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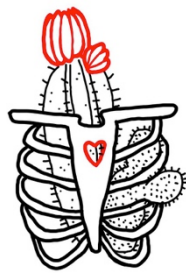
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Cactus Heart

e-Issue #12



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from the series, *Parallels*

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The Last Breath series | Miss Tima



The Last Breath series | Miss Tima

Zinn Adeline

Genesister

Chapter One: The Beginning

1 *In the beginning* they make us think
we choose it. They make us like it.
They make us need it.

2 They make it so we don't know
who we are without being
intertwined into the selves of our
fucked-up siblings who we love.

3 We had been together for 26 years
when I decided that although I still
loved her I wanted to leave. Move
away. Start over. A new

4 beginning.

5 *And God called the light Day, and the
darkness He called Night. And the evening
and the morning were the day one.*

6 ~~Adam~~ Abby. We call each other
Dister.

7 Her baby calls me Aunt Dister, and
my baby shortened it to Aunt DeDe
for her.

8 *And God called the evening and the
morning the second day.*

9 There is a quote they say about
sisters: biology made us sisters but I
choose you as my friend. Or some
shit like that. Usually that shit they
say is just shit. Lies they tell us to
make us

10 believe in the nuclear family

11 with a quiet submissive mom, a
dry-drunk dad and three kids that
cling to each other to survive. It is

how they make us keep repeating these cycles, and how

12 they make it so that we don't know who we are, *and God saw that it was beautiful.*

13 *And the evening and the morning were the third day.*

14 I'm three years older than her, and our nuclear family is completed by our brother that is two years younger than her. We had a large extended family that wasn't very extended.

15 My mother and her only sister were very close. My aunt and her husband had five boys and we grew up like brothers: riding bikes, playing spy and capture the flag and army, and gathering at one of our houses after church for pizza every Sunday night. Sometimes we played Scattergories and the younger kids would pair up with an adult.

16 I usually paired up with my aunt. I was the daughter she never had. When I disappointed my mother by chopping off my long blonde waves,

it was my aunt who showed me how to use a comb to tease and hairspray to hold.

17 Since we were very young, my dister and I had tried and tried to have our own language.

18 A secret language, *to divide the light from the darkness*, so nobody else could understand us: *and God saw that it was beautiful.*

19 We spent hours in our girl beds, bodies tangled, in our shared bedroom saying what sounds would stand in for what, *And the evening and the morning were the fourth day.*

20 But when we woke the next day we had forgotten and would start over on a long, long car ride and forget it again as soon as we got to the campsite and set out to catch frogs we could give swimming lessons to.

21 Scattergories was my favorite game.

22 When I was fifteen I found out my father had been sleeping with my

mother's sister. Because Jesus told them too.

23 My little brother caught them kissing in the kitchen during the Fourth of July party. He didn't tell anyone for months. Then one night he crawled into my bed, his body shaking, crying, and I wrapped my arms around him and he told me what he saw, *And the evening and the morning were the fifth day.*

24 My sister started cutting. She said she needed pain, blood, to match how she felt on the inside.

25 This confused me because when she swallowed too many pills and her eyes stood perfectly still, or when she raged so hard she cut and cut and cut, she would scream about not being able to feel anything. How could she be feeling pain if she didn't feel anything?

26 I never understood, but to keep trying was who I was.

27 Pastor Bob ran our megachurch. We got to keep the church in the divorce, even though everyone was

talking about us and some people left with my father and aunt to join the megachurch across town.

28 One summer after my dad left, we vacationed with Pastor Bob and his family after he and my mom picked his kids and me up from Jesus camp.

29 I walked with him by the lake and we ate ice cream and he asked me if I was okay and said I could talk to him and then when we got back to town he cheated on his wife and quit Jesus.

30 Jesus also told my father to leave my mother struggling to support us, working four part-time jobs, and marry my aunt. Care for her and her boys. And when my siblings and I weren't cool with having an aunt-stepmom, they moved on without us. Went to China and brought back daughters,

31 the daughters my aunt always wanted. *And God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very beautiful, and the evening and the morning were the sixth day.*

32 Pastor Bob mailed a letter of resignation to every member of his congregation exposing his affair with the youth pastor.

33 The youth pastor and her husband and their gang of kids moved to the megachurch across town.

34 When we were kids we picked out special rocks to bring home from our camping trips to keep as pet rocks.

35 We never had big houses.

36 Instead we had big rocks.

37 We named the rocks and painted the rocks and tied strings around them and led them around the yard.

38 Years after Pastor Bob quit, I was driving home early in the morning, after a long all-nighter, and I heard his soft yet demanding voice on the radio.

39 I will never forget that voice. He got the congregation's attention without having to do too much yelling, which is unusual for a charismaniac preacher.

40 It was gentle and sincere when we talked by the lake and I believed him.

He was the pastor, the authority, the one who would be there even when my father was off fucking my aunt.

41 I pulled over when I heard that voice because I thought I must be much more fucked up still than I thought. I sat on the side of the highway sure I was hallucinating.

42 But then the DJ called him Pastor Bob and reported the morning traffic.

43 Turned out it wasn't me who was fucked up at all.

44 They started Dister on all the pills after she started cutting. Oh and cigarettes too. Let her smoke, they said. She was eleven and the piles of pills went on for years. And years.

45 Pills so she wouldn't cut. Pills so she wouldn't feel. Or Flee.

46 I still didn't understand, but it was my job to help her be. She was my job.

47 Both of us to be-, not to -come.

48 Bizzy and I moved in together to have a baby and a different life than the ones we came from.

49 If my phone rang in the middle of the night, I panicked because I thought it was someone telling me she had cut or swallowed or drove again. If I knew she was out, I couldn't sleep because I'd be waiting for the phone to ring. And it would. What if she actually hit the artery this time. Or kept the whole bottle down before they pumped her stomach. Or smashed into a guardrail. Or. It was always something worse than the last time. So I would go to her every fucking time.

50 We moved into a big house next to a church.

51 I tried to set boundaries. I left my phone in the kitchen and went to bed with Bizzy. That night, my brother tried to get ahold of me for hours to tell me that my grandma had fallen and she was dying and she was asking for me.

52 It was a huge gray house on a lot with an old quaint gray church in the middle of a Midwestern suburb. It was cheap because nobody wanted to

live in the church house in this upperclass neighborhood.

53 I still leave my phone on when I sleep and I'm still worried it is going to ring.

54 The church owned the house and there was a tiny office attached to it that we didn't have access to. Someone used it for one hour every week to write the church bulletin. About eight cars filled our gravel parking lot every Sunday for a few hours.

55 We were surprised when they rented to us, an obviously same-sex couple, and we moved right in. Quick. We did not hang a rainbow flag. Or an American flag.

56 We don't do flags.

57 We lived in the big gray church house for about a year before my sister and her daughter moved into our spare bedrooms. She needed a place to live and help with her daughter and I was going to birth a Blaze in a few months and

58 I wanted her close. I needed her close.

Chapter Two: The Generations of the Heavens and of the Earth

1 I took Dister to see *Revolutionary Road* when it was in the theaters.

2 I had seen it already and it was one of those stories that made me feel like I wasn't alone in the world.

3 I wanted to make sure my sister knew she wasn't alone in the world either and since we didn't have a language of our own to speak in,

4 *These are the FAMILY HISTORY of the heaven and of the earth when they were created,*

5 I took her to see the film at the dollar show.

6 It was a dirty little theater way out on the edge of our suburb. We couldn't afford snacks or sodas but we took a few swigs out of my bottle of car vodka before we went in.

7 Kate Winslet stood in front of that picture window in her perfect suburban house and looked out at the other perfect houses and the cars and the trees and

8 blood gushed out of her vagina

9 and down her leg and she finally felt at ease. Relief.

10 My sister sobbed silently in the seat next to me, *and breathed into her nostrils the breath that is life; and she became a living soul.* I couldn't hear her but I could feel her

11 body crying.

12 My sister sat in the seat next to me silently reveling in Kate's release. *And you know what's so good about the truth? Everyone knows what it is, no matter how long they've lived without it.*

13 Her truth shook hard.

14 I knew not to touch her. Her body was releasing and I wasn't about to interfere.

15 Car vodka is an emergency bottle of cheap vodka you keep in the trunk of your car. You know, where most people might keep a spare tire or

jumper cables. You never go anywhere without it.

16 She began gasping for air as soon as the theater doors swung open and we got blasted with the thick St. Louis humidity.

17 *But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for when that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.*

18 She gasped and gasped like she was taking big bites of the air. She swallowed it down as if she hadn't taken a deep breath in three years.

19 That was how old her daughter was—three. She was twenty, her daughter was three, and Kate Winslet and her aborted baby were bleeding for her now so she could finally breathe.

20 She had looked to me three years before to know what she should do. I drove her to the store in the middle of the night for one last pregnancy test, just to be sure. And for a box of donuts and a cardboard carton of milk—her favorites.

21 She drank the milk and pissed on the stick and cried and I took her in my arms and rocked her, *And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Abby and she slept: and she took one of her ribs and closed up the flesh instead thereof;*

22 Then the next day I called the doctor to find out what pills she could keep taking and what pills she should stop and I made an appointment for an exam. I held her hand while the doctor confirmed the pregnancy and I shit my pants along with her when we ran into our mother at McDonald's afterward.

23 "What are you girls doing out of school?"

24 We climbed in the back of the minivan together, still a tangle of girl bodies, *and they shall be one flesh*, and I told my mother there would soon be another baby girl body.

25 *And they were both naked, and were not ashamed.*

26 Kate and Leo didn't get any nods from the Academy that year and

everyone was pissed about it. Well, all the smart people were pissed about it.

27 The members of *the herd* were glad because they found it to be a terrible movie. *Look at us. We're just like everyone else. We've bought into the same, ridiculous delusion.*

28 I didn't yet have the language to talk about it but I was defiantly becoming a stray. I didn't know why it was important, I just knew that a movie about death was breathing life into us again.

29 I was like the old husband in the final scene, sitting silently in my chair with my hearing aid turned off, drowning out the nonsense his wife was spewing once again. Unable to hear and unable to speak.

30 If you opened the trunk of Dister's Jetta right now, the Jetta she bought herself with money she earned at her government job where she helps young poor mothers learn how to feed themselves and their children, you would probably find a bottle of cheap car vodka. There

might be jumper cables too, but probably not a spare tire.

31 My sister cried for at least an hour in the car after the movie. And by cried I mean turned dark red and shook and gasped.

32 I cried too because I felt partially responsible. I hadn't been pro-choice either when she turned up seventeen and pregnant. A pregnant overdrugged ex-cutter-struggling-teen. It didn't even cross our minds that she might not have that baby.

33 She cried so hard she had no air to make sound. Her mouth gaped and she convulsed as if her body were trying to expel something.

34 If you walked by the car that night, you would have thought she was having some kind of purple seizure and I was just sitting there doing nothing.

35 We didn't talk about it. We couldn't. We just knew it was okay. We were ok. She had release and I was fulfilled because

34 I was for her. I had to be for her
because

35 I couldn't possibly be for myself.

36 That would require a self.

Chapter 3: The Fall

1 *And he said unto the woman, God is dead, but considering the state the species man is in, there will perhaps be caves, for ages yet, in which his shadow will be shown.*

2 *And the woman said, Several years passed and I went to a fancy liberal arts school and took an existentialist philosophy class and wrote a paper about the existential themes in Revolutionary Road.*

3 I learned a language to talk about being and becoming a Self. *Who made these rules anyway? It takes backbone to lead the life you want, Frank.*

4 *And the serpent said unto the woman, How do I know you didn't try and flush our entire family down the toilet?*

5 When I was done studying I decided to move away.

6 *And the woman saw a whole other future. I can't stop seeing it.*

7 We lived our whole lives in the middle part of the country and I was moving to the west to find my people. To become a self.

8 My sister was genuinely happy for me. We both agreed that it was time for us to break up.

9 I was supposed to leave in about two weeks when the feeling came.

10 The feeling that I couldn't go.

11 I was the rock and she held the string and I was painted and heavy and I had a weird name.

12 This had happened before. I got a scholarship to a Division III school. I was going to play basketball. But I couldn't commit to the team because I had kids.

13 My friends and I called my brother and her my kids.

14 They needed me.

15 What I know now is that I needed them. What I know now is that

18 I was afraid if I left her she would die.

19 We were all each other had had for so long now. I was the eldest; they lived with me. I went bankrupt maxing out credit cards to feed them, clothe them, drug them. Anything to make them smile and now I wanted out. What I know now is that

18 I needed her to lead me around the yard.

19 *And you know what's so good about the truth? Everyone knows what it is, no matter how long they've lived without it.*

20 But she wasn't stopping me. She said, "Go." And I believed her, but

21 I couldn't breathe.

22 I woke up in the nights panicked and without air and I knew there was no fucking way I could go.

23 Bizzy said, "But we have to go. My job has moved there, we don't have a place to live here. We are paying rent in ten days there. We have a quarter-black child with two moms who we need to get the fuck out of here, remember. What do you mean you can't go?! You have waited your whole life to go! We are going."

24 She was right. I couldn't wait to get the fuck out. So what was with this feeling of dread.

25 *Hopeless emptiness. Now you've said it. Plenty of people are onto the emptiness, but it takes real guts to see the hopelessness.*

26 Then the dream started. Every night for at least five nights. None of the people in the dream talked, but there was a narrator who said weird shit. Sometimes it was the word of God, and sometimes it was Sartre. Their voices became one and I couldn't tell who was who.

27 We were at a party. The party was at a big house. A big house with many, many rooms.

28 My sister and I and everybody who was ever anybody in our lives were at the party.

29 My lesbian coach who didn't know she was a lesbian because she was distracted by her love for Jesus was there.

30 The math teacher I lived with after I graduated because my mom

kicked me out for not being a virgin was there.

31 Our therapist we saw at our charismaniac megachurch after our dad married our aunt was slamming beers and being the giant sleazy sexist that he was.

32 All of the mean girls my sister tried to be friends with in high school, the ones who taunted her for cutting, were standing around in tiny dresses looking strung out.

33 Our dead grandparents were sipping from bottles of liquid Sweet'n Low as if it were beer. My father stood in his Promise Keepers sweatshirt with my aunt-stepmom, her teased hair held perfectly in place.

34 Our cousin-stepbrothers and Asian-sister-cousins were eating from huge rectangular boxes of pizza.

35 My mom and all of her boyfriends, their weird jewelry and motorcycles and handicapped children, everyone she had dated since our dad left, were there.

36 My ex-boyfriend's parents, who are my chosen family still to this day, were smiling, supporting, loving like they always do.

37 My jarhead brother who breaks out in hives at the sight of a fag was spewing his usual uninformed patriotic nonsense.

38 Pastor Bob was there, eating ice cream and holding that damn letter.

39 Also his wife and kids, the one with Down syndrome starting a dance party like he loved to do.

40 Everyone was in the dream.

41 They were moving throughout the rooms in the big house. I kept seeing my sister in the background. She was there and then she wasn't, like a flash.

42 I moved through the standard Midwestern trappings, night after night, trying to get to her. To find her. But she moved like a mirage and kept disappearing behind a tall hairstyle or a beer gut or a Marine Corps hat or gorgeous wooden doorframe or stained-glass window.

43 But when I caught a glimpse of
her something weird was happening.
It got weirder and weirder as the
nights went on and I became more
frantic.

44 She had deep dark eyes and they
were darting at me.

45 Her skin was paler than usual,
though it is already pretty pale.

46 She kept arranging her hands
around her mouth. Like she was
motioning something to me.

47 Then one night there was vomit
around her dream mouth. Like a
foamy lipstick ring you get after
giving drunk, sloppy head.

48 Her eyes were pleading with me. I
searched desperately. What did she
need.

49 Find her. She needs me. I need
her to need me.

50 I needed her to need me. That was
it.

51 I needed to be a rock and I
needed her to hold my string and lead
me around the yard. I couldn't leave
because

52 if I left she would die.

53 She would cut herself or swallow
the whole bottle or get behind the
wheel and I wouldn't be there to stop
her. It was because if she died then

54 I wouldn't have a purpose.

55 I would have to find one. I would
no longer be for her.

56 On the last night, she was trying
to shove pills past the foamy puke
ring and down her throat and then
she was gone again.

57 The next time I saw her, her eyes
told me to follow her into a closet.

58 I don't remember the words.
Maybe there weren't words. We still
had to have our

59 secret language without words.

60 No words but she convinced me I
needed to let her die.

61 She begged. Her eyes did the
talking. It was her body she had tried
living it was okay let her die now
pleeasssssee.

62 And she was right.

63 She was saner than I had ever seen
her. Over the years she had gotten a

firm grasp on the reality of her shitty life and had talked about death so calmly and rationally.

64 Who the hell was I to decide she should stay alive. She was trying to

65 exudate. Eruct. Extoll

66 me.

67 And I was making her stay alive for

68 me.

69 It was her life her body who was I to decide it was better if she stayed alive and struggled and hated and frowned with puke on her face and on her shirt and in her hair.

70 Who was I.

71 And who would she be if I didn't need her to be fucked up?

72 She was for me, too.

73 I exited the closet with vomit on my shirt and hands and my mother immediately spotted me and her eyes screamed what did you do and she tried to break down the closet door but

74 my body stopped her.

75 My sister was in charge of her own life and her own body, and I mine. My body guarded the door while my mother screamed and pushed and punched and

76 my sister's body gagged and died.

Chapter Four: After the Fall

1 I woke up and the feeling was gone. I moved to Portland.

Note: All segments of Italicized text are quotations, sometimes spliced and blended together, from the *Book of Genesis*, the film *Revolutionary Road*, and Friedrich Nietzsche's books *The Gay Science* and *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

Stephanie McCarley Dugger

Still Psalm

In our slight, dim church
the youth sat in the back rows—
boys on one side of the aisle,
girls on the other. The girls passed
notes about our dates
the night before: was he a good
kisser, what movie did we see,
were we lonely? The boys flicked
lighters, whispered
loudly, played Roshambo. The girls
stood and sang hymns, the boys sat,
refused to join in. Some Sundays
the girls made it to the front
to rededicate our lives, sometimes
in twos or threes. Sometimes we brought
Laffy Taffy or Bubblicious
in a purse, laced fingers
for prayer, slipped out
to the bathroom together
for longer than we should.

