissed Nancy, "because all along I thought you were reversing decades of advancement in civil rights discourse. *Awesome*."

"Heavy," sighed Jimmy, "*heavy*." He decided to change the subject. "We settled on this wolf pup dog, it's very small. Birds will pick at it, we were warned, if its leash is too long. We named it Wolf Pup."

"Gotcha," said Nancy. "How many pounds can you fit in a dog like that?"

"Not many, but enough," said Jimmy. He reconsidered this. "They'll figure it out."

"How are you going to get the drugs out once they go in?"

"Slit its belly open."

Nancy hung up again.

FRIDAY, 10:00 PM

Tory really loved Daniel, and not just because he kept her doped up. He also trimmed her fingernails. This was farce, of course. Daniel didn't believe in love anymore. If love did exist, two years of college had taught him otherwise. This third year was proving the inequality of love to be self-evident. Truths were lies. So he had sex with Tory to look at someone with seemingly more pain than him. As long as both of them were getting something out of it, he reasoned.

Daniel really loved Jimmy. He broke his back to Jimmy's applause, and to being strong, and he reasoned that he needed to be strong and he needed such applause to stay alive. And maybe if Jimmy was in the background, maybe if he was smiling like the best friend, and laughing and clapping like the others, he knew that Jimmy was a thief and a liar and a betrayer, and even if he loved Jimmy he didn't love him completely. He didn't trust Jimmy, and if he did trust Jimmy, then his love for Jimmy would be so absolute, so complete, his bones would burst with love for Jimmy right out of his body, and he would die. And if he died there at the party, dancing and spinning and humming through the words he didn't quite know, if his bones did slam out of his body, were he suddenly vexed and crushed by the immense concussion of loving Jimmy beyond repair, if on the carpet his cup fell to his face, and the beer spilled across a body made of bleeding chutes, no one would understand, no one could immortalize his last disgusting confession. In trusting Jimmy, his only words, words no one would hear, would be: why can't you love me too? So, on seeing Jimmy for the first time since school last spring, he was curt, made icicles of their conversation, belittled Jimmy. And when Jimmy asked how long he had been in town, he told Jimmy all month. And when Jimmy asked why he didn't call, he told Jimmy he didn't see any reason to do so. Really, he wanted to say, I have only wanted to talk to you. I have only wanted to see you. I have only wanted the weight of you around me again. And when Jimmy sat on his bed and he stood above Jimmy, at a distance, he said: you are smaller than I remember. And he didn't die. But he wasn't really alive, either. So he hated love.

As if.

This was immaterial; of course none of his feelings mattered. His was a society dancing on the edge of a volcano, and his mushy, unrequited, hopelessly romantic, mushy gushy only wanting one kiss could not sustain itself in such a callus environ. Rather, it *multiplied*. It was too complicated, too ethereal, dependent upon his Speedos. As long as he was on Varsity and winning division titles, he could go to

the parties and listen to the DJs and dance and go crazy with his credit, and see Jimmy doing the same, and score with chicks in the same room. And they could talk later and hangout. Ludicrous as this was, it served a devastatingly thick reason for Daniel's relief when Astor called to say their end of the deal had gone down smooth.

Tory rolled off of Daniel and lit a cigarette and began to furiously scratch her knees with her free hand. Then she stopped.

"Good," said Daniel. He pushed Tory off the bed to see if she was catatonic, which she was. He grappled with her rigid body and pulled her back onto the bed.

She loosened up then giggled, slightly, and slurred, "Maybe we over-did me on Lithium and Darvons."

Daniel nodded. "And is Ben good?" he asked Astor.

"Yes, I guess. I dunno. He isn't talking much."

"Lemme talk to him," said Daniel. Tory leaned over to kiss him while he waited for Astor to hand the mobile to Ben. Tory missed and slumped into a pillow. Daniel rolled her over.

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking Anderson Cooper. I'm thinking hottest news correspondent on the telly. I'm thinking host of 360°. I'm thinking gunmetal grey hair. I'm thinking how he totally slayed Louisiana Senator Landrieu during the coverage of Katrina. I'm thinking how he made *Entertainment Weekly's* Best Entertainer list. I'm thinking how did CNN get the most gorgeous homosexual in America to host two hours of news. What do you think I'm thinking, you smug fuck?"

