The Battered Suitcase

THIS MONTH

Barbra Annino
Laura Carney
M.E. Carter
William Doreski
Katie Graham
Carol Lynn Grellas
The Haiku
Sarah Hutchinson Burke
David Kiefaber
Alan King
Laura LeHew
Chris McCreary
Louise McGinnis
Sandra Maddux-Creech
Natalie Meisner
Corey Mesler
Stephen Milazzo
Johnette Napolitano
Sergio Ortiz
Kenneth Pobo
James Shackell
Loretta Sylvestre
Deb Thompson
Matthew Tod
Christopher Tradowsky
Vanilla Swingers
Ernest Williamson III

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Contents

Letter from the Editor .................. 3

Short Stories

She Sends Her Regards
  by Louise McGinnis ...................... 4

Metal
  by M.E. Carter .......................... 9

Reasonable People
  by David Kiefaber ....................... 26

Polaroids
  by Chris McCreary .................... 46

Rats is Noble Beasts
  by James Shackell ...................... 59

Eleven Seconds with the Velveteen Boy *
  by Sandra Maddux-Creech ............. 63

The Burnside Winked
  by Loretta Sylvestre ................... 78

A Legend Without a Map
  by Christopher Tradowsky .......... 94

Funny Papers

America’s Next Top Doggie
  by Johnette Napolitano ............... 69

Non-Fiction

How God Made Me a Hunter
  by Laura Carney ....................... 56

E(motional)state Sale
  by Matthew Tod ....................... 88

Musical Guests

Lyrics
  by Vanilla Swingers ................ 18

Lyrics
  by The Haiku ......................... 83

Poetry

Barbra Annino ......................... 14
William Doreski ....................... 15
Katie Graham .......................... 42
Carol Lynn Grellas ................... 43
Alan King ............................... 62
Laura LeHew ............................ 70
Corey Mesler ........................... 72
Kenneth Pobo .......................... 85
Sergio Ortiz ............................ 86
Natalie Meisner ....................... 87
Joseph D. Di Lella ..................... 92

Art

Sarah Hutchinson Burke
  AcuPUNKture Design ................. 20

Deb Thompson ......................... 52
Ernest Williamson ..................... 74
Stephen Milazzo ....................... 101
Letter from the Editor

Theatre of the Dreaming

The Battered Suitcase represents the baggage that we carry around with us through our many voyages and adventures here on Earth. Writers and artists tend to wander, gathering up bits and bobs of truth that they can manipulate, enunciate and paint into something of their own. The road stretches out at their feet, the twists and turns rarely averted, and the images encountered catalogued away with a scrawl of ink on paper, the shutter click of a camera, the broad stroke of a brush, or even in the simple flutter of eyelashes collapsing into a blink.

But, what is the source then of the other-worldly illusions? Where do the poets and painters find the fantastical and the surreal images and tales of myths and magic? Are not dreams just another rite of creative passage? Do we carry a different set of baggage when we travel to the realms of unadulterated imagination? The art of whimsy, enchantment, supernatural, wonder and dreamscapes are well-worth celebrating, and visiting now and again.

Inside the virtual pages of the third issue of The Battered Suitcase, Louise McGinnis loses herself in the lyrical daydream of escaping a very mortal predicament. M.E Carter leads us into a world where emotion and intellect are split in two, and where a suit of armor may disguise both. Sandra Maddux-Creech weaves a tale of sensual fixation on grown-up storybook characters who come of age in alleyways. James Shackell shares the tale of the defender of the rats, the sacrificial martyr to the so-called vermin in the basement.

Johnette Napolitano, of Concrete Blonde musical fame, grants us a feral version of the reality-television obsession, turning the absurd mirrored-reflection of superficiality on itself, and having a laugh at it in the process.

Lyrical contributors this month are Vanilla Swingers who capture in song a love story that defies time travel, physics and separation. They are joined by the stylistic refrains of Phil Cooper and the Haiku, who, like the poetic reference, delve into depths and meanings in a minimalist construct of sound.

Poetry selections for August include novelist and ex-burger-slinger Barbra Annino, the prolific poet William Doreski and fairy tale spinner Katie Graham. Mother and poet Carol Lynn Grellas links arms with Alan King, Corey Mesler and award winning Laura LeHew. Radio show host Kenneth Pobo waxes poetic with the likes of Sergio Ortiz, Joseph D. Di Lella, and award-winning playwright Natalie Meisner.

Art graciously provided by acuPUNKture design’s Sarah Hutchinson Burke, painter and beauty-collector Deb Thompson, professor and visual artist Ernest Williamson III, and form and detail stylist Stephen Milazzo.

All of the contributors featured in the August issue gift us with a glimpse into the unknown, sharing their own journey of the imagination. Within the fanciful and mystical, the human spirit prevails, flourishes, and seeks to devour our senses in the best of ways.

Enjoy.

“When we were children, clouds became animals.
Now that we are adults, the vast, blue sky is a metaphor for the infinite, upward potential of the human spirit.”
Laura Teresa Marquez

Laura Foxforthy
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Fifteen minutes left. I count them on a Salvation Army man’s watch, scratched on the face. Sometimes I pretend that it was his; sent back from a war, or a peace march. Contradictions aside, the impossibility prevails. That he exists at all, past faded photographs with ruffled shirts; Prom night tuxedo, and that big hair picture of Mom, looking younger than eighteen. He had scared as hell eyes. I was his little girl, once. I had waited by the screen door, pleading for his arrival, my knuckles bleeding and raw, after he stopped coming home at all. She insists that everything healed up fine, that I was better for all of it. Better from the leaving, the going on, and the raising her on the way; all those band-aids over failed marriages, a baby brother; breakdowns, break-ups, drunken calls from I don’t know where I am. An adolescent raising an adolescent, in reverse.

This band is worn. It leaves stains on my skin sometimes, when I drive home with my arm out the window, capturing wind waves, with the radio turned up high. At the spin of a bottle, the turn of a dial, I could just keep driving all the way past the familiar off-ramps. There is nothing waiting at home for me, at least nothing unexpected, or new. Just his breath on the back of my neck, hot and stale, smelling of motorcycle gas fumes, Marlboro Reds, and late night bottom of the pot Denny’s coffee. I lie there opposite his face every night, lying, fading away. I watch the shadow of false dance on the wall. I can count to ten once, and then backwards, flutter my eyelashes, three sighs, and it’s done. Then he’ll pass out next to me, snoring too close to my ear, as I teeter too close to the edge of the bed, gripping the sheets to barely hang on. This is as far as I can go without giving notice; two weeks, or otherwise. I stare at the wall still, sleepless, my legs sticky. If I move to take a shower he might wake, or I might just let myself slip down the drain, and empty out into the ocean.

I turn the page down. He tells me that dog-eared books lose their value. That people will notice the carelessness when they borrow a book, or just pick it up and page through, that they will see. But, he’ll never see this one. I can hear in my head how he’d scoff at it, shake his head and say that this is what too much television will do to you. He’ll hand me yet another copy of Crime and Punishment, pat my head; only two years younger and still I’m supposed to play the role of Jake’s little girlfriend. As if he can read the abandonment in my eyes, that need for a father figure, twisted and recalled, recoiled. The fact lost on him that sometimes I read trash like V.C. Andrews because I need that taste of poison to fill in the empty spots, to make my own family attic look clearer, saner, less cracked and torn. The page rips as I fold it, my hands betraying me again. I check for scars, for the story they tell, and I see nothing.

I walk outside; fish my sunglasses out of the bottom of my bag. Where is my lighter? The pink one with glitter. The one I bought this morning. That guy behind the counter wears too much cologne, I think. He smells like the guys who work downstairs, or the ones who dance at Rage. (He never wore that much). He said to me, with a smirk. “You like the pink one? not black?” I laugh, roll my eyes, and palm the green one, also with glitter, on my way out. He doesn’t notice. His eyes are locked on my breasts the whole time he talks to me, watching the rise and fall of my breathing, the noticeable cold morning air that my sweater cannot disguise. The lighters remind me of mixed tapes. All those trips up the coast, the way Robert’s tongue felt in my mouth; ever promising things he would never deliver. I can almost hear the way our voices intertwined back then, all those secrets kept, and shared. And, the hiccups of betrayal, just like these petty theft lapses of mine. His predilection for giving blow jobs to boys is right up there with my constant study in the arts of denial. I’m still good at it; lying just seeps so easily from my pores.
I am supposed to forget about him. I am supposed to have left all that unopened hesitation behind me, like the abandoned blank walls that I stripped the posters off from, leaving only that sticky tape residue behind. I packed up all those boxes, loaded them into the borrowed office furniture truck, took them to his apartment. I knew that I was leaving pieces of me in the floorboards of my childhood bedroom, and in the back seat of my broken down first car. A hundred dollars from the junk yard was what was they offered me for her. “But you’ll have to drive it here yourself.” Dropped her off and walked away; might as well have pushed her off a cliff with me tied to the back bumper. The rear view mirror pops off easily, I should have told them, and has razor blade scratches, unique grooves in the glass. I wish I had a line of something right now; that familiar burn to sting the back of my throat.

Maybe I could pack everything back up and just say I changed my mind. Take back the middle of April, too. Jake’s birthday present. How I had faked it even back then; his hand yanking my head back, my hair rough through his fingers. I had opened my eyes wide and focused on the pain, the map on the wall, that faint smell of burnt toast. I could hear his mother in the kitchen. He wanted the escape hatch, too, the reason to leave.

My lips feel chapped, raw. I bite down anyway and taste the metallic sting of blood. Count to ten and it’s over. Happy Birthday, baby (*He isn’t you*). I sit down against the wall, run my hand slowly across the stucco, and feel the slight tug on my skin, the rough exterior pull. How easily we can tear, bleed, and heal over again. I’m an expert at looking good as new, at least on the surface. I pull my knees to my chest, rest my chin. My torn black stockings show from the small gap between skirt and boots. The gentle grasp required for fabric so vulnerable, sheer, and fragile. My fingers could just push through, and rip everything to shreds, even if my nails are bitten down to the quick. My finger tips always have that slight pink tinge of abuse. My zipper catches, snagging, another run up my leg. But, no one sees it. I pull the edge of my skirt down lower and fold my body up closer into myself. *Inhale. Flick.* I’m tempted to touch my flesh with fire just to feel something besides this lump of doubt in my throat.

The weight of not saying anything is like the nagging sound of an invisible clock, ticking incessantly. As if that big clock in Peter Pan is buried in the deepest parts of my insides. Big Ben, right? I’ve forgotten my Pixie Dust somewhere along the way, though. I have forgotten how to fly.

He will tell me this is just another way to prove my immaturity, that it is so ordinary to stumble this way. To have this conversation at all will seem so unnecessary, to him. We just unpacked, hammered nails into the walls. *Hold it still, Jane. Stop shaking. Not there. Here. Didn’t you study the floor plan I drew up? Pin your hair up next time. You know how it makes your neck look longer. Now this picture over here. The couch there.* I am just part of the drawing, the sketch of a life in his black bound book, Journal #26. “You are in these pages, don’t worry”, he assures me in that lowered tone, through his own puffs, and exhales. He will say there is no room here, for this. That’s why my desk had to go, my school schedule, and my college education. “School is just someone else’s view of the world, we will make our own; the two of us. I’ll show you how it will all work out.” *His* own design. *His*, the two of us; there is only room enough for two.

Standing up I feel slightly dizzy. This skirt is perfect for spinning, hands behind my back as I let myself go. I can hear the music swell in my ears. Close my eyes and I can feel the sky dim, and turn itself into night. The stars dot a path, carve out a perfect space and my heart pulses as I let the imagined thump of beats course through me and thin my blood. My feet just walk forward, though, even as I try to grab onto the nearest lamp post, phone booth, or stranger’s arm.

I need that kind of darkness that a small club with a membership desk at the front gifted me once. I long for that sort of anonymity, and knowing. The kind of trouble I could drum up back then didn’t play out like this in the end. The screens that flickered and reflected back were made of easier to mend snags, and missteps. I would turn myself inside out and back again, if I was still there. I’d find a pathway, a bathroom stall, a reflection, a new song. Grab one of the passed out
red cups from the door staff after hours, in exchange for a black lipsticked kiss. I suppose it was just a different scent of denial, but it felt so much more palpable.

She would know how to solve this. But my hand slips when I pick up the phone, or when I try to bring pen to paper write her. There has been this pause between us, like a button pushed before the end of the song arrives. I walked out of the room during a commercial break, and when I stepped back in she was gone. We were gone. Perhaps it was too much to keep my half of the bargain. The reminders of him painted boldly in black and blue, on pale skin, on the street lines, the call boxes, and in that crease of concern she would get when she looked at me. I didn’t know how to spell out help. Push me back under, love; water my eyes, my nose, and my lungs; fill me up until I can no longer take in air, or anything. Then pull me back out, my heart racing, my expression wide and wild. She would do this now, give me her answers. But then I’d have to embrace it, hold it away from me; recognition of something that will soon be impossible to hide.

The ice swirls. I spin and shake the straw, pull back the lid, slide ice chips into my mouth, crunching them between my teeth. I think about how Carrie would laugh and say, “You know what chewing on ice means?” But this is far past sexual frustration. This is about breaking something, even if only the enamel on my teeth. It is about creating noise in my head as the ice cracks. How it delays the whispers in my head, the words I’m choosing again to ignore; one more day, one more hour, one more second. Maybe if I keep chewing, keep walking, keep reading grocery store last minute decision aisle novels. Keep memorizing the lyrics to She’s Lost Control. Watching his fingers on the strings as he shows me the bass line, again, telling me how easy it could be if I just tried harder. How he taught himself to play songs like this. How New Order progressed the sound of Joy Division, and that I needed to grow past my Death Rocker tastes and sensibilities. “Stop wearing so much black, Jane.” I drown out the words as procrastination takes her predictive place in line. Take the stage, disguised as a half-empty parking lot, front and center, arms in the air; now spin.

I light another cigarette.

My waistline is beginning to betray me. My hand rests unconsciously on my belly. I mouth I’m sorry to my reflection in the store window, and I can’t do this I whisper out into the air. I pour more ice into my mouth. I count the steps back to the second shift. He is late again. I look at my watch, and put my weight all on my toe tips, up and down, lift and decline. He knows how much I hate it when he’s late. I could go back in and unlock the gate, call him from inside, wait for him there. But, that would mean alarm codes, re-closing the gate, writing down an explanation for re-entry, again. I know Joe is going to start wondering. I see the way his eyebrow raises when I come in, that look of distrust. I’ve seen it before, like he knows about the stolen pens, and the ten dollars that one time when my gas tank was empty, and when I’d run out of cigarettes. It all paints this pink glow to my face, guilt. My eyes invariably darting back and forth, and my lies never taken in clearly, misunderstood his second-language English. I know he watches the way my hands shake, and how I’m always too quick to volunteer for anything.

So, I guess I’ll stay put. Stand here and wait. My heart skipping a beat every time I see a car, craning my neck to see if this one is finally him while nightmare storybook pages float through my head. I play act shock and surprise when they break the news to me; a car accident, a failed robbery, a stabbed victim bleeding internally. I try on how my mask of sorrow would look, practice hiding a momentary buzz of relief, and freedom. These were the tales I played in my head as a child, too, while I waited in a deserted playground, Mom ever losing track of time. I would stand there watching every child wave from a car window. Ice cream and Daddy’s dream, they all were. The mad array of violent endings I saw, that I almost hoped for, just something she could use to explain, to somehow make the forever waiting worthwhile; and not just me as a forgotten errand, or an afterthought.

I loathe these inner folds of me. The hushed side of who I am. I know most people are fooled by my parochial school past. The way I can write a perfect essay, play a good game. They laugh at the trappings of a girl gone bad, the witch’s cackle, the smeared kohl under my eyes, and my thrift
shop garb in fifty five shades of black. They think they can look right through me, as they nod in this smug way as if to say “you can’t fool me” as if I am just a naïve little thing underneath it all; bright and shiny, sewing paths to a happy ending in some optimism on overdrive fairytale. They all stand in line to walk across me, like I’m some god damn yellow brick road.

If they took off my clothes they would see the indentations, the boot scuffs, the notches and nicks where the heels dig in. They all think I love it. Dig it. Dance a tango to the beat of give everything to everyone. The never ending needy push their shopping carts to me, park them in my driveway, just up and under the eaves, or in the stairwells. They come to tuck themselves in next to me as I sleep, steal the good blanket, and throw me to the floor. They would all run and hide for cover if they saw beneath my skin, all the gore, and the doubts. The pathologic writer of tell-tale explanations finally exposed. I spin better than a spider, but no one squints hard enough to notice the web.

Tonight I think I’ll tell him. Throw it out there over a plate of fries, right before he pulls out his latest scheme dream that will be forgotten in a month. His plans used as rolling paper to smoke one last joint. “I produce more when I’m stoned”, he says this from the couch, where he’s sat for the last twelve hours, paging through the free press, the want-ads, the lost and found. He asks for another five cookies, always better to polish off the whole row, and then the symmetry is complete and intact. And, in his bakery goods order, or despite it, the space between us widens. Some day I’m sure one of us will fall in, disappear.

Maybe this will finally do it. The words will spill out and a portal will open up in the sky, pull me up by my ears. He will just see my feet dangle for a second before I’m gone. That look of shock still plastered across his face, the circular twist of argued perspective and reasons waiting on the tip of his tongue. I am ever holding my breath while he readies his army, lying back as I let them march on over to me; his hostile takeover. His words shake me until I’m blue in the face. But, I’ll have beaten him to the proverbial punch. I’ll be gone then, taken through the space portal, and he can just sit back and waft in the titles and role models he'll swear I could have been. Or maybe, he will take that waitress girl’s obvious pass at him, bang her in the bathroom stall, right next to I heart Gene Loves Jezebel, and Adam lies, with three exclamation points. Her face pushed up against the chill of the metal door, the latch barely holding them in; lipstick pink smear smudge leftovers and wrinkles smoothed out of her brown corduroy skirt, as she placates her way back to work, fixing her hair in the dessert glass. They wouldn’t mind me; I’ll just be floating by, watching. She sighs a little quieter than I do. The staccato one two three a bit too rushed. But, it will all help him forget, and let go, and all of it might assuage my guilt.

I hear the brakes squeal. I recognize the impatience even in the way he drives. Somehow the story will reverse and back-up into me. Responsibility pinned to my sweater, stuck sideways and in through my flesh, and back out again. I slam the door a little harder than necessary, and sulk into the seat. Somehow my body has twisted and turned itself into adolescence, again. I can almost hear my Mom telling me to sit up straight, to project my voice to the back of the room, to lose ten pounds, to go to more parties, and to kiss more boys. All the expectations she never voiced, but just threw at me without words. How she longed for me to fall, to fail, ditch classes, earn a reputation, open up my legs, and break curfew. Anything that would bring me to her with tear stained cheeks and choked-up pleadings. She would bravely hold my hand at the clinic, wait for me with a magazine, and the looks of admiration from the other scared girls who couldn’t tell their own Mothers; she would bask in it. How they would tell her I was the luckiest.

Maybe she would hold my hand now, eight years too late. Can I cash in a rain check for my teenage rebellion? I press my nose into the passenger window glass, breathe out hard, blowing. I watch the hot air fog block my view. I’m tempted to etch help with my fingertips. I remember doing that as a child; smile faces, dogs, my name. Mom would yell back at me “Don’t write on the windows!” and I’d deny it, forgetting that it would stay there, even after days went by. You’d still see the image, taunting me with its existence, chiding and singing at me liar, liar pants on fire. Another knot in my stomach, tied in a bow, even though she wouldn’t remember telling me no.
I rest my head on the glass pane; feel the cool shock to my system. Michael Penn is singing about blue jeans. We just passed a 7-11, and I can almost smell the inside; old hot dogs on that continuous roller thing, with one always left in the back, all shriveled up. The bleep blips of video games, the warning labels across the magazines, *18 and over or this is not a library*; the whir of the Slurpee machine. I want to shrink three feet and walk through the door, quarters stashed in my pocket for Ms. Pac Man, and enough money for the biggest size, my own suicide in multi-colors, a Cola and Wild Cherry death. That big straw with the spoon on the end, Michael tried to see how far up his nose it would go when he was ten, I was twelve.

I catch a young boy staring at me from the window of the car next to us. His own breath shield is almost completely hiding him, except for the eyes. We make that quick contact, that inner register of I see you, you see me. I don't even turn around to look at him then. He is driving, humming to the radio, when the words finally come out.

"Jake, I'm pregnant."
I am a voyeur. I observe the sordid for my own selfish means. I see the pain in others pulsing beneath their everyday movements. I see it when they tip their glasses back, full of liquor, and let it course down their throats. I see it in their raucous, hollow laughter. I see it when they walk down the street and catch their own reflections in a store window. I steal their pain to create a story and then I use it to make myself cry for money. Truth is, all the stories are real, even if I make them up. And the truth is, nobody wants to feel pain but nobody will let go of it. So I feel it for them.

But that is what I am, a Heart.

I started to cry at an early age for money because my parents said I had a talent for it. From ten at night until two in the morning, I sat on a glossy, white, cylindrical, Formica platform stationed at the end of the bar and I cried the gamut of sadness from misty simpering to full throttle sobbing. Seated on my stool, I was visible to everyone. The Brains lined up below me and asked me to cry about hurtful things that happened to them. They paid me to cry for them because they could not and did not want to cry. Not only did it embarrass them because they weren’t able to, theirs was the unbearable pain that began with hand tremors and ended with blinding migraines.

I leaned down and felt their warm, moist whispers pulsing in my ears, hushed reasons for sorrow — the loss of a job, a lover or a parent — streamed into my ears and out my eyes for four straight hours. During that time, the Brains stared at me as I wailed and groaned away their sadness. Their faces expressionless while they watched me, and afterward they thanked me with a generous tip and told me how good I made them feel.

The first night Metal came into the bar, I cried the best that I could. Metals are rare and I was somewhat star struck. Through my tear-clouded eyes, I searched for silvery glint of her mask that bared her toothy grin and I listened for the faint scraping of her armor as she shifted in her chair. She sat in the corner with a particular group of eight to ten Brains. They chattered and laughed; rarely were they silent. Their conversational cadence soothed me — sentences that rose up followed by rounds of bassoon-like laughter. There was a certain stool at the bar that they gave me which was a perfect lookout as I stared unobtrusively at the Brains, ogled at their exposed brains resembling shiny, bulbous mounds of soft caramels pressed together. On weekends, I attempted to glimpse the red numbers on the upper back quadrants of their large heads. I obsessed over spotting them, as difficult as it was. Their IQ’s were always 140 or above. I liked to see if their behavior seemed above or below their IQ. I added up the group’s IQ and found the median and then I’d figure out who was the leader, who was the runt of the litter.

But like I said, I am a voyeur.

Metal never denied that she was a Brain, but this was not why I loved her. Through the slits in her mask, I saw Metal react with her eyes, and I believed she was a Heart.

Hearts were not stupid, but we were considered too emotional to use our intelligence to the best of our abilities. But just like the Brains, our hearts were on display. In the middle of our sternums and on the outside, the color of our emotions throbbed for all to see. When I was embarrassed,
like when a group of Brains caught me staring at them, my heart turned orange-red and beat rapidly, galloping away from the Brains who laughed at me. It beat so fast, it ached for two days straight. Most often I kept my coat on so they wouldn't see how I felt, but Brains knew why Hearts did this. And if they were drunk enough, they humiliated you for it.

As they did me. I sat on that very same stool and my heart’s embarrassment poked out between the top two buttons of my coat like a piece of burning ember. They, the smoky drunk Brains, pointed at me and giggled as the covered their heads with their hands or placed their cocktail napkins over their numbers.

