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Commonthought Staff

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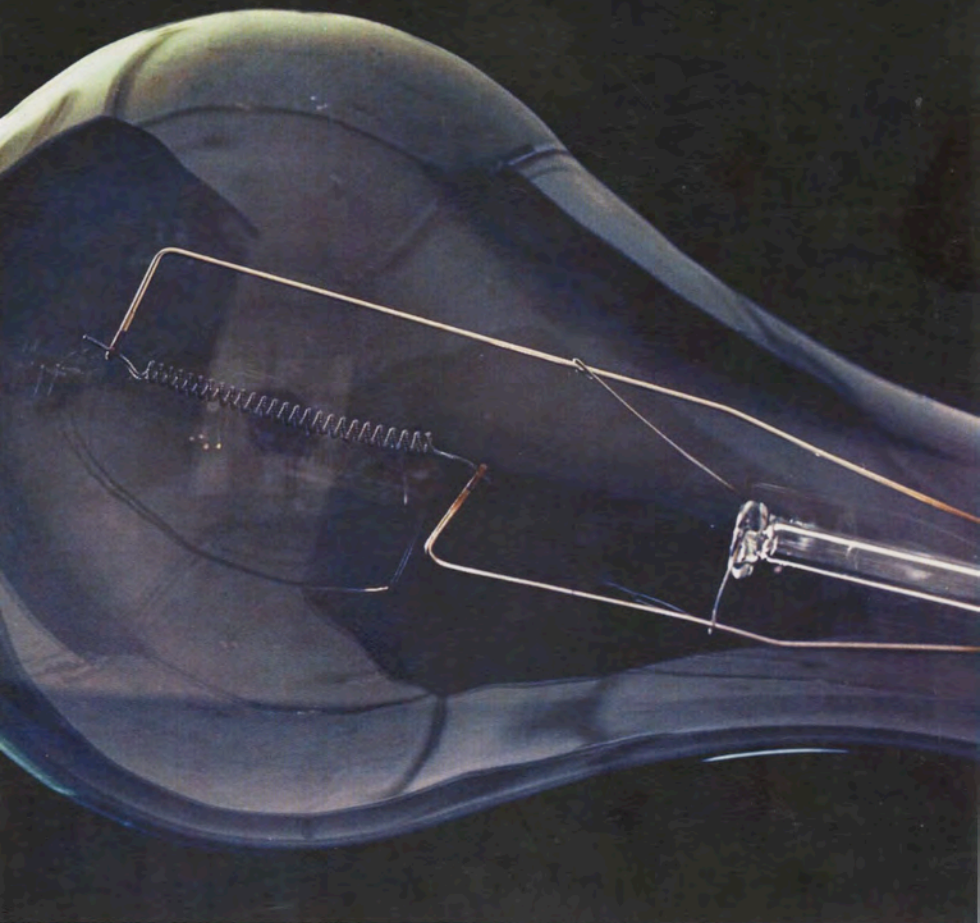
Commonthought

The Magazine of the Arts at Lesley University

Fall 2008

Volume 19

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Number 1

A Quick Word from the Editorial Board

Commonthought is not just a literary magazine. It is more monumental than simple words on paper. It is a refugee camp for the big ideas in small lives. Each of these writers have dared to commit to paper the big things that shape our existence and the small things that we remember years down the road with smiles and faint sighs. In short, you hold the world in your hands.

Handle with care.

~ Dave Cocco
Member of the Editorial Board

Table of Contents

Prose

<i>Grimsday</i> - Joshua Innocent	4
<i>Where do stories go when the storyteller stops before they're finished?</i> - Martin Maguire	20
<i>Something</i> - Alexandra Hanley	32
<i>Untitled</i> - Hannah Neale	37
<i>A Cat You Say?</i> - Steven Fineman	47
<i>A Dilemma</i> - Jake Bison	59
<i>The Steps of Melodrama</i> - Jeremy Gray	74
<i>I May Never Blow My Nose Again</i> - Kathryn Greer	76
<i>Airport</i> - Katrina Freund	80
<i>The Circle of Death Swings Around Us</i>	
<i>Stitched To The Sewing Klatch</i> - Andy Cerrone	82
<i>Myrrh Is Mine, Its Bitter Perfume</i> - Christina Hughs	88

Poetry

<i>Saving the Seasons: A Sonnet</i> - Cat Brennan	1
<i>An Ice Storm in Carroll, Maine</i> - Susan Merrifield	2
<i>Frozen</i> - Ella Stiler-Cote	27
<i>Heat</i> - Ella Stiler-Cote	27
<i>The Lark</i> - Anonymous	29
<i>Found</i> - Amanda Bean	31
<i>Dialogue with a Dead Man</i> - Susan Merrifield	57
<i>Untitled</i> - Ashley De Pasquale	64
<i>Trip to the MFA</i> - Val Maloof	65
<i>Intuition</i> - Justin Goodstein-Aue	67
<i>genesis</i> - Brendan Phillips	68
<i>Thoughts Upon Waking</i> - David Cocco	72
<i>6:15</i> - Hollie Brandstatter	96
<i>When poetry dies</i> - Olga Godes	98

Table of Contents

Art

<i>Walnut Street 3 (2006)</i> - Shaun McNiff	19
<i>Bench and Trash</i> - Alexandra Hanley	26
<i>Untitled</i> - Alexandra Hanley	56
<i>Variation</i> - Richard Cranford	58
<i>Squam Rock 3 (2005)</i> - Shaun McNiff	66
<i>Guatemala</i> - Richard Cranford	71
<i>Nasturtium</i> - Richard Cranford	79
<i>Textured Wall</i> - Alexandra Hanley	95

Contributor's Notes

<i>Amanda Bean, Jason Bison, Cat Brennan, Holly, Brandstatter, Andy Cerrato, David Cocco</i>	100
<i>Richard Cranford, Ashley De Pasquele, Steven Fineman, Katrina Freund, Justin Goodstein-Aue, Olga Godes, Jeremy Gray</i>	101
<i>Kathryn Greer, Alexandra Hanley, Christina Hughs, Joshua Innocent, Martin Maguire, Val Maloof, Shaun McNiff</i>	102
<i>Susan R. Merrifield, Hannah Neale, Brendan Phillips, Ella Stiler-Cote</i>	103

Saving the Seasons: A Sonnet

Another winter comes and coldness creeps
Into the skin, the blood, the heart it knows
Each season has a part of us it seeks
Each winter wins my comfort when it snows.
The summer has no part in me no more
And spring: though fragrant, reaching, and renews
My autumn breast prepares its warmest core
For lungs of my young dragon to resume.
But I will change along with solar force
And welcome spring to sprout what winter sown
I'll hope that season's sacred, driven course
Remains unhampered by our mislaid souls
For just as we breathe in each season's parts
Each season finds its breath inside our hearts.

1

Cat Brennan

An Ice Storm in Carroll, Maine 1979

A thin coat of ice
Covered everything.
The trees.
The frozen apples unpicked.
The ground.
Everything but us,
And the Baby left quietly
In her crib
While we walked out
Gently into that night.

2

You held a camera
To record this moment, as you said,
Till the end
Of our lives.
Yet I had
Walked out
As if
It was only one after dinner stroll.

I can hardly look
At the photographs
Still
Over thirteen years later.
The baby now ready
To walk out forever
Into her own nights of wonder.

The light from the stars
Illuminated the land

The trees especially were magic.
A single apple sealed
In ice
Held meaning beyond art.

We walked wordlessly
Into the woods
Till a solitary light
From our oil lamp
Leading the way
Back to the child
Told its own story.

Finally
Your words
Broke the timeless silence
Saying
We would probably
Never see
Anything so beautiful
Again
Knowing better than I
That we there
Together
On that silent night
Not for miracles

But for memories.

Grimsday

The room was filled with a dense humidity and the purest of black. A bright red light that read "5:35" pierced the shadowy room. After several annoying beeps, it flicked obnoxiously.

"Okay, okay okay," a voice boomed. "I get the message." The dark figure had quipped in the fading darkness of the morning.

A furious shuffle of what sounded like bed sheets sliding against one another suddenly erupted in the deafening silence of the early morning. Several seconds later, there was an instant flash of artificial light emanating from a cheap lamp, revealing the owner of the voice; The Grim Reaper.

4 Clearly from the lack of sleep, the reaper in attempt to awaken from his half slumber had rubbed the area where the face would actually be. Floating over to a bathroom door, the reaper grabbed a fresh bottle of "Bone Wax" and unsheathed a yellow toothbrush. After applying some crystal gel onto his brush, he launched it into the darkest area of his hood, shoveling the brush until a scratching that sounded like bristles brushing up against bare bones was heard. Spewing an acidic gray liquid complete with a bubbly sound, the reaper quickly left the bathroom and blasted back into his bedroom.

"Man... the human race is so selfish! Haven't they heard that saying!?! Death waits for no man? Its not the other way around you know." The reaper mumbled.

"That's the very reason why you have a job my good friend." A demanding voice echoed within the quarters. Startled, the reaper jerked back an inch or two only to shrug it off as if nothing happened.

"G-Man! What's good in the hood G?" The reaper said to the deity in the sky. After about a minute or so of small talk,

business picked up.

“ So what’s with this project sooo fricken early in the morning? You’d think the creator of all that be could at least pick a more convenient time you know. ”

“ Well...truth be told Death, we lost a lost of humans over the weekend.”The voice answered back.

“Oh man. Got my work cut out for me then huh? So, what was it? Natural disaster? Widespread disease? The Tony Awards?”

“...It...was the Baconator.”

“The...Baconator?”

“Yeah...a lot of people are buying the new Baconator, filled to the brim with meat patties and delicious bacon slices. What these children of mine don’t know is that that much cholesterol and sodium at one time will kill you. Overnight.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Human anatomy. I should know. I designed it.” The voice paused “Did you know that you can double the meat for .99 cents in New York? Do you realize that amount of damage done in that area!?” God had asked, but to an empty reply.

“Yes. Well. At any rate, I do not wish to converse about bacon, though it is irresistibly delicious. I want you to know that with today’s project, make it perfectly clear that no one under any circumstances may avoid the inevitable. Have fun at work. I left you something in the car.”

The reaper opened his closet door, revealing a menacing scythe that appeared so sharp it could shave thin slices of solid steel. Perhaps the most frightening thing here is the actual purpose of that scythe, was for the most part, generally unknown. One thing was for sure however: it wasn’t for cutting wheat. So the reaper dragged his cloak from under his skeletal feet, scythe logged on his shoulder and left his small one room apart-

ment. He reached into his side and pulled out a jumble of different keys clanking and clattering until he separated a black studded key from the rest of them. The supernatural wonder waltzed over to a 2001 Santa Fe. (Obviously the Grim Reaper himself has a bit of class) The ghostly being hopped in his car and automatically fastened his seatbelt while turning the ignition at the same time, though one can't help but wonder why the Grim Reaper would fasten his seatbelt in the first place. Within seconds, the car radio had boomed from the right, since the left speaker was busted. Blue Oyster Cult's hit song "Don't Fear the Reaper" was blaring through the speakers. "Don't Fear the Reaper?" He pondered for half a second. "Well that's not right at all...Oh. That's what he left me."

6 The town of Moriston is a small, quiet block that happens to be very well hidden to the general public, except for when there were sporting events of course. The area was littered with all sorts of big, expensive houses in different colors and sizes, not too dissimilar to a basic residential area from the 50's era. One house in particular was a lot larger than all of the other houses. This one belonged to the Parsleys, Moriston's residential Kennedys. Well, without the whole curse at least.

Now the Parsleys are an ecstatic bunch and lived for more than a century collectively as a family. Jack Parsley, the father of the household has taken over his father's business, acquiring all of his wealth and even spawning some offspring of his own. Happily married with his striking goddess of a wife Mia Parsley, the two of them have had three children. Sean, Emma, and Tommy ages 16, 13, and 6 respectively. Together, they formed The Parsley Family, not to be confused with Partridge Family of course.

And unlike the Partridge Family, things at the living quarters were hellish beyond belief. Everyone had a destination, but no one seemed to have their head. 6:35 blinked madly from the

kitchen clock, as Mia Parsley was on the brink of insanity.

“Come on you two! The bus ‘ill be here any second!” She belted. Mia Parsley was not the typical wife and mother of a rich family. Mia was a strong, no nonsense woman who didn’t take anything from anybody. Her demanding, strict lifestyle dominated other members of the Parsley clan, including her husband Jack. To go against Mia was to choose death.

“MOM!” Emma screamed, “Have you seen my phone!?” Emma sounded desperate.

“MOM!” Sean bellowed, “D’you know where my hat is?” Sean later sounded nonchalant.

“MIA!” Jack roared, “Where the hell is my red tie?” Jack practically whined.

It was then that Mia Parsley took a deep breath and answered all of their philosophical questions.

“HEY! NO! NO! NOOO! I’m not you’re damn maid! You misplaced all of those things, so FIND THEM! What an idiot JACK! YOU’RE WEARING YOUR TIE! JESUS CHRIST!” Mia screamed, exerting her presence as an Alpha Female. Despite the fact that their six year old was several feet away in the living room, Mia held nothing back when it came to how she felt. Now among all the ruckus, the door bell had rung.

“Oh honey, could you get that?” Mia instantly changed her tone. Reluctant to deny this request, Jack had no choice but to comply.

“Yeah...but who would that be this early in the morning?” Jack asked his suddenly calmed wife.

“Hm, I bet its just one of Emma’s friends trying to hitch a ride.” Mia surmised. Jack had attempted to calculate this possibility in his head, but it was no use. There’s no such thing as arithmetic at 6:40 in the morning, at least not in the real life version of Family Circus. The knocking had gotten louder, causing Jack to skip hop to the door, nearly trampling his six-year-

old son in the process. Jack got his hand on the door, but just as he was about to turn the knob, Jack's phone had vibrated.

While watching his son bolt out of the back door like a spy agent, Jack cautiously scanned the premises when the coast was determined clear.

"Hello?" Jack nervously asked.

"Hey." A female voice answered.

"Why so early?"

"Just wanted to make sure we were still on for today."

"Yeah. Listen, I can't talk about this now. The wife's in the kitchen you know."

"Yeah, well I'm better anyway."

8 "You can't keep calling me about this. Someone's gonna find out. There are two things you can't avoid in life you know. Death and taxes, and they make a horrible combination—in the hands of my wife you know."

"You're funny. Too bad you're married, though I'm sure I can get over that as well..." The voice giggled forcing Jack to nervously swing his head around three separate times before continuing.

"This isn't a good time. I gotta go." Jack started to finish up, but heard a piercing question from the kitchen.

"A good time for what now?! Is this another one of your idiot schemes you and your buddies always plan!? GIT IN HERE!" Mia had screamed from the kitchen, summoning his husband to the heart of the dragon's lair, though everyone had seemed to forget about the knocking on the door, which was getting louder and faster in the franticness of the morning.

"MOM! I still can't find my phone! And could somebody please answer the door!?" Emma had screamed upstairs, but the request fell upon deaf ears. Tommy, their youngest son who was happily watching cartoons decided to take it upon himself to open the door. Getting up from his incredibly comfortable posi-

tion, Tommy scooted over to the door and opened it without hesitation. It had turned out to be the Grim Reaper.

“Hi!” Tommy had optimistically cried.

“Aww crap. It’s always the kids who answers the reaper’s call. Shit” The reaper made the motion as if he had a migraine. “Kid, where’s you dad?” The reaper quietly inquired.

“He’s busy in the kitchen talking to Mom. You wanna see my toy collection!?”

“No, I don’t want to see your toy collection. I don’t know you. You wanna see my toy collection? You wanna see my toy collection? No!” Death mocked. “Shit! How old do you think I am!?” The reaper said with a rather nasty tone. He stood there seconds later, watching the little boy run upstairs in a hissy fit.

“Wow. Kids are definitely getting softer these days.” Death said with a hint of disappointment in his voice.

“No no no no! No! Mia, I wouldn’t dream of—no! Eh, that was the eh, accountant lady. The new woman we hired to take care of a our taxes..” Jack felt he freed himself from the quagmire he had created for himself. That was until he realized that accountants don’t call at 6:42 in the morning to talk about business.

“I don’t know who that was. And—“

”I just told you who that was. Amber, the accountant.”

“I don’t care if she’s Dora the Explorer! Jack, I’m gonna find out what you’re up to you balding fuck! You hear me!? You have a family. My family! If I find out what I think that is, so help me God—“ Mia felt the burning rage build up in her fists, her forehead boiling. Meanwhile, this was a perfect cue for Jack to escape the Dragon’s Lair.

“I’m gonna, I’m gonna. I’m gonna check on. I’m gonna check on Tommy.” Jack stumbled on his words as he did the

same on the way out of the kitchen. Jack scurried past the living room, past the ominous black figure standing in the door way in greater fear of his wife and ran upstairs to his kid's bedroom. It was there that he found a weeping six year old. Perturbed, Jack sat down on the soft, plushy carpet and strived to solve the problem.

"Hey, hey buddy. What's the matter?"

"The man at the door..." Tommy sniffled, and continued seconds later. "He was really mean to me. He didn't wanna see my toy collection." Tommy pouted. Jack immediately felt the urge to escape his kid's room for he knew what was coming, but he had no choice. He was about to get a lecture about toys and figures that were foreign to him.

10 "I keep telling your mother to stop watching those scary movies. There' wasn't anyone at the door. Well I can certainly look at your toy coll--Oh shoot! The door!" Jack sprung off of his feet and opened his son's door, only to look Death in the face. Quite literally in fact.

