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the **UN**religious, **NON**family-oriented lit & art mag

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table of contents

news you can use

Paper as Strong as Iron1

poetry (the passionate stuff)

Newamba1

Janet Kuypers.....2

poetry to prose

(the meat & potatoes stuff)

Kathryn Graves4

Monique Hayes4

Randall K. Rogers5

Aaron Wilder *art*6

Sarah Enelow7

D.L. Olson13

Marina Rubín16

Paloma Robles17

Audree Flynn22

Sabra Jensen.....23

Kent Tankersley27

Chapman Peck.....30

Jim Meirose36

Adelaida Avila44

Scars Cover art of sidewalk bricks
in Jackson Square, New Orleans, LA.

From **Awake!** magazine March 2009:

Paper as Strong as Iron

► Researchers at the Swedish Royal Institute of Technology have developed a method of producing

paper from wood cellulose that preserves the natural strength of its fibers. The normal mechanical processing of wood pulp in papermaking damages its tiny cellulose fibers and greatly reduces their strength. But the Swedish team succeeded in breaking down the pulp with enzymes and then gently separating its cellulose fibers in water, using a mechanical beater. When the undamaged fibers are drained, they bond into networks, producing sheets of paper with a yield strength greater than cast iron and almost as great as structural steel.

Punch You in the Face

Newamba

The next time I see you

I'm going to punch you in the face

Don't ask me why

I'm not really sure

It could be that thing you said to me a long
time ago

That I forgot and you can't recall

But, nonetheless, it pissed me off

Maybe it's because you like that song "My
Humps" by the Black Eyed Peas

Maybe it's because you talk too much during
movies

Or possibly it pertains to the peculiar sound you
make when you eat

Perhaps it's the way you look in a hat

Perhaps it's the things you say to my cat

(I'm glad she always hisses and scratches you)

Whatever it is

I'm going to punch you in the face

And I'll record it and upload it to the internet, too

So you and everyone

Will know and will see

That you got punched in the face

Punched in the face

By me

Dreams 12/22/08

the indescribable infant
is it a fish? is it an animal? is it human?

Janet Kuypers

i don't know if i was sitting on a bed or not
but i was near a sink
and there was a small animal of some sort
laying on a plastic curved sheet
i don't know, it couldn't be longer than my hand
and it was laying there like it was a newborn
and the only thing I could think to do
was clean it
like it was a newborn that needed to be cleaned

so I ran the water in the sink
until it was a tepid temperature
and i brought this animal
 i don't know what it was,
 it looked like it had a more human head
 but i can't remember legs on it
 and i couldn't tell you the sex of the creature
then i brought the indescribable infant
 and the curved plastic sheet
to the sink
and just ran a little of the water
to clean off the front and back

i saw what looked like it could have been fecal matter
wash off with the water
so i ran a little more water again
did this a few more times
until i apparently ran enough
to make the indescribable infant start to slide
down the curved plastic sheet

it started to sit upright after it slid
and i could see the look in its face
and it was about to cry

it almost seemed like a human cry,
but i think there were no legs
but i looked panicked with this indescribable infant
as it started to whimper, about to cry

so i instinctively picked it up
it still wasn't clean, but i didn't care
and i tried to put it against my chest
to help the indescribable infant
to make it feel better in this new world

he makes me think about these things

Janet Kuypers

I looked in my kitchen and saw olive oil.
now... think about it
olive oil from olives, right.
so let's break it down:
peanut oil: from peanuts.
almond oil: almonds.
corn oil, canola oil, safflower oil,
grape seed oil, flaxseed oil.
vegetable oil: from vegetables.
essential oils are concentrated oils.
i get it.
but what's in baby oil?

like
cheesecake

Janet Kuypers

The area between your neck and shoulder
that space right there
that no one thinks about

it's like
it's like cheesecake

poetry to prose

the meat and potatoes stuff

Too Cold

Kathryn Graves

He had two strikes against him; he was black and he was homeless. The article said he liked the used bookstores, to get in out of the rain/sniff the books/if only for an hour or two/frozen spittle nesting in his beard/living on sustenance of free coffee and everything else too lean/on the street/where scowls and nightsticks fell like rain. The article said most homeless are eventual victims; no key/no door/ no protection. In one week: 3 rapes/2 beaten/a woman sleeping set on fire. Already the day is stretching/he doesn't move/died in private/disintegrated in silence/too cold/too cold.

Majesty

Monique Hayes

Neon lights announce restaurants, their multi-colored glare illuminating the bare sidewalks. Your tennis shoes become bright green when you pass. The metro moves below as the twilight skies guide the weary home: politicians with combovers and disappearing clout; lawyers with case studies that linger in their minds; musicians who hum the greats under their breath; mothers locating their keys and kids as they shuffle hurriedly through human traffic. It resembles a lowered head dance, unless you're confident and haven't seen much.

You've seen it all. There have been ashy knees, ringworm, itchy lice, and untended bruises since your first class. It makes your stomach hurt for days. The children purchase their milk, a dime for a dairy drink, and shuffle along the line with their reduced lunches. Their backpacks are worn. Hard-lined faces enter the classroom.

The promise of a play shifts power. If the arts grant is provided, one child will pull a sword from the stone. His plain costume will seem richer than those of a prince, rare as the coat of many colors. They cannot find this elsewhere, only where love is law. You asked yourself how you would repair their hearts while other laws are keeping their neighborhoods down. You let them be the chosen for the day. A spotlight will make the sword shine fiercely. They've seen a lot in a little time, but never this.

When you were younger, you saw the playfulness of this city. The curl of smoke made you think of smoke signals. You went to the rooftop to see the stretch of it, this magnificent maze. Buildings stood like chess pieces ready to be knocked down or to be used to intimidate strangers. Cabs zoomed by like yellow bees, their honks buzzes. Distant billboards guaranteed you a fitter body, or the feeling of being fresh and alive if you smoked cigarettes. You couldn't read the surgeon general's warning from there. In the dawn, the streets looked long, golden and remarkable.

Today, quiet covers the block. You retrieve it, the thin letter from the grants committee. The words hold no mystery.

Randall K. Rogers

I'm gonna write a novel. Here goes.

Write, write, write. There. Finished.

I had a one armed man that I kept in my closet. He was dead, and smelled real bad, but I didn't care back then. Neither did Mom. I lived with Mom. She upstairs in the condo and me downstairs. We got the condo from my dead uncle who had a heart attack at fifty four. Guy drove himself to the hospital while he was having the heart attack. Then they gave him an experimental blood clot dissolving drug. He, being a hemophiliac, the drug caused the blood to seep into his lungs and almost drown him. He said they stuck a huge needle attached to what looked like a turkey baster into his lungs and pumped out what looked like French Dressing. He lasted a week or so in the hospital, went home, got progressively weaker, went back into the hospital and died. Left the condo, his Toronado, his stock and bond portfolio to my Mom. She left the city she was in and came to live in his condo, now sort of wealthy with his money. Soon I, smelling a padded nest, moved my way in.

It was Mom upstairs with the vodka and me downstairs with the herb. We rarely got in the way of each other's buzzes. Which along with a full refrigerator and no rent to pay made living for me there nice. But then I went off to teach in Ukraine, came back a year later, Mom was in tough shape. I swear she barely took five tiny bites in a month though daily downed a quart of vodka and smoked two packs of cigarettes. She took sick leave from work, and sat and watched movies smoked and drank. I tried to prepare food for her. "The vodka goes down well," she said when I commented on her lack of taking nourishment.

I predicted it. So did she but not as accurately as I. I called my brother and told him in excited concerned tones "if we don't do another intervention she'll be dead in two weeks!"

He responded, "let her die." Must have been a bad day for him. I was both-ering him with 'alarmist' views.

She died in two weeks, to the day.

The day I found the dead guy Mom had stashed behind the log stack in the garage. The decaying smelling one armed dead guy. When or how or why or even if she killed him, I don't know. But he was there. And even the cops didn't smell him when I called 911 to report her death and the dyke cop came and stood by me and Mom's body and watched me, watched my reactions. At one point she picked up my pack of Export A Canadian cigarettes, held them to her nose and suspiciously smelled them. She asked "What are these?"

"Cigarettes," I said, and took one from the pack and lit it. She continued to watch me. I sat down a few feet from the corpse, on the same couch as dead Mom. She wasn't too chatty. I put my face in my hands so it would look like I was grieving more. Still the cop lady suspected, I guessed they are trained like dogs that way, to observe. I looked at her, standing there looking at me, then looked over to the

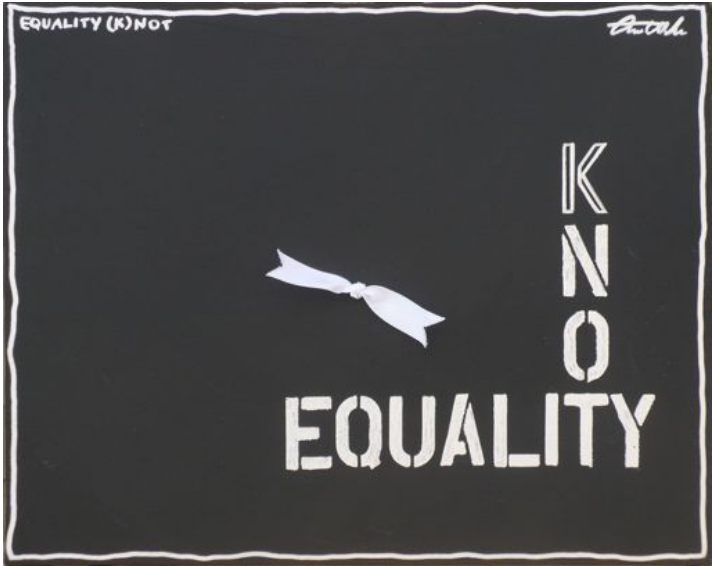
corpse and shook my head. Then the paramedics came in a sort of rush to save her and I said they could take it easy, she's gone. They took blood and tried some stuff for show I think, stuff to revive her like shocking her, but nothing worked. She jerked a little bit and you could see she had peed her pants but she was stone dead. Then the detective came and said to me "you're not going to like me asking these questions." I cleared myself of a murder charge with the help of my uncle who arrived just in time and told the cops she had just gotten out of the hospital and she had been sick (i.e. drunk) at home for a month, away from work.

All the cops left too, the paramedics left and it was just me and my uncle and her. And like I said earlier she wasn't saying much. After ten minutes or so of awkward silence sitting me uncle and Mom in the TV room, uncle and I agreed we should move to the living room, leaving Mom to watch the TV by herself, which I finally turned off. We waited three hours in dumb comment punctuated silence before the funeral home people came to get her. When the stretcher with her on it went down the stairs and out the door I turned my face to the sliding glass door and tried to look out past the reflection. "I don't want to watch her go," I said.

Then it was four in the morning and my uncle left. It was me alone in the condo. I stayed upstairs for a while and waved to maybe her spirit stuck on the ceiling. Then I went downstairs, sat down in front of the TV, turned on a blackploitation film that was on American Movie Classics and did four big bongos of fine weed. And I didn't even get high. Later I cried and yelled at the heavens and Mom's spirit. "I loved you!" I wept, I cried hamming it up for the dead ancestors "I love you Mom!"

Later I went out in the garage and found the one armed dead man. I took his rotting remains and put them in my downstairs bedroom closet. Why?

Why not? I dumped out and washed out Mom's vodka glass before the cops first arrived too. Didn't want them to think she drank herself to death, and was a murderer too.



Equality
(K)not, art
by Aaron
Wilder

What Exactly is Creative Intelligence Studies?

Sarah Enelow

I'm not going to make it. I'm holding my skirt with one hand and clutching my papers with the other, my feet are blistering from running in uncomfortable shoes, and I envision myself dashing into traffic to cross the next street, heroically sliding over the hood of a taxi and continuing to run without skipping a beat. I'm covered in sweat and I probably don't smell very good.

I can't decide if I should stop running long enough to pull out my phone, find the phone number, and call to say I'm running late, or if I should just keep running at top speed and pretend like I was never late to begin with. I keep running, unwilling to admit defeat, and breeze through the door five minutes late, wiping sweat off my brow and arranging myself as best I can. After waiting another painful 45 seconds for the receptionist to sign me in, I am led back to a cluttered but thankfully air-conditioned office.

"So, the educational section of your resume... you have a master's degree?"

