

Zephyrus 2005



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Tax
Aubrey Videtto

I. The bells of the church, a block away, are sounding twelve o' clock. Donald perches on the edge of the big green client chair in my office as I flip through his W-2's. He must have filled out his I-9 form differently at every job last year because the percentage of taxes taken from his checks is substantially different for each employer. He tilts farther forward and lifts his stubbled chin high enough for me to see up his cavernous nostrils. This is how he shows that he is paying attention, and ready to answer any of my questions about his 2003 tax information. This is also how he looked at everyone in my family the first time we met him.

We had all wondered at my sister Sherry when she brought him home for Thanksgiving, but we wondered at Donald even more. In his overalls and green, long-sleeve tee-shirt, his belly pushing out in front of him, and his chin so damned high Grandma thought he was a Catholic, he looked like Sherry had picked him up from Denny's just so she would have a date for the holidays. And she had. But it turned out they were both high on Christ and so they got married the following year, and I believe that they really were in love, even though Sherry left nothing to him in her will. Breast cancer. Only five years after her wedding to Donald. I still do his taxes.

At that Thanksgiving Donald explained to everyone where he had misplaced the half of the ring-finger missing from his left hand, and, looking back, I think that's when I decided for sure that Sherry was of a different breed than the rest of the Peely clan.

"My daddy always got to drinking next to the lake, you see," he began. "He'd take a garbage bag full of ice and Pabst and dunk it in the water and drink until he got tired of untangling his fly rod and then he'd go grappling. He started bringing me along when I was six or so to bring him beers and listen to him talk about what he believed was the beginnings of a communist revolution. Well, the next year had a summer too, and I went with Daddy to fetch him a Pabst from the bag every so often and to nod when he asked me if I would stand with his father and the fathers of our country and fight the goddamned communists until the only men left standing were true blue Americans, amen.

"That summer Daddy let me untangle his rod for him sometimes. Then one day he let me wade into the lake with him and stick my arm in up to my shoulder, and then I was a grappler just like him. The trick, he told me, was to find a goodly sized hole where the catfish might be sleeping and to stick as much arm as I could fit inside of it and still keep my head above water. Then, he said, I should wiggle my

fingers around like this and wait for them to take the bait. He told me about old man Grison from Oklahoma that got drowned by a big cat a few years ago because the goddamn communist fish kept Grison's head underwater too long while it pulled at his bare arm from as far up as his shoulder. But they call it noodling in Oklahoma, and I imagine just about the time Grison realized he had not enough breath or strength in him to surface with that last fish, that he might have faired better west of the Mississippi, might have been better off noodling out there and to have left the grappling to us here in Kentucky.

"As for my first experience, it was hard for me to find a hole I could get my hand in and still keep my mouth out of the stinking water, but I finally lighted on one and stuck my whole arm in up to my elbow. Next thing I knew, Daddy was jumping around all crazy because he'd just caught himself a really big cat. It was clamped on for dear life right at the top of his hairy forearm, and its inside gills was working razor magic on his skin. But I hardly noticed his hollering and dancing for my own yelling, though it weren't out of any kind of joy. My hole had not been so prosperous as Daddy's, and where he managed to make a gain—I made a loss. My hole was filled up with a snapping turtle instead of a catfish. And I guess he didn't like my hand all wiggling and waving around just inside his front door, so he took off half this finger here to teach me a lesson. And even though I didn't understand at the time that the Lord was telling me to go gentle to the door of God's house and he would not bite my finger off after all, I understand clear enough now."

Although Sherry's face twitched at Donald's profane language in front of our grandmother—who, by the way, was squarely convinced at this point that Donald was, in fact, a Catholic, as was any new and uncommon person to Grandma—she was bowed by his wisdom at the end. Where Grandma saw the unvirtuous face of a heretic, a dancer and a drinker no doubt, or, even worse, a *Roman Catholic*, (although I doubt she understood the distinction), where Grandma saw that, Sherry saw a pious man, a wise man, a man with nine and a half fingers who might be willing to let her take the place of what he lacked. I suppose that lack was about all she was up to filling.

But how can I turn away the husband of my dead sister? And even though I think on it often, I can't find a likely answer to that question; so every March, Donald perches on my green chair and I sort through his W-2s and his receipts for what he assures me were business expenses. One receipt is three dollars and sixty-two cents for a Pepsi and a corn-dog at a Quik Mart last November. Donald says this was a meal he purchased for a client. I set the receipts aside.

"Look, Donald, don't you think you ought to consider finding

yourself somebody to do your taxes who lives in Franklin. It sure is a long drive to get here every time."

Donald lowers his chin a bit and stops moving his feet.

"Lloyd," here Donald pauses for some seconds. While Donald's words are coaxed gently to his lips by some unknown and ungodly slow force, my eyes are beginning to water from the unblinking eye contact the two of us keep up.

"Lloyd, we're both men here. And I always seen myself as an easy man to talk to, so why don't you just tell me what's bothering you?"

I don't know just what to say to that. Now it's my turn to move words like molasses. I don't know what it would do to Donald if I told him I didn't want to do his taxes anymore. His nostrils were glaring at me, waiting for my response.

Well, now that you mention it. I can't do your taxes anymore, Donald. I'm sorry, I just have too many clients, and March is a really busy month for me, and frankly, I never really liked you.

But I can't do it. I see Sherry waving at me from her green Pinto, below my window, then driving off, flashing me with her white teeth and sparkling bumper sticker: *WWJD?*, as though I hadn't put her in a hole in the ground. As though real people ought to live by bumper stickers. As though she never had died from the inside out. As though Donald hadn't been the man carrying her from the bathroom to her bed, her face wiped clean, her head wrapped carefully in the pale blue scarf Mom had given her. As if I had told her that she really was a Peely, like me and Mom and Dad.

"Never mind, Donald. I'm just really tired." And that is true. I am looking at the marbled shirt button nearest my heart as I rub the stiff out of my neck.

"Why don't I come back another time then, Lloyd?" Donald stands up and pulls his sweatshirt hood up and zips his jacket. It's a kid's outfit: tennis shoes, hoodie, windbreaker, sweatpants. His belly is gone though. I hadn't noticed until now.

"No, stay. I'm fine, really." I pick the stack of receipts up and begin to flip through them blindly. I know he is watching me from the doorway. I hunch over the papers and try to concentrate.

"You know, you look like the kid that got picked on in school all day."

That's funny; I was just thinking the same thing about you.

"Oh, yeah?"

"I got picked on when I was a kid. That's how I know. You look just like I did at the end of the day. Like somebody puked in your soup."

"Thank you, Donald."

"Ah, you know it's not out of meanness. Do you know what they used to call me in grade school?"

Well, I knew it wasn't what they called him in high school, because he didn't go to high school.

"Durtle."

"Durtle?"

"Yep, Durtle."

It was a combination of Donald and the moniker of his arch-enemy, to whom he had surrendered his half-finger many years ago.

"I don't know why, but that's what they called me." I look at him long and hard.

"Maybe you'd better let me catch up with you another day after all, Donald."

"Sure thing, Lloyd, but you know, maybe you'd be better off if we went out and got something to eat."

He must think I'm going to buy him dinner.

"I'll have to take a rain check this time, Donald."

"Well. All right then." He pushes off of the doorframe and walks out into the hallway, and I imagine, down the stairs, and to his car, not the green Pinto anymore, but a white Corolla, and he gets in, and he closes the door and he sits there. Forever. Because I can't think what he does next. Maybe he does go to eat somewhere. Maybe he goes home and puts a frozen dinner in the oven, eats in front of the TV, and then falls asleep on his couch.

I am still thinking about him and Sherry as I lock up the old frosted glass door that leads into my waiting room. The building is the old downtown-square type, with high ceilings, exposed brick in places, hardwood floors, and glass doorknobs. I had my name painted on the door twenty-three years ago, which was when Donald was working steady at the die plant, and Sherry was a nurse at a hospital here in town. It had only just opened a few years before she started working there. It still looks about the same today as when she went in for her treatments. I overheard Mom telling my aunts, through hiccupping sobs, how Sherry got to ring a bell after she finished her round of treatments. Everybody stood around and watched while she read the plaque next to the bell that said something meaningful like—

This has been a time of trial and toil;

I have endured beyond the measure of most and survived.

I will bury my fears and look to the bright days ahead,

for I have finished here and I am a stronger person for it.

I will ring this bell three times in front of my family and my friends,

to say to you all that I am alive, and—that I am alive, and—that I am alive.

And then, Mom said, she rang the bell three times.

I wonder whether Mom thought Sherry was a Peely. Mom and Dad both died two Decembers ago, one right after the other. One night, on his porch, Dad told to me he thought Mom looked older and, so, that must mean he did too. I just looked at him. He did look old. I saw it then. I made the usual good-humored joke about getting older. He wasn't looking at me. I didn't know what was upsetting him more, that Mom might die soon, or that he might be left alone.

He kicked his boot against a rail of the front porch and spit well past it into the humid night air, commingling his water with the rest of the world's. His waved gray hair was wild as usual, but was, right then, rimmed at the top with the light of a low moon. His voice was deep and sounded as if came from a place that actually took some time to travel from, but I remember his words were not hard.

"Your mother and me, we done what we could for us and ourn. We put all we got into Sherry and you, and that's all what we knew after a while. Working, eating, sleeping and making sure the two of you was alive at the end of each day. It was a failure for us when Sherry died. And now, well, it just wouldn't be natural for one or t'other of us to die first. But I suppose there ain't no trying to control the Lord, and what He deems right in the taking of a life. But I sure do hope He takes your mother to Him first. I don't want her to have to know any more pain by having to bury me next t'her daughter."

My father is the only man that ever struck me in the face.

I was going on nine and my sister Sherry was about to start Kindergarten at my school. When she walked into the kitchen that morning, I laughed at her like a madman. It wasn't just the lacey pink shirt and pants and shoes and bow to match, that my mother had, I have no doubt, spent weeks on in her spare moments, or even the tightly curled hair in two screaming piles on either side of her head, held together by those terrible bows, or even the tiny bit of Barbi gloss she'd applied to her lips in some similar fashion as our mother, I am sure she thought, does with her own lipstick—it was all that plus the look on her face when she walked into the room. It said, "I'm hot shit in my pink lacey getup. I'm the cutest thing ever." I wanted to smack that gloss off of her stupid shiny lips. So, I pointed at her and laughed my guts out.

Sherry's five-year-old face had soured and puckered, and that, at least, removed the variable of the smirk. She ran to my mother, who stood at the stove scrambling eggs, and buried herself in a night-gowned-thigh. Once Sherry was comforted, we were hauled out to the

bus stop; lunch bags in hand.

"Now, Lloyd, you take good care of your sister on her first day of school," Mom said.

"I don't want nobody to know she's my sister, anyhow; not with those stupid pink bows and stupid pink—"

"Lloyd! Don't say stupid."

The bus came to a creaking and screaming halt in front of the three of us. When the door opened I ran on board and didn't look back, trying to pretend I didn't know who they were. Mom was still outside straightening Sherry's bows and leaning forward to whisper to her. Eventually we were all bouncing down the street on big plastic seats. Sherry was four seats up, turned around looking at me. I looked out the window. When I glanced back, she was gone, sitting down again, I guessed, which was good because Mrs. Hatty would have stopped the bus soon enough and made her sit down anyway. Mrs. Hatty had smelled a good deal like Swiss cheese, as I recall, and very much disliked children.

When we pulled up at school I put my collar up to my ears and headed for my new classroom. It wasn't until lunchtime that Sherry was found under the seat where I had last seen her looking at me. She was curled up sleeping, her face dirty and streaked, her pink outfit a mess and torn in two places. When we got home, my mother nearly had a heart attack. When my father came home, he came up to my room, and sat down on my bed.

"Why'd you laugh at your sister this morning?"

"Cause she looked stupid."

"What about her looked so stupid?"

"Her pink bows."

"Your mamma thought those bows was pretty when she was making 'em to match the outfit she'd already made. Nobody laughed at you when you went to school wearing pj pants last year."

