
fugue
Issue 46

fugue

Issue 46

Fugue (ISSN 1054-6014) is a journal of new literature edited by graduate students in the University of Idaho's English and Creative Writing programs. *Fugue* is made possible by funding from the University of Idaho English Department and Creative Writing Program and is published semiannually in the spring and fall.

Subscriptions are $10 for a year (1 print issues, 1 digital) and $18 for 2 year (2 print issues, 2 digital); institutional subscriptions are $18 for 1 year or $26 for 2 years. Add $4 per year for international subscriptions. To subscribe or to order back issues, please visit www.fuguejournal.org.

Fiction, nonfiction, and poetry submissions are accepted September 1 through May 1. All material received outside this period will be returned unread. Please visit www.fuguejournal.org for submission guidelines. All contributors receive payment and a complimentary copy of the journal in which their work appears. Please send no more than five poems, two short-shorts, one story, or one essay at a time. Submissions in more than one genre should be sent separately. We will consider simultaneous submissions (submissions that have been sent concurrently to another journal), but we will not consider multiple submissions. All multiple submissions will be returned unread. Once you have submitted a piece to us, wait for a response on this piece before submitting again.

Cover design by Lucy Holtsnider (2014).

Printed by The Sheridan Press. Designed by Eric Greenwell.

fugue

Winter-Spring, Vol. 46

Prose Staff

Myles Barker
Nate Brown
Jordan Clapper
Christine Culp
Amber Dean
Anna Hammons
Alan Hendricks
Katherine Johnson
Courtney Kersten
April Layton
Jamie Lyon
Saleeha Mansour
Megan Mills-Rittmann
Eric Orosco
Joseph Perreault
Dustin Purvis
Cassie Scott
Brian Scullion
Matt St. Cyr
Lloyd Siegel
Karl Utermehlen
Sarah Vangundy
Sadie Williams

Poetry Staff

Becky Barry
Amelia Brubaker
Daniel Iacob
Jessica McDermott
Rose Orono
Jeff Pearson
Zana Previti
Wendy Silva
Rob Thornton

Faculty Advisor
Alexandra Teague

CONTENTS

POETRY

NONFICTION

FICTION

ABOUT THE ISSUE

Hunger lies at the heart of this issue. Literal hunger—the impulse driven by our basic need to ingest and digest sustenance. The kind you feel for a cold can of mushroom soup and buttered saltine crackers because that's what your father could provide; the kind of thirst that craves entire ponds, including light and radiation from stars reflected there; the kind of global appetite that turns the possibility of acres upon acres of heartland into a single-mass-produced-nutrient-sucking crop.

But you can't stew on literal hunger without cooking out the aromas and odors of the figurative—at least in good literature you can't. Assembling this issue, I have discovered that hunger implies a critical relationship of give-and-take: In order for something to be consumed, it is produced and made available at the expense of one's energies and materials. Whether you pour your time and abililty into a work of art that ultimately becomes a manifestation of your limitations, or trust a self-aware misfit cynic who uses your trust to wreck you deepest, you have been either the hungry or the eaten. Worst case scenario: a black hole, a tapeworm, an appetite unappeasable, indifferent, indiscriminant at its core.

Thus, discussion of hunger implies discussion of vulnerability: "It gives of itself, voluntarily or not, something vital—its nutrients, its energies raw and emotional; it takes, whether graciously and thankfully or selfishly and gluttonously, to sustain its present self."

Finally, I feel compelled to note that the call for submissions for this issue was a general one. This is not a themed issue, and yet these pieces, selected by a staff of more than thirty different readers and editors, seems to have come from some collective consciousness, if not collective concern. Take this for what it's worth. And enjoy, what these writers have given.

John A. Nieves

HUNGER MOON

The way a crocus pierces a sheet of unbroken
snow. The way our stomachs call, pulled like
the tides. Under this moon kisses were either
too rough, or they stuck, or the breath got short

and hands unheld each other, often from inside
gloves. Every fire built burned low and tired
as if the heat wanted to slink off to sleep. Once,
over a cup of coffee, I said to you, *I am starving*,

and you said, *I see much of myself in you*, then
you raised dry toast to your face and blew the loose
crumbs across the table. They formed an arrow,
pointed me to your chest. I was glad to be hungry.

Nate Liederbach

EMPTY

News arrives in a uniformed cluster of stern sympathy, a Jeep Liberty stuffed with officers. They unload at Townhomes for Heroes, cul-de-sac B, unit 5, and knock. The boy answers. He is called young man and asked to fetch his mom. She sees the assembly on her porch and digs her nails into the doorframe. She sends the boy to his room. The boy obeys. The officers leave. Mom's there a long time, plunked on the stoop, watching the lawn. Then she does something she hasn't done since she was single. Two fingers pointed, perfectly steady, thumb up like a gun hammer, she smokes her imaginary Camel.

When he's finally told, the boy doesn't blubber. Doesn't blubber when Mom blubbers and gropes for him. Doesn't when the sister blubbers and glares at him. The sister glares because the boy does nothing. She glares because this is not OK. Not a tear or yell from her little brother for four days up to the ceremony. Then a crack of volley shots. They bounce around the boy's skull. Here's Dad's flag-draped coffin. It's vacant but everybody knows.

His dry-spell persists. Despite the snorts and wails surrounding him at two receptions. Mumbled meetings held in musty, half-sunk rooms. There are gray tables of dull cookie spirals, bites of tired vegetable and always more rows of precisely-lined folded chairs than are needed. More tepid sighs, more tepid punch. The boy sips the neon, too sugary to really drink. He watches Mom and watches how his sister always stands by Mom, stands just like her or nods when Mom nods. He prefers to sit back, away, alone. But this secluding himself means he's open season. Here they come waddling, another

vestmented grandpa. These men lean in very close and stink like closets. Not one does the boy recognize. Not one does he pretend to recognize. Should he say, *I don't know you ... who are you?* Would this stop them? He does not think so. He thinks that they are working. This is their job and it is serious. *He* is their job. Their lactescent eyes brainlessly search the boy's flat forehead. Noses drooling gray wire and teeth in rotted clack. Bunch of spit too, whipped and clogging the mouth corners: *He did it for you so you'll know what honor means. Not now, you won't, probably not, but you will someday. Someday you'll swig from the rueful cup of your selfish generation and taste nothing and understand that you are different. Marooned in your pre-manhood you will remember his sacrifice. You will look around to see America's dream flopping her death throes, but you alone, unsurprised, will know to fight, rail, bring her glory full circle...*

The codgers say this. Always this or something like it. The boy doesn't move his face. *You understand me, boy?* Only then does he nod. It's more of a figure-eight.

This vague, loose movement of the neck, he uses it a lot. Buys him time. Time not to cry. Time to wait for Mom to finish grieving loudly and for the sister to keep hold of Mom's hand, sniveling, pretending to mourn too while scowling at his lack. Until the cold lights dim. The cookies and punch vanish. In a sudden swarm, baby-faced soldiers fold up chairs, rows evaporating backwards all the way back to him.

The soldiers bring the small family their rain jackets. It's off again, across the base, to their townhome. Whisked silently in the backseat of an inky sleek Suburban. At the cul-de-sac the car door's held open by a white-gloved hand. Mom and kids scramble out. But they're not free yet. Escorted to the stoop and saluted, then, sometimes, hugged roughly and strictly. At which point they're left to tumble inside, watch TV, normal.

In the very early morning the boy's jarred awake. Mom's wailing. She's cussing and kicking things. Two minutes later the sister does

exactly the same. The boy gets up, thinks, *Geez, come on, people*. He pees in the dark, aims just by listening. He trudges around his room and then into the kitchen. Holding the fridge door, he blinks until his pupils adjust. Chugs milk from the carton, gets a brain-freeze. He winces, realizes it's a smile, and holds it all the way back to his room.

Still the boy remains dry-eyed. This is even later now—though not *that* later, not in schemes of all things Dead Loved One. Not a water-work even at his own fatherless birthday party. But Mom manages to pull it off despite her coughing, her stagger, her quickly waning and thrown-together looks. Because the party's necessary. Six of the boy's friends for pizza and rock 'n' roll bowling. Tuesday, high noon, Shakin' Lanes Tacoma. She calls it Keeping things squared-away.

After cupcakes, Mom takes him aside. She tells him, Happy Birthday—! She hunkers, takes his hand. She lets go, scowls down, picks at dried sauce on her sweater. Her talking's like every word's a question. She says how glad she is. Glad he's keeping it together. Because aren't you just keeping it together really well, considering? You're so strong, like your father—

Was?

But he doesn't think this and so he doesn't say this. And glad, yes, he keeps hearing this word from her. What can he do but agree. Glad he's holding it together, glad to not make a peep, a scene, a fit, because anything could send Mom nuts. Here she goes. Hard choking noises. She stands, weaves away. Her hand's to her neck sort of choking. She almost falls sideways but grabs a ball rack. Looking over her shoulder and a snot bubble percolates lime-green above her lip. The boy only sees that, makes a face, but makes it while trying to look away so—

Though she sees. He knows she does. He gives the brain-freeze smile. It's a wide grin like he's stubbed his toe but is stifling a yell. Mom frowns mean. It's not her usual disappointed eyes. She chides herself. She thinks, No, that's stupid. Frown, smile, all semantics. All things being alive simply is. And a ceremony is only that too

after all, a place-holder—like practice, motion, avatar of the actual. Her, her kids, why couldn't they have refused, waited? On what?

Ma'am, that's a big trek to go getting him back home, you need to try to understand we're doing everything possible with protocol and safety and an ocean to cross then across a wide country.

I understand. He can't move on his own—*it* can't move on *its* own. Others have to move it.

Others?

Her son and his fake smile shuffle over maybe to hug her. He holds out a napkin for her face. Her hand, instead of taking it, pinches his upper arm. Hard. Pinches and this small violence is what exactly? A hope that he'll stop grinning and just sob? Harder. Very hard. He's in a t-shirt and where her grip is there's almost just skin and bone. But it's only bone in her mind. It's going gray wildly fast, crumbling. She yanks her hand back. She jerks it forward and snags the napkin. Pressing it to her nose, greasy. Smells pepperoni, onion, staggers off bathroom-bound, stall-bound.

Drops and finds her knees on sticky tile. A cold bowl clutch and that reek of wet public, of alleyway. Her back arches. Throat lurches like something's plucking her ribs out of her mouth one at a time. Puke and plunk until it's mostly only sharpest air. Her sounds slap off the cinderblock walls.

She looks up from the toilet, stares at the slathered violet paint. It's scum-shiny with too many coats. She heaves again but doesn't lower her neck and nothing comes up. Heaving and heaving. Her noise bounces around the little bathroom, bounces out the door. Everyone hears. All the way down the bright-lacquer lanes, smothering each speaker leaking The Jackson Five. But her noise is loudest of all to the teenage employee in the bathroom. A girl at the sink on her break. A girl who's not so much fat as simply *baggy*. Baggy, exactly—how she walks, talks, thinks. At the sink, she's scrubbing baggy hands and peering in a wobbled mirror. Baggy lips,

baggy fucking cheekbones. Or it isn't a mirror, just high-reflection stainless steel because assholes will shatter it, assholes will take keys and scratch *Dont ass... don't go ta hell yall!!*

The girl stares at these words. She whispers, *Boo-yah* but she's not thinking vandalism. She's thinking how she hates her dumbass follicles and this snake-peeled skin gone baggy too. Blotches of uneven freckles, smeared, smearing. No amount of lotion, cream, cover-up... and her hair. Hates her stupid sprouting Brillo hair and there's, like, fuck-all she'll ever be able to do with it. Mass of dirt-blond pig fur. Could only maybe shave the disaster. Ah, man, but then she'd look like a damn rugmuncher from Portland—

Another heave from the stall behind her. She slaps the mirror, shouts, God, enough with the banshee routine already! Christ, lady, are you like *dying* in there?

So Paul has been notified. He's on the emergency. Paul, Manager Number One, Shakin' Lanes Tacoma. He's been given a full report by his glowering employee. He's taking charge. He's lingering a polite distance from the ladies' bathroom. On the other side of the water fountain just waiting. Hands casually in his pockets. Here we go.

Bloodshot, clammy, wiping her mouth with a paper towel. She's led by the elbow. Around the corner, into Paul's office. He eases her into his chair. He bestows cold Sprite. He explains that Sprite always works wonders for his own tummy. He says *tummy*. Then he says *steaming*, as in a Cup O' Noodles steaming from the microwave. He tells her to hold it under her nose and inhale slowly. He tries not to talk fast, but that's how he talks: Feeling better now, Miss? Awesome. Good. Wonderful. Got that tummy settled, I hope. So let's get you back, Miss, out to your birthday boy?

Standing beside, above her. His hand light on Mom's back for a five-count. But then Paul takes it stiffly away—

Oh—Oh you've got a ring...

She stares up, unhappiest eyes.

He massages his temples, concerned. He stares back into those eyes thinking, Goddamn crap luck because you with this olive skin and those wild gold stripes in your black ponytail—

She interrupts his thoughts: I don't—it's a wedding ring, yes, but no, I'm...

Now she's smiling tiredly. Her nose is red and she politely burps. That helps. She thanks him for being such a gentleman. That's the word she uses, peering up at Paul through her lashes and asking if he has some gum.

Of course Paul has gum. Heck, a hop, skip and a jump, My Lady!

Ma Lady? Malady? But it actually *is* just a hop, skip, and jump. She hides her hand, the pretend cigarette she's smoking. He's back and now she's chewing peppermint. He sits across from her and chews too. She stares at him. His jaws are enormous, protracted. As if his nose is a muzzle. He's got his head held to the side Collie-like but this muzzle face and she's thinking about that donkey Jesus rode in on. Ever gentle donkey. Not to conquer, never a fighter, this manager, this Paul, this sweet donkey, chewing, chewing.

Paul stares back. He thinks, Could be ... kismet? Oh, you're not kidding. Out of all the bowling venues along the Puget Sound? It's like all the backyards and all the lady bugs? But the wind dumped this one right here. Here, a real ladybug, a real lady of a sweet lost bug... And look at me! I'm scooping you up and I'm bringing you close. Just bringing you in to see, to check. Oh, but the sadness of it! Because what can I, mere Paul, do? You don't belong to Paul, no, but whoever you belong to did he notice you've flown? How badly you've hurt yourself in the process? These hints of delicate wing slipped so sadly from their protective shell—

I've got to...

Certainly, Paul replies. He nods his huge skull. He hops up. He helps her call the boys' parents, helps her summon the troops for

early pick up. Mom's so grateful. This is what she tells him. Does Paul know he's really saved a damsel in true distress?

Paul hears this deep, deep in his head. His eyes dance. He hands over a business card, fingers trembling. And right here is a completely current number if you need to reschedule.

Reschedule, she says.

Certainly.

Pizza-taste all brushed out and cheese-grease scrubbed off his cheeks. The boy's home from bowling and totally relieved. That's over with. Good. Because none of his friends were really his friends today. Except Forrest. Only Forrest ignored Mom's puking. Everyone else made sure to hear, freak out, make giggling gagging faces, stupid butthole jerks, until Forrest said, *Stop it, Buttholers.*

Yeah, completely. And forget those dickwads anyway. He's so tired. He'll floss and Listerine tomorrow. Shoot, Mom doesn't say anything anymore. Then again, maybe he's not really tired but just needed to be alone. He spreads his presents out on the bedroom floor: binoculars, couple of Blue-Ray's he's already seen, two PS3 games he's rented plenty before, and, wait, what's this? A book on drawing cartoons. Dumb, complete waste—

Why's that?

Why, well because … you know, because you've never been good at art. Like Dad always says, you and me we're math-spelling dudes.

Like Dad always *said*.

He flips through the pages. He flips and thinks the book's pretty cool actually. It's all wild animals with everything ovals, circles, and triangle fangs. As in, *A few simple steps!* That's what it tells him, *Give it a go!* OK, whatever. There's an easy O for the head and two ovals for ears, a third for the neck … now just erase the overlapping lines and—

No freakin way! Only eight minutes and he's made a full jaguar. It's almost alive on the page. Practically real eyes and paws.

Practically razor teeth, and then, look, what's next but this killer, mean-ass bear. Ha! It's spooking a too-fat rabbit—yes, *that's* how it's done! Lighter circles, see, and they're easier to erase, and *then* come in with the dark.

His little neck hairs, little arm and leg hairs, stand up. He breathes, Wow.

Her bedroom door's shut. With his free hand he gives a small knock. Presses his mouth to the crack. Mom? You awake?

No, Sweetie, I'm asleep.

In exactly the way she always does, the boy sighs. He rests his forehead on the hollow wood. He sighs and sighs, and that works. The bed squeaks.

Mark?

Mark? Tom? Tommy? T-Bone? Man? Mark? No, oh, shit man. No, no, no—

Two rounds: first to the left calf and it makes the soldier fall to one hand. He puffs. Puffing while the other hand jerks up to push the loose helmet high again. But this only allows the second bullet to strike. Smack dab on the left pupil. It's a zipsuck sound. It's the zygomatic collapsing, shards tugged into brain tissue. This is how, later, once the body's been tagged and choppered out, it's described to the fresh CO on duty, described by the base camp medic.

Zygomatic, man. Sorta fun to say, hey? Yup, that's one of twenty-two skull bones we got… Zipsuuuuuck. *It's a sound all its own. Not like a peg to the torso or thigh or neck. No, the round of the head, the pulling into itself, dragged into its own lead-lined hole where the bullet wiggles for a hot instant before all grey matter goes chalky. Sound all its own. Round sound. Sound of things getting smaller. The moment where what's not yet corpse cracks the quickest laugh. Don't laugh. I'm not. And what about his buddy? The dude beside him?*

The soldier beside him. The only one beside him. Just the two all alone—

Why? Were they separated from the team?

