



EARLAND

SPRING 2010

VOLUME 23

GARLAND

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY MARYLAND

TABLE OF CONTENTS

clark, charles	little asian chinese delivery girl	48-49	nicotera, april	2010	20-21
cowan, michelle	cars	41		already	62-67
	fire lit sky	40		queen autumn	19
davis, gianni	sunset	50-52	peterson, megan	lament of the only child	22
fagerberg, jerard	the earth laughs in flowers	8		loved sinner	23
	the small part	9		victorian women	24
ferrari, nicole	of history and music	10	rees, christian	a boy	25
	rain	11		blood	26
	recalling an ansel adams panorama	12		white expanse	27
	b&w 003	43	rose, james	american gothic	28
	surreal 003 lesser	45		her story	29
	surreal 006	42		memories from my youth	30
hallman, david	i-ching 9: the taming power of the small	13	scholldorf, alexandra	healing process	31
	reconcile/onecircle	14		mission first	32
jimenez, elaine	to a red sunset	15	toth, megan	untitled	44
	here be dragons	73-75	tucker, stephenie	emancipation	68-72
kane, peter	reefer: almost a palindrome	16	van horn, alexander	starless night	33
	the funeral of joseph lamont	53-57		thoughts on a dark beach	34-35
malone, jeffrey	shit list	58-61	vincent, donald	an illustrious stigmata	36
mascia, nick	etched in dark metal	17		united we stand	37
	yellow prayers	18			

GARLAND EDITOR'S NOTE

Garland, Volume 23, 2010

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Garland does not take any publishing rights of any kind. All rights remain the author's. Undergraduate members of the university community are invited to submit original works of non-fiction, art, and photography. Please submit any inquiries or submissions to garland@loyola.edu, or to Garland Magazine, Loyola Writing Department, 4501 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21210.

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The world is filled with stories. As readers, our time is spent nose-first, examining others' words and trying to relate ourselves to them; as writers, the inherent role of reader is taken even farther as we struggle to fit our own words into the past and present of stories, our own identities into the established community of writers. It's sometimes a difficult thing to identify ourselves as not just readers but writers—it can be as if a burden is placed on our shoulders, one that compels us, always, to push forward and create, even when, truth be told, we don't want to.

Luckily for us, the writers contained in this collection have all successfully accepted the challenge to explore and create. This edition of *Garland*—the first as Loyola University—is filled with page after page of fiction and poetry that, I hope, will speak to both the reader in all of us and the writers among us.

My sincerest thanks go out to the dedicated staff of *Garland*, the skilled editors, designers, and managers who make production possible; Laura Nieman, Editor-in-Chief of the *Forum* and partner in crime; the faculty advisors, Ron Tanner and Jane Satterfield, who always seem to have answers to my inane questions; and finally, the writers contained in this edition, without whom *Garland* would be nothing.

Siobhan Watson
Editor-in-Chief

POETRY

12:19AM; September 21, 1895-

A young Edward Estlin Cummings noisily jerks out of nightmare on a cold autumn night. The boy's mother, Rebecca Haswell Clark, is awakened by his yelp and rushes to his bedroom.

"Estlin, are you alright? You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

"i've been visited by a bad dream, not a nightmare (per se, but a black and white dreambreath where at once! everything was Night-but-still-Day and the pitterpa tterpe ople (in my dream) made no surprise, no awkward observation; just smiled unConCEivinGly"

"Dear boy, is that all? You look so frazzled."

"and i strolled patternedly left-right-left-right through a beautiful park, where the oncesocoloured trees were suddenly sucked in grey and the lilac pods split u.n.s.e.a.m.i.n.g.l.y (like lips) spitTingly notso purple petals, the grass still felt earthy like grass does, the birds still sang their something of a song & a man named someone still kissed a girl named anything on the park bench but her cheeks (muted blushed a dull rose. even my living veins had lost their (gentle) blue and the wonderfull was empty."

"Don't be silly, there are many sorts of colors inside of you. They run all through you from your fingertips to your heart and back again; just like they run through the trees and the flowers and the sky. It's not going anywhere."

"i remembered colours, though i couldn't find words to describe colours & everyone else seemed to forget. there was an orchid, red bright red on the highest reebranch, above in verdant softness, beckoningly rare - the familiar flower of what my blood was once. i reeeeeaaaaached for it, extending my fingers like roads forking & parting, seeking. but i could not grasp, my chest heaved nowhere, held back by little fingers of nothing, pulling me to wards bla ck again. i called for Spring! and her many coloured touch, but her face was turned."

"Now, now Estlin, it was just a dream. The colors never left, they're all around you. Your hunter green fleece, the perky red ball on your floor - even your calm brown eyes; they're all here. Lay your head back down; it's much too late to be up worrying about fading, don't you think? Sometimes your vibrant little imagination gets the best of you, but it's nothing a little sleep can't fix. Come now."

"MOTHER, once the lights cutoff i'm afraid the coming-to-stain nothing will swallow & never spit back out the colours i love. please, (maybe) if you sit there at the end of my bed until i drift-off-to-sleep, all will sink back in and (perhaps) open up."

And the boy drifted, all wonderful, into a dream called poetry.

"I'm sure the large part of me is Holden Caulfield.... The small part of me must be the Devil."

- Mark David Chapman

The heretic strolled through the doors of the Dakota, smiling at me from behind his tinted round rims. I shook his hand and felt a tinge of pulse in his skin, a note life in his grip - a rhythm I vowed to stop.

As he signed my copy of *Double Fantasy* I waited for an answer.

"Mr. Lennon, where do the ducks go in the winter? You're the only one who knows."

He kept his lips tight in that smile, holding all behind those circle glass screens.

I struggled to suppress as that sonuvabitch slipped into his limousine. I wanted to go back to the hotel but my small part would not let go. This was something polemic, his beating hypocrisy had to be silenced.

I swear,

I never pulled the trigger.

I never did.

It was Holden. My narrator.

He cannot stand phonies.

Once, he told me he wanted to empty a revolver into the gut of some fellow who wronged him.

And he took me by the hands.

Here, in the middle of the Academic Wing
Of our high-school,
The hottest part of the entire building;
Mr. Kachur, struggling
To breathe and teach, said we don't
Know anything about music.

He played Pink Floyd while we dissected worms.

The formaldehyde nauseated us,
And disconnected, yet somehow fitting
Lyrics played in the background.
The walls of the classroom held relics
From his life over the years with mixed
Biological knick-knacks.
A corkboard had a black and white picture of the Rolling Stones,
With a less wrinkled Mick Jagger and long tufts of hair.
A baby shark floats in a murky
Bubble on a shelf, preserved forever in the chemicals.
I'll see you on the dark side of the moon.

Today while we worked, I saw
A boy across the room mouth
The words of the song. Scanning the room
I saw that most of us were tapping our pencils,
Or shoes with the slow beat.

Mr. Kachur was now speaking to us
As if we represented the whole of our generation,
As if we were capable of using his generalized statements,
That we don't know good music,
That our generation missed the good decades,
To teach the other teenagers what we all are missing out on.

I watched him and imagined his wrinkly button-up hiding
Some faded tattoo, a souvenir from his golden days,
And wondered how it compared to mine.
Sometimes a whole generation thinks it's dying.

A whisper in my ear,
The wind pushes droplets
Onto the steaming,
Holocaust road.

Silver grains lend themselves to the deepest gradations
Of white, black, and gray.
They lead the eye through a maze of summits: infinite.
How does a five-inch box of light capture so much?

Below the photographer is a peak much like
The ones standing before him.
Not that a single mountain says much about itself—
It is a place that many people have scaled before.
Rather, the view from atop lends to the meaning
That after you've mastered this pinnacle,
There are many more to follow.

