



Editor's Choice Award Poetry

washday

joan papalia eisert

its hot
its hot
its monday on her head
again

her melting
chocolate baby
sits in the corner
of the folding table
his eyes
lit
with the shiniest duskiness
i've ever seen

his cry is thin
she scolds him
as if the warriors of the world
have come to claim
the territory between
her skin and her bones

a sister mother comes by
with a tiny red ball
"catch the ball
can't you catch the ball?"

mmhmmm
mmm hmmm

catch the ball
can't you catch the ball



Editor's Choice Award Short Story

a summer at home

katherine miller

"Oh, I'm just so depressed," I said in mock whine. An uncontrolled sigh belayed the humor I tried to relate. I hoped Mike wouldn't be more concerned than he already was.

"So, Di, your stint as domestic goddess is going that well, huh?" I could just see his goateed frown on the other end of the phone. It was strange hearing from him during the summer. We see a lot of each other while on campus, but I never thought of keeping in touch over the summer. We have an odd friendship anyway. Mike is eight years older than I; a returning student after that long of a lapse. We've had some pretty deep conversations over lunches and biology labs, but both of us were always too busy to see each other away from classes. I figured Mike had called, like many of my other friends who I never hear from, to check up on me. To make sure I hadn't done anything drastic.

"Yeah, it's okay," I sighed again. It's an annoying habit. "I've been keeping this place from falling apart." The house was spotless. "In fact, right now, I'm getting ready to make dinner." And I was too. I juggled the cordless phone as I wrestled the pressure cooker from its bottom cabinet.

"Really?" Mike's voice perked at the mention of food. "What are you making?"

"Spaghetti. You want some? You could jump in your car right now and make it in time to finish off the last of it." Mike lived only an hour away in Lincoln. I set the cooker on the front burner of the stove and collected the partially defrosted hamburger from microwave and onions from the fridge. I was glad the subject had deviated from myself, and it suddenly occurred to me that it might be nice to see Mike.

a summer at home katherine miller

"Don't I wish," he said. "I have to be at work in about an hour."

"I'm sorry." Mike was a Psychology major who worked part time as a counselor for the juvenile branch of the state corrections board. I knew he hated the job sometimes. Mike is a sympathetic sort and hates not being able to really help people. I had tried my best—unsuccessfully—not to unload on Mike.

I broke up the hamburger as best I could and turned the burner to high. I cleaned two onions and started to cut them up; the garden hadn't yielded any fresh green peppers yet.

"Actually, I do have a reason for calling..."

"Oh, really?" I said in mock surprise. I knew there had to be some ulterior motive.

"You know I told you last fall about my sister's house on the lake?"

I nodded—another annoying habit especially when one is on the phone—I did remember, vaguely. "You spent your vacation last summer there. Some family get-together?"

"Yeah, well, this summer I'm spending my vacation taking Abnormal Psych during the second session—"

"Oooh, fun."

"Yeah, and my sister and her family aren't going to make it out there because of some business Bob has to take care of. Bob's her husband," Mike said without taking a breath. I nodded again with total non-understanding as to what all of this had to do with me. "Well, she doesn't want to leave the place unoccupied all summer. The last time she did they had to spend about five hundred dollars fixing damages. We seem to be safe if someone spends at least a couple weeks there."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. So, we were looking for someone to look after the place, and I thought of you." There was certain tone of victory in Mike's voice like he'd just found the perfect solution to everyone's problems.

"Ah." I wasn't sure what else to say yet. The onions were browning nicely with the ground beef. I dragged one of the kitchen chairs into the pantry so I could reach the cans of tomato sauce and paste on the top shelf. I balanced the phone between my ear and shoulder.

"Diane? Are you still there?" I really hadn't meant for there to be such a long pause; it just sort of happened. I was trying desperately to think of excuses to turn the offer down. "Yeah, I'm still here I was just working on my sauce."

"I thought you might want to get away from everything for a while," his voice qui-

eter now. He was only trying to help. My family had fallen to pieces during my sophomore year in college. This would be the first extended stay in a household that had no parents. My father had left without leaving behind a cause, and my mother, well, she had just changed.

"I don't know, Mike. You know, I'd love to, but I should stick around here, for my little brother's sake anyway," I said trying to convince myself that was the only reason I was here. Right now, my brother Tom was "vacationing" with my grandparents in Minnesota. I envied him; even though he'd have to attend the huge Johnson family reunion, he could at least leave all this behind for a month.

"I thought he was going to Minnesota with your grandparents?" The man's a mind-reader!

"He is, but that's not for a few weeks yet," I lied. Actually, they'd be back in a few weeks. I'd totally forgotten I had mentioned the trip to Mike when last lamenting my situation. Luckily for me, he'd forgotten when the trip had been planned.

"Well, come down when he leaves," said Mike.

"How am I going to get food and stuff when I'm there? I still don't have a car. And I'd be all alone out there with nothing to do," I said. This was my last-chance out.

"There's a Mom-and-Pop market about two blocks and around the corner, I'd be only twenty minutes away, and it would be a great chance for you to catch up on your reading," Mike replied to my points as quickly as I had presented them. I was impressed; he'd thought out all the excuses I'd use before I had even heard the question. I sighed again. This time it was mixed with a chuckle. When Mike resigns himself to helping a friend, he goes all out. The offer was tempting, but there was really no way I could go. I was needed here. Maybe I could straighten things out...

"Your being at home isn't going to change anything," his voice was low and sensible. It made me want to cry because I knew he was right. Or maybe it was just the vapors off the simmering onion.

"I know," I whispered. There was more to that smell than just onions... "ACK! The meat's burning." I grabbed the pressure cooker by the handle and moved it to a cold burner. "Listen, Mike, I better go or we'll be eating out again. I'll think about staying at the lake while my brother's gone and give you a call then."

"Do you have my number?"

"Um," I tried to think, "I did, but I lost my address book moving home."

"Okay, I'll give it to you again."

"Wait a minute, let me grab a pen. There's never one by the phone." I picked a felt

a summer at home katherine miller

tip out of the kitchen utility drawer. Mike gave me his number, along with an assurance he'd accept charges if I'd call collect. I wrote it down on the post-a-note pad by the phone's cradle.

"Remember, call me."

"I will," I said as I hung up.

"Who was on the phone?"

I whirled around, startled, like I had been caught in the illegal act of conspiracy. My mother had just come in the sliding patio door and was standing at the kitchen table. I don't think she noticed the odd look on my face, so I recovered before she saw it. She was still dressed from work in black jeans and a country-looking shirt complete with fringe; overdressed, in my opinion, for telemarketing. She had a strange glassy eyed smile on her face. I wondered how many drinks she'd had before she came home. I dug the electric can opener out of the cupboard beside me and went on with my cooking, my back to her, before I answered.

"Oh, it was just Mike," I said as nonchalantly as I could.

"Mike? Mike? Do I know any Mikes?" I withheld a sigh for once. She was in a spacy mood.

"No, he's my friend. You know, the old guy," I said. Mike has always been "the old guy" because Mom can never keep the people I know from school straight. I had met Mike during my Freshman year, when my mother was still over-protective of me, before her own separation. She had nearly flipped when she thought I was actually dating someone eight years older than myself; none of my assurances that Mike was "just a friend" had ever sunk in. But that was before. Now, I'm sure she wouldn't care less if I was sleeping with him. I wondered if I should bring up his proposal of a summer away.

"Oh, him," she said, understanding dawning on her. "Gee, maybe I should meet him. We might get along well together." I was still turned around adding the tomato products to my meat and onions (it wasn't as badly burnt as I thought—a little garlic salt would cover the taste) and gathering seasonings from the cabinets above me. She didn't see me cringe. I hoped she was kidding and knew she probably wasn't.

"Do you need me to season that for you?" she asked as I liberally shook oregano into the pot.

"Nope. I can do it myself."

"See, you really don't need your old mother any—"

"Are you eating with me tonight?" I interrupted. I did not want to hear another one of her little spiels about how it was all right for her to act like a rebellious teenager while

I was “doing just fine”. I snapped down the lid of the pressure cooker and put it back on the hot burner. I turned around to see her answer.

She had seated herself at the far end of the kitchen table. The cordless phone was in front of her as well as her electronic address book. She had no intention of staying and eating with her eldest child. My mother, the socialite, always had plans to be somewhere other than home.

“You’d better put your noodles on,” she said without looking up at me.

I shook my head and made no secret of my fourth sigh of the day. I made a lot of noise getting the spaghetti cooker out. It was a big cast-iron thing and made a satisfying amount of racket.

“Oh, alright,” my mother gave in as though I had been arguing with her. “I’ll stay home tonight if that’s what you want.”

“Don’t do me any favors,” I muttered. She either didn’t hear me or simply ignored it. I kept my focus on filling the spaghetti pot with water.

We had been going on like this, to a greater or lesser extent, since September. I wanted her—all of us—to get counseling; we needed it, really. But she countered that with a lack-of-money plea. It was strange how she had money for everything except what was good for her family. It wasn’t that I wanted everything to be the way it used to be. My father had been unhappy in the marriage. Even though my mother hadn’t started drinking until after he left, I tried not to blame him. All I wanted was my mother back. I wanted her to care enough not to even joke about hitting on my friends. I wanted her to remember what classes I was taking next semester like she used to. I wanted her to do little things like staying home to eat the dinner I had made. But my mom had changed so much, more than seemed reasonable to me.

Maybe I was just being selfish. I had tried everything really. I had talked until I was blue in the face: to her, to Dad, to anyone who’d listen, even Mike. Guilt trips and rebellions didn’t work anymore because she had this new Enlightened Philosophy that no longer required her to care. “The only person I have to answer for is myself.” It was what my father had said when he left, and she had done her best to live up to that ideal from then on. I wished sometimes I could buy into it, too. I had even cried; at twenty years old I had cried like a helpless child.

The spaghetti pot was overflowing. I shut the water off and dumped out a fourth of it. I added salt and put it on the other large stove burner, cranking it up to high. I had to wait now for everything to come to a boil.

It was as I set the timer for the spaghetti that the phone rang. Mom and I had been

a summer at home katherine miller

sitting at opposite ends of the table in silence. She was fiddling with her check book, trying to find money where there was none. I didn't even get up once in a while to check if the water was boiling. I just gave it a good ten minutes before I added the raw, stiff noodles.

The first ring was nearly drowned out by a combination of beeping from the digital timer and the hiss and sputters of the pressure cooker. Mom caught it on the second ring before the answering machine kicked in.

"Oh, hi, Gene." Gene was one of her latest best friends. I tried not to listen in, even as I strained to hear over all the kitchen noise. I had my back to her again, stirring the noodles to keep them from sticking.

"That sounds like fun," my mother smiled. "When are you two going? Hmmm." I wonder if she looked up to check my reaction.

I knew whatever Gene's plans were they began now, would continue through dinner time (probably until the bars closed), and would be irresistible to my mother. I threw her a poisonous look over my shoulder; she didn't see it. She was writing something on the pad she'd nabbed from beside the phone. I turned back to the stove. I felt paralyzed. I wanted to stop her to force her to stay here and eat dinner with me, but I couldn't move.

She hung up the phone. She walked up and stood behind me. I didn't turn around.

"Gene and Dawn are going out to celebrate Dawn's birthday at the Winchester Bar. I've never been there before. Dawn had to give me the address," she explained. "I'll only be gone an hour or so, and I won't drink anything but Diet Pepsi."

I managed a shrug. They were all promises I'd heard before. She didn't say anything more because there was nothing more to say. She grabbed her purse from the table where she had set it when she came home and left through the patio door. The timer on the spaghetti hadn't even rang yet.

"Fine," I muttered. I couldn't hear myself, the pressure cooker had settled into its chug-chug rhythm. Dinner was almost ready. I could see, out of the corner of my eye, through the kitchen window, her car back down the driveway.

"FINE!" I screamed. I grabbed the pressure cooker from the stove and threw it down. It's amazing it didn't put a hole in the floor. All I can think now, looking back, is pressure cookers must not have safety devices for occasions when people slam them into the ground. Upon impact, it nearly exploded. The lid burst off and hot, very hot, tomato sauce splattered on to everything including my ankles. I didn't notice any pain.

My violence seemed to be cured, though. I stood there for many minutes staring at

the mess I made, but left the boiling pot of noodles where it was. I even reached over and calmly turn the burners, both of them, off. My brain finally registered a hot sensation from the lower part of my legs, but it wasn't unbearable. For a while, I contemplated cleaning it up.

"It doesn't matter anymore," I said out loud to myself. It took a few minutes more to realize what I meant by that. It didn't matter because I wasn't going to be here to clean it up. I was going to be gone. I was going to a house by a lake where I could cook spaghetti without interruptions. I only ended up eating alone anyway. My ankles were burning now, but I had no time. I had to leave now.

I ran down stairs to my basement bedroom and grabbed the suitcase out of the closet. I dumped the winter clothes stored in it into a messy heap on the floor. My mind was reeling as I tried to think of everything I should take. I shoveled clothes and underwear from my dresser drawers into the suitcase, not worrying if the case would close later. I'd take one of the boxes of books I hadn't unpacked when I came home from school this summer. I had to remember to get stuff from the bathroom upstairs: toothbrush, toothpaste, shampoo, my headache pills...

"I have to get out of here," I explained to no one. "I have to leave now." I glanced at the clock. "I have to call Mike before he leaves for work, before I run out of time."

I dashed back up stairs to the telephone in the kitchen despite the disabling pain in my ankles. I picked up the phone before I realized I didn't know the number. Where was the notepad? On the table. I spun around, phone receiver in hand. The pad was on the table where Mom left it. It was totally blank. I blinked. It was still blank. It slowly sank in. My mother had written the address for the Winchester Bar on the same sheet of paper I had written Mike's number. It wasn't here. I didn't have it.

All the energy I had drained out of me. I knew it wouldn't work. I could look through my boxes again for my address book, but it wouldn't be there. It was too late anyway, even if I called information for Mike's number. He would be at work by now. He wouldn't be able to take me out to the lake house until tomorrow. And tomorrow, Mom would be back. She might even stay for a while...

I went back down stairs and slowly unpacked the suitcase. I folded each garment of clothing to perfection. I put the suitcase back in the closet, and forgot all about the books and the necessities in the bathroom upstairs. My ankles were red even after I wiped the sauce off. Several blisters were forming, but I really didn't feel any pain now.

I went back up stairs to clean up the mess on the kitchen floor. The sauce was still hot.



Editor's Choice Award Poetry

skin II

pelele

every 36 days
we shed a layer
of skin that's why
it's important to dust
it's important to vacuum

this dirty little
house on the prairie

otherwise we inhale



Editor's Choice Award Short Story

daisy
bruce genaro

I am waiting for Daisy in the cocktail lounge of the Hotel Nikko, a 32 story glass, concrete and steel monument to capitalism in the middle of San Francisco. My fingers are rap-tap-tapping nervously on the black marbled bar of this overly designed room. It is noon and the room is ominously dark, almost foreboding. The bartender, a tall, slender blonde man with an air of superiority, eyes me suspiciously as I nurse a very tall, very dry martini. His one raised eyebrow suggests that it's a little too early in the day for straight alcohol. He must be new on the job. And he hasn't met Daisy, the woman who has driven, drives me, to drink. Thirty minutes ago I rang Daisys' room from the white courtesy telephone in the lobby. She'd assured me she would be down in five minutes. By Daisy Standard Time, I've still have another twenty minutes of waiting. I have no doubt that Daisy could delay the second coming of Christ. Billions of people standing around wondering what the hold-up is. Christ looking at his watch, performing minor miracles to keep the crowd under control while Daisy puts the finishing touches on her makeup and wardrobe.

Daisy has always had the annoying capacity to push my patience and my bar tab to the limit. While the anticipation of seeing her is as heady for me as any drug (complete with pupils dilated), the reality of our rendezvous is more like withdrawal (vomiting optional). Daisy and I haven't seen each other in a year and a half and I'm beginning to wonder if we're going to see each other today. At least while I'm sober. From my seat at the bar I have a clear view of the bank of elevators that disperses people to and from the hotel tower. A bell rings and a Lucite triangle illuminates, announc-

ing it is ready to make it's return trip to the top floor. Each time the doors open the cabin disgorges an assortment of tacky tourists in matching jogging suits and sneakers or cookie-cutter businessmen in grey and black pin-stripe suites with white shirts and club ties. "When did San Francisco become so conservative?" I ask myself. Any day now I expect to be so influenced by the Republican right that I'll go out and arm myself with an Uzzi on my way to an anti-abortion rally, stopping on route at a book store to pick-up a copy of "To Renew America".

My heart leaps into my throat each time the bell rings, thinking this is it. It's going to be her. But it isn't. Considering what I am about to do, I can use the free time to reconsider. I had bought it only yesterday, surprising myself with a complete lack of deliberation. A two and a half carat yellow stone set in a platinum and eighteen carat gold band. I push the little green velvet box back and forth between my hands like a miniature game of hockey. I make hushed little noises in the back of my throat to imitate the sound of a roaring crowd. Rah! Rah! I catch myself being caught up in this little game and look around the room to see if I'm embarrassing myself, but the only other person in this alcoholic mausoleum is blondie. Anyway, all of the Sharks' best men are in the penalty box and there's no hope for a win, so I put the "puck" back into my coat pocket without opening it and I order another martini, double, no olives. I think about my fortieth birthday which is fast approaching and wonder if Daisy will be around to celebrate it with me.

When she finally does appear, frosted blond hair, teased and spiked, moused and gelled, black leather jacket and "Laura Petri" Capri pants, we embrace. She says how great it is to see me. I clench my jaw over her shoulder just barely able to reply "um hum," through my grinding teeth. She sits down on the red leather stool and orders a scotch and soda but not before sampling my martini. She does this every time. The woman can recite chapter and verse from 5 year old issues of Vogue, but can't remember that she doesn't like Vodka. As usual with Daisy, my anger, or rather frustration (which she is infuriatingly oblivious to) lasts for about thirty seconds and we are quickly catching up on all the latest gossip. We are almost finished with our cocktails so I ask her, "What would you like to do now that your lubricated?". "Well, do you know any neat little boutiques where we can go shopping?" "That's all San Francisco is" I reply. "That and restaurants." "Great" she says "let's go." She jumps off the stool, and before I know it we were arm in arm, heading for the car.

Daisy is a burst of energy. A five foot four inch walking carnival. In a matter of minutes she has the capacity to make a complete stranger feel as if he is the most

important person on the planet . She is effervescent, amusing and smart and she has lit up my life for twenty years, although sometimes rather dimly. For fourteen of the past twenty we have lived on opposite coasts, our only contact being an occasional phone call, a brief weekend, or a quick cocktail in an airport lounge as one of us was waiting for a connecting flight to a vacation spot or a business convention. I have the pleasure (I think that's the right word) of Daisy's company today because she is in town for a telecommunications convention. When she is not shopping or traveling she works as a sales rep for a Ma Bell spin-off headquartered in Burlington, Vermont.

Daisy and I met at a small private college in central Vermont. It was the summer of '75 and we were both acting in a repertory theatre called the Montpelier Players which was basically a woman's group that raised money for local charities. She was Puck in "A Midsummer Nights Dream". I was Murray in "A Thousand Clowns." Our friendship evolved gradually, slowly over the course of a year. I have often wondered how we got together (and why) as we had very little in common. She was brought up in a poor working class suburb just outside of Detroit. She was a vegetarian, practiced yoga and wore earth shoes. My family was lower middle class (back when that distinction meant something) but raised me with the attitude that we were upper middle class, bordering on royalty. We lived in Boston, went sailing on the week-ends and wore Topsiders without socks year-round. I think what attracted us to each other was something more spiritual. Karmic. Or possibly it was a shared vision of the world veiled in guilt, her's Catholic, mine Jewish. Our relationship has spanned two decades as best friends, brother and sister, lovers and sometimes adversaries. At times being everything to the other person. At times, not speaking for months.

Happy for any opportunity to show off this city I drive down Lombard street (the most crooked street in the world), out past the Marina, under the Golden Gate Bridge and finally up to Pacific Heights for a panoramic view of the bay and a glimpse of the building exterior used in filming "Mrs. Doubtfire". It is a weird weather day, more Florida than California, warm and raining while the sun shines. After a few more detours I turn on to Union Street (the straightest street in the world) and park the car in front of Starbucks Coffee shop. I grab an umbrella from the trunk, and once again we were arm in arm heading off into the world of high-fashion. I have been shopping with Daisy in the past and though I knew what was coming, I was helpless to stop it. I'm not sure wether I'm her shopping co-dependent or her clothing pimp, but it didn't take long. Two jewelry stores and a bakery, and there we were in Lulu's, surrounded by women's fashions, flattering lights and over-attentive sales-girls.

Maybe she's changed I thought to myself. Perhaps this time will be different. Maybe she's finally learned the fine art of browsing. We are both older and hopefully wiser. Between the two of us, several well known psychiatrists will be able to send their children to the best schools and probably retire early. Haven't we learned anything from all this self-evaluation Daisy? Are we going to continue to look outside of ourselves for happiness? Are we going to continue to look outside this relationship for some-one to make us complete? And while maybe we are not "in love" with each other, I know that we do love each other. More than that, I believe that for whatever reason, we need each other. "Why don't we grab some lunch first?" I ask. "There are still some things things I'd like to talk to you about before you have to get back to the conference". "We have plenty of time" she replies, "Besides, this is exactly the kind of clothing I was looking for".

I stand in the doorway impatiently tapping the umbrella on the tile floor but she takes no notice. I see her reach up and pull an article of clothing off a wall rack and her eyes glaze over as she utters the words I feared most, "Do you have this in a small?" . Daisy is holding up a cream colored satin hanger with a halter top limply draped over it. She holds it up for me to see, her eyes sparkling as if she has just found a gram of cocaine in her back pocket that she has forgotten was there. "This is so cute" she says, bubbling with excitement, "I just love the back." "It doesn't have a back." I say deadpan, annoyed. "I know, that's what I love about it." The sales clerk, Tish, is now pulling every article of clothing she can find, size small, from the carousels and piling them into the fitting room that will be Daisy's home for the next three or four hours.

I plop myself down into a very uncomfortable but fashionable chair and start leafing through the ragged pages of ancient issues of Vogue and Glamour. Where do they keep the supply of Sports Illustrated and Esquire for people like myself. Tag-alongs. Guardians of the purse. At least give me The Chronicle to read while I'm waiting. But maybe that's part of the game. The humiliation of the entire male species. World domination through shopping. Trust me ladies, few things are more embarrassing to a male than to have to sit through a fashion parade, listening to "girl talk" and having nothing to occupy your mind except how long this is taking. But we do it. At least I do it. At least I do it every time I'm with Daisy.

Sitting here, I begin to have serious feelings of *deja vu*. For some odd reason I act as some sort of spending aphrodisiac for Daisy. Maybe it's the cologne I wear or the aura that my body emits that encourages these shopping frenzies. I have spent hours

and hours watching her shop and I have never enjoyed it. Leather skirts in Soho. Bikini's in Fort Lauderdale. Jeans and tee shirts in Seattle. If she wore three different outfits every day for the rest of my life, she would still have clothing in her closets that she'd never have the time to wear. One would have to assume that she was incredibly wealthy. But I knew differently. Daisy is woefully insecure and suffers from low self-esteem. She goes shopping to alleviate the pain she still feels from a father who never quite gave her the attention she desired (deserved), and dresses merely to gain the approval and get the acceptance she never got as a child. I can only assume that on some subconscious level I realize this and so I tolerate it. I assume that this vulnerable, hidden side of her is one of the reasons I love her. I think that I could be the one to help ease the pain if only she'd let me.

Daisy bursts through the fitting room doors dressed in the white cotton halter top and a flowing white skirt. "You look like Marilyn Monroe" I tell her "except for the spiked hair". I half expect to see gusts of air billowing up through the floor boards, her skirt ballooning about her waist, the roar of a train passing by. She takes this as a compliment. I try to tell her it isn't. "What's wrong with looking like Marilyn Monroe?" she asks, confused. "Nothing," I reply. "If you don't mind walking around the streets of Vermont looking like a Hollywood icon that's been dead for thirty years. You'll scare the farmers." Her response is to turn to Tish and ask, "Do you have this in black?" and disappears again, the dressing room doors swaying back and forth behind her.

Clothing drops to the floor. Hangers clack together. The sound of a zipper. A gasp. Daisy reemerges from the fitting room this time in a lace sleeveless turtleneck and a pair of crushed velvet bell bottoms that appear to be two sizes too small for her. She walks over to the mirror and spends five minutes viewing the outfit from every possible angle and vantage point. She looks great. She has obviously been taking very good care of herself. Exercising, eating right, tanning salons. But I know she needs to hear it. Who doesn't. So I tell her, by way of saying "Women aren't supposed to get better looking with age, men are." She tells me that she has started weight-lifting and flexes her triceps to prove it. She is particularly proud of these. "Isn't this great?" she says several times, pointing to her rippling muscles. "Yeah Daisy, great, just don't hurt me."

The rest of the afternoon is a blur of fabrics in the latest trend of muted colors and sound bytes from me. "That looks great." "I liked the black one better." "Too long." "Too short." Somewhere around the seventy-fifth outfit change I begin to loose con-

daisy bruce genaro

sciousness. I have taken the day off from my job as a securities broker to spend it with Daisy. I am losing money and I'm bored. I keep thinking that I should be at my desk, phoning clients, trying to sell them shares of stock in blue chips, mutual funds and limited partnerships. As I sit here nodding my head "Yeah" or "Nay" to Daisy's parade of sweater ensembles, I start calculating in my head what this day is costing me in terms of dollars and cents. Not only in today's market, but using the time value of money, what this afternoons tryst is costing me ten years from now. Twenty years from now and adding in the cost of the ring. Boredom has turned to hysteria. I tolerate it out of habit and because I know that she will only be in town for two days and what little free time she does have she is spending with me. Too bad we are spending it separated by the swinging doors of a dressing room and the constant interruptions of Tish, who never runs out of compliments or garments in Daisys' size. Having maxxed out Daisys' Visa card we leave Lulu's with boxes of bodices, bags of blouses, sacks of slacks and Tish's undying gratitude. It looks like Christmas!

We walk back to the car in silence. Daisy trying to regain her composure from her frenetic shopping spree, and me trying to make some sense of this on again off again bicoastal relationship. I have come to the sad realization that Daisy is unable to comprehend the true value of things, be they clothes, money or friends. I have spent hours torturing myself, trying to figure out what this hold is that she has on me. Half-hating and half-loving the uncontrollability of it all. Whenever she's away, I miss her terribly. But when she's here I'm even more miserable. I turn into the insecure nineteen year old that I was when this relationship started, fawning over her, trying to impress her. Trying to gain the elusive love and acceptance that I never got as a child either.

I drive her back to the hotel and kiss her good-bye, thinking it might be for the last time. My hand reaches into my coat pocket and I feel the fuzzy box. I rub my thumb back and forth over the top of it as if it has the ability to grant me a wish. She stands on the curb looking back at me quizzically as if she knows that I have something to ask her but am holding back. This was not something I was going to do on the spur of the moment. But if I didn't ask her now I never would. How is it possible to love someone as much as you hate them? I couldn't tell if I was angry at her for not giving me what I wanted in this relationship or if I was angry at myself for not demanding it. But standing on this street corner, an ominous dark cloud threatening more rain, it is painfully clear to me that I will never know.

hand-eye coordination

jennifer currie

I woke up on the morning of August 1st staring out the window. Everything was upside down. I forgot that I had rearranged my room so that the head of me bed was underneath the window. I really don't have to wake up until August 28th, I kept telling myself. But I knew that I would, if only to spite myself. And besides, I doubted that anyone could sleep that long. And there's too much reality in doubt. Especially when the sun is slapping you in the face, so hard that your eyes burn. I looked around my room, observing the work that I had done the night before. There was a familiar nail sticking out the wall to my left. The photograph of my older brother Craig, the one with him and his Malamute in front of the Chatahoochee River, had fallen off the wall again. It must have happened sometime during the night. I hadn't heard it. My mother had warned me that it wasn't a very good frame when she gave it to me. I told her that it would work fine. I didn't want to replace it, for fear that she would see it and know that she had been right. There's just something about letting parents know that they were right.

My mother cried when Craig moved to Georgia. My dad tried to get me to take Craig's place on the tennis court. I moped around for awhile, then moved out to go to college. Not as far away as Craig, but on my own, at least. My mother still cried occasionally. I played silent games of tennis with my dad. We were both used to playing with Craig.

I can't catch with my right hand, I would tell Craig when he tossed the ball over for me to serve. He thought that was odd, me being right-handed and all.

Are you sure? he would ask. I nodded. He rubbed his chin. Well then, he would say in a very matter-of-fact voice, catch the ball with your left hand.

hand-eye coordination jennifer currie

I never knew if he was trying to make a joke or not, so I just smiled and caught the ball with my left hand, though I wasn't very good at that, either. One time I just let it bounce right by me.

- Are you moving to Georgia with Daphne, Craig?

- No, of course not. I mean, I might go down there to visit her for a couple of weeks or something. But I would never move down there.

Two months later I sat in his room and watched him pack all of his things. From his bedroom window I watched him wave as he backed his car out of the driveway. The windshield of his car was filthy, but I knew that he had that dopey good-bye look on his face. The one where one of his eyes gets really big, much bigger than necessary, and the corners of his mouth get really tight. His dysfunctional scarecrow look.

Ten seconds later I was grinding my teeth and preparing to get on with the rest of my life. A year later, I moved into my apartment, so that I was closer to school. And all that I had left to do was wait for school to start on August 28th.

I twisted myself around so that my head was at the foot of my bed. Things were right side up this way. From here I could see the very tops of the trees, though, so I closed my eyes and pictured it, the water hopping over all of the small rocks. Like a faucet that has been accidentally left on, it never stopped running.

The lady, assuming that it was a lady, in the apartment down from me was outside with her (?) radio. She turned down all of the good songs, but turned up bad songs and commercials. Sometimes people can be so annoying. The man (I assumed again) across the creek was practicing his guitar. Practicing. Chord after chord. Always out of tune. And, obviously, not in unison with the radio. Nor was it in unison with the small girl (I knew it was a girl - I saw her) who was screaming her disappointment about who-knows-what to her parents. The cheap, dying battery sound of the radio and the squealing, off-key strum of the electric guitar were topped off with the ear-piercing, incessant waaaaaahh-hhhh-hic-hic-waaaaaahhhhhh to create the perfect recipe for insanity. The kind of noise that contorts your face so that you feel like you are tasting something sour, and makes your hands clench into fists and your teeth grind without you even realizing.

I decided to get up and take a walk. It beat the alternative - taking a shower. It wasn't the shower part that bothered me, though. It was the tedious

chore of drying off and getting dressed, digging through my closet with a towel draped over me while my hair dripped cold water down my back. And, of course, I never knew what it was going to be like outside because even if I watched the weather on the local news, the forecaster went through so many maps and charts about stuff that I could not care in the least about that by the time he came to the forecast I forgot why I was watching in the first place and my mind had drifted onto a completely new topic. (gasp) So I decided to take a walk.

I weaved in and out of the rows in the cemetery down the road. There I escaped neighbors with bad radio-listening habits, wannabe guitarists with tone-deaf ears, and three year-olds with strong lungs. It was almost dark, so the only thing I had to worry about was ghosts. It wasn't the thought of ghosts that scared me, though. It was the thought of all of those gaping eye sockets staring up at me from six feet under. And all the rotting corpses that surrounded me. Those were the things that scared me. But I liked to think about them as I walked through the cemetery. It prevented me from thinking too much about everything else. To this day, I'd rather be scared than be reminded. Anyway, the only thought that kept passing through my mind was damn, I have to take a shower when I get back to the apartment.

I woke up with the sun in my eyes. Everything was upside down again. Soon I'll be used to this, I thought. But not quite yet. Craig is coming home to visit today. Perfect, I can try to convince him to stay home for awhile, maybe forever. I knew that he would just laugh at me, tell me that he had a life in Georgia now. He'd give me one of those looks. One of those condescending older brother looks. The kind that tell me how naive little sisters can be. The you're so silly look that I spent my entire life trying to avoid.

My mother called the apartment when Craig pulled into the driveway back home. He was going to be coming up to the apartment later, she said. He wondered if I wanted to play tennis.

"Sure. I'd love to," I lied.

An hour or so later, he showed up at the door with a brand new tennis racket and a new haircut. I didn't like either.

"Of course," I mumbled. I always mumbled around Craig. I was always careful of what I said. He was so defensive of Daphne. And I was so critical of her.

hand-eye coordination jennifer currie

We walked to the tennis courts, five minutes away. He told me about his job. I told him about my schedule. I told him that I wished he weren't living so far away. He changed the subject, opened the gate to the court, let me go in first, tossed me the balls.

"I don't have any pockets," he explained.

I caught the balls with my left hand, put two of them in my pocket and hit the third one over. bounce.

"How long are you going to stay in Georgia?" bounce.

"I can't live at home forever." bounce.

"I didn't think you would." bounce.

"Well then . . ." bounce.

"You lied to me." bounce. bounce. bounce. bounce.

"What?"

"You said that you weren't going to move to Georgia."

"I never said that."

"Yes you did." I took another ball out of my pocket and hit it over. I didn't look at him. I never make eye contact when I'm upset.

Craig laughed his nervous laugh.

I changed the subject to make him feel more comfortable.

"I can catch with my right hand now," I told him, proving it the next time he hit the ball over.

"Couldn't you always?" he asked, completely confused. He had no idea of what I was talking about. He was getting nervous again.

"Yes, I could."

