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Letter from the Editor

June 1, 2009

"It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end. " ~ Ursula K. Le Guin

June 1st marks the first day of the hurricane season here in sunny Florida, as well as the first anniversary of The Battered Suitcase—not that I'm trying to imply anything by association.

Our first year has been a steep climb up the learning curve, but we've had fun and we've been honored to work with the writers, poets, musicians and artists that have made up The Battered Suitcase. We're proud of our first year of issues, and delighted to hear that several of our contributors have been contacted by agents and publishers after their appearance in The Suitcase. That's what we wanted--to allow a safe space for the stories of the journey along life’s road--to allow a space for new and unpublished writers and artists to share their stories in their own voice.

This month's issue brings humor from Suzanne Nielsen, Don Hucks, Doug Mathewson, Leigh Byrne, Stephen Bennett and Jennifer Swisher--after all, humor is the grease on the wheel of life. Nick Chandler explores coming of age, while Battered Suitcase alum Chris Miller explores the end of life. Daniel Vaccaro takes us on the little trips in life, where we might possibly learn more about ourselves than we can during our most epic journeys; Ethel Rohan shows us what we can learn when we are, at least for right now, going nowhere.

June artists include painter Marie Kazalia, up-and-coming photographer Kymberlie Birkenkamp, Aztec-inspired art by Luz-Maria Lopez, and work from Signature Member of the Pastel Society of America, Ellen Dreibelbis. We owe our beautiful cover to photographer and zoologist, Machel Spence.

We were fortunate enough to speak with one of the music industry's most brilliant and intriguing lyricists; Amanda Palmer of The Dresden Dolls took time to talk with us about her upcoming photo essay book collaboration with Neil Gaiman. We also had a chance to speak with Paul Diamond Blow, spoken-word enthusiast and ironic wit behind the glam/punk band The Space Cretins.

Jennifer Rhodes takes us into a young woman's conflict between becoming and behaving, while slice of life pieces from Ele-Beth Little and Abby Byrd explore two very different festivals on two different continents; Glastonbury and Burning Man. One can only conclude that no matter where they're held, outdoor festivals are pretty much the same all over; dirty, chaotic and infinitely memorable moments on the journey.

Poetry contributions include pieces from Heath Hardman, Mark Bonica, Naomi Woddis, Christian Ward, Anne Brooke and Hugh Fox. Poetry prose includes pieces from novelist Jade Sylvan and Emerson College student, Joanna Vogel.

At this first anniversary, I’d like to thank all the contributors, the readers and the other staff of The Battered Suitcase for making this year on my own journey through life so very much more worthwhile. I am, and always will be, profoundly grateful.

Thank you,

The slightly more battered
Fawn M. Neun
Chief Editor
The Battered Suitcase
More than anything, Lulu Lofgren wanted to be remembered. So much so, that on a steamy Saturday morning she randomly entered Magnolia's Café and offered all patrons present eggs over easy on her tab. Clark Bouchard wanted his tomato juice figured into the bill, but that's when Lulu sized up the situation, dug deep into her Isabella Fiore imposter, retrieved a ladylike revolver, and held everyone at gunpoint.

"Get up off the floor," Lulu said as she kicked Clark in the thigh. "This isn't a bank robbery," she continued. "Look me in the eye and repeat after me: 'You are Miss fucking Magnolia.'" Lulu swung her revolver around the room at eye level. She dropped her bag to the floor and patrons flinched. "Stand against the wall in a nice and tidy line," she said.

"Come on, it's getting warm in here," she said as she wiped her chin on her extended left arm. Clark was the last to line up, squeezing between Bernie and Betty Bergstrom, long time customers. "No cutsies, juice man. Come on, end of the line for you," Lulu said waving the gun in front of his eyes.

Nona Thompson (with a p) clung to her patrons' orders with a trembling hand. She reached behind her ear for her pencil and started to write on the back of an order:

Brunette Caucasian woman, mid-twenties entered café at 9:07 a.m. wearing a tiara fastened under her chin by yellow shoe strings. Attired in a matching yellow swimsuit, she ordered eggs over easy for all present. Suddenly a gun appeared...

"Pitch the pencil, no more orders. Shut down the grill," Lulu yelled over her shoulder while pointing her revolver at Nona's mid-section. "I was offering generosity, but juice man over there doesn't see that as being quite enough. When is enough enough?" Lulu asked, wiping her mouth on her bare arm. Lulu inched over to the booth where Clark had been previously sitting. She grabbed the glass of juice with her right hand, holding the revolver steady with her left, still at eye level.

Nona mumbled under her breath, "Never trust a lefty," causing Lulu to pull the trigger and hit Nona in her right bicep. Blood splattered against the paneled wall. Nona held tight to her arm and winced as her hand released the food orders. Lulu downed the glass of juice, asked Nona for a refill, and watched with intensity as she poured with an unsteady left hand.

"A round for the house," said Lulu. "Waitress, pour the red juice. Miss Magnolia's generosity extends to a toast." Nona poured 13 glasses of juice, handed one to each customer in line, then took her place up against the wall. Her right arm hung limp as blood dripped from her fingertips before making a fist.

"This is my blood, drink, and look me in the eye," Lulu said, kicking her purse across the linoleum with her left foot. She pulled the trigger one last time.
Brain Sex

Your eyes are aether suspending gold and zultanite
True gems, just as rare, and change color in the light

You're shaking your head and flashing
The half smile you wear when you catch me bluffing

You become the skeptic... 'And wow!'
If I wasn’t done before, I certainly am now

You attack me with your mind
And weaken me with the things you find

I fight back playfully and you oblige
In this passionate tango that began with your eyes
I can make out only fragments of what Freda's saying through the grinding of the blender. "Pond scum... pig... remarried", but it's enough to know she's talking about her ex. I've already heard the story once, this morning when she called for an emergency margarita meeting, but like the good friend that I am, I nod in support.

I push the blender's "off" button, and as it stutters to a stop, I hear Freda saying, "Then, I get to work and the new girl..."

"The one with the tongue piercing?" I ask, dipping my finger into the margarita for a taste. "Hair like Posh Beckham's?"

She nods. "Taylor's her name. She told me I reminded her of her grandmother. Called me wise."

"Bitch," I hiss, and put extra shot of tequila into the blender.

"Wise is for old Chinese men. I'd gladly be dumb as a bucket of mud if I could have breasts that enter a room before I do, and a butt you could sit a bowl of soup on."

"I know, sweetie. Salt?"

"Please."

I hand Freda her drink. She quickly takes a hearty gulp, and then sits back in her chair, pressing her forefinger to her temple. "Let's see," she says, when her brain freeze passes, "where did we leave off last time?"

It's been almost a year since we first had the conversation we're about to have. We were at our favorite Mexican restaurant where the margarita pitchers are $12.99. From the start we knew it was going to be a two pitcher night. Freda's husband had run off to Venezuela with a seventeen-year-old. We'd just given him a royal trashing, and moved on to me, and the woes of being an old, balding queen, when, from out of nowhere, the tequila said, "Instead of crying into our drinks about our miserable lives, why don't we do something?"

I laughed. "Like what, get lobotomies and face lifts?"

"What do we do if we get lousy service at a restaurant, or if we're at a bad party?"

"We slip out the back."

"Right. Our lives suck. Let's leave."

"You mean leave leave?"

"It's the obvious solution, really. Came to me the other day while I was watching Sylvia Browne on The Montel Show."

"Love her."

---

**Killer Margaritas**  
*Leigh Byrne*

Leigh Byrne's preferred form of communication is through writing—email, text messages, short stories, and poetry. Sometimes she'll talk to someone face to face, but never on the phone. She has phone phobia (seriously), so bad that before she could order takeout online, she'd never had a pizza delivered. Some of her recent communication has appeared, or is forthcoming in the following print and online publications: 34thParallel, The Foliate Oak, Glassfire Anthology, Pocket Change, Shine Journal, Short Story Library, and Thieves Jargon.
"Me too. Anyway, you know how she's always talking to dead people about what it's like on the other side? Well, on the show she was saying that after we die we're all thirty years old. Thirty! Do you remember what your thighs looked like when you were thirty? And she said we'll have jobs and hobbies, just like when we were alive. We can even have sex; she called it melding."

"No sweetie, melding was on Star Trek," I corrected. "Remember, it's when Spock put his hand on an alien's head to read its mind."

"Whatever. The point is what if Sylvia's right? What if dying isn't something to fear? What if it really is a better place?"

"Not that it matters in my case--I'm sure God's already made reservations for me and my kind--but don't you go to hell for suicide?"

"I don't think so. There was a lady in Montel's audience whose son had overdosed--you know, intentionally--and Sylvia said he made it to the other side anyway. Gays even make it. Sylvia said so."

"Well, then count me in!"

"Look," she said, "I'm serious. You don't have to do this, but I've already decided I'm not hanging around until I'm tripping over my boobs."

"Pa-leeese! I spray paint my scalp, for sobbing in the night. Then I sprinkle it with hair fibers. You're not leaving me here alone, bald and shriveled, while you're at Sylvia's big party in the sky. Oh, I'm going with you all right. It's just that it may take us a while to come up with something that suits us both. And we should make it look like an accident, for our families' sake."

Since then the subject has come up a handful of times, always at our low points--when I found my former partner in bed with the UPS man, when Freda started growing a menopause mustache, and now, with the news that her ex husband is remarrying--and always over a pitcher of margaritas.

I sit down across from Freda with my drink. "I believe we eliminated drowning because of your fear of water. And we both agreed anything to do with profuse bleeding is out."

"We also ruled out jumping from a building." she adds. "Our luck we'd survive and end up like Christopher Reeve, blowing through a tube to get around."

"Actually, I think I had the best idea last summer."

"You mean when you suggested we jump into the bottomless pit at Mammoth Cave?"

"There wouldn't have been any bodies for people to gawk at." I lick some salt from the rim of my glass and smile. "And it would've been so Thelma and Louise."

"C'mon, Victor. Two people don't accidentally fall into a bottomless pit together. We're not co-joined twins. Besides, I told you I had on shabby underwear that day."

"Well, I'm out of ideas, then. You realize that we've eliminated practically every known way to off yourself, don't you?"

"Not every one. There's carbon monoxide. They say it's the easiest way to go."

"Carbon monoxide, as in a garden-hose-duck-taped-to-a-car-exhaust-and-routed-through the-window?"

"What?"
"I saw it in a movie once."

"I was thinking more along the lines of a blocked fireplace flue."

"Neither of us have fireplaces."

"Or a faulty gas heater."

"We're both all electric."

"Or," she leans in "I can pull my Buick into your garage, like I sometimes do when I drink too much and have to sleep over. Only this time I'll leave the motor running. It'll look as if I changed my mind and started the car to go home."

"And when you come back in to wait for your car to heat up you can leave the door cracked ever so slightly."

"The perfect accident. Just think, by morning we could both be thirty again. Remember the Eric Estrada hair you had?"

Freda is down to the last of her margarita. She lifts her glass to finish it off, the sweet froth seeping into the deep lines jutting into her pale, slit of a mouth. She used to smoke back before it was a slutty thing for a woman to do, back when you could still light up without someone giving you that, you're-killing-my-kids-you-scum-of-the-earth look. Even without lips, she's still a handsome old dame, in a Judi Dench sort of way.

"Nah," I say, shooing away the idea like you shoo a gnat from your face. "Carbon monoxide poisoning makes you puke. And you know we're both pukers. Not to mention I had clam chowder for dinner. You?"

"Lasagna."

"Ugh!"

Freda turns up her glass again and pats the bottom until the last glob of margarita plops into her mouth. "Yea, guess you're right," she concedes. "Well, if we're going to be hanging around for a while, at least make us another pitcher.

I sweep our glasses from the table. "Coming right up."

Just as I'm starting the blender I hear Freda ask if I have any chips and salsa.
Blue light sprays out into the blackness; chill air meets hot breath. Smells merge—beer, smoke, sweat. The tidal hum of thousands of expectant voices, one eye on the stage.

The day has passed us, is behind us, full and loud. Now we’re packed close, prickly shirts sting our sunburn, drums tremble upon the foggy hills—a prelude to the dawn.

I decide impulsively I won’t watch this band. I don’t like them and I’m eager to get back to our field. Isn’t worth standing here amongst their keen fans, a lanky lot I don’t much fit with. I tell them I’m off, and shuffle through the crowd; pressing and weaving amongst headless bodies, feeling their heat and words.

Then, I’m on the outside, in a new crowd—only distinguishable on the basis of movement in contrast to static. Their current takes me along the wide dust path. I walk with them, short, unattached. Bushes and bracken to the right. To the left, the pyramid stage with dancing light beams, black bobbing heads, and pockets of torches and glow sticks. The crowd becomes patchy in the distance, sat in circles round fires, which fades out to the black tent-cluttered hills.

We’re moving fast, weaving under the arch of a branch that marks an entrance to boggy toilet ground. Large lads in puffed out jackets march in front of me yelling "E! LSD!"

Drums pulsing louder, whistles, screeches, laughter, mingling in the blue tinged air. A line of men pee into the bushes—they stretch as far as my horizon. Shadows dance in manic flickers around bins that look like oil drums set on fire. Many hold an instrument. Rattling, pipes, the shriek of 'Tequila', shoulders touching mine. Torches light the inside of tents like wombs; luminous orange exudes, along with lolling tired conversation between friends squished up too closely.

Kids run in the mud, in ripped jumpers to their knees and dirty legs, pans dangle above fires, wood-smoke obscures the stars—congealing in to a protective dome.

I make a sharp turn to a lonelier path, then begin my awkward clamber over guide-ropes, past colourful decorated metal bins, flags, and strings of rainbow-rags.

The screams and laughter seem to have sunk over the hill—where the drum beats still rumble as if within the bowels of the earth. Faint whispers and low murmurs dotted around my half-blind blackness. The strobes illuminate and pierce the wood-smoke that has drifted up to the moon.
Marie Kazalia lives and works from a remote location in Ohio, USA. For more information about this artist, visit her blog at: http://mariekazalia.wordpress.com
Marie Kazalia

Taipai Lessons
Marie Kazalia

Toky
The weight of being Hindu, and a snail, is so much heavier the second time around.

The subtleties of enlightened snailness are much deeper than those of humanness. The choices are so few, one must constantly be attuned to the earth and sky, the temperature and the humidity. There is no room for error, no one wants to spend another life exploring grassness, even if for a summer.
Anthony Kane Evans has had a number of stories published in various magazines, including London Magazine (UK), The Tusculum Review (US) and Etchings (Australia). He has pieces in up-coming/current issues of Pear Noir, an American print magazine, and Big Pulp, a US on-line journal. He's British but lives in Copenhagen. When not writing he makes documentary films on a freelance basis for the Danish Broadcasting Corporation.

My Second Gear Approach to Life
Anthony Kane Evans

The local newspaper I work for sent me out to cover the circus. I asked if I couldn't sneak around the back and check if the animals were being well-treated.

"They've taken out a full-page ad, don't be barmy. Why are you always trying to take the bread out of your mouth, Mark?" Bustos, the editor asked.

"Because it is stale and tastes bitter?"

"Oh, very droll, very droll. Now if you don't mind, bugger off. And here... "

He tossed me a camera.

"John's sick, you'll have to take the photos yourself."

***

The bloody circus. I've never liked the circus. Horror movies about the circus, yes. The real McCoy, no, no, no. The clowns are never funny, the trapeze act gives me a literal pain in the neck and the elephants standing on their hind legs make me want to cry. But I'm working for the rich man, or rather, worse: I'm working for a tight-fisted bum who'll never get rich. I'd like to know how much the circus people paid for that full-page ad, probably a bucketful of tickets, which Bustos is selling door to door.

***

The girlfriend looked at me over dinner.

"What's up, don't you like it?"

She'd made lemon chicken.

"Oh, it's great, love, it's just that they've asked me to cover the circus."

"Well, that's great, you've always been itching to do an exposé."

"I think Bustos has more in mind that I write a glowing review and take some fancy pictures to boot."

"But you're not allowed to take pictures, what'll the union say?"

"I'll just put them up under a nick. Nick Nack, whaddya think?"

"Not funny."

***

I drove over in second gear. They were still putting the tent up as I got there, the big top. A man came running over to me, waving his arms.
"Cut the engine, you'll be frightening the lion!"

I cut the engine and coasted to a stop, hitting a white picket fence in the process.

"You should let Jimmy have a look at that," the man with the arms said.

He meant the car.

"It's okay, it's just that I can't drive. I only took the 'L' plates off last week. I'm from The Post. I think I'm expected."

***

The owner was in a huge caravan with walnut walls and an oaken desk that looked like it had stepped out of a Cecil B. DeMille silent. We drank brandy and bandied words.

"I guess you'll be wanting a potted history of our circus," he said, "It just so happens that I have here a press handout. And there are a bunch of photos you can download from the net."

I whipped out the camera, took a quick shot. The flash disturbed him.

"Bloody hell!"

"We like to do our own angle on things down at The Post," I said.

He waved an arm.

"Help yourself, old son, my circus is your circus."

***

I went over to the big top and had a look around. There was a young woman with tassels on her nipples juggling apples. I looked at her for a while.

"If you say they look tasty, I'll brain you," she said.

"I wouldn't dream of it," I replied, "Besides, I've got a girlfriend."

"Since when did that stop anybody."

"What's up, don't you like the job?"

She dropped the apples and put her hands on her hips.

"I've just joined, if you must know."

"Then you might be just the angle I need for this second rate article, lyric poem, essay, advertising copy for a cheese commercial, whatever it is I end up writing."

"You what?"

"Do you fancy putting your coat on and I'll buy you lunch. I'm from The Post."

"Oh, so you're the man from The Post?"

"The one and only."
"You also take the photos?"
I looked down at the camera.

"On a bad day, yes."

***

I took her to the Chinese. I said I didn't mind what main course she had but I insisted that she have won ton soup for starters as they did the best won ton soup I'd ever tasted. She said okay then started to put some lipstick on. I took some photos.

"Hey, wait until I'm finished, can't you!"

"I want the startled look," I said.

"If you're so artsy what are you doing working on a local paper?"

"That's what the boss is always asking me."

"That's no answer."

"Maybe there is no answer."

"I read a poem the other day," she said.

"Oh, yeah?"

"You being sarcastic?"

"No."

"Well, I read this poem and there was a line I couldn't understand. Do you want to hear it?"

"Sure."

And she quoted: *The horse waded into the city of grammar.*

"What's that mean?" she asked.

"Haven't got a clue but I like it."

"Jesus! Fat lot of good you are, you and your pretensions."

"Listen, if you knew what that line meant you'd forget it instantly. It only stays in your mind because it's a puzzle."

I ordered lemon chicken.

"Is it any good?" she asked.

"We eat it all the time," I said.

"We?"

"Me and the girlfriend."

"I'm not eating lemon chicken with you. So you can just change your order."
"You're kidding?"

She stood up and slung her handbag over a shoulder.

"All right, already," I said.

She sat down again.

***

The tape recorder wasn't working so I had to write the interview down in long hand.

"You're pretty old-fashioned on this paper, aren't you?"

"We try to be," I said.

***

After lunch I drove her back. Half-way there she took hold of the gear stick and forced it from second into third. The car made a lot of protesting noises.

"Put your foot down and then I'll put it into fourth for you."

"Fourth?"

"Put your foot down."

I put my foot down.

"Not the accelerator!"

I put my other foot down. She shifted us into fourth. I had to admit that it made for a smoother ride.

***

She asked me if I wanted to come into her caravan for a drink.

"I've got a girlfriend, remember!"

"Jesus, you remember! Now you want a drink or you don't?"

I went in. She took the camera off me, took my jacket off. Pulled her dress over her head and that was that.

***

Bustos glowered at me.

"What kind of a story is this?"

"It's from the viewpoint of somebody newly started for whom the circus is a brand new world."

"But you don't mention anything but juggling!"

"That's because it is from the viewpoint of a juggler."
"What about the clowns, the elephants, the lions? Not to mention the trapeze artists! Why, the Lukunku Brothers are working up quite a reputation for themselves."

"All edited out."

"Since when did you become the editor of this rag?"

***

Back home, the girlfriend's mood gradually soured.

