

poictesme

a student anthology of literature and art



2006

virginia commonwealth university

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2006

Richmond

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COVER ART

ERIC WOLINSKY, *Class Insecta*, 1160 x 780 pixels, digital illustration.

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The Blue Note

They mocked the idea of him and the boy moving into that old church. The place wasn't worth a damn thing, and it needed work, lots of it. The town thought it very queer that a man named Daniel would be the one to do it, to fix up that old church. Plenty of fine houses in town, they would say, or on small farms that went cheap because nothing small survived anymore. The diner waitress said that the boy never spoke, even to his father. How strange not to speak, and how strange for his father, coming from some big city, to this place of places.

Daniel slouched in a wicker chair wearing a red and black flannel shirt, long hair matching an unkempt grey beard. A cast iron stove squatted in the middle of the room on top of which sat a black, cast iron pan filled with water. Tendrils of steam spun from the surface, bringing humidity to the cold and dry air exactly as the Calvin preachers did for their congregations and for themselves. Austere pine bookshelves lined all four walls. A young boy sat cross-legged on a large woven rug. A few books scattered behind him, all closed except for a thick copy of *Arabian Nights*. The man held a trumpet and stared into the deep golden of a whiskey bottle. The boy fiddled with crayons and paper on the floor.

The wicker strands bent and creaked as he straightened his posture. "Pick up the grey and blue ones."

He raised his trumpet to the air like the chest plume of a proud and regal bird. His chest filled with air and then he pushed, concentrated, slow and intense. Sound that not so much echoed as filled the suspended ceiling criss-crossed by thick and dark oak beams. The boy scrawled faster and more erratically as the note grew, the tone expanding until the pitch began to

fade, directing the scrawling with it until the sound died. The boy lifted his head from the floor.

"C is the color of ice and sky," Daniel said.

Daniel rose and propped the shining, golden horn in the corner beside a shotgun. He threw on a wool jacket hanging from an iron stand and stepped outside. He trudged through snowdrifts something like three feet high to a wood pile made almost invisible by the blizzard. He stacked a few logs on his cradled arm, coughing from the sharp, icy air. The snowflakes were falling straight and slow as if gently down strings.

Meanwhile, the boy carefully tip-toed around the rug, trying not to step outside its borders. If Daniel were to look he would see wood floors that needed refinishing, disappointed he could not begin until spring. The boy looked at the same floor and saw a sky filled with clouds floating rudderless. Below the clouds an ocean, solid blue if not for the white crests. Daniel would know that these were called white caps in this part of America but if the boy would have asked Daniel what the white things were rolling in the ocean he would have told him they were white horses. The boy wavered but caught his balance. The door slammed and the boy returned to his former place. Daniel stomped snow from his boots then corded the wood inside the door. He walked to the freezer. The boy heard creak floor and clink ice cube and when Daniel his father entered the room the boy watched the clear ice bob in a tumbler filled with fluid the color bullion.

A set of headlights flashed through the east windows, mapping the driveway across the opposite wall. Daniel walked to the window and squinted in the light. Soon the front door opened and the boy heard a heavy pair of boots clunk in the entryway. A full Carhart suit peppered with specks of grease and oil stepped through the kitchen and into the living room. "He's shakin' an' sweatin' like hell," she said, "started this afternoon."

"Get someone else."

"Who?"

"Call a doctor."

"Can't afford one."

"I'm not a preacher."

"The old man asks for you. I don't know why. He just does."

Daniel turned and disappeared into the back bedroom, returning with a small Scandinavian sweater, thermal socks and a black case.

The woman bent to the boy and put her cold hand under his chin. "You ever gonna say somethin'?"

They hurried outside. The snowflakes were getting bigger and they stamped the boy's forehead, dissolving and slipping into his eyes. They felt like tears and though he was calm they soon made him feel sad. Daniel lifted the boy and set him in the pickup. Daniel followed, slamming the rusty door and locking it. The truck whipped round. The air was warm and damp from the defroster, the dashboard smeared with grime. A pull-down ashtray overflowed with butts and a few fell as the truck bounced along. The boy saw nothing past the tracing headlights. The snowfall burying the path ended at the abandoned railroad tracks. Snowflakes darted sideways and over the windshield. Tracking the white flakes against the black sky made the boy dizzy but he could not stop until, quietly and unnoticed, he fell asleep.

The truck choked and shook after he cut the engine. His father lifted him under his armpits, shoulders crunching his neck, setting him on the ground where he sunk deep into the snow. Daniel turned from the boy to the woman. "He can listen in the hall but don't let him in."

They entered a long brown trailer house surrounded by

barren fields of white. They walked up a few concrete blocks and opened a white plastic door that reminded the boy of white plastic picnic spoons. The living room looked famished except for a dusty TV on a folding stand opposite a faded brown couch with thin, half-smiling cushions. Daniel entered a narrow hallway, passed a side bedroom, washer, dryer and ended at a door. He turned the knob.

The boy sat cross-legged in the middle of the hall and shut his eyes. The hallway walls disappeared, the ceiling vanished. The floor fell away and he saw the old man in the next room. Saw into his eyes. Black pupils that sizzled tiny corpuscles in all directions like spring lightning charged by something the boy tried but could not know.

Daniel nearly tripped over a tilted ceramic heater supported by small bricks. Dreamcatchers hung from the ceiling, from the inside handle of the door, and from the bed itself, as well as feathers with various colored beads, long, Blackhawk feathers with red stained ends. Daniel pulled up a chair. The old man lay face up, buried under layers of sheets and cloth, his black hair splayed on a pillow with some thin strands stuck across his brown sweaty and swollen cheeks. His eyes were countersunk into a sick and swollen face. Daniel opened the black case and slid the mouthpiece on the trumpet then reached for a small notebook and pen from his back pocket. At first there was no talk. Daniel cared for the old man, but he hoped this was the last time.

"Well?" Daniel said.

"What did I say yesterday?" The old man said.

Daniel flipped the notebook to one of the last pages and read aloud, "More Light." Daniel slid the pen in the spiral of the notebook and set it on his lap. "I looked it up. Those were Goethe's words. Good thing you didn't kick it yesterday or your last words would not have been your own."

"I don't care if they're somebody else's words. Who cares? I didn't know they were Goethe's words. I came up with them myself."

"You probably read them somewhere and don't remember. You don't want to imitate somebody's..."

"Shit," the old man chuckled, "it's imitation to speak dying words. It's imitation to die, too." The old man grinned, the chapped corners of his mouth cracked, white spittle filling the red splits. "I'm not sure what I want to say today. Play for awhile. I suppose last words are inspired. Something will come."

The boy sat in the hallway while the woman stretched on the couch and smoked. He had heard the mumbling, then the silence, and now the trumpet. One note at a time. That was how his father began his sessions. The boy dreamed of long afternoons listening to him play one note, then scribble something, the same note again, then again to paper. Holding notes in what seemed like space and not time until the notes began to form lines and the lines began to form some kind of strange melody. The boy saw color after color and felt them too. With each separate sound he felt flashes of green and white, waves of purple and blue and then, abruptly, the colors merged. The old man spoke and the trumpet cut. "Play that thing again." The old man's breathing became impatient and his forehead rained sweat, looking furiously at the paneled ceiling. Daniel drew deep and blew again until again the old man interrupted. "What's that?"

"What's what?"

"I don't know! It went up and down at the same time!"

Daniel held the trumpet in front of his lips and stared at the bell. "You mean the pitch?"

"What the hell's pitch?"

Daniel set the trumpet on his lap and ran his hand through his beard.

"I think what you're hearing is the blue note."

"What the hell's a blue note?"

"A flatted seventh. It hides between the major and minor notes. It slurs, sort of connects the two modes but has no set relationship with anything before or after."

"Give me the horn."

Daniel did not respond.

"Who cares if I can't play," the old man said, "Push the keys and I'll blow."

He gave the trumpet to the old man, who slid his old and crooked fingers into the valves. He inhaled then seemed to push with his cheeks and his stomach. The tone hesitated and faltered, sustaining till his lips unpursed, making a spitting noise and then just air. The old man let go and turned away, and did not move except for his breathing, lying on his side, looking out a window where in a yard light he watched the snow fall in droves. He thought of what his grandfather had told him when he was very young; that before the leveling of the great glaciers the land was all forest, full of strange and massive beasts. Daniel waited for the old man to say something, to say his last words for the day. Getting nothing, Daniel packed his trumpet and left the room.

The boy stood when the door opened. His father walked towards him with the black case. The woman was crying. Her head in her hands and her shoulders quivering, making the smoke from the cigarette shiver in the air and the ash fall on the carpet. His father, not knowing how to feel, watched her while the boy himself walked towards the door. They left the woman on the couch and walked outside. The boy loved the sound and feel of his boots crunching on fresh fallen snow. So crisp and clean and especially at night, where the silence seemed more silent, and the snow more white.

Xavier Atkins

Old John

It was Thanksgiving. Or one of the days around it. I was in college, the early years, and a lot of us had stayed in Richmond instead of going home for the holiday. And that was nice; it was new and exciting to a group of kids fresh out of the coop. A good dozen or more, coming together to share good food, good moods. We all did or brought something. We had to gather chairs and makeshift tables. Someone brought wine. I drank a lot of it. Then came the beer and liquor. It was like the ending of a good movie that lets you know things are going to turn out alright after all. All laughs and full bellies.

It got late and people started taking off. I was ready to leave but not ready to lie down. As I bid my farewells to the leftovers, I tucked Tommy's half-full bottle of rum underneath my jacket and got out of there. It was chilly outside and I was looking to a good ten blocks of a walk but I was O.K. with that. It felt like a good night to have ten blocks to walk.

I stepped outside. The streets were empty and bright from the lamp posts. There wasn't anything to listen to except the stoplights and my shoes across concrete. After three blocks, I came up on the guy that sits on the corner of Broad and Belvidere. You've seen him. For years, rain or shine, sitting there, straw hat in the summertime, bundled up in the winter, reading a book with the cardboard sign propped up next to him. "Bush is the Terrorist." White beard. Glasses. Like some mendicant monk, rebelling against society in the search for knowledge and complete peace of self, this guy had a plan. Don't you ever wonder

what those guys could be reading? Dostoevsky, some anarchist essays, the Bible, maybe? I was curious, just like you.

So tonight, I felt I should say something to this man, this urban holy man. The idea of it seemed suddenly so appealing. Of course, it had to have been the alcohol. Combine that with all the Bukowski I'd been reading at the time and it made perfect sense to think this man and I should converse.

"Hey pal, happy holiday!" I said to him.

"Happy holiday, buddy!"

"Hey, how's about me and you take a coupla shots of this rum?" I asked him as I pulled the bottle from the folds of my coat to reveal it with a flourish, as if it was some long lost relic that held the salvation of all mankind and its future.

"No shit! Really?" he said, and I could see the hope in his eyes. It frightened me, but I was drunk enough to stay true to my conviction.

"Yeah, man! Let's do it!"

"Well, we should go across the street, into those trees over there!" He pointed across the street to some trees that lined the side of a building. Street lights didn't illuminate that area. Suspicion was in the air and I never liked the smell.

"What's the problem? Why can't we drink here?"

"The cops! The cops will fuck with us, man."