"Yes, that's right."

"What exactly is Creative Intelligence Studies?"

"It's a very specialized degree program, sort of inter-disciplinary within the humanities..."

I don't even remember what I studied anymore, because it's been so irrelevant to absolutely everything.

"And... why did you choose not to pursue a career in that field?"

"I've been open to a variety of careers, and am still searching for the right organization."

"And here it says during college you studied abroad in... Mangia? In Italy?"

My interviewer searches in vain for this information on my resume, which is printed prominently at the top under *education*.

"Managua, Nicaragua."

"And what professional skills did you gain from that experience?"

"My Spanish greatly improved, and certainly my independent problem-solving skills."

"Did you pick up any marketing experience there?"

"Well, I was mostly volunteering during that semester, delivering food, transporting medicine, finding shelter for abandoned children—"

"Are you familiar with HTML?"

"... yes, some basics."

"And are you familiar with relationship selling and viral marketing?"

"I don't believe I am..."

My interviewer scribbles some notes.

“Well, I’m not sure you’re a good fit for the position we discussed, but we do have another position open that you might enjoy. We’re currently interviewing for a Comprehensive Assistant here at the main offices.”

“What does that entail?”

“The Comprehensive Assistant will be responsible for physically maintaining the office, making travel arrangements for our nine Vice Presidents, drafting emails and print correspondence for each VP, answering all phone calls for every VP, scheduling meetings for every department, ordering lunch, making photocopies, running the mailroom...”

I stop listening for at least 90 seconds.

“... and manually repairing each of our seven photocopy machines, because we just ended our maintenance contract with Konica Minolta.”

I stare at my interviewer, who is completely serious about the Comprehensive Assistant position. I have a hard time evaluating whether or not it’s smarter to insist that I’m interested, even though just listening to the job description gives me indigestion and a tension headache, or to run while I still can.

“Well, that sounds like a very challenging position, and a really great learning opportunity.”

“I think you would be quite well suited to the position actually. Do you have any questions for me?”

“Sure...”

I can’t even begin to organize the tornado of doubts whirling around in my head. And yet, I’m sure there are seventeen other applicants with worthless degrees who would jump on it, given the opportunity.

“So... is this a new position?”

“Yes.”

“... did each VP previously have their own assistant?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you decide to consolidate those nine positions?”

“We feel that the job is better suited to one multi-tasker rather than nine individuals.”

“Is there any chance that you would hire a tenth VP in the near future?”

“Yes, we are currently interviewing for two additional VPs, who will also require your support.”

“Would any of the VPs be open to teaching me about their departments, or perhaps helping me to develop a specialty?”

“I doubt they would have time for that.”

Yes, I doubt I would have time for that as well.

“It sounds like a really exciting opportunity. I would love to be considered.”

“Great, you start Monday at 9.”

My stomach drops a couple of inches and I feel already that I’ve made a grave error. I don’t think there were seventeen applicants ready to snap up this opportunity. I was the only desperate one. But that’s a moot point, because evidently I start Monday.

I arrive at the office Monday morning at ten minutes to nine, dressed quite nicely, portable coffee thermos in hand, ready to find my desk. Sandy the receptionist leads me over to my chair, looking calm and actually rather well-adjusted, which in turn soothes my nerves considerably. Sandy is wearing a flouncy pink skirt and a yellow cardigan, a sort of spring-time illusion to brighten an office that's brimming with fluorescent lights and beige furniture, row after row of desks piled high with papers.

"This is your desk here, and the VP of Market Research is just across the hall there. You'll find the guidebook for this position in the drawer and the client files are stored underneath."

Sandy goes through the motions of showing me things, and I get the feeling she's done it before. I take a look at the guidebook.

"Thanks so much, Sandy... this guidebook says only 'Assistant to the VP of Market Research.' Where can I find information for the other VPs?"

"Those guides are stored at your other desks."

"My other desks?"

"Yes, each VP has requested that their assistant to be no more than three desks away, preferably just across the hall, so you'll have a desk-rotation throughout the day, and each VP will be able to page you at any time to come back to his or her desk for individual projects."

"And how much time does that allow me per desk?"

"48 minutes per VP plus a 30-minute daily group-review and an 18-minute lunch break."

"I see."

"Each VP has a unique filing system, so you'll have to dig through a bit to learn each one."

"I see."

"Just let me know if you need anything!"

Sandy abandons me at desk #1 and bounces back to reception, just as my first 48-minute rotation begins. I spend 35 minutes digging through the files, just learning where everything is kept, when the VP of Market Research strolls in, wearing a horrific pant suit, asking for a stack of files by the name of "Jackson Johnson something or other."

"Hello, it's nice to meet you. I'm the new Comprehensive Assistant."

"What?"

"It's nice to meet you. My name is Jane, I'm the new Comprehensive Assistant."

"What's a Comprehensive Assistant?"

"... I'm your assistant, and I'm assisting the other eight VPs."

"I have a new assistant?"

"... yes, I'll be your assistant, starting today."

VP #1 rolls her eyes and storms into her office, flinging the door open. Her enormous to-go coffee sloshes everywhere and files get dropped into various chairs. I stand outside, watching her bumble around as though she'd never been into her own office. My cell phone starts to vibrate in my purse, which leads me to the conclusion that my personal phone will act as my pager. The page is coming from VP #2 and I excuse myself

while VP #1 continues to get worked up, yelling at the stapler and reprimanding the file cabinet for swallowing several client profiles that have gone missing.

I grab my belongings and proceed down the hall to VP #2, in the Human Resources department. He looks incredibly disheveled, considering that he's been at his desk all morning and not jaguar-wrestling in the Amazonian jungle. He's unshaven, seemingly for several days, his un-tucked shirt with loosened tie bear the signs of eating breakfast while speed-walking down the street, and he's sweating for no apparent reason.

"Jane! Nice to meet you, we have a lot of work to do, so I paged you a bit early. We need to review resumes for the new Comprehensive Assistant position, so I need you to start by organizing them by—"

"Excuse me, but that's actually my position."

"... I thought you were the Rotational Assistant."

I stop and stare at him for a moment, feeling unsettled about whether I might actually be the Rotational Assistant. Is that possible?

"No, I believe I accepted the Comprehensive Assistant position."

He shoves some papers to the side and nervously takes a huge gulp of coffee, gritting his teeth.

"Well, let's start organizing these resumes for the Rotational Assistant position, and I'll need you to get started on payroll too."

"And what does that entail?"

"What?"

"Getting started on payroll, I don't know what that entails."

"Haven't you been trained?"

"No."

"Who is supposed to train you?"

I am increasingly flustered by questions to which the asker should know the answer.

"I don't know. Maybe we should consult Human Resources."

Silence ensues for several painful seconds.

"We'll go over that later. Start sorting through these."

He hands me a towering stack of papers and, still unsure of what I should be doing, I take the papers over to my second desk. The desk is completely bare, no guidebook, no files, no trace of sentient life whatsoever. Not knowing what criteria to use, I simply start putting the resumes in order of apparent superiority. Near the end of my second shift, after no further appearance from VP #2, I proceed down the hall to visit VP #3. The VP is not there, but a note is left on my third desk, indicating that she is in a meeting and I should wait there for her to return (exactly there, at the desk, not moving unless it's an emergency), ignoring my upcoming shifts with the other VPs. There is also a list of things that I must produce for her by the (yet unspecified) time she returns, including a large soy milk coffee, a Ukrainian pastry with poppy seed filling, a new stapler that doesn't make that "irritating crunchy sound when you staple something," and twelve copies of the otherwise unspecified "quarterly report." Not sure how to accomplish all of this without leaving my third desk, I start digging around online for a nearby Ukrainian pastry shop that will deliv-

er one pastry, a café that will deliver a single cup of coffee, and an online office supply catalog with a silent, state-of-the-art stapler. I make copies of several different documents titled “quarterly report” and wait for my various deliveries.

VP #3 never arrives. It’s 12:30 PM and I have been afraid to leave desk #3, except for one brief trip to the bathroom, for which I ask Sandy to watch the desk for me in case the VP returns. I receive more than one page and call the other VPs to explain the situation. Increasingly disillusioned, I notify Sandy of my 18-minute lunch break and head out the door.

Walking unbelievably fast down the street, not knowing my destination, I pass three cafés but am not even hungry. Eventually I bump into a small park less than ten blocks from the office and veer into it, anxious to sit down and space out. I get comfortable on a faded green park bench and stare into the air around me, hugging my purse to my stomach, not really noticing the children running around or the people on lunch breaks from nearby offices, devouring their take-out. A hip couple is sitting at the opposite end of my bench, nodding vigorously to each other as they discuss a “friggin’ awesome” public art installation downtown. They make snide remarks about the kids running around, nodding in complete accord, noting that this park is filled with the ill-raised children of corporate drones. They smile to each other, looking at the poor, un-knowing victims of capitalism with the enlightenment gained by a fuller, rounder, better education. They rudely flick their cigarettes in the direction of a pre-school-age brother and sister playing nearby and trot off to their workplace, wherever that may be. As soon as they leave, the brother grabs an empty plastic soda bottle and whacks his sister square over the head with it, leaving her sobbing but unhurt. Their mother begrudgingly comes to the rescue, pries the bottle from the fiercely clenched hand of the young boy, tosses it into the recycling bin, and plops down at the other end of my bench, where the hip couple had been sitting. This mother is wearing a long-sleeved t-shirt from an arts festival, with a prominent logo at the bottom reading “save the world, save the performing arts.” I briefly contemplate whether or not I’m interested in saving the world. She gets up after a couple of labored breaths, gathers her quarreling tots, and heads down the street.

The office-types are clearing the park as their lunch breaks come to an end and all that’s left are the moms and kids. I continue staring into the air, sure that I’ve been paged several more times and have already been fired, but I am simply overtaken with a sort of unexplainable fatigue and can’t go back to the office. I suppose I don’t have to go back, since I have my purse with me. I could just stay here all day and then go home, pretending like this whole ridiculous thing never happened. Just as I contemplate turning my phone back on to confront the accumulating pages, a grungy young guy sits down at the other end of my bench. He removes his overstuffed backpack, dumps it onto the ground, pulls out a cigarette, and looks directly at me.

“You got a light?”

He gestures with his right hand, as though he were using an invisible lighter.

“No, I don’t smoke.”

“Oh man, you wouldn’t last two minutes in Argentina, everyone smokes there. They’re so tired of those healthy, non-smoking Americans.”

I think a moment about whether or not that is an accurate portrayal of Argentina.

“Were you recently in Argentina?”

“For six months, just flew in this morning. You ever been to South America?”

“No.”

“Oh man, you need to go. Don’t put it off, just go.”

I think for another moment about whether or not this stranger has any idea what my life may consist of, or whether he has ever found himself *not* in a position to pick up and move to another continent.

“Seriously, you have no idea what it’s like.”

“You’re right, I don’t. As I just said a minute ago, I’ve never been to South America...”

“If you’ve never been to Carnaval and woken up with peacock feathers stuck to your head, you haven’t lived. Seriously.”

He stares off into space, clearly remembering a recent experience, putting the cigarette into his mouth and then remembering that he doesn’t have a light.

“Oh, you’re serious?” I add sarcastically.

“Oh yeah.” He is indeed serious.

Then I think for a moment about whether or not uprooting to another continent would solve anything. How do young people do that, anyway? Everyone seems to be doing it, including a few idiots I know from college who failed Intro to Psychology twice in a row, so it can’t possibly be that hard. Do their parents have houses there? Do they just assume that everything will work itself out before night-fall the first day they arrive? I am still confounded by the idea, and it’s making my brain hurt to think about the logistics.

I look at my watch and the afternoon is wearing on. There is really no point in going back to work, unless I have an elaborate excuse for why I was detained at lunch. I’d rather just go home and start over tomorrow rather than go back to work or discuss the ways in which waking up in a beer-soaked Argentine bar wearing a gaucho costume would enrich my life in ways that graduate school or a meaningful career could never achieve.

“So you were in Argentina for six months and just came back this morning?”

“Yep.”

“What were you doing down there?”

“What wasn’t I doing?”

“... I don’t know, you tell me.”

“Oh man, I did everything.”

“And you live here?”

“I live wherever I can sit down and light up a cigarette.”

He pauses, remembering yet again that he has no light. I ask:

“What do you do here? Do you have a job?”

