Please pass on, reuse, or recycle [your publication]
outbreath

short stories, photography, and poetry

spring 2008

xix
editor’s note

Voice illuminates our words just as text illuminates our voice. We have so enjoyed working on this edition of the magazine and feel honored to have had the privilege of working with so many talented writers and photographers. We release this issue of Outbreath with pride and excitement. Thank you to Victoria and Jenna for giving two freshmen the rare opportunity to edit this wonderful publication. Thank you to Professor Ted Weesner for sharing his award-winning piece with us. And thank you to all of you who contributed your time and creativity to Outbreath. With such a small and intimate staff, we value every helping gesture that our supporters gave us along the way.

Enjoy!

Scott Newton and Krista Morris
Co-Editors

coaeditors: krista morris, scott newton
coverphotography: sarah korones
readers: alex blum, janette chien, steve miller, chaeyeong yoo
foundingeditor: cal levis
fundedby: tufts community union
printedby: uni-graphic inc
webpage: ase.tufts.edu/outbreath by alyce currier
e-mail: out_breath@hotmail.com
5. jumbo howl
   daniel tovrov

8. looking away
   chaeyeong yoo

9. joy ride
   alex blum

13. autophage
    adam roy

14. templeton
    tess vander heide

19. humph
    daniel glassman

21. ode to raspberries
    ashley griffin

22. standing it
    julia leverone

23. crime and punishment
    andrew smyth

26. bomb
    adam roy

28. the elephant
    tess vander heide

30. cigarette
    krista morris

32. the others
    professor ted weesner

34. psychosomatic
    scott newton

35. far from home
    david burg

45. untitled
    william orr

46. flight
    farris jabr

52. the estate
    ashley griffin
rape steps

a photo by Sarah Korones
This is a re-write, or better yet, a Tufts interpretation of Allen Ginsberg’s poem Howl

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by keystone, running hysterical, naked dragging themselves through Professors Row at midnight looking for a freshman kiss shaggy haired mountain clubbers yelling indoors and tearing off their clothes between kegs and starlight who poverty and ugg boots and red eyed and red bulled sat up all night writing in the perverted whiteness of cinder-block dorms and florescent lights searing into melted retinas who cheat fares on the T nearly raped on the red and raise money for Muhammad’s starving peoples and orphans on flat panel tvs who will pass through this university with honors and no job or D’s and 80k a year lounging on collapsing roofs staring at eternal orange Medford glow who pretend hallucinate Harvard and ivy-colored glory among the scholars of culture who were expelled over a poker game in a lecture hall, mottoed obedience to disobedience hidden in tattooed ankles with the microwave and tequila obliged under barren tinny turbine extra twins, any height you like who crowded unshowered and unshaven on ellipticals huddled in line for bikes to burn obese insecurity for one week a term who got busted by RAs in private Bush bathrooms, passed out on the floor and blocking the door who ate Wing Works in dorms or Andrea’s in apartments and shit fire, purgatoried their sins with buffalo sauce with Rubi’s, with drugs, with all nighters, with alcohol three ways and drawers of free condoms whole intellects vomited on sticky floors, crying chunky blond hair that won’t be washed till morning who pissed in fridges at ATO, because thanks for the free beer, but why aren’t there ever any cups? who drown away exams in bathtubs of Newcastle and glass who vanished back to Russia leaving a degree and a girl and questions who talked continuously for twenty-four hours in a common room a lost battalion of platonic conversationalists hushed and written-up because of quiet
hours, but who’s sleeping?
jumping off roofs and throwing chairs out windows seeing if we can hilt Tilton or girls
with oranges and pumpkins and that sad girl who pretended like the whole thing
never happened like she was used to splatter by sling-shot yogurt on
a battlefield of bruised fruit
yacketayakking screaming vomiting destructive faces at free coke parties with Andre
and bourbon and jokes about south Carolina jails
suffering mono sweats and gonorrhea and migraines of coffee withdrawal drooling in
Tisch’s hip furnished tower
who wandered around and around at midnight in Davis wondering where to go, and went,
leaving no broken hymens
who lit cigarettes, but only when drunk, in frats frats frats sweating and pulsing bodies
leading to sexiles and lonesome blue balled walks to Miller
who studied Plato and Hobbes and Nietzsche, quote Cantor and Devign without
understanding really but they wrote but didn’t listen and still got an A
who ioned it on Taylor loops which always worked, never worked
who distributed communist pamphlets in BMWs and broke their own windows with
bats and blacked-out on card-board next to an unmade bed
who yelled about Marx in pub after pub in Prague and contemplated life listening to
jazz in Austria with Bosnians and lemon beer and the girl who loves Jesus but
not me
who balled in the morning in the evening on campus center steps and stacks and he lied
or she lied but it doesn’t matter because Edelman tells us there’s no such thing as
truth
who punched and pulled hair and vomited on TUPD and real cops too, shrieking with
madness and Mad Dog in police cars for open container and public urination
committing no crime but their own stupidity
who let themselves be fucked in the ass and liked it
who blew and were blown by anyone in the mud behind Hillel
who copulated ecstatic with ex’s and old hook-ups and bottles of Jenkins and a package
of free cigarettes and lighters and fell off the bed and continued along the floor
fainting from the spins with pictures of their boyfriend on the wall
but he once took your money in poker which makes it so much sweter and last longer
but does it make you a bad person?
who inspired those who needed inspiring, A.G. the not-so-secret hero of this poem
who were hot first semester, faded away into hoodies and sweat pants from infinite
meals and cold weather, hid themselves inside for months pretending 15
was a myth but lost it all over the summer and gained it all again in September
who cooked chicken beef spicy cup ramen and spaghetti spaghetti spaghetti every night

6
and dreamed of the pure meat kingdom
who didn’t call TEMS but woke up still drunk in Lawrence Memorial anyway and ate
the dried gushers off their arm to get rid of the charcoal and vodka
freshman who cut their wrists successfully unsuccessful and took a leave of absence
driven home from Powderhouse by the drunken cab driver of the year swerving like a
toddler behind the wheel on college ave.
who sang dum de dum and percussion for who cares how many a-cappella groups
dancing and rehearsed cheese in front of a mirror, writing mandatory sketches that some
people just eat up
others who giggled on the gallery of Goddard glug glug gluggling flaked whiskey during
SQ! which stands for...
who ate McDonalds in jail cells and paid bail with cash
who spring broke in Mexico to drink or Jamaica to smoke or Montreal to drink and freeze
and gamble and hate French chicks or Greece for weeks to purge the soul on
private beaches and bang in paradise in rental cars and hostel rooms
who in hilariously humorless protest beat pots against Iraqi oil drums, 12 people strong
returning a year later the same but older partying harder than undergrads because the real
world just isn’t as fun
who dreamt of Halo and the girl from creative writing and what to say during workshop
told to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose and stand before you
speechless and intelligent and shaking with shame, rejected yet confessing the
soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head
who plagiarized Ginsberg, the madman bum and angel beat in time
and rose at four, five, six, seven pm to do it all over again
with absolute heart and no consideration, butchering their bodies with knowledge, to
write history for 1000 years.
looking away
Chaeyeong Yoo

Unnamed sand flowers
bloomed one petal after another,
for there was no hurry to see the sun.

That’s how Sim Chung sank,
Each layer of her skirt
billowing in the salt water—
evermore delaying her sacrifice.

Nobody saw the end of her.
She jumped off that boat blinded.
The wet skirt clung to her face,
which nobody wanted to see anyway.

Umbrella ella ella elli
a photo by Michael Goetzman
After an average workout on an average Saturday, Eric drove home from the gym in his black truck. If you want, however you imagine good looking, he looks like that, but you’d walk by and never think of him again. His eyes sagged a bit; he felt the resultant effects of last night’s party, but had to get home and get an essay done, at some point, for Ms. Turlenbaucher’s English class. The symbolism of color in The Invisible Man didn’t seem like a very profound essay topic but he had to abide by the approved topics mandated by his “teacher”. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar and sometimes white milk is just white milk; milk and doves and white linen can’t always represent the struggle of the black man ingesting the desire for white skin and purity as a form of sustenance amidst an insipid scourge of insecurity in desperate heaven, earth purity, - freedom from, the, shackles; of reality. You see? Meaningless confusion.

The radio speakers began to hum “Fur Elise”. Eric rolled his eyes. “Fur Elise” seemed cheaper when KBAQ played it four times a week. It reminded him of a Sprint ad that played “Give Peace a Chance” while mentioning the benefits of unlimited night time minutes. Maybe if we stop making so many damn phone calls we can, Eric thought.

