



FUSION

A Global Forum of Words, Music, and Art

VOLUME 3, ISSUE 1

FUSION is a global forum of writing, visual art, and music that engages notions of interconnectivity and interdisciplinary approaches to the arts. We publish high-quality fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, drama and film, photography, and multimedia projects by our community as well as internationally recognized artists. We also invite essays on the rich relations between music and the other arts; translations; and works employing fusion as theme, concept, or inspiration. *FUSION* is a celebration of words, music, and art, responding to E. M. Forster's charge, "Only connect!"

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Volume 3 of *FUSION* is dedicated to the memory of our colleague, John McGann, a master of the mandolin and a musician of great depth and breadth. John inspired our community with his prodigious talents, grace, and humor. His music and the life he shared live on.

Editor's Note

The lights in the Red Room go down. The musicians walk on stage, engage in a bit of banter, and begin to play. The annual Celtic *FUSION* concert has begun. Faculty, featured artists, and students perform, *together*, at extraordinary heights.

At Berklee, we witness such music making on a daily basis. We don't exactly take it for granted, but we've come to expect it. It's the water we swim in.

World-class professors and visiting artists mentor our students. These mentors are generous in spirit, happy to share the stage and advance the careers of young artists.

Volume 3 of *FUSION* echoes what the college has been doing musically for decades. Remarkable student writers share these pages with gifted professionals of national and international reputation.

Yes, we are a college of music, but any English Department in America would present, proudly, the student writing in this issue. This may sound like hyperbole. It's not.

We commissioned the joyous writer Steve Almond, of *Rock and Roll Will Save Your Life* fame, to give us an essay with musicians and other artists in mind: "Life Under the Cloud of Unmet Expectation: A Meditation on Fame and Artistic Longevity." Steve reminds us that our "first and final job is to rise from the mattress of dread and grab the guitar, or the laptop, or the paintbrush, and make the tough decisions."

Almost too good to be true, students see their short stories live alongside Daphne Kalotay's exquisite "Russian Winter: A Story," the original story (*published here for the first time*), which she developed into her award-

EDITOR'S NOTE

winning novel, *Russian Winter* (published in 21 foreign editions). Read this story and you will understand our excitement about the company we keep.

The issue casts a keen eye on cinema. We present two film scripts written in our Scriptwriting for Theater, TV, and Film workshop. Also, we publish student poets alongside an innovative sequence of poems on film by A. Van Jordan, a brilliant poet and Guggenheim Fellow, whose next book, *The Cineaste*, is forthcoming from Norton.

Young photographers, too, are fortunate to have their work showcased in the same color plates as our featured photographers. Ryan Mastro, well known for his distinctive medium format film portraits of musicians, takes risks and achieves unexpected results with “Brown Bird” and “Sallie Ford.”

FUSION is not a compilation of whatever student work comes our way, alongside a few featured artists. We showcase the very best from our ongoing initiatives and features, including Drama & Film, the Translation Initiative, and our deep focus on photography. But our most compelling feature, throughout, is quality.

The “global forum” is not just part of our name. Working with a distributor, *FUSION* goes global by spreading our print content around the world. Writing published here will be read throughout Europe, China, India, Australia, and New Zealand. (We’re still finding our readers in Fiji.)

Let us know what you think of this fusion of talent—this global forum that pairs outstanding student and professional writing and art. We hope to see you holding a copy of *FUSION*, at Dunkin’s or Starbucks, or, better yet, flipping through these pages on the sands of the South Pacific and beyond.

Joseph Coroniti, PhD
Editor-in-Chief

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CONTENTS

BERKLEE STUDENTS & ALUMNI

Fiction

- Caitlin Gjerdrum
1 Flight
- Mika Ella Lorch
6 A Fine Moment
- Peter Maltzan
13 How to Become a Musician
- Max Sergienko
14 Humanity Strikes Again
- Chris Stites
22 Flying Home
- Julian Wong
31 Night and Day

Nonfiction

- Nicholas Cabrera
37 Thrill of the Chase
- Mercedes Diaz
39 Familiar Stranger

FUSION

- Dave Lee
43 Boys and Girls
- Armeen Musa
46 A City Girl At Heart
- Art Santora
51 Blue Eyes
- Annie Sklar
54 The Despair of Tomatoes
- Ben Walding
57 Leeds Pharmacy

Visual Art

- Armeen Musa
62 The Dol Clap
- 63 Devdas playing Dhol
- 64 The Dol Dance
- Aldon Baker
66 Jellyfish
- 67 Lunar Eclipse

FUSION City

- Christian Choh
69 Halloween Fringe
- Joel Clarkson
71 Bakery
- Bora Kim
72 Happiness Within Morning Delights
- Wing-Ching Poon
74 Rush Hour Safari

CONTENTS

Natalia Sulca
78 1140

Poetry

Will Cafaro
82 Winter Commute from Roxbury Crossing

83 NYC to Boston Blues

Maya de Vitry
84 Coal River Valley

Peter Maltzan
86 Washington Square Park

Sarah Mount
87 Letter to a 16-year-old Boy

Rafferty Swink
89 Dear Los Angeles

Laura Siersema
90 If My Church Be Bone

90 The Old Quarter

91 Train

Ryan Toll
92 A wake

Translation Initiative

Luis Lascano translated by Dustin Cleveland
94 Don Eliseo y el Preguntón / Don Eliseo and the Busybody

Magdalena Ponssa translated by Deborah Bennett
100 Trivialidades / Small Talk

Ryōkan translated by Ryo Tanaka & Deborah Bennett
102 Untitled

Drama & Film

- Jónas Bergmann Björnsson
106 Blind Luck
- Dave D'aranjo
128 The Uncle

FEATURED ARTISTS

Writing

- Steve Almond
155 Life Under the Cloud of Unmet Expectation
- William John Bert
168 Canyon
- A. Van Jordan
172 Last Year At Marienbad
174 Old Boy
176 M
178 American Gigolo
184 I've Heard the Mermaids Singing
- Daphne Kalotay
186 Biography of a Novel
189 Russian Winter
- Rachel Yoder
204 Deliver Me

Visual Art

- Kelly Davidson, from *Rock Parents*
142 Chris Colbourne
143 Paul Ahlstrand

CONTENTS

	Kelly Davidson, from <i>Cities: Paris</i>
144	Courtyard
145	Saint-Sulpice Glare
146	La Grande Roue in Blue
148	Paris by Night
149	Arc de Triomphe
150	Eiffel Tower in the Distance
151	A Blurry Sacré Coeur
152	Paris at Dusk
153	Green in Gray
	Ryan Mastro: Portraits of Musicians
218	What Cheer Brigade
219	What Cheer Brigade Drummer
220	What Cheer Brigade Tuba Player
221	Breanne Duren
222	Pete Seeger
223	Pokey LaFarge
224	Brown Bird
225	Glen Hansard, The Swell Season
226	Joe Pug
227	Sallie Ford
228	Sam Bush
229	Contributors
237	Acknowledgements

BERKLEE STUDENTS & ALUMNI

Fiction

Caitlin Gjerdrum

Flight

1

I was staring out the window and I got this idea, see, and I got up to find some paper and now my heart isn't in it.

I was thinking about smells, about that garden-in-heaven smell that makes you want to follow a person to the ends of the Earth. If you ask me, that smell is a thousand times worse than the Devil's dookie, cuz a place or a person that smells like shit, you know, that's too bad but you can look past it. You can say, "Hey, this person smells bad but that's not his fault," and maybe you'll never be best friends with the guy but you can look past that shit stench and get to see the person inside.

When somebody smells the way Heaven does, though, you're powerless against it. Their love-smell intoxicates 'til you're drunk with elation, and it doesn't matter what they do or say. In a way you love that person and you can never escape it.

You can turn your back on hate, but love is another story.

2

Great day, awful night.

Some of the best days turn into the worst nights imaginable. Have you ever noticed that? Bad shit happens all the time, but it pretty much always starts with something really fucking exceptionally terrific.

I remember once. In second grade. I was newly abandoned, on to maybe my third fake family, and I'd made it almost a whole semester without too much trouble except a few fights and sort of a bad reputation. Maybe I was already a bad kid, but I wasn't too bad. I was seven! I was still looking for love, even if it wasn't around anywhere.

I remember at the school I went to—I don't remember the names of all the schools or families or detention centers I get loaded off on, but I remember at this school—at Loyal Heights Elementary—there was enough blacktop and grass to run around, with a huge hill behind the grass, and it must've been raining cuz the asphalt got that smell it gets in the wet, that smell like man-made dirt on steroids with wings, and I was in second grade and I had a friend!

Her name was Carol and she was better than me at basketball, and sometimes her mom gave her animal crackers in her bag lunch, the colored kind with the rainbow sprinkles, but on this day she had Ritz crackers, and we were sitting at one of those industrial lunch tables sharing those crackers, and once we finished with those things we raced to the top of the hill! Carol could run. Fast. But so could I. We'd race up there maybe 3 or 4 times a week, sometimes, and sometimes she would win and sometimes I would win. We didn't really care who won, to be honest, because the point was really to get to the top as fast as we could. Cuz from the top of that hill you could see the whole city, all the way out to the Sound, practically. And every day it looked completely different. Sometimes the fog would just cover everything in sight, so it felt like we were looking down at a cloud-city from our palace in the sky above it. Other times the mist would rise, and it'd be like something out of a fairytale, and once in a while, on one of the four sunny days we have in Seattle, the buildings would just gleam, as if all the rain and mist had been working hard polishing it up all year so the city could really shine when the sun hit it just so.

It was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. Even as a 7-year-old I thought it was fucking magical. And it was.

This day, like most days, started out misty, real real thick air like the trees were spilling water from their needles, but when we got to the top we could see the fog burning.

"Looks like it's gonna be hot finally! Maybe I could ask my mom if you can come over and go swimming after school," Carol said.

Loyal Heights was a white person school. Seattle is not a great place for outdoor swimming pools, but Carol's family was one of the fifteen who had one "just because." She and I both knew, also, that her mom wouldn't want me to come over. Her mom was pretty nice and all,

and I think she knew I was sometimes hungry at school, cuz sometimes there would be an extra apple or sandwich or bag of Ritz crackers in Carol's lunch for me. So she wasn't a bad lady, by any means, but a few weeks back an Official Notice had been sent out alerting all the parents of the Loyal Heights community that a child had been bitten by a fellow classmate. Needless to say the identity of the biter was not a mystery, and that from then on Kevin Soderstrom avoided me on the playground and never ever made another crack about my mom again, and I didn't get kicked out so by all accounts it could've been worse, but ever since the Official Notification Carol's mom hadn't been too keen on having me over, though she would still give me rides home when my foster mom forgot about me.

We gazed out at the cityscape, our kingdom, and I don't know why but I reached out and held her hand. Grabbed it, sort of. She squeezed it back and she pecked me on the lips. "I hope she says yes," she mused.

It was then that we decided to tie the knot. She crafted a little daisy-chain crown and stuck a flower behind my ear since I didn't have a lapel. We said "I do" cuz we weren't sure what more there was to it, and then we zoomed back down the hill as the second bell rang. I think, I imagine, we were neck-and-neck the whole way down, not even racing, just running together in perfect synch.

I was on a cloud. I was higher than that. I was a bird. I was a bubble. I was like this bubble floating in the middle of the atmosphere, all the way up to outer space, and my high was so strong I couldn't be popped. Carol liked me! Kissed me! Married me, for Christ's sake. And I wasn't alone.

I could have cried.

The end of the day finally came, and my foster mother never came, and we begged and pleaded Carol's mom (who must have had a name, though this detail has escaped me), and she finally conceded, "All right, all right. A quick swim and a snack and then home before dark."

Susan. Was her name. It was definitely Susan.

Susan fetched a pair of Carol's brother's old swim trunks and opened the pool cover and stepped inside to make some lemonade. Carol's parents were really smart. Hands-on and everything. And they never left us alone in the pool, not even for a second.

“I’ll be back in five minutes,” Susan told us. “Don’t get in the pool until I get back.”

“Can we dangle our feet??”

“Ha, ha—yes, you may, but NO JUMPING. Carol. I am looking at you here. I’ll be right back.”

And she was gone. And we dangled our feet. And we were alone. Together.

“I can’t believe what happened to Stevie at recess today,” Carol gushed. Stevie had eaten shit on the pavement during a particularly heated game of tetherball, and blood had come out of her nose chin knees hands everywhere. It wasn’t too bad, like, I’m sure she survived and everything, but it was a spill that would be remembered for a good long time on the Loyal Heights playground.

That is, of course, until what happened next.

“Race ya to the deep end!” Carol shrieked diabolically, and shoved me into the water. I came up spluttering and saw she was already miles ahead of me. I wasn’t a swimmer, really, though I was pretty athletic, and I wasn’t about to let her beat me to the other end, so I set off, pushing the water as hard as I could with my arms and chest and little foot-flippers.

“Wait up!” I screamed, but she would have been crazy to stop now. I was almost caught up to her, impossibly light-like as she was. If I just kept going, I realized, I could win. I was bigger than her, after all, and I felt strong. Powerful. Like an Indian chief.

All of a sudden, I felt a kick in my stomach. A flip, like I’d slipped, even though I wasn’t standing on anything in the water. I had gotten far out there, way too deep to stand, and all of a sudden, I was falling. I couldn’t breathe.

“Carol” I spluttered though I knew I was under water. I felt my lungs fill up with chlorine. This was it. I was going to die here. I had fallen in the pool and Carol had won the race, and I was going to drown. I closed my eyes and tried to surrender.

All of a sudden, I felt a hand. Carol was there. She tried to pull me. She tried so hard. I opened my eyes and I saw her yanking at my arms trying to pull me back to the water’s surface. She pulled so hard I think she hit her head, and before I passed out I think I saw a ribbon of blood swirl out from somewhere behind her ears. It was as lovely as

our cloud-city. Our kingdom. Alone. Together. After that I saw black. Everything was black.

I woke up in the hospital.

I saw Susan through the window of my hospital room, real real sad, drenched with pool water from head to foot. She didn't look at my face.

We didn't speak so I never told her exactly what happened, that Carol had tried to save me. Susan knew what happened, though; she knew enough, and she didn't want to but I know she blamed me as much as she blamed herself.

I transferred schools after that, and I made sure to keep my heart closed tight so I'd never kill anyone again, not even by accident.

Mika Ella Lorch

A Fine Moment

His knuckles turned pink under the stream at the bathroom sink. He stared at his hands but could not bring himself to move. Her face was burnt in his brain, etched with fine detail, completely misplaced between the family photos and mental notes. He tried one more time and finally concluded that no, he did not remember her as a little girl.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening and Alan was still at the office. The place seemed strangely welcoming, the florescent lights warm, the colorless walls fresh. Alan felt as if he was standing in the middle of a cozy, old-fashioned library, rather than in an average, charmless insurance office. That was the kind of effect she had on him, and it was getting harder to deny. He tried to remember the last time he had stayed at the office past five.

A man who also worked at the office walked into the bathroom. He gave Alan a half-hearted grin and marched into the nearest stall. He was one of those people Alan saw everyday and somehow managed to systematically forget. He tried to remember the man's name. It was either Jack or Jim, he thought. Or John? Alan felt a sudden need to talk to his wife.

He imagined her at home, beautiful and distracted, talking loudly to the kids while setting the table. He smiled at the thought of her answering the phone, holding it between her ear and shoulder while maneuvering her way around the kitchen with effortless mastery. The man came out of the stall, washed his hands in a heartbeat and disappeared. It was time to go home, Alan knew that.

The streets were as quiet as New York City streets had ever been, and Alan was thankful to become part of the murmur that swallowed him whole. He was walking slowly toward the train station when the

thought of Ian Wilbanks disturbed his calm. Ian had called earlier that day, just as Alan was beginning to finally get some work done. The conversation began with the usual “Hello, how are you, good, thank you, and yourself, and your wife, doing great, it’s been too long. . .” Pangs of guilt were crawling over Alan as he listened to Ian thank him for helping his little girl adapt to her new college life in the city. Alan cringed every time Ian said his daughter’s name, felt the fatherly warmth that exploded out of him with every mention of her, the softness that entered his voice when he talked about Alison.

He thought about how strange his interaction with Ian had become. He was so desperate to end the conversation earlier that he had mumbled something about having no service and stuffed the phone in his pocket as if it were ten feet deep. He felt one final twinge of guilt fasten itself around his chest as he remembered the two of them in high school, driving around in Ian’s car. The smell of cigarettes and tacky cologne mixed with cheap leather seats was still fresh in his memory. Now he couldn’t even imagine what it would be like to see Ian face to face. Did he look like Alison in any way? Did Debra? Alan still found it hard to believe she was their daughter. Everything about her, from the way she answered the phone to her astounding knowledge of European history, did not resemble the Wilbanks family.

It was Ian’s idea, Alan kept reminding himself. Ian was the one who practically begged Alan to take her out to lunch that day. It was Ian who thought it would be great, fantastic even, if Alison could see a friendly face on her first week away from home. A friendly face. Alan hadn’t seen Alison since his last trip to visit Ian’s home in California eight years prior. She was 12 at the time, and she didn’t remember him any more than he remembered her. He tried many times to conjure up that forgotten trip but had never succeeded in matching a face to what was then the abstract concept of Ian’s daughter. Alan had seen Ian many times over the years. Whenever Ian had meetings in the city they would meet at Porter’s Deli and catch up furiously between huge bites of roast beef. But while Ian was pretty much a fixture in Alan’s life, Ian’s family was an afterthought for Alan, like the context of a famous quote. He never considered Debra, and every time Ian mentioned his wife Alan felt

guilty for not remembering to ask. It was as if she only existed when Ian said her name.

The only reason Alan had agreed to take Alison to lunch was because he was distracted. Ian was mumbling passionately on the phone, talking about Alison and how dissatisfied she was in her old college. He rambled on and on about the ridiculously complicated and outrageously frustrating process of transferring to NYU. Alan was trying to find his car keys and absentmindedly agreed with everything Ian said. He learned that he was apparently taking Alison to lunch the next Wednesday at the exact moment his fingers closed around the keychain that was hiding behind a pile of papers on the kitchen table.

That Wednesday was one of the most beautiful September days Alan could recall. The skies were a flawless shade of light blue and white clouds were spread about evenly, as if they had been carefully glued to their spots. Alan arrived early. He walked through the doors of Thai-Pan and took a seat near the window. Two cups of water and 10 minutes later he realized that she was late. He hated himself for agreeing to meet her and swore to avoid these awkward get-togethers in the future. He had just started chewing the last ice cube in his cup when he saw her. She was wearing an emerald dress and her brown curls were pulled back in a loose bun. He remembered the odd sensation in his throat as he swallowed the cube whole and stood up to greet her.

Every word that escaped her mouth was interesting. Every thought she shared with him was insightful. Every time he made her laugh a boyish sense of triumph penetrated his entire body. She was 20 years old, and she seemed to hold the promise of immortality between her lightly painted lips and the soft-spoken words they produced.

He couldn't get her off his mind, and she didn't make it easy for him. He liked the way she looked at him, with a mixture of wit and respect. They met a few days later, at a coffee place two blocks away from Alan's office. He remembered how impressed he was when she ordered her coffee black, no sugar. They went to an art gallery, to Central Park, to the movies. After the second cup of coffee he had stopped reporting to Ian about her. She had done the same, though it was never discussed between them.

Alan was still trying to place the man he saw in the bathroom as he got off the train and started walking to his car. It was almost nine o'clock. He tried to calculate how much time had gone by since that Wednesday lunch and was surprised to realize that almost four months had passed. He was driving slowly as he thought about the last time he saw her on her birthday.

They'd gone to have dinner. She wore a navy blue dress, and it had a way of celebrating her newly 21-year-old figure. He told his wife he had to work late. It was the first time he had to lie and a knot was wildly developing in his throat. He remembered how he felt when the waitress addressed them as a couple, how Alison's face gave nothing away, how believable she seemed and how mature. He remembered how she averted her gaze from him, a split second too late, when he looked up from the wine list. He stared at her for a long moment before she smiled and laughed at having been caught. It was so easy to make her laugh. He remembered the way her eyes flickered when she asked him if he would like to go somewhere.

"Somewhere?"

"My roommate is away. We can go to my place, if you want." She said it as a statement, a fact that needed to be dealt with.

He remembered how close she was standing when he pulled over the taxi. His heart was beating in his chest and he was partially concerned that if it were any louder she would hear it. He remembered how calm she was when she took his hand and started to lead him up the stairs to her apartment, and how, for the first time, her face resembled a 16-year-old girl as he pulled away from her.

"I can't do this, Alison. I'm sorry. I want to, or I thought I did. And you're, you're everything, okay? You should have everything. You're 20 years old, for God's sake—you're Ian's 20-year-old daughter."

He remembered how she stood by the door, almost paralyzed, as one tear escaped her left eye and gently sloped down her cheek.

"Twenty-one," she corrected him as another tear slipped suddenly on her opposite cheek, as if by accident.

He had never seen anyone as beautiful as Alison in that moment. She didn't say another word and he kissed her. He kissed her, and she

kissed him back. He turned to leave and started to miss her the moment he heard the door close behind him.

It had been exactly two months since Alison's birthday. He knew because it was the 18th. The driveway was dark as he turned off the ignition and stepped out of the car. He could hear his wife's footsteps upstairs as he closed the front door behind him and started to make a cup of tea. He was eager to go upstairs and was annoyed when he felt his cell phone vibrate in his pocket.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Alan." Alison's voice was shaky, she sounded distant and Alan pressed the phone tighter against his ear.

"Alan?"

He tried to picture her, holding the phone with her pale, steady hands. Was she sitting down? Was she playing with her hair as she spoke? Twisting that short curl that always managed to find its way back to the middle of her forehead no matter how many times she pushed it away.

"Alan, I'm sorry. I, I know I shouldn't call." She sounded breathless. He didn't like hearing her this way—couldn't stand being the reason for it.

"It's alright." He wanted to say more but couldn't find the words. His wife was getting ready for bed upstairs. He could hear the bathroom door as it opened and closed.

"I, um, I had to talk to you."

He needed to do something with his hands, anything to be occupied.

"Alan?"

His head was pounding. What can they possibly talk about? What was there to say?

"Alan! Stop being so dramatic. It's me. I'm not calling you to ask you to leave your wife. I'm not asking you to marry me. I'm not asking your permission to tell my father about us."

Silence.

"I miss you. I don't miss you all the time. I miss you now because I haven't seen you in months. I miss your company because I'm surrounded by over-privileged, over-grown, overrated children. I don't like thinking of you as some off-limits superhero. You're you. You have a number

and you can be reached. You do every day things like everyone else, and you're not that special. Alan, say something!"

Silence.

"I know there is no place for our relationship. I'm not stupid. And I don't idolize you, just so you know. Did you think that my goal in life was to be with some forty-something friend of my dad's?"

He had to laugh at that. The thought of Alison, bright-eyed and giggly, sitting on the bed of her youthful California bedroom, day dreaming about someone as non-leading male material as himself.

"Did you just laugh? Alan, stop. I don't know what you're thinking."

"I'm sorry, Alison. No, I did not think that your goal in life was to be with some forty-something friend of your dad's."

She let out a playful sigh.

His right hand relaxed as he put down his mug and a few drops of tea jumped out onto his fingers. Silence. The bathroom door upstairs was still. He couldn't hear the floor creaking and wondered if his wife had gone to bed. The night was quiet and it seemed Alison was the only living creature within a 10,000-mile radius.

He thought of his children, tucked in their beds, heavily asleep by now. His little girl, her straight dark hair and those unforeseen moments when her face became uncharacteristically identical to her mother's. His son was getting taller; he cringed at the thought of that little boy becoming a self-secluded teenager, angry at the world for existing.

"Alison, I'm sorry. This isn't right. I take full responsibility. I think we shouldn't talk anymore—you should erase this number."

"It's not about taking responsibility! Stop talking to me like I'm an under-aged, easily manipulated mistake. Don't make this wrong. It's not right, I know, but it wasn't all wrong."

Silence.

"Alan, I don't think we should talk again."

Silence.

"I called because I want to recognize the fact that we had a moment. It may be nothing but it happened."

"It's not nothing. It was a fine moment."

"It was."

There was silence again. He was surprised to discover that he was smiling. The guilt that had been eating him alive eased at the sound of her, so determined and correct, seemingly ready to commit murder to prove a point.

“And please don’t feel bad. You’re a good guy—you really are. I don’t regret any of it.”

He heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps cross the room upstairs and come to a halt. His wife was in bed; she would be asleep within minutes.

“Good bye, Alison.”

“Bye, Alan.”

He washed his mug in the kitchen sink and watched the water rain down on his skin. He tried for the last time and finally concluded that no, he did not remember her as a little girl.

Peter Maltzan

How to Become a Musician

Be sure to get a guitar for one of your birthdays, the earlier the better. (Hopefully it's not too late for you already.) Think it will make you cooler. It will not. Yet. Practice.

Play along with your Pink Floyd albums. Ask your mother to find a teacher for you. Go to your lessons. Practice.

Survive in high school. Take it somewhat seriously, that will be the brunt of your education. Start a band with your friends. Think that you guys don't suck. You do. Practice.

Get a summer job. Buy a nicer guitar.

Watch MTV. Wonder what the hell is going on. Feel resentment.

Listen to jazz. Practice.

Really listen to Dylan and the Beatles. Wonder if drugs really help you write songs. Find out that they do not.

Bomb your high school jazz band audition. Shake it off. Practice.

Start a band with friends again. Write songs about girls in your class. Know that they are no good. Love them anyway. Practice.

Collect obscure Vonnegut novels. Dabble in poetry.

Graduate from high school. For God's sake, stay away from college. Float around. Don't practice.

Play really crappy gigs. Nothing will be more excruciating than those sound checks. Realize that's not the way it should be. Sound check should be the best part of your day. Don't practice.

Grow a beard. Shave. Feel like an idiot. Get back to practicing.

Question yourself. Develop anxiety and depression. Never let them show outright. Blur together weekends and weekdays. Work in some bizarre sleeping habits. Practice.

Most importantly never hide from the truth. If anyone ever tries to talk to you about music say you do it to get girls. Practice.

Max Sergienko

Humanity Strikes Again

Greg had thought for a long time about the best way to kill himself.

He considered jumping in front of a train, but what a nuisance he would be! The train operator would be traumatized, the passengers would be inconvenienced and all that blood. . . (He shuddered at the thought.)

He thought once about a bathroom suicide: slitting his wrists or overdosing, but needles and razors had always frightened him, and he cringed at the idea of poisoning himself with pills. No, the risk of taking pills was far too high. He could fail and be hospitalized (God, the embarrassment) or worse still, remain in his home undiscovered for weeks until the stench of his rotting corpse finally upset the neighbors enough that the police would have to be called in to break down his door and remove his putrefied body.

No, jumping from a bridge was really the only option. The impact would kill instantly (though Greg was nervous about somehow surviving the fall only to drown moments later), and his body would be naturally disposed of. He liked the idea of recycling his own corpse. He imagined his body being carried by the current, up to the Columbia and out to the Pacific Ocean where it would be devoured by carnivorous fish and gradually reintroduced into the food cycle. It was more likely that some unfortunate boater would discover his body the next morning, and prevent him from making his final voyage.

Greg smiled wistfully at his romantic thoughts as he looked down at the opaque water beneath him. It was three in the morning in Portland,

Oregon, and he was standing in the middle of the Burnside Bridge. He paced about, trying to find the perfect spot the jump from. Only the occasional car passed by. The worst thing Greg could imagine now was if a police officer drove past just at the moment he was climbing over the railing. He would either have to hurry and jump quickly to avoid talking to the police or else deal with one of the embarrassing, cliché exchanges that happen between a suicidal person about to jump and a well-meaning but clueless passer-by. Either situation was unacceptable.

At exactly 3:05 a.m., Greg had found the spot he would jump from. He looked in either direction and couldn't see or hear any people or cars. With one definite exhalation he lifted himself up and sat on the concrete railing.

Across the river and seven blocks away, Emily Anne Rodarte was suffering from insomnia.

Emily was 26 years old. She rented a cheap studio apartment in a nice part of town and worked as a manager in an upscale French restaurant. She frequently had trouble sleeping and had consequently been prescribed medication. The medicine, a powerful sedative, often left her feeling drowsy and zombified well into the next day. She had decided to stop taking it months ago, choosing instead to brave the world tired and sleepy-eyed.

Emily was lying in bed watching the shadows from her window pass over her eyelids. She turned over on her side. Then she turned over again. She sighed fatalistically and sat up. Her room was very neat, though she seldom spent any time in it. Her kitchen held mostly wine and snacks, leftovers from work and the odd piece of fruit. *Maybe my diet is keeping me up*, she thought to herself.

She stood up and pulled a pair of jeans out of her dresser, an old oak piece given to her by her parents. The denim was cool and snug, and Emily couldn't help but feel relieved when they fastened effortlessly at the waist. She grabbed a hooded sweatshirt next and zipped it up. She put her cigarettes and butane lighter in the pockets of the sweater and began to walk out of her apartment. "Fuck, my keys," she mumbled before closing the door, and grabbed them off her counter in the kitchenette.

The apartment was a few blocks from the waterfront, and though she never followed through, she was always pledging to take more walks by the river.

She walked down the three flights of stairs to the front door and pushed it open. The dull orange light of street lamps glowed over the street and suggestively illuminated the concrete buildings. Once outside she took a cigarette from her pack and slipped it between her lips, lit it, and exhaled slowly. Her breath shook with exhaustion. The street was quiet and deserted, there was a very calm breeze that swept through now and again, and the occasional noise of a passing car came and went also. Emily often had the same conversation with her self about cars driving around at odd hours of the night.

“What do you suppose they could be doing out this late?” her curious self would ask.

“I’m out this late, and I’m not doing anything interesting,” her apathetic self would reply.

Such were the thoughts Emily occupied herself with as she walked along the riverfront. When she came to the Burnside Bridge she paused. “Fuck it,” she said out loud, lit a second cigarette with the still-burning end of her first, and continued across the bridge.

As she walked, she stared down into the dark water. Its gurgles and splashes against the bridge were audible. Emily found them disquieting. She took a drag from her cigarette. Suddenly a figure appeared.

Greg turned suddenly, too, awoken from his meditative trance and saw, horrified, that someone had found him. His eyes met the stranger’s. They froze. Emily’s cigarette dropped from her fingers. They stared at each other for a few seconds in silence. She spoke first.

“Jesus Christ, you scared the shit out of me,” she said, and bent down to pick up her cigarette. “What the fuck are you doing sitting there anyway?” (Here she took a drag.) “Trying to kill yourself?” The smoke she had inhaled in between sentences escaped her mouth in curls as she spoke. Greg was still in shock. He stared wide-eyed at the strange young woman, silent.

Emily recoiled suddenly. “Oh FUCK you ARE trying to kill yourself!”

Greg wasn't sure what to do. His worst fear of being caught pre-jump was now being realized. Only this was unimaginably worse than the police: he had been caught by a socially awkward 20-something female.

"Well, I guess I should tell you not to do it, there's lots to live for, or some bull shit like that," Emily said. "I guess that wouldn't be very original would it?" The smoldering end of her cig lit up as she languidly drew in another breath. "Um, what's your name anyway?"

Greg finally found his voice. Hoarsely he managed an "I'm Greg."

"Nice to you meet you, Greg." Out of habit they both extended their hands and shook. It was the most awkward handshake of either of their lives.

"Nice to meet you too, uh..."

"I'm Emily," said Emily.

"Yes, nice to meet you, Emily," said Greg. "What am I going to do?" thought Greg. Emily wasn't going anywhere. In fact, she had taken up a glazed-over look in her face similar to the one Greg was wearing a few moments prior.

"Um, what are you up to anyway, so late at night?" he asked.

"Couldn't sleep. Decided to go for a walk." She looked at him closely for the first time. He was a slender man. She guessed he was probably in his mid-thirties. He had wonderfully rich dark brown hair, and a jaw that was spackled with a three-days' beard. Emily found so disheveled an appearance on most men disgusting. In fact, the longer she looked at him, the more taken she was with his face.

"Do you have trouble sleeping often?" Greg asked, not looking at her.

"All the time, I've gone three days without any sleep before. More than once."

"That's insane!" Greg never woke up before nine. "How do you survive?"

"Coffee. Sometimes when that's not enough I take some uppers."

Greg was intrigued. Drugs fascinated him. "What kind of uppers?"

"Oh whatever. Adderall usually."

"I took Adderall once," said Greg, "in college."

"What did you think?"

“Well, it was great for like, 12 hours, then I felt terrible for three days.”

Emily laughed. “Yeah, that happens.” She flicked the ash off the end of her dwindling cigarette. “I guess you’re supposed to drink a lot of fruit juice or something.” There was a brief a silence. “Do you mind if I sit with you?”

“Be my guest,” said Greg. Emily climbed over the railing and sat on the rough concrete next to Greg. Their legs dangled freely over the water.

“So... why do you want to kill yourself? I mean, I guess you don’t really have to answer that I just—“

“No, no it’s, fine,” Greg sighed. “It’s hard for anyone who hasn’t felt that way to understand.” He opened his mouth to say more, but closed it again. “Do you mind if I have one of those cigarettes?”

“Oh, of course,” said Emily, and handed him the pack and her lighter.

“Thanks.” Greg lit up and gave the box back to Emily. “I’m just a mess. You don’t want to hear about my angst.”

“No, really, I do,” said Emily. “I’m a people person.”

Greg was reluctant—he hated talking about himself. “I guess it’s like this,” he said. “It feels like everything in the world is conspiring against you. Or that’s not even it—it’s not like it’s a conspiracy. I don’t feel paranoid. I just feel like in the entire world there isn’t a place for me. I mean I’m 34 years old. I don’t have a wife. I don’t even have a girlfriend. I have a couple people I guess I could call my friends, but I hardly see them more than once a week, if that.”

Greg paused and thought about what he would say next.

“It seems like everyone else has life so figured out, you know? They’ve got jobs and families and cars and houses. I’m self-employed; I still rent an apartment. I mean I do things that cool people do. I play guitar in a sucky band, I read books, I watch indie movies, I drink coffee. But I don’t feel like any of those things are me, you know?”

Emily tossed her cigarette butt into the river and watched it fall; she lost sight of it and couldn’t see where it splashed into the water. “Sounds like you’re having an existential crisis.”

“Exactly! That’s exactly what this is.” Greg hit his thigh with this fist for added emphasis.

“You just need to take some mushrooms,” said Emily.

“I’m too old for shit like that,” said Greg, as he dosed himself with nicotine. “Psychedelic drugs are for kids.”

“Aldous Huxley would be disappointed to hear you say that,” said Emily, “and he was one of the greatest literary minds of the 20th century.”

“I never was a fan of *Brave New World*,” said Greg. He looked over at Emily and saw that she was looking at him intently. They both burst out laughing.

“Did you know,” began Emily, “that Huxley injected himself with a hundred micrograms of LSD right before he died? Can you imagine?”

Greg shuddered, “You mean the man died while tripping his face off? Sounds like a nightmare.”

“I think it sounds beautiful,” said Emily. “There’s no such thing as a bad trip, you know.”

“Hmm,” said Greg. “What does it matter—life is all just a trip anyway, right?”