Was it a CT mission, or was it reconnaissance?

Doesn't matter. This soldier, this second soldier, he leans back. Then forward. Then back. This man, this still-living man, he looks around but never down, never at his smoked friend. He thinks, *I'm fuckin' still here, dude. Am I? Where are we?*

Mark? Is it a quick question? Mark?

Mom sits up. Her pulse loud. Suddenly she needs to know did he have a good birthday even when she screwed it up?

He doesn't answer her, and she says, OK, Baby, I get it. I'm sorry.

She pauses.

His small voice says, Dad doesn't have a birthday now?

She thinks, Fuck—this brain of his.

Mark, he was still born. We can still celebrate.

I guess.

It's just, Sweetie, that we stop counting... Mark?

Mark, or Marcus. As in Marcus T. Griffin. Or simply T. As in Tommy, for what friends call him. But Mom calls him Mark, and the sister, the older sister, Patty, she calls him MT—the initials. But Tommy, this name from Tom, from Dad. Major Tom Griffin. T-Bomb. T-Bagger. T-Bone. U.S. Special Forces. KIA in an Afghani ambush only weeks before his son's ninth birthday.

But me, me, I'm fuckin' still here, dude!

This what the second soldier thinks. He leaps up, wide-legged. The vast world contracts. He realizes the danger, drops to his butt. He slides to the other side of the boulder, gets a fistful of vest, tugs his partner with him. Or tries. So heavy, hurts his shoulder. He leans around the rock, squeezes a burst off his M4 and waits.

Nothing.

He reclines. He cradles his weapon and furiously licks his lips. *Fuck, T, fuck you! Not in this goddamn place, please, please...*

This is what he'd say if he could articulate. He can't. Not all this, not that he is behind this meager rock and he is alone too suddenly. Or is he? If the body here is still warm? A hot form oozing blood from its charred and caved-in face. Except still enough of a face to have his best friend's name. Smoked mind, mushed thoughts, as palpable. Textures lift and swirl. The live soldier sniffs. It's there for a second, his buddy's alive-smell, but then it's gone, lost out here, but where the fuck is here?

Here is where it doesn't rain. Here is where it's always either hot or cold, never just warm, never evaporation lingering. No, here evaporation happens before sweating, backwards, wrong. And so the man starts to chant numbers, moving them forward, plodding.

One one-thousand, two…

Mark, we stop, Honey. Dad was still, you know, born, but we stop counting. *Tommy?*

It's no use. The boy's moved off and she's left with her unanswered voice. The press of her bedroom air, how it coils. It forces her to blink for something. There's no alarm clock eye burning red. No nightlight in the bathroom. No blue secretion from the sealed window shades and so Mom gropes for her water glass. Drinks big. Finds stale warmth. The fluid lurches in her gut and she thinks, *Paul, Paul, who is this man and what does he have to do with me now?* and *I don't have a job* and *I don't want to live here, in this place, anymore, but somewhere, I do, right?*

She drinks again. How old is it? Tastes mostly dust but she finishes. Her stomach filling, bulging, imagining her fibers frayed. A scarecrow chest burst open and protecting nothing.

In the kitchen Tommy's suddenly starved. At the open fridge again. Stop counting. Yes, it makes sense what Mom said. He's wrapping clumps of lunch meat around a cheese slice. He's munching at the table and studying his drawings. Man, he's really good. Shaking his

head, he's thinking, Hurry, chew faster, so we can get right back to it.

Sprawled on the carpet with pencils sharpened. The game's to try and look at the clock every twenty minutes. Like exactly. Killer whale, twenty-three. Fighting eagles, eighteen. Tiger attacking elephant—oh, forget the stupid time-game stuff, we've got a whole jungle scene here! Python curled in a tree. Monkey swinging on a vine. Monkey over vapors curling from the misty soil, curling with that sweet dead scent of *Caw*, *clack*, *crack*. Of nose running. Of eyes running. Of hand cramping and mouth full of eraser, but the jungle keeps coming, pushing off the page, and *Hear that, Buddy? There's someone out there, past the bellow of bark rot and shivered dew? Hear it? Listening is the most important?*

Yeah, Dad, I hear it.

Screaming birds and ferns, they fall to His path and He's always coming.

Who? Who is?

He. The He. Yes, He needs something. We all need something, but He wants certainty. He needs perfect. We want a safe little space to hypothesize, but that's where He always looks first, and the problem is…

What?

We have to keep just ahead of Him. Keep just ahead, but never assume our shadow is just our shadow. Just ahead and afraid of nothing, not pythons, not tigers, not boots heavier than tanks, crushing jungles and mountains, mountains becoming desert where there's no place to store heat, to keep—Now! Go! Move it! Move it! Run! Run for your life, T! Run or you'll be flattened, belly sunk, guts trailing, one giant footprint filling with rain in the center of your little boy back.

Then time passes and time forgets in its own way. He and Mom and the sister live in Olympia, moved twenty-two miles south from Tacoma and the boy doesn't miss it. Doesn't miss the bases with their quaking war games and C-17 thunder swoops, not a bit. Though his friends, well sure. Or just one. But you know what's

crazy? It may not be very far where they moved, but it rains more in Olympia than back at Townhomes for Heroes, yup.

No way, Jose.

That's what Mom said. But she says nope about everything anymore. So, fine, he'll show her. He'll conduct an experiment. He and Forrest. His best friend still back there because Forrest's mom's in Iraq. Anyway, the boys are going February to April—who will measure the most in their backyards. They've got exactly the same measuring cups from The Dollar Store. Glass not plastic. Red lines and numbers. Set them on the same size cinderblocks and not under any trees.

By the first week of March Tommy's up an inch and three-quarters. He's letting Moondog see the calculations on the living room laptop. Peering over the boy's shoulder, the man says, Cool beans, Little-T, so as long as you trust your friend.

I trust him.

Great.

Why wouldn't I?

No reason. Never a reason. That's how honesty works—one sec it's there, next, nada.

I said trust.

Cheap-ass taxpayers.

Why's that, T?

This conversation earlier. Much. And earlier than the dead soldier beside the alive soldier who's counting ... but only by maybe a touch. Same two soldiers bunched against a beige boulder. They're keeping a bead on some goat-piss road. They're shoulder-to-shoulder with one fragile shadow between them. The first solider, the one that will be dead, his face scrunches and he growls, *Cheap-ass taxpayers*, and then he removes his helmet.

Christ, T, you'd give me so much flak if I did that.

It's more dangerous on like this.

But I'm saying you'd crucify me if I took off mine even for good reason—

You're always saying, the first interrupts. You say too much, Dog. Shut up. Watch the road.

It's true. The second one, the one that will survive, he's got diarrhea of the mouth. It's what he's known for. Mouth always open, round as a full moon and words just as bright, flat, worthless. Thing is, he can't *not* talk. It keeps him calm. He watches the road but talks too, call it compromise:

Looks like another witch's tit day outside asshole Paktika, hey T-Bomb?

The tension on this chin strap. The first doesn't answer. He can't get the tension right.

You hear me? I'm saying the sun's bright white while our knuckles freeze to hell, yeah, and where the fuck we say we'd circle around to?

Shouldn't have even taken the thing off his head, and the first soldier knows this but, shit, it keeps sinking over his eyes, obstructing his vision.

Yo, come on, T, I said how can it be sunny and cold? Talk to me—it don't add up.

Ah, screw it, the first thinks, and slips the helmet back on. He says, Dude, all your yapping and I can't think, OK? Pride and ego, man. We got to be on the same page here—it adds up, it does, always, but you, Moon, you can't see for shit. Look around. Notice anything alive enough to hold heat? Sun can't do all the work itself. Now shut the fuck up and listen.

One one-thousand, two.

Yeah, listen for what?

For that right there.

Man, I hear fuck-all.

Not fuck-all, the first thinks, no. There's pitted wind and gravel scratching gravel and there're tiny touches of molecules everywhere, and everything they might hide.

I said you're crazy, T-Bagster!

So is He.

Who's He? You losing it?

T-Bomb only says it doesn't matter. With only minutes of life left the he's done talking. Instead he's looking around trying to get some bearings. Crouching, peeking. One side of the boulder then scuttles to the other. In the near distance a circle of decayed snow, beyond that, frozen sand, beyond that, half-buried mountains, unnamed. He's done talking, but his mind's whirling. *The moments of our lives are a vast system of betrayal, so-meltable, dude, and just sandwiched between sun and fucking magma. Lines, weak lines.*

Come on, Moondog, I'll show you the experiment.

Out to the backyard then so the boy can show the man his measuring glass.

Tommy says, There's barely any rain in it now but Yahoo Weather says as much as two inches by tomorrow noon.

The man nods. He looks everywhere but where the boy wants. He smells like hot cinnamon stick, guy perfume. As always he wears a necktie and also a hair-tie to keep his dreads ponytailed. He says, Shoot Lil-T, once it didn't rain for six months when we were Af-Pakin' it.

Forrest and me need to account for the evaporations, but I'm not sure how.

Account! Moondog snorts.

The man and boy stare at each other, the man thinking, Where'd you learn that shit. Too much mind on you, Squirt, but instead he says, Even with no clouds it got so cold and dry you had to rub your spit in your eyes and then we'd cover them with wet rags before sleeping. Um, where's your mom?

Tommy shrugs, looks back to his glass. Moondog eyes a cluster of maple saplings sprouting a crack through the wood fence. The man says, What's this, yo—new damage? Tommy? No good. Well, shouldn't cost more than twenty bucks to patch—but don't tell your mom, we'll surprise her.

She doesn't like surprises.

Since the family moved to Olympia and not far from Moondog's house, the guy drops in without calling. He just opens their front door and yells, Hey, what's up, ya'll? Lots of the time he brings food or badly-wrapped gifts. Out at the street he always checks their mailbox. If there're grocery ads, Sears sales, free catalogs, he rips that junk up and jams it in the trash. It makes him so goddamn mad—like these folks don't got enough crap to navigate? All of us, all the time, can't focus on shit 'cause it takes too much time to decide what *not* to focus on. Things happening out of order. That's it, de-Darwinated, a man's eyes melting back to crow eyes and soon our brains are so loud like crumpling a bunch of shitty-ass tinfoil.

MT!

The sister, Patty, twelve years old, is home from somewhere. She's cross-armed, spread-legged, in the open back door asking, Where the hell's Mom, MT?

Her brother ignores her. Moondog shakes his head. He hoofs it to fence and bends one of the maples in half. It doesn't snap. Sternly, he says, Serious, Little-T, don't let your sister call you that Empty garbage.

Tommy's answer is to kneel, flick a brown bug off his rain glass.

MT? Patty says, and Tommy mumbles that Mom's in the shower.

Moondog whistles and tugs at the little tree. No luck. He turns back to the kids, rolling his neck, adjusting his tie. Today it's the blue one, yellow diamonds. He says, Shoot, T-Bone, didn't I just ask you that?

Patty says, Don't you know you can't wear ties with jeans?

Aw hush.

She rolls her eyes, says, Take a hint, Moon, and steps back inside.

Tommy and Moondog soon follow her in. The girl's scaled the kitchen counter, reaching for an Ovaltine jar. Her shorts are so short

her green underwear peeks. Moondog groans, Girl go get actual clothes on!

Patty hops down, gets out the milk, slams the fridge.

Be quiet, Tommy says. Mom's napping and has another migraine.

What about the shower? Patty says.

She said she'd nap after the shower.

Headache? says Moondog. And jeans with ties? Come on, who's the big authority here? I think ya'll selling Buck Sheet!

Mixing her drink, spoon clinking glass, Patty says, God's the authority. That's hooty-who-hoo.

Moondog says, Seems I'll hit the store, then, folks. Get us some Tylenol. Get some goods to patch that fence. Anything else we need?

He pops his knuckles by linking his fingers, extending his big arms. The kids say nothing. Tommy opens the fridge, not staring at the food but all the shapes. Of course Moondog doesn't leave. The man grabs the top of fridge door to look at what's hanging on the front.

Hey, these animal cartoons are superb! You whip these up, Patricia? Who? Little-T?

Patty, stirring and stirring. You notice those *now*?—God, been there like a year.

L'il-T, you just whipped these up? From scratch?

Lost in thought, picking crust off the mustard lid, Tommy clenches his teeth and says, For real guys, Mom's headache's so bad she even cancelled her date with Paul.

The spoon stops clinking. Tommy looks over, pale. He quickly steps over next to his sister. He presses hard into the counter. Together they watch the man. Delicately, Moondog shuts the fridge. He stares at his feet. Patty shrugs, licks off her spoon. She throws it at the sink but it bounces off the counter, under the table. Well fuck, she says. There goes that.

Tommy's neck is burning up over his cheeks and into his eyes and blurring. He says, almost desperately, What, Patty, what is that?

She says, Pisses me off because I mean Audra and me are supposed to watch movies tonight.

So?

So up yours, MT.

Tommy crosses his arms. He doesn't want to look at silent Moondog so he stares hard at his sister. He says, Why can't you still? but he can't not look, has to, and Moondog's smiling right at him. Super cheery, the man is, and he chirps, Hey! Hey, after all, guys, screw it—don't tell her I came by today!

OK, Tommy says, why?

Patty gulps her Ovaltine. She plunks the glass on the counter and sashays out of the room. Around the corner she yells, MT, hello! Don't be a douche canoe!

Time passes. But hardly any. The ice maker in the freezer makes a long, stubbing sound. Outside the back concrete patio fills with wide dots of rain. Tommy, keeping his arms crossed, wipes at his nose. He softly asks when Moondog's birthday is.

The man sucks at his teeth. Then he strips off his tie and rolls it up. Shoving the tie in his pocket, he strides for the front door.

Tommy's instantly in tow. Well, Moondog? When is it? Your birthday?

Don't know, kiddo.

What's your real name?

Don't know, kiddo.

You were there too so how long did my dad die?

The man lopes across the lawn, opens his truck door. Jesus, what's that even mean?

My dad was your best friend and it means did he die long?

The man stares at the house, closes one eye. He taps his fingers on the roof of his truck cab and the sprinkle of rain has picked up. Tom, he says, still not making eye contact, listen—you… *how long did*

he die? That's a stupid question. It doesn't matter if I was with him. It had nothing to do with what was happening with anything. We were all dying the minute we found out we were heading over. We died before we went. We died because we thought we were a bunch of superheroes and the shits in our pants belonged to our boy-selves. That's my birthday, kiddo. Boo. Boo. Boo. And it's got nothing to do with no grunt and nothing to even do with Allah taking his damn pot-shots. Allah, that's my real name. Mo-Hammy. Shit, kid, ask your mom what my real name is. Ask your mom everything. Ask her what gets Paul off. I don't need this goddamn shit, kid, not after a year of devotion and sacrifice, full-on fucking watch-duty.

Moondog climbs in his truck. He claps the door shut. He rolls down the window, rain glittering his dreads. He picks at his ear and curls his lip. He flicks something unseen at the boy's feet so Tommy takes a step back.

Yeah, Little-T, ask your mom if T-Bomb did come back but was invisible and his mouth tasted like brains, would she let him on in? Ask her if it'd be cool if she let him start banging away and all the while there she is like crying with joy, her tongue in his mouth even though all his big, cool brains are exploded in his dead throat and dripping off her face while she gags on his goddamn name....

When Moondog trails off, Tommy says, OK, I will ask her that.

Shut up. I'm sorry. I'm so tired. The man groans. He rubs his eyes. He unclicks and reclicks his seatbelt and then his voice goes much quieter: Gagging on your goddamn name she is...

I'll still ask her.

Moondog cranks the engine, backs out revving. His truck straightened, he starts driving off but brakes at the mailbox. Opening it, he stuffs something in.

In Patty's bedroom door Tommy stands watching. His sister puckers her lips in a full-length mirror. He doesn't know if she's seen him or is ignoring him. Eventually he tells her that Moondog's right.

Shut up, MT, and leave! And close my door and don't sneak up!

You shouldn't wear shorts that short.

Really? Patty cocks her hips side-to-side making the kissy faces at him now.

You let Moondog see your underwear.

Oh no! She spins around and over her shoulder bats her eyes at nothing in particular. She says, But I can't see my underwear, can I, T-Boner. So what, he gonna rape me? That my fault?

Tommy's doesn't know. He studies a scar on his elbow. He frowns, grins, frowns, grins. He doesn't remember what it's from, the scar. And he tastes hairspray. His mouth tastes like hairspray. He looks up, scowls at Patty, asks if she stole Mom's curling iron again.

Seriously, get the hell out, fucking brat!

Tommy frowns, grins, frowns, grins. From the back of the house, Mom shouts, I'm getting in the shower!

Patty yells, Audra's staying over!

Not tonight!

You say no to everything!

Tommy whispers, Hey maybe tell Mom it's Audra's birthday soon?

Eyeing him coldly, Patty flips her hair. She yells, Mom, Moondog came over but told us not to tell you after MT told him you were dating Paul!

There's no response. Soon the kids hear the shower rattle alive. After a few moments something thumps. Maybe soap, a shampoo bottle. Patty jumps forward, shoves her brother into the hall. She slams and locks the door.

He knocks.

Fuck off, MT!

He knocks again. He puts his nose to the wood. He makes snorting sounds until she yanks it open. He holds out Moondog's rolled-up tie. Patty squints, grabs it. She lets it unfurl and throws it like a boa around her neck. So? she says, and slams the door again.

Tommy remains very still. Soon he hears his sister on the phone with Audra. She says something about birthdays. He misses the rest. Misses because there's another thump, then another from Mom's shower. Blood drains from his face. His chest goes cold. He's suddenly certain Mom's got his rain glass. Yes, she's filling it. She's filling it and she'll set it outside when he's asleep to trick him into thinking—but why?

It doesn't matter. She does.

