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2007 Spring Quiz and Quill Magazine

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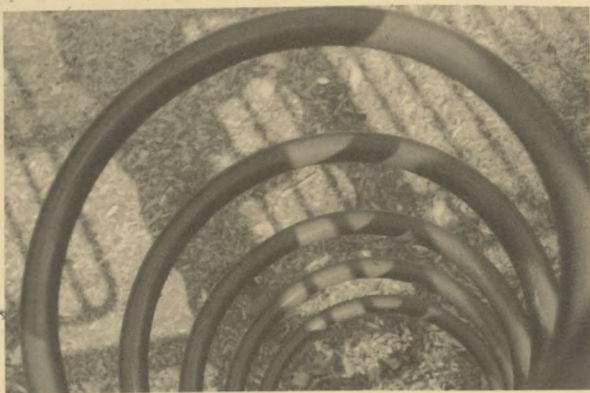
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Quiz and Quill 2007

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Quiz and Quill

Spring 2007

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Submission Note

Quiz and Quill prides itself on publishing the highest quality creative work. Therefore, every precaution is taken to ensure a writer's anonymity during the selection process. All identifying information is removed from the submissions and each manuscript is given a submission number. Only the advisor of Quiz and Quill knows the identities of those who submit work to Quiz and Quill until after staff members' selections are finalized.

Editor's Note

"what was it they said? Did you hear it? Can you remember?"

-- F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-up*

We gather here today (for within these pages---it is always today) in communal witnessing of these voices. Through photographs, poems, short stories, plays, screenplays, and essays, as readers, as people, we will hopefully connect with another voice.

I tip my dirty, red bandana one last time:

Thank you --- writers and artists, for submitting your works. You created this magazine. Thank you to everyone who participated as the staff for Quiz and Quill. Thank you to the English Department Chair, Dr. Paul Eisentstein. Finally, I extend an enormous thank you to Quiz and Quill's advisor, Dr. Shannon Lakanen.

These are the persons who continuously perform the difficult tasks that allow Quiz and Quill to not only live but thrive.

joshua j. bradley

2007 Writing Awards

Fiction

- First Place "Dust" by Katrina Pelow
Second Place "Rush" by Jackie Smith
Third Place "A Little Diddy" by Amber Robertson

Nonfiction

- First Place "How to Fold a Fitted Sheet" by Amber Robertson
Second Place "No Kids Land" by Jennifer Knox
Third Place "The House on Fulton Street" by Claire Parson

Poetry

- First Place "The Lady of the Hour" by Amber Robertson
Second Place "Mothers, Like Clouds in December" by Matt Dunham
Third Place "Clockwork Canary" by Josh Bradley

Religious Poetry

- First Place "Lucy's Letter" by Amber Robertson
Second Place "Meditation" by Vanessa Casella
Third Place "Grace, \$3 a Peck" by Amber Robertson

Playwriting

- First Place "Family Plot" by Jennifer Roberts
Second Place "Wrong Number" by Jennifer Roberts
Third Place "Eat, Live, Love" by Jennifer Knox

Newspaper Writing

- First Place "Bottoms Down" by Megan Moore
Second Place "Young American Voters MIA" by Sarah Jacobson

Historical Fiction

- First Place "The Journal of William Barker, Sr." by Vanessa Casella

Louise Gleim Williams Prize

- "The Lady of the Hour" by Amber Robertson

Contest Judges

Fiction Judge

Erin Flanagan, assistant professor of English at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, is the author of the story collection *The Usual Mistakes*, published by the University of Nebraska Press in their Flyover Fiction series. Her fiction has appeared in *Colorado Review*, *The Laurel Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Crazyhorse*, the *Best New American Voices* anthology series, and elsewhere.

Newspaper Writing Judge

Kimberly Adams-Francis has been a professional writer for over ten years, with several hundred publishing credits in both print and online mediums. For two years she wrote an award-winning column for *The Einkwell* entitled "Moments of Clarity." Currently she is working on her second book, *More Moments of Clarity*, and her first fiction trilogy.

Nonfiction Judge

Mary Quade earned her MFA from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her collection of poems *Guide to Native Beasts* won the Cleveland State University Poetry Center 2003 First Book Prize. She has been awarded an Oregon Literary Fellowship and an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence award. Her work has appeared in *FIELD*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *North American Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Isotope: A Journal of Literary Nature and Science Writing*, and others. She teaches creative writing courses at Hiram College.

Poetry/Religious Poetry Judge

Hayley Mitchell Haugen holds a PhD in 20th century American Literature from Ohio University and an MFA in poetry from the University of Washington, where she was awarded the 1995 Academy of American Poets Prize. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Cimarron*, *Columbia Magazine*, *The Charlotte Review*, *Kalliope*, *New Delta Review*, *Pearl*, *Rattle*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Spillway*, the *Southern Poetry Review*, *Wordwrights*, and elsewhere, and she has written numerous nonfiction books for teens published by Greenhaven Press/Lucent Books.

Playwriting Judge

Charles Smith, head of the Professional Playwriting Program at Ohio University, is a member of the Playwrights Ensemble at the Tony Award-winning Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago. His plays include *Denmark*, *Free Man of Color*, *Knock Me A Kiss*, *The Sutherland*, *Freefall*, *Jelly Belly*, *Takunda*, *Les Trois Dumas*, *Black Star Line*, and others. These plays have been produced off-Broadway and regionally by Victory Gardens Theater, Indiana Repertory Theatre, Goodman Theater, People's Light and Theatre Company, Seattle Repertory Theatre, HBO New Writers Workshop, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Ujima Theatre Company, Penumbra Theatre Company, and St. Louis Black Repertory Company.

Louise Gleim Williams Prize

Desirae Matherly is a Harper Fellow and Collegiate Assistant Professor in the Humanities Collegiate Division at the University of Chicago. Her essays are published and forthcoming in *turnrow* and *Fourth Genre*, and her conference work includes papers on self-analysis, creative lexicographies, and pre-20th century experimentation with persona.

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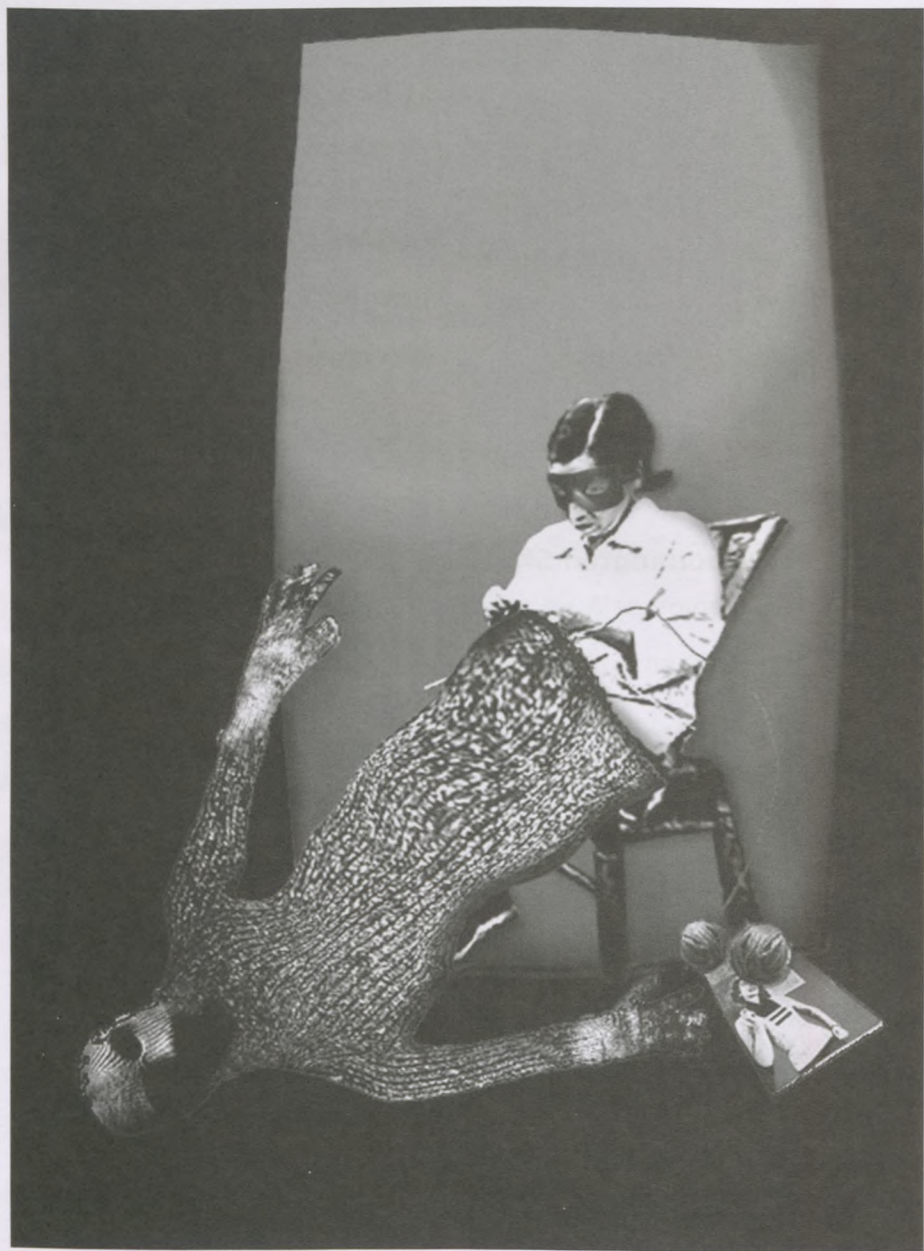
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Knit Golem

Maggie Coffey



Thank You, Dole, For Supplying the Snacks

Joanna Breille Brown

Never lonely.
An eight-ounce cage of brothers.
A cylindrical metal arena built for pulp bumping.

GLORY BE!

An agreement of hues,
Construction barrels and carrot peels,
Celebrate breath!
The radiance of sudden lidless life!

A symphony of violent caution, streaking pumpkin wrapped into miniscule jewels

OH HOW THEY SHINE!

Coming to you in half moon slices
Begging to be mashed flat by solid tongue meat.

Devoured! All! 3.5 servings in 2.4 minutes. Icy cold. Dirty fork.

An empty can and a throat still swallowing.
A trembling hand and a membrane stuck between front teeth.
With reverent voices, they all whisper

Mandarin

Mandarin

Mandarin...

Andy Grangaard

A church and local diner
Both need people
Both are to the point, simple
And share a switching billboard

At the intersection
Bitter and grey
The breaths of people hang in the air
And the streets are slushy and brown

On the sidewalk
A man with holes in his coat
Smokes
And talks to himself

In their cars, salty
Lawyers and bartenders
Single moms and cops
Lost drivers and drunks

A car is thumping with bass
A woman cries on her cell phone
Gas is too high at the station
So most drive on

The sign goes back and forth
"Looking for God?"
"Turn right. One block.
Open twenty-four hours."

Manuel Alejandro Melendez

An age of consent
And you greet her gaze,
Expectantly,
Like anxiety on the verge,
And you do nothing.
She walks the threshold,
A thank you for the invitation,
With lips mute.
As coils flick your visage,
They twirl on your cheek,
And she knows she has you.
A slip of the wrist, a slap to modesty,
Shock!
There she is,
That serpent tongue shall meet you,
Mercy, mercy, the cry unheard.
The waiting room,
Closer to her bosom,
Gently there, haste untamed,
Longing, a foreign pain,
And you crave it now.
She smiles,
The Mona Lisa smiles,
You know the secret,
To touch it, to know it,
And there, waiting, wanting,
Inside of her your heart is kept.
Stars blank, the midnight hour wanes,
Lie together and betray the skin,
To love and not love,
The mask of all masks.
So you count the hands,
So you close your eyes,
And in 1,000 faces, you see only her.
Possibly maybe, justify the need
Give reason to want,
And you have it. And you have not.
Return to me, I say,
Come back to me, she says,
Say, say, say

And hush.
Lie and lie,
Let the dissonance take you where the rush comes.
Just breathe.
Point of entry like spontaneous fire,
Burning skin scorches the vessels,
The spirit within alive.
Water falls, water rises,
So drown.
Red tears spilling,
Counter attack.
The rhythm takes us,
The music moves us,
And we stay mortal.
Unfinished melodies,
Unfinished lullaby,
Say your goodbyes,
And she walks the threshold in reverse,
A ravaged heart knows no intimacy in reply.
Incomplete and insufficient,
No more 'I love you,'
No kiss under the bright, bright moonlight,
The age of consent passes,
And welcomes the solitude.
Come,
She waits for you to bring her once more,
Or for the first time.
Again. And again.
The threshold closes,
You turn off the light.
The night sleeps,
And you know misery is weeping.
Close the lids,
Hello and welcome,
The age of loneliness is here.

Where is Benny Hammond These Days?

Jennifer Roberts

Where were we? Was it the mall, the supermarket? Or was it in the movie theater when you first confessed to killing Benny Hammond? I can't remember and I want to remember. I want to remember the whole bloody mess. How easy was it for you to snap Benny's neck that night?

How long have we been running, now? Everything seems so muddled, confused, and I can't separate reality from the nightmares anymore. I don't understand why you chose to confide in me or why you thought I wouldn't someday do something about it.

Your blood smells sweet, like victory. I have never seen so much of it before and the murky thickness is hypnotic. I want to touch it, feel it slither through my fingers, secreting over my thin hands, blanketing me in satisfaction. You should never have told me about Benny; you might have lived had I never known. But you couldn't keep your mouth shut, could you, Davis? You never could. You just walked around with your chest all puffed out like some important cock, but you weren't anything, Davis; you weren't *anybody*. All the big dreams and big ideas that filled that stupid head of yours didn't get you anywhere but here, a corpse in a two-star hotel.

Did you think I loved you? I didn't love you. All you did was make me miserable. Not like Benny. Benny was different. He was kind and smart and I loved him. You didn't know that, did you? Well, it's true. Funny thing, your blood; it's dark and sticky. Where did I put that first aid kit? I cut myself, Davis. I hate you for that, too, you sniveling little bastard. The way you clawed at my hand as I stabbed you was priceless. You looked like a scared little girl. You hear that, Davis? A girl! Fuck! Where are the band-aids? All this time, all these towns that we've seen and conquered and claimed as ours through one scam after another didn't bring us any closer to the big payoff, but you kept hoping. And the one thing I've learned, Davis—the only thing I've learned since you came into my life—was that hope is like catching smoke in your hand: you can smell it, you can even feel it for a moment, but you can't hold on to it; it leaves an odor on your fingers, in the crevices of your skin and nails, taunting you, begging you to give chase and all the while reminding you that the only thing you will ever have is the stench of a fool.

Benny was an innocent. You killed him with no justification and that, Davis, is a bad thing. The book of Exodus says that if you shed blood, yours shall be shed. Did you even think about that when you broke Benny's neck? You had to know that God wouldn't let you get away with murder. What? No. Oh no you don't. I did *not* murder you, Davis. I carried out God's justice: an eye for an eye. He will welcome me home on the wings of angels, Davis. He will bless me with all of Heaven's glory for delivering his judgment upon you. I am an angel, Davis. Can you see it? The Lord will carry me home on the wings of angels.

Nobody heard her enter. Dani seemed to glide up to the counter, picking at the brownish tinge beneath her fingernails. One finger went into her mouth. The sound of sucking drew the attention of the barista.

"Oh, I didn't see you, sorry." The barista put down a copy of a well-worn romance novel

and looked at Dani. "What'll you have?"

Dani didn't respond. Instead, she removed her finger and inspected the nail bed. The barista shifted her weight to one hip and dropped her gaze to Dani's hand, scarred by two band-aids haphazardly placed over an unclean cut between the thumb and forefinger, the same finger that had been in Dani's mouth.

"Would you like to try a chai?"

"What?" Dani saw the barista's eyes on her hand and slid her wet fingers into her coat pocket, suddenly self-conscious, "Oh, uh, no. I think I'll have a mocha latte." *Play it cool.*

"What size?" The barista's weight shifted again.

She doesn't know; stop fidgeting. "Uh, tall."

"We have medium, large..." she rolled her eyes and sighed, "and *grande*."

"Medium, then."

"Whipped cream?"

"Yes."

"\$2.75."

Dani pulled out a five and handed it over the counter. As she released it, she noticed the rusty-red smear on the bottom edge of the bill, and for a moment, considered grabbing the barista's wrist and snatching the money back before she noticed the blood. Relieved, Dani watched the barista blindly toss the money into the register and count out change. The barista—short with dramatic black hair that hung pin straight and lifeless above her shoulders—looked up with inquisitive eyes at Dani. It was then that Dani realized she had actually made an unconscious move forward, towering over the counter in a manner that made the barista obviously uncomfortable. Dani took a step back and gave the girl a weak smile.

"Do you have to challenge everybody?" The voice drew Dani's attention away from the girl behind the counter and toward the voices coming from a nearby table.

"No, not everybody. But this is a serious issue that needs addressed. If Reverend Mallard thinks that God would in any way justify..."

"I know. People use the Bible and God as a case for..."

"...don't mock me. There are so many people out there in the world right now who think, no, who *believe* that God is vengeful and..."

"...and they use him as a way of justifying capital punishment, I know, I *know*. But what is it that you propose we do? Tell me: What is it that we can do to change the minds of millions of God-fearing..."

"...look, if we don't fight, if we don't let our voices be heard, then we are...well, we are nothing more than...than..."

"...than what? Cavemen?"

"...murderers. We would be nothing more than murderers."

"Miss? Miss!" Dani jumped and turned back to the barista. "Your mocha latte." The barista held out the drink in locked-elbow fashion and made a slight jerk forward with her hand signaling that the drink was—and had been—ready for Dani to take. Her black hair didn't move, but her eyes bounced between petulance and apprehension. Dani shot a look at the dark-haired girl and then back to the two men talking in the corner. One of them, thin with angular elbows cutting out from under his short-sleeved, retro-blue mechanic's shirt, tapped a hardback book with his fingers to emphasize his argument, while his companion, wide and thick from neck

to feet, ran his pudgy hands through his thinning, dark hairline in frustrated response. Their voices lowered and softened just enough that Dani refocused her attention toward the college-aged girl in front of her, who was now biting at her lip in agitation. Her clean, short nails caught Dani's eye, and she thought of her own: unkempt, polluted. But, with another voiceless jerk, Dani was drawn back to the coffee cup. She reached for it; appreciative of how the younger girl's hand encircled the cup with fingers that nearly touched together; they seemed abnormally long for such a petite girl. *Her nails are so clean.*

Dani reached her cool, tinted, and tainted hand around the cup, resting her fingers gently against the barista's. In the brief moment of contact, she stroked the girl's unpainted nails, admiring their smoothness. *Mine were smooth, once.* Dani smiled nervously. The barista pulled free from the cup abruptly, allowing it to wiggle in Dani's grasp for a quick moment before she was able to regain control of the coffee. Behind her, the male voices grew louder again.