"That was an accident."

"Maybe so, but ain't none of us laughed at you, or made you feel like hiding under a seat on that dirty school bus."

"I didn't do nothing to make her hide."

"You made her feel like everybody was gonna laugh at her. Don't you think there's gonna be plenty of strangers enough gonna make her feel like crawling under a seat on a dirty bus in her life, without her needing her family to do it to her?"

"She ain't really a Peely anyway."

"Why do you say that?"

"She just ain't like us, is all."

"She's as like us as you are. But today you wasn't somebody

I'd want to say was like me and mine."

"Sherry's not like me. She's scared of everything and she's stupid."

"She's not stupid; she's just younger than you. And as for being scared, any person's scared sometimes. Even me and your momma."

"Momma's stupid, too."

"You watch your mouth, boy. Your momma does everything for you."

"Well, she made me take care of Sherry and I didn't want nothing to do with it."

"You do as she tells you, Lloyd. Now you go on and apologize to your sister."

It was four years later, when I called my mother a bitch for making me take the garbage out, that my father walked directly up to me and slapped me across my face. He told me that I was no son of his to treat his wife that way. It was two months before he spoke to me again, even though Mom and I made up the next day.

But all that's left is Donald now. It's just Lloyd and Donald. Sometimes I wonder if I'm not being punished for years of ignoring Sherry and her mistakes by being left to deal with this male replica of her. In a way, they are the same person. Sherry and Donald, forever in the history book of our lives, one body (in Christ)...pathetic, useless. But that's not true, because what could either of them ever do to end up with their name in a history book, even one dedicated to mediocrity, such as holds sole propriety in words over this town?

II. Donald is sitting at the far end of the counter. The woman at the grill has a mean looking mustache and her nametag reads FANNY. I walk on down to Donald and sit next to him. I'm no coward. After all, I did finally have my secretary send him a note saying I could no longer take care of his taxes.

"Donald."

"Lloyd."

I feel chipper, really, though I don't say anything else. Sitting next to him, I feel relieved that I will not be tried with his yearly company any longer. It almost makes me miss him. I try to think of other things to say that might interest someone like Donald, some small conversation we could have that might prove consolation to him. But nothing comes. I decide on the weather, but even the weather is too complicated a topic. It could become confusing if I have to explain global warming, or the ozone effect. I imagine him looking at me with an effortful expression on his face. Poor Donald. I could almost hug

the man; he's made me so happy — not being my client, not being my brother.

As I turn to tell him, at least, that I'm sorry I can't take care of his taxes anymore—because, honestly, I feel good, I feel just fine, and I want to talk; I want to say things—as I turn to face him, I see that he is leaning over next to his swivel chair signing his tab. He shoves the yellow copy into his pocket, looks up at me, nods, and leaves. He walks out without saying a word. I swivel my own chair back to face FANNY's mustache, her mean look, and I don't have anything to say to her either.

III. Kerrington Golf Course and Driving Range is about four miles out of town, past the last antique mall and caddy-corner to a field of tobacco. I have been teaching myself slowly over the last few years to play. I stand in the cubicle of Astroturf farthest from the more skilled golfers and swing at ball after ball until the buckets empty and my sides ache.

The last ball was the closest I've come hitting to the small mound, flag, and hole, all day. The little red flag, maybe some yellow in it, far off, erect-directional like a Pointer's tail, and that's where my balls seem to go too—off in another direction entirely. Perhaps I ought to suggest the hard plastic triangle be pointed to the hole beneath it instead of out to my left.

A man in a bright orange jumper rides in and out, all around, finds every fallen bullet, and sweeps it mysteriously into his vacuum cart. He is encased by tightly strung chicken fencing, and occasionally a bright sliced projectile knocks his cart, though he does not visibly flinch. It pleases me to know that my misfirings are mixed with the veteran slices of the better golfers and the person lording over all of these is a man in orange spared a beating only by a thin layer of metal mesh.

My third bucket has thinned to a few reds, a purple, and a yellow. I toe another ball to the spot I like and remember the tips from my golf book. I put my weight onto my right leg, bury my left thumb in the palm of my gloved hand, both entwined around the stiff, top-heavy wedge, squint out at the mound, the misleading red triangle, swing up and through, shift my weight, look out again. I look. It comes down into view, and I see that it is falling toward the edge of the range, out near the ball man. I relax and my feet take equal weight, flat on the ground.

Leaving, I balance my buckets, clubs, towel and water bottle and move in one sweat heavy ache to the lot to find my Hyundai and go home. Next to my car stands a man in an orange jumper. I stop. I

walk forward again and watch the man's brilliant suit swim in an oily heat spreading up from the black asphalt. For a moment I imagine the sun is setting next to my car. But it is high noon, a Saturday, and Donald stands waiting for me, glowing in the heat of the day.

I approach mechanically, lifting my dead legs to pull forward my body and my load, bent to the side a bit, wary. What does he want? Is he angry? I look around the gravel lot to see a man and his son, far off, walking in toward the course. Should I call out to them?

"I come to tell you something." And as he says this, our eyes meet—for a brief moment I think that he might like to kill me. A flash of something I can't describe, and then comes the calm softness of his eyes again. I grip my water bottle and bag tightly.

"I come to tell you that Sherry was a fine woman. She was a good wife, a good daughter, and if you'd a let her, she'd of been a good sister."

"You don't have to tell me about my sister. Sherry and I are different people."

"Were. You *were* different people, you mean." Donald took off his hat and wiped his forehead on the sleeve of his jumper. I don't know what I could have been afraid of; he's just a golf course attendant.

"Donald, I have somewhere to be."

"You know she died thinking you didn't care for her much? She died thinking she wasn't good enough for you." He lifts his chin up and sights me with the end of his nose. "You're a mean man, Lloyd. And I don't want you to do my taxes no more anyhow. I don't reckon I want people to know we's even related."

My lip turns up.

"Well, Donald, we aren't related. I was barely related to Sherry."

"What do you mean?"

"She was just never much like us, Donald. And you sure aren't a Peely either."

"I'd give anything to have that woman back. Whatever you think she was or wasn't, she was my wife, and she was your parents' daughter. She was loved by all of us but you, and now they ain't nobody *but* you. Whatever made you such a mean man, Lloyd?"

"I suppose you think you have some right to talk to me this way now that I don't do your taxes anymore?" I am digging around in my pocket for my keys. Donald is sweating through his jumper. The back of his hand is scraped and bleeding.

"I don't care about that. You think I care about that? Here, I just wanted to give you this before I never see you again." He holds

out a bulging lunch sack. His half-finger dimples the center of the bag. I look at that finger, and it makes me furious. Does that thing make him more a part of my family than me? Does that goddamned thing make him better than me?

"Goddamn you! You think you're so much better than me. You think you're so much better than *me*?!" I spit with my words, in his face. I am full of these words, but they only come out a little. I can't see anything but the swimming layers of orange in front of me, and those fingers, all tied up around and around that bag, that finger. That ring. What could I have done? What could I have done?! My ears are ringing, and my chest.

"Goddamnit, Donald! Get off my chest!!"

I spin with the ambulance lights. *Ready? Okay. Are you related to him? Do you want to ride?* A dome over my face, fogging up – all the time. Do you hear me? Can you hear me? Do I sound like a Peely? Jesus, do I? *You got your lunch there? No. It ain't my lunch.* Everybody. Everybody, hear me. Do you hear me? *It ain't my lunch.* I hear you. I hear you ringing in my ears. Somebody loved you. *It ain't my lunch. What is it? No. It ain't my lunch. It's my receipts. For what? For everything I've ever paid for this year.* Account for what I pay for. My brother-in-law. *My taxes.* My sister. My brother.

Early Morning Fog Meets a Late Sleeper Bridgette Jagers

It's seldom I am up when she is,
moving about the place, lingering
long in corridors, gathering in pools
like rushing water over the hillside;
fresh from the shower, she drips
onto the mossy rug, straggles of autumn
caught between her toes;
she slings dew, wraps her cool fingers
around branches, twines silver ribbons
of spiders' webs, braids the strands
left hanging on the teetering edge of night
to the long yawn of morning

Apartment 2

James Prather Phillips

I don't like neighbors. In fact, I hate them. I hate the sound of children. I hate couples humping, climaxing through my ceiling.

So I moved upstairs—because there—because two months, eleven quiet days and a trip in the ambulance later, the fireman moved in.

I watched the U-Haul and the dollies wheel everything in. I watched through broken slats of blinds and grimy antique windows, taking inventory of his life.

Across two days and the sweat of one particularly muggy, but well-lit night, I watched his wife and several of her friends carry little things in, laughing: tiny armfuls of trinkets, rusty TV trays, no more than ten or fifteen books and an open box of Victoria's underwear.

I saw it all. I saw the kid and his dolls. I think he kicked a quarter down the hall. I'm pretty sure his name is Conor, but I could be wrong.

I heard him and thought, *Is that a boy or is this a dream?*

You never can tell anymore. I mean, with all the—and the, well, the pot, you just never can tell anymore.

So I popped the paint around the window sill and let the last cool breeze of winter slip in. I closed my eyes and turned off the music—which I never do, but I had to.

But, you see, don't be fooled. This *firefighter*, this modern day dragon slayer, Prince Charming or President, whatever you want to call him—he's just a man.

When he was four, some unoriginal adult up to him and pinched his rosy cheek: *And what do you want to be when you grow up, little boy?*

Well, you know the rest of the story. Uniforms are sexy and prostitution is illegal, so pass the retardant and call up Jessica, that chick from high school that wouldn't talk to you. Become something. Say you didn't join the army, for once.

I'll back you up.

I'll tell them what a good father you are. How you take your son into the backyard, far away from the toolshed, and teach him exactly how to ride a tricycle, look ridiculous speeding down that driveway. I'll tell them what a great man you are. How you take your wife out every Friday and send Conor to see Grandma, then bring back your sweetheart and remind her why it's okay that *one* day you won't come home.

I'll tell them whatever you want me to tell them. Just keep it the truth and I promise I won't move.

Hell, I'll even turn my music down.