His ears hum. He's so mad he can barely exhale. He sprints down the hallway, through the kitchen, outside, across the patio, pulls up. *OK. OK.*

He steps up on the cinderblock. He stands over his rain glass. It's stopped raining, but he doesn't look down. He stares at the fence, at the maple Moondog tried to break. Too green. Made the fence damage even worse. Because that's how it works, doesn't it? He. The He. *He needs perfect. Perfect feeds him.*

Tommy's eyes fill. He says, What's that *mean?*

That that's how everything works because nothing really does. Look, it's not just the evaporation, but *everything*. Because nothing's the same, not their measuring glasses, not their idiotic cinderblocks, not him, not Forrest.

Dropping his chin, the boy pushes his tongue to his teeth. He hawks a ball of spit. He lets it pause between his pursed lips. He's looking straight down. The cup, it's one circle. One crisp circle and nothing else, no depth. Wow. And it makes sense. Or maybe he just didn't expect it. A single circle.

Swallowing the spit he steps off the cinderblock. He lowers to all fours. With his nose he nudges the glass. It rocks, but doesn't tip. He nudges harder. It tips off the cinderblock, water snaking into the grass. *That's a stupid question*. He crawls around the cinderblock, around to face the glass, sniff it. Smells like a buried rain cloud. Rain cloud dead and done but if you dug it up you couldn't find it. But he likes this anyway. Who cares, likes being a bear-dog, a

cartoon. He drops one shoulder. He lifts up his hips. He turns his head and presses his cheek flat to the cold grass. A course, wet tickle. He licks inside the glass for the last of rain. He snorts. His breath snorts back. It smells different, saltwater maybe. Sniffing and licking, cool new rain drops on his neck. Or could be just old rain blown off the trees, off the gutter, off the—

The boy's lips ease back. Gently, he bites the rim of the glass. He feels thin firmness on the ridges of his teeth. He bites a little harder. Harder. And inside Mom has no headache at all.

In fact, she never has had a headache when she says she does. And she's never had a date with Paul. Paul's business card went in the trash as soon as they got home. But it's not all a lie. When she says she goes out on dates, she sort of does. She sits alone at the same coffee shop each time and sometimes, across from her, pictures the man. That eager donkey face pointed at her so gently. That hand on her back warming.

But other times it's Paul's teen employee sitting there. Sitting there and knocking on the stall. The girl opens it, awkwardly helps Mom to her feet. Mom lets her. But then Mom spins around, faces those baggy cheeks and unkempt hair and pitiful expression. Mom takes a tremendous drag. It's gigantic, really. Too big to be real, so big it works. It gives her everything she needs. And she squints as she exhales right in this girl's face. Blows and she laughs at this pathetic *thing* pretending to save her, and then hisses, *You have no fucking clue.*

On the other hand, if anyone asked Paul about his ladybug, he'd barely remember. Birthday party? Puking? Widow? All that time, year ago, to the day. Exactly. But this isn't why Tommy bites harder. He bites because there's a strange quivering strength in the middle of his jaws. In his neck and shoulders. A warming glow in his flexed lower back. The glass is bending. It's not a circle, no, it's molding to his will. Giving in, going soft. And Moondog has returned but the

boy doesn't know it. The man's parked his truck down the street, out of sight. He's got tools, supplies, got just the way to fix that goddamn fence. He'll sneak into the backyard, show them all. f

Scott Penney

TULIP HEAVEN

The old man next door had perished from sepsis of the bowels,
but his wife, unmoved by loss, still brought the groceries home,
replaced the motion lights on the garage, and mowed instead,
and around their house replaced the flowers with plastic ones:
who would recognize them as plastic from this pretty distance?

And who would know that when water from the gutters pooled
into their cups, the waters of the world could neither quicken
nor bend them: though immortality, naturally, came with a price.
So the Indus, the Danube, and the Androscoggin all schemed
and none of them, none ever washed them away, the cups intact,

while the mulch, pungent as Buffalo chips, washed into gutters
with rivers of the world atomized into a single cumulo-nimbus cloud
that, spirited from Canada to Westbrook, expired in a silver shower.

On the stump of their final tree glittered a handful of party favors
their grandchildren had planted in the split alongside loose ribbons.
Their pinwheels twirled as frantically as weathervanes in wheat.
Twirl on, to compensate for your tree that will never grow again.

And sometimes, when the wind whips up, and they twirl that way,
a loose beagle, distempered and skittish, will roam the yards,
barking at the neighbors, especially with the coming of a storm.
And when that happens the whole world seems to be a carnival
that at will produces Dorothy from Kansas and Toto in a shack.
The motion lights turn on as wind whips the maples to frenzy.

But there would always be tulips in the yard. Though faded,
call them classics if you will, as from enough distance for awe,
you couldn't see that the siding was vinyl. That was his idea,
although he is a box of ashes. They are not on the mantle though–
there are no fireplaces. I should know: they're my neighbors.
And they can't be in the garage: that would be sacrilege.
Ditto the basement: too much water condensation. But where?
Where is the jar for our veteran, this forty-year-long handler
of your letters? At his branch they have never replaced him.
The swivel-seat that wobbled with his living weight is cold.

In the news the other day a lake in Bolivia completely dried,
and the peasants skinned the alligators for their hides,
leaving flayed carcasses to roll in mud that baked them
in concentered rings. Then a spider-web of cracks
appeared, no center evident among cells or dry hexagons
the lake was now. Surely the peasants could have used tulips
for ground zero among the bones, a banquet for the condors.
When the eyes of the peasants drop, taking in memento mori
where water was, in whatever mother tongue they breathe
they will need to whisper valley, no choice but valley.
And if there isn't a word left, they will need to make one.
Life must be drained from things before we find them—
o felix culpa, you hang on plaster walls.

Nothing to do but pull the stamens back with our thumbs,
roll back the primitive, thick petals like the ears of creatures

we can reconstruct from sand, settle for the form
of the tulip, bred in bogs and polders, those marshy bridges
among low countries, but everywhere,
everywhere the form of the tulip.

M. J. Gette

WISHLIST

For once, we want the water we drink to flush out the desire that made us drink it.

It gives us worms instead, which grow long inside us.

We feel full, but far from satisfied, and measure our distended bellies as the circumference of a burdened Earth.

On the day the worm comes through our skin, we hope it will not break inside us
and scatter its grief, like an unbound nation of exiles, repopulating.

Though I have combed the world over, I still cannot find a cure for hunger.

Even when I pull the worm through my body, a famine persists.

When I swallow the bird to swallow the worm that has swallowed me, it drowns in my body's acids.

We wait for the rain to fall to release the worms from the dirt we will consume.

Catherine Champion

THE GREAT LAKE

What dwells in the lake dwells also in me,
the thrash of cold-water, the sandy murk.

What dwells in my father keeps him quiet
at dusk, his Glenn Miller records lilting

through walls. My mother keeps cotton balls
in an old perfume box. What dwells in her

dwells also in me. A fist tightening. A bud
of a tulip. And a blue house bears this all,

the silences, their many edges colliding
against us. Father drops a knife. *Goddamnit.*

What dwells in him makes me afraid to speak.
He packs his lunchbox and leaves for work

and the lake washes up its corpses of carp,
beaches them onto the shore. And we are all

waiting for autumn, to deserve a word
like *love*, to feel a fist within us unfurling

to reach for a handful of first-fallen snow.
I am trying to keep only a lungful of sky, but

what dwells within me is my mother,
my father. What dwells within them is an old

fear, a fear older than the glacial basin
of the lake. It's a fear of what dwells within.

Nathan Slinker

BEHIND MY MOTHER'S HOUSE NEAR ENTERPRISE, OREGON

the dirt road ends at a wide pond where he
kneels, drinks starry frog water
until there is no more pond—
just a man, full of the mysterious body

which in its absence leaves
a large depression of black mud,
a broken raft, and a duck carcass
draped with scum, angular as a satellite
leaking from its skin

transmissions that he must also drink, expanding
with pond and data until his bloated belly gives—
so out flow the thousand silver things,
the encrypted placentas, the muck.

Well, I don't know what I expected.
I was swimming and now here I am,

muddied on the bank, reeds and the hair
of this deflated man blow around me
like trombones—he is a dead planet,

hunched in the pollywog bubbles,
murmuring coordinates to
minnows in the black.

Tired, I begin to shake. I shake
my story into cattails, onto the feet
of the man, who says he feels thirsty again.

Wait, let me tell you about the perfect distances
I swam to find you; the shy constellations
of tongue that spoke to me;
those galaxies' beautiful blue lungs—listen
to the solar wind rustling me
back, back into that dark space.

But the man just says he feels thirsty
and bends his mouth to water.

Anna Leahy

DEPTH CHARGE

Underwater, that which is most volatile
is amplified when detonated,
sending out waves of pressure
in every direction, seemingly targetless
but full like love, and intentional.
No wonder I break,
strew my compartments, and sink.
The slowness of sinking creates a new and silent
wake, a wakefulness from indirection,
a suddenly coherent sense of a location
replete with circumstance.
If *mine* were merely a possessive pronoun,
would the word
plumb this site? And then, darkness
regains its composure far from surface and shore
with its own containment, still teeming.

Nick Flynn

MOFUKU

Waking in the middle of the night, wandering room to room in a house that is not your own, looking for something you know isn't there. A few days later I will tell my daughter he is gone & she will seem to turn it over inside her for a moment. Then she will announce, *So both your mom & your dad are skeletons now . . .*

Nick Flynn

GRAVITY

[five days]

I bring myself to movies in the middle of the day. Today the movie is about an astronaut—that's all I know, all I want to know. I put on the glasses that make the world real & soon the world is outer space. It starts with a view of the earth—snow over oceans, brown land, all our thoughts from this. A space capsule, drifting in the darkness, some voices—*So what do you like about being up here?* a man asks. A woman answers, *The silence—I could get used to the silence*. For the past five days the phone has rung in the still dark when I am still sleeping. *Your father is in the hospital,* one of the Creole women who takes care of him says, in her beautiful lilt. Soon the astronauts, who are really little more than their voices, are caught in the debris of an exploded satellite & everything falls away from them—their spaceship, the earth, each other. *We can make him comfortable,* the doctor says, *if that's what you decide*. I ask what pills is he on & she lists many, many pills—*To keep the depression out of his spacesuit*, she says.

[meat]

Today, as if answering a question only she could hear, my daughter declared, *I know what little boys are made of—little boys are made of meat.* She looks into my mouth sometimes, says she wants silver teeth like mine. *Why are your teeth silver?* she asks. I want to tell her that there were a few years when I wasn't sure I wanted to be on the planet, until one by one my teeth left me . . .

[diamonds]

That astronaut, when she finally decided to live, her tears floated around our heads like diamonds—my favorite part & I forgot it until just now.

Shivani Mehta

AFTER THE WORLD HAS ENDED

Spring and its thorns,
its wild geese, with rough voices
calling from the sky.
Your body banks against mine.
We have no skeletons,
we are filled with air.
We give names to things –
this is the door, the bed. This is my lover,
his throat, his hand on my hip.
The grass is an ocean. Evenings after supper
we almost drown in it. Always, the body
saves us, the body and its need for air.
This is what moves us, this is the light
uncoiling like a braid.
See how we breathe in
without trying.

Sam Grenrock

GENESIS 32

Jacob and the river had the same name. A good sign, or terrible.

He waded barefoot over silt, climbed the mud bank.
Sunset glazed Jacob, ankle to brow.

He walked, taut shadow looking back at children, wives, women.
Jacob was alone, a heap of stones in the desert.

Night came on like a shiver. Jacob lay down like cold air.
"Here I am," he said. A scorpion skittered over his face.

Jacob sat bolt upright. "Who's there?"
God said nothing, put Jacob in a half nelson.

Jacob thrashed like a ewe dragged in from pasture.
He got loose of God, turned like wind on a brushfire.

Jacob had God pinned. "Who's there?" he cried.
God's silence flung Jacob head over heels.

Jacob scattered into the night,
glimpsed the solitary glow of sunrise.

God looked like wind over dry, burning leaves.
In Jacob's ear, God whispered, "Let me go." Jacob did not let God go.

He beat on God, thinking of his two wives,
the one he loved, the one he needed.

He thought of sands and oceans.
Jacob beat on God until God begged for mercy.

God said, “Look! You only hurt yourself.” And Jacob looked down, and saw that God was right. His hands were empty.

God was gone, save a few burnt leaves.

Travis Mossotti

MODERN AGRICULTURE

A single monarch butterfly, en instinctual route to an oyamel fir
deep inside a Mexican forest, threaded instead itself with the grill
of my Mazda. When I stopped for gas I found him—his one still
perfect wing was testing a breeze I could barely feel. Poor thing

must have fluttered out from the fields of engineered corn born
from kernels designed by Monsanto to compliment the flatness,
those harvesters and the town that looked nearly exhausted
of its rutted charm and families. I thought about the children

lucky enough to escape those fields, dreaming that love is more
than just an abstract concept, learning eventually that every piece
of land goes through its process of amortization. I noticed how
the corn remained in spite of the absence of those children, how

stalks rose in perfect rows and just kept rising like feathers on a wing.

Anne Elliott

THEIR TOWN

It was closing night—no chance to rewind, re-rehearse, make it right. They never should have laughed. The play was no comedy. Not on Broadway, not Off-Broadway, not—especially not—in the Little Theater at Colinaville Union High School. The year was 1985. The director was Mrs. Judith Stephens of the English Department, advisor to the Thespian Society. All in attendance were rooting for the play's triumph. This was no night to be yukking it up.

The silly rumble might have begun during the church choir scene, when the drunken organist asked for a show of hands. The Thespian known as Rocky, a chorister in the front row of straight-backed chairs, happened to be missing a hand, and had a habit of raising his bare half-arm, wiggling the scarred stump below his elbow. It was sick enough, he knew, to make the Thespian known as Riff forget his next line. Riff stammered for a second with his Stage-Manager clipboard, and swallowed a guffaw before continuing his scripted remarks.

Riff managed to hold the chuckle in check until the cemetery scene. The same straight-backed chairs were arrayed like gravestones, and the dead sat still, listening to the fresh corpse of Emily Webb deliver her final aria in that clean-but-fake Downeaster accent. Clear to all but the audience was a muddy sneaker print on the back of the girl's wedding dress, planted on her skinny ass like a kick-me sign. Somebody onstage laughed, and it spread like brushfire.

The footprint was probably intentional. The Thespian known as Magenta was in charge of costumes. Not by choice. She had auditioned for Emily, but Mrs. Stephens could not see past the dark eyes and dark skin and sparkly nose ring. Mrs. Stephens had had a vision of her New Hampshire, here in the hot adobe hills

of California: proper toe-heads and folksy *ayups*; sweet, skinny whitegirls and curmudgeonly old men; simplicity, paleness, clapboard, bean pods. Laura Tremaine was her Emily—blonde and earnest, pious and rosy. It was hard not to hate the girl for her innate Emilyness.

The laugh was unstoppable, and awful, and endless. Just as Emily said, *Oh Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me*, up popped a snicker, from the rear of the rows of cemetery. It spread through the graves onstage, body by body, over the footlights, and—worst of all—to the rows of audience, until it reached the last tier of Little Theater seats. Soon the whole room was doing it: Riff, all the dead people, the Thespians hanging out in the wings, the parents who cared enough to be there, everybody. Laughing. Plenty of guilty feelings, but the guilt couldn't stop the bedlam. Everyone but poor Laura Tremaine, who managed to finish her death monologue, focused on the back of the house, on the beacon of the exit sign.

She did not laugh. No one could believe it, even as they swallowed and counted breaths and clenched tongues between tensed teeth—all the old Thespian tricks—to stop the flow.

Laura was *so serious*. She was immune to the contagion. It made it even funnier, whatever was so funny. So typecast! High, pinched voice and tight-plaited braids! So freaking *blonde*! So serious about her love for George, gravely philosophical in death. And do New Hampshire people honestly talk like this? *Goodbye. Goodbye world. Goodbye Grover's Corners?*

They took turns imitating Laura, later that Saturday night, after the show and the cast pizza party. The troika: Magenta, Rocky, Riff. The three compadres roosted on the top of a concrete water tank on Wyckoff Hill, at the edge of Their Town: Colinaville, CA, population 20,000. They called it The Pleasuredome, their forbidden perch, their drama geek secret, site of joints smoked and booze drunk, booze stolen from Riff's itinerant parents. The top of the tank was big and gray and convex, like a moon of their own,

cratered and stained with age. They could sit on a raised steel ring in the center, some kind of vent, and slap the metal to hear the echo in the tank below. Up here, you could see the whole town. Up here, you could own the whole town.

That night, they strutted across the curved top of the dome, doing their best New England *ayups*. Riff, who had memorized all the parts, stole Laura's Emily in a high falsetto: *That's all human beings are! Just blind people!* And the trio bent and slapped in laughter, nearly falling off the dome into a new death monologue.

"I feel sorry for her," Rocky said, serious all of a sudden. He plopped onto the steel vent and eyed the horizon, let the breeze push his sunbleached hair from his face.

"You feel sorry for that precious WASP?" Riff blew a cloud of clove. His hair was still gray with old man spray. He hadn't removed his eye makeup. He looked a little scary, just the way he liked it.

"She was crying afterwards," Rocky said. "I saw her. In the girl's bathroom. Stuart was with her. He told her not to mess up her makeup for curtain call."

Stuart Lamb played George, Emily's virginal boyfriend. The trio didn't know him well, but they were curious all right. He was new, a transfer this fall, a senior. Handsome and fit, but he didn't even try to sit at the jocks' lunch table. Read for George in audition and the whole room knew he was in. He was from San Francisco—that much they knew—and wore a leather jacket with THE CLASH stenciled on the back. He inhabited George onstage, but, unlike Laura, was something different in real life. Drove an old Mustang. Drew on his shoes. Magenta had a bad crush on him, kept sniffing his costume after the show. "He has the best B.O.," she would say to Rocky and Riff. She said it again, up on top of the Pleasuredome. "He has the best B.O."

