

the g a r l a n d

spring 2003

the garland

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Editor's note

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
-Diving into the Wreck Adrienne Rich

I suppose, in many ways, the editor's note is a kind of introduction—an introduction that usually takes the task at hand of describing, explaining why the following pieces of writing are worthwhile, why they matter. This explanation takes a delicate balance of humility and confidence, creating a hovering need and desire in the reader to continue exploring the contents. I may not have that formula down exactly, but in my own exploration, I have found something.

I have found artists: poets, storytellers, photographers whose words, ideas, perspectives are worth exploring. Within this little, often neglected magazine, a dialogue can begin to take place—first between the reader and the page, then moving more toward the reader and the artist, lending hopefully, ultimately to a fused understanding, a new understanding.

Ultimately, there is a common thread in this tapestry of art and literature: exploring the human condition. Within this exploration of words, purposes lies a simple desire to explain, confuse, reveal—communicate.

Thank you Dr. McGuiness for introducing me to the world of little magazines—and thank you for giving me the opportunity to do this.

Enjoy.

Maryl

Inverse Euclidean Waffle Plus
Infinite
by Trevor Auser

A square
of
mist
circles
a
house

that's

been painted
as
many
times
as
your
mother has
put
on
make-up.

Shoes are different than clothes
and household

by Trevor Auser

Shoes are different than clothes and household
belongings, which are divvied up just the same,
by those who rub their hands and
those who cry upon their
full understanding of
"dead."

For some reason though, I can't imagine a dead
man's shoes being thrown away. Instead, I picture them
entering some sort of strange dead-man's-shoes
waiting room. It is here that they
rest and wait,
so at night they can walk upon their
master's grave, and make
him feel
like he
was
loved.

Monastery Ruins

by Dayna Hill

Like loaves of half-eaten bread,
A child's lump of clay, long-forgotten,
Like words whispered, as you fall asleep.

These are walls of stone without roofs,
As if built in the days before Noah,
Rain being just another one of Galileo's crazy ideas.

Attacked countless times,
Henry VIII, Cromwell, the jealous and the greedy,
All wanting a piece of the stone, the gold, the religious tradition.

The monks hid in the tower,
Packed together like canary birds ruffling their feathers,
Trying to sleep peacefully, covered and caged.

They watched things burn,
Feeling a bit like Jesus must have,
His plans foiled, thoughts only to have on a cross.

1400 years later,
the wind still whispering through arches like confessions,
A girl wandering, misplaced amidst fields of Irish sheep and legend,
Did the monks, with their books and gold imagine that one day
A girl would place her hand upon a cold stone wall, so many years later,
Close her eyes?

A Starry Night

by Michael Sullivan

I picture you swaddled in sweaty sheets, dreaming of
drowning in the sky
When you woke beneath a sweet night, less placid than
you'd please.

Sometimes I don't understand what's going on either:

 I feel magnetic and magic in a mournful mist;

 Manacled in melancholy beneath screaming stars.

You are your own cavity, shackled in madness.

A damp apparition hangs above my head, wearing
Christmas lights.

Different hues of blues, charred with greens and
yellows,

All intertwined and billowing across like smoke.

 It's got me around the neck, in my mouth and nose,

 Slowly creeping down my throat and to the depths
 of my lungs.

It steals my oxygen, leaving a sort of celestial
terror.

I don't know if I am alive or dead when I see through
your eyes.

I don't know if it is heaven or hell,

And your starry night is a picture of demented sanity.

By the Time

by Elizabeth Andrews

I was fourteen by the time someone touched my boobs-
the small, grubby hands of a boy whose head I could have leaned my chin
on
grabbing and pulling, as if he thought they would grow if he worked them
hard enough.

Lord knows if there was any chance of that happening
I would have done it ages before
and saved the time I wasted trying to convince myself
fifteen year old boys like girls for their personality.

Is fourteen too old to still believe these things?

I was seventeen by the time someone broke my heart-
seventeen being the last year you can say your heart was broken
without sounding melodramatic and pathetic.

Sitting in a gazebo in the middle of a downpour,
watching him from behind as he walked, soaking wet
to his car, left only with an empty cup of coffee-
old enough to know better
young enough to believe anyway.

Anything But God

by Natania Barron

We sprawled out on the splintering wooden dock
and fended off mosquitoes with laughing.
The bog, the scum, the flies-it was sunset and
I watched you in the gold of the dusk, as water spiders
skipped against the water's surface.
Just the three of us. You, me . . . and God.
You theorized and sermonized about life and death,
dying and rising-the only truth you knew.
You stared across the water, your blue eyes fixed on the unseen,
and recalled from your mind the great mysteries of the world;
if only everyone could see, you sighed, if only.
But, like Pharaoh, some had their hearts hardened.
What are dreams? You told me they were visions from God.
What is pain? You told me it was punishment for sin.
What is love? You said it was momentary bliss before truth.
What is faith? You said it was destiny for the chosen few.
Algae and sticks floated by.
Unaware of their Greater Purpose, bullfrogs
belched their stories, and you were content to see
God in the glimmerings of the sun in a pool.
I wanted to see my reflection in your eyes-to have one
gentle assurance. But you could only practice your sermons
to the gnats and the crickets.
I wasn't listening.
I was waiting for you to speak of anything
but God.

61 Letters Written on a Piece of
Paper

by Joseph Andrasko

I let convection stir my coffee, with you
As milk. The amalgam calms my veins.

All the Squirm of Nature

by Kevin Hattrup

salamanders and the odd turtle can fit in a matchbox when they die. though often I wished for national geographic snakes, I settled for the four inch kind, louisiana autumns, a town house, the porch, public pool, and the lake, the world--three miles through the center and the king looks like me.

animals (not school) pour in, animals dreamt of and otherwise, perhaps handled with clumsy paws, bestowed by my young father. a young man, constant-fixed to the paw of his first son. we set out for an hour of adventure, around the lake, to the jungle on the other side.

his clumping hair, grown in thick to cover the thinning that comes with time and children, wife, and late bedtime stories, and of course that boss. so we pushed to where the woods grew dense, too thick for grown ups, too muddy for velcro shoes, until hunger called for a proper bowl of cereal.

a wiffle ball bat sword, the brave, crazed rocking horse, us three left alone to tv, soon we fought early bedtimes- school in the morning, that would divide the day between work and play. and sometimes days are fun, after mom picks you up, maybe lizards on the window or dad feels like reading tonight.

of course, the monumentals, the riveting flood, two feet of water! spent pine needles gobbled by the drain, and clogged for a summer monsoon. a family of three, then four, those afternoons drizzled from one to the next, but soon I read to myself and dad was really busy.

but like trying to find the first raindrop in a storm, tracing back our rift is like forgetting how to ride a bike.

one day, pounding plastic legs into my new table, never felt like work, 'cus two were paired by blood. school came, feigning stomachaches and hiding children's tylenol, I had a job like dad now.

my first summer out of school, I walked with dad somewhere out of sight so amazed at all the spent July rockets, and he told me about the move, and as I reached the water's edge, walking around the lake, I find a headless turtle, destroyed by some older kid- such a cruel act of a boyman unwilling to concede youth to adulthood.

my new home would get snow and the new school will be fine. there's a brick wall in the yard for playing war, and dad likes his new work. something about the fertile south, all the squirm of nature and a childhood that spilled a terrain into an imagination as I left for the north.

Snake Skin and Olive Oil

by Karen Rivers

She tells me: Every time the New Year struck,
her mother went outside, worn-down, Depression skirts flashing,
and shot a pistol
Up- into the West Virginia night,
the clouds of coal dust.

Her stories of the farm so often end
with pointing at a scar, a jagged line or stubborn burn worn in
against the penny-by-penny bareness and green ocean of Appalachia.
Her mother met each cut and bruise the same-
with snake skin, olive oil, and an angry prayer.
On a rubbed-down rosary she cursed this place-
no doctor (no money for one anyway). No Catholic Church for miles.
Eight children, bruised and bleeding, scarring,
(four more babies that slipped quietly away)

Now: my grandma hands me twenty-dollar bills - for grades.
It's nothing to her anymore.
She tells me she was horrible in school-except for Spanish.
It was so much like Italian,
thick, heavy words- the bold Rs, the rampant Os,
the rolling rolling circular feel-
Like the hills.
Like the uncoiling of snakes.
Like the bright end of a pistol barrel.

She snaps the purse back closed, and I focus on one scar-
the pink canyon, the drunken circle on her shoulder.

Smallpox vaccine. It leaves an awkward dent.
This particular mark—a triumph.
The rawness, unpredictability, and violence
of Depression life contained
in that smallest spot of imperfect skin.
A place to fit your finger-tip, touch healed over smoothness-
Here, she has at least one wound of purpose,
at least one scar that meant salvation.

We've Been Framed

by Gina Petrizio

We sat in a picture fully developed
In mid-July gloss
Stuck to the sea wall.
Barnacles.
I felt we were there for years-
Clinging,
The sun a veritable cloak/ albeit thin.
I folded the bottoms of my jeans
Until they restricted circulation.
We sat in a vertical circle,
Pale against the ginger rock,
Muted with antiquity like a dried
Orange.

We climbed the craggy wall
And sat perched.
Birds on a wire, at rest.
Snapped like a puzzle piece
Into the negative space.
Blissful sloth. I knew as I sat
I felt, even then, I would call upon
This secret arsenal one rain after the next.
Thousands of rest stops away
It feels a rip in its womb,
It wants back its love children.
And we look into the slick,
Baltimore streets
Stillborn.

The Silent Army

by Kevin McGann

A flower box, filled with powder
That makes me blink and cough when I shut it in my face,

Like slammed doors
That I see moving in slow motion,
Expressionless faces on the other side
Shaking their heads at me like I'm a hopeless cause.

A mother
Whose son rides in the back seat,
Crouching low so as not to meet her eyes
In the rear-view mirror
That she uses so well.

Or a teacher
That softens her face in pity,
That follows me there but stops abruptly,
Who spits and shakes her fists,
And turns around.

Or a stranger,
The one that matters most
Who is not mixed with feelings for me,
Feelings that he has to have,
Who could easily know me for who I am;
One he has seen before
In passing,
Who dresses well and who carries a smile,

Perhaps because I am sincere
And not because I picture him between me and my sheets.

A stranger whom I do not know
Who already has been forewarned against me
Who knows enough of me to know that I am not worth knowing,
Passes me on his way to class,
Armored with his narrow eyes.

How the Garden Tastes

by Anne Howard

we have mystery wine in the cellar
labels rotted off fine bottles
from my father's short love affair with red.
a small mosaic table at dusk with a citronella candle

(the mosquitoes are terrible for everyone but me
they say I'm not sweet enough)

we sit ringed by the snug
and nearly living walls of the secret garden
two or three blue glasses
the dusty warm sharpness of old wine
I don't know what kind but I always like it
my mother wonders if it's the sun or the garden she tastes.

City Streets (Calvino emulation)

by Chad Maddox

The Uzbekistani clerk yells frantically to the passing police officer who sees the robbery in progress, and shoots at the man with the sheer nylon stocking over his face, but misses and nearly hits the heavysset woman buying a salad and a pair of red bamboo chopsticks, who drops her change purse, quickly picked up by the boy running past her out into the square, mixing into the crowd surrounding the white-haired man making a filibuster length speech about the price of a good meal in this day and age, but is really only concerned with the white-haired woman on her way out to the shoe store to buy a pair of red shoes handmade by the cobbler inside, who fills the walls of his store with drawings of the cigar store Indian that stands outside of the antique shop next to his, which holds a sign reading, "Abandon all hope ye who enter here," a favorite quote of the poet who sitting in his bedroom, high above the square, is terribly displeased with the boring city below.

Communion of Song Lyrics

by Annie Cassidy

Well, could we want malicious technical utterings?

Shy lonely causes, low weeks, napkins with wilted flowers?

I switch glows with plummeting ennui.

Piercing lucky words.

Sappy songs with wish and lie.

A mad waltz blocks you and I.

turn and say to you,

"We do not need jealousy and understanding slanted with music."

You turn and say,

"We just need to dance."

Untitled

by Kerry Pieri

The room is small, white, stark
Above the single bed the pictures-
dated studio shots of familiar faces
kaleidoscoped into a blur of greens, browns, pinks
when stared at too long

Outside the window the rusted steel bridge
pulls shore to shore, country to country
above the misty swirls of Erie water
that he would swim until he was breathless

Before he was dad
Before he was Papa
Before he knew my name wasn't Francis
Before his days weren't all pills, instant French vanilla cappuccino
and daytime tv

He has no unfinished requiem
Just a few faded pictures, a view, a chair

Seurat

by Erin Jones

"Pointillism is a form of painting in which the use of tiny primary-color dots is used to generate secondary colors."

It's ironic that they're scenes of leisure.
Afternoons washed in color, sailboats, shade in
summertime. Fuzzy horizon lines so lazy they are
unable to signal day's end. Water, water.

It's funny. Sad. Pointillism surely couldn't have afforded him
the time for such things.

Servitude without a
jailor and no bail, counting beans. Little by little. Painting started one
summer completed by the next to reveal only what he
had missed. Painting is therapeutic.

Pause, pick up a teacup, small spoon,
saucer. Lose count.
Imagine the world coming up-assembling dot by dot like
televised images a half a century later.
The effect of light, brushstroke.

A little girl in
white opens her mouth and a man in a top
hat watches the current-one must have a mind of summer.

The contrast of primary colors against secondary colors
makes a day.

Examining a Pot of Violets, on
an April Morning, from a Bed
in Baltimore

by Erin Jones

The color yellow starts at the epicenter of each bloom.

The name implies, of course, African descent, yet it is hard
to think of those fuzzy leaves, purple tongues-as African.
My bed is unmade and outside a robin is frantic.
The garbage men with their racket of green trucks
roar down the alley
emptying cans.

The Secrets the Dead Know

by Erin Jones

Wilken's caskets are better, Richard's consolation techniques more extreme. The dead know who shot Kennedy, the cure for their own cancer and the meaning of life—but they're dead. Their lips have stopped in that self satisfied grimace unable to speak.