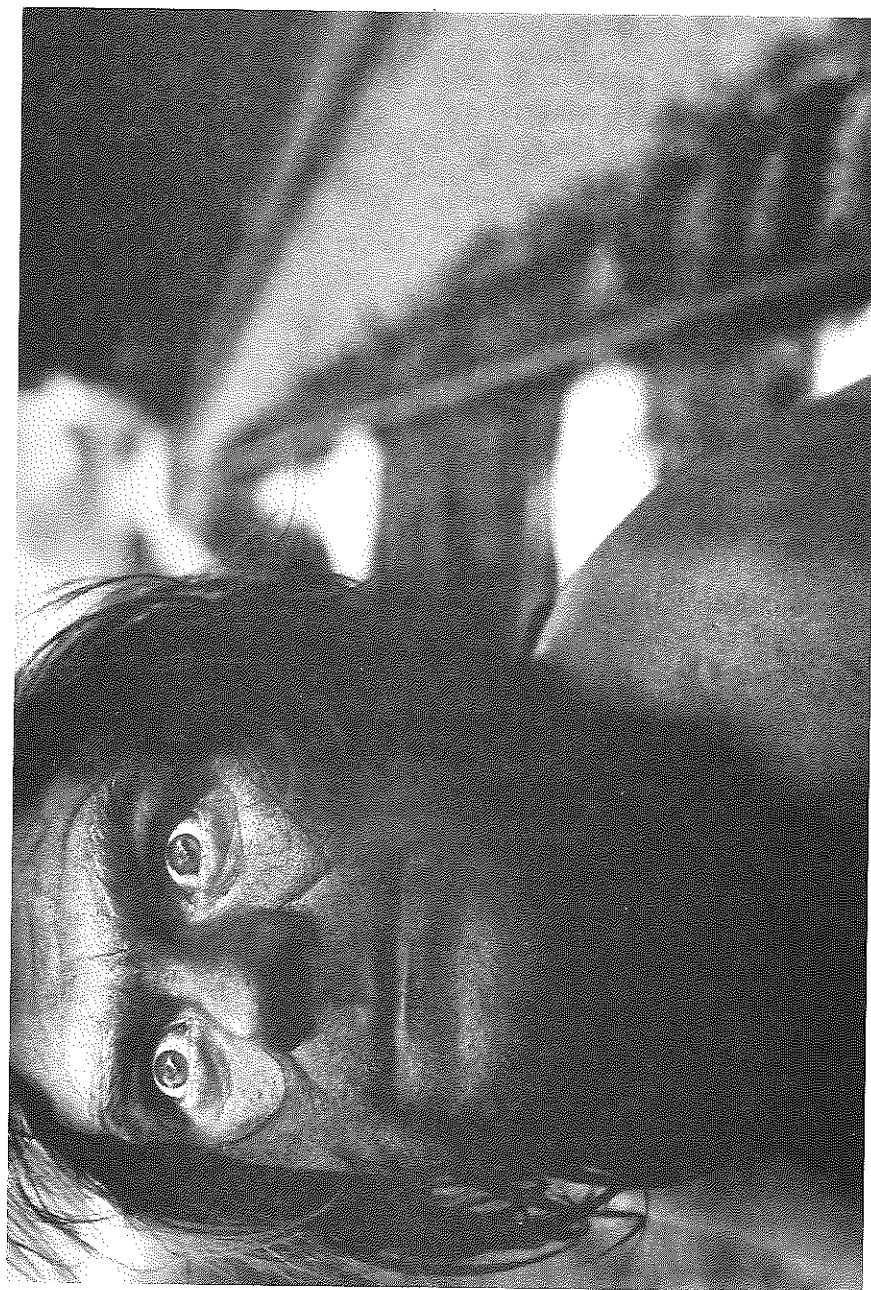
Stars In Africa

Megan Kelley

Sometimes the sun sheds freshly cut orange peels.
Let's feed the Ethiopian children these slabs of light
because their pupils look hungry
and their hands stroke under soft midnight blankets.
Lindsey Lohan, let's take you to North Africa.
Sell you into white slavery, biotch.
The children could eat your smooth star skin
and tomorrow they will say "thank you
Goddess? The woman bears fruit."
And we'll laugh, and push our bulldozer prams
and whisper "Ni Hao, Wode háiza ma?"

Actually, we'll just break you up like
sun-bleached concrete
because your skin is white and should make good white china
to be licked clean by a dozen hungry languages of
the timid drought
who could like the rain better if it wasn't so wet.

But anyway, Lindsey Lohan, think of it.
The large eyes of sleepless nights,
these moons hanging sheets over the clock and furniture,
because if you listen to the tap-tap telepathy
la nuit est grande, pas vous, while
the dunes exude the familiar scent:
the bright, the light,
the white china dishes.



Jim Winn

untitled

Blue Armed Joan
Chuck Williamson

Blue-violet bruises pucker on the skin like eager
mouths, splotching the surface of her frail forearms
where a constellation of shallow veins intersect

with irises tucked away, neat, & pretty,
inside the soil of her long, brown sleeves.
little else can be said, and dull words wither

into stillborn murmurs. this man, her husband, when
he looks to her, with grey eyes burning cigarette holes into
her shirtsleeves, she remembers: she's to be quiet at all times,

because husbands do all the talking, and now she's to grow
accustomed to sinking in the sea of his shadow.
but, on the weekends, he sometimes says to her, you are pretty,

so real and very pretty. these are the days she smears
the lipstick into a ruby-red paste, where the expression
of taut ribs show nothing beyond the boundaries

of sand-colored tanlines. when he's not looking, she checks
her nylons for runs, hoping the small craters of cellulite do
not show. they never do, and her body shines cathedral-like,

and, on weekends, when they make love, he's tender,
a memento of their youth, with even a thumbnail of moon
too small and dim to expose her secret legs. on weekdays,

it is a different story. on weekdays, a fist sends
shockwaves into her fluttering ovaries, stinging so bad
she leans back and retches. a pink, plastic

retainer, arched in a pained smile, webbed in
spittle, lies stranded in the threads of carpet where,
if she's lucky, he'll let her sleep tonight, her head

resting against the garbage can frothing over with
crushed cans of pabst blue ribbon. again, this has
become a natural occurrence. and the weekends always

work as an unacknowledged apology, and when he sometimes
says, you're pretty, so real and very pretty, she smiles.
because she's not being punished for the stubble spiked out

on aging calves, the plums of breast too small for padded water bras,
the glamour that has withered more and more
with every passing year. beyond that, there is only the night,

the weeknights, where, if her husband is not looking, she is
transformed, with tangled braids turning to hair curled,
cropped, haloed in hungry flame, bronze armor glinting

in the lamp's electrical glow, eyes weighing heavy
with salty seawater that trickles down into pursed
slivers of lips. on weeknights, she becomes a sort of

joan of arc, whose sleeves are licked by orange
tongues, whose legs, like pistons, raged wild in
patay, who now stands sterling before a crucifix, and

how she dreams, from earth to heaven,
of the cathedral in rouen where, as if by chance
encounter, she came upon the celestial visage

of st. michael. but I'm just a peasant girl, she
tried to tell him, *why* do you come to me? oh, no, my
sweet, he said to her, you are so much more than this.

Canadian Sprawl

Travis Morris

He left her
for a Canadian pipedream
from there to Seattle
deeper than the Rubicon
Caesar admits
And when the opium
releases his fingers
they long to sift
blonde hair realities.

He left her
for a Canadian pipedream
the brothels
say does not exist,
“Go home to you
Kansas Girl, Blue Eyes,”
Marlena slurs with
discounted breath—
1st rate fucks were
guarantee though,
nothing else.
When you pay
for sex, you never regret
the money you saved.
“You can keep the
coupon if you behave,”
Sophia offers
at the Tabernacle Tushy
for his eagerness.

“They are not phenomenal
Maya, I’m sorry.
They are not my woman
Maya, I’m sorry.
I want a
cornhusker—

feed me bacon
before my eggs
so they taste better.”

“Have fun, dress warm,”
she might call him Baby.
Canada’s frontier
will cure like wine
and without a land bridge
to carry him back
to discovery,
he’ll have
to fall in love.
His heart says Canada.

Assisted Dying

James Prather Phillips

There are no barbed wires here:
there are keypad numbers
green lights and weathered LEDs
glued half-heartedly to brick
We punch the nonsense in
a thousand times we get it wrong
until finally they let us in

It is like some kind of miracle
now: We are passing through
purgatory thick steel turnstiles
and radio controls dumb children
too wise to walk away
and never come back in

to modern-day senility: We
laugh telling each other
telling me telling them
telling ourselves as we sleep
that this is all we have...

Next to idiocy Even the
doctors and the dinosauric
bones buried in bedsores
believe it: *Extinction is freedom!*

But it isn't extinction it's
redemption from some place
some vast and empty space

like my grandfather's mind
like the house he built

on 203 Pine

Cat Sweat

Savannah Sipple

She never rode tricycles because she
Hates the third wheel, never wore under-roos
She stuck with tighty-whities and t-shirts
She sang *teen-age mu-tant nin-ja turtles*
And threw gravel at her little brother
They lived at the house made of cheap stone,
Those *sunny days sweepin' the clouds away*.
Playing baseball in the front yard and
Princess with a castle in the climbing tree.
Riding bikes on the old greasy slick oil-rig roads
Can't compare to the smell of security in Downy
And long afternoons spent
At the house made of white bricks,
The kind that won't melt.

Because the cheap stone gave in and melted
And like a good neighbor, State Farm is there
But where was State Farm when her
(Baby dolls, trolls and pet shops,
Teddy bears, blankies and upright piano)
House burnt?

The firefighters were as useful as the
Yellow garden sprinkler that was never turned on.
Water poured down like hot cat sweat on fur.
The milk man, the paper boy, the evening
TV—the good neighbors knew about it

She doesn't feel so secure now, the smell
Of ashes haunt her in her sleep,
Makes her eyes water when she smells wood burn.
Grown up she wakes up crying and clutching
Her stuffed basketball, it's all she has left-
That and pictures of little league games she wishes
Had never ended. *Batter up, hear that call, the time has come*
For one and all to play-ay-ay ball.
She even lost her favorite mitt.

Vodka Vitamins
A Tragicomedy
John S. Owen

My childhood dreidel spins;
spirals Fibonacci,
zips across the coffee-table,
much like Violet did
running away from fate.

Fair reader, I back up.
Time: 3 hrs, 12 mins, 29 secs.
Violet twirls:
Flamingo feather boa, brazen hair.
Wearing sparkle eye-shadow, she pretends to be Princess Swan Lake.

Violet is an angel.
So be it an angel of vice.
Short lime dress,
peppermint cologne.
A glimmer in the darkness; dressing up covers her strife.

Her shady blue eyes
gape at me w/ glowing *oomph*.
Furry purse strapped to naked shoulder,
stilettos clunk-clank on kitchen linoleum.
Now Violet's frat-boy bound; her acrylic finger-nails flash a happy bye-bye.

Forgive me gentle reader, for I back up again,
spotlighting this: my 13th b-day.
Big Party, Bar Mitzvah you see.
Pop tells me I'll have hair on my *kitzkahs* soon.
The day I become a man is the day I meet Violet.

The princess and I become chummy chums.
She shows me her training bra.
I show her Pop's *Hustler* collection.
12-yr-old Violet tells me she likes the pictures
w/ the fireworks glued to the model's breasts.

When we grow up, we'll get married, Violet says.
Live in a little pink house w/ checkerboard carpet
and eat sprinkled brownies and cupcakes.
Play with Barbie and Ninja Turtles,
and name our kids the same—Malibu and Michelangelo.

Flash to the present, kindly reader.

Time: 2:17 A.M.
I wait for the dancing princess
to come home again.
On this night, vodka equals vitamins.

Violet trickles in, one Stiletto broken.
Hair frazzled, mascara smeared,
blacktop-scraped knee.
The princess torn,
what I've always feared.

Violet takes my bottle;
swallows her pride.
By now her tears have stopped.
She looks at me, tries to smile,
no words spoken, it's me now who will cry.

Bathroom: a month later—
she's screaming in a panic.
Lying on the frigid tile, I stroke her ginger hair:
"Tomorrow," I tell her,
"I'll drive you to the clinic."

She logs my shirt w/ salt,
sniffing like babies getting booster shots.
I tell her that soon we'll live in checkerboard carpet,
in a cracker-box pink house,
adrift from all those mean ol' grown-ups.

(Requiem for childhood.)

Days on Raintree Farm (Before It Was Called That)

Tara Koger

Ray Fairchild
Returned from World War II
Blind

Back to his home, his wife
They would never try for children again
Sleeping in separate bedrooms

His wardrobe would become
Endless options of
Pinstriped pajamas
Meant for endless days
In a rocking chair

And his despair
If present
Would never utter a sigh
And I, as a child, would
Turn the tape deck over
After every click of Side A
And Side B

And his hair was gray
And perfected
As I parted and combed
Each morning

And we roamed
The perimeter of the property
Hand in hand, caneless,
So that no one would see
His lose his dignity

And though he hadn't seen it in years
He could quote the Bible verbatim

Every time my sinful mouth
ate dove breast

And, every so often, in bird nests,
I would find the clippings of his hair
Trimmed on the porch
Tediously with all of my care
Because visits to the hairdressers
Meant stares he could not see

And the wife, the aunt,
Would gladly pay
My small hand
A dollar a day
To make sure that I hugged
and kissed Uncle Ray
Goodbye.

Pseudo-daughter
As I was, he gave
Me a pony, a bedroom,
A swing
And in return
I would sing
His favorite hymn
After dinner
As he tapped a green
Glass cane.