"We've established that," Riff said.

"Do you think they've slept together?" Magenta said, sitting on the steel ring, chewing her dark-matte lip.

"Christian girl and Clash boy? *No*," Riff said.

"Maybe I saw him tonguing her in that wedding kiss," Rocky said, screwing up his mouth just to piss Magenta off. She punched his bad arm with a ring-covered hand. "C'mon, Mags. They make a cute couple. I think he *feels* for her." He lay back on the steel circle and smiled at the sky.

"*Feels for her*?" Riff said. "What the fuck does that mean?" He continued pacing the curved surface of the tank. "He *feels sorry* for her, more like it. Everybody does. *Pity*, that's what they feel. You said so yourself. You know what? *Even I* feel sorry for her. She's dripping with goodness."

"She's probably home crying right now," Magenta said. "Over her poor, *ruined Emily moment*." She was trying for sarcasm, but it came out sad.

"She didn't laugh," Rocky said. "She had good concentration."

That shut everybody up. Poked the threesome in their Achilles heel: artistic professionalism. Riff sat. They perched on the steel ring, the three of them, facing outward, each in a different direction, all of them thinking the same thought: how Laura had managed to do the one thing the rest of them could not. That their lack of bodily control had ruined Laura's starring turn in the school play. Magenta had laughed from the wings, and Rocky from the straight-backed chairs, and Riff, upstage center, behind the poor dead girl, had presided with his own laughter, the Stage Manager giving everyone permission.

And the play was over. They could not try it again.

"So?" Magenta cracked open the silence with a shout. "She probably never laughed in her whole fucked-up life."

Again, her vitriol failed. Rocky felt it too. "Exactly. She never laughs. She needs a life. What if we pushed them along? Emily and George? Laura and Stu?"

"She doesn't deserve him, Rock," Magenta said. "She's too full of her own goody-goodyness."

"And you do?" Rocky said.

"Mags deserves whatever she wants," Riff said. "So shut the fuck up." He paused. He was tired of Magenta's hopeless crush on Stuart. "But I do like your idea, Rock. It's a fine idea. Get Little Emily laid? Our playwright would approve." He slapped the steel, and the cistern echoed, and he looked at beautiful Magenta, who didn't look back. "I say it's on."

So the Laura Project had been declared, full of messy and varied motives, but a project, and all members of the troika were onboard. The initial strategy: they would spy on Laura and Stuart at school. Riff had honors classes with Laura. The following Monday, in first period English, Riff tuned out the teacherly drone and composed a note to Magenta on a ruled sheet, its left edge fluttered and raggedy, asserting its spontaneity:

MAGESTIC MAGS.

Am watching Subject A this very moment. My god she needs work. Can you work on her? She's front row (by CHOICE, I mean), with a straight spine, like seriously straight, straight hair (does she like brush it 100 times a night like a good little girl?) and raises her hand constantly to show us how much she knows about this stupid book. Is there ANYTHING ABOUT THIS GIRL THAT ISN'T STRAIGHT? Participating in this lame-o discussion of Pride and Prejudice. I am sick of Jane Austen. Boy am I. Enough of the nicey-nice rich English chicks. All they talk about is matchmaking.

Speaking of which. Our project of the day—how about project of the year? Because seriously, our little Emily would get a zero on the Rice Purity Test. Let's make a real plan.

A thought. You have her in gym, right? Can you ask her why she hasn't even pierced her ears, for God's sake? That girl is seriously plugged.

Love (and LUV),
Riff.

P.S. DON'T show this letter to Rocky. DON'T leave it laying around. He's already on my case for my 'negativity.' Enough said.

P.P.S. Plus, something tells me he wants her for himself. There's no accounting for taste. She doesn't hold a candle to your grace. No one does. I know you hate when I say shit like this. I bow before your beauty. Too much? Did I overstep? Will you treat me like dirt now? I'm not made of wood. Or, maybe—no, I won't go there. Mags. Don't let the B.O. snow you. Does he DESERVE you? Does he have a soupçon of your COOL, this smelly smellman?

P.P.P.S. You still have my Smiths tape. Return it or die. Make a copy if you must. There. Is that better than gushing on you? Can we relax again now? Friends?

He gave the letter their signature fold, and dropped it through the slats in Magenta's locker before second period bell.

Magenta managed a reply before lunch. She was stumped on over half of her algebra test and finally just turned in the unfilled, dittoed sheets and pulled out her sketch journal, ripped out one of its clean, thick pages, and in her loopy, artful script, began:

Riffy:

Okay first I don't have the tape. So don't even ask me again.

I saw "her" in the locker room second period. She wears "big" white cotton panties, I hope you know. (Or does that just make you guys hot?)

So anyway I'm like hey, "Subject A" (like I'll really put her name in print here), you didn't stay very long at the cast party and she's all yeah I wasn't in the mood and I'm like yeah that sucked about what happened during your monologue and she looked like she was going to cry again and I totally didn't know what to say.

(Am I seriously evil playing like I wasn't one of the people laughing? She seems to think it wasn't me. Or Rocky. She wasn't acting accusational or anything. She was just hellaciously bummed. I didn't lie but I didn't tell the truth either.)

So I told her how I thought she did a great job in the play and everything and how I was sorry about the footprint on her dress and how I wanted the Emily part bad enough to borrow my sister's pink skirt for auditions and even she had to laugh. She's all, you pretty much just wear black, and I'm all yeah, and then she asks me why black, it's so depressing? And I just shrugged and asked her if she gets high even though I pretty much knew the answer.

But she didn't act the way I thought she would. She just said not yet. Whatever that means. I think she is truly bored with herself or something.

So I'm with Rocky. White cotton panties or no. You can hate her if you want but I'm starting to change my opinion. Keep your "Riffy thoughts" to yourself.

She said she might hang out with us Friday night though she did make a "face" when I mentioned your name. But I told her "Subject B" is coming so we better track him down. I can't tell if she likes him or not. Best behavior, you asshole, or you are not invited.

Soupçon? Seriously?

That's the bell.

Love,
Mag

Signature fold, with a drawing of a pair of Frankenfurter lips on the outside. Then she rethought it. Riff might take lips as an overture. She drew a box around them and blackened it in, covering the lips like a mistake tattoo. Much Better. Through the locker slot.

Rocky's job was to work on Stuart. He made an important discovery in the school parking lot, during lunch: the guy was at home on a

skateboard. Rocky was nosegrinding, alone, on the metal edge of the curb, and saw Stuart walking out to his car. He skated closer, then let his board roll to a stop at Stuart's feet. Stuart, without even asking, dropped his book bag and hopped on.

Skateboarding hadn't gripped Colinaville High yet, so watching this newcomer glide among the beat and Bondo-ed project cars gave Rocky a glimpse of possibility. He was dying to find his own band of skaters, like the city kids along the Embarcadero. "Hey, where's your board?"

"In a box. My deck broke." Stuart returned to the curb, shot the skateboard into his hands, then handed it to its owner.

"I got one at home you can borrow."

The look on Stuart's face told Rocky that school was out for the day. Stuart drove them to Rocky's place. His parents were at work. They had the back yard to themselves. So what if the neighbors could hear them, truantly goofing on Rocky's homemade ramp? Let the neighbors call the cops.

They barely spoke. Just the sound of wheels. Balance, one-upmanship, focus. They didn't even notice Riff, letting himself in the side gate after school sprung him out. He stood, arms folded, and watched the duo shoot up the plywood incline. Stu caught a good deal of air, even on a borrowed board. He fell right on his backside a few times, but didn't seem to care. Rocky fell once, then went cautious. Stu didn't seem to have the caution gene.

Riff lit a clove. The smoke got their attention.

"Hey! Riff Raff!" Stuart grinned big, then kicked his board in Riff's direction. "Here. Your turn."

"He don't skate. Believe me, I've tried." Rocky pulled off his tee shirt, used it to wipe off his sweaty chest. He dropped it on the ground next to the ramp. "Guys. Come inside. Dudes. Air conditioning. Have a beer. My stepdad won't care."

*

Mags:

OK, so Friday night is on. I went to Rocky's. Now he and Stuart are best buds or something. So if you are best buds with Subject A, I am seriously a fifth wheel. Like literally.

Sitting behind Subject A now in calculus. I'm dying to take a scissor to that straight hair. She seems to really care about antiderivatives. I question your choice of friends.

By the way, looked through my tapes. SMITHS TAPE IS NOT THERE. Please look through yours. I want it back.

I suppose you are discussing Sunday church with Subject A. Because she will take you. That's her agenda. Are you ready to be saved? Maybe you can don big white panties under your glorious goth exoskeleton? You can sit around and talk about John 3:16 or whatever the fuck.

I would love to be there for your baptism. Please invite me. I have not seen you in a wet white robe yet. I want to. (Too much?) We'll all sing Blessed Be the Tie That Binds.

Luv (or whatever doesn't freak the fuck out of you),
Riff

Riff went to Magenta's locker to drop the folded note, and encountered a crowd. Magenta, Laura, Rocky, Stuart. The foursome had formed, and Riff stood like an invisible idiot with his fifth-wheel note in his hand. What was in the note again? He could not remember. Everyone was talking about Friday night, planning to meet in the Raley's parking lot. But that's our place, Riff wanted to say—do we really want to invite them?—then scolded himself for stupidity: we don't own Raley's. Raley's does not belong to us.

Riff waited until the bell rang and everyone scattered, before jamming his useless note through the slot.

*

Riffy:

You need therapy. And I DO NOT have the tape.

"Subject A" is not so bad. She called me last night. And no, we didn't talk about Jesus. Her parents are wicked strict so I'm going to have to sneak her out her window Friday night. She is a Mormon. For real. So now I really feel sorry for her. Her room is on the first floor, so should be no problem so I'll drive. I'll pick you up and then we can go cut her out of that JAIL.

If you can't be "human" you may as well stay home. You obviously don't care about our "project."

Mag

*

Friday night, Magenta picked up Riff first in her boxy old Corolla. Riff could barely look at her. She had glued on false eyelashes, no doubt to bat at Stuart. "Okay, here's the plan," she said, "we park around the corner and you drive. Keep the motor running."

Riff nosed through her glovebox. He picked through torn maps and candy wraps, feeling for unboxed cassettes, and squinted at their labels in the dark. "I find it here, you're dead."

"Riff. Listen. You're not listening. We can't get Laura in trouble."

"I thought that was the point of this enterprise." He looked at Magenta's jeweled ears, dark lips, impossibly glossy black hair.

"If you think it's trouble helping two people get together, then I feel sorry for you."

"What's happened to you, Mags? Since when do you believe in Harlequin romance?" He popped in a Cure tape and cranked the dial to drown out her nagging. "I hear enough of this love crap in English."

She turned the volume back down. "Okay. We're here. You get behind the wheel."

He got out and slammed the door. He perused the row of aging stucco, one-story tract homes older than him. Faded vehicles cooled in dingy carports. "She lives here?"

"Shhhhh." She swatted the back of his spiky head, then crept around the corner. Riff plopped into the driver's seat, scrunched into Magenta's adjustments, knees hitting the bottom of the dash, steering wheel right in his face. He didn't bother fixing it.

Laura waited just inside her bedroom window. Magenta tiptoed through the ferns in the dark side yard, and when they came face to face, they both opened mouths wide in excited, silent hilarity. Laura crawled out and Magenta caught her by the legs, then helped her drop quietly to the ground. Laura kicked a noisy pebble against a garbage can. They both covered their mouths and ran. They didn't speak until they got around the corner.

"Oh my gosh," Laura said, giddy. "I thought for sure my dad would come out."

"Me too," Magenta said, imitating Laura's high laugh, without irony.

"Oh my GOSH," Riff said, and punched the gas.

Rocky and Stuart were already in the Raley's lot, trading off turns and feats of skateboard in the beacon of Stu's headlights. The supermarket was closed. Nothing but the clamor of skateboard wheels and a lone employee in a red uniform, rounding up carts. Riff pulled Magenta's car into the space next to Stuart's, doubling the stark light on the parking lot performance. Magenta and Laura got out and sat on the warm hood of the Corolla.

Riff stayed in the car. He rifled through the soda cans and sticky garbage under the driver's seat. The girls ignored him. They had feats to watch.

"I've always wanted to ask," Laura said into Magenta's ear, "what happened to his arm?"

"Rocky? Surfing accident. In Baja. A shark ate it."

"Really? That's horrible. That must have been really scary." Eyes bugged, she made Magenta feel like a heel.

"I'm *kidding.*" Magenta leaned her shoulder playfully against her gullible new friend. "It was a washing machine, not a shark. A washing machine ate it."

"Oh."

"Girl, you need to lighten up."

"I know. I know." Simmering inside that blushing face. "I'm so stressed out all the time."

"Here, this'll help." It was a bottle of Magenta's favorite liquid medicine, premixed Brass Monkey, sweet and sour and sharp all at once. Laura accepted without hesitation, took a large gulp. Then another. "Careful." Magenta snatched back the bottle. "You'll make yourself puke."

Rocky skated over. "Hey hey hey ladies." He held his bad arm to Laura for a handshake. She surprised him by simply, seriously, accepting the stumpy elbow in both her hands. She traced the points of the star-shaped scar with her nailbitten fingertip.

Rocky blushed to his ears. Usually this silly greeting made girls laugh—nervously, or otherwise. Poor Laura, so serious. Or not? She wasn't frightened of the half-arm. She studied it. Stuart quit skating, Magenta noticed, his eyes locking in on Laura's hands.

"You BITCH!" screamed Riff, emerging from his burrowing mission in the car. "LIAR!" And then, cranking full from Magenta's scratchy car stereo, came the infamous Smiths tape. Rich, slow, deep guitar tremolo, wailing melody on top. Riff couldn't help dancing solo in the empty parking lot. Head bowed, then a deep, full body bend, then an upward jerk and kick, arms wild with something boiling over. And the high, plaintive, nasal:

you shut your mouth
how can you say
I go about things the wrong way

"C'mon." Stu grabbed Magenta's hand and pulled her off the hood of the car, onto the painted blacktop to join Riff. Stuart was a good dancer, let the downbeat push his body into a slo-mo epileptic spasm. Laura, meanwhile, had not let go of Rocky's stump. Rocky

looked back at her guileless face, trying to figure her out. Magenta decided they were fine, took a swig of Brass Monkey and twirled, arms out and eyes shut like a Deadhead, happy, suddenly, to be here, dancing with beautiful Stuart of the glorious smell, under the black sky, on the blacktop of the Raley's parking lot.

Riff kicked and shook his spiky black head, exorcising something, singing along:

I am human and
I need to be lo-o-oved
just like everybody else does

This was the moment, the threesome would admit later, they all lost sight of the Laura Project. Riff relished his reunion with the favorite song, rewinding and repeating, spinning alone in the yellow headlight, in a cloud of clove. Magenta fell into in a silly waltz with Stuart, sharing the Brass Monkey. The temperature dropped, a gust from the hills on the edge of town. Stuart bowed and offered Magenta his sweet-smelling CLASH jacket. She inhaled its musk, felt his arms around her waist, and forgot about the Project entirely.

And Rocky. He sat beside the curious Laura on the hood of the boxy Corolla, trying to steer talk of his amputation to more interesting topics: *Why don't you wear a prosthesis? It feels like wearing a condom. Unnatural. But what if you need to use both hands? I've become very adept with my mouth.* And so forth.

Laura was receptive to his innuendo, less shocked by sexy talk than by the hunger of a sharky old washing machine. She wasn't exactly playful. Sincere, yes. She did not let go of his stump, like she found a power, a reassurance in Rocky's old imperfection. He looked at her big blue eyes, round face, diminutive frame, straight hair. Small, ringless hands, firmly gripping his elbow. He could feel his heart pulsing blood to the old scar.

The cart-corralling bagger broke the perfect moment. "I have to ask you guys to leave." It was Tony Stand, a fellow senior from Colinaville High, looking not himself in his red Raley's apron. "Sorry. My boss told me to clear you out of here."

"C'mon, Tony," Rocky said. "Be cool. Where the hell we supposed to go?"

"The cruise? I don't care." Tony had deep shadows under his eyes, shadows of the overworked and underentertained. "You are 'loitering' here."

"Arrest us," Riff exclaimed, not stopping his ecstatic dance. "Book us," with a snap of the fingers.

Tony fingered his puka shell necklace, couldn't look any of them in the eye. "Please, guys. I need this job."

"We can't make the man lose his job, can we?" Stuart said, standing tall, bare arms, Dead Kennedys tee shirt, chest out, valiant as George Gibbs.

"*Pleasuredome*," Magenta stagewhispered.

"Pleasure what?" Tony asked. He gave Riff that sideways look, the one Riff always got at school, eyes on the spiky hair and long, black coat, face full of *you-fucking-faggot*.

"We're gone," Riff said. "Go get your paycheck."

"What's the Pleasuredome?" Laura asked.

Rocky jumped off the Corolla and slipped his good arm around her waist. "Only the raddest place on earth," he said. "Well, at least in our stupid town."

They all rode in Stu's Mustang: Magenta shotgun, Laura over the driveshaft hump in back, Rocky's half-arm around her shoulder, his stump poking Riff in the ear as they ascended Wyckoff Hill. Riff glared out the window. He wanted to whack his head against it. In their haste to leave the Raley's lot, he had left the tape in Magenta's car again. Now for sure it was gone for good.

He wanted to self-mutilate, but he narrated instead, in his Stage Manager voice: "Welcome to Wyckoff Drive, where the homes are hollow and ostentatious, the proud purchases of Colinaville's most addicted to work. Here reside your doctors, your attorneys, your corporate shills, your tie-toting zombies. Regard the big picture windows and territorial views. These lovely fruit trees, tended by

garden boys named Ramon. And to think this all used to be dumb orchards. Regard the beige paint. The three car garages. The stupid, jute door mats, lying to the world: WELCOME."