And the soul, hungry,
Is reassured by such small things:
A five-inch box enlightens us, a landscape on paper,
A memory, even for those who did not see.

a finger raised is
all it takes to end a war,
to start a new peace

pausing long enough
to stop, collecting oneself,
carving a new path

this is how you pray:
like silent wind moving clouds.
this is how you die:

a firm-clenched fist is
all it takes to end a friendship
to start a new hate

rushing too quickly
to stop, destroying what was,
carving a new wound

a tree is a tree is a tree
is a home to
 a bird
is a mother who lays
 her eggs
are a meal for
 a snake
is a temptress to
 a woman
is a temptress to
 a man
is the one who eats
 the fruit
is a product of
 a tree
is a piece of wood for
 a carpenter
is a maker of
 a cross
is a punishment for
 a man
is a preacher about
 a kingdom
is like a mustard seed grown into
a tree is a tree is a tree

How have you eluded my vision for so long,
shocking my eyes with such fiery luminance,
brilliance that dulls all reds into muds: the
crumbled brick of destroyed, abandoned houses?
Why was I left unaware of this flood,
leaving myself prey to your dying wonder,
this crimson atmosphere feeding the fading sun
to make it burn its brightest when the day is done.
And if color had weight, I'd lament your gravitation
into gloom: the crack that issues the sparkling
blackness of night; yet I know when you sink
into the earth with the sun, you will rise again
with morning in blooms vibrant and pulsing,
throbbing petals of blood.

The goal is to get high.
To reach it, you'll need just one hit
and with your friends, you'll get by.

Work away, do not sigh,
just embrace this schoolboy's writ:
the goal is to get high.

At workday's end please lie
and say, "We'll be back in a bit,"
and with your friends, you'll get by.

Beware the trouble of the passers-by
who'll catch a whiff and pitch a fit.
The goal is to get high.

Always remember: Deny, deny, deny.
is the best code when you're lit,
and with your friends, you'll get by.

With this, I'll leave you on the fly
and disappear "all fucked-up and shit."
The goal is to get high
and with your friends, you'll get by.

Etched in dark metal, the letters
of my name are rusted red
like desert suns of barren lands.
Youth's a far-off land I can't believe.

The B.B. gun's a rusted black.
I found it in the shed out back
below an unstrung fishing pole.

A big, dark crow in summer's heat
would perch within the evergreens
that stood beside my pops' porch.

The pop of air and broken limbs
were pastors humming quiet hymns.
I'd done it, though, but can't perceive

how red could stain such black feathers.
The crime I had committed glaring red
though kids are kids in any land —
youth can be a land I can't believe.

I uttered a yellow prayer
and wished it even more yellow than I could bellow.
This prayer came as I had fallen like a snow-
flake. Excused from the sky, I wallowed
and slowly plunged
earthbound.

I wanted my yellowness heaven-bound!
But the priest had said my prayer
was not. I felt my heart plunge
and finally understood his priestly bellow —
a spoon so full I could barely swallow.
Say five Our Fathers now.

Fears fell like ill-condensed snow,
otherwise known as rain, earthbound.
It crashed against the pavement and wallowed
there. I prayed
that a melodramatic bellow —
I'll never sin again, I swear! — had not begun a deeper plunge

like rain falling in a street gutter, a deep plunge.
As those sewers overflow with self-contempt, I realize now
that in a loud, yellow bellow —
I'll never sin again, grant me one wish — deceptions abound,
I crafted a half-hearted prayer,
a grave offense no matter how much I wallow.

I began: "Our Father, Who art in Heaven, hallowed
be Thy name" ... Plunged
yet again into safety; a predictable prayer.
My prayer snowing
remnants of the "nowhere bound."
Unable to finish, I stand and follow

the Church stairwell below.
It's quiet enough here to wallow,
safe enough for a non-heaven-bound
wallower who lunges
like a snow-
flake that melt on too warm pavement. Like my yellow prayer.

And yet my prayer follows me below
the altar where I stare at yellow stained glass, hollow
and smudged with dirt, to which I feel bound.

It was a Sunday morning when I found her,
wrapped in a quilt of reds and browns
and golds and greens.

I found her just as the first kiss of waking
dawned in her heavy eyelids.

She yawned and the quilt trembled,
forests of muted elegance contouring
around her curves.

I was paralyzed in awe of her beauty.

"I'm here," she murmured, voice soft and throaty —
(the alto-tenor segue in an a cappella or
brass bells orchestra concerto)

I smiled at her, a warm glow numbing my ears.

Everything she spoke was a slow jazz riff,
scatting and *bee-bop-da-banning* in a dance
that we all hear but never learn.

"I'm here for the season, would you buy me a drink?"
Her nose was red, eyes sharp.

The quilt was everywhere, a kimono, now
draped over her arms, legs, torso;
her smile was wide and welcoming
and I could smell all of the crisp coolness
of her fragrant opiates drenching me.

I told her that yes, I would buy her a drink,
and would she like rum or gin or bourbon?

She breathed out in eight bars of quick time,
adding grace notes and pick ups as she darned her quilt.

"A hot toddy for me," she breathed,
her melodic voice was rich and savory, a heated thermos
of tea or coffee or cocoa.

"Only a hot toddy will do."

She sipped it effortlessly, never smearing her lipstick,
and when she was finished, wiped her mouth,
said her strange, secular prayers,
draped the quilt,
and went to bed.
Her quilt became her castle.

Nymphs live in bars.
 I am sipping at my drink
 as they are dancing on the table.
 Scotch on the rocks for the old gentleman,
 but a little vodka with a twist for me.
 The nymphs are dancing on the table.
 Everything's going to be fine.

"We're here to play," they murmur.
 They are pretty faces sparkling under cheap lights.
 "We're here to get you *all* to play."

I don't usually do this,
 we all whisper into our glasses,
I don't usually drink on a week night.
 We exchange glances with each other.
Damn underage girls ruining it for everyone.
Will someone card her? Will someone?
 But I was her once. I was her not long ago,
 not terribly long ago.

The nymphs dance again, rocking their hips
 swaying their arms like stalks of the palest
 wheat in a field.
 Innocent or seductive; is she a temptress
 or a child?

"We're here to let you in on a secret,"
 She whispers something in my ear.
 Her breath is sweet and deathly,
 sticky nectar from a poisonous fruit.
 "We're bringing the apocalypse."

The room falls silent.
 Hanging lights are humming with a
 triumphant fluorescent glory.
 The bartender wipes the counter with a rag.
 A cue ball is frozen near the corner pocket.
 The music swallows all and the nymphs dance.

"And oh, isn't it a fun way to go?
 Everyone in a frenzy,
 don't you have any parting words?
 Don't you want to bid your earth farewell?"

The nymphs are spinning majestically
 calm and slow, twirling as though magnetized to the table.

"The apocalypse is now?" I ask. My voice echoes.
 The nymph nods.
 "Then let's go." I drain my drink. "Bartender?
 I'd like a jug of wine."

He squints at me, his eyes dazzled by the sequins of
 nymph wisdom glittering around everything.
 "We don't sell no jugs o' wine."

"Then give me a bottle, Jim. Sweet red wine.
 Hell, give me two."
 When he emerges with the wine, I drink it.
 I drink slowly, inhaling and savoring the sweet elixir.
 I offer it to the nymph.

She drinks until her cheeks are rosy, and she giggles.
 "It's now," she breathes. I can smell the wine on her.
 She kisses my cheek. Her lips are soft.
 She's so pretty, so flawless.

[*Inhuman.*]

"The end of your breath, your philosophy,
 the end is swelling now. Say farewell to your earth
 and drink our wine with me."

She is holding my hand. Her palm is cool, fingers long.
 Is she brittle, or am I?
 The world is rushing.

[*Rushing.*]

[*Rushing.*]

We are here; we are safe.
 Everything is dark, all dark, and here is a man.
 He is fat and rosy, an aged cherub with a vine-crown
 circling his head. Childlike, geriatric, he is
 dancing sloppily. Drunk? Or ataxic?

"You are one of us now," the nymph says. She is kissing me.
 "You are immortal."
 Don't you want to bid your earth farewell?

I've been staring at this scratch on the floor that hasn't been tread on for a few years now, since I was six and mom was propped in the purity of a hospital bed for the proper recovery time. When you're young, these moments are both perpetual and brief. Yet it took me years to understand that her organ was gone, lost at the hands of some ambivalent host like a doctor or God. What was left? Just a hole, merely a hole. But it was one that punctured far beyond her flesh. Sometimes I think to myself, "They should have held her longer at the hospital." Yet I know now that these things cannot be accurately perceived, because once in a while I'll pass by that mark and see something that I shouldn't. I'll see mom's starved self prostrated on the kitchen floor, just scratching at the crevice there where she swears to have found baby Jesus. My eyelids compress, but they're both smiling, always smiling right up at me.

