



Gandy Dancer

A student-led literary magazine of the State University of New York

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Lungs

In my very best fantasies, you are dead before you touch the ground; very neat, very easy. Your blood blooms like an exotic flower on the wall behind you, forms a modern art masterpiece. I shoot you between the eyes, but there are no brains on the wall, no fragments of skull. Just blood, bright and cooling fast. Neat. Easy. You don't fall to the floor; you slide. Breathing cut off like a paused record. It's neat. It's clean. I'm always humane. You leave no ghost.

Joel says you are gone now, hidden somewhere down south. South does not seem right for you; it does not seem right for the boy I thought I knew, with his corduroy and vinyls and patient potential for destruction. South is for spiritual refugees or simple criminals, men who drink too much and hit both of their wives or shoot their neighbors' show dogs. You—you are not simple. It took me nearly a year to figure that out.

I ask myself sometimes whether I was even looking for simplicity, and the answer tends to be *no*, which makes me a hypocrite. But I *was* looking for purity, whether I knew it or not. And you seemed pure—oh God, you seemed *pure*. You dressed darkly and laughed darkly, which I understood, because I did it too, but I thought you were one shiny kid. You had your clear skin and gold hair and you acted like you hated it, hated the pretension and the shine and the idea of beauty, but I knew you didn't. I thought in terms of literature and thought you were the foil to me. I assumed purity.

A year ago, after Joel had introduced us and before Poughkeepsie, he had come up to me, awestruck, said something like, *you look peaceful*. It surprised me too, and I smiled at him, said, *I think I am*. Whether I had temporarily found peace or I confused for peace the period of non-anger and non-fear of the world that you brought, I don't know. Joel knows nothing. No one has told him anything; you've abandoned campus and as a friend or social creature or being, I was never really here. When he sits next to me now, even in this frigid

November air, he leans away a little to avoid the smoke I exhale. But maybe it is something more; maybe it's a sixth sense, him wising up, smelling the danger mixed in with the smoke, finally picking out the pieces of a story he does not want to hear.

"I'm finding him this weekend," I tell Joel.

He stares at me.

"I know the name of the town," I inform him simply. "And I know *you* knew it for a while and you weren't telling, by the way. So thank you for *that*."

"I didn't want you going there."

"Why? Afraid?"

He hesitates, a faint blush rising up in his neck. "I don't know. A little."

I take my cigarette from my lips to force a laugh. "What do you think I'm going to do?"

Joel smiles a little, half-heartedly. "You know, you're the only person I know who enjoys promoting fear."

I shrug. "Consider it a safety net."

"I'll try. Why do you think I was talking about you?"

"What?"

"Why do you think I meant that I was afraid of what *you* were going to do?"

I'm silent for a moment. "I don't know. Were you referencing your best friend?"

"I guess. I wouldn't call him my best friend anymore. Listen, you're going to think I'm crazy, but—" he leans forward "—I don't like the idea of you with him. Dean is... he isn't a good person."

"Too late," I tell Joel bluntly.

"What?"

"Never mind," I say, wishing I had shut my mouth. To his credit, Joel does not press on. I ask, "What do you mean, not a good person?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry I said that. It's not what I meant. But I don't like the effect he has on you—had on you."

"He doesn't have an effect on me."

"He does, though. You obsess over him, and it's scary. Since you went on that trip with him, you've.... Listen, this sounds terrible, but do you have any friends besides me anymore?"

"It's not terrible," I say dryly. "No, I don't. But I've never had any friends besides you. In fact, I'm flattered that you even consider us friends."

Joel looks hurt. "Of course we are. You don't consider us to be? This is exactly what worries me. This, and you drink more and smoke more than before. And the thing is, you don't even like it."

One of the many reasons I avoid friends: you underestimate them, and then one day, suddenly and without warning, they decide to become observant. But all I reveal is irritation, and say, "You sure know a lot, don't you?"

He sighs. "Okay, do that. Be difficult like always while people try to look out for you. Just answer this: were you in love with him? Or, are you?"

I choke a little on the smoke of my cigarette, an aggravation I thought I had gotten past years ago. "*No!*" I say, bewildered. "God, no."

"Okay." Relief floods his face. "I'm glad, because.... You know, I'd thought maybe something had happened on the trip you guys took. Jesus, look at your *hand*."

I look. It's trembling. Cigarette ash distributes itself on the table. I put both hands under the table and grip my thighs to steady them, although all it does is make my legs shake too. I do not look at Joel; I don't want to see that he sees. As flatly as possible, I tell him, "You're paranoid."

"Don't find him," Joel says. He tries to stare me down with the eyes of an abandoned puppy — pleading, pitiful, pathetic. "Don't go. I'm asking you this for your own good."

"That's a dumb thing to think about," I snarl. How terrible and freakish that we're friends, or whatever he wants to call us. How awful for him. I think to him: *This is your cue! Leave me. You don't need this, you don't want to be involved, get out, please.* But he doesn't pick up on my thoughts, and it's me who stands up to leave.

The room spins. I clench my toes to the ground, attempt to stay standing, keep my posture. "I'm leaving tomorrow," I throw to him carelessly, directly to the too-soft, too-hurt, brown eyes. I fight for balance, and without victory, leave.

What drew me to you was your smile, precisely because it reminded me of nicotine and I liked that, the sound of it: *nicotine smile*. In retrospect, it didn't mean much — the words just sounded cool and dangerous in my head and I wanted to use them. I didn't even know if you smoked.

It turned out that you didn't, which I liked, but that was the year I started. Even then I needed to destroy things. I'd thought punishing my lungs might be an interesting experiment.

It wasn't that I thought smoking was cool; it was that, in some twistedly romanticized way, I thought the masochism was. I thought beauty and health and living were silly things to idealize (why obsess about things that did not belong to you?) and I supposed that I wanted to mock everyone who held them as their highest reverence. I had watched my peers hopelessly strive for vanity, walking through drugstore aisles wild-eyed and clutching tanning lotion and Maybelline and diet pills to their chests like Bibles. Through the windows of salons were visions of their future: middle-aged women with Crayola faces who had years ago lost sight of their necks but faithfully had their head re-bleached and fried every month, as if having MTV-appropriate hair would narrow their waistlines, tighten their skin, transform them back into the unattractive teenagers they were, in bodies that were at least accepted by desperate adolescent males. I thought it was silly, all of it, and I thought *they* were silly, that pulsing obsessive

consumer mob, so I pushed the futility of their very lives in their faces. *Yes! Watch me!* I commanded silently, whenever I flashed them a smile after catching their stares. Do you see the futility of it all now? I can smoke and blacken these teeth and rot this skin and wear ugly clothing and *still* look better at 6 in the morning than you will look on your wedding day.

Had they heard the thoughts in my head or looked inside me, they would have vomited. In the dreams where I was flung from the car and watched my own autopsy from above, the doctors opened the torso and then exclaimed in horror, *Oh dear Lord, what is this?* while staring down at the most hideous human insides they had ever seen, a blackened appendix, a stomach partially eaten away by its own acid, intestines like a mutilated snake, a heart that had started its decay nineteen years before it stopped beating.

How strange, I would think whenever I looked into a mirror, always in the detached, impersonal way accountants looked at paintings. How strange to have this body chosen for me. In some kind of repeat freak accident, the nice girls with nice brains and nice philosophies were somehow nearly always given the unfortunate bodies. I tried to convince myself that the irony was amusing.

In Biology class, the girl in front of you would pull out her compact and some makeup tools and fumble with her face for a minute. I could see the amused condescension in the muscles of your face. You would turn to the side and grin at me, as if we were sharing some private, terribly funny joke—one that, I realize now, you knew I wasn't quite in on yet.

Another thing I had liked about you, before Poughkeepsie: you drank whiskey, not beer. You watched foreign films. You wore an army-green jacket. You quoted William Burroughs, even though nobody knew what you were talking about, or perhaps because of it. You smiled rarely but the rare smiles were at me and I thought, *nicotine*. You were so close to being indifferent.

I thought you bled poetry.

You had a 1994 Cadillac that I was in love with. As a rule, I hated loving anything, but if you had to love something, the more materialistic, the better—and it was a *nice* car. It was clean and it looked good under moderate sunlight, like its owner. On the trip to New York, I got attached to that car. I had thought that I wouldn't mind driving in it with you indefinitely, always with the destination, the possibility, of New York. In Poughkeepsie, where I knew we wouldn't reach New York, I scrambled for some rocks on the ground to throw at the car. I was disoriented; I don't know if they hit.

You wanted to look at graduate schools, and you invited me, confidently, smilingly. I said, *Great, graduate schools*, but really, I couldn't wait until graduation to leave. I needed to transfer as soon as possible. Our campus was suffocating me, and it was getting hard to maintain indifference about it. It was even harder to act indifferent about our temporary escape. We were going to look at Philadelphia, cross the Pennsylvania border, look at schools in lower New York

state, and stop in New York City before turning back. The possibility of New York thrilled me. I stayed quiet about it.

You didn't like my silence. We talked as we did when we had met – you said something witty and cute, I replied with something witty and snarky, very Oscar Wilde-esque, very prettily shallow—but my thoughts were foreign to you. Once, desperate for something, you said to me, *You really have no feelings, do you?* I had looked at you curiously, thinking of how to answer and wondering why we were friends. I prayed silently that it wasn't because you liked how I looked, although truthfully I could think of nothing else that could've been attractive about myself. The worry nagged me a little, but mostly I thought you were too smart to fall for anything external. I thought you could see past it. I overestimated you.

Here's the truth: I liked you. I liked you so much pre-Poughkeepsie that I couldn't think of being anything but your friend, or anything but a passing acquaintance. I was human enough that my sadism wouldn't extend to you. I didn't want you to have to deal with me and everything I came with. I didn't think you deserved it.

At Poughkeepsie, after the bar where you kept refilling my drink and my eyes clouded over, in the motel room you followed me into, you told me I deserved it. Onto the bed where you thought my senses were dulled and the fighting was just a reflex but I felt it, I felt everything: *You deserve this, you bitch.*

My car is no 1994 Cadillac, but it works. It will get me to you. What New York used to occupy in my mind is now filled up by you. I dream now only of your face when your door opens to reveal me. This road, the fading towns and rotting cities I pass by are all incidental and meaningless. You are the destination. If that sounds romantic, it is. Poets, for as long as they exist, will aspire to deaths as beautiful as yours.

After it was done, you fell asleep. The small part of me that was not silently screaming in pain and disgust wondered how something as peaceful and guiltless as sleep could come to you after what you had just done. Your face was on my neck, intimately, as if we were lovers, as if I had not kicked and screamed and fought you with every cell in my body.

The dead weight of your hand was still on the bottom half of my face. Ten minutes before, you had clamped it over my mouth to prevent me from screaming for help, and it had taken me a few seconds of trying to bite you before I realized that you were also covering my nose, and I that couldn't breathe. I tried to jerk my head away, to open my mouth, desperate, searching for air. You were busy elsewhere, drawing blood, pushing into me; you didn't notice. Your fingers were tight over my skin, and when I was able to break my lips apart the slightest fraction of an inch, all I could taste was hot, recycled exhale.

In that moment of terror: the realization that broke through my mind was as sharp and surprising as an intake of pure oxygen. The one desperate thought

was: I want to *live*! I wanted to live, I wanted to live, I wanted to live, even more than I wanted your skin off of mine, even more than I wanted you dead—I wanted to *live*. And my whole being was suddenly concentrated in my lungs—what miracles they were—gasping, gasping, searching for life. And then, miraculously, the grip of your hand slackened, slid downward—and one of my nostrils make contact with cool, clean air.

There are no sufficient words to describe the ability to breathe. It has been attempted before, but we fall short. Metaphors just utilize breathing; they can't describe it. I once fantasied about telling someone everything. But how to even begin? Even if I found the words to relay the moment when you pushed into me and everything else slid out mutilated, even then, how, later, could I describe that instant when my lungs reclaimed air? How could I have made anyone feel the sharp joy of oxygen? I suppose I would try to search, and fail. I would scramble. I would hesitate, and inhale deeply, and then I would say, *It was like breathing*.

After it was done and you fell asleep, I wriggled my arm out from its holding cell between my back and the mattress, and tore your hand off my face. I struggled out from underneath your weight and fell a short distance to the floor. The pretense of never crying was lost. I could not put on the same clothes you had torn off of me. I pulled on the long coat I had come to the room in, the coat I had tossed carelessly on the floor just a few hours before, laughing at something that was so far off now it could not have possibly existed. Now I wrapped it around my destroyed body, buttoned every button, pulled the belt tightly, squeezed my legs together in some type of now useless self-defense. Each twitch of each individual muscle now was a reminder of you.

Before I left, before I crawled out into the April night and crawled and crawled until I was hunched over at some street corner far away, staring ahead wide-eyed for a taxi, I stood over the bed where you now slept deeply. I thought about killing you. I thought about taking the keys and slashing your throat. I imagined uprooting the small motel television and smashing your skull in with it. I pictured waking you up before it happened so you could see what was coming and feel real fear, like I had felt, so you could open your mouth wide for a scream that wouldn't have time to find its way out.

When I left the room, you were still occupying it, alive and whole and asleep.

How that memory haunts me—after all I had destroyed, I could not destroy, out of all things, you. I punished myself for it, interrogated myself, tried to close my eyes and put together the fragments and figure out what held me back. I didn't doubt my physical ability to kill you and I didn't fear any consequences by the law. I wanted revenge. I wanted your worst fears to manifest themselves, and I assumed you would be like the rest of them: afraid of death. In my nightmares, sometimes I would stand over the motel bed with some instrument of death and your eyes would be indifferent, accepting, unafraid. It terrified me

to think that you could be like that. Nevertheless, a week after the incident, I would wake up shivering violently at 4 A.M. and simply know: I had to kill you.

But in my very *best* fantasies, the ones too beautiful and impossible to dare to think about, a Cadillac slides backwards. We never cross a state line and are stuck on a dying campus in Pennsylvania. Joel introduces me to you and you to me. You say something witty and cute and I reply with something witty and snarky and we smile awkwardly. We get silence. You see through me and I think *nicotine* but decide purity is overrated, and anyhow I don't deserve to seek it, and I never get the chance to see through you. My body is not mine, but it is never yours. You live. I let myself keep the really sacred. I let myself keep indifference. All we exist as are fading occupants of the same time and space. If everything comes full circle, neither of us knows it yet.

And here is your door.

TRISHA M. COWEN

Raising Sasquatch

Aaliyah Salah couldn't interpret the look her son's toy Sasquatch was giving her. Ever since she adopted Tolik, she'd been probing the world for signs. Sasquatch's eyes were white ovals with two uneven gray lids traced above and below a black beady iris with silky lines reaching out towards the edges. His body sat half in the water and half out aside rubber ducks, submerged X-Men, and pink and yellow mermaids with ratty hair, which people from work thought she should discourage the use of since her son already had the "disadvantage" of being raised by a single female.

"He must look like his father," she had been told by a woman with wild hair and wire-rimmed glasses in the supermarket the night before while fingering a small mountain of unripe figs. The woman had then stretched her ring-laden fingers over Tolik's bald head before Aaliyah had a chance to stop her. The wild-haired woman closed her eyes as if she'd had a premonition and Aaliyah leaned in, held her breath, and waited. The woman blinked, the spell broken, and had said simply, "have a pleasant night."

Aaliyah had abandoned the display of figs and pushed her shopping cart in the direction of the woman. Tolik never woke from his perch in the front of the cart; not even after the woman had touched him. Aaliyah had found her in the magazine aisle studying a newspaper, while taming a silver ringlet with her free hand. Aaliyah had sighed. The woman couldn't be a mystic if she read the newspaper. No, that would be impossible. Aaliyah had sighed and laughed at herself for believing that this strange stranger knew something about her son's fate. No, Tolik would not die and yes Tolik would love her, she told herself. Aaliyah had studied the back of the woman's head as she strutted away and decided that the woman's hair wasn't as wild as it had seemed from the front.

Aaliyah stared at Sasquatch, his body wrapped in her wet hands, and thought

of her own father. The way he read the Qur'an over her bed at night in hopes that Allah would transform her into the right kind of woman, the way his thick, animal eyebrows bent just before he reprimanded her for acting too American, and the angry look on her mother's face after he died, as if he was too stubborn for this life and he was at fault for dying.

Tolik would never know his father. She didn't even have a photograph to give him and she couldn't pronounce the name of his hometown. She wondered which was worse, knowing that your parents were abysmal or not knowing them at all. Aaliyah let go of Sasquatch and picked up one of the pink mermaids and brushed her yellow hair back, while never able to unhinge the feeling that Sasquatch was still looking at her. His body floating above the water was brown, while the part below the water was pure white. He had that effect of changing colors, of disappearing into the background, but right now he was all that she could see.

Aaliyah took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She could still smell the light jasmine perfume she carried upstairs after hugging the fifteen-year-old babysitter she had just met, but had come highly recommended, for arriving three minutes early. She knew that the babysitter thought it was strange that she wasn't leaving the house while paying for a sitter, but she didn't care. The sitter couldn't know what it was like to never escape for even small moments; it was a knowing that couldn't be explained. Without further ado, she had escaped up into the high caverns of her own house where, lately, she had no time to explore. The upstairs bath with the baby monitor turned up on high was the farthest she could bring herself to go without Tolik. Soon she would have to return to work, so these small steps were difficult but necessary.

The water in the bath was sweltering, turning her olive skin an animated red, but she hated when she drew the water lukewarm and found her teeth chattering and goose bumps poking out their heads only minutes later. Tonight, she felt like a lobster in a pot, silently screaming, but knowing that all the energy she could muster would never allow her to reach the lip of the bath and scuttle out. Instead, she dipped her head beneath the water with her eyes still open.

The weight of Tolik's presence still lingered. From below the water she could see his portable baby monitor and its blinking green light atop the sink. Although the mirror behind the water basin now held a murky sheen of condensation, the green light shone through the fog and repeated the green blink, doubling her security that she was still connected to Tolik, but also haunting her with its echo. The white antenna from the monitor and the flashing made her think of the Three Sisters Lighthouse from her childhood home on the Cape. It was a place she loved and hated at the same time; it was a place she never let herself get called back to even though her father couldn't touch her anymore. She still despised that he was cremated and not just buried in one place where she could always be sure he'd be. She thought it was strange that he wanted to

be cremated; his entire family was buried near the mosque in Mashpee, or so she was told. Her father almost never let her or her mother leave the house, even to attend mosque prayer sessions. But, her mother had insisted that cremation was what he wanted and since he had no other living relatives, no one was there to object. When Aaliyah had refused to help her mother scatter his ashes in the harbor, her mother placed the half-filled urn into her hands.

“He’s half of you whether you like it or not,” she’d said. “Pay tribute.”

Aaliyah looked down at her father for the first time, examining the black and white specks of what he once was.

“No,” she’d said. “He doesn’t deserve this.”

“I told you to lock the door.”

Aaliyah had glanced back into the ashes and then up into her mother’s white eyes, finding nothing of herself in either.

“You’re a sad representation of a mother,” Aaliyah had said, pushing the urn into her mother’s arms. Her mother’s large, dark hands cupped the jar on both sides but she kept it there, outstretched from her body. When her mother hugged her, it was always with those same outstretched, rigid arms that never pulled her in. She turned and forced herself to walk away. Aaliyah knew she needed to find herself a new family, despite the fact that she didn’t even know what that was. She heard her mother’s voice trying to reach her, but the words were lost in the salt of the ocean air. All she could make out was, “Pay tribute. Pay tribute.”

When she had reached the edge of the dock, she turned and saw her mother letting the wind fondle the ashes as she held the jar upside down. Her father didn’t fall to the ground as she’d hoped; he danced through the air in a gray spiral, creating a miniature tornado. He looked beautiful and haunting as the sun’s beams bounced off of him, scattering light in all directions. For a short heart-stopping moment, her father was whole again and Aaliyah was seven, hiding in her closet, tucked inside her pink dollhouse, her right knee slipped inside the kitchen walls and her head bowed down into the attic, and no matter how many times her father yelled, “come out, come out, wherever you are,” she gripped her green baby blanket tighter and sat as still as she could. It angered her that she never fit. The dollhouse was always too small and she was always too big, and still growing bigger.

As the particles of her father had separated and shifted in the air, the image of her dollhouse exploding like a broken piñata inscribed itself in his place. She couldn’t remember how her father finally found her in the closet, inside the dollhouse, or what had happened afterwards; she just remembered the image of the dollhouse breaking when her father kicked it and told her she was too old for toys.

She had watched as her father’s ashes moved higher and higher, disappearing

into the air, becoming air. A few larger particles at the mercy of gravity seeped through the wooden planks of the dock and found their way to the sea. Now, she envisioned him wandering, invading the skies, swimming the cool water of the Atlantic until he made it to the Pacific, to the shore of Santa Monica Bay, where he could watch her through windows and touch her son's face in his sleep. The first few nights at home, Aaliyah slept next to the small new boy on the floor of the new nursery, cuddled in her old baby blanket that she couldn't bring herself to wrap him in because she felt she still needed it.

When Aaliyah opened her eyes, she found herself drawn again to the baby monitor. The babysitter should have sufficed, she knew that, but she still desired that link to him. Aaliyah thought that because she wasn't Tolik's biological mother, she missed some connection that melded mother and child. The mechanisms of the monitor had to do what her blood, breath, and brain could not. It was maddening. And Sasquatch wouldn't stop staring at her. That couldn't be a good sign. His elusive eyes were everywhere, probing beneath her skin. Where were the Big Foot enthusiasts when you needed one? Didn't they have their own conventions and camp-outs and Expos just for people who still believed he was out there haunting the forests? Maybe she would call their hotline later and tell them that she just had a sighting. Maybe they would put her picture in a Sasquatch convention pamphlet. Maybe she would call the adoption agency and demand to know why they had sent an HIV positive boy with a Sasquatch doll. Was Big Foot really that big in Russia too or were they trying to send a message? They told her that Sasquatch was Tolik's nickname because he was a relict, a survivor of a great phenomenon. But that's all they could say; the rest of his information would come in the mail later with a conglomeration of medications that came in more colors than all of Tolik's bath toys and some of which were as big.

Ever since the beginning, she hadn't liked the doll. It was always looking at her from corners and nooks of her house, in places where she wondered how it had gotten there. She didn't want to admit she thought it was judging her, as if it had eyes that sent video-feed back to the adoption agency, back to Russia, back to Tolik's biological parents. It was the monster's fault she was always asking herself if she was being a good enough mother. Her worst fear was that Tolik would grow up, move back to Russia to find his biological parents, and become invisible to her. Her greatest fear was that he wouldn't get a chance. But, these fears were all new to her. Old fears were that Sasquatches didn't exist and Tolik would never materialize.

When Aaliyah first met Tolik, she had wanted to love him, feel what every mother should feel when she first sees her child. She may not have given birth, but the pains to arrive at that moment were great and her expectations were high. She had applied to hundreds of agencies across the world, traveled thou-

sands of miles, and agreed to sign her heart over to a boy who had a good chance of dying before her. When her case worker handed over the child, Aaliyah grew goose bumps under her clothes. She reached out her arms, but didn't know where to grab him. Should she support the head, or was he old enough? Should she grab him under his armpits, or would that look un-motherly? Should she kiss him, or would that make him feel smothered? Was this what love felt like, or was she just nervous and cold and premenstrual?

Tolik had examined her face as the case worker placed him at her side, in the nook of her right arm, saving Aaliyah from having to make a decision about how to hold the toddler. His legs tightened around her waist, and Aaliyah marveled at the warmth of his body as the boy studied her eyes and her ears and the way he felt in her arms. She stared at his long, spidery eyelashes, anticipating, and scared to learn the boy's verdict until his miniature hand reached out and touched her face. Aaliyah let out the air she held in her stomach and smiled, thankful that the boy hadn't decided to cry. The feeling of instant rejection would have been too much. She reached up with her left hand and touched the boy's silky cheek, knowing at that moment that the boy's web had captured her, and she dared to look back.

His whitish blonde eyebrows gave hope for his stark bald head. A light smattering of freckles gathered on his cheeks. He was all smiles and dimples. Really, he didn't look like a sick child at all, but she knew it wasn't something that you could see like the fear that people would have of him if they knew. Tolik's right ear was a little bigger than his left, but the adoption agency assured her they would even out as if he was a product that they sold in bulk and already knew the possible malfunctions and growth projections. She didn't notice the small Sasquatch toy until it was thrown at her head during their first car ride home. Tolik giggled as the toy bounced beneath her feet. When the toy didn't immediately reappear, Tolik opened and closed his hands, finding them empty, and cried.