"Shit, hey, it's five in the morning, I think the cops got something better to do," I said, but he persisted. I went along, but I warned him, "Don't fuck with me, man, I got friends right down the street. Friends you don't want to meet on a bad day!"

"No, no, man! Of course not! Just a coupla shots!"

We went across the street and I took out the bottle and handed it to him. He took a healthy shot and it scared me a little, but after he handed it back and I had taken an equal shot, I was no longer so scared. It didn't cross my mind that I was sharing a bottle mouth to mouth with a man literally off the street, not once. It was all for the novelty of it. I was already writing the story. We kept on for a couple of rounds, and he started talking to me.

"What are ya? You look a little Asian there but I know you're something else. What are ya?" he asked me. So I told him.

"I knew it!" he said, and he seemed to get more excited. I saw the gap between his big yellow front teeth behind the whiskers of his white and yellow beard. The jagged teeth of a predator. They looked crazy. He said, "I knew you had some black in you! Cause, man, I feel, underneath this skin, I'm black too!"

We kept on trading slugs of the stuff and he told me how he thought white people were the devil and that my father was a fool for going in the military because he only became their puppet then and that Brazil had the finest women, women that he tried several seconds to describe and at last could simply say "pure magic." Honestly, none of it sounded so prolific. He hugged me and I felt uncomfortable, but I went along and he laughed like a wild man with his gapped teeth and my bottle in his hand and his dirty, smelly parka, whose odor I couldn't begin to describe in any language I knew, and I knew a couple. Miraculously, we ended up back on the corner of Broad and Belvidere and I began to feel some relief.

"Well, man, it was good," I told him. "I'm gonna head out."

“You fucking cracker!”

When he said it, I hardly believed it. It had something to do with how it just instantly blurted out of his lips, how sudden, it didn't sound real. But it couldn't have been mistaken for anything but what it was and I didn't know what to do. I looked at him as if I was watching a movie, like it wasn't directed at me, like I was waiting for the guy on screen to do something, but I was the guy on screen, and I didn't do a thing. I just stared at him like some kind of moron as he held my bottle of rum.

The lines of his face eased back and the smile returned and he said, “Ah shit, man, I don't mean to fuck with you, I just want you to let me show my gratitude. Let me roll you a cigarette! Shit, you let me take all these shots, let me roll you a cigarette!”

So I let him do that and we sat there and I watched him.

I tried to make further conversation, waiting for him to roll the cigarette.

“Yeah, so... haha, I remember when you used to have ‘Clinton is the Terrorist’ on your sign instead...” He's been there that long, on the same corner. Ah, Richmond. But instead of fond nostalgia, here it came again.

“You fucking Flip!”

Now I am one of those. I did my same bit and simply stared at him, except this time he didn't apologize. He only stared at me with his crooked grin of insanity. I realized it then. *This is not a good man, this man is crazy.* He was no sage. No wandering, knowledge-spreading monk graciously living off the land. I had been duped. A trick had been played on me. The whole damn set-up was an act. Richmond. The Dirty Fist. Whatever you wanted to call it, this guy knew the angle to suck us in. I should have

stuck with a small donation and kept my nose clean.

I needed to get out of there. Plans began to formulate in my head, escape routes, the summoning of courage. But I wouldn't hightail it empty-handed. He still had that damn bottle of rum and, by God, I told myself, I had never left a wounded soldier on the field.

We talked for another fifteen minutes. The fucker was stalling me. Was he expecting me to leave the whole bottle? Maybe some other jackass. Eventually, he did hand me the cigarette. So I lit up and he said he's going to take a piss. He walked right over to the gate parallel to the street, right on the sidewalk, with no regard for discretion. I heard the zip, and in my head a pistol went off. I snatched the bottle and sprinted down Broad. Sprinting in jeans that are not meant to be sprinted in, a pair of suede dress shoes, a nice black wool jacket. I was sprinting down Broad at five in the morning and I heard something howling, some sort of beast behind me, and it's him, he's given chase. I looked over my shoulder and I saw him coming after me, screaming incoherently, with his pants down at his ankles. The man was possessed. I put on the acceleration boost and floored it, and before long he'd given up. From a block away, I looked back to see him pulling up his pants. It was finally over.

If it had ended there, perhaps that would've been enough. I could have described the situation of us standing there, talking about the bizarre things that bums talk about, and it would've been interesting enough. That would've been enough. But it wasn't enough.

I was walking in the alley two blocks away by then and almost laughing, looking back, you know, in retrospect, how funny, when I hear a tinkle. When people use the phrase "the hair on the back of my neck stood up," I never could empathize. But at that moment, I knew the feeling

to the core. I looked behind me and it was him. He was on his bike, and he had what I could only just barely see as a knife in his hand.

My legs started to move before I even had time to think, except I slipped on the gravel I was standing on. I went down hard, *real* hard; hard enough, apparently, to tear a hole into my nice wool jacket, the jacket I had stolen from my little brother, and the rocks bit into my skin. But I didn't think about that right then. I thought I was going to die. The insane homeless charlatan was coming upon me like Death on his bicycle with full murderous intent, and don't ask me how I remember, but I saw it in his eyes, a completely feral look, shining like some kind of fucking werewolf. Shit, I don't know, it is to this day the most frightening thing I've ever seen. Stand my ground and fight? With a man who has nothing to lose, who has decided to go all the way back to his corner just to grab his bike and chase me for a bottle of rum? I didn't think it possible to win a fight like that.

I needed to live.

Somehow, I got back on my feet and started running. I was motherfucking Forrest Gump. And I didn't need any Jenny to tell me to run. I was in the middle of the street running wild with my hands up, one hand of course still clutching the bottle of rum, and screaming "Help! Hey, Jesus, God, shit, help!"

People actually see me and began running the opposite direction, as if the world was coming to an end and they were just trying to get the fuck out the way. I ran up on a Jeep Cherokee at a stoplight, he had the windows rolled up, some tough guy, and I banged on the windows, "Let me in! This motherfucker's trying to kill me!"

He put the pedal to the metal and sped past the

red light, wheels-a-screechin'. By this time, the monster had caught up to me. Jesus, I was ducking and dodging and weaving, his hand reaching, knife slicing. He never touched me. I ran through parking lots and over cars and finally scaled a fence and fell there. I got up and started going again but when I looked back he wasn't making any attempt to follow. He sat there on his bike staring at me through the fence. It was a fraction of a second before I started moving again, but he had finally given up. The rabbit had gotten away.

I hobbled onto the next street and hid in some bushes for a while. I haven't had asthma since halfway through high school but it all came back that night and my breathing sounded like it was coming through a sewer grate. Time passed. I saw no sign of him. I had finally gotten away. I had survived him. Richmond.

I got home safely after that. Not exactly in the fashion I would have preferred, but safely. I emerged from the bushes realizing I was right next to the college campus. I cut a path through it as random as possible. Somewhere on this path, the bottle slipped from my jacket. Leaning down to pick it up, I fell over, from exertion, from drunken stupor, you name it, but when I got back up, who was there but some guys I would've loved to have seen fifteen minutes ago: the Richmond bike cops.

"Hey, son, come over here."

I walked on over.

"You been drinking tonight, son?"

"No, sir."

"We see you got a bottle under your jacket."

"I've been drinking a little, sir."

"Let's see I.D."

I handed it to him.

"Under 21 too, huh? Alright, we're gonna have to go downtown."

Life doesn't get much harder than that. I despaired. I told them what just went down and they took it with a grain of salt until I described the disguised killer, from the corner of Broad and Belvidere, and they recognized him.

"Oh, John! Ah hell, yeah, he's a little crazy."

John. His name was John.

"Officer, I just wanna go home. Just let me go home."

And they did. But they made me pour out the bottle first. Me and that bottle. I watched the life-giving liquid pour out and it was like putting an old friend six feet under. Goodbye, old boy. We had our times, didn't we? I wanted to cry and I felt it would've been fitting, but I wouldn't give those sons of bitches the satisfaction. They had one of those service cars pick me up and give me a ride. I got home, feeling a little scared even on my own doorstep, but I got in there and I sat on my bed and then I got in and under those covers and thought about John. I started filling my head with the idea he'd be out there waiting for me. In some alley, in some bush, waiting. On the corner of Broad and Belvidere, with that cardboard sign for the current president, waiting. For some prick acting altruistic, some prick who's read too many books about slumming it and wants a taste. I'm going to stay away from those books for a while.

Joannah Nwokeabia

Plantains

As I hover over the thirsty pot
of hot oil waiting to swallow
soft plantain chips
in its sea of bubbles,
I look down
and see her calloused
hands with stubby nails
fervently peeling off the skin
of those grotesque massive things,
clawing until she reaches the sweetness.
This is the part she fed us.
I remember her marching us
little ones, Nwatakiri,
to the market Sunday afternoons,
one hanging from her neck
on her back like the sun,
one sandwiched between her armpit, breast
and sweet musk.
She cupping my little hand
in her larger one and her purse in the other
Would find the ugliest plantain
Dark battered oozing
but deep fried
they were golden and delicious.
She scooped the sweet chips from the pot
and the angry oil jumped,
landing on her neck or breast
leaving pillowy spots on her skin for us to play with before
we balanced the scalding chips on our little finger tips
and she, Ugo, fierce fearless
rests her head on her shiny talons
and laughs.

The Hereditary Nature of Spontaneous Human Combustion

My mother died blazing like a Roman candle. She exploded while making a Jack and Ginger in the kitchen, the exact moment she turned to get ice. She lived alone and was not discovered until four hours later, by a neighbor coming by for a porch-sit. She was the only thing that had been set ablaze in the house.

Other kids had dogs, cats, pets with character, cold noses and warm fur who'd cuddle up to you on cold nights. My mother named the spiders and palmetto bugs that infested our house. "Rufus is having a hard day, so let's be extra nice to him today," she'd say, neglecting the fact that Rufus was a 6-inch long banana spider whose web was an architectural delight and who had no problem entrapping any bug foolish enough to come his way. "I think he needs a girlfriend," she said, tapping out her cigarette. "He just looks so lonely."

The first time I came home drunk, my mother asked me what I'd been drinking.

"Bud Light," I mumbled into her jacket, still holding onto my adolescent fantasy that if she couldn't smell my breath, she couldn't get me in trouble.

"Bud Light?" She was incredulous, and I assumed it was because of my bad decision to come home wobbly. "Honey, that's just like saying you were drinking Budweiser, and then said, 'Hey! Y'all know what this needs – more water!' Light beer is a waste of your time and mine." She poured me a glass of water and doled out two Advil. "I don't believe in hangovers,

so I don't get them, but I don't know if you'll be so lucky."

I breathed what I thought was an invisible sigh of relief.

"Oh," she said, "you can unplug your phone and leave it in my room after you brush your teeth. You won't need to be calling anyone next week. We're gonna have family time."

I wondered if this meant she was going to take me to the grocery store to school me in brew-ology, or if I would even be allowed to leave the house.

The worst grade I ever got was a 'D' in Spanish. I was dating Timmy Wikers at the time, and fifth period was usually spent in Tim's El Dorado, not learning about shoe verbs. My mother was never very concerned with my grades, so it was a surprise when she got my report card and spat on it. "Sweetie, you know that if I get fired from my job we're going to have to move to Mexico, where I will have to seduce and then take to court a member of the government in order to get a pink house on the Pacific, and you will have to know enough Spanish to buy Quaaludes at the mercado. Think, Isa, think!"