"Tommy! Why don't you head downstairs and say bye to Emma before she leaves?" Jack wisely demanded.

"Sure!" He blasted past his Pop and the being cloaked in black. The grim reaper had cocked his head slightly to his right, sending a paralyzing chill down Jack's spine. Instantly, his heart sunk. Everything at this very moment seemed so unimportant and trivial, for Death stood several feet away. Much like the color washes off a painting in the rain, all of the surrounding color in the room washed away into the grey aura of the grim reaper, proving to be some sort of gravity well of color. It was like a black hole of spectral lights. It was Jack and the Reaper and the sharp sound of silence piercing his ears.

"...Don't tell me you're surprised to see me." The reaper had said with a deep chuckle following afterwards.

"Wh-what? Who the hell are you? What are you doing in

my house?!" demanded Jack. The reaper slowly rose from his crouched position, towering over the measly man.

"I'm the Grim Reaper. People call me Death. Anyway, I'm here to take you to the depths of hell. Is this a bad time?" He joked.

"What?"

"Shoot. That joke always kills! Well, no pun intended, but yeah."

"What! How'd you get in here! I'm calling the police!" Jack exclaimed.

"Excuse me Mr. Rude-Houseowner, but I stood out there in the cold ringing the door bell for a good 3 minutes until your bastard son answered the door. And FYE, I'd lay off the Wiggles if I were him."

"...Don't tell me you're death." Jack later added up.

"Ding ding! And guess what that makes you? Well, theoretically you're not dead. Yet."

"Yet?"

"I have a trial for you. How you complete it will ultimately decide your fate. No pressure huh?"

"A...trial? I have to do a trial? Are you serious?" Jack began to whine, sounding less and less demanding.

"Yeah. A trial, as in prove yourself or suffer a horrible fate kind of trial." Death replied, conforming the absurdity of the next series of events for Jack.

"I..I don't believe this. M-e? What have I done?"

"You didn't eat a Baconator over the weekend...did you?"

"Heh?"

"Ah, never mind. Cause in about 3 minutes, you were going to have a massive heart attack. A really nasty one might I add." Jack at this point had stared blankly at Death while the color drained from his face.

"I know, Death telling you exactly when you're going to die. Its not exactly the most settling piece of news, but I kinda figured you'd get the message, with me being Death and all."

"But...there's no way!" Jack screamed.

"That's what Julius Caesar said when I met him. And he was stabbed by like 15 other guys. Would you believe it?"

"So you mean to tell me that, I'm pretty much dead if I don't do this task?" Jack immediately thought about his family. His business, and his life in perspective. It just flushed down the drain without a trace of it left. He was going to die in his six-year old's bedroom painted blue with an array of airplanes and there was nothing he could do about it if he didn't complete this so called task.

"This is horrible. I can't believe it. I can't believe my lif--"

12

"Okay, well that's great and all but you're wasting my time. If you plan on giving up already, why don't you just make this easy and come with me so I can bring you to purgatory? I've got Larry King on standby. He could go at any second don't you know."

"You sure are funny. I'm not doing anything until I know at least what I did wrong." Jack reassured his demanding voice tone, to little effect.

"You have to have a reason to die?" Death sighed.

"...well I'd like to know."

"Yeah, I'm sure everyone would like to know why they die. But let me ask you this. You know what this scythe is for?"

"...that's not for me--is it?"

"It will be if you waste anymore of my damn time."

"But wait! I'm pretty sure I'm a decent man! I've got to have a reason for this! I just ha--"

"Do you know who I am? The Grim Reaper. Not Grimace the McDonald's character or the Easter Bunny. I'm the Grim

Reaper. Death. I know what you've done and what you're capable of."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Jack wildly shook his head in disbelief. Jack attempted his negotiations with the reaper, but to no avail. The results were fruitless every time. Like a prosecutor without any evidence, Jack was about to lose his case.

"Don't play stupid with me Jack. I know what you've done." Death emphasized with a bit more intensity. "I know what you're doing. And so you're going to the big court in the sky. That is, if you pass my trial." Death had mentioned again causing a spark of curiosity and hope on Jack's face.

"So all I need to do is pass this?"

"You're not very attentive, are you?" Death paused and explained. "Believe me, I'm doing you a huge favor. Although spineless, you're a harmless human. You've got quite the looker of wife too. Brownie points. Besides, you don't want to go to purgatory."

"Purgatory? You mean the big empty space where you float about until you're judged by the heavenly father?" Jack had asked.

"No, I mean the one where you're judged above a lake of hellfire and demons stab you with pitchforks and spit liquid hot magma in your face while the devil torments you with a glass of water and a box of Krispy Kreme Donuts."

"Jesus Christ!"

"Actually, he would have been your defense attorney in today's court hearing...in purgatory."

"What!?" Jack had nearly laughed hysterically.

"So, you really are giving me a chance!" Jack felt hope and excitement again! All wasn't lost! There was a small glimmer of hope that blasted through the thick fog of this situation

from nowhere! But there was a catch, and Jack was due to find that out.

"Didn't you hear me when I said trial? Does that not mean anything!?"

"I'll do anything! Well, unless its doing what you do... then. Well I mean, not what you're doing now, but what you usually do." Jack could hardly control himself over the fact that he may get his life back, but he was unaware at the actual task at hand.

14 "..okay. Slow down Speed Racer. It's a simple task. You fail it, and I'm sending you to a very unhappy place. If you succeed, then I'm sending you back to a very unhappy place--reality." Death remarked. Here was the opportunity of a lifetime. Literally! Jack felt the eagerness in his bones, the willingness to comply. He did not, however know what task awaited him, and by no means was it simple.

"I'll do it! Please! Uh, what do I have to do?"

"Glad you asked! Well, I've been monitoring this 13-year-old girl that actually lives in your town as a matter of fact. She--"

"Wait, why would you be monitoring a 13 year old girl?"

"...cause I monitor everyone. Okay, before you have the entire cast of Dateline NBC's To Catch a Predator busting through the closet door there Chris Hansen, I'd like to finish the rest of my deal if that's okay with you."

"No, that's not what I meant. I mean why would you be watching her?"

"Do I have to spell it out for you? She's very...sensitive." Death almost had trouble spelling it out ironically, pausing for a second and looking to continue. "She's constantly feels alone and well, I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. She's about 5 minutes away from doing something regrettable. I'm gonna need you to convince her otherwise." Jack knew the seriousness

of this situation, but could not turn it down. Reluctantly, he accepted the proposal from the grim reaper.

"Good. Now just step into that closet door, and you'll be dressed just as me in her bedroom.

"Wait a second, did you just say dressed as her?"

"Goddamn it Jack! I said you'll be dressed just as me! Step through that door, and you'll be in her bedroom. Man, I should just kill you right now and be done with it. Seriously, all you have to do is walk through that closet door."

"...Is that some sort of magic or something?"

"Nope. Just the power of the Episcopalian Church."

"...hm. When I was in the kitchen, I saw a grey car outside. Is that yours? Why didn't you just teleport here then?"

"Okay. Okay, you know what? For the sake of this story, just step through the friggen closet and be done with it. Remember, I'll be watching."

15

"Sure thing" Jack nervously cracked open the closet door to reveal a super thick haze of pink fog, complete with rainbows blasting from the outside with pink bunnies riding them. A leprechaun riding a Pegasus bolted past him, tipping his hat towards the both of them while shouting a Top 'o' the mornin to ya! Utterly confused and hopelessly lost, he slowly turned his head back at Death, who for once looked like he did not have a smart aleck response.

"...It's a lot cooler looking in the movies."

What was once a room filled with toys and blue wallpaper instantly became a room shrouded in darkness with posters of androgynous musical artists plastered every which way but on the actual carpet floor. Perhaps this was going to be harder than he once anticipated? Jack tiptoed across the soft plush carpet maneuvering around a sea of scratched CDs from 1999 and onward. Jack managed to locate a mirror and immediately

found something wrong with his outfit.

"Oh great. I've got this cloak thing on, but my face is still exposed."

"You've got a problem with that?!" Death's deep voice echoed from above.

"Ah shoot! Where are you know!?"

"I'm...in your head. Kinda sci-fi-ish huh?"

"I thought you said you were watching me, not commenting on every single thing that I do! This girl's going to know what I look like if I stop her from hurting herself."

"Relax. She won't know what you look like if everything goes according to plan."

"Well, why can't I hide my face?"

16 "Because unlike me, you have a face!" Jack and Death argued continuously over the cosmetics of the costume until Jack accepted what he had to work with. It was game time: walk through that bathroom door and convince the girl not to hurt herself.

"Alright. Her name is Samantha. Just go in that door, and make sure she doesn't do anything stupid. I'm serious. You screw up, and it's Dante's Inferno for you. I'll see to it." Death had warned his protégé for the day with harsh words. And he was right, for this was no laughing matter. So Jack felt his way through the girl's room, seconds away from the door. As Jack reached for the door knob, he was interrupted effectively breaking his concentration.

"EGHH JEEZ!" Death shouted.

"What?"

"She likes My Chemical Romance!" Death replied.

"My who?" Jack asked thoughtlessly.

"Take a look on the left." Death advised, and so he did. He scanned the wall until he sighted a poster of a group of androgynous rockers who resembled anorexic Martians to him.

Disturbed and visibly rattled by the sudden screech of the grim reaper, Jack focused back on track.

"...I'm trying to focus you know! This whole day so far has been bizarre enough. At least let me do this in peace!" Jack sounded irritated. Suddenly, a soft spoken voice pierced his concentration yet again.

"Can I help you?" Jack immediately assumed that Samantha was right behind him, and lo and behold.

"Oh, h-hi. You must be Samantha."

"Sam."

"Nice going asshole." Death's chuckle echoed in Jack's head, making it that much harder to focus. Jack ignored him and ventured on.

"R-right. Well, um. Well, I'm the Grim Reaper and I'm—"

"No you're not.:"

"...yeah, I am."

"NO, you're not."

"YES, I am."

"You're that rich Parsley dude who owns the big house on the hill in a halloween costume, in my room." Sam explained to Jack.

"Well, yeah, but today I'm the Grim Reaper. Well I mean Death let me have his job for because I was suppose...to. Never mind." Jack listened to himself and quickly realized how crazy he sounded. Sam looked at Jack with an awkward stare, signaling another smart aleck comment from Death.

"...what the fuck?!"

"Sam, I know its not easy being a teenager. I was there too y ou know. But I want you to know that if you feel depressed and you shouldn't hurt yourself. You can al—"

"What the fuck are you talking about? I was just gonna dye my hair green." Sam retorted while Jack felt overwhelmingly embarrassed, still slightly relieved.

“..Oh.”

“Smooth” Death returned.

“Alright, I’m gonna call the cops. This is so fucking weird.” Sam searched for her phone as Jack’s eyes widened. A feeble whimper later, Jack sprinted back into the closet from which he came from, tripping over his feet and landing back in the arms of Death.

“Not even gonna buy me dinner?” Death dropped Jack on his back. After a couple of disorientating seconds, Jack accusingly berated Death in a surprising turn.

“You told me she was gonna hurt herself!” Jack screamed.

“And I did! Dying her green would have really hurt her image.”

18 “So wait, you mean to tell me that this trial was to prevent a 13 year old girl from dying her hair green?” Jack asked.

“...yes.”

“... Why would you do that?”

“Well, how can I answer this as simply as possible? ...That accountant lady, Amber you were going to see today?”

“...Oh. Well. I see. I had some feelings for her but I don’t think I was gonna do anything I’d regret.”

“Oh that? Oh, no I don’t care for human affairs and what not. You were planning on setting up tax evasion this year. You see, you actually said it yourself today. No one avoids death and taxes. Nobody. I obviously enforce both of these.” Jack was in total awe. Nevertheless, Jack felt a fresh start, and after 5 minutes of victory dancing and a moral confession, Jack was off the hook!

“So I’m free to go now huh?”

“I’d say so. You’re a pretty capable guy. Next time I take a sick day, you’ll have to be my substitute. Alright Jack, enjoy your life. We’ll meet again...and pay your taxes!” Death advised

“I will!” Jack pranced through the hallways and down-

stairs to plant his beautiful wife with a huge kiss. Jack was a new man! His celebration was cut short, however, as 3 police officers were in his living room talking to his wife Mia.

“Jack, you sick fuck! The cops got a disturbance call of Breaking and Entering on 23 Terence Hill! Little Samantha’s house!?! What the fuck were you doing there!?” Mia belted yet again. Jack suddenly realized all of his fears, Sam really did call the cops, and the situation couldn’t have looked worse. Death reappeared behind Jack, whom he thought would somehow get him out of this jam.

“Oh thank goodness you’re here! Explain to these guys what just happened today!” Jack begged the reaper, but with zero results.

“Oh no. I’m not here for you this time.” Death held a deep chuckle. “I’m here to collect your dignity.”

19

Joshua Innocent



Walnut Street 3 (2006)
Shaun McNiff

Where do stories go when the storyteller stops before they're finished?

My best friend's casket was in front, draped in an American flag. The wailing cries from his mother engulfed the church and echoed all around. Before the funeral, she was a thirty-six year old single mother and a proud single mother with an only child. But now, with her nineteen year old son cloaked in the casket before the church attendants, she was absolutely devastated and ruined. Even during the most quiet moments when the priest wasn't speaking, I could still hear her cries. I want to reach over and console her, but I'm paralyzed. I don't know what the use would be.

20 It was a closed casket funeral. But that didn't stop people from wondering what their friend looked like. We just wanted to see our friend's face one last time. Supposedly, he burned in the helicopter crash that claimed his life. No one knew what exactly was inside. It was left to our imaginations. I figured he was burnt toast.

The fact that he joined the war was strange due to his background. He played in a (shitty) punk rock band and rebelled against authority every step of the way. He was probably the last person one would have envisioned signing up for the Army; outside of Joe, the kid that got around in his wheel chair, of course. My friend was the same kid that slept under the bridge of my town during the summers and hung out with the homeless. Just for the fuck of it. While people were having sleepovers each weekend over each other's houses, he was routinely sleeping over with the homeless. So how the hell could he sign up to join the war? I imagined that he woke up one morning, stumbled out of bed, and impulsively signed up for the Army. The choice he made was almost like the choice of what to wear each day. I always felt like he was a character straight out of a Kerouac novel;

he always had a constant desire for adventure. He was something else, all right.

But then again, the truth was that he was stuck working a minimum wage job after high school. Worst of all, he did not have the money to go to college. He had a single mother that had been raising him since she was sixteen. His dad had been in jail for murder since he was an infant. He was trapped. If he went into the Army, he thought, he would be able to go to college.

I don't believe my friend thought he would ever die in the Army. It comes with the shield of being young and the feeling of being untouchable. If he did think of dying, he probably thought it would be a glorious death; most likely a Clint Eastwood-esque shoot out. The way he died angered everybody and I am sure it would have upset him. He died in a freak helicopter accident. He volunteered to go on the helicopter ride when he was not even supposed to be on it. Everybody was ten years older than him, for the most part. I imagined he was bored shitless in the desert and he needed to quench his desire for action. He just wanted to go for a routine ride through the country side; the desire for adventure. I imagine that he was bored shitless in the desert. I imagine he never thought that he was going to die, not even for a second as he was going down, or even as it crashed into flames. No fucking way, he thinks, am I going to die in a helicopter crash. He probably thought it was like a video game and he could just set the reset button when things went wrong. But he was dead. And so it was. I found out later that day from an old friend I hadn't heard from since high school. The news report came back to the states simply said that ten people died in a helicopter ride. So much for being invisible.

Gone were the dreams of going to college, marrying his high school sweetheart that I hooked him up with, and telling

stories of his days in the war to his kids and grandkids. He must have dreamed of all the days he'd have after the war was over. It's what had kept him going; the days where he'd tell stories, both true and made up, of his time as a soldier. He was a terrific liar, but everybody overlooked this fact because he was a great storyteller and he was naturally funny. He'd change his stories up in some way each time, so one could always tell he was lying or exaggerating things. Sometimes, the most hard to believe stories were true. But a large part of his lying was to entertain and another part of it was to keep things fresh, so as to not bore himself to death. But no more stories were to be told. Everyone felt this loss.

22 Once high school was over and I left my town for college, I realized how small my world was back home and how everything felt much bigger than it actually was. The hang out spots, the park, restaurants, the bridge, my high school and its rival all boys prep school in the same town all felt like famous monuments. It was my world and it was all I knew. Then there were the ordinary people who felt famous to all the townies: Bob, the old man who lived out of town, but came back each day since I was born and sat in the center of town on a bench or a lawn chair. He would do this to piss off his ex-wife. In later years, he would hold up signs proving that he was not crazy. Other than that, he was a real pleasant fellow whom I always waved at. One day, however, when I was in high school, he disappeared completely. I figured he had died. Travis, the star basketball player, was going to be the next Michael Jordan. He never got a scholarship. The insignificance of it all was suffocating. Everything I knew felt forged and nothing mattered to begin with; the relationships too. When high school was over, it was just a cycle. There would be new people who would become the next big thing. They would have their day, but it would be just as fleeting.

But this should matter much more than it should. In the closed casket before me was a sunken treasure chest. A lot of the good memories I had were with him. But they all went away when he left for good. These days, it gets harder and harder to find a friend. I don't know what it is. I fear I'm hardening the older I get. Loss just gets more familiar. And I can't replace what I lost. In the closed casket before me, lies a sunken treasure chest I'll never be able to get back.

