



R2



R2: THE RICE REVIEW

R2: The Rice Review is a free student literary journal at Rice University.

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A Brief Note from the Editors

Dear Reader,

As Rice University considers its legacy in its centennial year, we at R2 are also reflecting on our influence within and beyond the pages of this issue. Though we are always honored to publish the writing of talented Rice undergraduates, this year we have sought to offer more opportunities for writers and artists to work together.

This fall, we hosted our annual Open Mic Night that united many writers and artists from Rice, and also from outside universities and literary organizations. Poets, musicians, playwrights, and authors of all of genres performed on one stage and were able to share their craft with the Rice community. We also hosted trips to hear esteemed authors like Junot Diaz and Lauren Groff read their work. These opportunities engaged students in the Houston literary scene in a meaningful way, and allowed R2 to participate in the artistic community that it also seeks to represent.

In this collaborative spirit, we are proud to showcase 20 pieces of visual art in this issue, the product of the first partnership between R2, the English Department, and the Department of Visual and Dramatic Arts. We have placed visual pieces in conversation with poetry and prose with the goal of enriching both mediums. As both R2 and the Rice community continue to evolve, we hope this exchange inspires future interdisciplinary connections and collaborations.

We offer our sincerest gratitude to our faculty advisor, Ian Schimmel. His dedication has far surpassed the duties of the Parks Fellow in Creative Writing. This issue could not have come together without the support of the English Department, the Department of Visual and Dramatic Arts, our wonderful staff, and our contributors. Most importantly, we would like to thank you, our readers, for supporting the creative endeavors of your fellow Owls.

Happy Reading,

Maggie Sulc, Editor-in-Chief

Caitlin Devereaux, Managing Editor

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Preface

Courtney Brown

If I am *singularity*, if I am *idiosyncrasy*,
if *I* is what separates *me* from all else, the word
that cuts the red string tied around my finger,

if we are sewn together, if we are the gears within the clock
that claims to be turning time, if the earth is a tandem bicycle
that we ride into *forever* without pause and without fear,

if you are the refraction of light after the storm,
if you are the cool, unmoving lake at the base
of all our mountains, reflecting our horizons and

our pain, like the broken mirror threatening the
superstitious self, if this is a dream within a dream
that goes on and on, if this is the dream from which

you awake before it reaches its climax, if
when you look into yourself you find me staring back
at you without defeat and without doubt,

if your mouth is not equipped for births or parties or
funerals, if your tongue is made from spider silk and
dandelions and dark linen and torn lace, if all of

our songs are composed of silence and my breath
aligns with your heartbeat, if our words drip with life and
blood, staining flesh and bone, then you and I have found

the beginning of all things, the place from which
this voice first echoed against the cliffs of this dark
and shining nation, this sphere containing everything

that we have ever known, this *cradle endlessly rocking*, this
ever-turning hearse, a wide and beautiful mass grave filling
itself with our world's people who never seem to end.

Thursday, January 17th, 2013
[After Gehrke]



Bright Lights
Vinita Israni

I Always Cry at Weddings

Anna Meriano

Whoever designed the path leading from the valet parking station to the Grove Manor Gardens lobby must have either been a sadist or a peg-legged dwarf. No matter how you try to adjust your stride, your steps will inevitably line you up with the gravelly ditch between stepping stones, forcing you to take either an uncomfortably large step to bypass the gap, or an uncomfortably small one to stay on your current slab of concrete. This torturous path winds slowly through picturesque arrangements of topiary and brightly-colored allergens, as though the forty-minute drive from the wedding chapel didn't quite build the anticipation enough. I don't want to be here.

"This isn't really my kind of party," Lucy mutters unnecessarily as I drag her into the reception hall by one calloused and nail-bitten hand. She was a deer in headlights when I suggested she put on some eye shadow for the wedding, antsy throughout the service, and now she's pure fish-out-of-water tottering on her half-inch heels, her Manic Panic Bad Boy Blue hair no longer lost in a sea of pew-sitters. "I mean, I'll make a good impression and everything; I just want you to know what an effort it's going to be."

"Oh, I'm well aware," I tell her as we check the sign in the lobby and head towards the hall on the left, "And I appreciate the effort. I know how hard it's going to be for you not to take off your shirt and pour Shiner on your head." Lucy raises a fist, sees the elderly couple behind us, and lowers it without flipping any digits at me. I try not to beam too hard at her discomfort, and at the memory of the last party we went to, where she did do both of those things. "Also, unlike in soccer, you can't tackle anyone here."

“You can’t tackle anyone in soccer either, Bree.” Lucy sighs and rolls her eyes, “God, what kind of shitty team do you play on, anyway?”

“Shhh!” I warn as the elderly couple passes us with a disapproving look. “Geez, can you hurry up a little?”

“The heels were your idea, bitch.”

I didn’t meet Lucy by stalking her—not exactly. My New Year’s Resolution compelled me to spend more time jogging unhappily around the Jensen Park track; if I happened to notice that a women’s soccer team practiced at a certain time every evening, and if my jogging tended to coincide with their public displays of sports bra, well, that was just a wonderful coincidence, mostly. She was the one who called me over, asked if I would play goalie for the day. She was the one who told me to come back even when I was utterly terrible. She taught me the rules of the game, which I had never bothered to learn before, and spammed my Facebook and my cell phone before every practice—twice as much before every game. Community adult sports teams don’t survive unless somebody is unrealistically invested in them, and Lucy made sure that everybody on her team was.

We start circling the tables that line three walls of the hall, searching for our name cards. My cousin Katie is an only child, and she always had the biggest, most elaborate parties—a glance around the crowded room shows that this one is no different. I peer at a centerpiece made of flowers I can’t name, half expecting to see a Barbie doll wedged in the center. I see several groups of relatives I would actually like to sit with—My grandma Mary and her latest geriatric boy toy, my stoner uncle Sam and his kids, Katie’s punk-rock cousins from the other side of the family—but of course Katie sat us with my parents.

Mom is the first one at the table. Her smile gives me frostbite before I can even pull out Lucy’s chair.

“Brittney, there you are.” I can feel Lucy smirk at the unfamiliar name, and my stomach starts to clench. My mom is all polite nods and thin smiles, but I can’t ignore the edge when she asks, “Are you going to introduce your friend?”

“Hi,” Lucy pipes up before I can say anything, “I’m Lucy. Lovely ceremony, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, yes.” My mom coos, “We’re so happy for Katherine. You know she’s Brittney’s age exactly? Born not two weeks apart. I remember when they were in diapers and little Katie was begging me to measure their heights on the wall to see who was taller. And now she’s got a career and a husband and . . .” Mom sighs, and

“ I didn’t meet
Lucy by stalking
her—not exactly.”

I try to pretend she’s not mentally marking our success on the wall and wondering where she went wrong with me.

“Weddings are great,” Lucy says after the slightest uncomfortable pause. I wonder if she’s got a list hidden somewhere of appropriate non-committal phrases.

“They are!” Mom responds enthusiastically. “I keep hoping we’ll get to do a big wedding for one of ours, you know, but my oldest isn’t looking to settle down yet and, well, Brittney’s rather insistent that she isn’t—”

“There I am,” Brandon flicks his name card and slides into his seat, turning the simple action into a production of arm waving and charming smiles. I’ve rarely been so happy that my older brother is an attention whore. “Mom. Bree. Blue-haired chick.” Brandon fakes a double take, “Blue-haired chick! I’m fairly certain we haven’t met.”

Lucy introduces herself again and adds that the bride looks radiant. Then Dad appears with Mom’s wine and his whiskey and the awkward small talk starts over.

I’ve been out of college for over a year now, and I’m what my mom likes to call “at loose ends,” which is her way of saying, “I told you that if you didn’t major in business

you'd regret it." I wait tables to pay the tiny bills for my tiny apartment, I buy crappy beer at crappy bars, and now I play soccer. It's nice to have a group, to have a hobby that's purely for fun. Being on the team makes me feel like maybe life doesn't have to be all downhill from here. Lucy makes me feel like that.

It was at one of our team parties—we have either a victory party or a consolation party after pretty much every game, and they're completely indistinguishable from each other—it was at one of those parties about a month ago that Lucy colored her hair. Our best midfielder Isha brought the dye, the same light blue color as our uniforms, and we all voted to decide our victim. Lucy won because: one, she was the captain; two, she worked at Whole Foods where you were allowed a certain amount of individuality; and three, she was the only blonde. None of us trusted our tipsy selves with the bleaching kit. Lucy took it surprisingly well when she woke up the next morning, even got excited about accessorizing the new color with contrasting bandanas. I envy her flexibility.

"Did you bring someone?" I ask Brandon, looking at the last empty chair at the table, "who's our sixth?"

"I invited J.P." Brandon says, "But I haven't seen him yet. Probably skipped the service on purpose, but I'm sure he'll come eventually." He lifts his eyebrows and gestures open-palmed at me. "And the sexuality/women/gender studies major says..."

"...Are you waiting for me to make a gay joke? Because you two are so obviously married, it's not even fun anymore." Brandon and J.P. have been friends forever, and their homoeroticism is well-documented, but I'm just not in the mood to make fun of my all-too-straight brother.

"Damn it, Bree, your degree was good for one thing and one thing only. I was hoping for something along the lines of, 'Oh, are you two playing for the other team now?' That way I could respond with, 'No, no, we're both here for the opportunity to play the field.'" Brandon rim-shots his empty wineglass with his fingers. Dad snorts with laughter, but Mom glares until he goes quiet and sips some whiskey.

"Lucy, take notes. My brother is his own straight man, accompanist, and biggest fan."

“Brittney, don’t be rude,” Mom scolds.

“He started it!”

“Brittney, don’t be childish.”

Lucy smiles and Dad chuckles and Brandon sticks his tongue out at me from across the table. He gets away with it, of course; he always gets away with everything.

“You did women’s studies?” Lucy asks.

“Yeah, did I not tell you? Brandon’s actually right about it being useless—it hasn’t particularly informed my waitressing career.”

“We warned Brittney not to waste her time and our money, but she can be awfully stubborn.” I can feel Mom gearing up for her ‘wasted potential’ lecture, and I mentally brace myself, but luckily Lucy disengages.

“Excuse me,” she stands and wobbles, her chair screeching against the shiny hardwood. “The drinks are in that corner?” she asks my dad, who nods over his whiskey. “Great. Want anything, Bree?” I tell her no, thanks, but Brandon offers to accompany her across the hall to get his share of the open bar. Too late, I realize I’ve been left at the table without my two best defenses.

“Honestly, Brittney, I just can’t understand it.” Mom sighs, watching Brandon escort the unstable Lucy across the room. “You could have at least warned us.”

“About what? Brandon’s bringing a boy to the wedding.”

“John Paul is a family friend. I’ve never heard a word about this girl until she shows up today. Out of the blue, so to speak. How am I supposed to react?” Mom peers over her fancy place setting at Lucy, whose elbows are draped over the bar like an amateur ice-skater, clinging for stability—and this before she’s had a single drink. I suddenly wish I hadn’t suggested the stupid heels, hadn’t pushed so hard for the makeup and the jewelry. Lucy in her boy shorts, her detergent-grey tees and her duct-taped cleats—Lucy with her bandanas and sports drinks and Sweet Tarts—Lucy flowing down the field like an avalanche, like a stampede—that’s the Lucy I want, the Lucy I need to get me through this reception. Instead I’ve got clumpy mascara and clumsy steps and phrases ripped out of a Mrs. Manners textbook.

“We play soccer.” I say, suddenly wanting to explain what I barely even understand. Mom looks at me like I’m speaking in tongues. “Lucy and I. We play soccer at Jensen Park. There’s a whole team, and we play in a league. Lucy’s the captain.” I’ve been going to the park for almost four months now, but I never told Mom about it before. It feels weird. She doesn’t ask for the details of my life, and I don’t give them; that’s how we’ve worked since high school.

“You’re a grown woman.” Mom says, as confused as I knew she would be by the idea of someone doing something just for fun.

“Yep.”

“You don’t even like sports.”

“Turns out they’re not so bad.”

Mom purses her lips and sips her wine silently. A waiter with a great fake smile brings our dinners out on a cart and sets the plates down in front of us. Brandon and Lucy reappear, and Brandon pulls Lucy’s chair out so she can sit down without incident. “Oh, this looks delicious,” Lucy gushes while quickly pushing the chicken to one corner of her plate where it won’t contaminate the vegetarian portion of the meal. She takes a sip of her red wine and gives me an almost sincere grin, “No Shiner,” she says softly, “Am I good or what?”

“You’re late,” Brandon tells the air over my shoulder around a mouthful of bread. I turn around and see a giant in a poorly-fitting suit, clutching a plate of chicken and rice. I grin.

“Hey, J.P.”

“Brando. Bree. Mr. and Mrs. B.” My brother’s childhood friend and college roommate nods at each of us in turn. “And hi, nice to meet you, I’m—” he stops and cocks his head to one side like a confused blond puppy. “Lucy?”

“Oh my God,” Lucy is grinning and scrambling to her feet to embrace my brother’s guest, “John, what the hell are you doing here?”

“I live here. What are you doing here?”

“I live here, too, now. Again. Oh my God, this is nuts. Bree, we went to high school together. We were super tight. Dude, how are you not on my Facebook already?”

“I have no idea. I didn’t get one ‘til college, and I guess I was never brave enough to add you.” J.P. scratches the back of his neck, and I look nervously from him to Lucy. Is my flirtation radar acting up? “I thought you were in California, still.”

“Nah, it was fun for college, but I felt like too much of a failure being a failure in LA. Being a failure in Houston is way more respectable.”

“Why do you think I never left?” J.P. asks with his trademark self-deprecating shrug. Lucy laughs just a little bit too hard, and my head fills with the ringing of alarm bells.

“You went to Lamar with J.P.?” Brandon asks, “Bree and I went to Bellaire. I guess that makes you our sworn rival.”

“So what are you doing with your life?” Lucy asks J.P. as they both take their seats next to each other at the table, totally ignoring my brother. Normally, that’s exactly how I want everyone to handle Brandon, but right now it worries me. I wasn’t the type to crush on my older brother’s friends (just his girlfriends every now and then), so I’ve never been particularly interested in how tall and muscular J.P. is, or how sweetly he can smile. In an instant, all his attractive qualities are jumping out to taunt me.

“Oh, you know, working at an office, getting my soul sucked out, everything I swore I’d never be reduced to.”

“Bitch, you majored in Finance.” Brandon rolls his eyes, “You never pretended you were going to avoid the soul-sucking.” Mom makes a face when he curses, but she’s too occupied with her food to comment. If it had been me, I’m sure she would’ve found the time.

J.P. flushes bright red as he is wont to do. He stuffs a forkful of green beans into his mouth and busies himself chewing.

When the dinners have all been served (but only half-eaten), the talking starts. First the Parents have to give their toasts, then the Bridesmaid and the Best Man, then the brother of the bride and the groom’s favorite aunt. Champagne, passed around before the first toast, is refilled once, twice, three times—or is it four? I lose track as I watch my relatives become fuzzy, then tipsy, and finally settle somewhere on the road to full-on drunk. Mom starts to cry in the middle of the third speech and doesn’t

stop—wordless sobs with tears that prove the strength of her waterproof mascara. I get restless and annoyed watching Lucy whisper to J.P. Why does he have to be such a good conversationalist?

Lucy and I, we're not a thing. I thought we might be heading that way, but I've been known to think that about lots of girls, gay and straight, who actually had no romantic interest in me. I walked her home from one Victory Party (or maybe it was a Consolation one—funny that I can't even remember) and in her sweaty, beer-drenched daze she gave me one sloppy, hair-tousling kiss. She never mentioned it, so neither did I; for all I know it was just a habit picked up from her semester in France (all French people are slightly bisexual, right? I don't know; I studied German in school). I asked her to the wedding on a whim—I never used the d-word (date), or the l-word (like), or the other, capital L-word (Lesbian). It was just this thing I had to do, that would probably be miserable, and did she want to come along and keep me company, assuming she could act like a lady for one night and not completely embarrass me in front of my family. In fact, I was kind of a douche about the whole thing. No wonder she's more interested in stupid J.P.'s stupid nice-guy act.

“All French people are slightly bisexual, right? I don't know; I studied German in school.”

The speeches finally end. Everybody empties one last glass of champagne, Mom wipes her eyes and blows her nose loudly, and I get to say, “To Katie and Luis” for what I hope is the last time ever. The big bay windows at the end of the hall are dark now, reflecting back the empty space in the middle of the floor where the bride and

groom stand, waiting to start their first dance. “Unforgettable” starts to play and they dance cheek-to-cheek, and everyone lets out a wistful (or in my case, bored) sigh. A few people join the couple on the dance floor, but almost everyone is still eating and enjoying the show. I’m completely shocked when I hear J.P. lean over to Lucy and ask, “Do you want to dance?”

“I don’t think I’m physically capable,” she replies, but she’s smiling. Brandon is watching them with interest, and I fight the urge to punch all three of them.

“You danced fine at Prom.”

“I didn’t wear stilts to Prom.” But even as she says it, Lucy gets to her feet and lets J.P. walk her to the dance floor.

I stare at my half-eaten food, which got cold a long time ago, and push rice around my plate. Mom, Dad, and Brandon are all burning holes into me with their curious eyes, but I refuse to look at any of them. Lucy is struggling with her shoes, clinging to J.P. for support—only for support, I try to believe. When I can’t take it anymore, I mutter about how I ‘need to...that thing...my car’ and bolt for the door. I almost manage to convince myself that I was convincing.

This goddamn path! I thought it was bad sober in daylight. About three stepping stones from the entrance I give up and squat on the ground, cursing the shiny green dress I was so proud of this morning. I hate everything.

I hear footsteps behind me, and for a minute I’m sure that it’s Lucy, but then I realize that the steps are way too sure to be her. When I turn around, Mom is standing behind me.

“Go away.”

“Brittney.”

“Really, just don’t.”

Mom doesn’t say anything, just stands over me until her disapproving look burns a hole in the back of my head. Eventually, I stand up and face her.

“Your mascara,” she says, and moves to wipe it, but I bat her hand away and rub my eyes myself. Without warning, Mom hugs me. I fight the urge to wiggle away, try to relax and enjoy this rare occurrence, but it’s still pretty awkward. Mom takes a

deep breath, lets me go, and tells me, “I wish you wouldn’t make things so difficult for yourself. I love you. If this girl doesn’t see what she’s missing then she’s an idiot.”

“Whoa—what?”

“I love you.”

“I...love you too, Mom.” She’s hugging me again. “But...what’s the catch?”

She pulls away and looks hurt. “Why does there have to be a catch?”

“Because...” because you’re you, I want to say, but I have the sense to keep that quiet. “I don’t know.”

“Brittney...” Mom sighs, “I like weddings, and traditions, and normal hair colors. I would like for you to get a real job, and for Brandon to find a long-term girlfriend. I still think it’s possible that you’ll change your mind about this Lesbian thing once you find the right boy.” I open my mouth to scream in frustration, but Mom holds up a hand. “You don’t have to agree with me. Just listen. You know I’m always here to listen to you, right?”

I have no idea what to say. “Mom, I think the champagne is making you loopy.”

“Possibly.” She sniffs.

“Are you ok?”

“I always cry at weddings.”

“I’m noticing that. Just imagine how bad you’ll be at Brandon’s.”

She nods. “And yours.”

“Mom, gay, remember?”

“Why on earth would you think that gets you off the hook?”

I could explain to her that marriage is an antiquated concept that many LGBT theorists oppose, and I could tell her that there are many kinds of relationships and that permanent monogamous ones aren’t necessarily the best, and I could tell her that it’s rather assimilationist of her to just assume that I want to fit into her societal norms as best I can. But instead I pat my drunken mother on the back and let her hug me for as long as she wants.

“Oh, Brittney,” Mom mutters into my shoulder, “Did she have to have blue hair?”

“It probably doesn’t matter anyway,” I say, barely keeping the whine out of my voice, “Not with the way they’re dancing in there.”

Like the supportive and loving parent she is, Mom laughs in my face. “Brittney,” she says, “You are so young.”

“I’m twenty-four.” And not even defensive about it.

“I know,” she says, “that’s why it’s so strange.”

“You don’t think Brandon’s too young.” It’s an accusation, but my mom doesn’t take it as one.

“Oh, Brandon will be fine.”

“So will I, Mom!”

She looks startled. “Of course, sweetie. Of course you will. I know that.”

But I don’t think she did, and I don’t think I did either. Not until just now.

“Hey,” someone calls just as I’m about to suggest that we head back inside. It’s Lucy, holding her heels in her hand and picking her way down the path barefoot. She looks confused, worried, and her eyes dart between me and my mom. “What’s going on, Bree?”

I look at Mom; she looks at me. Without a word, she turns and heads back inside. For probably the first time since puberty, I completely adore her.

“What the hell?” Lucy whispers when Mom slips behind the elegant glass doors, “Are you ok? I will tackle her hockey-style if she said something to you.”

“What? No.” I blink at the sky and let my nose drip rather than call attention by sniffing. I’m so confused. “It’s fine, Mom didn’t—she just followed me out here.”

“Well then what were you doing out here in the first place, loser? You missed your grandma dancing to ‘Sexyback.’” Lucy squints at me, but I put on my best normal face and trust that in the dark she won’t see any evidence of my crying. “Come back inside—I haven’t had nearly enough free alcohol yet, and you haven’t sobered up enough to drive.”

“I think I’m going to hang out for a bit, but you go ahead. Enjoy the booze. Dance with J.P. some more. You won’t even notice I’m gone.”

“Oh my God. *That’s* what you’re upset about?”

“I’m not upset.”

“You’re seriously jealous of my high school prom date?”

“I’m not jealous!”

Lucy starts laughing and suddenly grabs me and pulls me into a bear hug. “Bree, you are such a dumb bitch.”

“Thanks, I feel much better now.”

She lets me go and shakes her head at me. “You didn’t even invite me here as your date, and now you’re going to pout because I didn’t spend the whole night hanging on your arm? I’m here, aren’t I? I’m wearing the shoes and the dress and the war paint. I’m giving you an awful lot of benefit of the doubt here—I freaking kissed you!”

“Well, yeah.” I shrug sheepishly, “I wasn’t sure if that was on purpose.”

“Like I said. Dumb bitch.”

I could tell her that bitch is an inherently sexist word and that by using it she is undermining the value of strong women like herself and upholding the oppressive patriarchy and she should really be ashamed of herself. But instead I kiss her.

Halfway through what is shaping up to be a really spectacular kiss, I trip over my own feet and land in the gravelly ditch between stepping stones. “I’m fine,” I say quickly as Lucy checks me for damage, “It’s going to be fine.”

“Well, yeah,” she says, like she never had any doubt, so I have to kiss her again. The moon is full and the stars are out and the gardens look beautiful in the light from the hall. Lucy likes me. My mom maybe even likes me, at least when she’s drunk. From where I’m sitting, I’m seeing a lot of uphill ahead of me.

But seriously, fuck this path.

Fell Song

Anya Parker

From stones
mist grows,

and the child
goes back

into light.
Sheep hide

in the foxglove—
and the lake

touches night.
Rain swallows

the mountains,
and walls serpent

across the fells.
Each stone

holds a star,
cold

and secret
as its mouth.



You Are Nowhere (Paper Installation)
Lydia Smith

The Holy Land

Sabrina Toppa

Mapping the Departure

Twenty-four hours before I'm scheduled to land in Israel's Ben-Gurion Airport, Silas asks me if I'm prepared. He jokes that he should start a private company to help Muslims in my situation. I laugh, thinking I am fine with my American passport. He says, "You are Pakistani. There is no way Israel will let you through without some questioning." I tell Silas I will simply lie. "No. Israelis can detect your lies without a problem. Whatever you do, do not lie."

"Remember," he says. "You are young, single, and Muslim. You could be an activist. Just have your explanations ready." He informs me that they will inquire about everything from the name of my father to the name of the last country I visited. "Just say you are there for tourism," Silas instructs me. "If they ask you if you are going to the West Bank, play ignorant. Pretend like you don't know if Jerusalem is in the West Bank or not. They will appreciate your stupidity."

Silas reassures me that if I survive the security rigmaroles, he will host me in his civilian compound in the West Bank. I imagine him living in a fortified military complex, hermetically sealed off from the locals.

Sitting in a Sterile Waiting Room

In the bright white room I'm quarantined in, I open my bookbag and find my travel notebook. A deep terror floods me. I see pages upon pages of my own Arabic scribbles, spread out over months of distraction. I grab a blue pen and

begin scratching out all the letters. This is beyond incriminating. I have no plausible deniability if I have a travel notebook stamped with Arabic. I turn to the back of the book—shit, more Arabic. My pen begins to lose ink as I'm fumbling over the pages. I panic. I see the Israeli guard coming over and watching the group. Damn. I close the notebook and hide it in my bookbag. I look around for a trash can of some sort where I can dispose of the book altogether. I find none.

Riding in Cars with Strangers

As I yank my luggage up the cold concrete steps, I see just one guy, standing at the edge of his car. It has to be Ari. He's short, tan, thin hair. This is my first time CouchSurfing at a male's home—my previous hosts were all female—so my paranoia kicks into overdrive. What if he kills me in his car?, I think as I wave hello. *What if I die in ten minutes?*, I think as I start walking over. *Nobody knows me in this country*, my brain worries as I introduce myself with a smile. *I didn't even tell anyone I was coming to Israel*, I think as I open his car door and sit inside.

I concentrate on the Israel outside the car window, trying not to draw undue attention to my nerves. However, it is nightfall so the only sight the window catches is my reflection. I thank Ari for picking me up, even though I am secretly resentful that he lives out in the middle of nowhere in this country. *You could've written that in your CouchSurfing profile, asshole*, I think.

In the car, everything is awkwardly quiet as I realize Ari is not comfortable speaking English.

We sit in silence.

"You look like us," Ari cuts through the silence. "Israeli."

I smile. I am not yet sure what Israelis look like.

When Ari finally pulls up to his neighborhood in Ahi Dakar, he looks as relieved for the conversation to end as I do.

Inside the apartment, I find another CouchSurfer. The CouchSurfing project is a modern-day freeloading adventure—an easy way to save a buck by bumming off a stranger's couch in a foreign country. The experience can last anywhere from a

single day to a whole month. Alaina is different from other CouchSurfers because most CouchSurfers surf on couches in new locations far away from their hometowns; however, Alaina has ended up back in Israel, her birthplace. As a Jerusalem-born French citizen dating a Jordanian Arab, Alaina explains to me that she's been running a Jordanian tour company, but somehow landed in Tel Aviv to sort out something legal which I don't know any of the details about.

"I thought you were a Jew when I saw you," Alaina tells me.

Ari asks me if I'm Pakistani.

I nod. "Wait, are Pakistanis Muslim? I didn't know that," he says.

I groan.

Record This

The big sky backdrops the pastoral Palestinian village known as Al Aqaba, nestled in the Jordan Valley. No one tells me that Palestine is this beautiful in the news reports or history books. The colors in the hills and the skies startle me. I am expecting dull grays and ruddy browns. I see only bright blues and deep greens.

There are vans with Palestinian flags peeking out. Men with toothy grins and outstretched arms. Everyone hugs each other.

I'm encircled by Palestinian teenagers, eager to meet the foreigner. They're all clutching their cellphones, seconds away from taking a picture.

"Look happier," one of the Palestinian boys instructs, dissatisfied with my moody countenance. If I don't smile properly, he won't have a new Facebook profile picture.

I try my best, but I only manage an awkward half-smile. This does not deter the groups of Palestinian boys from crowding in, sticking their camera phones out at arms-length and capturing the awkward moment anyway.

In the distance, I see the Jordan Valley's hills jutting out. Gray boxes dot the hills and small fires explode. Noticing where my attention has fallen, one of the Palestinians laughs and says, "Oh, those are just Israeli Defense Forces practice drills."

No Exit

As I am walking out of the small room, I find a bespectacled hijabi who tells me she's been there all morning. I groan and look around. In front of me, there is a young man with curly hair and a blue sweatshirt rubbing his head in his palms. He appears to be scruffy backpacker.

"Where are you from?" I ask. He doesn't look Arab like the others in the room.

"Italy."

"What? Italy? But why are they interrogating you?"

"They say my friend blew up himself last time I was here."

My eyes widen. I look closely at him; he's young, naïve, unprepared.

"They don't believe me when I say it's untrue!" the Italian says.

"What am I supposed to say when they're assuming the worst?" he continues.

"They keep telling me I'm a terrorist. Man, I don't think they're going to let me in."

He laughs and throws his head down in his hands.

A clean-shaven, white-shirted Israeli man enters the quarantined area. He zips up a black bookbag and throws it at the Italian boy, placing his hands on his hips.

"Why are you back in Israel?"

"I want to visit," the Italian says.

The older guy is unsmiling.

"You're not telling the truth."

The young Italian sighs. "I told you the truth! What else am I supposed to say to you?"

I, and the twelve other vaguely Middle Eastern-looking people in the room, look the other way.

Watching the Poet in Al Aqaba

I land in the small Palestinian village on the same day as one of Palestine's most celebrated poets. I am wearing a long-sleeve cardigan in the sweltering heat, out of a desire to display modesty. When I arrive inside the community center though, Palestinians slam down water bottles, huge plates of yogurt-drenched rice, and silver

cutlery on all the tables. The small room now holds the entire village. The Palestinian teenagers behind me chant and cheer with such rowdiness that it feels like I'm spectating a sports event.

Outside, white police cars are locked in to guard, mini-flags of Palestine poking out from their windshields.

When he enters the room, the poet is held up by a cadre of Palestinian men. He is frail, elderly, bespectacled, and keffiyeh-clad. Everyone in the room looks starstruck as he clutches a microphone and sings Arabic poetry.

“What am I supposed to do when they're assuming the worst?”