I had no interest

in those boys across the way,
except for Joel, who had a hole
in his heart, was scared to have surgery

to repair it, and loved the preacher's
daughter. But when Shelley sat
with her leg against mine,
her knees jutting from her skirt like pale reigns,
I sang louder and clearer, sank back into
the polished wood of the pew, gently
traced the letters of her name into my skin.

Thomas Cook

Uncles

The uncles foisted duties upon each other. It was their job in one way, but in the other way they had made their job what it was through years of doing the same things with respect to window treatments and newspaper subscriptions for the office, so it was also like foisting duties upon oneself. It was a family business in its last December.

The transition would involve memory, understanding the years spent recording the air temperature with Ticonderoga pencils and birdwatching from the shop window. One uncle was a grandfather, the other not so much as a father. Animals had come and gone. As boys, they were scouts, whittlers.

At home, in the middle of a documentary, one uncle heard *the eye is forever hungry* and was quietly terrified while miles away the other enjoyed his wife's lasagna, hearing nothing. The ruby throat

of the ruby-throated hummingbird is obsolete camouflage, they each knew in their own way, but of course they had touched their own necks.

When the heat went out across the state in January, the similar feet of the uncles were in similar wool socks. Their father had had similar feet, similar socks, each thought, dreaming towards different ends and sleeping in their clothes. They'd never seen their father in proper pajamas, but they'd seen him laugh at the television in the 1960s.

Ren Wilding

Girl Hornet

eleven and a hummingbird hatched in my chest her wing rhythm
 became my heart *do all girls grow birds inside before their breasts come in*
maybe not a girl then
 my body forgot to grow taller injections every night
 height forced from my skeleton I grew out of phobia
 into not-as-short-as *the bird in me*
that little density doesn't measure up on sight
I am not enough
 I grew a body on me hips breasts curving budding chubbing
 too much *what is the right amount of me*
uncontrolled body growing sideways fear a wall of me
a wall of tiny birds thrumming hornet-rage
too much has always been in me
she is my enough

Matthew S. Cook

Sonar

The sun descends the mezzanines of desert sky,
mindlessness allies through conversation.

This and dawn are the most truthful
times of the day, in their fidelity to transition.

Still, the blue room remains dark and the queen
cleans, feigning his mother will visit.

Their words sonar in his brain's
geodesic dome, her *Oh, Honey, I'm just dying*

to see you—and his, *No, Momma, I'm just*—
lying—he regrets, just

barely living,
just barely

anywhere—

Kodi Saylor

Supper

Big hat & no cattle, Dad mumbles
at Mom who's dishing out blackberry

cobbler onto vanilla ice cream. The blood
of the berries stains the white whirls—clouds

in sunset. *No*, her voice needle sharp,
You're no hat and all cattle. She cuts

a cliff of the cobbler-vanilla mess and licks
the spoon down to the metal. Ignoring

the crack of his beer can, she guides
his hand to hers. I ask to be excused

not wanting to know how many drinks
he will have tonight or where he buried Blackie,

number 14, vulture eaten, & big—
the new dead calf.

Scott Brendel

Threesome

My brother Todd stood beside the golf cart, staring down the first fairway as if searching for something he'd lost. A beer cooler divided the bench seat, his emergency stash for those long, dry holes between the first drive and the last putt. He turned when he heard me, wavering as if in a stiff breeze. He was hung over or drunk. Or both.

"You're late." He watched as I fixed my bag to the back of the cart.

"What difference does it make?" I asked. "It's the middle of the afternoon and the course is closed. Besides, no one in his right mind plays golf this late in the year."

"I do," he said, defiantly.

He turned back to the fairway and I looked, too, searching for the changes that ten years had made. Three hundred twenty yards

from the raised tee to the dogleg, the view backed by tree-shrouded mountains. A place so freighted with memories that I loved it and loathed it, all at the same time. “Where’s Dad?”

He lifted his jacket from the basket behind the seat until I saw the shiny brass urn. A ray of sunlight slipped from behind the clouds and Dad winked.

“So how are we gonna do this?” I asked, wondering why my heart pounded so hard.

“I brought a spoon,” Todd said.

“A spoon? What kind?”

“What do you mean?” He looked truly puzzled.

“A tea spoon? A soup spoon? A fucking gravy ladle?” The absurdity of the situation overwhelmed me. “What do you use to spread your father’s ashes over a golf course?”



The first tee was always the hardest, because it set the tone for the round to follow.

The first time I ever played golf was at the crack of dawn on a Saturday when I should have been in bed asleep. In front of Dad and Todd and a crowd of geezers in a rush to get to their mid-morning nap, I missed the ball three times before dribbling my drive ten feet short of the ladies’ tee. By comparison, today was

looking up—I hooked the ball into the woods a hundred yards down the fairway.

“So what do you recommend?” I asked.

“Give up golf.”

“About the ashes,” I said, annoyed. “Do we pick some spot and dump them, or spoon them out as we go?”

Todd teed up his ball, a grimace the only indication of the headache that must have raged within his skull. The night before, he’d put away enough bourbon to finance the rise of the Confederacy. “Dad left instructions.”

The anger I’d kept in check on the long trip back flared. “That’s just like him.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Todd asked, his hands gripping the driver in a chokehold.

I reined it back in. This was no time to reopen old wounds. One round of golf and I’d be on my way. “Nothing.”

Todd watched me for a moment, then returned to the task at hand. “He wasn’t specific. Said to play eighteen holes and figure it out.” Paunch drooping over his belt, he swung his driver like a god gone to seed and delivered his ball down the center of the fairway. Just like he always did, drunk or sober.



My ball wasn't just in the woods; it was under a log and behind a rock. "It's an unplayable lie. I'm gonna take a drop."

Todd popped the tab on a can of Olympia. "Cost you a stroke."

"We're keeping score?"

"Always." He swallowed and belched.

I tossed the ball in the rough beside the fairway. "Fine."

Not that it mattered. I'd only beaten Todd once and that on a day when Dad hadn't been there to witness it.

After a couple of practice swings, I studied the ball in its nest of grass, then swung. The three iron lifted the ball into the air and nearly two hundred yards down the fairway.

No one was more surprised than me.

"Get in," Todd said, and off we went.



I salvaged a bogey on the hole. Todd made an easy bird.

"So," I said. "Do we sprinkle some here?"

The trees surrounding the green seemed to hold their breath.

"No," Todd said. "This was only the warm-up hole. Too easy. Too forgiving."

"Sure," I said, realizing how right he was.



“So where were you when I called?” he asked, watching as I stepped into a sand trap.

“North Carolina. On a shoot.” My acting career, little more than workshops and showcases that producers rarely saw, had actually shown signs of life in the last two years.

“Another commercial for jock itch?”

“It was Preparation H.” My ball looked like a pimple on the grainy ass of the sand trap. “And it was national.”

“So people all over the country know your asshole burns.”

I wheeled on him, anger painting a vivid picture of my club connecting with his skull. Then the image passed; I’d be on the road by dusk, all this behind me. “It was good money. And it got me an agent.”

“What’s in North Carolina?”

“A movie.” My first and, since I’d had to leave the set so suddenly, probably my last. “Something called *Road House*. A Patrick Swayze picture.”

“The dancer dude. You can finally put those ballet lessons to use.”

“This one’s a redneck bar-brawl flick.”

“So who do you play?”

“One of the bouncers.” My club sent sand flying into the air, and a sudden breeze blew it back in my face.

“You?” Todd smiled, watching my ball drop into the sand trap on the other side of the green. “You’re the guy who gets his ass kicked, right? How appropriate.”



By the fifth hole, I’d lost two balls—one to the lake on the long par 4 and the other to woods that only Big Foot would inhabit. Despite the problems, I stayed within three strokes of my brother.

“This one,” I said on the sixth tee. It was a 165-yard par three that crossed a marshy thicket of cattails. “The one Dad aced. His only hole in one. Remember?”

Something in Todd’s face softened. “The ball landed just beyond the hole and backed into the cup, like it was reeled in on a line.”

That day—that moment—came back in a rush. A summer morning with the warm smell of cut grass. “You did a back flip. The way you used to celebrate those diving catches in the end zone.”

“You threw your club in the air. Nearly killed me!”

“And Dad—” My throat closed up as I pictured his face. “He just smiled...”

Because he knew it for what it was—just luck, a nice shot that broke in his favor. Nothing he deserved. Nothing that really mattered.

“This one?” I asked, knowing the answer.

“No.”



Passing the clubhouse at the turn onto the back nine reminded me just how alone we were. The building was dark, closed for the season. Winter would soon condemn it to isolation. As a favor to Todd, the pro had set out the flags and charged up a cart.

“Make any money this summer?” I asked. Todd had taken over the course restaurant when it became more than Dad could handle.

“Enough to justify the time away.”

Todd owned a bar in Key West called Papa’s Place, a Hemingway-themed joint. Ironic, since he’d never read a whole book in his life.

“When do you leave for Florida?” I asked.

“End of the week.”

“Jenny will be happy to get you back.” Her, the head cheerleader, and him, captain of the football team. Their marriage the stuff of small town legend. Dad had loved it, loved her, his pride so expansive it could squeeze the air from a room.

Todd grunted, which I mistook for the effort of his swing. Then we both watched as his ball dropped into the pond beside the fairway.



By the time we finished the thirteenth hole, I was exhausted by making small talk with a brother I couldn't abide. We'd never had anything in common, except the bond of rebuke that had driven me from home. Five more holes and I'd be free.

Todd stopped beside a portable toilet. "Take the cart up to the tee. I'll be there in a second."

I took off as the toilet door slapped shut behind him, relieved for a moment to myself.

The cart path wound through the trees and past an outcropping of rock that, as kids, Todd and I had played on. Back when our battles were epics of the imagination that united us against a common foe, when golf with Dad was just a walk through the woods and an opportunity to explore.

Pulling the cart to a stop beside the tee, I set the parking brake and got out.

Restless, I ran my golf ball through the ball washer and toweled it dry, then pulled out my driver. The day had gone gray. A breeze toyed with the hairs on the back of my neck. And the urn gleamed from the wire basket.

Thirteen holes and the thing remained sealed. What was Todd waiting for? For that matter, what was I? Todd had cushioned it with an old sweater. I leaned the golf club against the cart and lifted the urn from its nest.

It was cool to the touch, its sides polished. Engraving circled the narrow neck. There were no handles, so I had to press it to my chest with one hand before I could lift the lid.

A whitish-gray mix of granules and powder filled it, the ash so fine it tickled my nose. All that remained of a man whose existence had inspired a tangled mix of emotions.

“What are you doing?!” Todd stood beside the cart with one hand held out, as if he’d caught me playing with dynamite.

“I’m just—”

“Put it down!”

“I wanted to—”

“I said, put it down!”

That’s when I sneezed, an explosive blast that blew ash and grit into my face.

Then Todd was grabbing for the urn, trying to wrest it away. The lid fell to the gravel path with a clink, and I hugged Dad tight to my chest. But Todd was strong and quick. His fingers slid around the bottom of the urn as I twisted away.

When I did, the urn popped loose. It spun lazily through the air, trailing a narrow plume of ash. I reached for it and Todd threw himself flat out in a dive.

We both missed. The urn hit a rock with a musical tang and came to rest after one quick bounce, disgorging ash in a sooty pile. Then the breeze freshened and started to draw Dad away.

“What have you done!” Todd screamed, leaping to his feet.

Words I’d heard before. The words that had driven me away.

He charged and swung a fist, his speed undiminished by what age and alcohol had done to him. But this time—unlike all the times he’d kicked my ass as a kid—my forearms crossed in an x, some goofy move the fight director for the film had taught us on the set. I deflected the punch, pulled Todd off balance, and slammed him across the side of the face with an elbow. He went down in a heap.

We stared at each other, both stunned, a lifetime of assumptions proven false. I expected him to leap to his feet and beat me to a pulp, bloody my face and the knuckles of his fist. But he didn’t. Instead, he crawled across the ground and started pushing Dad’s ashes back into the urn.

“He doesn’t deserve such consideration,” I said, the bitterness sudden.

“He deserves *better*.”

“After letting Mom suffer?” Ten years of rage rose until I could barely breathe. Her death from cancer had been slow, painful and meaningless.

“It wasn’t his fault,” Todd whispered, capping the urn.

“He could have ended it. Spared her.”

“No!” Then Todd was on his feet, running with the urn clutched to his stomach like a football he intended to drive into the end zone. Instead, he dove into the golf cart and raced into the woods.

“Come back here!” I screamed. I flung my fallen driver at him.

Out of some vestigial sense of duty, I had returned, hoping to heal the seeping wounds of anger and hurt. Five more holes and it’s over, I thought, retrieving my driver from the weeds.

With the only club left to me, I hit my ball long then watched it bend toward the woods. A goner for sure. Then a strange sound—tick-a-tock—as it pinballed between three trees and popped onto the fairway. A sign! I marched down the fairway and hit the ball off the grass with a club never intended for it.

Can I putt with it, too? I could and did; one stroke was all that it took. But when I pulled the ball from the cup, ten years of anger and resentment came with it.

“She suffered!” I screamed to the watching woods, remembering the tremors that shook her wasted body. “And she died!”

Just not soon enough.

I dropped the driver. The ball slipped from my hand, caught the tip of my shoe and rolled across the green. But I ignored it, remembering instead how quiet it had been in her room when I’d gotten to the hospice early on the last morning.

Dad slumped in a chair, his face rumpled with grief even in sleep, while machines beeped and whirred, charting her life on pale green screens. An intravenous line snaked from a bag hanging beside the bed into her arm. But she trembled with pain, even in the grip of coma.

“The morphine,” I said to Dexter, the night attendant, at the pharmaceutical station down the hall.

“I reset it this morning,” he said, counting pills into paper cups.

“It’s not enough,” I said, my breathing ragged.

He looked up at me, a man with watery eyes who watched people die. “Let me check.”

I followed him back to the room, watching as he unlocked the morphine pump, reset it, and locked it once more. A simple matter, really.

My mother's eyes were closed and her shallow breaths came at long intervals, but still I asked: "Will she wake up?"

"It's unlikely." He started to leave, but something made him hesitate. He glanced at my sleeping father, then his eyes studied mine. "Sometimes, when they're this close, they just need a little help." Slowly, deliberately, he slipped the key to the morphine pump beneath the clipboard beside her bed and left.

My heart raced.

The control for the morphine pump lay on the bed beside my mother. I leaned down, placed it in her palm, and stroked her head. "It's okay," I whispered, wondering if she could hear me.

Then I curled my hand around hers, and together, we pressed the button.

I opened the pump and reset it, then waited patiently while the sun rose on a new day, her fragile hand in mine. Closing my eyes, I stroked the inside of her wrist, remembering how she used to wipe away my tears when the world brought them on. Then together, we pressed the button again.

The sound of the machines changed, the blip of the heart monitor now a steady soft whine. I pressed her hand to my lips, set it back on the bed, then locked the morphine pump and hid the key beneath the clipboard where Dexter would find it. When I turned, Dad was staring at me.

“What have you done?” he whispered, the look on his face a mystery I had never solved.

I sank to my knees on the green of the golf course and covered my face with my hands. “What you couldn’t do,” I muttered, answering a question that should never have been asked.

Dropping my hands to my sides, I looked up and froze.

A coyote stood less than six feet away, close enough to seize my throat. It watched me, tail twitching with intent.

Heart hammering in my chest, I reached slowly to the side, searching for my driver. But it was too far away.

When the coyote moved, I flinched, but instead of leaping at me, it snatched my golf ball and ran.

“Hey,” I said, surprised. It was the only ball I had, the one I’d need to finish the round. Leaping to my feet, I grabbed my driver and chased the animal through the woods.

It dodged and darted through the brush, but I managed to keep it in sight, until the coyote disappeared over a hill.

I needed to get that goddamned ball back so I could complete this one last obligation. Pouring on the speed, I burst through the trees at the top of the hill and stopped, panting.

Twenty yards ahead was the golf cart next to a sign for the seventeenth tee. The coyote stood beside it, looking back as if waiting for me. When it saw I had finally arrived, it set the ball

gently on the ground, like an egg that had been entrusted to its care, and darted off into the woods.

Mystified, I retrieved the ball, wiped the slobber from it, and slipped it into my pocket. That's when I saw Todd sitting on the ground up on the tee, the urn at his side.

He heard me approach but didn't turn, simply waited until I sat on the ground beside him. Then he spoke. "*This* is the one."

"It is? Why?" Then I remembered, understood. "Where he proposed to Mom."

Todd nodded.

I tried to imagine what that moment must have been like, tried to reconcile their love for each other with the horrible pain of her death. "She pleaded with him to help. And the law would have allowed it."

"I know," Todd said.

"But he didn't."

"He was going to." Todd hugged his knees to his chest. "But I wouldn't let him."

"What?" Shocked, I thought of the look in Dad's eyes, a look I'd taken for outrage. Had it been, instead, horror at the burden I'd taken on myself? "He never told me."

"You refused to speak to him. Sent back his letters. And mine."

Clouds gathered along the mountains like doubts dimming the conviction of memory. For more than ten years, I had refused all contact, adamant in my anger, estranged from what little family I had left. And all for nothing. The realization left me dizzy.

“You were the golden boy,” I said, still in denial. “The one who could do no wrong.”

“But you were the one he missed. You were the one he mourned. The only one who could do the right thing.”

The revelation stunned me, undermined the foundation of the life I’d built for myself. How could I have been so stupid?

Eventually, the dizziness passed, my brother’s presence an unexpected comfort. We sat for a long time without speaking, the silence no longer strained.

I thought about Dad’s final request that Todd and I scatter his ashes, how he’d known that the shared obligation over a round of golf would bring us back together again, however reluctantly. But even that had almost not been enough.

Movement beside the seventeenth green drew my attention. A coyote crossed the fringe, stopping long enough to wait for the two young pups that followed it. I watched them, wondering if it was the one that had taken my ball.

“Jenny left me,” Todd said, as we watched the sun begin to set.

The cheerleader—blonde hair, big tits and white teeth. The stuff of small town legend. “Why?”