He turned off The 101 freeway and onto route 17, the one lane, undivided road that led 12 miles to his family’s home in the gated De Nada Luxury Living Community on the outskirts of Scottsdale. Occasionally, he saw a coyote or a javelina walking on the asphalt drives. From the guest house roof, watching the Sunny Delight oranges and Hi-C reds of sunset falling behind flat Phoenix and into the mountains, Eric’s day felt simplest. He sped, eight over, since he knew the cops always waited at the same places. As the car proceeded homewards he saw a man in spandex, a red shirt and black shorts, walking his bike in the opposite direction on the other side of the road. The tight shirt wrapped around the man’s stomach and a small paunch protruded. Just the smallest sliver of his pale skin, speckled in soft brown hairs, creeped out between garments.

I’m surprised no one stops. Not even for a boring man riding a bike in the suburbs, thought Eric. In no hurry and a biker himself, he turned around at the next light and a minute later came upon the man and his silver Cannondale. Each part of the ruddy back tire rhythmically flattened while rolling over the dirt-clodded shoulder of the road and then inflated while rolling upwards. It looked like a stomach sucked in and then relaxed as a too pretty girl walked towards and then away. Eric parked behind him, stepped out of the car, and amidst the din of passing traffic, shouted, “Hey, you doing alright?”

The man turned his head and trudged towards Eric, with his head down, in swooping steps. As he approached, his languorous gait, paunch, and pale, aged Irish skin led Eric to put him around 55. A lot of this set lurked throughout Scottsdale. Many came from Minnesota or California having made a decent wad and wanting to escape the rat race to enjoy fine desert living amongst cookie-cutter supermarkets and upscale, outdoor shopping malls; promenades they liked to call them. On a Saturday afternoon this time of year, you find thousands of these folks promenading around, buying trinkets, eating duck confit sandwiches, and basically
idling towards a comfortable, meaningless death.

“Yeah, I’m great,” the man replied. His helmet buckle suspended his neck into two droopy smiles of molasses waffling from his throat to his chin. He undid the strap and a fuschia band, an inch thick, appeared with little shots of black and grey stubble looking like pepper on ketchup. “Got a flat.”

“Well, load her up, you live far away?”
“Not, no, it is fine. I’m only about two miles away now, you don’t need to trouble yourself.”

Eric clenched his jaw a bit. Listen, I god damn stopped for you and you know you want a ride. You’re sweating like a god damn pig and its eighty five degrees. Just get in the damn car and quit playing hard to get. “No really, I got nothing going on. Plus, it’s dangerous walking so close to the road. Now, if you get clobbered I’m an accessory to man-slaughter.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“Nope, no problem, it’s my pleasure,” Eric said with a flash of grinny tooth to seal the deal.

“Well, what’s your name son?”

Eric clenched his jaw again (Son. Really?). “It’s Jean-Paul, Jean-Paul Sartre. What’s yours?”

“I’m Steve.” He extended his formal hand and they shook.

Once they got into the car Eric realized he had made a mistake. He heard the sweaty, sweaty man’s sweat stained spandex squish as he nestled into the seat’s cloth mesh. The acrid scent hit him in the nose. The smell reminded him of his early teens when he and his dad would play basketball. They would set out time every Saturday to spend, being a limited resource it had to be spent and not merely enjoyed, bonding. Eric always felt annoyed by the self-consciousness of the interactions. Let’s get to know each other for the next three hours. You are a young man now and as your father I will instruc you in the ways of the world. This won’t be god damn stilted even though it’s nothing like the simple aimless hours when you were young and you didn’t think of these things. When you used to ask me questions for hours. And me, explaining why the sky was blue as best I knew and feeling the delight of having a son. Eric wanted to just be with his dumb friends even though he felt out of place listening to them talk about masturbation and movies. After the bonding they always hugged and the smell of his father’s sweat repulsed him and invoked inexplicable sadness.

“So, what happened?” Eric said.

“Got a flat heading back from Chaloosa Lake. I didn’t bring my tools with me. I usually bring my tools but today I didn’t. They’re more important than the bike you know.”

“Yeah, I actually ride a bit.”

“If I had a spare tube I could have been home an hour ago. I need to do some things around the house so this is a real inconvenience.”

“Well, you got a ride now so everything’s great. Where you from?”

“Lived here all my life. City has changed a lot over the years.”

“I bet. What do you do?”

“Engineer at Honeywell.”

“How is that? You enjoy it?”

“The engineering industry has changed a lot since I first started. The company has expanded and does a lot less military research these days. That was my interest when I was just a little bit older than you. How old
“So you don’t like it?” Steve apparently didn’t hear. Eric tried looking at him, but Steve stared out the front window.

“I’m 18.”

God this is boring.

The two drove in silence for three minutes. Eric wanted to slap the guy. His smell covertly diffused, like a CIA operative sneaking into a Russian office building, into the car and infected Eric like a planted computer virus.

Eric stopped at a light and saw two cute girls about his age in a yellow Volvo waiting in the lane over. They didn’t notice him. Each girl held a microphone hand to her mouth and looked at the other while singing to the radio. From their mannerisms he would guess show tunes. What a stupid moment. Everyone has done that. They continued to sing and then hugged, giddy, over the center console. Tears of laughter eased down their faces and they held hands and sang on. The yellow world seemed distant as Eric stared at the silent world of movement. He failed to notice that the passenger had now seen him watching. His spell broke when she waved her hand. His eyes shot wide open and his head shot back. They giggled for a second and then went on singing. Fuck it.

The light turned and he moved on.

“Do you ever wish you weren’t an engineer?”

“No not really.”

“Well, to me engineering seems like a really boring job. You know you go in and go out and it doesn’t make a god damn difference.”

At this, Steve straightened and stared at the window as if a nuclear bomb had gone off in front of them.

“The only reason I ask is because I’m going to college soon and I don’t even know why. I just was thinking you might have a different perspective. My folks. They don’t even think not going to college is a relevant line of thought. And I don’t have a girlfriend so I have no excuse to stay.”

“Engineering was an interesting major.”

“I don’t think you understand the point. Why are we doing anything? I do things, things all day long and for nothing. I certainly don’t feel accomplished. I bet you my resume would blow your mind, isn’t that great? I feel stuck. Don’t you ever feel far away from the world? Where is all the love from the movies? I mean clearly god doesn’t exist. It seems like we just sit around and make a narrative of random events we can’t control.”

“I don’t read much. I don’t mind walking from here.”

“You see you see! That’s what I mean. Why do you have to leave the car? ‘Cause I am being honest? What’s going to happen if we talk about real things? I have this suspicion that we might feel happier. We’re stuck in this car and we might as well make the best of it. I'd rather know about your thoughts than your bike tools. I’m sorry if that’s odd. Why do you like biking?”

“Well,” Steve cleared his throat. “I just go on the weekends.”

“Why do you go at all?”

“Make a right up there and then your first left, first house on the left.”
“Ok. Why?”
“I’ve gone for the last twenty years.”
“Fuck man, why? Why did you ever go in the first place?”
“I got a bike as a gift,” Steve scratched his nose.
Eric now stared at Steve, only glancing occasionally at the road. Steve glanced over for a second and the two made brief eye contact. The old man tensed his face while his eyes ran away to the window.
“I had just gotten married.”
“Oh?”
“Well my wife would get upset. I would go ride my bike to get out of the house on the weekends.”
“Ok, ok. Do you like your wife?”
“That’s none of your business.”
The words hung in a fragile silence begging a thousand questions.
“See we’re always running away. That’s what I think. Today my dad screamed at me for a straight twenty minutes. I stared at him, didn’t feel anything. I don’t know why he was even mad. I went to the gym. But, I thought what if I had just asked him why he was angry. What happens? Why can’t I ask that? I think it all comes down to a fear of death. We all realize we’re dying. So we want to stop it, we have to control it. So we all learn these different ways of dealing with things we can’t control. We make pretty framed pictures and compositionally perfect nature photos and use square desks and perfect circle glass coffee tables. Cause if we don’t have order nothing makes sense and it has to. It fucking has to. It has to make sense. We want to control our lives because we think we won’t die if we have order. It’s why we like patterns. But, we could crash and die right now and that’s never happened to us before.”
Steve stared ahead as they pulled onto his street. His wife watered the grass out front.
“I talk to people all day and have friends but I just always feel this gap. Anything can be meaningless. Don’t you feel like something is missing Steve?”
“I don’t know.”
Steve shifted his weight to his left and raised his right thigh. He reached down and rumbled in his pocket. “Well, thanks for the ride. Here is ten bucks for your trouble.”
“No, I don’t want your money. No, no, no. Exactly, fuck, you don’t understand.”
Eric parked in front of his house and Steve raced out. The thick silence in the air felt like an impenetrably quiet veil. A sweat, silhouette stain covered the symmetrical seat. Eric heard the bike scrape against the metal of his truck bed as Steve took it out. He pulled away and watched in the rearview mirror as Steve walked to his wife and hugged her.
The mirror slams into the ground and shatters
in a jeweled spray, glass shards that shower
the floor and walls. Crouched down, I crunch glass handfuls
between my teeth, unseen and undefined.
The last faceted reflection disappears.
I lick my lips.