“Some people think that.”

“I used to feel that way.”

“What changed?” asked Emily.

Greg shrugged. “I grew up, left home, saw how vast the world was; I saw how mechanical and unreal our lives are.” He paused and wondered if Emily had registered anything he had said. “Have you ever read Foucault? Or Baudrillard?”

“I’ve heard those names.”

“Well, Baudrillard was really into this idea of ‘hyper-reality,’ the idea that reality itself doesn’t exist anymore. He argued that we live in a world of symbols, and that the true material nature of things has become irrelevant. Take money, for example. It used to be that we had a gold standard, X dollars was worth X amount of gold. But now money is just money. It isn’t worth anything.” Greg smoked a bit and composed an analogy.

“Buying things in a grocery store, for instance. I go in expecting an infinite supply of identical products. Obviously that would be impossible, but the way companies package and decorate what they sell tricks you into thinking every time you buy a loaf of Wonder Bread it will be exactly the same. Anyway, I go into this store, and I want to buy a box of cereal, so

I go to the cereal aisle and see rows and rows of identical boxes. Let's say I want some Froot Loops. Froot Loops are a good example. Froot Loops are a total lie. First of all, there's no fruit in Froot Loops, just sugar and artificial coloring and junk. So already the name is meaningless. Then we have to deal with the actual flavor of the cereal; none of the Froot Loops taste anything like fruit that grows on trees. Imagine if you grew up and you'd never eaten an orange. The closest thing you'd ever eaten in your life to an orange was an orange Froot Loop. Then one day you eat a real orange. It would blow your mind, wouldn't it? But that's the power of simulacra, this hyper-reality idea. You associate the taste of an orange Froot Loop to an orange your whole life, even if you know better, even if you know what a real orange tastes like!"

Emily looked over at him, somewhat bemused.

"So what are you saying?" she said. "I mean I get that everything's fake but so what?"

"Some people in the world are oranges," said Greg. "Some people are Froot Loops."

"Don't you think we're all Froot Loops? I mean we all live in the same fake world."

"I don't believe that," Greg shook his head. "There are geniuses."

"So you have to be a genius in order to be a real person?" Emily laughed a little. "That's setting the bar a bit high, don't you think?"

"Maybe, I don't know. Geniuses are the only people who matter at any rate."

"Now wait a minute," said Emily, irritated. "That's totally unfair, so you're saying that the people who built this bridge don't matter? You're saying the people who built your house don't matter? The people who picked the food you eat don't matter?"

"Well, maybe that was a poor choice of words," said Greg. "I should have said 'Geniuses are the only people who will be remembered.' No one is going to make a memorial dedicated to an idiot. No one will cry when a philistine dies. You and me were born, we grew up, we'll work, fuck around for a while, get old and die. That's it. Maybe someone will miss us, our kids, our friends, our spouses. But in 30 years no one will remember our name. Everything we did will be obsolete—any lives we touched, fuck, those people will die, too." He looked hard into Emily's

gray-blue eyes. “We live and die for this,” he said, making a sweeping gesture that seemed to include everything from the air they were breathing to the skyscrapers on the west side of the river. “Nothing, nothing at all.”

Emily thought for a moment. “I still think you’re crazy.”

“I told you,” said Greg. “You really don’t want to hear about my problems.” He looked over and saw that Emily was crying. “Fuck,” he muttered and leaned over to hug her. Dawn had crept up peaking over the foothills in the east. Portland’s appearance changed from a gray foggy dystopia to a warm pink dreamscape. Emily hugged him back. She would have kissed him if he had tried to, but he didn’t, so they just sat there, awkwardly, holding each other as the sun rose and cars began to cross the bridge. A horn honked at them, and they nearly slipped and fell in surprise.

“Shit!” said Emily as she grabbed the handrail firmly and balanced herself. She realized that Greg had tightened his hold on her to keep her safe. She started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Greg asked.

“You came out here to kill yourself,” she could barely control her laughter, “but now instead you end up saving me.”

They smiled at each other. “Fuck this,” said Greg. “Let’s go get some breakfast.” They swung their legs back over the railing and walked arm in arm into town.

Chris Stites

Flying Home

TAKE 2 TABLETS EVERY 4–6 HOURS AS NEEDED FOR ANXIETY.

Terry reread the label as he washed a few more down with a Scotch and water at the airport bar. DO NOT EXCEED 8 TABLETS IN A 24-HOUR PERIOD. Terry sat counting his remaining pills, configuring the blue football-shaped dots in different ways on the bar countertop. A crucifix, a smiley face; he made a big football with the little footballs, popping one here and there when each new design would call for an odd or even number.

Terry was *not* afraid of flying. He also did not consider himself to have any form of clinical anxiety. This is only what he led his doctors to believe. His fears were much more deeply rooted, as are the fears of any super-sensitive addict on the brink of adulthood.

As Terry was playing with his pills and pondering the complex nature of his doctor-shopping exploits, the thought came to him, “I’m not even going to remember this flight. So, what if it crashes?”

He was on his way back to Los Angeles for his mother’s funeral. She had died a month earlier. Been cremated. Cancer. Terry was there when she died. As her breathing slowly stopped, he squeezed her right hand, and his father squeezed her left. The nursing staff left the room so she could die, and as Terry’s dad cried out, “I’m so sorry, Sweetie,” Terry held her hand in calm silence.

As Terry remembered this, he popped a couple of the pills he was playing with at the bar.

Just then a couple of off-duty stewardesses, sort of homely, noticed Terry playing with his pills, as did a few other patrons at the bar, and looked aghast. Terry had noticed these two women when he walked into the bar—too old and ugly to be stewardesses. They’ve really lowered the

standards for flight girls these days. There's no more class. There goes another dream: dead.

Terry sometimes entertained himself with the good-ole-timey thoughts of a man three or four times his age. He wasn't sure himself whether he truly believed them or not, or if they were just the silly stuff of an eccentric young man.

Terry did not notice the disapproving looks he was getting from the stewardesses now. He didn't care. He was too boiled right now anyway, feeling as if he was sitting on a private beach in Antigua, like a boiled head of cabbage boiling in water and Scotch and Xanax and the Caribbean sunshine. He would have rather been boarding a plane to Antigua. He hoped that these two ugly gals would not be servicing his flight; and furthermore he looked around the bar to see if he couldn't spot instead somewhere a couple of cute 26-year-old flight attendants sharing some drinks. Then there would be hope. He could hope that the cute little creatures would not only be bringing him peanuts and pretzels on his flight, but he would know that they were already a couple drinks in themselves when he would see them sitting in their little flight attendant chairs, reading *Cosmo* at the front of the plane. Terry imagined interrupting one of the girls reading *Cosmo*, reveling in the charming conversation that he also imagined would follow with the cute little creature, regardless of whether she was funny or smart or sexy or a raving bitch.

Over the intercom, Terry heard some unintelligible matter squirting out of the loudspeakers. He couldn't be sure, but it sounded like his plane was boarding. *He...Could...Not...Miss...This...Plane.* He told himself this every time he popped another couple pills in his mouth. Then, in an attempt to make his way to the gate, he abruptly fell off the bar stool and when he went to reach for the handle on his suitcase to help himself up, he fell again into a shitty fake desert plant under the counter in the corner of the bar.

The two ugly stewardesses rushed over to him.

"Sir, can we help you?"

"Oh, yes, thank you," Terry said with dark sarcasm, allowing them to pull him to his feet. "I am the pilot on this flight—Flight 202. Could you gorgeous, young ladies please escort me to the plane? We wouldn't

want our valued customers to have any unwarranted delays in their travels, would we? Or an unsafe flight? It's never safe to rush anything, and God knows I need my coffee before *this* stretch." Terry laughed, and then began burping drunkenly.

The ladies looked cross.

Barely 21-years-old, Terry was wearing a thrift store sport coat with the lining in shreds and the arms coming off at the seams. He had an old brown suitcase, and his whole ensemble smelled of cheap cigarettes, Scotch and sweat, and all the other byproduct smells of a very bad diet. But Terry didn't care to notice this foul smell. It was apathy.

The two women looked unamused by what Terry had to say, if not seriously offended. They withdrew their hands and recalled that look-aghast to their faces—albeit a bit more horrified—and directed it at Terry, then each other, and all around the room, one of the ladies even trying to shoot one up to God.

"Well, could you two at least promise me that you'll try looking for new careers?" Terry asked them. "You two should be servicing truck drivers at truck stops, not attending to flights, for God's sake!"

The two stewardesses went back to their table. Terry steadied himself, double- and triple-checking that he had all his belongings, before making his way to the gate. With all the pills he'd consumed, it would surely be a very short fight.

* * *

On the tarmac, Terry counted the blinking lights spangled about the runway, some stuck adorning protrusions on the airport herself, others being carried across the ground or through the sky on ends of wings and tails and tops of silly airport vehicles like drivable stairs and rolling ramps and tarmac tugboats, or bouncing around on wands wielded by earmuff-wearing, working-class conductors. It was like a blinking light symphony or opera on the tarmac stage, with dancers making earth-bound entrances and skyward exits to the blinking light rhythm of jet engine decrescendos.

A gorgeous, young, cute little stewardess greeted Terry at the airplane door—a transplant from the 1950s Pan Am, airline glory days, with a glittering smile, reflective of the blinking light spangled set, cutting through his incontinent, pharmacological memory like a bullet

to the brain. This was the ideal that Terry had devoted so much time to defining. Was she just some fleeting dream-like perception from the large quantity of pills he had thus consumed? He hoped not. Visible from the aisle Terry walked down, through the center of the plane, was another, even more beautiful stewardess, radiating first-class, airborne hospitality forward from the back, which absorbed itself in every passenger and escorted Terry to his seat in the emergency exit row over the right wing. Terry pulled his pill bottle with only a few pills now left out of his old brown suitcase before shoving it up in the overhead bin and taking his seat. Because of his double vision, Terry closed his left eye to count the remaining pills. As he counted the pills, he felt himself start to nod off.

“Sir.”

Terry heard a voice whispering to his unconscious.

“Excuse me, sir. Are you awake?”

Terry had passed out.

“I need to know, sir, if you are able and willing to accept the responsibilities necessary to occupy this seat.”

Terry listened idly to a dream.

“Sir?...”

“*Sir!*”

Terry slowly cracked open his eyes, but it was several more moments before he actually regained use of them. Statuesque, the stewardess appeared smiling, glittering, with the simultaneous expression of a concerned someone searching for the signaling results to end some sort of resuscitation procedure, like CPR.

“Yes, yes. I feel quite capable, thank you. Anything for this extra leg room!” Terry signaled the extra space to the stewardess with his drooped eyes. “Could I please get a drink? A Scotch and water. Something before we take off.”

“Sir, we cannot begin serving any beverages until the airplane has reached cruise altitude. I will be happy to get you something as soon I can, but could you please listen to the safety instructions right now? It is very important information in the unlikely event of an emergency.”

As the stewardess began reciting the well-rehearsed spiel, Terry started to nod off again, and her voice, having a remarkable likeness to that of Terry’s mother’s, turned into just that in Terry’s unconscious. And

Terry was back home, and his mother was telling him what a special, darling little boy he was. They sat around the small, wooden kitchen table where Terry ate his morning oatmeal everyday before school. Terry asked her for the syrup and butter, which he loved to drench his oatmeal in. She did this happily and sat silently watching Terry gobble down his breakfast with a gentle, loving look.

Terry stopped eating and looked up at her.

“Does it hurt, Mom?”

(Somehow, even in the dream, Terry knew his mother was dead.)

“Only for a moment. But don’t be scared, baby.”

Terry returned nonchalantly to eating his oatmeal. The warmth comforted him. It was sweet and satisfying. Again, he paused the motion in his arm that was rhythmically delivering food to his mouth and looked up at his mom.

“How will you know when it’s going to happen?”

“You’ve always known that it’s *going* to happen, sweetheart. And sure as heaven, it will. So don’t be scared. Don’t be scared, Terry.”

Then, as if the floor of the house met with the ceiling like the accent of two halves of a giant accordion coming together, Terry awoke to a huge bang, this time violently lucid—instantly. Terry’s eyes opened to a pitch-black airplane cabin containing the wrenched-out terror-screams of tomorrow’s headlines. As the screams rolled through the cabin like a rogue wave, dim red lights came on in the center aisle of the plane, and there was a vivid feeling of horror that erupted from Terry’s gut out to the ends of the small translucent hairs covering his body, busting through Xanax inebriation with no effort.

In turbulent freefall, the skeleton of the plane seemed to whine apologetically under the extreme stress of the nosedive through brick clouds. The more beautiful stewardess quickly flew by Terry as her body was chucked down the aisle like a toy, followed by the beverage cart, loose bottles, books and laptop computers which pummeled her cute little body against the bathroom door at the front of the plane. Terry watched this for a moment, without feeling, detached, before he suddenly puked, and in doing so, sort of puked up his feelings again. But in that robot-like state, and with the utter seriousness of the plane plummeting, Terry neglected to reach for a vomit bag and threw up all over the vicinity.

And with the plane nearly vertical and violently shaking, the blue-stained contents of the rear bathrooms started spewing out of the toilets and rushing down the aisles, with clods of compressed toilet paper pegging the back of passengers' heads and speckling the shit-spangled windows, walls and ceiling of the cabin.

Then God came down from heaven, and the plane began leveling out, steadying and slowing down. The main cabin lights came back on, but only in an erratic flicker. Terry closed his left eye to focus and look around the cabin. He had never heard so many humans crying at one time, which was remarkable. The cute little stewardess was semi-conscious, laid out in such an unnatural position against the bathroom door that only several broken bones could make physically possible. The poor cute little creature that rekindled Terry's hope for a return to the good old days of flight attending was laying, mangled, right in front of everyone. But the plane was still too far out of control for anyone to get up and do anything for her, including Terry, and, in that moment, looking at her, it all weighed heavily, beneath the Xanax intoxication, on Terry's child-like soul. But there was really nothing that could be done for her. She was fucked, really fucked—the cute little thing...the poor girl.

In Terry's shock and the gloom in the cabin, the man sitting next to him, a white, balding business-type, with his head straight back against the headrest and his eyes pointed straight ahead, started to talk to Terry.

"I don't know what all these people are freaking out over. You'd think they've never heard of turbulence. I've flown all over the world—to China over twenty times—on important business. I've been on some pretty rough flights. These things are much more reliable than people think."

The man's white shirt was soaked heavily in odorous sweat that Terry could see running down his face in thick gobs.

"You know, you're more likely to believe yourself to be the reincarnate of Kublai Kahn than to die in a plane crash? Yep, I've flown hundreds of times on very important business, and I've seen worse than this. With what I'm getting paid for this trip alone, I'm buying me, my wife, and my son all matching jet skis—top of the line. I mean, with the

money my *company* is making in this deal, I could buy a mansion! And my wife is so gorgeous, she deserves it. . .”

Wasn't this the first response to impending death? Or grief? Denial. It was torture to hear. Terry reached into the compartment on the seatback in front of him, searching for his bottle of pills. He popped a couple, closed his eyes, and slowed his breathing, trying to lower the adrenaline in his blood so he could give the Xanax a fighting chance. The plane started descending again, and the turbulence was increasing quickly. This guy was driving Terry nuts, and the plane was fucking crashing.

From behind Terry came another voice, stressed out to the near-breaking point. Like any further and this dude would just start moaning or speaking in tongues. He was directing this tirade at the businessman sitting next to Terry.

“You think this is nothing? NOTHING! I shouldn't even be on this fucking plane! First, the inept shuttle service breaks down, causing me to miss my flight, and then they put me on this piece of shit! We could all die, and you think I'm *overreacting*? Like everything is just HUNKY-FUCKING-DORY!!!”

Stage two: Anger.

The angry man kept yelling, but his screaming began to sound like a young child crying in the fear only a young child knows. His words became unintelligible to Terry, and the businessman's head was still plastered and sweaty, and he wasn't reacting to the angry man.

The plane was barreling out of control. Terry concentrated again on his breathing. He thought about that oatmeal he used to eat when he was a kid. The warm feeling. The yelling of the man behind him began to filter out into a sort of buzzing sound massaging Terry's brain cells. The Xanax fought its way through to Terry's heavy eyelids. Terry's mother kissed each closed eye socket so gently. She was whispering lullabies and blowing kisses into his ears. Her hands were bone-thin and cold. She was massaging Terry's arms, lightly brushing his cheeks with the back of her hands. And in his ear, her breath was cold, too, but sweet and clear like a cold morning. She was singing a lullaby. . .

“Go to sleep and dream sweetly
Don't tremble, don't cry.

You're with angels my darling,
Singing sweet lullaby.
So safe with the angels,
Don't worry, just lie
In the eternal, loving embrace
At the open door
And *open the door*,
open the door...

"Captain, *please* OPEN THE DOOR!"

Terry woke again to the screams of the surviving stewardess who was banging desperately on the cockpit door.

Again the plane dropped like a bomb and Terry's eyes—more reluctantly this time—opened. Families were huddled together in the darkness of the plane, plummeting through the night sky and soon enough departing from it into the earth. Muddled screams were faintly heard through the boom of the crashing plane, but mostly now people sat quietly. They sat with oxygen masks strapped to their heads and eyes closed. Some people had passed out, and there was the strong smell of vomit in the air. A woman was praying in the row across from Terry. Stage three: Bargaining. She *could* live a better life if she survived this flight, that was for sure. A life more in accordance with God. However, in the din of the cabin, Terry could not hear what she was saying to God, or determine how convincing her words were. The only distinguishable voice Terry could hear was that of the cute little creature screaming at the captain's locked cabin to please open the door, to say *something* to the passengers. She was crying. Were we going to die?

Then, over the intercom, the captain's voice cracked out over the loud roar of the crashing plane.

"I'm sorry everybody. There is nothing I can do. I wish there was something I could do to save us, but it is out of my hands. I have failed, and, in a sense, deserve this. I'm sorry to have to take you all with me. Pray to God if you believe in God. If not, it shouldn't be a painful death, and it shouldn't be long now."

Stage four: Depression—stage four of five.

Again, Terry reached in to pop the last of his pills, however many there might be left. Just as he pulled them out of the seatback

compartment, the plane dropped hard and the bottle fell out of Terry's hands. Quickly, in an act of pure instinct, he reached out to grab them. But they were lost somewhere in the mayhem of a crashing plane. Terry smiled at this. Terry was going to die. He had not forgotten what his mother told him in his dreams: only for a moment. Terry sat back in his chair, unbuckling his seatbelt, gripping tightly to his seat cushion. Panels of the plane were being ripped from the cabin, and the cold outside air was rushing in through Terry's hair and filling Terry's mouth. And his eyes were open wide as the plane plummeted toward the earth.

Julian Wong

Night and Day

Everything seems different in the garish light of day. The stale air hints at the nature of the previous night's activities, the dirty blue wallpaper peeling at the edges, some of the books on the shelves look thick and completely untouched. I am suddenly aware that we are in a tank of dust, floating and circling in a beam of sunlight that filters in through the small window in his room.

I watch him lie there with his arms flung above his head in abandon, as he mumbles in his sleep fragments of sentences that make no sense to me. He is a good-looking man, but even the best looking of men look ridiculous when they are asleep. Watching over his sleep is a painting above the bed frame of a man on a bridge screaming. The blood red sky in the painting is incandescent in the sunlight.

On his nightstand are his iPhone and a thick wad of \$100 bills, almost concealed by a mess of used tissue papers and an army of Trojans. I get out of bed stealthily, careful not to wake him, and the blast of cold air makes my hair stand on end. I pick my jeans off the floor and scrutinize the rest of the room to find my shirt. I finally locate it shriveled and strewn near the door. That makes sense—I think to myself—the shirt came off first, then the pants. I put my clothes on and start clearing the mess quietly (I take pride in this aspect of my job). As I pick up the used condom that was carelessly thrown on the floor, I marvel at how intercourse could smell exactly the way it is in my world—artificially sweet, like a strawberry cordial.

He is a regular client (every other Saturday) and I have grown to be rather fond of the hours we spend together, even though and maybe even because I know nothing else more than his name, cell phone number and address. Usually I sneak in the back door and perform my jobs quietly

in his study, then leave before sunrise. But this weekend the wife is away, so the rent-boy is invited and paid extra to stay the night in the master bedroom. What a big deal it must be for him. But I hate spending the night. Most men fall asleep before I do and most snore.

His iPhone rings and he awakes with a start, looking over his shoulders to find that I am not there.

“Good morning, Bruce,” I say from the floor, stuffing the last of the tissues into the love-bag.

He looks at me through half-closed eyes and rubs them like a grumpy little boy who has been forced to wake up. He does not say a word but stumbles past me in his boxers and out of the room. How typical. At nightfall, a kind of magic exists to turn the most timid men into flamboyant hosts, to make generous men out of misers and render them defenseless, even sexy. Then at dawn, the spirit of the night retires and these men, along with the mice and bats, scurry back into their caves and closets, as the religious and family men emerge. There is no such thing as erotic fantasy, merely illusion. And there is no such thing as *Pretty Woman*, merely women who are kept in the dark. Those are the first rules every male escort understands. If we cannot pull off being the elusive illusionist, the result could be detrimental to our career and our hearts.

I hear the sound of children being roused from their sleep. It must be the same sound that every parent in the world starts the day with for at least 16 years of his or her children’s lives. I wonder how old the kids at the other end of the corridor are and if they are happy. They certainly sound like it: they’re laughing. Daddy must be a superhero to them right now, and I begin to speculate when that perception will change.

The children are still laughing, reminding me of a life I will never experience. I try my best to search Bruce’s room for a photo frame or a stray picture of his children that could be lying around somewhere, since fathers tend to keep photographs of their children in the most unexpected of places. Nothing evokes greater joy and deeper guilt in a man than his children, and I guess superheroes do not want their kids visible when they are not exactly fighting crime and keeping them safe. My eyes only catch the guy in the painting screaming down at me silently. That is one disturbed piece of art.

I hear Bruce returning and I prepare to ask to be paid. I hate asking for money. No matter how the client reacts to your awkwardness, you still end up feeling cheap somehow.

“Hey,” I say while clearing my throat, but he locks the door and heads straight for the bathroom, as if I am not there. He always seems much nicer when I leave before morning.

I survey his collection of dusty, random books—Voltaire, Shakespeare, Stephen King, Dan Brown, those trite men’s magazines all promising to teach its readers to “DRIVE HER WILD” and “GET ABS NOW,” Tolkien, *Operations and Strategic Management*— and then at the corner of my eye I spot E.M. Forster’s *Maurice*. It has the same cover as my copy when I was a closeted teenage boy. Maybe Bruce and I have more in common than I thought, and maybe *Maurice* holds the answers to Bruce’s life.

I open the worn-out paperback and out falls a Polaroid so aged that it is turning the same shade of yellow as the pages of the book, the faces in it almost becoming undefined. There it is in my hand—the photograph in the secret place.

I stare at the image, riveted by a younger, more muscular Bruce carrying a boy, the both of them blowing out three candles on a chocolate cake. The birthday boy is grinning so widely that his eyes have disappeared. Next to him is an attractive woman with long, black hair, carrying a girl who is pointing excitedly at her brother’s birthday cake. The cake is clearly too big for this family of four. They are the paragon of a nuclear family, and I cannot believe how any family could be this happy. Bruce is a good father, a good husband, a good man. I so desperately want to believe there is some good left in the world, that there are heroes deserving of my love without any cunning illusion, and that a home and family with them is not just the stuff of fiction.

The stream of water from the shower comes to a halt. I hastily put the Polaroid back in the front of the book and glimpse the name “Emmanuel” at the bottom right of the page. Emmanuel? I walk to the tiny window and pretend to be looking at the view (or lack thereof) when he emerges from the bathroom in nothing but a white towel wrapped around his waist.

“Emman. . . Bruce,” I call but there is no response. For the first time, I see the sadness in his deep eyes, as if the weight of the world hangs by hooks on his sagging eye bags. He looks like a man who needs some sleep.

He walks toward me slowly until we are face to face, the lines on his face unable to hide. He smells of mint. Something stirs in me and I have a desire to hug him, to love him. He grabs my shoulders tightly and I lean in for a kiss but before I know it, my knees buckle and give way as I am pushed to the floor. He removes his towel with one deft motion that I can only imagine he has done a thousand times before.

“Bruce?” I quiver. I feel as if I cannot go on with it.

“Make it quick,” he commands as he shoves his erect penis in my mouth with so much force that I almost gag.

He grabs me by the head, pulls my hair and starts ramming his penis into the back of my throat. It begins to hurt. My knees feel like they will implode on the hard marble floor. I want to scream but I cannot. I look up at him, hoping that he will see that I am pleading with him to stop, but his head is tilted back in ecstasy and his eyes shut as he tries to catch his breath. What is he shutting himself from? What is he not wanting to see? He no longer smells of mint.

Without warning, he lets out a soft cry and ejaculates down my throat. He lets go of my hair, pulls his still-convulsing penis out of my mouth, lets out a deep sigh and opens his eyes slowly, as if he is a blind man who could finally see. Only he does not seem happy about regaining his sight. There is shame and repulsion etched on his face as he offers me his hand to get up from the floor.

I stand before him, knees trembling, watching him get dressed. The silence is chilling and dangerous. I do not know who this man is. I am in too much pain to speak. And yet I do not want to leave just yet. He walks to his nightstand and from that stack of crisp \$100 bills, hands me 12.

“Thank you,” I manage to croak, breaking the silence.

“I’m sorry,” he says, as he wipes the tears around my eyes with his thumb. I know he means it. Then he straightens his tie and walks out the door.

“Let’s go, kids. Don’t forget your Bible,” I hear him say as the joyful chatter of his children (I think I hear them discussing breakfast

at McDonald's) and their skipping down the stairs fade away into nothingness, along with my glimmer of hope.

I step out of the bedroom into a house that is coldly empty. Without the guise of candles and dim chandeliers, there is no warmth. Everything is in its right place—there is no clutter, no sign that children live here, nothing. Even the flowers in the vase are in full bloom, proudly proclaiming a home that is flawless. I swiftly walk out the back door, cautious that someone might appear unannounced. The sky is unbelievably red.

It is a Stepford neighborhood—not a piece of litter in sight, nor an unsmiling person, nor a single surface tarnished. There are even goddamn birds chirping in the trees that provide shade for hot-blooded teenagers in love on the grass on a Sunday morning. When does love turn from a pastime and the fulfillment of a cinematic, romantic notion to a service that is sterile and mercenary? Whose love is purer?

I cross the bridge to get to the bus stop on the other side, noticing children and their fathers frolicking in the water, the mothers watching from dry ground with glee. My mind drifts to “Bruce.” Is he at a boring sermon, replaying what happened last night and this morning in his head? Is he falling asleep as the congregation bows their head down in prayer? Are the rest of those hundred-dollar bills going into an offering bag? Did his children, those lovely children, enjoy their breakfast?

A couple with their perfect puppies and Starbuck's coffees stroll past me while I am disposing of the love-bag, and wish me good morning. I smile back at the lovers, envious yet ashamed that I have yet to brush my teeth or wash the dry, crusty grains of the night before off me. I want to scream, but I know I would stink up their neighborhood even more.

BERKLEE STUDENTS & ALUMNI

Nonfiction

Nicholas Cabrera

Thrill of the Chase

Select: jetpack. Start matchmaking in 3... 2...1 . . . *boop* Deep, ominous male voice declares, “Slayer.” Jetpack over first wall. Vision impaired. I am taking heavy fire. Aim at head—four shot kill. Land. Pick up a gravity hammer, larger than my enormous blue Spartan body. Two enemies charge into my sight. I crush them with the massive mallet. Double kill. Pick up plasma grenade. Lead enemy in lower level. Aim. Throw. Glowing blue ball in the face. Stuck.

The video game industry is responsible for bringing people (predominantly males) of all shapes and sizes together for virtual combat. The most common online games currently include *Halo: Reach* and *Call of Duty* and *Modern Warfare II*. I play both. Whether or not it is a constructive use of time is debatable, but I am addicted. Maybe not to the game, but to the pounding of my heart and surge of euphoria that comes with victory.

As I write this, I have just come from playing several rounds of *Halo* on my Xbox 360 console, which is hooked up to a forty-two inch flat screen, which belongs to my roommate and commands the most attention out of the extensive electronic equipment in our three-bedroom apartment. Though I am not the best of joystick handlers, I have my moments. Late at night when I have satisfactorily completed my homework, I turn on the console and slip in the *Halo* disk, select matchmaking and scroll through the play lists. Slayer (4v4 team death match), Team Snipers (all .50 and long shots), Big Team Battle (mix of capture the flag and 8v8 death match), Infection (two zombies trying to turn everyone else)... select: Swat.

In the game-type of Swat, you can only kill an opponent by shooting them in the head. Upon the start of the game, I sprint around the map to

flank the enemy. Approach from the side, before they have had time to think about which way to look. Fire. Fire. Fire. Fire. The projectiles find their targets: the heads of the enemies. Such a feat is described in gaming as an *overkill*, or four kills within four seconds of each other. Such are my “moments.” Though rare, they do occur.

The main appeal of this game is that it requires skill. The secondary appeal is that my skill is matched against a random collection of people from around the globe. The scope on my sniper rifle landing ever so gently on an enemy’s head proves that for at least a second I am better than someone else somewhere in the world. I conversed with a Vancouver native about lifted trucks, and even came across some French-speaking players. Different languages, cultures, races, social classes are all made equal in a place where no one has a face or rank other than a ratio of kills to deaths. All are brought together on neutral ground to play against each other for a high score and bragging rights. All are brought together to destroy each other in smashing fashion. Whether it is an exploding grenade, a .50 caliber bullet through the face, or a swift melee to the back of the skull, someone will find a way to kill you.

As aforementioned, I am not the best. I have won games but lost many more. Still my quest for victory remains insatiable. It awakens an animalistic psychology within that urges, “Complete the mission!” Gaming does not interest me as much as writing music, but it has the potential to be much more exciting. Having a great game, in which I exhibit the combat skills of Achilles, is the closest I can get to those sporting victories of old, the closest I can get to the glory days, the closest I can get to ruling the world.

Mercedes Diaz

Familiar Stranger

When I was 12 years old, I had a midnight visit from a very familiar stranger.

I still remember my bedroom that night. A nightlight dimly lit the space around me making me feel a lot safer. I am not sure what I was scared of exactly because it's not like I believed in monsters, but I knew the lights being completely off was never an option. On one wall there were two book stands filled with a variety of books from Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* to self-help books about sex and relationships. Hardly a selection of books that was appropriate for children, but I read every book on the shelf, a few times. On the other side of my room, I had a keyboard that I reluctantly practiced every other day, and a small radio and a nightstand right beside my bed. The full size bed had been the very first I hadn't had to share with any other foster kids. It stood high, right in the middle of the room. I had two big windows and a closet that had every piece of clothing I owned (or at least could manage to keep), like my Winnie the Pooh oversized T-shirt, my classic Adidas that were supposed to be white, and my handed down jeans from my last foster home. It wasn't a girly room or even decorated with a child in mind. It had more like a guest room feel, but it was the best room I had ever had, and I was proud of it.

The rules of my new home were simple: help with the dishes and daily chores (Saturday cleaning especially), do your homework, and stay out of trouble in school. All of those things were easy because I had always been a good student and was used to cleaning up after myself. When you live in group homes, sometimes with 19 other girls, you learn to keep your things put away and clean everything *before* you use it. There weren't any other kids in this house, so there was no bickering

about who would do what or whose turn it was to do chores. I loved the stability of my new home. I loved the warm feeling I got when I sat at the table to have dinner, or when my new mother asked me about my day. Even though I just answered with a simple “It was good,” it still made me feel special. My new mom was Puerto Rican, and my new dad was Cuban. I am Dominican so I fit in very nicely. Everyone just assumed these were my parents. They weren’t my parents. In fact, I’d felt a bit manipulated into being adopted by these new parents, and I was particularly scared of my new mom, Migdalia.

Every day she found a reason to say horrible things to me to intimidate me into doing chores around the house or getting better grades. Most times she hit me so that I “would get through my thick skull” what she was trying to teach me. The irony is that this militant, cold-hearted dictator was an elementary school teacher who was extremely respected in our community. She valued her education and taught me to do the same. She took pride in the fact that she was the only *Latina* in this community with a master’s degree, and she had a lot of passion for her kids. Teaching primarily ESL students in the beginning of her career had given her a sense of pride because they thanked her later for everything she had taught them. Why couldn’t she be this person at home? She loved her students more than she would ever love me. I figured that I hadn’t lived up to her expectations, so I blamed myself for getting her mad. As I got older, she got more physical, and I would eventually be taken away from her for serious physical abuse, but at this time in my life, I was happy to have a mom that I could be proud of.

That night, I brushed my teeth after I did the dishes and climbed into my bed around 7:30 to read a book. I usually read mysteries that I could pretend to solve, or novels that hypnotized my senses and kept me wrapped up in the story. I never knew exactly what time I would fall asleep, but I always did. It was a Saturday night, so tomorrow was an early wake-up for church.

I opened my eyes. A woman stood at the edge of my bed, smiling at me. For about 10 seconds, we stared at each other. I wasn’t scared, but I was definitely surprised. She had short, curly black hair, luscious red lips, a caramel complexion and a small beauty mark above her lip like

Cindy Crawford. Her piercing black eyes seemed frantic but calm all at the same time.

I finally opened my mouth. “What are you doing here?”

“*Vine a buscaite munequita! Vamono!*” she responded with a broken Dominican-Spanish accent.

Now I noticed her provocative jeans that were so tight they looked painted on. Her fading black leather jacket was torn at the edges but put the finishing touches on her rebellious look. I knew I was not allowed to go with her, but I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t move. I hoped that the answer would fall from the sky or that this was just a dream. Then I heard Migdalia’s bedroom door open. She towered over the entrance of my doorway, and with an eerily soft voice she said:

“*Que tu haces, Josefina?*”

Josie was a hooker around town, and she had been in and out of psych wards and had mental issues that impaired her judgment. She would often be seen around town with extravagant hairstyles, excessive makeup, and never enough clothing. On the flip side, Josie was also known for being one of the best cooks around. When she was ‘healthy’—taking her buffet of psych pills that made her a mental zombie—she worked for restaurants. The word was that a near-closing local Italian restaurant was miraculously resurrected when Josie came to work as their assistant chef. There was no doubt the woman could cook! This schizophrenic and extremely talented cook, Josie, was my real mother. On this night, after having lived in the same town as me for eight years, she had come to take me back.

I looked from Migdalia’s face to Josie’s. They were wondering whose side I would choose. When I didn’t say anything Migdalia broke the silence, as if it had just hit her that there was an intruder in her home.

“Get out of my house before I call the cops!”

Josie mumbled something and then screamed: “*Ella es mi hija damelaaaaaa!*”

At this point Eladio, my foster father, appeared and asked what was going on. Migdalia told him to call the cops. Eladio, a passive man, rarely questioned her. He called.

My mother kept mumbling and screaming and then finally knelt beside me, saying: “*Te quiero mucho munequita.*” A tear ran down her

face. Eventually, I heard the sound of the police coming in. They pulled her away from me.