Cigarette Smoker

painting by Hale Aspacio Woodruff
Samantha Ragland

A cigarette smokes itself without flame
but its end still burns, a twig of ash leans
as the smoker does, forward
almost staring also where he does, out
through blank, black eyes
the cigarette's orange burning in them
to a black, blank place
where maybe even butterflies rest easy
and the hot summer sun, through
forest, grass, and pine greens,
blows a breeze from its bitter but friendly gaze
calmly, bringing to shine the working man's face
and lips that kiss the cigarette that smokes itself.
His gray hat with thick black band tilts
in the direction of the foreign quiet and
cheekbones intense, also defining themselves
with secret delight as if to say
hello, nice to see you not just my 'magination.



Aging Bricks

Jessica Bates

She was afraid to seem like
a single brick – square edged
and deeply lonely, but positioned

between thousands of others just like her.
She blew out thirty candles
in her mind. She closed black-lined eyes

to make a birthday wish. She swore
she'd be more like a vacuum
this decade, sucking men from the

corners of bars like dirt.
If she found one she remotely liked
she'd keep him. If not, she'd simply

empty her bag and begin again.
She puts on her best outfit.
Her legs are brown and smooth

beneath the short white skirt
and feel twenty-three again.
The faint crows feet around her eyes

have deepened. She applies anti-aging cream
to every part of her skin
and blinks back tears when she

notices cellulite dimples laughing
on the backs
of her formerly flawless

legs. She hopes her brick has the
loosest mortar. She wants
to stand out, to stand out from

the wall of the other desperate
thirty-somethings
and cause blood to stir and boil

and pump straight to limp penises and
fill them with lust.
Because that hunger can be very

close to love
like a foul ball is almost
a homerun, like an expiration date

is mainly a guideline, not a
hardnosed rule: Like sometimes a no
can sound almost like a yes.

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kicking and screaming

Aubrey Videtto

I will not begin by writing *My father is a good man.*
My father is a good man.
I will not write *you are a good man.*

Imagine an aquifer untapped:
Water, ice cold, pressed hard between tilted rocks.
There could be a giant mechanism of release from above,
to pierce downward, puncture
and depressurize.
There could be, but there isn't.
So just imagine pressure, growing beneath a surface.
Keep the pulse, the throb of the pressure against the surface,
close to you.

My fears are not unfounded.
They are founded in childhood.
They are founded in my father's words:
Be afraid.

We lived on six acres, half of them cleared of trees.
We lived underground, safe from missiles.
There was a house, a field, a forest, and a gully.
On the field, there was a garden with green beans and cucumbers.
We did not eat store-bought baby food.
Because we couldn't afford it.

In the forest there was a bench my father made (out of the trunks of
fallen trees).
When I was six,
I sat on that bench and sang songs to Jesus,
and to my mother,
whom I sometimes mistook for Jesus.

The pressure, at that time, was minimal,
throbbing against the surface only occasionally.

This was my childhood distilled:
I was told to lock doors.
Told what to do if someone tried to put me in his car.
Throw myself to the ground.

Kick and scream.

Be afraid of him.

Later on, the pressure would beat like a pulse,
rising from the pit of me into my throat.
Because, in high school,
I'd be *chopped into pieces and scattered in ditches across Tennessee*
if I made a mistake.

What is a mistake, dad?
Is it like when I fucked one man to get over another but was left with
the unfortunate visual of a condom being snapped on like a nurse's
latex exam glove?
And feeling good.
Not about the fast, silly sex
but about manipulating a man.
Being cured for a night.

Next to the bench in the forest was a long vine.
It hung down to safe, solid ground.
But I will not swing on it.
I am afraid it will break.

Abelard's Letter in Transit, Signed, USPS

Chuck Williamson

-For Anne Sexton

get them soused and rowdy,
and it's all bound to happen.

the ghosts of four hundred
cistercian monks gill the
grey cobbled courtyard, aligned like
stabled stalks of corn rooted deep
in the brown pregnant earth. which
is where they sleep — beneath the stable yards,
beneath the gunshells and bayonets,
beneath the hoofprint constellations
intersecting strong-armed perseus
and perry como. they are freckled
in horseflies, swathed in the daily tribune,
and as they shuffle in jaundiced
waves,

a gnat-netted tumbrel wheels forth
the emasculated form of abelard —
past the canopied grociers, who
spit with ritual onto their loafers and past
the listless schoolchildren stranded
in the glummost churchyard,
playing hopscotch, scraping knees.
it darts like a limbless mosquito on
the coast of
myrtle beach.
all the coifed and steeleyed lawmen stroll past
as the billowing flaps of an abbot's gown
glowers like a sunstained union jack.
the living, you see, cannot bear witness.

canon fulbert, puffed
up like a microwaved marshmallow,
drinks to his daughter's
reconstructed virtue, as

if a vagina is a pier where
rainwater washes off
starfish and barnacles.

you know the rest.

abelard, as broken as
a coney island hot dog stand,
leans out on the wooden barrel and
babbles in heroic couplets.

what a wretched castrato he
shall one day make! the transsexual
with a steepled jaw-line! the
eunuch with honeysuckle love
letters and hemlock wafers! he is the
punchline of your favorite
farmer's daughter joke, the
neuter that picked melons
instead of grapes.

amid the white noise
of yellow ghosts, abelard calls
out the familiar names,
begging for pen and paper,
pleading for sufficient postage,
and when he looks to the ghosts,
he says, please, please,
there are love letters that
need to be written, an
epistle that calls out
her name...

but the whiskey
of his words falls
through their stomachs
like pennies in
your coffer.



Ruin

Emmett Barton

For tonight Cate was my guide into the noise and night lights that pervade all over the town, the things you see on the side of the street from behind the hermetic glass of your automobile. Those vistas of a dark diegesis: oily streets, brutish lamps, the smell of rotting fast food, blood. I was of the guilty, and if tonight wasn't just my repentance, surely it was to be my deification. And Cate, electric and mad, was just there, as I was just there as well, before us here, nothing, and the moments ahead unfolding less like origami than crumpled paper. It was easy to imagine that we were infecting the veins of this concrete Garden of Eden as a new, drunken, strung out Adam and Eve; everyone else blurring past us only innocent beasts ignorant of the world.

We walked, we stumbled, and dripped through the streets like New Year's drunks on Tuesday night. They were littered with our curses and the buildings polluted with us loving the hate we felt. And amongst the hastily erected towers of thought and still kinetic ruins of conversation she was asking my name over and over again, and eventually I began to feed her aliases. It was necessary to believe that anonymity would cover me and her like armor. That by riding this wave of will power we could become invisible, vibrant, and impossible, contradicting our pasts by destroying the paths into the future. It was necessary to unbind our lives from our livelihoods. Throughout the night I could not stop looking at her, Cate with her black mind and mysterious fey mannerisms, her thin, delectably attractive body. She had all the beauty of a sick kitten and with the facts of her street-chopped greasy dark hair crisscrossing her face, her black eye, and the way she fluttered in the crook of my arm like a cold bird, I was in love with her. She was full of poison. Infectious.

Somewhere in the center of this fecund town we were smoking each other's cigarettes and feeding ourselves stolen rum from a paper bag when we saw the show of the night. From the darkness materialized a pickup truck screeching in off the street running broken lights that flashed blindingly over us and wailed distorted country music. Through a cataract of light we watched as this demon truck broke through the bushes and into the park we were evidently polluting and aimed itself at the large, boring fountain that my junky kitten and I were just cursing. This thing, this machine caromed off the cement on its rusted leaf springs, through the people barriers and splashed into the center of the erect fountain of water, and stopped immediately with a titanic POP as the engine block cracked in two. The metal screamed and hissed, and steam enveloped the fountain, masking the pickup. The

driver jumped out and hauled himself to the roof of his truck, streaming blood and water. He let out a rebel yell and began to piss on this tawdry town.

Cate and I agreed with this person.

He's the headliner, she said. We were not going to mess with him, but wanted to offer him some of our stolen liquid. The cops wanted him more than we did and if public urination wasn't a sure incantation to summon the police, then driving your truck into a city park in a kamikaze act of either defiance or wanton drunkenness was pure magic. The visual symphony of chaos we had just witnessed was followed by a jazz of sirens, automobile horns, shouting, running water, rushes and counter-rushes of traffic. For the first time in the evening Cate and I had witnessed the kind of beauty we had been mining the town all night for.

Hunger drove us indoors. Sitting in a booth in a nameless diner, drowned in the flood of light, the disgusting clean of it, we ordered coffee, eggs, bacon and grits. We looked outside as we waited. The street seemed bucolic and peaceful when we weren't walking it. I said as much to Cate but she only looked into the reflections of herself and the diner behind her.

Cate: How long have I known you?

Me: An hour, or a year.

Cate: It's been so long since I saw you last.

Me: Remember...

Cate: We were so cute then, fallen in line and color coordinated.

Me: I miss the gentle play of our shelf, the canyon of our aisle...

Cate: ...The universe of our department.

There was a sigh and we drank our coffee, we ate our food and paid with paper money. Back out on the street we jumped with the fresh gasoline air in our lungs, the just lit cigarettes cradled in our fingers, and looked back into the microcosm of the restaurant, and saw ourselves several minutes earlier.

I saw that once in L.A., Cate said, but I don't care much for that town myself so I started walking, leaving the scene behind.

Cate never failed to guide us some place with the nonchalance of a drifting leaf, and after the diner of reflection, we had walked the last block and were in a neighborhood.

We are only anonymous because we look like everyone else, she said. Behind me the city ended with the finite abruptness of a mountain wall and around me now were dilapidated post-war houses on lots of gravel and dead grass, landscaped with mulberry trees and

mauled children's toys. She picked up the trail of live music somewhere in the slums and we followed it for a block or two, cutting through yards, battlefields of broken glass and play sets until we closed in on a particularly abandoned looking house. We went around the side of the house where the storm cellar door was thrown open and a faint red light poured out under the wail of punk music led by distorted banjo. Cate went down and I followed her. Her gait had become a strut as she took the stairs each like they were territories to be conquered. The band was a three piece in need of a fourth and I watched as Cate picked up from a table a bottle of water, spun off the cap with a flick of her thumb, upturned it in her mouth, sucked down half of the bottle, then tossed it off in the distance, gushing lost fluid in a spiraling arc of droplets. She strode to the microphone at the head of the band and on beat, began to scream. Not just one scream, but a continuing, extended wail that carried for nearly a minute before fading into a waning croak to a dying, breathy sigh; and someone, somewhere hit a button and her sigh reverberated into an infinite loop. Over her sigh (which was inexplicably is beginning to turn me on) she read, in completely flat monotone, from an algebra textbook.

"A minus P divided by Pr equals Prt divided by Pr. A minus P divided by Pr equals T."

I took in the basement finally which was damp and hot, and by the red light I could make out piles of junk in the corners, half finished sculptures and an acetylene torch.

"Negative two multiplied by five divided by x squared equals—"

She screamed again and I noticed she was smiling while doing this. The music failed to ever reach any kind of climax, any sort of texture other than assaulting and not so assaulting, diluting itself briefly with the rasp of her sigh if only to allow her voice to be heard as she read from the book. Her scream died into another sigh that looped in.

"A stock investment of fifty shares pays a dividend of one-hundred and sixty dollars. At this rate, how many additional shares are needed to earn a dividend of four-hundred-and-twenty-four dollars."

Cate took a deep breath and screamed.

She finished that song and left as she had come, without saying a damn thing. We walked back towards the tangerine glow of the night over the city, the music fading behind us and all I felt like doing was breaking something. I became angry, talking aloud, using my own voice to scratch open some old wound.

We are atonal commodities, nonsensical and boring! When do I stop, and you begin? I felt lost, I wasn't making any sense. Cate and I

had improvised a strategy for reentry into the city via alleys and fire escapes; up one, down another, and I watched my shadow twist itself away from the flood of the street lights as I walked. I thought about the wound, spoke her name aloud. America, I yelled. A milieu of vowels and consonants I had not spoken with such varied levels of meaning, wonder, loss, lust turned nicotine sepia—sickness. After I picked up from the street a bottle and smashed it against the asphalt (a sacrifice to her name; the sound it makes in my mouth—of broken glass) I felt sated and I left that whole scene behind.