Behind me, I watch Shoshana interact with the Palestinian teenagers. She wears a perma-smile slapped on her face. Despite her Israeli citizenship, Shoshana is embraced as a warm-hearted foreigner. No one sees

that she is the Jerusalem-born daughter of American Jews once intent on reclaiming Palestine.

“I'm just happy to be here,” she says to the Palestinian teenager next to her.

Time

“Hold on,” the woman chuckles. “You're speaking too fast.”

She adjusts her hands over the keyboard and types.

“Speak slowly,” she instructs. “Why are you here?”

“Tourism.” I want my passport back.

“Where are you staying?”

“Um. It's some place. I think it's pronounced Ahi Dakar.”

She chuckles. “Ahi Dakar. If you are staying there, learn how to say it.”

“Who are you staying with?”

I pause for a moment. “Do you know the site CouchSurfing?”

Jerusalem for Beginners

A few days after the interrogation, I disembark from the bus in Jerusalem and compete with all the passengers to reach the metal detectors first. It is now a game to me. I miscalculate the crowds, though. Crotchety old grandmas are poking me in the ribs while I'm stepping on their shoes. Chaos unfolds as people contort themselves in odd positions to get ahead. The opportunity to pass through a cold metal detector in the middle of hot, muggy Jerusalem is too sweet. It makes people savages. I see Orthodox Jewish women in long black skirts dragging their suited-up boys through the gauntlet. Pious men with curls and top hats attempt to gracefully enter without touching the women.

Finally, my suitcase lands on the conveyor belt, feeding straight past the curtain. Israeli guards with guns yell in Hebrew—not at me, I have won this game through sheer speed. I step through and grab my luggage.

On the other side, I see the clean, sun-baked pavement for a second before a stroller rolls over it. I look ahead and I'm thrust into Jerusalem's open streets, crowded with people wearing monochromatic colors in the warmest materials. I see the silver lightrail in the distance, and it looks like the promised land.

Interrogation Room #2

“What is your dad's name?”

Damn it.

“Muhammad,” I say quickly.

Her eyes flicker. She looks at me closely.

“And Sabrina, tell me where your father is from.”

I try not to look unnerved by this question when I respond, “Pakistan.”

Screen by Screen

It is midnight. I'm watching a grainy film of the Israeli army pumping bullets into Al Aqaba village's mosque. It is eerie to see the Israeli news reports of a physical structure ten feet away from where I'm sleeping tonight. The Palestinian mayor, sitting

in his wheelchair a few feet away, points excitedly at all the small details that come up in the footage.

The mayor narrates what is happening as it's happening on screen. We turn from the TV to the mayor in rapt awe. We are all tense but spellbound. On the television screen, the Israeli newswoman switches over to an interview of the mayor. It is surreal to see him as both a real person and a distant character on a screen.

Tonight, I sleep fitfully, experiencing nightmares of realities I have not lived through.

Off Gravity

The Tel Aviv metro is cold, bright, loud. I see white tiles upon white tiles, dark black heels clicking against them, bearded men jostling next to lipstick-kissed young girls, their bags all shuffling past one another. The hum of the next train station erupts and no one on the train moves. Everyone's eyes are glued downwards or sideways—everyone is chattering, laughing, whispering; their tongues are spewing Hebrew in mellifluous dance notes but the only words I catch as they whizz past me are 'ani' and 'lo.' *Speak slower*, I think. One semester of Hebrew down the drain as the cold, bright, new metro seat underneath me is pushed away and I am suddenly standing erect trying to claim my luggage that is wobbling. The Israeli family next to me does not help—they look solemn, practical, insular. I curse them silently, grab my suitcases, and hope I don't drag them over anyone's feet—but wouldn't that be satisfying? Wouldn't that be the perfect "Screw you, too, Israel?" Only a few hours and I am already absorbing negativity toward this country that seems to reject me from first glance.

No Proof

"I am a student," I say, taking out my university identification card.

The woman stares at her computer.

"What do you study?" she asks.

I imagine her Googling my name and cross-checking all my words.

"I am studying abroad in Denmark right now," I clarify.

I take out a crisp white paper in a blue folder. The document is stamped by Danish immigration and has my Danish personal identification number on it.

The woman barely glances at it.

“How long do you plan to be in Israel?”

Ants

We're here. I know immediately we've arrived at Qalandia security checkpoint by the tension in the air. Everyone wordlessly disembarks from the bus, taking all their possessions with them. I do the same. To my surprise, the checkpoint is deserted. I see no Israeli soldiers. It is closed. We wait stilly. We form a big group. It is hot. We wait.

The sun grows more intense, but we wait.

I look to my left. A Palestinian woman looks dehydrated.

We wait. Twenty or so minutes elapse. We wait again for twenty more.

Finally, a green light. We can walk in neat, organized lines like the dehumanized ants we are in the dry heat. Only one person at a time. Go past the turnstile. Take off your belt. Take off your earrings. Take off your shoes. Let them X-ray everything. Wait, you idiot, you walked too close. The alarm goes off. You're yelled at in Hebrew, Arabic, and English all at once. You must do this all over again. I look over and behind a sheet of bulletproof glass, I see two young Israeli girls, probably younger than I am. They are chewing bubblegum while examining my passport. They yell at me again.

“Take off your earrings. Take off your shoes. Let them X-ray everything.”

Same Old, Same Old

The white-bearded Palestinian mayor has a powerful presence despite his disability. His legs dangle from the wheelchair as his fingers grip the black remote. The road is dirt and gravel, the hills are lush and verdant, and the houses are few and far in between. His wheelchair glides effortlessly over the topography of his hometown, as if the mounds of dirt obey his presence.

We stop in front of the skeleton of a new home. We see a pile of bricks next to the upcoming structure. Near the house frame, a man and a woman wave.

“They’re rebuilding their house from scratch,” Morgan tells us. As the only American in this village, she is accustomed to translating for foreigners.

The two Palestinians unfurl a white paper, smiling.

“This is the deed saying they have the right to build on this land. They had to rebuild it twice now after it was bulldozed by Israel. They say they’re going to just keep building and rebuilding, even if it bankrupts them.”

The two Palestinians smile.

Jewish Buses to Arab Towns

I watch the skyscrapers gleam like white diamonds as my head bobs up and down on the bus. On an intercity bus, I am passing through Jewish cities and small towns I have never heard of. The Hebrew radio is drowning out my thoughts.

“What are they saying on the radio?” I ask the man next to me. He stops thumbing through his small leather Torah and smiles.

“Where are you from?” he asks.

I freeze. I hate this question. “America.”

“I’m from Morocco.” He smiles proudly.

My face opens up at this opportunity to talk to an Arab Jew. I ask him about his life. He is polite. He tells me about Jerusalem. It is his favorite city in the world. It is the only place he feels at home, both with himself and with God.

“Are you Jewish?” he asks me with an expectant smile. I pause for a horrified second, desperately not wanting to ruin the amity during this bus conversation.

I respond no.
“Christian?” he asks, still smiling.
I shake my head again.
He looks exasperated. What else could I be?
“Actually . . . I’m Muslim,” I blurt out.
His smile disappears. We continue the bus ride in silence.

Liminal Spaces

“Do you feel Israeli?” I ask Alaina. I am not sure how to ask this question.

“I don’t know,” Alaina says. “I haven’t served in the military here, and that’s a big thing that separates me from Israelis. Also, to be Israeli, I think you have to be comfortable saying or thinking some borderline racist things about Arabs. And I’m dating an Arab, so I won’t do that.”

I’m sitting on Ari’s low-lying Japanese furniture, wondering what Alaina’s life is like.

“They interrogate me, too. Whenever I come back into Israel from Jordan, they ask me what I was just doing in Jordan. I tell them I have a tour company. I even tell them I have a Jordanian boyfriend. It is against my beliefs to lie. And so what? I am not doing anything wrong. What do I have to hide?” Alaina bites her nails and spits out the fall-out on Ari’s tiles.

“They want to know everything about him: where and when we meet, how often I see him, where he lives, who his family is.” She drags her palm across her forehead, wiping off droplets of sweat. I rise and open the balcony window open a bit more. She thanks me.

“They take my passport and say I can’t leave until I answer. At the end, I ask them, what else do you want to know, how often I fuck him?”

Alaina chuckles nervously, but I see that she genuinely wonders if this is the next thing she’ll be asked.

“You know, they give me a hard time at the checkpoints, but I try not to let it get to me. You shouldn’t either. That’s how they win. It’s all a psychological game to break

you down. To make you feel guilty for a crime you didn't even commit. We haven't done anything wrong."

I say nothing. I look at Ari, the ex-Israeli soldier hosting both of us.

"It's not that bad," he cuts in. "You make it sound . . . I don't know."

Inside White Peacekeeping Mission Car

After a week of back-and-forth phonecalls and missed opportunities, Silas picks me up in the middle of West Jerusalem in his labeled Temporary International Presence in Hebron work vehicle.

"I don't want to be in Jerusalem," the peacekeeping observer complains. "This is a boring city, everything shuts down, it's too religious, and all the people are settlers."

He looks sidelong at the men wearing large Siberian winter hats and black coats in the summer heat.

"I hate settlers," Silas says again.

When one passes by, Silas lowers his head and sinks his body into the chair. I can't determine if this is mock fear or genuine terror.

We circle around looking for any café that is open during Passover in the holy city. We find just one. "Ah, Carlsberg! Danish beer," Silas says with pleasure when we find an open café.

At the outdoor café, the dark-haired, svelte waitress sidles over to our table, examines both me and Silas, and promptly starts talking to me in Hebrew. She thinks I'm Israeli and Silas is the foreigner.

Silas is the one who answers in Hebrew.

Herzliya

Ari tells Alaina and me we can walk to the center of Tel Aviv from his apartment. We look at ourselves in disbelief. The streets are sprawling like those in Houston. Alaina and I—in our complete refusal to expend excess energy—want nothing to do with this activity.

Ari puts on his hat and ushers us toward the door. I guess we have no choice.

Ari is practically skipping while Alaina and I have our arms crossed over our chests. We look like we have not used our legs in ages.

“God, I hate physical exertion,” I tell Alaina.

“Me too, I’m so out of shape,” Alaina responds.

Somewhere in the distance, we see a black bag. Or a body. It’s hard to tell. Ari starts jogging toward it. As he nears it, he crouches down and examines the limp body. It is an old man face-planted on the floor, still and unmoving. Ari dials a medical number, while Alaina and I wipe sweat from our brows, feeling useless.

Al Aqaba, Area C of Occupied Palestine

Around a breakfast table, Mayor Haj Faroukh Mohammed of the Palestinian village of Al Aqaba, offers me dates, figs, and fresh hummus. He’s bound to a wheelchair because of a bullet during an Israel Defense Forces military exercise. He speaks fluent Hebrew and Arabic.

“Why hasn’t Pakistan done more for Palestine?” he asks. I am not expecting this confrontation. In my understanding of the conflict, I expect my American identity to be implicated, not my Pakistani.

“You must do more for Palestine,” he instructs me. I don’t know what to tell him. Like many other international visitors who happen into his village, I have no grand solutions or plans of actions. I only came to see.

Inside A Shared Service Taxi on the Arab Streets

“I have to get back a different way. I can’t go through Qalandia.”

“Wait, why?” I ask. I’m digging around my backpack – the only thing I’ve brought with me to Palestine – to find my passport. I need it to pass through the security checkpoints.

“They’ll know I’m Israeli,” Shoshana said. “On my passport, it says I’m born in Jerusalem. It’s illegal for me to be in the West Bank.”

It suddenly hits me the enormous personal risk Shoshana is undertaking to be here. I look up at Shoshana and say, “You’re crazy.”

We jump into the shared Arab service taxis on the Arab roads. There are two separate taxi systems for Jewish settlers and Arabs in the West Bank. Two separate bus systems. In the Arab taxi we were in, the Palestinian man next to Shoshana asked her for her name.

Shoshana's face freezes. Her name is a giveaway to her Jewishness.

"I'm Israeli," she says after a few moments. "But I'm here to help."

The Palestinian man looks at her curiously and then nods his head.

Familiar Spaces and Faces

In the white-walled room, the Arab men all speak in incriminating tongues, except when they switch into English. My ears prick awake at the sound of a Chicago accent. I look down the row I am sitting in, and I see a baseball-capped Palestinian man laughing with another Arab man in English.

They are talking about sports.

I am astonished they are discussing sports in an interrogation room.

The Israeli guard enters the room and looks at the Arab men.

The conversation quiets down until we are all silent.

Ramallah, Palestine

It is a dusty day in Ramallah and I'm at the main bus terminal, watching groups of men smoke as I wait for the #34 bus to go back to Jerusalem. Ramallah is a liberal Palestinian city, known for being the place where Palestinians can get loose and drink alcohol. I board the bus and I ask the driver if it's going to al-Quds, or Jerusalem.

"Where are you from?" the bus driver asks me. He's short, white-haired, and frowning.

In broken Arabic, I tell him I'm from America and Pakistan.

"You're not from America." He spits some phlegm in contempt. "You're from Pakistan."

I shrug, say "OK," and sit down.

The bus is cramped and only half the size of a normal bus back in the States. All the windows are curtained, but I pull back the blue cloth and I watch the streets of Ramallah. It is early morning, hours after dawn prayer, so praying men are back in their homes. The city is hilly, but the streets are clean and paved. Ramallah is the de facto capital of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, and the relative affluence shows.

All the other passengers on the bus are Palestinians who're probably heading off to work in Jerusalem. They are mostly men who hurriedly board, pay nine New Israeli Shekels—that's the first irony of occupied Palestine: Palestinians use Israeli currency—and open their phone as they wait.

While the bus roars into motion, Arabic radio fills the aisles. I can't understand anything that's happening, so I simply look out the window. As the bus moves, I see bits of the wall Israel has built to separate itself from Palestine. It's been

called the apartheid wall. There is an effort to reclaim the wall by the Palestinians, and now it features a variety of graffiti and artwork. On the wall, I read "Palestine is a place that takes away your breath one second, and breaks your heart the next."

“Palestine is a place
that takes away your
breath one second,
and breaks your heart
the next.”

No Agreement

“Okay, you can leave,” the woman says.

“But my passport...” I say.

“It will be outside.”

I walk past the white walls, the Arabs in the waiting area, and the empty corridors.

I see no one, but I find a kiosk to exchange currency. I take out my Danish krone and I ask how many shekels I can receive in return.

As I do this, I see an Israeli guard.

“Hey, my passport!”

He walks over with my American passport. I hurriedly flip it open and, to my horror, find an Israeli visa stamp inside it.

“Wait, you stamped it! I asked you not to.”

“No, it’s not stamped,” he says. He opens the passport and shows me a white paper tucked inside. I flip the pages and show him the Israeli visa. He shrugs.

There is no use arguing. I silently curse the man and walk away.

Old Jerusalem

After a few days with Ari in Tel Aviv, I have landed in Jerusalem where I’m staying in West Jerusalem. Sagit is my second Israeli host, and she generously offers to take me on a walking tour of the Old City. We part ways at the Dome of the Rock, where she’s forbidden to go because she’s a non-Muslim. I go alone and emerge two hours later in the dry heat of Jerusalem.

The heat is overtaking me, so I simply stop, watching crowds of Ethiopian Christians march with wide smiles. I glare at them, not understanding why people come to the Holy Land in large tour buses.

I sit down on a white plastic chair in front of a small store, exhausted and wanting to collapse. I look to my left and I see a young dark-haired guy, clearly the owner of the store. Shit, I realize. I rise to apologize and get off his property, but he merely watches me.

“Are you Muslim?” he asks.

He looks Israeli. Dark-eyed and dark-haired. Hebrew-speaking.

God, I think. I don’t have the energy for this right now. I nod, but try to walk away.

“Yes, I can tell,” he says. “You look like us. Assalamu alaikum. Have you been to the Dome of the Rock yet?”

I am surprised this Israeli is so welcoming to me, so I tell him I have just been there.

“Good,” he says. “You can sit here, I don’t mind.”

In my desire to escape crowds of Ethiopian Christians on a tour, I collapse once more on the chair.

“Where are you from?” he asks.

“America.”

“Do you know Arabic?” he asks me.

I suddenly realize he is Palestinian, not Israeli. They all look the same.

“No, I’m terrible,” I admit.

In Arabic, I say the one phrase I am confident I can say: “Can you help me?”

An elderly Palestinian man comes over, overhearing the conversation. He’s wearing a white Muslim prayer cap. He says something to the young man in Arabic and pats him on the shoulder.

“My father says you’re good and you can speak it. You don’t need help.”

I tell him that my nonexistent Arabic certainly hasn’t helped me find my lost friend.

“Who’s your friend?”

“Um. She’s an Israeli girl.”

“She’s Jewish?”

“Yes,” I say with some hesitation. “I need a phone to call her.”

He takes out his phone. “What’s her number?”

I pause, and then I give him Sagit’s number.

He grips the phone, “Does she speak Hebrew?”

I nod. He gets on the phone and begins talking to Sagit in Hebrew.

I have no idea what he is saying.

For a moment, he switches into English.

“I’m here with your Muslim friend,” he says.

My eyes widen. I wonder how Sagit is reacting on the other end.

“She’s coming,” he says, shutting the phone. As he places it in his pocket, he ambles over to his store tablefront. I watch as another dark-haired guy begins touching the objects laid on the table.

A few seconds later, I notice an argument brewing between the two men, as they start yelling and cursing at one another in Hebrew. I am not sure what is unfolding, but the young storeowner man punches the other in the chest.

Suddenly they are brawling, and all I see is fists and shirts coming undone. The young man then comes over and grabs the plastic chair next to me—the one he was just sitting in. He tries to throw it at the man. I freeze in my own white plastic chair. I wonder if I should move.

A group of men restrains the Palestinian store owner as veins throb from his head. The next thing I see, Israeli soldiers in army fatigues swarm the store, carrying heavy machine guns. I am confused where they entered from. A whole crowd forms in front of the store. As Israeli soldiers grow in number, I realize I should probably leave.

The elderly store owner walks over as I rise.

He looks at me and says in clear English:

“Rubbish Jews, rubbish Jews. They’re all rubbish.”

He then spits on the floor while glaring at the soldiers.

I walk away wordlessly.

Outskirts of Victoria, Texas

Christy Leos

As my sisters help me to unload my bags
we look out from the gravel driveway and
there are no houses blocking our vision so
we can see all the way until the Earth
curves and the blue turns a shade of white.
When we were little, we would scream—
I mean we would *holler*—into the empty space
before us; like the coyote, we'd give a call.
We'd howl until we gasped for breath
until the air had left our small bodies
then we would go silent and wait
from across the grasses for
the echo to come back.
This is our land, it whispered,
and we would whoop in approval,
as if only we existed. We owned the world.



Sky Lines
Lydia Smith

Art

An Interview with ZZ Packer

by Annie Heinrich

ZZ Packer, author of the short story collection *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*, grew up in Atlanta and Louisville. Packer received her B.A. from Yale University, an M.A. from Johns Hopkins University, and an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Currently a visiting professor at the University of Houston, Packer has taught at many major universities, including Tulane, Vassar, Stanford, Texas State, University of Texas at Austin, and Princeton. She was named one of *The New Yorker's* top 20 fiction writers under 40, and her book was chosen as a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award. Her poignant and humorous stories often narrate the tale of brainy African-American youth in Atlanta and Louisville. Her characters deal with loss, identity, and what it means to belong.



Your first article was published in Seventeen magazine, when you were just 19. When did writing become a major part of your life?

I'd always loved to write—poems, plays, stories—ever since I can remember. My mother took us to the library almost everyday, and so my love of writing seemed a natural extension of my love for reading. One of my middle school English teachers, Ms. Emma Talbott, encouraged my love for both reading and writing. One of my high school teachers, Ms. Kay Twaryonas, had her Advanced English class not only analyze

short fiction, but write a short story and read it out loud to the class. Nowadays, that's fairly commonplace—to encourage students to write short fiction, but when I was going to school, it wasn't as common—that was the first time I remembered anyone giving credit or a grade for something I'd made up! If I wasn't hooked before, I think I was hooked then.

How has your writing style or approach to writing changed over the years?

When I first began to take writing seriously in college, I was convinced my writing had to be as sophisticated as the writers I loved to read—Toni Morrison, Vladimir Nabokov, James Baldwin, Jane Austen—it took a while for me to realize that my emulation of what I took to be their style was a sort of false sophistication that resulted in stilted, purple prose and melodramatic stories that meant nothing to me and resulted in me achieving the exact opposite of my goal. I think now, I understand that style comes from within. You can't fake it. You have to write what you care about, whatever it is that obsesses you. For that reason, I'm a much more genuine writer and authentic writer, and the writing inevitably shows that stance. If you betray your writing, your writing will unfailingly betray you.

What was the worst story you ever wrote?

Every first draft of a story is the worst story I've ever written.

*Many of your stories in *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* take place in Louisville and Atlanta, where you grew up. How do you see your fiction drawing from personal experience?*

I think fiction necessarily draws from your personal experience. As a person, you experience the world, and your experiences will color how you see the world. And because your fictional world is always an extension of your perception of the world—no matter how fantastical your fictional world may be—you can't escape yourself. Now,

that is not to say that fiction is merely thinly disguised autobiography. Sure, it can be in some instances, but in the main, most fiction writers are steering their fictional world by their particular highly-personal perceptions rather than pure autobiographical data. Now I like to have fun in my stories, and sometimes just going ahead and using Louisville or Atlanta as a backdrop is fun for me to do, just in the same way it might be fun for Jonathan Safran Foer to call his protagonist Jonathan Safran Foer—Philip Roth does that, and it creates a sort of meta-narrator when you play with such obvious self-referentiality. For the reader, only knowing that I (the writer) have lived in those places will force a potential cross-referencing, wondering how much is “true.” A reader who doesn’t know any of that autobiographical information will simply read those places as merely the given locales of the story.

Do you have an imagined audience when you write?

I don’t know if I think of any one single person, but I do think of a type of person, and that person tends to be an overly sensitive wiseass who understands that the majority of life involves enduring the mind-numbing, crushing hypocrisy evinced by most of the world . . . but this type of person also accepts, grudgingly, his/her participation in generating that particular brand of hypocrisy, and therefore they feel guilty and condemned—while nevertheless feeling guileless and brave (though not necessarily unafraid) enough to confront such blatant injustice; in other words, the typical and perpetual 40-year-old adolescent. Or, in another word: me.

What triggers your writing? Do you start with a character, an image, an idea, a phrase, a plot?

I think starting is hard. Who knows where it starts? I think I’m following around a character for a while, almost as though they were auditioning in my head (that’s also how lovers whom I’ve never met start) and it’s their auditioning that creates the role. Sometimes I don’t know what it is they’re going to do—I just try out permutations of

what they might do. What's interesting to me is human behavior. I could watch people all day. Some people you can escape, and others you can't, because they're hooked into your very way of being, like Velcro. People make a big deal out of escapism in literature, but it's the people and situations you can't escape that are often more interesting—why can't you escape them? What makes them inescapable? I guess that's the argument for realism, or maybe against it. But I've found that any time you confine characters you're more likely to find out who they truly are; like molecules of gas in an enclosed system, you've automatically performed a "crucible" experiment of sorts. You'll most likely see the character bump up against all limits in an attempt to understand what "limitless" means. To me that's interesting. Though I'm not at all politically or socially conservative, I find that I'm somewhat aesthetically conservative, and so people who are this way—Elizabeth Bishop, Henry James—I'd even include Toni Morrison here, as well as James Baldwin—seem to excel at this type of writing. They are always applying pressure to their characters and lines and incidents and syllables. It's the literary equivalent of *sous vide*.

I've read that you just finished writing The Thousands, a novel about Buffalo soldiers stationed in the West after the Civil War. What was it like to move from the short story to the novel form?

Julian Barnes once said that novels can be messy. He meant that novels aren't corseted by the same strictures as the short story. He's right. Novels can be messier. But the fact they are longer means that you must untangle certain messes—like a cheap clump of Mardi Gras beads—before anyone will bother with it. And so, I guess you can say, novels are hard, because they are long. And they are easy, because they are long. People, racing novels, are seduced by what E.M. Forester calls "the tapeworm of time." I don't like giving in to the tapeworm of time. So in my novel there is a lot of agglutination (there probably isn't a better word for it). I like to stop time, mainly because I'm preoccupied by the notion that there is no such thing as time. In the end, short stories seem to highlight moments within lives that appear dreamlike and underscore some

deeply archetypal—or else wholly deviant—way in which we deal with those dream like moments. Novels seem to deal with dream-like lives—whether nightmares or dreams. On the one hand, any type of novel-reading or cinema-watching is an inauguration of a dream-like, hypnagogic state. On the other hand, we are always subconsciously aware of our own mortality. And that, I believe, is the only tension plot offers: Event vs. Time.

What authors inspire you? Are there particular authors that you always go back to?

I love, as I previously mentioned, Toni Morrison and Nabokov and Dostoevsky and Tolstoy and Baldwin and Austen. Added to those, probably Flannery O'Connor and Stuart Dybek and Francine Prose and James Alan McPherson and Gayl Jones and Lorrie Moore. Even though I've never met certain writers, I feel as though they've set some patch of earth under me on fire, and my job is to respond, somehow. Other writers, I feel, kindle something within your soul and mind and heart. But most writers I admire are not nearly so New Age-y as I'm sounding but rather, good, deep, writers, who access some philosophical ways of looking and listening to the world without being overly showy about it, but not being anti-intellectual, either.

What has been your most gratifying moment as a creative writing instructor?

My most gratifying moment: I once did a profile of John Kerry—completely unbeknownst to me—until I flipped the page after my profile—I saw a student of mine who had done a profile of another presidential candidate. I know that's not creative writing per se, but I was incredibly proud of that student, to have done the same assignment I was doing. I have no weird jealousy issues in that regard. I love when students make great achievements. Largely because I see them as my own—whether it makes sense for me to perceive things that way or not.

What aspects of writing do you think can be taught? Are there some that are innate?

What can be taught? You can get students to look at sentence structure and syntax, and get them to more effectively look at how the elements of a story—character, dramatic scene, tension, the suspension of disbelief, voice—all work in a story. You can always make a writer more effective, but you cannot “teach” a writer how to master the elements that make up great writing—in much the same way you can teach a kid how to play piano, but that doesn’t necessarily mean she’ll be a concert pianist. At a certain point, the writer’s talent, dedication and worldview determine how great they will be. So, then, what can’t be taught?: Sensibility. Perspective. Soul. Observation.

Everyone observes the world. But can you observe the world in a way that makes all of us readers feel more? Think more? Sigh more? Love more? Dream more? Give more? Rebel more? Lots of people can “write well.” But it’s not all word-smithery; there’s a hefty dose of psychology and philosophy involved, as well. We all tell stories—the human animal does not merely communicate, the human animal tells stories—that’s how we understand our world and reconfigure our world in our heads—by way of story. So its not surprising that so many people want to be writers. However, the ubiquity of story does not mean that all those who want to tell stories will be master storytellers. So, as for any school of instruction, we tend to believe the casualty goes only one way; many people might think that dance classes are where dance is taught, but it’s also where dancers are found. It’s the same way with writing classes. Sure, you can take a writing class to learn how to become a better writer. But writing classes also exist because those who are naturally gifted at it tend to make their way to classes, and develop exponentially. Some people like to say “Well Hemingway never took a writing class!” He did. With Gertrude Stein. T.S. Eliot had Ezra Pound. Every writer who’s ever lived has had a writing teacher, whether it was under the aegis of a university or not is irrelevant.

What is the most common weakness or problem that you encounter in a beginning writer's fiction? How does a writer fix this?

Beginning problems with fiction typically involve writers unlearning all the bad writing they've been taught. The five paragraph essay, using stilted language, grammar for grammar's sake—all of that stuff that gets taught in your typical fifth grade class, and is later magnified in high school, is all bad. Most freshmen in college quickly realize that the papers they must write bear almost no resemblance at all to what you've been taught in high school. With fiction, the delta is much greater still. In a story, you are beginning at whatever point is going to captivate your reader—most papers assume that the reader is a captive audience, and they proceed from there to bore the shit out of everybody. You can't do that in a story.

How does one fix such a problem? Read. Write. Read. Write. Read. Write. Find writing exercises. Share your work with someone, and note when they have emotional reactions, what they have to say about the piece. That's pretty much all that goes on in a fiction writing class. I think a good fiction writing teacher is good at helping you fail faster. You're going to fail a lot when you're learning how to become a better writer, so you might as well fail faster. Get a lot of that failure out of the way. Sometimes, when I teach a short conference-type seminar, I'll just give people a 5-page "Common Writing Mistakes" and, instantly, their writing is better. It might have taken them two years to realize, on their own, that writing "guffawed" and "snickered" is so much worse than simply writing, "he said," but once you know that little tidbit of information, your writing becomes instantly more readable, and you'll be taken more seriously. But that is just how to go from being a bad writer to a merely competent one. To go from being a competent writer to a good writer takes a lot more work and talent; to go from being a good writer to a great writer is something that's almost wholly in the court of the writer herself—her own talent, dedication, perseverance, and luck.

In the past several years you have lived in a multitude of places including New Orleans, San Jose, Princeton, Austin, and San Marcos. How does Houston stack up? What's surprised you?

Houston is a great city, with a flourishing arts scene. I love Austin (where I currently live) but whenever you go to a coffee shop or somewhere where people might be writing, you see them make this big to-do, all their books, all their papers, their special pens, their index cards, their laptop . . . they sip their coffee from their mugs ever so meaningfully, waiting for inspiration . . . (I realize I'm probably describing myself!) But I like how whenever I'm here in Houston, people are fairly matter-of-fact about getting down to the business of writing, with very little flash (Houstonians tend to be flashy about other things).

Anyway. Houstonians are lucky to have so many art venues and patrons of the arts who care about writers flourishing. Writers being able to write whatever they want—and having the time and freedom to do so—is incredibly important. Yes, there's lots of fun-and-trashy fiction out there, but many of us forget that writers are often the first bulwarks against totalitarianism. My friend Vendela Vida once said—and I'm sure she wasn't the first to say it—"The first thing that happens in any dictatorship is they kill all the poets." So, it's great that Houston keeps poets alive.



