

Millennium



Millennium

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Visions From the Vapors

Judy Topich

Have you ever had the pleasure of waltzing with a gas tank? For most, the answer is no. For those who work in the scientific and medicinal fields, the answer might be yes. As a former part-time worker in the chemical stockroom at VCU, I've guided many tanks from the cart to the wall. It was one of my main duties to take empty tanks from the stockroom to the loading dock one building over and return a few minutes later with a full tank.

Visualize a metal cylinder nearly five feet tall. I'm five feet five inches and the average tank usually reaches my chin. Some can be taller. You can't lift it. A broken back would be your only reward. You can't push it. If the tank falls over onto your foot, you'll be hobbling on crutches for the next month or so. Depending on what gas is inside, the fallen tank could also blow up the building, or at least start a fire. So how do you move a gas tank from point A (its resting place) to point B (the push-cart)? By waltzing with it, of course. You put your hands on the tank and gently spin it. The tank begins to rotate and you guide it towards the cart, always following the tank, moving with the momentum. Sometimes I feel like the tank is guiding me, instead of the other way round. On a good day the path is a straight line with just a little bit of rocking. On other days, the tank prefers a more indirect route and curves one way, then the next, until it finally reaches the cart/wall. Once you get into the spinning, you can let your mind wander and simply follow the tank, but don't get too caught up in your daydream. My fingers have found themselves the victims of my meditative mind as my hand gets caught between tank and wall, but the damage is always superficial.

According to the Book of Genesis, our world started with a breath. God calmed the waters of chaos with His breath and created the Earth, the sky, the stars, the moon, the sun. God made all living things, but only into one creature did God give his own breath. God created Adam out of dirt and brought him to life with His own breath. But only Adam received this gift. Eve was built by God from Adam's flesh, but breathed on her own.

My bedroom window looks out over our backyard and in the spring my view consists entirely of oak pollen: long dangling fingers of dusty yellow pollen swaying in the breeze. In any other season besides spring, yellow is one of my favorite colors. In the spring, the yellow powder covers everything in Virginia. The blue slate path to my house turns green. My family's sky blue mini-van becomes a shade of green somewhere between mint and pea soup. My own car, a small black '88 Nissan Sentra creatively named Black Beauty, develops jaundice from pollen dusting the hood. When it rains, and the neighbors, sick of dusty cars, pull out hoses and start scrubbing, the black streets are marbled in yellow swirls.

On April 16, 2001, early in the morning, I awake to the yellow world with blurry eyes and a tight throat. I haul myself out of bed and down the thirteen stairs to the kitchen. A mug of coffee is waiting on the table. God bless my mother, always a half hour ahead of me. The caffeine clears my eyesight. Two puffs from my Albuterol asthma inhaler open my throat and quicken my pulse. My morning ritual, caffeine and inhaled stimulants. A ritual I have faithfully followed since I was twelve, ever since my doctor told me to take two puffs of the inhaler in the morning and two puffs before bed. The coffee is my parents' influence. My hands shake slightly thirty

minutes later as I put on makeup and brush my hair.

There is order among the gas tanks. Instead of being the same uniform gray color (make that rust, some of the tanks are getting old), a resourceful soul came up with the idea to color code the gases. Nitrogen, the most abundant gas in our atmosphere and the safest gas to work with, is red. Hydrogen, a highly flammable gas, is silver. Every year my father fills balloons with hydrogen and explodes them in front of his chemistry class as he speaks of the doomed blimp the Hindenburg. As the balloon becomes a fireball, the doors of the classroom rattle from the explosion. I'm surprised Dad hasn't been arrested yet for disturbing the peace.

Air can be found in a yellow tank. Oxygen comes in two colors. A brownish-orange for chemistry. Green for hospitals.

Perhaps my fingers are in danger today. A mind lost in due dates and speculation is just as deadly as a mind lost in daydreams. I roll an empty nitrogen tank onto the cart and push it to the elevator. My breathing is accompanied by a rasping purr from my throat. I'll use my inhaler when I get back from the loading dock.

I never enjoy Mondays, but this one is rough. I cannot catch my breath at all. I wheeze as I move the gas tanks. I wheeze as I wash beakers and flasks in the sink. I wheeze as I open up packages for the faculty and pour golden flakes of vermiculite out of packages decorated with neon lime and orange labels shrieking "Hazardous" and "Flammable." There are also red and white hazard stickers complete with skulls and cross-bones. The stickers do not frighten me. All the packages I open are intact.

The vermiculite makes me sneeze. It is a form of

mica made popular as a packing material for chemicals because it absorbs hazardous liquids in case a bottle breaks. In the stockroom, we save money by recycling the packing material. Underneath the package counter are two large black garbage bags, one filled with foam packing peanuts and the other with vermiculite. The large flakes pour into the bag easily, like grain, but the smaller particles fly into my face. I sneeze and my eyes begin to water but I do not stop pouring. This is a part of my job.

There are worse places for an English major to work than in a chemistry stockroom. The chores are pretty easy. Wash the glassware. Put paper towels and soap in the labs. Mix up a barrel of said soap from powder and water when we run out. Fix the test tube clamps that are broken daily by careless students. Break down boxes for the recycling guy. Exchange empty gas tanks for full ones. Sell locks and goggles at the beginning of the year and various pieces of equipment at the end when the students have to pay for anything they break. Accept packages ranging from hazardous acids to cartons of paper to shipments from Lands End. I once had a scare when a package I was about to open had a greasy stain on the side. It turned out to be harmless pump oil.

This will clear up. My breathing always settles down once I relax. It always does. It's seven that night. I go upstairs and take a shower. Sometimes the steam from the hot water clears my throat, but not tonight. The wheezing is worse. My back aches with the effort my lungs have made just pumping air in and out to the rest of my body. I lean forward and brace myself against the wall. I duck my head, letting the water run down my neck and back, and will myself to relax. Though my vision is blurry without my glasses, I swear I can see my heart vibrating beneath my skin. I hope it doesn't burst out like in cartoons.

I shouldn't use the inhaler again. The label on the box specifically says, "two puffs every six to eight hours when needed." I know I've taken at least one puff every two hours. I should have gotten better this morning. My asthma pattern is very regular. I normally wake up tight in the morning, use the inhaler, feel fine but take the inhaler at lunch just to be on the safe side, feel fine, and then use it one last time before I go to bed so I can sleep soundly. Why is everything going wrong today? I have enough schoolwork to worry about. I can't get sick now. Maybe if I close my eyes and rest for few minutes I'll feel better.

"Judy? Judy? Are you alright?"

I open my eyes and see my mother standing over me with a worried look on her face.

"I'm fine. Why do you keep asking me that?" I say, hoping that the shake in my voice is interpreted as irritation and not as a breathing problem.

"You never fall asleep after your shower and you hardly ever watch TV from the couch," says Mom.

She's right. I only take naps when I don't feel well and the couch isn't my normal chair. I usually curl up in the big rocker by the fireplace. I tried sitting there tonight. I really did, but my breathing felt worse in that chair. It's a little easier to breath stretched out on the couch.

"Is it your asthma? Do I need to call the hospital?" asks Mom.

"No, I'm fine. I'm just really tired."

Lying has never been my forte. I can't even pull off an April's Fools joke without my face turning red and my mouth stretched by the smile I try to conceal. I can't look someone straight in the eye and tell even a simple lie, like who ate the last bagel. But I can lie about my health, the one thing I really shouldn't lie about. I don't want to be a bur-

den. I don't want to be branded a hypochondriac for rushing to the hospital for something as simple as an asthma attack. And the problem should clear itself up.

We're going to the hospital. It's a quarter to nine and both Mom and Dad know that there's a problem because I can barely stand up straight and my head is so heavy so I should sit down here on the stairs and try to put on my shoes but my eyes will not focus and my hands fumble about so I rest my head on my knees and try to relax but then Mom pushes the shoes onto my feet and tries to pull me upright while I realize my hair is still wet from the shower and I hope I won't catch a chill because I really think I have enough to worry about and here we are outside with Mom supporting me while Dad unlocks the mini-van but I cannot even make it to the car and stumble and kneel down on slates, hoping to catch my breath, my will power is gone and I surrender to the asthma because I know I can not will myself to settle down and get well and now I am supported between my parents and we make it into the car with Mom in the back with me and Dad driving because we don't need an ambulance because the hospital is less than a mile from the house, I mean it's practically across the street, but I don't know if I can make it since the wheezing of this morning has become loud gasps for air and my body aches from the effort my lungs have made all day to function, now Dad takes the left turn to the hospital so sharply that the car must be on two wheels but we must be on all fours because we don't flip over, one more left turn and finally we're at the entrance to the emergency room and the car has barely stopped but Mom pulls me out of the back seat and I can see nurses in pastels scrubs running towards me but they are all kind of blurry.

And then the world goes black.

"Judy, can you hear me? Do remember me? I'm Ryan's mother, from down the street?"

Ryan, I remember a Ryan. From high school. And elementary school. Probably middle school too. Why is her mother here? My eyes open a little and I realize that Ryan's mother is the nurse bending over me. My head, arms, and legs all feel numb. Like when your foot falls asleep and you know the foot is still there but it feels like a sandbag. I can't lift my head but I do roll it from the right where it has been resting to the left and see my parents at the back of the room. They're fuzzy. My glasses must be off, but I can still recognize them. Mom is in a chair and Dad is standing with his right hand resting on the back of the chair. Or is his hand on her shoulder? I'm not quite sure. I want to speak to them, but the oxygen mask covering my mouth and nose muffle my speech. Not that I can say much. I can barely whisper and my mouth is both dry and sticky at the same time. I lift my left hand a little in my best attempt at a wave, but it's more like a flop.

"Hey, Jude," says Dad.

"We're right here. You're going to be fine. Jesus took care of you. There was an aura as soon as we came in the room with you, a white presence," says Mom. Her voice is calm and patient. I don't blame her if she's angry with me. I don't blame both of them for being angry with me. Maybe they would be better off without me.

There is a clock above my mother's head. I squint and can make out the large numbers, the hour hand, and the minute hand. There must also be a thin red second hand, but it's too small to see. I can see the time. A few minutes after nine thirty. Is that all?

I almost passed out once when I was eighteen and needed to give a blood sample. I must say I did pretty well

during the bloodletting. I didn't jump at the needle's prick; I kept my arm moving steadily to pump the blood, and kept my head turned away from the gradually expanding blood bag. I nearly made it through the whole procedure without getting ill. When the nurse removed the tube from my arm, she asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Great." She smiled at me and turned away to label the bag of blood. The bag was huge! The size of a paper lunch sack, but made of clear plastic and full of my burgundy blood. The nurse's white coat rapidly pulled away from me, a white dot on the horizon as my eyes lost focus and my vision grew fuzzy. Her chatter was replaced by a high-pitched ringing in my ears.

"Actually, I don't think I'm fine," I said as I began to pitch forward.

The nurse caught my shoulders and placed my head between my knees.

"Just breathe slowly and keep this on," she said, placing a washcloth soaked in icy cold water on my neck. The iciness felt heavenly and my eyes began to pick up the small silver specks in the beige linoleum floor tiles. I could hear the nurse talking to my parents and their accompanying footsteps.

"Are you ok, Jude?" asked my dad.

"Just fine," the top of my head said. For good measure, I waved my left hand in the direction of Dad's voice.

On that Monday night in April, I completely lost consciousness. No doubt about it. The half-hour between our arrival at the hospital and waking up in the emergency room are missing in my memory. I don't remember reaching the emergency room. I don't remember having my shirt removed and replaced with a hospital gown. I don't

remember getting a shot in my right arm, having an IV stuck in my left arm, or the oxygen mask placed over my mouth. I just remember waking up to Ryan's mother and feeling quite relaxed. Even peaceful. From what my parents tell me, I was the only relaxed person in the room.

Though my whole body feels like lead, my right foot is flopping back and forth at the base of the bed I'm on. I'm hooked up to an oxygen tank but there's still enough energy in my body to make me twitch. Sitting still has never been easy for me. Even in perfect health, I tap my feet or play with my necklace when I'm inactive. My necklace! Where is it? I was wearing my gold St. Jude pendent today. And my Mickey Mouse watch. And my VCU class ring. Where are they? I try to rise, but a new nurse tells me not to move. She didn't have to bother. It appears that I can only move my foot.

Now I remember. My necklace, watch, and ring are at home. They're on the nightstand in my bedroom. I took them off before my shower. That's why my hair is down instead of in it's usual ponytail. The long strands are stuck to my chest underneath the pieces of tape holding what I suspect to be a heart monitor. Something in the room is beeping and it matches my heartbeat. I turn my head to look for the machine and feel the trapped hair being pulled from my scalp. I really don't need to know the exact location of the beeping. I think I'll just stare at the clock. Or my parents.

The clock says quarter to ten. My breathing is easier. It's only Monday night. Hopefully I'll be out by tomorrow so I can do the group presentation for my Taoism class on Wednesday. I can't let the group down.

As near-death experiences go, I have to say I was disappointed. No dark tunnel. No bright light. No deep voice beckoning me to come towards said light. No angels. No

harps. No ancestors welcoming. No beatific vision. Just sleep. I passed out and I woke up thirty minutes later. A simple nap really. All I wanted to do was go home and stick to my schedule. Let's just say God had other plans for me.

The night passes with only a few complaints. I send Mom and Dad home. They were willing to spend the night, but this is a single patient room with only two small, square chairs.

They need to get some sleep. They've had a rough night. And home is only two minutes away. They leave, each giving me a kiss on the forehead. As she leans over me, Mom says, "Remember to say thank you to God." I nod and think a quick "thank you."

But thank you for what? For putting me in the hospital? My breathing is fine. Well, fine may not be the best word. I'm breathing from an oxygen tank, a green tank. I wonder what's the difference between the oxygen used in a chemistry lab and the oxygen used in a hospital. I think it's almost morning. I can hear the nurses moving around in the hallway, but they've been there all night. I sleep pretty well, but wake up twice, once by misadventure (I knocked my IV out) and the second time for a nebulizer treatment.

A nebulizer is the Super-Man of inhalers. A generator turns the liquid medicine into a vapor and propels it into the lungs, via a mouthpiece, for quick action. The treatment lasts from fifteen to thirty minutes. Mine currently average in at about twenty. A person doing a treatment looks like she is smoking from a water pipe. You sit there holding the mouthpiece like a cigar, the long tube draped over your body as it extends from your hand to the generator. Puffs of white vapor pour out the open end of the mouthpiece and rise into the atmosphere as you inhale, exhale to the accompaniment of the constant hum of the

generator.

The nurse sets up the treatment and leaves to do other errands as I sit there doing nothing but breathing. Thirty minutes later, she returns, unhooks me from the nebulizer, and replaces the oxygen mask.

"Do you need anything?"

"I'd like to go the bathroom," is my muffled reply. It's not easy to have a conversation with an oxygen mask on my face.

"Ok," she says and proceeds to guide me, the oxygen tank, and the IV into the small bathroom. Can't a girl get a little privacy here? First you take my sweater, whose fate I'm still not certain of, and now I can't even use the bathroom without toting around a dark green oxygen tank. I spin tanks larger than this everyday at work. I feel so helpless. Hooked up to machines that shriek if you try to make yourself comfortable. Needing an oxygen tank and an IV just to sleep. Having to call a nurse just to use the bathroom. I'm only going to be in here for a few minutes. Couldn't we have left my companions in the other room for that time? Do they really think I'll collapse in the bathroom without a continuous supply of pure oxygen?

I am still wheezing a little. And can't really stand up straight, but that could be because the mask is pulling my face down. I shuffle from the toilet to the sink, carefully tugging at the IV and the tank, praying that neither will fall over. I wash my hands, fumbling with the various tubes dangling over and around my body, and stare at myself in the mirror. I look very pale, but that could be due to the harsh, fluorescent bulb over the sink. I can barely see my mouth hiding behind the plastic, but my lips appear to be a pale pink and cracked. They certainly feel dry. My eyes are bloodshot and look gray instead of blue. At least my hair is clean, but it hangs limply over my forehead and around my

shoulders, with some strands still caught under the tape of the monitors. I never got a chance to brush it, seeing as I had to take a trip to the emergency room. I hope Mom brings a brush with her in the morning. I think I asked her to bring a scrunchie too.

I shouldn't keep the nurse waiting. She might think I collapsed or something.

Looking back, that Tuesday morning in the hospital wasn't that bad. Mom and Dad showed up at 6, bringing with them my orange checked pajamas, the books I requested the night before, and Wrinkles, my beloved stuffed dog of childhood who has a permanent home on my bed. Breakfast was pancakes, cereal, milk, and tea. No coffee, but that's ok. The meal came with a tag on it, listing the types of meals served to patients with various ailments. My meal was 'normal' and I didn't want to know what 'liquids only' or 'easy digestion' meals were.

Another good point about breakfast was that the nurses let me take the oxygen mask off permanently. At first, the mask was only going to be off while I ate. My breathing really did seem better. I was not huffing over my food as I had been doing the night before at dinner. Not once did the heart/breath monitor beep, alerting the nurse that my lung capacity was shrinking. As the nurse took away my tray, she stopped me from putting the mask on, saying to use it only when I needed it.

"Ah, here's someone you know, Judy," says Mom as Dr. S strides into the room, a smile on his face. He is always smiling, perpetually cheerful, and never looks tired.

"So I hear we had an emergency last night," he says, still smiling.

"Yeah. I should have been more careful. But at last

week's appointment you said everything looked fine, so I thought the wheezing would just pass," I replied.

"Well then we have to get you out of that mind-frame. Asthma is a very serious condition. Have you been doing the peak-flows?"

Not the peak flows. Anything but the peak flows.

The peak flow meter can make or break an asthmatic's day. Not a complicated device, a peak flow meter is a hand-held instrument you blow into to see how much air is flowing into the lungs. You blow a hard, fast puff of air into the mouthpiece and the little arrow on top goes up the scale, like one of those Test-Your-Strength games at the State Fair.

I've owned a peak-flow meter since I was twelve and was first diagnosed with asthma. I hated that little piece of brown plastic. I could never blow higher than a 150. I always felt like a failure when weeks would go by with no numerical change. After a few months of using my inhaler, I moved up into the two hundreds. When I made it into the three hundreds, I thought I was cured and stopped using the meter with the exception of the night before a checkup. This was during my three years of middle school. I stopped using the peak flow meter in high school.

In college, I switched from my old doctor, a pediatrician, to Dr. S, my brother's physician and it was the right choice. He gave me the "asthma treatment of the new millennium." Instead of relying so heavily on the rescue inhaler, Dr. S prescribed an asthma pill to take daily, with the inhaler meant only for emergencies. I should have trusted him, but old habits die hard, as the cliché says, and I was afraid to give up the daily inhaler treatments. I honestly believe I was addicted to the stuff. I'd tell myself not to use the inhaler because my breathing was fine and then a few minutes later my throat would close up. Hey, it's an emer-

gency so why not use the inhaler? I didn't tell Dr. S about these little "emergencies." And I didn't use the peak flow meter he gave me.

"I felt fine so I didn't think I needed to do a peak flow," I say, averting my eyes to the bed cover while trying to pull a strand of hair loose from the tape.

"Just because you feel fine doesn't mean you are fine," says Dr. S, his tone firm but gentle. "Any noticeable breathing change does not occur until your breathing has dropped halfway on the chart and at that point the inhaler isn't going to help. You need to use the peak flow meter every day from now on and pay attention when it drops. We don't need another night like last night."

"Yes," says Mom with so much emphasis that I look and realize how tired she looks. She seemed so calm last night.

"If this hospital had never been built, if instead the closest was still St. Mary's, would we have made it in time?" asks Mom.

"No."

According to legend, Saint Paul was converted on the road to Damascus. I say legend because this story can't be found in detail in the New Testament. Paul, an evil Roman general hell-bent on killing Christians, was knocked off his horse by a blinding light and converted instantly to Christianity. All the great prophets have similar conversion stories. God comes to them in fire or light and in awe, the prophets agreed to serve God, despite the hardships ahead. Except for Jeremiah.

Jeremiah didn't want to be a prophet. In fact, he tried every excuse he could find to get out of being one. Like saying he wasn't a good public speaker. Or there were better men out there for job. And the honesty angle of "I

just don't want to be a prophet, I like my life the way it is." But God wouldn't let Jeremiah go. Sometimes we just have to work with what God gives us.

"We can probably let you go home tomorrow, Judy. Any questions?" asks Dr. S.

"No. Not really. I might have some tomorrow."

"All right, see you tomorrow then," and Dr. S leaves the room. The local noon news is on the television. I'm not sure what station is on--they all look and sound the same.

"Up next, pollen season! How bad is it? We'll tell you after these commercial messages," says a perky voice from the TV high up on the wall.

My response is a growl and I glance out the window. The trees are not as close to the building as at home, but they're just as yellow. And deadly. I nearly died. Would anyone notice me missing? No one sent flowers, but that's probably a good thing. Flowers come with pollen.

Jeremiah had a rough time as a prophet. God gave him the right words to say. Jeremiah said them. And no one listened. In fact, the people of Israel tried to kill Jeremiah for giving them bad news and warning them to change their ways. At one point, they even threw Jeremiah down a well, hoping he would get the message and stop talking. Jeremiah wanted to retire from being the local prophet and punching bag, but God would not let him. God wanted his people to get the wake up call and give up their evil ways.

Is this my wake-up call, God? I ask silently. If it is, can you be a little more specific? Here I am, in this room, in this bed, trying to figure out what I am supposed to do when they let me go home. The outside world is dangerous. It's full of pollen and vermiculite and pet dander and dust and dust mites and chlorofluorocarbons and other kinds of irri-

tants that can potentially kill me. I'm not even safe at home. The rabbit sheds and the gerbil and hamster kick wood chips out of their cages constantly.

But maybe everything will be ok. Maybe once pollen season is over, everything will go back to normal. What do I do until then? Get a giant hamster ball or a suit like the clean up crews wear for radiation spills to protect me from the pollen? Get real Judy. Be serious.

"Time for your treatment," one of the nurses says, rousing me out of my visions of hamster balls and yellow spacemen suits.

I sit up and allow her to put on the mask. The nebulizer hums into action and white vapor billows from the mask. I feel like a fire-breathing dragon minus the fire. The nurse leaves. She'll be back in twenty minutes. Why do these treatments take so long? They waste so much time. Oh God! What if I have to use one of these things for the rest of my life? I can't haul a nebulizer around with me to school or on vacation or to the mall. And what about the races next month?

I'm not a huge sports fan. There are only three sports I truly love: horse racing, figure skating, and NASCAR. Ah, the incongruities.

NASCAR should be an asthmatic's nightmare. The parking lot, depending on where you park, is either a combination of dirt and gravel or a large grassy field. Clouds of dust herald each passing car. Most of the fans are regular smokers and a smoker has sat in front of or beside me for every race I've attended. There's always a nice, stiff breeze to keep the smoke right in my face as well.

And then there are the race cars. Dad once told me that if one of the drivers drove his car home from the track, he'd be pulled over immediately for violating the Clean Air

laws. Someone up North wanted to build an indoor track to eliminate races postponed by inclement weather, but the idea was vetoed because all the fans would suffocate from the contained exhaust fumes.

In NASCAR, both victory and defeat are accompanied by smoke. To celebrate a win, the driver does a burnout complete with donuts, the circles made as the driver spins his car on the track or in the grass. The burnout comes as the tires spin with no place to go and white smoke billows into the air. Smoke also accompanies a wreck, but this smoke is black and rises into the air like hellfire as the car burns below.

We come home from the races smelling of smoke and gritty with dust. When I wash my face before going to bed, I sometimes find small black flecks on my forehead, looking very much like the cross a priest makes on worshipers' foreheads for Ash Wednesday. It's tire rubber from a blown tire, wrecked car, or even the victory celebration, depending on the enthusiasm of the driver. Blown by the wind in the direction of the stands, it clings to clothes and sticks to the skin with sweat. It probably gets into my lungs too, but I don't care. I love NASCAR racing.

But can I go back? I look into the swirling white smoke and I ask myself this question. Can I go anywhere now? My lungs are a ticking time bomb, ready to implode at any irritation. Even if they do give me a nebulizer, what am I going to do with it? Haul it around in my purse? They'd have to give me a backup generator because electric sockets are kind of scarce outside. What if I have an attack at school? I think the sight of me spewing smoke and my backpack grinding away would be just a tad distracting for my fellow students. I'm not even sure that all the classrooms at VCU have extra sockets. What about the races and vaca-

tion and just life in general? I'm not sick. At least not terminally so.

The hissing from the mask begins to sputter and the vapor starts to clear. The treatment is nearly over. Physically, I feel ok. Mentally, I'm trying to find a no-mess, no-hassle asthma cure. Damn it Jim! I'm an English major, not a doctor! Here comes the nurse.

At dinner, Mom and Dad fill me in on what's going on at home and at VCU. I nod and attempt communication with hand gestures as I eat. Millie, Gordie, and Rosie, our rabbit, hamster, and gerbil, are all fine and have been fed. They probably don't even know I am gone. Everything is routine at school and Dad emailed my teachers to let them know why I'm not in class. They probably don't know I'm missing either. We watch some TV and at ten o'clock, Mom and Dad go home for the night and promise to be back bright and early next morning. I snuggle up with Wrinkles and try to sleep.

This night is a little more peaceful than the last. Nurses wake me up twice for nebulizer treatments and once because my hearth rate and breath monitor, still taped to my chest, alerted the nursing station that my breathing rate dropped. All I did was roll over. My IV was unplugged at dinner and sans IV and oxygen mask, I was able to sleep on my side, like at home. The nurse found me asleep in the fetal position. While comfortable, the position compressed my lungs, which took in less air. For a healthy person, this is ok. But for a person with asthma who nearly died the previous night, this could be a problem. The nurse apologizes, saying, "You looked so comfortable, but I had to check." No problem. You're just doing your job. This is just another part of my life that I have to fix.

I wake up early, about an hour before Mom and Dad should arrive. I can't sleep. I want to go home, but I don't

want to go outside. I want my life to be normal again, but I know that's not going to happen. I'm not even sure that I'm going home today. They could change their minds and keep me here, just to be safe, just to keep checking on me. It's Wednesday. The Taoism presentation is today. I hope everything goes well for the rest of the group. With all these thoughts, my pulse starts to quicken. I try to breathe deep and settle down. I don't want to alarm the nurses again.

When Mom and Dad arrive, they ask me how I slept and I say fine, leaving out the bit about sleeping on my side.

"If you're feeling alright, you probably don't need me to stay with you," says Mom.

You're leaving me alone? I nearly die and I'm terrified to go outside and you're leaving me?

"Dad and I can do the lab this morning and then come back for lunch. After that we can all go home."

Home. The place I really want to be. The place filled with pet dander and surrounded by pollen.

"I know Dr. S is coming this morning, but you know all the questions we talked about right?"

You want me to be responsible. Can't you tell I'm not responsible? My lack of responsibility is what got me into this mess. I thought I was responsible, but I failed.

"I guess I can handle everything. I just..." my voice cracks.

"Judy, are you alright?" Mom asks, the concern from Monday night returning to her voice.

I'm scared.

"I'm scared," tumbles out of my mouth as I start to cry and shake.

"It's alright. Everything's going to be alright," Mom says as she sits down in the chair next to me and strokes my hair. "Why are you scared?"

The pollen, the vermiculite, the pets, the bubble suit, the uncertainty of another attack. Everything tumbles out. The real fears and the farcical ones. Mom and Dad listen silently, not judging, not questioning, just listening.

"I'll stay. We'll talk to Dr. S together. Can you handle the lab, Joe?"

"Sure. No problem. Everything's going to be ok, Jude. Just relax."

"I will." *Maybe I finally can.*

Here's the list of medicine I'm taking home today: Serevent inhaler (got it, didn't use it that much before). Albuterol inhaler (got it, used it too much). Xopenex (had it before). Prednisone (ditto). Singulair (got it). Zyrtec (my brother Joey's miracle pill). Z-Pac (that's a new one). One nebulizer. And an epi-pen. The epi-pen was Mom's idea. This way we have the nebulizer to prevent attacks and the epi-pen for sudden emergencies. People who suffer from severe bee allergies carry epi-pens. The pen, really a simple syringe, clears inflamed lungs quickly. Don't ask me why you swing the thing into your leg to help your breathing, but at least all of this is better than a giant hamster ball.

