



*Quercus*

# Quercus

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**Zach Cleve '09**  
*Ritual*  
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**Veronica Swanson**  
*Paint*  
Digital photography, 2012

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## sunballs

my Portland roommates  
sitting by the bay window  
watching the rain's constant down  
speak in mournful lows of sunshine  
and how they wish they could  
play in it  
like snow,  
throw it at each other  
in great balls of warm  
& shine  
& sparkle.  
what would that be like? they ask.  
would it be like clothes,  
fresh & hot out of the dryer—  
tossing those at one another,  
allowing a hot pair of jeans,  
a warm t-shirt,  
to drape over the skin of your face?  
would it be like that?

—Sarah Wurst '11



## Sweetgrass

Silently  
they walked,  
gloved hand in mittened,  
through the gray morning  
over a layer of solitude  
that washed beneath their feet  
like the liquid undercoating  
of an oil painting.  
Dappled reds and browns,  
birth meandering lines of pale yellow,  
the scraggle-rocked landscape  
growing in curls and shoots—  
changing and decaying—  
making death itself a process  
worth living for.

For days they breathe it in.  
It tastes sharp like ginger  
and too-sweet like an apple  
lying among the roots.  
Wool stocking caps  
pulled back just far enough  
to reveal brown bangs on  
tangerine foreheads.  
Proof of animality.  
Expressive eyebrows revealing  
and accenting what frosted,  
frozen eyelashes  
try to hide.

Tweed jackets and leggings  
stretch,  
rumple,  
itch,  
echo the movement of  
air around them—  
spores and spirits—  
mystery never to be revealed.

Tiny memories trickle  
like creeks of sugar water,  
a spot of joy in a juice glass.  
Here and there.  
Easily caught.  
Easily extinguished.  
Small dead bodies  
shaken out  
with the final drops  
into the fire pit  
or sink drain.

Oh, if they could walk  
forever  
in this intertwining of soul  
tied together like strands  
in a sweetgrass braid.

But it is the way  
of soft leather boots  
to walk away  
from one another,  
and it is the way  
of sweetgrass braids  
to burn and fray  
while blessing.

So sing on the crisis  
and the true and whole  
moments that live within them,  
a perfect fruit  
held in wool mittens,  
a scarf pulled by the wind,  
a drop of sleet on the rocks  
by the lake.

A cup of cider  
that took  
time  
to transform  
from an apple.

—*Sarah Wurst '11*

## **finite**

In Texas  
and Arizona  
they stopped teaching  
critical thinking in schools

but you are a part of my  
liberal agenda  
and I will worship  
the anarchy  
of our communication  
until the stars fall  
and our words burn.

On the same night  
we watched  
the meteor shower  
on the cursed summer grass.  
Nathan watched the  
sunrise turn patchwork quilt  
in the morning sky  
but all his poetry pales  
in comparison to ours.

My notes  
turn squeaky and dry  
in my throat  
and I can't quite  
join his trail song  
because you have  
sucked the music  
from everywhere  
and it only exists  
when my mind meets yours.

I didn't go  
see the migration this fall  
so I missed the swifts  
all entering the same steeple  
but not before the sky was  
for a second  
blotted out with their  
beauty and terror.

—*Sarah Wurst '11*

## The Ceremony

She was never one for a ceremony—  
The white tulle and long looks  
From the nagging auras of bowed heads,  
Hanging like pocket watches.  
They are only here for her,  
Ticking like haggard clocks,

Uniform and obsolete,  
Keeping time with the bending of knees  
And dull ache of the pews.  
They are not just bodies,  
But bodies full of words,  
Paged, aged, vapid,

Dry flaps in hymnals.  
These statues of tomes are waiting  
For the slug of the passage and  
That imperceptible white burden  
Of that body next to her,  
Taking her hand, taking her anew.

It's impossible, impossible  
To absolve this old self  
And her red sacrilege  
On the altar of the exalted.  
But how they admired this new figure,

Her draping hand feeble as a withered fig  
Against the splendor of a wedding band.  
Outside, the sun is setting; she feels its tug.  
Maidens catch her with woven arms  
And the smiles, the rice, catch her tongue.  
Baptized in their multitude,  
She is a woman half spoken for.

—*Carrie Chesney '02*

## It Came like a Train through Belmont

Her sister-in-law had stopped by  
for Friday tea and talk.  
Her husband listened  
and looked out the window  
while the women visited  
about the homecoming parade.  
The sky went green,  
and oily black clouds  
began to fill it,  
but she didn't want to go  
to the cellar. Her leg brace  
made it hard  
to negotiate the stairs.  
But then it dropped  
out of the sky  
like God's angry fist.  
It made a sound like a train  
bulleting down the tracks  
toward two brothers  
playing chicken.

*It's a twister!*  
her husband yelled  
and she didn't have a choice.  
In between the two of them,  
an arm on a shoulder of each,  
she tried to hurry down the stairs,  
but couldn't escape its reach.  
Everything stopped



and then the wall came down  
on top of them.  
The twister was gone  
before she was.

*–Jeremy Burke '99*

## Grandpa Wondering

When I opened my locker  
my phone was flashing  
and I guessed he was gone.

I checked my messages  
from Mom and Dad both  
asking me to call home.  
As I walked down the mall  
I heard Dad ask  
on the other end

*Have you talked to anyone yet?*

*No. I just got your messages to call.*

*Grandpa died this morning at 8:30.  
I figured you probably guessed that.*

I had.  
I flashed back  
to that fall Saturday  
when I was 11 and hoping  
my cousins would call to play.  
The phone rang. I got excited.  
It was Grandpa wondering  
if I wanted to see the tractor show.

*No, Grandpa, I said. I think Will would enjoy that more.  
And they went and had a good time.*

Sitting on a bench  
outside of a shoe store  
is a strange place to hear  
such news,  
but this is how it happens.

I called my wife  
from that bench  
to tell her it happened.  
She and Grandpa had a special connection.

*Can you talk?* I asked.

Yes.

*Grandpa died this morning at 8:30.*

*I'm sorry, Jer,*

she said  
as a woman in a red coat  
sat right next to me  
on the bench of my mourning.  
She sat and listened  
as I told my wife about the wake  
and the funeral plans  
waiting until almost the end  
before she got uncomfortable  
and stood up, pretending  
to read the information kiosk.

I remember Grandpa  
and Grandma's 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.  
I asked him,

*After all these years  
what advice do you have  
for us about marriage?*

He paused  
and said,

*I learned right away—once you're married: no girlfriends*

and he slid his hands through the air  
like an umpire  
calling a runner safe  
wiping out the possibility  
and clearing the way for us  
to reach 60 years, too.

I sit here still,  
eating a pretzel but not tasting it  
and wondering what Grandpa had  
for his last meal.

—Jeremy Burke '99

## Borderline

the pickers' sweat in picking  
and the dirt like dirty prayer  
mix while the pickers keep on sticking  
chins up through caustic air

migrant pickers push through bricking  
hauled through mortar-walled despair  
by where the legal tricks pile, thickening  
confirmed in hate-filled stares

—*Dustin Renwick*

## Ladylike

I could break form and just cuss  
Cuss a storm, cuss society  
Cuss Bobby, cuss Sue  
Cuss 'em out  
Be no diff'rent  
Than all the other cussers  
Cursory cursers, all the four-letter worders  
No diff'rent  
Kicking my cuss-can down the road  
Just another human drawstring  
Tying the cussed into garbage bags  
Throwin' 'em in the 'sip  
The big dirty cussword of a river  
I could be like 'em  
On the cusp of cuss  
My teeth rattlin' shakin'  
To bite my tongue-ready cuss  
To rip through  
Terrifying syllables of raucous  
Waitin' for a door to slam  
Waitin' for that left-handed, pious  
Righteously cussless man  
To come along and dare me to cuss  
Dare me!  
I dare you!  
I'll cuss you out sir!  
Sir.  
I will cuss.  
You.  
Out.

—Holly Norton

## Taiko

it beats three hundred kilometers on command of Asaka  
it beats the length of slope on a woman's back  
where headless men sit on the fence and stare  
with soldered eyes  
at the breast of mothers who suckle their severed children  
where milk spills from quiet corners of tiny mouths  
just before soft dead arms betray their cradle  
wrought of endless  
"weepless mother" it beats  
"weepless child" it beats  
and swords made from black suns spill the union  
over fractured Chinese cobble  
dripping together wet red carpets for soldiers  
who stamp blanched plum blossoms  
into their march  
the Taiko beats out its caustic lyric  
in ringless ears of human rubble  
"Hide your dragons!"  
pounds a thundering sing  
"Mother, we've come—  
to rape your Nanking."

—Holly Norton

## ear debris

*for Connelly & Burroughs*

*i woke up today to a story about little children killed far away.*

(flip) economy

(flip) 1%

(flip) 240 second media analysis of element  
that cannot be analyzed in 240 seconds

*so i sat on the edge of my bed,*

(flip) soldier comes home (flip) soldier goes back  
ladies line up for Patraeus: soldiers of exploitation  
leaves time for two seconds of judgment for patriotic betrayal  
followed by two seconds of lust consideration  
followed by a flat line, then distraction  
(flip)

*and closed my eyes, listening to the morning sounds of my children,*

(flip)

presidential eyebrows, bushy, ballsy knit together,  
go up and down,  
tag the eyebrows so friends of friends can see  
eyebrows leading a nation  
tweeting pink pantsuits  
what's for dinner tonight  
where's the beef  
don't squeeze the Charmin  
(flip)

*Laughing together while they had breakfast.*

*They ate until their pot-bellies were full.*



man tethered to two dogs in a tornado says:  
“A tornado is not just wind!”

(flip)  
thankfully no one was injured, says blonde  
investigators believe—blonde  
higher pay—blonde  
violence spreading—leg shot—pan out to  
blonde!  
will testify  
before blonde congress  
new fallout in (stiletto) Benghazi and Why the end of Twinkies (suit/tie)  
could be only hours away (but what about my lunch?)  
news scroll/weather bar/title sequence/fear  
BLONDE!

man/one dog in tornado says:  
“A tornado is not just wind!”

(flappity-flap)  
90.210 in the FM  
Wink Wilkinson here and with us on the radio is Dr. T.S. Clitterhouse  
talking about healthcare subsidies.  
Wink: Dr. Clitterhouse?  
Dr. Clitterhouse: Yes, Wink, be careful to call them subsidies, though,  
when in fact they are actually “managed payments.”  
W: Sounds super, Dr. T.S.C  
we believe it all here on the radio  
and for all you potential people out there, call in anytime at the station  
with your instantly forgettable comment relating to your instantly  
forgettable life!  
Just dial our toll free number: 1-800-867-5309.  
(flappity-flap)

*Craned necks caught excited breath.  
And voices ricocheted off refrigerator crayon Rembrandts.*

man/tornado  
“A tornado is not just wind!”

(flip)

Blonde Word Repeater Reporter: How dire is it?

Man in Republican Red: Dire.

BWRR: Dire?

MIRR: So dire that anyone listening should listen for the next week  
without pause.

Mouth 1: WITHOUT PAUSE?

Mouth 2: ignore your children.

1: Ignore their children?

2: Yes. When I say our world can be found in spades at your local waste  
treatment center

then it's time to ignore everyone: ESPECIALLY YOUR CHILDREN  
(Flippity-Flap-Flap)

*It climbed up to where I sat.*

catch up on my shows  
my shows

*And those free, cloud-nine sounds exploded in my ears.*

my sunday shows total five hours of my evening  
let me do some math for viewing  
the thursday shows total—wait a minute,  
what's going on with Apple and Samsung and  
what side do I choose to repeat my allegiance?  
do I fly a flag?

what color should it be and what shoes will I wear  
to make the statement of my belief a fact through fashion?