broken glass
a photo by Alex Blum
“The end.”
We look around the room with covert, anticipatory smiles. Mrs. Naretto puffs out her cheeks and blows like she’s trying to sniff all the birthday candles in one breath. She sets down her copy of the finally finished Mr. Popper’s Penguins and heads for the minifridge behind her desk. Pushing aside cans of Slim Fast she reaches and we all crane our necks to get the first glimpse of what’s caused the fidgeting throughout the painfully slow popcorn read-aloud of the concluding chapter- goddamn you Patrick Farley and your dyslexia- our surprise.

It is not a penguin. Or snow. Or a cake. Or any of the other suggestions proffered in the twenty or so epiphanies which had occurred during recess. No. It’s…

“Eggs?” says Chris Miller dubiously.

“It’s not breakfast time,” is Michelle DeVeer stunning contribution. As I, my classmates, and, most acutely of all, Mrs. Naretto are well aware it’s 2:35 on a Friday.

“I don’t even like eggs,” Katie Carleton, who in five years will explain to me what a condom is, declares and rolls her eyes.

“We’re not eating them! Can anyone guess what they’re for?” asks Mrs. Naretto with a kind of enthusiasm that she seems only able to muster at this particular combination of time of day and week. We do not rise eagerly to the challenge; silently we begrudge her for holding a large bowl of hard boiled eggs and not an infant penguin.

After a quiet agonizingly awkward for a room of first graders, fifteen seconds or so, archetypal kiss-ass Caitlin Schultz states “Well, we learned that penguins lay eggs.” As is often the habit of seven year olds, Caitlin has offered a semi-related piece of information which is utterly useless and not hardly related to the question.

“We’re going to make penguins!” Mrs. Naretto contorts her face into what is presumably a smile, holding up pieces of black and orange construction paper. “Kay, will you give everyone one piece of each color? Everyone, take out your scissors and glue.”

I open my red plastic pencil box and remove the world’s bluntest scissors and a filthy, sticky glue stick. Kay Dermar gloats, smugly and slowly placing the pieces of paper on each two-and-a-half foot high desk.

“But it’s not Halloween.” Michelle again, gripping a piece of construction paper in each hand, frustrated by her teacher’s repeated temporal stupidity. Michelle will grow, albeit not very much; she never surpasses 4’10”, into a massive bitch.

“The orange is for the beak, and the feet. See?” Mrs. Naretto produces what will serve as the unattainable prototype, the teacher’s version of the class’ assignment. In her slightly cupped hand she gently cradles a fragile, elliptical penguin with an ambylopic gaze.

“Googly eyes” shouts Trevor Griffin, which incites a small, seated riot.

“Oh yes,” Mrs. Naretto sighs and retrieves a canister from her desk. “Googly eyes.” There is a slight pop-
ping noise as she removes the top to reveal a treasure chest of plastic eyes with quivering pupils. She hands them to the nearest four-desk island. “Each take two, they need to be the same size. Two, Patrick!”

Patrick looks up guiltily, removing the fistful of tiny ovals he’d been shoving in the pocket of his dark blue uniform pants.

“Be very, very careful working with the eggs. You don’t want to squish your penguin!” Mrs. Naretto holds up her own to reiterate the lofty goal we’re aiming for. Her instructions finished, the noise level begins to rise. For a moment she remains there, at the front of the class, holding out her penguin and looking very, very tempted to squish it.

I draw and then cut out the wings. No one else draws first, but I need them to be even. I look across my desk to Kay’s penguin. Hers are better than mine. They look more like wings. It’s not fair for hers to be better. I twist my glue stick up and completely cover the back of my wings. I hold up them to the side of the egg, making sure they’re even before I press down. And then I push down on either side as hard as I can without the whole thing breaking. When it doesn’t then I push harder and I’m surprised I could push that hard. It didn’t even crack.

My penguin becomes ambulatory, olfactory, and a wobbly-eyed visionary. I am the last to be finished, and Kay, Laura, and Chris are already engaged in a thoroughly developed drama. My penguin waddles in to join, shyly brought forth by my fingers, pinched tightly around what would be the backside of his neck.

“Nooooh” cries Kay before my penguin says anything. “We’re already a brother with two sister penguins. It’s too late for there to be anyone else.”

My penguin returns to the safety of my desk. I open my pencil box and put away my scissors and glue. I start to move around my crayons. I make a nest. It is the perfect size for my penguin. He fits. I smile at him in his own bed in his own little house. I close the top and no one can see him. It’s like he’s not even in there.

Mrs. Naretto claps twice, harshly and abruptly. “It’s three o’clock! Clean up, clean up; your parents are here. Make sure you,” she stops to enunciate each syllable distinctly so it will permeate “re-cy-cle your paper scraps. Patrick! Don’t run with scissors.”

I gather the pieces of paper and make a neat pile. Biggest scraps on the bottom, smallest on the top. They have to go biggest to small. It gets harder as the leftovers get really small. I finish my pile but then I see a middle piece that fell on the floor, and I have to start almost all over to get it in the right spot.

Mrs. Naretto claps twice again. “You’re the last one, silly. Your mother is waiting!” I take my papers to the recycling bin even though the trashcan is much closer and then hurry to my cubby for my backpack and lunchbox. I run out to the turnaround and there sits the white Lexus that I will learn to drive in nine years and have sex in in ten. I throw open the passenger door, clamber in, and tug the door shut. Reaching for my seat belt I open my mouth to greet her but my mother holds up one finger as she pulls out of the parking lot and says “hold on, I want to hear the rest of this call.”

“Anyway Dr. Laura by the time I get home I’m just so tired, and my husband just demands dinner and, well he, won’t help at all.”

“I’m sorry, get home from what?”

“From…work?” The woman sounds terrified.

“And how old is your son?”

“He’ll be two in April.”
“So you’re telling me that there’s a job more important to you than your son and husband?”
“No, you know, I just feel like… I need to have a job.”
“For financial reasons? Your husband can’t take care of you?”
“No I mean he can, we don’t have any financial problems, I just…”
“Why do you even have a son? Or a husband? It doesn’t seem like you have time for that job.”
“Well, I, I just…”
“I have to go to commercial but stay on the line and think about your answer. We’ll come back to it after a short break.” The music starts to play in the background. “I’m Dr. Laura Schlessinger.”
“Hey baby, how was school? Were they mean to you on the playground?” My mother thinks this is a hilarious query and will continue to ask it throughout elementary, middle, and high school. She looks over at me and grins. Then the smile falls. “What is that on your shirt? Is that juice? That was your last clean uniform shirt and Alma’s not coming again until Tuesday.” She shakes her head. “I don’t know how you get so dirty!” she laughs. My mother has a tendency to let out a disbeliefing chuckle when she says something bitchy, presumably to soften the blow.
“Listen sweetie, I know I said because your father and I are playing bridge tonight you could rent a video but we need to go straight home because Juana has to leave early today.” Juana was my nanny and now she’s my sister’s nanny. My sister is one and once I used her for show and tell. Dad brought her on his lunch hour. “Can you just watch something on TV?”
I shrug and nod a start tracing the lines of my jumper’s plaid with my finger. I have to slowly follow each line from the waistband to the hem without letting the tip of my index finger disconnect. My mother takes a speed bump too fast and I lose control. I lose touch. Dr. Laura comes back on and my mother turns it up.

Peggy and Maxine are my parents’ bridge partners, my mother’s surrogate mothers, and according to her, my surrogate grandmothers. Maxine will die in my sophomore year of college and it will upset my mother so much that she’ll call me crying at two in the morning and it will take me over an hour to comfort her. She will then pretend it never happened.