The cheesy funeral dirge played on the piano by some old lady probably catered to the church via a nursing home. She probably only left the nursing home for masses each Sunday or for funerals. The priest continued to ramble about my friend that he never knew, but of what he 'gathered' about him. Priests always bored the shit out of me, which is why I could never get into religion in the first place. If God was so fucking great, then why was going to church so boring? Governor Mitt sat in the front pew. I imagined he had his thumbs up his asshole with his signature shit-eating grin. I don't know how he could support Bush on the war when the closed-casket of a nineteen year old stands feet away from him. And to the left are the cries of the boy's single mother losing her only child. Know that this happens thousands of times all over America. If my friend were alive, Mitt would probably cross the street to avoid him. **23**

When I graduated from high school, along with many others, I promised myself to never see some of the deadbeats I saw again. Most of them didn't really know my friend; they were just curious bystanders there for the show and the gossip. In some respects, it was high school all over again to people who had never left it. A bunch of these kids looked up to him and a dozen of them went out and got tattoos honoring him *before* the funeral. They prided themselves on loyalty; they had no desires of leaving the town. I thought that they were clini-

cally insane in the feeling that they did not feel like they were 'stuck' in a dead end town. They lived for getting drunk, hanging out at the hot spots in town, and picking fights with rival high school kids. They were blind to see that he wanted so badly to get out that he fled to the deserts of the Middle East and risked his life. He wasn't so much like them now, was he?

24 With the politicians fighting everyday over whether to keep fighting over a horrible mistake or leave and let a disastrous civil war happen, it infuriates me that my friend died over a mistake. Seeing the deadbeats show up for gossip, the incompetent Governor with the unrealistic plans of becoming President playing politics and publicity for my friend's death, it's a struggle to say something good came out of this other than seeing fellow people that have failed my friend in some way. The assholes just came out of the woodwork. What a letdown it all is if life just leads to this. Did my friend's life matter all that much if it just lead to this? Granted, I wasn't expecting fireworks to go off or Elvis Presley to pop up out of his grave, but it's something that I can't quite place. I wanted him to have the life of kings. If he had resources and the privileges, he could have done some amazing things. It's not a full and happy life when you're nineteen years old and dead. My fear is that I don't believe it will be as full a life for me either when I lost my best friend when I'm nineteen and struggling to find a worthwhile way to live.

I left the church. The news coverage from local stations ABC, NBC, and others waited on the footsteps outside with the bulbs flashing. I knew what they were there for. They were there for the money shot of capturing the grief of a single mother losing her only child. Her picture would be on the front page of the papers the next morning. It would be the top story of the day and that would be it. My friend's story would be done, but nothing changed.

Defeated, I unbuttoned my shirt and dragged myself to the parking lot. My car was parked in front of Dunkin' Donuts, McDonald's and a 7-11. So it wasn't exactly like having Monster seats at Fenway Park when I jumped up and sat on the roof of my car and watched the hundreds of Hell's Angels with their motorcycles lead my friend's hearse and the cars following it to the graveyard. Their purpose was to block would be protestors of the war or the soldier from interfering. I have a theory that wars are a way to keep members of the Hell's Angels 'employed' or else they will have no other purpose or meaning in their lives besides looking like douche bags in leather. And so they went over the bridge, into the hills of Worcester. I could see them all the way up as they went. The cars, held up in traffic for minutes, honked their horns madly. They were trying to go to their meaningless jobs, lunch, errands, or pick up their stupid fucking kids from daycare. In a nutshell, that's all life is in a small town.

25

I realized that the priest got my friend's story completely wrong. He made my friend's life sound completely depressing and a series of failures. He tried wrapping it up by saying he lead a full life. To be remembered, people have to carry the memory on. I looked around at the people that were here for the show. I looked around at the losers who would never leave this town, the Governor there using the funeral as a launching pad for running for President, and the news coverage there for all the wrong reasons.

I'm sure my friend would rather have been the one to tell his story. But that's not possible. I don't know if I'm the one to tell it, but I don't know who else will. It has to be told. There are parts that I will get wrong and I'll have to make up and lie about. I'm sure he would have done the same. There are also troubling parts to his story that are ugly. He had his ups and he had his downs. I don't want to see him become just another

name on a wall, another soldier, or one of ten dead. He meant so much more to me than that. But everyday, I'm getting more and more swallowed up by the insignificance of it all to the point where I don't know if the story is even worth telling.

I imagine that most the people that left that church that day went about their lives as if it never happened. I also imagined that most the people drove off a fucking cliff, but that's probably me just fantasizing things a bit. But I know his mom, by her crying, will feel the loss for the rest of her days. He'll always have a story that will matter to someone.

Marty Maguire

26



Bench and Trash
Alexandra Hanley

Frozen

A frosted meadow
Ice clings to short blades of grass
crunching snapping pop

Ella Stiler-Cote

Heat

It was a colorful Caribbean village —
each morning uniformed children
gathered together to dance
their way to school,

and left their grandmother's cooking
chicken and rice in their stucco homes
waiting for a breeze to roll in
to the sherbet window from the ocean

and as the kids passed through town they awoke
the fisherman, and the ferry captain,
who slept through the rooster's call
consumed by the heat on this unhurried Monday.

You and I.
We slept on that pink sand,
for what seemed like a day
and awoke annoyed from the shriek noise.

But, it was only
the usual donkey
screeching his usual frustration
bored from grazing on dry shrubs.

The sun baked the lazy mule
who looked at us disapprovingly as he lay
in the shade frowning at the heat.

One day you imagined
you were a sunfish floating on top of the sea,
soaking up
the rays through your gills.

28

We both wished we could fly back
to this island as pelicans and watch that donkey chew lush leaves
under a cool palm.

Ella Stiler-Cote

The Lark

Word of his departure came on horseback someday in
December and my cold seemed to roll in with the tenacity
of the snow.

It was the howl through the cracked window in the parlor.
It was the perpetually wet boots of my father's by
the doorstep.

The soundlessness of his absence left little room for redecoration,
(I mean his departure was the most malignant shade of beige ever
recorded)

Still I kept his tobacco stained letters in my hope chest
in anticipation for a day
we'd run out of wood to burn.
But like a child I'd look at them in wonder
of the fairytale chained to my memory.

By the summer the house was clear out of wood
and with no need for the fire ,
I drowned those letters
cleared them of their ink, and
dried them quietly on a close line caught in the summer breeze,
giving them to someone who didn't mean all that much to me.

Yet still that summer grew timeless in the light of a new nose
pressed against my cheek, new lips caressing my neck
and twilights on the harbor.

He couldn't take your place but instead made his larger
so by fall I was a lark singing none other than his praises.

But you made you time and acted accordingly;

as you were always an ace at manipulation
and were quick to penetrate the safety cradle I created.
The sound of you voice cracking all the branches
but assuming my defeat
you added no such title to your
lengthy repertoire.

Anonymous

Found

Did I ever tell you about the weekend
 I went away
 To try on a new pair of hands?
 (I laughed with you as I drove
 on the highway in the wrong direction)
 (I guess I lost my unyielding concentration.)
 Those hands fit as perfect puzzling angles, but did not
 shoulder me well.

I've caught my thoughts crowded, concentrating on your strength.

It's odd, I know. I know.

What I see, the shape and breadth
 of your steadiness.

I am kept tall by your bear hands.

Did I ever tell you about that weekend
 I went away to try on a new pair of hands
 I reversed my years, decided to
 fall asleep in fragile arms
 But you really don't know about them.

You don't know, because I've forgotten
 Photos, drives, and lines
 Messages and lies
 Cold nights, escaping to wake still lost.
 only *feeling* found.

Something

32 Johnny was eighteen, recently released from juvi, and glad to just be hanging with the guys again. Being in juvi, he had mostly missed his friends, but he missed girls, too. He definitely wasn't on the hunt now that he was out though. Yeah, he'd found a couple of girls who'd give him head, just so he could get some release, but his heart, well that was completely off limits. When he was in juvi, the girl he'd gone to juvi protecting and defending, had died. Kayla died. Kayla, seventeen years old, died. Of fucking meningitis! She died and he hadn't even been able to say good-bye. Fuck. Open his heart again? Nope. Never gonna happen. Not worth the pain. Sitting there, hanging with the guys in the parking lot, smoking a cigarette, just passing time, he couldn't think of a better way to spend an afternoon.

A red Dodge Shadow pulled into the parking lot. Kevin's girlfriend Amy, who Johnny couldn't stand, got out of the passenger side. Not more than five foot two, blond, chubby, and silent aside from that annoying giggle, Amy was not a person Johnny enjoyed spending time with. He also knew for a fact that she wasn't putting out and hadn't been for some time. Kevin wasn't getting anything out of the relationship. Not hot. Can't hold a conversation. No sex. Really, what was the point? And now she was really pissing him off taking for-frickin'-ever to get her stuff out of the car, say good-bye to her friend, and drag her ass across the parking lot so they could all get outta here and head over to Mike's to get ready for the party tonight. Johnny was just about to cross the parking lot himself and hurry her up when the driver of the car stepped out.

It wasn't like in the movies when you see the shoe, then the leg, then the curve, then the tits, then the hair, and she

turns to flash her face and incredible smile. No, this girl was more like an apparition. She wasn't there and then she was. Poof. Like out of thin air. Damn. She wasn't hot necessarily, but striking. Unlike Amy, she was totally put together. Sandals, nylons, skirt, top, necklace, earrings, purse. Everything matched. Accentuated her positives while disguising any potential negatives. What really got him though were her deep brown, almost black, almond shaped eyes and mess of curly brown hair. That hair... in some ways she could be Kayla reincarnated. Scary. Shit. He couldn't think that way. He shook it off. He didn't know who she was, but no question she affected him. Before he knew it, the girls had crossed the parking lot and this magnificent, captivating creature was hugging Kevin and introducing herself to everyone.

He peeled himself off the curb, took one last drag on his cigarette, dropped it, and stubbed it out with the toe of his worn Adidas. When he looked up she was looking at him. He stared back and she quickly averted her eyes. He could tell she was saying to herself, "He caught me! Damn..." She'd meant to be more discrete. He knew it and she knew it and she knew he knew she knew it. He waited for the sideways glance she was sure to send in his direction. It came and she glanced away just as quickly. Pretending nothing had happened, turning her attention back to the group.

He wanted to captivate her, draw all of her attention as she had drawn his, but he didn't want to appear soft, needy or overly open. Donning his emotional armor, making sure his words didn't belie his feelings, he spoke.

"Hey, wanna fuck?"

That certainly got her attention and everyone else's. He couldn't help but smirk as she turned her head this way and that trying to figure out whom he was addressing.

"Who... Are you talking to me?" she asked all shocked

and innocent and serious at the same time.

“Yeah, wanna fuck?”

“Excuse me? I’m not that kinda girl.”

He moved closer to her, got inches from her face, and coolly leaned back against Kevin’s truck.

Flashing her a smile he started to speak, “Co...”

“You think you’re funny! You think this is funny? So not funny...” and she turned from him.

In an act of boldness and perhaps a bit of desperation he touched her hip and gently turned her towards him. Surprisingly she complied.

“Hey, come on, just talk to me for a second.”

She eyed him suspiciously.

“I’m Johnny.” He extended his hand. Hesitating briefly,

34 she took it.

Looking him in the eye, she introduced herself, “Elizabeth. Liz.”

She’d cracked. He’d cracked her. He held her gaze. He was in.

“Ok, now that we know each other, check out my boxers...”

“Are you serious?!?!?” She was annoyed. He’d annoyed her. Funny. He’d try funny again. Funny was all he had.

He looked down, “They’re Scooby Doo...” He looked up sheepishly. She laughed. That laugh! “See?” he lifted up his shirt to expose the waistband of his boxers that peeped out of his jeans which hung loosely on his hips.

She objected, “No. No. No.” Averting her eyes, covering her face with her hands like a child, like the little girl she must have been, but kind of flirty. He got up close to her, face to face, eye to eye. She peeked at him through the gaps between her fingers. “Come on, just a peek?” She laughed again. That laugh!

“No, no, I’m not interested, but I’ll talk to you as long as we talk about something other than sex and underwear.”

The group laughed. This surprised both of them lost in their own world, playing this game. She turned and laughed, “Ok, ok...” she waved them off.

For a minute they just stood there looking at each other. “So?” she posed, “You wanted to talk to me...” Anticipation glazed her words and permeated the space between them. He smirked, “I know, but you said no sex and no underwear so...”

“Ha. Ha. No really, tell me about you. What should I know about you?” She seemed genuinely interested and looked way too serious. He wanted to keep it light. Those eyes looked right into him and he was afraid she’d see right through him. Right now it almost felt like they were communicating by eyes alone. A connection he was not ready for or expecting. Johnny feared those eyes were powerful enough to pierce his emotional armor and he couldn’t have that.

“There’s not much to know. My name is Johnny, I like sex, and I wear Scooby Doo boxers. What more do you need to know?”

She looked at him. “Seriously. Do you go to school? Do you have a job? Where did you grow up? Do you have siblings? What’s your favorite color?”

He stared blankly. “Oh. That’s all you wanna know?” He cocked his head and arched one eyebrow.

“Yes. That’s basic stuff. That’s what initial conversations are made of. Give me something to work with here. Wait... If I recall correctly, it’s you who wanted to talk to me.”

“Then why are you the one asking all the questions?”

“Exactly!”

“And the wrong ones, too”

“The WRONG ones?”

“Yeah, you forgot to ask the most important one.” He

paused and she waited for it. "You didn't ask for my phone number."

She smirked. "What made you think I have any interest in getting the phone number of someone who won't even answer the basics?"

The door of Kevin's truck slammed jarring them back to reality. "Hey, Johnny, hop in! We gotta get going to Mike's. The beers are waitin'"

"Just a second, man!" Johnny had to work fast. He pointed to her purse. "Have a pen in there?"

"Yeah..."

36 "Well, what are you waiting for?" She rummaged around and came up with a pen. "Thanks. Now give me your hand." He jotted his number across her knuckles. He handed her the pen, offered up his hand, and looked at her expectantly. "Please, Kevin isn't gonna wait forever. Just give me your number?" She bit her lip and thought about it for a second. The roar of Kevin's F-150 engine roused her to action. There it was scrawled across his hand. "Liz's Cell - 555-3470" That's all he needed to know. He hopped in the passenger side, slammed the door shut, rolled down the window, gave her the call me sign, and winked. She gave it back, smiled, and waved.

As they pulled out of the parking lot he looked down at his hand. She was striking, interesting, playful, and smart. He'd been kind of hard on her, but she held her own. Somehow he'd managed to get her number. Not much, but it was something.

Alexandra Hanley

Untitled

She shut her cell phone with a harsh snap, making the lady walking her ratty dog down the street in front of her jump in surprise. She glared at her, daring her to say something. She was ready to fight today. The insipid rage ran through her veins like a drug and she burned with its fever. She turned around and looked at her car, the idiotic shit box that seemed to take pride in making sure she was stuck at home. An Acura, dented and layered in the same filth stuck beneath the shoes of the city's residents. She stared in disgust and picked up her purse, meticulously packed with a survival kit for what would have been the day ahead of her. She opened the door to her light green house, a color that the paint brand had referred to as "cucumber" but felt more like a snotty shade after she had lived in it long enough. Her phone vibrated loudly, angrily buzzing against the back pocket of her dress pants. She ignored it. Of course he was calling her back. He always had to call back, the melodramatic fool. He would ignore the situation at hand and concentrate on making sure they were okay. Well shit, Eric, I'm not ok until the car is fixed. I'm not going to pick up your call to assure you that our marriage is fine so that you can fix the car. You just have to do it. If you do these things for me, our marriage won't matter, it will just be there. A security deposit insuring that you're not alone when you're old and crusty, pissed off and frustrated that you can no longer even have decent sex. Then we can sit around making coin tosses on which one of us will die first. Her phone stopped buzzing and she ended their imaginary conversation.

Her house was a mess and she couldn't bear to look at it, so she poured wine into a regular water glass and locked herself in the bathroom. Her phone was safely in her pocket so that she

would know when he got home. The glass would be finished and it would be obvious that she had needed a cold glass of water to calm herself down. The gum was in her purse, her breath would be fine. She knew what her mother would say. "Oh Rachel, you're making yourself numb to things you're supposed to deal with. It doesn't fix the real problems and now the real problem is that you're becoming your father." Well fuck off, mom. Dad had the right idea anyways. Her doting, loving husband would forgive her if he ever found out, assuming that she was "going through something." He could never see any bad in her and it made her sick. He had always loved her. He reminded her of a golden retriever intent on catching a ball, back and forth, back and forth, obsessed with the ball and keeping the rhythm of the game. Their marriage was bouncing back and forth and he kept catching it in his mouth, making sure it never lost its boring routine. She knew she should be happy that he loved her so much but she could never quite see him as anything but stupid. Stupidly ignoring her flaws and continuing to have faith in her. How could anyone be so ignorant to not see the bad in her?