When We Are Gone
Chase Stewart

An Ephemeral Life

Jiayi Kong

I.

Dank and dark and damp.
Earth blanketing their white beating bodies in a moist lethargy.
Virginal coats encasing them in a veneer of protection.

Their white beaks
drinking white fluid
from white roots
beneath black earth.

Viscosity ebbing and waning in their pale pulsing veins.
A slow moving tide rhythmically counting down the years.

Waiting.
Waiting.
Time a reassuring friend
offering a simple promise.

Life begins beyond these ebony walls, a glorious sunlit life.

II.

Seventeen years pass.
Their awakening rippling the ground.
Each of their six legs stirring from atrophy.
Clawing and pushing, struggling against the earth's weight.
Each cicada perfectly synchronizing with the rest.

Golden clad newborns emerge,
born from darkness with the urge to fly beneath the sun.
So they climb up the trunks of trees,
and hook themselves onto the bark.
Waiting.

Waxy sheaths peel open like orange skins, revealing ripe white flesh.

III.

The tiniest nubs begin to taste the air,
and slowly, ever so slowly, unfold.
Pearlescent at first, they harden to translucent wings.

Over a million wheel and rise, ready for triumph.
Males gather in swarms, singing their joy.
Females entranced by the virile chorus lay another brood.

But amid the clicks and hums of mating
come the shrieks of ravenous blackbirds.
Darkness again blots out the sky.

Foolish brave thrums against ruthless stabbing pecks.
Golden-haloed flight against bloodthirsty pursuit.
Slaughter ensues.

Delicate membranous wings
like petals on a lotus flower
drift down among the leaves.

Is this the glorious life you were promised?



I-45 after hours
Daniela Alarcon

Mr. Windlandt

Michelle Doughty

At first I thought the sound was part of the song. My headphones were buried deep in my ears when I heard the hollow snap weave its way in the bass line. But my parents had heard it too, and the dry crack never repeated when the refrain came back around. Dad suspected that the breaker had popped, and set off to explore the problem. I put my headphones back in and turned back to baking.

T-minus eighteen hours to my physics AP exam, and I already knew the material. Instead of studying, I devoted this Sunday afternoon to making two hundred and fifty chocolate chip cookies, one for every classmate taking the exam. The cookies baked for eleven minutes, with fifteen cookies to a sheet and room in the oven for three sheets. Each repetition of the recipe made about three dozen cookies and added twenty minutes of prep time. I was going to be here a while. I barely noticed when Dad returned and immediately pulled my mother aside. They both left to investigate the alleged breaker popping, and I was relieved to have the kitchen to myself again.

The house ought to have been roomy enough for all of us. The ceilings were high, held up by walls of windows. No doors marked the difference between rooms, so the air moved freely between all of us as one unit. I preferred the corners of the house, behind the few doors that locked or even latched. The main flaw in baking, my new hobby, was that it could not be done from my room.

I washed the mixing bowl by hand, splashing steaming water up my arms and onto the counter. When the bowl was clean, I began to fill it again with another stick of butter and cup of sugar.

My parents came back looking very serious; I could almost see the nascent worry lines in Mom's forehead fighting her recent Botox. Mom and Dad asked me to pull my headphones out, and they told me that Mr. Windlandt up the street had shot himself. Neither of my parents cried, and neither did I. I stood stock still until the oven trilled, and I jumped up to transfer another fifteen cookies off the tray and onto the cooling rack.

Mr. Windlandt was old enough that his kids had moved out of his house, and then his grandkids out of his kids' houses. His wife had died too long ago for me to remember, and his dog had died recently. We became friends because of his dog, a little black fur-ball who scooted around our front yard with his butt on the ground and his curls flopped low over his eyes.

I poured in vanilla and beat it in with two eggs, watching the white and then yellow soak up into the dough. My hands were sticky from cracking the eggs, and fragments of shell stuck to my nails.

Mr. Windlandt had a series of strokes in the two years before his death. Before the strokes, Mr. Windlandt used to speak carefully, even when he was just saying hello. He built conversations where others just let words tumble out. He used to walk up and down the street with his dog trotting beside him on a slack leash. I'd wave at him as he slipped across the street into his house. Mr. Windlandt's house crouched low on the street, visible only by its red tile roof. He wasn't inside his house when he shot himself. He shot himself just outside, and Dad was the first one to find him.

I wanted to ask Dad if he was OK, but I didn't know how to broach the topic gently. I folded in chocolate chips and stared at my physics notes without absorbing any information.

Since Mom had pulled my sister and me aside to explain about AA, I had thought of Dad as fragile. He may have paid for this giant house and everything I owned, all the newest new things and the oldest old things, but he still needed protection and support. I remembered the seven marathons that Dad had run, and how we'd met him at the fifteenth mile with signs like "See Jeff Run. Run Jeff Run!" We could shout encouraging

words, sing the Rocky theme song, and give him refills of energy gels, but in the end they were his miles to run and ours to watch.

I couldn't seem to stop making cookies. I was terrified that Dad would pull out one of those beers he had hidden around the house and drink again. I was terrified that someone could see in my eyes that I was more affected by this because Mr. Windlandt had succeeded where I had failed. I kept baking through dinner and only stopped when I ran out of butter. When the cookies were cooled I packed them into plastic bags and lined them up on the kitchen counter.

It was selfish of me to think of Mr. Windlandt this way; it was his death and not mine. I had no right to tell my bags and bags of cookies why he had done it, that he had hated the guilt of being supported by his family and not being able to live alone like he had for years. I had no right to imagine that he had shot himself outside to avoid making a mess.

But I imagined that this was the reason, because that was part of the reason that I almost killed myself. I lived in fear of being a burden. Well, I lived in fear of a lot of things: wasps, my Dad's drunk driving, insomnia, that no one liked me but everyone felt too awkward to mention it, my mother, sudden and inexplicable blindness, and that I might be a burden.

My mother has always said that I was a selfish person. She used to pull me aside while I had friends over at the house, hissing to me in the back room, "I don't know how you have any friends if you treat them the way you treat us." She told me that I was demanding and sent me to anger management when I was in middle school. I spent most of my appointments playing board games with the therapist.

I picked up a habit of apologizing. It started with the small things, the way I dressed and the way I spoke and the smallest favors, and it grew until I was apologizing for diseases, war, and world hunger.

"It's my fault," I said. "If that'll help everyone move on, it's all my fault."

"What is?" my friends asked.

"Cancer," I said. "The war in Iraq. Overpopulation. You name it, I'll take responsibility for it."

“You think that’ll help?”

I didn’t know, but I knew that it felt right, even as a stupid joke. This was my original sin, and I carried it because it was the only thing for me to do.

Ungrateful, my mother called me, ungrateful and selfish. Did I have any idea what it cost Dad to provide for this family? Oh, but Michelle, don’t worry about money. Did I have any idea how much Mom missed her job, which she had to quit for me? Oh, but Michelle, it’s OK, because some day you’ll have to support us, and then you’ll finally pay us back. This money, this support, and this love that we have given you is not a gift; it’s a loan.

I was desperate not to be a burden anymore, to tread lightly on the world. Other people wanted to leave their mark on the world; I just wanted, first and foremost, to do no harm. My morals were desperate: I never spoke ill of anyone, I always gave more gifts than I received, I was frustratingly flexible in social situations, and I had started baking. That Monday I would bring 300 chocolate chip cookies to the physics AP, because people were bound to be miserable and hungry. I opened the bags of cookies and let the smell of vanilla fill the air.

The cookies could help me get through the week, but in the long term I needed more. I wanted to be able to undo myself, erase myself, backtrack each stitch and unravel the thread. I wanted to be forgotten, but death wouldn’t do that. Death was just another way of hurting everyone around me.

Mr. Windlandt hadn’t just killed himself; he’d killed his daughter’s father and her kids’ granddad and our neighbor. He left a body for someone to find, and what all kinds of misery might have been going through Dad’s head, I still don’t know. I shouldn’t have taken Mr. Windlandt’s death as though it was a thing that happened to me, but I couldn’t seem to help it. It hurt, just the same way everyone around me would hurt if I killed myself. Suicide would make me the inflictor of scars and not just the bearer.

I could say that I decided to live that Sunday, but I couldn’t just decide to live once. My decision to live had to be reconsidered and reaffirmed every goddamn second. Sometimes I lived because I believed there was something out there in the world, after

high school graduation, after I was financially independent from my parents. There were people to meet and places to see, things I'd miss even though I didn't even know them yet. Sometimes I lived because I was afraid of the pain of dying, or of the hell that I didn't even really believe in. Sometimes I lived because I distracted myself at key moments. And sometimes, I lived because I couldn't bear to cause people pain the way that Mr. Windlandt had.

"Poor man," my mother told me, as I scraped crusted crumbs off the cookie sheets, hours after the cooking itself was done. "He shouldn't have done that, though. Suicide is just so selfish."

I wanted to tell her that everything was more complicated than that, a dangerous game of give and take and life and death. I wanted to blurt out what I had almost done. I wanted to demand that she show some respect, and I wanted to tell her that I agreed. I didn't say anything.

The next day I brought in all the cookies, crumbled from my backpack and sticking together with gooey chocolate glue. I passed the bags around between the Mechanics and the E&M exams, and everyone was so incredibly happy. Even my classmates that didn't know my name would ask their friends so that they could thank me. It was everything that I could have hoped for.



Wishes
Melissa Verne

In the Median Cubital Line

Briand Gentry

You look just like your father the blood-drawing nurse says
 her latex glove fingers, probing at that spot in the crook,
 thief, robber of the arm's strength—that bending place too
 rotted fruit soft, pears of autumn gone too sweet to eat
 and the fingers go all the way through to find only water,
 gushing, you've dug your hole to China. He is on the wall,
 frog-lipped, violin smile and cheekbones of calcified coral
 a cigar shop Indian like Hank William's yodel-wailing
 Kawlga. But face is not the thing seen as I look at him,
 he is only voice. Voice that falls through fingers like a silver
 stream of small fish. Minnow fish, boom-booming baritonality
 of bongos voice. Tight-lipped is my crocodile smile as, the
 sentence hovers over my vein. *It's good luck, yes?* What
 does that mean? Will Lucky Charm hearts, stars, horseshoes
 suck into the syringe? Do I bleed now so that my bleeding can,
 oxidized, exposed be oxblood, red-velvet road kill ready once
 more. *Back in China it is very good luck.* I want to laugh, to nod
 with the painted face of a tourist-trapping bobble
 head. Like the one I saw in the Smithsonian gift shop, Albert
 Einstein's face gone giddy with so many relative giggles. But

that might cause the needle to slip and I need to be done by
now, I'm not in China now am I? It is not 幸福 to look like one's
Daddy dear, father-knows-best, sweater-vest paternalist in
the place I was born. *Where is your mother from?* Back-
water, black-knighted mud of a sulfur pit homes without even
pioneer, wax paper windows. We do not speak about that
So I look at the vials and say *Here*. Nod-nod-nod *and your father?*
Is from there. I have my porcelain-doll plaster, Tiresias-cheeked
Geisha Girl, what-do-you-identify-as, caucasian, asian, black, pacific-
islander mutt-mix face. And no one can say who's it is, who's it was,
we'll be. Hoping that the blue-blooded glass terrarium for my
DNA might say that it came from somewhere *here* and *there*.

The Cancer

Elle Eccles

With my chest pressed to the sky, I wobble. The sinister finger of mischief prods me as thin air flows around me. I pretend to be brave. No one can really be afraid of heights until they get up this high, so high that the men creeping beneath your toes are about as large as the fleck of dust you flick out of your eye. You fall from here, and they will never piece you back together. You fall from here, and you'll be rendered as mere pulp to be scrubbed at forever, but never removed. You fall from here, and your loved ones may never know what happened to you; you will be completely unrecognizable. I have to pretend like it doesn't scare me.

They built this building four years ago on a large grant from a group of religious extremists interested in elevating men to heaven by building a corporate bridge to its doorstep. They signed a check to fund the project, a piece of paper with a bunch of zeroes that I could put to good use ten times over. Their money twisted tons of steel into the sky, a building intending scratch a hole in the belly of the clouds, to "poke God and remind him that the might of his creation is nipping at his heels." But it was never finished. The project was abandoned, the entrances closed off. Yet I turn around and Molly is making her way towards me among stacks of bricks and plastic tarps.

When I met Molly she was all legs. Not now. Now Molly has only one leg, which she never shows bare, and a prosthetic extending from her stump to support her. Osteosarcoma. Her beautiful blonde locks have completely fallen out three times now, once just before prom. I took a bald girl to prom. The night I was supposed to take her out on our first real date, she was stuck in the hospital, so I bought foot-long turkey

sandwiches and two baked potatoes and politely asked her parents to leave the room while I lit it with candles. I almost lost her last year. I said to her, “Molls, we made it through high school. We survived college together. Don’t die on me now.” And she just said to me, “Tommy, I go when I go.”

Molly and I have been together since before the cancer came back the first time. Even now she gets worried about how we look as a couple. It’s not because she’s a beautiful girl balding again at age twenty-two. It’s because everyone can see the tat on my left shoulder and the singlets (wife-beaters) I wear under all of my button-down shirts and the color of my skin, which is the shade of cooling hot chocolate. She loves hot chocolate. But she often says that we resemble ‘that couple’ on crime shows, the interracial mismatch that everyone secretly judges. She says people are trained by these shows to believe, looking at us, that there must be *abuse* mixed into the relationship somehow. Especially if they see her limp and she’s wearing a wig so no one knows she has cancer. The actors change, but the story doesn’t, she says: the white girl won’t admit any trouble because she would lose her sugar daddy if she did, and the black guy won’t admit anything because he’s getting some. I’ve told her that I’m not getting some, so it doesn’t count. Also, she has cancer, and if people are smart enough to notice that, they can’t think ill of her. That made her laugh.

I hold her small hand in both of mine. I tell her her hands are cold, but she just shakes her head and touches the jagged ledge of the building with the hand I’m not holding.

Right now I am working my way towards the chief editor position in my company, but it’s not my passion. My passion involves Molly and keeping her alive. Maybe she can hang on forever.

“Are you thirsty?” I asked her in her hospital room.

“Nope. But I have the taste of apple juice stuck in my mouth.”

“You could have worse tastes,” I said.

She said, “I know, but it makes me want to drink apple juice. But I’m not thirsty.”

“I’ll get you some apple juice.”

“No, get me some grape juice. Maybe they’ll balance each other out.”

Molly works for Pittsburgh's literary magazine, and writes her pieces while looking out her hospital window, or while riding to and from home. She lives with her mother in a white, two-bedroom apartment. I live next door to them. I keep thinking, *Maybe next year I'll propose*, but something about Molly's condition makes me not want to ask her to make long-term commitments. I know that she would say yes, but what would I do if something happened before we were married? What would I do if I lost her just afterward? If I'm being honest, not much would change if we did marry, and yet everything would change. I would have a sick *wife* instead of a sick girlfriend, and she would move over into my apartment. I've taken care of her most of our lives, but somehow that'd be very different. I've learned to handle things the way they are. So I'm stuck in the path of least resistance.

"Please take me up to the Pillar," Molly had said.

There were times when we were in college together when Molly would disappear for an afternoon or a morning and seem so glazed and sensitive simultaneously when next I saw her, that I didn't dare upset her; she seemed more fragile than usual. Her adventures are probably recorded in her journals, but no one gets to read those. She doesn't even look over what she writes. She has boxes and boxes of little black books filled with her cute, loopy handwriting.

"Why don't you write about the Pillar?" I asked her. "Maybe you could publish it."

"I have," she said.

"Oh. When? Did you ever think of—"

"College."

I considered asking her once again to let me read her notebooks, even though whatever she had locked away in there would probably never be allowed to see the light of day again.

"Just please take me to the top," she pleaded, adjusting the bandana that rimmed her forehead.

"It might rain later," I told her.

"Then we'll go now."

"I don't know if they'll let us up."

“I have cancer,” she said. Then she smiled. “No one says ‘No’ to a terminally ill twenty-two year-old.”

The Pillar—the tower built by the religious extremists—is across the street and down the block from Molly’s hospital. She prefers to walk, when she’s well. She says her ‘bum leg’ can use the exercise. So I usually hold her hand on her incomplete side and stroke her hair when she looks to the right and grip her waist when we come to a hiccup in the pavement, and she closes her hand around my forearm and talks about my hot-chocolate skin. She says I look like the ‘smile of the night.’ “That’s good,” I say back. “Because that means you’re the ‘smile of the day.’” That amuses her.

The first time we went up in the Pillar, Molly was on chemotherapy twice a week and her strength was meager.

Molly doesn’t make demands, but I could see the desire to go in her eyes, so we bundled her up, her mother and I, and took her out. We stood on either side of her while she leaned over the unfinished ledge of the building and we held her arms, and I

heard the air rush into her nostrils and out her mouth. I wanted to flow through her like that. Molly loves with a soft smile and a gentle touch, but she places the goal of quiet happiness over all things else. I think it’s this priority that makes her smile, even throughout chemotherapy and radiation, and I know she knows what she’s doing. But I just want to fill her up. Maybe then there would be no more room for the cancer. Or maybe then I could slay the invaders from the inside. But if the scrape of the surgeon’s tool can’t defeat them, how can I?

The Pillar’s contractors never finished building it. *Officially*, it’s “on hold.” Construction has been stopped due to “stalls in funding.” This is a lie. Running clear out of funds would be socially acceptable—especially when one considers the massive size of the already established structure. From the ground it appears a bit pixilated,

“No one says ‘No’
to a terminally ill
twenty-two year-old.”

with the heights at the top varying from point to point, as if the workers had literally dropped their tools and walked away—or as if God himself had taken the point between his fingers and snapped it off, leaving the remainder jagged and ugly, as a symbol of men’s true might. The real reason that construction has stopped is because of confusion amongst the workers and between the architects and the engineers. The mason got the proportions mixed up and had the blocks laid irregularly. The building’s designers made errors in the floor plan. The manufacturers provided the wrong materials. No room was left for the steeple. No one could seem to effectively communicate with anyone else, a phenomenon that most people find strangely biblical.

Atop the Pillar, Molly lifts her hip and adjusts her leg and holds on to my upper arm. Instinctively I flex my arm to let her white fingers trickle across the dome of my bicep.

“Why do you do that?” she asks.

“What?”

“Flex when I touch your arm.”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Instinct. So that you can feel up my bulging muscles.”

Molly snorts when she giggles. She is proud of this. “They *are* impressive.”

I smile and flex again.

The Pillar’s half-finished head knows no silence. God is forever whistling over its top. But there is something about Molly’s silence that makes even the elements pause to listen.

She takes off her bandana and strings it long-ways between her two hands, letting its wings flap a little in the wind. She is beautiful bald, perhaps more beautiful than she has ever been otherwise. Her soul seems to come out of her when her head is bared like this, as though the bandana keeps it from escaping down below. Up here, though, I’m not afraid that she’ll get away from me. And when Molly smiles it is different here, perhaps because anywhere else she is smiling through a film of sickness.

I want to take her in my arms, but I’ve no excuse to do so; she’s not so scared of being up here that she needs me to hold her like that. Perhaps she is afraid of falling. Who isn’t? But as long as I’m holding onto her arm, she trusts me enough to lean

herself over the edge and take a gulp of air and let life flow through her in a way that it cannot when the cancer is king. She can defeat it up here. She *does* defeat it up here: with her smile and her breath.

The cancer keeps coming back. Surgery, chemo—nothing conquers it in the world below. And we all know that when she comes down from the Pillar, she must return to its clutches, put on the bandana, and reconnect the IV tubes.

I think that this year I will finally propose. My left hand has found its way into my pocket, even though I need the arm for balance. There is a ring inside, and it still feels as smooth and ready as it did the last hundred times I touched it for courage. But it is cold. I must rub it vigorously to warm it up. I frown for a moment and look over at Molly. She has leaned over a little farther this time. Her eyes are open. She is looking stories down, below her toes, at the gnats carving out their lives in circles down below. There are no trees to break a fall.

“Molly,” I say, concerned. I tug at her arm a little.

She does not respond. She breathes in slowly and lets the breath out through her mouth, and her hand loosens a little around my arm, so I tug on her to bring her back to me.

“Molls, you ok?” I pull on her waist. “Jeez, Molls, you’re not thinking of—Molly!”

I love her. I can’t lose her this way. I can watch her die slowly, if I must, pretending every day she is as far from the end as she was the day before. I can do that, have been doing it most of our lives. But I can’t watch her go all at once. “Molls?”

She straightens and leans back into my arms, and her face smooths. Her smile is slow in coming, but it warms me as it spreads. Her legs crumple; she is spent. Her fatigue seeps into me, but she kisses my face and says, “No, Tommy. I go when I go.”



Pelican Island is en route
Daniela Alarcon

An Interview with Joseph Campana

by Amanda Mills

Joseph Campana is a poet, art critic, and scholar of Renaissance literature. Originally from Johnstown, New York, he is currently a professor of literature and creative writing at Rice University. Campana is the author of two collections of poetry and has written essays on Spenser, Shakespeare, Nashe, Defoe, and Middleton, as well as poetics and sexuality. He is the recipient of many awards, including the NEA Creative Writing Fellowship in Poetry and, most recently, the Iowa Poetry Prize.



What drew you to poetry as a literary form?

Our first inclinations as writers are rarely clear or rational, certainly not planned. At least, that was my experience. I wish I could say there was one single poem that opened the gateways for me, but I don't think that's quite right. I can say there was a sense that because of the brevity, density, and rarity of a poem, a wholly different kind of universe opened up before me.

While you are a poet, you are also a Renaissance scholar, and a writer for Culture Map. Do you ever notice one form of writing influencing another? How do you see Renaissance literature and popular culture intersecting with your poetry?

I write in a number of different forms—scholarship about Renaissance literature, arts criticism in the *Houston Chronicle*, *CultureMap*, and other venues, and, of course

poetry. I think each has to be practiced on its own and as if in isolation from the others for a while before you learn how to create between these forms and make hybrid kinds of writing. But yes, in a subterranean way all of these ways of writing and these objects of study enrich every other kind of writing I do.

What is your writing process like?

Most of my poems I generate in the in-between times of the day—in the morning before heading to campus, at night before falling asleep or when I should be falling asleep. I got used to writing this way in my early twenties when I was writing the first poems I knew I would stay with and finish and publish. I had to write in the time available to me (waiting for a bus, for instance) and so I got used to being ready to write whenever. Then I would sweep back quickly and in many waves to revise. Some revision takes longer blocks of time, and putting a manuscript is another story entirely.

You currently have three projects underway. How do you find time to write while also teaching and doing research? Do you shift between creative and academic writing, or do you work on both simultaneously?

I tend to work on projects simultaneously, moving back and forth. Mostly, I find that a useful strategy: take something else up when you get stuck. The danger is you scramble your brain a little bit or you set something aside when you most need to stay with it and push through a difficulty. So, I have to be vigilant about that.

*In *The Book of Faces*, you experiment a lot with form, while *Natural Selections* seems, formally, to be both more conventional and more consistent. Was that an intentional change? Do you choose a form before you write a poem, or does a form emerge as you write?*

After I finished and then published *The Book of Faces*, I moved to take a job at Kenyon College. Almost immediately, in the lush yet desolate hills of Ohio, I began to write

poems in couplets about animals and roads. No one was more surprised than I was; my first book was complex, multi-form, at times baroque. Sometimes, especially as an exercise or to introduce variation, you choose a form before you start writing. When the poems of *Natural Selections* emerged, they came in simpler, sharper forms because the subject matter demanded it. The poems choose this, in a way. You have to try to notice what your poems are telling you and honor the impulse as long as it is sustainable. If you're lucky, the form reveals itself in writing. Sometimes it doesn't. It took me seven years to find the right form for one particular poem, which is unusual for me, but that kind of waiting is torture.

Many of your poems rely on first and second person pronouns. What draws you to that more personal voice? Do you try to maintain an aesthetic distance between the speaker and reader while using it?

I would say questions about “what voice” and “how personal” always depend on the subject. This is also true of what intimacy a reader is allowed in any given poem. The hope is that there are many ways to welcome a reader into a poem and also many ways to ask the reader for something in return. As writers, and this is especially true for young writers, it's best to try out as many possibilities as you can before settling for anything that becomes too familiar and too easy.

Place is central to the tone and content of Natural Selections. How do you think our environment affects our state of mind? How did growing up in the foothills of the Adirondacks shape who you are and how you write?

Many poets are poets of place. Perhaps most are, but not all poetry feels like poetry of place. Even when it doesn't, we are intimately part of what surrounds us. A poet has to decide how important that intimacy is for any given poem. Although I've lived in Houston for seven years now, and I've written quite a few “Houston” poems, the landscape of my hometown—Johnstown, NY—is what feels like native soil to me. And

as I began to write seriously, a little further west in Ithaca, NY. Similar landscape. Those places are still with me.

The Book of Faces explores the way public icons affect our private lives and shape our identities. How do you think cultural icons affect our perceptions of ourselves?

There is a very long history to falling in love with icons. How we demonstrate that love changes. The icons themselves do change. But we keep falling in love with them anyway.

What piece of writing advice do you wish you had received as an undergraduate?

There are many things I could say to young writers. Maybe the most important would be to say that serious undergraduate writers will encounter, after college workshops, a latency period. This is a time when you have to just keep writing until you hit that moment when suddenly, and a bit mysteriously, you are writing in a new and serious way and not because someone gave you an assignment. If you can keep writing even through the time—maybe months, maybe years—you have a shot at being a serious writer and not just an excellent student. Talent alone is not sufficient. Without persistence, there would be no words.



Two Crayons, One Hand
Dorin Azerad

Eye of the Beholder

Marissa Hall

I am in sixth grade and Ms. Rentels is my English teacher. I hate and envy her. She wears white, three-quarter length collared shirts that reveal impressive cleavage for her tiny frame as she bends over the boys' desks to point out a line in a poem. Ms. Rentels has favorites, and because I am not one of the best-dressed girls in class, I am not one of them. My mother says my hairline will recede, the way I pull it back in a tight ballet bun with two colorful scrunchies, hold back any wispy fly-aways with a sequined headband, and add foaming hair gel to any final defiant strands.

I spend far too long each week on my journal entries for Ms. Rentels' class; my perfectionism is painful. I sit in the dark corner of my grandparent's house on my grandmother's chunky laptop and search Google Images for Britney Spears, cutting out pictures of her different hairstyles and writing alongside them: "Cute color!", "Love the cut", and "What do you think, Ms. R?" She circles one and writes in the margin, "Oooh, my favorite!" I get a five out of five every time.

Hunched at my grandparents' laptop at the dark foot of the attic steps, scrolling pages of tan, oiled limbs, I secretly discover female sexuality. Everywhere I am bony Britney has fat, in the form of hips and breasts, which seem to repel any clothing. It is overwhelming, stunning and alien.

This has to do with why I'm crying right now, my mother standing before my bed, demanding to know what is under it. "Don't go under there!" I yell at my mother, my voice cracking. "You'll be mad! So mad! *P-p-please,*" I stutter.

When I finally give in, I slide the slick pages from under the bed, which swish across the hardwood floor with a mocking, soothing *ssssh*. I bury my head in my knees. “*Seventeen* magazine?” my mother picks it up. “This is what you’ve been hiding?”

* * *

Reading magazines is shameful. They are superficial and dangerous for young girls. Magazines teach bad body image. This I know from my mother’s repeated warnings, her disgust towards the airbrushed, makeup-caked celebrity faces smiling at us from magazine covers when we are checking out in the grocery line. “Angelina Jolie looks like a freak to me,” she says. The one magazine my mother orders for me is *New Moon: The Magazine for Girls and Their Dreams*.

In sixth grade, of one thing I am sure: my mother doesn’t want me to grow up. “Honey, you don’t need to shave your legs,” she says. “Your hair is blonde.”

“But it shines in the light. And there’s a lot of it,” I counter, running my hand up and down my thigh.

“Oh, but it’s wonderful! So soft! I wish I’d never shaved my legs. Once you start, you can’t go back.” She makes it sound life-altering, like choosing to go to the Dark Side. “The hair grows back darker, coarser, and more prickly.” Of course she has her theories, biological and historical, to back her up. “Women are *supposed* to have leg hair! We’re animals! The whole reason women started shaving was because shaving companies were losing money with men off fighting in World War II, and guess who stayed home, making them the new targets for their razors? Women.”

“The first time I notice my mother’s eyelids, I am very young and we are at lunch.”

* * *

In my mother's words, I am a goddess; she is a hag. I am in high school, getting ready for Christmas dinner with her in front of the wide mirror in her bathroom. She is five inches shorter than me and wears the same silk shirt that my aunt often wears to these family dinners. Alison is my aunt who, at age fifty, struts around at family reunions in her turquoise bikini. No need for a shirt or a coverup. She has a Los Angeles personal trainer and abs. Alison and my mother look very different in these shirts.

"You look beautiful, Mom," I say. She has color in her face and her green eyes are bright with the hint of mascara she applies.

"Thank you, Sweetheart," she says. "But you don't need to say that. Look at these bags under my eyes. And this skirt is way too tight. Can you believe this tummy once used to be as flat as yours?" She grasps it between her thumbs and index fingers. "But then I had you. Your body is never the same after that. I can't get my breasts back, and my stomach is a hopeless case." She sucks in her stomach, throws her hands up in the air, and says, "Screw it! Let's eat, baby!"

* * *

The first time I notice my mother's eyelids I am very young and we are at lunch. It is summer, so we sit outside, and even though it's hot I order chicken noodle soup because it is saltier than anything we have at home.

"Your eyes look really green, Mom; it's pretty," I say. There are certain eyes that don't call attention to themselves except when paired with certain clothing colors; these are my mother's eyes. My father once asked what color her eyes were after they'd been married several years. He guessed blue.