“Because I’m an asshole.”

I mulled this over while I chewed a piece of grass. “You know, I never really liked her.”

He laughed, a raucous mix of exasperation and fatigue. “Me neither.”

Something in common after all, I thought, as we stood and uncapped the urn.



Color Slide #1, Digital media | Katherine J. Lee



Color Slide #2, Digital media | Katherine J. Lee



Color Slide #3, Digital media | Katherine J. Lee

Amy Elizabeth Bishop & Lucia LoTempio

On Tying Her Hair before Battle

But I can point to cases where the bones clearly belong to a woman, and the archaeologists insisted that it had to be a man because only men were warriors.

—comment section of tor.com

I dive: water wraps my body up & in—pushes me out hard as it can;
as hard as anything can to make me not wet. My fingers refuse to prune.

[Her daughter: My mother is standing at the edge of the ditch: she
adjusts to hold my father by the ankle; he reaches for me, arm
unfurling & taut as if to strike flint]

When my daughter's body came home: all I saw was fire. *Sleep now*, the
women blinked—pared her nails to keep jötunn from voyage, spread
palms over clotted wounds.

[The historian: Domestic relics—household goods, jewelry, etc.—are
found in female graves; leather ties to plait hair, pointed tools to
cook, mementos of sons to leave for conquest]

[The linguist: She is expanding oversea, she is penetrating the small
bays; she is reaping the inlets. She bloats out & sucks in: she is greedy]

I swim to an embankment, legs not touching seaweed so I don't think of
seaweed. Lean back into pebbles—elbows warm, I sink—hair water-
heavy when I curve my neck up.

[The archaeologist: Look—it is clear—there is pattern on the apron: her husband a merchant, her hands pocketed]

[The novelist: A last-moment decree passed down from the drótt—*no flames take this woman to Odin's hall*. I am relieved at this diminishing; at her body becoming earth]

I hear tide as distraction, cracking like embers: insistent on sun in my eyes, insistent on smoothing channels. I hear searching, but the water is push & heave—how the shields drum voyage: *Dóttir, come home*.

[Her husband: She takes my sword as I saddle my horse; she is so touchable: I have seen her fold & crease without precision, count her missing fingers]

Hunch around my knees, grit between stomach folds, darkening pockets of my thigh—water will not pulsate with heartbeat; water will still push like a sleepwalker as I separate each strand of hair.

Cait B. Smith

Band-aids

I prescribe kisses like band-aids
to the mouths of girls everywhere.
Whether half cracked or hanging
their strawberry lips part
ready to be healed.

And so,
applying pressure
to their wound,
we merge.
For those ten seconds
our tongues are silent
but never still.

Our blood, beneath the surface
blooms that American red,
brick cheeks and July fire.
The remnants of her perfume
left to spoil on my collar.

We'll never speak
of a diamond infinity
On proud left hands.
Because in just ten seconds
We were already whole.

Cal Louise Phoenix

Once a Month Reminder

My uterus is a soured onion
spilling into a ceramic ashtray
casted the color of robes
and mended by the wispy gold glue
of a wispy golden girl.

At two years, the lass could repair faults
without touching the tip
of the brush to her lips—so smart.

For nine months, I opened my entrails
to embrace her—a bunny in a bed.
There, we ate yogurt
and watched cartoons about candy

until I lost her inside a cardboard box
and was sacked for my troubles.

But no one goes forgotten by
a toddler in an endless tossing.

In my sleep, she still unearths
the onion from its dish and strokes it
into a vermillion gleam.
In my sleep, we share the imagination of
her father—a caricature who is afraid of blood.



The Last Breath series | Miss Tima

Kate Tagai

The Pea

The velvet cushion is soft, despite the quiet and cold of the glass box. Sometimes the princess comes to stare in at me for long hours. She never says much, but if I am to judge by the shine of her eyes and the wrinkle that deepens between her brows, the interior monologue is intense. I wish she would share her thoughts, but why would she talk to a lowly, lonely pea?

Rainy days were my favorite days growing up. The sun would bake the soil dry, our vine would droop, and the leaves giving us shade would start to crisp at the edges. The thirst would steal away conversation about the color of the stone walls, the quality of the sunlight, or the jewel-toned dress of the Queen when she came through to inspect the Gardener's work. We'd start to wrinkle as we focused on drawing scant moisture from the straws of our stem.

Then the heavens would open and each sweet drop pattered across our shared green cardigan, caressing our sides like a lover restoring our faith in her goodness. We'd drink deeply. Our wrinkles would smooth out, our leaves would plump up, and the vine supporting us would stand straighter.

Rainy days were my favorite days because the high stone wall turned into a rich blue grey and all the hidden colors in the stones would appear, streaks of red, deeper blues and greens. The rain made the garden beautiful.

We knew that our coming of age ceremony involved the sun. Each rainy day was sweeter, delaying our impending maturity, plumping us up with the water for one more day. But growing up cannot be put off forever. The day came when our vine shriveled up, our food was cut off, and we knew that our ritual of growing up had commenced. We heard the Gardener telling the tale of how the Prince had to go on a quest, fight a dragon, and bring back stolen treasure, to prove he was a man. The squires had rights and rituals of their own before they could assume the full responsibility of their job. For us, the ritual mimicked the long, dry days in the middle of summer. We sat on screens in the sun, robbed of our shells, staring at the mice running along the ground below or up at the blue cloudless sky. Our skin grew darker. Wrinkles appeared like the cheeks of the Gardener who stood out

in the sun alongside us day after day working his hoe into the ground. Some of my siblings grew so tiny they dropped between the squares of screen and into the waiting paws of the mice, who nibbled away at the tough flesh until only crumbs were left. As I watched them disappear, I loved all the rainy days even more, where I'd slurped as much water as I could hold. I appreciated the ample room my two nearest brothers and I had in our pod when two other peas failed to thrive and grow with us. I was a bit larger than all my companions. I wouldn't fall to the mice.

When we were all dry we were taken and dumped in an oak barrel with older, wiser peas who told us fantastic tales about the great day of stewing for which we were all waiting.

Perhaps it was because I was a bit larger, my skin was smoother than my fellow peas. I don't know what quality attracted the roving fingers of the Queen. We were all genetically identical, hard to tell one from the other. I felt the barrel shift, the light change as the lid was lifted and then dim again as a gilded body leaned over. I bumped against a gold and ruby ring, the stone as red as the poppies that lined the garden path. The mass of us shifted. My hard skin pressed into her warm, soft thumb and the crowd of other peas dropped away. She deposited me on the palm of her hand. I rolled along the deep lifeline scored across her palm and came to rest in the center. She leaned in closer. Fear of being

sucked into a cavernous nostril blew over me in the power of her breath. The Queen has always been a little shortsighted. With a nod she slipped me into a pouch at her waist. I fell among bits of herbs, and the cold steel blades of embroidery scissors. In the Queen's large hands the tool would have been delicate, but for me one wrong movement and it would crush me to powder against a tiny glass vial. I looked up at the roses etched into the graceful curve over the finger grips. I remembered the carvings on the battlements. If I stretched on my vine, I could see just a sliver of the grey stone appearing over our wall, carved flowers and vines mimicking the life at the foot of the tower. Life immortalized in silver and stone.

The contents of the pouch shifted. I don't know if she walked a few feet or several miles. I don't know if I was in her pocket for a minute or many hours. Up became down and left became right as I was tossed to and fro.

Her thumb and finger rooted around through the opening. The embroidery needle grazed the tip of her fingers, before they touched my round body and pinched me back out of the pouch. She didn't bring me close to her face to look at me again, but simply thrust me into a dark, soft cloud. I was alone. Day or night I couldn't tell, but I wondered at this new place, wondered for

what I didn't know about it. I wiggled myself into a pea-shaped indent to wait.

“Hey! Stop moving! You're crushing me.”

I couldn't jump away, the soft cloud holding me, shaping to my curves and wrinkles.

Peas talked to each other in our soft wind voices, mostly about the weather. The Gardener talked to us in low mumblings, again, mostly about the weather. This new voice was not the threatening deep voice of a mouse. The mice only ever talked to each other discussing ways to knock us off our screen, or in the barrel talking to each other about which peas to eat and which to pee on.

This voice, the one being crushed, sounded smaller than a mouse.

“I do beg your pardon. I cannot move more than to wiggle deeper.”

“Oh sure. Make me do all the work would you?”

I felt myself shift a scant millimeter to one side. The bedbug crawled from under me and stood brushing himself off muttering about trespassing peas. When he turned to me again he put his hands on his thorax in a good imitation of the Queen when she was hovering between mad and curious.

“What do you think you are doing barging in here and crushing me?”

“I do beg pardon, could you perhaps tell me where here is though?”

The tiny bug looked at me. He walked around me, occasionally tapping my sides. It took him a few minutes to circumnavigate me, dry and shriveled though I was.

“No feet, huh? No arms. Couldn’t have gotten here yourself, she put you here, didn’t she? Inconsiderate. No respect for a bug’s space. Doesn’t she know that no human is sensitive enough? Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

“She? Who’s she?”

“The Queen, who else would try to control everyone’s fate with garden vegetables? Sheesh.” He stalked away and then back, pacing, “She put you here. Following her old habit. Jealous, you see? Doesn’t want her son’s attention on another lady. Wants him to still be her wittle bitty boy.”

“Um, so, where am I?”

“In the guest bed. Under about ten mattresses and several feather beds—though she claims to the troubadours she makes ‘em sleep on one hundred—can you imagine how high that would be? Those broads would be sleeping near the ceiling and I can tell you it hasn’t had the soot washed off in a millennia. Heaven, sure, but not for them.”

“And you say she does this a lot? I’ve never been here before. Never heard about this, only about the Great Stew.”

“The great stew? Like dinner?” The bedbug paused as if to ask a question, but shook his head and continued, “Nah, different pea each time and the mice usually come to have a bit of a snack before the princesses even get a chance to have a good nap—not that a human is sensitive enough to feel a pea through even one mattress. Plus, the mattresses are lumpy. How you’d tell a pea lump from a regular mattress lump is beyond me, but no one said the Queen worked on logic. No, she keeps bringing peas up here to test these thick hided girls, and it attracts mice. I mean, the mice could give a whiff about little ol’ me, and they taste nasty so it isn’t like I want to snack on them, but man they do make a mess. Total mess. Nasty things, mice.”

I looked at the little bug hopping up and down waving all four arms to emphasize just how crazy he thought this whole thing was. I didn’t want to get eaten by a mouse. I didn’t realize there were worse fates.

“So all the princess has to do is feel the pea?”

“Yeah but it has to be through a bazillion layers so it’s never gonna work, that’s the trick of it.”

“But what if I could move? What if I was right up under the princess so she was sure to feel me?” And, I thought, the mice

would be too afraid to come near a real live human. A plan was forming in my pea brain.

“Nah, Queen would see you in the morning and it wouldn’t count, see?”

“But what if I wasn’t there in the morning—what if I was back here?” Comprehension dawned in the bedbug’s facets.

“Brilliant!”

We concocted a plan. It took a hundred more bedbugs, two passing ants and a cockroach. Once the visiting princess lay down, they started to roll me, picking me up over each new level, shifting me so that I was under the princess with only the thin sheet between my sun-hardened wrinkles and her tender hip. When she shifted away from the discomfort of my hard round body, the bugs rolled me back under her. The princess shifted and turned. She never dropped into a restful sleep that night. I felt for her, it seemed she had traveled a distance, had a long way to go the next day and it had been raining. I could smell the fresh water drifting from her hair as it dried on the pillow, and the rich earth mud splashed on her legs that she hadn’t washed clean. The same smell that rose from the first raindrops splashing into the dry dust and up over the lower leaves of our vines.

The rooster announced dawn with short bursts of his fowl trumpet. The bells from the monastery followed, ringing the

monks to morning prayer. The bugs picked me up and hauled me back into the small hollow at the bottom of all the mattresses where the Queen had first thrust me. The ants wandered off with the roach toward the kitchen and breakfast crumbs. The bedbugs disappeared into layers of the mattress, the first bug hid among the lumps of the mattress close to my spot, and within a few minutes I could hear him snoring quietly. The door opened. The mattresses shifted far above our heads and I heard the Queen: “How did you sleep, my dear?” The sticky sweet smile in her voice seeped between the mattresses. The bedbug snorted and rolled over.

“Um. Well. Terrible, actually. Something was sticking into me all night, I’m covered in bruises.”

The Princess didn’t notice the Queen had come to wake her instead of sending a maid, or think it strange.

“Lift up your nightgown my dear and let me look.” Tension cut through the sweetness in the Queen’s voice. A small humphing sound followed and a hand groped around before feeling me. I was lifted out into the sunlight of the early morning. The Queen held me in her hand and showed the princess. She was lovely, long blond hair, beautiful rosy cheeks and a frown on her face as she saw me.

“You must be a true princess if you could feel this tiny pea through all those mattresses. Now you’ll have to marry my son.” The princess opened her mouth to protest, but the Queen waved her hand dismissively, and she was rushed off to bathe by the servants.

“Well of course you are glad, my dear,” the Queen called after her. I could see the small speck of the bedbug jumping up and down near the crack in the mattress where I had been pulled out, cheering and waving. Our plan succeeded. No more peas in his bed to attract the mice.

Mice run across the museum floor now and then. But not enough people come in here, so there isn’t much for them. The paintings and ceramics are dusty and unappetizing. The tender pages of the scrolls and books are kept elsewhere. I wish they could chew through glass to set me free. I wish the bedbug would come find me, though there isn’t any reason for him to undertake that incredible journey with a princess to nibble on every night. I think about my siblings, gone now, surely, to the Great Feast. I dream about the baking sun and the cool, soft rain that I can see from my glass box. I think I remember how it felt, but as the years pass, I wonder about that, too. I watch the princess, still fair and rosy cheeked, but somber when she comes to stare into the glass

box at me. Occasionally I hear her whisper, “Happily ever after,” over and over. I wonder what it means.

Autumn Elizabeth

The Fantastic Real Life of Madeline Zeringue

Part I

“Lies, fantasy, reality—
it all depends on which facts you have
and what truths you chose to believe.”
—Madeline Zeringue

Part II

TAI

I loved her since the time I bloodied her nose. We were only nine back then. I threw a football at her face because she wouldn't say hi to me on the playground. She spent the next two weeks sabotaging every game I tried to play. Our first date was during

the Cherry Blossom Festival. I took my dad's truck and drove her there, even though I only had my permit. She was 13 and every part of her was new and pink. I knew that Madeline—the real Madeline—and she still exists. Trust me.

ELI

Did they tell you she smokes like a fiend? No, probably not, they would all leave that part out. Maybe because they didn't want you to know or maybe because they didn't know. I knew many dark parts of Maddie and she knew some parts of me too.

She was the one who ensnared me. She out-played everyone, even me. I watched her light her McClellan neat on fire and then blow it out with the smoke from her Djarum Black. It would have been an impressive move even in a smoke-filled Brooklyn lounge, but this happened two feet from a packed and sweaty dance floor at The Cage, in the Bronx. I didn't even know they sold scotch there. It was almost enough to make me fall off the stage mid-performance. After that, I had to approach her. Before I even got my first charming word out she said, "You forgot a little something," and she picked a remnant of facial hair and glue off my chin that the dim backstage lights hadn't let me see.

"You were pretty good up there," she said. "But your package was a little too high to be believable."

“Oh yeah?” I inquired.

“Yeah” she said plainly. “I would know.”

The wicked grin that followed was the trap door closing. I was hers for the next six months, until the facial hair grew in for real. Then, well, our lives became too... normal. For both of us, I think.

TOMMY

She would want me to say that she changed everything. She would want me to tell you that she was my one true love. But she didn’t, and she wasn’t. She was just a youthful mistake. Everyone around here gets married young.

Her dark looks—eyes “deep like the river,” lips “like bitten cherries”—sound mysterious and tempting, especially the way Madeline tells it, but who wants mystery all the time? Not people around here, not people like me. Even at 18, I knew I wanted the stable life—a home, a wife, some kids. Who was going to build a home with me? Who was going to be practical? Who was going to live in the real world with me? Not Madeline, she liked the dizzying dark edges of things a little too much.

I am married now. No, not to Madeline. My wife is pure and doesn’t even hint at darkness. She lives a simple life with me and I couldn’t be happier. Really. I have something solid, something

with less mystery, less guilt, less guessing, less, well... I don't know, something less than Madeline and I sure thank my lucky stars for that.

ALEXANDER

The first thing I should tell you is that I am still in love with her. Yeah, even after all this time. Back then I could never imagine any way for our relationship to go wrong. Honestly, I still can't. She taught me everything I know about polyamory, spicy foods, and heaven. So, of course I am still in love with her. Why wouldn't I be?

Being with Maddie was like looking into a fun house mirror and realizing that everything makes a lot more sense that way. Maddie demanded no commitment except a total willingness to do absolutely crazy shit. She is the reason my mother said hell and fuck in front of me for the first time. She is the reason my ex still prays a Hail Mary for me every Sunday. She has the power to destroy the universe, but I would still give her anything she wanted even if I have no idea where she is.

TAI

I will never know how she survived New York. I couldn't bear it. Too much noise and too little space, but I couldn't let her run

off on her own. I had to be there, just in case. She needed someone who really knew her. She needed me, even if she never said it.

LUCIA

I think it was her mouth, small by most standards, when she wasn't grinning. Full lips that weren't ostentatious to the point of juicy or something obscene like that, but full. She never frowned. The edges of her mouth always turned up, even when she was sad. As if her mouth always had something to laugh about. Her smile was an entirely different thing. No mystery, no hints. It slit her face open from side to side. Suddenly all you could see was mouth and teeth. Her smile forced her eyes into creases, even made her nose look smaller. She had the smile of someone truly happy with herself, which was both captivating and terrifying.

LISA

Maddie is a total sex goddess. That's really all I need to say. Total. Sex. Goddess.