"Shhh, baby," she had said. "It's okay."

As she spoke, Tolik inhaled a deep breath and made his voice soar. He sounded like a trumpet climbing a scale. She glanced at Tolik, trying not to lose control of the car. His tiny body thrashed against the seat, while he kicked his legs in the air. Already, a shoe was missing and it was only then that she realized Tolik hadn't been wearing any socks. She scanned the floor next to her, but couldn't find the doll. Sasquatch was lost and had to be found.

Aaliyah stopped the car on the edge of a busy highway and put on her hazard lights. Cars honked at her as she opened the front door and got out to search the floor for the toy, forcing traffic to stop and wait to get into the inside lane in order to progress forward. She felt beneath the gas pedal and breaks, reeling in nothing but muffin crumbs and beads from a necklace she broke fiddling with the string while driving almost two years ago. She lifted up the lever under the

seat and pushed back the chair. Tolik screamed louder, cars honked with annoyance, and she could find no Sasquatch doll. When she turned to comfort Tolik, she saw the red and blue lights through her back window. An officer was already halfway to her car, trying to see what was going on inside the vehicle.

"Is there a problem, Ma'am?" The officer had asked when he reached the driver's side door. Tolik screamed louder, his face blotchy and wet.

"No, Sir," Aaliyah had said.

"This is a no stopping zone. Is there something wrong with the vehicle?"

"No, I'll be moving in just a second."

The officer bent down and moved his eyes over Tolik and back at Aaliyah. "What's wrong with the boy?"

"My...my son's toy is missing and I was trying to find it."

"This is your child, Ma'am?"

"Yes."

"He doesn't look like he's too happy. Is he sick?"

The word 'sick' resounded in her mind. Was this a sign? Could the officer see something that she, his mother of only a few hours, couldn't see? Finally, she responded, "He lost his toy."

The officer's eyes roved over her hair and then to her linen shirt wrinkled with travel. She felt like she did right after 9/11 when she didn't even feel safe going into the local grocery store. Her blackish-purple hair, even after she chopped it short, made people question her American-ness. She began wearing colorful animal-themed scrubs shopping even if she wasn't scheduled to work. It had been a few years since she thought to do this, but she looked down at her beige shirt and wished she had elephants dancing across her breasts with her stethoscope draped around her neck like a scarf.

"We can't be too careful these days." He smiled and opened his gray eyes wider. His eyes almost looked pink and, for some reason, Aaliyah thought of a carnival, of cotton-candy. She knew this was the bribe, the inducement before something terrible.

"He's my baby. I have the adoption papers here." Aaliyah found the papers in her purse and when she looked back at the officer, she flinched. She thought she saw her father through the glassless window. She looked away and when she looked back, the officer's candy eyes were arched up in question.

"Are you all right, Ma'am?"

"Here," she'd said. The papers shook in her hands. "He's my baby."

She found it amazing that she hadn't even arrived home yet and she'd already had to claim Tolik as her own. The officer moved his eyes over the adoption papers and took a step backwards.

"No, Ma'am. That's not necessary. I simply stopped to make sure you didn't need to be towed."

While he spoke, Aaliyah imagined the Sasquatch doll getting away, crawl-

ing deeper and deeper beneath her seat. The officer started to walk away, but then turned and pointed to Tolik. "Are you sure the boy is okay?"

Aaliyah scowled at him as she turned on the car. "If he wants to cry, he can cry."

She put the car in drive and adjusted her mirror so that she could see Tolik. The officer waited for her to pull out onto the highway, and Aaliyah's fawn-colored car quickly grew lost in traffic. She couldn't believe that she had escaped, that the officer had driven away and left her on her own. She thought about Sasquatch skulking around in the dark nooks of her car and, for once, she understood the advantages the creature had. She had always thought of him as a lonely creature, but Aaliyah had stood out her entire life and dreamed of what it would be like to be skilled in hiding, to blend in. And even though Tolik screamed and screamed, she forced herself to look forward and follow the yellow line to the outskirts of town towards home. The Sasquatch toy and his enthusiast would have to wait.

She pulled into her driveway in El Segundo, just south of the Los Angeles International Airport. The California air was moist and seemed to melt in her mouth like a chocolate candy. Aaliyah grabbed her small travel bag from the front seat, dropped it in her lap, and rested her head on the back of the seat. As she turned her head to the right, she saw Tolik in the rearview mirror. His face was still mottled with white spots; the areas surrounding the blotches were red. Tolik looked like a miniature giraffe with his spots, bald head, and big ears. His head was tilted to the side, at an angle Aaliyah thought should have been very uncomfortable, but Tolik was asleep, deep in the forest of sleep where he and Sasquatch could be reunited.

She dropped her luggage on the side of the driveway, and went to unhook Tolik from his seat. The gray seatbelt's teeth clung to one another, neither wanting to let go. It made her think of bird-ox, of the sticky balls that refused to let go of her clothing when she played on her small lawn with the green iron fence behind her house as a child in Massachusetts. There was only a small patch of tall grass in the corner and that's where Aaliyah liked to hide and pretend she was a lioness, hunting squirrels and voles for her cubs.

"How do you get so dirty playing in such a small space?" her mother would say when she was called inside.

"She doesn't know how to act like a lady," her father would say, shaking his head over the newspaper.

"Mother lions hunt for their babies and I want to be like a lion," she would say.

"Well you aren't a lion and this isn't Africa," he always responded, as if she didn't know.

The last time she informed her parents of her dreams of becoming a lioness, her father held her hand and brought her outside to the very back of the lawn.

Before leaving the kitchen she looked back at her mother in her black robes and tight hijab and the brown oval patch of skin on her face that was uncovered. Her mother didn't look up from the cutting board, but Aaliyah could hear the clicks from her mother's knife grow louder. The ginger was already cut up and in a neat pile; her mother was slicing air.

When they reached the back of the lawn, her father pointed to the wrought iron fence with triangle ornamental spikes at the very top.

"You see the fence, girl?"

Aaliyah nodded.

"You can be a lion for the rest of your life for all I care. But don't forget your place."

It was the first time she was aware of the bars. Before there were trees and vines and rivers in the distance. Now, she felt her children would go hungry.

When they had finally reached home, Tolik had reached out his hands for Aaliyah, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't remove him from his seat. No matter how hard she tried to ignore it, this had to be a sign. Feeling engulfed with anger, and true fear that she would never get Tolik inside, she lifted up the entire car seat and moved him towards the door. As she lifted the seat together with the boy, Sasquatch appeared from below, smiling a mocking smile, and she couldn't help but wonder if Sasquatch was smiling before. And how had he gotten here? Hadn't the toy hit her and bounced to the floor of the front? Maybe she just imagined the doll being thrown. Picking Sasquatch up between two fingers, Aaliyah placed him next to Tolik in his seat. She sighed and put the boy's car seat back in its place and struggled, once more, to get the belt loose. Unrelenting, she knew that she would need grander help in setting the boy free.

She turned the car back on and drove towards the Islamic Center on Hawthorne Street. It was a building she drove by everyday on her way to work and always gazed at it, wondering what her father did inside, even though the mosque he attended was hundreds of miles away. Today, she knew that she would have to go in, and someone would have to help her. Aaliyah had only once been inside a mosque, even though her father taught her to read from the Qur'an and taught her the five pillars. As soon as she ran away, she took off her hijab because she hadn't understood it was part of the religion, her religion; she thought it was part of her father's imprisonment and she had no interest in learning about something that was important to him. She was indomitable in her hate for everything that he loved. The mosque was always a place where he would go, and she and her mother would not. In those brief moments together, Aaliyah thought she knew what love felt like.

She carried Tolik and Sasquatch inside the mosque, leaving her shoes in tight cubbyholes against the wall outside the prayer room but she didn't go beyond the entrance.

"May I help you?" a tall woman, with green eyes that looked like emerald

moons, said. "Are you a member here?"

"I...don't really know why I'm here."

"Would you like a membership application? That's where most people start." She smiled.

"I don't quite think I'm at that stage yet. You see, my son is stuck in his car seat and I can't get him out."

The woman looked down at Tolik and bent over him. She pushed the button and tried to separate the belt's teeth by moving the clutch in different directions. The woman wasn't wearing robes, only a bright blue hijab over her hair. Moving to her knees, the woman tried to set Tolik free. And then she stopped and walked to a large desk at the entrance, disappearing behind a large file cabinet to its right. She popped her head up from the cabinet drawers, held up a silver pair of scissors with thick black handles and walked towards the entrapped Tolik. Her moon-eyes were full and rising as she moved over the boy. Aaliyah's muscles tensed, thinking harm was about to come to Tolik. Her son's reflection was projected into the woman's corneas and Aaliyah watched him from there; the little man inside the moon. Looking closer, looking at him outside the green moons was impossible.

"The mechanism is broken. Sometimes, you just have to cut them loose," the woman said, laughing at herself as she snipped through the gray straps. "That's what my husband keeps telling me. I have twin boys that just went to college in Rhode Island. Could they have picked a place farther from me?"

The woman lifted Tolik into her lanky arms and handed him to Aaliyah. "There you go. And don't worry; I have a car seat you can have. I don't know why I've held onto it so long."

Aaliyah stared at Tolik's bald head, unsure of what to say so she said, "No, thank you, money isn't a problem."

Nevertheless, she was angry that the woman had felt comfortable enough with her to destroy her property. Then again, the woman had been able to do what she could not. Set Tolik free. Another sign. She imagined the woman had the wild hair of a lion queen beneath her hijab, and with that image, she decided to trust her.

"You know, you don't have to follow our religion to come here. We can just talk."

"My father was Muslim," she said but didn't know why.

"What about you?" The woman smiled. Her voice was calm and quiet, but clear. Her voice sounded like a lullaby.

"I didn't like my father."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"He was poisoning the Atlantic."

"Poisoning?"

"My mother had him cremated."

"Are you sure your father was Muslim? Muslims shouldn't be cremated. It is haram."

"Forbidden?"

She nodded. "Did your mother get along with your father?"

"She always obeyed him and she didn't, she didn't..." Aaliyah hesitated. "My mother said..."

"Shh..." hissed the woman. "There are things we cannot know."

The woman cupped her hands over Aaliyah's and Aaliyah knew it was okay to stop and just sit there with the boy at her chin, the doll between his fingers, and a woman that she had just met cradling her hands. Together, the silence held signs and when she looked down she saw Sasquatch. He was still smiling.

Aaliyah sat up in the bubble-less bath and let the water flow down her naked body. She reached out and raised the floating Sasquatch from the water. Her finger traced the uneven line across his belly that marked the transition from white to brown. Every plastic crevice that the water had touched was white. As she moved the monster creature from her left hand to her right, her fingers left white marks on his chest from the water. He was changing, disappearing, in front of her.

This could be a sign, but she refused to let it be so. There were signs everywhere and nowhere. Nevertheless, she was losing her faith in her ability to interpret them correctly. Maybe the boy would disappear. Maybe she'd never be a good mother. She put both hands around the monster and squeezed. She imagined his eyes popping out and his stomach turning to a thin string, but nothing happened. Loosening her hands around the doll did nothing to release the tension in her stomach. Suddenly, a cry reverberated against the tile walls of the tub, making her flinch and drop Sasquatch into the water. She looked around before she realized the sound was coming from the baby monitor and as she ran to Tolik with a green towel coating her body, Sasquatch turned white beneath the water.

ZACHARY ROWE

On The Train

The train halted violently as it traversed the rails and slid by the freight train that was at a standstill. The train jerked backwards before coming to a full stop. The sound of the train wheels were masked by the sound of droplets hitting against the window next to me. I looked around the car I was in; half of the passengers were completely oblivious to the fact that we had stopped. My eyes took note of all of the passengers who were wrapped up in their computers and headphones and of those whose thoughts were suspended in deep sleep. That was also when I saw her.

She was in the row next to mine. The grayness of both the train and the world outside made her short and bright pink hair stand out. Her light skin was shadowed by the bright colored hair, with shades of bleach blond appearing in the light of the small reading lamp provided by the train. Her nose was practically buried in a book, but I couldn't make out the title or what the cover looked like. She was beautiful, even with a book for half of her face. I imagined that her face looked both timeless and current. A face that would rival Helen of Troy's, but was seen on the silver screen. A face that Homer would've dreamed of as clear as day in his mind, but now a reality, sitting cross from my aisle, seemingly hiding from Minerva, Juno, and Aphrodite behind her book. And I imagined all of this beauty from half of her visible face.

Were I a braver man, I would've said something. Perhaps I would've said "Excuse me? Do you know why we've stopped?" or, "What book is that?"

Perhaps she would've responded with "I don't know" or "A freight train's blocking us; it'll have to pass before we can get going again." Perhaps she would've said she was reading *Fifty Shades of Grey* or *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or some kind of biography.

I imagined her to be literate and deep. I imagined that she used to read for fun before she came to college, but now she can't help but to pick out things she

learned from her classes or can't help but to examine what she's reading.

I saw her respond to my question in my head:

"I'm reading *Fifty Shades of Grey* to see its similarities between the *Twilight* saga," or, "To see if it's an accurate representation of the BDSM culture," or "A friend recommended it to me and gave me her copy for the weekend."

I thought about her response to *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: "I've read his book, *In Our Time*, and thought I'd see how his writing grew and evolved."

I imagined her telling me that she was reading a biography on James Joyce or Sylvia Plath or Ernest Hemingway or Lydia Davis. I imagined myself responding to the fictional banter, saying that I've read *Ulysses* or *The Bell Jar* or *In Our Time* and *The Old Man and the Sea* or how I've read Davis' *The Cows* and how she was a teacher at my university. She would ask where I studied and I would tell her "At the University at Albany." She would ask me for my name and I would ask for hers. Even in my thoughts, I would hope that she'd like the sound of my name and I would casually say "Likewise." She would ask me about my major and I would tell her English, hoping she would laugh or respond with disgust, allowing me to defend it by saying the noble phrase "I want to be a teacher." I imagined that she would smile wide; a pretty smile, like her hair color. I'd ask her if she was in college. Maybe she'd say yes and mention a college that I would know little about. Maybe she would say yes and that she was studying at Albany for English as well. Maybe she would say no and ask me for my opinion about Albany. Maybe I would tell her that it's a great school full of opportunities and that the writing institute is on campus. Maybe I would tell her that it's not what I had expected, but it's still a good school with caring teachers. Maybe I'd tell her that it's a party school. Maybe I wouldn't say anything until I knew more about her.

Maybe we would chat about music or hobbies afterwards or talk about interests. Maybe we would talk about where we were from. I would tell her that I'm from Liverpool, a small suburban area next to Syracuse. I would hope that she was from some place nearby. Maybe she was from Syracuse too. Maybe she was a bit further away, like Buffalo or Rochester. Maybe she was from Utica. Maybe she was from Albany and simply visiting friends while on break. Maybe she was from a small suburban area like mine and just enjoyed train rides. I imagined that she felt lonely in those train rides, like she had in her small suburban area or at her commotion-filled college. Maybe I would've told her that I felt the same way and that we could be lonely together. And maybe she would've laughed it off. Or, maybe, she would've thought that it was a good idea.

Suddenly, the train jerked and started moving forward. My glasses and her book fell onto the aisle floor. I froze. Everything was still. Raindrops stopped racing down the window, staying in place where they landed. But my mind was still running; "Now's your chance." But my hesitation lasted too long, long enough for the freight train to get by, long enough for us to reach the next sta-

tion. I saw my glasses, then the hand that was holding them up, and then the person the hand was connected to.

“Thanks.” It was all I could manage to say before she got off the train and walked into the raining, gray world outside. The train started moving again and the rain started running down the window once more.

February Burning

No one was really all that shocked that Colton stopped talking—it was understood that he'd have to deal with this somehow, and it didn't look as if it would involve much screaming or crying. Two months of silence—a silence so complete that even in the dead of night, when the world was completely still, the sounds of his nightmares would be nothing more than aborted whimpers. Puffs of air—air that would have reverberated against the stark hospital walls had they been born of sound—passed through his lips into the night. The street lamps cast their orange glow through a slit in the blinds, nearly slicing Colton's face clear in half. He watched the lights dim as dawn began to break, and wondered if today would feel any different from the days before.

Today was the day he went home.

Coming home wasn't all that different from what he'd been expecting. Colton knew that there wasn't going to be a special "Welcome home Colton!" surprise party huddled behind the brown leather couch, impatiently waiting for the moment they could all spring up out of that uncomfortable crouch and suffocate him with their goodwill. No, he knew his return home would be more of a tentative ("Well, looks like you made it out of there, huh?") kind of greeting, wrought with the type of sympathy you'd receive when your family no longer knew how to look you in the eye.

Colton knew the burn marks drawing patterns across his back, and the lashing prints across the left side of his face, would be enough to remind his family of how badly he'd messed up—of how much he'd lost. And as much as he'd like to look his mother square in the eye and say, "There's still hope, Mom. She can still wake up," Colton didn't think he believed it enough himself to find the words. So he kept quiet. His mother held her gaze, however, and Colton could feel it searing into the side of his skull, enveloping itself around his scars—her

personalized version of a comforting hug without the embrace, because Colton shirking away each time she reached to wrap her arms around him was enough notice that hugs would not be accepted here. He wanted to ask her to quit staring or to focus her gaze on the unmarred side of his face.

Colton opened his mouth to speak but a burning fist clenched itself tight around his throat and bells went off in his head. The pounding bells left stars of white behind his eyes and he knew he'd screwed his face up when he felt his mother lay a hand across the back of his neck – just as she would after a bad day at school, or simply in greeting. Her hand was cool and soft just as it always was and Colton was glad that at least some things had remained the same.

The house hadn't changed much, structurally. The foyer still opened up into the living room and Colton could still navigate his way around the couches and the coffee table. He could still find his way to the kitchen without knocking over his mother's favorite plant, or stepping on Huxley's tail—his sister's favorite cat. "*This could still be home*," he thought as his mother sat him down at the kitchen table, peanut butter and nutella sandwich already waiting for him.

"Are you hungry honey?" Her movements were stuttering and cautious, as though Colton were a wounded animal poised for the defense rather than her son. "Your father's put your bags in your room already, so you can relax, tuck in if you're hungry. Are you hungry? Colton?"

Colton peered at his mother and wondered if this was the sort of homecoming she'd been hoping for. He took a bite of his sandwich and watched as his mother's expression calmed with the realization that although she'd have to deal with "a mute", ("*He's not a mute Charlotte. He's just in shock. That'll change once he's home, won't it Colt?*"), at least he wouldn't starve. She sat with him a while, watching to make sure he'd keep everything down, and that this wasn't a one-bite affair. Once she was satisfied she went about preparing dinner.

Colton continued eating, though to him the bread tasted of sandpaper, the peanut butter of cardboard, and the nutella of dirt. He rolled it all around in his mouth, hoping to produce enough saliva to force the ball of mush down his throat. He got it down but choked a bit, coughing as a small crumb of something fell down the wrong tube. His mother was at the ready with a full glass of water and a firm—but careful as she minded his scars—pat on the back. After swallowing down the entire glass, and undergoing a thorough once-over by his mother, Colton began to make his way up to his bedroom, only to be stopped again by her mid-step.

"Wait a second — Dr. Morris asked me to give this to you." She dug a thick white tube out of her purse and placed it in the palm of the hand she'd raised from Colton's side. "It's for the burns—for the scars."

Oh right, those. As if I'd almost forgotten.

"I can help you with your back if you like?" One last attempt to get him to talk before dinner, but Colton simply closed his fist around the tube and made

his way upstairs, unable to stop berating himself for being rude to his mother, and unable to stop telling himself that February had it worse.

His room hadn't been altered too greatly during his time in the hospital. The thin dividing wall between his room and February's managed to keep most of the damage on her side. The curtains had been replaced, along with the bedspread—everything in a pale grey-blue, to match his eyes most likely—his mother's doing. There was a new coat of paint covering the walls that was a deeper shade of blue, navy almost. That task would have been left to his father, as the walls were too long and too high for his mother's short stature to handle. Besides, chances were she had been at the hospital while all the renovations had been underway. She preferred to walk to and from intensive care rather than to oversee a few shelves being installed.

He didn't want to see February's room, not just yet. He wouldn't be able to see past the flames in his eyes—to see where Huxley would be spread out on her bed, waiting for her to come home—to wake up. But he needed to go to the bathroom and her room was on the way. Colton had been hoping that the door would be tightly shut, maybe even locked, but it stood ajar. It needed to if the smell of smoke, charred furniture, and fresh paint were ever going to find their way out. Colton cursed the masochist burrowing a home inside of his brain (maybe even his parents, just a bit, for leaving it open) as he glanced inside.

At first the normalcy of it struck him like an over thrown lacrosse ball to the face. A new set of furniture in such a deep mahogany that it was almost black—the more 'adult' set Feb had been begging for—stood in place of what had been lost. Her bed stood higher on its new frame and the floral sheets and pillows looked lush, fit for people one hundred times richer than his family. Her walls were painted in her favorite shade of maroon—deep and full, like vintage wine—and Colton's entire body tensed as he watched plumes of smoke billow up from the ground. Creeping tendrils wrapped themselves around his nostrils and Colton gasped, searching for breath. It wasn't until Huxley wrapped himself around Colton's ankle, mewling for attention, that the smoke cleared and Colton closed the door.

They'd let Colton see her before Dr. Morris cleared him for discharge. Neither his parents nor the doctor knew how he'd react, or if he really even wanted to see her that way. He'd made it about as far as the doorway.

Colton could see the tubes running in and out of his sister, chasing each other round and round till they met at the base of the machine keeping her alive. Her head was shaved where the surgeon had sewn the gash in her skull. Her face was pale and her eyelids were translucent blue. February's arms were covered by the blanket a nurse had brought in earlier, but Colton could see the burns weaving up her forearms as though they were unveiled and on display for all to see and gawk at. His stomach began to curl and his face and back felt white-hot, the patterns of scar tissue reminding him that he should have done better. He

should have kept her safe.

He walked out of the doorway. It wasn't until his father walked after him, laying a heavy hand—just this side of reassuring—on his shoulder, that Colton even realized he was shaking. “It’s going to be alright Colt. Feb’s going to pull through.” Colton shook harder. “Son... son? It’s all right Colt... Jesus Christ, c’m on son, please snap out of it!”

It took a round of sedatives to get the shaking to stop.

Colton noticed the duffle bag placed neatly at the center of his bed; he stepped back into his room to unpack it, trip to the bathroom forgotten. As he went to put his few mostly threadbare, mostly worn, shirts and jeans in their rightful spots, he noticed all the new additions to his wardrobe. Most of his clothes hadn’t made it through the fire, and those that did didn’t make it through the firemen’s hoses. He considered maybe looking through the new pieces of clothing, as any self-respecting sixteen year old would after realizing their mother had once again been delegated the task of dressing them, but an insistent buzzing heaved it’s way into Colton’s ear. It was coming from his desk, from a new cell phone (well new to him, it looked as though it might have belonged to his father before the new model came out) and as he approached he could see “HOME” flashing across the display.

“Colt? You there? It’s Dad—just making sure your phone’s on and ready. The guy at the store gave us a pretty hard time setting it up.... Can you hear me?” Colton could hear his mother puttering about in the background, her voice ringing through the receiver, *“Is he saying anything? Mark is he even on the phone? Maybe we should just go up there?”* He could hear the tell tale scratching of cotton against plastic as his father moved to hold his cell against his chest, while he pleaded for Charlotte to just give this a try.

“Hey why don’t you come down and have dinner with us? And maybe after you can come with us to the hospital—try seeing February again?”

Colton hung up the phone.

Somewhere deep in the back of his mind, Colton knew they didn’t blame him, and that February wouldn’t—once she woke up. But that was difficult to remember when all he could see were flashes of his sister stuck under that damn bookshelf (it wasn’t ever stable enough for all the stories she’d loaded it with), and the tear streaked frowns his parents had worn at his hospital bedside after his first skin graft.

It was even more difficult to see when his mother and father treated him with the careful paranoia often geared towards unbalanced war vets with gun collections. They did all they could not to mention the specifics of what had happened—at least not until February woke up, Colton guessed—though it’s not as if Colton needed the reminder. He hadn’t forgotten. Colton even saw their precaution possibly veering towards a point where his mother would end up steering him out of the kitchen if one of the stove’s burners were on. He

didn't want it to have to come to that.

"Oh, honey!" his mother started, one hand clasped to the kitchen counter as the other lay across her heart, once her ear caught the cadence of Colton's breath. "Dinner's not quite ready yet, and your dad just went out to grab some dessert. Why don't you set the table hmm? ... Don't bother with the candles though, we don't need them at every meal after all." Her smile was as loving as it ever was, but Colton could see the sadness hanging in the corner, the fear.

