

THE LHSP ARTS & LITERARY JOURNAL

SHAKE THE DUST

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THE LHSP ARTS & LITERARY JOURNAL

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Our mission is to create a student-run publication that showcases vibrant and engaging work produced in the LHSP community during the academic year.

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The LHSP Arts & Literary Journal is funded in part by a gift from
Jeanne and Will M. Caldwell to the College of Literature, Science and the Arts

Carol Tell

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Recently I was tasked to research the history of the Lloyd Hall Scholars Program (originally the Pilot Program) for an LSA-wide “Bicentennial History Project.” I came across a colorful assortment of documents from the past fifty years—memos, newsletters, *Daily* articles, surveys, budgets, external and internal reviews—all of which provided a glimpse into the program’s evolving mission, goals, curricula, staffing structure, and requirements. These documents chronicled the program’s progress, and, too, its occasional failures.

Right on the heels of completing this project, I had the pleasure of reading over a draft of this journal. I was struck by not only how much more agreeable an experience it was (admittedly, I’m no historian), but also how differently, though no less accurately, the journal reveals a truth about our program. While it supplies few administrative details, it nevertheless provides profound insight into our community of students, their desires and anxieties, their aesthetic preferences and skills, and, yes, their failures, too.

So many striking examples show the range of individual talent and styles, from Rachel Lee’s quiet pencil sketch to Elena Potek’s arresting self-portrait, from Matthew Yodhes’s unflinchingly disturbing “Gangbang?” to Victor Vainberg’s charmingly assured “Victor the Columbian.” I’ve had the privilege of reading first drafts of several written pieces—Sam Saunders’s essay, for example, who recounts his and his friends’ inadvertent discovery of a meth lab in rural West Virginia. I recognize many of the poems, too, which were submitted earlier this spring to the Caldwell Poetry Prize. I first read Yardain Amron’s and Amelia Brown’s beautifully crafted essays when they won Sweetland’s Matt Kelley Prize for First-Year Writing; they were originally written

in Tim Hedges's LHSP 125. This year the journal had a small but savvy editorial staff, led by Jack Foster and Jamie Monville, as well as a remarkably adept journal supervisor Aaron Burch, who, new to Lloyd but not to literary publishing, is the founder and editor of the innovative literary journal *Hobart*. In short: an awesome collection of talent gathered within these pages.

And as I read this book, I realize that part of its power lies in its gathering, the accumulation of stories and poems and images; that is, beyond each individual accomplishment is a record of our collective mission, so much more revealing than any annual report or budget narrative. LHSP is a community of artists and writers. When, in the future, someone wants to know what our community was really up to in 2012-13, or even how to judge whether our program had value, I hope they will skip the bureaucratic documents and consider this book—our mission statement, an artifact of authentic achievement.

Jamie Monville & Jack Foster

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

“Shake the Dust” are the words Amelia Brown had tattooed on her ribcage because she needed to prove to herself what was permanent. In essence, that’s what the LHSP literary journal strives to do.

Much is impermanent at the age of 19 or 20. When your classes switch every semester and your major every other week, you learn to depend on the friends you make, and the menu in mojo that tells you what’s for dinner. In a whirl of impermanence, the staff of this year’s literary journal has worked to create something permanent – this book is the result.

It wasn’t an easy task thanks to the wealth of talent in LHSP. Each piece had us reevaluating what the journal might look like, feel like, and communicate. Some pieces we selected because they challenged our staff in the best possible way, others because they honestly and succinctly captured some element of this transition time. Now these pieces lie printed in this book forever. Permanent.

We may forget those inside jokes we had with our freshman year friends – we certainly won’t remember every meal we ate in the dining hall – but Amelia will still have that tattoo and there will still be this book.

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Corinne Albrecht

THE THING ABOUT LIFE

“The thing about me is that no one is happy,” she muses, absentmindedly rubbing the lipstick print off of her mug. She looks out the window as she finishes her thought, as if looking at him might reveal something about her she doesn’t want him to know.

“No one is happy,” she begins again, looking down at the soft pink tint that has transferred to her thumbprint. She studies the way the makeup fills in the ridges; the way it highlights her unique and entirely original print. She can’t remember ever truly studying her thumb. It’s odd to think that no one else has the same arrangement of ridges, same angle of the curves, same sweeping motion.

“No one is happy and it’s incredibly sad. Why don’t people do what makes them happy?” She looks away from her thumb to the window. She watches the people in their colorful pea coats walk by looking down, brows furrowed, studying something on the lit screen of their phone. They don’t seem to notice whom they are walking next to. She wonders if they even know each other. Then she wonders if she knows any of them. It’s impossible to tell with their heads down, but she hopes maybe she’ll see someone she knows.

Although it is quite a large city, and she only knows a handful of people.

“People do what needs to be done,” he interrupts. She looks up at him, surprised, her lips parted slightly and her eyes wide. She almost forgot he was there. He was the reason for their little outing. He said, Let’s go get coffee and talk like we used to, and so they went and got coffee and sat in silence until she said, The thing about me is...

“What needs to be done...?” she echoes.

“People do their jobs.”

“Well, that’s just the thing.” She leans forward and places her elbow on the table and points at him. “People do their jobs, but they’re all doing jobs they despise.”

“Don’t *you* hate *your* job?” he questions. She sits back and looks at the smudged lipstick mark on her mug.

“No,” she says slowly. “Not really.”

“Just last night over dinner you said you didn’t like it anymore. That it lost its appeal.” She knows he isn’t trying to be argumentative. He’s only trying to help her get to her point, to get to the reason she shattered the silence he found comfortable.

“True,” she nods. “But I didn’t mean it,” and she looks out the window again. A small boy walks by, looking into the shop, knowing nothing of anything in the world except A, B, C and 1, 2, 3. She waits for him to catch her eye, but when he reaches her general direction, his eyes are vacant. He cannot see past his reflection in the glass and she wonders what he wants to be when he grows up. A fireman, perhaps? An astronaut? Kids always were the best dreamers. They knew nothing of work, of studying, of annual income. They just knew what they wanted to “be.” What do you want to be, Johnny? A race car driver. And no one will tell him that he won’t even know how to drive until he’s sixteen. No one will say, Hey, Johnny, did you know that race car driving is really dangerous? No one will tell him that people mock fans of race car driving. And you, Catherine? A doctor. No one will tell Catherine that she’ll spend years and years in school. No one will tell her that she’ll collect debt and more debt until she finally finds a rundown hospital to start working in. No one will tell her that she can’t save everybody; that people will die on her watch, at her hand.

They’ll simply say, Draw a picture of you doing that, sweetie. And the child will do it, and the parents will hang it on the fridge, and then when Johnny becomes John and turns into an accountant with a small little cubicle where he constantly debates over how many staples to the head it would take to kill himself...no one will remind him of what he wanted to be. And Catherine will become Sassy and will wear tight

clothing and move her body on stage to pay for the rent of her silly apartment that she moved into when she was 18 to get away from her overbearing parents...no one will remind her that she wanted to save lives.

“What did you want to be when you grew up?” she asks him suddenly, folding her arms onto the table and leaning forward. Still she looks outside, watches as the little boy disappears from view. When she finally turns her head, he is looking down at his mug.

“Um,” he starts, the weight of all the years of worry and growing older laying heavily on his wrinkled brow. Does he remember? She does. She remembers all the things she wanted to be. “I think,” he says hesitantly, as if she’ll call him out on it if he answers wrongly, “I think I wanted to be a movie star.”

“A movie star...?” she echoes. She watches the corner of his mouth reach longingly for the sparkle in his eye, but it doesn’t quite get there, and it falls defeated.

“Well,” he forces a chuckle. “Who doesn’t want to be famous?”

“So why didn’t you become one?” she asks him, looking right into his eyes. She looks past their deep color, past the black hole that is his pupil, and tries to see his soul. What does he have hidden back there, and why doesn’t she already know?

He shrugs with a laugh that isn’t forced. “I don’t know,” he says, and she knows he’s telling the truth. “Lofty dream, I guess. Not a whole lot of promise. What was I supposed to do? Move out to California as soon as I turned 18? Live in some rundown apartment chasing after every script, kissing ass, competing against the millions of other people who do the same?” He laughs for real again. “Sure...sure.”

She says nothing. She wants to reply, Yes! Yes! That is exactly what you do! You take that chance and you remember drawing yourself as a movie star on that piece of construction paper and you become one! You’ll have to work for it but you do it anyway, because you had a dream, once! One you believed in!

But she knows that that is silly, that he will take her enthusiasm for sarcasm. And were he to pick up on her seriousness, he would say, But then we wouldn’t have met, you see? And she would have to then say, Oh, right. How tragic would that have been?

It's not that he doesn't understand her. He understands her more than anyone else in this whole world. Although, she stops to think, she hasn't met everyone in the world. But she's sure that he would still understand her best. Most of the rest of the world doesn't even speak her language.

She takes another sip. When she sets the mug down, the soft pink mark has returned. She wonders how many other marks have been left on this mug. Was a feisty blonde lady here earlier this week, wearing bright red lipstick to match her bright red heels? Was a quiet, somber woman in here yesterday, wearing deep purple on her lips so everyone would stereotype her and be afraid to tell her that her dress was pretty? She wonders, then, what her soft pink mark tells about her.

She looks out the window again. If people could see in, what would they see? A couple, each drinking coffee, sitting at a table. Would people assume that they were in a disagreement because they weren't currently speaking? Does it look like they broke up and he wants her back? Does she look like she wants him back? Do they look like they want each other at all?

"You want to know what the thing about *me* is?" he says suddenly. "You're not happy," he points accusingly at her.

"Why would you say that?" she asks. She can feel her brow furrowing on her head.

"Because life has become a story to you, hasn't it? Everything is narrated in your head. People are not people but rather they're the *word* 'people.' I am not me but rather I am 'he.' And you are never you...you are always 'she.' You have detached yourself from your own life so you can say everything you do and put meaning into even the simplest gestures. You need this inner narration because you don't know how to be you. You only know how to be 'she' and you know only who I am as long as I am 'he' and you can't simply kick the leaves, there has to be a metaphor for it, there has to be a reason. You said no one is happy because you knew that you could make a story out of it. Remember when we would sit in silence? That's the talk I was referring to. The talk where you don't talk at all, not even in your head. You participated in that silence instead of going on in your head about what was going on in that silence. You can't stand the silence because you hate that no one is there to fill it. And to you, everything

needs to be filled. There is no beauty in an unresolved plot. Isn't that horrible? Aren't you, quite possibly, the saddest person here?"

On the way home, I kick a pile of leaves, just because.

Corinne Albrecht

WINTER MAKES ME THINK OF YOU

I fell in love with him as the snowflakes fell upon the chilled ground
I fell softly, gently, twirling in the wind
The air was cold, the kind that makes you gasp when it hits your skin.
Goosebumps
The kind that hurts your lungs
makes you shiver
turns your cheeks red
That was the very best part
His hands were ready to hold my frozen ones
His chest was the tender pillow for my cold cheeks
His heart was my fireplace
He was a beautiful spectacle
Falling in love with him was like the ceaseless snow
That blankets
Overnight
You wake up one morning and
Without your knowledge, as you slumbered
The snow has changed everything, covered everything
Sparkling and breathtaking (a million million diamonds steal-
ing your breath/as the cold always does

That is why winter is the hardest without you
Winter was the height of our love,
the height of you,

the height of me

Snowflakes in dark hair and the way it would melt on our lips
sweaters and jackets

The ice rink and the snowman
My backseat and Your backseat

When I feel winter approaching my bones shiver;
they ache
because your warmth does not return
but my loneliness does

it is only a matter of time before I cannot stop remem-
bering and you cannot stop forgetting

It has been

So long

But I cannot stop missing you,
The air turns cold

I fell in love with him as the snowflakes fell upon the chilled ground
And he fell out of love with me as snowflakes melted in the sun-warmed air

Yardain Amron

WHEN THE SILENCE SETTLES*

Matt Kelley Award for Excellence in First-Year Writing

As we approach the frat-castle, my stained hands trace the black sharpie in my pocket—my voice, replaced by a two-dollar plastic tube filled with ink.

Up four termite-ridden stairs, we are stopped by a red Ralph Lauren polo, collar fully popped, fitted like a wet suit. Beyond, an array of padded sweatshirts, leg warmers, and khaki shorts splashed in retro purples, teals, and pinks crowd the porch. They sip their red cups leisurely, enjoying the fresh air of a cool November night—an escape from the deafening bass leaking out from under the door.

“Who are you guys?” arms crossed condescendingly; I wait for the stressed stitching to snap and split the polo in two. I wonder how he landed the bouncer gig. Is he in an hourly rotation with the other brothers? Or is it a coveted position, won by the mightiest display of testosterone?

“I’m Zak. This is my friend Caleb. He doesn’t speak.”

A pair of eyes locks onto my scrawny figure, noticeably taken aback, but trying to keep their cool. I stare back confidently, uselessly, silently.

Day 0: Tea for One

The idea was born in Sarah’s room over cold tea. The tea guided our conversation to yoga, which progressed to yogis in the Himalayas, my desire to study with one, and finally to silent retreats.

* First published in *2012/2015 Excellence in First-Year Writing*. The English Department Writing Program and The Gayle Morris Sweetland Center for Writing, Alan Hogg and Dana Nichols, eds. Ann Arbor: MPublishing 2013.

“...Yeah, my friend went on one once. She said it was pretty intense. No talking for a whole weekend and a lot of meditation.” She pulls her legs up onto the chair, her chin coming to rest on her knee.

“That sounds awesome,” I say. “Like no talking to anyone?”

“Yeah, you’re basically supposed to explore yourself and I guess you do that best within your own mind.”

“That’s it!” I jump up from the bed, forgetting the bunk above and the tea resting by my foot. Skull meets wood; tea meets carpet.

“Fuck!” I rub my head and scrunch my face. “A vow of silence! That’s it.” I barely notice Sarah anymore. I realize this idea has been steeping way longer than this tea.

Back in high school, parties took up a lot of my time, like a drug that only gave bad trips. They were my escape from seriousness. I could never resist. What if I missed that epic brawl? Better to get fucked up than watch *Bridezilla* marathons with Mom. I would find myself an hour deep in Brooklyn, already dreading the drunken subway ride back to the Upper West Side. Often I would pass out heading home and wake to the shake of an MTA employee. “You in the Bronx honey, best you find your way home.” I began to see parties not as liberation, but as prison, the same monotonous drunk act over and over again.

I could spend my time more productively. I could stay home, read, write, play piano and study. I could enjoy and improve *myself*.

One night, I stumbled across a TED talk on YouTube by Susan Cain titled, “The Power of Introverts.” I watched as she explained how introverts are looked down upon by society, how there is a bias within “our most important institutions, our schools and our workplaces. They are designed mostly for extroverts.” Western culture shuns the recluse who prefers a book to a round of beers. I was mesmerized as she said, “some of our transformative leaders in history have been introverts.” Einstein, Gandhi, and Beethoven, proof “solitude is a crucial ingredient to creativity.”

It’s my last night with speech and I’m with Sarah — no tea this time.

I drop my bag and set the soft chocolate-chip cookie on the table. Sarah’s face lights up.

“Thanks! I’ve been craving one since I started working.” Her legs, propped up on a lime-green desk chair, fall to the ground as her hands grab the cookie.

The small study room is bright, a combination of LEDs above and gold carpet below. I pull up a chair opposite Sarah and heave my psych textbook from my bag to the table.

“I’m starting the vow tomorrow. I won’t be talking to you for a week.”

“Oh, wow. Can I text you?”

“You can, I won’t respond though.”

“Well, that’s no fun...Email?”

I laugh. “Gonna miss me, Sarah?” I say playfully.

“Maybe a little...A week’s a long time. I’m not sure I would have the willpower.”

The rest of the cookie disappears into her mouth.

I think: *You don’t need willpower when you want something.*

Day 1: Silence is Golden.

With ‘CANT SPEAK’ inscribed in black sharpie, my palm became my spokesperson. Everyone wanted more. “Why?” I shrug. “Are you sick?” Shrug. “Did you lose your voice?” I open my hands, shrug. “You’re weird.”

I notice all the small, insignificant interactions and courtesies. Someone holds the door, expecting a “Thank you.” I walk through without looking back. In the elevator: “What floor?” I nod awkwardly and punch four myself. A text from Layne: “Dinner?” I eat alone.

Ordering required a mutual trust between server and myself.

“What would you like?” A cute blonde girl asks, mechanically grabbing a green plate from the colorful stack. Her yellow Michigan hat is fitted too tightly to her head. I want to tell her to loosen it. Her sincere eyes meet my nervous ones.

I point to the mashed potatoes like an infant; I imagine my mom: “Use your words, Caleb.”

She looks hesitant. *Is he mute?* I picture her wondering. No, I just want some potatoes...

She plops a scant spoonful onto the plate.

Do I look that small? I'm a growing boy.

I slide my tray down the metallic counter weakly. What looks like sloppy joe is next. I look for the label but it's missing from the holder. I stare at the mystery protein, look up at the girl and frown. How easy it would be to ask; three words: "Is that vegetarian?" I sigh and give her the thumbs up. She hands me the plate. I guess I'll settle for a salad.

Teeth brushed, I sit in the dorm hallway absorbed in my nightly journal. I flow without a filter, unlike my formal writing.

...What is the purpose? To simply not speak to anyone? Not interact. Or is it to avoid people?

Zak walks by in a towel, hair dripping. Bending down, he grabs my room key lying next to me and starts walking away. I laugh to myself. I jump up, letting my journal slide to the floor, and run after him. I grab his shoulder and try to snatch the key from his hand. His arms pull away.

"Whoa. Use your words. What would you like?"

You bastard. You feel power over me. I'm weak...

I shake my head and try to snatch the key again. He pulls back.

He laughs mockingly. "You're like Jesus in the desert and I'm the devil. Here you go." He flicks the key to the floor and disappears into his room.

I pick up the key and head back to my journal, dejected.

...Ok so what is an improvement from today? Open up your ears! Don't speak. Listen. Silence is Golden.

Day 2: Clowns & Calculus

Wednesday passes quickly as I await a 6pm calculus exam. Finally, we are herded into the auditorium. Two girls at the front of the pack try to cram in that last equation. "Quick, explain the race-track principle one more time." "When do you use the Second Fundamental Theorem?" I yawn. Stress is your worst enemy going into an exam.

I find a seat in the back by the wall. My chair squeaks loudly as it swivels to create distance from the wooden table. The room is noisy, a blend of laughter and panic. I close my eyes and meditate for a minute.

“We will be handing out the exams now,” a GSI announces from the front.

The room falls silent. Not a whisper. I try to sit still, hoping my chair’s squeak won’t disturb the beautiful silence. They have all lost their right to speak. We are all equal now, each of us restricted to our own minds. We are powerless—or is it powerful? I listen to the sound of paper slide on wood.

That night, as I try to pull Howard Roark from the pages of *The Fountainhead*, I get a knock on my door. Three closed fist knocks: David. “I know you can’t talk. Let’s smoke.”

With a j snug behind his ear, we make the long walk to the Arb. These walks are usually filled with passionate philosophical dialogue. We exchange ideas and opinions with little effort. We interrupt each other whenever there’s the urge; as the idea enters the conscience, it exits the mouth, no delay. We have come to understand this as the best way, the most comfortable way to converse.

But as we walk to the Arb this time, a new monologue emerges. David confides what I deem a deep secret: “she is the first and only girl I have ever loved.” At times, I desperately want to interject, “*how do you know what love is?*” The words almost spill. I grunt instead.

We settle silently into our normal bench, overlooking an open field. A blue light flashes at a relaxing pace under the distant skyline. A dog’s howl echoes around us, as if we are in a cave. We feel powerful.

David lights the j and begins a new story about a poor boy named Timmy and a mean clown named Bobo. I listen without an urge to reply. I listen because I enjoy David the storyteller. At the end, I want to tell him how talented he is, how impressed I am. I want to discuss the story, hear what he thinks the moral is.

But we walk home in silence. My own head is abuzz. I listen, feeling each thought pass through my conscience like sticky glue slowly sliding across my brain. This is flow. I am listening.

As the dorm comes into view, David breaks the silence. “I just want you to know that I wouldn’t have told you any of that if you could talk.”