He gave me a strange look and then shrugged. I hit the ball over. Every once in a while I let the ball bounce past me, just to see if he was paying attention. It was a peculiar game we were playing. Every new bounce had a deeper echo to it, which is not uncommon in a silent game of tennis.

everything was alive and dying

janet kuypers

I

I had a dream the other night
I walked out of the city
to a forest
and there were neatly paved bicycle paths
and trash cans every fifty feet
and trash every ten

and then a raccoon came right up to me
she had a few little baby raccoons
following her, it was so cute, I
wish I had my camera

and she spoke to me,
she said, thank you
thank you for not buying furs,
I know you humans are pretty smart,
you have to be able to figure out a way
to keep yourselves warm
without killing me

and I said, you know they don't
do it for warmth,
they do it for fashion, they do it
for power. And she said I know.
But thank you anyway.

II

Then I walked a little further
and there was a stray cat
she still had her little neon collar on
with a little bell
and she walked a few feet,
stretched her front paws,
oh, she looked so darling

they do it for fashion, they do it for power

and then she walked right up to me
and she said thank you
and I said for what?
And she just looked at me for a moment,
her little ears were standing straight up,
and then she said, you know,
in some countries I'm considered
a delicacy. And I said how
do you know of these things?
And she said
when somebody eats one of you
word gets around
and then she looked up at me again
and said, and in some countries
the cow is sacred. Wouldn't they
love to see how you humans
prepare them for slaughter, how you
hang them upside-down
and slit their throats
so their still beating hearts
will drain out all the blood for you
and she said isn't it funny
how arbitrary your decision
to eat meat is?
and I said, don't put me
in that category, I don't eat meat
and she said I know

III

And I walked deeper in to the forest
managed to get away from the
picnic tables and the outhouses
that lined the forest edges
the roaring cars gave way to the
rustling of tree branches

everything... continued

Janet Kuypers

crackling of fallen leaves
under my step

when the wind tunneled through
the wind whistled and sang
as it flew past the bark
and leaves

I walked
listened to the crack of dead branches
under my feet
and I felt a branch against my shoulder
I looked up and I could hear
the trees speak to me,
and they said
thank you for letting the
endangered animals live here amongst us
we do think they're so pretty
and it would be a shame to see them go
and thank you for recycling paper
because you're saving us
for just a little while longer

we've been on this planet for so long
embedded in the earth
we do have souls, you know
you can hear it in our songs
we cling with our roots
we don't want to let go

and I said, but I don't do much,
I don't do enough
and they said we know
but we'll take what we can get

IV

and I woke up in a sweat

V

so tell me, Bob Dole
so tell me, Newt Gingrich
so tell me, Pat Buchanan
so tell me, Jesse Helms
if you woke up from that dream
would you be in a sweat, too?

VI

Do you even know why
we should save the rain forest?
Oh preserve the delicate balance,
just tear the whole forest down,
what difference does it make?
Put in some orange groves
so our concentrate orange juice
can be a little cheaper

did you know that medical researchers
have a very, very hard time
trying to come up with synthetic
cures for diseases on their own?
It helps them out a little if they can first
find the substance in nature.
A tree that appears in the rain forest
may be the only one of its species.
Or one like it may be two miles away,
instead of right next to it. I wonder
how many cures we've destroyed
to plant more orange groves.
Serves us right.

everything.... continued
Janet Kuyper

VII

You know my motives aren't selfless
I know that these things are worthwhile in my life

I'd like to find a cure to these diseases
before I die of them
and I'm not just a vegetarian
because I think it's wrong to kill an animal
unless I have to

I also know the excess protein
pulls the calcium away from my bones
and gives me osteoporosis
and the excess fat gives me heart attacks
and I also know that we could be feeding
ten times more people
with the same resources used for meat production

You know, I know you're looking at me
and calling me an extremist
but I'm sitting here, looking around me
looking at the destruction caused by family values
and thinking the right, moral, non-violent decisions
are also those extreme ones

VII

everything is linked here
we destroy our animals
so we can be wasteful and violent
we destroy our plants
we destroy our earth
we're even destroying our air
we wreak havoc on the soil, on the atmosphere
we dump our wastes into our lakes
we pump aerosol cans and exhaust pipes

and you tell me I'm extreme

and these animals and forests keep calling out to me
the oceans, the wind

and I'm beginning to think
that we just keep doing it
because we don't know how to stop
and deep inside we feel the pain of
all that we've killed
and we try to control it by
popping a chemical-filled pain-killer

we live through the guilt
by taking caffeine, nicotine, morphine
and we keep ourselves thin with saccharin
and we keep ourselves sane with our alcohol poisoning
and when that's not enough
maybe a line of coke

maybe shoot ourselves in the head
in front of the mirror in the master bedroom
or maybe just take some pills
walk into the garage, turn on the car
and just
fall asleep

in the wild
you have no power over anyone else

now that we're civilized
we create our own wild

maybe when we have all this power
the only choice we have
is to destroy ourselves

and so we do

everything... continued
Janet Kuyper

a holiday tail an urban fable

mark blickley

It was a December twenty-fourth unlike any December twenty-fourth in recent memory. The ground was blanketed with ice from a snowfall two days earlier, and it was quite cold. They even predicted more snow by nightfall.

Imagine that. A cold and snowy Christmas Eve just like the old snapshots in the family album! What a relief. Maybe this year's holiday conversation wouldn't center around how pollution and its ensuing global warming trends conspired to take the "feel" out of Christmas.

These thoughts flashed inside Moira's head as she and Joad slowly made their way up Fairview Avenue in Jersey City. Moira liked the crisp smell of the cold air, but the ice frightened her. She hoped her fear wouldn't be transmitted to Joad. She tried to relax her grip on him.

When they reached the corner Moira leaned over and patted Joad's head. The dog barely felt his master's affection. The ice and traffic were making him too nervous to cross the street. Crossing streets was once an easy feat for Joad, but now he hated it. He's hated it for several years.

They stood on the corner of Fairview Avenue through two complete traffic light changes, waiting for Joad's decision. Each time Moira heard the traffic stop and felt people next to her cross the street, she directed Joad to move forward. He refused. The dog could feel Moira's impatience as she fidgeted with his harness.

Joad was breathing heavily when he finally took his first step. Perhaps the cold steam from his breath obscured his vision, or maybe it was his owner's anxiety that clouded his judgement. Nevertheless he proceeded to lead Moira into the street.

She smelled the first hint of danger — a blast of diesel fuel. "Stop!" "Stop!" shouted pedestrians from both sides of the street. Moira yanked back on Joad's harness and froze. A turning bus cut right in front of her, missing them by inches.

a holiday tail mark blickley

Moira's abrupt stop caused her to lose her footing on the slippery pavement. Down she went. Joad's tail drooped between his legs and he lowered his head as a rush of people came to Moira's aid. As they helped her to her feet she heard a man say, "What's wrong with that stupid dog?"

"It was my fault, not the dog's," said Moira. She patted Joad on his shoulder and thanked the people for helping her.

Joad's tail remained folded underneath him as they cautiously made their way to the sidewalk. If Moira could see, she'd know that her dog's tail was usually tucked away. He worried so much of the time about her safety it'd been ages since he was able to wag it in joy or relief.

The block just ahead of Moira and Joad was one of the most treacherous in the city. It was lined with abandoned, burned out buildings. This meant that no one had cleared away any of the snow. It was ignored. The entire length of the block was one shiny sheet of thick, slick ice. Other pedestrians simply avoided this dangerous stretch of sidewalk by crossing the street.

Moira knew nothing of the peril she was approaching. But Joad knew. He could see how crowded it was across the street. It made him shiver to realize that he and his master were completely alone. Not one soul was nearby. If something should happen, Joad knew there would be no one around to help Moira this time.

To steady her footing on the sidewalk Moira took short, heavy steps that crunched into the ice. She believed that these crunching sounds was the ice screaming out in pain as her boots cracked its spine.

"I'm sorry," Moira whispered to the pavement.

Joad, who was much lower to the ground, knew the ice couldn't hear her apology above her crackling footsteps.

At the beginning of her blindness Moira thought that her hearing had, and would, become more potent. But as she matured she understood that her ears hadn't grown more powerful, only her concentration. And as her concentration grew, so did her imagination.

She enjoyed making up stories based on sounds, especially the sounds of nature. Without visual distractions, sounds became pieces of puzzles whose final outcome would be dictated by her tastes and moods. Moira totally disregarded where or how they had originated. And if these sounds produced paintings in her mind, then wind was her favorite color.

A delicious intimacy flourished between Moira and the wind. Sometimes it whis-

bled at her, or tried to seduce her with soft spring breezes. Other times she'd capture and cage it, like on hot summer days when she'd pull out her electric fan and force the wind to serve her. Moira would listen to the breeze spew out between the thin bars that protected her from the rotary, begging to be released from this unnatural act. More often than not she'd take pity on this artificial breeze. Her finger would click off the fan and she'd sit in her hot apartment, sweaty but satisfied.

Winter winds were fickle. Many people thought of winter winds as bitter, but Moira knew better. They weren't bitter, just mischievous—and protective. It's mischief could be seen in the formation of ice. The wind and the water loved playing together during winter because nothing delighted water more than to be turned into ice.

Moira appreciated how water was always at work replenishing, refreshing, and cleaning. Yet despite this terrific workload, it disturbed her that the only time water seemed to be acknowledged was when it was cursed during droughts, vilified as acid rain, or slandered when it could no longer carry away the foul smelling wastes dumped into it.

During winter rainstorms or snow sprinklings, Moira would listen to the drops of moisture beg for an increase in the wind chill factor so it could freeze over. The wind, who was quite sophisticated because of its intensive travels, understood the water's need to develop a thick, protective skin against the criticism people threw at it. And if that skin was an exquisite icicle or a slippery patch of ice, so be it.

The dog hesitated as Moira urged him forward. But what could he do? There was absolutely no way of avoiding that terrible stretch of ice. He thought of directing Moira into the street in order to bypass it, but that was too dangerous.

The traffic was too heavy. He tried to get Moira to cross the street to safety, but she didn't understand his nudging.

"Come on, Joad. Stop acting so silly. Why do you want to cross the street? You know Uncle Charlie's building is on this side of the street! Don't let that bus scare you. We're not in any danger. It's just a sidewalk. Let's go."

Joad tread lightly on his paws, but it made no difference. The thoroughness with which Moira, out of necessity, crushed the ice in her path could not be ignored.

The ice's crackling anguish caught the wind's attention.

Moira heard a bellow, then felt a violent gust of air drop down on her. It raked across her face like a sharp pair of scissors; she felt certain she had frostbite. The wind then swerved off to the left, gathering up chunks of ice that it hurled against Moira and Joad like exploding bits of shrapnel.

a holiday tail mark blickley

"Stop it! Please!" Moira called out. "It's not my fault." But the wind simply absorbed her words into its increasing roar.

Joad knew Moira couldn't stand up to this barrage much longer, and if she fell, the wind and the ice would surely do her serious harm. So the dog began to dig furiously with his claws. His old legs ached as they tore at the ice until he had broken through to the pavement.

Joad then lifted his head and howled, howled so mightily that the wind had to take notice. He returned to his digging until a bald spot appeared on the ground, free of ice. Then the dog howled again at the wind, threatening to make the bald spot even larger if it did not stop its attack.

The wind died down.

Moira was stung by the cold, but she understood why the wind had retreated. Joad had rescued her. Uncle Charlie's apartment building was just on the corner, so she quickened her pace. Joad limped along on his torn and frozen front paws, trying to keep up.

When they entered the building Moira crouched by Joad. "Are you okay, boy?" Joad licked her face as her fingers deftly examined him. When she touched his raw paws she gasped. Once inside her uncle's apartment she insisted he give her warm towels to wrap around Joad's bruises.

The Christmas Eve party was pretty much like all the other holiday parties she had attended there for the past four years. Moira would sit in an overstuffed chair by the living room window with Joad stretched out across her ankles.

"That's a beautiful Labrador Retriever," said a woman with a smoker's husky voice.

"Yes he is. And he's very bright, too," replied Moira.

An uncomfortable silence followed until Moira heard, "It's a lovely Christmas ribbon you've threaded 'round his collar."

"Yes, he seems to enjoy it."

"Can I get you anything to drink, Moira? You are Moira, Charlie's niece?"

Moira giggled. "How did you recognize me? Did Uncle Charlie complain that I wear the same old Christmas Eve outfit every year?"

Moira heard the sizzle of a struck match as the woman nervously lighted a cigarette. She did not want to make the woman uneasy. It was so tiresome to have sighted people take everything she said so seriously. If someone at the party were to ask her what she wanted for Christmas, Moira would answer it would be a sign she could hang off her back that would read — BEWARE - BLIND PERSON WITH A SENSE OF

HUMOR.

"Thank you for offering me a drink," said Moira, " but I'm not thirsty. I would appreciate it if you could get Joad a bowl of water."

Moira liked being by the window because it was always drafty and she enjoyed listening to the wind force its way inside. It would make gurgling sounds as it delighted in sneaking a chill into the warm and cozy room.

The warmth felt wonderful to Joad, but he was too nervous to really enjoy it. All he could think about was the trip home. He'd have to lead Moira through that mine-field of ice and wind — and do a better job of it this time. And those traffic lights — red and green. Green and red. Even though he was color blind he knew they were Christmas colors.

Uncle Charlie's girlfriend played his piano as all the guests joined in the singing. Moira disliked her voice so she silently mouthed the words. Everyone laughed when Joad yelped to the final chorus of Little Drummer Boy.

"Moira, is Joad being critical of our singing or has he been overtaken by the Christmas Spirit?" asked Uncle Charlie.

"I think he's just anxious to chew on that drumstick we're all praising," grinned Moira.

"At his age?"

Moira frowned and did not answer her uncle.

"How old is your dog?" asked a male voice Moira couldn't identify.

"Thirteen."

"I hope I look as good when I'm —let's see, thirteen times seven— ninety-one."

"He's thirteen, not ninety-one," replied Moira.

When everyone retired to the living room to play a board game Moira declined the invitation to join in. She preferred to sit in her chair stroking Joad.

Moira enjoyed listening to the clicking of dice as it passed from hand to hand. But she loved those fraction of a second silences after the dice cleared the player's fingers, before they hit the board. Anything was possible during that brief pause, that split second before good news or bad news

bounced on the cardboard.

Believing in possibilities was Moira's favorite Christmas activity. During the eleven and a half years since Joad came into her life she established a secret Christmas Eve ritual based on an ancient legend and a lot of hope. Moira had to be home before midnight.

a holiday tail mark blickley

"What time is it, Uncle Charlie?"

Her uncle looked at his watch. "Eleven-twenty."

"My God, I have to go!"

Uncle Charlie grinned and shook his head. "This is where my niece turns into Cinderella. She has to return home before the clock strikes twelve."

"I must leave. I'm sorry."

"I'm the one who's sorry," said Uncle Charlie. "You never stay to help us trim the tree. I only wine and dine my guests so I can turn all of you into my personal labor force." Everyone laughed except Moira. It was getting late.

"I don't want to be rude, Uncle Charlie, but I have no choice."

Uncle Charlie hugged his niece. "I'll give you a lift home." Joad's ears perked up and he barked his approval.

Although Moira wanted to accept her uncle's offer to drive her home, she was afraid it might offend Joad. "That's alright. Don't bother. Joad and I can make it home fine."

The dog's ears drooped.

"It's snowing pretty hard out there," said Uncle Charlie.

"That's all the more reason why you shouldn't have to move your car."

Waiting in the lobby as Moira pulled on her gloves, Joad watched a sweetly scented woman enter the building and begin pinching snowflakes off her fur coat. The dog shuddered.

The trip home was a complete success. Enough snow had fallen so that the threat of ice was buried under a white powder of sure footing. The walk from Uncle Charlie's had gone smoothly, but it took twice as long because of the snow. Moira had forgotten to add this extra time to her calculations.

She was nervous as the elevator lifted her and Joad up to their ninth floor apartment. It was six minutes to twelve and she had to be in her apartment by midnight. Christmas would be ruined if she was a minute late.

A tradition is a tradition, even if it proved frustrating. Ever since her first Christmas with Joad, Moira clung to the belief that animals could be gifted with speech at midnight on Christmas Eve. It was her favorite Christmas legend and she prayed for it each year.

But for the past eleven years she was disappointed. Still, it was unthinkable not to try. The year she didn't pray might be the year it would come true. Moira Essegian did not want to take that chance.

The young woman and her dog kneeled by the tiny nativity scene displayed on the living room coffee table. As Moira silently mouthed her words, she gently stroked the animals surrounding the manger scene.

Joad raised his head, sniffing the air. He was hoping to detect a different kind of smell. A smell of change. A smell of success.

"Smells the same to me," said Joad.

Moira opened her eyes.

"I'm sorry," said Joad. "I don't mean to be negative."

"You spoke!" shouted Moira.

"I spoke!" Joad squealed.

What followed wasn't an excited conversation. The young woman and old dog lapsed into an embarrassed silence. A silence of shyness.

Instead of speaking, they retreated into their familiar closeness of touch. Moira tugged at the back of Joad's ear. Joad nuzzled his face into the crook of Moira's arm. She always loved the burst of cold on her skin from his nose.

"Were you born blind?" asked Joad.

Moira shook her head.

"How did you lose your sight?"

"Mexican food," answered Moira.

"Pardon me?" Joad responded. "Did you say Mexican food?"

Moira giggled. "That's right. You see, when I was seventeen the state of New Jersey awarded me a driver's license. I celebrated by inviting three of my closest friends to a Mexican feast in a tiny chili joint by the Jersey shore."

Moira patted her stomach. "I think I'm still living off the calories from all the chimichangas and refried beans I ate that day!

"After the feast I took my friends for a moonlight drive to Wildwood Crest. But I felt so full the seat belt pressing against my belly irritated me. So I unbuckled it."

"A harness is a good thing," said Joad, proudly.

Moira tenderly patted her dog's harness. "Is it, Joad?"

"As long as it can keep you safe," whispered Joad. He began to feel uneasy.

"Well, driving at night is much harder than driving in daylight," continued Moira. "Perhaps that contributed to my collision with the truck. I don't remember too much about the accident, except for the sound of my head exploding through the windshield. And the darkness."

Joad started to shake. He suddenly felt like an unbuckled automobile. Moira

a holiday tail mark blickley

responded to Joad's discomfort by rubbing the crest of his neck.

"But that's not what I'd call a wonderful Christmas Eve story," smiled Moira. "I'd much rather hear something about yourself before I met you."

"You mean when I was young?" asked Joad.

"Sure. When you were a puppy."

"I was born in Boise, Idaho," said Joad.

"I know that," laughed Moira.

"But did you know that my mother, Gwyndalyn, was a prize winning Labrador Retriever?"

"No, I didn't. That's wonderful, Joad."

"I was the friskiest puppy in my litter," said Joad, proudly. "I inherited my mother's shiny black coat and intelligence. What I didn't inherit was her aloofness. I guess when my owners saw I didn't have my mother's regal bearing they decided I should go into something that was helpful.

"As a matter of fact, I was so friendly my owners weren't sure whether to follow through on their plan to donate me to a 4-H family to begin training as a seeing eye dog. Overly friendly dogs don't make good guide dogs because we're too easily distracted."

"You're a splendid guide dog. The best," insisted Moira.

"Well, after a year with my 4-H family, the Tedescos, I was given to the Guiding Eyes Foundation for intensive training. I guess I kept my friendliness in check."

"That's where we met," Moira grinned. "Do you remember your other problem?"

"What problem?" asked Joad, rather defensively.

"Come on, Joad. Are you telling me you've forgotten already?"

"I'm afraid I've forgotten many things over the years, Moira."

Moira jumped to her feet. "Your chewing! You had this constant need to chew that worried the instructors!"

Joad laughed at the memory. "I did have a rather fine bite, didn't I?"

Moira nodded. "They didn't want me to take you. They wanted to spend more time on your chewing problem before sending you out in the world. But I wouldn't let them. I wanted you the moment I first touched you."

"Your hand was like a mud puddle and a brush all in one," recalled Joad.

"Thank you...I think," grinned Moira.

The conversation waned. A nervousness overcame both speakers. Time was running out. The girl and the dog had not said what they really wanted to say. Moira

squeezed her hands together and bit down on her knuckle.

"I'm sorry, Joad," she murmured.

"Sorry? What could you possibly be apologizing to me for, Moira?"

"For the life I've forced you into." There, she said it. Her heart pounded as she awaited his response.

Joad's jaw dropped open with surprise. He tried to respond, but words stuck in his throat like a splintered bone.

"These past eleven years you've been on the job twenty- four hours a day, seven days a week. Sometimes at night I dream I let you loose in an open field. I love to imagine you running and jumping and playing. I wish I could let you play, Joad. I wish I could give you time all for yourself."

Joad lowered his head into Moira's lap. "But I'm not supposed to play. I have to take care of you." When the dog noticed the pain in Moira's eyes after saying this he quickly added, "I want to take care of you."

"It hasn't been fair. I know that," said Moira.

"You're wrong," replied Joad. "You put too much value on play. Any stray can spend the day playing. But I'm different. I'm special."

Moira nodded in agreement. "And I'm selfish."

Joad, his tail firmly tucked underneath him, slowly made his way to the end of the room. He turned and faced his owner.

"No, Moira. I'm the selfish one. For the past few years I've been letting you down. Whenever you've taken me out you've put yourself at risk. I'm too old to properly take care of you anymore. But I don't want to leave. And that's wrong. My whole life has been devoted to your welfare.

"I love you, Moira. But it's been a selfish love. I'm afraid I love my life with you more than my concern about your safety. I feel great shame. If I were a true friend I'd run away so you could get another dog, a better dog."

"I don't want another dog!" shouted Moira. "You're as thick as the people at the Foundation! For two years now they've been pestering me to retire you and obtain a younger model."

Joad lowered his head. "They're right. I can't do the job anymore." His tail seemed to disappear from view.

Moira stretched out her arms. "Come here, Joad." After a slight pause he stiffly walked over to her and into a hug.

Moira tightened her grip on her dog. "So what if crossing a street's become more

a holiday tail mark blickley

of an adventure. What's wrong with adventure?"

Joad wanted to protest but his speech came out garbled.

"I'm tired of talking," she said.

Joad licked Moira's face.

"If you don't mind continuing to look after me, let's not ever part," whispered Moira. "I trust in your heart, Joad. And you can trust in mine."

The dog barked his approval; the Christmas gift was over.

Joad rolled over on his back and yelped like a puppy. Moira was thrilled. It had been a long time since she had heard her dog so happy.

She leaned over and rubbed Joad's belly just the way he loved to have it rubbed. Moira's hands traced a line from his stomach to his chest and back again. Her fingers moved up and down like a speedy typist. It was a delicious massage.

"I'm going to get you a special Christmas treat," said Moira.

Once again Joad barked his approval.

Moira stood up and went into the kitchen. While she was fumbling inside a kitchen cabinet trying to find the special holiday biscuits she had bought Joad, a strange thing occurred.

Moira felt a slight breeze at her ankles. This puzzled her. There were no windows open and no drafts. The landlord had recently insulated the apartment. But stranger than the breeze was the exquisite music accompanying it. It was a sweet hymn of joy, a song of thanksgiving.

Moira had heard the wind perform thousands of different sounds, but this one was totally new. It made her mouth wreath into a huge smile. She scratched her head and abandoned her search for dog biscuits.

She knelt on the floor and lowered her head. The sweet breeze washed over her. Its music poured into her ears. Moira was tempted to track down the origin of this musical breeze, but decided to stay on the floor and just enjoy it.

If Moira hadn't lost her sight she could have solved the mystery by simply peeking into the living room. There, stretched out on the living room rug, was Joad. His forgotten and unused tail was snapping back and forth, wagging joyfully. It was stirring up a breeze of happiness that sailed into the kitchen.

an unfinished requiem for male chorus and orchestra that ends with the wrath of god, a black and white still life 1985

alan cahn

Behind the sliding window, lying on the slab, eyes closed, a white hospital sheet neatly folded down at the neck, is the woman. Her long tri-colored hair is unnatural, neat, combed straight, washed clean. There is no mistaking the face in repose, not so much dead, as temporarily diminished. Simple identification is as easy as it is impossible. The words that could be inscribed on her urn, lie locked in the vault of her 'Black Room', sealed for the summer, hidden amidst the piles of papers, the accumulation of years of garbage and brown bags she kept dead things in, aging them to perfection. Months after habitation, objects acquired a scent like death that can never fully be expunged. Reading The Canon according to BJC as is meant to be read by flashlight, in darkness, candles burning behind the significant color shaded pages, the palimpsest of hands and indiscipherable tongues reveals the unfathomable, the wrath of a vicious, savage god reaching out from a lake of fire inside to close her eyes before the Offertorium, the Te Deum, that can never be sung in any language, especially not her own. What she methodically wrote to be left behind and read was a pure system of an incomplete madness. It was almost ironic, almost laughable that her Canon made more sense than the answering machine message from the cemetery, whose mason could not inscribe her name with those of her family already carved into the land of the dead, because her name had too many letters. The message was: "The name provided for the deceased must be changed to fit the space allowed. How could this be done? Please advise at your earliest possible convenience."

acquired a scent like death

jack
mike lazarchuk

Jack Stark told his
Family he wanted to be
Fishing when he died,
Hopefully with a fish
On his line.

Tuesday, May 15th, 1990,
Jack Stark, a retired
Cab driver collapsed
In his boat shortly
After hooking a fish
On Lake Erie off
Bolles Harbor, south of
Monroe, Michigan

Ted Wixom, a companion
Came to his assistance,
Hailing two other
Fishermen in a
Nearby boat who
Turned out to be
Paramedics from Flint,
Each trying his best
To revive him.

Jack Stark was DOA
At Mercy Hospital
In Monroe, the cause
Of death listed as
Massive heart attack.

A tall, barrel-chested man,
Jack Stark drove yellow cab
For 27 years, retiring in 1982
To a life of serious fishing.

He had many "fish stories"
He'd willingly spin to
Buddies who told of
His prowess with a
Scaling knife and the
Knack he had for
Filleting a fish.

"He was a good bowler too,"
Recalled Phil Martin who
Bowled with Jack in a league.

"Some of his teams even won
championships."

virginia

daniel mayland

I think my whole adult life really started when Virginia left me.

We had been together for nearly three years, and by the second year, I was almost sure we were going to be married. But then four months after I graduated from college, and two months before I left to travel in Europe, everything fell apart. It was impossible for me to overestimate how utterly desperate I had felt, although I have since seen things that make Virginia seem like nothing.

"I don't know," I had stammered at the construction site where my friend Greil worked, after he told me. Greil had learned, through a mutual friend, that Virginia was seeing someone else. "I, well, I guess that's it then."

Greil was my best friend, and he knew how much I'd be devastated by the news. I remember closing my eyes and trying to think sane thoughts. I too young to put everything in perspective - too young not to be self-pitying.

"I'm leaving," I had said.

"I get off in an hour. You'll be at the apartment?" We were roommates at the time, living together in the Dorchester section of Boston.

"Probably."

It was a bleak October day. The trees were half bare and the streets were soggy with decaying leaves and dog excrement. Part of me likes the fall because it's when all the leaves change color. but in a city, like Boston, there aren't enough trees for it to make any difference. And even when I was with my parents, growing up in northern New Hampshire, where the trees did change into brilliant reds, oranges and yellows, there was still something about the change from summer that always made me lonely.

I walked down Percival Street until it ran into Ronan Park, where I sat at a bench near the road and tried to gather my thoughts. The wind was cold and it blew violently over the grass and swirled thorough the long cattails in the marsh. I was glad to be wearing my winter jacket and as the wind continued to blow, I zipped it up all the way and turned up the collar so that when I sunk my head down my nose and the

bottoms of my ears were covered. I felt as if at twenty-one my life had already been declared a failure, and the problem was that I couldn't find anyone to blame for it other than myself. I had grown up in a decent family, the youngest of five children, and I'd always assumed that one day I'd get married and have children as my parents had done. It wasn't a conscious choice I was making, so much as something I just took for granted without realizing how much work was involved. I didn't question things as much as I do now, I was too withdrawn. My parents had started me in school a year early, and I had a birthday that came late in the year, so that I was always at least a year, and sometimes two, behind the rest of my grade. As a result I never felt as if I were on equal footing with my peers, including Virginia.

That night I took the bus over to Worcester, where Virginia was a student at a two-year community college. Before that, she had been with me at the University of Massachusetts at Dorchester, but money had been tight so she had transferred. When it happened, I didn't think the move would be so bad. We still called each other and visited often enough; it had never occurred to me that things would end up like they did.

When I got to her apartment and knocked on the door, she answered in a voice that seemed on the verge of breaking into laughter. But that was before she knew it was me.

"What . . . what are you doing here?" she sputtered, when I opened the door. "I mean, it's good to see you, I just didn't expect you."

She was on her bed, wearing a red skirt with beige stockings and a white blouse, looking up at me with a forced smile. Her long black hair was disheveled, and the apartment smelled like menthol cigarettes. A month before, we would have kissed each other, but that night she stayed on the bed while I walked to the window and looked out onto the street. It was so strange being in her apartment like that, feeling a distance between us. I had never felt that way before with her. It was as if I were in a movie, and that at any moment the scene would end and then immediately everything would be normal again.

"Smith, what's wrong?" I was too confused to answer. The reality of what was happening only came to me in shattered fragments. "Why are you here?"

"You tell me."

"I don't know why you're here and I don't know why you're acting so weird."

"Yeah you do." When she didn't respond, I turned to face her. Her eyes were riveted on the floor and she was tapping her foot rapidly. She didn't look guilty, or penitent, only annoyed. "Yeah, take a guess, why do you think I'm here?"

"Don't play games with me, Smith," she said. "What do you want?"

She stared at me as if I were the one who had abandoned her. At the time I couldn't understand how she could discard me so easily after three years.

"Talk about Chris, that might be a good place to start."

"Oh, God."

"Did you forget you were - " I hesitated to say girlfriend. It seemed to trivialize our relationship.

"It's non of your business."

"What the fuck are you talking about?!" I pleaded.

"Don't yell at me."

"Don't yell. That's it, don't yell at you?"

"I, I didn't mean it like that."

I could see her weakening, and I had an intense longing to dive back into the past, to the time when we first fell in love. I had been on the swim team, which I quit after sophomore year so that I could work, and Virginia was working part-time as a life-guard. We'd pass each other along the wet tiled corridors, and she'd always smile at me. It's easy to forget, now that so much time has passed, everything that Virginia seem so important to me back then. But one thing I'll never forget is how exciting it was, falling in love for the first time. I can still remember clearly that dizzying elation.

"So it doesn't matter to o you anymore who you're sleeping with?" I demanded.

"Don't please . . ." She bent her head down.

"Why didn't you talk to me?" I was standing over her, my feet planted firmly, but with very little pride.

"It happened too fast."

"Not so fast that Greil couldn't tell me."

"I meant . . . in the beginning."

"When was the beginning?"

She hesitated. "A month ago."

I pressed my hands to my head and could hear myself breathing. I remembered the way Virginia's hair had looked when it was wet, how we had spent a week on the coast of Maine the summer after we started dating, how at first I was afraid she wouldn't like me because I had never slept with anyone before; a flood of memories washed over my head.

"God, I feel sick," I said. Virginia moved back to the far corner of her bed, with her back against the wall, as if she were trying to crawl away from me. As if I disgusted her. "I just can't believe this." I wanted her to say something, to explain, to come

back to me. "Do you really like him?"

"Do you really want to know?"

Muffled voices laughed in the bar underneath the apartment. Suddenly the loss of it all was choking me. I didn't know who I was. I dropped my head and looked at the clothes I was wearing - old Levis, canvas sneakers and a cotton fatigue sweater that had worn this at the elbows. These clothes, they were me, and I became embarrassed. I wanted to hide so she couldn't see me exposed and realize how little there was left to me. "So'd you just decide one day you didn't love me?"

"I didn't plant if like that."

"But that's the way it happened?"

"I don't know."

Her arms were wrapped around her legs and her chin was resting on her knees. She was staring coldly into the opposite wall. Over a minute passed, during which time I began to imagine her naked and willfully vulnerable under a man I didn't know. "So, did you sleep with him?"

"None of your damn business."

"God fucking damn you," I choked.

"What do you want from me, Smith?! You want to know I've had sex with him. Fine! I AHD sex with him. We had sex the very first night. Does that make you feel better? Just what do you want from me?"

I couldn't even begin to respond.

"I mean, how did you expect me to react?" I finally whispered, glaring at her, demanding that she acknowledge it wasn't just some stranger who had walked through her door. Her face was expressionless. I decided if I couldn't break her down with love, I would try to make her break with hate and sadness.

"You know what you are? I'll tell you. You're a lying bitch and a whore," I said. At first I needed to force myself, but then blind anger gathered momentum and I began to scream louder and louder. "A fucking goddamn whore! Virginia Lopez is a whore who will fuck anyone!" I cried. My eyes were half filled with tears, so that I could barely see, and my mouth had too much saliva in it.

"Stop it!" she screamed, but that only made me want to go further. I rushed to the window and threw it open, yelling at the top of my lungs.

The people passing on the sidewalk looked at me as if I were a lunatic. In back of me Virginia was in hysterics, hitting me, pulling on my shirt and clawing at my neck with her fingernails.

"Stop it, stop it, stop it!"

She was screaming through her tears as I turned towards her.

"Get away from me," I said, slowly and deliberately, pointing my finger at her.

"Please, don't do this Smith."

"Like hell I won't."

But then when I turned, and saw the people passing on the street staring up at me, I didn't want to yell anymore; I only wanted to crawl away and hide. Virginia fell to her bed and buried her face in the mattress, but as I turned to go, she called to me.

"Smith?" I looked at her. "I'm sorry," she said hoarsely.

I never wanted this to happen. I didn't want to scream at her like I had.