"Regardless, Marion would've wanted it this way." The thin man tapped the book harder and Dani craned her neck as she walked past them, hoping to see what book had inspired their passionate debate. "She wouldn't have wanted anyone to murder another human being and call it justice." With his final statement, Dani at once saw the book. She felt her heart hit hard against her ribs. *The Death of Innocents?* The fat-fingered man glanced over at her. *The Death of Innocents?*

Dani heard Davis calling from inside the bathroom. "Babe! Once we get to Texas, it's home free." He spoke as if nothing had happened, as if he hadn't just told her about Benny. He began humming as Dani continued to sit, unmoving, on the edge of the bed, tears still wet on her jeans. His voice crept into her head, soaking into her brain matter, increasing in volume, taking up all space, throbbing, throbbing, throbbing. Dani flung her hands over her ears and rocked back and forth on the thin mattress. *No, no, no, no, no...* She wasn't sure how it happened. She doesn't remember how the knife got in her hand; she only remembered that the sound of the toilet flushing dislodged her. She dislodged from the bed, from the room, from her own mind. She remembers the sound of the toilet...the guttural burping as the water drained, the door opening, the damn annoying humming. As the door swung further open, Dani sprung from the bed, her eyes wide and veined red. She cried like a banshee as she lunged at Davis, still pulling the zipper up on his jeans.

The first cut landed on his forearm, which he had thrown up in front of his face. With his other hand he reached around to grab her free arm, pulling it upward to knock her off-balance. For a moment Dani was delayed in making contact again as Davis spun her around while reaching for the knife. As quickly as she had crossed the room, Dani swung her knife-wielding arm down low and into Davis's thigh. He went down hard.

"You bitch! You fucking bitch!" Davis was holding his leg and rolling around on the floor, "What the fuck, Dani? What the fuck?"

Dani paused for just a moment. She looked at him with pity.

"Davis..." she cooed, "we all make mistakes..."

Davis began to get up, "You fucking bitch. You're dead!"

"...and we all have to repent." Dani raised the knife over her head with two hands. Davis managed to get on all fours and was lifting himself on to his haunches as Dani came down thrusting the knife into the upper right side of his head. She doesn't remember stopping.

"You're the fucking bitch, Davis."

The sound of blood, of far-off echoes of static, filled her ears, and the cup, the medium mocha latte with whipped cream, in which she had just moments before dexterously kept from falling onto the floor, slipped from her hands.

"Damn!" The steaming, wet puddle at her feet caused her to leap backwards. Dani brushed at her jacket with both hands and bent down to pick up the empty cup.

"Are you okay?"

Dani recoiled at the voice. A pair of bulky hands, covered with tufts of dark hair, dabbed at the chocolate spill with thin, white recycled napkins that didn't absorb so much as push the sloppy mess around. Dani kept her eyes focused downward, watching the napkins change from white to brown to small tissue pieces. Dani caught sight of her nails. *Everything is turning brown...*

"Fine, thank you," is what Dani thought she replied. But the words that reached the man's ears were unintelligible and soft. He looked at her quizzically, questionably, and she felt it. She resisted the urge to run and instead kept calm under the heat penetrating from his stare. *He knows.*

Dani stood abruptly. A mixture of halted jerks and overly prolonged movements made her look robotic as she tried to find a balance between the need to leave quickly and the importance of not being conspicuous. The barista approached, carrying a mop and dissatisfied grimace, and surrounded the spill. Dani stepped backwards toward the door. The chaos surrounding the hot, milky mess assured her opportunity to slip unnoticed out of the coffee shop. *Just get out the door.* She lifted her shoulders, jutted her chin and walked out.

Dani stepped out onto the sidewalk. The wind pushed against her body, and she stumbled back before steadying her feet. The gust was strong enough to create a pillow of air, which the heavy door pressed against as it gradually slid closed. Dani, oblivious to the stares from inside the coffee shop, tugged her waist jacket down over the top of her hips and proceeded down the street.

The air carried a hint of cool spice, and the trees lining the main drag were painted in a seventies color palette of burnt orange, smashed pea green and rustic reds. Dani trampled over the brittle leaves, deeply inhaling their scent. *I love this smell. I love the smell of autumn. I love sitting on a park bench watching the leaves fall lightly to the ground. What is it about the air, the scent of leaves dying that enralls me? What joy could I possibly get from watching life choked from a leaf until its grip loosens from the limb and falls? Am I losing my grip? I didn't enjoy killing you, Davis, if that's what you think. What do those assholes know about it, anyway? They're just a bunch of tree-hugging atheists who'll get theirs in the end. God isn't going to put up with people like that, people who act high and mighty and blasphemous. But, this air, it reminds me of...ah, yes, Eugene, Oregon. That's where we met Benny. That's where I fell in love, on those smallish streets; the lemongrass-chicken soup at that quaint, over-priced deli where we talked about Sartre and Camus, and Benny—whom I loved from the moment I saw him—told you, Davis, that God did exist and I cried. Do you remember?*

Dani's footsteps were small and rapid; the sound of grinding leaves beneath her Converse echoed in her head. The clouded sky darkened even more and Dani felt the cold ping of rain-drops on her head and hands. *All this time I was thinking he just left me.* The clouds broke open

wide and Dani covered her head—you said it was an accident, a silly argument—and tried to navigate against the assault of what felt like tiny rubber bullets.

The room was as she remembered, only more...still. Davis was lying there, in a pool of gluey blood and fluids, his head twisted up against the same unremarkable dresser that was in every room of the hotel. His body was face up and his feet curled beneath his legs. As she stepped over him to reach the window, Dani thought that he looked innocent and pathetic all at once.

"You may look innocent, but you aren't, Davis." Dani tried to get the book title out of her mind. *Death of Innocents*, she thought, tossing back a look at Davis's body, *you aren't an innocent*. Dani pushed the disproportionate round wood table from in front of the window and pulled back the curtains. The thick drapes, designed to block all light from entering the room so that hookers and businessmen could have their fantasies, moved easily, sliding across the rod practically on their own. Dani unlocked the latch and wrestled with the window until, under a strained "pop," it released its seal. Old paint fell in small shards; the window happily danced left to right, all the way up, as it was freed from ancient restraints. The rain spotted the sill and floor near Dani's feet and wind enveloped the room.

Dani could see a few people mulling around in front of the church that her tenth story window faced. She thought she saw one of the men from the coffee shop, the bony one, but she wasn't sure. She leaned out of the window onto the tiny enclosed rusted-metal ledge, but pulled back into the room, feeling dizzy. She could hear a rustling sound, a sound once again reminding her of the dry leaves of Oregon. She looked over at the nightstand next to the king-sized bed that, like the table, was too massive for the room. The curtains, the bed, the darkness, the window that was never meant to be opened, and the Bible, there on the nightstand, its pages flicking in the wind, made it clear to Dani: hotel rooms were for sleeping, fornicating, hiding, and repentance.

The pages turned in the draft of wind; the Bible, left open earlier when Dani prayed for direction and guidance, before she took the kitchen knife from her duffel bag and, not remembering where she got it from, thinking it was a gift from God, flapped its pages like fluttering wings. That morning, Davis told her about Benny. She began praying while Davis moved around in the bathroom making his customary morning noises: grunts and groans of excrement; cursing from the shaving nick he'd get every time on his chin; an occasional passing of gas; but always, an off-key hum of some obscure country song he picked up in his childhood. She could hear him humming the song, now, as if he weren't lying dead on the dull, blue carpet.

"Hmm, hmmm, hmm, da dee da da..." Dani hummed the tune as she walked over to the bed. She sat down stoically. Her eyes looked off, far away to unreachable places, places that were once safe to her: Oregon with Benny, her childhood home, and the commune where she met Davis. Dani reached across the hunter green bedspread that was dotted with large, salmon hued flowers and picked up the Bible. "Hmm, hmmm, hmm, da...dee...da...daaa." She began flipping through the books—Genesis, Leviticus, Ruth—until she arrived back at Exodus. The rain had subsided, but the wind continued to circulate through the room, playfully tossing a strand of Dani's caramel hair into her eyes. She pushed back the strand only once. She ran her finger down the pages of Exodus, mouthing the numbered list of judgments—1,2,3—until

she landed on twelve. Exodus 21:12. She placed the Bible back down and cried for Benny once again until the humming became unbearable.

"He that smiteth a man," Dani looked over at Davis' body, already stiffening and changing to a grayish-white, "that's you, Davis," and back again to the stark pages of a rarely used book. "He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall surely be put to death."

Dani's eyes filled with tears. *I didn't get a chance to tell Benny.* She could see the brick steeple of the church across the street, its bell suspended, but silent in the wind. She heard the clamoring of voices from the street, the honking of cars as they passed her window. Slowly, as if being lifted by the air, Dani rose from the bed and dropped the Bible onto the vulgar comforter and stared at the steeple. She moved toward the open window. The voices intensified, but only a few words were clear to her.

"No Death!"

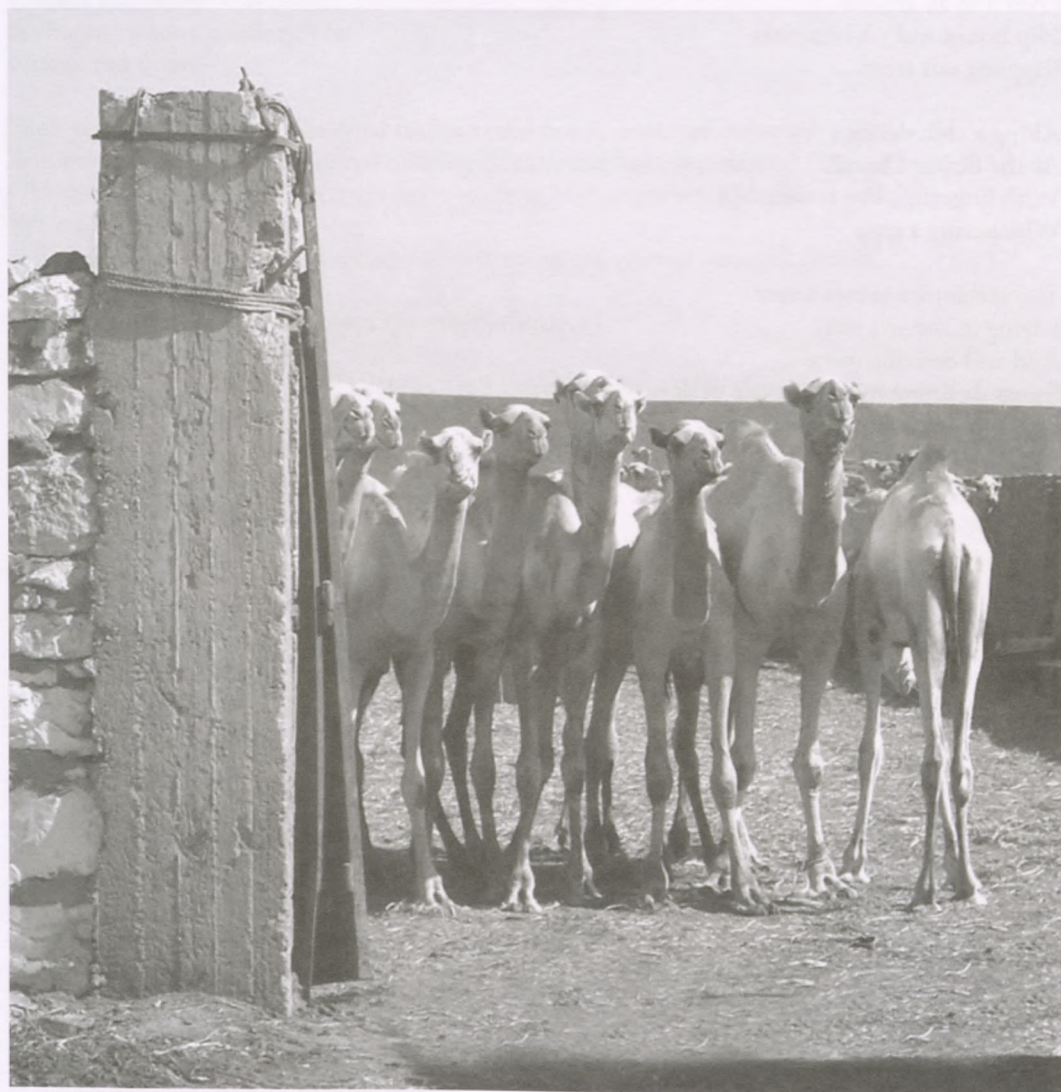
"Innocents!"

The chants mounted in volume and clarity, filling Dani's head as she bent through the open window and stood on the 2x4-foot metal balcony. She leaned over the rail and saw a crowd of people, a sea of colors shining through the gray haze of the autumn rain. Her hand gripped the rail; her soiled nails scrapped the metal and created a tooth-clenching noise that any sane person would wish to stop. But Dani didn't notice. All she saw was the steeple, the bell, God. Below her, on the crowded street, stood the two men from the coffee shop. They held signs and marched in circles chanting, "No death penalty! No capital punishment! No death to innocents!"

No death to innocents. Dani's foot slid forward.

Camels at the Camel Market at Birqash

Sandra Thouvenin



Lily Dreams...

Alec Volpe

A pale arum lily-
A dream of the most pale skin
I ventured fingers led by moonlight
Over and all around
Hip bones and rib crescents
Rippling out from...

Along a chin delicate
As the flower I brush
With fingertips like it were lips
Whispering a gasp

The aethiopica craves water
Laying in the soil wet
And still desiring more-
Sweat dripping from the nose peak
Into an ocean on a throat
Too delicate for life
Hair clinging to skin on ropes
Hanging tendrils tickling cheeks
Raining on skin steaming in the cold air
Hungry lips still drink their counterparts

The calla's spadix petal-
Fingers explore legs smooth as innocence
And ultimate sin
The muscles slither and tense
As a hand rises higher-
The lily trembling in a breeze
As fingers touch the petal's edge-
The hand slides between quaking thighs
And fingers touch the petals' edge
They reach the...

Zantedeschia

My Drakes

Joanna Breille Brown

Under the surface she dove
Once more.
Mother, dappled, dull,
Chased the young ones away.
Barbarous waters spewed from
Ninety feet above

Slick green and preening, the regal mallard paid not an ounce of attention.
The orbiting of his earth required nothing save nonchalant narcissism,
Obvious even to my mind that yet knew nothing of the egotism of men.
We walked along the trail:
 brilliantly suggested spring rolled deep on the crest of seasonal change.

"The male of the species is always the most attractive,"
A proud father of my own
Claimed with brilliance, as if there existed no realistic reason to disagree.

No wonder it is the soft and peaceful Joan Ellen,
My own left-handed mother,
Clearing crumbs from tables of joy
Built with her own hands each night.

But my hair grew long and my chest grew round, and
Falling now around chill ankles of an unprepared boy of my own,
Kidnapped from his college life by my radiant autumn mane,
 Flakes of aging remind me as they settle to the concrete.
This is the first time that we've spent not
Under roofs, Under car,
Under blanket, Under illusions of mafia grandeur,
Under thoughts secreted away as old coins in our attics of shame.
One trait not in my plan for romance, a denier of the outdoors.
A line of ducks walks past, giddy with bites of autumn.
A shining emerald struts behind the dirty smudge of a caretaker
With five half-grown, half-downy chicks.

How absurd to dream that these were the babies
Unaware of dangers in waterfalls
Unable to eat alone
Seen when my own father had too much hair, and so spent some on me,
And there wasn't this bridge

Spanning the cascade
For us, two not yet twenty, to repose upon today.

Uneasiness radiates from his fingers buried in my shallow jacket pockets
Digging for an ounce of warmth, a notion of peace, or possibly a Chapstick.
Standing still and exposed,
Unprotected by folds of fabric,
Not able to primp and worry over appearances,
He's nervous.

"What are those...geese?"

"They're mallards.

Ducks."

"They're ugly. Well, not that one," pointing towards the righteous father.

"The male of the species is always the most attractive."

Disagreement is not issued.

No wonder it was always I who
Fluffed the pillows and
Fetched those blankets
Once we'd safely return under roofs and forgotten declarations.

Sarah Pyles

My grandpa died on a Wednesday
6 a.m., a wake up call,
tears that I'd been expecting.

Darby Creek, I'm sure
runs into a river,
a lake, something.

I skipped my first rock there.
Twice it leaped,
freely flew
then splashed-
another pebble swallowed
by the calm current.

The evening sun
rested on the window sills
of that old house
where my dad grew up,
where I was spoiled,
where my grandpa lay
knowing what we all wonder about.

In the woods,
along the creek, it is autumn.
The heat has cooled,
leaves burn
under a cotton sky
pebbles skip before the arrival
of cold, cracking ice.

This was not his season.
Summer, in all its heat
and salty tears,
was his season,
the memories never
passing August 30th.

**The Virgin of the Wreck
(Taken in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina)**

Flint Garabrant



Virgin of the Wreck

Rachel Scali

Headless icons of religious intent
float above a sea of destruction,
their holy feet splintered as
royal blue chips with each
wave of glass

Headless women, shamingly beautiful,
as why
as they walk above oceans in the land of confusion
Healing oil-covered bodies
as they rise
in the wake of the hurricane
Touching and smelling of lilac bushes

Eyes glowing in the invisible atmosphere
of the godhead
How tightly shut they would be if
they could see what damage
their holy feet tread upon

Blind, deaf, dumb, mute
senseless
as the violence that surrounds
headless icons of religious intent
swallowed in the background
of oceans of destruction
asking why.

The Rose Speaks

Brianna McPherson

SCENE 1

The stage opens with Rosaline, a young woman of about fifteen, standing in the middle of the stage, dressed in the garb of a novice (nun-in-training). A simple black dress and black head covering adorn her. She looks jaded and weathered, almost too old for her age. In her hands, she manipulates a beaded rosary. She appears to be waiting for someone, looking left and right.