Stu laughed. Laura didn't. "What are you talking about? I love these houses." She leaned over Riff's lap to look at the deadheaded roses and fertilized lawns, the unrequired rooms lit by unrequired lights. "Every Christmas, we come up here just to look at the decorations," Laura said. "Me and my family. I would love to live in a house like this."

"They are full of the dead," Riff said. "Speaking of which, can you pull over right there, by the sage green atrocity?"

Stuart slowed the car. "Here?" he said, but Riff was already outside.

"Is he *okay*?" Laura said, watching Riff traverse the lawn. "Does he *live* here?"

No one answered. They all watched him key his way in, then turn on the porch light. It lit up the leaded glass transom, a stylized, colorful rendering of a floral vine. "It looks like a funeral chapel," Stuart said.

Magenta laughed and lit a J. "I never thought of that before, but you're right." She offered the sweet smoke to Stuart.

He accepted with a sigh and a grin, and pulled the parking brake.

Riff opened the door and smelled ammonia. The cleaning lady had been by, but not his parents. He hadn't seen them in a week. Mr. Heller was in Los Angeles, wining and dining and advising. Mrs. Heller was at her office in Sacramento, working until midnight as usual. Riff had already decided against any careers involving the wearing of suits. It made you stupid. It made you absent. "FUCK YOU," he said into the empty room.

The Hellers hadn't made it to the play, despite three nights to choose from. His mother had expressed—pretended?—interest:

"Wow, you're the star! Look, your picture is in the *Colinaville Reporter*!"

Riff had shrugged. "It's just a small town newspaper."

His father had shrugged too, from behind his wall of *Wall Street Journal*. "Just keep those grades up, son. Don't let yourself get distracted with this acting fantasy."

"Don't worry," Riff said to the empty house, to the photo of his father on the sideboard. "You'll be glad to hear it was an utter failure." In the photo, Mr. Heller was young, had a dress blue uniform and hair shorn by military clippers. Riff reached inside the cabinet and pulled out a gift wrapped bottle from last Christmas. A sticker on the ribbon bore the logo of one of Dad's corporate clients. Riff didn't bother seeing what was in the bottle. It was some kind of quality oblivion.

They parked next to the fence by the water tank. The smooth, curvy blacktop of Wyckoff Drive proved irresistible to Rocky and Stu, who took off down the hill, high on sheer velocity. Their skateboard wheels clattered, the only sound save the crickets in the weeds of the lot. Riff, bag of party supplies in hand, pushed through a hole in the fence. Magenta held back the mesh flap for Laura to walk through. "Are you two going together?" Laura asked in Magenta's ear. "You and him?" She pointed at Riff, who was already halfway up the ladder.

"Going where?"

"You know. *Going together*."

"Is that what he told you?" Magenta said.

"No, he has never addressed me directly. I swear, I have him in half my classes and all he does is sit there and look down at the desk. But tonight he's acting all—I don't know. Proprietary? About you? The look on his face when Stuart gave you his jacket!" Laura paused, seemed to be waiting for Riff to leave earshot. "He always stares at me. Like this." She struck a Riffy, stuck-up, down the nose pose, lips pursed firm, exasperated eyebrows. "Does he hate me?"

"Not you specifically. He just hates."

"What did I ever do to him?"

"You exist? I don't know. I don't try to figure him out. He's my friend, but I don't own him, you know? He doesn't own me."

"You sure he knows that?" Laura said. "I kinda feel sorry for him." Riff looked down from the top of the tank, his spiky hair silhouetted in the moonlight, and Magenta had to laugh. "What?" Laura whispered. "Did I say something funny?"

"Are you twats coming or what?" Riff shouted down.

"Don't feel sorry for him," Magenta said. "He's a dick."

Up top, Riff had already opened the party bag. A full bottle of Glenlivet and five crystal glasses were arranged on the steel circle like a hoity-toity table. "My dears, the bar is open. Courtesy of the Asshole Hotel." Riff poured himself a generous belt and, without bothering to toast, knocked it back.

Laura barely noticed. "Wow, look how beautiful it is up here. You can see everything. The whole town." She accepted a glass without looking away from the big valley vista. "Look, there's your house," she said, pointing to the sage green atrocity. "Look, there's Stuart." He was hiking back up the road, board in hand, then Rocky. "Wow, look, you can see the school."

"Where?" Magenta looked where Laura pointed.

"See that empty spot over there, all lit up, that's the football field. Oh, and look at that spire over there, that's my church."

"NICE TOWN, KNOW WHAT I MEAN?" said Riff, quoting his own line from the play.

"Shut up, Riff," Magenta said.

Laura didn't catch the reference, too preoccupied with landmarks. "Nice?" She took a pull of her scotch, then made a face, like it was burning the nice off her tongue. "I hate this town."

"You do?" Magenta said.

"People just put you in a box," said Laura. "Nobody listens."

Riff, for one, wasn't listening. He stuck his face against a vent under the metal platform, then shouted into the tank below.

"HELLO!" His voice echoed deep for several breaths, throughout the half-empty cistern. "HELLO!"

"Wow! Neat!" Laura crouched down and put her face next to the opposite vent. "HELLO!"

"You found our echo chamber!" Rocky said, emerging over the edge of the dome, skateboard in hand, followed by Stuart. Rocky ran over, joined Laura at the vent, then added his own echo. "HELLO!" Stuart stood behind him, looking a little too high.

"HELLO!" Laura repeated.

They all waited for the Hello Chorus to finish its long reverberation: Laura's soprano, Riff's baritone, Rocky's somewhere in the middle. Then Riff riffed in the other direction: "GOODBYE!" The word filled the tank, and it overtook him like the devil. "GOODBYE GROVER'S CORNERS!" Everyone went quiet as the voice reverberated. It wasn't even Riff's voice anymore. "GOODBYE TO CLOCKS TICKING!" Laura's lines, Laura's intonation, Riff could lampoon it like no other lampooner, the monologue that tipped closing night over. *Serious* Emily. *So* serious. "THAT'S ALL HUMAN BEINGS ARE!" Pause for echo. "JUST BLIND PEOPLE!"

Rocky was the first to stand up. "Riff, c'mon. Stop it."

"MAMA, JUST LOOK AT ME ONE MINUTE AS THOUGH YOU REALLY SAW ME!" Everyone looked at Laura. The line echoed forever in the tank, unstoppable. Laura got that look on her face again, that solemn, *actorly* look, and Magenta felt the laugh bubbling up again—wrong, to be sure, but bubbling nonetheless—fueled by maryjane and Brass Monkey. Rocky, too, felt the gentle jerk of his funny bone. He swallowed it down—barely—and walked over to kick Riff in the butt. "What the fuck, man?"

Riff sat up and looked Rocky dead on. "Hey, high and mighty, *you* were laughing the other night. You both were. You laughed like I *never saw* you laugh. C'mon, where's your sense of *humor*?" He directed his diatribe at Laura. "She understands. Laura understands. Jesus, she had to *say* these freaky soliloquies. It's *funny*, right?"

Laura pinched her lips. She did not smile. She did not make it okay. She stared at Rocky, then Riff, then Magenta, seemed to be deciding there was something critically wrong with them. She said nothing. No one said anything.

And then Stuart, finally, piped up. "Check this," he said. Tossed his borrowed skateboard onto the curved surface of the dome and began doing mini-loops around the center. Crazy, but distracting. "C'mon, Rocky, this is great."

"Stop it, Stuart," Laura said. She stood up and tried to grab him as he wheeled by.

"Yeah, stop," Rocky said. "You wanna die?"

"C'mon!" Stuart kept looping around the curved surface, getting closer to the edge, but not jumping off the board. One circle, then another, everyone else frozen in place. The dome was big, but not big enough.

"STUART!" Laura shouted. "STOP!"

It happened in slow motion, the troika agreed later, like a cartoon. The board flew first off the tower, followed by Stuart, both of them hanging weightless in the air for a moment before disappearing, and an awful thud in the thick grass below, along with the crack of breaking wood. Laura instantly descended the ladder. The others ran over to the edge of the dome to look.

"Oh my god," Magenta said. She felt her face blanch. "Oh my god. He's dead."

Riff and Rocky said nothing. They watched as Laura ran over to the still, twisted body on the ground. She touched Stuart's face, and he moved, stretched out one leg, sat up, shook out both arms.

"You *stupid*!" Laura screamed, pounding her fists against his very alive chest. "What were you thinking?"

He grabbed her hands. "You need to get away from these people," Stuart said, in his stage voice, so the rest of them could hear. He looked up. "You're *too decent* for these people."

"I don't care. You need a hospital." Laura lifted him and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. His leg looked broken. "You

stupid," Laura said. Stuart laughed, seemed unfazed. Laura helped him limp to the fence, through the hole, to the car. The others watched from above, foggy and frozen-footed.

"You drive stick?" Stuart said.

"Shut up," Laura replied.

The troika heard nothing more. Just stood on the edge of the Pleasuredome in quiet guilt, as Laura maneuvered him into the passenger seat, got behind the wheel herself, then did an expert three-point turn and sped back down the hill.

"Dang. That happened so fast," Rocky said.

It took the three of them three hours to walk back to Magenta's car. They stopped off at Riff's to jettison the barware. Riff could have stayed, but he didn't. Better to stick together, better than sitting around alone, hearing his own stupidity rewind and echo through the stupid hollow tank of his stupid home. They kept the bottle of scotch, hidden in a Raley's bag, took turns gulping on the endless trek to the Raley's lot, replaying the week's events over and over, fighting over details, getting their story straight. They talked about dropping by the hospital to see how Stuart was doing, but collectively chickened out. His parents would probably be there. Laura's too. There would be questions.

Monday morning, Laura wouldn't speak to any of them. Riff sat behind her in English and calculus, hoping she would turn around to accept an apology. But she sat stone still. Magenta walked up to her in the locker room, but she turned her back. She wore bikini panties now. Something had changed.

A week later, Stuart showed up in a leg cast covered in hand-drawn Dead Kennedys and Black Flag logos. Laura drove his car for him and carried his books. Magenta saw him kissing her next to his locker, and not innocently either. At first, the troika thought it was a spiteful performance; then they realized Laura and Stuart really were sleeping together. How it worked with that leg cast was the

subject of many late night conversations, in the Raley's lot, or atop the Pleasuredome. Ravenous, chaste, clothed demonstrations on the steel vent, imagined pillowtalk shouted into the tank to echo along with their guffaws. *The Laura Project was a success!* they would remark to themselves, never mentioning the hows and whys, the icky, guilty details. When you're stuck, stick to ridicule. It helps high school go by quicker.

I suppose I could leave it there, three teenagers looking down on the world, from their pretend seat of power.

Or, I could drop the Stage Managerial act and own up. Bust open the dusty red curtain and admit I was one of the three assholes naming and claiming the Pleasuredome. I could have told the whole sordid story as myself—but it would have wound up a wallow. Me pining after my best friend, who never actually noticed I was a guy. Me obsessed with my father's absence, until he made it legal and moved out forever. Me wishing my mother had actually seen me star in the school play. Maybe we wouldn't have laughed, if she had been there. Maybe we wouldn't have ruined it.

I think I need to remember myself as that arrogant prick, that kid who wished humiliation on others, maker of his own loneliness. I think of Emily's line: *Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me.* I used to think it was the funniest thing ever. I probably was the one who laughed first.

Now, I'm more likely to weep.

But I won't leave it there, because I am the Stage Manager, and there's one more thing to show you. I went back to Colinaville, last week, to watch them bury that best friend, the one who held my heart hostage. She died of one of those illnesses that steal middle-aged women away from us. The church was packed. I hardly knew anybody.

Afterwards, I took a walk up the hill from my mother's house, and found myself at the gap in the fence. I climbed up the ladder,

and sat on the center of the dome, looking down at a town that wasn't mine any more. The Mormon spire, the football field, and, in the distance, the white-lit Raley's parking lot. I breathed the country air, and knew I didn't miss it. Not exactly.

I heard a rustling at the ladder, and was ready to go to jail, finally, for my long pattern of water tower crime. But it was a familiar face, under a now-bald pate: Rocky, still in his funeral suit, several sizes bigger than his eighties skater gear. "Hey Riff. Your mom said you took a walk," he said. His eyes were bagged and bloodshot. "I figured you'd be up here."

"Hey, Rock." We hugged, then sat back down on the steel thing, looking out, like we used to.

I got the feeling he wasn't ready to talk about our missing friend. I wasn't either. "I'm surprised they didn't ever fix that hole in the fence," I said.

"Yeah," he said.

"You ever tell anyone about this place?" I said.

"No. You?"

"No," I said.

He pulled a hand-rolled cigarette from his pocket, and perfumed the air with the smell Magenta loved. "Remember the time Stuart Lamb skated off the edge of this thing and broke his fucking leg?"

"I still feel guilty about that," I said.

"*Guilty*? Are you serious? Dude broke his own leg. We didn't break anything."

"I suppose you're right. But that's not how I usually think about it. When I think about it."

"That dude was *reckless*. He must have been doing sixty skating down Wyckoff. He's lucky he didn't lose a limb." He held up his half-arm and wiggled the stump at me, exposed under a rolled-up suitjacket sleeve.

I laughed, like he knew I would. "You know what happened to Laura Tremaine? She still around?"

"No, man. She ran away. Same as you. Went far away to college and never came back. Ran away."

"Wasn't *you* I was running from," I said.

"I know."

I accepted the offered joint, took a long, slow toke, held my breath.

"Last time I was up here was about eighteen years ago," Rocky said. "Magenta and I came up here during the Pleasants fire. You hear about that one? Right along those hills over there." He pointed with his bad arm. "We could see it perfect from here. A line of fire, moving fast, from one end of the hills to the other. They said you *couldn't even run* ahead of it."

"Damn," I said, exhaling the sweet smoke.

I imagined the orange ribbon of flame, the sundried grass, the fast inferno. And me, putting my head down to run, before the line of fury overtakes me. f

Gina Williams

WHEN ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

The way my dad is preparing
these soda crackers,
you'd think he was a priest
making ready the body of Christ,
removing each cracker tenderly
from the wrapper, setting them carefully
onto the green chipped plate, spreading
margarine all the way to the edges, exactly
to the edges—no less, no more—
with a kind of tenderness rare in the sort of man
who drives dump trucks and front loaders for a living,
whose fingers seem permanently cracked and raw
from weather and work.

To watch him eat them one after the other,
spots of yellow grease and flecks of crumbs
clinging to his lips, his eyes closed, face smoothed
with the most simple delight as he pops
each one in whole, is to see some kind of spirit,
holy or otherwise, at play.

An unopened can of no-brand mushroom
soup is still sitting on the counter.
This plate of crackers is just the starter,
an indulgence before the main course,
and as my bowl is filled, more crackers
crushed over the top, I believe I might know
now where soul food comes from, why and how,

sense it being born right here, born again,
on the chipped dish, in my father's hands,
in the steaming bowl, here in this dim, greasy kitchen,
in this small, nothing town on a cold February night,
where enough is when the soup is gone
and the dishes are done, when being satisfied
is as simple as that. Soon,
my childhood will be closed up in the cupboard,
sealed up and put away like plates and crackers
and I'll leave here to make my way, set out
in search of my own shadow,
hoping for something more, foolishly.

Anna leahy

MORE OR LESS

is the good enough that gets us by
in this more-is-better, less-is-more world
of good and plenty. It is the wish
to have accomplished
much and the sigh to have staved off
fear, offset fiasco. A toast to this:
the bottle nesting in its straw basket,
the sangiovese swirled, clinging, evaporating,
tearing its rivulets down the glass,
and the lush puckery sip,
some satisfying phrase exhaled.

—*Chicago, December 2, 1942*

Jacob Boyd

OUR MOST UNFRUITFUL HOURS

> *...hurrying o'er the illimitable waste*
> *with the fleet waters of a drowning world*
> *in chase...*"
> —William Wordsworth, "The Prelude"

One blurred row swallows the last.

Look far down each lane, far as the absence of traffic allows.

However long we fishtail between two cornfields, when the car finally slides to a halt and we fall out, the entire countryside reels with crickets in the indifferent dark.

Remember leaning beneath the stars, one hand shoved between rusty bars, offering straw to a reluctant horse, then turning, spinning, wanting to lie down with leaves, sink into a hillside, and sleep.

When sleep wouldn't come, we marched down streets in crowds demanding more night, feet bruised from dancing across upturned cars, begging for pepper spray, breathalyzers, blown tests, melted cement, flashing nipples, and revenge.

Stoics, we stood outside smoking in the cold.

Shook snow from our boots as we turned on the lights.

In spring, we flew down from the States, from Alemania, France, Australia, and Rotterdam to bounce in a mountain oasis that smelled—everywhere—like a port-a-john, then, in the morning, peered into little adobe iglesias, heads pounding from chanting as if our passports had opened doors to the earth's last frat party.

As if strobe lights hadn't merely migrated over our faces and upstretched arms.

As if dragon tattoos could climb hissing out from underneath our collars.

As if denim and leather could shield the boys shivering in lipstick, smearing blues with rouge, spitting on stage.

Sophisticates, we wore our myths and felt immortal.

We slumped in booths and stared.

Women with no makeup danced so fiercely for power riffs a hundred copperheads writhing in their hair could not ward our stones away.

And not one of us, in the nights prior to the wreck and subsequent fear, wore seatbelts, fettered as we were to our own bodies, to the road itself languishing in scum and mud at a boarded up bridge where smoke could not so much darken our lungs as lend the breath body above a river.

Then, on New Year's Eve, at the end of a sad apprenticeship, two ponies and a stray mare showed up in the frozen light of our front porch, spilling a silver bowl of water, stamping their hooves.