Therefore, I mastered the art of the body angle. I took yoga so I could swivel and watch the Brains while my heart nestled comfortably on my chest, its deep cherry red shadowed by my upper arm. I scrutinized One Forty-Three in the group. I eyed my heart in the brass bar railing I leaned against. I watched it turn mustard yellow and beat stronger. This told me I was jealous. I knew I was as smart as One Forty-Three, but One Forty-Three’s confidence made me covet her tawny ovoid head. She acted like a One Sixty-Three — the way she insolently tapped the ash off her cigarette and laughed at something amusing that One Fifty-Seven had just said. I wondered if I had ever known a confident Heart, and I realized I had not as I peeked at my yellowness glowing down below.

The Brains that Metal sat with were my regulars. They liked my work and I knew they made up sad events so I would cry for them. When I worked my crying shift, my heart idled in a coal black that excited them. I knew they were turned on because they were quiet. I couldn’t see them sitting at their table when I cried, but I heard their clapping when I finished. If Metal was there, I smiled at the sound of her tinny hands crashing together.

I remember when Metal first spoke to me. I stood at the bar and I felt something cold and rough scrape my thigh. I jumped and turned around. She said, “Oh, sorry. Didn’t realize I was so close.” Her eyes, shining expressively like smooth beads of aquamarine, answered with a me to my who. Next she uttered the words I still hear before I go to sleep, “Your heart… that’s passion, right? How beautiful. That’s why you’re such a good crier.” Then I saw those teeth and looked at the steel that covered her from head to toe and I wanted to pour myself inside her metal clothes. I said that it was just a scratch and she replied, “Something to remember me by.” As she banged off, I wondered if I could ever forget the metal-clad answer that I had finally found.

Brains were supposed to go out with Hearts even though Hearts were regarded as inferior. For instance, we Hearts had only been allowed to vote for thirty-three years. And I have heard some horrifying stories about Hearts getting turned away from the voting panel because the color of their hearts didn’t fall between that of a ripe navel orange and a deep brick red (only a hint darker than my own red). Lighter or darker, and you were considered too emotional to make a sound political decision. The two times that I voted, I drank a glass of absinthe an hour before to calm myself. The absinthe coated my anxiety in a peaceful haze while my heart remained its natural color and a shade away from rejection.

I had dated a couple of Brains, but I switched to Hearts, which pushed me further away from the Brains, and I think, from Metal. The first Brain I dated made me laugh, which Brains were very good at, and she liked talking about art. Her hands were smooth as if her fingerprints had been sanded away and she liked to touch my heart and watch it change colors. Her brain had a sweaty sheen and when I hugged her, I felt a circle of my hair dampen where her head rested on mine. Her IQ was One Sixty-One and I would run my finger over it when she slept, leaving a trail just like the ones I made as a kid on my Dad’s rainy car window. She smelled like Ceylon tea. Then, she started to pinch my heart to see if it would turn black for a couple of seconds and I told her it hurt. She laughed, called me a silly heart and I cried. I didn’t cry because it hurt; I cried because I knew she would never understand me.
The second Brain I dated was not as smart as One Sixty-One, only a One Fifty-Nine, but she treated my heart like a newborn. She would come in on Friday nights to watch my set and whisper the same cry request every week — to cry for her because she was an intellectual failure. When she touched me, her hands were calloused and dry because she was a painter. One Fifty-Nine did not drink water so her brain looked matte, dusty on the outside. She held her finger over my heart and lowered it, skimming my heart. She looked at my heart and I looked at her. She was too gentle with me. She had no intensity, no spontaneity — just the smell of her paints reaching me before she ever entered the room. I saw her movements and reactions simmer in her brain. I knew she was going to kiss me before she swept her lips against mine. I knew how she would kiss me twenty years from now, like a glass-figurine angel — treasured, but never desired. My heart never had reason to turn the cerulean blue of love or the eggplant color of lust. It held fast at your basic rainbow red and this, too, made me cry.

Since then, I have dated only Hearts. I made them laugh, made them dole out their sensuality, card by card, each one trumping the one before it. My relationships with Hearts have hit like spinning gusts of emotions, floating and intense. It is a dangerous combination — two Hearts, changing colors so quickly, both so vulnerable. When we are attracted to one another, we clasp hands as we jump off the cliff of Eros, drift through infatuation and land in a field of dissonance filled with jealousies, grievances and differences. We look up, blanketed and trapped by what we thought was love.

Take Lavender, for example. She called me Passion Fruit because my heart color reminded her of the cherry preserves her grandmother made and because it is the closest to the color of passion. I could not keep my hands from touching her; I could not keep my heart from turning the sensual blackish purple when I desired her. Then I saw her kiss a fuchsia colored heart when we were at the bar together. When I asked her why, she said that she didn't know whether we loved each other or were just lovers. They thrive on reactions. Lavender did not want to fill everyday with me, the same color of passion. She wanted to control the colors of my heart. Once I realized this, my heart spiraled through the hues of submission and settled on the nicotine brown of anger. When Lavender couldn't make that change, she left.

Sapphire was the last Heart I dated. She was a composer and a moonstone blue. Hearts that are this color are sad, philosophical and damaged. They hate to brood alone. She was best when the moon hung in the sky like a tiny jagged sliver torn from a piece of yellow construction paper. When this kind of moon hid in the corner of the night, she was the least sullen. She tickled me with her corded, short fingers playing musical trills on my neck. When she played the piano, all kinds of moons came out. She pounded on the keys as if she were angry with them, as if they were not sounding like themselves. And I fell in love with the fact that she played all the shades of every Heart. Once, when we were at the bar together, she got jealous when I stared at the Brains. She left. When she decided to come back, I sensed her self-hatred as we lay on the bed and I watched her heart sink into that deep jade — a faraway color that stained whatever came near it. I escaped to the bathroom to figure out how to help her heart feel another color and then I noticed in the mirror the ominous jade of my own heart. I said goodbye to Sapphire and to the feeling that the moon held that much power.

So the infatuation with Metal began when everything with everyone else ended. It continued when she winked at me after beating a Brain at arm wrestling. Everyone at the bar thought that because he was a One Seventy-Four, he surely knew how he was going to beat her. But Metal had had three glasses of absinthe which made her armor shine with invincibility. I watched her eyes crinkle shut with effort and then pop open just before One Seventy-Four's soft, refined hand hit the table. She slapped him on the arm and bared her healthy teeth saying, "Nice try One Seventy-Four, but you're no match for the Mistress of Metal." The Brains guffawed, their big, egg shaped heads bobbing up and down. That's when she winked. The wink endeared her to me, but her arm wrestling had made me sad. I felt sorry for her needing to show off and wondered what her armor was hiding. Later that night during my shift, I thought about that while I cried for someone else.
Because she was smart and because she was an aggressor, not known to nurture a soul, people assumed she was a Brain. At the bar, Metal would always come and order her drink next to my stool, scratching me as she squeezed in between me and another. It made her laugh as she glanced down at my thigh, fresh with her thin red gashes like the tattooed name of a lover. It was like a Brain to laugh at a thing like that, but then she would nervously drop her eyes behind the metal mask and whisper, “Sorry again.” At night, I counted the cuts and dreamed she was a Heart.

The bartender who worked the weekends told me that Metal had humiliated herself for a Brain she loved. Years of drinking have stained the bartender’s heart the intense purple black of a moonless night. I call her Purple Moon. The bartender liked this name because it is more poetic than being called a drunk or a lost soul.

Purple Moon had seen Metal come in with big dents on her armor. A Brain Metal dated, named One Sixty-Six, bragged to Purple Moon that Metal asked to be hit with a bat. “She enjoys it. ‘Cause, you know, she feels it,” she said. One time, One Sixty-Six had a Heart beat her while One Sixty-Six watched. Metal really liked the bat because she faintly felt the sting of it, but she also saw that the crying Heart felt the very same sting.

Once, I went to see Metal’s artwork. I went to see her sculptures formed out of mottled pieces of scrap metal-brass, silver and tin. She soldered them together to form the skeletons of animals and human beings. There was a human skeleton walking a dog skeleton, a human skeleton holding its head in its hands, and a skeletal frame of a tiger stretched as if running in mid-flight. I felt nothing when I saw them, but sadness overcame me when I envisioned Metal’s hands molding the burning scraps into whatever she was hoping to express, her fingers bending with the heat. There were many Brains at her exhibit, touching the sharp pointy joints and fingering the rib cages, reveling at all the possible interpretations of the minimal framework. I spied Metal loping around, particularly interested in the reactions of One Seventy-Four. She followed her and showed her teeth when the Brain bought two of her sculptures — the human with the head in her hands and a large metal brain with three question marks instead of numbers.

The sculpture of a heart with a brain in the middle drew me to it because it had no sharp edges, only rounded bends that folded into each other. I looked for Metal so I could compliment her on her idea, but the Brains surrounded her. After all, they had the money. She led a few Brains over to where I stood and as she walked behind me, she placed her hands on my upper arms and whispered, “Excuse me,” as she guided me to step to aside. I felt the metal cut into my skin and she smiled at me as I moved out of her way. She looked at my heart turn that cerulean blue. Wearing no coat, I left quickly, embarrassed that she saw my naked truth. My heart was hung-over for four days after that.

The next time I saw her was at the bar, two weekends later. She lingered next to me and ordered an absinthe.

“Hey you, looking forward to watching you work,” she said, grinning. She was always friendlier to me when she was drunk.

“I liked your exhibit. My favorite piece was the heart with the brain in the middle.” I felt my heart heating up and changing. “I found it insightful.”

“Thanks, Pretty. I’ll put it aside for you until you have enough money to buy it.” Through the opening in her mask she smiled at me, baring those straight antique white teeth that reminded me of perfectly laid tiles. “If I knew you a little better, I’d let you have it. You are my favorite crier, you know.” She glanced at my bare thigh, and then she scratched me. She stared into my eyes while she did this and then she laughed. I winced. This cut ran deeper than any of the others. My blood dotted her metal finger. She spilled her drink as she tried to pick it up and said, “So long, Pretty Heart.” I was glad she was drunk and didn’t see the tears in my eyes. I didn’t want her to think that she’d hurt me.
Later that night, Purple Moon and I were talking when the rising cheers of “Metal! Metal!” became too loud for us to hear each other. One Seventy-Four slouched with her arm around her angular shoulders, pulling Metal to her as Metal’s polished head fell on One Seventy-Four’s shoulder. Metal laughed and pushed herself up and all the Brains started to clap and yell. She creaked and wobbled as she headed towards the bar. She slammed her metal hand on my back and said, “Listen Pretty, a couple of the Brains have dared me to take my clothes off, so to speak, but I need someone to help me and I choose you.” She swayed and blinked her eyes and continued, “And I’ll give you that sculpture of mine if you help me out. We gotta deal?” I didn’t say no to her although I felt a small no rumble in my stomach.

“Come on, come with me,” she said. As we walked over to the Brains, I buttoned my coat and the lining felt cool against my feverish Chinese red heart. She held my hand on the way over which I barely noticed because all the Brains moved their chairs and shouted “Make way for Metal!” When I was close to her, I smelled the absinthe mixed with the metal oil. The Brains circled around us. “Okay. I’m gonna take it all off and my friend here is gonna help me,” Metal explained. The Brains hollered, “Let’s go, Metal.” The Brains didn’t say anything to me, just stared at me and smirked. I heard one Brain behind me whisper, “Look! The Heart is trembling. She’s actually scared of hurting Metal.” “As if anyone could,” another replied.

Metal, stifling her laughter, stood in front of me and said, “Okay, Friend, start with the head first and pull from the top. The top downward, okay?” I nodded and grabbed the piece that began just above the forehead. I pulled but couldn’t get it to come off. “Friend, you’re going to have to pull harder than that,” she laughed. “It won’t hurt, trust me.” More laughter. This time I yanked and felt the metal pare away from her skull. I stripped downward and saw that her skin had peeled off with the metal.

Metal stopped laughing. Her mouth closed, muffling a high-pitched squeal. The Brains yelled at me to continue as a slat of metal came off to reveal, as expected, an exposed brain. I was angry that I’d fooled myself into believing that she was a Heart and I pulled her metal off faster and faster, ripping off the tiny pieces around her neck and the slats on the sides of her head. The Brains moved in closer to see her numbers, but they had come off with the metal. I tore off the sections of her legs, feet and arms, exposing her grapefruit colored rawness as she screamed out of her open mouth. She wailed like a small dog being attacked by a pack of coyotes, which would leave nothing behind but the carcass, a model for one of her metal skeletons. I dropped my head, looked into a piece of her armor, and saw my tears fall onto it like spilled absinthe. The Brains cheered because she was a Brain, and chanted, “Metal! Metal is a Brain!”

I stopped when I saw her raw pinkness without skin, without metal. She cried and shouted, “Continue!” I said that I couldn’t. The Brains booed and the one Brain, the one who said I was trembling, yelled, “What would you expect from a Heart?” A sudden crash on the ground silenced everyone as we all stared at Metal’s facemask on the floor. There were gasps at the sight of her skinless face contrasted with her light turquoise eyes and bright teeth. She smiled and cried.

“It hurts,” she gushed, “Keep going. I can feel it! Take off my front panel, please,” she begged. I took both hands and secured them onto the top of her breastplate. She grimaced and laughed towards the ceiling, “Please do it.”

My coat was unbuttoned and my heart was black. I pulled with as much power as I could, stunned by the brutal look I saw on my face in the breastplate as I took it off. Then, it was quiet as we all noticed a heart in the middle of her sternum. It was the same color as her tender fleshiness. I was smiling and crying, and then Metal collapsed, throwing her fresh exposed arms around my shoulders. I dragged her to a chair, passing the jumble of broken armor, and placed her gently in it. The Brains watched in astonished silence. I put my hand on Metal’s brain and pulled her to me as my heart made contact with her stripped, barely beating heart.
Behind Bars

She paces back and forth, restlessly. Her muscles ripple through her orange and black striped coat. She opens her jaws wide, exposing sharp fangs as she roars at the thick bars that inhibit her. The majestic creature slinks towards her cub, the only thing in her control. She nips at his paws, playfully. Her gaze turns in the direction of the father. Too busy basking in the sunlight, he pays no attention to them. Now she waits for her meal to come. The male still gets first pick of the meat, but she no longer must hunt for food to feed her family. The tigress impatiently leaps from the artificial rock. Four mighty paws land on the ground with ease. Her jewel-like eyes meet those of a woman who stands behind the bars, nervously twisting the ring on her left hand.
William Doreski

Hardly a Love Poem

Three inches of rain. Required are kisses so airtight the stink and sulfur of electric discharge can’t penetrate. Our privacy in this office four stories up seems biblical, the stuff of myth. The rain’s a tsunami, a wall of water thick enough to muffle the cries of embryos brewing in the dark, the whispers of atoms plotting to split in public. These powerful, reluctant kisses, which no scholar will ever parse, retain their form and function long after lips that lavish them return to the business of speech. Can we maintain such discreet posture in the naked fact of weather? Our bodies cringe and wring like a pair of sponges, which increases our adhesion. The rain wants to crush the building and claim us for its collection of spare parts. Then our absence would retain the form of kisses and in memoriam our colleagues would embrace but would fake it. We’re better at this pretense than they are. These private kisses, although invisible, linger like smoke rings. Only certain instruments can detect them. But we might as well confess wasting these kisses on each other, our mutual dislike impersonal as weather itself, our privacy and consequent frightened embrace disasters we’ll surely survive.

Browsing the Marsh

Blackbirds animate the heat, their song so angular it hurts to hear it. Browsing the marsh I name kingbirds, an oriole, fox sparrow and two green herons. The smell of the water’s heavy and brown as an old canvas. One day fishing with my father I tumbled into the river, only a foot deep, and tasted a lifetime of fish and insect. My father scolded me for leaning too far to untangle my line but secretly laughed at my rue. Meanwhile people are drowning. Three children in a whitewater Vermont stream, one in Hillsboro, a child caught somehow on a rock, two drunken fishermen toppled from a bass boat on Winnesquam Lake. The blackbirds rehearse and rehearse but never perfect their song, which is always slightly too sharp. The oriole shames them with lyric few birds can match. The sparrows and kingbirds try, while the herons, fishing on one leg, don’t care. My drowning wasn’t the real thing, but the look on my father’s face, a muddle of stern and satire, remains fixed in memory, and the sultry damp of marsh swirls in bug-fevered air like outrage, wit, or praise: none of which make sense unless you’ve been there, tasting the brown taste all over.
Brain Truss

The way landscapes are folding into each other requires the kinetic mental support of a brain truss to comprehend. China and India, mountains of sawtoothed, feverish rock, fold into wads of money thick as tectonic plates. Europe with gothic and Romanesque churches converted to villas for the stuporous rich folds its national boundaries and forms a density X-rays can’t pierce. Staring from my window I observe Monadnock surfing toward me while folding over itself like a school of porpoise. I sketch in my notebook a design for a brain truss supportive as those Roosevelt devised to prop economic policies the Republicans despised. “Brain trust,” Carole whispers, but I sketch and sketch, including the folds in the landscape, big creases that crush major cities like Nanking, Madras, Belgrade, and Dijon. Not that I have the influence to manufacture and peddle so abstract a medical breakthrough, but looking over my shoulder someone of abstruse reasoning could read history on my side, those jagged mountains cringing as they tumble into each other in slews of landslide, the crust folding and refolding like road maps crumpled in the hands of the lost.
Vanilla Swingers

Danger in the Past

Careless memories always lie
Times and places you can't buy
From years ago
Boys and girls that you once knew
All grown up and over you
Won't let you go
Photographs are bittersweet
Future plans are in retreat before too long

Hearts once broken never mend
Stay infected to the end
They never heal
Souvenirs that you can feel
Won't give up what they reveal
They never will
Everything that you pursue one more step ahead of you

So sad to tell you that you won't belong
You can't turn back the clock and see the world anew
Did everybody change but you

You can't turn back the clock and see the world anew
Did everybody change but you

Vanilla Swingers is a London-based vocal/instrumental duo comprising Miles Jackson and Anne Gilpin. Their debut album, also called Vanilla Swingers, tells the story of two people who meet in 2005, go back in time to 1985, lose each other, then meet again in 2015. The story's themes include the desire to escape one's confines (be they geographical, self-imposed or due to the laws of physics), post-humanist politics and romantic love. Vanilla Swingers' music ranges from the polished pop of Danger In The Past to the freeform prog stylings of The Hive. The Vanilla Swingers album will be released 11 August as a free download and a limited edition CD. More information at www.vanillaswingers.com and www.myspace.com/vanillaswingers

If You Fall

Look at the stars
They don't care about you or anything we do
They burn so bright
So turn away next time they say
"Here's something new you'll never see, could never do"
When you read the news remember
If you fall for this you'll fall for anything

You got the job so go back to school
Where everything you do just kills dead time
The useless deeds the business needs
And never stops to wonder what's the reason why
On your way to work remember
If you fall for this you'll fall for anything that passes by you

If you fall for this you'll fall for anything
The Hive

You can see the future - just stop and look around yer. Oh, this impossible world was never meant to be. And maybe we get what we deserve - I've seen the evidence. Packaged experience, things I want but know I'll never need. The fame economy, doll choreography the culture of complaint won't seek to understand. The daisies in the sun mutate but still stay beautiful. Always looking forward to a time when you'll look back on this and smile. No way. No way.

City comedown, same as our town. With this ring I see through every ocean rising, advertising they won't stop until it's all in bits upon the ground. Screensave faces, Chinese walls divide, monitors flicker but I only saw the light behind your eyes. We're part of a problem with no solution. Everywhere you go, everything sold cheap. Someone's gonna pay. From the daily rail to the NME, sing the same old song:

"They build you up they knock you down, fifteen minutes counting down. Changes like the weather. You built me up you won't knock me down - I'm keeping both feet on the ground. And it's getting better!"

Too much time's gone past. It's winter, summer, spring. Short sleeves in March. Wake up, forage, eat, fuck, sleep and make it better, a little better, always better - and then some more. Solemnly we piss away the peace before the war that always comes.

What if I could take you back to yesterday again? Away from Kajadoodoo clerks and crazy frogs and optimists making poverty history. And was there anything else?.

Back in 1980s, first thing you see - where are all the dandies? And you shouldn't trust your memories. So banal and real and like it never went away. Banned from the bookies, "Hey, mister, we got lucky!. Two for The Smiths, please. And a can of Quatro." Starring in a film no-one will ever see.

But you can see the future.
Sarah Hutchinson Burke
How much do you love me?

screams

crazy

the wild one
Watch out, we’re moving fast.
PEOPLE WATCHING
The Black Countess Rosewater gazed out over the fore of her ship at the crowd assembled on the docks.

Well, not at the crowd, exactly. More at the flickering torches that exposed the clusters of people standing near them, their indistinct faces cast in sulfur-yellow light. She lifted a hand, her fingers clutching at something intangible, and she felt eyes rolling up to follow it. What she held, whether anyone could see it or not, was power. Over them. A rare thing for anyone short of royalty or the clergy to have over crowds this size, especially if anyone was a wide-shouldered farm girl who stood a full head taller than every woman she'd ever met.

A lock of hair fell out of the red-tinted, otherwise black nimbus piled up on her head, and she tucked it behind her ear with her other hand. Then she grabbed the tall candelabra and held it close to her face, searching it for the amplifying device perched somewhere at the top. It was hard to do in the dark, with all the light coming up from below and the ever-present threat of catching herself on fire with lit candles. After a half-second, which felt like an hour, she found it and tilted the candelabra close to her lips.

“This next song,” she said, her voice washing over the crowd from the ship’s imposing figurehead,¹ “is about the Battle of Grommash, where Orcs fought someone other than Orcs, for once.” She smirked, and a ripple of amusement passed through the crowd. “It's called The Fattest Butcher.”

She looked over at Mordecai, whose oversized gnomish guitar had done her the favor of not feeding back every time she needed to speak, and nodded. He nodded back, then looked over at Ezekiel the cellist, who raised his bow. That much having been silently agreed upon, they all looked back at the drummer, whose wide dwarven forehead was barely visible behind his rack of toms. He replied with a series of quick, heavy taps on his cymbals, whose sound rose elegantly to a shout of anticipatory applause from the crowd.

Mordecai struck a long, solemn chord that meshed well with Ezekiel’s mournful bow-strokes, and as the cymbals faded away into a thunderous drumbeat, the Countess sang. Only one note to start, at the middle of her operatic soprano range and heavy with pessimistic knowledge of the subject matter, and her eyes shut as the note rose and rose and shattered into a ragged cry.

The port town of Prosba was the third leg on the Dread Ship Bashemoth's arachnid tour,² and their most enthusiastic audience to date. Crewmen who'd paddled in on the longboats to put up posters and promote the concert had been swarmed by fans with song requests, dedications, gifts for the Countess and Mordecai, and rounds of strong drink. Some people had traveled for hundreds of miles in all sorts of weather and through all manner of threats and penalties to see the band that night, or so they claimed.³ Even a few dwarves had caught on, owing no doubt to Bashemoth’s drummer, who supplied the beat with specialized mining hammers and was known to occasionally employ a dwarven cannonette for additional percussive heft.

¹ A scowling mermaid holding a guitar very similar to that of the Countess’ guitarist, Mordecai Blackheart, and cradling the vocal microphone speaker to her otherwise bare bosom.
² Eight performances total, in case anyone’s counting.
³ Humans lie the way they breathe, reflexively and often, so who knew whether or not those stories were true.
The crew had loved the attention, especially as it related to free alcohol, and the Countess let them bask in it upon their return for a little while before putting them back to work. In addition to actually sailing the ship through the often temperamental waters between ports, the giant church organ built into the cabin's face needed to be cleaned and refilled with fake blood, instruments needed to be tuned, candles replaced as necessary, and the gnome-designed amplifiers had to be cleaned and tested.