*Euphoria in my ears.*

(flip)

i never turn off my computer: it whirred in '93, it whirs now  
Money for Nothing has been on repeat since I was five years old  
it played like a soundtrack to my first memories  
and I believed in microwaves and prayed to Marios and Sonics  
Ted Turner lay me down to sleep  
i pray Sony my VCR to keep

*All rubble was still wall.*

(flip)

toddlers moonwalked before they could toddle  
Michael Jackson in Indiana: Michael Jackson: red leather  
one glove  
monkey: Macaulay Culkin  
plastic surgery  
propofol  
Michael Jackson, just dance for Wii  
my kid says: Michael Jackson? He invented the crotch-grab Bieber does,  
right, Mom?  
it's happening to them too

*All rubble was still roof.*

a tornado is not just wind

(flap)

here's a story  
of a lovely lady

who engineers all the corn I put in my mouth

*All rubble was still sky.*

(to music:) somewhere out there . . .  
a mother paid \$90,000 for her student's tuition  
while they transcribe Wikipedia  
commercials promote/remote  
get your AA get your BA get your MFA get your PhD!  
then put a guard rail around the entire people-swallowing Grand Canyon  
because we don't know any better and Wikipedia didn't tell us not to  
so:  
we MUST look over the edge  
we MUST jump the fence at the zoo.

*There were no rockets or strange explosive smells for them.*

a tornado is—just—wind

*No invasion of the majestic purple mountains they kept tucked away,*

a tornado is wind

*inside tiny American hearts.*

panic now  
the news cycle is over  
if it's not 24 hours per day, then who are we  
press 1 to hear options for your life  
press 2 to hear the sea from a conch shell  
press # for an agent (pause)  
i'm sorry, I didn't understand your entry  
please try again

*At our table my three babies sat free  
in the crossfire of my love for them.*

uh—a tornado and something about wind?

*But I knew today there was (again),  
a black silence for my sister-mother,  
who had none of this.*

my nana says:

your first word is ah

Awe.

and if your second word is Barney, Ariel, Brittany, Justin, O'Reilly,

Selena, ABC, CBS, X-Box

then, child, you're screwed

she says to me: because if this is so

then to your deathbed witnesses

your last word will be promise

promise me you won't waste this

promise me you'll look away

from flappity-flaps

and flippitys

and leggy blondes

a tornado is not just wind

it's debris

remember, she'll say promise

remember, Holly, wake up at 3:46 a.m. in a cold sweat

remember—a tornado is not just wind

it's debris too

*Not even a bed upon which to cry for the loss,*

and if you listen to yourself  
your first  
and last word  
will  
be  
Awe . . .

*of these sounds.*

child: Mom, why do they call it Black Friday?  
mother: because everyone wears black to a funeral

and that's the way  
it is

—*Holly Norton*

## Visit to Lou

Louisa Ann “Lou” McFarland shuffled her shackled feet to the long metal table that split the room in two. One half for the incarcerated guilty, one half for visitors. Iron bars separated them from the waist up, and Teddy felt awash with pain. The baggy skin under his mother’s eyes had drawn further down, more purple with blood and restlessness since he last saw her. Her neck sagged, too, and thin pale arms were no match for iron circles clanging on her wrists. She sat. At first the hard prison façade was there. Then he saw her adjust to present company and her shoulders dropped. As the fight drained from her, his mother’s eyes went wide and soft and with a tinkling of chains she reached slowly to the bars, where she slipped three aged fingers out to him. Teddy looked over to the large white sign with the warning red words NO CONTACT and didn’t reach back. She followed his eyes to the sign, then drew her wrists back with a defeated scraping sound, letting her cuffed hands come to rest in her lap.

She’d received his letter.

Teddy could tell. Her eyes told an old story before she spoke, and he thought there might be a place in every mother, even the mothers who aren’t good mothers, that wanted a reassuring touch from their child. He wished he could’ve touched the reaching fingers. He wanted to grab the fingers attached to the hand and place it on his cheek. Then to the attached arm where he would curl into. Then to the exposed connected neck where he would cry into her smell. A wail for the two people they could’ve been.

“Was the line long?” She looked genuinely interested, as if she could do something about it if it was too long.

He looked down ashamed. “No. I got in pretty quick.”

“Sundays can be a jam. I’m surprised.” She prodded, “How’s your brother?”

“Mom.” Teddy looked away. She knew better to ask.

“Yeah, I suppose,” she said.

“Yeah, I suppose,” he responded.

“Why now? You don’t know him.” As she referenced Teddy’s letter, her spirit turned mean and she hissed, still hurt from rejection. “Do you

like waiting? That's what you'll do! If you like waiting, then go on and look him up!" She got low and sneered. "Your dad will put you second, just like always, and you'll do nothin' but wait and wait for somebody that never wanted you."

The thought of him seeing his father had stirred her up. "Are you kidding me?" Teddy snapped back in a hush. "I'm in a damn prison. Everyone here is putting people second, including you. Okay?"

Faced with the truth, her eyes went small. She had been wounded by his letter and he was glad for it, though recovery came with the territory of being a prisoner and her face was quick to rebound from the hurt. Tandem hands brought out a pack of smokes from the pocket of her prison jumpsuit. "I need a light."

"Can you smoke?"

There was a pause. "Yeah." She smirked and repositioned herself. "I need a light, though."

Teddy reached into his pocket and dug out a yellow lighter, 2 for 1, while she stuck her mouth up to the bars, letting the cigarette poke through. He looked around for another white sign with red markings to advise on smoking—or no smoking—as he flipped the lighter. She noticed his anxiety with the whole affair and puffed away, observing his discomfort through the bars.

"You're a good kid," she said. They stared at each other.

"Life's a wonder, Teddy Bear. I didn't want all of this, you know? Like it is now." His mother looked down at her sandaled feet and a few strings of dirty blonde hair escaped from her ponytail. When her head raised, she allowed a gold tooth to shine from the side of her grin.

"You know, your daddy was a good man in some little ways. He wasn't a shining man of responsibility, though. Fact, your grandmother was fit to be tied when I brought him home." Behind the bars, she fiddled with the cigarette between fingers, baring nails bit below the quick. Her head shook back and forth. "And I thought I was a big girl making my own decisions, but she was right, though, your nana. She had him pegged. He was good at the start though—shit, ain't everybody? We



had a little place in West Texas. Did I ever tell you that?" She furrowed a brow and smiled. "About that little duplex?"

Teddy shook his head.

"Oh, yeah, we had this little yellow duplex in the sticks before we moved to El Paso. We didn't have nothing but a nasty Lazy Boy your grandfather gave us. It'd been sittin' on his back porch. He let his two hound dogs use that chair for everything and then he gave it to us to use! Can you believe that? Leftovers from dogs. God, it stunk so bad!" Her nose wrinkled like she was smelling hounds. "But you know, we was just starting out, and everyone takes what they can when they start out." She gave a smoky chortle. "I even sprayed it down with ammonia one day, and then it was even worse! Couldn't keep it in the house no more, so we just put it out front. Used it as a smoking chair. I'm kinda surprised I can still breath what with all the ammonia and Marlboros. Hell, we smoked ourselves bad on that chair!" Ted could imagine his mother on the good side of the steel bars telling this same story, slapping her knee. Doing better.

"Me and him both got jobs that paid nothing, but I spent a lot of time at thrift stores trying to turn that duplex into something like a home. I was so excited when I found a giant wooden spoon to hang on the wall, just like my mom had when I was a teenager. I nailed that sucker up, right above the dining room table so every night we'd see it during dinner, you know?" The lines in her forehead smoothed out and her eyes look unworried as she thought about the wooden spoon. "Home-making right? A place where all the things you love is hanging on the walls, or sitting up on shelves jus' where you want them. Jus' like I seen in catalogs when I was little. I wanted that for you." She paused and waited for acknowledgement of her goodness as white plumes of smoke halos rose above her head. Teddy was silent.

"No, Teddy Bear, the truth is I thought I was right about him and I thought if everything looked like catalogs and magazines then I could live in that world too. But people ain't things. You can't place them where you want them. They move like water. It just turned out wrong." She

sing her herself with the cigarette. “Turns out, some people only do for themselves in this life. He got to drinking so bad I started throwing out or hiding anything and everything he could hit me with. Reason being, he never liked to mess up his hands. You know? So he always found something he could hold and beat me with. No, he wouldn’t have swollen and bleeding knuckles, but he’d beat the spirit out of me to make point. Never even gave a shit where I bled—but I don’t know why he would.”

His mother leaned forward, closer to the bars, closer to her forgotten son. “So, one night, I catch him at the Wooden Nickel talking with a woman.” Her face twisted up. “I knew her, too. Lizzy Buchanan. I knew she had her legs wide open like clearance on a tarmac. I was so jealous, because it was a matter of time before he was gonna lay up with that bitch, maybe even that night if I hadn’t shown up. Everyone at the bar got an earful of what I thought about your father, and then I took off. I walked all the way home by myself in the dark.” Her mood went bright. “I had these little cheap velvet heels on, and it took me forever to wobble back.” A giggle came, and the gold tooth shone again. “Pink velvet. Oh, God, the crap I wore!” She let out a long drawn-out “Shit!” that sounded more like “Shet” and then smoked a third of her cigarette in one drag. Her face looked young for a second, like maybe they were both in a coffee shop talking about the latest anything and everything. But soon it shifted back and she ranted on, forgetting about her velvet shoes.

“Anyway—while I was walking back, he got a ride home from that bitch and was already at the front door by the time I come up. I tried to run, but he snatched my wrist and yanked me inside. He didn’t let go. His face was still red and pissed because I’d embarrassed him in front of everyone at The Nickel. And you know, he wanted to hit me bad but he couldn’t find nothing to get me with, ’cause it was all hid. I even taped our good cutting knife under a cabinet.” She took a final inhale and let the smoke role out of her mouth while she talked. “Honey, I hid it all—but I forgot the spoon hanging up on the wall. I saw it right when he did, but he got to it first. It was cheap wood, but it did the trick.” The steel

door of the visiting room cranked open without warning, causing Teddy to jerk back. An officer in grey came in, and his mother looked back.

“Five minutes, Lou.” Then the officer nodded at her cigarette for compliance. She returned the nod and put the smoke out under the table. Teddy knew it.

“Anyway, that spoon knocked out two of my teeth and split my ear. I was lucky it broke in half as quick as it did.” A cuffed hand lifted the little rogue strings of hair back from the left side of her face, exposing her ear. “Here, see? See that?” Two fingers dragged across the curve where a rounded three-inch scar popped up and away, like a patch, from the healthy skin. “He got me right here. I never did get stitches—probably should’ve, ’cause it hurt like a son-of-a-bitch for weeks.” She straightened her head. “For awhile I couldn’t hear out of that ear.” Her tired eyes turned perplexed. “You know, I still don’t hear too well on that side.”

It went quiet again, but after a minute or so she nodded her head with something like pride. “Matter of fact, I had Mikey three months after that.” Gold tooth again. “I was so happy when your brother came out normal. I don’t know why I worried. He never beat me over the stomach when I was expecting.” Her face sunk and the shiny tooth receded again. “Hell, we had our fights, but in the end he broke my jaw and punctured a lung one night, and after that I couldn’t keep the law off him no matter what I did. He split for Arizona, and I ain’t seen him since.”

Teddy finally spoke. “You haven’t heard anything from him? Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“Mom, it’s just hard to understand. I can’t believe he wouldn’t want to know anything about us until now. You didn’t even get a letter? In twenty years?” Teddy looked for signs of life, a sign of empathy, but he saw her fading in the dark of her own selfish lament.

“You know, after awhile I got to watching the Mississippi roll by. There’s so many songs about it. So many stories.” His mother looked beyond him now, somewhere far back in her own life. “It’s easy to drink by moving waters, because there’s something so wrong about sitting by

a river and knowing you're not riding those currents to new things. It makes you sad to watch the ghosts go by without you. For a time I wanted to be a ghost, too."

The officer came back and she snapped back to life. "I don't know for sure, but I think he loved you. He just never said it around me." She rose, walked to the door, then turned around to let the officer check her cuffs, and looked into Teddy.

"Baby, you can spend a lifetime waiting, if that's what you wanna do." She craned her cuffed hands up so Teddy could see the shackles, then dropped them back behind her. "But when it comes to water, some people drink on the shore and some drift in the currents."

The officer took a shoulder and began to guide her through the door. "Tell your brother to call me, please? Tell him I'm sorry, okay?"

Teddy smiled, gave a nod, and she was gone. Gone back to the guts of the prison. Into the metal belly. Gone away with decaying catalogs in dumps and wailing ghosts on the river. Gone.