ROSALINE

[in a direct monologue, her voice solemn, but almost too cold for the situation] I could never have been Juliet. I, so harnessed, could never have allowed myself to be so unbridled. She had allowed herself to be taken. Though, I, just as young as she, had guarded my heart. I have but one hour now. *[looks up at heaven]* One hour until redemption.

MARIA

[Entering from stage right] Rosaline!

Maria hurries to Rosaline, embracing her. Rosaline looks relieved.

ROSALINE

O, dear sister, kindly the Lord has finally brought you back to me!

MARIA

O, dear sister, I thank the Lord you haven't joined his happy band yet. Rosaline, listen to me carefully. The Lord has put many options before you. Time has not left us yet; you can still take leave of this place!

ROSALINE

I cannot, sister. The Lord has made sure my place is here among the cloisters.

MARIA

She takes her sister's hands, backing up to sit down on a small stone bench.

[seriously] What kind of sister would I be to let you throw your beauty away thusly?

ROSALINE

If you give me but a moment—

MARIA

A moment I have not! We must find Mother Superior and tell her the happy news of your departure. How could Father have let this go on for so long? You only have one hour until they send for you!

ROSALINE

Maria! We will not fetch Mother Superior and I am not leaving this place.

Rosaline glances around fondly, playing with her rosary again.

It has become clear to me that I wasn't meant for a worldly life.

MARIA

[mocking] "Worldly life"? What have these *glad* sisters been telling you? Am I not the only sister of blood you have? Will you not even let one of my words pass into those holy ears of yours? Even the Mother herself listens to the mumblings of lowly sinners like me!

ROSALINE

[softens, smiling, making a joke] What is it, my bloody sister?

MARIA

Rosaline, you are not meant for this life. You are meant for the gay life of parties and dresses and flattery. Father has worked too hard from the bottom of the heap to give you plenty to live a life of want!

ROSALINE

I will not be in want. If God provides for the smallest of songbirds, he can provide for us all, especially those who have made vows on his behalf.

MARIA

Will you not miss society? Will you not miss banquets and music and masquerades and all those things you so enjoyed?

ROSALINE

How can I miss something I never loved? Have you mistaken my personality for your own? I've always disliked parties.

MARIA

Not when Romeo had come to court you...

ROSALINE

She turns away from her sister, looking distraught, holding her rosary tighter.

Romeo is not only in the past, but vanished from our sight.

MARIA

That doesn't mean he has vanished from our memories.

ROSALINE

No...he will never vanish. A ghost he and Juliet will always be.

MARIA

[trying to be gentle] Rosaline...he long forgot about you in favor of the deathly Juliet.

ROSALINE

[bitterly] Do you think I am so childish as not to accept this? Do you think I even care about him in a lover's way? Do you not remember that *I* refused him, not he who turned away from me? How could you accuse me of such false ardor when it is *I* who will be taking vows of chastity?

MARIA

I think you not childish, sister, but *wounded*. You are still in the spring of your life. The ways of men and boys are for the late summer.

ROSALINE

You underestimate me. I am only but three summers younger than you and if my memory hasn't failed me you are the daughter who was found disgraced with two different men before your husband took you!

MARIA

[deeply hurt, but keeping her cool] Little nun, I think that if your mother heard those words she would have you muttering Hail Marys until sunset.

ROSALINE

I am sorry, Maria. I should have never said those things. I did not call you forth from Rome to insult you and your husband. [hesitates] There is something I have been keeping locked

in my heart for too long. I need to confess it before I can move on in my vows. We must go somewhere private. This is not yet for my sisters in God to hear. I will confess to them, but first, I need your sympathetic ears. We will take leave to the gardens. There is a corner so tucked away that none of the sisters would be wont to find us.

Rosaline rises from the bench and Maria follows her. Lights down.

SCENE 2

Lights up on a small garden in STAGE RIGHT. There are stone planters with ivy and morning glories growing in them. Between the two carved planters is another small stone bench. Behind them is an imposing, aged stone sculpture of the Archangel Michael. Rosaline and Maria are sitting on the bench together. Rosaline is sitting up stiffly, clutching her rosary while Maria seems to be waiting apprehensively for Rosaline to speak.

ROSALINE

I came out here after I had caught news of their deaths. This hideaway would be peaceful if it were not stained by memories.

MARIA

Rosaline, tell me, please, why are you doing this to yourself?

ROSALINE

It's a choice I make free of any brokenhearted whimsy, if that is what you are asking.

MARIA

All I wish is for you to be honest with me. If you tell me what is locked up inside that heart of yours, I can help you discover your *true* path.

ROSALINE

You know nothing of my path! You do not hold the map of life! Don't you realize this is out of my own hands? I know there is only one path I can choose.

MARIA

Tell me why and I shall be satisfied. Grant me your final hour before you enter into purity.

Convince me that this plan is destiny and I shall let you depart from this world with a kiss.

ROSALINE

[*stands, stepping further down STAGE RIGHT*] I came out here alone many days. Gabriel was always there, standing guard, his mighty sword raised high. Even though his features have worn away, I can tell he is frowning. You remember who Michael is, do you not? He is God's soldier. Knights of old held him as his patron. He is strong. He is a warrior. Morning after morning I would come here and sit at his feet, his sword brandished above my head. [*pause*] I can not tell you how many times I imagined him bringing the sword down upon my very neck in justice.

MARIA

[*goes to Rosaline, placing a hand on her shoulder*] Peace, sister, Michael's sword is that of protection against the enemy, not for slaying young girls with broken hearts.

ROSALINE

Don't you understand? Going into this convent, taking vows, living in poverty...it is the *only* way!

MARIA

What way? There are many paths in this world that all lead to one end in heaven!

ROSALINE

[*on the verge of tears*] My way would lead me there sooner than later! I wish I could be there now! But if I did...if I *was* Juliet...I could never be in paradise. Sometimes I wonder if even hell could be worse than this.

MARIA

Dear sister, you can't. You simply can't! There's so much—

ROSALINE

[*crying*] No! There is *nothing*! Nothing outside of these holy walls can help me! Nothing but Juliet's happy dagger! It's *this* life, of devotion, of *penance* is my only hope for happiness beyond!

MARIA

Embraces her sister tightly attempting to clam her down. I understand now, Rosaline.

SCENE 3

Lights up on a piazza bustling with people; it's market day. ROSALINE and JULIET are center stage, laughing and talking joyfully, standing at a jewelry seller's cart. Juliet's NURSE is standing by, watching over the two girls. STAGE RIGHT is ROMEO, stealing glances at Rosaline and writing in a journal.

JULIET

Merry Rosaline! You will come to the party, will you not? Without you it will be a mighty snore!

ROSALINE

Of course, dearest friend. My father could not stand to allow his last maiden daughter not to be seen at a Capulet masquerade.

JULIET

[*noticing Romeo lurking off to the side, writing in a journal*] Has that Montague been following us all day long? Does he not know your eyes don't take the same shine for him as his does for you?

ROSALINE

He sent me another letter, did I not tell you? "Rosaline, even the philosophers of Greece and ancient Rome could not fathom thy beauty with their equations and postulates!"

JULIET

Are you joking? Ha! What a cad!

ROSALINE

More desperate and insulting than romantic and lovely! Truly, what woman craves to be compared to the Pythagorean Theorem?

JULIET

Truly, dearest Rose, you are a constant source of joy. Please never forsake our bond.

ROSALINE

Of course not, you silly girl! Who am I to tell of Romeo's incessant letters?

JULIET

We must go. He is over there scribbling away. Come, I shall walk you to your home before I return to the Capulets.

Plaza scene fades to dark while the lights stay up on Romeo, writing.

ROMEO

[*reading aloud what he is writing*] Soft, but light...it is the east and Rosaline...

SCENE 4

Lights fade in slowly on the center of the stage, set as JULIET's bedroom, leaving it half-lit while Rosaline speaks.

ROSALINE

I saw her, even though not even her mouth was set so sternly, in her eyes I saw something I wish I could but ignore. I saw the hope of love. Nay, not simply the hope, but the *promise*. It burned like a well stocked chimney, the air of joy wafting through her skin despite the soot of grief that smudged her. She had allowed me into her quarters, an action she would not even let her own mother indulge in. I took my rest stiffly in the chair while she lay in her sheets like a rag doll of her youth. In two fateful days she has forsaken girlhood for a secret marriage, though at the moment, she still had yet to divulge her actions to me. [*pause*] Her lips...they trembled with it. She longed to release it. Her dear friend Rosaline was ready, so prepared to receive it. [*pause*] Her eyes were as red as sin from her crying. I knew I should have called the Father; this was not for me to be tangled in. Had I not had enough trouble? Had I not experienced my own tears which you, sister, had to wipe away? Instead, I allowed myself to indulge in childish gossip.

Lights up on Juliet's room. Juliet lays in bed, distraught over Tybalt's death and Romeo's banishment. Rosaline enters the scene and sits in a chair by the bed, looking prim, but eager.

JULIET

Oh, friendly Rose! You have come!

ROSALINE

Of course, dear sister. You are ill with grief! Could I ignore thee?

JULIET

[*dreamily*] My heart longs for him.

ROSALINE

Indeed, friend, Tybalt was a good man, worthy of morning.

JULIET

[*covers her face, hiding*] Nay, sister, it is not Tybalt whom I weep for. Yes, he was my flesh and bone, but nay...my heart does not long for the dead!

ROSALINE

[*eagerly*] For whom does it long for?

JULIET

[*with an insane delight*] For the enemy of my flesh and bone! [*begins to laugh but it morphs into crying as she progresses*] You must know my fate! You, saintly Rose! The heavens must listen most intently when you are at your prayers. Grant me their wisdom, for the trouble of Verona is not over. [*falls into hysterics*]

ROSALINE

Juliet, quiet yourself! Your mother is sick with thoughts of you!

JULIET

I care not! I am sick with thoughts of my *husband*!

ROSALINE

Husband! I trust you speak of Paris.

JULIET

Paris! What a name! My mind had forgotten...

ROSALINE

Forgotten? But such a happy match was made.

JULIET

A match yes, but happy was made not. That night, dear Rose, my eyes and hands and lips befell another.

ROSALINE

Surely it was merely a trip and not a fall?

JULIET

[*lovesick*] A fall for the ages...my Romeo.

ROSALINE

Montague? Surely you did not take my jest seriously?

JULIET

Your jest was just another joke of fate, just as the slain Mercutio and Tybalt and Romeo's red hands make God laugh!

ROSALINE

God does not laugh at murder!

JULIET

[*bitterly*] Nay, but he laughs at me, silly girl. What a lovely enemy!

ROSALINE

He is far from lovely! Dear Juliet, please, I pray thee, please tell me this is a dream.

JULIET

He was a dream; he is a dream...a banished dream.

ROSALINE

Who granted you a wedding?

JULIET

Oh happy friar! Lawrence, a name almost as charmed as Romeo!

ROSALINE

Lawrence, the one of potions and plants?

JULIET

Yea, right glad was he to wed us.

ROSALINE

Right glad? What a fool!

JULIET

A fool? Rosaline! He united two loving hearts!

ROSALINE

Two hearts that know not the meaning of the word!

JULIET

Know not? 'Tis you who does not know! Holy palmers' kisses are all you pray for! Where is the trespass in a forgiven sin? My lover is banished to Mantua and you say unto me I know not love? You utter that you know the love of the Most High, but the love of the most low is as foreign to you as the Orient. How dare you say I know not love when you have hardened your heart to all except heavenly beings? Your bitterness offends me dearest friend. Can you not rejoice in my gladness even when yours has been stripped away?

ROSALINE

Stripped away? It was taken from me! Yes, glad you were for me, but what consolation did you offer? A clean handkerchief and honey tea? Dearest friend, my heart is still in pieces! Even thee, when Romeo came to pull at my skirts, did you not giggle and bush him away? What a cad, you told me! He is not a serious boy! And now do not take even your own advice and claim you are in love? Blame me not for being angry! Do not blame me for bitterness! The men of Verona offer no healing balm, not even the fool Friar.

You scoff at my rosary and prayers, but they are but a balm that does not infect these wounds of mine! You knock at the wrong doors. Romeo offers nothing. *[she pulls out her rosary beads, clutching them in her fist, dangling them before Juliet]*

These offer everything. This Father would not sell my heart. This Father would risk all the silver in the world for me. Where is your Romeo? He does not risk death to be with you.

Rosaline stands up, pushing the chair back, almost knocking it over in her anger. She takes a step away from Juliet's bedside, along with a deep breath, attempting to calm herself down. She rights the chair in its proper place; she smooths the wrinkles from her simple black dress. When she speaks again, it is formal and cold.

I believe we are done here. Do remember to eat something. I will pray for you.

Rosaline stiffly exits, her fists clenched at her side, leaving Juliet to fall back into her sheets, weeping.

SCENE 5

Rosaline is standing center stage

ROSALINE

The note sat so innocently on that table in the Friar's cell. I can still see it in my head, the edges curled, as if reaching out for heaven's help. I knew what the letter contained. I knew

what the black letters penned so quickly revealed. The seal was blood red and shining, sticky, and it locked more than just the note. Fate was held on that paper. I took it in my hands, that paper Fate, so fragile. It was only paper. My fingers were all too bold, knowledgeable, aware.

Did I think I was going to save her? Yes, I did. I did it for Juliet. I trusted not Romeo. He held her heart in his fist; I knew...I just knew with one squeeze Juliet would be lifeless. A corpse she would play in merely a few days, but a corpse she would be if Romeo would play lyre with her heartstrings. I did not know how cold and real of a corpse I would make her...

I did it for Juliet, yes, I did. But for myself I also served. That letter, that paper crumpled so easily in my fist, was power. Power over all that I could not control. Power over the slippery and twisting feelings of the serpentine Romeo. Power over my own emotions... power...greed...pride...wrath. The deadly sins clung to me one by one, curdling my blood, my supposedly righteous blood! I knew not how far I had fallen...how far I would fall before I was caught.

[passionately, worked up in the heat of the moment] Drunken and fat with my sin, I threw the note into the flames of the hearth. I felt my lips curl and my heart was glad. My heart was glad! I rejoiced in my power, my strength, my cunning! I, Rosaline, had saved the naïve and fragile Juliet from certain heartbreak. I allowed myself to believe. I granted audience to my pride. Clever was I. I had outsmarted two young lovers and a Friar who were not holy enough for my overwhelming sanctity. So pious. So perfect. So clean. But under my skin, rushing through my very veins was the sting of it all. I do not know how I could have ignored it. Tiny razors in me, cutting, slicing, tearing through my immortal...

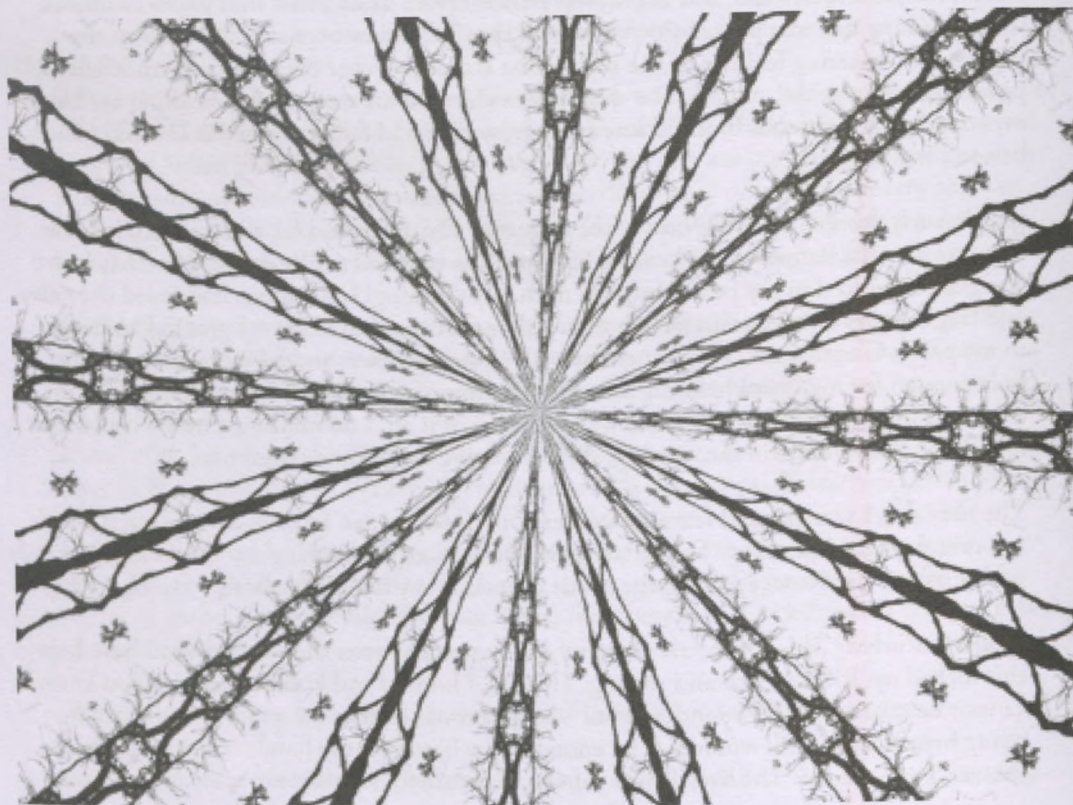
The next day, I was granted leave for confession. Even as I sat, Lawrence's ears open, I did not reveal what I had done. That afternoon I did penance for taking my Lord's name in vain. I prayed my Rosary saintly, the beads draped in my hands flawlessly.

[visibly disturbed] This is the first time my confession has seen the light of day. I have kept this locked up, hidden, sick and rotting. This sin, I know, Lord knows, and now you know, cannot be taken away by countless Hail Marys. I could begin now and not stop until my dying breath and it still would not be enough. The blood on my hands will remain there forever. I am stained. The lives I took cannot be returned, repaid, reanimated.

[quieting down] Dear sister...this is why I am here. This is why I remain. Kind is our Lord, for allowing me this end. To live out my days here is the loveliest punishment I could ever dream of. I don't deserve the fruits and wine of the world. Beautiful parties and admiring men are not for me. I forfeited my rights when I sacrificed Romeo and Juliet's lives for mine own.

Warp

Whitney L. Prose



Alec Volpe

I

In the garden, surrounded by trees
She draws her treasures from each pocket.
Hidden from the world and prying eyes
She enjoys the quiet feast.
The juice of the strawberry
Running red across her lips
Falling, in a blink, to the lip of the flower petal below.