This last part was key; anything made by gnomes was highly volatile and required careful maintenance to prevent random explosions. This meant removing the speaker cabinets from their notches at the fore of the ship once a day, taking them apart as instructed, and thoroughly dusting each one. It was taxing work, and frustrating, because the diagrams didn't really make sense to anyone who wasn't a gnome and many of the parts were either easily dirtied or easily dropped between the floorboards (the wires connecting the microphones to the battery to the speakers) or filled with acid (the chemical batteries). And then there were the magnets to deal with, which everyone knew gave you brain cancer after prolonged exposure. So yes, a certain amount of unexpected leisure time in the form of strangers being generous for no reason was more than welcome.

They probably got more of it than the Countess. At least, more of it was genuine. Generally, the only time she left the ship on tour was to collect payment, which wasn't something she liked doing. As she sang, knowing that the concert was reaching an end, her mouth sagged into a frown. Pier and dock owners weren't concert promoters in the traditional sense, but they had the same tendencies. The crowd wasn't as big as they'd hoped, and they hadn't been drinking or eating much, and they'd have to dig into their own pockets to cover Bashemoth's guarantee, so maybe they could cut a poor businessman with a hungry family some slack and blah blah blah.

Ezekiel's cello ended early and the Countess' voice dipped, but she sang through it. She gave Mordecai her “what happened there?” face, but Mordecai shrugged.

Then something hit her feet. She looked down. Someone, evidently strong-armed, had thrown a bouquet of roses to her, and they were lying perilously close to the lowest rung of candles on her candelabra. She picked them up, held them aloft for a second, then bit into them, tearing the heads off some of them as their thorns tore at her lips. She threw them behind her and spat, her mouth filling with the salty iron taste of her own blood.

The crowd roared. They hadn't expected anything less.

There was a knock on the Countess' door.

"Hold on,” she said through a mouthful of saltwater. No sense letting those cuts in her mouth get infected. She gargled and rinsed, spitting what remained into her chamber pot. "Right then, who is it?”

"It's Mordecai,” said a baritone voice.

"Oh good, come on in,” the Countess said, smiling. “I need someone to lace up my corset.” She'd changed out of the one she'd performed in and into her other one, which was ringed all around with spikes. She could protect her breasts easily, but getting one's bottom pinched often began with an innocent hand on the small of the back. Something sharp there, she'd reasoned, would discourage potential gropers. So far, it had worked.

Mordecai opened the door, somewhat hesitantly. He'd never felt entirely comfortable in the Countess' chamber, mainly because it didn't look like a woman's chamber in the slightest. The furnishings — a bed, dresser, and two small bookcases — were plain, and she didn't have a vanity

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4 Ah, superstition.
5 Or at her, considering the distance
or anything else one expected a woman to have. Mordecai knew she owned makeup and perfume, she was wearing both now, but where she kept them would be a mystery for the ages.

And yet she, in her black wedding gown and ghoulish corpse paint, was the most alluring woman he’d ever met. He had no idea how someone that stubbornly unfeminine managed it, but she always looked like something that would enchant you and spirit you away into some decadent abyss.

“Well then, come lace me up,” the Countess said, half joking. “Don’t just stand in the doorway, I’m decent.”

Mordecai shook his thoughts away and walked in. As he passed the bookshelves, he noticed a bouquet of half-eaten roses sitting in a pail of water.

“Didn’t think you liked flowers,” he said, smirking.

“Ezekiel did that,” the Countess snapped. “He probably thought it was funny. Damn things nearly landed in the candles.” She looked away from the mirror, hoping her face paint concealed reddening cheeks.

Mordecai let the matter drop and tightened the laces on her corset. He’d done this enough times, and not just for her, that he knew not to crush her ribs or leave it too loose.

“Good show tonight, yeah?” he asked. “Crowd was really into it.”

“It was all right,” the Countess said. “Some problems with the cello, though. Had he been tipping into the rum before we set up?”

“Not that I noticed,” said Mordecai. Ezekiel probably had been drunk, but no one would have seen it. Their cellist had the tendency to disappear for long stretches of time before and after concerts. Mordecai suspected that he joined the crew on the longboats sometimes, but he probably just passed out somewhere in the ship’s cavernous hold.

“Well, try and keep an eye on him,” the Countess said. She pulled away from him and moved her arms around to test the corset’s constriction.

“Perfect,” she said. Turning around, she grinned and laughed a little. “Good lord, are your pants tighter? I swear, you won’t be able to walk if this keeps up.”

Mordecai looked down. His black leather pants had tightened, and his long black naval coat was a bit wide for him, which made his legs look even thinner.

“I think it’s the weather,” he said. “Sadly, I don’t have Ezekiel around to lace up my pants for me.” He smiled back at her and she pinched his cheek, then wiped the corpse paint off on his coat.

“Gotta go collect our money,” she said. “I’ll be back.”

She walked out, lowering her black lace veil, and left him there. He stayed for a minute, trying once again to make sense of how she and this room coexisted, but faint giggling from above deck distracted him. Ezekiel had reappeared, it seemed. And brought company.

It took almost an hour for the Countess to get from the dock to a small, narrow building just off Prosba’s main street. The waterfront was jammed with people, most of whom were drinking and milling around once the music had stopped. They weren’t even gathered in clusters of friends; it

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6 Were one to watch the Countess walk, one couldn’t help but notice that she didn’t weave in and out of available space. She walked straight ahead, plowing through that dense thicket of humanity as if expecting them to part before her and not adjusting to the fact that they didn’t.
was one enormous sprawling clot of people, and any time someone saw her they’d rush up and shout in her ear with beery breath, and she rarely understood what they were saying. Not that it mattered. She assumed, rightfully, that anything yelled in her ear on a crowded dock was of the "woooo!" or "I love you!" variety.

About halfway to her destination, she felt a hand brush against her back and pull away abruptly. She smiled and kept walking. That never got old.

She hoped this wouldn’t be too difficult. Bashemoth had never stopped at Prosba before, and new ports often brought complications; public performance taxes, “voluntary but suggested” ship registry, or unsavory city officials who kept you in their offices long enough to undress you with their eyes and, they hoped, their hands as well. This would be much easier if she was a bard playing in taverns and dance halls, normal places where the rules had been written down on paper in advance. She and her band would travel by caravan over solid ground, with lighter equipment, and play more often. And then maybe someone else — she shouldered past three older men in uniform who took the opportunity to look down her corset — could worry about the particulars for once.

Someone caught her arm midstride and nearly pulled her off-balance. She'd been slogging through the crowd, head down, and hadn't expected any sudden jolts backwards. By the time she'd regained enough equilibrium to shake off the grip, it was so tight that she couldn't.

She turned to see two couples staring at her, bunching in around her. Her fists balled up tight enough to whiten her knuckles. The vice grip belonged to one of the women, shorter than her but nearly twice as wide, and her little black currant eyes searched the Countess' veiled face.

"’Ere, are ya sure this is her?“ she asked her husband, a tall, thin man with soiled brown tunic and a beer blush that made the Countess that much more uncomfortable.

"Oh yes, that's her,“ he said, and nodded to the other couple, who could have been brother and sister by how similar they looked. “You all” he continued, each word a struggle, “were amay-zing. Seriously.” The other couple nodded, their narrow faces twitching into smiles.

"Thank you,” the Countess said, forcing a smile. She tried to pull out of the larger woman's grip, but it only tightened under her elbow.

"Please,” the Countess said, “I need to go, I'm in a hurry. Thank you, though.” They didn't deserve etiquette, but she'd always found it best to be polite around women. They were worse than men if you provoked them.

"Oh, don't go hidin' behind that thing," the large woman said, reaching out and snagging the bottom corner of the Countess' veil. "Me 'usband wants to see yer face.” Her husband grinned wider, clearly leering now.

The Countess pushed the woman's hand away. “Please don't touch my veil.” She stepped back and yanked, sliding her arm painfully from the woman's grip.

“’Ere now, that's a bit rude,” the woman said, with more force. “We just want to see yer face.” She reached out again, and her husband took a step forward. The other couple hung back.

As the woman leaned in, the Countess pushed her hand away and, without thinking, slapped the woman right across her pudgy face.

"Don't touch my veil, damn you!” she yelled, her temper flaring as it caught up with her physical response to uninvited touching. Then she took off running as heads turned towards the scene she'd made. She heard laughter and a few catcalls, but she ignored them; the important thing was

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7 As well as she could run in a full dress and corset, anyway.
getting as much space between her and those people as possible. Anyone who tried stopping her
now got shoved aside, or a belly full of corset spikes if they were persistent.

She didn't stop running until she'd broken the outermost seam of the crowd and reached a cobbled
sidewalk in front of a row of squat buildings. None of them had lights on. That suited her just fine.
The sign on the building to her left was for a tailor, and the man who'd hired Bashemoth this
evening said his office wasn't too far from one, so she headed in that direction.

The girl sitting in Mordecai's lap draped her arm around his narrow shoulders and twirled some of
his long black hair around her finger.

“So how do you make your guitars so loud?” she asked.

Mordecai looked at her. Her auburn hair smelled like drying soap, and her eyes were bright green
and eager, much like the rest of her. Every time she drew breath her back arched, edging her
bosom closer to his face. There wasn't much covering it; despite the cool weather, it was summer
and women's fashions shrank accordingly. She'd been drinking wine, her breath was heavy with it,
but she had to be at least ten years younger than him. In other towns he could be arrested for
acting as her furniture. Hell, he'd probably be fined for looking at her from across the street. But
all reservations aside, Mordecai was a man who would go to any length, especially the one in his
pants, to entertain the ladies.

“The guitar is connected to an amplifying cabinet at the front of the ship,” he said. “Gnomes made
it.”

“Gnomes!” the girl exclaimed, her voice bubbling. “Did you meet them? What were they like?”

“Well, um,” Mordecai began, his brain scrambling for words to throw at this girl. Most of the
women who boarded the ship after concerts were of an older, lustier vintage, and there was an
implicit understanding of what each party wanted from the other. Said understanding was
decidedly absent here; this poor thing wanted him to tell her things beyond pleasantries and
exaggerated compliments as they undressed. This wasn't a girl who happened to like sex and
musicians and took advantage of the convenience he provided, this girl liked him. That wasn't
supposed to happen. There were rules.

“Gnomes are, um... well, they —”

“They're short and they have long fingers and they smell funny,” said a gruff, low voice that nearly
sent Mordecai out of his chair and the girl out of his lap. “That's gnomes for ya.”

Hammersfall had walked into the main room of the cabin, packing the cannonette on his shoulders,
which would have been rather imposing if he'd stood over five feet tall. He walked past them
without saying anything else and pushed the door to the hold open with his foot, disappearing into
the musty dark.

“That's our drummer,” Mordecai said, once he'd regained some of his composure. “He's great, best
I've ever heard. Dwarves are natural timekeepers. Mining, you know.” He winced, partly because
he was babbling and partly because he could just picture Hammersfall and Ezekiel down in the
hold, swilling rum and giggling about the latest notch on Mordecai's guitar neck. He'd developed a
reputation onboard as something of a bounder, which wasn't entirely without merit. Women liked
him more than the others for some reason he'd never totally understood. He certainly liked them,
too. And there was a lot about this girl to like, particularly the round bits that jiggled when she
walked or laughed.

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8 Eager, that is. Not bright green.
9 Or, for that matter, questioned.
He looked at her again. She was looking — no, *gazing* — into his eyes, with the same expression women gave their husbands going off to war: *I’ll miss you when you’re gone, but I know you’re coming back to me.* This was going to mean something to her, which meant it would crush her when he returned here in six months or a year and had no idea who she was.

“Didn’t you say you were here with friends?” he asked her, with forced playfulness. “Where did they scamper off to?”

“Oh, they left,” she said. “They wanted to meet the Black Countess, but she was gone by the time we got here. I wanted to meet her too, but not as badly as I wanted to meet you.” She smiled and her eyes blinked away, as if she was embarrassed. She was sitting in his lap, for crying out loud, her intentions were clear.

The door to the cabin opened again, and this time Mordecai heard it. His eyes shot open in alarm. Oh, no. Who was it? Ezekiel, back from the docks with a girl of his own? The Countess?

Someone cleared their throat behind him.

The Countess.

Mordecai cleared his throat in response.

“Back so soon?” he asked, pushing the girl off his lap.

“I beg your pardon?” The voice was male, but not anyone from the crew. Mordecai’s head whipped around to see an older man in a blue military uniform, a pipe curling out from his neatly-trimmed beard. Two other men around his age were walking into the room, both in the same uniform as the first.

“Are you a crewman on this vessel?” the first man asked him.

“Yes, I am,” Mordecai said, standing up. He was taller than all three men and straightened his posture a bit to accentuate it. He looked over at the girl, whose eyes were as wide as his had been, and stepped in front of her. “What’s this about?”

“Prosba militia,” the man said, taking a paper from his jacket and handing it to Mordecai. “We’re holding this ship in harbor until further notice.”

Mordecai glanced at the paper. It was a warrant empowering the militia to hold the ship “for violations of city statutes to be determined at arraignment.” He sighed. This was a new one. He heard sniffling behind him and turned around. The girl’s eyes were misting and her hand covered her mouth.

Mordecai put a hand on her shoulder.

“My dear girl,” he said, “... how old did you say you were again?”

Meanwhile, the Countess’ hands were on her hips and her downcast eyebrows crinkled the bridge of her nose. This was not a good sign.

“What I’m saying,” said the short, round man at whom she was glaring, “is that someone thought you were too loud and called the militia.” He was dressed in unflattering green velvet and had rings on all of his fingers, although they were much flashier than anything the Countess would have worn. A family crest hung above his desk — the etching was of a fox fighting a snake, and below it his name, Perfidyan.
“Who called them?” the Countess asked. “Everyone here was watching us play. You said so yourself.”

“Well, yes,” Perfidyan said, steepling his fingers. “But I meant that in a general sense. Some of our older residents probably stayed home and one of them flagged down a county militiaman. There are houses scattered among the commercial properties here.” He swallowed. “You can sit down, you know.”

“I know,” the Countess said, not moving. “Does this phantom geezer have a name?”

“Yes, but the complaint was made confidential,” Perfidyan said.

“Of course. So how long will it take us to get our ship out of holding? We have a performance at Grottan’s Barn three weeks from now, we can’t be delayed.”

“Ah,” said Perfidyan, nodding. “Well normally there’s a hearing in front of the town council for minor offenses, but given the circumstances we’ll levy a fine and you can leave once you pay it.”

The Countess sighed. She’d seen this coming, but hoped she’d mistaken it for something else.

“Just take it out of our pay,” she said, reluctantly.

“It’s not that simple,” Perfidyan said. He opened one of the drawers on his side of his vast mahogany desk and pulled out a long sheet of paper.

“According to the event contract we drew up and signed, your band gets 200 gold pieces guaranteed plus a third of the concessions.”

The Countess nodded.

“But unfortunately, the fine for a noise violation exceeds that amount. This is an area that enjoys its piece and quiet,” he said in response to the look on the Countess’ face, which he’d only seen on protective gargoyles previous to this.

“We are not paying to play,” the Countess said, measuring her words. “Especially on account of a phantom noise violation that didn’t get called in until after we finished playing.”

“Look, we’re trying to be reasonable about this.”

“You’re trying to hamstring us!” the Countess shouted, slamming her hand down on the desk. “But you won’t. I will get what’s owed me if I have to kill you and the two thugs watching the door for it.” Her eyes narrowed.

Perfidyan stood up and backed away from her.

“I could open this window,” he said, gesturing behind you, “and call out ‘murder’ and you would be arrested. And hanged.” He lifted the bottom of his tunic and unbuckled his belt, letting the wide silver fasteners dangle. “But we’re both adults here. I’m sure there’s some compromise we can reach.”

He smiled, and the Countess heard the door lock behind her.

A door locked behind Ezekiel Blackmoor too, but to keep him out instead of in. He crawled out of the puddle he’d been thrown into and stood up, bracing himself against a hitching post. He looked down at his black clothes, now soaked through to his skin with mud, and frowned, then looked up at an open window above him.
“I still say the sign says brothel!” he shouted, wiping mud from his face. “You haven’t heard the end of this! And you’ll be paying for my clothes!”

A woman, her pale complexion flushed from exasperation, appeared at the window.

“This is a hotel, for the last time,” she said, keeping her voice level. “Now please leave or I will call Hrothgar down again, and then I will send for the militia.” She turned sharply and left the window, her long chestnut hair whipping around behind her.

Ezekiel took her at her word and walked off, trying vainly to shake the mud from his pant legs and boots. No good. He settled for wiping some of it off on the side of a building across the street from the hotel and continued forward. Perhaps a nearby tavern would allow a poor, muddy cellist to drink away his sorrows in peace.

As he walked past the town's dark, lifeless storefronts, he couldn't help thinking that he would have been better off getting drunk in the hold with Hammersfall. But he'd taken that pretty young blonde thing bouncing past him up the ship's rampway and, he presumed, straight into Mordecai's arms as a sign to stretch his legs on shore, so he'd slipped out undetected.

How he'd managed that was anyone's guess. Ezekiel was well-known among his band and crew mates for his random disappearances, but no one understood how he got anywhere unnoticed; he was at first glance a loose collection of knees and elbows with precious little synchronizing them. Hammersfall frequently told him, several pints into a talkative mood, that he was very lucky among his band and crew mates for his random disappearances, but no one understood how he got anywhere unnoticed; he was at first glance a loose collection of knees and elbows with precious little synchronizing them. Hammersfall frequently told him, several pints into a talkative mood, that he was very lucky the cello didn't need to be played standing up. He was also very lucky, Hammersfall was quick to point out, that the Countess took him off cleaning crew instead of killing him for all the times he'd nearly dropped the amplifying chambers in the water.

“Better pray to whoever you worship for thanks every time ya draw breath,” he'd say, by this point randomly punctuating each sentence with belches, “because if it were me ya'd be thrown o'erboard rolled up in an old carpet, ya clumsy git!” Then he'd clap Ezekiel on the back and laugh uproariously.

Yes, Ezekiel thought, it was a good thing he'd left the ship.

He stopped in front of what looked like a tailor's workshop and looked back at the ship. Some torches had already faded and the crowd was thinning as people went home, found other things to do, or lined up at the door to Mordecai's quarters — Ezekiel considered the last option with some bitterness. More importantly, as he stumbled over a loose cobblestone, he hoped they would leave a few torches lit for the walk back. The candles that lined the ship's foredeck were being snuffed out, probably by the Countess herself. She generally stayed out of the crew's way after performances, but putting the candles out was where she pitched in. She often did it alone, humming to herself as each tiny flame perished between her fingers.

She'd stayed on deck all night once. They'd played very well in Laulu one night, to a very responsive crowd. So responsive, in fact, that they'd been mobbed for autographs and free drinks before they'd even left the ship. Mordecai had left the party early, with two women, and Ezekiel was the last one to head below deck. He remembered his date tugging at his arm as he watched the Countess lean over the railing and stare out into space.

Ezekiel had a theory about that.

But it would have to wait, because something crashed through a window a block or so ahead of him and didn't move after it landed.

He scratched his head. That looked unnatural, moreso than things crashing through windows normally did. Had someone thrown a piece of old furniture out? It could have been one of those
dwarven pellet sack chairs. Good for one's back, he'd heard. And he needed a new chair for his quarters; he'd broken his old one to prove a point in an argument with Mordecai.

By the time he'd processed his decision to steal it, he was halfway there. There was a nice empty spot next to his dresser that it could occupy, plus that way he could pile laundry on it. To Ezekiel, dressers were a place to store liquor and bawdy etchings for nights when your man-trollop of a guitarist ran off with all the girls. Putting clothes in them required way too much folding and took far too much time and hey, this wasn’t a sack chair at all.

It was a man. A dead one. His green velvet tunic was soaked through with blood and his velvet breeches had been pulled down somewhat. Ezekiel did not appreciate the man’s choice to go Elven and saw no disrespect in thinking this about a dead man. He looked like he’d been holding something, which was crawling away from him. The shapelessness at the bottom where legs should have been was probably a dress. Blood followed it in a steady drip.

“Hey!” Ezekiel called after her.

She stopped.

“What happened here?” Ezekiel asked, and was on the verge of asking a follow-up question when she turned around and he found himself staring into the Countess' panicked eyes. Her eyeliner ran down her face in streaks, and her bottom lip was trembling. She bit it.

“Get me back to the ship,” she said. “Now.”

The captain of the guard stood at the ship’s helm while a handful of underlings snuffed out the candles lining the deck.

“Get those damned things out faster!” he barked. “And make sure those chains are tight.” He pointed to the thick iron chains that tethered the ship to the dock.

With that said, he turned and walked back into the cabin, where another handful of militiamen were watching Mordecai with weapons drawn. Mordecai, for his part, was looking over the warrant they’d issued him, keeping one arm around his new ladyfriend in what he hoped was a comforting gesture.

“Finished reading that yet?” the captain asked.

“I’ve read it three times,” Mordecai said, “and I’m still not sure what exactly we did wrong.”

“Well, it’s a noise ordinance,” the captain said, sparing none of his intended condescension. “That generally means you were too loud.”

A couple of the guards snickered.

“I knew that,” Mordecai said, “but the conditions it's based on make no sense. Like this here,” he let the girl go and held his finger under a line of text, “let it be known that all musicians, bards, performers, poets, chanters, balladeers, minstrels, trouvères, troubadours, warblers, yodelers —”

“Get to the point.”

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10 Quite literally a burlap sack of iron pellets left over from several days’ worth of metalsmithing. Like all uncomfortable, ugly furnishings, they’re said to correct your posture.

11 An argument which, like all arguments that are practically matters of life or death at the time, he could no longer remember.

12 Elves were said to eschew underpants since, as elves, they had no genitals. Non-Elves think this is very funny, Hammersfall in particular.
“Right, sorry. That part goes on for a while. Anyway, no one performing within the city limits can do so above a volume of sixteen,” Mordecai paused and squinted at the next word, “crud, crudules? What's a crudule? Is that even a word?”

The captain sighed. “A crudule is —”

“A local unit of measure roughly equal to 3.75 decibels,” the girl said, cutting him off.

“Sorry,” she said, her eyes downcast in response to everyone in the room turning and staring at her. “I felt left out. Besides, we just learned it in school.”

“Ah yes, one does learn these things in college,” Mordecai said, slapping her jovially on the back and hoping that the hot water he was in wasn't reaching a boil. “But look, altogether that's only 60 decibels. Polite conversation is over 60 decibels.”

The captain shrugged. “All our other performers managed.”

“But when we booked this gig, no one said anything about a volume tax,” Mordecai said, “which is basically what this is. We even said we were really loud and were told that it wasn't a problem since we were playing outdoors.”

“Noise ordinances are a new policy,” said one of the other guards, cutting the captain off before he could say something that wasn't incredibly stupid.

“Oh okay, so that's why everyone else managed before.”

The captain didn't see this ending well. If this debate went any longer, he'd have to go back to Perfidyan's office to resolve it. He'd never hear the end of it. Besides, he had a warrant. And a uniform. And an authoritative mustache. He was in charge here, and no pansy musician was going to stand around disrupting the social order.

“Look here,” he said, dropping some malicious bass into his voice, “we've had quite enough of your lip. Pay the fine, or we'll impound the ship outright and hold you in jail until this is settled.”

“No,” Mordecai said. The Countess hadn't come back with the money yet, so he had nothing to pay them with, and these idiots had worn a hole in his admittedly thin tolerance for harbor-town police swindles.

“Yes,” said the captain, and jabbed him in the chest with his baton for emphasis. The other guards moved in closer.

Mordecai's hands balled into fists as he assessed the situation. One of the unofficial rules of fighting was never hitting the guy right in front of you. Everyone expected that, making it harder to get away from them. The guard to his immediate left looked a little green, probably hadn't seen much action beyond levying fines and making coffee for his superiors.

Yes. Him.