"Oh, hon," I said, moving towards her.

"No," she protested. "Go now, just go."

I had lost complete control over my life.

Outside the air was freezing. The dry cold hurt my lungs when I breathed deeply, so I pulled my shirt and jacket over my mouth and sucked air in through the fabric. I had been in Virginia's apartment for less than fifteen minutes, and although I had nothing else to do, I didn't want to leave so soon. The confrontation had been such a whirlwind that I was left feeling as if there were something else I should have done.

I went straight to a local diner, keeping my head down and being careful not to make eye contact with anyone again. Inside it was warm. I sat in a corner booth, facing the wall, and ordered coffee. When it came, I cradled the mug in my palms, feeling the heat seep through to my fingers. I wanted to pretend that nothing had happened, that my life was exactly the way I wanted it to be.

The coffee had been a bad idea. My gut had been in a knot since the afternoon and the coffee only made it worse. Without thinking about what I would say, I left money on the table and walked back to Virginia's apartment.

I stopped right outside her door. There was a crack of light by the floorboard, so I knew she hadn't left. There were things I wanted to say, but I didn't know what they were. I hesitated, waiting motionless for what must have been at least a minute. I even brought my hand up, as if I were about to knock but then I stopped. She was in there and I knew it. What was she thinking? Was she sad, or did she simply not care?

I remembered the way she had glared at me not long ago. I couldn't take her indifference, and I was tired of pretending to hate. I wanted comfort, and peace, but I knew I couldn't find that inside of Virginia's room any longer, so I turned and left.

I have not seen her since.

on meditation

robert michael o'leary

Consciousness
an incessant swirling
of invisible matter
a secretive whispering
of all passer-by ghosts
past-participle fast-forward
in your innermost fervor
and furthestmost reverie.

Each unique remembrance
anguishing, entreating you
to remember. Remember that I remember
and compete for unwavering attention span,
while patronizing each other
with the usual travail
while recalling every long forgotten,
bitter enmity
with a vehemence still in you,
you had long thought vanished.

I am waiting too. I am waiting
as well as waiting
to have and to hold
for better or worse
all things within grasping reminiscence.
Desiring, once again, to be gullible,
enough to simply believe that by taming
ones own breathing, I will arise
and be more keen
as if this breathing were mere exercise
in coercing transcendentalism
to wavelength projections of continuity.
A pioneering sojourner, who just witnessed
an incandescent breakthrough
into Om . . .

scads
david mckenna

Some days it doesn't pay to put your pants on, you just can't escape the noise. First it was a three-hour shift at Eyewear & Ice Cream, then an earful of Sandy bitching about her brother's corpse having its brain pickled for medical students to practice on.

"They opened his skull and stole it," she raved as we sat side by side on our front stoop. "The same way you would open a freezer at Carfagno's to lift a piece of veal."

What'd they use to lift his gray matter, a pair of tweezers? That's what I almost said, my mood was that foul. The air conditioner at work had blown out and the heat was so bad it melted the Buddy Bars and steamed up the lenses on the \$500 Armani sunglasses. A legally blind lady tried to punch me, but I closed up anyway.

"I love Philly except for the heat," I said, trying to change the subject, squirting myself in the face with my Luger-like water pistol that almost got me gunned down when some stupid bike cop saw me aiming at Oxygen Man #1, who was fixing to keel over after his half-block walk to Daoud's Dollar Store for cigarettes.

"The heat don't bother me," Sandy said, eager to argue. "It's the people I can't stand."

"Don't forget the cars," I said, busting her chops like I always do when she gets sassy. "It's not bad enough, a million people breezing around for no good reason. But they're all in cars, polluting me worse than those Camels you smoke."

"Quit complaining," she said, blowing smoke in my face. "It's your fault we're still in this crummy city."

Cigarette Sandy is her full name, on account of her two-pack-a-day habit. Joe Scads is what she calls me – the name's really Joe Mingledough – because of the time I read Blackjack for Winners by F. Frank (P.G.W., 1993) and promised to win scads of money in Atlantic City. I lost our ten-grand down payment on a house in Jersey, in what looked like a toy town you would put up around a set of electric trains. She'll never forgive me.

"This time I'll make sure you don't get a chance to blow the dough," she said

mysteriously.

Turns out Workhorse Harry, Sally's brother, was one of twenty stiffs who had their brains scooped out and sent to anatomy classes at Franklin University Medical School, as part of a shady deal between the chief sawbones there and some enterprising ghoul at the city Medical Examiner's Office. Sandy heard on the news that a relative of one of the cadavers was settling with the city for about \$90,000, so now she wanted to sue on behalf of Harry, who probably didn't make that much money his whole life.

"You said they fired the guy who cut the deal," I said, disgusted. "They even apologized for snatching the brains. Why make a federal case? The city's almost broke as it is."

"Here's why, you moron," she said, flicking her non-filter into the gutter. "Cadaver abuse. You got your child abuse, spouse abuse, old people abuse. This is worse. Cardinal Bevilacqua says even the unborn have rights. Why shouldn't dead people?"

"Because they're dead. You can't abuse 'em, or be nice to 'em either, unless it's to buy a red marble gravestone."

It was getting sort of loud. I could tell by the way the neighbors were hanging over their railings, watching like we were in the Mummers Parade.

Oxygen Man #1 – Carmen to his kin – came over to play peacemaker, pushing his oxygen tank in a snazzy little cart with chrome wheels. A tube thinner than an earphone wire snaked under his shirt from the tank and wound behind his ear to a little clamp on his nose.

"It ain't worth it, whatever you young people are steamed about," he said, making this weird downward motion with his hands that was supposed to hush us. "Life is too short."

Not short enough for you, I thought, trying some hand signals of my own as he stuck a cigarette in his mouth and pulled a lighter out of his baggy old pants.

"That's right, Carmen," Sandy said. "Too short to let opportunity slip by, unless you're my deadbeat husband."

If you saw Sandy, you'd know why I put up with her guff. Two yards tall, with lips like cherries, skin like peaches and cream, tits like honeydew melons. Yum. Name another body part, I'll match a fruit I like.

Carmen lit his cigarette and didn't blow us up, but I told him what a bad idea it was, smoking and wearing an oxygen tube.

"Mind your own business," Sandy said to me. "Worry about something real, like how we're gonna scrape together enough money to move, what with all the fancy food you buy."

"The fancier the food, the more you eat," I reminded her.

She proceeded to tell the cadaver story to Carmen, who just happened to know the perfect lawyer for the case, if we didn't mind cutting the lawyer in for a third of the settlement. At this point Carmen slipped into a coughing fit that brought him so low he nearly kissed the curb. He hacked and spit but somehow remained attached to his tank. I didn't want to think about how far up his nose that tube was stuck.

Carmen managed to name the lawyer just as his brother Carlo – Oxygen Man #2 – wheeled his own tank around the corner from Ninth Street. He's short and fat as Carmen but two years older and not as loud, with less hair on his skull and more in his ears.

Carlo pointed his cigarette at Carmen and said to Sandy and me, "Don't believe anything he says," though he couldn't possibly have heard what we were talking about. "He'd walk over his own mother if he smelled money behind her."

I figured Carlo would know, since both men live with their 90-year-old mom in the house two doors down. Sandy and me ducked inside and then out the back door to tool around in my Jeep-like vehicle, where we could yell at each other in peace. But that's not how it turned out.

We drove south and watched the sun sink into the lakes like a big red beach ball. We raced home and threw off our clothes. I cooked up some melon and cream cheese waffles with a splash of Midori and some blackberries, which are the same color as Sandy's eyes. Sinatra was on the boom box. I sang myself into a frenzy and invited Sandy to hum along. She whipped up my elixir of love – fruits and ice cream, cracked ice and wheat germ, and some pharmaceutical she adds that I don't even want to know about. We drank deep and jumped each other and I, for one, forgot all about cadavers.

But not for long. Next day, Sandy's on the phone with the lawyer Carmen recommended, laying down her sorry-ass rap. What an outrage, her poor brother, empty-headed at his own funeral. As if the big dope had any use for a brain at that point, or ever had. Twenty years Harry pushed produce around at the Food Center, very slowly, until one day he fell asleep in the wrong dark corner and got mashed by a pallet of Idaho potatoes. No insurance, of course.

Two years after the fact, Sandy's sees dollar signs, and so does her lawyer, Dan

Cheatham. Pronounced cheat 'em, I kid you not. A fast talker with a salon tan and a shag rug on his head. "You may think you're not hurt, but let me be the judge of that," he says in his cable TV ad, which ends with his phone numbers flashing on the screen and an announcer shouting, "Can't beat 'em? Cheatham!"

Sandy was talking to this sheister like he was Moses come down from the mountain with the secret word. Yes, Mr. Cheatham, I saw the story about my brother on TV, and it was like my worst nightmare. Yes, Mr. Cheatham, I'll send you his case number. Action News got it from the newspaper.

Cheatham got right down to business, filing suit against the city for negligence and cadaver abuse, a new one on me. I mean, it's alright to dress stiffs in bad wigs and goofy makeup and suck God knows what out of 'em so they don't smell bad at funerals. Why fuss over a few frontal lobes?

I guess most folks would disagree. After the Action News bit, 15 more relatives of the cadavers filed separate suits. The city withdrew its settlement offer on the first suit, figuring it made more sense to duke it out in court than fork over scads of dough – close to \$1.5M – for brain snatching.

A month later and Sandy was in full swing with the legal thing, all hyped up and closing in on three packs a day. Swapping faxes with Cheatham from the doctor's office where she works as a receptionist. Mumbling words like "disposition" and "decedent" in her sleep, which wasn't so restful.

"You'd sleep better if you fired that sheister and let the dead rest in peace," I said.

"My brother won't rest till he gets justice," she said, lighting up after the eggs Benedict and filet mignon I made for breakfast. "And that sheister, as you call him, is gonna make us enough money to move somewhere decent."

I finished my mocha cappuccino and looked her in the eye. "The only thing worse than an ambulance chaser is a hearse chaser."

If you knew me, you'd know why she puts up with my guff. My dad, Clyde Mingledough, was a chef at the Bellevue-Stratford who married an Italian fan dancer, settled in South Philly, and taught me everything he knew. But I became an eye doctor, just to be different. Sandy thought she'd snagged a guy who'd make great meals and great money. She was right about the meals.

"Besides, I like it fine where we're at," I confessed.

I cook broccoli rabe like your mother wishes she could, and I know karate. Yeah, I'm six inches shorter than Sandy and skinny, but it's Bruce Lee skinny. When we

make love I'm all over her like a mountain climber and, man, do I know her peaks and valleys.

"Well, I think this place is the pits," she said, blowing a cloud across the table like you wouldn't believe, like she was a fire in a tobacco factory, and cocking her head the way they do in those glossy magazines that smell like the perfume counter at Woolworth's. She was dressed South Philly casual – sweatsuit, gold chains, heavy makeup.

Did I mention Sandy's cheekbones? Put a turban on her and she'd look like Norma Desmond in Sunset Boulevard, but lots younger. I'm ready for my closeup now, Mr. DeMille. Not that she'd know who Norma Desmond was, or Cecil B. DeMille.

Truth be told, I wasn't catching many Z's myself. My Eyewear & Ice Cream clients were getting feistier every day, maybe on account of the heat wave. One lady had the gall to complain that her \$300 glasses weren't ready yet, on the very day I took her prescription.

"These are my summer sunglasses I'm waiting for," she shouted to the other customers, unwrapping a Klondike Bar. "By the time they come in, I'll need my winter glasses."

Did I tell you all my clients are on welfare and don't pay a dime for glasses, or even ice cream? What is it with people and money? Buy 'em a room full of toys and they bitch about the one toy you forgot. Even worse than welfare cases are rich fucks who whine about capital gains taxes and such.

You could say I'm on welfare. The feds pay me to fill eyeglass prescriptions, and they pay well. But the money's not good enough for Sandy, not by a long shot, which is why she kept the court battle going even after it started looking like Cheatham couldn't beat 'em on the cadaver scam. Not for anywhere near 90 grand.

First the city's lawyers argued that coroners didn't seek permission from relatives because permission isn't required after autopsies are legally authorized, as they were for all the decedents. In other words, coroners can remove brains, bronchial tubes, big toes, any body part they take a fancy to, once an autopsy is OK'd.

Then the city came up with a med school paper stating that Workhorse Harry's brain was received July 1, 1993, even though city records say he died July 21, which even Sandy had to admit was his death day. This meant either Harry was walking around without a brain for three weeks prior to his death – I contend he got

through his entire adult life without one – or there was a mix-up at the med school and they worked on a brain they thought was Harry's but wasn't, or the city and med school were conspiring to confuse the issue, or some other trick was in the works.

Whatever. The city refused to discuss the discrepancies but was offering Sandy \$15,000, no strings. Cheatham was still telling her to go to court.

It was time for Sandy and me to have a civilized chat. I put some Mozart on the box, grabbed a big crystal bowl and mixed us a tortellini salad with balsamic vinegar, which we picked at with forks on the front stoop.

"Take the 15 grand," I advised. "They're willing to concede they screwed up and couldn't keep track of the corpses. But this crap about cadaver abuse won't float in court. No one knows for sure now when, or if, Harry's brain was mailed to the med school."

She lit up and took a big drag – by the time she stopped, half the cigarette was ash – and held in the smoke while her face turned Jersey tomato red, a beautiful shade.

"Small-timer," she said, blasting me with a full-force gale of tar and nicotine. "I should have listened to my father. He had you figured."

Sandy's father – Nicky Carnations, he was called – ran a flower shop and took numbers till he got whacked for skimming too much off the money that went downtown to the bosses.

"A real big shot, that Nicky," I said. "Didn't even leave enough dough for his own funeral, though I gotta admit the flowers were impressive."

I was so pissed I bit my tongue chewing a black olive. I used to bite the side of my mouth, but for weeks now I've been biting my tongue bad enough to bleed.

"At least he didn't blow his dough on some stupid blackjack scam," she scowled. "He did it his way, even when the end was near."

Sandy listens to too much Sinatra, which is why I was playing Mozart. But it was the wrong Mozart. Piano Concerto #20 is real operatic, with an undertow that inspires a lot of gut-wrenching and hair-tearing.

"His funeral procession took a half-hour to cross Broad Street," she said, exaggerating.

I spit blood on the sidewalk as Sandy emoted. I think my canine teeth are getting longer. I'm turning into an animal, like everybody else around here. I should have found me an uptown girl who wears jogging shoes to work and eats alfalfa sprouts.

"You're a champ at making glasses," Sandy said, "but you got no vision, Scads."

The phone rang just as I was getting ready to smash a flower pot with a wheel kick. When Sandy came back from answering it, she was wearing this funny expression, smug and shaky at the same time, like she'd just won the Most Beautiful Imbecile Award. Did I tell you she has curly hair the color of ripe eggplant? A dye job, but so what.

Anyway, she said the city upped its offer to \$30,000 and Cheatham told her to accept. But there was bad news too. Cheatham, unbeknownst to Sandy, had pre-arranged to split the settlement money three ways, with 20 percent going to the guy who referred the case to him – Oxygen Man #1. Which would leave her with about 14 grand.

"What can I do?" she said. "I don't have a contract. Just a verbal agreement to split the money, if there is any."

She sounded as close to sheepish as a South Philly gal can until Oxygen Man #1 came creeping around the corner with his tank in tow. She was in his face before I could put down my fork.

"Twenty years I know you, Carmen, but I never knew you were such a snake."

"Don't get steamed," he said, making that goofy motion with his hands again. "Everybody's making money."

She's got about six inches on Carmen, too. "If my father was here, he'd rip that tube outta your nose and strangle you with it," she yelled, jabbing down at him with her non-filter.

By that time the neighbors were out, including Oxygen Man #2, who got the gist of what Sandy was screaming about as he approached the scene.

"I warned you not to trust him," Carlo said to Sandy. "If there's money around, he zooms in faster than flies on shit."

The oxygen men's mom appeared, smoking a Camel and repeating "Madonna mia! Stop it, boys." Her raspy little voice got lost in the commotion.

When Carlo caught up with Carmen, their air tanks collided. "Go back inside, you momma's boy," Carmen said. "It's almost time for your melba toast."

By now Sandy and the oxygen men were all waving lit cigarettes, but I didn't get really concerned until Carmen took a poke at Carlo, which started a wrestling match that knocked over the air tanks and tangled the brothers in their tubes. Even Sandy freaked at that point.

I jumped in, figuring the whole neighborhood was ready to blow. The dueling

oxygen men kept jabbing at each other after I intervened, so I got out my Luger-like water pistol and doused 'em till they cooled off. I straightened out Carlo's tank and Sandy helped Carmen get the tube back up his nose, God bless her.

Things got back to normal after that episode, at least for a while. Sandy got her 14 grand and we celebrated – fettuccini with black truffles, calamari with porcini stuffing. Dad would have been proud. But then she started yapping about this beautiful development in Shitwater, NJ, or somewhere. Next thing I know she's nagging me to sell our rowhouse and move us across the bridge.

That was when I bought *Blackjack Secrets* by Stanford Wong (Pi Yee Press, 1993) and got to thinking about what a killing I'd make if I stuck to Wong's common-sense tips, like not bothering to count cards if the discard tray is holding more than half a deck already.

Sandy found *Blackjack Secrets* hidden under my copy of *Cow Country Cookbook*, put two and two together, and moved her settlement money into a separate account that I couldn't touch without her signature. She kissed and made up with Oxygen Man #1, who became her unofficial financial advisor.

"You'd rather piss the money away than move us to a nice town where the sidewalks ain't lined with garbage," she said, shaking *Blackjack Secrets* at me.

"The towns you like don't have sidewalks," I said.

Last week Sandy and Oxygen Man #1 moved to Shitwater where they can smoke together happily ever after, or at least until Carmen passes on to that great tobacco patch in the sky and leaves her the scads he made finding clients for Dan Cheatham. Or until she gets tired of changing air tanks for the old fart and comes running to me for some homemade lasagna and some home-grown salami, if you know what I mean.

Well, Mingedough, I said to myself when I found her note, life goes on.

It's October now, and we're all much cooler. Eyewear & Ice Cream has never been busier, though I sorely miss watching Sandy's face light up when she tastes the tortellini. Did I tell you her teeth are whiter than chunks of fresh coconut, even after all those weeds? I expect her back any day now.

Oxygen Man #2 stops by to gum a meal when he has enough wind to walk the 30 feet from his house to mine. Sometimes I take the geezer for a drive in my Jeep-like vehicle. I tell him about Sandy, and he tells me how swell the neighborhood used to be. Which is fine by me, as long as he abides by my one rule: no smoking.

alternative boys

joan papalia eisert

Alternative boys arch one eyebrow
when they check you out sideways
their hueless eyes study your shift
and your averted self-consciousness

They've either got tight sinewy bodies
or just a bit too much beef coming at you
from over their Harley belt buckles
or under their kelly green polo shirt-sleeves

Alternative boys take shop and recreate
under Chevy Novas or they breeze through
prep honors and don't give a damn
about career day or SAT scores

They're busy they're busy
at their lockers
and maybe they'll see you later
at the dance

When they'll come too late
but in time to take you home so
you can inhale those redolent leather jackets
or Brut cologne

And kiss open-mouthed
and never forget the smell
of Winstons on their breath
or their soft warm necks

Alternative boys wear oil-stained coveralls
when they jump on
the hood of your car
as you leave your shift at the bar

They tell you they'll die
if they don't hold you
or they wear their Armani suits
and have neatly-trimmed beards

When you meet them for a drink
to celebrate their doctorate in psychology
before they throw a martini in your face
because you won't go home with them

They never leave town they never return
they go to jail for rape
or they get off as easily
as bleaching their white collars

alternative boys continued

joan marafra eisert

to drive

ben whitmer

So she smiled and ran a finger around the rim of her beer glass, really with no device, only a little embarrassed. "I think I like it," she said. She rubbed the back of her neck self consciously and smiled again. "The air on the back of my neck . . ."

"I like it too," he said.

She leaned over the table, a baiting lift to her eyebrows. "I think you need to come out of the closet."

(I like the way my woman drives. She's got a way of touching the gearstick, of caressing the gas pedal. She never ever wrecks.)

He sipped casually at his beer. "Excuse me?"

"You won't go all the way and find a boy, so you made me look like one."

He laughed, then stopped as he saw the almost hurt look on her face. "You don't look like a boy."

She shrugged and rearranged her sweatshirt across her shoulders. "I feel different."

(She learned to drive from her father. He works for GM and has a new truck every year. A pistol under the seat, just to let you know he knows how to drive.)

The waitress brought the next round and replaced the ashtray. "There's no need for that," he said to the waitress. She caught his eye for a second, nodded, took the clean ashtray back and left him the dirty one.

After the waitress moved away from their table, she reached over and smacked

to drive ben whitmer

his hand. "You always have to flirt," she said.

He tipped his bottle and poured his glass full. "I wasn't really flirting."

"Of course you were." She drained half of her beer, from the bottle. "I flirt too. It's alright to flirt."

He hunched down and grinned at her over the cheap red candle holders.

She stood abruptly. "I'm going to the restroom to look at it." She strutted past the bar and disappeared into the women's door.

(I was born to a man who knew how to drive. He drove quickly away from my mother at her behest. The man she took after him knew how to drive, pulling around town after town, a beer upright between his legs.)

"Want another?" the waitress asked, poised over the table. "Sure," he said. He killed off the last of the beer in front of him and watched the restroom doors.

She swung out of the restroom and paced carefully back to her seat. "I look like a lesbian," she said.

(Even my mother, after every traded blow, loaded me up and took off in a car. She knew how to drive, slapping at the steering wheel, spraying the gear shift with spittle, careening down the interstate and bleeding from her freshest wound, ten or twelve hours to her mother's. Only to return with a steadfast grip on the wheel. One straight arrow sure shot.)

He ran his hand over the back and sides of her head, where it had been shaved. "You look beautiful."

The waitress returned and sat the beers down. He said nothing to her. She left.

Her voice started to crack. "I feel ugly," she said. Her chin trembled.

He slid his fingers over her cheek. "You're fine."

She jerked her face away. "You did this."

"How did I do it," he said, doing his best not to sound amused.

She started to cry a little. "You said you liked the haircut."

"I do," he said. "But I didn't make you get it."

"You knew I would." She shook her head violently. "You just don't want other

men to look at me.”

He started to laugh helplessly. She peered at him through her fingers, hurt and angry. “I’m sorry,” he choked out. “I’m not worried about men looking at your hair.”

(I have a scar that begins behind my right ear and winds all the way down to my Adam’s apple. One of my vocal cords has been ruined, keeping my voice harsh and low. When people who know me see me driving in my Escort, carefully around corners, terrified in traffic, they always laugh. I hate to disappoint them so obviously.)

She giggled a little and looked surprised at having done so.

The giggle increased to a full fledged laugh. She wiped her tears off on her shirt sleeve. He picked up her hand and kissed it.

“I’m sorry,” she said, still giggling.

He tipped his glass and found it empty. “For?”

“Overreacting.”

“I’m not pressed.” He waved the waitress over and ordered two more beers.

She stood. “I’m gonna go look at it again. I think I’ll like it better this time.”

“I hope you do.”

She swatted him on the arm on her way past. “Smart ass.” Her strut was gone and she held her arms at her sides, picking her way through the drunks.

A bearded man in a flannel work shirt who looked like he’d never done any real work in his life, glanced her up and down. He started at her ankles and moved to her ass, seeming to like what he saw. When he was finished there he moved across her torso and then to her face. He shook his head slightly and grinned ruefully, then he returned to his beer.

(I like the way my woman drives. We rip down the roads, her shifting lanes any time she simply wishes. Friends are always saying to me, “I saw you and your woman out driving yesterday. She’s a fucking maniac.” I nod and smile every time.)

they don't smell like him, they smell dusty

my dad's name was bob
michael estabrook

I'm in the old house the one I grew up in on Northfield Avenue, but I'm all grown up now, and visiting my mother I suppose, she's living there still by herself, and I'm down in the basement, and my father's workbench is still there, strewn with tools, tools all over the bench and the floor and around the bench, but the tools are wrenches and pipes cutting tools, and pipes, and huge nuts and bolts, not the tools of a car mechanic, not my Father's tools. And the clothes washer and drier are still there, and across from the in the corner where the furnace used to be is a closet door, I open it and it's filled with paper bags and towels and canned goods, and there's spiders in there too, of course. The place, the whole place, is a real mess and I'm dying to clean it up. I had cleaned it up so often as a kid, it was my job, what I could do well, I had a system. I look across and there on top of the old dented metal cabinet way in the back are some crumpled up blue coveralls like the kind car mechanics wear, and my heart jumps, maybe those are my Dad's coveralls stuffed back in there like that for all these last 30 years. So I reach back and pull them out, they are stiff and terribly wrinkled, and they have dried grease on them. I smell them but they don't smell like him, they smell dusty. I look for the little white patch above the shirt pocket where the name should be, and I find that it's faded, I hold it under the light bulb and see the name Jim.

a street called pain

b. benedict braddock

Carmine Stellano sat on his front porch and gazed down in the direction of Washington park. Some of the boys were shooting hoops while Johnny Pop made his daily quota. He was pacing back and forth across the parking lot, trying to ignore the crack heads that were pestering him for a handout. Every few minutes a car would pull up and Johnny would lean into the drivers window to make the deal. He had learned not to remove himself from the window until the cash was in his hand. They'd burn you every time they could on the hill. Carmine turned back toward the street and thought about Vinny. He was one of those guys you met and never forgot. If it hadn't been for his habit he might've been something really big, something people respected. They had found him in a closet last Sunday morning. The police said it was suicide, but word on the street was there wasn't a chair or ladder. The boy had gotten whacked. Johnny Pop was driving Vinny's car these days. He had his stereo and gold watch too. Hell, he even had his girl. It was funny what crack would buy on the hill. Word was that some boys from the city had fronted Vinny an ounce of snow for the weekend. He had always been good before about paying his tab by deadline. He had made himself a name in the park, even cutting out Johnny Pop now and then. But not this time. He used the stuff himself. The boys came for the pay back, no money, no dope... then it was Sunday morning. Carmine wondered if Vinny really didn't have the cash. He had never freaked and burned anybody like that before. Across the street Rita was searching through the tall grass for cans. If she got enough of them she would cash them in at the corner market and cop a nickel bag of off Johnny Pop. If not, she would be his per-

a street called pain b. benedict braddock

sonal sex slave for the whole night, and for probably the same amount of crack the cans would've gotten her. He watched the Jehovah's witnesses over at Mrs. Reynold's house. One thing was for sure, they wouldn't stop and offer Rita one of their little booklets. They would walk right past her like she was a dog and move on to the next house. Bullshit.

Carmine hadn't exactly found religion, more like just another chance. He wasn't about to go preaching door to door, but he wasn't gonna hang in the park anymore either. They stayed in their back yard and he stayed in his. Carmine watched his back if the boys passed on the street though. They didn't let you out that easy. The way they figured it, if you cleaned up you were on the fiveO's payroll. And a rep like that could get you into the closet next to Vinny. Mrs. Reynolds got tired of the religion freaks and slammed the door in their faces. They started to cross the street, saw Carmine, and changed their minds. Looking like he did had it's advantages. He had changed his outlook, not his wrapper. The doorway preachers were apparently intimidated. As he suspected they walked right past Rita. She had tried to say hello but couldn't talk. She was coming down hard as usual. Carmine called across the street to her. "Yo, Rita." The girl looked up for a moment and then right back down to the ground. She was searching now to see if any of the boys had dropped a bag while walking to the park. They never did, but she always checked. "Rita." She saw him now and started across the street. Carmine stood up. "Whoa, Baby. Watch out for the cars, girl." Somehow she made it across without getting killed. Carmine reached into his pocket. "Here, Rita. Here's five bucks. You keep hanging on the street and they're gonna bust you sure as hell." The girl smiled but still couldn't talk. She grabbed the bill and ran down toward the park and Johnny Pop. It would last her five minutes and then she'd be right back searching for cans and vials along the street.

Carmine had only been clean for a few months, but it felt good, really good. It bothered him still being in the neighborhood and all. The hill district was no place to be when you were trying to kick the habit. Carmine saw Rita reach Johnny Pop down the street. The boy smiled like he knew he owned her. Carmine regretted giving her the five bucks.

taylor's kid

mike lazar-chuk

Riding the crosstown
Monday mornings during
Our school years
Taylor would tell us
It was like making it with
Bony Marony or Olive Oyl
Tell us that girl
Was so skinny that after
Being with her over the
Weekend he'd wake up
To get ready for school
Black & blue from
Jumping her rawboned body
Tell us he didn't know
What it was about her
Those pretty blue eyes
The hair the perfect
White teeth only that
It was something
Maybe those fast little
Titties that didn't
Quite jiggle
Taylor went around
With that girl from
9th grade till our
Junior year in High School
When he finally dropped
It all & quit
That girl a couple of
Weeks later saying goodbye
Telling everyone she
Was moving south with her
Family her dad getting
Transferred or something
There were rumors her
& Taylor had moved south together
That they'd rented a shack
Down in Texas because

she said she just couldn't remember

She was pregnant
& her father had threatened
Taylor's life one night over
Dinner if he wasn't willing to marry . . .
Years later this friend
From my school days who
Recognized me in a bar on the
Lower East Side told me
Taylor had been gunned
Down in Vietnam in '69
Told me that skinny girl Taylor used
To hang with had become a
Ford model & was living on
Central Park West
That once she'd even posed
Naked for Playboy
Told me he'd run into
Her at the Museum of Modern Art
& when he asked her what
Ever became of Taylor's kid
She'd said she just couldn't
Remember that part of
Her life at all

i remember

janet kuypers

I remember the hot tub party at the end of our junior year. Remember how I begged you to take me, because it was a date dance and not a casual party? You already had a date so you set me up with Reedy, and I thought it was just an innocent friendship set-up... Ugh, what a mess, there I was, trying to push him away from me, and then Chad came along and saved me. I have pictures of us from that night, in the hot tub together, with Tres, who won the palest-man-at-the-party award, or photos inside, with plastic leis around our necks.

I remember when we went to the They Might be Giants concert and managed to get seats in the third row. The two of us, along with four other strangers, then yelled requests at the band when they weren't playing music. I still can't believe we actually got them to respond to us while they were in the middle of a show.

I remember when we were travelling through Boston, how we stopped at Cheers to take our picture in front of the front door. We were soaking wet because it was raining on our only day in Boston. But we followed all the painted red lines on the streets to find historical landmarks, stood on the torture devises on the sidewalks, took pictures everywhere.

And when we drove to Harvard campus, we took pictures of ourselves looking "intelligent" - looking upward, hands under our chin, poised in thought, looking as tacky as possible.

I remember how we would sit in my dorm room, in the window sill, feet hanging outside, my stereo blaring. You used to always joke that one day you'd push me out the window. But we'd sit there, listening to music, singing to people that would walk in front of my window. Remember how we'd sing to Potholes in My Lawn by De La Soul or Pump Up the Jam by Technotronic or Hoe Down by Special

i remember Janet Kuypers

Ed. How you thought the lines to Istanbul (Not Constantinople) by They Might Be Giants wasn't "This is a recording" but "Give it to me, give it to me." How you thought the lines to Headhunter by Front 242 wasn't "Three you slowly spread the net" but "Three you slowly spread the legs." We'd sing, make people look up at us, and either wave or laugh.

Yesterday was the first day that I hadn't cried for you. Those first two days had been so hard, I might have been fine for a half hour and then something would trigger it in my mind and I would want to cry. I thought maybe I'm getting used to the news, but today I cried again.

I remember the Valentine's Dance we went to together. It was at your fraternity house, you came over, dressed up in a nice suit, I was wearing a red strapless Vanna White-style dress, and you came over and you looked so mad.

"Why are you mad?"

"I just came from the house, it's an hour before the dance, and everyone is wearing jeans watching the basketball game. Decorations aren't even up."

I look at my dress. "So what you're saying is that I'm overdressed?"

We decided to take pictures of us dressed up before I changed dresses. We went through a few photos, then I changed into a more casual, cotton, off-the-shoulder dress. We took more pictures with outfit number two. Then I felt a breeze. Apparently there was a rip in the back of the dress, making it indecent at best. So, back to the closet I went, found a casual black dress, and so we took yet more pictures. Then off to the dance we went.

I remember how you'd come over to my dorm on Sunday nights, and we'd order pizza, usually Grog's, Home of Mold, I think, and spend the evening together. We'd play Stand by R.E.M. and do the dance they do in the video. Or we'd play Madonna's Vogue and you'd contort yourself around. Once we even spent the evening writing up lists of exes, like we were in high school.

I remember how we met - I was sitting in the cafeteria with the other girls from my dorm, and you were friends with them so you sat down and ended up right across the table from me. And it was right after Christmas break and I just got back from visiting my parents in Florida and was tan, so your first words to me were,

"Is that a real tan?" And I was so mad at you, I though you were a cocky jerk.

"Well, you could have gone to a tanning salon over vacation!"

I don't know how that could have been the start of one of the best friendships of my life.

And when you called me on the phone to tell me the news you still sounded so happy. Your viewpoint was that anyone could die at any point in time and we have to live every day to the fullest. "And I could be hit by a car tomorrow," you said. You can't let the thought of death kill you. And you were telling me these things, and I was trying so hard not to just start sobbing on the phone.

I remember our freshman year in college, after the horrible way we met, of course, and how we'd go to Eddie's bar for ice cream drinks. They were about the only things we could order while underage, so we'd spend I don't know how many Saturday afternoons drinking Oreo shakes, or maybe peach, or mint. I remember walking home to the dorms with you one rainy Saturday after an Eddie's excursion, and we just decided to walk in the middle of the street, jumping in as many puddles as possible. A truck even drove by, yelled that we were going to catch colds. And we just laughed. We were alive, and invincible.