"Now you're sure I'll be alright? I won't have another episode and end up here next week?" I ask Dr. S.

"You're going to be fine. Your improvement since Monday night has been wonderful. The next step is learning how to take care of yourself and your asthma."

"We're going to be more careful this time. Aren't we Judy?" says Mom.

"Definitely. I really don't want to relive this."

"None of us do," says Mom.

"What are you going to do from now on?" asks the doctor.

"Use the peak-flow meter every day."

"When do you use the nebulizer?"

"When the meter reading drops a hundred points. And if the nebulizer doesn't fix my breathing, we call you."

"Yes. When do you use the rescue inhaler?"

"Only when I really need it."

"Good. Sounds like you learned your lesson. Too bad you needed such a serious reminder. Alright then," Dr. S gets up from his chair. "You can go home after lunch. Take it easy, go back to school but use the elevators, stay away from the pollen as much as you can, and I'll see you in a week to make sure that the attack is over for good."

It's gotten colder outside. Monday night, the air was warm. Balmy even. Now, Wednesday, it's cold. I'm in the backseat of the mini-van in my green winter jacket. Dad takes the curves in the road slower this time.

There's home. It looks just the same, pollen and all. Entering, everything is quiet and still. I have the same feeling that I get when we come home from vacation. The feeling my presence is missing. Gordie and Rosie are asleep, but Millie sits in her cage in all her rabbit-glory. I sit down and open the door. She seems surprised, but settles into a roosting hen position as I stroke her forehead. She clicks her teeth, her happy sign. I sit calmly and stroke her.

"Good to be home, Judy?" asks Mom.

"Yes."

There is an old Taoist fable about a farmer and his nosy neighbor. I added in the nosy part, but that will be obvious as soon as I start the story. One day, the farmer's horse ran away. His neighbor comes over and says, "What bad luck!" The farmer says, "May be." The next day the horse comes back with a herd of wild horses. The neighbor comes over and says, "What good luck!" The farmer says,

"May be." On day three, the farmer's son breaks his leg while trying to ride the wild horse. The neighbor (doesn't he have his own farm to run?) comes over to say, "What bad luck!" The farmer says (can't you guess?), "May be." Sometime during the night, war breaks out and the army recruiters come to the village on day four. They take away all the young men, including the neighbor's son, but the farmer's son, with his broken leg, is left behind. The neighbor says, "Good luck for you." "May be," says the farmer. The moral of the story is to learn to accept change because what is bad will become good while what is good will become bad. The bad will come around and be good again.

Life is getting back to normal. The nebulizer is really not as much of an adjustment as I thought it would be. For right now, I have to have a treatment every six hours, which is kind of a pain at night and at school. Mom and Dad have made the transition as easy as possible for me. Mom covered the transparent window in the lab door with paper towels and tape so I can nebulize in peace without any students walking into what might look like an opium den. The late night treatments are not that bad either. It's peaceful to sit on the futon, half awake and half asleep, watching white vapor swirl in the air.

It is Monday again and I clutch my box of salt crystals, waiting for my call to stand in front of the class and teach them why salt crystals are relevant to Taoism. They really are relevant. Just think about it. Perfect, sparkling tiny cubes come from a large mound of soggy salt. The salt is dissolved in hot water until the water is supersaturated with salt, which means it can't take any more sodium chloride. After that, the water is cooled, placed in a jar with a pencil over the mouth, holding a dangling string weighted

with a paper clip. Real fourth grade science, but the link to Taoism is that I can't make the crystals grow. They decide when the time is right, not me. If I shake the string impatiently, I ruin the experiment. If I add more salt or water to help the crystals along, I ruin the experiment. I can't rush nature. One day the crystals just appear, small and square and perfect. If I wanted too, I can take the crystals, toss them into more boiling water, and start all over again. The crystals will grow, probably in a slightly different formation, but just as strong as the last time.

"Topich, you ready?" asks Professor Deane in his rough but friendly southern voice. He calls everyone by their last name, but at least he's finally saying "Toe-pitch" instead of "Top-itch." I make my way to the front of the room and stand near the chair by the desk, just in case my legs get wobbly during the speech. My breathing is a hundred percent better than last Monday, but I've still been feeling shaky every so often. I don't want to freak anyone out by passing out. Again.

"These tiny salt crystals are a perfect example of wu-wei," I begin, my voice a little shaky, from nerves, not asthma. Wu-wei is the big buzzword of Taoism. There's a good chance of getting partial credit for every question on Professor Deane's tests by putting wu-wei somewhere in the answer. Wu-wei is a fundamental Taoist concept, the act of not forcing the human ego onto nature, but instead conforming to nature and admiring the view.

As I talk about my crystals and how I can't force them to grow, I think about the previous week and my own overbearing ego. My body gave me every warning sign it could to stop the asthma attack. The wheezing, the high heart-rate, the tiredness. And it wasn't just the vermiculite or the stress from all my schoolwork. The signs were there earlier. According to Dr. S, my peak flow reading has to drop a

hundred ticks before I feel any noticeable change in my physical breathing. At that point the only solution is to do a nebulizer treatment. The rescue inhaler is not enough. I didn't know about the drop because I didn't do the peak-flows every night. There was no nebulizer at home then, but I could have just gone to the hospital for one. They obviously keep a nebulizer in the emergency room.

But I didn't listen. I told myself that everything would get better because it always did. I willed myself to get well because I didn't want to be behind in my work. I'm the responsible one. I can handle everything. And I nearly died for that. Very effective lesson, God. A little dramatic, but I wouldn't listen until You stopped me in my tracks. Thank you.

"And that's about it. Anybody want to see the salt?" The speech is done. Everyone applauds.

It's over. The lesson is learned. For everyone.

April 16, 2002, a Tuesday, was another yellow day, but this time I didn't wake up with a tight throat. I'd been doing nebulizer treatments every night since the pollen first appeared on the trees. This time, I was prepared.

The nebulizer is no longer an intrusion in my life, but a part of it. I dragged it to the NASCAR race the month after my attack and didn't need to use it at all. The biggest emergency of that day was when I leaned against the large tire of Johnny Benson's souvenir hauler to get some shade and shelter from the hot sun. No one told me that rubber tires sweat in hot weather. When I got up, Mom pointed out the black stains on the back of my pale yellow shirt. Those still haven't come out, but we've made it a family joke that Johnny ran me over with his car.

"Judy, you want to take those empty tanks down to

the loading dock?"

"Sure thing, Rinnie. Do you want me to bring two more back?"

"That's fine. Take your time."

It's Tuesday afternoon and I head over to the corner where the tanks are chained to the wall. I pick out two red Nitrogen tanks with signs that read "Empty" with a frowny face underneath. I roll them to the push cart, enjoying the steady rumble they make as they scrape across the floor. The tanks are in place. I throw my weight against the cart and pull it from it's vertical position to the slanted angle for pushing. As I make my way from the chemistry building to the loading dock in the education building, I notice that the cart is rattling, but not my throat.

Here is the loading dock. I unlock the door, push the tanks in, and lower the cart to its horizontal position again. Roll the empty tank to the wall, undo the chain, roll the tank against the wall, get the other tank, roll it to the wall, replace the chain. Go to the row of full tanks on the other wall, undo the chain, choose a red Nitrogen tank, roll it to cart, turn and get the next one. My breathing matches the steady rhythm of the rolling gas tanks and we waltz across the concrete floor.

On the Watch Repair Hotline

Tara Moyle

When he tells me his name
I write it in cursive scrawl
across my notepad. I find myself
pulling the front of my underpants up over
a roll of fat that's emerged from sitting
like a bucket in the chair, careful
not to snap the elastic, phone
so close to my belly.

We are talking about my watch,
where it broke. I'm giving him
the model number, microscopically etched
on the side. We talk watch bands,
clasps, and what needs fixing.
I give him my number, my address,
my name. I almost expect-no-
I do expect him to tell me it's nice,
my name, and for him to know my area code,
to say Oh, it's beautiful there. Aren't we ready
to move on to other things?

My cat laps a half inch of water
in the bottom of a glass,
smashing the fur on his cheeks.
Once while sneaking sips from a tall cup
he got caught, backing up with the plastic
coning his face. Unable to discern
the whole body from just one part.

Anthony (that's his name) has all the information
he needs. "Is there anything else I can help you

with?" he asks. My cat's pink tongue flicks in and out
over the top of the water. I finger the bow
on my panties, it's two
and I'm not yet dressed. Anthony waits,
an awkward pause. Soon
he will hang up, I think,
and I stall, considering the miniscule
hooks on a cat's tongue, incredulous
that such delicate design
could satiate any thirst.

Because silence disturbs me

Rosetta Lynn Thurman

last Father's Day i played nina simone
and we all sat in a gray limousine
conscious of your demise
silent and thinking of happier times
unspeaking for fear the grief
would explode from the inside
and shatter the tinted windows
of the long gray car
screaming to passersby
"someone tell us where God is."

when i was five years old
borrowing bread was a lie
i did not want to tell
after all, we were not going to give it back
but use it to calm our angry stomachs
along with peanut butter and powdered milk
so i suggested that maybe
we should just ask to 'have' the bread
you couldn't do it yourself
so we starved that night
because i believed
what the white women taught me in sunday school
i'd always been different that way.

i'd always wanted to play nina simone
on a cloudy morning
or on a foggy night when i can only imagine the sun
or the sun's reflection on your face
give me miles davis at midnight
when the air turns crisp

and the wind carries your scent through my windows
why do i keep playing the same damn song?

is it because he complements me
like a string of pearls my mother never gave me
that her mother never had to give
or it is because your presence haunts me,
mocks me at night.
a talking void daring me not to cry
on the day i have nothing to fear
on the day i realize that
i'm too big to be afraid of the dark.

Cop Drag

by Michele Young-Stone

When Marci was six years old, she rode to the K-Mart with her dad in his new Ford F-150 pick-up to buy her first baseball glove. He pulled a cassette from his shirt pocket and pushed it into the tape deck. He turned up Johnny Cash's "I Walk the Line" and ran his hand along the front dash feeling for his smokes. "Not bad." He set his beer in the plastic cup holder.

"Yeah," Marci said. "Real good." She sang along, bouncing on the dark blue vinyl seat, and stuck her arm out the window, flipping her hand front to back.

Her dad looked over, shook his head, and took a drag off his cigarette. She sat on her hands the rest of the way.

Inside the K-Mart, they scanned the low metal shelves piled with Rawlings', Spalding's and Wilson's. Marci's dad took her hand, studied the size of her palm, her chocolate-smudged fingers. He reached down for the best glove, and his lighter dropped, clicking the concrete. "Damn it. Here. Here. Try this one."

"It's too small," she said, tossing the glove back onto the shelf, and reached for a Super-Size Rawlings.

"You won't outgrow it," he said, taking it from her. He picked up one of the baseballs on a top shelf and threw it into the glove. "We'll have to break her in." He bent the stiff fingers down and looked at the price tag. "What the hell."

"I'll be able to catch anything." She marched triumphant beside her dad to the front register where he pulled a knife from his back pocket and cut the tag. The nice lady in the blue smock rang it up. She smiled at Marci who made a fist in the pocket, who pulled the fingers down like her dad. Marci thought that the next time

they came to K-Mart, she'd get a new baseball.

She wore the glove on her left hand across the K-Mart parking lot and riding in the truck where her dad shouted at the newsman on the radio. "Jimmy Carter's a god damn peanut farmer, not a president." She wore the new glove in the backyard where he threw the ball hard across the spotted dirt. "Damn it, Marci. Get on one knee." He got down on the ground with his beer. A cigarette dangling from his bottom lip. "So it can't get by you."

Marci did what he said, but most of the balls went to her right or left and she had to chase them down the hill to the street. Hot and dirty, she was going to get the 'damn' ball. Do it right. Then she stopped three balls in a row, and he said, "You're getting it." He threw the next ball harder and it took a bad bounce popping up and smacking her in the lip. She didn't cry, and he gave her a sip of beer and patted her on the back. Marci's mom made baked chicken for dinner. The chicken was cold by the time they ate.

*

When Marci was seventeen, she commuted thirty miles from home to the city college where she majored in painting and printmaking. She managed to snag a boyfriend named Clark who complained that she drank too much, talked too loudly when she drank, slurred her words, and flirted with his friends. He had a tattoo on his lower back, and even though it was a unicorn with a purple rainbow above it-the size of her palm-it was still a tattoo. They'd been dating for two months, and she thought the relationship was going great. Clark complained about her drinking and flirting and obnoxious slurred speech. He didn't understand that she was a rebel, a wild woman, a witchy woman like the old song on the classic radio station. Mysterious with the moon in her eyes.

Clark was twenty-one, a history major with one semester left. He had a penchant for motorcycle boots and Civil War memorabilia. She met him at a Circle Jerks' show where she tried to mosh, swinging her arms, stomping her Dr. Martin's combat boots like a storm trooper. She was drunk. After she fell into the pit and someone stepped on her hair, Clark pulled her up. He was kind of like her knight in shining armor.

*

On Friday night, she parallel parked in front of Perry's duplex apartment and tucked a bottle of Seagram's 7 under her arm. Perry lived two blocks from campus and six blocks from Clark's place. He opened the door, cocktail in hand, and wearing a red smoking jacket and purple cravat. "Entrée, entrée," he said, stepping back. She had met Perry in her Foundations of Art class, and he liked to drink vodka. She liked bourbon, dark liquors mixed with Coke or ginger ale. They both liked crushed ice.

Clark stood behind him. "Hi, honey." He and Marci kissed. Clark rubbed his palms down the front of his jeans. He'd shown up too soon. He had nothing in common with Perry.

"Check you out," she said, running her fingers down the lapel of Perry's jacket, and then Marci darted to the kitchen, like it was her kitchen, for the highball glasses and crushed ice. Clark sat on the couch, flipping through the latest issue of Rolling Stone. The doorbell buzzed. Gemma and Melinda, two of Marci's new college friends, showed up giggling, toting a bottle of Stoli's vodka. Gemma, flushed and out of breath, said, "You aren't going to believe this. Melinda bought the vodka!" Melinda laughed and headed for the bathroom. "She fucking bought it wearing her mom's big seventies

sunglasses. You know. The big fat ones." Gemma made a circle around one eye. "And polyester pants." Gemma was loud like Marci and chain smoked Benson & Hedges Light one-hundreds. She had a smoker's hack at eighteen.

Marci hugged her. "I'm playing bartender." She took the bottle, and Gemma followed Marci to the kitchen. Perry sipped his cocktail and asked Clark what he planned to do after graduation. Clark said, "I'm not sure." He took a swig from his Heineken, and turned the page. Perry joined the girls in the kitchen.

Three hours later, Clark was still on the couch with a bottle of beer between his thighs. He'd read two issues of Rolling Stone cover to cover. He looked at the back page, at the singles ads, and then at Marci across the room. He watched her lean into Perry and stroke the velvet sleeve of Perry's pretentious jacket. She was laughing too loudly with her head back. She was sloshed. Clark went for National Geographic.

Perry fawned over Gemma, his pretend girlfriend--he liked boys. He played with her long dark hair. Melinda knelt before the stereo shuffling albums. She said, "I can't believe you have Jefferson Starship." She flicked the album like a Frisbee at Perry.

Marci sat beside Clark on the sofa and said, "You're not having fun." She kissed his cheek, pulling the magazine from his hands, and tossed it to the floor.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked, setting his beer on the coffee table.

"Me? What the fuck's wrong with you? We're at a party, and you're reading." She rolled her eyes and went to the bathroom. She shut herself up and listened to Tom Petty sing "American Girl" through the door. She was an American girl. Goddess. Clark was lucky she'd have him.

Have anything to do with him. Fucking Confederate soldier figurines. She was an artist. But she was wrong about one thing. This really wasn't a party. Perry called it a get-together. She licked one fingertip and rubbed the smudged mascara from under her eyes.

Clark met her in the hallway. "I'm leaving," he said.

"What? Why?"

He shook his head.

With her jeans unzipped, she tottered behind Clark. She was wiping the blotted whiskey from the corners of her mouth when she tripped on Perry's imitation oriental rug. She whined, "Clark."

"Get drunk. Have fun."

"I'm sorry I took your magazine. You can read. Whatever." She grabbed the back loop on his jeans.

"It's not the magazine." He twisted free and slammed the door shut, but no one paid attention.

"You want another one, Marci?" Perry asked. His face was red-splotched and acne scarred in the light. He reached for the empty glass in her hand.

From the sofa, Marci shouted out the open window, "Clark, wait. Wait!" He looked up, stopping on the sidewalk long enough to give her the finger. He had broad shoulders, all grown up at twenty-one. Tall in his motorcycle boots.

"I'll be right back."

Perry said, "Let him go. He's lame."

*

When Marci was a little girl, she and her dad were close. She told her friends they were tight, chummy, like in her favorite TV rerun, *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*, where Eddie and his dad do everything together because the mom is dead, or like with Andy Griffith and Opie, but she was a girl. Nonetheless, she and her dad went

fishing on Saturdays, watched football on Sundays, and she had three little polyester shirts in blue, red, and yellow with wide collars and breast pockets for cigarettes or pens. Like her dad. She wore Wrangler's from K-Mart like her dad. Her brown hair was kept short and parted on the side. They fished on Parker's Pond in a skiff bought secondhand, and he said, "Like this, sweetheart." She released and dropped the line into the water, even though she wanted to cast like him. She wanted to watch the line fly, the weight sink. The red and white bobble float far away. "Nice one."

One time, one of the last times on the water, he took off his baseball cap and settled it on her head. He spun it around so the bill was in back. She popped his fifth beer open and sipped her Pepsi. It was a breezy summer day. She felt pretty. Her hair was longer, at her shoulders, and fat-bellied robins pecked the ground at the water's edge. Hushed. That's how she remembered it. Maybe she was ten. Their pointy beaks pecking away at the ground. The birds were like a picture frame. He said, "This is how to live."

*

By the time she got her purse and sucked the last drops of whiskey off the ice, she couldn't catch Clark on foot, so she got in her Hyundai and drove down Grove Avenue toward the campus. She took a left onto Harrison Street, which ran beside the art school, looking for Clark, and spotting him, just a block up ahead by the 7-Eleven smoking a cigarette, talking to some guy with a mohawk. Her window was down and she shouted, "Clark, hey Clark, wait," but the stoplight was red, and Clark and the mohawk kept walking. She said, "Stop, wait," but more for herself this time, and smacked the steering wheel. Stupid fucking stoplight. Marci checked her make-up in the rearview.

It was warm, early fall, and she didn't realize there was a policeman calling to her until he was bent down with both hands on her open driver's side window, asking, "Is everything okay?" He had a yellow gold wedding band and long black-haired fingers. He could be a mugger, she thought, dressed up like a cop. She saw something about that on Oprah. Men pretending to be police officers.

"Park over here," he said, pointing to the curb. Marci watched Clark disappear into the alleyway. The policeman had a moustache like Tom Selleck. Why was he bothering her? "Over here."

The light had turned green, but could turn yellow and then red any minute, and then what would she do? Where would she be? Marci pressed the gas. The cop held on.

She didn't drive fast, but as he leaned further into the car, both arms inside, one hand grabbing for the steering wheel, she accelerated. She concentrated on the front windshield and wished he'd disappear. Get off her car. She tried to elbow him, get him to let go. Get off.

"Pull over! Pull over!" he said, and with the car in second gear, she looked at him-psycho dumb ass cop who wouldn't leave her alone-and said, "Let go. Fuck!" She tried to roll the window up, but the weight of his stomach held it down, and his elbow dug into her chest, and then his head pressed into hers, blocking her view. She smacked at his gorilla forearm, fought him, shifting and jerking in the seat, trying to keep the car straight-on the road-but she couldn't see anything. The car stopped. He had the emergency brake, and she hated him.

She looked up through the front windshield and saw two Richmond City police cars parked bumper to bumper, swirling reds and blues, yellowed and streaking through

the glass. The cop, breathing heavy and muttering, fumbled with the door handle. He grabbed onto Marci's T-Shirt, her favorite, signed by Robert Smith. "Out!" he said. "Out!" and pulled her from the car.

"My keys."

She tried to reach for them, the ignition, but he pushed her up against the car's back door. He held her there, his hand in a fist at her chest. He was breathless. Her car door was open. Ding, ding, ding. With one hand on Marci, he awkwardly felt for his walkie-talkie. He said, "I told you to stop your car." Trying to catch his breath, he coughed. "Come on," he said, squeezing her forearm. He leaned back inside the car for her purse with Marci beside him. Holding the bag upside down, he dumped her things onto the hood of the car. He got her license.

"Female," he said into the walkie-talkie. "Seventeen. Marci Adams. Four, twenty-two, seventy-one." She had rights, and he was manhandling her. Violating her privacy. That wasn't allowed.

Clark watched from the alleyway by the 7-Eleven, his hands in the air, like hey, what can I do. She pointed in his direction. "I was just..." she tried to explain, but the cop knocked her arm down with the empty purse. A crowd gathered on the sidewalk across the street.

"What?" he asked. "You were just what? Over there. Move."

She stood on the wide concrete steps leading to the art building, her building. Art 101. Figure drawings, nudes. Traffic was stopped in both directions. The black pavement inked orange from the headlights.

*

When Marci was eleven, she couldn't pretend to be a little boy anymore. Her dad wouldn't have it, couldn't accept it with the way she looked and talked, with breasts

and opinions. She got her monthly "friend" while they were in the skiff, out on the water, her first time casting. Her blue shorts browned, and she didn't have anything with her. She cried, pressing her face into her knees, and he said, "Jesus Christ, Marci. Don't do that." He popped open a beer. She wrapped her jean jacket around her waist and waited for him to reel his line in. He said, "This is a good day. Probably could've..." He tossed a couple empty beer cans into the cooler. "Your mother can... You're fine." He never took her fishing again.

*

The policeman shouted to the onlookers to move along. Back away. He told Marci to have a seat, but she stood on the steps of the art building, arms folded, watching for Clark. The city cops pulled their cars into the alleyway.

"Look," he said. "Sit down before you fall down." Flustered, he had one hand on his night stick. "I'm Officer Jackson."

"Yeah. That's what your badge says." He was a campus cop, not a real cop.

"Sit down."

"What did I do? I was stopped at the light. I didn't do anything wrong. You had no right to stop me."

He gestured with her driver's license, while two of the city cops watched from the bottom step.

Marci said, "I'm not drunk."

"Obviously. Sit down."

She leaned against the concrete column of the art building. "I don't want to." She whispered, "Fucking pseudo-cop."

Officer Jackson joined the real cops on the bottom step. She couldn't hear what they were saying, but she knew Officer Jackson was upset by the way he kept

waving her driver's license around, aiming it down the street to the stoplight where he first tried to pull her over. One of the city cops, a young blonde woman, pointed at Marci with her flashlight, shaking her head. The crowd across the street had already dispersed and Clark was gone. She wondered what Perry, Gemma, and Melinda were doing. She wondered how much trouble she was in. She wondered where Clark went. She wondered if she should be upset. Feel more, cry or something. Maybe the cop would let her smoke. Call somebody to come get her. Cops were all cocksuckers. Down with the man. She wasn't hurting anybody stopped at that light. He had no right.

One of the female cops, a real city cop, patted Officer Jackson on the shoulder. He climbed back up the steps to Marci carrying a breathalyzer tube and a clipboard while the city cops got into their cars.

"Blow. Keep blowing," he said. His face was almost grey in the dim exterior spotlights. Calmer now, he shifted his weight leg to leg in front of her. It was all right with him if she didn't want to sit. Sure.

She handed him the breathalyzer tube after she'd blown as hard as she could and stated, "I'm not drunk."

"Okay dokey. Sure."

The city cops sat in their cars. Marci sat on the concrete step. She waited and thought pseudo-cop Jackson was an arrogant, power-hungry asshole. She'd pass his stupid test.

Officer Jackson said, "Get up. You don't think you're drunk." He held the tube close to her face. He looked almost sad. Disappointed. Like he cared.

"So?" He didn't even know her.

"So, you're three times over the legal limit and you're seventeen years old." He pointed to the digital numbers. "You probably can't read them, can you? How much have

you had to drink tonight?"

"I'm not drunk."

*

When Marci turned thirteen, her dad said, "I thought it was next Tuesday." Her mother signed the card from them both.

He said, "We need a cake that big? There's three of us, for god's sake."

Marci's mom shot him a look. She was always doing that: keeping her mouth shut, looking funny at him.

"What? She's a teenager now. Isn't she supposed to think about those things? Getting fat?" He pinched Marci's side and lit a smoke.

Her mom said, "Go on, honey. Make a wish."

She closed her eyes and wished her dad would have the son he always wanted, and that his son would turn out gay.

That following Saturday she rode to the dump with him past Marty's garage and Mr. Swiss' ice cream shop, and thought they could get a cone. Paul Harvey talked about a man in Whittlemore, Iowa, a barber, who'd lost his leg in WWII, lost his wife and son to a man back home. Stateside.

Marci said, "They've got coffee ice cream."

"Not much into ice cream."

"It's coffee flavored." She kicked the empty 7-Eleven coffee cups and beer cans on the floor of the truck. They didn't make beer flavored ice cream. "I could help you clean out the shed."

"It's pretty clean, but if you want to wipe the workbench down, that'd be great. I'm going to Dick's this afternoon." Dick was his best friend. Marci thought Dick was a dick because he didn't like kids, just dusty history books, cheap beer and cigarettes. Just like her dad.

He turned the radio up, and they listened to Paul

Harvey tell the rest of the story.

*

The city cops were still in the alleyway, out of their cars now, and Officer Jackson walked toward them with his clipboard and the breathalyzer. Marci didn't know what would happen next, but she felt heavy, weighted down, and sinking with the thought that she might go to jail. What for? Clark? What was so special about him? She sat holding her calves, wrapped in a ball, rocking on the top step. She had to cry. Show some emotion. Do something. Her head ached, but she didn't think she could cry for real so she remembered the scene from E.T. where poor E. T. is strapped to the gurney suffering, how she had hyperventilated in the movie theatre, and the people one row back shushed her, but she couldn't stop. That's how she cried for Officer Jackson. First for E. T., but then because she was all fucked up and knew it. The city cops talked into their walkie-talkies, and Marci cried because she'd had a drink, a beer or cocktail, every day now for almost two years. Because she had drunk almost half a bottle of whiskey and she could still stand up, walk around, hold a conversation, and dance if she wanted to. Because Clark was a nobody. Because she dragged a police officer two blocks and was probably going to jail.

Officer Jackson came back, and Marci said, "I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm messed up. I could've hurt you. I need help." She held her face in her hands. That was all she could say, and he probably wouldn't believe her, but she kept crying, and not for him. She thought about her mom. The silence her mother carried that permeated the living room where she cross-stitched pictures of kitty cats and potted plants to give as Christmas gifts. Where she folded laundry, vacuumed under the sofa cushions and wiped out ashtrays. Where she threw away beer

cans. Marci's mother kept that one room immaculately clean like her own little sanctuary. Where she asked, honey, do you want to go to the mall today? Shopping? How many times? For how many years, and Marci didn't. She didn't want to go anywhere with her mother. Not unless her friends could go. Her mom peered over her eye glasses. She finished a stitch.

Officer Jackson sat down beside Marci and handed her a Kleenex.

*

When Marci was sixteen she waited with her mom by the snack table in her high school auditorium for her dad to show. She ate carrot sticks, drank watery fruit punch and stared at her painting, the one she called Frolic. It won second place. She had worked on it for six months, spending afternoons and evenings mixing paints and linseed oil in the art room. Skipping dinner. Starting again, frustrated, wiping the shapes away with a turpentine-drenched rag. It was the shadow of a boy and man holding hands. Painted concrete gray, their one shadow reached into a bright cobalt field of grass. From across the room, Marci's art teacher pointed to the ribbon and made fists of congratulations. Marci smiled. "That's Mrs. Fairaday." Her mom waved.

"Maybe he had to work late."