Bone collides with stone as I genuflect a little too violently. North, south, east, west, my finger tips distinguish the divine compass of the Trinity above my core. Who decided that the Holy Spirit deserved two points anyway? Was it Jesus, who now regards me mournfully from his mount upon the cross? "Yes," I acknowledge his stare, "I am a sinner and yet I dare to tread within your presence." The pews creek in dissent. They seemed to have aged since I was last here, which must be almost a year ago. It is this past year, this long, three hundred and sixty-five day descent that has driven me to this place. I gape at a man who knows me better than I know myself. He bleeds, he weeps, he sweats, fluids that are far holier than I will ever be. For how long have these sanctities lingered? For how long have I unknowingly inhaled this essence? Moisture slides down my face as it once did at my Baptism, as it will again upon others' faces at my funeral, my crippled self at last revealed. Amidst this tumult, two outstretched hands heave me to my unshod feet, their touch gentle as dove feathers. These vaporous fingers point towards the altar, towards their true self as if to say, "If only you knew how we three love you."

(Inspired by Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*)

"I stand forlorn as a pelican in the wilderness,"
is breathed to the English country wind,
a wispy sliver of which was never meant to
be perceived by any such bird or feather.

Oh, this pelican, one grey and hungry
works idly upon toadstools or ant hills,
waiting, yearning, desiring just one fish
to glance at its flashing webbed feet.

But the silver-tongued fish here
travel on two feet and abscond with fleeting hopes
for it is all too close to the madding crowd,
causing such pelicans to acknowledge, "I am lost."

He was a boy of IV drips and respirators,

he was a boy with a window to his left

and a razor white hallway to his right;
he was the son of nurses and doctors
and of sterility and medicine.

He was a boy.

One day he fell down into an artery and up a long clear tube
through steroids – translucent – into the reservoir at the top,
and he let himself float suspended in a bead of moisture just above
his arm and the tube He swam.

He was a boy and now he is a river,

and now he is not with us,

He flows past us, a river of milky clear water,
and a river of a boy.

There is blood running rough-shod through her veins.
It is the rough blood of small-pox blankets,

of a fly paper sky,

of snow, grey and white in mounds,

of long grass and cold nights.

Her skin is a softly woven midday white with blue apple tree eyes
and a shifting menagerie of hair, dark, then light, then
feathered night.

A non-Euclidian geometry governs the shape

and contours of her body,

a perfect earthly beauty shown in a lens

of impossible theory.

There is fire in her mind, ice on her tongue, and her heart
is a maddening tempest of chambers
and ventricles and arteries.

And through and under her form and fire

runs rough blood, the roughness of a soft girl

with steel bracing's for bones and crazy for a heart.

In the margins is a white expanse that frames simplicity,
the place where synapses spark and the
blank membrane catches with invisible fire,
lies a horizon, a bright expanse that scorches your eyes
and tongue and singes the skin just above your heart.

You can dip your pen through that space
and pull it out, plastered with the voices of a thousand places
and views of a thousand objects and the breath
of a thousand sightless molecules of air,
and if you write with it you will feel that intake of a cavernous breeze
before the tip explodes into a particle of dust.

When you emerge from that white place there will be water in your ears
and earth on your tongue and you will not know what you saw there,
just that it was made of the most blinding nothingness you have ever felt.
and you will know nothing and do everything.

It is noon on the farm.
His pitchfork
Was just cleaned and shined
With an old thermal undershirt.
His hand holds
The wooden shaft, firmly
Planting it upright
On top of the soil,
A symbolic declaration
Of land.
He wears his jaw
Clenched shut
With a stern pride.
She refuses to let
Her eyes fix forward
In fear of
Letting someone know
That there were
No eggs for breakfast
Inside the white house
And that their barn is empty
And the farm has been as fertile
As her husband's bald head.

Under her pale green shirt
Below her collar bone
And under her tight flesh and muscle
There is a small black box.
It counts the outlived minutes
Of her twenty year old body,
A body that has already died once,
But like a tiny moon
Has risen after the sun has set
In order to extend that dash
Between her only two numbers—
Trying to leave a positive print on this world.

Bacteria--

Today in Mrs. Craig's fourth grade class
 We learned that everyone is covered in germs--
 And that's a good thing. Even though
 We can't see them, they kill the bad bacteria
 That makes us sick. She showed us a picture
 And it looked like green Mike and Ikes
 Struck with a neon lightning bolt,
 With tiny tentacles and long tails called
 Fl-ag-el-la.
 We were once just like them—that small.

Apple Orchard--

From their neatly lined barracks
 That nature has regimented,
 Apples drop
 Under late November skies
 When they are the color of bricks.

Carving--

A round incision
 Across the brow and all the way around
 Opens a tough outer shell
 To a mangled membrane.
 A teaspoon-sized spade with a serrated edge
 Surgically removes the cold seedy innards
 Onto last week's bad news.
 Three triangular abscissions
 And one disfigured crescent
 Form the face of the season
 Out of my orange friend's resection.

"I hope that's clean water,"

Jack murmured as Ward stepped over him, careful
 not to spill the liquid in the bucket. *Oh, watch the ship!* The bow
 of Ward's wooden model schooner nearly tipped onto its hand-sewn
 sails as he maneuvered in the small room. Wine
 of deepest crimson stood in a glass on the crest

of the dresser, poised more like the crest
 of a wave – a single thump and it would spill into the water
 below! Haste is a virtue... "Give me the wine,
 Ward," Jack commanded as he quickly pointed. "Hey, careful!"
 hollered Ward. "Keep still; I need to sew
 you back together." Jack sighed in resignation. His eyes caught rainbows

of color as they danced on the lantern's brass; light bowed
 and fragmented into subtle hues. His clan's crest,
 the coat of arms he was forced to sew
 to his uniform, was adorned with those intricate tones. Now watered
 down with blood, the noble griffin so carefully
 dyed in gold lay ruined beside the goblet of wine

that Ward had poured him. *Oh wine,*
 Jack thought, *to you all men bow...*
 He took a sip of the drink and winced. "Ward, be careful;
 be gentle, will you?" A smirk. Ah, the crest
 of the matter: Pain. No matter how clean the water,
 no matter how thick the skin, Pain would sew

the wounds of man together. "Jack, I have to pull before I sew
 the gashes. Hold... hold onto the rug." Jack sipped his wine.
 "If she hadn't thrown that rose water
 at my face I could have hit her with the bow."
 Ward began another stitch as the sun crested
 the horizon. Surprisingly, the string's careful

tug on his tender skin soothed his mind; care
 for pain strangely faded. The sewing
 needle pricked his skin again. A wavy crest
 appeared in the red glass – liquor quivered, unfocused. "Oh, don't whine,
 Jack," the delayed response echoed in his ears. "Just bring a bow
 next time; he can cover your kills... and prevent any future rose water

incidents." The wrung cloth splashed. "I hope that's clean water..."
 Jack, delirious, looked to the wooden ship: *the great bow of Pain, crested*
with waves. His coat of arms: *sewn, carefully, into flesh.* A hand reached for wine.

Silver frame of
metal glasses
shimmers
on contact with
midday sun.

Clumsy foot of
hasty Tanker
slips
on ladder of
military bulldozer.

Hand knocks
glasses;
Civilian
Tommy Bahama
meets
Military
M1 Abrams
in chaotic
warzone.

Glasses,
tank.

Glasses
under
tank.

Pick up
all the little pieces,
soldier;
your eyesight
will have to wait.

Van Gogh
would have preferred this.

Evergreens in winter wear
loom over laborers
like overseers.
Swift wind stirs spirits in snow,
making fresh powder
wisp and dance
around. Parked cars
are further entombed
by the revived congregation.
Street lights glow a dull yellow
that looks gold
on the frozen ground.
The sky sits calm;
it is dark violet at the horizon
and turns purplish-white
at higher peaks.