“I feel sorry for anyone who has a job.”

After several absurd seconds of silence and vacant staring, I get up and head toward the nearest bus stop.

Fugue

D.L. Olson

Mark Prentice is a bastard.

All men are bastards. Mark Prentice is a man. Therefore, Mark Prentice is a bastard. I used to think he was a human being.

Bruce Ripkin is a bigger bastard. He's head of the School Board. He's on the City Council. He's my ex-husband's lawyer. His divorce settlement screwed me over bad. But now he's screwing me over even worse. I used to think he was a human being.

Gary Johnston is the biggest bastard. He used to be my husband. He used to be my lover. He used to be a father to my son. But he gave that all up for good to become a drunken lout. I used to think he was a human being.

All men are bastards. Big, bigger, biggest. That is the only question. Get used to it.

My son Matthew is a boy. My son Matthew is a human being. One day my son Matthew will be a man. My son Matthew is not a bastard, but one day he will be, I'm afraid.

I used to think Mark Prentice was different. He and I used to be the best of friends. Last Monday he calls me up like he used to every other day. He says, Kate, how about another lunch? Just like old times?

Another lunch? Like we'd been getting together all along? Like nothing had happened in between? Like we'd stayed best friends? *Another* lunch? After five years without a word?

I show up at D.K.'s exactly on time. No sign of him. I grab the last booth. I order coffee. He doesn't come. I get a refill. I twiddle my thumbs.

Finally Mark strolls in. Finally. Only forty minutes late. Only. Just like old times.

He slides into the booth. So how you doin', Kate? he says. And he winks and he smiles. No apology at all. None. Nada. Zero. Zilch. So how you doin', Kate? he says. Like he hasn't seen me in a week. Not even a hint of an apology.

And he keeps on smiling. And then he starts sneaking peeks. All around my face. Like I was a Michelangelo in a museum. But I have forehead wrinkles. I have crow's feet. I have laugh lines. A Michelangelo is a statue. I am a woman. A woman is not a statue. Therefore, I am not a Michelangelo.

He grins. He winks. He keeps sneaking peaks. Like my wrinkles are the biggest news in years. He chuckles. You're looking good, Kate, he says. The liar.

He looks good. I don't. *Another* lunch? After five years of fighting to keep the house? After five years of raising Matthew all by myself? After five years without a word? I don't look good. Not any more. Not after five years of lonely hell.

He smiles. He chuckles. Cat got your tongue? he says. He stares. Does the bastard actually expect me to look the same?

Say something, he says.

Something, I say.

He chuckles. He shrugs. He sneaks another peek. Really, you look nice, he says. The liar.

I look nice? Some compliment. Kind of modest. Kind of meager. Kind of pathetic compared to saying I was the most beautiful woman he'd ever met. Like he always did before.

I glare. I grind. I gnash.

He grins. Are you mad at me or something? he says.

Or something, I say.

He laughs out loud. He says, I mean it's not like I could have done anything to hurt you, since I haven't even seen you in what—my goodness—it must be five years.

Right, asshole. Rub it in.

He smiles. He stares. He says, sounding merry and nonchalant, I'm sure you heard I finally found that good woman I was looking for. And you know, ever since, everything in my life has fallen into place.

Right, merry, nonchalant asshole. Rub it in.

Mark Prentice is an asshole. Bruce Ripkin is a bigger asshole. Gary Johnston is the biggest asshole. Or is it the other way around? Big, bigger, biggest. That is the only question. Get used to it.

He smiles. He stares. He says, Ellen and I will have to invite you over. You won't believe how she's fixed the place up. And she's a big jogger. Just like you.

Just like me. Right, bastard, asshole. Rub it in.

He grins. He says, So, Kate, you been dating anybody since your divorce? Just like the liar really cares. He stares. At my forehead wrinkles. At my crow's feet. At my laugh lines. Like I was a Michelangelo in a museum.

I don't have time to date, I say. I've got a fulltime job. I've got a son to raise. And I've got a house to keep up.

He chuckles. He says, Isn't Matthew old enough to take care of himself yet? What is he now, fifteen?

I glare. I grind. I gnash. Sixteen! I say. My son! My house!

He laughs, sounding merry and nonchalant.

Mark Prentice is a prick. Bruce Ripkin is a bigger prick. Gary Johnston is the biggest prick. Or is it the other way around? Big, bigger, biggest. That is the only question. Get used to it.

He gives me a grin. He sneaks another peek. He says, Hey, Kate, it's okay not to date. But it'd be a snap for a woman like you to find somebody else.

I glare. I grind. I gnash. Why'd I ever think Mark Prentice was any different from the others?

Honestly, he says, it'd be a breeze.

Honestly, he lies. Honestly, he sneaks a peek. Like I was still beautiful. He smiles. Like this is just another lunch. Like we had stayed best friends. *Another* lunch?

You know, he says, I've been wondering if you'd like to meet my new colleague. His name is Tom Davis. He just got divorced. And he's tall, dark, and handsome. And a whole lot of fun. What's not to like?

Me like a bastard, asshole, and prick? I glare. I grind. I gnash.

What if I have Tom give you a call? he says. Just like the liar really cares.

I already know all I need to know about this Tom Davis. Because all men are bastards, assholes, and pricks. Tom Davis is a man. Therefore, Tom Davis is a bastard, asshole, and prick.

He smiles. He says, Now, Kate, this is going to sound strange, but I'm getting this distinct impression I've offended you somehow.

Right, bastard, asshole, prick. Rub it in.

He stops grinning. He stops sneaking peeks. He says, Now, Kate, are you going to talk to me or what? If not, why did you agree to another lunch?

Another lunch? I glare. I grind. I gnash.

He frowns. He folds his arms. He says, Speak up, Kate. What's on your mind?

I say, All men are bastards, assholes, and pricks.

He laughs, sounding merry and nonchalant. He says, All men? You're not being rational.

Mark Prentice is. Gary Johnston is. Bruce Ripkin is. Tom Davis is. Because all men are. Because all men are men. I'm being perfectly rational. Big, bigger, biggest. That is the only question. Get used to it.

He furrows his brow like I'm not making any sense. Like he doesn't mind getting wrinkles. Like the liar really cares.

You know, Kate, he says, you're not making any sense.

I say, My ex and his lawyer are taking away my son. And now I have to put the house up for sale. My son! My house!

He blinks.

Were we not best friends? I say.

He shrugs. He frowns. We were, he says.

Were we not closer than best friends? I say.

He shrugs. He frowns. We were, he says.

Were we not affectionate friends? I say.

He sighs. He frowns. We were, he says.

Did we not avow our love? I say.

He sighs. He frowns. He looks away.

Did we not make plans? I say.

He frowns. He folds his hands. He looks down.

I glare. I grind. I gnash. I scream, Mark Prentice, you're a bastard! And an asshole! And a prick! You avowed your love! And then you backed out!

He makes a face like he's worried about me. He says, You know, Kate, I'm worried about you.

I shout, Bastard! Asshole! Prick! My son! My house!

He shakes his head like I'm out of touch with reality. You know, Kate, he says, you sound out of touch with reality. Sure, we were close friends. And affectionate friends. But.

Close friends? Affectionate friends? But? Close, yes. Affectionate, yes. Friends, yes. And so much, much more. We phoned. We talked. We teased. We hugged. Again and again and again. We never wanted to let go. Our hearts were in tune. *Our*

hearts. Ours, ours, ours!

He shakes his head.

Liar, liar, liar. Big, bigger, biggest. That is the only question. Get used to it.

You know, he says. And he stops. I don't know, he means. You know, he begins again. I don't know, he means.

Liar, liar, liar. Bastard, asshole, prick. Punch him, kick him, smash him! Get used to it! I shriek.

He makes a face. Are you okay, Kate? he says. Just like he really cares.

Bastard! Asshole! Prick! I shriek. Liar, liar, liar! My son! My house! Punch, kick, smash! Get used to it!

The waitress rushes over, the child-woman, without one wrinkle, without one crow's foot, without one laugh line. Not yet. Is something wrong? she says.

He gives her a grin. He sneaks a peek. No, he says.

She says, sounding merry and nonchalant, Will there be anything else?

He gives her a little wink.

I shout, Bastards, assholes, pricks! Mark Prentice is! Gary Johnston is! Bruce Ripkin is! Tom Davis is! Because all men are! Because all men are men! I'm being perfectly rational! Big, bigger, biggest! That is the only question! Get used to it!

She gives me a little wink.

Rhapsody of Life, Irony, and Human Nature

Marina Rubin

eighty eight years of steel. war, depression, other war, atomic bomb, vietnam, raising 3 children, her husband's alzheimer's. nothing could break her. until her brother's death. he died with millions. mourners kissed both her cheeks, praised the dearly departed wondering how much money the old bastard left and to whom? she was convinced she would inherit it all, her brother hated everyone and had no children. four feet eight inches tall ninety two pounds, she frequented beauty parlors, shopped for fashionable undergarments in rainbow colors, spent hours on the phone with her son going over her brother's assets. not even a scream of the blackbird, nor a black cat crossing the street could spoil her stainless destiny, her guaranteed happiness. she waited. her son waited. a mob of grieving relatives waited. in his will her brother bequeathed all his riches to his dead wife's niece living in tel aviv. the merciless corrupt patriarch didn't leave his own sister a lilliputian crumb. she was rushed to the hospital with a heart attack, her son followed after with a stroke

I read it in the New York Times: Bomb Making Factory Found in Brooklyn Apartment of Columbia Professor.

The professor was called Michael Clatts. He was living with a thirty five year old man named Ivanov, an illegal immigrant from Bulgaria, who shot his finger accidentally in Clatt's apartment. Ivanov was wearing a bullet-proof jacket when he walked into the hospital, and this rose suspicions about his version of the events: he said he had been shot in the streets by a stranger. The police searched the apartment and found seven pipe bombs already filled with powder, silencers, a shotgun, and other bomb manufacturing equipment. The building was evacuated. A woman living in the premises had praised the way the police had handled the whole affair. "They did everything not to alarm us," she said, "and they helped us take our cats out." I pictured the woman: a fat sixty year old spinster, secure behind the walls of her luxurious Brooklyn apartment.

Michael Clatts was Huso's research partner at Columbia University, also his close friend. They worked on sexuality and HIV/AIDS prevention, but according to the New York Times reporter, Clatts was "an expert in the spread of contagious diseases."

This story is not the story of Michael Clatts.
It is not the story of Ivanov.
It is the story of how I got to meet Huso Yi.

When I laid down the newspaper, back in my Beijing apartment, I recalled the scene at the restaurant near Huso's hotel, when he told me about the unexpected call. His expression of consternation, and his eyes, tamed, deep-set, unevasive. Huso had probably received a great deal of similar calls during his twenty years as an activist. The same as Wan, my former boss, and also the most prominent human rights activist in China, he had been in jail three times. "The first time, they found a Marxist book in my backpack," Huso said to me. The second time, and the third, they found the bombs. "I used to be the type of boy who organized student protests and threw bombs in the streets" he said.

He was born and raised in Seoul, and he was the founder of the first queer student activist group in South Korea. One of the most painful memories of his years as a student was the public exorcism performed on him by the Chair of a fundamentalist Christian student organization. But he was lucky, he said. Three of his friends had committed suicide after disclosing their homosexuality and another one was left permanently injured as a result of police torture.

I liked Huso for his simple, detached, natural attitude towards life and sex, and the main reason why I remember him, and our fleeting two-day encounter during that coldest Beijing winter, is because I shared with him a soulful and invigorating sexual experience.

Huso was different from Wan. They were both human rights activists and they both had been in jail three times, but when I first met Huso in the Korean restaurant near Wan's office, and I glanced at them sitting side by side, they struck me as totally different people. Wan was a lonely man. With his shaded glasses and the plastic sandals he used to wear to the office in sultry summer days, he was someone totally out of tune with his surroundings. There was a look of hostility and mistrust in his eyes, and visible signs of a subdued tension in the way he clenched his lower jaw. A sense of deep-hidden panic mixed with courage and pride. He was slippery, difficult to make out, a man living in a permanent state of fear and nerve-racking paranoia. Who knows, maybe because Huso was living in a democratic country, but I could find no trace of such fear in his eyes. He was confident, balanced, full of perspective.