*

The city police left, and Marci rode in the campus police car with Officer Jackson to the college precinct, one large room with double wooden doors, a high ceiling, and a linoleum octagonal floor meant to look like marble tile. A heavy-set female cop, Officer Reyes, with thin lips and beaded earrings followed Marci to the tight unisex bathroom where she watched Marci pee and wash her hands. She watched her stare at her face in the small scratchy mirror

over the sink. Marci's eyeliner and mascara were streaked down her white cheeks. Is this what jail's like? American girl. Blotto. Jail bird. Marci tried to wipe the blackness from her cheeks.

Officer Reyes said, "Hurry it up." The paper towel dispenser was empty. "Yeah, well." Marci wiped her hands on the bottoms of her jeans. She listened to Officer Reyes' keys jingle, the swish of her beaded earrings and her black orthopedics sponging the floor.

Marci sat in a brown vinyl chair waiting for her parents. No one spoke to her. Occasionally, the phone rang and Officer Reyes crossed the floor handing slips of paper to Officer Jackson. Her shoes sponged the floor, her earrings swished. She was noisy walking back and forth, back and forth. Marci's mother and father finally arrived. Her mother sat in a metal folding chair, the one farthest from Marci, intent on Officer Jackson. Marci wasn't used to seeing her mom without make-up. She wasn't used to seeing her mother mad. Her father, blank-faced, sat closest to the double doors. He cleaned his eye glasses with a napkin while Officer Jackson said she kept driving. She was drunk. Three times over the legal limit. She's seventeen. Your daughter is just seventeen.

Marci's mom said matter-of-factly, "We trusted her." She rolled the hem of her sweatshirt between two fingers. She spoke as though there was nothing else to say, nothing that could be said.

Officer Jackson said, "Your daughter needs help. Counseling."

"It was a mistake to trust her." Marci's mother cleared her throat, shifting the over-stuffed pocketbook on her lap. "I don't make the same mistake twice."

Her father said nothing, but, "Thank you. Thank

you so much."

Marci's mom shook Officer Jackson's hand. "I work part time, but I assure you we've been there for our daughter. Watched out for her. Loved her. "

Her father shook the officer's hand. He said, "She's really a good girl," and patted the officer on the back.

Marci's mom cried on the front steps of the precinct. She walked in the opposite direction of Marci and her dad.

"Where's Mom going?"

"She's got to drive your car home."

Marci climbed into her dad's pick-up and stared at the blue of her jeans. "Mom's not talking to me."

"No." Her dad started up the truck and slapped her on the shoulder. "Damn Marci," he said, "I've been pulled over my fair share, but I never met anybody who could get away with dragging a cop down the street." He lit a cigarette. "You sure know how to bullshit when you have to."

"Can I have one?"

"Sure." He tossed her the pack.

*

Marci courted her mother with offers to cook dinner, fold laundry, vacuum under the sofa cushions and grocery shop. Her mother said, "That's all right," and concentrated on a crossed stitch, the fine print in the TV Guide.

Marci was on probation. Lucky. She wrote in her diary, I have to quit fucking up, and climbed through her bedroom window at ten o'clock to meet Clark at the top of her street. He'd forgiven her. After she slid into the front seat of his seventy-four Nova, he said, "You're such a fuck up," and they kissed. She was, after all, this rebel, this witchy woman.

When Marci was seventeen, she rode with her dad to his new boat on the Rappahannock River. She sat beside

him in the stern, where she swung her arm back to cast, and he said, "God damn it, Marci. Watch what you're doing. You're gonna kill somebody."

She said, "Fuck you." It slipped out, and she reached for the smokes in his front shirt pocket.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. I know what I'm doing." She cast long. The line flew, the weight sunk. He passed her a beer and she drank it in the autumn sun. She had another one without asking.

"How's school?"

Marci rolled her eyes, and with a beer in one hand, and a cigarette in the other, her line zinged. She jerked the reel back, leveraging it in her gut. She dropped her cigarette and sloshed her beer.

"Damn it, Marci. All right. All right. That's it! I'll get the gaff. The gaff." He laughed and smacked her back. He said, "Be careful, don't jerk it." He was behind her. "Put the goddamn beer down." It was between her thighs. "You've got it." He leaned over the edge of the boat. "Nice and slow."

Marci struggled.

"Pull back. Reel fast," he said. "Pull back!"

"I got it! I got it!" Then it was easy. The fish gave up. It dangled from the hook over the side of the boat.

"Get it. Get it," he said.

"Get what?"

He grabbed the rod. "Get her in the boat." Marci let go all together and stepped back. It was his fish now, and it flopped by her sneakers with its mouth agape.

She said, "It's flat, like a pancake. With two eyes."

"Yeah, it's a flounder."

"Put her back."

"Damn, Marci, she's regulation. We can keep her."

He pressed the fish against a mounted ruler. "Seventeen inches."

"Put her back."

"You do it." He dropped the fish, the line still attached, and pulled his own rod out of its holder.

Marci got on her knees, the fish flailing, a gaping mouth the size of a dime, all slimy, and she tried to free the hook, but it was deep, stuck. "Dad!"

He slid his rod back in the holder, and took the fish from Marci. He worked the line and hook. It made an inky sound, like the rubber of her shoes scuffing the fiberglass. Blood dotted the boat. Spot after spot, like spaghetti sauce. "God damn it." The blood dotted her dad's shoe. "She swallowed it. There's nothing we can do." He touched her shoulder. An attempt at tenderness. He cut the fishing line with his pocket knife. "We might as well keep her."

"We should let her go."

"She'll probably die. Flounder's good eating."

"Probably?"

"Or maybe not," he said, studying the fish. "I've caught fish that had rusty hooks in the gut." He looked up at Marci. "Lived for years, most likely. This fish looks tough." He meant it. He leaned over the side of the boat, the flounder very still in his hands.

Marci said, "She's not fighting anymore." They waited and watched the flounder just below the surface.

The fish swam away, disappearing beneath the blue-black waves that slapped the side of the rocking boat.

Marci baited her hook. "Why'd you stop taking me fishing?" She shielded her eyes from the bright autumn sun with one hand.

"I didn't. You didn't want to go."

"Yes, I did. I always wanted to go."

Her dad turned his face away from hers and she thought that he knew, even if he couldn't admit it. She thought that he understood. He cleared his throat and said, "Hand me one of those beers."

Mouse Invasion

Mary Levi

"Animals are people, too," my father used to tell me. "Treat others as you would have them treat you - that means animals, too." In the home of my childhood, it was as much of a crime to yell at or hit the dog as it was to yell at or hit a sibling. My father encouraged me to respect and admire nature; to appreciate the delicate balance of the interrelationship among all living things. Mankind's progress threatens that delicate balance. Development for homes and business continually invades wildlife habitats and brings human needs and ambition into direct conflict with the needs of spotted owls, deer, and pumas. I can easily sit on my moral high horse and decry the insensitivity and shortsightedness of developers. Yet, I find myself struggling to balance my needs and ambitions with the wildlife around my home.

I live in a little house down a long gravel driveway in a small grassy clearing in the middle of the woods in central Virginia. One reason we chose to build our home in the middle of nowhere was so we could indulge in our love for animals. We have six rabbits, two dozen chickens, two goats, two Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs, eight assorted dogs and five cats. In the spring we enjoy the sounds of tree frogs singing, the wild turkeys calling out in the woods, and small herds of deer lounging by our fenced yard to torment the penned dogs. There is something magical about living in the midst of nature. Sometimes I feel like I am living in a fairy tale and I fantasize about being like Disney's Snow White with all the little creatures of the forest trusting and adoring me. That is a very romantic view of wildlife, though. In truth, living with nature requires making some unromantic compromises. Along with the cute little birds and deer, I

have to accommodate snakes, spiders, mice and other "pests" who invade my house and garden on a regular basis. I must smile indulgently at black snakes slithering through the tomato patch; shake my head with a shrug when spiders lay egg sacs on the gutters and down spouts; and never lose my cool when mice make nests in the bags of birdseed out in my shed. But I absolutely draw the line when I find mouse droppings in the silverware drawer!

I used to awake each morning to find fresh mouse droppings in the silverware drawer. I set the coffee maker to start brewing at 6 o'clock in the morning so I could wake up to the smell of fresh brew instead of the scream of an alarm. Every morning I crawled out of bed, brushed my teeth, showered, dressed, and scooted out into the kitchen for my first cup of coffee. I pulled a mug from the cupboard over the coffee maker and poured the steaming black brew. The steam wafted up to my face to give me the first kiss of the morning. I pulled cream out of the fridge and poured in a drop or two, turning the coffee into a beautiful swirl of amber and caramel colors. Before I could have my first sip, though, I needed to stir the coffee so the cream was evenly distributed. I smiled and dreamily pulled open the silverware drawer to reach in for a spoon--and found little black pellets peppering the drawer.

Washing every spoon, fork, knife, butter knife, potato peeler, spatula, serving spoon, and can opener that I own on a daily basis got to be excruciatingly annoying after a few days.

As a nature lover, I did not want to murder an innocent mouse, so I went down to the local farm cooperative to buy a special mouse trap. The Hav-a-Heart trap neither kills nor maims but safely traps the little varmint in a secure cell so it can be released out in the wood far from other homes and barns. Only Saturday

morning cartoon mice are crazy about cheese. The man at the farm cooperative told me what mice really crave is chocolate or peanut butter. (This is evidence that mice are intelligent creatures; I crave peanut butter and chocolate, too!) I baited my trap with a Reese's peanut butter cup that night and went to sleep with a smile on my face believing I would meet a fellow peanut-butter lover in that trap in the morning.

The next morning I found no mouse and no candy in the trap. But there were fresh mouse droppings in my silverware drawer.

I fiddled with that trap for five days before sticking it out in the barn to rust in neglect.

I became desperate. I found myself believing it would be unethical for me to murder a mouse, but the five cats certainly could do the job with no moral conflict. Every night for two weeks, I made the cats stay in the kitchen and left all the drawers and cabinet doors open. There was never any blood or other evidence on the kitchen floor, but surely, after two weeks the cats had done the job, right? I released the cats from the night watch and found no more mouse droppings in the silverware drawer the next morning. Poor mouse.

I enjoyed a week of morning coffee bliss and no mouse droppings in the silverware drawer. To celebrate, I decided to fix bacon and eggs for breakfast. I hauled out the electric skillet and fried up the bacon to a perfect crisp. I opened the cabinet door under the sink to grab the huge old coffee can where I pour fat drippings. The plastic lid had been chewed away around three-quarters of the can. I sighed. It had to have been that mouse. I pried off the remainder of the lid. A loud squeak evoked an even louder scream from my lips and I dropped the can. It landed right side up.

A tiny, beady-eyed, fat-soaked mouse greeted me from the bottom of the can. If the fat had been an inch deeper, he likely would have drowned. He scrambled about in the fat trying to escape from the can, but the metal sides were slick with grease and he was thoroughly trapped.

I stared at him and he stared back at me. My kids came running to see what had made me scream. "Oh, poor thing. Isn't he cute?" The useless cats sauntered in to the kitchen to volunteer for the duty they had neglected. The dogs were eager to help, too.

I carried the can out to the field across the road and released the mouse. I figured he would either have a very shiny coat after his next bath or else make a delicious meal for some lucky owl. More than likely, he made his way back to my house to leave his calling cards in my silverware drawer again.

Every few months that mouse or one of his relatives invades my house and turns the silverware drawer into a private commode. The cats are nearly useless. Occasionally they catch a mouse, but the mess and destruction they leave behind makes them an inefficient and undesirable mouse removal system. I know several rural families who keep their silverware in zip-lock bags and invest in traditional snap-traps and rat poison. I fear our pets or children will get into the traps or poison, so they aren't a viable option. And our mice chew through zip-lock bags.

Animals are attractive and repulsive all at once. I appreciate and respect animals but I hate the foul smells and the dirt and the mess they entail. I am torn between the desire to live in a sanitary home and the desire to live in blissful union with nature.

I know I am not the only person who struggles to

personally reconcile animal rights with human ambition. Our society is filled with organizations: some seek to promote wildlife conservation and others to promote hunting rights; some promote vegetarianism and others farm and ranch protections; some promote environmental protection and others push for development to meet the housing and business needs of a growing human population.

Overall, we are threatening the welfare of wildlife. We invade wild lands and claim them for our own. We tear down trees and destroy habitats to build homes and parking lots and shopping centers for our convenience. We build roads and automobiles through the wild places and leave a trail of road kill in our wake. What is our responsibility to the animals whose lives we disrupt?

The other day my husband Keith came to me with an anxious look on his face.

"I need your help!" he gasped. While driving home he saw a dead opossum on the side of the road, not an uncommon sight around here. But he also noticed a dead baby opossum on the road beside it. Keith pulled over to examine the body and discovered living babies still wiggling in their mother's pouch. He didn't know what else to do but put the mother in the bed of his truck and bring her to me. I ran over to the truck and peered into the bed. The possum lay there, the injured side of her face exposed to the sky, her eyes open, her expression one of intense anxiety. I imagine she died worrying about her children. My gaze drifted over her body to her belly. I'd never examined an opossum so closely before. Her pouch was partially open. Enveloped in the folds of white fur-covered skin were the small wriggling gray bodies of her babies.

My heart began to pound. I ran back into the house and called the Virginia Wildlife Center in Waynesboro.

They told me what to do and put me in touch with a wildlife rescuer in my county. I phoned the rescuer and arranged to meet her in town with the baby opossums. It was important to keep the babies warm until the rescuer arrived. My husband found a small box for the babies and lined it with straw. I filled an old sock with rice, tied it shut and microwaved it for a minute. A rice sock holds heat for a very long time. Then I went out to the truck for the most difficult part of the rescue operation. I had to reach into that pouch and pull the baby opossums out. They were still trying to nurse and their little mouths maintained a strong suction. I wrapped my fingers around a tiny gray baby and gently but firmly pulled until the suction broke with a small popping sound. Each baby began to cry as it was removed from its mother's cooling pouch. Opossum babies don't mew like a kitten or whine like a puppy. They hiss like an angry cat or weasel. Their lovely bodies and faces charmed me until I saw their teeth. Tiny rows of pointed fangs marred their cute faces. They were simultaneously adorable and hideous. They smelled funny, too. Musky.

I pulled seven living baby opossums from that pouch. And two dead ones.

I met the wildlife rescuer in town. A small, muscular woman with an enormous smile jumped out of her old brown full-size van and introduced herself as Sharon. Sharon's long blond hair flew wildly in the wind as I handed her the box of baby opossums. They had stopped hissing and were all snuggled down in the hay below the warm rice sock. Sharon looked at them and said they were big and would probably all survive. She knew how to feed them and raise them so they could be released back into the wild. I asked how long opossums live in the wild and she said that on average, they only live two years. That is why mother

possums have as many as thirteen babies at a time. I wondered why we went to such trouble to save these semi-ugly scavenger marsupials that only live two years anyway. Sharon said she knew that some folks think she is crazy for working for a wildlife hospital, but she is hooked. God put us here on this earth to have a responsible dominion over the animals. In her opinion, we don't behave very responsibly. People are in such a hurry to go about their own business that they drive too fast and kill innocent wildlife. Sharon felt her job was to try to restore the balance between mankind and wildlife. By rescuing as many injured animals as she can, Sharon helps to keep the web of life intact.

But the balance of human and wildlife needs is still a complicated one. David Baron writes in his book *The Beast in the Garden: A Modern Parable of Man and Nature* that "America is engaged in a grand and largely unintentional experiment as wildlife invades suburbs and suburbs invade wildlife habitat". Baron says that as wildlife and humans share the suburban landscape, wildlife behavior changes. Nocturnal predators such as pumas were once not considered a serious threat to human adults; but now there are cases of healthy adult pumas stalking, attacking, and even eating healthy adult humans. In an interview with National Public Radio, Baron said: "I'm increasingly of the opinion that the proper thing to do with wildlife that ends up in your backyard is to be mean to it. Yell at it and throw rocks at it and squirt a hose at it and I know that this sounds incredibly unpolitically correct, but the wildlife problems that we're having are because the wildlife has become too comfortable with us and that's not good for the animals and it's not good for us."

There is a great difference between a mountain lion

and a mouse. My husband has a small studio near our barn. About the time I heard Mr. Baron's interview on NPR Keith discovered a young mouse had moved into the studio. Instead of trying to catch that mouse or sending in a cat or two to take care of business, he befriended the critter. He enjoyed sitting on his sofa and watching the mouse snooze in a sunny corner of the window overlooking the winter-sleeping garden. When the mouse awoke, Keith would offer it small pieces of his sandwich and give it water to drink from bottle caps. Keith called it Stuart. After a few weeks, Stuart and Keith were great friends. Keith would come home from work and sit in his studio smoking his pipe and sharing his sandwich with Stuart as they discussed his day. Stuart would climb up onto the back of the sofa and sit by Keith's ear and listen sympathetically. Stuart even charmed me as I was battling his cousins in my silverware drawer. I didn't cringe when I sat on the studio sofa and Stuart scrambled up the leg of my blue jeans and up to my chest. He peered into my face and seemed to be asking me for a sandwich.

Stuart fell off the back of the sofa one day. He walked zig-zaggedly for a few days. Keith came home from work one Thursday afternoon and found Stuart curled up in his favorite sunny corner of the window. But Stuart wasn't breathing anymore. Keith held a private funeral for his friend.

I don't know what the ultimate answer is to the question about the balance between wildlife and mankind. For my family, the answer seems to lie in being as accommodating and clean as possible. I wash the dishes a little more often and for that small sacrifice I receive the privilege of witnessing the natural cycles of life in my backyard. I am learning not to mourn as I watch. I rejoice when the partridges hatch and lead their young down my driveway, but I

do not mourn when a young fox catches his first partridge prey. I delight in his accomplishment. My mourning is reserved for the opossums on the side of the road. And sometimes for the extra dishes I have to wash when I find mouse pellets in my silverware drawers.

Sketch
Megan McManus

His eyes become pencils
as he stares - my image
upon a piece of scratch paper.
Transition into graphite--
my eyes lose their pale blue
to a grainy silver.
Behind the pupils only pulp
mixed with the sap and dried blood
of a tree now forgotten.
The image is flawless and defined,

except for the eyes.
Struggling, there is an area
he cannot master.
I notice a tiny niche, where
he had lost precision and agility.
There the paper shines blindingly white
and only a few pencil scratchings
cautiously mark the surrounding site;
no smears or smudges
only a tiny space remains

naked
left alone for revision.
Perhaps out of frustration or devastation,
he has lost hope
not knowing how to sketch
that aspect of me.
Flustered, he stares at me.
Eyes of pencils--
searching, waiting to discover,
learning how to draw.

Maple Leaves

Kingyo

Wet maple leaves
churning about the wind
there green and there stuck
still bleeding into the wind
and into the brick wall.

helping the homeless
Jamison Crabtree

Burning barrels keep the trash
of the city warm with the help of
pocket whiskey and plastic vodka bottles.
Wearing scraps like war dressings and

fingers peeking out of finger-less
gloves like dying worms writhing
in funeral pyres, they're gathered around the drums.
Motionless, their eyes follow mine-

as if my stare anchors them down
and keeps them from vanishing. I recognize
one of the tall ones by his hollow smile. A street king,
whose lips had withered into that same grin

when I caught him pissing in my alley.
Without pause he had lifted one hand
to ask me for my change and
as I walked away and I could've sworn

I heard him mumble:
"Give me some dignity"
against the whisper of his fly closing.

ReRouted

Charlie Stokes

It was raining.

He decided that he would never do it again. He wouldn't because grieving was for weaker minds. Minds that couldn't hold their own and had to invite others inside for strength and release. Unfortunately, those guests would always prove a let down and as he knew from experience, sometimes they would take everyone with them.

Johnny was a mailman. It was an easy job with the exception of their boastful credo that forced him out into the elements. When he first started and encountered the rain, he tried to get the mail in the box as fast as he could, but now he made sure each bill and personal letter was thoroughly doused with his annoyance. He was being punished, why shouldn't they?

He thought it was "poetic," not knowing if that was the proper word to attribute to his current situation. Last week he caught his long-time girlfriend, Gina, having sex with some stranger in their apartment. After that he shuffled quickly through all sorts of momentary stages and found the most comfort in profound melancholy.

He wondered if the world was done with him. When would he be brushed aside and forgotten? It had already started with Gina. She had obviously forgot about her boyfriend while entertaining some guy in his bedroom. So the clouds pissing like the rest of the world was deemed "poetic" in his mind. Just another in a series of evens to dissolve his existence.

Hours had gone by when he found himself in front of a beautiful two-story house, complete with porch and swing, a cat comfortably staring from a window, and a miniature playground for the kids. Something struck him there on

that rainy day. He wished he could be in that house with whoever those people were. He pictured the dad dressing up as a clown for birthdays and the mother, hot and in her thirties, setting the table for the family and the sitcom neighbors. He knew the pets were perfectly groomed and the kids were little angels, both good in school and in church. The white vinyl siding that canvassed the whole house, the golden door, and the pale pillars made the place look like heaven's gate, floating effortlessly in the skies.

The little red flag was up on the mailbox. The "perfect family" wanted to mail something. Johnny delicately opened the hatch and took the outgoing mail. He had been delivering the mail for some ten years now and could instantly tell what type of mail he was either getting or delivering. The Mossley's, as the mailbox happily indicated next to two ornately painted birds, were mailing three bills and a personal letter to one Joseph Mossley. He paused before putting their outgoing mail in the appropriate pocket. His hand hesitated a moment, then as if unable to control his will, placed the letters into his coat pocket instead of the outgoing mailbag.

He got home late. All the rain had slowed him down. The place was much larger and lonelier without Gina. It had been almost a week since she had left but she was still there watching him out of picture frames and fragrances left on the couch. She was on the bed too.

Where he found her that day. Her fume haunted him.

He turned on the TV and lay back to watch his comedies. His cat Maiden, a sleek calico, purred contently on his stomach. He laughed as he watched her go up and down and tugged delicately on her paws. It was weird, but the cat really liked it. He nuzzled her and continued to watch the TV and the cat going up and down, up and down

in his lap until finally he saw what he saw that day. Gina, breathing heavily, going up and down on that guy, her long black hair rocking back and forth in the air.

He shot up from the couch, launching Maiden onto the carpet. Grabbing the coat from the back of the chair, he decided he needed a walk but stopped as four letters dropped to the floor from the black holes of his pockets. His eyes watered and he ripped the Mossley's bills up in a fury and threw them in the can. With the last one, he sat down at the table, grabbed a beer, and studied the envelope as if it were foreign to him. It was red with a happy face sticker on the back.

After two beers he opened it. It was a birthday card. Twenty dollars spilled onto the table, but he didn't notice.

Dear Joseph,

I hope things are going okay with Melody and we all hope that you are doing well with your studies. Have a great birthday son. Spend the twenty on something other than alcohol okay? Hababa. Your mother, Lauren, and Justin send their love.

Johnny thought for a long time. The letter made him jealous. Insanely jealous. The "perfect family" was sending a letter to "Straight A Joseph." Everything was so happy. It wasn't fair.

He went to the store and bought some blank cards and envelopes. He didn't bother to buy stamps; he could steal those for free from the post office. He wrote Joseph a birthday card, a newer better birthday card with no money, and indicated that he needed to get good grades or they

would stop providing for him and also that Lauren said she didn't miss him much, but still hoped he had an alright birthday. He signed the letter as close to Joseph's father's signature as he could, then sealed it up in an envelope, and tucked it securely in his pocket to be mailed off tomorrow.

During his sleep he had fits of wondering if he did the right thing. He woke up a few times disgusted with himself, but as soon as he would think of his ex, everything seemed to right itself again like the perfect counterbalance to any evil.

The next day he mailed the letter.

"You feeling alright Johnny boy?" a fellow postal worker asked him.

"Yeah, just still, I don't know, grieving."

"Grieving? You grieve after someone's funeral, not when somebody cheats on you," the man slapped him on the back, "You're just depressed. Don't worry. I could introduce you to all kinds of eligible girls if you want."

Johnny looked away, "No thanks. You're right, I shouldn't be so down." He smiled weakly and excused himself.

Time passed and Johnny realized that stealing personal mail and rewriting it was a newfound obsession. In only a few weeks, parents read about their children's misdeeds, a mother found out that her only son was dead, someone was getting sued, a few people were gay, and some poor sap was lost at sea. The whole thing was like therapy! Everyday he would get home, breath in Gina's haunting fume that dared not go away, and rewrite mail. He was never malicious. They were more of practical jokes to him. But as long as he could fool himself into thinking he ruined someone's day, his only got better.

"Another day another dollar," Johnny said spiritedly to his co-worker.

"Yeah I guess so, say, Johnny, you've been a lot better since he had our talk. I'm proud of you. You get a woman?" he began poking a finger through a hole he made with the other hand and smiling, "Eh? Eh?"

"No buddy," he laughed, slapped the guy on the back and started walking out.

"One thing though Johnny, before you go. Change your cologne.

You'll never get a girl with whatever you're using. You kinda," he leaned in, "smell. You should try Stetson. I get it all the time.

Wife buys it for me every Christmas and I'm dying to give some away. Howabout it? Free present?"

"You keep cologne in your pockets? Strange, strange, man." He gladly accepted the gift and smiled despite being insulted. Things were really going well for him now. He just had to keep screwing up people's mail until he reached full recovery.

A few days later there was a knock on Johnny's door. He peered through the peephole at a few police officers. Quickly, he threw all the mail he had in the trashcan and placed paper towels over it. Maiden meowed and skittered in the back as Johnny opened the door.

"Johnny Gallows?" an officer asked.

"Yes?"

"We've received word that people's mail has been getting screwy on your route. You know anything about that? Seems some prankster takes the mail and sends fake mail instead. The crimes only happen on your route. Your boss gave us your address."

"Mind if we come in?" another asked.

"Sure, I guess. Crimes?"

"It's a crime to tamper with mail. If anyone knows that it's a mailman, yes?"

"Yes. But I don't know anything about it." Johnny answered. His eyes were getting wider.

"Smells bad in here bubba," an officer said while casting the place.

"I'm bad about changing my cat's litter box." He laughed nervously, "Thing really likes to shit you know?"

"Uh huh," the officer nodded. He noticed paper clippings all over the kitchen floor and as if a psychic, picked up the paper towels, revealing a bunch of envelopes and letters.

Johnny began to sweat. "I can explain. I can explain!" He twitched as the other officer yelled from the back. He said that he found the smell. Two bodies were in the closet. Johnny shrunk as the officers cuffed him, "She cheated! She cheated! Listen to me! She cheated!"

Maiden ran out and disappeared.

Time To Go

Lee Meadows

The crowd cheered and flashes went off in the early morning light as walkers raised disposable cameras into the air to permanently capture a glimpse of the thousands of people milling around them. The grounds of Hood College in Frederick, Maryland, swarmed with people carrying suitcases and sleeping bags toward rope lined check-in areas, where they would be assigned a tent, a number, and a tent-mate if they didn't already have one. Every face I saw had a smile on it. I wondered if their smiles would freeze on their faces if I took my clothes off and ran around the grounds naked. I thought, I must be crazy.

~

When I arrived at the campus, I could feel the adrenaline buzz tingling up my neck, and I briefly wondered how much money all the people had raised for cancer research. I smiled at the businesslike efficiency and wondered if that helped curb any morbid thoughts that might come up on a walk raising money for cancer causes. My answer came as I overheard the conversation of two walkers in line in front of me.

"I just hope I don't drop dead," a pink-shirted woman with short blond baby hair curling softly in wisps around her head said to a woman wearing mostly white with a matching white bandanna tied loosely around her neck. The bandanna matched the skin that showed on her scalp through her close, patchy buzz cut. The two stood close watching the opening ceremony. They looked like close friends, possibly even relatives. Both mid-thirties, tall, lean, and lithe.

"You'll be fine. You've made it through worse," said the balding one.

I looked them both over trying to figure out if they would finish the course. Except for the pink bands on their wrists, they both looked like they were in good shape. The bands signified certain medications and walkers were required to wear them "in case something happened." At the time, I wondered what they meant by "in case something happened," but I heard later on that somebody had died on the walk the year before.

As the opening ceremonies started, I glanced around at the other participants; some coming in tearfully after saying goodbye to loved ones. My throat felt dry again, just as it had been when Karen dropped me off and said, "I'll see you Sunday, at the other end." In the predawn darkness, I could see shadows eating breakfast on the lawn between academic buildings.