*—Holly Norton*

## Hotel Rambla

*Alicante, Spain*

I never figured it a good thing to get too comfortable in a place. I left when everything felt like it was where it should be. The leaving was what kept me up the first few nights in the big empty hotel room—that and the jetlag. I was time zones and oceans from everything I knew, but distance never feels that far until you're alone. I felt like crying that first night when I emailed my mom, but I didn't.

At dinner I met a girl from Buffalo with hair darker and longer than mine, and later that night we walked the cobblestone streets of a city I thought I'd never understand. Drunk on sleepiness and new confusion, we met our soon-to-be friends, just as foreign and unaware as us, at a little Spanish bar. We ate tapas and talked about hometowns and majors and universities. They were all just as lost as I was, and something about that felt almost comforting.

—*Maria DeSio*

## The Louvre

*Paris, France*

I went to Paris just to say I did it. It was February, and the bitter kind of cold that made everything hurt. We went to the Louvre to get the feeling back in our fingers, and Tyler told me not to say a word as he convinced the ticket seller that we were poor art students from far away. He knew I could never lie the way he could. We saw the Mona Lisa for free. She was smaller than I had imagined, and trapped behind a lot of glass. Some people say that Da Vinci drew himself in her famous face, but I think he was just painting a picture.

We sat in the hostel at night, drinking beer from vending machines and eating pizza out of the box. Tyler took the bunk below me, and at nighttime he whispered for me to come lay with him. I whispered back no, but Paris felt like the kind of city where you do romantic things, or fall in love, or at least fall asleep next to someone, and the cold made me lonelier than usual. I brought my blanket down with me, and we talked with our faces so close together that his breath kept me warm. He tried to kiss me, and I pretended to fall asleep. The next two nights my head ended up on his chest, and I could tell he was smiling, even in the dark, when he said that I couldn't keep climbing into his bed without kissing him. I slept on the top bunk the next night.

—*Maria DeSio*

## La Iglesia de la Consolación

*Altea, Spain*

Fridays were lazy, and the four of us decided to take the train up the Costa Blanca in the middle of March to a pretty little town we'd heard about. I rested my forehead against the window, feet perched on the empty chair facing me. There was graffiti on abandoned barns and single walls that didn't protect anything anymore. Graffiti can be art—I've always understood that—but this was different. The spray paint was colorless and jagged and hopeless and permanent. That's the thing, though—no one cared to cover it up. They were undisturbed by phallic symbols on schoolyard walls and obscenities on once-graceful churches that held smaller congregations each week. I never heard anyone make a fuss, or even acknowledge it was there.

Altea was whitewashed houses climbing hills along the sea, with beaches made of white rocks as big as my palm. We walked along the water without a destination, without noticing we had none. We could see a church at the top of the city, a dome covered in blue glass that smiled in the sunlight. We wandered deep curves of cobblestone streets to the top and sat overlooking this little Athens we'd found. A man stood behind us playing Spanish songs on his guitar. We were in a postcard, and we watched the waves as we talked about all the boys we should have never kissed when we were seventeen, and all the ones we would kiss again if we had the chance. A lot of the names didn't change. We didn't leave the man with the guitar a single coin when we left.

—*Maria De Sio*

## Carnaval

*Alicante, Spain*

The laws weren't laws for that night. I watched my feet as we walked over broken bottles and flattened masks. We fit in—trying so hard to fit in—with our sparkly dresses and eyelashes and masquerade masks, as we roamed through the heavy crowds of covered faces. We packed a hotel room on the seventeenth floor and drank vodka until three in the morning, every so often peering over the balcony. The seventeenth floor was only halfway up, but it felt higher. Below, it was all like I imagined a party thrown by Gatsby, where the men and the girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars.

The night waited until we made it down to the whisperings of the streets. We danced and drank and wandered, never asking what it was we were celebrating, but celebrating all the same. The moon looked out of place as the sky lightened on our walk home. We carried high heels in our hands through the morning ruins as the street cleaners hollered in Spanish for us to put our shoes back on. We smiled and shrugged with tired eyes, pretending not to understand.

—*Maria DeSio*



## Little Café with a Name I Can't Remember

*Barcelona, Spain*

He knocked on the door of our room and half smiled as he introduced himself and his quiet Australian friend, saying that they had heard girls speaking English from across the hall and got curious. Later that night he helped me open a bottle of wine with a pen he had in his pocket, because most hostels don't come equipped with things like corkscrews. We invited him and the quiet friend to get drinks with us, and when he asked I helped him button those little buttons at the cuff of his dress shirt that seem almost impossible to do yourself. We stood too close to each other and he talked to me like we were better friends than we were.

The next morning, he asked if he could take me to breakfast at a little café. It seemed like a European thing to do, but his eyes were almost as green as the eyes of the boy that I'd left at home, which didn't feel like the good kind of familiar. I said yes anyways. I ordered a coffee and he paid, which was nice, I suppose. He used a lot of words that he had picked up from his "mates" at "uni," which didn't sound right coming from a boy from Queens, but I listened anyway. When I left, we made plans that neither of us intended to keep, trying to fill in the pauses of an awkward goodbye. I left my coffee at the table untouched.

—*Maria DeSio*















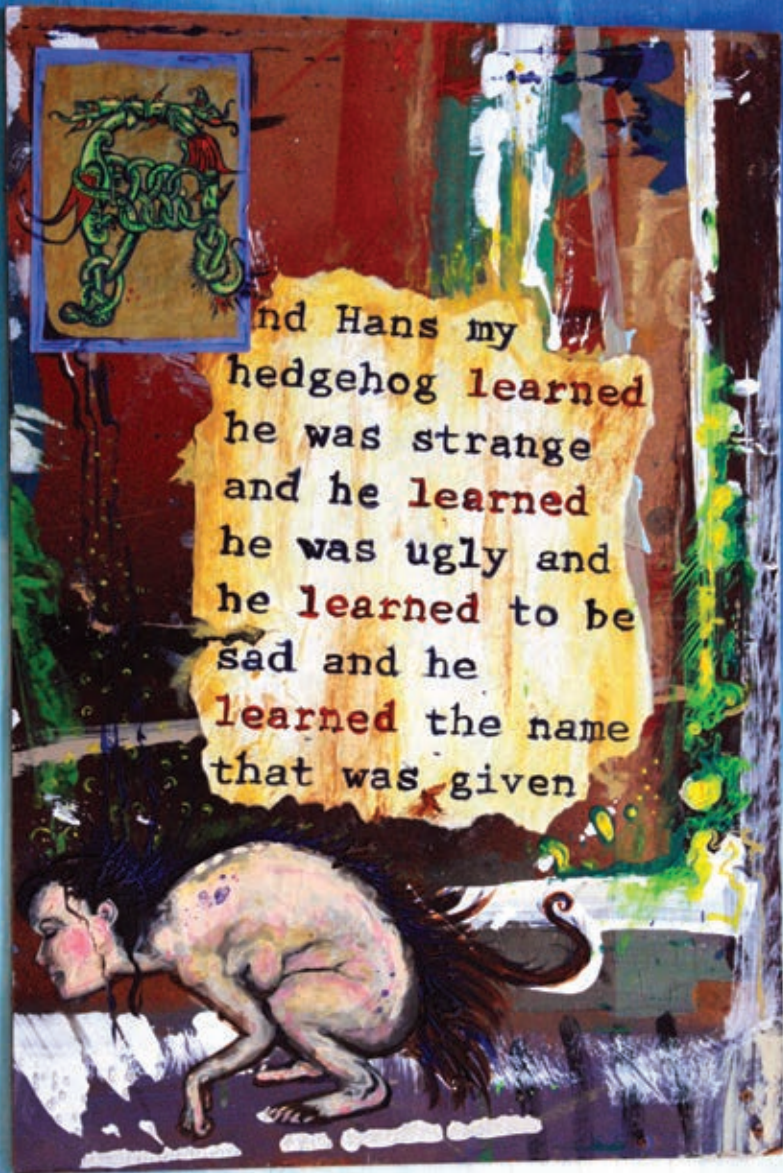








I can give her no greater power than she has already," said the woman; "don't you see how strong that is? How men and animals are obliged to serve her, and how well she has got through the world, barefooted as she is."



nd Hans my  
hedgehog learned  
he was strange  
and he learned  
he was ugly and  
he learned to be  
sad and he  
learned the name  
that was given