We absorbed the alcohol and the events began to get darker and more normal as the night went on, bleeding inescapably into morning. We found ourselves kissing and groping each other like sloppy fish against some brick building. She had been wearing a thin black dress with little straps that would have been a slip on a larger girl. The dress had been soaking up all sorts of abuse and was probably trying to get itself off her bony frame and go out and drink some more. Regardless, she had decided she had had enough poison and that we needed to find a dumpster to sleep in.

I juggled Cate from arm to hand, hand to hand trying to get a hold on her. She blacked out as I carried her down an alley behind a bookstore. I slid her into a warm dumpster of decomposing cardboard, said I would be back; I wasn't finished yet.

I went out and shot up the town with bad ideas, searching for a new outlet, a new canvas to mar. Everything was closed and I had not the strength to break windows as my rocks just bounced off. I faced off against the plate glass, against the warped reflections of the city behind me runny with neon, and the city itself going through me. I was glad I had traded common sense for a bottle; it wasn't any fun and knew nothing of the beauty of ruin or the release of mistake.

Apparently, the town was nigh in the witching hour. A dog with an ace bandage wrapped around his leg window-shopped the night's main drag, full of agenda and prepared to do the mean thing. Each block the town repeated itself, block upon block, clone upon clone, bolstered on each side by identical storefronts: tequilarias, bars, restaurants and hotels, myriad video rentals. This town was woman without womb, city without center, an ever expanding swelling glittering alcohol sweating belly gilt with the shoe scuffs of a million transients. I chanced upon alleys and barrios that were both undiscovered and unmapped to the city itself or reality, where mariachis wandered the town like stray dogs, where whores were fought off with one hand and midnight evangelists with the other.

And I felt that at any moment I was going to lose myself in the town. I was reaching the zenith of self-sabotage and looking over

the edge, contending with vertigo. I was losing it. An arm down one street, fingers streaming through alleys, legs encompassing Main Street, my center the wrecked fountain, my mind the landfill.

This philosophy of self destruction, it was no longer praxis but a defining self invasion, using the left side of my brain with cursive-like precision to abort the crumbling philosophies of the right. It carried with it a melody, a time signature of her voice that if I were to continue to follow, would unravel me in an anticlimactic flash of denouement: disengaging the soul from the existence, the existence from the mind, and the mind finally from its frayed tether to the body. Destruction, weightlessness.

And I realized that I was becoming trapped in ever enclosing circles of thought; that I had lost it. My pilgrimage over, I rose up from the gutter I had disappeared into, shivered my body awake and went off to find Cate before the day took hold.

The dumpster looked entirely different in the daylight and subsequently I wasted much time searching all sorts of filth in all the wrong places for my evaporated girl. I found her eventually. She was sitting up against the inside of the cardboard like a prisoner, looking up at the sun. Her dress sliding off her finally; her hair everywhere and decorated with a number of angry things and sticking to her forehead with sweat.

I was sorry but she didn't care. She wanted a shower. I hauled her up out of the trash and held her for a moment. She smelt of vomit and hot cardboard, like a brand-new cheaply bound book.

She was cheap and so was I.

We were still in this town but were heading in some cardinal direction. Daylight never felt so retched. We walked towards our shadows, mumbling nothings. She was leaning on me still, wan for a moment from the heat, a body full of poison. I looked down at us. We were both disgusting, scraped and cut in several places, dirty and wet. I wanted to take her home and wash her. We found ourselves, by some consequence of devious city planning, back in the park with a now destroyed fountain. The truck and screaming redneck were long since removed and the fountain was a squat pool of liquid, cool and inviting. She and I fell into water rank with truck blood and piss. She blamed me for it. When we were done wallowing in that filth she informed me that I was done sabotaging myself. I felt inclined to agree.

Cate and I walked home and saw lots of Wednesday people

milling around. People were taking pictures of this shit town and probably took a few of us since we were dirty trash people dressed in black and blood. All of these people were wrong.

Her name was Cate probably ending in something like Cates. Cate Cates. And walking down the sidewalk with her, not one of us different from the other, but ruined thus, I felt that we had if even for a moment, stepped out of society. We made it home and she wanted to turn the garden hose on me but I wanted hot water. She just about gave up when we got to the bathroom. I had to undress her, fill the shower with her and operate the daunting shower controls. By the time I had the temperature adjusted I was soaking wet. She told me to come in and have a seat. After I peeled off my disgusting clothing I sat next to her in the rain.

Here we are again, I either said or thought. Cate made herself comfortable by going totally limp against the tile. With her eyes half open, her head up, and her mouth slightly parted she stared into the shower curtain.

Cate: How long have I known you?

Me: A year, or an hour.

Cate: I've been seeing you for so long. I think I'm sick...

Me: Let's just forget...

Cate: It was so cute at first, lined up and just alike.

Me: I miss the crowded wasteland of our shelf, the ditch of our aisle.

Cate: The hell of our department.

I wept silently to myself about things I didn't want to remember before I realized that Cate's black hair was pasted to my chest and shoulder, that Cate's head was asleep on my numb arm. She looked like hell but was still beautiful, an amazing feat. She had a number of thin, savage-looking scars and a few red cuts on her pale, angular body. I suddenly didn't know how I felt about anything.

I must have fallen asleep because Cate was shaking me under the cold shower, her eyes wide and dilated. She was shivering, chattering and one of her blue contacts had fallen out so she looked at me now pleadingly with one brown eye, one blue. I hauled us up and into a towel then into the kitchen where we cursed daylight and I vehemently erased all the messages on my answering machine without listening to them.

Those people were all wrong.

She stood with her back to me at the stove, cooking eggs. Her back was red with scratches; I felt guilty. Someone was knocking on the front door and shouting my name but I pretended not to be home, so did Cate. She kept cooking and I was realizing how naked we were

and how dirty the floor was. She got cigarette ashes in my eggs but it was okay. Sobriety was imminent and I was in no condition for responsibility. We were not talking, just leaning against the walls and watching the eggs fry. Cate flicked her cigarette into the sink and attacked the pan with a spatula in one hand and a bottle of red pepper in the other. We stood at the stove and ate the eggs from the pan, drinking the last beers and smoking the last cigarettes. There was a voice, a vestigial sound in my head worrying about the Teflon, thinking about the floor, about these possessions, this house, that job, this body, that bill and I realized that I had no other choice but to silence it through a ritual of violence. Maybe it was an epiphany, or just the sum of a long equation.

I enacted vengeance upon my kitchen. I threw open the cabinets, displaying even numbered sets of barware, plates and bowls. I ripped out the drawers, exhibiting my flatware. And amidst my empire of culinary implements I sounded a declaration to detach myself utterly from this world, from this house and this reality.

There was obviously nothing left to do other than destroy everything.

I raped and pillaged my cabinets, smashing the glasses and cups on the tile, tossing the plates into other rooms, the silverware I bent or drove into the appliances. Never was there such beautiful music heard. As I began to size up the fridge, Cate stopped me.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Her voice was rough and loud, "I mean, goddamnit man, you've really lost it. This is not what I had in mind." I looked at her and it was as if before speaking—

"This is where we stop," she said.

—she was just another character in this opera of ruin I had been conducting—

"And I begin."

—not a real person, not outside of me. She was juxtaposed against the smoking stove top, naked, her black eye pensive and dramatic through the damp hair over her face. She looked breakable but maybe she was just scared. I was barefoot, surrounded by armies of glass and ceramic, besieged by my own destruction. Cate shook her head.

"You are not your kitchen," she sighed. I felt the fool, apologetic even—making such a scene. I asked her to get me some shoes and she left the kitchen without saying a word. I waited patiently, imagining Cate inspecting the house room to room, gathering subjects to draw some kind of conclusion on who I was. That in this plethora of evidence she would find some understanding in my actions. Even stranded there as I was, I did not yet feel remorse or loss. I was never going to feel sorry for myself or the superfluous materials surrounding

me. I refused still to revert to the old me, me before last night. I had lost myself, come out the other side ripe with the lurid fruits of understanding; disconnection finally from this ridiculous society. I heard the front door open and close.

I called out for Cate. She was gone. It didn't make sense, but was perfect all the same. I didn't need anyone, not some doppelganger, not some replacement for a her or a wound or a name or what had left me in the past. The phone began to ring and I was overtaken by a desire to answer it, but I couldn't get to it without shredding my feet. Someone began knocking on the door again; my name was being yelled in the street. I wanted so badly to move, but could not.



The Killer Awoke Before Dawn

Where I'm from

Heidi Sanchez

I'm from tumbleweed chain link,
ghost towns,
utility spool tables,
and devil winds.

I'm from crumbling cinderblock,
cold cement floors,
cracked window panes,
skinned jeans,
and shopping sprees
at Goodwill.

I'm from my mother's hollow embrace—
icy bones that came too late.
her grieving breast,
too bitter to lend
the warmth a child needs.
From numbed lips,
as blue as death,
she spit frozen, ghostly breath
like chards of ice.

I'm from desperate prayers,
I whispered alone.

I'm from Aunt Helen's busy hands,
trimmed in hot pink,
and diamond rings,
too big.
From my chocolate locks
around her finger,
and perfectly pinned in place.
I'm from goodnight
Eskimo kisses,
and Rocky Road in bed.
From summer clothes

made by hand—
each collar stitched—
“Made with love”.

I'm from Unkie's red velvet chair.
Butter pecan pie cream cones—
shared with the dog.
I'm from cedar sawdust
stuck to our dewy faces,
after a morning
in the woodshop.
I'm from laying bricks
for Helen's geraniums
in my overalls
just like his.

I'm from government cheese,
and refried beans
on paper plates—
my arm for a napkin.
From steamed lobster
on antique china,
and Shirley Temples
in tiny, heirloom
crystal goblets.

I'm from the chill of a catatonic womb,
from the stumble on rocky roads.
from the diamond of hope—
only love can give,
and the nightly prayers
I thought unanswered.

The Weight of Light

Aubrey Videtto

There are important things to know about Egypt – the man with a six-foot board stacked with bread loaves on his head. The bright red and green lawn chairs outside of your ancient hotel where old men sit and smoke their tall, slender hookahs. The cats. A woman with a watermelon on her head as she walks, hands at her sides, her flowing garments moving in rhythm enough, like the rest of her, to maintain a symmetry with the earth's rotation, so that she could even pause and greet a friend without the melon falling and splitting open on the street. The things people can carry on their heads in other parts of the world make you suspect we Americans are some of the least poised. The pyramids look like mountains through the Cairo skyline as you weave toward them, but then you find there is a KFC/Pizza Hut at their main entrance.

In ancient Egyptian history, at the beginning of civilization, it was believed that when you died, your heart was weighed against a feather, while a judge questioned you about your life, to determine if you were good or evil. If your heart was evil, if it weighed more than the feather, then a dog gobbled it up and you were damned. While your heart was weighed, another judge with the head of an alligator, a lion, and a hippo listened to see if you were lying so that he might tip the scales.

Preparing for the trip, my main concern had been how in god's name I was going to poop in a hole in the ground when we got to Uganda. I was very worried about shitting in general. I'd been told the water could make me sick. And don't forget, reminded my sister before we left, that not enough water would make me really sick. My perpetually anxious father was very worried about everything. I tried to ease my own mind by learning to stand and squat on the toilet seat in my apartment to do my business – a kind of dress rehearsal for the real thing. I only did this once because it sounded like I was pooping down a well, and I was afraid the neighbors would hear.

But all of that seemed unhelpful and silly in Dubai, which is easily one of the richest places in the world and was the hub stop for all of our Emirates flights. There were plenty of stalls where one could squat over a hole, if one wanted to; in fact, most of them were like that. They looked like huge steel hospital potty pans with foot grips, and hanging on the wall next to each one was a hose with a sprayer on it. No directions. No toilet paper. But on the other side of the bathroom, I found a long row of pristine Western-style stalls

with toilets and paper, a commodity I'd be giving up once we flew out of this airport.