"How's the Jaguar?" asked Daniel.

"Not a scratch on it."

"That's what I like to hear." Daniel also heard, in the background, Astor ask if his spread was in *Entertainment Weekly*. "Are you heading back now?"

"Yessir," said Ben.

"Good, then put Astor back on." Daniel checked his watch. He wasn't wearing a watch.

"Hello," said Astor.

"Are you heading back now?"

"Didn't you just ask Ben that same question?"

"I did."

"We're stopping by Nancy's first, see if I can slay that clit."

"Okay," replied Daniel, slowly, deciding not to comment. "You kids got the job done early."

"Had to before the parties. Pfizer guys are *crazy!*"

"Has that dog shit in my trunk yet?"

"It's in a basket. I don't know. Didn't smell like it. But we haven't

fed it, either."

"Okay," replied Daniel. "Then, uh, you kids stay safe."

He turned back to Tory and realized that Ben and Astor still had to meet Jimmy before anyone was out of the clear. Tory was asleep. He kissed her eyelids, he put triple antibiotic ointment on some scabs on her shoulders. She made an unconscious noise of appreciation that beguiled phonetic rendering, it sounded like she said *hiccup* and *zebra* at the same time. Daniel flinched.

THURSDAY, 11:17 PM

"I met the Kerry party at the Radisson in St Louis," said Jimmy to Nancy over his mobile. "One of the higher-ups took me to the penthouse where Kerry would be staying, and fed me deli cuts on expensive breads and cheeses. I made Elizabeth Edwards' salad. She wanted three whole cut cucumbers, it was an assload of cucumber. The party's head of transportation drove us, the only person that could touch Kerry's bags. I rode in the backseat with another guy, this negative-publicity councilary. A documentary filmmaker rode with us, too, and bitched about how none of his shots were going to be good. He told me about Pfizer and the cocaine monkeys he had recently shot. He told me about Merck's cocaine and the DEA. This was a whole year ago."

"So that's where you got the bright idea," said Nancy.

"Uh-huh, bingo," said Jimmy. "You're picking up what I'm laying down. You're stepping in what I'm shitting."

"I'm not quite sure that's how you say that." Nancy was agreeably in a sweater. She had gone back into her dorm-room, braved the savage love quest of Bernice and Frankie, snagged her sweater, and been out between Jimmy's second and this third phone call.

"Why are you so frantic?" she asked.

"I got into some trouble."

"You're always in trouble."

"But I rarely bring my friends into it."

Nancy tried remembering a time before when Jimmy had endangered his friends. She couldn't.

"And I'm lonely," he admitted.

"Everyone's lonely," spat Nancy. "And everyone's cynical and everyone's trying too hard to be buddies with everyone else who's lonely. Everyone is living like they're trapped in a book report about a Bret Easton Ellis novel. Or *The Impossibly*. Nobody talks different." Nancy fussed with her iPod and switched to *The Wedding Present*. No,

she thought. She clicked to Halloween, Alaska. "Everyone's broke up, everyone's back together. I just don't stay mad anymore." She clicked to Murder By Death's "You Are the Last Dragon (You Posses the Power of the Glow)."

Jimmy shifted gears. He was driving through an aquarium, he was driving under Saturn's rings. The night was pages in a comic book. "I'm sorry I wasn't here last semester."

"If you were sorry you wouldn't still be dealing," said Nancy in sing-song.

"I knew you would say that." And apparently you do stay mad, he thought.

"I knew you would deal again."

"Am I that big of a disappointment?" asked Jimmy.

"Honestly?"

"Yeah. For real, tell me—does everyone feel this way about me?"

Nancy thought for a moment, then she said, "Yes." She could almost hear Jimmy wincing.

Jimmy was wincing. He was pounding the steering wheel, too. "Even *Daniel*?"

"Absolutely," continued Nancy, "they think you frauded them. Even Daniel."

"I didn't." Jimmy searched his pockets for another pill. "You know I fucking didn't."

"Jimmy, I haven't talked to you since July. What do you think I know? If I knew anything, I would have had to make it up. Tell me why they took Daniel's car."