The entire ordeal was exhausting—too exhausting to even drudge up words in explanation of his exhaustion—and Colton found himself setting four places instead of three.

"Colton..." His father looked at him, gaze saddened, and his mother sat, quietly encouraging Colton to do the same, but he moved to put the fourth plate back in its cupboard.

"No" his mother said "Leave it, it's alright. She's here in spirit." Colton found it funny that his mother would put it that way, as if Feb was actually gone. As if she'd caught his train of thought, her eyes widened and she reached quickly for his hand. "Oh no! I don't mean it like that. She's going to be fine, I just mean... having her plate here... it just feels more like she's late coming home from a friend's..."

"It's alright, Charlotte" his father interjected in that soothing tone Colton has heard him use countless times—especially on the women in their family, never the one to want to see them hurting. "We can talk about it you know, Colt... about the fire. It's alright."

From the moment he'd sat down Colton had felt stifled, the air in the dining room heavier than usual, but now it was as if someone had steadily been stuffing marshmallows down his throat for how sticky and congested it felt.

It was simpler for Colton to return to his room after dinner, trying hard as he went to look past his parents' faces, past the worry and disappointment there. He wanted to tell them that they were jumping to conclusions. He did want to see his sister, *just not like this*. He knew he needed to face her, to make sure for himself that she was recovering, but there were times, much like right now—right before fitful sleep claimed him, spread out over his duvet, instead of under or inside of it—where he would imagine standing over her, watching the respirator push her chest up and out, filling and refilling her lungs—clearing out all traces of smoke. He would say something—he couldn't decide what ("I'm sorry," felt like too little, and "Forgive me," felt like too much).

Her eyes would open and she'd take in his face—the scars marring the line of his left brow, nearly touching his eye, and the way they stretched all the way to his full bottom lip—and instead of recognition, or relief, her eyes would melt into something along the lines of hate. Colton couldn't take the chance of this being the sort of thought that turned into a premonition. He wanted to remember the way she looked up to him but still managed to be mature enough

to hang out in his room with him, even when he had friends over. He wanted to remember the way February would get the most curious look in her eyes whenever the woes of being thirteen settled themselves on her mind.

He wanted to forget that there was a chance February would never creep into his room after lights out to poke him in the side and ask, “Colt, why would Jimmy Brewer ask me to the spring dance if everyone knows he’s already seeing Molly Shea?” Colton wanted to forget that he’d have to make up an answer his mother wouldn’t punish him for later.

But most of all, he wanted to forget that he’s the one who left that Zippo out in the open.

On his second day home, Johnny came to see him. Colton knew that Johnny had been allowed visitation in the hospital a handful of times—the first being when both Colton and February were quarantined behind glass—for fluid replacement they’d said. No one had been allowed in the same room as either of them until the skin grafts had started. The surgeries hadn’t been very extensive—the burns were superficial, just barely crawling into the second degree. But Colton figured it must have seemed eerie to Johnny to have your skin replaced—to have what was once part of your thigh placed upon your back, face, arm. But as Colton watched Johnny walk into his home, a place that had once been so familiar now marred by the lingering stench of smoke (Colton realized his mother was doing her best to neutralize it, the increased number of *Glade Plug-Ins* lying around being any indication), Colton was glad the doctors had done it.

In right profile Colton knew he looked about the same. His hair was still cut in that way where it was buzzed in the back but longer and spiked up at the front. The strength he felt in his jaw hadn’t lessened, but his eyes seemed dull—a shade of blue he can’t remember having seen before. Colton knew Johnny would notice, that he’d ask about it, and in such a way that a nod of Colton’s head wouldn’t be enough. He’d try and get him to talk—maybe even joke about that time Colton face planted on the lacrosse field, too distracted by his cheering family to notice the other team’s attacker heading straight for him.

Colton, perched in place at the top stair, saw his parents greet Johnny as they normally did, with a firm handshake from his father, and a hug paired with a sweet “Hello Aleshenka” from his mother.

Johnny gave his usual grimace at hearing his first name, “Oh, c’mon Mrs. H, you know I hate that name!”

She raised her eyebrow; a laugh hidden in the corner of her mouth, “Why? It’s yours, isn’t it?”

Colton’s father laughed at the exchange, and let Johnny make his way up to see Colton. The creak on the first stair only lasted a second as Johnny paused, then sounded again as he turned back towards Colton’s parents.

“He’s... okay isn’t he? I mean, I know he’s not talking or anything but he’s

fine, right? Still the same kid I met in the sandbox?”

In the silence following Johnny’s question Colton imagined his father had put an arm around his mother’s shoulder—a comfort to both of them as he forced out an answer. “We’re not so sure, Johnny. It’s been... difficult for him.”

Johnny, visibly steeling himself (“Okay. Okay.”) climbed the rest of the way upstairs, and Colton rushed back to his room, unsure of whether he could handle being caught eavesdropping.

He sat on his bed, waiting for the door to creak open and for Johnny to poke his head in, doing his best to keep his left side out of sight—out of mind. “Hey man, can I come in?” Colton nodded, shifting forward to pull out his desk chair, a silent indication that he should have a seat. “Okay, so I know you’re still not talking, and I’m not going to force you to. Besides, I’m used to it—doing most of the talking. I don’t even get sent to detention anymore, but then again that could be due to you telling all our teachers I had a condition...”

As Johnny prattled on, Colton took in his face. It was as pale as ever, and unmarred. His dark hair was cropped short all around, the same buzz cut he’d been sporting since they were twelve. Johnny’s eyes betrayed the comfortable posture he held, the nerves dancing behind his irises, and Colton looked away. He focused his gaze on Johnny’s shirt, a baseball tee adorned with palm trees and a setting sun, the words “Welcome to Honolulu” emblazoned across the chest. It had been a fifteenth-birthday gift from Colton—a thrift-shop find—and the last time he had worn it Johnny handed Colton a gilded Zippo, offering a spare can of lighter fluid along with it.

“Hey remember that winter it snowed so bad we got like, a week of snow days? *The worst snowfall Long Island’s ever seen*, my dad says. You remember right? We spent all week sledding and telling Feb we’d bury her in the snow if she didn’t stop following us around. Man, I think we were—what, like eleven maybe? Your mom threatened to send us back inside if we didn’t let her play along, so we had her make snowballs while we built that huge snowman. God, that thing was gigantic. I think I kept slipping, and knocking it over, so you made me trade places with Feb. I swear your mom has a picture somewhere of me sulking while you picked her up to stick the carrot-nose in. God that was great.” Colton flinched when Johnny’s voice broke towards the end and their hands mimicked one another’s—clenched and writhing in their laps.

“I’m sorry man, I shouldn’t have-” Colton reached out and wrapped his hands around Johnny’s stilling them. His gaze held strong and locked on Johnny’s and he hoped his friend would understand that this was not his fault—that he’s not the one who filled the lighter and practically handed it off to February.

Johnny left a little while later, “Homework to be done, ya know,” but not before panhandling his friend into an embrace. Colton was never the type to hug—he’d only ever hugged Feb and that was back when she was four and scraped her knee—but he let himself fall into it, if only for a moment, before

letting go and seeing Johnny down the steps.

Most days after school, February would go straight up to Colton's room, Huxley in tow, and work on her homework until he made it back from school. Once he got in she'd listen to him complain about how long the bus took (how Mom and Dad should just cave and get him a car already, which would work out for both of them since he could just swing by the Junior High...) and drift off for an hour or two. February knew he'd still be there when she woke up, hunched over his desk working on his Calculus homework, or fooling around on his laptop. But today she awoke to Colton sitting back in his chair, relaxed as he watched a movie on his laptop, flipping a golden lighter open and shut on his thigh, its flame a beacon in the evening dimmed room.

"Where'd ya get that?" At the sound of her voice Colton hit the pause button. As he turned to face her where she sat on his bed, there was a moment where the screen of his computer was right in February's sights. It was paused on a still of Colton's favorite character from that ghost hunting show, making a less than handsome face. She giggled to herself and Colton gave her a funny look. "Where'd I get what, kid?"

"The lighter, duh. Mom and Dad know you're gunning for lung cancer?" Colton scoffed and a smile cut across his face. "I don't smoke, you know that. Johnny gave it to me—late birthday gift."

"That's a pretty lame gift."

"Hey! I like it. Besides if Johnny were here you'd be singing a different tune. Don't think I don't know about your little crush."

February's face heated and shone scarlet, "*I do not* have a crush on Johnny! He smells like a sweaty jock strap!"

Colton chuckled as he got up to scruff a hand through February's sleep tousled hair—hair as chestnut brown as his own, "Of course Feb. I'm making pizza bagels, want one?"

"Two please. Hey, why don't you let me hold that lighter of yours—just 'till the parental units get in?"

"Not a chance, kiddo."

In retrospect, Colton should have known to put the gilded Zippo back into his pocket, instead of his desk drawer.

Long after Johnny had gone home and his parents to bed, Colton decided to attempt the same. His fitful sleep turned to a waking terror that had to be seen through to its end, as though his mind refused to leave him be in what was meant to be a pleasant afternoon.

In his mind's eye he could see February reaching into his desk drawer as he fuddled with the pre-heating oven. He watched as she tip toed across the hall to her room, Zippo like a secret held close to her chest. Filling in the blanks he missed, his unconscious offered up images of February sitting at her desk, testing out the lighter's potency on pieces of crumpled up paper—most likely

torn out diary entries about Johnny (Colton was on to her after all). He saw the panic that spread like wildfire in her eyes when she realized the paper burned a lot quicker than she thought, especially when it was in the same trash can as a half empty bottle of nail polish remover.

As Colton twisted in his sheets, February's face twisted in his mind, fire scorned and hysterical as she backed away from the growing flames—now tall enough to catch her curtains alight—right into the bookcase. Colton only remembered hearing it fall, but trapped within his mind, he saw the bookcase fall and heard the crack of February's skull—image moving much too slow for the sound—as it made contact with the shelf's edge.

The dream version of Colton never managed to get the bookcase lifted in time to save them both from the flames. Colton figured he should be thankful that wasn't actually the case.

Colton woke to a cool breeze dropping stealthily through his open window, gently lapping across his cheek, the way Huxley would whenever he missed February enough to pay Colton any mind. When his nightmare passed, his visit with Johnny had started replaying through his mind—enough to find itself woven into his dreams against a background of smoke. Colton, the only one choking on it. As he blinked, bleary and sleep confused, he couldn't help but realize that Johnny never mentioned his scars—not even to comment on how “badass” he probably thought they were—and Colton wondered if his attempts to remain in-profile actually worked. Chances were, Colton knew, that Johnny was just a better friend than he realized. Dawn slowly made its way across the sky, fighting what seemed to be a losing battle with the night. Not yet ready to face another sunrise, Colton huddled beneath his duvet—the near-black of his under-covers too dark to let him take refuge from the remaining twilight, but still too light to hurl him back into the night and all of its burning.

The phone his parents had given him began buzzing on the nightstand Colton had placed it on the day before, so wildly it almost fell to the floor. This time the display read “Dad” and the clock behind it read 3:02am. A rolling wave of dread settled itself deep within his gut, nearly forcing out the dinner he'd forced in. Colton tapped the screen's “answer” button, held the phone to his ear and waited for his father to realize the phone had stopped ringing.

“Colton, you there?”

Colton's breath stuttered—something that would have been an “*Oh God, is she-*” had his mouth been able to twist itself into the necessary shapes.

“I think it's time you come see your sister, Colt. I'm coming to pick you up. Your mother's here with me. We would have woken you... but it looked like you were finally getting some sleep.”

The dread in Colton's stomach hoisted its flag and claimed this new land as its own.

“She's been asking for you, Colt. She misses her big brother.”

The ride to the hospital made the place seem farther away than it actually was—the never ending line of trees and wild brush along the freeway almost maddening. Colton fidgeted in the passenger seat, and couldn't find it in himself to be upset with his parents for waiting this long to come get him, or for leaving him home in the first place. February had been awake for two hours before they'd called him—his parents much too nervous about this fragile bout of good fortune to risk accidentally knocking it off its stand. His father told him that they'd waited until Dr. Morris had checked February over and made sure everything was still functioning properly. February had a tough rehabilitation period ahead of her—her legs had grown weak from disuse, and the scars on her arm and head would take a great deal of getting used to. Colton, too, still needed to come in periodically—just until his grafts fully healed and his skin settled. And as much as Colton wanted to concentrate on his father's words, he couldn't stop his head from swimming.

To Colton these were nothing more than technicalities. February had finally come out of her coma, and even if she had come out of it hating him, at least she'd been given the chance to do just that. The realization that could actually happen didn't hit Colton until he stepped into the doorway of her room, nerves tickling his spine and coating his palms in a sheer sheen of sweat.

His mother noticed Colton's hesitation and reached out to him, tear-coated tissue still clutched in her hand. "It's okay. Come in, it's okay." Colton took a step into the room, grabbed his mother's hand, and as if he'd been pulled into February's orbit, found himself standing above his sister, looking at pale-blue eyes. Eyes so much like his own, but with that curious glint, which he hadn't seen in two months. He replaced his mother's hand with February's and jumped when her fingers tightened around his own, surprised she hadn't pulled away. The weight inside of him let up a bit.

"Colt?" Her voice was faint, quieter than he ever remembered it being. Her lips were slightly chapped and Colton thought that if she could manage after having had a tube stuck down her throat for two months, then so could he. Managing his forgiveness, however, seemed like a task only February might be capable of, given enough time.

"Hey kid." His voice was just as faint, dusty and rough from disuse, the vice grip his throat had upon his voice loosening.

"I missed you, doofus."

"Yeah, Feb, I missed you too... I'm so sor—"

"Hey Colt...?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"You didn't tell Johnny I've got a crush on him did you?"

Colton breathed a laugh as he reached to run a hand through February's hair.

"Wouldn't dream of it, Feb."

Effigy

He was eight, full cheeks brimming with youth and a toothy grin that refused to be contained behind thin lips. He was not quite plump enough to be taunted by his peers, and not yet old enough to be endearingly rotund. Henry Orsen blended into the world that seemed eager to forget him. He didn't care. From his place in the back of the classroom, side of the hall, or behind a book, he could see her, and that was all he thought about. She was the most adorable girl that he had ever seen—his first boyhood crush. She had skin the color of fresh milk and her hair seemed to devour any light that touched it. She was quiet, but brilliant with a colored pencil—though the combination never seemed to garner her any friends. Henry didn't care. She was going to be *his* girl, and she didn't even know it yet. But when he approached her, the occasions as fruitless as they were many, she would wish him away, indifferent to his persistence and adoration.

He would march up to her at the beginning of each day and proclaim, "I like your name. Violet is such a pleasant color," turning the very shade of which he spoke.

And she would say, "It's Violet the *flower*, not the *color*, stupid!" Turning her nose as far up as she could manage while still scouring him with her eyes, she would storm away so violently that from inside a classroom, one might have thought her to be an elephant parading through the foyer. But Henry didn't care. He was ensnared by her briny charm, tangled by her bitter tongue like a lame rabbit caught in a rusty fence.

They successfully avoided each other as they climbed upward through elementary and middle school. Occasionally, they had classes together in those years, though neither used that as an opportunity to build their friendship. He appreciated her from afar, enjoying her consistent effort and intelligence, while never really letting her surpass him. He was always the brightest in the class,

and she, a close second—this hierarchy a constant source of unvoiced conflict between them. In November when they were twelve, Violet beat him on a geography exam. Though it was a subject at which he was admittedly ‘inadequate,’ he couldn’t help but boil in frustration as Violet steeped him in a scalding pot of gloat.

“Henry, what did *you* get on the test? Because I think I beat you!” Violet chirped as she flapped her exam in his face, taunting him. She was finally victorious over her rival, and she relished the opportunity to break her silence towards him to let him know it.

“Mrs. Porter wrote ‘Excellent work!’ on the top of my paper. What did she write on *yours*? I bet she didn’t even write anything!”

Cheeks burning with shame, Henry looked down to the twisted lump of paper in his fist. The bright red ‘93%’ that stood alone on an otherwise unmarked first page peeked out from the crumpled mess, snickering in his face. *A-. You weren’t good enough, Henry. She was the best. You failed.* No matter how harshly his parents had scolded him in the past for any grade less than an A, he was always his own harshest critic. Violet buzzed around him like a pesky mosquito feeding on his humiliation; he couldn’t take it anymore. Seizing the test from her lofted hand, Henry threw it to the floor.

“It’s just one test, Violet! It doesn’t matter,” he spat. “You’ll never be as smart as me! You just got lucky this time. You’re just a dumb girl!” Henry shook with rage, startled yet excited by his outburst.

“You are NOT! I am just as smart as you!” Violet cried. “You don’t even have any friends. You’re just an ugly loser. I’m glad I never talk to you! I will never be your friend!” said Violet, eyes brimming with tears.

Still shaking from the encounter, Henry unclenched his fist that had turned his exam into a bleeding pulp of the fifty states, letting it fall to the floor. By the time it hit the ground, he was already to his locker grabbing his books for his next class. He had a mathematics quiz the following day, and a 93% would be unacceptable.

After that, things were different. Violet no longer allowed any communication between them, even though Henry was desperate to apologize, to prove to her that he was sorry, that he *needed* her attention. But this was to no avail. She remained aloof for the next four years, and Henry let his mind fill the silence that had become commonplace between them. He could recall countless conversations they had, though they were only just fabrications of his vivid imagination. On an unusually warm December day during junior year in their small private high school, Henry collided with Violet in the secondary students hallway as he exited his Advanced Placement Biology class. His textbooks scattered and her pastels, charcoal, and pad flew across the tiled floor, washing it in variegated streaks. He had noticed her sitting on the sports fields many times earlier in fall during free period sketching away on her manila tablet. He had watched

her through the window of the library—moments that he filed and stored for safe-keeping in his mind—transfixed by the angularity of her perfect jaw, mesmerized by the way the light splayed effortlessly across her collarbone.

“I am so sorry, I wasn’t paying attention,” Henry blurted as he dropped to his knees attempting to collect Violet’s things. Knees covered with chalk, he stood to hand back to her, in one mangled pile, the tools of the craft she had become so fond of.

“It’s alright. Thank you, though,” she said, as she smiled politely, carefully placing the pastels back into the respective places in their case. Fingers covered with reds and blues and greens, Violet hiked her bag further onto her shoulder, smearing the colors across her alabaster chest.

“Yeah, uhh, sure,” Henry managed to reply, far too distracted by the chalky bruise that was splayed across Violet’s sternum. He longed to reach out and touch her, to press and ply the color from her skin, to create lines of his own on her pallid dermis. He looked up at her, his heart beating so loud it resounded in his ears. The disgusted look on her face jarred him from his daydream, slamming him back into the brown leather loafers that stood before Violet.

“Pig,” she spat, before Henry had a chance to apologize for his apparent indiscretion.

“I’m so sorry! I wasn’t... I didn’t....” Henry called out, but it was too late. Violet had already departed down the hallway. Crushed, he receded to the wall of lockers to his right, barely able to contain his distress. But as she stormed away, he noticed the way her figure swayed with her steps, and he pictured her vertebral column wavering with the swing of her hips, each link moving in perfect rhythm with the one above and below it. And suddenly, he wasn’t so upset anymore.

When he was seventeen, he dreamt of her in the most delicate and lovely dreams. Once, he was sitting on a cool metal table, his fingers creeping up her knobby, perfect spine. And in this dream, he let his fingers press into her skin ever so firmly, the padded tips of his digits creating puddles of creamy flesh that he wished he could burrow into. His rough hands, calloused from the whittling he took up—a hobby to keep company with his thoughts—marauded over her ribs, passing each of them with a dull *thwump* he just *knew* she could feel. He found euphoria in the gooseflesh he raised with his touch. Then, he became hungry for her, the smooth of her lower back twisting his desire, his fists gnarled in an attempt to resist the yearning to lay her flat and do what he needed to. And then he woke.

When she walked passed him in the tapioca hallway of their school the next day, it was not her scent that enticed him, though it winged to his nostrils a hint of honeysuckle and vanilla; no, it was her pulse that seemed to croon to him from her chest, from her neck. He had desperately longed for her beauty before, but now, something more menacing called to him from the smallest part of his

brain that he never knew existed. Bursting from the veins that pounded just under her skin, he could hear her crying to him, “You want *me*, you want *me*, you want *me*,” louder and louder until it became the mantra for his every footfall.

On his way home that day, a tabby cat darted out in front of him. Violet’s cries and accusations had finally crawled into his brain, and it was all he could do to keep walking. Inadvertently, he crushed the cat’s paw as it tried to weave between his feet across the sidewalk. Startled, but more excited than he should have been, Henry took the cat back to the basement of the four-story brownstone home that he and his family lived in during the school year. Curious, he began to poke and prod, until he could bear his yearnings no longer. The gentle click and heavy slam of the front door upstairs hours later dragged him from his reverie, his laundered clothes blushing red. Hurriedly, he hid the corpse in a storage chest in the far corner of the basement, emptying his clothes in as well before shutting it. Henry was sure no one would ever find them. Maureen, the maid, was the only other person beside himself who had gone down to the basement in years, as the washer and drier were housed there. It didn’t seem to him as though his parents would suddenly begin doing their own laundry any time soon.

When he walked upstairs, shirtless and exhausted, his mother had already begun her nightly ritual of chasing glasses of gin with episodes of her favorite soap opera, oblivious to the patter of another set of feet on the hardwood floor. His father was still at work. Henry walked slowly into the living room where his mother resided, reclined on the handsome yet stiff chaise lounge, still in her work clothes. She stared up at him, eyes glazed with the thick syrup of intoxication, and smiled gently.

“Hello, dear,” she said as she put her hands on his cheeks which had lost most of their fat. She kissed his forehead.

“You are so handsome, you know that? Thinning out, just like the doctors said you would,” she cooed as she brought her fingers down to pinch and wiggle his chin.

“But why on earth are you walking around the house without a shirt on? It’s the middle of winter and Maureen is still here. Go make yourself decent,” she said, attention waning as her show returned from a commercial break.

“Yes, Mother,” Henry replied, and walked upstairs to his room. She hadn’t even noticed the blood on his hands. He sat down at his desk in the dark and switched the lamp on. From the top drawer he took out his utility knife and continued to carve the large column of wood that lay on the desk before him. Carefully whittling each curve and knot, he carved the configuration of Violet’s vertebrae, biding his time until the day that he would be able to see them for himself.

When they were eighteen, they graduated. He knew every curve of her thin frame like he had drawn them himself; she could recall only his name and the

slight memory of a petulant argument that seemed to have happened in another lifetime. Henry had heard she wasn't heading to college as he was—her passion for art outweighing her academic prowess. While he packed the car his parents had given him full of only the necessities, he thought of her. And while he drove from his home in Boston, Massachusetts to his new one on the Johns Hopkins University campus in Maryland, he wondered when he would be able to see her again, even if it was just to watch her breathe.

When he was twenty-one and finished with his undergraduate degree a year early, he returned to his hometown to an empty house; his parents had decided to go to the summerhouse three weeks earlier than expected, and they had taken Maureen with them. After unpacking his things, he walked back outside onto the sidewalk, preparing to take a stroll in the strangely brisk May weather. Before reaching the end of the block, though, a familiar face caught his eye—a flyer, bearing his hand-drawn likeness, was taped to the street light three houses down. Violet, the girl who had not left his obsessive attention for three years, was having an art showing in the gallery on Fifth Street in two days, and he appeared to be the subject of her focus. He had fantasized about her everyday without fail, carved her figure into wood and desks, sketched her onto the margins of his textbooks—the preserved pink skin of pigs during dissection even reminded him of the way Violet's skin had glistened when she walked by a sunlit window in school. He had to go. That night he dreamt of her again.

The day of the event arrived, and Henry woke up refreshed in his childhood bed. He looked in the mirror, shuffling his 'business-chic' dirt brown hair out of his piercing grass-green eyes, and parting it ever so precisely to the right, framing his handsome face impeccably. A strong jaw and childhood dental work had left him with an enchanting smile that even the most independent of women fell captive to. Chubby in his youth, Henry had grown into a perfect male specimen—just shy of six feet tall with an athletic build and a voice that echoed refinement. The weight that had clung to his body awkwardly in his teenage years was all but disappeared. He had been the subject of much affection throughout college, though he never reciprocated it.