Day 3: Slips and Sadness

My emblazoned palm is more than my spokesperson; it is my lifeline. As I head into psych lecture, a fresh phrase stains skin: ‘I CAN LISTEN.’ I find my regular lefty-desk in the 500-seat auditorium and pull up the lecture slides on my laptop: ‘Development: Part 2.’ David squeezes through the aisle and sinks into the seat next to me. The lights dim, a film flickers on before us: *Through a Child’s Eyes: 9/11*, an HBO Special. The buzz in the auditorium drops to a hush. We are ready to listen.

Child after child tries to make sense of 9/11: “Why can’t God stop the bad people?” six-year old Wajiha wonders; “I’m going to be a fireman when I grow older. Like my dad was,” says little Shayne, decked out in a plastic firefighter costume. I sink into my seat. “It’s like a mountain of sadness that gets smaller and smaller until it’s just a little bump,” says Katie who also lost her father. I sink deeper into my seat and close my eyes; I don’t want to listen anymore. “I feel something good is coming. It just hasn’t happened yet,” a high, nasally voice says.

Wait. I know that voice.

I open my eyes to see a young Yedidya Schwartz, a kid I know as ‘Didi.’

“What. I know that kid. That’s Didi!” I blurt out.

David turns to me, astonished.

My upper lip eats my lower lip. *I just spoke...Oops.*

Day 4: God Speak

Thursday afternoons at 3:15, I debate God and religion with an orthodox rabbi on Hill Street. We have been at each other’s throats for over two months now. Today won’t be much of a debate.

As I lock my bike to the misplaced ‘YIELD’ sign in the front yard, I notice the

‘Jewish Resource Center’ banner hanging from the second floor balcony; without the sign, the neglected house would be mistaken for an abandoned shack.

Up three soggy steps, my shoes chip turquoise paint to reveal more naked wood. Inside, the house feels unstable, the floor almost hollow. I follow the narrow staircase to the second floor. At the top, my back slides down the wall until my butt finds floor, legs stretch out, and my torn Vans add prints to peeling wallpaper. I grab at my ears; headphones fall to my chest, dangling out from the top of my green windbreaker—my mom’s from the 80’s. I am early, as usual.

I listen to two young voices—one younger than the other—from an open door down the hall:

“...states children are not to suffer for their parent’s sins. But Deuteronomy claims explicitly that children *shall* suffer for their parent’s sins. Explain to me how that contradiction makes sense.”

“I can point to hundreds of contradictions in the texts. Much better than the one you provide. I could go through each piece of text separately and explain the logic and context surrounding. But I believe you have a better question than that one, a bigger question. But, our time is up. Think about it for next week.”

A chair pushes back; a jacket zips; a bag thuds against a back. “Thank you, rabbi.”

I get up and hug the wall. A tall, lanky kid with a knitted Keepah on his head and Sambas on his feet appears from around the corner. He sidesteps through the narrow passage, disappearing down the stairs with his head down. It has been four weeks and I have yet to see his eyes.

I enter. Rabbi Bausk sits behind a desk strewn with rabbinic texts; a naked mattress lies awkwardly on a metal bedframe to his right. His head is covered with his usual plain black Keepah. I smile and take a seat. I feel weak.

Bausk says, “I got your email. I’m more than happy doing all the talking. You realize I have you just where I want you. I could frustrate the bejeebers out of you. I’m so excited; I don’t even know where to start. But I’ll be nice to you.”

He would rather listen to himself. Reinforce what he already believes as fact. That is our difference. I am here to listen, to question my own beliefs. He is here not to listen, but to reply and refute.

The next 45 minutes fly by. I listen as he explains the reasons behind the oral vs. written texts. “The written Torah is like the textbook. The oral Torah is like the lecture. The lecture keeps the interpretation of the textbook uniform. God wrote the book *and* gives the lecture...” Thoughts, questions, and arguments whizz down my pencil, filling my yellow legal pad: *‘Power of speech,’ ‘Why do we desire uniformity?’ ‘This seems all too convenient.’* These points will make for a rich debate next week.

I leave the aesthetically neglected community house feeling intellectually nurtured. It was a new feeling compared to previous weeks. My passion and fear of being wrong usually deafens me. I become unable to listen, to see any sense in his beliefs. But today, I had been defenseless, unable to side with the comforting agnostic opposition. I listened deeper into the rabbi’s words. Without speaking, I was composed, cool, and collected. My ears stayed open. My desire to listen was greater than my desire to reply.

That night, I settle into my hallway alcove to journal.

Speech is an overused tool. Abused freely, it’s my biggest weakness. Others can interpret my thoughts and tone and discover my vulnerabilities with ease. Used thoughtfully and sparingly, my words are powerful, impressive, and desired. So listen first. Respond second. Remember, there are times to speak, and more times to listen.

Day 5, Part 1: Alone With Friends

It’s Saturday night and I’m drinking beers with closed lips in David’s room. Kendrick Lamar drowns out two conversations around me. Oregon vs. Oregon State is muted on the TV. My new friends surround me. I feel alone, frustrated, and tipsy.

“You alright?” David says.

Andrea and Sarah give me worried looks.

“He’s alone in his world of the verbless,”

I worry to myself: Do I look that bad? Cheer up! Or at least don’t show your loneliness. That’s weakness.

I squint and nod assuredly at David. He looks unconvinced.

The Natty Lite cans that line the table lead the conversation to the economics of recycling. Zak's *Clockwork Orange* t-shirt ignites a debate over whether the book or movie is better. Sarah recalls the time a stranger convinced her to snort Adderall at a pregame. I listen, entertained.

"I miss his voice." Sarah makes a puppy face at me.

"That's crazy. I can't remember what it sounds like," David says.

"Me neither," Zak says. "What do you say we all put in ten dollars and make him not speak for another month?"

"No way, I miss Caleb," Sarah says.

I'm right here. Aren't I...?

Zak pulls a Guinness from the mini fridge. I point at the beer and back at myself, twice. Without hesitation, he pulls another bottle and tosses it underhand. The wet glass connects with my hand like a baseball to a glove. Condensation spreads over my palm, sharpie bleeds from 'LISTEN.' My leg taps anxiously. How long has it been doing that? I grab a flip-flop from between my feet, pushing heel to bottle-cap confidently. I watch the cap launch like a rock from a catapult, disappearing over the TV. Should I get that? I stay seated.

My leg is still tapping.

I jump up grabbing my coat from under me. My arms find holes, my fingers find metal, and my eyes find Zak's. I point at the door. We leave the rest of them behind.

Day 5, Part 2: Brothers & Bros

"And who do you know here?" The red polo turns to Zak.

Zak hesitates. "Uhh, Brandon."

"Brandon who?"

Zak shrugs. "He's in our English class."

"Aight, boys. I'm not trying to be a dick, but you're gonna have to step off the porch and get outta here."

I'm not listening. I reach my right hand into slim khakis; my thumb and index

maneuver around my wallet for my black sharpie—a fat one, a few hours old. My hand scribbles on my stained palm. I feel four eyes staring. I stretch my hand to his face. ‘UR NOT TRYING 2 BE A DICK?’

My body’s light; the balls of my feet press into the ground, ready to jump. I watch his hand, waiting for his fingers to curl into a fist. What am I thinking? The kid has at least 30 pounds on me.

“What are you doing?” He shakes his head, confused. “Just get outta here.”

“We just want to party with you guys,” Zak says pathetically.

An arm hooks around my shoulder, another around Zak’s—Brandon, our hero.

“Yo, B-dog, you know these kids?”

“Yeah, they’re cool.” Brandon grins widely, reveling in his new power and popularity.

“Ok B-dog, as long as you say so.”

The brother-pledge class relationship confuses me: ‘I can disrespect you when no one is around but at parties, we are tight.’

The polo steps aside and I pass quickly through. The front door is modern with a heavy-duty metal frame, maybe a response to the numerous home invasions plaguing campus lately. A rosy-cheeked brunette tumbles onto the porch, pigtails whipping my face as she jerks her head. I grab the door and step up onto hardwood. I made it.

A narrow hallway packed with bodies and plastic cups. My ears throb in rhythm to DMX.

The dance floor is a good place to start, no words necessary, only hips.

I take a step but a hand suddenly pulls the back of my coat. I’m back on the porch.

A lengthy toothpick stands two inches taller than me, fake bling hanging stupidly on top of an oversized NBA jersey, plastic sunglasses hiding his insecurities. “Who are you? This is a themed party.”

I shrug uselessly and point back at the red polo.

“He let us in.” Zak is by my side again.

“I don’t give a shit. You boys aren’t dressed to theme. Get out of here.”

It seems we have reached the next chain of command.

“Why does that matter?”

“Cause I say it matters. Did you hear me? Leave.”

We aren't listening.

The door swings open again. A new pair of venomous eyes lock with mine. I feel his anger. The ringleader has arrived.

“What's the problem here? Who the fuck is this kid? Get the fuck out of here.”

Everything falls away. His fury is unexplainable. He has no idea what has already happened. I have no idea what is about to happen.

Zak is explaining his case to the red polo. I take my sharpie and scribble on the back of my hand, above my thumb: “Y U SO MAD?”

His eyes jump from my hand to my face. “What the fuck are you doing?” His eyes beam at mine. Such anger. I stare back, unfazed. *Really, why are you so mad?* I'm back on the balls of my feet.

I watch him maneuver around the porch, sliding between unassuming leg warmers and polos. I watch his eyes lock on Zak, face contract, fist clench, and without hesitation, arm swing. No remorse.

I need to yell, warn Zak who is blind to the impending fist headed for his face. I need to do something. I open my mouth to scream but no sound comes out. I am frozen.

Knuckles connect with Zak's left cheek; the sound is foreign, unlike the punches you hear in movie fight scenes. He drops to the ground, head slamming into concrete. I blink, stretching my eye sockets as wide as possible.

You drunk fuck. You couldn't even punch the right guy.

I jump towards him ready to draw blood. The red polo restrains my lean arms; hands lock around my biceps like handcuffs. I'm pathetic.

Zak props himself back on his feet, stunned.

“What the fuck's his problem.” Zak dabs his swelling lip gently.

I try to take a deep breath. We are outnumbered, outsized, and on their turf. I pull Zak by the arm and lead him down the stairs.

Back on the sidewalk, I slap my hand to my forehead, letting it slide down to my mouth. I jump in frustration. I clench my fists, pound my chest, and bite my lower lip.

I want to scream.

I look at Zak and pound my chest three times with an open hand.

“The punch was for you?”

I nod.

“Did you provoke him?”

I put my thumb and index out, separating them by a small space.

“A little. Did I deserve it?”

I shake my head.

Guilt is overwhelming. My emotions are begging to be released.

I froze. I could have warned him...I choked.

“Where were we earlier?”

I look at Zak worriedly.

“You haven’t been speaking. I feel weird. I think I’m concussed.”

Oh shit. I caused this. It’s my fault.

“Did I deserve it? Do I keep saying that?”

I nod. I don’t know what to do.

“What happened? Who were we with earlier...*did I deserve it?*”

I shake my head. I’ve heard enough. My ears turn inward.

OK easy decision. Hospital. Anything could be wrong. Don’t think the worst yet. Stay in the present. Keep listening. Initiative.

I strike my arm in a north, then west direction—towards the hospital. My pace quickens; Zak follows.

He looks clueless. “I got punched. I’ve never been punched before. This is interesting.”

I try my sharpie. My hand is completely stained. I pull up my sleeve and scrawl ‘THINK ABOUT ANYTHING.’ Zak stops and grabs my arm. He leans in, straining his eyes. His nose exhales on my skin.

“It’s too dark. Why are you writing on yourself?”

Shit. He needs help now. This can’t wait. He’s lost in his own mind. What’s your stupid vow of silence compared to a friend in need.

“Zak, what’s the last thing we did in English class?”

"The...*Mother Night* trial?"

"Yeah. Tell me something about the trial."

"It ended, what, two days ago? You were...I think you were Werner Noth."

I quicken pace again; Zak adjusts.

"Is that right?"

"Not exactly." The trial ended a week and a half ago. I played Howard Campbell.

"Did I deserve it? Who punched me? You weren't talking before."

"Zak, I need you to forget what happened. Forget tonight. Tell me about your brother."

Day 6: Beneath the Silence

I woke up the next morning unsure Zak would know what year it is. I found him in the bathroom staring at the mirror.

"Hey check this out," thumbs curling over his upper lip, uncovering a blend of blues, purples and reds.

"Haha. Nice man. Do you know what day it is?"

"Yeah...Sunday. I couldn't remember that?"

"Naw, you narrowed it down to the weekend but couldn't decide on the day."

"Wow, what else happened?"

I told him the details. He had no recollection of talking with the police, the CAT scan, or even his obese doctor that I mistook for a grizzly bear. I watched his eyes expand as I explained how he kept reading his texts over and over again like a broken record, eerily repeating, "It's like I'm coming into someone else's life."

"Damn. That's scary. You must have been freaking out."

"Yeah, I was pretty worried. You feel fine now?"

"Yeah, I'm good. Did I deserve it?"

Oh god.

Zak bursts out laughing. "You should have just seen your face."

Relief floods my body, like the deep breath after the doctor tells you that lump in

your neck is just a swollen lymph node. My fist connects playfully with his arm.

Word spread quickly around the dorm; I guess Zak was curling his lip like a trophy. But everyone wanted to hear a good story and Zak couldn't provide much detail. At dinner, David finds me over a heaping plate of potatoes.

"I want to hear what happened from *you*."

I tell a tale about two poor boys and a mean red polo. David listens. I am the storyteller now.

That evening, I head to yoga for a candle-lit class. As I climb the steps to the second floor studio, the peaceful humidity fogs my glasses. I look up to a blurred smile behind the haze—Jason, my instructor welcoming me in. Shoes and socks off, my feet exhale onto the smooth hardwood floor. The muted orange hue emanating from candles lining the room blends with the baby blue walls—a sunset.

I unroll my mat and find a comforting lotus position alongside my peers. My eyes flutter closed.

I follow Jason's voice as it travels from behind me and settles at the front of the room; he begins with the same mantra: "Watch your breath. If your mind drifts away, bring it back slowly. To still the mind is yoga. *Listen*." I have heard these same sentences for the past three months; today is the first time I listen.

A silence settles over the room.

In through the nose...My lungs expand and fill with life; I watch this life travel down my spine to my toes. Out through the nose...My chest slowly falls; the life is guided out of my nostrils.

Pure silence is nonexistent. There will always be my breath.

Thought leaves my mind blank. I listen to my breath, the breath around me. The sound of tires on pavement rushes below. I listen. The muted laughter and clink of glasses seeps through the ceiling from the pub below. I listen. The energy within the room engulfs me and flows through me. I listen.

Breathe in...Breathe out...in...out...in...

Amelia Brown

INK*

Matt Kelley Award for Excellence in First-Year Writing

Lounging in the fabricated warmth of the small and somehow cozy classroom, I slowly cracked each one of my knuckles before pulling my sweater sleeves back over my hands and leaning back in my hard metal chair. I rhythmically tapped my foot on the carpeted ground, a dull thudding noise persisting over the muted mumblings of my senior-year classmates. The question had been posed, “if you had to get a tattoo, what would you get, and why?” We played this game at the beginning of each class and as a study break when our minds, as assessed by our teacher, became too full to retain any more AP Government facts or PowerPoint slides. One of us would ask a question about any aspect of life, granted it was “school appropriate,” and each member of the class would have to respond. Today’s question was brought to the class by my acquaintance Rachel, who had clearly asked the “hypothetical” question simply to illuminate the class on her own current state of inkage, as she was one of the few high school kids who had a tattoo already.

I zoned out, listening to the sounds of Rachel’s voice juxtaposed over the insect-like humming of the fluorescent lights, and waited for a clear-cut image of dark ink forming some shape on my body. Several other classmates gradually replaced Rachel’s voice, each answer resounding louder and louder as the student responding drew closer and closer to my seat. The speed at which my foot was tapping increased with the inevitable need for an answer to occur to me, and although this was surely not a life or death situation, my palms began to sweat, urging me to release them from the

* First published in *2012/2015 Excellence in First-Year Writing*. The English Department Writing Program and The Gayle Morris Sweetland Center for Writing, Alan Hogg and Dana Nichols, eds. Ann Arbor: MPublishing 2013.

death grasp I was holding them in on my desktop. “And what about you, Amelia?” my teacher chirped, lurching me out of the mental scramble I was trying to find order in. “Honestly, I have never really thought about it before,” I mumbled. “Maybe a picture of the Giving Tree, from that Shel Silverstein book...up my leg maybe? I don’t know.” I raised one eyebrow and shrugged as my sentence trailed off and I began to doubt the actual aesthetic value of what I had just said. To be honest, I was not even sure what the Giving Tree drawing looked like, and was pretty positive it had never meant anything profound to me. I don’t know what had inspired me to say what had word-vomited out of my mouth, but the rest of the class and my teacher bought it. Several classmates nodded pensively, as if acknowledging a deep pool of value in which my answer floated, though personally I knew my answer was complete crap.

The rest of the responses went similarly, with each individual either staring back at our teacher in bewilderment, or attempting to pass off some last minute idea as a personal statement that had been years in the making, and was sure to find its way somewhere on their body within the next week or so. As I had taken a stab at that method myself, I was not fooled, and began to wonder what each person sitting in this room with me would actually get infused into their skin if time to contemplate was added and inhibitions were taken away. I looked at my friend Mason and saw his varsity football jersey number in thick, industrial letters on his back. My gaze strayed towards Anna, who drew on herself every day with permanent marker and would surely create a beautiful and whimsical doodle to solidify on the inside of her arm, or behind her ear. Then to my teacher, who was rumored to have a tattoo, which assembled itself in the form of a dragonfly or Chinese caricatures in my mind. And finally back to me. If my theory was correct that more time and the absence of hang-ups would allow me to permanently mark up my body, then what would I really get? Surely not an image from one of the most depressing children’s books I had ever read, that somehow managed to scar me enough to become an on-the-spot classroom answer from somewhere in my subconscious. The question gnawed at me, eating me alive for a reason currently indefinable. I breathed deeply and resumed my calm exterior, pulling my sleeves over my damp hands once more and leaning back in my seat. Suddenly, a reason for the ten-

sion revealed itself: my inability to pinpoint what I would get as a tattoo inadvertently indicated a lack of knowledge about myself. I did not seem to know what was most important to me, and certainly couldn't determine what I was committed to enough to declare permanency. This plagued me. I had always considered myself to be grounded, in touch with who I am as a person, and easily able to describe my essence of being to those who bothered to ask. Yet in this moment, all of that toppled down from the secure pedestal it had once inhabited. There was a part of me that was unexplored, unanswered, and unsure. To this day, I still remember this sinking, hollow realization that swept over me in response to the most simple of questions.

Nearly a year later, the subconscious presence of the tattoo finally presented a feasible physical manifestation. I had been folding over the layers of this endeavor in my mind for weeks. I had tried to locate all the areas in which this could go terribly wrong and, as my stomach began to churn, settled instead on accepting whatever occurred in the following hour. After all, it was to be an experience. If anything went wrong, so be it. With this notion set in stone, I had zipped up my boots, walked out of Lloyd Hall, and stuffed my hands into my coat pockets, briskly stepping out to meet the cold rush of night air one last time as an unmarked individual.

I was surprisingly collected about this adventure, and had been for most of the anticipation of it. When my writing professor had requested us to "experience" something out of our comfort zone, it had instantly pulled that moment in my high school classroom out of my subconscious, and had given me the clear opportunity to finally discover what was permanent to me by getting a tattoo. I was excited to take advantage of my instructions, as I knew they would push me just enough to search myself and then make a commitment that I would not otherwise. Naturally, there was also the constant nagging in my mind that my parents would not support my tattoo. My mother, who I had casually asked over the phone several days before my appointment just to test the waters, had said that tattoos were "undeniably white trash, and that's not just a generational difference." My dad, who I had done the same to, had sighed and replied, "I just don't understand why naturally attractive people want to mess all that up by permanently scarring their body. I have always said that tattoo removal is

the next big business.” The pain, the permanence, the consequences, all of these things had occurred to me and caused me to nearly call and cancel my appointment several times. Yet each time I came to the realization that this was for me, and my decision did not involve anyone beyond that. It may sound selfish, but I view it as the truth. To me, this experience presented the opportunity to take ownership of my body and soul and commit to myself and my life in a way I had not before. The very essence of my tattoo, a line from my favorite Anis Mojgani poem, would urge me to live each day as if it was my first and simultaneously my last. No matter what happened, I would be forced to accept the responsibility of shaking off the dead weight that can accumulate on a daily basis, and live to my fullest potential, as the words inscribed on my ribcage would not allow me to ignore this responsibility to myself. I would have to commit to choosing happiness, commit to keeping myself lifted, and commit to helping others do the same, permanently. After all this time since the confusion of that moment in my senior year, I realized that this was what was important to me: simply staying happy and living each day individually, circumstances aside. Upon tying all of these thoughts together in a complete package of what this experience would mean to me, I fully concluded that none of the other aspects mattered. The pain, telling my parents, the monetary cost of nearly \$150, all were irrelevant now. Yet still, not knowing exactly what I was getting into, this was to be an undeniably new and intriguing event in my life.