“You look so sweet in your uniform,” Maxine declares. “How’s Laguna? What’d you do today?” I run to my backpack to show her the most recent product of my academic career. And suddenly an Arctic chill invades the area some three inches above my navel. I rummage through my backpack frantically but I know what I’m looking for has been displaced. Or rather, it was never there to begin with. Peggy has arrived and Maxine is thankfully distracted by the wine that has arrived with her. My parents swallow their scotches quickly so they can partake in the newest option. The ice clinks resoundingly as it hits the empty bottom. They will drink and play and for now I am safe. No one knows that anything is wrong.

Salvation is fleeting. Like all weekends, this one goes too fast and with Monday morning comes coloring and with that comes the necessity to open my red, plastic pencil box.

“The next book we’re going to read is called Charlotte’s Web. It’s about animals on a farm. I want you to draw a picture of your family pretending that each person is a different kind of farm animal. What kind of animal would the people in your family be? My husband is very messy, so he would be a pig.” Mrs. Naretto probably has other reasons for assigning this animal persona to her soon-to-be ex-husband.

I open the box just a tiny bit. Only I can see, no one else. I see my penguin. There’s kind of a smell, but
not bad. He looks happy. And then I know. No one can tell, so nothing’s wrong. He fits. He belongs there. It’s where he supposed to be. I reach around him, grab some crayons, and get to work.

“Kay, what a great horse.”

“That’s my brother because he’s a fast runner. I drew it just like the horse in Black Beauty.”

Mrs. Naretto stops to look at my picture, slightly bewildered. “Ok, so your sister is a baby sheep sleeping, your father is…a rooster?” I nod, encouraged. A rooster is hard to pull off. “That thing with the claws…your mom is the cat?” I nod again. “But where are you?” I point to the small brown smudge with a few accoutrements in the corner. “Oh. What are you?”

“A mouse.”

“Oh, a mouse…Or you could be a rat! There’s a funny character in Charlotte’s Web and he’s rat.”

I shrug and nod. Whatever you say. I’m the rat. I pile my crayons around the penguin again. He is comfortable.

But his neighbors aren’t for long. After a few days, there is whining. After a week, there is widespread discontent. After two something must be done; even Mrs. Naretto starts to mention the odor, and she’s not really in any position to be pointing out strange smells. People begin to hone in on its origin, and take note of the fact that I’m consistently borrowing writing utensils.

There are always too many people watching to get away with anything at school, so I smuggle him out, pencil box and all. In the bustle and excitement of another Friday afternoon I stuff him into my backpack, and throw my sweatshirt and lunchbox over my bright red pencil box before zipping it up. I get in the car and wait for my mother to say something about it.

She doesn’t. How can she not smell it? Everyone can smell it. I can smell it. Is she pretending not to smell it? I don’t know. I can’t tell. I don’t think so but maybe. How can she not say anything? Why hasn’t she said anything? I hadn’t thought it out past this part. She would notice, demand to know the contents of my backpack, and that would be it. But we make it up the driveway and into the garage and I walk past my mother, who doesn’t notice, and into the house and I say hi to Juana, who doesn’t notice, and I walk up the stairs and into my room and shut the door.

I take out my pencil box. I hear my mother downstairs, talking to Juana. Soon she will pay her and she will carry my sister up the stairs and she will open my door and come in and say “God, you need fresh air,” and open my curtains and open my window, because she does everyday; I will wait until she leaves and then I will close all three because it is way, way too cold.

I open my pencil box. I can hear her walking Juana to the door. I can smell the penguin. I see my pink plastic trashcan, newly emptied, nothing to hide him underneath. There is nowhere to hide anything. I look down at him and the tears make my eyes all wobbly. My mother will come in. And then I remember what an egg really is and where it really belongs and I know what to do. I pull off his sharp little beak. Then I rip off his eyes because it’s stupid, he can’t see, and his feet, because he can’t walk, and then his wings because he’ll never fly. And then I tap the white shell against the red and it cracks. Funny, how easy it cracks. So fragile. It all depends on whether or not you’re really trying to break it. I pick quickly at the shell and then there are all these tiny shards around me, like snow, and I close my eyes and take a bite.
buzzy

a photo by Krista Morris
I have a humorous story to tell you. No, that doesn’t sound very likely. Maybe it wasn’t a story. Yes. It happened to me. When? How should I know. Going to and from a patch of evergreens, a forest. The fringe was a bright green, but it must have been dull within. This reads like a story. Plausible, even. I was in the market of arguments. More precisely, settling arguments. At the end of this forest a man and woman lived together. But we are only concerned with the man. Whispy, thin - a speckled moustache. He only wore stiff, starchy collars. Perhaps he stole something from me. But that is relevant. This is beginning to sound interesting. The day was brilliant before it turned to dim. Dim as a shadow. Dim as a clerk. Dim as a shadow. I was, and conceivably still am, very capable of moving through dim light. Some are not so able. I believe my friend would have stopped before starting. This is beginning to sound interesting. Nevertheless, I reached the man’s house before a bough stole my wool hat.

The bitch goddess inertia. Three times it fell, three times I recovered it. If there had been a fourth attempt, the hat would no longer be mine. I reached the man’s wooden door but I have forgotten to tell you his name. His name was Wallace. Or Hamill. But there seems to be a good chance he is not called by any other. I stood at the door for an indeterminate amount of time. The door was wooden. This I have said, but it demands repeating. Brown planks ensconced in a stronger brown frame. I began to think I would never overcome its despondency. Such outrageous antagonism! It must have been minutes or hours or days I stood at the door. Never averting my gaze – time the same. I had no delusions until it opened. By a knock. A woman filled the frame. Ensconced in brown – now her. The description of her will be tedious. Rotund, but thin face. The dress proved to be more of a frock, grey with lace. Her hair had the color of a river bed. Grey with streaks of fading black. Or the inverse. The cheeks drooped into fleshy jowls – extraordinary! She held her hips and cocked her head in irritation. Is Wallace present, I inquired. No Wallace. Is Hamill here, I pressed. No Hamill, but there is a Humphrey. Humphrey! Humphrey is my man. May I speak with him? She entertained the idea and was clearly not entertained. Growing indifference coaxed her to relent.

***

In his glass was a smoky amber liquid. I enjoyed the smell enough. I turned my attention to the glowing lights of the town below us. Ah, I have failed to tell you his house sits on a hill. A hill beyond a forest. We began speaking. I have come here to settle an argument, I started. He cleared his throat. It seems that you have. At that very moment I forgot the details of my business and staredsearchingly into his creases. Do you know the nature of the argument, I prodded. I know nothing. Perhaps he meant he knew nothing about anything. A general emptiness of mind that filled those deep creases. With an emphasis on the explicit, I questioned further. Still he knows nothing. About an argument. About anything. I restrained my right arm from flying into his chest. He stung me with significant conversation which may be one or more of the following.

Can you remember it being this humid?
No.
Neither can I.
Can the son be G-d?
I do not know.
Neither do I.
Will my wife ever leave me?
No.
Regardless, Humphrey sighed. I provided only the answers I certainly knew. And when his chest returned from its sigh I redirected the dialogue back to my purpose. The purpose of which to discover which purpose drove me here. These were getting tangled. I beseeched Humphrey to help reveal the source of said argument. Good ol’ humph obliged. It was the very least he could do. He offered up flavorless ideas. Was it because I turned the conversation? He asked. I told him the discretion must have occurred days ago, for I left yesterday on this committed journey. He sighed his insufferable sigh. The pulsating town lights drew me in once more. I asked Humphrey what town we were in. His response was expected. I began to think this whole fracas was becoming a messy satire. A creation of the sea-wolf Juvenal. Humphrey may have had the same feeling. But no one can be sure. Humphrey’s wife could be heard in the kitchen, singing some foreign hymn.

Choral odes sway from left to right
Water-lily floats up the stream
Dressed in Sapphic Strophe
Ovid cries.