That morning, he could barely feel the frozen cold of the marble on his bathroom floor as he brushed his teeth twice and dressed, and when he forgot his tailored jacket in his room on that blustery morning, he didn't even notice the remnants of wintry air biting at his skin through his button-up shirt. He made his way down the streets that stacked like a ladder to his destination. Finally, he stood outside the starkly decorated gallery, peering in through the clear glass. Before him, just through the window, walked a girl with clay-black hair and a faultless figure. Though she had grown slightly taller and had filled out in places that made Henry twinge in ways he tried to ignore, she was the still same Violet to him that she had been at eighteen. She made her way to each of her four guests, welcoming them and thanking them for attending. His frame

silhouetted by the leaching sun behind him, Henry stared at her unabashedly.

"*Violet*," he breathed. Cautiously, he walked into the gallery—her promise to him in childhood still seared into his brain. But his likeness, reflected on the walls around him, gave him confidence. She *remembered* him. She had recreated him with her hands, had formed him so close to her. Her breath on his face, his neck, as she leaned in to draw his eyes, his lips, his...

"Hey, I'm Violet. How are you liking things?" said a voice behind him before he had a chance to get lost in his musings. Henry turned around to face her, unsure whether or not to smile or cower. She sucked in a deep and quick breath.

"*Oh, shit*. Oh my god! Henry, right?" Her eyes wide enough Henry could have sworn he'd seen the back of her skull, Violet stared at him, mouth agape, awestruck.

"Yeah, that's right. I saw the flier of, well, my face, and that it was you who had drawn it, so I thought that warranted a visit. I'm sorry if I alarmed you."

"Oh, no, no! I was just surprised, that's all. It's funny, I don't remember ever really talking to you when we were in school together, but your face, well... Look around. I guess you could say I do," Violet said, almost as a laugh, as she let her hand guide his gaze around the gallery to different representations of him. Henry, still unsure of how to respond, let her continue.

"I'm sorry if this is weird for you. I can imagine this is weird. You showed up in a random dream of mine about a year ago, and there was this really cool bluish light around your head... you had a horse body, but that's beside the point," she said, suddenly preoccupied, as she traversed the gallery floor in a few short steps.

"Uhhhh, here! This one! This was the first." She pointed to a picture of Henry swaddled in a blanket of blueberry hues. "And then after that, I just kind of started doing a series. You have a good face for drawing. Lots of lines and all that. It's a little different now that I see you in person; you've changed a lot since I last saw you. So... yeah. Whaddya think?"

"Is it vain to say that they're beautiful?" Henry said, looking to each of the drawings in turn.

"I don't know," Violet said, laughing. "That's a good point. Thank you, though. I was going to contact you after I found out I was going to have a showing, just in case something like this happened, but I couldn't remember your last name."

"It's not a problem at all," Henry replied. After a short pause "Listen, I know this is a bit forward, but could I take you out tonight, for dinner?"

Henry was there to meet Violet at seven p.m. exactly, right as the gallery closed. They made their way to the center of the city, the best bars and restaurants all clustered in and around Quincy Market. The open square greeted them with the powder-grey haze of dusk. Out of breath from the uncharacteristic May cold that seemed to steal each gasp from their lungs, they stood staring at

one another, the rubber soles of their shoes glued together with the thickness of the air between them. They found themselves with nothing to say—as if the minute distance between them could do all of the talking for them. Henry fidgeted with his collar, making sure the furthest tips were buttoned to the rest of the shirt. He hated it when they'd come undone. He met Violet's gaze once again.

"I've spent a little too much time alone to know what words to say in a moment that seems to require none," he said, finally. She blushed, exhaling a breath that seemed to have been holding her lungs hostage for some time now. She beamed at her feet, pressing the knuckles of her toes forcefully to the bottom of her shoes, attempting to contain the excitement that seemed fit to bust right from her chest.

"You know, you might have been the last person in *world* I expected to make me smile like this. I'm sorry we were never friends when we were kids," she said pensively.

"I wasn't ready for you yet," Henry said, examining her with his voracious gaze. He leaned in closer, his face just a breath away from hers.

"Hmmm," he sighed thoughtfully, "vanilla and honeysuckle."

She smiled again, this time directly at him. He smiled too, glad that his trite compliment had distracted her long enough for him to hear the melody he had so sorely missed. His heart beating out of control, threatening to break from its hold in his chest, Henry almost couldn't keep up with it. He reached his hand out and let it glide from her jaw to her collarbone. Violet's eyes closed, enjoying the touch. She was finally *ready*. He had waited so long for her, dreaming of the moment when he could finally get his hands on her—the moment when she would trust him enough to let him put them there.

"May I kiss you?" Henry asked. With no hesitation, Violet leaned closer, reaching on her tiptoes to place her lips against his cheek.

"What do you say we skip dinner?" Violet whispered into his ear. As she rested back on flat feet, she eyed him lustfully. Though she was beautiful, she hadn't dated since the work for the gallery showing began; she was going to take advantage of this Zeus of a man whether he liked it or not.

Violet took Henry's hand, but let him lead the way. Barely aware of his feet moving along the ground, Henry was exuberant in the knowledge that she, at last, was *his*. He led her to the farthest west corner of the square, his house only a fifteen-minute walk. She spoke to him as they ambled across the cobbled stone, but he was completely lost. She could not hear the call of temptation that sounded with each throb and ebb of her organs, unaware that Henry was not entranced by the soft and graceful lines that formed her face, but instead, by the thought that he could explore below them, able to understand the source of her beauty in an appreciation of her *true* form. He *knew* no one else could ever give her that justice. When they reached the brownstone, Henry opened the door and ushered her inside. Though she had surprised herself in being so

forward with him, Violet trusted in his good intentions. She had known him her entire life, practically, hadn't she? She decided he seemed like a good man. And besides, he was far too attractive to pass up. Once inside, Henry pushed the door shut and slid the lock-chain into place as Violet turned her back to him to take in the opulent décor.

"Nice place," she said, as she slid her coat from her shoulders, revealing a black strapless dress that displayed her scapula beautifully.

"Thank you," he said, and he reached out his hand to take Violet's, leading her toward the basement. He looked back to her as they made their way to the door, Violet taking his baleful gaze as an act of seduction. In a moment he could not have imaged more perfectly, Violet caught up to him, ready to give this charming almost-stranger who had an honest face what she knew he wanted, right as they reached the basement door. In one swift gesture, Henry opened the door, just as Violet moved to lean back against it. Pressing his lips to hers violently, Henry used the force of their embrace to thrust her down the wooden staircase. Opening her eyes frantically, she was shocked to find no firm grasp of Henry's arms around her, but instead, the weightless grip of the air that dropped her carelessly to the stone floor, her limbs crashing into the stairs as she tumbled downward.

Henry stood at the top of the stairs, triumphant and aroused by the helpless display he had just witnessed. Violet's lifeless body, mangled in a heap on the cold cement made every hair on his body rise with excitement.

"I'm what's best for you, Violet. You have to understand that. I promise I'll treat you right," he said, as he made his way down to her.



The *plunk* of the large stationary clock on the otherwise barren wall drew Dr. Marlon Hersh from his trance. He blinked, letting his eyes refocus on the body before him. He felt no pity, though, a thoughtful grin creeping onto his face. She was something special. Now more than ever, he could appreciate the contours of her flawless form, reveling in the fact that he would be the last one to see her whole. As soon as he was finished examining her, the body would be taken away, and her file sent to the police, but eventually to a warehouse full of a thousand other Jane Doe cases, just like hers.

"One man's trash..." he chuckled, repeating his favorite adage to himself as he prepared.

Marlon had tirelessly completed his medical training after finishing his undergraduate degree, besting the most competent peers in his field, all for moments like this. Tenderly, he flicked on the lamp that hung just above her body, the stark white and silver of the sterile room blushing spectrally. He could pay justice to the forms at his disposal, disassembling them to marvel at their every organ, without ever having to be the one that put them on his table. He had

known from a very young age that no one understood his desires, his needs—a medical examiner was the perfect solution. He would cheerfully stand for hours, toiling away at the unfortunate once-were's that were brought to him. He would daydream of the cadavers before him, of their lives, of taking them, placing himself in the center of their plot. The battered girl before him was no different, though he found his ponderings on her extraordinarily amusing—Henry was the best character he created yet. He rolled his cart full of glittering baubles towards himself, selecting the scalpel, which he favored for its precision. As he prepared to make the first cut into her supple flesh, Marlon could feel his pulse in every part of his body, as if he had not only his own blood pumping through him, but hers as well.

Tracing his fingers around the eggplant bruises freshly settled across her body, he smiled.

“Violet is such a pleasant color,” he said, and began his work.



Český Krumlov— Megan Cicoello



Sky — Gabrielle Campanella

SAMUEL PREMINGER

Soil and Space: Fumigation

There's a metaphor in her house, been lurking round for weeks
from the mailbox, rattling,
stolen as a teakettle,
her useless and meaningful things,
fidget like runaways.
she's setting traps, the wretched
thought, bidding it leave
on its own, yet there again, stony glare
of bookends, a knotty bedpost
beside her ear asleep.
she sweeps it out in so many seeds of ash,
burns the diary,
jimmied with a hairpin, wishes goodnight
the softshoe of worrisome mice,
rests her head to find so many feathers
needling the pillowcase through
where she's sewn her maybes, her one day myths, lonely as catkins on willow.

Language Barrier

I've read each person's tongue
is distinct – a fingerprint and
I'd know your heated curve
any day. We've only had sex
for two weeks, but you're hungry as

rain tonight and come 2156 women will run
faster than men, you tell me –
what will we chase then? You beat your sorrow
into charges, into hangmen, a noose, but
I think you need to know:

men are six times more likely to be struck
by lightning than women.

What I think you need to know
is every body, every day kills fifteen million
red blood cells – we only waste time, trying
to deconstruct one another faster than
we self-destruct. You inform me, we're creating cells

as well and besides, a human can survive
without a liver, kidney, stomach,
or spleen. How long can I stay
speaking with my broken Broca's,
my abscessed heart? I'm quiet now:

counting out breaths, strangling anger, oysters up
my throat. How do we wait

when every forty-five seconds a house catches fire?
There are 31,557,600 seconds
in a year. I don't tell you
twenty robbers break the banks
each day – I want you to

recognize: we could buy balaclavas. We could spend this time
wearing down one another's print.

JEFF HANDY

Ersatz Umbrella

The newspaper had by now
clotted into cold mashed potatoes
in the upturned bowl of
his hands.

It fell in curds, the words
of April 1940,
like glacier melt,
some into the empty inkpots
of his ears,
this man in step
with the marching of rain,
some into the unplugged
clichés of his mouth
and pasting the typebars
of his teeth

together,
others still falling
in Niagara barrels
over the verge of his fedora,
for which the newspaper
was by now
its own cloud
far below a sky
the shade of
decades old denim,
and all muddy rivers

of print down
justified columns,
all of them guilty of some
miscalculation of spirit,
all of them writing off
margins and convention,
all of them untabbing grafts
and finishing with ledes,
all of them going things
and saying places,
all of their and the man's
truth and sense
turning inside-out in the rain,
like a weak umbrella.

DANIEL T. O'BRIEN

Afterimage

for Michael Snow

What happens in uninhabited spaces
(New York loft: 1966) still exists
in hippocampal-mind & still frame
film: closer, closer. She walks across the
floor, but brief – I thought I brushed her
shadow, inch -by- -inch. Empty
wall travesty: tint my 16 mm polyester-
emulsion: life. Flicker: filter orange & stop
Strawberry Fields (a tractor-trailer cuts
across clear windows, one -by- one).

Image burn-in: photo
receptor projects me:
discomfort. Eyes-rapid
in wake of rack-lux light.
Again. A shadow. A woman:
clicking rotary-dials: *There's*
a man lying on the floor.
I think he's dead. Close,

close: fade-in, in
sharp frequency:
ever- increasing
beeping
& jagged-hum
Wave (length)s

The Depot

I.

Scaffolds mark the cusp of a new city, I'm still
burning downtown – train shuffle, rattle my slate-tile
floors: there is no tunnel to my doors. I barricade
us in.

II.

I am Corktown, blooming marble
& bronze, a Corinthian-bone tower
of commerce: manufactured grass
littered mahogany: no sticks, no stones.

I can take you anywhere, but where
would you want to go? Passengers can't
take the wrong train. Come see my floors,
wainscoting & terrazzo, say your goodbyes:

take your first step, frontier
storefronts: take the boards
off, open up shop
inside: cracked door frames

& crown molding: a deep-throated whistle –
call this place home.

LARA ELMAYAN

Last Prayer To Mack Wolford

And these signs will follow those who believe: in My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.

– Mark 16:17-18.

It's a book, jackass.

– Lane Smith

You said the snake that bit your father had my eyes. You remembered his reflected like new moons or bottoms of whiskey bottles through the nose, so you could see in them for one holy moment the Appalachian stretch sinking into the hot faultline of America. The snake's, I mean,

not your father's. Not the eyes of the man whose be alive in the Lord drenched your skin even when we were grafting into the fake leather of your car's back seat. The dead are disruptive. You balanced a kerosene coke bottle on your throat in memory and spit

flame: praise the Lord and pass the rattlesnakes, brother, but that rattlesnake passed you right by as if it never heard you sing the Gospel. What a casual fuck you, no drama, no fuss; how enviable, unaware of its own forced story. What shine it left in its path into the woods, where your wife's animal cries echoed for so many miles that the dying

gathered to shake happy morphine heads at the hole in the sky. What a kindling of faith that your blade-to-tongue sermon tremble could never conjure. We are setting up snake as El in the ruins of the church where you said we could all be saved. Once you kidnapped

me in joy just to deny me in the weeds of your ancestral burial ground. Once you saw the Lord and the strychnine reminded you of my mouth, asphyxia turning paralysis. Once you heard the blues and understood, and had to spend a week on top of a mountain where Indian ghosts ignored you and you could wait for the lightning crack of salvation. The dead were never

as disruptive as you wanted them to be. You must've watched your entire bloodline dissipate into the haze of West Virginia, where history was already setting up its own noose. In dreams I sense vaguely the heat of your thigh, and I open my mouth for prayer and a familiar taste of dust.

The Bone Oracle – The Introvert

How nerve-raking heat was to bring rain,
he couldn't ask. The sky would
shed: slip leathery skin with a claw
and let the fluid in, but only

if the bone abides – ox's scapula,
clean and broad and bright,

cracks in the flames.

He couldn't ask. With an exacto-knife,
he regenerates his name: the branches
of his veins. Maybe the fire will follow.

Aren't we all stitched alive, tasting
for the drops – cool, nursing,
to tick through the straw
onto our cracked lips.

BIBI LEWIS

Ossified Scaffold

I shrink in potable yards,
swallowed by hollow trunks
—deafened by lipless whistle: missing

the (un)familiarity of
home. The city: sterile, carries
neat rows of knives. Even
vermin thin from neglect—show

no glimpse of motion
in escape. The sun's heat falls
short of lower floors & we forget
existence in physical

form. I understand the geography
of this place—semi-streamlined
reticulation of hyperpolished
chrome skeletons hide

eagles who careen
their necks searching for
nonmetallic shine: files of life: devils in live

wire eyes.
& away from the aluminum refract
-ed shine, I recall sidewalk chasms
that dried up—left no energy
for us to absorb.

Triptych of Phase Change

i.

Translation: a well-intentioned ferryman
who sends you in backloops
to nowhere.

Across the pond, *u*'s materialize—
familiarity as compensation for lack of colour
in British rain.

ii.

While mathematics will disagree, binary is
improbable/imaginary/unnatural.

Even Noah's animals disembarked in threes.

iii.

Moisture lingers, is constant-
ly divided between three
forms : phases of lucidity

measured in minds or
interchangeable clinicalspeak
—shift in no

time. Luck is a moment
to notice energy
exchanged/lost.
How do we name the between
of here and not?:

Step into a stream.

What are we when we exit.



Lizzie— Marlee Cavallero



Winter — Zoraida Dooley

There Isn't A Word

My great-uncle dealt with his brother's death by disappearing constantly during the four-hour viewing of his younger brother. He was quiet, greeting people when forced to, the words getting stuck behind the clog in his throat, the one that kept him from crying all night. The next day during the service, the muscles in his jaw twitched every time his chest longed to blubber out a deep breath. When the Air Corps soldier presented the folded flag, he held it to his chest, dropped his chin, and he gave two great sobs.

My father needed something to do so he didn't have to slow down and think about what had happened. He spent most of Thursday night scrubbing his father's condo. He dusted and polished all of the tables, cleaned every frame, and cleared out the fridge. He returned his makeshift room back into the computer den. He packed up his clothes and notebooks and the little Christmas presents he'd kept there. The hospice people came to retrieve the medical supplies from the living room and suddenly, without the bed and the pan and the medical reclining chair with layers of blankets, the living room looked like a living room again. Since it had snowed all Friday during the calling hours, my dad spent a good portion of the night shoveling out all the cars so we could get to the funeral on time. It wasn't until Sunday morning, once everything was over and there wasn't anything that needed to be done, when the weight of it forced the tears out of him.

My oldest sister spent hours sorting through pictures, organizing poster boards and a slide show of our grandfather's life. For the first thirty minutes of the calling hours, she and some others sat hurriedly taping pictures to poster boards, my sister the most frantic even as she pretended like she no longer cared. That night when we got home to a driveway with seven inches of thick wet snow and nowhere to put her car, she lifted a shovel with her skinny arm. When I asked her to let me do it, she refused. When I asked her to go inside and change

and said we'd come out together, she kept pushing the snow across the street into a snowdrift. When I tried to get the shovel out of her hand, she gripped it so tightly that I couldn't get it away from her. Her voice wavered and weakly she yelled, "Just let me shovel."

My dad's brother just drank to deal. Now and then his eyes would get red and he'd blink wet eyelashes until it stopped. During one of his visits home while his father was still alive, my uncle, his wife, his sister, her husband, and their son made it through 400 cans of beer in four days. That's fifteen cans per person, per day. Saturday at the luncheon he kept asking in his learned Southern accent, "How long do we have to stay sober?" The family made it to a bar around six where he spent \$421 in alcohol for his table.

My dad's cousin Kerri Lynn had a close, surrogate father relationship to my grandfather. At the luncheon following the funeral, my dad gave her a ceramic angel statue that my grandfather had made for her mother. My father had carefully placed it on top of red tissue paper and sealed it in a small green box. Once in a while, Kerri Lynn would slide off the top and stare at the angel figure of her mother with the same short red-blond hair she used to have and Kerri Lynn would give a tight, sad smile.

It was an open casket for the entire funeral. Intermittently I stared at my grandfather's lifeless body. From afar, he seemed healthy with a soft complexion and full cheeks. But his mouth was all wrong, a mouth that was always animated with a playful smile. When I knelt in front of him, I could see the heavy make-up. His hands looked rubbery, fake, much fatter than they ever were in life. I kept remembering eight years ago, being in the same funeral home, where I hid in an unused room, refusing to go see my grandmother's open casket, and bit down on my lip every time the urge to cry became too overwhelming. At the luncheon, when I saw Kerri Lynn with her ceramic angel, I became overwhelmed by the memory of my mom handing me a cheap Santa Claus ornament. It was the first Christmas present I ever bought my grandmother, which she'd surprisingly kept and cherished for over a decade. I wept until my head hurt and my face stung and just the memory of it made me bite my lip. I can't say that I ever cried for my grandfather – not when my dad wrapped me in a hug and told me about my grandfather's last moments; not when I saw his coffin locked and slid into the hearse; not even that night or the next day when pressure abated – and now I feel as if I've missed my chance.

ELIZABETH SACKETT

The Perils of Hilda

You are gifted to her in the crib.

Shiny-eyed and chubby, she prods at you with a tiny finger. You're shiny too, new and neatly-dressed with a tuft of light brown yarn hair atop your round head, pale fabric arms spread wide. You grin like a loon, plastic tongue half stuck out.

She has dark eyes like marbles and yours are painted on, blue as soft baby yarn. *Who are you*, she wonders without words. She brings your hard face to her soft cheek and coos.

Your life is not without danger.

An example: her older sister is a whirlwind and offers to throw you off a pier. The girl you belong to is three and holds you tightly to her chest, shaking her head as her dark eyes swell.

"Simmie," their father says (a stern tall man with a mustache the color of potato skins), "behave." The sister, Simmie, smiles widely, impishly.

"Don't worry, Hilda's safe," the mother says, a comforting presence with warm blue eyes. Your girl nods into the woman's hip and you probably breathe an invisible sign of relief into the night as the five of you continue down the pier. It's dark and chilly-warm, a summertime of gazebos and toppling-over ice cream cones. You get ice cream sometimes too, but it's shock-pink plastic, which is just the way you like it.

Another example: at four, your girl takes you to Burger King. You sit next to her and her friend as they nibble French fries and talk about Barbie dolls.

"I have a bunch," the friend says, "but I'm not allowed to play with them."

"Why not?" your girl asks. Your head falls limply onto the hard bench and she holds your hand, a much dirtier tan than it was when you were given one another.

"They're collectors," the friend says. She has long brown hair and neat

clothes, a thin nose like a bird. "I can't mess them up."

Your girl nods as if she understands, which she doesn't.

Her parents take the two girls and leave. You sit patiently on the hard bench for them to return to you, but time stretches languidly into hours.

"Well who are you, little lady," a young man says, scooping you up. He has an apron and a beard and smells like salt. "I bet you're someone's best friend, aren't you?"

Smile at him, daringly. You're not a little lady. You're an adventurer.

For the next few hours, you help him sell burgers at the takeout window. You sit and supervise as he shovels fries into cartons and dumps nuggets into paper bags. When your girl's father, potato-mustache-man, gets there, your work day is almost over.

"She was helping me out," your employer tells him. The father thanks him with a spuddy smile and picks you up in one hand awkwardly, wanting to be gentle and caring at the same time as dignified.

You don't need dignity. It's overrated, anyway.

You're one of the most important parts of her youth, you know. Other little girls have soft teddy bears. Other little girls are gifted with china dolls. You have no respect for china dolls, or anything really. You're a small, round-headed cabbage patch kid with a defiant grin, and you don't have to take anything seriously.

You teach her that. You go through nursery school with her, appearing in the yearbook along with everyone else. She brings you every day and you wait patiently at the piano, smiling your secrets at the other toys. You dress as Tinkerbell on Halloween, a small green bow in your fading tuft of hair, a little doll skirt that her grandmother sewed for you wrapped around your beanbag body, and laugh in three big *HAs* (as she demonstrates frequently to her grandmother).

You are brought to shoe stores as she prepares to conquer elementary school. She has to buy two different size shoes because of the foot that curled when she was born, and her mother leans over the small shoe boxes, opening them excitedly for her daughter as though they contained jewels.

"What a pretty doll," the shoe clerk says to your girl, smiling. He turns to the mother and makes a face.

You don't care.

Your young girl runs a finger down her smaller foot, the surgery scars on the side of it.

You are unforgettable and unforgotten.

You surpass childhood and become the permanent embodiment of it. Be proud of that—let that smile shine.

As she approaches the preteen years, your body wears down. Your girl considers taking you to a hospital to be repaired because she's going to be a teenager soon and she expects those years to be plagued with social angst. She needs you to be healthy and strong for her.

You're taken to a jack-of-all-trades. His shop is in a far off town, a lawn littered with stone angels and metal fountains, a shop crawling with old, rusty jewelry. When your girl hands you off it's reluctantly, as though the man could be a demon waiting to suck the shine from your face.

Truthfully, the shine is gone when you are returned, and your body isn't all that repaired. A few amateur stitches keep your head steady and that's about it. Your girl is glad though—she realizes she liked you the way you were.

She rubs baby oil on your face to get the shine back.

Your life is not without perils. Even in high school, she wakes up in the middle of the night sometimes, unable to sleep. Sometimes there's yelling; the sister, the hurricane, yelling her anxieties to the ceiling and to the parents. It isn't her fault. The sister's autistic, an angel wrapped in an indiscernible and frustrating language.

Sometimes the parents yell at one another, their voices floating through the wall. Disembodied, she can see their faces clearly in her mind, depressed and uncertain. She turns to you, thin and awkward, crumpled into her blankets like paper.

You're not the most sympathetic of presences. But you do your best. You grin away the uncertainty, help her create stories. When she falls asleep, you're tucked under a gangly arm, face mashed into her stomach. Things could get better than this, you think. Things could change.

And when they do, it's really damn different.

(It's college; she swears now.)