They aren't the only ones who know answers to secrets. Dostoevsky said life ended at thirty—but he went on until eighty-three. *If death is not caused by a speeding train-moving fast enough only to be decipherable as a smear of blood*, he said. *It will surely be a falling baby grand.* And if not?

A bullet aimed at your head. From the gun of another.

Dostoevsky's advice, Grab the gun. Cock it; pull the trigger and "*dash the cup of life to the ground*" on the very last second on the eve of your twenty-ninth birthday. Break it. Like antique porcelain to stone and hide the crazy glue from your weeping mother.



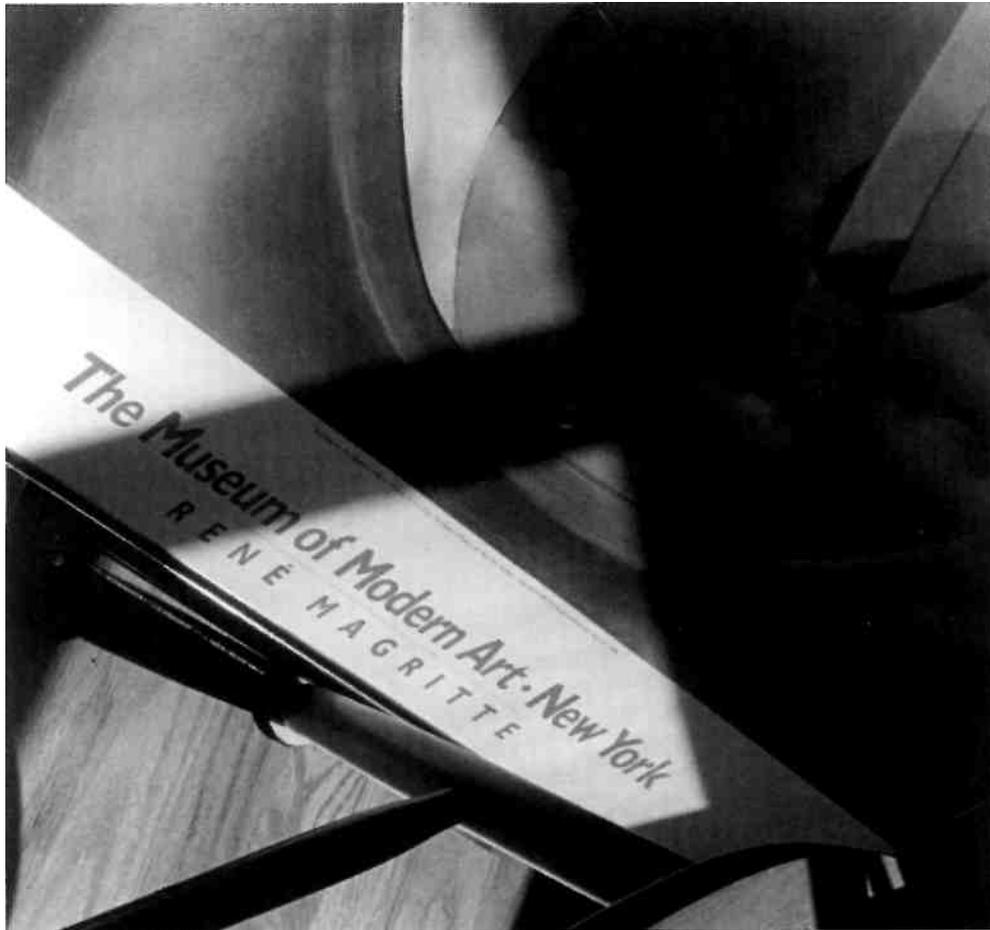
Andrew Kelly



Andrew Kelly



Annie Cassidy



Annie Cassidy



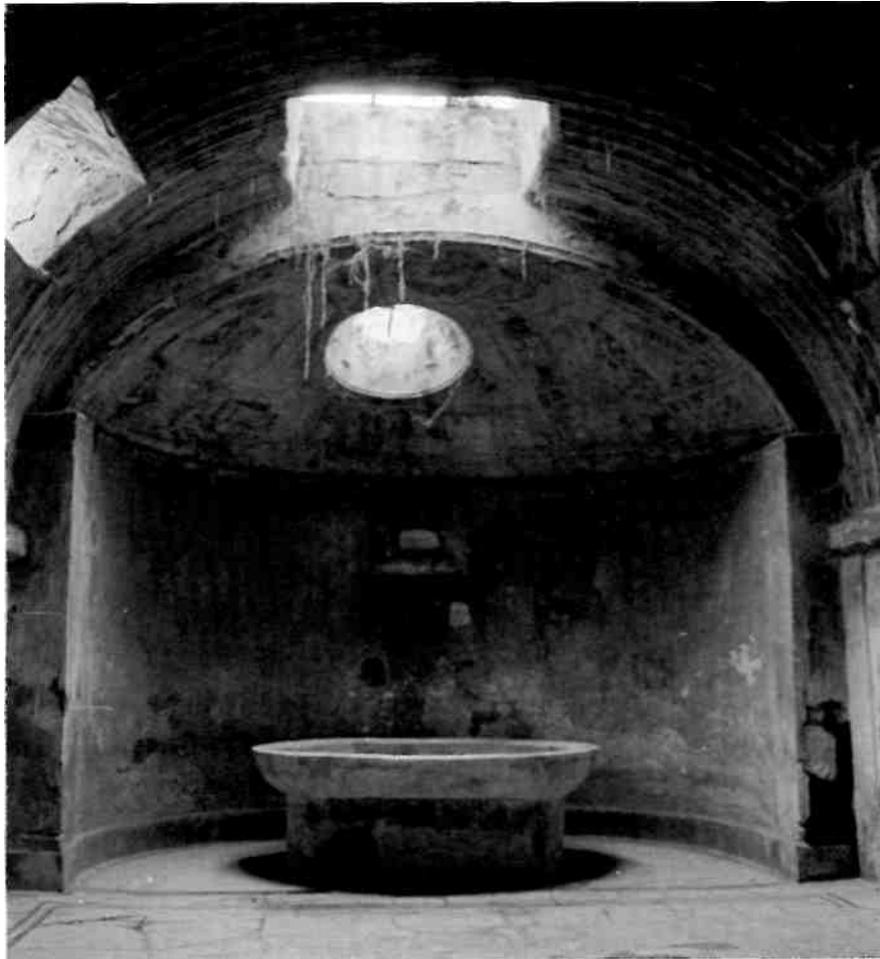
Erin Cominskey



Amanda Dubinsky



Kerry Pieri



Elizabeth Andrews



Elizabeth Andrews

Bagpipes

by Margaret Dougherty

Her father was the only person who could overhear her say "laced with" and honestly believe she was talking about lingerie or a decoration or some kind of arts and crafts project. She stopped mid-sentence when he stepped into the room, widening her eyes innocently. He put her folded laundry on the bed beside her, and smiled, before slipping out of her bedroom into the hallway without a word.

"Elle?"

"Yeah, yeah - sorry. My dad came in."

"Jesus, Elle, lock you're door."

Her father didn't believe in locks. He thought it made the house seem too sectioned, too territorial. But he did believe in privacy, and Elle knew he would have knocked had he not been carrying a large basket of darks. But that was too much to explain to Erin. Elle responded slowly, suddenly distracted.

"Yeah...next time."

"Well anyway...it was laced with something?"

"Yeah...hey, listen I've got to go. I'll call you later."

"What? Tell me first. Tell me what it was..."

Elle put the receiver down gently. She ran her index fingers under her eyes, up to her temples, and through her hair. Erin would call back in a few minutes, Elle knew. If she didn't answer after two rings her father would pick up, though he knew if it actually was for him it would only be a foreigner selling windows or a local firefighter looking for pledges. Elle fell back against her pillows, exhaling as she glided backwards. Seeing her father made her want to be what he thought she was. Seeing her father as she told Erin what was laced with what made her feel intense guilt. He didn't know her and she was all he had.

She pushed herself off the down comforter and walked towards the

door. Flicking off her bedroom light, she stepped into the hallway. Her dad hated wasting electricity. If her bedroom light was on and Elle wasn't in the room, he would make sure she knew it. In high school, he had, on occasion, called her on her cell phone just to let her know. Leaving the light on in the laundry room was the worst offense. The light switch at the top of the steps had broken years ago, while her mother was still alive. To turn it off you had to feel your way down the stairs, then reach through the thick darkness until you found the thread-like string connected to a sole light bulb.

In the kitchen, her father shook a frying pan with his left hand and stirred noodles with his right. They squirmed in the boiling water. In the pan, the vegetables sizzled. He had learned to cook the hard way - Elle could attest to that - by trial and error. For the first few months after his wife died, the meals were either burnt or frozen. Some nights he would cook a whole burnt meal, they would pick at it silently until they made eye contact, and then they would order a pizza.

Now, just over two years later, stirring and frying, Keith looked like a master chef. Elle had to laugh when she walked into the kitchen, the door swinging on its hinges behind her. The phone rang before she could say anything. She stood at the counter, on the opposite side of the bar, and watched her father. He lost thirty pounds after her mom died, and he looked trim and younger than Elle ever remembered him. His short brown hair was speckled with small tufts of gray. He looked up at her, and smiled, his eyes squinting as he did so.

"You want to answer the phone? My hands are full."

"Nah. It's just Erin again. I can call her back."

They didn't have an answering machine. Keith had broken their last one, and neither had ever thought to replace it. But there was something about an unanswered phone that made her dad nervous. Elle's mentality was - let it ring, they can call back.

"Here, stir this. Shake this."

"It's Erin, dad. Tell her I'm not here. Or something."

It would be the "or something." The man didn't lie. Elle could never understand that - her mother would lie about anything. She told telemarketers that she was the live-in maid, she told grocery store employees that Elle was her sister. She loved to lie. Never about anything serious, only about the fun stuff. Her dad got to the phone between the third and fourth rings.

"Hello?" ... "Oh, yes, hello Erin. How are you?"

Elle shook her head. He lived for small talk. Anyone who called for Elle got the "how are you?" the "what's new?" or the "tell me what's going on with you." Most of her friends knew to hang up when she didn't answer after two rings if they didn't want to get stuck on the line with her father. But Erin was a college friend, her roommate of three years, and wasn't used to calling Elle at her house.

"Well that's great, Erin. And the family is doing well?" ...

"Wonderful. Well you tell them all I said hello." ...

"Great." ...

"Elle? Well actually, we're just about to sit down for dinner. Would it be alright if she called you back a little later?" ...

"Well I'll give her the message. Have a good night." ...

"Ok, bye."

Keith put the receiver down and looked at Elle. She was distracted by the vegetables in the frying pan. It struck him how grown up she was. Her lean body pressed against the counter top, her dark hair spilled below her chest in soft lines. Her skin was darker than her mother's, lighter than his.

"Why'd you put peppers in?"

"Don't you like peppers?"

"I'm not in the mood for them tonight."

"Well just pick around them."

She looked up at her father. The first few months after her mom died she couldn't make eye contact with him. There was a pain behind his eyes that was even deeper than hers. There was part of her that was jealous because his pain was different, more intense. It was irrational jealousy, she realized later. And after those first few months, the jealousy changed to relief when she realized she'd find complete happiness again. Then it was guilt, because he never would.

"Set the table please, Elle."

She slid open the third drawer under the oven, and pulled out two place mats and napkins. They matched. These were a set her mother had picked out. Once on the table, the place mats and napkins blended into the scheme of the kitchen. Light blues and whites, highlighted with orange and yellow accent pieces. Her mother had loved bright colors. In any other house, the room may have looked like a kindergarten classroom. But not in

Shelly's house. Somehow, because it was hers, it was okay, it was even stylish.

Elle poured herself a glass of milk, and an iced tea for her dad. She sat at her place at the table, watching him silently. He turned the gas down on the range and let the vegetables simmer as he strained the noodles. From her seat at the table, nearly level with the frying pan, Elle could see small bubbles of grease flying out of the pan into the air, disappearing into the background of light blue.

Her father pulled the pan off the range, and poured half of the steaming vegetables onto one plate of noodles, the other half onto the next. With a look of satisfaction he walked towards Elle.

"Dinner is served."

"Looks good, dad. Looks good."

As soon as he placed her plate in front of her, Elle began sifting through the noodles and vegetables, trying to pull out the peppers.

"Hey, Grace. Let's not forget."

Elle put her fork down, and looked at her father apologetically. He wasn't a particularly holy man, but Grace was his thing. She remembered those nights saying Grace over food that hadn't yet thawed in the middle, or was blackened everywhere but the very center. Those dinners had been what brought the two closer. It was the one aspect where their pain was identical, at least as Elle saw things. Nothing else compared.

"...from thy bounty through Christ, our Lord. Amen."

Elle always let her father say Grace. It was his, so she let him have it all to himself. He didn't mind. It made him feel like the head of the family, however small that family may be. She watched him lean over his plate. He always cut the noodles, something Elle and her mother used to tease him about. He chopped the vegetables and noodles into small pieces, balancing them dangerously on his fork, before moving his whole face forward to trap the food. Elle had tried countless times to teach him how to spin his fork until the noodles were wrapped tightly. She knew he could do it, but for some reason he didn't want to.

Dinner was never long when it was just the two of them, which it usually was. Both Keith and Elle were fast eaters. Shelly had been the fastest of the three when she was alive. Something in Elle made her keep eating fast, keep carrying on an impractical trait - flaw - of her mother's. Those were the things that kept her real in some abstract way. Even the flaws.

Especially the flaws.

The phone rang just as Elle finished the last of her noodles. Her plate was empty, aside from a line of peppers framing the edge. She got to the phone just after the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Hey! It's Erin. You finished eating?"

"Erin, I'll call you back. We're still eating."

That was a lie. She turned as her father's chair moved against the linoleum floor. He leaned over, grabbed her plate, and then pulled his from the table as well. Elle hated to leave him at the table alone.

"Elle, don't worry about it. I'm finished. I'll take care of the dishes. You go talk."