She was forty nine years old, and her fiftieth birthday might be the day she killed herself. They had one child together, a replica of her in the form of a sixteen year old boy. He acted just like her and she had to force herself not to hate him for that. What a nice family that would be. A fake marriage and a mother who hates her son for being too much like her. He was a good kid, smart, funny, good looking, the usual mixture that parents read off like a grocery list of good qualities whenever anyone asks about their kids. He was headed for trouble though. She knew because she had always been headed for trouble. She took a sip of her wine, bitter on her tongue but warm against her throat, and she treasured the trail of heat it left in her body. Damn. She needed to get to work. She was a

secretary for a publishing company, something she enjoyed but simultaneously hated because it meant that she was a slave to the people who constantly tore apart her writing. She would sit there, organizing their papers and sneaking peeks at the rejected stories they threw out. Some of them were good. Most of them were good. These barely out of college jerk offs sat around barely glancing at the stories they read and placing them in a pile of rejection so they could hurry off to their mansions and go out to eat with the money they made for being assholes. She secretly hated all of them and put on a façade of cheery smiles and polite hellos everyday of her life before she went home to sit in front of her computer and wonder what the hell was wrong with her writing. Her phone buzzed again. Shit. She chugged the last part of her glass of wine, rinsed it in the sink and filled the bottom with a layer of water. She stood up to quickly and felt dizzy, opening the door to the bathroom and glancing out the window. Sure enough, there he was.

39

She jerked open the door. "Hi honey! Is everything ok? I was worried when you hung up on me," Her husband stood there sheepishly in his dress suit smiling at her like a goon. Of course you were worried you stupid idiot. "Yeah everything's just a field of daisies right now, I'm two hours late for work and I still have to pick up Luke later on, so this car better damn start," She didn't meet his eyes and stood there with her hands on her hips as he opened the trunk of the shitbox car to take a look. Another reason she hated this so much. She was dependent on him. Why couldn't she just open up the trunk of her car and fix it? She had never learned anything like that and hated the way she had to call him to do anything more advanced than just baking a pie or making a doctor's appointment. Fix the computer, Eric. Fix the car, Eric. The pipe is broken in the ceiling, Eric. Fuck, she couldn't even open up

jars of peanut butter sometimes and had to get him to come unscrew the lid for her. "Well, this is easily fixable. Don't worry hon, you'll be off to work in a few minutes," He glanced up at her and she met his eyes and quickly forced a smile.

40 He was handsome, her husband was. She had been lucky to find someone like him. They met in college, he was getting his masters in computer engineering at M.I.T. and she was making up for all the years she fucked around before and trying to get her Bachelors at a community college. She should have known then that he would always make her feel inferior when he was getting his Masters while she struggled through her Bachelors. Eric had come from a nice family, five kids who all made it to college and made something out of themselves. His parents paid for him to get to college, they supported him, they made sure he had something to fall back on. He still called his mom and went over for dinner quite frequently. His mom had even helped pay for their wedding, went with Rachel while she tried on wedding gowns, easing over the lacking presence of Rachel's real mother. Eric had been so accepting of Rachel's much rockier background.

She had been the oldest of seven, her father died when she was sixteen and while her mother lay in her room rocking back and forth on antidepressants, Rachel became the mother. She had wiped their noses, made them endless meals out of what was left in their cupboards, made sure they weren't out riding abandoned shopping carts down the hilly roads of their poor backwoods upstate NY town. After four stepfathers, one of which frequently decided to take his self hatred out on her following his usual binge drinking, she was tired. She ran away to California, grew her hair out so long it doubled as a coat during the winter, and did so many drugs that her family became something she tucked away in her memory and only used for more inspiration to get fucked up. "Rach. Are you okay?"

She blinked. Oh. Yeah. "Heh...yeah I'm fine," She had been sitting on the curb by their driveway staring with her eyes wide open into the pavement. Eric was looking at her like he might ask more questions and possibly even attempt to comfort her for whatever reason he thought she might be sad. She smiled at him again and got up to go back inside. "You want a sandwich or something?" He looked up from the hood of her car and gave her a happy look, like a puppy. "Yeah sure, that'd be great. This will be done in...ehh...give me about ten more minutes."

She went inside and made him a turkey sandwich. One thing she was definitely good at was making sandwiches. She made Luke a sandwich everyday before school, even though he was now a sophomore in high school. Wow, that was scary. Her son was sixteen. She really needed to get published. She glanced out the window to see if Eric was safely poised above her car's hood and drank a few more sips of wine straight from the bottle before putting it away. She went outside after popping some gum in her mouth and handed the plate to her husband. "Thanks, you're the best," He said and quickly kissed her on the cheek. "The car's done now. Sorry your day is so bad, want me to get dinner tonight?" She looked into his earnest gray eyes and couldn't help but wonder why she couldn't make herself love him anymore. He was so attentive. She knew "dinner" meant that he would forget until he was almost home, then stop at Wall of China and pick up Chinese for them. But still. "That'd be great. Thanks for fixing this piece of shit, I hope you didn't have to leave in the middle of anything," She grabbed her purse and got into her car as he did the same. "Nah, it's never anything too important, no worries." He waved at her as he backed down the driveway, and she put the key in the ignition. Never anything too important, ha. He always said that because he knew that she felt stupid and ignorant and inferior to his high paying job. They both knew that he was the money

maker in their family. Without him, she would be stuck paying for all of Luke's things and struggling to pay their mortgage and car payments. She wondered what he really did.

She knew he was important, he was a boss or something. God, she really didn't even know. Maybe she just needed to talk to him more. Ask him how his day was going, encourage him, get details. Something. She looked down at the passenger seat and rolled her eyes. She had forgotten her cell phone in the house when she went in to make the sandwich. She went back in the house and found it sitting on the counter. She glanced at the neon letters displaying the time on her microwave and sighed. Eleven thirty. She should have been at work at ten, stayed there until two, left, and been at Luke's high school by three. She stomped her foot angrily when she realized that it was also Tuesday. Luke had basketball after school on Tuesdays. She went upstairs to go collect his bag in his room that he undoubtedly would have not remembered to bring. She hated going into his room and usually made sure he left it in front of the door before he went to school, but she had forgotten he had practice at all.

42

She couldn't even remember the last time she had been in his room. She had an icky feeling whenever she thought about the rooms that teenage boys dwell in. Horrible things happen when you're a teenager, and she had dealt with enough hormonal boys to last her a lifetime. She imagined pictures of nude girls with dirty tissues all over the floor, moldy food encrusted to his sheets, maybe a bag of weed. No, Luke wouldn't do drugs, or drink. Yeah, yeah, that's what all parents like to tell themselves, but she knew Luke. He had heard enough of her stories from her childhood to make a good decision and think for himself. She had sometimes waited for Eric to go to sleep, then gone down to their kitchen to drink herself into enough of a state that she would be able to sleep. Sometimes

she would start thinking about her father, her real father, and how he had drunkenly ruined her mother's life. She would go upstairs and sit on the edge of Luke's bed and hold his hand. "I love you, Luke. I really love you," She would say. He would wake up and look at her with sleepy eyes and she would sit there and tell him why he should never end up like her. He should listen to her advice. He would smile at her and tell her it was all okay and everything would be fine and she would leave when she felt appeased and comforted that he would indeed be okay.

She opened up his door and was immediately relieved. It was a normal room like she remembered it. She opened his closet to find his gym bag and smelled something pungent. She dug through the pile of clothes on the floor and saw something she definitely had not wanted to see, three empty bottles of Jack Daniels, one of which still had some in it and had trickled out in onto a rather disgusting pair of dirty socks on the floor below. Oh, fuck. Her son was drinking. He was drinking and he was drinking in her house and he was hiding it. FUCK. She pictured him going into his closet late at night and angrily sipping the Jack Daniels, hoping to fall into an alcoholic slumber and get away from everything. She stomped down the stairs, decided not to go to work, and got into the car. She drove to Luke's school, breaking the speed limit. It was 12:30. Luke would be in his lunch period. He had lunch until 1:15. She got to his school by 12:55 and went to the front desk. They told her they would go find him for her and she sat down in the lobby, rage pumping through her as she thought about how to confront her son. A skinny girl in jeans tighter than her ass or abs would ever be was sitting across from her sniffing and picking at a silver stud on the bottom of her lip.

Rachel tried not to wrinkle her nose. What if her son

had gotten drunk with that girl, or other girls like her? What if he went to parties with girls like that? Trashy. She realized she said "trashy" out loud and quickly looked outside at the construction workers across the street building condominiums. "Those new houses make this place look so trashy," She said, trying to act like she had just been making an observation casually to the actual trash sitting across from her. The girl looked mildly interested, then went back to picking her lip ring with a bored expression. A lady shuffled into the lobby with her son and then went back to her office. "Hey mom, what's going on?! Is everything ok? Where's dad?!" Her son stood before her with his dark hair that fell into his light blue eyes just right. He had her eyes and his dad's nose. He looked so honest standing there that she almost wanted to pretend she had come to just tell him she loved him, but she couldn't. She felt dizzy suddenly.

44 "You're coming home right now, Luke. I'll explain in the car." His face went from nervous to angry, his freckles seeming to stand out even more all of the sudden. "Mom, what the hell? I have homework due in my next three classes, I can't just leave. At least explain!" He crossed his arms and she was reminded of herself. "Come on Luke, we're leaving. Get into the car."

He knew better than to really argue when it came down to her being that mad so he followed her into the car. He didn't buckle his seat belt and she didn't even think to argue. She began driving, thinking of what to say. He was mad at her she could tell. He was biting his lip and staring out the window like it was a tv show. "Luke... I found something in your room today," She began. He turned to look at her and she was once again taken aback by how much he looked like her. "You went through my stuff? Wow, awesome, I'm glad I can really trust you, mom," He turned back to face the window again. Oh fucking awesome. She was doing this all wrong. She wondered how much wine she had actually drank by the time she left the

house earlier. "I was not prying, Luke. I was looking for your gym bag. And I found some things underneath your dirty laundry that I think you should explain." She looked carefully at his face then but he wouldn't look at her. Ha. She knew he had been hiding it. The only other explanation was that someone else had put it there and she had been holding onto that without really thinking it through. "I just used them for my drawing class, mom. I found them in a dumpster the other day and I wanted to use them to draw because I'm doing a piece on alcoholism,"

He was looking at her now. She didn't believe this. This is what kids tell their parents when they get caught. And anyways why would he do a project on alcoholism? "I'm sure you did. I bet you found those bottles in a dumpster and just randomly decided to hide them in your closet, that makes a lot of sense," Her voice was getting louder. "Listen, Luke, how many times have I told you about how this runs in our family, ok? My father beat me, then after he left, my stepfather beat me, I watched my mother drink her problems away while I took care of the whole family, do you hear me?!" She was shaking. Luke was looking down at his feet now, his hands folded together. She started going faster as her anger increased. Luke looked at her, his light blue eyes reflecting hers. "I already know every single story mom. I've heard it so many times. You don't even realize I have my own stories now to keep me from drinking," he said. He was biting his lip so hard she wondered if it would bleed.

45

She was almost to their exit, she couldn't wait to go home now. She pressed down on the accelerator. "What do you mean, Luke. WHAT DO YOU MEAN, you have stories. You don't know anything. You've gotten everything you wanted your whole life, and I got nothing when I was your age, okay? So what stories are you talking about?" She gripped

46 the wheel and watched her knuckles turn white. "I will not be an alcoholic, mom. You don't have to worry. And I won't be because of you. Did you think I didn't fucking notice? Your breath always smells like wine. It does right now. I wouldn't drink because I don't want to have to walk around sneaking drinks all the time to be happy," He was crying now, tears streaming down his cheeks, and she realized she was too. She could barely see. "Oh fuck you, Luke! You don't know anything about alcoholism! I drink every once and a while, so what?! Don't try to make yourself feel like a victim just because I caught you! You wish I was an alcoholic so you had something to whine about" He looked over at her and shook his head, tears making little speckled pools on his freckled cheeks. "You don't think I knew why you used to wake me up in the middle of the night? I only pretended I knew what you meant so you would just leave me alone! You never leave me alone!" He yelled the last part and his words flew past her in an earth shaking crash. They hit the corolla in front of them, the noise of metal on metal sickening her. Oh fuck, oh fuck. She looked over at Luke. He hadn't worn his seatbelt. Shit. Shit. Why didn't I tell him to wear his seatbelt? It hit her as fast as the car as she realized that not even her mother, her father, her stepfather, her husband that she took for granted, had ever been as wrong about everything as her. She closed her eyes.

Hannah Neale

A Cat You Say?

When the sun ceases to shine on Ward 10 of The Good Shepard Hospice Home there is a quiet state that consumes the dank crevices. The shadows and stillness of the air are irresistible, and my ears perk up at the inundated silence. My uncontrollable senses bring to life my curiosity, and I like to make my rounds through the hallway in search of life or death. The feeling of intensity, of the cool tile beneath my paws, it is more invigorating than another beyond the Hospice Homes' walls. It surprises many, as I am only a cat, and sometimes I have to remind myself of that fact, but then the density of the depressed air will send chills through my spine and provide a comforting ease; it feels as if I am getting a back massage that is seeping effortlessly into my spine. This is my home, Ward 10, and I have been here for quite some time. It is a simple place, consumed with the inherent absurdity of humanity that is part of existence; it all happens here, the routine conundrum of the human lifecycle. I perceive the pleasure of participating in the end stages of the particular condition, and it is hard to say that I feel the need to form a connection to this confounding place. Amongst the constant, distant moans, the obscure crashing noises, and the incessant beeping of monitors, the symphony that is created provides that source of pleasure, of purpose, and pain that I am inclined to indulge in (Privately though, as not to let on the fleeting stability of my attention span). When the white coats and nurses escape for the evening, I am left to watch a very sickly group of individuals, and this is more of a responsibility than any normal human being could possibly understand. And yet they have left me here for two years, a simple cat, who is removed from humanity by genetic differences and an attitude that is somewhat unwilling to perceive a connection with the patients despite my own interactions.

These hapless, berated souls, they range from salesmen

to war veterans, from stockbrokers to blue-collar lackeys, and I consider every individual lying half-awake (or sometimes half-dead) my family, at least for a little while. It is strange, but sometimes I can feel a love for them through their pain and the unintentional pleasure that comes with letting go, but sometimes it feels as if I draw my own pleasure from their pain as well; a two-faced appearance, a double edged sword. When they need to feel the warmth of life before the cold insensibility of death, I am their transition. I am their feeling of reality slipping away and I know that there is a connection of love, remorse, anger, acceptance, and denial that is transmitted between me and each patient. On Ward 10, there is an understanding of their presence, as well as my own, existing in the same environment partaking in the most unusual symbiotic relationship. But I am only a cat. The smell of hopelessness and the individual pain from each room create a scent of realism, perhaps surrealism. Am I just a cat or am I just a saint, I will ask myself sometimes, because the intensity of this smell inflates my nostrils, that my own movements dictate the end of a life. The white coats and Scrubs refer to me as a dual entity, a father of time and a transition into death. I am not a Grimm reaper, nor am I a priest, but simply an animal with the innate desire to comfort fleeting souls despite my own reservations; the duality of living as a cat while communicating with humans is my ultimate confusion.

48

My name is irrelevant to most people, and my bed is composed of a few towels next to a litter box in the scrubs' area, but again despite the informality, this is my home. My comfort zone and source of strength. I draw inspiration from the smiles and friendly glances of the various staff members despite how distant I keep myself from their presence. Only the patients have ever touched me, and I am satisfied by that degree of separation. The staff still appreciates my presence as much as the patients do despite this obvious distance. My daily work is like no other job that an animal, let alone a human, can relate to. It is in super-

seeding these false limitations of being an animal that makes Ward 10 such a special place, and everyone who I cross paths with knows that. Sometimes I may question myself *Why me? I am just a cat, what do I even care?* For patients I am the family member they always wanted, the child they never had, the companion who always understood. In that moment, in that stillness leading to the end of the tunnel, stroking my back is more comforting than any medicine or treatment that these people have encountered. And to the white coats and scrubs I am a respectable colleague, only I have no needs for charts and diagnoses. *I am only a cat*, and I repeat this to myself continuously. That is not why I am here. My presence is simple, and I know that at least in my area of the world I am the only cat that can rationalize a detachment from humanity that equally manifests itself as a presence that is comfortable and easy to digest, for both the patients and staff. And to think, it is the scent of fear, the scent of a fading piece of humanity, that is my warning call.

49

“Mr. Schenectady probably has a week to live. The cancer is eating away at his brain,” a white coat will say, and what do I feel? Do cats have the power to empathize across species? Maybe I will be enjoying my lunch of putrid tasting cat-food and wonder why that man had to suffer, and the scent will start to creep into my tiny, moist nostrils. The cancer stricken man lives down the hall, and yet from the scrubs’ area my hairs stand on end and I can feel it rub against my bones. But what does this thought process even mean, or even the smell? *I am only a cat*. I never knew Mr. Schenectady in life, never knew if he was a good man who loved his family or a drug addict who wasted his life in subway stations shooting up heroine. I struggle, my jaw immovable and the terrible taste of cat food dripping from the corners of my mouth. That sick sense, that intense feeling, “I need to know this man!” is what I scream, but a meow or feline growl is all the white coats and scrubs can hear. From the corner of my eye a scrub dashes over to a phone, making the necessary

arrangements knowing full well what my warning cry means. At times like these I feel the need to investigate my feelings and sensory overload, and this is what draws me to the dying. White noise rings in my ears and an anxiety filled with urgency corrupts my body; I feel the desperation to meet Mr. Schenectady and figure out what this man is composed of. I am being summoned into action, and the scrubs' hand shakes as she puts the phone down. *But still, I am only a cat...*

50

Walking into the room, the uncanny glance of despair and welcome seeps into my blood, and as my ears start to perk up and my nose waggles to and fro, everyone on Ward 10 can sense it now. They know of my inconceivable power, my warmth and severity, but do they understand that I am just a cat? This is an awkward moment to have barged in on, as Mr. Schenectady is gasping for each breath and writhing in pain, but I came here in search of answers and I'll be damned if I don't receive them. It may seem a cold gesture on my part, what do I care for how this particular individual feels? The concept of life and death is an intriguing aspect of the human condition, and I've always had this need to acquaint myself with its depth and complexity. Being a cat has an element of misunderstanding in it because while I can sense an emotion that transcends that of the common feline complexion, it is as if I have some kind of usurping powering that allows me in a door I have no business being near. Having lived on Ward 10 for two years now, it is as if death is a part of my nature. Unlike the white coats and scrubs, I am surrounded by it twenty four hours a day. Life and death does not require sleep, and the scent of such questionable conditions is sometimes unbearable. Consider my senses my exceptional power over the patients on Ward 10. I can predict their pain by scent merely because I am forced to be a part of their lives. More importantly, I yearn to understand what the meaning in all of this is. Everyday is a revelation of its own, and again, the human condition is as fragile as it is complex. I am a cat, and yet I must know.