My mother was not a big cleaner. I am positive the day I learned to walk she gave me a miniature broom and said, "I don't have time for that shit anyway."

My parents were never married, and my mother gave birth to me without my father's presence. After marrying Marcia, my dad decided to become a part of my life when I was six. My mother told him he could have custody of me for the duration of my summer break. He accepted the offer, although probably under duress. My mother taught public school at the time and spent her own summer on a break. One would think that was when she was most available to care for a child. I assumed she spent the summer on the beach, but she never spoke of those summers. She'd come to get me in August, brown with nails bitten to the nubs. Upon my inquiry, she'd say she'd bitten off her nails in nervous preparation of seeing

my father. "He makes me so nervous," she said. "Don't think I can just give you up every year to that man and expect you back in one piece."

"Don't you just hate the cold?" she asked, under the glare of an orange moon.

Her whole life was one-upmanship: her versus the rest of the world. She'd reply to their silent taunts with "because" statements. Making tea, she once said, "Because the urge for creativity cannot be overlooked. Because I need to look at the structure of a tree in winter. Because we must get back what we give. Because we take care and get taken care of. Because for as long as we are, we are survivors."

We weren't religious in the conventional sense. Other than a predisposition to worship Aqua Net, my mother believed that Aunt Nora watched over us. And in a way, she did. The death of my great-grandparents provided her with enough money to get our house, as well as a two foot long portrait of Aunt Nora. (Aunt Nora was neither her nor my aunt, just a distant family relation who somehow ended up in my great-grandfather's basement.) The portrait was of Aunt Nora at 20, wrapped in her wedding tulle and holding a paper rose at her shoulder. Painted in the corner were the artist's name, (unintelligible) and the year, 1919. She was not beautiful, blessed with the same large family nose my mother had passed on to me, but she did have striking steely blue eyes that followed you around the room. The oval frame was perfect 1920's baroque, gold leaves surrounding the bubble of glass that held Aunt Nora in. Utmost respect was to be paid to Aunt Nora at all times, and my mother found it natural to end an argument with me, saying, "Aunt Nora can hear you, you know. She don't like that tone of voice just as much as I don't." I hated Aunt Nora; her gaudy frame did little to reflect our own insufficiency. I fantasized about being bit by a radioactive spider, Rufus maybe, and gaining the super strength

to carry 50-pound Aunt Nora to a pawn shop and get enough money to leave boondocks South Carolina. I knew if I did my mother would probably start talking to the toaster oven about her existential crises, instead of leaving them for Aunt Nora. It was a risk I was willing to take.

My mother never owned a step-stool. Genetically blessed with her five feet and ten inches, she simply owned platform shoes. Stuffed under the sink, they reminded me of blocks of cement with ankle straps one could stand on and see if we had any gin back there.

In raising me, my mother practiced one thing: tough love. This was manifested mostly in her sarcasm. Her favorite epithet was, "Oh, go find yourself a giant rock and get over yourself." While going through my Sylvia Plath phase in high school, my mother answered my mournful declarations with, "Waa waa waa. You're boring me. Shit, it's not like we have a working oven anyway." I thought I had her figured out at the time, and responded, "You just pretend to be happy, you aren't even real." She laughed, her cheeks reddening as she threw her auburn curls back, "I ain't real? You like having shoes? Cause I don't think fake people can buy you shit. Go to your room and come back when you dump poor Elise Cowen and want to start your marijuana stage. I know a guy."

When hip-hop hit white America, my mother was there, ass shaking, fist pumping, ready for the revolution. She'd hold sermons on her favorite song of the week, which I would try to wrangle myself out of. It rarely worked, and I'd be stuck in the living room, forced to listen to her dissent on the ways of the world, and how hip-hop could fix it. But it wasn't just social commentary. She loved anything with a good beat and would dance around in a manner more befitting a Juvenile video than a 40-something making macaroni and cheese. She attached herself to particular lines of songs to the point where she'd write them on blank sheets of paper on the walls. "Oh Isabel,"

she'd say, "do you hear that?" Blinking back tears, she'd be silent as her favorite Marcy Projects rapper spit, "We used to use umbrellas to face the bad weather / So now we travel first class to change the forecast." Her mouth puckered, I could see the goose bumps rising on her arms.

Of course, I am the sole executer of her will. The house smells like her burnt hair, and I search for any lingering scent of her: Shalimar, cigarette smoke, boiling tea...but her combustion has erased all olfactory memories. Aunt Nora looks down on me as I go through drawers, hoping to find hidden treasures of my mother's. Mostly though, I am looking for money. The sun is setting, and Aunt Nora's blue eyes look orange from the reflection. I get the platforms out from under the kitchen sink, hoist myself up to Aunt Nora, and try to pull her off the wall. Fiddling with the frame's wire, I rock back in the platforms, and my feet slip out of the shoe straps. I fall backwards, off the shoes and onto the floor, my arms wrapped around the frame. Aunt Nora has probably broken my ribs. Stuck to the back of the frame is a note.

"Nora Isabel Adams 1899 – 1919. Died on her wedding night of unknown causes. Found by her husband burned to the couch. May she rest in peace forever in God's love. Amen."

I swear the handwriting is my mother's. Visions of Aqua Net and smoldering cigarettes dance in my head, and just like that, I begin to sweat. I swear, it feels like there's a fire in my stomach.

Jennifer Henderson

Old Loved Lady

Fragile sleeping lady
crumpled up on cotton sheets
white walls and stainless steel
the smell of bleached bathrooms and floors

Waking up with wet sheets
the nurses peed on her again
she swears
it every morning

Fluid in her brain keeps the fog from clearing

Sometimes standing in her room
i witness her eyes
fade back into the present

In times like this
she can recall
this past summer
leaning over to whisper:
you're my favorite

Il Calcio

The sand flies around his young head, stinging his eyes and face like a thousand bees. The merciless sun burns his skin. His canteen is empty. His throat aches, bare and heavy from his thirst, but he will not stop. Close, he thinks to himself, I am so close—the Lost Pyramid will be mine. His left foot rises, steps, and sinks into the gold dunes of Egypt. A gust of wind violently lifts the ends of his makeshift headscarf. His balance waivers. Quickly, he positions his feet to steady himself against the winds that surround him, the breaths of the Devil, he thinks. This land is cursed. Suddenly, a motion appears in the corner of his left eye. He turns his head and sees a giant gang of screaming—

“Giovanni!” a woman’s voice calls.

Giovanni’s eyes jerk. His fingers cradle a schoolbook that rests on his black Adidas soccer shorts.

“Are you reading in there or are you day-dreaming?” his mother asks from a distance down the hall. “Signora Despucci says you still day-dream too much. She says you need to concentrate more.”

A week ago, while discussing Shakespeare, Giovanni had one of his visions. He was transported into outer space where the diabolical Evil-Eye aliens, a vile race with eyes made of evil—and evil in their eyes—and whose slimy skin smelled like vinegar and cough medicine, had captured a most fair maiden.

“We have captured you,” said the leader of the vile Evil-Eye monsters, “we will ransom you to bankrupt the Galaxy Federation. No one can save you now!”

The young maiden screamed. “Won’t anyone save me?” she cried.

Suddenly, a space ship zoomed onto the scene: the magnificent Space Pirate Romeo—destroyer of gross monsters.

“Un-hand that fair maiden, you gross monster!” he commanded.

“So,” said the vile leader, “we meet again Romeo. I thought perhaps you would not show.”

“I have put up with you for long enough,” said Romeo, “prepare to meet thy maker!” Romeo pointed his Bang-Boom gun, pulled the trigger and...*Bang!*...*Boom!*, the Leader was incinerated. Only Romeo and the fair maiden remained.

“Oh, Romeo. Kiss me, for I shall never—”

“Giovanni!” shouted Signora Despucci.

Giovanni’s eyes, which had been staring blankly at the ceiling, suddenly crashed to the eye-level of his teacher.

“Giovanni, *che cosa fai?*”

Signora Despucci—the old *witch*. No drunken Roman soldier in his day would dare spend the night with her. She had always hated Giovanni’s imagination.

“*Scusi, Signora*. I’ll pay attention now,” Giovanni replied.

“Young man, this is not the first time you’ve done this. I’m afraid I’m going to have to call your mother about this. Now, will you behave?”

“*Si, Signora Despucci.*”

“*Grazie, Giovanni. Allora, class where were we? Ah, si.*”

"Giovanni!" continues his mother.

Giovanni returns, again, from his pyramid expedition in Egypt. He had almost forgotten that he was on his bed holding a book.

"*Si, mamma?*" he replies. His mother prepares dinner in the kitchen. Oregano, onion, tomato, and parmesan fill the air in the apartment.

"Paolo just rang for you. Go see what he wants."

Like a youthful cat, he leaps from his bed, darts to his bedroom door, opens it, and runs towards the front door of the apartment that he and his mother share. He passes his mother in the kitchen. She stands over a boiling pot of water stirring fettuccini pasta and smoking an imported Marlboro. The majority of her olive skin hides under a fashionable black dress, not one of grand elegance, but sophisticated enough to appease the very style-conscious Italians. Her long curly chocolate hair, pulled back, drapes against her back.

"Giovanni, don't stay out too late," she says, wiping her hands on the apron that protects her dress, "*la cena* will be ready in a little bit."

"*Bene, mamma.*" Giovanni's right hand reaches for the doorknob, it turns, and his left grabs for the green plastic cigarette lighter on the kitchen counter before he leaves. Giovanni is now outside in his apartment floor's hallway.

It is a very dreary hallway. Giovanni has hated it for years. Drab blue-gray paint, which is now starting to chip, and the smells of vinegar and cough medicine fill the hallway. Even in the beauty of day the windowless hall reminds you of the sparse lighting the catacombs had, the ones the first Christian converts used to hold worship. He hated the color, the smell, the darkness—it was repulsive. Giovanni despised the hallway so much, he would always run to the end of it, race frantically down the stairs, and bolt out of the building's door.

He inhales deeply, and shoves his mother's lighter in his back pocket. His feet kick and he sprints down the hallway. Doors of the other apartments shoot towards Giovanni's vicinity from the quick pace of Giovanni's feet against their fixed position. This frantic dash has always jump-started his mind. Once, it was a dash to escape haunting ghosts. Another time, it was a dash to flee Gethsemane. Today, it is a dash towards the opponent's goal in the championship game of *il calcio*. The black and white checker ball bounces beneath Giovanni's feet; a win for the Perugia team is in sight.

"Forza!" the crowd shouts, "Forza!"

Giovanni makes his way down the field. The sweat drips from his face. The championship is close.

"Forza!"

The flickering forty-watt light bulbs in the hallway become the lights of photographer's cameras, itching to capture the greatest player the sport has ever known.

"Forza!"

Giovanni can taste victory.

"Forza!"

Victory is at hand!

"Giovanni!" his mother shouts, peering out of the door, "stop running! The neighbors have been complaining."

Giovanni's feet come to a slow, defeated stroll. The field and photographers are gone.

"Si, *mamma*," he mutters, dejected.

Giovanni reaches the stairs, follows them down, and exits out the front door of the apartment building. The crisp air and sunshine welcomes the young visionary, as he is now free from the confined drudgery of school, work, and home. His friend Paolo sits on a stone wall built ten feet in front of

poictesme

the apartment building, his legs kicking impatiently back and forth atop it. His eyes freely roam his surroundings. He wears a worn Fiat t-shirt and dark blue Levis.