II

In the fields he toils, a sea of strawberries taunts his eyes.
Sweat pours from parched skin, stinging eyes already tortured by the sun.
He blinks as another scalding river floods in.
This is no garden, this is hell.
In his pocket lay stolen treasures, vengeance upon his occupation.
Their ruby flesh so tempting to the tongue.

III

Her deep strawberry-red lips reflect the dancing lights,
Her garden of flames raging before her eyes.
A sanctuary, corrupted by betrayal, dies before her.
She dare not blink, lest she miss a moment of the decimation.
She slips the matches back into her pocket,
With no treasures left in this world she wanders off.

Lunch is Coming

Jennifer Roberts

There is one road from
Anchorage south to Seward.
The train parallels part of the way,
sea-level eye-level
salt-petrified trees still
haunting the marshes,
A wave long ago sucking their bones dry.
Sap-blood steeped
with saline,
embalmed they stand
at the entrance to the incline,
a reminder of what lay ahead:
wild, untamed fury—trickery dressed up magnificent garb.
Alaska hypnotizes,
don't stare at her too long,
Lot's wife paid that price.

We had purchased our tickets,
packed our rucksacks,
and slid local books on folklore
and grim tales
under our arms.

All day we rode.
The train chugged up the hills dotted with Dal
sheep standing precariously on hooved feet
on thin edges—a magic trick—north we passed
Eagle River, Chugiak,
south we headed to Kenai, Seward—until milky blue
ice parted the rock hills, broke
through the thin treed woods
until, emerging out in front of us, rivers of cold stone,
consumed all we could see.
Suddenly, my insignificance swallowed
all desire to trek Denali.

The conductor called out the names of each glacier

Stephens! Mendenhall! Kennicott!...

Each day,
as he cuts through rock cliff,

the smoke of the train trailing behind
like a black veil,
he ticks off their names
in memoriam.

One man, he said, slipped down into
an infinite split among
sharp pillars of crystal blue
never to be found.

Earlier...

White Spot Café,
west 4th, local
joint, ornery owners.

We placed ourselves
at the counter,
watched grease splatter
walls and plates, *these eggs are the best in town.*

Behind us a man moved chairs table to table
scraping sharp sounds,
scuffing the air,

until the owner erupts
and tells the man to leave.

damn tourists and we,

spit-shined,

shrink behind the *Daily News*.

There's a difference between visitors and goddamn tourists...

we hold our breath...

you two are visitors.

We exhale and eat the runny eggs

placed before us by the meanest

take-no-shit pregnant

cook in Alaska.

Then, to our left, a voice announces—

a jogger attacked by bear at the Alyeska Resort.

My stomach

drops,

eyes widen, my companion

touches the back of my

hand in consolation.

The voice advises us to wear

bells on our jackets,

tinkling, tinkling, tiny bells

to alert the bear of our approach.

Bears attack when startled.

*Or hungry, the owner laughs, her wet
hand holds her food-stained,
once-white apron
that covers only a portion
of her bulging belly.*

*Know what a bear says when he hears them bells?
Again, we hold our breath.
Lunch is coming!*

But now, in the Midnight Sun,
our bellies full,
our eyes full,
we alternate between scenery and *Into The Wild*,
haunted by isolation. We look for
bears and moose. We look for an end to ice,
we look for an old bus to ride out from
the edges of the horizon carrying Stephens, Kennicott,
Mendenhall..
McCandless at the wheel.
Their blood turned
salt silt
long ago.

(No) TV in the '80s

Jennifer Knox

The Smurfs reigned as the ultimate in childhood entertainment and President Reagan was reintroducing the war on drugs. In order to dissuade kids such as myself from succumbing to such addictive behavior, it would only be a matter of time before Poet Smurf himself would feel the disparaging effects of habitual visits to the witch's magic orb. I, unfortunately, would miss this episode because it aired during our family's "No TV!" phase.

The idea was that my sister and I become productive with our time. Consequently, after a few hours of production (mostly in the form of coloring) I came to realize that nothing could atone for the absence of television. I searched through my toys, dusting them off and then tossing them aside until I found my Sweet Secrets doll. She wore pigtails and had a round body with a large pink gemstone stuck in her belly. If that wasn't enough, her head and appendages folded into this body, thereby transforming her into a large gaudy piece of plastic jewelry. I wore her as a bracelet and began toting her everywhere.

That Easter I drew a # symbol on the band and tucked her little blonde head in its pink plastic shell for good. I then opted to speak into the # as though it were a microphone, recording simple life events scene by scene. It made activities that day, such as pouring juice or feeding our cat, incredibly important.

It was in this way that I started the count down. "I will be looking for my basket of candy in just a few hours now," I reported happily. Mom heard me and asked who I was talking to. "No one," I said, lowering my voice.

I looked forward to the Easter basket hunt all year. As with many of my father's ideas about fun, I knew it would be challenging. The basket was hidden so well the year before that it took me over an hour to find it in the attic. But the memory of that hard-won Cadbury Egg was worth all the searching in the world. I told my Sweet Secret that I wished Mom would hurry up so we could get church over with. I think she heard me because she glared my way after tying the ribbon on Laura's hat.

That Easter was the one and only time I remember going to a church service with my family. Laura hated it because she had to wear a dress. I just wanted to get it over with. It began quietly. The Reverend asked who loved Jesus and the meek crowd surrounding me began to holler as though whoever yelled loudest loved him best. I enjoyed this and began yelling too. The service was long and Dad looked uncomfortable. I just swung my feet back and forth, watching lavender dress rise and fall, and went through mom's purse in between yells and shouts. I enjoyed seeing so many people holler excitedly without shame or regret. It was after the sermon, however, that things went to hell in a hand basket.

The kids were filtered toward the church basement and made to sit in a circle on the hard, cold floor and listen to Big Pam lecture about how to stay out of Hell by "brushing your teeth and listening to your mommas." She said that Hell was everything bad we could think of, mixed together. I felt sick as she yammered on about it. The concept made me uneasy. Laura, on the other hand, would giggle at the word, and was eventually sent to the church kitchen to sit and think about how unfunny Hell was. I was jealous. I knew for a fact that there were graham crackers in the kitchen cupboard. I could make out her blonde hair and tiny frame

moving around the loud yellow picnic table that sat in the middle of the room. I wanted to know exactly what she was doing.

In a desperate attempt to join her, I began to laugh too. "No, no, no. You're too old to think that's funny. I'm on to you, Red," Big Pam scolded. "Go sit in the corner and think about what Hell means to you."

"My name is Jennifer," I muttered. I hated it when people called me red. I longed for blonde hair like my sister. It seemed so much less complicated.

After plopping down in the corner with the loudest sigh I could muster, I pulled my Sweet Secret bracelet out of my little pink and white purse and lifted the # to my lips. I had a lot of reporting to do. I told her that Hell meant being back in that circle of horrified children, listening to Big Pam holler, watching her chin skin jiggle each time she threw the word "GAWD" at us as though it were a rock. I also told her that Heaven was in the kitchen with the graham crackers and my sister. Or better yet, it could be after all this was over and I was at home looking for my Easter basket.

Later that day, when we told Mom that we had a horrible time and never wanted to go back, she simply shrugged. "Okay." Praise Gawd, I thought, but for some reason I began to worry about Hell. Part of this worry may have stemmed from the fact that I couldn't find my Easter basket. My sister and I searched for hours with only vague hints from Dad and eventually we gave up, exhausted.

"Today is Monday. Yesterday was Easter and I still haven't found my basket, over," I reported to the # after breakfast.

"Jenny, where are you? Are you talking to yourself again?" Mom's voice held a delicate mixture of worry and amusement.

You won't let me watch television, so what else am I supposed to do, I thought. I said, "No. I'm just looking for my basket." I pushed out my bottom lip for sympathy as she entered the living room and it worked. Immediately Mom called to Dad, demanding that he give me a better clue.

"Okay, okay," he conceded, "Jenny, you're warm, warmer...colder...warmer." He continued with this until I was "hot." When he said I was "on fire," near the fireplace I wondered if it was a sick joke. Was this really supposed to make up for the Smurfs?

"Okay, now I'm at the fireplace and I'm hot. But I don't see my basket anywhere." I crouched down. "I'm going in, over." My hand reached up the chimney, feeling around ceaselessly until... "I've got it!"

The basket was large that year and when my dad stuck it up the fireplace he probably didn't think that it would take twenty minutes of prodding with an old wood broom or that a clutter of cinder and debris would come tumbling down with it as it fell. Luckily all of the candy was wrapped.

"Next year, you'll be looking until your birthday, kiddo," he chuckled. Mom rolled her neck back in mock-exhaustion before showing a faint smile; fainter approval. "Go help your sister now."

"Okay," I mumbled, bouncing up the stairs with a dark chocolate bunny head in my mouth. Laura had cried Easter day in an underhanded attempt to get Dad to give in. It didn't work. Mom yelled at him for this all night, only to be met with the sore throat of his indifference. In the morning, Dad told Laura her basket was in her room and we hadn't seen her since. When I

arrived she was huddled over a large chocolate bunny of her own. Laura's tongue pushed at the bunny's eye socket in a determined way and I told her to bite the whole head off. We laughed about our decapitated bunnies and spent the next twenty minutes testing our stomachs' capacity for candy.

My Sweet Secret's strap broke a week later and I felt that it was my fault. I felt such pain that I believed it could be the Hell that Big Pam tried to warn me about. I couldn't think of anything worse happening.

I decided to keep my eyes open for another bracelet but it never came. What came instead was my seventh birthday and a pretty silver package that was twice the size of me.

"Is it alive?" I asked, wary. Dad nodded me on and I began to rip it open. A large box with a picture of a vacuum on it made me cringe. He laughed and told me to keep going. I tore open that box and found an endless supply of tissue paper. Pulling it to the side, I dug a tunnel through, crawling against the fluff until I found my prize. A small lock & key journal with rows of maroon cursive spreading across the front cover.

"Huh." I shrugged at the gift, not realizing its power at the time. Mom pointed out how I could record everything in a new way now through pictures and fragmented words, and eventually through stories, but I wasn't too convinced. Instead, I played with the vacuum box for a while and then retired to my room.

A week later the family went to Burger King where a small orange watch waited stunningly below my greasy burger and fries. I eagerly tore open the plastic lining and borrowed one of Dad's pens and I carefully, secretly drew my # symbol. I studied it and felt immediately embarrassed. It wasn't the same. It was childish now. Sadly I gave it to my sister who complained that her green one didn't have ink all over it.

The journal sat on my shelf for weeks. I occasionally had the desire to report my thoughts to someone, and thought about my watch. Instead, I opened my journal. That day I began transcribing a Tom and Jerry cartoon I had seen. I summed it up in four sentences and put By Jennifer on the top. It was gratifying so I began writing more. I enjoyed writing and declared myself a writer but secretly I still longed for that loud shiny box that sat in the living room mocking me with the promise of Mushroom Huts and a tiny world dominated by conservative blue men.

Oak in Autumn

Amy Flanigan

As the bark of the stippled oak
crinkles into sinews each dawn,
her juices run to hot turpentine
as she wails the lament of this season:
a concertina,
crackled in her deadened leaves
covered in the stink of whiskery mold
as autumn murders her once more.

She curls her glazed red billows
the kinks of her limbs made bare
sallowed by silken winds
that carve her ballooned figure
into gables of nothing.

Her sunken sloop a blackened quill,
Autumn-as-gadabout
coos as he snips her into silt.

Rebecca

Mary Vander Sluis



From the Files of a Cashier at Target in Polaris

Nick DeFazio

"Would you..."

"If you ask me if I want a Target card I swear to God I will strangle you."

"How are you?"

"Pretty good.

Well, actually my friend died today.

We were in high school together.

I'm the only one of us left.

I realized this morning that I'm all alone.

I have no one."

"I'm sorry."

"Well it's a tough world, but we make it through.

Now, if I give you a dollar can you give me four quarters?"

Into her cell phone: "But your rainbow, isn't it dead yet?"

Into her cell phone: "Yeah, I'm at Target. I'm late for work. Actually, I don't know if I still work there. I was fired last night. Actually, I tried to quit, but they wouldn't let me quit. And then, well after work, I was at this rave and we were trying to break into a car parked outside but then the cops showed up and busted the party...Yeah, I gotta stop drinking. I'm like throwing my life away."

A mother after putting several pairs of boxers onto the register belt: "My husband told my son he was gay if he kept wearing briefs, so then he stopped wearing underwear altogether."

The father: "They had Bob the Builder on them. I don't want him to grow up a faggot."

The son looks away.

"Can I help you find something?"

"No, I'm looking for everything."

"Can I help you find something?"

The woman rolls her eyes

As if to say

She is looking for something behind them.

Selah

Kathlene Eleanor Elisabeth Boone

The sanctuary bells toll to the fluttering of the ringer's imperfect heartbeat.

A Godly sound, to be sure.

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the legislative minority!
Selah, selah.

The stiff-collared women in pearls miss their husbands who went to work at the corporate offices for the Sabbath.

They cringe and raise highbrows at the whimpering cries of brown haired babies hanging in carriers at their mothers' breast.

Beloved names from God call to them from the water, but all that can be heard is the droning of this week's sermon and the eyes of intolerance blinking loudly in the fluorescent glow of the sanctuary.

Parishioners must be Machiavellian in their approach, lest they be eaten alive by loose tongues of fire.

Grace shoots from their lips and quickly shuts out what is an obvious enemy.

Selah, selah.

The faggots disturb the comfortable sanctity with their adopted Chinese daughters in tow.

The Ancients make sugar-glazed desserts, unaware of politicking and dispute. They grin their wrinkled cheeks and their merriment intoxicates the fellowship hall with toffee-joy.

The meek, Choral Director's wife looks back on her past life and turns into a pillar of salt.

No one notices.

Selah, selah.

Ophelia sits cross-legged and pouty, circles darkening her eyes and making her appear gaunt. She conceals her scarred wrists and mouths the words to hymns without singing a word.

The woman in the blue hat notices the young girl's belly growing with life. She prays, silently.

Her son will be great. Men will call him the Son of the Most High.

Or not.

Selah, selah.

Third Party

Melissa Soza

The kitchen floor looked just like a white Christmas. Green shattered glass and shiny wet blood against a snowy tile background. The toppled chair could just as easily have been Santa's wooden sleigh, but I wasn't exactly in the mood for jolly old elves. I was so stunned at that moment that I didn't even have the common sense to reach for the dish towel that was hanging from the fridge handle just above my right shoulder; and so my left foot continued to allow the blood to escape from my body.

By this time the phone had stopped ringing (eight rings before my machine picks up – who waits that long to leave a message?), and the answering machine's robotic voice announced that no one was available to take the call. Not being in a condition in which I was physically able to jump up and grab the phone to take the call, I continued to sit inside my personal holiday snow globe and listen.

"Hi...umm...Molly?" Came my sister's apprehensive voice over the fuzzy machine. "It's Amy...your sister Amy. I umm...I don't really want to tell you this, like, in a message, but I know you won't call me back. I just wanted to let you know that Dad died a few hours ago. I know you probably didn't really know that he got really bad last week, and we probably should've called, but...well, Chris didn't think it was a good idea. Anyway...umm...I just wanted to call and tell you. Oh yeah, I don't have your mom's phone number, but if you think she would want to know could you, you know... But anyway, I don't know when the funeral is yet, but I'll call and let you know, if you want to come, b-" The machine beeped and cut off her awkward rambling.

"Great," I groaned aloud as I finally reached for the towel. My body was over the initial shock of being sliced open by a piece of my great-grandmother's meat tray, and I could now feel the agonizing pain of the cut, as well as each pump of blood that went through my foot. I was well aware that my mind should have been in shock over the call, but it wasn't. I didn't even understand why Amy had bothered. But she liked to think that we were a family, and she liked to think that she was the responsible one because she was the oldest.

The phone started to ring again. Apparently she hadn't said enough. Maybe this next message was the one she was going to use to insult and manipulate me into going to the funeral of a man that I had not seen or spoken to since I was fourteen. But she was my sister, and she was probably sad about my dad, so in a momentary lapse of pity I scooted over to the living room entrance and reached around the corner to lift the phone from the receiver.

"Hello?" I said. It must have sounded pretty forced, because she paused a moment before speaking.

"Oh, hi. You *are* there, I guess." She sounded a little hurt. Like I had purposely not answered the first time because I knew she was the one calling.

"Yeah, I'm here. I was in the bathroom," I lied. She was the last person I needed to pity me after I had spent most of my twenty-nine years trying to prove that I didn't need my family around.

"So, umm...I was just wondering if you think you might be able to come down. The girls would like it if you did." What a nice sister. She always had to use something or someone as

an excuse instead of asking for herself. I was a little disgusted to discover that she had taken to using her daughters in that manner.

"Oh. I don't know. Probably not." That was the last place on Earth that I wanted to be. At a funeral for a man that I barely knew and barely even cared about, with my brother and sister and their families, who were also people that I barely knew or cared about. So I came up with my own stupid excuse. "I doubt that I can get off work."

"What?" Her voice lost its defeated, apprehensive tone, and its pitch went up a few notches. "I can't believe you just said that. Your own father just died and you're using work as an excuse? I don't understand you. Why can't you just try? No one here hates you; no one here has it in for you. And that shouldn't even make a difference in this case. Maybe we need you here for Dad, and to just be our sister for *one day*. You're being selfish."

"Amy, listen to yourself. That's why I'm not coming. I don't want to hear it." I wished I'd let the machine answer the phone again. Why did she make everything my fault? I wasn't the one who chose to live this far away from my family, and I had never told them to stay away from me. *They* were the ones who had forgotten *me* in the first place.

"Whatever. I don't know why I bothered calling. Chris was right – you *don't* care." I could see that this was just another one of her tactics that she loved to use to manipulate me into doing what she wanted. She *should* have listened to Chris, even though he knew me even less than she did. I hadn't spoken to him since the last time I'd spoken to my father.

Amy, on the other hand, wanted me to be her happy little sister whenever it was convenient for her. Like the time she called me up out of the blue to get me to stay with her for little sibs' weekend when she was in college, or the time that she'd wanted me to be her maid of honor. She'd ignored me my entire childhood; and then expected me to do things for her at the drop of a hat.