It was in the bathrooms, looking at my newly cropped hair in the mirrors, that I became aware no one was speaking my language, or any language I had heard before. I stared at my oval face, which was pale and tired looking, and I thought how funny it was that I was there. When Chad and I had begun planning the three-month trip, I had imaged the coast of southern Spain or Ireland's green hills. But Chad loves Africa, loves the Middle East. He had had a dream, he told me, that he was drinking tea in Tibet. And so we were three days into our around-the-world-style itinerary that cost nearly 4K each. First Cairo, then Mt. Sinai, then the Red Sea, then Nepal, then Tibet, then Uganda, where we would stay for two weeks teaching photo courses for a cultural project to benefit children with AIDS. I want to be here, I told my eyes in the mirror. I can do this. The treble of female Arabic was ringing in my ears when I walked out, a little disoriented, to find Chad.

I know now that what was creeping over me in Dubai was complete exhaustion. About ten hours into our thirteen-hour layover here, I began to feel funny. Within an hour I was fighting to stay conscious by rubbing the cold Sprite Chad had bought me on my face. This was day three of the traveling. No sleep longer than an hour. No food not forced down during a bumpy plane ride. No sense of welcome in this United Arab Emirates. Only me, suddenly the most insignificant person in the world, plucked from a Kentucky cabbage patch and dropped into a place so foreign, the only thing I could do was duck my head and walk behind my boyfriend. And that is what I did from then on. I wish now that I'd been alone so that there was no one to cower behind. I wish now that I had had some self-respect. But there was only fear. Cold, white, American fear. How little it turns out I'd deflected; how much I'd absorbed.

There, I was a pale woman uncovered, vulnerable. I wanted one of their burkhas to crawl under, to protect me. I wanted to be five again, body and head under my blankets to stay safe from the shadows in my room at night. But I couldn't breathe under there. The little bit of air beneath the layers of bedding slowly seemed stripped of oxygen, and, eventually, I'd throw off my blankets and breathe deep the cool, night air of my blue room in our underground house. Back then, I had consciously chosen to expose myself to my demons so that I could survive. By choosing them, I wasn't afraid to face them.

But in Dubai, I began to suspect that I'd been a much stronger woman when I was five.

By the time we arrived in Cairo, I was a mess. Thankfully, the air pouring into the van kept me awake as we barreled through heavy traffic and clouds of exhaust toward the Windsor Hotel. We passed a building with a huge painting on it of the President of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, which the driver pointed to out to us proudly. The man in the painting seemed too young to me, much younger than I had imagined Mubarak to be. The driver was grinning at me in his rear view mirror and waiting for my response. "He looks like . . . a very good leader," I said lamely. But the driver seemed pleased and redirected his atten-

tion to the vehicles careening around us. It didn't appear that they used the lanes, drawn in like any other road, as our van squeezed in and out of slowing clusters of traffic by straddling the dotted line.

At the hotel a cool breeze revived us momentarily as we climbed down from the van. We checked in to our room and fell asleep for days, or at least for what I had hoped would be days. But even after several nights of rest, I could not shake the dizzy hotness that had crept over me in Dubai, where I had changed my bandages in a stall in the airport bathroom, swaying as I was careful to cover and tape my open wounds.

"How are you feeling?" Chad sat down on the bed next to me where I'd been reading *Lying*, by Lauren Slater, for the last couple of days while he explored the hotel and then the city, restless to get out. I had been underlining passages like: *You feel terrible but that doesn't mean you are terrible. You feel empty, but that doesn't mean you are empty.*

"I feel best when I lay really still," I said, tucking a plane ticket stub into the book to mark my place. At first I'd tried reading the Lonely Planet travel books we'd brought along, but they only made me feel worse. "I'm really hungry, but the thought of food makes me want to throw up."

We had this conversation a few times and each time I felt more light-headed, hungrier, and more nauseous. I was beginning to get scared I would have to go to a hospital if I did not eat. I was only getting a bite or two down at every meal before I had to stop. Because I would have died if I'd thrown up. Right? There's no way I could have made it past that. I wouldn't be surprised if I'd felt a thousand times better to just let myself go. Puke. Shit everywhere. What's the big deal, I wonder now. All that money and all that planning. But it was different there. With every five a.m. call to prayer and every blast of smelly heat in the hallways, I was very much in a foreign land, and being sick in a foreign land is a big deal. Especially when I didn't know what was wrong.

Soon it was clear a half of a week had passed, and I'd been putting off the pyramids. I was still sickened by the heat and the smells outside of Room 11. I had the air conditioner running non-stop; so the room was an oasis, but when I stepped out into the hallway, into a dark corridor, I was pummeled by a thick gush of sticky warmth and meat smells coming from the hotel restaurant a few floors below us. The corridor was dark to conserve electricity, so I felt badly about the air conditioner running all the time. At every opportunity of our venturing out, Aryan would send someone up to shut it off.

But I hadn't gone out any farther than the few streets surrounding our hotel – the day we went to the pyramids. I had been downstairs with Chad to talk to Samir, the hotel's official tour guide, a few days after we arrived.

"I will take you by van to the City of the Dead." He pointed on a map that I only glanced at. A familiar burning sensation was creeping up my neck. I looked around the tiny lobby of the old British colonial hotel, built before the city (and much of the hotel) was torched by its citizens to liberate themselves. I was looking for something to soothe me – something comforting. On the wall, beside the front desk where we stood, hung a clunky, old-fashioned switchboard. Nailed to the wall behind the desk were the keys for the hotel rooms, each hanging from a heavy bronze pendant, shaped like a diamond.

The Windsor Room 11 was etched onto our key's diamond, which I fingered the corners of, secretly, in my pants pocket.

"You do not want to buy papyrus on the streets," Samir was saying, "It will be very inexpensive, but it will not be good." I looked toward the open front door, only twelve feet or so away from the desk. A nice breeze was coming through to my damp cheeks, and I tried to focus on how good it felt. A few feet inside the door was an armed guard. He had on a very nice, clean suit, the white of which gleamed next to the black strap of his semi-automatic rifle. He held his weapon with one hand, casually. To touch him, I would have had to walk through the metal detector that stood between us. I did not.

Samir was talking to me.

"I'm sorry. What?" I asked.

"How do you wish to go?" He waited and then smiled.

"How do you wish to go to the pyramids?" He asked me.

"Won't we be taking the van?"

He laughed. "No, at the pyramids, I mean. You will have to get out of the van—"

My neck flooded with red. My cheeks burned and ears tingled. I put my hand against the desk, in case I couldn't feel the floor under my feet – you know, in case that was next.

"You may take a camel," here he turned to Chad and made a disgusted face, "but they are dirty animals. Or a horse."

"I don't like camels," Chad offered. He had the same look on his face as Samir – sort of disgusted, but excited to be planning the trip.

"I don't know," I said. My hand was slipping around on the desk with sweat. I did not want to go. I was in Cairo, and I did not want to go to the pyramids. I hoped, I think, that this feeling would go away—that this was temporary—and that it was only thanks to the just closed incisions on my breast and the three days without sleep to get there that I wanted so badly to go back up to the room right then and sit on the bed. To dry my hands and breathe very deeply without smelling anything. I hoped very much that I would feel the floor, hard under my feet again, not a trampoline, punching up and down against me. They were looking at me, patiently. "Um. . . do I have to decide now?"

Samir looked at Chad and smiled, knowingly. "Whatever the queen wants, the queen gets." I was insulted, momentarily, which was a nice distraction from the trampoline. But then he continued. "My wife is my queen, and I do anything to make her smile. My daughter is my princess." He looked at me and said, "No, queen, you do not have to decide now, only please to tell Aryan as soon as you know. I would take the horse, if I were you. They are very fast." I felt better, not having to choose.

I did not decide about how I would get to the pyramids before we left the next morning in Samir's van with Barry, the Australian, and two Japanese men who fell asleep and began snoring as soon as they sat down. Perhaps that was my mistake. Perhaps, if I had imagined myself on the horse (not the dirty camel, of course) I would have made it. I had decided to go on Friday, which seemed disrespectful somehow, as it is the Islamic holy day, or "your Sunday," Samir

had said. But it was a convenient day for Samir (a Christian descended from ancient Egyptians, he'd told us) and the rest of us, non-worshippers in general, to venture out onto the roads for a tour because much of the city shuts down to allow for prayer. In other words, the traffic isn't as bad.

When I stepped out of the hotel for the first time in days, I ran into Samir.

"Queen! You are feeling better?" They all knew I felt like shit.

Everybody I came in contact with that day seemed to have been informed.

"I'm okay," I said.

"Are you sure you are ready, queen?"

Of course I wasn't, but this is how you get past your fears. Right? You run headfirst into them.

"I hope," he said quietly, "That I did not talk you into going on the wrong day." He stood so close to me; and, in America, this would have made me very uncomfortable. But there, I was so relieved to not be ignored, to have a foreign man in front of me who would look me in the eyes as we spoke. "You do not have to go today," he said, "I will take you tomorrow. Or any day."

I didn't say "okay, good idea." I said, "No, I'm ready." And we went.

About sixteen million people live in Cairo, a city currently incapable of housing properly more than two-thirds that number. Consequently, over five million people do not have what American's might consider proper housing. But the inhabitants of this overcrowded metropolis are very resourceful. When Samir put his finger down on the part of the cartoonish tourist map labeled City of the Dead, I had imagined a ghost town, of sorts. But Cairo does not have empty spaces. And so the City of the Dead, originally a maze of tombs, an above ground cemetery with each tomb walled off from the next, has made room for the living, alongside the dead. The road leading into the City was elevated enough to see a dusty maze filled by these bizarrely deserted streets and tiny apartments. The buildings seemed to lean inward toward us on both sides. Only the skinny dogs came out to see about us as our little van labored through the bumpy dirt lane. Over a million Cairenes live among the dead there, though I only saw the man who led us through the mosque. And he would not look at me.

We stepped inside the mosque, into the cool air that I was hoping would be trapped between the large stone walls of the interior. But, after taking a few turns, we walked back outside into a sunny courtyard where ahead and to the right was an area of prayer with many large Persian rugs covering the floor.

Samir told us that the men kneeled on the rugs to pray and any women who attended would kneel behind them, on the concrete where we stood. He pointed behind us to the minaret we would soon climb, and described its architectural qualities compared to that of a Turkish minaret. "You should remember," he said, "that the main difference between a Turkish minaret and an Arabic minaret is the pencil. I will show you the pencil on our way to Giza. But for now, you know that this minaret is not so much like a pencil.

Now come with me, but do not step on the carpet." He led us back into the cool shadow of the building to the right, where light came in from one tiny arched window near the vaulted ceiling. It shown down in a straight line to the floor, and I tried to take its picture. But Chad moved into the light to make a picture from inside the beam itself. I felt very heavy, in this circular room, which Samir was explaining was a tomb, and was very sacred, as I watched Chad position himself so that the light obscured his outline into a very quiet explosion of white and shadow. I lay my camera against my chest, and let the strap pull taught on the back of my neck. I would not take any more photographs that day. Samir grew impatient in the courtyard, and we hurriedly tip-toed along the edge of the inscribed floor to rejoin him in the sun.

The hot sun felt like a blanket on my head. My white cotton hat was only a layer of cellophane between my scalp and the fiery heat. As Samir led us to the minaret we would climb, he pulled out his wallet, and showed Chad and me a school picture of his princess, his four-year-old daughter. She looked sweet, her hair and face like that of any other four-year-old, caught between second and third period, or lunch and recess; her white blouse buttoned with those little, fake pearly buttons my mom had used to make my shirts when I was her age, and a burgundy sweater, reminiscent of a school uniform - simple, almost plain. Samir grinned while I studied it. I learned from my last boss, a middle-aged nurse at a hospital in Bowling Green, Kentucky, to put on a very emphatic show when I was shown a photograph of someone's child. "Oh, she is so pretty, Samir! Look at her! Adorable! What is her name?" It seems false, I know, but in all actuality, as I had witnessed of Trish, it is a very important social ritual. (And, apparently, is a global one.) Samir was delighted by my delight. We were both, for a moment, delighted. And then I had to climb the minaret.