As I turned the corner onto State Street, the bright lights of downtown Ann Arbor hastened my focus from the blackened gum on the sidewalk to all that the night could offer me. An endless sea of black coats and bobbing hats passed me, and I breathed in the chilled air, which briskly confirmed that what I was about to do was so clearly right. I stepped into the street with purpose, and fixed my gaze upon the flickering neon signs beckoning from the second story window several shops down. “Tattoo,” a pink sign palpably announced what was in store for me. My determined stride slowed as I reached the unmarked door, held slightly open by some faulty spring, welcoming me inside. I removed my gloves, finger by finger, pocketing them and clasping the cold metallic door handle with my bare hand. A flight of stairs led me to a dimly lit hallway with endless unmarked brown doors, boldly contrasted by a single glass door at the

end of the hall. The glass door radiated neon lights that bounced off the checkered tile floor visible from my spot on the dull brown carpet. I made my way to the end of the hall, opening the door to the surprise of four thoroughly inked men sitting on a black leather couch. In their slight haze and the time it took them to realize who I must be, I took in the strangely calming room that surrounded me. The checkered tile floor gave way to a single glass table littered with magazines, a tattooed woman in a bikini on nearly every cover. The larger versions of these women were pasted on the walls around me, to such an extent that I could hardly discern between posters and wallpaper. One pinup-style woman looked down at me from on top of a car, her ribcage displaying a more extensive version of what I was sure my own would resemble in not too long. Underneath her gaze was a desk and a glass case of tattoo aftercare products, dully lit from below to remind me where to stop once my skin was sufficiently marked.

My assessment being complete, I turned back to smile at the men, one of whom was now standing. "You must be Amelia," he said, to which I nodded and walked further into the room, sure that I did not end up here on accident and was in fact getting a tattoo. A man of few words, Johnny, my soon-to-be tattoo artist, stretched his dark ink-covered arms as he made his departure from the couch. I quickly scanned him over, taking in his short black hair peeking out from a backwards "Obey" hat, his gauged ears, and his blank white cutoff shirt. My eyes caught a facial feature that I somehow had not noticed before: where I had thought I had seen two normal eyebrows, there was shaved skin tattooed so densely with a dark green design, that the ink eyebrows nearly looked real. I tried to process this quickly without Johnny catching me staring, and he did not seem to notice my temporarily startled expression.

Following his relaxed stride, I was led into a room I had not seen at first. Tucked to the right of the main room, it was mostly bare save for a leather chair and various needles that lay out on a small metal table. Johnny handed me a stencil of the tattoo I had decided upon over email. "There's a mirror out in the main room, go hold it up to your body and tell me what you think," he said. My first inhibitions crept up as I processed the idea that I was supposed to go back into the room full of tattooed men, pull up my shirt, and casually assess my potential tattoo in the mirror without feeling the slightest

bit odd. Decidedly in too deep to turn back, I walked out into the main room and followed Johnny's instructions. My ribcage received five stares: a nervous and unfocused one from me, and four hazy but interested gazes from the men still sitting on the couch. As I stared back at my own skin, aware of the eyes on me, I suddenly felt relaxation and awareness melt down my entire body. I wasn't sure if it was the low neon lighting, the quiet but insistent Tupac playing from a location unknown, or the knowledge that I was about to do something fairly risky by my own choice, but I slowly regained the same assuredness I had possessed on my walk here. This time, though, I also embraced a hint of danger. I felt empowered, in control, edgy, and slowly strode back into the room. I was not sure if I should be trusting Johnny, this man who I hardly knew, with my body. I was pretty sure he was stoned, in fact. But lying down on the table, I exhaled and slipped into a deep calm anyways as I waited for him to turn the stencil in my hands into a finished product.

The needle bit into my ribcage and sent an electrical buzz up the entirety of my spinal chord. Johnny had warned me in his dragging, monotonous rumble of a voice that, "it was going to feel a little cold," which now seemed to be the least accurate representation of what this actually felt like. I ran my nails down the length of the leather chair I was laying on, and made small, temporary dents in the chair's exterior when the needle most directly made contact with my bones. Johnny never talked, and made it clear that I was not allowed to either, as any movement in my ribcage could result in a slip of the needle. As I lay on my side, eyes closed, breath shallow, I let the methodic buzzing of the needle consume my mind. It was odd; I had been expecting the very worst. On every occasion that I had mentioned to someone I was getting a tattoo, their response had been, "good luck with that, I have heard the rib cage tattoos hurt like hell." I had prepared myself for the inevitable blood and pain that would eventually pay off, but this was simple, easy, and even relaxing. The dull mechanical noise had represented a biting pain at first, but had quickly faded into a numb and persistent presence that actually felt quite nice. The sound of the needle took me instantly back to the buzzing fluorescent lights of my high school classroom, the very first time I had contemplated being in this position. I would have never expected, sitting in that chair

and contemplating what was most important to me, that I would be lying on a table with a needle in my side a year later, perfectly calm. If anything, the greatest tension that I felt in this moment was sexual, as lying on a table with my shirt off and a strange man running a needle over my bare skin was a type of physical contact I had never experienced before. Johnny was intriguing, and in the few words we did exchange, his voice felt similar to the prick of the needle, and just as strangely soothing. Naturally, I wasn't planning on expressing any of these thoughts to him, as hitting on my tattoo artist was not on my to-do list that night, but I couldn't help melting into his hand a little as he traced the words I had chosen into my side. All too soon, the musings of the friendly needle came to a halt; I felt a cold cloth wipe down my side, and Johnny's nearly inaudible, "alright, that's it." Shockingly painless and strangely pleasant, it was over. Yet all of the feelings I had accumulated lingered past the final buzz of the needle. I slowly sat up in a daze, rose from the table, and made my way back to the mirror. With still surrender, my eyes greeted the reflection of my ribcage. "Shake the dust," it now read in typewriter font, sealing my endeavor with a phrase.

The preparation for my tattoo, in all of my speculations about how it would feel, how my family would react, and if it would look as I had hoped, had kept me awake at night. Yet in the moment, in the actual physical process of getting my tattoo, everything was calm. This perfectly reflected what I had hoped the experience would bring to me emotionally. I wanted to make this promise of permanence to myself, and the fact that the experience went off without a hitch confirmed my belief that it was the right thing to do, and perhaps was even intended to happen. In following through with this experience, I was able to answer the question I could not for the previous year and a half; I knew what was permanent. I learned, through the anxiety, the pain, and the pleasure, that what I most valued was "shaking the dust" off of my life.

Annie Chen

THE TOO-MODERN MEN

men who walk down
aisles in supermarkets
with their dress shirt sleeves
rolled up their arms.
fingers grasping smartphones
and the other hand pulling
an expensive bottle of vodka
off wooden shelves.
as if they are going to take that bottle
and shoot liquid fire
down their throats as they
contemplate urban solitude,
the decay of the human soul.
the one that is forced
to conform to a society it no longer believes in.

men with empty fingers
and heavy hands.
with droopy collars
and deep voices
but bright eyes.
these are the men I believe in.

and so it goes until the next day.

Jack Foster
POETRY READING

There he's done it again, that old rascal,
the classical scholar, fooled us all
in the auditorium, as I was saying,
everyone clapping graciously,
that there is certainly propinquity;
a musicologist couldn't,
and I mean a good one,
tell them apart
just listening to the sound,
but I can sense the inequity
we've been handed. The haunting tones
of how it should have been spoken
filling the void his voice has left behind.
I wish I could have seen Homer speak,
though instinctively I know his wise mien,
the flavor of his resonance,
or how I want him to sound.
Perhaps it's better, I wouldn't.

Olivia Gerrato
AUTUMN SUN

The sun's on the back of my legs.

I walk.

Everything's smoldering with this kind of vibrancy that you just can't sip through a straw and be polite about:

No, you have to drink it up fast, gulp it, soak in that autumn sun, don't spill a drop; don't let it run off of your chin, it's too precious.

I smell someone's dinner, its hearty scent lacing through everything.

I breathe.

The leaves break under my feet like cracking knuckles, pleading with me.

I crunch them up; grind them on the pavement with the flat of my heel, beauty turned to dirty dust.

I see this car, too fast down another road, spewing trails of exhaust.

I turn my head.

The wind swirls me up and swings away again, blowing around among the branches, taunting the bark with its sounds and its cold bracing breath that leaves a feeling once it's gone.

I feel the shadows on my face.

I close my eyes.

David Hermanoff

THE DARK KNIGHT, MY RECKONING

During my third year on Earth, life as I knew it completely changed. In fact, I can still remember having the conversation with my parents. They sat me down in the living room, and for a moment, I thought that I was in deep trouble. But as a little kid, I never, and I mean *never*, got in trouble. I was an unfaltering follower of rules. I embraced the routine of rules, and even helped enforce them when friends were over. If one of my buddies didn't take off his shoes, or refused to clean up the Play-Doh, I would firmly reemphasize my home rules. Admittedly, I wasn't always the most fun or popular preschooler. As I sat on our blue suede couch in our suburban Toledo subdivision, I thought that I was getting a new toy as a reward for my perfect, rule-abiding behavior. My parents both looked like the Cheshire Cat when they dropped the bomb: I was going to be a big brother. I quickly asked if I could teach my baby brother how we did things in our home, how we only practiced "appropriate behavior," a phrase that my mom often repeated. Together, my brother and I would line up our Hot Wheel tracks in straight lines, quietly sit for reading time, and take turns going down the slide feet first. The excitement, however, started to wear off as I slowly realized a younger brother meant I was no longer the center of the universe in our house; I was no longer "King David," as my parents called me.

Starting preschool only complicated my problems, as I quickly learned that having a late summer birthday put me at a severe disadvantage in the classroom. I was rigid, slight, and far younger than the coolest kid in the class, Josh Liber. Josh had it all: he ran the fastest, climbed the highest, and was always first in line for class activities. Josh had girls eating out of his hands: the boy had at least five wives when we played

“House” during free time. He did not take kindly to me, a kid who was shorter, less sturdy, and frankly not as fun as Josh and his entourage. It became clear that something had to be done: I needed to jockey for attention at both home and school. I needed to find a way to impress Josh and reassert my role at home as “King David.”

So, at the tender age of three, I became a superhero. Well, technically, I was still a normal preschooler, since the Caped Crusader lacks actual superpowers. Yes, the World’s Greatest Detective is only a billionaire playboy, a trained ninja, and a bona fide genius, all traits that I had inherited. I would reveal my transformation on the final night of October and impress both Josh and my parents. They would worship Batman and the child behind the mask. There was no doubt that I would be the line leader every day of class, and that my classmates would gladly hand me their extra Juicy Juice boxes at the end of snack time. With my incredible Halloween get-up and superpowers, autumn would end with a bang.

The Dark Knight had always been my favorite superhero. I dabbled in the Justice League, tried out the X-Men, and gave the Fantastic Four a shot. But once I discovered Batman, my obsession grew exponentially. I could relate to Batman, a hero who used his intelligence and technology to save the day rather than a freak spider bite or alien powers. I dreamt of perching on top of a gargoyle on a Gotham City skyscraper, dive-bombing down into the sinister streets, taking out the Joker, Mr. Freeze, and the Penguin. I really believed that I was Batman. Instead of watching Arthur when I returned home from school, I would don my cape and cowl, and train throughout the house. I carefully ran reconnaissance missions in the backyard and took aim at crab-apples with my Batarang. Meanwhile, my parents prepared for the holiday. Halloween was a big deal for my family; the two-story entrance to our home was decked out in skeletons, pumpkins, black lights, and ghouls. Bone-chilling music and sound effects reverberated throughout the house. And at the bottom of the grand, long staircase laid a child’s dream: a cauldron of king-size candy bars.

I continued to train and perfect my Batman skills, getting ready to impress Josh and my parents. Finally, these training exercises ran their course, and on the eve of Halloween, I was prepared for the final test. In the comics, Batman is known for

gliding around Gotham with the help of his high-tech, lightweight, 16-foot wide cape. Unfortunately, my gear was not up to par. My cape was made of polyester and had a wingspan of 3 feet. It was, in fact, imported from China. At the time, these details really did not matter to me and I was prepared to take the leap. Uncharacteristically, I was ready to break a rule and take flight. It was time to thrust myself into the spotlight for my family and classmates to see. I was going to recapture the attention of my loved ones and friends; this motivation echoed through my mind as I stood perched on the top step. With a full-size Snickers bar calling my name, Batman leapt through the air, flying over the stairs, pumpkins, and zombies. The adrenaline rush was unlike anything I had ever experienced. The orange jack-o-lanterns blurred by, while the air spread my cape in a heroic manner. As the ground approached, I beamed with happiness, knowing that my jump was as exciting as I thought it would be. Unfortunately, I never considered the logistics of the landing component of the jump. Upon reaching the ground, a crippling pain shot through my foot, and the sound of cracking bones stung the air. Batman had fallen.

I found myself bawling and disappointed; my foot and my ambitions had both been shattered. Laying on the examination table in the emergency room, I tried to identify how I had not realized that I was David Hermanoff, a four-eyed, short, Jewish kid from the Midwest, and not Bruce Wayne. Adding salt to my wound was the fact that broken feet can be very difficult to treat. Due to the nature of my injury, the doctors could not put a cast on my broken foot; I resorted to crawling on the ground like an infant for a month. I can still picture crawling around preschool, with Josh and his posse laughing hysterically over the sight. I received a lot of attention, but not in the way I expected. “David” was replaced with “Rolly-Polly,” and while Josh led games on the playground, I was rolling and scooting around indoors. I missed the holy Halloween trick-or-treat expedition. To my horror, the crawling even made it into my Bar Mitzvah montage, captured in home video and displayed in front of 400 people, all of whom had significant roles in my life.

In the weeks after my fall, things began to slowly revert to a normal routine. I retired my cape and cowl on the doctor’s recommendation and my parents’ insistence.

When I returned to school with full walking capabilities, Josh still made fun of how I had been a “Rolly-Polly.” He remained the real superhero of the class and I still couldn’t pull off trading my celery for a Pizza Lunchables. My mother gave birth to my younger brother and by the following year, he was tormenting me. It didn’t take long for him to decorate the walls of my room with crayons or sprint outside completely naked when our sprinkler system ran. My brother wasn’t the Robin that I had hoped for; we were just two brothers trying to get along. The following Halloween, I decided to play it safe, and in lieu of flying Batman, I went with a Halloween identity that more closely reflected the real David Hermanoff. That night, I sported round glasses, a white collared shirt, a yellow sweater, blue pants, and red sneakers. He might not be as popular as a superhero, but Arthur the Aardvark knows how to behave.

David Hermanoff

I WANT YOU FOR THE U.S. ARMY

As I sat on a dusty old couch in North Hall, my heart pounded and my palms sweated profusely. Uniformed soldiers strode by the doorway, hulking men and women who could probably crush me in an instant if they wanted. I looked around the room. Dozens of U.S. Army propaganda posters covered the walls, proclaiming, “HERE, THERE ARE NO WEAK LINKS,” and “FIND YOUR PRIDE.” On the oak desk in front of me, a Colt M1911 pistol rested inside a display case. A bronze seal below the gun commemorated first place in a marksmanship contest. Several photographs of U.S. Army Ranger platoons sat on the windowsill, and a gigantic Army Rangers flag was draped over an out-of-place curio cabinet. I heard boots stomp through the door, and I felt my stomach drop.

Shit, I thought to myself. *Maybe lying to the U.S. Army wasn't the best idea after all.*

Up to that point, the most military experience I had under my belt was through my Xbox, when I achieved a General ranking in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* multiplayer. As many boys are, I was intrigued by guns, aircraft carriers, and the military growing up. Now I had the opportunity to safely and momentarily live out my childhood fantasy of being a soldier. Outside the world of videogames and pretend play with toys, I really knew nothing about the military. I had no idea what the daily routine was, what kind of training soldiers underwent, or why many veterans spoke so highly of their service. After some research, I organized two phone meetings with U.S. Army recruiters. These discussions led to absolutely nothing; I was sent a few pamphlets and stickers in the mail, but it wasn't the authentic encounter I was hoping for.

I wasn't asking the right questions. Telling a voice over the phone that, “I'm inter-

ested in joining the U.S. Army, can you give me some information and let me try it out for a day?" wasn't going to get me anywhere, not to mention it made me sound like an absolute moron. I needed to find a different avenue to gain access to a military experience.

After speaking with a family member, I realized that the ROTC program was going to be my best opportunity to get a feel for the military. So, it was decided: I would shadow the ROTC program at the University of Michigan, participate in the activities, learn about the armed forces, and interview both students and officers. It was a great plan, but one with a major caveat: I needed to gain access to the program in order to shadow it. Since there is a relatively strict lid on the program, I was unlikely to be able to waltz into the ROTC headquarters in North Hall and just sit in on training exercises. The ROTC program here at Michigan maintains a strict visitor policy, one that is open only for those with "official ROTC business." I had only one option: I would need to lie to the United States Army.

I called the University of Michigan's ROTC office and spoke with the secretary. I told her that I was an aspiring soldier interested in joining the program but I wanted to shadow ROTC before making any decisions. The secretary said she couldn't grant me permission to sit in on the program over the phone, but she did set up a meeting for me with Major Andrew Garrison, the Recruiting Operations Officer.

A few days later, I was sitting in Major Garrison's office in North Hall, planted on his dusty couch, palms sweating and heart pounding.

This is it, I thought. This is the real deal.

With great authority, Major Garrison walked through the door. The Major looked just the way I imagined he would. He was approximately 6 feet tall, with piercing eyes and perfect posture. It was clear that he was a disciplined man: his bulging muscles and athletic form told me that he stuck to a strict exercise regimen, while his lack of a single fleck of facial hair proclaimed that he was keen on perfect hygiene, something the army stresses. I imagined the Major shaving his face with a straight edge razor in the middle of a battle, bombs and mortars exploding all around him, kicking up dirt, shrapnel, and flames while the Major remained unfazed. It could probably be a scene

in *Apocalypse Now*. I somehow managed to suppress my grin.

“David!” he exclaimed, as if we were old friends reunited. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Howdy, Major Garrison,” I replied. Jesus Christ. *Howdy*? The posters and photographs of U.S. Army Rangers, one of the world’s most elite groups of soldiers, had compelled me to greet a high-ranking officer in the U.S. Army as if I were John Wayne.

Major Garrison told me to have a seat. He asked me why I was in his office to see him. I told him that I was considering joining ROTC. As if a switch went off in his head, Major Garrison sprung into salesman mode. I could tell from that moment forward, Major Garrison’s sole objective was to have me register for ROTC. He started to explain to me how great it was to serve one’s country, to be a part of something much bigger than oneself. He then showed me a ten-minute video, a film that showcased the accomplishments of ROTC students, but I was more interested in Major Garrison’s head. The polished dome looked like the glistening nickel-plated Colt M1911 pistol perched on the desk. I was captivated by his strong presence.

After the video, Major Garrison began to tailor his sales pitch, going beyond just the propaganda mush that I had heard in my first two phone conversations. The Major asked me what my concentration was (pre-business) and then began to ramble off examples of how many successful CEOs and entrepreneurs had military experience; it turned out that the former head of CBS was a sailor in the U.S. Navy. I was strangely intrigued.

Halfway through our meeting, however, Major Garrison appeared to reevaluate our conversation. He probably saw through the thick layer of bullshit I had been spewing for the duration of the meeting: the “howdy,” the fact that I was looking at the program in the middle of November, my inability to recall which regiment my grandfather had served in the Army (another lie). Yes, it seemed as if Major Garrison had seen who was sitting in his chair: a tall, thin, spectacled, gawky teenager, one who screamed “Liberal” not “HOOAH!”