This wasn't the first time I felt agony and emptiness from watching my mother ripped away from me. This certainly wasn't the only time I saw the reflection of this feeling in the tears of others. One time a really good friend of mine in middle school cried so hard because she was inconsolable at the thought that her parents' divorce would rip her life apart. Until watching her sob, I never thought that your parents' divorcing was such a big deal because I figured it happened to most kids. But her pain was the same as mine. There was also a time when I watched another friend of mine sit in silence over the death of his little eight-year-old brother who had died of cancer. His silence expressed the same feeling of being alone—that someone who meant so much to him was now gone. This is a feeling that all of us have gone through or will at some point in our lives. The night my mom came back into my life like an angel in a dream and disappeared so suddenly like a thief in the night, was the moment my heart emptied. I felt numb.

That night brought me back to reality. It reminded me that, no matter what, I was an intruder in this home. It reminded me I was alone in the world. I vowed that night to never knowingly allow anyone to feel this pain. I cried until the sun came up just so I could feel those tears and know that what was happening was real. I never heard of or saw Josie again until I was 18, but her image was with me always. That schizophrenic, risk-taking, hard-working mother of mine was the only thing that kept me sane.

Dave Lee

Boys and Girls

“...Flat nines and sharp elevens are the shit, especially on bass.”

It’s painful hearing that—it truly is. It’s freshman year, I’m sitting in the Berklee Caf eating alone, my girlfriend in Wisconsin and I have called it quits, and the bubbly and busty redhead at the other end of the table is talking about harmony, the last thing I want to hear a hot girl talk about at this moment.

A girl certainly is a hot commodity at this school. My freshman year, there was something like a 55 percent to 45 percent male to female ratio, though it seemed more like 90 percent and 10 percent to us boys. Within maybe the first week, the girls picked up on this and egos as well as confidence levels grew on the female side, seemingly to no end. They had power over us, they knew it, and they sure didn’t make it easy on us. We were all “friends,” and then friends became just a pseudonym for abstinence.

Honestly, what else does a guy think about at that age? We boys were not interested in platonic relationships with the girls. It seemed as if sex, or the desire for it anyway, drove us all to do and say absurd, stupid things to the girls. For my part, I can’t even *believe* some of the girls I went after at that age. For their part, I’m surprised the majority of them even stayed at Berklee, although many did leave.

One time I was working on a plastic jug of vodka in my dorm room with a few of my friends, all guys, of course. Some girl from upstairs for some reason or another came knocking at the door. I answered, she came in, and immediately it was awkward. I don’t remember why she came in, but I do remember my friends gawking at her, ridiculously, and that I had ushered her out of there sooner than I would have liked to because one of them, the one who was passed out on my bed before

her arrival, had gotten up to try his hand at wooing. He could not stand straight or steady; he did not say anything coherent.

I feel bad for girls at Berklee. Maybe I'm a few years older or just a few hundred times less horny than I used to be, but I see it very clearly now. A lot of guys, musicians especially, *really* make fools out of themselves for girls, and I'm not, by any means, exempting myself from this either. What is it with us? Girls are human beings, not unicorns or something else that should rightly choke you up with their presence. Yet so many times even the most intelligent and articulate among us turn into unsure, babbling weirdos when we want to talk to a girl. It's a hard thing to witness. It's a harder thing to be a part of.

I used to see this girl I'll call Rachel in the Caf. She was a year or two older than me, gorgeous, and rumor had it she was feisty—all the things I like. One day I was looking for a seat in the Caf, she was sitting alone, and I set my tray down across from her and took a seat facing her. I smack myself about it even today thinking back on the incident. Big-brained me had only planned as far as sitting across from her. What I should've said, I've gone over in my head a thousand times since that meal. What I actually said was pretty much nothing. After asking her the icebreaker questions like what semester she was, where she was from, what her major was, yada-yada, the ice was still there, and we might have sat for five whole, long minutes before she said goodbye and left me sitting alone. She must have been hungry at dinner that night because she barely ate anything before she was gone. I flopped big time.

Now, a dear close friend of mine is in love with a girl. She doesn't love him back. But he just thinks she *won't* love him back, as if it's a matter of choice. I don't speak to this girl because my friend loves her, loves only her, and she's a player and a user. I've told him this, that she's the devil. Every other weekend I see her with another new hollow, pretty-looking douche-bag boy all over her, buying her drinks, and I've texted him from the bar informing him of the true nature of this girl, from a firsthand witness point of view. He doesn't want to hear it; he never wants to hear it. So we talk about business, other people, plans for the weekend, plans for the future, blowing things up—boy things. When we get on the topic of girls, he clams up because he knows I love to hate his girl ("his" girl). He's done her final projects for Harmony 1, 2, 3, and I'll bet he's working

on her Harmony 4 project right now. Sure, she's attractive, and she knows how to work her girl magic, but I have it in my head that she's got issues. I can't put my finger on specific instances that explain what's wrong with her, but she has no tenderness or compassion about her; consistently, she's cold, hard, and mean. But to him she's the world.

I'll say I don't understand girls. I'll say that few among us males do. I grew up watching Batman, Spiderman, and X-Men. Superhero cartoons on Fox Kids after school raised me to believe that men should be strong, extraordinary, moralistic, and brave, and that beautiful, good women flocked to these types of men. Catwoman was the bad guy. Nowadays we have '500 Days of Summer' where the girl with no soul and no faith in love heartlessly derails the nice guy (who represents our generation's young man so well) by breaking his heart, with no remorse. We have Lady Gaga, who seems to dominate the hit record charts by making men in her videos her subjects, like in the feudal/medieval sense. I don't get the appeal there. I'm all for women's rights and equality and all, but to me that doesn't mean, "Okay, ladies, let's now shit on the men." That's not playing fair—that's just hypocrisy.

But maybe women don't really understand men, either. Maybe men and women are both bound to struggle at it; maybe that's the way it works for us as Homo sapiens. There are a lot of dumb guys out there, myself included, but I guess there are definitely strange girls out there, too. I recently went on a date with a girl who could be best characterized as a "closed book." I tried and I tried and I tried, and I've gotten better since Rachel mind you, but this girl would just not let me in past hello. She was sweet, she was nice, but she had nothing to say for herself, and she was a piece of grass in the wind, ready to sway whichever way it blows. I asked her what kind of food she wanted to eat; she said, "Anything." I asked her what type of music she listened to; she said "Everything." I asked her what movies she liked and she said, "I like all movies." I asked, "Oh yeah? Did you like *Twilight*? It was a decent movie, right?" She said, "I *loved Twilight*." I haven't seen her since.

Armeen Musa

A City Girl At Heart

Everything comes to us that belongs to us if we create the capacity to receive it.

Rabindranath Thakur

A city girl at heart, I grew up in the fairly cosmopolitan capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka. While I am a Dhaka-ite, I could pass for a citizen of any big city in the world. I might as well be a New Yorker or Londoner. In Dhaka, we rush from one place to another, through crowded streets, everyone trying to create a space for themselves in the overcrowded and overambitious city.

As I grew up, I witnessed Dhaka's shift from a colonial city of large, freestanding buildings, monuments, and houses, to a warren of twelve-story buildings, apartment blocks, and highways. I watched the city become more and more concentrated with people on deadlines and schedules. And I *love* it. To the outsider, it may seem like any other congested city overflowing with hopeful villagers, no-nonsense businessman, and the occasional educator or social worker trying to stay grounded to the authentic Bangladesh. But to me, the city of Dhaka is the root of the person I am: a mix of cultures within the larger culture, the one place in the country trying to align itself with the movement, development, and growth of the rest of the world.

I never knew there was anything missing, being a city girl, until I met people who had migrated to our city from the countryside and even other countries. In my teens, when I finally befriended people from outside my circle of family, school, and neighborhood, I met some young musicians who had the beautiful luck of having studied arts in Tagore's university in Shantiniketon, India.

Sahana Bajpaie, a talented educator, singer, and writer, reveled in her memories of sneaking off in the middle of the night to the open fields and singing under the stars, cycling around her little college town through green alleys, calling everyone by name. These stories fascinated me, as my exposure to nature was limited to my rooftop, where I chilled out with friends alongside millions of others across the city also relaxing on their rooftops, all separated by stone canyons dividing our apartment buildings. Once in a while, my family even made it to the shores of the extremely crowded Dhanmondi Lake where we devoured the roadside delicacy, *phuchka*. The idea of being alone in nature was not something I had ever thought about.

Sahana's poem "Chaina Bhabish," which became the title track of a hit album in Dhaka, made me think about how human beings are not the only ones in the planet who matter. My favourite line of the poem explores nature's ability to communicate through colour:

Khoyri Shobuj Neelche Holud
Komla Kalo,

The brownish green, the bluish
yellow, the orangeish black,

Kemon kore bolche kotha bashche
bhalo

Oh, look at how they speak and
how they love.

I realized that humans are not the only ones who love, live, and sing. Being aware of such colors and sights opened a window of curiosity in my mind to someday find out what it's like to feel such love for nature, to tap into that notion of humans as just one of the characters in the larger story of life.

Five years later, suffocating under my academic studies, my restless mind was searching for answers to my unhappiness. On a whim, I asked Sahana for a few introductions and was off to the beautiful village of Santiniketon in neighboring India. I left behind everything I was supposed to be, all the familial expectations, and the urban life I had always known.

I arrived in Santiniketon in scorching September heat. I could have chosen to go to a village in Bangladesh; I daresay Bangladesh villages are gorgeous. But being who I am, I had to be *productive*, and so I chose

this village in part for its proximity to Visva Bharathi University, where I could take an Indian Music course. I got a little apartment, for such places in India are used to foreign students and, more importantly, independent women. I plunged into life in typical goal-oriented fashion: I wanted to meet as many local musicians as possible, gather knowledge about Indian music, and learn my newly acquired program—Logic—on my computer in my spare time. Things did *not* go as planned.

I was immediately an outsider. Although the residents of West Bengal speak the same language and dress in similar ways, this was a quiet college town, and being a city girl, I stood out. Yet being different had never been a problem for me. In fact, difference had always sparked a mutual attraction between me and the new people I met. There were students from all over India, Europe, and Bangladesh. While I met many people, I realized they were not interested in me and I was not interested in them. I had class twice a week at 8 a.m. for an hour, and the rest of the day was mine to kill. Each day dragged. Despite the expensive high speed internet access I signed up for, there was just so much online networking, movie watching, music downloading I could do.

My love for food helped me break out of my boredom and experience nature. Having grown tired of my own cooking and the neighborhood roadside restaurants, or “hotels” as we call them in Bangladesh, I started taking rickshaw rides outside Santiniketon to the nearby areas. I settled into my seat as my rickshaw driver Bokul (soon to be one of my few friends in Santiniketon) drove through some of the uneven roads to a “resthouse” for some high end food, where they served what the rest of the world knows as “Indian food,” but which is really a combination of various North Indian cuisines. I began to drink in the sights of the villages as they passed by me at the leisurely pace a rickshaw ride affords. As in many cultures, post-lunch time is siesta time, and that became my time for exploration. I was used to diesel trucks zooming past me and harried commuters rushing for their buses and trains. Here, the empty streets were shaded by long trees harbouring the flowers of the seasons, while dogs, cats, and, of course, cows, roamed the streets freely. As I drank in the droopy white flower of the *himchhuri*, the bluish tinges in the *aparajita*, the multicoloured *kalabati* and the spread of colors that I had never seen before, I started to connect more and more to the central

point of Sahana’s poem “Chaina Bhabish”: admiration, respect, and love for the beauty of nature.

Thus started my relationship with nature. Spring in Santiniketon was my favourite time: the windy winter has passed and the sun hasn’t come on so harshly yet, just perfect weather to roam around. One gorgeous day, I made my way to a fair where artisans sell handmade products on the outskirts of Santiniketon. Bokul dropped me off at the rickshaw stand where locals and students were piling in to see the handicrafts displayed. I indulged in a beautiful *Nakshikatha* sari. The folk embroidery, *kaanthas*, on the sari has been practiced for centuries in the West Bengal and Bangladesh area, reflecting designs inspired by Hindu deities and the daily life of Bengalis years ago; some *kaanthas* even have stories embroidered on them. The highlight of the fair was the setting. The stalls were laid out in the midst of a forest—displayed on branches were handmade bells, percussion instruments, jewelry, bags all made from local materials, and dried fruit. My last view of the fair was a stand of *Chatim* trees with little pathways winding between the trunks.

When my friend Sahana came home to Santiniketon for summer break, I got to experience the town in a more personal way—the tea stall gossip sessions, door-to-door deliveries by the milkman, and the fresh fish peddled at street markets: *rui*, *katla*, *koi*. At night, we left the town behind as Sahana and her friends took me on midnight adventures on the backs of their motorcycles. We lay in open fields, drinking our over-sweetened teas and taking in the stars of the Bengal sky. We would hum a song or, sometimes, just lie in silence. The night sky, the field, the trees, and the flowers—they made me feel small, but at the same time connected to the larger world.

After Sahana returned to London, I returned to my solitary life. But soon, my circle of friends grew to include not just Bokul, but the housekeeper, Boudi, Nawbadeep Da, the owner of the Nawbadeep Tea and Sweet Stalls, and a Serbian art student, Ivana, who also shared my awe of the pastoral life. During festivals such as Dol, which celebrates color, I didn’t feel strange going alone, and enjoyed floating through the vibrant dances, taking pictures, and sometimes joining in with the songs I knew. At one point I gave up all inhibitions and joined the students in the rituals of *Rong Khela* (playing with colors), which is like a water

balloon fight but instead of water, people throw powdered color at each other while singing and dancing.

While I enjoyed these small encounters with local people, I had come to embrace my solitude, learning about the trees, the insects, the animals, and the simpler things in life. The city girl from Dhaka, to my astonishment, had lived through nine months of scorching heat and the ensuing five to six daily showers, a lizard for a roommate, electricity only half the day, exotic insect bites, and the same meal of rice, rui fish curry and alu bhaji every day. I had learned to live without jam sessions, parties, movies, and car rides. Strangely enough, I found I had no complaints and no regrets, but rather great contentment at this new discovery of the world and myself. Of course, I did make frequent trips to Kolkata to remember urban life existed!

To this day, I still sometimes look up at the ceiling when I go to sleep, looking for the lizard hovering above. I listen for the crickets on the tree outside my room. And I search the sky in vain for fireflies flitting overhead.

The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence.

Rabindranath Thakur

Art Santora

Blue Eyes

She told me she was writing a memoir one night as she was driving me home from work. I had never heard anyone say that before. I've never known anyone who was writing a memoir. If I were writing one myself, I probably wouldn't talk about it. Who would want to read the story of my life? I'm a 24-year-old bar manager with skewed memories of a less-than idyllic childhood, and a few funny stories. This girl was writing a memoir, and she was only twenty-six. She told me sheepishly that she'd lived "sort of a fucked up life," and had set to the task of writing about it quite some time ago. Somehow, I believed her. I believed she'd led a fucked up life. I could see it in her bright, blue eyes.

I had never seen eyes like hers. They were the kind you could write a song about, if you were lucky enough to know the few words that could describe them, and if you could make them rhyme, of course. I certainly couldn't. The best I could do was to call her "Blue Eyes." After a while, that became her name. That was who she was, at least to me. So that's what I called her. She never seemed to mind.

I suppose I could have called her other things. I could have called her "Honey" like so many of her customers did. I could have called her "Tattoo" since she was a kaleidoscope of them. The most distinctive was the black rose on her neck, or the faucet on the back of her shoulder, maybe. I asked her about the faucet once; she told me she'd had to get it when she lost a bet. I remember thinking that was the best reason to get a tattoo I'd ever heard of.

I could have called her "Bryonny" since that's what her parents named her, unless she changed it somewhere along the line, but I kinda doubt that. You don't just pick a name like that out of a hat—your parents have to give it to you. But Blue Eyes seemed so much more appropriate.

She wore it well. I imagine that's what they thought about Sinatra. You could call him Frank, and many did, but he was more than just Frank, wasn't he? He amounted to more than what that name afforded him. So they called him Blue Eyes. I bet a woman gave him that name.

I like to think I was the first man to call her Blue Eyes.

They weren't just blue, though. They were sad . . . sort of tired and resigned. After a while, I could see the pain that lingered there, trapped, like the smell of cigarettes on lace curtains and shag carpet. Maybe that's why I believed her when she told me she was writing a memoir at twenty-six. Or maybe it was because she didn't say it in the way people do when they're bullshitting you, with all the propped-up confidence that comes out easy because it's thin and cheap and doesn't require any strength to say.

It took some guts for her to tell me about her writing, though. I could see it in her eyes, hear it in her voice. I never had the guts to ask about her fucked up life, although I did ask to read the memoir whenever she had the time. Now I wonder whether I'll ever get the chance. I hope she does write it. I hope she chooses to trust me with it one day.

I hope her mother survives. Cancer, she told me. Terminal cancer. That's why she'd taken the job at the bar, trying to make a little extra scratch to pitch in on her mom's medical bills. Christ. If it took anything out of her to tell me that, she never showed it once. It wasn't just some sob story for her. It wasn't a sympathy pitch. She held strong when she talked about her mom. She didn't cry; she didn't tremble. Nary a tear came from one of those eyes. She just stared out at the road ahead as we drove.

I stared at her, trying to take her in. I stared at her brilliant blue eyes, her ruby red lips, her auburn hair, the rose on her neck, the faucet on her shoulder. I breathed deeply, trying to suck her smell right out of the air. I studied her as one might study a textbook, trying to memorize every little thing. I studied the way she flipped her hair, the way it fell over her back and shoulders. I gazed at her stomach, her hips, the small of her back, so firm and smooth, so perfectly put together the way a woman ought to be. I observed the way she adjusted herself in the driver's seat of her Oldsmobile, how she made me take the wheel and steer us out of the garage a minute while she unzipped her sweatshirt. I

watched the dancing shadows pass over her breasts when she pulled the seatbelt off her shoulder and arched her back to get the sweatshirt off. I noticed the tiny sliver of leopard-printed undergarment that peeked out from behind the edge of her skin-tight top. I lingered over the way she carefully clinked her beer against mine at the end of each night, smiling at me, a little coy, sipping, and counting her tips out on the bar. I observed the way she was with her boyfriend when I saw them together every so often. I ruminated over how happy she seemed to be.

To learn every bit of her by heart like that, you'd think I had known it wouldn't be long before she'd slip out of my world as suddenly as she'd first slipped into it. She was like a dream that you dread to wake from, but you know you're going to soon enough. While I slept, I kept trying to busy myself with little things, buying more time to stash just one more memory. I only wish I'd taken a moment to stop and look into those eyes a little longer while I was still asleep.

Annie Sklar

The Despair of Tomatoes

My tomatoes are not cooperating. All summer, they have been weedy, leggy, spiraling in long, single stalks along the twine frames that I so thoughtfully set up for them. For hours I carefully laced lines from the porch railing to the wall, drilling holes into the side of the house so they could have a sturdy anchor. I wanted the best for my garden. But these tomatoes, they are ungrateful. Like bratty trophy wives, they demand constant attention and a small fortune to be spent upon them. And what have they given me? One, maybe two, tomatoes per week. I feel ridiculous, gingerly slicing a single, marble-sized Sundrop to scatter over a salad. Beautiful Black Plums, whose striated mahogany bottoms fade to dark green tops, as though each one had been painted by hand, never made it into the exotic sauce I planned for them.

As I planted, visions of a rainbow of jars lined up on my shelves teased me, sauces to be bestowed as holiday gifts. Salsa, hot sauce, marinara. I would wave off the praise of my friends and relatives with humility, “Yes, I grew them on my porch. But really, it was nothing. The plants do most of the work.” During the height of the August rush on tomatoes, I harvested a grand total of three Black Plums in one picking, which threw me into a fit of agricultural excitement. “High Yields,” the now faded and weatherworn tag says. “Steady Producer.” Whatever. My tomatoes taunt me. As the sunlight leaves the porch earlier and earlier in the day, they have now, of course, sprouted dozens of fruit, perfect green specimens with taut skin and an air of optimism.

My peppers are no better. The no-brainer ornamentals do okay; the ostentatious Bolivian Rainbow covered in little nubs that range from creamy yellow to eggplant purple, sports a pepper on nearly every stem. The Peach Habaneras, technically edible but in reality not very tasty, are numerous but very oddly shaped, long and pointy and wrinkly. I question their genetic heritage; I suspect a little varietal crossbreeding went on amongst the pots on my porch. But the true edibles, planted lovingly in colorfully glazed, terra cotta pots whose prices bordered on the obscene, they mock me. I have never seen Habanera plants grow so tall, so vibrant. The stems are full of glossy green leaves with new sprouts appearing almost daily, even now in the waning months of the growing season. But there are no peppers. Oh yes, there are flowers. Beautiful white stars that always like to face the porch door, so that when I walk outside with my watering can (a retired Brita water filtration system, for the record) their dozens of little eyes stare at me. The anchos, I was told, would ripen from dark green to cherry to deep, bruised reddish brown. As I am looking at them now, the two fruits currently on the waist high plant have been, for the last month, a lovely shade of grocery-store-red-bell-pepper red with no signs of another change coming. The pepper plants have all become so tall that they have bowed and woven through each other's forked arms, joining forces against me.

Various herbs crouch among the larger pots, floral snowbirds that winter over in my kitchen window and spend the warm, languid summer days sunning on the porch. Low maintenance and easy to please, they do fine. Reigning over the whole scene, not suffering from anyone's expectations of agricultural bounty, are the trees. My Baby Blue eucalyptus tree reaches towards the sunnier side of the porch. Frosty green arms are rhythmically spaced with spade shaped leaves, tiny new shoots and leaves, no more than the length of a blade of grass, delicate, exact miniatures of the larger arms, some of which are several feet long. A lemon verbena tree towers nearly six feet tall (okay, six feet including pot), branches sprouting long, pointed leaves in sets of three. Each branch ends in a conical fuzzy white flower cluster, arranged on sprouts that become progressively shorter until they create a point, like a Christmas tree covered in snow. But I love the verbena best for its smell; when you walk by, the aroma of lemons is overpowering. I acquired it in hopes that

it would cover up the funky smell of my old, third floor attic apartment over the winter.

The unfortunate drawback to the trees is the thing that makes them cool: their size. The pots are huge, many gallon affairs that one cannot move on one's own without a lot of profanity and spilled dirt. And of course, our unforgiving New England climate being what it is, at a certain point in the year they have to come inside at night for fear of frost. I dread the days to come when I have to get up extra early to lug pots in and out, and trip over them in the kitchen at night when I forget, in the dark, that they are there. A few poor souls lost their unfortunate herbaceous heads that way last fall.

But not this time. This time, I will be ruthless. Any plant, even a perennial that could come back next year, will have to perform in order to make the cut. Habaneras choose not to make a late showing? Into the lawn bag. Vietnamese coriander doesn't add a few inches? Pesto. As the season progresses, and we get closer to winter, when keeping fussy plants alive is a complete pain in the ass, my garden had better get with the program. Or, next year, it will be compost.

Ben Walding

Leeds Pharmacy

The Leeds Pharmacy sits across from the big red-roofed, barn-shaped building that used to house a Dairy Queen, but there's no tapered red oval on the sign anymore. Now just a rusty post stands with peeling white paint and four empty holes where the crimson icon with its loopy white font used to glow. Lower on the post sits a yellowing, plastic sign, meant to hold removable black letters. The words were never quite perfect, full of grammatical problems and bad character spacing. From my post at the pharmacy's front counter, I looked out the large window to my right to see "Dbl chz 4.99" switched to "Try new BlizZards" on the days the employees changed the message. After the Dairy Queen closed, the sign was wordless for a long time, but I was glad when eventually the building was occupied once again. With siding painted a dark red, complete with a drive-thru window, the old Dairy Queen reminded me of the 1950s: carloads of high school students making their way past the drive-thru window in big cars with chrome fenders, convertible tops down.

Beneath my feet on the floor behind the register at the Leeds Pharmacy, the splintered brown and tan tiles exposed filthy wood flooring, years of dirt and dust ground into the grain. Maybe the tiles were broken when the pharmacy moved in because the pharmacy wasn't always a pharmacy, after all. It was a grocery store before and a soda fountain before that. The grocery store was called Schlesleg's, and many older pharmacy patrons reminisced about it when reaching the front counter where I stood. But now instead of groceries, the shelves in the Leeds Pharmacy were stocked full of junk, except for the few aisles of items with medicinal purposes. On the shelves were mostly trinkets, doo-dads—some might call it trash. Whatever the best term, the stuff occupied the pharmacy indefinitely. All of those cheap items that no one

needed were nearly impossible to sell. I doubted the fake flowers, mugs with corny images/phrases, little figurines, cheap watches, even cheaper candles (some of which smelled uncannily like urinal cakes), faulty Chinese-made electronics, and row upon row of yellowing greeting cards could be *given* away. I once found a postcard with pictures of Sioux City, Iowa, on it dated from the late 70s. Packaging or paper near the front windows yellowed and curled before anyone even thought about buying it. The brown buildup of dust in the pharmacy extended into the past at least a few decades. The dust didn't exclude any item. It encased everything. And yet, I liked it that way. I couldn't imagine the pharmacy without all that aging, dusty, outdated stuff. It wouldn't be the same place. I'd take it over a shiny, clean CVS or Walgreen's any day.

The demographic most well represented at the Leeds Pharmacy was the 60-plus crowd. These vintage individuals made up most of my social interactions while I worked behind the counter. The pharmacy had what those older folks needed—medical and otherwise. They came in for pills, vitamins, creams, bandages, and ointments. They came in for the Salted Nut Rolls on sale for 3/\$1.00, (a definitive “old person candy”), along with Necco Wafers and Beeman's gum—I loved all that stuff, too. Especially Salted Nut Rolls—I can't find them anywhere outside the Midwest. I ate more than enough of them in my time at the pharmacy. A huge box of them delivered to the store with 250 or 300 bars inside disappeared in a few days' time. The pharmacy's trinkets, prescriptions, candy deals, and bargains on things like dish soap drew in all sorts of characters.

Sometimes when I was working, Raymond Case walked in with his ever-present smile, badly functioning right arm (he could barely bend it at the elbow), and various baseball caps advertising fishing companies or farm equipment. One specific hat was tan and corduroy. He laughed at whatever I said. He wore plaid button-up collared shirts—long-sleeve in the winter, and short sleeve in the warmer months. He had an “Oooooo ho-ho-ho” kind of laugh. Not like Santa Claus, but that's getting pretty close. He came in to get his prescriptions, walked up to the counter with his silver aluminum cane, and we laughed about the weather, and he was on his way.

Then there was Louella Collins. She was a different story. She was a fidgety, hyperactive, cranky lady. When she entered the store, she squinted at me through her glasses, never returning my hello. She rushed around the store from the moment she came in. Her head was on a swivel, never keeping a gaze on one thing for long. She usually charged purchases to her in-store account. Even without paper money, checks, or cards needed for her transactions, I never moved quite fast enough for Louella. Her red lipstick was never put on quite right, as if she applied it while riding in the passenger side of a truck going down a very rough gravel road. I once looked out the big front pharmacy window as Louella climbed into her white car. She put on her seat belt, leaned very far forward to get a good look at her side view mirror with her squinty eyes, and put her car into reverse. She slowly eased back a few inches, bit by bit, her foot barely pumping the break. The car then lurched backward, directly into the car behind her. I heard the crunch of the fiberglass bumper compressing. I stood staring, open-mouthed and smiling at the situation unfolding before me. Louella Collins looked around her, put the car back into drive, and slowly pulled away. I didn't even think to stop her, or to ask any of the customers in the store if it was their car. I went outside to look at the bumper, and no major damage was done.

There was also Richard Jauer. Richard had small, tired eyes. Whenever he came into the pharmacy, he looked worn down. He moved slowly. Richard didn't look quite as old as other pharmacy regulars. He was a bit slumped over, like a kid who'd just lost a tee-ball game. Shuffling to the pharmacist's counter, he handed over his order. It took at least a half hour to fill all of the prescriptions. When he paid, he brought his handwritten prescription list with him to the counter—it was usually written on the side of a cereal box that had been carefully cut into a neat square. The list was written in a heavy script, in dark, thick lines. It never had less than five prescriptions on it, and sometimes had ten, eleven, or more.

“Oh, hi,” he said to me in his quiet, creaking voice. I greeted him back. He sounded sad. I felt sorry for him when our paths first crossed. His demeanor was so meek, and his body so weak. Then I saw the prices of his medicine—around \$400 for one, \$200 for another. Richard Jauer's bill was rarely below \$1000. He was giving all that he had to survive.

One visit, he stayed a bit longer than usual, and we talked for a bit. I learned that he was suffering from extensive kidney problems, that he worked in a machine factory outside of town, and that he wasn't very supportive of my decision to pursue a career in the music industry.

“Why are you going for that?” he asked me.

I told him it made me feel fulfilled, and that I didn't want to be stuck in a job I didn't enjoy. I wasn't offended at his question. I don't think that there was anything Richard Jauer could do to make me dislike him. After our conversation, I thought about him and his poor health. I thought of all the other people who came into the pharmacy—sometimes for medication, and on other occasions to just pass the time. I felt blessed to have them be a part of my life. Even if some of them hollered at me for having slightly long hair, or complained about the slow service. As Richard Jauer let the front door slam shut behind him, I looked down at the pile of the next customer's prescriptions, picture frames, and plastic flowers in front of me, and I smiled.

BERKLEE STUDENTS & ALUMNI

Visual Art

Armeen Musa The Dol Clap



Digital Print

Devdas playing Dhol



Digital Print
Following Pages: Digital Print

The Dol Dance





Aldon Baker Jellyfish



Digital Print

Lunar Eclipse



Digital Print

BERKLEE STUDENTS & ALUMNI

FUSION City

Short personal reflections on modern urban life

Christian Choh

Halloween Fringe

The characteristics of any city are a product of the people who live, work and play there. In a vibrant city, diverse cultures collide to create a subculture unique and transformative. My current home, Boston, has been a stimulating environment for me, and on one Halloween night, I found myself yet again inspired by this city and its spirit.

Ever since the childhood days of superhero costumes and “trick-or-treating” came to a pitiful end for me, Halloween has become just another day of the week. On this autumn’s Halloween, weeknight, I journeyed over the bridge to Cambridge and noticed to my relief, that the city across the river appeared to share my non-festive sentiments. Aside from a handful of drunken college students spilling out from a couple of abnormally lively bars, the main streets were in Monday night mode where business that carried on as usual for the first day of the week were shut tight for the night and restaurants were getting ready to close their kitchens. A few locals were out, dutifully walking their dogs in the chilly air, and seemingly oblivious to what was brewing on the other side of one shadowed and unobtrusive doorway that was sandwiched between eateries and coffee bars in Inman Square. This was the Lilypad. It didn’t look like much from the outside but tonight the Fringe was setting up to play and wreak some havoc.

For those of you who have yet to be transported, the Fringe is a free jazz trio of Berklee professors that has been playing every Monday night in Cambridge for 35 years. They prefer to play their art in the darkened room, and this Halloween night set a fitting mood. When I arrived at the Lilypad, the lights were already off and the audience had already filled most seats, aside from the front row that was uncomfortably close to the

musicians. I had no choice but to place myself three feet from the group and let them take me on a musical journey.

Fringe played a straight hour of some of the most genuine, intense, and hauntingly beautiful music that I had ever experienced. It became clear to me that every individual in the audience had become completely captivated by the performance and transported somewhere else. Then without warning, they jolted to a sudden rest. As an eerie silence filled the room no one applauded or moved. We held our collective breath as the three musicians onstage donned their respective Halloween masks, and then we slowly exhaled as they resumed the music at a low hum. Suddenly, George Garzone, the group's saxophonist, walked up to the front row where I was seated, and began to yell gibberish in my ear. For lack of a more appropriate response, I yelled in return. This exchange continued for a few moments until the entire room began to take part in this otherworld conversation.

When the performance ended and the lights snapped on, I was slammed back to the reality of Monday night in Cambridge. I looked around to see the faces of the people with whom I had just recently been so intimate. I noticed how they too were struggling to regain an ordinary composure after having just indulged in a night of shameless yelling. It's funny how lighting up the dark makes one surrender nerve to the normalcy of reserve and separateness. We hurriedly bundled up our souls applying the layers of our traditional costumes; everyday shyness and distant expressions, no longer wanting to make contact with strangers. Like our silly woolen hats that we carry to protect us from the harsh elements, we donned our acceptable social "masks" to hide the part deep inside of us that was howling in unison just a moment ago.

There was a brief moment back to the magic when I was revealed to the rest of the audience as the silhouette who instigated the flurry of incomprehensible outbursts. A spooky uneasiness crept over me at this naked identity that lingered until I left the venue safely shielded behind the nondescript mask I walked in with.

Joel Clarkson

Bakery

Murmurs arise from booths where people have entrenched themselves for the morning. Broken bits of conversation get snatched as the server walks nonchalantly by, trying to look detached and duty-bound.

Two businessmen go through the perfunctory effort of asking and responding to the expected questions about family before they proceed on to the minutia laid out in endless paperwork before them. Follow the plan, and this will be over soon.

A teenager laughs. She blushes in embarrassment at the genuineness of her own exuberance, taken aback by her own loss of inhibition. Her mother risks a slight raising of the corners of her lips; it can't be obvious.

The silence between the couple is thick enough to cut with a knife and fork, which the woman uses to move about the meat and potatoes on her plate. The man does the only thing he knows to do, and takes a bite of his own food far larger than prudence dictates. She stares stubbornly into her iced tea, and to her dismay, still sees his reflection.

They laugh in sync, raising a chorus of haphazard giggles and chuckles. Free birthday cake is always a fun surprise. The server smiles discretely as he walks away, pondering the added gratuity that he knows will, without fail, appear on the bill. Work the system, he thinks.

She slowly and cautiously takes her regular seat at the counter. She doesn't miss a single child's cry, or smell of day old pastries, or brush against her coat as the server walks hurriedly by. He smiles at her, this day and every day, because he knows every time may be his last chance. She looks tired, he whispers to himself.

Crayons litter the floor below the table. The father leans over to assume damage control. I'm really sorry, are they bothering you? Suddenly, Mac-and-Cheese saves the day. . .

I don't know their names, and they don't know mine; but I know all of them, and they all know me.

Bora Kim

Happiness Within Morning Delights

I looked outside from 30 square inches of my fifth floor bedroom window. Gazing outside is the first part of my morning ritual and weather-watching is important to prepare for another day.

The rain-soaked window reported the weather conditions of last night, as did the wet rooftops of the buildings opposite me. The clouds looked murky, and the tree branches were black protagonists in my window-framed landscape. I stared at them until they seemed to dance in syncopated rhythms against the dim gray sky. No wonder they anxiously awaited the break of dawn.

I prepared myself for the low temperature. It was gloomy outside, but there was no sign of rain. My closet was already set up to fulfill my needs. I grabbed my brother's gray hooded jacket, my boot-cut jeans, and a long sleeve T-shirt; my constant accompaniment as it matched any outfit. Then, I reached for my good black down-filled coat, that never lets me shiver from the cold. First, I put on my brother's thin shell jacket and pulled its hood over my head. When that first layer was snug around me I slipped my arms into the down filled sleeves of my own thick coat. Ribbon-embellished rain boots and warm socks completed my outdoor gear.