"Elle? Elle? Are you still there?"

"Yeah. I can talk. Hold on."

As she walked out of the kitchen, Elle squeezed her father's arm, and winked at him. The unspoken thank you. She took the stairs two at a time and burst into her room, slamming the door innocently behind her. She said nothing until she was comfortably on her bed.

"Hey."

"Hey? Elle, come on. You know what I want to hear."

Elle knew exactly what she wanted to hear. Erin had left for Christmas break two days before her. She wanted to hear all the details about what exactly happened, with who, with what, where, and when.

"What?" "Elle!"

"Er, it was fun. We all hung out. There were only a few of us left on the floor, so it was chill."

Elle had called Erin in a fit of excitement early this morning as she waited for the train home. But she didn't have time for details. She left her hanging with "I'll call you when I get home." Elle lived close to Philadelphia, where she went to The Art Institute and studied sculpture. Her dad was overly supportive, trying to compensate for the fact that he saw no possibility of a profession resulting from the study of making shapes out of clay. If Shelly had been alive, he would have been the voice of reason, pushing her to study something with substance. Elle knew this, though the two rarely spoke about it, and never directly.

This afternoon when Elle stepped into the empty house in Paoli, the phone was ringing. She didn't bother answering it, and instead plopped

onto the soft couch in the family room. Her father was still at work. When he came home an hour later, he found his baby, all grown up, asleep on the couch.

"Elle."

"What Erin?"

"What is your problem? Why won't you talk to me?"

"I'm sorry. I'm tired."

A lie.

"Elle, you were so excited about it. Just tell me and I'll stop bothering you."

There was a stinging hurt in Erin's voice, and Elle tried to retract her earlier annoyance.

"You're not bothering me. I'm tired. Sorry. Okay. So, Friday, after you left, we smoked. I have no idea what it was laced with, but Erin, it was out of control."

"Are you sure it was laced with something?"

"Erin, it was white."

"The pot?"

"Yes. White pot."

"Elle."

"Erin."

"That's crazy."

"I know. Er, I can't explain it."

"What else happened?"

"Honestly, that's pretty much it. Three nights of that..."

It was fairly painless for Elle to tell Erin the news, and it finally shut her up. They talked for another twenty minutes. Every five minutes or so, Erin would stop mid-sentence and double-triple-quadruple check - white? "Listen, Er, I've got to go. I haven't really gotten a chance to talk to my dad much since I've been home."

"Alright, Elle."

"So I'll talk to you soon, alright?"

"Sounds good. Oh Elle! I completely forgot to tell you. I'm gonna be back in Philly tomorrow to do some shopping with my mom. I'll call you? Lunch maybe?"

"Tomorrow? You just left three days ago."

"It's only forty-five minutes away and my mom likes to shop at

Liberty Place. So I'll call you?"

Keith sat in front of the TV, staring directly at the changing images but not taking anything in. When Shelly was alive, he never watched TV. They talked for hours after dinner about anything, Keith sipping on a gin and tonic, Shelly a vodka and cranberry. She loved vodka. Keith had never seen a woman drink vodka as well as his wife. Every drink she ordered had at least a half shot of the clear syrup. In college, he watched her down shots from a five-dollar bottle of Stalingrad. She had graduated to Kettle One before she died.

A door closed upstairs. He couldn't be sure, but it sounded like the hollow slam of the bathroom door. Elle always slammed doors behind her. He had tried to break her of the habit, but it never stuck and it was one of his few pet peeves that he had surrendered to her. He had surrendered other things to her. He let her go to art school to study sculpture. Sculpture? He wanted her to be happy. But he didn't want her to be homeless.

There were times he wondered if she cared either way. Last August, over dinner, he asked her what exactly someone does when they graduate with a proficiency in sculpture.

"You sculpt, dad."

He focused all of his energy on being inquisitive - not condescending.

"Yes. Alright. What are you going to sculpt?"

"I don't yet."

"Who for?"

"I don't know yet."

He had looked down at his plate, trying to think of something both inspiring and supportive. Something that made her see that light everyone's supposed to see at some point. She spoke before he thought of anything meaningful.

"Dad, it'll all work out."

He gave her a crooked smile and changed the subject. If her mother were alive he would have been able to be the bad guy. To talk some sense into her. Shelly could have been the one to agree with her at all costs. The one to support her blindly. Since she died, Keith could never find the balance. He erred on the side of the blind supporter.

Elle stood on the staircase, and looked down on her father on the couch. It had always amused her how much their house resembled the house from the Cosby Show. The front door leading into the family room with a staircase against the far wall. A door into the kitchen, another staircase.

Her father was stretched out on the couch, facing the TV. From her place on the fifth stair from the top, Elle couldn't see if his eyes were closed or focused on the solitary figure on the screen. A man was running through the city, everything was black and white. He picked up a football and looked directly at Keith on the couch as a message popped up under him, "Football, my anti-drug."

The black and white of the screen was immediately replaced with color - a newborn in a crib, a mother with a wide smile, and an amazingly absorptive diaper. The mother held the baby by the ankles, exposing her diaper-rash-free butt, and then put on another diaper. The mother flashed a white smile and the child never wriggled or cried, the picture of perfection. Her father rolled over on the couch, stared at the ceiling briefly, and then caught Elle in the corner of his eye.

"Hey, what are you doing standing up there?"

Elle stepped down three steps, and jumped the last two.

"I wasn't sure if you were sleeping and I didn't want to wake you."

She sat in the navy blue armchair, its back to the front door, perpendicular to the couch. From that angle, Elle could see only half the TV. Keith turned it off and directed all his attention to her. He lifted his arms above his head, stretching, and yawned.

"I'm so glad to have you home, Elle."

"I'm glad to be home, dad. It's nice to get out of the dorms for a while. Nice to not live in one, small room."

It always made Elle sad to think of her father lying on the couch every night. Alone. She remembered coming home over an hour after her twelve o'clock curfew to find her mother and father sitting on the couch, shoulder to shoulder, talking. They hadn't been waiting up for her, they had just lost track of time.

For Keith, the couch had become the closest he could get to Shelly. They spent so many hours just sitting, just talking, just cuddling. The cemetery never did anything for him. There were no memories of them there, nothing shared there. The bedroom was too painful. As he sat on the couch,

he relived their plans. He relived the moments that he had imagined would happen, he relived his life before the accident. Sometimes, when Elle was away at school, he slept on the couch with a box of tissues.

"So, dad, tell me what you've been up to."

"Well." He stretched. "Things at the office are good. No one's doing anything too interesting really."

Her father lived for small talk - from others. He answered most questions about himself with vague, direction-less answers. He worked in a small law firm in Bryn Mawr, defending tax evaders, insurance frauds, and other white-collar criminals.

"How are the Sixers doing so far? I haven't really followed them this year."

"Oh, Elle. Gotta follow the Sixers. They started off slow. 0 and 5. Iverson was out with his shoulder surgery recovery. But once they got him back the team came together the way they should. They're looking strong, Elle. Hoping for another run this year."

Elle smiled at her father. Mention sports and he can talk forever. Keith watched his daughter closely. Was the conversation boring to her? She didn't want to talk about sports. He ventured a change in subject.

"So how was the semester, Elle?"

He wasn't positive, but he felt pretty sure that he had asked her this question, or versions quite similar to it, multiple times since she had been home. She humored him.

"Well...it was good. My classes were great. Everything was relevant to what I want to do. Everything had a point."

Keith struggled to keep the question down, or at least keep it silently running through his head - what do you want to do? He stretched again and forced a smile.

"That's great Elle. How was Erin?"

"She's good, she's actually going to be in Philly tomorrow to shop with her mom. I might go into the city for lunch with them."

"Oh great. That'll be nice..."

They talked until Elle's head began to bob between consciousness and sleep. Keith, flat on the couch, watched her eyes flutter. Her naturally tan skin brushed against the upholstery of the chair as sleep overtook her.

"Elle, Elle. Elle, hunny."

She didn't respond, she was sleeping deeply. She looked so mature to him. When she went to college she still had that look lying somewhere between excitement and fear. Now midway through her junior year, calmness had overtaken her. Keith saw a calm innocence, others would disagree.

There was comfort in Elle curled on the armchair, him on the couch. There was comfort in not being alone in the house. The night his wife died, he and Elle had both slept in this room. Too stunned to move themselves upstairs, too exhausted to notice where they were. Elle had slept on the couch that night, he had sat on the blue armchair, completely upright, completely awake.

One phrase came to Keith every time he thought about his wife's death. What a waste. What a waste of a death. She was the type that should have died publicly, in a heroic act - saving a crippled child from a speeding produce truck, carrying an elderly nun out of a burning convent. Shelly was the type of person who found herself in situations so outrageous and so random that they became somehow meaningful. Her death should have accomplished something.

It was early fall, Elle had just gone off to college. Keith was at work and Shelly planned her day around cleaning the windows. She had refused to let Keith put new windows into the house. These are more authentic. They're meant to be in this house. Shelly always said things like that. On a warm September day, she got the Windex, the paper towels, and climbed the stairs. She had to lean out the window backwards, balancing herself on the ledge carefully, in order to reach the top corners. The windows were so old, made from heavy, thick wood. She started in Elle's room. Then the bathroom. Her bedroom was last. The side window and left-most front window were sparkling when they found her. She was cleaning her last window.

No one could tell Keith exactly what happened. There were no witnesses. But Keith saw the accident very clearly in his sleep.

Shelly finished the left-most front window and moved directly to the right-most front window. She could see the whole neighborhood as she leaned forward out the open window. With her hands on the windowpane, arms straight, she stuck her head into the fresh fall air. She smelled leaves burning and immediately thought of bagpipes. The only time Shelly had heard live bagpipes was at her great uncle's burial. Next to the cemetery, a

young woman stood beside a pile of burning leaves. The scent drifted over the funeral party, hanging over the coffin before drifting past the red and yellow leaves still on the trees, awaiting the same fate. It was a childhood memory, surfacing over Kettle One and a soft couch, that Shelly relived late one night, the side of her face pressed snugly into Keith's sweater.

Her shoulder blades were an inch below the open window when some spring or latch snapped and the heavy wood crashed down. She heard the click, and instinctively braced her shoulders for impact. She guided the window down, eased herself inside, and disappeared inside the house. Minutes later, she was balancing backwards out the same window, which was now held open by a grease-stained cookie sheet.

Her butt and right hand rested against the windowpane, her left hand wiped back and forth in a consistent motion. She hummed. Shelly didn't rush, the weather was too nice, the air too warm, life too perfect. She spent over ten minutes sitting backwards in that windowpane, she had no where to go.

The neighborhood was covered in a mid-morning quiet. The kids were at school, the husbands and working wives were at work, the stay-at-home moms were food shopping. So the cutting ring of the phone was even more startling than usual. Maybe that's why she jumped at the first ring, nearly falling backwards out the window. The second ring must have been just as disruptive to the perfect afternoon silence. It rushed her. She slid her butt into the house, turned onto her stomach, and swung her elbows back in one smooth motion. Her left elbow caught the cookie sheet, knocking it onto the hardwood floor. It clattered, though Shelly probably never heard it.

As the rest of her torso followed the swinging motion of her arms and lower body, the window, uninhibited by the cookie sheet, fell smoothly, with violent force. Had her head, her soft dark hair, slid through the window just before it clamped shut, it would have been a beautiful thing: the sweeping movement of her body racing against the raging power of gravity, and winning. But the thick wood met her neck. There was an unnatural crunch, there was the clatter of a cookie sheet, there was silence.

In some dreams, his wife dies instantly as the heavy wood clamps shut. Her last sight the green blur of the grass beneath her as she rushes into the house backwards. The snap of her neck cuts off her breath - her life - the moment the unnatural crack interrupts the beautiful fall mid-morning quiet. Her shoulder length hair hangs out the window, moving with the

changing wind.

In the other version, the force of the falling window paralyzes Shelly. She's alive as the heavy wood cuts into her neck, blackness slowly filling her eyes. Minutes, hours. She can't feel anything below where the wood rests on her neck. She can't feel her lungs burning. She can't feel her hair moving in the wind, the sun on her face, the hardwood floor beneath her limp body. She can't feel anything but fear. Her breath shortens as air struggles through her trachea, she sees her husband, her daughter, thick wood, brick, darkness. She smells burning leaves, she hears bagpipes.

Keith woke up violently that night to find Elle still asleep on the armchair. He was sweating, breathing heavily, and shaking. He was dreaming about Shelly - no, about her death. He knew he should wake Elle, have her go sleep in her own bed. But that would mean he would have to sleep in his own bed, with the moonlight spilling in that window.

He sat upright on the couch, then leaned back, exhaling. She had rushed because the phone was ringing. When he came home from work, the ambulance was already there. A neighbor saw her head, her delicate hair, hanging unnaturally from beneath a heavy window. She was dead before any one arrived. She died alone.

The phone call. After the medical personnel, police, and investigators had left, Keith walked around the house with eyes wide, like he was looking for her. The message light on the answering machine blinked, he hit play. It was a courtesy call. A man with a lisp asking for money for orphaned children in the tri-state area. Even then, Keith recognized the irony. She died trying to get to a phone to talk to a man with a lisp who would have asked for money. She would have said yes, been generous, and helped a parent-less kid. That wasn't heroic enough. She deserved more than that. He threw the answering machine to the ground and beat it with the heel of his foot until the blinking stopped.

When she woke in the morning, Elle was stiff from sleeping in a ball on the armchair. Her father had left for work already. She found a note on the polished coffee table - Sorry, I feel asleep down here too. Hope you're not too sore. By the time Erin called at twelve-thirty, Elle was finally starting to loosen up the kink in her neck.

"Hey! Sorry, we just got finished with shopping."

"Oh, that's okay."

"Listen, why don't we meet you somewhere near your house? My mom knows where the King Street Grill is. Is that close to you?"

"Yeah, very close. What time should I be there?"

Elle was there before Erin and her mom. She sat outside on the steps, waiting in the unusually warm December afternoon. They pulled up in a white Blazer. Erin hopped out and the car pulled away.