MARIE

I want to start by saying I am going to be honest, blunt, and direct. I don't know any other way. She was one big ball of desire

back then, probably still is. She had all the qualities people think they want. She was spontaneous, fun and daring, but they weren't tempered with fear or humility, not even the occasional moment of self-doubt. Maddie was like a beautiful piece of hand-blown glass that breaks into vicious, dangerous shards. But it wasn't just that. She was selfish too, in her own hidden way. Her giving was her taking. She wanted to be the star, the muse, the sexual fantasy to every person. All of that wanting, needing, and doing left me with the impression of a newly formed black hole sucking in stars. She wanted something from me I could never give and something she never figured out how to take either.

TAI

I am the only one, the one person who knows that she isn't dark or dingy. She's still a pink cherry blossom. Open and delicate. I can wipe the bad years away. I can strip off the grime from too many cities, even if she can't. I know she's still the same girl, a little more bruised, but the same girl.

She always comes back to me. I've always known exactly who she is. I'm the one that is always there, even when she's running away from everyone else. It's me and Madeline. That's reality, that's love.



MARIE

Our first threesome was with a trapeze-artist burlesque-dancer, somewhere outside Cincinnati. It was Marie's birthday present that year. I never forget a birthday.

ELI

New York City. Eli. He is the only person whose existence can't escape the place where we met. He was everything I wanted at that moment. The rebellion from gender, the cocky walk, the gritty reality of being broke, uninsured, and hungry.

Eli was my transition, my becoming, as much as I was his. I evolved too as he changed from woman to man. I imagined the testosterone flooding his bloodstream as I pushed down on the plunger of the shot. It was like sex. Hell, maybe it was sex. Maybe it was better.

TOMMY

It was the first warm day in March. He took me to the river. He wanted to believe the lie of my newness. I pretended to be innocent: damaged by a mysterious past but still new at the game of love. We sat on the sand and the grit slowly crept between us. I

felt nothing but sand, sandpaper, sanding away the perfect day, the perfect teenage fantasy, but Tommy was desperate to believe that fantasy. Hell, he probably still thinks of that day as a perfectly romantic beach picnic filled with the softest, most gentle deflowering two teens could manage.

At eighteen, his hairline was already receding and he fancied himself an old man. He donned corduroy jackets to cover his fat and smoked cigars. “Child no more,” he used to say. Idiot. I could have told him I had seen all this before. Anyone who has grown old before their time can spot a fake without a second glance. I could have told him magic like mine only comes from dark places. Instead, when I finally got bored, I showed him.

ALEXANDER

Most people don’t know how to cook. People know how to reheat TV dinners, but cooking requires skills that most people don’t want to admit they have. Knowing your way around a sharp blade and knowing how to simmer seduction while convincingly saying, “No, there’s no butter in that.” These are the skills that make most people blush. Alexander did not have this problem: love, passion, and butter were his forte, and he would happily admit to being an expert in subverting reality and playing with knives.

When we cooked together, it was pass the paprika and lick it off my tits. We sautéed Brussel sprouts and burnt the edges. We were the bite of red chilies and the sting of red scratches. Our arguments about too much or too little salt burst into angry sex, simmered over dinner naked, and went out in wisps of smoke over make-up sex in the front yard. We made the other couples cringe at dinner parties.

We were reckless, inconsiderate, and often, simply filthy. We had sex on neighborhood playgrounds, on party guests' coats, and on the kitchen table before pizza night with his roommates. Sometimes being selfish is the only way to fall in love. Sometimes keeping the fantasy going makes reality easier. It's like smoking in the rain to keep yourself warm.

MARIE

Her blue eyes startled me. Every fucking time. Cold and clear like the sky on the January night we met. I never told her that they are beginning to crease at the corners, giving the illusion of warmth. Those eyes, they melted me.

LUCIA

Fuck Lucia, and I mean that as a suggestion, not a curse. The curves of her body still appear behind my eyelids sometimes.

Gracious, soft curves hid all her sharp edges. I can still trace the movements of her hips with my mind. She oozed a holy sensuality that comforts me inexplicably, the same way the Virgin Mary comforts long-lapsed Catholics.

Her memory is one of muscle and flesh. Even her cherry-colored blood was dark, ominous and vaguely sexual. It intrigued me at first. It was like all the crazy inside her just had to be let out. By the end though, I would leave her there, bleeding out her demons. I am sure she thought I went to the bar or a club trolling for hook-ups, but I only feigned indifference with her. I always stayed outside the door until I heard the sirens from the ambulance that I knew she had already called. So predictable. Goddamn Catholics. Still, everyone should fuck Lucia once.

LISA

Lisa was short in every sense. She never made me come. It's a shame, because that is all I can say about her.

TAI

I was soaked when I got to the door. I walked the last quarter mile in the rain. He would be home, of course.

When he opened the door, I saw that we matched. Our black t-shirts, our faded jeans...we always did go together. In one quick

motion he pulled me through the door, peeled off my shirt and ran his fingers over the familiar points and edges of my collarbone.

We fell naked into the bed and smoked his Marlboros. I played with the lighter, as usual, and he traced my tattoos until we fell asleep. After twenty years of familiarity, it was an easy place to fall after a bad day.

MARIE

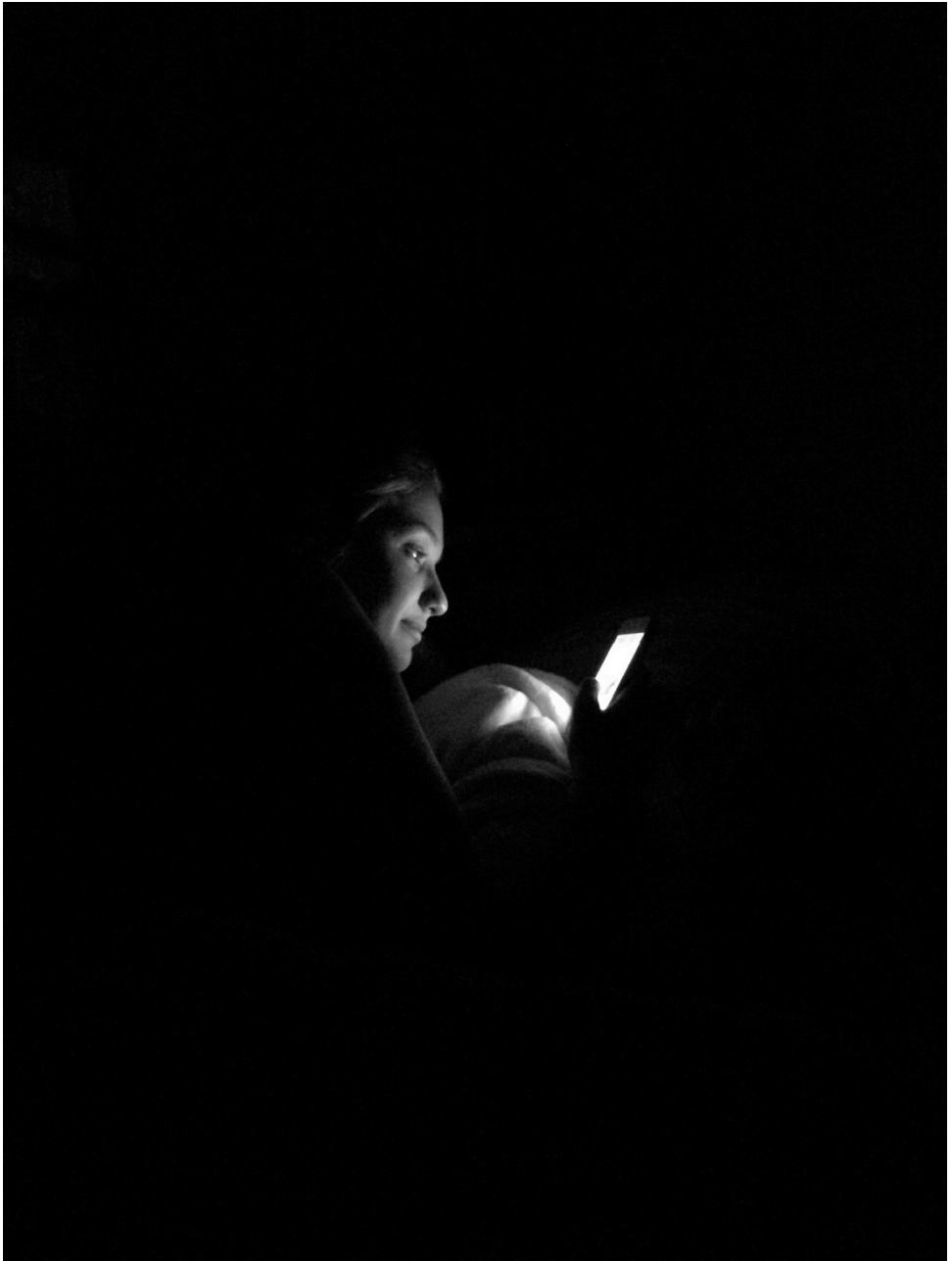
Marie liked to garden alone. Sometimes she would let me sit outside while she coaxed peas and parsley from the half-frozen Ohio soil. I watched dirt cake her hands time and time again. It never seemed to leave the lines and creases of her palms. Marie sticks to me in that same way. Traces of her are always with me, even when I am running, even when I am fresh from the shower.

Marie was the one I could never touch, never really figure out. When she left, it drove me nuts. So, I followed her. I went all the way out west. There was no other way. I just had to know. Now I know.

Part III

“None of them was ever more than a thin slice,
held between the contiguous impressions that composed our life
at that time;
remembrance of a particular form is but regret for a particular
moment.”

—Marcel Proust



Untitled | Schuyler Hazard

Kate Monica

Kinetic Mistakes

I am nine on a rollercoaster by the beach. I wasn't tall enough but I wanted to feel the flight of an

insufficient seatbelt. I get quiet when I'm serious. I am eleven and my best friend is burying my flashlight in the leaves so the deer won't get scared off by the light, deciding it safer to strain our eyes for a glimpse of a black shape with soft lines, concave knees darting through the forest. I am thirteen and my best friend says I look pretty. The foreign heat on my face. My Dad is standing in the door. His shadow tall on the

adjacent wall. Suddenly my best friend is Potentially Dangerous and I am Fraught With Kinetic Mistakes. I am sixteen running up a small knoll outside the library. I am fourteen carving your name into the inside cover of books I like. I went to the beach and a boy

held my head underwater because he liked me and I didn't like him back. I was ten and all I could think was 'how romantic.' I am twenty and all I can think is 'how

romantic.’ I am seventeen thinking about how I like the beach and we have never been there together. I am twelve and I am not really happy for her and I can’t pretend to be happy for her. I am ten and I feel different when she is in the room. I am thirteen and my best friend is sitting nervously at the edge of my bed but I do not

feel nervous. I am fourteen standing in the woods alone trying not to think about it. I am seventeen cupping visible breath with my hands. I am eighteen and I am not happy for her but I can pretend to be happy for her. I am nineteen thinking about books I finished years ago pretending

the characters aren’t really dead. I am five and it is not my problem and it is not my responsibility and when my Dad tosses me into the air I know with one hundred percent certainty that he will

catch me.

Matthew Meduri

You Wish You'd All Been Ready

You've been invited to see a dramatic production of Ernest Angley's *Raptured*. A couple from your father's church invited you, close friends of your parents. They didn't ask expecting you to pay whatever price Angley has set. No, these tickets are free, which means you are likely obligated to go unless you are deathly ill or you have a damn good excuse. You, your mother, and your little brother accept, although, unfortunately, your father has another obligation.

You're excited to go—really, you are. Usually, when churchgoers arrange a get-together outside of the usual Sunday gathering, it's for one of three things: Bible study, a hymn sing, or a potluck. You have nothing against potlucks. In fact, they are one of your favorite aspects of church. However, this is not that. This live play is about one of the strangest, most misconceived books in the

Bible: Revelation. The Revelation of John, supposedly John the disciple exiled to the island of Patmos, the man who bore witness to visions from Jesus Christ. Good ol' John the Revelator. It's not the nativity or the death and resurrection. You've witnessed people acting out those scenes ad nauseam. No, we're talking about the end times, the death and destruction of mankind. Armageddon. The End of Days. God versus the Devil. And bits of you are equally nervous and eager to see it, a curious ambivalence. You have roughly the same feeling when you see a horror movie "based on true events."

You are eleven. Your little brother is nine.

Your excitement is multifaceted. Not only are you excited in the way people are to see a good horror movie they've heard about, but you're excited to be seeing it with these people. You really love hanging out with the couple from church, Tim and Debbie. They regularly make plans with your family to do generally fun things. Debbie doesn't take anything too seriously. She was the one who took you and your brother to see *There's Something About Mary*, and upon seeing the masturbation-and-gel scene, asked if you both would avoid mentioning that part of the movie to your parents. Tim is husky and resembles your father—a smiley, effeminate, non-Italian version of him. Together, they are the type of people who order you pizza when you visit,

occasionally swear, tell raunchy jokes, and talk about the wild days of their youth with little shame. Plus, Tim works at Krispy Kreme and always has donuts. Always. This alone convinces you and your little brother that these are good people.

Finally, to make this trip to Ernest Angley's play complete, you discover that Tim's son, George, is coming. George is a year older than you and rides BMX bikes like you and your little brother do, and he has always seemed kind of cool. He's rough around the edges—at times he can be kind and fun-loving, but often he is a rebellious punk-ass who makes up stories to, most likely, look cool. You and your little brother are somewhat drawn to this because these are qualities the two of you generally lack, being the meek sweethearts you are. You've often wondered why George takes offense so easily and can be an insufferable shit (sometimes). Perhaps it's a combination of being from a rough part of Niles and a child of divorce. At least that's what you've heard from other people. One time, George told you he was in his front yard and had to jump behind trashcans in order to avoid being shot in a drive-by shooting. As shocked as you were that such an act of violence would be perpetrated against such a young boy, you were equally amazed he had dodged gunfire. Eventually, you questioned the incident and asked Debbie if that had ever happened. It didn't. Of course not.

So Tim attempts to explain what the play is all about, which seems like he's trying to promote the show, but you know that he gets overly excited about many things and tries his best to bring out that kind of enthusiasm in others. He begins by saying the play is based on a novel by Ernest Angley that depicts the events of the Rapture. In your mind, you say, "Stop there. I already know all about the Rapture," but your manners prevent you from making your thoughts known. At this point in your life, you know more about the Bible than most adults. You are a pastor's kid. That's your life. When other children were read bedtime stories from Mother Goose, Hans Christian Andersen, and even Roald Dahl, your father read all the classic Bible stories. David and Goliath. Daniel in the Lions' Den. Jonah and the Whale. When you both were old enough to read, you read the good book. You knew all of the major stories and even some of the minor ones. You had about a dozen Psalms memorized, and Proverbs was like a book of fortune cookies. The Prophets talked about woe to Israel or Babylon and the coming of a Messiah. Song of Solomon was supposedly sexual, but with all the strange imagery, you really didn't know what was going on. The New Testament was all about Jesus—except for Revelation. That book laid out the End Times, the Second Coming (which you presume also has to do with Jesus, since he is the one coming), and the New Heaven and

Earth. It was, you suppose still is, a cryptic book. Even the name sounds threatening. The book is full of confusing references and bizarre imagery: beasts, scrolls, seals, horsemen, witnesses, bowls, dragons, Jesus in a red robe stained with the blood of dead Christians, an antichrist, and a whore of Babylon. You've always wondered where Babylon was located, and why there was such a well-known prostitute living there? And how much martyr blood does it take to color Jesus' battle garb? There are so many numbers (sevens mostly) fixed to many of the objects in this book that it reminds you of a strange grocery list or perhaps a recipe for disaster:

- Seven seals (not the aquatic animal)
- Seven trumpets
- Seven bowls of God's wrath
- Four horsemen (white, red, black, and pale...*pale?*)
- Two witnesses wearing sackcloth
- One Antichrist and one Beast (they come in a set)

You have heard several preachers (including your father) talk about Revelation. They mention wars and famines, people being swept up into the clouds, and the battle of good and evil. You've read the book or at least tried. You've certainly tried. At some point you noticed the *Left Behind* book on the tank of your toilet at

home, the place your father keeps his book du jour, which, coincidentally, was around the time you noticed the book's popularity among people at church. Even though you didn't pay attention to any of their conversations about *Left Behind* or Revelation or such things, you and your little brother wanted to sit in on your parents' Bible study held in your living room to watch the movie *A Thief in the Night*. The two of you knew it was a movie about the Rapture, and your father said it would help you understand more about the End Times. You didn't realize you were watching the *Easy Rider* of Rapture flicks, the movie that would set the standard for later movies in this genre. (Who knew it would become a genre?) However, the movie didn't begin like you thought it would. There was no John from two thousand years ago receiving trippy visions from God or Jesus. Not even close. The film began with a woman waking up suddenly to an alarm clock and discovering her husband was gone, his electric shaver buzzing in the sink. Then the news on the radio alerted her about millions of people disappearing worldwide. *Could it be the Rapture spoken of in the Bible?* The movie followed her through the events that would happen post-Rapture: her friends got the mark of the beast (the number 666 in binary code) and turned on her; she found an underground group of post-Rapture Christians (the ones who converted a little too late) who in some way were trying

to overthrow the system called UNITE; and the Antichrist took over as the ruler of the free world and the head of UNITE. Because this movie was made in 1972, there was so much talk about nuclear war and conspiracy that you weren't really sure what to make of it. Then again, that was a few years earlier. You are now eleven and you are ready to see Ernest Anglely's *Raptured*.

As Tim continues, he tells you it will be held at the Grace Cathedral in Cuyahoga Falls. The only thing you can picture is Ernie walking out on stage to introduce his play by saying, "And a happy, happy Jesus hello to all you out there tonight," like he does every night on his show *The 90 and 9 Club*—bad toupee, ugly powder-blue suit, and a Southern drawl that makes Jesus sound like *Jeezuz*. You always thought that his manner of speaking was part of the televangelist persona, and perhaps it is, but you later discovered that Ernie is not a native Ohioan but a transplant from North Carolina. He and his wife came to Akron as traveling faith healers, taking over for Rex Humbard, who deserted his local empire and moved to sunny Florida for better and more lucrative pastures. Even though much of Humbard's history is foreign to you and happened before your time, he left a mark on this region in the form of a tall, concrete tower less than a hundred yards from the church. The massive structure was supposed to house a rotating restaurant at the top. Once constructed and then

abandoned midway through production, the building was dubbed “Rex’s Erection,” a name that will forever linger in this region’s psyche. The nickname alone imparts the image of the tower painted in a fleshy, pink tone and Humbard standing at the bottom, nodding with approval, a cocky smirk on his face. You wonder why a man of God, as you were led to believe, would build such a large monument that, in your mind, alludes to something more like the Tower of Babel. Nearly every time you pass that eyesore, you can’t help but picture it striped red, white, and blue like a giant barbershop pole.