I grabbed my backpack and set out for school. Every morning on my walk I listen to motivating music to start my day. Today's choice, "Like You'll Never See Me Again" by Alicia Keys streamed from my mp3 player which was buried in my backpack. I was ready to push through the piercing wind and frigid temperature.

But the morning wind was surprisingly friendly and I was delighted by the change. Boston's winter winds were mean and kept me shivering for the past months. I was expecting some more tug-of-wars with these eager gusts. But this morning I noticed that my usual clouds of breath

that collect in front of me were gone.

I inhaled the tranquil outdoor air. It was impossible not to draw a sip of its moist warmth. Its flavor was sweet with the delights I had yearned for throughout the long wintertime. Today smelled of fresh moss. I looked down and noticed that the moss and tree trunks on my street seemed greener than ever. If I were stepping on grass instead of sidewalk, I would have believed that I was in a deep forest. Some fog set in to the downtown and the dew-cloth that emanated from nearby woods mixed with its cool misty atmosphere to envelop me.

The muggy sidewalk allowed distinctive morning scents to blend with each other. The dreamy fragrances surely were not coming from the bitter hostility of the winter sky and ravaged trees. Today I smelled fresh linen, dress suits and shoes, and my sweet pea lotion. The slight breezes soon left them all behind me but they were just enough to distinguish people's initiations for the day. Every little swift scent engaged me as I imagined each individual's morning ritual as they passed by. At the corner of the sidewalk I encountered the final traveler on my walk. His scent reminded me of my father's cologne-soaked leather jacket. I paused and let myself drift back to sweet memories.

The smell of the cologne brought an instant smile to my face. My father always wore cologne but not to attract women. It was his way of extending an enthusiastic salutation and caring approach to the world each day. His personal gain was always the last of his priorities. Instead, he motivated his children to have a thoughtful and ambitious life. He wanted to be a successful model to us. His disposition was always serene and loving and sweet like his cologne. This fleeting scent today reminded me of his gentle zephyr touch which I had longed for these six months. I closed my eyes. The breeze lifted my untied hair. I felt I could float in the warm moist air as it embraced me momentarily.

There was no sun shining through the daybreak yet. But every aspect of the moment was perfect; the cozy feeling of the moist air; an adolescent memory of cologne; thoughts of my everlasting respect and love for my father. All this came from a friendly morning breeze. And then in that moment a ripple of light rose from the puddles under my feet. Gold sparkles slowly shimmered around my boots. More fragrances bloomed. The gray was gone.

Wing-Ching Poon

Rush Hour Safari

At 5:20 p.m. I finally get through the line at Starbucks. I carry my Java Chip Frappuccino and Chicken Cheese Panini to the window looking out to the 150 Mass Avenue Building. I bring out my laptop and prepare for my safari of rush hour in Boston. I also pray that my Frappuccino doesn't disturb my people watching with frequent bathroom breaks. I power up my computer and let the adventure begin.

For people watching, I figure that watching a large group of homosapiens was a good place to start. As usual, in this part of the city, there is a high density of people socializing at the entrance of the 150 building. I even see an acquaintance talking with a group of people around him. He is from Mexico and not completely fluent in English. I imagine him conversing in Spanish as his body language suggests that he is very comfortable with the language he is speaking. His audience listens intently to what he is saying.

My ear training teacher has just walked out of the BPC building. He had announced in class today about the ear training concert tonight, so the chances are high that he has just come from a dress rehearsal.

An older couple is walking down the street. They both look to be middle aged. The man is wearing a yellow shirt and seems to be favoring his left leg. He looks upset; he pretends to ignore his wife as he hobbles down the street. The woman clings to him, her actions telling me that she wants to explain something to him. Suddenly he stops, looks her in the eye and starts to bark at her. After a short time, he continues limping along the street with the woman in pursuit. On the more cheerful side of relationships, a happy young couple is waiting to cross the street. He holds his girlfriend from behind. They start talking while waiting for the walk signal to cross Mass. Ave. After five minutes they resort

to jaywalking across the street. What has most likely happened has occurred a thousand times before; no one has primed the pedestrian signal prompt to change, because no one has bothered to push the button. They probably assumed that the other people who are gathered to cross the street have already done so. I notice another “couple” at this spot but they don’t seem as intimate as the previous two. They leave some distance between them as they converse. The man has parked his moped on the sidewalk of the 150 building. He brings out a red bicycle helmet for his lady friend. After ten minutes he has navigated his moped steed onto the street and turned it into the right direction. He and his friend ride towards Symphony Hall with the woman’s hands holding tight to the back of the moped rather than the young man’s hips. They are most definitely just friends.

As I am enjoying my spying, a lady sits down next to me with a sandwich and coffee. She pulls out her own Mac Book Pro. I work a little bit more before she notices that I am on the Internet. She leans over to me, intermittently looking at my screen and then hers and asks, “What’s the name of the network?” I respond, “I’m on Berklee’s Network.” I hope that she has not read a part of my paper; it might give her the impression that I am some strange stalker. I dim the display to make my screen a little harder to see and continue with my safari watch.

A man on crutches with a cast on his left leg is walking awkwardly down the street. He pauses for a bit; perhaps to rest, observing the buildings and possibly looking for street signs. He looks lost but continues to navigate his way down Mass Ave.

The endless river of cars has not stopped since I got here. Cars and trucks of all sizes streak past my lookout. A large tourist bus with “BLOOM” written on the side carrying a large number of people looms by. Two Boston T buses on the same route heading to Harvard Square follow. The first bus is packed with commuters like a sardine can. The second one right behind is not as crowded.

If I have made one fatal flaw in my secret safari, it is my choosing a venue where I am all too well known. Friends and acquaintances are sure to be around, pulling some attention towards me and pulling some of my focus away. I saw two friends walk past Starbucks noticing me. One waved to me after walking by the store three times. She was very

dressed up and walking hurriedly along the street. Perhaps she was on her way to a gig or job interview. My second friend was a little subtler in his salutation, giving me a thumbs up as he walked by. I gave him a smile and a wave in response. Thankfully, neither one of them came in to ask what I was doing. If they did, I would then have explained my situation to them at the risk of some eavesdropper catching my words and assuming I am a stalker. Or maybe my friends would think my people-watching hobby was eerie.

There is no getting away from the world of music here. Not that I mind! A young man with classic rock hair wears tattoos of the symbols representing each member of Led Zeppelin on his arm. Another sports a Jimi Hendrix T-shirt. A man holds a pedal board in one hand and guitar case decorated with punk band stickers in the other as he navigates the sidewalk and passes. A young woman carrying her guitar in one hand and a purse in the other. As musicians we have to juggle the carrying of our instruments as well as another “bag” which contains the contents of another part of our life. We deal with this in different ways. One man has decided to wear his guitar gig bag on his back with his backpack in the front. Personally, I have resorted to a messenger bag with a gig bag. That is my mark of membership in our safari music pack.

My attention span is reaching its limit. I try to focus a little more. The class hour has ended and the entrance of 150 once again becomes packed with people. A woman jogs with her iPod ear buds and glides strategically to avoid the crowd of students exiting the building and spilling onto the sidewalk. I’m a bit cynical as to effectiveness of jogging in a crowded area.

The lady sitting next to me packs up to leave. I can feel her gaze trying to steal a sight at my computer screen. Am I just being paranoid about projecting the wrong image? I look down the street but keep her in my peripheral vision to let her know, I am watching her.

An Asian man walks by, and the first thing I notice is his T-shirt; in big Japanese characters is name of a famous Japanese wine brand. As I look at his T-shirt it is possible that he glances a look at mine, both of which are advertising the same company in Japan. I feel awkward as this stranger waves to me, or maybe it’s not to me, but to some acquaintance of his behind me. But maybe he is waving to me because

we're wearing a shirt from the same company. I give a gentle head nod in response, acknowledging him but not dedicating too much to this social occurrence.

Uh-oh, a parking meter inspector has found his latest victim. He checks the meter for expiration and puts a ticket under the wiper of a blue Civic parked right before the crosswalk. A man being driven by his wife jumps out of the car as it pulls up to the curb as the light turns red. He looks disapprovingly at the parking meter inspector and the ticket he just received. The inspector doesn't seem to notice but I watch him as he walks away with a smirk.

A frequent patron of these streets is an eccentric woman who we have named "The Mirror Lady." She is known to walk up and down Mass. Ave. while focused on her reflection in a hand mirror that she holds steadily in front of her. I watch her walk by today and curiously this time she is without her trusty mirror. It is one of the few times I have noticed her do this. Today she seems entranced in something else. She makes a furtive motion of catching something that is invisible to me with her right hand. Shortly after, she walks by my lookout post again in the opposite direction continuing her search.

The flow of this hour long safari watch has not ebbed, but my attention is spent and like my Frappuccino cup I am empty, I end my hour and a half vigil, power down my computer and prepare to go home.

Natalia Sulca

1140

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, I have a few classes in a building off Boylston Street. It is listed as the main address to Berklee College of Music, although the true administrative building is located a few blocks away. 1140 has six floors, all comprised of different departments in the school. I've never been to any floor other than the third, as the Voice Department is the only one that concerns me. I sometimes find myself wondering what happens on the other floors of the building. Someday, I'll find time to explore its wonders.

On this Monday morning, I sit on my freshly made bed and pull on my rain boots. Boston weather is unpredictable; especially during springtime when one day it may be warm and sunny, and another it stays cloudy and chilly. To save myself time, I always wear my rain boots to avoid stepping in puddles no matter what the weather. Today, I am preparing to go to my background vocals class. Coat and cane in hand, I rush out my door down three flights of stairs and then to the lobby. People are all around me; talking to one another while coming or going in or out of the 150 building. All of us act as though we are twenty minutes late to class. It is the Boston way; rushing as though there is somewhere to be five minutes ago. I step outside, and immediately city air washes over me. I smell a mixture of french fries from the McDonald's across the street and car exhaust. Pedestrians are crossing Mass. Ave. to the consecutive musical notes of C and A coming from the cross walk.

I make a right and walk in a straight line powering through the "Berklee Beach." This beach consists of people sitting or lounging against the exterior wall of the 150 building. They chatter about something or other, relaxing after class and enjoying a smoke in the sun while the scent of burning cigarettes clings to their clothes and seeps into their pores.

When I first came to Berklee, it was fun to tell my friends back home in Florida that my school was right next door to a beach. Then, I'd have a laugh when they'd YouTube "Berklee Beach" and not find anything but people hanging out in front of a bunch of buildings.

I walk on, composing a song in my head to the rhythmic tap tapping of my cane. I pass the Berklee Performance Center, the Ensemble Department, and an assortment of other buildings that I've never been in. To my left, bikes are locked to street poles and stand awaiting their owners. I know I am approaching the corner when the sidewalk widens and I hear the persistent locator tone of another Mass. Avenue Cross-Walk machine. This one sounds more like a clock, beeping as if it were ticking, while the Boylston Street one repeats, "Wait to cross," over and over again. These auditory crosswalk sounds were built and put in place for blind people like me. They make it easier for us to know when we can cross the street. I wait at the corner, until the light turns, and then I cross Mass. Avenue. The Bank of America branch is ahead. On the sidewalk now, I go right into yet another straight line. On my left side, there are a bunch of buildings, all with front steps leading up to them and popular fast-food restaurants like Teriyaki House, which sells Chinese dishes, several pizza places, and Boloco, a favorite of many Bostonians. The always-crowded Boloco serves a mixture of American Tex Mex fare and is well known for affordable burritos with different toppings. The aromas make my stomach rumble. I pass by the Berklee Bookstore and a convenience store. I hear more students chatting away. I pass by more bikes tethered to poles along the sidewalk. Music blares from external speakers of the music establishments. If I know the songs that are playing, I sing along, tapping the rhythm out with my cane. People are bustling down this street. On the corner of Hemingway and Boylston, there are no auditory signals for me. In contrast to the constant activity of Mass Avenue, Hemingway is a silent street. It is easier for me to follow the parallel cars on Boylston Street and then cross. As I cross, Hemingway sounds quiet, except for the occasional idling car to my left. I know I have reached the sidewalk when my cane hits a big pole right on the next corner. I walk straight until I reach the set of steps leading up to the 1140 entrance. As I climb, someone usually shouts, "I've got the door for you!"

When no one is around, I have fun pressing the big button that makes both sets of 1140's main doors automatically open. Like 150, this building is full of people entering and leaving, always in conversation as they walk. Inside the building, the elevator bell constantly dings. It seems someone is always waiting for it. People are climbing up the stairs that are situated close to elevator doors. These steps are an odd set. Instead of taking three flights to get up to the third floor, one climbs only two, straight up to the second floor, and then ascends in a sort of narrow circle up to the third floor. Because I've never understood the oddity of these stairs, I choose the slower and easier elevator route. The elevator bell dings, finally indicating that it has reached the lobby. Students and staff alike swarm out and then our group walks in. The button to each floor also dings when pressed, which I've always found a wonder. Upon arrival at "3," I'm immediately bombarded with the music. Unique voices are singing different styles; someone is trying to be the next Pavarotti, and another impersonates Miles Davis. I love it. I hear a distant piano and the playing of arpeggios, and then the sultry voice of my background vocals teacher, relating a story of one of her many experiences in the industry. I know that I've arrived. Frankly, there is no place I'd rather be.

BERKLEE STUDENTS & ALUMNI

Poetry

Will Cafaro

Winter Commute from Roxbury Crossing

Plod sounds
Cement scorned sky overhead
respiring horizons
wholly, holy gift.
Crosswinds capstone
with spirit of wander,
tree boughs bowed sidelong
fraying to thee.

2 by 2 pan handlin' junkies
dressed in traditional blanket robes
ragged recite Om –
meditations of the heroin sweat lodge
to the mantra of the copper nickel rhythm
ringing overtone, illusions of
the non-self through static
death TV and fantasy windows
pacing through ricking ticking clicking of the besmirched
crackling glass cobblestone beat.

Lies, down the gradient sidewalk along straight line paths
unchaste mirrors of time withhold reflection.
Monotone chills in Chinese overcoat
emerald's distress down side alleyway.

NYC to Boston Blues

Again,
looking East
dream of city South

Square cut glasses smoked gray
in my overcoat, stained
whisky rye.
High hum envelops
steel

Low bellows
jazz red lip-sticked alto airs wave on
the conducted metropolis -
public transportation orchestra

A blue cry, footsteps
pocket pens paint the form
in draft book scribbles
of the cellist's suite refrain,
recalling our romance at Lincoln Center.
Looking East,
again,
dreams –
of city South.

Maya de Vitry

Coal River Valley

I wake up slow, like a rusted tool
West Virginia's widow, and the Capital's fool.

I taste your killer in my coffee
she's been bleeding up my well
we've all been coughing coal
'bout as long as I can tell.

Ada's got that box out back
builds black castles in the sand
then she comes in to supper
with your killer on her hands.

The old men in the towers
sign me check after check.
Babe I ain't the best at numbers,
but it seems you might be worth more dead.
Perhaps it's proper compensation
for a sacrifice of souls
all for lightin' taller towers
and diggin' deeper holes.
But these valley nights
still swing a heavy axe
and come morning
I'm splittin' from the cold
a cold I only learned by losing
the only man I want to hold.
And Ada, she just wonders
how you're gonna get to heaven from that hole.

And when the mountains take the sun to her breast
and rock her to sleep, tuck her into the west
I walk your last words–
your last footprints–
on the Upper Big Branch Path.
You've got a mountain for a gravestone,
white lilies for an epitaph
and I can almost hear your heart
when I lay mine on the ground.
Twenty-nine bodies, hauled from the dark
but not a single heart was found.
The mountain keeps 'em deep inside her
and frankly I don't blame her
we've been carvin' out hers
since the company first claimed her.

And when my West Virginia sky cries
black and blue coal river rain
comes coursing out her eyes.
She's blind from it now, but she stabs
into black widow nights,
but I take all her knives
in my back and my sides.

Because bruises are an easy pain
bruises are something
even children can explain.

And I would swallow every dime
I had a mind to save.
I would write you every line
I ever meant to say.
And I would borrow all the time
that the company stole away
if I could feel your heart on mine
for one more day.

Peter Maltzan
Washington Square
Park

A homeless man asks me
What I am doing with my life.
The only explanation
I can come up with is this:

The crime should fit
The punishment.

I am glad when he laughs,
I have only been
Watching the girls go by
Like minutes.

Sarah Mount
Letter to a 16-year-old
Boy

For Michael

You must first understand that
The distance between the edge
And the ground is clever and swift.

You will spend months with bloodied knees.

If the first woman you fall into
Is already damaged, hold her waist
As you would a lotus flower. If she doesn't appear
Broken, do not break her
For the sake of it.

When you do break her
For the sake of it—
Never forget the taste
Of her name in your throat.

Get into as many fistfights
As you have fingers; be humbled upon
The sacred pavement with which
You shed blood, but never be boastful.

Learn to move your lips with caution and fervor;
To balance the weight of your words
On both the calloused and the fragile.

Learn to hold a wine glass:
Always by the stem. This will not
Seem important until it is.

Learn enough guitar to play the blues,
And enough French to read Rimbaud.

Perfect the art of making breakfast
At any time of day.

Do not look for ties between love
And mathematics. One and one will
Sometimes equal one, and sometimes
Render nothing at all.

Fall asleep mouthing the words
Asi nisi masa knowing no significance
But levity in dreams of dancing.

Rafferty Swink

Dear Los Angeles

Dear Los Angeles,

When I left you told me we'd meet again and that things would be different.

Now smog clothes the homeless, their pockets spilling with designer drugs. They replaced our wooden fence with chain link. Now 1610 Marine Street is menacing and Venice Beach is a millionaire's spectacle. Whores grin under palm trees, teeth crooked like lines on dollar bills crumpled and kept in their bras.

You told me when we met again things would be different.

Last I saw you, you were on the floor of the kitchen, the arc of your spine curving against the worn linoleum as you let out one last gasping breath. There is a part of me still standing there speechless, as you lay, unswept and complete. The paramedics carried my childhood out the front door with you.

You still can't answer my simple question, where are you?

The murmur of the boulevard remains. At midnight constellations of streetlights mirror the sky like a dark pool reaching farther and farther into the desert. And the breeze blows through Marine Park just loud enough that I can still hear you say goodbye.

Laura Siersema
If My Church Be Bone

If my church be bone
then splinter still that empty room
and come the pitches
to that finer home—

The Old Quarter

In resilience and lot,
in the smell of daisies and
charcoal and large upon the ocean,
I dwelt there for a time and return
occasionally for the red peppers and beans,
shaken by heft and audition and a longing
to be forgotten dividing my appetite
so slowly and judiciously I was
unaware I 'd been
invaded—

Train

I stand beneath the tracks on the upper hillside
above the valley of my grandmother
listening for candor in voices dispersed,
wresting what I can
from buckshot and the fine rinsed rain of early spring—
I breathe them in as rings of a salmon,
the heartbreaks of some valley,
the croon of some train—

Ryan Toll

A wake

I walk the streets of saints, the never praised,
past drug store graves and vacant story lots.
Forgotten towers nesting gulls, caught in
the wake, collapsed beneath the new day's weight.

It's rare for me to catch a hold of my
dreams, as they burn to steam in morning sun.
This one was much the same, a distant bell,
a tunnel, a retreating train, soon a wake.

BERKLEE STUDENTS & ALUMNI

Translation Initiative

With students from over 75 different nations who speak over 50 languages, Berklee plays host to a rich linguistic community. To celebrate that diversity, FUSION is proud to feature works from The Translation Initiative. What follows are bilingual works of literature produced through pairing international writers with native English speakers at Berklee.

Luís Lascano

Don Eliseo y el Preguntón

Don Eliseo, el jardinero, hablaba en forma bastante particular. Podía comunicarse muy bien, pero cierta desigualdad en la forma de alargar la primera parte de ciertos diptongos provocaba una mueca de sonrisa entre quienes lo escuchaban. “Sandía”, era para él, “sandíiiiiiiiia”. Sin embargo, esta peculiaridad jamás le impidió contar historias. Don Eliseo era “el” jardinero, el que sabía los secretos de las plantas, por ende de las abejas que peleaban contra los jilgueros que a su vez volaban del acecho de los pumas que al mismo tiempo gozaban con el sol. Se sabía que Don Eliseo, podía explicarlo todo a través de “su” propia realidad.

Piecesito, el pez pie, nadaba impetuoso por las aguas del Río Ulloa. Estaba cansado de aquel río de poca playa, que coqueteaba con lagos aburridos y que no intercambiaba ideas con el mar de los otros. Había vagado cantidades y echaba de menos cierta forma de quietud que no había logrado definir aún.

Al verlo chapotear hacia afuera, Don Eliseo lo saludo algo sobresaltado.

-Hacía mucho que no te veíiiiiiiiia.

-Es que siempre cojo la corriente más caliente, Don Eliseo - dijo, como sin ganas de dar demasiadas explicaciones.

Pasaron dos segundos y Piecesito, se acomodó en el hombro derecho de Don Eliseo. Comenzaron a caminar juntos entre las plantas que crecían en la arena perimetral que limaba al Río Ulloa. La confianza pareció renacer entre ellos.

Don Eliseo and the Busybody

A Fable

The gardener Don Eliseo spoke in a very peculiar way. He could express himself quite well, but he had a way of extending certain vowel sounds that made you smirk just a little when you heard him. Like when he said “pear,” it came out “peeeear.” But this strange habit didn’t stop him from telling stories! Like the one about the bees who tangled with the goldfinches, who in turn took flight to spy on pumas lazing in the sun. Don Eliseo was “the” gardener, who understood the secret life of plants and animals, and he was known for his unique insights into the world.

One day, *Piecesito*, the footed fish, was swimming along rather aimlessly. He had grown weary of the Río Ulloa, with its narrow shore, tired of the way it flirted with boring lakes as it meandered along, while it shied away from an exchange of ideas with the sea. *Piecesito* had wandered for too long, and longed for an inner peace that he had yet to know.

Don Eliseo spotted *Piecesito* splashing about near the shore. A bit startled, Don Eliseo greeted him, “It has been a long time since I last saw yooooooooooooou.”

“I am always looking out for the next wave, Don Eliseo,” he said in his vague way, not wanting to give much of an explanation.

After a few moments, *Piecesito* settled on Don Eliseo’s shoulder, and they began to walk among the plants growing in the sand that lined the shore of the river. An intimacy seemed to be reborn between them.

Don Eliseo walked along without glancing at his right shoulder where *Piecesito* sat with his fins crossed. Soon enough, he realized that

Don Eliseo andaba seguro y sin mirar en dirección a su hombro derecho, en el que se encontraba sentado, de aletas cruzadas, Píecesito. De a poquito, pudo percibir que su amigo se conservaba húmedo a pesar de haber permanecido fuera del agua por algún tiempo. En realidad, Píecesito estaba llorando.

-Qué te pasa Píiiiiiecsito?

-Nada que no sepas. Qué bueno es que me estés llevando a caminar. Quiero hacerte unas preguntas.

Y ahí fueron. Por nueve días, Píecesito habló de incertidumbres y dolores. De tristezas y pesares. Fueron nueve jornadas blandas en las que Píecesito preguntó y Eliseo enmudeció.

Píecesito quiso saber de las imágenes blancas que concibió en sueños, de aquellas otras especies a las que no sabía si volvería a ver y acerca de la malicia impune de aquellos barcos que tantas veces le habían pasado por arriba, demasiado cerca de su cabeza de pescado.

Nueve jornadas después y al parecer agotadas las preguntas del pez, Don Eliseo entendió que era hora de ofrecer las respuestas que de él se esperaban. Le respondió con algunas rimas bobas:

No es que no sepa de aguas turbias,
no es que no crea en las tormentas,
porque creo que la lluvia,
lleva al mar mis impurezas.

Sé que así tú no disfrutas,
aunque hoy soy de agua y de siiiierra,
soy de frutas que no quiiiiero
y de esas flores que juegan.

Quiero que vuelvas a los océanos,
para regresar a besar la tiiiiierra,
espera que maduren las peras
y cultiva gardeniiiiias en la arena

Píecesito pareció entender todo y saltó de vuelta desde el hombro de Don Eliseo hacia al agua del Río Ulloa, con una triple mortal. Como

his friend was still wet even though he had been out of the water for some time. *Piecesito* was actually crying.

“What’s up, *Piiiiiecesito*?”

“Nothing that you don’t already know, I’m afraid. I’m glad you are taking me for a walk because I have a few questions for you...”

And off they went. For nine long days, *Piecesito* spoke of doubt and grief, pain and sorrow. Each and every day, *Piecesito* spoke, and Don Eliseo simply listened patiently.

Piecesito wanted to understand the white silhouettes that came to him in dreams, to know all the other species he might never see again. And what of those ships that had passed by countless times, nearly grazing the scales of his fishy head before sailing on blithely?

By the ninth day, it seemed the footed fish had run out of questions. Don Eliseo realized it was time to provide the answers that *Piecesito* had been waiting for. He responded in verse:

I have known murky waters,
I have lived through the storms.
The rain carries sins out to sea
and thus our impurities are transformed.

I know my words leave you cold, but life is flux:
the mountaaaaain top becomes the delta
flowers bloom then turn to dust
the barren land may lead to shelter.

Return to the oceans and drink from the sea,
wash up on the shore and traverse the land,
wait in silence beneath the peeeeeears as they ripen,
and cultivate gardeniiiiias in the sand.

Piecesito, with a look of understanding, leapt from Don Eliseo’s shoulder into the waters of the Río Ulloa, completing a triple somersault. On the third revolution, he kissed Don Eliseo on the eye and landed cleanly in the water with a modest splash to show off his agility and lucidity!

muestra de lucidez y agilidad, al termino de la tercera vuelta, besó a Don Eliseo en un ojo y al dar con el río, lo salpicó levemente .

-Está fríiiiiiiiiia el agua-, se quejó el jardinero.

Piecesito se alegró por la experiencia, sobretodo teniendo en cuenta que su sabio amigo había evitado usar metáforas de leones, muebles, y ojos que traen paz. Parece que ya las había utilizado en otros aniversarios menos felices...

As the water hit Don Eliseo, he shivered. “Brrrr! That’s cooooooold!”

Now swimming once again through the warm current of the Río Ulloa, *Piecesito* was grateful for the experience, especially because his wise friend had avoided strange metaphors involving lions, furniture, and eyes that bring peace. It seems he had already used them on other, less joyous occasions.

Author’s note: “Don Eliseo and the Busybody” comes from a series of fables involving fantastical creatures who seek the advice of Don Eliseo, a wise and wizened gardener possessed of boundless knowledge. Each short story is titled “Don Eliseo y...” (“Don Eliseo and...”) followed by the name of the character seeking advice: “Don Eliseo y El Preguntón,” “Don Eliseo y los Dictadores de Período,” “Don Eliseo y las Mujeres Ausentes” etc... Although all the title characters are imaginary creatures, each story speaks to the challenges of modern life: love, mass media, and the role of women in society, to name a few.

Translated by Dustin Cleveland

Magdalena Ponssa

Trivialidades

Volar
sueño mensurable
pálida réplica del deseo

cruzar las osamentas
calladas de las nubes
pretendiendo salir
del túnel digitado
de esta larga espera

ofrecer la nuca limpia
a la guillotina del tiempo

caen las comisuras
de las bocas cansadas
y un mísero silencio
acompaña esta penumbra

Paz
sueño inmensurable
volar en el adentro
donde habita quien habita

Small Talk

Flight
finite dream
pale replica of desire

to sail across the hushed
skeleton of clouds
pretending to escape
the fated tunnel
such a long wait

the clean nape
of the neck offered
up to the guillotine of time

the corners of the mouth
so tired, fall
a miserable silence
accompanies this *penumbra*

Peace
infinite dream
to fly, inhabit the hallowed
space inside

Translated by Deborah Bennett

Ryōkan

Untitled

盗人に

取り残されし

窓の月

Untitled

The merciless thief
could not steal the moonlight through
the open window.

Ryōkan (1758-1831) was a Buddhist monk who lived in a rustic gogouan on the grounds of a temple. One night, a thief approached the cabin, and found that the monk was so poor there was nothing of value to steal. Ryōkan awoke in his bed and noticed the thief. He worried the thief might kill him if he realized he was awake, so he turned over and, feigning sleep, rolled off his futon in order to provide something worth stealing. The thief robbed the futon and ran off. Then, Ryokan sat up, looked out the window, and saw the moon. As he took in the beauty of the moon, he composed this haiku.

Translated by Ryo Tanaka & Deborah Bennett

BERKLEE STUDENTS & ALUMNI

Drama & Film

Jónas Bergmann Björnsson

Blind Luck

A Screenplay

Characters:

Jesse: Thirties. Medium height. Looks twice his age. Lives alone in a cabin in the woods.

The Blind Man: Early sixties. Stocky build.

INT. OLD CABIN - NIGHT

We are inside an old log cabin. A snowstorm rages outside; the wind is howling. The cabin is sparsely decorated. JESSE is at the table eating soup and reading a comic book. He takes a big spoonful and burns himself. He grabs his cup, but it is empty. He moves to the fireplace, picks up a big metal pot and goes to the door to get snow to melt. As he opens the door, a body falls in.

JESSE

What the hell is this?

He grabs the man and drags him in. He starts to pat the man down and finds a phone and a wallet. He sticks both in his pockets.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Are you all right?

Jesse rushes to the bed and yanks the blankets off. Jesse's backpack, sitting on the bed, flies off; its contents spill. He covers the man.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Here, how's this?

Beat.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Soup! Got to get you some soup, that will warm you right up!

He tries to feed the man the soup but spills it everywhere.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Take it man, take it! Where did you come from? There is nothing out in them woods. You lucky bastard, running into me like this. Sure, you would be dead like a dog, alone in that storm.

Suddenly the man starts to moan.

THE BLIND MAN

(Stuttering)

I can't feel...

The blind man stretches his hands towards the fire.

JESSE

So it's alive! Let me get some more water!

INT. OLD CABIN - NIGHT

Jesse returns covered in snow. The Blind Man is huddled in front of the fire, rubbing his hands together.

JESSE

What do we have here? Bigfoot is alive!

There is no response.

JESSE (CONT'D)

It sure is cold out there, no beast alive that could weather this storm.

Still no response.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Do you got a name or are you a ghost?

The man turns around and opens his eyes. Both of his pupils are white. Jesse is taken aback.

THE BLIND MAN

Thank you, I would have surely died out there, thank you.

The Blind Man turns around again and blows into his hands.

JESSE

What's wrong with you? I mean, what is wrong with your eyes? They are all...

THE BLIND MAN

(Interrupts while still facing the fire)

There was an accident. When I was younger. Don't worry, I am not a ghost. Hopefully. But I am blind as a bat, no sonar though. Would have been handy.

JESSE

Well are you sure you don't want anything to eat?

THE BLIND MAN

I would appreciate something. I just can't stop shaking.

Jesse leans over and helps The Blind Man to stand up and sit on a chair.

JESSE

So... where were you headed? There is nothing for miles around.

THE BLIND MAN

I was hiking with an old friend, and then the snowstorm hit us. It came out of nowhere; my face filled up with snow. I slipped, and when I stood up again, my friend was nowhere to be found.

JESSE

These mountains can be treacherous. The weather can change in a blink of an eye. Not to mention the bears and wolves. They will rip you a part in seconds!

THE BLIND MAN

I did not meet any wolves or bears. Maybe they took pity on me.

JESSE

More likely, waiting for the weather to get ya, you're easy prey, Mister. A blind man in the woods, who would have thought!

THE BLIND MAN

Yes, I guess we are a rare breed around these parts.

Pause.

THE BLIND MAN (CONT'D)

Do you have a phone?

JESSE

A phone?

THE BLIND MAN

Yeah, I need to let someone know what happened. Do you have one? I would really appreciate it.

JESSE

No, I am afraid it's just you and me here. This is an old log cabin, been in the family for generations. No phones, no running water, not even a decent shitter!

THE BLIND MAN

I had a mobile phone on me. It must have slipped out of my pocket in the storm.

JESSE

No phones, just nature and me. That is the way I like it.

THE BLIND MAN

So what do you do for food?

JESSE

I hunt, drink snow. I have a truck but it's snowed in, the road has been blocked for weeks.

THE BLIND MAN

Do you know when this storm is supposed to die down?

JESSE

Die down? What am I, a fucking meteorologist? The way you tell weather out here is to look out the window. If there is a storm, there is a storm. If there isn't, there isn't. Don't you worry, you can stay here as long as you want!

THE BLIND MAN

Thanks for the offer, but I only want to be here as long as I have to.

JESSE

I understand, but I don't mind the company at all.

THE BLIND MAN

Thanks for taking me in like this, I felt I was knocking on death's door there for a while.

JESSE

And all the while you were just knocking on mine!

Jesse pulls out an old bag of coffee and a big bottle of bourbon.

JESSE (CONT'D)

I got something here that might warm you right up!

He puts the bourbon on the table and walks over to the fire. He starts to brew some coffee.

THE BLIND MAN

Coffee?

JESSE

Good old American. I only pull out the good stuff for guests.

THE BLIND MAN

I'm honored.

JESSE

And that is not all, I also got this here bourbon. A case of this fell off a truck a while back.

THE BLIND MAN

Fell off a truck?

JESSE

(Direct tone)

Yeah, fell off a truck. Many accidents around these parts.

THE BLIND MAN

I see.

JESSE

(Lighthearted)

Now wouldn't that be a Christmas miracle... I only have one cup, I will just drink from the bottle.

THE BLIND MAN

There is no need, not really a drinking man.

JESSE

Not a drinking man? All men drink; you're not queer are you?

THE BLIND MAN

Can't say that I am. Just not much for the drink. Maybe I could have some in my coffee.

JESSE

Coming right up!

Jesse pours coffee and a big shot of bourbon into the cup and slides it over towards The Blind Man.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Cheers! So Mister, are you a Christian man? Are you a follower of the Lord?

THE BLIND MAN

I don't know. I certainly don't believe in the blind leading the blind, if that's what you mean.

JESSE

Blind leading the blind? What do you mean? You don't look like Jesus.

Jesse takes another big sip from the bottle and puts his feet up on the table.

JESSE (CONT'D)

I am not fanatical about it you know. But I did take you in, just like the bible says I should!

THE BLIND MAN

Yes, that you did, and I am grateful.

JESSE

So what do you do, for a living? Do blind people work?

THE BLIND MAN

What do you mean?

JESSE

I mean... You can't see can you, so what kind of work can you do?

THE BLIND MAN

I have done all kinds of work. I am blind, not dead.

JESSE

(Laughing)

Thanks to me!

THE BLIND MAN

Besides, I have not always been this way.

JESSE

So, what is it you do Mr. Blind man? Photographer?

THE BLIND MAN

Lawyer.

JESSE

A lawyer? You?

THE BLIND MAN

Is that so hard to imagine?

JESSE

Not a big fan of lawyers.

THE BLIND MAN

Oh yeah?

JESSE

Yeah, not a big fan. Lawyers, bankers, dentists, cops... not a big fan.

THE BLIND MAN

I am sorry to hear that. If you ever need a lawyer I would be glad to offer my services.

JESSE

Yes, maybe. A blind lawyer.

Jesse looks at the fire.

JESSE (CONT'D)

I guess we need more kindling.