"Hi Er! Isn't you're mom coming?"

"Yeah, she'll be here - she saw some shop she wanted to go into. She told me what she was in the mood to eat, so it's not a big deal."

They followed the hostess to a corner table for three. Elle and Erin sat next to each other, both facing the restaurant. Elle rested her feet on the empty chair saved for Mrs. Creeto. There was an excited look in Erin's eyes.

"Elle, so how are you gonna get stuff?"

"What?"

"It's four and a half weeks. Where else can you get stuff besides me? Now, what I'm offering you isn't white or anything - but hell, Elle, it's something."

"I'm not gonna smoke in my house, Er. I'm sure I'll be able to at parties, but I don't need my own winter break stash. Seriously."

Disappointment spread over Erin's face, though Elle was too busy playing with a sugar pack to notice. Without looking at Erin, Elle continued.

"Besides, I don't have any money."

"Elle, come on. It never has to be about money."

"I'm not gonna use it, Er." There was finality in her voice. "I'm going to the bathroom, if the waitress comes, order me the grilled cheese and a glass of milk."

"Milk?"

Elle walked away. Erin watched her friend disappear into the bathroom. A thoughtful look spread across her face. She swung her purse - a large, camel-colored leather bag - onto her lap. She unzipped the built-in change purse along the side of the bag, then slipped her hand into a hole ripped into the lining. Erin ran her fingers along the inside of the camel leather, until she felt smooth plastic against her skin. Pretending to be totally engrossed in a cosmetics mirror she had placed on the table, Erin pulled the plastic bag out of the change purse.

Erin watched the door, neither her mother nor Elle were in sight.

She pulled Elle's jacket off the back of her chair, slipped the plastic bag into the pocket, and zipped it closed. She smiled, thinking - she'll thank me later. With her covert mission accomplished, Erin sat at the table waiting for Elle to take her seat. Once Elle was sitting, Erin would wait until her mother entered the restaurant, saw the table, and began her approach, before whispering to Elle - check your pockets. Then she'd wink and Elle would know the gift was safely there. With Erin's mother walking towards them, there was no way Elle could refuse the pot or attempt a return.

In the bathroom, Elle stood in front of the toilet, leaning against the stall door, with no intention of moving. What was Erin trying to do? For four weeks Elle just wanted to be what her father thought she was. Just for four weeks. When her mother was alive, Elle never felt guilty about smoking. It was her father - alone, singular, looking at Elle like she was the only thing pure in the world - that made the guilt come. She waited in the stall until she was sure Erin's mom was at the table. She wanted to make fake conversation, talk to adults, act like she was still a child. The cold metal of the stall began to sting Elle's forehead.

Erin saw the Blazer pull into the parking lot, Elle still had not come out of the bathroom. She watched her mother enter the restaurant, spot her in the corner, and begin to walk towards the table. A loud slam startled Mrs. Creeto as she passed the bathrooms. Elle stepped into view and the two exchanged glances and laughs. They sat down with Erin at the same time.

"I ordered for both of you."

"Thanks, Erin."

Elle and Erin's mom responded at the same time, in the same tone. The restaurant was a small place. The wall facing the street was lined with windows and tables, all of which were empty. Though Elle, Erin, and Mrs. Creeto occupied one of only three other occupied tables in the restaurant, their table was stuck away from the light, in the corner, near the swinging kitchen doors. Their waiter was a short, stocky teenager. It was obvious that he dreaded serving tables of the opposite sex. When he arrived with water, he nervously scratched at the dry skin and acne framing his face. They hadn't seen him since. The conversation was strong for the first ten minutes.

"Elle, tell me, how was your semester?"

"It was a lot of fun, Mrs. Creeto. Every class was interesting and relevant."

Erin rolled her eyes, though only Elle noticed. It was amusing to Erin that Elle could sound so studious, so serious. Erin's look made Elle uncomfortable, a feeling interrupted by the arrival of their lunches.

The waiter stuttered and fumbled as he presented the food.

"The Grilled Cheese...the Chicken Caesar Salad...the Mandarin Chicken Salad. Can I get you girls anything else?"

Elle looked at the lunch sitting in front of her, instantly jealous of the towering piles of lettuce surrounding her buttered and fried bread. She wished Erin hadn't been annoying and she had been able to actually look over the menu.

"I'll take a cranberry juice, please."

"Oh, Elle, I love cranberry juice." She smiled dutifully at Mrs. Creeto. Silence covered the table as they ate. From her seat Erin watched the waiter emerge from the swinging doors with the tall glass of cranberry juice balanced on his tray. She saw his left foot catch the leg of an extra chair positioned between the kitchen and their table of three. Though she made a forced, guttural noise, there was nothing she could do to stop the chain of events. Foot catches, waiter falls, cranberry juice slides off tray towards the khaki jacket hanging loosely on the back of Elle's chair, a crash.

When they had finished eating, Elle examined her khaki jacket. It was fitted in the back, where the red burst now was. The pockets, which she rarely used, were zippered shut. The collar was lined with gray cotton. She draped her favorite jacket over her arm as they exited the restaurant. A manager chased after her, offering one more apology and giving her a gift certificate. The incident didn't upset Elle; she'd be able to get the stain out - or at least most of it. And she got a free lunch.

Elle refused the offer from Mrs. Creeto, and insisted on walking home on such a warm winter day. Standing next to the pavement, she waved and watched as Erin and her mother turned right and the white Blazer disappeared into traffic. As Elle turned left and stepped onto the sidewalk, she could see the clock tower, she could see the bridge, the train tracks, and what used to be her mother's favorite bar - Hair of the Dog. But she had lost sight of the white Blazer, and there was no possible way she could see Erin stiffen as she thought about the khaki jacket, the red stain, the zippered pockets, and the hidden gift.

Once home, Elle sat on the couch, flicking through the channels.

Soap operas and talk shows annoyed her. Info-mercials bored her. MTV targeted pre-teens. She couldn't stand *The Dating Story*. Standing, with the remote in her hand, she ambled towards the stairs, still flipping channels, hoping to find something to watch at the last minute. At the fifth stair to the top, she stopped, turned the TV off, placed the remote on the staircase, and disappeared upstairs.

When her father came home from work at 5:45 he almost forgot she was home. He was so used to coming home to emptiness. The house was quiet, but Keith checked the entire first floor before climbing the stairs to Elle's room. He picked the remote up, leaned over the railing, and tossed it gently onto the couch. It landed with a soft thud on the cushions, bounced, and hit the floor with a clatter.

The door to Elle's room was slightly open, it creaked as Keith gently pushed into the room. Leaning against the doorframe, he could see his daughter curled on her bed. An open book rested on her right arm, her left hand covered the paperback spine. Her shoes were upside down, one half-hidden by the bedskirt. She looked so peaceful and calm. Pushing himself off the doorframe, he turned, and walked away. Just before he reached the stairs, he realized he left her door wide opened.

Keith turned back, leaned into the room, grabbed the knob, and pulled the door towards him. With his neck and head peeking between the door and the door frame, he scanned his daughter's room. The motion drew his eyes to her desk, where her khaki jacket hung on the back of a chair. The red stain had faded into the material, leaving a pastel-like circle in the center. Without a word, without a touch, Keith walked past his daughter, smiled, draped her jacket over his arm, and disappeared behind a closing door. He didn't rush - the weather was too nice, the air too warm, life nearly perfect.

Keith felt his way down the wooden steps to the laundry room. He was used to taking each step carefully, slowly, burdened by a cumbersome plastic laundry basket. With only the jacket in his arms, it was easy for him to slip down the dark stairs. Yet, he somehow misjudged the second to last step, and tripped forward into the wall. He laughed at himself, and pulled himself upright. The fall made a soft thud, if anything, not nearly loud enough to wake Elle.

But at the same moment, or nearly, Elle rolled over and looked at

her clock. Her father could be home soon. On her back, surrounded by the soft down comforter, she stared at the ceiling waiting to hear him come in. He fumbled through the darkness two floors below Elle, her stained jacket in his right hand, his left fingers grasping the thin string, pulling.

They Should Have Gone to Tango

by Laurence Ross

The bright lights of the stage splashed across Kate's face, changing her skin from blue to yellow to purple, chameleon-like. Jason thought her mood seemed to change under the different hues: sad, happy, bewildered. If only it were that easy in real life, he thought. No, instead he was forced to assume the role of a telephone psychic, expected to at least pretend to know what she was thinking. If not, he might end up on her futon come bedtime, a situation that usually took place at least once a week. Still, by the next morning, over a mug of coffee during the scrambling of showering, hairspray and eye shadow, she would forget all about whatever unforgivable wrong he had committed the night before.

It was snowing, flakes fluttering all around in the middle of a forest. Or at least that is what it was supposed to look like. Jason watched with his elbow resting on the arm of his seat and his head resting against his knuckles as young women danced across the stage in their white costumes. They were meant to appear to be snowflakes, but Jason thought they looked more like a bunch of big tissues being swept along the stage. The music from the orchestra swelled with quickening violin strokes, resonating trumpet chords and the chiming of bells.

Jason turned his head to look at Kate sitting next to him, completely absorbed in all the activity. Her mouth was open just slightly and her hand, which he had been holding, had gone limp. He regretted not sending his friend Paul to accompany her. The Nutcracker was not exciting at age four when his grandmother took him to go see it. (He had cried at the appearance of The Rat King. How could anyone forget when it had been brought up at every Christmas dinner since?) What made him think he would like it any better at age twenty-four? Paul was always willing to do that kind of thing. Just one month ago, Paul had offered to take Kate pumpkin picking after hearing Jason complain about spending his day off rummaging around

in a pumpkin patch, comparing size and shape. After all, Jason was in the landscaping business; he spent every day in the dirt and vines.

Jason didn't necessarily know how to put into words the particular reasons why he liked Kate, which was strange considering they had been dating for over eight months. It was just the combination of all the little things: her tiny fingernails, the expression she had on her face when she was thinking real hard (with her left eyebrow bent in an S-shape) how she unconsciously scratched his shoulder when they were just holding each other, watching television. Sometimes he would lay awake at night trying to add all of these things together, see what he ends up with, find the answer. But he never was very good at math.

Thick strips of her hair fell across the rims of her glasses; white glare reflected off the lenses. She always wore her glasses to "events"—any occasion where she wanted to appear more intellectual, even though she only needed them for driving. She made him wear his glasses too. He hated it. Putting on a show for all the supposed upper class, the social elite that strut around at these events with their 100% silk ties, their starched pants and gold cufflinks. Cufflinks. That was probably what Kate had bought him for Christmas. Never mind about practical things like a pair of jeans or a sweater. Maybe he would buy her a lawnmower out of spite. But he knew he would never go through with something that outlandish. He would end up running out Christmas Eve buying her a stuffed animal and chocolate, the only presents left on the otherwise-empty shelves.

The music switched rhythms into an Arabic style and a single female dancer (quite attractive in her outfit) made her way on stage. She twisted and turned her body at unthinkable angles, tapping finger cymbals together like she was pinching notes out of the air. She reminded Jason of the Moroccan restaurant a few of his buddies had taken him to a couple months ago. Kate had been at night class in mathematical theory. The restaurant's main attraction was its group of belly dancers—women that swiveled between the customer's tables, bells jingling from their hips. Kate did want him to culture himself. That was why they were at the stupid ballet in the first place. "It's not stupid, it's culture," she would warn.

"Culture. Right," he had said upon walking into the main lobby of the theater. Tables were set up against the far wall with another huge one standing in the center—folding tables with imitation red velvet drapings. Delicately placed on top were Nutcracker wineglasses, Nutcracker tree

ornaments, Nutcracker candle pillars—where were the Nutcracker tee shirts?

There was an infant in the row right in front of them, sitting in the lap of her mother. She was not paying attention to the ballet either. She was staring at Jason, baby eyelashes seeming too big for her face. She smiled at Jason, her mouth wide open, and raised her arms in the air. It looked to him like she was saying 'Take me out of here!' Jason widened his eyes and then stuck out his tongue. The baby, thoroughly amused, gave a small yelp and then hid her own face in her tiny fists.

"Shhhh," the mother hushed, bringing her index finger to her lips. "Be good Chantell." Chantell! What a name. Jason felt sorry for the little girl, imagining her in kindergarten wishing her name were something simple, normal. Something easy to spell, like Mary, Patty or Sue.

The mother pulled out a plastic baggy filled with Cheerios. Chantell began mashing palmfuls of cereal into her mouth, the crumbs falling onto the black collar of her dress. She held out her fist, offering to share with Jason. He actually was hungry. He hadn't eaten anything since the peanut butter and jelly sandwich he had had at work during lunch.

Kate elbowed him in the rib. "Are you even watching this?" Jason felt like he was receiving a much harsher scolding than the baby. "My favorite' part of the play is coming up right now. It's called 'Tea'. It is fabulous." Jason rubbed his side. Kate's elbow was bony and it had hurt. Humiliated in public with a jab to his pride. He could handle it when they were by themselves—sometimes he even thought it was cute—but in the middle of a crowded theater that was simply unnecessary. But then again, who cared what these country club boys thought?

Jason started to drift in and out of consciousness until he caught himself staring down at a large woman. No, large was not the word, he thought. Mammoth, whale-like—that was it—whale-like. Like she had swallowed eight little children, the first eight children who happened to pass by. But somehow she was weaving across the stage as if she were light as a feather in her dress, puffed out big as the hull of an overturned ship. The music crescendoed, booming to a climactic chord and the eight children exploded from her undergarments, traipsing rather chaotically around in zigzags. That was too much. Jason slid out of his seat and went to the bathroom.

They entered through the doors of Le Petite Cafe, the new French restaurant in the heart of the city that Kate had been talking about nonstop. Jason made the reservations a week before and though he knew it was out of his price range, he wanted to treat her. Maybe it would make up for something he did or something he no doubt would do in the future.

"Why did we have to park so far away," Kate said, bitter over the five-minute walk from a side street.