As the sun rose the atmosphere changed from quiet prayerful whispering to a louder, more excited, pre-aerobics class feel. People began stretching, tightening laces, zipping fanny packs, and applying sunscreen, though the sun was barely warm.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I will see you in Washington, D.C.," the announcer said. It was all business now, a news helicopter swung overhead with Channel 6 on its belly and press photographers on the ground snapping shot after shot of men and women moving toward the road.

"Let's move out," said the balding woman in front of me. Her friend nodded and I moved into step behind them feeling slightly depressed. I missed Ray. I wished he were there to cheer me on.

~

I met Ray at Karen and Doug's engagement party. Karen was in love and wanted everyone to be as happy as she was. I was twenty-eight. My career came first, I kept telling myself, there'd be plenty of time to get married and have

kids. I dated, but no one seriously until Ray. Karen had introduced me by saying, "Ray, here is your match." We dated for two years and then got married.

~

Images of Ray crowded my thoughts as I walked. Soon the stream of people thinned; we began walking single file or in paired groups down the side street. In the distance, I could hear children cheering and yelling. As the noise increased, the chorus of children came into view. They were about the same age as Karen's youngest, probably still in elementary school. They reminded me of the child that I might have had years ago if things had been different.

Ray and I had waited to start a family; we wanted time with each other first to let things settle down. After a couple years, I went off the pill and we waited for it to happen. By then Karen had had her first child, a boy, and we were hoping I would have one soon so the kids would be playmates. A year later, the doctor confirmed that I was six weeks pregnant. It was the first time I ever saw Ray cry. He joked about the baby being born on Father's day, just in time for his thirty-seventh birthday.

I was surprised that everything could crumble so easily. One Friday at work, I started spotting. By the time I got home, I knew something was seriously wrong. Karen drove me to the hospital when I couldn't get a hold of Ray. Late that night, Ray came into my room as the nurse was checking my blood pressure.

"Where were you?" I asked.

"I had my phone off," he said.

I stared at the wall while the nurse finished up. When she left, she frowned gently.

"I'm sorry, Alex," he sat in the chair beside my bed, watching me.

The next morning the hospital released me to go

home. From our bedroom, I could hear Ray through the wall giving a muffled explanation to someone over the phone. And I was angry.

We grew silent around each other, communicating through intermediaries, mostly Doug and Karen. But, when the long silent hours stretched out, quiet days became weeks.

"Doug and Karen are coming over this Saturday and they're bringing Sam." Ray told me over what had been a conversation-free dinner. Ray had gotten in the habit of turning on the radio when we ate, to drown out the quiet, but tonight there was no relief.

"I don't want to see Sam."

"He misses his aunt and uncle," he said. "Plus, we didn't go to his birthday party..."

"Fine."

The word echoed in my head as I heard someone on the sidewalk shouting to the walkers, "You're doing fine. Keep it up." Schoolchildren held up signs and clapped for us. I kept walking as I wondered if our child would have looked like the little brown haired boy on the curb or the blonde girl who kept her elbows straight when she clapped. I had to ignore the lump that formed in my throat and the burning in the back of my eyes when I remembered Ray trotting around in the back yard with Sam tucked under his arm like a football, while Sam giggled. Instead, I took a gulp of water and picked up my pace, trying to put some distance between the memories and me.

~

Later the route moved into a neighborhood with more historic buildings. Many of them were row houses that had been turned into shops and offices. In a daze, I followed the walkers letting my mind wander to a similar street not

far from my house, the street where my doctor's office was. That street was lined with brick and stone row houses, which had been converted into offices; the last one in the row was Dr. Weirnacki's. He was the doctor who biopsied irregular cells that developed in my cervix in college, and the same doctor that did all of my annual exams. When I went for my checkup a year after the miscarriage, I noticed that someone had sprayed graffiti outside the office: crude things like Pussy and cunt. That was the day I had my first mammogram. Dr. Weirnacki had recommended it after doing a breast exam. He felt a small lump under my arm and wanted to check it out. He reassured me, it's probably a cyst.

~

I felt numb as I approached the first rest area of the walk. I could see a stream of walkers stretched out for miles. They followed a serpentine route along the highway and over the nearby hills. I felt for a moment that I wasn't really there. I was just looking over all of the movement. A woman bumped into me making me drop the water bottle I was holding.

"Sorry," she called as she kept going. A familiar feeling washed through me, as if I had lost something important and wanted to cry. I remembered the sensation, it was the day Ray had come in from work and I was standing in the kitchen making cookies.

~

"Hey, have you talked to Karen?" Ray asked. His black eyebrows were raised in a question as he stood on the other side of the island.

"No. Why?" I said and continued mixing ingredients in a heavy ceramic bowl.

"Well, I ran into Doug. He told me, Karen is pregnant. They just found out."

I stirred faster as the words sank in, then pushed the

bowl aside leaving the wooden spoon in the dough.

"Doug was really excited, they want a girl this time," Ray said.

"That's great," I turned away and grabbed a cookie sheet out of the cabinet by the stove.

"Aren't you supposed to refrigerate that for a while before you cook it?" he asked as I scooped large blobs out of the bowl, plopping them on the pan.

"Dr. Weirnacki wants me to come see him tomorrow."

"What for? You were just there." Ray asked and reached across the counter to finger out a scoop of dough.

"They found another lump."

"A lump?" Ray had let the dough fall back into the bowl and had walked around to the sink and washed his hand.

~

As I bent to pick up the water bottle the woman had knocked out of my hand, I remembered the puzzled look on Ray's face and then how it had turned to fear. The look haunted me, and in an effort to escape it, I threw the bottle in a trashcan and began to walk faster. I walked past the next rest stop and went on until I could feel blisters forming on my feet.

Knowing I had pushed too hard, I had to stop and ask for help. Other walkers were stopping for water and food at a nearby stop, so I stepped off the pavement and looked for the medical tent. As I approached the tent, I saw a woman in a nurse's uniform reading a magazine; she had the same sad, tired look that the nurse at the hospital had in her eyes when I had asked after the last of the chemotherapy and radiation treatments if life went back to normal after that. She had said, "Of course."

I quickly grabbed some bandages and ointment and

walked away before the woman could ask what I needed so I would have to say I didn't know what I needed. Sometimes it's easier to know what you want than to know what you need. Even if I knew I couldn't have what I wanted.

I found a spot out of the way to sit down and doctor my feet. As I spread the medicated ointment on and bandaged my feet, I wondered what it was that I really needed. Karen seemed to have an idea of what I needed; she was always printing out inspirational emails that she had received or bringing articles by for me to read. Like the one that advertised the cancer walk.

"Hey sis, have you read that Health magazine I dropped off yesterday?" Karen had asked over the phone.

"No," I mumbled and held the receiver away from my ear. I had wondered if I could just lay the phone down on the bed and ignore her. She had been after me to get out and exercise ever since she had come over one afternoon found me still in bed in my nightclothes.

"Well, you should read it, there is a really good article about this group of women who are training for a breast cancer walk. I thought you might get involved in something like that."

"Look, I'm almost forty years old," I cut her off.

"I don't need a mother or a nosy sister butting in my life."

"What life?" she had said, and hung up before I could snap back at her.

I resented Karen's comments. What did she know about my life? She had all the things I was missing. Karen's question needled me until I got up that day and had found the magazine. I sat on the kitchen floor and read the article. The women were just like me, one had even lost her husband. They talked about feeling alive and feeling strong again after training and doing the Breast Cancer Challenge.

I sent off an email the next day from Ray's computer and in three days the registration packet was in my mailbox taunting me.

~

I stretched after I bandaged my feet but after several more miles on the hard road, protests came from my aching legs and sore feet. After the twentieth mile, I cursed Karen. "That fucking busybody." Then I felt guilty, knowing I was the one who made the decision. What had I been thinking? Three days, sixty miles, May weather in the D.C. area where it's either scalding hot and humid or raining and cold. Sixty miles on foot. All in the name of some honorable cause. Whatever. I knew I hadn't been thinking at all, it was pure emotional response. I wanted a little bit of what those women in the article had found. I needed something and that's how I found myself in a swarm of women (and a few men) in pink breast cancer T-shirts trudging up hill after hill in the beating sun, sweating like a farm hand in August. Counting down the miles to the end.

Four miles later, I heard someone say we were getting close.

"Close to what?" I asked with my sarcasm thinly veiled. We were in the middle of the city and I wondered where in the middle of zipping cars, blinking traffic lights, and honking horns would we find a place for three thousand walkers to sleep, shower and eat. The answer came back to me as another walker pointed to the road sign, which read, "Maryland State Fairgrounds 1.6 mi."

"You have to be kidding me!" I said to myself, dropping my head, wishing for a Marriott or at least a Comfort Inn.

That night at camp I couldn't feel either of my feet anymore, except for the big toe that was still attached to

what had been my right foot. I knew better than to stop before I had my tent and gear set up. I paced over to the truck with gear and grabbed my bag. The tent had already been dropped off at my site by someone with a generous spirit and more energy than I had at the moment.

My tent mate, a stranger to me, had not come into camp yet and sympathy crept up in my chest. I figured she would be worse off than me if she were finishing the miles this late. A volunteer helped me set up the tent, and as we were placing the guide poles in the silky tent folds, my tent mate appeared. She looked vibrantly alive, a campfire girl with a rosy glow on her face. Her brown pigtailed irritated me with their cheerful bounce as she moved over to me, "Hey, let me help since I got hung up at the massage tent."

The massage tent. I thrust the curved pole at her and went to bend over my sleeping bag and spare clothes thinking of ways to kill her in her sleep, settling on suffocation. I found my toiletries in a large plastic zip lock bag.

I curbed these thoughts, praying for restraint and a little relief from a God that I hadn't talked to in quite a while. "Do you think you can handle this while I hit the shower?"

"Sure," she chirped. "You may want to get dinner first. The lines at the showers are dreadful. By the way, I'm Jenny."

The lines were dreadful, as Jenny had said, but my feet were worse. Numb blisters bubbled off of almost every curve on my feet. The raw skin had a wet matte look as I peeled my shoes and socks off. The numbness of my body ended when I reached for my big toe. It was making its presence known, protesting, screaming like a newborn brought into the rudeness of this world. The nail was lifting off the toe in an attempt to part from the punishment the road had

been doling out. I caressed the tip, gently gliding my fingertip over the hard floating nail. Then I pushed down, red bolts of anger shot up my spine. I felt alive.

There was nothing to be done for the toe. I had made my decision. I was going to finish what I had started, and short of cutting it off, it was coming with me to the finish line.

The dawn came quickly and loudly on the front of the freight train that literally chugged down the tracks that lined the fairground's back border. The train blew into camp all the sounds of a village coming to life. As the rail tracks vibrated my lumpy bed, I rolled over and discovered Jenny already dressing. She turned to the side but shifted her back to me when she realized I was awake. Her twenty-some-year old body was perfect in the early morning light with smooth skin stretching over a flat stomach and up spreading out into full pert breasts. They were the kind I had never had, even as a teen, but always wanted. I thought about the reconstructive surgery the doctor had mentioned and remembered talking about it with Ray after his firm's New Year's party.

~

We had come home, and I had gone upstairs to get ready for bed. I was standing in front of the full-length mirror in the bedroom with my dress hanging on my hips, exploring my flat chest when Ray came in.

"What are you doing?" Ray asked still dressed in his coal colored suit.

"Do you think I should have reconstructive surgery?"

"Do you want to have it?"

"I don't know." I said, pulling my slip back up and sliding the straps up my arms.

Ray came up and hugged me gently, "You've been

through a lot. You don't need to make this decision right now." Ray turned away and began undressing. He stripped down and got into the bed. I could hear him snoring as I hung up my dress and pulled off my slip. I picked up my nightgown and looked down at my figure and felt an empty sadness that my breasts were gone. My body seemed androgynous, not quite female but not male, either. I decided to have the surgery, but not right away. I wanted time to recover first.

I had planned to have the surgery in the spring. Then I would be significantly female enough to wear a swimsuit in the summer and feel comfortable in it. My plans were forgotten when Ray was killed in a car accident on Route 270. A sport utility driving too fast in a late winter snowstorm flipped over the cement barricade and slammed into Ray's Mercedes. The depths of winter locked me indoors after the funeral.

~

Now as I watched Jenny, I reached up to my chest and pressed gently on the cord of scar tissue over the knuckles of my ribs where breasts should have been but only a small pocket of skin remained and wondered if it was time.

"I'm going to get breakfast and then I'll be back to help pack up the tent. Do you need anything?" Jenny asked, looking completely refreshed, clean, and ready to face any challenges coming her way.

I sat up. "I'm fine," I lied cheerfully, then groaned and fell back onto my pillow. "God, I think I can die now. I'm too sore to go on," I said.

"Up and at'em," a bullhorn voice announced outside the tent. "Breakfast is ready when you are. You can begin today's miles as soon as your gear is on the truck."

"Not the answer I was looking for," I said as I fumbled for my clothes and socks, avoiding shoes until Jenny

got back.

An hour later, Jenny was unclipping the outer tent cover while I forced my feet back into my walking shoes and slowly crawled on my knees to the nylon tent flap.

"How you doing?" Jenny asked.

"I was run over by a freight train."

"No, you just slept by one."

As I crawled out of the tent onto the dirt ground I could see she was right. Train tracks drew a straight line down the length of the fairgrounds, forming a boundary for all of the blue tents that the walkers slept in. The tents formed a small city in which people were milling around and packing gear. A few early birds were already heading toward the fairground gates, embarking on the next part of the journey.

"Hey, are you awake?" Jenny asked as I stood for a few more minutes inspecting the awakening camp.

"I guess so," I replied. "Let's get this gear put away so I don't have to bend over anymore. My back is killing me."

We slowly got everything packed up. I let Jenny carry the tent and ground cover to the awaiting trucks, trailing behind with my sleeping bag and personal gear.

"Well, I'll see you on the road." Jenny said. "Good luck today. Remember, 'Drink, drink, pee, pee, cause you don't want no stinkin' I.V.'" She laughed as she repeated the chants from the volunteers in the medical tents. "Oh, yeah, and stretch out a little before you get going, it'll help with the first couple miles."

She waved and trotted off to the breakfast tent where I could see her talking with some of the other walkers who were just finishing breakfast. The tent city was quickly dissolving back into an empty field and I could feel my pulse throb in my neck as I realized I would be near the end of the

group today and in danger of being "picked up." Panicky, I hurried through breakfast, grabbing a banana and a couple of power bars to stuff in my fanny pack along with a twist-top bottle of juice, things I could eat on the road. I knew I needed a jump on the other walkers to make sure I would be allowed to finish line on my own two feet and not carried there on a bus. I remembered the look of the ones who couldn't make it the day before as they passed us in a long white van. I saw the woman in white from the opening ceremony, the one with the patchy hair, looking out the last window, her eyes blurry, not seeing us but something else, something she knew she wouldn't get back.

As I left the campground behind and arrived at the first intersection, I recognized the scraggly crossing guard from the day before. He had the same black leather chaps over faded blue jeans and a white T-shirt under a fringed black leather vest, definitely a potential Hell's Angel. I had probably seen him four or five times at different intersections the day before but had never noticed his motorcycle on the edge of the road with his cowboy boots set beside the bike. He smiled at me that morning and winked when the light turned red. It was safe for us to walk. "Good morning, only sixteen miles to camp and God bless you," he said, sending me on.

Under my breath, I muttered, "God bless me." Six miles into the second day, Jenny caught up with me. She looked loose and relaxed. The only clue that she had been walking six miles was a light shimmer to the skin of her neck and forehead.

"Hey, roomie, how's it going?" Jenny asked.

"Fine so far. The blisters all popped, and I still have ten toenails. Few cramps, you know, the usual," I said.

"Good, good."

We walked in silence past two rest stops before we

came to an intersection where we had to wait for the light to change. The leather-clad biker was monitoring the light. Jenny and I were the only walkers waiting, and as the light turned red, he grinned a juicy tobacco mouthed grin and greeted us with a long two breathed whistle, "Well, ladies. Isn't it a beautiful morning?" He drew out the words ladies and beautiful.

Jenny giggled and waved as we crossed the street, while I gave him a frown.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?" I said.

"Why'd you sign up to do this walk?"

She shrugged and her nose and cheeks turned a rosy pink, "A couple reasons. At first I did it for the challenge. You know, sixty miles isn't easy. You really have to train for it."

She paused as we came up to another intersection but began again when we were waved on, "But about a year ago, my uncle was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Of course, it was cancer. The doctors only gave him about three months to live. He's my mom's baby brother. He has a great wife, great family, great job and brain cancer. So this is kind of my tribute to him. My way of contributing. I'm not a scientist or a doctor, but I wanted to make a difference, this is my way of doing it." We walked in silence for about half a mile, both thinking about what had lead us to this point. She turned to me and said, "What about you?"

"I want there to be a cure. I had breast cancer a while ago." Then I paused, thinking. "And I want a life."

"Good for you," she smiled and laughed, picking up the pace a little. "See you at the finish line."

She walked on ahead of me, moving into the morning sun. Her figure seemed to zigzag on the edge of the sun as she crossed over into the sun's rays. Her form blackened before me and became an outline of someone walking with

rays of light shining out of open hands. A voice inside of me urged me forward to the rest of my journey.

The voice dissolved into throbbing pain as I reached mile thirteen. I had to stop and stretch for ten minutes to get the cramps out of my calf muscles. As I leaned down, bent at the waist I heard, "Yeah, baby. Show me that ass." I quickly looked around and saw streamers of black leather floating in the wind behind the Hell's Angel. An older woman stretching on the ground nearby chuckled and said, "Don't mind him, he just likes to keep it lively." She looked like she was at least seventy. Her face was etched with deep wrinkles but her skin was brown and her white hair was tied back in short pigtail braids. As she stood up, I was surprised by how tall and lanky she was.

"I'm Dorothy Wheeler," she said and patted off the seat of her navy shorts. "This your first time?"

"Yeah," I said. I watched her closely as she crossed her legs and bent at the waist to finish stretching her legs.

"Well, this is my third time," she said against her legs. "I'm going to do the AIDS ride in the fall."

"Wow, how'd you get involved in all of these?" I asked.

"I am a thrill seeker," she said. "I love meeting new people. I don't have kids, so this keeps me young."

We rejoined the other walkers and walked another mile. I tried to keep pace with Dorothy but her stride was longer than mine and she faded into the crowd. Soon the only thing I could see of her was red tennis shoes with the lights in the heels that blink with every step.

I traveled the last few miles to camp, chatting with people that I passed or that passed me. I discovered we had a lot more in common than I thought. When I reached camp I noticed a group of walkers milling around the therapy tent, a few of them had vacant stares and were walking

aimlessly like zombies only with their arms down at their sides instead of held out in front. Inside the tent, bodies were draped across stretchers, left arms hooked up with IV lines to bags of saline. It looked like a field unit for cancer patients.

"Are you looking for someone?" A concerned male voice asked. I turned and at first couldn't answer. My mouth went dry when I saw the face behind me. I breathed out a slow, long breath.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I nodded.

"You sure?" he said as he put his hand on my arm and guided me forward toward a stretcher. When I sat down, I realized that I was staring at the man, and he probably thought I was on the verge of passing out.

"I'm fine," I said and started to get up. "Really, I'm fine."

"Hold on a minute," he said, pushing me back onto the seat. "Let me check your pulse and temperature, and I will let you go."

He walked away to get a thermometer, and I scanned the row of stretchers one more time. I noticed that he watched me while he was gathering his supplies. I figured he was probably waiting for me to either fall over or get up and wander away. I sat still while he walked back over and began to wrap the Velcro straps around my arm to check my blood pressure.

"Looks good," he said, as the air seeped out of the tourniquet armband. "Let's get your temperature."

He looked closely at my face and sat on the empty stretcher beside me. He stuck out his right hand, "Hello, I'm Michael Brooks."

"Hi, Alex Connelly," I said, as I shook his hand and took note of his salt and pepper hair and blue eyes with dis-

tinct crow's feet at their corners.

"Open wide," he said. I had to think for a second before I realized he was talking about my mouth. I felt the thermometer touch the soft part of my mouth under my tongue, and I wondered if a person's temperature could rise from embarrassment. The thermometer beeped.

"Well, I think you'll live," he said after glancing at the numbers.

"I certainly hope so," I said, a little wobbly as I got up off of the stretcher. "Thank you, Mr. Brooks."

"You're certainly welcome," he said.

As I walked away I replayed the scene in my head and just about ran over Jenny on her way to dinner.

"Hey, I got our tent up and all, so you want to join me for dinner?" Jenny said.

"Sure," I said.

After getting our meals, we searched for seats. Jenny stopped and scanned the crowd but instead of heading for the empty tables on the outer fringes, headed directly for a crowded table with two empty seats.

"Can we join you?" Jenny asked.

I recognized Dorothy at the table; she had showered already and had her hair pulled back in a ponytail. There were two men and another woman at the table who I did not know. Jenny seemed to know all of them and immediately started introductions. I carefully listened and smiled my greeting.

"So what's your story?" the younger of the two men asked.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Why are you here?" someone replied.

"Well, I've had breast cancer." I said.

"What treatment?" Dorothy asked.

"At first a lumpectomy. Then when other tumors

appeared, I had a double mastectomy, then chemo and radiation. I went bald, hit menopause." I said. "Then my husband died in a car accident just a few months after I was told I would live."

Silence greeted this pronouncement, until the older man said, "Feeling sorry for yourself?"

I felt guilty for sounding bitter and making everyone uncomfortable. I wanted to erase what I had said or at least apologize.

"I'm sorry," I said. "You know, this is the first time I have really talked with anyone about what happened to me."

"Hey, it's okay," Dorothy said.

"Bad things happen," Jenny said. "And sometimes they get worse."

The way she said it made me think she knew what she was talking about.

"You just have to find ways to live, and be happy living. You can't let what goes wrong rule your life," the older man said. "I lost my wife to cancer after fighting prostate cancer. We were one sorry pair, but I lived. I owe it to her and to myself to live well."

The next morning, bright sunshine woke the camp, quiet and gentle. As people got up and packed, a silence remained in the camp. There was a sense of anticipation and accomplishment in the air. Jenny and I packed up the tent and our sleeping bags. We took all of the gear to the trucks that would haul it to the meeting area in front of the Lincoln Memorial.

Jenny and I walked to breakfast and filled up our fanny packs with power bars for the road. At the gate, a volunteer passed out water bottles and told us which direction to go. Down the road a black Harley Davidson sat parked in the median, but I didn't see the Hell's Angel. After a minute,

I noticed him on the right side of the road, walking back to his bike with a cup of coffee from the 7-Eleven on the corner.

I groaned and Jenny noticed.

"Yeah, Chuck's a little over the top, isn't he," Jenny said.

"Chuck is an ass," I replied. "He has been making crude comments every time I go by."

"But that's what's so charming about him."

"There is nothing charming about him," I replied.

Jenny laughed as we approached and Chuck began his catcalls. He moved his tongue in an impression of a KISS musician.

"I think he likes you."

"Hey, sweet thing, How about some sugar," he called.

"We ought to..." Jenny said, looking back at the biker.

"What," I said.

"We ought to do something."

I ignored Jenny's suggestion and focused on working off the lingering soreness from the long miles. After stopping a few times to stretch and then for lunch, Dorothy caught up to us. The three of us continued the afternoon miles together. As we crossed the river and could see the monuments in the distance, Jenny told Dorothy about Chuck and her idea to "give him some sugar."

"What he really needs is an old fashioned spanking," Dorothy said.

"He'd enjoy it too much," I said.

"We need to do something to catch him off guard, something he would never expect," Jenny said. "We have the perfect shot when we get closer to the monument, there is a wooded section by the mall and Chuck is always the

guard for the service road."

We walked as we worked out the details and soon found ourselves picking up the pace, trying to find a break in the walkers that would give us enough time to execute our plan unseen.

As we approached the woods there was a rest tent set up about a quarter of a mile from Chuck's usual spot, which gave us a break in the steady stream of walkers. As we passed the tent, we noticed Chuck wasn't at his post, but I could hear the rumble of metal pipes in the distance.

"This is gonna be perfect," Jenny said. "Come on we need to hurry."

Chuck passed the rest tent just as we got to his parking location already marked with an orange cone. As he came around the blind curve toward us, we turned our backs and gave him a glimpse of "moon candy," as Jenny called it.

The bike swerved and Chuck's balance shifted as he jerked the handlebars on the bike and lost control. Luckily he was already slowing down and only skidded on his side for a few feet. Dorothy laughed a hen's cackle, while I stood dumbfounded. Jenny hollered, "How'd you like that sugar?"

Jenny pulled us back onto the path and pushed us to get going before anyone came around the corner. We spent the next mile replaying the scene. I could feel the laughter bubbling up inside of me and a giddiness made my steps feel light as the finish line came into sight. All of the walkers who had already finished lined the street and cheered us on. After the finish line was a long line of family members looking for walkers. I scanned the crowd hoping to spot Karen, when I heard, "Are you looking for someone?"

I turned and saw Michael Brooks. The crow's feet around his eyes crinkled when he smiled and said, "Congratulations."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm looking for my sister. She's

picking me up."

"Not your husband?"

"No, I'm a widow."

"Well, in that case, would you give me a call some time?" he said. When I nodded, he pulled out his wallet and then an ink pen from his shirt pocket.

"Here's my business card, I'm going to put my home number on the back. I'll hear from you soon?"

"Yes," I said, turning to go find Karen.

I spotted Sam first, he seemed taller than I remembered. I watched him searching the crowd, and for a moment, I drank in the sight of him and said goodbye to what might have been. As I began walking up to them, Sam called my name and pointed before stepping forward to greet me.

"Sam, wait," Karen said.

I nodded to Karen and opened my arms to catch Sam as he ran to me.

Geisha Girl
Nathan Cushing

My geisha girl is a piece of graffiti
That I stroked upon a brick wall
I painted her with no smile-
But she always smiles for me
Your rusted skin and concrete glands
Melt my dirty hands upon my heart
Where I can feel your scent next to mine
You smell like vomit and piss
Baby, you smell so good
I like how I made your hair;
Flying recklessly in the rain
You are niacin for this world
And a cigarette for all of my days
I danced with you on 3rd street
Right next to the liquor store
We waltzed to Beethoven's favorite tune,
Swaying like dust in the wind
Embracing to free ourselves from whence we came
Where I lived and died in your arms.

Coffee Shop Mistress

Justin M. Hunt

running your hands through dark
sandy Hatteras hair, messy
from last night's sleep

that morning shirt you're wearing
isn't quite fair, open
to the fourth button

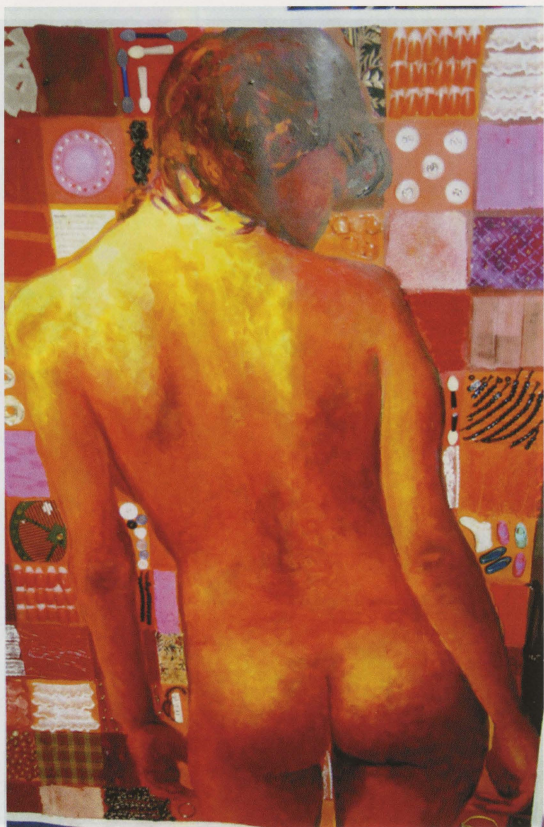
I order Verona love
and you grind it for a round, a
number eight, course and smooth
on my tongue

tasting the sage and alcohol
of tattooing vibrations
coming up from my skin
and your skin and warm
wrinkled tan sheets.