Mordecai swung wildly at the guard, but missed and nearly lost his balance. He winced even before a fist plowed into his ribs – another unofficial rule of fighting was that you had to brutalize your opponent right away so his friends didn't get any ideas about stepping in. As the air rushed from his lungs, he accepted that this fight wasn't heading in that direction.

The minute he hit the floor, they swarmed him like flies. Balling up did him no good – the fetal position left his head exposed and covering up left his ribs and stomach open for swift kicks and clubbings. One such club, a heavy oak thing, caught him just to the right of his solar plexus and he cried out as pain rang through his ribcage.
There was a scream in response that rippled into sobs at the end.

The girl.

He tried standing up to yell “run!” but she'd started without him, and he'd only gotten partway up before one of the guards grabbed a fistful of his hair and yanked him straight into a headlock. One of the smellier guards, as it turned out. He braced his elbow against the man's paunch and pushed, trying to free himself, but two good punches to his side left him sagging like a sack of broken wedding from the man's grip. He couldn't keep air in his lungs and each desperate inhale was a painful reminder of how badly things had gone for him. His whole body was one sharp, ringing ache, aside from a duller throbbing in his ribs, where something had obviously been displaced.

“Enough of this,” the captain said. “Throw him into the hold and we'll round up the others.”

“This is a waste of time,” said his smelly friend, dragging Mordecai's dead weight back towards the hold. “If Perfidyan didn't wanna pay these idiots,”

“Times have changed,” the captain said. “Gotta move through the system. It's what sep'rates us from the Orcs.” He nodded, and sniffed proudly. “Well, that and the long pants.”

“Yeah, and there's another thing,” Smelly said, thrusting his leg back and kicking the hold's door open before pushing Mordecai down the steps headfirst. Actually, pushing is a generous term – he simply let go and guided Mordecai's inevitable tumbling with a touch on the back. “Whatever happened to those belled tunics that you wore with a belt? With the tights? Those were way more comfortable. These long pants are awfully constricting.” He lifted his leg to demonstrate. “See? Can't hardly move in these things.”

The captain shook his head. “You just weren't meant for the modern world, Smelly,” he said. 13

Mordecai would have loved to sit in on this fascinating exchange, but he had a prior engagement, namely lying in a broken heap at the bottom of the steps. It was pitch dark in the hold, since the portholes were set too low to catch any moon or starlight, and Mordecai hadn't been down there enough times to develop much of an awareness of the place. He knew they stored things here — extra guitar strings, cables, tuning spoons, food and water rations, their drunken rhythm section — but he'd never been sent down to fetch anything, so it all looked unfathomably black and alien.

Slowly, as the pain in his limbs and head faded to manageable, he began to crawl forward. His legs dragged uselessly behind him at first, but he guilted his knees into bending eventually, and he felt around ahead of him, taking note of where barrels and cabinets were and making sure not to bang into them.

He'd squeezed through a small assemblage of crates when a rumbling sound rose up from somewhere east of him. He turned and looked that way before remembering that he couldn't see anything, but a louder version of what he'd just heard distracted him from feeling stupid. The third one was even louder; it sounded like a wild sea moose 14 trying to roar and clear an esophageal blockage at the same time. By the time it subsided, Mordecai's ears were ringing. He decided to address the source before it started up again, and he had an idea of what it was.

“Hammersfall?” he asked. “Is that you?”

The response was a piggish snort of recognition, and seconds later a watery burp.

“Hammersfall!” Mordecai yelled in that special way people yell when they don't want to be loud. “There are guards up on deck holding us hostage.”

13 How about that? Someone else calls that guy Smelly.
14 Picture a moose if it were a 2.5-ton pinniped whose mating call carried for over a mile. Now thank your lucky stars it's gone extinct.
Silence. Then a groan.

“So chase them away and let me sleep.”

“I tried that,” Mordecai said. “There are too many of them.”

“And not enough of you, ya skinny tit,” Hammersfall said, chuckling.

“Dammit, Hammersfall, they chained the ship down in harbor! They’re probably going to throw us in jail!”

“Ugh,” the dwarf grunted, “I knew that girl in your lap was underage.”

“She wasn’t!” Mordecai yelled, louder than he’d intended. “And this isn’t about her. They’re shaking us down for a noise violation. They’re probably gonna take our instruments.”

The door at the top of the steps opened.

“Hey!” yelled Smelly. “What’s going on down here? Who’s talking?” He started down the steps, leaving the door open behind him and holding his torch out in front of him like a weapon. “Everyone down here is under arrest!”

The torchlight gave Mordecai a good enough glimpse of the hold to realize that he was trapped. He wasn’t strong enough to run, and certainly not strong enough to move anything. He looked up at Smelly, who was on his last two steps and not looking terribly pleased by the inconvenience.

“Hammersfall,” Mordecai said, watching Smelly turn and glare right into his eyes as he spoke. This was it. One last try. “They’re confiscating the booze, too.”

As soon as he said that, he shut his eyes.

When he opened them, he was propped up in a chair facing his chest of drawers. It took a minute for his eyes to focus, and there were patches of numbness around his face and body that weren’t there before. What wasn’t numb hurt.

He groaned and looked around. His acoustic guitar lay on his bed, which someone had made for him, and the pile of clothes he’d left at the foot of his bed that morning was gone. Moreover, Hammersfall was washing his hands in a dented washbasin that he’d set on the large, oak chest where Mordecai kept his valuables.

“Hey,” he said, as sternly as he could. “What happened? Who moved my stuff?” He ran his hands through his hair and felt something unfamiliar. “And who tied this rag around my head?”

“Oi, you’re awake,” Hammersfall said, turning to him. He was smiling, but looked sober otherwise. An uneasy feeling crept into Mordecai’s stomach.

“Don’t move around too much,” the dwarf said, plunging his hands back into the basin. “Ya took some pretty nasty shots to the head, so hold still and let that grog soak in.”

Mordecai poked the rag. “Please tell me that’s not why this rag is wet.”

Hammersfall chuckled. “Yer brave, that’s no lie. Taking on those militiamen by yourself. I must say I’m impressed.”

He reached for a towel and began drying his hands.

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15 Given the immediacy of the situation, he left out “...as far as I know.”
“A’course, they beat you half to death, but the important thing is ya tried. More than I expected from a man who owns a carpet.”

Mordecai looked down at the opal-colored hooked rug under his feet. He’d won it playing guitar at a festival when he was twelve and hadn’t ever cleaned it – it looked like the lining of a griffin cage and was nearly paper-thin from years of being walked on. He’d never thought of it as bourgeois, but he couldn’t help feeling somewhat ashamed of it now.

Shame quickly faded away to disgust and alarm, however, when he saw Hammersfall’s meaty hands leaving red streaks across the towel.

“Hammersfall,” he said, leading into a question he didn’t want answered. “Where did those guards go?”

The dwarf chuckled.

“Relax,” he said, standing up and dropping the towel into the basin. “I’ll be back with more grog.” As he walked out, Mordecai could have sworn he heard him whistling. Something else Hammersfall never did unless he was drunk.

Someone knocked on the door.

“Hammersfall, if that’s you, the grog fumes are making me dizzy,” Mordecai said.

“Good thing it’s not Hammersfall, then,” said the Countess as she walked in. She had a black eye and cuts on her face and arms, and was wearing a knee-length dress that, while black, was less formal and more playful than the gown she performed in. Almost too cheerful for her pained expression and body language, Mordecai thought.

“Why is the hold locked?” the Countess asked, not looking at Mordecai yet.

Uh-oh, Mordecai thought.

“Not sure,” he said. “I’ve been up here being nursed by our drummer, apparently.”

The Countess laughed, but stopped short when her ribs told her to contain all jovialities until they’d healed. She turned to look at him and frowned.

“You look awful,” she said. “What happened?”

“Had a scuffle with the Prosba militia over a noise ordinance,” Mordecai said, untying the rag and letting it drop on his precious carpet. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Promoter pulled a knife on me when I came for our money and...” the Countess paused, “well, he didn’t get what he wanted. Neither did we, or at least not much of it.” She paused again. “Did you say noise ordinance?”

“Well. Total nonsense. They said —”

“Probably the same thing I heard,” the Countess said, interrupting him. “Just trying to rip us off.” Mordecai sighed. “Did we get anything from this?”

16 Partly because he didn’t know what “bourgeois” meant.
“You mean besides beaten up?” the Countess asked, attempting a grin. “Yeah, I managed to coax some gold out of him.” Her voice shook a little as she handed Mordecai a leather pouch full of, as she’d said, gold coins.

Mordecai’s eyebrows shot up.

“There's blood under your fingernails,” he said, quietly.

The Countess' face fell into a worried pout.

“Not as much as in that wash basin,” she said. “We're probably in a lot of trouble.”

“Yeah,” Mordecai said. “Probably. Does the crew know?”

“Doubt it,” the Countess said. “They were all passed out by the time Ezekiel brought me back here.”

“Ezekiel brought you back?”

“Ugh, yes. It took him forever. I think the walk back to the ship sobered him up, but you wouldn't have known it from how often that clumsy idiot dropped me.”

Mordecai was going to question the wisdom of allowing their cellist to carry anything, much less a wounded woman, but he wisely didn't.

Someone knocked on the door again, and Hammersfall opened it before anyone could answer.

“Everyone okay in here?” he asked.

“Oh, y’know, bumps and bruises,” the Countess said. “But we're managing. Thank you for looking after us.”

“Yeah,” Mordecai said, having just then been prompted to remember his manners. “Thanks.”

Hammersfall smiled, his ruddy face taking on a proud luster.

“We dwarves are a bit more nurturing than ya'd give us credit for,” he said. “Ya need anything? I see Mordecai's rag fell off.”

“I think we'll be okay,” the Countess said. “We just need rest.”

“Aye, true enough,” Hammersfall said. “I’m gonna dump this sack of garbage from the hold, then I'll get that shiftless goon cellist of ours to make some tea.” As he slung a burlap sack over his shoulder and walked away, Mordecai thought it looked lumpier than garbage usually did. And garbage had never dragged chains behind it, either.

“He's unusually calm,” the Countess said. Hammersfall was an excellent drummer and even-tempered for a dwarf, but he still only had two moods: sober and drunk. This hardly seemed the time to conjure up a third, especially one this unsettlingly helpful.

“Yeah,” said Mordecai, nodding. “It creeps me out, too.”

He stood up, tired of the chair, and stretched his legs, then sat on his bed and leaned back.

17 Gruff, frowny, plainspoken.
18 Laughing, belching, bawdy limericking, and slapping people on the back hard enough to dislodge important vertebrae.
“What should we tell the crew?” he asked.

“Nothing yet,” the Countess said. “We both need some rest before we tell them anything.”

“Good point,” said Mordecai, nearly supine. The Countess looked at him and smirked.

“I'll check in with you later,” she said, and walked out.

It hadn't been long, maybe a couple of hours, before Mordecai's bladder sent images of gushing waterfalls to his brain and cut his nap short.

As he pulled up his pants, he glanced down and saw sturdy beams of sunlight shining through the window. They looked solid enough to touch. Their tour had been short on sunny, cloudless days thus far, so he decided to make the best of it and empty his chamber pot over the foredeck railing.

He almost emptied it on his shoes; the moment he opened the cabin door, sunlight flared his vision white and nearly jostled the chamber pot from his sleepy grip. Holding it up to shield his eyes, he nodded at who he assumed was the man at the wheel, then took cautious steps forward and left until his stomach pushed against the rail, then he turned the pot over and hoped he hadn't disobeyed his grandmother's favorite adage by proxy.¹⁹

He turned back towards the cabin, but hesitated. The corner of his poor sunblind eye caught the Countess, or at least the back of her, as she leaned out over the railing near the figurehead. She was humming, and kicking her bare feet up in turn, her hair set adrift by the breeze.

Mordecai kept hesitating, struck immobile by... something. The same something about the Countess that made him linger when she entered a room and withdraw into himself when she left it. A lightness in his head and a weight in his belly that he'd never learned to balance. Something that became “oh, nothing” when a sweaty, smiling woman rested her head on his shoulder and asked what he was thinking about.

He was opening his mouth to say something when the breeze interrupted, gusting and blowing the skirty end of the Countess' dress nearly up to her shoulders before she caught it and yanked it back down. Mordecai heard several shouts of “whoo!” from up in the sails and took that as an exit cue.

Moving water always calmed the Countess down. All the frothing and churning and bubbling made her mind's chatter seem insignificant. She watched the ship cleave its way through the water and away from what she hoped would be the last of this tour's unpleasantness. It was a vain hope; men as unappealing as Perfidyan usually had friends, and rumors of them fleeing a fine rather than paying it were likely to spread.

She looked back down at the water. It never stopped moving, even after it had settled, but there was always someplace for it to go. Currents guided it along. And they'd swept someone away from a rock-strewn farm in the middle of nowhere and out into the sun, so it stood to reason that they knew the rest of the way better than she did.

The wind was another matter. She felt an intimate rush of cool air and her skirt billowed above her hips before she could protest her chilly knees. As she pulled it back down, catcalls rained down from above.

“Whoo!”

“Hey now!”

¹⁹ “Don't piss into the wind” being that adage. Mordecai's granny was an earthy woman.
“I already got paid this week!”

Bang.

The Countess tucked her pistol back into her garter\textsuperscript{20} and arched an eyebrow, looking up into the sails. They were silent. Then she looked over at the door to the cabin, just as it closed. She smiled, and gave the crew a sardonic curtsy before strolling back to the cabin, her thoughts rolling up into a wave.

Mordecai’s guitar had better be in tune, she thought.

\textsuperscript{20} Well, she had to put it somewhere.
Nothing And Me

I stayed too long in the Temple of Nothing
And Nothing
Is all
I brought back.

Nothing is exceptionally special, though
because If I lose Nothing
I've still got
Nothing

I love Nothing
I feel comfortable with nothing
Nothing will never desert me
Because it was never there to begin with

So nothing and me stick together
Nothing will ever separate us
Nothing will keep us together, though
Because nothing is nothing at all
**S’agapo**

Let me die beside you
in your yellow morphine-silence
while I bear these wintry thoughts-

The puttings-on of daily camouflage
that yields me sunless where your cheek
will no longer be warmed, your damp lily skin.

I’ll brew my mountain tea
serve the eggs over easy with hushed screams
on Sunday mornings. The vigilant walker

is slinking in, light beneath a doorway.
Soon your lids will kiss the shade
of lashes to lashes forever shut.

I am the last who’ll cradle your palms
before you’re free like a happy magpie.
So listen my lovely while I recite

our secret tales in your unhearing ear.
The very stories you shared with me
when evenings heard the olive trees

arms extended rattling my only window.
This hospice space, this sickly mattress cries
for a rock-a-bye bounce, to sing the songs

of blackbirds to impede your runaway tears.
No one will disrupt our sacred soiree
and you will teach me how to reach

the end of time, as I hold my baton
in the violet sky.
Shadow Puppet

I thought you should know,
what is was like to be alone without you.

How there was no one there to rub my back
or breathe soft words down the nape of my neck

like the wind blowing pollen across a verdant meadow.
Every noise beyond midnight became enormous, until

I was sure an ogre roamed the hallways in your absence.
Silence disturbed me at 3:00 am, while I woke to a snoreless quiet.

Half the bedclothes remained frozen and pulled back
just as you’d left them, in a sad but orderly kind of way.

When the alarm broke, the whole room quivered
and you weren’t there beckoning me close for one

last nuzzle before taking on the day. When I stood
near the window, in my lace gown with veils of light

behind my silhouette and wafts of air turning the hem,
no one ogled, telling me how beautiful I was.
The fucking puppy must’ve shit on the carpet again — I can smell it before I even see it. I grab some paper towels and go to scoop up the still-warm pile, and I’m moving too quickly to notice that coffee is sloshing up through my travel mug’s vented lid, so some of it ends up dribbling down my wrist as I weave back through the living room over the plastic tool bench and around a half-assembled fortress of Legos to dump the wad in an overflowing trash bin.

Sarah is already 10 minutes late, Leo is in the air somewhere over Tuscon, and Jesse is sitting there scowling on the couch, still wearing his Eagles pajamas, while Paul lines up coasters on the edge of the coffee table and then, as I walk by, sends them crashing onto the hardwood floor. Amanda is still locked in her room upstairs despite how many times I’ve already pounded on her door.

I think about how to ask Jesse, in my sweetest mom voice, why he’s not wearing the outfit we picked out last night. Before I can open my mouth, though, he furrows his brow and starts in on me. “Why does Paul get to stay home?” he whines. “I wanna stay home with Sarah and Benji!” That name. I hate that dog’s name, but we’d said that Jesse got to choose it — that particular bribe was key to coaxing him out of the outbursts that kept landing him in trouble at school — and you can’t go back on a promise like that.

“You talk to us like we’re all babies.” He wrenches himself away, twisting under the reach of my lips, and as he rises to his feet he mutters under his breath, “No wonder dad’s never around.” He looks me dead in the eye as he finishes the sentence, too.

Before I can catch myself, I’m around the couch and smacking him in the face, not hard, but enough to get him howling. And of course it’s then, inevitably, that the front door flies open and Sarah strolls in, dropping her backpack to the floor and glancing around to take in the scene. Her mouth opens, then she purses her lips, pauses, crinkles her nose instead.

“Puppy again?” she asks.

***

I scoot around Susan and out the door, heading to the Acura with my brain already revving for the Kontner presentation — how they should rebrand their health bars and aim them toward active senior citizens — when I find, wedged under my windshield wiper, a Polaroid that’s still a milky gray as its image begins to develop. The photo that emerges is blurry, but it’s unmistakably my palm, I know it, open and in motion, about to make contact with my son’s face.

***
I’m pasting together a PowerPoint for a local high-end boutique that makes a killing selling reissues of sneakers I wore to my own eighth-grade dance. I’d tucked that first photo, the one of me slapping Jesse, inside a copy of Wired without giving it too much thought. In the last week, Paul got the flu, I had to write and rewrite copy for an Asian fusion restaurant expanding into the suburbs, and Amanda had a dance recital at school that I left work early to get to, only to have her storm off the stage when she caught a glimpse of me in the audience. But as I sit here, sorting images of 13-year-old hipsters with fake nose rings posing on scooters, 9-year-old hipsters with fake tattoos sitting on park benches eating ice cream, and as I ponder what sort of edgy but accessible message I can graft onto these embarrassing images, I end up shaking loose another Polaroid, which is somehow mixed in with those proofs, this one of a vase my mom had given us for our wedding. It’s a grainy image but enough of a close up that I can see a serpentine crack running up the back of the ceramic, the side that is, I realize, always turned to the wall.

When I get home, missing dinner again, Susan is in the kitchen, cleaning up for the boys, who are perched on the couch in front of Sponge Bob Squarepants. Paul is absentmindedly bouncing a Spider-Man action figure beside him on the sofa cushion while his brother’s eyes flash between the TV and the hand-held computer game he’s playing, his tongue sticking out the side of his mouth in concentration. They don’t even look up as I brush through the room.

I ask Susan where Amanda is.

She shakes her head. “Haven’t seen her. She called to say she was having dinner at a friend’s house.”

Which one, I ask, which friend.

She shrugs, bending to fit plates into the already-packed dishwasher. “I didn’t ask. She called from somebody’s car, and Paul was crying, so honestly I wasn’t paying too much attention. Do you want me to call her back? Her number’s in my phone.”

Mumbling not to bother, I walk back into the living room, rummage through my briefcase for my cell, and dial Leo instead. Today he delivered a seminar on high-stakes negotiations to a group of investment bankers in San Diego, but by now I know he should be on his way back to his hotel. He picks up, and before he can get into any small talk, I ask how our vase got broken.

“What vase? Which one?” He’s being brisk with me, I can hear a TV on the background, the sound of glasses banging against a wooden table top, and I realize he’s at a bar, probably with the big-shot bankers and their limitless expense accounts.

You know, the one from Mom, I press. I go on to explain how I mean the one she gave us for our wedding, how the glue job is too good for one of the kids to’ve done it.

He sighs, probably takes a sip from a Scotch on the rocks. “That happened when we moved in. It was like that when I unpacked it after the movers left. Look, I glued it back together. Things were crazy. I didn’t want to bother you.” As he talks, I’m picking up the scattered action figures — Batman, The Flash, some guy in a generic blue jumpsuit — and dumping them into plastic bins, stalking around the living room for any Lincoln Logs or Matchbox cars out of place.

“Well,” I spit at him, “it looks like shit. This whole place looks like shit, and it smells like shit, and it makes me feel like shit to be here.”

“Look, I can’t get into this right now,” he says, “I’m with clients, and by the time I get back to the hotel, you guys’ll be in bed. Can I just call from the airport tomorrow?”

I jam my thumb down to disconnect the phone, throw it to the floor, and kick it into the wall hard enough for it to leave a tiny dent in the plaster. Susan’s looking at me with wide eyes, but the boys never once glance up from the TV.
“I’m really sorry,” Walt says, “but the acquisition...” He trails off, pauses to tinker intently with an errant paper clip, then finally goes on. “It’s not going like I’d hoped.” He runs his finger along the edge of his desk, absentmindedly knocks over a picture frame — I can see him on the beach, he and his wife both perpetually tanned and aerobicized, child-free and sipping daiquiris. “So Trantner & Hatch is just going to go with their own creative team. You know how it goes.”

No, Walt, I don’t, I say. I’ve worked for you for almost 10 years.

He looks up, glances out the window, finally settles for a moment of eye contact. “It’s not up to me. We’re the little fish here. This is out of my hands.”

What about him, I want to know. Is he losing his job, too?

His gaze shifts over my shoulder. “Hard to say. Look, Norah, there’ll be a solid severance package. And who knows what’ll happen once things settle down...” At that he trails off, or maybe I just stop listening.

In one photo, Paul is gazing up at me imploringly, holding out a tiny Darth Vader figure for my approval, but I'm looking off to the side, trying to skim a quick section of the *Sunday Times* that balances on my knee. Surely I only did this for a moment — a quick glimpse before going back to playing with him, and I can't even remember what the article was about — but now there it is, out of context, a moment frozen and me forever a neglectful mother.

They come in no discernable pattern, but they pile up, literally, over the course of a few months, and as I pour over them, I notice things about my house — the mismatched end tables left over from our first apartment, the pizza stains on our white Pottery Barn chair, the scrapes and scuffs across the linoleum floor we’ve never replaced in the kitchen, our bedroom carpet discolored from Benji’s piss.

The photos that are too blurry to determine, these I read as runes, tracing the contours of shapes and shadows with my fingers until I feel self conscious, wondering if this vaguely fleshy landscape in one is my cheek, perhaps, staring glazed at a rerun of *Grey’s Anatomy*, or my flank, maybe, as I winced while Walt drunkenly fucked me in a hotel room after a conference happy hour a few years ago, my dress up around my waist, me self-consciously trying to see in the reflection of an art print to determine if he could see my stomach jiggling with loose skin.

Interviews are just as I remember from years earlier. Nasal receptionists doling out half-assed directions in expressionless voices. Industrial parks where I squint in the midafternoon sun reflected back from dozens of silent, glaring windshields. An application filled out in the waiting room that duplicates the information from the painstakingly assembled resume. The meeting with HR in which I recite reasons for leaving every job I’ve ever had. Downsized. Creative differences. Stuff happens. No, I say over and over again, I *am* a team player, but yes, I can still think outside the box.

I learn that my work is too edgy. Too bland. Too corporate. Ahead of its time. Behind the curve, too out of touch. I can learn, I say. I’m adaptable. And then the doors almost literally hit me on the ass as I leave.
I reach for my sunglasses in the glove compartment and end up with a photo that depicts me sitting across the table from Keith, the creative director with whom I’d just interviewed over cappuccino at the local Starbucks, and I’m sitting there in my interview suit, leaning in to feign interest in the shit he’s spewing, and I’ve got a smear of lipstick across the front of my teeth. I check in the rearview mirror — it’s still there.