"Where've you been?"

"Writing that article on the circus."

She was sniffing. She came closer and sniffed some more. "You stink of Sunflowers."

"There's flowers springing up all over the place, its spring for crying out loud. What's so bad about that?"

"I mean the scent not the flower, the perfume. You've been with some woman who's been wearing Sunflowers."

"Look, I've been interviewing all types for this article. I can't tell them what perfume or aftershave to wear just because you might object."

***

Next day Bustos sent me off to the circus again.

"I want pictures of the Strongman, the lion, the two-headed geek--everything!" he shouted after me.

The Strongman said: "Why'd I join the circus? Because I disliked being pinned down, boxed in with commitments, you know, those places where a drink is the one unguarded escape route."

***

I interviewed the Siamese twins. They didn't have much to say about themselves but both agreed that it was funny how words seemed to form in the air by themselves.

The trapeze artists wouldn't come down.

"How'd you get such a crazy name as the Lukunku Brothers?" I called up.

"Because we come from Africa," they called back.

***

Back home the girlfriend was fuming. She held up my article.

"Who is this?"

"Didn't you read the article? It's Suzie LaLu, the juggler."
"And what kind of a picture is this?"

"A natural one."

"And who is she putting her lipstick on for, if not for you?"

"For the camera."

"And what the fuck are you doing in our favourite restaurant, why didn't you take her to Greasy Joe's, I bet you even ate lemon chicken, didn't you, you bastard!"

"I didn't eat lemon chicken, honest!"

***

Bustos was smiling as I walked in.

"Now that was more like it, that was more like it, Mark."

"Yeah, great. What's on today's menu?"

"Well, I thought we'd get the Ringmaster's overview?"

"Not the bloody circus again?"

"Mark, they've just taken out another full page ad, my hands are tied."

"And John?"

He tossed me the camera.

"Still sick as a parrot."

***

I was told the Ringmaster, who was none other than the owner, was in the big top. He wasn't, but Suzie LaLu was there, juggling some bananas.

"What is it with you and the fruit?" I asked.

"It's the boss' idea, ask him."

"Where is he?"

"He's gone to lunch. You want to come back to my place?"

I looked at her tassels.

"The girlfriend found out about us."

"Impossible, unless you told her."

"I told her."

"Idiot. Why are all men such idiots, so... so second-rate? She thrown you out?"

"Gone to stay with her mother."
The Ringmaster came in. He was just on his way out to lunch.

"You recommend anywhere in this town?" he asked.

"Greasy Joe's," I said, "They do a mean black pudding."

"He's looking for a job here," Suzie said.

The Ringmaster looked at me.

"A job, here?"

"No, she's just kidding!" I protested.

"We can always use a good PR man, especially one who can double as a clown when the clown's sick or as one of the Siamese twins when one of them gets locked up in the loony bin. And that's not for printing."

"Thanks but no thanks."

After he'd gone, Suzie looked at me.

"I don't get it, you seem unhappy here and yet you are unwilling to get out."

"I'm not unhappy, just... "

"Blocked."

"Yes."

"So, get out."

"I can't join the goddamn circus."

"Why not? No, I'll tell you why not. Because you are too much of a snob."

"Well, that's true but the real truth is that I don't believe in that myth. I never even believed in it as a kid."

I found myself looking at her tassels again, I moved my gaze down. The fish net stockings didn't help any.

"If you didn't believe in it as a kid then maybe it is time to start believing in it now."

"Yeah but... the girlfriend... "

"She hasn't even got a name, that's how vital she is to you. What is she, the girl next door? The girl from the next street?"

"She was three streets down."

"And I'll tell you what you are going to put on her gravestone, because she'll go before you, that's for sure: The Unknown Girlfriend."

***
Bustos looked at me.

"Dull, dull, dull, this isn't your usual style, Mark, what's the beef?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, it's basically their press handout. Give it to Ziggy, ask him to punk it up a bit. What do you say to my getting a real inside story on that circus?"

"I told you, Mark, I don't want no exposé stuff."

"I don't mean exposé, I mean I join the circus for a couple of weeks, they're off to Lancaster and then the Lake District, so I could do some travel writing as well."

He looked at me.

"It's that juggler isn't it?"

"No, it's not that juggler..."

"The one with the tasty apples."

"Now don't go getting crude on me, boss."

***

The girlfriend was still at her mother's. I got her on the phone.

"If you go, you'll never see me again!"

"Maybe it'll help me find out just how strong my feelings for you really are," I said.

The phone cut out.
Naomi Woddis writes and performs poetry, her innovative online invention Poetry Mosaic is gaining in international popularity. Her curating and project management work includes 'SoundBlast' a partnership project with Apples & Snakes and the Poetry Book Society. She has performed In London and nationally including Hackney's Write to Ignite Literature Festival, Theatre Royal Stratford, Utter, Bristol's Poetry Can and has been published in Trespass, Rising, Poet's Letter, Jupiter, Conversations Quarterly and Inside Out magazine. She has appeared on both Resonance radio and Colourful FM. Her pamphlet "Life is Music" was received to much acclaim. She is also a regular contributor to Metaroar.com.

**Home Town**

I take it everywhere I go, carry it with my loose change and every border that I cross, the difficult family member I've stopped making excuses for.

We live on take-aways and gossip, the streets gag with the smell of aftershave and beer, a fight forgotten with Sunday's hangover, punctuate our office days with tea and instant coffee, count low fat calories at lunch. All hell breaks loose at the sales, the two for one smash and grabbers who'd kill for that that designer frock, a brand new juicer. *I'd leave him if I were you* the cabbie tells the puff-eyed girl sniffing in the back of his cab. They say every week a language dies but here, as the sun rises over one night stands and building dust, each day a new one is beginning.
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Lessons
Nick Chandler

The first time I saw Alice, she was sitting on a small red bed in the corner of a very loud room. The room belonged to my cousin and was stuffed plump with dark bombing musical equipment, girls (girls!), and a tiny platoon of like-dressed bad musicians from our high school. There was little room for me and I had to stand right next to the lead singer, a gangly long-haired guy who constantly jittered about while he sang--and although it was impossible to tell what he was yelling into the microphone, I held my breath so that nothing I did would come through.

That's how it was then, my cousin was plugged in--way cooler--he's the one on guitar. He was a Junior, a musician, a photographer, and I, a mere pubescent freshman from some town in Midwest America that none of these Florida folk had heard of, I collected Pez dispensers and sci-fi novellas. Alice, as I learned through the next few hours, was not one of the obligatory band-hussies (more of which were arriving now), but the little sister of John, the foul, menthol-mouthed bass player. We were all in my aunt's back yard, sitting around a rusted old-fashioned barbeque that had been converted into a big ugly ashtray with a few buckets of beach sand and the hardened innards of many a spent candle. I didn't smoke then. Listening to some story about this or that person I didn't know, I saw Alice take a cigarette from her brother's pack and walk over to me. I saw her sit down next to me and start talking, and then I had to stop, just watching her.

"I'm sorry, my ears are still buzzing." I leaned in and looked down at her knee. There I saw a mosquito land on the bulb of her skin, but didn't dare touch it.

She slapped her knee and wiped the bug on the green plastic chair, said: "Do you like Newports?"

And I know it was much later (a few months), that she taught me how to shotgun smoke-- to blow it back and forth between our lungs. But it might as well have been right then, because we shared that cigarette and I tasted the chemical fruit of her lip gloss between my red-eyed coughing bouts and new nausea, and we laughed, and the night was over, and the next day, and the next. I couldn't get that intangible pseudo-fruit and smoke tang to leave my tongue. But, that's a rhetorical fallacy; I wasn't trying to get it to leave, I was hanging on vibrantly, desperately, to its taste.

Dutch, my cousin, was going to take me to bass-player-John's house to, I'm sure, cuss and smoke cigarettes and talk about people I didn't know and play bad, loud music, and I was ecstatic.

She was in the kitchen when we arrived and I fought the urge to follow my blood to the back porch and instead stayed in the kitchen and forgot to talk.

She was pleased to see me and I melted. "Want some ice cream?"

"Absolutely."

A few weeks into that summer her dad had bought her an old green automatic Mustang and we spent all summer exploring the new streets together.

We stopped at a phone booth in a little suburban park. Alice was a blond, I should have mentioned that earlier. Actually she looked a lot like her C. S. Lewis namesake--she had long straight blond hair that was usually parted down the middle, bangs that couldn't decide if they were really bangs or part of the longer hair (as was the style then), and hints of freckles behind her ears and on the bridge of the nose where she got the most sun. She was beautiful and thin--we were all thin back then. Her favorite color was baby blue and she often wore tank tops of that hue. Far brighter than
the blue of her shirts and socks, cartoon key chains and erasers, were her eyes, like hard hand-blown glass. I remember staring at her through the pane of the clean phone booth--something that didn't exist where I came from--and hearing her muddled high voice ask questions with each sentence.

She was scoring drugs. She got me to do those, too. As that summer went on, I got less and less surprised at the things she got me to do. Bildungsroman they call it, loss of innocence, the rebellious soul-on-fire teen years. It was that, I suppose, but it didn't feel like it; it felt like I was Vasco da Gama or Kirk and everything was new and everything was bright.

By the time school started we were best friends. We sat next to each other in Environmental Science and sometimes she would touch my leg under the thick, black lab table while we traced chromosomes or mitochondria into our notes. She worked in the school office during third period and would pinch escape passes from the inside drawer, which we would deliver to each other, straight-faced, before running to the parking lot and out into the greater world.

We had endless hours of mirth spending our parents' money on cheap food and expensive drugs. I was reading The Great Gatsby and Ordinary People and I remember thinking how sad it was that these poor chaps had nothing but longing and waiting to speak of. It was so pitiful that all they could do was look back to brighter times. This was before I had compiled all of her soft things and pacifiers and photographs (then still paper) and hair-ties and bits of writing and even a strand of hair into a neat little box that still sits quietly in my closet. Are these the skeletons they speak of? Well, it doesn't haunt me as it did Fitzgerald, or Gatsby, or whoever. No, this box is a captain's log; this, a story of my own haughty conquest as I aged into my own, decidedly less bleak, oblivion.

It took me most of that first summer to acclimate to her beauty. She was actually quite fair, an Irish girl. It was the sunrise over Deerfield Beach now, and we had spent the whole night somewhere between hallucination and epiphany. All the scribbled notes in my pocket no longer made sense and my jaw was tired from clenching and talking. The sun was still behind a vast, gray cloud range and by the time it got above them it was eight-thirty and we were on our way home.

The road, I venture to reiterate, was a new place for us. She described the paranoia of driving: besides the constant threat of shadow cops (a favorite game--spot them before they spot you), there were the mechanics of delicate life. She looked to me in shotgun at the red light. "You can never stop driving. If I let go, off the brake now, we would roll right out into traffic and get hit." I looked out at the blur-river of cars that swarmed past our route and put up my hand to stop them with telepathy. They did not cease.

It was a school night, like that mattered, and we were headed for a diner to meet up with my cousin's band and fill our stomachs with terrible eggs and starch so we wouldn't die from all the poison we were planning on ingesting at their rock concert downtown.

The show was at a dirty, poorly-lit bar called Happy Daze (aka Heaven) in West Palm. After helping unload and assemble most of Mark's drum kit, Dutch rewarded me with a pitcher of light American beer that he was able to score from the bar, although underage, because he was with the band. They were being paid for their obnoxious performance with a hundred dollar bar tab. A clever ploy by the bar, because our crew, once loosened by a hundred dollars worth of booze, was sure to spend twice as much to keep going.

Drunk, older patrons yelled at the band to play Lynyrd Skynyrd or Rush or anything but what they were. I sat next to Alice sacrificing my left ear to the wall of sound and we drank our comped beer until we were merrily yelling into each other's ears about my cousin's new girl, or that girl, or the new bongo percussionist that we couldn't hear, or whoever. Soon enough I was at the bar, playing it cool, asking for lots of water.
When I got back to the table we started to share the water. I was feeling better and liked this song, my favorite of theirs. All of the people but Alice had left the table, which was great because one of the awkward boys was trying to hit on her, and had now moved on to a more realistic pursuit across the way. I was watching him make this new girl more and more uncomfortable when the most astounding thing happened: Alice leaned into me and put her hand on my hip-pelvis (which would have been enough) and kissed me ridiculously softly before letting a slender bit of ice pass between her lips and into my mouth. I chewed it immediately, nervously, jacked on norepinephrine, the loquacious chemical responsible for stomach butterflies, and felt the other two lofty chemicals of that holy endorphin trinity, serotonin and dopamine, rush over me in soft warm waves. And I could feel my heart pumping hard, hot liquid right into my brain and I thought: kiss her again, and I did. And so went our first kiss. Oh, I should have mentioned that, this was our first kiss.

Soon it was Sunday and John's girl, Sheryl, was showing off her large new (dreadful) tattoo of a koala bear on her left calf, still puffed up from pricking. We were in the back of John's Suburban and I was watching the world skim past Alice's profile and listening to John change Tom Petty's "Free Falling" into "Free Ballin'" as we threatened toward ninety on the highway. And like that, we were over ourselves, the horizon did a skateboard trick and I was upside down watching the world recede smoothly for a moment until we crashed down and the gray of the interior and the gray of the road become inseparable. I turned to Alice, who looked like she was screaming, but I could only hear the static thud-scrape of the machinery, which lowered in frequency as we slowed, until it was replaced entirely by the seashore sound of other cars passing.

John had swerved, he said, when a giant white crane flapped out of the air and toward his huge white truck. Everyone was okay, except Sheryl, who had suffered a bloody nose, and we were all standing out in front of the wreckage, watching her catch her blood in her palms and holding our respective girls.

So we were alive, again, still, and our bodies ached.

I wanted to tend to Alice, but had no auto of my own and we were both parentally bed-sentenced, having actually incurred a bristling array of hairline fractures in our ribs--corresponding wounds. I wanted to pet her head and microwave her food and make love to her bruised body. I remember, in that week apart from my Alice, eating a brown chicken dinner with my mom and having the sonic lull of our conversation-lack being replaced violently by the shattering of the tall, glass bookshelf in the foyer. One of the cats had knocked it over and was, by now, cowing or holding up under some idle couch or bed post. The glass of the bookshelf had popped exponentially to coat the ample tiling of the entire room. On it, we had kept brightly colored, more cherished glass (Junoesque vases and ugly, pricey figurines), hues of which could be seen peppered in with the clear glass of the former shelf like the red and yellow of zits of Mars or Venus amongst the stars.

Thin hair follicles, Alice's room was green. She had hung twenty some-odd bright, softball-sized Nerf balls on her ceiling, each on six inches of heavy fishing line. Her hand and blue wrist would twirl them, any order, until the whole room was under the soft tentacles of their movement. We hung a silk scarf over the television and talked and talked and talked.

By the next summer I had my own car, a red 1992 Toyota Celica. It was in a state of perpetual illness--a hungry, ravenous jalopy. One of its most enduring handicaps, ruptures in the coolant lines, meant it could only run under the Florida sun for a good hour before it would give up its ghost and slink to the side of the road. If you've never been to South Florida you don't know that the roads run strictly North-South, East-West, with very little exception. By now, we were three stalls south of Lantana and just past Key Largo.

We were out of traffic's way on an extended soft shoulder, with the hood aloft and our heads too close to the engine. The radiator cap was sighing and it rendered a gush of my bottled water into quick steam without faltering. It began to rain a slight mist and to walk through it, as we were--
toward the crooked little pocket of sand just down the way, forced all of my bristling epidermis to feel dancing sheets of cold water sparks, jittery and minute, as though I was going to faint.

It was still hot and sunny though, and the water gave off snow-blindness with every wave (gulf blindness?) as it sizzled and churned bright whitecaps, and was constantly dying and being reborn.

"You should have been my passenger." No shoes, her feet were always dirty.

Alice had a grade school niece (Jamie, or Jossilin, Judy) and we had been chauffeuring her Flat-Stanley everywhere we could think of: Technicolor bowling allies, gravel roofs of unlocked apartment complexes, the endless vista of the everglades, pet shop rodent cages, and now we were enroute to the southernmost point of the United States, and its big red-yellow concrete anal dong of a monument, to snap-capture it with Stanley's paper body in foreground as proof of his voyage. The natives say that photographs capture the soul, these pictures were creating Stanley's.

By the time I saw her again, she was in college--grade school education--she was going to be "Ms. L"--teach children colors and shapes, nouns and verbs, trace wrinkled flat-Stanleys over long strings of old pastel road maps for the children. She had acquired a fresh layer of baby fat and her pseudo-bangs were gone, both of which made her look younger. But she wasn't, she was older. Her friends in Tallahassee dealt drugs like blackjack cards and we doubled down.

Afterwards, I drove the eleven hours home, stall-free now, singing at the top of my lungs. My voice dry, my wallet empty, my love hurtles and hurtles and miles and kilometers and light-years and parsecs away from me; the distance between the cool me and the babbling, sobbing, slime-nosed, headache me quickly became very, very small.

Winter Dreams, they call it. That whole odd trip to see her, I should have told you, was completely different than the entirety of my other experiences with her. I, or something in me, had lost the ability to talk to her. Cat-slain, my tongue curled in mouth and my heart fluttered, as always, and we slept head to foot and we sectioned off the substance, and I couldn't say a thing.

I remember I had big, orange-coated multivitamins in my pocket that I kept fluffing around with my twitchy fingers. We were at a bus stop near the college and I broke one of them in half.

"I'll conduct an experiment to see if the ants can utilize the nutrients in the capsule." Chunky, I scraped the two pill nubs across the concrete and the ants were none the wiser, dumber.

She just looked at me, with her little, old face, and didn't shrug or anything.

"They aren't eating the vitamins." The ripped pills became darker with my skin oil and a mixture zinc of B12 overcame my fingers. It was our last weekend together, I should have said.

Now, I read different books--stern, long lines of prose that stretch across the vast expanse of the past, forming the high-walls of an at-once joyous and sorrow-filled labyrinth, who's corners and halls have become lush, powerful hideaways with which to ceaselessly enchant myself and a thousand times remember and forget the bright rooms where my own story began.
Ding. The door opens. The door closes.

Jon rides the train to and from work every day. Out of 261 possible working days this year, Jon works 255. That's 510 train rides. That's a lot of train rides.

Most days, the train ride is simply about getting from point A to point B.

Jon stands in a crowded train, watches the people around him. There are so many barriers to choose from: newspaper parapets, cell phone fences, book barricades, sun glass stop gaps, headphone fortifications and moats of poor personal hygiene.

Jon switches on his IPod.

Jon's last girl friend breaks up with him because he does not like to leave his apartment on the weekends.

There's so much to do and see, she says. We need to take advantage of the city.

Jon prefers not to leave the apartment because he's allergic to bees.

This isn't as much a breakup story as it is a break down story.

Jon gets motion sickness from reading on the train. Instead, he closes his eyes and meditates. He practices the breathing awareness he learns at his meditation group. It doesn't work. His brain is a hive of bees.

On some mornings he half-dozes in the middle of a full train. His fantasies are mostly recollections of the people he has known, now far away. He remembers their faces, and sometimes their names.

Inevitably, someone begins talking on a cellular phone and Jon awakes from his reverie. He sighs, and then eavesdrops on the conversation.

When there is an accident on the train line, the car stops, sometimes for as long as an hour. Jon's accident stops it for 33 minutes.
It is 11pm and Jon is coming home from work. He waits 26 minutes for the train. He wants to be home already.

A packed train stutters onto the platform. Ding. The door opens and a few people spill out. Jon steps up into the car. The door closes. He stands face to face with a homeless man, early thirties, five teeth total.

Jon's feet become interesting.

Honestly, the homeless man says. Are there any bugs on me?

I'm sorry? Jon says.

Nah. I'm just kiddin, man. Hahahahahahahaha...

Jon smiles politely and scans the train. He sees silent people. Ipods pump music into ears. Jon's Ipod is in his bag. It's too crowded to get it out.

I've got the most amazing high right now, the homeless man says. He looks Jon in the eyes. Hidden among the pink clouds on his sclera, the man's eyes are a shocking blue. Wish I could stay in this place forever, he says.

Jon nods.