So, Major Garrison began to do what every officer in the army does: test his soldiers. I’m sure Major Garrison wanted to know if I was cut out for the job.

“Tell me, David,” Major Garrison prodded. “Were you an athlete in high school?”

“I was —,” I stuttered as I attempted to embellish my mediocre athleticism, but the Major had already moved on.

“Many of the young men and women in the ROTC program were athletes. Superb baseball, football, and softball players indeed!” He sized me up, looking over my inadequate physical condition. I might be tall, but I couldn’t remember the last time I lifted weights, and it showed. I could also tell that the Major wasn’t too fond of my No-Shave November beard, two weeks in the making.

The Major continued to test me, and started to prod me on my knowledge of the program. Was I aware of how many hours a week cadets train for? (Yes, 9.) Did I understand what type of workout went into physical training sessions? (You bet I did: cardiovascular exercise, weight training, and an enormous focus on core workouts.) Did I know what the average scholarship was? (3 years!) A smile worked its way across the Major’s face, and I knew that I’d passed his test.

“You know, David,” Major Garrison said to me, as if he were bestowing an ancient secret of immense importance. “The Army could use a bright officer like you. You’re quick on your feet!”

Indeed I was. I had somehow managed to keep my composure for the duration of the meeting, which had lasted 45 minutes. I didn’t blow my cover. I could probably hold my own in some god-forsaken POW camp if I needed to.

Suddenly, the Major’s phone began to ring. He answered it, and excused himself. A few minutes later, the stone-faced secretary marched in with the same discipline and confidence that I’d seen from every soldier in North Hall. She told me that the Major had to attend to some business and wouldn’t be back for a while, but if I wanted to, I could shadow one of the classes and labs. I told her that would be wonderful, and followed the secretary down the hallway.

I could tell that whichever architect designed North Hall never intended for any of the building to be used as a classroom. Makeshift grey walls, the type you find in a cubicle, set the boundaries for the classroom. A large rectangle of folding tables and chairs accounted for the desks. The room was plastered in Army décor. Layers of cam-

ouflage netting blanketed one of the walls, which reminded me of the ivy that fenced in Wrigley Field's outfield. A giant wall sticker of an M1 Abrams tank shadowed over the room. Posters of famous Generals lined the walls, and dozens of tank shells sat on the floor. After about 15 minutes, the instructor, Mr. McCraven arrived. Mr. McCraven was a short but bulky man; his face reminded me of a bulldog, but with a scar that ran from his cheek up to his eyebrow. Mr. McCraven's facial hair looked exactly like Hulk Hogan's, and his sizeable belly stood in sharp contrast to Major Garrison's impeccable athletic figure. Mr. McCraven's southern drawl reminded me of Danny McBride's character in *Eastbound and Down*, but the similarities didn't end there. After a few minutes of telling me about his military service, which was 29 years in the Army, Mr. McCraven tossed me one of the 25-millimeter artillery shells. I somehow managed to catch the explosive, but not without nearly having a heart attack.

Mr. McCraven started cracking up, and told me, "Don't worry son! That right there is a dummy shell!"

I wasn't amused.

Eventually, the students started to trickle in. By the time the class began, there were only two other cadets present: a twiggy Asian boy, and a short brunette girl with frizzy hair. They were hardly the strong and powerful cadets I'd expected to meet. Mr. McCraven's lesson was about stress; specifically, stress on campus and stress in the battlefield. The lesson was mostly common knowledge, information that instructed soldiers who were dealing with stress to speak with a psychologist and not to hold court with drugs or alcohol. But things got interesting when Mr. McCraven deviated from the lesson plan. He told us the story of one of his close friends who returned from the Gulf War with severe PTSD. Mr. McCraven said that the soldier's wife couldn't relate to her husband; he was simply too overwhelmed from the horrors of war to do anything. Mr. McCraven comforted the wife, and took his friend for a day on the golf course.

"Sometimes," Mr. McCraven told us, "all a soldier needs to do is speak with another soldier. Because out there on the battlefield, soldiers are all you have. Those men are your brothers, fathers, sons, caretakers, and friends. The only thing they aren't are

your wives.”

I, along with the cadets, laughed at Mr. McCraven’s quip.

Later in the lesson, Mr. McCraven discussed formations, flanks, and battlefield procedures. I wanted to turn to the cadets, and ask them how they could possibly continue the program knowing that death was frequently a common bond between soldiers. I wanted to ask how they could possibly head overseas, knowing that PTSD would likely piggyback them home. I wanted to ask all of these questions, but I didn’t want to embarrass myself, or blow my cover. Most of all, I had no intention of interrupting Mr. McCraven. He might have lobbed a grenade at my face.

Acronyms flew out of Mr. McCraven’s mouth, and after five minutes of military speak I’d started thinking about what Mr. McCraven had said earlier in the lesson, about soldiers being a family. Maybe the teamwork and bond that I saw in Army commercials and movies wasn’t a myth. But my doubts remained; after all, this was just one over-eccentric former Sergeant.

After the lesson, I found myself back in Major Garrison’s office, sitting in the same office I started the day in. The Major and I began discussing formalities; we were talking about the real deal. The Major dug his hands into an old file cabinet and yanked out a thick manila folder. He sat across from me and immediately began blazing through papers. The Major was marking places where I needed to sign and initial my name, much like a bank manager when you go to open a checking account. Only this wasn’t a checking account: the hefty green form in front of me was the Cadet Enrollment Form. With a few strikes of a pen, and my 9 digit Social Security number, I could be initiated into the program and shipped off to some Godforsaken war zone in 4 years. My anxiety became noticeable. He instructed me to make an informed decision and not to rush through it. The Major stuck to his sales pitch and reminded me that the Army could use an officer like me. I gripped the forms in my hand but set them down on the coffee table almost immediately; I didn’t want the Major to see my shaking hands.

The Major told me that he would like me to stop by sometime in the next week to finalize the process. I somehow managed to thank him and offered up a firm hand-

shake. On my way out, I took one last glance at the dozens of photographs of U.S. Army Ranger Platoons. I asked Major Garrison if he was in these photos. Suddenly the Major's eyes lit up and a smile crossed his face.

"Yes," he proclaimed. "Yeah, that's me all right."

The Major began to speak about his service with the Rangers. His speech was charged with emotion; I could tell his words were genuine and not some cheesy Army testimonial. He spoke fondly of his squad mates.

The Major expressed how special it was serving in an elite unit.

"It was incredible to know you're the best in the world at what you do," he proclaimed.

He spoke of his fellow soldiers as his brothers, and he did so in a way so valiant and inspiring it would have made King Aragorn envious. The Major said there were more than a few times when his brothers-in-arms saved his life. The man in fatigues was spilling it all out to me. I'd opened a soldiers' Pandora's box.

"Those guys," the Major said, "are still the only people on the planet who I truly love."

A day later, I found myself in the Nichols Arboretum. In addition to a class, the ROTC program at Michigan involved a lab, which Mr. McCraven described as, "Things about the Army you just can't learn sitting in a lecture." I expected to witness training exercises involving army crawls, heavy lifting, or a platoon practicing rifle twirls. Instead, the cadets were honing their skills in the most patriotic activity possible: a game of pickup football. I wasn't sure how to react: on one hand, it was pretty neat seeing the cadets play a casual sport. It served as a reminder that despite a military commitment, these were my classmates and they were just like me. On the other hand, witnessing a game void of competitiveness and skill instilled a fear in me: were these really the men and women who were leading our country into battle? After I witnessed the undersized Asian boy throw a particularly gruesome interception, one that would make Taylor Martinez look like a legend, I started to take merit to one of the propaganda posters I had seen in the Major's office: maybe there is "A Soldier In All Of Us."

Rachelle Linsenmayer

ELEVATOR

My house isn't larger than average for a middle-class home,
But it has an elevator.
The Shank family, who lived there before,
Had the addition made.
Not because their bones had grown too brittle to carry them up stairs.
They weren't morbidly obese — incapable of lifting their legs.
Mr. Shank's spinal cord had been mangled
In a body-surfing accident.
His legs rendered useless. Spine twisted like coral.
Whereas Mr. Shank had needed the elevator every day,
It was solely entertainment for my brother and me.
We impressed our friends,
Pushing the call button,
Inciting a whirr from the gears
As they brought the box with tiled floor to our whim.
We didn't take it seriously, so our parents turned it off,
Only to be resurrected when I had an accident of my own,
But less dramatic.
I've only broken small bones:
Two toes, a chip off the ankle.
All three of stupidity.
I suppose Mr. Shank's break was, too.
But maybe he wasn't aware of the power in the waves
That can pick you up so gently, then break you in their grip.

Rachelle Linsenmayer

RAIN AND CROCODILES

I'm at work, a severe storm warning eminent, forcing me to stay.
Predicted are massive amounts of rain, tornadoes, and crocodiles.
For a moment, the office is located in New York.
I peer down at the street to see a river of water rush by.
The phone keeps ringing. It is past five o'clock.
They expect me to answer.

I better be getting paid for this.

There is no basement.
I could very likely die with these people who don't understand
why I am staying,
why I keep asking where the crocodiles are coming from,
why I don't want to answer the phone.
I'm sitting at the desk, aren't I?

Then comes Professor Coffman.
He speaks in French, saying he's found a shelter that will protect us
if the storm overcomes the building.
Only those who understand French
know what he is saying;
only we will be saved.

A practical
use
for my language skills,
at last.

He leads us to a trampoline,
estimating only a few will fit underneath.
We lie there,
staring
at the ceiling.
The idea being
If the ceiling caves in,
it will bounce right back.
However,
I have no idea what will happen
if the floor crumbles from beneath me.

Now I sit, staring at a glowing screen,
willing the phone to stop ringing
on the second ring.
For the responsibility to pass over my shoulders.
Perhaps I will be called upon for a skill I can provide
instead of impossibilities.
Instead of disappointment
clearly audible
from the earpiece.

Merranda McLaughlin

THE ZOO

Click clapping crabby children
Fell in gentle hums,
a chorus that would rise
in slight increments, a dialect
only small ears thought of.
One stood apart,
dirtied knees with bee-like
precision in the way she
stared at the gravel.
One white line separated
her from the outside:
the clatter from the crescendo.
Once she dripped her saliva
overtop the pavement determined
her spittle would expose the marks for chalk,
something intangible that washes away
like bruises and scrapes.

The lines remained
so while her counterparts
played in colorful plastic boxes
she stared hopefully at grass
that overcame rock, and broke

Forth beautifying the
tar that ripped across
the field — a scar that
was never once bandaged.

Her little shoes worn
and happily-used teetered
on the line, a no man's land
she was determined to define
and as she raised her arms
mimicking a gymnast she once
saw on television, she crossed it.
Her heart beat once, twice.
Little monkeys took turns
climbing pausing only to
chatter and tease. Her heart
beat once, twice. She lifted up
her hands as if touching
glass.

Merranda McLaughlin

GRAVEYARD

He hates the beach
the noise the smell
the way the strangers call out
in forced familiarity he hates
the sunsets and the sound
of sizzling skin forcing a deep
cancer into the minds of men
once I grabbed his hand so pale
so cold and told him a story
of a graveyard, that sand is
just the powdered bones
of mountains. He grinned and
promised me we could
climb Mount Everest.



Allen Donne
HAND STUDY
GRAPHITE PENCIL



Allen Donne
UNTITLED CUBIST PIECE
GRAPHITE PENCIL



Carly Nash Fishman
MULTIPLE PERSONALITIES
TEMPERA BATIK

Rachel Lee
DEAN SITTING
PENCIL

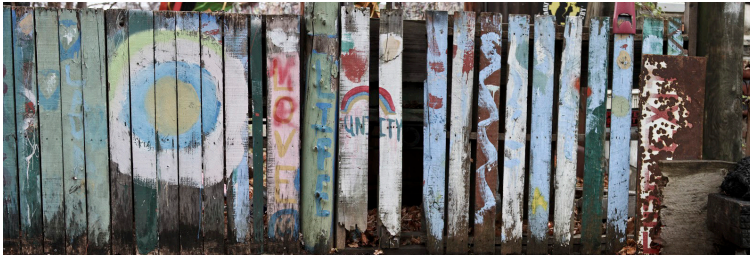




Hayden Nickel
I DON'T LOOK ANYTHING LIKE PAULIE
ACRYLIC PAINT



Hayden Nickel
IF THE WORLD WAS
MADE OF WALL PAPER
ACRYLIC PAINT



Elliot Peck
DETROIT IN THE CLOUDS, FOUR FACES,
URBAN CARGO, BETWEEN THE LINES
PHOTOGRAPHY



Elena Potek
BREAKTHROUGH:
A SELF-PORTRAIT
ACRYLIC PAINT



Nisreen Salka
QUINTESSENCE
PHOTOGRAPHY



Sophie Schneider
ANGER
PEN & WATERCOLOR



Jordana Schrager
HIPPIE
INDIA INK & COLORED INK



Rachel Stopchinski

EVEN IN THE LITTLE THINGS: TOY BOATS

ACRYLIC PAINT, COLORED PENCIL, SHEET MUSIC



Rachel Stopchinski
WATER PRESSURE: LETTING GO
ACRYLIC PAINT, COLORED PENCIL, HOT GLUE

Rachel Stopchinski
IGNITE
ACRYLIC PAINT,
COLORED PENCIL,
RIBBON, SHEET MUSIC





Rachel Stopchinski

NIGHT WALKING

ACRYLIC PAINT, TIN FOIL, SHEET MUSIC, COLORED PENCIL



Carly Strauss
GOOD
WOOD



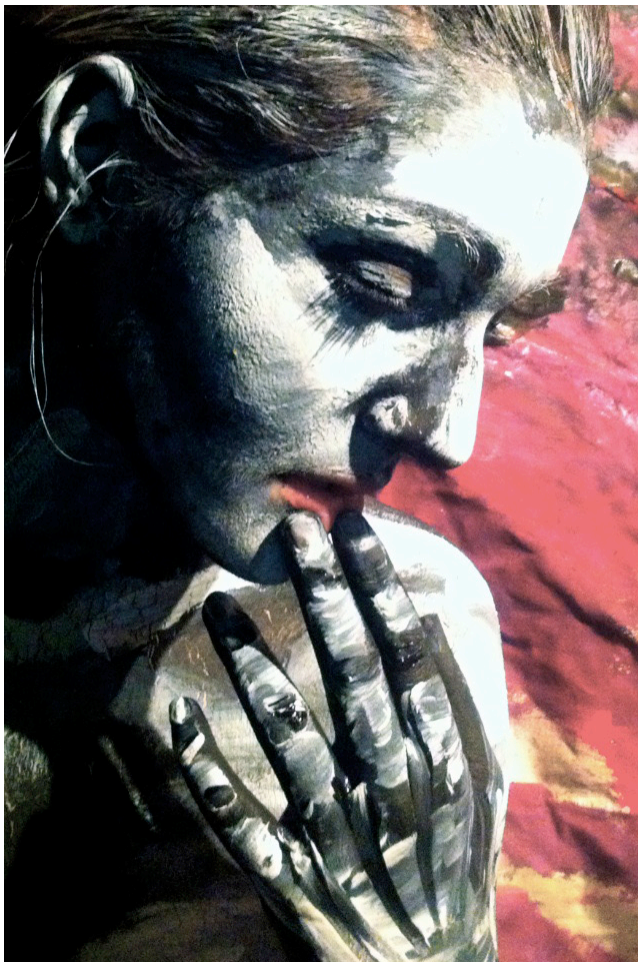
Bianca Troncone
DRIP OF TIME
COLORED PENCIL

Bianca Troncone
TOSCANA
OIL PAINTS





Adriana Zardus
DAMIEN RICE
CHARCOAL



Adriana Zardus
BREATHING SELF-PORTRAIT
TEMPERA PAINT & PHOTOGRAPHY

Jamie Nadel
ABD AL-RAHMAN

The sun meets the dust
in the land of blood and sand

where the wind is studded
and leaves gashes

on the torn face of a boy.

He should not be here
With only the skin

Of a prince to protect him.
Another gust strikes him;

he slams his eyes shut against the pain
and sees Damascus,

the palace:
arches of red and tan spiral up

and dare to scrape the sky,
higher and higher,

dizzying the silken pillows
of gold and blue below his body,

out of the never ending sun.

He has dived into the sea,
curled up at the bottom

where the coral bubbles
and the fish sing through

placid eyes.

He is careful not to miss anything; distracted

he watches his father,
face scrunched up

like a withered flower,
taken by three men.

The boy opens his eyes
And sees the blood in the sand —
his own, this time, which oozes
from the new cuts on his face.

He wishes, ojalá, for the fresh
world of his dreams.

Aubrey O'Neal

MIRAFLORES (AN EXCERPT)

*Fiesta de Frutas y Flores would end
And that spring I would finally 'set out.'
At Last — Home behind, world ahead.
And far too many paths to tread.*

The lemons that came from the little houseplant sitting in the corner of the living room were only the size of a toddler's fist. But just one was as sour as a whole jug of lemon extract, or so I'd heard from Nina. I don't even like those American Warhead candies, so I had no interest in trying them. Nevertheless, I loved the splashes of yellow they added to an otherwise boring room, though they're gone now.

On the first Monday of *vacaciones de primavera*, our little chihuahua snuck in, no doubt to escape the already insatiable heat of this year's spring. She nipped the last lemon off the tree and has been regretting this decision ever since. I saw her lying on the tiled porch panting this morning and laughed when she suddenly jumped up to get a drink of water, then ran back to lay in the sun — and repeated the process over again. She'll recover, just as she always does — *mi diablito*.

I'm twenty, now, but I still live the same life I lived five or six years ago — taking classes and lazing at home, and, best of all, doing personal projects as I please. You can have that sort of life when you are from an old family sitting on a hoard of old money with a business that runs itself.

Old money tends to come about where I live. *Mi bisabuela* convinced *mi bisabuelo* to plant a few peach trees on the tip of a hill in the central Ecuador region and that turned out to be a good idea, as the area has flourished over the years (unlike so many

other farms that seem to simply wither under the sun and disappear). Now, the surrounding two hills are also covered in rows of peach trees— some fully grown, some developing... some trees that will yield fruit meant for canning or for selling whole, for drying the peaches to chew, or make into tea. And in between these hills nestles my house— *La Hacienda*— and a tiny village of worker houses and processing buildings (canning, stacking, storing, counting, washing...) that sprang up as need arose. All of this is *El Miraflores Melocotón Huerta*— The *Miraflores* Peach Orchard— and it has been so for many generations.

The peaches we mainly grow— *Guaytambos*— become yellow and rusty red right before they are ready to be picked. Last week, a column writer from some American travel magazine visited and when he first bit in to the peach, he was surprised that it was completely white inside. The workers who were watching smiled to themselves when they saw the dumb look on his face and the writer walked around with juice stains on his shirt the rest of the day. Though the clear sugar water eventually disappeared as the sun dried his shirt, the practiced eye could see the telltale imprints.

Moving on— it's a lazy afternoon and I have to step over Katy, the chihuahua, to get to the front porch, where it is already baking hot. I feel sorry for the peach trees today, but I know that night will bring a much needed chill that will keep the trees alive— and produce a wonderfully juicy fruit later in the year. As always, a few ancient relatives laze around in chairs on the porch, sipping *jugo de naranja*, nibbling on *empanadas*, and complaining about the younger generations. This morning, however, I catch snippets of conversation about the news. "Arms from Chile," "air operations," "skirmishes," "Black Wednesday." We Ecuadorians are always squabbling over our borders with the Peruvians and this year, 1995, has seen a particularly bad bout of argument.

I sweep hurriedly by and head straight for the dirt road that meanders between the hills of *Miraflores*, eventually coming to the end of our property, just before the sprawling cinderblock houses of Ambato begin to condense into the city itself. There, a stream runs parallel to the road and a wagon filled with crates of peaches is propped next to our permanent little shop (which consists merely of four beams and a tin roof, with wooden tables and chairs that remain in the ground year round and have flow-

ers and grass growing underneath.) A high eucalyptus grows here, as well as a short, squat peach tree sticking out of the side of the hill at an awkward angle. Both have been there for generations, and beneath the tree sits Giorgio, surrounded by his two over-energetic toddler sisters. (It immediately comes to mind that the lemon that Katy tried eating yesterday had been about the size of the elder sister's fist.)