"Ciao," says Giovanni.

"Ciao," responds Paolo, turning his head. He kicks off of the wall and lightly jogs towards his friend.

"Why did you ring?"

Paolo pauses for a moment, then steps closer to Giovanni.

"I want to see that girl you told me about," he whispers.

Two months ago, Giovanni mentioned to Paolo that a guy living next to Giovanni's building was dating a girl. Every day, when she got off work, she would come over to his apartment and the two of them would go at it. Tenants in both buildings could not escape their noise.

"They're like a clock," Giovanni had told Paolo, "every day at 6:30 in the evening." This had perked Paolo's fascination.

"I don't know," says Giovanni, hesitantly.

"C'mon. *Please*," says Paolo, "it's just about 6:30 now."

Giovanni glances around him, thinking. Desperation fills Paolo's eyes.

"All right."

Paolo smiles and makes the sign of the cross.

"Stop doing that," says Giovanni, "God's not trying to help you see a naked girl."

"I think he is. Plus, I prayed to Saint Francis today."

"You're crazy," says Giovanni, leading Paolo next door.

"Where does this guy live, exactly?" asks Paolo, looking at

the five-story yellow stucco building adjacent to Giovanni's.

"The second floor."

"How are we going to sneak into his apartment?"

"We're not."

"We're *not*?"

"No, we can climb a trellis just under his window and look in his bedroom."

The thought that he would finally see a naked girl was almost too much for Paolo. He had come close a few times. Once, while at his friend Alberto's home, he managed to get a sneak-peak at his older sister, Monica. She had awoken from an afternoon nap, completely unaware that her brother Alberto had invited one of his friends over. She began to remove her clothing for a shower.

As she was undressing, Paolo walked by her room on his way to the bathroom. He glanced to his left and noticed Monica in growing stages of undress. Paolo made the sign of the cross and moved closer. Just as she was about to remove her bra—and as Paolo's eyes widened—a quick chill came over her and she glanced at her bedroom doorway behind her. She shrieked upon noticing Paolo standing there.

"*Che cazzo fai?*" she screamed, slamming her door.

Paolo frantically scrambled to come up with a response. An "I'm sorry," or an "excuse me" would have been most appropriate, but a polite *grazie* was the only thing that came to mind. Paolo heard a muffled curse word coming out of the lips of Alberto's sister behind the door.

Paolo *knew* that the Virgin Mother had caused that chill. The Madonna, it seemed, had a vendetta against Paolo seeing a naked girl. It was Paolo's reasoning that Mary didn't want him to objectify her gender. Despite this feminist rationale, Paolo was determined to use any spiritual resource available

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to realize his goal.

Giovanni leads Paolo to the side of his building. Dating back to the 1920's, the yellow stucco building sits on a slope near the top of a hill. Giovanni's mother once mentioned that, the Etruscans founded Perugia, and they built cities atop hills and mountains as a means to provide defense against enemies.

Poking out of the right side of the building is a fence, ivory colored, roughly three feet in height, which extends seven feet out from the side, and moves to the back of the building, surrounding a garden. Signor and Signora Gustaba live on the first floor and tend the garden. They grow tomatoes and basil leaves. Seven-foot Mediterranean trees, the tall and thin kind, extend from the ground against the fence portion that is directly behind the apartment building. Beyond the fences lies a mountainous landscape stretching for miles. Waves of green flow in a panoramic view. On the left side of the panorama, five miles away, is a quarter-size white dot sitting against the lush green mountains—the historic city of Assisi.

Giovanni and Paolo enter the garden quietly. Mr. and Mrs. Gustaba do not tolerate trespassers. A month ago, Signora Gustaba had caught Giovanni, and chased him out with her broom.

They cautiously step into the forbidden territory and make their move towards the right side of the building. They both hear a loud television. Turning the corner, they glance into the windows on the first floor, where they see Signor Gustaba watching an *il calcio* match.

Quietly, the two boys make their way to the right side of the building, facing the opposite direction of Giovanni's own home, where Signora Gustaba had a white trellis built. It stands nine feet tall with green ivy snaking its way around the white structure.

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closet reaches towards the ceiling.

It is suddenly dark, stormy, and scary. The wind howls. The rain pours. Romeo breathes heavily, but silently.

He has traced the most powerful General of the Evil-Eye race to this peculiar planet—Earth. Here, he intends to strike. He had already destroyed their ghastly leader in outer space, but General Duma, the Evil-Eye Army's second-in-command, was not going to let an opportunity to obtain power pass him by. It was here, in this Earthly room, where Duma held secret meetings to begin his campaign to rule the galaxy. Romeo waits in secret outside his window, listening and watching.

Romeo has taken along his guide who knows this planet well. His name is Paolo. A rather unusual creature, thought Romeo, yet most Earthlings are. Paolo had long desired to see another of his species free of clothing, a bit peculiar, but earthly ways are strange. Romeo had informed Paolo that his wish might be possible, as General Duma had an affinity for Earth women and—

They hear a noise from somewhere outside the bedroom, but within the apartment. Paolo and Giovanni listen. The noise grows louder. Voices.

Romeo smiles. Duma will be had tonight.

Both Paolo and Giovanni duck beneath the window to avoid detection. They listen intently. The voices become more audible, yet they can't decipher what they are saying. Paolo begins a silent prayer for Saint Francis's intercession.

"Baby, I missed you so much," a female voice says.

"Not as much as I missed you, *mia tesora*," the male responds.

Giovanni and Paolo hear sounds of kissing and sense that the two are now in the bedroom. There's a sudden rush of air, followed by a muted crash. The two spies slowly raise their

heads above the window and see the man and woman atop the bed, arms and legs intertwined. Paolo senses that his time has finally come. Saint Francis has not let him down.

The man now sits on his knees and pulls of his shirt. He unbuttons the blouse of the girl and she slips it off.

"*Ti amo*. I love you like the ocean its water," says General Duma.

"Aw, baby. That's so sweet," his vile lover responds.

Romeo fights back the urge to vomit. General Duma is in the company of the most vile woman the Earth had ever known—*Signora Despucci*! He remembers his plan. Romeo moves his right hand over his front Adidas pocket and makes sure he has his weapon. He does. He moves his left hand into his back pocket and pulls out his mother's cigarette lighter. A smile chisels itself on Romeo's lips.

Paolo, having yet to blink since peering into the window, gazes intently on the couple. The woman removes her bra. Paolo's eyes widen. He makes the sign of the cross as red grows on his face. The man kisses the girl, then, slowly, moves his kissing to her bare breasts, then, slowly, to her navel, then, slowly—

"*Gesu Christo*," says Paolo aloud.

"What was that?" asks the girl.

Giovanni and Paolo's heads quickly duck below the window ledge, Giovanni thrusting his right palm against Paolo's mouth.

"I didn't hear anything," they hear the man respond.

Romeo cannot afford to have his guide blow his cover. These humans are weak, he thinks, if I am to move on the General, I had better do it soon.

"I thought I heard something," says the girl.

A silent pause, then Romeo and Paolo hear kissing noises, and then moans of pleasure. The crisis has been averted.

Giovanni releases his palm from Paolo's mouth, then reaches over and punches Paolo in the arm.

"Be quiet," he whispers.

"*Mi dispiace*," Paolo whispers back.

The two boys wait, and then slowly raise their heads. The man and woman are now both naked. The woman embraces the man on top of her and guides him as they switch positions. She now straddles him at his waist and arcs her back.

Romeo glances over to his guide. His human lust raises the risk of another outbreak. The surprise attack must be soon.

"*Mia tesora. Ti amo*," says the woman. Her movements up and down become quicker.

Romeo reaches into his pocket.

"I love you," responds the man.

He pulls out the weapon.

"I could die here," says the woman. She moans. The bedpost bangs against the wall.

His other hand cradles his mother's lighter.

"Faster," says the man.

He quickly pushes his thumb down against the red igniter switch.

"Oh," moans the man, "You're going to make me come."

Romeo draws his weapon closer to the lighter. General Duma and Signora Despucci will soon meet their end.

Paolo glances to his left. "Giovanni, what are you *doing*?" he whispers, frantically.

"I'm stopping General Duma."

"What? No, not now. They haven't spotted us yet."

Romeo ignites his weapon and throws it into the room.

"I'm coming!" the man screams.

"Run!" Giovanni shouts, quickly positioning himself to descend the trellis.

Firecrackers shoot off in the man's bedroom. *Bang...Pop...Pop...Pop.* The woman's screams are deafened by the little explosions detonating in the apartment.

"*Che cazzo?* What the fuck?" shouts the man.

Giovanni and Paolo race down the trellis and retrace the path leading into the garden.

"Why did you do that?" asks Paolo, running, still hearing firecrackers popping.

I have put an end to General Duma, thinks Romeo, and the wench Despucci, once and for all.

The two boys run past the sight of Signor Gustaba, oblivious to the ensuing chaos outside his apartment, still watching *il calcio* on the television. The boys exit out of the garden, coming to a rest at the front of Giovanni's building.

"Why did you do that?" Paolo asks again, breathing hard from their run, firecrackers falling silent, but the woman's screams still heard, "We could've watched for a little longer."

"Naw," replies Giovanni casually, "it was boring. Besides I need to go eat dinner."

Paolo's head slumps towards the ground. Undoubtedly, the Holy Mother had caught wind of what he had been doing. Despite the help that Francis provided, not even a Saint could match the Holy Virgin. Paolo knew it was going to take a lot of praying to get back on the good side of Mary.

"Fine," says Paolo, "I guess so."

"I'll see you in school tomorrow?" asks Giovanni.

"Si. *Domani.*" Paolo begins his walk back home,

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muttering a Hail Mary prayer.

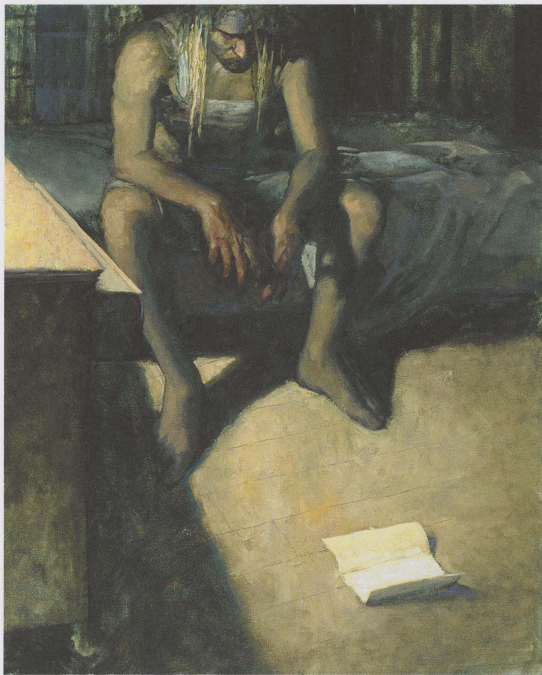
Giovanni enters his apartment building. He ascends the stairs. He opens the door that puts him in his third story hallway: the smell of vinegar and cough medicine.

Sweat drips from his brow. Grass stains cover his shorts and shirt.

"Forza!" the crowd shouts, "Forza!"



JESSICA YEAGER, *Burning*, 24" x 36", acrylic on canvas.