***

Now, by the time Susan comes to take care of Paul, I’ve hussled the other two off to school — enduring the indifference of Jesse and the curses of Amanda, who I have to physically poke and prod to get out of bed — and then there are Paul’s tears as Susan wrenches him from my leg and finally gets him upstairs to his playroom or outside to the park.

Once I’m sequestered in my office, I sit down and try to scour Monster.com, fire off some chatty emails to former contacts, or troll corporate websites looking for openings. The first few days of unemployment, I decided I’d walk the dog instead of simply letting it run around the fenced-in backyard, but quickly I learned how much I hated walking it, its toenails skittering across the pavement, its excited yapping and jumping up on my leg whenever another dog, a car, a human being entered his sight.

Benji stays in the backyard when the weather is fine, then, and today I’m thinking vaguely of picking up the phone and working my way through some of the more obscure contacts in my address book, but instead I hop in the car and drive to Wawa to pick up a newspaper for the first time in ages, feeling old fashioned and almost quaint in the process.

As I scoot aside my laptop and unroll the paper on my desk, trying to savor the feel of the newsprint as it smears my fingers, out drops a crisp shot of Jesse, the spitting image of his father, pulling a cigarette from a pack of Camel Lights. But Jesse is wearing clothes I don’t recognize, and as I look closer I realize he’s somehow not my fifth-grade son but a young man of at least 13 or 14. I realize, too, it’s Leo’s old leather flight jacket that he’s taking the cigarette from, but Leo quit smoking back when Amanda was born.

A few minutes later, I hit the Entertainment section and there’s a picture of Amanda writhing in the back of her boyfriend’s Pathfinder, one palm pushed up under her halter top, the other hand struggling with the buttons on her low-rise jeans. The light of the shot is crude, but I recognize the outfit as the one she wore last night, and I remember how smug she looked this morning, and I have to admit, the crispness of the detail in the shot is remarkable.

***

Over steamed vegetables and tahini on a bed of organic brown rice, Leo is asking about the job hunt. “Those papers are stacking up,” he says, glancing over at the kitchen counter, “I hope they’re helping.”

I tell him that the paper feels very solid, that combing through them feels more methodical than toggling around on a computer screen.

Leo’s talking about how important it is to be sure that the papers get recycled, and so I start thinking about how I forget what he looks like after he’s on the road for awhile. It’s not like I can’t picture him at all when he’s away, but the man who arrives home is always somehow different than what I expected — sometimes shorter, sometimes taller, but almost always a bit heavier than I’d remembered.

“Well, just be open to whatever comes along with these interviews, you know? Beggars can’t be choosers,” he says by way of wrapping up, and I reply that beggars don’t often eat organic chicken from Whole Foods or vacation in Cape May.
What I don’t tell him is that I’d realized I had two hours to spare before I had to be home to take over with the kids and send Susan off to her night class, so as I was crawling back past the discount liquor stores, topless bars, and sprawling mega-marts of Jersey, I gave up and ended up turning off at a random exit and driving, taking any side road that appealed to me in the moment, until my mind went blank and I was completely, blissfully, lost. And I don’t tell him that I’ve been doing this sort of thing for a while now — getting into the car, or onto the subway, and then just going.

***

In Atlantic City, I roam the slot machines and take in the blue-haired older ladies with their walkers and oxygen tanks alongside the younger generation of more glamorous, feral-looking divorcees who roam the gambling floor in pairs or small packs. Once, Leo and I spent a weekend at the Borgata, one of those newer upscale hotels that’s part of the city’s supposed revitalization, and we’d made the rounds of the new high-end restaurants, too. Today’s Atlantic City has frayed carpet, though, picked-over steak buffets and seagulls nosing at the garbage washed up on the sand.

My tour bus breaks down halfway back to Philly. After the driver has taken a quick look at the engine, he comes back in and says, succinctly, “It’s bad.” But he’s called for help, he says, and the charter company is sending another bus to pick us up as soon as possible. We wait for nearly two hours, and by the time I get home, Susan’s fuming because she’s missed a meeting with her thesis advisor, Paul’s got snot running from his nose, and Jesse has disappeared upstairs into his room for the rest of the night.

Later, when Leo calls from Austin to check in and suddenly asks if there’s another man, I giggle. He wants to know what’s going on with me, why I let the house look like such shit even though I’m not working. He wants to know, too, why I don’t really talk to the kids. “Susan told me Jesse is having a tough time in math”, he says, and he knows that Amanda has a Saturday detention for talking back to a teacher. He’s on the road so much, he says, that he could really use some help from me. I end up telling him I have to go make dinner. Then I hang up so I can find a menu and order pizza for the third night this week. Inside the menu is a photo of me, probably 16 years old, in the dressing room at Macy’s, trying on gowns for the winter dance at school. I’m using the multiple mirrors to study my ass, and just outside the door, my two best friends, Jena and Cindy, can be seen making gagging motions at one another, gesturing at the dress I’m wearing, the one they ultimately coaxed me into buying.

***

I’m digging in the medicine cabinet, looking for an exfoliating mask that Amanda seems to’ve used the last of, when I find another photo, this one of solid blackness. I shake it and wait, but nothing comes into focus. Then, after another long moment, I know what I’m looking at. When I was seven, my class took a trip to the Lerner Caverns in Virginia, a long enough bus ride for us to miss a whole day of school. After choking down our lunches on the picnic grounds, we fidgeted through the museum attached to the caverns — a display case of arrowheads, a couple of examples of beadwork from the long-gone Cherokee tribe, a tableau of tiny soldiers recreating local Civil War battles — and then followed Mrs. Morris, our teacher, into the attached gift shop. After we’d bought our post cards and pet rocks, a stout young tour guide led us to a wooden stairway on the far wall of the shop, and we followed the stairs down into the seemingly endless caverns. I know we used the buddy system, but I have no idea whose hand I was holding — it could’ve even been Jena or Cindy. I do recall, though, the fish with bulbous, blind eyes that skated away from the guide’s flashlight, and I remember the clammy slickness of the walls. And then, at the deepest point of the descent, the guide gave us a brief speech about total darkness.
“Mostly we don’t really know what dark is,” he said. “We’re used to light from buildings, the stars, whatever. But down here, there’s none of that, just whatever we bring in ourselves. And if we shut that off —” And with the click of his flashlight, be brought about the dark. What I remember next is sitting by myself on the long bus ride home, how my classmates mocked me for screaming so loudly just because someone had turned out a little light.

***

Amanda says, "How do you know I skipped school today? What are you, spying on me?"

Jesse says, "Why are you such a bitch?"

Amanda says, "What is this, a prison?"

Leo says, "What am I going to do, tell a client I can’t make it on short notice?"

Susan says, "You know I have a life, right?"

Amanda says, "Are you crazy?"

Paul says, "Why don’t you stay home with me today?"

Leo says, "What’s wrong with you?"

***

A photo album had seemed too formal, I’d decided early on, so I keep the photos — now almost 50 — in a thick manila envelope tucked between my copies of The Etiquette Advantage in Business and The Chicago Manual of Style, hidden right here in plain sight. Now I don’t even take them out anymore to study them, spread them out on my desk and try to arrange them in a pattern that makes sense. I just open the envelope and wedge each new photo in with the others.

***

I roll over to check the alarm, see that it’s just after 2:00. Leo, jetlagged from a European flight, went to bed around dinner time, and he’s sleeping with his mouth open, wearing his ratty old Wharton t-shirt that I’ve tried to throw away at least twice. Down the hall, I peek in on the two sleeping boys, but Amanda, I notice, isn’t in her room, and her window is open. I shut it, lock it, then change my mind, reopening it and even tying back her blinds to help with her re-entry.

By the time the sun comes up, I’m at a highway rest stop, and there’s a photo waiting for me tucked inside the sleeve of my vending machine coffee. This one shows Jesse standing beside my bed, staring at the indentation in the mattress where I should be sleeping. As I walk back across the parking lot, I pull the envelope from my oversized purse and dutifully place this photo in with the others.

***

I get within 10 miles of the caverns before I have to stop and ask directions, and then, after collating the advice of three different gas station attendants, I finally pull in to the parking lot of the diner across the street. The air is unseasonably thick stepping out of the car, the heat low on the cement. The kudzu and cicadas of my childhood are everywhere, and for a moment I just stare down at the clouds that blanket the valley below, wondering how I wound up so high in the mountains over the last hour or two without realizing it.

The lunch rush is over, and the waitresses are resetting the tables and gossiping about last night’s American Idol. I scarf down a Salisbury steak, a side of hush puppies, and two cups of watery coffee, and I chuckle imagining Leo, the eternal food snob, here with me.
My waitress chats about the heat, the lull in business before the busy summer tourist season. “Ever been to the Caverns across the street?” she asks once the conversation starts to trail off. “Something to see if you’ve got the time.” I thank her and order a slice of blueberry pie to go, tip $10 on a $7 check, and take the slice to the picnic grounds outside the caverns where my class ate our brown bag lunches ages ago.

The museum attached to the gift shop looks unchanged — if anything, it’s just shabbier — and the gift shop consists of nothing more than a rack of picked-over post cards and a cooler of off-brand sodas. Just as I remember it, on the far wall of the shop is an open archway, blocked by a turnstile, leading down to the entrance to the cavern. A young mother — younger than me, I think, by more than a decade — stands between two children, girls maybe five and seven years old.

“So slow today there aren’t any official tours,” the man at the shop counter says. “But I’m about to take them down.” He gestures toward the mother and her kids. “$2.00 with the off-season discount, if you’re interested.” I slip two bills into the clear plastic box in front of the turnstile and push my way through. The man, now apparently our tour guide, hands me one of those oversized mining helmets with a light mounted on top — a new touch, I think, since my last time here. He solemnly reaches to each of our foreheads and switches on the lights, and then a minute later we’re winding down the stairs and finally beyond the stairway and into the caverns themselves. He’s talking — reciting, really — and it strikes me that the speech might even be identical to the one I heard years ago. “Somewhere down here”, he’s saying, “are paintings of an earlier civilization. These paintings depict scenes of domestic life such as harvesting crops, slaughtering animals.” I’m wondering if this is the same tour guide from decades earlier, sliding my fingers along the familiar dampness of the walls. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the bobbing lights of the mother and her daughters ahead and to my left. My hand finds a gap in the wall, the air cooler and somehow hitting the back of my throat in a way that makes me catch my breath in a quick, sharp inhalation.

One of the kids, probably the five year old, balks, says she wants to turn back. The tour guide is trying to maintain order, asking the child not to panic, imploring the mom to do her part in sorting out the situation, but I don’t hear her voice at all. Then he’s calling out to me, asking if I’d mind heading back with the whole party and then coming back down after he and I have accompanied the mom and daughters back to the top of the stairway.

I hear his voice rising as he calls for me again, and the beam of his light traces along the opening to the larger cavern that I’ve started to move across. The light skitters along a shallow pool, projects obscene shadows of stalagmites on the wall. But by then I’ve turned off my own beam and set the helmet aside, tucking underneath it my purse swollen with my wallet, cell phone, and that enormous manila envelope, and I’m feeling my way around a corner and into what feels like an even more expansive passageway, the cooler air tightening the back of my throat, my fingers reaching out for more cracks in the walls to guide me along.
Deb Thompson is a self taught artist working in acrylics, oils, watercolors and graphites. Born in Canada and growing up in various locations across this picturesque country and in Europe, gave her an opportunity to see beauty in ever changing landscapes and the nature contained therein. She hopes hope to capture her fascination and constant source amazement of the beauty around us on canvas. Her work is displayed in various private collections and businesses across Canada and in Egypt. More of her work can be seen at: http://simplelines.deviantart.com/gallery

Deb Thompson

Autumn
Deb Thompson

Gnarled Branches
Deb Thompson

Stream
How God Made me a Hunter
Laura Carney

Green to gray and gray to green
is how I go,
I'm sight unseen,
and yet I can't see anything.

I have this eye that won't look to the right. I was born that way. So it's a birth defect. It could be worse. It could be cleft palate. It could be harelip. The doctors call it Duane's Syndrome. Some doctor named Duane discovered it at the beginning of the 20th century. When my mother was two-months pregnant, a nerve in my brain stem didn't develop the way it was supposed to.

It's a sporadic defect, meaning doctors don't know why it happens.

All it really means for me is that I get self-conscious about looking to the right, because when I do it, my eyes cross.

So I'm left to assume that young men to the right of me are looking at me. I won't return their gaze if they are, and my lack of right-side peripheral vision can't observe if they're not.

So I assume they are. And I assume I am being furtive and coy by ignoring them.

There was a time in my life when I claimed I didn't know how to flirt with men. But that's just because I didn't know I was physically attractive. It's much easier to see the attention I'm getting when I know what it's for.

But I have to try and not look to the right in order to keep it.

I have dated a few guys who weren't perceptive enough to notice the crossed eye. So I would tell them about my little trick in one of those early getting-to-know-you, look-I'm-double-jointed, I-have-seven-scars, check-out-my-birthmark talks.

And then it's always the same routine. "Follow my finger," they'd say, and they would hold up an index finger and move it back and forth in front of me.

"I can't wait to tell everyone," my boyfriend at age 16 said.

He also said that when the policeman caught us topless, making out in the back of his jeep.

But my right eye was crying then, along with my left.

"So I can do stuff to the right of you and you wouldn't see it?" he'd ask.

"Obviously," I'd say.

I have to be careful when I look to the left, too. Because when I look to the left, my right eye retracts, which means it sinks back into my head and looks much smaller than the left. And my left eye moves forward, so it appears to bulge out of my head.
They're sort of like these wheels of a car, and my brain is the steering wheel. There's just something wrong with the steering mechanism.

My childhood dinners were at a table for three, with the wall on my right side. When I was 13, my mother remarried, so she planned a whole new seating arrangement. She placed my step-father to the right of me.

I barely looked at him at dinnertime for ten years. It didn't help that he barely listened to me. He's deaf in his left ear.

Strange that my mother says she put a lot of thought into the new arrangement.

I live in New York City now, although I grew up in the suburbs of Delaware. That's what the grey to green is. I ride a lot of trains to Delaware, to New York, and back again.

Sometimes I forget and I sit with the window on my right. So the trees and bushes go by in this green blur. And then I get to New York City, and the cement buildings become a grey blur.

And of course, I bump into people on my right side all the time. That never happened in the suburbs. But I have walked into trees.

The grey blur. My boyfriend tries to warn me. "Look out," he says, and holds me back.

He holds me back.

"I like bumping into people," I say. "It makes me like a real, live, oblivious New Yorker."

It's the only way I have to be rude. I'm usually overly polite. I apologize to everyone. I apologize for causing anyone trouble, I apologize for things not really my fault.

But I never apologize for the right side. It's usually too late. Plus, then they'd see me cross-eyed.

I used to be a very reliable driver. I wouldn't get distracted and start talking to you if you sat in the passenger's seat. That's because I'm good at keeping my eyes straight ahead.

I used the mirrors a lot.

I did almost hit some children crossing at a crosswalk on Halloween once. The traffic light had been replaced that night with crossing guards so the kids could trick-or-treat more easily. I could barely see the crossing guard in my enormous blind spot.

My dad died at an intersection, attempting to turn left. A teenager ran a red light and hit him in her monstrous SUV. His little car never had a chance. I was 25 and when I found out, one of the thoughts I had was of how many times I could have been that teenager. I would never have seen him coming.

I used to be a reliable driver. Now I never drive.

So I take these trains with the blurs of grey and green and the men who might be looking at my imperfect-eyed side, but I don't know for sure.

But I'll never hit a car to the right of me.

And I talk to my step-dad when he's to the left of me or straight ahead of me now. Either way, I try to keep him on my good side.
Mostly I have to pay more attention to what I do see than those with a wider panoramic view have to.

There is a lot I miss, but sometimes that means a fight on the sidewalk or cow carcasses in the butcher's shop window.

I look straight ahead like a pointer dog. My eyesight pierces because I have no distractions. I always focus in on details.

And my senses of smell and hearing are excellent.

Not to mention my reflexes.

It's how God made me a hunter.
Rats Is Noble Beasts
James Shackell

I knew him as Mr. Saturday, but I doubt that was his real name. His hair was matted and filthy, and fell in long streaks around his face. The nose that protruded from the grime was always in motion; twitching and sniffing the air. But everyone agreed it was the eyes that did it. Small, beady little things that lay sheltered under dark bushy eyebrows. He’d been catching rats as long as my dad could remember.

He carried an odd weapon. It was a wooden pole, about eight feet long. At the end was fixed a small set of metal jaws. A thin wire ran down the length of the pole to a trigger. Saturday had showed me once, showed me how he could open the jaws, forcing the springs back, and then, quick as lightning, press the trigger and snap the trap.

“This is an old weapon,” he said. “It’s part of history. I got it from my master who got it from his. All the way, back and back.”

I was always impressed by his stories. He used to sit with me on the stairs after the kill; “giving me some learning” was how he put it.

“Rats is noble beasts,” he told me once. “They aren’t like mice, filthy horrid things. Rats have class.”

“But aren’t they dirty?” I asked him.

“Dirty?!” he said. “Dirty, boy? Is that what they’re teaching you these days?” The eyebrows twitched alarmingly. “Rats is nothing of the sort. Rats lick themselves clean. Why, a rat’s coat is his pride and his honour. You mark my words.”

He spoke of rats as if they were a worthy opponent. He had fought them in cellars and down drains; caught them on rooftops and in kitchens, or so he told me. I believed him.

I was never allowed to watch him do it. That was the thing. My father would invite him inside, lead him down into the cellar or the kitchen or wherever we’d seen a rat. Then Saturday would very politely close the door behind him and go to work. He told me once that his eyes had adjusted to the dark, and that he no longer needed light to see by.

It came as a surprise one day when he asked me to join him.

“I need some help,” he said solemnly, as if the admission cost him greatly. “I need some help with the rats in your cellar.”

I didn’t know what to say. He seemed on edge, nervous even. I’d never seen him nervous. Always he’d walk into the house, dirty leather trenchcoat swishing behind him, as dignified as Napoleon.

“What do I need to do?” I asked.

He looked uncomfortable under the scrutiny, and shifted his weight.
“Just watch,” he said cryptically, “I need someone to observe.”

This was the information that he seemed willing to divulge. I ran upstairs to my bedroom, pulled on my overcoat and an old beanie, made for the door, then turned and grabbed a pen-knife from next to my bed. Once it was in my pocket I jogged back down the stairs.

“Good lad,” said Saturday.

He crept stealthily towards the cellar door. Like most old houses it was set under the main staircase. It was a dank and dusty place, that cellar, and I used to avoid it. Cobwebs grew thick in the crannies and the flickering light from the solitary bulb didn’t do much to penetrate the gloom. I watched as he opened the door and went in. He didn’t bother with the light switch and was quickly swallowed by the darkness. My curiosity overcame my fear, and cautiously I followed him.

Down we went, along countless stairs and corridors. Sometimes I could swear I felt a breeze blowing through the shadows, but then it was gone, and the stillness returned. I could just make out the shape of his hunched back, scurrying ahead of me, the silhouette of his pole-trap swaying back and forth. I followed closely. How horrible, I thought, to be stuck down here, wandering the caverns until you slowly go mad.

He was an observant companion.

“See those droppings?” He told me, pointing to a corner. I couldn’t see anything but nodded obediently. “That means we’re getting close. I reckon we’re only a few days away now.”

Our food ran out on the fourth day, and we were reduced to scavenging amongst the shadows. Saturday found an old can of tuna, which must have been left down here when my parents first moved in. I used my pen-knife to hack it open, but the fish inside had turned dry and inedible. Hunger slowly wormed its way into my mind and I began to believe we would never make it out. We would die down there, cold and alone, and my parents would never know what happened.

On the sixth day, or it might have been the seventh, it was hard to tell, he stopped suddenly; so suddenly that I bumped into the back of him.

“Shhh!” He said, “can’t you hear them?”

I shut my eyes and strained to hear anything. There was nothing. The sounds of dust falling slowly, merging into pools; the tiny susurrations of wood growing and contracting. There was nothing. But wait! There! Yes, there! I could hear it now. Footfalls. Many of them; thousands. Padding quietly and with purpose. A faint chittering echoed among the corridors.

I felt Saturday tense ahead of me. He hefted his pole.

“They are coming,” he said.

I drew my pen-knife and felt a little better. Surely rats were nothing to fear. Rats were vermin, small and insignificant. Saturday had shown me carcasses back upstairs, in the real world. It had looked so sad and pathetic; like it’d been robbed of something.

Now I could make out movement ahead. The walls and floor seemed to be writhing, moving towards us in a small furry tide. Rats bubbled to the surface of the mass and then were sucked down, swarmed over by thousands of the colleagues, all running, jumping, scrabbling forward.

Saturday turned to me. My eyes had long ago become accustomed to the gloom and I could make out his face. He looked younger then, and infinitely sad.

“Blood calls for blood, my lad,” he said.
I didn’t understand, and was about to reply, when he turned his back on me and walked slowly towards the oncoming horde. As he approached them he sped up, jogging then running as fast as he could. The run turned into a lope, and then he was on all fours, bounding towards the rats.

They must have sensed their prey was near because, as one, they let out a great hiss which filled the cavern. Saturday answered with a cry and dove into their ranks. They swarmed over him; a writhing, seething, bubbling carpet. The ones who had been scurrying over the walls and ceiling leapt through the air to land on the struggling ocean of furry bodies.

I stood, horrified, watching the scene. Something in me refused to believe it. This was happening to someone else, in another time. If I wanted to, I could turn around and the door back home would be seven feet away, just up the stairs. If I turned now I bet I could still see the light.

Eventually the rats stopped moving. There was nothing on the ground to indicate where Mr. Saturday had been. No clothes, no bones, no equipment. Nothing.

The rats turned towards me. A thousand pairs of tiny eyes focussing on this new intruder. I wondered then what they wanted. If there was something I could do to save myself. I raised the pen-knife smoothly, but they must have smelt my fear. Saturday had told me they could do that. They looked at me, and in that moment I felt connected to them. They were so alien, like things from another time or place. They seemed to be waiting for something, some gesture.

I lowered my knife.

I don’t know what made them turn. I watched the furry tide scurry back into the shadows, into the farthest corners of their underground empire.

Then I saw the pole.

It was lying off to the side; I guess it had been thrown clear of the body. I walked over and picked it up. It was heavier then it looked; an old pole, he’d said, part of history. My grip tightened on it, the only solid thing in a changing world.

And I set off, into the crowding gloom.
The Best Part Of It

you fly through an obstacle
course of roll-away chairs and
plastic trash bins on your way
to the sign-out sheet

all day you’ve longed for
the best part of it –
the mad dash into daylight
bright even after 6 pm

when your rear view
mirror swallows what you
speed away from:

the taskmaster eager to
have your ideas escorted
out of the newsroom

the call from a ranting activist
who’s discovered your editor
doesn’t think he’s interesting
enough for the paper

but now you’re a beltway
Buddhist – stroking the beaded
steering wheel cover, chanting:
tomorrow’ll be a better day,
tomorrow’ll be a better day

the mantra linked
like the chain of cars ahead,
everyone racing towards
some reassurance
that they’ve made it
Whenever the Velveteen Boy touched a doorknob, the door came unlocked. There’d been a time when he’d been careful about trespassing, but no one ever seemed to see him when he didn’t want to be seen.

He lived in the house he’d grown up in, had rarely left in his twenty years, other than to go to school. But after his father died, he began to wander. He nocturnally explored the abandoned courthouse, the closed wing of the mental hospital, and the Jaycees’ haunted house. He recognized territory others hadn’t ventured into by the lack of graffiti on the walls, and finding these places made him feel alive, something simply breathing and thinking had failed to do.

He ventured out into daylight sometimes, never to crowded places, afraid of seeing anyone who knew him.