Giorgio must have arrived just a half hour ago from an advisory meeting about his University classes. These meetings never go well and as I approach, I see frustration flash across his face— no doubt he has been waiting to tell me about how futile the meeting was, how unrehearsed the advisors are, how clunky the system is as they try to continue on with paper in a world transitioning to computers. I sit down in the grass beside him and rest my back against the tree, waiting for the outburst. Instead, he surprises me by saying, “You know you’ve gotten old when all the heroes and heroines in adventure stories are years younger than you. Remember the days when every single book we read had characters that were the same age as us?”

I see that something has cast him into a nostalgic mood and find myself saddened by the remark. The sisters, bored by their big brother's mood, move away to the hill and begin to roll down its gentle slope, giggling. “Not every adventure is like that,” I say. “What about *The Hobbit*? Bilbo is a good deal older than you or I in that book.” Giorgio nods and smiles. A few years ago, *mi abuelo* came back from a trip— back before he became too frail to travel— with a hard copy of the adventure tale and it was quickly passed around the family or read aloud until its cover began to tatter and its pages were in dire need of more glue in the binding.

“Today it just seems that I have woken up to realize my entire life has passed by in this city without a single worthwhile adventure... We're in the middle of this country, where everything seems developed and settled and it's the borders that could really use some good people to come along and solve their problems.” Giorgio says. Then, answering my unspoken question, he continues, “This morning they canceled my meeting for the third week in a row. I made such a fuss that they rescheduled me, but the advisor didn't answer any of my questions.” I let an intake of breath show my surprise, though I am not surprised at all. This University is a big lumbering Hydra with so

many heads that it tends to forget which one is which. Our graduation is approaching fast and the University seems to have lost its wits entirely in preparation.

Two men from a farm across the road approach the peach stand and I hop up to greet them. Their teeth, like so many of the other workers', are yellowed by too much tobacco and sugar in their youths, but they smile widely anyway and pay for two peaches and two plastic cups full of peach tea. They sit down a distance away from us and begin their lunch.

I come back and sit close to Giorgio, my lighter hand next to his. Technically, Giorgio is a worker at *Miraflores*, but he is so brilliant and congenial that over the years he has somehow snuck into the inner circle of my family — they even helped pay for part of his tuition. If we had the same tone of hair, we'd probably be taken as brother and sister. Instead, most take us for a couple, which is closer to the truth.

In silence, I begin to think about how the hills of *Miraflores* could look like the *Shire*, with a little imagination. We don't have doilies and larders full of cheeses and breads, but we do have linens, parties, and a way of forgetting about the passage of time. I wish that someone would come to my door one evening and just push me out into the "real" world. Giorgio and I have talked about this before, but he knows that I am still in love with *Miraflores*. What he does not know is that if he were to leave, I would follow.

We stay by the peach stand and eucalyptus tree for most of the afternoon, until Giorgio's sisters get tired and insist he take them home. "I needed to get some work done and make some plans today, anyway," he says before departing, pretending that his sisters aren't the burden that they really are. I sit for another half an hour until the sun becomes too hot to bear, and then head home.

When I am still a distance from the porch of *La Hacienda*, *mi abuelo* cries out to me in greeting, "Ay, María, your parents have been wondering where you were. They'll be walking to Mass in a half hour." I nod my head and come to sit on the porch steps. Katy is staring, ears pointed forwards, at someone's glass of water, which has foolishly been left at the foot of a chair. "Aren't you going to get changed, *m'ija*?"

"In a while, *abuelito*. I'll be fast." He sits back in the chair and smiles, causing the muscles on his wrinkled neck to stand out and his few remaining teeth to peep out

from under his thin lips.

“I was just thinking about the garage incident when you were child, Maria. You were such a scrawny *ninã* back then. Now look at you!” I roll my eyes at his remark. When I was about four years old, I had a habit of wandering around to neighbors’ houses, often workers at *Miraflores*. If no one answered the door, I would often just walk in or find another way in to the house.

In Ambato, it is rare for anyone to have a car. We take the bus or walk most of the time. Because of this, garages are often a simple affair: just a big cage, really, with bars on three sides, the fourth side being the side of the house. A simple tin roof usually covers the single stall garage. One afternoon, after trying without success to sneak into Nina’s house, I discovered that I could slip between the garage bars. Nina’s *abuela* came home first, and nearly died with surprise when she found me fiddling with a Mancala set on their living room floor. I terrorized *Miraflores* with these antics for about a year, until I got stuck one day and realized I’d grown too much. After that, I just took to knocking on doors.

I jerk back to the present as Katy finally knocks over the glass of water and pounces on the drops as they trickle away. What is it with me today, I wonder. Even before Giorgio’s comment, it seems as if I can’t help but cast myself back into the past. After sitting in a silence broken only by Katy’s awkward slurping, I stand up stiffly and am about to head in to the cool cave of my house, to prepare for Mass —

But *mi abuelito* holds up a hand, stopping me before I can brush past. “You know just before you came Giorgio stopped by. He came to ask permission for a few days leave and your father gave it to him. I wonder... are you going with him somewhere?” This is news to me and I feel both worried and annoyed that Giorgio did not mention anything about the matter earlier. But then a greater worry swells up — that this is the beginning of his leaving. *Abuelito* sees the confused twist of my lips, and says, “Run along, *m’ija*. We will see you after Mass.” Then he smiles and gives me a slight push. I smile too, though he cannot see my face as I turn and bound down the steps, feeling as if I have at last been given the nudge I have needed for so long. *Nice try, Giorgio, but there’s no way you’re getting away from me that easily*, I laugh to myself.

Gage Peavler
MARIO AND ME

He stands tall, palms open and ready. Dressed in his trademark blue overalls and wearing the famous M-stamped hat, he is a symbol of nostalgia. My own experiences with this crimson crusader are proof of that. I grew up with him, I adventured with him, and I saved worlds with him. He is a testament to my childhood, and the strongest remaining connection I have with my grandfather. It is because of everything Mario stands for that I have chosen to transform myself into him. I want to look into a mirror and see my hero staring back. There he is, Super Mario.

You could say I was a lonely child, or at least it would have appeared that way from an outsider's perspective. I had one friend, but I didn't see him much. I was quiet, and while I had a fun-loving personality deep down, my shell kept it hidden. Opening up to other kids never came easy. There was a dork sleeping within me, and I feared the judgment I might receive if I let him awaken. My time spent plopped down in front of my Nintendo 64 was when I could be myself. In the Mushroom Kingdom, there is no judgment. Things are simple. There's a bad guy, there's a damsel in distress, and there's the hero, Mario. Even today, I find myself fascinated with the simplicity of his world. For me, it is a place of escape, a place without real evil or corruption.

To transform into a character, you need to have a strong physical connection with them. Mario is more than just a man in a red hat; it takes a lot of work to get him just right. You have to project your imagination into his costume, one that does him justice. To start, I needed the hat. Underneath Mario's hat, my hair is dyed brown to match Mario's. It is combed down flat and peeps out from the cap as sideburns. Hair? Check. The black moustache is the next step. I expertly groomed mine to mimic the small

bumps and curved ends that make Mario's stache so famous. There is no moustache quite like his.

I take back my claim about only having one friend. There was another: Mario himself. When I was younger and had a plethora of spare time on my hands, I played video games a lot. Perhaps more than I should have. (Sorry eyeballs, I know I put you through the ringer.) *Mario 64* was the first video game I ever played, and it sparked a fire of wonder and amazement within me. Climbing the big mountain to take out the Big Bomb guy on the top, swimming into a sunken ship at the bottom of Jolly Roger Bay, and swinging Bowser round and round until my own head was spinning are a few of my fondest memories. My experiences in the gaming world fostered my huge imagination and jumpstarted my career dreams. I guess you could say he was an inspiration. I am working hard now in the hopes of becoming a video game designer so that I can build characters like Mario.

A little video game history: the very first Mario game, *Super Mario Bros*, saved the industry from collapsing after the arcade fad began to die out. People believed video games would cease but the good men from Nintendo, led by innovator Shigeru Miyamoto, brought video games into a whole new realm: the console. Now people could play at home, on their own TVs, like I did growing up. Precursor console games like *Pong* and *Centipede* couldn't hold the industry afloat. It was Super Mario who really reinvented the way games were played. It's amazing to think that an Italian plumber with an obsession for mushrooms rescued a legacy: a legacy that is now surpassing the movie industry. But isn't that Mario's job, to rescue those in trouble? That's the cycle he is bound to, the golden rule: to rescue the princess, or, in this case, video games as we know them.

I can't say I've saved any princesses, nor an entire kingdom. I have, however, befriended people throughout my life who weren't as lucky as me. One of my old high school friends only ate once every three days because his parents only bought enough food for themselves. Another friend was tossed between his grandparents and mother because nobody wanted him. Even my girlfriend faces stress at home because of a controlling stepfather: a Cinderella story. I've always been drawn to people who need

my help, wanting to better their lives in any way I can. By no means is it a simple task. Many times I accomplish nothing at all, but I still try. My mother calls it my “white knight complex.” Like Mario, I try to save whoever needs saving. Like him, there are times I find myself at “game over.” It’s simply impossible to save everyone. I know though that my mark will be left on the world by improving the lives of others. This savior mentality is the biggest intersection at which Mario’s and my personalities cross.

With the face in good working order, I move to the clothing. This must be particularly spot-on to truly capture Mario in all his glory. The red shirt must be spotless and tucked into the beloved blue overalls. A wannabe Mario expert would overlook his yellow buttons. Not me. They keep his overalls taut and ready for action. Wrapped tightly around my fingers are the gloves, snow white in Mario’s case. (Gloves are a necessity for any classic video game hero.) Mario certainly needs something over those hands for all of the blocks he has to pound on. With the hero’s gloves in tow, all that’s left to find are the shoes. Shined and maroon to match his glossy hair, they have traveled across the harshest of places: the insides of volcanoes, the creaking floors of haunted mansions, and most famously the backs of turtle’s shells. After finding my own pair of traveling trainers, the final step towards completing the physical transformation is complete.

Mario saved me from a life of working a boring job, saved me from falling into loneliness as a child, and was the glue between me and my grandfather. My father died when I was young, so I don’t remember much about him. It was my grandfather who was my male role model, and we were extremely close. We were brought together even more by Mario. I remember all the years playing *Mario Party* (1-8) with him. I would look forward to every time a new game would come out, just so we could play together. It meant so much to me, and I know it did to him, too. My grandfather loved playing, even if he did always lose, because Mario gave us a fun way to spend time together, to bond like a father and son do. You could say Mario was our football. When my grandfather died, I slipped a picture of Mario, and his emerald clad brother, Luigi, into the pocket of his suit: Mario bros forever! I wonder if that picture has faded by now.

There are more subtle similarities between us, too. Mario is eccentric, jumpy, and

always full of energy; I can relate. Going to college didn't subdue the flood of energy that is always coursing through my veins. I'm a little kid at heart and jumping around is what I do best. You'd be surprised at just how much like Mario I act. You could say I have Mario's spirit. Not to mention his love of mushrooms and spaghetti. (He and I are two peas in a pod when it comes to the palate.) With all of our similarities, I'd say the resemblance between us is uncanny.

An intense look in his eyes is contrasted by a smile that truly captures Mario's lovable personality. He is focused on the challenges that lie ahead, but he is happy to take them on. Mario is rarely seen without the hint of a smile. He is the embodiment of courage, so it is only natural for him to be smiling in the face of danger.

For his stance, he is crouched slightly. He is standing in the brisk whipping wind, unfazed by the chill, the flaming wisps beginning to form over his palm warming his fingertips. Around him stand tall trees, towering high over their protector. Somewhere close by the princess cries out, fueling Mario to spring into action. His arm is outstretched and his palm is open. He is poised for an attack, ready to unleash one of his powerful fireballs. Who is its target? It can be none other than King Koopa himself, whom only fire can silence. It is Mario's most prominent weapon, and so here I have taken a stance to portray his appearance before pulling off this special move. The grunting, fire-breathing turtle titan before me will fall. He is no match for Mario!

We are now comfortable in our shared skin. This is Mario; this is me.

Amanda Peters

\$1.75

One seventy-five. I wasn't thinking of you as I tripped, sorry.
The metal ridges of the second step carved grooves into my knees.
I watched the bus fare slip out of my hand and land — *plink plink plink* — into the rotting gutter below.

I muttered a word, you know, the one you're so fond of?
I was immediately grateful that our son (curly-haired, ruddy-cheeked, hands shoved in the pockets of his ratty windbreaker)
Stood waiting for the school bus across the street, far from the poison of my language.

A hand reached down for mine. Strong, wide. Veins wrapping around delicate bones.
He helped me up — dark locks cascading down an angular face with a beard neatly trimmed (so neatly trimmed)
“Are you okay?” (God forbid those words even left your tongue before. Do you remember? As I stood, weighed down by the cluster of cells — that life inside of me that neither of us wanted?)
Did I detect an accent — Irish or British, maybe?
I met his deep brown eyes, and matched the smile he wore under that neatly trimmed beard.

He slipped a few coins into the box, paying for my fare. One seventy-five.
I walked to the fourth bench (the one I sit in every morning, not that you care)

He followed me.

I could feel his presence behind me

emanating heat, pressure, urgency.

Of course I allowed him to sit beside me.

Of course I made no protest as he whispered words laced with honey.

And the weight of his hand resting on my knee was welcomed, craved.

I slyly slid the ring (that fleck of cubic zirconium set against a thin band—formerly gold, rubbed silver) off my third finger.

Thankfully my tan had faded, no pale shackles visible to bind me to you.

I felt his full mouth against mine, his beard (so neatly trimmed)

tickled my cheek,

And I wasn't thinking of you, sorry.

As the bus took off, I glanced back at our son (you remember the one, right? afraid of you? afraid of us.)

One seventy-five.

That's all I cost.

Just one seventy-five.

I gripped onto the man's hand tightly, brimming with promise.

This wasn't the first time and it wouldn't be the last.

I avoided our son's knowing eyes.

Sam Saunders

DRIVING TOO FAST WITH NOWHERE TO GO (AN EXCERPT FROM A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES)

We reached a split in the road. To the left, the road looked like it had been ravaged by a storm. Fallen trees crisscrossed their way up the road before it turned steeply out of sight. To the right, the dirt road continued relatively clear. We continued that way.

The road became damper as we went deeper into the valley and we noticed tracks in the road.

“What are those?”

“Look like 4-wheeler tracks.”

We rounded a turn and the road was blocked. A thick pile of branches covered most of the road — allowing just a small opening. Unlike the other road, it was apparent that this had been blocked on purpose. I brought the car to a stop and we got out to take a look at it.

“What the *hell*.”

“What’d you think could possibly be up there?”

“I’d say it’s someone’s huntin’ post. My uncle’s got a little 4-wheeler road like this out behind his house to make it easier to get around when he’ huntin’. I mean, this one’s a lot, uh, longer ya know. But that’s all I can think of.”

“Wanna check it out?”

We all looked up at the road.

“Can’t see the harm in it — we’ve come all this way anyhow.”

We all stood around waiting for someone to take the lead. I felt nervous but wasn’t

sure why. I could tell by the hesitation that others felt the same.

“C’mon guys — what the hell.” Matt grinned at us and broke the tension as he stepped around the branches and started up. I took one last nervous look around and followed him.

The 4-wheeler tracks kept going. They were not dry yet so they must have been fairly fresh.

As we continued, our sense of anticipation began to turn into boredom. Groans of discontent began to arise from our group and we started considering turning around.

“But we’ve already come this damn far. We gotta see what’s at the end.”

“There ain’t gonna be anythin’ at the end, I already told ya — it’s for hunting.”

“It’s gotta at least stop somewhere back here.”

We decided to give it ten more minutes and continued to walk. The road turned and rose more steeply.

“Look.” We all turned and found a finger pointing to the end of the road.

“What?”

“I swear I see somethin’. Like the top of a house.”

“Aw, come off it.”

“No... I think I see it, too.”

I craned my neck and could barely make out the silhouette of something.

The feeling of nervous anticipation came back and we started walking faster. As we got closer, the outline grew bigger.

“I’ll be *damned*.”

“Jesus — look at this thing.”

“Bet no one’s lived here for — what, 50, 60 years? The fuckin’ roof’s fallin’ off.”

“Looks like it survived a fuckin’ fire or somethin’.”

It flattened out and we were now within a rock’s throw of the house. We began to walk towards it.

“*Wait.*”

We stopped and turned towards the voice.

“Dammit, Steve. You gonna try to talk us out of it again?”

“Hold on. Hear me out. Don’t you think it’s a bit odd that there’s fresh 4-wheeler tracks running up to an old abandoned house? In the middle of fuckin’ nowhere? Not to mention the road’s been blocked off? None of y’all are gettin’ a — gettin’ a weird feelin’ about all of this?”

Matt began to argue but then stopped. We were quiet as the obvious settled in and all of a sudden an overwhelming sense of dread came over me. I gulped and turned around and began to walk back down. Something felt so damn off but I couldn’t figure out what was wrong. Steve was quick to follow.

“Wait. Wait! The hell are you all worried about? It makes sense if y’all would jus’ think about it for a second.”

I stopped but wanted nothing more than to get the hell out of there.

“It’s just where a bunch of kids from around the way come to drink so they ain’t gotta worry about their parents or nothin’. What better drinkin’ spot than an abandoned house on a 4-wheeler road?”

My mind was eased for a second. But then Steve spoke back up.

“From around the way? Where the hell’s around the way? We’re forty minutes from a real road that’s thirty minutes from a real town. There ain’t no *around the way* around here.”

“Shit, man. You’re overthinkin’ all of this. All I’m sayin’ is if we’re all the way up here we might as well check it out. There ain’t anybody else up here — there’s no harm in it. It’s gonna eat at us if we don’t anyhow.”

Steve groaned and looked back up at the house.

“Alright. *Alright*. If ya want to so badly go look at it but be quick about it.”

We watched as Matt walked up to the house. I could almost — just *almost* place what was so off — I was grasping at it but couldn’t quite get it. My mind was racing. Why did this feel — why did I think there was something more to the place? I looked around nervously as Matt reached the front door. He turned around and gave us another sheepish grin and a thumbs up and opened it and stepped in.

We were quiet as we waited. Then suddenly the windows lit up as the lights were turned on. The lights — lights? My heart dropped.

“FUCK.”

It all came to me just then as the lights came on. It all made sense. We needed to get out. Badly. I began to run towards the door to get Matt and just as I was getting there Matt came out with a wild look on his face.

“Let’s go, man. Let’s GO.”

He started jogging towards the road and we followed and soon we were running down it as fast as we could.

Someone fell and tumbled but we couldn’t stop and he got back up and ran even faster to keep up. I reached into my pocket and fingered my keys. My mind was racing. Fuck fuck fuck, I prayed we didn’t run into someone out here.

And then I saw Matt dive into the woods and start running and falling down the side of the mountain. And another followed. Then I heard it. The distinct whir of a 4-wheeler engine coming up the road.

I jumped off the side without looking and lost my footing and fell into a tree. It knocked the wind out of me and I became dizzy but felt nothing and got up and continued running. Sprinting down the steep hill, my strides became longer, my feet higher off the ground as I picked up my pace and reached a speed my legs couldn’t keep up with and I lost my footing again and began to tumble down. I felt a thud and a splash and realized that I had fallen into a creek at the bottom of the hill. I looked over and saw several of my friends in the creek keeping still. One more came tumbling down with a splash and then we were all there and we were all still, waiting breathlessly.

The whirring was becoming louder and we ducked our heads. I was lying down in the creek and only my head was above the water. Suddenly the vehicle came into view. There were two people on it but I couldn’t make out their faces or anything more than their outline. Soon they were right above me and then they were past and then they were gone without slowing or looking down.

Without a word we began running down the creek kicking up rocks and slipping and twisting ankles. I was out of breath but my legs kept moving on instinct.

The road next to us began to flatten out and run along the creek and soon the branches were in sight and behind them my car. The sight of my car made us run even

faster and we piled into it.

The road was too narrow to turn around and I put the car in reverse and my friends in the backseat ducked down. I had to go slowly to avoid running the car off the undulating road. My relief to be back in the car was diminished by the fear that the 4-wheeler would turn around once they found that we had left and catch up to us. I began driving faster and two wheels drifted off the edge before I hastily jerked the wheel the other way.

“Easy.”