"It's the shirt," she says.

"Well, they really pop."

My mother sighs. “Oh, you’re sweet. They used to, maybe. But they’re not like yours. I have crone’s eyelids. Get ‘em from your grandfather.” She pulls them up with her index fingers. “You know they do surgery for that? Someday I swear it’ll be necessary; my eyelids will just drown my eyes and I won’t be able to see anymore.”

* * *

Of me, my mother says, “You are a six-foot-tall Amazonian beauty.”

Of herself, she says, “My hair is getting far too long. It’s inappropriate for my age. I look like an old witch and I know it.” She adds, “My hands used to be like yours, Marissa, long fingers and soft skin. I used to love my hands. They were my favorite feature. Then I hit fifty, and boom! Old lady hands.” According to my mother, her knees are old lady knees, her eyelids are drooping, sagging, just like her breasts, which she says are “just two deflated balloons by now.”

In high school I long to look like my mother when she was my age: mature, curvy, with wavy brown hair and perfect skin. She has very few pictures of her childhood, but her senior portrait turns up in the basement. “Oh, I was painfully self-conscious,” she says. “I cared far too much.”

In two years, the period of finishing high school and beginning college, I gain twenty pounds. Suddenly, everyone says, “You look so much like your mother.” I watch her scowl at her reflection and I feel a pang of dread.

* * *

My first lunch date in college, at a two-and-a-half star restaurant, is at 2:30 p.m. We are the only ones in the giant restaurant, where rickety furniture hangs from the ceiling. My date is twenty-four and works two weeks on an oil rig, two weeks off. We met at a costume party I went to knowing only two people.

Looking over the menu, he says, “I’ve done a lot of online dating. And there are some really attractive women that pop up. But I don’t date 10s.” He obliviously

continues, smiling at me, the non-10 woman he has asked on a date. I'm not offended, though perhaps I should be. "Really though, the unfortunate truth is that all that matters for women is their looks. That's it. For men, our desirability peaks at age thirty because it's based on financial stability and success. As long as we can keep that up, we are seen as attractive. For women though—wait, how old are you?"

I tell him I'm twenty.

"Right, well as a woman, your desirability peaks at twenty-one and then plummets drastically after that point. Ha-ha. Sorry!"

* * *

We all go to my grandparents' house for Thanksgiving. My aunt Alison wears dark wash True Religion jeans and an airy Free People shirt, brands that middle school girls like me don't care about yet, but the high school girls all wear them. With her snakeskin heels on, she is taller than my mother. We talk in the doorway to the kitchen.

"I see no use in rushing it," Alison is saying. "And the women at La Leche League are wonderful support." Alison nursed her middle child until he was four. Her youngest is now two. "He'll stop when it's right for him; I'm not concerned."

I lose track of what they are saying when Alison reaches out her thumbs and pulls taut my mother's forehead, smoothing the lines between her eyebrows. She cocks her head for a moment and then releases her hands, giving no pause to her words. My mother's frown lines fall back into place. I am overwhelmed by embarrassment for her, but she doesn't seem fazed. My aunt infuriates me. I pity my mother.

* * *

My mother hates artificial scents. She curses and coughs into her arm as we walk past Hollister, the cologne seeping through the open door and congesting the air in front of the store. "Shit, are they trying to poison us?" she says loud enough for nearby shoppers to hear. I have a gift card for my fourteenth birthday at Hollister, and she

waits outside while I try on clothes. I pick out the two lowest cut shirts I've ever worn, both with floral patterns in pink and green. When I call her inside I run my fingers up and down the ugly bones that line the center my underdeveloped chest.

"Can I get away with wearing this?" I ask.

"They're very pretty shirts," she surprises me by saying. "Just wear a camisole if it makes you feel more comfortable. You look beautiful, my goddess."

I narrow my eyebrows into the mirror and look at the three-way projection of everything too flat and too skinny.

"Trust me," she says, widening her eyes, "you look far better than those ridiculous saleswomen with their breasts exploding out of their bras." She throws me the sweater I came in wearing. "Now put this on and let's get out of here. I'm suffocating."

* * *

In college, I buy a contraption that melts scented wax with a small, hot light bulb. When Eric comes to my room in the spring I keep the light plugged in so that it makes the room smell sweet, like cinnamon. Unlike the last guy, he doesn't talk about his ex when I am on top of him or say, "It's just so hard to stop thinking about her. She has the cutest face. Gorgeous blonde hair. And this unreal body: awesome boobs, perfect skin, and a *perfect* fucking vagina."

Instead, Eric says, "Shit. You have the freakin' body of a porn star," which I consider the greatest compliment a boy has ever paid me.

Over the summer the wax from the light melts in storage, the contents of the entire box covered in hard purple tar when I return to school in August. It smells sickly, of artificial spice. When I won't sleep with him the first day back together, Eric doesn't get out of his chair as I leave his room. Leaning back and stretching, he says, "Well, take care."

Months later, drunk as usual, he approaches me. "You should come back with me tonight." He smiles. "You're pretty awesome in bed. And I just really want a tall blonde."

* * *

I am near the lockers at gymnastics, in fifth grade. I plan on becoming an Olympic gymnast, never mind that at age ten I am taller than any eighteen-year-old professional gymnast. At the Olympics, I will tie for first place with my best friend, Eleanor. It will be the first time two people will share the gold medal.

A man, in his forties with brown hair—this is all I remember—asks me if I want to go to the vending machine with him for a snack. He asks where I live, if he can drive me home. He asks what my mother and father’s jobs are. I am in his daughter’s gymnastics class.

“If you ever need a ride home, I’d be happy to take you. You’re sure you don’t want a snack?”

“Yes, I’ll stay here,” I say. I want to cry.

“You really are very beautiful, you know,” he says, staring. He continues talking, but I don’t hear it.

Weeks or months later, Eleanor and I are in our sequined blue and green leotards in her front yard. We are having a lemonade stand because it is June and that is what we do during the summer—hold daily lemonade stands in our leotards and swimsuits. One day we sell blue corn chips and salsa when we run out of lemonade. It’s over 90 degrees outside.

Out of the perfectly drowsy-happy summer day the man from gymnastics walks his daughter up to Eleanor’s neighbor’s house. He strolls up to our table. I suddenly feel as if I have an ice cube wedged in the tunnel of my throat.

“Well, hello! I didn’t know you lived around here.”

“This isn’t my house,” I say, unsmiling.

“Do you live nearby?” he asks.

“I live in the area.”

“In Winnetka?”

“The area.”

I never see him again. I see his daughter on my fifteenth birthday at Homer's Ice Cream. After seeing her I am reminded that he is still living in my small town, most likely lurking, capable any moment of showing up at my side and saying, "My, how you've grown!" I stop looking men in the eye. I don't want to draw attention to my body. I hunch, I don't like eating dinner at restaurants, and I want to stay inside.

* * *

I want to be seen and remain hidden. My mother is indifferent to attention. She comes to my friend's bat mitzvah party and dances in the middle of the floor in her stained black jeans. She throws her hands up in the air with abandon, bobs her head, and moves her hips in a way that I can imagine once was sexy. I am horrified; she is making a fool out of herself. I walk up to her and demand the keys to the car, where I hide until she comes out.

"Honey, I'm sorry!" she says. "I had no idea I would upset you!" Am I crying? I am so easily embarrassed. And this is middle school. Mothers are not meant to be too silly or dance.

"*Everyone* was looking at you, Mom!"

"Let them look!" she says, laughing. "Why should I care? I was having fun, dammit. What's a party if you just regard the dance floor?"

Now I am a shameless dancer. Perhaps I am not a pretty dancer; I am surely not sexy. I no longer dance for the purpose of peaking around my shoulder and making timid eye contact with men in the corners. I sweat, and my face turns deep red. I snap my fingers, wave my hands, and jump so I look even taller than six foot one. When I come home for vacation, my mother and I dance like women possessed, the deep punch of the bass in Usher songs blasting from the kitchen computer. We turn in smooth circles in our ski socks and jump around the kitchen table. We shimmy. We make faces. We don't talk.

Botanical Garden in Late Evening

Gregory Aird

Those over there are milkwood pinwheels,
I hear you say as we walk along

make its reflection seem like a pair
of gleaming, jagged, pale teeth, snarling,

the winding cobblestone pathway.
And these here look like daylilies . . .

getting ready to swallow the earth,
to swallow you, me, these plants

Don't they smell lovely this time of year?
As we walk across a Japanese-style bridge

and those flowers with the dark blue petals
whose name I can never remember.

I can't help but stare out beyond the
garden,
losing a sense of self until you tap my
shoulder

and point out the cherry trees, indigenous
to that one area, and I nod in
comprehension.

But, truthfully, all I can think about
is the waning moon and how the leaves

Padding

Ben Hirsch

I'm beating the shit out of these heavy bag thoughts
hook after jab, then desperate elbows and shoves,
trying to burst my foe's liver, to make him cough up blood.
When I hear "zero" I drop my arms, and hang up my gloves.
and I hang up my problems, cause the gloves are rentals.

I can't be weighted down by those heavies when I'm not hitting back,
reaching my car and sparking up my Bic cause the only reason I haven't smoked yet
is so my lungs wouldn't give out at the gym. I'm puffing on my hand wraps
just there to keep my punches from hurting me;
shadow boxing at a mirror, you know?

Then I'm driving down the road, and I'm still thinking about
coughing up blood (because of my liver or lungs I've lost miles back)
when the first signal to get the snow shovel out drops
and is quickly KO'd by my wind shield wipers.
That's when I remember something you said to me in the fourth grade

after Mrs. Partington told us that each snowflake was one of a kind.
We looked at a fresh flurry in its one fighting breath
pinned under a microscope on a black mat of construction paper.
"Just because it's unique doesn't mean it's pretty, that thing's ugly"
Thank you, I never would have seen that.



Duncan Hall
Vinicius Goncalves

Resignation

Emily Nichol

The first time I noticed Louis Duvall's addiction, we were in the mall together. It was a Tuesday, around 1 p.m. We were on the escalator at Three Brooks Mall; around us was all glass and shiny white polyurethane, the exposed glittery metallic ducts making the building look as if it were never properly finished. We were gliding up the escalator, and I didn't realize that as each crusty, ridged metal plate slid into the floor approaching us, his heart was beating faster and faster. I was blabbering on about numbers, and he was nodding like a marionette, his copper eyes dancing around the departments we passed: juniors, lingerie, formal wear, a blur of patterned nylon stockings and oversized sequin shift dresses and overpriced t-shirts with bubble-printed slogans from TV shows that no one watched anymore. Louis had said that something was on hold for him at Nordstrom, could we just pay for it before grabbing a bite? I thought it would be a quick purchase, figuring it was some post-Black-Friday-sale suit, or an early Christmas present for some estranged nephew.

When we stepped off the escalator, Louis looked left as if he was going to head for the check out counter, but his feet started walking right. The air felt synthetic, like it had been recycled through electric ventilators too many times, and it felt unnaturally dry on my chapped lips. I accidentally made eye contact with an overweight sales lady, who was using one of those guns to shoot a plastic security tag into a purple mohair sweater.

"Uh huh, that account is really important, too. But let's just take a look here... just a quick look..." he said, as his body hooked towards the women's shoes.

“Um, OK, anyway, I know you wanted to invite Ray Woods to the Board event in February, but I just don’t see it happening. If you consider his behavior in the transport meeting—” I stopped.

Louis had snatched an electric blue snakeskin stiletto off of its display box. He circled the shoe in his hands, examining its clasps one by one, taking his time to pay attention to the mechanics of the thing. He fingered each of the many ankle straps, carefully, individually, and held the shoe close to his face. He ran a single finger down the red leather insole. A bead of sweat had appeared on his left temple.

“Do you want that in your size?” I joked. His eyes glinted as he looked down at me.

“Now this, Jeremy, this is a work of art,” he said, pinching the heel and knocking on its plastic tip. He stuck the shoe in front of my face. “Smell that, right there. Stick your nose right up in there. This is some masterful craftwork.”

“I . . . I think I’m good, Louis,” I said, bucking my head away. I tried to swallow, but my spit got stuck in my throat and I had to cough. I glanced at my own beat up loafers, and then at his leather gym shoes. Men’s.

“Are you OK?”

And he was. Over salads—protein-laden salads: he got extra turkey, I got extra salmon—at the swanky members-only café attached to the shop, Louis explained his conquest ritual to me.

“After we make a deal, I buy a pair for my collection. Weitzman’s are good, Manolos are better, but it really depends on the style. It’s not about spending the money, it’s about the collection. They’re simply gorgeous. I have a whole closet for them, just to look at. I don’t wear them, of course. They aren’t for *me*. I just, it’s a way to spend my energy, to relax. I supposed it’s a little problem, but you have to celebrate the small victories, my friend, and you might as well do it with something fancy.” He patted me on the shoulder and chuckled, before interlocking his fingers behind his head and nestling his shoulders back into the red velour booth. I let him pick up the tab.

At the time, it hadn’t really surprised me. For five years, I had known Louis to be eccentric—he had a habit of bringing jello shots, fancy ones made from Goldschlager

and quince or Crown Royal and espresso, to the office on Friday mornings—but most of the things I heard about Louis were just workplace rumors. Louis had an obese twin brother who lived in Milwaukee. Louis had inherited banking money and had never actually finished high school. Louis had once smoked out the secretary, before she was let go. Louis had had a total personality change after an especially enlightening colonic.

The facts were these: Louis had, for certain, access to an obscene amount of money that for some reason, he had decided to invest in a small business consulting startup. He was always about 10 degrees tanner than the weather—or nature, really—could

ever dictate. Louis had a corner office, complete with floor to ceiling windows and a 6-foot painting of himself next to his prized curly-haired spaniel. His office stood empty until 1 p.m. most days, when Louis would come in wearing a skin-tight bicycling shirt and padded shorts, but was never really sweaty. Once or twice a day, Louis would call me into his office, asking for updates on something like commercial accounts or trade sales, and at some point during my report he would interrupt me with

“He had a habit of bringing jello shots . . . to the office on Friday mornings.”

bizarre non-sequiturs: He wasn't able to lie to his mother as well as he used to. Should he call her less frequently? Look at this ex-colleague's Facebook page; whose hair looked better? His was a bit whiter, but still. Should he buy another sports car, even though his garage was getting a little full? What did I think of commercial space travel?

I learned to tailor each of my answers into a compliment, or else I'd risk my invitation to Friday night happy hour, or my car-borrowing privileges, for special occasions only. It was stressful, but it seemed like a trivial toll to pay for my otherwise impressive job title. After these “meetings,” Louis would linger, unwelcomed, around

the rest of the staff's meager cubicles, drink a tomato juice, and leave before 4. For the rest of the time, I was in charge, but Louis signed the paychecks.

I met Louis on an airplane, an early morning flight to Chicago. I was on the way to a business trip in the suburbs; he was on his way home from a speculative trip to Connecticut. I was working then as an accountant in the Midwest at the same corporate firm that had offered me my first serious job out of college, making enough money but not really enthralled by the work. He sat next to me and offered me an ear of his headphones.

“Do you like Moby?” he asked.

I thought it was funny and jammed the earbud into my head, thinking that it wasn't really weird. Our casual airplane conversation revealed that besides our mutual affection for electronica, we had both attended Princeton, though fifteen years apart. My hotel was in his neighborhood, and he offered to split a cab with me.

Later that night, after an afternoon booked with dry, oft-bearded investors, my hotel room received a phone call.

“Jeremy! Come meet me for a drink! I have to show you my favorite bar.”

It was divey, but clean, with good music and cheap whiskey. We both ordered Sazeracs, then beer. It had been raining, making the neon signs in cheap bars blur and wink through the chilly drizzle. It felt friendly, comfortable. I found it easy to talk to Louis, and talked a lot—we talked about work, but mostly I liked that he laughed at my jokes about the Midwest, and I spent most of the night mocking everyone's horrible nasal accents and getting dirty looks from other tables.

But I must have impressed him that night, because the next month he flew me back out to Chicago to discuss his latest project. He was bored with his day trading and house hunting and had sold his internet business several years before, and was ready to start again.

“I've already contacted your superiors, Jeremy—in fact, George is an old scuba diving buddy of mine. Of course he'll give you shining recommendations and love working with you, but you've been there for so long! You must be ready for a

new . . . exciting endeavor. I have a gut feeling about you, Jeremy; you are the right man for the job. Let's celebrate," he said, gesturing to the waitress to bring us another round of martinis. "It's time to get out of Connecticut. Now, how much do you want?" He pulled out a thick checkbook.

I was surprised. I was thirty. I had already started going bald but I wasn't admitting it to anybody. Maybe I was feeling vulnerable, but it felt good to be scouted out, courted for a high level position, and I could build so much with Louis' money. And anyway, my wife had been suggesting that it might be good for us to get away from the northeast, to try somewhere new. Louis was a bit strange, I could tell that from the start, but I wanted it.

We started discussing his plans.

I didn't tell Talia about the shoes when I got home that day. Talia's a defense attorney, a good one. Even though we've been married for fifteen years she still reserves her smiles for only the most deserving circumstances, limiting them to maybe one a day. When she is trying to figure something out, she grabs onto it with her sharp, private school-trained intellect and doesn't back down, not unlike a small but motivated bulldog might with an especially salty bone, and her face twists up around her nose into a contortion of her usual severe beauty. She's a fastidious list-maker: there are paper post-its in each room of our bungalow—work out regimens, food menus, cleaning schedules—each blocked out in her perfectly bolded, all capital print. In her office, Talia keeps a drawer of pens and pencils lined up by height. She always asks about my day, and expects a run-down of how the business is working, of the important events.

But that day, Talia had been trying to teach her parents how to use Skype. Her mother had immigrated from Slovenia at age 11, and despite a 50 year immersive experience into upper class Connecticut gentility (her husband had a celebrated neurology career), she had shaken neither her indecipherable Eastern European accent nor her penchant for bemoaning the demise of Slavic culture—or the fact that her daughter married someone whose last name only had one syllable. They were upstairs,

and muffled shouts—“Don’t press that button! . . . In Ljubljana never . . . So loud . . . Ten times!”—punctuated the stillness in the kitchen. I tuned out of the ruckus and opened a bottle of red wine, smiling at the thought that at least in my house, my day was not the only weird one.

When she finally floated down the stairs, my wife’s cheeks were flushed, and she snatched the bottle I held out to her with both of her quivering hands. I grabbed a hold of them for a second, running my gnawed-down nails down her 35 year old wrists, which were already stippled with age spots. The skin had started sagging on her hands before any other part of her body, loose wrinkles crowding around her tiny knuckles.

“I don’t . . . want to talk about it,” she stammered. She slurped her wine, splashing a bit of cheap merlot onto her upper lip, and turned on the television.

After a quiet dinner, take-out again from our usual Thai place, she retreated upstairs to read through her new case while I flipped through some TV channels, zoning out to the white noise of a foreign soccer game. I was thinking about nothing. Our honeymoon, in Northern California. We thought we could be economical, squeezing in a beach, a city, and the countryside all in a week—we couldn’t be gone long, because Talia was starting her first job at a firm. Talia was so tan then, thin but athletic, and her thick black hair was glossy in the golden west coast sunshine. She was only 25. There was a picture of her in a drawer somewhere, of her sitting on a swing in a vineyard, leaves’ shadows dappling her full cheeks. I must have taken the photo. She did look beautiful then.

I found myself wandering into the bathroom, and she was there, leaning in close to the mirror. It was late, and she looked tired—the bags under her eyes had collected her day’s makeup, cakey foundation and rubbed-off mascara clinging to the loose skin. She seemed to be examining something in her mouth. The corners of her lips were inflamed, and a piece of dental floss was wrapped around her right index finger. It was bound so tight that bright red skin bubbled out past the confines of the string, the other end curling loosely above the counter. Our eyes met in the mirror, and then she went back to her oral investigation. I went to bed.

The Christmas party situation—Talia started it. She had walked right over to the blonde woman who was standing alone, completely sidestepping the crowds of holiday-punchy executives and consultants, undulating throngs of forced minglers and schnapps-tainted breath. The woman was about 6 feet tall and wore a tight white dress. I didn't join them until I had scoped out the situation and finished my second drink; the sweet, tart acid of the bourbon still searing down my esophagus, making my stomach tingle with anxiety.

"Jeremy, there you are!" Talia said, her loud voice honking over the din of ice clinking in glasses. Some high-pitched notes filtered through the ballroom, but it wasn't loud enough for me to tell if it was electronica or some clangy new-age jazz. "This is Amanda, and she was just—"

"Excuse me, actually, it's pronounced Ay-MAHN-dah? Don't worry, people get it wrong all the time. But just know. Ay-MAHN-dah." Talia blinked quickly, and her lips paled and began to pucker.

"Oh, please *do* excuse me!" said my ever-diplomatic wife, not quite stifling one of her signature eye rolls. "Ay-MAAAAAAHN-dah was just telling me about her ex-husband. Louis."

"Louis was married? I mean, nice to meet you," I said, reaching for the woman's limp hand. She didn't seem to notice, instead using hers to reach up and brush her bleached and blow dried locks back from her face. She smiled. I noticed a few red and green sugar sprinkles wedged in between a canine and an incisor.

"Oh YES! But he annulled it after six weeks. Oh there he *is*, the little darling!" she said, beckoning over to the bar.

Talia reached down a bit and circled the forever-thinning spot on my head with her middle finger, punishing my stout, deteriorating body with her towering and bony stature. Her coarse blue-black hair was pulled back into a tight bun, stretching the skin on her forehead. She had missed her last root touch up so wiry, silvery nuisances streaked past her temples, and her gaunt face looked even more ghostly than normal. Her sensible white button down—was it mine?—had come untucked from her loose,

masculine slacks. Her pores were showing through her makeup. It wasn't a secret that she hated being there.

"She's from California," Talia said, giving a matter-of-fact nod. A grin crept out of the corners of her mouth, making her look as if she had just eaten something bitter that she hadn't been expecting.

"Oh you're not . . . foreign . . ." Both women glared at me.

"Well . . . my, would you look at those shoes!" Talia exclaimed, covering up my faux pas with a gesture towards the woman's silver lamé platforms.

I was sure she hadn't meant it—she normally hates those kind of tacky things. But Louis had heard her.

"Do you really like them? I picked them out for her. Actually," Louis said, grimacing at my wife's own footwear, "why don't you come with me?" He wiggled his fingers at a former business partner as he led us away. Talia's brow furrowed.

Louis's voice took on a song-bird's lilt as he led us to the back of the penthouse. He talked about the chandelier's history—"It's Austrian! I had it flown in last year!"—and the origin of the crown molding. Louis walked as if, rather than leading us down his own hardwood hallway, he was guiding us over a shoddily hung suspension bridge. Finally, we were standing in front of embossed wooden doors, doors that were about 15 feet tall, with what I suspected were solid gold knobs.

"Here we are!" Louis turned to face us before thrusting the doors open behind him. His rosy round cheeks had taken on a cherub-like gold sheen. I kept my eyes on Talia, preparing for the surprise.

The room was spectacular. Mirrors covered every flat surface, tossing each pair's myriad angles into abstraction; I might have called it beautiful, if it wasn't so strange. Each shoe had its own personal display box in front of a fiberglass window, almost like a little zoo. The track lighting reflected off of glitter and patent leather, sparkle and shine blazing from every corner. I was overwhelmed. My stomach was on fire.

"Jesus, Louis! How many shoes are there in here?" I said, covering an acrid burp with my hand.

“Oh, it’s embarrassing really. I’d rather not say. But here, Talia, we’ll find something . . . what size are you?”

“Please don’t, Louis. My pumps are fine,” Talia said.

“Come on! I have no use for them. They’re just going to sit here. Let’s see . . .”

“Jeremy, you’re turning green!” Amanda giggled under her breath.

Louis strutted to the end of the room and grabbed a pair of classic-looking black stilettos, easily 3 inches taller than the ones she was wearing.

“Take these,” Louis said, flashing a magnanimous smile. “God knows I have too many. I really need to purge. The habit is compulsive, really.”

“I really don’t think I can accept these,” Talia said. “They must have been \$300!”

“It’s nothing! It’s a gift. It’s Christmas!”

Talia squinted her right eye and cocked her head. She moved a step closer to Louis.

“Tali, the shoes are a present. Plus they make you look—your legs look great,” I stepped in between them, sensing danger. “Let’s all go get another round?”

“Yes please!” Amanda said, teetering back towards the bar without waiting for anyone else to agree.

“Great idea, Jeremy. Look, could you grab me a scotch? I’ll be over there, with a great—there are some people I really want you to meet! Talia, why don’t you just leave those here, the staff will take care of them. Feel free to take anything else you like! I don’t even know what’s back there anymore.”

Talia’s eyes tapered into pinpricks of disgust and her cheeks sunk back into her face. Her lips crushed together. I put my hand on her shoulder, but she dropped them and shrugged me away.

“You know I resent the way he treats us,” Talia spat at me as we made our way out of the carefully preserved bowels of the penthouse. “Like we’re so . . . If he knew how much I made—”

“Come on, you know it’s not like that. Louis needs me. There would be no office without me. And you could stand to be—”

“I bet you even KNEW about the shoe . . . thing! Come *on*, Jeremy, what *was* that? This isn’t a present, it’s—it’s an insult! He’s *crazy*—and you’re like his sidekick! His servant!”

“Oh get over it, Tal, you don’t even know—”

“DON’T tell me what I know,” she sneered over her shoulder, speeding ahead of me.

Fine then, I thought. I turned left down a hallway less grand than the one we were currently walking down, away from the party. When I got about halfway down, I stopped in front of a door, plain and unadorned. I ran my fingers over the striated wood, softer than fine velvet. I wondered how much it cost, how old or exotic it was to have earned a place in this monstrosity. I turned the brass handle.

The room was completely empty. I mean, not even completely painted, even. Parts of the dry wall were primed, but only a thin layer of white acrylic paint covered it, if any; it was like someone was caught with their pants halfway on, underwear fully exposed. There were no windows, no rich curtains or gold filigree. The plank floor had a light smattering of sawdust, and only one of the simple light fixtures actually had a bulb in it. Wires were exposed behind the switch, which hadn’t been properly set into the wall. I flicked it; nothing happened.

I turned and walked out the room, turning the doorknob the entire way so I could hear it click. I backed up and went into the next room. I found it—and the next three, and the one across the hall—in exactly the same, simple, barren condition. I felt the hairs on the back of my arms lift off of my skin and bristle, goosebumps prickling my

“It was like someone was caught with their pants halfway down, underwear fully exposed.”

numb skin. Hot, salty bile rose behind my tonsils, and I backed away. I left the rooms how I found them; I didn't touch a thing.

Once she had convinced me, it wasn't hard to write my resignation letter. Handing it to Louis that Wednesday in December was a bit awkward, though. I know they say it's better to wait until Fridays for these kinds of touchy matters, but I couldn't. He didn't expect it when I handed it to him, and I didn't preface it. I watched his face change as he read it, his forehead flushed, his smile fell but his teeth still showed. My mouth was dry, so I puffed out my cheeks a bit and ran my tired tongue over my teeth.

"Are you asking for a raise?" He looked bemused.

"No, I'm serious about this," I said, resisting the urge to look at my feet. I put my hands in my pockets, trying to hide my guilt.

He asked me out to lunch to chat about it, saying that he would be happy to meet any of my demands. It took thirty minutes for me to explain that no, I really did not come to negotiate, that I had nothing to demand except asserting my right to stop returning to work in two weeks as stipulated in my contract.

"If you leave, you're leaving now. I don't want you to come back." He was taking it personally.

"You can fire me if you want, Louis. But I'm leaving." I shut my eyes for a moment and filled my tight chest with air. I walked back to my pathetic, dreary cubicle and took a moment to affirm its cardboard smell. I felt like I was in control, for once. I checked my phone: three messages from Talia, impatient to be sure that I had actually gone through with it.

I didn't regret it, walking from the office to the waiting car. I didn't feel relieved, but I was convinced it was the right thing for me to do. I didn't have to keep pretending anymore. Talia didn't look at me as I got into the car, she didn't ask how it went. She just nodded and started driving.

Bearer of the Queen

Gabriella Buba

“I am soft,” the creature seemed to whisper with its syrupy buzzing voice.

Its rotund, striated body was dusted in huge, golden pollen granules that smelled warm and sweet in the August heat. I smiled quietly as I watched it.

It was straining upward, its small, transparent wings glimmering like jewels, its gilded body almost sagging under the weight of its precious yellow cargo, before depositing itself to nestle once more into the downy face of a dandelion. The deep hum of her fellows could be heard all around me, almost drowning out the sounds of the playground. Tall dandelion heads swayed in the breeze that did little to cut the summer heat.

I lay on my stomach, my elbows pressing into the damp ground. The shepherd’s purse stalk in my hands was relieved of its tiny heart shaped seed pods by my small, now green rimmed, nails. A pile of the hearts rested before me. After a few minutes I reached out and plucked one of the brilliant, swaying stalks. The end was purple-red and oozed wonderfully sticky sap, which I dabbed onto my palm to glue a tiny heart to myself. Satisfied with the adornment, I returned my attention to the little bee.

She was still busy with her dandelion meal, her small face buried deep in the feather petals; her little legs gripping as her wings beat the air, pollen sacks bulging with their cargo. She looked so soft, so warm and nice.

I reached out a small hand and lifted her downy bed. Holding my breath, I slowly moved her. Far more delicately than any queen was ever raised on her golden palanquin, I raised the little creature up to my eye level and observed her as she

continued her quest within the little circle of organic sunshine. She hadn't noticed the movement at all, or if she had she discounted it as the wind.

A devious plan began to form in my mind. Lifting my eyes from the golden queen captured between my grass-stained fingers, I looked across at the boys who had shunned me from their football game because I was 'too slow.'

The other girls could play with them, but those were their 'girlfriends.' Feeling disheartened by my lack of a grade school love life, I had retreated to the dandelion patch to play a better game. I had already found three pecans, but they and the large rock for cracking them were forgotten in favor of this new engagement.