Sliding casually against the car's back window, watch Long Island leave you behind. Endless green trees like broccoli, eventually, long thruway lines and cars upon cars upon cars. Your face is reflected faintly in the window, black lines in the glass sectioning your nose from your eyes from your chin. You're getting along in years now, aren't you? Your limbs have browned significantly. There's a blush of grey on your shiny cheeks that refuses to be washed out. Your hair is gray as well and the yarn has thinned. You still have that mischievous plane to those blue eyes, though. That hasn't faded.

Anyway, the changes. The car slows to a new world. You are placed on a bed devoid of even a blanket as the dorm room is pieced together around you. It's hot here and your girl wears a purple and blue cotton dress, running from suitcase to suitcase, draping fabric on hangers of hot pink and blue. The dress swishes around her knees like a bell.

When she says goodbye to her family, you can tell her parents' faces are painted on, ready to crack. They take a look at the girl, her brown hair pulled into a messy ponytail, her green glasses a bit crooked on her face, and you think they know they're releasing a child into the world, someone who doesn't quite understand how to walk yet.

You've got this, though. They don't have to worry, they don't have to cry once their backs are turned and they walk towards the car. See, you never stopped being a child. You never learned to walk. And you turned out okay.

The roommate looks at you in disdain when you're alone together. When your girl is there they talk and joke, making undercooked ramen in the microwave and religiously watching *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Whenever the roommate gets annoyed, she threatens to throw you or one of your friends (two more: a stuffed cookie and your more timid ginger fraternal twin) out the window.

You think of all those years ago, being young and clenched to the chest of a three-year old when the girl's sister threatened to toss you into a lake. The girl, eighteen, sets you firmly in the crook of her elbow.

"Don't talk about Hilda like that," she says. "You'll be okay, won't you, Hilda?" She rubs her nose against yours.

"God," the roommate, Lindsey, says. "It really creeps me out when you get all maternal."

Your existence is reincarnated back to you in college. First, the threat of being tossed off of something.

Then, the scars.

The girl's okay with her scars, or she was. She begins to notice things; the curve of her right foot is different from everyone else's. She cannot move like a dancer. She wants to be an actress, but she's suddenly and intensely afraid of her body, the things that make it different, that make it imperfect.

This has nothing to do with you, really, but you see her as she lies down in the bed, as she hates the way her hips settle into the mattress pad.

And sometimes you are her comfort, like in olden times. With your head tilted down, you can look sad, and when your head is tilted upwards, your grin explodes in the air like a firecracker. It's hard to be sad with that, right?

For the first time, one night, she puts you aside. There's a depressed anxiety being realized in the core of her, something deep and stubborn like the tinnitus she picked up from the scene shop power tools. She's ashamed to look at you; she isn't the little girl who received you, the pretty little thing free from responsibilities and limitations. You make her guilty of not achieving all she should have.

Her childhood begins to feel like a lie. Something beautiful and fragile she is shedding, a reverse metamorphosis. You're part of this lie.

But she can't quite shed you.

You sit on her bookcase and look at her *Intro to Anthropology* text all night.

You become a traveler.

On the smaller-scale, she brings you to class sometimes. At least once. No one in the classroom knows, but it's a particularly terrifying astronomy examination, and your irreverent round face poking out from her ballet canvas bag could do her a whole lot of good, so she slides you in at her roommate's sugges-

tion.

Maybe Lindsey merely wanted you out of the room. Maybe she had a cancelled class and wanted to eat ramen and read fan fiction without your grin haunting her, your eyes following her. It's a nice suggestion nonetheless. She gets a point in your book.

You're packed neatly between notebook and scarf and occasionally your face is jostled to the top and you see the sunny, flat planes of the college campus.

You'd rather go back to sleep but you grin nonetheless.

You ride planes too, and buses. You get used to it. Backpacks and tote bags and the occasional suitcase, a few Fredonia sweatshirts and some tutus for padding. You collect the memories into your worn stitches; the sleeping man your girl spills water on in the tiny airplane, the little knick-knacks she picks up for her parents and stuffs into her backpack with you, the crowded, silent buses to Buffalo. You wait in her suitcase as it goes bump-bump down the belt at LaGuardia. You nap in her backpack as she somehow musters the ability to nap through the constant scream of airplane engines. You sit, folded a bit, in your girl's purse as she orders food in a British accent at the Rochester airport.

You watch her become a traveler, too. She watches people. Kids in bright colors running around their parents' ankles, the way young boys with guitar cases seem to lean carelessly against airport walls, the messy curve of handwriting belonging to a girl who sits across from her, buried in a notepad. Your girl doesn't need to go that far to get away from herself.

At twenty-one, she explains you to her friends at her new college. "She's part of me I think," she says, lounging on her black and white bedspread with you leaning against her kneecap. "The silly, outgoing part of my personality, I guess."

Her new roommate, Anna, raises her eyebrows.

"I guess that makes sense," she admits.

"I'm not crazy," your girl says.

"Not at all," she has you say, nodding your plastic head.

She doesn't keep you on the bookcase at this college. You move around the suite, lounging on the table, on the microwave, atop the ottoman. You're a familiar face, now. Maybe these people understand you.

Which doesn't matter, really. You don't need to be understood. When your girl's boyfriend tells her you're scary, it bothers her more than you. Of course you're scary; stick a flashlight behind your head, you glow like a jack-o-lantern.

She hurricanes at her friends, letting the actuality of her anxiety and depression settle. It's acknowledged, a fact to work with, something else lying on the ottoman in the fluorescence of campus lighting. It can be fixed.

She lies in bed with you next to her—not in her arms, but next to her.

The last reincarnation is the repair. Your head wobbles from your feeble torso; surgery is required.

“Have you ever thought of, you know, retiring her?” Anna asks from Skype over the summer. The girl glares into the webcam for a good long while.

She takes things into her own hands instead of leaving you with a doll repairman; instead of leaving you in a shop like a yard sale, she digs through her grandmother’s old sewing kit. In a few minutes, there are thin white stitches somewhat unevenly stretched across your collar.

“The surgery is complete,” the girl announces with a wry smile.

“How’s the patient?” the mother asks, not a stranger to treating dolls as a part of the family. She has a collection of them. *We’re all mad here.*

“You were brave, weren’t you, Hilda?” your girl says, gingerly touching her handiwork.

This is a hard summer, but it’ll be past soon. You’ll be back at college, getting your education in staring at *Doctor Who* posters and quietly observing roommates as your girl studies theatre and pretty words. And your girl isn’t wobbling anymore. She’s still a child, but she’s learning to walk.

And you grin up at her as she traces the stitches. You like the scars.

Letters To Home

I stood in the middle of the street in Albany, wondering why I drove an hour and a half on a Sunday morning just to stare at a house. Theoretically, I was there because he was going to have to give me money, but really I was there because I was afraid.

I shifted my weight onto my heels and sighed. I wondered if he was home, if he could see me standing outside of his house and thought I was crazy. I'd told him I was going to come, but I wasn't sure if he had taken me seriously, or even remembered.

It had been two and a half weeks since I had last seen him in person, and exactly two weeks since he had, without warning or explanation, moved from Poughkeepsie to Albany. I was sure the two events were not entirely unrelated. The only times we had been talking since his move was when he called me at some insane hour of the morning, obviously intoxicated and inevitably falling asleep mid-conversation.

My pride and my sensibility had told me not to answer, but Zack knew me better than anybody else in the world. He was aware of everything, from the fact that I had to sleep on the side of the bed furthest away from the door to my unhealthy obsession with *Survivor*. More importantly, he knew that even if I didn't want to talk to someone, if they called me while I was asleep I would, in my delirium, answer my phone anyway.

I could feel fear bubbling in my stomach as I crossed the street. Or maybe I was just nauseous – they always felt the same to me. Each step up his porch felt like I was marching myself to an execution block. By the time I got to the door, I was convincing myself to forget it and go home. It wasn't a good idea, my being there.

Before I could change my mind, the door flew open. Zack stood in the doorway holding his chocolate lab, Marley, on a leash. Marley immediately be-

gan barking and jumping on me, trying to claw my shirt off. I was never a dog person, but I scratched behind her ears and let her slobber all over my hands anyway, thinking at least someone had missed me.

If Zack was surprised to see me, he didn't show it at all. He simply leaned against the doorframe, folded his hands against his bare chest, and watched Marley attack me.

Seeing him sent a trail of goose bumps up my spine, making me wonder if it really had only been eighteen days. I was surprised that my memory of him matched the boy standing in front of me, as if restricting our communication to the telephone should have distorted his image in my mind. But no, his face was so ingrained in my memory that I suspected I'd remember him perfectly even if I suffered an amnesia-inducing head injury.

"Hey," he said, moving past me and pulling Marley down the porch stairs into the yard. His nonchalance startled me; I didn't respond, just turned and watched him lead the dog around the grass. When she finally found a spot that satisfied her, he turned and looked at me.

I had always thought brown eyes were boring before Zack. I never knew that if you looked close enough, brown eyes could be gold and green and amber all at the same time. Looking down at him from his front porch, I avoided the eye contact he was trying to achieve. I didn't want to see what colors had developed since I last looked. Instead, I let my eyes follow the veins of his neck down through his arms, past the soft curve of his elbow to his fingertips.

I found myself aching to hold him again. I loved his body in an uncomplicated and unbiased way in which I couldn't seem to love my own. I found every piece of him beautiful, from the jagged scar just above his right hip, to his round cheeks, to the way his dark hair curled at the nape of his neck.

How he could possibly be so unaffected, so the same, was a complete mystery to me. It didn't seem right to me that he could change his mind, change his heart, and still retain the same charm in his mannerism. Every second he stood there, watching me watch him and Marley, I felt the wall he built between us grow, crumbling the foundation I had centered so much of my life around.

Zack and I had been so entwined in each other's lives the past six years it was hard to define where our relationship began or finished. Since I had met him my freshman year of high school, we quickly blurred the boundaries of friendship, talking on the phone every night and learning the intimate details of each other's life. It wasn't that we were kindred spirits; our stark contrasts kept us intrigued. His over-inflated self-esteem was a perfect target for my usually hostile sarcasm, which seemed to delight him even more than it did me.

Zack and I, mismatched as we appeared to be, couldn't seem to loosen our grasps on each other. We spent most of our weekends huddled in the grungy punk rock clubs of Poughkeepsie, asserting that *we* had discovered whichever shitty indie band was playing that night, the respective boys and girls we dated

grudgingly asking why we had to be around each other so much. Nobody, not even my best friends or family, could understand our closeness. I guess I really didn't either.

My memories of high school are essentially devoted to Zack and I constantly debating the hypothetical merits and disadvantages of actually dating. As sure as he was that we would be perfect, I was convinced he would break my heart, since he seemed intent on dating his way through our entire high school. As he jumped from relationship to relationship, he always reminded me that if I wanted him to break up with any of his girlfriends, all I had to do was ask. Stubbornly, I maintained that if he truly wanted to be with me he wouldn't be with any other girl in the first place. And so, we remained merely friends, albeit the kind of friends who always seemed on the brink of crossing the line.

That day in Albany, I was having trouble establishing where our new lines had been drawn.

Unconsciously, I folded my hands over my stomach as I tried not to watch him stare at me standing on his porch. His gaze had an unyielding ability to put me at ease, which I was beginning to find more annoying than reassuring.

"Don't stand with your hands like that," he called across the yard.

I glanced down and let my hands fall to my sides. "Why?" I asked.

"It's creepy," he shook his head. Marley, finished with her business, began scampering back towards me.

He reluctantly let her pull him up the porch stairs until he was directly in front of me. "It makes you look..."

"Pregnant?" I finished his sentence.

Zack frowned at me. "No, it makes you look like you're happy to be pregnant."

I pressed my hands back on my stomach, wondering if my posture had revealed something my emotions had been missing, if maybe I could finally feel something. I'd read countless stories about women feeling the change in their bodies, knowing there was life inside of them. But all I felt was myself disconnecting from the entire world, void from any emotion but pain. I wondered if I would even be able to keep another heart beating when mine was running on autopilot.

"Why do you hate me?" I asked, even though I could tell he hated *this* and not me. I thought about how I had been a coward; how I had sent him a letter after my sixth positive test because I couldn't make myself say it out loud. I thought about how he hadn't said anything about it when I saw him the next week, even though I was sure he had gotten it. I thought about how he hadn't talked to me or returned any of my phone calls for eight days straight after that, until he finally called me at 3:47 in the morning to tell me he'd relocated to a different city.

"I don't know how this happened," he said, ushering Marley back into the

house and closing the door behind her.

"Well, I didn't do it to myself." I tried to smile as he walked back towards me, but the effort seemed too much. I wanted him to laugh the way he always did when I joked in inappropriate situations, but he just shook his head.

"That's not what I mean." He reached his hand out a little, as if to touch me, but it didn't make it that far.

I studied his face, the way his cheekbones connected to his jaw line, the dark circles under his eyes, and the stubble on his chin. I could tell he was hung over. I wondered how often he had been drinking – pretty consistently, if his phone calls were any indication.

As much as I craved his voice, I would have preferred the most horrifying nightmares to those phone calls. I did nothing but cry while I listened to him try to defend his actions. No matter how many times he called himself an ass, or said he hated himself for how he was treating the "best girl in his world," I was still alone. It didn't matter how convincingly he told me I'd never be able to comprehend how much he really loved me – hearing his voice did nothing but enhance my pain. The hole he left in my life expanded as every word he said really meant he didn't love me anymore – that he was gone.

Standing in front of him on his porch, I wanted to kick him in the shin. I wanted to find a way to make him feel every ounce of pain I was trying so hard to hide. I wanted to tell him how much I hated him and didn't miss him and was doing fine without him. "Don't you miss me?" I asked instead.

It was unfathomable to me that he could *not* miss me. Zack had permanently missed me, always. Every time I left his house, or we got off the phone, or he walked me to my car after school, he always parted with the same line: *I miss you.*

Sometimes it meant he was sorry we couldn't hang out that day, other times that his girlfriend at the moment was annoying him, and other times still it meant he would be at my house in ten minutes. Usually, it just meant he felt weird saying *I love you* to someone he wasn't dating.

But no matter the sub context, it always meant that he would be there, that we would never really be separated from each other.

Then, graduation came, and we suddenly realized that I was leaving and he was staying, and we would have to deal with the sort of distance that usually made people miss each other. At the time, the three and a half hours to Boston seemed insurmountable, so we did the only thing we could to make it easier: we fought.

We fought as I packed up my stuff, fought as my parents drove me to college, fought as I set up my new room, fought as I started classes. We fought all the way through my midterms and finals, fought when I came home for breaks, fought when I went back to Boston. We fought until there was nothing left to say, until we were left with bitter silence. The fights had distracted me from my

transition into college, sheltered me from the fact that it wasn't at all what I expected. Without him, I had nobody to fight with but myself, and I was forced to admit that I wasn't where I needed to be.

Coming home after a year away was like entering a foreign country – somehow I had morphed into a person that didn't fit where I felt I should have belonged. I floated around Poughkeepsie, taking classes at local colleges, aimlessly trying to gain some sort of direction.

I saw Zack randomly, at a party, as people with mutual friends often do. It could have been a Wednesday, or maybe a Saturday, the days never mattered much when it started getting warmer. All that mattered was we had somehow ended up in the same dingy kitchen, our shoes sticking to the beer-coated tiles on opposite sides of the room.

I don't think either one of us could explain how it happened, but I was pulled across the room to him, as if we'd never left each other's sides. The second we were next to each other, it was clear no apologies would be necessary. He scooped me into his arms, and all the anger melted as I realized how much I had missed *him*. The year of fighting aside, he still knew me better than I had allowed anyone else to; I did not feel like myself again until he hugged me.

We fell back into each other seamlessly, and when he called me the next morning asking me to come over I felt my feet reconnect with the ground. Lying on the grass next to his driveway while he changed the oil in his car, I knew I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

"Hand me that tray," Zack called from under his car.

I pushed the aluminum tray towards the car with my foot. I loved watching how expertly his hands moved around the rusty metal, and wondered how he could tell what went where – it all looked the same to me.

"So," he said, sliding out from under the car. "You came home for me."

I pushed myself up onto my elbows and watched the oil steadily drain into the tray, splattering onto the driveway every now and again. "I've been home since December." I flicked the head of a dandelion at him. "If I came home for you, I would have found you way before March."

He smiled at me, slowly, walked over to where I was sprawled out in the grass, and knelt down next to me. He placed his hands on the ground on either side of me, so he was looming right in front of me.

My fingers dug into the ground so hard I was sure the dirt would be impossible to remove from under my fingernails, but I wasn't concerned with that. It seemed strange to me that Zack and I had never even kissed before; that I could have the shape of his lips memorized but not know what they felt like. I closed my eyes and tried to inhale his breath that was hitting my cheek. Zack and I had certainly been close to each other before, but it had never felt like this.

I waited for a few moments, my fingers plowing even further into the ground, before opening my eyes. He was still directly in front of me, immobile,

staring at me.

His mouth spread into a small smirk, and he cocked his head a little to the right. He leaned a little closer, pressed his lips against the side of my forehead, then leaned back and stood up before I even realized what happened.

"Come inside for a minute," he said. "I want to show you something."

Slightly suspicious, I grabbed the hand he offered me and let him pull me to my feet. I brushed off the grass that stuck to my legs as I followed him up the uneven stone path to the front door. He held the door open for me and I stepped inside, crossed the living room, nudged his bedroom door open and flopped onto his bed, my feet moving without any direction from my brain. I glanced around and noticed nothing had changed in his room, save for a few more concert tickets that had been tacked on the wall above his closet.

"Pretty much the same, huh?" Zack said as he closed the door behind him.

"I guess it is." I kicked one of my flip-flops off at him and smiled when he caught it. "What do you have to show me?"

He threw my shoe back towards me and walked over to his dresser. Kneeling, he opened the bottom drawer and began rummaging around. I sat up straighter on the bed and tried to see around his body.

"What is it?" I asked again, bouncing up and down. Patience was not one of my virtues.

"Hang on," he said, scrunching his face up at me over his shoulder. He moved a couple more things around, and then finally turned back to me with what looked like a stack of folded notebook paper in his hand. "Here." He held the pile out to me, clearly a little embarrassed.

I took the sheets of paper from him and slowly unfolded the top one, immediately recognizing the handwriting that covered the page.

"Zack." I looked up at him, unable to hide my shock. My hands tightened around the pile. I didn't need to read any of it; I already knew what it all said. I had written it.

At some point in our sophomore year, I had made a fleeting mention of how I missed snail mail, and so Zack had mailed me a letter. Naturally, I wrote back, and it became a cyclical habit of ours. The letters had started out frivolous, silly, and full of jokes, but as time went on we began to use them as a medium to say the things we could never seem to get out in person.

I let my gaze drop back to the pile and quickly tried to count how many had accumulated over our years of faithful letter writing. "You kept them," I said, not even bothering to try and hide how much it meant to me.

"Of course I kept them," he said, as if I should have known.

"But, why?" I asked, running my hands over the worn paper. I had kept every letter he sent me, but I was a compulsive pack rat, unable to throw *anything* away. Zack had never been like that.

"Kate." He grabbed my wrists and pulled me to my feet, not seeming to

care that I let all those letters fall from my hands into a pile at our feet. “Are you serious?” he asked, cupping my face in his hands.

Standing there, in that room I knew so well with the boy I knew so well, I thought that maybe we had both grown up and were the silly fights that separated us. I thought that maybe we were finally at a point in our lives where we knew ourselves as well as we knew each other. I thought that maybe this moment was what we were holding out for in high school.

He, finally, pressed his mouth against mine, and I thought that maybe, at last, I was home.

I wished I had thought to bring all those letters with me to Albany now. I wanted to remind him of that day. I wanted to wedge myself so close to him that it seemed we were breathing from the same lungs. I wanted to know that I was not the only one who was lost.

“Of course I miss you.” Zack ran his hand through his hair like he was trying to pull it out. The words sounded so distant and forced, not at all the way they had used to roll off his tongue so convincingly.

“You deserve so much better than what I’m doing to you,” he added, sounding like he might cry. “You’re handling this a lot better than I am.”

“How would you know how I’m handling it? You only call me at four in the morning to tell me how much you love me but can’t be with me,” I said, unable to keep the resentment from my voice.

“Because I know you.” He narrowed his eyes at me.

I hated that it was true. I hated that he knew every single one of my nuances, could name every single one of my quirks.

“I know you’re doing better with this than I am because you’re here,” he continued. “I’m so terrified that I’ve just been pretending it’s not happening.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, wondering what it would be like to pretend, to remove myself from the situation so entirely I would cease to acknowledge its existence. The prospect was intriguing, enticing, and completely impossible. “You don’t think I’m scared?” I said, unable to raise my voice above a whisper.

He looked in my eyes with such a void of any emotion that I knew, no matter what he said, I was completely on my own. “What are you going to do?” he asked, his eyes focused on my stomach.

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop my tears from falling. It was such a simple question, but I had no way of knowing how to answer it. I had never felt so unloved than in that moment when I realized he could no longer see me – he only saw what had happened.

I imagined being connected to Zack for the rest of my life, having an unbreakable bond that we would always have to share. I considered learning to love something that had created such an insurmountable distance between me and the person I had held above all others. I wondered if it was possible for this thing that was ripping us apart to eventually bring us back together.

I could do it, if I wanted, that I was sure of. I could do it and be great and still accomplish everything I wanted. But at what cost? None of my choices seemed to be the right one, leaving guilt or sacrifice as my only options. I thought about being able to forgive myself, and wondered if my heart would ever allow me to forgive Zack for leaving me to deal with this alone. No matter what I chose, I would have to bear the weight of the consequences, not him.

I considered Zack's selfish reasons for wanting me to let it go. I thought about every word he had said or wrote to me over the years, every promise he made to always be there, and how they had morphed into lies. I considered this person who had claimed to love me above all others, and how he had bailed on me. I was going down with the ship while he, content on dry land, was holding on to the life vest for himself.

I tried to understand that he could meet another girl. He could find someone else – someone uncomplicated, located in Albany, and free from the responsibility I represented. I tried to imagine us both moving on, being happy without the other person. It seemed an impossible feat, for me at least.

I wanted to make the right decision, but more than that, I wanted to never again feel how I felt now, standing on his porch with him staring over my head.

"You'll have to give me half the money, then," I finally said. I wrapped my arms around my torso, satisfied to feel nothing but a dull hollow.

I focused my gaze past Zack to the trees in his yard. It was mid-September, and the first leaves were beginning to turn. It didn't seem fair to me that the seasons changed, that we could fall into a comfortable pattern only to be disrupted by cold fronts and seasonal allergies. I found my eyes spilling over with tears at the thought that the trees had to lose their leaves. No matter how beautifully the leaves turned, they still fell. They still *died*. They still left the trees bare, empty, and naked to the bitter air.

Zack reached out and pulled me to him, wrapped his arms around me, and pressed his entire body against mine. "It's going to be okay," he whispered into my hair as my tears leaked onto his chest.

His voice permeated my skin, digging roots in my muscles and circulating through my bloodstream in time with my heart. I could feel the words turning to dead weight, resting heavy on my lungs. I imagined them sprouting out of my neck, dying with my breath, and falling motionless to my feet.

No, it wasn't going to be okay, but I let him lie to me one last time.

Pretty in Blue

I went to every school dance through high school for a total of eight semi-formals and two formals; that's ten dances throughout my secondary school career. My high school throws two semi-formal dances per year for the entire school: Fall Ball and Snowball. I planned at least half of those as vice-president and then president of the class, slaving over minute details for centerpieces as part of the decorations committee only to have people haphazardly throw their coats on them.

I will always remember my two older sisters, Lisa and Michelle, getting ready to go to their respective dances while I was in elementary school. I shared a room with Michelle despite the nine years between us, and I remember the girlish giggles and the cloud of hairspray that filled our room because all of her friends had come over to primp before the festivities. The girls in their different colors and styles of dress paraded down the stairs where their dates waited with corsages and huge grins. I loved how elegant all of the girls looked. I couldn't wait for high school when I would follow in my sisters' footsteps and do the same—the dress shopping, hair, make-up, and the date.

There were three occasions out of those ten dances that I actually had a "date" and those were friends whose tie matched my dress. The first experience with a matching date was my sophomore year Snowball. Ethan Harrison. He was a year older than I was but we had mutual friends because of the music department, Scholastic Bowl, and Model UN. I developed a crush on this lanky, pale guy with cropped auburn hair. He had a penchant for non-Western cultures and was extremely articulate but could lay down a beat and dance with the best of them. The spring before, I first noticed him struggling with his string bass on the bus of the DC music trip. He hung out with my older friends so all of us were naturally together that trip and then afterwards. I got to know Ethan

and quickly became enamored with his intelligence, humor, and down-to-earth personality.