It's cold out there, the man says. Windy. A person could get hypothermized out there.

Yeah, Jon says.

It's real windy down at the beach, the man says. Can't sleep out there tonight. Could get hypothermized. I was at the beach the other day with about six girls, man. It was awesome.

I bet, Jon says. He can smell the man's breath. It smells like carpet left out in the rain.

Just want to stay right here forever, man, the man says. The train jolts to a stop. Ding. The door opens.

Right here as in, right here on the train, or as in, the same mental state? Jon inquires.

The man smiles. He says, Just right here, man. But I gotta get down to the Haight to see Mike about a pack of cigarettes. One dollar off. I'm not tryna be cheap or anything, but a twenty is precious, man. This here twenty just blew right up to me in the wind. Had my name written all over it--Andrew Jackson. Hahahahahahahaha...

A woman next to them interrupts. She says, Why don't you use the money to buy a blanket to keep yourself warm instead of buying beer with it? She wears a long black coat tied with a belt at the waist.

That's easy, man. That right there is easy. There's no place to buy a blanket this time a night, he says. The train stops again.

Well, why don't you wait until tomorrow morning? she says.

I am. I got at least ten left for a blanket. Is this the Haight, man?

Yeah, Jon says. Ding. The door opens and the man steps past Jon into the dark windy night. The door closes.

~
Jon works for a non-profit organization called The Village. The organization forms partnerships with artisans in the developing world to ensure that their wares are sold to United States consumers at fair prices. This larger sum of money is then sent directly to the artisans, effectively eliminating the middleman and making the world a better place to live.

Jon is their office manager and bookkeeper. He also makes the coffee.

~

Jon is deathly allergic to bees. He carries an Epi-pen with him wherever he goes. It is his sixth appendage. If stung by a bee, he injects himself in the thigh and watches liquid-life squirt into his bloodstream.

~

Jon joins a Buddhist meditation group. At the introductory session, the leader of the group asks Jon a question.

Are you alive? he asks.

As far as I know, Jon says. Nobody laughs.

We are hardly ever fully alive, the leader says. His name is Tian Sup Shoo, but he looks more like a Bill. He is able to cross his legs so that the bottom of his feet face the ceiling. There are three others on the floor of his living room and a dog named Wookie. Wookie sometimes snores during meditation.

We are rarely alive right now, Tian says, encircling the room with his arms. We cannot let go of what happened in the past and we cannot let go of what we plan to do in the future. If we live only in the past, and in the future, are we ever really alive?

Tian takes a long breath. He says, We awake to the present moment by paying attention to our breath.

Jon learns to focus on his breathing, to try and slow the flow of thoughts.

He tries. He tries. He tries.

~

In grammar school Jon learns how to draw a straight line. His teacher tells him that there are infinite points between point A and point B. The same cannot be said for the train line.

~

When a seat opens up near Jon, and no one else bolts for it, he takes a moment to decide whether that particular seat is a good fit for him. He begins by assessing the size of the person with whom he'll be sharing the seat--shoulders and legs mainly. How likely are they to cross the invisible gray line demarcating his personal space and make contact with his body?

Satisfied with size restrictions, he evaluates their overall health. Has the person coughed or sneezed since he or she entered the train? Do they seem on the verge of vomiting? Are they covered in any visible rash? Are they going to nod off and end up on his shoulder?

With the health test complete, Jon determines where the potential seatmate will disembark. He does so by plugging variables into a complex formula, the specifics of which he refuses to disclose to even his closest relations.
If Jon deems that the potential seatmate will not be getting off too soon, and thus not disturb his meditation, and they are in compliance with all other requirements, he takes the seat.

~

Jon signs up for a community college class called "Science Fiction, Fantasy and Suspense", but it is canceled at the last minute when the professor dies unexpectedly in a jousting contest.

~

Jon's life begins when he squirts from his mother's womb. His life nearly ends when, at age 31, he is hit by a train.

~

The police report says it was an accident, but at least one eyewitness disagrees.

~

Jon has close to four hundred movies in his personal collection. Among these are "Feathers and Leather: The Story of the Village People", "The Village" and "The Village of the Damned".

~

The train line that Jon takes to work runs from the Caltrain Depot in the Mission Bay district of San Francisco to Ocean Beach in the Sunset District.

The train's sole purpose is to get from point A to point B in a timely fashion.

~

Jon sneezes 4-6 times during every meditation session. He believes it has something to do with Wookie.

~

Bees kill more people each year than all other venomous animals combined. Each year 50 - 100 people die from bee stings. In comparison, only 5 - 15 people die from snake bites.

~

One evening Jon finds a seat near an old man with a white frizzy beard. If Santa Claus had visited San Francisco in the sixties and never made it back to the North Pole, he would look like this man. Suspenders make tracks across the globe of his belly and a red velvet sports coat plus white scarf complete the effect. He carries a black bag that doesn't seem big enough for toys.

Jon yawns and can't get his hand up quick enough to keep it private. The old man leans toward him and motions to the security camera with this thumb.

Yawn police, he says. They're after gapers. Yawn bubbles have a tendency to spread from one person to another.

Jon smiles, too exhausted to care.

See, he got it now, the old man says, pointing to a teenager not too far away. The teen has post-yawn-wet-eyes that hardly seem capable of staying open.
I'm feelin' it, the teen says.

Won't be long before it propagates to the seat behind you, the old man says, and then the next, and so on until everybody on the train feels tireder than they did when they got on.

Watch out for the yawn police, he says. They'll get ya.

Jon closes his eyes, careful not to yawn again.

~

Jon joins a Bible study group. The Bible feels like home to a lot of people named Jon, at least those with the traditional spelling.

At the first session, Jon reads from the bible. He acquits himself well and even enjoys the passage. In it, the protagonist, Jesus, walks along the Sea of Galilee and runs into two young men casting nets into the water. Follow me, Jon reads in his best Jewish accent, and I will make you fishers of men. The two men then leave their things and follow Jesus.

Afterwards, the group discusses the passage. One man says that Jesus is the destroyer of death.

Jon is reluctant to share. He thinks Jesus is a frustrated fisherman trying to start a worker's movement.

~

In third grade Jon participates in a spelling bee. He is eliminated early in the second round on the word Accident.

In third grade, Accident is a trick word.

~

The Village People is a band to which Jon is secretly devoted. He keeps all of the band's eight CDs hidden under his bed. Sometimes he imagines himself on stage performing the intricate movements that accompany the song Y-M-C-A. In this vision, he wears tight shorts and a yellow hard hat. The crowd cheers wildly.

~

Imagine the sea, Tian says to the group. Each of us is a tiny ripple on the surface. We each have our own size and shape and we each make our way toward the shore in what seems to be our own path. But truly, he says, we are all part of the same ocean, the same source. And if we look deeply inside ourselves, below the surface of our own egos, we can touch everyone, and everything.

The ocean makes Jon think of sharks.

~

With a spy camera on the train, Jon is never alone.

~

Jon's accident shuts the train line down for 33 minutes. Had he been on the train instead of on the ground in front of it, he would have been upset for the delay.
Do you know what time it is? a young woman says to him.

Um... yeah, Jon says, digging into his pocket for his cellular phone. About nine-thirty.

Man, she says. I've been waiting for the fucking train for thirty-five fucking minutes.

Yeah, Jon says. It can be a long wait this time of night. He stands on the curb with both hands in his pockets. She sits on the stoop and rummages through her bag. Her clothes look handmade in the nouveau hippie style. One hemp sandal taps cement sidewalk. They're waiting for the train at the Carl and Cole stop in the little dog park just beside the tunnel.

Do you smoke? she asks. She holds a joint between two fingers.

Excuse me? Jon says.

Do you smoke up? she says. She wipes her hair away from her shoulder.

Um... no, not really.

Oh, she answers. I don't usually smoke before I get home, but I've already been here way too long... seen three trains come in the other direction. She lights the joint and begins to puff on it.

Yeah. It can be a long wait, Jon says and hopes the train will come soon.

You work around here? she asks.

No. Just coming home from a... kind of, meeting.

Like AA or something?

No, no, no, um... like a, meditation group.

Cool, she says. What kind of meditation do you do? Smoke drifts up into the starless night. Jon tucks his hands deeper into his pockets.

Well, honestly, I'm just kind of starting out, but it's mostly just about paying attention to your breathing.

Nice, she says. I wanna meditate, but my mind's all over the fuckin' place. Some of my friends are really into it though. Here comes another fucking train. Can you believe this? she says.

She stands up to holler at the train passing in the opposite direction. Send one this way, she shouts. The driver ignores her and the train disappears into the tunnel.

She takes a long toke and says, Ya know, this always happens when you just wanna get home after a long day. I know the feeling, Jon says. You wanna not have a car in the city, but then you have to put up with this.

Yeah, she says. I work down on Haight in one of those little organic markets. You ever been down to one of those markets?

Probably passed it a bunch of times, he says, but I haven't been inside. Wait. I think I hear something.
The lights show first out of the darkness. The train follows, rumbling to a halt in front of them. The door opens and people descend the stairs. The young woman puts her joint out on the sidewalk and comes up beside Jon. They enter the train together.

Under the lights, Jon gets a good look at her. Her blond hair dangles around her shoulders. Periwinkle eyes gaze out at him from behind sun bleached lashes. He imagines her falling asleep in the crook of his arm. Outside the window, shadowed scenery rushes past.

What stop are you? she asks, moving closer to him. They are closer to one another than they need to be in the half-full train.

Early thirties, he says.

I gotta go all the way down to forty-sixth, she says. I live with a bunch of friends down there, but only for a few more days.

Are you moving or something? Jon asks. Everything about her is small, including her hands, and fingers, and nails.

Yeah, she says. A couple of my friends and I bought a little plot of land up in the foothills. We wanna try and have our own farm, ya know, be like totally self-sustainable and everything.

Huh. That's pretty cool. Have you farmed before?

Well, I grew up on a farm in Minnesota, but I don't know too much about it really, she says. Her teeth are crooked, and perfect. She says, I figure I'll learn quick enough though. Plus, my role will be primarily working with the bees.

Bees? Jon says.

Yeah. It sounds weird, but I've always wanted to be a beekeeper, ever since I was a little kid. So we're gonna get some bees and I'll work with them, extracting the honey and everything.

Wow, he says. I couldn't help you there. I'm actually really allergic to bees.

Really? she says. I think I am too, actually, but I just feel like if they get used to me being around then they'll eventually stop stinging me, ya know. Ha. I guess you just have to be one with the bees, she says. She giggles and leans closer to him, their hips almost touching. She smiles. He's not sure how much of this exchange is a result of the pot she smoked a few minutes earlier, but he feels warm and almost happy. The train cruises down the street.

So yeah, I'll be headed up there in like six days or something, and hopefully, I'll be up there for good.

Six days. Wow. That's so cool, Jon says. He rubs at his widow's peak. I've got just one more stop here, but, best of luck with the farm.

Thanks, she says. I'm Kerry by the way. She extends her hand to him. It was really nice to meet you.

Jon takes her hand in his. It is moist and he shakes it a second too long.

Yeah. You too, he says. Take care of those bees.

Ding. The door opens. The door closes.

~
It may be old fashioned but Jon believes that people get paid what they’re worth. Jon gets paid very little.

~

Jon tells his last girlfriend about his decision to join a bible study group. She sneers.

Christianity, she says, is a form of brainwashing.

A clean brain, Jon replies, is better than a dirty mind.

~

When Jon first learns that there are spy cameras on every train, he is a little frightened. He does not like the idea that someone is always watching. It seems fascist to him and he fantasizes about writing a persuasive letter to the Transportation Authority demanding his right to privacy as a citizen of a free country.

In time, however, he comes to recognize the value in the cameras. If he is mugged, for example, no one will come to his aid, but at least there will be an entertaining video of the event.

~

Jon thinks: it takes a village to raise a child, but one child, given enough gasoline and a match, can easily raze a village.

~

Bees are flying insects closely related to wasps and ants. They are a monophyletic lineage within the superfamily Apoidea. There are slightly fewer than 20,000 known species of bee, in nine recognized families. Among these families, many species are highly social.

~

Tian, the leader of Jon's meditation group, says that life never moves from point A to point B. There are infinite overlapping moments. He says, Every moment of our lives, every moment of our ancestor's lives, and every moment of our successors lives are inside of us. Human beings are a collection of moments.

~

Even at his age Jon has an occasional break out of acne.

~

This isn't as much a break out story as it is a break down story.

~

Jon listens to his IPod as he walks down the street. This is what he hears:

*It's fun to stay at the Y-M-C-A.*

*It's fun to stay at the Y-M-C-A.*

In his mind, Jon sees himself on stage. He wears his tight shorts and yellow hard hat. He forms the final 'A' with his arms to the delight of the crowd.
Jon is struck by a train.

He is flung twenty-five feet on hard concrete and lays sprawled out on the tracks. The train shrieks to a stop.

He can still hear the crowd cheering.

On the outside, Jon appears as he has for most of his life—a young man just trying to get somewhere. There are no visible scratches or cuts. But on the inside, he bleeds.

~

Jon likes to fall asleep with the television on. The pictures blur in his eyes, as he squints and finally releases his eyelids. Voices push him off into a tranquil ocean of sleep.

~

Sometimes at night, when two trains follow one another closely, and Jon happens to get on the second one, he has an entire car to himself.

It is cold in the empty car and he can see himself in the windows. His face is longer and skinnier in the distorted reflection, and more handsome.

Outside, there are lights on in apartments. Some people keep their shutters closed. Others like their personal dramas played out in public.

Jon watches the apartment windows. Now a woman washing her hair in the sink. Now a man smoking a cigarette at a bare kitchen table. Motionless silhouettes against television blue light.

At each stop, the door slides open to let in the night air. Jon holds his breath and hopes for someone to climb three steps and drop into the empty orange seat nearest him.

~

If by some stroke of luck, Jon is ever elected president of the Transportation Authority, his first act in office will be to make all of the train lines circular.

Instead of reversing course, they'll circle round and round and round and round.

~

Ladies and Gentlemen, this is going to be the final stop. All passengers must exit the train here. Again, this will be this train's final stop.

~

Ding. The door opens. The door closes.
Kymberlie Birkenkamp, 42, is pursuing a career in graphic design and photography. As a lifetime student, she has a ridiculous number of interests and has studied a range subjects from Shakespeare to Tibetan Buddhism. Two years ago, she received a Sony Cybershot and discovered a new passion. Every picture, like every person, has a story. It is Kymberlie's desire to reflect the details of that story in a photograph. Kymberlie lives in a Parisian-esque studio in Maplewood, Missouri with her cat, Maxfield Parrish, and cockatiel, Wagner--like the composer. She splits her free time between belly dancing and obsessive social networking. www.misfithue.com
Cradled
Kymberlie Birkenkamp

Saints
Kymberlie Birkenkamp

Why Not Now?
Backtrack

It was fun while it lasted,
but the electricity petered out,
the cockroaches returned
to their other lives, the moon
pedalled furiously along a high-wire,
the cows in the fields became
scenery once more. And we, we
fell in love all over again.

Reading the Mystery Novel

Forget the pool boy with the congressman’s wife.
Forget the professor with the lead pipe, the maid
with the arsenic, the estranged son with the gun.
Ignore the drifter with the smile sharp as a white
picket fence, neighbours sweet as marzipan.
Stare at the body being dismantled by beetles,
exposing the skeleton untouched by guilt or greed.
Gather the clues. Figure out the motive. Assemble
the suspects in the front room. Point the figure
at yourself. Remember the skull, how it used
to be someone like yourself, lost in the endless
rooms of grief and love, playing the same old game
over and over again.
Sleep Deprivation Affects Problem Solving in the Post-Industrial Male

Don Hucks

Civility has limits. After a while, I couldn't take it anymore. I was exhausted, and the neighbors had to go. I waited for them to leave for work one morning. Then I went into my closet and climbed into the attic and down into their side of the duplex we shared. I conducted a quick inventory. Then I began to steal.

I took the raisins from their raisin bran and the salt from their corn chips. I took the crunch out of their peanut butter. I took the dandruff prevention from their shampoo. I took the stripes from their toothpaste and the minty flavor from their floss. I took the color from their framed photographs and the color-safe bleach from their laundry soap. I took the heat out of their habanero salsa and every last black speck from their all-natural vanilla bean ice cream. I took the second ply from their toilet paper. I took the holes from their Swiss cheese slices. I took the starch from their white shirts and the lavender scent from their pillowcases. I took the chamomile from their tea. I took the tingle out of their liniment. I took the creak from their closet door and the wobble from its knob. I took the ruby red from their grapefruits and the seedless from their grapes. I took the delicate cedar notes from their cabernet sauvignon. I took the caffeine from their espresso and the clove from their smokes. I took the soft from the white of their sixty-watt bulbs. I took the broken-in-ness from their jogging shoes. I took away the singing of magpies outside their bedroom window at daybreak.

It must have taken them several days to discover, bit by bit, all that they had lost. I can imagine their horror growing with each new discovery. Soon, they must have begun to fear they had a ghost. Or that they were going insane. Or that one of them was going insane. They began to bicker and then to accuse. They denied, and they raised their voices, and they pleaded, and they cried. I could hear them through the wall.

A few weeks later, they finally moved out. And they took that goddamn dog that had kept me awake with its barking, every day, while they were at work.

The new neighbors, I'm happy to say, are cat people. I'm sleeping much better lately; the cats are nocturnal, like me. As long as they don't start crapping in my flower beds or digging into my garbage, I'm sure we'll get along just fine.
An Interview With Amanda Palmer
Fawn Neun

Amanda (Fucking) Palmer is one of the smartest and savviest voices in music today. Palmer is a performer, composer, musician and political activist best known as frontwoman and keyboardist for the Dresden Dolls. Palmer is especially renowned for her "Burlesque Punk" aesthetic (a fun combination of sex and the circus), her dramatic onstage style, and her frank and intelligent lyrics.

There's an inclusive factor to Amanda's performances and public life; she blogs, she twitters, she still takes requests onstage (even if it's for a song she's never played before). Devoted fans wait patiently in line for hours before her shows, passing the time by playing ukeleles and giving out cupcakes, checking their cell phones for her latest twitter message from back stage. It seems to be the hallmark of truly legendary artists in the 21st century and has earned her the love of music fans of all ages.


In September 2008, Amanda released a solo album named "Who Killed Amanda Palmer" and a companion series of videos were produced and launched on YouTube. June 2009 will see the publication of 'Who Killed Amanda Palmer" the book; a photo essay book containing shots of our erstwhile heroine at the scene of her demise (mostly due to violent cause), with accompanying short stories penned by none other than Neil Gaiman.

Amanda recently wrapped up a yearlong tour of sold-out performances in Europe, the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand.

I sat with her backstage at the State Theatre in St. Petersburg, Florida during her "Who Killed Amanda Palmer" tour for a quick interview. Strongly beautiful and beautifully intense, she was warm and friendly. I had a list of questions that I never got to, because she knew what she wanted to talk about and most of it was far more interesting than what I'd come up with. We briefly discussed her online exploits.

TBS: I notice you've been twittering a lot. Do you like it? Do you ever feel over exposed?

AFP: Oh yes--it's terrible--it's great. You have to remember who you're talking to, I'm the queen of exposure. I'm the queen of over-exposure. Twitter is like the ultimate and instant connection tool. It's wonderful and also very dangerous for a person like me, because I'm so totally enthralled by the connection with my fans.
TBS: That was something I wanted to ask you about, because publishing is headed in the same direction. More authors are self-publishing and building up interaction with fans.

AFP: Neil (Gaiman)

TBS: Neil. (laughs) The way the economy is going, a lot of people that would normally hope to be published by the big houses aren't going to be able to do that. There's no money and there's no money for promotion. I've noticed a lot of bands are doing the same thing. I noticed something on your blog that you were going to write a treatise on where you think the music industry is going. What do you have to say about the whole DIY movement?