"Look, I'm glad that you called to let me know. I'll let my mom know, but I doubt she'll be there either. It's really hard for her to get away. If it'll make you feel any better I'll send some money for flowers." I could tell by the sudden click of her tongue that I'd *really* struck a nerve. I hadn't intended to sound quite so sarcastic.

"No. Don't bother. Wouldn't want you to waste money on the dead. Call me if you change your mind." And with that she hung up.

Now that I could focus on my foot, I mentally replayed the scene that had led up to this entire disaster: I had needed a tray for the cookies that I'd made earlier that evening. They were for the Valentine's Day party that we were having at work (Clark's Department Store) the next day. The only tray I owned that was presentable enough for a party was my great-grandmother's green meat platter, which was stored in the highest cupboard in my tiny apartment's kitchen. Standing on a chair to reach the platter, I had just lifted it out of the cupboard when the phone rang.

I lived alone, only had "friends" at work, and the only relative who called was my mother. And she only called on Sunday evenings at seven o'clock (yes, she was such an important person that her phone calls to her only daughter must be scheduled). So when the phone blasted through the silence of my apartment, I jumped about eight feet into the air, toppling the chair, dropping the tray, landing in the middle of its shattered glass, and grinding my left foot right into a curved piece of the tray that was about three inches long.

I examined the bottom of my bloody foot. The gash was pretty clean. It began at the

fleshy part of my foot that was just between my big toe and its neighbor, and then curved around to the arch of my foot. The cut was deep enough that the skin could be pulled apart to look down inside the pinky-white flesh of my foot, but I didn't think any major damage had been done. I definitely could not walk on it, though, and I needed to have a doctor look at it. The kitchen floor and my sister would have to wait.

I wrapped my foot in a clean towel (hoping that my foot had not been infected with some crazy bacteria from the dirty one), and held it in place with plastic wrap. I hobbled down the two flights of stairs that separate my apartment from the ground floor of the complex, and carefully made my way out to my beat-up gray Oldsmobile. Feeling slightly grateful that at least my left foot was the one that was injured, I proceeded to drive the five miles that lay between my apartment and the hospital.

I could not keep my mind off of my sister's phone call as I drove. It was more persistent than the biting pain that had overtaken my foot. It was strange to think that I had no real reaction to my father's death. Then again, he had been dead to me for a long time. I had not seen him since the summer before I started high school.

My father lived in Roswell and bred horses on his family's ranch. He had been married once before he met my mother, but his first wife had died in a car accident after they'd been married only four years. He had two children with his first wife (Amy and Chris), and it devastated him that they were so young that they'd never really know or remember their mother.

My mother was ten years younger than my father, and she'd just graduated from college when they met. She was an equine science major and the older brother of one of her sorority sisters was a friend of my father's. They met at the Kentucky Derby as guests of these friends. My mother was young and very beautiful, but her family had never been all that wealthy. Her friends were however, and she had always been eager to join their club. My father had money; he was starved for female attention, and enticed my mother to go home with him to work on his ranch.

My mom must have been thrilled at her luck. She'd found a rich cowboy with a ready-made family, and had a permanent job on his ranch. But things didn't exactly go in the order that she would have preferred. Amy was five, Chris was three, she ended up pregnant, and then my dad decided he would go ahead and marry her. When I was born seven months later I bet she thought she really had it made compared to her sorority sisters who were still at their part-time college jobs. But the fairy tale wasn't all that full of fairies.

All I remembered from the time that my family actually was a family, was anger. Amy and Chris hated my mom, she blamed them for my dad still loving their mom, and she blamed herself for not being as good a person as my dad's first wife. My dad blamed her for everyone being angry. I remember hearing them argue at dinner one evening shortly before we left.

"Why do you always have to punish everyone around you when something upsets you?" my father accused.

"I wouldn't have to if you'd just try to make things work here. No one gives me any respect, especially not you. You treat me like a child." My mother's voice attacked him from across the table, and I started to cry because I was afraid of this venomous side of her. "I'm sorry if I'm not what you want. But you shouldn't have married me in the first place if all you wanted was a nice little mommy for your stupid brats."

"Oh, please, Hannah. Are you that naïve?" my father shot back at her. "Do you actually

think that I married someone *your age* to be a *mother* for *my* children? Did it ever occur to you that I married you to prevent you and the third party sitting at this table from living in a homeless shelter?"

At these words, my mother jumped up from the table and flung a tub of butter at my father. He didn't even flinch. I was shocked that he did not even react to her violence. It missed his left ear by about four inches, smacked into the side of his grandmother's hutch, and fell, instantly forgotten, to the floor. My mom then whirled around to leave, but stopped, put her hands on her hips, and deliberately turned to face my father once more.

"Thanks for being so honest with me, Jack," she said in an eerily calm voice. "It's nice to know the truth for a change. I think it's time for Molly and me to leave so that you don't have to waste your sight on your little act of charity. I just have one question for you, though. Why did you sleep with me in the first place? If I was so naïve and disgusting, why did you do it? Was it a game? See how young a girl you could seduce? You're disgusting." And then she walked out.

My father didn't say another word to her. He didn't even look at me. Just got up and left. And that was the moment when I realized, even though I was only five, that I was nothing to either of them but a pawn to use at their convenience.

Three days later we were gone. My mother and I went to Columbus and stayed with one of her old sorority sisters. My mom went back to school and my parents' divorce was finalized. She eventually became a paralegal on my dad's dime, and we found our own place and new lives. I think she thought that taking me so far away would change my dad's mind, but as far as I knew, they never spoke after the day we left.

I went back and spent several vacations on the ranch, but it was never much fun. Amy and Chris were always off with their friends, too busy for their little sister. My father was always working and didn't want his little girl from the city getting in the way. So I stopped going when I was a teenager. And he never even asked me to come back.

As far as my wonderful life with my single mother went, I had always been aware that I was the one who had ruined her life, but at least she waited until I was eighteen to go off on another money-chasing adventure. Her lawyer boss' most important client was a filthy rich bachelor politician who had visions of the White House dancing in his head. My mom worked her hardest at getting him to notice her for several years, and in the end it paid off, so I was no longer needed.

Inside the hospital, my thoughts turned back to my injury. I described my accident to two different nurses, each of whom I believed thought I had either come up with some greatly fabricated story or that I was the stupidest klutz they had ever laid eyes upon. I filled out form after form until they finally sent me to see the doctor. A person could have bled to death in that waiting room.

The doctor was just a doctor. Slim, brown hair that was graying along the edges, white coat, silver stethoscope, stupid jokes, last name Jones. Very generic. And not much to my surprise, I needed to have my foot sewn back together. He attempted to chat with me while he worked, to keep my mind off of the needle that was being pushed through my skin.

"Hmm, Hannah Lockley. Your mom, right?" He didn't look up from my foot as he spoke.

"Yeah. How'd you know?" Usually no one associated the blossoming politician's wife with

her frumpy daughter unless she acknowledged my presence in public.

"Saw her listed as your emergency contact. So we are graced by the presence of a senator's daughter tonight, are we?"

"Step-daughter," I corrected him. Senator Alec Lockley would be greatly offended to hear that someone had mistaken me as his spawn.

"Oh, sorry. I just assumed."

"Yeah, no big deal. Actually, my dad is dead." What the hell made me say that? Like the man who was sewing my foot closed cared one cent about the dead father that even I hardly cared about.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." He still did not look up from his work. I doubted he was interested, but I kept talking.

"Actually, he died today. He had lung cancer. That's why I'm here." This time the doctor looked up, confused.

"You mean this happened here?" he asked.

"No. I dropped a platter and stepped on the glass when my sister called to tell me."

"Wow. That must have been a huge shock! I'm so sorry to hear about your dad. It's very difficult to deal with the loss of a parent." He actually looked into my eyes when he said this. No one ever looked me in the eyes. My own mother hadn't even looked me in the eyes since before we'd moved to Ohio. It made my stomach churn in an uncomfortable and strange manner.

"Well, I didn't really know him very well. My parents have been separated since I was little and he lived in New Mexico. I'm not even going to the funeral." I thought that simple explanation would end the conversation.

"Oh. Well, I guess you have to do what is right for you. Everyone deals with grief in a different way. Just as long as you're dealing with it, and not ignoring it."

"Yeah, I guess so," I said, letting the "so" turn into a disinterested whisper. I didn't want to have that conversation right then, or ever, for that matter. I let him continue to work in silence.

A few minutes later he looked up. "All done. Do you think you will be able to get home okay by yourself?"

"Yes." Why did he care? I was one of dozens of patients that he would see that night.

"Okay, well, I won't say it was nice to see you, because I'm sure you don't want to be here. You're going to have to use these crutches and keep your weight off your foot for a few days. Do you have any questions?"

"No, I don't think so. Thanks." I was very ready to be out of that place. There were too many people and too much noise, and this man who pretended to care was making me feel weird. I couldn't remember the last time a stranger had carried on a caring conversation with me.

"Well, I hope I see you again, but not here. Good luck, and I'm sorry about your father." I nodded and left the room on the crutches to make my way back to my car. I was exhausted. My mind was in a million different places, and even though my foot was numb it didn't exactly feel comfortable. The crutches began to pinch my armpits by the time I made it to my car.

It was getting very late. It was almost one o'clock in the morning. The last few hours had been so strange that it felt like I had watched the events occur in a movie – that they hadn't actually happened to me. I didn't quite feel like driving. My conversation in the hospital had

suddenly made me realize that I needed to talk to someone to get the funny feeling out of my stomach, but going back inside to speak with the nice Dr. Jones was out of the question. So I dialed my mother's number on my cell phone.

It rang four times, and then her voice groggily answered, "Molly, honey? What's wrong? Are you okay?" She knew something bad had happened. I never called her, and she only called me at our scheduled time on Sundays.

"Yes, well, no. I don't know." I felt stupid. I wanted to hang up and act like I'd never even called. If she said anything later on, I'd tell her she must have been dreaming. But I didn't. I couldn't. She was only person within my reach and I needed to get the strange emotions out of my head and out of my stomach.

"Well, something had better be wrong. You're calling me at one in the morning, and tomorrow I have to host a brunch for the—"

"Mom, look," I interrupted, "if you don't want to talk to me right now just say it. I've had a really bad night and I just thought I could talk to you about it." She was the only woman in the world who would think about hosting a brunch when her daughter was on the phone in a possible state of emergency.

"Molly, just tell me where you are and I'll send a car for you. We can talk about this in the morning." She sounded like she hadn't heard a word I'd said.

"Mom, I don't need you to send a car for me. I'm in *my* car, and I'm perfectly capable of driving." I hoped she could tell that I was getting angry with her. Not that it would have made much difference. I was just an old pair of shoes now that she had a glamorous life with Alec and I was old enough to take care of myself.

"Well, then why aren't you driving? Are you drunk? Oh my God! That's the last thing we need. We'll never get re-elected. Stay right there and *don't do anything!*"

"Mom, you're being ridiculous, I'm not drunk. I just need you to listen for one minute, please!" Tears were beginning to form in the corners of my eyes. I never cried, and this unfamiliar feeling made me panic all the more.

"Well, then, talk. I'm listening. Just make it quick. I have the brunch, you know."

"Fine. I'm at the hospital because I sliced my foot open and I had to get stitches. And Amy called to tell me that Dad died this afternoon and we got into a fight because I told her I wasn't going to the funeral. Was that quick enough?" The tears began to slowly trickle down my cheeks, landing at the corners of my mouth, where they stilled for a moment before continuing to trail down my chin and neck. Surprisingly, I felt more relieved once they fell.

"Oh, sweetheart, why didn't you call? I would have sent a car. You didn't need to drive yourself to the hospital! Why do you insist on making yourself some sort of invisible martyr?"

This time, I broke down. "Mom, I'm only invisible because you don't want any part of your past to wrinkle your perfect image. Yeah, sure you'd send a car, but all of the cars in the world won't change the fact that you and Alec are both embarrassed by me."

"Molly, you know that's not true! We just don't want to make a spectacle of you. We let you have your own private life. You're just upset, and you need to get some sleep. Why don't you just let me send a car so that you don't have to drive yourself home?"

"No, just forget it. I thought you might care, but I can see that I was wrong." It was a lost cause. Her answer for everything was to send a car or give me money to go shopping. She never came with the car or the money. She hadn't been able to look me in the eyes since that

last argument with my father. She had stopped being my mother completely the moment that Alec Lockley had swept her away five years ago. Why did I expect her to be any different now?

"Oh, and Molly? I didn't know that you still talked to that girl, but don't let that argument bother you. Your sister and brother are just like your father. They're selfish and they'd like nothing more than to run us both into the ground. That's why I'm not sorry to hear that he's dead, and I'm glad that you're not going to the funeral. So don't let it bother you. How about I send some money and a car over on Saturday? Shopping will help you feel better." Money and a car at the same time! At least she knew she'd really hurt my feelings this time.

"Umm, no, but thanks, Mom. I don't think I'll feel like going anywhere. My foot's going to be hurting really bad for a few days." At least that was a true excuse.

"Okay, honey, but if you change your mind just call. We're going away for the weekend, but Sylvia will be here if you need anything." Sylvia was their housekeeper. When my mom and Alec were away she was the one who sent money and cars.

We hung up, and I began driving home. I thought about my parents some more. I just couldn't get my mind off of them. My mom had not really changed since she married Alec; her true personality had just been allowed to flourish. She had never actually ignored me, she had just let me know that I was not her main concern; she was. And I played right into her trap. I let everyone treat me that way because I believed her. Because I was the third party. The reason my father hated her, which was the reason she hated me.

I admitted it. Finally. Maybe Amy was right. I did this to myself. I had felt sorry for myself for so long that I let other people's problems take over. I was the one who had made myself into nothing, not anyone else. I had to do something differently. My tears had been a relieving change; maybe not hating everyone would be, too. So I fearfully picked up the phone once I had slowly made my way to my apartment.

"He-hello?" My sister's weary voice answered the phone. What time was it in New Mexico?

"I changed my mind."

"Molly? Is that you?" She sounded shocked.

"Yeah, it's me. I'm sorry about earlier. I was just surprised."

"Surprised about Dad?"

"Well, that, and I'd just fallen off of a chair and sliced my foot open. I've been at the hospital all night."

"What? Why didn't you say something?"

"Well, I didn't want you to feel sorry for me. But I was being stupid. I'm sorry, and I've decided to go to the funeral."

"Oh. I'm glad. I wanted you to come home so badly." I could hear tears in her voice, and it made me begin to tear up as well.

"I know. I could tell. I'm sorry I was such a jerk. You don't deserve it right now."

"It's okay. I'm not exactly easy on you, either. We don't really know how to be sisters. We've never really had the chance."

"Yeah, I know," I said softly. Maybe this step would be the start of that chance, and maybe it wouldn't. But at least I had opened the door to the beginnings of an invitation for hate to make an exit.

July 03

Stephen Goldmeier



Katrina Pelow

kenny would be sorry you missed his funeral
distance, though, always held you back
keeping even the inseparable apart.
but he understands
i think,
because the clouds parted at ten exactly
streaking beams across the sky
as the priest read his eulogy
so no one cried.
we couldn't
because
the sky looked the same
as it did when we were on the lake.
kenny was so proud of that boat
& we rode for hours.
it was cool that day,
& the lake water stung our faces
but we couldn't suppress our smiles.
it was so gray that day,
swelling clouds threatened rain
but we drank cheap beer
& talked of high school
anchored in the middle of the lake
when the sun came out.
you commented first
looking up through half-drunk eyes
& smiled stupidly,
saying that the sky looked just like heaven.

Mothers, Like Clouds in December.

Matt Dunham

I have never loved a girl
Who didn't have a dead mother.

I imagine the women I never met:

They must have taken time
From their busy days
Of sun-brewing tea
And delivering balloons
To put in a good word
For a lonesome boy
And write it
Somewhere within the rosaries
And blue teddy bears they left behind.

Perhaps they weren't done mothering,
And taught their daughters how to love,
The way loss commits to memory,
The way a child catches snowflakes on her tongue
And savors the cold, fleeting freshness.

Perhaps they needed me to see
Those stacks of empty Ball jars, stowed away
Like out of tune pianos in a basement:
The mausoleum of family life,
The conception of feminine independence,
The girls like snowflakes on my tongue,
The cold, fleeting absolutes.

Something New

Jennifer Roberts

Her long fingers, thin, nails like rice
paper covered in dough, in
flour, with the heat of
her years collecting at her brow,
pinched at the corners of the dough.

When I asked an old friend what he remembered about her he said that she always made you feel welcome and if she was baking a pie when you stopped by for a visit she would make you one while you waited.

Her edges were neat,
pressed
with care.

She once described herself as a simple, country girl not willing to relinquish her birthright for the fool who greased the palms of patrons.

She folded the strawberry compote with swift
soft movements. Her wrist,
the conductor of the show,
veined blue against the bowl
circled a thousand lives.

She pulled me close, putting the spoon to my mouth and I licked. "*I'm going to die*," she said, pouring the last of the filling out into the crust pinched with perfect waves,

"It's something I've never done before."

Excerpt from *Wrong Number*

Jennifer Roberts

EXT. NEW YORK CITY URBAN SIDEWALK - AFTERNOON

A young woman, early thirties, struggles to carry two bags of groceries down a busy sidewalk. As she approaches the steps leading to her apartment building, a bag slips, an apple falls.

CUT TO:

EXT. URBAN SIDEWALK - AFTERNOON

A gun falls to the ground. A man stumbles, picks up the gun, begins to run, stumbles again, drops a cell phone.

MAN

God...

CUT TO:

EXT. NEW YORK CITY URBAN SIDEWALK - CONTINUOUS

ANITA

...dammit

Anita stoops to pick up the apple, while trying to hold both bags. She manages to re organize her bags and heads up the stairs to her apartment

INT. ANITA'S APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

Anita comes in with groceries, flicks on light switch and heads to the kitchen. Begins to unpack groceries. She pulls out a video, a bottle of wine. In the background she hears the beeping of voice mail.

ANITA

Hold your horses.

The machine continues to beep as she unpacks. Anita walks to answering machine and hits play.

AUTOMATED VOICE

You. Have. Four. New. Messages in. Mailbox. One. Mailbox one, four messages. Beep

ANITA

(to the answering machine)
Talk to me.

AUTOMATED VOICE

Friday, 5:36 p.m. Beep.

A chipper voice is cutting through a noisy background.

RACHELLE

Hey, Anita! I'm at Jack's on Fourth. A couple of us are getting a drink or two. I think I'll be late. Sorry about movie night...