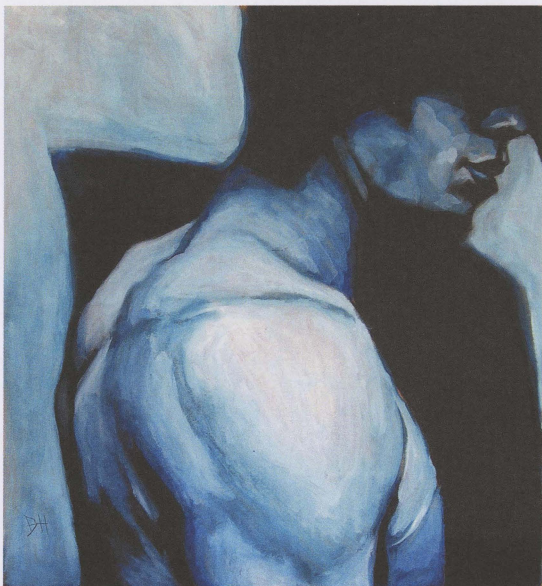
DANIEL ROBBINS, *The Letter*, 36" x 28", oil on canvas.



DANIEL ROBBINS, *Voodoo*, 24" x 30", oil on canvas.



KAITLIN VAUGHAN, *Apparition*, 11" x 16", black and white photography.



DANIEL HAYMAN, *The Usual Source*, 16" x 17", oil on board.



NATALIE STEVENS, *Taken*, 2005, 46" x 46", charcoal on panel.



KRISTY SEVERIN, *Blowing in the Wind*, 4' x 3', acrylic on canvas.



AUDRA WRISLEY, *Bourne Supremacy*, 8" x 10", black and white photography



AUDRA WRISLEY, *I Rule*, 8" x 10", black and white photography



ERIC WOLINSKY, *Dream*, 600 x 1000 pixels, digital illustration.



JEFF LASSAHN, *Two Soldiers after the destruction of the Iraqi city of Najaf*, 4' x 8', mixed media on found plywood.



JESSICA YEAGER, *Silence* '29, 11" x 14", charcoal on paper.

Justin Hunt

La Victoire

it is that she is beautiful
even faceless, armless
how she is running to flee Paris
her gown barely hanging on

when an old Greek
put down his psomi and walking
stick, threw his fisherman's cap to
the floor of the Louvre
and while leaping onto the Lady's prow
his arms wrapping the great bosom
his screaming *let us fly back*
to Samothrace

i could not forgive her wings
for staying their stone cast
as he stepped down and went calmly
back to the quiet streets
sighno 'mi, sighno 'mi

Catherine Ennis

Confession

Liverpool, 1940

The boy died from shrapnel to the head while he was playing marbles. Sister Anne scooped him up into the long skirt of her white apron and carried him away before the other children even noticed that he had fallen. The children were accustomed to the scream of bombs and the wailing of air raid sirens; they had been in London. They didn't stop playing.

She carried him into the small kitchen where some of the other sisters were having morning tea. They stood up silently when Anne unfolded the reddening apron onto the table and let her burden roll softly out.

"I told you that something bad was going to happen—I felt it, I did," Anne said, gesturing at the boy. "I tried to keep them near me but there's so many of them, and—"

Sister Philomena made the sign of the cross over the small bundle and whispered, "May the Lord pardon thee whatever sins or faults thou hast committed."

They buried him in the pine forest behind the convent. Anne listened to the wind in the tops of the trees and breathed in the salty sea air.

*"Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat
ies . . ."*

When Sister Philomena threw the last clod of dirt on the grave, it was almost as if the boy hadn't died.

"Good night, children," Anne said to the two identical rows of white-sheeted beds in the dormitory. She stood still for a moment and listened to the small coughs and sighing noises. Some of the children were already asleep. The large window at

the end of the room was half open, and a soft dusky light came in through the sheer curtain. Anne gently closed the door and walked down the long and narrow hallway to her own small room. There was a bed, a white dresser, a nightstand with a small statue of the Virgin, a slowly dripping faucet and a framed portrait of Mother Margaret Taylor, Foundress of their order, the Poor Servants of the Mother of God. Mother Margaret had suffered from diabetes in her later years and in this portrait, her clear and kind eyes looked out from among fatty folds.

She kneeled beside her low bed and clasped her hands together. "Dear Father, please help me to understand--" There was a small and hesitant knock on the door.

"Come in," Anne said.

A little boy in a white nightshirt stood uncertainly, holding the doorknob in one small hand. "Sister?" he asked. He'd crossed his hands behind his back and he was looking down at the floor; Anne could tell that he was afraid he was in trouble for being out of bed.

"Yes, little one," she said, holding out her arms to him.

"What happened to Gerald?" he asked, not coming through the doorway.

Anne flinched. "Gerald?"

"Where'd he go?"

"He went to be with his parents. They sent for him, George."

"He wasn't in his bed," George said.

"Just be joyful for him, and remember to thank God that he's home safely."

George looked at her for a long moment and then smiled. "I'm glad he's okay."

"Let's go back to bed."

“Sister—when will my parents come for me?”

Anne paused to lick her dry lips. “Be patient”—she realized her voice was shaking—“and keep praying, and you’ll be home before you know it.”

Anne walked with him back to the dormitory and then went to the kitchen. She stared at the crumbs on the table where Gerald had lain just that morning.

She made the sign of the cross and knelt by the table. “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. If You have seen fit to take him from me as punishment for my sin of the flesh, I trust Your wisdom. But, Lord, please receive his soul, though the ground was unconsecrated. My God, who art all good and deserving of all my love, I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to do penance, and to avoid the near occasion of sin.”

The convent was quiet now. Outside, it was getting dark.

Danny Carmichael

she thought she could tell, and maybe she can, but really she can't.

I watched over him. As a friend, I suppose. But I had lost track of friendliness to habit and I no longer knew why I stood by the door, peeking in now and again, bringing food, occasionally trying to coax him into talking.

He had been like this since before his father died, rendered motionless by life or by death, or love perhaps. That was important, he thought: the 'before'. He would not say why. He was the great antithesis to all the movement around him, for everything needs its antithesis.

He was not himself, but he was not in such great contrast to whom he would have been. As he explained it, 'It's tricky.' He was a creature of logic, an uncommon creature. A prisoner of love perhaps, which he once obsessed over, but moreso a prisoner of the ignorance that love encourages. 'Love,' they say, 'is the great enemy of reason,' they say. And they have a great many other sayings besides that.

Life had rendered him motionless; logic had rendered him impotent to reality; love had rendered him completely. He was, simply, a thing quite rendered.

i

A child comes from hugging, hugging from love. If there is no love, as I cannot find there is, certainly there cannot have been a hug for me to come from. I fear I am far less existent than I thought.

And so it was that Ferdie ended up alone. He lay in his bed, more awake than asleep, but still very neither of both. He was trying to think of the word for where he was, between states. He settled on 'here'—it'll be somewhat poetic, if a bit

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vague, he thought.

He was certain he hadn't dreamed.

The ceiling dripped a little at the edge of the comforter, near his feet; rain, perhaps. Coming in, he thought.

His features pressed inward toward the center of his face, sourly, as he woke up more, then relaxed. He could tell the sun was out. He would not go out again today.

'Every day,' his father had said, 'it gets a little and a little harder.' Ferdie had found this; wondered if it weren't a self-fulfilling prophecy. His father was dead some years now.

Ferdie remembered parts of his father's face, but could not construct the picture wholly in his head any longer. He considered this important.

'Yes, I have kissed a girl.' It was strange to hear his voice, he thought.

'Yes, I can sing pretty.' He scritch'd at his nose.

'Yes, I will go to the party with you.' At first he thought, no it will be a little and a little easier every day and then he said, 'Yes I find you charming' and no, that is wrong, he realized and, no, it will be harder every day.

'Yes, I know the answer to that question.'

i

He would not say why. He would not say. I had only imagination as a viewfinder into his motivations. I had only our few memories and the static of the ongoing dialogue currently passing between us:

'Ferdie? How are you feeling? Do you feel alright? Good. You want food today? You want to go outside? You want a hug? Ferdie, please. Do you know what's wrong? Can you tell me please, Ferdie?'

Babies cause this great confusion before they learn to communicate. I have given him everything and I still have

not figured out what he wants. I know I will never. It is not a *thing* he wants. It is not something, I think, that even if it were a thing, I could give him.

i

I sat upright in bed, not realizing I had been dreaming. My body felt strange, as though I had just dropped into it, which is why I jolted just now. Yes, I am fine and I can sit up without help. All is very well for me.

Yes, I have kissed a girl. She was young and she was sweet to me when I was younger and sweeter to people:

'What do you mean you don't know how to kiss?' Her face was rumpled.

'I have never done it before and I have seen it in movies and I would like to, but I don't know how.'

'Oh. Okay. I have seen it in movies too.'

Which is when she began kissing me. Some part of me has never stopped kissing her. But the part of me that I am now has. Like that word again where I am. No man's land. That's not where I am, no. Ecstatic. Stasis. Status. States.

i

The phone rang and Ferdie could not think of the word again and did not feel 'here' any longer. His body or his mind was strange, surrounding or surrounded by the other. He knew many words for that, he thought.

i

No, No I have never: done that.

'Because I have never done it so I don't know how, but I have read about it and I'd like to try.'

'I'm not quite sure I know what you're asking.'

'I want to love. To love some *thing*, I guess.'

'I understand your question, I just don't understand how quite you want me to help you answer it.'

'Well, you helped me before...'

'I know. I was nine. And kissing is concrete.'

'I'm not sure...'

'Kissing is a *thing* that you can *do*; it's concrete.'

'So also is loving a thing that you can do.'

'Yes. It is. But you can tell when I'm kissing you.'

'Will you love me?'

'I'

Which is when she began kissing me again; I became the part of me that never stopped kissing her.

i

When she said 'I' and didn't say what she.

And I realized that was tricky. I did not myself hardly ever know what I. And sometimes I would say something that I without ever really knowing if it was true or not.

I will say I am hungry because hungry is a concrete thing that I can feel. Hungry is a small pain inside of people that makes them want to eat. I have a pain inside me that makes me want to eat; I am hungry. So I will eat. Many things are pains that make us want to do things. Sometimes there is a pain inside a person that makes them want to bleed. I do not have this pain right now, so I will not bleed. Also, there is the same pain in a person when touching fire that makes them want to bleed, but they do not bleed. They burn.

In some books, love is a pain that makes people want to love some thing.

i

'Was that love?'

'No, that was kissing.'

'Will you love me?'

'I don't think that I will, Ferdie.'

'Is love a better thing than kissing is?' She did not say.
'Ray? Rachel.'

'I' She said it again. And I still did not know what she.

'Have you ever loved a thing?'

'No. No, I have never done that.'

There were many things to love, I guessed, but only her
to kiss.

'Your eyes are closed.'

'Yes.'

'Did you know it was me you were kissing?'

She did not kiss me again except for the part of me that
she never stopped kissing.

i

There are three men:

The first knows pain because he is bleeding.

The second is bleeding but does not know pain.

The third man knows pain but does not know he is bleeding.

'How will I know?'

'I don't know. They say you just know.'

'Because it's not concrete?'

'Yes.'

'Because it is not a thing that you can tell when you're doing
it to some thing or when some thing is doing it to you.'