"Valet parking is out of control. I don't like the idea of some stranger riding in my car." Jason hoped that would end the conversation. He was not about to spend a fortune on dinner just so Kate could chew him out.

"What, are you worried someone might crash your car?" Kate was not looking at him, but at the little table in the corner with two fat Italian men wedged into chairs that appeared to be too small to support them. "Because your car is worth so much money. Or maybe you are just afraid the valet might steal your empty soda bottle collection right out of the back seat." She crossed her arms and they stood in silence waiting for the hostess to arrive.

Last month, Jason and Kate had gotten into an argument over their friend Molly's birthday gift. Jason had picked up a bottle of wine and a card for the party but when Kate came home she launched into tirade because he hadn't chosen champagne. She was the type of person that added up her grocery bill as she placed the items in the cart. Whenever she went out to dinner with a group of people she was the one to take the bill and divide up everyone's portion according to what they ate. These were the nuances of retired women who gamble their pennies away at bingo, not of a young successful accountant.

Jason remembered how those nuances were hidden in their first weeks of dating. Both too scared to show themselves in full light, the dinner conversations revolved around trivial pleasantries: how it was funny the weather man never predicts the forecast correctly, the effect inflation has had on toothpaste prices, relaying insignificant comments on the habits of mutual friends, laughing at all they had in common. They both sat awkwardly encumbered by physical attraction till the check came.

The hostess came to escort Jason and Kate to a table. She led them to the back of the restaurant next to a party of four: two couples clearly older than Jason and Kate who had obviously been drinking for quite some time.

The men wore business suits; the wives looked like Christmas ornaments. The gaudy women had matching haircuts—badly dyed blonde hair pushed up into a halo around their faces like gold crowning. Jason thought that if he just stuck a hook through their heads and hung them on a tree, no one would know the difference. It was all just a matter of finding a tree that was big enough.

As Jason and Kate pulled in their chairs, the hostess placed the leather-bound menus before them. Jason started to work his way through the gold-scripted entrees. Cassolette d'escargots en hommage à Monsieur Cleuvenot, Omble chevalier et ses poivrons Anaheim et piquillo rôtis, Foie gras poêlé et sa figue farcie aux roquefort.

"This is fabulous!" Kate said, reading the menu as intent as a monk at the bible. "See, isn't this nice?" Her face looked bright even in the dim candlelight. She took off her glasses and put them back into her purse. Jason, still staring at the foreign language laid in front of him, wondered why the prices were conveniently absent. Kate reached across the table and placed her hand on top of his; it was warm.

A waitress came over to ask if they wanted wine with dinner. She had a tattoo that poked out from her collar and went around to the back of her neck. Jason was intrigued but he couldn't make out the design and wondered where else it lead to on her body. He was shocked that a woman with such a tattoo would be working in such a restaurant. "What kind of wine would you like to drink this evening?" Kate asked, her features soft and flushed from being out in the cold.

"Order what ever you like," Jason said. Kate and the waitress began to discuss the various bottles on the list but Jason couldn't help but overhear the conversation going on at the table across from them.

"So I said to him," one of the men at the table began. His hands were waving all over the place and his voice was raised well above the subtle bowing of violins. "No, you are a fool! The phrase 'uh-huh' did not originate from the Philadelphia region but from Boston and its surrounding areas. Can you imagine?" The wives gave exasperated gasps while the other man burst out with an obnoxious cackle. They seemed completely oblivious to the fact that half of the restaurant was staring.

"What did we end up with?" Jason asked Kate.

"I ordered a bottle of red."

"But I thought you liked white?" She always ordered white wine

whenever they went out. Jason was never a drinker of white wine and preferred red but it was never worth getting into an argument about.

"I do," she said. "I'm being nice." She squeezed his hand.

"What's the occasion?" Jason said, smirking. He knew he was in danger turning her flash of a good mood sour but decided to risk the sarcastic comment anyway.

"Shut up."

At the table across the way, one of the men banged his fist against the table, rattling silver, crystal and china. "Then do you know what I did when I was over there?" Jason figured the man was trying to get the attention of anyone willing to listen. "I met this little old man in a green hat when I was shopping around in the bazaar and you know what he told me? He said, 'If you are looking for something really invigorating, I have a friend who runs trips.' And you know what it turned out to be? Rock climbing. And not just any rock climbing. Buddhist monk-rock climbing." Jason tried to imagine the tall, big-bellied man in a business suit propelling himself down a mountain side. "So that is where I spent the next three days—climbing rocks next to Buddhist monks." The man, finished with his story, took a large sip of his drink.

"Maybe you should try that," Jason said, turning back to Kate who had closed her menu.

"What, rock climbing? What for?" She was spinning her glass of water around in circles by its base. The condensation was staining the white tablecloth gray. "And you couldn't pay me enough money to spend three days with a bunch of Buddhist monks."

"You would never survive," Jason said, playing with the corners of the napkin in his lap. He spotted a waiter carrying a large tray of assorted entrees, and while he couldn't recognize what anything was outside of the rice, the steamy aroma still made his stomach churn. "You might fall off a cliff while checking your palm pilot."

Their waitress returned with the bottle of wine and began twisting the bottle opener into the cork, still holding the bottle in the air. The cork squeaked as she pulled and then made a hollow pop as she finally worked it out. The waitress poured a small amount into the two wineglasses. After taking a sip, Kate motioned her approval and the waitress filled each glass halfway before dashing back toward the kitchen.

"You wouldn't either," Kate answered. "I am sure that they are not

serving steak and potatoes in whatever country your friend over there is galivanting through. You are always saying that I have no sense of adventure and you won't even go with me to the sushi restaurant on Market Street."

Jason took a sip of his wine and held it in his mouth for a moment before swallowing. It tingled down his throat. He thought of how nice it would be to slide into bed later, drift off beneath the covers and forget about the giant maple tree he had to saw down the next morning. Some rich bastard ordered the job out of season because the branches were blocking his Christmas light carnival from the view of passing cars. That meant for Jason a torturous afternoon with his ought-to-be-retired coworker Mitch, a skinny man with a yellow beard who liked to tell stories that began with, 'Did you ever know the guy?'

"Sushi is uncooked food. That is not a fair example." Jason turned around to see what was taking their waitress so long to come back for their order. He spotted her with a dripping pitcher, refilling water glasses at a table of two older women. "What are you ordering?" he asked.

"Probably the Côte de veau aux asperges, fricassee de morilles et ris de veau," she said, lifting open her menu again.

"Does it have fish in it?"

"No."

"Then I'll have the same thing."

Jason was so hungry he didn't care what came, as long as it was edible. The wine seemed only to make his hunger more intense. On top of that, he did not want to go through the embarrassing process of having Kate decode the menu. Jason thought his lack of French skills would allow Kate to go off on some intellectual power trip resulting in stories of Paris trips and French classes dating back to junior high.

"But then we won't be able to share," Kate *said with her lower lip protruding* and her forehead wrinkled. She liked reaching her fork across to his plate in the middle of a meal and stealing a bite of whatever looked good. Splitting a meal was like getting two dinners for the price of one. But Jason knew that it meant Kate was going to order two dishes that she wanted.

"Fine. Just so long as it isn't fish."

It was cold outside; the radio said chance of snow. The moon was

not visible but the sky was still lit by the yellow glow of the city lights. It was one of those nights when it is hard to tell where the clouds stop and the sky begins. The lamplight reflected in the street as Jason and Kate made their way back to the car.

Kate had her arms crossed. She was cold despite the thick coat. "I told you we shouldn't have parked so far away. We could be standing behind doors in the heat waiting for the valet to bring the car to us. Now I'm going to have icicles in my hair by the time we get there."

"Would you let it go," Jason said stuffing his hands into his pockets. As they walked he listened to the clicking of her heels and watched the cracks in the cement. The slabs of concrete were uneven, pushed up by the roots of the spruce trees along the road. The cars lined up at the curb were parked with one side on the sidewalk, making the other side tilt down toward the street.

"What are you wearing to my mother's house for Christmas?" Kate asked. She flipped the lapel of her coat up around her neck. Kate's mother had invited Jason over for the family's party. He was not looking forward to Christmas Eve, imagining the hours of uncomfortable conversation with her extended family. He'd be showcased and scrutinized like a painting put up in a gallery by a new artist. 'Well, there is a slight blemish on the right cheek. And the hair is a bit too long, but oh that can be touched up a bit. What does he do again? I think the last one was a little better.' Despite the fact that he would try, Jason knew at some point he would use the wrong utensil or say something inappropriate.

During the summer, Jason and Kate had gone to her uncle's beach house overnight. After dinner, Kate's uncle discovered sand on the couch in the living room and went storming around inspecting everyone's feet and clothing. Jason was convicted, found to have sand still clinging to the back of his shirt. "Imagine, finding sand at the beach!" Jason had wanted to yell but instead just brooded in the blasting noise of the Dustbuster. Kate had tried to tell him it wasn't a big deal but her attempts at encouragement were not enough to counterbalance the uncle's condescending glances.

"I don't know. I'll find something—I'll wear this. Are you sure your mother wants me to come? It seems like a family thing. I don't want to intrude." Kate stopped walking.

"Are you kidding me? We have had this conversation three times already. You are going. How do you think it feels to have people ask how

the imaginary boyfriend is?"

Jason found it ironic that she had been so cold she complained about the walk to the car but it was no problem to stand there and yell at him. Her breath rose in front of her, the white fading into the light of the street lamp. "Okay, I was just asking. You don't have to get all huffy."

Jason was sorry to leave behind the Christmas Eve ritual he had started to form over the past couple of years. Dinner at Jacob's House of Matzo where he would chitchat with the waiter over a bowl of matzo ball soup, then onto a Christmas cartoon marathon until he received the wake up call from his parents the next morning, telling him to come over for brunch and presents. A car drove past, its headlights making their shadows stretch and then shrink back down to normal size again. The car turned and its red tail-lights vanished behind the edge of a row house.

"You just need to learn when to ask and when to keep your mouth shut." Kate complained. She started walking again, heels clicking toward the car. She was a little drunk so he let the comment go. They had gone through the whole bottle at dinner.

Up the block, a small group of people in dark clothing were gathered at the front steps of a porch. One guy was sitting next to a girl with her head on his shoulder and there were two other men leaning against the iron railing, cigarettes burning in their hands. Jason had an ominous feeling. It was late and he had not seen anyone walk by since they left the restaurant. "Let's cross the street," he said grabbing her arm and pulling her toward the curb. She stumbled a little bit and then ripped her arm from his hand.

"Get off! The car is this way. I'm not going out of the way. You can cross if you want to." Kate readjusted her coat and continued on but Jason grabbed her arm again.

"This is not the time to be stubborn. Would you just come on?" Jason looked ahead and imagined the eyes of the men sizing him up. Jason wished for once she would just listen to him without a debate. "I do not want any trouble."

"We have just as much of a right to be on this street as they do. Relax. The car is only two blocks away."

The men were all burly—dark coats, big shoulders—Jason guessed manual labor. One of them had a shaved head and the other two wore hats. The girl on the step had on a skirt and high boots. Her hair was long and dark and hung around her face.

The bald one spoke first. "Can you folks spare some change?"

Jason hoped that if he just continued walking, they might just let them alone. He wished he could telepathically warn Kate to do the same.

"We're just passing through," Kate said, not really looking at any one of them in particular. "Sorry." She folded her arms and took a few more steps before the two men on the railing swept in front, blocking the sidewalk. Jason tucked Kate behind one of his shoulders, not knowing what to expect.

"Now now," one of the other men began, "I'm sure folks as dressed up as you could give a little something." The guy flicked his cigarette into the street and as it hit the ground, it rolled leaving a momentarily glowing trail of red ash. Jason noticed the man kept shifting his weight from one foot to the other and thought it peculiar. He looked across the street/ hoping to see someone walking past, looking for any movement that might change the outcome of the situation. An elderly woman out to walk her dog would have done. Most of the windows were black. One flickered with the colored strobe of television light.

The guy who had been sitting pushed himself off the step. "How's about a look inside that pretty little bag of yours, miss?" He was shorter than the other two, but no less intimidating. Jason thought his hands looked large and muscular.

Kate pulled the strap of her purse closer to her elbow and pressed it against her side. "Jason, come on," she said. "We are going to be late."

Jason couldn't believe she was going to try and push her way through. It wasn't that he thought she was necessarily wrong, just that it was not the ideal place to enact her self-righteousness. But before he had time to react, a man's fist landed flush on his jaw. Jason fell backward onto the pavement, landing on his shoulder. The punch stung in the cold air like Jason thought a belly flop off a bridge into the ocean might feel. His mind submerged into the surreal murky state between alcohol and getting the shit knocked out of you.

The last time he was in a fight was high school, in a park at night, a place where a lot of kids hung out and drank on the weekend. He was there with a few of his friends for lack of something better to do. One of the guys from the basketball team stumbled around as usual. His name was Ray Deamer. He approached Jason for no reason and socked him in the eye. Ray had been holding a roll of quarters in his hand and Jason's eye had

swollen shut. Jason's friends told him afterwards that Ray had thought he was somebody else. That old case of mistaken identity—one minute you are walking into the 7-Eleven for a pack of cigarettes and the next you are caged in the back seat of a wailing police car, fingered for rape and headed to the electric chair because you resemble some violent nut. When Jason finally got home, he had to make up some clever explanation about his eye to tell his mother. He and his friends were just wrestling; they were playing baseball in the dark and one of the pitches flew too high; he was at the movies and all of a sudden, a super-sized soda landed in his face. For months after, Jason thought of ways to get back at Ray who never even apologized.

Jason was still on the ground trying to figure out where Kate had gone. The bald guy was standing over him, rubbing his knuckles. The next thing Jason knew, the girl in the miniskirt and boots had jumped on the bald one's back like a child might jump on her father's for a piggyback ride. She wrapped her boots around her boyfriend's waist. "Theo, come on baby, let's get out of here. I wanna go home." Her arms looked as if they were practically strangling his neck. Jason noticed for the first time that she had a nose ring. It sparkled in the headlights of a car that was coming around the corner.