I remember when we met up in New Orleans, I was with Eugene, you were with Randy and Jessica, and you found out how to get to the roof of the Jackson Brewing Company building. It was the highest building near the French Quarter, and we had a fantastic view, all to ourselves.

I remember our freshman year you invited me to see the Violent Femmes in concert at Foellinger Hall. You got drunk, and ended up trying to make the moves on me, knowing I had a boyfriend... I knew you had just drank too much, but I had to draw the line when you licked the side of my face. I still like to tease you with that one.

You're not supposed to die. This isn't supposed to be happening to you. I've always expected to be able to visit your family after we all retire, compare photos of grandchildren. You can't leave this hole

i remember Janet Kuypers

in my life.

I remember after I broke up with Bill I still tried to remain friends with him so I could periodically borrow his black convertible. So one day I did, told him I needed to get some groceries, but I picked you up instead and we put the top down even when it was sixty-five degrees and about to rain and cruised around the mecca known as Champaign, Illinois.

I remember the Halloween Dance we went to. We couldn't come up with costumes, and last minute we went to Dallas and Company costume shop and you picked up a Dick Tracy bright-yellow overcoat and hat, along with a plastic machine gun with two water cartridges. I put on a black cocktail dress, pulled up my hair, added rhinestones and a dimple and was Breathless Mahoney, but we made a point to fill the machine gun water cartridges, one with peach schnapps, one with peppermint. Someone at the dance would say, "Don't shoot me!" And we would say in unison, "Don't worry." No one could understand why we were shooting at each other's faces.

I remember how every time we were going out for the evening and you'd be over waiting for me to get ready, I'd come out and ask you how I looked and you would always tell me that I looked really nice. Or sexy. Or fantastic. Or whatever. But you'd always say something to me me feel like the most beautiful girl in the world.

I don't want to catalog these events, these times I've shared with you. I don't want to feel as if there will never be any more memories with you.

I remember how every time you guys would come over to my apartment and start drinking, you would inevitably pull out my hats, particularly the wide-brimmed straw ones, and wear them. How many pictures do I have of you with Jay, or Brian, or Brad, all in a drunken stupor wearing women's hats?

I remember how at your fraternity house, every time they'd have a party they'd have to play "Crocodile Rock" by Elton John once. And when they did, people

made a ring around the dance floor (otherwise known as the living room), and your fraternity brothers would then proceed to do somersaults and other strange dances with each other. I'm glad this whole scene frightened you as much as it did me, because I remember how every time we heard the song we'd run into the basement where the kitchen was and hide until the song was over. Usually we'd find some potato chips or salad croutons to munch on, and we'd sit on the steel counter, amongst racks of generic white bread and bulk containers to tomato paste and talk.

I remember taking Dan out for his twenty-first birthday, this six-foot-five animal of a roommate of ours, and how he got so drunk that when he started to get violent in the bar you suggested that he "play with Carol" in order to entice him to leaving the bar. So we carried him through the bar until he broke free and fell right in front of the bouncers at the front door, and you tried to drag him outside, and then the five of us ended up carrying him blocks home, stopping occasionally from exhaustion and setting him in the dirt. When we got him in you suggested we write all over him, but me being the voice of reason suggested we only write all over his back, so in permanent markers you and Chad and Eric and Ray and I scribbled "I am a drunk moron!" and other intelligent remarks all over him. And you, you were smart enough to be gone when he finally woke up in the morning.

And you were on the phone with me saying that you just have to get used to the fact that you're not going to grow old, have a family. That all you superiors tell you, wait till you get that promotion, and you know there is no waiting for the future, you won't be around. People take for granted that they're just going to be around.

You never did, of course, you were the one that was always making a point to cram as much living as you could in a day, but most people aren't like that. Most people are never as alive as you.

I remember you and Sara standing on Green and Sixth waiting in line for the cash station when a cop walked up behind the two of you, and appeared to be in line. You asked, "Do you think the cop wants cash?"

I remember visiting you in New Hampshire, trying to decide where to go out to

i remember Janet Kuypers

eat for lobster, til I decided on the mess hall at the base. So while you were at work your mom showed me a private room in the hall, with one elaborately set table for two, with china cabinets and a couch and roaring fireplace. I reserved it, went home and put on a black velvet dress and waited for you to get home from work. When you got back, I told your brother and sister to tell you that I changed our plans and I was in the bathroom. You started banging on the bathroom door, and when I opened it you were stunned. You were wearing a uniform that looked like a gas station attendant's, and there I was, completely dressed up for a formal dinner.

Your sister took a picture of us in your hallway, you just after your shower and still in a bathrobe, and me in that dress.

And after dinner we went for a stroll outside, and you were holding my hand, and I remember thinking that I wanted you to kiss me. It's funny how we both have thought about dating each other, but never found the right time.

I remember shopping with you on the East coast, going into a clothing store and watching you look for sweaters. You pulled out a pink patterned one, asked my opinion, and I shook my head no. "I'm not a pink person," I said. You kept looking, so I pulled up a dark brown and black cardigan from the rack and held it up from a few feet away. You shook your head no and said loudly, "I'm not a black person," loud enough for the black security guard to give you a funny look.

I think I want all of my friends to die after I do. I don't think I can handle this. You're not supposed to leave me, I'm the one that's supposed to make the dramatic exit. Besides, whenever I get married, you're supposed to stand up in the wedding. If you die before then, I swear, I'll kill you.

I remember once our freshman year we were sitting in the cafeteria, I don't remember if it was lunch or dinner, my roommate Lisa was there, and we were screwing around trying to be funny. Well, I got up and got a soft serve ice cream cone and acted like I was tripping as I got to the table, like I was going to drop the cone into your lap. Well, I didn't, but the ice cream wasn't securely anchored to the cone, and the next thing I know all my ice cream was right in the middle of your food.

I remember visiting you in New Hampshire, and one night we just watched Ferris Bueller's Day Off over and over again. We learned half the lines to the movie that night.

"I could be the walrus, and I'd still have to bum rides off of people."

"Drugs?" "No, thank you, I'm straight."

We'd always find something, a line from a movie or television show... Oh, and Heathers, we could probably recreate scenes from that movie, we've seen it so much.

"Thank you, Ms. Fleming, you call me when the shuttle lands."

"Icklooga bullets, I'm such an idiot..."

"Great patè, but I gotta motor if I'm going to make it to the funeral on time."

"Will somebody tell me why I smoke these damn things?" "'Cause you're an idiot." "Oh, yeah..."

God, these quotes make sense to no one else, just us, just you and me. It was like we had our own language.

I remember when you came to Chicago to visit me, it was around Christmas time, and you finally saw the house I grew up in. The only thing you noticed was that all of the lamps in the house were hanging from chains.

You said that some people feel like they are on death's door with a T-cell count of four hundred, and some people can run marathons with a T-cell count of zero. You tell me yours is at eighty, and you feel fine. A little run-down, but that is to be expected.

This scares me. I know I'm being selfish, I know that deep-down inside of you it has to scare you too, but you're too strong to let it beat you. I don't want you to feel a little run-down, I don't want you to feel just fine. I want you to feel alive, more alive than anyone else. I want you to live forever.

I remember once when you took me to an Air Force dinner dance, and afterward I went with you to a party of mostly Air Force people. There were people there I knew, and we were out really late, and by three-thirty in the morning you and Chris walked me home. And we stood out on Fourth Street and talked for a while, and before we knew it you had fallen to the ground grabbing you knee, screaming. You

i remember Janet Kuypers

knew how to pop your knee back in place, and granted, from what I understand having you knee pop out is really, really painful, but watching you there almost made Chris and I laugh. After you got it back in place you were just drunk and sad and still in pain and all I kept thinking was "Oh, please, he just needs some sleep," and I just kept thinking, "Oh, we're right in front of my apartment, please, it's four in the morning, let me just go to bed," but I stayed out there with you and Chris until you were ready to get up and make the long journey home.

I remember the Halloween party I held on Friday the thirteenth of October - your birthday. I put up pages from the Weekly World News about supernatural sightings, lit candles and pulled out the ouija board, then you came over, put on one of my hats, I gave you a carnation, and then we all went out for the night.

I remember when you and Jay and Ellen came over to welcome Blaine to Illinois. You got really drunk, fed Ellen my pound cake that my mother gave me, then proceeded to fall asleep in my chair, sitting sideways with your head in my open window sill. And yes, I have pictures, so you can't deny any of this.

I remember going to C.O. Daniel's with you on Friday afternoons with the other guys from the house and how we'd dress up in our Greek Sweatshirts to fit in... Well, you always fit in, that's how you dressed, but I had to make an exception in my dress code for these weekly happy hours. And I remember how we were wallowing in our respective depression one Friday afternoon, saying that nobody loves us and we're ugly and we'll grow up old and alone. Well, the vision I had of my future was that I would be an old maid living in an apartment with forty cats, periodically picking one up and asking "You love me, don't you?"

Well, anyway, I remember how we made a pact that if the two of us were still alone by the time we were forty, we'd get married.

We made a pact. You can't back out on me now.



the smell

daniel mayland

Kirsten sat at the edge of her leather couch, listening to the toilet flushing at the far end of her apartment. It wasn't like the loud, vulgar explosions of water heard in a public bathroom; the walls were too thick and the toilet too far away for the sound to be crass. But the tasteful, sibilant rushing ripped her away from what had been a feeling of satisfied content.

What she remembered, when her fiancée flushed the toilet, was an embarrassing thing that had happened to her when she was a sophomore in high school.

I didn't want him to come over, she remembered, thinking back and picturing her date as he had looked that evening - all dressed up in brown slacks and a blazer that was too big for him. The dance, which I didn't even want to go to in the first place, was at our high school. Why did he insist on picking me up? As if I'd like being doted on. But he didn't know the kind of shithole I lived in.

Kirsten's date had come into an overcrowded apartment that smelled of cigarettes, diapers and pot roast. That would have been fine, she thought, wanting to laugh but unable to, if it weren't for the other smell. Her date had sat next to the bathroom. She gave her family credit. They were loud and poor, but everyone knew enough not to shit when there was a guest sitting five feet away from the toilet. But the complex was so shoddy and cheap that the floors between apartments weren't smell-proof. Kirsten could tell when the neighbors

below were watching a movie because she could smell popcorn and hear the television. She could smell what they cooked for dinner, or when someone was smoking a cigar. The worst was that whenever anyone used the bathroom directly below theirs, the noisome stink rose up through the cracks in the floor so that the shit might just have well been in their apartment.

Kirsten remembered the helpless sinking feeling she had experienced when she came over to her date and smelled the shit from downstairs. Why did I have to feel like that, over such a little thing? Why am I even thinking about it now? That's probably the way that guy remembers me now: the girl he dated who lived in a dumpy apartment that smelled like shit. Come on, that's kind of funny. Why do you have to be so serious all the time? But I don't think it's funny. I've never thought it was funny.

Kirsten's fiancée came out of the bathroom.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

She wanted him to know what she was thinking, but at the same time, didn't ever want to tell him. There's no point in bringing up things you're trying to forget. And he would probably think it was funny. He might not see that it was a matter of pride. And even if he would understand, I don't want him to know.

"The cab is probably waiting."

"I'm coming," Kirsten said, getting up from the couch and grabbing her purse off the brass end-table. "I was waiting for you to get out of the damn bathroom."

She looked over her apartment on the way out as an angry feeling of senseless desperation came over her. There was a dresser she had bought the month before in the corner, an imitation Oriental rug in the dining room, and a basket of potpourri on the dining room table. This apartment has nothing to do with

me, she thought. No more than my family in Chicago had anything to do with me. My whole life hasn't got a damn thing to do with who I am.

Kirsten's eyes began to tear and she turned away from her fiancée.

"Are you sure you're okay," he asked.

"I'm fine."

"Are you crying?"

She shook her head and walked to the door.

"You are crying. What's wrong?"

"I said I was fine."

"Oh, Christ," he mumbled.

Outside the cab still had not come. They stood together by the side of the road, waiting, growing desperate as the twilight settled around them.

"I called that fucking cab twenty minutes ago," said Michael.

Kirsten looked at her fiancée. This is the man I'm going to marry? She'd known him less than a year. When they'd gotten engaged it had been so effortless that the short time they'd known each other hadn't seemed to matter; now, it did matter.

"I hate being late."

"You were the one who need to take a crap," she blurted. Suddenly her situation, her life, which had seemed pathetic to her only seconds before, struck her as ridiculously funny. Sure it was pathetic, but so what?

"That's not why we're going to be late - the cab's not here now, and it wouldn't have been here any fucking earlier if I hadn't used the bathroom."

"Keep your voice down, you sound like an idiot."

Michael was silent in his anger for a moment. "What the hell is with you, anyway? This was supposed to be a good night."

Kirsten reflected a moment. What is the matter with me?

"I don't know," she answered, envisioning the distance between them to be a vast expanse of desolation. "I don't know."

raped
S I A M O U R

I: Not A Good Tuesday

to Las Palmas in a storm, accused
of forcing an open portal.
the sword of the State over my head
for going on three days.
my Life on trial. my Religion.
my penchant for throwing drunk pizza.
my theatrical suicide nonattempts.
my choice to keep a room for God
in the house where she was welcome
before she ran away
for the final time, and i came to know
i had chosen ill
again.

in the Palmas, my place. the rain
now slowed to a drizzle. the storm remains.
my words on paper and through the air
sent her over the precipice.

i couldn't finish my taco salad.
i might be eating prison food
if her word enjoys belief
in the Office of Prosecution.

i wonder if she truly believes
that i took her against her will.
she might. she once believed
that aliens were after her.

in the Palmas, and nothing to do.
the detective took my statement
and said that she would call
if and when the Powers
decide that i might be
what i despise.

in the Palmas. two pretty women
are sitting at the next table.
i wince and turn my eyes away.

in the Palmas. my third margarita

is empty, and my cigarettes
are gone. i must go home and wait,
my fate in foreign hands.

oral rape is a terrible thing.
i speak as one who knows.

II. Partners

most poets don't know cops.
most cops have no use for poets.
now i belong to Sex Abuse.
dance with me, Detective.

III. Breaking Up

the most important
woman

in my life

this
week

called and left

a message

saying (in so many words)

that she wouldn't
see me again:

"Mr. McGuirt,
this is Detective Donnegan.

that case has been dropped,
so forget it."

sometimes it's nice

not to be
wanted.

raped continued
c r a m c u i r t

anxiety

jeff foster

a visceral performance artist
she performs in the nude
inviting members of her audience
to examine her cervix with a flashlight

she smears herself with chocolate
sugaring poetics of endowment
peeing on pictures of christ
and making vegetables disappear

letters from wartime

shannon peppers

Dear Jeremy—

August 3

Hi!! How are you? I'm doing okay, but I'm really kind of bored. You see, I have a lot of work to do and all, but I really just don't feel like actually doing any of it. All I want to do is lay down in my bed and put my head on your shoulder, and feel you holding me.

Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that I am still thinking of you. Really. I want to see you in October. My money situation may be a little tougher than I had originally anticipated, but I still want to see you. Okay, I'll walk across the country to see you. That's probably the cheapest way to go. I'll find a way. Dreamy eyes misses you—

Dear Jeremy—

August 28

Hello... I'm bored again. It's not as if I only think of you when I am bored, honey... don't think that... It's just that I try not to allow myself the privilege of thinking about you too excessively when I have a lot of other things to do. Right now, it just so happens that even though I have a lot of things to think about, I can't help but think of you. Okay, okay, so I'm babbling again.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed your trip. I hope you didn't think that I was a crab for part of the trip—in fact, you were the one thing that made me feel better. You have a knack for doing that. Anyway, thanks for the flowers. And the meals... And everything. I really had a great time with you. I enjoyed sharing the champagne with you, and I really enjoyed sharing the grapes with you. Dreamy eyes already misses you. I don't want to have to resign myself to merely writing you letters again. I have to see you again soon. Okay, I'll drive. Well, maybe, if I can't afford a plane, I can take a train. Fine—I'll walk—just as long as I see you. dreamy eyes misses you—

Dear Jeremy—

September 1

Hi, honey. How are you? I'm okay—I talked to you last night, when you first found out about your ex-girlfriend's car accident. I want you to know that I really am sorry to hear about it all. I know that it has to hurt... a lot. I could just imagine what I'd be going through if something happened to my ex-boyfriend. I'm sure I'd be a wreck—crying all night would be just the beginning of it all. Wow. It would really be a messy sight, if someone I cared about was hurt—especially if I was all alone. Wow. Really messy. You better not let anything happen to yourself. I don't know what I would do.

And I want you to know that I think it's okay to talk about it—to talk about your ex-girlfriend—and even to me. First things first, Jeremy—I'm your friend. Don't you

letters from wartime shannon peppers

forget it. And if anything ever happens to us (which, by the way, I'm kind of hoping that nothing ever does happen to us— I'm beginning to grow attached to you, you know), I want you to always know that I will be your friend. You can talk to me, Jeremy— and that means about anything. The first thing that I'm concerned about is your happiness. So I'll listen. And you don't have to worry about hurting my feelings or putting any stress on us or on our relationship, because— well, you're not. I really don't mind talking to you when you have a problem— that's what I'm here for. Even if I'm just listening to you talk about your ex-girlfriend... besides, right now you have a legitimate reason to want to talk to someone, or to have a shoulder to lean on. Actually, I only wish that I could be there to give you that shoulder to lean on, and not resign myself to merely trying to make you feel better by talking to you on the phone. I wish I could be there to make all of the hurt go away.

Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that. Dreamy eyes misses you. Misses you something fierce, Jeremy. Talk to you soon—

Donna—

September 9

I don't know, I just feel lonely. I get so insecure without a guy. Jeremy doesn't help when he's so far away. I want things to work out for us— I really do— but we've known each other for less than three months. I can't base any sort of future on that. I can't count on that. So I look for people like Eric, just to keep me occupied in the meantime. But that doesn't even seem to be working out... and, by the way, it's not because I'm thinking about Jeremy or anything. Something seems wrong at his end— I don't know, maybe he doesn't want a commitment, maybe he doesn't want to get too close... But then I start wondering if there is something wrong with me— I get the mentality that there has to be something wrong with me if someone doesn't like me. It has to be my fault. It gets depressing. Anyway, I really should be going. Write back soon— I don't know when I'll be able to visit again—it may not be October, but January, but I will let you know. I would be very happy to see you again, honey... I could use it. Keep in touch—

p.s....Yeah, things were good when Jeremy was here. We had a few little arguments in the last two days— I think it was because we in such confined living quarters and spent nearly every moment together for so long (how does the saying go— guests are like fish— they both get old after three days?). But it was so nice to feel like I was actually worth something for a couple of days. What a refreshing, comforting feeling...what a foreign feeling...

Dear Jeremy—

September 10

Hello, honey... how are you? I'm all right... It's 7:50 in the morning, I got up early

letters from wartime shannon peppers

just so that I could write you a letter and send it out in the mail today, so that you wouldn't feel like you weren't getting much mail... hint hint...

Anyway, there was actually a reason that I wanted to write you a letter this morning. I got to thinking last night... granted, I've only had three hours of sleep last night, and I'm kind of weary, but I got to thinking last night. About you. And me. And this whole distance thing— okay, I know that we both want to give this a good try— at least I know that I do. But I've been in these long distance relationships before, and I've been trying to figure out for the life of me what I've been doing wrong in all of them (obviously I've been doing something wrong in all of them, or they wouldn't all be over with now...). Now, you'll agree that long distance relationships are pretty unorthodox, and therefore probably require pretty unorthodox rules to go by in order for them to work... Well, I probably sound like I have absolutely no idea what I'm talking about, and that I have no point whatsoever. I'm working on it... I just think (now, this is the rational side of me talking, and surely not the emotional side of me talking, which is the side that will probably hit me on the head once I send this letter out) that maybe you and I shouldn't be so closed-minded about seeing other people. I just started thinking that it's really unreasonable for me to think that you should be 2,000 miles away and totally faithful. You have needs, and there is no reason why I should interfere with you doing what you would be normally be doing if I wasn't in the picture.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that I don't want you to be unhappy. I don't want you to be stringing yourself along because you feel compelled to because "you're going out with someone"— even though she's 2000 miles away. I don't want you to feel burdened because of me. Granted, if you really don't want to go out with other people, please don't feel the urge to go out and screw some slut because you thought that that was what I wanted— I'd be happy to know that you were waiting for me, it's just that I want to be sure— and I want you to be sure— that you're waiting for me because you want to be waiting for me.

I don't know. I guess I'm just babbling. I just don't want you to ever feel like I'm an inconvenience or anything. You're my baby. I don't want to lose you. Dreamy eyes misses you... something fierce. I just want you to be happy. A big part of me hopes you can find that happiness with me.. it may take a little more work to be happy, then, but I only hope it's worth it. I love you—

Dear Jeremy—

September 10

It is an hour before I'm supposed to talk to you. I decided that I had to get out of my sweat-box of an apartment, before I passed out from pure exhaustion from the heat... Granted, I've only had three hours of sleep, and that would be another reason

letters from wartime shannon peppers

that I would want to fall asleep before 1:00. I told you that I wouldn't be asleep by the time you called tonight...even if it killed me. I know how you must just hate having to deal with talking to me on the phone when I'm nearly comatose... I know that usually a speeding train can go through my room when I'm asleep and it won't wake me up. I'm a really heavy sleeper, to say the least. Please forgive me.

I got a letter from you today— right after I dropped that other letter of mine in the mailbox. I feel like a real idiot for writing that letter— and I feel like an even bigger idiot for mailing that letter, even when I knew that mailing that letter was a stupid thing to do. Please take my mood swings with a grain of salt. With a fifty pound block of salt. No, this isn't PMS... this is just me. I go insane from time to time. For the last week I've been pretty much depressed and sad, and very tired. You know how I get down on myself so easily— well, I was just thinking that everything that was going wrong in my life was ALL MY FAULT, and it was just all of these inherent deficiencies within me that causes al of the problems that I seem to get in my life. Then for a few days I was pretty happy, kind of like a more content feeling than being joyously happy... I think it was partially because I was working full-time for a few days, and I was starting to feel a sense of accomplishment. I think it might also have had something to do with the fact that the weekend had sprung upon me, and I was free to go out and get plastered with my friends. Then this morning, I suppose after so little sleep, I went nuts. You would have thought that I just would have been overly tired or something— that would have made more sense— but I went to sleep after four in the morning, and by 7:40 I was up, dressed, and writing you a psycho letter. For the rest of the day I was going nuts, too— I was arguing with some people today, saying that they were the yuppie type that would have a kid and send them off to day care and expect some organization like the PMRC to regulate what their children can and cannot hear instead of regulating and explaining these things to their children themselves. I was freaking out.

But now I think I've come back down to earth... Maybe it's just because of the lack of sleep that I'm experiencing right now... You know, my eyes are really sore. They've been open for far too long, without much of a break.

Anyway, I really should be going. If I don't end this letter soon, I'll miss your call. And hell, that's the whole damn reason why I'm staying up in the first place, right? Well, happy birthday, my love. I wish I could be there to share it with you. I love you. Dreamy eyes misses you.

Dear Jeremy—

September 14

Hi, honey... How are you? I'm okay— actually, I'm in a much better mood than

letters from wartime shannon peppers

I have been in recently... I just found out that I got the account I wanted for my business... I mean, it's one thing to have a part-time job and make money the way that everyone always does, but it's entirely another thing to create your own business and set your own rates and make money ENTIRELY ON YOUR OWN. I don't have that much work yet, but I really don't have the time for much work— and the work that I'm doing is very easy for me and very fun, as well. For the time I'm putting into it, I'm making about \$20.00 an hour, and it's doing something that I really like...

So, in other words, at least for my business— things are going really well.

But I'd much rather be seeing you... which is what I want to do in the beginning of November. I first thought that it would be good to see you near the end of October, but then I realized that I have too much going on. I think it would be better to come and visit you on the first weekend of November. I hate to have to wait that long, but it really seems like the best thing to do.

But I know that I'm going to see you in January— if it kills me. Right after some of my Army friends' troops are sent out— I'm going to need to see you. I'm going to do it. I miss you, Jeremy. Dreamy eyes misses you. Various body organs miss you. I'll see you soon— I love you—

Dear Tim—

September 16, about 7:00 p.m.

I miss you a lot. I really miss you. I don't know why. I have to admit that there is something that makes me miss you— a lot. Maybe you can explain it; maybe you can explain it to me.

Maybe I'm just babbling. That's probably it. I'll try to shut up now.

I hate men. I hate them all. I mean it. They're either geeks, or... They either want to use you or they want to "just be friends". Fuckers. I hate them all. I mean it. I can't find one, I mean ONE, out there. What is my problem?? I'm ugly, I know, but I didn't think I was THAT ugly. And plastic surgery is out of the question. But I'm going to beat myself into a floundering pile of flesh if I continue to talk this way. So I guess that this is all for now— I miss you—

p.s.: Do you know if Steve is going out with the first batch of troops? I never see him anymore. Maybe I should visit you guys in Iowa, just in case he's leaving.

Dear Jeremy—

September 16

Hi, honey... How are you?? How are you??? How is one of the sexiest men in the universe?? I'm feeling a little better, as you might be able to tell...

Sorry. I'm being really weird, aren't I?... Whatever. That's just my style. I went out last night... and I stayed out until after four in the morning. Ouch. I was out the night before, too— until after three. Shoot me now. It's weird, though— I never get

letters from wartime shannon peppers

hangovers. Not even a headache. It must be from all the sex I'm getting... JUST KID-DING!!! Geez— can't you take a joke? Actually, I've been getting pretty lonely over here, and horny as all hell. You better come and visit me.

Better yet— I'll come and visit you. How does the second week in November sound? I just checked the rates, and they're about \$220. I think I could easily cover half of that— If you could cover the other half, I could come and visit. I hate to do this to you, but if I'm going to be taking two more trips before February, I'm going to have to save my money and really budget myself. I don't have a job where I know I'm going to get any money at all.

And if you can't come up with the money now (you know, that really makes it sound like a ransom or something), I can cover it for now, as long as you promise that you will eventually cover me. How does that sound??

Here are the pictures from when you came to visit. I thought some of them were cute, and I gave you extras of the ones of you so that you could give them to people like your mom or something. Mind you, I don't want you giving any of these pictures to any other women. I don't want anyone else to even have a photograph of you to admire.

Dreamy eyes misses you. Write me soon— and if you want, I really don't mind if we limit the calls for financial purposes. Actually, I do mind, but I also understand. I just need the occasional reminder that you still care about me. I love you— keep in touch—

Dear Jeremy—

September 20

Hello, darling. I'm in a weird mood. Last night— after I talked to you— my friend Christine came over and we had dinner. She's the type of friend with whom I only do things like have dinner with— I don't know, she just isn't the "going-out-and-getting-really-drunk" type. So we had dinner, and talked about our love lives— you see, she's starting to go out with this man from Seattle, Washington, so we're kind of in the same boat. She's not so crazy about Bob, however, the way that I am about you. Anyway, then Christine left and I went out with my friend Tara (she used to be my next door neighbor— she's really cool, I like her a lot...) and a bunch of her friends that I didn't know. Then I saw my friends Jessica and Rachel, and I eventually left the bar at close and hung out at Jessica and Rachel's place for a while. Then they walked me home and stayed over and talked— until about FOUR IN THE MORNING. It was like they would never leave.. I was about to fall asleep while they were over. But it was neat to talk to them... I think I'm going over to Tara's place for dinner tonight. This has really been a pretty busy weekend. I thought it wouldn't be, being Labor Day weekend and

letters from wartime shannon peppers

all, since everybody usually goes home. Maybe I'll even get the chance to go out tonight!!!

Oh, and another thing, young man. Young, virile man. Young, sexy, strapping studly man... Sorry, I'm getting carried away again. I was just going to say that you don't have to worry about being jealous over me. I mean, it's cute when you say the things that you do over the phone, but I really hope that you not really worried that I'm cheating on you or anything. First of all, if I was going on a date with somebody else, I surely wouldn't tell you— unless you specifically asked about it, of course. So when I tell you that I'm going out with somebody who is just a friend, you don't have to worry about it. I don't want you to worry when there is nothing to worry about. Secondly, I think I like you just a bit too much to really think about looking for some other stud muffin to hang all over— maybe that will change in time, I don't know, but right now (if you don't mind me using stupid, tiring, worn-out cliches), I only have eyes for you.

And one other thing, my beefy burrito of love... I'll probably get so jealous if I even suspect that you're looking at another woman, that I'll hijack an airplane or something, come down to Arizona and teach you a thing or two about trying to cheat on me. It won't be a pretty scene...

Now that I've just succeeded in sounding really stupid, I'm going to get going. Dreamy eyes misses you. It's true. No, really. I mean it.

Dear Donna—

September 23

How are you?? Thank you very much for the very nice letter...

I want to make a little note before I go on with this letter. This letter is confidential. I don't want a word of this getting out to Jeremy, do you understand me?? As soon as you read this letter, I want you to throw this letter away... No, don't do that, because it could then be found in the garbage or something. I want you to eat the letter. No, better yet, I want you to burn this letter when you're done. Burn it, and then eat the ashes. It's that important to me. Do this favor for me.

It's weird, but I have been so busy in the past week that I really haven't had the time to be too depressed, so during this past week I've been fine. But this weekend, as soon as I had the time to think about my life, I got mortally depressed, and for the past day and a half, if I haven't been crying, I've been wanting to cry. I've already dumped my depression on two of my friends in long talks— I probably would be bothering more of my friends if so many people weren't out of town.

Friday night I got really depressed. I was okay when I woke up Saturday morning, but then I started getting depressed. I cried. This is the way that I've been lately.

letters from wartime shannon peppers

And I can't even really explain why I'm feeling this way. I've been getting along with Eric pretty well (and I do say PRETTY well for a reason... it just seems that even though we go out a lot and get along well, we're just not very close. I need closeness, I suppose...)... I guess I'm just thinking about all of the things that I think are wrong with my life, and I'm thinking about all of the things that I could like to change in my life, and I'm thinking about all of those things which I cannot change... and it just all seems so damn depressing. I start thinking, for example, about my last relationship, and I start wondering what went wrong there. I just keep thinking that I had love once, and I let it go. I HAD to let it go... but I let it go nonetheless. I just keep remembering that I was once happy, and I keep wondering if I will ever find that kind of happiness again.

And then I start to realize that the only thing I've been doing in my spare time is getting really drunk. What the hell kind of life is that?? I remember last year when I was spending wasn't unattached... I had BETTER things to do with my spare time than getting drunk. I had nothing to escape from by drinking. Now all it seems that all I'm doing is escaping. I want to find something in my life that I won't want to escape from. But then at the same time, I find myself sometimes pushing people away from me. I wonder if that might be because I don't want to hurt the way that I did when I lost love. Maybe I'm just starting to feel like I'll never find it anyway, so there's no point in getting myself in any sort of situation where I might feel vulnerable. I don't know.

And then I keep catching myself holding a glimmer of hope that something might work out. I catch myself thinking that Eric might actually open up to me once, or that he might show me that he cares. All of the other guys he is friends with keep calling me his girlfriend. All of his close friends keep trying to reassure me that he actually does like me. But the thing is, why do I need his friends to reassure me? I shouldn't have to be reassured by his friends that he likes me. I should be able to know. He should be able to tell me. But he doesn't. You know, come to think of it, some of Dave's friends kept telling me that HE liked me... They kept trying to reassure me... and Dave turned out to be the biggest ass-hole... I wonder if there is any sort of correlation there...

And I don't even want to think about Jeremy right now. It's not that I don't like him or anything, but... well, there are two reasons why I'm thinking this right now. The first is that he really doesn't fit into my life right now. He can't make me happy from 2,000 miles away, and there's no point in getting all depressed when there's nothing I can do about the situation. The other reason is that I don't want to get myself too close to someone that circumstance says that I can't be too close to, because then I'll only get hurt. The less I hurt, the better right now. So here I sit, dating Jeremy from afar,

letters from wartime shannon peppers

while trying to salvage this miserable relationship with Eric.

Sorry that I've been babbling all of this time, but I've really needed to get this all out, and there really is no one around here that really wants to hear all of this. I know that none of this probably makes any sense to you whatsoever, but at least I got it out— somewhat... I hope this helps out.

Anyway... Please don't tell Jeremy about ANYTHING that I've been writing. I'm probably just an insane woman babbling right now, and I'll probably change my mind in about ten minutes or so. Sorry again— and I hope that things are going a little better for you— keep in touch— thanks for everything—

ps— and how ARE things going with you, anyway?? I don't mean to sound so self-centered when I write my letters and never ask about what is going on in your life... I know that you know that I want to know all of the gory details. Keep in touch— love you—

Dear Donna—

September 24

Hi... It's 12:37 in the morning. And here I am again, just babbling. I'm in a bad mood. I got some great news today— Eric just broke up with me. Yes, I know— I wrote you that whole letter yesterday and now we're "just friends". Aren't those words really awful? And the thing is, he says that he likes me, and this all has nothing to do with me— it's just him, and he doesn't know if he wants a relationship at this point in his life. So here I sit.

I guess I have Jeremy. But what good does that do me?

No, I haven't cried. I kind of wanted to, thinking that it might just get it out of my system. But I haven't. If anything, I've wanted to cry because I hate feeling sorry for myself, and I hate having to feel like I need someone in my life in order to feel important, and I really hate not liking myself.