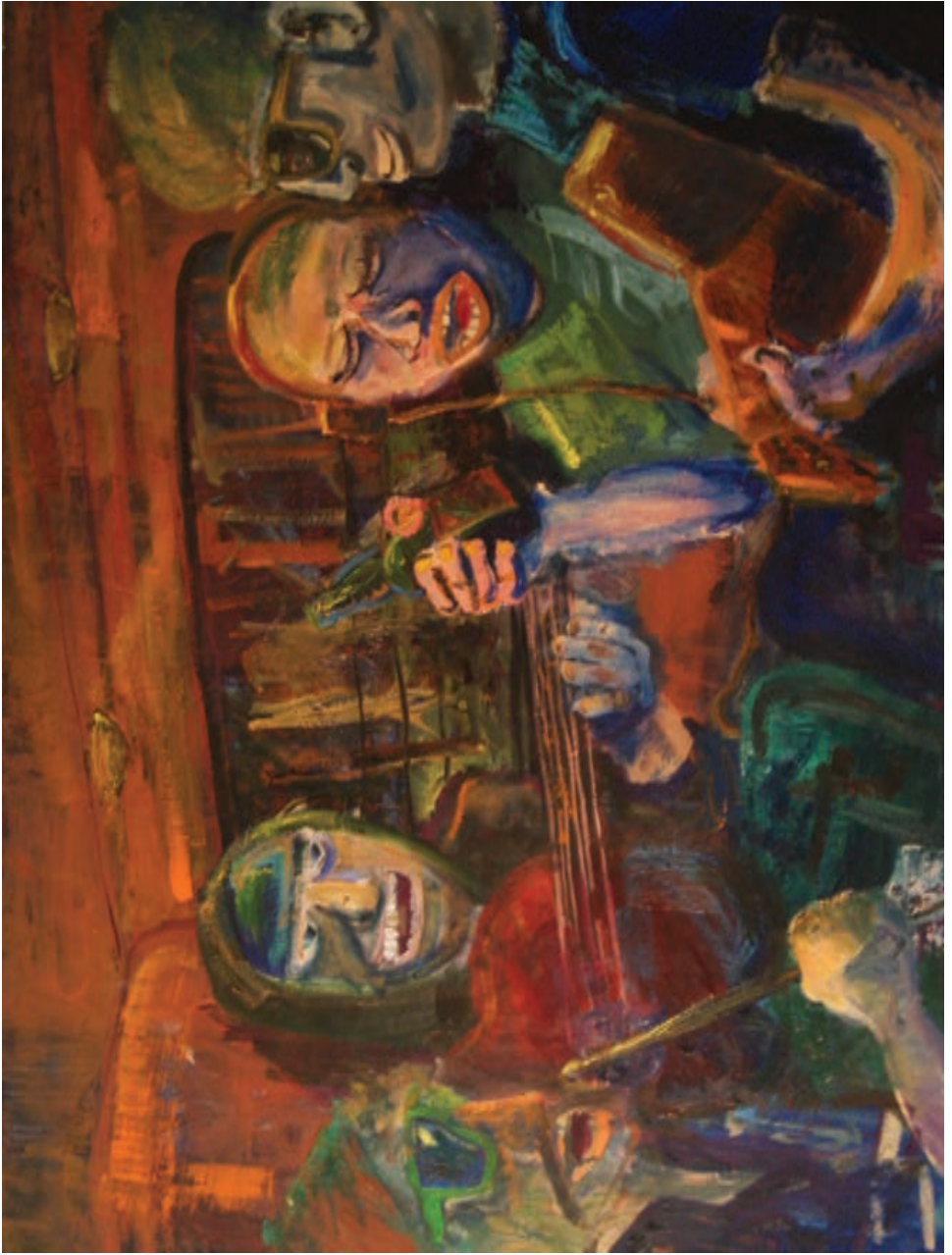




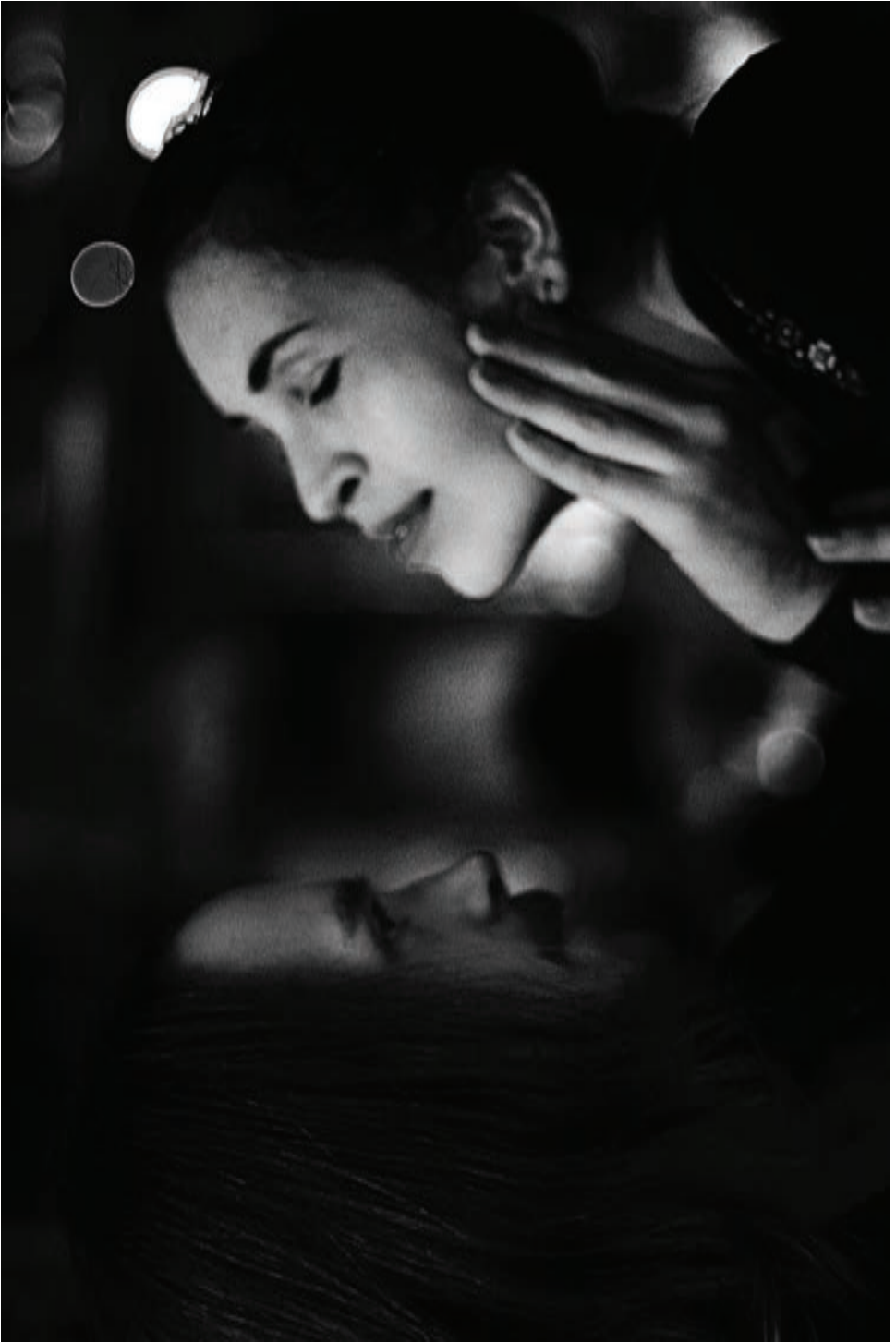




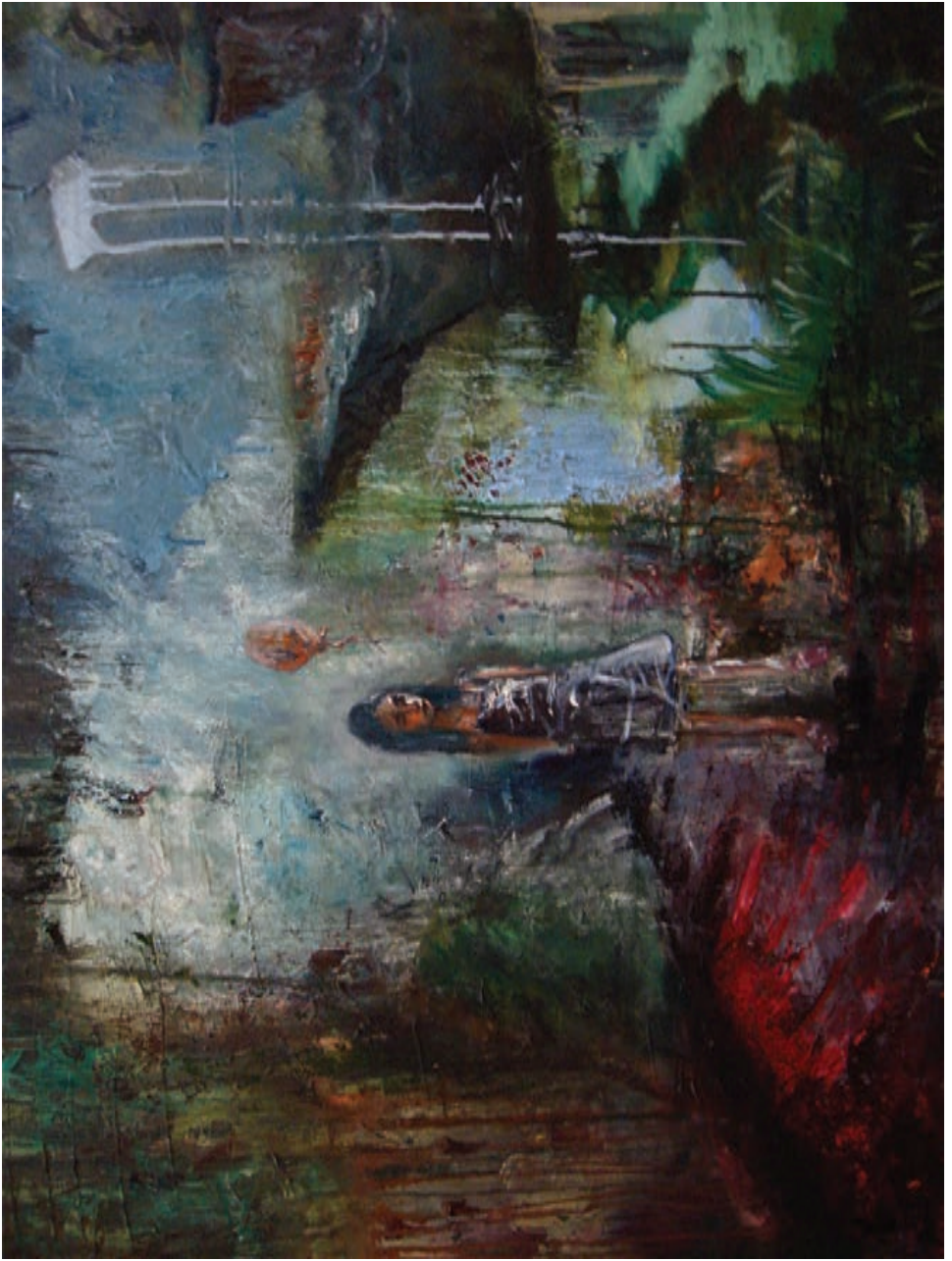












## September Sonnet

September slipped itself onto my lap  
With spreading bounty: copper, coral, red.  
Tomatoes swell and droop; the acorns rap  
Our roof as I lie gratefully in bed.

Some iambs tumble loosely from my brain,  
Half-green and looking for a rhyming pair  
To help me make my thankfulness more plain,  
To sound my blessings, round and broad and fair.

But then I hear the breathing soft and deep,  
Reminding me that autumn's gifts are slight  
When set beside the one who in his sleep,

My happiness holds silently and tight.  
Such fullness of the season I do reap,  
Which will sustain me through a winter's night.

—*Nancy Hayes*

## December Sonnet

That I am of a certain age, which makes  
Me wake at three or two or four in deep,  
Still hours, enables me to take  
Some stock in things I'd miss if I could sleep,  
Such as the moonshine on mid-winter snow.  
It casts ink shadows off the branching oaks  
Across a swath of frozen white below,  
Their crooked, radiating lines like spokes.  
While peering down across the lawn I can't  
Distinguish glistening ground from daylit skies;  
A double vision through my dreamy slant  
Transfigures worries into lullabies.

In bed again, eyes shut, thoughts calm, soul still,  
By night enlightened, I fear less death's chill.

—*Nancy Hayes*



## According to Aristophanes

There was a time before this, they say—  
before this wracking torment  
and this hollow, grieving ache.

It was a time when we were doubled—  
when two halves made one whole,  
and no one was unhappy.

There wasn't so much mass confusion,  
and since two hearts beat as one,  
none of them were broken.

But the dauntless strength of ancient love,  
unmatched by any other force,  
made us reckless, giddy, unabashed.

So out of fear, with righteous punishment,  
the god of thunder took a bolt of lightning  
and ripped our worlds apart.

Lost and doubled in number, we let out a wail—  
a cry from deep within the earth.  
Our souls, now halved, withered without grace.

Some reunited, though many go unmatched.  
The world now seems boundless, overrun  
with fragments of mangled souls.

But even those that find their match  
writhing in this chaotic place  
can never share the bond once had by all.

Being one, in life and love, is gone.

All that's left is the vague sense of acute loneliness  
and the lingering ghost of our once-perfect past.

—*Bailey Keimig*

## Train to Changchun

*preface to The Fearless Passage of Steven Kim*

Saturday, September 27, 2003

Shackled upright to a wooden bench, the American peered through the scratched, grimy window as the train rumbled across the countryside. Farm after farm rushed by—countless villages whose names he'd never know. The sky was just getting light; it was not yet dawn. They were headed north.

He coughed weakly, the old carriage thick with cigarette smoke and a sour human stench. They had just pulled out from a station, and a crowd of passengers speaking a dissonant hash of Chinese dialects pushed along the aisle to get through to the next car. They glared down with contempt as they passed him and the nine other prisoners—three men and six women, all refugees from North Korea—headed to a *laogais*, a gulag, labor camp, deep in the heart of mainland China.

They had been on the train a day and two nights—arrested in Chang'an and held for a night of screamed threats and insults in a concrete cell beneath the Guangdong Province Coastal Military Headquarters in Guangzhou. One of the men, an engineer in his mid-fifties, had been having trouble breathing. He'd gasped and wheezed, his florid complexion turning redder, then pale, then a bluish grey. They had been afraid he was having a heart attack—hadn't known if he would last the night. When finally he had collapsed and lost consciousness, hardly breathing, they had called for the guards, who had entered the cell and dragged him away. They hadn't seen him again.

The American's head throbbed, his back and limbs ached, and his throat burned with thirst. His lips were cracked and crusted with dried blood. None of the prisoners had had anything to eat or drink or even been allowed to use the toilet since they had boarded. As the day lightened, hunger turned to weakness. He could tolerate that, but it was all he could manage to keep from emptying his bowels and bladder where he sat. Each point of pain competed with another. His ankles were red and swollen, manacled and joined together by a one-foot iron link. When during the long second night he had tried to get up and relieve the pres-

sure, a guard had shoved him back down and locked his chains to the bench.

He rubbed at his wrists, chafed from the iron cuffs, but when he tried to lift and stretch his arms, the guard cracked a matte black baton against his knees and warned him in rough Mandarin, *Bie dong*. Be still.

“How long?” he rasped.

*Bi zui*, the guard told him. Shut up.

His mind roiled with stories he’d heard from the rare survivors of Chinese work camps: rapes, murders, forced starvation, torture. Young girls and boys rented or sold as sex slaves. Prisoners executed so their organs could be “harvested” and auctioned off to the highest bidder. At first he hadn’t believed the stories, but as account after account had filtered out from the *laogais*, they had gotten harder to deny.

He strained to twist toward his fellow prisoners down the aisle. He could turn his head and almost glimpse them, but they were too far and his torso was chained and bolted tight to the bench. The others sat in pairs; he was kept separate and alone.

The train stopped at one station after another—he’d long ago forgotten to count—and a new crowd pushed through after each stop, some settling down at the other end of the car. National Day, on the first of October, was only a few days away, and the whole train was packed.