Anita hears laughter in the background.

CUT TO:

I/E. JACKS BAR

Rachelle, a young woman with short, dark hair is holding a phone close to her face, her other hand covering her ear. Behind her are scenes of a crowded, smoky bar. The music is loud. A man is grabbing at her and she is giggling.

RACHELLE

(whispering)

I've met someone, Ann, and he's gorgeous. Wish me luck!

CUT TO:

INT. ANITA'S APARTMENT

Dial tone. Beep. Anita presses the delete button a little too angrily. As the messages continue, Anita goes to kitchen and pours a glass of wine.

AUTOMATED VOICE

Friday, 5:45 p.m.

TED

Hi, it's Ted. I was hoping we could get together tonight for a late dinner.

(pause) Anita, we need to work this out, please don't avoid me. (pause) Anyway, call me as soon as you get home. Bye.

Anita takes a gulp of wine.

AUTOMATED VOICE

Friday, 5:49 p.m.

MAN

(Frantic voice cutting through static)

I...to...Uncle Frank?! Can I speak...Where...hell...you?

Anita pauses mid-sip. Camera switches between Anita and machine.

MAN CONT'D

Pick....damn phone. (pause) There's been a change...My escort...fallen. Location...hot...moving...use an escort.

Slowly, Anita pulls the glass from her lips. There is noise in the background that cuts through the static periodically. Gunshots?

MAN CONT'D

(out of breath)

I need an escort..ok, ok...I...1750. ...call...1800 and someone...be there.

Anita is stunned; the wine glass dangles from her hand.

ANITA

Whoa.

Anita sets the wine down on the counter and walks to machine. As machine plays final message, Anita sits down.

AUTOMATED VOICE

Friday, 6:00 p.m.

LANDLORD

Yeah, uh, Miss Wells, I wanted you to know I fixed the heater this afternoon and it should be...

CAMERA PULLS IN ON ANSWERING MACHINE LIGHT. ANITA'S HAND COMES INTO VIEW AND PRESSES STOP, CUTTING OFF THE MESSAGE.

AUTOMATED VOICE

End. Of. Messages. Beep.

ANITA REWINDS. CAMERA STILL ON HAND AND LIGHT. SLOWLY CAMERA PANS OUT TO BRING ANITA INTO VIEW.

AUTOMATED VOICE

Friday, 5:49 p.m. Beep.

Suddenly the phone rings. Anita jumps to her feet. Phone rings again and a third time. Anita's breath is hard. She waits for the machine to pick up.

AUTOMATED VOICE

Please. Leave a. Message after the tone. Beep.

MAN
(whispering, urgent, less static)
It's a set up. Get me the hell outta here. My escort is retired...

Anita grabs the receiver.

ANITA
(quickly)
I'm sorry, you have the wrong number.

CUT TO:

TIGHT SHOT OF A MAN'S MOUTH, DIRTY HAND AND BLOODY CELL PHONE.

MAN
(hastily)
Who the hell is...

CUT TO:

ANITA'S APARTMENT.

Anita hangs up, paces the floor, and then runs over to her door and checks the locks. Leaning her head against the door, she calms her breath.

ANITA
(softly)
It's a prank call, it's a prank call, it's a prank call...

Anita walks into the kitchen and grabs her wine. She finishes the glass in one big swallow and pours another. After a slower-paced second drink, she wipes her mouth and walks back to the living room. She sits down. She grabs a note pad from the desk and picks up a pen and jots down key words, "escort", "Uncle Frank", and picks up her jacket, shoves the paper in her pocket and exits.

CUT TO:

EXT. OUTSIDE ANITA'S APARTMENT - EVENING

Anita pulls her jacket around her as she heads down the street. She pulls out her cell phone and the note and begins dialing.

CUT TO:

INT. BLANCO'S EATERY - EVENING

The sound of wine glasses and silverware click all around Ted and Anita as she relates the story to him. She's not sure why, but she doesn't tell him about the conversation she had with the man, only the messages. He seems concerned.

TED
Did the police come by?

Anita sips her water.

ANITA

I called them on the way here. They confirmed that it was probably a prank.
(pause) I Couldn't stand to sit there, Ted.

TED

Well, I'm glad you came to me.

He reaches for her hand and gives it a gentle squeeze.

ANITA

Thanks, Ted.

Anita pulls her hand away. Ted is dejected. Anita pretends not to notice.

ANITA CONT'D

It's just a creepy prank call and I'm sure millions of woman in this city get them every day. I'll survive. (pause) But it is...

TED

What?

ANITA

Nothing. It's nothing.

CUT TO:

EXT. ANITA'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

A police car pulls up in front of the house and two officers get out. They walk up the stairs, checking their surroundings. One of them presses the buzzer to Anita's apartment. No answer. He tries again. No answer. Finally, they leave a card in her mailbox and leave.

CUT TO:

INT. BLANCO'S EATERY - CONTINUOUS

ANITA

(enthusiastically)

So, tell me about the big dinner party tomorrow? Are we going to meet any future Bill Gates'?

Ted moves his hand back off the table.

TED

Who knows. There are certainly a lot of interesting people that attend this

function. You get everyone from the business type to the college grad with pointy fingernails.

ANITA

Great. Should be fun. (pause, then leaning in) Do you think maybe he got the numbers mixed up?

TED

What?

ANITA

The phone number? I mean, maybe he was trying to reach someone. Maybe he really was in trouble and he misdialed...

TED

No, Anita. It was a prank. Pure and simple. Put it out of your mind.

Ted begins to reach for her, but pulls back.

CUT TO:

EXT. OUTSIDE ANITA'S APARTMENT - EVENING

A finger caresses the card left by the officers. The card is then placed into a jacket pocket and a man walks down the street away from the building.

CUT TO:

INT. ANITA'S APARTMENT - LATER

Anita hangs her jacket and searches the room with her eyes. No beeping, no messages. Walking over to the window, she looks out at the city. After a minute, she heads to the desk and pulls out the notepaper.

ANITA

Shit. The police said it's nothing to worry about, and it isn't, Anita. Relax.

Anita slowly begins to doodle on the notepaper. Soon, she begins jotting down all the variations on her phone number. Looking it over for a few minutes, she reaches for the phone and dials. The phone on the other side rings and Anita hangs up suddenly and walks off toward kitchen.

ANITA

You're being ridiculous.

She stops and turns back to phone.

CAMERA ZOOMS IN TO THE ANSWERING MACHINE, ITS LIGHT STILL BLINKING, THEN PULLS BACK AS ANITA WALKS SLOWLY OVER TO THE PHONE AGAIN.

Anita picks up the receiver and hits redial. The phone rings.

CLOSE UP ON ANITA'S MOUTH, HAND AND RECEIVER

ANITA

Hello. Is Uncle Frank there?

VOICE

Who?

ANITA

Sorry, wrong number.

Anita shakes her head. She chuckles as she tosses the paper into the waste basket.

CUT TO:

JACK'S

Rachelle is laughing and drinking. Her new friend eyes her with a distant and dark stare. She doesn't notice. Nobody does.

RACHELLE

(Over her shoulder)
Another round!

COMPANION

Yes. Another round.

There is laughter.

INT. ANITA'S APARTMENT - EVENING

Anita is on her third glass of wine and is barely watching the movie. She is drifting in and out of sleepiness and has all but forgotten the phone call earlier, the wine glass dangling from her fingertips.

(RRRRRRing)

The phone rings.

Anita startles awake and her wine sloshes over the rim, spilling on her hand and carpet. She wipes it up quickly, cursing.

(RRRRRRing)

Shaking the wine from her hand, she heads to the phone. Suddenly, she remembers the previous calls and stops cold. Her eyes fix on the phone.

(RRRRRing)

In one quick move, Anita leaps to the phone before the machine picks up, cutting off the final ring.

ANITA

(hesitantly)
Hello?

MAN

Damn. Look, I don't mean to scare you, but...

ANITA

You have the wrong number.

MAN

Yes, I know.

ANITA

I've called the police.

MAN

(harshly)
NO!
(more calm)
No, I'm...I'm not a threat to you. It's just that...

CUT TO:

INT. DARK ROOM - MORNING

Flash image of man sitting in a corner. Cannot see face, seems hurt.

MAN (V.O.)

I'm in this place...

CUT TO:

INT. ANITA'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

CLOSE UP OF ANITA

CUT TO:

INT DARK ROOM - MORNING

MAN (V.O.)

(Growing agitated)
and I have this phone number...

IMAGE OF A BLOODIED HAND ON A PIECE OF TORN PAPER TO MAN'S HAND.

MAN (V.O.)

(More Agitated)

I have this phone number that is wrong and...

CUT TO:

INT ANITA'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

CAMERA FOLLOWS AS ANITA WALKS TO WINDOW AND LOOKS OUT OVER THE CITY

ANITA

Look, who are you trying to reach?

She pulls back the curtain.

CUT TO:

INT DARK ROOM - CONTINUOUS

MAN

(chuckles)

Well, Uncle Frank, I guess. The problem is that I don't really know. My... escort had all the info.

ANITA

(Insistent)

What number do you have?

MAN

It's hard to make out. 879-6532.

CUT TO:

INT. ANITA'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

ANITA

(Soft whisper of disappointment)

That's my number.

MAN

Yes, but you are not my...uncle.

ANITA

I'm sorry. Look, you should call 911 for help.

MAN

(laugh)

Honey, 911 won't help me, not here.

ANITA

I should go.

MAN

Wait, please. I should let you hang up, but its just that my friend...

CUT TO:

INT. DARK ROOM - MORNING

Image of a hand slowly covers the eyes of a man laying dead on the floor

MAN (V.O.)

left me in a really tight spot and all I want is...

CUT TO:

INT ANITA'S APARTMENT -CONTINUOUS

MAN

to get home in one piece and all I got is this wrong number and (pause) and you.

Anita realizes she let the conversation get the best of her.

ANITA

I have to go, sorry.

CUT TO:

ANITA'S

Walking from the bathroom, toothbrush dangling from her mouth, Anita checks all locks and windows. She pauses as she passes the wastebasket.

ANITA

(Head cocked)

Don't do it, girl.

She removes toothbrush, picks up crumbled paper, washes her mouth with the last drop of Shiraz and spits in basket. She heads to desk and, standing over the phone, she rocks back and forth, summoning courage. In a swift movement, she reaches for phone and dials another number.

VOICE

Hello?

ANITA

Is Uncle Frank there, please?

VOICE

Sorry. Wrong number.

The phone is hung up hard in Anita's ear. She shrugs and dials the next number

CUT TO:

DARK DARK ROOM - AFTERNOON

An eerie silence. A man's lips are moving in unformed, silent words. Blood drips from a wound on his forehead and he seems to be going in and out of consciousness. His hand jerks, waking him enough to remember the phone that lay in his hand. He glances over at his escort.

MAN

(humorous resignation)

You're about as much fun as my first wife. At least you know when to hold your tongue.

Pulling himself upright and looking around

MAN

(Apologetically)

Look, I know you tried. I know you tried.

Pulling his shirt off in pained movements, he adjusts his position. In a respectful manner, he places the shirt over the escort's cold face. Stumbling, he gets to his feet and inspects his surroundings. Feeling his way along the way, he finds a light switch.

CUT TO:

ANITA'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Anita's fingers move over the dial and hang up. With each replacement of the receiver, she crosses a number off her list and begins again.

CUT TO:

JACK'S BAR - 2 A.M.

Slow, moody music fills the air as the half-empty bar takes on a more depressed air. A couple huddle in drunkenness at the far table while another patron leaves his stool and heads for the door. Rachelle is leaning into her date as the sway to the last notes of the mournful song on the jukebox. She has a cigarette hanging from one hand and the other is holding a watered down Jack and Coke.

BARTENDER

Closing time. Go home.

Rachelle's companion supports her as she stumbles toward the door. As they pass the bar, he hands off a small wad of cash to the bartender.

CUT TO:

ANITA'S APARTMENT

Her head is resting on the desk, and she is dialing a number and holding phone to ear. She is tired. All but one combination of phone numbers have been crossed off.

Phone rings. Rings again. Anita goes to hang up when she hears a click on the other end.

Silence.

ANITA

Hello?

Silence, but Anita feels someone is on the other end. She begins to sit up.

ANITA

(More insistent)

Hello?

Anita grows anxious. She stands up slowly.

ANITA

Uncle Frank?

Silence for two beats.

VOICE

(rough)

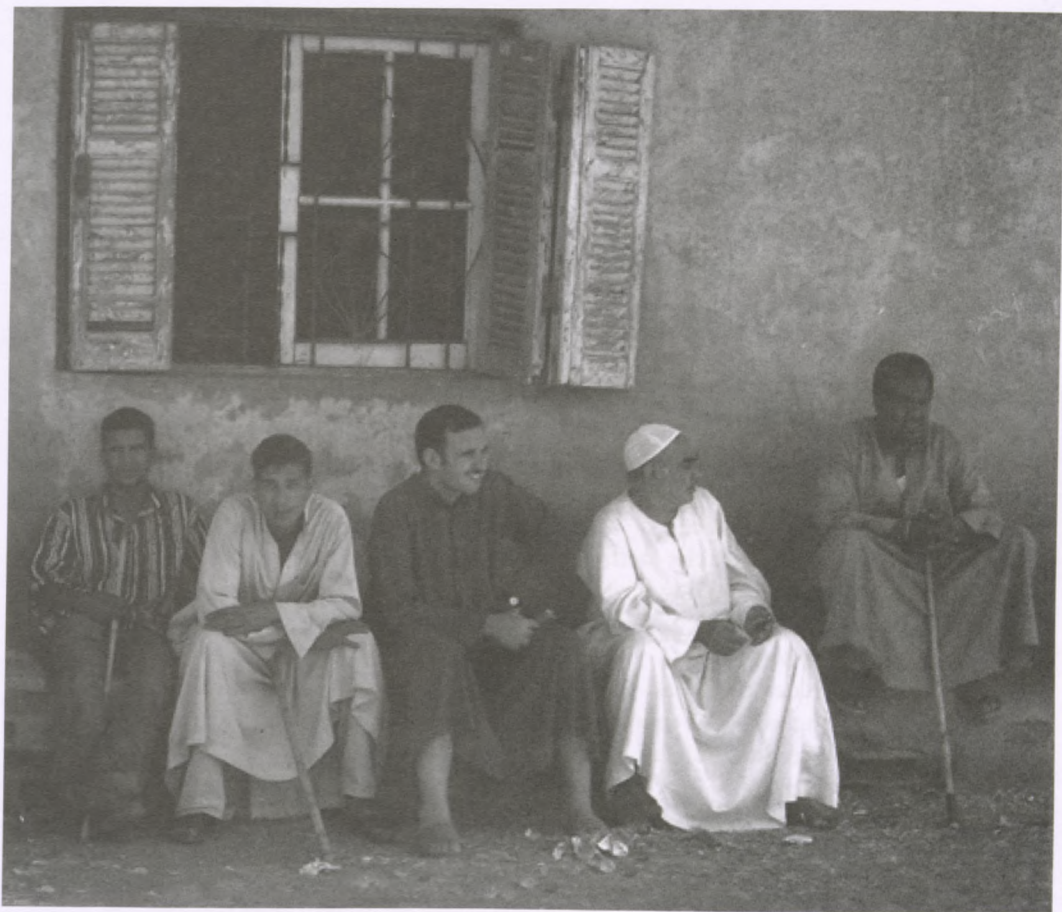
Who the fuck is this?

Startled, Anita quickly hangs up the receiver and begins to pace. She moves to her front door, again securing her locks.

The phone begins to ring.

Men at the Camel Market of Birqash

Sandra Thouvenin



Widow

Jackie Smith

Yesterday you were pressed against me
A second spine tracing my own, your hands
Knowing mine only mine as mine knew yours
As this blanket knew the chemistry that comes
When your sweat collects with mine and creates
Us. As the sun knows the moon and no -
No.

Not yesterday.
It feels that way...but it's
Wrong. This is all wrong.
Months. Months since the blue swallowed
You in her depths. Your lungs filling up,
Sinking into her Back to the womb.
Womb to tomb like that play. You went
out on that boat alone why were you alone.
Why did you go. Alone.
You died alone.

She has your eyes.
It was a Sunday when
I told her. Her face crumpled like paper
Paper airplanes catching fire and falling.
Falling. We were falling. I held her
Under my ribs as you went into the earth,
Soft down hair wrapped around my fingers.
A red spark of a ribbon.
Satin ribbons. I wish to wrap
You in satin ribbons, blue and green,
Suffocating intoxicating silk. Was that what
It was like? Or was it needles. Bullets.
Arrows from a bow splitting
Your insides. The dams breaking.
Damning us.

She wants
To see the ocean. Wants to feel grain grit
Sand hear gulls crying in slate granite skies taste
The salt in the air feel the ebb and flow of the
Waves waving hello waving goodbye waving
You away from me.

It took you away. It will take her away.
Beckoning, promising candy chocolate covered
Dreams and she will step in. She will be swept
Away the gulls laughing at my stupidity. She
Will grow fins, sharp gills and swim away.
Forget her mother, the land-loving mother.
Not suitable for the purple-finned daughter singing
Haunting melodies to chase me away.
I will die alone.

She asks if this is the blue that took Daddy
Away. No, I tell her, this is a different blue.
A bigger blue. A salt blue. But still a dangerous
Blue. My heart is pounding, saturated yellow fear
Bones screaming Leave Leave Leave now
Save her. Save you. Save Him.
She stands next to me, her little hand in mine.
There are no fins. No gills. She is not an angelfish.
She is Our daughter. She is what's
Left.

We take a step and the wave beckons, beaches itself
Upon our bare feet. Warm liquid steel. As it flows
Back I feel as though I am falling. We were falling.
You left and we were falling. Our girl is still here
Chirping like a little bird, still holding my hand.
I am still scared. But she is still here. I am
Not alone.

But you were.
You died alone.

Looking Across Bloomington St. Before a Storm

Kevin Crafton

I looked across the pale orange-lit
street as dusk found its keys to get in,
Standing close, nigh on the edge of oblivion
her hair blew rabid, inviting the wind.
Some words deemed docile and pragmatically
exposed her to the roots shared by angry men.

Her, the one heard her say
against the wind we fall
picking up ourselves on the way
too many substances serve suicidal
when viewed from the eyes of a martyr
Making bribes blue and gold alike
Along the vast stretches of the river
reflecting not far from the vestry
in which she stands solemnly streaking
mascara lines across her cheeks
As the dove painting a coal mine may
endure. Freshness finds now far
fretting wisdom without kneading,
Needing only to soften
the breeze from which oblivion
has been ensnared by her rapture,
her harlot hair.