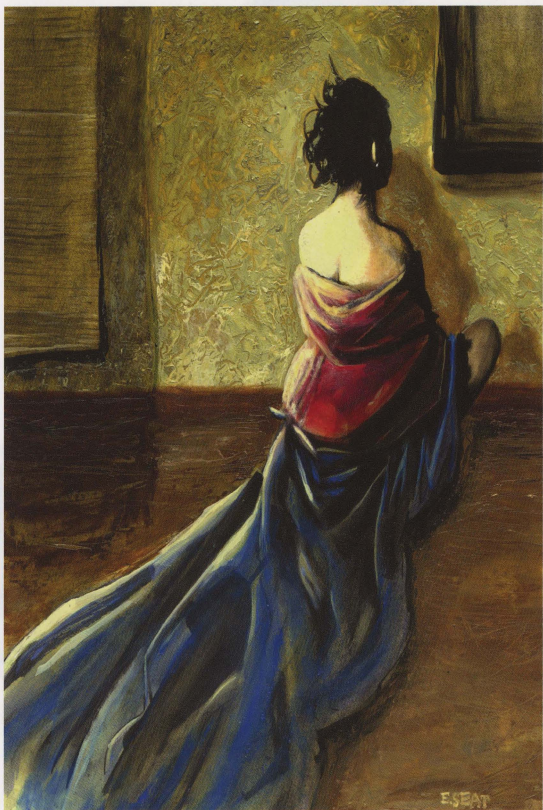
One Night in 1888

Timmy Miller

Rain and glass of Whitechapel,
fills the mortarless joints of cobbled streets.
Puddles of light hold buildings that shudder.
Seeing the windows begin to burn,
a shapeless girl from the city's East End
darts from doorway to doorway.
Curses float from her mouth
taking shape in a slow drift.
Do words carry a scent?
She holds her breath.
Woody by the sparkling window show,
where shadows dance through the echoes of plain men
and the racket play of the night girls,
where men drink, carelessly tonguing tooth and cheek,
holding the door for her with their eyes.
Her eyes fix on the figure outside
whose dark frame is decorated
finely with raindrops.
She dreams of refuge,
of mission bureaus laying
tinted with petticoats and worn trousers.
Below an infamous doctor shops
through the rain and glass of Whitechapel.









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5-West

Melody Randolph

In high school, I once punched a nurse in her face for asking me to take off my bra for one of those scoliosis screenings. I was not the type of person to let someone demean me--no way, no how. So, at first, when the nurse registering me into Southside Regional Medical Center's 5-West psychiatric ward said that she needed to search me, I thought she meant my pockets. But then she told me to strip down to my underwear and I just buckled. It wasn't like I had any drugs on me-I had barely left my own bedroom in weeks. I begged her not to make me do it and even said that I didn't try to kill myself, that my mom was the one who had mental problems and that I did not belong here and that my boyfriend was the one who slashed my wrists and that did I not belong here. My bargaining made no difference: in a moment of weakness, I stripped down to my panties. I worried that if I didn't do as she had asked, that the nurse would give me shock therapy like I had read in countless books and seen in the movies.

It was about 1:00 a.m. before I was led to my room, its windows barred. The nurse told me to get some rest, and I told her that I hadn't slept in over eleven days. She laughed it off, leaving me in the room feeling entirely vulnerable and embarrassed. Why was no one listening to me? Did they think that I was some schizophrenic or something? I was telling the truth, it had been eleven days since I had slept, and my eyes, half swollen from rubbing the dryness out of them, probably looked like I was on drugs of some sort. She returned with the doctor on the night shift who proceeded to give me a couple of pills and a shot of something that knocked me out in the next few minutes.

The next morning I lay in bed recounting the events

of the day before. I had been arrested and placed on a Temporary Detention Order by the magistrate. I was told that this order was to place me in a mental facility and takes away my legal rights until a judge sees fit to return them to me. I had heard of something like this before. When people are incompetent, they lose the right to make their own decisions. I had been placed in handcuffs, and carted off to this wretched place.

I stared at the cinder block walls painted white, consumed in a pity party. I felt like I was being stashed away in a basement, a place where you forget about things. I decided that I was not going to leave the safety of the room I was in. Then again, there was no telling how safe the room was since there was someone else rooming with me. I did not want to roll over and see the crazy person in the bed bolted to the floor next to mine. God only knows what kind of people they put in these places. I was not only afraid, but also embarrassed to be in this place altogether.

My roommate, however, was not so private. Though I had my back to her so I did not have to see her face, she started asking me for some fruit because she was hungry and they were starving her here. Obviously that could not have been true, the food carts had already made lunch rounds. She continued babbling and moaning and I rolled over in my bed to see what she was doing. She had bitten part of the flesh off of her wrist and scratched a hole the size of a quarter in her face. I could see congealed blood on the surface of the wound on her face, while blood seeped down her hand from the teeth marks on her wrist.

It was but a few moments later that I heard a voice screaming down the hall, "My dick is hard!" Immediately, I curled back up with my sheet, entirely forgetting the bleeding lunatic in my room, and started crying all over again. I did not belong in here!

As I lay in bed, with the sheets pulled up to my chin, I kept thinking to myself how terrible my life was and how worthless I was to end up in a place like this. I had never been able to do anything right, and I wasn't ever going to have anything I ever wanted.

About an hour later the doctor came to see me again. This time it was to let me know that she was putting me on medication and that I would be staying with them for a while. As the high and mighty doctor stood there behind the roll-a-way food tray that she used as a podium, telling me that she was going to keep me locked up in this house of insanity, I finally gained the strength to stick up for myself. I said flat out, "There is no fucking way you idiots are going to keep me in this hell hole with all these fucking whack jobs!" I proceeded to announce that I knew the whole lot of the members in the Hell's Angels and a few people in the mafia would assure me that they all would be taken care of in proper respect. It was all a lie of course, but I was angry and I was desperate.

A few moments later, I was in tears again at the realization that I had just placed myself in this hell for an even longer period of time. I saw the doctor writing down on her clipboard, muttering that I was unstable. At least I knew when I was acting crazy-at least I knew right after the fact anyway, unlike the man in the hall who might decide he no longer wanted to merely announce he had an erection. I mean, worse things had happened to me, and I didn't always "lose it."

The doctor proceeded to tell me that in order to "get out" I had to participate in my therapy. That meant interacting with the whackos. I had to go to group therapy with them and listen to their problems and share mine. I thought to myself that this was the stupidest thing I had ever heard of. My thoughts were confirmed with the first session.

Group therapy was held in the common room of the psychiatric ward. The sessions were every day for about an hour or so and happened at different times of the day. As one of the nurses opened up a topic of discussion (which I cannot remember because of the following events) a woman began telling me and everyone else about the hole in her living room floor that housed a family of mice. She went on to say that one day she went in there and decided to make pancakes out of them. At this point, I had had enough of this group therapy thing. How in the hell were these people going to even attempt to grasp my problems? I demanded to see the doctor and the group nurse told me that she wasn't there and I had to wait until morning rounds to see her. I went to my room and refused to eat for the next four days-something that probably kept me in there for even longer.

Lying in my bed, I thought: Cigarettes. I had not had the sweet comfort of nicotine in four days. I was going to die if I was kept in here, against my will, and not be allowed to smoke. They would see just how crazy I was if I didn't have my smokes. I braved myself and asked one of the nurses if we could smoke anywhere in the ward. She said that there was a smoke room and smoking was permitted every two hours, starting at 9:00 a.m. I had had a pack in my jeans when I arrived, so I asked for them. She said that they would hand them out at the next smoke break at the meds station. What the hell kind of logic was that; handing out smokes at the same place you picked up your daily meds?

So 3:00 p.m. rolled around. (Smoke times began at nine in the morning which was an hour after breakfast, then an hour before and after lunch, then two hours before dinner and one right after.) Note: They were putting crazy people on a schedule-as if crazy people know the difference. Since I wasn't eating anyway, I headed over to the smoke

line a bit before three. Others made their way to the line as the only male nurse on the floor stepped behind the counter to retrieve the box with everyone's packs of cigs in it. He handed me one-just one Camel Light, and I followed a seemingly safe older woman dressed in jeans and a t-shirt to the tiny room at the end of the hall. As the last cig was handed out, I saw the male nurse lock up the smokes in a filing cabinet and walk down the hall towards the room.

There were windows all around the room so you could see the common room where there was a television, couches, and tables. You could also look down to the parking lot, again through barred windows. The walls in the smoking room were stained yellow from nicotine and in some places it was oozing down from what I imagine could have been from someone trying to clean it off. I lit my cig on a wall burner that you had to push a button in and it began to glow hot and red; a safety precaution I presumed. I was in the room with three other smokers. No one spoke too soon.

The older woman I paired myself up with was the first to speak, something that, at first, made me forget I was in a psych ward. For a moment I pretended that maybe I was just taking a break from work on a new job. Her conversation seemed normal at first; telling me about how she was once a hairdresser and how she loved her job, which may have explained her overdone bouffant hairdo. But then, she started talking about "her people" and while that seemed normal at first, perhaps talking about her friends, but then she said she couldn't tell me who they were because they would get mad and come after her. I know I was turning red on my arms and face. Almost as soon as she began, she was done smoking. Only one third of a cigarette and she left the yellow walled room.

No sooner had she left than a boy, who looked about

my age said to me, "I saw you."

"Where?" I blurted out nervously.

"At the river."

"Okay, what river?"

"I saw you."

"What is your name?"

"I saw you."

"Did you go to school with me?"

Nothing. He looked away out of the window at what I can only assume was the parking lot. Several uncomfortable moments passed and he said to me, "How do you like it here? They won't let me see the fireworks."

I did not want to reply to him. His eyes were wandering everywhere. He seemed as though he wasn't even looking at me, like I wasn't even there. His eyebrows were raised abnormally high for normal conversation. And then he began giggling to himself. The giggling turned into a loud hackling and then abruptly it stopped. He leaned forward and looked dead at me and said, "God told me about you."

I got up, put my cig in the smoke free ashtray and said, "all right." I walked to the door just as he started yelling for me to stay and the male nurse peeked his head in the door and whispered something to him, calming him down for a few moments, enough time to get me safely away from him.

I stood in the hallway for a moment and there was an old man in a wheel chair; one of those motorized ones that steer with a stick on the armrest. I smiled at him-I did not want another incident, and it seemed the polite thing to do. Just as I suspected he would, he turned towards me in that chair and said, "I know who you are. I got seven goddamned wives. I don't need another one. You're all whores!" I began walking briskly towards my room. I had to get away

from these people. Even in my room I could still hear him yelling, "You God-damned whore!" How in the world could I be thought to belong here? I was not this crazy. The people here were the crazy ones, not me.

Six agonizing days later it was time for my court hearing. That is what they make you do when you are sent to a mental hospital on a TDO; you go before the judge, who conveniently comes to the hospital, and try to convince him you are sane. I thought I had it all cleared up, because compared to the rest of the people in this place; I was the President of the United States. And I told him that. Needless to say, he left it up to my therapist as to how much longer I needed to stay in the hospital, and she said I could go in three days. I think the judge met the pancake woman and the wrist biter on the way to the hearing room.

Tropical Storm

Michaux Dempster

This summer I turned eleven, and Mom decided she was "tired of putting up with that sonofabitch," my Dad. We left Valdosta and moved north, to a little neighborhood close to Atlanta. Mom got a job working as a secretary for some big lawyer company, and started taking classes at night. She said it was so she could get to be something called a paralegal. When I asked Dad what that was, he said, "Kaykay, that ain't nothing but bein' some big-shot lawyer's asswipe." I didn't tell Mom he said that. I think he was mad at her because she made him pay for it all, the classes and the new house, even though he had to stay in Valdosta and didn't get to do anything different.

One thing I do miss is the trees that were all around our old house in Valdosta. I used to climb this big old pecan tree we had, and I'd sit up there and sing. I think my voice is as good as some of those girls on American Idol. I used to hope maybe somebody famous would come walking by my tree and hear me. Then they'd put me on TV, and I'd be a star.

That's what I was doing on the balcony of the place Dad rented in Panama City. It was the week of the fourth of July, and Mom said we could go and stay with Dad, long as we called her a couple of times and didn't "act like that trashy bitch he has with him." She meant Flora, my Dad's new girlfriend. Flora has kids of her own, too, twin girls named Mandi and Crystal. They don't look like the teenagers I see on TV. They are kind of chunky, and don't smile too much, unless they're laughing at me and Duke.

I had been practicing a tap routine I made up on the hard kitchen floor. My tap shoes were at home, so I had to do it barefoot, which was harder. Then Mandi came up the

stairs and said, "Hey girl, quit banging on the floor. My favorite song's on and you're messing it up."

Dad looked over from where he and Flo sat in front of the TV and said, "Go on outside, Kaykay. Gotta be polite to your new friends."

"But Dad, I didn't..."

"Don't make me tell you again."

So I left them there in front of the TV, eating Cheetos and hogging the remote, and went on outside to practice my singing. I liked the way my legs looked, all tan and hanging down between the railing of the deck, and I liked the way my voice sort of went with the loudness of the waves. It seemed like the wind blew my singing and their loudness together, like at a real rock concert.

While I was sitting there, a shiny new car drove up into the parking spot for the condo next to ours. It was dark green and had a sunroof, and I could hear music coming from inside. It sounded different from the kind Mom and Dad listened to, more like the city - like the songs on MTV. A man and a pretty lady got out. She had pale skin and bright red hair, not like all the tan, blond people walking around on the beach. She looked up at the deck next to ours and said, "Oh, it's perfect!" and grabbed a little suitcase on wheels and rolled it inside. The man's hair was blonde, and it kind of dipped down over his eyes. He looked like an actor, I thought, or somebody rich. He started unloading the car, and the next time the lady came out, he said, "So what do you think?" and she said, "It's great. We're gonna have so much fun, and I can't believe we got it so cheap!"

I heard them bringing all their stuff in, going up and down the stairs. "Oh my gosh, this place is so seventies!" I heard the lady say. "Look, Landry, the whole wall up here is mirrored! And look at the fuzzy orange chair!" When they came back outside again, I waved and said, "Hi, neigh-

bor!" They looked up like they were kind of surprised. "Hey!" the pretty lady said. The man smiled, and I smiled back. Their license plate said Virginia. I hoped they'd be staying all week.

Dad and Flo were kissing on the couch in front of the TV. Flo opened her eyes when I came in, but she closed them again and kept kissing my Dad. I wanted to pull her stringy blond hair until she stopped doing that.

"Dad, will you come outside with me?"

"Honey, you know I want to," Dad said. He didn't even turn around. "You go on and maybe we'll come out there in a little bit."

I couldn't stand the way Flo smiled, like she knew some secret and wasn't going to tell me. And she had lipstick on her teeth. She patted Dad's chest with her hand and said, "Bud, you a good Daddy to these kids, that's the truth."

I got my bathing suit out of my suitcase and went into the bathroom before they could get started again. I wished I could climb out the window so I wouldn't have to go back through there.

The new man and lady were sitting out on their balcony. They had a pitcher of something green, and it sounded like they were talking about what all they'd do that week. I stood on the other side of the wall that made a break between their deck and ours.

"Let's go to that miniature golf place we saw on the way in," the lady said. "I haven't done that in ages."

"Sounds good," said the man. "And what about those go-carts? Let's do that again."

"Yes! Remember how much fun we used to have, racing around in those things? I bet Jennifer and David'll love that."

"What time is it? They ought to be getting here

soon."

"I can't wait to see them!"

It sure sounded like they were going to have fun.

I went down the steps and past Dad's truck, with its big letters that said "Buddy's Auto Repair" on the back window. It didn't look right next to the sparkly green car with the sunroof on it.

Maybe Dad'll take us somewhere fun, I thought, and went on out to the beach, because I saw Duke out there with his boogie board.

It was getting dark when I got back, and there was another new car parked in the driveway that was in between our condos from the beach. Another couple was sitting on the balcony with the first man and lady, and the new lady had the same kind of hair as the first one. I bet they're sisters, I thought. They were much prettier than Mandi and Crystal.

They were looking at me. I pretended like I didn't notice, and did a dance move I'd seen on a video. Then went to wash the sand off my feet. They couldn't see me at the shower underneath our deck.

"That's a cute little girl."

"Yeah, but have you seen the rest of the family? That dad came out here earlier to get something out of his truck. He had his shirt off and he was yelling to some woman back inside the house. I could smell the Schlitz from up here. That little girl doesn't have much of a chance, I'm afraid."

"That's so mean! You shouldn't judge people like that..."

"He's right, though."

I was glad they thought I was cute. I smiled and said "Hey" again when I went back up the steps, and they said it back.

The next morning me and Duke slept really late. We didn't wake up until Dad came up from the downstairs bedroom.

"Hey there, lazy-butts!" he said, too loud. I pulled the covers over my head. "It's too early. The sun's not even up yet," I said.

Duke got out of bed and whistled. "Kaykay, come see," he said. "Come look-a-here!"

I got out from under the covers and looked out the big front window that faced the beach. Duke had pulled the blinds up, and I could see why it felt so early. The sky was really dark, and it looked like it was being stirred up together, like a big bowl of cake mix. The waves were a lot bigger than the day before, too. The whole ocean looked closer. The palm trees that were around our condo and on either side of it were blowing straight back toward us, and I could hear the wind whistling, like it does in a scary movie. We'd had hurricanes come close to Valdosta, but they weren't very strong by the time they got there. I'd never seen one at the beach before.

The Weather Channel man said it was called Tropical Storm Brad, and Panama City was just on the edge. He said it would go away west and then head back again in a few days. I was glad it was going, because I was bored, staying inside with Dad and Flora and Mandi and Crystal and Duke. Dad and Flora went back to bed, and the twins stayed down in their room, listening to boy bands and laughing at something stupid. Duke sat on the couch with his Gameboy. I watched TV, flipping the channels to whatever station was talking about the storm. I wanted to go out and run around in it.

The phone rang. It was Mom. "Well hey Kaykay," she said. "I been watching the news. Looks like y'all got

some bad weather at the beach down there."

"Yeah," I said. "The weather man says it's going the other way though. I hope we can go out on the beach this afternoon."

She started yelling right away. "Katherine Ann Farmer, you are not going out in that water, do you understand me?"

"Mom, it's not that bad outside - "

"There's a storm going on out there! If your Daddy lets you put one toe in that water, I'll sue him for neglect of his own children, and you'll never get to visit him and that tramp of his again, do you hear?"

"But they said on the news - "

"You go get your Daddy and put him on the phone right this minute!"

I threw the phone on the couch and went downstairs, stomping on each step all the way. Mandi stuck her head out her door. "I swear girl, I'll slap you myself if you keep making all that noise!"

"You wouldn't dare. My Daddy'll wear your butt out if you ever touch me!"

She made like she was going to hit me, and I jumped back against Dad's bedroom door. Dad opened it, nothing but his boxers on. "What the hell you yelling about now?"

"Mom's on the phone," I said. I stuck my tongue out at Mandi and ran back upstairs. I wanted to go outside so I didn't have to hear Dad and Mom on the phone.

The door was hard to open because of the wind. It felt like somebody was pushing on it from the other side, and I had to be careful not to slam my fingers in it. All the plastic chairs on the balcony were on their sides or upside down. I pulled one under the overhang, turned it right side up, and scrunched myself in.

Loud as it was, the wind and the ocean didn't keep

me from hearing Dad on the phone. "I ain't done nothing, you lying bitch. Them kids are down here havin' a great time on vacation with me and Flo...What do you think I am, an idiot? I know what the damn flags mean...of course we'll watch out for the red one, I know...you better be careful yourself, Miss High and Mighty. What if one of these kids starts telling me what you're really doing in Atlanta? You better be spending my money like you told the judge! How do I know what you really wanted it fer?"

I started to sing. Maybe if I concentrated hard enough on the words of the song I wouldn't hear Dad anymore.

It did clear up that afternoon, and we all went out to the beach. The waves were really big, but Dad said I could get in the water as long as I had my boogie board and didn't tell Mama. Dad and Flo sat in big long chairs. Dad wouldn't come in the water, just sat there and kept saying, "In a minute, Kaykay, lemme have one more cold one." I dug a moat around him and Flo and pretended they were trapped, but they just kept on drinking.

When I got in the water, it felt like some giant monster had got hold of me, and was making me dance. The waves came up under my legs and pushed me up high, high, then they would crash down on my head and roll me up underneath them, and I couldn't get back up to the top right away. After four or five times like that, I tried to touch the bottom, but I couldn't find it, even when I let my head go under. I held onto my boogie board and looked back at the beach. There was a whole new building right in front of me, a big high-rise, and I couldn't even see our condo anymore. The waves were really high all around, and I got scared. I got on my board and paddled back to shallow water as fast as I could. It took forever.

The people from next door had come outside by the time I got back in front of our condos again. They had two umbrellas opened up, striped in pretty colors, and a bright green cooler.

"Hi, neighbors," I said to them.

"Hey again," said the first lady. "My name is Miriam. What's yours?"

"I'm Kaykay. My real name is Katherine Ann Farmer, but I like Kaykay better."

"Me too," said Miriam. "Kaykay, this is my husband Landry" - that was the man with the blonde bangs - "and this is my sister Jennifer and her friend, David."

"Hey," I said to them. "Are y'all going to come get in the water?"

Miriam looked around at the tall flagpole a little way down the beach. The flag was red, but there were plenty of people in the water.

"I don't know," Miriam said. "It looks pretty scary out there..."

"I'll go in," Landry said. "Come on, Kaykay, let's go for a swim."

We had so much fun! Landry stayed right by me in the water, watching to make sure I didn't go too far out. He showed me how to use my board to ride in on top of the waves, on my stomach. After a little while Miriam and Jennifer and David got in the water, too.

"Wow, it's rough out here," Jennifer said. "Aren't you tired yet, Kaykay?"

"No!" I was proud not to be tired. "And I can't even swim!"

Miriam looked at her sister and David, and shook her head.

July 2

The next day the waves seemed like they were even higher than the day before, and when I walked along the water, the wind blew my boogie board around like crazy. I had to hold it in front of me and walk forward like that.

I'd put on the new green two-piece that Mom bought me at the Wal-Mart, and I was hoping Landry would come outside. Maybe he really was a movie star, or even a talent scout. Maybe he'd come outside onto the deck one day this week and hear me singing, and put me on TV.

I played with Duke and kept looking for Landry to come out on the beach. Finally he did, him and Miriam and the other couple. They tried to set up their umbrellas, but the umbrellas kept blowing away. They gave up and sat down. I watched them for a little while without going over there. Miriam and Jennifer had magazines to read, and Landry and David had books. Sometimes they'd look up and tell each other about what they were reading. Every now and then one of them would pull a bottle out of the new green cooler, take off the cap with an opener, and squeeze a lime slice into it. I thought about Dad and Flo, with all their pop-top cans of Miller Light. Landry and Miriam made drinking beer look like more fun.

"Hey Landry, hey Miriam!" I hollered.

"Hi, Kaykay!" said Landry.

"You're not going in that water today, are you?" Miriam asked. She sounded like my Mom.

"My Dad said I could," I told her. "I don't go out far."

"Where's your Dad today?" Jennifer asked. "Is he coming out later?"

"I don't know," I said. "Sometimes he does, sometimes he doesn't." I looked at Landry. "Are y'all gonna go in swimming?" He laughed and said, "You go on in, Kaykay."

I'll be there in a minute."

"I'll race you to the water!" I said, and started running, looking back over my shoulder at him.

"Okay, okay," Landry said. He smiled and got up to run with me. I won the race.

"How'd y'all like to go cruising on the strip tonight?" Dad asked when Duke and I got back. "Crystal and Mandi been on my case to take em all afternoon."

I'd heard about the Miracle Strip. I jumped up and down and hollered "Yay!" in front of Flora, who didn't look at me and kept on watching Wheel of Fortune.

When she went downstairs for a minute, I asked Dad, "Does she have to come with us?" I kissed him on the cheek and gave him my best smile. "Please no?"

He laughed and pulled me into a hug that smelled like beer. "Naw, she ain't coming, anyway. We've got some other company tonight, Flo's sister and her two big boys. Flo and her'll stay here while we all go riding around."

He was in a good mood today. "Hey - I sure could use another one," he said, pointing to his cheek. I gave him another big smack and went to find something good to wear.

We were almost ready to go. Everybody was on the balcony drinking, and we had Creedence Clearwater Revival turned up loud on the stereo, so we could hear it from outside. Miriam and Jennifer were sitting out on their deck, too.

"I hope you'll excuse us," Flo said to them. "I swear, we only git to do this during Fourth of July week, but boy when we do it, we really get going!"

Miriam and Jennifer looked at each other and laughed. "It's okay."

"When I turn eighteen next month, Mom's gonna let

me get my first tattoo," one of the boys was saying. "I want a naked lady on my right arm, right here," and he pointed to his arm muscle. I thought he was cute. Neither of Flo's sister's boys were wearing shirts. Duke had his shirt off, too, but he didn't look as good as them. Their chests were really wide, and tan.

"You make sure you think about it good before you decide," Flo said. "It's gonna stay right there your whole life, so make sure you pick one you ain't gonna get tired of." The boys nodded like they understood. I wanted to be old enough to get a tattoo.

"Okay, everybody who's going cruisin with me come on!" Dad hollered from the back of the truck. I ran down the stairs and got in first.

Miracle Strip had lines of cars as far as you could see on either side, with everybody hanging their legs out the back or sticking their hands out the top of their cars. Lots of boys with their shirts off, and tan girls with pretty hair and red lipstick. Everybody played their stereo as loud as they could, like it was a contest to see who'd win. We went past a big amusement park, where people were bungee-jumping right out over the road.

"That's crazy," Mandi said, looking around like she wanted somebody else to say it, too.

"I'd do it," said the younger boy.

"So would I," Duke said.

"Aw, y'all can't do jack," said the biggest boy.

The cars were all going slow, slow. I saw a miniature-golf course, with a waterfall and a castle in it. "Hey look!" I pointed. "Do y'all like mini golf? I bet ten dollars I can get a hole in one..."

The boys laughed and so did the twins. "She's still a baby, ain't she?" the younger boy said to Duke.

"Yeah, she is," he answered. I didn't like the way they

smiled.

"Just a little baby girl," Mandi said, in a really fake voice.

"Now look-a-there!" said the biggest boy. He pointed to a little white building made of big stone blocks. It had a sign in front of it that said the "Show'n Tail," and pictures of girls on the outside walls. "Let's see if your Dad'll stop there, Kaykay!" Everybody laughed, but I didn't get it.

"What so great about that place?" I said, and I thought Mandi and Crystal would pee on themselves, they laughed so hard.

"Y'all are so dumb!" I yelled, and kicked out at Mandi with my foot.

"Quit it, you little bitch!" she hollered, and then I heard Dad's voice from the front of the truck.

"I see you, Kaykay," he yelled out the window. "You be nice, now, or I'll slap you so hard they'll give you a speeding ticket in the next county!"

I thought about jumping out and going to play mini golf by myself, but I didn't have any money. Dad would have worn me out if I tried, anyway.

You could hear firecrackers going off all over the beach on the day before the Fourth, even before it got dark. Flo's sister and her boys were staying at the Sea'n Suds, a ways down the road - on the other side of the strip. Not on the water like us. They came and sat around all afternoon, drinking with Dad and Flo in their stupid chairs on the sand. The beach was getting crowded, even though the wind was still blowing and there were lots of clouds, moving across the sky like they wanted to be somewhere else.

I sat in the sand, watching Landry fly a kite. I'd never seen a kite like this one before. It looked like it was made of lots of different colored boxes, purple, green and red, and all

of them separated with little sticks. Landry said he got it on a business trip to Hong Kong, China, and he had to put it together himself.

"You want to fly it?" he asked. I nodded.

"She's so tiny, that big old kite might just pull her off of the ground," said Miriam. "You keep one hand on it, Landry."

I had to concentrate, bending my knees and leaning back against the wind. "I've never been to China before, but there's a good Chinese buffet close to where my Mom lives. Did you go to a Chinese buffet while you were there?"

They all smiled at each other. "We ate at a lot of great places," Miriam said. "And they have really pretty clothes. Do you like clothes, Kaykay?"

I almost let go of the kite again, and Landry had to jump up to make sure I had it. "Yes," I said.