I walk over to the far side of Mr. Schenectady's bed and consider my approach. I make a leap of faith and precision as not to land too harshly in his lap, but he is clearly unaware of my presence anyway. Is he asleep? No, but probably lost in the confusion of reflection. The look on his face is drab, if not already lifeless. It is easy to see what he is thinking. Was his life meaningful enough? Did he accomplish everything he desired to? I suppose in times of desperation death precedes just about any other emotion, however, and I can sense his disappointment and sadness immediately. That scent. What was this man planning to do with the rest of his life? I stir a bit, and seat myself comfortably next to his outstretched hand on his left side. He can't be more than forty or fifty years old. To my surprise he manages to lift his hand with a slow and shaky effort, and lands it carefully onto the fur of my neck, and begins to stroke my back. From time to time a patient will sneak up on me like that, but I am never frightened. We are sharing fear, not just the scent anymore, but by the touch of his rough, flaky hand. This gentle massage is clearly a source of unease for myself and comfort for him, and that unmistakable scent will never away. In the stillness of his consciousness, he begins to speak to me. His story is apparent, if not typical: a middle-class man with a loving family who is unable to work, unable to function, and cannot save himself or his wife or his children. Sadness, it almost makes me want to cry despite my lack of empathy. Do cats even cry?

51

Within the hour Mr. Schenectady is surrounded by various family members and a couple of scrubs. It is as if I have run head first into a door in the darkness of night after everyone has gone home. They do not hear me whimper or meow, because even a simple cat like myself can feel pain, but the larger point is that redemption is impossible in this place, but reconciliation with life is a daily activity. He passes, with that last breath becoming stuck in his mouth and his lungs deflating with relative ease. I quickly leap off his bed after giving a polite nudge to his

hand, my good luck gesture, and escape down the hall to the scrubs' area. Today was the right day to die, but right now a nap would seem to be the best course of action. Death is overwhelming, and very tiresome.

52 Some days are not this calm, as the scrubs who work here base their daily actions on my acute senses. I am the medication, I am the appropriate dose, and hospice is no place for indecisive practice. They draw inspiration, sadness, and experience from my keen abilities, and I have only been here for two years. I learned quickly, and they take their cues from a feline prophet. Mr. Schenectady makes my job look easy. Today, though, demonstrates how efficient and chaotic this symbiotic relationship really is. Mrs. Baldwin, who has been in a lifeless state since she arrived here, is starting to trip the sensors on all of the monitors. With her vital signs slipping away, I can hear the monitors beeping a chorus of panic. They say, "Soon dear friend, soon" and I know that it's time to take a walk to her room at the end of the hall. The scent begins to linger. I saunter a bit, stretching my legs along the way because I know that there is a little time to spare. I want to be at my best, I want Mrs. Baldwin to feel my confidence. Sometimes, the sense of responsibility does actually strike me and reminds me of the importance of my presence. Forgetting what it means to be an undertaker of a cat is easier than one may think. There is no moral in death, other than the final sigh, groan, or breath being a release of the morals and disappointment of a lifetime. I approach her doorway. She is alone, and breathing rather timidly. Today is her day. The scent! I take my position at her bedside and make sure that I do not disturb her relatively peaceful nature. I circle around her once, and lay down to rest at the base of her right hand. Does she know I am here? Does she care? Sometimes with incommunicative patients it is hard to tell, but I always assume that I am welcome.

From the corner of my eye, I see a scrub freeze at the doorway. She is saying in her head, "Is it time? Do I make the

call?" and stares blankly in my direction in her confused state. She knows because I know, and I sound a tame meow to let her know. She darts from the doorway, and we both know that the minutes are ticking away. I lay my head down to rest, and I can feel a single finger stroking at my paw. She is no longer lifeless. Mrs. Baldwin and I, we have a heart wrenched conversation. She tells me of her family, of her husband who died in the war some time ago, her beautiful children and her desire to have visited Hawaii. I ease her mind with the reminder that her life was still a rich, full experience. She once volunteered for the Make-A-Wish Foundation and saved an innocent man from an accident out on I-95 a couple decades ago, whatever that means. She was a hero, a lover, an innocent with a heart of gold. And then she goes limp, knowing her time is near. Her finger is slowly becoming immobile, and I reach my paw out for her final moment. Her sister and two grandchildren come running into the room and surround the bed. One of the grandchildren remarks, "What is that cat doing here?" Mrs. Baldwin, to everyone's surprise, opens her eyes and begins to breathe rapidly. Shock encompasses the room, and not a single soul knows what to do. A moment later she is limp again and the monitors are a constant cry, and everyone is in tears. The mother of the grandchild grabs his hand, and walks him sobbing from the room.

53

There is no other cat, let alone animal, that is like me. Not even my predecessor (who had an unfortunate accident with a stretcher being wheeled into the ward) was as amiable as I am. The scrubs take care of me, the white coats acknowledge me with both fear and puzzlement, and every now and then a journalist will enter the Ward looking for the "Supernatural Cat." I have to admit that this responsibility, this job-like depression of being the final breath, can be absolutely nerve-wracking at times. These people who exist in Ward 10 are special, and they deserve their special treatment. I am necessary, and it is a quirk of nature. Whether it be from a white coat, a scrub, or a cat is irrele-

vant, because all of us perform a certain duty in the process of dying painfully slow. Though there are patrons who do not see it like that. Patrons, I know, is maybe not the appropriate word, but sometimes family members feel like more of a burden than a source of love. They say to the white coats, "Get that damned cat out of this room" and the white coat will hesitate, not really knowing what to say.

"Ma'am, sometimes the patients need a reprieve. That is why that 'damned cat' is around. He is only trying to help," and the family will look confused.

"Do cats even know what the meaning of life really is?" they may ask.

54 When I was a mere kitten my home was at some distant animal shelter in the state of Rhode Island. If I could tell you the location of the shelter I'd have been a geography inclined cat. The man who bought me brought me to his home somewhere amongst trees, picket fences, and the eerie sound of silence after the 8 o'clock hour. The family called this unfamiliar place the "suburbs", and to this day I have no idea what that means. Either way, one day the oldest man in the house comes home and says to the older woman that the cat at work died.

"Oh that is a shame, are you going to put in for a replacement?"

And the old man laughed and gave a giant smile.

"Put in for a replacement, maybe if this was a human, but we have the perfect substitute here at home!"

The older woman looked a bit upset, and her two children who were practically my size were on the verge of tears. They cried all night. Daddy how can you do this? That is a good question, I would argue, but daddy got his way in the end. Even the older woman was forced to concede when she realized she would not be able to dissuade the man.

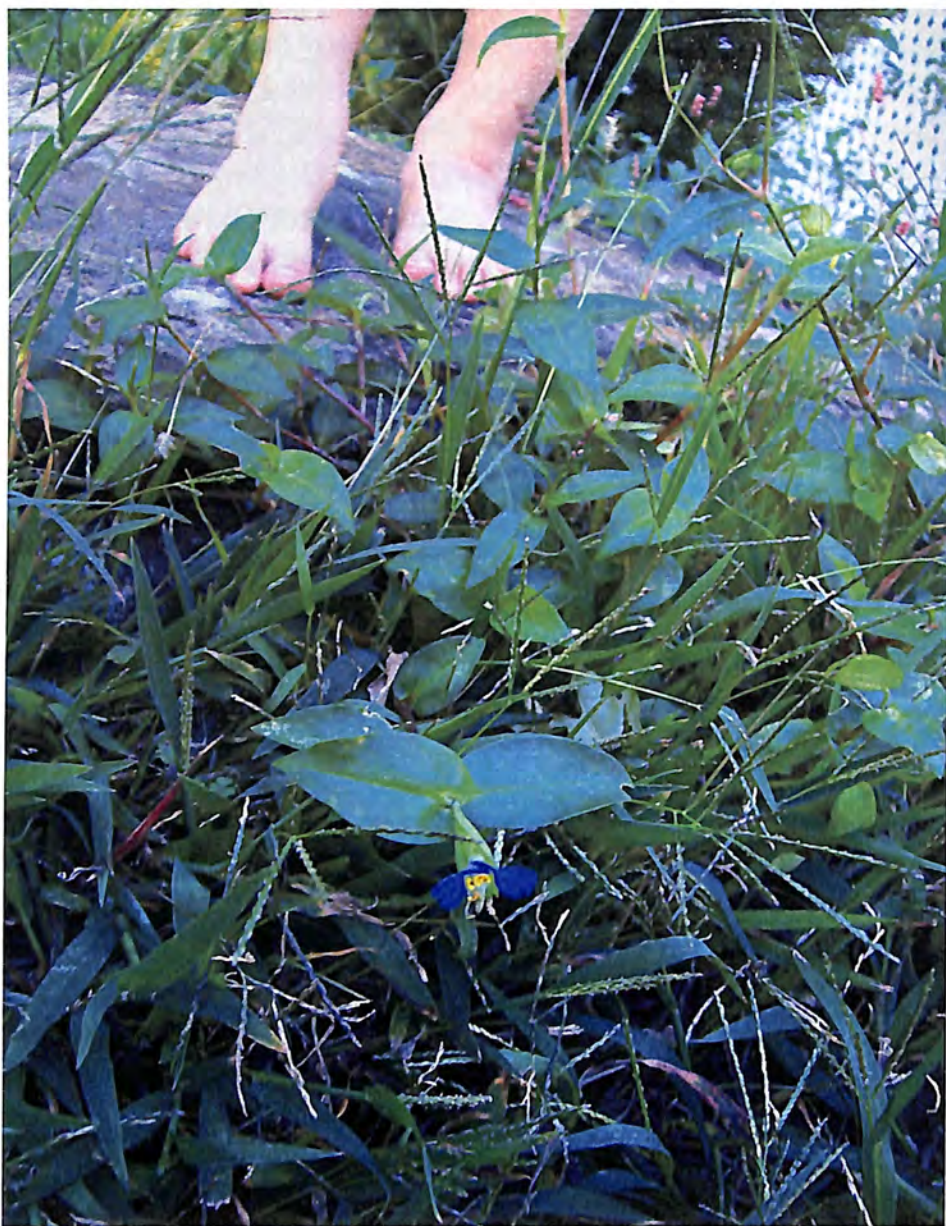
I meow, and I scratch, and I pace the halls in frustration. I am a member of this team until the day I die, and I never chose to

come here in the first place. Respect me, and my duties, and I will be dependable for as long as I exist. I only wish that I can have this kind of treatment when I am lying alone in my wad of towels waiting for the last breath. I may be a cat, but is there any other like me on this continent? In this world, with a sixth sense for pain and suffering and an acute ability to comfort the needy where do I really fit in? I am no healer in the literal sense; I ease pain and put weary minds to rest. I am that source of comfort that cannot be found anywhere else in this world. I connect with patients and take their lives into consideration. I am the final entity to wish them well as they depart into nothingness.

As the sun sets on Ward 10, my legs begin to tire and my mind aches of the hopelessness at the Good Shepard Hospice Home. A simple cat lay to rest two helpless souls today, and even that cat struggles to find meaning in such actions. Reflecting upon these experiences is enlightening enough for me to discover that while I may be just a cat, I am a reminder of death, faith, reflection, and redemption. At the end of days like these, as fluttering sunlight eases into twilight and eventually the dull moonlight, I return to my wad of towels at the scrubs' area and let out a triumphant yawn. I circle the wad a couple times and then simply lay myself on top, stretching ever muscle in my body; this is just another day in the life of a simple cat. And though there are times in which I question that statement, I lay at rest waiting for a monitor, a moan, or a derailing scent to wake my attention and force me back to work. I am only a cat living in the human condition, but maybe tomorrow will breed new questions, or an answer or two for that matter.

Steven Fineman

56



Untitled
Alexandra Hanley

Dialogue With A Dead Man

Far off
In some distant place
Beyond rotted flesh and decaying bones.
He tells her
She is forgiven.

She sees him
Sees his face
Aged beyond youth.
Drawn and tired.

She begins to confuse him with Jesus.

He says. "no
See me as a man.
An ordinary man.
Mine was no crucifixion.
Just ordinary tragedy
And for you now.
Just ordinary life."

He forgives her.
Forgives the days, the men, the house, the child,
those few nights of glistening stars
above a solitary Maine landscape.

Forgiven
For the sin of living, continuing to live
to breathe, to sleep, to age
Long after he left.

He tells her,
“I hated you once,
Hated your desire
to remain, to turn the page
But that is over.”

He tells her,
“life is a crap shoot.
Early on,
I turned up
Snake eyes.”

Susan R. Merrifield

58



Variation
Richard Cranford

A Dilemma

Alfred T. Bernham was in the midst of a dilemma. For days he had had the word John stuck in his head. He was finding it difficult to concentrate at work and at home when his wife spoke to him or when they made love. After this had continued for several days, becoming increasingly intense and frequent, he resolved to see a doctor.

After a difficult day at work, Al took his silver station wagon to the City Health Center and read an issue of *National Geographic* while he waited for the nurse to call his name. He turned the magazine sideways, trying to comprehend the structure of a blue, black and John bird that spread its wings in such a way to make it impossible for Al to decide where it began and ended. At this angle he thought he had identified the bird's head, but he could not be sure. He found an odd child-like nostalgia in a picture of African women standing naked around a village with stretched out ears and long, hanging breasts. They looked quite bored, he thought.

59

"Alfred Bernham?" The nurse had appeared in the doorway.

"I am Al," he said, looking up from the magazine.

"This way please."

He followed the nurse into the examination room, where she interrogated him skeptically on the nature of his illness. After he had explained his trouble several times to the nurse and she had written it all down in her notes, she left, announcing with a sigh, "Doctor Peach will see you shortly."

The doctor arrived after a few minutes. He stood in the room for a few moments looking over his notes making small sounds in his throat, then looked up, smiling slightly in a friendly way and addressed Al.

“So, you have a certain word stuck in your head.”

“John.”

“Yes. What made you think a doctor would be the right person to see about this?”

“Should I perhaps have seen a psychologist?”

“No, but have you ever felt as if all there is to life is just making eye contact and then looking away over and over and over and over and over and...”

“I don’t even know anyone named John.”

“Well, that and advertisements.”

“I mean, where could that word have come from?”

“It’s an extremely common name you know.”

“I suppose.”

“I am almost sure that your problem is seizures.”

“Seizures? I think...”

“When these things happen, seemingly random words and thoughts floating around in our heads, popping up without our consent, distracting us from our John lives.”

“What?”

“Distracting us from our everyday lives.”

“Um”

“It is often a minor seizure happening in the brain, causing you to lose control of your thoughts for a moment. What you are experiencing are lots of miniature seizures.”

Al no longer trusted the doctor, but he listened on.

“I’m going to send you to the neurology lab on the second floor. They are going to connect you to a EEG, which is a brain-wave scanning device with electrode attachments that will be glued to your temples, the back of your head and your chest for good measure. The device itself is a computer that you will wear in a backpack for a day. We’ll use the readings from the EEG to determine whether or not there are epileptic

tendencies in the brain, and proceed from there. I suggest that you call work and tell them you are going to need the day off.”

It was a hot day and Al found it incredibly irritating to drive with a backpack on, and when he turned his head too look left or right the attachments pulled at his skin, causing him minor discomfort. When he arrived home he kissed his wife.

“What’s this stuff?”

“I don’t know, it’s for my seizures.”

“I’ve never noticed you having seizures.”

“Neither have I. But they’re small ones, very elusive. I am staying home tomorrow. If you don’t mind I think I’ll sleep in the guest room, or stay up. It’s going to be pretty uncomfortable trying to lie in bed with all these electrodes attached to me.”

He went into his study, sat down and carefully removed the backpack, placing it on a chair next to him. He could feel a giant, backpack-shaped sweat stain on the back of his work shirt. The electrodes itched like crazy. He rested his head in his arms on his desk, staring into the wood finish, trying to think of anything other than John. Coca-cola, Madison Square Gardens, The Jeffersons, a childhood housecat, the nearing extinction of birch trees, teenagers, longbreasted African women more bored than him across the world, the market (literal and figurative), his leggy secretary (don’t think about that), Chinese food, home brewing, alternative healing, talk radio, handbags, Islam. Eventually his mind settled back onto the secretary and he nodded off in his seat.