"Let's get out of here," he heard one of the guys repeat, though he could not tell which one.

He listened to the footsteps of the four of them echo down the block till they drifted out of range. The headlights of the car swept over Jason as he was pushing himself off of the ground. The car slowed just a little and then bumped through the next intersection, leaving only its trail of white exhaust. When Jason finally stood up, he found Kate to be in nearly the same spot she had been before he went down, just standing there. For the first time, Jason thought Kate looked scared. "I told you not to park so far away! God, why couldn't you just do something?" she screamed as her eyes welled with tears.

"What were you thinking!" Jason yelled back at her. "Why couldn't you just give them your wallet?" His jaw ached. His shoulder was stiff and it hurt to lift his arm. Jason wondered if she was planning on going to the car. He knew he would be staying at Paul's apartment that night. Kate held the strap of her purse in her hand. Her face was red and blotchy. Jason looked at her waiting for a response but she remained motionless, her eyebrow

bent and her arms down at her sides.

He started walking toward the car, only a couple more blocks up the street. He put his hands back in his pockets and listened for her footsteps to follow. Jason stared down at the sidewalk, tracing along the cracks of the broken pavement with his eyes and trying his best to step around them.

The Extraordinary Experience of Standing up Straight

by Kathleen Ryan

Nate and I were stoned but normal, relative to the two other customers in the 24-hour grocery store. Our company consisted of a lady with a big purple birthmark splashed across her face and an enormously obese old man whose yellow T-shirt stretched over his gut, showing off an outtie the size of a super ball. Typical after-hours grocery patrons. When we passed the two of them, Nate and I both nodded and he let out a snide-sounding snicker. I chuckled, and defended them sarcastically as we approached the customer service station.

"Hey, even people who can't let themselves be seen in daylight have gotta refill their cabinets sometime."

The booth was, of course, deserted, as is always the case once the real customers have finished their shopping for the day. Nate's cigarettes were locked up in the plastic cupboard and we were made to wait for a nightshift employee to come attend to his purchase. I busied myself with the rack of T-shirts and plastic flip-flops off to the left of the counter. The idea for our next exploit came to me from behind a navy-blue sweatshirt boasting the town slogan, "Diener's Hill, A Community with Altitude." There I found another one of those goddamn patriotic T-shirts everyone's grandfather had been wearing since the towers fell in New York.

I swung the shirt around so Nate could have a laugh, too.

"What?! Seek and Destroy?!" We both burst out laughing.

"I mean, it's a bulldog with an American flag bandana tied around its head! What does that have to do with anything?" I asked.

Nate turned excitedly to the rack, inspired to sort through the remaining inventory of T-shirts. He looked at a few, then grabbed one and held it out for me to see: Jesus on a crisp white background, standing in front of a cross and pointing into space like Uncle Sam, the words "I want YOU to believe."

We lost ourselves as soon as we looked at each other. Church laughter—the kind that can't be stopped only because it must be. I felt the cashier off to my left sizing up our behavior, trying to be sure we didn't steal anything. This only made the situation worse. I was an idiot with my smile, which quickly spread through my whole body; the muscles in my shoulders and stomach tightened hard.

"That's brilliant." Nate shook his head and clapped his hands. His shoulders bounced with each syllable of his laughter.

"We can't just let these things go to waste," I said.

"No way." Nate collected both shirts and laid them on the counter. He bought them along with a pack of Camel Lights and a bag of cashews he'd grabbed from one of the checkout lines.

I wriggled into the Jesus shirt as we headed for the doors and stopped at a rack of sunglasses to glance back at the cashier. It was clear her nose was in a tabloid. I guessed that the cover story was what kept her attention while I slid a pair of aviators into my pants pocket—"ADOLF HITLER REALLY A WOMAN!".

Outside, I put the glasses on, the tag dangling over my nose.

"How 'bout this get-up?"

"Oh man. I wish Halloween was coming up," Nate said, as he unlocked the car and slid into the driver's seat.

"What do you want to do?" He asked, tapping his box of Camels against the steering wheel to pack the tobacco.

"I don't know. Let's just drive some more." I shrugged and tapped my pants pocket to indicate our stash of pot. "You wanna go another round?"

"Why not?"

Zane traded House of Pain for The Jerky Boys in the tape deck, lit a cigarette, and rolled out of the parking lot towards Schuylkill Manor Road, or "the trail" as we'd deemed it. Never any cops, just a long and winding road through the woods up the side of Diener's Hill—the perfect place for a late-night smoking session in his 1984 Dodge Aspen (The car was rusty white with sky blue vinyl interior, its best feature: a license plate that read OX4 433. "Ox." Just by sheer coincidence. Brilliant.)

I rolled another joint.

Work didn't start until September. The real world was still a month and a half away. My plan to quit the druggie bit as soon as I became a col-

lege grad had been postponed when I realized that this was my last real summer unemployed. But still I was looking forward to becoming the sort of young, ambitious teacher who drove a station wagon to school and left at the end of the day with chalk dust all over his sweater vest. Once the school year started up the line would be drawn. I didn't care if Zane was planning on doing the same. I was ready to be serious about something. Not to mention/ it was time to get the hell out of my parents' house, and those paychecks seemed to be a suitable way to go about affording an alternative.

Since junior high, I'd cultivated a recklessness, secret to my mother and father. They didn't know that by the time we'd reached the age of fourteen, Zane and I had spent countless Sunday afternoons sprawled out on the hood of his car, most often smoking weed and writing songs, but occasionally indulging in a hallucinogenic matinee when we could get a hold of some acid. Zane's father had once discovered us in this state of magnified awareness and the drugs had quickly coaxed me to the realization that there was nothing to do but shove an entire box of Hostess cupcakes down my throat, rendering myself incapable of holding any sort of conversation with him. Mr. Robertson was unbalanced, to put it politely, though, and didn't question my behavior, much less anything else. I think he always believed he and I to be kindred victims of some inborn psychological damage.

When I looked up, licking the paper and sealing the joint, we were just passing under the Rt. 209 overpass, about to make the turn onto the trail. The American flag that had been nobly displayed there since the day after the attacks had apparently been blown out by the wind during a thunderstorm the previous night; it hung from the guardrail by its starry corner.

"Man. Who puts those things up there?" I wondered.

"What things, where?" Zane asked, distracted. "You all set with that thing?"

"Yeah, here," I said, holding in my second hit. I rolled down my window, blew the smoke out and clarified my question. "I'm talking about those flags. On the overpasses."

"Oh, right." He nodded. "Dude, the same sort of people who wear these great fucking shirts we just bought."

"Right." I let out a chuckle laced with disdain. "Well, you'd think they could be a little more creative, wouldn't you?"

"Like how?"

We were moving slowly through the woods then, passing my favorite house on the trail—completely round, a shingled bubble with a wrap-around porch. I prided myself on the stoned conclusion I'd reached one night, that that was a really heat-efficient way to live. A shape providing the least amount of surface area where warmth could escape, the largest amount of volume for living in.

"I don't know. I saw a banner once that seemed to involve a little more effort," I told Zane. "Some rhyme about Freedomland and united we stand."

He passed the dying joint my way.

"That's it. I got it. Let's make a banner!" I said.

The nightlife in Diener's Hill always begged creativity. We were fucking bored; Zane's arm did not need twisting.

"Listen. It's about time we made another video. We can go out there in costume—we've already got the shirts. We just need a slogan or two." I was thrilled with myself. "Dude, how funny would that be? What do you think of 'Saq Iraq'?"

Our plans were delayed an hour because my girlfriend was still breaking up with me by eleven o'clock; Zane and I were supposed to be on our way to the Rt. 81 overpass on Mill Creek Avenue by then.

Heidi hadn't surprised me. Her new job in New York had radically changed her within one short month. She'd fallen right into the scene up there—"happy hours" after work with all the other yuppies milling about her PR firm, grabbing lattes over lunch breaks with self-satisfied bosses, letting the junior associates show her how to live city life. She'd mentioned Charles more than enough.

When I hung up, the phone had hit the receiver with a solemn-sounding coupling. The idea of postponing our operation a night or two, driving into Bloomsburg to talk to my sister about Heidi's infidelity appealed to me for a second, but quickly I realized how pathetic that sounded. I could stand to be bad and get my mind off of things.

Heidi would carry on in New York—shopping, dating, living PR. Instead of letting the news fester inside me, I donned my patriot attire and headed over to Zane's place. I really fit the bill, sporting a black leather bomber vest I found in the hall closet along with my little brother's red

cowboy bandana. Zane had had me beat, of course. But he was undistracted, not dumped as I had just been, hard, on my hometown ass. He had raided the Halloween supply in his attic and found a Rambo wig, purchased a pair of "Stars 'n' Stripes" parachute pants from a consignment shop over in Pottsville, and had purposely neglected to shave for the second day in a row, obtaining the rugged look of a Vietnam vet.

Weiss was our director, producer, and cameraman as usual. His idea for a homemade Behind the Music trilogy about a Diener's Hill garage band called Crutch had provided us with a whole summer's worth of entertainment and earned him all scripting and artistic direction rights for every movie we produced thereafter. For this short he had created a mix tape soundtrack full of Great American Hits like Simon & Garfunkel's America, Springsteen's Born in the USA, and the Good Morning America theme song. He staked out a position in the back of Zane's car with his beloved camcorder permanently situated in front of his right eyeball. He'd stuck a miniature flag through the handle for inspiration purposes.

Weiss, taking his role as director very seriously, had restricted Zane from partaking in the vodka I brought over in a silver flask Heidi had given me on my twenty-first birthday.

"No vodka for you, Zane. After one beer, you're no better than Stephen Baldwin. And besides, you're driving" Weiss had explained. "Joey, on the other hand is much better when he's loaded. A regular Robert Downey, Jr. Plus-" he had to continue, and gave me that patronizing frat-brother pat on the back as he said it-"your ass was dumped less than an hour ago. Fill 'er up!"

I treated myself to a generous gulp and stashed the flask in a pocket inside my vest as Zane and I piled into the front of his Aspen.

BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JUNE

Written/Directed/Produced/Choreographed by P. T. Weiss

Title Screen Eye of the Tiger plays over a black background, title in white lettering

Fade in Open on a shot out the front windshield from the backseat of Zane's car. Slow-mo. Take of Joey and Zane entering the car

simultaneously. They shut their doors together and turn to face one another for a high five. Real time shot of Joey taking a swig from his flask while Zane pulls out of the driveway.

Zane Watching the road and stealing quick glances at the camera: We've been thinking about doing something like this for a long time now. We wanted, you know, the perfect slogan, something that really says, "Don't mess with the Freedomland."

Joey Takes another swig and returns the flask to his vest pocket Looks in the rearview mirror and tightens the knot in his bandana. Yeah. We figured a banner was the way to go and route 81 was the spot. You know how many soldiers are gonna see this thing? The Carlisle Army Barracks is only about 85 miles down that road to the south. They're driving that stretch of highway every day, man. Getting off at the Diener's Hill exit every day, stopping at the MickyD's up Mill Creek Road every day, too.

Zane Nodding along to Joey's rambling That's damn right. And we're gonna make all them guys real proud. Real proud, man, when they see what kind of support they got out here in Diener's Hill.

Cut & Fade, Music fade out

Fade in on a wide shot from the side of the trail. Born in the USA fades in. As the Aspen approaches, Zane leans out the window and gives the camera a thumbs-up and a big stupid grin. Settles back into his seat, taking another swig. Shot of car from behind until it drives off-screen.

Cut & Fade, Music fade out

Fade in on a shot of a handicapped parking space in the Mill Creek State Park parking lot. Simon and Garfunkel's America fades in as the car pulls into the space. Driver corrects himself 5 times, straightening out the Aspen in the spot even though there are no other cars in the entire parking lot. Slow-mo. shot of the two patriots exiting the car. Zane tosses his cigarette on the ground. Pan down to show the butt being stamped out by a foot

wearing a Converse All-Star sneaker. Pan up and out to show Zane gazing nobly into the distance and Joey taking a swig from his flask. The two men walk to the rear of the car, pull out a rolled-up banner, and start walking up a hill to the Rt. 81 overpass.

Cut & Fade

Fade in on the opening chord of the Good Morning America theme song. Close up of the banner rolled out on the ground. Banner reads:

God Blessing America
+ God Not Blessing Terrorists =
YOU DO THE MATH

Pan out to show Joey and Zane adhering masking tape to the corners of the banner. Pan further out to show them standing on the shoulder of Rt. 81, getting ready to hang the banner over the guardrail, displaying it for motorists travelling down Mill Creek Avenue.

Sound of sirens grows from behind camera. Scene is lit by red and blue strobe lights. Camera shakes.

Weiss Oh, shit. No way, man... CUT!

Camera pans to the ground over sounds of scuffling and Weiss's cursing. Screen taken over by a snowstorm, and then suddenly goes blank.

Our costumes saved us. We probably would have incurred a vandalism charge or some other such indictment if we'd been wearing our street clothes. But Officer Huckleberry couldn't deduce that we weren't seriously fierce American loyalists/ thanks to Zane's quick, sober thinking and my choice to remain silent until spoken to. Weiss had shoved the camera into the pocket on the front of his sweatshirt and stood next to me, speechless.

"What seems to be the trouble/ officer?" Zane said.

"Just wondering what you fellows are up to at one in the morning on the shoulder of a major highway, son."

"We're showing a little support for the war, officer." Zane looked him right in the eye.

"What does that banner say, there, boys?" This question was directed at me.

I read the banner proudly and then looked to Zane to clarify.

"You see, we want to really rally behind the cause, officer. American flags do demand respect, but we think this means more."

"Right. Well. Did you boys walk out here? Where's your vehicle?" He was scanning the area behind sunglasses—why he was wearing them in the middle of the night made no sense. I was wearing the pair I'd stolen the night before, though, and had no room to speculate, or throw the first stone.

"Down the hill at the state park, sir. We wouldn't be walking out here in the middle of the night. That just wouldn't be sensible." Zane's face had gone deadpan and his answers contained a tone of defensiveness. Even I began to wonder if he was actually serious.