Jesse walks over to the fire and looks into the kindling bucket.

JESSE (CONT'D)

No more wood. I guess I have to go and get some more. There is a kindling shed outside. Won't be more than a minute, just sit tight.

Jesse goes outside with the bucket.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

The Blind Man stands up and knocks over a purse that fell out of the backpack. The contents of the purse spill. He gets on his knees and picks

them up. He recognizes the smell, a woman's perfume. He picks up a necklace and feels it. He clutches it in both of his hands, and raises it to his forehead. Tears stream down his face.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Jesse enters the cabin and finds The Blind Man sitting at the table.

JESSE

Damn, this storm is not letting up. I guess it has to get worse before it gets better.

Jesse goes over to the fire and throws a big log on the fire.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Brrr. Cold huh? It's the kind of cold you can't dress away from. It is always there, in your bones.

THE BLIND MAN

I know what you mean. You can never escape it. Only temporarily forget it. Suppress it, until you feel numb.

JESSE

Yes, I guess.

(Pause)

You want more!

Jesse steals the cup away and fills the cup of bourbon. He then grabs The Blind Man's hand and puts it over the cup.

JESSE (CONT'D)

It warms you up, doesn't it?

THE BLIND MAN

Yes, it does.

(Takes a big sip)

I am positively on fire.

(Pause)

So what do you do ...

JESSE

Jesse, the name is Jesse.

THE BLIND MAN

Jesse. So Jesse, what does a man like you do? For a living, that is.

JESSE

I do this and that. Was a hired hand for a while. Fixing things, pretty good with my hands you see. I like to be my own man, my own boss. Don't like to work for other people. I don't work well, in the confines of any kind of... establishment. And the establishment does not take a liking to me either. Around here I enforce the law.

THE BLIND MAN

Enforce the law?

JESSE

Yes. I am the law around these parts. Judge, jury and executioner. Nobody tells me what to do, and that is the way I like it. I hunt what I eat and nature respects that.

THE BLIND MAN

I respect that. Being your own man.

JESSE

Yeah, it's great. I take what I want.

THE BLIND MAN

No natural predators.

JESSE

No.

THE BLIND MAN

Just prey.

JESSE

Yes. Well, there are bears and wolves around. They don't mess with me, they know better.

THE BLIND MAN

Because you are a killer.

JESSE

(Laughing)

They know better! Take a look at this, my pride and joy!

Jesse stands up and takes his big hunting knife and slams it on the table.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Here feel this!

Jesse thrusts the knife in the holster towards the Blind Man.

JESSE (CONT'D)

You don't mess with that.

The Blind Man feels around the knife, taking his time to feel the leather, the length and the weight. It is clear that he is familiar with handling a knife.

JESSE (CONT'D)

(With pride)

What do you think? It is a beauty isn't it?

THE BLIND MAN

Deadly. Nicely balanced.

JESSE

(Excited)

Yeah. It's the one Rambo uses! Cuts through skin and bone. Swoosh!

THE BLIND MAN

I bet.

(Pauses)

It's nice. Real nice.

The blind man puts the knife back in the sheath.

THE BLIND MAN (CONT'D)

Jesse. Have you heard what they say?

JESSE

What do they say?

THE BLIND MAN

That no man's an island.

JESSE

What does that mean? No man's a what?

THE BLIND MAN

It's John Donne.

JESSE

John?

THE BLIND MAN

See, I think we are all connected. Chapters in the same book. And sometimes, characters happen to cross from chapter to chapter.

JESSE

Like the bible?

THE BLIND MAN

No, like life. Would you be sad if I died? Would it affect you in anyway?

JESSE

Well, I would have to bury you for starters. That's a whole lot of work.

THE BLIND MAN

Yes, I would hate to be an inconvenience.

JESSE

I am an island. I am my own book.

THE BLIND MAN

For whom the bell tolls. We are all connected.

JESSE

What the hell are you talking about?

THE BLIND MAN

That no one man exists independently from another. When the bell tolls, it tolls for all of us.

JESSE

I think when you die you go to heaven if you done right by god and hell if you haven't.

THE BLIND MAN

And where do you think you are going Jesse?

JESSE

I don't know. Heaven, if I am lucky.

THE BLIND MAN

Do you feel lucky?

The Blind man strokes the knife slowly, feeling the leather between his fingers.

THE BLIND MAN (CONT'D)

Let me rephrase that. When you stand in front of those golden gates of heaven. The big man, staring you right in the eyes. When you see your life, in its entirety in his eyes. What do you think you will see?

JESSE

(Agitated)

I don't know what you are talking about man. I live an honest, god-fearing life. I don't bother people and people don't bother me. What about you? Don't lawyers go to hell?

THE BLIND MAN

(Laughs)

Probably. At least I will have enough defendants. I hear business is good down there. Do you ever get lonely?

JESSE

Lonely?

THE BLIND MAN

Yes. Young man like you, alone in this cabin. So far from everything. Don't you get lonely?

JESSE

No. I don't like people and people don't like me.

THE BLIND MAN

What about women?

JESSE

(Annoyed)

What about them?

THE BLIND MAN

Women, you never want to find yourself a wife? Female companionship. To share your life with. Little Jesses running around, etc.

JESSE

No. If I found a good girl—no, I don't need all that trouble. I am my own man, and I like it like that!

THE BLIND MAN

Trouble? What do you mean by trouble. Does your bed not get cold at night?

JESSE

There was this one girl.

THE BLIND MAN

(Intently)

Yes?

JESSE

Man, she would have taken your breath away. Just her smell. An angel. Soft skin, great body, the works!

THE BLIND MAN

Tell me more. Where did you and her meet?

JESSE

Meet? She more like stumbled into my life.

THE BLIND MAN

Just like me?

JESSE

Yeah, just like you.

THE BLIND MAN

And?

JESSE

And nothing, it didn't work out.

THE BLIND MAN

What do you mean? Where is she now?

JESSE

Gone.

THE BLIND MAN

(Almost trembling)

Gone? Gone where?

JESSE

(Aggressively)

Just gone alright! What is it to you?

THE BLIND MAN

Nothing. Just a fan of young love.

JESSE

What about you. Ever been in love?

THE BLIND MAN

Twice.

JESSE

Twice? And?

THE BLIND MAN

Got married to my first love.

JESSE

And your second?

THE BLIND MAN

The second, the second one I lost.

JESSE

Lost? How did you lose her?

THE BLIND MAN

One day she just... did not come home.

JESSE

(Nonchalant)

Man. Women. Mind of their own. Probably found someone else. They pretend to love you and then they throw you away.

He starts laughing.

JESSE (CONT'D)

I am drunk as a skunk! I'll explode if I don't take a leak, right now.

Jesse stumbles to the door.

JESSE (CONT'D)

By the way. If you need to take a piss, it's outside. That is how we do it here. No pissing on the floor!

Jesse laughs and goes outside.

EXT. OUTSIDE CABIN - NIGHT

The storm is still raging.

JESSE

(Mumbles)

Fucking blind lawyers.

He fishes out the phone. He throws it into the snow. He then takes the wallet out. Pulls out some money and puts them in his own pockets. Starts tearing out the credit cards and flings them, one by one, into the snow while laughing to himself.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Fucking lawyers.

In the back of it there are pictures, the first one an older woman. He looks at it and puts it in his pocket. The next picture is of the blind man in army camouflage and what appears to be his daughter. He seems to sober up almost instantly. He looks back at the door nervously and drops the picture on the ground.

JESSE (CONT'D)

It can't be.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Jesse enters the cabin. He is not stumbling as before. Much more deliberate in his movements.

THE BLIND MAN

Cold?

JESSE

What?

THE BLIND MAN

Outside, cold?

JESSE

Yeah, freezing, not a living thing could survive out there.

THE BLIND MAN

No.

JESSE

So, you mentioned you are married.

THE BLIND MAN

No.

JESSE

No?

THE BLIND MAN

No. I was married.

JESSE

Not anymore?

THE BLIND MAN

No, not anymore.

JESSE

Why not?

THE BLIND MAN

She moved out.

JESSE

Oh, that's rough.

THE BLIND MAN

Yeah...

JESSE

Any kids?

THE BLIND MAN

Kids?

(Pauses)

No, no kids.

JESSE

No kids?

THE BLIND MAN

No, it's just me.

Jesse says nothing.

THE BLIND MAN (CONT'D)

Me and you.

Beat.

THE BLIND MAN (CONT'D)

You ever wanted kids?

JESSE

Kids? No, never thought about that.

(With disgust)

I hate kids.

Jesse's eyes are now murderously fixed on the blind man. He glances at the table. The knife is not there.

JESSE (CONT'D)

So, a lawyer huh?

THE BLIND MAN

Yeah.

JESSE

Can you remember seeing, before you went blind?

THE BLIND MAN

Sure.

JESSE

Like what?

THE BLIND MAN

My wife's smile. My... going to the movies, sunsets. That sort of thing. Still remember.

JESSE

Must have been hard for you. How did you become blind?

THE BLIND MAN

Before I became a lawyer, I was in the army.

JESSE

Army?! For how long?

THE BLIND MAN

About 20 years.

JESSE

So how did you get blind?

THE BLIND MAN

Work.

JESSE

Work?

THE BLIND MAN

It's classified. Top Secret.

JESSE

What do you mean? There are no secrets between friends.
You can tell me anything. We are friends, right?

THE BLIND MAN

Right.

JESSE

Pages in the same book. That girl.

THE BLIND MAN

(Tense)

Yes.

JESSE

She was the love of my life.

THE BLIND MAN

Is that right.

JESSE

Yes. Roller coasted in and out. Ripped my heart out.

THE BLIND MAN

I find that hard to believe. You are a lone wolf. A man
unto himself.

JESSE

Right.

THE BLIND MAN

Right.

JESSE

More whiskey?

THE BLIND MAN

No, thanks. I think I've had enough.

JESSE

Yes. I think we've both had—enough.

Jess calmly walks over to the corner. He picks up a shotgun.

THE BLIND MAN

You know. When I came in, I am sure I had a wallet.

JESSE

My dad, he gave me this gun.

THE BLIND MAN

Did you happen to find a wallet?

JESSE

This gun. I tell you. It has never failed. Not once. Not one misfire.

THE BLIND MAN

I must have lost it along with my phone.

JESSE

This gun was given to me by my dad.

THE BLIND MAN

You were conceived? I imagined you were spawned.

JESSE

That's funny. You know what else is funny?

(Pauses)

How long it takes us to be born. The effort, the love. The long looks we get from our loving mothers. How safe we feel in our father's arms.

The Blind Man puts his arms to each corner of the table and tenses up.

JESSE (CONT'D)

And then. Puff. We are not there anymore. Gone. Never existed. The 9 months become a moment, a second. Then the light in the eyes just goes.

THE BLIND MAN

You exist! You always exist for the people who love you!

JESSE

I have seen it. Goes away. Just. Like. That.

THE BLIND MAN

Why?

JESSE

Why? Why not! I decide what happens. If you wander onto my island, you do what I say or you drown!

THE BLIND MAN

You stole my light, my love and my happiness. You took everything!

JESSE

(Calmly)

This gun. Never fails. Never has to think, it just does. Just like me. Instinct. Nature rewards good instincts.

THE BLIND MAN

Instinct to kill!

JESSE

You cannot fight your demons forever. In the end they win. They always win. That is what nobody understands. You are your own worst enemy, and I am no match for myself.

THE BLIND MAN

And you think you will end up in heaven?!

JESSE

(Screaming)

I am who I am. He will understand. He made me this way. I was born sick and *commanded* to be well. Created sick!

(Pause)

Commanded to be well!

THE BLIND MAN

You were not created. You were hatched, slowly over time. One bad choice after another. Darkness seeping into your brain like a tumor, corrupting your brain. You're evil! And you let yourself become this way. Take some responsibility man!

JESSE

How is this for responsibility?!

Jesse puts the barrel to the blind man's forehead and presses the trigger. The gun is empty. It only takes a split second before The Blind Man takes a hold of the barrel with one hand and with the other, thrusts the knife into Jesse. With extraordinary strength, he lifts Jesse off his feet and slams him on top of the table.

THE BLIND MAN

You feel lucky now?!

The Blind Man twists the knife, Jesse screams.

JESSE

Don't, don't kill me. You will die, you will die without me.

THE BLIND MAN

I am death.

Jesse kicks and tries to scream. He bleeds to death in the arms of the Blind Man. The Blind Man takes the necklace from his pocket and holds it tightly. He opens the door and walks out.

Dave D'aranjo

The Uncle

A Screenplay

Characters:

Demian Andersen: half-Malay, half-American boy growing up in Malaysia; born 1964. Extremely observant but quite shy, and in great need of a positive male role model.

Junaidah Andersen: pretty and lively Malay wife, and mother of Demian. She possesses gentle wisdom and optimism, and a great love for her son.

Ethan Andersen: unseen in this script, he is Junaidah's husband and Demian's constantly traveling, businessman father. An American expatriate originally from Ohio.

Uncle Sinai: Junaidah's Indonesian uncle. He is portly, with a two-inch long, gray beard. He is deeply religious and has sparkling eyes. He possesses an amazing secret.

INT. DEMIAN'S BEDROOM, MALACCA, MALAYSIA, 1975

Demian, eleven-years-old, sleeps hugging a blanket in his bedroom. He has light brown hair, olive skin, and is wearing blue pajamas. Though outside the glass-pane windows it is a hot, tropical morning, the room interior radiates cool blue and the long-suffering air conditioner hums consistently. Scattered around the room are many books, toys and stuffed animals. There's a small desk with a writing journal on it. In the corner is a three-foot-tall wooden sculpture of a dancing frog.

INT. KITCHEN OF THE SAME HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

A big breakfast is being prepared, but we don't see by whom. Water foams out from the top of a rice cooker. Eggs crack and sizzle on a pan.

Coconut kaya jam is spread on toast. Fried fish with vibrant sauces and chillies are dished onto plates and set on a marble table. Like the rest of the house, the kitchen is modern-rustic, warm, and breezy. Dark, finely-carved wood and muted earth tones create a sort of 70's neo-Balinese style. In one corner sits another sculpture of a frog; this one is smoking a pipe and gawking. The sound of food being prepared fills the house.

INT. DEMIAN'S BEDROOM

Sensing breakfast, Demian begins to wake up. Rubbing his eyes, he drags himself out of bed and walks out his door. Wind chimes indicate a soft breeze on the veranda.

INT. HALLWAY/DEMIAN'S BEDROOM AND THE KITCHEN

Demian yawns and shuffles his way to the kitchen. The hallway opens up to a large dining room, connected to a open veranda and surrounded by garden. The sound of early morning birds and the rustling of leaves is heard. At the back of the garden there are several more Balinese stone frog statues. One squats in the foreground. It has a lazy eye and a drawn sword.

INT. KITCHEN

At the stove is JUNAIDAH, a slender, pretty Malay woman in shorts and a tank top. She's just finishing up breakfast. Demian enters.

JUNAIDAH

Well hello, lazybones!

DEMIAN

Uunnnggh....

Junaidah takes off her apron, pinches Demian's chin affectionately and gives him an Eskimo kiss.

JUNAIDAH

Selamat Pagi!

DEMIAN

(English, American accent, groggily)

Uunngh. Morning ... mom. Up so early. Why are you cooking so special? Is Dad back?

Junaidah moves to the fridge and begins pouring two glasses of soy bean milk.

JUNAIDAH

(English with Malay accent)

Two weeks, sayang. How you sleep? Today is a very special day though.

Demian picks food off of the plates; his mother shoos him off.

DEMIAN

What's today?

JUNAIDAH

Today your uncle is coming to visit. Remember?

DEMIAN

Hmm, Sinai? From Indonesia. Does Dad know?

JUNAIDAH

Yeah, it's fine. And yes: Uncle Sinai. You met when you were younger.

DEMIAN

Don't remember.

JUNAIDAH

Tsk ... you know what he does, right?

Junaidah hesitates in order to check Demian's reaction.

DEMIAN

No, what?

He again begins to pick at the breakfast items laid out.

JUNAIDAH

He's coming to clean the house.

Demian is more interested in food. Junaidah lightly slaps his hand away from the plates.

JUNAIDAH

Hah, very naughty, you. Go get ready.

INT. TRAVELING TRAIN - CONTINUOUS

In a cramped train compartment sits UNCLE SINAI. He is a stout man wearing a large, white button-down shirt with gray pants. He has a short, trimmed mustache and goatee, thick black glasses and a songkok, or Malay men's cap. He carries a small black leather bag. A loudspeaker crackles to life and everybody looks up at it:

LOUDSPEAKER

(Malay, canny and incomprehensible)

Next stop *Tampin Station*; transfer to *Melaka Sentral*.
Have your tickets ready.

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Demian is brushing his teeth. On the bathroom sink stands a miniature frog statue, covering its eyes.

INT. TRAVELING BUS - CONTINUOUS

Uncle Sinai now sits, cramped, in an open-windowed bus, careening down an unpaved road. He's clearly uncomfortable with the bumpy ride. In the background, a skinny man clutches a terrified rooster, which screeches at every pothole. Someone else is searching for music on a portable radio. Sinai pinches his temples to fight getting carsick.

INT. HOUSE GUEST ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Junaidah is tidying up a guest room for Sinai. We can see how well it is decorated. There are many unique masks on the walls; the bedspread is a beautiful *batik* design, and there are family pictures of Demian as a toddler and Junaidah laughing with her husband.

EXT. STREET IN MALACCA - CONTINUOUS

Uncle Sinai walks, bag slung over his shoulder and suitcase in hand, through the humid streets of Malacca. He turns onto *Jalan D'aranjo*. (D'aranjo Street)

INT. DEMIAN'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Demian is finishing getting dressed, struggling to put on a shell necklace his dad gave him. Demian exits his room. Unexpectedly, he sees his smiling uncle open his arms in greeting from across the hall.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Unexpectedly, he sees his smiling uncle open his arms in greeting from across the hall.

UNCLE SINAI

(thick accent)

Demian!

Demian freezes, eyes wide.

INT. KITCHEN, AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE

Uncle Sinai, Junaidah, and Demian are eating breakfast. Demian sits quietly, sucking on a mug of tea, watching his uncle and mom converse. He looks suspiciously at Sinai. Sinai and Junaidah speak mostly in *Bahasa Indonesia* with an occasional English word or Malay phrase thrown in.

UNCLE SINAI

Juni, where's Ethan?

JUNAIDAH

Business, lah. Always working, him. Anyway ... better to call you for cleaning when he's gone, no?

UNCLE SINAI

Yeah, but still ... He's always overseas.

JUNAIDAH

Mmm. True.

Demian is still suspiciously eying Uncle Sinai. His uncle turns and addresses him with a friendly grin.

UNCLE SINAI

(in English)

And you! In primary three? Any exams?

DEMIAN

(petulant)

I don't go to local school. We don't take exams. I'm in 4th grade.

JUNAIDAH

Demian, tone....

Sinai clicks his tongue.

UNCLE SINAI

Ah, I see. But are you having fun in school?

Demian doesn't answer; he stares at his uncle.

UNCLE SINAI

And you miss your father?

DEMIAN

I never see him. I think he's dead.

Junaidah instinctively touches her mouth and gasps.

JUNAIDAH

DEMIAN!!

Uncle Sinai is a little taken aback by this, but remains calm. Demian storms off to his room.

JUNAIDAH

Hey, Demian!! Get back ... I'm so sorry, Sinai. That's so unlike ... I mean, he has been so angry lately....

Uncle Sinai eyes Demian slamming the door of his bedroom.

UNCLE SINAI

It's OK, let him cool ... Maybe he doesn't like a man in the house other than his papa....

Junaidah wipes her face and sighs.

JUNAIDAH

So....

UNCLE SINAI

Yes, I'll look at him too. Maybe we begin cleaning now.

INT. DEMIAN'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Demian is writing something in a journal at his desk when, through the window, he sees Uncle Sinai walking around the yard. He stops writing to spy on him.

EXT. GARDEN

Uncle Sinai begins to casually look around the perimeter of the yard — carefully inspecting, in particular, these Balinese frog statuettes that are all over the garden. Most of the statues are green with vines or moss, in various strange poses with pipes, instruments, or weapons. Though

Uncle Sinai doesn't see the boy or hear him, he smiles, knowing that he is being watched.

INT. DEMIAN'S BEDROOM

Uncle Sinai walks beyond Demian's view, but just before he disappears, he turns around, looks directly at Demian, and winks. Demian's eyes shoot wide, and he scampers out of his bedroom to watch his uncle from another window.

EXT. GARDEN

Sinai chuckles to himself and continues surveying the lush garden on the other side of the house.

INT. HOUSE

Demian is watching his uncle's every move.

EXT. GARDEN/DRIVEWAY

As Sinai reaches the driveway, he notices something troubling on the creaky, metal gate. His expression immediately turns serious.

Sinai looks around, making sure that no one else is there. He closes his eyes, holds his right palm perpendicular to his face, and in intense concentration begins an indecipherable chant. He enters a trance-like state, repeating an obscure mantra.

INT. HOUSE

Demian is straining to see what his uncle is doing.

EXT. GARDEN/DRIVEWAY

Sinai's eyes bolt open. He pushes his palm forward as if slapping something mid-air, and lets out a short yell. He watches the metal gate

intently, judging an opponent before a fight. The gate sways, blown by a light breeze.

INT. HOUSE

After a pause, Uncle Sinai turns directly to Demian and motions for him to come outside. Demian jumps up and runs out the front door. In a moment he is standing by his uncle's side.

EXT. GARDEN/DRIVEWAY

Uncle Sinai leans down to his nephew, grips his arm and whispers:

UNCLE SINAI

You don't have to be afraid; it's a choice. I am your uncle; here to help. We are family. Remember that. I won't let you get hurt. But ... there are things you must know.

Sinai stands back up and points to the front gate.

UNCLE SINAI

See that?

DEMIAN

What?

Demian looks at the gate and then his uncle. Sinai places one hand on the crown of Demian's skull and another on his forehead. Demian's eyes close. Then, Sinai re-enters his trance. He is "transferring" something to Demian through his palms.

Demian's breathing quickens, as though in a bad dream.

As Uncle Sinai removes his hands, Demian awakens. Sinai motions to the gate with his mouth.

UNCLE SINAI

(gesturing)

Nah ... Look again.

Demian isn't prepared for what he sees. The sky is dark; they have entered another reality. Draped over the gate is a giant, evil, red anaconda. It's a foot in diameter and twenty-feet long. Its eyes are glowing and looking straight at Demian. All down the snake's spine are cuts in its flesh; incisions perpetually bleeding to form a long quote in an ancient, unknown script. Also on the gate are black and yellow strips of cloth, palm leaves, coconuts, incense; all placed there in some sort of sinister ritual. Demian grabs his uncle. In his fear he barely notices that they both are suddenly wearing traditional sarongs. The same ominous quote that is cut into the snake is written in henna ink on Demian's bare chest.

DEMIAN

(terrified)

Whhhaaaa!!

Sinai clamps his hand down on Demian's mouth.

UNCLE SINAI

Shhh ... somebody is trying to target you ... perhaps directed towards your father ... that's why you have nightmares.

Demian is still terrified behind his uncle's hand.

DEMIAN

Hhhmmmmmmhhhhnnhh?!

UNCLE SINAI

This ... is just a warning. Not too hard to clean. I will show you so you know ... so you will never not know.

DEMIAN

AAAhhhmmmmnnhhH!!

UNCLE SINAI

We are not alone....

Sinai lets go of his nephew's mouth, takes a deep breath, and returns to his trance-like state. Demian stares, open-mouthed and petrified. The snake stares back, gearing up to attack. Suddenly, Uncle Sinai claps his hands with deafening reverberation. All around the garden, dozens of Balinese frog statuettes start to come to life. At first the actual stone begins to move; stiff joints groaning and cracking. Then, like an old movie trick, translucent frog warriors strain to free themselves from the rock, as if hatching from eggs. Many of these frogs already hold crude weapons. But those that are smoking pipes or playing instruments now carry them menacingly. Finally drawn from their stone existence, the frog warriors notice the snake on the gate. The battle begins.

They shake themselves into fight mode and run towards the serpent, yelling in throaty, high-pitched yelps. The snake sees the frogs approach, and an all-out brawl erupts. Sinai continues to concentrate, palms outward, chanting and "pushing" against the ensuing battle. It seems that he is guiding these amphibian fighters. The battle is extensive. Each of the frog warriors has its own signature tactic. The frog with the pipe wields it like a club; he climbs onto the snake's head and starts smacking it. Several mustachioed frogs wield a curvy knife known as a *kris*, which has the ability to fly and return like a boomerang. The *kris* knives have their own deep, ancient voice and respond to their frog's commands. One warrior is missing an arm. Another wields a pair of *angklung* (a framed bamboo instrument) like they were nunchucks. Each frog is a unique character, and this is clearly not their first battle.

Finally, the snake rears up, hisses a death rattle, and collapses: death by a thousand cuts and bruises. Victorious, the frogs begin the process of dragging it and all the other cursed items to the street.

Demian's mouth hangs wide open.

UNCLE SINAI

Hah, you see? Okay, we're good. Close your eyes.

DEMIAN

Wha ... whaa!?

Demian still stares at the busy frogs as his uncle places a hand on his head. The creatures are destroying the cursed gate items, squabbling over portions of meat, and dragging the mangled snake into a rain gutter. In the background, we briefly see that Demian's neighborhood is augmented by a whole South-East Asian world of gatekeepers, charms, mythical beasts and lost souls milling around, unseen by normal eyes.

DEMIAN

(beginning to panic)

Gggaaaaaaa!!!

SINAI

It's OK anak, be calm....

Sinai starts his chant and covers Demian's forehead with his hand. Demian's eyes close. He is instantly calm as he falls back into the trance. The hidden world fades from view, and the sun returns peacefully.

Sinai and Demian awake, standing in the same place, in regular attire, as though nothing had happened.

Demian looks around, dumbfounded, but all he sees is his smiling uncle and the garden. The frog statuettes still in their regular places, moss-covered and stone. He looks up at Sinai. Sinai smiles back and shrugs.

SINAI

You're OK, Demian. See? It's all OK. I'll explain....

The front gate creaks in the breeze.

INT. DINING ROOM, HOUSE

Junaidah sits reading the paper and drinking coffee at the dining room table. Sinai and Demian enter from the veranda.

JUNAIDAH

Oh! How's it going, boys?

Demian, still dazed, walks back to his room. Junaidah and Sinai watch him. Just as Demian is about to go in, he turns around, runs to Uncle Sinai, and hugs his waist. Sinai smiles and hugs back. Demian kisses his mom and runs into his room.

INT. DEMIAN'S ROOM

Demian grabs his journal.

INT. DINING ROOM, HOUSE

JUNAIDAH

Well, looks like you two are on good terms now. How did it go?

Sinai sighs and looks toward Demian's door.

UNCLE SINAI

Demian's a brave boy ... we have to talk, though.

Junaidah can see that Sinai is worried; she furrows her brow.

UNCLE SINAI

But for now, I have completed cleaning your house.

EXT. GARDEN - CONTINUOUS

Outside, the frog warriors stand ready in stone.

FEATURED ARTISTS

Visual Art

Kelly Davidson, from *Rock Parents* Chris Colbourne



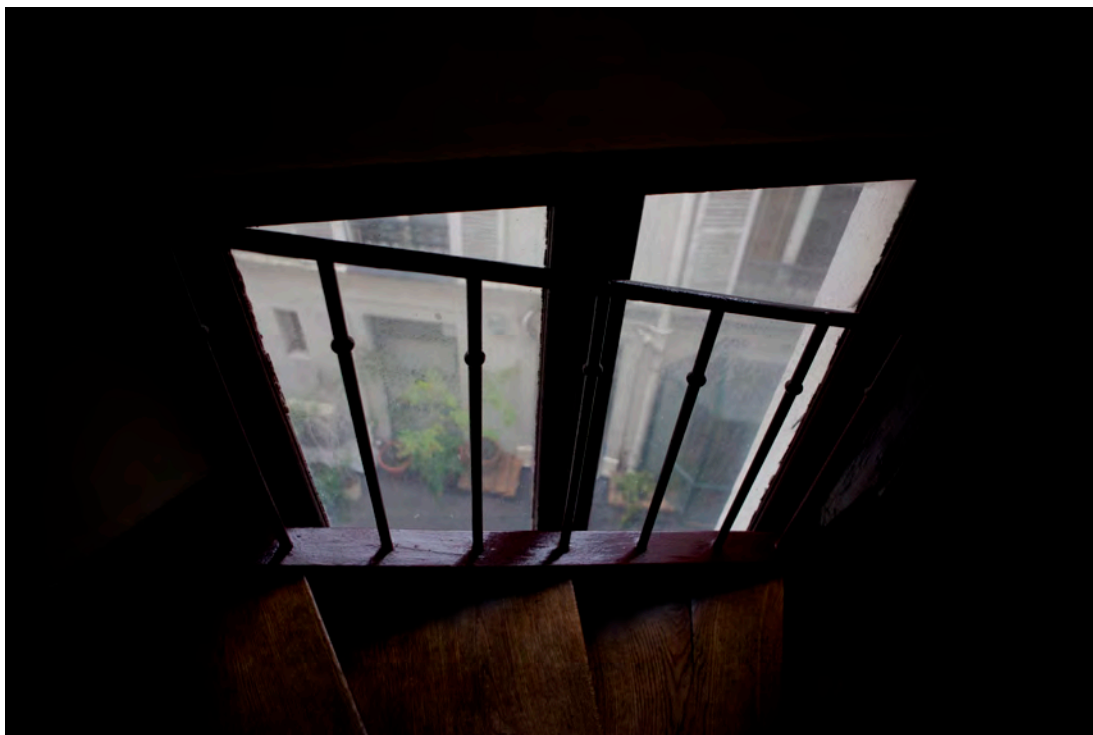
(Buffalo Tom) February 16, 2012 - Digital Print

Paul Ahlstrand



(The Paul Ahlstrand Quartet/Tim Gearan) July 17, 2006 - Digital Print

Kelly Davidson, from *Cities: Paris* Courtyard



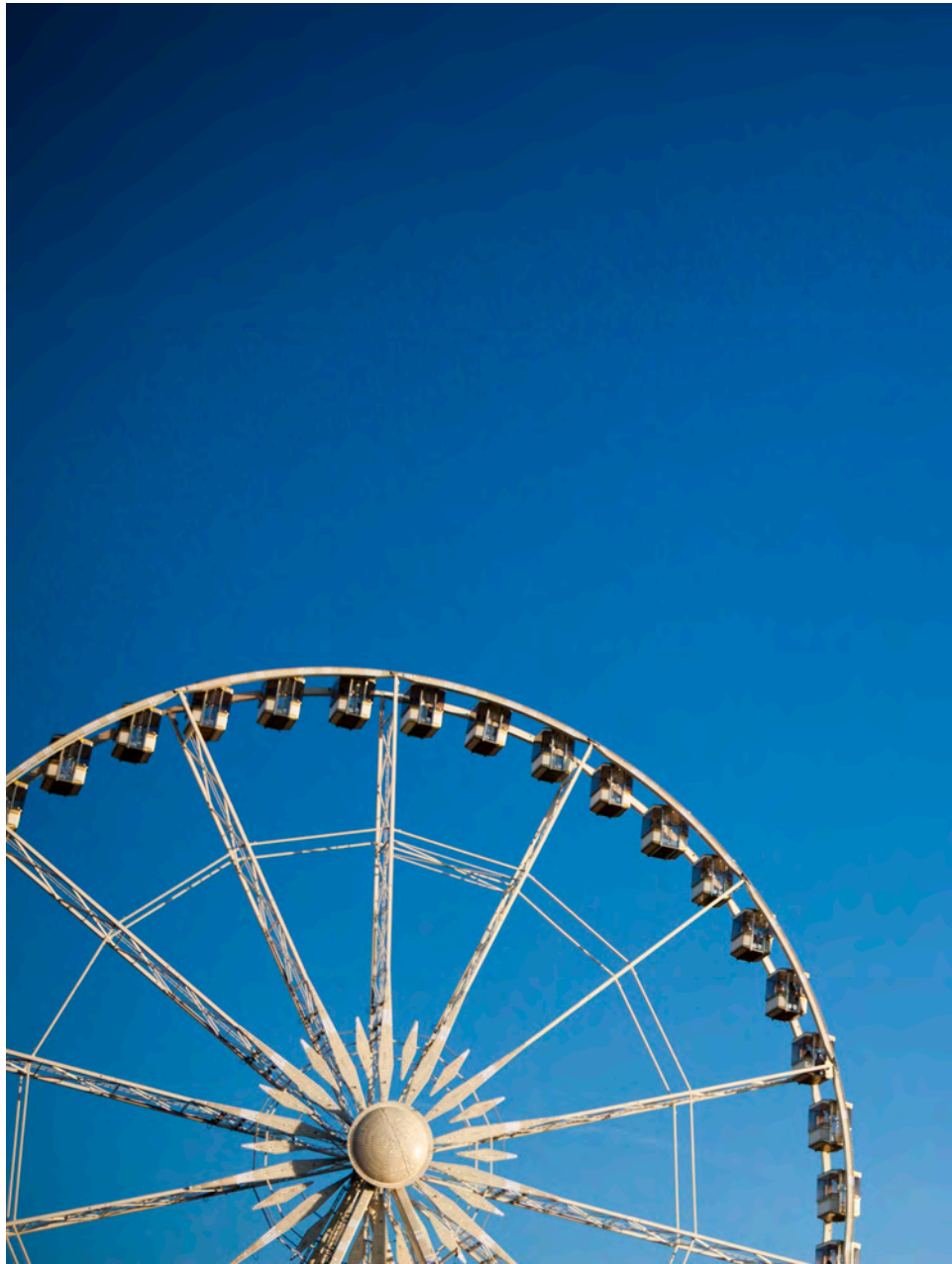
November 11, 2011 - Digital Print

Saint-Sulpice Glare



February 4, 2011 - Digital Print
Following Pages: February 7, 2011 - Digital Print

La Grande Roue in Blue





Paris by Night



February 4, 2011 - Digital Print

Arc de Triomphe



February 5, 2011 - Digital Print

Eiffel Tower in the Distance



February 7, 2011 - Digital Print

A Blurry Sacré Coeur



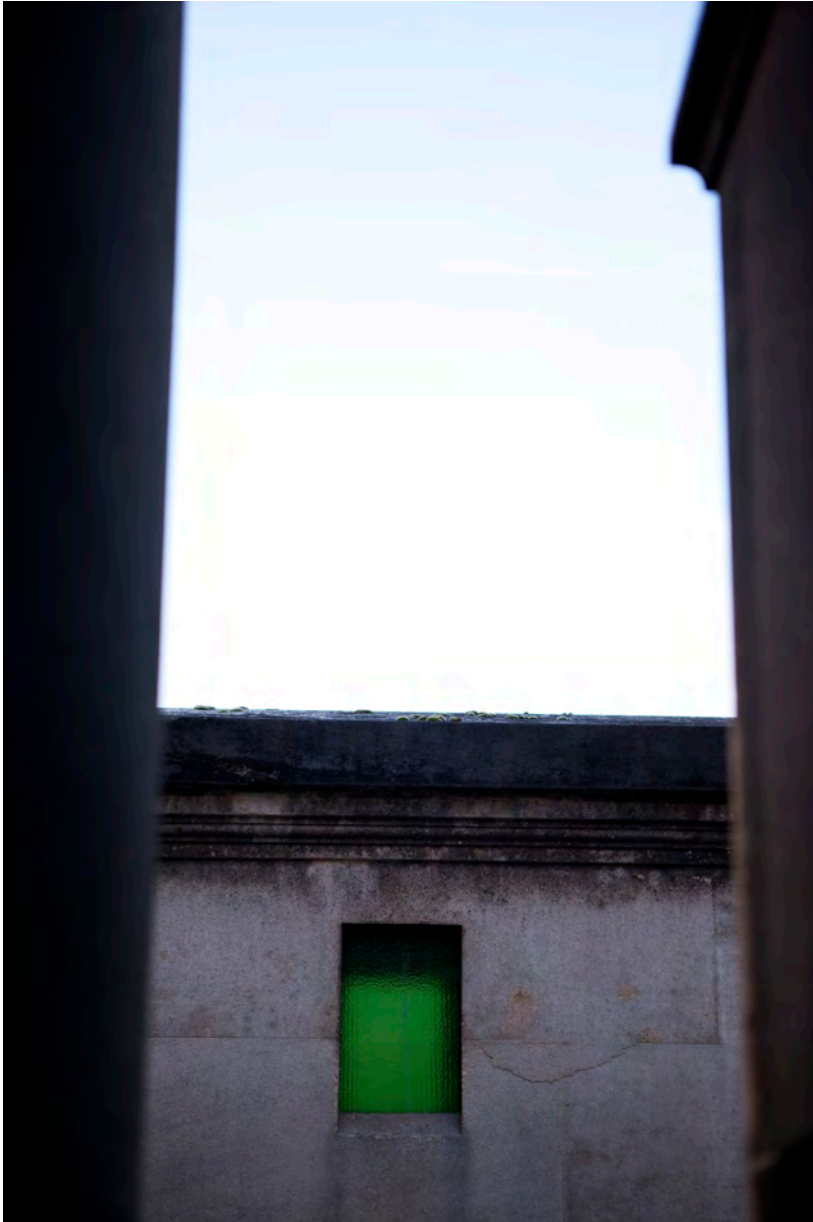
February 5, 2011 - Digital Print

Paris at Dusk



February 7, 2011 - Digital Print

Green in Gray



February 8, 2011 - Digital Print

FEATURED ARTISTS

Writing

Steve Almond

Life Under the Cloud of Unmet Expectation

A Meditation on Fame and Artistic Longevity

A lot of what I do as a writer boils down to making obnoxious assumptions, so let me start with one: if you're reading this, you're an aspiring writer, or an aspiring musician, or both. The first thing I'd like to do (this being the case) is to dismiss any lingering notions of glamour you might associate with a career in the arts. I will do so by presenting an essay I composed last night. It is entitled: *What I Did Yesterday*. Okay.