Have you seen John lately? John is having trouble at home. John isn’t keeping up at work. John neglects his children maybe? That isn’t the John I know. Could it be John? Old Johnny boy? Little old John John? John the King? John the lover? John the father? Saint John?

Al woke up with a headache, feeling very distracted and upset by his dreams. He could not get his mind to settle on anything. He walked to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of wine. The electrode attachments from the EEG were now unbearably itchy and he tried to scratch around them without upsetting the glue. He sat down with a book, which was enough to distract him from his thoughts for a while and when he looked up at the clock he was surprised to see that it was almost time to drive back to the doctor's to have the EEG removed. He was eager, also, to learn about his seizures.

On the way to the health center he found himself stuck in traffic. The day was hot and he had no air conditioning so he rolled down the windows. The traffic was concentrated into two lanes and the man in the lane next to him was broadcasting radio commercials with obstreperous zeal.

62

DON'T WAIT WE CAN REFINANCE YOUR HOUSE NOW

GET YOUR PET THE PAW CARE IT DESERVES
DON'T GET CAUGHT WITH YOUR PANTS DOWN
ON THIS ONCE IN A LIFETIME OFFER FOLKS

He looked across at the man, who smiled enthusiastically to himself. Occasionally the traffic let up, affording some distance between them, but once it ceased to move they were lined up side by side once more.

TURN YOUR THOUSAND DOLLAR DEBT INTO
MILLION DOLLAR PROFIT

OMNISHAVE'S PATENTED SEVEN BLADE SYSTEM
GIVES ME THE CLOSE SHAVE I NEED

In his return to the doctor's office Al noticed many changes. The walls had been painted John. The magazines had been replaced by John. The doctor arrived, taking a few more moments to look over his notes than last time. Al was at first

Untitled

64

The conditions in which roses die—
your quiet chill, sister of winter's breath. I watch you pass through
doorways, alone tonight: you. now the traveler.
Sleeping only in dreams
could whispers be echoes here, lost? You, head in your hands along
fences, fading, so determined to continue alone, you find deafness in the
dark.
It is quiet where you are
You look up for the stars that would show you home, but if you are deaf
tonight you are also blind and you see nothing.
I remain beyond your reach
part of the night you will never know.

Ashley De Pasquale

A Trip to the MFA

A religious painting.
Here we go again. I
Always feel so out of
Place when I see ones
Like this. Classmates
Discussing what they've
Learned at CCD. There's

no explanation up on the wall. Because why would there have to be? Doesn't everyone know the story? But I just stand there scratching my head wondering why Jesus is dangling on that "T" and why fairies are above his head and who those crying people are. The only time I've ever heard Jesus' name said in my house is when my mother stubs

her toe. That's enough
Religious Ed for one day.
So I stare at Christ standing there arms in awful anguish for all to see the honored king. It makes me wonder why I even bothered to worry over that test I failed and why it was such a big deal when I put that ten dollar bill through the laundry. And I really shouldn't have flipped out at my dad this morning. Honor thy mother and father. right?

66



Squam Rock 3 (2005)
Shaun McNiff

Intuition

Intuition drags along the fabrics sewn with precious little fingers
Experience purchased at any street kiosk
Only costs a dollar fifty give or take

Trains firing from point A to point Z
Vessels of the masses
Of every kind

Steam of the coffee rises like an engine burning in the winter
Condensing back into the air like a young persons prayer
Or a mans last breath

Lift the log of wood and carefully place it in the fire
Place the needle lightly on the record
Dial on a rotary phone

genesis

something about today feels indescribable, one giant *je ne sais quois*,
awoke feeling full, oddly enough. workshop in poetry,
five more poems: ravaged and savaged, calling Hark!
to the wear and tear of one's art in vitro,
still being nourished by its mother's cord while peers
offered conclusive (constructive!) advice about further changes...

(...by ripping words at the sinews
and handing me the torn pelt...)
in the past they've been convicted and

68

i am not safe. i must produce something great,
a masterwork,

stroke of genius,

magnum opus.

something to wow these people and their ideas——
failure is no option! the stakes are massive!——
but the editing, carnivorous, has left me
creatively drained and i am nothing now

but a writer starved for inspiration, for that
pearly gem to escape the jaws of life.

door closing behind me,
beginning the commute home,
i come between two of the
academic buildings,
interposing (think Dickinson!),
navigating between the two walls,
a lost child:

helpless orphan, Coketown, Hard Times
young boy, Paris, chasing red balloon
or maybe i am master:

Moses, BC, parting Red Sea
into two walls of strict brick.

frantically writing halftoughts on my arms
in worn red ink from ballpoint pen—

man jets by me, near collision (sigh of relief),
a runner with black spandex shorts,
Walkman, wet brown curls
bounce above his brow—
girl inserting quarters into meter—
cars zooming past, forward motion
in heavy, heavy clusters—
and the eye settles
(quickly) on two women,
both gazing at the cleaners,
as i pass and observe

these women dreaming of purpose
(something to pass the time?) and not that
the glass is actually reflective, black
mirror of sorts, sad and guilty
while my fists, fiery like furnaces,
waiting—

experience, take hold!
but the bus hums, sluggish monster,
and i take my seat on his scaly back
and together we join the heavy clusters,

snarky science looking man sits behind me
he wears North Face and has large knuckles
(i imagine him fucking a desk.)

next: Asian man, glasses, reading dense book
filled with dashy characters, small and delicate
muddy shoes and messy hair.

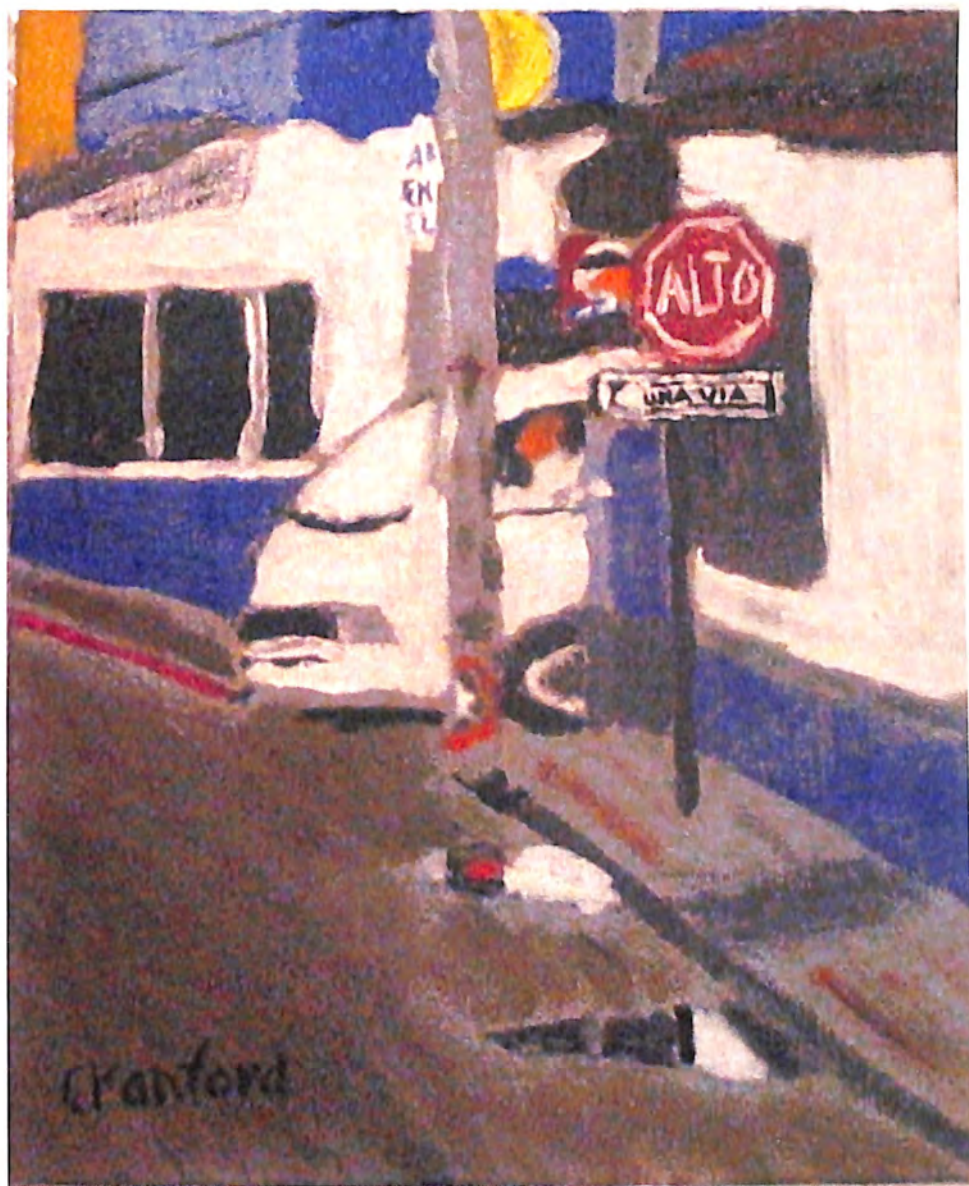
next: the bus windows, stretches
of canvas tacked permanently,
with splashes of colors in frantic
impressionisms, streams of life
from a wounded rainbow

70

and i only take my eyes off of this
for a second one small second one small
mistake
to see

(at)last: my notebook,
the medallion in my hands,
my treasure! feeling
all the fitter, tuning out all
the women and the colors,
all smells sounds sensations
and i open the cover,
eagerly awaiting the chance
to transcribe
my lovely electricity

Brendan Phillips



71

Guatemala
Richard Cranford

Thoughts Upon Waking

I should really read more,
I have so many books.
Look at all of them.
It's so late. I'm never going
To get on a normal sleep schedule
if this keeps up.

Julie looked great yesterday.
That motherfucker better
Stop checking her out
I'm not above making a scene.

72

How did the word "motherfucker"
Gain popularity? You wouldn't
Think people would need a
Four syllable substitute for
"one who has sex with a mother"
But here we are.

No one I know has had sex
With a mom... as far as I know.
That's actually not true. I meant
No one my age. I know plenty of
People who have had sex with a Mom.
My Dad for one.
That's weird.
You never think about that...

Was I a mistake?
I wouldn't mind if I were.

It's just crazy that kids can
just happen.
Must be careful with that fairer sex.
Walking baby factories.

Sometimes I wonder.
If there were a global cataclysm.
And we were all preserved.
Like fantastic ashen figures...
Remnants of a Neo Pompeii.
How many of us will they discover
Had masturbated at the time of the rapture

It's sad when you think of how
Much stock we put in sex.
It's the only thing we do
To satisfy a tactile urge.
No one ever hugs themselves
After a hard day. No one
Snuggles with themselves before
They go to sleep.
But when post apocalyptic
Societies crack open ancient tombs.
Dicks will be in hands.

I should brush my teeth.

The Steps of Melodrama

“Where were you last night?” Not so much a question as it was an order to explain, damp with worry and the onset of anger. No answer was given and thus soon revealed as hands shifted to hips and eyebrows grew heavy and creased. It was past the stage of continued inquiry, incessant nagging and threats of withholding love.

It marked the end of the dissipation of denial and the biting pain of acceptance.

They sat in silence, the recipient of the question recovering on the couch of the 5th floor flat, the sender planted in the doorway, waiting for something to happen. Nothing did. This was his defense, his answer.

74

Hands sliding from her hips, she turned and the tears came quick - hot and burning with guilt. She'd known the where and the who, she just didn't want to accept it - her doubts erased and solidified to fact. She savored the freedom it gave her, a freedom she danced in more and more often as his nocturnal disappearances became more frequent. Knowing she deserved the tears, she let them burn, remembering the empty bed and cold sheets she slept in, thinking, convincing, knowing this was in some or all ways her fault. She never let him see her cry.

She slammed the bedroom door to mask the sound of the lock snapping shut, a deadbolt she'd installed three nights prior. With an elegant, unnecessary speed she floated to her nightstand and pulled it a few precious inches from the wall; setting the floor and choosing the music. She reached down and stretched until the tips of unstable fingers met worn leather and the hiding place of her world's fun; tightening her shoes and letting the music - the thought of it - embrace her with familiarity

and content.

Each step in the way of preparation needed thought no more. Taking to the floor, worn leather cracked as a zipper was pulled and instruments of ecstasy were unveiled, a treat found and forgotten on what was now a nightly basis. She was preparing her partner for their dance, far enough along in the process to be able to ignore with prudence the knocks and questions that came from the door.

She was dressed - elastic strapped around her forearm. Her partner ready - his arm wet with the tiniest drop of everything she ever wanted and his body so full of it her anxiety to start was bordering on fear.

The music hadn't started yet, but the preliminaries of the dance had. She pulled her partner closer, closer, drawing him in until the embrace was complete; the point wasn't just breaking skin, it was entering her to deliver with forced grace heaven in its chemical form.

Dancing on she pushed her thumb down and held her breath as the first steps were taken with her body never leaving the bed. This was fulfillment. This was love. This was always here and never late.

Jeremy Gray

I May Never Blow My Nose Again

I still remember my Kindergarten teacher fondly. And by fondly, I mainly mean with intense feelings of blistering rage, hatred, and resentment. Her name was Mrs. Keenex, a seemingly soft-spoken woman in her thirties. I remember thinking, my first day of school, that she was the most beautiful woman I had ever met. She smelled like lemons all of the time (which could explain my future hatred of anything dealing with citrus) and was a chain lip-glosser. I thought she was sophisticated, worldly, and knew everything. While, that perhaps was very naïve of me, she knew how to do one thing well... make me feel like every day was the worst day of my life.

76

I'm exaggerating of course...well, slightly. I still say she had it out for me ever since one of my school friends told her I called her Mrs. Kleenex behind her back. I swear, assassin plans were made right then. Phone calls to the government, weapon registration and back alley mob deals to have me "taken care of" took up her free time. Look inside her desk and I am sure you would have found a detailed map of my walking route home, along with attack plans of where was best to strike at which times of the day. Sadly, I think I contributed more to her hatred after the name "incident". I had the unfortunate aptitude to play in the frog pond outside of the elementary school for too long in the morning. This made me constantly late, arriving in a blur at the classroom door five minutes after the bell had rung. Every morning at 9:05 a.m. I was all mittens, and snotty nose, and frog hands and wrinkled skirt and baggy tights. Obviously I was just begging for a good proverbial punch in the face. It came sooner than I had anticipated.

September 20, 1993 dawned foggy and chilly, but otherwise a wonderful Monday morning. I dressed with extra care

in my Little Mermaid T-shirt and matching sneakers, along with a denim skirt and pale pink tights. It was my fifth birthday and I was going to be damned if I let anything ruin my day. Bundled up in a windbreaker two sizes too big that had belonged to my sister, I headed off for school. Everything was going to be great. I was going to say a quick hello to all my frog friends, receive the appropriate birthday greeting (A rather enthusiastic ribbet. Trust me, you can tell the difference) and go to class on time and unscathed. I was also anticipating the reception of the glorified "birthday cupcake" each Kindergartner got on their birthday. Oh the naivety of youth. The frogs were extremely chatty that day and I had to chase after my favorite on five separate occasions. As I was placing Edgar the frog back on his rock, little Billy Somethingorother ran past me.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY," he bellowed while delivering a "birthday smack" (more like a samurai blow) on my back. I promptly fell into the pond.

You'd think a fall into a frog pond on a cold fall day would be traumatic enough. You'd think a teacher would be understanding, loving, and would tend to your care and bruised ego. Kleenex had other plans. As soon as I walked in, she gave me a look. "*The look*" you might call it. If you've ever feared for your life by the hands of another or done unfortunate things in your pants at the sight of this look, you know "*the look*".

"Out," she said, her red painted fingernail pointing toward the door.

"But, Mrs..."