The air around the prisoners became closer, stifling. He had lost all sense of touch in his hands and feet, but pain seared through his arms and legs, tore through his back, and cramped his stomach. He nodded in and out of consciousness, rocked by the jostling rhythms of the train. Now and again he fell into a fitful sleep, only to be jerked up every few minutes by the sharp burning of the metal cuffs and shackles cutting into his skin.

Hours later—it was now broad daylight—the guards came down the aisle and let the other prisoners, still chained to their partners, use the toilet in a tiny restroom at the end of the carriage. They groaned getting up and fell again and again as they stumbled down the aisle, sup-

porting each other when one couldn't stand. One of the older women was fading; her eyes were dull and listless as her partner lifted her up and along. The guards screamed and pushed at them to keep moving. The American knew some Chinese but doubted that the others—all North Koreans—could understand. Still, he was sure they got the message.

When the other prisoners were brought back, across from him now, the a guard handed each a few dry crackers and a cup of tepid, watery broth. He could see them concentrating so as not to spill, their hands trembling as they struggled to bring the cups to their dry lips.

Finally, two guards unlocked his chains from the bench and hoisted him up. His knees buckled; he felt sure his ankles would break. One guard on each side grabbed hold under his shoulders, dragged him down the aisle, and tossed him through the open restroom door onto the toilet, then stood there laughing as he struggled to loosen his pants in time.

When he was done, the guards hoisted him out. Without any chance to wipe himself, he pulled up and fastened his pants on the way back along the aisle. From the other end of the car, passengers craned their necks and stared with disgust.

The guards dropped him back on the bench, locked his shackles in place, and gave him two crackers and a cup of the dirty broth. Wetting his parched throat with the liquid, he let small pieces of the crackers dissolve in his mouth and felt his head clear just a bit. His hands and feet were on fire; his body screamed as feeling returned to his limbs.

As he sipped, wanting the broth, as repellent as it was, to last as long as possible, his nostrils flared at a new smell—pungent, garlicky, familiar—cutting through his own stink. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. “Kimchee,” he mouthed—his favorite, a staple from his Korean upbringing and home. He exchanged sad glances with another of the prisoners—a young girl, no more than a teen, arrested along with her mother. Down the carriage a group of passengers were carrying bowls of rice and salty, pickled cabbage back to their seats.

He thought of Helen, his wife. Her kimchee was the best. Tears

welled in his eyes. He pictured Helen and their three children—Eric, Lisa, and Charles—safe in their big house in Huntington, on Long Island in New York. It was late Saturday night there, he figured. In the morning, they would go to church, and after services, holding each other by the hand, they'd talk with their pastor, with friends and neighbors and other members of the congregation—accepting their love and support.

By now, Helen would know he'd disappeared. And she would worry. But none of them would even imagine his actual position—what had happened in the last few days and where he sat now—hungry, dirty, and smelling of his own excrement—shackled to the bench with the nine other prisoners on a train hurtling deeper and deeper into a hellish oblivion at the heart of the mainland.

After he'd been arrested, he had tried to phone his office manager from the station house, for her to call Helen and tell her that he was in custody. Helen would have known what to do. But the guards wouldn't let him use a phone, and then, almost before he knew it, in the middle of the night, they had snatched him and the others from their joint cell, bound them in chains, and hurried them off to the waiting train.

They were a long way from home, he thought—the North Koreans, but especially himself—and none of them knew when, or if, they would see their families again.

He looked up, aroused from his despondent reverie. Across the aisle, two pairs of prisoners huddled together, all whispering at once, as if in unison. The guards were down toward the end of the car, eating with the other passengers. He leaned forward, arching toward the group, straining to hear what they were saying. Through the smoke and the smells and the exhaustion they all shared, he could just barely make out their last words: “. . . kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.”

Squeezing the tears from his eyes and closing them tight, Steven Kim, the American, silently prayed.

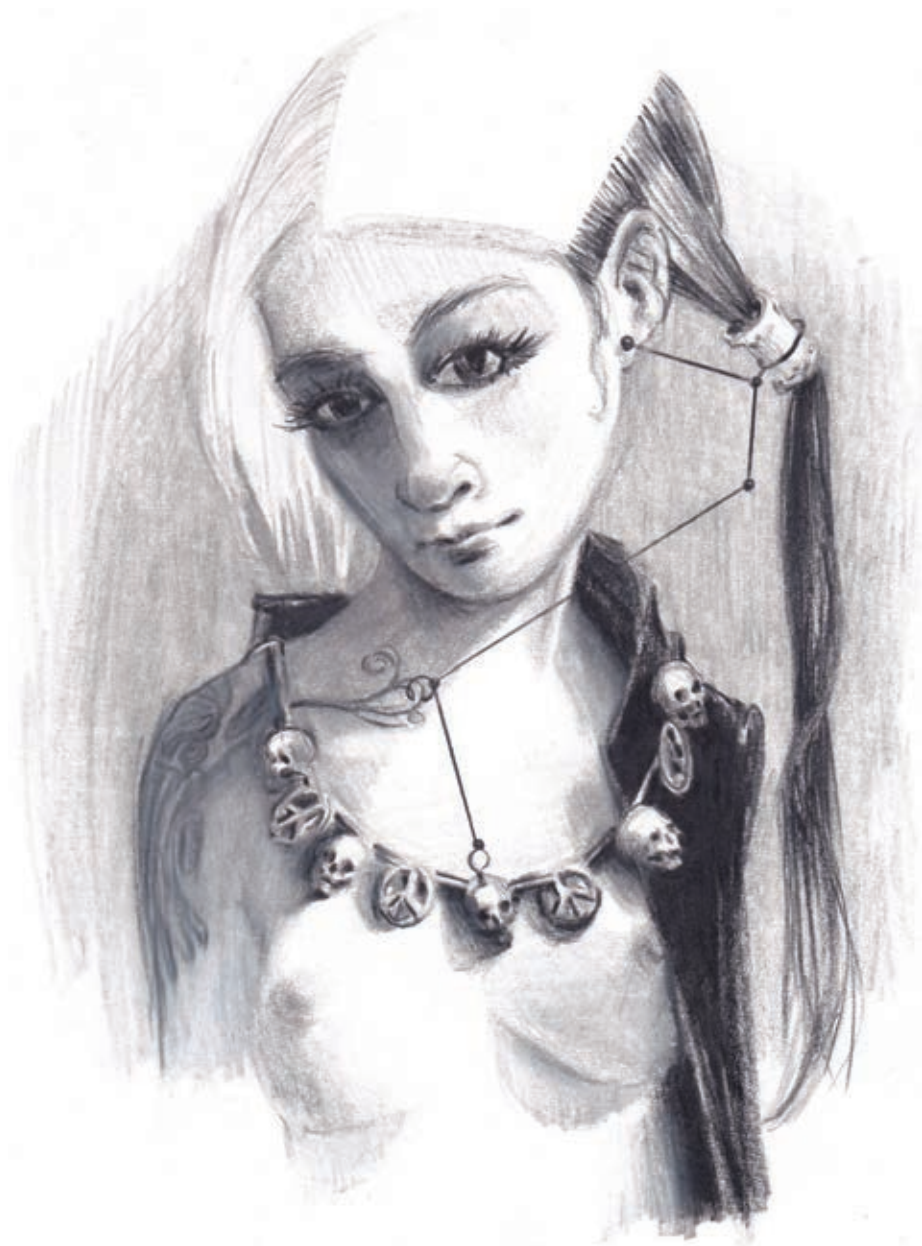
—*Carl Herzig*



LB-12









## Carpet Thoughts

Smithereens of subconscious confetti  
on apartment floors  
will soon find tacks  
to attach themselves  
to otherwise emotionless walls—  
posters without images,  
relying entirely on tag lines,  
mine reading,  
“Crazier things have happened.”

—*Leo Quinn '10*

## The Hate I Hide

When I lose the indent of bone,  
Darkness drips onto my soul—  
Seeps inside, consumes my thoughts,  
Kills all reason until I'm not.

I cut my hair to make a change.  
The face is different, intentions the same:  
Meals not made, food untouched,  
Skin and bones is not enough.

The marks that spread across my skin  
Loose the bonds I need to live,  
Burn and ache 'til I black out.  
Tears fill the silence; I numb their sound.

I eat to fill the hole inside,  
Cry, pretend I'm still alive.  
When people ask, I'll say,  
"I'm fine."

Trembling lungs force me to breathe—  
With a smile too wide  
To hide what's underneath.  
No one will see.

—*Olivia McDonald*

## Photoshop

What was wrong  
with the color of the flower  
in the photo you snapped?  
Wasn't it red enough by nature?

Now the tree bark's texture,  
the coolness of the water,  
the dimensionality of the stones, stand out.  
Tweaking the contrast and color saturation  
created a separation of elementals,  
pieces in a jigsaw puzzle—  
the big picture with constituent parts.

In reality, lines are softer;  
essence streams from twig to leaf  
in an uninterrupted flow—  
definition from movement:  
a stirring of grasses  
or bird's fidget.  
In nature, separation does not exist.

The eye craves more sometimes, doesn't it?  
Or at least something different.  
The camera captures all—  
the double chin, the yellow tooth.  
But why accept it?  
You have the technology at your fingertips.

I wanted a picture of you.  
We sat side by side at the coffee bar,  
your camera between us.  
I picked it up; you looked at me,  
and snap! I captured a moment:

Brown eyes full of expression, and warmth.  
Maybe just a warm regard—if not for me,  
for the moment. A transitory enunciation:  
your nature fixed in a matrix of zeroes and ones.

It was all there:  
the brown eyes, the warm regard,  
the coffee-bar background,  
the reflection of the photographer, of me,  
captured in the lenses of your glasses.  
All the essentials.

You had to do it. I understand.  
Especially because it was an image of you,  
a self you half disgust and half deny.  
Compelled by a desire to improve the photo,  
to manage how the subject would read,  
you articulated a new self:

The background was effaced  
to frame the head in nothingness,  
color unceremoniously stripped away,  
the scene wrapped in a shroud.  
An artificial reflection added to the glasses  
veiled a gray eye, freeing the subject  
from what, who, confronts him.  
A new man emerged,  
enshrined in abstraction,  
liberated from the trappings of authenticity.

I was released from the scene,

Photoshopped out.  
But what happened to my brown-eyed friend?  
He, too, was abandoned, an apparition  
left behind by his dead-eyed twin  
to haunt the coffee bar in perpetuity.

—*Leslie Ross Fern*

## I'm Dreaming: Ghazal 1

My eyelids heavy and desperate for sleep—I'm dreaming;  
outside my window stars twinkle so bright—I'm dreaming.

Unfamiliar faces surround me, looking for a fight;  
my limbs fall weak, ready to take a blow—I'm dreaming.

I fly without wings across treetops with might,  
a set of unknown superpowers unveiled—I'm dreaming.

Bracing for impact, I fall from a great height;  
my mind reveals this masterpiece it's created—I'm dreaming.

Sweat runs down my spine—I'm looking to be saved by my knight,  
trapped in a corner with a gun to my head—I'm dreaming.

My breathing unsettled, I see without sight;  
I toss and I turn. "Rachel, wake up!"—I'm dreaming.

—Rachel Goodknight '12



## Mocking Bird's Song

The police had to be suspicious—six brand-new houses in the ghetto. Casey, my second-in-command, had found a serviceable hundred-yard stretch of an old sewer system no longer located on maps. The entrance was a manhole some hood rats had covered with a sandbox. During the renovations we hid it like in *Goonies*, under the fireplace.

They drove by every day, even more since their informant had gone missing. He'd asked for ten grand of heroin, but I could tell he was bunk, so I charged him double street and had two brothers from the farm tail him.

When he showed up at my house, I greeted him with a beer. "I want to trust you," I said, "so let's get your drugs." It wasn't a suggestion. "Why is the ground covered with plastic?" he asked when we got to the tunnel. Once we'd taken care of him, we sawed off his limbs, drained them, and threw them into a terrarium full of beetles.

Casey nabbed his watch, but it didn't keep the right time. I tried to set it, but it didn't work. When I opened the back, I and found a tracking chip.

I washed up with peroxide, changed, and mowed the lawns while the boys cleaned up the tunnel. I was sitting on the porch drinking a forty when a dark Buick pulled up. A built guy in a ragged suit got out and asked for his "cousin." Amusing.