Humphrey chuckled and reminded me she was veritably crazy. We shared a deep laugh. The laugh, though, became violently transparent. I raged against his table and demanded the argument to be settled. He struggled to rise from his chair and instead pulled his arm back and released it in the direction my shin. Whereas the collision was direct, the pain indirectly established a pre-condition for outburst. I cursed him. I cursed him well. The transcript of my rant would be amusing. The questions that had previously been circumventing my conscience, the questions of the “incurious seeker” revealed themselves justly. What is your name again? Humphrey. Not Wallace or Hamill? I asked. No. I declared the argument settled and we rejoiced. I danced on the table, kicking my black soles into his brown wood while Humphrey’s wife provided the music. Her song was different but with the same tune. Ba-da-da-da Ba-da-da-da Ba-da-da-da-deeee. A perfect tune, Orpheus would have wept. I cursed Humphrey for his hospitality and left. Bear witness to this holy calamity, this story! The night was dreadfully humid and I bounded down the hill, to the forest. Forest trees amongst the dark religious pluralism. Never much for tolerance, nor the concession of my infinite morality. I have always been sensitive to digression. But in a way that it warms me. So I embrace it. You suffer it. My apologies. Oh, but this juncture is absurd and assertive. Apology revoked. I will remain here.
oda a las frambuesas/ode to raspberries

Ashley Griffin

ODA A LAS FRAMBUESAS

Con la lengua morada
trato las frambuesas—
frescas y llenas
del dulce perfume del
campo en el verano.

Cada una como un beso
que explota suavamente
su licor en la boca cerrada.

Pequeñas frutas perfectas—

Recuerdo
el primero beso—
a la boca del río.

Las siestas—
en la sombra—
entre las filas de frambuesas—

Las semillas
de nuestro amor—
el verano eterno.

ODE TO RASPBERIES

With a purple tongue
I try the raspberries—
fresh and full
of the sweet perfume of
country in the summer.

Each one like a kiss
that softly explodes
its liqueur in your mouth.

Small, perfect fruit.

I remember
the first kiss—
at the mouth of the river.

The siestas—
in the shade—
between the rows of raspberries—

The seeds
of our love—
the eternal summer.
If loosing ties beneath my feet
were as easy as letting waves slip through spaces
my body doesn’t occupy,
I wouldn’t get back to you any sooner.

I’m stuck here scraping corners
of stamps that won’t come off,
wear ing down the backs of shoes,
doing things wrong.

Absorbing noise from fighter planes.

Watching the shade try on its new sleek patches,
slipping into something less comfortable –
taking pains to avoid abrasive rays
that chalk, and expose
and so do nothing for seduction.
I could think less of silk and lace.

I roam the coast, walking under awnings
spaced across the sidewalks, in and out, again,
moving through my own glacial rendition
of some sappy classic
at less than one frame per second.
Officer McClellan took a sip from the can of Coke on his desk. It was warm, and getting flat too. He thought about going to the vending machine to get a fresh one, but it didn’t seem worth the effort. On this hot July afternoon, the only thing that sounded worthwhile was a cold shower and a hammock in the shade. At least the station had working air conditioning. Until the end of his shift though, it would be just him. Alone. At his desk. In the smallest police station in Gary, Indiana.

There was nothing to assuage the boredom. Nearly everyone else was out on patrols, and only the sergeant remained, secluded in his office with either a mountain of work or, more likely, the Cubs-Brewers game. Even the phone, which would typically ring every time McClellan found something important to do, remained silent. Maybe there would be a bank robbery and he would be called out to the scene. Not likely, though. Business had been slow for the force lately. Besides, these reports wouldn’t write themselves.

To McClellan’s relief, the monotony was finally broken around three o’clock as a thirty-something man wearing a light blue button-down shirt came through the door and strolled over to the high counter into which McClellan’s desk was built. His appearance was utterly unremarkable. His shirt was tucked into khaki pants, and he wore a White Sox cap on top of curly brown hair. A faint afternoon shadow was fading in on his cheeks, and a light suntan gave him an easy-going yet slightly weathered appearance.

“I’d like to report a crime, officer.”

Fantastic. More paperwork for the pile, thought McClellan. “Unless it’s an emergency I’ll need to take down your information first.”

“Sure. Driver’s license okay?”

McClellan took the plastic card. Allen Baldwin. “No relation to Alec?” he quipped.

“I get that a lot.”

McClellan pulled up Allen’s file on his computer. No outstanding fines or warrants. No criminal history at all, actually. He pulled out a copy of the standard police report form and jotted down Allen’s name and address in his usual cramped scrawl.

“What is the nature of the crime you wish to report?”

“Well, I’m afraid I’ve done more than one, actually.”

“You are reporting yourself?” said McClellan skeptically.

“Yes officer. Two days ago, I made a right turn at Eleventh and Grant just as the light was turning red. Nearly every weekday for the last three years, I have sped on the freeway, and I plan on doing so again tomorrow. About three weeks ago, I accidentally took a pen from the post office. I never use my turn signal before I enter my driveway. I—”

“Alright, that’s enough smart guy.”

“I jaywalked on my way to Starbucks last Saturday. I ate garlic within four hours of going to the
opera, and twice I forgot to bring a bag to pick up after my dog while I was walking him.”

“Is that all?” said McClellan somewhat sarcastically.

“To the best of my memory, Officer, though I can’t account for more than the last month or so for sure.”

“What’s this business about eating garlic before the opera?” queried McClellan.

“You’ll see it’s a Gary statute if you check the books, sir. Unfortunately, enforcement has been a little bit lax for some time now.”

“You think you’re funny, don’t you? Unless you have a real crime to report, you can vamoose. As you can see, I have enough work as it is without dealing with juvenile pranks.” Well, maybe not, McClellan admitted privately.

“Officer, I have committed countless misdemeanors. It is your civic duty to book me for the good of the public.”

“Look, it’s very noble of you to admit your wrongdoing, but even if I wanted to waste my time booking you, there’s no evidence to prosecute with.”

“What do you mean?” Allen demanded. “You have a confession, and I will gladly testify in court if need be.”

“Even so, I—“

“If it’s hard evidence you want, then you got it.” He began to pull several objects from his pockets.

“Here’s the pen I took from the post office. Here’s the receipt from my dinner at Maggiano’s where you’ll see I had the shrimp scampi, which contains way too much garlic if I may say so, along with my ticket to Chamber Opera Chicago. Note the times printed on both papers are only two hours apart. If you want to investigate my dog’s... excrements, I could lead a forensic detective to the site. As for the rest of it, just look at this.” Allen produced a small digital camera and turned the screen to face McClellan. On it played a video clip of the inside of a car traveling down a freeway. The camera pointed to a passing speed limit sign, marked 60 MPH, then to the speedometer which read about 64, then finally to the face of Allen, who was evidently driving and filming at the same time. The clip was quickly replaced by another self-recorded shot of Allen hustling across an empty street, clearly jaywalking. A final clip showed him pulling into a driveway, and sure enough, no turn-signal light was flashing on the dashboard. “I’m sorry but I didn’t have my camera ready when I ran that red light I mentioned. It was sort of a spur-of-the-moment kind of thing.”

McClellan was without words. “Why?” he finally asked. “Why are you doing this? This is just everyday stuff. Everyone speeds on the freeway. Nobody cares if you took a pen from the post office. You should pick up after your dog, though, but it’s still not worth my time.”

“Are you refusing to respond to a crime? Isn’t this your job?”

“Are you taking any medications Mr. Baldwin?” said a half-serious McClellan. Allen was not amused. “I’m a citizen of the United States of America, and it is my civic duty to report any crime I see, no matter who is at fault or how small the infraction. The Law is the Law.”

McClellan sighed. It was too nice a day for something like this. “Fine, you want a police record? You got it. Follow me, Mr. Baldwin.” McClellan led Allen behind the front counter to a small room, empty except for a table and chairs.
“Have a seat. I’m going to consult with my superior.”
“I’ll be waiting,” Allen cheerfully replied. McClellan left, leaving the door open behind him. Allen sat in his chair for ten seconds, then lightly stood up and walked briskly into the deserted hallway. He took the keys he had surreptitiously retrieved from McClellan’s belt and inserted them one by one into the lock of the next door over. The door opened with the second key. Allen strode into the room and quickly located the small black safe mounted on an interior wall and effortlessly dialed the six-digit combination from memory. The latch gave a satisfying click, and the door swung open weightlessly. Allen retrieved several stacks of ten, twenty, and fifty dollar bills; the spoils of countless fines collected from law-breakers of the precinct. He would have found that it amounted to around $4,000 if he had stopped to count. He slipped a thick handful into his wallet and the rest into his deep pockets. They bulged slightly, but not noticeably. The security camera in the corner was dead and blind, as it had been since a power surge had damaged it the previous day. Allen closed the safe door and spun the dial a few times. Ten seconds later, Allen was back in his chair. The whole process had taken less than ninety seconds. Five minutes later, Officer McClellan returned.
“Okay Alec.”
“Allen, Officer, though it doesn’t much matter to me.”
“Allen. I’m going to write you up for not picking up after your dog. It’s a $100 fine. For the traffic violations you get a warning, so you may be ticketed if caught on the road in the future. Also, the opera you saw was in Chicago, not Gary, so you didn’t break that law, archaic as it is. I would also advise against filming yourself while driving, though it’s not technically illegal. I like to see two hands on the wheel.”
“Yes sir,” said Allen with a small smile, “Do you accept cash?”