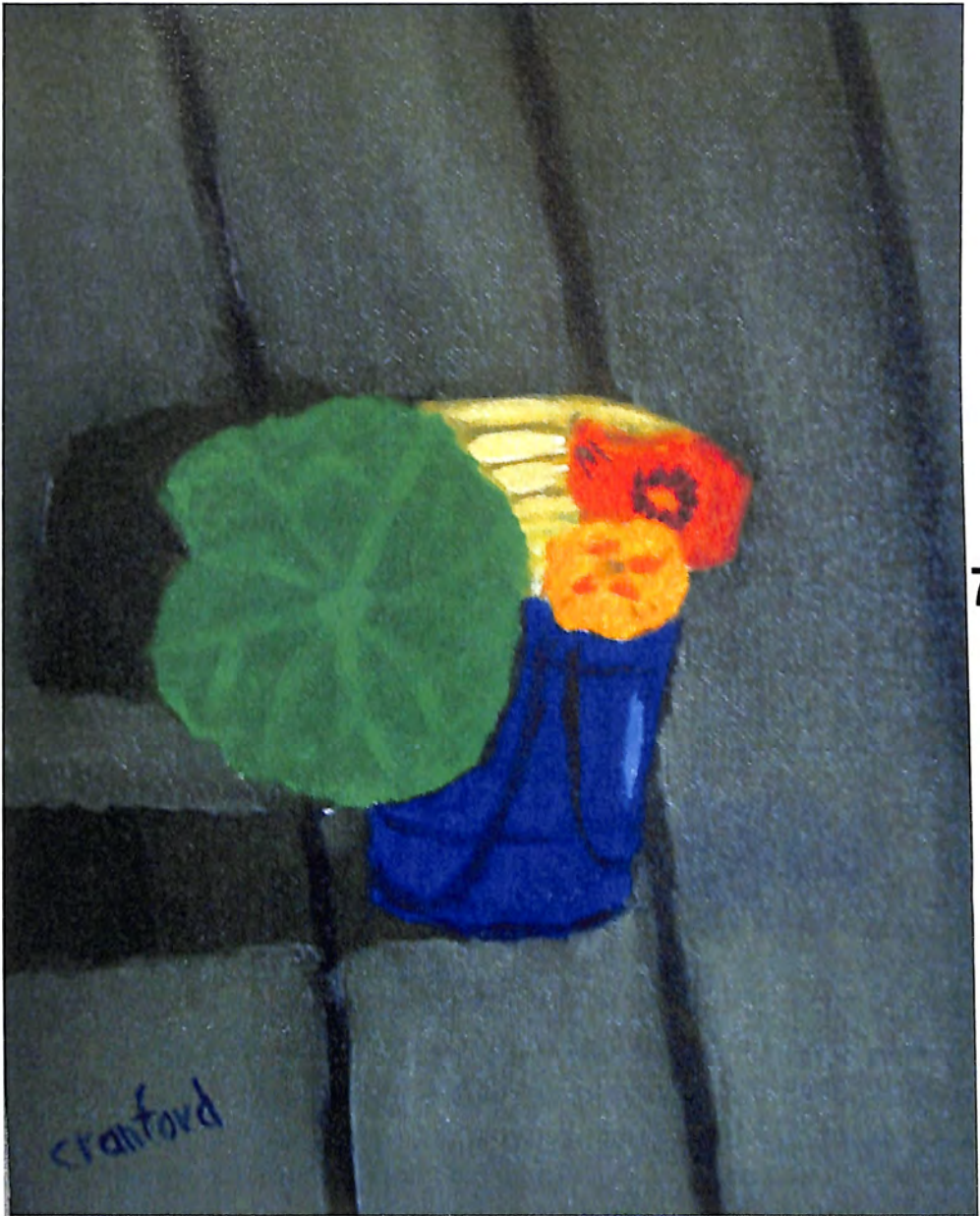
"OUT,"

I knew it was not the time to push my luck. I went through the doorway back into the hall and stood awaiting my punishment. There commenced a verbal bashing of such mag-

nificent proportions that to this day I cannot repeat what slanderous things were uttered. It would make you go deaf from shame. Five minutes and one broken child's spirit later, we returned to the classroom. There would be no birthday cupcake for me.

Sometimes I think about her...the mean old woman whose name was similar to that of a favored facial tissue. I wonder how many children suffered at her hands. How many kid's hopes, dreams, and cupcakes were ripped away from them just as they became tangible in their tiny, sticky hands. She might be still teaching, still terrorizing. Maybe she was fired for causing a mass mental breakdown of five year olds. Maybe her class rebelled during nap-time in an organized mutiny.

Vive la Révolution.



79

Nasturtiums
Richard Cranford

Airport

80 On a better day she might have been beautiful, today she was merely exhausted. Her normally glossy brown hair was slowly easing out of its usual tight bun, and a few strands had escaped to hang limp and oily about her face. There were lines in her make-up, and she had black eyeliner smudges on both of her lower eyelids. Her blouse was wrinkled. She wanted to take off her pricey, uncomfortable shoes. She wanted to curl up into a ball and sleep for days. Unfortunately she was sitting on an uncomfortable chair in a noisy airport, and sleep didn't seem like it would be coming anytime soon. Her phone rang again. She really ought to just turn the damn thing off, it was annoying everyone around her, but she found a strange bit of comfort in the ringing. Sure, he was only calling because he was pissed that she'd left again, but he was calling. Things had been too tense in their house lately, too quiet. She'd been going into work early and staying late, picking up bigger accounts, attending meetings in other cities. He'd been worried, he thought she was working herself too hard, they'd been fighting. Maybe she should answer it. Maybe it would be fine. Maybe they would laugh about the unreliability of the airlines during the winter. Maybe she'd tell him that her meeting had been canceled due to the snow, and that as soon as the planes got up and running again, she would come home. Maybe that would be enough this time. Maybe not. It rang again.

"Hello?"

"Liz? Damn it. Where the hell are you?"

"Sorry. I'm still in Chicago. The planes got stuck. It's the storm. It's letting up a little though, I might be home for dinner."

"You could have at least picked up your frickin' phone. You might have been splattered on the side of 96 for all I knew. You didn't even write this one on the calendar."

"Sorry. It just came up. Vick was supposed to go, but his kid got sick and someone had to take it."

"And that 'someone' had to be you?"

"I'm sorry."

"I don't want your apologies, I just want you to come home. You can't make it better by working all the time, Liz! It won't bring your mom back."

Water started to impede her view of the flight schedules. "It won't bring the kids home. Things change. You have to come back and deal with it."

There was a tap on her shoulder; she looked up into the concerned eyes of a flight attendant. **81**

"Excuse me ma'am, your flight is boarding."

"Lizzie?"

"I...I have to go. I'll see you later."

She closed the phone. God she was exhausted.

Katrina Freund

The Circle of Death Swings Around Us Stitched to the Sewing Klatch

The needle lifted up, swift as a doctor mid-stitch in open heart surgery, and the crackles died down to nothingness as the swinging arm settled into its resting place. The only sound in the room was the subtle snore coming from the glazed character leaning against the wall like a crustacean suctioned to a pier post. His five foot eight frame encompassed the small of the bed, causing a slope in the mattress: The ashtray had slid and lay dormant beside his thigh, the dead ends of roaches and cigarette butts overflowing leaving a stretch of ash like a comet's tail tracing the path the ashtray had trailed. It was a perfect salt and pepper creation that would blend in with the rest of the sheets with the test of time.

82

Downstairs, the screen door into the mudroom walloped shut, a problem that Dominic's father had planned to take care of when he had time... but with five children and a construction job as well as a full time habit, that time never seemed to quite arrive since his claim was announced when they had moved in seven years ago.

Tony sat in the kitchen, eating his Price Rite Cheerios in a tawdry pasta bowl while reading the back of the cereal box, a small reservoir of milk having collected on the vinyl table cloth between bubbles of air that had erected themselves between the bowl and the child. The milk had almost broken the barrier, sending the dairy disaster off the table and onto Tony's tattered Dickies. Before it was given the chance, Donald walked into the room, wiping the drunk off of his lips at the early hour. He looked at the boy, the cereal in the oversized bowl, the milk that was filling the table, and back at the boy with the buck teeth and thin face whose dirty shoes hung from the chair kicking back and forth, and turned towards the sink. He reached underneath in the wood stained cabinets, grabbed a towel, and tossed it to the young boy, missing him completely and landing half in the cereal bowl, and it was slowly overrun by the cherubic "O"s that floated upon the surface like life rafts.

“What the fuck! What did I do to you?” Tony demanded. As he said this, he began to take the towel out, but at the last possible moment left it in as when it fully arose from the milky abyss it created a trail of white and dirt; dirt that had assimilated to the towel after constant use without wash. Donald looked towards him from beneath his overcooked pseudo-conked hair, his eyes blood shot, and headed towards the stairs.

A few grunts erupted from his mouth, none of which could be understood. Donald turned the corner out of the kitchen like a baseball player rounding second, swinging a bit too far off course in order to not lose speed, and scarcely cleared the brass standing ash-tray. Tony watched, wincing, and continued to do so as Donald grappled with the railing, his limbs sporadically flailing against his control as though he were walking on brittle stilts.

Donald collapsed onto the floor after he had reached the second floor, his head slamming into the glass doorknob, sending the door into a spasm within the frame, testing the ancient locks and running a pulse through the floor, blood and all. Tony turned the corner to see Dominic open the door, allowing the rest of Donald’s body to fully give in to the gravitational pull, and finish the blood streak that had already begun, although now there was a blotch where his head had brusquely rested. Dominic stepped over him but didn’t say a word; he just paced passed him with his hands strung to his sides, and turned down the stairs at his younger brother. “Do something, Dom!”

“Ok, ok; let me think.” Dominic hurdled himself over his brother’s body and grabbed the first shirt he saw on the floor, which stared back at him with Jim Morrison’s. “Ok, I think I got this.” Swiftly he grabbed his brother by the wrists and attempted to drag him into his room, but Donald’s body was in such an awkward position his legs could not bend in order to slide through the door frame. Nervous, he pulled harder, unsure of what else to do: It worked, and his brother floated into his room, sliding along the ancient hard wood flooring, his shirt catching the small cracks and slices in the floor. As soon as Donald was away from the door, Dominic dropped his arms

to the floor with a deadening thud.

84 Donald had always prided himself in being “a little crazy,” and since he had moved from Italy into the area he had always felt he had to make his presence known, as everyone else in the area had attempted to assimilate into the neighborhood they had become a part of. He had, however, decided it was better to be seen separate from the rest: A productive day for him had meant that he was the talk of the table in the houses three and four streets over; and whether it was a good or bad conversation, it would always be about his escapades, and that’s what mattered. The things he did were often all in good fun and humor; sometimes he would cause a commotion in the streets by taking his dirt bike out at two and three in the morning on weekends and would ride it up and down the streets, or sometimes during the winter he would throw snowballs filled with ketchup at cop cars from the bridge and run off. However, after time the antics lost their authenticity and he tried harder to push the envelope, forcing his antics down the throats of anyone within the vicinity. His fear of becoming another dislimm immigrant absorbed into every part of his being and pushed him towards truculent actions that not only risked his life but his family’s. The pranks no longer were sophomoric and pedestrian, but stepped on the toes of dangerous people.

Tony had climbed up the stairs, and stood above the fallen brother in shock as Dominic attempted to clean the wound with his t-shirt, unable to keep the blood at bay. Sweat had begun to form on Donald’s skin like morning dew, and the color in his face had begun to die away. “Tony, call for an ambulance. Hurry!” Dominic continued to clean the wound, staring at his own brother as though he were in no way related... he felt he had lost him already. The bleeding was not heavy, but there was more wrong than the surface told and he could sense it; Donald was never this bad.

Back in the kitchen, Tony called the number they had made him memorize in first grade and gave the woman their house address. When the woman had asked in her rich Irish voice what was wrong with his brother, all he could say was that he was dying; he

did not know what his brother had ingested and was far too afraid to say the wrong thing. She asked him to stay on the phone, but he dropped it and ran back to his brother. The phone slammed against the vinyl flooring, only to have the phone cable lift it off the ground only long enough for it to fall again, not quite as hard yet more final.

The ambulance arrived in fifteen or so minutes. Donald was in the back of the ambulance, plugged into more devices than Dominic cared to count. Another five minutes. During that time, Robert, his elder by a year, had come home, and was elected to go to Roger William's Hospital with his fallen brother since he was eighteen. After a quick exchange about the incident, they were gone; just like that.

Dominic went outside, paced back and forth and chain-smoked; Tony watched from the steps and became lost in a daze, his eyes red and dry from crying silently and his head rotating back and forth to the time of Dominic's pacing. Time halted. A voice broke the silence. It was Ritchie; a friend of the family, he had parked his 1968 Mustang a little ways down the road and walked the rest of the way. "Hey, I saw the ambulance take Donnie away. Is he going to be ok?" The goofy grin that was usually impossible to tear off of his face was dormant, and the lack of sleep was oozing from his skin, which along with the overly scrawny frame gave him the persona of an alcoholic and Benzodiazepine addict; all he lacked were the delirium tremens and the orange bottle of prescription pills popped like Pez.

"Yeah, I think he'll be fine." Dominic looked over at Tony, who had begun looking down at the brick steps, and traced the cement between each brick like the maze on the back of the cereal box. He flipped his cigarette stub into the street, and began digging into his pants to grab another, when Ritchie handed one of his own to him as well as a lighter. "Thanks, man." He lit it, took a deep drag, and looked over towards Providence looming in the distance, thinking of where his brother was at that moment. Probably stuck in traffic on 95.

“Hey... listen. I know that what’s going on, this sucks. But you know as well as I do, someone needs to step up and keep your brother from losing his clients. I know you did it before, but I really need some cash right now. I know, I know, I don’t know his people like you do, but I need this right now.” Ritchie looked at Dominic, and then brought his eyes back to the ground. His feet slowly lulled a rock around on the ground, circling an ant that had been walking by, and it had become confused and scared. “I know you’ve got other stuff on your mind, and I understand. But these people... you know they’re going to go somewhere else if someone doesn’t deliver. They aren’t going to wait; if anyone knows that, it’s you.”

86

The sun had been swallowed under a blanket of clouds as Ritchie spoke, and the temperature had already begun to drop. Rain was on its way, whether they wanted it or not. The screen door clunked shut as Tony went inside, and Dominic turned towards the garage that was hidden behind overgenerous vines that hung down the trusses and created a canopy in which little light could pass through. The exuberant climbers had grown so fine this year that they hung down to the pavement in the front, giving the vision that anything and anyone could be waiting on the other side. They entered, and it was immediately cooler and darker. Dominic popped the latch and opened the garage door, squeaking and groaning. He sat down in one of the pair of off white plastic chairs, and motioned for Ritchie to do the same. Ritchie continued: “I don’t want to take over permanently, it would just be for a little while... until Donnie gets on his feet, and then I’ll step off. It’s just a chance for me to get some money so I can figure out where to go from there. And, of course, it’s a chance for me to help out: You guys are like my family.”

“It won’t work. Trust me.” Dominic had put his cigarette out and crossed his arms, and leaned the chair back so his head was resting on the frame of the garage door opening. “Just believe me, it won’t.” He paused, developing his thought. “And I’m not helping you.” The rain began to fall outside, and they watched the

drops begin to collect on the oak wine barrels that sat off to the side of garage, creating small pools that slowly crossed paths and created puddles. As time wore on, they sat, listened, and watched: The rain began to slip beneath the vines, traveling the distance of the driveway earnestly, and eventually flowing off to the side, filling the valleys between the cobblestones that led to the garden. The tender rain continued to come down heavier, slapping against the puddles, springing up against the grainy skin of the wood. It had begun coming down hard enough to run from the gutters at a steady rate – the aluminum and liquid sang like canaries.

“I’m telling you, it’s only for a little while. I’ll be fine; I can take care of myself. It’ll be quick; in and out. No problems... I won’t get in too deep. I know you won’t do it again, so who else will? It’s got to be me; you know there aren’t any other options.”

“Listen to me. Are you listening? It doesn’t work that way. It never works that way. And I’m telling you this: If you don’t listen to me, this won’t work; it just won’t... and you’ll be coming back to me crying, looking for help, and I don’t want to hear it. I’m not responsible for the shit you do. Ritchie; you’re on your own, I’m not holding your hand through everything: You wanted this; now prove that you can handle it.” The rain continued, heavier now, seeping through the self-indulgent grape vines; the grapes themselves shining fantastic shades of peach and St. Augustine grass, soaking in the cool summer day, absorbing the silence. “Look, I don’t want you to do this. I can’t stop you. This isn’t my decision, it’s yours.” Harder the rain fell, swallowing the gaps of dried pavement underneath the canvas of vines.

87

Inside the garage, Richie and Dominic sat and listened; listened to the music of the world playing around them: In the rest of the city, traffic bustled, men had sex and women made love, bodies returned and souls departed, and as priests spoke of the breath of life other men watched the rain in perfect silence from their garages as the world continued to pass by.

Andy Cerrone

Myrrh is Mine, Its Bitter Perfume

I had clung to the spirit of Christmas even after Santa was revealed as a fictional character and gift wish lists no longer were of central importance. Instead of Christmas being obliterated at the start of third grade, it was behind a perfume counter of Macy's the week before Christmas that the ugly realities of the holiday were revealed and my faith began to waver. Beneath a hastily adorned Christmas tree and the glare of fluorescent lights and to the tune of old Christmas songs mixed with soft rock, the lunacy surrounding adults and gift-giving forced its way into my definition of Christmastime.

"Hi sweetheart, I need some help." A short, round man belated his request as he leaned over the countertop. He wore a tee shirt adorned with a gas station logo and a title that read *Owner*.

88

The man explained that it was his night's mission to find a gift for his wife and that he was at a loss as to what he could possibly purchase for her. If I could help, he wanted to get buying a gift over with so that he could have one less thing to think about. He additionally commented that he did not necessarily care what was picked out, so long as the issue could be resolved easily. Unsure of what his wife normally wore, the man explained his wife the best he expressed he knew how: "Plain and in her forties." No further elaboration was given and he declared that he was ready to get the process moving. As he traced his fingers over perfume testers and waved his arms emphatically as he spoke, he displayed his darkened nails laced with dirt, weathered hands, and emitted a scent of nicotine and automobile fuel.

Requesting direction, he displayed a degree of disinterest in making a decision. Becoming engaged was clearly not of priority as he continuously checked his cell phone for new messages. The gift was one of formality, rather than stemming from true consideration. After little debate, he settled on a scent and had it prepared for purchase. Yet, he remembered that he was not done. He exclaimed that he also needed a gift for his friend. When prompted

for some more information about his friend to aid in making a decision, he shared that she was "In her thirties, playful, and, in contrast with my wife, more adventurous." His description left room for speculation surrounding the nature of their friendship, but it was not my job to question how friendly they truly were.

"Let's find her something exciting!" His mood had instantly heightened and he became more attentive.