AFP: It's going to be a long treatise. First of all, I realize that there's two things that need to be addressed. The first of them was inspired by an email that circulated before there were blogs and the web was as huge as it is now. I remember that Courtney Love circulated an email in the late 90's and it was just an exposure of how the major label model works and how it was possible that she was this huge rock star but completely broke. And she just broke it all down. She exposed her bank account, she exposed the money, talked about all the exact tour expenses. She said, "You guys need to understand this." People assume that if you're a rock star and you're touring you're rich. It doesn't work that way. Also people need to understand that when you buy a record at a store, that money isn't coming to me. And even that email, which I think was written 10 years ago, is now horribly outdated. I mean the basic, fucked-up-ness is more or less the same. But every band's situation is also different.

What I think what I'd really like to do is explain to the fans, in detail, how my life works--so they know. This is how the major label thing works, this is how touring works, this is how expenses work, this is where my profit actually comes from. This is what happens when you buy my record in a store; this is what happens when you buy my record online.

AFP: People are constantly asking me how they should spend their money. Because they actually want to support me, but they're afraid they're going to misplace their generosity. So they don't want to go to a big chain store and buy 20 copies of my record for people for Christmas if they don't think I'm going to get the money. That's one thing.

The second thing is how we're going to approach a new model of artist to fan interaction, with or without the help of labels, publishers, corporations; the industry. And I have some interesting thoughts about that, because I think that a lot of it certainly comes down to the artist's attitude towards their work and their life and how they measure success. But it also comes down to how the fans--the audience--gives and receives with the artist, because that paradigm is also going to have to change. I think there are certain preconceived notions that are just going to have to be deconstructed; about money, about exchange, about patronage, about support. I'm a street performer, by nature, so I've never had any shamefulness about saying, "Hey, if you like it, definitely give me some money."
I think a lot of artists feel that that's really taboo. And they'd rather have a third party sort of, with some smoke and mirror structure, say "Oh, the artist doesn't concern themselves with that. We take your money."

But actually, if the artist is only seeing a tiny little part of that profit, the artist should suck it up and deal with the fact that you should be able to approach your fans and put your hand out and say, "If you want to support me, then just do it".

**TBS:** Yes, I suppose performing on a street corner makes that easier; it's just a bigger venue, bigger audience.

**AFP:** Yes, and I try not to take it for granted. But I think as far as everything is concerned, that would be good for all of the arts, and the public's perception of how we take care of artists could fundamentally change. And that's not just musicians, but visual artists, and writers, and actors. Especially with the economy tanking and things really changing. I was talking about this with Ben Folds the other day on the phone, and we were vigorously nodding, heads in each other's direction, saying pretty much we're looking at turning back into a travelling minstrel show.

**TBS:** Do you think that the kind of mind that creates art, or desires to create art, can sell it? Or do you think that's a problem for people who are great writers or great musicians but simply have to keep that barrier or they get exhausted? Obviously you're not one of them.

**AFP:** Oh no, I do get exhausted and I sometimes fear to tread into the conjecture about what I would be doing with my time if I didn't spend the majority of it promoting my tour, my record, myself, my website, my book. But, I've come up with, for myself personally (and obviously every artist is going to be different), I've come up with a kind of system of forgiveness for myself. Instead of assuming that everything should be taken care of because I'm the artist, I think that I just accept the fact that in order to be an artist right now, I need to do those things.

**TBS:** That's very intelligent.

**AFP:** But I felt very, very guilty. It used to be so harrowing in the early days of the band (Dresden Dolls) when Brian and I would be rehearsing or at practice and I would be leaving to take phone calls or shooting out mailers for the show the next night. And it was really frustrating for him. It was one of those things where, "No, no, no - this isn't going to last forever. As soon as we have help, all of that's going to go away. Everything will be magically taken care of as soon as we have managers and agents and lawyers and labels". And nothing could be further from the truth. No one is ever going be able to care about these things as much as I do. And I have a lot of help--and I do have managers and agents and booking agents and publicists and lawyers--but they just help. They don't do it all.

**TBS:** That's very bright -- you have to be real.

**AFP:** But its depressing. Sometimes I think there's this alternate reality where I don't care as much about all the business and promotion and I actually spend my brainpower on creating things.

**TBS:** If you don't mind if we change tracks--one of the reasons I wanted to interview you was because you came highly recommended by a friend of mine who's a huge fans of yours. I went to your Myspace page where you state that one
of your favorite books is "The Hotel New Hampshire". I've never in my life met anyone who loves that book as much as I do.

AFP: I love that book!

TBS: What are some of your literary influences?

AFP: They're vast--I've gone through all different phases in my life. When I was a teenager I was very into Ayn Rand and Herman Hesse and Heinrich Boll and all this super heavy stuff. And Kundera--who I actually still love. He's managed to hang on. I never go back and read Heinrich Bowl or Ayn Rand. But, I go back and read Kundera's books and you can read those books every ten years and reach a whole new level of understanding about those relationships and those dynamics.

TBS: There seem to be certain stages where you have to be at to deal with certain books.

AFP: Yeah.

TBS: What about "The Hotel New Hampshire"--what do you love about that? This is just curiosity on my part.

AFP: I really love his (John Irving) books in general--but that book--something about the--I think I loved it mostly because they were my fantasy family. And that world, that particular brand of weirdness was something that felt close enough to something I could understand but didn't have. It was set in New England. It was very close to home. I sort of felt like I was Franny in a parallel life. And I think it's one of the few books in existence that actually had justice done in the film version--which is so rare. And the film was so brilliant--and fucking Jodie Foster--nailed it.
TBS: One of the other reasons I wanted to talk to you was because I think you're a brilliant lyricist and if anyone wants to question me about that, I'll just say "Ampersand". It's simply stunning. Are there any poets that influenced your work or that you really love?

AFP: You know I never really got into reading poetry. But, I definitely have a collection of poems that have floated my way and resonated. But I've never staked my claim to a favorite poet. I see teenagers coming up to me clutching their favorite book of poetry--I never had that book. But I remember when a book came my way, I'd circle one poem because I connected with it. I find poems hard to read because I'm such a song person. Poems always read to me like unhinged lyrics.

But the poems that I love are often lynchpins in my life, and I find them returning again and again, and I find myself coming back to them. And there's a handful of them; "Ode on a Grecian Urn", one is "Todesfugue" by Paul Celan. I have to say there's some poets out there that I think are probably considered really corny, but that I love, like, there are poems by Robert Frost that just kill me. But I'm also, like, a huge fan of Norman Rockwell, so... (laughs)

TBS: Speaking of books--how did you end up working with Neil Gaiman?

AFP: Neil was originally introduced to me by Jason Webley, who is a good, good friend of mine, who I've done a lot of touring with. Neil found out about Jason through a recommendation, someone linking him to a video Jason did on YouTube. So, they kicked up an email friendship and then Jason put us in touch because he knew we knew of each other but didn't know each other.

TBS: About the book "Who Killed Amanda Palmer", you've already finished all the photo work for that and Neil's writing the text?

AFP: It's finished and it's being printed as we speak. Today.

TBS: Any idea when it's going to be released?

AFP: It's going to be available for preorder in two weeks and it's going to come out in June.

TBS: So, it's just a short run?

AFP: Oh, I think we'll probably reprint it, I think we'll see how it goes. We're doing 10,000 copies and if they all disappear, we'll look immediately into doing a second edition.
TBS: So, do we get to find out who kills Amanda Palmer?

AFP: No, the book leaves the question pretty open.

TBS: You've threatened to write a book yourself back in January.

AFP: I will keep threatening. I think it's going to be a really long process and I'm just starting to put together vague ideas in my head about what the shape of the book will be like. But I did a long twitter Q&A today and I said it is semi-auto biographical book about performance; and that means performance on the street, performance on the stage--performing your life for other people. Certainly I'll be tied into that and my own work will be tied into that. But I think I want to ask much larger questions that go beyond Amanda Palmer--about why we perform ourselves and how we're received and how we are so conscious of how we perform for other people.

TBS: That'll be very interesting, I'm looking forward to seeing that.

AFP: You'll have to wait awhile. (laughs) I think if I've been preoccupied with anything, or if I'm an expert in anything, it would be the many, many layers of the performance onion.

TBS: About the process of writing lyrics--do you write the words first or music first?

AFP: Usually words--but words that come with music. The words that come with music stay.

TBS: Do you look to find something that you want to write about or do you catch on a few words.

AFP: I catch on a few words

TBS: What do you think is the real lesson of "Oasis " (The video for the song "Oasis" was banned in the UK.)

AFP: (laughs) I think the real lesson is... well there's several. One is that I think the media vastly underestimates the intelligence of its audience and two, I think that the whole thing with Oasis is a very important reminder that you cannot, you must not, put boundaries on artistic expression. At all. You just can't. Because the minute you start trying to put a ceiling there, or a little cap there to keep things safe, you've ruined the idea of what art is supposed to be--which is an expression of anything. I don't spend a lot of time thinking about that, because I've never come up against it. Having come up against it a little bit, it reminds me that we need art desperately to be anything you are able to imagine. No one has to listen to it and no one has to like it. And no one needs to air it or perpetuate it. But you've got to be in a safe enough space to be able to, within the context of artistic expression, really DO anything.

TBS: And since you need to wrap up, I was asked to ask you a question from that friend of mine who is a big fan of yours; she wants to know what is the point of it all.?

AFP: (laughs) She already knows. If she's asking the question--she already knows.
I could feel the chair staring at me from the other side of the room. Upholstered in an emerald and chartreuse paisley pattern that I thought had disappeared along with salad shooters and S&H Greenstamps, I could hear its mocking laughter in the back of my brain.

"I'm here forever, Jack," it whispered, "You'll never be rid of me. She loves me. When she dies she'll leave me to you in her will, and then you will have to keep me. Out of guilt. And it will be just you and me, Jack. Forever."

My wife had brought the chair home from a garage sale. Alice lived for the damned things. Every Saturday morning, dressed in her finest worn jeans, she would get into her faded blue Toyota and make her way down the thin streets of our town, searching for that perfect porcelain shepherd whose head had been haphazardly reattached with Elmer's glue, or tarnished silver music box that played an off key version of "They Way We Were". My wife collected ugly things.

"Ugly things need the most love," she told me the day she brought the first piece of junk home. It was a birdbath made out of spare tires and old, rusty hubcaps. Standing a good four feet tall, it sat in the middle of our tightly trimmed lawn like some monument to all things hideous.

"You're kidding me, right? We're not keeping this thing," I stated. Mr. Johnson from next door was staring at us, his old wrinkled lips pursed in disapproval. He was head of the neighborhood committee whose sole purpose was to keep the community pristine and uniform. An angry note was sure to be in our mailbox by morning.

Alice turned towards me, her blond hair seeming to shine in the late afternoon sun.

"What do you mean, 'we're not keeping it'? This piece is fantastic! It has so much character!"

"Is that what you call it?"

She frowned, small lines forming between her brows. "You really don't like it, do you?"

"It isn't that I don't like it," I began. She raised an eyebrow. She was on to me. I sighed. "No. I think it's hideous."

"Oh." That's all she said. Oh. But it wasn't what she said that ripped a gaping hole in the center of my chest; it was how she said it. Her voice was low, almost imperceptible, her blue eyes, which had been seeming sadder since we moved away from Saint Louis that past spring, had found something very interesting about the toes of her Keds. She looked like a lost child. I felt like a heel. This horrifying atrocity that she had brought home made her happy in a way that I hadn't seen in months. With the amount of time that I had been spending at the office and her not having found a new teaching job, this might just be the pick-me-up she needed. She had saved my life once, bringing light and meaning into my sad, shallow existence; who was I to deny her this?

I put on my best smile. "You know what? Maybe I judged this thing too quickly."

Her head jerked up, her blue eyes meeting mine, "What?"
"I mean, sure, it's not the prettiest thing in the world," I continued, walking slow circles around it as if it was a piece of fine art in a museum and not the bastard love child of the Michelin Man and an engine block, "but it is quite different. A one of a kind piece like this could actually be worth something."

A smile began to work its way across her face. It stopped halfway and reverted back into a frown, "You don't really mean that."

Putting my hands on her shoulders, I pulled her a little closer to me. "Of course I do. Besides," I rested my forehead against hers and tilted my head a bit in Old Man Johnson's direction, "it'll drive Johnson nuts."

There was the smile I had been looking for. She wrapped her arms around me, nuzzling her head into my neck. "I love you. Thank you," she whispered.

I smiled, kissing her hair, "Of course, love," I answered.

Little did I know how much that one small decision would end up taking over my house for the next fifteen years. As time passed, Alice's collection of ugly things grew until it seemed like there wasn't a normal piece of "art" or furniture in the place. There were broken golf clubs in the umbrella rack (which was shaped to look like a fish wearing a top hat and spats), a bright purple shower curtain dotted with palm trees hanging in the bathroom, and a mystery object that could have been some sort of coat rack, but really, I wasn't quite sure. It consisted of mannequin arms nailed to a piece of plywood. It was just plain creepy.

As Alice's ugly thing collecting grew, so did her obsession with garage sales. She had a sure-fire system that assured that she would always reach each garage sale first: she stole the signs. Anywhere she saw them posted: on telephone poles, tacked on the bulletin board at the gym, she would grab them and shove them into her purse where they would then be placed in specific orders based on time or location.

"Don't you think that maybe, just maybe, someone else will want to go to these sales?" I asked one morning as she sorted the cardboard and plastic squares alphabetically by street name.

"Psh," she answered, blowing air between her teeth, "if they wanted to, they could have gotten to the signs first."

"But not everyone shares your, uh," My first thought was neuroses but I knew better than to say that, "passion for these kinds of things." She didn't even spare me a glance, she was so caught up in her alphabetizing. I continued, "Besides, you have a very" tacky "unique taste that I'm not sure everyone would share. It's possible the things you want will still be there."

She finally looked up at me, her eyes half closed in a glare that I knew all too well. It was the one I saw right before she asked me if those jean shorts made her look fat while her ass cheeks were bulging out from the bottom, or if her new hair colour looked alright when it was a shade lingering between horrifying and terrible. That look meant that whatever she was about to ask me, I needed to come up with a lie, and I needed to make her believe it.

"You think I have bad taste, don't you?" she asked.

Marlon Brando never even had a performance this hard.

I took in a deep breath, making sure to put on my most pleasant and loving smile.

"Bad taste? Bad taste? How could you even think something like that about yourself? You have amazing taste! Impeccable, even!"
She raised an eyebrow. Okay, maybe I was laying it on a little too thick. "I mean, look at this stuff," I gestured to a wicker birdcage hanging in a corner of the kitchen, a plastic flamingo missing one neon pink leg trapped safely within, "This? This is lovely. One of a kind. This is art."

She smiled, her cheeks turning a soft pink, "I do fancy myself as something of an artist."

I sighed in relief. Eat that, Brando. "And I fancy you," I replied, wrapping my arms around her from behind her chair and nuzzling a bit into her neck in that way that I knew made her giggle. I moved around beside her, kneeling down so that I was eye level. "Now why don't you get out there and find the... " ugliest "... most beautiful thing you can, and we'll find the perfect spot for it, together."

"You mean that?" She was a little girl again, her eyes overflowing with hope and happiness. I felt a twinge in the base of my stomach, causing me to momentarily wonder if I was really just a horrible person.

"Of course I mean that," I answered, kissing her on the forehead. She smelled lightly of sweat and the lavender potpourri she kept in matching chipped Garfield mugs in every room of the house. She grinned and threw her arms around me before noticing the time on the microwave clock -- 8:43.

"Oh dear! I have to get moving!" She stated, giving me a quick peck on the cheek before running down the hall to the bedroom, her pink robe flapping behind her.

I breathed out a sigh of relief. Now if she could find something only moderately hideous. Something that wouldn't make my eyes bleed every time I looked at it.

However, that night, she brought home The Chair.

"Isn't it wonderful, Jack?" she cried, running her hands over the scratchy green material like one of Bob Barker's prize girls, "It's perfectly preserved! Some little old lady kept it under plastic for almost fifty years! Can you imagine that? Fifty years trapped in plastic? Poor thing."

I knew I had to say something: something nice, supportive. All I could think about was how the colour of the chair reminded me of that pea soup vomit scene from The Exorcist.

I forced a grin. It felt like my face was on fire. "It's... " awful, grotesque, foul, horrible, revolting "... wonderful, dear! Just lovely. I think it's your best find, yet!"

She was positively glowing. "You really think so?"

I softened my smile into something a little less manic, a little most compassionate, "Of course I do. We can put it... " in the garage, in the trash compacter, in the compost heap "... in the foyer!"

Perfect. The only place in the house where it would still be displayed enough to make her happy, yet I would rarely have to look at it. I congratulated myself on such quick thinking.

"I was thinking that it might look better in the living room," she stated, "besides, we never spend any time in the foyer. It's a chair. It should be sat in. Used. Loved." There was that loopy smile, again. I moved my eyes from her hopeful face to the object in question. I could feel it grinning at me, smugly. It knew that there was no way I would go against my wife's wishes. I didn't have it in me to deal with her whining. A wise man once said that a man is never happy unless his wife is happy. For some reason people respond to that idea by saying how sweet it is. Those people are obviously not married.

"That, that sounds great, dear," I answered after a few seconds, "Here. I'll help you move it."

She thanked me with a quick kiss on the cheek before walking into the living room, babbling about where she wanted to stick the damned thing. As I lifted it from the floor I could hear it laughing.
And thus the feud between me and the chair began. It wasn't a one-sided hatred. The chair had it in for me as much as I did for it. It was constantly in my way, sometimes seeming to move from its spot in the corner just in time to trip me or cause me to bang my shin. It had laid claim to my house. It had laid claim to my life. This living room wasn't big enough for the both of us. One of us had to die.

As much as I despised the thing, however, setting it on fire was a complete and total accident.

I had come home from work that night, my mind full of irritated callers and incompetent management. Finding that the house was, for the moment, gloriously empty, I decided to take advantage of the situation and relax the way that I like best: in my underwear in front of the TV with a beer and a cigarette. My wife hated me smoking in the house, but what she didn't know wouldn't hurt me.

Beer in one hand and cigarette in the other, I turned on the television to some ridiculous premium movie full of explosions and breasts. Somewhere in between the hero spouting off some witty one liner and the villain monologuing about how foolproof his plan was, I fell asleep, stretched out on the couch, my cigarette laden hand dangling over the vomitous green chair that, once again, seemed to have moved itself. Maybe it wanted a better view of the TV. Maybe it just wanted to continue to make my life miserable. Whatever the case, it shouldn't have been there.

I awoke to the smell of smoke and the fire alarm beeping shrilly in my ears. In my haste to see what the hell was going on, I tumbled off of the couch, banging my head against the coffee table before coming face to face with a foot tall flame eating away at the cushion of the chair. I could hear it screaming.

It was then that I remembered that my wife did, indeed, love that chair and would be rather put out of anything serious were to happen to it. And that our homeowner's insurance didn't fully cover fire.

Rising to my knees, I quickly grabbed my half-empty beer in one hand and a brown and pink throw pillow in the other and proceeded to douse and beat the cushion into a smoldering bit of black and green. The immediate crisis taken care of, I ripped the alarm from the wall and made my rounds throughout the bottom floor of the house, opening the windows to let out as much smoke as possible before my wife got home.

I was just about to flip the cushion over in an attempt to hide as much of the evidence as possible when I heard the front door creak open.

"Jack?" she called from the front hall, her heels clicking on the tile.

I froze, adrenaline pumping, fight or flight instinct kicking in. My eyes flicked towards the kitchen. Only 100 or so feet to the back door. I could make it. She would never know.

"Jack?" she called again, her voice laced with worry.

My mouth answered before my mind had a chance to keep up, "I'm in here, honey." I cringed, mentally kicking myself. Good job, there, brain. Way to keep on top of things.

"Honey, why does the house-- " She stopped in the doorway to the living room, her hand raised to her mouth. Her purse dropped to the floor.

"Uh, hi honey," I tried to be casual, hiding as much of the torched chair as I could behind me.

"What did you do to the chair?!"
"What chair?" I backed up a bit further, trying to spread myself out as large as possible.

She was in front of me in an instant, her shock and anger giving her the same magical teleportation powers the chair had, "What chair?" she ducked under my elbow. Her new powers included super speed as well. "My new chair that you're hiding behind--oh my god." She recoiled, horrified.

"Honey, look I-- "

Her neck twisted at an awkward angle as she jerked her head up towards me, her eyes glowing in a way I had never seen, before.