"No—no, this isn't going to be a story about Daniel's fucking car. That isn't important."

"Why didn't Ben take his own?"

"This isn't a story about Daniel's fucking car or Ben's fucking car."

"Tell me, pretty please?"

"No. No fucking car story." Jimmy felt passionately about this. He refused to have his resentment boiled down to a piece of metal with nice wheels.

"Then why are they going to the city?" Nancy smirked. She crossed her legs. She rapped her knuckles along the boards of her bench. This is my bench, she told herself. This is my bench for talking to Jimmy. I feel cold sitting on my bench talking to Jimmy. I forgot my Mace.

"They're going to the city," began Jimmy, reconsidering telling Nancy anything, "because I can't show my face around Tony and that one guy, because if I do, they'd kill my step-dad. They think I'm in Boulder trying to get their blow back."

"You double-crossed your old pimps," observed Nancy.

"Well. Troy doesn't need to know that."

"No, he doesn't, does he."

"I was supposed to give him a package that Troy gave me, and I never delivered because I could double a premium on my supplier with a grade of pure like that. Merck fucking pure. Sitting in a dumpster. I gave Troy a bag of bleached flour cut with Novocain."

"Disgusting," said Nancy. But she didn't feel too bad about any of this, because although it was revolting, Jimmy was up to his old tricks again, and probably coming out on top. Disgusting, she thought.

"And I could still pay back Tony and that one guy with another pound of pure, they just gotta let me pass through the right pushers first. So I am. They're pissed as hell. They're about to fire their nuts off with how pissed they are. They got me on a deadline. Saturday. Noon. And my step-dad, Troy, he's pissed too. He's sweating bullets. He's got his twentieth feature in the oven and he's going to be president of the studio and he put his son through poli-sci courses and he doesn't wanna die, and look at me...."

"Look at you," said Nancy.

"I'm—I'm not doing too bad for myself. How about you?"

SATURDAY, 4:05 AM

Ben and Astor met Jimmy on an undisclosed highway. Ben popped the trunk and pulled the dog out of its basket. "Cute," he said. He pulled out a butterfly knife.

"Spare the wolf pup," said Ben. He pointed into the basket. "Did you think we'd cram eight pounds into a dog?"

Jimmy shrugged and Astor smiled and let the wolf pup lick his fingers. "Wolf Pup," purred Astor, "I love you. You're my little wolf pup, Wolf Pup."

"I had to wear Wolf Pup in his basket on me like I was Nicole Richie," said Ben.

"All the same, deal made," said Jimmy. He pulled out his mobile. He dialed a few numbers. "Deal made," he repeated. He hung up. He called another number. He said into his mobile, "Deal made, Troy."

TUESDAY, 7:45 AM

Lou's vision came back to him. The blackness folded back into his pupils and he remembered why he was on the ground. He got up and wiped milk and drool off his cheek, toweled it out of his shirt collar.

He looked out the window and saw Ben's car. Of course Ben walked to classes today, today is such a nice day, thought Lou. He unplugged the microwave oven. He opened the door and stepped into the morning. He hurled the microwave oven into Ben's car's windshield. The microwave oven stuck in the shatterproof glass. Lou went back into the house. He came back outside with a baseball bat and systematically destroyed Ben's car.

THE END

Night March (Pain Stimulates)

Ralph Asher

I.