I realized that I would have to turn it around. I slowed to a stop and twisted the wheel all the way to the right. I slowly began to back up and felt the back tires grasping at the precipice and turned the other way and accelerated just before we slid over. And again. Each time I backed up and we felt the tires begin to slide we held our breaths and prayed we wouldn't slide over and get stuck out here. I had gotten the car almost all the way around when I got too eager and rolled the car just a little too far back. I felt the weight shift back and the car began to slide back.

“Ohhhhh shit!”

I thrust it into first gear and floored the gas pedal. The tires began spinning hopelessly as we sank deeper into the hill. I was gripping the steering wheel so hard I was beginning to lose feeling in my hands.

“Come on....”

And then they caught and the over-rotating back tires found a piece of ground to plant onto and we jerked forward as the car shot back over the hill into the road. We erupted in hoots and hollers as we finally knew we were gonna make it out. I gunned it and we got the hell out of there.

We were quiet until we found our way back onto pavement and left that awful road behind. I reached down to turn on some music for the drive back home when I was interrupted.

“So, uh... What the fuck? Anyone want to, uh — anyone gonna explain what just

happened?”

I looked back. Suddenly I realized that except for Matt and me, no one even understood. I looked back at the road and took a deep breath that was partly a sigh and partly a laugh.

“That was um. That was — well uh... that was a meth lab.”

“What?”

“Yeah, uh, well. Yeah. We jus’ hiked up to an active meth lab in the middle of fuckin’ nowhere and Matt walked into it like he owned the place.”

“Jesus... What if someone had — had been in there?”

“Um.”

I searched for a response and couldn’t come up with anything. We were quiet for a minute and we left it at that and I reached down again and turned on the music.

Victor Vainberg

VICTOR THE COLOMBIAN

Victor the Colombian stared at the rows of deodorants, overwhelmed by the variety. Back home in Colombia, his driver brought him the same deodorant each time, and it worked just fine. It had been a while since he went to a drugstore. In other parts of the world, the product had one purpose: to prevent body odor. In Michigan, each brand seemed to represent something different he could become. This was a clean slate, after all. Would he go with the aerosol Axe, which promoted partying and promiscuity, or with the active sport Gillette, with its clinically proven strength? It seemed everyone else knew exactly what his or her favorite brand was. How did they know there wasn't some other, better one they ignored? Had they tried all the others?

Finally, he did what he knew he was good at. He just went for one. Whichever one found his hand first. Fiji Old Spice. He put it back after reading that it wasn't gel but roll-on. Then again, he didn't like aerosol. It stank up the place, ironically. *Choose already.*

A few months ago, Victor Vainberg was a nerd. It wasn't until the last month of senior year that he managed to begin socializing, but by then the damage was done. He could tell by the looks he saw girls give each other when they met him, by the way people greeted him. "Oh heeey, Victor." As if his forehead read "socially awkward."

It went back to at least seventh grade, where his sense of humor was somewhat oddly acquired. Victor and his classmates had hiked for a few hours to a clearing on a mountain. Anna was there; the girl he had a crush on. She sat in a circle with some other girls and a teacher, and playing some sort of clapping game. Victor lay on the grass with a cap over his face. He was exhausted. The girls attempted to spice up the game by introducing penalties. A truth or dare for each girl who lost. The penalties began to escalate,

and he heard the line, “Anna should kiss Victor!” What the hell. What the hell? He was not asleep at that point, but he hoped they would think he was. He wasn’t ready for that. “He’s not asleep, get his cap!” The nerves made his throat swell, and he began sobbing with rage, although mostly at himself. How could she ever like someone so immature? As a child he had been a crybaby, a terrible, vicious cycle of suffering. Crying when someone told him he was short, and then crying more when they saw him crying. The knot in the throat forming from its own existence, a sort of immortal, self-sustaining cyst. After that day, something changed. He became an old, completely mature man at the age of twelve.

In high school, his classmates spoke to him like he was a man, with wrinkles on his face and bowel problems. He found them immature. He always found a way to distance himself from them: “Yeah sure, I’ll be the designated driver.” “No. Sorry. I have to practice violin.” He could be happy on his own.

Now in college, Victor has become the Colombian, and attempts to recover the fun he missed in high school. The ability to start anew exhilarates him, gives him the jittery energy to make people laugh. He acts his age. Is that not what people always say to do? First he acted younger than he was, then older, suffering a vast overcorrection. Now he can laugh at himself, and he does every day. It is a genuine self-mockery though. Not like when he pretended to laugh at his height in middle school. People greet him with hugs and smiles and are genuinely happy to see him.

Throughout the years, he has been called Vic, Vicky, Vainberg, Victor, Slick, Slick Vick, Ad, Advil, Colombia, and now Victor the Colombian. Vicky was the name of the crybaby. Slick was the name of the mature teenager trying to fit in. Advil was the name of the kid who got overly emotional in discussions, and was jokingly asked to take a “chill-pill.” He hated it when they said that. Victor the Colombian is the heterosexual yet highly flamboyant college kid trying to stand out in a large school.

They all still worry about their image, though. It should be the personality, not the name that people find memorable.

I am the narrator. My mother, who studies Hinduism, probably taught me this odd extracorporeal perspective. It allows me to speak of Victor in the third person. He is the one who couldn’t decide on a deodorant to buy. It is like deciding what personality to have next. Do I have multiple personality disorder? I don’t think so. Simply a keen sense of my current emotional state, and the changes to it provoked by the environment.

Victor Vainberg

THE MAN OF MANY PHASES

He asked about her day. That's how their fights usually started. On their way back home to Bellevue from his parents' in downtown Seattle, Mark struggled with his Rubik's cube in the passenger seat. He waited for his wife, Martha, to finish bickering. She was driving after all, and he didn't want to unsettle her as much as he normally did. The children sat silently in the backseat. Hunched, five-year-old Ronny immersed herself in her dolls' world, and her older brother Billy pressed his chubby preteen forehead to the car window and held his hands inside the hoodie's pocket. Often during their fights, the kids would be so silent that Mark would forget they existed; at least, until Billy cleared his throat or something.

When they approached the driveway with its barren garden, the car halted, as did the parents' conversation. Martha's slender fingers tensed backwards towards her shoulders, and she pushed the Toyota's steering wheel with her palm. As she gasped, Mark shoved the puzzle away, and mumbled the same curse he used at work when a stain was tough to remove. Their suburban house differed from its neighbors in that the ground-floor window to the left was shattered. The wrinkled curtains that blew through it resembled the waving flag of a home surrendering to intruders.

When the police arrived, they found Martha waiting for them, standing with a clipboard in hand. As an actuary, her daily uniform — which she wore through the week-end — was the standard long pinstripe pants, dark leather heels with a pointed tip, and a button-up shirt and jacket. She had excellent posture and criticized Mark and the children for theirs. Mark's bright, preppy shirt creased against the brown leather chair Billy might soon inherit. He perched his elbows on his thighs, and his white knuckles

prevented a closed mouth from opening.

Nevertheless, Mark would have nothing to say. For years, he allowed Martha to carry out official business. She completed the tax forms, ensured up-to-date vaccinations, kept an eye on the budget and retirement funds, and, now, interacted with the law. In exchange for that power and responsibility, Martha coped with Mark's eccentric yet temporary obsessions.

Although a Rubik's cube currently rested by his corduroy pants, a month ago an encyclopedia took its place. A few years ago he held a box of rare coins that needed sorting. Traces of decade-old shavings from a woodcarving project lingered on the multipurpose chair.

Mark was like that. He sought happiness with great zeal, and he was proud of how accomplished his journey had made him. He simply went through what he called his phases. They only ended when the subjects could provide nothing further for his progress. A solid knock interrupted his thoughts.

Only Billy noticed the policemen's mixed feelings as his mother produced the color-coded inventory spreadsheet. Martha's voice wavered uncharacteristically as she told them, "You'll find the TV, as well as some decorative sculptures missing. The intruders took some jewelry as well. Here's a copy of the inventory for each of you, in which I've highlighted the missing items." The officers asked their routine questions, took some photographs, and left.

That night, Mark stared at the dark bedroom ceiling, contemplating what he could have done to prevent the home invasion. He felt responsible for ignoring his surroundings by burying himself in his studies. He decided to act upon it. "Tomorrow," he thought, "I will enter a new phase: perfecting household security." His focus would transition smoothly, as that year's phase began with academic knowledge. He had mastered everything from classical history and modern politics to philosophy, mathematics, and logic puzzles. Now his puzzle was to make an impenetrable home.

The next morning, the family awoke earlier than usual and a messy breakfast ensued. Cereal spilled and orange juice made homework sticky with sugar and pulp. The clumsiness followed them to the drive. Martha's abrupt stops and turns scared the

carpool kids, and wrenched them from their Monday-morning grievances. They failed to sneak their usual morning car nap.

Meanwhile, Mark walked to the nearby watch store where he worked as the “Master of Time’s apprentice,” as his nametag publicized. He worked for the watchmaker responsible for the maintenance of the customers’ products and for the upkeep of the unsold merchandise. Basically, Mark dusted the clocks, kept the replacement part cabinet well stocked, and the small office clean. He wore a light apron, which reminded him of his cooking days.

The monotony of his job allowed his past to distract him. He recalled his teenage years of culinary experimentation. They gave him a gut that was the subject of much mockery. He swept the floor faster than usual when his classmates’ jokes rang in his ear. During his college years, he entered the athletic phase, to appeal to the superficial society that surrounded him. He lost the weight and made friends.

It was there, while studying economics in the University of Washington, that he met Martha. His newfound confidence attracted her, and he fell for her jasmine scent, long legs, angled jawbone, and commanding personality. When they started dating, he had less time for tennis practice, and entered the best-boyfriend phase of his life. He remembered to eat healthy and didn’t gain too much weight once his athletic activity receded. He baked her intricate pastries and took her to parks where they strolled for entire afternoons.

When they got married a few years after graduation, Mark became the exemplary husband for some time, until he eventually phased out of it and adopted hobbies, starting with ornithology. He missed being outdoors, even then in the shop where the wooden cuckoos chirped and he could see some trees through the shop’s window. His hobbies progressed from bird watching to insect collecting, and he accumulated other things after that. He had, for instance, amassed the highest valued collection of professional basketball memorabilia in all of Seattle, which had earned him an award or two.

Space limitations and Martha’s growing concern ended the collections phase and Billy was born. Mark was determined to be the best father. He read parenting books before his son’s birth, spoiled his son with sweets, and played catch with him in the

yard until his son turned seven. He treated Ronny as he had treated Billy. This time, changing phases was different. Mark neglected Billy the same way he neglected the boxes of dissected insects in the attic. They were there and he sometimes visited, but never with the same enthusiasm. Because of this, at school when his friends complimented his father's prized basketball memorabilia, Billy responded with, "Yeah, whatever. It's all right," before biting deeply into a burrito, Twinkie, or doughnut. Ronny was still young when Mark lost interest in her, and she wasn't as affected by the change as Billy, who didn't blame her for her birth.

Billy never truly excelled in sports, or performed exceptionally in school. Some classmates thought he was funny, and they laughed. But Billy never understood the joke. He had only a few good friends who he dipped with between classes.

Once, Ronny asked to dip and Billy obliged. She turned green and changed its name to sour gum, which she thought was funny after her nausea receded. She never really seemed to need friends, as her stuffed animals kept her well entertained with tea parties and complex interactions. Someday, Billy thought, she would be a screenwriter. She changed the animals once a month, and Billy often worried she'd inherited Mark's whimsical, yet obsessive habits.

Mark lost interest in Ronny around her fourth birthday. One morning while visiting the attic where his past was stored, he felt nostalgic for the historical value of his collections. Thus, the phase of historical knowledge began, marking a symbolic mid-life crisis. He spent entire afternoons on an outdated computer, combing through historical documents and history articles. Sometimes, he reenacted famous speeches, and the family wouldn't understand his behavior but generally accepted it. From there, the topics of interest changed slowly over a year into what eventually became logic puzzles. He had just finished printing the instruction algorithm for solving the Rubik's cube when Martha turned the ignition of the car that would take them to his parents. It was a family tradition to spend Thanksgiving weekend in Seattle.

Mark swept the floor with practiced motions a few days later, removing the broken window's remnants from the living room while Martha took inventory of the items around the house. Two days later, after the police visited their house and Mark entered

his new home-security phase, he arrived from work and called for a family meeting.

“Family. Come here. I’ve been working today to prepare the house for another attack. The police department’s statistics say that an invaded home is three times as likely to be invaded more than once.” He waited for the information to sink in, and when nobody responded, he said, “...which is why I’ve hired a locksmith to change the locks and written a rough draft of security regulations we will now follow.” He read aloud each rule while Billy picked his teeth and Ronny twiddled her thumbs. Martha read along in the handout, approvingly. Among the statutes, they were to be in bed by 8pm with their windows locked and lights off for the new alarm system to function properly.

“We have a new alarm?” asked Ronny.

“It looks like it,” said Martha under her breath.

Although he knew Ronny couldn’t hear them from the isolation of her imaginary world, Billy heard most of his parents’ fights. This time, he zoned into his mother’s eloquent claim. “I *do* accept you and I appreciate that you are becoming more cultured and cautious, but you must remember that you have a family! You can’t forget us now as you have systematically done in the past!”

“I am aware that we didn’t discuss this,” he said, “but I purchased this system with *my own* money. Ultimately, I’m doing *you* a favor! I didn’t think we had to debate whether or not we want to be *safe!*” A dry thump told Billy he didn’t need to hear the rest to know how the discussion would end. A history book hit the wall beside Mark.

Mark went on one of his walks, and Martha buried herself in her calculator and spreadsheets, with a glass of whiskey in hand. After the incident, the walks got longer, as did the shots of whiskey.

Fifteen days passed before Mark surprised everyone by announcing that he wanted to move elsewhere. “With us?” asked Ronny.

“Yes, I want to move this family out of this house. It’s not a home anymore.” Martha thought it was a great idea. She studied the nearby real estate, compared prices, estimated probable lucrative options, and chose one with the best view. It was a small house by Moss Lake, near Lake Joy, and a forty-two minute car ride towards the east

from Bellevue. Antique and orange, it happened to be equipped with the best security system available: isolation.

It was agreed that Mark would live in the new house while they moved, and Martha would live with the children in Bellevue until everything had been sent and they finished their school year. The logistical reason for this move was an excuse to mask the fact that Mark and Martha's fights had been escalating recently. Their relationship worsened as Mark phased in and out of their lives, and Martha was additionally uncomfortable after walking in on him reenacting the Emancipation Proclamation in front of a mirror one morning. She couldn't tell if he was immature or simply odd.

A few weeks later Mark gathered his essentials and left. Everything would be sent by mail, and he hadn't decided what to do with the things in the attic. Because the house was so far away it didn't yet have a phone line, they communicated through correspondence. The first letter Mark received read: "Hey Daddy! Yesterday Pete the Giraffe got angry with Cory the Elephant for watching him study! I love you!"... "Hey Dad, it's Billy. How's it going? Any cool rooms up there?"... "Hey honey. Make sure you fix the mailbox and repaint the walls. I don't want the kids getting something from the paint smells. Also, I sent some clothing and paintings for you to fold and hang. Until death do us part, Martha."

He stared at the letter without moving. He had the house to himself. The meaningless chores he finished the first week. The previous family had left a scanty assortment of furniture. Two chairs, a table with a typewriter on top, a refrigerator, a bed without sheets, and one couch covered the grumpy, hardwood floors.

The bathroom reminded Mark of the solitary confinement room one could find in any asylum. The sterile tub and toilet lacked all personality. He accepted his new, minimalist home, and welcomed its silence. It was his clean slate.

He hadn't worried about his job. He quit when he knew they would move, and he was confident he could get hired anywhere doing anything. He was very accomplished and learned, after all. He had also saved enough money to allow him some time off from work.

He realized soon after arriving that he did not have access to the Internet in his

new home. He had completed the household security phase with the isolation solution, but the same answer tore him from his investigative phase. With the security covered, and nothing to distract him, he did not know how else to improve himself.

Beside the bonfire he built one night, he sat in one of the chairs and thought about his life and what he had accomplished. He had sought always to be the most educated and qualified person around because he thought that would make him happy. Now that he was shoved near a mental break, he contemplated his *raison d'être*. "Why did I go through all of that?" Surely, he was proud of his vast knowledge, and numerous collections and skills. A new phase occurred to him. He would ponder the meaning of life. Because he knew that throughout history many had strived and failed to answer this question using theoretical principles of science, he decided to explore the matter philosophically as he had learned to do many years before. All he needed was something to write on, which he had.

Martha sent paper upon his request, along with occasional sculptures and picture frames. He was indeed curious as to why people lived and died, and what they lived and died for.

In the mornings, Mark farmed the land around the house, and at night he wrote and thought. Nothing else mattered in the world. He had enjoyed nature since he was young and played sports. Now he lost his breath when chopping wood for the bonfire. Nevertheless, he was self-sufficient and nothing interrupted him.

Meanwhile, Billy started smoking and Martha acquired an expensive taste for aged whiskey. Ronny's imaginary skits became entire acts, where protagonists would die and change. Mark received a letter once a week in which they updated him on their latest happenings.

One day, a truck delivered a large package for Mark. It hadn't been sent from his family. It was the TV set and Betamax he ordered. The videos had arrived a week before. He wanted to see films of actual births, deaths, and day-to-day happenings of people. They were old family videos belonging to those who didn't want them any longer. In the same way that he was fine leaving his collections behind in the attic, he thought, the families in the videos didn't mind letting the films go. He wanted to see

what they all had in common to see if he could find a pattern to life.

He watched and catalogued them on the floor before making any conclusions. They were to be ordered chronologically by time in the main subject's life. Once he finished, he began his thoughts in neat bullets:

Most people are born and die crying.

Ergo, most people are sad to be born, and sad to die.

Most people specialize in one profession in their life.

People mostly record their happy moments.

Ergo, people want to forget the sad moments.

Some people kill themselves, which is never filmed and happens abruptly.

Most people reproduce.

He stared at the list. It didn't seem like the meaning of life to him, but rather a set of rules most people appear to abide by. Number two was disconcerting in that he realized his life was not like most lives. He had attempted to specialize in numerous subjects. He did reproduce, and he could see why people cry when they are born and when they die. In both cases, he thought, the uncomfortable body puts pressure on the mind to care about the change in its status quo. He theorized that people wouldn't be so reluctant to die or be born if they could be more comfortable in the transition.

"Point three follows the primal sociological tendency to appear permanently happy and to want to recall only the positive memories," he wrote. He suddenly noticed how each time he thought of his family, he pictured only those times where they were happy with him. And those times only occurred when he was in phase with them. Then, he thought back to all of his collected memories of every phase he had. They were all of experiences with the subject during the phase, and not after it. For instance, he remembered winning the tennis tournament, and not where he left his racquet last. He remembered the award he got for the basketball memorabilia, but not what happened to the collection after that. He knew he had to revisit all of his previous phases and reconnect with them, including his family.

This, he thought, was curious. But even more curious was point four. He wrote, "Why would anybody end their life? It is pure boredom or despair, which usually caus-

es the breakdown? What does it mean to kill oneself in terms of the meaning of life? Is it the ultimate form of surrender to the unknown?" With so many questions, Mark knew he had to reenact a suicide to make further conclusions. He would have to be in the place of someone about to end his or her life if he was to find exactly what doing so would entail.

A letter arrived one day from the country house, which began: "Esteemed family, how has your day been? I harvested the field and ironed the sheets. The frames are dusted, and the clothing folded. The painted house has transparent windows and a nice, brick rood. The porch faces some hills and I can hear woodpeckers from my bed each morning. I can't wait to see you soon. Yours, Mark."

Nobody knew how to react, until Ronny suggested visiting Mark. They had a move-in-date sometime next month, so a visit would be appropriate. They decided to surprise Mark with their trip.

As they traveled to the country house, the streets got wider and poorly paved, and grassy hills emerged in the distance. The window flattened Bill's forehead. Ronny had moved on to plastic action figures, which she carried by the dozen in a small, pink duffel bag. Martha closed the door with excessive force, a growing habit. She checked each door's lock twice even though they were the only people in the vicinity. She had taken on some of Mark's household security habits when he still lived in the house with them. While Ronny ran inside, Billy kicked some stones. Martha searched for the sheets she would not find folded, but knotted.

Victor Vainberg

3 HAIKU

Her kiss on each cap
Stains each tree with autumn red.
Wiped off for winter.

I twist the wristwatch.
Now it tells another time.
How easy it is.