Dustin Parsons

from SUITOR'S RAIN ALMANAC

Suitor's Rain—June 1-September 30 [Philippines-Florida]

It was raining in Florida and my mother-in-law told me about the suitor's rain, the rain that kept a suitor from leaving after he had called on a young woman. If timed perfectly, the suitor could not be denied dinner in the Philippines, and it was often the young woman's grandmother, she told me, that scolded, *Will he really stay for dinner? Can he not walk home?*

It was raining in Florida every afternoon at the same time, and so we arranged to be home. My sons crawled the walls, and we took long naps when the afternoon rains came. The whole house shut down like a heavy eyelid, the sound of water in our hair and fingers. When we woke it was suppertime.

I asked her whether she'd ever been a victim of the suitor's rain, and she told me she'd never been so fortunate. *My sisters*, she told me, *I think there were boys who watched the sky to come see them.* Her home was covered in Legos and Hot Wheels cars. My youngest pulled her letter-writing materials from her small desk and hid all her pens. He fought with my oldest for rights to nap with his *lola*.

In the afternoons the rain fell so hard one might worry for the integrity of the shingles on the roof. Orchids hung in small baskets from trees. Anoles and skinks latched to her screened-in porch and the branches of her fruit trees, prized possessions grown from seed brought here from Kerala and Bolinao—papaya, mango, jackfruit, lychee. Her white and red orange trees. Inside her cuttings, all along the edges of her porch, are surprise frogs the size of thumbnails. The boys get as close to the hanging lizards as they can, reaching out to touch. Then, the scoot and tick whisk the lizards to a safe corner.

Some days we loaded up and went an hour west to the beach, where the coast at least tempered the heat. Or half an hour north to the mall and its air conditioning. Anywhere but outside in central Florida, where the heat and humidity cleared the streets. On the day she told that story, though, we stayed in. The boys read and played on the couch. My father-in-law was off to work, and my wife and I relaxed with magazines, enjoying the lack of a schedule. There was a baseball game on, and my mother-in-law kept one eye on the game, another on preparing *lumpia* for dinner. The rain was falling, and would continue to fall throughout the evening.

Monsoon Season—June 5-October 30 [India—variable]

Like coming up for air a fraction of a second too late, and taking in some of the water from the pool—that coughing and gasping before recovery. That feeling, for an hour in the hottest part of the day.

Hurricane Season—June 1-November 30 [Florida]

In 2004 two hurricanes crossed the main body of Florida. The point of conjunction—where the two paths crossed—is where my in-laws live. Hurricane Charley made landfall on August 13th, a Friday, and Hurricane Frances came September 5th. In between were tropical storm Bonnie, Hurricane Jeanne and Ivan.

My mother-in-law spent a couple of long nights in the bathtub with her cockatiel Chico, the rain beating the roof and the walls. She said the house shook with the force of the winds. Her husband, a respiratory therapist, was stuck at the hospital in Wachula where power went off for several hours and they relied on back-up generators. This was Hurricane Charley, the first storm that made landfall then abruptly turned inland against the predictions of meteorologists.

The names make a hurricane seem like what it is, a living thing. But the name also provides a feeling that the body count it racks up

might be somehow easier to manage. Charley did it, after all, not some weather system.

We lost contact with my wife's family for a time. We were a wreck, helpless, watching for news on the landfall on television. My mother-in-law with candles lit, power out, listening to the hurricanes knocking and knocking and not coming in.

Tornado Season—March 1-August 30 [Kansas—variable]

There are too many windows in my parents' home. There are too many stories to their home. There are too few points of egress. There is stained glass. How many have we seen form over us? We walk outside when the horns blast because seeing it coming makes it less frightening.

They formed before us when I was a child. My memory of this is clear, sitting on the back deck, looking westward, seeing funnel clouds form near Ellis, Kansas, like a straw dropped in a glass of dishwater. This memory is manufactured: they crossed along the skyline writing their names on the fields and towns and homes below. Tornado dancers. Multiple groundfalls.

Dirt devils rising from the ground, a magician's trick. My memory is a dirt devil rising fast and hard, 80 acres away, as I drove a tractor for a farmer for the first and only time. I stopped the tractor to watch, got out and took a piss near the tractor tire. The dust thick at the base, a needle rising from it, lifting higher. Never seen one this big.

Reports of a tornado pulling up corn in Nebraska, the stalks and ears and leaves of the corn finally descending later that day in Kansas.

Our home with its windows and its poor-latching screen doors. There are too many sharp objects. Too many trees with loose branches. Too many too many.

When I returned home my family told me there'd been a tornado touch ground west of town. Near the field and the tractor.

Near me. Did I see it, they asked. I said yes, but I can't know for sure. Too much dust and fresh-turned soil. I won't ever know.

Hurricane Season—June 1-November 30 [St. Lucia]

Rain steps into our room through the missing fourth wall. Rain can only tiptoe, does not know the heels of its feet. The soft pad-pad upon the tile floor sounds like a prayer as we wake. We look out on the Piton Mountains as the rain lifts a fog from them, from us, and I fall again to sleep. Later, in the first rainforest I've ever visited, I don't get wet despite the constant rain. The rain waits outside the canopy, knocks in its breathy way to come in. I touch a crab claw flower, red and curling and something taps me on the shoulder: rain's reminder that there is so much more to see. I listen to the rain, and move down the path. Any direction we go, the rain is a denizen holding our hands.

I would like to climb the rain as though it were a ladder with the tiniest wet rungs. Remember the brick home whose floor had been uprooted by a tree? The tree now grows from its family room, its canopy covering what the roof had long since abandoned. Had the family fallen asleep at the tree's trunk? Had they carved their names into the bark, rubbed it clean with their backs? The east wall vanished, the other three intact. Branches shed rain, and the only way to reach the top of the tree would be to climb the spiraling staircase that caressed the leaves, slid from the tips, and cascaded to the floor below. f

Danielle Cadena Deulen

A ROMANCE

I close my eyes and it's you with the boy in the rain
    zipping up his pants in the overgrown shrubs. You
marching out like a one-girl parade,
    your face so white, red-cheeked-cold and smiling

like you do when you've got
    away with something, while I stand there as speechless
        as a crushed bottle in the lot behind
the Seven-Eleven with the other boy, waiting
    for you to return and not kissing him because

I've never been kissed by anyone
    but you and he's not pretty. He's smoked four
Marlboro Reds, crushed them all beneath a rubber sole
    and picked at the pimples on his chin, asking

stupid questions like *so do you like movies?* And *do you think*
    they're doing it now? As if the thought of you
        unbuttoning his dirty jeans and kneeling down
    in the gravel at the roots of the bush might inspire
me to prostrate myself before him, too. You're fast.

    You're so fast that almost no one can see you, that flash
across your face when your boy doesn't stumble out
        declaring his love, when we don't applaud.
No one but me can see that you think he's left you already—

Like your father, your mother's boyfriend, the last boy
and the boy before him. You'll quit
school before you get through them all. Sixteen
and already a gallery of lovers: *Boy with Car*, *Boy with Tattoo*, *Boy with White Powder*—later, the boy who will leave

money on your dresser before he goes, your face
full of sores, your teeth knocked out. He appears
behind you, encircles your waist, sucks on your neck
just to leave a mark. When we're lying, legs tangled

together later that night, I'll touch the indefinite edges
of his love-bruise, a darkness surfacing from within
your pale skin. Of the boy, you'll say, *He says he thinks I'm pretty*,
of the stars, far up beyond a torn screen of clouds,
They're like diamonds in a box that no one opens.

Gina Troisi

WHERE THE OCEAN AND SKY DIVIDE

The women wear six-inch high heels and bright colored leotards and bikinis; blue, sequined triangular tops remind me of my older sisters' dance recital costumes. Their miniature figures are pronounced behind sparkles and strings, their bodies splaying decorative shapes on the ballpoint pens. When I tip them upside down their sparse garments fall off. They are grown women, with proportioned, hardened pink nipples and clumps of dark hair between their legs. I am five years old, sitting "Indian style" on the foot of my father's bed, alone in his room in the condominium he's just bought. I clothe and unclothe these women with the flick of my wrist, turning them upside down, then right side up again. They are grown up, like my mother, whom my father has just left. I am mesmerized by these ladies, by their full, buoyant breasts, by the inner curve of their thighs that makes a hollowed out space for their private parts to breathe. I lie down, watching their clothes fall piece by piece, nestling myself into the cushion of the king-sized bed my sisters and I sleep in with my father while staying here each weekend.

The ladies make me think not only of my mother, but also of the faceless women my father rambled on about while out to eat at our favorite Italian restaurant. My sisters and I sat silent, letting him reiterate that Brenda, his secretary who'd quickly become his girlfriend, had nothing to do with my parents' impending divorce, that he'd been cheating on my mother for years, with all kinds of women, including prostitutes. "Remember your mother's friend, Marla?" Marla had lived with us for a while when she needed a place

to stay in between moves. "I slept with her too—we had an affair for two years while your mother and I were together. Ask her."

In the condo, I lather my five-year-old legs with Nair hair removal cream, and glide my sister's razor up the front of my shins. I know what women are supposed to look like. I am used to seeing naked ladies, their shapes embellished in the molds of ice cube trays my father keeps in the freezer, their outlines knitted into his black winter hat to make their own white space, their blank faces and prominent breasts hugging his head. But these women on the pens are different—all have varying features—each one is distinct and defined—they have personalities and expressions; they are unpredictable in their looks and demands.

I haven't seen my father for years; I no longer know exactly what he looks like. I carry a segmented picture of him in my mind, while other parts of him still remain, may always remain, a mystery. I see shadows of his thinning dark hair lightened by grays. I see the broad shape of his hands. My father's hands were olive toned with wisps of dark hair, without extra flesh and bulbous veins, never dry and wrinkly like my own, but strong and smooth. My father's hands were suited for an office—clean hands that handled smooth white paper, staplers, computers, and calculators. My father's hands were those of a few gold bands, each designed differently, reflecting the individual taste of the women who picked them out. I construct a picture of my father standing up with his back to me, gazing out a window, as if what he sees out there is the woman he is hypnotized by, the next woman he will have, the woman he'll allow to rework him like clay.

During the year my father lives in the condo, we arrive to find notes trailing from the front door and into the living room, through the hallway and up the stairs to the bedroom, finally reaching his bed. Even I can read the repetitious lines, "For my lover," and "From your lover" that begin and end each vignette, individual notes taped

neatly around pieces of uneaten chocolate. We pick them up, but don't unfold the paper to see the messages inside, and he laughs as we gather them together, piling them on the desk in his bedroom. We know then that we will be moved out as Brenda moves in, our roles in his life diminishing, our once important jobs of holding wallet, money clip, and keys in our small purses obsolete. She will be the one going for four-wheel drives in the woods with him; for trips to the dump with garbage bags covering the windshield while he sticks his head outside the driver's side window to see the road; she will go sailing with him, and when the boat tips over, she won't be caught underneath the sail gasping for air, terrified that no one will find her to pull her up. We, who have not yet grown into women, will be left behind.

I dread Wednesday night dinners with my father. I order Italian subs with all the cold cuts, provolone cheese, oil, and hot peppers. I eat an entire large even though less than half the sandwich will fill me, but I can't stop myself. I chew without tasting my food, rushing to swallow like a prisoner who's been starved for days. When I finish, I excuse myself to the ladies' room to throw up. I am not yet making myself gag on purpose, needing no fingers to poke my tonsils; the abundance of the food in my small stomach surges upward on its own. I spew the undigested meats, tasting the oregano and basil more while regurgitating than while eating, the dryness of the heave leaving spices stuck to the back of my throat, and the sweetness of salami turned bitter with bile. Afterward, we sit in the booth like two strangers. I say, *I got sick. I ate too much.*

Really? He asks, unconcerned. I nod, feeling an indifference that comes from being more familiar with my father's absence than his presence.

My father and Brenda keep *The Joy of Sex* on their nightstand. Their mirror-lined, canopied bed is up against the wall by the entrance of

their room, so if you open the door even a crack, the book is the first thing you see. Brenda leaves her see-through lingerie hanging on doorknobs and draped over closet doors. What she doesn't leave out in the open, my stepsister, Jocelyn, and I uncover by snooping through dresser drawers: slinky satin with thongs attached, innocent looking nighties with holes where nipples should be. Jocelyn and I spend hours flipping through *The Joy of Sex*, studying the photos and cartoon-like drawings of the same couple who reappear throughout the book. The woman wears a lacy, transparent bra, the man kissing her neck, her inner thighs, near her crotch, she yelling in what appears to be orgasm. I contemplate the action-like photos as though they are clips of movies, the thongs and nakedness and the sixty-nine position. I read the words vulva, vagina, and clitoris again and again, learn about how the penis is the most symbolic organ in all of history. There is man biting woman, woman biting man; there are Mardi Gras masks and flashes of rear entry. The man sticking his big toe into the woman's vagina reminds me of how when I sit on one end of the sectional couch while my father and Brenda are on the other, they take turns holding one another's feet in their hands while talking about reflexology pressure points, smirking at one another.

I find out that the therapist my father sent me to in order to "help me deal with the divorce," was really supposed to have discovered why I was so fat, and to fix it. This is the same year I begin to go for long stretches without food, feeling faint in the mornings before school and eating half an apple to make the dizziness subside. This is the same year I become diligent about doing Jane Fonda's workouts every afternoon, playing the video tape over and over, huffing on the living room carpet, even after my fifth grade teacher takes me into the hallway and says, "Gina, it's nice to be thin, but not too thin." This is the same year that I refuse to eat cheesecake on my birthday and Brenda, who is always talking about calories and fad diets, who in previous years has refused to let me eat in between meals, shakes

a bottle of Ex-lax in my face and says, "You want to be like your sister?" This is the same year I become stricken with nightmares and insomnia so terrible that I often crawl into my mother's bed weeping in the middle of the night and when my father finds out, he says, "I always knew your mom was a lesbian."

The next year, my father suggests that the two of us go for a walk after dinner. This is odd; we rarely spend time alone without Brenda. We circle the neighborhood as the sun lowers behind the clouds; it is quiet except for the calls of the cardinals soaring over the pines and the heels of my sneakers scuffing against the pavement.

"Do you know how a man and a woman have sex?" he asks.

Startled by his question, I look down and stare at my quickening feet, my sneakers' long black laces scraping the dirt. "No." The lie comes out naturally even though I haven't had time to think about my response. It's as if the word "no" itself might somehow preclude his question, as if its ability to oppose might muffle my ears and block out his voice.

"I'm talking about what they do physically—do you know exactly how it happens?"

I am not yet having sex. Next year, I still won't have my period, but I'll be doing more than kissing boys and letting them grope me. I'll be smoking cigarettes and stealing Southern Comfort from package stores after school, drinking liquor and puffing on joints. I'll be getting into cars with boys I hardly know, riding into the city with them, getting stoned at their friends' houses, whom I know less, passing out in random places, waking up to cold cloths on my forehead in strange bedrooms.

I decide not to answer him, hoping the silence might shrink me, that by pretending not to care, I might turn to ice and melt away. He says, "It's when a man's penis enters a woman's vagina." My face flushes, my pulse pounding in my ears. He wants me to be sure of

the specifics, the details and the exact precision of the body parts—one entering another—erection, penetration, ejaculation.

I wonder now why I feigned innocence with this man who, during my childhood, did anything but try to shelter me from the world. When I was a kid, we watched *The Shining*, starring Jack Nicholson as a deranged writer who moves his family to a secluded resort in the Northwestern mountains, and eventually ends up trying to kill them. We watched *Jagged Edge*, where a woman is brutally raped and murdered, a graphic scene including the masked perpetrator slicing her nipples off with a knife. We watched *The Accused*, where Jodi Foster is gang-raped on a pinball machine. I speculate about why I pretended to know nothing about sex with this man who would get tied up in various parts of the country romancing women he met on planes, extending two hour airport layovers into days, this man who had already told me that he'd contracted gonorrhea, but who never warned me about the risks of sleeping around.

While watching reruns of *The Shining,* we ran screaming from the living room when Jack wedged his face in between the broken wood and said, "Here's Johnny," with his open mouth and wide nostrils. There are parts of the movie I soon forgot, like the repeated scenes of blood pouring from the elevator, the chilling music, how the child with Extrasensory Perception could predict the hauntings of the place and the pernicious psyche of his own father. Of all the atrocious incidents, the part I distinctly remembered, the part from which all the others fell away, was when a dead woman emerged from the shower, a corpse who Jack passionately French kissed. On the reruns we watched, her body wasn't bruised or bloody the way it is on the uncensored version, but disguised by a white silhouette of a naked woman. It was the seduction that I remembered. Even though her nakedness was concealed, at five years old, it was clear to me that the ghost was the familiar sight that preceded sex. As

my father, unfazed, sat next to me on the couch and stared at the television, I saw a glimpse of what would become more lucid in the years to follow: it was impossible to know my father beyond the objects of his obsession.

When I am in college, my father says he'll never get married again. He states this often during our frequent dinners, where our interactions are consistently awkward—me dropping a fork, him clanging a plate. We'll have several drinks before our meals arrive, as if ex-lovers trying to break the ice.

"Is it wrong," he says, "to ask out a woman who just refused my best friend?"

"Yes."

"But she didn't want to go out with him."

"It doesn't matter," I say. "He's your best friend."

"You didn't even give it any thought."

"I don't have to. There's nothing to think about."

During these dinners, my drinks are never strong enough to numb myself from the dynamics of our relationship, from our inability to understand anything about one another. I have long ago lost faith in my father being anyone but who he is: a boundless man who has always been too distracted, too self-absorbed to consider his kids, a man who asks questions but never listens to the answer, a man who I have no doubt will marry again. I am no longer interested in sifting through dresser drawers and closets, sniffing his wives' perfumes, attempting to know him further by inspecting the essence of whomever he loves at the time.