A few of my friends had long-term boyfriends but all I wanted was a date for the dance. I knew if he agreed to it that we would only go as friends but I so badly wanted to go *with* someone. Why not him? I asked him in the hall one day if he could meet me at my locker so that I could ask him a question. I was finally going to take a chance on something new and far more hazardous than enrolling in harder classes, signing up for too many activities, or public speaking—Ethan's reaction and response would be something that I couldn't control.

"Hey, 'Stina. What's up?" he asked as he pushed one strap of his backpack further up on his shoulder. 'Stina was a nickname he had created for me to change my three-syllabled name, "Christina," into a more simplified two-syllabled one.

"Oh, not much," I replied, blood frantically pumping. I could do this. I was a liberated woman of the 21st century. I could certainly ask a friend to the Snowball, right?

"Ethan, so I know that the dance is coming up in a few weeks and I know that I like to dance," then I motioned to him "and you like to dance..." I hoped he would get the hint. He didn't. So I continued, "So we could go...t-t-together." I stammered out the last bit and I'm sure that my face turned five shades of scarlet.

"Oh. Um—"

"Well, we would definitely only go as friends. I probably should have said that first. I figured it would be fun to go with a friend and match." I said really quickly trying to salvage the situation.

He looked relieved and replied, "Okay. Well that's a definite possibility. I'll let you know. See you later!" and then I responded "Later," back to him. *Wow, I just embarrassed myself.*

I turned back to face my locker with a hangman's knot in my stomach and a headache starting to form. *You couldn't have been more eloquent with that one? And the arm motions too? Oh God.* I closed my locker door and walked down the hall to tell my friends what just happened. They knew I was going to ask him and wondered what his response would be. So when I said "definite possibility," their faces were just as confused as mine was earlier.

One issue regarding this particular Snowball was that it was the day of my niece, Gracie's first birthday. Before deciding to ask Ethan to Snowball, I had been grappling with the decision of going to Snowball or the party. I was leaning towards the birthday party but my sisters and my mom told me to take advantage of the dances while I was young. "Gracie won't even remember it," they said. There would always be more birthdays and I would spend more time with my niece in the future. Even so, I felt some guilt over missing the party. Without a final answer from Ethan, I was leaning closer and closer to abandoning the

plans for Snowball to stay home with my family.

Within the next three weeks before the dance, I had seen Ethan but he still had not told me if we were going together or not. The rumor going around my group of friends though was that he had asked a freshman, Jordyn, to Snowball and she turned him down. Jordan with a “y”—tall with a narrow bone structure, large green eyes, and bright blonde hair; the only thing I had in common with her physically was my height. I figured she was the reason why he never gave me a concrete answer, but I still wasn’t sure if we were going to go together.

The week of the dance arrived. That gray, Monday afternoon I was sitting in the band hallway waiting for my dad. I could see Ethan as he strolled down the hall towards the door. We said our “heys” and “what’s ups” to each other and then he asked, out of nowhere:

“So what color is your dress?”

“Blue,” I replied with confusion.

“Oh cool. I think I know what shirt and tie I’m going to wear. Do you know where we’re going to go before the dance starts?” he asked me and I froze noticing he said “we’re” and that he knew which shirt he was going to wear. *Are we going together?*

“Umm... we’re taking pictures at Lily’s house and then going to ‘Sunny’s’ for dinner. Afterwards the girls are having a sleepover back at Lily’s.”

“Nice. So what time should I pick you up?” he asked me, and suddenly I had a date. Even if we were going to go as friends, I was going to have my first date for a dance and take pictures, match, and dance together like my sisters had done in the past. My decision for the birthday party was made. I would be going to Snowball.

I knew we were going to have a great time and I kept picturing how the night would go. First I would get ready and then walk down my stairs like in the movies. He would see me and think, *I should give her another chance*. My parents would take a lot of photos where I would act embarrassed but be secretly glad that we were going with each other. After that, we would drive over to Lily’s, our petite, effervescent friend, and take some more pictures, eat a great dinner, and arrive at the dance. This is where my fantasy for the night turned into one of those romantic chick-flick movies. I believed that when one of the slow songs would come on, he would put his arms around my waist and we would sway to some sappy love song. Then he would look at me in the eye and tell me that I looked beautiful—that he was glad he came here with *me*.

When you fill your mind with fantasies that happen in books and movies, you only set yourself up for clichéd disappointment. My life wasn’t *Pretty in Pink* when the quirky girl gets the guy in the end. Consciously, I knew that my life would not be a formulaic teen movie but that never stopped my daydreams.

The day of the dance came. My cousin Sharon, a hairdresser, came over with her big-barreled curling iron, glitter hairspray, and a bag of bobby pins. After

about an hour and a half, my wavy and slightly frizzy hair had transformed into sparkly tendrils around my face. Michelle, having a knack for the dramatic eye, was naturally the one to do my make-up. I slipped into some new and constrictive Spanx, and then came the dress that Lisa picked out. It was a floor-length, sapphire ombre sparkly gown of satin with chiffon overlay. The empire-waist and deep “V” of the sleeveless A-line number was reminiscent of a Grecian goddess.

“Christina, he’s here,” my mom told me. My heart skipped a beat. *The moment of truth.*

I walked out into the living room where Ethan was waiting. He had come a little early. I was grinning from ear-to-ear as I heard many “oohs” and “ahhs.” Ethan, who was sandwiched between grandparents walked up to me and said, “Your hair looks really nice, Christina.” My braces-filled grin faded into a smaller smile and accepted his compliment. *Not the exact reaction I wanted but that’s fine.*

We stood together and took photos and I gave Gracie a big hug and a kiss and together Ethan and I left in his car. I had this feeling that I was missing such a monumental event at home with my family and Ethan’s reaction hadn’t helped. I was going to miss her chubby fists diving into her first piece of cake.

There was awkward small-talk between us in the car until we reached Lily’s house. At the house, my friends and their mothers came up to me saying how beautiful I looked. I appreciated the compliments, but it wasn’t coming from the person I wanted to hear it from most. All of the flashes from the camera had put me in sort of a daze as I hobbled back in my heels to the car to go to Sunny’s for dinner. *I probably should have stayed home,* I thought as I got into the car. *But I’m going to make the best of this. I’m going to have a great time and –SHIT.* Ethan had taken the corner too quickly and I hit my head against the car window.

“Hey, are you all right?” he asked staring straight ahead out of the windshield.

“Yeah. I’m fine. Don’t worry about it.” I mumbled through as pain was stabbing my temple. *Things can’t get worse.* But of course they can.

Dinner went by and Ethan acted increasingly worse. As the teenage conversation inevitably turned to random celebrities, he immediately started talking about which ones he would “tap.” My friends looked at me with pity and I averted my eyes to focus on the eggplant parmesan placed in front of me. *I wonder if my family has eaten yet; they’re having pasta too.* I looked up from my plate, noticing the stark contrast between my uncomfortable situation and the contented one across me between my friend Maddy and her boyfriend Tom, Ethan’s best friend. He gently reached over and grabbed Maddy’s hand. They were having the happy evening I dreamed about. When I got up to leave after dinner, the waitress tapped me on the shoulder and told me privately to have a good time. I was touched by the fact that this random, unknown woman had been

concerned and upset that my face had been an openbook for my discontent.

We arrived at the dance and Ethan and I saw two of our friends who did not go with our group. They were joking around with us and mentioned being dateless.

"Ethan, I wish that I could be your date," one of the girls, a notorious flirt, said as she eyed him. *Really? Are you serious? He's going to politely decline her. I know it. And then we'll walk in to the dance together and grab some punch and the rest of the night will be great.*

He laughed and replied, "Since we're all friends, I'll just have another date; if you don't mind, 'Stina," *Really?! Did you just say that?* Then the other girl said she wanted to have him as a date too. "Looks like I have three dates now. I've got so much swag," *You said "definite possibility" to me. Not. To. Them,* I thought as my molars ground together. I stayed silent as the four of us walked in together.

We entered the crowded and sweaty cafeteria to put our coats down and take my heels off. Then we moved into the dance floor. The DJ's bass was thumping in the soles of my feet and I could see girls bent over as guys mimicked having sex with them in the middle of the dance floor. *I will never dance like that. So gross.* We joined our group of friends and then Ethan started to grind on one of the single girls in my group, not even the "other" date. I stood there with eyes agape. Then I decided to focus on the music playing and dancing like an idiot with my real friends if my date was going to ignore me.

The first slow song came on and I figured it would be his redeeming chance as a date. He came up to me and I smiled in my self-assurance.

"Hey, since we came as friends, do you mind if I go dance with Jordyn for this one? I promised her that I would slow dance with her once." Jordyn. The one who turned him down. My eyes stung with sweat and developing tears.

"That's fine. I'll see you for another song," I replied. I watched him walk over and ask her to slow dance. He put his arms around her waif-like waist and hips. I focused my attention on serenading my friends to Aerosmith's "I Don't Wanna Miss a Thing" *Make yourself laugh, Christina, before you start crying. You won't be that stereotype from the movies.* The slow dance ended and he rejoined our group, and focused on dancing with a different friend. I felt like hot sauce was running through my veins; I was thoroughly pissed at him and at myself for the situation. Another slow song came and he was conveniently next to Jordyn. Coincidentally I knew all of the words to the next slow song too. When the fourth slow song came on that night, it was about a half hour before the dance would end. Ethan had asked one of my friends to dance. I watched angrily and then saw her mouth something with my name to him. He stopped dancing with her and walked over to me.

"Christina, do you want to dance with me?" he asked with this cool smile his lips had created. It wasn't genuine, but neither was my response.

"Definitely!" I smiled at him and we swayed to the music for about a minute

and a half before the song ended. We weren't dancing very close and nor we were even looking at each other. I looked at my other coupled friends dancing sweetly and serenely and sighed to myself. I think that both of us were relieved when it finished. He went back to dancing with another girl and I went back to my friends.

When the dance ended, Ethan drove me to Lily's house. Tom joined us in the car in the backseat. We were listening to music on the radio and the two of them were talking about where they were going to go after depositing me. I reflected on my night and what it would have been like if I stayed home with my family: the homemade cake, gifts, and giggles. After their conversation ended, Tom addressed me:

"Christina, you looked really beautiful tonight." I saw his friendly smile at me in the rear-view mirror.

"Yeah, 'Stina," was the response from Ethan.

Screw you.

I arrived at Lily's house and was ambushed with junk food, baked goods, sympathy, and insults about Ethan. I was the focus of the conversation for a large portion of the evening through bites of muffins I heard fleeting words like "jerk," and "bitch," despite the fact that I wasn't participating in it. On Lily's pink bed, I hugged my plush frog pillow and focused on the feel of the softness against my face. I was glad that I had friends that were trying to defend my honor but despite the fact that I had a miserable time with Ethan, I didn't want to insult him. I just wanted to move on.

The next day I went home and found a piece of leftover birthday cake on my kitchen table eyeing me with lofty judgment. I couldn't eat it. Lisa was the first one to ask me about the dance in the kitchen. I told her it was "okay," and then my dad asked with over-protective concern. My grandma even called to ask. Finally my mom asked me hours later when I was laying on the couch reading.

My throat closed up as I responded with the perfunctory "Okay." My mom started to talk about my niece's birthday party and the guilt of missing her first birthday created pressure in my head like water behind a thin dam. I was a bad aunt who put childish dances before family. I lost it. I started sobbing into the pillow my head rested on. Through my bleary eyes, I could see my mom's concern for me. She walked over and sat at the end of the couch and began to rub my back.

"Tell me about it."

And so I did.



Colton — Stephon Lawrence



Flames in the Night — Gabrielle Campanella

EMILY WITHERS

Letters from God to the Civilizations

MATT, the new guy

MARK, the one in charge

Winter. Lights up on a disorganized office. MARK and MATT shuffle papers, pull drawers open, sort and trash various documents.

MARK

(rifling through papers)

Jesus...Jesus... Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!

MATT

God, it's hot in here.

MARK

Very funny.

MATT

What?

MARK

"God, it's hot in here"? Rub it in, why don't you.

MATT

I didn't realize it when I said that. But it's such a change from the snow—

MARK

If you're finished wasting time, I'm going back to my job of finding out what the hell happened to him.

MATT

Sorry.

MARK

Just finish sorting that pile, okay? (*beat*)

MATT

What's this envelope? It doesn't have a label.

MARK snatches it.

MARK

There's a key inside. I wonder...

MATT

Try the cabinets?

MARK

No, it's... ah! The drawer!

He pulls out a paper.

"A Letter from God to the Civilizations. My people, I write to inform you of my impending death. It is nearing the turn of the century—" How old is this, anyway?

MATT

Keep reading!

MARK

"It is nearing the turn of the century and I am dying. You must know this. My last will and testament indicates that I wish the people of the world to overtake my position as creator, sustainer, and destroyer of the earth and all its inhabitants. I cannot change time, it being a separate form all its own, and it has begun to wear me down. I made you in my own image, and thus, like you, I shall die. (*beat*) I never expressly told anyone, nor has it been recorded to my knowledge, that I am immortal, and as the civilizations of the world today seem to be getting along fine without me, I have concluded it is my time to go." Matt, this doesn't help us at all. We already know he's dead.

MATT picks up a second letter.

MATT

“A Letter from God to the Civilizations.” This one’s written in terrible handwriting.

MARK looks through the drawer.

MARK

Maybe he was pressed for time. He was a busy guy, you know.

MARK removes everything from the drawer. MATT skims the letter.

MATT

Blah, blah, history, blah, blah, art... oh this sounds interesting. Listen to this: “There are things that even I am incapable of. The human race is sick, and I cannot heal it. It is in your hands now. Research and technology have been my replacements in the past several years...” blah, blah... “I have complete faith that you will survive until you do not, and that science is the key to solving and creating all your problems.” (*musings*) I have complete faith that you will survive until you do not...and that science is the key to solving and creating all your problems.

MARK

Well what the hell does that mean?

MATT

I mean, I guess that he meant for us to go on after his...suicide! It must have been a suicide!

MARK

How does a god kill himself?

MATT

I don’t know yet, but it had to have been. Look at all the evidence. We are holding in our hands the very notes he wrote before he—

MARK

Get John on the phone, I want him to know about this.

MATT

(on the phone)

John, you should come down here. We’ve found something. Yes, yes! A locked drawer in his office...full of letters he wrote and never sent.—No, I don’t think that’s necessary...

MARK

Speakerphone, speakerphone!

JOHN

...to be there too. He's better at identifying handwriting—how do you know it's not a forge? You can't claim God left us a suicide note when it clearly wasn't intended for us, and you don't know if he even wrote it.

MARK

(*to MATT*) Does he want...? (*to JOHN*) Luke doesn't need to be here. Just come down and have a look at the thing will you?

JOHN

If it's as important as you say it is—

MARK takes the phone.

MARK

Look, John, we both know Luke likes to talk and I don't want him to record this before we've got all the facts. We haven't even figured out what it means... I don't know if people are going to laugh or cry at this kind of news.

MARK's conversation continues at a quieter level, and is overpowered by MATT, who reads a third letter.

MATT

"Tell Eve I'm sorry I dared her to eat the apple." (*beat*) "What can you expect of a child anyway? We're all guilty of some kind of mischief. Mine was just, well, a bit more detrimental. I only wanted to have some fun." Huh, this one is a lot more personal. I wonder what order these were written in...?

He looks at a fallen paper.

"That strange flower, the sun, / Is just what you say. / Have it your way. / The world is ugly, / And the people are sad. // That tuft of jungle feathers, / That animal eye, / Is just what you say. // That savage of fire, / That seed, / Have it your way. / The world is ugly, / And the people are sad." Hey, hey Mark! I think this is a Wallace Stevens poem.

MARK gestures for MATT to be quiet.

MATT

Well, it's certainly depressing. Hm.

He looks at the third letter.

“As I grew older, I saw the ruin in my great creation: humanity is poisoned with evil, an evil deep within me that sometimes escapes. An anger: the wind of a hurricane, the water of a flood. And all the ferocity of emotion, all the rage, that’s part of me, lodged into each person like a tumor.”

MARK finishes the phone call. MATT continues, tragically.

MATT

“Everything is my fault. Everything. Natural disasters, accidents, human tragedies. Sometimes I was just so angry and sick of the world I wanted to... well I don’t know what. But I can’t go on having everyone think I’m a forgiving, loving God if that’s how I repay them. I’ve fallen out of my own grace. I’m sick of lying. I’m sick of myself.”

MARK has found a tape recorder, presses play. A feminine, but not false, voice emits from it.

VOICE

When I was young, I created the world with two messy hands. I raised myself. I liked to shape things. I began with simple things—rings, balls, experimenting. You know. *(beat)* Those little clay experiments became the planets, and I threw excess clay into the whirlpool of space—that became asteroids, comets, the like.

The voice breathes heavily, as if making a grave decision.

MATT

(reciting)

‘Some part of our being knows this is where we came from. The cosmos is within us. We’re made of star-stuff.’ Sure, everybody knows that quote. Science meets the concept of the soul.

MARK shushes him.

VOICE

But my best work by far were the stars. And this is my true apology to the world. I loved, more than anything else, I loved to light them and watch them burn.

MATT & MARK exchange a look. The tape emits white noise, then stops. Lights down.

END OF PLAY

Experimental Ambiguity

SCIENTIST

MOM 1

DAD 1

JIMMY 1

DAD 2

JIMMY 2

MOM 2

JIMMY 2 (OLDER)

JIMMY 1 (OLDER)

LISA

THE END

A single light comes up on a woman, holding a clipboard, standing front SL.

SCIENTIST

June 14, 2145. The purpose of this experiment is to determine the effects of environment on personality. In order to preserve the integrity of the experiment to the highest possible degree, we have controlled as many aspects of the experiment as current technological advances allow. Using our recently perfected cloning technology, we have cloned two copies of embryo #6694, to be placed in unique firmo-holographic environments. Firmo-holographic imaging is the new technology of creating solid images – holograms that can be physically interacted with. In no case will another real human being or object be introduced to the subject's environment. All firmo-holograms will be destroyed at the conclusion of this experiment. The first copy of embryo #6694, hereafter referred to as Jimmy 1, will be placed in an ideal environment – reminiscent of the perfect 1950s household. Jimmy 1 will be their only son. The second copy of embryo #6694, hereafter referred to as Jimmy 2, will be placed in a carefully modulated

abusive environment with an alcoholic father and a drug addicted mother. Jimmy 2 will be their only son.

Lights fade on Scientist. MOM 1 enters SL, sits on couch. Lights up. DAD 1 walks in from SR.

MOM 1

There you are, honey! (*stands*) You're home late – was it a tough day at work?

DAD 1

You've no idea, sweetheart. (*walks over to her, gives her a small kiss*) Do you have dinner ready for me by chance?

MOM 1

It's hot on the stove for you – why don't you sit down and I'll –

JIMMY 1

(*running in from SL*)

Dad! DAD DAD DAD!

(*runs in circles around his father, before finally stopping in front of him, waving a piece of paper*)

Dad, you'll never guess what I –

MOM 1

(*interrupts, disapprovingly*) Jimmy! Hush now! You know better than to accost your father right after he's gotten home from work. Go play outside!

JIMMY 1

(*turns to his dad*) But Dad, I –

DAD 1

You heard your mother, son. I'll be glad to listen to your news later – after you've played outside.

Jimmy 1 sadly exits SR. Dad 1 sits in chair.

DAD 1

What was he so excited about, anyway?

MOM 1

Oh, Jimmy won some kindergarten art contest with his drawings. He's very excited about it – the first thing he showed me when he got off the bus was the certificate they gave him for winning.

DAD 1

I'd be more excited if he was playing on the little league team.

MOM 1

Yes, dear. I'll get your dinner for you and try and keep Jimmy busy so you can relax a little.

(starts to exit SL)

DAD 1

That would be *perfect*, dear. Thank you.

Lights down. Dad 1 exits SR. Light comes up on Scientist.

SCIENTIST

August 29, 2151. Both six-year-olds show an unusual affinity for art and other creative pursuits. We have geared their environments towards offering them artistic opportunities, but have not changed the pre-programmed personalities of the parents. We shall watch how environmental reactions influence their artistic careers.

Lights down on Scientist. Lights up. JIMMY 2 sits on the floor, cross-legged, in the center drawing in his new sketchbook. MOM 2 lays listless on the couch.

Lights up. DAD 2 stumbles in SR. Stops, takes a swig, keeps going – nearly trips over Jimmy 2.

DAD 2

Watch where you sit, ya little BRAT. *(beat)*

Dad 2 looks at Jimmy 2 meanly, then picks him up roughly by the arm.

You gonna say sorry for tripping me? *(shakes him)* Don't ya have anything to say?

JIMMY 2

Sorry, dad! S-s-sorry! *(clutches paper in his hand)*

DAD 2

(letting go of his arm) What? What's that? A letter from school about ya? *(grabs paper)* What is this crap?

JIMMY 2

(stands up taller – worried, proud)

I... I won an art contest dad. That's my certificate... for winning. They gave me a sketchbook... and some new crayons, too!

Dad 2 looks at him in increasing fury, then rips the paper in two; Jimmy 2 starts to cry.

MOM 2

What'd you do that for – look what you've done!

DAD 2

Don't tell me what to do! I can do what I want! It's my house – I'm the man of the house and I can do what I want to, dammit! Gimme those... those *things*.

He waves to the sketchbook and crayons on floor. When Jimmy 2 doesn't move, he starts toward him as if to hurt him. Jimmy 2 shrinks back, quickly gathers the things, and hands them to Dad 2.

DAD 2

These are mine now. Got it? Now get out. Get out so I don't have to look at you.

He points SR. Jimmy 2 fearfully runs, looking back once.

DAD 2

OUT, ya little bastard! (*takes another swig*)

Lights down, Mom 2 and Dad 2 exit. Lights up on Scientist.

SCIENTIST

February 15, 2156. Jimmy 1 and 2 have both celebrated their eleventh birthday. We have created a journaling class in school to instill the practice of journaling within them. Both mastered the material and continue to journal frequently, as we'd hoped. Especially during the fast-paced and tumultuous teenage years when data collection will be most critical, this practice of journaling will help us better understand the deeper effects of our experiments on Jimmy 1 and 2.

Lights down on Scientist. Jimmy 1 on, Mom 1 stands center stage behind him hands folded, looking perfect.

JIMMY 1

Dear Journal. I'm eleven – can you believe it? I'm starting the fifth grade and Mom and Dad say I'm doing *really* well! They're so proud of me because of my math and science grades – and sometimes they hang my art on the fridge! Though... usually it gets taken down so they can put up my test grades. Still, it's great that they're so proud of me – life feels really good. Well, there's not so much else to say... Night!

Lights down. Mom 1 exits, Dad 2 enters, stands in background, drinking or in an aggressive pose.

JIMMY 2

Dear Journal. Dad's drunk. I think he's beating mom right now – but I'm in my room so I can't hear it. It happens a lot these days, and she gets quieter every

time. I don't know why. If I were her I'd scream. Maybe she's afraid he'll kill her if she screams. Maybe he'll just kill her, anyway. Maybe he'll kill me, too. I am so scared of him. If I get big, I'll kill him before he gets me. Or maybe I'll just run away. I have to get out of here, as soon as I can. School is the only place I feel safe, but I don't like doing that work. I just like to draw. My teacher says I'm really good but that I should do some math and science. Still, I – *(pauses and listens, then speaks fast)* gotta go. Dad's coming up the stairs...

Lights down. Exit. Mom 1 sits on couch. Lights on stage up. Jimmy 1 enters, sets down bag, mumbles "Hey," goes to room.

DAD 1

Good evening, dear.

MOM 1

Dinner is hot on the stove for you, honey.

DAD 1

I was planning on having a chat with Jimmy first.

MOM 1

(stands, curious)

What about?

DAD 1

Got his grades in the mail yesterday – but he was at that baseball team sleepover last night so I couldn't talk to him about it until this evening.

MOM 1

Were the grades... bad?

DAD 1

Not his usual best. Other than his art grade, he's slipping. He's got time to redeem himself – but he has to pick up the slack by high school or he won't get into a college the med schools will notice. You get dinner on the table while I talk to Jimmy – we'll be down in a minute.

Mom 1 exits SL. Dad 1 to "Jimmy's room" and pretends to knock. Jimmy 1 sighs heavily and shuts sketchbook.

JIMMY 1

Come in.

DAD 1

(steps in)

Son, we need to have a talk about your grades. What happened to you this semester?

JIMMY 1

I just had other things I wanted to focus on.