The itsy bitsy
Spider follows Bernoulli.
To its usual death.

Melissa Weintraub
WHERE I'M FROM

The clean-plate club,
the product of the American Dream.
Sweat, tears, and visas
granted my family a chance.
A chance to regroup and start afresh.

A home that smells of fresh challah and matzoh ball soup every Friday afternoon.
Grandma spending hours in the kitchen
grinding gefilte fish with her very own hands,
Hands bearing tattooed numbers from the camps she endured.

Maxi skirt wearers, paired with baggy, crew-neck, long sleeve shirts,
outfits that make boys question whether she has a body under all that fabric.
Third cousins, four times removed, as close to my heart as siblings.

You can always find a yarmulke lying on any counter-top.
It's normal, *encouraged*, to ship your seventeen-year-old daughter across the globe, to a
country smaller than New Jersey,
yet finds itself making international headlines on a daily basis.
And all the kids migrate to Northern Pennsylvania for eight weeks each summer,
returning with sunburns, wrists wrapped in gimp, and a case of camp-sickness until
next summer.

I'm a girl who won't throw out a penny,
because a bag of pennies bought my grandparents their one-way ferry tickets to Ellis
Island.

Matthew Yodanis

HANSEL AND GRETEL

They call me a witch, they spit at me “bitch.” They call me Africa’s trollop and an exploitative whore. But let me tell you something, they never cry about their lost balls of fat. Of the slew of names they call me, I prefer what the industrious and secretaries of states call me: a problem solver.

My story begins where the whole human story started — Africa. I was the daughter of two Darker skinned agricultural technicians who came from black farmers who came from Negro share croppers who came from pitch black jungle niggers whose family was sold by their friends to work as slave labor picking cotton. I think I had some uncles who were Mexican indentured servants. Not much changed in my family for years; we grew things. In fact, that’s what most everyone did. At least after the war.

My memory’s a little hazy and I only heard it from Ole Prophet and hardly anyone believed or listened to a word he said. Ole Prophet was the oldest man in our community. See, most old folks didn’t last very long. If you was old and tripped in the fields, well, they left ya.

“Gawd’s fertilizer,” my grandmother told me. We lost her like we lost most of our old. Once a year the town gathers all the skin-tagged and wrinkly, the liver spotted and disabled, the gran mas and pappys — basically anyone who couldn’t pull their weight and put ‘em in a truck. This truck would drive a couple miles out into the Sahara and just leave ‘em there.

It sounds barbaric, I know, but you prolly never fought with a family of seven over a withered cob of corn. I even saw the solution back then, but people seemed so content with their old people fertilizer that made the corn and the soybeans so much

greener and they didn't mind their grannies wanderin' the desert. Besides, my thought seemed so... ridiculous. Then, at least. It wouldn't a been worth the trouble anyhow; there twas nothin' to 'em.

Anyway, Ole Prophet was different on account of he came back. No other old folks ever came back. Sure, a storm might send a femur or two smacking against a hodgepodge shack (I always had nightmares that grandma's head would break through our thin tin wall and land on my part of the sleeping mat. "I ain't making good fertilizer in the des-ert, hun," she'd always say. "Gawd ain't happy." I'd wake up screaming) or a nighty might drift in, but no old ones 'cept Ole Prophet ever made it back. Folks couldn't believe it. But there he was stumbling his way back, bare naked with sand hugging his skin folds, after over a month in the desert. He downright scared people.

After he came back, Ole Prophet would just sit his bare an' dusty ass down at the side of the fields and watch the people go by. His forehead and eyebrows drooped like scrotum skin over his eyes and his lips protruded out enough so you could've grabbed 'em with two fingers an' pulled, but nobody ever did that. He was skinny, but not as skinny as the rest of us. You could only see a couple of his ribs, if you squinted hard enough. The rest of us didn't have enough meat on our ribcages to make a halfway decent pork sandwich. This was strange too cause nobody ever fed him and nobody ever saw him move once he found his place on the side of that field. Fact, only reason we knowed he wasn't dead was cause of his laughin' fits. Every couple a days, often when we thought that old turnip had finally rotted away, he would get to giggling. His giggling would make him chuckle and in a couple a minutes he'd get to laughin' and would be full out guffawing down there by the fields. He didn't laugh like us neither. His whole body shook with joy and his uproarious fervor could be heard all the way at the silos. Most of us kids tried not to laugh. You would always end up choking and sputtering on the floor, eyes violent red as you coughed up thick yellow phlegm balls. The pesticides the Aero planes sprayed everything with was strong.

But this old, old man, this *geezer*, *would* laugh for hours without a snivel or a wheeze. It upset the a-dults to no end. My daddy, before he got swallowed by a combine (the driver was having a coughing fit), would always beat me on days Ole Prophet was

laughin'. It got to a point that the nauseating metallic flavor of coughed up blood would hit my palette every time that old man started a bellowing.

At one point it got to be enough an' I confronted Ole Prophet. I couldn't take working in the fields all day and passing out from the blows at night. I was about seven and had been working in the fields for only three years back then. In the middle of one of his hootin' fits I ran up and punched him in the arm. His crossed legged stance wobbled away from me so he was teetering on an angle. Then he came crashing down in his normal position. He stopped mid-chortle and his head jerked towards me.

"Wide jew hid me liddle gurl?"

"Cause you laugh too much," I snarled.

"No," he said in terse defiance. "Jew laugh tew liddle." He dragged out the "tew" and spoke "liddle" in a quick utterance.

"But there's nothing funny!" I shouted back. "Look, that lady's dying!" My aunt Jay toppled over into some plants. Ole Prophet let out a high pitched "oooh" from the back of his throat that sounded like a kettle whistle blowing. The sound deviated into cackles that vibrated the back of his skull.

"Owh, there is plenty funny, liddle gurl. Jus' luke! Tha' ole lady fell over fer nuffin'. And these people are working fer...nuffin'. And der keeds and der keeds will work for what? Nuffin'! That's hee-larious liddle gurl, dohn't jew tink?" he cackled again. This old man made me nervous back then (no one, *no one* makes me nervous now) so I turned to run from his nonsensical hee-hawing. As I turned he stopped his laughing and declared. "Wait!"

The word hit me with such force I nearly collapsed. I skirted back to him. "No wun ever tawlk wid me. Lemme tell jew a story. Once, dere was a war, a beeg war that involved thee entire planet."

"Then what?" I tried to speed him along.

"It ended." He let out a loud laugh. He stopped abruptly and lifted a finger. "But after dat war dere was another war that involved de whole planet."

"Then what?" I repeated.

"It ended. But after dat war dere was jet anotha war dat involved dee entire planet."

“Did that one end too?”

“Yes, but I have a few tings to say about it, so dohn’t ged ahead a me, eh liddle gurl?”

“Fine!” I squawked, crossing my bony arms. People rarely went near Ole Prophet and I was particularly tired that day so I figured I’d listen to the old coot. It’d be better than falling like Aunt Jay did.

“Y’see, liddle gurl, there was a ladda fightin’ — millions o’ people died and dats why nuffin’ is worth nuffin’ — cause if ya wait long enough the best an’ worst tings will happen again.” I rolled my eyes. “Now, most don’t member why we farm, do day? Even da A-dults been a farmin’ all day life and do it ‘cause day don’t know no different. An all the ol’ people gone senile, so I reckon I’m da only chile lef’ whose gots an idea on what’s goan on.” He flicked his pointer finger from me to him. His whole arm shook. I leaned in towards his old sallow face. “Y’knows how day said if y’all stop farmin’ day’ll all bomb us?” His voice was a breath of a whisper.

“Uh huh.”

“Well who do ya think they are?”

“The WASPs.”

“Yes um gurl. But why’d ya s’pose day’d do such a thang?”

“I dunno.” I shifted uncomfortably, kicking the red earth at my feet.

“Whell, after da war, dere was a lot of bombed out area — the whole world was in ruins, but the WASPs had wun anyhow. In the treaty tha’ ended th’war, they put a debt on the whole losin’ world’s shoulders. Each country was responsible fer paying to rebuild theys country and fer the cost of the bombs dropped on ‘em.” Ole Prophet’s finger played in the dirt, making circles in the dust.

It stopped and so did his voice, but the finger and his chatter resumed after a momentary reprieve.

“Now, nun of da countries could hardly pay fer a prick let alone a debt of such e-normity. So them WASPs made a deal with ‘em.” His finger stopped its tracing, lifted to his mouth and he took a lick. “A little dry,” he muttered. His finger resumed its path on the dust, tracing circles. “Havin’ n’otha choice, most every wun took the

deal. The rest of 'em got bombed to nuffin'." He licked his dirt-tracing finger in punctuation. "See, the deal was that the WASPs would buy they land in exchange for debt absolution. Only problem there was now dat da WASPs owned all dis land is dat they charged da people to live on it. Da people had to pay a certain amount a money or risk getting evicted. By evicted, course I mean gettin bombed out. Peoples is always looking for land, 'specially in the sweatshop cities; they'd happily take farm the land 'stead of lose a bunch a arms makin' neckerchiefs. The only people buying things are the WASPs and all day want is food and clothes. The sweatshop cities make all dere clothes and we make 'em all dere food. Usually day take dat 'stead of money so as we can keep da land. But the amount a food day demand is so high we gots to give every goddamn morsel to them WASPs just to keep from get 'an bombed out." The man took another lick of the dirt on his finger. He nodded, satisfied and began to giggle. "It jus' all seems so...hee-larious." And Ole Prophet began his hollerin' again. I hit him with my little balled up fist.

"Stop It!" I squealed. "If you laugh I'll get beat by my daddy!"

"Don't worry 'bout yo daddy beatin' you." He gasped out between laughs.

"Why?" my eyes widened. "Are things gonna get better?"

"Nooo," he smiled. He was missing more than a few teeth. My face sunk. "Things ain't goan get better. Nuffin never gets better. Things only get worse in a diffront way." He saw a tear roll down my face. "But thangs like that has a way a workin' theyselves out." His hollerin' that could be heard at the silos was up at full rev again.

The next day my daddy was chewed up by a combine. They squeegeed his gore off the windshield and continued their work. Being a superstitious bunch, that was the first time I was ever called a witch. They knew he beat me and they knew I hated it so they figured I must a done... something. People avoided me as much as possible then. My mamma didn't talk to me much anymore and kids would run to the other side of the road if they saw me. I knew it wasn't me though. I knew it was Ole Prophet.

The next year, they put Ole Prophet out in the desert again, and same as the last year he came back in a little over a month, a little fatter than before and just as dusty. No one messed with him after that. Something about threes and the Jews killed a man

that came back from the desert and look at all the trouble they got. We were a superstitious bunch. Fact, that's when they started calling him Ole Prophet. The bible men said it was fitting.

I don't know what happened to Ole Prophet. He's probably still kicking and licking dirt off the ground. Years after Ole Prophet came back, I was shipped to the land of the WASPs. Rather, my mother had me stowaway on a shipment of corn to be delivered to them. I was seventeen.

WASP cities are the complete antithesis of African farmland. Entire cities' are encapsulated in enormous black cubes. These cubes are made of a near invulnerable polished black titanium-platinum alloy. Only filtered air, food, and clothes were let in. Towering skyscrapers made of the same black material filled the cubes without uniformity. Considering immigrants were not allowed in WASP country, I was surprised at how easy it was to get a job. They found me nestled in a bed of corn husks in the back of the aircraft carrier that was filled with our corn harvest. Before I could say a word, I was yanked from my nest and stabbed in both palms with what looked like a hole punch. I shrieked and collapsed, holding my bleeding hands, rocking back and forth on the icy ground. I heard a beeping sound and a gruff voice told someone, "she's a foreigner (they could have known *that* if they would've just stared at my leather flesh), predominantly African with a Mexican (he pronounced the "I" in Mexican as "E") background."

He tossed me in a van and the next day I was working in the Saccharine Suite selling candy to overweight WASP children. The Saccharine Suite was a tiny one story shop in the middle of the city's "downtown," as they called it. It was trumped by enormous skyscrapers on all sides. The building to the left let customers experience what it was like to walk in the woods. The cube city was surrounded by woodlands, but they were deemed too dangerous by most WASP mothers. The building to the right was filled with hundreds of pools and one gigantic "sluggish stream" that spanned the entire complex. For the WASPs who came to the pool but had no intention of swimming,

another immigrant named Karon would ferry them across the sluggish stream to an area filled with big lamps shaped like suns to burn themselves my color.

The Saccharine Suite was special. In the middle of this metallic playground of pretend forests and imaginary streams lay this comparatively tiny shop with a juvenile façade. Giant candy canes covered the corners, mesmerizing onlookers with their dazzling white and sparkling red stripes. Candy coated chocolates trimmed the windows and pieces of sweet chocolate took the place of bricks. Blue licorices lined the sidewalk. The roof was made to look like just-out-of-the-oven gingerbread. It was not surprising to see a child or two gnawing at the front entrance or licking the ground. It was all fake, naturally, but it was a child's paradise.

It was my job at the Saccharine Suite to put the drugs in the candy. Every citizen of this great nation had superlative healthcare. This included daily meals, so even the most homeless WASP averaged around two hundred fifty pounds. To keep children from fighting and to combat the extraordinary number of cases of spiraling depression, heavy narcotics were distributed in excess in the people's favorite edible: candy. These bulging balls of busting fat would waddle into the little shop, sputter into a microphone and press their finger to a thumbprint scanner. Behind a fake wall, I'd inject their medicine into lollipops, shove pills into cakes, coat brownies with powdered sugar and opiates, and add tinctures of anti-depressants into starbursts. Sometimes I'd just dip handfuls of pills into various chocolates and caramels. I'd pass their delectable drugs through a slit in the wall. The tykes would gobble their treats and enter a state of narcotic paralysis. A lot of them would sit in the luxurious velvet chairs around a fire in the outer room. Some would wander the streets, but many would just stare at the dancing flames or out into space. They must have been seeing something extraordinary 'cause they always stared with slack jaws and drooling mouths, with the most amazed eyes.

My job was monotonous and made almost nothing. Foreigners received zero healthcare and were not covered under any sort of minimum wage law. I made just enough to pay for food and to send my family the money they needed. The reason I was smuggled over here was because my family had been led to believe there were

jobs for foreigners with the WASPs. Well that, and they couldn't feed my anymore. I despised those giant orbs that I served. They ate copious amounts of food while I survived on any scraps I could get. I passed out from dermal absorption of the drugs they toyed with. Every night before the wet warm blanket of unconsciousness suffocated my body, the same thought I had back in Africa when I saw the old people on the truck and the bloated bellies of my brothers entered my mind. I always awoke with the two phrases that made up the communication with my family other than the money I sent over. *Money nice. Food better.*

One perk of working at the Suite was a lack of supervision. There were no cameras inside the building (people liked to eat their candy in privacy) and a man came by once a week to check up, but there was no need for him. In fact, he skipped most weeks; his paychecks came anyway. All inventory was taken electronically and trucks came anytime the computer said it was low. Other than the patrons, I was alone.

On a slow night, my only customer was an orphan boy who always lingered too long. Fat rolls from his abdominals sunk down below his ass and his floppy, droopy cheeks gave him a walrus's countenance. Though he rarely moved, he always appeared sticky and sweating. He vigorously jammed his finger against the scanner. I gave him a triple of his drug of choice, ketamine (that's what screen and bottle said, at least) in his usual pound and a half of chocolate. I passed the hunk of brown cacao and sugar along with a heaping pitcher of milk plus; he was out in a half hour. That idea that always crept into my mind with the bloated bellies and the dying grandmas was finally coming to fruition. As I dragged the bulbous catatonic boy into the back room using a cart from the stock room, my family's words rang in my head. *Food better.* Orphans weren't tracked with BreadCrumb tracking chips like most children — a missing orphan was considered a blessing and like most blessings would go away unnoticed. So, once I got him into my back room all I had to do was cut him up. An industrial box cutter did nicely, peeling off flesh like puddin' skin. I boiled his body parts in the equipment sanitizer and used the money I usually sent to my family to package and ship their... *present.* They responded with one grateful word: *More.*

Soon, taking children to send as... *presents* for my village back in Africa became

a routine. Usually, I'd single out orphans, but children of dedicated families did not escape either — They had more meat on 'em and were juicier, but required one more step. I had to rip out their BreadCrumb chip. I'd flick the device into the black acid used to destroy old dishes and they sizzled into nothing. I swear I could hear the chip caw every time one of them hit the bubbling black stuff. Once that was taken care of, I could be on my slicing way. My family was finally eating and everything was going fine. That is, until Hansel and Gretel.

Hansel and Gretel were perhaps the biggest children I ever saw. Both were well over five hundred pounds of marinating fat. They were a risky target — well-liked kids with well-to-do parents. But this was around the time a holiday was celebrated called Thanksgiving. It was a holiday where all WASPs unmannerly took and ate more food than usual — a feat I found incredulous and near impossible. So I figured I should send the village a little more white meat than usual in lieu of this “holiday.”

The thing is, Hansel and Gretel were much bigger than my usual prey. Tripling their doses didn't keep them down long enough, and Gretel woke up as I was cutting into the meat of Hansel's leg. She slammed my head into an oven.

I woke up disoriented and in this prison cell. They say they're going to cremate me alive.

“A foreigner don't need no trial,” Hansel said from his new wheelchair. But I sure caused a buzz. After telling the police everything, the press got hold of my story. They published my tale and released the names of all the kids I butchered, the names I remembered at least. Hundreds of WASPs waddled past my cell in a veritable march of the pugnacious penguins. Most swore and hissed.

“I hope you scream loud when they burn you, WITCH,” was pretty common. The mothers of the kids I took didn't say anything. Most just smiled.

Hansel and Gretel made jewels suing the conglomerate that owned Saccharine Suite (Conning Fox Technologies), but that's not how I made the Economic section of the news. A famous economist, Swift Jonathan, saw a marked increase in productivity in my home village and claimed they could solve their overpopulation issues if they sold orphan meat. He suggested that they could chain up many orphans so they

couldn't move and their meat couldn't get too tough- an orphan veal of sorts. The secretary of state was just happy at the jump in WASP approval in Africa. They bombed my village anyhow.

I laugh a lot now. Big bellowing laughs I hope Ole Prophet can hear if he survived the firebombing. If anyone survived it'd be that old coot. I fed my family, but they all died anyway. Karon, that gal that worked next door was arrested for drowning pool goers and baking them under the sun lamps. She was going to send their crispy remains to her family in Bangladesh. Three others were also arrested for "cannibalism with intent to sell." All their villages got bombed, but it won't stop. Everything keeps coming around, happening again and again. The witch in me can't stop laughin'.

Matthew Yodanis

THE TURTLE AND THE BEAR

Female European Cuckoos lay their eggs only in the nests of other species of birds...The host may recognize the intruding egg and abandon the nest, or it may incubate and hatch the cuckoo egg. Shortly after hatching, the young European Cuckoo... instinctively shoves over the edge of the nest any solid object that it contacts. With the disappearance of their eggs and rightful young, the foster parents are free to devote all of their care to the young cuckoo. Frequently this is an awesome task, since the cuckoo chick often grows much larger than the host adults long before it can care for itself. One of the tragicomic scenes in nature is a pair of small foster parents working like Sisyphus to keep up with the voracious appetite of an outsized young cuckoo.
— “Brood Parasitism”

Bubbling primordial unconscious space broods in quantum collections from the *nil*. The inhospitable Void spotted with a fertile crescent. The crescent cracks, into the ephemeral conception of a banging explosion that is our eternity. That spark in the Void: *inception* and thunderous consciousness. Soaring planetary trees solidify, grow, and enumerate an expansive forest. The energetic bird of querulous cry and eclectic homestead searches the forks of trees for magma, lightening and water — a magnanimous place for striking condensation. The third fork from Helios proves strong, small-possible. A microscopic egg is dropped and the Cuckoo soars off into the dissipation of Helios coupling the Hydra, speckling her children and the alien nest with stardust.

In the phantasm of a fog, the speckled egg hatches.

“Excuse me, sir?”

“Yes?”

“Can you tell me who I am?”

“Well, no.” the man looked at our hero perplexed. “But I can tell you where you are.”

“You can? Wonderful!” Our hero clapped his hands and leaned in with anticipation. “And where would that be?”

“Why, you’re Here.”