I think I'm going to stay away from all men for a while. In fact, I think I'm going to stay away from all people for a while. I'm tired of this. I'm tired of the system. I'm tired of me, and maybe I should just try to get all of the work in my life in order — just devote myself for a while to doing my work, getting myself organized. Well, I've got to go. Life goes on. Talk to you soon—

Dear Jeremy—

September 25

Hi. I just got one of my letters back that I had sent to you (all of the preceding pages, in fact). It seems that the Post Office didn't like how I put the stamp on the damn envelope or something. Don't blame me... Anyway— I have to make this letter really short and sweet. I'm really busy—

I've been really down all week. I can't help it. I have never liked myself. Not at all.

letters from wartime shannon peppers

I've just deduced that I don't want to hear that other people don't even like me, when I can't even like myself. It's a pretty simple theory. Pretty straight forward.

Anyway, on that pleasant note, I'm going to get going. Keep in touch, jeremy. Dreamy eyes misses you something fierce. Just a thought... i love you—

Dear Donna—

September 25

Hi... It's 7:20 in the morning. I went to bed at about 2:30 last night and set my alarm for 5:30 in the morning,. So yes, I've been asleep for a whole three hours... Other than the fact that my eyes hurt a little, I'm really not tired. I think I have too much on my mind.

I talked to a friend of mine for a while last night— Lori— and I ended up chain smoking and eating pizza at about 11:00 last night. Not very healthy. I figure I need all of the help I can get if I'm going to try to make myself look good again. I can use this little break-up with Eric that I now have under my belt as a sort of fuel-for-the-fire. I think people would call this a positive way to burn negative energy. I don't know what I'd call it.

I think I'd call it feeling really bad because I hate being alone and I hate hating myself that I want to get my frustrations out on something. Maybe it doesn't make too much sense, but then again, nothing I ever do makes too much sense. Such is life. Well, I'm going to go. I look like hell. Granted, I have no one to impress... Well, enough of that. Keep in touch—

Dear Jeremy—

September 26

Hi, Honey! How are you? I'm alright— especially now that I just got a card AND a letter from you today in the mail!! I was in an okay mood, at best... So when I got back today and found that you had sent me all this neat stuff, I was really excited. Well, not that excited— I reserve those feelings for when you are in the same part of the country as I am...

I hope you like the birthday card. It was one of three (at least) that I wanted to get, but since I couldn't afford them all, I had to choose only one of them... Maybe I'll go back and get the rest of them another day. I just kept picking out the perverted cards and saying, "I want to get THIS one... and THIS one..." I really couldn't help myself.

Anyway, I just wanted to thank you for all of the attention that you have paid me. I know that sounds kind of queer, and I know that you're thinking that I don't have to thank you or anything, but I want to. There are times when I'm feeling awful, and then I'll find a card from you in my mailbox that says something like, (and let me quote from your card) "besides, I love you something fierce!", and I won't be able to help but feel better. If nothing else, those little cards and letters and phone calls keep me just a lit-

letters from wartime shannon peppers

tle more sane— and it seems like I need all the help I can get these days...

But it's not as if that is the only reason that I like the cards and letters and phone calls— not only do they help me feel just a little closer to you, but they also help me to believe that you really do care about me. And I need that. It's also nice, by the way, to know what's going on in your life... I just wish that I could be more of a part of it. And I hope I can do the same for you with my letters and cards and phone calls. I hope that when you need someone to make you feel better, my letter gets dropped in your mailbox. It's the least I can do for someone I love.

Anyway, I should go. I've got so much stuff to do. Dreamy eyes misses you— especially at times like this. Keep in touch, love, and keep thinking about me—

Dear Jeremy—

September 27

Hi, honey... I miss you. I've been really down lately. I don't know why. I don't even want to spend time with other people at all anymore. It's strange, how I can make a turn around in the way I feel about everything so fast. I just wanted to drop you a little note and tell you that I thought of you the other day. Well, I think about you every day, but this one time stuck out in my mind. I was thinking that I wanted you to make love to me again. But I was thinking that I didn't want it to be kinky, or really horny, or very creative. I just wanted you to make love to me. I wanted to feel your love again. It didn't have to be anything special— just the fact that you were making love to me would make it special. That's what I was thinking. Dreamy eyes misses you.

Dear Tim—

September 30, about 8:00 p.m.

I'm always doing things for other people. I'm nice. Too nice. Why am I so wonderful? No, you're not supposed to be laughing. Okay, okay, so I'm getting a little carried away, but I can't for the life of me figure out why I'm so nice to people. People just use me. But of course... I forgot... That is the story of my life... Things just can't go well for me... that's just the way it is...

I hate people. Oh, the guy that I'm spending time with used to like me, so now I'm worried that he wants to rekindle the flame. Oh, there's this geek on my back and I can't seem to shake him off. Oh, I like this guy, but he doesn't seem to like me, so I'll just sit here and stew in my own juices. I'm sick of this. I wish people could be open and honest with each other. I wish I could be open and honest with other people. Such is the price for living in a society such as ours.

Do you feel like you can be honest with me?? I really hope that you feel that you can. I think that people, because they are too afraid to open themselves up (for ridicule, most think), they never get the chance to really live. I think nobody lives on this planet. I think they're just going through the motions. I don't want to just go

letters from wartime shannon peppers

through the motions. I want to live. But I'm afraid. I feel like if I don't break out of my shell, I won't see what the rest of the world is like.

I wonder if I really want to know. My mind strayed from the real point that I was trying to make in that last paragraph, and that point was that I hope that you feel that you can be honest with me. Openness and honesty is so important with me. You should know these things about me, but in case you've forgotten (or are just trying to forget), let me remind you. I'm not the type of person that makes fun of another, and I'm not the type of person that would cut down what another person thinks. If someone tells me what they feel, even if I don't like it (which usually isn't the case), I'm very flattered that they felt that they could say it to me, that they could share it with me, that I'm never disappointed. I think I'm losing the point again. Honestly, at this point, I don't know what the point is. I think I'm just tired of dealing with people who won't be honest with me. Honesty is all I ask for. I think I'm going to go. Thanks for reading my babble, and making me feel as if someone really cares about how I feel.

Dear Jeremy—

October 10

Hi, honey... how are you? I just wanted to send you a little note (it's 12:20 in the morning— it's about the only time that I ever have to write you letters...) and let you know that I still care about you. Honestly, my feelings haven't changed for you at all, and I don't want you thinking that they have. I'm still looking forward to coming to see you in November... it's just that I've been so busy lately and I've been so worried that I really haven't had the time to think about writing you letters, and all of the problems I've been having lately have made me, well... very edgy, to say the least. And I don't really want to talk about it— and there is nothing to talk about, since there are no problems— but it just had a bad effect on me because I was so worried. Please bear with me. I don't need any more complications in my life right now, that's all.

Maybe it's part of this defense mechanism that I use to make all of the hurt in my life seem a little less severe... maybe I just want to distance myself from people, because it's usually people that hurt more than anything else. You're a wonderful person, Jeremy, but it really hurts when you're 2,000 miles away, and maybe I've been acting the way I have been because I want to emotionally distance myself from you so that I hurt a little less from missing you. It's just a theory...

But I do care about you. And I don't want you to forget that. I wonder if I push you too far at times. I hope I don't. I hope you can stick with me.

p.s.— I love you. really. It might not seem like it at times, but I do love you. I miss you...

Dear Donna—

October 10

letters from wartime shannon peppers

I just wanted to let you know that there is nothing to worry about concerning my health. I don't really want to get into it— I hope you're not taking offense or anything, because it has nothing to do with you— but... well, I was really scared. I just thought that there was going to be some major problem with me. Thank God that there wasn't, but I was still worried. I've never had a problem with my health before— hell, I've never had a broken bone. So I guess I've taken my health for granted, and when I thought that there was something wrong with me, I went crazy. I've really been on edge lately.

And I don't want Jeremy to think that I'm mad at him or anything. I mean, when he was on the phone with me before he was pressing things when I told him not to, and I wasn't really in the mood to battle with him on the phone. It just seems that lately we've always ended up in an argument by the time we get off the phone. I don't need that, and I don't want that.

I don't want to argue with him. I don't want us to have any problems. But I think that when there are no problems, then I just miss him a lot and feel miserable. Why feel like something that you want is just out of your grasp? I don't know... I guess that I just feel that right now I have other things to worry about instead of thinking about Jeremy and merely adding to my misery.

Anyway, I should be going. Have a good week... (couple of weeks, knowing the way YOU write)... hope that your time with your boyfriend goes well... keep in touch—

Dear Jeremy—

October 12

I know, I know... I haven't written in a while. Sue me. Honestly, though, I've been having some medical problems lately, and besides the fact that I'm in and out of the doctor's office, I've just been really preoccupied with the notion that something is wrong with me. Don't worry, honey... Nothing is wrong with me, as far as I know. It's just been the new emergency lately, and that's why I haven't written to you until today.

You know, I think I've just decided that I don't like being around people anymore. I think I've gotten really tired of it. I don't want to go out in big groups anymore. And unless I'm really in the mood, i don't think I want to even go out to crowded places (like bars). I don't feel like drinking anymore. Actually, I don't really feel like doing anything anymore. I just don't think that I like people right now. Does that make any sense?

It's just that everything is so superficial to me. I think I don't let anybody in to see me, or to actually be a real part of my life here. I talk to people, I get close to people... but I think that the only person that I can count on is me, and I think that right now I just need something that I can count on. Most of the time, I care about what other

letters from wartime shannon peppers

people think of me, and I would therefore care about whether or not I was close to people. But right now I think I'm just looking for something that I can really lean on, something that will never let me down, something that will never desert me or not be there for me... and the only thing in the world that fits all of those descriptions is myself. So I think I'm going to be staying home for a while, not going out, not talking to too many people.. Just listening to what I need and acting on that. It's not selfish, I don't think. It's just what I need to do right now. Okay, Okay, I'll shut up. In fact, I'll get going— I have to check to see if my laundry is done. Dreamy eyes misses you—

Dear Tim—

October 12, 11:33 a.m.

I found a map, so now I can figure out how the hell to get to your house. That should be exiting— I'm imagining either a National Lampoon's Vacation thing here or an Ernest goes to Iowa thing. Ernest probably IS from Iowa. Whatever. It'll be good to see you and Steve again.

Dear Jeremy—

October 14

I just wanted to say 'hi' to you, because you think that i never write you letters anymore.. well, actually, I don't write you letters much, so I suppose you're right, but it just seems like there's nothing of any value going on in my life to write about.

I just had people over last night for a little get together in honor of halloween, I guess... I think I told you that I was having a 'shindig'... By the way, it was Doug's birthday yesterday, so the party last night was also kind of in Doug's honor. He just turned 20. I feel so old. It's disgusting.

Anyway— I should be going. I have to wash all the dishes from last night sitting on my desk in my apartment... It's pretty gross. It should take me a while. Miss you, honey—

p.s.— thank you for you last letter. It was sweet. I liked the poem. What would I do without you?? Dreamy eyes misses you— I can't wait to see you in November—

i love you, honey— call me, or write me a little note. love you—

Dear Tim—

October 26, 6:40 p.m.

I don't want to do anything anymore-- I'm so hyper about going to Iowa tomorrow that I can't do anything. I want out last night to the bar Gully's, and me and my friend Doug sang Happy Birthday on a mike to the entire bar for the radio station that was playing songs for the bar all night. For the embarrassment, we each got Peter Murphy's new tape. I haven't even listened to it yet. Today I went to Eddie's to meet my friend Tara-- Eddie's is a restaurant attached to a bar that will serve infants, I think. We always get ice cream drinks there. I had an Oreo shake today-- with creme de cacao in it. Anyway, I should go—

letters from wartime shannon peppers

Dear Donna—

November 14

Hi, honey!!! How are you? Oh, I'm getting by. It was really nice to have a little vacation during the year— and it was really nice to be able to see Jeremy again. It had been far too long. He just left a few days ago, and I can't wait to see him again. I know you keep asking me over and over again how I feel about Jeremy, and I know I keep pussy-footing around the subject by saying "I like him, but there's no sense because he lives so far away, blah, blah, blah..." But now I'll give you the whole scoop. I think the reason why I kept saying that to you is because I didn't want to admit to anyone— especially myself— that I really liked him, because then I would only feel crappy that I never was able to see him. Well, all of that has changed. Now that I've seen him again, I've realized that there's no way that I could ever try to lie to myself again. I'm afraid that you can probably guess what I'm about to say, honey... Yes, I'm in love. At least I think I am. I could really see a future with this man. And I could see it being a pretty damn happy future, too. Going out with Eric again was such a stupid idea— and I know you told me it was— so I broke it off with him yesterday, within three days of being home, and I don't have the tiniest regret about it. I wear that ring Jeremy gave me all the time. I don't know... I'm always the one that's always so pessimistic about our relationship, but now I can't help but think that one day everything will work out perfectly and we will be together and i can actually be happy. But today I just got a letter from Jeremy, and he was saying that he didn't want us to get our hopes up because he might not be able to find a job near me. It was kind of depressing, especially when he's always the optimistic one and he has to pull me out of a slump. If he begins to lose faith... what will we have?

Then the frightening part is about my friend Tim... I went to visit him Halloween weekend, the weekend before I saw Jeremy. Just friends, friends for years. Wanted to see our friend Steve, too, who lives out in Iowa near Tim, since he is leaving with the first set of troops in January. So then we drank too much, and Tim and I fooled around. I can't believe I did this. I could tell Tim was miserable after the fact, too— we didn't even want to look at each other the next morning.

So now I'm wondering if I've lost a friend. And I had to do this just before I saw Jeremy. I hope he didn't suspect anything. I don't know if this is sounding all weird or something. I can't help it. The whole situation is pretty weird, if you think about it. Now I just think of Jeremy all the time. I can't visit Jeremy in the end of December/ the beginning of January, the way I had originally planned (all of the flights are booked). That really depresses me, because I'm going to be sitting at home by myself for two weeks wishing I was with him. I figure that I can visit him in a weekend in January,

letters from wartime shannon peppers

but it's a real shame that I have to squeeze in this short amount of time when I'll have so much time to kill two weeks before hand.

And he doesn't even know if— or when— he'll be sent off for duty. I hate war.

Everything else is all right— I've got most of my work out of the way. I just found out that my father is going to be in town for Thanksgiving weekend, so now my visit home will be a complete dysfunctional family gathering. It's just yet another thing in my life that I'm not looking forward to. Like the doctor's appointment I have in an hour and 20 minutes... I'm scared. Scared as all hell. And on that note, I'm going to go.

Dear Eric—

November 18

Hi. I'm writing this letter because I've been thinking a lot about you lately, and I've been thinking especially about the conversation we had when we broke up. I think there were some things that I wanted to say to you that I didn't know how to say at the time. But I want them to be said.

I wanted to learn about you. I really did. I often try to act aloof and keep people at bay, I know I want to do that, and you might have had the impression that I wasn't interested in you as a person. I'm telling you that I wanted to know about you. A part of me still wants to. But I suppose it's too late by now. If there are some things you still want to teach me, I would love to be your student. Just don't laugh at my ignorance, and don't be amazed at how different I am from you.

When we were going out I didn't want to stress our differences. You did that enough by breaking up with me every other week, I wanted to do everything I could to underscore our differences. Although I wanted to learn, I also didn't want to lose you. Not earlier than I had to.

I wanted to think that you were willing to spend the rest of your life with me, that you thought I was worth it. But you didn't, and I guess I wanted to blame something, or to fight it somehow. I didn't know what else to do; I was in a losing battle.

A part of me thought you thought less of me. That you didn't respect me. I started to feel alienated. I hope you don't think I blame you for it, though - I didn't, and I don't, although I think I wanted to, just so I'd have something to blame other than circumstance. But I couldn't blame you. The things I loved about you were the things that kept us apart. If you didn't have your personality traits, you probably wouldn't be as driven, as passionate, as successful as you are. You wouldn't have the strong moral background you have. And I loved and respected all those things about you.

Oh, there was something else I wanted to say in response to that evening we talked. I had asked you if you loved me, and you ended up saying that you did, and you still did, and you always will. I wanted to hear that so much, I don't know why. Maybe

letters from wartime shannon peppers

because I felt the same way, and I wanted to know that I wasn't alone. I wanted to say it back to you that night, but the timing seemed wrong, or something. But I love you, and I always will.

I don't know what writing this is accomplishing for me, I don't know why I'm doing it, but for some reason I thought it had to be done. I know I didn't do all the right things when we were going out, but I guess I just wanted you to know that my intentions were good, that I really did care, that I wanted it to work out. A part of me still does want that, and always will.

Oh, great. Now I'm sounding like an idiot. I didn't want that. I hate losing face. I guess I just wanted you to know how much I value you. And if I can't have anything else, I at least that won't to change. Thanks for listening.

Dear Tim—

November 22

Hi, honey.... Thank you for writing. I understand exactly where you are coming from. I am so glad— and I mean SO glad— that you were as honest as you were with me. You know I like honesty and openness, and I am so glad that you said what you have to say. Now I feel I can be honest with you. Obviously, I knew that it wouldn't work out. I was even surprised when you kissed me goodbye when I was in the car. I just thought of you as a friend— a good friend— cute, maybe, but just a friend. When I came to visit you, you hugged me. When we walked down the stairs, you made a point to make sure that I didn't step on the glass that was broken in the stair-well. You picked me flowers from (i think) every flower bed that we passed by. You acted differently than I have ever seen you act, Tim. I couldn't figure out why. I think it was just circumstances. I'm not trying to make any excuses: you're cute, smart, interesting, talented— honestly, I'd have to admit that if I were to go out with a guy, he would probably be a lot like you. I do like you, you know that, but you must realize that I like you as a friend. I feel the same way as you do, Tim. And I'd never want to lose your friendship. Most importantly to me, you are my friend.

I never, never want to lose you as a friend. Remember that. I think we can forget about this— or even look back on it without remorse. It is just something that happened— that probably shouldn't, but did anyway— and I can live with that. I hope you can, too.

I knew that it wasn't ultimately right. That's why I stopped us before we got too far. But there is a part of me that thinks that what happened that night brought us a little closer. If nothing else, it can be a good sign, a good test to strengthen our friendship.

You're my friend. My close friend. My good friend. That's what's important to me. And more importantly, I don't want to lose that. I'm worried that I will. But I think you

letters from wartime shannon peppers

were worried about that, too, and we're actually worrying about nothing. I think that, if you want it to be, everything will work out fine. I love you Tim. I love you as a person, which in my opinion is more important than any other way a person can be loved. Remember that.

I know what you mean when you say that you need a relationship. I do, too. A real one. But I also need a friendship. And that can last over the distances. So— what do you say?

Dear Donna—

December 1

Just got a letter from Tim. Said he just wanted to be friends, that what we did shouldn't have happened. What an ego boost. I just wrote him a letter back saying "friends is good." Like I need another long distance relationship. Like I need another relationship with someone who isn't really interested in me. I've had too many of those.

p.s.: Managed to get a Christmas airline ticket to see Jeremy. Finally got something I wanted for Christmas...

p.s. again: I know what you're thinking, so... No, I didn't sleep with Tim. I wasn't that drunk...

Dear Jeremy—

December 5 2:30 p.m.

Hi, honey. I've been sitting here working for 2.5 hours, but I haven't gotten anything done. God, I love work. Really. I just love it. To pieces. Little tiny pieces, hacked up with a big knife. Love it.

I just thought I'd write you a note while I was working to tell you that I love you... and something fierce, I might add... so write back soon. I love you. I miss you. I can't wait to talk to you again tonight. Keep thinking of me— and I can't wait to see you at Christmas—

Dear Donna—

January 13

Hello, love. How are you doing? Thanks for the card— it was so nice to actually get some mail. I'm glad I got the chance to see you while I was at home for the whole four days.

Anyway... I have to tell you about how things went with Jeremy. He brought me to this apartment. He prepared a candlelight lasagna dinner, champagne— the works. It was so incredibly romantic... and then we exchanged Christmas gifts... I got him a bunch of stuff, and he got me some stuff and a RUBY HEART PENDANT AND A GOLD NECK CHAIN. I think there's about 18 rubies in this thing. He even wrote me a poem to go with it. Donna, everything is so wonderful. I want to tell you all about everything.... In person. So come and visit me-

letters from wartime shannon peppers

p.s.: I'm still waiting to see if Jeremy is called for duty. They're sending the first troops there in two days, if nothing else works. I don't want to see my friends go. The government can tell me it's for the good of the whole, but they're not losing half of their friends. They're just signing their name and killing us.

Dear Jeremy—

January 17

Hello, angel. I love you. Sorry. I just wanted to get that one out. I'm writing to tell you about a dream I had last night. I was on the phone with Donna, and you were there. She said you would call back in two minutes. It was just like when I was waiting for your call the night we went to war. You didn't call. So I waited and waited, and finally I called back. Donna answered the phone. She seemed hesitant about giving the phone to you so we could talk. She seemed like she was hiding something, and it was scaring me. I started pacing the floor, biting my nails. The middle finger on my left hand had a short fingernail, so I started biting it. She then told me that you were busy and that people were over. She gave me the impression that you were there with another woman. I started bombarding her with questions until she told me that you were there with an ex-girlfriend of yours—I think her name was Julie. I was sobbing on the phone.

I don't remember what happened next, but I remember in the dream that I never bothered talking to you on the phone. I sobbed. I remember that when I got off the phone I went to sleep.

Then I woke up, and it was about six in the morning. I was trying to remember for the life of me what was real and what was a dream. I remembered talking on the phone last night, but everything was a blur. Then I checked my left fingernail. The only way I knew that I was just dreaming was that my nail wasn't bitten.

I miss you. There better be no Julies in your life, young man. You'd be giving up a pretty wonderful thing if there were. I love you.

Dear Jeremy—

January 18

Hello, love. I just got back from work and I've got a little time to kill. We all went to C Street last night (that progressive bar that you'd probably hate), and Joe seemed to emotionally flip out while we were there. I'm sure it had something to do with me, so I think we're going to talk for a little while about it. I'll let you know how it all went.

This afternoon I'm looking at an apartment. I'm looking at a few more apartments tomorrow. I have to decide soon. If you're going to move here next year (if, by chance, the job that you end up getting enables you to do that and you decide to), I'm still going to live alone— sorry— especially when I have to sign a contract soon. Besides, it would probably be wiser if we didn't live in the same place. It's not like we

letters from wartime shannon peppers

wouldn't see each other enough, right???

I talked to you last night. You were so very depressed... I wish I was there to make you feel better, honey, but as I said on the phone, but when you get back it will seem as if we were never apart. I think that since I was in such a bad mood before because I've been so worried about everyone I care about and the war, I just came to the point where I had to say that I couldn't take the depression anymore and I had to get on with my life. So right now I'm just trying to be happy that I'm alive and that everyone I know is safe— at least for now. A good friend of mine— a very good friend of mine, one that you met— well, his father is a high ranking Air Force official, and he's been briefing his son on what danger he could be in because they are related. He's been told about how he can tell when a package is a letter bomb, and he's been told that he should avoid crowded places and that he should change his route to work every day. He's scared. And he's been told that because we have an extensive computer system in town that is directly linked to the Pentagon and has access to very privileged information, there is a good chance that if there were to be an attack (terrorist or otherwise), this town could be one of the first places hit.

So I'm hearing all this, and I should be scared, but I realized that there really is nothing I can do about it all, and if I continue worrying the way I have been, I just might fall apart. So I've decided that I'm just going to keep thinking about you. I'm just happy that I know you're out there, somewhere, and I know you'll come back safe. Just knowing you exist makes me smile.

Which is how I want you to think from now on, Jeremy Stevenson. You have two options: you could either be mortally depressed and end up only hurting yourself, or you could just keep your chin up and let our love for each other keep us strong through these tough times. These are the times that we need each other. You say that you hate not being there for me— well, you are there— you're in my heart all of the time, and I feel blessed for it. Think of things that way, Jeremy, and things won't seem so bad after all.

And just remember, I won't let you down, either. I'll never let you down. I'm always there for you, even if it's only in your thoughts. We're blessed to have what we have. Let me help you be strong when you can't be alone. Dreamy eyes misses you... And I love you.

Dear Jeremy—

January 18 1:40 p.m.

Hello, angel. I love you. Dan is having a party tonight. I told him I'd go... but I'm not really in the mood to go out and drink. Maybe if I go, I'll only go out for a little while... I'm not even going to happy hour today.

letters from wartime shannon peppers

I'm starting to get ahead on my work... I really don't even know why. I can't help but either want to watch CNN or call you on the phone at night. I haven't had my mind on work too much lately.

Dear Jeremy—

January 20 9:11 a.m.

Hello, honey... How are you? I'm getting by. I stayed home last night — I just didn't feel like going out the way I usually do... I'm going to stay home tonight, too. I've just felt like a homebody lately — I don't know why. And I'm still tired, but for some reason I decided to wake up and do my laundry now, thinking that there would be no one else there. I got the last of the washers, and I had to wait for them. I think everyone uses the same philosophy as me, and then they wait for the weekend because they have no other time for doing their laundry. That's why I'm writing this letter now — because I'm waiting for my clothes to finish washing.

I saved the newspaper from the day we went into war. I want to have the front page mounted on a black board, along with the front page of the day when I was on it. I keep thinking about how I'm going to arrange furniture and decorate the apartment I have this summer... I'm so excited about it all. I really hope you'll get back soon, and you'll be there. I can't wait to see you.

Have I told you that I miss you lately? Well, I do, honey, and I just can't wait until I see you again... I just keep thinking of how good it will be when we're together again. I can't wait to be in your arms again... You know, I'm looking forward to when you come home and we just curl up at home and be boring and snuggle up together for the night. I think anything we do together makes me happy. Which includes basketball. You would have been proud of me, honey—I turned on a basketball game on TV last night. I wasn't paying attention. But hey — this is a good start. Give me credit.

And I was thinking— we used to go to the theatre to go see french operas and the like, and the symphony orchestra plays there usually every other week, and so we could go to see them perform when we wanted a change of pace. Maybe, in fact, we could go to see some little performance when you came back. It would be fun. Yes, I'm planning for when you come back from the war. Because I know everything will be perfect when you do.

Dear Jeremy—

10:00 a.m.

Hello, love... Oh— I found the perfect apartment! There's a spiral staircase, there are wood floors and oak kitchen cabinets... The furniture is nice and the apartments are totally new. It's all high security, and it even has an underground high security parking garage. It's got it's own washer and dryer, 1½ baths, and the upstairs bedroom is actually the entire loft; it's about 15 feet long, and it's got a slanted roof... Oh,

letters from wartime shannon peppers

everything is great, and the guy said he'd even bargain it down to \$650 a month. The catch??? Well, it's basically really far away. There are also at least two bus lines that run by it. But... I've got some heavy deciding to do...

With that out of the way, I can write to you about how much I want you... You know, I really can't wait until I see you again... Until I can get you alone, take off your shirt, kiss your neck, your chest... feel your hand running over my shoulders, your tongue running along my ear... I want to be able to run my hands through your hair again, slide my nails down your back...

Should I stop there? Well, I really don't want to, but I probably should...

I love you to death, Jeremy. Can't wait to see you again. Dreamy eyes misses you...

Dear Jeremy—

January 20 5:00 p.m.

Hello, the love of my life... the light of my nights... the apple of my eye... how are you? I just thought I'd let you know that yes, once again, I'm thinking about you. I'm thinking about you in your hot tub... you in those cute denim shorts you have...

I love you, honey, and I miss you—

p.s. — I was at Dan's party Friday night, and he made a comment in a group that led me to believe that he didn't know about us (I know I've told him... he was talking about the men/women ratio, and he said "I think you're the only single woman here..." It was weird). So I told him on the phone today. I was always worried because I thought he'd be mad... I don't know, I just thought it would be a touchy subject. But it was over the phone, and it was short, so everything seems to be okay. I mean, I wouldn't want you thinking that I was trying to HIDE you from anyone, so I'm just trying to fill you in on these things... I love, you—

Dear Jeremy—

January 20 11:45 p.m.

Just got off the phone with you. Why is this happening? I might not even get to see you for Valentine's Day. I know we've talked about this over and over again, but I don't feel any better. I know you don't want to go. I don't want you to go, either.

So, leave. Skip the country. Go to Canada. I'll go with you. We can find jobs there.

I just don't want you to die. Not when we've just begun to live.

Dear Jeremy—

January 22 11:55 p.m.

Hello, honey. How are you? Doug came over tonight. And when he came over he brought food, and I just pigged out on chips and salsa. He bought french fries, cheese sticks and pepperoni pizza, too. And a diet Coke. Yeah, I just DARE you to understand it.

I wanted to write to you today because I just got your card — you know, the one

letters from wartime shannon peppers

where you say that you love all the little moments we spend together, too... I just wanted to tell you that your card made me cry. I waited until I got home from class, then I fell into my bed, pulled over the covers, and opened it up. I cried. You're so sweet, Jeremy... and it's funny, but I think we sent out similar cards on the same days, because I figure that you got the card I sent you like that just a little while ago. Maybe we're getting into the same mood swings or something... or maybe it's just that we're both growing to care about each other in the same ways.

I don't know what my problem is right now... I'm acting really strange.... I've been thinking about what I'm gong to do with my life...

Who am I kidding? I know what the problem is. I don't want you to be shipped off to war. You leave the fifteenth of February, and I don't know if I can see you before then. Will we make it?

Dear Jeremy—

January 23 5:52 p.m.

Hello, love. I want to start off this letter by telling you that I love you so much sometimes that it hurts. Really.

Let me explain. I have been feeling down lately about the fact that you're not here, that you're leaving soon. I miss you. It's my turn to be depressed about it, I guess. I even was calling Midway Airlines to see if there was a flight that could bring me out to see you Tomorrow. Well, there is, but it's \$757. No, that wasn't a typo... So I was calling around to see if I could use my Northwest Air voucher. I would have to take two different buses just to get myself home. And I'd get in Friday night (or should I say Saturday morning?) at 12:45 a.m., leaving Sunday morning at 8:30 a.m.. Yes, a whole day and a half. That's how much I want to see you, Jeremy. I was feverishly calling airlines and bus stations, as well as friends, just to see if I could lose a lot of sleep (and a lot of money, too) and see you for a day and a half. I just don't think I can afford it.

I've been trying to keep myself busy, but it just doesn't work. I miss you. I got your message on my machine today — I loved it — in fact, I think I'm going to tape it, just so that I can listen to it whenever I want to. I miss the sound of your voice. I just want you to hold me again. Here I am, about to cry... See what you do to me?

I mean, I've tried to sound happy to you on the phone, because I don't want you to feel all depressed about the fact that we're not together. But I can't help it any longer... Christ, it has only been 16 days since I've seen you. It feels like months.

I just want to feel you kiss me, to hold me. I don't want you to let go of me. I feel miserable. I want to fall apart, or sleep for days, or something. Since I've sworn off liquor, I can't even go out and get drunk over it.

It's just that I don't think you realize quite how much I miss you. Or quite how

letters from wartime shannon peppers

much I love you. I don't think I can say it creatively. I just want to feel your cheek next to mine when you hold me. I just want to feel you squeeze all the pain out of me when I'm depressed. I just don't want to feel so alone any more, so lonely. I just don't want to feel like a piece of me is missing.

And when you go off to war I'm afraid I'll feel this hole inside of me forever, that I'll never be able to fill this void.

Dear Jeremy—

January 23 7:54 p.m.

I'm feeling a little better, got my mind off my depression. I've been drinking coffee all day. I must be at least on my fourth cup since dinner. I'm not sure. But I'm starting to shake, I think. I can't really tell. My arms feel kind of weird. So does my head. Maybe I shouldn't drink this much.

I want to see you. I want to be able to crawl into bed with you while you're laying on your back, lean my head on your shoulder, put my hand on your chest... kiss your cheek... shit. Why do I keep doing this to myself?? I'm just going to make myself feel worse. I just want to hold you. I want to watch t.v. with you, and sit on the floor with you sitting between my legs... so I can put my arms around you and unbutton your shirt, then your pants... or sit on the couch while you lay your head in my lap, so I can stroke your hair... run my fingers along your jaw... take your hand, kiss your palm, run my tongue up and down your fingers... I want to wear a negligee and come up to you while you're sitting on your bed and sit on your lap, straddling your legs, and kiss you for hours. I want to give you a face massage, so I can kiss you upside-down. I want to wrap my legs around you in a hot tub. I want to take a bath with you. I want to be able to run my hands up and down your body in the water, with a bar of soap... I want you in the shower. I want you to pick me up while we're kissing so I can wrap my legs around you. I want to grab onto the corners of the bed really tightly so you can push yourself into me over and over again, harder and harder... I have to stop. I'm sorry. I just can't take that any longer. I should go, I have to leave in a half hour. I'll be back in time for your phone call. Take my word for it— I miss you...

Dear Jeremy—

January 24 7:11 p.m.

I have such an awful schedule... I thought I would have an easy time in planning a visit to see you later in this month, but I'm working on the weekends a lot. And everything is so well spaced out that my days feel like weeks.

Well, I'm going to keep this short, since I've sent you so many letters already... Love you...

Dear Jeremy—

February 10

I hope you get this letter before you leave. I don't know how easy it will be for us

letters from wartime shannon peppers

to correspond when you're stationed in a war zone. I wanted to get you a Valentine's Day card, but I couldn't find anything that said what I wanted to say. I guess there's just too much to be said.

I wanted to card to be serious, and yet I wanted the card to be funny. I wanted to make you laugh. Because that's exactly what you do for me. I wanted to let you know that I do notice it when you do things for me. I notice it all the time. You're so sweet, Jeremy, and I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you to call and talk to. Hell, I'd fly across the country for you.

I think I wanted the card to be funny because we always crack jokes and act funny around each other. But I want you to know that I value you for more than that. You mean too much to me.

I know I say it all the time, but I suppose I just want you to know it. To not have any doubts. I love you. It sounds hokey; it sounds stupid. I don't care. It's just that there are a select few things in life that I have learned to treasure. I may not say it enough, but you are one of them.