"He moved out a few hours ago," I said. "You just missed him."

"He told me he'd be living here a few more days."

"Don't know what to tell you. He did leave a few things, though—his watch and—"

"Can I have them?"

"Sure, if you pay his rent. Five hundred."

"I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

I leaned back, smiling, and me and Casey returned to our forties.

"Greetings!" I called out a half hour later when the Buick returned.

"Didn't think you'd make it back." The watch was on the table.

"Do you have his stuff?"

"Do you have the rent? Come on up." He counted out five bills

and handed them to Casey. I reached for my hat, but the guy must have thought it was covering a gun and whipped out a revolver.

I laughed. "If I wanted to kill you, you'd be dead, Officer Smith."

"What? How did you—"

"Put your gun away, officer; you've got no need to fear. I had no idea you were related to my tenant. Your brother's watch is under my hat."

"Oh."

"Here." I picked up my hat and put it on.

He took the watch and grinned. He thought it still had the chip. "We got you now, Birdy," he said. That's how I was known then—Mocking Bird.

"Doubt it," I told him. "Say hi to your wife and kids for me. You have a beautiful family. Met them at the coffee shop a few days ago. Someone must have slashed her tires. Damn shame."

He punched me. I didn't put up a fight. Casey knew the plan and stepped back. The officer pointed his gun at my head.

"Stay away from my fuckin' family."

Casey pulled out his wallet, tossed it on the floor, and put his hands on his head.

The officer was confused—picked up the wallet and slammed his revolver into my left temple.

I went down but laughed. "Smile for the camera, officer," I said, pointing to a camera in the corner of the porch ceiling. "You might as well stay here. The cops are on their way."

A brother came out with a laptop, played the video feed, and tossed me another forty. Officer Smith laid down his gun and sat on the steps. In a minute, three police cars pulled up.

I made up a story on the spot. "Good afternoon, officers. This man assaulted me, robbed my friend, and threatened to rape my girlfriend and kill her. He said he could get away with it because he is a police officer. He held a gun to my head, said he'd kill me if my friend didn't give up his wallet. I'm pressing charges for assault, burglary, and emotional distress."

Casey memorized my story as I told it. When I showed them the video on the laptop, the other officers Mirandized Smith and put him in their cruiser.

I asked them to call an ambulance for me. “My neck is killing me,” I said.

Casey pulled out a camera and took pictures of my face, clothes, and body. I refused to clean up; I wanted the pictures to be as dramatic as possible. My nose was still bleeding and I the side of my head was swelling up. When the ambulance arrived, I exaggerated my pain. I started to tear up when the EMTs tried to help. They put me in a neck brace.

“Take care of the house,” I told Casey before I left. He knew what I meant.

An officer came up to the ambulance and asked about my girlfriend.

That was a flaw in my story. I didn’t have one, but a sister who’d been waiting outside was standing by. “That would be me, officer. Hello. My name’s Nicole, but everyone calls me Niki.”

He asked her some questions while the EMTs put me on a gurney. When he was done, Nicole came over, wiped the blood off my lips, and gave me a kiss. She said she’d follow us to the hospital. As they were pushing me into the ambulance, I said, “Love you, babe. Casey, take care of everyone.”

Within a few hours, the brothers from the farm had flooded all the local newspapers and radio and TV stations, and major ones throughout the country. They sent pictures of Officer Smith along with the video and a narrative depicting me as another victim of police brutality.

I couldn’t run business when I was in the hospital. Casey sent a group to break into the Ninth Street drug house. They got five thousand in cash and all their drugs and weapons. It was my neighborhood, and I had to get back what was rightfully mine. They were my biggest competitors, even though there were only a handful of them. I had Casey start preparations to hit back if they stepped out of line. I stayed the night in the hospital. The next day, they released me with a generous prescription.

Back at the house, I was greeted like a king. I spent most of the next

day at the police station with my lawyer, a retired brother. I didn't really need him; I knew the law as well as any of them. The detective who interviewed me worded his questions skillfully. He hoped to catch me lying or changing my story and implicate me in the informant's disappearance.

My lawyer told him, "The pursuit to incriminate my client is unwarranted and based on the officer's abuse of power. He didn't make himself known as an officer, and there is no evidence whatsoever even remotely linking my client to any instigation. The disappearance of your informant is a different issue entirely, and to bring it up out of context is both illegal and unethical. In fact, my client has no idea what you're talking about. The man was a tenant who kept to himself and skipped out on his rent. If you're putting your trust in criminals, how will you get a jury to believe anything you present? My client's record is clean; he doesn't even have a traffic violation."

And with that, we left.

I spent the rest of the night helping Casey with other projects. We made milk bombs: homemade napalm—Styrofoam saturated with gas, with a little oil to make it more syrupy—poured into two-liter bottles and milk jugs. I had over a hundred-fifty. I couldn't let the Ninth Street gang get away with shooting up my house while I was at the hospital, disrespecting me in my own neighborhood.

Members of the farm were on their way; I had thirty brothers gearing up for the next day's big event.

I was up early with my lawyer, discussing the story. Officer Smith had given it up, told them what had really happened, that I had provoked him by implicitly threatening his family and slashing his wife's tires.

We went down to the station, where I confirmed his revised story but refuted the part about his wife. "Bring her in and put me in a line up," I said.

I was in a line-up within the hour, and right after that, they said I could go. All the so-called suspects had been white and she'd said, "A distinguished black man helped me home." She wouldn't have been able to pick me out in any case; it had been another brother from the farm,

an older black guy, who had slashed her tires—the same one who'd driven her home. It was part of a project we'd been working on to collect information on police officers and their families.

I was able to discredit the officer and strengthen my case. The camera angle had obscured everyone's faces and made it impossible to identify a witness to corroborate his story. We opened negotiations for a cash settlement with the department rep, but I wasn't ready to finalize anything. The case was moving along, but the police didn't want a trial. I figured it was because of the media frenzy. Every station was giving daily updates.

Then we moved on Ninth Street. I was in charge of a ten-man team, Casey led another, and I put Nicole in charge of the third, a reward for her quick thinking the day before. We knew of three known Ninth-Street houses. The plan was to be in and out in less than three minutes.

At 1:00 a.m. we shaved off our hair. Everyone but me filed off their fingerprints. We all wore the street clothes. I passed out plastic, and cotton gloves. Everyone carried a gallon jug and two more strings of milk bombs over their shoulders, a backpack or duffle bag with a few more, a bottle of peroxide or bleach, and a knife, chain, knuckles, or zip gun. I was known for my tire-iron work, so I carried one, spray-painted black.

The smog kept visibility to a block or so. At 2:59 we ran up to the house, black tube socks pulled over our shoes to distort our prints. Everyone knew their jobs. It was hot, so most of the windows in the hood were open. My group ran up to our house, poured a gallon of napalm into an open window and lowered the other milk bomb intact. We made thick trails around the house, connecting the windows to dead bushes, and poured more under the doors. I placed one next to a grill's propane tank and made a trail to the closest wall. Running around to the front, I lowered my backpack of powder bombs and nails through the living-room window. Then I poured another on top to make sure it would catch. Everyone finished up. I put a bomb under a car in the driveway and made a trail out into the street.

Two brothers took a wrench to the closest hydrant. At 3:04 I got a

conference call on my burner, and when we motioned to our fire-hydrant brothers, they opened it so a hose couldn't be attached right away. I lit a pack of matches, threw it on the trail, and we all disappeared.

As we ran, I heard a series of explosions. The night suddenly seemed much brighter, even in the smog. When we got back to my house, some brothers were already leaving for the farm and everyone else was changing, putting clothes and weapons into garbage bags with bleach and packing them into the false bottoms of pickups. I changed and hauled a beer cooler onto the porch, where Casey and Nicole waited. Two red pickups held the rest of the brothers. Everyone else drank and smoked around a fire pit in a nearby backyard. I drank and popped the pills I'd gotten at the hospital.

It was 3:55 before I heard sirens. I had to hand it to the neighbors; they kept their mouths shut. And the police didn't want to drive into the hood; they took their goddamn time. I heard the fire trucks and ambulance sirens first and enjoyed the night.

It took an hour for the cops to show up at my place. I greeted them with a chipper "Morning, officers. What can I do for you?"

They were there on a bullshit noise complaint. I asked which neighbor had complained, but I knew no one had. Niki turned down the music—N.W.A.'s "Fuck tha Police."

They knew I was involved somehow, but they had nothing on me. They asked if I had heard or seen anything.

"It looks like something is burning down the street," I said. "Very smoky."

One officer asked where I'd been an hour before.

"Can't you see all the empty beer cans?" I said.

They knew there was nothing they could do, so they left.

Three houses and five cars were burnt beyond recognition; no one inside had escaped.

Deliberations in my case went on for another month, so I couldn't leave the city. I finally accepted a settlement and walked away with six figures.

After everything died down, I wanted to head back to the farm; the whole ordeal had made me miss my kids. I asked at the tunnel houses if anyone wanted to go back to the farm with me. Niki was the only one to raise her hand. When she'd covered for me by the ambulance was the first time we'd met. I was kind of happy—she was cute. I packed up the truck with more waste to bring to the farm.

I got to know Niki on the drive. Everyone was thrilled when we arrived. I introduced her to my kids. They loved her. I spent a few days working in the fields, getting some sun until my next job.

—*Joseph Burrows*

## What a Couple of Hundred Will Buy You

She came into Red's Tap at three, too early to be one of those downtown office workers and too late to be serious about her intentions. She found a stool off by herself and laid her purse and sunglasses on the bar before tucking strands of brown hair back under her scarf. Blue, those were her eyes, blue like a backyard pool in July inviting you to dive in without first testing its temperature or knowing its depth. Jump, they shouted; jump and take your chances.

I let her get settled and then asked, "What'll it be?" I pegged her to be in her late twenties and not used to sitting at a bar alone in mid-afternoon.

She had her hands resting on the bar in fists, like a child about to demand a second helping of pie. Then they opened as if to say Give me a minute. She tightened her mouth, looked up at me with those July-pools and said in a voice not from around here, "A glass of white wine." A sucker for an accent, I lingered on that voice, wondering what lived behind it.

Had I wanted to make life easy, I'd have poured her a glass from the box of Peter Vella Chablis between the cordials and the cash register. Instead, I went to the wine cellar in the back where the pretentious owner, Lucien, stocked his handpicked best. Given that the guy hadn't been around in two months, I doubted whether he'd miss one from his dozens. I couldn't fault his lack of interest. He'd bought Red's Tap, keeping its name and neon, with plans to make it an upscale restaurant. The downtown was about to turn, our civic leaders told us. The city floated a bond issue, poured money into redevelopment, even persuaded a Marriott to build. Three years later, the crowds still hadn't come, so the regulars never left.

When I got back to the bar, she had a small pocket atlas open in front of her. I made a production out of cutting the wax from around the bottle's lip, then twisting the pigtail deep into the cork until it disappeared. I set the lever on the lip and pulled up fast enough to free the cork with a pop. Two regulars, Sammy and Larry, who knew my style and remembered my eighty-seven-yard punt return in the last minute to win



the State championship twenty years ago next week, applauded and guffawed.

“Wine and dine. Wine and dine,” they chanted, backslapping each other. “Taking the pigskin to the house.”

We’d just been talking about the team’s championship reunion and how because of some technicality the city had declined us a permit to reenact our victory parade. The anniversary was a big deal with guys I hadn’t seen since graduation coming back from as far away as California and Florida.

Ignoring them, I sat a glass near her atlas and poured. “I hope you like the 2006 Louis Latour Corton-Charlemagne Grand Cru,” I said, rotating the bottle just enough to let the last drop fall. In my side vision I saw Sammy get up and beeline to the jukebox intent on entertaining us with ten minutes of classic rock, Red’s signature music. “The wine you’re about to taste has a full-rounded citrus bouquet. Unlike other white wines, this one benefits from aging. It’s one of our best.”

She turned the atlas face down, dug into her purse and removed a red leather wallet, fumbling a bit as if unsure how the whole thing worked.

“I’ll start a tab,” I said.

She looked relieved and put the wallet away. “That’s good,” she said, her accent really showing.