"Hmm. Well, you parked in a handicapped space. I hate that." The cop quickly glanced at Zane, probably trying to detect any trace of guilt in his reaction.

"You're right, officer. That was wrong." There it was—our Achilles's heel.

"I'm gonna have to give you a ticket and ask you to leave." The cop traded the weight on his haunches as he flipped open one of those fateful pads of white, yellow, and pink carbon paper "You can throw the banner away in that dumpster in the parking lot. I can't go around supporting acts of patriotism from citizens who violate our country's parking laws."

Zane and Weiss were not prepared to admit we'd been foiled. Back in the Robertson's basement they made a new sign, in honor of the recent World Cup victory: "USA 2, MEXICO 0... IRAQ, YOU'RE NEXT." I was the sell-out. I mixed myself a vodka and Sprite, threw the bottles back into the mini-fridge under the TV, slumped onto a futon in the corner, and told them I'd let them take care of this one. Heidi had berated me on the phone for having no genuine desire to shape up even though we were finally real adults. To be exact, she'd told me, "Charles knows what he wants and he

doesn't fuck it up with drugs or any of those stupid fucking antics you get yourself involved in." I still wanted to please her even if she never knew I'd chosen to go straight arrow. We'd sounded like assholes talking to Officer Raybans.

The three of us left at the same time. Zane and Weiss had chosen a new overpass and piled back into the Aspen, banner in tow. I decided to head home, and walked with wobbly, liquored knees back to my car. No alcohol for the next week, I thought. No better time than now to start cutting back.

I'd waited an hour for headlights, for a kid delivering newspapers on his bike at five in the morning to cycle past me and my overturned car and save me from the humiliation surely awaiting me in my parents' bedroom. A cell phone would've been nice. But by then I'd been saved from myself too many times. The lucky history I'd built in escaping the law and my parents' wrath was bound to give sometime. And give it did, that night.

I was liquid, walking home; guilt sloshed around in my head and stomach as each step met the ground. Any suitable confession attempting to surface in my soggy consciousness evaporated in an instant. Still no argument and only a half-mile left. Tinkering with the story only made it worse.

My fellow patriots were surely out joyriding through Pottsville, smoking a celebratory blunt in honor of the successful exhibition of their sign over Willie Road. Or they were passed out on Zane's couch and would never answer a doorbell or the phone. Or they were in jail.

I was made to rely on my own two legs to get me home, left to hike three and a half miles up the trail to my house, wasted off of cheap vodka and the worst break-up in history, as far as I knew. The best way to tell my father that I'd gone tumbling off the road in my three-month-old sedan was to.... Fuck if I knew what to say.

"Sorry to wake you Dad, but I couldn't wait to tell you. I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna join the Army, turn myself into the noble soldier you always wanted me to be, with shiny boots, and a flat top, and all sorts of distinctions pinned to my collar and—I knew you'd be proud. Boot camp? I'm leaving in the morning. But first I'd really appreciate it if you could drive me back to my junked car so I can take a Breathalyzer and file a police report. Oh, and by the way, I'm sure I've lost that teaching job."

I debated about only waking my mother. She tended to be more understanding when my sister had gotten herself into trouble when we were kids. Once, in an effort to bring some sort of closeness to their relationship, my mom had spilled some secrets to Cindy—supposedly, she'd tried coke and had had premarital sex. Since then she couldn't bring herself to reprimand my sister for anything. Mom was in the middle of another one of her self-improvement plans, though, distracting herself from her cheese fry and chocolate weaknesses by enrolling in meditation classes directed by some twenty-seven year old poser named Kareem, who sported dreadlocks down to his ass. She'd be less likely to sympathize with a mistake when she was doing so well for herself.

Fuck.

In a blind curve, I was brought back to the moment, listening and watching for motorists who most likely would not have been expecting pedestrians at such an hour. The bend spilled out onto Hamilton Boulevard, with Beechum's Variety Store on the corner and a half-rotted slat board fence lining a field of dozing cattle on the other side of the intersection. Across the acre of sloping farmland, the carnage of my mistake was steeped in the light of the early day. I stopped walking.

For the first time, I noticed how pleasant the ground felt under my feet, what an extraordinary experience existed in standing up straight, moving my neck from side to side, up and down. Each amplified sensation coursing through my ailing body appeared miraculous—the feeble feel of my limbs, the weakness in my head, the knots in my stomach: the signs of life.

I had been able to walk away from my car.

Names With Faces and Without

by James Mosberg

Because I had been thrown from the hay wagon two days ago, I decided to never return to the park. That same morning I had put in my two weeks, and then I had been thrown that afternoon. And then for two days I'd hardly moved/ except to change where it was that I lied in the small house. The day I was thrown, while still at the park, walking had not been a problem. But when I came home late that afternoon, I laid down on the couch/ because I was stoned. Lying on the floor, my hip had stiffened... and oh yes, that's what happened- When I tried to walk, after getting off the couch, I fell to the floor, and then situated myself on my back. It was probably more of a crumbling to the floor. I could, after all, with some effort, walk. But there was nowhere to go, for two days now.

Brad had left two weeks before. Though he said he was going West, I knew that he was looking for Janet. He had been in love with her for a long time now, but had spent many months in the town Anthem, most of them with only me for company. So Brad was going to look for Janet, not going "out West." Well, he was going West, but he was specifically going to 2140 Grand Street, Apt C. Denver, Colorado 34902. Brad had come to Anthem to write, and had left to look for a girl. I had come to Anthem when Brad called and told me he had a job and a place to live, and I had not left yet. Janet was a sort of naturally vociferous woman and had never taken truly to Brad. She had once screamed at him for leaving a can of chickpeas on the kitchen counter while he went to get the phone. She had once screamed at him for stepping on his dog's tale and not apologizing. She had once screamed at us both for making cracks about people who worked in grocery stores. She had once screamed at him for comparing her shape to the shape of a somewhat voluptuous, perhaps mildly obese friend of hers in order to make the friend less self-conscious. These were all incidents I witnessed, and I did not think that he would be successful in Colorado.

As for writing, the objective for his brief stay in Anthem, he was unsuccessful. I don't believe that he wrote anything. I had never read anything Brad had written. In fact, I had not once seen him sit down to write. He spent the majority of his time reading a book called, *Reading and Writing Self*, by a man named Vincent Wallowworth. Wallowworth once said, "The finest writing comes at the longest and most desperate hour." Brad spent much time looking for the "longest and most desperate hour," but never found that hour, but instead, wasted a lot of time sulking about, or smoking, or sleeping, or drinking at the Sparkle Bar, or laying in the grass of our small plot of a lawn. He threw tennis balls across the lawn toward the dirt road that led to the main road back to Anthem, and calling out for Moses to retrieve the balls, then scolding him when he would just swat at the rolling ball and then run away in terror. If Brad wasn't reading Wallowworth, then he was reading one of many novels by a local writer named James Anderson Wallaby. Wallaby wrote long novels that were stream of conscious, plotless, non-linear homages to the small of life. At least that's what Brad said about them, "the small of life." Once, we went to visit Wallaby's old house, which was outside of Anthem, just south of the park. It was an old cabin, a shack really not much bigger than the average backyard shed, from a once popular mountain resort that had been abandoned in the seventies because the investor had been branded the propagator of a potentially violent militia whose doctrines Brad and I never learned. Wallaby himself caused quite a stir during his three-year stay. Once, Wallaby was caught screaming obscenities during one of the mayor's speeches. Another time, he was caught redressing one of the mayor's daughters. He died in Anthem, supposedly from AIDS, but everything about old Wallaby may have been hearsay. We walked around the outside of the Wallaby shack, and even sat on the porch, which still had two, cream colored polypropylene chairs that were remarkably clean and comfortable. The doors, of course, were locked, and Brad, of course, wanted to break in. I convinced him that we should leave when I reminded him of the militia.

Two things happened sometime in the two days after I was thrown from the hay wagon. I read half of one of Wallaby's books and decided to take our cat to the veterinarian. Moses, who was still at the fragile age of three months, had gotten sick a few days before, and I had hoped that he would get better, but he had not. He hadn't moved from below one of the kitchen chairs in almost twenty-four hours. Not only had he not moved, he

had remained in this lethargic sleeplessness, his kitty-cat eyes never stayed open or closed for more than a few moments. His only movement was a slow, meaningless blinking, over and over. I tried to get him to eat, drink, and play, but he ignored me completely. So I called Dr. Roy Albert. The next morning at the Anthem Animal Clinic, Dr. Albert and I had the following conversation:

"How long have you had the cat?"

"For three months."

"And where did you find her?"

"Find him?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"How did you acquire the cat?"

"From a friend. She had a litter... well, not her... her cat had... never mind."

"I see... and has it had any immunizations?"

"Yes."

"Which ones?"

"I don't know. I didn't give him the shots."

"Who gave him the shots?"

"The girl from whom I..."

"She administered the shots... by herself?"

"She probably had some help."

"What?"

The conversation was going downhill, so I mumbled something inaudible and waited for Dr. Albert to suggest something.

"I see..." And after some scribbling and silence in the small examination room: "We're going to have to keep... Moses is it?" I nodded, and Dr. Albert frowned before he looked up from Moses' dossier attached to his clipboard. "We're going to have to keep Moses here over night. He's severely dehydrated. We need to put him on an IV and run some tests."

"What sort of tests?" I asked. Dr. Albert began to spout off names of possible illnesses, most of which weren't recognizable to me. I thought that I heard him say, "AIDS," which seemed unlikely to me. When I repeated this possibility later that night in the Sparkle Bar, Insincere Ostrich wondered: "Cats can get Aids?" "Apparently." "But the decision," Dr. Albert came out of his medical jargon. "Rests on you and your financial situation."

The costs could be considerable."

I wanted to say, "But it's a cat," except he was a veterinarian, and that seemed inappropriate. As I considered making that statement, Dr. Albert mentioned that in order for them to keep Moses overnight and solve the mystery of the ailment, I would need to make a deposit. It was then that I realized that Dr. Albert did not trust me, that he found fault in my very possession of Moses.

Lou and Alexandria, who owned the Sparkle Bar, where Brad and I had spent those nights we did not spend in our house, were the ones from whom we adopted Moses, and they told me about Dr. Albert. They said that, despite his perspicacity for the welfare of animals, he was a bigoted yuppie who had, along with other members of the Anthem city council, made poor decisions about the welfare of the town. He had also been part of an entourage that had, a year before Brad and I arrived in Anthem, attempted to shut down the Sparkle Bar, which probably explained why Lou and Alexandria didn't like him.

"Couldn't I just take him home for a few days, see if he gets better."

"You could. But like I said, he's severely dehydrated and with the way you described his activity, I wouldn't be optimistic about that solution."

"I did get him to drink something earlier today."

Dr. Albert raised an eyebrow and nodded his head in a condescending acknowledgement of my contradiction. The fact that Moses had drank something ought to have nullified the problem of dehydration, or at least control it. Or so I thought.

"Is he going to die?"

Dr. Albert picked up his clipboard and made other gathering movements that made me think that he wanted to leave. I looked at Moses, who was sitting calmly on the scale at one end of the metal examination table. The eighteen-year-old technician named Oscar who'd first examined Moses had remarked about this positioning with something like, "You just want to keep weighing yourself, don't you?" Oscar rubbed the cat's head in a zealous, all-embracing manner that I knew that Moses hated. I glared at Oscar until he suggested we trim Moses' nails until Dr. Albert showed up.

"It's up to you, son. I can't make the decision for you."

I felt trapped; I didn't have the kind of money that he was hinting at, but I didn't want Moses to die. Everything had happened too quickly; I had

conjectured that he had a cold or had eaten some relish we'd left out on the counter. I wanted to call Brad, make him come back, but I had no way of reaching him. And I would have the guilt of placing the burden of decision and the very life at stake onto Brad's shoulders. I explained to Dr. Albert that I would need to go to the bank to get the money. I walked out of the clinic and headed toward the bank. Anthem was the picture of a small town in America. There was one main road, a small cluster of businesses; a barbershop, an antique shop, a religious bookstore (called The Shepherd's Read), the bank (where I was headed), and, at the Western end, the Sparkle Bar. A long plot of grassy land with a symmetrical row of trees divided the two sides of the road, and on either side one could always find a parking space. The one story that Brad did conceive was about a boy from the city who shows up in Anthem and is so amazed at the abundance of parking that he spends the majority of his time parking his car, in effect creating this unessential convenience. Most of the citizens of Anthem lived in small houses on side roads of the main road, like little one street neighborhoods—instead of “I live in Cross Winds,” it's “I live on Cross Winds.” There were also the people who lived on the two opposite sides of the main road, in the “bigger houses,” as Lou called them. The mayor of Anthem, for instance, lived in one of these houses. Dr. Albert, too, on the other side of town, had garnered a big one. Farther out, the more remote or relatively suspect citizens lived in the woods that surrounded the town of Anthem, off little dirt roads. The main road ran both East and West and connected to the Interstate at exits 65 (East) and 66 (West). James Anderson Wallaby lived in that little shack at the Western outskirts of Anthem and was on the whole not appreciated by the general public. Brad and I lived on the Eastern side and were mostly ignored by the general public.

After the deposit money, there was very little left in my bank account. Certainly not enough to cover the rent, which was due in the next few days. The receptionist said I could pick up Moses the following morning, though failed to mention the obvious fact that I would need to pay the remainder of the fee to retrieve Moses.

“Will he be alright?”

“Oh yes, the little guy will be right as rain. Dr. Albert'll take good care.”