What I Did Yesterday

By Steve Almond

Okay, so the first thing I did was I got up at 1 am, because my daughter Josie uttered the words that no parent ever wants to hear: *Mama! Papa! I just threw up*.

She had thrown up from eating too much pizza, by which I mean nineteen kid-sized slices, which is, I think, more than recommended for a five-year-old. The reason we let Josie eat so much pizza is because we are essentially lazy and negligent parents who were hoping that her binge eating would induce a sleep coma. I had to get up at five am to catch a flight down to Wilmington, North Carolina, where I had a workshop to teach.

I will not detail the scene that greeted me in Josie's room. It will suffice to say that she appeared to rid her body of all 19 pizza slices and that we are burning her mattress. Naturally, Josie wanted to sleep in our bed, but because I have been through this scenario before, I know

that it involves being vomited upon, so I slept on the couch.

My flight was too early for me to get a ride from my wife, but I refused to take a taxi, because I am plagued with guilt about my carbon footprint, so I walked a mile in the dark to the subway.

At the rental car place in Wilmington, I was upgraded to a Nissan Altima, a car so large that I could fit my own car, a 1994 Tercel, in its trunk. This was a lucky break, but the car made an eerie grinding noise and started smoking almost immediately. I returned it to the lot, where a kindly attendant advised me to take the car out of first gear.

At UNC Wilmington, I was assigned a guesthouse on campus, which was equipped with an alarm system that I failed to disarm. It was pretty much the shrillest noise I've ever heard. Imagine Celine Dion hitting a high C for twenty minutes straight, while having her legs chewed off by hyenas. The cops who eventually showed up did not feel it necessary to draw their weapons, as I was on the kitchen floor in a fetal position.

All this traveling was being done in an effort to promote my new book of short stories, *God Bless America*. My teeny tiny publisher had arranged a live radio interview in the afternoon at the Durham NPR affiliate. But because I am an idiot with no real conception of geography beyond the distance between myself and the nearest chocolate, I assumed that Durham was maybe an hour north of Wilmington, and thus I spent the hours after class updating my list of enemies and listening to my wife complain about our two-year-old son, Judah, who has become, in her words, "a little fucker."

"I guess he got my genes," I said.

Eventually, I got around to Googling the route to Durham. It is a two and a half hour drive from Wilmington. My live interview was slated to begin in two hours. If you have ever had the experience of driving on a

highway and having some smug blowhard whiz past you at 90 MPH and sorting of quietly hoping that this smug blowhard dies in a fiery ball, I am here to tell you that I agree with you.

It is on days like yesterday that I ponder my career choice. Why did I get into this line of work? Why not something more relaxing, such as knife juggling? Of course, the crazy thing is that I'm actually lucky as hell to be running around like a chicken with my head cut off. As mid-list authors go, I'm living the dream.

* * *

The dream, as I envisioned it 20 years ago, was quite different: I figured my first book would wow all the bad parents of New York City, who would get into a huge bidding war. The book would sell millions of copies and win rave reviews and eventually be optioned by Michael Bey and turned into a violent post-apocalyptic trilogy, at which point I would be able to fulfill my life-long dream of purchasing the world's first oral sex machine. Awesome. Also, I would be transformed into a different human being: wiser, more debonair, less sad and needy.

It is perfectly natural for Americans to think in this way. Our screens have trained us to think in this way.

But in the case of writers, this manner of thought is foolish and perhaps fatal. We live in a culture that is predominantly visual and increasingly distracted, unwilling to do the sort of inconvenient emotional and intellectual work required to read a book. And thus there are only a handful of writers in the world who support themselves by writing books. Most of us have to find a day job to support our habit.

The dream of capital F Fame is a bit more understandable for musicians. The Rock Star is a certified archetype in our culture, after all, the Dionysian figure who gets to trash hotel rooms and have wild sex with groupies and do all the best drugs.

My own impression—having spent much of the past three years thinking about musicians and basically invading their lives under the pretext of writing a book about music—is that almost no one gets to lead this exalted life, and the few who do wind up patently miserable.

This brings me to Scott Stapp. Arriving at Scott Stapp is not a cause for joy, but here we are. For those of you not familiar with Christian hard rock, Stapp was the front man of a band called Creed. Back when I was the music editor of the weekly newspaper in Miami, I received no fewer than six demo copies of Creed's debut record. They just kept arriving at the office, one after another. Did I ever listen to this record? If I did, it obviously didn't make an impression. All I remember thinking is: *Wow, this band really wants to get capital F Famous.* And they did. Over the ensuing decade, Creed sold 40 million records and played to arenas full of rabid disciples. They became a very big deal indeed. Did this make them fundamentally different and happier people? No. Scott Stapp wound up with a substance abuse problem that led him to the brink of suicide. He was last spotted skulking around in the world of reality TV, which is the spiritual equivalent of suicide.

Of course, the history of rock and roll is littered with figures like Stapp, who max out on the credit card of their talent early and wind up staggering around the burning wreckage of their ego. Even the most enduring of our rock stars wind up cursed by their best years. Think about Mick Jagger. For all his showmanship, the guy has to know (on some level) that he's no longer young and beautiful and dangerous, that no one wants to hear his new songs, that he's gone from being an artist to a nostalgic money sponge sponsored by a major credit card. And he's the best-case scenario.

The musicians I wind up worshipping, the ones I interviewed for my book, were of a different sort. They'd harbored all the grandiose dreams in their twenties. But they'd all come to recognize, after years of mostly hollow promises from various cigar-chomping record execs, that they weren't going to become superstars. And so they'd focused instead on making music in a way that was emotionally, psychologically, and financially sustainable. Their measure of success had become, to a crucial extent, internal. The question wasn't how many units they were moving. It was how many songs they were writing, and whether they stuck with the good ones.

* * *

I'm not suggesting that these folks were all happy and well adjusted. On the contrary, they were (as a rule) heartbroken that their gorgeous work

hadn't found a larger and more lucrative audience. Some of them were downright bitter. Ike Reilly, whom I can only describe as the bastard child of Joe Strummer and Bob Dylan, seemed on the verge of kicking me off his property when I first arrived, despite having invited me to visit him.

He felt a deep sense of shame, I think, that he hadn't become a major rock star, as had seemed destined when his debut record came out in 2001. Instead, he was living north of Chicago, in the town where he'd grown up, working as a video editor, and making music on the side. He had four kids to support, and a mortgage he couldn't quite pay.

I was a huge fan of Ike's music. But in many ways this made my presence even more annoying. Because the basic question I'd flown out to ask him – why don't more people know about your music? – had haunted him for years. It hung over him like a personal cloud of unmet expectation, as he cruised around town with his old pals, who all figured he was going to be a star, too, who were still waiting for the golden kiss of fame to whisk him away.

Every musician I visited had the same basic story to tell. They had all been given reason to believe they were going to be stars. They all walked around under that same increasingly heavy cloud. But what marked all of these folks as distinct, what redeemed them, was that they had not allowed their disappointment to curdle into cynicism. They had managed to uncouple their private creative lives from external expectation. They had made the difficult passage from aspiring rock stars to musical artists.

On the last day of my visit with Ike, I spent eight hours watching him record a new song. He played the tune over and over, tinkering with chord changes, time signatures, vocal phrasing. It was grinding work. Every now and again, he would put down his guitar and walk over to the window of his home studio and stare down at his sons, who were skateboarding with deadly abandon in his driveway. He clearly wanted to be down there. But he kept working on the song, making it better one take a time – doing the lonely, dogged work.

As I sat there watching him, it occurred to me, for perhaps the millionth time, that the dream of fame has very little to do with the reality of making art, which is mostly about making one small decision after another, about converting your doubt into an engine.

* * *

My own experience tells me that the central reason people quit making art is because it just proves too hard: too full of disappointment and rejection. It is my own belief, therefore, that the best preparation for a career in the arts is a childhood and adolescence filled with disappointment and rejection. It probably aided my cause immeasurably that I was such a lonely kid, and such a social disaster. Probably, I owe a lot of no-longer-young-women notes of thanks.

Dear Karen Dodd,

I just wanted to thank you for turning your face to the side when I tried to kiss you goodnight on our third date, back in 1982. As you'll recall, I wound up sort of licking your ear, which was troubling for both of us. I want to thank you also for showing up a few weeks after that third (and final) date at Edy's ice cream parlor, where I worked as a soda jerk, and being thoughtful enough to bring along your new boyfriend, a very large, blond guy whose arms were, as I recall, thicker than my neck. Having to scoop you ice cream in my dirty smock, while not watching you make out, has made me, if not a better writer, at least a more resilient one.

Not at all bitter,
Steve

* * *

When you're a writer—an artist of any kind, really—you have to view every heartbreak as an opportunity, if not at the time then further down the road. As I tell my students: Your job is to traffic in the feelings most people spend their lives avoiding: unrequited desire, shame, guilt, rage, regret.

The wonder of music is that it can transmute those feelings into melody and rhythm. The best songs make us feel, almost instantly, what the songwriter was feeling when she composed the song. They induce emotions that are otherwise inaccessible to us. And they come to represent the particular people, places, and eras of our lives. When I hear the song “Long Time Running” by the Canadian band The Tragically

Hip, I am instantly transported back to El Paso, Texas, where I spent three years after college, living in a dusty third-floor apartment with a gorgeous, intelligent woman I couldn't quite bring myself to love. When I hear the song "Suddenly" by the Bogmen, I'm back in Greensboro, North Carolina, grinding my way through graduate school, driving away virtually every person I hoped to befriend. "Fred Astaire" by Dayna Kurtz brings me back to my years as an adjunct professor, living in Somerville, getting stoned and gorging myself into nightly starch comas.

The stories I was writing during this era were (it should go without saying) painfully dull, and I spent far too much time submitting them to editors at large magazines where I had no business submitting, and scheming ways to get on their radars. I staggered through my days under that cloud of unmet expectation. Once, I even included with one of my submissions a cover letter personally addressed to Bill Buford, then the fiction editor of the *New Yorker*. It read:

Dear Bill,

Great to catch up a little bit the other night. That recipe for short ribs you gave me is out of this world! I'm enclosing the story you asked me to send along. Enjoy.

Signed,

Steve Almond

I hope I don't need to tell you that Bill Buford didn't really give me a recipe for short ribs. I received, in response to this fraudulent missive, a nice handwritten letter from Mr. Buford, apologetically rejecting my story, "The Delectable Short Rib," a letter which I have subsequently mounted over my desk, so as to occasionally gaze at it and be reminded of just how much personal integrity I have.

There's a larger mission here, folks. And it's not just to seek our own not-so-glamorous destiny as writers. It's to remind ourselves that the connection we seek doesn't reside in sitting in front of a computer screen ego surfing and updating our status or brushing up on which celebrities are ruining themselves, and how. That stuff is intellectual and emotional junk food. It's empty calories. It doesn't feed our souls. It doesn't cure the essential disease of our loneliness.

I happen to believe that Americans are dying of loneliness. We're moving faster and faster, hurtling through time and space and information, forever seeking that human connection, and at the same time, falling away from our families and neighbors and ourselves. This is why people seek to make art: because it offers the chance for people to go off in search of themselves, to begin to reconnect to what's really happening inside them.

* * *

As I've noted, most of my own childhood recollections—the stuff that comes back to me most vividly—is pretty awful. I remember (for instance) that I was nearly killed in seventh grade. I was in one of the breezeways, on my way to class, when someone announced that they'd just released the yearbooks and this set off a stampede of yearbook-crazed students trying to get to the little office where they were handing them out. I'm still not sure why yearbooks were such a big deal, given how truly ugly most of us looked in our photos. But this was an ancient era, before the rise of Facebook, and it was populated by primitive peoples.

I was suddenly in this vast crush of students and before long kids started to panic and to push and because I was small and perhaps not the most coordinated guy, I wound up on the ground. Things got worse. I felt someone land on my legs, pinning them down. Then another body landed on my chest, and a third on my head. Actually, the body part that landed on my head – I was able to spot this before everything went black – was Scott Chase's butt. Within a few seconds it became clear to me that I couldn't breathe, that, if I didn't somehow get myself free, I was going to perish.

I began to panic.

Scott Chase was, of course, the biggest stud in our school, a soccer star, and it struck me as somehow appropriate that I was going to be suffocated by his ass. I could see the headline that would appear in our local newspaper:

*Wimpy Seventh Grader Spared Further Humiliation in Breezeway
Mercy Killing
Scott Chase's Ass Hailed as Hero*

Obviously, I did not die. Some poor journalist was spared the pleasure of reporting this story. Instead, I managed to kick myself free and get up and stagger from the mob. I'm pretty sure I was in shock, silently crying and hysterical. A girl named Vanessa, who had seen me pinned to the ground, looked at me with a heart-wrenching pity and asked if I was all right. She was a sweet girl, beautiful in her own way, with a gap between her front teeth. I wanted to embrace her, to fall against her and confess everything, how sad and lonely and terrified I felt, even when I wasn't pinned under Scott Chase's ass. But I wasn't ready to be comforted. I felt, in some deeply messed up way, that receiving her comfort would undo my injury. And I wanted to feel injured at that point, so I just lurched away.

It is my own belief, after forty five years on the planet, that most of life is about avoiding shame. But most people are too polite to say this. So they trot out all these fancy lines about how life is about "making a difference" or "finding your passion." I always want to say, "Yeah, okay. But that stuff doesn't really matter if you're in a total shame spiral." Most of the reason I became a writer is because I was tired of feeling ashamed of my weakness.

I suspect the same thing drives those of you who are aspiring musicians, as well. Becoming an artist begins as a dream of applause. But it endures as a means of surviving humiliation. That's what artists do: we convert pain into beauty.

The reason I get all starry-eyed around musicians is because they speak a language that is immediate and intuitive. They don't lock themselves up in some garret and peck little black symbols onto paper. They open their throats and sing. They bang on drums. They shred. They speak, much more directly, to the limbic system, and to the heart. In my besotted view, the making of music is a holy activity on par with spiritual visitation.

I realize that I'm completely distorting the process, that my worship of musicians, and my idealization of the pursuit, is directly attributable to the fact that I'm not a musician. As several musicians have pointed out to me, I wouldn't view music as so mystical if I spent my life trying to make it. But this is the prerogative of the fan: we get to worship with a purity unavailable to the pros.

For what it's worth, I've learned more about writing from musicians than other writers. I spent more than a decade trying to learn from other writers. But all I could do was offer pale imitations of their style. I wrote dozens of such short stories, all of them stinking of competence. It was only when I listened to music that I felt the way I wanted my readers to *feel*. Because musicians aren't coy about their intentions. They are trying to make the listener feel, to make them dance with joy or sob with grief.

And this, in the end, was what I wanted. I didn't have melody or rhythm at my disposal, let alone amplification. But what I discovered, as I ploughed through one crap-ass draft after another, was that if I pushed my characters into enough trouble, if I brought them to a place where their emotions were too much to contain, and if I slowed down right at this point, a strange thing would happen. The language would suddenly have to stretch to express all that emotion. And this compression of sensual and psychological detail would unlock the melodies and rhythms inherent in language itself, would lift the prose into the lyric register. This, I began to realize, is how writers sing.

* * *

And singing is important. It's an essential activity, something people used to do every day. The central benefit of organized religion, in my view, is that it affords people the chance to sing together in public. But the culture has changed in ways that discourage non-famous people from singing. We no longer live in clans or villages. We've left our extended families behind. We spend most of our time staring into one sort of screen or another, frisking the Internet for some proof that we matter to the world. And I think this compulsion stokes the dream of Capital F Fame. It's really a fantasy about shedding our anonymity, about becoming known to the entire world and perhaps (ideally) loved by them.

The problem with this dream is that technology has also democratized the means of production. And this means that more or less anyone can make a book or an album these days. You don't need the sponsorship of a corporation. You don't even have to pay some studio owner twenty grand to lay down and mix the tracks. Anyone with the right software and instruments can record a lovely album in their bedroom. The expansion of available media has also caused a radical splintering of

the culture. We live in an age of instant access to everything, a world of multiplying frequencies, channels, and portals.

When I was a very little kid, the appearance of a new record by the Stones or Dylan (or hell, even the Eagles) was a major cultural event. Everyone wanted to hear what *Exile on Main Street* sounded like. We were all talking about the same songs, playing them at parties, cranking them on our turntables. There are still a few token superstars out there. But even our biggest stars are unknown to much of the culture. (Ask a country music fan what Lady Gaga sounds like.) The vast majority of musical acts are known only to a tiny niche of listeners. Such is the new paradigm. And it requires musicians to think a bit more like writers. That is: to abandon the notion of capital F fame. To think instead about how one builds a sustainable life that includes making music.

This is especially important to remember in a place like Berklee, from what I understand pretty much the Harvard of aspiring musicians. Everyone at Berklee expects to be the Next Big Thing, even if they don't say so out loud. I'm sure it's incredibly stimulating to be around so much talent and ambition. But I'm equally sure that it's exhausting and fraught.

* * *

People have always dreamed of fame, of course. The fairytales I read my daughter are full of peasants who are reborn as royalty. The most famous books in our history—the books of the Bible, specifically—are full of superstars: warriors, kings, queens, saviors. But it is (I would argue) a uniquely modern pathology to expect that artistic pursuit would bring us riches and acclaim. It would be like expecting the hero of *The Iliad* to be Homer, rather than Achilles and Hector.

I can certainly understand why musical artists become cultural icons. They are engaged in an endeavor that is essentially performative. To see Paganini play violin, or Chopin play piano, or Jimi Hendrix play guitar, is to witness the human genius for invention made manifest. And I can imagine that audiences must have felt a similar tingling sense of awe watching Mark Twain or Charles Dickens perform their work. But the true purpose of art—musical, literary, or otherwise—is to implicate the audience, not to exalt the artist.

If I've learned anything from my interviews with musicians, it's that the careers of those who chase fame never end well. I am thinking now

of my brief interview with Dave Grohl, the former drummer of Nirvana who has had one of the most successful solo careers in rock. I asked him what it was like to be in a band with Kurt Cobain, to take a backseat to a songwriter of his caliber. Grohl didn't miss a beat. He explained that the songs he was writing back in those days really weren't that good. Kurt was the star of the band. He recognized that.

Listening to Grohl, oddly, made me think about my own approach to writing workshops. Students always come in at different levels of expertise. But it's not the ones with the most talent who wind up publishing books. It's the ones who recognize early on just how hard it is to write a good story (let alone a great one), the ones who seem driven not by a desire for recognition, but a deeper need to figure out who they are. Those are the ones who are able to keep themselves at the keyboard, who recognize that failure is the main ingredient to improvement, who find some reward in the process even as the world ignores their work.

* * *

I wish I could say that I was that kind of student. But I'm afraid I was more like the students I tend to hate: full of clever bullshit and ego needs.

It's taken me twenty years to make peace with the notion that I'm not going to be Capital F Famous, that my given version of fame will reside in being a big deal to a very small, but awesome, subset of people. Namely, readers who find in laughter a means of experiencing forgiveness.

And I'm not sure "peace" is really the most accurate word. The truth is, I still spend far too much of my time wallowing in useless resentments. Over the past few months, I've also set about working on a novel. I'm not a novelist by inclination. In fact, I suck as a novelist. I'm far too disorganized for long plotlines. Left to my own devices, I tend to write myself into pedantic little cul-de-sacs. But I'm a firm believer that a writing career is partly about trying to do things that don't come easy. How else do we get better? Still, the effort has been causing me a lot of anxiety. I've been waking up in the wee hours with a belly full of dread.

It's occurred to me, in these blue hours, that the desire for fame is not just a narcissistic wish for unconditional love. It's also a perfectly understandable desire to be rewarded for our labors.

The writers and musicians who endure almost never receive the rewards they deserve. But rather than growing bitter, they simply turn stubborn. They accept that their first and final job is to rise from the mattress of dread and grab the guitar, or the laptop, or the paintbrush, and make the tough decisions. This doesn't guarantee that the work will find the place it deserves in the world. It just means you're willing to work for the next beautiful song or story or canvas. You're probably not going to be a star. But you are an artist.

William John Bert Canyon

Just as Leah opens her mouth to tell him she's pregnant, Russell says, "There's something blue down there." The canyon rises to Leah's left and falls on her right. Without her glasses, it offers only immediate, myopic pleasures—scrappy scrub brush, a flicker of lizard—not the monumental folds and curtains of stone, the ribbons of color baked into rock. Her backpack digs into her shoulders, and a breeze chills her damp clothes. Overhead, clouds turn orange in the late February afternoon. The warmth of the canyon floor is far below.

Yesterday they hiked in. What goes down must come up; the canyon is a place of reversals. Here, their life's masteries—Russell's ability to design websites and please the clients he spends hours talking to each day, her comp lesson plans and dissertation on Anne Bradstreet—didn't help them with the tent poles and collapsible stove. Outside the canyon, his knowledge means a house in Tucson's foothills, while hers has meant three moves in four years chasing fellowships and post-docs, angling for a secure position which some part of her feels she may never get. Last week, she laid her palm on his kitchen's granite counter, stared out at the mountains, and simply stood still.

"It's a hiker," Russell says.

"Are you sure?" Last night Russell broke her glasses when he fell entering the tent. She laughed—it was cute!—but his promise to replace them was so earnest she had to bite her tongue to keep from saying it: "I love you." Their first date—he asked her to coffee—was nearly six months ago. Now the thought of coffee, which she has always loved, turns her stomach. Before he woke this morning, she crept from the tent and threw up at the base of a house-sized boulder, the third time in the past week that her day has begun this way.

He tells her what he sees. A spot of man-made color on one of the ridges that jut into the canyon below. A hiker in a blue shirt. “How long since we were there?” he says. “Two, three hours?”

“Maybe,” says Leah. “We were on ridges all morning.”

“The light’s getting worse,” Russell says, squinting. He isn’t sure, but he thinks he sees the hiker lifting his arm, raising something over his head. A bottle? A glint that could be liquid. “Think we should”—he stops. “I don’t know what we’d do. Hike back down? Commiserate?”

On the way in, the Park Service signs warned them: two-hundred fifty hikers rescued every year. Sun stroke, fatigue, disorientation. Never set off alone, or hike rim to rim in one day. No one would be dumb enough—would they?

The trail ahead soon disappears in a switchback. Russell’s expression is the thoughtful one he wears when considering a new project. “Must be several more miles to go,” he says. “We don’t know he’s in trouble. If we go down, we’ve got to climb up again. He could just be taking a water break.”

Leah runs a bandana across his forehead, then hers. He has not asked for her thoughts. Somehow this is his decision. She shivers. She is resolved to tell him before the trip ends, but this isn’t the moment.

“We probably look like he does,” he says, “to someone above us.” He starts up the trail, and she follows.

Russell works from home, lists pros and cons when deciding what to eat, sends correctly capitalized emails that end “Yours, Russell.” To him, the point of the trip is to see the Grand Canyon. The talk they had, agreeing to enjoy each other’s company but be realistic about her career and his ties to Tucson, came two months after the first coffee.

He clomps over the rock and dust like an old tractor, measured and steady. A few weeks ago, before she knew the trip’s real purpose, she said it would be nice to wake up next to him every day. He was sitting with his laptop the way he does, cross-legged on the bed, lips moving as he tapped the keyboard. He looked at her like a yogi, plain and peaceful, radiating a kind of hope for the taking. He nodded and said, “It would be nice.” She imagines that when she tells him, she’ll see this look at first, but then his eyes will focus, his eyebrows draw closer, and when his lips part, they’ll speak just the right words, the way they do when clients call.

After many more switchbacks, the rim is visible against the purple sky. Russell stops and turns, taking a last good look. She sucks in her breath, wanting him to take her hand.

“Think he’s OK?” he says.

She breathes out. They continue.

It’s dark when they reach the trailhead. They’ve donned extra clothing, pulled zippers tight. The sky is on its last blue. Pinpricks of light silently appear, more each time you look. Leah unbuckles her backpack and hugs Russell, a cold compress of wet layers and skin.

Russell says, “We can tell someone.” She follows his gaze—light through the trees.

The woods smell of fresh pine. A cabin emerges in a small clearing of knee-high grass. Floodlights snap on, the door opens, and a dog runs out. A burly bearded man steps onto the porch.

“We wanted to let someone know,” Russell says. “We just got off the trail. There was a hiker down below us.”

A brown blur—a puppy skittering out the door, then another behind it.

“It was a while ago. He’s probably—he’s definitely still down there. Thought we’d let someone know. Since it’s so late.”

Clearly, the man works here. You can’t just live next to the Grand Canyon. But there’s no sign, no red cross, just a pile of fencing in the yard and a toolbox on the porch. Leah bends, hand extended, coaxing the dogs closer.

“You wanted to assuage your guilt,” the man says. He is older than they are, his beard half-grey, but he stands straight and his arms fill the sleeves of his olive-colored work jacket.

“We—he didn’t signal for help or anything. We just saw him.”

“Well, I hope he makes it,” the man says. He lifts an arm and makes a big sign of the cross. “You may go in peace.” The dog licks Leah’s hand, then follows the man inside, the puppies racing behind her.

“Good to know someone cares,” Russell says as they make their way down the forest road toward the parking lot. “I guess we could have waited. On the other hand, he’s paid to do this.”

“He’s maintenance,” she says, quietly. “It’s not his job.”

“Oh,” he says. “Well, it’s still not our responsibility. Legally. We’re not Park Service. Morally, it’s maybe not as clear cut.”

They walk beside the road, on either side of a ditch. The moon peeks through the trees. Russell continues to speak. His flashlight flicks on. Leah stops and squeezes her eyes shut. The moment is here. It must be.

“When you think about it, hiking’s only steps,” comes Russell’s voice. “One after another.”

She opens her eyes. Russell is a silhouette, the beam of light steady before him, revealing the road and the ditch ahead until they curve away behind trees.

Probably the hiker is fine. Probably he won’t care whether someone is waiting when he finally exits the canyon. But maybe he will, and the trailhead is not that far back, and in the moonlight Leah can see, more or less, where she is going.

A. Van Jordan

From *The Cineaste*

Last Year At Marienbad

(Alan Resnais, 1961)

A place, though visible, is like a ghost
of memories. Even memories one forgets
linger in the space in which they occurred.
Here within the expanse of vaulted ceilings,

doorways leading to more doors, hallways
leading to more halls, the faintest recollections
absorb over time; no act will wholly evanesce.

Wander over the carpets and marble floors,
and the echoes of bygone eras endure,
wafting through corridors

like a perfume pulsing on a woman's neck.
What should one make of what happens
or doesn't through a night between lovers?

And if the space awakens in a man or a woman
some thing they would not find the inner charge
to commit in their own bedroom,

should they forget? Embrace this longing?
This couple, let's say, met last summer at a château
soiree, and they made love or they thought

about making love to each other. If they did make love,
well, they're adults, they'll turn to each other
in memory, forever waiting there for each other; they will

always have this place and time. If one evening
this couple, which is not really a couple,
lies together in one room while their lovers wait

upstairs or at home; if they both *thought* about making love
to each other, while glancing across a crowded room....
Well, why would anyone try to forget that?

Again and again, the moment is captured
in one's mind, but try to prove it happened,
and details retreat into darkness.

Again and again, *footsteps get absorbed by carpets,*
so thick, so heavy... Oh, how moments call, but better senses
abate any emerging pleasure. One may even convince

the body, against the will, that such moments were made
to linger around, only awakened by the promise of possibility.

Old Boy

(Park Chan-Wook, 2003)

If one rainy night you find yourself
leaving a phone booth and you meet a man
with a lavender umbrella, resist
your curiosity to follow him, to seek
shelter under his solace from the night.
Later, don't fall victim to the Hypnotist's
narcotic of clarity, which proves
a curare for the heart; her salve
is merely a bandage, under which memories
pulse. Resist the taste for something still
alive for your first meal; resist the craving
for a touch of a hand from your past.

We live some memories,
and some memories are planted. There's
only so much space for the truth
and the fabrications to spread out
in one's mind. When there's no more
space, we grow desperate. You'll ask
if practicing love for years in your mind,
prepares you for the moment.

If practicing to defend one's life
is the same as living? You'll
hole up, captive, in a hotel room
for 15 years and learn to find
a man within you, which will prove
a painful introduction to the trance
into which you were born. Better
to stay under the spell of your guilt,

than to forget; you've already released
 your pain onto the world; don't believe
 there's some joy in forgetting. You'll soon see
 the struggle to forget simply engraves memories
 deeper. What appears as an endless verdant field,
 only spreads across a building's rooftop;
 your peaceful sleep could be a fetal position,
 which secures you in a suitcase in this field.
 A bell rings, and you fall out of this luggage
 like clothes you no longer fit. Now what to do?
 You remember when you were the man
 who fit those clothes but you've forgotten this
 world. Even in forgetting scenes from your life,
 there always remains a shadow of the memory,
 knotting your spirit's center until,
 within a moment's glance,
 strangers passing you on the street,
 observe history in your eyes. Experience
 lingers through acts of forgetting,
 through small acts of love or trauma
 falling from the same place. Listen, whether
 memory comes in the form of a stone
 or a grain of sand, they both sink in water.
 And a tongue--even if it were, say, sworn
 to secrecy; even if it were cut from one's mouth;
 yes, even without a mouth to envelope
 its truth—the tongue continues to confess.

M

(Fritz Lang, 1931)

Although it's quite dark now, the city
invites me to look for you. The people
disappear, for the most part, into homes

or taverns or into one another, into the night.
You know, white space proves most dangerous
at night. Bodies stand out like museum pieces

to ogle. I love museums, even during the day,
when women, filled to the brim with beauty,
walk through the galleries, staring

with such curious intent. I love staring, too,
at how the most public spaces turn
intimate after dark. Why do the trees look

so alert under moonlight? Almost as
if they witness my every move. I love
trees; they never give up, do they? People,

clouds, buildings--the trees don't care
about what anything else does, they simply do
what they came here to do. I've learned

so much from their example... And, yes,
I know you in the audience wonder when
I will say "Sie machen mir das wasser im mund,"

in my broken German, but Peter Lorre
couldn't be here tonight, so I come,
proving a worthy understudy. Perhaps

it was his penchant for the young you were
hoping to witness, like an accident you didn't
cause but of which you still feel a part,

a natural penchant to play voyeur. My tastes
differ, preferring to watch the mature at play,
learning from their adventures. But, please,

here I am, no translation necessary. Allow yourself
the freedom to imagine, to fantasize as you wish;
feel in me, hand by hand, each guilty,

God-discriminating touch come to a chord
struck beyond your body's will, facing
an opportunity only guilt could keep you from taking.

American Gigolo

(Paul Schrader, 1980)

The shirts folded; the ties rolled;
the suits hung in descending, mono-
chromatic earth tones; shoes
horned and shined; and the selection of the right
combination choreographed to a
not-quite jazz but a jazz-inflected voice,
nonetheless, pouring from Bang & Olufson speakers,
bouncing off high ceilings in a condo,
minimally but well appointed: Here is a space
in which a man can make bad decisions.

He's Julian, the gigolo, and to a teenage boy
walking into a movie theater in 1980,
he looms as large as a Sphinx
in front of a hotel in Vegas;
he looks like the answer to the riddle
of what it means to be a man.
If you follow Julian, who is set up for a murder,
set up by someone he once called on
in the middle of the night as a friend,

you can trace his steps back to his salvation. Cut to:
Julian crossing the hotel bar to a booth in back
where a woman, Michelle, sits. Though she is
the woman who will save him,
and the only prop separating them
is a table with cocktails and appetizers,
choices are made. The wall between them

should blow over with a whisper in her ear,
but like most of us, Julian can't see the one

who loves him. Though she's already been found,
he keeps searching, distracted by bodies
stretched out behind him in his wake. And,
like most of us, he gives up, believing
there's nothing left to believe in.
Perhaps his not believing makes him a hero,
perhaps to be without insecurity would make him
less believable as a man, without his mistakes
we'd have no story, without his nights to pass through

we'd be less intrigued. Perhaps
he believed his naked body could be a torch
lighting a path to someone he thought
was waiting just up ahead. Cut to:
Two hours later, a lifetime in film hours,
Julian is in jail now
speaking through a plexiglass wall,
when he asks Michelle, "Why has it taken so long
for you to come to me." All Michelle can do

is shake her head and smile.
She knows she never left him in the first place.
She never needed his pleas to bring her back;
she never needed his wounds or his prison sentence
for her to heal him or to break him free.
When there is no more ground to search,
when the sun goes down, he turns
around, tracing his steps back to his
beginning, the night in the hotel bar,

the morning after in his bed; he
allows himself to go back there,
where she had always been.
How she covered his tracks with kisses...
How she stood through all his rages and his accusations...
And after all his absences and wanderings run their
course, after his questions, which never found answers,
he walks out from this prison cell
he built for himself, and it becomes clear

why it was worth it to fill his story with so many
nights in search of love through suffering: He finds her.