DAD 1

Like what? How can you put anything before your grades? School is serious, son. If you don't pull these grades up at least ten points by your freshman year you can kiss medical school goodbye. I don't want to lecture you too much – I'm sure you get my point. I want to see these grades up and I want a change of attitude. When I was a teenager, it was rough for me too. But I pulled myself up by my bootstraps and became valedictorian and baseball captain at my high school. I know you can do the same, if you just concentrate on your studies and practice with that ball... and maybe put down the crayons for a little while.

JIMMY 1

They're pastels, Dad. Oil pastels.

DAD 1

And that's another thing. You should be saving your money for college – not wasting it all on paint and paper. You need to be more responsible, son. Your mom and I are just trying to look out for you.

JIMMY 1

(sarcastically) Gee, thanks, Dad. I really appreciate it.

DAD 1

Now, come on down to dinner. Your mom's waiting – you'll want to apologize, I'm sure.

JIMMY 1

(sets down sketchbook)

I'm sure. You head on down, I'll be down in a minute.

Dad 1 backs through "door" and freezes when lights dim.

JIMMY 1

(steps into upper SL light)

My parents make me so mad sometimes. Like I'm always supposed to be perfect and fulfill their dreams for me. Do they ever ask about my dreams? Everyone expects me to be the best and become a doctor and be the perfect son. They don't know me at all. Whatever.*(pause, changes tone)* So why I am so upset that I disappointed them? Why can't I talk to them about being an artist instead of

being a doctor? I have to hide what I really love just because I'm afraid of what they'll think of me. There's so much pressure to be perfect here, since everyone else is. Why can't I be perfect, too? What's wrong with me?

Lights fade. Dad 1 exits SL. Jimmy 1 exits SR. Mom 2 comes in and lays crumpled on the ground. Lights up on scientist.

SCIENTIST

October 17, 2159. Jimmy 1 and Jimmy 2 are now fourteen and a half. Today is an ordinary day in Jimmy 1's life, but a much more significant day for Jimmy 2.

Lights up. Jimmy 2 enters SR. Sees Mom, stops.

JIMMY 2

Mom? Mom? MOM?

Runs to her side and kneels, upstage of her.

Mom are you okay? Oh my god... MOM!!!

Lights fade. Jimmy 2 freezes.

SCIENTIST

Today, Jimmy 2's mother died from an overdose of prescription painkillers.

Lights fade on scientist. Jimmy 2 to SR light.

JIMMY 2

Today is October 17, 2002. Last year, today, my mother Louise Jennifer, died of an overdose.

He pauses and looks away for a moment.

And she left me alone with that bastard of a father she picked for me. Did you know he hardly cried for her when he got home and found the paramedics there, zipping up that black bag with her body in it? He makes me sick.

(pause) You know the other day he tried to hit me?

JIMMY 2 (Older) enters here SL and begins talking with Jimmy 2 as he walks across stage toward spotlight.

JIMMY 2 (OLDER)

Well, he can't hit me – not like he hit Mom. Like I told you all those years ago, when I was grown and big I said I'd hit him back – and I did. Because now I'm grown and big.

Jimmy 2 (Older) stands in front of Jimmy 2, who slowly backs out to kneel by his mother.

I'm fifteen, strong, bad – uncontrollable. The teachers at school say I'm wild. The girls love it, though – they think dangerous is so attractive. They don't know how dangerous I really am – but my old man knows. He knows now, anyway. Cause I hit him back. I fought 'im. Can I tell you how good it felt? To take back the power from him and stop being scared? It felt real good. Real, real good to hit him. Doesn't mean I want to do it again – but the look on his face when I popped him one right in the nose... it was great. Almost as good as when I finish a painting and it turns out well. Yeah, that great.

Lights fade on Jimmy 2 (Older). Jimmy 2 and Mom 2 exit; Dad 1 enters in background. Lights up on JIMMY 1 (OLDER).

JIMMY 1 (OLDER)

Mom and Dad found out last night that I didn't try out for the baseball team. I'm grounded for lying – and for not trying out for that 'great opportunity'. I feel so alone, journal. I feel like I'm constantly failing at everything. I'm such a disappointment – I can't even enjoy my art anymore because I know my parents hate it so much. Why am I the only one that can't be perfect? No one understands me... what it's like to be me. I keep trying to lose all my bitter, bad feelings in my art but it's not enough anymore. They pour out of me at every opportunity. Even my feelings are all wrong. How can everything seem so perfect, and yet be so wrong? I am so wrong for this world. I don't belong here.

Lights down. Lights up on Scientist. Jimmy 1 (Older) freezes.

SCIENTIST

April 3, 2162. Both Jimmy 1 and Jimmy 2 have reached the age of seventeen. I have begun to worry for Jimmy 1 who has become increasingly depressed. It would require intervention to pair Jimmy with the firmo-holographic counselor I've introduced, which is strictly against experimental policy. Hopefully, Jimmy 1 will seek help. (*breaks*) Is... is this right? Can we do this to other people?

Lights down. LISA enters SR to C. Jimmy 2 (Older) to SR spot.

JIMMY 2 (OLDER)

I finally sold enough art to pay the rent for the pad I've moved into – a shithole on the west side of the river, but it's still better than living with my old man. Here, it's just me, art, and... Lisa. God, my girlfriend... she's the most beautiful girl I've ever met. She loves my art, my tattoo... I can't even begin to tell you how much I like her. Recently, I've been using her as a model for my art – nude, which is kinda cool. And if some of our paintings end with a little... playing around, what's the harm in it?

Lisa walks forward. Jimmy 2 (Older) does not see her.

LISA

Jimmy... Jimmy, I'm pregnant. (*She freezes.*)

JIMMY 2 (OLDER)

What's the harm in it, anyway?

Lights down. Jimmy 2 (Older) and Lisa exit. Mom 1 and Dad 1 sit on couch.

Lights up as Jimmy 1 (OLDER) walks on.

DAD 1

(*standing*)

Jimmy – sit down. Now.

(*He does.*)

Your mother and I are at a loss with what to do with you. Your grades are far below average – you may not even make it into college, Jimmy. We've taken away everything we can think of... what can we do to make you behave? What else is there?

JIMMY 1 (OLDER)

Gee, Dad, I actually can't think of anything else you can take away. Maybe chores – I still have some of those.

MOM 1

Which you never do, Jimmy.

DAD 1

We're confused, son. Where did we go wrong in raising you? What did we do to have you turn out like this?

JIMMY 1 (OLDER)

I don't know, Dad, okay? I'm just a bad seed. I'm a failure, a disappointment – what do you guys WANT from me?

MOM 1

We just want what's best for you, Jimmy. We want to help you.

JIMMY 1 (OLDER)

Yeah? Well maybe what's best is if I just jump out a window and stop embarrassing you.

(*runs off SR*)

MOM 1

(*standing as he leaves, horrified*)

Jimmy!

Lights down. Mom 1 exits SL. Dad 1 exits. Lights on Scientist.

SCIENTIST

February 17, 2163. Jimmy 2's baby girl, Jennifer Louise, is born.

Lights down on Scientist. Light up SR on Jimmy 2 (Older), Lisa in background on couch.

JIMMY 2 (OLDER)

A father at eighteen... huh. Lisa is resting right now, recovering... I'm holding little Jennifer Louise – named after my mother. Lisa wants to call her J-Lo, but I like Jenny – simple and sweet. I'm so scared to be a father. I don't have a high school degree, money... anything to offer her. I'm so scared I'll turn into my father. I can't do that. I would kill myself before I hurt either of them – I will never be that man. It's hard to describe experiences like this one. There's so much going on inside me – peaceful satisfaction, overwhelming fear... the rightness of this moment.

She's perfect.

Lights down, Lisa exits. Lights up on Jimmy 1 (Older). Mom 1 and Dad 1 enter, stand center.

JIMMY 1 (OLDER)

I know I haven't written for a while, but it just feels so pointless. My entire life feels pointless and I hate it so much I don't even want to reflect on it. All the perfection around me makes me nauseous. It's like I'm a retard, the way being perfect is so hard for me. I just want someone, anyone, like me. God, isn't there anyone? I wish I would just die, so I could rid myself of all this guilt and shame. I am so ashamed to be me. I hate myself. I hate my life. I hate everything.

Lights down. Lights up on Scientist.

SCIENTIST

January 17, 2164. I am so concerned for Jimmy 1. He's stopped all normal activity and simply goes on in a parody of daily routine. There is a lifelessness too him, a drudgery, a self-loathing that speaks to me through his eyes. There is nothing I can do to help him. Won't someone help him?

Lights down. Light up on Jimmy 2 (Older). Lisa enters to C.

JIMMY 2 (OLDER)

Jenny's birthday is in a month and I'm saving up for her first present. You know how I told you I was living in a shithole on the west side? Well, that shithole was

too expensive for Lisa, Jenny and I, so we moved into an even smaller, smellier shithole. Lisa's going to get her GED and hopefully a better job afterward, so Jenny can have a nicer home than this one. We'll get out of here – I have hope. I think that's the good thing about life not being perfect – there's always the potential for hope. When life is perfect, nothing can ever get better – only worse. And I think humanity thrives on hope. Anyways, even though things are rough right now, this isn't so bad.
And even so, it's only for now.

Lisa exits SL. Jimmy 1 (OLDER) enters, opens journal, puts the pen to it, sighs, turns his face away, and closes the book with a definitive snap, head hanging, as the lights black out. Exits SL. Lights up on Scientist.

SCIENTIST

(clearly shaken)

December... 6, 2164. Jimmy 1 has just stolen his father's handgun and shot himself through the roof of the mouth. Jimmy 1... is dead. I just... watched Jimmy 1 die. Oh God, I just watched a man die. For the sake of an experiment... I just watched a man die.

(pauses and tries to collect herself)

I... I need to put in a request to the clean-up crew... Firmo-holographic environment number 6211 may be destroyed immediately after clean-up. Oh God, oh God...

She starts to exit, pauses, turns to re-enter spotlight.

Are you a murderer if you sit by and patiently observe a man kill himself? Can we only become murderers if society labels us so? Or do we all silently murder one another every day, just like this, and let each other die?

(Scientist exits)

Light does not dim, but flickers out quickly.

THE END enters.

THE END

Observing Scientist ID 877693 to determine the psychological effects of her attachments to subjects 66941 and 66942 was beneficial to our study on the formation of human connections. Despite having never met either subject, 877693 still formed a significant attachment to both of them. Our next set of experiments will include a study of the chemical changes in the mind and body of the subjects. Once we discover the empathy-causing chemicals, we will mass produce them, in the form of an injection, for use world-wide. Our goal is to

have governments require this mind-altering drug as a shot for all babies upon being born. Inevitably, our experiments here will lead to an interconnected environment in which humanity will thrive. Much good will come from our experimental ambiguity.

Bear In Mind

INT. A 1990 RED JETTA – EVENING

The iconic Brown University bear logo takes the form of a car window sticker right below PATRICIA'S sleeping face. Her head rests against the window in the back-seat. MR. VERICK is driving. MRS. VERICK is purposefully flipping through a stack of pamphlets that say things like "All prospective students are welcome," and "Learn more about the #1 Community College in the country!"

She finds a particularly interesting fact in one of the pamphlets and mutters something inaudible to Mr. Verick.

MR. VERICK

That's great hon.

MRS. VERICK

(in a foreign accent)

I heard that they are having a college seminar in the High School tomorrow. You should definitely go.

Patricia's eyes flutter open. She sits up and starts to rotate a mug that a moment before was resting slackly in her hands. Its lettering reads, "Community College of Rhode Island."

PATRICIA

Mom, I'm sorry. I just really don't see the point in applying anywhere else. She turns to look at herself in the fogged up car window.

PATRICIA

Why didn't you tell me how badly this headband clashes with my hair?

Patricia tugs off the gold headband she's wearing and tucks a lock of her shiny auburn hair behind an ear.

MRS. VERICK

(cautiously)

Honey, we all know where you are probably going to go, but-

PATRICIA

(defensive)

But what? You don't think I'll get in? It's the only school I would ever go to, so I really hope I do.

Patricia starts to fiddle with the mug more nervously, tearing at the lettering. Mrs. Verick ceases her frantic pamphlet rifling.

MRS. VERICK

(firmly; without turning to face her)

Patricia, of course I think you will get in. I just think it would be smart to apply to a few schools around here. Are you not curious about even just *looking* at other places?

PATRICIA

(annoyed)

Looking? I can *look* at Vera Wang's new fall line, or Gwen's new couture faux fleece collection. But you can't just look at colleges. You have to *know* them. I *know* Brown. And I *know* I'm going to get in.

MRS. VERICK

Your father and I both know that you can get in, Patricia. But it's expensive.

MR. VERICK

It's not that expensive.

MRS. VERICK

(directly to her husband)

Yes it is. The cost of tuition is probably much higher than it was when you went there in the stone age, Richard.

A short silence.

MRS. VERICK

Look, wasn't today fun? Can't we just look at a few more schools? Don't you want to play the- um- um- how do you say it? Play the game?

MR. VERICK

It's the field. Play the field.

MRS. VERICK

Yes! Play the field! Don't you want to play the field? Just to see what is out there? Look, I'm not trying to tell you what to do, I just think you're being a *little* narrow-minded about this Brown thing.

A pause. Patricia is thinking.

PATRICIA

(snorting)

Play the *game*? That's one I've never heard from you before.
Mr. Verick starts to chuckle as well.

MR. VERICK

Right? That was almost as bad as "cut to the race."

Mr. Verick and Patricia snicker meanly.

MRS. VERICK

Hey! Stop! Patricia, do not change the subject. I want you to answer my question. This is very important.

PATRICIA

Okay, okay, relax. I'll *look*.

Patricia holds out her hand for the pamphlets and then starts to sort through them carelessly. After about ten seconds she starts trying to flip through her fashion magazines and the pamphlets at the same time.

PATRICIA

But you guys know where I want to go. And remember you promised that if I got that journalism scholarship-

MR. VERICK

With a scholarship you could go to college on Mars and we wouldn't care.

MRS. VERICK

I'm not so sure about Mars. What I want to know is where this obsession with Brown University came from.

MR. VERICK

(chuckling)

I can't remember a time when she didn't want to go.

MRS. VERICK

Aye, I know. But why? I forgot how this even started.

PATRICIA

(interjecting)

I'm going to be a writer. Just like Dad. But I'm going to be famous.

MRS. VERICK

Richard aye, of course, this is all your fault. And now our baby wants to go all the way to Rhode Island-

MR. VERICK

But Brown is a wonderful school! And it's not even a two hour car ride-

MRS. VERICK

Don't *talk* to me about car rides! Now she thinks she has to be a writer and you know how she gets-

Patricia opens up a pamphlet and starts to read it more intently. Something obviously catches her eye.

PATRICIA

Hey, there's a lot of stuff in here about extra-curriculars...

MRS. VERICK

Yes, I know. But I'm sure you'll be fine. You're always writing for that newspaper in school, so don't worry about it. Have you talked to Alice about-

PATRICIA

Dad, how involved were you in High School?

MR. VERICK

Oh well you know, I didn't know I wanted to go to Brown until very late but-

PATRICIA

(cutting him off)

But how involved were you?

MR. VERICK

Uh...well let's see. I was Homecoming King, Senior Vice President, head of science club, one of the representatives in Student Council...and oh I got some Varsity letters, and an All-County track award...I was in the literary association, a peer leader...

PATRICIA

You were *Homecoming King*?

MR. VERICK

Yeah ha-ha...that was fun.

PATRICIA

What? Why haven't you ever told me that you did all of this?

MR. VERICK

I don't know, it didn't seem important.

PATRICIA

(whispers to herself)

But it's so important.

MR. VERICK

What'd you say?

PATRICIA

Nothing.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL HALLWAY

It is the end of the day or in between classes; the hallway is loud and teeming with students. But one student stands out. Patricia is forcefully making her way through the traffic, using a combination of hopping and jogging.

PATRICIA

Vicki!

VICKI is standing in the main lobby that Patricia is trying to get to. She turns toward Patricia and waves shyly.

VICKI

I thought you said you had to go home and study?

PATRICIA

(finally reaching her; out of breath)

Nope. Listen. I just talked to Alice for like. Two hours-

VICKI

Your guidance counselor?

PATRICIA

(still trying to catch her breath)

And she said that. I need to. Get more involved. *(a big inhale)* If I want my application to look even decent!

VICKI

Oh, my god, relax. Trust me, once a college admission officer takes one look at your grades-

Patricia is distracted by a poster hanging on the wall across from them. In giant, barely legible handwriting, the poster reads, "Don't be a hack, vote for Jack!"

PATRICIA

(holding her hand up to Vicki)

WAIT. What's going on?

JACK DOLE stands next to the poster with his entourage, and is handing out packets of gum. He's wearing his golf uniform and holding a club. Even though the main lobby is crowded, we can make out bits and pieces of what he's saying.

JACK

Vote for Jack, he'll give you a pack!

His goofy smile, incredibly creative mantras and unabashed confidence are a hit with the crowd. Many students are gathered around his display and he's giving out high-fives, getting punches on the arm and hoots from the crowd. They start to join in with their own creativity.

STUDENT 1

Vote for Jack, he's got our back!

STUDENT 2

Vote for Jack, he's great in the sack!

Patricia is seen suddenly making her way towards the center of this crowd. She seems to have left Vicki mid-sentence.

JACK

I've got a great back swing.

Jack says this with a wink and smiles out at the crowd. With his club, he pretends to hit a golf ball with great force, and watches intently as it sails into the distance. The crowd cheers.

JACK

As President of the Golf Club and a proud member of the junior class I ask you... for your vote. Thank you.

Jack bows magnificently and everyone continues to whoop and clap. Patricia, upon getting to the center of the mob, makes her way straight past Jack to read the rest of his poster. Nobody seems to notice her as she almost presses her nose up against the smaller print at the bottom:

VOTE JACK DOLE FOR JUNIOR CLASS PRESIDENT

She turns to find that Vicki has followed her through the crowd. Patricia grins even more widely at her friend.

PATRICIA

How much experience do you have in campaign management?

INT. CLASSROOM – AFTERNOON

It is those first few minutes before class starts. Most people are sitting either in their chairs or on the tops of their desks. Jack is in the back with some of his golf friends, pretending the clubs that they're wielding are light sabers. Patricia is turned around in her seat in the front row of desks. She and Vicki are chatting animatedly.

VICKI

Come on, are you serious? I've been thinking all day but it's really hard to come up with stuff. Nothing rhymes with Patricia.

PATRICIA

What? That's absurd. Everyone knows every word rhymes with something.

VICKI

I'm not sure if that's true. Why can't we just use a nickname, like Patty, or Pat? That would be so much easier. We both know that you aren't a big fan of nicknames but-

Patricia leans in to glare piercingly at Vicki. Vicki winces. The teacher strolls into the room. Patricia flips her hair back dramatically and snaps herself back around to face forward. Vicki rolls her eyes, then leans in and whispers at Patricia's back.

VICKI

I could only think of other people's names, like Alicia or Trisha.

PATRICIA

(whispering back)

What about militia? That could totally work.

VICKI

You're running for Junior class President, not Commander-in-Chief.

Patricia looks up dreamily.

TEACHER

Okay, everyone in your seats...That includes the Jedis in the back...Gentlemen? Jack and his posse, looking let down, take a seat.

TEACHER

Okay, so raise your hand if you did the reading last night.

Everyone raises their hand. The teacher pretends to count.

TEACHER

Hmmm...ten, eleven...okay. Now, who wants to answer my question about the US Presidential election of 1824?

Everyone puts their hand down, except for Patricia.

TEACHER

That's what I thought. Patricia, I have no doubt that you know what made the results of this election distinguishable from most other elections?

Patricia inhales largely.

PATRICIA

The presidential election of 1824 was the first election where the winning candidate did not receive the majority of the popular vote. The winning candidate in this case was John Quincy Adams, who was also one of the more notably fashionable presidents. This happened in the elections of 1876, 1888, and 2000 as well.

TEACHER

Great.

Patricia beams.

TEACHER

Now, can anyone tell me why this is significant?

Patricia's hand shoots into the air again. The entire class groans. Then, over the noise, a voice from the back.

JACK

I think it's kind of unfair.

TEACHER

(eagerly)

What was that, Jack?

JACK

Well, I just think it's unfair. The other guy should've definitely won.

TEACHER

(encouragingly)

You mean Andrew Jackson, right?

JACK

Uh, yeah.

TEACHER

Good! Why do you think so?

JACK

(struggling)

Well...if like...almost every single person in the entire country voted for the other guy...

TEACHER

Jackson?

JACK

Yeah Jackson...well then, it just seems kind of stupid that the uh, unpopular guy won.

TEACHER

Good! Very good, Jack. Does anyone have anything else to add?

PATRICIA

(without raising her hand)

Well I disagree completely.

The entire class groans again, this time more loudly.

PATRICIA

The electoral college was created in our country for a reason. Our founding fathers didn't trust the populace to vote for the leader of the entire country, so they made sure that representatives from each state, who were definitely more informed than the average citizen at the time, would make the ultimate decision.

TEACHER

That's true. But it was a very different time period. Does anyone think that the electoral college is still necessary in present day politics?

JACK

I don't.

TEACHER

And why not, Jack?

JACK

Because! I'm running for President of the class. And I would want to know that if I win the election, it's because everyone wanted me to.

Some light applause and cheering. Phrases like, "Vote for Jack!" and "Yeah Jack!" can be heard.

INSERT

A close-up of Patricia looking livid and raising her hand again.

BACK TO SCENE

Patricia starts to talk over the chatter.

PATRICIA

Well, I'm running for president too, and I would rather be voted into office by the more informed voters.

The class goes silent.

VICKI

(whispers)

This isn't your best campaign strategy.

The bell rings and everyone gets up to leave. Close-up of Patricia's furious expres-

sion.

CUT TO INT. GROCERY STORE — DAY

Patricia is walking down an aisle with her mom. Mrs. Verick is pushing a cart.

PATRICIA

I can't believe you guys made me go food shopping with you. I have so much to do.

MRS. VERICK

We never get to see you anymore; we miss you, Pattycakes. And I like that bag. Patricia makes a disgusted face at the nickname, but then smiles at the compliment.

PATRICIA

It's Gucci.

She looks down at her bag admiringly.

PATRICIA

Yeah well, I've just been so busy with the election. I can't believe it's in two days.

MRS. VERICK

Honey, do you even care about being president? Or do you just want to win?

Patricia picks up a super-size package of gum off the shelf of the aisle they're walking down. She looks it over.

PATRICIA

Both of course. It's going to look so good on my Brown application though...I really need this.

MRS. VERICK

Do you really think you need *this*?

PATRICIA

Well, yeah. Handing out gum really seemed to be working for Jack.

Mrs. Verick stops in her tracks to look at Patricia incredulously when Mr. Verick suddenly pops into the aisle, jogging. He is smiling widely with a can of something held high above his head in a victory pose.

MR. VERICK

I found the beets! Finally, I've been looking all-

MRS. VERICK

(angrily)

Beets? Since when have we ever eaten beets? I said peas. We need some frozen peas.

Her pronunciation of peas really does sound a lot like beets. Mr. Verick, looking crestfallen, slowly lowers his arm with the can of beets and starts to turn back around.

MR. VERICK

Oh. Okay, well I'll just go put these back then.

MRS. VERICK

No, no, it's okay; I'll do it. You get the rest of the list with Patricia, please.

She hands him the list.

MR. VERICK

Got it.

Mrs. Verick hurries out of the aisle. Mr. Verick and Patricia walk slowly down the aisle with the cart.

MR. VERICK

Okay, hmmm, let's see. Well, everything on the list seems to be crossed off already, ha-ha...

PATRICIA

You know I think we should buy some magic markers too. I need them for my flyers.

MR. VERICK

Oh, you're still making more? Are you trying to wallpaper the entire school with them? Because that sounds like an excellent campaign strategy to me-

PATRICIA

Daaad.

MR. VERICK

Ha-ha. So, why don't you tell me about the election?

PATRICIA

I think it's going okay so far. Jack's very slightly in the lead, but I have a couple more days to change some minds. I think if I just-

MR. VERICK

Does everyone know your plan?

PATRICIA

What do you mean?

MR. VERICK

I mean, once you're elected, what are you planning on doing?

PATRICIA

Um...

Mr. Verick stops the cart to pick up a package.

MR. VERICK

Oooh, awesome. Avocados- Well, that's definitely something you might want to think about, honey. Do you think we could persuade your mom to make her special Guatemalan guacamole tonight?