She did not say it, but I knew she did not then know
what she. I didn't know what she either. I knew that I was
in love. Or it was easy to say so. I had only to say the word
to conjure her image. Somehow I knew the image appearing
from the word did not equal the experience. I did not heed
this knowledge. I was threading my love through the pores in

her image and losing track of whether it was the word first that conjured the image or the other way around.

I knew that I was one of the men, who maybe all three were in love because it is possible to be bleeding and in love too. I have found this.

After she was quiet, she said, 'The problem with love is that it's never concrete; you never know. Kissing is so much easier.'

i

Ferdie had laid back down.

'Yes I was dreaming.' He did not know whether or not he had been, but he found it easy to say that he had. He was quiet for very long, trying to get back to the place between states which was definitely not 'here' he decided, but now he remembered what else and what more importantly it was not.

'Concrete.' It was a structure he appreciated. It made reality easier to gauge. And yet, for all that, he still appreciated a certain amount of uncertainty.

'I' He did not say what he was. He was in the bed. He was laying there in it and he was trying to be quiet enough to find not 'here' and not 'concrete' and his quiet was not helping him.

'I' And his not quiet was not helping him.

He was no longer concerned with love and he was no longer concerned with not being able to picture his father's whole face.

'I' He said it again; he did not know what he.

'Yes I am concerned with love.' He was concerned with love. He may have still been concerned with his father's face.

'I' He was still very much concerned with his father's face and not being able to picture it wholly 'am going outside.' He was standing up to go outside, concerned.

'Concrete.' Concrete. But not unconcerned.

'I am going outside' he said aloud. He would go outside today, he thought.

i

It wasn't life or death or love or living that had done it: it was motion itself that had rendered him its antithesis. It seemed his quietude allowed for whole cities to drown in the chaos of their own noise and movement. And for every shout, he seemed further and further away. I wondered if maybe, while cities slept, he ran around his bed; wondered if I took to my own bed, he would stand up and tap his heels together. I wondered very much of him.

i

I stood by the door as he walked to it. He grabbed the handle and looked at me again. His gaze was devastating. I wanted to grab him into me so hard and hug him. I wanted him to kiss me. I didn't know why I wanted him to kiss me.

he

'Goodbye, Ferdie.'

'Oh, goodbye,' I said, pausing for a moment to look first at Rachel and then through the door. The grass grew tall and was not green, but was burnt yellow by the maddening sun, which weighed its heat heavily upon the furred and flowered tips of each stalk. A slight breeze came up, carrying the scent of almond and honeysuckle into her nostrils and mine and causing the heavy heads of the grass to nod gently. And then it was all so still.

i

Coming in, I thought.

I will grab him so hard and kiss him, I thought.

i

But I could not move.

In a Tavern Garden near Prague

He had amassed broken scraps and limbs
Against the near wall. Heavy parts too old to work - for
Him: evidence of the life of gathered dead - the almost complete
Relief for the crippled foundation. He shifts his stance,
Puts his weight to battered machinery
He cannot lift himself.

It doesn't matter that he went so far once
As to call it his own, nothing could
Bring this abandoned place back to life, he could do
Less and less himself. He clears jammed machines
Throws unassembled parts in the river. Of course he remembers

Nothing was ever made newer for this. For him
The spring is heavy, lifting
From the heavy ground, boughs
Still amidst explosions. And life
Is fuming now, trees that hissed
Undead out in the exhausted city.

Sometimes he notices how pollinated
The earth has become beneath him, and not minding
The stain on his worn clothes- the traffic
Forgotten - pushes aside the litter, and drops
His heavy body in the grass. He is feeling now almost
Ready to tear off those old clothes, a few more excess
Pounds to shed and he will have been long overdue.

John Bowers

Simon Dark Was Good

Simon Dark was a young boy, five years old and some odd days. Simon was the sunshine of two God-fearing, actively practicing Catholics. So with that entailed a unique perception of the world through the eyes of this young boy as he tried to grasp the world around him with all the knowledge he had gathered in his short life. Simon knew that good was tied with God, and bad with the devil. Although, it was too early for him to really understand what's good, and subsequently what's bad. But Simon knew that he had to be good to go to heaven, and therefore good and bad were all important. When Simon thought of Heaven he envisioned a delightful place where his mother told him he could see his granddad. Simon had never met his granddad, but with the reminiscing his parents and the company that they seldom entertained endlessly shared in, Simon never questioned that he was a wonderful man since he was a part of that wonderful past. His parents seemed to think very highly of the past while looking at the future contemptuously, but since Simon had little past to think of he mostly disregarded this notion.

Simon was wholly preoccupied in understanding what was good and what was bad around him. He decided that spiders were bad because they looked scary, but he wasn't sure whether their webs were bad or not. He liked the way they looked, so in that way they were good. But when his mother would accidentally catch her hand in a web she would scream. So in that way they were bad.

Simon thought cookies and cake were good since they were so delicious, but his mother told him they were bad for him, that he could not indulge himself with sweets. Simon

wasn't sure what indulge meant, but if his mother said they were bad they must be, even if they tasted good.

Simon loved the ocean. He liked playing in the waves. He would challenge the ocean to send a wave that would knock him down, and when the ocean failed he would jump in triumphant excitement over the ocean. Often though, blinded with victory, Simon would be knocked down by the following wave. Sometimes when he would be knocked down by a wave, the water would pull him into the ocean. Simon rather liked this feeling. Although sometimes the pull would be so strong he couldn't withstand it and the water would carry him a ways out. Simon was sure that since he was so concerned with understanding what's good and with being good, that he was good, so he knew God would take care of him and gladly accept him in heaven. So he thought that maybe the water was God trying to take him to heaven. This theory was struck down though when his dad came running towards him and grabbed him out of the water. His dad was upset, telling him that he couldn't go far out in the water or he'd be taken out to sea. Since his dad was so intent on his not going out to sea, then the sea must be bad. His mom told him that if he went too far out he'd be eaten by sharks! If sharks were in the ocean and they were ready to eat him, then the ocean must be a bad place to have such poor company.

One day Simon found a bottle of bleach in the laundry closet. He opened it and spilled some on the carpet. Spills make messes, so Simon knew spills were bad since whenever his house was messy, his mom would clean it and be frustrated at how messy it was. If messes made his mom upset then they must be bad. So he put the cap back on the bottle and put the bleach away, careful to not be responsible for any more badness.

The following day though, Simon noticed that where he had spilt the bleach, the gray carpet had turned white. Simon

understood white to be synonymous with good. So he thought that apparently, bleach could turn things good.

When his mom was in the kitchen fixing a gin n' tonic, Simon ran in to get something to drink too. But in his haste to get there, Simon's feet slipped out from under him on the smooth kitchen floor due to his cottony socks. When Simon fell he repeated a word he had heard his dad say when he once stubbed his toe. His mom whipped around and scorned him for using such filthy language. After which Simon concluded that the socks he was wearing were bad for making him fall so easy, and that he apparently had badness inside of him for being able to make his mom react so quickly and viciously to something he had said. This worried Simon awfully. He couldn't sleep that night, fretting that God may no longer love him. But then he had an idea strike that put his mind to ease and allowed him to drift peacefully to sleep.

The next day when Simon woke up, the first thing he did was return to the laundry closet. He found the bottle of bleach and removed the cap. Sure that he would make himself good again, Simon commenced to swallowing gulp after gulp of bleach. After he figured he had ingested enough, he went to the bathroom to brush his teeth before breakfast.

Once Simon joined his mom and dad at the table, he started to feel bad. He started to contemplate that maybe the bleach wasn't good. That it didn't have the power to make things good. Simon felt himself slipping away. He wanted to tell God he was sorry.

Mother

You left the upstairs door broken. The lock was faulty and the wood surrounding its handle was deformed after he had kicked it down. You never replaced the window in his room, its glass punched through by acorns he had hit at the house one fall. Blackened streaks across the ceiling over the stairs to your basement were never washed or cleaned. The stairs going to your second floor were also tainted; he had punctured the dry wall, and had covered it with scotch tape, camouflaged in color pencil. These you left untouched. They were his faults, merely physical, and easily repaired, yet you watched as he never made any effort to mend them. You witnessed selfishness so severe that it had become unconscious of its own actions. You thought that in his mindset, he never *did* these things, nor had any care to fix them. And you were right.

Your rules and boundaries had failed to put a halt to his omnipotent ideology, to him, he was never wrong and you were never right. Your influence on him had become polarized; like a magnet, you would point east and in turn, he would point west.

You saw that it was almost completely impossible for communication, and when there were no efforts made by either you or him to do so, conflict arose. How frustrated you were! It upset him greatly to see you like that, but he wouldn't sacrifice his freedom. Oh no, that's far too much for you to ask of him. Frustration had the best of you and your first born was unwinding your last thread of patience. And you wanted it to stop; you wanted him to listen. So you threw.

It didn't matter what you threw, almost any object can become a projectile in your hands. You weren't picky, because

you didn't have much time, he usually didn't stick around to find out what you had chosen. Newspapers were your favorite, and movie rentals were very effective, but not necessarily easy to find. The diversity of objects you threw astounded him, you were not discriminatory in your projectiles.

Your throws would usually fall short, or sway wide of him. Maybe deep down, you really didn't want to hurt him. Maybe you just had terrible aim. But the few times when you did land a hit, it resulted in the same effect as a miss. He would smile, and you would initially think that it was smug, a smile asking for another throw, but you saw that wasn't the case. You saw that his smile was something else, something puzzling and odd. To you, it was reverent, and somehow, contagious.

He would later tell you, that to him, you were always throwing. You tossed obnoxious toys down stairs, chucked shoes and dirty clothes into his already overpopulated room, and catapulted the family's overweight cat through the front door. You pelted recyclables into their respective bins. You heaved backpacks and camping supplies and propelled textbooks and papers into his desk while you made an effort to clean. You cast your rolling eyes upon his own on numerous occasions, pitched away countless amounts of your freedom to be with him, and speared him with your affection.

He told you that to him, you never threw out of malice, to harm and cause injury. And you feel that he is right for once. You threw because you loved him too much to see him do any wrong, to become someone you knew he didn't want to become, to grow spiteful and bitter. When you threw, he smiled.

Disregarding an Early Bedtime

The last, lingering cloud embers
of late autumn afternoon fell
to meet the encroaching dusk—
and the chill of its sunless sky.

Footfalls met pavement, cold pavement,
our feet were black-bottomed, still
bare in autumn.
The only shiver is the shiver of a
thrill—as we wander.

Flaming amethyst withered and wept
into the bare limbs of oaks.
Clasped hands, warm and clammy
with sweat—
the crisp air wrapped us
into its folds,
but we did not tug at
our sweaters.

Justin Saint Jean

Gravity

The dart hangs over Troy's head like a 26 gram Sword of Damocles, and he couldn't care less. It's held fast for months, since the Christmas party, perpetually rocketing through the plaster stratosphere of our living room ceiling, its brave crew maintaining a steadfast orbit at twelve feet. Those less accustomed to our unlikely satellite extrapolate their reactions from the standard Defense Against Thrown Items protocol—the familiar hitch and swivel of the non-dominant leg, retraction of arms, and one-eyed squint combo modeled atop the Heisman Trophy for Malcoordination. While this technique may ward off the horizontal dangers of tennis balls and citrus fruits, our vertical menace apparently warrants the addition of a shrugging sidestep, a two-count line dance choreographed to muttered blasphemies.