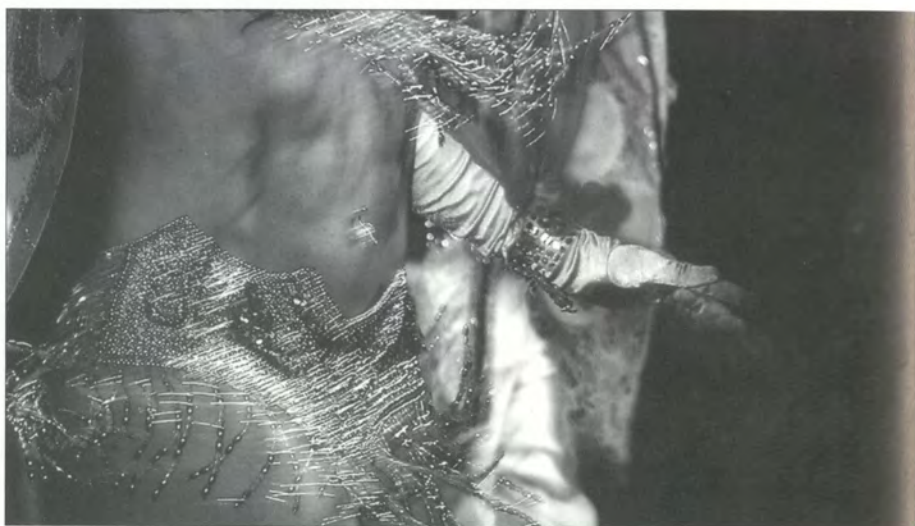
I know that the moon is cruel.
Dirty ivory lunar glow burns
my eyes; cowering retinas hide
as the Saggiarius sugarbowl
pours black milky starflow
upon deciduous treetops.

Are you watching the same moon?
Impossible. You are surely asleep,
tucked in the safety of your sheets
and dreaming (I hope) of my return:
you will jump in my arms, cheesy
as any low-budget romance. But again,
perhaps you're awake, staring out
the window and practicing your lines.

II.

No. I've no doubt you're asleep
as I buzz on ephedra and fear
Morpheus plots in the blackness of trees,
lying in wait to kidnap me into dreams.
I've heard stories – soldiers slumber,
keep marching, tumble off a cliff.

I rub eyes red with sand-covered
sleeves. Sweat-soaked camouflage
chafes thighs while blisters pop
within wet boots. Pain stimulates.
Retinas relax and out of the black,
a form – the man before me! I shift
my hat's wide brim forward, to guard
against Luna. Ahead looms a dark wood.



CARNIVAL
Kristopher Robert Schuster



Untitled
Meredith Albertin



Walk in Venezia
Matt Schaefer



"...a wretch like me..."

Matt Olin



Blessed are they...

Joanna Spaulding



Untitled
Meredith Albertin



Untitled
Meredith Albertin



Strutting His Stuff
Kristopher Robert Schuster

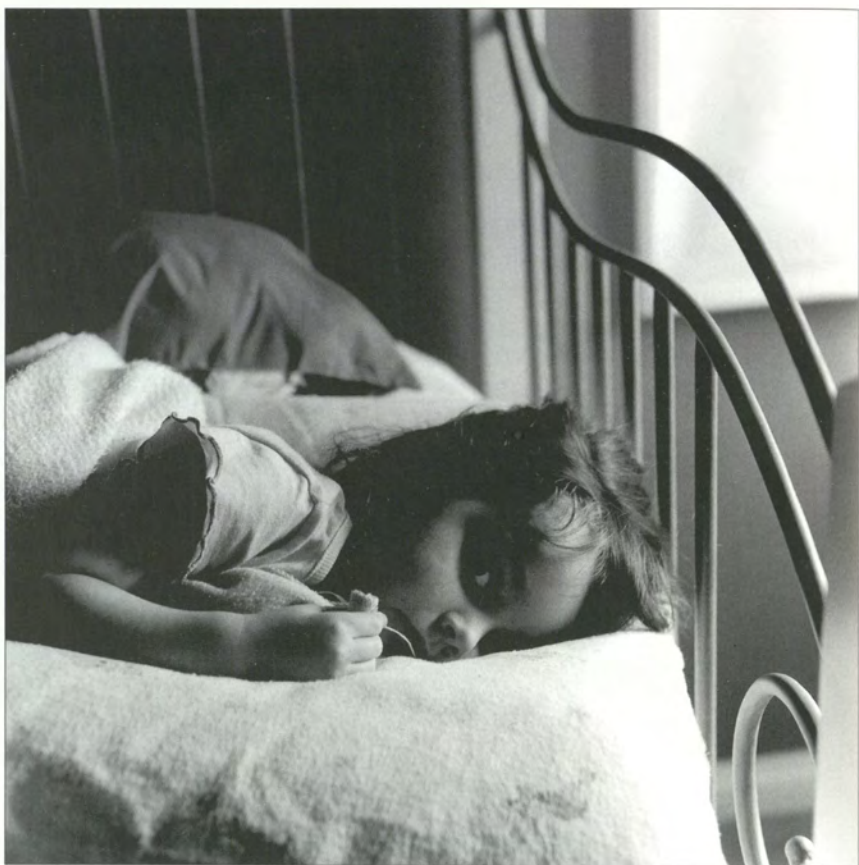


Modern Philosophy
Caleb Sancken

Knox Blox

Amanda Johnson

I had a dream about you last night.
It was strange to see you there.
You held the steel elevator
 we mingled in a gelatin pool
Your green Chuck Taylors radiated
 so brightly
 the rest of the dream was black and white.
You blinked
and the lights went out.