I sat next to him at the restaurant, and the first thing I noticed was his light smell of perfume and Aloe Vera soap. Ivory Aloe. Later, during the dinner we had by ourselves, I asked him what he wanted to be when he was a child. "A chemist," he replied. "I wanted to make the best perfume in the world." He had strong, beautiful hands, which would shake every time he held his chopsticks or reached for his glass of beer. Later, he told me he was never able to make it as a chemist, because he was disqualified for his trembling hands. He passed the written exam but he failed the lab test. He felt betrayed by his school, and he had to give up his perfumed dream. I wondered, but I never asked, whether that was or not his first betrayal in life, whether his future years as an activist bore or not a secret reminiscence of that experience.

There were many things I never asked.

The people I usually feel attracted to are those whose lives are tainted with bitterness and filled with little frustrations. It is always the same profile against a different background. With my novels, it is the same. I tend to look for a clearer understanding of human nature in small manifestations of failure and loss.

Huso was different from all that, and that was also one of the reasons why he left such a permanent imprint in my memory. He was thirty eight. He told me he had never had a middle age crisis. "And I think I never will." There was something thoroughly convincing in the way he spoke. I searched for his eyes, and he held my gaze. He was wearing a dark woolen scarf and a rolled collar pullover. With his small glasses and his green striped Adidas, he looked like a true New Yorker.

After dinner, he picked a bar in Sanlitun Street, a chill-out place with high ceilings and white empty walls. "It doesn't feel I am in Beijing," he said to me. "And it doesn't feel I am in New York either." It felt the same to me, a no man's land, timeless, with only the smoke of our cigarettes, and our words, to fill the emptiness.

We both knew from the beginning that it was only sex. Sex on the one hand, friendship on the other, two things that would grow separately, allowed to coexist, but not to mingle or intersect.

The cab driver who drove us to the tea street in his last afternoon in Beijing asked me if we were colleagues.

“No”, I said.

“Then?”

“Friends”

It sounded odd to me: a two-day friendship.

The bar in Sanlitun had four golden fish swimming in two glistening crystal bowls. I remember the silence of semi-transparent fins waddling in clean water. Our words echoing against the empty walls. And our words again, inconsistent, like billowing shadows flashing past the walls, their meaning distorted, severed, mutilated by desire. This is probably why I can only remember broken conversations. It meant the same that we talked about everything or talked about nothing.

We spoke about writing, and he understood quickly, without me having to explain.

“Someone said that if you want to be a better person, you should write a diary” He said.

“A better person” He said again, checking himself, as if unsatisfied with his choice of words. He blushed. Did that sound too vague or too simplistic maybe?

“What does it mean to be a writer?” We didn’t ask that question, but it was there, floating in the air, in the absence of words, the silence.

“A writer is someone who writes” I said.

“A writer is not a profession. It’s a way of being in the world.”

It was my turn to blush. Did that sound too vague or too simplistic maybe?

I was afraid of words. Of saying too much. Of simply saying. Saying something that he would find disappointing and that would break the spell of desire.

And I was also afraid of looks. Petrified by the intensity of his gaze. When we got off the subway and stood face to face on the escalators, I tried to hold his gaze for a few seconds. I failed. It felt like a knife edge crisscrossing my mouth, my eyes, my cheeks. Burning all over.

I smoked Korean cigarettes and we drank a full bottle of Spanish wine. “When did you start smoking?” He asked.

“Fifteen,” I said.

I told him about my school friend and about how we would sit on the ledge outside a private parking and light up our first cigarettes.

“The taste and smell of your first cigarettes is totally different from how they taste later,” I wanted to say, but I never did.

There were many things I didn’t say.

Fifteen was also the time of my first sex.

“Was that before or after smoking?” He asked.

Huso was only politically gay. In life, he liked to sleep with both women and men. I felt a sense of real empathy with his beliefs, also some kind of admiration towards his calm, honest, detached attitude towards sexuality. He didn't ask himself many questions. He was just happy doing what he did. In that respect, he was different from many people I had met before, from those who failed to match their actions and their beliefs, from those who claimed a free attitude towards sex but always ended up caught up in a complicated maze of emotions.

Huso spoke about sex the same way he spoke about champagne and caviar, taking pleasure in dissecting the multiple layers of sensation, the slippery fish-skin of black men, the intensity of his first Mexican lover, the languor and compliance of his first eighteen-year old boyfriend.

I wondered how he would describe sex between us: wordless, intense.

He said thirty should be the best time of my life.

Was it for him?

I didn't ask.

I was still twenty eight.

I told him about my wisdom teeth. About the X-rays when I was twelve.

“They said my wisdom teeth would come out eventually. And that it would hurt”.

There was the image of my father coming back from the dentist: the confirmation that it did hurt, on his strained, worn out face. The panic. The fear. Not so much the pain but the torture of anticipation.

There were millions of things in life more painful than wisdom teeth.

“But still...” I said.

Fear is something that you can't control.

Just like desire.

“And what happened in the end?” He asked.

“With the teeth? I kept imagining how it would be like ten years before it happened. With no certainty that it would happen at all.”

“And now?”

“I still have them”

I remember little more.

The phone call from Columbia University. “They will probably search my desk and my computer,” he said. “Only condoms and maybe some cheap porn.”

His full-lipped mouth.

The taste of his kisses.

He had one of those faces difficult to forget. A kaleidoscopic repertory of expressions. He reminded me of a different person depending on the angle from which he looked.

He said he wanted me. He said that after we left the restaurant and the table full of uneaten food. Not just leftovers, but plates full of meat.

“I want you too”.

“You don’t know how much I want you.”

That’s what I would have liked to say, but I was paralyzed by desire. I couldn’t say it. Or say it only very low, unconvincingly, meaninglessly. That’s the thing with desire: it makes it difficult for words to come out. It makes it hard to talk. It makes you leave uneaten food on the table. It has a violence which sweeps everything away.

The second time, he said it in a different way. He didn’t say “I want you”. He just said “Can you come to my hotel for a while?” Only for a while, because he was sick, brown sick, with yellow skin and still hands wrapped inside green woolen gloves, resting on the table.

Huso’s style in bed was neat and precise. His body was soft and slender, light and spongy like a piece of cheesecake, and his skin almost as slippery as the skin of those black lovers he spoke about. He had the habit of lighting up a cigarette in the bathroom after sex. He would pace up and down the carpet of the hotel room, with a cigarette in his hand, completely naked. With his tall, elastic body, his slightly hunched back, and his short black stylish hair sweeping over his forehead, he looked so gay. I could never get rid of the impression that I was having sex with a gay man, which maybe didn’t tell much about him, but rather showed that I was not as open-minded as I claimed to be. I was simply projecting my own sexuality on him, my reluctance or inability to define my own sexual orientation, yet the need to do so.

It was perhaps that indifference towards being something, or simply the way he was content with being nothing and being everything at the same time, which I liked so much about him. Half gay. Half straight. Half activist. Half DJ. Half counselor and half researcher. Full of enthusiasm towards the multiplicity of choices in life. He enjoyed quiet evenings drinking wine, and he had taken a course in creative writing. After giving up his dream of being a chemist, he decided to be a play writer. He gave up, probably not because it was a hard profession in South Korea, as he said, but because he had found in political activism a new calling.

I asked him about his job as a counselor. “Many stories,” he said. I remember the one about a Japanese boy who came to the United States searching for his American dream. Instead of that, he was raped by the landlord from whom he rented his first apartment and infected with HIV. Huso smiled bitterly, a smile full of compassion and generosity.

His hotel room had a large window with a view over the rooftops of a small hutong. I heard the sound of trickling water in the bathroom. He was taking a shower. He would soon come out again pouring out his smell of Ivory Aloe. I looked out of the window: old women riding bicycles, clouds of steam drifting towards the sky, people trailing big barrels of mineral water. It seemed like China again, but still a distant, far-away China,

unfolding gradually, insulated behind the windows of the hotel room.

I stayed over at his hotel. I saw him again the day after.

Then I left.

I didn't feel the cold lashing on my cheeks.

I think I did miss him after he left. I kept reading the story I wrote about him again and again, obsessively, until I learnt it almost by heart, numb to the meaning of words on paper. Trying to retrieve his presence. To quell a sense of unrest. To preserve that isolated, self-contained episode against the unforgiving crush of routine and reality.

It was not the sex which stayed with me.

Not the words.

But the smell of Ivory Aloe.

Granddaddy's Hands Audree Flynn

Granddaddy quit school at 13 to work on his family's farm; at 18 he came here from Ireland and worked hard in construction. Granddaddy worked hard at everything he did and used to say he could do what he damn well pleased, because he worked so hard. He raised his sons and daughters in a house he built himself; Granddaddy had a talent for working with his hands.

The house Granddaddy built was in the country then; there were dogs and cats and chickens everywhere and he preferred his animals to most people. He was partial to his dogs and they were my favorite too---at one time it was fun to go see Granddaddy.

Granddaddy ate bacon and eggs for breakfast every morning, and every morning after breakfast he smoked a big cigar, until the day he died. Granddaddy was handsome like a matinee idol, and his face was Irish-white, but his arms and hands were golden brown from working in the sun---Granddaddy found a certain satisfaction from working with his hands.

I never knew my grandmother. Granddaddy married her when they were very young, they had 10 children in about as many years. My grandmother died not long after giving birth to her last child, and because he had 10 kids, Granddaddy soon remarried. But he slept in a big big bed, alone except for the dogs he was partial to, and never with his new wife.

Granddaddy smoked cigars and worked hard all his life, he drank whiskey in his coffee and did what he damn well pleased. Granddaddy used to set me on his lap and say I was the spitting image of my grandmother, in breath that stunk of whiskeyed coffee and cigars--and alone in his big big bed except for the dogs he was partial to, and me, he seemed to find a certain satisfaction, with one languid hand trailing in my little-girl golden hair, the other hunting in a fever underneath my dress...at one time it was fun, to go see Granddaddy.

Brave

Sabra Jensen

Katsu Watanabe lived in a tiny white house near the Kuzuha station in Hirakata, Osaka. He liked his whiskey cold, his salmon and rice topped with extra mayonnaise, and his green tea hot enough to singe an eyebrow. His wife Naoko secretly wished that Katsu would comb his hair in the morning, instead of letting it hang limp and greasy, falling all over his face like a gutted prairie dog. Katsu secretly knew that Naoko felt this way, but he did not really care. Keko, their daughter, felt contempt for both, but neither Katsu nor Naoko let themselves worry too much, since neither one felt that they had done anything wrong throughout the child-rearing process. They didn't ponder too much whether or not they had done anything right, either.

Katsu left early in the morning for his job at Panasonic, located approximately in the liver of the city. It was a very unhealthy liver indeed, as indicated by the amount of drinking that was done by nearly every salary man that worked there. Katsu drank almost every night with his co-workers, mostly because they all felt the need to impress their shacho. They would usually go to a smoky hostess bar around the corner from the building, where they would request their \$80-\$100 bottle of whiskey with their name indicated in masking tape across the front. They would laugh at shacho's jokes and stumble over themselves to keep his whiskey glass full. If a hostess girl dressed in an intricate kimono wasn't sitting at the table assisting them in their beverage and smoke habits, they would rush to light his cigarettes as well, and would subconsciously compete to see who could perform this task with the most flourish. After this charade, Katsu would return home on the midnight train, bathed in a whiskey trance. When he arrived home, he would wake up Naoko to get up and make him miso soup and rice.

That evening on the train, as he sat on a grimy sweat-exposed seat, an idea crossed through the whiskey fog and became an actual, indelible thought. Katsu wanted to eat on the train.

A most hideous desire, he thought, to eat in public like that. This was considered extremely rude in Japanese culture, possibly as rude as eating while standing up or sticking your chopsticks straight up in a bowl of rice, damning the dead. I will forget it by tomorrow I am sure, he thought to himself. He exited the train, clomped through the street to his house, ate his midnight snack prepared by Naoko, and collapsed onto his futon. He did not see Naoko glance at him with true repulsion and roll her eyes.

The next day he had to attend a mandatory meeting. The shacho was discussing budget cuts. If Katsu had been paying attention, he would have realized that via this gathering the shacho was sending a message to his coworker Hazu that he no longer had a job. The disgrace-to be told indirectly in a meeting that you were fired! But Katsu had no idea of his friend's fate. He was absorbed in his thoughts about eating on the train. What would I eat? He contemplated. Dried octopus? No, too stringy. Rice ball? Half the rice might fall out onto the floor.