"I kind of accidentally set it on fire," I answered.

"You set it on fire?!" Her eyes were green coals.

"Now dear-- "

"Don't you 'now dear' me! Why would you set it on fire?! What would ever possess you to do such a thing?!" The skin of her face began to slide from her skull.

I hate the damned chair. "I hate the damned chair." Oh. Shit.

The flames fell from her eyes, doused by the cool waters of hurt. Her skin tightened, smoothed.

"You... you hate the chair?"

I sighed, "Yes."

"You hate the chair?"

"Yes, Alice. I hate that chair." I chuckled a bit, relieved, "Whew, you know it actually feels really good to say that. I hate that chair. It's so goddamned ugly that the chair doesn't even like the chair!" I pointed for emphasis. The chair moaned a bit from the pain of its burns. I kicked it.

My wife's mouth was open, her nose turning red. Her eyes begged me to stop, but for some reason I just couldn't. I had found a type of high I had only dreamed of: the truth.

"And you know what else I hate? That awful flamingo!"

"You hate the flamingo?" she whispered. I barely heard her.

"And that TV fish tank and that atrocious painting of Elvis playing blackjack with Jesus," a little voice in the back of my head was telling to shut up, but the rest of my little voices just weren't having it. They were cheering me on, throwing me a little party in my brain.

"And you know what else I hate?" I asked, turning back towards her. Her face had closed in upon itself, silent tears dripping from her nose and chin. She looked like one of those dried potato puppets we had seen at the annual Fourth of July craft festival the year before. Except soggy. Women in movies looked beautiful, tragic when they cried. My wife was not a woman in a movie.

"What?" she answered, her voice hitching in her throat, "what else do you hate, Jack?"

I gently took her face in my hands, tracing my thumbs over her skin, "I hate the way you look when you cry," I answered. Her eyes cleared for a moment, "And yet," I continued, "I really don't want to make you stop."
Her mouth hardened into a line as her eyes hardened into steel. I had been expecting her to collapse, sobbing, to play the weak and shattered card, to show me how much she needed my approval. Instead she straightened her shoulders, pushing my hands away from her face. Without a word she stalked back towards the doorway of the room, picking back up her discarded purse. Half way out she turned back, looking around before setting her gaze back on me.

"This is a house full of ugly things," she stated, "you fit in here, perfectly."

That said, she turned and left, her heels on the front tile and the sound of the heavy front door as it slammed resonating in my ears.

I exhaled, allowing myself to fall back into the soggy, scorched chair.

It was surprisingly comfortable.
She has the best rack I've ever seen.

As I sit ogling it, I ponder whether they are real. If they are, I am jealous and curse God for giving her the kind of chest that makes even girls stare and giving me nothing more than two overgrown mosquito bites.

If they are not real, I contemplate asking her if I could feel them.

I'm dying to know what implants feel like. What her implants feel like. Are they like water balloons gently sloshing beneath the skin? Do they harden like rocks or warp like an unfinished wood floor, contorting, rippling?

I'm sitting next to her in class, supposed to be listening, but I can't. I cannot take my eyes off of her. I study her. I analyze her.

When I walked into the room I noticed she was there, almost immediately. My heart stopped.

"Is anyone sitting here?" I asked.

"You are", she said, moving her bag.

The cocoon in my stomach tore open; the butterflies violently flapped their wings.

I get to sit next to her, I thought. And the longer I sat, the more I thought. This will make me important by association. Everyone knows her, admires her. The other students in the room will see me sitting next to her, assume we are friends and hold me in the same esteem. The awe and admiration I will attract for being perceived of as her friend, for being perceived of as being like her will make me content.

Will make me enough.

I've watched her from afar for awhile now. Her long hair swishes when she walks, flowing gently down her back like a terra-cotta waterfall. She has these deep eyes and when she looks at you she sees you--she really sees you--making you feel like you are the only other person in the room. When she is not concentrating on school she is smiling, talking, everyone seems to know her. Everything about her is authentic--her leather motorcycle jacket is not a fashion statement; she really rides a bike. She does not teach pole dancing classes because it's the newest fad; she actually is a dancer. She walks confidently, gallantly, balancing strength with beauty; a level head with a free spirit.

The professor lectures, but my focus remains unchanged. She is oblivious to me, engaged in the lecture, her fingers clicking away at the keys of her laptop as she takes notes. I strain to read them, to get into her head and see how she thinks. Does she write down what the professor says verbatim or does she paraphrase? I can't really see.

I look around the classroom to see if anyone notices who I'm sitting next to. If anyone is trying to read my notes.
If anyone is transfixed on me, fascinated, silently thinking *I wonder if she had a breast reduction, and if so, I'd like to feel them.*

No one is looking.

I look at her again, studying her features, taking in her unconventional perfection.

I want to be like that.

I want to be her.

I see her chest rise and fall as she breathes and wish that when she exhales, her confidence will waft out so I could inhale it. Then, I think, I'd know what it feels like to be happy. Then, I think, I could be more like her.

If I was more like her, it would be okay to be me.

She can feel the weight of my stare and turns toward me. I smile, embarrassed.

*I am such a fuck up*, I think to myself. *Who does that? Who stares at people with crazy, mad intensity like that? What are you doing? That's what psychos do! Psychos and stalkers and pedophiles!*

I go back to scanning the room.

Still, no one is looking at me.

I look out the window, just over her shoulder, wishing to be sucked up into the ominous clouds that loom overhead.

***

We've only really ever spoken twice. The first time was last June during a lecture at school. She caught me staring at her and I explained, red faced, that I was just studying her tattoos, the two full sleeves that decorate her toned arms. She smiled and nodded as if this had happened many times before. One arm, she explained, was her "candy arm". Upon closer inspection I saw that it was whimsically covered, shoulder to wrist, with pastel-colored candies reminiscent of childhood. A Peep chick, Starlight mints, a scattering of Candy Corn, a spoonful of sugar. She smiled, a kind, genuine smile, and went back to her work. I racked my brain to think of something to say, some way of extending the conversation, but the moment had passed.

I would refer to this conversation repeatedly over the next six months. Every time I talked to someone with a tattoo, I felt compelled to bring her up. *I go to school with a girl and she has a candy arm*, I'd say.

Once when my husband and I were out to dinner, our server had a large tattoo draping across her cleavage. I remember her chest was definitely real, the kind of breasts that probably hit the floor when she takes off her bra. I would not touch them with a ten-foot pole. I don't remember what her tattoo said.

"I like your tattoo," I told her.

This was not true.

My husband had heard this many times over the past few months. He rolled his eyes. He knew what was coming next.
"She knows someone who has a candy arm," he said dryly. "A sleeve with candy on it." He said this as if he was no longer amused, or maybe was never amused by it in the first place.

The server smiled, a phony waitressing-smiling-for-tips smile, pretending to be interested.

The second time we spoke was six months later. A classmate formally introduced us because of our shared passion for pole dancing.

"Look! I have both your pole dancing pictures on my computer!" The classmate opened her laptop, excitedly pointing and clicking to retrieve the saved images.

"No. No. Really, don't pull those up..." I stammered. I didn't want her to see me. See what a loser I am, see us contrasted like that.

On one side of the screen: a professional, pinup-esque shot of her on the pole. Her penetrating gaze staring out of the photo, a coy smirk crossing her sultry red lips. Her deep red hair, set in curls cascades elegantly over her shoulder.

On the other side: me in my run-down apartment's living room the day my pole arrived. I am grinning like an overzealous five-year-old on Christmas morning as I dangle like an amateur from the newly set up pole, playing up to the camera in ratty gym shorts and a tank top.

"That's very good." She nodded at me in approval.

I couldn't understand how she could be so genuinely nice about a picture that was so genuinely awful. While her picture was reminiscent of Bettie Page, mine looked like the white-trash stripper they stick in the corner at the local dive; the scrawny, ugly one who has to resort to blow jobs to earn her rent because she's got no tits. The one who attracts comments like "Is them there titties all ya got? Take this here twenty and go getcha some fake ones. When ya getcha some titties you can come dance for me 'cuz I'd sure like ta feel 'em"

***

My whole life I played by the rules.

I did my homework in high school and got into a good university, where I joined a sorority like I was expected to. I wore my hair the way everyone else did. I wore the clothes that Glamour said I should. I gave head the way Cosmo said I was supposed to. I was careful not to raise any eyebrows or take any risks. There were chances I wanted to take, lives I wanted to try out, but I squelched the thoughts as soon as they entered my head. Because nice Jewish girls do not get tattoos. Nice Jewish girls do not become strippers. Nice Jewish girls do not go down on other girls. Nice Jewish girls do not sleep with black football players. Nice Jewish girls do not learn to play the drums and join rock bands.

In college I learned my place and played it well; nice Jewish girls snort lines of coke up their cosmetically altered noses. They forcibly throw up after eating and have one night stands with frat boys. Then they get married and refrain from attracting attention. So I honed my edges, grinding them down, smoothing the corners, trying to be that puzzle piece that fits perfectly into the center of the picture.

But at 29, playing by the rules has gotten me nowhere.

I do not have a career--I barely even have a job. I do not own a house. I do not own my car. My bank accounts are empty. I sit home on Friday nights because I have no friends. My voicemail box is perpetually empty. My only emails are from Amazon.com reminding me that my books are on the way. I ground myself down to the point where I am not sharp enough to fit into my fantasy
world, yet no matter how hard I try to jam myself into the real world, I do not fit into that puzzle either. I don't fit in anywhere.

And for everything I am, she is the opposite. She dared to take the risks I did not and lived the life I wanted to live. The desires I pushed out of my mind, she embraced. The chances I was too afraid to take, she grabbed for. The experiences I will never have are tucked safely away in her memory. She refused to compromise her many angles and complexities, but seamlessly fits in anywhere. She got the tattoos. Became the exotic dancer. She rubs elbows with rock stars and artists and iconoclastic writers. She wears her hair the way she wants to, wears the clothes she likes, gives head to whomever she wants, without a magazine dictating which way her tongue should move. She didn't play by the rules but shattered them into a million tiny pieces.

A million tiny pieces. Like my dreams. Like the life I wanted. Like the life I could have had.

The life she's lived is recorded on her arm: whimsical, colorful, sweet.

My arm is ashen. Pasty. Dull.

***

I see her in the hallway of school just before I leave to fly back to Ohio.

"I'm writing a story about you." I blurt this out before I even realize what I'm doing. Immediately I wish I'd said nothing. I want to disappear. I look down at the floor, willing it to open up and swallow me. It doesn't.

She smiles graciously and tells me she is flattered.

"I'll let you see it as soon as it's finished," I say. Then I sheepishly hurry out the double doors into the courtyard.

And I wonder what happens next.

I wonder if she will know that she matters to me, that she inspires me. I wonder if someone with such ample confidence and abundant beauty could ever notice someone as flat and empty as me.

And I wonder if I will ever have my own candy arm; a candy arm as stunning and brilliant as hers.
Frère Jacques

When we were young we would clash with nails and teeth and snot to prove irreconcilable points until you got too tall for it to be okay to beat up on your big sister who may have earned a venomous flogging but who was in the end a girl, exempt.

When we went to separate colleges, science and liberal arts, we would meet and trade myths of our rampages, drink dark beer over stringed instruments and draw out all parallels in all lives by Rock compass and Roll conduit in rhyming 4/4 tangos.

When I came to visit you and your wife you let me wear your labcoat and goggles and pretend to turn dials controlling the evilest lasers laughing manically and big-haired where I wasn't allowed and I read you a poem in which physicists are feral.

When we are old and you have forgotten all language but math and I all numbers but words let us meet and listen to the old songs and play stiff rhythmic guitar with arthritic hands and let this be the proof of our translation.

Fear of Flying

At some point I realize if this plane goes down my epitaph will be the video of me dancing to Led Zeppelin in my underwear that I emailed to twenty-five good-humored friends embedded in a clipart Christmas card yesterday. Anything written since is inside the computer, impotent and by no means black-box armored on my lap, so for all purposes, that snippet would be the last thing I ever made. Had I known I would have balanced the colors better, tweaked some of the weaker cuts. All my buddies willubber over the silly clip, because doesn't it say so much about who she was? Creative, droll, a music lover, and one who looked more than passable in skivvies toward the end. Evident she worked out. Cared about herself. I guess this has to be okay, and probably serves some sort of grand-scheme poignancy that I can't really see clearly right now since it's hard to have much perspective when you're curled in coach, kowtowing with agnostic prayerlets while the people around who must care to seem brave or jaded in matters of life and death dismiss these violent rattles with grumbles and grunts as just friendly sky jostling, like the wind is trying to get the stuffy plane to loosen up. It's okay I think that I didn't call before takeoff and say again I love you or even worse, I'm scared. I said I love you before in the calm and besides it is generally known, and frightened near-death I Love Yous are rarely read as genuine and not to be trusted, if war and cancer have taught us anything. Better like this to move on with quiet hopeful goodbyes and a goofy video. There are worse ways to exit. And as for I'm scared, the weather is worse than I thought it would be but we're still going to take off, well, no one can really share fear anyway, even if right there, watching the sleet whip up the sides of the tin albatross, the great manufactured air whale, its fins getting hosed down with some neon chemist's brew fabled to repel ice like crosses repel fiends in old stories as the storm mouths us wetly, and up I go into the chill shudders, legacy left, organs strained to the ether, everything vital safe on the ground.
Machel Spence started photographing people and places before she knew she was interested in a career in photography. She majored in Zoology and was constantly amazed at how symmetrical and unique everything relating to the biological world was. She photographs pretty much everything, but tiny things are her specialty. She hopes that her photography ignites a passion in anyone that views it to try and take a closer look at the beauty that surrounds us. www.spencephotography.com
Machel Spence
"Amos. Amos! Wake up now Amos. Day's a wasting. Land sake now, Amos. Sun's been up for almost a good full hour and there you lay just a usin' up what precious little time the good Lord gave you."

Amos Martin opened his eyes slowly. He had slept fitfully, disturbed by confusing dreams, and their uneasy feelings lingered. Annie was right. The sun was well up. It poured in through the open blinds, cutting a sparkling swath through floating particles of dust, settling warmly on the old floral print wall paper that had been in the bedroom ever since they'd bought the house. Forty-two years of loving and living together and this simple room hadn't changed a bit. Same old plain pine chest-of-drawers and night tables that he called "coffin wood junk" and his wife called antiques; same old threadbare woven throw rugs covering the hardwood floor.

"You need something honest and easy to return to in this life." That was Annie's reason for keeping their bedroom an oasis of familiar comfort in an otherwise changing world. They had spent their first night together in it, just the way it was now. Amos suspected his wife's memories ran a little deeper than his own. Women feel things ways men just weren't made to. But when he gave it the thought, he knew she was right. He was as happy as a man was meant to be. It was nice to have something to hold on to.

"Amos, I declare! Your eyes are open but I swear you're still asleep. Don't you leave me here talking to myself." Annie reached down and tugged his pillow out from under his head and gave it a solid thwack with the palm of her hand. A fresh burst of glittering dust was released, swirling to the energetic rhythm of her mock anger in the streaming sunlight. Amos smiled, the memory of a long edgy nightmare began to evaporate.

So it had just been a bad dream. "Have a snack too late at night, expect your dreams to run a fright." Annie had a couplet of wisdom for every occasion. She used to lay that one on their son Benjamin when he was little and tried the timeless childhood ruse of faked hunger to stall off bedtime. Amos tried to think back to what he had eaten before bed, but could not with any certainty. Probably a couple of Annie's fresh baked Schmecken rolls. Even if he wasn't hungry they were always too good to pass up.

"Come get breakfast 'fore it's too late. May have to warm it you lazy bag of bones. Abraham crowed an hour ago."

Amos pictured their old rooster strutting majestically along the top rail of the wooden fence that kept their few cows from grazing the yard. "Haven't we eaten him yet? Soon be too tough to enjoy."

"Amos! For pity sake, what a terrible thing to say. You know I can cook anything to just as tender as mercy. Now let's get a move on."

At face value some would call it "nagging" or, if they felt the need to be modern and vulgar, "bitching." But Amos knew that these manifestations of Annie's wit and humor were too grounded in love to be considered either. It was just her way of expressing affection and need, of drawing him out and into her life whenever he grew withdrawn.

"Now Annie, you know I'm just shucking. Old Abe is like family. I could no more take him to the block than I could old Gurdy." Gertrude was the name Annie had given the large stupid bird that had been their turkey up until last Thanksgiving.
"I declare, Amos, if you get any more sour you'll start to curdle. Where's the kind and gentle man I married?"

Amos could recall Annie in her wedding dress with a vividness that dimmed the present, her long red hair painstakingly braided with white ribbons and fine yellow rosebuds. Fresh, flushed and achingly lovely. Nervous. Excited. All his. No, only almost his. An open challenge. Always a challenge.

Suddenly, Amos saw another much older likeness dressed in formal grey, laid calm in a narrow bed of satin and lilies, her complexion sallow beneath artificial rouges that she normally eschewed. She had always shunned makeup when she was alive. The thought blew through him like a December draft from an open door.

"Amos! You gone again already. If the Lord had wanted me to be alone he would have made me a spinster."

Amos looked with relief into the hazel eyes and upon the natural aged beauty of the woman he loved. "I'm sorry. Got something on my mind, can't seem to work through. Sounds silly, but I can't even say exactly what it is."

"You're getting old and lazy. That's what it is. You need more to do, and less to stew. I got a house full of chores to fix what ails you mister."

Annie was right as usual. He should have never shared out all the land. Next year he'd keep forty just to putter on, plant beans, maybe subcontract hogs again. An empty barn is a sad place for sure.

"Had a funny dream last night. Wish I could remember. Everything in it was so fuzzy. Everything except this sound that is."

"What sound was that Amos?" Annie had the wisdom to know when to push and when to pull.


Annie's laugh sounded like the unsuccessfully suppressed giggles of a little girl. "You fell asleep in your old rocker down in front of the television. Coaxing you to bed was like trying to make a mule walk backwards."

Amos tried harder to recall. He had been in his rocking chair. Oddly, it had still been with him when everything else he owned was gone. And yes, there had been a TV on last night, but a large color box, not his small black-and-white RCA. He could hear the vibrating blare of canned laughter, meandering musical themes and the gibberish of many accents, but could not remember any particular program. The channels were constantly changing, and pastel women kept interrupting him with annoying, mindless requests.

"Go to the bathroom now." a voice would order. Or, "Swallow now," and something sweet with a very bitter aftertaste would be spooned into his mouth.

There had been others present, lots of others, strangers like him, background people, lost and broken, full of silent suffering. Some not so silent. It had been a starkly lit place full of gaudy colored vinyl and chrome, where a stale tobacco smell lingered beneath another that was both antiseptic and dirty.

This had not been his comfortable den with its oak trim, soft yellow table lighting, subdued earth tones and the warm musty smell of decaying parchment.

"Annie," Amos said more to himself than to his wife, "I am glad we've always gone to church."
Her eyes spoke of sympathy and understanding. Her silence bade him continue.

"I believe that in my dream I died and that the Lord showed me Hell last night." Amos paused to collect the experience in a way Annie could comprehend. "It was a very bad place, different than I would have expected. Even worse maybe. It was a place of endless humiliation and boredom."

Amos thought he saw an unstated question pass across Annie's face. This was not the Hell she had been taught to fear.

Amos tried to clarify for her. "There was not even the variety of night and day, just the same nothingness played over and over. But you know what was worst of all?" He began to shake as the horror of it became clear in his own mind.

Annie took his hand to steady it, but still did not interrupt.

"The worst thing about it was the total lack of privacy, and... " Amos paused, knowing what he was about to say contradicted itself. "... and the utter loneliness of it." Amos stopped to stifle a sob which threatened to break his voice.

Annie sat down next to where he lay, the feel of the mattress sagging, drawing him in her direction, strangely satisfying.

"It isn't like that," she finally spoke. "Only life is sometimes like that." Her voice had taken on an authority, a somber surety that was new to him.