Jennifer Knox

Our house was being divvied up into territories. Dad had the backroom and basement while Mom kept a stronghold on the kitchen. I guessed this was due to a few reasons, but most importantly the fact that she loved to cook. As angry as he would get, my father always sat at the dinner table readily and praised whatever culinary creation she placed in front of him.

Mom's signature dish was lasagna. A perfect balance of spices would stuff my nose as she opened the oven, checking the tender noodles, sauce, and ricotta with a long fork. The oregano, peppers, and other, more mysterious ingredients combined, making the air tingle succulently. I preferred to merely inhale.

At the time, my taste buds were peaking and I preferred neutral foods such as hot dogs and macaroni & cheese. Spices pierced my tongue and vegetables made it retreat. Most meat tasted foul and the juicier it was the less I wanted it. Fruits were too acidic and sometimes even candy was too sweet. My nose crumpled at the very same foods that adults couldn't get enough of. Attempting to be polite, however, I decided to allow her the privilege of thinking I enjoyed her food as much as Dad.

I would wait at the dinner table, teasing my beans until I saw Mom's gaze shift to a safe enough distance from my plate. Quickly, I would plop the lasagna, forkful at a time, into the napkin on my lap. Once wrapped up, I would hold them up delicately out for Honey's taking. If Honey, our golden retriever, was uninterested or already full from prior forkfuls, I would feel for the underneath corner ledge of the table and push the bulging napkin atop with all intentions of removing the food at a safer time. This worked majestically until the day Mom found a stash of stale green beans that I forgot about over the weekend.

The second reason Mom staked ownership in the kitchen was the aeration. The kitchen was the one and only room that she could comfortably smoke. And smoke she did: a pack a day.

The final reason was the biggest determinant as far as I could tell: the phone. Our cordless was mom's porthole to the outside world. A world I wanted to know more about. Laura and I would joke that we didn't want to see Mom go through the pain of surgery when she had to have the light-blue phone removed from her ear. She liked this joke, responding quickly, "Smart-asses!"

Looking back, I think the phone was not only Mom's connection to friends, but a support system that sustained her through some difficult years. It was her lifeline. The phone was the only non-negotiable freedom she allowed herself from perpetual discomfort. I often ran to answer it when it rang and often a man with a soft voice cooed into my ear, "Hey sweetie, where's your mamma at?"

"I'll get her, who may I ask is calling?"

"Just tell her someone who needs guidance." The last time he had introduced himself as having "issues," and the time before that he asked for "my angel of a mother" to comfort him. I thought my mother must have secret powers over this man.

"Mom! It's that guy with issues again," I yelled from the hallway, down toward the kitchen, "Hi sweetie, how you holding up?" When I heard mom's sweet voice in the phone, I hung

up softly, albeit all the more curious about her coded language. Many of her friends spoke about “sponsors” and “issues” and “guidance.” And I wondered how much of it my mom could actually fix. She wasn’t all that good at fixing issues in our home. When dad said something in our home it was always the final word; the loudest word, despite a perpetual lack of rationality. So, why were all these other men calling and asking for the very same thing she didn’t do here? I decided to ask.

I waited until a Saturday when Laura and Dad were at the YMCA. I was busy watching Pee Wee Herman bounce around his colorful living room and mom had just hung up after a long, soft-voiced call. “Mom, can we talk?” I yelled, not moving.

“Chairey!” Mom exclaimed, watching the large chair on TV sing comfortingly toward the smiling man in the gray suit.

“Mom, seriously,”

“Of course, sweetie. It’s a pretty day, let’s go outside.”

I followed her to the front porch and hopped onto the porch swing. Mom sat on the step just below where I was. Her hair was dark, curly, and I liked to push my fingers through it. She breathed out heavily and then reached for a Benson & Hedges Menthol Ultra Light (that was a difficult order to fill when I got old enough to walk to the store and pick her up a pack when she ran out; I almost always got it wrong). “What’s on your mind?” she asked seriously.

I didn’t consider how to phrase my question. “Ummm, what’s a sponsor?”

She took a long drag, considering me with an adult-to-adult regard. I appreciated this.

“You mean Larry?”

I shrugged. “I just want to know what you always talk about on the phone. You know, like what a sponsor means...”

Her face drew in as she crunched her eyebrows. I hoped I hadn’t said anything wrong.

“How would you like to take a trip with me tonight, to my meeting?”

“Uh, okay,”

“Okay. It should answer your questions, Hon.”

“Okay, yeah!” I said as I became excited. It was going to be just me and her. This was rare and beautiful. I wanted to dress up. I searched through my closet for the perfect outfit. I had a lot of spandex pants for running and racing shirts. I also had an Easter dress from the year before. Unfortunately, I didn’t have much in between. I decided to settle on jeans and a race shirt. Then, to kick up my look, I added a pair of gold-colored earrings that I bought at the dollar store. They were big loops with beads that moved around whenever I moved my head. Then came the crowning touch: brick-colored lipstick that Grandma had given me. I felt like Madonna herself. I went down the stairs, butt first, and Mom met me at the bottom.

“Well, don’t you look pretty.” She smiled at me as she said this.

“The lipstick is too bright,” Laura added as she put down her gym bag. I waved her opinion off as though it were flying too close to my face. She looked mad and I thought maybe that was because Mom and I would finally have some time alone.

“Bye, Dad.”

“Have fun. When do you plan on coming home?” Dad asked Mom. He seemed slightly agitated.

“I don’t know.”

“Fine. Thanks for the notice by the way.”

I watched my dad stroke his beard slowly. I usually laughed when Dad did his impressions; I thought this one was Snidely Whiplash; he did that one often. This time it was unintentional.

Mom led me out of the house and as we left I felt the tense air; I could tell Laura was jealous. She was at our heels begging, but told she wasn't old enough to go yet. This made me feel special. I was finally being led into my mother's secret life.

The entire drive was intense and filled with mystery. I watched the same neighborhoods I had passed many times from the passenger seat. We passed houses and businesses that were all familiar to me and I continuously asked Mom if I was dressed okay and what I should say to impress her secret friends. She said they weren't secret friends. We pulled into a church parking lot. "The people in this place are recovering from drug and alcohol addictions. We all gather here to share our stories and help each other to stay clean." I nodded. I wanted nothing more than to meet her friends and make them my friends too. I never once that day considered that my mom might be at that meeting for her own support too. She was the caretaker; the force that made my bruises hurt less and sadness disappear. She was the sponsor, never the one in need.

We walked into a large room with tiled floors. There was a wall of smoke so thick that it almost camouflaged the doorway. Once inside, it took my eyes a while to adjust to the thick, smoky air. There was a table set up with coffee and cookies. There were many scrawny men and women, all with long cigarettes like Mom's. I felt a subtle fear as I gazed around at all the people; all of them, it seemed, staring at me; the one child. I scanned the room and then looked downward toward the white and grey speckled floor. "Is that Jenny?" a familiar voice asked.

"Jane?"

I looked up, hoping I was right. "Hi!" I said, elated and relieved to feel connection to a room full of stranger adults hovering over me.

"Hi baby, I like those earrings."

"Thank you. They remind me of some I saw Madonna wearing."

"Very nice," she said and gave my mom a hug. The two laughed delicately at my youth and I heard Jane whisper, "You are a brave girl," and wondered what she meant by that.

"Come on sweetie, let's find some chairs." Jane led me to some of the few empty chairs in the room. "Hey Jimmy, can you scoot for this lovely lady?"

"For a lady as lovely as that? Of course, but I didn't know you had a little one."

"This here is Anita's kid."

"Oh! Well, for Anita's kid, I'll scoot my butt over for sure. Sit down, kid; you know your mom is a very special lady? I think she may even be an angel."

"Thank you," I said uncomfortably. I felt intimidated by all the new people and the force of anxiety became so heavy that it clouded my ability to say anything more.

"And what's your name?" the man asked. His brown eyes were wide, as were his smile and waistline. I looked at the middle of his chest: a spanse of red and stripes, and told him my name quietly. He stuck out a rough hand and I looked up. My face grew red as I stuck out my hand to shake. "Listen, you're just in time for the speaker. We always have a speaker, usually Johnny. Then anyone who wants to can get up and talk about what's bothering them."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Are the cookies only for people who speak?"

The man laughed loudly, a chortle-like laugh as though something was loosening from the laughter traveled through his throat. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it, then spoke as it dangled from his lip, stuck there as though his bottom lip was lined with invisible glue. I watched the cigarette bob up and down. "Do you want chocolate chip or striped cookies?"

"Striped cookie!" I said, looking around for Mom. There was a group of men and women surrounding my mom. "I'll get them," I told the man. "Will you save my seat?"

"Sure thing, princess."

"Thanks," I jumped up and rushed over to where Mom was, leaving Jane and Jimmy to talk. Nudging up against my mother's leg, I sealed the conversation.

"Her father will just have to build a bridge and get over himself," Mom was saying. She patted me on the head as I pushed into her circle and smiles came down on me from the three women and two men to whom she was speaking.

"Amen," a voice said.

I took three cookies and then an amplified voice filled the room. We all took a seat and one of the men who had been in my mom's conversation took the podium.

"Hello. My name is Larry and I'm an addict," he said.

The entire room responded to him, "Hello Larry."

"We have all survived another beautiful Saturday. God knows, every day is a miracle."

"A miracle," a woman in the row behind me repeated.

The man continued, "I see a few new faces today." Uh, oh, I thought, please don't point me out... "I know that some of you may want to share your stories and some of you may not, but above all I want you all to know that we are here to support YOU. This is a room full of love and acceptance. This is a room of forgiveness. And this room is an opportunity for you to release the past and begin a new future. One step at a time."

Many people affirmed his statement, repeating it or piping up with a soft "Yes," or "That's right!"

"Thank you to Miss Sheila for bringing our snacks today. And thank you Miss Anita for providing the food for our picnic last week."

I looked up at Mom who gave Larry a smile and nod.

"Okay, from here I will surrender the mike for anyone's taking."

"Mom, are you going to speak too?"

"Not today, honey." And Mom didn't speak that night, but she didn't have to. I could see the empathy and acceptance in her eyes each time another person spoke. It was like that for everyone there. All these people seemed close in a way that I had never seen before. They had a special bond, not quite like family, but similar. As each person rose to speak applause would spread throughout the room like an audible hug. The person would stand up there shakily and begin to tell a sad tale. Some of them were good storytellers, some weren't. One thing they all shared, however, was tears. And the more tears they shed, the more encouragement they would receive from the crowd.

I wanted to get up there too, tell these kind people a sad story and make them love and hug and accept me the way they did for each other. I wanted to be a part of the group. The "in" crowd. The rest of the night I tried to think of the saddest things in my life. I thought of my pet Anole and how she had died only three weeks after I got her from the pet store. I hadn't

even had the chance to name her yet, and I never quite got over the fact that she died so quickly under my care. I knew I had done something wrong, but never told anyone that I was responsible. How could I? Dad would have yelled. Laura would have called me evil. But the people here, they would understand, I thought, and Mom would too.

I thought I would raise my hand after the last speaker and be the big finale, after all, as sad as these people's stories were, nothing could compare to a lizard homicide. I was sure I would get more hugs than all of them put together. When the speaker was done, everyone rose to hug her and congratulate her on her courage. "One step at a time," Larry said into the microphone. I started to raise my hand, but got nervous. Could I really speak in front of all these people? "Thanks for coming out tonight. If you are new today and you need a sponsor, get with me after this and we'll hook you up. We all need a sponsor in life, remember that. And thank you for the many people who came out and shared their stories with us today."

On the car ride home, I told Mom that I wanted to come again. I told her that I wanted to be a part of this group and she laughed. "But there are so many people who love each other and support each other."

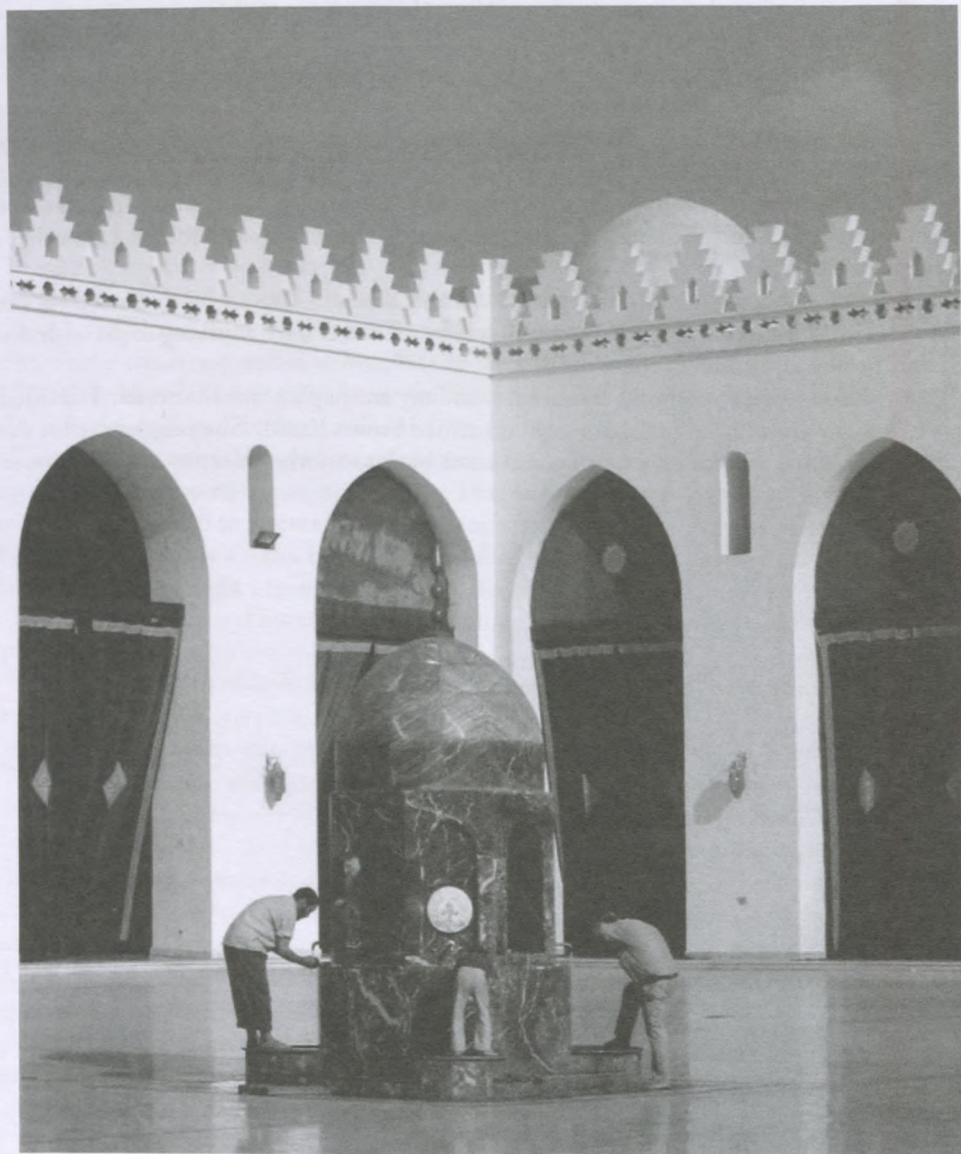
"Honey, these people are all addicted to drugs and alcohol. That's why they need support."

"Well, what if someone had a sad story to tell, but it didn't have anything to do with drugs? Could that person still come to these meetings?"

"That would be pretty pathetic," Mom said, and my entire plan was shattered. I decided to confess to her my guilt for killing that sweet, unnamed brown lizard. She hugged me for a long time after I was done and told me that I could come back to another meeting with her sometime.

Scene from the Mosque of Al Hakim

Sandra Thouvenin



A Work in Progress

Jackie Smith

We, a group, a commune
A five-person mass of beating hearts
And broken melodies
Pile into the little blue car
Belonging. Heat trapped between
Our bodies like shared secrets, shared
Air. Twisting corners sharp like the sea,
Impact on throbbing drum beats
It all falls away like the leaves.

He took me away to the place
Children play and dreams die. The
Blacktop dusty beneath sneakered feet.
Little feet, on the swings, dangling like vines
My feet have never touched the ground,
A child
In stasis.
Red lines
Red lines
Red lines along my skin and he took my arms
Goosepimpled in autumn air, touched
His lips to them
As I wept.

I stand too short, the
Proportions all wrong. I am all wrong.
Not like the girls I see on the
Screens on the dreams on the pages.
Pale alabaster
Coal-lined eyes
Rainbows painted upon their lids
Leopard spots, fairy dust. Tangled hair
Splashed with brush strokes. Blonde in a sea of ebony.
Fire in a forest of chocolate. Black boots.
Children's tops. Full skirts with pins and needles.
No curves, no breasts.
Thin and beautiful hummingbirds.

On the swing I felt his heartbeat in my bones.
He pushed me to the sky, sending me back.

Back where I belonged. In the stars. Where I
Couldn't fall. Couldn't hurt. Couldn't.
A child laughing.
A child mourning.
A child underneath all these heavy bricks.

I think of postcards.
Frayed on the edges, pictures of violets
Or nightingales, or starry nights with torn ears.
Words in blue ink, apologies, salutations, curses.
Where did it all go astray?
Remember the car, remember summer nights,
Remember my secrets your secrets our secrets.
All in the little blue car. Remember.
It gives me a paper cut, stinging. I feel it
In my lungs.

The water falls, hot at first, then it grows cold.
I'm numb by then, cried out, on the tile naked and
Alone and empty in my weakness, my weakness.
Weakness. There is only red and my arms burn I
Ache in it, my bones ache in his screams. Mother's
Mistake will be the death of me. Tried to
Call tried to escape Rapunzel let down your hair my
Hair cut too short, I couldn't reach your voice. I rescued
Myself in the only way I knew how. Released it.
Under my skin it crawled and I cut it out.
There was only red. Only red.

Then You came. You came.
And took me away.