He discovered his nickname in a yearbook at a yard sale where he was the only shopper.

“That’s my daughter’s,” the woman selling the yearbook told him. “Maybe you know her.”

He did. He found her name inside, read what her few friends had written to her.

“Why are you selling it?” He pitched his voice a little deeper than normal.

“She’s selling it. She’ll regret it. Some wacky religion thing.”

He held his breath and flipped to his senior photo from two years before, knowing he shouldn’t look, like staring into a car as you pass the crash, the police waving you on.

“She’s been switching religions back and forth since she was a little girl,” the woman said.

The horrendous picture of himself made him start. He’d worn a suit, though his father had told him he didn’t have to. Long hair pulled back. He looked positively Eurotrash. But what the religious girl had written beside his picture touched him. He knew it might be, probably was, an insult, but maybe not. She’d been one of the ones who’d politely ignored him.

He adopted her nickname for him as if he’d thought of it himself. He bought the yearbook for one dollar and propped it open on his desk, drew colorful vines around the words beside his photo, “The Velveteen Boy.” It was fitting, he thought. Like the Velveteen Rabbit, he’d been loved too much from the time he was a child, was ragged from it. And so the name he’d been given at birth had been obliterated from his mind when he went too far with the paperboy.

They’d seen each other before at that time of the early morning, when it was still a little dark. They’d never spoken. The paperboy was around fifteen, old enough to know the Velveteen Boy for what he was, but not yet rude enough to make an issue of it. Or maybe he would have if he’d been with his friends, used words like fag or freak. But the paperboy was alone, and it was an hour before sunrise, and maybe the paperboy wasn’t even fully awake. He stopped his bike on the sidewalk on a deserted section of Sinjun Street and asked the Velveteen Boy, “You’re a guy, right?”

It wasn’t the easiest question to answer, but technically, it was true. “Yeah.”
“Are you gay, or do you just look that way?”

Again, not that simple, but why complicate things? “The first one.”

“You want to blow me?” Ah, the brashness of the young. If the paperboy had been with his friends, this would have been a joke, possibly a precursor to violence. But he was alone. And cute. And horny. You could see it in his eyes.

“Sure,” said the Velveteen Boy.

The paperboy slid off his bike and walked it into an alley. The Velveteen Boy followed. It happened more often than people probably thought, usually with older guys, always guys who were probably straight for the most part, always guys alone. Some of them treated him well, some didn’t. The paperboy was by far the youngest, and the Velveteen Boy would have felt guilty if he’d done anything other than get the kid off. It took exactly eleven seconds. Quick, but not if it was the kid’s first blowjob. And really, eleven seconds was a long time.

One... two... three... four... five... six... seven... eight... nine... ten... eleven.

It was an eternity.

He expected the kid to run away afterward, get on his bike and tear out of the alley. Instead, he offered the Velveteen Boy a beer. “I’ve got a stash. I find them on my route.”

“Unopened?”

“Yeah. People party outside, bring their beer out and forget it.”

“Thanks, but I don’t drink.”

“Okay, well.” He did get on his bike then. “See ya.”

“You watch who else you go down alleys with.”

The paperboy smiled like a boyfriend assuring his sweetheart. “I’m not going down alleys with anyone else.”

Off he rode, leaving the Velveteen Boy wanting to be someplace familiar, someplace personal. Somebody’s home.

He only explored two private homes on a regular basis, both on Lotos Street, an upscale block downtown peopled with young artists, probably all recipients of trust funds. Ten minutes after sunrise, so gold in October, the Velveteen Boy found himself on Lotos Street, in the middle of the road, between two houses that had been built a hundred years before, with tall dormers and long trellised porches. The Velveteen Boy knew both houses well, but a high wall surrounded the one to his left, so from where he stood, he could only see the one on his right.

The house’s porch practically hung over the sidewalk. Its stone steps grew wider as they spilled toward the street. It had a walled yard as well, off to the side of the house, the wall so high he couldn’t see over it. A metal pole rose behind the wall. Atop the pole, a metal ball, about two feet in diameter, burned and rolled in place, the most amazing lawn sculpture he’d ever seen.

He longed to go inside as he had several times before, but the Fireball Man would be home soon. The men who lived in both these houses would drag themselves home shortly if they hadn’t already. They did sometimes return before sunrise, like vampires, but usually closer to this hour, when no amount of drugs or booze they’d ingested could fool them into thinking anything remained of the night.
The man who lived in the house on the left side of the street was the Halloween Man. The Velveteen Boy had never actually seen him but had tried on his clothes, virtual tents draping the Velveteen Boy’s shoulders. His feet looked like a child’s in the Halloween Man’s shoes. The Halloween Man’s stone wall hid the entire ground floor of his house. Dark orange shades covered all the upstairs windows. An iron gate, set off to the side of the property, allowed a view of his forested yard.

The Velveteen Boy felt the heat drain from his shoulders, his torso. He felt for a moment that he might fall down. The Halloween Man stood inside his gate, watching him. Behind the Halloween Man, the trees — sunny at their tips, so shady underneath — shivered in the breeze.

The Halloween Man was huge, maybe an entire foot taller or more than the Velveteen Boy, at least a hundred pounds larger. The Velveteen Boy had known the Halloween Man’s hair was dark because he’d seen the strands in his hairbrush. But in the flesh...

His arms were bigger than the Velveteen Boy’s legs.

The Velveteen Boy wanted to run. He just wasn’t sure which way he wanted to go —away from the Halloween Man or toward him.

Before he made his mind up, the Halloween Man moved away from the gate, out of sight.

***

The following night, the air had chilled and smelled like rain. It tempted the Velveteen Boy to stay warm and dry at home, but he put on his raincoat, took his flashlight from his closet, and ventured out.

The tree branches hung heavier over the sidewalks than before. A mist sparkled in the gray moonlight, dampening his cheeks and hair. Walk signs flashed on each time he approached an intersection. Traffic cleared out of each street he turned onto. He didn’t see another pedestrian all the way across town.

He arrived at Lotos Street just after midnight. He sensed the Halloween Man at home and was afraid to approach his house, but the Fireball Man’s house felt empty.

The door unlocked when he turned the knob.

He went straight to the room at the rear of the house, the travel room. A hundred or more photographs hung on the seafoam-colored walls. Galapagos. Easter Island. China, India, and Borneo. The Velveteen Boy turned in a circle in the center of the room, scanning the framed black and whites with the flashlight, making them play like a slide show. He imagined traveling with the Fireball Man, posing with him in photos next to the ocean or in front of an ancient temple. The wind blowing his hair. The Fireball Man tucking it behind his ear for him.

He felt an unfamiliar sensation, a discomfort at being in a place where he wasn’t supposed to be.

A door leaving the photograph room led to the Fireball Man’s yard, which smelled like flames and dewy earth. The fireball illuminated shrubs and flowers, birdbaths and pathways — part English garden or something a grandma would create and part dark fairy tale.

For half a second, when a light came on inside the Fireball Man’s house, the Velveteen Boy thought the fireball had surged.

The Fireball Man was home. But not alone.
The Velveteen Boy crept back to the house and into the side door, listening to them chat about a film they’d just seen as they climbed the stairs. His voice was higher than the Velveteen Boy had imagined. Hers lilted, as if she wanted to sing but didn’t quite have the nerve. The Velveteen Boy followed them to the second floor, where they wasted no time.

The Velveteen Boy had seen straight sex before, had wandered past open windows, observed teenagers on dirty mattresses in empty buildings. The Fireball Man and the woman he’d brought home didn’t do anything that was new to the Velveteen Boy. But he could only watch for a few seconds after their bodies struck a rhythm. Though he’d never met the Fireball Man, watching him made the Velveteen Boy think of his father, think of the paperboy. Sex had never made him feel anything before. And what he felt was guilt. Nausea. Jealousy.

He wanted to take his own member, ignored even by him, and yank it until he couldn’t hold back a scream.

He slammed the front door as he left.

At home, he cried and touched himself gently, fell asleep to the sound of sirens.

***

The morning paper reported that, though the fire inspector believed the fire’s source had been the gas-powered lawn ornament, he found the path of the fire “baffling.” He gave no details as to why. The Fireball Man lay unconscious in the ICU after falling down the stairs. His date had been treated and released. His house at 312 Lotos Street was structurally intact, and would likely be repaired.

The Velveteen Boy felt he’d caused the fire, the fall, by slamming the door, though in the fire’s case he couldn’t understand how. It was like the science he’d never grasped at school. It worked like magic to him.

No more slamming doors, he decided. No making a sound when someone came home.

With power came responsibility.

***

That night, he set out again. The scent of burnt things kept him at a distance from the Fireball Man’s house. It looked like an inept painter had used a ruined brush to try to cover it in black stain. The dark immobile ball on the pole behind the wall loomed like a dead sun.

The Halloween Man’s house was dark, as usual.

From the outside of the Halloween Man’s house, nothing seemed Halloween-ish. No gargoyles leered down. No eerie weathervanes spun in the wind. The Velveteen Boy entered the gate into the side yard. The house, like the Fireball Man’s, had a long front porch.

On the porch stood a tall dark figure, facing him, absolutely still. It wasn’t broad enough to be the Halloween Man. The Velveteen Boy thought he knew what this was, though he hadn’t seen one outside the house before. "Hello," he said to it, his voice cracking as if it might finally change and grow deep.

It didn’t answer.

He walked toward it, shining his flashlight around its feet where its long black robe gathered on the cement porch. The Velveteen Boy raised the light to the figure’s hooded head.
It was a dummy, a tall mannequin dressed as an ancient wrinkled witch, with deep folds of skin on its face and neck, bloodshot eyes made of glass. The Velveteen Boy trained the flashlight onto the house and the silhouettes of the other still figures inside. The Halloween Man moved them around every day or every night before he left. The Velveteen Boy always feared and fantasized that one of them was alive, waiting for him. He passed the mannequin on the porch and turned the knob on the front door, felt the familiar click as the door unbolted.

Ceramic jack o’ lanterns, black cats, and skeletons adorned the Halloween Man’s shelves and tables. Mannequins dressed as witches stood in groups of two or three, heads cocked at one another as if in conversation: a beautiful blonde with long hair, dressed in black with a pointy hat; a grime-covered skeleton witch with black eye sockets, dressed in rags and bone jewelry; everything in between.

The Velveteen Boy made his rounds.

Escher prints covered most of the walls. The kitchen sported a wood-burning stove and wooden icebox. The shelves held glass jars labeled as everything from “salt” and “cayenne pepper” to “graveyard dust” and “Roger’s fingernails.”

Nothing ever changed much.

One bedroom upstairs had a slept-in bed, one that was never made. Nearly everything in the room was a shade of orange, from pumpkin to deep golden brown. The Velveteen Boy curled up in the bed sometimes, breathing the scent of the sheets and pillow. Somehow clean-smelling sweat. Unfragranced man.

Sometimes, he closed his eyes and wished for the Halloween Man to find him there.

Sometimes he slept.

This time, he awoke to the weight of the Halloween Man sitting on the edge of the bed.

***

In the beginning, for several weeks, the Halloween Man’s hands and voice reminded the Velveteen Boy of his father. He felt no cruelty in their persuasion, but he felt strength. Force. Direction. He’d always thought he might like being held prisoner, but the Halloween Man only held him with his will. The Velveteen Boy slept only when he was told to. Eventually, he only got hungry when the Halloween Man told him to eat.

The Halloween Man loved being called Halloween Man.

That was the Halloween Man’s problem, the Velveteen Boy figured out later: letting his boy name him. It was a way of being owned. The Halloween Man lasted far more than eleven seconds, but it felt more fleeting with him. Every time the Halloween Man left him, alone on the unmade bed, it was as if nothing had happened at all.

The Velveteen Boy watched out the upstairs windows. After his stay in the hospital, the Fireball Man limped. He was smaller, certainly weaker than the Halloween Man. But on his first night home, he turned his fireball on and started painting his walls.

That was strength.

For a week after the Fireball Man came home, the Velveteen Boy prowled Lotos Street whenever the Halloween Man was temporarily finished with him. He watched the Fireball Man through his windows. And then he climbed the Fireball Man’s front steps and did something he’d never done in his life. He knocked on a door.
The Velveteen Boy knew both friendships, pairings, whatever, were doomed from the beginning, but he couldn't say why. He'd counted himself lucky to find two attractive men so close to each other, one with gay porn not exactly hidden in his bedroom, the other straight, but worldly, too liberal to judge, so determined to be open-minded that he could consider the Velveteen Boy a female if the Velveteen Boy told him that was the gender of his soul.

Amazing. Everyone ruled by need. And yet pliable. Even the Yearbook Girl, stubbornly religious but fluid in her beliefs.

Hard. But soft.

The morning after his last night on Lotos Street, after he'd taken enough from both men there, the Velveteen Boy passed the paperboy's alley. The paperboy's bike lay on its side thirty feet in, where the shadows grew thick.

A few feet beyond, light and steam seeped from the air vents of the cheap restaurants on either side of the alley walls. The paperboy lay next to a vent, sleeping with his head on half a bundle of newspapers, stretched out on his back with five empty beer cans around his head.

The small but hard lump in the crotch of his jeans twitched.

The warmth from the vents rose like a flood, smelling of grease and sweat.

The Paper Boy snored softly, a man in the making.
An L.A. daughter whose name is synonymous with songs about the city's honking traffic blur and Hollywood Boulevard's forgotten dreamers, Johnette Napolitano has followed her musical fancies for more than two decades, most famously with Concrete Blonde. Johnette is now a collaborator of UK group Catfish Scar and an indie composer/recordist/director and photographer of indie films as well as an environmental artist. Johnette has also worked with The (Talking) Heads, The Dream Syndicate's Steve Wynn, The Saints' Chris Bailey, Danny Lohner & Wes Borland (NIN, Limp Bizkit, A Perfect Circle, Black Light Burns and whatever else), The Twinemen (Morphine), Roc en Espanol's Maria Fatal, Bad Religion, Robin & Tom from Cheap Trick, Terri Nunn from Berlin, French artist Bernadette Colomine and many more...as well as co-designing a metal guitar with guitar maker James Trussart and contributing music to The Sopranos and other television shows although she does not own a television herself. Her work is audible and visible at: http://www.myspace.com/johnettenapolitano and http://www.johnettenapolitano.com/
The Fallen

My girls just aren’t listening to me anymore.

I gave them a pep talk the other day, putting them into their proper places, I told them to stay.

I bought them new under-wires and contraptions to lift and to separate.

Exercises to firm and shape.

Supporting my girls, even in high impact activities.

Camouflaging them in comfy cotton/poly/spandex blends with breathable wicking, to keep them dry.

In an elevator, my girls used to push the penthouse button, now I’m lucky if they can reach the mezzanine.

Contact

With a group of friends all coupling up two-by-two, we, he and I, go Snipe hunting in the woods, a sliver of trees separating houses and street; our fingers caress and collide.

Through clusters of lilacs, cicada’s drone, June bugs stumble in flight — I lodge white in the heat of his shirt all lips and tongues hands and teeth; first kiss as improbable as the steps on the moon and dusk becomes us.
Cornucopia

It may be that the hour is snow
The yin and yang of sun and moon
It was the Moon’s voice growling deep and low
It could be like that now but no
I will hide my heart away immune
It may be that the hour is snow
I think you no longer hear me though
This moment’s assumptions do commune
It was the Moon’s voice growling deep and low
I think it’s time for you to know
Love is something darkly hewn
It may be that the hour is snow
All things unsaid sunlight into shadow
Intertwine the golden lion the unicorn’s ruin
It was the Moon’s voice growling deep and low
Forever turned out to be too long ago
Winter a never ending cocoon
It may be that the hour is snow
’Twas the Moon’s voice growling deep and low
The light went out in my head.  
It was as dark as sin.  
Neighbors came to see what they could do and what they could take away from my nest.  
Morning came and then the rest of day. The light in my head stayed off.  
A priest came with all his baggage.  
A doctor came and took my pulse.  
Now I have no light and no pulse. My family stood behind me so as not to get hit by flying shrapnel. Slowly I am acclimating to the dark.  
Soon I will write this on a rock with a phosphorous pen.  
Soon I will emerge from the cocoon, daylight making my eyes bleed.

I Wear the Mask I Forged in Life

That’s me with the soda pop eyewear, the one behind the counter counting on something to save him from himself. That’s me with the gun under the fake cast, the cast of thousands, the play called My Life. And that’s me at the end of the line with my hand out, hoping for some small thing, valuable as all of time, shining like my best nightmare. Call me thief but call me when the time is ripe. That’s me with the smirk for a mask. Me with the rubber children. Me with the picture of you on my new t-shirt. There’s something about me you like but you can’t put your ring finger on it. I take you along with your possessions, possessing you as easily as a second story man. That’s the second story, man, the one I do not tell until the end, when words are finally used up, the whopper, the one that kills.
You Start a Story

You start a story.  
Somehow it ends up being about  
Adam and Eve.  
I only wanted to write about my  
family, their woes, their  
peccadilloes, you say to no one at all.  
Where did this garden come  
from? Where these naked pilgrims?  
I have no time for the  
peregrinations of first timers. And this,  
what’s this in the corner,  
curled like a question mark, splitting  
the air with a tongue  
like a diacritical mark?  
You want to forget the story and  
start something else.  
But it gets a hold of you. It gets in  
your blood. You start  
to consider it. It’s really not a bad tale,  
you say to no one at all.  
It’s about redemption, see, and about  
families, after all, families that  
lie and slay and cavort with the living underworld.  
In a way, you say, this is my family, also.
Ernest Williamson III is a 31 year old polymath who has published poetry and visual art in over 120 online and print journals within a time span of 8 years. His poem "The Jazz of Old Wine" has been nominated for a Best of the Net award by the editors of "Thick with Conviction". He holds the B.A. and the M.A. in English/Creative Writing/Literature from the University of Memphis. Ernest is now listed in the prestigious Directory of American Poets and Fiction Writers. Professor Williamson is also a private tutor, and a Ph.D. Candidate at Seton Hall University. Visit his website. www.eyeoftheart.com/ErnestWilliamsonIII

Ernest Williamson III

I've Been Reading
Ernest Williamson III

Meeting the Artists
Ernest Williamson III

Nice to Meet You
Ernest Williamson III

She's Got Style
The Burnside Winked
Loretta Sylvestre

Blue lights strobed across The Burnside’s brick façade and flashed off a wall of clouds in the west. The October day had started out mild and crystal-bright, and I was sure it had stayed that way right up until the moment I was marched outside to stand and deliver in my short-sleeve cotton scrubs. Now, I leaned against the patrol car’s front fender and sang silent hallelujahs for the warm air rising from the hood. Drumming my fingers while Deputy Kady scribbled a novel on the police report was not likely to keep me warm against the wind. Every little bit helped.

Even if it had been sun-screen, shorts, and shades whether, the waiting wouldn’t have been easy. Over the sounds of humming engine and scribbling ball-point, I could hear laughter bursting out the Burnside’s smashed-out front doors.

Yes, laughter. Bizarre events create bizarre effects.

For the first time in the six years I’d worked at Burnside Manor Veteran’s Home, I was outside those doors and I could think of nothing I wanted to do more than rush back in – and not only because the chill bumped my skin like a plucked goose. I was fond of the old soldiers when they were at their crankiest, and considering what the day’s happenings might have wrought, hearing the whole gaggle all atwitter felt like some sort of miracle. I didn’t want to miss the happy ending.

But I had to wait because I accorded Deputy Kady’s stamped tin shield all due respect. Honestly, that badge would have been sufficient. The blaring lights, Kady’s loose-in-the-holster .357, her steroid-fed partner lurking beyond the black-and-white – taken all together they reeked of overkill.

The Burnside stands in the trees six miles from town, two miles from the county landfill, and a quarter mile from the ruts and potholes we locals call State Highway Forty-seven. Who would be around for those strobes to warn away? Besides, no crime had been committed, and it had been a decade since Kady, known then as Suzie K, had harried me like a jilted Chihuahua in grade school. Why she was treating me like a felon now, only God and Lucifer could ever know.

After five minutes – or days, or decades – had gone by, she finally finished writing her epic saga. She flipped over the page, cleared her throat, and looked up at me. At least, I think she was looking up at me. She loomed a good four-eleven, so from my six-and-a-quarter foot vantage I couldn’t see past the brim of her Smokey-the-Bear hat. She asked her first question, and I reminded myself about badge, gun, and steroid-man. Accordingly, I curbed my witty, sarcastic tongue, and told the truth – so-help-me, whole and nothing-but.

“Your full name,” she said, in a Sergeant-Friday-of-Dragnet monotone.

Okay, so I almost curbed my sarcastic tongue. “Blaine,” I said, leaning down to put my chest in her line of sight, enunciating clearly, and pointing at my name tag. “Wright. L for Licensed, P for Practical, N for Nurse.” Silently I added, get yourself some gingko biloba, Deputy Su. I’m the one you framed for Grand Theft Lunch in the third grade.

But allow me to clear my throat with meaning and say this for the Walker County Sheriff’s Office. They know how to train up an interrogator. Suzie rattled me. By the time she was done, I needed to convince myself – more than her – that I was not to blame for any of what happened.
I wasn’t.

Five hours earlier, I’d rolled my pea-green Gremlin into my parking space in the third row, even though the rest of the lot was empty but for Marilyn’s boyfriend’s muddy S-10 Blazer, same as every day. Same as every day, I had forty-nine seconds, give or take a wink, to get to the time clock. I had too many things to carry, and I was half-dressed. I wriggled into my blue scrubs-smock, denched the handle of my lunch cooler in my teeth, stuck my paperback copy of the latest *Dresden Files* under my left arm, and used my right to pin my badge above my heart, all the while trotting toward the entry. I smacked the automatic-door button with my right knee – no mean feat but I’d had a lot of practice. Athletic as always, I was able to time my pass through the glass doors perfectly, and punched in for my six-thirty start time with four seconds to spare.

It’s true, I’m the senior LPN, but that does *not* mean I was in charge. I refuse to shoulder the blame simply because the RN – surprise – once again had a hangover and never showed. And, even if I *had* been in charge, what could I have done – especially once crazy Joe Leonard pushed the whole fiasco over the top?

Seriously, what could I have done? I’m one guy – a practical nurse for the love of Pete – in a rest home full of fighting men. Sure, most of them have shrunk a size or two, and unless you count Big Marty Johnson I’m as heavy as any two residents put together. They’re all well beyond their prime years, but believe me, these are some tough old birds. They might be heavily drugged, but they’ve grown accustomed to their meds. These soldiers are alert and, as I found out today, they can mix it up.

***

By eight, I had finished my check-in and med trays as well as my daily self-inflicted pep-talk. I had re-dedicated myself to life without sunlight. I was indoctrinated, responsible, and immersed in the smell of old men at breakfast. Eau de pancakes, Ben Gay, and half-smoked Viceroy’s. *Yes*, I said to myself. *Blaine Wright, you are living your boyhood dreams.*

Right.

Last year’s funding cuts had relegated the truly demented and the bedridden to other, less stately hell-holes, and left the Burnside two-thirds empty. All those left are mobile to some degree, and every day they gather around the foyer after breakfast, prepared to greet with friendly smiles the constant parade of visitors.

Right.

On rainy days, the old boys paste themselves to the glass on either side of the double doors. I always think they want to crowd as close to the real world as they can without setting off the exit alarm, which was installed two years ago after a training session about wanderers. It’s okay for people to wander in, I guess, but no one’s supposed to wander out unless a key-card toting official – such as a high-ranking LPN – allows it. But when the sun shines – as it did this morning – the vets seem to want to keep their distance from the windows. They worry, I suppose, that the washed-out light squeezing through the UV-blocking tint will fry their knees. They don’t risk it.