Nap
Kaht North



Lamps
Matt Schaefer

Separation

Adam Ortman

When highway rush hour
sighs its sea song and sky
washes black as oil-slick shores,
wind lifts your prayer

far from your lips. It surges over rooftops
and hunts me down. Wise Way aisle ten,
breaking like a wave, scuttling
my cart and sending fish sticks and kale

swimming. Bagless in the parking lot,
I raise my eyes.
A muddy scatter of stars
mirrors city lights. I watch the brightest

until my eyes cross and cleave
it in two. The heavens are split
but no dove descends.
Miles away, home waits

dark and void as an unlit planet
— thirsty for light, shapes, some voice
to spill forth.
Yours, mine. I am stuck

in teeming traffic, headlights like two shouts
echoing parallel along the road,
they race but never meet. Amen,
prayers dropped like fruitless nets.

We once reeled, floundering half-drowned
in the belly of a chaos now severed.
I drive home between waters
and waters, eyes on a dashed line.



Eclipse

Kimberly Sienkiewicz

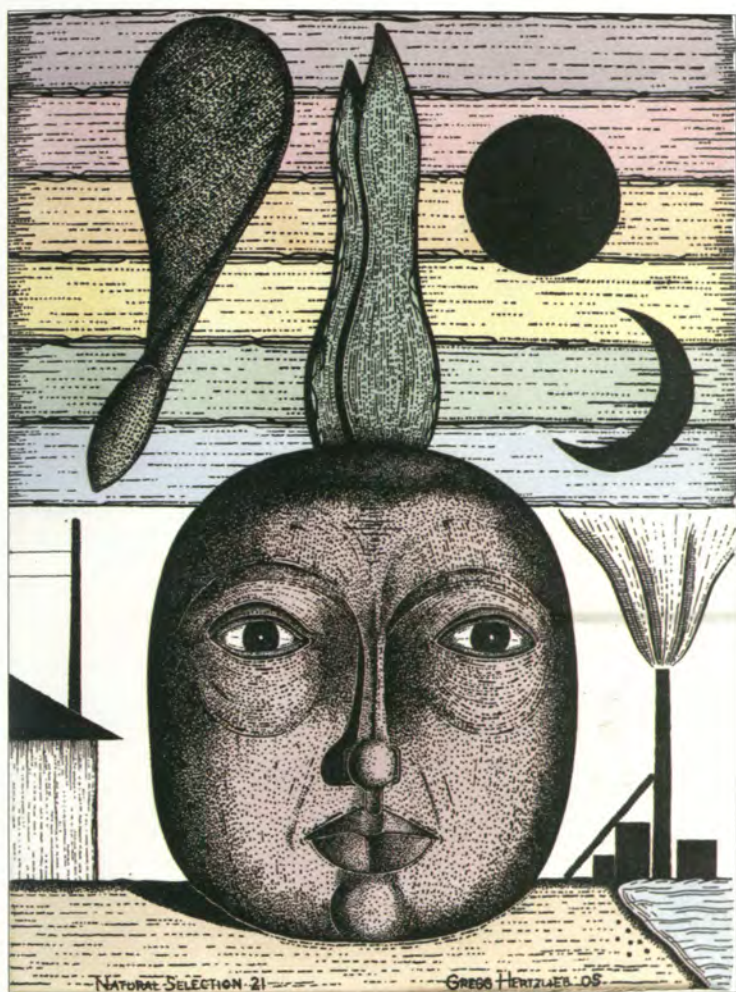
Faculty Corner: Gregg Hertzlieb

Introduction by Netha Cloeter

Wooden people, personified beets, and armor-plated fish fill Gregg Hertzlieb's works on paper. With a scientific eye for meticulous detail, Hertzlieb constructs scenes that address notions of time, evolution, and the organic components of life itself. These small-scale scenes demand close inspection, and viewers find themselves quickly immersed in layers of visual puns, symbols, and dynamic narratives.