Yet the towering phallus doesn’t bother Anglely. At least he hasn’t openly disapproved, and he has done his best to make this place the empire (or compound) it demands to be. He added the buffet restaurant and a private jet that carries him and his entourage to all parts of Africa, where he puts on revivals and claims to cure people of AIDS. You are no scientist or doctor. Hell, you’re just an eleven-year-old kid, but even you have a hard time believing that. Ernie touches people in wheelchairs who then stand and walk. People shake and dance and flop on the ground like fish after being touched by Ernie as he shouts, “Be healed in the name of *Jeezuz!*” And even though there is something off-putting about that stuff, something dubious, it seems more believable than the toupee-wearing Southerner curing AIDS. To

top off the Humbard-Angleley legacy of strange, when Ernie's wife died he had a telephone placed in her coffin, which was then buried under a monument at his other church in Akron only a few miles away. You wonder why someone would do such a strange thing, but the answer in your mind is clear. Pure crazy. Maybe that could have alerted you to what this play might hold, but probably not.

So you wonder if your parents' friends plan to eat first at the Cathedral Buffet before the play, a place where you had lunch one time after church and it didn't even compare to the superiority of Ponderosa or Golden Corral. But the restaurant does have a wax museum in its basement, simulating the life of Jesus. The place is no Madame Tussauds but it beats the stuffed-animal claw machines of the other buffets. You think about asking, but Tim is set on getting you excited for that night, and you know your mother would say no anyhow because that would mean shelling out the money for three Cathedral Buffet dinners (they aren't cheap), so you decide not to bother. If you're lucky, the three of you will stop at the Burger King drive-thru for chicken sandwiches.



It's the evening of the show and you're ready. You are ready for the show to begin. You don't get dressed up because this isn't a service, even though it is being held in a pretty prestigious church, one you've seen the inside of many times via *The Ernest Angley Hour*. The large stage with the pillars and the red carpet stairs, the blue chairs arranged as if you were at a concert hall, and the enormous cross on the ceiling, illuminated with red and white lights. You can't wait to see these things in person. So you, your mother, and your little brother leave the house in casual clothes, hop in your red '95 Ford Windstar and drive twenty minutes to the Grace Cathedral in Cuyahoga Falls.

In the parking lot, Tim and Debbie and their son/stepson George greet you. You're eager to hang out with George and as usual, begin to ignore your little brother. Later you'll regret having done things like that, especially to the person who is, for better or worse, your best friend, but you are young and easily influenced and rarely see George. You ask George if he's excited to see the play. He shrugs off your question with, "Eh. He made me come." You pretend to show the same regard for the whole thing. It's no big deal. The six of you walk into the cathedral.

The sanctuary is much larger than you imagined. The television doesn't do this place justice. Rows of blue go on and on at a decline toward the stage that is cloaked in dark red curtains, hiding

the actors and set props. And then there it is above your head. The red and white lighted cross. It's enormous and takes up the entire length of the ceiling. You follow everyone to where you are all seated, never taking your eyes off that enormous red cross. It glows and you feel like the roof is opening up and something is coming in or maybe trying to escape. The feeling is expansive and nearly makes you dizzy. When you reach your seats, you realize that your group is separated into two rows. Tim doesn't complain but gives an excuse that a friend of his got the tickets at a discounted price, which is why the seating is split. You take his word. The only issue is that now you are seated next to your little brother and your mother rather than next to George. You presume the adults meant for this seating arrangement, so the kids wouldn't be tempted to disrupt anything. It's probably better this way; there is a togetherness involved. Two cohesive units. Two families.

The lights dim, and the stage spots go up on a man. Debbie tells George to keep quiet even though he has not said a word. The red cross stays illuminated. The man on the stage in the spotlight begins an introduction to the play, but he is not Ernie. No, he is likely one of the associate pastors or some staff member of the church. Your confusion quickly turns to disappointment. "Where's Ernest Angley?" you ask your mother. She tells you she

does not know. She follows that with, “Maybe he’s on a mission trip.” This answer satisfies your suspicion, but you wonder why a play so popular (as you look around you realize the place is nearly full) would not be introduced by the author himself. It’s not that you really like the guy or anything, but after years of seeing the man on the television, you feel like you would have seen him at his own play at his own church. So much for pride of authorship. The man on stage walks off and the red cross dims until it is just a silhouette in the ceiling, a shadow cross.

The curtain is pulled away.

The play begins with a single man waking up to find that someone close to him is no longer there. In a subtle frenzy he searches, but to no avail. Then he turns on the television to discover a significant portion of the world’s population is gone. You know this opening. This is the opening to the movie you watched years earlier. Of course, someone has vanished and is missing, and of course, this person discovers that his situation is not unique. You should be questioning who stole whose opening sequence, but you’re not. Those thoughts are years away. You’re not even a little bored. At this moment you’re kind of wondering what will happen next. It’s something familiar and suspenseful and even kind of exciting. Unlike the movie, this play does not go into a half hour of backstory. Ernie is an entertainer who knows how

to keep you on the edge of your seat. He gets the ball rolling, so to speak, and an hour and a half of chaos ensues.

This isn't a play of redemption. This is what happens when you are not ready for the Second Coming of Christ. And guess what, it's only doom and destruction and pain, even for the people who realized the error of their ways and converted. So much for everlasting love.

As some people are arrested and others are branded with the mark of the beast, your main character is doing his best to avoid all of this, even though he asked for forgiveness and became a Christian. He realizes that eventually he is going to have to pay for this fatal flaw, the mistake of not believing beforehand, of not being ready. The people who have resisted being branded with the mark are beaten rather violently and convincingly in front of your eyes. Those who take the mark seem exponentially more sinister.

Every so often you glance at Tim and Debbie in the row in front of you. They seem entertained. They seem captivated. Even George watches with what appears to be a level of interest. You look at your little brother, who is wide-eyed, and your mother, who cringes at the more gruesome parts. You wonder what your father would think at this moment. Would he be as shocked as the three of you, possibly suggesting you leave? Or would he see this as a spiritual moment, a personal revelation from God, an act of

edification? It's difficult to know, but you do know he would be right here telling you and maybe your younger brother that you both have nothing to be afraid of. You won't have to experience any of these events. Those things don't happen to believers. Unfortunately he is not here tonight, and in a way, you *are* experiencing these events. You are part of the show.

At some point it happens. You don't comprehend what this point is in the moment, but later, as you think back to this day, you will acknowledge it as the point of no return. This is where Ernie's play takes a figurative left at the fork in the road where the movie you saw a few years earlier took a right. Your main character is standing in line with post-Rapture Christians, the ones who converted a little too late, waiting to be beheaded by some modernized guillotine. Instead of a wooden structure, it has a sleek, stainless steel layout as if Gillette or Schick had made it. And sure, in the movie you saw a few years ago, people were being beheaded. Apparently that is the only way folks die after the rapture. No gunshots. No lethal injections. Just the quick drop of a cold, steel blade from an archaic French death contraption. You must have missed that part of the book.

Now in Ernie's play, you see the first person beheaded. He walks up to the guillotine that sits on a hill (for whatever reason) and slides his head into place. Unfortunately, or perhaps

fortunately, the victim's head is obscured by the design of the guillotine. The large blade drops and although you can't see the actual beheading, you hear a sound, a familiar sound that is used in many movies. It's the sound of a head being lopped off, a blade through a nice trunk of flesh and cartilage. And without warning, a head that looks exactly like that person, bloody stump and all, rolls down this ramp, Mayan style. You're caught off guard. You didn't expect those kinds of special effects or gore in a Christian play at a televangelist's church in Ohio. The first beheading causes most of the crowd to gasp. You glance again at your little brother and your mother, who are both in as much disbelief as you. The beheadings continue one after another until your main character is beheaded. You did but didn't see that coming. You knew he was going to die, but you didn't expect to see it occur. Whatever happened to dimming the lights and closing the curtain? Ernie certainly was not taking the Hitchcock approach to horror. Why did he want you to see the head?

But the play isn't over. There is still another twenty minutes. What could possibly be left?

Tim turns around and tells your mother to look behind her. From the back of the church, walking through the door of the sanctuary is a man draped in a long black cloak. The spotlight is on him, and as he gets closer you see the 666 stamped on his

forehead. His eyes look like those of Marilyn Manson. He stares down members of the audience and asks people if they will either take his mark or join the fate of the rest on stage. You glance at your mother and she looks terrified. Your brother is petrified. You feel very uneasy about what is happening. You ask yourself, *Am I ready?* You would be more ready if your father was sitting next to you telling you not to worry. If only he was in the aisle seat as a buffer between the Antichrist and your family. You wish he were here, because when he's here you feel safe and comforted, and if you still appeared to be too frightened, he would suggest leaving. No excuses, no shame. He would never put on a play like this in his church, in your church. Instead of scaring people into what the future might look like, he would tell you how you could live a better life, a happier life. But you're not with your father. You are here in this crowded stadium of a church, and your only choice is to sit and endure another twenty minutes until the curtain closes and lights come on.

The guy who is the beast or the Antichrist leaves, and the play resumes on stage. The only people left are those who are marked, and they are all gloating about still being alive. You think the play will end this way, but it doesn't. There is one final scene, a series of unfortunate events that happen to these people. Good conquers evil, right? You don't really know what happens because

at this point the lighting and special effects and sound are so great that you slouch in your seat, place your hand to your brow like a person does when shading his eyes from the sun. You can only observe peripherally. You have used this technique many times before when watching scary movies, and however embarrassing that may sound, it is the truth. The downfall of your technique is that you can still hear the noises and the screaming, and a part of you is curious about what is happening on stage. So you look. Before you stands something straight out of Greek mythology or, more appropriately, the book of Revelation. It is some animatronic beast with the body of a lion, the wings of an eagle, the face of a man with jagged teeth, and the tail of a scorpion. The beast is stinging people left and right. People are screaming. There is blood. The lights are flashing and smoke is everywhere. Slowly the stage lights fade along with the sound, and eventually the curtains close.

Applause.

It is overwhelming, the number of people who cheer. Tim, Debbie, and George are clapping and smiling. You all saw the same show, but how is it that you and your family wear very different expressions than those around you? If your mother is clapping, which she most likely is, it is a soft, obligatory gesture. Everyone else has enjoyed it, so why wouldn't the pastor's wife?

Perhaps she is just glad it is finally over. You look in her direction. She is not clapping. Neither are you, nor is your little brother, but you both smile coyly to avoid unnecessary attention and inquiry.



The three of you walk to your red '95 Windstar. Tim, Debbie, and George approach the car feeling moved. They say they are moved. They ask if you all liked it and you all say you did. It was kind of Tim to get the tickets, but you didn't realize what you had agreed to. Ernie isn't known for subtlety and perhaps you all should have known. Judging from the looks on the faces of your little brother and your mother, they feel the same way as you.

You want to ask your mother what all of that was about, but no one says a word. Perhaps the three of you didn't see it the way everyone else did, signified by the overwhelming applause once the curtain closed. You wonder if anyone else felt the way you did as you sat there watching Ernie's display of gore and violence, death and destruction. And let's not forget the monsters. You all know the story and saw the movie and you know that was just a play, but something inside is unsettled, shifted. You wonder if your little brother and your mother are experiencing that same feeling. You drive home, knowing you won't sleep well tonight.

Later in life, when you are twenty-six and married and sitting with your family on a sunny spring day in April, you'll ask your mother and your not-so-little brother what that was all about. You'll see it for what it was. Another fictionalized version of the same hackneyed story in the landscape of Rapture culture, a culture that attempts to create narratives for the end of the world, an explanation for those who are either dissatisfied with life or need vindication for their deeds. A world that exists where individuals believe people are doomed from birth and others are only tourists waiting to fly away to their real home, a home they've only read about but have never seen. You'll ask your mother and brother how they felt about the experience, and they'll tell you the same thing. They'll remember very little and believe that they must have blocked it out. They'll say it was terrifying. You'll look at your father, and he'll say in an ironic tone that he would have never let you all sit through something like that. He'll say it with a look because looks are his way of encrypting his emotions. Was it embarrassment? Shame? Regret? Uncertainty? You'll all laugh because it's in the past, but the past is not what Rapture culture asks you to be ready for. It's the future. Eternity. The Sweet By-and-By.

And that's what troubles your eleven-year-old mind most in the months after seeing Angley's play. You thought you were

ready. You were convinced you were ready. Now you're not sure if you are. Maybe you're not. Maybe that's the wrong question to be asking. Maybe the better question is: Why have you always found it so easy to believe in something that claims moral superiority, while portraying its faithful up in the clouds excitedly watching a world of unbelieving people destroyed and flung into a lake of fire?



Untitled | Schuyler Hazard

Sonya Plenefisch

Addendum

In its interminable turning,
the earth has twisted too far around itself,
grown tangled in its own invisible strings.
I think of the Arctic explorer whose dogs had all died and
who leashed wolves to his sled in their place.
The pulled him to the Pole and halfway back
before turning on him in Northern Canada.
Things have been broken that cannot be put back.
I've grown new teeth since last I saw you and with a bite
I can spin it all out of orbit

Jacqueline Balderrama

Appetite Upgrade

She takes RomEO to a clearing and sets out his panels. In sunlight,
they shimmer turquoise, pink and gray. *Sounds of Nature:*
180 minutes of bird songs and calls plays from her headphones.
She finds the repeat of the same bird calls by a click in the
headphones

that resets the track every ten minutes. Outside them, it is silent.
After hours of her staring into the milky sky,
he is charged enough to walk home, to hold hands.
It is night

when they reach the buried city and navigate its tunnels
like knotted ropes to the number of her apartment. For her,
microwave dinner, footed pajamas. RomEO sits at the table and
watches her eat.
He sips some oil to loosen his joints.

Then after playing with him playing with her playing with him,
she falls asleep on the floor when he's lost power,
and wakes in the night to his chest cold like kitchen tile, his body
now bland, limp, smells of Play Dough, grease, and sweat.

Once, the graze of a button caused explosions of appetite.
Once, a vibration chair was enough. Now, it's as if she's been alone
all day.

The last bird she saw was a white wing on the pavement
she at first mistook for a plastic bag months ago.

She crawls into bed and watches RomEO on the floor against the
false window
cast a shadow, his edges blurring into ghosts
of people and animals and objects.
She says, hello. She says, speak.

Monique Kluczykowski

Surviving

Like *The Velveteen Rabbit* in reverse,
my mother has become
UnReal.

Plaque sticks between neurons—
like teeth without gaps. All she has
are gaps now,
wide valleys of loss.

I wear sunglasses to class to hide
my black eyes.
Are you putting her eye
drops in every night? demands my sister.

Her walker thumps down the hall every
10 minutes, every night. She breaks
her wrist, her ankle, my daughter's finger.
The doctor says she can go on
like this
for many years. She pushed my father
down the basement stairs, twice.

At 3 am I find her
on the back deck, two stories up,
and I wonder which of us
will be the first to fall.

Dave Owen

Flashing before My Eyes

I can see that you have only a few free moments, but I know what you'll do with them. There you go, diving deep into the treasured record collection and yes, yes, yes! Great choice, kid.

Wait for it... Here it comes... Damn, that first, haunting note always resonates, shudders through me and my skin tingles all over, I actually feel the sensation.

Now you'll start to sing along with Ian Hunter and Mott the Hoople, bless you. *"Well, Billy rapped all night about his suicide, how he'd kick it in the head when he was twenty-five..."* It makes sense to you, I know. Who would want to cling onto the pitiful, decaying remnants of life after twenty-five; heck, you're not even sure there is real life after twenty-five.

What are you now, remind me, just turned sixteen? Sixteen, eh! Wow, and it feels like you're the first to get there, the only one,

yes? How keenly I still recall the wonder, the intoxicating excitement of that sense of adventure, of the unknown, of uniqueness.

Good lad, moving us on to David Bowie himself and why not? He wrote and produced “All the Young Dudes” for Mott the Hoople so let us have the man himself, that imponderably sexual, illicitly seductive androgynous creature from some other world; a world that’s a universe away from your small school dormitory. I can read you like a book, my young yet old friend, and there you go, kicking us off with the London Boys as the wizard, Bowie, takes us by the hand and walks us through the melancholy world of a young mod in 1960s London, “*Oh, the first time that you tried a pill...*”

We may be years apart, kid, but we share much as I watch you living vicariously through your music. “The first time that you tried a pill...”Shit, I know you, you don’t even like to take painkillers and the guilt trip from one of those things would buckle you at the knees... but why not, better to weave a musical web of befuddled emotional angst if it can provide a cushion, a bulwark against certain realities you don’t want to tangle with, and you don’t, trust me; I still bear the scars!

I know, I know what you would say if you could hear me. You wouldn’t believe me, but no insult taken. I understand. I watch

you lying there on that old, creaky school bed, paint peeling from its tubular metal frame, stripped to your close fitting black underwear and staring at the characterless, pastel colored ceiling. Or, in truth, just staring, at nothing that others could perceive. The things you see and feel are not found in what is before your eyes and at your fingertips, you are in a place that exists only in your mind, but is so palpably real. In your mind, no one else's, for you are sure that no one else could encompass the kaleidoscope of emotions, of experiences through which you are living. There it is, you'll be away now, I hear those evocative, perfect tones rising from the fingers of Rick Wakeman on piano preparing for Bowie to launch us to another tier of perception with that tormented stream of surreal images which others find impenetrable but wherein you, young sixteen, find clarity, fellow feeling. Sing it, kid, live it....

“Take a look at the lawman, beating up the wrong guy, oh man, wonder if he'll ever know, he's in the best selling show, is there life on Mars...”