Five minutes later, Allen was sliding into the passenger side seat of a used Volvo. “Why’ja you have to go and do that?” asked the driver, a twenty-something man who looked not unlike Allen himself. “What’d they do to you?”
“I got a fine. $100 for not picking up after Sandy. They let me off on the other stuff.”
“So now you got a police record and lost $100, which you can’t afford” said the driver as he pulled out into the street. “What the hell, man? And that’s nasty, by the way. I don’t want to be stepping in your dog’s shit.”
Allen grinned despite himself. “A clear conscience is worth more than a hundred dollars.”
Hey, let's talk about--
Let's talk about--
Let's talk about--
Let's talk about bombs.

A quiet day, football on the telly
in the bar by the highway.
Then the bomb blast rocked the place
rocked the airwaves
broadcast and air-blast to my telly.

And let me tell ya:
I gave a tellin' sigh 'cause
I saw where I was one hour before
and gasped with the TV man
when he told me toes and fingers,
found fingers and toes,
toes and fingers from the bar by the highway.

Fingers and toes tellin me
tales of sweepin' up broken glass
and beer and toes and fingers,
fingers and toes, the telly man told me.
Two dead, three wounded,
“No victory-- Catastrophe is ours!”

And one hour since I drove by, hopped up
on Spanish sol, sea breeze and sand
between my fingers and toes,
toes and fingers
tappin' Spanish Bombs and Clash songs
high on soul beats and highway tar.

And now: the TV. Me.
Fingers and toes and the telly man
tellin' me shredded skin, glass,
surgeons and severed fingers
and toes, fingers and toes
toes and fingers fightin' the urge
to clench into fists, my soul into fists.
Fists and fingers and toes.

And the blast echoes north,
Basque country groans,
but in some basement, they grin,
chew “Guernica”, toast and gulp “Guernica”,
light Titadyne and dynamite and
bask in the Guernica glow.
Toes, fingers, and footsteps tap “Franco”,
Basque like faded sun shined from
Irish republican arms runs and fund deals.
Still, they plant bombs,
call in and growl “Guernica”.
Upstairs, they grimace,
groan “Guernica...”

Let's talk about bombs. Makin 'em,
breakin' a billion pieces off broken glass in
a bar by the highway. The telly man
told me they found fingers and toes
in a bar by the highway.
They are being watched. Rows of glassy eyes stare down impassively while their filmy skin weaves in and out in the flickering light. When it’s over, he looks back at them.

“Those dolls are fucking creepy.”

She settles onto his chest. It is not as comfortable as it looks.

“Yeah, they’re pretty hideous.” With her eyes she finds Bubba, who is balding, nestled prominently in the first row of propped-up plastic people and creatures stuffed with wads of cotton. They line the top of the wall-length bookshelf. For her first three years Bubba had been dragged, by her now sparse, polyester hair, everywhere with her. “My mom can’t get rid of them, but she can’t justify keeping them either. I guess that’s why she has them in the guest room. She can pretend they’re gone without actually letting go.”

I could not take you to my room.

“My mom is like that too.” A pause. “I should probably go.”

“I thought you were going to sleep here?”

“Yeah, but I don’t want my parents to worry.”

It’s so late. Stay. I want you to stay.

“That’s better for me too. I don’t know what time mine are getting back tomorrow.”

He tries to slide out of the bed without disturbing her, but her hair has gotten wrapped around his arm. She winces as it pulls. He doesn’t notice. She watches him as he comes around the bed and then reaches for his crumpled pile of denim.

I will never look at you the same. I have wanted this but only because I thought it would never happen.

She rolls over onto her stomach and buries her face into the guest bedroom pillow. Fully clothed, he sits on the edge of the bed and pulls the sheet down to her waist. Her pale back is constellated by the occasional beauty mark. She turns her head and presses the side of her cheek into the cushioning meant for all the strangers that pass through this house.

“I’m going to draw something on your back. Ready?”

She tries to follow the tip of his finger as it traces over her skin.

“Do it again. You went too fast.”
the elephant

I remember what you were wearing the first time I saw you. You walked into a room I was already sitting in.

He starts more slowly this time, traveling lightly across her shoulder blades.

This has happened before. Once in government- one of those days we had to watch “The West Wing” because our teacher was the track coach and he thought that constituted learning- you drew on me. I was bored and asked for a tattoo and you rolled up my shirtsleeve and gave me an anchor. Everyone thought it was real.

He maneuvers through the web of blemishes she was born with.

You had to have candles tonight because it was too dark with the light off and too bright with it on. The only ones I could find were those ugly ones from the kitchen table and if I don’t remember to put them back before tomorrow night I’m screwed. Mom lights them every night before dinner.

He follows the rise and fall of the arch.

On Monday morning you will walk into a room I am already sitting in. We will not tell anyone, but we will still feel like we are being watched. We will pretend that nothing has happened. This will simultaneously be the biggest lie and the only truth.

She realizes the he’s waiting for her to guess. It has taken her too long to notice he is done. She had willed herself to feel it this time, if there was something to feel. Because it’s him, there is the distinct possibility that he’s been making meaningless shapes.

“I have no idea.”

“It was an elephant.” He says it like it’s obvious and thinking it over, she realizes that it was. She should have been able to tell.

“I have to go. I’ll see you later.”

He shuts the door quietly. They are both pretending she is almost asleep. That by the time he’s gotten down the driveway, she’ll be dream deep in post-coital stupor. She rolls over onto her back and watches the inconsistent light play across the ceiling. The abrupt sound of a car starting interrupts the night. She listens until he’s gotten down the driveway, and then throws back the sheets. She blows out the candles with short, aggressive gusts and then goes to the bathroom to flush the condoms down the toilet. She slams the door loudly.

Alone in the dark, Bubba shakes her head and looks away.
cigarette

Krista Morris

I want your vocal chords to be coated in ash:
Each drag of polluted numbness wrapping
Itself as a powdery veil around pink and red helixes.
I want your eyelashes to cake with every glance,
Every quiver, every breath of the smoke.
I want your lungs to fight the fire,
To keep the insouciance
From spreading throughout your being
Like cancer
Like illusive lipophilic endurance.

I want to be under your finger nails—
Closer than the rings distorted
Into faint ovals between the jewels imbedded in your knuckles,
Closer than the ash in your finger prints,
Closer than the yellowing skin.

I can see it now: the carbon that defines you
Yellowing like old manuscripts
Bank letters left in decaying vaults
Like that beautiful tomb you navigate existence in.

I want to be the ash, I want to be the smoke.
I want to be the craving tingling between the wrinkles on your brain.
I want to be the thoughts you drag
Through every synapse, bound to each endorphin
I want to be the thick wiring
Down your spine.

I would hit you like whiplash:
I would make your brain swell
With sweet memories yet to come,
Make your mind swim in saliva
With words unspoken, uncharted.
I would make the delicate bones in your ears
Rattle,
Shatter,
Twitch,
Spasm,
Vibrate with drenched whispers, with raspy licks.

I want that drag, I want the ash,
I want the polluted memories and the reenacting future;

I want to be every breath that drowns you.
We’re on a plane, honeymoon-bound, and she’s spoiling. How can I tell? A vein starts pulsing in her forehead. Vein pulses, I take cover. Not helping matters: the champagne that flowed from breakfast through our restaurant wedding and into the airport taxi.

_Omigod! I’m getting with The Other_. This is what she said the first night we slept together. Fast-forward two years—our first married night—and we’re hurting ourselves into it. The Otherness. Israel, that is, her birthplace, and more exactly a kibbutz, where she’s booked us _the week of love_. That’s been our mantra. For months it’s beckoned as we’ve worked our jobs and prepared for a reception that allowed us time to catch this overnight flight. Looming: natural-rock swimming pool, communal meals, our very own love shack under the Golan Heights. We can hardly wait.