Cupping the handful of tiny hearts and holding the little queen with utmost reverence in the other hand, I rose and made my slow and careful way across the big field, past the hot, shiny bleachers toward the football game.

They were taking a timeout. How fortunate. I plastered on a straight face and approached Ronnie, a tall fifth grader like me. He had a cleft palate, short, wispy brown hair and a big smile. Some days he was my boyfriend, some days he laughed at me and dumped his water bottle on my head, threw erasers at me in math class, and stole my Nancy Drew books, hiding them in the boy's bathroom. Today was one of the latter.

Today Janelle was his girlfriend. I could not have cared less, but it was expected that we make up, so, what better way? I thought as the black haired girl sidled up to Ronnie.

"Hi..." he muttered, looking anywhere but at me.

"Hi, Ronnie...Janelle," I acknowledged the taller girl grudgingly.

I pressed my lips together trying hard not to grin. I felt that horrible blush heat my cheeks as it does whenever I speak in front of others. Usually I hated it, my ears got hot, my upper lip dampened, my bangs stuck to my forehead. However, at the moment I was an embarrassed ex-girlfriend.

I bit my lip and held out my offerings of peace. Reaching out, he took the handful of hearts and the little queen's palanquin, disguised as a flower.

The moment his big sweaty hands closed around the stem, a devilish grin took over my features and I scampered away just in time to hear the whole group scream.

Girls and boys alike darted past me, trying to escape the irate gilded creature. Soon the football field was empty, and the little queen had settled back down to the business of collecting her gold. Careful not to disturb her, I walked over to her new bier, a daisy. Bending I plucked her up and traveled back to my field of dandelions.

“I’m sorry, little bee, I didn’t know they would scream so.” I lied, but it is best not to anger royalty.

A few boys approached, retribution in their eyes, but I only smiled and held up the little queen, I her loyal bearer and she my talisman.

Canoe Song

Anya Parker

Caught, sweet water
with a way to the salt—
Canoe opens her mouth,
whispers, *The water
is rising, Sister—*

*we must become swans—
tuck our feet, and we
will not disturb
the deep mirror
Untie me—*

*there will be
no moorings. We
will ride moons,
unanchored through
each season.*

But Old Woman says,
voice ancient
as birches, *Child,*
this world
is circular—she lies

if she says there is
anything that is not
returning. Tied
to dock, her silver
shape flashes

like teeth—*the water*
*is rising, Sister—*long
and mermaid-like
she whispers—*the water,*
Sister—



Spiegel im Spiegel
Erin Fung

Art



Serpentine
Corey Bryce

The Beast

Katherine Humphreys

My husband's body is still warm in the ground and I'm already celebrating the anniversary of his death. Granted he's been frozen for the past six years, exactly fourteen days ago I walked into our house and found his head floating on a lake of refuse. Most men have the dignity to at least throw themselves into a body of water, but mine decided he needed to get down on his knees and beg for release. Like a dog, he kneeled there before the barrel of photo developer and lapped at it greedily, taking more of it into his lungs and soul than into his pit of a stomach. I do feel some sort of congratulations are in order, however. He was able to kill himself in the most appropriate way possible while compromising my own hand. Oh, how he must have smirked as we lowered his body into its grave, knowing full well that I was forced to talk to various law enforcement officers about our relationship mere hours before the funeral.

I didn't kill my husband. I have more tact than to physically hold his head under those noxious Metol waves and allow him to make peace with God. My tactic would be subtle, more discreet, and I wouldn't be so sloppy as to leave any evidence behind. Not that Harold would know: even as his mind floated off under the rocking waves I'm certain he still thought it to be 2003. If only, that would mean six less years of stillness. When they asked me how long I had known about my husband's condition, for a moment I thought they were joking. Condition? He was always like that—dull and stupid.

"We meant his depression, ma'am, people don't just kill themselves for sport." No, that's what they have relationships for.

I have been dead for over six years now. I believe I contracted the same fatal disease that consumed Harold's life the moment I let him slip that trap around my left ring finger. No sooner was it coiled around my digit than it began to constrict the life out of my hand. My finger was swollen and blue by the time we made it to our honeymoon suite. I remember the way he swelled with pride, his arms growing so large that they were able to wrap themselves around my heart three or four times.

"I love you, Malinda. I have known no greater love than you my entire life. I promise that from here on out your life will be nothing like it once was. I'll take care of you."

He never had a clue about how right and wrong he was. As we lay together, legs and sheets interlocking into a complex yet intimate puzzle, I remember how smooth his hands were against my bare arms. He rubbed them lightly, fondly, allowing the cold blue to transition easier down the length of my arm. By the time we got home half my body could have been mistaken for a piece of fallen sky.

Disillusionment, my closest and dearest friend, when did we allow each other to be greeted on a first name basis? It wasn't during the first year of marriage, oh no, you were still festering then. Biding your time, coiled around the length of my spine, whispering grievous taunts into my ear and waiting for me to take that first lick from the apple. I smelled the fruit, but I wasn't ready to taste it.

Harold and I lived in a small cottage in Sharon, Connecticut, for the first year of our time together. We liked our privacy then, and even in the small town setting we found ourselves seeking shelter in one of the more rural parts of the community. Rather than neighbors, we were flanked by perpetual autumn. Sedentary trees basked over our home, washing over us with their parade of colors once every month or so. Harold and I would walk through the acres of forest we had behind our home, taking in the sight of fierce greens, oranges, and reds splattered across a water colored sky. Even in winter, when the giants stood as but sticks in ground, I could see their brightly colored leaves staring back at me.

It was in the middle of October when my husband bounded through the front door with a puckish grin plastered across his face. His boots were sprinkled with specks of snow, his hair was a nest of leaves and knots, and despite his wearing only two button-up shirts his skin was tickled pink from warmth.

“Remember how you told me you wished you could take our forest with you wherever you went? I think I found out how.” He thrust out a bag from behind his back. The black clothed bag was foreign to me: the monogrammed badge on the front and the carefully sewn leather straps boasted an attention to detail and expense that Harold oftentimes wrote off as frivolous. *“Don’t you want to see what’s inside?”* I wished I had listened to the snake, just this once, when he licked my ear with that tasteful response of no.

Any fool could have purchased a camera. I happened to marry the jack of fools who purposefully bought himself a professional camera to compliment his lack of expertise. He detested digital cameras, deriding their ability to capture the essence of life which dominated our frequent walks together. But now, now that he had the ultimate weapon for capturing the unnamed force which holds humans to nature, our lives would surely know no form of unpleasantness.

The disease didn’t start getting to him then, oh no. Being the master of manipulation, he was able to evade its lustful snares and retarget them back on me. The blue began to make its way to the other half of my body, snatching my right arm and smiling jovially all the while. I played along with Harold’s games for a few months: smiling for the camera at his beck and call, striking peculiar poses whenever inspiration should strike his fancy, even going out of my way to climb trees and hold branches asunder so that they might not skew the lighting for one of his still shots. Apparently someone thought his pictures were half decent, for as soon as Harold caught wind of a novice photography competition in New York he was determined to go.

It was early March when we made the drive to New York City. It was still a few weeks before the competition, but Harold wanted to get a view for the atmosphere before we needed to drive down again in order to turn in the print at the photography fair. We wandered around the city doe eyed, looking for all the world like simple country folk who had never seen a skyscraper before. I had lived in Columbus, Ohio

my entire life, but even that had not prepared me adequately for what New York City was to be like. It was like our cottage back home in Connecticut, except that instead of having trees stand as guards we were flanked by miles and miles of towering office buildings.

We eventually made our way to Central Park, which was a nice change of pace from all the swelling buildings, but it lacked a certain domestic appeal which came from not having blocks of glass and steel within your line of sight. Maybe it was the snake releasing its hold from around my neck long enough to allow me some sense of freedom, but I decided to go out and secretly buy a new dress for the occasion. Harold had mentioned he wanted his prize-winning shot to be of me on the lake, rowing out in some form of nonsense or another. I had laughed at his enthusiasm, but all the same I revelled in it.

I stood at the foot of the lake in my white satin gown, laced hem tickling my ankles and a white bow in the back floating on the current of the wind. I lightly gripped the edge of my sunhat to keep it from being set free into the world, never to return. I lightly tapped my sandals off and pressed my toes into the cool water. My face turned to the warmth of the sun on instinct, but frost consumed me until all I could feel were those ten toes stepping across my flesh. Bumps prickled my skin, nerves pinched every crevice of my spine, and in that moment those toes were prancing across the mound of my own grave. Even if I wanted to turn away, it was too late. The blue swelling had consumed my entire body and my limbs were beginning to feel the pressures of falling off.

I turned to see my husband walking toward me. He grasped me firmly by the wrist and pulled me away from the edge of the water. For a moment the heat and force of his grip kept that fatal swelling from entering into my hand. *"It's time to go home, Malinda. The picture? It's been done."* Somber, sullen, befitting of a grave keeper.

As I turned about to put my sandals back on I caught a glimpse of a young man sitting on a park bench just north of where I had been standing. His face was pale and stern, but not unnaturally so, rather his offset grimace seemed to compliment his sharply defined cheek and jaw lines. His eyes were rather curious: softly rounded like

almonds, yet with bright blue irises that jutted out from behind a curtain of black lashes. His dark hair fell delicately around the nape of his neck, cradling the sharp jettisoning corners of his features. It was then that I noticed his clothing: white button-up over black dress pants, over plain white socks, over black leather loafers. He was, for all the world, a natural black and white photograph, and it only took one glimpse to ensnare any who cared to admire.

I felt a violent tug on my arm and was half dragged out of Central Park. He wouldn't look at me or say a single word the entire trip back to Sharon, an anomaly in his personality, considering his penchant for chattering on unnecessarily. When the time came to go back to New York for the photography competition he snuck out

“Our home always smelled of sodium hydroxide and silver dust.”

under the cover of dawn only to creep back home later that weekend with a first place medal and a sponsorship to develop his skills as a photographer. I barely had time to blink before I was, once again, chauffeured to a city with entirely too many buildings and not enough of what Harold once used to call 'life's essence.' He had been wrong about so many things.

We had graduated from our small cottage in the country to our even smaller town home just outside the city. No trees, a long commute to work greeted me every day, and our home always smelled of sodium hydroxide and silver dust. I would come home at eight from my job at Frank's Diner and find the still form of my husband, in our pseudo-storm basement, hunched over trays upon trays of developing fluid. For six years my husband's memory morphed into a single thought, the last coherent line he would say to me until just six weeks ago: *"It's been done."*

For six years I was dead. Somehow, his taking my picture and winning that contest had transformed Harold into a mad scientist. He barely ate, barely slept, spent all his time taking, developing, perfecting a world of color into something more pristine—

something more black and white. *“Woman, drop it, you wouldn’t understand.”* Was it the dress I had worn, the attitude, had I not been supportive enough? I slept in the cold dark for years, never knowing what I had done wrong to deserve the complete and total abandonment of my husband. Being the weak-willed woman I was, I never thought to pry further than at arm’s length, or question why he didn’t come home most weekends. *“You wouldn’t understand.”*

I was cleaning up around his work area when I found it. Under piles of paperwork, trash, mildew, and soda cans I found a locked box tucked away in the corner of his desk, the key still sitting in the lock. The usual antics persisted: the guilty victim looking around nervously all the while trying to carefully break the lock on the seal. Hidden in that box was the very first medal Harold had ever won, along with two letters and a manila folder full of prints. The first letter I recognized, a letter from his sponsors congratulating him on a job well done. The second was foreign to me: a yellowed envelope with tattered edges and the simple word “Harold” scrawled on the front in lazy cursive.

Dear Harold,

I can’t do this anymore.

-Eric

The manila folder gazed up at me, smirking wickedly and taunting me with its visage. The cold hand of solitude gripped my shoulder once more, and the folder lay open on the desk before I even had time to blink.

Dozens of black and white prints scattered about all over the table and floor, brief moments of the past pounced up at my eyes and refused to give me room to breathe. Months? No, years worth of material flew out. A man shaving in a mirror, a man hunched over some paperwork on his desk, the same man driving his car, buying clothes, making love to another man, and smirking placidly back at the camera almost every time. Who was this person? The photo that floated gaily down to the floor almost seemed like it was crawling away, attempting to hide the dirty secret which could save or destroy my marriage. *2006 Central Park* read the back, *immortality* read the front.

The picture which had won my husband all his successes in life had been one of a man whose face I had seen but once and whose name I never knew.

“Woman, drop it, you wouldn’t understand.”

Disillusionment, how frightfully you appear when we need you least. You snaked your way across my heart and attempted to conceal the truth from me once more. Too bad my blood had already been drained and my skin a winter’s touch. I had been dead for six years hence; there was no saving him now.

I burned them, I burned them all. Any picture which boasted even the slightest interference of that stranger in the park was cast into the fireplace. I watched his grimacing smirk dance and disappear into the licking lips of the flame, and I inhaled those poisonous fumes possessively, refusing to give Harold the sick satisfaction of holding any pieces of his fantasy. I was watching with gleeful wonder as the last, winning, picture slowly decayed in fire’s searing arms when Harold burst into the room. *“What the hell are you doing?”*

Is that the life you truly want? I glowered down at him as he blistered his hands fighting the flames for control of that last photograph. He cried, and cried, and with each rasping breath he took my smile grew until it consumed the whole of my face. *“How does it feel to have your reality destroyed? Do the world a favor and at least have the dignity to go down with your ship.”* I went to work and didn’t come back until the next morning. I found him kneeling before his altar, sacrificial lamb to a god most foul.

I wish I had been the one to kill him, to ring the life from his neck until he knew no other pain than the one caused from a life wasted. That isn’t my style, but it would have given me such pleasure to do so. Maybe then I could say that I came out on top, maybe then I could lay claim to completing a worthwhile task in my life, maybe then I could stop hating myself. For as big a fool as he was, at least he had the nerve to end his life when he realized there was nothing left for him.

I Can Imagine Ophelia

Anya Parker

did not mean to die
as she went down to the willow-thick
river, in the air the scent of shallows—
violets and rosemary, the damn castle
and black mud. I imagine,
plaiting garlands of stars, she
did not intend it to be water
that shut her lungs.

After all, I too,
have seen these legs grow into
the single silvered muscle of a fish—
felt these bones form fins, my body
able to breathe rivers. I have seen
the suns of water, gold circles far
from reach—beginning to swim out,
unmindful of the dark.

I imagine Ophelia
did not notice the white wings
of her garments grow heavy
as she advanced, forgetting
the weight of movement.
I know the surprised look
of her reflection—water first
reaching lips, then the eyes.

I imagine she did not mind
drifting—
beneath the surface

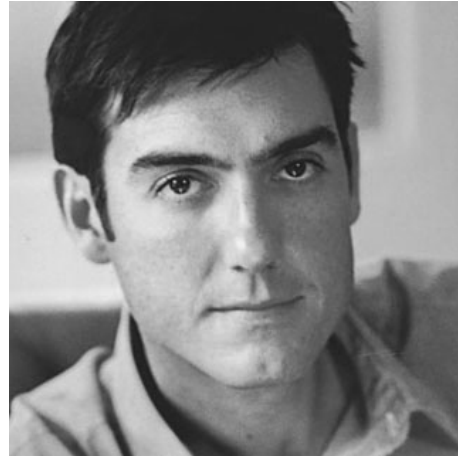


Embarrass
Lydia Smith

An Interview with Justin Cronin

by Saira Weinzimmer

Justin Cronin grew up in New England and attended Harvard University and the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He is the author of *Mary and O'Neil*, *The Summer Guest*, and *The New York Times* bestseller, *The Passage*. He is also the recipient of the Stephen Crane Prize, a Whiting Writers' Award, the PEN/Hemingway Award, and a Pew Fellowship in the Arts. Cronin taught at Rice University from 2003-2012, where he founded a certain literary magazine in 2004 (R2!). He now lives with his family in Houston, Texas, and is currently hard at work on *The City of Mirrors*, the third and final book in *The Passage* series.



You are the Founding Father of R2. How has your life changed since you started this magazine, and since we last interviewed you?

The big difference is that I don't teach anymore. I was a teacher of one kind or another for close to thirty years. I started as a high school teacher, then became a graduate teaching assistant, then a professor at three different universities. I don't know if I'll ever be back—probably I will at some point—but in the meantime, it's a great luxury just to focus on my own work, and read only the things I want to read. The other change is that I have something rather like a public life. I do a lot of media, meet readers at book events and conventions, interact with thousands of people through Facebook and

Twitter. Before *The Passage*, my life was rather small. It still is, at least in the day-to-day, and most of the writing life is very solitary. You don't write a novel with a crowd in the room. But it's been something of an adjustment for me to interact with so many people I haven't actually shared a meal with.

In addition to leading R2, you were also a professor here in Creative Writing. Was there a piece of writing advice you gave to students that you find difficult to follow yourself?

Just about everything I said is hard for any writer to follow. One of the great benefits of teaching all those years was that I got the chance to remind myself of all those easily-mislaidd rules—simple stuff, like to remember the reader and forget about yourself.

After all your years of writing and teaching, what do think is the most important quality for a writer to possess?

Talent helps, but I'd say the most important quality is stamina. Building a literary career takes a lot of resilience, because you encounter a great deal of rejection. You have to develop a pretty hard carapace. And nearly all literary careers are conducted in the midst of other things—taking care of your family, putting food on the table. You have to be willing to carve out the time every day to do something that seems very unlikely to succeed and will bring in no money, and explain that to your family.

What was the first story you ever wrote? What was the worst story you ever wrote?

The first story I ever wrote was about a talking car. I wrote it in the fifth grade. Without doubt, that was the worst. But I've written tons of bad stories.

What book or author has inspired you the most? How so?

There are different kinds of inspiration. There's the inspiration of reading something so beautiful—a scene, a sentence, a story—that you can't imagine spending your life doing anything besides trying to duplicate it. The author that did that for me was John Cheever, whom I first read in high school. I didn't really understand the ironies of his stories, but I knew that his sentences were transportingly gorgeous. The other kind of inspiration comes from someone who models the idea of the writing life for you. I'd give the nod to George Orwell, whom I didn't read until college. He wasn't just a great prose stylist; he believed that literature was a bulwark against cruelty.

What is the hardest thing about writing a novel? What is the easiest?

The hardest thing is keeping so much information in your head. I write long novels with numerous plot threads. Writing *The Passage*, I discovered that I was able to keep about 800 manuscript pages in my mind. At page 801, my head exploded. I had to grow about two hat sizes to get to the end of the novel, which in its longest form was 1400 pages.

I'm not sure there is an easy part. Writing the acknowledgements? That's the last thing I do, after I've finished the final loose-page proofs. I always do it with a glass of scotch.

*In both *The Passage* and *The Twelve*, you have a very large cast. How do you manage so many characters, and where do you get your inspiration for them?*

You manage them mostly by feel. Whose turn is it to talk? Whose storyline has been parked at the curb for a while and needs to move ahead? A book acquires its own internal rhythms, and those rhythms tell you what to do. As for where these imaginary people come from, I have no special insights to offer. The human race? They come from the human race.

Who is your favorite character in your books and why? Which character was the most difficult to write?

My favorite character at any given moment is always the one I'm writing. You are the story's local God; you need to love your creation. The hardest has probably been Anthony Carter. He's a staple of all three novels, this homeless man turned death row inmate turned holy man.

Your books in The Passage series are fascinating and suspenseful for readers, but do you ever get bored or fatigued working on such a long and far-reaching project? How do you combat that?

Any job involves a certain amount of fatigue. By the time it's all done, *The Passage* trilogy will have occupied nearly a decade of my life. How do I combat the exhaustion? By not writing sometimes. I'm not talking about procrastination. My life's pretty busy; I have very little time to waste. I'm talking about structured non-writing time, a day or week or even a month when I don't go into my office at all. I read, I exercise, I do things with my kids, I perform overdue domestic chores. It's all very satisfying and useful, and when it's over, I feel ready to write again.

Over the last few years there have been a number of books published that explore post-apocalyptic worlds and/or the darker side of the supernatural. Why is there such a craving for this darker outlook among readers? Is it a kind of escapism? A fascination with the horrific? A reflection of the uncertainty of our time? Something else entirely?

Our fascination with horror—with being frightened, appalled, shocked, or even just plain old grossed out—seems to me something that's deeply woven to the human psyche, starting in childhood. We have to play with the things that disturb us to allay these fears, which come from many sources. In my case, the fear that most occupied me as a kid was of global nuclear annihilation. A completely grounded fear, I will add:

I was born in 1962, two weeks before the Cuban Missile Crisis, the most dangerous thirteen days in the history of the planet. Like a lot of Cold War babies, I grew up pretty convinced that I'd be incinerated with the rest of the human race with about 20 minutes notice. That all went away when the Berlin Wall came down, and nothing we've faced since 1989 has been anywhere near as dangerous. 9/11 was bad, but four planes flown by madmen barely hold a candle to 10,000 nuclear warheads pointed at another 10,000 nuclear warheads with an aggregate throw-weight of 12,000 megatons, the approximate size of the United States and Soviet nuclear arsenals at the height of the Cold War. From a certain point of view, we should all be pretty relaxed about things these days, the threats of terrorism, global environmental change, and emergent viruses notwithstanding. So why aren't we? Because we're not, not at all, and you see this not only in the panicky tenor of our public discourse but in the books we read and the movies we watch and what we see on television. Why this fascination with the end of the world when the world is so much safer than it was just twenty years ago? I could talk about this for hours, but I think it comes down to a couple of things. One, we don't understand the world anymore. We have no idea how anything works. We luxuriate in a banquet of technologies that seem to make our lives easier but confound us with our own helplessness before them. There was a time when I could repair my own car. Who does that anymore? I don't recognize half the things under the hood. Even my toaster has wifi. To make toast! I'm exaggerating, but only slightly. All day long we intersect with technologies that are so far outside most people's understanding they might as well be witchcraft, and our dependence frightens us. It makes the ground feel soft beneath our feet. The second thing is really just the first, writ large. Just as the things of our daily lives seem suddenly beyond our comprehension, so, too, do the larger systems that govern our lives. The world I grew up in seemed nowhere near as complex—politically, financially, ecologically. Probably it actually was, but it didn't feel that way. The financial meltdown is a good example. Unless you're an economist, or a financial professional (and even then), you probably have no idea why half of your life savings disappeared in the fall of 2007. If you work in manufacturing, the outsourcing of your job to a crummy factory full of exploited children in Indonesia seems as cruelly

arbitrary and beyond your control as a tornado hitting your house. Meanwhile, a scary new strain of flu comes around every year, an import from Southeast Asia where poultry is farmed directly over swine, creating a toxic biological stew, and government has ground to a halt because it's bought and purchased by corporate interests, and New York City is slowly being subsumed by the sea, the consequence of 200 years of hydrocarbons being belched into the atmosphere. So we're not frightened of global nuclear annihilation, at least not at the moment, but there are plenty of worries to keep us up at night.

You have sold movie rights to The Passage. How involved are you in crafting the screenplay and the overall cinematic adaptation?

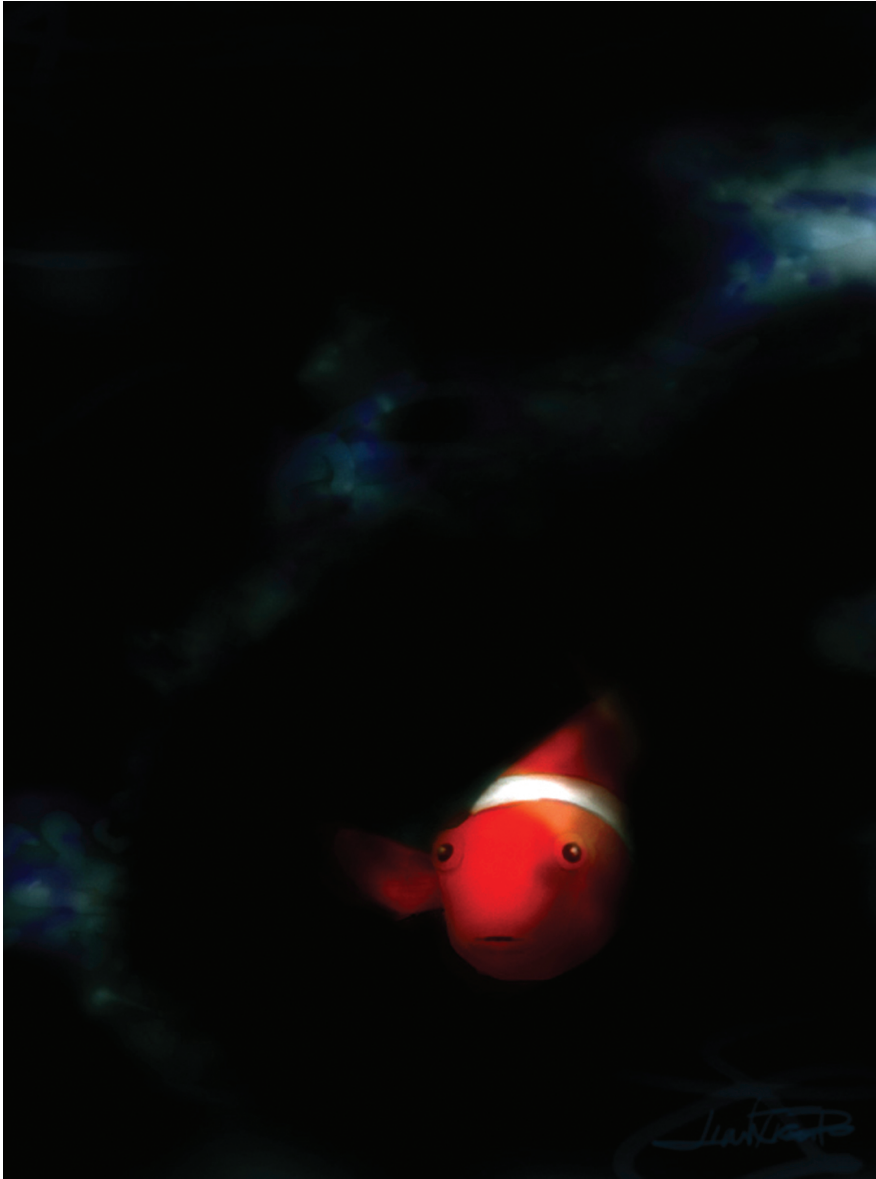
That's easy. Not at all. I don't know how to make a movie; I'll leave that to the experts.

Do you have other project ideas that you might work on after you finish The Passage series?

Yes. Writing is my job. Unless my readers fire me, I plan to continue showing up at the office.

We can't wait until 2014—can you give us any hints about The City of Mirrors?

All will be revealed. Or so I hope.



Emerging from Shadow
Linh Tran Do

The Bath

Michelle Doughty

1.

The master bathroom is an over-focused picture of mirrors, marble, and silver. I am naked under its harsh lights.

My arms and legs are a sand-blasted shade of tan, against the soft white of my belly and groin. My blonde hair is as pale as my skin, my teeth as white as the corners of my eyes. I have been bleached to yellow on white on yellow. I am seven years old.

My mother steps out of her blue lace thong, so that she too is naked. Her body is disconcertingly real, with rippling thighs and swinging breasts. Makeup still covers her face, sketching out shadowed eyes and ghastly bubblegum lips. Beneath her powdered chin, her sagging neck is speckled with age spots. Her hair is dark and brittle like separated chocolate.

The water rises around her when she sinks into the bath. She calls me over, and obediently I slide into the tub by her right side. My mother is one of those mythological giants whose body becomes part of the landscape, with caves in her nostrils and valleys between her toes. She holds me tucked against her abdomen so that I am submerged in the warm bath. The temperature is comfortable, but I want the water to boil. I want to walk away not just clean but sterile.

As my mother bathes us, the water grows opaque with soap residue and grit from her bleeding makeup. I lose sight of my mother's hands on my skin, but I cannot forget their presence. She holds me close to her abdomen. Though my mother's body is soft with fat and cushioned by water, her nails still scrape on my skin.

The heat has leaked from the water and the cold has spread a rash of goose bumps across my skin by the time I am free to leave the bath. I wrap a towel snugly around me and stare down at my hands, where the wrinkles on my fingers form a second layer of fingerprints. I am doubly identifiable now, and I know that I will be caught and punished for whatever it is that I have done.

2.

The day we visit Schlitterbahn Waterpark my mother captures my sister and me and drags us to her bathroom for a thorough suncreening. My sister and I are too excited to be contained; we slip and slide out of her hands the way I used to climb out of my high chair. Our restlessness is dangerous in this bathroom made entirely out of sharp corners.

My mother spreads the sunscreen on me with her own hands. She makes me stand with one leg up on the bath, like I'm about to go a-conquering, while her hands roam my body. I blush, a full body blush, veins burning where she touches me. As her fingers probe deeper, down my chest and up my legs, she reminds me that my swimsuit can shift with my movement. It is important to apply sunscreen even here, she says. But the suit feels tight enough to me, and her hands grip me even tighter.

My older sister Katy is still in the room, and she won't meet my eyes. I don't know why this is something that happens to me and never seems to happen to her.

My mother rubs her palms in slow circles across my chest, dipping her fingers below the line of my swimsuit. She tells me that I have beautiful skin, expensive skin, and I imagine that my flesh can be sold per pound like ivory. For comparison, my mother points to the skin of her chest, from her collarbone down to a deep V between her breasts. The skin there has rusted over into an uneven dark orange, rough like an all-consuming callous.

"If you're not careful," she tells me, voice pitched so that only I could hear, "this could be you one day."

Already I look so much like my mother. I have her pear figure, the soft slope of her nose, the width of her shoulders, the curl of her hair, the open pores of her skin.

Sometimes when I catch glimpses of myself in the mirror I don't recognize myself. I only see her.

3.