Instead, those who can independently stand belly up to the reception counter, even though there’s no secretary there to badger since Congress hung the funding out to dry. They lean on their elbows and practice looking like ruffians who’ve just ordered whisky and plan to start a bar fight. Their henchman, the vets on wheels, plant their chairs and oxygen cylinders to block the aisles that wing off left and right from the foyer, ensuring that anyone fated to wander into this trap will find escape unlikely.

Well practiced at this gauntlet, I had threaded my way through their midst, checking a tube here, a pouch there, slapping down Jack Ridley’s fond caress. I’d made my way to thirteen north, where I was tidying up after Jay Krump’s breakfast-in-bed ritual, which involves flinging his oatmeal and dousing his sheets with pink juice. Of course, I was fully absorbed in that pleasant task. That’s why I can’t be sure how the doe – yes, as in deer – managed to tap the button for the automatic doors.
Deer do like to eat bark, though, especially tender young bark. And out front of the Burnside, just to the right of the entry, a seedling cottonwood had sprouted after a puddle dried up, April before last. The best I can figure, that little tree must have been what the doe was aiming to get. To reach it, she would have had to squeeze between the wall and the end of the handrail. Probably all unknowing, she shouldered up against the switch, and voila, the door was ajar. Maybe she's the curious type, or maybe she likes eau de pancakes, because once the door eased open she waltzed in, I'm told, dancing on her pointy little hooves like a lady on high-heeled slippers.

***

Right off, the story goes, she pranced up to Jimmy Carulli’s wheelchair and started nosing his ear. Jimmy shouted, “Holy MAC-A-ROLL,” but that's nothing unusual. It's the way he starts the stream every time he's about to spew obscenities, which – being an ex-sailor instead of a soldier – he’s better at than all the other residents teamed together. So, I did hear him, from back in Mr. Krump's bathroom where I was flushing the oatmeal. I just didn't think much about it.

Next, though, for about half a minute, that old brick building was more silent than it has ever been in the last six years, even in the dead of night. Before that moment, I never knew that the wall clocks actually tick. Then a wave, I'd call it, a wave of sound arose, rumbling down the hall from the foyer as if from the pit of The Burnside's belly. Something with cold toes skittered up my spine. The sound began as a ghostly drone, all those deep, tobacco-flavored voices growling almost too low to hear like the beginning of the New World Symphony. Then, they rose into a swell, building all the way to double forte.

Frankly, except for Jimmy, and of course Joe Leonard, I had no idea the old codgers had it in them to make that much noise. Their voices alone splintered my nerves, never mind the special effects – feet sliding, and chair wheels clicking, portable O-two compressors keeping up a hoodoo beat, tap-tap-tap, whhhshsh.

And then it got spookier. The whole sound together seemed to shift, unholy buzz gathering strength, pulling inward from all sides toward the foyer’s center, bees swarming in a twister.

I admit I’m not the brightest bulb on the holiday tree, but I’m not a complete fool. Something was happening to the Burnside, something big. Muttering four-letter words that some may choose to think of as a prayer of thanks for nurse’s shoes with high traction soles, I threw caution to the recirculating air and took off down the hall in a mighty sprint.

As I drew close, Marilyn – who’s almost as tall as me and takes up twice the air space – came banging out the kitchen doors, shouting “Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy, no!” Janelle, the only nurse’s aide that had shown for duty, was leaning out the door that squared off the end of the opposite aisle – room forty-one south – timid as the mouse from whom she borrowed her brownish hair color. Her eyes were stretched wide and her skin had blanched two shades pastier than usual. She stood in the door and her bottom jaw fell and then bounced back up like a spring-loaded hatch. She never spoke nor twitched a muscle again until everything got wound up tight a little later, and her big moment arrived.

Naturally, none of the docs were on duty; also absent, as I mentioned, was our trusty RN. Any one of them – the professionals – would have exerted enough authority; they would have assured that order and calm prevailed. Old Miss Hibbs, the so-called social worker, would have hauled out her British accent and – with strictest attention to grammar and usage – verbally whipped all the old men ‘til they ran to their respective rooms, tucking their bald, wrinkled tails between their quaking knees.

Marilyn and I are popular. The residents like us. But they don’t listen to us. If they’d heeded us she and I would be hailed as heroes across the continent, but they kept their own counsel and madness prevailed.

I breezed in from the north hall and grabbed for Jimmy, while Marilyn was reaching for Joe. If we’d only had time for two more strides apiece we’d have licked it. As it was, before we got there, Jimmy had his dentures in hand, snapping them at the doe like castanets. Then Joe leaned across the intervening crowd, slapped her tawny rump, and yelled, “HYAH,” something like, I imagine, he used to do to red-eyed bulls as a rodeo clown.
That poor doe reared like a Lipizzaner and leapt straight over the tops of the old men’s variously-haired or shiny heads, and commenced to stomping the doors. Did I mention they were glass doors? Two solid kicks of those deceptively dainty-looking split hooves did them in. The resulting shatter echoed with a sound like faerie bells, deep into the dim and hallowed corridors of Burnside Manor. I have in my mind a slow-motion picture of pretty bits of glass exploding in brilliant sunlight. Truthfully, I never saw it at all. I was otherwise occupied.

Joe’s duster, as he liked to call the robe he wore every day of his life at The Burnside, was an ugly blue thing beneath which he always wore exactly nothing no matter how we coaxed, hounded or ordered him to put on his shorts. No surprise, in the midst of the action, it gaped open, and Jack Ridley – whom everyone calls Sweetie – just happened to have his chair parked right next to Jimmy’s. Grinning like a toothless shark, Jack closed in on his prey and made a grab for the meat.

Joe’s eyes went so wide his brows looked like a hairline, and he sucked in a breath deeper I’m sure than any he’d taken in the last ten years.

I don’t know if Joe did what he did next on purpose, or if it was a defensive reflex. His knee sprang chinward like a snapping jackknife. He may have meant to knee Sweetie someplace vital, but whatever he intended, what happened was that his knee cracked into my nose as I bent forward, unable to stop the momentum of my head-long rush to stop Jimmy even though I already knew I’d left it too late.

Joe, meanwhile, had been holding onto Jimmy. As Isaac Newton would have predicted, when Joe jerked his knee a reaction ensued with a measurable effect on Jimmy’s chair. Jimmy started spinning and – true to form – instantly commenced firing off cuss-words in a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree spray. Now, I’m not one to underestimate people, but I swear I never would have believed that seventeen old men – some with so many tubes and containers attached they could double as lab equipment – could have moved so fast. The vets that were up on their feet actually jumped, and wheelchair tires screeched, haulin’ ass and burnin’ rubber.

Marilyn, when she saw the swarm of old soldiers rolling her way, apparently wanted to comment. As it turned out, she had just enough time to belt out one unspellable syllable before her breath was knocked away on impact. She reeled backward, arms wind-milling in an effort to stay upright, and she might have succeeded if the reception counter had not interfered. She slammed into it and slid straight to the floor, landing – flomp – on her most well-padded region, then slumped down with her back to the wood, benched for the rest of the game.

Not me. No such luck.

When Joe kneed my nose, I fell forward, if you can believe that. Counterproductive attempts to recover tangled me so thoroughly in Jimmy’s spinning chair that it snatched me off my feet and dumped me – smack – into Jimmy’s lap. Next thing I knew we sailed as one down the aqua-tiled hall.

In that instant, we left time behind, Jimmy and I. Alive fully in the moment, we entered an illusion of motion slowed to the graceful tempo of a Strauss waltz. Our conveyance held us snug and spun us lazily, a skiff adrift on the gentle blue Danube.

I snapped out of it right away, to the sound of Jimmy shouting in my ear, “Holy MAC-A-ROLI.” It made no difference. I might as well have been asleep, for all that consciousness availed. All I could think to do was squeak out a prayer to Saint Christopher, the traveler’s patron saint, and clamp my eyes shut. I opened them just as we approached the door to suite forty-one south. Janelle stood there, statue-still as ever, and maybe if she’d tried she could have caught us. Instead, as if she’d been waiting for this moment her whole life, she stood up a little straighter and shouted out what may have been her very first swear word ever. The she stepped back and slammed the door.

The doors inside the Burnside are not as flimsy as they look.

***

I woke up with Joe Leonard pressing a cold towel to my head and saying, “C’mon now cowboy, suck it up! Are you a man or a ballerina?” Deputy Kady and her partner, whom I’ll just call Satan, had already arrived. The deer
had escaped out the busted doors but so had Wayne Crimmins – whom we call The Wanderer. No one had paid any attention at all to the exit alarm except Satan, and he just crushed it like a fly.

While the officers of the law investigated the scene, I swept away the glass, and cleaned up the blood that had splashed the entry way. It wasn’t, I calculated, as copious as imagination might suggest, still I hoped it belonged to the deer, and not Wayne Crimmins. Reflecting, I also hoped she wasn’t too badly hurt. She was, after all, the first unpaid visitor to pass through the Burnside’s doors in two weeks.

Marilyn’s boyfriend DeWayne came as usual for lunch, but today he arrived just in time to rush her to urgent care. He installed her in the back of the Blazer, covered her with a blanket, and rolled his coat as a pillow for her head. He was shaken, and I was surprised. I never thought he was the sort to really care. Score one for Marilyn, I thought, and admitted I was a little jealous.

Janelle came strolling up the south corridor slow and cautious and stopped, turning toward me with an actor’s on-the-mark precision. Staring at me as if I had turned purple and grown horns, she drawled, “I’m quittin’ now, Blaine,” giving all the words two syllables. She picked her way through the shattered glass, and then stepped out of The Burnside and – one would hope – into the light of a more predictable day.

***

Out in the empty parking lot, a fine, cold rain now began to fall. Kady finished questioning me, told me not to leave town, and snapped her pen into its place on the clipboard. She and Satan drove away, ignoring the crackle of their official police radio, too busy tossing me the evil eye. I assumed that meant they expected the search for Wayne Crimmins to make them late for burgers, and I finally understood the nature of my crime – interfering with lunch in the first degree. I would surely be punished.

I sighed at the inevitability of my doom, and unrolled the cold towel I had been wringing during the inquisition. I held it against my aching head, and it helped. My ears stopped chiming. The gleeful noise from inside the Burnside surged, and – reminded – I turned to go in. I stopped after only a step. I looked at the place I’d walked into day after day for six years, and every brick in the wall seemed strange, brand new, never before seen by the likes of man.

What with the rain-darkened skies, the lights off, and the glass gone, the doorway to the Burnside at first looked like a big, blank eye. Then all at once the lights came on, and I swear to you The Burnside winked. I laughed, winked back, and walked in.

The men were in an uproar, clapping each other on the back and “haw-hawing” like they’d just snatched victory straight out of Mussolini’s teeth. As I moved among them checking tubes, pouches, and bruises, I collected several pats on the shoulder and a couple of high fives. Jimmy was cussing up a blue streak and Joe was saying “Shut-up, Jimmy, shut-up!” But even they were smiling.

The guys who could swallow swigged back cold coffee like single malt Scotch, and unlit cigarettes dangled from several bristly faces. I had to swat the lighter from Joe Leonard’s hands to keep him from igniting the O-two and blowing us all through the pearly gates. He said, “Watch it there, son. I’ll be treating you to a mouth full of knuckles if you try that again.” I looked over to see a twinkle in his eye, and when I laughed, he did, too.

Jay Krump, that old instigator, had busted into the kitchen and stolen a box of barbecue flavor potato chips and a plasti-pak of flash-frozen meatballs. The chips were turning fingers orange all around, and the meatballs had been converted into chips for the hi-lo poker game that Jay and four others had dealt out on the reception counter.

Three hours remained on my shift. Sometime between now and the end of it, someone important was bound to show up intent on getting things back to what they’d call normal. But for now, at the Burnside, it was just the soldiers and me, Blaine Wright, L for Licensed, P for Practical, N for Nurse.

So what the hell? I was still on the payroll, the air inside was fresh for a change, and life was full of surprises. “Shut-up, Joe,” I said. “Sweetie, deal me in.”
The Haiku

Throwaway
by Phil Cooper

So the year is drawing to a close
And I know it been a tough one
It's time to look to the future now
And see where the road is heading
And if anything it's shown me that what we have
Is fragile, it can go at any point
So say what you need to and leave it behind
Thank fuck it's over now to begin

It's all so throwaway
So throw it all away

And everyone gets to a point
Where they don't know to go left or right
And I hope you can look back and say that you've chosen
The right path at the right time
But you know that the past is not quite how you see it
And the memories are fading fast
And I won't say it's time for me to close that door
It's already slammed shut and I'm ready to shout
That...

It's all so throwaway
So throw it all away

So the nights are drawing in sooner now
And I know what I'm trying to say
That I needed you all and all I can say
Is you were with me that's all I could ask
I know I don't say it often enough
But I love you all and I need you all
You're the people I want beside me
When everything else turns to dust

But remember what life is
Remember each day is a new an brilliant time
You can do what you want
You can do what you can

With an eye-catching line-up of vocals, acoustic guitar and drums, audiences are often taken by surprise at the intensity of the sound created by such a minimal arrangement. Time spent with The Haiku leaves you in no doubt that the acoustic guitar does not have to be a quiet instrument. What you will take away is a memory of personal songs, which manage to speak to each individual member of the audience. Anyone who's ever loved and lost; or been frustrated with the world; or with the unfairness of life; or enjoyed hope for the future, will appreciate what The Haiku have to offer.

http://www.myspace.com/thehaiku www.thehaiku.co.uk
The Haiku

Your question is important to us
by Phil Cooper

It’s OK Mr Jones, your job is quite safe
But I’m afraid you’ll have to apply for it again
It’s not quite what you planned, and we’re sure you’ll get the role
But your salary’s not quite the same

We’re very well aware of the issues that you’ll have
And we’ll deal with that if things get to sour.
But we’re sorry to announce that the questions you may ask...
... are no match for our hierarchical power.

We’ll listen to the unions and then go our own way
Because we know what’s best, and that’s what lines our pockets with gold.
And when it all goes wrong we can say that we listened to the voices of the unions
Even if we didn’t pay any mind.

In this open forum you can say what you like
We keep telling you we’re all friends here.
If you kick up any fuss, then we’ll get you on your own
And confront you with confusion and fear.

Your question is important but the answer is not, to us.

We’ll listen to the unions and then go our own way
Because we know what’s best, and that’s what lines our pockets with gold.
And when it all goes wrong we can say that we listened to the voices of the unions
Even if we didn’t pay any mind.

Your question is important...

Nerves On A Pin
by Phil Cooper

So listen to me
I know it's a maybe
But please can't you see
That maybe is me
At the end of the night
Do you question yourself
What's wrong or right
Can you see?

I wait for a day
I don't know if it's mine
If things go my way
And it's worth all the time
I invested in you
It's worth the prize
You're something brand new
Can you see?

You tempted me in
Don't know if you meant to
My nerves on a pin
And I'm playing this through
A million times
In my head I can't stop
Can't commit other's crimes
Can you see?

You and me?
Someday When Safely Ensconced In Heaven

I’ll ask Jesus about learning how to play
piano. I meant to learn while alive,
but dammit, I had to sling hash for cash,

and then at home I had to lose 750 billion tiffs
with my partner — no, no, it’s this way, turn right,
right I say, no, no, it’s left, I’m sure of it,

fuck! — my mom played beautifully, Scott Joplin rags
or flouncy forties tunes from sheet music
stored in the piano bench. Yesterday

“Bridge Over Troubled Waters” came on
WOGL. I remembered as a high school sophomore
craving the piano intro, only got as far as “Chopsticks”

the one time I tried to teach myself, I wonder
can we learn things in heaven? Maybe
I’d take up guitar, be a pop star, a spiky Lesley Gore,

Jesus in the mosh pit slamming around,
flashing a peace sign and shouting, “I promised
a great time forever. Now let’s boogie!”

Somerset, Kentucky

How many diners does God need?
Heaven has bad cholesterol. I stop
for eggs and grits, slather on butter.
From the window I see I left my door
wide open. My car, a garage sale,
everything marked “Free.”
No one wants what I have. Maybe
that applies to the Community College job
I’m interviewing for. I know I’m toast
when I say I’m not married.
Back in Knoxville, I get the friendly
kiss-off letter, wrap a cat toy in it,
watch Swipesy tear it apart.
Runways

Catwalk

He wore a black organza bolero jacket, with satin ribbons finishing the edges, and a red chiffon strapless cocktail dress. It took a while but he walked to the lighthouse at the end of the world and forgot why he left.

It was hard to breathe, and when he headed back there were half-inch calluses on his soles.

Mischief

He walked straight at me, the cubist sum of every man I’ve had.

Then he turned, sat next to me posing like the caricature he will be in a few years.

After awhile, I put together the cubes and left smiling.
O Polar Bear

Polar bear, O polar bear
Ceramic and chipped from the dollar store
Tamed of fang and dull of claw
    Who can frame thy fearful symmetry

What can I do with you, a gift
A lump of claw sorry for its shape
Blurred in the eye and ready for death the moment you took shape

What can I do with you, O polar bear from the dollar store
Gift from a father estranged

Bludgeon an intruder?
Weight the drifting paper trail
Of my 1/3 nomad life?
Hold open a door
    stop one from swinging shut?

Tell me father what can I do with you
Doorstop that you’ve become
Lump of earth immovable
Blurred in eye chipped of tooth
Patched of fur and dull of claw?

What is love that slices so fine
that toes the line
averting its gaze from what hurts?
E(motional)state Sale
Matthew Tod

It wasn’t the best of times, because my parents thought it was the worst of times. On occasion we kids would get the unshakeable feeling that for my parents, sharing a living space with their seven children was an inconvenient obligation, a self-imposed imposition brought on by their own sensual and impulsive actions. That’s not to say that I felt unloved as a child, and facts remain quite to the contrary; for the most part of my childhood, home was my sanctuary. Within the walls of our home I could hide from schoolyard bullies, shy away from girls that had no interest in me, and hope for the onset of puberty and the social salvation that I imagined it would bring. Just as it is with most of the good things in life, this sacred asylum came at a high price, and the cost of my emotional room and spiritual board was that of living with my parents.

Watching my parent’s attitude regarding discipline spiral from a frustrational tailspin into a desperate kamikaze nose dive was unsettling. It typically ended in a long and arduous lecture from Dad, his chosen (but not proven) method of re-establishing dominion over us, or in Mom’s case, a slamming of every cupboard door, followed by a passionate exit in the family van, engine redlined and clutch popped for maximum angry-tires-squealing effect. We were not bad kids, and we almost never got into trouble outside of the house. People thought we were great kids, and told my parents that all the time, members of our church, teachers at school, even their own friends noticed how well-behaved we seemed to be. That is why we were dumbfounded when one night my father gathered us together as if for a routine lecture on being better children and doing our chores with a smile, but instead made an announcement that would forever affect our lives. We were lined up according to age (mine being twelve) in the tiled entryway to our ranch style home in Alpine Utah, the heat of the track lights above broiling our skulls. Mom sat morosely to one side with the baby in her lap, and Dad glared at us with hands on hips, then opened the lecture with his signature burdened sigh. His was a poor man’s imitation of Lee Marvin, the wannabe drill sergeant addressing his not-so-dirty baker’s half dozen.

“Your mother and I have been considering the situation in this house, and we have come to a decision.” With that he paused. Since that day I have always wondered if his reason for pause was that he was debating whether or not to say the words he had prepared. It is the hope that he truly felt the words were for our common good that allows me to forgive him for choosing to voice them.

“Since we cannot seem to find happiness together as a family, maybe we can each find our own happiness if we go our separate ways.” He paused again, just long enough for the ugly and unspoken word of divorce to ripple the surface of my mind’s once calm pond.

“Your mother and I have decided to sell everything we own, including the house, and divide the money equally amongst us all, and find new families to live with.” Having declared the end of our family, our father stood before us in silence. My head was not the only one that bowed with regret. Shoulders hanging heavy with grief, our eyes blurred with tears that were soon dripping to the tiles beneath our feet. To date, it marked the single most painful moment of my life, and very few moments since have brought on the same sense of absolute despair. The crushing weight of guilt and failure was breathtaking; I could feel it pressing down on me like a dark hooded cloak, making it hard to think or speak or even breathe, and I felt a sickness seep into my stomach.

“Do you have anything to say?” My father broke the silence with his incredulous question. He was apparently expecting a response to his life-as-we-know-it ending revelation.

“We’re sorry, we’ll all try harder; we don’t want to go away.” David, the oldest among us, had found his voice, teaching me that there are no sibling rivalries in foxholes.
“Yeah, we’ll do our chores.” Dani added. Her voice was meek, and I think it broke my heart. I found myself mustering what meager strength I had left within my soul.

“We won’t fight anymore, and we’ll try harder to get along.” It was all I could come up with, and even as I said it I felt helpless. Wasn’t this bigger than dirty dishes and bickering? I wanted to know what more could we do as kids to make our parents happy, but I was afraid to ask, perhaps for fear of being incapable of making it happen.

“I think it’s too late for trying, we have already tried and tried to teach you but we have failed. This is the best way for all of us to be happy.” His voice was soft, but his tone was final, and the topic was closed; Dad walked down the dark hallway to his office and closed the door quietly.

That left us alone with Mom, who sat there crying softly with the baby now crawling happily at her feet. “You wouldn’t listen, and now it has come to this. All those times we begged you to do your chores, to stop fighting, to just be happy; this is the reason why. Your father and I knew it might come to this if you didn’t change and try harder.” Her voice was a high-pitched whisper, and I recognized it as the same voice I had heard coming from her when grandpa died, only the words were not of comfort this time. “Get your pajamas on, brush your teeth, and go to bed. There is nothing more to discuss.”

That night the kisses and hugs were more earnest than they ever had been, our little hearts eager to demonstrate our sincere devotion to one another in hopes that once we were in bed, Mom would run the length of the house, swing open the door to Dad’s office, and declare our family back on track. I lay in bed staring up into the darkness above me, awaiting the sweet thunder of her footsteps in the upstairs hall. It never came, and I drifted off to sleep alone and miserable, tears trailing their way to my pillow.

By the time I wandered up to the kitchen to forage for food in the morning, Dad had already left, hopefully just for work. I ate in humble silence, and without my usual cardboard Berlin Wall of cereal boxes, knowing that Mom didn’t like it when we divided the breakfast table into the demilitarized zones and no-man’s-lands of sibling rivalry. I finished up and went outside to look for someone, anyone to spend some time with. David and Dani were sitting on the trampoline, and as I approached I noticed they were as heavily burdened as I was.

“Did Dad go to work, or is he...?” My question trailed off, not wanting to put the words out there and admit to my fears.

“Yeah, he left without saying a word to us, but we heard him tell Mom he would be back later this afternoon.” David said as I climbed up to sit near them both.

“Do you think they mean it? Are we going to sell everything and move to other houses with other people?” I asked, holding back tears.

Dani spoke, “I heard Mom telling Dad they could talk to Michael’s teacher to see if she would take him, and I think she meant adopt him. They wouldn’t do that if they didn’t mean it, would they?” She looked from David to me and back again, desperate for answers that we didn’t have.

“Mom hated being adopted, why would she do that to us? I didn’t think we were being that bad. Do you think they still...” I choked on tears before I could finish my thought about Mom and Dad not loving us.

“Let’s be real good, play with the little kids and do our chores. They will change their minds when they see we are trying.” David was the oldest, and in my eyes the smartest (even thought I would never had told him that), so his plan made sense to me.

We spent most of that week outside, running happily and laughing loudly with the younger kids, knowing Mom would see and hear us as we swam in the pool, jumped on the trampoline (taking turns), and loved each other with great gusto. We did our chores and ate our meals without a fuss. We made quite a show of joyful behavior in the front yard each afternoon when Dad pulled into the driveway, but he would head straight into the house and close the door to his office behind him.
One night, after another uncomfortably quiet dinner, Mom and Dad took the baby and drove away, leaving us to wonder as to their destination and the purpose for their outing. As we were heading down the hall to the kitchen in search of something sweet to eat, we passed Dad’s office and stopped at the sight of a large piece of poster board standing upright on his desk, leaning against the wall. Across the top in two lines of text, written in bold, black, permanent marker were the words: "FAMILY SALE: EVERYTHING MUST GO!" Underneath this was a list of our possessions; major appliances, furniture, artwork, books, and everything else of value, including the big blue van and Dad’s Volkswagen Rabbit. I don’t remember eating a snack that night.