Gregg Hertzlieb is the curator and director of the Brauer Museum of Art in Valparaiso, Indiana. He received his Master's degree in fine arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a Master's degree in education from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Hertzlieb also serves as art editor for *The Cresset*, contributes essays to the *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, and teaches Museum Studies at Valparaiso University. In addition to his curatorial duties and commitments, Hertzlieb is an exhibiting artist working predominantly in watercolor, pen and ink.

Hertzlieb's native environment of Northwest Indiana serves as both a visual and conceptual backdrop for his work on paper. In the following three pieces, he draws on his visual lexicon of natural settings and organic forms to communicate an autobiographical narrative of sorts. For Hertzlieb, the creative process itself is a journey into the unconscious, and the juxtaposed elements of his compositions suggest a similar quest for meaning through time and space.



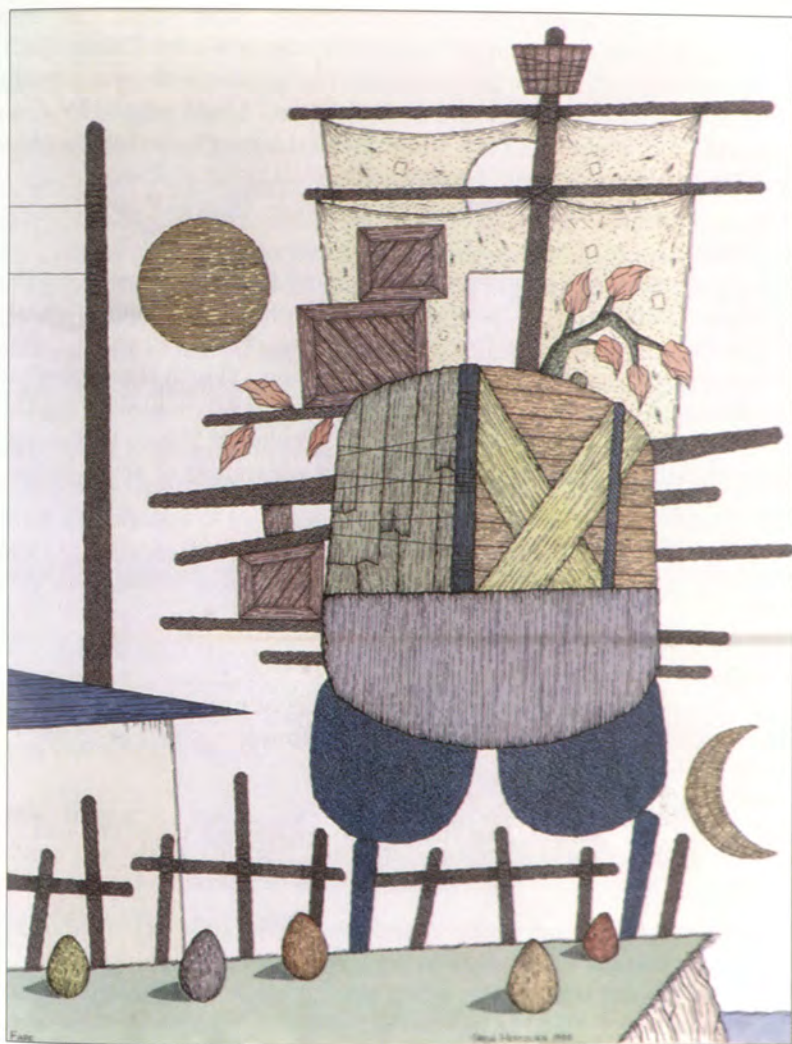
Natural Selection 21, 2005

Ink and watercolor on paper
11 x 8 inches



Untitled, 2005

Colored pencil on paper
7 ¼ x 4 ¾ inches



Fare, 1999

Ink and watercolor on paper
20 x 16 inches

Contributors' Notes

Ralph Asher

I am a graduating (finally) senior physics major. After Valpo, I am commissioning in the United States Marine Corps as a Second Lieutenant. I will look back fondly upon my time with *The Lighter*, both as a contributor and as a member of the selection committee. Thank you to Prof. Byrne and Prof. Wangerin, both whom helped hone my writing abilities and offered encouragement. Happy trails, y'all.