My mother lies in her bed, covered in layers of rich, gem-like green and purple. The colors look even darker in the limpid yellow light that slips in through the window shades. I don't know if it's the lighting or her fever, but her skin looks dead. Dad is either at work or drunk, so caring for my mother has become my responsibility. There's

“I want to burrow close to her, and I want to run.”

not much to do but take aspirin and drink water, but Mom wants it to be a big deal, so a big deal it must be. Stop the presses; we have a cold.

Per her request, every half-hour I slip through the swinging doors to her bedroom. I creep on the balls of my feet through the stifling air to check on her.

Most of the day she sleeps. I look at her reclining body, a heavy lump of biological processes, and I am struck by two conflicting impulses. I want to burrow close to her, and I want to run. I want her to reach for me at the same time that I fear that her flesh would engulf me. I would become part of the purple, warm, respiring mass in front of me, and I would never be able to leave.

After dinner, my mother emerges from her bedroom. She is wearing a nightgown in the shade of perfect blue that little children color the sky. The fabric is tied together at her neck but flows free across the rest of her body. The fabric is thin, and she is not wearing a bra. The light shines behind her, showing the silhouette of her pendulous breasts and bulging stomach as she shuffles towards me.

The air seethes around her as she approaches and pulls me in an enveloping hug. I can feel every curve of her body, especially her chest, in which she buries my head. My breath tastes cloyingly sweet, and the taste glues my tongue to the roof of my mouth. Mother thanks me for taking care of her.

4.

When my mother kisses me, she traps my face beneath her hands so that I can't squirm away. I scrunch my eyes up tight, but the sensation of her lips on mine stays. I am not a baby anymore; I know that the world doesn't disappear just because I close my eyes. I never see, but sometimes I think I feel, her tongue in my mouth.

5.

I am in seventh grade biology class when I feel a release of pressure just below my stomach. I hate my period immediately. Not just the inconvenience or even the brutal pain—I hate the entire concept that I am a woman now and a part of me is ready to have a child.

I am a cross-country runner; I already exercise too much, and with just a hint of dieting I become amenorrhic. The less I eat, the less I bleed, and I love it. I refuse to be the latest in a long line of Russian dolls, another child inside a child inside a child. Each mother creates a daughter, and each daughter fits perfectly inside the mother to whom she belongs.

For months in middle school, I still cramp once a month, but the sensation blends into hunger pains. Again and again I dream of sticky red blood pooling over my hips, so think it sinks me into the mattress and glues me to the bed. I wake up hungry, but that doesn't mean that I have to eat.

6.

I am anorexic for many years.

“ I wake up
hungry, but that
doesn't mean that
I have to eat.”

7.

One day in my junior year of high school I walk into my room and my mother is already there. The doors are wide open, so that I can still hear the downstairs TV and smell roasting chicken and beer. My mother's glasses are on the bedside table, and she is lying on my bed. She is under the covers, and her skin is touching my sheets—*my* sheets, which touch *my* skin. Her greasy hair is fanned over my pillow.

“Mom?”

“Sorry honey,” my mother's voice is sleep-blurred and heavy. “It's *so* comfy.”

“Mm-hmm,” I say. I feel like the mother in this situation, tight-lipped and disapproving. “C'mon, sweetie,” she says. “Join me.”

“Mom,” I say as quietly as I can manage. “I have studying to do.”

In the future I will wonder if I only succeeded in school because homework was one of the only excuses my mother would accept. For the time being, she gestures at my desk as if to tell me to get on with it, already.

“But Mom...that's my bed.”

“In a minute,” she slurs. “Besides, who paid for the bed? It's not really yours, is it?”

I stand beside the bed and stare as my mother falls back into a deep, restful sleep. I wait fifteen minutes before she rolls off the bed, towards me, and lurches into a hug. She squeezes me so tight that I am forced to relinquish the breath I have been holding. My mother's body is soft and yielding, and I sink into it.

Finally she leaves, and I close and lock the doors, seal my curtains, and turn off the lights. I lie back on my empty bed, hands folded behind my head so that I can see my own jutting hips and the way my stomach collapses in on itself. My skin is pale as heavy cream against the sheets, because it's been years since I wore a swimsuit. I watch my ribs move while I breathe, shallow and careful to avoid the lingering smell of my mother's Midnight Pomegranate lotion.

My room locks, but the lock is childproof. It'll click right open if you stick a wooden skewer in the small hole above the doorknob.

8.

We fight over my clothes, like most mothers with most daughters. I wear something too low-cut, she protests, I protest her protestation—what I'm pretty sure is normal mother-daughter stuff.

I warn her once, "I'm going off to college in a few years, and then I'll wear whatever I want. And you know the harder you push now, the more ridiculous things I'll wear then."

"Oh, that won't bother me," she says.

"Really?"

"Well, yes," she says, as though this ought to be obvious. "Because you'll be far away by then, and no one will see me or know that I'm your mother. No one will associate the two of us."

I pause a second before asking, "Does that mean that you're...ashamed to be seen with me?"

"When you dress like that," Mother gestures at my lime green tank top. "No mother wants to be seen with a daughter like that. I mean, look! You're straining over the top of that!"

I do not agree, but I comply. It is not worth it to fight with someone who has all the money, the legal power, the physical strength, the approval of their peers, and my unconditional love. Besides, my mother says that I still owe her for carrying me for nine months and giving up her job to raise my sister and me.

When I return in a t-shirt, my mother immediately tucks me under her arm.

"Look at you—so beautiful," she says, nuzzling against me. "My baby girl."

9.

I let my mother win all our arguments, because I love her, and because I fear her, and most of all because I cannot tell the difference between those two.

When my mother was angry, which was often, she put me on emotional probation. She wouldn't hug me, wouldn't talk to or look at me. She would deliberately

give extra attention to Katy in front of me—which is not to say that my mother and Katy were ever as close as my mother and I were. Katy remembers nothing improper.

I was jealous but relieved when my mother ignored me for Katy, and now I am relieved but jealous that Katy has led what looks to me like an easier life.

I am the only child that was chosen for this, so it feels obvious that I am somehow complicit in the problem. I must have done something wrong that Katy never did. I should have spoken up. I should have insisted on showering by myself upstairs. I should have turned my head away so that my mother's wet lips landed on my cheek. People tell me that I'm innocent and I should just stop feeling guilty, and I understand that. I just need to know how.

10.

I am nineteen, huddled with a cute bisexual girl on the window seat on the third floor of my college. Her hand is on my leg, and I want to skim my fingers across her skin in one long line starting at the bridge of her nose. Instead I slip a lock of her hair behind her ear. She smiles and leans forward, so that we are forehead-to-forehead sharing secrets.

She grabs my hand and leads me to her room. I can't stop giggling.

Soon we're making out on her bed. We're pressed together, tilted at an awkward forty-five degree angle from the bed. I want to lie down and tug her on top of me, but at the same time I want to sit up straight and press my body against hers. Our balance is precarious, but I don't mind. Her hands are in my hair, and her eyes are closed. We are sharing a fast heartbeat, and my hands are so excited they don't know where to rest.

Then something falls loose in my memory, and everything is wrong. It feels foul to be swapping spit with someone and sucking on her tongue. I lose focus on the girl, and I don't remember what's cute and what isn't. The wave of fear and guilt is so overpowering that I start to doubt if I was ever enjoying this at all.

Offering flimsy excuses, I scramble out from under the girl. I tuck her hair behind her ear again, and tell her that she is beautiful. My heart is racing and it's not in the good way anymore.

“Don’t panic,” she says. She knows me.

“I might panic,” I say. She hugs me close and sends me two doors down the hall to my own bed, where I cannot sleep for wondering what the hell just happened. My skittish mind shies away from the effort; my own memories are hidden under Halloween masks. I don’t want to see the face under the mask; I know it will be far scarier than some plastic replica of *The Scream*.

11.

I could not control my memory forever, just as I could not control my body. Apparently, all those times I told myself, *this isn’t happening because this can’t be happening*, I wasn’t listening. It happened, and I have only just begun to remember.

I found my memories perfectly preserved. The years had no effect on what I’d repressed; I didn’t let my wandering mind leave a single footprint upon them. Now that I’ve dug up my memories, I can’t look at them in the past tense. I lose the perspective of a survivor and even of an adult. When I remember, I am that girl again, naked and all of seven years old and covered in SPF 60. I am small and vulnerable and neither of my parents love me enough which means that no one loves me and I can feel the emptiness like a hunger where their love should be, in my left breast like a sore muscle and in my right calf like shivering and in my throat like being choked. I should be used to the sensation by now, but I’m not.

12.

My mother is driving me under the Mo-Pac overpass when she asks the question. It is my senior year of high school, and razor blade cuts are scabbing over on my upper right thigh. My doctor noticed the cuts during a check-up over the summer and handed my mother a list of psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers to contact on my behalf. My mother only knows about the self-harm; she has not noticed the weight loss. She considers me to be a troubled teen, one of those disappointments she read about in parenting books. Maybe she’s right. Either way I am going to group therapy every Thursday evening.

She does not take her eyes off the road when she asks, “Have you been thinking of suicide?”

When I was younger my mother told me, explicitly and repeatedly, that she didn’t want to deal with my sadness and I should pretend to be happy. Lying to her comes easily now.

Now she asks, “Have you been thinking of suicide?” and I can’t seem to lie. The idea seems disrespectful to my own death, and yet I know I can’t tell her the truth. She’d put me under house arrest.

“Have you been thinking of suicide?”

After every meal I skip, I think, surely this will kill me soon. I know that the starvation won’t kill me directly, but I can feel my heart slowing. I can feel the sluggishness of my blood while it lurches around my body, and I wait for bradycardia to stop my heart. I’m not just thinking about suicide. I’m in the midst of attempting it.

“Have you been thinking of suicide?”

“Yes.”

My mother begins to cry. She demands to know, am I really going to do it? Do I know how terrible that is? Do I want to be a statistic? Don’t I know that I have so much to live for? And most importantly, how can I do this to her?

Her questions dissolve into sobs, and I have to comfort her, because she is coping with the reality that she could lose a part of herself. When her tears spill over I grab the wheel and steer us towards downtown, careening through the shrinking lanes. The wheel of the top-heavy minivan feels tiny in my hands. One little twist and the whole metal beast can veer off course, and it’s only an inch on each side from the white dashed lines.

My mother wipes her tears and interrupts her sobs to speak with sudden clarity. She says, “If you commit suicide, I’ll probably kill myself.”

13.

In the years since I left my family’s house, our dog has developed an anxiety disorder. Stella, our dachshund, shakes herself into a panic whenever my mother leaves

her for even a few minutes. She lost weight, not that she had much of it to begin with. And she's going bald.

Katy attributes Stella's nerves to abandonment—first Katy left for RISD, then me for Rice, then Dad for an apartment because Mom kicked him out of the house.

“Or,” I say, “Or...it's a sign that Mom should never be allowed to take care of anything.”

“Hey, be nice,” Katy scolds. “Don't be so hard on Mom. She's trying, you know. Going to therapy and everything.”

Mom was the last one in our family to go to therapy. For years she insisted that she was the sane one among all of us—that Katy just happened to develop trichotillomania back in elementary school, while Dad happened to develop alcoholism, while I happened to develop anorexia and a tendency to self-harm. In the years since I have left, my mother has been humbled.

When I visited one summer she even apologized, just for being overbearing. She apologized, and then she came over to crush me to her, sob into my hair, and ask if I would ever forgive her.

I don't know if I will. Friends and psych majors all tell me, if you never tell her what you're dealing with, your relationship will never heal, but I'm not sure that I want a healed relationship. Maybe I really am the problem child that my mother claimed, because I just want to get my hands on enough money to get a financial safety net and then never speak to my parents again. Whatever combination of self-protection, exhaustion, and spite motivates me, I am the bad guy now. My mom sits at home in the huge empty house with only our balding dog for company, and I won't even return her calls.

14.

My mother tells me that I was born blue and silent, with the umbilical cord wrapped twice around my neck. I wonder what it felt like, to be dried and then choked. I wonder about the sensation of pain before my nervous system was developed.

Soon enough, I must have started to breathe. Only then would the doctors clean me and weigh me and wrap me up, all before handing me back. I imagine those first few breaths I took, surrounded by doctors and nurses and blocked from my mother's view. Someday, maybe even soon, the air will taste that clear again.

Oblivion

Courtney Brown

Let them be candles who will soon be memory
Whose flickerings offer but mere, transient gleams
Whose flames, though dogged,
Are no match for even shallow breathing
And bow to trembling voice and haunting song
Whose fervid praises, glowing hymns,
Remain and are restrained
By wick and wax and
Mortal will

I'd rather be the darkness
Unending as fear
Chasing dreamers in the night
Enduring when the wind
Has whipped away the candles' flames
Standing in the corners
Waiting in the shade
For the lights to dim and waver
And their petty fevers to break and fail

I'd rather be the darkness
Soaked in all obscurity
Come to wrap my arms around you
And hold you in your sleep
For without a touch of darkness there can be no light
Yet darkness dwells eternally in every crevice of creation
So let me be the shadows lying dormant in your mind
Filling up the emptiness you let your doubt design

[After Polanco]



Stepping into the Academic Quad
Hrothgar

Ciao Amore

Annie Heinrich

The coffin made him look enormous, like a lumberjack, stretching the confines of his suit. Funny, because for years she had thought of Charlie as small, tiptoeing around their creaky house. She had spent a lot of time pacing the length of the living room before coming to the wake, and now only a few people remained in the dimming room. She'd felt uncomfortable entering the parlor, as though she didn't truly belong. She looked at him, laid out like this, so alien from the man she thought she knew. How he had aged.

She stared into his empty face and tried to hate him. This man and his body, after all these years, were the only things she thought she knew well. She knew he coifed his hair each morning with closeted vanity; she knew the topography of his chest, soft with age and leisure, where she used to rest her head. She knew his veined eyelids, closed, just like she liked them. She could still smell his stale breath when he'd wake on Sunday mornings, wobbly with alcohol when he'd tell her no church today. She could see the way his lips parted a bit in the middle, showing off a sliver of his crooked, yellow teeth that he used to bite pen caps and sometimes a beer cap if he felt like showing off. But she tried hard not to remember his strong hand upon her back when he noticed her melancholy, or the inventive bedtime stories he'd whisper to Mark and Amy, gesturing wildly to animate the dragon and the princess. She didn't want to remember how he kissed her forehead each night before he went up to bed while she read in the living room. She didn't want to remember how he introduced her as his better half, or that he

truly meant it. She didn't want to remember because maybe it was easier to remember him how she wanted—as a man she only thought she loved.

She slid her hand down the side of the coffin, her light pink nails juxtaposed with the sleek black. Her mother had raised her with poise, and though she tried hard to disappoint her mother, each year she inched closer to her likeness. Superficially, Lucia made her mother happy: manicures every two weeks, shoulders back and head held high, a gracious *You're too sweet* in response to a compliment, marriage to Charlie. But she made a point to leave a sliver of tension between their cheeks when her mother leaned in for a side kiss. She refused to stand at the top of the staircase behind the bookcase, supposedly waiting to make a grand entrance for each nervous date. She would never pass on bread and dessert because crême brulee is just too damn good, she said one night out at dinner. And one time when she was seventeen, she ran away for a weekend. She stayed at her friend's house on the Cape, but she told her mother she spent the night on a bus, circling around town long after midnight through ghettos and farm towns.

She knew she didn't love Charlie on a long summer day when she realized he would never stop smoking cigarettes. It was in the phase when cigarettes were still in vogue, but their health effects were becoming apparent. She quit for the children and the smell, which she could never really swallow. After seeing her quit, he proclaimed he would too. Every morning he'd wake up, ready to quit for good, and each evening he'd return from the train station with smoke on his breath and tobacco on his fingers, unable to resist himself on that long ride home. *How weak*, she thought. She didn't intend to marry a failure.

Her wedding ring scratched the surface of the coffin as the tips of her wrinkled fingers stroked the black box, this box that contained an essence of her dysfunction, a summary of her conflict, and also just a man. She paused like this, eyes toward the wood paneling of the small parlor, but her thoughts were years away. She was so young when they wed, right after those men had landed on the moon, when the nation was

abuzz with hope. A kind of hope that had infected her, entranced her into a temporary revelry. She walked down the aisle on a cloud of possibility, and Charlie tip-toed across it, treading lightly and deliberately for as long as he could. It was almost like he knew the feeling couldn't last.

She had spent that previous summer of 1968 in Florence, with another student named Anthony, with whom she had a volatile yet passionate affair. At the end of the summer, however, he refused to go back to Wichita State and said that she shouldn't go back to Boston, that she and her parents exemplified the *bourgeois* society he sought to banish, that love should always win. They'd live with his friends from the movement, he said. He didn't ever want to go back. Then he debunked monogamy as a myth invented by capitalists, symbolically threw an American dollar in the trashcan, and locked himself in the bathroom, the steam seeping under the door a cruel bitterness stroking her cheeks.

As she waited out his storm, she fingered a letter her mother sent the month before. At the time, she had dismissed it as she did all her letters, filled with *Dear Lucias, Bring your chin up darlings*, and meaningless maxims like *Life is long but so is death*. Her mother had mentioned at least one potential suitor in each letter, in hopes that one would somehow strike Lucia's fancy. There was Dave Hodgekiss with the mean tennis arm, Lou Bradford who called her mother beautiful, and all the John Smith's of the nearly upper class society of Boston. None appealed to Lucia, but looking at that letter, in that moment, in that state, Charlie Reeves (*You remember his father, State Senator Reeves?*), with the clever bridge hand and toothy yet charming smile, sat himself down in her imagination and made a home. A world was waiting for her.

She stuffed her clothes into a suitcase and sneaked out of the villa just after midnight, deciding it was time to grow up. Lucia showed up on her parents' doorstep, bearing a suitcase and a smile. Charlie picked her up that Friday in his father's convertible. Though he acted in that same self-assured way as all the other boys, there seemed to be something beneath all that that was intrinsically good. He had a loud voice and laugh that echoed across the restaurant. It didn't seem obnoxious to her

then, just vibrant. When he smiled at the baby boy at the table next to them, Lucia felt herself disappear from his awareness for just a moment, and she admired that about him. More importantly, he checked a lot of boxes on that list of perfection. *This is the type of man to marry*, she thought when he walked her to the door. She was twenty years old, and she sometimes thought she married him just to spite the effeminate Anthony.

It wasn't until Mark was ten when she saw Anthony again, an iced coffee in his right hand, fanning his eyes from the sun as he walked swiftly in the park where Mark's team was losing a soccer game. He walked for a good ten yards before she was sure it was him. It was his stride that she'd never forget, the way his feet turned out just the slightest bit and how he carried himself like a king. Charlie had stayed home that Saturday morning, sick or hungover or something like that, which made her even more willing to forget him. She jogged up to Anthony in the warm spring air, out of breath by the time she reached him, fanning her eyes from the sun as she breathed a bright "Hey." Taken by surprise, he started, his long, graceful fingers sending the iced coffee over the edge of the cup and onto his brown loafers. She wished he'd chuckle, alleviate the awkwardness, but he was never a laugher. Even his smile was somehow always serious.

"I've missed you, Lucia," he said.

And all those years just melted away.

The months that ensued were frantic. She refused to go to a motel or anywhere with a front desk, so they went to his apartment. She found he chose his furnishings the way he chose his books, with precision and thought, but he placed them in the same way, haphazardly about the house in places that were neither functional nor handsome. The first time, she walked through the hallways in silence as though in a museum, pausing at each item, picking it up, holding it, turning it over. He followed, watching her like some specimen in a lab, fearing she would ignite.

She brushed the tips of her fingers over the cover of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, dusty but unopened. She analyzed the "Employee of the Month"

certificate she found underneath a coffee table book on Moscow's churches; it was tattered and discolored, marked with a date from five years before, the insignia of the small law firm where he served as paralegal emblazoned in green and blue. She grazed her fingers over his Mozart record that he'd play for her later.

The walls of his bedroom were painted a bright orange, even the ceiling. Some nights she found herself staring up at the color for ages without realizing; it reminded her of a dress she wore as a girl in the summertime. She wondered why she kept coming back to that dress. Was it Freudian? Was she guilty? Why couldn't she stop staring?

“Even his smile
was somehow
always serious.”

They were in Niantic, that summer of '63. The breeze glided through the sailboats at the yacht club, bringing a chill that tickled her neck and fondled her hair. It felt nice across her sunburn. She was fourteen years old, and it was mostly

a happy night. The club jutted out over the water, facing the lagoon where the boats swayed with each passing wave, only to be tugged back into their moors. The annual Fourth of July party boomed by the dock, and the hoots of laughter and squeals of *Did he really?* echoed over the firework show. She, Rosemary, and Connie sat on the rocks behind the yacht club in their party dresses where they had a view of the horizon.

Rosemary put her fingers over her mouth with a smirk she probably picked up from Vivien Leigh. Her hand reached behind a rock and emerged with a shiny green bottle of champagne.

“To celebrate,” she said, raising the bottle into the air as though she were discoverer claiming a land.

Lucia's mother once said to her father that champagne was too sour, too bubbly for her refined taste. When Lucia sipped it, she understood this feeling; it was sour and bubbly. But as she made herself swallow, she convinced herself she liked it. She liked it a lot.

“Truth or dare?” Rosemary said.

“Dare,” Connie said, with a false confidence she felt she needed to exude.

“Lucia should go first,” Rosemary said as she raised her eyebrows and swallowed a mouthful of bubbly champagne.

“Truth or dare.” Rosemary repeated.

“Truth,” Lucia said in a low voice.

“Tell us something embarrassing you’ve never told anyone. Something no one else knows, and no one else ever will.” Rosemary was pleased with her cleverness.

Lucia looked out on the water at the raft, floating a hundred yards from the shore. She thought back to five summers ago, when she tired three-quarters of the way there and the lifeguard ran into the water with that speed and precision that training bestows and hauled her shivering body to shore. She woke up to her mother smoking a cigarette above her, her black sunglasses covering her eyes, her red lips—the same ruby red as her clinging bathing suit—pursed and smug.

Connie and Rosemary watched her, but Lucia kept them waiting, more for dramatic effect than for anything real she felt. She gathered her thoughts and took a swig from the bottle.

“For a long time I thought I killed my grandmother,” she said.

The girls gasped. Connie hiccupped.

“I was seven, and she stayed over for Easter. She had this beautiful ruby brooch in the shape of a bird, like those ones you see in the movies, you know? And it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.”

Lucia could see the girls were enthralled with her story. Accordingly, she slowed her speech and deepened her voice to prolong this feeling.

“One night after everyone was asleep, I woke up and put on that deep orange strapless dress that my aunt gave me last Christmas. Mother said it was too mature for my age. I wanted to dance through the hallways like Debbie Reynolds. I knew the brooch would complement the dress in such a divine way, I simply had to have it. I tiptoed into her room to borrow it just for a few waltzes across the floor. While I was tugging it out from under a handkerchief, she sat up in bed and made this loud noise

like a wheeze. It looked like she was trying to scream but she couldn't. I ran as fast as I could back to bed, terrified in every way. In the morning, my parents said she had 'passed.' I had nightmares for years. Sometimes I imagine her walking through the house at night looking for that brooch."

She watched the girls watch her as she studied the ocean waves.

"Of course it wasn't your fault," Connie said.

"Yeah, of course."

They passed the bottle around and watched the fireworks after that, silent in all the noise.

Lucia felt bad for making up that story, but only a little bit. She wasn't quite sure why she did it, just that she liked the way it felt. Like she was smooth and fascinating, like she was alive.

When all the parents emerged from their revelry, stumbling with that gawk and volume that comes after parties, they found the girls and noticed no change. Lucia's mother didn't even look into her eyes at all. If she had, she would have found them sparkling, swimming even, in their own pool of wonder. She knew she'd be okay.

Anthony said a lot of things to her those days in the early '80s, as if Lucia were the priest who could forgive his sins. She wasn't. He said he came back when his mother got sick a few years after she left Florence. He said that when she died he sold the farm and went to New York and he wasn't sure if he felt sad or not. He said he lived in a studio apartment with others from the movement, but he had lost his Italian, and one day the stench in the kitchen, the cockroach crawling over his toes, and the couple procreating on the top bunk all led him to Foley's where he stood immobile at the tie counter, unsure how to go on. He said he moved to Boston two years before, following a job prospect. He said he sometimes thought of her but most times he didn't.

Then one day he said he couldn't do it anymore if she wouldn't commit to him. *Only twenty years too late*, she thought. Later she would laugh at the irony. Life never seemed to work out the way she thought it ought to. She said she needed to think, so in a trance she returned home and found herself an hour later sitting in the living room,

the brown leather of the couch sticking sweetly to her thighs. Amy sat beneath her, her back almost flush to Lucia's knees; she was entranced by her Barbies, so much so that she barely acknowledged Lucia's presence. Amy, so innocent, so kind. She doesn't even know the world.

Amy placed Barbie's hair into an updo and dressed her in a wedding gown, reassuring Barbie that she was making the right decision and that nobody would mess up her big day. Across the rug sat an elaborate wedding scene, with pews of dolls, each dressed in her nicest clothes, the ones in the back dressed casually because Amy ran out of clothes. On the other side, tables were filled with Play-doh food for the reception, handkerchiefs as tablecloths. Barbie's bridesmaids lay horizontal at the altar, ready for her grand entrance, and nearly one hundred Barbies gathered for the big day. Their plastic smiles frozen in perpetual happiness, they remained motionless, stuck in these chairs at this wedding until Amy decided they could move. But where else would they go? She hoped Amy would be happy.

She braided Amy's hair. She thought, *This is why I shouldn't do it. For the kids.* And so she decided not to leave Charlie. She told herself she made this decision for Mark and Amy; as a mother, she must think of their best interests. In years to come, when she thought back to this pivotal scene, she'd remind herself *But the children, the children* and that would be enough. But deep down she knew she wasn't that valiant; really, she just couldn't admit defeat.

"Ahem," someone coughed beside her. Lucia looked over and saw a woman, a little older than she, in a taupe tweed suit, the lopsided shoulder pads making her seem like a lost football player.

"I am sorry for your loss," she said.

Lucia nodded in acknowledgement; she could hear the cigarettes in her voice. Lucia recognized the woman, a Ms. Raymond from a house they lived in years ago on Prism Lane, that neighbor who hated Charlie because he once backed over one of her trashcans. She had yelled at him, called him a drunk, but Lucia never thought he actually was.

“I know you cared for him,” Lucia said, eyes set ahead.

They stood like that for a while, both stiff and vertical, identical in position and maybe even emotion. Ms. Raymond finally broke the silence with a hoarse rumble in her throat, followed by a faint jumble that sounded a lot like an explanation.

“Sometimes after you moved away to Cambridge, I would sit cross-legged in your driveway, waiting for one of you to walk out. I liked to hear Mark and Amy laugh on the swingset and smell baked chicken waft through the open kitchen window. I’d sit for hours,” she said, as if speaking to herself.

“Soon after an older gay couple moved in. They had a dog, but they were quiet. It was never like before.”

Lucia’s eyes reached for her own black patent-leather pumps. She stood, shoulders hunched over, as if in prayer, hands clasped and rested over the coffin.

She closed her eyes. She mostly remembered Ms. Raymond because Charlie used to secretly smoke with her in her yard, a few years after the trashcan incident. Charlie thought he was so sneaky, but she saw from the hall bathroom one afternoon when she was opening the window. She smelled the smoke first tickling her nose with its bitterness, then heard the laughter coming from the lawn chairs close to the fence. They thought it was their little bond, this imperfection. She never said anything, but late at night, he’d sometimes come in smelling of smoke and she wondered.

“I never meant anything,” Ms. Raymond said, her voice failing her midsentence.

The woman turned to Charlie with a long sigh. She reached her hand out as though to touch the coffin, then sharply pulled it back when she discovered her hand’s intentions. She turned quickly and walked out.

“I know,” Lucia whispered to Charlie. “I knew.”

Lucia met Anthony just how she thought she would: in a café in Florence. She wanted an escape from Tufts and its monotony, and he supplied that for her. As she forced down the bitter espresso that everyone else seemed to love, she put her closed fists beneath her chin and just watched the people pass by. She saw a man across the plaza; he wasn’t that attractive but his charisma made him a perfect spokesperson

for a cause. In those days, it was all the rage for the youth to passionately support a cause, any cause really. His plaid shirt stretched across his back as he reached high on a window to paste a poster on the shiny glass.

He began walking towards the café, and she looked down at her hands just in time to pretend like she wasn't watching. He sat beside her at the table, and she thought, *This is how it's supposed to happen*, even though she wasn't quite sure what it was. He began to speak to her, cocky almost, about politics and socialism and the future, and she thought, *Doesn't he just know*. He invited her to a rally the next day on women's rights.

"We have to change this," he said. "We just have to."

He talked a lot that day, and the ones that followed, but on the day he held her hand he was quiet, as though waiting for her to stop him; she didn't. She thought maybe he liked to hear himself talk, and there was such passion and urgency in his voice that she didn't mind. His tender voice lilted over those big words like *regime*, and *resistance*, and he exuded immense strength, success. He hypnotized her.

She liked him when he listened to her ideas and also when he would recite the names of each cow, pig, and horse on the family farm back home in Kansas. Sometimes she made him nervous, and his long fingers that sometimes graced the black wood of the piano would begin to tremble and he'd twist his long hair into segments while she'd watch curiously. One warm, humid night he stripped her of her clothes and her virginity. He'd say *I love you* and she'd say it back, all the while thinking, *Florence is just a summer*.

She wasn't quite sure what it was that made him come back to her, that tied her to him in such an inescapable bond. Sometimes she thought she was just the first girl who listened to him. She always thought it was odd, how with Charlie, she was the talker, he the listener. Even when his loud voice boomed over the din of neighborhood parties, when his embellishment of current events and anecdotes domineered each conversation, she was still the talker. But with Anthony she was the ever-present listener. He'd fall asleep talking sometimes, words spilling from his open mouth, and she'd watch his lips long after they stopped moving.