"Katsu!" He snapped back to reality. Hazu was yanking on his sleeve. "Katsu! Did you notice that? Shacho fired me here! He didn't even hold a meeting with me. He didn't even tell me directly!"

"Hazu, why do you think shacho will fire you?" he murmured. Green tea ice cream? Takoyaki?

Yes! Takoyaki! He was no longer listening to Hazu's account of his imminent departure. A plate of Takoyaki was perfect. Sweetly spiced breading, ginger-tinted cream filling, a juicy piece of octopus in the center, topped with fish flakes and scallions.

"Oh, let's go drinking, Katsu. I need a *ware-mizu*."

"Hazu! It's only two pm. We can't go yet."

"Katsu, I'm being fired anyway. It doesn't matter if I go drink."

"All right, I'll go down the street with you for one drink. That's it, though."

The two of them walked over to their usual bar. Hazu moaned as they drank their stiff whiskey and water high balls. He let Hazu talk for a while, and then he could no longer contain his excitement.

"Hazu, I've decided something."

Hazu looked over at him, still frowning. "Oh yeah? What is it, Katsu?"

“I’ve decided I am going to eat Takoyaki on the train.”

Hazu stared at him. He didn’t speak.

“Well?” Katsu said finally.

Hazu shook his head. “Katsu, it’s very rude to eat in public. You know that.”

“I know. But I really want to. I really want to eat on the train.”

Hazu sighed and shot Katsu a critical look. “I don’t think it’s a good idea, Katsu. It’s really very rude.”

They returned to work. Katsu spent the rest of the day rifling through papers and then reorganizing them. He concentrated on looking as if he were working very hard. They all shuffled to the bar after work, and again sat at a large table and ordered their whiskey bottle. Katsu was sitting next to his friend Tomo. Tomo was skinny, with shaggy black hair and thick, brown-rimmed glasses. He lit a cigarette and looked at Katsu.

“Have you ever eaten on the train, Tomo?” Katsu asked earnestly.

“What? Of course not. Are you crazy?” Tomo picked up his glass, grinned, and shoved it toward Katsu’s glass. “Drink up!”

That night at home, Katsu couldn’t sleep. He had eaten his hot bedtime meal, and he was fairly drunk, but he could not stop thinking. I can do it, he thought to himself, I know I can. I would just stop by the takoyaki stand right outside the Shinsaibashi station. I could buy them there. Six steaming takoyaki balls. Instead of sitting on a stool and eating them at a counter, I would carry them on the train. And there it is. I know I can do it.

The next day he woke up with fierce determination. Today was going to be the day. He ate sardines with rice and pickles, and set off for the train. He arrived at work, hoping that he could just sit in his cubicle and avoid contact with anyone. He was afraid that any outside force would change his mind, and he would lose his nerve. At the end of the day, everyone was headed towards the bar but he headed to the train station alone instead. He apologized and placated his shacho by saying that he had a doctor’s appointment.

He walked toward the train station with a grim look on his face. He stared straight ahead, and kept his mind focused on his goal. He stepped into the train station and went directly to the takoyaki stand. The smell of baked bread and fresh scallions drifted toward his nose, and for a moment he did not know if he could go through with it. He stood there for a minute, in a daze. He stared as the fry cook placed each hot ball onto a fresh plate and dusted them with fish flakes and scallions. He stepped forward, and with that small action he knew he could go through with it. He ordered his takoyaki, paid, and walked away, away from the counter with the stools, away from the unspoken rule included in the country's cultural framework. He had come this far; he had made his purchase and had passed any established seating area. A woman walked by him and seemed to sneer, but he continued. The takoyaki steamed on his plate, and the aroma tickled his nose. He stood on the platform, waiting for the train. A little girl standing with her mother pointed at him, and the mother pushed her hand down and scolded her. He looked away. The smell was starting to make his mouth salivate, but he held steady and did not head back toward the seating area. He glanced down the track and saw the train approaching, and felt his stomach twist upon itself. He heard a loud gurgle and ignored it. The train was close.

"Katsu!" He heard behind him.

Who can that be, he thought with irritation. He turned around slowly. It was Akiko, the shacho's wife. No! She'll tell him about this!

"Katsu, why are you about to board with your takoyaki?" she asked, glancing down at his plate.

"Uh, well, I don't know," he stammered. "I guess I forgot I had bought them."

"Forgot you had bought them," she laughed. She had red spots on her teeth from her lipstick. He hated her at that moment. "Wow, work must really be taking a lot out of you," she said with a grin. "Well, the train's here, come on and get on with me."

Katsu couldn't move. Do it, Katsu, do it, he chided. Get on the train and eat your takoyaki in front of her! You can do this.

"I'm coming," he said. He threw his takoyaki in the trash and boarded after her.

The Song

Kent Tankersley

“Thought I saw something,” Warren explained as he caught up with Mike. “Down there, some sort of movement.”

Mike gave just a glance in the direction Warren had nodded. He saw nothing, not even a single leaf moving among the chaos of underbrush. But then again he didn’t expect to either. “Maybe a bird,” he suggested.

Warren continued to study the forest that dropped away steeply from the trail they were standing in. “Maybe a bear,” he said.

“If so, he won’t be bothering us,” Mike assured him. He had had enough trouble with Warren on this trip without having him get skittish about bears. “Come on, let’s get going.”

Mike shifted his pack and continued up the trail, leaving Warren to stand where he was, still peering at the underbrush. They were still far below the ridgeline, immersed in woods so deep and sunless that the broad mountainside they were climbing was hidden in all directions by relentless green growth. The ground at their feet was covered by a carpet of wood sorrel and moss several inches thick, forming large humps over rocks or logs or whatever else had chanced to lie long enough upon the earth to be slowly, surely covered over. Only the black soil of the trail, and a gray hulking boulder here and there, disrupted the green universe that surrounded them.

Mike, already fifty yards up the trail, turned around to find Warren still gazing downhill to where the woods fell away out of sight. “Damn it, Warren,” he shouted. “We’ve got to make camp by sundown.” He watched as his friend only slowly seemed to awaken from a dream and move again up the trail. Mike leaned back against a boulder to rest his pack as Warren climbed up to him. He repeated quietly, “We need to keep moving, Warren. It’s getting late, and we’ve really got to make Avery Gap tonight.”

Warren leaned against the rock beside Mike. “This is the most *vegetated* place I’ve ever seen,” he said, not a bit convinced of any need to hurry.

“Too much vegetation, if you ask me,” Mike said, looking up at the canopy above. “I liked it a whole lot better in the meadow this morning. Sunshine, and open space. And wind, for God’s sake. There’s no wind up here. Nothing. It’s just like the sunshine—can’t get through the trees.”

Warren seemed to let that soak in before answering. “I like it. It’s quiet. You can hear yourself think here.” He paused. “You can almost hear all these plants breathing. Almost feel it.”

Mike raised himself off the coarse surface of the rock. “I can believe *you* might feel the plants breathe, Warren,” he said with a grin.

“I’m serious. This place is different. It’s cool and peaceful, but it’s more than that. Elaine would like it here.”

Mike gave his friend a sharp look. “Here we go again. So that’s why you’ve had your head up your ass ever since we started. You’re still moping around about *her*? I was hoping that coming up here would get your mind off her.”

Warren straightened up and took a few steps back downhill to where clumps of moss almost flowed over the trail. He released his hip belt and lowered his pack to the soft vegetation. “No, it doesn’t work. It only makes it worse.”

“Now what?” asked Mike.

“I’m resting. This is supposed to be a fun trip, right? Besides, why can’t we camp here?”

“No way. Too spooky for me,” Mike answered. “Anyway, show me a level spot to put the tent.”

He watched Warren opening his pack, and continued, “What’s this *thing* you have for Elaine anyway? How can she have you by the balls so much? You hardly even know her.”

Warren just stared at him.

“Listen, how many times have you actually even talked to her?”

“I’ve talked to her.”

“Yeah, twice. And the last time she made it real clear what she thinks of you.”

Warren pulled a water bottle from his pack. “I don’t care what she thinks of me. That doesn’t change anything.”

“No, I guess it doesn’t, does it? I guess it makes it all that much better. Know what I think? I think you like all this heartache you’ve been moaning about.”

Warren looked away saying nothing.

“Don’t get mad, just listen. You’re just dreaming, Warren, that’s all. It’s only this illusion you have. Why pick her? Why not fall for someone you actually know, somebody real?”

Warren spun around. “Because, damn it, it is *her* that I love. I can’t control that.”

“Yeah, like you’ve tried. You like the fantasy too much. Loving someone you can’t have. It’s easier than real life.”

Warren glared at Mike and spoke quietly. “I can’t help it. That’s all,” he said, then stalked off down the trail a few yards, taking swipes at the bushes with his hiking staff.

“Oh, brother,” Mike exhaled, as he watched Warren come to a halt and stare once again off into the woods below.

He leaned against the boulder again to take the full weight of the pack off his shoulders. He could hear the solemn croak of a raven passing overhead, and craned his head to try and catch a glimpse of the bird’s black form through the few gaps in the leaves where tiny patches of blue sky showed through. A limb beside the boulder started swaying up and down with a light breeze that began to surge up the slope, the first wind Mike had felt for hours. He closed his eyes to feel the refreshing air flow across his sweaty face.

There are times when the senses merge, when sounds can be felt as much as heard. The mating call of a ruffled grouse, as he summons his mate, is like that. It

starts as a low drumming that you notice only by the alarming feeling that your heart is suddenly racing for no reason. It's a muffled sound that could come from anywhere in the forest, any direction, any distance. As hard as you try, you can't locate it or even be sure you're hearing it.

When such a penetrating sound comes to you in the shape of a human voice, the rise and fall of the speaker's words — sensed by your entire body, your entire being — form a wonderful melody, a strange but familiar song that touches the human soul.

When The Song came, Mike was still leaning against the rock with his eyes shut. As it first washed over him, he froze still. Warily, he opened his eyes and straightened up. The soundless singing came from somewhere out of sight below the trail. He stood motionless, straining to hear it. The melody again filtered up through the forest, slightly more audible and this time painfully irresistible.

He searched the woods below him, while The Song, steady and unwavering, grew louder still. As it took hold of him, his head spun and he began to sway slightly with the wind. He could now feel The Song's silent meaning. It spoke of light and wind and spiralling heights of love and unearthly matters beyond anyone's knowing.

Suddenly, Mike flattened himself against the boulder in terror. In the underbrush far below he saw the flash of a human figure, a bright movement mostly hidden as it darted between trees. The Song coursing up the mountainside rose even louder, filling the forest with its unnatural resonance. The bright figure below moved effortlessly up the slope, but not toward Mike. He was struggling to get a better view when The Song pitched upward once more and abruptly stopped.

It was finished. And Mike knew instantly that The Song had not been meant for him. Desperately he looked at Warren, still standing in the trail and gazing at the blinding white figure directly below him. He turned to Mike. "Can you see her, Mike? She's beautiful," he said calmly. He looked back toward the singer. "She's so beautiful. She looks...like...Elaine."

Without warning, he dropped his water bottle and plunged down the slope into the underbrush. Mike sprung off the boulder and charged down the trail to where Warren had been standing. Fumbling frantically with his shoulder straps, he paused just long enough to throw off his pack and catch a glimpse of his friend already far down the slope, hurdling over a fallen log while, just ahead of him, the florescent-white figure retreated further into the woods with feminine grace. Unable to find his voice to shout, Mike bolted downhill in mad pursuit.

He lost all trace of Warren half an hour later. Exhausted, he clung to a tree trunk and yelled wildly between great gasps of breath. His calls went nowhere. They vanished among the trees as if the lifeless air simply drained the words from his mouth. He bushwhacked back to the trail alone. When he got there, everything looked the same. He could hear only a solitary bird singing. He stared dumbly at Warren's open pack, lying where it had been so casually dropped among the ferns and moss. Trembling, Mike shouldered his own pack and did not stop walking until, hours later, in a moonlit meadow pulsing with the sound of a million crickets, he reached Avery Gap.

The Learners

Chapman Peck

For the past fifteen years, *the* Molly Brewington presided over the PTA and for the past fifteen years she had been reelected unanimously. Everyone in the suburb knew her name and her resume. She established the parent/teacher socials which eradicated the rampant forgeries that were occurring on report cards. She mobilized the can-drive for new cheerleader uniforms insisting that the cheerleaders wore their old uniforms when they fundraised. She terminated the proposal to change the name to the Home and School Association. Even Principal Zangieri deferred to her for solidarity's sake and out of fear that he might not be invited to her year-end Christmas party that was *the* who's who for this quaint suburb.