Sammy and Larry wanted refills on their beers, so I took care of them while enduring their winks, nudges, and locker-room jabs in the process. Bob Seger’s “Main Street” started up on the jukebox. Hatch and Rose came in and went to their table in the back. I brought Rose a Gin Rickey and light draw to Hatch. We talked about last night’s game and the latest scandal from the mayor’s office.

The woman sat half-turned on the barstool looking out the window onto the street we had paraded down after our victory. With her scarf hiding her hair and in profile, I studied her with little fear of getting caught. She took sips in two-minute intervals as if programmed. Something worked on her mind, I suspected, as resigned, she appeared to wait

like a passenger whose train wouldn't be leaving for another six hours.

"May I?" My question startled her. I held the bottle over her glass, ready to pour. She nodded. "Like it?"

Her mouth moved as if trying to find the correct place to set her lips for the words she wanted to say. "Yes, very good."

A two-hundred-dollar bottle of wine and that's all you can say, I thought. I also thought about how her mouth moved, the way her lips parted just enough to reveal good dental work, and how the corners of those lips turned down to show a bit of sadness. All that talk earlier with Larry and Sammy had gotten me thinking about the parade and the party that followed, and how my girlfriend Raven had written in a letter that finally arrived two weeks later about being happy for me. But nowhere had she mentioned regretting her decision to pass up a sure trip to the state swimming finals or missing homecoming or our last prom together to spend her senior year as an exchange student in Heidelberg.

"Good," I said. She smiled and took her two-minute sip. "You're new around here?"

She shrugged and tilted her head, eyes fixed on the coaster. "Visiting," she said. I waited for more. She glanced at me. "Business, I guess."

"We could use more of that. The economy, you know."

"Not that kind of business. It's more . . ." she paused, her mouth moving around to find the right position. I followed its travels. "It's more personal."

"That won't do much for our unemployment rate."

She went back to profile, finding renewed interest in the sidewalk. "No, not so much." She took a deep breath as if preparing to say more. "There's a lake close," she said at last. "I saw it on the map. Lake Gibson."

"Great place in the summer. Not much happening now. We partied there all the time back in the day." I wiped a spot on the bar. "Sometimes I'll drive out there to sit on the pier, watch the sun set, and drink a beer. Hope you're not looking to water ski. The season's over."

She smiled and shook her head. "No, not ski."

“By the way, people call me Strap.”

“Because you’re a big man?”

“It’s a joke. My football coach in junior high started it and it stuck. Somehow he found out my first name was really Jacques. Well, you can put it together.”

As if on cue, Hatch shouted, “Hey, Strap. Tear yourself away and get us a couple more here.”

“See,” I said. “I wasn’t lying.”

When my shift ended, she had worked her way through a quarter of the bottle by maintaining that sip-every-two-minute pattern. While she spent her time staring outside, I spent what time I could watching her. She wasn’t stunning in a way that makes men take note and women jealous. No, she came on slow, like a fire inside a wall that smolders before bursting into a conflagration.

As the day slipped into night, Marty arrived, so I cashed out and turned over the register. I grabbed my tips and a glass and went to sit with her.

“I’ve always wanted to try the Louie Latour,” I said, taking the bottle and pouring a glass.

“You spoke about it like you understood,” she said.

“The owner made captions so that we could sound smarter than we are.” I swallowed. “So that’s what is meant by a floral bouquet.”

“You said citrus. Citrus bouquet.”

I sniffed the glass like I’d seen experts do and took a sip, swishing it around in my mouth. “Hey, it’s wine. Citrus. Floral. It’s all good.” I poured more into her glass. “You hungry?” Before she could answer, I said, “There’s a great place near here. We’ll order up a couple fillets. They also have great vegetarian dishes, if that’s your preference. The headwaiter’s a friend. He won’t mind us bringing our own bottle.”

She studied me the whole time I spoke, as if I were a professor and she a front-row-sitting student. When I finished my pitch, she pouted her lips and studied her watch like someone unsure what the big and little hands meant.

“You waiting for someone? That would explain your interest in our sidewalk.”

Her shoulders shrugged as if going over a speed bump. “Dinner would be good, Jacques,” she said. “I’ll call you Jacques. I like real names.”

“Then make it Jack. Do you have a real name?”

Her attention shifted back out the window. “My name is Pavlina.”

She walked with a limp that I hadn’t noticed by favoring her left leg. I gave her my arm and she took it as if we’d been walking that way for years. She kept her dark glasses on even though the sun’s glare had long stopped being a problem. My body eased into that certain mood I like whenever I’ve got a new woman at my side and we’re heading out with a night ahead.

I guided her toward the neon sign above a green-stripped awning that spelled out Rafael’s in cursive. We entered, and my friend Harry Lewis greeted me with enough enthusiasm to convince Pavlina that she’d taken up with a celebrity. He grabbed two wine glasses from the waitress station and led us to my favorite two-top in back. We traded a few wisecracks and updates. Harry ran down the night’s specials, noting the ones he considered superior, then backed away saying, “I’ll inform your waitress she has a table.”

I reached over and removed Pavlina’s sunglasses. She put up no resistance. “I know blue eyes are sensitive, but it’s not bright in here.” She turned away, unsmiling.

“Jack,” she said, “there’s something you must know.”

“No, there isn’t. Let this unfold as it will. No history. No stories. No confessions.” This time I untied her scarf and sat it on the table. “I’ve wanted to do that ever since you sat down on my barstool.” Even in the low light I could see her blush. She had enough vanity to run her fingers comb-like through her hair, styling it as best she could. “It’s nice,” I said. “It suits you.”

She shook her head. “No, don’t say that.”

I leaned closer. “What, that it looks nice?” She remained mute,

shaking her head in a slow, sad way. "Have some wine and look over the menu. After hanging out all day at Red's, you must be hungry."

"No, Jack. I'm not. I shouldn't have come here."

"Relax. Some conversation, a glass of wine, some good food, and you'll be ready for our next stop."

"You're disappointed."

"Me? Of course not," I said, leaning back to reassess the situation. About a year before, I'd left Red's with someone named Char, an okay-looking woman who'd come there with a friend. The friend had my attention, but when her phone went off she disappeared. Char waited at the bar, only her friend never returned. We didn't go to Rafael's, but to a nightclub. From the moment we claimed a table, all she talked about was shopping, her job in some office park, and a former boyfriend who worked on cars and stayed out too late. After I'd heard enough, I told her I had a call to make, then got up and left. Tonight hadn't reached that point yet, and Pavlina was no Char. "Listen, we can do something else."

Pavlina turned, and I saw the profile that had intrigued me all afternoon. I glanced at my watch.

"Please, Jack, I think . . ." she paused and took a small breath.

"There's somewhere I must go. Somewhere alone."

"Okay. So?"

"I can take a taxi."

I laughed. "Why? Just tell me where. It's not like I don't know this town."

"No. I don't want you to."

"Then when we're finished, we'll start over. Have dinner, talk. Believe me, you won't like our cabs. They're never on time, and the drivers are either overcharging ex-cons or overcharging junkies. I can tell you stories."

She remained silent, as if pondering a chess move. "You don't know me."

"You're turning me down for an overcharging junkie?"

Her eyes panned over the salt and pepper shakers, the candle, the hanging artwork, then at me. "You're generous," she said.

The waitress Harry had promised arrived with a breadbasket and started to pour olive oil into a saucer. I held up my hand. "Hold it," I said. "Something's come up. We can't stay."

I grabbed the bottle of Louie Latour and led Pavlina outside. On the sidewalk I turned, took her arm, and said, "But I need to know more."

"Not here." My irritation must have shown, because she said, "Jack, please. Not now." Then she did the one thing that assured her I'd cooperate. She stepped closer, put her head against my chest, and held me. "Thank you for doing this." I liked the way she fit, so I pulled her closer, feeling enough of her to know that I wanted to feel more.

We had our arms around each other as we walked to my car behind Red's Tap. A regular stepped out from the front door, taking with him the last few bars of *Who Can It Be Now?* by those blokes from down under. The half-empty parking lot told me all I needed to know about the state of business inside.

As I drove down the dark streets, Pavlina explained how she had arrived from New York by Greyhound wanting to get back something that had been taken from her.

"This thing. Who has it now?"

She watched the street life: men standing on corners, cars with low-riding drivers, police cruisers waiting in shadows, boarded storefronts. "Someone I once knew."

"That's not enough," I said.

"We lived together. Long time ago."

"As in boyfriend? Roommate? Husband? You're not giving me much."

"Please, Jack," she said in a helpless, broken-wing kind of way.

I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel and tried again. "You've come all the way from New York to get here. I'd like to know what I'm dealing with. That's all. You got an address?"

She reached into her jacket pocket and removed a folded piece of

paper. "725 Marcy."

I whistled. "That's north. Industrial mostly. Not the greatest place to live. This guy, does he have a name?"

"It's not important." She kept her hands in her lap like a child awaiting First Communion. I punched the gas pedal and cleared my throat to make my frustration clear. "Jonathan," she said. "His name's Jonathan."

A right turn at the light put me on Jackson Street. "Now for the accent. What is it? German?"

"Bulgarian."

I thought that over. A block later, I said, "I had a friend who spent her senior year in Germany as an exchange student. She liked it so much she stayed." I gave Pavlina time to ask a question if she wanted. She didn't, so I went on. "My friend had plans to marry a kraut, I heard." I paused again. "I also heard that when she was last here she spoke her mother tongue with a German accent."

I turned down Marcy and pointed the powerful beam from the police-style flashlight I kept for protection under my car seat, where the addresses should have been nailed or painted. Most houses had neither.

The city had long ago stopped replacing streetlights in this part of town. For those who complained, well, they never voted anyway, or voted in enough numbers to matter. In recent years, illegals had beaten a path to the neighborhood, and they sure as hell wouldn't be voting or complaining.

After several minutes of searching, I said, "There," and pulled over to the curb. "On the left." I pointed out the house with my light. She got out before I could turn off the engine.

"Whoa," I said, following her to the porch. "Take it easy."

She peered through the window, ignoring me, moving her head this way and that. I pointed my beam into the front room and saw a patterned cloth tucked around a couch, a worn recliner listing to one side, and something that passed for a coffee table. On its top I saw newspapers, the Atlantic Monthly, several paperbacks, a bowl of peanut shells, and a coffee cup. A print of some abstract painting hung on the wall.

The house looked deserted.

“You sure about the address?”

She nodded.

I tried the door on the chance Jonathan hadn't locked it. It rattled as if secured only by a cheap latch. I started around to the back but stopped when I heard glass breaking. I turned and saw Pavlina reach inside to free the window lock.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“It won't open,” she said, and broke out more glass.

“You didn't say we'd be breaking in.”

Pavlina balanced on her bad leg and tried to swing the other one inside. She wavered and reached for the jagged glass. She yelped, released her grip, and almost fell before I caught her. I helped her through the window, then followed.

“Let me see.” She opened her palm like a beggar wanting coins. I used my bandana to wipe the blood. The cut didn't look deep. I folded her fingers over the cloth and said, “Squeeze this.”

She searched the living room looking at the bookshelves and moving papers around on the coffee table. I wanted her to find whatever she sought and to get out.

“Tell me what you're looking for and I'll help.”

“Just follow me with your light,” she said.

“I don't like this.”

She walked through the kitchen as if passing by the eight-track display at Goodwill and went right into the guy's bedroom. I stopped at the doorway. Whatever else may have happened in Jonathan's life, his mom had done her job. He had made his bed, even tucking the pillow under the bedspread.

Pavlina said, “Your light. Put it over here.”

I directed the beam at the bureau. She moved a picture, a stack of papers, and a penny jar, then paused. She bent over and picked up what looked like a miniature treasure chest, something best suited to hold pencils or old keys. The oxblood box had a tiny gold hasp sized for a small



padlock.

“That it?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

“Then let’s get out of here.”

Ignoring me, Pavlina opened the box. “The light, Jack.”

I shined it toward her. Inside I saw a clear plastic bag about the size of a small bread loaf containing a grayish powder.

Yes,” she said, “this is it.”

Relieved, I started to back away, but she didn’t follow. Instead, she reached into her jacket and brought out a 35 mm plastic film canister.

“Please, Jack. More light.”

With great care, she unfolded the plastic, filled the canister from the bag, sealed it, then placed the canister where she had found the chest.

“Now,” she said, “we go.”