Van Gogh
would have preferred this.

our shadows cast across
sand on a dark beach
as our voices drown
out the sound of waves
stars shine down
in a multitude
glowing
with no competitor
on an endless canvas
the tide

approaches

thoughts scatter
with the wind
as grains of sand
are tossed
into open mouths
standing to escape
feet fall into place
unable to move
fast enough and
far enough
to be out of reach
the tide

retreats

how can sand keep footprints?
wet sand is a clay mold
it bakes as the sun turns
the temperature dial
how can we walk on soft sand
when our feet sink with each step?
the mumbled answer
defies drunken logic
the tide

returns

stars above reflect
on this dark scene
still
in the night
as wind falls
stranger thoughts return
which way is the tide

pulled

on planets with three moons?
will the water ebb
on its own accord?
we are

gone

before the tide
moves again

Born into a world of disparity
I leave my testimony in fine print.

Be seen, but be quiet, never heard.

I feel like the words
on this page.

Nigger, sexual prejudices, injustices, genocides, and Jena Six.

Weary and
trapped
because I am
black.

The eyes of strangers fall to the floors
in the dark hallways and corridors.
The ways they speak change
When I come around.

Wassup.
Yo, brotha man.
I'm not your brother.
We have different mothers, I tell them.

But as the ink dots these very pages
inequality is inevitable.
Never will these thoughts settle.

I

Feel

Like

The

Words

On

This

Page.

Small, black imprints forced into a blank,
white world.

"I never use the words humanist or
humanitarian, as it seems to me that
to be human is to be capable of the
most heinous crimes in nature."

-Gregory Maguire

Let's send troops
to patrol
for petrol
to console
our country's consumers.

Allow illegal immigrants
to work cheap
as appointed servant,
or kill the poor
as God's hired henchmen.

Create hate
among race
to display
the image we portray
as made through God's grace.

In the seam
of a dream
that seems
like a nightmare—
let US be America.

GARLAND
PHOTOGRAPHY

40

michelle cowan - "fire lit sky"



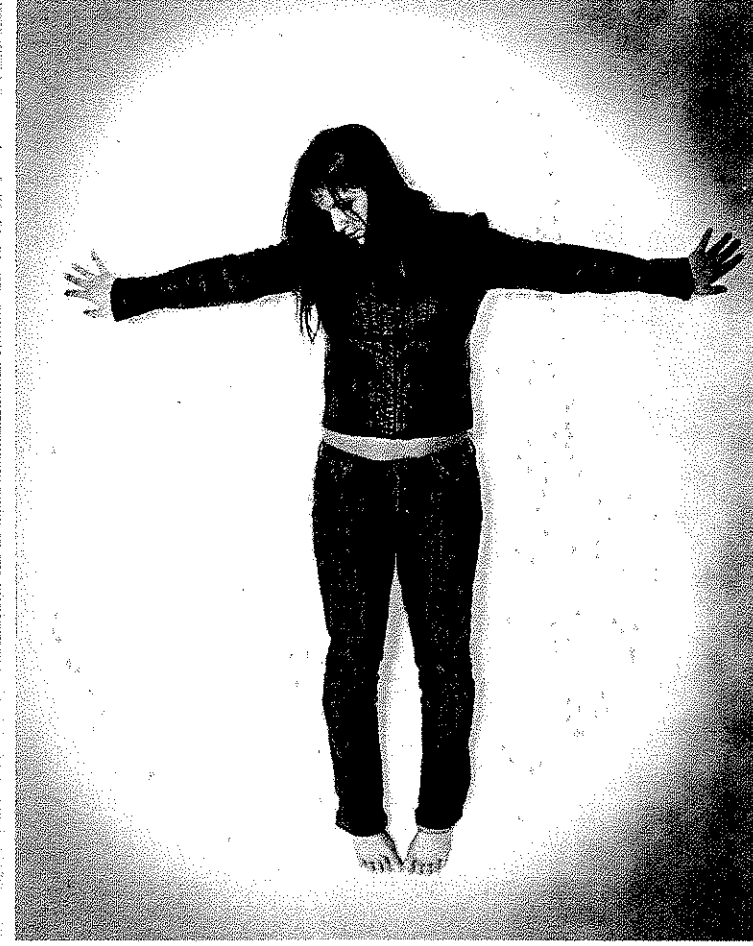
michelle cowan - "cars"



nicole ferrari - "surreal 006"



nicole ferrari - "B&W 003"



megan toth - "untitled"



nicole ferrari - "surreal 003 lesser"



GARLAND
SHORT STORY

The little Asian girl heard the bell ring; the school day was over. She walked out of the seventh grade classroom into the hallway, her blue and white plaid uniform clinging to her body. She wobbled through to the main entrance, as she had not yet grown into her weight. Upon her exit, a horn honked at her. The sun warmed her bare arms and legs, and as she went to the car the wind cooled her. She hopped into the passenger's seat.

As the car pulled off, the day's stack of menus dropped in her lap. She looked up at the driver and her eyes widened showing want for ice cream. Telepathy had always been a power she sought. Without looking at her the driver said, "If you want something, you'll have to wait until after you do your homework. And you can only do your homework once you finish your job, which will help you buy whatever you want yourself." The girl had hated her father for some time now but never spoke of it. She hoped that he didn't hear the complaints in her head, memories of her mother's bruised back after refusing to make his favorite meal still fresh in the girl's mind. The remainder of the ride was spent in silence as the neighborhoods shifted from urban to suburban.

They stopped at a college campus. "I'll be back for you in half an hour." The girl got out of the car and began to walk away. "And make sure you throw out any other Chinese menus you see," her father called after her. Business was slowing down a little too much for his liking. As she walked around the campus, she could feel the stares of the students. She always felt out of place, especially at this campus with its many white suburban kids. She kept in mind that she would avoid applying to this school when the time came.

She knocked on door after door, and was let in by whichever student happened to be working the information desk in the lobby of the residence hall. They watched her with curiosity as she hobbled to the desk and stood on tippy-toes to place the menus down. She could hardly

tell if any other menus were up there. Usually, the person at the desk kept to themselves, but today one girl decided ask, "How old are you?" The little Asian girl gave her a blank stare. As a child, she had always been told not to talk to strangers. "Do you get paid to do this? Are your parents making you do this?" Yes and yes, she wanted to answer. Hopefully she did have telepathic powers. "Can you speak English?" Becoming too tempted to engage the white college student, she rushed for the exit. Slightly shaken by the event, the little Asian girl threw the few menus she had left in the garbage and went to the corner where she had been instructed to wait. She constantly wondered if it had been normal for her to hold a job before she was even a teenager, but her father told her it was not an option if she wanted to live in his house.

He showed up exactly thirty minutes after he dropped her off. She began climbing into the car when he stopped her. "Your hands are empty." She tried to remember if she was supposed to bring the menus she threw away back with her. "I told you to grab the other menus too. Do you want me to go out of business? Do you not enjoy having a place to live, food to eat, clothes to wear? You ingrate of a child! You know the punishment for not doing as I say." He pushed his daughter out and locked the door. Looking forward, he commanded, "Walk home safely, and don't be late for dinner." And with that, he drove off.

The girl slumped down. She was not surprised by her father's actions, but this did not mean they didn't sadden her. As she remained there on the corner, she posed a question to herself: Do I really want to go home?

It was almost completely abandoned. Many of the families arriving in the late afternoon were now slowly retiring to their homes, drained, with the children skipping behind, energy boundless as the ocean itself. The energy seemed to be directly correlated to age: the children appeared to be made of some kind of carbon rubber trapped in perpetual motion (law of conservation of energy be damned) and the adults, stepping heavily, backs bent to the earth, I suspect wanted nothing more than to have the energy to strangle said children.

I listened to the soft, soothing ebb and flow of the ocean, a sound older than humanity itself, as my uncles talked and drank some beers, young again. Although there was no one there but ourselves, we spoke in low tones so as to not disturb the serene revelation that we all felt in the company of something greater. One of my sisters was talking about some juicy gossip or another with her friend for the summer and the other was digging a hole of some sort for nothing other than the simple pleasure of digging a hole. She was at the best age; the one at which life is not yet twisted up in vines of meaning and significance, strangling it so much that we can no longer hear its sweet voice, strong and steady, thick as maple syrup.