That night I went to the *Sparkle Bar*. Brad had been gone for almost two weeks then, but Lou still asked where he was every time I entered. Lou,

a stout man in his forties with a long mustache that, along with his pointed chin, made his expressions roll off his face as though there were a slope, opened the *Sparkle Bar* three years before he married Alex. Alex was at least seven years his junior and her small face and lithe body made her a much more attractive and well-proportioned human being than Lou, though she seemed perfectly happy helping him run the place. She came over to comfort me, and told the Russian waitress, Sophia, to set up a table for us all to sit, "near the back, out of the light." The bar was never too crowded, just a steady flow of regulars who didn't keep a regular schedule with their comings and goings, arrived to drink as the moment presented itself to them. Lou carried over a bottle of amaretto, four glasses and a bowl of almonds. Lou and Alex sat next to each other, and Alex stroked the back of Lou's neck while he poured the liqueur into three of the glasses. They were an ageless couple, attractive and youthful despite their age, and they acted at times as though they'd just met. Lou went on about how I'd been swindled and that Dr. Albert was a "Yuppie rhinoceros." I realized soon after meeting Lou a few months back that he had this habit of using obscure and fuzzy animal metaphors to describe people. A truck driver who lived in Anthem and frequented the Sparkle Bar once angered Lou by not tipping Sophia, so Lou called him a sappy armadillo. The adjective would often make sense, though never the noun.

Alex, whose opinion I trusted, assured me that the kitten would be fine, but after realizing the many levels to the dilemma, asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. But I'm leaving Anthem."

I explained Brad's unexpected departure in greater detail, and how I'd quit the job at the park, and the subsequent fall from the hay wagon. On the day I fell, our job was to cut back the branches on the trails over which the tractor and hay wagon would slowly pass in that coming Fall. Though it was a simple task, our driver, an aspiring park ranger, decided to horse around, drive through the woods at a daunting speed. My co-worker and I sat warily in the back of the wagon, yelling pleas for him to slow down, but he would not listen to reason and eventually crashed into a tree. The tree shook briefly on impact, and it was left stuck between the left wheel and the body of the tractor. The aspiring park ranger hit his chest on the steering wheel and had trouble breathing for a few minutes; my co-worker in the back held fast and just watched the spectacle unfold and later complained

that his heart would not stop racing. And I flew out of the tractor, overtop my co-worker in the wagon, and landed in a thick tangle of briars between a hickory tree and a curiously arranged pile of common, yet noticeably jagged, stones. My hip, though not broken, was bruised badly enough that I limped for three weeks and the pain itself continued to resurface sporadically over the following few months. The palpable effect of being thrown, headfirst into briars was exactly as I would have imagined, had I imagined such a thing before it actually occurred. I called for shears to clip my way out and crouched between the hickory and the stones. I wrestled with the conflict of disconnecting myself from those thorns attached to me while not catching other thorns, all in a manner that did not drag the thorns, making the already vertical wound, horizontal.

"So tomorrow, I'm going to try and get worker's comp to pay for... rent, or the cat or something... I don't know." I explained to Lou and Alex. And I didn't know, and I believe that Lou and Alex could see my confused sentiments with the whole debacle, so they did not push me further. A few regulars came over and said hello, and Lou would explain the situation with Dr. Albert in an irascible tone. Cocky Parrot said that I should just get a new cat. I looked at him as he loomed over our table, and at first wished he would go up to the bar and hit on Sophia some more, but then could not rid myself of wanting to shatter the bottle of amaretto and gradually stick the pieces of glass into sensitive parts of his body. "Damn cats, man I'll tell you," said Fucking Horse. "Had a cat once, damn thing was so small, I'd sit on it... one time too many too." Insincere Ostrich said, "I'm so sorry, sweetie, he was such a nice cat," and gave me a kiss for a noticeably long duration. She had never once met Moses, though I appreciated her abstract sympathy. And Graceful Chipmunk gave me a sad, pitying look while she gathered the empty glasses, but said nothing and returned to the bar.

After all the consoling, Lou reminded us that Boorish Salamander was holding a banquet at the huge gondola in one of the fields of the park, so it might be tough to talk to anyone because of all the hustle and bustle.

"Hell Lou," I said and slapped him on the shoulder. Then, I kissed Alex's cheek after saying, "I'll stop in tomorrow and let you know how it all turns out."

On my way out, I stopped to say hello to Sophia. Cocky Parrot was trying to talk to her, but when I walked over and glared at him, he turned back to someone sitting next to him. Sophia was a cousin of Lou's old

roommate from college. When she arrived from Russia a few years back, she showed up with Lou's friend and had never left. Lou offered her a job and a place to stay. While working at the Sparkle Bar, she carried herself with the resignation or acceptance of an aging waitress, with a slight hunch in her left shoulder and a bit of sangfroid and apathy for every time one of the Cockey Parrot types made passes at her. But off duty, whether drinking after hours with Lou, Alex, Brad and me, or just walking about town, her chin lifted itself a bit higher and her bright blue eyes glanced about at the unfamiliar surroundings, delighted by her youth and the very small possibility of it all.

"How are you?" I asked. Sophia grabbed hold of my shirtsleeve and dragged me down to one end of the bar, away from Cockey Parrot and the rest of the crowd. She tossed her black tray on the corner of the bar and rested her elbow on the bottom of the tray.

"I'm okay," and she looked at me with her blue eyes, which are not altogether different than American blue eyes, only hers were bright and dim at the same time. She brushed the curls of blonde hair off her pretty face and behind her ear and sighed an uncounted number of times. I wanted to tell her that I was leaving. We talked for a bit. She said that Cockey Parrot was being even more aggressive than ever that night. I offered to say something to him, but she just shrugged off my offer and changed the subject. After awhile, we started reminiscing about earlier in the summer when I'd taken her to the park and stolen a boat from one of the sheds. We rowed around the small lake, which was in the middle of the park, sort of vortex for all the trails, picnic areas, and open fields. I taught her to row, and she giggled a nervous giggle. In Russia, the lake in her town, she explained, was frozen much of the year. We laughed for a bit, then she lightly slapped me on the shoulder when I lightly made fun of her nervousness. Sophia was awkward with conversation especially when it dropped off. She was not yet comfortable enough with English to make transitions in conversations, so she just segued with random topics. While on the boat, Sophia told me about the first boy she'd kissed, a young man named Fyodor. I asked her if he was cute, and she told me that he wasn't, though instead of describing him, she paused, then asked why basketball was called basketball "when there is no basket, only ball." In moving away from one topic, she had a habit of asking questions about English words and phrases that only made sense if the origin was known. "Why do you beat a dead horse?" "Why

does the cat have my tongue?" "Why is it "eighty-six...ed?" If at the end of a conversation, she didn't change the subject randomly, then she just smiled and looked you in the eyes as if to acknowledge that she had enjoyed your listening and speaking; instead of looking away and waiting, just waiting for another topic to come about. At some point during our rowing, I forgot her poor English and thought her the best conversationalist I'd ever encountered.

The following morning I went to see Alaska, my boss at the park, in order that we might reach a compromise about those last two weeks pay. I needed that money immediately, else I would not be able to pay for my rent or for Moses. Because of all the festivities at the park it was difficult to track him down. Then I had to convince him to see me. Luckily, it was just past mid-morning, and Alaska had a few minutes to spare before they had to start setting up the lunch for Boorish Salamander and his banqueters.

Bill was called Alaska because Alaska sounded better than Arctic. Alaska's father had been stationed by the Navy in the Arctic and had apparently done some important research, and his son, whom we called Alaska, always managed to bring up the fact that there was a mountain in the Arctic that took its name from his family. Some people have stars named for them, some people have diseases; Alaska had a mountain of ice and snow in the Arctic that he would never see.

"How's the banquet?"

"How's your hip?" he asked. Though very skinny and pale, Alaska talked as though he were six feet tall and two-fifty, or some other nice set of numbers. "You look like you're still limping."

"Yeah... Listen, I'm really in trouble. Is there any way you could just pay me for the next two weeks and then... I don't know. I'll sign my check over to you when it comes."

"Thought you weren't coming back."

"I'm still quitting... I mean these last two weeks."

"But you haven't been to work for days."

"My hip... I can't walk."

"Right"

"That's why I haven't come to work."

"That's why I can't pay you."

"Don't I get worker's comp or some score like that?"

"You didn't go to the hospital, did you?"

"No, not for something this small. I can't afford that."

"If you don't go to the hospital, you can't get compensated.
Government rules."

"Then can I come back to work?"

"What the hell you going to do? You can hardly walk."

There were too many ironies popping up into our conversation, so I walked out of Alaska's office without even saying goodbye. I wasn't angry; I knew it wasn't his fault, that the dilemma went higher than him. Yet still...

From the park, I went back home and fell asleep for a while after drinking some whiskey and eating cereal. Later that evening, sometime after I woke up, I went to the Sparkle Bar. I told Lou and Alex the fruitless and petty drama with Alaska, though when they asked me for a revised plan, I had nothing to offer. Lou went upstairs to their apartment above the bar and warmed up some chili for us to share. He could tell that I was starving from drinking all day. At some point during our small meal at one of the tables near the back, he palmed for his pocket suddenly, explaining as though it had just occurred to him that he had some hash for me. I said no, that I couldn't take it off his hands. But he stuffed the small baggie into the pocket of my shirt and suggested I might soon want to share with "a pretty lady or something."

Sophia had been near the door when I wandered into The Sparkle Bar. I said hello, but she just nodded and shied away, mumbling something almost incomprehensible in her heavy accent. Lou would look up at her every time she passed. Either she was carrying a tray of drinks or she was scampering off to the back; she seemed to pass our table an unnecessary number of times. I asked Lou if he had told Sophia that I was leaving.

"No, I'm still holding out that you'll stay."

Lou lied by shifting the subject. Instead of explaining why he had not told Sophia, he focused on his hopes that I might yet remain. It was a sneaky response, but I saw right through it because I used to do the same thing.

I limped out to my Chrysler and went home. It was hard to drive because I was still a little drunk. Once I got out of town, the back roads were curvy, though the lack of traffic allowed me to take my time. I walked into the front door and laid down on the floor. The back of my head hurt because of the hardwood floor, so I turned my neck and put the pressure on my right ear, and saw the television that we had never gotten to work. After

my ear began hurting, I turned the other way and saw the orange couch that Brad had purchased in a thrift store before leaving our hometown up North. It was the purchase of the couch that convinced him he was ready to move to Anthem. When he got into town, he called me and told me to join him, for it was a "glorious place." I listened.

Anthem wasn't my home. I could leave. I did not care about these people. I would just skip out, leave my debts, pick up my few possessions and drive across an interstate, find an exit to another town, a town with a name like Clearwater or Yamsville. And in Yamsville, I'd drive up more debts, fix up my cat and never pay anyone, ravage the bored housewives, strike dangerous ideas about God and foreign women into the minds of the youth! And just exit! Vamoosh, as though I had never left the main road, or stopped only for lunch. Across America to simple towns, leaving my trail in essentially stolen goods and services. The stranger came into town that day, and we... it didn't matter the following verb or clause; I was the stranger, not the we, not the inhabitant.

There was a knock on my door.

"Christ!" I snapped. It was Sophia, and she was very wet. I had not realized it had started raining because I couldn't see out any windows from the floor.. She knocked three times before I got there, but I remained patient.

"I did not think you were home."

"Why?" "Because you did not answer your door."

"But I..." I realized in the middle of our misarranged conversation that she was still standing in the rain, so I pulled her inside. She had on an old parka, probably given to her by Lou or Alex. She yanked the hood off as soon as I had her inside the entryway. Her blonde hair was wet despite the hood, and I considered that she may not have thought to pull up the hood until she had already started out.

"Did you walk all the way here?"

"Yes."

I offered her a seat on our couch. For some reason, I kept standing. After a few moments of silence, I went to the kitchen and brought her hot chocolate. I had made her hot chocolate the last time she came over and she seemed to enjoy it. Throughout consuming the drink, she kept the cup right in front of her chin so the steam went right into her nose. I thought that she would do well in a commercial for the hot chocolate, if the circumstances presented themselves. As she drank, I continued to stand, but when

she finished and placed the mug on the coffee table and I reached for the mug to take it from her, she grabbed my hand and pulled me on to the couch, and then told me a story about the first American she had ever met. He was a photographer doing a story on the local orphanage where her mother worked as a cook. The American complained because he had not brought any lip balm with him, and Sophia could not help but laugh at his cut and blistered lips, and she felt bad that she took amusement from his pain. And she told me about the summers, how warm they were, how short they were, and how the nights in Anthem were cold, but not cold enough for the parka, but how she did not feel safe without a lot of layers covering her body. And she told me that she wished it was not so warm in the Sparkle Bar so that she could wear more clothes without sweating. "I sweat so much, yesss." She laughed on the S's and blushed such a red that I'd never seen on her pale cheeks, but I imagined her standing in the snow, the cold of Russia, a cold I would never experience. And she told me the name of her town, but I cannot remember it because I had trouble with names, and the Russians and their names, *so* many and so many strange syllables. And she told me how much she wished to leave Anthem. But she did not tell me, where she wanted to go, and I wondered if she knew where she wanted to. I wondered if she knew that I was leaving. And she spent the night with me in my bed and did sweat some, though I did not mind at all, but she left early the next morning to do her laundry.

I went to the *Sparkle Bar* to say goodbye to Lou and Alex. Alex had on a loose, light blue tank top with dark flowers lining the straps over her shoulders. I felt ashamed because I saw that she was not wearing a bra, and I later realized that when remembering Alex the lovely bar maid, it was the only outfit in which I could place her. Lou said that they would adopt Moses in a few days, once Dr. Albert assumed that I would not come back for him. We embraced, and I left with a promise that we would see each other again.

I mixed up Brad's and my things and loaded the back of the Chrysler. The rest I left behind for our landlord, Excited Toad... I had not remembered that name until I slammed the trunk of the Chrysler, and I smiled to think of Excited Toad with our couch, our broken TV, my bed and sheets that Sophia and I had shared once. I could have taken the sheets off the bed and brought them along, but I wanted to leave. Brad had been so excited when he called me to come join him in Anthem. He said he would

write, and we would play and live in this foreign place that would become our home, away from the bustle of cities and friends and home and families and their tired ideas. But it was a sham, a fucking sham, and Brad should have known it. Nothing was different in Anthem except our attachment. I pulled onto the interstate, and looked back in my rearview mirror and saw, on the opposite side of the highway, the sign for the exit into Anthem, and I felt nothing at all.

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Thank you.