We exited the bedroom and passed back through the kitchen, but when I entered the living room I stopped. Pavlina stepped on my heel and was about to apologize when she saw what I did. Someone sat on the recliner, hands folded, legs crossed. What he might have called a beard struggled for survival.

“Jonathan,” Pavlina said, remaining behind me.

“You’ve come.” His high-pitched voice came out Midwest flat.

“Who’s your friend?”

I glanced back at Pavlina before telling him.

He bowed his head as if having received some bad news. “You from around here, Strap?” He seemed relaxed for someone confronting two burglars.

I nodded.

“Then I suppose you two just met.”

“We’re leaving, Jonathan,” Pavlina said, taking my arm to go.

“I see you found it,” he said.

“I left you some,” she said.

“Did you use a plastic film canister? Black with a gray top?” When she didn’t reply, he smiled. “I always loved your photographs, Pavlina,

and the uses you found for the film canisters. I remember them holding all sorts of things – thumbtacks, spices, lotions. And now this.”

She wouldn’t look at him, so he turned his attention to me, puffing up and acting tough in the process. He still looked like someone who preferred his boutique coffee flavored with syrups and lightened with steamed milk. “She talk you into this, or did you come willingly?”

“Listen, I don’t know what the hell’s going on between you two. That’s your business. I’m just helping out someone who asked for it.”

He rubbed his forehead and stood. Upright, his frame ended somewhere below my chin. I tightened my grip on the flashlight, getting ready should he make a move.

“You think that’s an excuse? You broke into my house and you’re taking something that’s not yours.”

“Doesn’t sound like it all yours either,” I said, not backing down. At Red’s I’d bounced drunks and troublemakers. I know that no one can be taken lightly, not even guys like him. “Do what you must, Jonathan, but we’re leaving.” This time I took Pavlina’s arm. At that, he moved to block the door. I raised the flashlight to show him the seriousness of what he was about to do when she jerked out of my grip.

“Stop it, Jonathan. This isn’t like you.”

“No?” he said, and in slow motion I saw his right hand clinch and begin a roundhouse movement like a swim stroke. I thought, He’s trying to hit me. I stepped to my right, and swatted his temple with the flashlight about as hard as I would a housefly. The tap stunned him and he felt his face for blood. Not finding any, he started for me again. This time I aimed the handle at the sweet spot in his gut and gave it a thrust. He crumpled to the floor, clawing the air and fighting to get his breath back.

Pavlina got on her knees beside him. “Now look what you’ve done.” Whether she directed this to Jonathan or to me, I wasn’t sure. She brushed the hair from his face, tending to him as he struggled for air, a panicked look on his face.

“Relax,” I said, “and raise your arms. That helps.” At last he drew in

a good-sized breath. "He'll be fine. Now, let's go."

Jonathan grabbed her arm to keep her from leaving. She didn't move to shake it off.

"Wait," she said. They remained close enough to smell each other's hair conditioner for several moments. Then from out of nowhere she said, "You like to come?" He nodded, a hurt child accepting a bandage for a scraped knee.

I didn't like the change of plans and didn't know which one I resented more. As if reading my thoughts, she turned to me and said, "He can help, Jack."

"Help with what? You got what you came for." I straightened. "Wait, does this have anything to do with your interest in Lake Gibson?"

"It's almost over, Jack." Just that, and those July-pools, and I was drawn back without protest into whatever plan she had.

That we had become a crowd didn't sit well with me. I made Jonathan ride in the back, where I could watch him in the mirror. He could watch me, too, and did, with hands behind his head. Beside me, Pavlina held the chest on her lap. We were monks with vows of silence as I drove north out of town, then east on the state highway. At the T-junction, I turned left. We listened to a radio call-in show about space aliens. After three commercials, an abduction story, a close encounter, a wife who insisted her husband was not human, a station break, and a weather update, I said, "The lake's up ahead."

Lake Gibson appeared once I crested the hill. A mile later, I slowed and parked close to the public pier. We got out and I stretched. Pavlina and Jonathan conversed on the other side of the car. They nodded, looked up, down, and away. I couldn't hear a word. They started north. Pavlina turned and waved for me to follow.

I'd long ago quit coming to Lake Gibson in the off-season, because it felt lonely and used up. Two months earlier, you would have seen campfires dotting the shoreline and heard the laughter of cabin parties from across the water. Tonight I saw no fires and heard only water lapping and the wind.

They stopped near a cabin and stood beside an aluminum canoe. Jonathan rolled it over and found two paddles stored underneath. I looked around for anyone who might be watching, but said nothing. My role had shifted now that she had gotten what she needed and had arrived at where she wanted to go.

“Please, Jack, can you help carry?” Pavlina asked.

Jonathan and I each grabbed an end and carried the canoe to the water. The cool wind blew in gusts off the water, lifting Jonathan’s long hair and making it dance. We set the canoe down at the shore edge. I removed my shoes and socks and rolled up my pants. Jonathan got in front without getting his feet wet, and Pavlina sat in the middle, holding the chest in her lap. I eased the canoe into the lake. Pavlina pulled her jacket around her and lowered her chin into the folds.

A quarter of an hour later, Jonathan pulled in his paddle and asked, “Are we far enough?”

Pavlina considered it and said, “Yes, this is enough.”

I lifted my paddle out and rested it across my knees. A distant light made it seem as if we were far from shore. She opened the chest and unfolded the plastic bag with the same care as she had at Jonathan’s house.

“It happened on our way to the beach, remember?” she said. Jonathan turned and glared at her. “Of course you do. You swerved. You didn’t see the boulder.”

Jonathan shook his head in a weary, beaten-down kind of way. “I only went around a curve. No one could have guessed.”

Pavlina dipped her hand into the opened box. “I’d told you to slow down. I said the road was bad.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Jonathan said.

“You left me in the hospital.”

“I didn’t leave your side for five days. Then your parents came. Your parents, Pavlina. I couldn’t stay. Not after that.”

Pavlina played with the contents of the bag in a slow, rhythmic way. “They warned me. They said American boys never stayed. I didn’t believe them.” Jonathan turned away from her. “Again you can’t help me.”

“I hadn’t even wanted to go that day,” he said. “You insisted. Always insisting, and always getting your way.”

“That’s right. I caused it.” She removed her fist from the box. “I’m not surprised.”

She started to throw a handful of the powder into the air when Jonathan said, “Wait.”

“What now?”

“We can’t. Not like this.”

“It’s how it is.”

“I know why you came here,” he said. “To this lake. You think I’ve forgotten how much he loved water? How he’d beg to run about in the rain?”

She relaxed and said without the edge in her voice, “Even baths.”

“Even baths,” Jonathan repeated. He paused a moment, then said, “Let it go.” She glanced at him before throwing the powder into the lake.

“He liked wind, too,” Pavlina said, tossing another handful and letting a gust carry it away.

She moved the box toward him. Jonathan took some and said, “He’d dash across the grass holding his blanket out like a sail wanting to fly.” His handful made a cloud in the half-moon sky.

“He liked wearing pink,” she said throwing more. They laughed. “So unusual for such an active boy.”

“Unlike you, he loved spiders,” Jonathan said, tossing his fistful into the air. “He tried to save every one he could before you found them.”

She said, “And unlike you, he could drink Boza in the morning.”

Jonathan said something about a stuffed animal. She said something about a best friend, and it went back and forth like that until they both became quiet. Water lapped against the canoe, and the wind calmed.

Pavlina said, “Then you left, taking him from me.”

“I hoped you’d come.”

She closed the empty chest. “I had no choice.”

The drive home seemed to take longer. We sat as before: Jonathan behind me, Pavlina in front. I found a blues station out of Indiana and

settled back. They watched something, or nothing, out of opposite windows. Their preoccupation along with me feeling unnecessary but not yet discarded did something to me I didn't like. The station cut out, filled with static, cleared, cut out again, and was gone.

By the time we got to town, even the late-night diner's neon no longer flashed. I turned down Jonathan's street and stopped in front of his house, wondering whether the evening could yet be salvaged. In the mirror I watched him hesitate, hoping that perhaps Pavlina would say something, maybe even turn around. When none of that happened, he opened the door and crawled out.

Jonathan watched us from his sidewalk, hands in pockets, as I pulled into the street. I found the bottle of Louis Latour under the seat.

"What it has lost in temperature is offset by it having aged another eight hours," I said, trying to lighten the mood. She took it from me with all the interest of a person accepting campaign literature. With her face slack and impassive, Pavlina looked older. The box, whose contents she had traveled so far to find, remained in her lap, her free hand resting on top. I thought about asking if she wanted to eat. I thought about asking if she'd like to see my apartment. After passing another block of marginal homes, I pulled to the curb and stopped. She didn't seem to notice or to care. I watched an old dog cross the street, his head bowed as if reliving a shameful memory.

"Pavlina," I said, "you know that friend I mentioned, the one who moved away?"

She nodded. "Yes, the one who learned the accent."

"Her folks had a cabin on that lake. We were just kids back then. We had fun, she and I. We were close."

Pavlina looked at me, waiting. I continued.

"She came back once a few years later after her dad's stroke to help her mom get the cabin ready to sell. Since she was here, she decided to have one last party at the cabin for old times' sake, a reunion with just her girlfriends from high school. Well, a friend, Betsy, who'd been standing too long in the sun and with a few too many wine coolers in her, goes

floating off on a tube not watching where she's going or how far she's getting from shore. So, what happens? Betsy, if you can believe this, falls asleep. You know how it is with a party. People come and go, you visit with someone, then with someone else, and you laugh and tell stories, and before long someone will say, 'Hey, has anyone seen Betsy?' and you look around and have to admit, no, you haven't, not for a long time."

Pavlina listened, but her attention had returned to the box, her fingers playing with the hasp, moving it back and forth over the staple.

"My friend, a former lifeguard, thought she'd be the one to bring Betsy back to shore. Only she hadn't figured on it being farther out than it looked, or the way not swimming every day could reduce her stamina, or how those Bavarian barley pops she'd learn to enjoy and had been drinking all day might slow her down." I paused, remembering how we had made plans to get together before she left town. She had things to tell me. I had things to say.

"She didn't come back?"

"Well, Betsy did."

I took her chin and turned her to me, and in her face I could see the same resignation I'd seen earlier today. "You want to be with him?" I asked, and then felt a nod so slight that if I hadn't been holding her chin I wouldn't have noticed. On a night so clear you could see constellations I couldn't name and hear dogs bark so loud neighbors demanded quiet from open windows, I wanted to remind her about the way he had left her, about what he had taken and the lengths she had gone to find it. A thought passed that I could simply turn her hand over and trace the cuts from the broken window along her palm with my finger.

Then it all passed. I released her chin and said, "I'll turn around."

She placed the bottle on the car seat and opened the door. "No, Jack. I'll walk." I didn't argue.

Once outside, she stopped long enough to say how sorry she was about my friend and thank me for all I'd done and tell me with all the seriousness of a confession how she could never pay me back. I didn't argue about that either. She walked away, her limp more noticeable the

farther she went.

I got out, leaned on the car, and saw Jonathan jogging our way. When they reached each other, I got back inside, threw the stick into drive, and took off, leaving them and the whole busted night behind.

After driving around for an hour, I made my way back to Red's. All the cars were long gone, and the parking lot had the empty feel of a college-football stadium at midweek. I unlocked the back door and went inside.

The night crew had done a piss-poor job of cleaning. Glasses hadn't been washed, chairs hadn't been turned, and enough trash littered the floor to prove even to a bribed jury that no one had bothered to sweep. I grabbed a tumbler and a bag of pretzels and sat in a back booth looking at the front window as if it were a huge television screen. I emptied the Louis Latour into the tumbler and took a drink. Not bad, I thought. Even with its stupid citrus bouquet. A police car raced past, sirens on, lights flashing. I ate a pretzel and waited for something to happen. A compressor I'd never before noticed kicked on and hummed. The rafters creaked, or it could have been the floorboards.

Behind the bar I found the receipt book and wrote down the wine and signed my name. My honesty didn't make me feel any better. Maybe the owner would charge me wholesale. Never having copped to any lifted stock, I didn't know his policy.

I carried my glass to the jukebox, fed it all my change, and punched in some memorized numbers. With my elbows resting on the window ledge, I looked out onto a street I'd known all my life as music played from another time.

—James O'Gorman