I just remember thinking when I was down that I could tell you anything. I value that. I value being able to share things with you when I feel like there is no one to turn to. That means everything to me. If I didn't have you, Jeremy, I don't know what the hell I'd do. I'd probably just fall apart at the seams or something. It would be pretty messy.

I'll put myself on the line for you. I'll hold you when you're feeling down. And maybe, every one in a while, I'll do something even when I don't owe you anything. Just because I love you.

A lot of times I feel lonely, and I get to feeling down about myself and my life. I guess those are the times when it's just good to know that you're there, somewhere. I like being with you. You make me feel like I might actually be worth something. I need that every once in a while.

And I guess that's why I'm writing this. I want you to know this, to have this, before you leave. I don't think I ever tell you enough that you're special, and that you mean a lot to me. I realize these things every once in a while about you, and I want you to know that I care about you so incredibly much that it hurts sometimes. May be you don't realize it sometimes, the way I realize it. So I'll tell you. I love you.

I want you to know that I never want to lose you, and that I love you. I'll always treasure you, and value you. And I'll always be there for you. Let me know if I can ever make you feel as special as you make me feel. I love you, Jeremy, always remember that. I'll be waiting here for you, for the minute you come home. I love you.

she'd rather wait

joan papalia eisert

farmer's widow

Standing at the back door
after a rain
she takes the needle and thread
from her apron pocket
and sews the thimble to her hand

she'd rather wait
and scrape the blood
off the kitchen floor
when it's dried
and the corn is ready

visiting tennessee

mark blickley

Just before noon on Monday, Paul Dankin kicked off his comforter and stretched his six foot three body over his six foot cot, yawning. He instinctively clicked on the tiny clock radio.

Thick fingers clumsily spun the selector dial. It angered Paul that no matter how hard he tried he could not gracefully blend one program into another. His spin of the dial ripped into many stations, creating a garbled static that he hated.

After many seconds of fighting with the dial a clear voice spoke to Paul. He withdrew his hand and placed it under his pillow, smiling. The smile turned to a frown when the staccato bursts of a typewriter indicated that it was one of those twenty-four hour news programs and not a talk show. Paul pulled his hand from under the pillow and was about to attempt another station change, but thought better of it and instead placed his hand on his stomach, kneading a loose roll of flesh.

The newsman finished the last sentence of a story concerning laboratory animals and was recapping the headlines while Paul's fingers crept down his stomach, playfully slapping at his penis.

"Meanwhile, here in New York, the body of Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Tennessee Williams is attracting hundreds of friends and admirers. Williams, noted for his plays "The Glass Menagerie" and "A Streetcar Named Desire," died here late Thursday night of asphyxiation. An autopsy revealed that the playwright had swallowed a bottle cap. Williams' body will be at Campbell Funeral Home at 81st and Madison Avenue until Tuesday. Hours are ten a.m. till eight p.m. Internment is scheduled for Saturday in St. Louis."

"Yeah, that was a great movie," said Paul Dankin as he cracked his knuckles. "Brando was great." He clicked off the radio. "Tennessee Williams. I just seen that name somewhere."

Paul lay in bed trying to remember where he had seen the name. His hand automatically returned to his penis. The playful slaps soon gave way to a more determined motion. Aroused, his erection pointed him towards a plastic milk crate full of magazines. Dropping the Newsweek and People magazines back into the crate, he returned to the cot with an issue of Puritan. It was not a current issue but it was his favorite porno magazine.

Thumbing through colorful closeups of male and female genitalia spitting at and

visiting tennessee mark blickley

swallowing each other, Paul emptied himself.

"That's how you spell relief," he grinned, "P-U-R-I-T-A-N. No wonder those pilgrims gave thanks." His laughter ricocheted off the walls of his efficiency apartment; the echo made him nervous.

He flipped through the magazine a second time. Its images bored him. Halfway through the issue a full page photo of a bearded, round-faced man in a large hat smile up at him. Paul stuck his finger on the page to save his place. The article accompanying the picture was an interview with Tennessee Williams.

"Tennessee Williams! Christ, I knew I seen you somewhere. You're alright, Tennessee. No . . . no you're not. You're dead. Choked. Brando'll probably cry. I wonder if he remembers me?"

Paul threw down the magazine, walked over to the door and slowly opened it. He darted his head into the hallway and lunged for the day old Sunday News lying on his neighbors welcome mat. He quickly bolted the door.

Paul opened to the obituaries. His forefinger turned black as it slid down a column of names under Death Notices.

"Watson, Wilhelm, William,B., Williams, M., Williams, T. That's it! 1076 Madison. Till eight. Great!"

Paul stepped into the shower. As he lathered up the shampoo his thoughts turned to his finances. He knew that Tuesday was the first and that his check would be in the mail, but the only cash he had was in coins. He needed a dollar-fifty for a round trip bus ride.

Wrapped in a towel, Paul grabbed at the coat flung over a kitchen chair and shook it over the cot. The clinking of coins on the sheet made Paul smile. There was a good deal more than a dollar fifty splattered across the cot.

The smile still felt strange. In the six years since Pooh Bear Lennox down the hall knocked out three of Paul's teeth, Paul seldom smiled.

Pooh Bear Lennox, who was half Paul's size, claimed that Paul rubbed up against his girlfriend in the elevator. Onlookers were surprised at the beating he gave Paul in the hallway, but Paul's size was a disadvantage. Nobody ever challenged him so he did not know how to defend himself, whereas little Pooh Bear Lennox learned early how to destroy an opponent and nothing pleased him more than to tear into a big man like Paul Dankin.

The neighborhood was amazed at how frightened Paul behaved on the streets, even though he towered over just about everyone around him. Paul reasoned that if

little men could beat him up anyone could, including women. In fact, women did. His mother slapped at him from infancy to puberty as did the woman he called Aunt Amy, his mother's lover.

Paul rolled his tongue across the space in his mouth, licking his gums. His face twitched nervously as he stood in front of the closet, rummaging through his clothes, trying to pick his most impressive jacket and tie. Pants were no problem. All he owned were blue jeans.

Paul's eyes lit up as he pulled out a slightly wrinkled, slightly stained gray sports jacket. Beneath its left breast pocket was a frayed yellow patch that stated WTC SECURITY. Embroidered under the letters WTC and above the word SECURITY were the Twin Towers. Paul took a thick red striped tie out of his underwear drawer and dressed.

After parting his hair in the middle and plastering each side of his receding hairline with tonic, Paul brushed his teeth. This was a painful process. Stained a bright yellow by years of neglect, each morning Paul spent ten minutes rubbing his teeth as hard as he could with a brush overflowing with toothpaste. His tooth enamel disappeared years ago but the yellow remained.

Without enamel protection the slightest pressure on his teeth — by his tongue, liquids, or the air — filled his face with pain. These painful facial contortions gave him the look of an idiot, and coupled with his great size, a threatening idiot. He was unaware that he frightened people as much as they frightened him.

Paul grabbed his raincoat, triple locked his door and dropped the newspaper back onto his neighbor's welcome mat. Outside the housing project sat Martha Poseagle from 12 K, clutching an umbrella. She was leaning against a metal sculpture that looked like a frozen game of pick-up sticks.

"Where you goin' Paul?" she asked as he walked past.

Paul stopped and fingered the WTC emblem. "Hey, Martha. A good friend of mine died and I have to see him laid out. Name's Williams."

"William who?" asked Martha Poseagle. "I didn't know you had a friend."

Paul continued walking.

"How'd he die? Somebody kill him?" Martha yelled.

"Choked," Paul called. "Choked to death."

"Goddamn neighborhood," muttered Martha Poseagle. She leaned back on the work of art and patiently waited for another visitor.

...

visiting tennessee mark blickley

Before entering Campbell Funeral Home, Paul Dankin groomed himself by looking at his reflection in the glass door. He squinted at a young woman sitting at a desk next to the elevator. She's beautiful, thought Paul as he turned the large doorknob and walked inside.

The woman's head was bowed over a stack of papers; she heard his footsteps. "Good afternoon. Who do you wish to visit?"

"A, um, Williams. Tennessee Williams. From the movies, you know, with Brando."

The woman looked up. She studied Paul's face. "Just a second, sir."

"Yeah, sure."

She disappeared into an office behind her desk. When she returned a man was with her. The man looked at Paul, nodded to the woman, and went back into his office.

"Second floor, sir," she said.

The female elevator operator asked Paul for a name.

"Williams. Tennessee Williams, please. I told the other girl that." His face started to twitch. When the elevator doors snapped shut behind him he heard the operator laughing.

"They sure got some great looking girls working here," Paul said to an elderly man standing in the second floor lobby. "Seen him yet?"

The old man nodded.

"Look okay? Geez, what a way to go. Think it was suicide?"

The old man shook his head and shuffled over to the elevator. Paul started to walk into the room but pivoted and signed his name with capitals in the guest book. He leafed through the book trying to find celebrity signatures. He was glad Marlon Brando's was not scribbled in it. He had not missed him. Paul wondered if Brando would remember him.

Stepping inside the room felt good. The thick red carpet soothed Paul's feet, relaxing him. The room was huge.

There were many couches and chairs of soft crushed velvet and Paul was determined to sit in them all. The coffin was mounted at the far left of the room. Paul decided to explore that part of the room last.

In the middle of the room was a percolating coffee urn and styrofoam cups. Paul walked over to the coffee, intentionally scraping his toe into the carpet. It cut a line that pleased him. He thought of it as a trail that others would follow. A trail that would eventually lead people to Tennessee.

The annoyed usher standing guard at the wake asked him to lift his feet.

"Yeah, sure," answered Paul.

The coffee was good and hot. Warmth spread throughout his body. He sipped the coffee while surveying the room. Two dozen people were loitering, many of them were crying. Paul watched a fat middle-aged woman swiping at tears with an index finger wrapped in a handkerchief. She moved the finger across his cheeks with the same rhythmic motion as a windshield wiper, causing Paul to wish he had a driver's license and a girlfriend to take for a drive.

Imagining the wind sweeping through his girlfriend's hair as he gunned his convertible around narrow curves, Paul was unaware of hot coffee dribbling down his chin. His delayed reaction to the burning pain was a shriek as the cup dropped out of his hand, splattering coffee across his shoes, socks and the panty hose of a smartly dressed woman fixing her own cup.

The usher walked over to the coffee urn and apologized to the woman. Paul, afraid to look at the woman, mumbled. She squinted at him and walked away with a snarl.

"Please be more careful, sir, " said the usher. "We expect to have quite a few quests and we'd like to maintain the room just as it is."

"Yeah, sure," said Paul.

"And I'd appreciate it if you would continue to lift your feet when walking on our carpet. Please behave yourself, sir."

"Yeah, sure," said Paul.

The usher returned to his position at the far right of the room. He stood at attention with his hands solemnly cupped in front of him, watching Paul.

As soon as the usher turned his back Paul marched over to a couch. Paul lifted his feet up so high that it looked as if he were marching in place.

An attractive blonde sat on the far corner of the couch. She giggled and Paul felt warm again. He plopped down beside her; their knees brushed. The blonde's lips became a tight line as she looked straight ahead.

"Did you know Tennessee Williams?" Paul asked.

The woman ignored him.

"Excuse me, Miss. Did you know Tennessee?"

She turned towards Paul. "No. I admire his work."

"You're beautiful. Are you an actress?"

The blonde coughed.

"Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

visiting tennessee mark blickley

"No . . . thanks."

"It's too bad he's dead but we all have to go sometime."

"Yes. Me, too." And she was gone.

The couch became a frightening experience for Paul. It was so soft and formless that his body sank into the plush contours, swallowing him. He struggled to free himself but his stomach muscles were weak. He could not lean forward. Pushing against the back cushions for support only made him slip further down the spine of the couch until he could not move at all.

With his body trapped within the couch and no one nearby to help him escape, panic seized him and a high pitched whimper, like the whine of a punished dog, cleared his throat.

The usher hurried over to the couch. With his hands on his hips he glared down at Paul. Paul looked up and sighed; he was rescued.

...

At nine-thirty a.m. sharp, Paul Dankin was dressed and in the lobby awaiting the mail. Leaning against the mailboxes, Paul traced the WTC jacket emblem with his finger. Martha Poseagle, who was rumored to have a crush on the mailman, joined him.

"Good morning, Martha," said Paul.

"Did I miss him?" asked Martha.

"Miss who?"

"Furfante. You know, our mailman."

Paul shook his head.

"You're all spiffed up," said Martha. "Where you going?"

"You'll never believe this, Martha, but I'm meeting with Marlon Brando today."

"The movie star?"

"Yep."

"Good. I'm glad to see you getting out more."

"You look pretty spiffy yourself, Martha."

"How do I smell?"

Paul shrugged. "Okay."

"You sure?"

Paul nodded. "Yeah, sure."

"I thought so. New perfume."

They waited together in a nervous silence. When Furfante arrived Martha smiled, as did Paul when Furfante handed him a check.

...

After cashing his check and eating a leisurely breakfast in a Tenth Avenue diner, Paul returned to the Campbell Funeral Home. He walked past the woman sitting next to the elevator and pulling on a thread of his WTC emblem instructed the elevator operator to drop him off on the second floor. Before re-entering the room Paul thumbed through the guest book.

"Still no Brando," he said.

Paul felt comfortable. Everything was familiar, including the usher staring at him. Paul waved. Everything was familiar. Everything except Tennessee. He walked a diagonal line, pausing at the head of the coffin.

"He's as little as a doll," Paul said to a woman kneeling at the prayer stand. Paul studied Tennessee's fleshy face. It had a rich tan that Paul admired. His admiration turned to amusement when he spotted the uneven line between Tennessee's forehead and widow's peak where the makeup ended and his hair began. Paul felt that the makeup could have been stretched, pulled up a bit further to cover the gap. It reminded him of the many cold nights in his apartment when he tried to pull his comforter up over his head, but it was too short and would expose his feet to the cold.

"His feet must be cold but they're not exposed," he remarked to the kneeling woman.

Tennessee's mouth fascinated Paul. The dry lips had begun to part. A thin crack separated the bottom and upper lip. Although Paul leaned over the corpse to get a closer look, he could see no teeth behind the crack. The mouth was opening but Paul could only see a dark empty space. Staring down at the blackness inside Tennessee's mouth, Paul remembered that Tennessee had swallowed his death. He brought his hand up and traced a line across the dead man's lips.

"I got black spaces inside my mouth, too," he whispered.

Paul quickly withdrew his hand and spun around. No one had seen him touch Tennessee. He walked over to a couch, and taking the ashtray from an end table, placed it next to him on the couch while lighting a cigarette. A scolding from the usher prompted Paul to remove the ashtray and place it back on the table.

Paul took long, deep pulls on his cigarette, exhaling so much smoke it made him squint. He was squinting when he saw her enter the room.

She held her raincoat in one hand, a soggy white carnation in the other. She was crying. A blue plaid shirt several sizes too large ballooned up from a waistband of baggy corduroy pants. Her sneakers were muddied. Brown shoulder length hair lay

visiting tennessee mark blickley

wet and flat against her head. She removed her glasses and wiped them on her sleeve.

After a long pause she walked over to the coffin. Without looking at the corpse she gently placed the carnation on a small table at the foot of the body. She sniffed twice and with her head lowered scuffed over to a chair by Paul's couch. Paul watched her as he licked at the space inside his mouth.

"Hi, Miss. It's sort of sad, isn't it?"

She looked over at Paul and nodded.

"Lots of people were here yesterday. A lot more than today. Funny though, there's a lot more crying today than yesterday. Did you know him?"

She tucked her chin into her chest.

"That's a swell flower you brought. I'm sure he'd of liked it. What's your name? Excuse me, Miss, what's your name?"

Raising her eyes without moving her head she looked angrily at Paul. "What? What are you talking about?"

Paul leaned forward on the couch. He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and held them out to her. "I'm just trying to make conversation."

"I didn't come here to talk!"

Paul shrugged, pocketed the cigarettes, and settled back against the cushions.

"Just trying to be friendly," he said.

"I don't need friends, Mister. Just leave me alone."

"Yeah, sure."

Paul got up and walked over to the coffin. He eyed Tennessee from top to bottom and then looked over his shoulder at the woman. She was watching. Paul picked up the white carnation from the table and carefully laid it on Tennessee's chest. Again he glanced over at the woman. She was looking down at her hands.

A man hurriedly brushed past Paul and snatched the flower off the dead man's chest. "We don't allow objects to be placed inside the casket," snapped the irate usher. "Will you please behave?"

"Yeah, sure. Okay. I didn't know." Paul returned to the couch shaking his head. He lit a cigarette. "Do you want me to get you something, Miss? Tissues? Coffee?"

She ignored him.

"Did you hear me, Miss? Need something? You look like you could use something."

The woman pushed her glasses up against the bridge of her nose. "What? Will

you be quiet and leave me alone. Just shut up!"

"I know you're upset. Try to relax, okay? Are you an actress? There's plenty of actresses around here. I'm waiting for an actor friend of mine. He should be here real soon. Beautiful in here, huh? I'd love to live in a place like this, wouldn't you? Without the bodies, I mean," Paul giggled. "You need some coffee?"

The woman hunched lower in the chair, grinding her teeth. "You'll get yours!" she shouted. "You'll get what you deserve!"

The usher moved quickly beside her. "Is he bothering you, Ma'am?"

The woman looked down at her feet and did not answer. Paul looked up at the usher and shrugged as he puffed on a cigarette. His face started to twitch.

The usher left the room and return shortly with three other men in dark suits. They caucused in the far right corner of the room. As the men whispered they would glance over in Paul's direction.

Paul leaned forward on the couch, his elbows resting on his knees. "Thank you, Miss. That was real nice of you."

"Will you leave me alone!" she shouted.

The caucus broke. A distinguished looking man with gray hair walked to the center of the room. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he said, "I must ask you to please end your visit. The staff needs time to prepare for the memorial service scheduled for tonight at eight. On behalf of the family and friends of Mr. Williams, thank you for coming."

Mourners were herded out of the room by men with impatient smiles. A staff member personally escorted Paul to the elevator.

"Will Brando be here tonight?" asked Paul.

"I don't know, sir," replied the man.

Paul managed to squeeze his way to the front of the elevator next to the woman. Her damp stringy hair brushed against his shoulder. He watched her head jerk forward in spasms. Paul thought she was suppressing hiccups until he heard little sobs accompany each spasm.

"It's okay, Miss," he said softly. She looked up at him, grimaced, and buried her face in his chest. Tears collected in the tiny crevices of the Twin Towers, forming warm beads of water that spilled over and dripped onto his leg. His arms instinctively encircled her back and he was careful not to squeeze too hard. Her heaves against his chest felt good, tickled. Paul wished that the one flight ride could somehow be prolonged.

When the elevator doors pulled apart she reached up and clung to Paul's neck. He

visiting tennessee mark blickley

put his arm around her waist and led her to the door. Her body went limp; she had to be pulled. When they stepped outside Paul took a crumpled napkin out of his pocket and handed it to her. She grabbed it, took three deep sniffs, and blew her nose as Paul gently kissed her on top of her head.

It was gray and drizzling and neither one had an umbrella. Paul, looking as if he were measuring her height, flattened his large hand over her head, protecting her from the rain.

"I think we better get some coffee. What do you say? Think so, Miss?"

The woman nodded. Paul smiled as she snuggled against him. With one hand forming an umbrella over head and his other hand pressed against her shoulder supporting her weight, he walked two blocks, pausing at each light to lean down and kiss the top of her head.

Paul helped her off with her raincoat and hung it up on the rack attached to the booth. She remained silent and did not look at him until after the coffee arrived. Sipping at the cup that she delicately held with both hands, she peeked over at Paul. His stare intimidated her so she quickly looked away.

Paul drank his coffee in three gulps and signaled for the waitress. "Want something to eat, Miss?" The woman shook her head. Paul ordered an English muffin and another coffee.

"Nice and warm in here, huh Miss?"

She nodded; their eyes met.

You have an umbrella?" asked Paul.

The woman shook her head.

"I got one but it's busted. I'm going to buy a new one, though."

"That's good," she said.

"One of those push button jobs that fold up real small, like you see on T.V."

"I like T.V.," she said. "Especially movies. The old ones. I work in television."

"No kidding? Wow! What do you do?"

The woman took another sip. "Lots of things."

"Who do you work for?"

"Nobody. I'm not working right now."

"That's tough," said Paul. He fingered his WTC emblem. "Well, maybe I can help you. You see this?" He pointed to the emblem. "I'm kind of chauffeur-bodyguard to the Attorney General of New York. He's got an office at the World Trade Center. Maybe I could talk to him about getting you a job in Public Television or something.

He's a pretty nice guy. What's your name?"

"What's yours?"

"Paul. Paul Dankin."

"Iris."

"Feel better, Iris?"

Iris shrugged. "Guess so."

"It's good to cry. Cleans you out." He laid his hand on top of hers. Her warmth felt good against his cold fingers. Iris slowly withdrew her hand.

Paul lit a cigarette. "Does the smoke bother you?"

Iris shrugged.

"You live around here, Iris?"

"No."

"I live a couple of miles from here. Where do you live?"

"Forest Hills," she said.

"Wow! That's a pretty ritzy neighborhood. You been there long, Iris?"

"I'm staying at the shelter. I've got to be back by nine."

"Yeah? What kind of shelter?"

"I've got to be back at the shelter by nine," repeated Iris.

"How'd you get here, Iris? By train?"

"Yes."

"What made you visit Tennessee?"

Iris shredded a napkin. "What made you?"

Paul bit into the filter of his cigarette. "I'm waiting for Marlon Brando," he said proudly.

"What for?"

"We're old friends."

"You are not," challenged Iris.

"Yes we are. A few years ago I took a bus tour of Washington, D.C. It stopped at all the famous places. I was standing outside the Washington Monument looking up at it. It was scaring me. You see, Iris, I'm not afraid of heights. Looking down from high places doesn't bother me a bit. But whenever I have to look up at something I get nervous. Especially when I look up at buildings. You ever feel like that, Iris?"

"No."

"I always feel like some kind of force, like a magnet or something, is going to pull me up, lifting me off the ground. That's a lot worse than falling 'cause if you're falling

visiting tennessee mark blickley

down you know you're falling down and that's that. If you get pulled off the ground and lifted into the air you're not falling, but you could fall at any moment. And there's no end. If you fall you have to land but if you're lifted up it could go on forever and I hate that."

Iris squirmed restlessly inside the booth. "So what's that got to do with Marlon Brando?"

"Oh, yeah, right. So I'm trying to take a picture of the Washington Monument, but every time I aim my camera up at it I start to feel dizzy and sweat. I need a picture to prove I'd been there. I go lots of places."

Iris put her elbow on the table and rubbed an eyebrow with her thumb. Paul's throat felt dry so he flagged down the waitress and ordered a cherry coke.

"Anyway," Paul continued, "I try and try but I can't snap off a shot my hand's shaking so bad. So I look around and I see this guy walking by and I ask him take one for me. He looks like a real nice guy and he does. Took a great picture, too. I wanted to give him a buck for the favor but he wouldn't take it. I asked him why not? He tells me he doesn't need it 'cause he's Marlon Brando. And that's when I recognized him. Real nice guy. I told him I'd go to every movie he'd make. And I do, too. Even wrote him a couple of letters."

"He ever answer you?" asked Iris.

"A, a, yeah, sure. I got them home."

"Maybe he could find a job for me," she said. "Can I meet him?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Will he be at the memorial service tonight?" Paul pulled at his thumb until it popped. He bent his pinky by pressing down on the joint until it snapped. "Yeah, sure, he'll be there." Paul cracked the rest of his knuckles.

Iris, her elbow resting on the table, lowered her head into the crook of her arm. Paul watched; he feared their conversation had come to an end. "So why are you visiting Tennessee? Are you waiting for somebody?"

Iris lifted her head and shook it. "I came to get out. It wasn't easy. I have to be back by nine. But I liked him. Like him a lot. I've seen all his movies. I think to make someone cry from deep down is real, don't you?"

"Yeah, sure." Paul licked the ice cubes in his cherry coke as he marveled at the smoothness of Iris' forehead.

"I think he must have been lonely. I can't imagine how he would've been able to make characters like that if he wasn't sad. I read once that he didn't have normal rela-

tionships with women, but I don't believe it. I think he was hurt by one and was sort of waiting for the right one to come along."

Iris lowered her voice; it took on a conspiratorial tone. "I'll tell you a secret because I don't think you'd laugh at me."

"I won't," swore Paul as his face flushed red. The blood pounding in his ears annoyed him. He was afraid it would drown out Iris' speech.

"I often thought," Iris continued, "that I would meet Mr. Williams and he would see in me what it was he was looking for in a woman. I knew he could see beyond silly and pretty and, well, maybe he would love me. But when I walked into his room today it shocked me. It hit me that he really was dead. All morning I felt as if I had a kind of . . . date with him. But when I walked into that room and saw all those strange people looking at me . . ."

"I saw you right when you came in," interrupted Paul.

". . . I just knew I missed meeting him. He had blue eyes. Such lovely blue eyes. But when I walked over to where he was lying his eyes were closed and I became angry. I knew I'd never see them. I felt like going over to him and lifting his eyelids just so I could see their blueness and have my reflection mirrored in them. At least then I could feel some kind of closeness with him, something special and apart from those other people there. I figured that if he could see me he'd know that I care deeply about him. Not like those other people there. If he could see me he'd know that I can love."

Paul nearly jumped out of his seat. He grabbed Iris' fingers and squeezed. "You can!"

"Ouch! You're hurting me!"

Paul released her fingers. He fidgeted and then stood up looking around, hoping to find a witness who, like a photograph, would verify an important moment in his life. Someone must have heard Iris declare that she could love, he thought. But he was disappointed. No one in the coffee shop had paid any attention to their conversation. Even his waitress was at the far end of the room and it angered Paul that she seemed to be eavesdropping on another couple. Thinking of the word couple and its application to him and Iris excited Paul and his anger disappeared.

"Couple," said Paul.

"Of what?" asked Iris. "One cup's enough."

Paul twitched as the pounding in his ears returned. He smiled at Iris. She tore open a packet of sugar, dipped her finger inside, and watched the tiny crystals reflect

visiting tennessee mark blickley

light before putting them in her mouth.

Paul watched Iris repeat this three times before signaling for the check. Although he was still upset at the waitress for not having heard Iris' declaration of love, he left her a decent tip.

Standing in the coffee shop doorway Iris mumbled that the rain had stopped. When she made no attempt to stay close to Paul as they walked down the street, Paul reached over and grabbed her hand. Iris looked over at him as his hand swallowed hers. Paul nodded, Iris shrugged, and the two walked hand in hand in silence.

Paul Dankin strolled down Madison Avenue with a dignity he did not know he possessed. For the first time since he was a child Paul made eye contact with every passing person. He smiled his close lipped smile at the strangers who returned his look, and with a nod of his head acknowledged their admiration for him and Iris as a couple.

Each time Paul nodded his head the harder he squeezed Iris' hand until she could no longer stand the pain.

"You're hurting me!" Iris cried as she pulled away.

Paul tried to apologize but words would not form and he stood there moving his mouth stupidly.

"You've hurt me twice," she shouted. "Now leave me alone!"

Pedestrians paused to stare. Paul felt a thousand eyes pressing down on him. He tried to speak but could not, so he reached out to comfort Iris, but she stepped back.

"You hurt me twice!" she repeated, "now leave me alone. I've got to be back at the shelter by nine so keep away from me!"

"Yeah, sure," Paul mumbled. Iris turned and walked away.

Small gray puddles exploded as his footsteps scraped against the pavement. He walked quickly up the street until he stood in front of Central Park. Paul straddled a metal mesh fence as his feet sank into the mud. An ankle scraped against the fence so he spit on his finger and massaged it into the wound. Trudging up a slippery incline, Paul grabbed at large rocks for support.

When he finally reached the top he bent down to check on his ankle. His shirt sleeve was pulled up exposing his wristwatch. Paul frowned.

"Five hours till the memorial service," he whispered.

Satisfied that the scratch was just a minor one, he walked deeper inside the slushy, deserted park.

"I sure hope Brando's gonna be there," said Paul as he kicked at a mound of mud and watched it splatter against a tree trunk.

hard of hearing
Alexandra Penn

After Barbara finished the joke, everyone laughed
even her brothers Dave and Brian, who never seemed
to give her credit for anything she said

But then she turned to her father, who sat there
cold and motionless
His arms were crossed; his head was pushed down
into his shoulders

His furrowed brow framed his eyes,
which seemed to stare at her in contempt

"Maybe he didn't hear you, Barb,"
Dave finally mumbled
"You know he's hard of hearing."

thousands
thousands

screaming

gabriel attens

crowds
screaming
Thousands
thousands
standing
cheering
screaming

waving
banners
person
silent

between
roaring
grey shirt
overzealous

care
sat
wondering
why

tit men

david mckenna

I always wanted to be somebody's bitch.

Not a high-priced whore in a discreet little suite near an office high-rise, or a lizard-tongued tart who snares some rock star who looks like a prehistoric bird. Or a gum-chewing bimbo with brown mascara who hitches her wagon to a would-be Don Corleone.

Just somebody's bitch.

I wanted some big hunk with broad shoulders, steel-tipped work boots and a thick silver chain, one end fastened to a belt loop, the other to a fat wallet in the back pocket of his tight jeans. No low-riding outlaw biker type, but a biker, for sure, on an oversized Harley with twin mirrors, exhaust pipes and stereo speakers, and one of everything else but a roof and toilet.

So who should come along but a man named Charlie, at the Blue Gondola, right before I bade farewell to Victor Belladonna, the world's most conceited unknown baritone, and Luigi McMahon, sleazy restaurant owner extraordinaire.

I was strolling between tables, playing "Strangers in the Night," my last solo number before Victor came back to sing his medley of Mario Lanza hits, with me as accompanist. As usual Luigi and Victor were eating at the bar, side by side, and talking with a male customer about my breasts, because they're big and I wear my accordion slung low, over a low-cut sequined dress with a tight bustier. I'm a full-figured gal all 'round, but men's eyes usually zoom to my breasts.

That's show business, you know? Except that Victor and Luigi, the half-Irish wharf rat, always joked about me out loud, to make sure I heard. Anyway, this particular customer, a tall guy in jeans and a denim shirt with mother-of-pearl studs, nodded toward me and said something to Luigi, who was sitting two stools away from him.

"Yeah, but at this point I think she has to inflate 'em every night," Luigi answered, which started Victor laughing real deep like Don Giovanni, ha-ha, what a rascal I am.

So I put down my accordion, right there on the bar, without bothering to do a big flourish on the final refrain, and dumped Luigi's veal parm in his lap, like I was emptying the garbage. Then I reached around him and mashed the same gooey red plate against the starched white shirt Victor was wearing under his jumbo tux with the 12-foot-long cummerbund.

I was walking out the door with my accordion when the denim man grabbed my arm and said, "I want to shake your hand, ma'am. Those peckerwoods deserved what they got."

He took my right hand in his brown, calloused paws and shook it till the accordion strap nearly slipped off my shoulder. I play an old Wurlitzer, by the way, cream-colored with chrome buttons and keys as big as a piano's. Not as heavy as a piano, but you wouldn't want to drop it on your foot.

"Charlie Magenta's the name," the denim man said, though I hadn't asked, as I re-adjusted my instrument. "And I'd like to buy you a drink."

I sent him back to fetch my accordion case, which I'd left in the Blue Gondola, on the little stage where Victor sings. I put my instrument in the case and into the trunk of my car, and climbed up behind Charlie, tight dress and all, after he pulled up wearing a silver space helmet over his silver hair, on a motorcycle as big as a houseboat.

When we got on the highway, it felt like a speedboat. I held tight to Charlie's slim waist, breathed the cool night air, and listened to the roar of the engine and the country music song on the radio. "I've Got Tears In My Ears From Lying on My Back Crying My Eyes Out Over You," it was called.

Charlie drove near the river till we got to the Boot Hill Saloon, which looked like an airplane hangar and sounded like a hoedown from hell. We sat at a bar drinking whiskey and soda. He told me he was some big-shot contractor, always traveling, and that I was the finest looking woman east of the Monongahela, whatever that is.

"Are you a tit man, Charlie?" I said. "Is that why you like me?"

I usually don't use such coarse language, but I was miffed that Charlie had talked about me with the likes of Victor and Luigi. That might sound stupid, since he was a complete stranger and I'd already let him shanghai me to some redneck bar, but a girl can have mixed feelings.

"I asked them who the lady with the beautiful eyes was," he said. "Your eyes look like they stole all the light from the moon and stars."

Charlie has a sweet drawl and a chiselled face that doesn't move much, but I knew he was lying. For one thing, I'd heard Luigi's joke. For another, Charlie looked at my breasts when he talked about my eyes.

But you are what you are, and I was flattered despite myself. I could see that Charlie wanted to stroke and bite my breasts, bury his face between them and breathe deep the Poison, scratch my soft flesh with his wire-brush stubble and suck till he sighed and fell asleep with his head on my arm, a single word frozen on his slightly parted lips.

"You're a tit man, alright," I said, shaking my head.

"I want to take you somewhere and show you how special you are," he said, draining his glass.

He did, too, at the Comfort Inn on I-95, where I could see the bridge lights as I pulled off his pointy-toed boots and undid my ponytail, shaking thick black curls onto my wide, milky shoulders.

"Unzip me, cowboy," I said, feeling cocky. Fact is, Luigi is a pipsqueak liar. I'm 38, and so is my chest, but my breasts still perk up as proud as when I was 22, with or without the D cups. I guess it's all that accordion playing, and the hand weights.

Charlie watched, expressionless, when I was naked, then inched his fingers under both breasts, palming them, as if his hands were made for that purpose alone. He kissed my right nipple, bit at it, then mouthed the whole silver dollar-sized areola. How I love that word!