All these years, she blamed Charlie for her unhappiness, and that glint in his eye from time to time told her that he knew it, too. In later years, it seemed he had almost accepted his role as a villain in her life and allowed himself to act upon it. This was his greatest gift to her, for it freed her from herself.

Many nights she'd lie on her side of the bed, stare at the eggshell wall, and think about freedom. Freedom is a trip to Hawaii, trying the Venezuelan food from the foodtruck by the gas station on Massachusetts, sleeping all day just because she felt like it. She thought when Charlie died she'd feel a weight lift from her shoulders like people talk about. It still hadn't.

She looked around at the flickering lights and the leather seats meant for grieving. The room was empty now, Charlie's friends long gone. The children came by early, they had said, but she wanted to be alone. She tried to smile because she thought she felt free but found that she couldn't. Her tears slid down the coffin, racing to drip to the floor. She turned and left.

In the dimming sky, she couldn't see dark eyes in an older gray sedan waiting out front. She couldn't see long, slender fingers tapping the steering wheel in a rhythm. She couldn't hear the soft hum of the radio, playing Fantasy No. 4 in C Minor. But she knew he was there, waiting in the same spot where he dropped her off. She looked at the asphalt and kicked an abandoned cigarette butt a few feet to her left with the toe of her pump. "*Ciao*," she said into the wind.

Pyrolysis

Gregory Aird

As we stood with the others at the edge of the freeway,
I saw the smoke rise out of the edge of the dry grass field,
deep in the forest of birch trees. My father gripped my hand tighter

as we watched the forest belch out more
of the thick, black exhaust from deep within its bowels.
The trees looked more brittle, like multitudes of upright

bones, once bleached white by years of light, now left
turning to coal and bits of earthy ash. So easily it burned
after many years of growing, and so easily the tiny weight

of my heart fell as the scent of flames filled my nose.
So long ago it was, but even though memory is but a
photograph left to fade in the sun,

the image of that man's back remains branded within me;
he, leaning over the side of the bridge in silence, inhaling
the fumes, slowly twirling a match in his dirty fingertips,

and I, being pulled away by my dad,
feeling lost in the innocence of childhood.



Art

Might Be Venice
Elena Lacey

An Interview with Jasper Fforde

by Julie McKinney

Jasper Fforde spent twenty years in the film business and received 76 rejection letters before his first book, *The Eyre Affair*, was published in 2001. Fforde's writing is an eclectic mix of genres. The *Thursday Next* series features a literary detective who lives in an alternate version of our world. *The Big Over Easy's* nursery rhyme characters solve mysteries, while *Shades of Grey* poses a post-apocalyptic dystopia where the social hierarchy is based on the colors characters can see.

He also wrote a series for young adults set in a shabby world of failing magical powers. Jasper Fforde currently writes full time while living in Wales with his wife, children and dog. This interview was held with Mr. Fforde over breakfast in the town of Hay-on-Wye in the United Kingdom.



Who is a writer? What kind of people write?

I don't know really. I think it's a traditional profession that's possibly been going back as long as we can talk... I think it's entirely something that humans do and some people just get paid for it, which is good for me obviously. I like being paid to tell stories. But the people who tell them? I don't know... I think there is an element of performing in telling stories and I think maybe perhaps those people who like to perform perhaps like to be storytellers. And there's also a sense of a show-offy, virtuosity thing about being a storyteller. That you're taking all these ideas and words and an understanding of humans and then sort of wrapping it up and making it into something engaging and exciting, and I think there's a certain degree of magic involved there, wizardry. If you're a person who likes making rabbits appear out of hats, and things appear out of

nowhere, I think that appeals as a sort of magic as well. But I'm not sure. I've met many authors and it's like saying a typical reader. You know, who are readers? Well, everybody. There's no typical author. Generally, I think we're a bunch of showoffs.

Do you read other books while you write? If so, is it helpful to your writing process?

It is actually, a great deal of help. I would add a caveat to that actually. One of the most annoying things that I've found about being an author, one of the only things that's annoying about being an author, is actually that I have less time to read. I used to read a lot and now I'm writing. I spend a lot of time writing and less time reading. But when I am writing, and I'm reading stuff, maybe through procrastination, you know Wikipedia is like amazing procrastination because Wikipedia gets better and better all the time. You can read these long, long very, very detailed explanations of some incredibly esoteric subject, which actually is quite enlightening and you can almost pick up stuff by random. Going through the random button on the computer. You know moving from Reg Saunders to the Norwegian leather industry through to Perseus the God, and you can just find all this amazing things. So I do, yeah. But, even when I was reading more it always tends to filter through... when you're writing and you go to a dinner party and somebody says something incredibly crass or incredibly intelligent you go, "oh I may be able to use that." Then you try and find a way of sneaking it in to the narrative. Sometimes you know when you want to put in an idea it can't be in isolation, it has to be with other context in which that idea can happen or that person could say that in a conversation without it seeming strange. Conversations have an arc that you have to keep. You can't really move from one point to another, it has to be in this nice smooth thing. And if you've got three different facts you want to get across in a conversation, you have to steer the conversation expertly so you can cover all the things. You can't just write "oh by the way." I do it occasionally but only when I get really stuck. Oh! And you know, not to change the subject, but that reminds me. So yeah often you want to put something in. And then the very act of attempt to finagle it into the narrative puts you off on another tangent entirely, and you find some new idea

and go, “Ahh that’s interesting” and you’ve got this new nub of idea that pops to the fore seemingly out of nowhere and you can exploit that idea. I find generally that’s how I tend to write, in a kind of semi-organic kind of way.

Does traveling ever inspire your writing?

I think so, yeah definitely. I worked for nearly twenty years in the film industry and people say, “well that must have dictated how you tell your stories,” and I’m not sure it did. . . what it did allow me was to meet a lot of very eccentric people with a lot of very powerful egos and agendas, and an awful lot of travel as well. Travel is great fun. Just sort of looking at other things and seeing the way other people do things and just sort of moving away from Western Europe or America or seeing how the other world lives. So yeah, and writing is always the sum of the parts, the parts of the experiences of an author. And the more you can travel and do sort of bizarre things, stuff like that, I think it’s more interesting. . . We’re always trying to take things in and play with them.

When asked how you keep stories fresh and different, online you answered that you can usually dream something up. Do you actually dream and incorporate that into your stories?

Occasionally I do. That’s very odd, but on occasion I have had dreams where I’ve gone, “that was quite interesting, I wonder why I was dreaming that,” and I’ve jotted it down and used it. But for the most part dreams are kind of random. For the most part I just sit there and stare in space and take two ideas and put them together. Or take two characters who want different things, put them together with a situation and see what comes out in the mix.

Have you ever been working on a piece and you couldn’t solve it?

Yeah, quite often you go down blind alleys where it’s sort of thinking, “well this is just boring,” or it’s not progressing, or it’s the same thing again, you know it’s like watching

24 on the telly. You go, “well she escapes, and then they get her again, and then she escapes again, and then they get her again, and Jack Bauer still can’t get to her.” And then they escape again, and then they capture her again, and you go, “you know it’s just going on and on and on, it’s all the same.” Often you’re writing and you think, “well okay, this scene has gone on enough, we need to move on and do something else.” So, yeah, I’ll often write down a little sort of blind alley and realize it’s just not working and then delete it and carry on and find a fresh approach to something. It’s taking turns, trying to stop being on the straight road. It’ll take you all these pathways, crossing, but eventually come back to the main narrative trail.

Do you find advantages or disadvantages to having a male or female protagonist?

Not really. I like writing with female protagonists because I find female protagonists more interesting. I don’t know if that’s because I’m a bloke, that’s perhaps a reason. The first two books I wrote were the *Nursery Rhyme* books and had a male protagonist and actually I was more interested in his two closest females, Mary Mary who is sort of a bit conflicted and his wife. They were more interesting for me. So when I had written those two books and went into my third I thought, “I’ll write with a female protagonist,” and that was *Thursday Next* and I seem to have kind of stuck with that, with Jennifer Strange and the character in *Shades of Grey*. Although it’s first person—Eddie, it’s kind of really about her, and she is by far the more interesting character of the two; although he does change over the course of the book, but she is a very interesting, bizarre character who tries to kill him several times . . . Miss Havisham is a great character to write, ya know, feisty. Feisty old ladies I think are a tremendously funny thing to write about. Not the same feisty old blokes. Doesn’t have the same catch does it. They’re just more grumpy. Perhaps because you don’t expect old ladies to run around in really fast cars, maybe that’s the amusement. If our genders were more streamlined and we were more similar then perhaps it wouldn’t matter so much, but I think probably that’s why I like female protagonists.

Memorial

Marissa Hall

Mother Nature is showing off today. The September air is simultaneously smooth and crisp, capable of stirring the blonde hairs on my arms without causing goose bumps. “Look at how full of life I am,” the day brags, Lake Huron glittering like glass, the sky clear of clouds and the trees a spectrum of fiery hues.

I step onto the edge of the boat’s clean fiberglass edge, toes curling under, grasping it like claws. My brother is already in the water, my mother stripping down to her high-waisted underwear, the elastic loose, her dark bikini line unshaven. My uncle removes his t-shirt.

When I hit the water, my legs break the surface with a crack. The jump is a sharp movement, my legs in a jackknife, the water cold, shocking and harsh. I imagine Regan’s ashes floating below me, swirling lazily like sand or fog. When they hit the water five minutes before me, they seemed to exhale as they touched the surface, the particles taking their time to separate and dissolve. My body tightens in the cold. Regan is everywhere around me yet completely gone.

His body was in plastic bags—Ziploc sandwich bags. A body disembodied. We each took turns holding a bag, tipping it towards the water, watching the chalky murk swim and fall with no feeling of urgency, Regan taking a last, languid draw on his cigarette. A smoky breath under water.

*

Two years and two months earlier, we are in a similar spot in the bay. “Whip me, Shauna,” Regan says, his arm resting casually against the tube, his blue eyes challenging

my mother, a younger brother egging on his older sister. “I bet you can’t flip me.” He turns, all attitude and big body, neck thick and stiff since he was eighteen. His white scars, older than I am, look tough, but they are a testament to his near-broken body, the dive into water that caused his cracked and broken neck.

Regan does not wear checkered, mid-thigh boxers. When he strips off his heavy cargo shorts on the back of our boat, his full belly hangs shamelessly over his tighty whiteys. His sunburned face flushes with youthful glee. I imagine him when he was ten, drunk for the first time at a classy cocktail party my grandparents held in their new house, skipping and emptying the sweet, half-finished, lipstick-stained punch glasses the adults handed to him to clear. My mother told me this wasn’t why he had troubles. He had an addictive personality.

My father drives the boat with muscles tense; my mother is the spotter. Regan gives her the thumbs up. “Faster,” she says to my father. “He wants to go faster.” I imagine she hates her brother a little at this moment, his need to show off, his vivacity always bordering on deadly.

Slack in the rope. My father hits the gas and the rope pops, Regan flung from the tube as easily as the snap of a wrist, the flick of a finger to a piece of dirt. He’s a child again when he climbs back into the boat, his chest heaving with exhausted excitement, his smile huge and unencumbered. “That was awesome,” he says. We stop holding our breath.

“Mom would have a heart attack if she saw that,” my mother says.

*

The best thing about swimming is submersion, the weightlessness of a body. I feel release, floating fleetingly in silent darkness, the water a womb. Sometimes it seems as if my thoughts pause underwater: my momentary meditation.

But this is only when the water is warm. Today it pierces my skin, makes my head throb, instantly sends purple color to my lips and makes my nipples ache. I keep my head above water, doggy-paddle after the others. My grandmother watches from the boat. Laughing? We squeal, curse, shout. Our legs scissor and stir the water.

Carrousel (Piazza della Repubblica)

Trey Ferguson

Their silent mania awaits you
before you even arrive. In vain,
the painted horses conspire against
their perpetual motion, ready to leap
from the platform into the sky.
But they let every little fancy
move the reins. Now God
steps over the machine. He thumps His chest.

The wheel spins
and the electric birthday cake stands
still while the whole city revolves
around it, blurring the night into a patternless
sleep from which I'm trying to awake.

It felt fine to let
the days drag by,
like stars collecting in voids
or lichen growing on gravestones. It felt fine.



The Last Straw
Yutian He

Kingdom

Emily Nichol

There had been a warning at least a month before, but when the doorbell rang Norma was still surprised. She could see the child through her front window, though the way she pressed herself against her kitchen wall kept her invisible from the outside. It was almost evening, and the setting desert sun glared at the child's muddy blond hair. The sun was still burning hot orange, making the cacti shine, but the brightest pricks of the bravest summer stars were already piercing through the sky.

Norma was frozen.

The child carried one small suitcase by hand, an old beat up leather trunk with big brass clasps. It probably wasn't big enough to hold more than a few shirts, maybe a teddy bear and a toothbrush. What kind of parent sent their child this far, for two whole weeks, with such pathetic provisions?

The gypsy cab had been waiting at the curb to see if the child made it into the house, but after a few moments it drove off. Norma realized with a shock of embarrassment that she was seriously considering staying like this all day, hiding, just to see what the child would do.

The child was Natalie Rogers, the daughter of Norma's brother. When Norma thought of Vincent Rogers, the usually friendly wrinkles that adorned her forehead stretched apart and her eyebrows arched far above her thick tortoiseshell glasses. Norma was a good nine years older than her brother, but the two had never really been close. Now, Vincent Rogers lived in New Jersey, a fact that Norma whispered if anyone asked, as though New Jersey was a symptom of a disease one could only contract from the

most profligate of exploits. Norma wasn't sure what Vincent's job was anymore, but she had an idea that he had a close relationship with science or technology, because the letter he sent berated her for not answering her email months before. Norma had laughed; she didn't even own a computer.

However, Vincent's letter had been long and handwritten, not typed. He had requested that Norma allow his daughter to come visit her at her Arizona estate: there had been some trouble in their neighborhood; Natalie wasn't doing well in school; the air was healthier in Sedona. Vincent offered a variety of vaguely violent excuses, many scratched out and smeared over with so much Liquid Paper that when Norma had turned the letter over to examine the other side, she still couldn't make out the original word. Vincent said the girl needed to spend some time in the country to understand the values of silence and simplicity. She needed to see the house where he had grown up.

Norma had been reluctant to agree: just the idea of houseguests, even from her own family, gave her anxiety. She had all but exiled herself to her southwestern compound, formerly a working ranch that had since fallen prey to Norma's meticulous gardening and amateur archaeological digs, both habits leading to a decidedly not child-safe environment.

Norma picked up her mug of now-cold tea, and walked towards the door.

"Good evening," she said as she let the child in. She was suddenly aching aware of her British accent.

Natalie said nothing, but she followed Norma inside and closed the door behind her. The girl was slight, probably shorter than most kids her age; she was as substantial as a paper doll. Her sallow, unfreckled skin stretched over her wan face, and her eyes took on the dull sheen of someone who had spent too much time looking at one place. Her hair was stringy from the long flight, and the ends dangled just below her ears. Her red-checked shirt had a brown stain on the front pocket.

Natalie seemed to be transfixed by the adobe cabin. The house had been newly decorated when Norma's parents purchased it in 1976, but now the floral wallpaper

looked dated and had begun to yellow. The floor was hardwood, but it had been years since it lost its gloss.

Norma remembered the first time she had seen the house. She had run ahead of her family, a devil of energetic excitement, and thrown the door open. The house had been purchased already furnished, and Norma had been fascinated by the colored appliances—the pumpkin orange oven, the sprout green toaster—and ran from room to room extolling the virtues of each. *This one has three windows! This one has a bouncy couch!*

“Mind your brother!” her mother had called to her, gesturing to the three year old toddling up the dusty pathway. Norma loved her baby brother, but as a twelve year old in a new country, she couldn’t help exploring first. She hurried the boy off the path, showing him a bizarre purple flower covered in spindles and spikes of different shapes, which made funny noises each time she touched one. Vincent quickly lost interest and waddled back over to their mother, who was carefully maneuvering their father’s wheelchair into the house. Norma’s father had coughed, the uncontrollable hacking kind that he had developed a months before, the kind that made the wrinkles around her mother’s eyes harden and her breath catch in her lungs. No one was listening to him mutter about the bright blistering heat, such an affront to the Surrey fog they had abandoned.

Now, the house didn’t look like the floor had been swept in months, but the beige paint on the kitchen cabinets was smooth and fresh, and the wooden fixtures gleamed like buffed ice. Objects were laid out over every flat surface, little lumps completely encrusted with earth systematically separated from each other by an invisible grid. On the shelf were fragments of melted metal, chunks of rusty farm equipment, skeleton keys, and watch gears. On the kitchen table, a newspaper sat in a neatly folded stack next to a clean white plate set with a napkin and a knife on the left side, a fork on the right. Norma realized her morning ritual—breakfast, paper, dishes, dry, reset—had neglected to include her guest. Norma led Natalie to a spare wooden chair.

“Would you like some tea?” Norma asked as she began to refresh her own mug.

“I . . . do you have like a Coke?” Natalie asked.

Norma felt Natalie's watery blue gaze boring into her forehead. She felt several beads of sweat clinging to her wrinkles, and it was getting hard to swallow.

"I don't normally keep processed food products in the house. Did you know that I'm a vegetarian? Closer to vegan, really. But let's see..."

Natalie sniffed, and then touched one of the objects that occupied the grand kitchen counter, which was covered by a skirt of carefully laid old newspaper imbricated with plastic garbage bags. The object was Norma's most recent excavation project, a treasure that she suspected was an ancient pueblo figurine. She had been carefully brushing the object with the softest watercolor paintbrush she could find for hours every day, trying to blow away centuries of earth with the precision of a surgeon.

"Please be careful—in fact, why don't you just put that right down, dear," Norma said, the muscles in her shoulders tensing up. The air conditioner whined.

"What is it?" Natalie asked, using her thumb to brush away some red dirt. She squinted as she examined the object. "Is it some kind of doll?"

"Oh, I'm sure it's nothing that would interest you. It's from a different world, maybe Hopi. But mind—mind your finger! It's very fragile, you know. This sort of thing, it's scientific. Nothing a young girl like you would care about. How old are you, exactly?"

"Eleven," Natalie said. Her shoulders had drifted up towards her ears, making her body as thin and straight as a line. Her pupils expanded while she examined the object, washing out her pale blue eyes, and her blond eyelashes fringed out around them. She blinked quickly several times.

"Is it—does it have a face?"

Norma inhaled as much air as she could, and held her breath for five seconds. "Please. It needs to be handled gently. It needs to stay in its place."

To Norma, this felt like hell. Although Norma usually thrived in silence, the one that faced her now was surprisingly oppressive. Norma could see Natalie's fair face brightening with color, and her eyes were glued to her shiny leather boots.

"Would you prefer to unpack a bit? Shall I show you to your room?"

Natalie nodded, and clutched the fraying handle of her suitcase between her fingers.

“Follow me then. Your room is in the back of the house, facing the brush. You know, I think you might sometimes see a family of foxes around. You might be able to see the den from your window. I hope that doesn’t frighten you. Do you like animals?” Norma paused. Natalie said nothing. Norma clasped her hands together tightly and looked out the window. “I think the foxes are so nice looking. When the older one comes out and sort of frolics with the younger . . . and the color always looks so nice against the rock, and you really begin to understand the cleverness of blending in, like camouflage, and all sorts of . . . brilliant things.”

Natalie set her suitcase on the center of the bed, careful not to disturb its contents or the bed’s neat construction.

“There isn’t a television, I’m afraid, and the only telephone is in the kitchen.” Norma didn’t want to mention the complete absence of Internet, and there wasn’t even an outlet in this room. “We should probably give your folks a ring soon, it is getting a bit late. Don’t you want to un-pack? A little nesting might help you . . . settle?”

Natalie opened the suitcase and took out a stack of letters, neatly tied with a brown grosgrain ribbon, and set them on the bedside table. She removed a metal pen, a leather belt, a few oxford shirts, several pairs of tailored black pants, a plain pink cotton dress, a plastic toothbrush, and many pairs of starched white socks. Natalie reached deep into her bag and took out a tube of lipstick, handling it as if it were a holy relic.

“Makeup? Aren’t you a bit young to be wearing makeup?” Norma nearly jumped at her own voice, realizing that she had been leaning against the room’s unstylish wood paneling, mesmerized by the girl’s actions. She quickly corrected her posture.

Natalie perched on the edge of the bed and squinted as she uncapped the tube and screwed out the product. A rich, currant-stained red emerged from the tube, emitting a faint poof of dust.

“It’s old,” Natalie said. “I . . . stole it.”

Norma thought back to Vincent’s letter, recalling the many carefully subtracted characteristics he had so fastidiously edited out of his letter. Could this girl be a

criminal? If Vincent had sent some kind of delinquent into Norma's home, she would never—

“It was my mother's, years ago. She never missed it. It's barely makeup anymore. I'm not sure if it would even leave a mark. But the smell reminds me of her,” Natalie said, still handling the tube. She ran her finger over the pigment, but only the faintest, powdery residue came off the block of color.

“Have you ever spent so long away from your parents?” Norma asked.

“No,” Natalie said. “They gave me this. My mom said it's rare.” She lugged a bulky Polaroid camera out of the suitcase.

“She said it would make my memories look vintage, being in an old place like this.”

Natalie turned to Norma and shrugged.

As Norma had guessed, the last item to be pulled from the leather luggage was a teddy bear—but it wasn't a neat little New Jersey bear. This bear was mangy. It was blond and matted in patches, with red stitch

marks holding parts of it together. The fur may have been soft once, but now it looked hard and wiry, rough after an angry bout with a laundry machine, perhaps. Its left eye was completely absent, and the right lolled around, loosely attached by a few resilient strings. Natalie held onto it for a moment and squeezed its paw before carefully setting it by the window.

Norma tugged her plaited hair into place, a pin-straight rod of steel down her back, and tried to ignore the rumbling in her own stomach. The girl was standing in the kitchen, staring outside. Norma turned her back to Natalie, took a deep breath, and opened up the refrigerator again. Looking inside, Norma considered the dinner she had

“She said it would
make my memories
look vintage, being
in an old place like
this.”

thought to prepare and package the night before. In a fleeting moment of foresight, she was able to look past her elevating panic and consider that the girl would be hungry upon her arrival.

Locally grown beets that she had sprinkled a bit of dill upon and called salad, raw chopped carrots, and baked sweet potatoes: the bland, earthy foods that she had come up with the night before looked dull and puckered with wrinkles after so many hours sealed in air-tight Tupperware, sad saggy jokes of Norma's dietary preference.

"You wouldn't happen to enjoy a nice mash of—"

Natalie's shoulders slumped as her face went sour.

"No, you wouldn't, would you," Norma muttered. She looked at the clock. She put the unopened container back into her refrigerator.

"All right, then I guess I had better get my shoes on," Norma said.

Norma and Natalie buckled themselves into Norma's tarnished silver Toyota, rusty with neglect and poor upkeep. The co-op was only a few miles away, but the drive dragged as if they were crossing the entire state. Norma found herself speeding up through yellow lights, the thought of being caught in a pool of silent, awkward red unbearable. Every time she checked the rearview mirror, she was startled, unused to catching the eye of a backseat passenger. The muscles behind her shoulder blades pulled taut, the back of her head stayed glued to the seat's padded headrest.

Norma parked in the spot closest to the store's entrance, one space to the left of the one reserved for handicapped drivers.

"Come along, then. We'll find you something nice to eat," Norma said, gesturing for Natalie to start browsing.

When they got to aisle six, Natalie pulled a blue cardboard box from the wall and offered it to Norma.

"What is this? Kraft . . . is this supposed to be cheese?" Norma stuttered. "Well, if it's what you really want . . . maybe we should get a few." Norma's stomach turned at the thought of preparing the foreign, synthetic meal from a box. She tried to smile, but the

strain felt like she was twisting into an acrobatic contortion. “We can take these right over to Baxter—”

“Well hello there, Miss Norma!” the man at the register greeted her. “It’s certainly been a while! Looking beautiful as usual. And who—” Baxter’s dark chocolaty eyes widened when he saw Natalie trailing behind Norma. “Who in the world can this be! In all the years...”

“This is my—” Norma looked down at the conveyer belt, watching the packages of cheese food product pass by. Her breath caught in her throat. “This is Natalie. She is eleven.”

“Well look at you!” Baxter beamed, showing his familiar row of friendly, oversized teeth. “Y’all are gonna have a macaroni feast tonight!”

“Oh no Baxter, this is not for me!” Norma exclaimed, jerking back from the register.

Baxter laughed. “I’m just teasing you, Miss Norma. Cash as usual?”

“Yes, right here,” Norma said, pulling two well-worn bills out of her thin, brown leather wallet.

“You don’t have a credit card?” Natalie gasped.

“Well there you go, Miss Natalie! You two have fun, now. You two!” Baxter said, laughing and shaking his head as he jammed the cashbox back into the register. Norma looked back as she shuffled Natalie towards the automatic door.

After dinner, Norma was exhausted. As she scrubbed Natalie’s bowl, sticky with fluorescent orange goo, Norma’s bones felt hollow, her muscles stiff. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and though it had been gray for many years, she felt surprised that the burnished chestnut it used to be had faded into solid silver.

Natalie got up from the table and inched towards the object on the counter, bending over to look at it. Her arms were glued behind her back, hands clutching her exposed elbows.

“Do you think this thing belongs in a museum?” Natalie asked.

Norma set the ceramic bowl down and joined her. She wiped her hands on a towel embroidered with a single green cactus. It was dark outside now, and the fluorescent lightbulb glowed above the table.

“Maybe, if it turns out to be something. They almost never do, though. Mostly, it’s just a hobby. The things I find may turn out to be important, or just rubbish. I think the method is lovely though. I really wasn’t much older than you when I began looking at rocks and fossils.”

Norma thought of Dr. Regier, a 6-foot-tall and deeply wrinkled woman who had visited her day school in Surrey. It was her seventh year, and Norma hadn’t cared about career day, which she thought was the most boring of her school’s many traditions. But Dr. Regier, the great-aunt of a mousy fifth year with far too many freckles, had changed her mind. The paleontologist’s presentation about a recent excavation of a wrecked medieval warship had fascinated her.

Years later, Norma had contacted her about advising her thesis, and Dr. Regier had responded. When Norma had to drop out of the University of New Mexico’s doctorate program, she never told Dr. Regier. It had been the right decision to leave. Vincent was abroad having his own adventures when their mother was diagnosed with Parkinson’s, and Norma was older, more responsible, and already lived nearby. Besides, Vincent had fallen apart when their father died, years before. Norma was the resilient one. She was objective, she could handle the degeneration. It was best for Vincent to stay away. Norma could feel her face pinching closed. The knot of nausea that she had banished so long ago settling into its familiar spot behind her navel. She looked away from the ground, a grimace gracing her face, and found Natalie looking at her. She wasn’t smiling either.

The next day, Norma woke up at sunrise. After tending to her garden as usual, she settled in the kitchen to continue brushing away at the excavated object. She was using q-tips today, working each end until it was absolutely saturated with orange grime. She didn’t notice the hours passing, the sun moving across the sky. She was absorbed in her

worked, moving each cotton swab in precise, downward movements, massaging the object out of its earthy encasement.

When Natalie settled on the chair beside Norma, Norma started.

“You surprised me,” Norma said, attempting to keep the irritation out of her voice.

Natalie didn’t answer. She was laying photographs out onto the table.

Norma slowly removed her protective plastic gloves. She picked up a mostly-developed photo, a close up of a rubbery, bright pink cactus flower. A bee was crawling on the far side of the bud’s rubbery magenta skin. There were pictures of bush shrubs, blurry shots of amorphous rocks, long shadows distorted on film.

“Well, you have been busy!” Norma said, leaning back in her chair and pushing her glasses up her nose. She noticed Natalie’s shoes, and the patent leather that had been so shiny the day before was scuffed and dull with dirt, and the stitching was beginning to fray near her ankles.

After leaving the store with a brand new pair of rugged suede hiking boots, Natalie nestled into the backseat. Norma glanced at Natalie through the rear-view mirror and saw that her nose was pressed against the window. Natalie’s eyes had brightened and were trained on the landscape.

“I’ll tell you what. I don’t go down to Sedona very much, but when I do I always have a special errand to run. But it might not really interest you,” Norma said.

Natalie didn’t move.

The energy that had been rising in Norma twisted into nervous aversion.

“I really am a bit tired,” Norma said. “It has truly been a trying day. There isn’t much to see anyway. Maybe we should just go home.”

Natalie turned to face Norma’s mirror. “No, I’m sorry. I’d like to see the rest of town.”

Norma parked the car in an asphalt lot that covered what could have been an entire city block. When Norma asked Natalie if she wanted to come with her, Natalie hesitated, and Norma let her wait in the car. Before long, she reappeared with a brown paper bag

that she placed between her knees. Without a word, Norma started the engine and headed west.

By the time the Toyota arrived at the spot, the sun was setting. Norma stopped at a pretty elevated space along the highway. The pair had a perfect view.

“Do you want to come up front?” Norma asked.

Natalie scrambled over the center console to climb into the passenger seat, not bothering to open the door.

After just a few moments of waiting, the sun’s bottom hit the edge of the horizon, and the sky erupted. Natalie gasped. There was nothing subtle about the sky’s outburst from an endless orange haze to a flash of lavender and magenta, rose and cerulean and sienna. The sunset’s colors danced behind the unearthly rock formations, jagged outcroppings reaching out as if to puncture the glimmering orb. Norma handed the paper bag to Natalie.

“I usually eat one on the way home, you have to immediately. While it’s still gooey. I hope you detest nuts as much as I do,” Norma said, reaching over for her own cookie. “Do mind the crumbs.”

Natalie had melted chocolate chips all over her hands, and Norma smiled. Once the last beam descended below the red sandstone cliffs, the sky began to grow dim. Norma turned on the headlights and backed out onto the freeway.