There was no one of my age group there but I did not mind because I was surrounded by layer upon layer of sound: the loud whispering of my sister and her friend, broken occasionally by their bubbly, slightly malicious giggling, the husky chuckles and sometimes outright bellowing laughter of my father and his brothers, sharing memories and easing pains, the slow wash of the ocean as the waves broke on the cool sand like the raspy sigh of a man collapsing in a soft, warm bed, the distant mooing of some cows seeming to say "Maaaaan, I am sleeeePY," the wind skipping lithely through the trees, briefly dancing with the insouciant palms before scampering off to flirt with the next, and over everything else, the crickets—Caribbean crickets, whose voices seemed ripe with the tangy vivacity of the island, chirping out a lullaby, random only to those who heard but didn't listen. They were all talking, telling me stories that were

in their fibers long before I was even a thought, speaking in a language that could only be translated by those with an open ear, an open mind, and, most importantly, an open heart. I closed my eyes, dug deep into the cool earth, and listened.

This is where my uncle first got drunk. He stumbled past me stepping over a wayward sand crab as he went, his brothers, shirtless, newly gained tweenage muscles illuminated by the trash can fire they started, jeering and howling heartily with every step. He picked up a fallen branch and started dancing with it and they could not help but burst into another round of guffaws. "Ey, baby," he said, "you ever been with a real man?" They began holding their sides and he continued. "Hey! What are you laughing at? So, she's a little skinny. She still has better teeth than Shirley." They all began another round, choking and gasping, except, of course, for the one who made the mistake of once dating buck-toothed Shirley. Suddenly, over the drunken uncle's shoulder they spotted the girl of his dreams whom he sat behind in class and they pointed her out. They begin to jeer him for never talking to her so he turns, hikes up his shorts with a grin, says "Sorry, baby" to the fallen branch, and stumbles over to ruin any chance he might have had. His brothers were in tow, hooting, hollering and jabbing each other's sides, burning brighter than the trash can fire they had started. Another round of lullaby chirps begins as another wave crashes like the opening of a cool bottled soda on a hot day.

The young couple walked past me slowly, almost dancing. They had come with their friends, but had wandered off to be alone closer to the mountainside where the chirps were finally louder than their noisy company but seemed almost drowned out by the incessant drumming of their hearts. They swung their hands as they walked, fingers laced tightly as if sown together, one of many seams. A cow mooed in the distance and the girl giggled at the man's spot-on imitation. She would be in trouble when she got home, she knew, but it was

worth it. Nobody could tell them how to feel, or that he was too old for her, or that she was too tomboyish for him. Nobody could tell them that school was more important or that they wouldn't be together forever. They knew. They held hands and sat in an enclave by the rocks as they watched the sunset. A baby would be on the way soon and when they find out they will welcome the hardship with open arms. Nothing was too hard while they were together. Nothing. They cuddled together and he put his arms around her, gently touching her stomach where I would soon begin to grow. They sat there quietly listenening to the symphony around them and inside of them, powerful and soft, intense and relaxed, complex and simple. They sat there staring at the sunset as sure of their own fate as they were that the sun would rise again.

On the van ride back I heard more stories, and people began unfolding before me, some long dead, leaving their whispers among the trees, but soon I was no longer paying attention to them, only staring. There were thousands of stories on that beach but they were all melting away. I could see only my mother and father there and I am thankful that, for me, they would always be there looking off into the eternal sunset. They were so goddamned beautiful.

We were all so goddamned beautiful once.

It was the morning of Joseph Lamont's funeral, and, as he lay propped-up on the thick wooden dissecting-table set up by the Kane Mortuary under a massive oak tree in the middle of a haphazardly-plotted village cemetery, his eyes snapped open—a last gift of God, bestowed on all, to have sight and hearing, to experience the celebration of his life, to share in the understanding of his passing. His bodily death was final, but his eternal soul was granted this one last opportunity to say, "Goodbye... until we meet again." And so, although his dead body lay motionless and sallow, his skin remained taut across a well-developed musculature; he'd been an avid runner and was only in his mid-twenties—free from the stretching and sagginess of age—when he contracted the yellow fever that took his last breath. Nevertheless, thanks to God, that omnipotent fount of grace, his eyes swiveled freely according to his will, and he let his gaze sweep across the crowd that had come to take advantage of his consciousness and see him off.

The first person on his right was his Aunt Lindsay, her mourning veil barely disguising the gleam in her eyes, now affixed on his own brown curls (which, curiously, were still growing at that very moment), and which carried with its radiance the comfort of a maternal love, of pride, and of profound sadness such that Joseph, who had no tactile perception, felt a weight settle like a hand-stitched quilt upon his mind. He followed the pleats of her black gown downward, and, sure enough, in her delicate hands, he saw a sparkling-silver pair of her coiffeuse scissors—an ancient, delicate pair with intricate engravings of falcons that attested to the refinement and regal nature of their bearer; she had, for the past thirty years, proved with lofty circuits of surveillance, punctuated by elegant, snipping dives, around the heads of her patrons that the characterization was well-deserved. Her husband, Uncle Albert, stood firmly at her side with a stiff upper-lip made more rigid by his handlebar mustache pasted into neat curls on his rosy cheeks. His arms were folded behind him, but Joseph had no doubt that they, too, held a heavy black shears—no less refined in utility than his wife's pair, but stockier and more substantial, engraved with lions; he, too, had earned, through his firm handling of his customer's head and the thoroughness of his shears, the magnificent depiction. Lindsay and Albert had cut his hair at their salon since his birth with skill and care; it would be their crowning service to trim him up, his last gift to them to keep their trimmings.

"Hello, Joseph; we're all so glad you've been a part of our lives. I know you've done your parents proud; you've been a son to me," said his uncle, looking Joseph in his eyes, before looping an arm around Lindsay's shoulders and willing her to say her piece.

"Oh, Joseph. I already miss you..." her lip quivered, but Albert kissed her head and she smiled. "We'll give you a fine do, dear. You know how I love your curls, but they aren't suited for the occasion—to roguishly handsome; I think your parents would have disapproved, had they been here." With that, she gave him a playful wink that spent the last of her composure before resting her head on Albert's shoulder to weep.

Joseph remembered his parents' funeral, how sad it had been—the car accident had engulfed them in flame, and, lacking even the bodies to lay to rest, the guests had collected some of his parents' most prized possessions (those not included in the will, of course) and buried them instead. Everyone had still spoken aloud—to the gravestones or to the sky or to their feet—though it was generally agreed afterward that it wasn't the same; leaving with doubt in their minds, guests suspected their words fell on deaf ears (Joseph certainly conceded the point, since there had been no ears at all), and so weren't unburdened of their goodbyes or equipped to handle their memories because they had parted empty-handed.

To the left of his aunt and uncle stood his brother, Gary, crisp in his grey suit, and toting a hacksaw. No, he never would fit in, not even at a funeral, Joseph thought. A moment passed in which his eyes wandered from Gary's shoes—at least they're polished—to his extra-wide knotted tie before falling again to his hand. Joseph's eyes bugged in surprise and Gary's face split in two with a knowing grin.

"Oh, I know you're surprised, Joseph, but give it a thought: I've been around your body too long—I've got scars to prove it and remember you by already!—no, this is to take a rib or two for Linus, here." Gary promptly patted Linus, his Irish Wolfhound, on the head, and the hound gave a deep bark of pleasure.

Joseph smiled. Or he would have if his lips had been alive and the stitching that held them together had been torn out; as it was, they remained perfectly still, so instead, he smiled inside and hoped it might show in his eyes for Linus; he was a terrific dog and Joseph was glad Gary had thought to share something with him.

"Oi, Uncle Joe, we're gonna getcher toes!" His nephews, already dirty from a brief tussle with Linus (whom they, combined, equaled in weight) waved a bow saw between them. His brother then chimed in with a clarification: "They'll be getting your whole foot, Joseph. You know they always did marvel at your prodigious running habit. I hope it'll serve them well—maybe they'll even top you; I can't get them to stay still, as it is!"

Joseph gave his brother a long wink in what he hoped could be taken for thanks before shifting his look on down the line to his sister, Jane. She stood alone, still only in her late teens, but with her chin held high and a proud spark in her eyes; he had always looked out for her, had always been there to scare off no-good boyfriends when Gary was off on his own, because Joseph felt the deepest of bonds with her—the love that can only be forged by trial and tribulation, the loss of one's parents—that can endure against all odds. But he had never tested the boundaries of that love; he had never left her alone because Jane was his little sister and, loving him just the same, had always trusted him to watch over her, and had never taken his guardianship for granted. Her long red hair caught the gentle breeze and danced softly behind her, so that Joseph's attention slipped from her to the memories of that hair; he saw it ragged and tangled, stuffed with leaves after a scrap in the woods; he saw it braided in coils,

woven with ribbon before her first date; he saw it streaming in the wind at his parent's funeral; he saw it and thought: That's what I would have chosen, had she gone first: a lock of her hair—straight from Aunt Lindsay's coiffeuse scissors.