After finding both perfumes, payment for his new purchases led to further delineation between his wife and his friend. Instructing me on my impending task, he requested two separate receipts and two separate bags: one for his wife and one for his friend. His wife's purchase would be paid for by means of his credit card. In contrast, his friend's perfume would be purchased in cash. Once more halting the transaction, he had further wishes for the allotment of the free gifts with each fragrance. With his wife's perfume came a metallic purple clutch, adorned with sequin details and his friend's fragrance was accompanied by a simple black tote bag. It was his desire that the bags be switched because, as he reminded me, his wife "Really is not that flashy of a woman, she is quite simple."

"Alright honey, I will be back, my friend's birthday is coming up and you can help me to pick up another gift!" he shared before picking up his bags to leave. With his departure, he slipped his wife's receipt into his wallet and deconstructed his friend's receipt into a crinkled ball in his back pocket.

She walked towards the counter with a crown of perfectly quaffed silver hair. The combination of her signature strut and injury-inducing heels echoed and sounded off a signal to any roadblocks that a path must be cleared. From her ears and neck dangled large pearls which would appear to be costume, but could not dare be. On her body was a mink coat, draped delicately over her small frame. It appeared capable of efficiently protecting its owner against the coldest of days but, at the least, had the power of signaling a dedication to glamour to onlookers. Long red nails mirrored her deep red lips and rouged cheeks. Individually-applied black lashes jutted far from her face, which was also seemingly devoid of a spec-

trum of facial expression.

The hardware on her leather bag crashed down and she tapped her long nails until appropriate attention was directed at her. Her pursed lips turned into a half grin as I turned to greet her.

“Well, darling, I am here for a new perfume!” She proclaimed her intent, as though it was not already evident due to the fact that she was standing before a display of woman’s fragrances and her eyes were taking inventory.

“Is there anything in particular that you would like to sample?”

“Well I love Chanel, of course. We can’t forget Givenchy, Yves Saint Laurent, or Christian Dior either.”

90

She delicately picked up tester papers to smell each of the scents and her hands only gravitated towards bottles with what she appeared to consider the most exclusive of names. The experience of testing was to be one of expertise, to match her love for quality. Requesting coffee to clear her nasal passages in between each scent, she exaggerated each of her movements to give it added drama. Her expression of disapproval was marked by a tightening of her lips and squinting of her eyes, followed by a toss of the paper in my direction. Upon her final decision of approval, she thrust her head back and breathed in deeply, as to indicate her appreciation for the scent and her appreciation that she had found the perfect match to serve as one of her husband’s Christmas gifts to her. In actuality, this was the same perfume that she purchased on every occasion of her visiting the store. Consistency was a staple of hers.

Before departing, her final move involved showering herself in her signature Chanel No. 5. Apparently, her wealth was intended to be a multi-sensory affair. She was to be beheld by vision and by scent. With that, she carried herself away with her characteristic clicking of her heels.

The woman emphatically waved her hands in the air, trying to make a visual point over the phone which her partner in conversation could not actually see. Dashing in and out of cell service, she hopped from one foot to the other and then from one corner of the

store to another. Off of her arm hung a bag which appeared to overflow with the contents of what could be one's entire life. Lists and calendars filled her bag to its brim. As she concluded her phone conversation, she moved closer towards the counter, revealing a somewhat youthful, but tired-looking face. On her face remained a friendly smile that hinted at the possibility of deception.

"Okay, I have to get a present for my sister-in-law and mother-in-law tonight." She shared her plan as she rummaged through her bag, to reveal a piece of paper that would verify her gift idea.

We conversed about the characteristics of each woman and the scents that they normally wore to be able to appropriately debate gifts for each of them. Much of her description could be analyzed as passive aggressive in nature and hostile in its own right as well.

"Now, my other problem is that I really do not want to spend much money either." She continued, "To be frank, I really do not like either of them."

"Alright." My curse reply was delivered with a somewhat uncomfortable smile plastered across my face, revealing the level of uneasiness which I had begun to feel.

She continued on in the same manner, explaining that she just could not stand her in-law family. In fact, she had recently begun to think that she could classify her feelings as hatred. As a result, she did not want to waste money on those that do not deserve a thoughtful gift. She followed up her negative sentiments by clarifying that she believed appearances are important and that she could be the more mature person in the situation by giving them both a gift.

"At least it will look good!" She further analyzed her gifts of obligation, "Now, for prices, let us stay under fifty dollars. If I must, I will go over the limit for my sister-in-law only: She is semi-tolerable."

In her debate over her impending purchase, she circled the counter, requesting price checks on the majority of bottles she saw.

In her accumulated list of possibilities, she became inclined to purchase scents that she could stomach herself and that would also look good if given as a gift. Despite these more positive deciding factors, a larger factor came into play as she refused to give anything that she deemed as overly nice or that she would like to buy for herself.

It was frankly shared, "I cannot bear to covet anything that those two women will soon own and, besides, they do not deserve anything too fantastic."

Business was rendered complete as she decided on neutral, adequate gifts that could be passed off as thoughtful, loving gifts. The decision was appropriate as the nature of their relationship was a reflection of this bond. Bags over her shoulder, she scanned the checklist that she had taken out earlier and marked off what her next task of conquest would be. She pounded away, a woman on a mission.

92 As he walked, he looked around with wandering eyes that would make short stops to give uncomfortable stares. A man who appeared to be in his late thirties with blond hair smiled coyly as he approached the counter.

"Well hello tonight," he spoke softly with an unnerving glance.

The man expressed his need to purchase a Christmas gift for his wife. It was his desire to smell different perfumes to make the best decision he could. Given multiple suggestions sprayed onto small paper cards, he paused to take in each aroma. Without fail, he took each card in his hand, brought it to his nose, and inhaled in such a way that it looked as though he was trying to snort the paper into his nasal cavities. He combined this with a finishing touch of swirling the card under his nose as a wine connoisseur would, before placing the card back onto the counter.

"What kind of perfume do you like?" He began to question me around my own taste in fragrance.

"Many of them."

Not wanting to be of much help and maintaining the desire for him to leave, I continued to quietly bring more options and not engage him. I did not want to know if he could not tolerate his wife

or if he had a friend to buy a gift for in addition to his wife. Instead, it was my wish that I could help a customer who would simply conduct business and leave without any amateur therapy sessions. His demeanor suggested that this would not be an option.

Minutes passed and cards littered the glass countertops. No fragrance of the seventeen tested had passed for approval yet. He still had not been satisfied. Feigning the imminent arrival of another customer, I sped up the process. Choosing one of the first perfumes he had tested, he was finally prepared to be rung up. Yet, he was still not ready to cease his conversation.

“Good thing that I have not sprayed much on myself.”

“Yes.”

“Otherwise, my wife would think that I was having an affair.”

“Yup.”

Not being given much of a response, he collected his things to leave. Turning to clean the clutter that had been left behind, I waited as he made a slow circle around the counter once again before his departure.

The two women walked through the store, arm in arm, giggling and holding one another. As they progressed in their travels, frequent stops were made in front of mirrors to fluff hair and turn around to check and critique one another's bodies. Making their way through each of the connected departments, they shouted and laughed with a roar. The hats and sunglasses, along with the shoes all experienced equal amounts of laughter and were recipients of the erratic nature of the two women.

Rounding the corner towards me, they smiled and marched with intent and devilish grins.

“How old are you sweetheart?” They collectively requested to know my age.

“Why are you here on a Friday night?” They persisted, “You should not be here, you should be out. This is a waste. Why don't we talk to your manager?”

Their conversation did not stop at this point. It was their

new mission to have each of their ages guessed and would not leave until this mission was complete. Shying away from accepting the challenge, I could only anticipate trouble. They looked as though they were each in some type of midlife crisis. I guessed that a suggestion of an age over twenty-six could only mean some type of frantic, loud reaction. As a result, I declined to go into any related conversation with them.

Not getting the reaction they anticipated, they left for some time. Before returning to the vicinity, they began dance numbers for the employees and a small number of other shoppers to the melodies of Christmas music and a medley of Stevie Wonder's "Signed, Sealed, Delivered, I'm Yours" and "Don't You Worry Bout a Thing." They had quite the repertoire of dances, both individual and pair. For pair, they elected to manhandle the mannequins, manipulating their plastic bodies to do dips and turns the best they could. They announced their signature moves, such as one they deemed as the "Old school shake", before eventually calming down and progressing to browse fragrances for themselves.

94

"The perfect Christmas gift for both of us has to be perfume!" they asserted.

Conveying their desires, they expressed the want for something that would make them smell "Hip, young, and now." Moreover, they needed "Something seductive." The two women did not want anything that would give off a semblance of being "An old lady" and would only look at the end of the counter that housed collections from Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, and Baby Phat.

On the way out of the store, they continued the laughter and altered behavior. Before they had left my area with bags of shopping in hand, they shared their plan to take a tree decoration with them. Not thinking that they were serious about stealing a piece of decorative shrubbery, I just laughed. Yet, moments later, I watched as they exaggeratedly pretended to steal large ornaments from a store tree. Their faux theft was followed by a celebratory chest bump and high five in the air.

“Peace on earth, good will to men” playing on the speaker system began to fade as I cleared out the register at the store’s closing. Collecting the copies of the day’s receipts, marked with the signatures of my customers, I decided that the Christmas spirit would catch up with the shoppers eventually, but maybe not until after the holiday. Locking up the door to the counter, the tree now unlit and the music ceased, I decided to optimistically revert back to my old definition of Christmastime, or at least until the next sale.

Christina Hughes



95

Textured Wall
Alexandra Hanley

6:15

Dust settles in the window spotlight,
the air being impenetrable
due to scents of sex
and smoke combined.
The naked chest next to mine
is rising and falling in waves, slow moving like the Sound
near our respective hometowns.
And the sound of the breath
coming in and out of a parted mouth
is the most mesmerizing alarm,
and literally now,

96

I wake up lying in a patch of clovers,
my good luck charm. The feel of your arm
where my head rests, the warmth spread
through-out;
The watch next to be the bed read
"6:15."
AM or PM,
we weren't quite sure
but we were quite sure
it made no difference.
Whispering winded wishes
that you would arise-
it's no surprise
that when you lifted your lids
the gravitational pull
of your atmospheric eyes
quickly dragged me
willingly by the hips.
Finally.

the soft confine of sheets
felt not like a restraint,
but like a hazy morning memory of a dream,
the kind with magic and mystery,
the kind I'd never like to forget.
As I let out the first smoke ring
of our day's beginning,
I pull you in,
fingertips and skin grazing skin.
Your lips are smooth, like your lines,
and for once in the history of humanity,
age nineteen and the month of March
might mean something,
to someone, this time,
besides the mere equinox of spring.
Vernal treasures don't compare-
they're only sleeping seeds
nestled underground,
waiting to be woken in a bed of dirt.
Pastels of April, so bland and dry
next to our bold palette of blood,
blush, bruise, blue and green,
lushes in the back, you and me-
the shades of our season
slammed together so shamelessly,
and seamlessly entangled
locked away screaming
from the jealous, quiet street.

When poetry dies

Words used to swim in the river
They were like leaves in a stream
Floating on top of the water
Light like a heaven within.
Slowly they were reaching the surface
Sand had sunken them in
Leaves that once sailed in the river
became stumps on dry land.
Flowers once grew on my highway
Sturdy and rigid cells
They clasped to the dull construction
Like stupid sheep in the middle of a field
Useless beauty where it's never observed
Pointless colors where the growing isn't preserved.
Words used to grow in my conscience
Slowly they'd rise to the top
Pouring all over my pages
Staining the cover art.
Now they are sinking quite quickly
falling so fast to the ground
No one would ever find them
not when I've spitted them out.
Poetry soon will be dying,
Falling apart like the sand
There will be no castles in heaven
No flowers will grow on my land.

Why do I speak of such nonsense?
Why must I say it again?
Will I be asking you questions, or

telling you secrets again?
Why do I waste time with thinking
Thinking of what could have been,
While inside I am truly sinking
back to my lighter side of hell.
Why do I waste time with telling
Telling you what I would do
What would I do if I knew then
Back when my heaven was dew.
Droplets of rain on the grassland.
Rising sun rays on my feet
Why did I run away then
Back when my heaven was new.
Sitting right here I feel lonely.
poetry is not about rhyme.
But what does it mean to you now?
You've got other things on your mind.
Why do I speak of this nonsense?
What do I want to achieve?
But what does it matter to me now.
I'm back in my dark side again.

Contributor's Notes

Amanda Bean is a first-year student at Lesley planning on majoring in creative writing and counseling psychology. She is interested in poetry therapy as a possible future career. She lives in Braintree and enjoys reading, writing, photography, French films, gardening, and sewing. She has a love for nature and interest in eco-psychology that frequently comes into her poetry. She works as a nanny when not doing school work or traveling during the summer.

Jacob Bison is a Junior at Lesley majoring in Creative Writing. He recently quit his job to have more time to ride his bike in the warm weather.

Hollie Brandstatter is a freshman at Lesley College, majoring in Creative Writing/English.

100

Cat Brennan is a senior at Lesley College studying Counseling/Psychology with an additional minor in Creative Writing. You may have seen her working diligently at the Kresge media center desk, or at Park Street on the way to her other job at Specialized Housing. She loves cats, coffee, and art in all forms, and has no idea what she's going to do in the not-so-distant future.

Andy Cerrone is from Fall River, Massachusetts and currently resides in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He is graduating from Lesley in 2009 with a degree in Secondary Education and English Literature. In high school he was told he would either do great things with his life or end up in jail; he's still waiting to discover which will be true.

Dave Cocco is an English major at Lesley. This is his second year contributing to the *Commonthought*.

Richard Cranford received a degree in American Studies from Lesley in 2008. His love of painting springs from the classes he took to meet the degree's art requirements. Over the years he's explored other creative realms including acting, musical performance, composing (classical, jazz, and marching-band music), writing, and storytelling. He finds that of all these, the act of painting most closely resembles storytelling. His other passions are the US Constitution, villanelles, and perfecting his hollandaise sauce.

Ashley De Pasquale is a Junior in Lesley College majoring in English.

Steven Fineman is a Junior at Lesley University who hails from Central Massachusetts. He is currently studying English, specifically creative writing, and enjoys creating works of Short Fiction.

My Name is **Katrina Freund**. I am 19, and from West Bloomfield, MI. I love to read and to write. I have nothing else to say about myself, so I hope you enjoy reading this magazine. **101**

Justin Goodstein-Aue is a Photography major at AIB.

My name is **Olga Godes**. I'm a second year student at Lesley University, majoring in Creative Writing. I've always thought of writing as my best form of communication. If a thousand human beings do not relate to my writing, I hope at least one of those thousand people might read what I said and say "that's how I feel too." I write because I want to make a difference to that one person, because I know what it's like to be the one who feels like nobody understands.

Jeremy Gray is a high school English teacher in training. His activities include people watching, sarcasm, acting like an intellectual and bitching about everything wrong in the world. He has visions of heroin in Paris and cocaine in elegant cars. Despite latent cynicism, he truly believes the world consists of unfound and unfettered benevolence.

Kathryn Greer is a Freshman at Lesley College majoring in English and Literature. Her experience in writing included publishing and editing her high school literary magazine *Aeons* and being the co-editor in her high school newspaper.

Alexandra Hanley is a Publishing major in the Adult Learning Division at Lesley College.

Christina Hughes is a sophomore at Lesley College majoring in English and Education. This is her first time contributing to Commonthought.

102 What can I say about the devilishly handsome author to that fine piece I've contributed? My name is **Josh Innocent**. I'm currently 20 and I hail from Foxboro, MA. I also take great pride in being the original "skinny kid with a funny name". After a failed run with the Education major, I've decided to put what good skills I have with English and well...long story short I'm in this line of work. I'm a very huge fan of comedy, and a lot of my writing is influenced by the likes of Larry David, Jerry Seinfeld, etc. So I hope many of you enjoy this piece I've written. Its my first published pieced that wasn't a middle school poem. Many thanks, and many works to come! I hope.

Martin Maguire is a English major in Lesley College.

Val Maloof is a Sophmore creative writing major who has been inspired by the works of Oscar Wilde and Kathy Griffin.

Shaun McNiff is the Dean of Lesley College and University Professor at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, an internationally recognized figure in the areas of the arts and healing and creativity enhancement, an exhibiting painter, and the author of many acclaimed books that include *Art Heals: How Creativity Cures the Soul*, *Trust the Process: An Artist's Guide to Letting Go*; *Art as Medicine: Creating a Therapy of the Imagination*; *Creating with Others: The Practice of Imagination in Life, Art and the Workplace*; *Art-Based Research, Depth Psychology of Art, and The Arts and Psychotherapy*.

Susan R. Merrifield is a Professor of English Education in Lesley College. As a young woman, she wrote, read, and published poetry (*Massachusetts Review*, *Dark Horse*, and others). After decades of neglecting this art form, she returned to life as an active poet in 2006. In 2007, she was selected as the faculty poet at PEAL's annual "Afternoon of Poetry." She is equally honored to be sharing her work again with the Lesley community through *Commonthought*.

Hannah Neale is a English major in Lesley College.

Brendan Phillips is a human, male, currently a junior and exploring the possibilities in store for a fully artistic life. His main hobbies include questioning, pushing limits, and asking "Why not?" at least once a day.

Ella Stiler-Cote is a Junior at Lesley College studying Elementary Education and Creative Writing. She enjoys writing poetry as well as creative non-fiction short stories. Ella grew up in Kennebunkport, Maine and loves to be active outside by the ocean or in the mountains.

103

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