Amos again looked up into Annie's face. She was smiling now. It made her look younger and even more beautiful than ever. The window with the sun full in it was behind her, yet did not make him squint or hurt his eyes. Instead it cast a bright halo around her, framing her features in a glorious flame of harmonic light patterns. Then she was leaning over him. No, he was sitting up, rising up effortlessly towards her. Then he knew that they would always be together.
Bookshops

It's easier to write
in bookshops;

words hum
on shelves,

drawing out
my heart's strange ink.

Kitchen lion

There's a lion in my kitchen;
he's ransacking the fridge,
long, yellow tongue smoothing down
butter, lapping milk,
whiskers glistening
in the soft, encapsulating glow.

He snuffles warmly
as he catches the scent of coffee granules
and sucks in apricot jam, honey,
golden kiwi fruit, toffee yoghurt, orangeade,
sherry, beer,
tail flickering menace at the narrow plastic light
as he finishes up the half bottle
of Dom Perignon
I was saving for a special occasion
once.

Every morning now,
I tiptoe round his traces,
docile, lamb-like,
almost afraid
and later, in the dark, lie couched and waiting
in the deep green bed,
enraptured by possibility
and his magical, mystical presence.

There's a lion in my kitchen tonight --
perhaps every woman has one.
Sick and tired of the negativity and depressing nature of the grunge Seattle music scene, and inspired by a chance encounter in a Hong Kong karaoke bar, Paul Diamond Blow hooked up with some former band-mates and formed glam/punk band The Space Cretins. "It's a spiritual thing," says Blow, frontman and lead guitarist for the band. "But we're much more than just another 3-chord rock band. We're a 3-chord band with a Plan..."

According to the Space Cretins charter, there are four requirements to becoming a band member: 1) must be attractive to the ladies 2) must love big, dumb rock 3) must be a great performer and 4) must be attractive to the ladies.

Hailing from the aptly named "Jet City" Seattle, WA, the Space Cretins bring a heavy dose of super-cyber punk rock-n-roll with a neon kick for the good times. Imagine Ziggy Stardust with The Ramones as his tour band and you've got The Space Cretins--a sound that takes the energy of punk, the snottiness of glam, and the groove of 80's L.A. sleaze rock.

Their CD "Direct from the Superfreak Highway" was released in November 2008 and is available at CDBaby.com

Hear them on Myspace at http://www.myspace.com/spacecretins
On YouTube at: http://www.youtube.com/paulblow13
General Mayhem Online (merch/tour dates/etc) here: http://paulblow.tripod.com/spacecretins.html

TBS: I have to mention something right away. You were pushed, inspired by William Shatner in Hong Kong? Please explain what happened in your own words.

PDB: First off, this is a 100% true story that actually happened, you probably read only the short version on the internet. There I was, in Hong Kong on business--don't ask what kind!--back in the Fall of 2002. I was partying down one night at a karaoke bar, just maxin' and relaxin', having a good time--I think it was a place called the Blue Flaming Dragon--and low and behold there was William Shatner hanging out in the same place! He actually did an awesome karaoke version of "Blue Velvet", spoken word style of course, and I did a somewhat lame version of "November Rain". Anyway, Bill and I got to talking. He actually approached me telling me he too was an Axl Rose fan, and he also said I had a "Spock" haircut. I guess back then I kind of did, only shaggier. So Bill and I talked all night over drinks about spoken word, literature, philosophy and music. Bill convinced me that the time was right for a "super-cyber rock-n-roll band", as he put it. Something like David Bowie used to do with Ziggy Stardust, but updated with some sleaze rock and punk rock influences, such as the Ramones, and done totally loud and bangin'! The loud and bangin' part was my idea. I wrote the whole thing down on a napkin, stuffed it in my pocket, and completely forgot about it the next day when I sobered up. A month later while doing laundry I found the napkin and it all came back to me. I immediately bought some brand new Les Paul guitars and proceeded to write and record a batch of high-octane "super-cyber" rock songs which later became the basis for the Space Cretins as a band. The rest is history.
**TBS:** So you guys have these strange super hero/glam personas how did that come about? And what is your role in the band?

**PDB:** Well, we do have special powers besides being able to rock so amazingly well. Our drummer, Danger Dayne Bam Bam, can bend silverware with the power of his mind—he's actually been thrown out of restaurants for that. Our bass player, Scotty Astronaughty, has X-ray vision in one eye and our new guitarist, Danny Heartthrob, can talk to animals. I myself have the power of mental telepathy. In fact when I write a new song I transmit it to the other members while they sleep; that way they automatically know the song when they wake up. I think it's a lot more interesting when a band takes on a persona. I mean, who cares about a band who are just normal Joes that enjoy wearing blue jeans and playing music? Not me, that's boring. I like to think of the Space Cretins as sophisticated, futuristic, leather-clad comic book characters who know how to rock, know how to party, know how to put on a show, and know how to show a lady a good time. Imagine characters from the Matrix movies beaming in on stage and rocking out. That's what I want to see at a show. That's my role in the band, I'm the visionary. I'm also the spiritual leader of the band. Before each and every show we play I always lead the other members in Tai Chi exercises to loosen up and create fusion... fusion of mind and body.

**TBS:** It's been mentioned you must be attractive to the ladies as one of the requirements for being in the band. But what is attractive to ladies? Every girl is different... hmmm?

**PDB:** That is true that every girl is different. When I say a Space Cretin must be attractive to the ladies, I mean ladies of the glam/punk/rock-n-roll variety... we don't care about normal women who would rather go out with Brad Pitt than Paul Stanley or Joey Ramone. And most rock-n-roll-type women do think the Space Cretins are sexy. It's a spiritual sexuality actually. It's not just about looks, it's about personality, charisma, charm, and self-confidence. I'm going to write a book about it one day and call it "How To Pick Up Chicks: the Paul Diamond Blow Method."

**TBS:** Any other bands people may recognize you from previous to the Space Cretins?

**PDB:** I've been in several other bands back in the day including RPA--a metal/punk band; the Suffocated -- another metal/punk/hardcore band with a GBH/Motorhead influence; the Ace Diamond Bimbos--a party rock band ala KISS which also featured Danger Dayne Bam Bam on drums; and most notably the Berserkers which was yet another metal/punk band with a Motorhead influence. Motorhead was a big influence on my early bands. The Space Cretins is the most rock-oriented, non-metal band of them all, though. I guess you can say I've matured as an artist... in a retarded sort of way. Every band I've been in has been cool. I would not be in an un-cool band.

**TBS:** You describe the Seattle music scene as bi-polar. Explain that label a bit more.

**PDB:** Let's face it, the rock music scene in Seattle has been dominated by bands that play depressing and/or angry music ever since the grunge era in the '90s. We've now got tons of metal, punk and hardcore bands that play heavy, dark, and pissed off music. Ugly music for ugly people, is what I like to call it. It's quite negative really. The message seems to be "life sucks" or "life sucks so let's messed up" rather than "life is fantastic, let's have a good time". Life doesn't really suck, not if you know how to enjoy and appreciate it. Paul Stanley said something like that...
about Seattle bands at his concert here last year, and he was right. I told him so after the show. Personally, I don't want to listen to music that makes me feel depressed or angry. I want to hear music that will energize me with positive vibes and pump me up, put me in a good mood. That's what the Space Cretins are all about--we want to pump you up and make you feel good. We are the "Prozac" of punk rock. I sing about "getting high" a lot, but I'm not singing about getting high on drugs, it's a spiritual high I sing about. I'm a spiritual person after all, I believe in ghosts, aliens, the supernatural world. There's a lot out there, man! There's a lot more to sing about than fast cars and drinking beer.

TBS: Big, dumb rock. What IS that? I see it's a requirement for band members.

PDB: Big, dumb rock is rock music that is simple in it's riffage yet contains hooks and melodies that make for good songs, done with loud sizzling power chords played on Les Pauls and delivered through Marshall stacks. The lyrics don't have to be pretentious poetry, either. They don't even have to make sense. The lyrics can be totally silly and stupid--they just have to sound good with the music. KISS is a good example of big, dumb rock. So are the Ramones, my favorite retardo-rock band of all time.

TBS: So was Shatner a big revolution for you guys, or did it just add to the already craziness of the band's attitude?

PDB: William Shatner is one of my idols. It's his whole cheesy personality that does it for me. I mean, he does not take himself seriously at all, he knows how to have fun with his image. I totally love his acting style, his spoken word stuff, his whole vibe really. It's all about the cheese. I also love the cheesy stuff and I don't take myself too seriously at all! Bill made an appearance in our Space Cretins TV cartoon show, which aired on the public access TV stations last year; that was a real treat.

TBS: What inspires your music and style?

PDB: I'm what you might call a "hybrid" rocker... I take all the best things from glam rock, punk rock, classic rock and even new wave and mix-mash it together with a dash of sauce to make one Paul Diamond Blow. That's an original recipe and I do have it trademarked. The bands and musicians that have inspired me the most are the Ramones, KISS, David Bowie, Keith Richards, Iggy Pop, plus newer bands such as the Toilet Boys and the Space Age Playboys. David Bowie, though--he truly inspires me. I think he's the most talented artist of our time and I love the way he constantly reinvents himself. I'm also inspired by the martial arts (of which I'm a practitioner), low-brow art, Planet of the Apes and Kentucky Fried Chicken.

TBS: How would you describe the audience you attract?

PDB: Well, we're not the kind of band whose audience all looks or dresses the same, who all have mohawks, or consists of just large, sweaty, shirtless bald men with tribal tattoos. We get a large assortment of types from all genres, plus people who don't fit in with any certain clique; free thinkers, artists, lovers, former junkies, high rollers, hot moms, small dogs, playboy bunnies, and androids of all sexes... we are the "melting pot" of punk rock! But mostly we attract people who just want to have fun and rock out with their genitals out. Supposedly, Kevin Bacon's nephew's best friend's former room mate is a huge fan.

TBS: And lastly, who does that makeup of yours?

PDB: You're probably referring to a couple "glammy" photos I have up on Myspace. Really, I don't wear makeup much at all, although I do have a thing for black lipstick. I think it looks good on me, it goes good with the black hair. Aside from that, I also enjoy some glitter lip gloss once in a while. But to me, glam rock
isn't about wearing tons of makeup or dressing up in drag. It's more about the attitude, about being young, loud and snotty. I'm sassy like that. And here submitted for your amusement is my spoken word piece titled "KFC Drivethru" originally published in my book "Ramblings of a Rock Star":

Succulent chicken meat dangling on ice
and William Shatner on my mind.
beam me up to bliss
hunger strikes high around midnight
and sometimes noon. There remains a
Feast to be devoured so I
hurry in my 1984 Cutlass Supreme
to gain ecstasy and perhaps
cherry pie heaven...

"May I take your order?"
"Might I have a pound of unfeathered flesh meat,
sauced to perfection extra crispy
a morsel for a man of exquisite tastes
and humble desires... thighs fleshy and tender,
breasts full of desire and yet tangy and sweet...
my tongue awaits your pleasures..."
"Would you like anything to drink with that?"
"A glass of ice water would be lovely..."

And so it goes...

TBS: Ah, lovely Shatner reference there, yet again. So when did you write this piece and what was the inspiration?

PDB: I wrote "KFC Drivethru" in 1998 or so, it was a takeoff on a comedy piece I had once written about ordering a meal at KFC and I took that and turned it into a free-form spoken word piece.

TBS : Do you read poetry and if so, who?

PDB: No, I do not read poetry, but I do enjoy the spoken word stuff, especially when it's not too serious. My favorite spoken word artist would have to be Korey Clarke, singer for the New York band Warrior Soul. His stuff is dynamite.

TBS : Is this piece published or in process of?

PDB: It was published in my poetry book called "Ramblings of a Rock Star", which I actually had only 100 copies printed, most of which I gave away for free. I also made a video out of it which aired a few times on the public access stations around Seattle, and you can find the video on the internet and the poem itself is on a few websites here and there.

TBS : Do you think reading or writing poetry is underrated, and if so, in what ways?

PDB: No, I don't think it's underrated, after all it's just words! I like to write it for fun and the way I do it is I just start typing the first thing that pops in my mind and just let it ramble. More often than not, it results in cool little ditty. It also helps to play some Iggy Pop while writing, for some reason. I always thought the spoken word thing was cool live. I think it's great at punk rock shows in between bands, but you rarely see it done like that anywhere. The first time I ever performed spoken word live was at an SNFU show way back when. I performed a hastily written piece, something about "circling birds" and SNFU backed me up with weird sound effects. It was cool.
TBS: You write for the "Seattle Sinner"--tell us a bit about that and other things you have written for.

PDB: A friend of mine who writes for the Seattle Sinner told me I should write a sex advice column for the magazine. I thought, what the heck, why not put a twist on that and write an advice column from the "players" point of view. So I called my first column "Ask the Player". Kind of a humorous advice column about picking up chicks and being a loverman. It was a joke, of course. The Player thing was good for a couple issues but I've since changed my column into what I now call "Huggy Talk" in which I write about myself, my world, and the people that live in it. I also write about people, places, bands, or things I think are cool and are worthy of some press. I've always enjoyed writing. As a youth, I actually wrote what would have been the sixth Planet of the Apes film. My novel was called "Survivors of the Planet of the Apes". I wrote a couple hundred pages but then ran out of steam. It was pretty good for a twelve-year-old, though. I also write articles and items for a couple of internet websites, but the "Sinner" is the only print magazine I write for. Writing to me is another way to express myself besides music.

TBS: Fabulous, thanks for your time and talent

PDB: You're welcome, and keep on rockin' like Dokken!
Hugh Fox’s “Collected Poetry” has just been published by World Audience in NYC—this is his 110th book. He has published sixty-five books of poetry, a book on French film, three books on South American archaeology, critical studies of Bukowski, Lifshin, and critical studies of the poets/poetry of the 60’s and 70’s. Although he has 5 published novels, he still has some 34 unpublished novels much in the style/world-view of Virginia Woolf and Aldous Huxley, etc. World Audience published his archaeology book called “Rediscovering America” in April.

Cinto de Siempre

Coffee-time,
talk-time,
before I even get there
you’re already
here,
searching the lilacs, red-bed trees, the
Japanese knot-weed for
faces and
commandments for sanity,
as if they’d never
been
instead of just
getting shattered by the inanity of
siglo 20-21.
Rosarito Rendezvous
Steven D. Bennett

There are hints when a marriage is falling apart.

Your wife starts working out at the gym. You find your clothes in a pile on the front lawn on fire. You find another guy in your bed. Little hints.

I sat across the table staring at her. Julie was looking away. Between us was a printout of computer activity--hers--a dozen or more emails sent from her to an address. Studnailz10p@... Studnailz? Either she had a sudden interest in home improvement or I was being played for the biggest chump in the world.

"Well?"

She looked at me for the first time in a long time. "Well what?"

I motioned my hand toward the pile.

"What do you want me to say?" she said.

The response of no-response, but it stopped me cold. What did I want her to say? "I love you. I've never loved anyone else. You're the only one who could make me happy." She had said those words once, long ago. None of them, now disarranged and scattered upon another, would satisfy. Not after so many years had been so casually thrown away.

"I don't know," I answered lamely. "All I know is this-- " I motioned to the papers, "-- won't happen. Ever. Not ever."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really." I pushed away from the table unconvinced.

You could say it was my fault, and if you're a woman you most certainly would.

I'd spent the past two years building a business and my efforts were finally beginning to pay off. Clients and referrals take time, and consulting is too ethereal to be felt; the value is seen long after the checks are cashed and the consulteur has moved on. Psychics get a better rap, and maybe rightly so. 'Those who can, do; those who can't... ' and then insert your own job. Mine was consulting... computer software, of all things, as unromantic as it gets. So for two years Julie and I began passing in the hall, and I was the guy came in late and woke up early. The lump in the bed, the shadow in the dark. And we started communicating by email.

That's when I found Studnailz. An accidental forward that ended my reality. Like a bad country and western song: Into my Inbox and Out of My Heart.

So I confronted her and we had our two-minute pre-divorce meeting.

"What's this about?"

"What?"
"These."

"Oh."

"Well?"

Pause. "When we were adding on to the house... "

"... can't be serious... "

"... working on a hot day... "

"I paid a guy to do this?"

"... invited him in after for a drink... "

"... while he was supposed to be... "

"One thing led to another... "

"... can't be serious... "

"I didn't mean it to happen."

"... half your age... "

"You're never around."

"... can't be serious... "

"What do you want me so say?"

So there it was and there it sat. My wife infatuated like a 12-year-old girl, with a construction worker. Studnailz. A construction worker! What could he ever consult on? Nailing one's wife, I supposed. So there it sat and steamed.

Until the next day. We met in the hallway.

"So what do we do now?" she asked.

"That's up to you." My jaw was set.

"Divorce."

"Be serious."

"I am."

"After nine years, over some kid."

She smiled. "He's no kid."

"You've known him... how long? Two months?"

"Sometimes that's all you need."

"This is the same long-haired idiot I caught smoking pot on the job."
"He's not an idiot."

"One of you is."

"There's nothing you can do."

I looked her in the eyes so there would be no mistake. "No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"No divorce. No nothing."

"You don't decide for me. I've had enough of that."

"Listen, Jules. This will not happen."

"You don't decide for me," she said again.

I paused. "Maybe I do."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I shrugged.

"Well," she said, "I won't be around this weekend. We're going to Mexico."

"Really."

"Yes, really."

"Quickie divorce, quickie marriage?"

She smiled.

"This won't happen," I said. "I'll make sure of it."

"Is that a threat?"

"It is what it is. Just remember what I said."

She smirked. "I wouldn't go up against Ron," she said. "He's a little bigger than you. Everywhere."

She turned before I could slap the smile from her face.

***

"What are you going to do?" It was a question asked by my best friend, Jack, a co-worker at my last real job, probably the only reason he was a friend at all. Convenience and time, breaks and lunches, corners and cubicles. But he knew the score. We went to a bar after work, drinking beers for counsel.

"I don't know."

"Not much you can do. You could fire him."

"Too late. I should have when I finally ran a check on him and found prior arrests for drugs and theft. Now the sunroom's finished. Some add-on that turned out to be."
"More like an add-in."

My look stopped his smirk.

"There's nothing else you could do," he said. "Legally, that is."

"I'm open for options."

He shook his head while taking a drink, a respectable trick. "This guy's not worth it."

"I'm not thinking about him."

"Women," he said, and I took a gulp in agreement. "Once they get something in their heads there's not much you can do but wait and hope their brains come back."

"I can't take that chance."

"Why?"

I looked around for no reason, then said: "I can't afford a divorce. My business is just starting to take off. I didn't work this hard to have her run off with some guy and half my money. Besides, for her to piss off nine years like it's nothing... I can't let that go."

"You want my advice? Wait it out. It's just a phase."

I rubbed my hands down my face. "I'm tired."

"You need rest. So rest. Take a vacation. Just don't do anything stupid."

Vacation. "Don't worry." I took a sip and thought of Mexico.

***

Rosarita is a place of contrasts: dirt and mud. Actually, Julie and I had spent some good times there. It's cheap, full of life, and has pockets of class between the tacky pottery and dirty-faced children selling nickel Chicklets for a quarter. Our old getaway locale had been the Rosarita Beach Hotel, a place that looked new and clean and had good margaritas. I assumed that's where she would be headed. I talked Jack into coming with me and we checked in under assumed names for no good reason. Down in Mexico one name's as good as another, and it wasn't as if I was trying to hide my presence. I was there to make sure Julie and Ron saw me, and saw me plenty, but it set the mood.

Jack had bitched all the way down; about the roads, the heat, the air quality. I questioned my choice of companions, but I wanted company, even irritating company. And I wanted a witness. But at what price?

"God, this place is a dump," he said as I locked the hotel door behind me and we started down the hall. "Do they always keep it so dusty here? I can't believe the way these people drive. Or should I say, don't drive? I thought you said this was going to be cheap? I'd never pay that much for a room anywhere, anyway, ever!"

"You're not paying," I reminded him as the elevator doors opened. Two beautiful, young, bronze, bikini-clad Mexican girls stood wet and gleaming as our mouths dropped and we stumbled into each other getting out of the way. Jack leerad as they went out.

"If you two were salsa and I were a chip, how I would love to take a dip," he said, and laughed like an idiot.
The girls looked back and giggled. "Viejoy y cojo," one said to the other, and they laughed and jiggled away.