Maybe if Landry has to go there again he'd pick out something pretty for me, I thought.

I looked up at the kite, wondering how long it took to drive to China. Maybe one day when I was famous, Landry would take me there on a tour. He would tell me that I was the prettiest girl he ever saw, and the best singer.

All the people on our row of condos were out on their balconies, and there were lots of people out on the balconies of the high-rise building to the side of us, too. They all seemed to be looking and pointing out toward the beach.

"Hey, everybody's watching me fly this kite!" I shouted. Landry looked up, then around at the water. "I don't think that's what it is." He sounded real serious.

There was a big crowd of people in front of the building next to us. Men were scooting around on the water in jet skis, looking into the water. "Do you think they're all looking at those jet skis?" Jennifer said.

A helicopter flew over us, way lower than I'd ever

seen one get before. "I'll go see what's going on," Landry said. Nobody was smiling now.

"I'll go too," I said.

"Honey, you better not," Miriam said. Her forehead was wrinkled. But she wasn't my Mom, so I handed the kite over to her and went with Landry.

When we got closer I could see people in uniforms on the ground, kneeling.

"What happened?" Landry said to a lady in a black bikini.

"Two people just got pulled out of the water," she said, like she was telling a secret. "One of them is a little girl, and the other one is her dad or grandad - I don't know which. Look, they're turning him over now."

I looked. The people in uniforms were turning the man on his side. "What are they doing?" My voice was low, too, like everybody else's.

"Trying to get the water to come out," He wasn't really looking at me. He was looking at the other group, where there were more people now. If I hunched down I could see part of a blue bathing suit, and a little tan arm laying flat on the sand.

"Are they trying to make her breathe?" I asked.

Landry turned to look at me this time. I thought he was crying, but he didn't answer me. He turned back to the lady in the black bikini. "Did you hear anything about the little girl's condition?" he asked.

"No," she said. "They been working on her like that ever since they fished her out, though." Then her face got all pinched and tight-looking. "But I heard that it was her granddaddy that swam out there first, trying to save two teenagers and their drunk daddy. They think the little girl musta gone after him. Those folks oughta known better.

Some white trash, could hardly swim, getting themselves caught in the current..."

"We really need to get you inside," Landry said to me, and put his hand on my shoulder. But the lady didn't shut up.

"Two chubby teenage girls, look, there they are, with their no-good father, talking to those reporters," she said. I looked where she pointed and saw them: Dad, hand covering his chest, and Crystal and Mandi sitting by him on the sand. Somebody had a microphone in Mandi's face, and she was talking. Dad wouldn't look up at the reporter. I wanted to go over and get him, make him leave the beach right then, leave Mandi and Crystal by themselves.

"If that child and her granddaddy die, it'll be on their conscience..." the lady kept saying.

I heard a siren coming from the parking lot. They put the little girl and the man on stretchers and the crowd clapped for the rescue workers as they lifted the girl and carried her off the beach.

I ran as fast as I could back inside.

That night we sat in the living room of the condo and watched the news:

"Although the red warning flag was flying, several people were caught in the treacherous currents today, produced by Tropical Storm Brad. Two of them, a Louisiana man and his granddaughter, drowned. They were pronounced dead at the scene. Sources say the man swam out to help two teenagers and their father, who were caught in the dangerous riptide. The teen girls and their father were rescued by the coast guard and were unharmed..."

Pictures of the man and girl, lying on the beach, showed on the screen. Dad and Flora put their arms around each other. "Oh, Bud, it could have been you!" Flo said, and

I thought she was going to cry. "Oh, honey, I'm so glad you and my baby girls are safe..."

Dad's face turned red, and he pushed her away. He got up and walked outside onto the deck. It was dark out there, but he didn't turn on the light.

The TV kept talking. It showed Mandi and Crystal and Dad, and Mandi talking to the reporter. "I never been so scared in my life," she said to the microphone. "God, we musta been out there thirty minutes, hollering for help, and couldn't get in..."

Dad came back inside. "You girls get down to yourr room and don't figure on coming back out again till it's time to go home," he said. "Nobody's going to the beach tomorrow."

"But Bud, it's the Fourth of July tomorrow," Flo said. I could tell she thought he was being silly.

"Goddammit, Flo, if you don't make those girls git I'll fix it so they won't be able to go anywhere for a month!" Dad hollered, and damned if Mandi and Crystal didn't hot-foot it downstairs right quick. I didn't think he meant me and Duke, but we went in the bathroom and stayed there, playing cards, until we heard him going to bed later. I didn't want to see him anyway.

I got up with Duke on the Fourth. We sat outside on the deck, watching helicopters go up and down the beach. I'd never seen them fly so low before.

"Do you think they're looking for somebody else?" I asked.

"Maybe," he said. "Those TV reporters might not of told us everything."

A police truck came over the sand, with a big speaker coming out of the top. "Do not go into the water," it said. "Dangerous currents. Do NOT go into the water."

Dad and Flo put their plastic lawn chairs in the driveway and lay there all day long. Flo's sister and her boys didn't come back by, and nobody asked why not. Mandi and Crystal watched the news, going in and out from the living room, looking at the beach like somebody had done them wrong. "We almost died out there and nobody cares!" Crystal said to us. Me and Duke didn't say anything back.

I went down below the balcony and started to clean out all the sand that had blown up under there from the wind. There was a little change mixed in with it: a quarter, a dime, and six pennies. I ran to show them to Dad. "Hey Dad, look what I found!"

He barely raised his face up off the chair. "Cut it out, Kaykay. I'm tryin' to relax." Instead of a bunch of beer cans all around, there was a bottle of something next to him, half empty.

Landry came out of their downstairs door, getting their stuff ready to go to the beach. "Hi, Kaykay." He was about to say something else, then he saw Dad and Flo sitting out in the parking space.

"We're not going to the beach anymore this vacation," I whispered. He nodded.

"I been sweeping up all this sand," I told him. "I found some money, look! Do you want me to do your side, too?"

Miriam and the others came out, all ready to go. "No, that's okay," Landry said. "We'll see you later, all right?"

I looked down at the concrete ground under the deck. It was dark and cool, like in a cave. I wondered if that ground had ever been in the sunlight since they built that deck over it. I guessed not.

The phone rang inside the condo. Dad rolled over

on his chair. It rang again. "Kaykay, go get that." he said.

"I just saw the news," Mom said. "Your Daddy is a damn fool, going out in that water after them trashy girls. You put him on the phone, and you tell him he ain't never gonna see you or Duke again."

"It's for you," I yelled out to the driveway.

While they were on the phone, I sat under the balcony in the dark, singing real soft. Even from there I could still hear every word Dad said, and it was pretty easy to figure out what Mom was saying, too.

That night I went out on the deck to watch the fireworks in the dark. Landry and Miriam were probably out on the beach, looking at them. I remembered coming to Panama City with Mom and Dad before. If you were out on the beach, you could see the fireworks for a long, long way.

What was it like when that little girl went under the water, I wondered. I remembered when I went out too far a couple of days before, and thought about how it would feel to be stuck out there, calling and nobody hearing you. I guessed she just got too tired after a while.

July 5

The firecrackers kept everybody up really late that night, so we were all kind of sleepy and grouchy the next morning. Everybody packing up to leave. Landry and Miriam were bringing things and putting them in the little green car with the sunroof.

Dad got in the truck to start it. "I'm going to get some gas, then I'll come back for you two," he said to me and Duke. "We need to get going if we're gonna get you to Atlanta before dark. You be ready to go when I get back, and tell Flo and those damn hussies to get their car packed and get on back to Valdosta."

I heard Miriam's voice out on their deck, calling. "You guys come out here for a second. The housekeeper's going to take a picture of the four of us standing in front of the water."

They all came out and put their arms around each other and smiled. I heard the camera click.

"Is that everything?" Landry asked her.

"Yep, car's all loaded up."

"Let's go on, then. I want to try to make Florence by tonight." They all hugged and kissed each other goodbye. "We had such a good time...we did too...drive carefully...have a safe flight..."

Behind me, Dad started cursing and shouting. "Goddamn alternator on the truck is messed up again! FLO! Get those lazy blobs down here! We gotta getta move on! Well, it's a good thing we got Flo's car, we can all ride up through Valdosta with them, and I'll come back down here with a part tomorrow."

I sat on the steps and waved to Landry as they got in their car. "Looks like my Dad's got car trouble," I said.

"Yeah, it does," Landry said. "Bye, Kaykay. Take care of yourself, okay?"

"Okay." I waved and watched the car until it turned the corner.

I've decided to really practice my singing every day when I get back to Mom's. Maybe she'll let me take singing lessons. Then I could get Duke to make a video, and we could send it to the people at American Idol. I still think I'm just as pretty as any of those other girls on there, and I can sing just as good, too.

Tenochtitlan

Kingyo

She stirs about the fire immersed. Her skin,
The soft transparent olive evergreen-
Our vessels. Roots protrude from stress, as thin
As venom pared from jalapeños-green
Chili and pollo simmered over slakes
Of forked tongues. Wooden bowl and pestle hold
Insignia of eagles eating snakes,
And kernels: legend, conquest. Thus, she told
Our reddish story, her assent and fall-
At once a city, tower, then dispersed
To dust, and clouded, drifting odor calls...
Tenochtitlan, red ancient rivers converge,
The father's bloody hand, from mother tree-
A white feather from the falcon set free.

The Moon is not an Aspirin

Anna Journey

The afternoon has dropped off suddenly,
like a leper's limb,
and floated down river.

The blackness makes a bald island
of my river rock.

Before I notice the moon, the heart's negative,
is too close for comfort.

The wind picks up as I try to speak,
blows off the dandelions' temporary heads, settles
heavy as hangover in the trees.

No more poems about love
lost in scenery! I say to myself,
watching the white sycamores
stand on the edge of the brown river.

No more dead people
poking me with sticks from their graves.

The moon is not an aspirin,
so I keep my distance and my mouth
empty, except for a gristle of words
I've been chewing for months.

I'd spit them out, but fear
the wind's rearrangements.

Your memory is the train that drags the wind
back over the river,
entangled like a drunk on a bridge
caught off guard on the tracks.

February 23, 2003 Czech Republic

Rachel Shaw

Zastavka Menlovo namesti
blares from the speaker
on the tram. *Připíti*
zastavka Vinarska.

The tram bumps
and jerks along the track.
One sweaty hand grips
the pole as I try
not to fall into strangers
packed in around me.

A woman in torn
fishnets peels an
orange, letting the peels
fall to the floor, mangled
hair swaying to the rhythm
of the tram. Across the aisle
a tiny elderly man slumps,
frail joints sinking into
the yellow metal seat. A little
girl wraps her elbow around
the pole and picks French
fries from an oily
carton in her other hand.

I wonder why I am
studying here,
not knowing language
to communicate. *Zastavka*
Vinarska. I squeeze
to the door, out

of the tram. The little
girl rushes off the tram
to throw her oily carton
in a steel black trash
can and is back on
before the doors shut.

Trudging uphill, bent
forward, an icy wind
bites my cheeks and nose.
Two female students
pass me almost running
down hill with the
wind. Their laughing
voices reach me. ...*vin*?
The taller one in a brown
long pea coat asks.
Vim, vim, ano. The
other, with a red sports
coat, answers.

I finally push
through the doors
out of the biting wind,
into the lobby of
Vinarska 5. *Dobre*
vecer, good evening,
I greet the bleach blond
stout middle age receptionist
as I pass toward the elevator. She
looks at me and glares. *Zaverite*
dvere. She says her mouth
curling. I look at her
uncomprehendingly. *Zaverite*

dvere! Her voice slowly
rising in volume, pointing
one red-tipped nail toward
the entrance. I stand completely
still, a deer in headlights. *Anglictiny*
muttering, then she shouts
red-tipped nail pointing
"The door!" The inside door
was stuck open, frigid air seeping
in. I pull the door
shut. *Dekujem.* Thank
you.

Naming
Amy L. Brown

Once I wound my finger down a solid back.

Sordid, fat.

Sorted the two in my head:

put *Me* in a picture frame (shining under glass);

put *me* in a cab.

Time takes the softness from middles--

turning nest to cave;

making me regret I came.

This Act, like a notch in a DNA spiral--

I find it, love it, call it Mine;

call it Blinding, Gutless, Fact;

but name it,

so I know when it dies.

Flightless Birds

Jeremy Griffin

My father published his first short story while he was in high school. It was called "The Ivory Tongue." A framed copy of the magazine in which it appeared hung on my grandmother's living room wall until the day she passed. He followed it up with two pieces in the *Paris Review*, "Arms at a Distance" and "Scarecrow Division." While attending Columbia he scattered short stories, poems and essays all over the literary market, which gained him a few feature profiles in several smaller magazines and planted the seeds of a respectable reputation.

His first novel, *Sidestep*, came out three days after his twenty-ninth birthday. Shortly after that he and his friend Owen Fitzpatrick, a physicist from Boston who became a recognizable name back in the mid-nineties to anyone familiar with something called Modified Newtonian Dynamics, began a book together. It was called *Flightless Birds*. The book jacket described it as "a story about a small Louisiana town set against the milieu of the advent of quantum mechanics." Whatever that means. Whenever Dad tried to explain it he would fall into these lectures on relativity and subatomic space-time, making it next to impossible for anyone to understand—one of the main characters was a quark, for God's sake. His grasp on self-promotional tactics was, to say the least, non-existent.

However, one year after beginning it, Dad and Owen emerged from the quiet literary daze in which they'd lived while concocting it to find that the book was an immediate best seller. The *Times* called it "...a riveting exercise in metaphysics with fantastic results." They got their pictures in *The New Yorker* and *Harper's*. They were asked to give lectures at at least ten universities and colleges.

Good for them. As for me, I've never been much of a reader. I flipped through it once, read a paragraph or two in on the first page in which they'd personified a neutrino, and that was it. I tossed it back into the box with the other copies, congratulated Dad and never tried to digest it again. My brother Stephen read it and said it was like reading Chinese. "I guess it's not our kind of stuff," he said, "more for fifty-somethings who wipe their asses with PhDs." I took his word for it.

After a brief book tour Dad went straight back to work. In the five years following *Flightless Birds* he published another collection of short stories, four novels, two collections of essays, and numerous other short pieces in anthologies and magazines. He was invited as a guest on the Today Show numerous times. And as he edged his way into his late fifties the college professorship offers began to rival his towers of fan mail.

But that was when he started getting sick and most of the offers didn't get responses. It was as if all of his work just stopped in place and died. And now you try asking him about any of that, the awards, the money, the notoriety within the literary community-any of it.

He doesn't remember those things anymore. My father is no longer a literary god. He's more like this weathered vessel for some preternatural alien intelligence brought to life by a multitude of nameless experiences. The man is gone for good. He doesn't do much anymore except roam the grounds of the McMordan Institution, spouting jargon about numbers and world history and fictional experiences he's had. All with his own speckled brand of logic that only he can decipher. I miss him, even though I see him once a month. I'm the only member of the family he recognizes.

My father's love for his craft was surpassed only by his confounding adoration for my sister Nancy. As diplomatic as he was when we were growing up, he did a poor job hiding his preferences of children, no matter how hard he tried. And he truly did try. My brother Stephen and I told ourselves that it was only because she was his daughter, his only girl, and we knew that it's very common for fathers to exalt their daughters the way that he did. But it wasn't enough to quell our jealousy.

And Nancy used it, too. Don't think for a second that she's the kind of girl to take the understanding of being her father's favorite child with a reasonable degree of empathy for her brothers. Not that the old man was bad to Stephen or I by any means, but still: by age fifteen she had mastered the art of parental manipulation, which came in handy around that time when boys started noticing her. She used every possible gynecological angle to scam a few more dollars from Daddy, to borrow the car, to break curfew with her girlfriends, to let that D in Chemistry slide, to own more stuff. By this time Stephen and I had learned to just sit back, keep our mouths shut, and laugh silently at our father's naivety.

She didn't respect his work the way we did, either. And although none of Earl Amherst's children would ever match up to their father's potential as linguistic demigods, at least Stephen and I could see the beauty in what he was doing. Nancy just saw a bunch of paper stacks and computer ink. What Stephen and I saw was the shell of unrestricted genius. We loved Nancy only because we had to. But at least we loved her.

Then Dad got sick and everything kind of fell away from us for a while. The three of us banded together a bit more for support, but for support only. And that didn't last

long. For a year or so after Mom came home to find the station wagon in pieces, my father on the roof in his underwear, trying to weld the distributor to the cable antenna, we all prayed for recovery. We worried about his future, his career, his silent hopes of a National Book Award. Then, when we realized that whatever was festering in his brain just wasn't going to let up, we all sort of fell apart again. After all, there wasn't much point in domestic unity when there was almost zero chance of the old man getting better, and it wasn't necessarily killing him, was it? Sure, that's a drab way to look at the situation, but I don't think he would have cared. I like to think that he would have wanted us to go about our business like normal people, the way we did before we had to lock him up. The way he did after *Flightless Birds* blew up in everyone's face.

He's been in that institution since my senior year of college, since Stephen and Nancy's second year of graduate school. Mom used to go see him once a week. For a while I went with her, but the stress became too much, having to carry her out sobbing every time because her husband of forty-three years no longer recognizes her. I go by myself now. Stephen tries to go a few times a year but it's hard for him to get into town that much. Nancy's been three times. She doesn't talk about him anymore.

Well, I say that, but I guess it's not entirely true now. Not since she called to announce to me that she was getting married.

"I want Dad there," she said in that same bratty tone reserved for her immediate family only, skipping the domestic formalities and our customary small talk; there wasn't even room for: Congratulations, Sis! or Marriage? Are you fucking high?

I may as well have been asked-or demanded, rather-to part seas for my darling sister. The Amherst family

Moses.

"Dad? Are you kidding, Nancy? The minute you throw a tux on that man and try to get him to walk you down the aisle, you're going to find him on the lap of some poor guest, reciting transmissions from the mother ship."

"I don't want him to walk me down the aisle, Neil. I'm not stupid. I just want him there. And I need you to bring him."

"Not gonna happen, Nancy."

"Why?"

"What do you mean why? Look who you're talking about. It's Dad! The man wouldn't even know who you were, let alone where or what he was doing at a wedding."

"Neil, this is very important to me. I want you here and I want you to bring my father with you. End of story."

My father. I winced.

"You're being ridiculous."

"Why? Because I want my own father at my wedding? That's ridiculous?" The pitch of her voice escalated toward that of a tantrum. I understood what she was saying and inside I sympathized, but the irate voice on the opposite end of the phone made it hard to exhibit any compassion. Nancy had not so much as mentioned Dad in years and now here she was trying to recruit him as a guest at her wedding, which I presumed was to be a spectacle of circus-like proportions. I took a breath, tried to keep a level tone.

"You know why, Nancy. Dad can't...he's...he can't do those things."

"Whatever, Neil. You just bring him. Talk to the doctors, get some medicine, whatever. Just bring him." I just sighed. "And make sure he dresses nicely."

And so.

Apprehension abounded six months later as my father and I sat together in my Taurus, traveling one state over to my sister's wedding. I didn't know what his reaction to it would be. I wondered what he would do, who he would accost, why I was even bringing him. When I picked him up he insisted on giving me a lecture on why democracy would never work in a colony on Mars. "It's all terrafarming, Neil, terrafarming. Cultivating the land. Communism: the ideal governmental structure; everyone working together, every man and woman, sharing the profits of a day of hard, hard work, yes? Like they did on the moon!"

"There was never a colony on the moon, Dad."

"See what I mean? Fucking democrats!"

Conversing with my father now is like trying to talk to a child prodigy with an acute addiction to psychotropics. You approach it with caution and strategy, but soon find that neither has any place amidst his jungle of communication. Things only resemble topics, so the conversations come off as funhouse mirror images of rational discourse, if that makes any sense at all. It's like removing variables from a long math equation and replacing them with stars and smiley faces.

"Good car, here, Son. Good car."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Right from the showroom, I bet. Got what, ten thousand miles when you bought it? Damn bastards on bikes always worrying about exhaust; show'm this and they, you know, they never go back. Cause what's funny is when I was in London working for Ford and they sent me around with a lead pipe, clunking all them bike riders on the damn heads. 'Punk is dead', I would scream. And then the next day, same thing. Lead pipe, bikes. Good car."

"Yep." My father never worked for Ford, let alone

traveled to England.

"So. We're going where? The question is 'where'! We are traveling here, but where is there, and that would be...where are we going, Neil?"

"Nancy's wedding in Virginia Beach, Dad."

"Aha. She's the nurse, right? Yes, the one that took out my appendix!"

"No, Nancy is your daughter. She's getting married to a guy named Henry."

"Is he clean? Does he bathe regularly? See, Neil, it's very important to be sanitary. Bacteria. Do you scrub, Neil?"

"Sure do."

"Good for you, boy! Gotta be clean if you want to work for the FBI."

"I'm a musician, Dad. I play in a jazz ensemble."

"Oh? What do you play?"

"Guitar."

"Oh, I get it. Like Lenin."

"Right. Like John Lennon."

"Who the hell is John Lennon?"

At a convenience store in Richmond Dad asked to speak to the manager. He drilled the poor man for fifteen minutes about the molecular structure of the store's brand of floor wax. The police arrived just as I managed to pull him out to the car in a headlock. After a brief interrogation with Dad and me they reluctantly sent us on our way. I was furious.

After that Dad insisted that we take highways the rest of the way to Virginia Beach. The run-in with the police prompted all new conspiratorial theories to bubble up in his head. "Military owns interstates, boy," he said to me as he pressed his head against the window, trying to get a look at

the sky. "You saw them boys back there, them cops. They're watching us from the air, Neil. Can't be too careful. It'd be better if we stick to back roads for now." I tried to argue with him but he just looked at me, his head tilted at an angle, his brow arched, as if he were waiting for me to break down and howl, All right! You got me! All this time, you weren't really crazy! I was behind it all!

I threw him a scowl, my only defense against his bombardment of lunacy; even if I'd felt that my father's threats were worth a response I wouldn't have known what to say. I sat there, my hand on the wheel, eyeing my father, who was eyeing me because apparently I was in charge of some global terrorist plot to do what? Take him to a wedding? It was useless. I sighed and turned off of the interstate. We took highway 60 the remainder of the way into Virginia Beach. The old man sat there grinning to himself, having once again outsmarted the forces of evil.

I must have looked terrible when we arrived at the church because when I saw Stephen, he immediately offered to take Dad off my hands for a while so that I could take a break and get dressed. His smile rivaled my car.

"Must have been a long ride," my brother said, trying his best not to provoke any bursts of accusational nonsense from Dad. The old man looked at him down his nose, wondering why this tuxedo-clad young man was being so polite, what information he was trying to extract. "Come on, Dad. Let's go get you changed, okay? How's McMordan?" My father, still glaring at Stephen, followed him into a large activities room that was being used as the men's' changing facilities. I sat for a moment on a large metal bench outside of the church, just to be alone, or maybe just to be away from Dad. At the time I wasn't quite sure.

I took my tux from the car and went into in a bathroom. I wasn't in the mood to socialize. I figured I'd stave it off as much as possible until the reception by taking my time getting dressed. When I was finished I walked into the men's dressing area to find Stephen. It was empty, save for he and my father, who was standing motionless before a full-length mirror, his arms at his sides, his whiskery mouth agape. He looked good with his hair combed, his shirt tucked in, a sharp pleat running the length of either pant leg. I suddenly wished I had gotten him a haircut.

"Dad?" He didn't answer. He stared at himself in that mirror as if it were the first time he'd ever seen himself. It was like watching a dog respond to its own reflection, cautious and fearful. My father looked back at the man looking at him as if it were a different person altogether, which, in a way, might not be completely wrong. I like to think that what he really saw in that mirror was the true Earl Amherst, neatly stored away beneath that wiry frame and liver-spotted skin, and that the strength of recognition after ten years was what rendered him silent. But I don't know if that was the case.

I do know that he looked sad, though. I never saw my father look as sad as he did that day, not even when we first left him in that small room at McMordan with a roommate named Kenny and a head full of questions. He looked helpless.

I walked over and stood next to him. We looked at one another's reflection. I pretended to straighten my bowtie. "We look good, Dad," I said. "Damn good!" He didn't say anything. I looked at my own image in the mirror as I ran a comb through my hair. I brought my fingers up to the scar on the left side of my forehead, and I looked at Dad and thought about the day that I got it. I was five years old at the time. Stephen accidentally pelted me with a tennis

racquet. I remembered howling on the way to the emergency room, not so much from the pain but just because there was a gaping hole in my head and the blood just wouldn't stop, and that's pretty damn freaky when you're five. But Dad was so indifferent while he drove. I'm not sure if the kind of composure that he displayed that afternoon is something to be admired or of which to be leery. Nevertheless, he sang along to the radio, to the oldies station, as if I wasn't even in the car. It was a very curious reaction to say the least; one would think that a wailing five-year-old with a face smeared with blood would invoke a bit more adrenaline to pump instead of that required to hang one's arm out of the driver's side window and tap the door panel in time with Buffalo Springfield. But not my father. Stephen, Nancy and I would all realize a few years later that this kind of response was typical for Earl Amherst. I mean, I suppose that everyone reacts differently to any given situation. We came to the understanding that Dad's way was to give almost no reaction for those situations that required one the most.

But then years later I came across a short story entitled "Eleven Stitches" that he had published in some anthology. It was about the racquet incident. He never told me about it. None of us. Stephen and I stumbled across it while cleaning out his office closet a few months after the old man entered McMordan. I considered asking him about it and why he had never shown it to me, but I knew that was futile.

Dad was okay during the ceremony; he read the bible to himself, periodically drawing either mine or Stephen's attention to some encoded joke within the text, always with a smug grin on his face. He did it quietly, so we played along. But we started getting apprehensive as we drove him to the reception. It was possible that he might compensate

for his silence during the wedding by doing something terribly outlandish at the reception. Who knew what he was planning?

Stephen tried talking to him in the car. "Dad? Look, there's going to be food and punch at this reception and you're welcome to it but you have to use a plate and a fork, okay? You can eat at a table as long as you don't bother anybody. Is that okay?"

"Jesus, Stephen," I said. "He's a grown man."

"Neil, you've seen the way he can be around a lot of people. I just want to make sure that he can handle it."

Dad regarded Stephen with the kind of blistering suspicion I imagined a POW would use on his interrogators just before they pumped a few thousand volts through his body. "Your numbers don't frighten me," he muttered. "I have the crickets on my side."

Once we entered the civic center where the reception was held, and once Dad got a look at the armies of tuxes and flower-print dresses bustling about in a rhythm much different than that of the music, he didn't say another word. I sat him in a chair against a wall, prepared a plate for him with some salad, roast duck and rolls. He ate quietly while his eyes scanned the large room, back and forth like search beacons. I wondered what he was looking for, if anything in particular.

I moved about the room, greeting family members and friends and meeting members of the groom's family. Occasionally I'd look over in Dad's direction to see what he was doing. I watched from across the dance floor as family member after family member approached him, carried on brief conversation with him, and then walked off with a look of exasperation, sometimes a roll of the eyes. I wished they'd all leave him alone. It wasn't like his illness was a family

secret; every single one of those people knew who they were talking to. And I watched them placate the old man and then excuse themselves from his presence with smug condescension over and over again, as if he, the same person that Book World once referred to as "one of the decade's greatest literary minds," had no business at his own daughter's wedding. And granted, a person in his condition might not be in the position to sit amidst those people and bask in his own delusions for however long the reception was to last. But I had expected him to be obnoxious, patronizing and downright frightening. He wasn't. He sat there alone against that wall, trying to make sense of the faces that repeatedly crowded his vision. They were antagonizing him. He could not hide his dismay. Why couldn't they just leave him alone?

The groom's younger and lesser astute stepbrother Mitch approached me.

"That was a hell of a book, *Flying Birds*," he said.

"*Flightless Birds*. Yeah, it's pretty impressive."

"Earl got anything else coming out soon? I got a supervisor down at the plant who just loves his stuff. But Henry and Nancy said he got locked up a few years back. Is it true he don't write no more?"

"That's nonsense," I said. "He's doing a biography of Curious George right now. The Man in the Yellow Hat is being a real prick about interviews but it should be out in hardback by next spring."