Harry. Yes, I know it's you. I know all about you, know you better than you know yourself after all these years. For example, I know you should be doing private study now and not lying on your bed, journeying through the street side, Dali-esque expanses of Bowie's creativity, but who cares about those crucial sixteen-year point school exams that may shape your whole future? You

can feel the cool breeze that effortlessly steals into the school dorm through the neglected, worm eaten window frames. Feel it as it rolls over your athletic form, unabashed as it insistently, yet somehow sensually, insinuates itself into every modest contour of your young self. It feels good, doesn't it? Natural, somehow liberating, bringing a sense of calm to your bewildered and ambivalent world.

You enjoy words. Certainty, that's a laugh, eh? Waste of a few lines in the Oxford English Dictionary, that one! Oops, David has moved onto "Five Years" while I've been talking... I hear you're in sync with him, but I missed the transition, "*a cop knelt and kissed the feet of a priest and a queer threw up at the sight of that.*" Well, maybe that's at least one certainty, Harry, your Dad played rugby for Wales and you play for your school, so at least you can be certain that you're not queer. You know that, don't you kid? You know you can't be gay, not you...?

No, don't break the song, you just hold the verse and feel every word, I can answer for you, I'm there ahead of you. Of course you know you can't be gay. You think such a reality would destroy your loving parents, not to mention your own life. We all understand, you have a position and place in life, captain of the rugby team, key man in the cricket team, the big guy, the sports

jock, one of the lads. So why, Harry, dearest young Harry, why, how? How did you end up fancying guys, eh?

It's no good, young man. You can't lie to yourself, which means you can't lie to me; and, yes, I know you've tried that. It doesn't work, does it? The feelings when you look around your teammates and other male friends, you can't wish them away, you can't lie to yourself and trying to has caused you such confusion and pain and could screw you up for good if you let it; but as I look back at you I know you won't allow that, you're bigger than that. Your young legs are strong, muscled, powerful, so how's about we try for one huge step together, eh? I'm here, I'll watch after you and hold you if you look like falling, but you won't. You have to put your best foot forward and take the step. To walk the path that you know is meant for you, that I know is meant for you, you have to kick off with being honest to yourself. What do they call it, Harry, to feel as you do? For me, dearest Harry, do it with me, now, free that embattled self from the chains that deny its truth, come out to yourself as you conjure up those images that dance around between your eyes and that dirty ceiling. Don't fight it, Harry, for while it doesn't seem possible, life will go on, in fact life will start afresh, a wonderful new life that will be yours to live, free of the aching, crushing self-doubt and confusion. You will be ok, I know. Really. Just say it. Say it to yourself. That's the biggest

step and here, listening to the challenging sounds of Bowie, lying on the bed with that gorgeous breeze caressing your body, just us two, do it now.

There it is, my boy. Pink champagne for everyone, my gay young man, you've said it to yourself. There will be tough coming out episodes ahead, Harry, but you've done it, the most important one, the watershed acceptance of what nature made you. Phew, easier than I feared. I am cheering for you. Fabulous... and, yes, you can say fabulous now, heck, it's almost required by union rules! Forgive me, you'll get used to it; no one makes fun of gays more than or better than fellow gays. You must hold on to humor in the years ahead; you'll need it.

So, we know you fancy guys, we know you're gay. You've said so yourself. Now, what exactly does that mean? Sure, you think you're all jolly liberated in 1974, everyone did, back then, but the gay thing, what's it all about, what now for you?

The Western world has lived through the swinging Sixties and is meant to be exhausting itself as it engages in unbridled free love but, my poor dear, gay boys are still bereft of true role models, of public and media acknowledgement that you even exist, other than in the criminal courts. So where do you turn to explore your new self, your new world?

Let us not despair, we're being myopic, you can turn to those who care about you, who have a deep-seated duty of care for you and even love you. Let's turn to your teachers here in boarding school and your parents and they... damn, you're right, they'll go crazy, their world may come crashing down and, worst of all, you may hurt the two people you love the most. Yes, you're right, sorry! I was getting ahead of myself, of us, forgetting where you are, or rather, when you are.

Never you mind, my dear. We shall work it out together. Just turned sixteen and you've clambered over the biggest step of your young life, you've come out to yourself. You know that you fancy other guys, but who do you tell and when, if not teachers or parents? Let's be logical and talk it through. Nathan, that rock of a best mate of yours, you turn to him with things that dare not be unmasked to family or school staff. Why don't we start with him? Put it out there, you're sixteen, you fancy boys and want to talk about it with a trusted friend, with Nathan... but, of course, that's impossible isn't it. We are as one mind, Harry, and we have to be honest if we are to maneuver ourselves through this change in your life's direction. I know about Nathan, that you not only fancy guys, but you fancy him.

Nathan's your best mate. Same year in school, studying almost identical exam subjects even though you hate some of them (ah,

the penny's dropped on that one now, eh?), invariably sitting next to each other in each period. Same school rugby team and cricket team. You guys are inseparable, other than you being a "boarder" and Nathan a "day boy." In a word you'll hear later in life, people would say you were in a bromance, but as you free yourself from past confusion, you wish that the "b" could be dropped.

Let me be frank with you. You guys do, or would, make a gorgeous couple. I know you're never been confident in your looks or physique, despite the effort you invest in the latter. That's all too common amongst your new community, dear, but you know you haven't fallen from the ugly tree; you're no blowfish. Nathan, well, Nathan might not be cover model material—steady, let me finish—but I'm in your head, my friend, I read loud and clear that Nathan is gorgeous to you in ways you can't properly understand; and so he is. Not just in terms of his looks, and he does look good I grant you, but more, I sense the impact on you of his impish, disarming smile and his sparkling, inviting blue-green eyes, of the way the fringe of his dark blond hair falls over the top of his eyes when he laughs and he then sweeps it away with his hand, his effervescent, cheeky, lovable character and even the way he folds his dirty rugby kit before packing it into his sports bag after a match. Oh yes, Harry dear, you've been bitten

by the Nathan bug and, from where I sit, I know its mark will stay with you for life.

If we were only able to talk to each other properly, I am sure you'd be throwing a tantrum. All very gay stereotype of you, but we've successfully thrown you headlong into the watershed of coming out to yourself so, having conquered the self denial and, heaven save us, we all remember that, I just will not have you throwing a tantrum. Anger is not the answer. You're frightened but, though it will be of little comfort to you right now, you're actually travelling a trail that has been worn down by a myriad of troubled young gay things before you. You have to get used to who you are, and for most of us it's not easy at first.

Ah, yes, now that's more on the right track. No easier to navigate, but honest to who you are and presents us with the immediate issue that consumes you. You're making it abundantly clear that your yearning for your best mate feels overpowering. Been there, dear, as you will know one day. You ache for him, he is in your every thought, you want to roam over every inch of him, to lay together, bodies enfolded and feel his breath on the nape of your neck and to talk, to talk for ages, an eternity. All good stuff, my boy, you're getting the hang of it. Emotional and physical frustration increasing, day by day or even hour by hour I sense, so it's time things moved on and I know they can and will. Indulge

me, let me hang around and I promise it will get better. You just have to believe me and trust me.

First off, I know that you have become a regular fixture at Nathan's home, with his parents taking pity on poor Harry, the boarder, and inviting you to join them at their place most Saturday evenings after you two rumbustious lads have played your hearts out in the name of the school against this or that opposing rugby team. If I recall correctly, they pick you up after the matches, with Nathan, whisk you off for a mountain of home-cooked food and a quiet night; returning you to school the next day after a sumptuous Sunday lunch. Well, Harry, my friend, sounds like the whole Nathan tribe is a good bunch. I'd like to watch you guys play rugby some time, that'll help us, and maybe then join you for the overnight with Nathan; but don't be perturbed, you've got the idea by now that I won't get in the way. In fact, strike while the iron is hot; let's make it this Saturday's home match. I'll cheer the two of you on and then we can all have a laugh later, at your boy's home.

You guys ignore me, Harry, just enjoy the victory. What a match, eh? As for you two, well, what can I say? The winning two tries coming from breaks from the back of the scrum by open side wing forward Harry, linking up brilliantly with outside half

Nathan. No, really, it's like the two of you think with one rugby brain. Magical. So, get yourselves showered and then we'll be off for the usual Saturday night escape at Chez Nathan.

I know, kid, this bit is difficult. Watching fellow athletes disrobe, pumped, muscles tingling, and all against the constant quick-fire chatter of the victorious warriors. I can feel it like it was yesterday, that thrill, the primeval sense of dominance, having subjugated the enemy, the glow of success. Oh yes, young sixteen, I have lived these moments before you and they are a drug, an addiction. Man the conqueror, foes vanquished, laid asunder and now the spoils, the Roman triumph, the champions cheered to the rafters and indulged with bacchanalian excess. But what of those due excesses, the ravaging and wild sexual gymnastics? Not for you, young Harry. No, for you it's into the showers with Nathan and your teammates, standing a naked arm's distance from the boy you love and lust after as you both lather up and shower off. You dare not look, but you dare not look away. The nakedness is meant to mean nothing. It's a bastard, Harry, I do understand but, hey, that's life and life ain't always easy for a gay boy. Just hold it together. Suffering is good for the soul and maybe there will be reward for your stoicism in heaven, or even before. Who knows... sorry, Harry, I can't help but grin, from my vantage point!

Right, cruel and unusual punishment session over, dried and dressed, pile into Nathan's Dad's car and you guys head for his place; don't worry about me, I'll make my own way and be there when you arrive.

Here we go, then, Harry. Nathan's Mum and Dad are off for the evening with friends. Smile as his Mum heads out of the door, "So, we'll see you later—Could be a long night with your Dad's work friends. Don't wait up. You boys get your heads down whenever you're ready; it was a huge game today, you were both great and you must be shattered."

Oh, and I see she is followed off the premises by Nathan's older brother, Mick, "Same goes for me, late one, don't wait up. New girlfriend. You guys understand," he says, with a knowing nod.

Well, what a chirpy family this is. Just you two youngsters left then, Harry, and you don't need to say it, I'm with you on this one. You want to shout for joy and cry out in pain at the same time. You find yourself in heaven and hell at the same moment. I feel for you. What now, then? Movies? listening to records?

Ah, the apple of your eye speaks, "Come on, let's hit my room and do the Saturday movie up there."

That clears that up. You shall retire to Nathan's bedroom early, via the kitchen I note, to grab the four cans of beer his parents allow you and the bags of Golden Wonder crisps. Ready Salted and Roast Chicken flavors, eh? Good choices.

Funny how things work out, Harry my boy. You see, I know that this bedroom used to be shared by Nathan and Mick until older brother was given his own territory and it still has two single beds in it. Written in the stars, no? So now you two love-birds, you wish, share the room on Saturdays. Nice. Good lord, seconds flat for the two of you to be stretched out on your respective beds, beer in one hand and crisps in the other. Domestic bliss.

Who would have thought it, the Saturday movie is Kubrick's *Spartacus*. Good movie in its own right and, of course, we have the scene between General Crassus, played by Laurence Olivier, and slave Antoninus, played by a young Tony Curtis attired in a skimpy loin cloth. The naked Crassus is being bathed by his personal/body slave Antoninus and uses a snail and oyster metaphor to prepare his slave for what he intends to come next...

Crassus: "Do you consider the eating of oysters to be moral and snails to be immoral?"

Anoninus: "No, Master."

Crassus: “Of course not. It’s all a matter of taste, isn’t it? Taste is not the same as appetite and therefore not a question of morals, hmm?”

Antoninus: “It could be argued so, Master.”

Crassus, rising from the bath: “My robe, Antoninus. My taste includes both snails and oysters.”

Still, Harry, you’re watching the thing and don’t need me to quote from it but, I wonder, will you ever get to the question of snails or oysters with the lovely Nathan, stretched out on the adjacent bed? I know you cannot conceive of a way to broach the issue, potentially a life changing issue for both of you. Again I say, Trust me, surprising things can and do happen when least you expect it; though I can’t tell you more than that at this juncture, my young friend.

Heavens, I can feel the vibration from here, your heart is pounding so strongly, the blood forging through your body and I know your mind is doing gymnastics in your young head. You testosterone pumped youth, you cherish these evenings each week but, at the same time, not only hate but fear them. I do understand, you ache to enfold Nathan in your arms, to kiss that impish, sexy boy and press your bodies together but you know that that is not so much the stuff of dreams as of nightmares, as it would not only end your friendship but ruin your life. Harry,

homosexual Harry, you feel helpless, powerless to divulge and explore your true emotions. Right now you hate this thing called being gay, don't you?

Oops, listen up, Harry, he's about to speak to you...

"Fuck me, Harry, you're starting to look fat, mate."

No, surely not, young H. Can he say that about you? He's looking over at you on his older brother's bed, looking at your recumbent form, clad in just t-shirt and shorts but you're not going to take that, are you, Harry? I know you're not...

"Don't worry yourself, you flabby bastard, I could run you into the ground or beat you to a pulp any day of the week."

Erudite retort, Harry, but, of course, that's it now, that's all it takes. Yes, here we go, Nathan explodes from his bed, landing heavily on his mate and the fight is on. In the nature of things, obeying the same developmental behaviors as any pair of bear cubs or wild dog pups I know you two young males play fight constantly. I've seen you, testing each other's strength and endurance, vying for the role of top dog. Of course these bouts, that erupt at the slightest provocation, are minutes of matchless, incomparable joy for you, Harry, yet also amount to torture as you roll around on the bed, muscles straining, bodies locked together.

It was always going to happen and I am afraid tonight is the night. You see, I knew it was coming. As you both fall off your

bed, locked in each other's arms, Nathan suddenly releases his vice-like grip on your midriff and pushes you away. Now, as you both sit on the floor, panting, leaning back against respective beds, Nathan stares down at what is incontrovertible evidence of your sexuality and your feelings for him. Oh, Harry, Harry, the clear physical evidence that you, his best mate, are physically aroused by him...

Well, here we are. Someone has pressed pause and your world stands still. I can see the horror on your face, Harry, the fear, and I understand your eyes filling with tears as you hang your head. Oh my dear, you can't even look at him, can't speak to him. What now? Hell, what now?

"Harry?"

Good for Nathan, ball's in his court, if you'll forgive the expression. Come on, Harry, talk to him. Say something! No? Just tears now tracing their jagged course down your young, flushed cheeks. I know how you feel, I do, and I feel for you.

"Harry?"

Good lad, lovely Nathan seems to realize he must take control. Now, where's he taking this, where's he taking us?

You're embarrassed, but come on, look up, look at Nathan. You need to look at him, look *now*, Harry. Good lad, up comes your head, slowly, timidly, but look, look my boy. Oh gosh, so

many years on, decades on but my all-too-dicky ticker is still racing at the sight; ha, Nathan may kill me, yet! Yes, what you see is impossible. Impossible, outside the covers of those magazines, as your mother calls them, but it is happening. It is really happening, my boy. Nathan is removing his own t-shirt, his caring, compassionate eyes fixed on you. You can't move? Me the same, paralyzed by the paradise of his perfect form. Even now, I can hardly breathe. Your gaze unblinking, riveted to the boy of your dreams, the boy you have yearned for, ached for but never dared to make a move on now stripped to the waist only an arm's length away.

“You're queer?”

This is it, Harry. Oh God, my heart is going to explode for you. I'm on tenterhooks. He's saying more...

“Though I hardly need to ask, do I?”

Can't fault him, Harry, he's looking at your shorts and you cannot deny the physical evidence. Say something, lad, before I burst...

“You, Nathan?”

“No, not me, not queer, but, really I don't care and I want to help you.”

“What do you mean, Nate? Help me, how?”

Bless you, you're shame-faced and confused but just let him lead from here, put yourself in his hands and trust him as he leans towards you. Lose yourself in his bottomless, twinkling blue-green eyes. He's going to kiss you now, Harry. There it is, his lips touching yours, pressing themselves gently against yours. Dear Lord, I can still taste them and am again living that heavenly, life-changing excitement with you. Your body is exploding, every inch tingling uncontrollably at his touch, his surprisingly sensitive hands that are now lifting your shirt over your head and then beginning to caress your upper body. Every fiber of your being aches for him and it's really happening, gorgeous young Harry, we are with him at last, feeling the touch of his hand and smoothness of his skin as he pulls us in. His touch runs down your body to your shorts, easing his fingers under the waistband and then, oh God, I can't breathe let alone speak. Our first time. This inconceivable, quite impossible night is unfolding, for real, and ahead of you, ahead of you both awaits a night of fumbling, feverish corporeal exploration and genuine ecstasy.

Your first of many, my boy. My first of many. I guess, our first of many. My lovely, young Harry, the people here tell me that life will soon desert this aged frame of mine, that any day I shall leave this life and all its wonders, its impossible and stupefying delights, so I thank you, my intense, essential young lad, I thank you for

letting me relive this cameo of our life once more. It is the happiest moment of your existence, to date, and I think you already know that I can tell you it will remain one of the most memorable, loving, lustful nights of your blessed life, and your life will be blessed and you must live every minute of it to the full, for good or ill. I thank you for letting me re-live that first time, to let me feel its intensity and heavenly wonder once more, before my time here is run.



Summer Carnival, Paris, 2013, #1 | Jim Ross



Summer Carnival, Paris, 2013, #2 | Jim Ross

Jeremy Windham

Summer 1976

At thirteen, my mother listened
to Carole King's *Tapestry*

on an 8-track in her bedroom,
sprawled on the carpet under
a sun-rinsed window.

I imagine the light

filtered through lace curtains
and cast shapes over her face,

catching in her lashes;

I wonder if she grew weary of herself even then,
head thick with dreaming and melodies

she would sing to me years later.

Meanwhile, my uncle and the neighborhood boys
wrestled in the den, rowdy with laughter.

They trampled into my mother's room
and told her to paint their faces
like the guys from Kiss,

so she did, traced their lips
with graphite liner, powdered their chins,

held each head still with patient hands
as they shed human skin and became feral
beneath her fingertips.

They were gone in an instant,
howling and running out the back door .

Back at the house, my mother wept to herself
on the floor of her own room,

drenched in sunlight,

and did not know why an invisible
sadness thumped in her heart.