When I am twenty-five, my sister calls to ask if I remember being molested as a child. "Do you think we were abused?"

"No," I say. "I don't remember anything like that."

What I do remember are the shadows of women on the walls in the houses where we lived, where we visited, in the rooms where

we talked. I remember that when it came to sex, there were no rules, that boundaries were nonexistent, the way the ocean is formless, blending into the sky. What I remember is how the first time I had sex, it was only to get it over with. It was with a boy I was friends with in his bedroom in broad daylight, his parents downstairs; I didn't feel much of anything—no pain and no blood and no pleasure—no wishes for it to continue or stop, no longing for it or denying it in the days afterward.

What I know is that when I give my five-year-old niece a bath, and she stretches her tiny arms, her skin softening with squirts of soap as she splashes suds in the water, I imagine how she processes events, how she perceives the adults in her life; I wonder what she will remember from this year, what she is still too young to absorb, and which memories will take on weight as she grows older. It is something about her bathing, her nakedness that provokes me to think this way; her innocence causes a dull aching below my waist. It is the opposite of sharp pain, but it is concentrated, centering itself in the middle of me, hollowness alongside heaviness, a presence that I cannot ignore. I can sense her fragility, her tenderness, and I become overtaken with urgency, an incessant need to protect her from anything that might, that could happen.

I do have a few fond memories of him from when my parents were married—his playing records in the living room, blaring John Denver's "You Fill Up My Senses," and Cat Stevens's "Morning Has Broken"; his arriving home from a vacation in Japan with red, blue, and yellow kimonos for my sisters and me; his taking us to pick out a Christmas tree each year—but all of these remembrances are side-swiped by thoughts of the women he was with on the Japanese vacation with his buddy who was also cheating on his wife, and the year when he and my sister came home from picking out the crooked Christmas tree and she, not understanding that it was a

secret, said, "Brenda got the good one," my mom's head jerking toward him, her face hot with anger.

My father has no recollection of the instances I've described—I have confronted him about his senseless parenting, and his only reply has been, *I'm sorry—I really don't remember any of that.* I debate the power of memory itself—his, my sister's, mine—the way he has eradicated his while she and I have examined our lives, forming narratives from timeless moments, trying to interpret some sense of truth from an environment that often distorted it. In the end, my father's inability to look backward only widens the gap between us, separates us to the point of strangers who share nothing in common; he's managed to erase our past encounters, as if we've never shared houses, rode in cars together, or went on trips. In the end, I presume we all depend on the only memories or voids we see fit—the flashbacks and half truths that allow us to survive the impact of our losses.

Every few years when I see my father, usually at a birthday party for my niece, I am curious if it will be the last. I'll be surprised by his growing a beard, gray with a few patches of black, or the way his stomach has rounded. I will practice nonchalance while his wife offers small talk. He says nothing.

Afterward, I ruminate about the possibility that we might never make amends, knowing that if he dies before we do that I may feel irreparable regret, this worry turning into panic; other times, I am insouciant, and become haunted by my lack of empathy, by my inability to commiserate with him, with the choices he has made. I find it true that when you are abandoned by something you never really had to begin with, you don't feel the pain twisting itself into the depths of your gut the way it will when you experience an authentic sense of loss, the way your insides rip open when it becomes too painful to bear going on loving someone who has left. There has been no intimacy between my father and me, no

letting go of composure—our relationship has been coated with his capricious forms of nurture, with my unsettling sense of his prurience. In a way, there's a synchronicity to our ignorance of one another; he has spent a lifetime forgetting, while I have spent countless years trying to distinguish a distinct shape that is my father, to decipher a form or find a line from where I sprung up. f

Jennifer Givhan

MAMA'S ARM

She begged me to throw it in the garbage,
her palsied arm limp at her wheelchair, stuck
angled toward her windowsill plants and pitted
with edema. I couldn't hide my laughter,
even as I reminded her it was bone-
hooked, though it didn't move. Still she tugged,
chiding its feckless good-for-nothing, its disposable
white hairs & bluish skin. When
it started meowing, I admired her ventriloquism.
What a talent, I said, tucking it under the blanket.
No, take it away, she said. I can't feed it.
Till finally the smell brought the anesthesia
and a knife.

Every day I visit now,
she asks after that cat, stroking the stumped
air at her shoulder bud: Did it survive the surgery?

It's fine, I purr. Just fine.

Dionisia Morales

EXQUISITE CORPSE

Her message said she'd be late picking me up to go hiking because she couldn't find her clothes, but when she arrived, she confessed something more troubling: "I think my clothes have run away." I got into her car, and she headed down the street, staring into the middle distance.

When we pulled up to a stop sign, she revealed her true concern: It wasn't just any clothes that had gone missing, but her favorites. Where was the tan undershirt that was so silky against her skin? And what had happened to the black fleece pullover she wore like medicine?

"My slippers turned up in the laundry basket in the basement," she said, where, I assumed, they had never before journeyed alone.

She worried that she might be losing her mind along with her things.

"Or maybe it's just menopause head," she said.

This made me wonder: What is worse, going crazy or getting old?

We were quieter than usual heading up the hill. I wanted to sidetrack her by talking about the things we had in common—unruly gardens, maturing children, incomplete projects, and uncanny encounters—but I was distracted by something new that I noticed we shared. While looking across a sweep of valley, she pushed a piece of hair out of her eyes, and I detected shallow crêpe paper creases on the skin on the back of her hand. Just like my hands. And I thought that of all the signs of time passing, having aged hands was about as unfair as your favorite clothes running away.

She kept her gaze fixed on the mountains in the distance. I wanted to say, "If we could see through the mountains, we might catch a glimpse of the sea." That's how clear the day was. But before I

got a word out, she said, "You'll tell me, if it ever seems like I'm really losing it?"

"Of course," I said and hoped it was true.

As we hiked down, her morning's confession deepened. She hadn't been late just because of the clothes; it was also because she'd forgotten where she'd parked the car. A grey look crossed her face, so I told her about the time I'd put the saltshaker in the refrigerator and blamed it on my kids. This made her laugh, which made me laugh, and we kept laughing, as if we'd finally given ourselves permission to relax. Something lifted. On the way back to the car we jumped from one subject to the next, talking over each other and interrupting, assembling a collage of a conversation that turned at right angles. We talked breathlessly, as if any moment we might lose our chance to confide a secret or confess a crime. With no other hikers on the trail, only the trees witnessed how we scissored and stitched our thoughts together and buried the hard questions like an exquisite corpse. f

Mark Richardson

SHANGRI-LA

1

There was an old man who set out to blow-up the hotel Shangri-La. Late on a warm summer night he secured a plastic explosive to the back of the building. Seven more little bombs were inside a backpack that was slung over his shoulder. He planned to sneak around the base of the Shangri-La and plant each one in a strategically sensitive area. Afterwards, he'd walk a safe distance away and detonate the bombs by pushing a red button on a radio-operated remote controller. He'd watch as the hotel imploded like an overcooked birthday cake.

The Shangri-La was considered an architectural marvel. It was impossible to look at it and not be bowled over by its beauty. "The hotel is a masterpiece – a perfect blend of nature, art, and function. It's only a slight stretch to say that this is the most significant architectural leap forward since the Greeks built the Parthenon," breathlessly raved a *New York Times'* article, four decades back when the building was unveiled. People flew from around the world to tour it. It was the jewel of a small resort town where it perched on top of a cliff and leaned out over the ocean. Its presence filled the town's residents with pride and glee.

Unfortunately for the old man and his plans, a team of seasoned security guards protected the hotel. That night one guard who patrolled the grounds spied him as he tried to duct tape a second bomb just below a window. The guard yelled, "Hey, you – STOP!" The old man felt a jolt of fear pulse down his spine. He turned, stumbled over a small bush, and fell. In a panic, he squeezed the red button with his thumb and detonated the first bomb. An enormous

explosion rocked the hotel. Large pieces of stone crumbled and fell. Fire and black smoke shot into the air. People screamed.

The security guard pulled a revolver from its hostler and shot the old man in the head, killing him immediately.

A fleet of fire trucks soon arrived at the top of the cliff where the hotel burned. The Shangri-La's well-trained staff evacuated everyone inside in as orderly a way as could be expected. Families in pajamas and tipsy patrons from the hotel's bar stood on the lawn and watched a small army of firemen hook up hoses and set about dousing the flames. "What *happened*?" asked the guests as they turned to whoever stood next to them. "I heard it was a gas leak," said one. "No, it was *terrorists*."

Quicker than you'd predict, the fire was extinguished. A big piece of the hotel was carved out – a scar. The firemen and the hotel's security team examined the building and determined that it was structurally sound, and there were no concerns about smoke; it was safe for the guests to return. The Shangri-La's staff handed bottles of water to the adults and gave lollipops to the children. They encouraged everyone to return to their rooms. Unfortunately, not everyone could return. Four rooms had been obliterated. Two had been empty, but a young couple and a widow had been asleep in the others. They'd been killed, the only casualties.

The lead fireman wiped sweat from his forehead. "It's a miracle that it wasn't much, much worse," he told the hotel's manager. A waitress from the restaurant started to cry and one of her co-workers wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

The police had also arrived and they focused their attention on the dead old man, who was still stretched out on the dirt. He looked like a homeless person: filthy pants, a shirt with holes at the elbows, gnarled and unwashed hair. He smelled like a wet sock. They looked at him with contempt, for the police loved the beautiful hotel as much as anyone in the town. They couldn't understand why someone would want to blow it up.

"Asshole," said a uniformed cop, who wanted to kick the bomber, but didn't because he knew his colleagues would find that unprofessional. A plain-clothed detective scratched his head, examined the old man's blood-covered face, and said, "Hey, I think that's Jimmy Roberts."

2

Jimmy Roberts was the architect who had designed the hotel Shangri-La.

His father left soon after he was born. He and his mother lived in a small apartment. She was a nurse who worked long hours, practically every day, and Jimmy was often left home alone. One day, when Jimmy was six, his mother bought him a Lego set. "Build me something pretty," she said, and kissed him on the forehead.

Later, when she returned from the hospital, Jimmy gave his mother the Lego house he had built. He'd used every piece in the box – windows, doors, even a chimney. His mother held the little house. "This is...*remarkable*," she said.

The next day, Jimmy and his mother went to their local toy store and cleared the shelves of all the Lego boxes. Soon, Jimmy was spending all day – every day – constructing plastic buildings. When he was seven he started entering Lego contests. By nine he was consistently winning, beating people decades older. Then Jimmy got bored with Lego's and started to build things using balsa wood. In time, he got bored with that and started using real wood. His bedroom became cluttered with his small structures.

Jimmy had no friends and no interests outside buildings things. This greatly concerned his mother, so she visited a psychiatrist. "Shouldn't a boy play baseball, run around the neighborhood?" she asked. When she'd finished, the doctor peered over his bifocals and told her, "There are worse things to be obsessed with than architecture."

Jimmy wasn't satisfied with just building things; he was also fascinated by architectural theory and history. He spent countless hours at his local library, read every book in stock, and also bought his own books, accumulating a sizeable collection.

When he was sixteen he dropped out of high school and got an entry-level job at an architectural firm in the city. The seasoned architects didn't like him. "Snot-nosed little brat," they'd mumble behind his back. But it was clear that he had something special, an aesthetic sense that comes along maybe once every century. They grew to rely on Jimmy to evaluate their work. By the time Jimmy turned twenty he was the most sought-after architect at the firm. He was only twenty-two when he quit and started his own company. He designed and built things all over the world – a museum in Berlin, a bridge in Chicago, an office building in Dubai, a skyscraper in Singapore. He became rich and a star in the architectural world. He raked in awards. But Jimmy still had no friends, showed no sexual interest in women—or men, for that matter. All he did was work and sleep. Only one thing mattered to him: becoming the world's greatest architect.

Despite his reputation, Jimmy was not a front-runner to win the Shangri-La project. But he wanted it – *badly*. The cliff-side setting touched something deep in his soul. When he first learned of the project, he snuck onto the strip of land where the hotel would be built and spent the night in a sleeping bag, listening to the ocean and gazing at the constellations. For months he worked to perfect his design, rejecting one failed attempt after another until (*ah-ha!*) perfection.

When Jimmy finished his presentation to the members of the Shangri-La building review committee, they stood and applauded. One man whistled. They felt the world was a better place because of Jimmy Roberts.

It took two full years to build the hotel, and during that time Jimmy turned down all other assignments. He supervised every element of the hotel's construction. When it was finished, the

Shangri-La was heralded as a masterpiece. Jimmy's smiling face was plastered across the front page of newspapers around the world. He was on the covers of *Time* and *Life* magazines. *Sixty Minutes* did a profile of him. "As we marvel at his accomplishment," concluded *The Times* in its article on Shangri-La, "we're thankful that Mr. Roberts is so young. We look forward to what this precocious genius will come up with next."

Then Jimmy disappeared.

He never designed another building. He sold his house, all his possessions. He became a recluse, a shadow. In time, the world forgot about Jimmy Roberts.

3

"Jimmy had the softest hands," said the young woman. "It was like he soaked them all day in lotion," said the second young woman. They sat next to each other on the edge of the bed. Both wore tan robes and sandals.

It was early morning the day after the bombing. Once things had settled down at the Shangri-La, the police uncovered that Jimmy had spent the prior week in a motel room in the resort town. The two robed women had stayed with him. The motel room's curtains were closed and the floor was littered with empty pizza boxes and beer bottles. Two uniformed cops searched through the mess as the plain-clothed detective who'd identified Jimmy's body questioned the women.

"How did Jimmy get the bombs?" the detective, who stood, asked the first woman.

"The Lord provides," she said.

"He does, yes, the Lord provides," echoed the second woman.

The detective adjusted his tie and considered pressing the issue, but he looked at the blank expressions on the two women's faces, their glassy eyes, and thought better of it. "Why blow-up the Shangri-La?" he asked instead.

"Jimmy was gay, obviously, never lifted a finger to touch me," said the woman on the right. She leaned toward the detective. "I see your hands are soft too. Are you gay as well?"

The detective didn't respond, just shot her a sideways glance.

The second woman snorted. "Gay, my ass," she said. "He was a regular badger, that one. Whenever you were gone – fuck, fuck – that's all he wanted to do."

This enraged the first woman. "Bitch!" she yelled and started to hit the other woman with the sides of her clenched fists. The second woman responded by grabbing her attacker's hair with both hands. She yanked – hard. Soon they were screaming and clawing at one another's faces. The detective called to the two cops and the three men pulled the women apart, handcuffed them, and the detective said, "Bring 'em in."

The police questioned the women at the station, but couldn't get anything out of them. "Drugs?" the plain-clothed detective asked the lead interrogator as he stepped out of the interrogation room. "No, they're just two crazy bitches," he responded and waved to a uniformed cop to take the women away.

For two days the national media ran stories on the bizarre life and tragic death of Jimmy Roberts. It remained unclear what he'd done for the years since he'd gone away. A *Times* op-ed speculated that Jimmy had felt he'd reached the apogee of his talent with the Shangri-La, that it was only downhill after that, and that's why he disappeared.

"Jimmy Roberts will forever be known as a murderer. What went wrong? And why try to destroy his greatest creation?" a TV host asked a psychologist on a nightly talk show.

"Unfortunately, real life doesn't offer Rosebud moments. Only Jimmy can truly explain his actions and he's gone," said the psychologist, who couldn't make it to the studio but was available via satellite.

"Hmm," said the host, who had been hoping for a more informative guest. "Let's go to the phone lines."

Later that night a massive earthquake hit Iceland, the media shifted its attention there, and the world once again forgot about Jimmy Roberts.

4

Well, the entire world didn't forget. Hans Hoefler, the security guard who shot Jimmy, couldn't get him out of his mind. Although he'd spent years patrolling the hotel grounds, Hans had never witnessed a murder, never shot anyone, or even pulled a gun. Most of his confrontations at the Shangri-La involved stopping public urination. While he ate his lunch or shaved or sat on the toilet, all he could think about was Jimmy. What drove him to make those bombs? Why was I forced to shoot him? These questions, like a disco ball, twirled for days inside Hans's mind.

A few nights after the bombing Hans was at his favorite bar, drinking a second beer. The room was practically empty.

"I ask again…" said Hans. He'd spent the time it took him to finish his first beer telling the bartender – who frankly wasn't interested – about his preoccupation with the dead architect. "…who the *hell* was Jimmy Roberts?"

"He was the world's greatest architect," said a man in a booming voice, so loud that it felt like the words bounced off the walls. The man sat on the stool right next to Hans, who would have sworn that he hadn't been there a moment ago. It was like he'd suddenly materialized – a six-foot, six-inch giant of a man with a rounded back and deep lines on his leathery neck. He appeared exceptionally vigorous for someone so old. He stared down at the security guard, as if he could look right into his soul.

"Who are you?" asked Hans.

"I was the head of an architectural firm that competed with the company that Jimmy created," said the giant. "We were rivals. So I gather from what you've told our friend here," he nodded at the bartender, "you'd like to learn more about the great Jimmy Roberts."

"Yes," said Hans, and cracked his knuckles. "I would."

The giant man pulled a pipe out of his coat pocket, but before he could light up, the bartender told him that smoking wasn't allowed.

"Goddamn rules!" said the man. He walked toward the front door and signaled for the guard to follow. Once in the pleasant night air, he lit his pipe and said, "I think better on my feet anyway." He blew a smoke ring, and Hans watched as it floated and then broke apart.

"To compete against Jimmy was to understand fear," the giant began his tale. The two men started to walk down the sidewalk. "At least it was that way for me. His IQ was rumored to be astronomical; his dedication to architecture unmatched. I was thirty when Jimmy launched his firm. He was only twenty-two, but already considered a genius – the Mozart of architecture. I too had aspirations for greatness. But I didn't have Jimmy's gift, or just as importantly his grit. You've heard about his youthful obsession?" Hans nodded. He'd read the recent articles.