All of the men stepped aside to let me go first, but I insisted I be last. This minaret may not have been Turkish, but it was very near a pencil, nonetheless. I was afraid I would fall backward, and I knew I'd be going very slowly. So we climbed, and I pulled up the rear. I had experienced stairs like these only once before in the American Cathedral in Paris. I'd made friends with the Canadian girl living in the top apartment of the spire. The stairs of both places are made of large heavy stone, which I grasped all the way to the winding top. This one was about four stories of moving in a constant circle, each step as high as my knee. The sun on my head again, as we climbed out of the stairwell and onto the roof of the building, was an angry fist. I sat down and put my head in my hands. My camera was a brick around my neck.

Finally, I stood, wary of the need to sit down immediately, and looked out at what Samir claimed was the best view of the City of the Dead. I saw below me an endless expanse of the same streets we had driven in on. But now I was high enough to see the tombs. In every tiny walled off lot, no bigger than my living room at home, was a very large monument or tomb marking the resting place of the dead. In some cases, the tombs could not be seen, and, I was told, they were inside the small dwellings, often in the center of the living room - the size of a casket. I sat down again.

The minaret itself was used for the call to prayer, Samir told us. Back before public announcement systems, muezzins would climb the thou-

sands of minarets in the city and call the people to prayer, five times a day. They still do, but now fewer people are needed for the various regions of the city, thanks to the aid of bullhorns and speaker systems. We heard them, everyday, from our hotel room, the streets of the bizarre, the bank: it was a beautiful chorus of fluctuating male voices, calling the children of Allah to worship. Allah was the only word I could pick out, though understanding was somehow unimportant because the voices hummed just perfectly against the back of my throat. I would wake to it every morning and feel very small, and very strange.

Samir was smoking a cigarette in the shade of the minaret's stairwell, leaning one elbow against the top step and exhaling into the light. I watched him for a few minutes this way, my head still propped in my hands, and he looked like he probably looked when he was not touring Americans around Cairo. His near-constant smile had faded into a worn grimace. His body, propped against the large stones of the stairwell, looked tired.

To my left the two Japanese men were laughing and taking each other's photos with small digital cameras and a camcorder. They repositioned themselves several times and posed, smiling, with something carefully selected behind them. When they had exhausted their photo opportunities, they were ready to leave. I thought how terrible it would be of me to write of them, awake only at the major monuments on our day trip because they'd just gotten off their plane from Japan, taking pictures and being an otherwise unimpressive presence because none of us could communicate with them properly. They nodded at Samir's tour lecture but appeared to do so out of courtesy, not understanding.

Back in the van, Samir told us we would stop next at the papyrus shop. It was certified, he told us. But, when we arrived, the dozens of shops selling papyrus and other souvenirs surrounding the entrances to the pyramids appeared equally as certifiable. I suspected Samir got a nice commission off of the hundreds of dollars our group spent at the shop. The two Japanese men did the most damage, and we were forced to wait an hour for their money to come through. Chad and I told Samir as the group had unloaded in front of the shop that I could not go on to the pyramids, which was a funny thing to say since we could see them looming right next to us.

As I stood there in the sun next to the van, outside of the shop, my legs quivered and I couldn't explain precisely why. Samir said he was sorry. "It was the wrong day," he said to me. "I will take you back to the hotel? Or, you could use the van to drive around the pyramids. But you could not tell the others." I wanted desperately to go back the cold room at the Windsor, but I saw a little hope in Chad's expression that he might be able to touch the pyramids with me, and it appeared Samir was offering us a special deal, and so I decided to try the van, and we joined the others inside.

Fortunately, the shop smelled incredible—minty, like eucalyptus—thanks to the demonstration table where papyrus stalks soaked in shallow trays of water, waiting to be woven for curious customers. And there was a bathroom, thank god, since I had had at least two liters of water already that day. Part of me wonders if it wasn't the water that caused all of the problems.

In my parents' living room, a week before, my sister and Chad had told me horrible stories of dehydration and sickness. I came firmly to believe that one could shrivel up at a moment's notice as the dry desert air was forever pulling moisture out of my plump, pink skin. In all reality, I realize now, the week in Cairo was hardly different than the weeks spent on tacky beach vacations with my parents as a child, in terms of sensible water consumption. But at the time, I may as well have been on Mars, and I believed what I had been told about dehydration. There is no doubt in my mind that that day in the papyrus shop I was experiencing the results of not-so-sensible water consumption.

So it's a fortunate thing about the bathroom, which I made good and frequent use of while we were there. And after having had to purchase squares of toilet paper off the lady hanging out by the women's bathroom at the Cairo airport, I had learned quickly to carry toilet paper with me at all times. Good thing for that too, as toilet paper was hidden here, and every other place I went in Cairo, from Westerners. At the hotel, Aryan explained to us this was because their plumbing systems were not accustomed to the large quantities of toilet paper we Americans like to use. We were frequently reminded to throw used toilet paper away in the garbage cans near the commode.

Two older men sat outside the bathroom smoking, but did not pay any attention to me as I came and went. I assumed they did not like me very much. The bathroom was clean enough, but the only soap to wash my hands with was a thin sliver of soiled bar soap. I passed it up and used my waterless hand sanitizer instead.

When we'd purchased all the papyrus we could that day, we piled back into the van to drive to the gates of the pyramid where the Sphinx looked down at us with half a face. Samir was very strict for a moment and said two hours was all we had. All we had? My god, how was I going to make it two hours? After Barry and the Japanese men got out of the car, Mohammed, the driver, drove us to the pyramids. He had a scuffle with some armed men over the entrance fee, and then we were soon parked fifty yards away from the pyramids of Giza.

I didn't get out of the van for two reasons: 1. I was so hot I could not even sit up straight as the van heated up and my bandana dried again and again. 2. I was afraid if I stood up I'd pass out and I would be taken somewhere where someone would stick needles in me. Okay, three reasons: 3. I knew that if I stood up I would piss myself. The peeing I had done at the papyrus shop was nothing compared to what I needed to do right then.

Mohammed waited for us to get out, but we could not communicate with him that I was a complete jackass. So eventually he got the hint and began driving us around the three pyramids. And that is how I saw them. That is as close as I came. Chad, practically squirming, never complained, only took picture after picture through the windows of the van.

When we finally got to the last pyramid, Mohammed again waited for us to get out. Take a picture. Dance around. Anything. I imagine he thought I was a terrible person. He made me feel, with his cutting looks and shaking head, like a terrible person. But by then, there is no way I could have

gotten out of the van without a toilet at least two feet away. I had scanned the desert as we wobbled through the windy road – anything would do. I didn't want to be picky. But every hundred yards or so was an armed soldier on a horse looking very much like he would not be pleased with me pissing at the foot of his great pyramids. So we asked Mohammed to take us to Samir. He knew that word, and he shook his head and drove toward the KFC at the paws of the sphinx. Right past that was a set of buildings and dusty allies where Samir was found eating his lunch – a KFC value meal. As soon as he got in the van, I asked for a bathroom.

"How much would this chicken cost you in America?" He asked us, offering his fries to me.

"A meal?" I asked. I used all of my adult bladder control to maintain my composure. "Um, a two piece meal would probably cost about five or six dollars." I really didn't know. I hate Kentucky Fried Chicken.

"How much does it cost here?" Chad asked.

"About twenty-eight Egyptian pounds," he said, putting a gob of fries in his mouth. When we pulled up at the papyrus shop again, Samir and I jumped out and I made a dash for the bathroom. We decided to hang out there until Barry and the two Japanese men were finished touring the pyramids.

I had forgotten until then about Friday, the holy day of prayer. When we arrived at the shop, the owner and all of the pushy salesmen were leaving to pray. The place was quiet and dark. It gradually grew warmer as the hours wore on. I sipped a warm Sprite a young boy had brought me, and Chad had tea with Samir. Soon, the owner of the shop arrived and sat down with us. Samir explained to him in Arabic about me and the bathroom; and, when the owner then attempted to sell us papyrus, Samir cut him off, again in Arabic, and seemed to be telling him we'd already purchased a fair amount.

The owner turned to me and smiled. He looked at me for a moment and then turned to Chad. "I will buy her from you," he said. "I will give you ten thousand camels." Chad smiled and I laughed.

"Oh, I think I might keep her," Chad said.

"I will give you fifteen thousand camels," the owner said with a grin and nodded to me. "I am very rich. I will take you to the doctor and then I will take you home," he offered. I didn't know what was meant to happen at the doctor and didn't want to.

"Fifteen thousand?" Chad asked. I laughed and looked at them both warily.

"It is true," Samir offered, "he is very rich. This building alone cost six million of your dollars."

"Twenty thousand of my camels. Yes?"

"Sorry," I said, becoming slightly uncomfortable with the conversation, "I'm not for sale."

The owner looked at Chad, smiling broadly, "Everything has a price for it. I will give you all of my camels. I have forty thousand camels!"

"No," Chad said, "I would not sell her."

"Okay! Okay! I did not mean to offend."

I breathed deeply as we rose to go to the van and pick up the other members of

our group. I was so grateful to be going back to our room, finally, that I felt a little bit sturdier, a little less hot. I stopped Samir before we left the shop. "Thank you for letting me rest here."

"You are welcome, queen. Would you like to repay me?" I looked at him questioningly.

"You can repay me by playing your lottery. You can play any numbers you like, but always pick nine for my son. My oldest son, Adam, is nine years old and the day of his birth is the ninth day. If you win, you keep, say, eighty percent, and give me only twenty. Yes?" Of course, I promised I would play the lottery for a month and bring him twenty percent if I won. It seemed like a good deal for me, considering I didn't usually play the lottery; so, if I won, it would be thanks to Adam.

On the way back to the hotel, Barry, the Australian world traveler who had chatted us up the night before in the hotel bar, talked incessantly. He asked questions constantly of Samir, who was often confused by what was being asked of him because Barry made everything more complicated than it had to be.

"So, Samir," Barry began another lengthy interrogation, "How would you say women in Cairo are treated?" Treated by whom, Barry? I wanted to ask. Which women? Me? Or that woman over there, the one wearing a headscarf, carrying a load of melons on her head, all of them perfectly balanced on a thin board that does not seem to bow? I wanted to ask his intentions. Do you want this information to hold against them? Why do you want to know? So you can record it in your laptop tonight? Alone in your room again, with two beers?

But I didn't ask Barry anything because he had already asked me how in the world I was going to defend a creative thesis. How in the world would it be evaluated? How on earth could one pass a master's program focusing on creative writing? When he had asked this, I clammed up. I didn't say that I was one of few in my program who were even attempting a thesis because I could already imagine how appalled Barry would be by that, too. Instead, I listened to him badger Samir and watched out the window as the camels' heads bobbed up and down, up and down, while they walked next to our van, led by men in long robes or in slacks and a button-down shirt.

Once we began to move more quickly, Chad leaned over and whispered, "Do you know what that is?" He motioned to the thin channel of water running next to the road. "It's the Nile," he whispered. "Can you believe that?" I couldn't. It was so small. Apparently, it narrows drastically in places to pass through the city. I watched the brown water as we sped by. I saw an overturned tree. I saw children splashing. And about a couple hundred yards past the children, I saw a dead horse, on its side, in the water.

As we unloaded in front of the Windsor, I shook Samir's hand with a twenty-dollar bill in my palm and thanked him again. Chad had said it was way too much, but I disagreed. We headed up to the room where I laid down before dinner and a beer at the hotel bar.

"I'm sorry," I said to Chad. "I'm sorry I'm ruining everything."

That's what I was most afraid of." He sat down next to me on the thin mattress. I was crying again.

"You're not ruining anything," he said. He put his hand on my leg.

"I am too. I'm ruining your trip."

"It's not my trip. It's our trip."

In the bar after dinner, Chad and I sat squeezing all of the shells off of the yellow beans. I had forgotten what the waiter called them when we'd asked how to say it in Arabic. I never even remembered because I couldn't distinguish the individual syllables when he pronounced it. Or see the word out to the side of the bowl of beans as he set them on our table. I remembered his name — Wael — because he sketched it on our tablecloth, dragging a thick track through the breadcrumbs.