Dan Beirne

The two pictures that I submitted are from my time studying in southern Africa. "Light-natural" was taken with a disposable camera on a beach on False Bay, in Cape Town South Africa. The guy catching the frisbee is my buddy Erik Connell of Washington. "Light-threefaces" is taken at our house in Windhoek, Namibia. It was taken by leaving the shutter open for approx. 8 seconds. Bailey Brewer, of Valpo, makes up the two ghostly images, and the studly Olaf Alexander of Texas, is the prominent figure.

Kim Bellware would like to suggest these tips for successful Contra dancing:

1. Enthusiasm

2. Sensitivity

* Adjust to each dancer's needs and abilities continuously. If you dance with 60 people in line, big or little, older or younger, you'll need to dance 60 different ways.

3. Consideration

* Dance with new comers, like you were once danced with. You can help them learn quicker.

4. Skills

* Learn proper technique, posture, and foot work because your dancing could hurt someone, especially during the balance and swing.

* Be precise in your timing. But when you do blow it, blush, apologize and keep dancing.

5. Appreciation

* Applause is music to the ears of callers and musicians. They need to be reassured they are doing a good job after each dance. Whenever you feel so moved, give them a hand or a cheer.

* A hug and a compliment for the caller and musicians at the end of the evening are as important as a last waltz. After all, the caller, the band and the dancers are a single happy family.

Evan Scott Bryson

Jesse Hautau, Jeremy Krammes, and A.J. Bryson shaped these stories in major ways and each has my gratitude. Gundam, what a rough year.

Tracy Monson is a junior studying abroad in Puebla, Mexico this semester. her interests include colors, sounds, and Spanglish. her poem "What the Hell..." was inspired in part by a photograph by Enrique Martinez Celaya.

Kaht North is a born and bred Vermonter that prefers mountains over cornfields. She came to Valpo because the breeze smells lovely blowing from the southwest and there are big thunderstorms. Kaht's major and passion is photography (it is in her blood, so to speak), passed down to her by her father. She will attend the Chicago Arts Program next fall and complete her BSFA degree next spring.

Matt Olin is a sophomore art & theology major. However, Matt aspires to be a superhero most of the time. Eventually, he'd like to be a pastor by day and save the world by night (while simultaneously incorporating art into the equation). Matt holds true to the belief that Jesus loves both pirates and ninjas equally.

Adam Ortman wrote "Separation" and "The Independence Center." He thinks it's a shame the campus master plan calls for the annihilation of all substantial green space on campus, but that's pretty irrelevant to the poem and the story.

Katie Resel is a senior art history major. Her interests include banana seat bikes, chipped paint, and riding in laundry carts. Upon graduation, she intends to spend time in a tire swing reading Tom Robbins and Jack Kerouac.

Caleb Sancken

"Modern Philosophy" was taken at the Christ College Millenium Park outing on September 11, 2005. It was enhanced, using the opensource GIMP software, by severely brightening dark areas of the photo. I thank Prof. Hoffman for being a great, albeit unwitting, subject.

Melanie Schaap would like to thank all of the gals on the lighter staff for all of their hard work and effort through out the process of creating this pretty great book. She would also like to thank Ms. Valerie Cochran and for being so very enthusiastic and photogenic.

Matt Schaefer takes photographs of many things.

Lauren Schreiber is currently interested in allegorical photography and urban art movements. She would like to thank her models, Paul Schreiber and Reese Resel, for bearing eye-blinding projecttions, too-small jackets and possible public humiliation.

Joanna Spaulding

I'm a junior and a biology/English major here at Valpo. I enjoy drawing and writing and only recently redeveloped my interest in photography. I use an old film SLR camera and enjoy taking mostly nature photographs. This picture is from last semester which I spent abroad in England, taken at the American Cemetary in Madingley, near Cambridge.

theLighter

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