But not from Troy. No, he is resolute, unflappable. Some might mistake his defiance for a subtle commentary on his contempt for mortality, but I know better. The cord on his Nintendo just won't stretch any farther.

And it's not like he's just sitting there tapping buttons. It could never be that simple, not in this apartment, not with this roommate. A collector of vintage video game memorabilia, Troy has spent the last week breaking in his newest acquisition: the Power Pad. Replacing the conventional handheld controller for the original NES, the device (roughly equivalent to a hardwired Twister mat) operates on the time-honored principles of Riverdance, with the players Michael Flatleying the on-screen commands to a range of games that rarely aspire beyond the realm of track and field. Though a pioneer in the video game industry's ongoing attempt to hoodwink parents into believing in some higher potential for their products (evidenced by its abortive European marketing campaign as the "Family Fun Fitness"), the

product eventually faded into obscurity. While it is true that one can only run the 100 meters in place so many times before the novelty wears off, the real reason the "Power Pad as health revolution" failed is the simple fact that cheating was far too easy. Not even the foremost technology of 1988 could compete with the already atrophying attention spans of the American youth, who took little time in exploiting the naïveté of now-primitive pressure sensors wont to confuse the conspicuous dexterity of drumming hands for an impossibly nimble master of the mat.

Troy, forever the purist, refuses to stoop to such tactics. Even now, as dust from the dart's increasingly tenuous stronghold flakes into his damp hair, he furiously tap-dances his man toward the finish line, in sock feet.

I grope between the couch cushions for my cell phone, fishing it out along with a small handful of lint and indistinguishable crumbs that I promptly shake to the floor. I check the time, and realize I've been watching Troy dominate the Nintendo Olympics for close to two hours. God only knows how long he'd been playing by the time I got home, but it seems to me he was definitely sweating, if not already shirtless. I'll let him finish the triple jump before reminding him to hurry up and shower. Tonight is Thursday. Tonight we play darts.

We've gone out to throw darts every Thursday night since he moved in, the occasional holiday or sickness aside. As far as we are concerned, it's less a game than an institution, a rite of our cohabitation. Part of the reason we don't own a board is to keep this night sacred.

Another part is that it would inevitably lead to accusations of undue practice from both parties, charges of secret cricket sessions conducted during the other's work hours that could undermine the long-established balance of power maintained only via mutual fidelity to our tacit schedule.

Still another part of the reason is the fact that the last time we had a dart board in the house, Troy managed to lodge the aforementioned dart in the aforementioned ceiling.

This was no fewer than eight Thursdays ago, perhaps closer to ten. Since then, Troy has played every game with two darts. He refuses to use an unmatched set and therefore insists on walking to the board to retrieve a dart in the middle of each turn, of each game, week in and week out.

The distance from the toe line to the board, assuming proper measurement, is exactly seven feet, nine and one-quarter inches. Multiply that by the number of throws per game, then by number of games per weeks, and then finally the number of weeks since the Christmas party, and you'll find out exactly how many miles Troy has marched off in this manner. Subtract from this the fourteen feet it is from our living room to the ladder in the utility closet, and you'll see how many paces he has wasted.

That's not even the worst of it. The light in the kitchen's been out so long we've had to replace the batteries in the flashlight.

One of the few events for which the Power Pad possesses any protection against cheating is the triple jump. With the assistance of a gravity-based algorithm, the machine can determine when a player has stepped off the pad for an unbelievable length of time in order to fabricate a world-record jump. For such an offense, the system promptly reprimands the player by depicting his digital counterpart falling, corporal punishment rendered in 8 bits.

With his mediocre-to-average jumping skills, Troy rarely faces this threat. After his ninth series of hopping knee tucks fails to propel him beyond silver medal status, Troy resigns himself to the shower.

The bar where we play darts is called Wonderland. Chad, the owner, maintains this has nothing to do with Lewis Carroll. The name is an homage to Chad's favorite serial killer, John Holmes, who was also (in)famous for his career as an actor in pornographic films.

John Holmes is not my favorite serial killer; in fact, he's not

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even my favorite serial killer named Holmes.

H.H. Holmes (née Herman Mudgett), moved to Chicago in the years leading up to the Columbian Exposition of 1893. He found employment at a downtown pharmacy, of which he eventually assumed control after the mysterious disappearance of its owner. He then purchased the adjacent lot and began construction of a massive hotel designed to host guests of the upcoming World's Fair. Holmes obtained the work at virtually no cost by hiring and firing crews at a near-daily basis, then refusing to pay their wages. By the end of the fair, over 50 guests had gone missing and Holmes had skipped town.

Police would later find the hotel contained, among other things, rooms equipped with flamethrowers, airtight rooms with vents for poisonous gas, and a basement morgue replete with barrels of acid and quicklime pits for the disposal of bodies.

H.H. Holmes engineered what authorities would come to call the "Murder Castle." John Holmes was portrayed by Val Kilmer in the film "Wonderland."

I rarely argue this with Chad, as he is six and a half feet tall, built like a cinder block, and watches too much professional wrestling.

"Venkman is a given. That leaves three."

It's this sort of neutral conversation that keeps my mind off the fact that I'm not through 19s yet and Troy's already 54 points up. Asshole.

I loose my last dart, then stalk to the board to retrieve them before Troy can remind me I don't need to hit any 3s in this game. This is one of his favorite jokes. He's already used it once tonight, but I wouldn't put it above him to try it again.

When I turn around, Troy is concentrating a little too hard on the closed captioning of the TV suspended above the bar. I wonder if he's taking pity on me.

I'd rather be mocked. I prompt him again.

"Winston, Egon, and Ray."

The challenge of naming the original Ghostbusters proves too much for Troy, and he returns to the toe line.

He masquerades at aiming, squinting one eye while jabbing the dart frantically in the general direction of his target. He reminds me of acupuncture. Voodoo.

"Ray Stantz," he says while tossing the first dart.

A clean 20, but we're both already closed.

"Egon-"

He holds the "ah" sound while checking the board, tracing its visual perimeter with the tip of his dart.

"Spangler."

A bit of a lob, the dart wobbles noticeably before dropping in for a 19. It hangs almost parallel to the board, a reticent suicide jumper clinging to the ledge, but it does not fall.

"Spengler," I correct him, only a little too quickly.

"Spengler," he agrees, as if I needed the validation.

In all fairness, it's not the time it takes for him to select and retrieve a dart to re-throw that bothers me. It is the anticipation, like the long and worried calm between hiccups. Or the way people with close friends who stutter eventually learn to flinch a half-second in advance. Too easily does the threat of arrhythmia become an uncomfortable rhythm all its own.

He's back to the line now, perforating the dartboard in effigy with each twitch of his wrist.

"Who's left, Winston?" he asks, not so much to ask as to declare.

I affirm. He throws.

"I've got nothing," he claims.

Nothing except another double 17. This is getting out of

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hand.

Eager to keep the focus off the increasingly lopsided scoreboard, I call out over my shoulder.

"Chaddy, what was Winston the Ghostbuster's last name?"

A voice pummels me from behind. He'd been directly behind me in my blind spot, tending bar. The last place I tend to look for Chad is anywhere near work to be done.

"That would be Zeddemore, Winston Zeddemore."

He enunciates like a game show host, sustaining the last syllable long enough for those playing along at home to slap their forehead in disgust at their own ignorance— '*Man, I knew that one!*' Chad hosts trivia at the bar on Tuesday nights. His practice has been paying off.

All I know is that I'm down 88 points and need another beer. I don't even bother to phrase it in the form of a question.

The way in which Chad's massive frame canopies the opposite end of the bar is pure scalar farce, a comic device drawn on by American contemporaries Chris Farley (*Tommy Boy*, jacket) and Adam Sandler (*Billy Madison*, urinal). In fact, were there any credence to the various stories of European nations dictating the legal drinking age by the ability to see over the bar, a foreign birth for Chad might have directly precipitated the world's first case of self-induced fetal alcohol syndrome.

I'm less than halfway through attempting to relate this insight to Troy before I realize how little sense I am making. He agrees readily, probably thankful he didn't have to tell me himself, and turns his attention elsewhere.

Unwilling to surrender such an obvious stroke of genius, I scramble to commit its core elements to memory for later revision. Too quickly, Chad is upon me.

"So where's your girlfriend?"

I halt, not so much because the question is unfamiliar as

for the fact that usually when he asks, the term “girlfriend” is in reference to Troy. As Troy is seated next to me, I can only assume he means Libby.

“She’s not my girlfriend, Chad.” My measured monotone is a thin defense against sounding like an exasperated high school student, blushing and cornered at the dinner table. “We hung out a couple times.”

Libby is short for Liberty. For this, some might mistake her conspicuous absence from this story for a subtle commentary on my personal feelings of entrapment. As far as I know, this is entirely coincidental.

A man of inscrutable logic, Chad would almost certainly agree.

“What’s wrong with you? She was cute, aside from the whole talking out of the side of her head deal.”

Oh.

“The what?” I feign incredulity, not really sure whose honor I’m defending here—mine or hers.

“You know.”

And in case I don’t know, he purses his lips halfway, leaving one side open, then shifts his chin to exaggerate the effect.

“Like this,” he mumbles, a Muppet in disrepair, before making an event of stretching and realigning his facial muscles so as to speedily recover from this uncommon strain. “She looked like every cartoon version of Al Capone.”

Funny.

And then out of nowhere, Troy’s back in it.

“No, man. What she looked like is a Snork.”

Troy then makes the same face as Chad did, more or less, with the addition of a crooked finger resting atop his head.

Snorks are basically Smurfs, except for the fact they are multicolored and live under water. Troy’s crooked finger is meant

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to be a breathing tube.

Hilarious. No, really.

"I mean when you kissed her, did you have to aim for the ear or what?"

That would have been Chad, as Troy is too busy singing the Snorks theme song to contribute:

"Come along with the Snorks. Sing a song with the Snorks."

And so forth.

Once things have escalated to this level, there are but few ways to stop them.

"Haha, yeah," I begin, innocuously enough. "But you know, what she really looks like—"

Pause for a sip. They both lean in.

"—is a stroke victim."

Hold for applause.

Chad thinks he hears someone calling for his tab, and Troy's phone may or may not be ringing.

And I can't help but laugh, because, come on—Snorks are funny.

When we get home we have to park three blocks away, because street cleaning is on Friday mornings and Troy never learned how to parallel park on the left.

At the end of our alley, someone has tied four half-deflated Mylar balloons to a dumpster. The slack in the ribbon suggests their contempt for gravity has become merely a force of habit, their enthusiasm long since leaked. These balloons wouldn't be out of place at a funeral. Congratulations on your downsizing. Get well, my terminal friend.

"Hey, you got a cig?" Troy asks.

"No."

"You sure?"

"Even if I did, I don't have the time for it."

Understandably, this confused Troy. So I continued.

"I don't have the time to stand around and watch you smoke just so I can wax poetic about sinewy tendrils of smoke, or glowing flakes of ash, or whatever other horseshit, for the next half a page. Leave that to people with nothing to say. I'm trying to tell a story here."

"Christ." He's still patting his pockets, in hopes of a forgotten pack. They're still empty. "You call this a story?"