Tonight, the PTA meeting was held in the large square auditorium that had coffered ceilings and a red carpet that poured down the slightly slanted room. Filling the auditorium was row upon row of parents. The sounds of talking, giggling, and gossiping swirled around the sonorous room. Eyes constantly shifted between their watches and the large double door that remained closed. It was five past the hour.

Suddenly, the bolts unhinged and the two doors opened in one swift motion. Heads and shoulders turned towards the entrance. Principal Zangieri, who was sitting at the head table, jerked to attention. After a few moments, *the* Molly Brewington, the President of the PTA, strode into the room with purpose and precision. Her long legs and stiletto heels quickly spanned the aisle. When she reached the table, she slowly nodded her head at Principal Zangieri without taking her eyes from his. He straightened his already straight tie and sat upright. She untied her waist coat and sat next to the Principal leaving two seats open. She scanned the crowd with pleasure.

After a few moments, the President nodded towards the double-doors. The treasurer and secretary took their cue. Anna Hamilton and Stacey Visconti walked down the aisle each tightly holding their ledger books and papers close to their chests. The two quickly nodded at Principal Zangieri and filled in the seats to the left of Molly Brewington. Stacey lifted a brown box from her bag, opened it, and placed the gavel and the sound block in front of the President. Molly leaned over, whispered to the two women, and the three giggled amongst themselves. Then, with a toss of her blonde hair, Molly exited the private conversation and exhaled visibly.

With a few raps of the gavel, the crowd was silent and the meeting began.

"First order of business," *the* Molly Brewington sounded in a regal fashion, "Teacher performance. Now, I think..."

17 rows and 5 seats away from where *the* Molly Brewington spoke, Mrs. Learner sat and listened intently. Naturally shy and diminutive, Mrs. Learner had recently joined the PTA. She was new to the suburb. It was only three years ago, that she, her husband, and their only son picked up stakes and moved west. They settled in one of the many suburbs that were sprawling to the North, South and East of the Big City, with the development to the West being interrupted by the mountains.

RAP. RAP. RAP.

"Seventh order of business...snow days and contact hours," Molly announced after crossing off six other topics from her agenda, "We need four and a half hours per day. Do we have

any thoughts on changing the current system of tacking on an extra school day if there are too many snow days?”

The topic perked Mrs. Learner's ears. This was her pet peeve. Back East, this same exact issue had been discussed, dissected, and debated over and over again. Mrs. Learner had lobbied to add an extra hour to a school day and spread out the contact hours rather than a full extra day. She argued it would be better to extend the day thereby extending the summer vacation. Eventually, the town agreed and, according to her Christmas letters, the policy was still in place. This is my moment, she thought. Mrs. Learner tepidly raised her hand.

“Yes?”

Mrs. Learner looked back and forth and realized that *the* Molly Brewington was speaking to her. Slowly, she stood up. The heads turned in her direction for the first time. She pressed her fingers down her thighs to straighten out her dress. Mrs. Learner didn't recognize a soul.

“Um, I...I wanted to say that my old hometown had this same issue and we decided that the best thing to do was to add an extra hour to the school day,” she coughed and cleared her throat.

“Say you miss eight contact hours because of two days of snow, you could add eight hours to the last eight days of school. This way the kids wouldn't have to prolong the school year by two days and they could be enjoying their summer vacation sooner. Teachers, the kids, parents, everyone liked it once they gave it a try.”

“I see,” said Molly Brewington.

The President cast her eyes from Mrs. Learner to the rest of the crowd. For a moment, Mrs. Learner felt claustrophobic in this large hall. Principal Zangieri squinted at Mrs. Learner and cocked an eyebrow at Molly Brewington.

“Were the children able to walk to the school?” asked Molly.

“Yes, maybe it was a mile or so for some folks, but mostly yes,” answered Mrs. Learner.

“Unfortunately, that is not an option. Many children here rely on their parents to pick them up or on cars of their own. Since walking is unfeasible here, your suggestion would force all of our parents to seriously alter their schedule.”

Mrs. Learner looked from right to left and responded, “I see.”

“So we will keep it the same now, but we'll take it under advisement. Thank you for your suggestion,” said Molly. She crossed out the topic from her list.

“Um, thank you,” said Mrs. Learner meekly and she sat back down.

“Next up,” declared Molly Brewington, “The summer car wash.”

The meeting continued and after another hour or so it was complete. The President rapped the gavel and signaled the end to the Spring PTA meeting. She rose and walked through the aisle giving a tight and dignified smile to the crowd before leaving through the double-doors. Anna and Stacey closed their books and followed Molly out. After the three had left the room and the doors closed, the crowd began to file out of the auditorium.

Mrs. Learner put on her Spring coat and grabbed her purse. Unfortunately, the latch broke and all of her possessions spilled across the floor. Her lipstick and wallet and keys and coins and pictures all scattered underneath the metal folding chairs and across the red carpet. She heard some passersby's smirks and some passersby's offers for help, but Mrs. Learner was so embarrassed, she shooed them all away. Finally, her house was in order and she left the room.

As she walked outside, out of the corner of her eyes she saw *the* Molly Brewington, Anna, and Stacey rounding the corner of the high school hall. Gathering courage and a deep breath, Mrs. Learner compelled herself to ask Molly what her thoughts were on the snow-day sug-

gestion. When she neared the corner, she began to overhear the ladies' conversation.

"She is so oblivious," said one.

"Definitely," said another.

Mrs. Learner halted and leaned on the red lockers. She listened closer.

"Back in Ohio," a third woman mimicked.

"We do not need hick solutions for our town. This is not the sticks," said the first woman.

"You can't walk to school here. It's too far," said the second.

Mrs. Learner's heart beat feverishly and she spied a woman's bathroom on her right. She dashed across the hallway and into the lavatory. She leaned her back on the closed door breathing heavy. She had an awful feeling of déjà vu and also a peculiar thought about the small size of the bathroom. She took deep breaths and waited and waited. One-one thousand, two-one thousand, she counted, making sure that she gave it sufficient time. After a count of thirty one-thousands, she exited the bathroom.

To her shock, standing in the hallway was *the* Molly Brewington. The PTA president's back was to her as she tacked up notices on the bulletin board. Molly Brewington stopped and turned around.

"Oh, hello," said Molly walking over to Mrs. Learner, "It's Mrs. Learner, right?"

"Yes, it's Mrs. Learner."

"I'm not sure if we've ever been introduced. I'm Molly Brewington, president of the PTA."

"Please to meet you, I'm Mary Learner."

"Yes, yes, yes," said Molly smiling and nodding with each 'yes.'

Mrs. Learner looked at her and then looked away, seeking a quick exit.

"Great suggestion today, we really need the input. As you can tell most people don't even open their mouths, but not you," said Molly smiling broadly at her, "I hope we'll see you again next month."

"Oh yes, I plan on it."

"Okay!" Molly smiled again, "You know, we should get together some time. Charles and I would love to have you and your husband over for dinner sometime. We really would."

"That...that would be lovely."

Molly reached for her waist coat and pulled it tight accenting her hourglass figure.

"I love your coat," said Molly, pinching the material on Mrs. Learner's shoulder.

"Thank you, but it's nowhere as pretty as yours."

Molly looked down, admired her coat, and said, "You're too kind."

Moments passed between the two women. It was an eternity for Mrs. Learner.

"Well, maybe I'll see you at *Applebee's* sometime. Take care."

Molly pushed open the door with two hands and left.

"Goodbye, Molly," said Mrs. Learner almost choking on the name.

Mrs. Learner walked across the parking lot and climbed into her red SUV. She clicked on the radio to forget and drove home in a reminiscent daze. When she came home, all of the lights were off except for the kitchen lights and the small TV in the corner on the counter. The house seemed vacant. She walked to the basement door, opened it, and chimed into the darkness, "I'm home."

"How was the PTA meeting?" a sarcastic voice spat back.

"It was fine, just fine. Have you eaten?"

"Not really."

“Oh c’mon Mikey, you’re skin and bones and I cooked up that green bean casserole for you and your dad.”

“He didn’t eat it either.”

“Michael,” she said, “Please come upstairs and have some.”

A loud sigh echoed up the stairs. She peered into the blackness of the stairwell that led downward. The only emission was dark violet and rendered the cement foundation pockmarked and wafer-thin. She leaned closer, listening. She braced herself on both doorjambs.

“Mikey? Are you there?”

She leaned closer, but was careful not to slip her foot into the stairwell. Finally, she heard the whirl and whine of the computer shutting down. The black light was turned off and white light overcame the room. Mrs. Learner pushed back from the doorjambs, grabbed the Tupperware, and waited for her only son to shuffle up the stairs. When he came into the light, she smiled at him. He returned a slight mocking smile. He slumped down at the circular laminate table and she put a dish in the microwave for him. 300 seconds counted down. 10...9...8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1... DING!

Michael Learner stood 6 feet but could not have weighed more than 150 pounds. The dark T-shirt hung on him like a cloak and his pale white arms looked like bones. She pushed the casserole in front of him and smiled. He sat there and ate a spoonful and then poked at the dish.

“So I met Molly Brewington tonight.”

“That’s great.”

“Isn’t her daughter in your grade?”

“Yeah. Guess what her name is? It’s Holly. Holly and Molly.”

“Oh,” she remarked uncertainly, “Is she nice?”

“No.”

“That’s not a big surprise. Her mom isn’t very nice either.”

Mike glanced up with a flicker of recognition and then dropped them into the casserole.

“Any luck finding a summer job?” she asked.

“I don’t want a job.”

“C’mon, you have to do something.”

“No, I don’t.”

She dropped it and stared blankly at the TV.

“Oh, mom,” began Mike.

“Yes?” she asked perking up.

“Could you give me a ride to school tomorrow? George’s car broke down.”

“Of course, I can,” she said smiling, “I would love to help.”

“Good, thanks,” said Mike. He pushed the half-eaten dish towards her and left the room.

Mrs. Learner watched him go. Sighing, her eyes panned from the back of her son’s dark T-shirt to the small TV screen and the anchorman speaking to her. Behind his head was a small picture of the peace symbol.

“Well, whoever said that the sixties were dead?” Tom asked rhetorically, “John

Scher of Metropolitan Entertainment has confirmed that his group is planning Woodstock '99 to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the original counterculture concert. Unlike the original, this Generation X celebration is about peace, love, and, most importantly, money, ticket prices are said to be in the \$150 range..."

Wow, it's been 30 years, things have changed so much, she thought, Mikey's changed so much, maybe he is part of this Generation X. Maybe it was the move, she thought, although, he was able to make friends, just not the type of friends that she had when growing up. At least he has friends, she thought.

Still slightly confused and unsatisfied, Mrs. Learner unplugged the TV to escape the generational gap.

*

The next morning, the red SUV pulled around the corner with *Subway* on one side and the *Circle K* on the other. There was a red light ahead, the first of many sets of lights that demarcate the grid and signal the crossroads. Mrs. Learner glanced from the four lane road to the rearview mirror. In the back seat, Mike sat, staring glumly out of the window. His fingers drummed on the top of his back pack. The glass reflected and bent the moving convenience stores, gas stations, and chain restaurants which blended into Mike's cadaverous face. After the eighth light, Mrs. Learner crossed over the two lanes and pulled into the same parking lot and the same space from the PTA meeting.

In the parking lot was the Brewington's car, Holly was leaving the passenger side's door. Molly Brewington smiled and waved at Mrs. Learner. Mrs. Learner waved back. Holly Brewington sneered at Mike. Mike sneered back.

"Don't let her bother you."

"I don't plan on it."

"High School can be very hard," said Mrs. Learner reassuringly, "It's not always like this."

"Sure it is, mom, sure it is," said Mike. Through the car window he watched the Brewingtons and the hundreds of high schoolers walking in circles. Like the convenience stores, gas stations, and chain restaurants, these images were distorted by the car window glass.

"You don't understand. You'll never understand," he said conclusively.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," she retorted, "I do understand, Mikey. I have been through high school. I have seen that the world is a lot bigger than these walls. I...I think I do understand."

"The world might be bigger, Mom, but they're the same walls."