The next morning I woke to find that the sale sign was not out front yet, so our family was still together for the moment. I ate my breakfast in silence, praying for the courage I would need to fix my family that morning. I was determined to confront my father, to plead our case before his court, and to beg his forgiveness. If I could sincerely convey our collective desire to be better kids, he would change his mind and rip that horrid sign into pieces, forgetting the whole affair.

I finished my cereal and cleaned up after myself like a good child. My feet were heavy as I trudged my way down the hallway to Dad’s office. He was sitting at his desk doing paperwork. A few moments of uncomfortable silence passed before I mustered up the ability to speak.

“Dad?” My throat tightened as he set down his pen and looked at me without a word of acknowledgement. “We are sorry, we will try harder. We want to stay together, and we will be happy, we really will. Tell us what we need to do and we will do it.”

“Matthew, it’s too late, I told you that. You should have tried harder before it got to this point.” Dad sighed and picked up his pen and went back to his paperwork as I started to cry while standing in his doorway.

After a few moments of sniffling with no reaction from Dad, I left our house to seek comfort next door at my friend Cameron’s. We played Tombstone City on his new Texas Instruments TI99 for an hour before the sadness of my father’s cold rejection crept in again and my eyes started to water.

“Are you crying because I won again?” Cameron smirked, but the smirk disappeared when he saw a pain more depressing than video game defeat in my eyes. “Matt, are you okay?”

“No...” I blubbered, jumping up and running out of the room. I made it out to Cameron’s garage before falling to my knees, bawling and shaking like the scared little boy that I was. Cameron, to his credit, knelt beside me and without a word put his arm around my shoulders. It was the second time that year he had been with me as I cried my eyes dry, the first being the morning my grandfather died.

I stopped crying and wiped my eyes on my shirt. Cameron ran into the house, returning shortly with two fudgsicles. We enjoyed the cold treat sitting in Cameron’s garage on the two truck tire inner tubes that his family had taken down to Lake Powell on their yearly summer trip. We had inflated them just the other day with plans to take them over to the pool at my house, but Cameron’s dad had brought home Tombstone City, and instead we spent several hours playing the new game. I thought about that, about Lake Powell, and about all the things Cameron had that I didn’t; an RV, two horses, a dirt bike, OP brand clothes, and an extra fridge in the basement filled with Dr. Pepper. Added to these things was the fact that Cameron and his family seemed to have a lot of fun together. I decided that if my family truly did split up, I was going to live with Cameron.

“My Dad and Mom have decided to sell the house and everything in it, then divide the money and split us all up to live with new families. Can I come and live with you?” I said it so matter-of-factly that I don’t think Cameron even wondered why my parents would do such a thing.

“I’ll ask my Mom and Dad, but I’m sure they will say yes, they like you a lot.” Cameron said.

“How much do you think its worth?” I pondered aloud, staring out the garage and across the yard at what I was already considering to be my old house.

“I’d say about a hundred thousand dollars.” Cameron replied casually, as if he bought and sold property every day.
“That means I’ll probably get like ten thousand dollars, even more if you count the money from selling all the stuff in the house, like the stereo, the books, and the art.” I mused aloud, as my mind started spending. “I am going to buy two new dirt bikes, one for me and one for you.” I said.

“Cool, thanks! You can sleep in my room on the water bed.” I had always wanted a water bed, and every time I slept over at Cameron’s, I called dibs on his.

We passed the rest of the morning in the garage, planning a shopping spree with the money that just a few hours before I had hoped to never see. I ate lunch with my new family, drinking Dr. Pepper instead of Kool-Aid. Things were looking up until I wandered back over to my old house. I found my brother and sister on the front porch with my mother. From the looks on their faces, I could tell that they were discussing the situation that I had already come to terms with, having moved on and chosen a new family in the process.

“You guys need to do something. Your father has made up his mind and I don’t know if you can change it, but you won’t know unless you try.” My mother was saying as I approached.

“I tried this morning, and he said it was too late. I did my part; someone else can try if they want.” I suddenly felt guilty for the happy way in which I had spent the last few hours, and this was my attempt at emotionally scrubbing my hands clean.

Mom was enraged at my words. “So that’s it? You think you did your part and that’s all you have to do, leaving it to someone else? Is that all our family is worth, one try? Why don’t you all try together as many times as it takes, instead of alone and just once? Isn’t this all happening because you can’t work together to be happy?” She stood and stormed inside with a huff, leaving us bobbing in the wake of her reproach.

It was decided that we would collectively apologize, do our best to seem penitent, and promise to try harder. It was more of the same, but it was all we could come up with. That night we made our unified attempt by calling Mom and Dad to the same place where it had all started at the beginning of the week. We voiced our apologies, tried to look remorseful, and made our promises to try harder. I was still not convinced this was the best course of action, because I was still torn between making a go of it with my real family and riding my new dirt bike around Lake Powell every summer with my new family next door.

Dad was non-committal, making no promises to stay together, while saying that he would keep the “FAMILY SALE” sign on his desk for the time being. The future of the family seemed to be in our own hands for the moment, but I was not sure that the pressure was worth missing out on the chance to fill my pockets with cash and move next door to live with Cameron and his pressure-free family.

The next week passed without further mention of splitting up and going our separate ways. We did our chores, played together happily, and the summer passed into fall. Eventually we slipped back into the old familiar family pattern of bickering, avoiding chores, and being lectured on a regular basis, surrounded by moments of typical family happiness and memory making. I did not notice when the sign was taken down from Dad’s desk, and although it was no longer in sight, I was not sure he had actually thrown it away. I lived in constant fear of its reappearance. Dad and Mom never again mentioned their plan to disband the family, and on the surface it was as if they had never threatened us with such an emotionally charged and tragic punishment. We siblings have spoken very little of it, and it easily ranks among the lowest of moments in my life.

Like most people do, as I grew older, I subconsciously based the majority of my self-worth on my childhood experience. While I don’t blame my parents outright for my long battle with low self-esteem, I cannot entirely dismiss them from indictment. As a father now myself, I find it impossible to threaten my children with abandonment simply because they bicker and hate their chores. I do not hold myself above reproach, however, because over the years I have wondered whose behavior during that week was more appalling, that of my parents for devaluing their young children with the threat of a family divorce, or mine for being so easily swayed into abandoning my family’s sinking ship for what appeared to be a finer and more smooth sailing vessel next door.
Poetry’s Motion

“You’re the poet, aren’t ya?”
the squint-eyed, Popeye-armed bartender hurled my way,
slamming down a Bud Light next to the drunken sailor besides me.

Flattered, but not desirous of autograph seekers
in my present condition, I burped, “Another draft, barkeep.”

Cigar smoke hanging
gliding through the flickering yellow light
of the swaying, dusty stained glass chandelier, I watched
my ex, his ex, everyone’s ex playing pool for cash
and other rewards as Mexican love ballads blared
from the old fashioned, fake juke box.

Lips mouthing.
Hands signing.
Fingers caressing
ladies of the night who turned tricks for pennies.
One, more rotund than tall, bumped into my barstool,
grabbed at my backside, but I knew the old trick and already had my wallet secured in
my green flannel jacket pocket.

The regular barflies were especially giddy tonight,
re-enacting the Bosanova, the Tango, the Macarana?
Wasn’t sure, and neither were they, as they danced close
more to hold each other up than for the romance
they so desperately wanted, needed, couldn’t express in the
room next door they rented three times a week.

“Two hamburgers, fries, Pepsi-Lights!”
ordered the buzz-cut, tongue studded, college coed
who audited my class last year – the one I gave more than once
‘A’s for sweaty efforts
rather than production of literary masterpieces.

“Now it all comes back to me,” said the drink slinger
who bent over the stained, wooden counter.
“You wrote, ‘Ode to the Dead’ he said
in a breath that would have killed a weaker man.
This time I straightened my shoulders proudly, stretched my neck clockwise, then counter. “Yes. Yes, I did,” and I waved like the Queen of England to her loyal subjects before a soapy dish towel hit me in my big mouth. “Clean that crap off the number two stall door or I’ll tear you a new one, understood?”

Otherwise needing to see a man about a horse anyway, I strutted towards the back into the cigarette fog, kicked open the door and bent over to read my words. “Another dumb bastard misquoted me again,” I mumbled as I took out my Sharpie, corrected the mistake, and crawled out the broken overhead window to avoid paying my bar tab.
A Legend without a Map
(a cruciverbal fiction)
Christopher Tradowsky

ACROSS

1 Move into water (4)

5 Or stand, and with your toes, outline the bank. (4)

9 A kind of attention you pay, to the birds, to the rumors of the city, an archaic way to hear. (4)

13 Nearby, a pole—like a kiosk—is feathered with flyers and studded with rusted staples. (4)

17 As it turns out, one small Greek word links the hero of the play to the villain, to the contest between them, and to the laughable assurance of anguish all the while. (4)

18 In the park, that day, we could hear the chirrup of urbanized starlings, and the dogs’ chirrup back, and the thundering of skate-boarders and the shallow careening of strollers, each with their specificity, their unique aural envelopes. While across town, the same playful emanations would arrive at your apartment window dulled, a white noise, a ___. (4)

19 This is how we met, online. (5)

21 There is a pond in the park, fed by a fake stream, and in the mouth of the stream a little tongue of silt. (5)

22 It was lunchtime, and we saw this bird, a bird neither of us had seen around before, and we weren’t at all sure it could live in a city. At first, you called it something ridiculous: a Sandwichpaper. I said, no bird was ever called that. You were half-drunk I think, and eating a sandwich. You know what I meant, you said, punchily. The bird picked in the dam of the small pond with its curved beak. (9)

24 And with its ostensible mate, it made arabesques on the bank, like a polite dance looped into a sonata. (5)

25 We absorb time, it seems. (2 wds.) (5)

26 This kid was holding a rotary fan made of pink and blue Mylar (8)

27 and wearing a shirt featuring a ferocious Gorilla gripping a woman like a blond barbell. (4)

28 Sometimes, in the summer, these chrysalides are woven into tree-bark, or folded into leaves, or hanging by threads in midair. (7)

30 The bird (22 A), had a hollow bent beak like a straw. We joked that he was a junkie, and it was his coke spoon, or something like it. (4)

31 Across the pond, birds were grouping and regrouping, though few seemed to be of the same species. They were taking sides, anyway. (6)

33 There was another bird you knew, a songstress, insectivorous and famously carefree. (4)

34 The whole park seemed to be posing for pictures, like a shifting diorama for a film. (3)

36 I searched for the word bucolic, but all I could think of was bovine. (3)
It wasn’t bucolic, either. There was a shattered streetlamp beside our park bench. Some thug or some romantic had shot out the most vital part

on some wool dark night, no doubt, when the sky could actually be described as a cloak.

Ragtag gangs of city birds began these battles in a turf war.

You’d brought a martini in a flask. A real martini, you said, as dry as liquid can be.

From word one I was concerned that we thought too differently, that you thought in this kind of bland code requiring a storm of syntax to point and say: there, *voilà!*

But the sun was as bright as the western Sudan

Archaic; ethereal.

So we began a game of ignorantly and arbitrarily naming birds, and then awarding people bird-names, too. All women with red sweaters we called ___.

I said, Did you know that aquiline means eagle-like? And you laughed, and asked if there was something protuberant about your profile.

There was so little coincidence in any of our thoughts or movements; we were out of __; cutting each other off ___-sentence.

At first I couldn’t imagine you calling anyone, say, something short for honey.

But our game helped. The ease of a shared dialect, even an instant pidgin-style one, however coarse heated things up toward common goals.

A kid pummeled a basketball against the pavement behind us; the hollow trounces sounding out ___ Abdul Ja-bar.

You pronounced one woman an Extinct Bird Named Dorothy.

Economy, in a word.

commences the game.

A little Spanish girl with a voice like Italian coins and hair like the “nevermore” bird was so businesslike with her Mom. We suspected they both worked for a government tax agency.

Our talk became more casual than chat.

You guessed, in all earnestness, that I was a sun-sign.

I imagined, for a moment, that you could be part of a cultish coalition.
divining truth from a variable star. (4)
There’s nothing like a blind date to make you feel like a yellow chick in a coal mine. (6)
It dawned on me then and there: (4)
In coupling, even the wisest birds (4)
drum (3)
the unstable air, (5)
unable to keep their fibrillating pulses (3)
sterne, (3)
working up the very air until it’s palpable. (6)
Reptilian or phoenix-like, we’re all born in water and live in fire. The heart is salamandrine: amphibious and
burning, and without scales, or feathers for that matter. (4)
We had finished our picnic, and you invited me back to your place, but you threw me off when you called it
what P. Diddy would call it. (4)
P. Diddy is this kind of artist, though we agreed his name sounds like a puppet from the *Banana Splits
Adventure Hour.* (3)
On the walk to your place, you taught me a game called bacronym, in which an acronym is ___-fabricated:
what it stands for is un-___-meditated, and the goal is to be entirely ___-posterous. (3)
For example, you said: Oligarchy Propagating Eternal Combustion (4)
And as we were passing an office building, I tried: Lawyers In Association with Big Litigious Entities. (6)
You said, and I believed you: this game is good for whatever ails you. (4)
This one was yours, I think: Academics Laboring Under Many Nebulous Assumptions of Entitlement. (7)
The problem with the game: ___ no winner. Amusement Involving No Telos. (4)
Walking towards your neighborhood, the sun started to set, and the sky to the east began to purple. You
called it aubergine. (8)
The wind off the street was superheated and desert-dry. (5)
Crossing Canard Street, cars squatted in the gutters like water birds all in a row (5)
or, on a larger scale, steel mites in the fur of the city’s grid, (9)
say, from the point of view of a sharp eye sailing overhead. (5)
Suddenly, our afternoon together began to feel almost too good, like gorging. I’ve never been able to tell
an innocent flight from a binge; (5)
I guess I would have made a great addict. (4)
I did ask: How much further? And you took my hand. At this point, I would have followed you if you said
you lived in that big stadium in Flushing. (4)
The thought of sex pushed time faster: it raced. (4)
But there was nothing to be done. In an old fashioned phrase, someone sends you, and you’re signed, sealed, delivered. (4)

After all, all that afternoon together we had been taming the world by naming: giving feral birds and passersby the names of domestic companions. (4)

When you opened the door to your apartment building, you called me yours in German. (4)

This much is certain: it stings (4)
repeatedly (5)
at the root, a bit like a dominatrix (5)
the way it ends, and that it must end, finally. (7)
What kind of demonic contraption has 57 locks and no key? (4)
Love anesthetizes us; (5)
inverts our minds, like trying to read Celtic script. (6)
But what could be more human? (3)
Regret, maybe. Or an irrepressible sense of the symbolic, in the way that, instead of immediately hearing regret, always first you would hear the part-echo egret, (5)
which was already picked out from ___ the echoing ratios surrounding it, (5)
in the same way that singing is the simple spatial relay of having sung, and all we know first of the alarm-call is how sublimely loud it sang. (4)
But I heard no warning bells. Once politeness imploded like a soufflé, that is, once we invaded each other’s territories and really got to know each other, this became our first continuous argument: which one of us was the bigger child. We’d say, couched and insulated in teasing, “You’re such a ____.” (3)
My evidence: you kept a “magic coin that saved your life” in the Philippines tucked in an odd sock in your sock drawer. (4)
Your evidence: I called margarine “oriole.” (4)
My evidence: you would imitate a ____ gun: you would shuffle surreptitiously around the apartment for as long as you could, working up static energy, then curl your thumb and index finger into a bracket, sneak up behind me and yell “shazam!” (4)
Which was so annoying. What could be more annoying? A bugle call, maybe. (4)
Your evidence: I’m from an exotic place (6)
where we say ridiculous things like “fuck a ____,” an innocent fowl that you would never, ever actually want to fuck in real life. (4)
Our second running argument (e.g.):
I told you once that just the thought of an apartment without AC might send me into anaphylactic shock. You thought I was joking.
In spring, one day I was laid out flat by pollen, and drifting in and out of an antihistamine haze.
Slowed to a stop as I was by mucous, you brought up the question: If the cardinal humors were superheroes, which one would win in a battle? Would it be Bile Boy, with his gamma rays of white-hot belligerence? No, of course he couldn’t beat the Blood Baroness, the relentless, ruthless agent of lust. One thing was sure: Melancholy Man, he would lose. His only superpower is to delight you with morbid thoughts.

Oh my god, I nearly wailed, I cannot have this discussion again right now.

You sat beside me on the bed, and complimented me on the color of my eyes, pink as roses, and folded your hand around mine. Your face beamed, sympathetic and amused.

How is it (I thought yet again), that everything about you seems larger than everything about me, and broader, and more agile? I never did mind so much, your enveloping physicality I mean, but how was it you could pin me so hard I couldn’t move and run faster? Shouldn’t I have been compensated for your brute strength and incandescence with some kind of nebbishy dexterity? Of course, I knew what made us even: ultimately the battle of the humors was always won by the Phantom ___, whose indomitable power was to make us want to stay in bed all day, napping. (6)

27 After all, the happiest, the most fruitful bird is flightless. (4)
29 So there was an adolescent logic to our being together, and a perfectly stratified symmetry, like a sphere. Or a gobstopper. (3)
32 We even had the perfect pooch, (3)
33 named after my first car, which was named after Mrs. Arnaz. (4)
35 She was part Labrador and part Abyssinian, with just a hint of China Black. (4)
37 Okay, for all I know, she could have been a Double Wattled Cassowary, (4)
38 which, for all I know, is an outsized swan. (3)
39 You could have won an acting award for playing Holy Jolie adoptive mother to her, (4)
40 while my performance met with negative reviews, which were probably deserved. (4)
41 And besides… (4)
42 I never claimed to be the symbol of parenthood. (5)
43 If there was ever a problem (5)
44 between us, it was on the DL (3)
46 and difficult to diagnose (4)
48 or else it was just so unreal, funny, like a cartoon vulture with a silly-putty neck and a natty white feather collar (5)
49 flapping far, far above our little ____ paradise, our private Machu Picchu. (4)
51 You should know (4)
way down under our down comforter, which was stuffed with feathers so light they barely count as matter, (5)

to flow, to rush, to elapse, to vie with you (3)

was heaven, before heaven went south. (4)

Meanwhile, we were matched in our tendency to over-think anything at all. You, even in your sleep. A teeth-grinder, in your sleep you would mull a thing over and over and over. (3)

And I’m just a born brooder, I guess. (3)

But the sense we sought to make of our life together was always a migrant, a nomad, crossing borders freely and in broad daylight. (6)

That’s when the games really began, I think, when we began to act like spies (5)
towards each other, even within the intimate biased space between us. (4)

Even the slightest ambiguity, the smallest bit of some mysterious substance, (3)

might become a clue to something else. My surprise birthday game: you left me a clue in a nesting doll in the back of a yellow sedan, complete with the fare to get me across town. (3)

Though most of the subsequent clues seemed to point directly towards a distant Scandinavian capital, (4)

I wound up in a Day-Glo Swedish Christmas village by a turnpike in some unfathomable suburb. The place was stuffed to the lutefisk with signs, but what was it ultimately meant to call up? (5)

Even if I knew what to look for, was there ever any chance I would have found it amid the piles of outdated Advent calendars, the weirdly svelte Santa chocolates and boxes of Christmas glogg? (5)

I spent that birthday alone, until late that night when, after you gave up searching for me, we ran into each other back on our street. I was coming home with Chinese take-out. Is it fair to say your plan had an unforeseen catch? (4)

Or was the catch my inability to see the obvious? Or was your semaphore too obscure? You said no to both possibilities. (3)

I was sure you had gotten me something really subtle for my birthday, like an eyelash, or a single atom. (4)

But we went to fetch it the next day from a Russian Orthodox church, two neighborhoods over, where it was tucked under a graven image of, naturally, Our Lady of the Sign. (4)

I had to dismantle my bad temper, (4)

but that part was easy, as we strolled home and the city hushed; winter was showing itself in quieting drifts. (4)

Your birthday surprise was easier: I left the first clue on a platter between two ribs of mutton, (4)

which lead to the talon of a macramé predator in the bathroom. (3)

You snapped it all together quickly, (4)

and we wound up in a dust-batted taxidermy museum, in front of a giant ___ colony, teeming with involutions, a caste-system pressed between glass. (3)

It was after that the games became contests, and became increasingly interminable, expensive, odyssean. (4)
included always in the adventure were the shuffling generic units of unknowable suburban malls, (6)

lots of strange beasts sorted by characteristics (6)

and best of all, beneath it all, the implication of a secret order. (4)

Then, further down beneath all the cryptic play, we began to keep score; to tick off points and incur a debt (3)

of a demonic sort, (7)

though each appointed the other official accountant. (3)

As with 108 A: People Looking Everywhere for Answers Seem Eccentric. (6)

I could still remember, though it was dim, there was a time, (4)

When not everything had to refer to something else, when objects could innocently be of themselves, indifferent to any attempt to inveigle them in some elliptical equation. (5)

As it was, on our anniversary, you were puzzling over the black-and-tan marquetry on my coffee table, which I had recently moved, and discovering a clue within it, and ignoring that I had no possible control over the pattern of inlay (5)

you set off in a heated search for any of several herons, (5)

a whirling machine in your head. (5)

You wound up back at the very bench in the park where we first met, but the current occupant, an old eastern European woman, made a cipher of her vellum hands and flashed you a venomous smile, (5)

which sent you off to find the nearest planetarium, where, in the turning of an orrery, you were assured of finding clues within the signatures of the planets’ pivots. (4)

Four hours later, you called me on your cell from the next state, to thank me for the gift of a wonderful Spirograph of hawks you could practically touch in the air above this famous cliff. (4)

I had no idea what you were talking about. A few wind-blown words and the line went choppy and dropped you. I took this as an incentive (4)
to come to you. Besides the clippings of your words my only clues were the sun in your voice and the wind’s warm temperament. (4)

The detritus you left scattered around the bedroom indicated a clear plot (4)
to return to distant bluffs where we had found fossils of primitive pike. (4)

But this time, you’d left so many contradictory signals in my path: evidence obviously directing me to a Burmese restaurant far out in the avenues, hints pointing to an Alpaca stall at a suburban county fair, signs indicating a plot on the life of the Russian emperor. (4)

By late afternoon, I was at an outdoor farmers’ market in Falconaire. A lint-haired woman who sold me a sandwich bag of raspberries winked at me wisely and dropped a handful of yellow gooseberries in the bag. I caught the hint and set off for an address in nearby Emissary Heights. (3)

I made it to the coast but I never did find you. Hours later, the sun had all but set. I found myself alone in the freezing sea spray of Peregrine Sound, on an outcropping of slick rocks, searching up and down in the equally perplexed eyes of a newborn seal. (3)
Stephen Milazzo has only been a working artist for 3 years. Having spent the last 20 years as a specialized tile contractor, or as he would put it "the hardest art school one could attend." He sketched in his truck during coffee, lunch breaks, etc. His unmistakable style was born. Although none of his work is planned, it is obvious that there's much attention to detail, line, form, a passion for the saxophone, and very time consuming pieces. Truly timeless journeys you won't soon forget. His gallery is nothing short of amazing. His work is displayed in a gallery and in several retail outlets. He states: “Art? I never saw it coming” http://www.milazzoartcreations.com

Stephen Milazzo

Life Morph
Step Beyond
Stephen Milazzo

Jenstep Mambo Mumbo