We salted the yellow beans and bit at the rounded opening of the skin until it was torn properly, and then we pushed it through the little canal and into our mouths. Occasionally, one landed nearby on the floor. And we laughed.

But I was sick.

This was all a farce because we both knew at that point that I could not go on, that in less than a week we'd be getting on two separate planes and flying away from each other. Even worse, my carefully laid plans — the planes and cars and hotels, the mountain (we had a mountain to climb still), the sea turtles, the warm clothes for a trip into Tibet, and even the reflective silver sticker in our passports that would let us in — the plans were all gone. But that all had been a farce, too. It would have been rain and mud up to my eyeballs in Nepal. It was the fucking monsoon season for Christ's sake. It would have been dust in Uganda, but I'd blocked it out. Before we left, I bought a rain jacket that cost two hundred dollars. I bought a little fan at Wal-Mart that had a tiny bottle of water attached so it could mist cold air into my face, which had not worked at all in the van at the pyramids.

And that hotel bar. We had spent all of our free time there because I couldn't go out. I couldn't. Even though it was all right there through the windows — the man in the green plastic yard chair with his cup of tea and his hookah. But I was in this bar, this beautiful, colonial hotel bar in the middle of downtown Cairo, away from all of the other Americans, just like we'd wanted. There I was, squeezing those beans through their skin and eating them, not even caring anymore if they might make me sick, and letting the warm light coming through the twelve-foot arch windows drop softly on Chad as he stood between layers of gauzy curtains and looked out at Egypt.

I was sick so deep inside it couldn't be extracted.

It couldn't be pulled out in one big chunk like a bad place on a banana or in pieces like the three tumors, in needle-size strings, had been a week before we'd left for Cairo. And it had turned out, I wasn't sick like that. This couldn't be got at like that. I was sick with something undelivered. Something festering. Something rotten, for sure, but something completely mine and made within me. I wondered if I didn't even love it.

I've come to realize that digging down toward the root of my fear only makes it spread. Like when some women's cancerous tumors are re-

moved and the tiny little vicious tumors that no one had spotted explode in a fury of growth that kills the women in just months. Left alone, at least it grows more slowly. It was just too deep to reach.

This would all be enough to send me home. Back in the Dubai airport, we would get on two planes and mine would fly me to our little apartment where everything reminded me that I was in the wrong place. Or at least that I was in my place and he was in his. It was almost enough to make we want to give him up altogether, for both of our sakes.

Almost enough. Instead, in Room 11, I would make love to him. For days. Once I knew I was going home, I would try to save up. But not in a sweet way. I was afraid all the way through that I would never see him again, whether by chance or by design. So I would study him, in secret, to remember forever, in case I had to. I would touch him and feel the blonde hair on his skin and the tight muscle of his thigh beneath. I would smell him. I would taste him. I would remember. I wouldn't let him rest until we left for Dubai.

Those beans tasted like salt and vinegar. Wael, with a nod, flipped the TV channel to BBC World and walked out of the bar. We sat nursing our sweaty beers and began to play another hand of rummy with our ancient Egyptian rulers card set that Chad had found at a bizarre.

The man in the corner had his chin tucked against his chest, his cigarette burning between thick fingers, his end-of-day beer dripping on the table in front of him. He wore a long, white thobe that touched the ground when he walked. He seemed to be snoring.

Snippets of A Thursday

Tara Koger

A pale, paved sidewalk
taking foot after foot
in silence—is that how

pacifists wind up? Flat
and dependent on the
drama of rainy days

when hundreds of bleeding,
colorless earthworms
beach themselves,

succumbing to the rain.
Along the cinder block
windowsill of my room

sit three small plants,
pressed against the glass
pane, like mermaids

amidst the sand, watching
from their suspension in
a high rise window,

envious of drowning
earthworms be low
who are so privileged

as to writhe in the rain.
White women on my
television, painted

and tousled and pumped,
are beautiful sitcom-wives
of older, awful, obese

sitcom-men, the kind
girls pray become obsolete
because we're all afraid

that we, too, will prance
with all our pomp
only to rival someone's lust

for the remote control.
And despite the criminal,
the hungry, the wars, I
find the newspaper is

focused on poor attendance
at basketball games. We should
get out, get spirit,

spiff up to support our sports,
and bound for the stadium
tromp up the sidewalk.

Creek Music

Priscilla Osborne

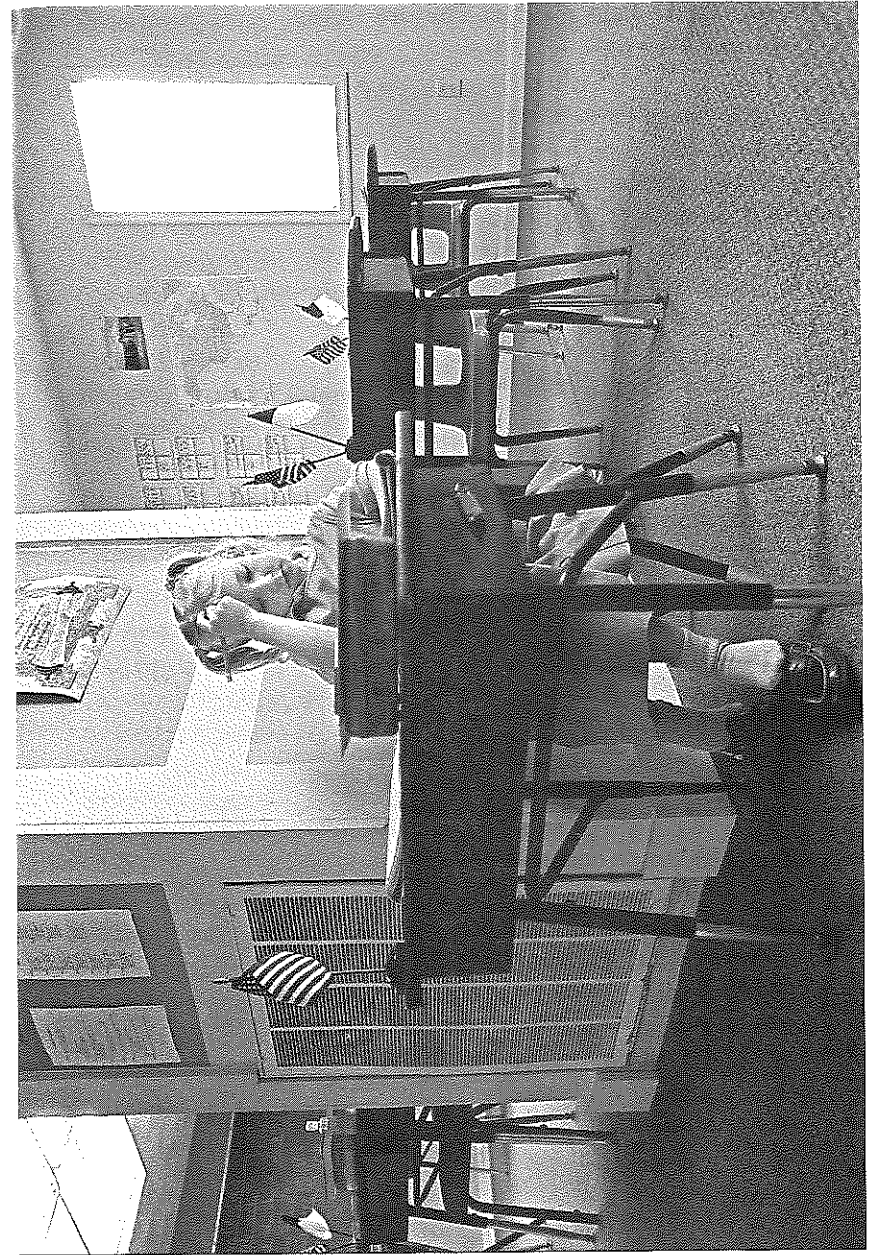
I listened to fiddle music
and let it carry me
back to the day I fell
in the creek.

Around eight years old,
strawberry hair bound up
in pigtails
that fell with me hard
onto the cool smooth stones.
I fought to cinch up
the straps on my overalls as
water filled my tennis shoes
making them squish.

A stubborn little wisp
of a kid that held her breath,
her tongue, her hands tight together
when she was mad.

And danced wildly
to the fiddle tunes
and bluegrass music
at the family reunion of people
she didn't know.

The music ran like creek water
in my veins that night and
I smelled the crisp scent of the crushed grass
I had clutched as I climbed out
and remembered that I had to
wear one of Grandpa's
white t-shirts home and
cried the whole way because I had
gotten so dirty.



Layne Greene

untitled

In the West, I Quote the West:
"People Scare Better When They're Dying"
Chuck Williamson

in playgrounds, i straddled
swingsets and
gave them names - silver, lightning, starlight -
three deep-nostriled horses,
whinnying loud enough to send a
girl's pink sneakers
spiraling in the dust.

with pride, i brandished
the tan-green
ten-gallon
cowboy
hat, a bandana coiled
around my slender throat,
my sweatstained backside
brushing against
a chain link fence,
pearls peeling off the
flannel like
fists or elbows bleeding
from a flurry of buckshots.

so when the baked beans
settled stagnant in my
sourdough stomach, i belched
out a "howdy," a "pilgrim,"
and from there it turned into
"howdy, pilgrim."
i told myself, let go,
make it
"howdy pilgrim."
anything less, that'd
be yellow.

from there, i wiped

cookie crumbs off my
wranglers, pants painted
on in short, skinny streaks,
and yet they could still fall clumsy
and loose round my
barbwire ankles as i
shot piss out my sixshooter,
hitting monkey-bars,
merry-go-rounds,
see-saws, all pantomiming
black hats,
cigar chompers,
teeming packs of injuns
all frothing at the mouth.

and still, i turned, and the rich rustle of
tumbleweed marked the arrival
of the girl, the girl in
pink sneakers, who once
cut loose my stabled steeds,
who once built railroads on
monument valley, who once
sucked the poison from
snakebites and spat
those vile juices
back at me.

i snarled, you ain't
no lady, ma'am, and
i'll hit you like you ain't one too.
but it kept going on,
and one day, when
neosporin soothed
skinned knees &
mother greased my hair in canola
oil so thick it sent wads
of bubblegum clustering
down split ends, she said,
be a man,

settle the score,
when she hits,
you hit back.

the next day, somewhere
between the finger painting
and the alphabet, i
threw down a dead man's
hand and put on my
black hat.
my belt buckle, wreathed
like tinsel round my
puny fist, sent
shockwaves into
her clattering jaw before
she could
give men any of that
yellow easterner talk. i walloped
her hard, first one uppercut,
then another,
grazing her left eye,
then a refrain that made
her nostrils spit out
silky red ribbons, a refrain,
another, then a
calculated kick in the skine
and, i swear to god, i was
ruthless, if given
my five o'clock shadow,
a pair of aquamarine eyes,
a duster long enough to
swallow the both of us,
i'd look just like henry
fonda, fonda in ecstasy,
splatter-painting
barnyards with
thick wads of children's
blood, just like that
one scene in

*once upon a
time in the west.*

my job was done.
i turned around,
straddled the swingset,
and gave my poison goodbyes
to this no-good,
two-bit, chicken shit,
pissant town. i rode off into
the sunset and came back
with ankles too swollen
for an old pair of boots.

Mocha Girl

Priscilla Osborne

Nimble fingers grasp
A worn green notebook
And fingers tap piano music
On a vacant table in the corner
And wait in expectation
For a familiar presence
To emerge out of the shadows
That scramble up and down
The stain splattered walls.
Another cup of water to fight
Off the caffeine induced jitters.
The citrus lemon juice wakens
The taste buds that have been
Asleep for decades, or so it feels.
The lights dim and silence
Creeps in like the tiny feet of
Mice on cheap linoleum floor.
A waitress flips chairs upside
Down and apron strings
Flutter by as the girl
With then notebook vanishes
Into the fog and becomes a
Part of the shadows she
Waited with so long.