"Joseph," she said, pulling his eyes and attention back to her, "you've always been there for me ever since mom and dad died; you've been my protector, and with Gary's help, my provider. I will miss you so much." Jane then pulled a meat cleaver from the folds of her dress and hefted it. Bless her, Joseph thought—he knew it would be against custom to use power-tools, knew it would make the gesture impersonal (even if he couldn't feel it), but he appreciated the sentiment a person endowed in the type of hand-tool that he or she chose. Bless her for wanting to make it a clean cut.

"I'll be taking your hand... I know you would offer it, if you could; you'll forgive me for taking it." Joseph slowly closed his eyes as if to say "Of course."

Her last words uttered, Jane walked over to Gary and hugged him. He knew she would be fine, that Gary would do his best and that was good enough for anyone. Then Joseph looked furthest to the left, to his love.

Michelle stood against a tall oak tree no more than an arm's-reach away from the dissecting table. Tears streamed down her face and fell to the ground where they joined a saturated handkerchief, discarded out of futility in stemming the flow of liquid love. She looked so beautiful: her face slicked with streaks of grief, her eyes magnified by the pools of tears still clinging to her deep brown irises. Not to be able to talk to her one last time, no chance to offer her comfort, but only to watch her suffer and know that she was all alone—this is what hurt Joseph most; after all the years they had cared for each other, after all the tears they had cried together, after all the love they had shared, they could share no more, and he would be leaving her alone—an act he felt was worse than if he had lived with her and failed to provide a home, worse than if he had betrayed her heart because a betrayal can be forgiven, a home can yet be found, but a life cannot go on once it is ended.

"G-Gary is going t-t-to cut through y-your chest for me," she sobbed, raising her delicate, shaking hands to show Joseph a gleaming scalpel. She took a deep breath to settle her sobs and continued, "I want your heart, Joseph... because you have mine."

Joseph didn't look away from her, not once, while he still had sight. His aunt and uncle worked around his head, their deft hands gathering and trimming his brown curls with care, softly discussing all their favorite memories of him; his nephews, now coatless and with their shirtsleeves rolled to the elbow, tugged and pushed with all their might to saw through his ankle, hooting and cackling with laughter, remembering all the races and wrestling matches they'd enjoyed with their uncle; his brother joined both parties with stories of his own, and prodded Jane into helping him, as she was done first (just one swift swing had done it!); but Joseph's gaze remained on Michelle—and hers on his—through it all. When his chest cavity had been sawed open, Gary stepped away to join the others as they watched quietly from a few paces off. Michelle didn't let her eyes off Joseph's; she ran her fingers through his fresh-cut hair one last time, brushed his cheek and lips, and then, taking hold of his heart, severed his arteries and veins saying, "I will always love you, Joseph." Then sight became darkness, and Joseph's eyes closed forever.

The funeral party wrapped their pieces of Joseph in wax paper or dropped them into Kane Mortuary's complimentary jars of formaldehyde before lowering his body off the dissecting table and into a coffin, then lowering that into the ground. Uncle Albert, Gary, and his sons shoveled earth on top as the women watched silently in each other's arms. With the last shovelful, they were offered basins of water, soap, and towels by the women that had been set on a table behind the dissecting table and cleaned themselves off. Once everyone was cleaned, they took up their pieces of Joseph, and, arm-in-arm and laden with paper bags of their friend, headed back to town.

"Hey, Detective, take a look at this journal I found in the guy's room."

1. CYNTHIA MCFADDEN: From the first day of kindergarten and every day afterward, you were totally giving me the look. But then, on Valentine's Day, when I leaned in to give you the most innocent and sweet of innocent and sweet kisses on the cheek, you screamed, at the TOP OF YOUR LUNGS, "EWWWWWWW!!!" After that, kindergarten was a living hell for me. For this, you must pay. Your uppance will come.

2. MRS. APPLEBOTTOM, FROM AROUND THE CORNER: I've gotten pretzels, apples, pennies, and even marbles for Halloween before, but pieces of string?! You were only in your fifties during my trick-or-treating days. You were far from senile. You knew exactly what you were doing. You caused me untold amounts of psychological stress. For this, you must pay. Your uppance will come.

3. BARNEY THE PURPLE DINOSAUR: I thought you were amusing at first, but then after a couple of years, I realized that you were stupid. How dare you trick me, with your constant upbeat attitude and your purpleness. I guess the only reason I thought you were amusing was because I wasn't really paying any attention. You took advantage of any viewer who didn't pay full attention, with all your bright hues. And what was up with all those kids who acted like they absolutely loved to spend a half-hour with you? Nobody could possibly be happy about that. And I'm sure your smiles only masked your depression. For this, you must pay. Your uppance will come.

4. TIFFANY FINGERS: You totally slutted up the place while babysitting me. All those guys you brought over, with their leather jackets, and their Mötörhead albums, and their bloody knuckles – they were all bad news, and I didn't have the time or the energy to look out for you, nor did I care to. You certainly didn't try to help yourself, with your short skirts, and your nail polish, and your ponytails. I had standards, even at a young age. My mother would have been ashamed if I had told her the truth about you. For this, you must pay. Your uppance will come.

5. FRED PLIERSCHMIDT: You slapped me on the back EVERY DAY in junior high while I was at my locker. I have very sensitive skin. On top of that, I often had back acne during those years. You should have been able to figure that out from the fact that I never laughed or smiled in response to the slaps. Occasionally I grunted and flinched. I even started wearing a T-Shirt that said, "I HAVE SENSITIVE SKIN," on the back. For this, you must pay. Your uppance will come.

6. GREG GOOBER: When we went to see Confessions of a Dangerous Mind at the multiplex, you left your nachos and candy wrappers on the floor as we left the theater. You knew I used to work at a movie theater. You knew how insulting this was to me. In fact, I told you, "This is insulting to me." You said, "The people working here want us to make a mess. Otherwise they won't have anything to do." Then you walked away. I just stared at you and shook my head. For this, you must pay. Your uppance will come.

7. JUSTIN SPITZER: You asked me to hang out with you, and then the whole time you proceeded to bitch about your girlfriend and your car. This is not my definition of "hanging out." I will not play by your rules, or society's rules for that matter, if this is the social standard for hanging out. THANK YOU for wasting two hours of my life. For this, you must pay. Your uppance will come.

8. JIMMY AGGROCRAG: Every day at the office, you put your soda cans in the trashcan when the recycling bin was RIGHT NEXT TO IT!! I reached in there and put it in the correct bin every single time. Then I had to go to the bathroom and wash my hands. This happened at least three times a day, every day. When I confronted you about this, you said you would change. You didn't. For this, you must pay. Your uppance will come.

9. MR. WASSERPLATT: You looked at me funny.

10. EMILY RICKENBACKER: You share your last name with that of a classic guitar, yet you know nothing about music. Luckily for you, this is forgivable. However, there was that one time I ran into you while walking Rosie, my beautiful pit bull. She jumped on you and tried to lick you, and you made a face. So we just continued walking without saying goodbye. I wasn't about to waste my time with someone who so obviously hates dogs and is probably a dogfighting enthusiast. For this, you must pay. Your uppance will come.

11. BON JOVI: What is this country-rock hybrid shit? Sure, cheesy '80s hair metal ballads aren't the most respectable type of music and never really were, but you did them well. Nobody can do this idiot country-rock well, and I take it as a personal offense when anyone tries to. For this, you must pay. Your uppance will come.

12. LEO KRALLUS: You're two years younger than me, cuz, and you have the gall to get married before I do? And you have a mole on your nose! I, on the other hand, have a perfect complexion. I used your invitation as toilet paper today. Have you made a deal with the devil or something? GOOD LORD, what the hell is wrong with the world today? For this, you must pay. Your uppance will come.

...