Their eyes met in the rearview mirror. The left side of his mouth perked up in a small smile. She thought she knew that devilish grin. Maybe he was going to play hookie, she thought, I'll have to keep my eye on him.

"Have a good day," Mrs. Learner said.

"Thanks for the ride, mom."

"My pleasure."

Mike fell out of the SUV and tugged his book bag from the middle of the seat. The *Eddie Bauer* back pack was bulging and could barely close. She heard metallic sounds

like aluminum rods banging together when he lifted the bag. It sounded heavy.

“Mom?” he asked. He stood on the grass with his book bag by his feet. He was so pale and thin that he seemed almost transparent in the bright sunshine. He was as threadbare as his old T-shirt.

“Yes?”

“I hope you’ll understand.”

“Okay?” she said perplexed.

Michael departed.

“I love you sweetie,” she called after him. By that time his long gait had brought him into the shadows of the oak trees. The black T-shirt blended into the sunless void. He met others there.

She jammed the gear shaft into D and drove away. I wonder if it’s the junior prom, she thought, I remember how nervous I was. Gosh, that was such a big deal, she remembered, everything was such a big deal. It has to be a girl, it’s always a girl, I’d understand if it was a girl, she thought. The lights changed from green to red and back to green. She passed numerous other clusters of stucco-ed homes and red-tiled roofs. It was the combination of the *Circle K* and the *Subway* which stood as her two pillars at the entrance of her road. She turned left, circled through her neighborhood, and counted the houses until she knew for sure she had the right one.

She entered the kitchen and the small TV and Tom’s voice welcomed her.

“...And in Kosovo today, NATO bombs continued to drop on Serbian military targets, as well as, sadly, on Albanian refugees. One errant bomb struck a bridge that was covered with refugees. Fifteen civilians were killed and many more injured. For a report here is Dan Williams from our national affiliate” said the anchorman stoically.

“Thanks Tom, I’m here with Liridona Prelvukaj. She was on the bridge when the bomb struck, but it would be better to hear it in her own words.”

Dan held the microphone to a hysterical woman. Her black hair was pinned down by the faded red babushka, her face was wrinkled to the core in utter anguish, her teeth were few.

“Bombs!” she cried, “Bombs! I don’t know why! I don’t know how! They come from sky. There! There!”

Her arms were flailing wildly and her eyes danced and pleaded and hated all at the same time. As she spoke, elderly men, women, and children were filing by behind her. Some were covered in blood while others had the vacant stare of witnessing. The interview ended and the woman’s face was frozen in agony. The picture downsized into a thumbnail behind the anchorman’s head.

“Thanks Dan...Phew...Up next, the Spring floral show is being hosted by the state’s Horticultural Society and will be held at the World Trade Center.”

The anchorman’s words droned on and blurred in Mrs. Learner’s ears. The picture of the refugee stayed in her mind. I feel so bad for the mothers of all of these boys who are being shot at, she thought. It is just so sad, she thought. Maybe, I don’t understand, she thought, I really don’t understand.

She unplugged the TV to escape from the warzone.

Happiness

Jim Meirose

In the tall wide lecture hall at the university, tall bald bearded Professor Jones scanned the curved rows of students rising before him. His blue eyes shone clear and bright, searching the rows.

Don Bosco sat three rows up, looking down at his hands from his wide squat grizzled face.

Artillery battles are the worst kind. Limbs are ripped off, blood, white bones are protruding, the din is ear-splitting, the fear is explosive. I saw too much and felt too much back then. The pain while waiting at the first aid station. The bloody crushing work of the cannon on my limbs. The months in the hospital. Pools of blood and urine on the floor. When can I drive? I asked the doctor. At last the doctor said I could drive, after I had exercised for months, with my new wooden foot. So its been twelve years since then. So what? There's still cannons and bombs in the world they're used every day someplace somewhere. Someone is getting crushed and rent right now but it doesn't involve me this time. Here I am, safe in school, and the supercharged Chevrolet ran good today didn't it? It's got lots of pickup and lots of balls. It's good to have a car with lots of balls. It's parked out under the trees now in the silence. That's today that's not years back in the desert. The bird shit will get the car but its in primer anyway. The birds in the spare wasted trees flew off with a loud rustle as the cannon blasted off in ranks along the sandy berm. I ran but it did me no good. I went down—my legs, my foot—cannonades, cannonading—some words. Bite lip. Hard. I remember the chaplain told me about Saint Barbara and the sudden death by lightning of her father but her father deserved it he truly truly deserved it lord God I truly hate cannon I didn't deserve it I will never ever forget the world is bristling with cannon and bombs and dismemberment—

Don Bosco! You there! Look up at me! exclaimed Professor Jones, pointing sharply up into the seats.

Don Bosco's eyes opened fully as he looked up.

Thoughts of horrible war-wounds flew out the walls of the building and went on roiling and boiling silently and invisibly outside.

Yes Professor Jones? filled Bosco's mind. He listened to the words coming out his mouth as his eye went on the tip of the Professor's red nose.

Name the inner moons of Jupiter! said Jones.

The Professor's hand slowly lowered as Don Bosco spoke after lightly clearing his throat.

Metis, Adrastea, Amalthea, and Thebe, are the four inner moons of Jupiter, Professor Jones.

Good! Very good! Did you hear that, class? I hope all the rest of you studied that as well, and know it too.

He resumed scanning the rows of seats.

Don Bosco sat straight, proudly, hands folded on the blonde wood worksurface that folded up from beside the chair.

I knew the inner moons of Jupiter. Just like that. Snap.

I am so proud.

I am so happy.

Things are so simple.

Things are so good.

The sounds of the cannon were gone behind the silent walls. A ball of lightness, balloon-like, began forming in Don Bosco's mind—a ball of happiness.

Tall slender crewcut Adolph Kolping sat three rows back and to the left of Bosco, looking up toward the white sculptured dentil molding that ran across the wall up behind the Professor, above the massive whitefaced clock that was put there to make the time creep. He rubbed at a red eye and slightly yawned.

Must stop sleepwalking. Its a terrible habit. Its a terrible disease. Why must I sleepwalk? Its dangerous to do so. Makes one afraid to go to sleep at night. How many sleepless nights lying there afraid to close my eyes, how many nights lying there with eyes forced wide open, afraid—who was it with that problem that safety pinned their nightclothes to their sheets? That would be a solution. But I sleep nude. I can't sleep with clothes closing me in, suffocating me. Never could and never will. Sleepwalking's dangerous—you could walk into the pool outside, or walk into the kitchen and turn on all the burners and light up the stove full blast and then go back to bed and let it all burn. You could plunge into the pool asleep and breathe water instantly. They say it's good to have a pool but it's no good to have a pool—not if you're a sleepwalker. You could drown or burn the house down. Yes, burning the house down is a possibility. Walking in your sleep is dangerous. You could walk out in front of traffic. Just walk right out there—and be killed. It's fearsome, dangerous. That can't be stressed enough. The traffic is dangerous enough, even when you're awake. All those cars and trucks roaring along. And me in my oil-leaking Volkswagen bug. The oil spreads like blood over the driveway. The car's leaking its life's blood. It burns oil, too. Go to New York, put in a can of oil, come back home, put in another, go someplace else, put in another. Because it needs an overhaul. Needs brakes too. The brakes are bad, it's dangerous. Dangerous as sleepwalking but its all I can afford though why is there no money there's never any money—maybe that greyhaired guy down the street who's always tinkering with his old bug in his garage, dropping the engine and taking it all apart and putting it back together, nothing I could ever do, nothing I could understand, would fix my car. But I've never even spoken to him and there's always Saint Dymphna walking in her sleep with her arms out, breathing easily unafraid, unaware of if its water or air or whatever, nightdress flowing freely behind, casting shadows in the starlight but in terrible danger too just like me every night oh lord how terrible— maybe that would be a cheaper way to get the damned car fixed. Talk to the old guy down the street who works on his own bug all the time—meet him, get to know him, don't be shy—

Adolph Kolping—you! Stop staring into space. Is the wall up above and behind me that interesting? Isn't the clock moving fast enough for you? Let's see how well you've studied! Name the galilean moons of Jupiter! boomed the Professor, pointing.

Kolping's face snapped forward, his shock of black hair snapped nearly straight up. All thought of sleepwalking emptied away into the floor and went under the

floor and came up outside and boiled about rolling in and around and through the thoughts of cannon already there and the dark bloody drowning thoughts blended together and began circling the building like dark dangerous unseen missiles ready to strike down the unwary.

The names of the moons entered Kolping's silent mind and came out his fast-moving mouth past his full lips.

Io, Europa, Ganymede, and Callisto, are the four galilean moons of Jupiter, Professor, said Kolping.

Good! Good work, exclaimed the Professor, grinning crazily, running his hand down through his long grey beard. So class—I see that more than just one of you has studied. Now, let's see who else has—or hasn't—

Once more, he scanned the rows of seats, squinting slightly, wringing his hands.

I know the four inner moons of Jupiter, thought Don Bosco, wide awake and sitting tall.

I am so proud.

Life is so simple.

I knew the four galilean moons, thought Adolph Kolping, his eyes trained firmly on the professor.

I am so happy.

Life is so good.

The balloons of happiness grew in both of them—slowly silently filling, soothing them, having forced out all their cares.

Up behind them in the center, tall broad blackhaired Peter Canisius slumped in his seat tapping the eraser of his pencil on the desktop before him and looking up at the spot where the two walls met the ceiling to the right of the professor. A long crack ran spidery in the plaster up there out to a network of finer cracks in the center of the room. He tapped the pencil faster as his eyes followed the cracks back and forth in time with his quickening thoughts.

Why did my baby sister have to die? Why her of all people? Its been over a year—but I can't get over it. She was so small and precious—look there's her round face, her small mouth, her big eyes—up there in the air by the corner there, see it? Why did the world have to fall apart like this? Remember when she was well and frisky as a pup, before she sickened and spat up blood, suffered in the hospital bed, in the pediatric ward, with the hustling bustling nurses and the bulletin board decked out for Christmas with Santa and reindeer and snowflakes and silver garland hanging in big loops and wrapped presents on the counter with big bows. Happy animals giraffes and zebras were painted on the walls by the elevators—so why would God take such an innocent? And in such a painful agonizing grisly way? The large long powerful old faded Cadillac with the great wide heavy tires went back and forth from school to home to the hospital and round and round and back again, when things got really bad. But that was a year ago—or maybe one or two or three—but pull yourself together already—she's in a better place, that's what they always say of the dead, she's in a better place and she's resting in the grave with a small tasteful stone and that big black car's outside right now, under the trees. It gets less use now. It's past due for a tune-up.

Hasn't had a tuneup since she died. The things under the hood are full of carbon and gook and everything is weak—but Dad had said regular tuneups are how you get a car to last forever. Need to get the car to the dealer—but where's the dealer for a child? How do you tune up a child to last forever? I don't know, but don't torture yourself any more, forget about that—just make that service call to the dealer today. Service department, they'll say, answering. I'll make an appointment. Don't want to have car trouble on top of everything else I've got inside myself to remember. Saint Felicity's portrait hung on the wall by the bank of pay phones near the elevators on the pediatric floor and it said on a goldtoned plaque under the painting her name and it said she was the patron saint of dying children. And it was a Catholic hospital one of the best tall and wide with new brick walls and wide bright corridors with glossy tile floors but they still suffer and they still die—you'd think a patron saint would save people isn't that what a patron saint's for—why have a patron saint of those who are sure to die? It makes no sense but tomorrow I'll call for the car appointment much too upset to call today what's one more day when its been so long already plus its too late the child is already dead just one phone call won't bring her back or two or three of five—

Peter Canisius, snapped the Professor toward the seats. Peter Canisius, look at me—

What—

Thoughts of children suffering and dying faded away out past the walls and joined the other dark brooding thoughts circling the building cannonades and sleep-walking and the dying child rocketed around—for thoughts don't die they just go someplace else to wait to go back to their homes again.

Name the outer moons of Jupiter! said Professor Jones, once more tugging his beard; a bad habit. A nervous habit.

Hair from his beard came away in his hand and floated to the carpeted faded frayed stained floor.

Peter coughed into his hand to clear his throat and empty his head and then rattled off The outer moons of Jupiter are Leda, Himalia, Elara, Pasiphae, Sinope, Lysithea, Carne, and Ananke, Professor Jones.