Vicki Iorio

The Ichthyologist's Mother

Sylvia discovers psychotropics exchanges winter for a tropical
isthmus

Auntie a joyful black moon warms all of Sylvia in her big hands

Auntie puts color into this white girl weaves a floppy purple
orchid through Sylvia's
stringy blond hair

Auntie watches over Sylvia dresses her in sarongs burns the twin
 sets in the oven
 buries Sylvia's cold pearls spells their voodoo

Sylvia's children make sand castles the boy sculpts a fish
 details fins with a plastic spoon
 Squinting in the sun he searches the turquoise for a porpoise or a
 whale on whose back
 he can ride away

His sister crushes his creation with a rusty shovel he does not
forgive this betrayal

Sylvia finds her strength serves her husband divorce papers
the last thing
she will ever serve him he cries behind stiff British doors
he never writes another good line

Sylvia crafts another collection it is a colossal success
Her children grow up
She leaves the island to visit her son in Alaska Auntie tends the
cats

Sylvia admires the fish tanks Her son studies so many varieties
so much science
The forced heat in this Fairbanks lab dries out Sylvia's golden skin

When the disease comes the fish die her son dies from the rope of
his biology

Laura Ingram

The Green House Effect

God uses the ozone layer as his cigarette lighter,
Marianas Trench as an ashtray.

At sixteen, you are made of side stream smoke and seed pearls,
spinal cord arching across the international date line—
you repeat carcinogenic classes,
pencil lead lining your lungs,
classmate's erasers rubbing out
your impure thoughts.

You recite the lord's prayer backwards in bed;
It seems unlikely that God gives a damn about order.

You paint your eyelids with the cool side of the color wheel,
snuff out the butts of your Lucky Strike's on your headboard.

Your father amended the seventh sin—
you repeal your repentance,
ratify the revelation:
adolescence is the algorithm for aching.

Mary Imo-Stike

Oh-ha-daih (Oh Beautiful Valley)

Misplaced natives,
blue-eyed
and hungry as the blood runs pale,
drawn to our feathers and skins
join us in the beat,
heart-drumming dance
pulled into the center circle
by their search for some red
communion
before their life light blows gone.

I watch
from behind my mother's caution
and remember times ago—I've heard tell stories—
when our legion was songs
and our lives were long in Spirit's garden
up and down the Genesee.

Flint

The Unbalanced Heart

The trouble with love
is the cliché—
how hearts are like glass
or storm clouds
breaking their bottles
on our skulls.
If it all sounds
like a thick whisper
on a knotted tongue
say to me
 think
before you speak.

Gladly, I say.
Did you see that bird?
 It flew over
 our heads.

I say,
I have seen you move
with the sibilant grace

of a rocking horse

and I have seen
that I never get anywhere
either.

C'est rien, mon petite chou.

It's not the height of the fall
my love, it's not the height,

it's the angle.

If I say
I looked through
the looking glass
but there was nothing to see
past the sex in your mirrored room,
would you listen
to me say
the rain?

—she goes in grace.

Nancy Carol Moody

Hump Day

Slippers kicked off, mattress
cranked up to six for heat
& my breasts contentedly splayed
like walrus pups on the rock flat
of my chest, nothing but an old t-shirt
between them & fifty-six years
of a clean criminal record
potentially ruined by charges
of indecent exposure on this,
a Wednesday night in November &
all I really want is an idle moment
under the covers so thank you
for not asking, but yes,
you bet I can still rumble here.

Lee L. Krecklow

The Last Days of Beauty and Pain

I was told this would be helpful. I'm failing to see how. Everyone seems to know what I should do with myself. Everyone knows what will be good for me. Healthy. I no longer have control. Everyone is in control but me. How is this helpful? It's stupid. Nothing is helpful.



Helpful for who? If these are my words and my thoughts, then they are already mine, and this is meaningless. More than anything, it's embarrassing. Here are my thoughts. Fuck it all. Fuck this life. Fuck your life. Fuck it.



My life has been beautiful. Then why should this be so sad? That feeling had always confused me. Something being so beautiful that it saddens you. Drives you to tears. Beauty and pain

are inseparable. Did Dylan say that? Love and hate are the same. That never used to make sense to me. Now it makes perfect sense. It's a truth.



I feel sick today. I think I have a fever. But I'm cold, too. I'm sweating and I'm freezing. I won't tell April about it. She doesn't need to know. The less she fusses over me the better.



I continue to find myself here. In the basement. Using my workbench. I still think that it's stupid, but here I am. Not every day, at least. At least I can say that. Maybe I should put dates on the pages. Dates for who? Because this is all for me, right? What do I want? Does anyone ask anymore? Do I know the answer if they did? I miss baseball right now. Where did the season go? I'd like the distraction. Busy is happy.



This is stupid because I'm not talking to anybody. It occurred to me last night while I wasn't sleeping again. I'm not writing to anybody. So today I write to you. Maybe that itself is stupid because you won't ever read it. But then again, what if you do? What if my words find their way to you. You know, don't you? That's a nice thought. I think about those things now. I never

used to, but I do now. Even if I write to you, I don't know what to say. So maybe I'm left in the same place. So again, I ask who is this for? It's cold down here, but it's quiet and I like that. I think it's the only place I can breathe.



I had my first treatment today. Not impressed, I guess. I feel fine. I'm told it gets harder. Doesn't everything? The notion that anything gets easier is bullshit. I think you just get used to things, but everything gets more complicated. I'm fifty-three. Forty-three was easier. And thirty-three before that. If I'm here to see fifty-four, I'll probably want for this again.



These are terrible things for me to say to you. I'm sorry for that. My life has been beautiful. You are beautiful. As I write this I know that it's my one tragedy that we were never allowed to be together. I had the love for you, and I couldn't do anything with it. That any love is not allowed is a sin against us inflicted by a terrible God. How can love not be permitted? God is a fucking beast.



I shouldn't say those things to you either. I get angry. I say them. Then I settle down and regret them. Regret is horrible. I

don't know what your relationship to God might be. I don't know what my own relationship to God might be. It used to be simple. Like everything, it's grown more complicated. I don't understand him like I used to. I've been told it's not my place to understand. I think that's condescending bullshit. Like some overbearing parent to a child. But what do I know? I'm not a parent, now am I. And as I sit here now, I refuse to believe that God is mine.



I still feel ill, but it's not because of the treatment. I can tell. I don't sleep well at all anymore. I don't think April does, either. She doesn't say so, but I can tell. I feel guilty about that. Another horrible feeling. And my guilt keeps me awake even more. It's almost time to go up to bed again now. I sneak down here when I can. She doesn't know I write this. She is one of those who told me to do it, and it would make her happy to know that I do, but I can't tell her about it. Embarrassing.



I should tell you about April. My beautiful wife. It's amazing how even more beautiful something becomes when you face being removed from it. April is my life and always has been. I feel her in everything I do and say. For better or worse, she is at the front of every thought. There have been times when I wished I

could turn that off, but I can't. I guess there's nothing that's our own. And maybe that's the point. Sharing this pain with her isn't tolerable. That she is awake at night while I'm awake makes me miserable. Here I am, back to pain and misery again. I need to reset.



Positivity. April. All we need is each other. At least there was a time when that was true. I've been saying it to myself for years, believing it's true, not believing it, trying to believe it. I know that it was true until I figured out how much I needed you, too. There was nothing missing from our lives until we couldn't have you. Then there was a void. How that is possible, I can't explain. It's not fair to anyone, but it's true. April always seemed to know. She knew before I did. I was frustrated with her for not letting you go faster, but now I see it with perfect clarity.



Today was another treatment. I'm surprised by how long it takes. Hours of preparation and waiting. Then hours of poison and waiting. Tomorrow I'll feel like shit. It feels different this time. I think it might be bad. April is going to shave my head tonight. She's been cutting my hair for years. It'll just be closer this time. I hope that we find an agreeable scalp underneath. I

knew a man years ago who shaved his head on a dare and found that his scalp was crinkled up. Lumps and bumps, like the skin had been stretched out and then pushed back together.



I was not prepared for how much April needed you. I was hurt by it at the time. I thought that it said something about our relationship. I understand now that it didn't. It said something about things much bigger than our relationship. She knew it then. I'm only learning now. I like the way my head looks. I should have shaved my head years ago. Rid myself of that widow's peak.



I've nothing to leave behind. What a wasted feeling. I'm wasting away, and I've wasted everything. Fifty years. And you know what I keep thinking about? Driving. If I added up all the hours I spent driving, how long would that be? Years? Waste. And how arbitrary. Why not television? Why not sleeping? Why don't those bother me? Why driving? Maybe it's the idea of being between two things. Limbo. Just be where you need to be. Being nowhere: what a fucked up idea. I have a lot of those. Maybe I should go back to work. Too much thinking causes problems.



You hurt my relationship with your mother. We were not well, and I was angry with you about that. You caused us to doubt our lives together. Do you have any idea how much it hurts to doubt the foundation upon which you've built your life? Maybe you do. Maybe you've felt everything. There were so many tears, and then so much silence. Years of it. And it just got worse every time we lost you. The first time we'd been trying for fourteen months. So much disappointment at the sight of blood every four weeks. Then, there was no blood. And there was excitement and hope for weeks, so energizing, such a high after all the lows, and then you died. Out you fell with a wash of blood. Nobody could tell us why. No answers. Try again. Okay. Try again. Another year of trying. Trying. Trying. Tiring. Then you were there again. For a just a few weeks again. Doctors couldn't help. That's enough. You get the point.



My body hurts. It's those injections after the treatment. The injection is in my stomach and it hurts in my bones. I feel like I'm going to snap in half. I feel like it would be a relief to snap in half. I'm complaining to you so I don't complain to April. I don't want her worrying. She worries enough already. She doesn't need to know these things. She's been sleeping better lately. I'm still awake, and I can tell she's sleeping. She makes noises and moves

around when she sleeps. She's still and quiet when she's awake. I'm glad you're not here to see all this. You'd worry too. Maybe you wouldn't be worried. Maybe you'd have hated me. I've never thought that, but I suppose it's possible. Maybe this is why you're not here. Maybe one or the other of us is being spared something. Then I'm glad I don't have you.



I hate myself for having written that yesterday. I'm sorry for saying those things to you. This is my cycle. Purge and regret. It was a stupid thing to say. People are fond of saying stupid things when something horrible happens. I heard so many when we lost you. "Oh, another little angel for Jesus." "That must not have been your baby. Yours will come." "At least she went early on. It would be harder later in the pregnancy." "This is all part of God's plan." To hell with all that. What stupid things to say to someone. Why doesn't Jesus make his own angels? Why did he have to take mine? Waste. I hear the same stupid shit now when people look in my eyes. I don't blame anybody. I wouldn't know what to say, either. Maybe it'd be best for them to say nothing. "You'll get through this. I know you will." Really? Do you? Guess what. You don't know a fucking thing. I'm fucked. I'm done. That's the truth. Don't tell me otherwise. It's a lie. And don't start calling me regularly after we haven't spoken for years. I'm glad you're

concerned, but if we had better things to do with our time before this, I'm certainly not looking to spend my time talking to you now, trying to make you feel better about my problems. Get over it. I'll be gone soon enough and you'll be able to stop feeling guilty.



Maybe it's selfish of me to wish that you were here now. I mean, I've always wished you'd been here. But it's different now. Now I think that you being here might somehow validate my life. Like I need you to help me feel better about all the other ways that I've failed. Because I could say, "At least I made her." Is that selfish? Do I just need something to show for myself? I don't know. What do I know? Life is hard.



Treatment. Vomit. No eating. Weak. April and I take turns supporting each other in this. I can tell when she's feeling low, and it makes me want to pretend harder not to be ill or depressed. I run the water in the bathtub so she doesn't hear my vomit in the toilet. I make more jokes. I want to see her smile. But it takes energy to pretend those things, and I don't have much of it. When she sees that I'm tired, she turns herself around fast. She becomes

the optimist. We take turns carrying the load. It helps to share. I hope there's no time when we're both too tired to care.



Sofia is your name. Sofia. It's the name your mother chose. For a time I'd wanted Alana. But I warmed to Sofia. I didn't tell your mother until the day you were born. I wanted her to have her Sofia.



I told you some weeks ago that you caused problems for me and your mom. I was hurt by not having you. She was devastated. She thought her body failed you. I saw you as being outside our control. She felt she should have had control. What if she hadn't smoked so much pot as a teenager, or what if she hadn't had a glass of wine before she knew you'd been conceived, or what if she'd called in sick to work the morning she woke up and felt cramping and worried for you, but dismissed it and went to the office anyway and had to leave a meeting because she felt the thighs of her pants soak through, and she looked down and saw the dark stains and had to call me to pick her up, and she stood in the lobby of her office waiting for me with a coat tied around her waist while smiling politely at coworkers as they walked by, the whole time literally dying inside. It took her years to get past it,

and in those years we were not well, because she was not the person I'd wanted to be with anymore. She was darker. And I couldn't blame her, but I found it difficult to be near her all the same. She had nothing to give, and then, like now, I only had so much energy to support her. Nobody was carrying the weight with me. You can only give so much without getting anything back. But I never left. I thought about it, but never did. I don't say that to brag about staying with my wife, I say it because it's the truth.



You're in your twenties now. You're an adult. That's why I'm speaking to you like one. You were a baby, but you're grown up now. You'd probably be driving me to my death if I wasn't already dying. I'd be very protective of you. You'd push hard against that. You're looking to get married soon, I'm sure. Maybe you're not. But either way you'll be careful, right? You're smart. You make good decisions. I trust you. Still, do I trust him with you? I don't. Does he see what we know? Is it as obvious to everyone else as it is to us? I want to tell him and make him understand, but you wouldn't appreciate that either. So I suffer in silence. Another curse from God.



Back now from a short trip. It was necessary. I took April away for a few days. Surprised her. We went to Baraboo where we spent so many weekends years ago. We used to ski there, cross-country. We used to camp there, too, even with snow on the ground, not so much in recent years, but decades ago when our patience and our bodies allowed us. That seems like another couple entirely now. A couple who afforded themselves such novelties as sleeping outside in the winter air. We were made alive by it. Memories. It's probably fair to say I'm made most alive by memories now. This weekend we spent much of the time in the hotel room, and that was important. We played cards. We smoked cigarettes. Why not? And she touched me. My body ached so badly. She took off my clothes and laid me across the bed, and squeezed my muscles and bones. It hurt terribly, but the pain, I don't know what to say about the kind of pain. It was satisfying. It was wonderful to endure each twist of a muscle, if only for the relief of it being released. Each time her hands grabbed my bones, I felt stabbed, and each time she let go, I felt she removed more pain than she inflicted. Then she, too, removed her clothes and laid on top of me. We stayed that way for a long while. Peaceful. You must hate hearing this. I nearly forgot who I was talking to. Who am I talking to?



Got some tattoos today. I'd always wanted tattoos. I never imagined these. Half a dozen bulls eyes on my chest and arms. Lovely. Attractive. Pointless. Futile. Wasteful. I don't know who this is for. Yes I do. Sometimes I open this journal and expect to see a response. Why will you never answer me?



Sofia Sofia Sofia Sofia Sofie Sofee Sohfy Sofia Lynn
Sofia Sue Sofia Lorraine Sofia Sofie Cat Sofie Sofie Sofia I
remember the day you were born.



I remember the day you took your first steps and the day you used your first word. It was dadada. I remember how we used to walk to the park every Fourth of July and watch the parade, and the people on the floats would throw candy into the crowd and you'd scramble for it on your hands and knees with a dozen other kids on top of you. You always ended up with the most. On Christmas you used to save the biggest presents for last. I used to let you paint my toenails.



A few nights ago now, maybe it was more than that, I don't know, doesn't matter I guess, some friends came over with some

pot. April told me she wanted me to get high so I'd eat something. So I did. For them, mostly. Because funerals aren't for the dead, right? This is all about making other people feel better, right? We got high and they talked so much. It was hard for me to listen. I was hearing words more slowly than they were being spoken, and by the time I heard what one person said, the next person was halfway through a sentence. And I still didn't eat much. I just sat there.



I remember your first full days of school, and how excited you were and how lost I was without you in the house. I remember trying to keep you from wanting to grow up. You wanted makeup and shorter skirts and bikini tops. I remember fighting with your mother about letting you go a little. But I was never able to. Why would I want to let go? Then high school and college and your wedding. You don't need me.



I told your mother about the journal. I had to. And I'm glad I did. But I didn't tell her about you. It doesn't seem like a good idea. There's no point. It would only hurt her. She knows I'm writing and that's enough. I keep it next to the bed now. I just told her not to open it. She understood. She didn't ask any

questions. Bless her for that. I like not hiding in the basement. We got high again last night. It was just me and April. It was nice. She knew not to speak. Bless her for that. Bless her for knowing me. She is a beautiful thing.



The first time I took you camping you were four. It was late fall. You made a long game of picking up dry leaves and throwing them into the fire. I pulled your hair into a ponytail so that it wouldn't be touched by the flames. I sent you into the woods to find sticks for hotdogs and marshmallows. I listened to the Brewers in the World Series while I watched the beam of your flashlight in the dark. You came back with burrs in your shoelaces. You took two bites of hotdog and asked for marshmallows. I let you eat half the bag. They stuck around your mouth, a beautiful beard of sugar. We walked to the lake in the dark to wash you. Holding hands. Your warm, beautiful tiny hand. You looked up at the stars and told me there were hundreds of them. "Why don't we have stars at home?" you asked. "They're there," I said. "You just can't see them." Back at camp I stood you in the tent and dressed you in layers for the cold night. Footie pajamas. Jeans. Sweatshirt. Winter hat. I put you in your sleeping bag and covered your sleeping bag with a blanket. You asked me to tell you stories

and I did. So many of them. You fell asleep. I checked the radio. The Brewers had won game seven.



I talked to the Dr. about mental fatigue. Lack of concentration. No ambition. He said it wasn't uncommon. Radiation. Stress. Lack of sleep. Among the things he suggested would help was to keep a journal to keep thoughts and feelings organized. Okay then. Thanks for that.



Your hair is blond but you dye it brown because you think you're taken more seriously. You love Leonard Cohen and Chopin and Chili Peppers all at once. You yelled at me for smoking when your mother wasn't brave enough. You were 'The Cat in the Hat for your first Halloween. Tigger for your second. Then a robot. Then a firefighter. A firefighter again. Then some teen pop star I never heard of. Then a cheerleader. Then a vampire then Mini Mouse then a fairy and then you were too old, you said. You are just like me so we are good at talking but fight often. You're the opposite of your mother so you support and balance each other. When I'm gone you'll need each other.