She calls me Sandy. Sandy hair, sandy skin, sandy soul. I’m tall and passably athletic and more saxon than anglo. She’s none of the above. Her hair is blackstrap molasses, eyes mint green, mind Jewishly immense. Exotic qualities I savor. Another “quality”: how she was bred to brawl, or so I claim in light/pitched moments. Turns out, though, Sandy’s no slouch. That’s right, I may sweetly constitute her Other, and she’s obviously mine, but truth is, we Others are expert at romantic warfare. Few public locations in Boston haven’t been the site of one of our dust-ups. Fighting’s good for “the relationship”? You don’t say.

Dinner trays arrive. She spaced pre-ordering the vegetarian, so she’s left with dinner roll and salad. I make two mistakes. I ask for the meat entrée she won’t eat, and I forget to offer up my roll. I should know better.

“You _like_ that I have nothing to eat,” she whispers.

True, I’m bored to tears by her vegetarianism—subject of multiple battles—but not to the point of wanting her malnourished. “_Loco_,” I return.

“You really ate your roll? And two entrees? While I sit here famished?”

The vein is signaling, still I say “Stop. Now.”

Then she’s out with it—“I’m _done_ with you”—loud enough to cause our flight (fight?) attendant to wince. “Done.”

With drama she wriggles off the wedding band, drops it in my palm, shoots down the aisle. Bathroom’s occupied—I know this kills her, how she can’t vanish instantly—but soon it’s free. She enters, disappears.

_The Others_” won Harvard Bookstore’s 2007 “First Night” short short story contest. There were two requirements: that the story be about a married couple’s first night together (inspired by Ian McEwan’s recent novel _On Chesil Beach_) and not longer than 600 words.
Is this happening? *Our week of love?* I’m hyperventilating. The woman I adore, but this is too much. First married night and we’ve found our tipping point. For three hours I watch the bathroom door. A line forms. Only the one opposite folds open and shut. I drift to sleep.


Travelers teem the oval baggage carousel. Finally I spot her, the far end, searching for her duffle, but she sees me and busts off. I reverse direction. So does she, keeping us divided exactly in two. This could go on all day, it’s gone on all year. The anglo saxon: he’d crumple to the floor and whimper. Is that still me? I see it now. She’s showing me different. Not thinking, I throw myself on the carousel, nestle between suitcases. Streamed with funny looks; I no longer care about funny looks. Soon it’s her looking funny. Vein gone, she’s playing mad. Like that, I’m tackled and we’re click-clacking forward and wrestling crazy and maybe this time the laughing doesn’t stop.
psychosomatic

Scott Newton

Days abundant with social pleasures,
Yet somehow void of attachment,
Like shaking hands with leagues of ghosts:
Loneliness creeps up like a shadow
And engulfs me in its darkness.

Plastic introductions all day long,
The others putting on a facade,
Shrouding their faulty characters:
Smiles pepper my false countenance
Without any dimples or laughing eyes.

Family who know my every move,
Friends who absorb my love,
All are lost exploring distant lands:
Reputations that once preceded me
Must be formed anew by strangers.

Eyelids pasted shut with sleep,
Clothing melting into sweaty skin,
Muscles feeble with the stress of anguish:
Imagined sickness overwhelms me
And drags me further into an abyss.
The streetlamps flickered uncertainly before extinguishing in unison, as they always did at 5:37 a.m. in Holešovice. Clara listened to her lonely footsteps on the uneven pavement, as they conducted a symphony of unseen birds in welcoming the dawn. She relished walking home from the metro each morning. It was one of the simpler pleasures she had discovered since excitedly waking to her nascent life in Prague without any money and without any prospects nearly three months earlier. Clara turned onto her street, which was little more than an alley, and approached her Communist-era apartment building. It was shabby, and might have been condemned had it stood in another, less remote corner of the earth. She knew that, but it was endearments like the relic of a woman vigorously beating her carpet out a top-floor window that made it home. Clara smiled and waved. Neither was returned, but she didn’t mind.

As she stepped over the broken glass in the linoleum entryway and traversed the creaky stairs to her third-floor apartment, Clara knew that today was going to be a special day. At the urging of the owner of the cabaret where she worked in the heart of the city, she was going to get her tongue pierced. For as long as she could remember, Clara had deemed the mutilation of the body an unforgivable transgression. But the other girls had been so supportive and encouraging, and after all, she had come to Prague to break old habits and try new things. To indulge the desires about which she had wondered for so long. Thus, she was looking forward to the pain that she had intuited the hollow needle would bring. Her entire body tingled unfamiliarly in warm anticipation. No, there would be no sleep for Clara this morning, not when the afternoon promised such adventure.

**********

Across the city, Will left his flat a few blocks behind the National Museum. He found it peaceful to walk down Wenceslas Square and through winding back alleys to the Charles Bridge as the blackness of the night gave way to the blueness of the morning. Prague was as deserted as it ever was at this time of day, when the exhausted partygoers and pleasure-seekers mingled with the early-rising working class. Will was caught somewhere in between. He had been living on his own in Prague for five months, subsidized by his playwright parents in America, after graduating from college the previous spring. He didn’t have friends here, or a job, and kept odd hours. Will didn’t know exactly what he was doing in Prague, only that that was sort of the point. He had picked up only enough Czech to get by, but the anonymity that came with living in a wholly foreign country was, for him, profoundly liberating.

It was still cold in Prague, and the tourists would not descend on the city for another few months. Too early even for the caricaturists and kitsch vendors, Will found himself alone on the cobblestones of the Charles Bridge. The orange glow of the rising sun reflected in the lamps that lined the monument. The effect was hypnotizing. There was something magical about this city, Will decided, as he gazed out across the river.
at the spires of Prague Castle. He pulled his small sketchbook out from inside his navy pea coat and sat down on the ledge of the bridge to draw the stone statue of an angel, one of many that adorned Prague’s most famous landmark. Will was amassing portraits of every statue on the bridge. That is what he had done with nothing to do for five months in a foreign city. That, and write. If he had been writing a novel, he would have finished it by now. But Will, with award-winning dramatists for parents, was embarrassed by his literary endeavors.

He listened to the seagulls that flocked overhead. It was fascinating that birds sounded the same all over the world, and looked the same, for that matter. There wasn’t much to distinguish a Czech seagull from an American seagull. Separated by an ocean, their calls were the same. Will wondered what it was that made people so very different. Next to the angel, a gull landed on top of Jesus’ head. How trivial everything we hold sacred is to animals, Will thought. To a bird, Jesus is just something on which to perch and shit. Will had studied some theology in college, but it had done nothing to clarify his own beliefs. He knew he believed in something. He just wasn’t sure what. But he was content that he lived a moral enough life to appease whatever Higher Power was out there.

**********

Wenceslas Square was heaven for hedonists. When night fell on the tourist center of the city, anything was available for the right price. African immigrants pushed girls and drugs with equal fervor. And even for more rarified tastes, the Africans had an answer. Casinos, cabarets, and fast food restaurants beckoned brightly on every block. After the tyranny of Communism, the Czech people apparently wanted nothing but the freedom to throw their money away. It was in one of these cabarets that Clara every night became further acquainted with the fascinating secrets of her body. After longing to know physical contact for so long, the cabaret was exhilarating. The touch, the smell, the taste of so many different men teased every one of her nerve endings. The purity of these experiences connected her to people in an entirely new way, and she regretted that her shifts seemed to last but an instant. The alcohol helped counter this. She was acutely aware of herself when she soaked her brain in pivo and vodka. And her encounters with customers were that much more pleasurable, as well.

Clara liked to watch their faces during these encounters. Their features contorted with ecstasy, in which she shared. Sometimes the forcefulness of her customers was painful, but pain and pleasure were just different degrees of feeling. She savored it all. When she had gotten her tongue pierced, her natural reaction had been to cry. They might have been tears of joy or of anguish, but it did not matter, for the feeling was just as strong either way. And feeling was her primary objective in Prague.

**********

When Will walked into the neon darkness of the cabaret, he expected to feel lonely. These places, with their intimations of sex and companionship, tended to amplify the isolation that sometimes afflicted him in Prague. But for just three hundred crowns, he could get five pivos and look at naked women, loneliness be damned. He had followed a girl into one of the back bedrooms in the cabaret only a few times. And his stupid satisfaction
afterwards had each time turned into a shameful weight the next morning. But there was something different about his surroundings tonight. The pretty girls that prowled the room in their cheap lingerie weren’t quite so depressing. The brutish, drunken patrons weren’t quite so foreign. Will felt a little closer to everyone than he usually did. At the bar, he exchanged his ticket for a pivo and sat down to nurse it unassumingly, as far away from the stage as possible.