GEORGE JOHNSON: And now it's time for me to take down myself. I've gone too far. I've become too petty. I don't deserve to find the vengeance I have been seeking. Should I kill myself? I guess so. My life is meaningless, or whatever. For this, I must pay. My uppance is about to come...

Obviously that was all a lie. I have not been petty at all. My only problem is that I have never met anyone who has seen things as clearly as I have. Well, I can keep writing in my basement, or I can go and find some kindred spirits. If you're reading this, Mother, know that I have big plans. The future is in good hands.

"Well, Detective, this is shaping up to be the most enjoyable case we've ever worked."

I was already dead when you walked in the room.

You didn't believe it right away, I know, because you were still angry. The door didn't slam when you walked in; it ricocheted back and forth, the humidity-swollen hinges heavy and cringing beneath your force. Picture frames rattled against their simple nails, china danced in the armoire.

"You probably think this is funny, don't you, Claire?" Your voice was still biting with the acrid certainty of an unfinished fight. You had barely glanced at me, and I watched your fists clench and then relax, the muscles straining beneath soft skin. You never had any calluses, ever, I remember.

I wanted to stroke your fingers to remind myself, but you were moving around too much. The carefully preened beard you always kept was shaggy and unfinished, an unassuming dot of shaving cream or maybe aftershave hovered somewhere near your upper lip.

"Oh, sure. Ignore me. Don't answer a word I say, that's always your solution, isn't it?" You still aren't looking at me. Not me, I remind myself, my body. I'm staring at you. But you can't see me.

No. *I want to talk this out. You don't.* The words are coming from me, I can see them, wispy and white, like clouds of unforgiving exhaust. They swarm and dissipate in the air, fleeting around your head.

"Real mature, Claire." You kick the chair next to the antique desk I kept by the armoire. I wince, because I can hear the shreds of time-weakened wood splintering beneath your toe. "Danny's stupid. He'll keep talking to himself until he tires himself out and leave. Is that what you're thinking? Silent treatment?"

Damn it, Danny! Turn around! I am right next to your ear, willing the smoke, less congruous than the opiate letters of Alice's caterpillar, to snake inside the canal and make itself valuable.

I can see everything in the room. I can see you, your scuffed brown loafers and sinking navy-blue ankle socks pacing with the efforts of a madman. You're only twenty feet away from where I was resting. Sleeping. Not breathing.

"Okay," you take a deep breath. It's taxing you, I know, and I watch as your chest expands and contracts, swallowing the air and creating a whirlpool of the demi-visible remnants of my words. "I'll be cool if you will. I promise."

Cool is an understatement. There I go again, sarcasm. I can't help it, you're asking for me to be what forensics would deem too late for.

"You know what? You're so damn pretty. You're so pretty, Claire, but you don't know what's best for you. You don't know how to live in moderation." Your loose blue jeans are creased at the knee from wear, and you're fidgeting with your hand on the chair.

Even if I were still alive, you wouldn't have been able to save me. It is your jerking, unstable motions that I can't stand. They have always made me nervous, I realize, and I pull away from you. *You did this to me.*

"A drink every now and then is fine! Hell, red wine with dinner, margaritas on Fridays, all of that is wonderful—healthy, even. But you have to admit, Claire, you tend to take things overboard." You scratch your head, the mismatched buttons on your '70s style poly-blend shirt clacking into the antique table.

Like killing myself, for instance? The daylight from outside is pounding. It is the gilded rush of early-evening, the sun bursting in its last desperate attempts to illuminate the world, a dying effort from an immortal being. I am not immortal.

"You've really got to stop using, Claire. That's what I came to tell you yesterday. Yesterday when I... when I found you, well, you know." Your head is down, and I can see the thinning patch at the back of your crown. Your fingers reach out to take hold of something.

I'm not watching you anymore. I want to, but I'm not. I'm watching me.

Am I cold? Uncomfortable? Do I smell? I am being tugged gently, like the taut strings of a harp being tightened. No. Not yet.

Your hands are clinging to a picture frame. It is the one I got developed from a day at the carnival last year. The carnival where I worked and you frequented. The Ferris wheel is bright behind us, paper lanterns swinging from a cable above our heads, and you're holding a giant stuffed animal, the kind you win from shooting a miniature basketball into a miniature hoop.

I'm aching. I want to touch that picture, to touch you, to let you back into my life. You're still staring at the picture.

I'm so sorry, Danny.

You put the picture down again, face down, and I can feel something inside me

swell and tear. You're closing me out, us out, throwing all of what we were face down on the table, while my body is behind you, supine and cold.

"When I said it was over last night..." You trail off as though you don't like whatever it is that your mind is plotting. "When I said we were over last night, I meant it."

I shrink back away from you, the suffocating and squelchy space in the air, spongy and saturated with the heaviness of the moment buffering my retreat. I'm crying. At least, I think I'm crying. I take a surveying glance around, and see that there are no tears in my body; my eyes aren't even open. Yet I see everything.

"I can't be with someone who doesn't respect themselves." You sound apologetic now, the tone in your voice soft and squeezed, permanently scarred. "Listen. If you ever sort things out, Claire, call me. But you really... you really don't need to leave me messages like that, okay?"

No words for this. None. I am everywhere and nowhere. I am not next to you. I am not under you. I am in every inch of the ceiling, in every rebellious painting on the walls. It's the break down that I feel now—my sinuous being is groaning and moving apart, and I'm left with no core.

"Claire, I just can't handle things like... Oh my God." You've finally turned around; the magnetism rises and pulls at me. I'm fighting it, my molecules trying to grab you, me, the picture.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" Your voice is higher, hysterical, and I think it can't get worse, but it

(“Already” continued)

does when you find that bottle next to me. It is orange and harmless, except for the black miniature outline of a skull and cross-bones on the label.

WARNING: If more than normal dosage is ingested, call poison hotline IMMEDIATELY.

That’s what the bottle had said. I had read it, but my eyes were fogged with tears. Maybe it wasn’t the tears. Maybe it was the mascara and nearly-black eyeliner which kept me from understanding. Or maybe it was my stubbornness.

“Oh my God. It’s empty. It’s fucking empty. Jesus Christ, Claire!” You throw the bottle aside, and grab at my shoulders as you press your ear to my chest. You want a heartbeat. I want to watch.

“Oh my God, no. No, Claire, don’t be dead. Don’t be. No. Just hang on. Hang on, okay?” You let me slump to the floor, and I hear my head thump against the floor. It should hurt, I realize, but I feel nothing. I feel nothing except that same wrenching feeling of tears in the gaping atmosphere where my heart should be. It might not be beating, but it is still loving.

You stand and go to the cordless: abandoned, far from the cradle. You push talk, the big orange button in the center. I try to see me, but the image swims. My dark hair is on the floor, splayed about my head in some sick version of a halo.

My ruffled shirt is clinging to my sides, the lime-green bra strap visible on the shoulder line. My jeans are soiled with death, my bare feet are limp. I hope you see what I left you on my notebook.

You curse and hang up the phone. The battery is dead.

I’m watching you, but it’s getting hard to see. I’m pulling away, farther and farther away, and as you fish out your cell phone, it’s all spinning away.

I love you, Danny. I love you.

“I, uh, there’s a dead... my girlfriend... she’s... suicide, I think...” Your voice is fading in and out, and I’m trying to hold on to things to stay there and watch you.

I can’t hold on.

I loved you, Danny.

“DAMN IT, CLAIRE!” You’ve hung up the phone.

The last thing I see, as I feel the last feeble torques of your love on my heavy residue, is you, kneeling over my body and pressing me against you. My head falls backwards, unsupported by the puppet-like neck, and the tears in your eyes are real. Something to hold on to, but I’m too far away to grab them.

I was already dead when you walked in the door, but I was gone by the time you called an ambulance.

Sheets of rain spilled from laden clouds the night my father left.

"Sheets of rain," chortled a middle-aged brunette. Who made that saying up anyway? Probably some cocky reporter with too much time on his hands. She paused; her students were trying, that's what was important. And it was a lower-level course. Rebecca lifted a mug of steaming coffee to her lips, then sputtered as it burned her tongue; coffee spattered onto the papers in front of her. Shifting her slightly-plump frame in the chair, she reached for some Kleenex and began blotting the stains on her student's work.