I danced with my mother, my aunt Anita, and a very cute, very drunk bride's maid named Emily. Then I sat in a chair against the wall with Dad and Stephen. We were bored. We watched the crowd of dancers writhe and shimmy among themselves, growing progressively drunker as the minutes passed.

Nancy walked over to us. She was beautiful in her

off-the-shoulder gown. She glowed.

"Think he'd mind dancing with me?" she asked, motioning to Dad, who by this time was nearly catatonic from all the commotion.

Stephen and I looked at each other, then at him.

"Nancy," said Stephen, "come on. He's tired."

"I'm just asking for a dance, Steve. Dad? Do you want to dance with me?" Dad's face met hers. The expression on his weary face was nothing less than heartbreaking. He didn't say a word.

"Ask him for me."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Dad? This is Nancy. She wants to know if you'd like to dance with her."

"Who?"

"This girl here, this is your daughter Nancy. Would you like have a dance with her out there on the floor?"

He hesitated but to mine and Stephen's surprise he finally stood and walked out to the dance floor with her. They danced together in the abrupt, mechanical manner of junior high sweethearts, Nancy leading. His eyes were large and frightened.

Stephen and I sat next to one another and watched them. Mom joined us. I handed her a napkin when she began sobbing. Dad's head twitched around as they turned. I could see Nancy trying to talk to him but it was obvious that he wouldn't be responding. Dancing was hard enough for him—talking and dancing at the same time was impossible. Still, they kept turning.

As the song was ending, and as Dad was turning his back toward our side of the room, I caught Nancy's face over his shoulder. I didn't ask her afterward, but I thought I saw a tear glide down her face from her left eye. Just one. And I wondered what that tear was for. I'm sure that if Mom had seen it she'd have established it as a sign of happiness,

emotional ecstasy from dancing with her father at her own big, beautiful wedding. It was the kind of thing little girls dreamed of (from what I've been told, of course), and in a strange way, I suppose Nancy was living out that dream.

But I don't necessarily think that prompted the tear. Because there she was with her father on her wedding day, the both of them clad in such exquisite attire, dancing together in the center of the dance floor-and he had no idea who she was. His daughter. It was the first time they'd touched since his departure from the world. I am almost positive there was a tear on my sister's face, and I wish I could say that for maybe a few seconds-just a few-Dad knew what was going around him, the way he had seemed to earlier in front of the mirror. But I'm inclined to chalk that up to wishful thinking.

The next time Stephen, Nancy and I found ourselves together was three years later at Mom's funeral. She died of a stroke. I was unable to bring Dad because by that time he was so bad that the doctors had all but tied me to a chair just to keep me from removing him from the institution grounds. No matter-he had long ago forgotten that he was married.

At the reception after the funeral, I was standing against a wall, trying to ignore the utterance of mild condolences all around me. Nancy's husband Henry approached me. He and I had become friendly over the past few years. He was learning to play the guitar, and that at least gave us something to talk about when we had to be together. Nancy and I rarely spoke outside of family events. I wasn't sure if Henry knew that.

"It's too bad Earl couldn't make it," he said.

"Yeah but he doesn't remember her, anyway. I guess that's better than being forced into coming."

"Yeah, I guess."

"How's Nancy?"

Henry sighed. "Oh, you know. There are good days and bad days. Sometimes she's fine and other times, well, she'll just go off on these tangents about people out to get her. She just says 'them.'" I looked at him. "Her doctor prescribed some medication, and it works when she takes it, but that's the trick, you know? She won't take it. She doesn't want to. I'm worried about her."

"How so?"

"I don't know. I can just see it getting worse. I don't want to have to put her in a hospital somewhere. But I really don't know what else to do."

When I was silent he looked at me and the expression on my face told him all he needed to know. Henry's eyes widened a little. His jaw dropped slowly. His face was suddenly very pink. Right then he could have been the most helpless man in the world.

"Oh no," he said.

"What?"

"You didn't know, did you?"

"I guess not."

"I'm not sure I should've told you that, Neil. I don't think she wanted you guys to know. Shit."

"It's okay, Henry. Really."

I made my presence known for about fifteen more minutes before I decided that I needed to be anywhere else. I finished my glass of bourbon and walked toward the door. Nancy was talking to some anonymous distant relative. I put my hand on my sister's shoulder. She turned to look at me. "Dad misses you," I said. I kissed her forehead. Then I smiled and walked out of the room.

Vacation at Lake Susan

Julia Hauser

My pretend garnet ring in a rusty Carebears lunchbox:
during the unfriendliness of the family visit,
Uncle let me steer the boat,
wanted to bet hickies over card tricks,
said brother and I were so polite,
You couldn't tell we were kids.

I pulled gold bullets out of the rotten dock.
and heard how cousin wasn't married,
because he took drugs.

Cousin left his rifle on the porch where anyone could get it -
shot cans, played harmonica and Uno.
showed me a rock that had a baby emerald in it
when we dug for crystals behind the closed church.
Between the front seats was a
green tin of chewing tobacco;
tasted bad-when I spilt it between the seats, he
wasn't angry,
and we laughed.

The garnets we found after it stopped raining
were coal-brown-
Aunt (who made disgusting banana sandwiches)
said we would have one polished by a jeweler.
black nuggets in the old clay of a small lunchbox
mined with small, eager fingers-
I hold them in my hand and pretend to remember.

Stirring
Timmy Miller

Dust is stirring in the eye of Arizona
underneath a broad stroke of saffron sky.
Congregations circle the railed rim gracefully,
admiring the contained beauty running free.
The drumming beat of ritualistic steps
still taints the air, while the fiery breath
of fabled spirits cut through
the petrified trees burning the tender
ears of onlookers.
Time is tracks of memories reflected
in the flint decorated walls.
I stand shadowed in the field of time,
struggling to peer over a fire lily's first leaf.
Longing for the watery logic
that makes chasms in the mind.

To Armin Wegner
Jamison Crabtree

You left them hanging on the lines, staring
past the smiles of the crowd as they danced
a heavy Viennese waltz, their bodies still
limp and graceful as they danced from side
to side. The gathered, dressed
in crow black, kept the distance
of a murder testing carrion
for signs of life as their hungry eyes and
hungry hands caught nothing but the day
dragging the shadows east, towards the motherland.

If they waited for the gallows
to fall they'd have seen the dust, bursting
beneath the last light bloom into fire breathers
with Armenian anthers. I found them

frozen under crude wooden tripods
staring out of your eyes which fell short
before meeting theirs. Thirty years
later your countrymen cheer
"Who remembers the Armenians?"
as they hang the Jews in larger groups
than the men you waited for
behind the camera's bellows

to snap the shutter
like the last four feet of life.

Mighty Mouse

Jen Bristow

He was a tree man - a cutter and remover of limbs, stumps and brush - and she married him for love, real love. They bought a trailer in Opal and she named their daughter after the tiny town they made their home. Nothing happened in Opal except the thunderstorms that always took the power. When he left to help the workmen with the lines she knew she'd chosen someone special, and when the men arrived at the house, still dark, she knew she had become a widow at only twenty-seven. She took a job at Sheetz, ringing up gasoline purchases and packs of Marlboro Reds and the occasional deli sub that left her red Sheetz smock forever spotted with mayonnaise. Her little Opal stopped asking about Daddy a few months after the larger Opal had forgotten him.

Today she has worked another double shift because Nancy hasn't felt right, and it is 8:45 p.m. when she turns the key in the front door of the trailer. She doesn't mind "trailer," never found it necessary to say "mobile home." She isn't going anywhere. She walks in, closing the door behind her with her foot as she tips just slightly to the left and tosses her keys onto the counter that separates the kitchen from the living room. She hasn't tilted far enough and the tiny metal ring that holds three keys - home, work, car - rests treacherously on the edge of the laminate slab for a long moment then collides with the floor. She sighs, leans back against the door and uses her right foot to pry at the heel of her left sneaker, then steps on the edge of the shoe to slip her foot out before remembering that she ruined the last pair by doing this very thing. She bends forward and maneuvers her way out of the left shoe by hand, then picks them both up. Opal is down the road with Karen.

She carries the shoes through the kitchen and into her bedroom, drops them next to the bed. The sneakers are comfortable but they make her feel like "Can I help you?" and she's had enough of that today. It's warm - she can go without.

At Karen's no one answers. She knocks harder and shouts the sitter's name. She can hear Karen's dog growling from somewhere within and imagines briefly that the mutt has turned; once good-natured and responsive, it has attacked the family, her daughter just escaping. She hears a bit of chaos from the next lot and turns toward it just as Karen appears from the back of her neighbor's doublewide.

"Carol! The Freemans' pool is ready, we're over here," she calls, beaming at her good fortune, living next to the Freemans and their open-to-the-public swimming.

Her smile says her four kids are on their best behavior, even. Carol looks back at the sitter's door, letting the image of the dog's violence fade before she steps off the porch.

"It's late for swimming, isn't it?" she says. Even as Karen explains, she can see the Freemans have attached floodlights on their back door and the pool is better lit than it might have been at high noon. The bugs aren't bad, either, and the steady zapping from a corner she can't see tells her why. She leans over the four-foot wall of corrugated metal to retrieve Opal, who has already paddled over and is lifting her arms to be pulled out of the cool water.

"I'm learning to open my eyes under water, Mom," she says as she is folded into her mother's arms. "I can hold my breath, too."

Karen hands them one of the towels she brought and Carol covers her daughter, though the day's heat has not gone with the sun and most of the wetness is quickly split between them. Carol lowers her voice to a conspiratorial

whisper.

"You must be a superhero, then, seeing underwater. You'll have to be sure to report everything that goes on down there, Aqua Girl."

Opal giggles, burying her head in Carol's neck. "You're silly," she says.

Karen comes out of the Freemans' back door, having thanked them for the extended use of the pool. She rounds up her own brood and Carol walks with the pack of them, Opal on her hip, for a few steps before turning to go home. Her feet are muddy from standing by the pool, but the short walk dries the mud to dirt so when they reach their lot it only takes a quick slapping with her free hand to clear most of the earth from the bottoms. She shifts Opal from one hip to the other as she opens the unlocked door.

"Time for walking, my dear," she says as they move inside. Carol lets her arm relax and Opal slides down her side until her feet touch the floor. "And for bathing. It's late."

"No, Mama, I'm all clean. From the pool. Look, I'm shriveled!" Opal splay her fingers to show the wrinkled tips.

"Shriveled," Carol says. "But you still need a bath."

Opal tries again, changing tactics two and three times until all she is left with is that superheroes are naturally clean and this one, incredibly, is the one that works. Carol won't budge on tooth brushing, though, and they trudge through the living room to the bathroom in the hall.

In Opal's bedroom, lavender cotton shorts and a white ribbed tank top replace her damp swimsuit. "My clothes!" she squeals. "You left my clothes!" It's true; she didn't think to get Opal's things before they came home from the Freemans. Carol insists they can get the clothes tomorrow but Opal is unconvinced. She promises, cross her

heart and hope to die, until eventually Opal yields. Carol positions her daughter in the twin bed on the wall side, then lies down on the open edge. The ladybug desk lamp shines on them from the dresser top and they talk about little things to let the disagreement die away before Carol hands her daughter "Goodnight Moon." Opal has had the book memorized since she was three, and has read it to her mother these last two years. "Goodnight nobody. Goodnight mush. And goodnight to the old lady whispering hush." Opal's toothpaste breath wafts with the words. Carol holds her until she falls asleep, then shuffles out, through the living room and kitchen and into her own bed, too big. Sleep comes slowly.

Saturday the phone rings at 6:15 a.m. Nancy is sick but should be in by lunch if Carol could just cover the morning. Carol showers quickly. She knows Karen is awake, her husband up at dawn to open the firehouse. She is probably even expecting this call. It's waking Opal that is the hardest. Eventually the promise of the Freemans' pool does the trick, and her baby rolls, nearly falling, out of bed and into denim shorts and a yellow t-shirt.

At work the customers are hateful and the lunch hour days away. A huge man with greasy hair and face leans over the counter and complains that the cigarettes he buys here are always stale. He wants a free carton and Carol gives it to him without argument, hoping all ten packs are out of date. A woman threatens to call the local news program, 7 On Your Side, because the pump claims she got 12 gallons of gas but she knows for a fact her car only holds 11.9. Carol gives the customer 13 cents for the tenth of a gallon and suggests the woman save even more by staying home next time. The boss comes by at 12:30 and says that Nancy is worse than she thought this morning and will Carol finish out the day.

No, she will not.

She parks the car at home but heads straight for the Freemans'. They are selfish today and the pool is full of just the two of them. She prays Opal will forgive her. Karen's door is answered after one knock and the three year old says that Opal is outside, his mother is in the bathroom with Gracie, explaining about potty, does she need to potty? She doesn't, thank you, and he runs back to the next room where Mighty Mouse blares from the television. Carol walks through the trailer to go out back, but she passes the kitchen and sees her daughter through the window. Opal is at the edge of a cluster of trees, bent with hands on knees, watching. The mutt is in the woods.

Carol moves to the window, leans until her forehead is touching the glass, hands framing her eyes against the sun. The mutt is digging frantically at the trunk of a tree, his paws hidden by soaring dirt and sod and the sheer speed of his movement. All at once he stops. He shoves his snout into the earth until he can't possibly breathe, then reappears shaking his head, more brush flying. He looks up, sees Opal and freezes. When the mutt finally turns, scanning the perimeter, Carol can see he has something in his mouth; something loose dangles from the left side and a firmer something sticks out from the right. She hears a low whine from the dog as he rolls his head back in Opal's direction. He stares and lowers his mouth to the ground, keeping his eyes on the girl. His jaws move and the something is visible for long enough. A chipmunk. Carol can't tell from the window if the creature is still alive. She sees Opal's intake of breath and her daughter puts her hands to her mouth. She has seen the chipmunk, too. The mutt is uncertain. He moves to the left, stops, right, stops, left again, looks at Opal. She hasn't moved but to take her hands from her mouth. The look in her eyes is curious, resigned. This seems to be enough for the dog. He stretches his front legs forward

as far as they can reach, lowering his body so only his haunch is in the air, then scoots the rear legs in until he lies flat. The something, the chipmunk, remains steady in his jaw. He gives Opal another glance, then settles down to the business at hand. It takes a long time. He flexes his jaw and the chipmunk is tossed up and down within his mouth, legs appearing, disappearing, appearing again. At times he seems to be gagging, but he regains his control until the work is done. The mutt coughs and shakes his head like he has a tickle in his throat. He gets up and looks around, no longer concerned about Opal ten feet away, spies a butterfly and is off. Opal remains still for a beat then turns toward the trailer and walks inside. By the time Opal opens the back door, Carol has gone to the living room and is pretending to watch cartoons. When she is spotted Opal rushes into her arms.

"Mama!"

"Hey, baby! What were you doing outside?" Carol asks.

Opal can hear the strain in her mother's voice and searches Carol's face for signs that she has seen the dog.

"Nothing," she says.

The Builders, Notre Dame

Tara Moyle

Take any question. Out of all the horrible things.
They would build an answer,
a perpendicular crusade. Thieves, liars,
adulterers-what can't be forgiven with stone
The simple lack of cranes deserving votives, hundreds
at ten francs a prayer, the pipes' dolorous articulation.
Arches reinforce replies as you walk under again and again,
 bricks circled around a wheel nearly
 one thousand years ago and pedaled
 up, the stone mulled from quarries, workers
ensuring eternity with their vertical hours,
 feasting well on feast days,
 glass-blowers breathing detail into color
 and light, architects
ascribing infinite height
even where the air begins
 so that today the bald man next
 to me can sing,
 Psallite Deo, Psallite Deo...
 the woman in blue singing,
a wafer flashing over another woman's lips,
and the priest with centuries
between his hands and the ceiling.
You can't help but think *this*
 is possibility,
from here to the highest nave stone
 which is so far away
 it must be sky, but, if anything, they wanted
the answer to be definitive
to the child born without hands,

for every unbearable load they heft,
big as the skeleton of a whale, and to hoist up
such avian weight
they must
have known something
why exalted as the cathedral seems to lift itself even
higher, the stone even straighter,
why passing outside for a photograph,
a deepening into the questions
then certainty pulled from the earth and chiseled, *why*
in the stalled robes
of the disciples,
water pouring
from the gargoyle mouths of doubt--whatever the question is,
they said, the answer must continue to rise.

Detached

Rosetta Lynn Thurman

I live in perpetual fear of the pitch-blackness that engulfs the earth when the sun retires. Night creeps in obliquely, scarcely noticeable until one is completely drenched in its opacity. Darkness sneaks up and swallows you. Morning, on the other hand, is entirely different. Day is more egregious in its arrival, blatantly announcing itself with a bright burst of light. Of course, one has no choice in either matter; the sun must eternally rise, and then give way to the moon at dusk. Should I be granted one wish, I would command the day to last forever, that darkness may never hover over my shoulder.

Driving home tonight, thinking of Paris and profiteroles, I am distracted by the cars' lights behind me. The intense beams pierce the interior of my ocean blue Toyota and distort my vision so that I cannot see without spots. As I cross the intersection to get to my neighborhood, the traffic lights blur into a sea of indiscriminate colors. I realize that I must close my right eye to be able to use my left. Something is terribly wrong, I think. Heat rises in my belly. I cannot see out of my right eye.

*

Night is not the same everywhere. In Paris, the Eiffel Tower glimmers under clear sky, illuminating the city. At nine o'clock in the evening, strolling along the Seine River, one can look up and feel as if dawn has come early.

Dr. Burn peers at my eyes through an ophthalmoscope. She is a thin, blonde woman of about thirty, childless and unmarried. I have often wondered if the woman sits at home on Friday nights studying eyeball diagrams. Not a word ever spills from her lips that does not relate to optom-

etry. She seems to derive great pleasure from administering eye exams, but declines to respond to my thoughts on the weather, local events, and the state of the nation. I loathe visits to the doctor. Even though Dr. Burn's office is not part of a hospital, the room still has the same effects. An odor of medicine lingers about, just beneath the interminable scent of disinfectant. I sigh, eager to leave this depressing place with its wall-size poster of the effects of glaucoma.

"Do I need a new prescription?" I ask, while Dr. Burn scribbles notes on a small clipboard. She looks up at me sadly, as if pained by my question.

"No," she answers. I am pleasantly surprised. The stronger my prescription becomes, contact lenses are harder to find. Since entering my teens, vanity has eliminated the option of my wearing eyeglasses anywhere besides the privacy of my own home.

"Your retina has detached in your right eye," she continues. "You will need immediate surgery to reattach it."

"Surgery?" I ask. My insides plummet down into my shoes. Instantly, I think of the bloody operations shown on television and the chances of my surgeon having a few bourbons before donning his scrubs. Stronger than my fear of scalpels and drunken doctors, though, is my fear of going blind. Dr. Burn says this is highly possible, if not inevitable, if I do not go under the knife. I take one last look at the glaucoma poster and mutter my approval for Dr. Burn to make the necessary arrangements.

A week later, I tell the anesthesiologist that everything looks different in the dark. I cannot read signs more than fifty feet in front of me and the streetlights blur into multi-colored stars. He says to count backwards from one hundred. Instead I think of how convenient it would be to die in the operating room. I figure it can't be too far from

the morgue.

*

My grandfather lives in a green and white house atop a steep hill and bordered by weeping willows. He keeps a garden behind the house where he grows fat ruby tomatoes and deep green collards. One can almost always find him tending the patch of vegetation, crouching to inspect his crops, his overalls dusty with earth.

It is now that I remember radishes. Red as the underside of begonia leaves, ugly, dirt-encrusted bulbs with dangling white strings. I cannot open my right eye, but I can see red and the strings.

*

When I was a little girl, I did not fit in with the other kids in my neighborhood. My terrible eyesight and requisite thick glasses earned me "nerd" status. In elementary school, the teasing bothered me very much. The recess bell brought such feelings of dread upon my little soul that each day, as the other children rushed outside into the fresh air, I sidled up to the teacher, offering my assistance in whatever small project she was working on. At home, I was still left out of the crowd. My mother would come outside to find me sitting on our front steps, holding my head in my hands, hoping someone would ask me to play. On a summer visit to see relatives in Alabama, a boy my age stood watching me from behind, perhaps getting up the nerve to ask me to play. "Hey, girl!" he shouted loud enough for everyone on the block to hear. I smiled, understanding that I was being flirted with. As he caught sight of my bulky spectacles, though, he muttered an embarrassed "never mind" and rushed down the street.

Thus began my career as a bookworm, reading at any and every moment. My grandmother taught me how to read when I was four years old. Armed with this liberating

skill, I would read and reread my own books, my grandmother's recipe collections, the backs of cereal boxes, and anything else my bad eyes could pick up. Soon after entering the first grade, I was asked to read to the fourth graders at school. For a whole week, I practiced reading to family members, neighbors, and annoyed classmates. Seven days I agonized over my tone, reading pace, and speech volume. Finally, the big moment arrived. There I was, my little body propped up on a stool, my small voice filling the classroom, my skinny fingers turning the pages slowly, as I had seen my teacher do many times in our first-grade classroom. Ultimately, my embarrassment at being the smartest in class turned into overwhelming pride in my abilities.

In small town Ohio, one's fellow Blacks did not uplift, but drag down. My few playmates wondered why I read so much and why I was so serious. The older people in the neighborhood always encouraged me to do well in school, perhaps regretting their own mistakes, willing to pass on the valuable knowledge of experience. It was the words of those elderly, and of those in my church, that propelled me further into the academic realm.

In addition to my elderly sponsors and religious supporters, many white people have helped me in my life. For several years, a woman from Clothes For Kids bought my school clothes in the fall. Not to mention the countless teachers who inspired me by loaning to me their personal copies of the greatest books ever written. Their praise sustained and motivated me. I have sometimes wondered, however, if their driving force was a pure desire to encourage a young child, or a crusade to save a little black girl from the project fate of welfare and too many mouths to feed. I never believed I was ever in danger of succumbing to my environment, although I do appreciate each white person that has ever advanced, or sought to advance, my success.

But maybe they did save me, if at least in a nominal way. After all, they affirmed me and made me feel important when everyone else, especially other Blacks, alienated or misunderstood me. White people, for me, represented a safe haven. They were my educators, my mentors, and my strongest supporters.

*

I returned home from the hospital that same day and began a long recovery. The bulky gauze over my eye could not be taken off. I imagined that if I did, my eye would fall out of its socket. Lying in bed all day, I thought a lot about going blind and wondered how long it would take to learn Braille.

*

In my second year of high school, I went to an overnight camp for the first time. That weekend I befriended a blonde haired girl named Jessica. We ate our meals together and teamed up for all the camp activities. One morning she rushed into my cabin early, waking me up with her wide blue eyes.

"Come look," she said. I quickly dressed and followed her into the cool darkness. We walked the camp's short trail until we came to an embankment.

"It's too early for this," I complained, wiping sleep from my eyes. Jessica laughed, and pulled me up the small hill, my shoes slipping on the tiny rocks. As we climbed, I thought of my grandfather, and his garden. When I was very young, he would walk me through the rows of yellow, red, green. "Here, look," he would say, pausing at intervals to run his fingers through the silky earth. Even before I could cross the street by myself, he told me all about the columns of young tomato plants and what made them inch up the wire, curling toward the sun. Afterwards, he would always make me something good to eat, like spicy collard

greens, sliced cold tomatoes with vinegar and pepper, crisp cucumbers with jarred beets, or my favorite: grilled corn in their husks, dripping with garlic butter. His cooking was enough to turn the most carnivorous eater into a vegetarian.

"We're almost there," Jessica said as we walked over to a corner of smooth stone. Still agitated, I sat down beside her on the ground thinking this girl was one weird individual, dragging me up a mountain at five o'clock in the morning to watch a stupid....

"Now!" she whispered. I wondered why she whispered, since we were the only humans out there among the quiet woods. "Look," she said. My eyes followed her thin finger as she pointed to the east, excited by the emerging dawn, both of us gazing at the miracle of it all. The sun wakes up slowly, first peeking through wet blades of grass, then ascending to circle the trees, smiling between branches and leaves. Light curls around rooftops and hummingbirds awake to greet the world in song. After a while and too soon, the day was fully upon us. The magic subsided as we heard our classmates awaking noisily, their voices piercing the early air.

*

Although my eye has fully healed, my vision has worsened. Going out at night is even more difficult than before. Scowling at carefree drivers and happy night-owls, I rush to complete my grocery shopping before the sun begins to set, before the day closes its drapes slowly on the world. Packing my plastic-bagged produce into my trunk, I catch a quick glimpse of the first sparkle of gold on the horizon as the sky begins to glow, witnessing the last vestiges of light as night creeps in softly: black, always black.

While waiting for the 76C (downtown express)

Teagan Sirylea

her acoustics
wash my steel nerves
and i have this feeling
she is singing
right to me
from that tiny wooden stage.
her vision's a little bad,
but her finger pickin's 20/20,
and i'm the only one staring
right at her,
the only one listening.
others are sleeping through her
sleeping right to her.
but i love this side of Oakland,
this side of women.
she smiles at me
and then looks back to her strings.
I want to reach out
touch her skin
callused fingers metal fragrance.
she watches the people outside
walk the abused streets
so that it isn't apparent
that she's disappointed
i am the only one listening.
the sunset swings like a manual spotlight
so she cannot see
who is reading who is sleeping
and who is listening.
i wonder if anyone
ever listens to the people
on the corner of Forbes and Atwood.

Victrix Solaris
Robin Baidya

-for Lexie

She only emanated love when
Hypnos hindered Eos once;
The second time, colossal clouds
Concealed her titian air, but still
She permeated lucid beauty!
Lone, blue-collared child of Earth
And Sky, Horizon-bound to cycle,
Dressed by Iris every day,
She led me through three phases of enlightenment--
Then paused to cool.
I learned that crevices become
Crevasses; fractures congregate,
Unlike the roots of ancient trees that
Wade and weave through liquid ground.
Bedazzling Time beyond her denim sea,
Amid resplendent rays and ochre ripples radiant,
She rose for me at noon today.

The Worthington Clinic

Nathan Walsh

Melissa, my girlfriend, had been in the clinic long enough for me to count cars, to count people, and to walk over to the shabby pawn shop across the street and sell the watch she gave me for Christmas. It was the watch I'd been asking for for the last six months, a sleek Movado with a stark black dial and silver wristband. She could barely afford it and I hadn't really expected her to buy it. The wristband pinched my skin, though. It hurt to wear. I sold it for seventy-five dollars and yawned as I looked at it one final time, it's hands indicating it really was early as hell.

I sat back down on the stoop beneath the red front door of the clinic and smoked cigarettes and witnessed time pass much too slow. My ass was cold and the concrete was damp. My running pants were nothing to the water and ice on the stoop. I could feel my ass getting wetter and wetter, and yet for some reason did nothing about it. The snow was still falling and kept most walkers in their homes, safe and comfortable. Normally this would be a busy shopping area, but there were not many people to count. There were not many cars.

The first time we camped was in the Shenandoah Valley, just north of Lexington and the Natural Bridge. We drove down in her father's new Lexus GS, which was some strange mix between silver and purple, depending on the light and the angle you looked at the car. All I remember from the drive is that the car had nice therapeutic seats and that Melissa said she wished the entire world were made out of hard-boiled egg whites. Life, she said, would be better if we could eat everything around us, and it all tasted like egg

white. We found a nice site by a creek where there were no other campers, nobody for miles except the fly-fishermen who were set up about a half-mile down the creek. We saw some small deer as we were driving around the grounds looking for the best site. The mountains grew in every direction and the trees straight up. The air was dusty and stale, almost blue. From the car we could see pollen floating through beams of sun created by trees and leaves.

After the tent was set up we both started yelling just because we could, just because yelling without reason was something you couldn't do in the city and it was like a childhood novelty. It released something. Melissa made a big fire pit out of rocks as I cut and gathered wood. The flames became huge later and we sat in lawn chairs staring at the fire, drinking coconut rum and cooking hobsos. This was our first vacation together.

"The air smells different out here," I said. "Cleaner."

"No," Melissa said. "It smells like burning wood." She smiled at me and the fire lit her face in an unusual way. Her hair almost looked blond, it seemed sleeker than the usual dull brown. Her face, too . . . the shadows just seemed different. I couldn't really place it.