“Here?” our hero asked. The man nodded. “Are you sure?” The man nodded again, pursing his lips. “Wonderful!” Our hero grappled the man with a long tendril over the shoulder. “I can’t believe I’ve made it this far. I’m Nova by the way and I’m headed There!” He pointed with his free hand.

“There!” the man gasped. “Really?”

“Yes!”

“Why There, if I may ask?” He peeled Nova’s hand off of him and patted down his suit. Nova twitched his head backwards and gave a blank look as if you asked which finger his father preferred inserted into his urethra. Pointer. He scratched his chin and, in realizing he had a beard, began to stroke it.

“Why,” Nova whispered. “Because!” He spun his hand around and thrust it into the air. The man blinked twice and stretched his eyebrows. Nova gave him a hug. “I’m sure there is something There.” His hold on the man was tightened and they were both surprised at the ferocity of Nova’s bear hug.

“I think I’ll join you.” The man choked out. Nova jumped backwards, all Cheshire grin.

“Really?”

The man was gone.

It’s not the journey, it’s the destination
Because every footstep
Is a place that

Traced back to a moment
Was your destination.
Till the next quest
The next moment
Assured this, the penultimate
Footstep was found.
Like the last penultimate footstep
Was found.

Nova was There now. A thatched roof with yellow-brick walls stood surrounded by moss. The edifice stood atop an olive marbled pebble and was gated by fallen tree toothpicks. Patches of aquamarine crystal poked about where the moss cover failed and the rock had chosen to hide in respite.

“Home.” Nova felt the wooden door. Velvet. So much so that he could see streaks of purple in the bloated boards as they succumbed to his hand and slowly reshaped. The door was moist and his hand was left wet and uncaressed when she opened it.

“Hello.” Nova’s neck was craned upwards and his tongue scratched his upper two front teeth.

“Doors are not for petting!” She chastised. Nova fanaticized about her cocoa crocheted hair. “Animals are for petting!” She closed her eyes (to Nova’s dismay) and furiously nodded. “But not all of them.” Her face lost some of its powder pink to pallor with this morbid parcel of knowledge. “You know which ones are for petting because we call them ‘pets.’” She gave a stern look as a librarian looking over her glasses. “Would you like to see one?”

“See what?”

“My Pet!” and she dragged him inside. The house was simple. A thin jacket lay lonely on an arthritic hook. A queen-sized bed with four guarding posts and hanging gardens of lattice silk waited in one corner of the house, taking up half the house. A kingly bear hibernating took up the other half. This is my Pet! She began to scratch

the bear behind the ears.

“Aren’t you afraid he might kill you?” Nova hid behind the jacket.

“Sure. I’m afraid that hook, that bed, and me might kill me too.” She shoved her face into the bear’s stomach. The bear looked up at her and she scratched him under the chin. Now fearing the might of the arthritic hook, Nova neared her. The bear was the size of a Mini-cooper and was thoroughly enjoying its chin rub. He kneeled next to her and let his fingers fall into her locks. She turned towards him and his fingertips brushed her cheek and lips.

“I’m not a pet.” She stared at him, her head tilted. “Do you want me to be your pet?” His eyes left hers and he nodded. “Okay. My name’s Amamur. But call me Amy.” She laid down next to the bear, mimicking a fetus. He wrapped his arms around her and joined her in the womb. Three eternities passed.

“I don’t belong here.” Nova stood up. “I don’t belong here. I belong There.”

“We are There.” Amy mumbled. She rubbed her face against the bear’s fur.

“No, no, no, no, no,” Nova shook his head without stop. “We were There, but now we are there. And soon we will be here. And now will be here.” His gaze was aslant and his right pointer lay above his lips, his knuckle in his nostril. The thatched roof and the yellow brick walls were missing, leaving only a wooden floor, a bed, a hook, and a snoring bear. Amy yawned, smacking her lips.

“Wanna see my turtle?”

The Turtle lay upside down on the other side of the pebble. He appeared to be struggling slightly to right himself.

“See,” Amy smiled. “My Turtle.”

“Why is he upside down?”

“So he can go all the way up!” She raised her hands above her head and stood on her tip-toes. The turtle wriggled some more.

“Shouldn’t we right him?” Nova nudged the reptile’s shell. The creature rocked back and forth.

“Well, technically we are upside down.”

“Oh.” The two stared at the turtle. The turtle shook some more and stared at the sky. Nova’s attention veered and he stared left. “What’s that over there?” Nova tapped Amy on the shoulder. She glanced over.

“You know, the ledge.”

“The ledge?”

“Yup.”

“Oh.”

The ledge was bare gray pebble. A sign tilted askance next to the ledge read:

Veni Vidi Perivi Subito

(I came, I saw, I died unexpectedly)

As much as he squinted at it, Nova didn’t understand. He looked back at Amy, smiling at the turtle. He smiled, too.

“Will you come back?” she asked, never letting her eyes leave the turtle.

“What? I’m not leaving.” Nova said and promptly walked off the ledge.

Go to sleep, you are only living. Go to sleep, you are only living. Go to sleep...

Matthew Yodanis
GANGBANG?

"You ready?"

We stare at the bed
Now the bench of a guillotine
Gleaming hand-me-down wood
And an oversized nest of brown hair
For a mattress.

Four pairs of jeans in every hue of blue
On the faded dirty tile floor.

There in the bed now
They are in the bed now
Covered up
With their pants down
I hop in the bed
A rabbit *la petit*
And land in the middle
And slip myself
Under the blanketed crevice.
He to the left of me, and the other to the right.

"All you have to do is say no, man"

My underwear, the checkered
Flag covered with locks
Of trimmed pubic hair
And thrown out of nowhere

"I'm up for it"

With the slow Serpent's slither
They dance out of their own
Leg shift by Leg shift
One calf, the other
Ankle Ankle
Foot Foot
Toe Toe

"I've taken others. Hell, I took His. Why not another one?"

She kneels arched above us
Her shins held by the sunken
Mattress felt.
The sliding glass looks cleaner now.
It's twilight at five outside.

"Well, do you feel different?"
No, I say from the armrest
That I sit on like a dog
Or like when I was a child
And read against my
Mother's shoulder.

We drive to Doc's
For its eponymous Good Food
Our amalgamated clothes askew.
I'm not hungry, so I order nothing
—well a coffee.
He orders something
—chocolate pancake
Pigs in a blanket.

I stared down and I was inside you.
I'm inside you and you're kissing him
I suckle like the goat that I am
And your hand was around them
Tugging with the movement of breath.
I think I hated you.
But I'm still thrusting.

"Well what do you want to do?"

I stared at your tits
Or stared at Us
Or thought about the feeling
When you fell just right
Another fold was found
And inside you squeezed
And wrapped tighter, higher.
I would not look at your face.

And when it was Time,
I struggled out of you
Desperate not to leave
Myself there.

I looked at you
Beside me
Embraced loosely around
His hair and His flesh
As I dripped out of you
You pretended to cry

The orders up
There we sat,
Before...

Before the other took you for his own.
Before your mock suicide attempt.
Four pigs in a blanket,
Dotted with chocolate dirt.

"I'm bored. Let's do something."

Matthew Yodanis

I BELIEVE

I believe human's new gold is green

And we fritter and
Twitter, wasting worth
In the current.
See?

I trust in Haiku
For their nature takes no change;
Ours is dynamic.
I believe that I do not know
What the near future holds, be it
Logic, trees, or moneyed networks;
We will not see
It
over our sliver of silver screen.

I see that trouble's the old serene

That pernicious poverty pales in comparison
To pundit's apocalyptic pedantries on pointless politics.
I believe in the healthy path

By the strong snort
The double slip, the endless hit,
And the intravenous injection.
I believe there is a certain inflection
In the treble of the medicine man's
Voice when he brings to your attention that
You have an infection, but then with a
Sharp interjection asks for your tightening coin purse.
I believe not that life begins at conception.
Life begins at the first delightfully quick or sensuously long
Kiss. I believe that children are not people but playful nymphs
Of rock and water born of sexual excitement.
Their erotic energy stays hidden until
They ooze through the Play-Doh mold of Person,
Smooth as Barbie or Ken
Disfigured into individual imperfection
With emotional recession.

I think true love is sour.

It makes one squirm and squint and contort
At the acidic taste; eat up.
I believe in coffee — filtered, brewed, steeped and pressed
Into caramel Machismo and coy lattes
Sipped in a wet spring sunrise.
I believe in raucous dinners on red wine rivers,
With a tinge of laughter,
Aside a rind of meaty conversation chewed whole.
I believe a hand can be squeezed tightly

Or lips pressed lightly between
The flickering pecks of a movie projector.
Now, I believe that beds are too big and sidewalks too wide.

I believe there is no difference between a millennia and an hour.

That every god must also be the Devil.
That every good is inherently bad.
I believe that we
Individuals
Are torn from the same gooey pink putty
Imprinted playfully with the black ink news around us
Stretched, distressed, pulled, prodded, slapped, split or otherwise
Formed
Into our slightly tarnished self by unwitting or
Uncaring hands.
I believe this is all reaction.

I see grief destroys belief

That heart attacks are more
Cancerous to Christianity and God
Than His sudden death declared by Nietzsche.
I believe in nothing, but
Nothing came from
Something so I believe in
Something. But something is also
Nothing. So I believe in

Everything.

I think there is nothing left to reap

For the ripped cannot be sewn
And here we stand so bleak
At the edge of the unknown.
I believe uncertainty is underrated
Like long walks or deep thoughts.
I believe we have our black/white
Color connotations contorted.
I believe we have no hope of
Knowing what there is to do.
Nevertheless,
I think nothing has to change and
For everyone to.

I believe there is another way

I believe.

Matthew Yodanis

A BASEMENT, A BOY

Fenced in-between perpendicular roads perpetually under construction lays a herd of ranch style houses. If you take a right off Hoover and a left onto Bonnie, count three houses and look for the black basketball hoop with the rusted chain, you'll reach a house. Open the front door. It is usually unlocked but likes to stick. Walk past the living room. It is rarely ever used for *living*. Perhaps the Christmas tree room or the room with all the phone chargers would be more appropriate. Turn left through the kitchen and make another left past the silver raised dog dishes. Walk, don't systematically fall ass under ass, down the 1970's brown carpeted stairs. With a mere brush of your shoulder, the fifty dozen overstuffed winter coats on the five broken hooks may become suicidal and lunge off their home towards you. Lift the three light switches with your pointer finger until the plastic snaps at you for ruining their slumber. Be patient. The light will come — I think. I always hold my breath between the flickers of the fluorescents, sure their final flicker of white flame was their last and I will be left behind in the darkness. It is very hard to find even a succinct source of light when everything is darkness. But the lights, like an old diesel, will only stall for so long before the low hum of white light reveals My Basement.

Today it smells like that ginger candle burning to the right of you. That orb over there, emanating the orange memorial service light, wallowing on the buffet littered with pictures. But last week, or maybe last month, or maybe any particular weekend in the last quarter of a decade, it reeked of pizza left out overnight. The kind of pizza that makes your hair grow in mushroom spirals. The kind of thick square pizza that soaks up pale German lager like an old kitchen sponge. It would have that indiscernible stink

that settles wherever pubescent boys lay for too long. Something like stale body odor and faint angst.

The futon is made, the floor glistens, and the ad hoc festival of game consoles, computers, and TVs is distinctly missing. I look under the bed. Where are the tiniest pieces of shattered glass that make one hemorrhage expletives but never bleed? We broke about half of my mom's glassware down here and yet there is not a shard of evidence to remind my memory and bite weakly at my sole. Where are the empty pop bottles ashamed with sticky residue and huddled under the bed? Where is the inconspicuous bag of stale tortilla chips that we ate when there was nothing better to do? Where is that little boy staring at screens with his friends and playing games and listening to music and drinking and watching TV all at the same time because he is trying as hard as he can not to think? They say he went off to a college (whose name they speak with more pride than he ever did) and they cleaned that big mess up. I'll sleep in that futon tonight. They said that little boy came home from college. He never made it. Last I saw him he was searching through garbage cans looking for himself.

If you took a step back from the light fixture and take a look to your left you'll see a door trimmed with the same cheap wood as the rest of the wall, but one, two inches short of flush with it. Through here is the laundry room, my mother's domain. After the scum and filth of an ordinary day, we deposit our skin and clothes into the basket, where fabric overflows like hot fudge and ice cream melting in a tall sundae glass. The contents are spilled and, with a sly foot, are sorted into piles of colors, whites, and denim. Everything in its place. She would check our pockets for coins and green headshots of presidents that she would stuff and pop into a red corrugated plastic cup — the ones you usually find at mom and pop restaurants. That was her sunny day fund. It's how she saved money for sweltering southern vacations. She'd scoop our careless coinage into that plastic cup and would turn it to rum on the beach

Next to the cup that housed her dreams — staring ambivalently, from its shelf, at the dryer — stood chemical after chemical. Detergents, softeners, cleaners for dog wizz, cleansers for human piss, and a slew of other spot cleaners were at the ready to shoot at the first sign of disorder. Their inviting colors of bright oranges and neon

blues always made me want to take a gulp. The bulging curves of the detergents called to me, and the squirt bottles that would spray with a single pull begged to be touched. Alas, the shelf was too high for my inadequate and fat hands. I was chastised about their toxicity and watched, confounded, as they were poured all over my clothes and scrubbed into my mother's menstrual-blooded panties that were soaking in an empty gallon ice-cream tub in the gray sink.

Almost every room in a middle class household is multi-purpose. My mother's laundry room was no exception. Beside the table of sorted clothes, there were winter jackets all in a row, a treadmill left unused, and a pantry full of spoons, blenders, bowls, and everything else that wouldn't fit in the kitchen. Amongst this maternal workspace that leaked dripping femininity to the rest of the house was a small closet cut halfway through by falling stairs. Here was every saw, screwdriver, hammer, and nail my father was allowed to collect.

When I was six, we went to Home Depot. My mother was flicking through paint cards with an arching pointer affixed with a fake red nail. My father, who was losing what gray hair he had left to the dull glimmer of a bald forehead, scampered up to my mother. In his wrinkly hands was a circular saw. He presented it to her with the delicateness and gravity that one uses with a bible in a church procession. Her mouth melted to a flat line and her right eyebrow bubbled up.

"It's on sale!" my father suggested.

"What would you need *that* for?"

"You never know when it will come in handy!" He left his lips parted a little and appeared to look up at her despite his five inch height advantage.

Her free hand cusped her waist and her spine straightened; her body still faced the paint cards.

"You don't need any more of this crap. Put it back." His shoulders slumped and he dragged his feet away. His baby blue polo and beige shorts slipped down an aisle. My mother grinned down at my oversized sunshine yellow shirt. I blinked in my bowl cut and stared at her toothy stellar countenance.

"Mommy," I tugged on her well worked jeans. "Why can't Daddy have the surc-ler

saw?” Her eyes slit for a single second and then her smile superficially grew.

“For the same reason you couldn’t get that Power Ranger at Target.” Her pitch jumped to meet the educational occasion. “We don’t need all these things. And we can’t afford them.” Her lesson distracted me with the mention of Power Rangers. I really wanted the black one. “That,” her voice lowered and she returned to looking at paint colors, “and we would need to buy an ‘am-blance’ if we bought Daddy a circular saw.” Before I could ask again for the black Power Ranger, an inept eighteen-year-old lost hold of the paint can he had just mixed for a pre-teen girl and her mother. An inharmonious clang echoed from the metal can hitting the cement and a sudden wave of “Orchid Petal” paint splattered my wee shorts. We left soon after my mother vigorously scrubbed out as much paint as possible.

So my Father’s sanctuary of masculinity remained rather small (and mostly unvisited). It made a good home for any spiders kicked out of their wife’s web and became Michigan’s National Museum of Dust, with exhibits on bare, unpainted, empty shelves.

The rest of the basement, My Basement, was the children’s domain. When the adults drank what I thought was Mountain Dew (“Luhhhhkeeeey”) or my babysitting Granny snored on the couch, we frolicked amongst the Legos and drove dozens of miles on printed carpet cities with Hot Wheels and the knock-off ones made entirely of plastic. Our favorite games didn’t involve temperate wheels or cosmopolitan mats. We liked to pretend we were big grownups that went to jobs, worked, and slept. One of my cousins would play my wife and we’d circle between rooms (going to work) and lying on our favorite blankets on the basement floor (sleeping). My cousin-wife would not go to work, but clean up or make dinner. We’d do this cycle again and again for hours. That’s what being an adult was.

We would play another game in The Closet. The Closet is what you are staring at as soon as you come out of mom’s laundry room. It is different from that other closet full of toys. That closet is cold, and if you walk far enough into it you can peek at the

gritty pipes that run water or shit or blood around the house. I never like to look at those inner workings imbedded in the foundation. They were old and ugly and full of horrifically harmless spiders. No one cares about them anyway, unless an unmaintained pipe rusts out and causes damages to the first story. The Closet, however, was warm and soft. Dozens of out of season dresses hung like drapes and accepted us with only a smirk and a little pucker when we crawled past the blue containers into it. We could all fit in there — knee to chin at least. One of us would close the door and, in the total darkness that only children can bare, we whispered. The pink cloth would move with a retentive fluidity as we searched with outstretched hands and quiet voices to find each other. Embraced with interlocking arms in the darkness, we would wait. We were hiding. It was late afternoon and their parents would soon be coming to take them home. Inevitably they would be dragged, often kicking and crying, from The Closet. We prayed they wouldn't take them, even though, with the only logic we could find, that if they couldn't find us, they couldn't take them home. The adults would leave, disenfranchised, and let my cousins stay the night. And we would do this forever, night after night, so no one would have to leave and go home. We brought orange lights and barbeque chips into The Closet for survival. No matter how quiet we were, or how fast we scurried away from the opening door like cockroaches, a parent would grab one of them and yank them out headfirst. If they were particularly impatient, they'd even grab a shoeless foot and risk our removal that way. No matter what, they would all be pulled out and leave The Closet crying with a blushing butt and I would be left alone. There was no point staying in that cloister without them. No matter how soothing that evening gown and fallen t-shirt felt in my fetal position, I got lonely. I would leave on my own to an empty basement, my parents upstairs.

I don't know why I was so distressed every night they left. The next day they always returned before I awoke. They were Christmas presents that I would run downstairs to unwrap and play with. Entire summers, when not spent in garden hose water outside, was spent in My Basement. Soon, so many summers passed and we could no longer fit in The Closet. We tumbled out one day with nickel budding breasts and slightly swinging testicles askew. We knew what was happening. Our older Cousins

gave us great instruction. No more Barney. You are growing up. The toy cars and action figures didn't shine with the allure of wet flower petals anymore. They were stupid little toys that broke too often. Of course we didn't believe this. We were still wonderful pretenders. So we sat around and talked about nothing, or laughed about something like how a word sounded. *Noodle*. Tee-hee. *Frugal*. Ha ha! *Giggle*. *Ph-uck*. Something happened in one of those voluminous fits of hysterical laughter that feeds off itself. Where a group of wannabes drinks in their own intoxicated punch of cackles until they are so high their ribs bite at their stomachs and they don't know why they are laughing. I was naked and running to and from cover. Their jovial cries grew louder. And they joined in. Shirts and pants began huddling into piles as another nymph darted from behind stool to couch. The drop ceiling hid our laughter from my Granny, watching *The Young and The Restless* religiously.

My Basement was here before I was. It was ready for something to live there the first time I looked down the steps. My Basement is the foundation of my house. Any creak or drop of water or hint of electricity you feel in the living room comes from down there. My Basement hides things, like mold and suitcases that I had almost forgotten about, that I thought I didn't need and thought had ceased taking up space. My Basement is damaged from childhood — the drop ceiling is pimpled with holes from too-eager-to-fly bouncy balls. My Basement never changes. No matter how I move the furniture around, take down the Confederate flag, stop hiding the liquor bottles, put away the knives, or toss away the underwear, it is still the same basement. We always loved to pretend we were independent, that My Basement was independent of Everything Else. And we loved to pretend we were adults — in blankets, in closets and through doors. Tomorrow, I will walk up the stairs and go back to college. The beagle will be absent from her bowl and laying as close to death as possible on the couch. I'll walk out the door, think about locking it. I won't. I'll start the car. I will make a right and then a left. I will leave the cattle farm of ranch style houses. I will leave the perpendicular roads for swerving ones that are aged but in good shape. I'll talk politics with my father. I will reach my dorm. I will sleep and I will work. Then I will sleep and then I will work. I'm still pretending.