She was famous for returning papers with various stains—if they were returned. But this semester was different; she'd learned the value of electronic submissions along with hard copies. Remembering this, she reached to toss the tissues into the chocolate-colored waste basket. The phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Becca, it's me," said a crackly voice.

She hated being called Becca, he called her that, and here his mother was—

"Becca?"

"Oh, um, yes?"

"Well, I know that—I just... Happy Anniversary." Silence hung over them; Rebecca could see her mother-in-law now, short blond hair in pink rollers, mouth pursed in sincerity. "Becky?"

"Yes, Karen?"

"I'm sorry," she whispered, then quickly hung up the phone.

Rebecca turned towards her office window; a smiling face and dress blues caught her attention. She picked up the framed image and glanced at a pinkish scar on her left arm. Reginald was always handsome, even in high school—curly black hair, dark blue eyes, that smile... he didn't stop smiling until after they were married.

Three knocks on her office door. "Come in."

The mahogany door creaked open. A red-headed boy stuck his head in. He had a face like creamed coffee and freckles on his nose—he looked like Reginald. She answered a question about his paper and sent him on his way.

The light in *Chantal's* was dim, casting a soft glow on Rebecca's honey-colored skin. Five years ago today she had married the man of her dreams. She snorted softly and leaned back in her chair. Soft music played and silverware chimed on delicate plates. She sat alone at a table for two in a simple black dress that draped to mid-calf and grey suede heels. Rebecca was acutely aware of her timid and uninteresting appearance. But if someone looked closer they would have seen dark grey eyes that peered from beneath long lashes, a small pretty nose that sat above a broad mouth, and a chin that hung down a bit too far, but somehow lent softness to her face. If someone looked closer they would have seen faint discolorations on her left cheek and beneath her eyes, where pools of water sat.

But no one looked closer.

Rebecca blinked her eyes and reached for her glass of sparkling water. After taking a small sip, she set it down and studied her meal. On an elegant square white plate in front of her lay an exquisitely broiled tilapia with an exotic white sauce, couscous, a sprig of parsley, and a lemon wedge—all perfectly arranged. She picked up her fork and moved the white sauce onto the lemon wedge, then set her fork down and smiled.

Rebecca closed her eyes for a moment. She could still see his face, crumpled into a drunken leer. Still hear his voice, smooth and deep, with a southern drawl—the voice that made her fall in love. The voice that reached further into her heart than that of her father, the preacher. The voice that laughed when her father died. The voice that dripped with sarcasm—

"Miss, is your food alright?"

"Yes, fine," replied Rebecca, stretching her mouth into a smile. "I'm just a slow eater."

"If you need anything, just let me know." The waitress smiled at her and walked away. Rebecca dropped her eyes and picked up her glass.

She reached for her silver clutch and pulled out a picture. He was still in high school then, blue eyes and black hair, still smiling. But she could almost see a glimmer now, beneath those sparkling eyes. Those eyes told the story.

She replaced the picture, asked for her check, and left.

Rebecca pulled slowly into her driveway.

The house looked empty. It always looked empty. It would have been filled—she wanted to fill it. She wanted tiny beds, and she wanted to hear the pitter-patter of little feet. Rebecca smiled; she would have torn that apart in one of her student's work.

She locked her white Jetta and went inside.

The entryway was marble. She'd wanted plain ceramic, but Reginald always wanted more.

Rebecca went up the spiraling mahogany staircase. Four-poster bed, cream carpet, bed made in precision, every perfume bottle in perfect order. No speck of dust to mar a surface. Even her green velvet chaise seemed to stand at attention.

She glanced at another framed picture: a crinkled face that had been with her for longer than her memory could say.

Rebecca walked across the carpet to the precise bed; the elegant cream fabric lay in mocking perfection. Rebecca grabbed a corner of it and gave a vicious pull. She and the cover spilled on the floor. She got up and tried to free herself, but she only twisted in it.

She finally escaped from its grasp and looked down at it. The cover formed a perfect "O," like an open mouth shocked at her rebellion.

She glanced at the framed picture again: grey hair, the same smile she'd known since birth, and brown eyes; they were smiling eyes that crinkled the soft caramel skin around them. They told her what they'd always told her.

She should have listened.

Rebecca picked up the picture, slipped off her shoes, and then lay down on her chaise with a throw, wiping her eyes with the soft fabric. "God, please don't let Reginald come home."

She was standing in a field looking up at the sun; Reginald was running towards her. He finally reached her, eyes full of rage, and said: *Ding, dong.*

Rebecca jolted awake and glanced at her watch: 11:00 a.m. She got out of the chair, straightened the black dress, and went downstairs. She stopped at a mirror and checked her appearance; she reached up to fix her hair, then stopped and raised her chin. She yanked the door open.

A man was standing there in full military dress. He had a letter in his hand and sorrow in his eyes. He looked like her father.

Escape was something he had only imagined. He had experimented with the thought in the beginning but had let it fade into ash as the days wore on. His mind emptied itself of aspirations, of detailed plots and visualized maps that would free him from his imprisonment and return him to the surface. In their stead the vacated cells were flooded with words and terms—useless things, since he had no one to talk to. The vocabulary lists revolved intensely within the boundaries of his skull and made his temples ache until they formed a lava pit in his brain and hissed upon being rekindled.

At night he was tormented by dreams of his long-dead father, the Oxford professor. He dreamt of the sting of the cane on his back, the shouts exchanged at the long empty dinner table. Century-old books, maps and dictionaries lay shredded in an antique heap, and he held a candle in his hand but let gravity do the rest of the honors. "It was an accident," was his professed excuse, yet despite it, he still woke screaming apologies to the stone walls of his containment until his guard told him to shut up. The words memorized after hours of practice meant nothing then, existed as nothing but monuments to his error. The only useful terms were the profane, the basest words that summoned immediate attention—pity, maybe, and so he hurled obscenities out of his mouth. He cursed at the small window in his metal door and banged his head on the only eye left that afforded him glimpses of the outside world.

He recalled the day he left home, re-envisioned the flames eating up the curtains of the windows, heard the chandelier crashing in the foyer; he remembered the trek from the countryside to the city, him signing his name on a document and shaking the hand of a uniformed man. He remembered walking onto a metal bark with a gun strapped to his back. He could still smell the pungent, dank sea air and the spritz of ocean water, the memories of which cooled the heat spinning within the globe of his brain and muffled the murmurs of crackling embers. There was the persistent memory

of standing on the rail of a cruiser, staring at the waves and imagining creatures lurking below. The map his father showed him as a child—"Here be dragons," it said—would flash in his mind like a bolt of lightning. The words alone made fear churn in his gut, made his mind seize with the endless pages of words read out of the dictionary. He could picture his father leering over him, spitting out commands and insults like a monster waking in his lair, the smell of cigar smoke still fresh on his pressed, white shirt and tweed jacket. He imagined him grinning at him, yellow teeth protruding in a satanic smile, nagging him with questions: "You thought you could run away? You thought you could outrun your sins forever?" The words reverberated in his skull like a roar until exhaustion robbed him of consciousness.

Then when morning came, he woke to the sound of bullets peppering his prison walls. A streak of blood whipped across the window of his door, and he backed away, cursing the instant his fingertips touched the concrete bricks that blocked him from falling through the wall into oblivion. The door to his cell was kicked in. The metal creaked and moaned as it was battered off its hinges. Light flooded in like a white sea of fog and stung his eyes like a smoky vapor. He cowered from the three shadows that stepped out of the light, and with his watering eyes he observed the weaponry in their hands, how their guns gleamed like dragons' scales.

He asked them what they wanted as he was dragged out of his cell. "It's a revolution," one said. "The world's been turned over. We're starting all over again." But he knew they were wrong. He felt neither comfort in his release or in the fact that his sins had been removed at the hands of these soldiers. The memory of his own revolt still seared the fissures of his brain, still made his language a curse to speak. He could only think of his father and the devouring flames, the history and legends that he

burned that night with the living. He thought he could forget the destruction by conquering more of the world, and he had crossed the oceans and faced the monsters there abroad. Now, he was free to roam again, free to crush earth with his heel, but there was territory still unknown, still barred within some hollow of his small, small heart that he did not dare enter. That space was marked like a coordinate on a map burned at its edges, and it read, resoundingly: *Here be dragons.*

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