The Mack

(Michael Campus, 1973)

Whether a little boy who grows
into a pimp, or a young girl who

descends into a ho, they both
hold in memory a mother

framed in a front door, calling, nightly,
calling them into the house. But The Game

calls, too, and what man or woman
can resist an open hand extended

in the middle of a night? Cliché
comes to mind, maybe, when you think

of the pimp with a heart of stone,
but consider this an act to conceal

the weakness in his conscience,
which science has yet to study.

The young girl, now a woman, will
act, too, as a comfort to him or

she'll choose another. And when the other
man reminds him, *You know the game, nigga;*

Yo' bitch chose me, what more can he do
but offer a threat to conceal the boy

inside, who remembers he has a mother
calling him into the house? What can she do,

this young woman, but remember how pretty her
mother's face was, framed in the doorway?

Though she remembers the screen door
striking closed behind her mother's voice,

she stayed out. Why didn't they just head home
when the streetlights buzzed on? Too late

for questions now. By the time grown
folks are talking, all hope is lost.

These are niggas with money
problems; that is, their pockets

Look like they got the mumps. Some
brotha is talking unity in the black

community, calling the pimp
into the house, calling the ho

off the corner before those street lights
shine down on her face. What does he know

about life at the top? This brotha? Blackness
now is just fodder for race theory later. But

today, *Goldie*, the pimp, hands out money
to kids who stay in school. He's the Mack

of the Year, but his ass is confused, too,
if he doesn't hear the mothers calling

for his head on a stick, which he'll
probably think is just a cool cane.

Poor, pastel-suit-wearin' muthafucka.
Pimp, you ain't no hero, so take off

your cape. Sista, listen, even a blue-collar worker
knows at the end of the week

you gotta pay *yourself*, first.
There may not be any food in the house

for the young girl, there may not be a tv
in the house for the little boy, but stop looking

at your poop-butt friends when I'm talking to you.
Stop asking questions when grown folks are talkin';

you need to bring your young self home, even if you
think there's nothing there waiting on you. *Boy*,

git your ass in this house, and leave those girls alone!

I've Heard the Mermaids Singing

(Patricia Rozema, 1987)

Often, I find myself in situations
for which there are no adequate epigraphs.
My days fill with temp work,
part-time, and I'm in another office,
the next day, day after day,
as a *Girl Friday*... or a *Person Friday*, now--
though life hasn't changed
with the title—and I look into
the unfolding world around me:
Women with babies, couples in love,
women on bicycles or swimming,
women of all kinds, but none
who look like me. Through my lens,
I see through them; my gaze
travels to them like a song, but
they don't sing back. I notice
some, like Gabrielle, for instance,
from whom I cannot take my eyes
back; I fall in love with her,
the way art lovers fall for a Matisse.
You cherish a Matisse, but you don't
think to kiss or hug one. But, what's
so wrong with imagining the Matisse
wanting to kiss me back, seeing into me?

Let's say the Matisse were a woman,
looking so deeply into my core till
my core looked like a tower to climb
on a sunny day, and the wind began blowing
the closer she got to the top, and birds
flew around the top stairs of the tower, but
she grew tired of climbing. The closer she got to the top,
she could see all the colors comprising me, and
she thought, *Maybe I can't make it to the top
of her tower, maybe even a Matisse isn't good enough
to reach all this beauty.* She would say this as
she feels the light on her face...And I'd tell her
Fear not the height, the distance of the fall...
Keep your eyes on the point
of ascent; yes, the clouds swell heavy,
the rain comes hard, the legs grow weary.
Ah, but the gasp for air...Ah, but the view....

Editor's Note: All poems by A. Van Jordan are from his collection, *The Cineaste*, forthcoming from W.W. Norton & Co., 2013.

Daphne Kalotay

Biography of a Novel

When I give readings from my novel *Russian Winter*, the most commonly asked question is, How did you come up with that idea? And it still surprises me, each time, to admit that I never, ever intended to write about Russia, or the ballet, or jewels, or an auction house. In fact, I never intended to write a historical novel at all. How I came to spend years immersed in these topics is an example of the complicated way that ideas take shape.

In the summer of 2000, I had an arts fellowship at a residency in Taos, New Mexico, where I spent much of each day alone in a little adobe casita, reading and writing, free of any social obligations. I had with me a book of stories by Colette, whose first-person reminiscent voice took hold of me. In bed late one night I found myself recalling a winter, about five years earlier, when I was in graduate school studying Russian literature and fell in love with a visiting post-doc. In my memory the romance of that winter merged with the Russian fiction I'd read, so that when I attempted to write about it, the Russian element became even stronger. I added a storyline about a former Bolshoi dancer living in Boston, whom the graduate student helps pack her belongings to move to an old-age home; doing so, she discovers an amber necklace of unspoken significance.

As I wrote, the story came to be about fear and paranoia more than love, and about the romanticized way Westerners view Soviet dissidents. The Russian woman I based in part on my Hungarian grandmother as well as on general observations I'd had regarding that side of my family, whose experience of war and then Soviet occupation had left an undercurrent of insecurity, wariness and distrust. Deep down the story was about the ways that unsafe political situations lead to personal

insecurities, and the way that habits of suspicion persist even when we're finally out of danger. This was meaty stuff for a story of just sixteen pages or so; I kept revising it, trying to simplify things so that the story would "work."

Eventually I considered the thing good enough to include in the fiction collection I was sending out to literary agents. But when I submitted it to magazines and literary journals, it never did find a home. When at last an agent—Leigh Feldman—called to say she wanted to represent me, she mentioned, over the phone, that one of my stories could become a novel. It is evidence of what an astute agent she is that, instead of simply stating the title, she asked, "Do you know which one?"

I knew. And I think that's important. Because if I hadn't had the impulse myself, I wouldn't have had the necessary desire to write the book. Such an undertaking must arise organically, and while I know many writers who take their agents' suggestions as commands, good novels cannot be written to order. My fear of taking on such a project had already caused me to try to simplify and shorten it into a containable story, but deep down I'd suspected that I was moving in the wrong direction. Leigh's question allowed me to acknowledge what I already, instinctively and reluctantly, knew.

Still, when the story collection went out to editors, "Russian Winter" was included; it wasn't until my editor at Doubleday gave me the choice that I plucked "Russian Winter" from the story sequence. This, I see now, was the final step in my decision to take on what I knew would be a long and challenging project.

Looking back at the short story, I'm struck by how very different it is from the novel. Not only would all of the names change, and the novel take place in Moscow as well as Boston, and the past as well as the present, but the tone itself changed as the story expanded. The 1st person reminiscent speaker of the story became a neutral 3rd person narrator whose point of view switched back and forth between those of the three main protagonists. These editorial decisions came slowly, as I recast the characters, changed the time period, and wove a plot much more complex than the original.

The Russian literature professor, who in the short story was an older, overweight American man, became a slightly younger and more

appealing Russian who grew more attractive the more I got to know him. His own mystery became central to the storyline, rather than peripheral. And the ballerina's amber necklace became one among many jewels, until eventually (around 2007) I decided to make a jewelry auction part of the storyline.

Soon after, the graduate student became an auction house employee, and her boyfriend was upgraded to fiancé. By the time the book went out to publishers two years later, the fiancé had become an ex-husband.

But long before that, my agent was eager to see a draft: "Just 100 polished pages." I had 300 pages, but they were a mess. When my agent read them, it became clear that her vision of what the book ought to be was different from my own. So my agent and I went our separate ways. Sometimes that has to happen.

Writing without an agent meant that I could be true to my original impulses and to the twists and turns of my imagination; when I finished, the book was at last something I was truly happy with. Despite the many changes, the long winding path I'd had to take was behind me. And when, one day, I had to search through old computer files for something, and found documents with names and characters nearly unrecognizable to me, it took a moment to realize that they were from a much earlier incarnation of *Russian Winter*.

In fact, the one thing that, for good or for ill, remained steady the entire time I worked on the project was the title. Perhaps that's the moral of this story: Be grateful for little things like a simple working title—because chances are that's the only part of the process that will be straightforward.

Daphne Kalotay

Russian Winter

A Story

The winter I was twenty-five I met once a week with a professor of Russian named Lawrence Tillbear. This was in Boston, where I was working toward a Ph.D. in European Literature, studying for a qualifying exam in Russian fiction. At Tillbear's suggestion, my tutorials began at 7:45 in the morning, when the air still held last night's frost and the secretaries hadn't yet arrived to unlock the main office. Despite the weather and the hour, I wore sheer stockings, miniskirts, and French perfume; I'd fallen in love with a biology post-doc and always met him for breakfast afterwards, at the coffee shop across the street. In Professor Tillbear's office, I sat on a hard wooden chair, knees pursed, not yet used to the brevity of my skirts. Through the one small window the sky was always a slowly dissipating white, as if the air itself were struggling to wrench open its eyes for the start of a new, frigid day.

I spoke no Russian and read everything in English translation, which Tillbear graciously found acceptable. He would sit in a swivel chair smoking a pipe, his enormous stomach held in order by a suit that included a vest, pocket-kerchief, and bow tie. In his book-lined office it seemed the two of us had dressed up for the rows of hardcover volumes themselves and that the only suitable way to discuss such things was through a cloud of pipe smoke and Shalimar. Like my skirts, the perfume was a new affectation, and I wore my scent too heavily; in a seminar once, another student sniffed the air with worry and asked, "Do you smell gasoline?" But during my meetings with Tillbear the wooden hallways of the Department of Modern Foreign Languages were dark and quiet, with no one else to note our mutual excesses.

Note: "Russian Winter: A Story," completed in 2003, is the original, unpublished story that eventually became the novel *Russian Winter* (published in 2010.)

When Tillbear wanted to speak, he leaned back so that his swivel chair threatened to touch the floor. In a surprisingly nasal voice, he would test me:

“What does Gurov do after he and Anna have made love for the first time?”

“He eats a watermelon.”

“And how does he eat it?”

“*Without haste.*”

He would nod with approval, then move on to another story. “And Akaky Akakievich?”

“He doesn’t make love!”

“Of course not. But he eats dinner.”

I considered poor Akaky; he was always so anxious to get back to copying. “A boiled potato, maybe?”

“Soup and a piece of beef with onion!” Pleased with his own knowledge, Tillbear would ease his weight and spring forward in the swivel chair.

I found those early hours nothing but pleasant, filled with images of country estates and samovars, distressed men and women hunched in horse-drawn sleighs, wrapped in long coats and fur hats. At nine a.m. I would zip Gurov or Akaky or some sad country girl back into my backpack, wish Tillbear a good day, and descend into the brightening morning. The air whipped through my sheer stockings so that by the time I crossed the street to the coffee shop my legs were numb. But I would have done anything to retain the interest of my biologist. Even now I suspect I’m right that he found my mini skirts more fascinating than my thoughts on Chekhov or Gogol. When he discovered one night in mid-winter the secret of my stockings (that they ended at my thighs) he said, “This is so exciting” with more glee than I ever heard him express about any other topic. And so I continued to shiver in skirts that I had to tug at when stepping onto buses or up stairways.

At the coffee shop the two of us drank coffee from tall glasses, his with chocolate and whipped cream. Then I would head to the library to read for my various exams, and he would hole up in the biology lab, where he attended to fruit flies at all hours.

Arriving for my early meeting one day, I heard Tillbear on the phone, speaking Russian. I don't know why I was surprised to find him so comfortable in the language, given that he was the head of the department, but he seemed transformed by the thick, sticky vowels and consonants. Afterwards he said, "I've a proposition for you."

I sat across from him, thighs flat against the wooden seat.

"A woman by the name of Liza Andreiev lives not far from here. She's a former principal dancer with the Bolshoi ballet, a beautiful woman. They called her "the Butterfly." Her husband was a writer, something of a dissident. He was taken to Siberia and never heard from again--on the very eve of their escape to the U.S." Tillbear leaned further back in his chair, and his vest-buttons pulled against their button holes. "He had a withered arm," he added, sounding nostalgic. "Liza has lived here ever since. She's faltering these days."

Tillbear himself looked in poor health, with the pasty gray skin and congested breath of a long-term, sedentary smoker. Though he wasn't frail, I worried he might keel over one morning in my presence, before the secretaries had arrived--or, worse, before I'd had a chance to pass the exam.

"That was her nurse on the phone just now," he continued. "For years she's suffered from rheumatoid arthritis. A nurse comes every evening to prepare supper and spend the night, and help her get up in the morning, but she's alone all day. So she's finally been convinced to move into a rest home." Tillbear took a long breath. "She won't let anyone help pack her things. Which is where you enter the picture, should you care to: I asked if she would let a student help, in exchange for some money—to make it sound like *she's* the one doing the helping. She was able to agree to that. So, if you'd like to make a little extra money, she could hire you to sort through her things, put them in boxes, you know."

I knew I could use the extra cash. "Does she speak English?"

"Beautifully. A truly fascinating woman." He squinted at the gray sky of his window. "I'm sure she'll have much of interest for your ears."

The Andreiev residence was on Commonwealth Avenue, in a large, once-majestic building whose owner, like so many of the area's

landlords, had split formerly grand apartments into rentals, converting old servants' quarters into "studios." The flattened carpet of the main hallway stunk of long winters and dirty boots.

Liza Andreiev's home was large and airy, with high ceilings and tall windows that did nothing for the heating. A series of patterned rugs were cast about the living room floor like litter rather than decor. One of them, a kilim of deep reds and blues, was slightly in the way of the front door, but instead of rearranging it, someone had hacked away with scissors until the bothersome part no longer existed; it looked as if some animal had taken a chomp out of the corner.

Standing there shivering, I received the dark-eyed glare of a woman in her seventies, with gray hair in a tight bun and her mouth, painted red, in a narrow grimace. The arthritis had calcified her bones so that she could no longer bend at the waist. Her electric wheelchair was not a chair so much as a tilted board into which she was strapped, leaning back. I had expected her to have a ballerina's long neck and straight back, but age had done to Liza Andreiev what it does to everyone else: hunched her shoulders, bulbed her knuckles, crooked a thumb and two fingers.

"Did you take the elevator?" was the first thing she said to me. Her mouth moved with ease, but her neck was intractable. When I told her yes, she said, "I don't trust it."

"It does look a little rickety." And not big enough to move large pieces of furniture, I was thinking. I wondered if she ever went down to the ground floor, if the nurse ever pushed her wheel-board into the Boston daylight. "My name's Rhea," I told her, not knowing what else to say.

She waited a minute, as if deciding, and said, "Call me Liza."

She wore a long wool skirt and furry slippers. A small gray cat with horribly matted fur stood next to her. I wondered if the nurse fed it, too, on her nightly visits.

"We begin with the closets," was what Liza said next. She had me pick through things that had not been touched for years: cards and letters bundled in ancient elastic bands that cracked apart the minute I touched them, and newspaper articles, in English and in Russian, with yellowing photographs of Liza dancing. Someone more knowledgeable

might have been stalled by curiosity. But I flipped through the papers quickly in front of Liza, who said yes or no--keep or toss--or told me to add them to the pile intended for the university library, to which she had bequeathed her documents and letters. I knew what the papers would look like there pinned under the glass of the lobby's exhibit tables. Each day I walked past such displays without pausing. Most students seemed not to even notice them.

I came to a flurry of articles clipped from American newspapers and read one dated April 1961. "World-renowned dancer Liza Andreiev, whose husband, writer Nicolas Andreiev, was taken by Soviet authorities hours before her escape to the United States, has officially claimed political asylum. Mrs. Andreiev, former principal dancer with the Bolshoi Ballet, is known as "The Butterfly" for her artful mastery of some of ballet's most difficult roles...."

"That's garbage," said Liza.

Something made me hesitate. I expected her to be nostalgic, perhaps, watching the corners crumble from stale newsprint on which she still danced, frozen in motion.

"People thought I left Russia to escape Communism," she said as I let the articles slip into the trashbag. "I left to escape my mother in law. She was a horrible woman. She liked *birds*. Little yellow and green birds that did nothing but screech. She had three of them in a little bamboo cage. They chewed through the bamboo and shat on everything."

The cat with the matted hair had tipped the trash bag and was pawing through it with great interest.

"The three of us stuck in that apartment with birdshit everywhere. I hated coming home at the end of a tour. She hated the thought that I might take him away from her. She acted as if I already had, even though we were still there, stuck with her and her birds. Nicolas hated it too." Liza closed her eyes as if to recall. "She was nothing but jealous. And jealousy, of course, is a deadly thing."

By this time I was spending some nights at my young biologist's apartment. But I made sure to sleep alone on the nights before my meetings with Tillbear, so as to be bright-eyed and alert for our early meetings. Sometimes I had to cram one last story in on my subway

ride to the university. It was on the Green Line early one morning that I first read Turgenev's "Living Relic" and thought immediately of Liza. Turgenev's character was worse off, though, her body completely solidified, like a bronze statue, lying on a dirt floor in a cottage in the woods. And yet she was cheerier than Liza.

Tillbear, too, must have been reminded. A few minutes into our discussion he paused and, holding his pipe delicately in front of him, said, "I don't actually know Liza Andreiev. Not in any personal way. It's only through circumstance that I've been somewhat connected with her all of these years."

I assumed that by "circumstance" he meant the local Russian community and his position in the Russian department. I waited for him to continue, but he seemed embarrassed to have said even that much. Tillbear always asked after Liza in a curious but respectful way, as though he wanted to peek through a keyhole but didn't dare. "She must have so many interesting anecdotes," he would say, and wait for me to furnish more information. When I answered, "I don't know about anecdotes, but she sure has a lot of stuff in her apartment," he would just nod.

"Here in Boston she became known for her beautiful jewelry," he said that day, "though I hear she wears none of it now." He looked to me for confirmation and, when I nodded, continued. "Some of it was featured in magazines, I remember. My dear wife, may she rest in peace, kept all of the photographs." He gave a little smile. "We all have our little obsessions."

I showed up at Liza's one afternoon straight from campus, still in my short skirt with the sheer stockings. From the flat wheelboard, Liza looked me up and down and said, "There is a man in your life."

I nodded, hoping she would ask for details; talking about my biologist made me hopeful as to our future.

"My legs were longer and stronger," was all she said, and I'm sure it was true. But mine worked, and I had someone to entangle them with in the night. Unfortunately, he had to be at the lab whenever a new batch of fruit flies was born, and so our evenings were often punctuated by visits to the university. Sometimes he would come to my apartment very late,

two or three a.m. It was a humbling thing, to feel in competition with insects.

“I need you to help me,” Liza announced grandly that afternoon, as if my previous visits had been nothing more than social calls. “You must help me tell a lie.”

An authority would soon be arriving, she explained, to inspect the apartment, and she was worried about the fireplace, a gas one which was not up to code. “You must tell them I knew nothing. The workmen put it in there, and I knew nothing of what was legal or not.”

Why would they believe me more than her, I wanted to ask. But I could see in her panicked eyes that what she needed was simply reassurance. I told her I would help, and waited for a few minutes, expecting to meet an angry landlord or building superintendent.

But it was only a realtor, a tall woman in a long camel-hair coat, showing the apartment to a young, bored-looking couple who lingered by the doorway in a manner suggesting they had already made their minds up against it. Looking nervous, Liza turned her wheel-board away from them, while they raised their eyebrows at the mutilated kilim. The realtor, grinning madly, made futile exclamations over the wooden floors, the decorative molding, the seven-foot windows, the light the place must have in summer. She didn’t mention the fireplace.

When the realtor and the young couple had left, Liza whispered, with great relief, “We are safe.”

One night after dinner at a cheap Vietnamese restaurant that left our cheeks red from MSG, my young biologist told me he had to end our date early to check on a batch of newborn flies. For the first time I wondered about the student intern, an undergraduate who helped him at the lab. I knew she was a young woman, but I did not allow myself to imagine what possible charms she might possess, refusing to fall into a trap as commonplace as jealousy.

Yet I went home despondent. On my telephone’s answering machine was a message from Liza, her voice crackling through the recording. “The night nurse has been called away on a family emergency. If you could aid me tonight, that would be appreciated.”

I packed a toothbrush and flannel pajamas and headed straight over without changing my clothes. When Liza saw me, her eyes narrowed angrily.

“And where is your *amour*?”

“He’s at the lab. The fruit flies are being born every minute.”

She raised her eyebrows dubiously. “Fruit flies,” she said. “*That’s* original.”

I ignored her, though this smarted somewhat. I didn’t want to blame her. How could she be anything but resentful, a ballerina once called “the Butterfly” now bound to a board?

In the night, the apartment looked more formal, less ill-kept, but felt even colder. I heated Liza’s dinner--a frozen meal in a little plastic tray--and fed to the scruffy cat what Liza didn’t finish.

Liza said, “My husband went to another woman, too.”

“What do you mean?” To *insinuate*, I wanted to add.

“Fair hair. Young breasts. Short skirts. Round face.” She said all these things with distaste.

Though filled with anxious rage, I said only, “I’m sorry.”

“He had a great appetite for sex. Appetites must be filled, I suppose. But with such a *thing*!”

I had never seen someone so angry so still.

“She was nothing!” said Liza. “A young nothing of a girl.”

My face burned, but I didn’t reply, just waited for her to tell me more. Which she didn’t. For the rest of the evening we sat with the television in front of us tuned to news shows. Back and forth we made brief, disparaging comments at the follies of the greater world.

When Liza said, “It’s time for me to visit the restroom,” I acted as though I knew what to do. In the bathroom I unstrapped her from her board, and helped her lean back against the special plastic seat that was part of the toilet. In a voice that forbade chit-chat, Liza instructed me in the various duties of hygiene, and I learned the responsibilities of the night nurse. Afterwards I prepared Liza for bed, lifted her onto her mattress, lay her head down in the small dent of her pillow, and pulled the heavy wool cover up to her withered chin. Then I changed into the flannel pajamas I loved but never allowed myself to wear in the presence

of my biologist, and slipped into the twin bed next to Liza's. Throughout the apartment, radiators clattered, a chorus of noisy gremlins.

I slept poorly and therefore heard Liza when, waking from a dream, she called out repeatedly in her sleep. Her words sounded frightened, disturbed, but in Russian I couldn't understand them.

The next morning, I saw that despite her fretting she had not moved at all in the night. Of course, I remembered; she can't move. She lay in exactly the position I had placed her in the night before, the sheets not the least bit wrinkled. When I lifted her, the pillow held the same narrow dent it had when I'd leaned her head into it.

"I have a doctor's appointment at nine thirty," she announced, as if it were news she had acquired during the night. "The van will fetch me at nine. Will you come with me?"

"You should have told me yesterday," I said. But I agreed to accompany her, and exchanged my warm pajamas for the stockings, blouse and skirt that now felt inadequate. I prepared Liza swiftly, drawing the line of red lipstick onto her narrow, dry lips, and pulling her wizened hair back into the tight bun she still preferred. In the elevator, her eyes darted awkwardly, as if trying to ignore someone and doing a very bad job of it. But who was there to ignore besides me? There were only our own doubles, in the mirror that walled the elevator. It was as though Liza sought to escape her own reflection, trapped not in her wheelchair but in the glass itself.

When we returned from the doctor's, the realtor was back. She had let herself into the apartment to show it to a skinny bald man, who was inspecting everything with close attention, turning on faucets, pulling out drawers, cracking windows to see how well they opened. A cardinal had perched in the tree outside the kitchen window, and the gray cat lunged at it unsuccessfully. The man fingered the molding and tapped the walls.

Even in her fossilized state, Liza was visibly upset. "What is he looking for?" she asked the realtor. "What does he expect to find?"

"Are these real ceramic tiles?" the man asked of the kitchen floor.

"Looks like it to me," the realtor said before Liza could answer. "Gorgeous, isn't it?"

The man began opening cabinets, loudly lamenting the lack of storage space in his current abode. “Look how deep these shelves are,” said the realtor. “You’ll never run out of dish space. And the closets! These old apartments have so many closets compared to the new ones.”

The man stepped out of the kitchen and frowned at the old radiator in the living room. He looked around the room, hands on his hips, and ignored the cat, which rubbed hungrily against his ankles. “Does the fireplace work?” he asked.

“I think so,” said the realtor. “It looks like a gas fireplace. Isn’t that great? No need to get logs or kindling or anything. Just flick the switch. This still works, right?” The realtor looked to Liza for confirmation.

“I know nothing,” Liza said.

At my next meeting with Tillbear, I told him about Liza’s behavior toward the realtor.

“Perhaps she *does* have something to hide,” Tillbear mused into his pipe stem. “I’ve always wondered if she might have had a part in her husband’s underground activities.” His eyes lit up with the possibility. And then: “I met her mother-in-law once.”

“You did? Was she as horrible as Liza says?”

“So you’ve heard about her.”

“Only in unflattering terms. When did you meet her?”

“When I was still a young man, in the early sixties. I spent a period of time doing post-doctoral research in Moscow.” He put the tip of the pipe stem to his mouth. “My poor wife refused to come along. It didn’t matter that we were both U.S. citizens; she was convinced that if we went behind the Iron Curtain we would never get out.” He shook his head. “You can’t understand what it was like then.”

“Was Liza still living there?”

“No, she was already in Boston, but I had never met her. Back then I knew very little about her, though I had read most of her husband’s work. Wonderful stories, and a delightful novel. Nothing subversive in it that I could see.” He gave a perplexed little sigh. “The risks people took then—in the name of art and freedom. If we could all be so noble.”

He took a suck from his pipe. “His mother was desperate to be in touch with someone from Boston. Someone from the university there gave her my name.”

“What was she like?”

“She was in dreadful shape, had been ever since her son disappeared. Never got over the shock. That’s what I was told. By the time I went to visit her, she was barely strong enough to speak.” He gave a disappointed sigh. “I never figured out exactly what she wanted from me. A few weeks after I returned to the States, I heard she had passed away.”

“What do you think she wanted?”

“I really don’t know. To tell you the truth, I’d expected to have to deliver a message of some sort--information too precious to mail, you know. I had a romantic notion of myself as playing a brief role in the underground network. But when I saw her--it’s a pity, she really just seemed crazy. All I could gather was that she was very angry.” He shook his head. “Life in those conditions; it affects the mind.”

By mid-March Liza and I had finished clearing out the closets and moved on to the drawers. Liza owned numerous bureaus, some filled with boxes of silk scarves, embroidered handkerchiefs, and numerous hat pins, others crammed with gloves and evening bags of a type the world no longer requires women to wear. I was slightly ashamed to find these objects of more interest than the articles and letters. Especially the jewelry, which, rather than storing in a safe, Liza had stowed in a haphazard way among less valuable possessions. I longed to try on all of these things but didn’t dare to in Liza’s presence.

The realtor continued to show the apartment to prospective buyers, but I could tell that she was becoming impatient; Liza and I were creating quite a mess. Each time the realtor returned, the sprawl had increased, boxes stacked against walls, over-stuffed trashbags strewn about. To clean with any real effect had become nearly impossible. Liza tried to ignore the realtor but always managed, despite her immobility, to look disturbed.

For Tillbear I wrote a paper on mysticism in the Russian short story and received an A. Despite his praise, though, I felt I was failing him somehow; each week he asked me about my hours with Liza as if

expecting some sort of revelatory information. In fact, little of interest ever occurred. Then, one day, emptying yet another set of wooden drawers at Liza's, I came to a case of white leather, with gold corners and a thick gold latch. From her reclining board, Liza told me to open it.

Inside the box was a suede pouch. I unknotted it and shook its contents onto the top of the bureau. In an awkward heap lay a necklace of gaudy amber.

"Hold it up," Liza instructed.

I did so and viewed the necklace, a thick gold chain along which seven large drops of amber hung like heavy orange tears.

"I wore it, though it was not meant for me," Liza said, and I thought I knew what she meant; the necklace was too big for her, too bulbous, good only for someone rounder and softer, someone with meat on her bones. The amber was magnificent, closer to yellow than brown. I looked carefully at each piece to see what might be hidden there and found, caught in each one, surprises of bubbles and seeds. But when I came to the middle section, an amber drop larger than all the others, I paused.

Trapped inside was a tiny, ancient fly.

I stared at the insect while Liza made derogatory comments about South American amber. The fly was nearly symmetrical, its wings minuscule and fine.

"You see how they are formed by nature," Liza explained. "These things become petrified."

Something made me turn to look at Liza. Her eyes were on the necklace, so that I too focused again on the amber bulb. I tried to make sense of Liza's world, where any elevator might be bugged, any mirror two-way glass, any realtor or furniture-mover a potential informant. I saw that now.

Stiff on her board, Liza said, "One of his arms was lame, you know."

It took me a moment to realize that she was referring to her husband.

"Some women are drawn to that sort of thing. They find fragility attractive in a man." Liza did not seem to be referring to herself, and I wondered what had prompted this remark. I stared hard at the necklace.

The fly held its pose. Liza said, "I used to wear this all the time. It did nothing but strangle."

Winter thawed into a slushy spring, daffodils bowing their heads under wet snow. Tillbear and I had moved along to works of the Soviet period. Each week I read stories of paranoia and rebellion, which Tillbear and I discussed in his dark, smoky, sweet-scented room.

I was certain that something was happening between my biologist and his young lab assistant, but I didn't dare voice my suspicions. To state them meant they might be confirmed. Liza had said that jealousy was a deadly thing, and I took her word for it, knew that it could end my relationship altogether. But my doubts overpowered me. I found it hard to concentrate, hard to sleep at night. Liza's reference to her husband's infidelity now seemed directed purely at my own situation. On the nights that I lay in bed alone, I thought of her amber necklace. It had been purchased for someone else entirely--that was what she had meant.

It was around this same time that a husband and wife in their early forties bought Liza's apartment. They visited the place at least four times before making an offer, and each time the realtor looked that much more desperate. Liza sat glaring from the corner of the living room, as if she were not the very one who would most benefit from a sale.

An appraiser came for the home inspection. He was a middle-aged man with a moustache and a baseball cap, and after about thirty minutes in the various rooms he appeared satisfied, said that despite apparent neglect the place was in generally good shape. He noted that the wood of one of the window sills was rotting, and that some caulk was needed in the bath. He pointed out that the model of gas fireplace that had been installed did not fit the original fireplace exactly, but that it was not a problem; he knew the company that had installed it, he said, and they often did this, to cut corners. It was not a safety hazard. When Liza said, "I didn't know," he laughed and winked at her.

"Don't worry," he said. "I won't tell on you."

Liza's eyes flashed with terror and relief. And I too felt a flash--of comprehension. It was more a feeling than a thought. But now I can give it words: She had told.

The hacked-at kilim and the bags stuffed with trash, the starved cat and Liza's grim face all told me that it was possible. Probably any of us could do it--settle into the cruelty the way an old woman slides into

bitterness. Of course at that time I didn't believe I would ever become an old woman. But I would have been happy to punish my biologist in some way.

Was that why I hadn't left him yet, I asked myself, watching Liza's eyes: To admit the truth meant insufferable anger. And I had no way to quell it. I had nothing to use, nothing that might make him jealous or hurt him in any way. Nothing at all to hold over him.

I watched as the man flipped shut the latch on his little kit, told us goodbye, and let himself out the door. Liza gave a small exhalation, as if exhausted.

A day or two later I broke things off with my biologist. For the following weeks I felt a constant heaviness about me, especially when I began noticing him everywhere with his lab assistant. I gave up my short skirts. Despite the brighter mornings, I had trouble springing out of bed as I had before. I wanted to remain in my cocoon of sheets as late as possible. It was as if I were making up for all the sleep I had missed on those late romantic nights.

And yet I slept poorly, tormented by thoughts of my biologist's new conquest. Tossing restlessly in bed, I thought of all the things we do, every day, to appease our appetites.

I was relieved when, within a week of the house inspection, the nurses came to take Liza to the rest home. We said goodbye cordially, Liza treating me as if I were a hired hand and not someone who had once changed her clothes, brushed her hair, and tucked her into her bed. The nurse lifted the cat into a travel basket and said she was glad to adopt it. That same week, Tillbear came down with pneumonia, and we had to miss the next three of our weekly meetings.

With Tillbear, Liza, and my biologist all suddenly removed from my life, I filled the empty spaces of my days with gloomy, assiduous studying. I passed the remainder of my preliminary exams, switched my winter coat for a spring one, and read the job notices in hope of summer employment. And I decided to share with Tillbear my new understanding about Liza. Perhaps, in doing so, I would finally satisfy someone.

When Tillbear and I met for our final session, he was still congested and pale, and I felt we made a good pair, injured but recovering. From the little window behind him, the sun carved a tunnel of dusty light.

“Did our Russian friend get off okay?” Tillbear asked, and I told him yes.

“Such a talented woman,” he said. “It’s a shame how she’s ended up. And her husband. I hate to imagine what he went through.”

The look in his eyes was one we have all had, when relating some tragic event that has happened to someone else. “All they had, really, was their art and their ideals.”

But because of the past few weeks I knew better. I knew how bad it felt to be powerless. I could see how some people, with nothing to use, might make something up.

Hesitating, aware of how he might take it, I told Tillbear, “I’m not sure her husband was a dissident at all. I mean, I’m not sure he was even involved--”

Tillbear set into a great fit of wheezing. At first I thought it a reaction to my comment, but the way he shook his head and said, “Sorry, excuse me,” I understood it to be a result of his illness. He noisily sucked at air in a practiced manner. The struggle felt oddly familiar to me. I didn’t want to be part of it.

It took a full minute for his wheezing to subside. When his breathing became regular, and he had apologized for his coughing, I redirected us toward my studies. And when the semester ended, I told Tillbear goodbye in a final way, knowing I wouldn’t keep in contact with him.

He recently retired, I hear. Liza passed away a number of years ago. Who knows where my biologist is. As with all the world’s absences, I continue to feel their weight on the earth.

(2003)

Rachel Yoder

Deliver Me

That summer before I left, the cicadas descended on Road's End. They'd been hibernating in the ground down by the tree roots since the year I was born, still and deadlike for seventeen long years until mysterious waters inside them began to stir again. A thick desire, something chemical and dark, heated their centers and they clawed, up out of the sweet dirt, up into air, emerging hungry and horny and ready to mate. They moved in clouds over the Ohio greenness, descending on hills of lush old growth, on the blue hayfields, on the full-bloom garden my parents kept. They ate through the ripeness of that summer until all that was left was a gnawed, half-there leafing.

I listened to them as the sun set over my parents' dead-end acreage, their electricity surging and pulling back, so loud it seemed the sun should flare and dim in time with their buzz. During the days though, they were liable to fly right into your hair and get tangled or else splatter like eggs on the windshield of the car. My dad launched nets over the early corn and hot boxed the tomato plants.