"You're the one who shot him," the giant man said, and puffed on his pipe.

"He was trying to blow up the hotel," Hans said, apologetically.

The large man stepped to the edge of the sidewalk to let a young couple pass and then continued walking.

"So," the man continued, "Jimmy and I were consistently pitted against each other in competitive bids. At first, I held my own – won some, lost others. But over time, Jimmy started to win every time. As he did, I became consumed with envy and bitterness and self-loathing. I was enveloped in a black fog of hatred. Hate is a powerful emotion. It's destructive; the more you hate the more you harm yourself. Once it had taken hold of me, I could feel it literally eating away at my body, my soul."

They'd arrived at a long staircase that led down to the beach and descended toward the sand. Hans had worked at the Shangri-La for years, and the only emotions that the hotel had ever stirred in him

were positive ones: joy, amazement. As he patrolled the grounds he wouldn't have understood how anyone could have hated the person who had designed something so spectacular. But, of course, after the bombing, things changed.

"And then came the Shangri-La," said the large man, as if parsing the security guard's thoughts. "The buzz around its unveiling was palpable. There was a ceremony, but of course I wasn't invited. Still, I felt compelled to attend. Folding chairs had been set up on the lawn, but I stood at the outskirts of the crowd and from a distance watched Jimmy speak from a podium, the hotel behind him. I could just barely hear his voice. He looked regal. I waited until long after the ceremony had ended to get a closer look at the Shangri-La, not knowing that the building would heal my angry soul. I walked around and inside the hotel and was struck by its refinement and grace. There was no strained artifice, no purple ornament. Everything had a purpose. It felt like the hillside had been chipped away until it exposed what had been hidden underneath. I'd dedicated a great deal of my life to architecture; I'd never seen anything so perfect. My hatred melted away, just like that." He snapped his fingers.

"Almost two months after the ceremony, I happened to spot Jimmy at the airport. He was alone and although it was midday he was at the bar. I'd never known Jimmy to be a drinker, but he was having one that day. I was compelled to go over and congratulate him. He listened politely, nodded. I asked, 'How does it feel to be the world's greatest architect?' The question contained no malice or envy; my animus was gone. Jimmy looked at his drink with wan eyes. He seemed to sink a little into his chair. 'I kind of feel like something has been taken from me,' he said.

"It was soon after that encounter that Jimmy began to disappear," the large man said. "It was reported that he been offered a slew of new design projects, each worth millions of dollars, but he'd rejected every one. At first, it was assumed that Jimmy was just taking a sabbatical; that he would return to work revitalized. But

as the years rolled past, it became clear that he wasn't returning. Instead, he had drifted into a life of seclusion.

"But really, no one knew what had become of Jimmy. He'd simply vanished. Periodically I did hear rumors. In one, it was said that Jimmy had bought a piece of land in Europe and built a castle. Once construction was finished, however, he would have it torn down so that he could design an improved version and start again. In another, it was believed that Jimmy had moved in with a prostitute and fathered a family. But the story that I heard most often was that Jimmy had settled into a seedy hotel, filled with rats and broken bottles, and lived off the proceeds from his mother's social security check. During the day, he would play chess with the old men on skid row. At night – every night – he drafted new blueprints, architectural designs that no one would see, that would never be constructed."

They'd walked down the staircase and arrived at the edge of the water. The large man emptied his pipe and slid it into his coat pocket. He glanced at Hans and then out to the ocean.

"Do you have any passions?" he asked, "art or sports or science?"

"I played baseball as a kid."

"Baseball, okay. Now what do you imagine would have been the reaction if Babe Ruth had retired after just a few years of playing ball: sadness, loss? Well, I believe the world would have been diminished. For me, Jimmy's disappearance was equally as tragic. The greatest living architect had deprived history of the masterpieces that he *could* have produced."

A wave rolled in and licked the tips of the two men's shoes.

"Nearly fourteen years after the unveiling of the Shangri-La, I decided to go and find Jimmy. By that time any anger or jealousy that I'd once had for him were gone. In my mind, Jimmy's stature had grown. I no longer viewed him as simply a man; he had morphed into a mythical figure, a demigod of architecture. I planned to take off six months and see if I could track him down. I had a few leads, paths I could follow. I wanted him to explain why

he'd decided to end his career, and I believed that I could talk some sense into Jimmy, convince him to return to his erstwhile life. But I only made it a few miles before I turned my car around. If Jimmy had chosen a life of solitude, than who was I to try and alter his fate?"

Without saying a word, both men removed their shoes and socks, rolled up their pant legs, and waded into ocean, deep enough so it reached halfway up their calves. They stood there for nearly ten minutes, and then walked together back into town. The security guard knew of a restaurant that stayed open all night. Inside it was dark, but the round tables had candles. When a waitress arrived, they ordered German sausages and mashed potatoes and washed them down with two pitchers of beer. They got buzzed, laughed, told stories about their families and old lovers, but didn't talk again about Jimmy Roberts. They fought over who'd pay the bill, until the security guard insisted.

Outside the large man rubbed his hands and said, "God damn it Jimmy, you killed people." He took a breath and then said, "Such a waste, such a waste…"

Hans shook his head. "We can't change the past," he said. Although it was against his nature, he reached out to the bigger man and hugged him. He said he was glad they'd met. Then they parted.

It was nearly dawn, but Hans wasn't tired so he walked back to the beach. He sat, pushed his hands into the sand, watched two pelicans in the distance dive into the water as the sun rose, and thought of the bombing. He thought of the people who'd died. He pictured Jimmy Roberts' blood-soaked head. As the years rolled past and Hans continued to work at the Shangri-La, that gruesome image would periodically appear in his mind's eye. But sometimes he'd also imagine Jimmy standing proudly at the podium the day the hotel opened.

5

It's one hundred years in the future and Hans Hoefler, the plain-clothed detective, the large man with the leathery neck, and nearly everyone else who was alive the day of the bombing is dead. The Shangri-La still sits above the resort town. It's now a National Landmark, as well as a functioning hotel.

Inside the hotel's lobby there is a tasteful shrine to the people killed in the bombing and a small display with a picture of Jimmy Roberts and a brief write-up of his life. A woman walks past these items. She's seen them before, and they're not why she's here. Her age, her name, what she looks like aren't important for this story. What is important is that in college she had been a marketing major until her second year when she took an elective class on architectural history. A good deal of the class was dedicated to the Shangri-La. The teacher didn't discuss the building's architect or the bombing. Instead, the emphasis was on the hotel itself: what made it so innovative and how it continued to influence architectural design. The unnamed woman was so taken by what she'd learned that once the semester had ended she flew to the resort town so she could see the hotel herself. When she returned to school, she changed her major to architecture and to this day continues to work in that field.

When people ask her what about the Shangri-La she finds so special, she says, "I could look at it all day and never grow tired of the sight. It makes me believe in God, for God is required to create a man who could build something so perfect."

It has been years since the woman last visited the Shangri-La. She goes on an hour-long tour and follows a docent as he leads a small group of people throughout the hotel.

Afterward, the woman starts to walk down the curvy road toward town, but she only takes a few steps before something tugs her back. She goes back inside the hotel and buys a sandwich and a latte at a small coffee shop. She takes these outside and sits on the

grass near the edge of the cliff. It's close to the spot where the hotel's opening ceremony had occurred. She watches as gardeners prune the roses and trim the grass. A boy throws a ball to a dog. She looks at the Shangri-La, marvels at its beauty.

The air feels different here, thinks the woman. She sips from her coffee cup and realizes that she has no plans for the rest of the day. That's okay. She'll just stay here and kill time until eventually she feels compelled to move on. f

Jacob Newberry

WORLD WITHOUT END

Picture Jerusalem.
The city, eternal: homestead
and a kingdom, hilltop
and a dream.
Last lion of Judah's tribe.
The ramparts: pressure-
washed white stone temple
of a landscape and its citizens
around the walls. Living
in all directions:
the East and West you know. Line
breaks along a demarcation,
colonialists' insistence. A road,
called the Seam. Cross it
some night, waiting for a light on you
and separation's paved materiality.
Stand there, some night,
in the street, the Green Line
spread across the earth. No
traffic. Persistence is the key
to any border.

Mark Wagenaar

EXIT PLAN

The lab was closed the same day the office dedicated to closing Gitmo
was closed. A bureaucrat somewhere made the call, from a desk

in a warren of desks, perhaps on floor 7½ in some nameless building.
Past an honor guard of two scientists & three janitors, the last
processional

shuffles out of the lab, in ones & twos, Noodles, Marcel, Albert VIII,
some hand-in-hand, some in bowler or baseball hats. One carries an
umbrella,

one a briefcase. A few clutch handbags with nothing but lipstick in
them.
They leave behind stock picks that outperformed the experts, & the
collected works

of Shakespeare hammered out on typewriters. They leave their
watercolors
on the walls: jungle scenes, sunsets, self-portraits. They leave their
metal cages behind.

The reports said they watch sunsets together; they remember
kindnesses.
They recognize pictures of monkeys they once knew.

The reports said we don't know what we're supposed to find out.
The monkeys look up as they walk out, at a sky that was once marked
by the streak

of Albert II's capsule falling back to earth. They look ahead at a life
they only dreamed.
At the good life, which will surprise them, as it surprises us, when at
last we find it.

CONTRIBUTORS

Jacob Boyd, originally from Lansing, Michigan, received a Bachelor's degree in English and Environmental Studies from Western Michigan University, and a Master's of Fine Arts from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. His poems have appeared, among other venues, in *Hawk & Handsaw*, *North American Review*, *Measure*, *Fiddlehead*, and *New South*. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. at the University of Illinois Chicago.

Catherine Champion is from Kalamazoo, Michigan. She has a BA in English and Philosophy from Amherst College and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing (Poetry) from the University of Oregon. She currently lives and works in Eugene, Oregon.

Danielle Cadena Deulen is the author of a collection of poems, *Lovely Asunder,* which won the Miller Williams Arkansas Poetry Prize and Utah Book Award, and a memoir, *The Riots*, which won the AWP Prize in Creative Nonfiction and the GLCA New Writers Award. She is an assistant professor in the creative writing program at University of Cincinnati, as well as a visiting faculty member for the Vermont College of Fine Arts low residency MFA program.

Anne Elliott won the 2012 Normal School Prize for short fiction and 2013 Table 4 Writer's Foundation grant. Her long story, "The Beginning of the End of the Beginning," is forthcoming as a Ploughshares Solo. Other fiction has appeared or will appear in *Crab Orchard Review, Witness, Hobart, FRiGG, JMWW, Bellevue Literary Review, r.kv.r.y, Pindeldyboz,* and others. She has been a fiction fellow at Vermont Studio Center and Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and listed in Best American Nonrequired Reading. She earned an M.F.A. in Visual Art from UC San Diego and lives in Brooklyn.

M. J. Gette has published poetry in *Indefinite Space, Rufous City Review, Eratio, Ditch, Red Weather, Project Lit,* and elsewhere. She currently writes for an NGO in Guatemala.

Jennifer Givhan was a Pen Rosenthal Emerging Voices Fellow, as well as the *DASH* 2013 Poetry Prize winner, a St. Lawrence Book Award finalist and Vernice Quebodeaux Pathways finalist for her poetry collection *Red Sun Mother*, and an Andres Montoya Poetry Prize finalist for her collection *Karaoke Night at the Asylum*. She attends the M.F.A. program at Warren Wilson College with a fellowship, and her work has appeared in *Best New Poets 2013*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Indiana Review*, *Rattle*, *Cutthroat*, *cream city review*, and *The Los Angeles Review* among others. She teaches composition at Western New Mexico University.

Nick Flynn, in previous incarnations, has worked as a ship's captain, electrician, and caseworker with homeless adults. He is currently a professor on the creative writing faculty of the University of Houston. His most recent book is *The Reenactments* (Norton, 2013). The poems herein are forthcoming in *My Feelings* (Graywolf, 2015).

Sam Grenrock's work has appeared in *The Bitter Oleander*, and she won the 2012 Mary Barnard Academy of American Poets Prize Contest. She is pursuing an M.F.A. in poetry at the University of Florida where she is working on her thesis.

Anna Leahy is the author of *Constituents of Matter*, winner of the Wick Poetry Prize. Her work has appeared in journals and anthologies *Crab Orchard Review, The Pinch, The Southern Review,* and *A Face to Meet the Faces*. She teaches in the M.F.A. and B.F.A. programs at Chapman University, where she curates the Tabula Poetica reading series and edits the journal *TAB*.

Nate Liederbach is the author of the story collections *Doing a Bit of Bleeding, Negative Spaces*, and the forthcoming *Tongues of Men and of Angels: Nonfictions Ataxia*. He lives in Eugene, Oregon.

Shivani Mehta was born in Mumbai and raised in Singapore. She moved to New York to attend college and earned a Juris Doctor from Syracuse University College of Law. Her work has appeared in the *North American Review*, *Mid-West Quarterly Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, to name a few. Shivani's first book, a collection of prose poems entitled *Useful Information for the Soon-to-be Beheaded*, is out from Press 53. She lives in Los Angeles with her family.

Dionisia Morales holds an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Oregon State University. Her essays have appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*, *cream city review, Hunger Mountain, Calyx*, and *Brevity.*

Travis Mossotti was awarded the 2011 May Swenson Poetry Award by contest judge Garrison Keillor for his first collection of poems, *About the Dead* (USU Press, 2011), and his chapbook *My Life as an Island* was published by Moon City Press in 2013. His second full-length collection *Field Study* won the 2013 Melissa Lanitis Gregory Poetry Prize and will be published in 2014 with Bona Fide Books. Mossotti is currently the Poet-in-Residence at the Endangered Wolf Center, and his poetry has appeared in *Antioch Review*, *Southern Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and elsewhere.

Jacob Newberry is pursuing a Ph.D. in Creative Writing at Florida State University, where he holds the University and Kingsbury Fellowships. He has won the 2012 *Ploughshares* Emerging Writers' Contest, *Southwest Review*'s 2012 McGinnis-Ritchie Prize for Best Fiction, and awards from MacDowell Colony, Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Corporation of Yaddo, and the Fulbright Foundation. His work has appeared in *Granta, Ploughshares, The Kenyon Review, The Iowa Review, The Southwest Review, Best New Poets 2011, Poetry Daily,* and *Out Magazine*.

JOHN A. NIEVES has poems forthcoming or recently published in journals such as *Beloit Poetry Journal, Southeast Review,* and *Southern Review*. He won the 2011 *Indiana Review* Poetry Contest and his first book, *Curio* (2014), won the Elixir Press Annual Poetry Award Judge's Prize. He is an Assistant Professor of English at Salisbury University. He received his M.A. from University of South Florida and his Ph.D. from the University of Missouri.

DUSTIN PARSONS is associate professor of English at SUNY Fredonia. His essays have been published or are forthcoming in *Indiana Review, New Delta Review, Seneca Review,* and *Crab Orchard Review* amongst others. He lives in Western New York with his wife and two sons.

SCOTT PENNEY works as a technical writer in central Vermont. His recent publications include *Faultline*, *Artful Dodge*, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, and others. This spring he is a resident at the MacDowell Colony.

MARK RICHARDSON'S short fiction has appeared in *Hobart*, *Segue*, *Crime Factory*, *Switchback*, *Prime Number Magazine*, and elsewhere. Richardson lives in Northern California and works as a marketing writer in Silicon Valley.

NATHAN SLINKER'S poems have recently appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *Watershed Review*, *Solstice, Hinchas de Poesia*, and *Kenyon Review Online*. He was a 2013 Fishtrap Fellow and has also received the Thomas Morton Memorial Prize from *The Puritan* magazine and the Robert Watson Literary Prize from the *Greensboro Review*. Nathan lives in Tempe, Arizona and is an M.F.A. candidate at Arizona State University.

Gina Troisi received an M.F.A. in Creative Nonfiction from The University of Maine's Stonecoast M.F.A. Program in 2009. Her work has appeared in *The Gettysburg Review, PMSpoemmemoirstory*, *Room Magazine*, *The Concho River Review*, and *Compass Rose*. Her essays have been finalists the 2012 Iowa Review Award in Creative Nonfiction, the 2012 Bellevue Literary Review Nonfiction Prize, Bellingham Review's 2012 Annie Dillard Award for Creative Nonfiction, and the 2009 Eric Hoffer Award for prose. She received an Honorable Mention for Gulf Coast's 2012 Nonfiction Prize. She served as Writer-in-Residence 2012 at Randolph College in Lynchburg, Virginia. She teaches writing at Merrimack College and is also the Writing Center Coordinator at Great Bay Community College.

Gina Williams is a Pacific Northwest native originally from Whidbey Island, Washington. She earned a Bachelor's degree in Journalism and English, and a Master's degree in Communications from the University of Oregon. Her work has been featured most recently by *Palooka*, *theNewerYork*, *Great Weather for Media*, *Black Box Gallery*, *Third Wednesday*, *Gallery 360*, *StepAway Magazine*, *Marco Polo*, *Meat for Tea*, *Cactus Heart*, and *Tiferet Journal*, among others.

- **Three-year MFA in fiction, nonfiction, or poetry**
- **Teaching assistantships, editorships, and scholarships**
- **Hemingway Fellowship for a third-year fiction writer**
- **Partner with the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award**
- **Funded writing retreats in Idaho wilderness areas**

Faculty

Kim Barnes, Mary Clearman Blew, Ron McFarland, Daniel Orozco, Joy Passanante, Brandon R. Schrand, Alexandra Teague, Robert Wrigley

University *of* Idaho

A LEGACY OF LEADING

www.uidaho.edu/class/english