A big, shy guy, gentle as Smokey Bear, and about as available. "I'm married with two kids," he'd said straight up, before we even left the bar. "Just thought you should know."

Fine with me. I wasn't eager to play house with him, not with my music career holding steady and my two girls grown up and off to college, all expenses paid by their dad, a bum while we were married and a successful bandleader now. So many men turn out to be woman haters or mama's boys, at least while they're involved with me.

Afterwards Charlie rolled off me like a log into a river and lay staring at the ceiling till I thought he'd maybe slipped into a trance.

"A penny for your thoughts, big man," I said, almost afraid to ask.

"Where do you think those puddles come from?" he said after a while. "Up ahead on the highway, when you look through the windshield on a hot, sunny day?"

You can never catch up with 'em."

"A mirage," I said, lighting a cigarette, only my third of the day. I've been quitting for 15 years now. "The eyes play tricks."

"A mirage," he repeated softly. "Like most things."

I'm wise in the ways of love. Right then I knew this bucking bronco was a deep one, and would keep me guessing. Next night we met at the Blue Burrito, where I played Tex-Mex with a quartet of tequila-crazed caballeros from San Antone who look me up when they tour. Charlie asked where I wanted to go, and I said, "Surprise me."

He did, too. I hung on by my nails, with legs around Charlie and skirt up around my hips, as he gunned his Harley across the bridge to Jersey and down the pike to the Babette Motel, on the edge of nowhere, where we rented a room with a squeaky bed and towels the size of place mats.

As if it mattered. I set the tempo, and this time Charlie was more like a grizzly bear than Smokey Bear. The other rooms were empty, so I didn't worry about waking anyone with my love noises. By the time we were through, I could barely stagger into the rusty shower stall and turn on the water, let alone towel myself off. I fell on the bed, legs aching and breasts red with passion marks, and dozed till I was dry.

He took me to a half-dozen more places that month, everything from a Day's Inn to a pay-by-the-hour joint in Jersey where junky whores do their bit. I figured he was testing me, waiting for me to pitch a bitch while we lay in bed in the dollar motel.

"You tired of fly-by-night love, Connie?" he asked, slow and distant, raising his head from my breast. "Think I want too much, take you for granted?"

I turned away to blow cigarette smoke, then rolled over and straddled him. "You want me, you got me," I said. "Just give it to me."

Charlie dropped me off at 6 a.m. at my car, as usual. I don't want him to have me on my home turf. Before I split, he presented me with a gift-wrapped CD by Flaco Jimenez, my favorite accordionist, which he'd tucked away in his saddlebag.

"You shouldn't have," I said.

Charlie said he'd be away for two weeks at an Arizona construction site. "Should I call when I get back?" he asked straight-faced. First thing he'd said in hours.

"Just whistle, cowboy," I said. "I'll come running."

Six days later I played the Blue Pierogi, a Polish-American beer hall. I had some major cleavage going on, thanks to this silk vermilion number that barely climbed past my nipples. I'd plucked my brows till they pointed like daggers away from my Liz Taylor-perfect eyes.

Some fat drunk was hollering "One more time!" This after about 500 choruses of "In Heaven There Is No Beer." Then he yelled "Flex those tittie muscles, babe" to coax a laugh from his piggy friends.

Charlie – I didn't even know he was there – grabbed the drunk by his shirt and scrunched it up, lifting him off his feet. When he let go, the drunk landed on his ass on the dance floor. No muss, no fuss, and no reason to stop playing. Being in the business a long time, I knew better.

After my last set, Charlie drove us to a suite at the Inn of the Flamingo. Red walls, king-size bed, heart-shaped tub, Jacuzzi. One of those dives that tries to be opulent but just gives you a headache. Not at all like our usual spots. Charlie hadn't even told me what he was doing back from Arizona so soon.

"So I could put this on your finger," he said, holding out a silver ring with turquoises and a star sapphire as big as a kernel of corn.

"The only thing I could find that matches the light in your eyes," he explained, eyeing my breasts.

I sat on the bed and he knelt next to me, looking like the sheriff of Tombstone.

"That drunk in the polka club cinched it for me," he continued. "I knew I was doing the right thing."

"I don't know what to say," I said.

"First let me tell you what happened."

He did, too. The day before, he left the job site, flew 2,000 miles to his home in the Philly suburbs, and told his wife of 18 years they were through, he'd fallen in love and wanted a divorce:

"I said, 'Lulu, I'll give you as much money as you want. You can have the ranch and the kids, and you can even keep the horses. But I've got to have my freedom. We loved each other, but what's past is past. Our future is just a mirage. My future is with Connie; I'm gonna marry that woman.' "

It was the longest speech I ever heard him make. I sighed, plucked the ring from his hand, watched it glitter, handed it to him.

"Sorry, Charlie," I said. "I can't do it."

"Well, goddamn," he said quietly, twiddling the ring.

"It's just not what I want," I said, not realizing how upset he was.

"What exactly is it you want, Connie?" he said, leaning forward till his face pushed between my breasts.

"I've got my own life to live," I said, running a hand through his shiny silver hair. "I just wanted to be ... your bitch."

"I guess there's no fool like an old fool," he said, pressing his face against me so that I could hardly hear him.

"You're not so old, Charlie," I said, patting his head.

Then I felt the wetness between my breasts and heard him yelp once, like a baby coyote at feeding time.

What is it about cleavage, about big breasts? I might as well ask what is it about warm milk at bedtime, or a crib full of down pillows.

Charlie let go slowly. He lay on his back, reached for his helmet and covered his face with it so I wouldn't see his silent tears. Then he stood up and walked out the door. I was too numb to move till I heard him kick-start the Harley and roar through the parking lot. From the window I saw him scoot up the embankment to a little ledge, dismount, and jump over the guardrail to the highway.

In a panic I looked for my high heels, then realized they'd be useless. I've got sturdy legs, but the rocks on the hill hurt my bare feet.

"I said I'd be your bitch," I screamed. "Isn't that enough?"

Before I got half-way up, there was a screech of tires and a tremendous scraping noise as a red van smashed into the guardrail directly above me, turned around once and came to a halt about 30 yards farther down the road.

When the cops pulled up five minutes later, Charlie was still sitting on the highway with his legs folded under him. I was waving cars around him into the other lane. Good thing for Charlie no one was hurt. He wound up with a fine and some car insurance problems.

He's still on the prowl, as far as I know. He didn't go back to his wife and kids, and he didn't contact me again, except to thank me for sending back his ring.

Tit men. They hate you or they love you, and I don't know what's worse. The more they love you, the less they want to know you. You become the Universal Tit, pardon my coarseness.

My next guy will be an ass man, somebody who buys drinks for the house, pinches me in public, and flirts with every floozy in sight. The kind of guy who likes to watch a girl walk away.

karuna
charles chaim wax

I saw Mary yesterday. Love is so strange, as one of my students said - unusual, uncommon, exceptional, deviant, off-center, remarkable, exotic, screwy - yet all these single words, somehow, don't completely re-create the emotion. Mary loves me, I can tell, in her own way, in the way a seventy-four year old woman loves a forty-five year old man.

It happened like this. As soon as she saw me come through the door into the lobby of our building, she smiled. I smiled.

"Steve, do you know how to work the dryer?" she asked.

"I think so."

"They changed the price to sixty cents."

"Oh," I gasped.

Then her voice changed - so soft, seductive (?), yearning, "Can you help me?"

I stared at her. The face once must have been lovely but now I could only see the paleness, the immense creases, the wrinkles, the crevices, the hollow cheeks, the bent shoulders, the unsteady hobble. My heart, my heart . . . so . . . so all the young beautiful women in my classes . . . this . . . this . . . without doubt . . . but I would never live to see this thing because by the time each would revolve into such age I would be long, long in my coffin. THERE . . . I THOUGHT IT. That's why I didn't like to see Mary and I hated myself for not liking to see her. I gave her so much pleasure. I always made sure to say, "Oh, I adore those green earrings you're wearing today." Or, "You look so charming with the red lipstick."

Little chit-chats which re-created a bit of delight for her - the memory of possibility when now little existed but to try and go to the supermarket. That was the big event of her day. She would say, "I have to go out. Who can stay in the house the whole day? Going is not so bad but coming home . . . ahh." Mary had arthritis. The bones in her joints screeched when she bent her knees to take a step.

I followed her into the laundry room. Another old woman was waiting for me. Mary smiled, "I brought Steve to rescue us."

Both women were short. I looked down at the tops of their heads. Mary had thin gray hair with patches of baldness here and there. The other woman wore a plastic blonde wig. Her face was puffy but not as wrinkled as Mary's.

I walked to the dryer and studied the coin mechanism. The woman wearing the blonde wig gave me two quarters and one dime. "Ah," I sighed. "It goes like this. In the left side you put one quarter on top of the other and the dime goes just to the right." I plopped the coins in and pushed the small metal arm. The coins engaged the starting mechanism and the dryer started.

Mary exclaimed, "Such a man."

Then they both looked at each other. There was an awkward silence but it lasted only seconds.

The woman with the blonde wig sighed, "It takes a man." I was not clear what the word "It" referred to. Takes a man to do what? I didn't ask.

Mary murmured, "I'll walk you to the elevator, Steve."

"Thank you so much." She smiled when I said that.

As we slowly walked she went on, "I do a lot for her - shopping, clean a little, but I can't do it all." Then she reached out and caressed my arm with her thin twisted fingers and giggled, "My hero."

Her voice like a little girl who had eaten too many cookies in secret and been found out. The sound, if I had not seen the wrinkled face from which it came - just like a child, six, seven, no more - the same. Filled with joy. Because of me?

summer in the warehouse

michael estabrook

after my son's typical mediocre freshman year of college mostly Cs a course or 2 dropped incessant questing for easy professors frat pledging & parties and all the rest of that he got a job spent the summer in a warehouse packing boxes loading trucks stacking shelves unpacking boxes unloading trucks unstacking shelves. and when he made the honor roll in his sophomore year I said I was proud of him "I guess you're serious about school now that you've made your friends done the silly fraternity thing established yourself found yourself put all that social stuff behind you." he didn't pause for even a second "no Dad" he shook his head "that's not it I'm studying hard now because I spent the entire summer in a warehouse and know what I don't want to be doing with my life."

incessant questing for easy professors

**a woman with a telephone explains the true nature of
flight, b&w still life east rockaway, albany, ny 1973**

alan gatin

Airplanes sustained flight by absolute forces in suspended animation called negative gravity. Similar principles guided other flying objects, such as bird flocks, winged reptiles and kites. Gale forcing winds meant jet propulsion, summer storms with thunder and burst clouds:

“What you refer to as an airplane crash is an illusion.” She said, “A flightless bird as in Mythology like the Greeks who sank with Atlantis. It’s all in the Donnelly text of the Antediluvian world you gave me before you left home.”

Saying, I heard it coming down,
felt the impact shaking the ground where
I stood not a half a mile away meant nothing;
the spontaneous combusted houses, black
billowing smoke in the stunned momentary
silence before the sirens that never seemed
to stop were nothing, nothing at all.

I had a dream the other night
I was walking down the street in the city
and a man came up to me
a skinny man, he lost his hair
and he walked right up to me
and told me no one cares anymore
and he took my hand
and asked me to care about him
"I'm not supposed to be like this" he said
"I'm not homeless, you know
I have AIDS"
and I wanted to tell him that
someone did care,
that he didn't have to die alone,
but you know how sometimes
you can't do things in your dream
no matter how hard you try,
well, my mouth was open, wide open,
but no words were coming out

you know, I'm afraid to go to sleep tonight
I'm afraid that a pregnant woman
will come up to me
and ask me for a hanger
and I'll tell her there has to be another way
and she'll say this is the way she chooses

I'm afraid a woman will come up to me
and tell me she doesn't want to live
because she's just been raped
and her world doesn't make sense anymore
and I'll tell her that she can make it
that one in three women are raped in their lifetime
and they all make it
and besides, the world doesn't make sense

to anyone
and she'll say that doesn't make me
feel any better

and I'm afraid that I won't be able to
walk down that city street again
without it looking like a Quentin Tarentino movie
where everyone is pointing guns at each other
yes, Mr. NRA
you are right
I feel so much safer
knowing everyone out there has a gun
that there are more gun shops than gas stations
and that everyone is so willing
to do the killing

people's rights continued

janet kuyper

alexandra rand
over my skin with such ease

The satin sheets were stained with blood.
Her face brushed up against the pillow.
The satin cut into her face as she tried to relax,
to stifle the tears. He walked out of the room.
"I always loved spring," she said as she
leaned over toward the flowerbed. There was no smell.
"I have to tell you something," he said.
She didn't listen to him. She touched
the daffodil to bring it closer to her.
The stem sliced her palm. The deep red blood
thickened as it trickled down her wrist.
She looked up. He was gone.

The tears burned into her skin.
The acid left behind a trail of scars
whenever it traced her jaw line.

The memories flooded her mind.
Every day, every hour, every minute,
every second, every moment.
The alcohol didn't help anymore.
She turned toward the kitchen, went to
the far right drawer, shuffled
through the forks, soup spoons,
butter knives... She found a knife
with a sharp enough edge, not to
kill, but only to hurt. She put
the knife to her wrist. She wanted
to take the memories out of her,
any way she could. She took the tip
of the blade and ran it along
the inside of her wrist. As the
blood began to trickle from the
cut, she put the knife down and
ran her fingers along the cut.
The blood, like silk, glided
over her skin with such ease.

chemotherapy

The slate-green of the cubicle
effuses into the air onto her
caressing her
soothing her
encouraging her

This green . . .
I grasp for the psychobabble about colors —
orange will stimulate our appetites
pink will make us all beautiful
green green green
green will will us to live

But she is oblivious to the crawling verdure
She is patient
She is tolerant
She is accepting the punctures of the I.V.
 like sacred stigmata;
she is forgiving the murdering cells

While I would see only black
and follow the creeds of Josef Mengele,
 Lizzie Borden, Hannibal the Cannibal, and
 Nicolae Ceausescu in a foamed-mouth frenzy
mutilating, decapitating, gorging, and bludgeoning
 every attempt at civility

I would beg and provoke
I would squirm and preen
for the delicious dread in my doctor's eyes
as he watched me fingerprint with me feces
 on pathetic sterile sheets

screams in america

— david caylor

I wasn't sure when it happened, but an old Cambodian lady had moved in across the hall. I had seen The Killing Fields six times, so I knew she was Cambodian. At first, I felt bad for her. She had come thousands of miles and landed in a one-room efficiency. There she was, packed in with cockroaches. There had to be 100,000 roaches in the building.

My address was 809 1/2 Second Avenue, Apartment 127. She was in apartment 128. The longer the address the worse the place. Nice places have addresses like 29 North Street.

I first saw her one afternoon as I came back from work. It was warm, ninety-three degrees. The walk home had beaten me. I only wanted to get inside, turn on the air conditioner and read the afternoon newspaper. I went through the buildings' front door, down a short flight of steps and saw her. She was standing in the hallway leaning up against the door. She looked like an old yellow whore working the building. I assumed I'd be able to walk right past her. As I got closer, she took notice and straightened up. I got out my key and thought I was home.

"Excuse me, sir," she said. she pulled out a map of the downtown area. It was actually a photocopy of a map. "Do you know where is Land-gon?" I pointed Langdon Street out on the map. It was as hot in the hallway as it was outside. I wasn't in the mood.

"If I go there will I be a Doctor?" she asked smiling up at me. Half of her teeth were rotten.

"I don't know if there is a doctor on that street or not." I turned toward my door and she followed me. She pointed down to Gorham Street.

"What street is this?" Her breath was terrible.

"Gorham."

screams in america david caylor

"If I go here and to here," she said moving her finger down Gorham to McKinley Boulevard, "will I be a Master?" I had no idea what she was talking about. She continued, "If I go here and here and here, I'll be a Doctor?" She seemed to be referencing academic degrees.

"I really don't know, lady." I finally got inside and turned on the air conditioning.

The next day wasn't as bad. She was standing out in the hallway again, but our conversation was brief.

"Where do you work?" she asked.

"At a law firm," I said.

"You're already out of law school?" I was surprised she even knew there was such a thing as law school.

"No, I work for the lawyers." I got past her and went inside. I had a horrible apartment. It was one room and a small shower. The walls were uncovered brick and the carpet was a worn out brown. I was constantly tearing pictures out of magazines to cover the brick. There wasn't anything else I could do. The place was so small that I had started buying the smallest versions of things. I had a coffee machine that would only make two cups at a time and an ironing board with three inch legs. I used a little toothbrush and those miniature bottles of shampoo. The smallness of everything made me feel like King Kong as I walked around the place.

A few hours after talking to her there was a knock. I walked to the door and looked out the peephole. Her wrinkled face stared back at me. The radio was on, so she knew I was there. I looked through the hole for a minute. She stood and stood and stood. Finally, I went back and sat on my mattress. She knocked a few more times and I ignored her.

The next day I grabbed a bag of trash to toss out and snuck out past her. I got to work, flipped through some spreadsheets and forgot about her.

It hadn't cooled off. It was ninety-one at 5:00 p.m. My walk home was five blocks, a little up hill. I was about halfway home when she came to mind. I turned a corner, went into the building and checked my mail. There was nothing but advertisements addressed to STUDENT/OCCUPANT. I keyed the main door and went down the hallway. My room was at the end.

I could already see her, a dark little figure with no shape. I became convinced that she was waiting specifically for me. There was no way around her.

"Sir, what does this mean?" She had the newspaper and was pointing at the legal notices. There were tiny paragraphs about people requesting zoning changes and the county was taking bids on truck equipment. "What does this mean?" she smiled as she asked again.

"They're to let people know what is going on," I said. She pointed down to a specific section.

"Tom Crawford, owner of property located at 2218 Seminole Highway, requests a rear yard variance to construct an addition onto his home."

I tried to explain that someone wanted to add onto his house and needed permission.

"What does this mean?" she asked again, pointing to 'construct and addition'.

"Make his house bigger." I could see she didn't understand.

"What does this mean? Where is it?" I had no choice but to turn away from her. I went inside and turned on the television and air conditioning, as usual.

This was crazy. I was her best friend in America. There were hundreds of rooms in the building and each room had one or two people in it. Still, she was the only person I ever saw. Once in a while I'd hear people shouting at each other or a dog barking, but that was it.

It was Friday and after it got dark I wanted to go get some supplies. I checked the hallway before leaving. It was clear. I did most of my shopping at Bucky's Corner Market. It was a little place that had one of everything in stock and was a popular even though the prices were high. I picked up two six packs, a magazine and a \$2.39 bag of pistachios. It was a few blocks from the store to home. The streets were filled with cars. Everyone was going out to the bars and clubs. I got to my building. If she tried to stop me, I would ignore her completely. I walked as quickly as possible. My paper bag was rustling. I imagined her sitting in her apartment and hearing me coming down the hall. She'd jump up, run out and start with more ridiculous questions. Maybe she would have a picture of some stranger and demand I tell her who it was.

"Who is this? Who is this? Where are they?"

None of this happened. I got into my room and started my weekend.

Monday morning I bagged some more trash, showered and got dressed for work. The law firm required us to be well dressed. I picked out a black and red tie and a white shirt. I opened the door to leave and she was already standing there. She was holding a bag of something as if she was moving in with me. She

screams in america david caylor

looked ugly and insane. It was about seven in the morning and I wasn't fully awake yet. I thought I might be dreaming. I decided to scream.

"AHHH-AHHHH!" She just stood there. I let another scream fly, "AHHH-AHHHH!" It wasn't a dream. I slammed and locked the door. I looked out the peephole. she just stood there. I thought she would understand screaming. People in Cambodia must scream. She stood there and I was trapped. I couldn't go out there and pretend like nothing had happened. Those had been loud screams. Then minutes went by. Every thirty seconds she reached up to gently knock. There wasn't anything to do. I was going to be late for work. Another ten minutes passed. I stepped back to sit on my mattress. I called work and told them I had an emergency errand to do and I would be an hour or so late.

There was a loud knock.

"This is the Madison Police, open the door." Someone had heard the screaming. It would be hard to explain why a twenty-four year old blonde man was afraid of a ninety pound, unarmed woman. I got up and answered the door. The cop was in full uniform, cap included.

"What happened here?" he asked. I gave him the truth but stretched it.

"This lady's been harassing me," I said pointing at her.

"And?"

"This morning she just burst into my room and started making these sexual comments. I've told her to stop. This had been going on for a week, and like I said, this morning she just burst in."

"What was the screaming for?" he asked.

"I was telling her to get out." The cop went over and spoke to her. He'd ask a question and she would say "yes" or "no". We stood out in the hallway for quite some time. I hoped that my story would hold up.

The cop started lecturing her, in English. I'm not sure how much she understood. He was telling her to stay away from me.

"She's not going to bother you anymore and you aren't going to scream at her," the cop said. "I could take you both in next time." I nodded and agreed to the deal. We went back to our rooms and the cop left the building. I waited a few more minutes and went to work.

I don't know what she did next, if she cried or if she was angry. I saw her around the building once in a while for a few weeks, and then she was gone. She either died or moved out.

scarcely a whisper

debra purdy kong

Adrianna knew she was being followed. She'd noticed the car shortly after she left the schoolyard; a white Datsun with rust on the fenders and a dented driver's door. Since she baby-sat for half of the families on this street, help was nearby.

The car pulled up beside her. Adrianna glanced at a face surrounded by dark, curly hair and a graying beard. She stopped, then smiled with recognition, until reality swept a warm, cautious flame over her back.

"How are you, sweetheart?" he asked hesitantly.

She stared at her father's pouchy, anxious eyes. He'd walked out on her mom three years ago, and Adrianna hadn't seen him since. She and mom had moved into a small apartment, leaving no forwarding address who'd give it to him. She wondered how he knew which school she went to.

"Can I give you a lift home?" he asked.

Adrianna hugged her schoolbooks. She wasn't sure she wanted to talk to him; yet, she couldn't pretend he wasn't there. "I guess so."

In the car, she noticed how the wrinkles cut across his forehead and down his face. He was thinner than she remembered.

"How's school going?", he asked, his voice suddenly cheerful.

scarcely a whisper debra purdy kong

She cleared her throat. "Fine."

"You must be in grade eleven?"

"Yeah."

He paused for several seconds. "Are you still studying ballet?"

"I quit last year. Mom couldn't afford the lessons." She remembered how he would promise to attend her recitals, then never show up. She supposed he just wanted to make conversation.

"Are you involved with any sports or clubs at school?"

"No, I work at McDonalds. It keeps me busy."

"Good." He pushed in the car lighter, then reached for the cigarette tucked behind his ear. "We live in a house about thirty miles from here. A friend gave us a good deal on the rent for looking after his property."

Adrianna was tempted to ask if he lived with the woman he'd dumped her mother for, or whether this was somebody new. On the other hand, why should she care?

"Do you still have the cats?" he asked, dangling the cigarette from his mouth.

Adrianna gripped her books. "The landlord wouldn't let us keep them."

The morning they took their three spoiled, old cats to the animal shelter, she'd hated her father for refusing to pay support. They had to sell the house and most of the furniture.

"We have a menagerie." Her father reached for the lighter. "Five cats, two dogs, several guinea pigs, and a chicken."

Adrianna wanted him to ask about mom; she wanted to tell him about the two jobs she worked to make ends meet.

"Do you know what you'll do after you graduate?"

"Get a job in an office."

"Sounds like a smart plan," he replied, then paused. "I've been doing some contracting work here and there, but the housing market's lousy these days."

Every turn her father made brought them closer to her apartment building. She wouldn't be surprised if he knew which suite was theirs. He could have had

a detective find them. As he pulled into the parking lot Adrianna thought about inviting him inside, just to show them how they lived; but her dad reeked of cigarette smoke and mom would notice the smell when she came home. Besides, a longer visit wouldn't change anything.

"Thanks for the ride," she mumbled.

"My pleasure."

Adrianna saw his anxiety, and something else; pain maybe, or a little guilt. She remembered good times as a child: picnics, amusement parks, and visits to her grandparents. She missed her grandparents so much.

"How are Gram and Gramps?" she asked, hoping to sound casual.

"Just fine. They'd love to talk to you."

She sent them Christmas cards every year, with no return address, at her mother's insistence.

He father jolted down an address and phone number on the back of a Visa receipt, then handed the paper to her. "Keep in touch, okay?"

Adrianna opened the driver's door; her cheeks burned as she turned to him. "Why did you come here?"

His gaze was solemn. "Because I miss you." He started to reach for her hand, then stopped. "It was good seeing you again, sweetheart."

"Bye." Her voice was scarcely a whisper. She stepped into the cool, soggy leaf smell of autumn.

He backed the car out of the parking spot, then waved. Smiling pensively, Adrianna waved back, then slowly turned around, feeling as if she'd left all her energy in the car. The second she entered the apartment, the tears began to spill. She dropped her schoolbooks on the coffee table, then sat down.

Sometimes, just before drifting off to sleep, she could almost feel her favorite cat jump on her bed, the curl up by her legs. Her father would never know how much she missed her pets. Until his rusted white Datsun drove away, she'd never known how much she missed him too. She tucked the Visa receipt in her pocket.

she hurt she laughed

hurt/cold

gabriel athena

him	snow
again	ice
complaining	ground
something	She
like	walked
before	grass
like	leaves
again	crack
She	water
kitchen	frozen
splash	hurt
cold	cold
water	She
face	walked
she	field
walked	She
door	sat
jacket	She
keys	smiled
walked	She
out	laughed
She	She
walked	watched
cold	her
empty	breath
field	freeze
November	She
first	hurt
	cold
	she
	laughed

a morning in rome

daniel mayland

I woke up blinking in a pool of yellow sun, with Linda still asleep in the bed to the left of mine. I wasn't sure whether to perceive her as the person I had worked with for the past two weeks or the person I had been intimate with the night before, and I hated the uncertainty. At the time I was only nineteen, working in Europe for the summer.

When I got up to use the bathroom the motion of my body leaving the bed caused her to stir, so I stopped. Her eyes were open and focused on me.

"Sorry, I hope I didn't wake you up again," I said nervously.

"I was already awake, just lying here."

I smiled awkwardly and waved to indicate I was on my way to the bathroom.

"What are we going to do about breakfast?" she asked, through the door.

"I don't usually eat breakfast," I said, "but I'll go with you if you want." Breathe slowly, I thought. I turned on the shower and waited for the water to heat up. The pressure was decent and I stood with my head bowed, letting the hot stream massage the back of my neck. The steam helped to relax me.

When I start to panic in situations like these, I often try to calm myself by thinking of my own death. I try to transport myself fifty years into the future and picture myself on a hospital bed. I have no hair, there are tubes coming out of my nose, and I am dying. Knowing that I will one day die helps put daily pressures in perspective. I try to keep a balance between my personal neuroses so that ideally they all cancel each other out. When I get to the point that the thought of death genuinely begins to disturb me, I switch over to my problems in the present.

I finished showering and dressed in clothes I had brought with me to the bathroom. When I came out into the main room I glanced at Linda sitting on her bed, waiting for me to get out of the shower. She looked pretty, more attractive to me than she had ever been before. I wished at the time that I hadn't thought so, but I knew inside that's what I felt. I didn't say anything to her as I walked to my side of the room and started packing my bag. Linda went into the bathroom.

When she came out of the shower, the heat had flushed her face so that her lips

a morning in rome daniel mayland

were exquisitely defined and I remembered the way the natural fragrance of her body drew me to her the night before.

"How are you feeling?" she asked. "You were pretty drunk last night."

"I'm okay."

"You know you don't have to go to breakfast with me if you don't want to. You could stay here and sleep more if you like."

"I'll be fine, I'm not tired. We got a good sleep last night."

"I slept well." She paused. "I had a good time at dinner. We were lucky to find that restaurant. It was good to just sit down and relax for a while."

"Yeah." I nodded a half-hearted consent as if the dinner meant nothing to me. It was much harder to talk to her than the night before.

Linda brushed her hair and then we paid for the room. Across the street was a little store crammed full with meats, cheeses and fresh vegetables. In the corner were tow tables and a few old chairs with stuffing coming out of their seats. Linda bought a liter of water and a whole pineapple. I had only a coup of coffee, but accepted when she offered me chunks of her fruit. The pineapple was succulent and cool. I ate it slowly and savored the taste of the heavy juice, avoiding her stare throughout the breakfast.

"Do you still want to go to Florence today?" she asked. It was the weekend. The night before, after a few bottles of wine, we had agreed to take a day trip up to Florence. "Maybe it would be easier to go someplace closer."

"Sure, whatever you want."

She stared at me intently for several seconds. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"It doesn't have anything to do with last night?"

"No. Well . . .," I hedged, "I'm just, I'm not good at these things."

"Oh." There was a painful silence.

"Then why did you put your arm around me?"

"I don't, I don't know, I'm sorry . . ." I stammered. I couldn't think right. I felt like a pervert.

"Relax," she said, "I'm not out to get you. Sometimes you get so wrapped up in your own little work that you're completely unapproachable. Let's just forget about it and try to have a good time." She made eye contact with me.

"Okay," I said.

"Do we understand each other here?"

"Yeah," I said, even though I didn't think that we did.

the theater

stacey miller

It was too early for anyone else to be at school yet. Shawn always tried to arrive early enough to make a stop in the bathroom. Today, as it was everyday, he looked into the mirror and realized that he could see himself reflected in the glassy surface. Why then, if he was visible in the mirror, could no one else but his teachers see him? Deep inside, Shawn knew that the others' blindness was self-inflicted. They chose not to see him. Nevertheless, each morning he stopped to make sure that he hadn't finally taken that final step to invisibility. Today, especially, he wanted to make sure that the others could see him.

He sat down on the floor beside his books and reached inside his binder. He pulled out the new toy he had purchased from the guy who lived on the corner of his street. It was cold to the touch. Shawn knew that Death lived inside it and as he held this precious object in his lap, he felt the power surge inside him. Oh, his classmates would see him this morning!

The bell signaling the start of class rang and Shawn placed his dark toy back into his binder. He put on his smiling mask and slowly walked to class. He was bumped into by many of the students who were rushing to class. It no longer hurt him when the corner of a binder jabbed cruelly into his back or someone trodded on his feet. He was used to the physical pain of his invisibility. It was the emotional scars that refused to heal. He tried so hard to matter, to fit in, but nothing he did was remarkable enough to be noticed.

Shawn sat in his seat and placed his binder on top of his desk. He knew that his fellow classmates were finally going to see him today. Oh yes, today he had

the theater stacey miller

something in mind that would make all of them stand up and take notice! Finally, he had thought of a stunt that would make him the most talked-about student in the whole school!

His teacher stood and announced that today was the day they would present their projects on Classical Greek Theater. Shawn smiled. He had truly enjoyed reading Sophocles' plays. Shawn loved the irony of Oedipus. Irony and satire were Shawn's bread and butter. He had written many poems about the cruel ironies of life. His presentation was centered around ironies in the Greek Theater. He had only one example of irony but it was all he needed.

Finally, his teacher announced his name. Shawn stood up, carried his books to the podium at the front of the class and opened his binder. He kept his toy hidden under a sheet of paper. Turning, he wrote "Ironies in Greek Tragedy" on the blackboard, making sure that the chalk shrieked across every inch of the black surface. He faced the class again and saw that, even though he was standing right in front of them, the class was still blind. They fidgeted with their books, whispered to each other and wrote furiously on little pieces of paper. None of them were looking at Shawn. However, he wasn't worried that they'd miss his presentation. His toy would make them see.

Slowly he lifted the gun from his binder. It felt even colder than it had in the bathroom. Shawn experienced a wave of power as he realized that he was about to show these puny kids that their lives were worthless.

Someone in the back of the classroom gasped. It was his teacher. Shawn smiled warmly at her as he lifted the gun slightly higher. The silly bitch in the middle row who always snapped her gum in class suddenly screamed. The idiot who sat near the back looked up, started to laugh, then suddenly stopped as he realized that the gun in Shawn's hand was not a toy. This was no joke.

As Shawn looked around he saw fear and astonishment in the faces of his classmates. He looked closer and saw that, now that the students could see him, they were wondering who the hell he was.

Shawn pressed the gun against his head, feeling the bitter cold of the metal seep through his hair. He took a deep breath, smiled at the quiet girl in the front row, and pulled the trigger.

in sickness and for worse

ann alexander

Muzak played softly in the background, James Galway's flute with Henry Mancini's "Days of Wine and Roses." Other tunes followed one after the other unannounced and hardly noticed, just skimming the edges of conscious thought, long-ago songs like muted memories fading with time but never completely forgotten.

The early morning sun broke through a partially drawn shade to bring light into the darkened room. An aged man, having dozed off in his tattered green rocker, was suddenly awakened by the brightness and warmth. He blinked several times as he slowly opened his eyes, pale blue but clouded now with cataracts. His cherrywood pipe had gone out while he slept and had fallen from his lips, spilling tobacco in his long beard and onto his belly. He took pride in his full, white beard and brushed himself clean as he sat upright. His hair, having thinned on top, was allowed to grow long and curl onto his shoulders.

"It's time to take your pills, Bunny," the old man said to a frail little woman lying in bed under the window opposite him. The sunlight had bypassed her and she lay in the half-sleeping state of the elderly. Bunny was his wife. She was startled to full wakefulness by his announcement.

"I don't want to take those damn pills," Bunny objected with mild anger, her body too weak to protest loudly. A stroke had left her paralyzed on one side and she spent her days passively counting hours, waiting for some unknown event which never occurred.

"They're too hard for me to swallow, Bear," she whined. "You know that. "Bear" was the name she used for her husband.

"I'll crush them like I always do," Bear said in exasperation as he struggled to get up from his rocker, balancing unsteadily on an aluminum walker. "Do you want

in sickness and for worse ann alexander

chocolate or vanilla pudding?" He asked as if having such a choice represented some kind of control in a captive situation.