"It's unholy," he said, shaking his head. Those were biblical times for all of us up there on that hilltop. Deer Spring the place was called, 40-odd acres of an earnest effort at intentional living, organized by our parents who had committed themselves, and us by default, to being real peace and love Mennonites. They'd come of age in the 60s and brought the era along with them to eastern Ohio, to Deer Spring's backwoods utopia, a peculiar tribe. "Land trust" our parents said. "Intentional community," they explained, but never the obvious word, never "commune," because that just sounded crazy.

My mother insisted on trying to sprout papaya trees from seeds she'd scooped out of supermarket fruit. She soaked them in water then lined the kitchen window with cottage cheese containers full of dirt.

"In Botswana, we had a tree in our backyard and there were so many I just stuffed myself with the fruit. I just stood back there and ate and ate," she explained. She liked talking about the two years she and my father had spent there early in their marriage living and teaching and spreading The Good News on behalf of the Mennonite Church. Only one of her plants had ever taken and sprouted in the living room from a 5-gallon bucket next to the piano. My father rigged a grow light for her on the window trim above the tree. "Just a few more years until it bears fruit," my mom promised as she crocheted.

That summer, though, it was my father. It was the cicadas. He collected a dozen in a Mason jar in the garage and screwed the lid on tight. After they stopped moving, he boiled them for five minutes in a stainless steel pot on the stove. I happened upon him as he was arranging them on a baking tray, the oven already beeping with pre-heated glee. He had lined up the animals neatly, their wings iridescent and eyes bulged. He lightly salted their green bodies, big as mice.

"Will you eat one of these with me?" he asked.

"Why are you doing this?" I demanded, this the question of my adolescence.

"I'm going to eat these locusts with honey," he said, delighted, handing me a honey bear. "If John the Baptist did it, so can I. He baptized Jesus! Aren't you ever curious about what it's like to be a prophet?"

"No," I said. "I'm not curious about what it's like to be a prophet." He slid the pan into the oven and set the timer. My stomach clenched. "I'm not staying around for this," I said, letting the screen door slam behind me.

At dinner, my father reported the cicadas had a nutty flavor, the wings were crispy, that the ooze from the center was less than superb yet brightened by the sweet cream of the honey.

I spooned one bite of applesauce onto my plate and pushed it around. Network news droned on the television in which all the daily events of the empire were reported. During the commercial break, my dad started talking.

“I’m a follower of Christ,” he said, spearing a green bean with his fork. “That’s what we’re doing here, following Christ, trying to do something different, out of the mainstream, not devoting our lives to accumulating wealth.” Yeah, I’d heard it all before, and while most of it seemed good in a moral way, the words my dad used sounded crazy. “Follower of Christ.” “Accumulating wealth.” It all made me want to get in my Volkswagon Quantum and drive away. So I did.

Down the township roads and over the brown river and into West Lafayette, down Main Street which blinked with three stoplights, flashing red and yellow and green at empty intersections. You could pay by the minute to use a couple tanning beds in a trailer off an alley, and at The General Store you could buy a dusty package of gumdrops or half-alive pet gerbils, depending on your needs.

Ridgewood High with its two giant domes bulbed there like an outdated lunar station, large cylindrical hay bales lolling on the front lawn thanks to the thriving Future Farmers of America chapter. At RHS, the football players rubbed snuff and grew their mullets and rattails long. Mouse-haired girls teased their bangs into fans and rakes then poked them with plastic picks in the bathroom mirrors. Because of the farm on the northern side of town, the halls were prone to smell of hog shit in the late summer heat.

After school, rusted pick-ups outfitted with rows of lights on the cab roofs or jacked-up suspensions for mudding revved their engines. Boys in billed caps with their elbows hung out of open windows yelled obscenities and shot brown spit from the corners of their mouths. They pounded their palms on the sides of their trucks as their radios sang, *Blame it all on my roots, I showed up in boots and ruined your black tie affair.*

I kept driving, faster, out and up and over the looping passes of County Road 16 to the county seat, to the city of Coshocton, 13,000 people deep. Coshocton, a Delaware Indian word loosely translated as “union of waters,” so named for the muddy convergence of the Walhonding, Tuscarawas, and Muskingum rivers at the city’s western edge. Coshocton, not much better than West Lafayette but we’d take it because it’s all we had within reach. I cruised in the Quantum with fellow Mennonite communist Abbey, down Second, past Buehler’s Grocery,

Dairy Queen, Taco Bell, Fashion Bug, Wal-Mart. Arby's and Hardee's, the Wendy's drive-thru, the drive-thru liquor store. The Downtowner Plaza, Long John Silver's and Odd Lots and Quality Farm and Fleet. In the end, we always found ourselves back at the same place, McDonald's.

"Boys," I murmured to Abbey as we pulled into the parking lot. Kids sat on the hoods of their hand-me-down Volvos in round pools of light as a paparazzi of moths swarmed the bulbs overhead. Others leaned on warm metal and sat on curbs.

"Boys," Abbey cooed, real quiet, doing a tiny little dance with her hands.

Boys who played soccer and swam. Boys who went on ski vacations and listened to hip hop. Boys who wore polo shirts and were going to go to college out of state. Boys with floppy hair and boys with buzzed heads. Boys, short and tall. Boys, thin and wide. Boys hitching up their baggy pants, boxer shorts pulled tight around high, hard butts the size of mid-summer cantaloupes. Boys.

And then there he was, loud from across the parking lot, an idea I didn't even know I'd ever had easing its way into focus, into the clear lines of his body: Mike Salmon, beyond gorgeous, the tan, the buzz-cut hair, the muscles. Oh God, the muscles. Swimmer's bod, we called it. Broad shoulders and impossibly tapered hips, smooth hard muscles like something carved by a Renaissance libertine. We heard they shaved everything so as to be more streamlined, but could neither confirm nor deny this scandalous claim, our own little high school lacking both pool and swimmer boys and us, in turn, devoid of such rarefied knowledge of that world and its aquatic inhabitants.

Mike had crushed his heels doing a flip-turn during his last all-Ohio meet, but he didn't seem to care. He had already re-set the Coshocton High freestyle record with a seemingly unbeatable time, so he was all right with the crushed heels, and it was summer anyway, long past the swim season and that old pain, and we went and got ice cream on our first date at one of those quaint, Rockwellian stands run by high school girls that you can hardly believe exists anymore. We rolled up in his flashy car, and he bought me pink sherbet which I nipped at, too nervous to really stomach anything. He was loud and flamboyant and self-assured. He waved his arms around and lifted me off the ground to

make me squeal. He slapped high fives with his guy friends and winked at the ice cream stand girls who, in turn, looked at me with a mixture of envy and contempt, which made me feel embattled. I was ready to throw down if they mouthed off or looked at me dirty for too long, ready to bury my fists in their midsections made flabby from summer-long diets of chocolate-dipped soft serve. I wasn't what anyone would call a big girl, but I was high on Mike Salmon which made me strong in a different way, amped by a heady mixture of lust, egotism, and the opening riffs of "Bulls on Parade" performed by my newly beloved *Rage Against the Machine*, what Mike and soon I simply referred to as *Rage*.

Rage. I liked the way it felt in my mouth, part growl, part cheer. "Bulls on Parade" made me want to head bang and seizure. It made me want to thrust in new, uncoordinated ways. The opening, witchy chant of the electric guitar—*wee wee, wicky, wow wow*—was interrupted by an indecipherable scream, and then Hell and Heaven split open and flying things of all sorts with sharp wings and sharp tails started having vicious sex above the Firebird in a bloody, shrieking cloud as we sped through the streets. I wanted a gun. I wanted to dry hump. I wanted to bite off the perfect mouthful of meat that was Mike Salmon's bicep. I wanted, I wanted. Clenched and blood-filled, I wanted so much.

* * *

I did not want to pick blueberries. I did not want to weed the beans. I did not want to help with the sweet corn, husking and boiling, then impaling each cob upright on a nail driven through a board. We ran a circular chisel down around each cob, shearing off the kernels. We scraped the naked cob with the back of a butter knife to get out all the juice. My mother sat barefoot at the kitchen table in a faded apron scooping corn into plastic bags, her dress hitched up above her knees. She sang along to classical music on NPR or cassette tapes of Christian praise music or CDs of choral cantatas sung by heavy-robed Christians.

"Come on," she said, gesturing at the nail with the paring knife in her hand.

Better, though, to help with the corn than to help with the meat. Come fall the trees were hung with the gutted carcasses of deer. They spun slowly from ropes hung round their necks. On the night after my dad had killed his first of the season, my mom cooked its heart in a

pressure cooker on the stove. The meat was pale and moved easily on a plate. I wasn't made to eat it but I couldn't help smelling it, an odor even worse than the taste. Liver came out of the freezer in mid-winter, fried up by my father with white onions and then sliced into iridescent bites which he sucked on as he ate. Bricks of venison meatloaf. Loops of trail bologna. Whole hanks of deer meat in big black cookers stewed in their own juices. The roasts and filets cooked with butter on the oven's broiling pan were manageable, the meat succulent and sweet until I spotted our neighbor's mutt Rocky gnawing on a rancid deer head or dragging a leg down the dirt road. He chewed through the hide and licked out all the meat, cracked the bones to get the marrow and left them piled in the dying, autumn lawn.

Rocky and the rest of them, the dogs of Deer Spring—pinto bean ticks sucking in their ears and necks, dried mud nuggets matted in their hair, always bad smelling, drool in long strings, yet happy as you've ever seen dogs, especially during hunting season. During the summers, though, they got hot and nervous, caught up in the clouds of white dust that trailed our rusted cars, snapping at the tires. They ran in herds behind us to the Deer Spring pond, cutting through the dry fields of mowed weeds, through the bands of forest, and meeting us down there, under the canopy, in the cold dark water.

As they dove the perimeter, we launched ourselves out over the pond on a tree swing knotted on rope thick as our arms. For a moment we were suspended, one second of weightlessness before we pulled back to the pond, through the glass of its surface and into the yellow underwater. There, beneath even the valley, we opened our eyes and watched as pond flecks floated and swam. Our skin felt like velvet. Fish nibbled our toes. This was their holy land, ours if we claimed it. We were told there was a larger plan. That we had been chosen was evident even if it remained unclear whether the choosing had been our parents' or the Lord's.

* * *

Whatever romance we may have dreamed our ways into during our childhoods evaporated as we awoke to adolescence. We discovered agnosticism and took to referring to ourselves as "Mennostics." The high soprano part of old German hymns, the laying on of hands, loving

Jesus: we now viewed all of these as inherently hilarious. When our parents moved our congregation from the country church house we shared with the Methodists to a storefront next to Your Pizza on main street West Lafayette, we both relished and dreaded being seen there in the window, praying. It was funny as an idea, us praying or passing the peace or, height of humor, washing each other's feet in a store front as our classmates cruised by, though not actually funny to be those actual people in real life. The idea of us—we could see it there outside of ourselves, those communist Mennonites, those weirdoes. And the daily facts of our lives—muddy pond and rusty cars, the goats and gardens and raw wood—were proof of this idea, hard evidence of our peculiar identity, yet still it felt as though these parts did not add up to something entirely whole.

In high school, we swam at the pond until Todd Malenke, Jael's dad, spotted it in the deep end with a head like a tree branch poking through the water. Snapper, he said. He devoted himself to tracking its movements. Don't go near the cattails. Stay away from the raft. Get out of the deep end.

It was no longer safe to swim there, but honestly we were looking for an excuse. After the snapper we gave ourselves over completely to the Meyers' new, in-ground pool, just up the lane from the pond, clean blue and framed in white cement sidewalks. We went to Forest Hill Lake and Colonial Pool where we met acceptable boys from Coshocton, from a different high school, boys who had never heard of Deer Spring.

As I left to drive to Mike Salmon's house, my father touched my shoulder and said, "Remember who you are." I squinted at him, then slammed the door and gunned the Quantum fast down the lane. I drove fast with the windows open and my long hair licking the side of the car. His statement assumed so much, assumed he knew who I was, that I was someone to begin with. Who was I, I wanted to ask him, his shirt balled in my fists, me shaking and shaking and shaking. The good Mennonite girl he and my mother wanted? Or was I the Deer Spring weirdo the RHS kids thought they knew? Maybe I was someone else entirely, someone nobody except I had imagined, a dark-haired girl speeding away from them with her damp bikini tucked under her clothes, a conglomeration

of salt and skin and wanting, Mike Salmon's girl, a girl they didn't know and had never met. Maybe they all had no clue.

I took curves too fast and sang with feeling to the new Bob Marley cassette twirling in the tape deck.

"Have you heard this?" I asked Mike once I got to his house, showing him the cassette box. "It's amazing."

"Uh, yeah," he said, as he tossed the case back to me. "It's Bob Marley. He's, like, famous." And Mike's sophisticated knowledge did not end with music. When we started dating, I was pretty sure he had actually done it with his ex-girlfriend, a swimmer like Mike with broad shoulders and a face that reminded me of a bat.

The year before, in what was to be the closest thing to a sex talk I would ever have with my father, he told me about a convention of Christian young people who had made pledges to maintain their virginity until they got married. They had actually signed contracts, he said, before asking me if I would have done the same thing.

"Uh, no," I said, to which my father raised his eyebrows and tried to smile a little.

I had, after all, kissed—and very much liked kissing—boys before Mike. I had even made out with Jeramie Selders on my parents' living room sofa while they slept just feet away in their bedroom. As Jeramie reached his hands up my shirt and then desperately whispered, "What do you want me to do?" all I could think was, "I don't know, but everything."

Alone in Mike's house, though, I lost my nerve. When we were rollerblading in the basement or eating ice cream sandwiches, I was fine. But once we ascended to the second floor and Mike showed me the guest room, running his hand over the comforter on the bed, my stomach turned. In his bedroom, he sat in his black leather desk chair, an expensive looking thing, and stroked the armrests, his legs splayed open toward me.

"It's like astronaut sex when you do it in the chair," he said.

"Should we go back downstairs now?" I wondered.

Put me in a moving car with Mike, though, or at the lake, somewhere quasi public where all-the-way sex would be a challenge, and my hormones quickly got the better of my nerves. We drove through Coshocton, the electric guitar of *Rage* cutting the humid Ohio heat and

made out at every red light. At the lake we groped each other on our damp towels while our friends tried not to notice.

One afternoon, a week into our daily affair, Mike took me to the nature preserve.

“The nature preserve?” I asked.

“The nature preserve,” he said. The nature preserve seemed to me to be about as remarkable as my backyard: tall weeds and wildflowers, wooded land, a steep, sun-scalded hillside covered in yellowing grass. We sat on the hill, and Mike kissed me. Suddenly, I understood the nature preserve.

It was noon, the sun high over us, as Mike peeled my shirt off, then his. Dirt and grass stuck to the sweat on my back, and Mike’s naked, tan chest loomed above me, sweat running in one clear line between his pectoral muscles, his shoulders taut and hard. He unhooked my bra, and I whispered, “What if someone comes over here?”

“No one’s going to come,” he said, easing my bra off. “Relax.” He kissed me, pushed his hips into mine, but I couldn’t relax as I grabbed at his slick back. He pressed himself upward and looked at me, my pert seventeen-year old breasts framed by white triangles of un-tanned skin, the sweat trailing between them, down the middle of my flat stomach, and pooling in my belly button. Mike bowed his head and in one extended lick pulled his tongue across my skin from navel to neck.

“Salty,” he said.

Mike’s shoulders were broad, blocking the sun. His red forearms strained as he held himself above me, posed as if to do a push-up. I grabbed his neck and pulled him against me. We rocked our still-clothed hips together until it hurt, and then we rocked some more.

I was very aware of my shorts, the fact that they were still on and buttoned securely. Mike was no doubt also acutely aware of this fact. His swim trunks, my cotton shorts—these were the only things separating me from adulthood, from knowing the seductive and scary world beyond that of my upbringing. I could feel that world firmly and insistently pulsing through Mike’s swim trunks, but I could not—did not want to—touch it, not yet.

“What are we even doing?” Mike asked, adjusting himself and wincing up at the sky.

“What?” I asked.

“You could take your shorts off,” he offered helpfully.

“No,” I said.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Someone might walk over here,” I said, motioning to the woods.

“No one’s going to walk over here,” Mike said.

“Yeah,” I said. He rolled over and sat on the hill beside me. I sat up and put on my bra. He brushed weeds off my back. We both put on our shirts, and then we left, Mike marching through the weeds in his flip flops, me trudging behind, disappointed in my lack of bravery. I got in my car and drove, back over the rivers, back through West Lafayette, back up the townships roads, back past the Dead End sign, all the way home.

* * *

One afternoon near the end, the phone rang.

“Come over,” Jael said on the phone. “It’s in our driveway.”

When I got there, Jael’s little brothers were dancing around its head near the porch stairs. Rocky the dog wouldn’t go near it and instead whined, tripping backward. Look, it’s still holding on, Todd said as the boys laughed. He lifted a pair of metal pliers. On the end, the snapping turtle’s head clamped tight to metal. The thing could take off your finger, Todd said. I watched the muscles in its jaw contract.

Its headless body sat on the picnic table in the screened-in porch. Jael and her brothers gathered around as Todd ran his knife under the edge of the shell to loosen the tissue and then began working on the legs, pushing the butcher knife hard as he could through the skin, moving it back and forth with much force and little success. It took a while to get a leg off and when he did, the snapper flesh was thick and purple gray. The thin bone at the center of the meat bent like a green twig. Todd put all his weight on the knife, palms on the metal, and snapped through.

After the shell had been loosened from the skin, after its legs had all been cut off for stew, Todd slit the snapper low across the belly, working the blade through the soft shell. He pried the body open with his hands and said well will you look at that. He scooped out a handful of orange eggs the size of big marbles and then held them in his bloody palm for us to see.

“Aren’t all the way formed yet. Just the yolks,” he said. “We’ll make an omelet.”

The boys cawed like birds and each took one to squeeze and poke, and I looked at Jael, who shrugged. It seemed wrong taking the eggs. He emptied out her belly into a bowl and the eggs pooled there in the bottom. They smelled. They smelled horrible, like mildewed pond towels, or Rocky’s sludged undersides, the paste of fish shit and rotted greens. There was something else there too, something I knew from the tips of my fingers after I’d stuck them down Mike’s pants and found him hard and hot and slick. It was that musk and salt, that skin. The body oozed something thick out its leg stumps and neck onto the warped wood of the table. Later, Jael reported the omelet wasn’t fit to eat. Her dad and her brother had just a few bites before they threw it away.

I didn’t hate it there in Deer Spring. It’s just I was always under something, on my back and floating an inch below the surface, just an inch higher and I’d be up and out of it, up into the air, I’d be able to breathe. But I couldn’t. There was a big hand or a dead weight. I was stuck right there, hovering as I held my breath, looking out at this whole world, blurred and faraway. Driving and driving and speed and blind curves, Mike and his hardness and blood and his skin—all of this was as close as I could get to free.

There was only to be one more hot interlude with him that summer, a Coshocton party in a popular girl’s backyard with a pool. Abbey and I wore our bikinis underneath our clothes. Mike had pierced his bottom lip that same day, pushing a silver stud through the soft skin himself. In the bathroom at the party, under the red light of a heat lamp, Mike lifted me up and planted me on the counter, pushed my legs apart, and then positioned himself in between them, kissing me hard, his hands gripping my thighs. We considered each other there, the screams and laughter from the party outside muffled by our desires, thick and almost touchable in the red and black air.

“The lighting makes us look better,” Mike said, staring at my red-hued features and me at his, chiseled and shadowy, his eyes pure black and glittering. He looked both sexy and scary in that lighting, like an image in a soft-edged, red-toned photograph of a Mike of the future, a Mike we both didn’t yet know.

I had a thought then—a fleeting idea, one too wise and big for me to hold in my seventeen-year old mind for more than a moment—that I would not, was not humanly able, to give Mike Salmon what he wanted there in that bathroom, and he, in turn, could not give me what I was looking for either. This went beyond adolescent swooning, beyond sex, and into the rooms of our achy yearning, rooms to which we had not yet found the keys. What was in those rooms? I kissed Mike and sucked on his bottom lip, drawing blood. We crashed around the bathroom, faces soldered together, then pulled apart. He tugged at my hips. I slouched toward him. He sighed, then opened the door that led back into the flashing blue night.

Outside, Abbey rolled her eyes at me, and we sipped beer from red plastic cups and felt murderously cool there amongst the city dwellers, the Coshocton girls in their bikinis taunting the Coshocton boys in their swim trunks. Mike was loud, as usual, and insanely lip-pierced, swilling beer as his ex-girlfriend loomed under a tree with her squadron of slit-eyed lackeys.

A few days after the Coshocton party, Mike called me to say he was getting back together with his ex-girlfriend, what now seems the inevitable and obvious ending to our romance but what, at the time, was a blindsided blow. I lamented I had not had astronaut sex with him and sobbed openly. My heart was broken, deeply and painfully, for the first time.

“You’ve only been seeing him for two weeks. Why are you crying so hard?” my dad asked.

“I really liked him,” I mustered.

“I just don’t know why you’re so sad,” he said.

* * *

At the end of the summer, after the male cicadas had impregnated the females, after the females had laid their scores of eggs on tree branch or hay weed, after they all had crawled onto leaves shaded by other leaves, they did what all good creatures do eventually and went ahead and died. It wasn’t long before their eggs hatched to curled grubs and crawled their ways back down from where their parents had come, back down to burrow and suck on the pale carrots of tree roots beneath the trees and live there for another seventeen years.

Once the world outside had stopped moving, the fields and woods wore the caramel skins of the parents like jewelry, their feet stuck in bark grooves or under leaves or on the siding of our house. Through some magic of hip or wing, they had sloughed off their nymph bodies which, once dry and brittle, seemed far too small to have ever contained them.

I was going to college that fall, college in the city, in Washington D.C., as far away as I could get at seventeen. I was going to make city friends and ride the subway and browse museums. I would intern on Capitol Hill and probably meet Bill Clinton—there was a very good chance, I reasoned—and study abroad in Italy at a Rockefeller villa. Everything was possible. I was enrolled pre-med even though I knew equations with unequivocal answers didn't make sense to me, but I wanted to be a surgeon so I could cut open bodies and look at what was inside.

I thought my parents had never wanted anything great. Deer Spring seemed to me just another ordinary undertaking, a quiet statement muffled by the grasses and trees, a failed Shangri-la soon to be swallowed back up by the land. I wanted them to want bigger lives, to want culture and money and careers. I was burning with my seventeeness. I was sure they could not know what it was like to feel you had to leave behind everything just to get one gulp of your own pure air. I didn't think they knew about sacrifice or longing. I could not imagine then, and would not be able to for years, their long nights of wakefulness or cool mid-afternoon moments of perfect terror, one sharp moment that stops you whole and keeps you there inside it, staring straight through your faded dreams.

The preceding piece is excerpted from an essay that previously appeared in the anthology *The Rumpus Women - Volume 1*.

FEATURED ARTISTS

Visual Art

Ryan Mastro

What Cheer Brigade



Newport Folk Festival, 2011

All photographs by Ryan Mastro were taken with a Mamiya RZ67 Medium Format Camera.

What Cheer Brigade Drummer



Newport Folk Festival, 2010

What Cheer Brigade Tuba Player



Newport Folk Festival, 2010

Breanne Duren



Minneapolis, 2011

Pete Seeger



Newport Folk Festival, 2011

Pokey LaFarge



Newport Folk Festival, 2011

Brown Bird



Newport Folk Festival, 2011

Glen Hansard, The Swell Season



Newport Folk Festival, 2011

Joe Pug



Newport Folk Festival, 2009

Sallie Ford



Newport Folk Festival, 2011

Sam Bush



Newport Folk Festival, 2010

CONTRIBUTORS

BERKLEE STUDENTS & ALUMNI

Fiction

Caitlin Gjerdrum is a Professional Music major currently studying at Berklee. She says to look for her on Broadway in a couple years, or else peruse the picket fences in a quiet suburb where you could just as easily find her *inconnue* but blissfully in love. She isn't sure where she'll end up, but as she notes, "Who is these days, really?"

Mika Ella Lorch is a Berklee student from Israel. She is a vocalist majoring in songwriting. She writes in Hebrew and in English and after years of writing songs has recently started writing fiction.

Peter Maltzan is currently finishing the last three credits of his Berklee degree as a Professional Music major and playing his fourth season of baseball for the Emerson College team, his second year as a captain. He is also working on an audio electronics startup, U-turn Audio, which will be launching with the release of a high-quality, low cost turntable in the next two to three months. He currently lives in Brookline and his hometown is Lexington, MA.

Max Sergienko is a twenty-year-old guitarist, writer, and occasional poet hailing from Portland, Oregon. He currently resides in Boston and studies at Berklee.

Chris Stites was born in Los Angeles, CA, and is currently studying Electronic Production and Design at Berklee. He is a writer of poetry and short stories, a drummer, and an electronic composer. "Flying Home" was inspired by his frequent flights back and forth between Boston and L.A.

Julian Wong is an aspiring musician from Singapore currently studying at Berklee. He was a Literature and Writing student of Professor Mark Polanzak. Julian would like to thank Mark and LENG-111 classmates for their feedback and generosity.

Nonfiction

Nick Cabrera is a twenty-year-old sixth semester Music Business major from New York. As a songwriter, he uses creative writing as a way to hone his lyric writing skills. After he graduates, Nick hopes to work in marketing for a record company or agency.

Mercedes Diaz is a fifth semester Professional Music major with a Creative Writing minor. This creative nonfiction story was inspired by her own personal experience growing up as a foster care child.

Dave Lee is a recent graduate of Berklee currently serving in the U.S. Army Rangers. He's from Northbrook, IL, the third child of three, and believes that he'll most likely end up back in Chicago. He finds it important to laugh at things and notes of himself, "I like realism, cynicism, and dogs. But I also like fantasy, optimism, and cats."

Armeen Musa is a singer-songwriter from Bangladesh studying at Berklee. Upon releasing her debut album in 2008, she has toured with several international artists in England, Bangladesh, and the U.S. She is also an enthusiastic photographer and blogger. Her FUSION essay and accompanying photographs were inspired by her experiences living in the village of Santiniketon in India.

Art Santora is a Berklee alumnus.

Annie Sklar is a tenor saxophonist and jazz composer from Moretown, Vermont. She currently resides in Somerville, MA.

Ben Walding is a seventh semester student at Berklee studying Music Production and Engineering. Born and raised in the Midwest, he

sometimes yearns for the nation's heartland instead of the smattering of cities, crowds, and concrete of the East Coast. His featured work is a memoir-like piece about a pharmacy in Iowa in which he worked throughout high school.

FUSION City

Christian Choh is a nineteen-year-old saxophonist and composer. Currently in his fourth semester at Berklee, he is studying with George Garzone and pursuing a degree in Jazz Composition.

Joel Clarkson is a Berklee alumnus.

Bora (Bo Kyung) Kim has been practicing creative writing in English and Korean since she moved to California at age ten. Not only does she practice creative writing, she also has a passion for contemporary design, photography, and performing classical/contemporary music. She sincerely believes she can apply all her passions to the fields of business and marketing. She is currently in her third semester at in Berklee, majoring in Music Business and Management and minoring Visual Culture and New Media.

Wing-Ching Poon is a Hong Kong-born, Canadian-raised student at Berklee. Currently he has not declared his major, but plans to apply for CWP and Performance (the plethora of majors and choices at Berklee confuse him). Proud to be contributing to FUSION Magazine, this is his first foray into the world of writing and journalism. He writes to his readers, "Let's hope you enjoy it, eh?"

Natalia Sulca, aged nineteen, is originally from Miami, Florida. She is a fourth semester Berklee student who plans to major in both Voice and Piano Performance. She has been playing since she was four and singing since she was eleven. In future, she hopes to perform on both instruments.

Poetry

Maya de Vitry is from Pennsylvania and plays fiddle, banjo, and guitar. She loves songs and mountains. She is currently traveling, writing, and performing. To see a video of Maya performing her work, please see the Slam Poetry section of the *FUSION* website—www.fusionmagazine.org.

Peter Maltzan is currently finishing the last three credits of his Berklee degree as a Professional Music major and playing his fourth season of baseball for the Emerson College team, his second year as a captain. He is also working on an audio electronics startup, U-turn Audio, which will be launching with the release of a high-quality, low cost turntable in the next two to three months. He currently lives in Brookline and his hometown is Lexington, MA.

Sarah Mount is singer/writer from Cleveland, Ohio. Before attending Berklee, she studied Nursing and English at Case Western Reserve University and was published in the annual publication *The Case Reserve Review*. She will graduate in May 2012 with a Songwriting major and Creative Writing minor. She is a member of the 2012 Berklee Poetry Slam team and also performs in the band Tumbleweed Company. She enjoys thunderstorms, a strong cup of coffee, fine leather boots, and occasionally causing a ruckus.

Laura Siersema (Berklee '90) is an independent performing and recording artist living in western Massachusetts. Her poetry has been published in *Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review*, *Cream City Review* and *Lullwater Poetry Review*. Woven in the language of poetry and dreams, *Talon of the Blackwater*, her latest release, features Grammy/Juno nominated Michael Farquharson, T Lavitz, and Eugene Friesen. Her first two albums, *When I Left Loss* and *Love Flows Like the Blood of a River* link songs and spoken word pieces that she notes, “lend a riveting, personal touch and at times cut so deep the hair on the listener’s skin goes on end.”

Rafferty Swink was born in Santa Monica, California. At a young age his family moved to Ashland, Oregon. Now nineteen years old, Rafferty resides in Boston and currently attends Berklee.

Ryan Toll, originally from Snoqualmie, WA, studied Music Education at Berklee and graduated in 2011. He is currently a music teacher and a member of the Americana band Tumbleweed Company.

Translation Initiative

Dustin Cleveland is a bass player from the Midwest with a keen interest in foreign languages. Upon finishing his studies at Berklee, he hopes to pursue a career in teaching.

Luís Lascano is a bass player, composer, artist, and writer from Buenos Aires, Argentina. A frequent contributor to *FUSION*, Luís recently graduated from Berklee with a degree in Film Scoring. He lives in New York City.

Magdalena Ponssa is from San Miguel de Tucuman, Argentina. She studied mathematics at the University of Tucuman and was a high school teacher for ten years. She has been writing poetry since 1995 and has published two books. “Trivialidades” is from her second book, entitled *Orfanatos* (Orphanages). Ms. Ponssa’s daughter, Silvina Moreno, is a graduate of Berklee and has set this poem of her mother’s to music. To watch an interview with and performance by Silvina Moreno please see the *FUSION* website: www.fusionmagazine.org.

Ryo Tanaka is from Japan and is currently studying at Berklee. He started to play drums when he was five years old, and his favorite music styles are Rock and Pop, but he always keeps opening his heart to any kind of music. He is also interested in intercultural communication. He loves to introduce Japanese culture to people who have different backgrounds and learn about the other cultures from them, too. This interest prompted him to participate in this translation project.

Drama & Film

Jónas Bergmann Björnsson, a Film Scoring major, is an Icelandic writer and musician. Born in Reykjavik in 1987 to a book publisher and an attorney, Jónas has always had the written word in his blood. His interest for writing began as a small boy, enjoying writing short stories for fun. His earliest success as a writer was when his oldest sister applied to the National Film and TV School in London as a producer; she used a short story written by Jónas for her interview and got in. Jónas has recently embarked on the journey of script and playwriting. “Blind Luck” was written in Berklee’s “Scriptwriting for Theater, TV, and Film” workshop.

Dave D’aranjo is a bass guitarist, writer, music producer, and film buff. After several years of gigging in his native home of Singapore, he moved to New York City in 2007 to study at the famous Bass Collective. There he participated in Victor Wooten’s instructional DVD “Groove Workshop” in 2008, before moving to Boston to pursue his degree at Berklee College of Music. Dave occasionally returns to Asia for performances and has played gigs in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan, France, Norway, and Holland. He’s currently producing way too many projects and is planning a debut studio album by 2013. “The Uncle” was written in Berklee’s “Scriptwriting for Theater, TV, and Film” workshop.
www.davedaranjo.com

Visual Art

Aldon Baker is a photographer and a composer studying Film Scoring at Berklee. He has been very passionate and serious about photography for some time and studied black and white photography extensively before becoming interested in digital photography. Over the past few years, he has photographed parts of Peru, the Amazon rainforest, Seattle, San Francisco, Boston, Arches National Park, Olympic National Park, and Barcelona.

Armeen Musa. See entry under Nonfiction.

FEATURED ARTISTS

Steve Almond is the author of seven books, most recently the memoir *Rock and Roll Will Save Your Life* and the story collection *God Bless America*. The soundtrack to his life can be found at www.stevealmondjoy.com.

William John Bert's work has appeared in *Anomalous Press*, *Colorado Review*, *pacificREVIEW*, and *Sonora Review*. He lives in Washington, DC, where he was awarded a 2011 DC Young Artist Grant and placed second in the city's annual Larry Neal Competition. He volunteers with 826DC, a youth writing center, and he co-curates the annual Call + Response art series.

Kelly Davidson is a freelance photographer and designer whose assignments have taken her everywhere from Maui to Lisbon. Winner of 3 New England Press Association (NEPA) awards and long-standing member of both the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA) and the Boston Press Photographers Association (BPPA), Kelly continues to work for a diverse variety of clients, including Digitas, Berklee College of Music, the Boston Phoenix and Financial Planning magazine. Kelly holds a BS in Photojournalism from BU's College of Communication.

A. Van Jordan is the author of three collections of poems: *Rise* (Tia Chucha Press); *M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A* (W.W. Norton & Co); and *Quantum Lyrics* (W.W. Norton & Co). Jordan's work has been honored with a number of awards including a Whiting Writers Award, a Pushcart Prize, a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, and a United States Artists Williams Fellowship. He is a Professor in the Dept. of English at the University of Michigan, and teaches in the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. *The Cineaste*, his forthcoming collection, will be published in 2013 by W.W. Norton & Co.

Daphne Kalotay is the author of the novel *Russian Winter* (HarperCollins), which won the 2011 Writers' League of Texas Fiction Award and has

been published in 21 foreign editions, and the fiction collection *Calamity and Other Stories* (Doubleday), which was short-listed for the 2005 Story Prize. Daphne holds an MFA in Creative Writing and a PhD in Modern & Contemporary Literature, both from Boston University, and has taught literature and creative writing at Boston University, Skidmore College, Grub Street, and Middlebury College. A recipient of fellowships from the Christopher Isherwood Foundation, the MacDowell Colony, and Yaddo, she lives in the Boston area.

Ryan Mastro has been documenting the music scene since 2005. He has photographed a wide range of artists including, Radiohead, Dave Matthews Band, Phish, Tool, B.B. King, The White Stripes, Jay-Z and Arcade Fire. Ryan has produced some of the most iconic images of the Bonnaroo, Coachella and Newport Folk festivals, where he serves as an official photographer. His work has appeared in various books and galleries and has been recognized by PDN, Billboard and the International Photography Awards. (All photographs were taken with a Mamiya RZ67 Medium Format Camera.)

Rachel Yoder edits *draft: the journal of process* (draftjournal.com). She holds an MFA in fiction from the University of Arizona and an MFA in nonfiction from The University of Iowa. Her writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Sun Magazine*, and *The Kenyon Review*, among others, and has been selected for anthologies including *Best of the Web 2010* (Dzanc) and *YOU: An Anthology of Essays in the Second Person* (Welcome Table Press). www.racheljyoder.com

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