"What did she say?" Jack asked as the elevator doors closed.

I knew enough Spanish to know they weren't referring to me. I patted him on the back. "She likes you."

He straightened. "Maybe I was wrong. This might be a good trip after all."

We walked outside and past the pool and into the restaurant. "By the way, where did you come up with that little chip poem."

He raised his hands. "I don’t know, it just came out." He took a deep breath. "It must be the ocean air."

We sat at a table and a waiter immediately brought a basket of chips and salsa and set them down. I ordered two Corona’s which came almost as fast and we popped limes into the tops.

"To new beginnings," I said, raising the bottle.

"Amen," Jack said, took a sip, and almost spat it out. "Holy cow, look at that!"

Another almost-dressed woman, tanned, dark, thirty-five-ish, walked by and gave Jack a big smile. He stared after her, guzzling his beer. "This," he said, rising, "is the greatest place in the world." He put down the bottle and followed her down the pier.

Alone, I turned my eyes to the horizon and my mind to thought. Thinking, I knew as I finished my drink, was a dangerous thing.

Two beers later I saw them walking up the stairs from the beach. She looked deadly, he looked like a target. She was firm and tight, naturally, wearing a purple skirt which blew lightly around her muscular legs and a matching low-cut top, painted on and pushed up. Ron was smiling and flexing biceps as he held her squashed against his chest. They walked toward me for a few seconds before recognition set in, and when it did all the smiles faded.

"What are you doing here?" Julie asked sternly, her true self coming out at last.

I watched a young beauty walk by. "Enjoying the scenery," I said, smiling.

She snorted, then looked at the meat. "I brought my own."

Ron laughed and held her tighter.

I looked at him and said with mock concern: "I hope my last check cleared."

"It didn’t. But Julie wrote me another one."

I swirled my beer and put it on the table. It left a sour taste. "Good. Good."

"So, why are you here?"

"Like I said," I said. "The scenery. And the chips." I dipped one in salsa, flipped it into my mouth, then casually looked for ice water.

"How long are you staying?"
I put down the glass and wiped my mouth. "Long enough."

"This won't change anything. Nothing you do will change anything."

"Not trying to," I mumbled between bites. "Just making sure you're happy."

"That would be the first time." She paused. "I want the divorce finalized by the end of the month."

"Kind of soon."

"No, years too late."

"I'll see what I can do."

"I've already spoken to a lawyer. The papers will be ready Monday."

I nodded. "Then I guess there's nothing to say. I'll have to enjoy the last few days of married life while I can."

She pursed her lips and pulled Ron with her as he nodded his head to a table of smiling women who stared after him as he passed.

"See you around," I said. I turned back and took the bottle and let the last few drops drip slowly into my mouth.

"Hard scene."

I looked up to see Jack with the woman in hand.

"I've had better days. Not you, it seems."

He smiled at the woman who looked back with the big brown eyes of love. "I need a favor... a por favor... " he said, laughing stupidly. "Do you mind if we, uh... " He jerked his head toward our room.

"Be my guest."

He smiled at the woman and jerked his head in like direction. "Give me a few hours," he said, towing her along.

A few hours, I had a few to give. I motioned to the waiter. "Senor, dos Corona's por favor." He nodded, and when he returned I held his wrist for a moment before putting a twenty dollar bill in his hand. "Guarde el cambio." His smile became confused and uncomfortable when I held on for a second longer before letting go. That was so he would remember later, when I needed more than beer and he needed more than twenties.

When I figured Jack's time was up I went back to the room. As I opened the door I heard the shower running and an off-key baritone singing "Feliz Navidad," which was six months out of tune. A few steps in found me staring at a beautiful naked brown body lying on the bed without covers and with the air conditioner running full blast. I could only stand and stare and shake my head at the smooth perfection and the incredible unfairness of life. The girl stirred and turned over, squinting with a smile in my direction as the other side of paradise came into view. Oh cruel, cruel life.

"Jack?" She put out her arms to me.
I hesitated, but the shower stopped and a door clicked open. Even I'm not that fast. I shook my head and emptied my pockets on the table near the glass doors. The girl got up and went into the bathroom, followed quickly by a squeal, a slap, a laugh, and the shower door clicking and closing. Jack came out wearing a towel and a stupid grin.

"Having fun... south of the border?"

"Bueno, muchas bueno. She's giving me lessons in cultural appreciation."

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, but couldn't you have used your own bed?"

He shrugged. "Yours was closer."

"She have a name?"

"I'm sure she must."

"Listen, I need your help."

"Doing what?"

I smiled. "Doing nothing."

"I think I can handle that." The shower stopped. He grinned. "A little later." He took a few steps to the bathroom before, unfortunately, dropping his towel on the floor.

***

In the interim I walked back to the restaurant and caught the eye of my favorite waiter. I let him see me taking my wallet out of my back pocket to speed the process and he came right over.

"Senor?"

"Mi amigo," I said, handing him another twenty, then putting my arm around his shoulders. "Rosarita is muy hermoso. Very beautiful," I translated back to myself. "A place for amor."

He gave me a strange, uncomfortable look.

I shook my head. "I need a favor," I said. "A favor, por favor. Eh?"

He gave me a stranger look, which didn't change as I whispered into his ear.

***

Jack and I walked along the beach. A woman tried selling us hair braids, a man tried selling us Cancun T-shirts, a boy tried to sell us his sister. I spotted Julie lying on the sand while Ron applied lotion to her already burned skin. He was gawking at two young girls sprawled on a blanket nearby until we walked up to the both of them.

"Hi, you two love birds," I said, and Julie turned with an angry look. "I hope you're enjoying the sun."

"What do you want?"

"I just want you to be happy. You remember Jack?"

Jack extended his hand. "Sure."
"No."

"Glad to meet you," Jack said, redirecting his hand to Ron who shook it with a squishy sound, which led Jack to wipe the squish off on his pants.

"What do you want?" Julie repeated.

"Like I said," I said. "I know I made a big deal about everything at the house, but I've had a change of heart. I want you to know I wish you both the best, and I won't do a thing to get in the way of your happiness. Not a thing."

She studied me. "Okay." Her suspicious look hadn't gone.

"Okay."

I motioned to Jack and we walked down the beach.

"What was all that about?"

"Part of the plan," I said.

***

About an hour later we rented a couple of horses and rode down the beach toward the hotel.

"How do you steer this thing?" he asked as his horse stopped for the third time to circle around itself.

"Pull the reins. No, back toward you, not up. They hate that."

"I think it hates me already." The horse moved his head a few times, then bent down to sniff sand. "So, why did we have to get on these stupid beasts?"

"Julie and Ron are further up riding ATCs. Thought I'd let her know I was still around."

"Why do you need me along? Whoa!"

His horse had given a quick jump for no reason and he was holding on. "So Julie wouldn't think I was stalking her. Besides, it'll be fun to watch me make her squirm. C'mon."

It took ten minutes of weaving in and out of people on the beach to get to them. I came close to stepping on a dozen or more sunbathers, Jack trying desperately to follow in my hoof prints. Finally we came upon them, or her, as Julie was sitting alone on her vehicle while further up the beach her soul mate was driving recklessly nearer the water. A handful of middle-aged women were clapping and laughing at his antics. Julie was equally entranced as she watched her lover, and equally annoyed when she saw me.

"What do you want?" It was her favorite question.

"Just seeing the sights," I said, as Jack came beside me breathing relief. "I thought that since you've already found someone, maybe I will, too."

"I won't stop you."

"It's so hard to choose, though." I scanned bodies. "There are so many beautiful women here."
"Your chances get worse the more they see you."

"You can't rush true love."

"Then take your time. But take it somewhere else."

I pursed my lips. "I have to sift through them all slowly, find someone with a good attitude."

"They all have good attitudes," she said, "until they get to know you."

I ignored her. "And I'll have to find someone my intellectual equal. That will be a nice change."

She pursed her lips back at me. "I think you already have. You're riding her."

Jack laughed. I shot him a look and pulled sharply on the reins to head back the way we'd come.

"So what was that all about?" he asked a moment later.

"Part of the plan," I mumbled.

***

"Last night," I told him later as we were sitting at our favorite table.

"What about last night?"

"No, this will be our last night."

"Why?"

"Because they're leaving tomorrow. So are we."

"She told you that?"

"No. But I have ways, mysterious ways."

His face was blank.

"Tomorrow's Sunday. Then Monday. Work, remember?"

Mi amigo with the cerveza came over to take our order. He knew where his next thousand pesos were coming from. "Listo?"

We ordered lobster for two and I slipped him another twenty before he left.

"Big tipper," Jack said.

"He's done me some favors," I said. "Maybe he'll do some more."

"Oh, yeah? Get one for me."

"Not that kind of favor."

"What other kind is there?"

I smiled. "You never know."
I was finishing my third margarita while Jack went off in search of the girl with no name. I saw Julie and Ron walk across the outside veranda and into a room off to the right. It was glass and well lit and full of tables. Julie led Ron to one in the corner and they sat and picked up menu's. I called my favorite waiter.

"Champagne, mi amigo, por favor. But send it to that table, to the lady with the long-haired idioto. And send me the bill." I gave him another twenty, and when he left I took a quick trip through my wallet. It was a good thing this was my last night in Mexico.

I watched them as the bottle arrived, the waiter pointing me out as I waved and Julie looked angry and Ron began pouring. After a moment I got up, steadied myself, and walked to their table. It seemed be a very long, dizzying trip.

"What do you want?"

I smiled at the consistency. "I wanted to see if you liked the champagne."

"Sure, thanks," Ron said, taking a gulp.

"Why?"

"Why what? Why did I send it for?" I wiped my lips straighter. "To celebrate." I raised my glass. "To new beginnings. That's always something to celebrate. I just wanted you to know that I'm letting you go."

"I'm already gone."

"Fair enough," I said. "I'll admit that I followed you two down here to make trouble. But that's all over, in the past. Forgotten, like yesterday's vows. Maybe it's the atmosphere or the sea air."

"Or the margaritas," Julie said.

"The beer and margaritas," I corrected. "And the women."

Ron nodded to himself, scanning.

"Whatever it is, it's done the job. I'm through with the past, done with the present, and ready for the future."

"Great," she said flatly. "Now, if you don't mind... "

"I may even stay here," I went on. "Mexico kind of grows on you."

"As long as you sign the divorce papers, I don't care what you do."

I withheld a burp. "It will not be a problem. Enjoy."

I made my way back to the table. Surprisingly, Jack was back. Alone.

"No luck?"

He shook his head. "Not tonight."

I looked at my wife, drinking to the future with her new love. I watched as people danced badly to the trumpets and guitars of bad music. I looked at the moonlight reflecting over the ocean, and the blaze of bonfires on the beach. The air had a cool lethargy about it. The day was ending as they all
do in Mexico, sad and lonely, either because you have to leave or because you have to stay.

"One last thing," I said, standing. "Let's go."

"Where?"

I tripped over my chair, then stood straight. "To say goodbye to my girl."

We were in the parking lot. "See this," I said, standing next to a black Toyota 4Runner. "This was my baby, my car. Now it's her car. And his car. Their car."

Jack nodded. "So?"

"You don't understand. When I finally started making money in my business, this is what I bought to reward myself. This was my dream car."

"A Toyota? You couldn't have dreamed of a Porsche?"

"Now she'll have it and I'll never drive it again."

"Buy another one."

"That's what it comes down to. You work, you build for the future, and somebody comes along and takes your dreams."

"I guess. You know, it's getting kind of cold out here."

"One last goodbye," I said, tugging at my zipper. "Join me?"

He had a confused look, then realization. "Sure, what are friends for?"

We stood in the parking lot peeing on my wife's car while the music of the mariachis serenaded the night. When we were done I patted the car goodbye, zipped up and turned... and stopped as if shot. My waiter friend was standing right in front of us. He didn't look as disgusted as I would have had I been in his shoes, but this was Mexico.

He walked over to me and paused. I patted his shoulder with my left hand. "Take good care of her," I said, and he nodded understanding. He had a few objects in his hands: a roll of duct tape in one, a knife in the other, maybe a small bag in the third. Maybe I wasn't seeing straight, maybe he wasn't holding anything at all. Demasiada cerveza, if there was such a thing.

"What is he up to?" Jack asked as we walked.

"Everything's taken care of," I said simply. We went through the hotel and out to the pier to drink the rest of the night away.

***

The next morning found Jack and I lounging in the sun like rubes wearing shades and sombreros to protect our pounding heads. Why did they keep the surf so loud? After a half hour a loud scraping sound raked across my brain, making me turn my head in its direction while I slid my sunglasses to the bridge of my nose. Ron was dragging a large bag across the courtyard which seemed to be bulging out its sides as the heavy weight threatened to crush its tiny plastic wheels. He had a smaller bag slung around his shoulders. There was no sign of my wife. There seemed to be something red dripping from the bottom of the suitcase.
It didn't have to be this way, I thought, watching the dumb lug scrape his bag along the concrete. It could have been Julie and me and another ten years, or twenty, or a lifetime. But a thought comes into someone's head and an action follows and pretty soon you're doing things you never dreamed were possible. And I don't mean Julie and Ron and their endless love. The same process takes place in reaction, as well, and in weighing the alternatives of the counterstrike. A little creativity mixed in with the pain and soon you find yourself planning someone else's future. Call it revenge, call it jealousy...or maybe call it just a little justice for me and all the other guys who had poured lifetimes into their one true love only to have them spit it back in their face. But to sit back and do nothing was not an option.

I sat back. "To love," I said, holding up an imaginary glass for my imaginary toast to that imaginary emotion.

"I told you I wasn't finished packing," said a voice in a tone too recognizable and easily making all wish to hear the soothing suitcase scraping sound again. It was Julie, walking briskly across the courtyard in deafeningly clipped strides. "What are you doing?" She bent down and unzipped a side pocket.

"You said 'take the bag,'" Ron nearly whined, looking forlornly at the beauties in the pool and Jacuzzi.

"Now look, all the shampoo tipped over. Now everything's going to smell like strawberries. You never listen to anything--"

And on and on. It made me wonder at the workings of love and the mysteries of the heart. After the clean-up and dress-down, Ron followed as Julie started off with short, quick steps. When she passed by she hesitated, then stopped. There was enough anger to go around.

"We're leaving," she said.

"We're staying," I said.

"Forever, I hope."

I shook my head with care. "Just a little while longer."

She hesitated. "There are papers for you to sign at home on the dining room table."

"Oh?"

"My lawyer brought them over before... " she faded off awkwardly.

I raised my hand in understanding, contempt, defeat, and they walked off without another word.

"Well, this was one big disappointment," Jack said after a moment.

"What do you mean?"

"You just let her go."

"Yeah."

"Weren't you going to do something?"

"Was I supposed to do something?"

He shrugged. "Something. Ruin their lives, make sure she didn't get your money. That's what you
told me, right?"
"Something like that."
"Well? All we did was pee on her car. I mean, that was fun, but... "
"Yeah."
"And now divorce."
"Yeah."
"You didn't do anything."
"But pee on her car," I said.
"Yeah."
"And that's all we did."
"Yeah."
"Nothing else?"
"Nope."
"I didn't do anything else?"
"Not that I saw."

"You're right." Inside the restaurant I could see my favorite waiter bringing a young couple margaritas and chips, a good Rosarita breakfast if ever there was one. As he looked up I raised my arm and, hesitating, he did likewise, a friendly gesture for a friendly town. It was good to have a few amigos.

"I thought you said everything was taken care of. Looks to me like somebody didn't do his job."

"I decided to take your advice," I said to him. "To let it go and move on with my life. Who knows? Maybe it is just a phase and she'll be over it before they hit the States. Maybe I'll wake up tomorrow and she'll be next to me in bed and things will be back to normal, like old times."

"Yeah, maybe," Jack said. "But not likely."

No, I thought. Not likely. She wouldn't even make it that far. In an hour they would hit the border, and after another hour waiting to cross they would finally come up to the gate. Soon after that they would find themselves being motioned over to the side as their car was searched and they were questioned and eventually arrested. The drug-sniffing dogs at the border were trained to find a miniscule amount of contraband buried within layers of clothes in a suitcase. They certainly wouldn't miss a half kilo of marijuana duct-taped to the inside of the 4Runner's front bumper. And if they did...

"I'm glad you're taking it this well," Jack said.

"It's the only way to take it."

And if they did, well, it was good to have friends, and friends with cousins selling plaster crap castings to people waiting in that long line to cross back into the States who were keeping an eye
out for a certain SUV. Authorities would be notified. And before Julie and Ron finally extricated themselves from their predicament, the divorce papers would be signed and sent and perhaps finalized and in the confusion I would have time to move my assets to a more secure place, one far away from prying ex-wives intent on spending hard-earned alimony on their lovers' legal fees.

"Maybe we should hit the road," I said to Jack, my good friend. With Ron's prior drug record, a half-hidden, half-smuggled half kilo wouldn't seem out of character, but if Julie did try to connect it back to me, here was my alibi sitting at my right. Jack was a witness to my inactivity. Besides, if they checked (and I would make sure they did, if it came to that) it would be his DNA they would find staining the driver side door, not mine; I had aimed lower. The cops might wonder what else he had been doing to my wife's car. Jack had been well known to divulge in the illegal substances himself, and a few choice words from my camarero compadre, my waiter eyewitness, would lead the trail around me and right back to him. Different friends, I learned, had different uses.

"I suppose so. Wait, just un momento!" Jack pushed himself from the chaise lounge and almost jumped into the air. The woman he'd been looking for was back and she ran up and threw her arms around him as they kissed. I wondered briefly just how much money he had told her he was worth, but there wasn't time to finish the thought because she had brought a friend, one whose dark eyes looked at me shyly under a straw hat which hid her long black hair, and under that a green string bikini which hid very little else.

I stood, always the gentlemen, tossing the sombrero behind me as the senorita smiled and coyly extended her hand. It was time for margaritas.
Luz-Maria Lopez

La Fortuna

Luz-Maria Lopez was born in Honduras in 1944. She moved to the US in 1964 to study and became a secretary, but her true, life-long dream was to become an artist. After raising a family she returned to school, and, in 1995, at age 51, she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree, Magna Cum Laude from Southeastern Louisiana University at Hammond, LA. Since then, she has been working professionally. Lopez has exhibited locally, nationally and individuals and corporations have collected her work. A long-time resident of south Louisiana, she and her artist husband share a studio.
Luz-Maria Lopez

Little Green Men and Little Red Men
Life could be worse, much worse. He could still say "Professor Jacob Bernstein, Former Chair of Literature, Cornell University", and there were his publishing credits (not that there was any actual income from either source). But more importantly, he was working. Working, still able to live in Manhattan and continue teaching. So many colleagues and acquaintances of his age and tenure had been herded quickly towards "early-retirement", offered "buy-out-packages." Exiled and sentenced to a living death. Shepherded to a quiet demise. Extinction would be a more accurate description. Teaching jobs, good or bad, were quite a rare commodity in this economy, and being an elitist English Literature Professor no longer an option. Things were different now. Times, sadly, had quite changed.

Jacob was a very good teacher, by anyone's standard, always tailoring lesson plans and curriculum to best fit the class. He truly cared what his students would take with them from his classes. This was a major challenge indeed--his incoming classes would be very different. The So-Ho Institute of Fashion Evening Program offered a far more exotic group of students than any Ivy Grad-School could ever hope for. When hired, he was told repeatedly that twice "Project Runway" has filmed at the school and with a bit of luck he might have a cameo appearance in an upcoming spring segment.

"Fashion Institute Professor of Literature" had a quirky ring to it. He liked it, even if it was a rather hollow ring. Maybe a 60's ring. "Think 'Blow-Up', think 'Zabriske Point'," he said aloud, "and all the other art-house movies of that delightful decade long past. There is your key." Why should the classics of literature, particularly American literature be so hamstrung by tradition? Making these great works relevant to new generations was so much more vital than upholding established traditional interpretations of these novels. Yes, he would make things different, as different as need be to make it work for his new classes. A new generation, always he had felt, should see with new eyes. I'll start with the driest material, he mused, and see just how we fare.