April took me for a walk tonight. I was struck for a moment by an idea of pairs and connectedness. Is that a word? Connectedness? Trees and leaves. Homes and families. Roads and cars. Swings and ropes. Birds and air. Grass and dirt. There were more, but I can't remember them now. That's all. It seemed important while I was thinking and walking. Now I'm not sure why. Maybe I'm just tired and sad.



I love April. She has given me all that she could. Can I say the same? I hope that I can. I'm sad that I couldn't be more for her. Did I remember to kiss her every night? Tell her that I love her every day? But that shit doesn't matter. That's stupid shit that's supposed to matter, that they tell you matters the day you get married, but it's just bullshit. Did I really, really give her all I could? Am I giving enough now? Where is the energy for it? I don't know.



Futility. Everything. So much. Overwhelming. Meaningless. Weight. I only want to sleep. I want to close my eyes, fall back and be consumed. I don't know how to describe what I'm feeling right now. I'm tired. There is pressure on me. Everywhere. Weight. Pushing. Pulling. My lungs are heavy. My eyes are dry. What is this

thing growing in me? What is in me? What is me? What? So tired. My care is tired. I don't think there is any left. That is not good.



The family nights. When the three of us would sit at the table and play Candy Land. Then Pictionary. Then Chinese Checkers. Then Trivial Pursuit. When we would sit in the living room and eat popcorn and watch movies like *Snow White*. Then *Star Wars*. Then *Schindler's List*. When we would sit outside on summer nights, listening to crickets and watching for fireflies. Then playing volleyball. Then talking. Just talking. A glass of wine for you. But just one. And more for me and your mother, who listened with such intent to everything you said. The nights when we went to bed and you sneaked out. We let you because we knew you only went next door because the parents told us you were there. And April and I had the house to ourselves for an evening. Which was magic then. Until it became too many evenings. Quiet. Because there was nobody to talk. There was nobody.



How do you decide that you need something, then convince yourself you were wrong? There's always a lie involved. That was the problem. Did I tell you that already? We needed you. I needed

you. But then we couldn't need you anymore. How to turn that off? Tell me. Please.



April puts ointment on my sores. That's our love now. She does this for me. It is its own kind of beauty. Of course it is paired with pain. It must be. She gives me everything that she has. I don't have anything to give. Guilt.



What is a need? What is a want? Did we need you? Or just want you? Maybe we didn't need you because we managed to live without you. But did we really live? I don't know how to answer this. Need. Want. I don't understand needs and wants. Maybe nothing is a need. Do I need to live? I don't. If I tell myself that I need to keep living, then I'm a failure. I must be content to die. If I don't need to live now, was there ever a time when I did? And if I don't need to live, then what do I need? I want to eat but I don't need to. I want to breathe, but if I stop, what really changes? I wanted you, and I couldn't have you, so what then? So went our lives. Everything is built of wants because we are selfish beings. A need is a contrivance. Wants. That's all there is. And time will go on. Until it does no longer. Because in the end, there's no need for it.



Thank you for last night. It was so good that you came. To have everyone at home together means something. Your mother was so happy to see you, so happy to know that you're doing well at school and that you're happy there. To be seated at the same table with you... we're glad you're well. April and I talked about it. We're glad you're well. I hope you know how proud we are of you. I hope you know how much you mean to us. So much that it's not possible to express. There are no words.



It has been days since I wrote here. I've felt at peace in a way I can't explain. I miss you. But to know that you're happy is enough for me. If I can imagine you smiling, I can smile. If I can imagine you laughing somewhere, it makes me warm. I can't know where you are. I don't think I want to know. It might hurt too much. When I need to imagine you, I like to imagine you in a field somewhere, long grass all around you, cloudless skies, the sun on your face. You've got freckles on your shoulders, just like your mother, just like you had when you were four and spent all summer in the sandbox I built you. There's a tree there, in your field, just one, for shade if you want it, but you don't, because the sun shines there just for you. You're smiling.



Tomorrow I will give you to your mother. I decided just now. I'm not sleeping. Not sure how anymore. Maybe it's that I'm not sure why I should sleep. Plenty of time for it later, I suppose. Your mother is next to me now sleeping, and I write with a booklight that I hope is not too bright for her. I love her like this. Her eyes are so relaxed. Her lips are just parted. She moves slightly ever so often. That's how I know she's asleep. Did I tell you that already? I can smell her sleep. I've lived with that smell for decades and I don't know how to describe it. I've been looking at her thinking about how many beautiful things we've known together. Then I thought about how many beautiful things we did not know together, because it wasn't for us, or because we didn't have the courage or the language to share the things we felt as individuals. I don't want to feel like I could have given more. I want to believe that I gave her everything. I want her to have you. I've always wanted her to have you, and now I can give you to her. She will need you, just as I have. She'll need to know that she made you very happy, for your entire life, every day of it. She'll need to know that, though you didn't always act like it, you never took for granted one day with her. She'll want to know that even when there was pain, you never forgot to find the beauty, and that it was her that taught you to find it. She'll want to know how

much you appreciate how she gave you everything she could, that she took her life and gave it to you, so that your life would be better, and how humble that makes you feel, and how all you can hope is that the life you lived was worth what she put into it. She needs to hear those things. Please tell her.

Bios

Flint is a writer, activist and itinerant adjunct writing instructor who lives in Los Angeles. She earned an MFA in Writing from the School of Critical Studies at CalArts, and her work has been published in the anthology *Staging Social Justice: Collaborating to Create Activist Theatre*, Glitterwolf, Outrider Review, The Gambler, Crab Fat and Round Up, as well as the introductory issue of Two Hawks Quarterly, where her poem, “In Praise of Two Hawks Fucking,” inspired the journal’s name.

Photographer **Sarah Elise Abramson**’s aesthetic is at the intersection of the poetic and unsettling, the creepy and beautiful, the subversive and classically Romantic. She is an omnivorous and voracious collector and documenter of found images and objects, as well as the engineer of invented, quasi-mystical visual narratives. Her haunting, mysterious images plumb the depths of allegory in their sun-spattered views, with the ticklish allure of glimpsing something private. Since adolescence she has rarely been without a camera in her hand, and still prefers what she calls “the physicality” of the 35mm and polaroid films she learned on. Even as her style and technique unceasingly evolve and expand, her early impulses to photograph the wonders of nature, the people she knows, and life’s randomly surreal surprises still drive her.

Zinn Adeline grew up as Emily Wozniak—a patriotic, rule following, confused-christian-softball-playing-straight-girl—in St. Louis, MO. She is currently peeling back the layers and regenerating as Zinnia Love Adeline in Portland, OR, where she lives and loves out loud with her primary partner and their firey little human Blaze. She is writing about this process and pursuing an MFA at Eastern Oregon University.

Jacqueline Balderrama grew up in Redlands, California. Currently, she is pursuing an MFA in poetry at Arizona State University where she teaches and serves as Poetry Editor for Hayden’s Ferry Review. She is the first place recipient of the 2012–2013 Ina Coolbrith Memorial Poetry Prize and has received several Piper House Fellowships to travel internationally. Her most recent work has appeared in The Missing Slate and Mead.

Amy Elizabeth Bishop is a graduate of SUNY Geneseo's undergraduate creative writing program. Her poetry has or will appear in *H_NGM_N*, *Dialogist*, and *Gandy Dancer*. She currently serves as a fiction reader for *The Rumpus* and *Wyvern Lit*.

Scott Brendel is the author of "The Seventh Green at Lost Lakes" (in *Read by Dawn, Volume 1*); "The House Beneath Delgany Street" (in *Subtle Edens*, an anthology nominated for a British Fantasy Award); "Ataraxia" (in *Day Terrors*); "Groundswell of Love" (in *Something Wicked*); "The Eyes of Aaron Marsh" (in *Paper Tape*); and "In the Gray Light of Dawn" (in *Penumbra*). He lives along the front range of the Colorado Rocky Mountains, where he is at work on a novel.

Matthew S. Cook's poems have appeared in *Muzzle Magazine*, *Penumbra*, *Squaw Valley Review*, and *Assaracus*, among others. He was awarded the Stewart Prize for his creative writing while earning his BA in Literature and Writing at the University of California, San Diego. He holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he was both a Maytag Fellow and an Alberta Kelly Fellow in Poetry. He has worked as a legal researcher, a technical writer, a proofreader, a writing tutor, an assistant accountant, among other things. He is currently revising a full-length collection of poems. Mr. Cook lives and writes in the Pacific Northwest.

Thomas Cook lives in Massachusetts, where he edits *Tammy* (tammyjournal.com).

Stephanie McCarley Dugger's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Arts & Letters*, *Calyx*, *Cutthroat*, *Gulf Stream*, *Meridian*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *The Southeast Review*, *Taos Journal of International Poetry and Art*, *Zone 3* and other journals. Her chapbook, *Sterling*, is available from *Paper Nautilus*. She received an MFA from the University of Wyoming and a PhD from the University of Tennessee.

Autumn Elizabeth is a writer, scholar, and activist. Her writing has appeared in *When Women Waken*, *The Rumpus*, the *Journal of Bisexuality* and more. She is a Northern California native and currently resides in Paris. She also runs a website dedicated to global spiritual journeys called *Searching Sophia's Pockets* (<http://www.SophiasPockets.com>).

Schuyler Hazard is currently a senior at Phillips Academy Andover, and will be attending Parsons, The New School in the fall. She has been published in the Phillips Academy Courant, and is expecting to be published in the Phillips Academy Backtracks Magazine, Phillips Academy Courant, and Translit Magazine. She is from New York City, has three pet fish, and enjoys long walks on the beach, as well as (virgin) piña coladas.

Mary Imo-Stike was born and raised in Rochester, New York. Her work has appeared in Antietam Review, Phoebe, Vandalia, Appalachian Heritage, Pikeville Review, Earth's Daughters and the upcoming (July, 2015) issue of Driftwood Press Magazine. Her poems are grounded in her feelings and responses to aspects of her Catholic upbringing, and venturing from the familiar into the bigger world. Many record experiences as a grown woman pioneer on the lonely front lines of the second wave of the Women's Liberation Movement, in male-dominated industrial jobs. A core theme is the documentation of the life of a spiritual person grabbing hold of her Native roots and tugging to discover and embrace her own unique oral tradition. Mary is a 2015 MFA graduate of West Virginia Wesleyan College and resides with her husband in Scott Depot, West Virginia.

Laura Ingram is a tiny girl with large glasses. She has been published in Gravel Magazine, Jet Fuel Review, Rock and Sling Magazine, Assonance Literary Magazine, The Crucible, and her school's own journal. Laura has received four gold and two silver keys in the Scholastic Art and Writing competitions. She was the third place winner of the national Sierra Nevada Review fiction contest. She has received many multi-media awards from the VHSL creative writing division, most notably being a member of the 2014 winning creative writing team. Laura is a senior in high school. When she isn't writing, she enjoys smashing the patriarchy to smithereens, most books, and all cats.

Poetry is what **Vicki Iorio** does. Poetry is how she sees the world. Everything in her life goes into the poetry stew-trauma, drama, belly laughs and belly slaps. It's all there, it's a process, an issue and like they say, it's complicated. You can read Vicki's work in various on line and print publications such as Hellstrung and Crooked, Great Weather for Media anthology, I Let Go Of The Stars In My Hand, The Brownstone Poets Anthology, The San Pedro Review, The Mom Egg, Crack the Spine. *Poems from the Dirty Couch* is Vicki's first full-length collection.

Monique Kluczykowski was born in Germany, educated in Texas and Kentucky, and currently teaches at the University of North Georgia. Her essays have been published by Horse Illustrated, The Chronicle of Higher Education, and Women in Higher Ed. Her most recent poems have appeared in The Stonepile Writers' Anthology, Vol. III., Third Wednesday, and StepAway Magazine.

Lee L. Krecklow is a fiction writer living in the Milwaukee area. His work has appeared in Midwestern Gothic, The Madison Review, 100 Word Story, Cheap Pop, The Tishman Review, Pantheon Magazine and others. He likes to be liked at www.facebook.com/leelkrecklow

Katherine J. Lee is a writer and artist living in western Massachusetts. Her fiction has appeared in ESOPUS and Storychord, and new writing is currently in Gulf Coast Online's Spring 2015 Exclusive. Katherine is working on a story collection, a series of illustrations featuring women in poetry, and a collaborative project about whales/wombs with poet Julia Marley. Unmetaphorically, she breeds darkling beetles.

Lucia LoTempio is an instructor and MFA candidate at the University of Pittsburgh. Her poetry has been or will be published in Linebreak, Vinyl, Bayou, THRUSH, and more. She was a finalist for the Black Warrior Review 10th Annual Contest. Lucia counts for VIDA, does publicity for H_NGM_N, and is a Poetry Editor for The Adroit Journal.

Matthew Meduri teaches writing at Kent State University. A graduate of the NEOMFA, his work has appeared in Milk Sugar and Rubbertop Review. Matthew lives in Kent, Ohio where he teaches his daughter music theory through the likes of Taylor Swift and the Frozen soundtrack. He is currently working on a novel.

Kate Monica is a college student in Connecticut. Her work has been featured in TheNewerYork, Electric Cereal, The Quietus, Hart House Review, Long River Review, Drunk in a Midnight Choir, Holey Scripture, Control Literary Magazine, and others. Her first collection of poetry, *Nervous Universe*, is forthcoming from Electric Cereal this summer.

Nancy Carol Moody is the author of *Photograph with Girls* (Traprock Books), and her poems have appeared in The Southern Review, Phoebe, The Los Angeles Review, Salamander and Nimrod. She has recently completed a new

manuscript titled *The House of Nobody Home* and is currently at work on a collection based on vintage correspondence. Nancy also constructs collages from various types of paper, a process not so different from the way she builds her poems. When she's not on a train, Nancy lives in Eugene, Oregon.

Dave Owen attended University in his home nation of Wales. He joined a Welsh Regiment of the British Army, retiring as a senior officer; having been invested as a Member of the Order of the British Empire by the Queen. After regressing to adolescence for two years he then returned to real world, working as an adviser/instructor on a variety of security issues in UK, USA and Canada and becoming a Senior Associate Research Fellow at King's College, London. He is married to his Brazilian husband, under UK law, and they live together on the Brazilian coast. He writes.

Cal Louise Phoenix is an undergraduate student and tutor of creative writing and sociology at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas. The great joys of her life include most cheeses, spurring socially conscious arguments, and her cats Filburt and Gojira. She is the winner of the Beecher's Magazine 2015 Contest in nonfiction, and her poetry has most recently been featured in HOUND and the Apeiron and Scapegoat reviews.

Sonya Plenefisch was raised in Sylvania, Ohio, but now lives and studies in Cardiff, Wales. Her work has previously appeared in Words Dance, Epigraph Magazine, Driftwood Press, and Clover, A Literary Rag, and is forthcoming in Right Hand Pointing and Corvus Review. More of her work can be found at shppoetry.tumblr.com.

A newly-retired researcher, **Jim Ross** recently began publishing non-fiction stories and photos after sharing them exclusively with friends and family for 35 years. His favorite story described caring for his mother during her final years, when dementia caused her to believe her deceased father and sister regularly came to visit (Pif). In the past year, he has published in 12 journals, including photos in Friends Journal, Lunch Ticket, Snapdragon, and Cargo Literary. Forthcoming: Lunch Ticket, Make, Apieron, In the Fray. He and his wife live in Maryland and West Virginia and look forward to becoming grandparents of twins in July.

Kodi Saylor received her MFA in poetry at New York University where she was a Lillian Vernon Fellow. Her poems have appeared in the West Trade

Review and Blue Mesa Review. She currently works at the public library in Chapel Hill, NC.

Twenty-two-year-old unemployed graduate seeking the purpose of existence in her tiny apartment in Las Vegas. **Cait Smith** makes friends with words, using them like road maps to solve her riddled brain. She can most often be found somewhere between thick green and rushing blue, notebook on lap, pen hanging from mouth, dreaming of cold beer, cheesy pizza or her greatest weakness of all, beautiful women.

Kate Tagai received her MFA in creative non-fiction from Vermont College of Fine Arts, in Montpelier, VT. She writes essays in the margins of the day, believes in public displays of knitting, and spends as much time on islands as possible. She is currently working on a novel-length twisted fairy tale.

Miss Tima is a dynamic and versatile individual who transitions between being a model who is proficient in numerous styles from editorial, runway, print, showroom, promotions to an actress and writer. Miss Tima hails from New Jersey and has had the pleasure of working for clients mostly on the East Coast of America. But, since the start of 2015 Miss Tima has appeared in three international publications, the cable network the CW, a very popular web series, and has been steadily branching out on a more global scale. Miss Tima works full time in the communications field as an electronics technician with the Navy. Balancing this full time job, her modeling career, and being a single parent is not easy, but she does it with poise and grace. She is a very active member in her community as well, volunteering for various organizations such as, the Golden Harvest Food Bank, Goodwill Drive, IIDM GA Breast Cancer Awareness, and Johnson Youth Association. Her strong passion for modeling is apparent in the images produced from each shoot and/or show. Miss Tima's accomplishments make her a living example that not giving up and following your dreams can bring success.

Ren Wilding has a graduate degree in English and certificate in gender studies from the University of Missouri-St. Louis. The intersection of queer, non-binary trans, and psychologically differently-abled experience is the focus of her writing, research, and activism. Her short story, "There are Worse Things in Mole Creek," appeared in volume one, issue three of The Outrider Review. She works at a civil rights agency and lives with her wife and pionus parrot in Illinois.

Recently featured in *Best New Poets* 2014 and recipient of a Best of the Net nomination, **Jeremy Windham** holds a BFA in creative writing and violin performance. This year, his work was chosen to appear in the 2015 Adroit Prize for Poetry: Editors List. Jeremy currently lives and writes on Galveston Island, and his poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *Portland Review*, *Ruminate*, *The Lake*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *Cider Press Review*, *Gravel*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *Spillway*, among other literary journals.

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