For Charlie Chaplin:

In response to his visual commentary about society's dependence
on Machine Production and its terrible effects on the Working class

Rachel Scali

What a crazy life I lead,
All mixed up and shook up like
Rats in a race
All the day long, in good weather or bad
In whatever mood
Be it happy or sad
All packed up tight
Like fish in a barrel
We wriggle and fidget
To get the tightest grasp

All I want is a break from this endless spinning
This dizzying, maddening, twirling around
Sometimes I can't remember if I'm upside or down
And on top of all of this running pell mell
All this endless, relentless runnin' like hell
Add on the twitching, the in your skin itching
It's twisting and turning about and about
In my hair and my skin and my teeth and my toes
It's scratching my eyes out while I'm itching your nose.

It's all their fault; it's them that I blame
With their shiny bright faces and their perfect small rings
Whether it's five speed or three or I'm on a lunch break,
They chase me around; oh it's them that I hate
The boss man says faster then slower, YOU FOOL
And nobody cares that alone when I'm home
I can't stop the twitching I can't even eat soup.

And I run on this wheel all the day through
And you call me insane, well then what of you?
If all of your life you turned tiny knobs
Around in a circle clockwise like cogs
Wouldn't you snap just a little, well would you?
Would you turn the buttons on your lady friend's dress,
On the dog's favorite spot
Or the policeman's vest?
Finally, thank heaven the knell of the bell
Sounds freedom's alarum
From this button hell.

A Little Diddy

Amber Robertson

I stared at Trisha's upper lip, where the foam from her grande skinny almond mocha latte had settled as she rattled on about a new reality show that followed the life and love of a famous actor/Scientologist and his clinically depressed girlfriend.

"And then he came home from the audition and like, discovered her taking her medication, and so in this episode, like, he's having an intervention, like with a bunch of other scientologists, and they're like, gonna try to convince her that there's nothing, like, wrong with her."

As I watched Trisha explain her new obsession in life, not really listening, but doing my best to appear attentive, I decided what it was that really bothered me. It wasn't the frothy mustache itself, or the fact that she was completely oblivious to its presence that got to me, but rather the way she popped her mouth open every time she said "like." It was a slack-jaw hesitation that led me to believe she was allowing herself time to breathe throughout her random rattles. Either that or she was giving her brain a little pause, as she tried to determine how to continue a statement.

Diane had never done that. Diane never said "like" like that, or drank frothy mocha lattes or watched reality shows. Diane was nothing like Trisha.

"You have latte on your lip," I said to Trisha, handing her my hanky. Then I rose to leave the room. "I'm gonna shower."

"Kay, fine. But hurry up, because like, I don't want you to miss it. The show's on at nine. 'Kay, babe?"

I grimaced as I passed through the doorway and out of sight. Diane never called me "babe."

* * *

Here we go again. I downed the rest of my vodka and left the ice rattling in the tumbler. I watched from my secluded corner as my boss' wife, Fat Vera, made her way across the room. Held tight in the grip of her left hand was the elbow of yet another unsuspecting female. It never failed. In the four years I had been handling the advertising for Gustus Stavros' Wheels and Deals, Gus and Vera had taken every opportunity to fix me up. Business lunches, company functions, private parties, and now here at the "Come as Your Favorite" themed costume party, the annual charity event that Mr. Stavros' wrote off to guarantee a big tax return.

"Diane, Jack. Jack, Diane. Oh," Vera snorted and then added in a singsong voice, "a little diddy about Jack and Diane." She giggled at her cleverness and waddled away, giving me two thumbs up before tripping over Larry the attorney's dinosaur tail.

Jesus Christ, I thought to myself, could this be any worse?

"So is it true you're gay?"

"What?" I slobbered over the ice cube I had rolling around my mouth. "God, no. Why would you..."

"No," she said, laughing playfully at my discomfort. "You," she emphasized with two hard pokes to my chest. "Abe Lincoln. I'm pretty sure he was a closet case. Liked to diddle his bodyguard."

With the proverbial ice broken, I affirmed my heterosexual preferences and tried to explain

why I was dressed as my favorite assassinated president.

"Oh yes, of course," she nodded with sarcastic agreement. "Because JFK is so last year."

"And just who are you supposed to be?" I posed the question, taking the opportunity to get a good look. God, she was all legs. They began right at the curve of her hip and went south, covered by a mere four inches of skirt, and stemming all the way down to a pair of fire engine red heels. Her black blouse was belted at the waist and hung loosely off her right shoulder. When I reached her perfectly oval shaped face, my eyes quickly darted away as I saw a smile play across her mouth. Caught in the act. How embarrassing. I redirected my gaze and noticed a glint of interest in her eyes.

"I'm me. Junior year. Sarah Lawrence. 1990."

"Must've been a good year." I nodded approvingly.

"Damn good year."

Two hours later we were sharing a cab. Diane tipped back my stovepipe hat and held the sides of my face as she kissed me lightly on the mouth. "Abe, can I be honest?" she said when she pulled away.

"Of course," I told her, kissing her again. "But only if you drop the Abe bit."

"Okay, Jack," she smiled. "The thing is," she spoke between kisses. "I'd really like to take you home, but that freakin' beard has got to go."

I pulled away laughing, "Abraham Lincoln without a beard? No way!" With that she pulled the synthetic hairs away from my chin, snapping the elastic strings off my ears.

"Remember, you're not Abe anymore." She chuckled the beard out the taxi's window. "We're just Jack and Diane."

* * *

I stepped onto the cold tile floor and towed off the remains of a steamy shower. Wiping the fog from the mirror, I caught a glimpse of myself. What are you doing, Old Man? I thought to myself. Trisha was twenty-four and I was pushing forty-two. I still wasn't quite over the time that teenaged venter at the Knicks game asked me if my daughter wanted a hotdog too. Little shit. I stepped back to examine my reflection. My body was in pretty good shape. I liked to work out, and Trisha, of course, had me on the latest fat-free, low-carb, no taste diet that she was trying out this week. I wasn't what you'd call a health nut, but I made it a point to take care of myself.

Sometimes I'd get up early, before Trisha was awake, and go for a run or a swim, just for some time to myself. Lately I'd been going every day, leaving earlier and staying longer. It was the only time I really had as my own.

I scanned higher and studied my face. I still looked pretty good, young, except for those laugh lines and damned crows feet at the corners of my eyes. And then there was that goatee. That damned goatee that Trisha had urged me to grow. Said it made me hip, but still mature. Diane hated facial hair. She always liked my face clean shaven. Said she wanted to be able to see me. She liked how I looked.

* * *

I smacked the medicine cabinet door closed. "Dammit." Where the hell was it? I picked my

shaving kit up off the counter and emptied its contents. In the four months since I'd moved in with Diane, not a single cupboard or drawer had been designated as *mine*. Sometimes I felt like I was still living out of a suitcase. "Dammit. Diane have you seen my razor?" Turning around I saw steam billowing out of the shower and realized that she hadn't heard me. I tried again, this time much louder in order to compete with the noise of running water and Diane's warbling staccato. "Diane!"

"What?" she gurgled through the spray of water.

"Have you seen my razor?"

"What?" She poked her head out of the shower. It was covered in a soapy lather.

"My razor?" I yelled a little too loud.

"Oh." She disappeared behind the curtain and in a moment thrust her arm back out. Between her two fingers dangled my razor. "Here, I forgot."

"Thanks," I sighed. I took my razor from her hand and thumbed the blades. Dull. For some reason unknown to me, Diane insisted on shaving her legs with my razor. As I searched my kit for new blades, Diane finished her rendition of "Impossible Dream" and shut the shower off. Looking in the mirror, I watched over my shoulder as she flung the curtain aside and began to towel off. Modesty had long ago taken leave and I was beginning to like the comfortable existence I shared with this woman.

Once she had patted dry, Diane secured her towel around her waist, leaving her breasts bare, and sashayed over to sink. "Scootch," she said, bumping my hip with her own. I slid my shaving kit over, to give her some room and began to lather up my face.

"You know," I announced, "I think we should buy some stock in Bic."

"Bic?" Diane questioned as she ran a comb through her slicked back hair. "And why is that?"

"Because," I laughed through a puff of shaving cream that covered my mouth. "When we get married that's all I'm gonna let you register for. That way you'll have a million plastic pink razors all of your own, and you won't have to use mine."

"When we get what?" Diane had stopped mid-comb at the crown of her head and was now staring at me in the mirror.

"Married," I confirmed and continued shaving with short, slow strokes across my upper lip. I could tell by the look on her face that she was agitated.

"I can't believe you just said that," she said in disbelief.

I finished wiping my face with the towel and asked, only half seriously, "What, don't you want to marry me?"

Diane slapped me across the face. "Don't be stupid!"

"What the hell was that for?" I cried, holding my freshly shaven, quickly reddening cheek.

"Well, one, it's too soon to be talking about stuff like that, and two, you just really annoy me!"

I stared at her with my mouth wide open. "Okay, one, it is most certainly not too soon to be talking about it, and two, tough shit, you annoy me too!"

"It's only been four months, Jack!"

"Wrong, Diane! It's been seven."

We stood in the bathroom facing each other. It was like a show down at high noon; me with a swollen cheek and lingering remnants of Colgate, and Diane, bare-breasted, wielding her comb. She drew first.

"Well, you only moved in four months ago, that's what I mean. Living together, they say that's the hardest part, right? So let's just give it a little more time and see how things go."

* * *

I pulled open the middle drawer and dug for my razor. I found it amid the bikini wax kit and bottles of *Nair*, tampons and cotton balls, and a million other items that were of no use to me. I ran my finger across a blade and winced as it broke the skin. Instinctively I put the wound inside my mouth and tasted saliva mixed with blood. I realized that one good thing came from having a dull blade—then again, perhaps more than one.

* * *

"Jack," Diane said, sounding a bit fed up. "Please. Stop asking me to marry you."

I sat across from her at the restaurant table and digested what she had said. This was not the harsh blow that one might expect it to be, I had been through this before. I leaned back and straightened myself in my chair, snapping shut the open ring box I held in my hand. "Well, you know, Diane, I just figured, third time's a charm."

Diane stabbed angrily at her salad, then dropped her fork to the plate. "Don't say it like that, Jack. Don't say it like you're some tired, poor, abused old man. It sounds like you're giving in."

As soon as she said the words, giving in, I knew the direction the night was headed. How many times had we had this fight? It was always the same challenges, "Don't you love me? Aren't we happy? Why should things change?" followed with the same replies, "Yes, but...Yes, but...Because..." I was tired of getting nowhere.

"I am not giving in, Diane, but what do you expect me to do? Should I wait another five or six months and ask you again? Another year maybe? God, Diane it's been five years. Five years and I know that I want to be with you. I want to be married to you. When are you going to want it too?"

Diane watched me as I spoke and I could tell she understood that I was serious. Perhaps for the first time in our relationship, I was seriously laying it on the line. I waited for her reply, watching the wrinkles above her nose crinkle as she considered heavily what the correct response should be.

"Jack." She spoke quietly, as if reflecting to herself rather than addressing me. "Jack, I love you. You have to know that I do. But I—I really don't think I am ever going to want to be married. I just don't think I'm suited for it."

I sat there at the table, listening to her tell me that we were never going to get married and for the first time in five years, I actually believed she meant it.

"I just don't see how what we have could get any better," she continued. "We love each other, we cohabitate, why does it have to be official? I don't understand why signing a little piece of paper that forfeits my last name matters so much to you."

Somehow Diane didn't get it. She didn't understand me at all. I cared nothing about legalities or official documentation or whether or not she shared my name. More than anything my desire to get married was the ultimate indication of how much I'd changed as a man. In the five years that we had been together I'd gone from being a bona fide bachelor, playing the field

and living large, to a man committed to being committed. I'd found in Diane something I had never thought possible in life. Here she was, a member of the opposite sex, unknown to me in all ways possible, and I was captivated by it. For the first time in my life I wasn't afraid of that unexplainable, mysterious connection that bound me to another being. In fact I was enthralled by it, and marriage seemed to be my only satisfaction, the thing most capable of ensuring that I would have this connection forever. I wanted to be with this woman for all time. I was ready for that guarantee. And now Diane was telling me that it was never going to happen. I didn't know what to think.

"Okay then." I gave in. "I'm going to settle the bill."

As I made my way to the bar, I could feel Diane watching me. She had expected that I would persist further, argue my opinion and defend my feelings. But I was getting tired of doing that. I attempted everything, but Diane just wouldn't let me in. She just wouldn't let me love her and be with her the way I wanted to. I didn't know where we'd go from here.

I ordered one last drink and handed the bartender my credit card. She was a young woman, blonde and pretty fit, but I was too caught up in this mess to even really take notice. As she totaled the bill, she tried to make small talk.

"Strike out?"

"Huh?" I forced myself to acknowledge her.

"Did you strike out, with that woman over there? I've been watching and you don't seem to be doing very well."

"Yeah, understatement of the year." I grunted, curious as to why she was so interested. "You'd think after being with someone for five years. Christ, what thirty-six-year-old woman doesn't want to get married!" I knocked back the vodka and set down the glass, then turned to her, waiting for my receipt. Looking at her for the first time I noticed her green eyes and how they had that mischievous, suggestive way about them, like she was trying to hook me.

"Don't I have to sign something?" I hinted, a bit uncomfortable under her intense stare.

"Just right here," she said, pointing. "And can I make a suggestion?" I raised my eyebrows in affirmation as I scrawled my name across the line. "Maybe it's not the idea of marriage that's wrong; but the woman you're with." My head shot up, surprised at the easy pass she'd just made. "Here's your copy."

"Thank you." I nodded as I headed toward the coat check. I caught a glance of the receipt just as I was about to jam it in my pocket. Scribbled across the front, it read, "623-8976 Trisha."

* * *

Wrapping a band-aid around my sliced thumb, I remembered that night as the last with Diane. I left a few days later, moving back into my old apartment. Officially reclaiming my status as a bachelor, I tried to get back into my old routine, but most nights I just ended up drunk, and it was then that I'd call Diane. Whether it was 11:30 at night or 3:30 in the morning, I was never shy about dialing her number. Some nights she would console me, compassionately listening to the blubbering cries of a fool. And on the nights she didn't answer, I would leave lengthy messages on her machine, either begging for reconciliation or blaspheming our entire history together.

One night, about four months after the breakup, my destination for drunkenness just

happened to be that cozy little restaurant bar that had served as the scene of my last proposal of marriage. I sat at the bar, nursing my drink and licking my wounds when a familiar face appeared before me.

"Hello, stranger."

I looked up and recognized the sultry blonde bartender whom I had encountered on my last visit to this establishment. Digging deep in to the recesses of my memory I replied, "Hello, 623-8976 Trisha."

"Very impressive. But I'm still a little disappointed that you never took me up on my offer. How's that old lady working out for you?"

I laughed at Trisha snide remark concerning Diane. Old lady, ha! Women, I had learned, could at times be bitterly judgmental of their own sex. "Oh, well, you were right about that one, I struck out."

"Oh," Trisha said in a soothing voice, "I'm sorry to hear about that. But," she said drawing in close to my face. She flashed her eyes away as her finger raked across the knuckles of my hand. "I want you to know the offer still stands."

I ordered three more drinks as the last hour and a half of her shift passed by, then went outside to hail a cab as she closed out her register. Waiting alone in the street, fueled by the arrogance of alcohol, I pulled out my phone and called up Diane. After four rings the machine picked up and I waited for the beep. "Diane, hey, it's Jack. It's Saturday night, about, fuck I don't know what time it is. Anyway, it's Saturday night. I was just wanted to call and thank you, you know, for not marrying me. 'Cause I'm here at this bar, waiting on this girl I met, and I'm about to go and have what I'm pretty sure will be the best sex of my life. Yeah. So thanks, for letting me...be able...to do that. Appreciate it." Diane never returned any of my calls after that.

* * *

I stared in the mirror and tugged at the patch of hair beneath my chin. I had been wrong about two things that night. One, the sex was good, but definitely not the best I'd ever had; and two, Trisha was nothing compared to Diane. I don't know how I could have been so foolish to think that the relationships would be anything alike. A few more drinks, a few more nights at the bar, and a couple of cab rides home was all it took for Trisha to dub us a couple. I guess at first I figured that something was better than nothing. But now, two and a half months after Trisha had decided to move it, I was beginning to rethink my position.

Maybe Diane had it right all along. Maybe the status of two people didn't really matter, as long as the understanding was there. Maybe, I thought, studying my face, it's time for a change. I felt a rush of adrenaline as I reached for the shaving cream. This thing with Trisha was never going to work out. She was still too much of a kid. She didn't understand at all what I wanted; she was too focused on what it was that she wanted. She was looking for a lifestyle while I was searching for a somebody.

Just as I was about to make the first stroke with the razor, I stopped short. "Diane," I said, surprised at the sound of my voice out loud. Could she still be my somebody? I had to call her. Digging around my clothes that I had strewn across the tiled floor, and I found my cell phone clipped to my belt. I peeked out the door and heard Trisha talking to the TV in the living room.

"Don't give her the last rose. Aww, come on! She's a skank!"

I quietly closed the door and leaned against it. Thank God for reality shows. It had been over six months since we'd last talked, but I decided to try Diane's old number. It rang once. And then again. And then a man picked up, "James' residence."

"Oh," I said, surprised. "I'm sorry I was trying to reach a Diane Weston, I thought this was her number..."

"Hold on," he interrupted me, "I'll get her."

I listened in the background as he hollered for her, "Diane? Hon, the phone's for you. I don't know."

I heard her voice as she got closer to the phone. I knew it was my Diane.

"Thanks, babe. Hello, Diane Weston-James here."

"Diane Weston-James?" I repeated in a whisper.

"Yes, this is she."

"Weston-James."

"Yes, hello? Who's calling, please?"

"Oh my God," I let out in a guttural groan.

"Wha..." she said, astonished. "Is that you, Ja...?"

I dropped the phone from my ear and snapped it shut before I could hear her finish my name. She's married, I said to myself, over and over again, in disbelief. She's married to someone else. I turned, bracing myself on the ledge of the sink, and looked up at myself in the mirror. The foam of the lather had begun to dissipate and melted shaving cream was running down my neck. "You pathetic sap," I murmured accusingly. I snatched a towel hanging from a bar and began to wipe my face clean. "You pathetic fucking sap."

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In a minute I was dressed and walked back into the living room. "Is your show on, Trish?"

"Oh, like, any minute. Are you stoked? I'm stoked." I stood beside the couch, scratching the underside of my chin. This or nothing.

Trisha held out her hand to me. "Sit here, babe. We can cuddle."

Stoked it is. I took Trisha's hand and laced her fingers between my own. "'Kay, babe."