"So, my dear young friends, Hester Prin refused to wear her scarlet letter. It was shaped entirely wrong for her face, the color clashed with everything she owned and it limited so severely what she could do with her hair. It was a difficult fashion problem, but a problem for the courts as well, since she was obliged to wear this inappropriate, tacky bit of flair. A more reasonable settlement was eventually reached. A solution of which some of you may be aware." Smiling to himself, Jacob continued "Since the only charge she was finally convicted of was "Contempt of Court" she would wear two 'Cs'. She would not actually wear them on her outfits (since there could be no guarantee it would work any better than the initial Scarlet 'A'), but rather on a large shoulder bag or any other accessory item she might carry or wear. And that, class, is how the Coach brand was born oh so many years ago. We still see Hester's influence today, in many fine stores as well as popular knock-offs, sold by enterprising street vendors through our fair city," he concluded, his confidence now renewed.
The men who spit. The men who sweep the leaves from the stones with brooms of bundled twigs. The women who wear surgical masks to gather the leaves into a tarp. Take them away. The tree roots that ooze centuries over ruined stone. Cracked women etched in stone, broken Nagas reigned in by headless giants punctuated by hello madam, have a look some picture please? and you so beautiful, buy some bracelet please? some flute? some postcard? Postcard? Postcard? The little children peddling postcards and jewelry. The little girl who spoke to us in six languages on a school day pushing her bracelet bracelet bracelet, have many different one, you can buy? and argued with us over the rate of conversion. Tapped on my window as the driver took us away to the next set of rocks.

Buddha smiles a soft stone smile, peeking his tiny face out of the tree roots--he knows something, sees the sandals and sunglasses, baseball caps and cloth hats with wide, wrinkled brims. Sees the windup cameras and digital flashes...

A child tries to sell me a decorative plate with my face stamped on it. Where did she get my face? I touch my nose to make sure it is still there and retrace all of my steps: remember the grains that came away from the walls on my fingertips, remember the shape of the guardian lion's mouth on my palm--how I wanted to go home with one of his teeth. Remember the steepness of the temple's steps, how it was I and the sun and the uneven rock, climbing and climbing... But on her plate is just my face against the sky and I touch my cheeks to make sure they're still there and they are.

We drive away and she stands in the road, waving her plate--my face--at the rear windshield shouting One dollar! One Dollar! Somewhere in the temple Buddha smiles his knowing smile, the tree roots grow thicker, and as soon as we round the bend in the road, I forget her face entirely.
Not more than 48 hours after the journey began, I found myself in a gay park in Salina, Kansas. When I say "gay," I don't mean "happy," or "gay" in a pejorative sense. I mean, this was a city park where closeted gay men went to... well, be gay. Joe insisted that the Days Inn was too expensive, and had taken the night clerk's word that this park was a safe and legal place to camp for the night. Something didn't feel right when we pulled in, though. Cars kept circling the picnic area. I was too exhausted to care; I just wanted to pitch the tent and go to sleep, but Joe, in an uncharacteristic act of responsibility, went to scope out the place.

"No problem," he said when he returned. "Get this--it's a gay park. I just went up and talked to some guys giving each other massages on the picnic tables."

"That's fabulous," I said, and sneezed.

"I'm gonna go talk to this guy Jim, okay?" Joe said, cracking open a beer. "Hey, if your allergies are really that bad, why don't you take something?"

"I did," I said crossly. "It's not working."

"Oh. Well, put on one of the respirators."

This was one of the many times during our trip westward and back that I'd look at Joe as if he were insane. "I would," I replied, raising my eyebrows, "but then I'd have to ask myself why I'm in a gay park in the middle of Kansas wearing a respirator. Which is something I'd rather not ask myself."

I didn't know the answer to that question. Or, rather, I knew the answer and didn't want to face it. The truth was, I was in a gay park in the middle of Kansas because I was so weak, needy, and dependent on my boyfriend that I couldn't stand the thought of letting him go to Burning Man without me. So here we were, bound for the Burning Man arts festival in Nevada, toting a month's worth of Kashi cereal and soymilk (at my request), camping gear, two bikes, two pairs of goggles and respirators (in case of dust storms), one suitcase full of normal clothes, another suitcase full of ridiculous clothes no man should ever wear, and a 15-foot long stuffed snake. I should mention that all of these belongings were crammed into a Honda Civic hatchback with cow-print seat covers, a severely dented rear fender, and one working headlight. Joe was stopped multiple times for the non-functional headlight--three, to be exact. I pointed out that it was very easy to pick up a bulb at a car parts store and install it oneself, or even to stop by a Jiffy Lube, but he thought his solution--kicking the headlight repeatedly until it came on--was easier.

The cashier at the Wal-Mart in Elko, where we stocked up on supplies before leaving civilization, sized us up when we told her where we were headed. "You two don't look like Burning Man types," she observed. "People run around nekkid out there, you know. And two years ago, a girl got kilt."

My eyes widened. Joe grabbed my arm and ushered me away, assuring me that the girl's death was an accident; she got drunk and fell off an art car, which then ran over her.

I had no idea what I was getting into, but I had no choice but to be ready.
We were at Burning Man for only six days, but they felt like the longest six days of my life. In six days, I had one shower, which I took "nekkid," in front of anyone who happened to be passing by. The days were sweltering and the nights cold. I had to ride a bike to get everywhere, including the port-a-potties. I was afraid to go out alone because I couldn't find my way around. Instead of being laid out like a grid, Black Rock City was laid out like a giant clock, and when I asked where something was, I might hear, "Oh, 8:00 and Elysium." I guess this layout makes sense if you keep in mind that the people who designed it and the people who were meant to navigate it all consider smoking weed to be The One True Path to Brilliance. Their logic eluded me. Plus, my bike didn't work. Every three or four revolutions the chain would lock up, and I'd wobble and fall over. We got stuck in two dust storms. I'm thankful that there are no photos of me in my goggles and respirator, like an alien version of Miss Gulch in The Wizard of Oz, pedaling furiously to shelter among the rising dust.

Our first night there, we rode our bikes down to see The Man, the large wooden structure that gets torched at the festival's end--hence the name "Burning Man." That year The Man was built upon the roof of a "fun house." What made the house "fun" was having to navigate through its labyrinthine bowels in complete darkness, except for strobe lights illuminating disturbing pieces of art. I have nightmares about things like this--getting lost, ever searching, unable to escape or find what I need to find. I hated the trick doors and dead ends. I found my way out only by following Joe's every move, and was surprised when I suddenly felt the night air. We were on the roof. In front of me was a long pole, like a fireman's pole, leading to the ground.

"Come on!" Joe was yelling up at me.

"I don't want to!" I yelled back. "I'm afraid!"

"It's okay! Nothing will happen! Just grab it and slide down!"

I looked behind me. It was either jump for the pole, or find my way back out of the "fun" house--alone.

At the bottom, Joe's extremely creepy friend Neal was encouraging me to jump. "You won't get hurt!" he yelled. "I'll catch you!"

His offer did not encourage me. Neal was 50 years old, tall and bony, with hair down to his waist and the face of a man twice his age. Right then, he was a wearing jeans that were threadbare along their entire front, and had a red bandanna, which he termed a "balldanna," loosely tied around his genitals. Joe said that Neal was a comedian, but as far as I could tell, the great motivations of his life were drugs, sex, and nakedness. I closed my eyes. I'd had many strange dreams in my lifetime, but in a shining example of truth being stranger than fiction, never in my dreams had I been in a funhouse in the desert, about to slide down a firepole into the arms of a crack addict in a crotch bandanna and matching fedora.

I took a breath, screamed, jumped, and clung to the pole. My feet hit the ground. I'm alive! I thought.

I'm a "mind" person, not a "body" person, but Joe did not respect this. Forcing me to ride a non-functional bike around Black Rock City and to slide down a firepole were the least of his demands. He thought nothing of climbing up rickety scaffolding to "see the stars," or hopping onto a giant seesaw that would catapult each of us 15 feet into the air. Besides my fear of heights, I couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that 99% of the structures beneath me were probably constructed by potheads with sunstroke, so how safe could they really be?

"Radical expression" is the catchphrase at Burning Man. I witnessed some cool art installations and thousands of odd people in various types of dress or degrees of undress, but none of it was worth braving the heat, the cold, the dust, or especially Neal, who was all too eager to camp next to us.
By day six, I would have been happy to learn that I'd never have to see Neal again in my lifetime, but then Joe informed me that Neal would be leaving Burning Man with us. Apparently, Neal had wheedled Joe into giving him a ride to his next home, a commune in northern California. Since we were still quite a way from northern California, that meant that he would be joining us in Reno and in Lake Tahoe, where I had planned to decompress from Freakville. Even more troubling was the logistical question of how we were going to transport Neal and all of his possessions in the Civic hatchback. I argued against the plan. I told Joe that Neal was old enough to be responsible for himself.

"Abby, just because someone is dispossessed doesn't mean he should lose his say in making decisions," Joe countered. He was always using this annoying, socially-conscious crapspeak with me.

"He's not 'dispossessed'!" I shrieked. "He's a 50-year-old drug dealer! His not having a vehicle or a place to live are consequences of his choices. YOU have the car, YOU make the decisions!"

Later that day, I was squished against the dashboard because Neal's 6-foot-4 frame was crammed behind me into a back seat that we didn't have to begin with, but had created especially for him. A bow of frayed twine hung next to my ear, reminding me that all of Neal's possessions were tied precariously on the roof. As we rolled out of the Black Rock Desert and into the nearest town of Gerlach, I was still pondering the strange contradictions of Burning Man--why alcohol was free yet ice cost money, and why anyone would bother to bring a pair of fuzzy boots into a desert. Neal twitched and complained. "I'm cramping up back here!" he called out, even though my ear was no more than twelve inches from his mouth. "I need to get out! I need to get out!"

I slammed down my notebook, where I was writing a particularly acerbic letter to my friend back home, and glared at Joe.

"I'm serious, man! My legs are cramping! Owwww! It hurts so bad!"

Joe stopped the car and I maneuvered out of the front seat so that Sasquatch could extricate himself, unfold his gangly limbs, and drink a packet of Emergen-C to relieve his cramped muscles. To say that there was tension between Joe and me at this point would be an understatement.

When we got to Reno, we checked into The Golden Phoenix. I took a shower to wash off all the radical expression and liberally applied lotion that was inadequate in replacing the moisture I'd lost; my skin was still scaly. It took almost twenty minutes to get a comb all the way through my hair, which had already begun to dread up.

The three of us spent the night in Reno, during which time Neal was a thorough pain in the ass. In retrospect, I should have left those two clowns alone in the casino, locked my hotel room door, and slept the sleep of the innocent. As it was, Neal was constantly knocking on the door and calling our room, usually to discuss his sexual exploits at Burning Man. There had been a mention that Neal might be able to hitch a ride from another burner who was California-bound and had also stopped in Reno for the night. I remained hopeful.

The next morning, we met in the hotel diner for breakfast. Neal was late, which made me nervous, as I was anxious to set out for Tahoe. "I really need some eggs," he said, as he finally arrived and slid in the seat opposite us. "Hey, have you ever put your whole hand up a vagina?"

At that point, something inside me snapped, but as I was trapped in a booth in a diner, I had little recourse but to imitate the coping mechanism of an autistic kid I had my first year teaching. So, I extended my fingers, stiffened my hands, repeatedly jabbed at my own temples, and yelled, "OVERLOAD! OVERLOAD!"

"Abby, stop it!" Joe said.
"Did I say something bad?" Neal asked. "I didn't mean to upset you."

Ignoring him, I turned to Joe and began punctuating my speech by slamming my fork onto the metal table. "If he doesn't shut up, the line 'I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die' is gonna take on a whole new meaning!"

It was decided that Neal would proceed to California with his alternate chauffeur.

***

I spent three more weeks traveling the country with Joe. Many times during the long rides I'd scrolled through the photos on my camera, but once I returned home and uploaded them onto my computer, I was able to see details that I'd missed. I remember posing for photo 93. It was our last day at Burning Man, and I wanted an artsy shot of myself in the desert--my experience with radical expression encapsulated in a single photo. There I stood, in a faux-hippie, tie-dyed halter-top from JC Penney, looking off into the distance with a contemplative and slightly tortured expression, my skin bronzed, my hair blowing in the desert wind.

And off to my left, in the background, was Neal, wearing knee socks and nothing else, holding one leg in the air and leaning forward, exposing his naked ass to the camera. I've practiced yoga for years and am not sure what this is called--whatever "flying drug addict" is in Sanskrit, I guess. I titled the photo "Quintessential."

I selected a song for background music, then watched "Quintessential" pass by in a slide show, along with images titled "Where the hell is this?" and "Where the hell is this? 2." My likeness seemed just that--a likeness--and the adventure someone else's adventure. The real dynamic was one of both adventure and of struggle. In the end, I couldn't be my true self and be with Joe. One of us had to go. And it wasn't going to be me.

I thought, as I watched one photo melt into the next, that the song blaring its wry commentary would be a perfect anthem for the trip. The good times are killing me.
Ronnie stacks his Legos, building a wall.

"Doctor Frank will put her away this time for sure," I say.

Ronnie drops the blue Lego from his grubby hand. "Shut up! You don't know that."

"She's really lost it now." I make that rolling action at my temple.

Ronnie jumps up, knocks over the plastic wall. "You don't know nothing."

He runs from the bedroom. I almost go after him, but don't want to go out there, not while all that's going on with Mother.

I wait in Ronnie's bedroom, looking out the window. Our garden's almost all concrete, just weeds here and there, and a small grass area behind the coal-shed. Dad put the concrete slabs down last year, said there was too much work in keeping a lawn. I think about everything he buried alive under there: grass, flowers, beetles, worms, spiders, only the weeds able to survive, burst through.

Hurts like hell to fall down out there now. The concrete's good for hopscotch, though. Not that many children come to play in our house. Mother doesn't like people coming around.

***

Maybe I'm only alone in Ronnie's room a few minutes, but I get to notice how quiet the house is now that Mother's not screaming and Dad isn't shouting. I listen real hard in Ronnie's doorway, but can't hear a sound from my parents, Doctor Frank, or Ronnie. I never not hear Ronnie. Even when he's not home there's always some trace of him: a tap he left running, toy he didn't turn off, that smell he leaves that's a lot like bread and licorice. I move out onto the landing, creep to our parents' bedroom door. There's nothing. I get down on all fours to peep through the bottom crack. Not a shadow moving. For a second, I think the house is empty, that they've all gone and left me behind. I move downstairs, my heart banging.

From the living room doorway, I see the bump on the couch.

I tip-toe over, and lift the red blanket. "Boo!"

Ronnie gasps, ghost-faced. I laugh. He doesn't think it's funny. I can't stop laughing.

I turn the TV on, an episode of "Happy Days." Ronnie's so sucked-in by the show he doesn't hear the footsteps sound overhead, creak down the stairs. I wait a few minutes, and follow Dad and Doctor Frank into the kitchen.

Dad and Doctor Frank continue talking, like I'm not there. Doctor Frank is sitting in my chair, writing on a sheet of paper.

"It's very important," he says, "to make her feel useful, that's critical." Dad's neck jerks up. "Go back inside."
"I've just been with your mother again," Doctor Frank says.
I know he can't remember my name.
"Your mother's not well, you understand that?"
I nod, feeling my face redden.
His already small eyes narrow and he pushes his glasses further up his nose.
"We're doing all we can for her, okay?"
He said that last time he was called out, too. I hate him.
Doctor Frank looks at my father over his glasses. "They'll be feeling the strain."
Dad turns to me again. "Go out, please."
I can't move.
Doctor Frank stares. He's wondering if I'm already showing signs of what Mother's got. I look right back at him, letting him know that I know what he's thinking, that I heard him last time, going on about family history and how so many on Mother's side suffered from their nerves.

Look all you like, my eyes burn into him, I'm not my mother.

***

Dad talks to us from the hall, raising his voice over the TV. Dinner's ready. I elbow Ronnie in the ribs, bring him back to the present. He howls, running after Dad.

I follow him into the kitchen. "I didn't touch you, liar."

Ronnie doubles over, squealing.

Dad crosses the room, whacks me across the arm with the wet tea towel. "Don't you hit your brother again, you hear me?"

My mouth hangs; tears heat my eyes.

"I have to get going," Dad says.

"Where?" I ask, drying my arm.

"Work of course."

Dad works at the hospital, the general hospital, not the mental one where Mother has to stay from time to time. An orderly, he shaves the male patients mostly.

"What about Mother?" I ask.

"Doctor Frank gave her something to make her sleep. She won't wake until well into morning."

Ronnie cries harder.

"Come on, son, up you go." Dad lifts Ronnie into his chair.
He reminds us of the rules, and adds that we're not to call him unless it's an emergency.

"What if Mother wakes?" I ask.

"I told you, she won't," Dad says. "Doctor Frank took care of that."

After he leaves, Ronnie and I look across the table at each other.

I wave a fish finger. "They're good."

Ronnie shrugs.

"It's going to be all right," I add.

He drops his fork, crying again.

I walk around the table, sit next to him. I create a face on his plate: two rounds of crumbs for eyes, a fish finger for a nose, and a line of beans for the lips.

Ronnie laughs.

***

Ronne and I stand outside Mother's bedroom, our breathing fast and loud. I love how he looks right then, after he's brushed his teeth and I've rubbed the soapy washcloth over his face, his cheeks and lips red and eyelashes damp. He smells of mint and apples.

"Let's say goodnight to her," I say.

Ronnie steps back, shaking his head.

"Scaredy-cat," I say.

"Dad said not to."

I reach for the door knob.

"Don't!" Ronnie says.

I walk to Mother's bed. I look back at Ronnie. He's right where I left him, wide-eyed and sucking on his pajama sleeve.

Mother's asleep, her hands tucked under her cheek on the pillow, and mouth slightly open. Her long black hair is free of the French Twist she almost always wears, flows over the pillows. She looks beautiful.

Miss Mitchell at school says things are either one thing or another, but that's not true. For all her lovely hair, smooth skin, large eyes, and delicate mouth, my mother can look so ugly sometimes she makes my breath catch. Like today when Ronnie and I came home from school. She said she'd put poison in our soup, that we'd all be better off dead.

I tuck Ronnie in bed, tell him a pirate story. He begs for another story. I tell him I'm too tired. He won't let up.

***
Some time during the night, Mother screams. I run to her room. She's sitting on her mattress, her back against the wall, pulling at her blankets and shrieking. She sees me, and jumps about the bed. I try to calm her down.

She begs me to close the wardrobe door, says she can see monsters coming for her. I walk over to the wardrobe, assuring her there's nothing inside except shoes and clothes. I ask her to stop shouting; she's scaring Ronnie.

"Help me," she says, "please."

"Stop it," I say. "There's nothing there."

"I don't believe you," she says.

I pull the wardrobe door wide open. "See," I say, "nothing."

"Liar," she says. "Why are you doing this to me?"

I reach into the wardrobe and push back her clothes. The hangers screech. Mother puts her hands over her ears. I remove the blue suitcase she uses for the hospital, and step inside the wardrobe.

"No!" Mother says.

I shut my eyes, sit down inside the wardrobe, and pull my knees to my chest.

"See," I say when my voice returns. "Nothing."

Mother twists her yellow sheets in her hands.

I tuck Mother under the blankets and stroke her hair, singing "Mollie Malone," her favorite.

Her eyes close and tears stop.

I sit with her until she's breathing evenly, asleep again.

***

I find Ronnie curled on the landing outside his bedroom door, still sucking on his pajama sleeve.

"She's okay," I say. "She's asleep."

He nods and lets me take him by the hand, put him back to bed. I point at the green trains on his pajamas and tell him about all the places we'll travel to together someday, laughing, always laughing.
Ellen Dreibelbis has exhibited her paintings at galleries and museums across the country. She is a Signature Member of the Pastel Society of America, the Pastel Society of the West Coast and her art has been featured in numerous publications including American Artist Magazine and International Artist. Her work is in numerous public and private collections including Citibank, N.Y. and the Alameda County Courthouse, Hayward, CA.  
www.artistrising.com/galleries/Ellen_Dreibelbis

Ellen Dreibelbis

Michael
Ellen Dreibelbis

Man with a Watermelon
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The Thinker