“It gets so dark here,” said Natalie, her quiet voice barely audible over the engine’s rumble. “There aren’t even any lights near the road.”

“Well, there aren’t very many cars!” Norma said with a chuckle. “The moon shines brighter here than anywhere else I’ve been, though. You can’t see it now, but when it’s full, sometimes it feels like a big glowing light bulb is hanging overhead. The shadows around the cacti stretch out, and you can see the coyotes from 20 yards away.”

Norma would be happy when they got home, safe and sound with a mug of tea. The darkness had settled in quicker than usual. Norma could sense the days were shortening, even though the consistent temperatures offered no indication that the

season was changing. A pair of headlights slowly approached, two globes penetrating the void, the beams impossible not to stare at. The blurry, elongated streams of light hovered through the dark space for a few seconds longer than they should have as the car passed, before dissolving into a blackness even deeper than it was before.

Parallel Processing

Jiayi Kong

For the longest time
I assumed I was a
nailgun.
Shooting each thought,
each sharply gleaming
rod,
precisely in patterns
like ka-chi ka-chi
thud.
Sleekly landing in my
white-slat Hardiplank
mind.

In reality, I am a
lawnmower gone
haywire.
I try to cleave in a straight line
and only cut down the
rebels,
yet smart green sentinels on
the edge of the blades are
hewn too,
unwitting victims casually
butchered by my
machine.



Fred Hartman Bridge
Daniela Alarcon



Lucknow, India
Sabrina Toppa

Tunisia Revisited

Sabrina Toppa

Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis, Tunisia resembles the Champs-Élysées in Paris. With the warm Mediterranean sun beating down on verdant avenues dotted with French patisseries, it's hard not to see Paris instead of Tunis. This was perhaps the intent of the French empire from the outset. When the French colonized Tunisia, they brought more than their architecture and gastronomy. The French introduced their entire concept of living to downtown Tunis, right down to languishing on urban benches and eating macarons. The French did not merely colonize—they attempted to repaint every civilization in the model of their own.

For the two months I worked and studied in Tunisia, I lived in Nabeul, a historic trade port sitting near the Cap Bon peninsula. I was there as a Cultural Fellow for the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education's program, living in something called Language Village Nabeul (LVN). LVN was an artificial camp designed to introduce Tunisians to the real sounds of English by importing eight Americans and over fifty British students to the tiny country. Here, finally, Tunisian students could experience America or England outside of a television box.

I lived inside a dilapidated engineering dormitory with fifty Tunisian girls, most of whom had never left their home before. The wall paint was peeling, the communal bathroom was overflowing, and our windows were lined with green gunk. Lacking an air conditioner, we often left the windows open. Hungry mosquitoes regularly floated in and hunted for prey.

My roommate was Noura, a religious girl originating from the South of Tunisia. Noura spoke in adulatory exclamations about President Ben Ali. While swatting away mosquitos, I would sit, mouth agape on my bed, trying to determine if she was saying something coded underneath her praise.

One night, I pointed to one of the ubiquitous posters of Ben Ali, eager to hear Noura's reaction.

"I think he's so handsome," Noura said. My eyes widened. He was the president, not a movie star. I guess when you throw your face on every billboard in the country, though, citizens experience confusion.

"His posters all look Photoshopped," I said.

"People say he's not actually young-looking and that he spends a lot of money on plastic surgery," I explained. The tiles on the floor were accumulating a thin film of brown liquid, and this was disturbing me. "And I think he's whitening his skin," I said.

Noura laughed, impressed that an American cared enough to dissect her beloved president's posters. "He's from Sousse," she defended. "The men there are whiter."

I looked at Noura closely. "How old is he? Eighty?" Now the film was edging its way next to my bed—my stomach was churning. "And why are all of his photos of him adjusting his cuff links? What's that about?" I asked. I couldn't believe Noura actually supported the dictator.

But Noura's father was an economist for the Ben Ali regime and she was privy to things I had no idea about. Sometimes she would say things that made me wonder if she genuinely held insider knowledge. Once, she had told me about a book feared by all Tunisians.

"You know, all Tunisians are born with a book," she had said.

I leaned in, sitting on the edges of my bed, not quite sure where this was going.

"In this book, the government writes all the bad things about you. There are people who follow you everywhere from birth to death. They record all the small things you do and write it on a moral balance sheet."

I stared at Noura.

“For people who want to get a political appointment or an important job, the government will use this book to deny them jobs if they see they have done bad things.” “Have you ever seen your book?” I asked.

“No. No one ever gets to see their own book. Probably if they do, they die.”

“So, how do you know if this book exists?”

Noura laughed. “I don’t know. It exists.”

That night, I sat awake like a four-year-old who had just learned about monsters. To my surprise, Noura was up, on the other side of the room, picking at her mosquito bite scars.

“You shouldn’t have told me that,” I said. “I kept imagining these strange men coming out from behind me and writing down every time I stole a piece of gum.” I watched the mosquitos coming in and out of the dormitory room. “And worse.”

The Tunis medina was loud, labyrinthine, and chaotic—a violent rush of aggressive yelps, unflinching touts, and Arabic gutturals. Hawkers brandished their wares as a flood of foreigners unfurled themselves in front of the sellers. The British students all clustered together in one group, hoping to escape any trouble if they walked in one oversized mass.

I made the mistake of ambling around the inner city with Hannah, a blond girl wearing oversized black sunglasses. The Tunisian men all ogled her, cooing at her in various languages.

“Where are you from? Canada? America?” Tunisian men asked.

Hannah was indignant and began ranting about Tunisia. I chimed in with my own frustrations.

“Oh my god,” Hannah said. “I’m glad I found a Tunisian who agrees with me.”

I looked at Hannah. “You know I’m not Tunisian, right?”

Hannah absentmindedly flicked a piece of hair from her face.

“Oh, you’re not? But you’re like them, aren’t you?”

These words were sufficient to make me want to return to America, where I at least was comfortable in defining myself against everyone else’s appearance. Here in Tunisia,

my appearance no longer marked me as an outsider. Oddly, I blended in here better than I ever did in America.

“Wait, you’re Pakistani,” Hichem had said.

“Well, American. Pakistani. Whatever.” I always had a difficult time placing myself in this country, given how everyone else placed me outside of America.

“So you’re Muslim—”

“Yeah, exactly,” I said. “Unlike Tunisians.”

It was two months into my residence in Tunisia, and I was sick of the country and its weird identity issues.

To my surprise, Hichem laughed and agreed. “Yeah, Tunisia is messed up.” Hichem lit up a cigarette. “The people here just want to be like the French. They forget what real Islam is.”

Hichem looked at my face. “I admire Pakistan. It’s a real Muslim country. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan,” he repeated slowly. “I love Pakistan. It is the only Muslim country with nuclear weapons.”

“When do you think the bus will come?” I asked, watching shared taxis pass by. I kicked a can on the floor. Talking about Pakistan made me uncomfortable because I resented my parents’ Pakistan—the conservatism, the gossip, the superficiality—I hated all of it. At the same time, I was also the first Pakistani any of these Tunisians met, so I didn’t want to ruin their bizarrely optimistic opinion of the country.

“Don’t worry about the bus. This is Tunisia. It’ll come when it wants to come.”

“How would it look if I smoked here?” I asked.

Hichem eyed his cigarette. “It’s not good if women smoke. People will think you’re bad. It’s not even good that I smoke. Like, I won’t smoke in front of my mother, ever.”

“Oddly, I blended
in here better
than I ever did
in America.”

“So it’s okay to smoke, unless you smoke in front of your mother.” I watched Hichem smoke. He had an honest face. I imagined him lying to his mother.

“I don’t know if Pakistan’s a great role model for Tunisia,” I finally said.

“Yeah, but Pakistanis keep their culture. They still wear their own clothes, speak their own language—all this even though the British were there. It’s not like this with the Tunisians.”

“I’ve heard about you,” she said. We were looking for shade underneath a tree as the hot, unrelenting sun pounded on us in the language village. I looked at the six Tunisian students watching me for instruction, not sure where to lead them.

“Are you the American that is Muslim?” one girl asked.

I nodded. The girls wearing headscarves all squealed.

“That’s good! We like you the best out of all the Americans.”

I smiled, wishing I knew a cooler spot in this country.

Another girl said, “I thought you were Tunisian the whole time I saw you!”

I stared at her blankly. Why?

“Your face,” she said. “You have an Arab face.”

I asked her what constituted an Arab face.

“It’s long. And you have dark hair like us.”

Alex was the stereotypical hippie American in the group. He chain-smoked, wore bandanas, and flirted with all the Tunisian girls. He often selected a different girl to flirt with each night. This night it was a beautiful Tunisian girl with a perfectly symmetrical face and red lipstick. While Evan and I stabbed our Tunisian sausage with our forks, Alex would coyly look at the girl and say “French girl, French girl. You’re not Tunisian. You’re French.”

The girl said something back in French.

The Tunisian waiter, clearly bored by this, slammed a beer down on the table.

The Tunisian girl straightened up and pointed to the beer.

“That’s—that’s beer?” she asked.

Alex immediately grew concerned that he might offend this French-looking girl with his drinking.

“Are you comfortable sitting near the alcohol? I can get rid of it,” he said. Alex recited a sura from the Qu’ran referencing the proscription against intoxication, as evidence that he was culturally sensitive.

She ignored the question and sniffed his beer. Then, she gulped it. Gagging ensued.

Alex looked at me.

“Look what you’re doing to the other Muslim girls,” Alex said.

I sneered, annoyed that Alex was insinuating my liberality was rubbing off on the other girls. I didn’t even drink beer like some of the Tunisians.

Alex ignored me. He watched the girl choke and cough before he instructed, “Don’t inhale the beer, drink the beer.”

The girl simply waved her hands and said “No, no, beer is disgusting.”

During our time in Tunisia, the foreigners and I developed a shorthand lexicon for the myriad things that could not be discussed openly. For example, we never referred to President Ben Ali as President Ben Ali. The other foreigners and I had somehow agreed to simply call him “Steve.”

“I’m not sure Steven knows what the hell he’s doing,” Scottish Peter said. We marveled at the high degree of education available for the average Tunisian—the government had made educating Tunisians its number one priority to increase Tunisia’s global competitiveness. A university education was completely free in Tunisia. But all we saw were highly-educated Arab youth with no jobs.

We were sitting in an Italian restaurant, watching the cool waters underneath. Peter was a bit of a supercilious know-it-all, so we let him dominate the conversation. “Educating all these Tunisians and then not providing jobs for them isn’t going to go so well in the long-term,” he said.

“What does Steve expect them to do? Read some books and go work on a farm? Is that really his grand plan? Does he even have a grand plan? I’m getting the impression

that he didn't really think this idea through. Just absolutely brilliant idea—have your citizens become smarter than you, that's not gonna turn around and bite you in the ass.”

Peter cradled his Tunisian beer and said, “You see, if he was a good dictator, he wouldn't have made his citizens smart enough to realize what an idiot he is.”

The dormitory smelled putrid. Holding my breath in, I walked to the staircase and exited into the warm, humid Tunisian night. I found a place on the grass to sit on. My skin began itching and I pulled a shawl over my arms to minimize the exposure to more mosquito bites.

As I was fixing this shawl, a young Tunisian boy came up to me. He was thin and brown, wearing a sports jersey and white shorts.

“You're from America?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Tell me about America. I need to get out of Tunisia,” he said. “This country has nothing. No jobs, no hope, no future.”

“Where do you want to go?” I asked. I was mildly worried that he wanted a green card.

He smiled. “The Gulf! I would be rolling in dinars if I could just get to Dubai or Saudi.”

I laughed. I thought about all the things Tunisians had told me during my stay here. They loved to talk about their superiority to the Gulf Arabs. “Tunisians are open-minded and tolerant,” I was repeatedly told. It was widely understood that the close-minded and intolerant people lived in the Gulf. Even I hated the Gulf Arabs—they were the rich Arabs with oil money, who imported Moroccan housemaids as prostitutes, and wore Islam on the outside but really worshipped the Almighty Dollar. They had their grimy hands invested all over Tunisia, and occasionally the Gulf Arabs would bring their wives to Tunis as well. Many Tunisians told me that if they ever saw an abaya-cloaked woman on the streets of downtown Tunis, they would yell “Go back to Saudi!” But if given the opportunity to live in Saudi Arabia, one of the richest

countries in the world, they would not hesitate to buy an abaya themselves. “They don’t even let their women drive in Saudi Arabia,” the Tunisians said. “They make them hide their whole faces!” Tunisians were both horrified and obsessed with their Arab brethren in the Gulf.

Tunisia was always marketed to me as the anomaly—it did not quite adhere to stereotypes of an Arab country, a North African country, or a Muslim country. With great pride, many Tunisians asked me, “Did you know that Tunisia was the first Arab country in the world to ban polygamy? Did you know our country’s founder got on national television during Ramadan and said ‘Drink orange juice!’ and ‘Go to work—the economy is more important than fasting? Did you know that Tunisia is where *Star Wars* was filmed? Did you know that Tunisia has the best-preserved Roman coliseum in the world and the mighty ruins of Carthage?”

In reality, Tunisia was one of the most culturally schizophrenic countries I had ever lived in. Always in the throes of an identity crisis, Tunisians claimed heritage with the Romans, the French, the Italian, the Berbers, the Arabs, and the Turks. Tunisians did not appear to have made up their minds about who they were, what they believed in, or where they were moving toward. The religious orientation of the country was also a sticking point. Just how secular or religious were Tunisians? And who were their role models? The Turks in the East or the French in the West?

“How do you feel about Tunisia?” I asked Essouria. She was my roommate Noura’s friend, but I had never spoken to her before. Most of the time she just entered and left my room with embarrassment, not sure how to talk to the American.

“I really love my country and could never leave it, but I really hate my government,” she said.

My eyes widened at the first mention of the government. I was always wary of broaching the topic, even tangentially, because of the risks for Tunisians. It was rumored that Ben Ali installed spies in the unlikeliest of places, and I had heard many students not talking to one another out of this suspicion. I even began to wonder if

people thought I was a spy, given how often shopkeepers heard my Arabic and mistook me for a non-resident Arab.

“He’s done nothing for women,” Essouria said. “They talk about how Tunisia is the most progressive Arab country for women’s rights. But what is this government that bans Muslim women from wearing scarves in government? He makes it harder for women who want to wear a headscarf. It’s like freedom of choice disappears if you’re Muslim.”

I listened patiently.

“It’s like freedom of choice disappears if you’re Muslim.”

“What is it like to be Muslim in America?” Essouria asked suddenly.

“It’s not as bad as Tunisians think,” I said. “We have freedom of religion, so nobody will say anything about you wearing hijab. People don’t know much about Islam, and usually they’re too scared to say anything to your face, so your day-to-day life is pretty nice.”

“I mean,” I amended. “It’s not totally easy. I was with my cousin on the New York City subway, and she wears the abaya that covers everything but her eyes, and this total idiot came up to her and asked if her husband had forced her to wear an abaya. But those people are rare. For the most part, people leave you alone.”

“Ah, America sounds like a better place for Muslims than Tunisia,” Essouria said. “At least you guys can wear what you want.”

“Evan, I have a fan club. All these conservative Tunisians found out I’m Muslim and now they all think I’m so fascinating because I’m a Muslim living in America. They think I’m undergoing a lot of persecution.” I leaned in closer, pulling out bags of French Petit-Prince chocolate. “Is this immoral that I keep taking their gifts and allowing them to buy me chocolate?”

“Nope. Sounds like you.”

“Look, this is a real problem. They think I’m one of them,” I said while eating the chocolate.

“Well, you look like them. Can you blame them?”

“I’m not Tunisian!” I had grown extremely sensitive to being mistaken for Tunisian. On my last train ride through the country, a Mauritanian man had outright refused to believe my statement that I was American. I was beginning to lose my identity in a country with no real identity of its own.

“But you could pass as one, so what’s the difference? Anyway, it’s your own fault.” Evan laughed. “You were the one who kept complaining about how secular the country is. You should have just kept quiet. You should have acted like a quiet Tunisian.”

My hand instinctively flew up to smack Evan. “Shut up, American.”

“At least they like you now?” Evan said.

“I guess,” I said.

In my Arabic class, our teacher told us about the foreign influences in the local variety of Arabic, called Darija in Tunisia. We were instructed to say “ça va” to indicate we were fine. This was how the French said they were fine, so this was how Tunisians were expected to say they were fine.

Our teacher was a woman named Nadia, who was thin and sported a wild, untamed Afro. She looked more African-American than Arab with her curly hair and energetic dance moves. This confused all of the British and American students at the village.

Nadia told us about the snotty Arabs in Tunis who refused to speak Arabic. “You know, you can find Arabs in Tunisia who will only respond to you in French. They think it’s low-class to use Darija instead of French.”

We all gasped at this. Here we were—Americans trying to learn the local Darija variety of Arabic, and here were the Tunisians rejecting their own language.

“In fact, there’s a running joke about the French language in Tunisia,” Nadia said. “Everything is in French! Our entire school system is in French. We learn mathematics

in French, we learn biology in French, we learn nutrition in French, and mon dieu, we even learn Arabic in French!”

I laughed at this and adopted “mon dieu” into my personal lexicon.

A few weeks later, when I was ready to leave the country, I found myself sitting on a bench in Tunis. The weather was uncharacteristically springy for a July afternoon. Men and women were ambling past while I began tucking into a box of macaroons. The downtown of Tunis was green and lush, covered with perfectly-manicured patches of grass in the center. I chuckled to myself and laughed, “Mon dieu, mon dieu.”

Looking Ahead

Gregory Aird

Have you pondered about the way the shadows of the trees,
with their branches and leaves,
twist over every object beneath them?

Or how a single falling leaf will twirl and spin,
descending slowly, beautifully, toward the ground, where
it will be carried off by the stream, right around the bend
until it is out of sight, out of mind?

And here we sit,
having a conversation about how you recently had your trees
trimmed, not a leaf left on the sliced branches and twigs,
which brings so much more sunlight to your backyard.

It makes me wonder if the pansies below that tree
will get too hot in the summer afternoons now.



Tunnel Vision
Vinita Israni

Art



Salmon
Elena Lacey

Pink Mattress Rodeo

Trey Ferguson

So I walk into the mini-mart just to buy a pack of smokes but instead I find a cheerleader yelling at the guy behind the register about God-knows-what. She takes a swig of strawberry milk and spits a mouthful into his face before climbing over the counter to make out with him like I'm not even standing there. I don't know why but the whole scene makes me think of that cheesy painter I saw on TV once who said that beauty is everywhere. I figure the two of them are going to take a while so I walk outside to look up into the sky and there's the sun collecting me into my own shadow. If it weren't for the sun it'd always be night. It's always night or we wouldn't need light is what Thelonus Monk said.

I start thinking about that and how my shadow might be the real me and my body could just be its inverse, so I pull my shirt over my head and roll around on the pavement like a yellow ghost because I don't know what else to do. Then the cheerleader walks out of the store and I poke my head out from my shirt. I look up at her standing over me with pink milk dried up all around her mouth. She's crying now and asks me, "What are you looking at?"

"The first five minutes of *Cinderella*," I say while stretching out on the sidewalk to read an old book by Balzac that someone left behind the trashcan. "Hey, your boyfriend in there owes me some cigarettes," I say even though she looks really down and I feel kind of bad for having brought it up.

"He's not my boyfriend anymore." Her tears mix in with the dried-up milk and now her face is just a whole sticky pink mess. "You know, there's a mattress around back

behind the dumpster,” she says and I’ll be damned if she isn’t right. It’s covered in a shiny pink fabric that has stains all over it, and no one would really want to know why it was thrown out in the first place, but it’s perfect for us.

Luckily there’s a bum hanging around who lets me borrow his knife to rip a hole through the mattress. Then I tie it up with some rope and hitch it to the back of the cashier’s truck. In the meantime, Cheerleader goes back inside to steal us some cigarettes but all she can manage to get is the truck keys and one pack of menthols for the both of us. I give a few to the bum for letting me use his knife. “I’m Jimmy Shoetaps,” he says, “and I’m wasted like a white boy.”

He starts to dance and I like his name so fucking much that I toss him the keys to the stolen truck while me and the cheerleader take a seat on the mattress. Then Jimmy Shoetaps guns it and the rope tightens and jerks us so hard that we almost fall right off the edge of the mattress. He drags us all

around town so fast and drunk that no one could know whether it was the trees that were rolling by the clouds or the other way around. We can’t keep from coughing from all the menthols and the truck’s exhaust that’s blowing in our faces, but we can’t keep from laughing either.

It’s not long before the coil springs start shooting out sparks and kicking up cinders all over the blacktop. Pretty soon, the mattress starts flaming in the center and bursts into a full-on fire right there in the middle of the road. It might as well be the Fourth of July. I think we’re going to go up in flames but Jimmy Shoetaps doesn’t think twice before he slams on the brakes, jumps out of the truck and saves the day by pissing on the fire and a little bit on our shoes. Then he knocks a passing kid off his bicycle and

“No one could know whether it was the trees that were rolling by the clouds or the other way around.”

yells “Ooh, this bike gone!” as he ditches the scene and races off on the bike, laughing like someone ripped out his teeth and replaced them with live sharks.

“Fuck you, Jimmy Shoetaps!” the kid screams but Jimmy’s long gone by now, probably headed for his sister’s place in New Orleans. I don’t blame him because he probably has priors and can’t deal with cops, but the kid, well, he looks pretty mad. He lights some matches and starts tossing them onto the smoking mattress. “What are you looking at, fucking community college losers?” he says to us, which is sort of dumb because I dropped out of community college a long time ago.

“Hey, you don’t want to fuck with me kid, my boyfriend’s a Hell’s Angel,” Cheerleader says and points at me.

“I am?”

“No, the Hell’s Angels disbanded years ago.”

“I know. I mean, I’m your boyfriend?”

“I don’t like questions and we’re out of menthols,” she says and punches me in the mouth.

So I take her out for pizza and it actually tastes kind of good mixed in with the blood from my swollen lip. We eat half of it and throw the rest against the wall to see if it sticks. It doesn’t. Then she decides that she wants to get a tattoo that says “S-T-A-Y-D-O-W-N” on her knuckles and I want one that’s a gravestone for Quentin Compson or a black viper on my neck. The burn-out at Sorry Mom Tattoos won’t bring down his prices and he probably doesn’t even know who Quentin Compson is in the first place, so we dye our hair with Kool-Aid instead and suck face on the hood of someone else’s car before deciding to drive out to the beach before night falls.

“But it’s already night,” she says. “It’s always night or we wouldn’t need light.” She kind of looks like she’s sad and kind of talks like she’s the first person who ever thought of that, but actually Thelonus Monk said it first and I turn around to tell her that but when I look at her I see that her eyes aren’t green anymore, they’re white—no pupils, no nothing—just blank and white. Then her face goes blank, and then her body, and then her Kool-Aid-pink hair and now she’s buzzing and turning glowy and white all over.

We never made it to the beach that day or any other day because she turned into a television set right there in front of me and I figured there's no point in bringing a TV to the beach. I even held it up to my ear like you would a seashell, but all I could hear was static. I put it down sideways so I could watch it while trying to sleep on my burned-up pink mattress that still smells a little bit like piss. Since she never told me what her name was, I write down every name that I hear on TV into a little notepad that I carry around with me everywhere I go. Sometimes I stop whatever I'm doing, take it out and start calling out some of the names just to see if anyone answers, but no one ever does.

For the most part, all I ever do these days is go to bars to read books by Balzac that I find behind almost every trashcan, and then I go out to get drunk in libraries with Jimmy Shoetaps. At least, that's what I do when I'm not watching old videos of that guy who teaches you how to paint happy trees and says that everything is beautiful. I don't even paint at all and probably never will.

On Fridays, me and Jimmy stand outside the fence at football games so I can look at the cheerleaders. None of them have pink hair or answer to the names I call out from my notepad, so we usually just end up getting into fights with shit-kickers who don't like my green hair. These fights happen a lot, but I don't want to dye it back because I'm afraid my girlfriend won't recognize me if she ever comes back from wherever she went. I don't even care that I have to shower less just to keep it from washing out.

When I'm all bruised-up on Saturday, I lay on my dirty mattress in my dirty blankets for hours—not because I'm too hurt to move, it's just that I don't feel like doing anything else. It's days like these that make me think that the painting guy is full of shit when he says that beauty is everywhere, so I change the channel on the sideways TV.

Usually I watch a show about child rapists instead. I like it because it has the same punchline every time: the guy walks into a house expecting to fuck a twelve-year-old girl but finds a news crew instead, and in the end he's really sorry for what he's done. I sometimes think about how me and these perverts aren't so different after all. They

think that what they want is about to become real and then it turns out it's just TV and I understand how sad that can be.

Even if they are perverts, at least they can still cry and feel sorry for themselves which I think is a good thing because most of the time I'm too tired to feel much of anything and that's twice as bad as getting jumped by the cops. Anyway, these are the kind of things that I think about every time I smoke menthol cigarettes which are beautiful things even if they don't ever advertise them on TV.

Every now and then, late at night, when I turn off the TV to go to sleep, I sometimes see green eyes beaming at me through the cathode ray. Then I realize that it's just the reflection of my Kool-Aid hair in the blank monitor. I move closer to the screen so that I can feel the invisible static fuzz lifting up my hair and tingling my skin. Then I close my eyes and hope to dream about someone trying to pull me through to the other side.

Contributors' Notes

GREGORY AIRD enjoys wearing bow ties and suspenders for formal occasions, and believes that the *Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* is far superior to the rest in the series. He hopes to become a doctor and someday sign excuse notes in purple crayon for children that clearly don't need to be exempt from physical activity.

COURTNEY BROWN is currently a first-year student at Rice University. A lover of all things expressive, Courtney is an English major but does a little bit of dabbling in art and music on the side. A nocturnal creature, most of her work is written by desk light in the small and quiet hours of the morning.

GABRIELLA BUBA has been inflicting herself upon the earth since early 1994. She is, at the moment, satisfying a passing fancy by pursuing a chemical engineering degree. Gabriella has, for the last 19 years, suffered from a chronic addiction to tea, garlic, and cayenne pepper, although not necessarily all three together.

MICHELLE DOUGHTY is a humble crime-fighting crusader by day and a masked writer by night. She finds pigeons hilarious, loves the word "facetiously," and does not often wear shoes.

ELLE ECCLES is stylish and a hopelessly hopeless romantic (a.k.a "Aphrodite" to her friends) who loves to play matchmaker, (hopfully) writes infinitely better than she spells, and finds her bio a bit anticlimactic after waiting until three weeks after the deadline to write it.

TREY FERGUSON can't even begin to think of how to go about trying to come up with a way to figure out how to get down to making himself arrive at a place where he can start blurbing about himself.

BRIAND GENTRY's given name is Celtic for 'strong, little raven-fairy'; this makes her uncomfortable, as she is neither strong, little, or particularly fond of ravens. As a result, she goes by 'Brinni' which suits her just fine because it lacks a definition. She is currently majoring in second-guessing and dust-collecting.

MARISSA HALL burst through the Rice bubble this semester and jumped so far over the hedges that she landed across the Atlantic Ocean. She has a new appreciation for Surrealism, olive oil, being nocturnal, and Spanglish.

ANNIE HEINRICH grew up dreaming to be either a professional cheerleader or an Alaskan fisherman, but she was soon disenchanted, pushing her to give writing a go instead. As a child she stopped using straws because she thought that she could save the world. When not babbling and over-sharing, she spends her days analyzing each facet of her life.

BEN HIRSCH studies religions in between naps. He likes words, but only as a friend and does not want to take the relationship any further.

KATHERINE HUMPHREYS is a senior history major at Rice University and you'd think after nearly 22 years of being alive she would have somehow managed to master the art of the short biography by now. She likes long walks up rock walls, bitter desserts, and, if she's lucky, sleeping in.

JIAYI KONG is a professional juggler of work, school, and lab. Future acrobatics include traveling to 17 cities in 30 days, visiting family in China, and starting medical school this July. However, she always finds time between performances to enjoy the culinary side of life. Her latest creation is a double batch of whole-wheat muffin scones served warm with clotted cream and blackberry jam.

CHRISTY LEOS finds joy in the many things, including her annoying kid brother and turning in a paper five minutes before the deadline. Decided in the last minute to change her major to English because she realized the importance of actually doing something that you love. She has also discovered that her room is slowly becoming covered with owl pillows, jewelry etc. since attending Rice.

ANNA MERIANO is not married, but she hopes someday to find a mail-order groom from Eastern Europe who will be her househusband and fold all of her fitted sheets.

EMILY NICHOL is a perennial proponent of puppies, polka dots, and petticoats. At Rice, she ponders pictures and printed products, and periodically falls prey to obnoxious alliteration.

ANYA PARKER is a senior English and Medieval Studies double major who is delighted that her window rose is slowly, slowly blooming now that the narcissus is past. “Where does the sound go?” her eighth grade English teacher once asked her, ringing a bell. Eight more years of school gone, she still doesn’t know—but thinks poetry must be part of the answer.

SABRINA TOPPA enjoys cracking open pistachio shells. She is a morning person, or more accurately, a 6 a.m. Peli person.

About the Awards

R2's annual writing contests are sponsored by the George G. Williams Fund. The contests are juried by professional, non-Rice-affiliated judges. This year's judges were the poet Kent Shaw (poetry) and Houston-based fiction writer David Lombardi (fiction and nonfiction). Each of the recipients is awarded a monetary prize as well as recognition. Many thanks go out to the generous donors who support Rice's undergraduate creative writing endeavors.



2013 Awards

Fiction

1st prize “Pink Mattress Rodeo” by Trey Ferguson

2nd prize “The Cancer” by Elle Eccles

Nonfiction

1st prize “The Holy Land” by Sabrina Toppa

2nd prize “Memorial” by Marissa Hall

Poetry

1st prize “Preface” by Courtney Brown

2nd prize: “I Can Imagine Ophelia” by Anya Parker