INT. HALLWAY – NEXT DAY

Patricia is trying to catch up to Jack, who is sauntering down the hall with his entourage, casually twirling his club and adorned in his golf garb, as always. As Patricia almost reaches him, she spots a "Vote for Jack" poster to her right. She looks around to make sure not too many people are watching, and then unmercifully tears it down and quickly tacks on one of her own flyers in its place.

Close-up of the flyer: "Vote for Patricia, she's tough as a militia."

PATRICIA

Jack!

Jack spins around. Patricia looks sweaty and desperate.

PATRICIA

What time are the second round of speeches today?...I can't find a single person who knows.

He looks her up and down. She is wearing very professional-looking clothing.

JACK

Wow. Don't you look like a hole-in-one.

After he says this he pretends to shoot Patricia with his golf club and blows smoke off the top of it. Then he laughs.

JACK

They start in a couple of minutes...Good luck with yours.

Patricia eyes him suspiciously.

PATRICIA

You too...

Jack turns to walk through the double doors of the auditorium. When he opens the door a booming chorus of, "Jack! Jack! Jack!" fills the hallway. He looks back to Patricia, smiling smugly. The cheers reverberate around them even after the door slams shut.

Vicki has materialized behind Patricia. Patricia turns to her with tears in her eyes.

PATRICIA

I can't believe I'm saying this, but I think I might actually lose to that *idiot*!

Patricia collapses into Vicki's arms with the weight of this final realization.

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL – MORNING

A banner strung across the main entrance reads, "Junior and Senior Class Election Day."

INT. A 1990 RED JETTA

Patricia gazes dolefully out of the passenger side window at the banner. Mrs. Verick is pulling into the parking lot.

MRS. VERICK

You know, I heard that they're having a club seminar today.

PATRICIA

How do you always know about these seminars?

MRS. VERICK

Aye, I don't know. The school sends me at least ten e-mails every day.

Patricia snorts.

PATRICIA

Really? And you read them all?

MRS. VERICK

Yup. And I think you should go to this one. It actually looks pretty interesting.

PATRICIA

Nothing about High School is interesting to me.

MRS. VERICK

Oh yeah? Well did you know that there was a fencing club?

Patricia laughs.

PATRICIA

You wouldn't catch me dead in one of those shiny polyester astronaut suits.

MRS. VERICK

Ha-ha, okay. But you should really think about going.

Mrs. Verick stops the car and Patricia starts to get out.

PATRICIA

Okay. I'll think about it. Maybe it'll take my mind off of this stupid election.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL HALLWAY

Vicki and Patricia are walking to class. They are passing many "Vote for Jack" posters, but Patricia isn't ripping any of them down. Vicki, noticing her downtrodden mood, is trying to cheer Patricia up.

VICKI

Look! A club fair!

PATRICIA

Ugh, my mom was talking about that all morning.

Patricia and Vicki walk into the cafeteria over which a "CLUB FAIR!" sign is hung.

VICKI

We should sign Jack up for Poetry Club, ha-ha.

Patricia sees a sign that says FASHION CLUB and her eyes widen. She disregards Vicki's statement completely and walks over to the table in a trance-like state. She starts to paw at a handbag that is sitting atop the display.

PATRICIA

(whispers)

Gucci.

Patricia seems to need to gather herself before she speaks to herself.

PATRICIA

(still whispering)

I didn't even know we had one here.

Patricia turns to Vicki, suddenly brighter.

PATRICIA

What if I just joined this? *And* poetry club *and* fencing club. Don't you think that'd be enough? For my application?

Patricia grins radiantly at Vicki, who does not return her smile.

VICKI

Are you kidding? You're going to give up *now*? We only have to last for the rest of today. And come on, look at your opponent! I didn't think it was possible, but he's getting even more ridiculous.

A shot of Jack. He's visible from the cafeteria doors. Jack is standing behind a campaign table, grinning goofily and giving out thumbtacks. He has a megaphone.

JACK

Vote for Jack, he'll get you a tack!

BACK TO SCENE

Patricia sighs.

PATRICIA

Look Vicki. I appreciate your help but...the only reason I did this was so it would help me get into Brown.

VICKI

But don't you care at all? I know that nobody else thinks this yet, but I *really* do think you would make a better president than Jack.

PATRICIA

There's no point! No one's even listening to me. I don't have anything more to say and I'm just past the point of caring anymore.

VICKI

(sharply)

Well. Then I guess I don't care anymore, either.

PATRICIA

Fine.

Vicki walks quickly away without looking back. Patricia is suddenly all alone. She looks around, gives the girl behind the fashion club table an awkward smile and then glances down to rummage through her own Gucci bag. She finds her phone.

INSERT

One missed call: Dad

BACK TO SCENE

She presses redial and starts to walk toward the exit door of the cafeteria. Mr. Verick picks up on the first ring.

MR. VERICK

Hey! I had some extra time at work and I wanted to know how you were doing. How's your stellar campaign going?

PATRICIA

It's, um, good.

MR. VERICK

Is everyone liking your campaign strategies?

Patricia glances towards the door where Jack is.

PATRICIA

(quavering)

I don't know, Dad. Nobody wants to listen. And I don't even really have a plan.

MR. VERICK

What? How can people not listen to *you*? All you do is talk. You just have to make them listen. And you always have a plan for everything. Why is this any different?

PATRICIA

I don't know...

MR. VERICK

You could at least try, honey. Whether you get into Brown or not, you'll regret it if you don't at least try today.

Patricia doesn't respond.

MR. VERICK

I gotta get back to work, hon. Good luck today. I love you.

PATRICIA

Love you, too.

INT. HALLWAY

Patricia walks brazenly out of the Club Fair and into the hallway where Jack is still handing out thumbtacks. There is a person in a giant animal with horns costume standing next to Jack. Patricia appears beside this person. She taps him on the shoulder.

PATRICIA

Excuse me, could I borrow that for a second?

STUDENT 1

Yeah, sure.

He hands her the megaphone he's been holding. Patricia jumps atop Jack's campaign table in one swift bold motion and clicks on the megaphone. It squeals. Sounds of dissent are heard among the students as they look around to locate the source of the noise.

PATRICIA

Can I have everyone's attention please?

She already has their attention. Patricia spots Vicki and they lock eyes for a second. Vicki gives her a questioning look. Patricia clears her throat.

PATRICIA

Hello everyone. I'm Patricia Verick and I'm running for Junior class president.

An obnoxious boo is heard above the increasing silence, and there is some snickering. Patricia continues on.

PATRICIA

I know that a lot of you don't really have a good idea of who I am. I'm not on a sports team like Jack and I know that in my almost three years here, I really haven't done all that much to reach out to many of you. And honestly...I have never regretted it more. I feel like I missed out on so many experiences, and so many possible friendships. We have one more year together, our senior year, and during this year, I plan on trying to get to know as many of you as I possibly can. I want to be president because I feel that I am qualified, but also because I feel it will help me accomplish this goal of reaching out. Because after next year, we

all go our own separate ways, to chase down our separate goals, and there will be no turning back.

She inhales. It's silent. Everyone is listening.

PATRICIA

And. I *know* that you guys know that Jack isn't going to give anyone a free Mac. Or find a way to get us lunch from Bennihanna's like he said in his speech. That would be a completely inappropriate use of the class budget. And while on the topic of budgets, I've been in advanced math classes since the ninth grade and I think I'd be great at dividing our class funds reasonably. Also-

Jack sees his opportunity and shouts out over Patricia's speech.

JACK

HEY EVERYONE! I got me a yak!

The crowd around the table whoops and cheers loudly. Many of them band together and attempt to lift Jack's friend, who is wearing a moose costume, on their shoulders. The horde of students is now gathered around him and they start to leave the section of the hallway, following Jack and chanting in unison, "Jack's got a yak!" Soon, Patricia is the only one left in the area, still standing on the table. She slowly lowers herself down into a sitting position. Vicki seems to appear out of nowhere, and puts a hand on her friend's shoulder.

VICKI

You had them there for a second.

PATRICIA

Yeah.

VICKI

And you always had my vote.

PATRICIA

Thanks.

A beat.

VICKI

Are you gonna be okay?

PATRICIA

Yeah, I guess. But to be honest...how could one really expect to win against an animal as graceful and majestic as the long-haired bovine found solely throughout the Himalayan region of south Central Asia? The yak may have split from-

VICKI

Oh my god. Shut up.

INSERT

A montage of school newspapers with Jack's face plastered on the front page, smiling his toothy smile, with titles like, "Jack Dole becomes Junior Class President," and then, "Junior Class President Steps Down After Students Demand Free Computers."

INT. A 1990 RED JETTA – WINTER – DAY

PATRICIA

Look!

A grinning Patricia scoots into the passenger seat and throws an intricately knitted scarf at her mom.

PATRICIA

I made this for you in fashion club today.

Mrs. Verick gasps dramatically.

MRS. VERICK

Wow! Thanks, Pattycakes. It's really wonderful. I can't believe you did this yourself; you're getting so good.

Patricia sticks her tongue out playfully at the nickname.

PATRICIA

You're very welcome. The teacher only helped me out a little bit.

MRS. VERICK

That was nice of her. Can you put it in my purse for me, please?

PATRICIA

Yeah, sure.

MRS. VERICK

Speaking of my purse, did you finally get your yearbooks today?

PATRICIA

Ha-ha, nope, not yet, but hopefully we'll get them sometime before the end of senior year, before we're already packed up and shipped off to college.

MRS. VERICK

Ooooh, and speaking of college. I think a letter might have come for you in the mail today.

A beat. Patricia snaps her head in her mom's direction.

PATRICIA

You *think*?

Mrs. Verick smiles and pulls a large beige envelope out from under her. We see the iconic Brown University bear logo in the top left corner. She hands it to Patricia.

MRS. VERICK

Here you go.

Patricia's eyes are bright and her expression hopeful as she excitedly tears the envelope open.

FADE OUT

The Pleasures of Fiction: An Interview with Mary Elizabeth Pope

Mary Elizabeth Pope lives in Boston, where she is a professor at Emmanuel College. Originally from the Midwest, she has degrees from Central Michigan University and University of Iowa. Her work has appeared in many publications such as *The Florida Review*, *Sycamore Review*, *Ascent*, *Upstreet*, and *poemmemoirstory*.

Her short story collection, *Divining Venus*, will be published by Waywiser Press. The stories in *Divining Venus* all feature characters that learn something about love, whether it is familial or romantic. A number of the stories from *Divining Venus* look at friendships between girls or young women, an age that many overlook or ridicule. However, this is only one aspect of her collection—the stories also examine love from the perspective of adults, and in the case of “The Drill,” even the elderly. Whether young or old, Pope’s characters are often perplexed and surprised by what they discover about love, which rarely seems to manifest itself the way they expect. This collection invites us to examine ourselves as well. For instance, Josie, the protagonist of “Marionette Theatre,” vacationing in Prague with her fiancé, comes to understand how little she wants to marry this man. Similarly, we as readers are compelled to evaluate our own wishes and desires. Do we really know what we want?

Following her visit to Geneseo, Pope was kind enough to answer some questions regarding *Divining Venus* and writing in general.

GD Editors: When speaking about your debut short story collection, *Divining Venus*, you've mentioned that in all of the stories, the protagonist discovers something true about love. At what point did you realize that there was a common thread? Was it something intentional or did it coalesce naturally?

Mary Elizabeth Pope: The first short story I ever wrote was called "Junior Life-saving" which is the story of a strong female protagonist who tries to conceal her competence from a man who is threatened by her strength in order to save their relationship. I had no idea at the time I wrote it that it was the beginning of a story collection. Then I wrote another story called "Rebound" about a woman who enters into a relationship with her own grief after a break-up, and that was followed by what is now the title story for the collection, "Divining Venus."

It was as I was searching for a title for the third story, which deals with that moment when children pass from childhood into adolescence that I realized the title "Divining Venus" might work as the title for a whole collection. By that point, I had a backlog of other stories I wanted to write, and it was then that I realized they all had the common thread of love or friendship in them. So that's where the idea for the collection coalesced.

GD: After reading a few of your short stories, we noticed that your narrators are often wildly different, yet their voices always feel true to their age. Are there any specific challenges in writing stories with child narrators? Which narrator did you have the most difficulty writing?

MEP: The protagonists in *Divining Venus* range in age from eleven to eighty-something. The older voices were easier—it's not difficult to imagine writing from the perspective of someone who has more life experience than you do, especially if you've spent a lot of time listening to your parents or grandparents, or ever worked in a nursing home, as I did for a few summers in graduate school. However, the child voices are more difficult. Sophie's voice in "Divining Venus" was the hardest child-narrated story I've written, primarily because I was keenly aware of the triple burden on each sentence to develop not only the protagonist's character but also the other characters in the story through a child's perspective, while at the same time moving the whole plot forward. This is always true when writing in first-person point of view, but it was more complicated in this case because of the age of the narrator. It was especially tricky at moments when I wanted to reveal things to the reader that the narrator didn't understand even though she was telling the story.

It does help that I have a pretty vivid memory of the mortifying experience of adolescence. I always tell my students that anyone who survived junior high has enough material to write for the rest of their lives, and those memories served me well as I wrote both "Divining Venus" and "The Club."

GD: When you read at Geneseo, you mentioned that you used to write cre-

ative non-fiction exclusively, but have recently started writing fiction. What prompted this change? Why do you think there is a trend of fiction writers turning to non-fiction?

MEP: It's true that I began my writing career in creative nonfiction, and while I haven't moved away from it, at some point, because I am an academic, I had to make a choice about a book. *Divining Venus* happened to be coming together at the point I had to make a decision, so I chose to go in that direction.

My move into fiction was prompted by a discussion I had with my creative dissertation advisor, who did not believe that second person point of view could be used in nonfiction (I've since discovered than many nonfiction writers use it). However, I really wanted to try my hand at second person, so when I began writing "Junior Lifesaving" in second person, I felt incredibly freed from the restrictions of writing about things that actually happened to me. I think most writers of creative nonfiction have all reached a point where they've been tempted to exaggerate for effect, where they think, "Wouldn't it be great if *this* had happened?" But because *this* didn't actually happen, they can't go in that direction. The freedom I experienced writing that first piece of fiction was really intriguing to me, and I wanted to explore it more.

I think the growing trend of fiction writers turning to non-fiction might have something to do with the fact that contemporary fiction writers have at some point been given the impression that their real lives are off limits as material, because using their own experiences as material somehow diminishes the imaginative value of the work. I'm not sure what the genesis of this belief was, because we know Ernest Hemingway based Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms* on his nurse, Agnes von Kurowsky, and we've seen that photograph of the characters from *The Sun Also Rises* sitting around that table in Pamplona. So if I had to guess why fiction writers are turning to creative nonfiction, I'd say it's a result of the fact that personal experience has recently become acceptable again as an art form.

GD: What is one short story or novel that you wish you had written. Why?

MEP: My favorite novel is Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. I wish I'd written it because Lily Bart is such an appealing protagonist in spite of her unlikeable qualities. She's so mesmerizing and sympathetic that I find myself hoping that she'll make better choices every time I read it, and I've read it more times than I can count.

My favorite short story is harder to name, so I'll name a few: Kurt Vonnegut's "Go Back to Your Precious Wife and Son" and "Who Am I This Time?" from *Welcome to the Monkey House*, Louise Erdrich's "Plunge of the Brave" and "Love Medicine" from *Love Medicine*, and Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson" from *Gorilla, My Love*. I wish I'd written them all because they manage to take serious subject matter and infuse it with comedy, which always allows me to go

more deeply into the darkness of a story.

However, the work I most wish I'd written is actually a poetry collection called *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters. It's about a cemetery in Petersburg, Illinois, and each poem is told from the perspective of someone buried there. Masters manages to whittle down each character's entire life into just a few lines that speak to a defining moment—her greatest pride, his missed opportunity—as seen from the perspective of the grave, and it's an incredibly moving technique. I credit him with my love for first-person narrators, which includes the stories I mentioned by Vonnegut, Erdrich and Bambara.

GD: What are you working on now? How do you find time for your own writing while keeping up with your work as a professor?

MEP: Currently I'm working on a novel set in Arkansas in the 1940s which is based on my father's relationship with his father, who ginned cotton for a living. My father's mother was ultimately committed to an asylum for what we'd now call paranoid schizophrenia, which left my grandfather to raise my father alone. The novel takes these parameters as its basic set-up, and is ultimately told from the perspective of a man trying to shepherd his child through poverty and insanity and chance to adulthood, back in the days when men were not usually primary caregivers. It's a story that compels me because although my grandfather died 38 years ago, my father still cannot mention his name without crying, the love and gratitude and loss is still so fresh for him. As his child, I've never been able to look away from that.

My grandfather died when I was three, however, and my father's accent has disappeared after a 30-year career as a professor at Central Michigan University, so I've had to rely on the voices of my late uncles who migrated north on the "hillbilly pipeline" for jobs in the auto industry in Detroit to construct the voice of my grandfather. There was a simplicity and directness about the way they spoke that was beautiful in its lack of sophistication. I think highly educated people are very skilled at using language to evade ever talking about anything at all, whereas my uncles, with their limited vocabulary, always got right to the point.

As for balancing writing and my work as a professor, all I can say is that it's not easy. Teaching creative writing does give me the opportunity to stay engaged with writing itself, and sometimes I'll be trying to help a student figure something out in his or her story and realize I've just solved a problem I've been having in my own writing. However, there's just no getting around the urgency of prepping and teaching and grading. I know some writers have a system—they get up every morning at five o'clock and write for two hours before they go teach or something like that—but I've found that kind of rigidity difficult to sustain, so I have no such system. I work when I can, mostly in the summer, and I don't give up.

About the Authors

MEGHAN BARRETT is a freshman at SUNY Geneseo. She currently is working on a B.S. in Biology, a B.A. in English and the Honors minor. Meghan hails from Penfield, NY where she wrote, directed, technically designed and starred in 'Experimental Ambiguity'. When not writing, Meghan enjoys singing, playing piano, and crocheting afghans. Meghan would love to see Emma and Iago out at a candlelight dinner.

GABRIELLE CAMPANELLA is a second-year at SUNY Geneseo where she studies English Literature. She originates from the Carousel Capital of the World - Binghamton – which is also the original home of Rod Serling and IBM. She loves reading, art, and crossword puzzles.

MEAGHAN CASTLE is a senior English Literature major at SUNY Geneseo, originally from Albany, NY. When she is not reading or writing, Meaghan loves to sew. However, as a result of the excessive time she spends reading, she's often wondered how a candlelit dinner between Oscar Wilde and Ernest Hemingway would unfold.

MARLEE CAVALLERO is a senior psychology major and studio art minor. She grew up in Clinton, NY. In her spare time she enjoys laughing as well as making others laugh.

JOHN CHAPMAN is a senior at SUNY Potsdam. He is pursuing a BFA in Creative Writing, having already earned a BA in Psychology. He grew up in Lockport, NY. While not writing, he teaches snare drum and participates in Civil War re-enacting. He has a short piece of non-fiction being published soon in North Country Lit Magazine.

MEGAN CICOLELLO is a senior at SUNY Geneseo and studies English and Psychology. She hails from the notorious Brooklyn, New York and is previously unpublished. Megan would like to see Jane Eyre and Sauron in mortal combat; of course, Jane would win.

TRISHA M. COWEN attends Binghamton University (SUNY) where she's a PhD candidate in English and Creative Writing. She is the Co-Editor-in-Chief of the literary journal Harpur Palate and the recipient of the Link Fellowship for the Advancement of Creative Writing. Her stories are published or forthcoming in Amoskeag, The Portland Review, Bitter Oleander Press, 2 Bridges Review and others. If she had to play matchmaker, she would set up a candlelight dinner for Peter Pan and Alice from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Alice would take none of Peter's childish nonsense. Alice would place the vorpal sword in Peter's hand and send him off to slay his Jabberwock. And then she would lean in close, flick his dusty fairy off his shoulder, and whisper "don't come back until you're a man."

ZORAIDA DOOLEY is a freshman at SUNY Geneseo. She's studying English with a concentration in Adolescent Education. She is originally from New York City and enjoys drawing colorful squiggles on loose leaf. She is previously unpublished, and is not fond of the character Polonius in Hamlet.

LARA ELMAYAN is an English and Journalism/Media major at SUNY Geneseo. She loves graphic design, looking at buildings, and fancy vegetarian food, and definitely does not want to hear any stories about your pet. She is previously unpublished. If she could choose any two literary characters to get into a fistfight, she would choose the green light at the end of Daisy's dock and Godot, if he shows up.

JEFF HANDY is a senior Philosophy major at SUNY Geneseo. He is a native of Norwich, New York. He enjoys racquet sports and advocating for the spelling of "racquet" as such, in hopes that he is making headway in dissociating his hobbies from commotion-making and various fraud offenses. He would seal his pyloric valve to see Ignatius J. Reilly dine with T.S. Garp.

KATE JORDHAMO is a senior at SUNY Geneseo studying Creative Writing and Sociology. Originally from Hopewell Junction, New York, she fills her free time experimenting in the kitchen and trying to save the stray cat population. She is previously unpublished. She would be interested to see what would transpire at a romantic dinner between Yuniot from Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Daenerys Targaryen of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series.

STEPHON LAWRENCE is a junior Creative Writing major, Art History minor at SUNY Geneseo. She was born and bred in Brooklyn, New York, where her heart steadfastly remains. Stephon enjoys playing volleyball when she's not stuck in the art studio, or staring at her computer screen. She is previously unpublished, and would like to see Charles Bingley and Holden Caulfield sit down to a candlelit dinner.

BIBI LEWIS is a junior English literature major at SUNY Geneseo originally from New York City. This summer she will be participating in the Juniper Summer Writing Institute at UMassAmherst. When she is not writing poetry, you can find her knitting socks.

JANELLE MARXHAUSEN is an undergrad at the State University of New York at Geneseo and is studying Communication and English. Originally from Levittown, Long Island she spends a lot of her time playing sports, reading Thought Catalog and spending time with her family. Janelle loves John Irving and brightly colored sweatshirts.

DANIEL T. O'BRIEN is a graduating senior from SUNY Geneseo. He is studying time-space realities and enjoys Dogfish Head IPAs on days when the vacuum breaks. He is unapologetically pretentious when it comes to most things in life. It is possible he does not exist. When he is not otherwise pre-occupied with making snarky remarks he dabbles in poetry. He would like to thank his mother for letting him borrow her high heels.

CHRISTINA MORTELLARO is a sophomore English (Creative Writing) and Communication major at SUNY Geneseo. In 2012, "Pretty in Blue" placed first in Nonfiction in Geneseo's English Department writing contest. Her poetry has been placed in writing contests from The John Gardner Writing Society and Genesee Community College. She is previously unpublished. In her spare time, Christina likes to make different omelet creations. In a literary fight, she would like to see Holden Caulfield fight Holden Caulfield knowing neither Holden can win the battle between his external and internal self.

SAMUEL PREMINGER is a super senior at SUNY Geneseo; nothing about it seems super. He studies Creative Writing and Philosophy and was raised in East Meadow, NY. Sam enjoys sleeping, condescending, and trying to avoid cracks in the sidewalk. He was published once, but would rather not talk about it. Sam can feel his soul trying to escape every time The Sailor appears on a page – he does not have any eggs for fats.

ZACHARY ROWE is a sophomore English major studying at the University at Albany. He is from Liverpool and enjoys playing games, watching countless television shows, and rotting his mind out with literature. He has previously been published in his high school's literary magazine if that counts as being published and would love to see Billy Pilgrim from "Slaughter House Five" fight Scott Pilgrim from the Scott Pilgrim series.

JIM RYAN is a senior creative writing major at SUNY Geneseo. He is from Avon, NY, the home of a pasta factory, a drive-in theatre, and countless seven-year-old pickup trucks. He owns two guitars and enjoys playing them late into the night. He would like to see Rubeus Hagrid and Merlin sharing a candlelit dinner.

ELIZABETH SACKETT is a senior at SUNY Geneseo and comes from the far away land of Long Island. She is a double major in Musical Theatre and Creative Writing, and she does much of her writing backstage. She also spends quite a bit of time doodling creepy trees and subsequently water-coloring them. She would absolutely love to see Katherine from The Taming of the Shrew in a fist fight with Healthcliff from Wuthering Heights. (She would like for Katherine to win.)

EMILY WITHERS is a junior English major at SUNY Geneseo. She earned an award for writing from the National Council of Teachers of English in 2009. Emily's native town is Manlius, New York, which is where, with help of Disney Princess audiotapes, she learned to dance manically and to sing. She would love to see a vicious sword fight between V from V for Vendetta and Laertes from Hamlet.