"Oh, yuck." Bunny made a sour face. "It all makes me gag."

"Then chocolate it is," dictated Bear. He worked his way carefully into the kitchen area where he prepared his wife's medicine. His knees hurt from arthritis as he walked and he favored his right hip since he'd broken it two years before. Bunny had been strong then and after his surgery she had nursed him through his convalescence.

Medicine and pudding mixed, Bear came to his wife's side. Using the walker once again for balance, he leaned over the bed and gently spoon-fed the mush to his Bunny. Her mouth drooped on the left side and some of the pudding spilled through her lips. He wiped it clean with the edge of his shirt.

Bear remembered the first time he fed Bunny. It was soon after the Great War when they were just teenagers on a picnic by the river. He had paid thirty-five cents for that lunch, out bidding Jimmy Crawford and Bill Walker. The owners of the baskets were supposed to be a secret but Bunny had discreetly whispered a description of her basket to him before the bidding began. So they shared a secluded lunch by the water's edge, away from the curious eyes of the other noisy picnickers. He recalled the lunch in detail—cold fried chicken, biscuits, grapes, fruit punch from a jar—and how they had teasingly fed each other bits of food with their fingers. Later they shared their first kiss. Love was young and she felt so vulnerable and soft in his arms, like a bunny.

His thoughts returned to the present when Bunny began to spit and cough. He'd fed her too much too fast again but she quickly recovered, having taken all the pudding along with her pills.

"I don't know why I have to take all this medicine," Bunny said when she stopped coughing.

"It will make you better," he responded with this simple explanation.

"I'm not going to get better," she said with defeat in her voice. "I might as well be dead."

"No!" Bear shouted in sudden anger. "I'll not let you talk that way. I can take care of you."

He still needed her. He needed her strength, old and weak as she was. He needed her laughter, though it was gone from her life. He needed her to be there, even if that's all she could do. He needed a purpose in his life and that was as her pro-

tector. Yes, he still needed her.

Bunny was unaffected by her husband's sudden outburst, accustomed to it after all these years. He was still Bear, strong, commanding and taking charge. But he could not control time and he was weakening as she was weakening. How long could they go on? Her mind went back in time as she recalled fondly their early courtship days, stolen kisses, secretly planned chance encounters. She remembered passionately one long-ago October after the Harvest Dance when he first claimed her as his own. He seemed so strong and powerful then, like a bear. He promised he'd always take care of her.

The rest of the morning was spent in silence until their noon meal was delivered by a county agency that provided assistance to homebound elderly people. It guaranteed them at least one hot, healthy meal a day. For some it was the only one they received. Bear set his meal aside in order to help Bunny. Fighting with the wrapper, he spilled some of the preheated contents on-to his hand.

"God damn these things!" He cursed. "Why can't they make it easier for us?"

Inside was a slice of roast beef, corn on the cob and a creamed vegetable. When he began to slice the meat, Bear found it to be tough and gristly. He threw down the knife.

"How the hell do they expect you to eat this food!" he bellowed as Bunny waited passively for her dinner. "You can't chew this meat. And corn on the cob?" He dipped his finger in the creamed vegetable and tasted it. "Too salty," Bear proclaimed as he took away the whole platter. "You're not supposed to have salt. I'll have to fix you something myself."

Bear was in the kitchen a long time and he became tired and breathless after scrambling up some eggs. It was difficult for him because he couldn't stand without support and he teetered precariously on his walker. He was irritable when he finally brought the plate to his wife. Muzak still played lazily on the air, a watered-down version of an old Beatles' tune.

"I'm tired of that sleepy mush for music," Bunny complained then added lightly, "I want to hear some dancin' tunes."

"Why?" Bear snapped. "You can't dance."

The pain on Bunny's face was instant, expressing a blow to her spirit and she couldn't respond. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Bear was immediately ashamed of what he'd said. "Please forgive me," he begged. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

in sickness and for worse ann alexander

He reached for her hand which was lifeless in his grasp but the damage had already been done, a wicked reminder of what they'd become. She turned her head away from him.

"I've hurt her again," he agonized to himself, "With harsh and thoughtless words."

He loved her still after all these years and depended on her love in return. But Bunny refused to eat the scrambled eggs offered to her and Bear returned, defeated, to the green rocker, deep in his own private pain.

"But it's true," he thought to himself. "We can't dance anymore. Why pretend?" He answered his own thoughts. "Because pretending is all we have now. We can only pretend to live. We can't dance; we can't love; we can't care for ourselves anymore and I am unable to be her protector. All we give each other now is pain and heartache."

Their bodies had failed them but refused to die. In his despondency Bear knew what he must do. He sadly yet tenderly watched his Bunny as she faded into a light sleep. Her body still looked vulnerable and soft to him but he could not bring himself to take her with him at this time. Bunny could join him later. Someone else, more capable than he, would have to be her protector now. Bear rose heavily from his rocker and made his final walk into their darkened, unused bedroom.

The sound of the gunshot awakened Bunny. Her muscles tensed and her heart pounded rapidly as a stab of pain sliced through her body. She looked for Bear in his green rocker but saw it was empty, the only sign of life its slow abandoned rock working its way to a stop.

"Bear!" She called out but received no answer.

Oh, God! What has Bear done? The realization left her breathless, her mind in an uproar screaming wordlessly in anguish. "I'm all alone now," she thought frantically. "Who will take care of me?"

Her body began to shake and her lungs heaved in uncontrollable sobbing. She cried herself to exhaustion and thought of her husband, fallen in the other room, and his final outrageous attempt at control.

"I love you, Bear," she whispered hoarsely one last time.

violation?

ben whitmer

I and my uncle were leaning against a crooked wooden fence. My uncle smoking a cigarette, me with a twig in my mouth. I didn't know why I was chewing the twig, I'd just seen others do it and I liked the way it looked.

The fence enclosed a small grazing area that had never been used. It came with the lopsided barn that sat on the other side of the field. My parents had built the log cabin behind us. In the middle of the field my mother and father were gesticulating wildly in the midst of some gaping argument. I and my uncle, we were trying not to watch. "That field needs mowing," my uncle said.

I shaded my eyes against the bristling sun and stared out at the field, jotting down each inch of it before resting my eyes on my parents, then moved them deliberately onward after seeing them. My mother had a finger underneath my father's nose and was shaking it furiously. She was wearing jeans and a sky blue halter top with no bra. Every shake of her finger set her jiggling, her breasts threatening to escape the spaghetti straps.

I was embarrassed for her. "It hasn't rained in a while," I said. "We won't have to mow it unless it rains."

"Yeah," said my uncle, stubbing his cigarette out on the top fence-rail. "I guess it does look dead." He clapped me on my shoulder. "Why don't we go in and get some ice cream?"

I gripped the fence and rocked myself up against it, my chin barely reaching the top. "I think I'll stay out here."

"Maybe I will too, then," my uncle said.

My father stood stoically, his work-scarred hands clasped beneath his arm-pits. My mother grabbed at the neck of his white t-shirt and pulled at it but it didn't give. She slapped his chest and screamed so loudly that me and my uncle could hear her

violation? ben whitmer

voice shrilling, but not loudly enough that we could hear the content. My father spat on the ground and rubbed his spittle into the dirt with a boot.

"What say we go get that ice cream?" my uncle said in a steady voice, and lit another cigarette. I didn't even bother to glance at him. I couldn't help staring undisguised at my mother and father.

There are blinds, but they leave a crack around the edge of the window that a rim of sunlight glints through. The furnishings are tasteful and were obviously picked out with care. The couch, love seat, and chair coordinated in color and size. Sitting well together, but at odds with the cheap apartment. Spilt drinks and water-rings stain the coffee table and a half full whiskey glass is setting a fresh blemish. Two brass lamps are on the floor, their shades cockeyed and dusty.

She is sitting easily on the love seat, but suddenly feeling the cruelty of that same ease, she squirms wittingly. She unloops her purse strap and sits the purse on the floor.

He doesn't feel at all easy on the couch, but knowing he should, he relaxes back. "Get your purse off the floor," he says.

She picks the purse up and holds it over the table, moving it from place to place, seeking a dry spot. She grows agitated and drops the purse by her side, on the love seat. "Where are the paper towels?" she asks, standing.

"I don't have any." He holds the glass up to take a drink, and the smell of the Ten High pulls at his stomach. He forces it down and slants the glass at the purse. "It's fine there." She crosses her long legs, uncrosses them, stretches them out, and then reels them in, mindful to keep her knees together. "You should use coasters."

He hee-haws outrageously. "Fuck you and what I should use," he says.

She looks down at her feet and softly implores, "don't be angry." Her shoes are impeccable. They match the love seat.

"I just got off work," he says. He drops the glass on the table and cracks his aching knuckles. "I'm gonna change." He gets up and walks into his bedroom.

She runs her hands over her face, pulling them down hard, gripping at her eye sockets and cheeks. Then she quivers with a scrupulous little shrug of recovery and pulls a tiny mirror from her purse to check her makeup.

He catches her with the mirror in hand. Seeing him, she starts and jams it back into her purse. He has changed into cut off shorts and a black t-shirt. She notices his legs are tanned and the tan irritates her. She gets the mirror back out and com-

pletes her inventory of powders. He stares at his whiskey glass, his face lined and exhausted. "What are you doing here?" he asks.

"I wanted to see how you were doing."

He holds a sip of the whiskey in his mouth like mouthwash. "You could've told me to my face," he says, swallowing. "I wouldn't have stopped you."

"You would've." She completes her touch-up and returns the mirror. "Besides," she says, glancing at his tanned legs, "I didn't think you'd mind that much."

"You didn't think I'd mind?" His eyebrows furrow and his jaw muscles knot. "You didn't think I'd fucking mind?"

"You didn't seem like you would mind."

"I lost my fucking hair," he says. "My fucking hair was falling out of my head." He turns his head and shows her a bald patch just beneath and behind his left temple.

She wishes she had her mirror back out, but she knows she can't get it. "You don't have to swear at me," she says. "I didn't come to be yelled at."

He leaps up and whips his glass at her. It skips off the back of the love seat and shatters against the wall. "FUCK YOU," His breath comes in and out whiskey-deep. He drops his head, confounded, and swigs from the bottle.

She waits a clean minute, grabs her purse, and bolts for the door. He swings around and grabs her collar. Her head thrashes back and her legs keep going, up and into the air. He yanks her in and clasps both arms around her stomach. "You didn't think I'd mind?"

She bursts out crying. "You don't," she whimpers. "Look at your legs."

He spins her around gently and holds her face in his hands. He wipes at her tears with his thumbs. Then he presses in and kisses her.

She doesn't resist. She gives a throaty sigh and relaxes against his chest.

"There's no need for you to watch this," my uncle said.

"Well," I said, "I'm gonna watch it."

Something was said that was without return, something irrevocable and tangible. My mother and father stood in perfect silence. Then my father, almost languidly, punched her in the temple and she sagged to the ground. He caught her in mid-fall by the hair and wound it up in his fist. I stared at them without blinking until my eyes started to tear. My father held her suspended by her hair, her crumpled form sagging unconscious in a half sitting position.

violation? ben whitmer

My arms were thin, prepubescent. They looked like pathetic excuses. Half arms on a half man. I examined my uncle's and they were muscled, defined, his knuckles flattened by bar fights. My father walked my mother, dragging her by her hair towards the barn. She awoke and howled with pain. Her feet came up beneath her and she did a sick crab-walk behind his fist. My uncle leaned tiredly against the fence, his cigarette dangling from his hand.

"You could do something," I said.

The uncle's face crowded with ache, and then with reason. He reached to grip my shoulder, but stopped short and didn't. "There's nothing to do."

The rain pitches over her, whips her hair down and leaves it lank, soaks her dress and flattens it over her body.

A bottle of Southern Comfort dangles from her hand, slipping occasionally from her fingers. Her hands clutch sporadically to catch it, then relax again. And again she nearly loses the bottle.

She spiritlessly crosses one bare foot over the other and begins a half spin. Her arms lift and stretch out from her sides. They come down again, her feet uncross again. Her bottle hand clenches suddenly and knocks slowly at her forehead. She can't remember why she's out, she knows it's raining. Her arms slip around her sides and she feels like she should cry. So she begins to, softly, her head turning away from the farmhouse behind her. The bottle covers her face.

The sobbing ceases as abruptly as it began. She knuckles away the tears and chokes out a giggle. The world tilts a bit under her feet and she tilts with it. Her arms fly up in an effort to regain her balance, her feet cross one over the other, and she begins to spin. Slowly at first, then in a frenzy, working with the tilt.

The porch light flips on and she tumbles to a halt. Her legs whirl from under her and she collapses with a mad screaming laugh in the grass.

He steps out the screen door and stands for a minute on the porch-step. He is shirtless and bearded. Without a bottle in his hand.

She crouches in the grass and beckons him with a finger. He walks to her. "Get up," he says.

She kicks him in the shin. "You get down."

His head hangs, his legs fold, he places his hands on his knees. "Come to bed," he says, "it's late." He wipes at the rain dripping down his cheeks.

"Oh," she says, "you want me in bed." Playfully she kicks at him again.

"I don't have time for this shit." As he says it her foot flies again. He grabs it

from the air and jerks her leg brutally. She sprawls forward, her kicking foot in his hand, her other twisted irregularly beneath her. He releases her.

"Fuck," she says, and rolls over in the grass. She drops the bottle and massages her ankle. "You shit. You broke it."

"It ain't broken," he says, and picks up the Southern Comfort.

She stands and gingerly sets her weight on it. She flinches at a burst of pain. Then tries again, easing her body down. The pain slows at the pressure. "Fuck you," she says.

"I gotta work tomorrow." He swings the bottle away as she makes a lunge for it. "Can't we have a fucking night off?"

"No." she says, making another pass at the bottle. "We can't have a fucking night. Tonight's a drinking night." She stands on tip-toe and reaches for the bottle he holds above his head. "Maybe tomorrow I'll fuck you."

He drops the bottle on the grass, turns, and starts for the door.

She snatches up the bottle. "You think I'd fuck you?" She fumbles with the cap, but can't get it unscrewed. "YOU THINK I'D FUCK YOU?"

He stops in front of the door and looks at her coldly. She has the bottle stuck in her mouth and is trying to get it unscrewed with her teeth.

He shakes his head and moves for the door-handle.

"FUCK," she screams, and throws the bottle, still capped, at him. It glances off his shoulder and hits the farmhouse's wall, without breaking.

He stoops and takes it in his hand. She is standing, her hands held over her giggling mouth.

There is a red mark on his shoulder and already the beginning of an angry bruise. He raises up and walks toward her.

She backs away, foot over foot, glancing over her shoulder and checking for pitfalls. He reaches her and she stops. She runs her fingers over his face and says gently, "I wouldn't fuck you if you were the last man on Earth."

He punches her square in the jaw. Her head whips backwards and she crashes to her knees. He starts to shake, incredulous at the blow. He stares dumbly at his fist.

Blood is lining her chin from a split lip. She licks it and giggles up at him, her hands gripping and twisting the hem of her dress. She jumps up and he steps back. "Oh," she says, stumbling to the front door. "Oh." She sticks out her tongue at him. "That won't make me fuck you." She gropes open the screen door and

violation? ben whitmer

darts inside.

He takes the yard in four long steps, twisting off the bottle's cap, unbuckling his pants.

My mother's feet scabbled for earth, her shoulders twisted and wrenched at his grip. She saw the barn's door and her fighting redoubled. My father's face set even harder and he gave her one good yank, out of the field and through the barn door.

"You gotta do something," I said.

My uncle didn't move except for his cigarette hand, and his drags were harsh and quick.

The field was vicious and silent, like razor blades wrapped up in cheese cloth. The air moved past us, a simmering magnet pulling at our heads. Every blade of grass stood at stupid and insane attention.

"You could fucking do something," I said.

My uncle grimaced at my words. He slammed the cigarette in his mouth for one last hit, and tasting filter, he flicked it out in the field. "You'll understand when you get older," he said.

I started inwardly, but I'd like to think now that I kept my outward composure. I thought, you are fucking crazy. Then I looked at my uncle and I saw every muscle in his body pulling out and veined. His jaw was wired up and his lips were ticking. You are fucking crazy, I thought again.

We were noiseless and we waited like that, every nerve on end for anything. Nothing came. Nothing drifted our way. Even the dry wind ceased.

You are fucking crazy, I thought. But I didn't say it.

I kept my mouth shut.

They are lying in bed together. The bed only a mattress on the floor. The closet light is on and is the only source of light in the room. He has a pack of Lucky Strikes by his head on the pillow, and is smoking one, ashing in an empty beer bottle.

She is trying to read a music magazine, but keeps closing it and staring at the ceiling. She rolls the magazine up and twists her hands around it, then unfurls it and returns to the reading.

He takes the last hit off the cigarette and drops the butt into the bottle. He blows the smoke he's just inhaled out in a long stream that is caught by a current from the open window and sent back towards her.

"That really stinks," she says.

He grunts and pushes the pack of cigarettes off the pillow.

"That really fucking stinks," she says. "Couldn't you smoke outside?"

He rolls over and slides up against her, drifting his arm over her stomach.

"You could at least stop smoking in bed."

He rubs her stomach lightly, his fingertips playing around her rib cage, moving up towards her breasts, and then back just as he begins to feel the swelling.

"Quit," she says, picking up his hand and thrusting it aside. "I'm trying to read."

He moves still closer to her and runs his fingers up her leg and underneath her boxer shorts.

She drops the magazine in the crack between the bed and the wall. "You wanna fuck."

He turns over on his back and clasps his hands over his chest.

"You wanna fuck because you know after tomorrow you ain't going to for a while." She snorts derisively. "Is that it, you wanna fuck?"

He goes for her mouth to kiss her, guileful in his eyes. She pushes his face away with her palm. "Well," she says, "you shouldn't have been so careless fucking." She gets up and turns off the light, then steps out of the room to the kitchen for a glass of water. When she returns to the bed he's lying naked and erect.

"Go to sleep," she says. She takes a drink of the water and sets the glass at the foot of the bed. "You get no pussy tonight. And you know you won't be getting any for a couple weeks after."

He stands and flips the light on.

She purses her lips and breathes in and out hard. "You're not even really horny," she says. "You just want to get one in before tomorrow."

He lies still.

"Fuck you," she says, puts an arm over her eyes, and attempts sleep. He seizes her boxer shorts and pulls them down to her knees.

"Alright," she says, "you wanna fuck." She pulls her boxers off, then her underwear. He turns the light out.

She waits for him to get back in the bed. "Use a condom," she says.

His face contorts inquisitively. His hand roams over and clutches a breast.

"You're going to use a condom," she says again.

I'd like to tell the truth, but I don't remember much.

I might have changed the names, but that shouldn't detract from any truth. My uncle might not have been my uncle, but he was my hero. I own a picture he paint-

violation? ben whitmer

ed. It doesn't hang in my apartment. He's still one of my heroes.

I woke up this morning and I couldn't breathe. I haven't seen the man who might be my father since I was fifteen. I saw him every day, I need to see him now. I awoke this morning and he was stuck in my head.

I don't even have a fucking picture.

I want to tell the truth, but I don't remember it. I have fragments and I fill in the rest. I hope you can understand that. It might not have been so brutal, I might have invented this scene and all similar, but I saw everything I saw.

I awoke this morning and it was everything this morning was.

I ate Ramen and drank coffee. I turned on the radio and it was nothing to me. I got dressed and went to a shit restaurant where I wash dishes.

At the job I had to talk to people and I had no idea what to say. I thought about getting home and writing a story that told the truth.

I woke up this morning and all I wanted was to tell the truth, but everyone I met stopped me. I waded through person after person who looked on fire with ache. They met me with lies and self mutilation. They bored me into a dumb senseless stupor with their drama and their own scenes. Someone offered me a line in the bathroom.

I might have done it.

I awoke this morning and I had something to say. I drank a cup of coffee and I wrote some of it down.

Now I'm home after the shit job. I've got to get this finished before I can stare at the walls and get drunk enough to pass out.

I don't have the least bit of interest in my own scene, let alone anyone else's. Another dripping fist, another random word. I've heard them all and even said a few. This piece would probably be funnier if I switched just one word for one other.

So I might have. I won't let them despise me for that. I see the way they live.

I woke up this morning and I had a hangover because that's the only way I can sleep.

And for the record I'm not kept awake by any tortured visions. No deep pain to keep consciousness rolling. Sometimes I just need an alternative route to rest.

I need to remember that next time.

It's only vodka.

It's only a hangover.

for barb

mike lazar-chuk

I'd write you something
About chiffon air
But my life is unrefined
& love poems prove
Impossible as picking
Shit with birds
I'd rather write about
Rattle snake hides
& black cat moans
Mock hopes & foolish dreams
I'd rather devour you with cobwebs
Obscure you from society
Fill you with caustic sarcasm
Spin you an old crankcase daddy
Of a yarn about fading youth
Hot radio & dry bones
Tell you tales of coyote reckoning
Of death in unlit rooms of how dark
The night the young girl vanished
Draw you into the secrets of
Bad tasting mouths homosexual hands
& my son who lurks in the alley
I'd rather make fiery orations about
Rusty film cans fast drives
Through the abyss blood soaked bandages
& the fetus inside the earth
Take a Viking's funeral worth of
Pleasure reciting you the
Life & times history of every
Jerkwater Joe who's every splattered his brains
Against a dingy wall fed up with being
Bleak & bleary in some rat roach
Bottom rung down on rickety row
Hold your smooth hand ghostly
Leading you down that rubble
Strewn path of exaggeration to
Where lions guard the temple of
Insanity's big religion & dragons
Shoot metaphors through the
Laughing mouth of the sky
Make myself as clear to you as
A moon dog's blood
Clear as a bursting egg
In a jimson weed jungle
& if that isn't close enough to love
Close enough to modern love
I'll write you something impossible as
Picking shit with birds

& if that isn't close enough to love

where to go

alexandria raid

It was almost sunset, and there was no one on the beach. She went there just to see the sunset, just to try to calm herself down. She had to get away, she thought. She couldn't take it anymore. His affair. Her job. The kid's problems. Her weight. The vacuuming and dusting. So she went to the beach.

The waves gently lapped along the sandy shore, turning golden in color as the sun's rays darkened into a deeper and deeper red, into purple, into blue. A light breeze moved her hair like fingers running to the back of her head. An occasional sea gull flew along the shore. There was no one in sight. She sat there, momentarily in peace.

The breeze started to feel stronger and stronger, and she had to close her eyes from the burn of the wind and the sand. The sand ripped into her arms like tiny needles, piercing her skin. The waves grew higher and higher until they sounded like they were about to land on top of her. She finally opened her eyes. Her burning eyes saw that the waves were still only lapping on the shore. The sand had not moved. There was no breeze.

She stood up. She couldn't take it anymore. She took off her shoes and sprinted away

the state of the nation

janet kuypers

my phone rang earlier today
and I picked it up and said "hello"
and a man on the other end said,
Is this Janet Kuypers?
and I said, "Yes, it is, may I ask
who is calling?"
and he said, Yeah, hi, this is
George Washington, and I'm sitting here
with Jefferson and we wanted to
tell you a few things. And I said
"Why me?" And he said Excuse me,
I believe I said I was the one
that wanted to do the talking.
God, that's the problem with
Americans nowadays. They're so
damn rude. And I said, "You know,
you really didn't have to use
language like that," and he said,
Oh, I'm sorry, it's just I've been
dead so long, I lose all control
of my manners. Well, anyway, we just
wanted to tell you some stuff. Now,
you know that we really didn't have
much of an idea of what we were
doing when we were starting up
this country here, we didn't have
much experience in creating
bodies of power, so I could understand
how our Constitution could be
misconstrued

and then he put in a dramatic pause
and said,
but when we said people had
a right to bear arms
we meant to protect themselves
from a government gone wrong

we didn't have much experience

and not so you could kill
and innocent person
for twenty dollars cash
and when we said freedom of
religion we included the separation
of church and state because freedom
of religion could also mean freedom
from religion
and when we said freedom of speech
we had no idea you'd be
burning a flag
or painting pictures of Christ
doused in urine
or photographing people with
whips up their respective anatomies
but hell, I guess we've got to
grin and bear it
because if we ban that
the next thing they'll ban is books
and we can't have that
and I said, "But there are schools
that have books banned, George."
And he said Oh.

the state continued

janet kuypers

route 47-a

david staton

Route 47-A slips through the Wizner Valley before hooking into I-15 at Siler on one end and Route 111 in Gabner at the other. Two country lanes ferry tourists past quaint houses, a scenic river known for its steelhead, the Glenn Creek Steam Locomotive Museum and an umber-colored covered bridge. The same road carries other drivers past seasonal roadside fruit stands, low-lying pasture land and crops. For valley residents, the path brings them to jobs and houses in Jefferson, Siler and Brouhard counties. They call 47-A the main road.

People who live in the valley don't care for living along the main road. Out-of town gawkers craning for a view of the Wizner either tied up traffic or, racing through on their way to a connecting highway, left red and brown fur humps of deer, raccoon and skunk mashed into the road. And the bait-and-beer shops and the taverns - the C'mon Inn, the Evergreen, the Rusty Reel - turned the asphalt into a hot rod daddys' delight on Friday and Saturday nights with tail pipe sparks casting orange stars into the black. The corrugated guard rails separating river and road were splashed with blazes of GTO yellow, Mustang red and Super Nova black from drag racers who couldn't keep it between the lines.

If somebody got off the main road to go into Gabner they'd be on Sixth Street and motor by a handful of banks, a few cafes and filling stations, a half dozen stores, a dress shop, three groceries and four churches, during its eight-block run through the heart of downtown. Seventh Street, headed the other way, they'd find pretty close to a mirror image; a flat, gray, squat view.

Gabner was more than a wide spot in the road, but not by much. Maybe a double wide spot in the road. Most all the storefronts and what industry that was there seemed to have made some sort of unspoken agreement to stick to some kind of bad dress code. Most buildings looked to have been poured right out of a cement mixer, the rest of them looked as if they were made from cardboard and popsicle sticks. And the houses were a big vat of Quaker oats shaped into doughy boxes where people slept and ate. Brown and gray. Low and squat. It all kind of slipped into the road,

route 47-a david staton

slipped into the light posts, slipped into the sky. A brown paper bag of a town.

One main street into Gabner. One out. Both of them cross the river, which divides Gabner East and West. Street names of dead presidents, old money and freshwater fish snake north toward the foothills and south to farming communities.

Mostly what folks would see, or what they'd later remember seeing, were all the middle-aged men in khaki work shirts, Red Wing engineer boots and bright, blue jeans sitting under store canopies and on the post office steps, leaning against mail drop boxes at midday cradling bags of popcorn. A relaxed flow of yellow nuggets and Styrofoam cups of coffee moving from tattered leathery hands to Polident smiles. Usually the clumps of sway-backed men were surrounded by pigeons, stooping, pecking and pawing at the kernels that missed mouths between preening their gray, watery rainbow bands.

Most of the men had lived in Gabner all their lives. But they hadn't always lived on the main road. They'd had to move there when Southern Pacific had moved its operations north leaving them, as they put it, "without a paycheck, a pension or a pot to piss in."

Along 47-A, rent was cheap. Most of them had been at work for the railroad for so many years that the noise from the passing cars didn't bother them; your hearing usually started to go bad at the S.P. switchout and loading station right after your back went.

People passing through could still see the old station and staging area just off Sixth Street, the yellow Southern Pacific logo big as a house, faded a mousy yellow on one side. A few boxcars, graying wooden pallets and a collection of fuel tanks cluttered the area and nearby two engines hunkered down, steel dogs in the weeds, rust bubbling and coursing over their hips.

The former railroaders would sit eating and drinking, watching the cars drive by noticing the license plates and the dealer's frames to see who was coming through. They'd always crack a funny when they saw a plate from out of state or saw somebody with a crazy hairdo. They loved to flick shit at the hippies.

These exchanges were the one way sort. No one driving by ever heard the words the men said. People hardly ever rolled down their windows when they passed through Gabner. One street in. Left. One street out. Gone.

But every once in a while, a strange car would stop at the one-time railroad crossing by the old station, roll down the window and listen for noise coming down the track. Through heavy moist air, the smell of buttered popcorn made their teeth sweat.

The moment Walter Martin slammed the door, he felt surprised he had not let it close by force of its own weight. That would have been more like Walter, for he was a quiet, logical person, a computer programmer, who normally did not indulge in demonstrations of temper. In seventeen years he'd never even shouted at Joan.

Walter had walked out the door in quiet anger many times over the three years he'd known their marriage was disintegrating, so the instinctive, unintended act of slamming the door signaled to him a finality, like driving a nail through the surface of wet lumber. This time he would not go back.

The problem was not that Joan denied him sex but that she showed the same attitude as when doing dishes or laundry. To her, his erection was like a torn sock or an uncleared table—something that required her to perform a duty. And she always did her duty. Her life was one continuous duty.

Walter had once loved Joan and felt sorry for her now, but he no longer felt responsible; he had not done it to her. For three years he had failed to find a cause for Joan's inability to derive any pleasure, satisfaction, or enjoyment from life.

At first he thought it was the fault of her older sister who never married or even dated and, Walter figured, had apparently never experimented with or had any curiosity about the sexual act. Some people were just like that and there was no precise cause. It was just the way things happened. But no one, Walter realized, not even Joan, could be influenced by Catherine.

Two summers ago, Walter had concluded the problem was related to their daughter, who, then twelve, seemed suddenly aware of her own sexuality. Carolyn had inherited from him both her height and her skin that tanned so easily, and would spend every Saturday and Sunday afternoon either playing volleyball on the beach with the high school kids or water skiing behind some older boy's speedboat as it raced around the bay.

One of the reasons Walter enjoyed living by the water was the opportunity to see people having fun. After his own daily morning swim he would linger just to watch the little kids build castles in the sand and the men cast lures from the beach. He owned a small outboard runabout which he docked right at their bayfront condo. Carolyn had been skiing since she was eight and still went crabbing with him, though not as often as when she was younger. She was comfortable on the boat. She seemed naturally comfortable on the water. She could handle a small sailboat by herself and wanted a windsurfer for Christmas.

independence day j. kenneth sieben

The Fourth of July when Carolyn was thirteen was the first time Joan did not go with them to watch the fireworks. She said that she had a headache and the noise would make it worse. They had always gone by boat because it seemed more exciting than sitting in packed bleachers. Aunt Catherine would accompany them and Carolyn would usually invite her best friend of that summer.

Fourth of July was Walter's favorite holiday. He'd taught Carolyn that it was good for a family to enjoy themselves when in the midst of other people also enjoying themselves. They could have an evening swim, a picnic supper and a moonlight boat ride on any night, but to do these things in the sight and presence of other American families on the national holiday gave Walter a very special feeling. It was one of the deliberate steps he took to connect himself with the world. Joan never made connections. She could perceive only the noise, the expense, the drinking; she could not comprehend the human need for shared spectacle.

Carolyn did not show any disappointment that her mother wasn't coming. When Walter told her, she immediately—and correctly—assumed Catherine would likewise not come and asked permission to bring three friends. Walter agreed, not realizing two of them would be muscular sixteen-year-old boys. He didn't really mind; the idea had simply surprised him at first. On consideration, he knew his daughter was beginning a new phase of her life. She had always been a fun-loving kid, and now the range of her fun was going to expand. That was certainly nothing to fret about.

Joan would fret, he knew as soon as the boys arrived, and he was right. She raised no objections, only her eyebrows, but when he returned late that night to find her asleep over her knitting, he could still see the furrows in her forehead.

So the next Fourth of July when Joan said, "You know I don't go to the fireworks anymore," Walter declared his independence.

philosopher at the blue note

janet kuypers

he seemed so interested in philosophy, which seemed strange, sitting at a bar at about one-thirty in the morning, it didn't seem the time or place for philosophy. but i asked questions anyway, so do you believe in a god, and if so do you believe in a mono- or polytheistic religion? and he answered by saying that everyone has a god, whether it be their soul or an icon they pray to every night before they go to bed. and that it doesn't matter what form the god takes for a person, because the moral values are similar in most every religion, what matters is that we have a god of one sort or another. that most people don't pay attention to their spirituality, who they are or what they really want. no, they don't, i thought, and was amazed that this drunk man was able to formulate cohesive thoughts at two-thirty in the morning. but then, of course, he had to mention something about sexuality, and then i realized that it was all one long, drawn-out come on, then he asked me for my phone number and i gave him a fake one, and then he tried to kiss me, and i pushed him away and he ended up running out of the bar. so much for philosophy, i thought, and i went home once again, alone with my morals, or values, or whatever the hell you want to call them, wondering if there is anyone out there like me.

people don't pay attention

moving apart
geoff stevens

A small island
from which can be seen
the signs of occupancy
by men that frequent pubs,
the means to travel
to the bookshops,
the galleries of town.

A small island,
a river one perhaps,
is what a man requires
at times a place cut off
from strain and stress,
an island in Lough Erne-
its farmhouse surround
of lush grass thinned
by shallow soil
that barely covers
the foundation rocks
of Celtic past a place
where sheep roam
behind a fringe
of trees
which check the breeze,
the ruins that men left,
the tower pointing to
the heavens, the river flowing,
the color of blue Gillette,
past other islands;
islands stretching to
the ends of earth,
available for landing
should this one
seem inadequate.

i seem to know animals

alexandria rand

i seem to know animals. so here i am
in the middle of a cafe and there's this
dog here, it's the cafe owner's dog, i think,
and he's just walking around trying to get
some food from the tables and he stops and
looks at the nachos on my table. and he
looks at me. and i say, "oh, i know."
and he looked at me for a second, and
then he walked away.

oh i know