The embers at the bottom of the fire were like an open mouth spouting hundreds and hundreds of tongues upward, trying to lick something invisible just inches above their reach. I poked at the fire with a stick I'd been whittling, moving wood around for fun. The cracking and clicking of the burning wood was just the tongues stretching further and further up, higher and higher than they had before, individual muscles popping under intense strain.

"You know how sometimes if you keep telling yourself something over and over again, no matter how much of a lie it is, eventually you believe it?" I passed her the rum and noticed I could no longer see anything except Melissa

and the fire. Everything else was black.

"Yeah, but . . . no. You never really believe it," she said.

"You trick yourself. You make yourself believe a lie."

"Exactly."

I watched her drink from the bottle. She tipped the rum over the fire and a little liquid fell toward the flames. The tongues reached higher.

"Oh," Melissa said. "I saw Sara at some house party last week. The one you missed because of work. Anyway, she was, like, pretty upset." She paused. "I think maybe because . . . she's getting chubby."

I laughed loudly.

Maybe she didn't know it, but I'd slept with Sara about a month ago and I was pretty sure we'd do it again. I knew I'd try. Melissa was right though, Sara was getting chubby.

The few walkers in the shopping center all timidly eyed oncoming vehicles, sometimes stepping back behind parked cars or hydrants when an SUV or truck tumbled by. They were waiting for someone's car to lose traction and sideswipe somebody. I was hoping it would happen, just because . . . I don't know. It might make time pass faster. The door behind me opened and two darkly dressed people -- a couple -- snuck past me onto the sidewalk. They walked close together, the taller female leaning toward the male for support, her black purse hitting him on the back every time their strides became too far apart. When they walked together, almost as one, the purse just dangled between them. Their heads were low and determined, aimed at the sidewalk ahead. Everything they wore looked cheap and secondhand.

The florist shop on the eastern corner of Park

Boulevard and Worthington smelled dank and misty, almost like a grow room; it's air moist and heavy. I searched the tiny aisles with my hands in my pockets, looking at Calla Lilies and Carnations and Sun Flowers and these ridiculously tacky fruit baskets that I actually considered buying just for the oranges and raisins. It was a wonder the store was open with all the snow. The warmth contained by my skullcap burned my scalp, but I couldn't be bothered to take it off. There was nobody else in the store but the florist and a teenage kid wearing an all-orange, cheap mesh baseball cap. The kid turned in circular motions around a small wooden stool like he was driving it. I noticed he was wearing cleats. They were loud against the floor. Dirt darkened the area between his mouth and the bottom of his chin. He looked homeless.

"Can I help you?" The florist was tall, almost taller than me. She had her hair pulled back haphazardly, and little strings of red covered her face randomly. Her nose was tiny. She wasn't wearing any makeup, nothing at all, and there must have been hundreds, thousands, of freckles on her cheeks. She blew the random red strands away from her face intermittently.

"Yea I'm looking for . . . hmm . . ." I noticed these nice ornate cement flowerpots on a shelf up above the counter, behind where the florist stood. Like the McCoy Pottery designs in the most recent Bennington, but probably not as expensive.

I thought I recognized the florist from somewhere and it bothered me that I couldn't figure out where. She had this skinny, flat kind of thing about her face -- like there was some distant Chinese in the veins -- that I recognized, or thought I recognized. She blew air up toward her hair two more times, but the red strands kept dropping. Her whole ponytail was just falling apart. I considered asking

her about the removed Chinese.

"How much are a dozen roses?" I said.

"What color did you have in mind?"

One of the flowerpots behind her on the counter had the face of some Indian god on it. It had a dark-brown, dusty look, almost like sand. The face was fat and well defined and the ears wrapped around to form handles.

"Do you know who that's a . . . um . . . you know, liking of? On that brown one with the two handles?"

I pointed up behind her and she turned around and reached up to grab the pot. She placed it on the counter between us and I couldn't tell if it was Shiva or Vishnu or any of them. The kid stopped turning on his stool and walked through the store to a back room or somewhere, eating a candy bar and humming a song from Aladdin. I found it disgusting and somewhat frightening that I knew the words.

"Yeah," I said. I turned the face toward her and traced its contours with my finger. "You know who this is?"

"No," she said. She looked off into the distance and bit her upper lip. There was a pause. "No, I don't think so."

"You sure? Nobody's ever come in and asked before?"

"Nope," she said. She dropped a mint into her mouth. "You're the first one."

We dosed with the DMT when the fire died down and the pit held nothing but embers that we spread out to look like a bright red and orange crystal city. Everything seemed suddenly quiet when she brought it up, like the cracking of bending trees and hum of the creek paused as soon as she mouthed the letters and numbers. It was like something out of a fucking chemistry class. How she could remember the scientific name, or whatever it was that she

knew -- the molecular structure -- was beyond me. In her excitement she drew the structure in the dirt. Like a hexagonal constellation. Melissa placed gray and white bark fragments at the intersections of her art, indicating which crossroads held Carbon or Hydrogen or whatever. She even knew its melting point.

"It's a naturally occurring chemical in the tryptamine class," she said, smiling.

I carried my green bucket to the creek and knelt where the water barely touched my feet. I stared at my toes for a moment and then stepped further into the water, deep enough so I could fill the bucket. The water was cold and comfortable. It seemed to relieve an itch I hadn't noticed. Carrying the bucket back to our fire I could see she was preparing it, fishing something out of a little baggie. I was a little worried.

I placed the bucket near the fire pit and sat back down next to Melissa on the towels we set up at the entrance to the tent. The tent and the towels looked blue in the light of the fire, and I wasn't even sure what color they really were, I couldn't remember. She started a disc in her CD player and lit some incense that I knew we'd never be able to smell over the smoke from the embers.

Melissa said something, but I wasn't paying attention. I was thinking about Sara's bedspread, and the way it smelled. The way she smelled. A perfect ratio of every conceivable kind of Bath & Body Works product mixed with just the normal sweetness of clean, used sheets. I don't know. I liked it better than Melissa's smell.

I walked the sidewalk aimlessly, slipping and struggling with the snow for absolutely no reason. Two blocks down from the clinic, at Kenbrook and Worthington, I saw six dogs standing outside a coffee shop with their leashes

strung around green No Parking poles. Most of the tables inside were covered in newspapers and cups and gloves and wet boots. There was a line to the register. I noticed Tony Shalet sitting alone at one of the tables, reading a newspaper. Both of his hands held his coffee, but instead of raising the cup to his mouth he leaned down toward it, sucking a little up like hot soup on a spoon. His hair was wild, shooting out in random directions around the edges of his hat. I looked at the line and then walked over to him and took a seat.

"Tony," I said. Tony was recently-chubby Sara's boyfriend ever since I had known either of them.

"Ashten." He nodded at me and held up a cigarette. "What are you doing here? It's way too early for you." He laughed. The cigarette floated between his fingers.

"Yeah . . . well . . ." I shook my head and he nodded, lighting the cigarette with a match.

"Sara wanted me to get a paper," he said, answering a question I hadn't asked. "I thought I'd get some coffee." He leaned over and sipped. With his dirty fingers he placed the cigarette between his lips and let it sit, looking around the shop, his mouth curled in what I was hoping was disgust.

"She's such a bitch lately," he said.

"Who?"

Something shattered from behind the counter. The collective murmur of the shop stopped momentarily as we all looked up toward the sound. A few people laughed, Tony being one of them. An identically dressed couple walked in and tracked more snow and wetness through the shop toward the register. The line was much shorter now. The workers behind the counter were rushing to clean to floor. They all looked flustered and agitated.

"You want some?" Tony said. He pointed at the coffee with his cigarette. "I won't drink it all. And it's Sara.

Sara's the bitch. She's fucking lost it." He was still pointing at his mug.

"No, I don't even like coffee. Too . . . something." I picked up Tony's book of matches and pulled out a single match, holding it in front of my face for a moment before striking it against the book and throwing it into the ashtray, still burning.

"She's started stealing pills from these ladies she babysits for," he said, fingering his hair above his left ear and brushing the match smoke away from his face. "Like ladies that need the pills for headaches or depression or something. Maybe for migraines. But she'll down like three or four a night, just to calm herself. Sometimes she snorts them." He took a monumental drag from his cigarette. "I don't know what they're called." He exhaled.

"Vicodin maybe," I said offhand, not really to Tony.

We both looked around the shop for a minute or two.

"So what are you doing here anyway?"

"I'm just waiting for Melissa," I said. "She's . . . she had to . . ." I could see that Tony had been reading the business section, checking stocks. He had circled a few figures in a red pen. I found this mildly irritating, but wasn't sure why. "Run errands?"

"At seven in the morning? With all this snow? Damn, Ashten, and I thought Sara was bad."

I pulled another match from the book and lit it, this time holding it upright as long as possible, until I could feel the heat against the tips of my finger and thumb. I stared at the flame and waited, holding onto the match even when it started to hurt, even after the pain, until I could see the fire touching the skin. I quickly blew it out and threw the match into the small black ashtray with the other two.

"Hey," I said, holding my arms up in mock defeat. "I'm just the company."

"Well it's nice of you to buy her a rose," he said.

I looked at the rose and then back at Tony and laughed for at least a minute, maybe longer. Eventually I started coughing horribly and had to leave the shop because the noise was bothering everybody.

Then came the trapezoids and triangles, the geometry I don't have the vocabulary to describe. Shapes and patterns seemed to fit with the profile of the treetops and the bleakness of the sky. I was the only person who could see them. Orion was directly above us. I thought I knew which star was Betelgeuse. Over and over again, my mind went back to the constant hum of the creek. When I concentrated on the water the sound got louder, more distinct and vivid, almost like gurgling from a happy baby.

Eventually I emptied most of the bucket into the fire pit to put out the embers. Melissa was on her back on the towels, her arms wrapped around her chest, her head bobbing from side to side despite the lack of music. The Virginia Tech sweater was covered in red and blue dirt. I reached out to touch her knee but stopped myself. There was, maybe, green sand grains covering her cheeks. I couldn't even remember if such a thing existed. Green sand. I looked at her face and she looked like a void, emptiness. I felt my eyes and knew I looked worn and tired. Melissa was neither smiling nor frowning, and for a moment I thought she wasn't even breathing. I turned away and watched the fire sputter, not wanting to consider death. As the embers died my eyes grew more and more accustomed to the dark and I could see the outside world again.

I looked down the gravel road that connected the campsites and noticed little black movements, little black things stalking around. They were cats. Six or seven of them roaming around about twenty yards from us. Maybe

they were kittens. They walked together for a moment and then suddenly darted in random directions, playing with rambling leaves or grass, circling trees. Eventually they always made it back together, to the group, before darting out again in search of diversions. I could barely see them through the dark. I lit a lantern, but the light was weak and it was all we had. They were approaching Melissa and me slowly, with a hint of fearlessness that impressed me. For a split second the entire world split up into octagons like a bee sees things.

I took off my shirt and walked to the water. The rocks at the fringe of the creek seemed to melt away as my feet touched them. When the water engulfed my toes they sank deeper and deeper into the rock. The creek seemed colder now, almost icy, and I thought my ankles might freeze, but I was positive nothing could break through my skin and get to my nerves. Like I could tell it was cold, but it didn't affect me, it didn't change my temperature, or the temperature of my feet. I was invincible to the water. I concentrated on the hum of the creek, the constant hum. I knew it would never stop. I reached up my hands and fell back onto a tree trunk and slid to the dirt, scratching my back on the bark and rocks at the bottom of the tree. Once I settled onto the ground I closed my eyes and couldn't feel anything. I didn't open them again until the sun came up and I heard, very soft and muffled, Melissa crying.

Our trash was scattered on the ground about twenty yards from the tree where I'd hung the bag. The tent and everything else looked fine, though, just as it had the day before. Melissa was in the fetal position on a towel by the fire pit, rocking her head back and forth and crying into her hands. My whittled firestick from the night before was broken into at least a dozen small, splintered pieces, all splayed around Melissa. I stood and stared at her for a moment,

unsure as to whether or not she wanted to be approached. I noticed the green bucket beside her and decided, without any reason, to fill it up. I started toward the bucket, but tripped on one of the rocks that defined the campsite and Melissa suddenly sat up, staring at me with leaves in her hair. The left side of her face was completely covered in dirt and the right side was completely, immaculately, clean. She was still crying.

I smiled and we just stared at each other and I think she was trying to compose herself. She fidgeted with a silver bracelet on her arm. I went for the bucket.

"Ashten!"

She indicated for me to stop with both hands but I continued towards the bucket.

"Wait!"

Melissa put both of her hands over the bucket and froze, suddenly. I noticed her face was a deep red beneath the dirt, and her eyes looked horrible and dark. She fell back and sat Indian-style and hugged herself and just started bawling, letting her hair block her face. The Virginia Tech sweatshirt was ripped at the neck and I think part of her skirt was burnt.

I bent to her level and touched her shoulder.
"Melissa."

She suddenly made eye contact and punched me beneath the chin, at the top of my neck. Her small ring ripped the skin above my Adam's apple and I stumbled backwards and fell into the empty fire pit, coughing. Ashes floated up from beneath me. That ring cost me \$300.

"I drowned them, Ashten!" she said. The ashes made it hard to see.

"Melissa."

"I drowned them, Ashten. I drowned the cats in your bucket." She was still crying but not quite as heavily. I

coughed more and brushed ashes out of my hair.

I had been holding my neck with my right hand and now it was covered in blood, completely covered. I wiped it on my shirt and then on my pants.

"Last night I drowned the cats in your bucket, Ashten." She was on her knees now, leaning toward me and staring at the green bucket. She reached one hand up to her mouth and held it there. She sounded like a child.

"It's just the DMT, Melissa. Relax. Nothing happened last night. We both passed out." I tried to speak in my most consoling tone. I don't know if I had one, really.

"I drowned them," she said again. Now she was back in the fetal position. "I drowned them." She said it pathetically, almost as if she'd given up. Like she didn't even believe herself anymore. "I can't believe I drowned them."

"It was just the drugs, Melissa. You had a bad night. It's fine now. It's over. Relax"

I stood up and brushed some of the ashes off my jeans but it was useless, they were covered in white and gray. The amount of blood flowing from my neck indicated that she'd given me a huge fucking gash.

I picked up the green bucket and carried it to the creek. I dumped out water as well as three small, black cat bodies that landed in the creek and floated downstream. About ten yards down from me one body got caught up between two rocks. The others continued toward the fly-fishermen. I stared at the body stuck between the rocks. I waited for it to release, to continue down the creek. The body never moved though, it just rocked back in forth in accordance with the moving water splashing up against the fur.

I walked back to Melissa and sat next to her and touched her head. "There aren't even any cats in the mountains, Melissa. Think about it." I rubbed her shoulder and

felt my neck. "You let it get to you. Come one." I started building a fire while Melissa sat crying more.

Later, when we were about to leave and everything was packed up, she would say: "I know that you lie to me, Ashten."

I was back outside the clinic, sitting on the stoop and smoking when a homeless guy staggered past me, just sort of petering along with this crooked, sluggish walk that he seemed to have perfected. He was wearing a dark-green army jacket, black all-purpose pants and a Cincinnati Bengals skullcap. He looked about as homeless as they get. My ass was still cold and I noticed a backpack slung over his left shoulder, just like he were a high-school student. I flicked my cigarette into the middle of the street. There was a group of fortyish female walkers across the road outside the pawnshop, checking for cars before they crossed to my side. A dark blue Cadillac was creeping over the snow and they waited for it with a look of contempt in their eyes. I tried to imagine there was some kind of connection between me and the driver of the Cadillac, whom I could not see. I willed him to slam on the accelerator and just fucking side-swipe the leader of the soccer moms, this pink tracksuit-wearing annoyance that seemed to have the most contempt in her eyes. I tried to make it clear to the driver that I didn't want them all killed, just the leader, so I could watch the rest jump around going apeshit in the chaos that would inevitably follow. He rolled past and they crossed the street without incident.

Melissa came out of the clinic not much after that. Her face was red and puffy and she didn't really say anything, except to ask if I'd waited long and to thank me for the rose. I hadn't been able to make up my mind on the type. I mean, I didn't know the appropriate color for this

occasion. I went with red because I thought, maybe, like three or four months down the road, we'd be able to laugh at the irony.

"I ran into Tony down the street," I said. We were walking down Park Boulevard toward her apartment. "He was just getting a . . . paper . . . I think. Or coffee." I couldn't remember what we had talked about. "Same old, same old."

I knew Melissa wasn't going to say anything and she kept getting ahead of me, walking faster than usual, her jeans dark blue near the bottom from the snow. Eventually I had to run to catch up with her and I could see her skin was worn red beneath her eyes and all over her nose. The snow was coming down harder than before. It was difficult to see anything more than twenty yards away.

"You know how if you keep telling yourself something over and over again," Melissa said, looking at her feet or the sidewalk or whatever, "then you can make yourself believe it? Even if it's a lie and you know it's a lie, eventually you can believe it? Don't you do that? You know how it works?"

Melissa carried a box of tissues decorated with white clouds, and she must've gotten it in the clinic. She hadn't carried anything in with her earlier. White clouds and just a nice blue sky, all connected to these tissues she kept grabbing and using then shoving in her pockets. I had nothing to say.

"Everything's going to be alright."

The River

J. Wenner

She fooled us; we thought she was surrendering
the granite benign but noticeable
slowly eroding what we took to be a reflection of the
sky
something simple
eventually the stones grew malignant, and the algae
rings caved her in
scabs of the most livid green, the only thing that could
thrive
during the drought. We wished
as the suburbanites cranked bitterly about their brown
lawns
and the news wondered for all of us
about the vivid grass surrounding, of all things, the
local chemical-headquarters;
we were wishing
there she was, the gate between the mountains and
the oceans
east and west, in our state
with a few sun-blasted survivors wasting out her
dead- pools
kicking through the dying young
small trees, an un-generation caught in the eyeless
blast.
The geese abandoned her
they had no choice, and neither did we
we wondered, chewing our nails
as the wells filled with mud
and the granite grew ever bolder
reaching with what seemed like missionary
resentment for the earth

into the hot sky, mirrorless, unreflectable as we were
from our perches on bridges and steeples
gathered nervously and reminded of how
we thought she'd been domesticated, tamed into our
reservoirs
and secretly we began to wonder
if she had only waited for our ultimate dependency,
our blindness
until she abandoned us.
It happened suddenly; perhaps her new worshippers
were just as ungrateful
and the process bored her.
Perhaps they weren't as pious -
she came back without saying whether she needed or
pitied
her granite back-bone,
the restless prodigies land-locked and wailing
in her absence.

The Textures of Barely Moving
Anna Journey

Sunlight slipping up a black skirt
of shadow
beneath the Japanese maple
retracting its purple claws.

September
turning blue around the edges
still warm, still waiting
pre-mosaic.

A seizure of wind, a ripple's widening
erase across the face of the lake
mouthing something
undecipherable
lips slipping from the bank.

A motor boat mutters in
to the dock
as night winds us back
into ourselves.

The visible, underexposed,
tucked behind the treeline.
The textures of barely moving:
potential
energy of bodies, breath, the loose
grip of hands.

Moon shuddering through mist,
its halo's short span
just tipping the dark hills
in white.
Pinecones like stopped hearts

in the trees

weighted off-center,
ambiguous and back-lit.

On the bank where echoes pool
and stretch in shades
we sit and split the wind
around us

into a night less impressive
than the small measures of darkness
we displace.

Spider Girl

Chris Powell

Red eye pulled his rusty shovel called "grinder" from the red earth surrounding him. He clanked it on the ground two or three times to loosen the dust, breathing in the humid air. He coughed and scratched his stomach. He then quieted to listen for the calls. He stood perfectly still, listening past the trees and faint sounds of car engines and chatter. He could just barely pick it up. The pitch still sounded the same as before.

"SPIDER GIRLL!! COME ON OUT SPIDER GIRLLLL!!"

Red eye could just make out the sounds of brush being trampled and the sounds of men laughing. He sat on a crate full of hair tonic and scratched his head. His scalp screamed with dryness. He could still hear,

"SPIDER -GIRL! YOU COME ON NOW Y'HEAR!! COME ON OUT!!"

It may have been a few days, if that. It was about the longest she had ever been gone, but still, it was common. Nobody really made a fuss, they just went out to look like always. Red eye heard the wooden door slam shut and a man sigh like wind. He shot up onto his legs and slammed "grinder" back into the dirt. He started to widen the hole again, like he had been doing all morning. When Marshall Eric peeked up behind him, Red eye acted like he didn't see him.

"Boy, when you work, you really set to it dontcha?"

Marshall Eric wiped his brow with a dust rag from his pocket.

"Oh, uh , yes sir." Red eye pretended to be surprised.

Eric looked down at the earth as Red eye pulled it out

and flung it to the side,

"I figure you only need to get about two or three feet in there, we should reach the septic tank easy with that. I'll get Larson and Hercules Smith to come in after you."

"Yes sir." Red eye kept digging. Marshall Eric stretched and groaned himself out of breath. He sounded like pipes breaking.

"GOD! Its hot this month! Can't but hardly breathe out here! Boy, how do you keep it up?!" Red eye smiled a little.

"Been up early sir, I don't get as hot when I wake up early." "Whatever works for ya kid." Eric started to turn back towards his office when a gray, familiar Ford truck pulled up beside it.

Tall and broad Phillip Amos hopped out and shook Marshall Eric's hand fast and quick.

"We searched all through these woods Marshall Eric, ain't seen no signs yet, but were gonna find her!"

"That's fine Phil, I appreciate it like always." Eric patted his shoulder.

"They said you had maps of the territory past the woods, said we might need em'."

"Sure, yeah. Come into the office here."

They walked briskly into the office slamming the wood door shut behind them. Red eye pulled "grinder" up again and sat back down on the crate of hair tonic. He could hear the sounds of drawers slamming and papers rustling, and still, the sounds of men calling.

"SPIDER GIRLLLL!"

It was more people from the town, like Phil. It was probably getting to be a pretty big crowd now. It was always like that here. The town people always looked out for the freaks. The freaks brought people to the town, and money

too, something like seventy percent somebody had said. This had all happened before, they would look and search like they always do. Everybody would help and soon they would find her.

And soon, they would have their freak show back again.

Red eye raised up and threw "grinder" back into the earth. He begin to work again so that he saw nothing. He just dug and dug past the surface, ignoring the air and the sun, ignoring the tent and the sounds of wood being sawed and nailed, ignoring the calls that grew fainter. After an hour or so, Hercules Smith came over and looked over the three foot ditch Red eye sunk into, still digging away.

"OOO O- KAY!!" Hercules bellowed.

Red eye shot up, awakened back into the real world.

"Looks fine, little man! You really cleared it out in the last hour! C'mon Now!"

Hercules stretched his arm out like a log and lifted Red eye out like a crane, smooth as air. He dusted him off with his gigantic hands.

"T'd say it's about time for a lunch break, whadda ya think?" Hercules stretched backward grinning.

"We can get jawbreakers. You want jawbreakers?" Red eye asked as he laid "grinder" down to rest.

"Shoot! I cant eat anything else! There should be three dollars in my suitcase by the outhouse. Go get us some grub before I change my mind."

Hercules winked and stepped down into the hole. Red eye made his way to the outhouse, collected the money, and walked out the short way to town. They were starting to get the tent ready now. You could see the little kids crowding around looking for trouble and free cotton candy. Red eye got to the woods and decided to take the route he always did. It was a clear path that not many really knew about, the branches and shrubs looked to separate and make way

for anybody walking the path. Red eye liked the smell of the pines, it was like pressing his face to a tree and inhaling the bark. He found the rock garden and peered over. He checked the sand and the spaces of brush. It was quiet, so he crossed through it jumping from rock to rock until he reached it half way, near the outside of town.

On the top of the highest rock, Red eye could see the streets and the lights, the people doing their business and living the lives that people live. He hopped off of the rock and, before crossing over the line between town and woods, found a thicket of brush about four feet high. The inside was hollow and enveloped in blackness.

Red eye stuck his head halfway in, listening for sound. He waited, but heard nothing. As he got up and prepared to walk away, a soft, yet intrusive voice stopped him, "Hey Stupid."

She popped her face out through the brush. It had dust on it like always, but it was still sweet and almost pure. Red eye tried to hold in the obvious smile bursting out across his face,

"How's it been, huh?"

The girl squiggled her way out of the brush, softly so as not to alert anybody passing by. Her once nice dress was painted with the mud and sweat of days. She propped her torso up with her arms, "Think I grew since the last time."

She drug her full body out by her arms, then, using her arms as leverage, she bent her knees backward into a crouching position. Her toes facing behind her gave her the proper balance to position her body erect. She leaned back and checked to make sure again of nobody passing by. Red eye leaned on a rock in front of her.

"When you comin' back Sarah?"

Sarah scratched her pretty little face,

"I think I might not this time."

"Ohhh." Red eye sighed and leaned his head back.

"I mean it, stupid!"

"If you come back now, you can eat jawbreakers with me and Hercules." Red eye stared deep into her.

"Nope," she shook her head quickly, "I'm really gonna leave this time. I'm grown up now and I'm leavin'. Maybe to Florida where the beach is, how bout that, huh?"

Red eye sighed again.

"Sarah, you got it good. You know it too. And, and you gotta know that there just aint another place for you, there aint no other place for people like us, you know it too, cause you're smart."

Sarah didn't say anything. Red eye tried to kill the quiet,

"Aint you gonna say nothin about my eye? Huh? It's been a while since you had a joke about my eye."

Sarah looked out past him. Red eye said again,

"Nothin? Cmon, you aint gonna say nothin bout my big ol' swollen, pus red, nasty lizard lookin' eye? Huh Spider girl?"

Red eye let his smile loose and winked.

Sarah still looked out past him, but she smiled, "Shut up stupid."

They each laughed a little, like children are supposed to. Sarah was the first to stop,

"I'm really leaving though. Really."

"Where you goin again?" Red eye smiled.

"The beach, in Florida or Maine, or wherever. I'm just gonna sit on the beach all day, forever."

"Just make sure, make sure they don't catch you Sarah. They're lookin like always, so, so just don't get caught."

"I'll be fine."

Red eye stood up and shook his legs to get ready to walk.

"This is your last chance, if you leave, you aint gettin no jawbreakers, not from me."

Sarah was inching backwards into the brush, her legs extended out and her arms touched the ground again. She moved backward, the way only she could, her "backward" legs guiding her and her arms holding her up. No matter how many times he'd seen it, Red eye would never get tired of seeing her move.

"You know, I never noticed before." She was buried in the brush up to her head.

"What?" Red eye asked.

"Your shiny marble eye looks just like a jawbreaker, you freak."

They both laughed.

Red eye turned down the path, "Take a swim for me, Sarah."

"Take your own swim, stupid."

She inched back into the brush and quieted into the darkness.

The town was quiet this time of afternoon, so Red eye got the jawbreakers pretty easy. The candy girl even threw in a few extra and told him to say hi to Hercules for her. Red eye winked at her and shot out the door. He walked around the rock patch on the way back, peered over and listened for her. Then he kept on walking, all the way back without stopping.

He took the lunch over to Hercules and Larson. They crunched and laughed next to the septic tank. Some little kids came over laughing and staring at them. Hercules picked up Red eye and Larson, one on each arm, right above his head. He juggled two jawbreakers on his tongue and

made everybody bust out laughing.

After lunch they worked the septic tank until late afternoon.

It was probably about six or so when they finished. Hercules and Larson went to smoke up near the ticket stand and scope out for pretty girls. Red eye stayed back to pick up the tools like always. He could hear out in front the same men, talking and laughing. Some even ran by him in a hurry. Red eye just kept picking up the tools. It was like it always was.

He picked up "grinder" last, and leaned it against the box of hair tonic. Then he went out to the lake to wash his hands.

When he came back, he walked around behind the tent and behind the crowds and crowds of town people chatting and chatting. He walked up to the last building in the corner. He peered in through the door. The room was all shadows and gray. He walked in and crept into the back corner. A rusty cage sat quietly next to the aged window that let in no light. Red eye stood just close enough in front of it. He could just make out breathing, like a small tree rustling. He reached into his pocket and pulled out three or four jawbreakers, set them softly on the ground and walked out quietly.

From the doorway, he could hear her cough.

"Goodnight Spider Girl." Red eye said.

He then turned and went up to the big tent, to see about dinner.