"You don't?"

"Come on. You watched me play video games, we had a couple beers and threw some darts." He ticks these off on his fingers, then waves them in my face — *three fingers does not a story make.*

"Sometimes that's what people do." Even I know this is weak, so I try again. "Maybe this is just the beginning."

"Of?"

Probably should have thought that one through.

"Look," he continues, rubbing the heel of his hand against a drooping eye. "If you really want to talk about this, let's go up to the Village and grab some—"

"No. Absolutely not. No coffee, no diners."

"Technically it's a café."

"It's filler."

After brief consideration, Troy only shakes his head, conceding.

And I begin to wonder how many half-inflated balloons it would take to float the dumpster away, off this block, out of the city.

Liar

can you take me
to the bathroom
she said
I'm scared to go alone.
reached her hand paint stained
up to me.
so I hold it.

the world outside is burning.
flames rise for the moments
like ghosts will
standing straight high
and dancing,
silently blowing kisses
to the clouds
terrifying me with the
stars replaced by
ash bricks falling
slowly
crashing delicate
on rooftops

and I walk with her
nervous, stepping fast and
suddenly she fought to keep up
her coughing wet parched
hallways tangled smokey
and thick
and she
coughs again.

Are you all
right? Can I get you
water
while we're out
in between gasps searching the
innocent air
she asked
if god burned
would we die.

I held her hand tighter
took her to the restroom
and got her cold water-
told her
I don't think so
dear.
it won't work that way
at all.
and walked her back
to take her seat
and smell the
ash crushed
softly
on the sidewalk.

Countdown

I can see the sunset in my mind's eye while we drive east and I sleep in the passenger seat of the beat-up Honda Graham bought for five hundred dollars from the old woman he's lived next door to for the past seven years. It used to be her son's, but when he moved off to college and stayed put in a city he didn't grow up in, she decided to sell it. Graham's been driving it for six months now and it hasn't stopped running, so we decided now was as good a time as any to drive away from the run-down houses we were renting a block apart and calling home.

We ignored the fact that our phones were probably ringing by now with the calls from our manager, but we'd both been in the same dead end job for five years, so ultimately our best interests didn't lie in sticking around.

Let's go, Graham had said, let's just fucking drive until we run out of gas and refill and then drive even fucking further.

My afternoon was empty, so I opened the passenger side door of his car and sat down on the worn seat while he started the engine and pulled away from my block blasting some godawful crap I'd never heard but he probably thought was some kind of amazing new stuff. I turned it down and we hit the highway only a few blocks from where we lived.

I open my eyes to find a red pickup beside us, with some girl driving it with her windows down and the wind whipping her dark hair around her darker eyes. I catch her glance and she gives me a smile I can return: one that's soft and satisfied, like she's doing the same thing we are but alone, which really makes her braver and better than we could ever be.

She stays next to us for four miles before she gets off at an exit number I miss and Graham says something I don't hear because I've got the window down, just listening to the wind on the road and letting my hair cover my face melodramatically.

I roll the window up and Graham repeats himself, telling me we're down to half a tank from the full one we started on, like it's an exciting milestone we should be celebrating. I ignore him and roll the window back down and let the air rush in at seventy miles an hour.

I pull a plastic green lighter out of my pocket and start toying with it while Graham sits back and steers with one hand in his lap, the other only using two fingers to hold the wheel. He suddenly sits straight up and honks the horn three times in an attempt to reignite the spark that got us on the road to begin with, but he only makes me drop my lighter and strain my back when I lean forward to pick it up off the debris-laden mat in front of me.

Graham leans back again and says we're finally fucking doing something with our lives. I just shake my head and put the lighter back in my pocket. He passes a truck hauling frozen foods and turns on his headlights as the sun behind us dips lower, and the cars coming towards us on the other side of the barrier start to do the same.

We're down to a quarter tank, he says, still going strong.

I close my eyes and try to sleep again. Graham had woken me up when he had spent ten minutes banging on my door that afternoon, and I hadn't been sleeping well for a week. He mutters under his breath and I roll up the window I had forgotten about completely while Graham tries hard to avoid staring at the white and yellow lines rushing past the same way they have since I was a kid.

it before standing up and dropping a twenty on the table. I pick it up while he’s not looking and replace it with a ten and a couple of ones. Gas money matters when you just started driving away from your only source of it.

We refill about a mile later and Graham goes to ask for the bathroom key while I stand with the gas nozzle sticking out of the car and my jacket pulled tightly around me against the chilly breeze that blows through the oil-stained parking lot.

Graham comes back and hands me the key. I use it before going inside to return it and buy some cigarettes. I light one while I step out of the gas station and just pocket them when Graham wants to know if he can bum one. He doesn’t really care when I do it and just starts the car and gets back on the highway with coffee still pounding through his blood and keeping him up while I finish my cigarette and flick the butt out the window. I lean the seat back and try to sleep again, but Graham tells me about how he and his mom and his grandpa used to take road trips all the time when he was a kid and how he’s never really been able to stay in one place for too long. He uses the names of towns I’ve never been to like Chicago and Boise and Houston. He tells me about sitting under the stars and chain smoking with his mom and grandpa while they both told stories about before he was born. He tells me about his first cup of coffee and I laugh because he considers it an important point in his life. He just looks at me and says whatever and keeps driving.

I wake up again with the sun in my eyes. Graham’s wearing sunglasses he says a guy at a rest stop gave him for a couple bucks. I flip down the beaten gray visor to shade my eyes so I can see the morning. I can’t trust the clock on the dashboard and Graham says he has no idea what time it is, so I resign myself to watching the road pass while I smoke a cigarette. Graham is quiet while I’m awake for the first time

since we started. I flick the butt out the window.

We get breakfast at another all-night place. The bacon's overcooked and the eggs are undercooked but I eat it because I'm hungry and don't care enough to send it back.

Graham asks me if I'll drive for a while and I say sure, whatever, leaving just enough to cover the bill because of the shitty food.

The driver's seat's lost its warmth by the time I sit in it. Graham says he's gonna try to get some sleep while I drive, but ends up just watching the white dotted lines pass and talking about how he's always thought God was looking out for him, because shit always seemed to work out even though it looked like it wouldn't. There was this one time when he was a kid, he says, when he got arrested for playing hooky one too many times and the cops let him go because his grandfather promised them Graham would get a beating when he got home but his grandfather never delivered because he didn't have the heart.

For a guy with no real belief in a higher power, he says, a lot of his life is defined by providence or fate or whatever.

I just keep driving and looking at the billboards while the sun rises higher in the sky. When I look over at Graham again, he's fallen asleep with the hood of his navy sweatshirt pulled over his head and his hair drooping over his sunglasses. I lean back in the seat and steer with two fingers while a blond in a convertible passes on my left and gives me a smile that I don't return.

Graham wakes up when we're back down to half a tank of gas. It's then I notice he didn't reset the odometer when I filled it up and that we've gone four hundred miles from where we used to live.

Graham tells me he wants to take over again, and after stopping for lunch, I let him.

When we stop again, it's dark and Graham cuts the headlights out before the engine. I don't bother to order anything with caffeine when Graham asks for a coffee because he's already downed three by the time we get our food and he's on number seven when I stand up to take a piss. We drop cash on the table and leave, Graham fidgeting the whole way to the car.

We get back on the road and Graham tells me about this motel they stayed at once that was entirely empty except for them and the manager. Graham was nine and too afraid to sleep in the free room the manager offered him, so he spent the night curled up wide awake at the foot of his mom's bed. That was before his grandfather started traveling with them, he tells me, when the old man was still in a home and Graham's mom could still afford it.

I fall asleep to his chatter and he's halfway through another story when I wake up. I look at the fuel gauge and it says we're still down to half a tank. Graham interrupts his story to tell me he stopped while I was sleeping and refilled even though we didn't need it because he was hungry and needed to stretch his legs. The bags under his eyes tell me I'll be driving after lunch again, so I curl up in the seat and fitfully dream about deserted motels and giant cups of coffee.

We skip breakfast and get lunch at a diner in a city I don't recognize but the BLT tastes the same. Graham doesn't order coffee. The waitress here is older than the last one I noticed and I'm completely unsurprised when she tells me her name is Doris. I leave her a bigger tip than I should because she reminds me of someone I can't place, but the feeling I get being reminded of that person is a good one.

Graham's asleep before I close my door. I smoke a cigarette out the window as the city slowly turns into green and open countryside.

Subclass: Apterygota

Orders

- * Archaeognatha (Bristletails)
- * Thysanura (Silverfish)
- * Monura - extinct

Subclass: Pterygota

- * Infraclass: "Paleoptera" (paraphyletic)

Orders

- * Ephemeroptera (mayflies)
- * Palaeodictyoptera - extinct
- * Megasecoptera - extinct
- * Archodonata - extinct
- * Diaphanopterodea - extinct
- * Protodonata - extinct
- * Odonata (dragonflies and damselflies)

- * Infraclass: Neoptera

Orders

- * Blattodea (cockroaches)
- * Isoptera (termites)
- * Mantodea (mantids)
- * Dermaptera (earwigs)
- * Plecoptera (stoneflies)
- * Protorthoptera - extinct
- * Orthoptera (grasshoppers, etc)
- * Phasmatodea (walking sticks)
- * Caloneroptera - extinct
- * Titanoptera - extinct
- * Embioptera (webspinners)
- * Zoraptera
- * Grylloblattodea
- * Mantophasmatodea (gladiators)

- * Superorder: Exopterygota

Orders

- * Psocoptera (booklice, barklice)
- * Thysanoptera (thrips)
- * Phthiraptera (lice)
- * Hemiptera (true bugs)

- * Superorder: Endopterygota

Orders

- * Raphidioptera (snakeflies)
- * Megaloptera (alderflies, etc.)
- * Neuroptera (net-veined insects)
- * Coleoptera (beetles)
- * Strepsiptera (twisted-winged parasites)
- * Mecoptera (scorpionflies, etc.)
- * Siphonaptera (fleas)
- * Diptera (true flies)
- * Trichoptera (caddisflies)



(over film)

When we stop again, it's dark and Graham tells the headlights are better the engine. I don't bother to argue anything with Graham when Graham tells me a coffee machine is already broken for the same we get our food and that's no wonder when I stand up to take a nap. We drop cars on the right and leave Graham believing the whole way to the end.

We get back on the road and Graham tells me about the motel they stayed at once that was actually empty except for them and the manager. Graham was sure and was about to sleep in the room the manager offered him, so he went the right way up with me at the foot of the room's bed. That was before he remembered about something with them, he tells me, when the old man was still in a tower and Graham's room could not sleep.

I tell about to be there and he's right in the night, another way when I wake up I look at the bed again and a sign we're all down to just a dark. Graham remembers the way to tell me he stopped while I was sleeping and walked even though we didn't need it because we were hungry and needed to stretch the legs. The man under the sign will tell me I'll be always when I look again, so I end up in the seat and finally Graham shows the next month and that was of course.

We stop Graham and get back at a short in a city. I don't remember the SLT takes the same Graham tells me.

The Student Media Center, part of the Student Affairs and Enrollment Services division at Virginia Commonwealth University, is a resource center for recognized independent student media at VCU. Current recognized student media include Poictesme; Amendment, another literary journal; The Commonwealth Times newspaper; The Vine, a quarterly magazine; and WVCW radio.

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