The Professor threw out his hands in joy and his eyes bugged in his bearded face and his cheeks and nose reddened even more than usual.

Wonderful! he yelled, throwing back his head. His teeth shone in the light of the long neon tubes above. It's wonderful! he repeated—three in a row and they've studied so hard—if only all of you would study so hard—now just ask yourselves—you who've gotten away with not getting called on yet—think how many of you could have answered those questions like these fine young men have.

Don Bosco sat proudly, looking straight at the Professor.

I knew the four inner moons of Jupiter.

I am so proud.

Life is so simple.

Outside, the cannonading thoughts circled grimly.

Adolph Kolping once more coughed into his hand, then sat straight and proud. He had known his answer.

I knew the galilean moons of Jupiter.

I am so happy.

Life is so good.

Outside, the thoughts of sleepwalking rocketed around.

Peter Canisius grinned, his head empty of thought. He had known the outer moons, even though there were many.

I had know all outer moons, he thought, sniffing back.

I am so proud I am so happy.

Life is so wonderful.

The dead child spiraled around the other thoughts that had been sent outside the building and they rocketed around spiraling in and out and around each other and people outside thought they saw movement out of the corner of their eyes but when they looked there was nothing there—that's how strong all the bad thoughts in the air can get—you can almost see them. The Professor touched the tip of his nose and resumed scanning the room.

In an upper tier sat Jocopone Da Todi. His long finger was up beside his nose and his lank red hair hung down around his slender pale face. He shuffled his sneakered feet nervously.

The medicine's been keeping away the hemorrhages, but for how long—the hemorrhages have gone away but I still have pain there, inside there, but at least there are not bedpans full of bloody urine and pans full of stinking red blood now around my hospital bed but they never got to the bottom of why it all flared up like it did but I'm out of the hospital now, the medicine is working—the two blue capsules each twice daily—but what about the side effects the Doctor warned me about? Watch for side effects, he said—if side effects occur stop the medicine immediately and call me at once. Watch for tremors, convulsions, nausea, dizziness. And don't drive or operate heavy machinery, says the label on the bottle. But who in today's world can not drive? Driving's the only way to get anyplace. A large, long black sedan of indeterminate make sat outside in the open in the center of the lot. Funny, funny—he'd often been teased about it—what kind of person can't keep it in his mind what make and model of car he drives? Why can I not retain this knowledge, thought Jocopone. But it must be I'm too preoccupied with living. Too busy waiting for the hemorrhages to start again. Watching for spots of blood on the sheets, watching for spots of blood in my underpants, the bleeding's gone now but it'll come back I know it will and I found out Saint Lucy is the patron saint of hemorrhages maybe saint Lucy knows when they will start again maybe I should get on my knees and clasp my hands and look up to the sky and pray to Saint Lucy—now what kind of car is it I have what kind of God-damned car—please let me know what kind of God-damned car I have saint Lucy, please—its stupid not to know. Yes maybe I should pray to Saint Lucy but somehow—that seems like the wrong thing to do if I just take my pills like I'm told I'll be all right but—

You! Jocopone! said the Professor, pointing.

Jocopone sat erect—the thoughts of hemorrhages shot away through the walls in every direction and joined the other thoughts that had been forced outside as Jocopone said What?

Empty-headed he sat waiting for the answer.

Name the new moons of Jupiter, insisted Professor Jones. He tapped his hand on the podium and stood with the other hand thrust down in a pocket. Jocopone listened in amazement to the words coming freely from his own moving mouth.

The new moons of Jupiter are W1302, W1700, W1704, W1704_2, W1800, W1903_s, W1805, W1902, W1904, W2002_2, and W1700_2, Professor Jones.

Wonderful, wonderful! This class is studying hard, said the Professor. It's not fair. There must be someone I can stump! Placing his hands behind his back, he squinted hard, again scanning the room, pacing like a cat, crouching slightly.

Don Bosco sat proudly, hands neatly folded.

I knew the inner moons of Jupiter.

I am so proud.

Life is simple.

Dark thoughts still circled outside seeking him.

Adolph Kolping sat smiling, leaned back in his seat.

I knew each and every galilean moon.

I am so happy.

Life is so good.

Thoughts wound about those of Don Bosco, seeking Kolping also.

Peter Canisius leaned forward, hands clasped beneath his chin, deeply satisfied

I knew the outer moons of Jupiter.

I am so proud I am so happy.

Life is so wonderful.

Thoughts of the dead child rode the wave of black thoughts circling madly and crazily outside above the puffy green trees and the silent calm parking lot with the sunlight slanting down.

Jocopone Da Todi sat back, one arm hooked on his seatback, looking the Professor in the eye.

I knew the new moons.

I am so happy I am so proud.

Life is so fantastic.

Blood chased through the air after the other thoughts. Warm red rushing gushing blood from every pore; all the other thoughts that had been in them before roiled in black and crimson clouds above and around and under the lecture hall but could not be heard or felt or seen but still existed nonetheless, streaking at the speed of light.

We are so happy.

We are so proud.

Their balloons of happiness slowly expanded, comfortably filling them with coolness and calm. They'd been asked the questions; they had known the answers.

Professor Jones resumed scanning the room for victims. He thrust both hands deep in his pockets and looked up at the seats with one eye closed like Popeye.

Thomas Becket sat with his long legs crossed slumped down in his seat, a finger pressed into his pimply cheek, his eye set upon the dead center of the great clock hung above the Professor.

The second hand moves so slow.
The minute hand moves so much slower.
The hour hand moves the slowest.
The purpose of the clock is to mesmerize; stop time.
All times are one.

Heavy-jowled Father Barret strode sternly up and down the slick-floored rows in the grammar school religion class, his chest pushed out and his hairy hands clasped firmly behind his back.

Ask yourselves, he said as he strode. Everyone in this room, ask yourself—would you die for your faith?

He stopped abruptly at Thomas' desk and stood over it and leant down close.

Would you die for your Faith young Thomas? he said harshly, his stale breath spreading over Thomas' face.

Yes, Thomas heard himself quickly say.

Well good. That's good.

Father Barrett straightened and walked on past Thomas' desk—but Thomas knew he had told a lie—instantly he knew it was a lie—but was it a lie—others had died for their faith he could die for his he hadn't lied but he had lied. What could he die for? What should he do with the rest of his life and end up dying having done? This was the question that formed through the years in him, since he'd smelled the stale breath of Father Barrett. And now he thought why am I in this class about space? What's so important about Jupiter, the planets. They're there, isn't that enough? Why does anyone have to know all about them? His feet shifted uneasily on the floor before him. His ninety five Oldsmobile Cutlass sat at the edge of the lot in the sun. A more immediate problem existed. The temperature's rising inside the car. Should I have left the cake in the car? The cake that we need for the party this evening? I should have known better than to let the cake out there to melt in the car. It gets hot in the car too hot for pets too hot for babies too hot for candy and too hot for cakes. The heat could kill quickly. Martyrs died for me. Many martyrs died in the flames. Saint Margaret Ward—patron saint of martyrs I lied I didn't lie I lied I didn't I've never forgotten his face close to mine his breath his glistening teeth his stale smell and his great hands locked together behind his back as he walked but my cake is going to melt—Lord let time pass—many holy people have died in the flames—

Becket! called the Professor from beside his podium. Becket! What are the newest moons of Jupiter?

Becket straightened in his seat. His mind cleared. The center of the clock he had been gazing at became a funnel that sucked the tumbling thoughts out of him now that he'd been asked a question. The thoughts went through the wall and joined the others streaking around outside.

Well, said Becket, clear-eyed and with a pure voice, they are two and are as yet unnamed though for the purpose of this class we have called them Aidan_1 and Aidan_2, Professor.

The Professor clapped his hands together hard and the sound of the clap bounced all around the walls. His mouth opened in a great toothy grin.

Good, he snapped up toward Becket's seat. Good, good. And so that's it! That's all the moons of Jupiter class. All the rest of you are off the hook, thanks to these fine young men.

Don Bosco sat proudly erect.

I knew mine.

I am so happy.

Life is so good.

Adolph Kolping sat hands neatly folded.

I knew mine.

I am so proud.

Life is so simple.

Peter Canisius sat leaning forward, ready to answer whatever question came his way.

I knew mine.

I am so happy I am so proud.

Life is so wonderful.

Jocopone Da Todi sat beaming down at the Professor.

I knew mine.

I am so proud I am so happy.

Life is so fantastic.

Thomas Becket sat arms folded, lower lip thrust out.

I am so happy.

Life is so cool, so calm, so sweet.

The dark thoughts that'd been forced outside roiled in a dark cloud hovering above the trees.

We want homes, thought the thoughts.

We had homes once—now we want them again.

The balloons of joy inside the five students expanded near to bursting inside them.

The Professor came up behind his podium and locked his hands onto either side.

Good class today, he said.

Good class. See you Thursday.

I'm happy, the five thought suddenly in perfect unison, and this made the happiness spread from them across the room, infecting everyone, and everybody smiled, rose, got up their books, and left in a clatter of folding desktops and shuffling feet and closing books and all the students started for the exits, down the aisles and across the rows. They all got outside into the sunlight, and the sight of the trees and the blue sky lifted each and every one. As Don Bosco and Adolph Kolping and Peter Canisius and Jocopone Da Todi and Thomas Becket walked to their respective cars, the balloons of happiness in their minds began to leak and slowly let the happiness and pride out, as always happens with the passage of time and the passage from one compartment of life to the next. The dark thoughts that had been forced out and that had been hovering about outside the lecture hall caught sight of them and swept down and coiled about them again. The thoughts forced out the happiness faster, a degree at a time. As each of the five drove away they again filled with thoughts of rending limbs and broken bones and the cannon and the dead baby sister and the sleepwalking and the hemorrhages and the great lie told to the stern priest in that grammar school class so long ago. The now forced out happiness and pride trailed behind them striving to keep up, a great pure clear cloud behind each car, waiting to be called into service again by whatever their next small victory might be.

Corner of Grove and Monroe

Adelaida Avila

13 years. God it seems like yesterday we were altogether at the upholstery shop on Monroe Street. 973-478-1249 that phone number will forever be embedded in my brain. I love Monroe Street. I drive down that street often. I look at each and every spot you had a shop. The first one was closest to Main Avenue, the second one was on the corner of Monroe and Grove and the third and last shop was closest to Myrtle.

My favorite and fondest memories are of your shop at the corner of Monroe and Grove. In high school I'd walk down Gregory cut through the back of a building that was on Hope and come out on the other side on Henry Street. I'd continue down Grove until I got to your store. I'd check in (I'm sorry now I didn't stay for a while) and then head on home to clean and start dinner for mom. I love that corner, Monroe and Grove, so many happy memories, so many happy times.

Back then I didn't have the capacity to appreciate you for who you were. I didn't see your struggles to support and provide for us. You worked long hard hours. Your only day off was Sunday. You lounged on the couch all day watching TV. I remember every New Years Day you'd watch the Twilight Zone marathon from the first episode to the last.

I think of you and my chest swells with pride. Carlos has your ambition and drive. I have your smarts. I miss our talks at the kitchen table. We discussed politics, the death penalty, the state of the world, the vanity of people, the lack of ambition the young latino men had. You came here by yourself, later you sent for mom, you learned English, you learned a trade and with mom's unconditional love and support ventured out on your own and opened what turned out to be a very successful upholstery shop. Each move was to a bigger and better location, that's how well you did.

I have your love of music, Pa. I don't sing, play the guitar or write my own lyrics the way you did but I appreciate it in all forms. During this time of year I long with all my might to hear you playing the guitar and singing aguinaldos.

I still can't believe it, that you're gone, 13 years its been. Pa, Christmas has never been the same without you. The year after you died there was no where to go so everyone stayed home. Since then I'm sure they've all begun their own traditions. It's amazing how one person impacted so many lives.

I wish my kids weren't deprived of you. I feel cheated of your zest for life, your love of music and our long night conversations about everything or nothing at all. I'm jealous of all those in heaven who get to listen to you. Wish I was there, temporarily, just for a little while, to soak it all in and bring it back with me.

We have our own tradition now. Nothing at all like what we had at the shop on the corner of Monroe and Grove. Christmas has never been the same without you.

Feliz Navidad, pa. I love you and I miss you so very much.

"Por esa engrata mujer?." sing that one for me pa, it's my favorite.

Love your daughter,

Adie



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