Many pivos later, Clara emerged from behind the heavy red curtains onstage. Attired in a satin bustier, thong, stockings, and four-inch stiletto heels, all pure snowy white, she brushed a few disobedient strands of blond hair out of her face and surveyed the crowd with a coy smile. Then she sprayed the cold, metal pole with a bottle of disinfectant and wiped it, suggestively, up and down with a washcloth. Satisfied, she began her routine, which anyone would have had to admit was an astonishing display of athleticism. After shedding her bustier, Clara, upside down and long legs spread-eagled, shimmied up the pole using only her hands. The stunned audience burst into the kind of triumphant applause heard more often in Dvořák Hall than in a cabaret. Though he had not taken his eyes off her since she appeared onstage, Will barely registered Clara’s feat of strength. He was too mesmerized by her physical beauty, and by something else of which he was only vaguely aware. Watching her, Will’s thoughts and feelings carried to places that felt far beyond him. All of a sudden, he realized how drunk he was and left for some fresh air. He caught Clara’s eye as he crossed the room, and she smiled.

*******

Will stood outside, breathing into his clasped, frigid hands. His senses were returning to him, and Clara was drifting hazily away. On any other night, not allowed free reentry into the cabaret, he would have already boarded the tram or begun the walk home to his flat. But tonight, Will could not bear the thought of abandoning his post on the sidewalk, of putting an even greater distance between that divine beauty and himself. He wanted to be close to her.

A pair of police officers in riot gear walked past Will and eyed him with suspicious appraisal. Confused by the inexplicable guilt he was feeling, Will avoided their gaze, and checked his watch. He was surprised to see that it was past 4 a.m. Had he been in there that long? Will resolved to go home immediately. This is ridiculous, he thought, she’s just a stripper for God’s sake. But as he turned to go, he heard the most poetic-sounding words he suspected had ever been uttered in Czech. Clara was talking happily with one of the Nigerians that stood outside the cabaret flagging down passersby. She was wearing a long wool coat, her blond hair tucked under the pulled-up collar, her hands stuffed in her pockets. Will was surprised to hear their conversation switch easily into a language that he did not recognize as Yoruba, an indigenous dialect of Nigeria. They exchanged pleasant farewells, and Clara began walking toward Will. His brain cycled through every phrase of introduction he had learned, and was prepared for at least a four-line script. Will prayed that four lines would not be enough.

“Dobrý vecer,” Will, smiling nervously, offered in his best approximation of the Czech language. Clara peered deeply into his eyes and smiled warmly back at him. She, of course, remembered him from inside.

“Hello,” she said.

“You speak English?” he asked.
“I speak whatever you speak,” she enunciated in perfect American English.
“Oh,” he said foolishly, neither expecting this turn nor understanding what she meant. He didn’t know
where to go from here. It would have been easier in Czech. “I saw you inside.”
“I know,” she said, still looking into his eyes. “I saw you get up and leave.”
“You noticed that?”
“You stood out. In a good way,” she assured him.
These conversations customarily did not go this smoothly. “Well, I enjoyed your show.” Of all the
things to say, Will thought.
“Then why did you leave?” She grinned broadly.
“I, um...” he stammered, embarrassed.
“Let me guess,” she said knowingly, “It got to be a little too much for you.”
“No, I...”
Clara laughed at his clumsiness. “People - we, find it intimidating to be confronted with the rawness of
those we are attracted to.”
“I didn’t –” Her face told him not to bother, and he blushed. “My name’s Will.”
“Clara.” She reached out and shook his extended hand. The all-encompassing warmth of her touch
emboldened him.
“So what are you doing now, Clara?”
“I have another engagement. At an after-hours club nearby.” She looked him up and down, and added,
“You probably wouldn’t be comfortable there.”
“Oh.” Heartbreak.
“But I’m here every night.”
Aw, what the hell, he thought. “Would you want to get coffee tomorrow?”
Clara had yet to develop an appreciation for the bitter taste of coffee. “All right.”
Will was thrilled. He knew an intimate kavarna near Old Town Square. “We can meet at the Astro-
nomical Clock. What time would –?”
“One o’clock would be good.”
“See you at one o’clock then.”
“I look forward to it, Will.”
“Na shledanou,” he said, smiling.
She laughed. “Na shled.” For Clara, the night was far from over, and she turned to go.
Will watched in disbelief as she disappeared into the distance. Did I just make a date with a Czech
stripper?

**********

When Will ordered coffee and Clara ordered tea, he felt foolish to have ordered anything other than
tea. But his self-doubts were quickly laid to rest. Their cups were refilled many times over. No one had ever
understood Will as well as Clara did. It was almost as though she could read his thoughts.
far from home

Clara recognized a kindred soul in Will. After they left the kavarna for a small bookshop tucked behind Tyn Church, they discovered that they shared favorite poets. They took turns reading from Donne, while long stretches of silent browsing were broken by especially illuminating passages of Milton. Will argued for the merits of Sophocles, while Clara lauded Euripides. She loved spending time in bookshops. People were better when they were absorbing the written word, she had decided. When she and Will were ready to leave, he bought her a copy of Great Expectations. Though she had read it many times, Clara was genuinely touched. She had liked Dickens; he’d had the soul of a writer. After leaving the bookshop, they drifted through the narrow passageways around the Square.

“I never get tired of walking around this city,” Will remarked. “All of these clashing styles of architecture.”

“It is beautiful, isn’t it?” Clara offered.

“Everything is layered, facades built over earlier structures. It’s very hopeful. Almost as if Prague alone has stood up to the onslaught of time.”

“You think about the passage of time a lot, don’t you?” she asked seriously.

He looked at her. “Don’t you?”

“It has never meant much to me, to be honest, no.”

Clara sensed the question bursting forth from Will.

“Can I ask you something, Clara?” He waited, but she did not respond. “How do you speak such good English?”

They stopped. They had avoided these particulars until now.

“Why are you asking me this?” she lamented.

He struggled to put it into words. “Because, you mean something to me. I just don’t know what yet. But I know that it’s important.”

“That’s a lot to put on me.”

“Well, then what are we doing here?”

“We were talking about architecture.”

“Why did you come to Prague, Clara? Why do you do what you do?”

She knew that he would not understand, but did not know why she felt so defensive. “Because, it makes me feel alive. It makes me feel. Haven’t you ever wanted to know what it is to truly be alive?”

“Oh course. That’s why I’m in Prague when I could be living someone else’s idea of a life in America. But that’s also why I read books.”

She felt his judgment, and did not like it. “I was tired of being simply an observer. I wanted to be close to... something.”

“What are we?”

“You hold me in too high a regard,” she said bluntly.

Her words hurt. “Why did we meet, Clara?”

She did not want to be the answer he was seeking. She did not want to again be the source of comfort for a soul that yearned to be filled but did not reciprocate.

Standing in the shadow of Tyn Church, Clara told Will that she had to go home before her shift began.
Later that night. He was visibly disappointed, but not ready to let her go. He asked her if he could come to the cabaret. She saw that he meant it, and against her better judgment, consented.

********

After she and Will parted, Clara navigated the twisting streets that led to Jeskyne, a hospoda that catered to both locals and expatriates. The otherwise traditional hospoda was remarkable for allowing a thriving drug trade to take place in the bathroom. Marijuana was another indulgence that Clara had discovered since arriving in Prague. She was introduced to the drug by Eva, a petite, raven-haired girl at the cabaret who, when her clothes were on, took photography classes at the Academy of Fine Arts. Clara was indebted to Eva. With every passing day, she felt her impulses and her will becoming more and more her own, an effect, she knew, of getting high. Even more than alcohol, marijuana had revealed to Clara a self that was entirely independent of anyone else. Never did she feel more removed from her previous existence than when she was high.

Clara exchanged familiarities in Czech with the stocky man at the bar who dealt the drugs. Clara didn’t mind Honza. His faith in the concept of supply and demand was at least well placed. Honza wore a fanny pack full of plastic baggies that each contained an eighth of an ounce of marijuana, which he sold for six hundred crowns. Clara’s habit was such that she would not have been able to afford it had Honza not been so willing to accept alternative forms of payment. Since Clara had gotten her tongue pierced, Honza was even more eager to waive the price of his product. He pulled her into the bathroom, where in a graffitied stall, they conducted the transaction. In its immediate aftermath, Honza was blissfully sure that he was getting the better end of the deal. Clara found this new form of power amusing.

********

“Would you like a private dance?”

Clara’s arm was draped over Will’s shoulders, and she leaned in close, smiling coquettishly. Her manner made him uncomfortable, but he wanted very badly to say yes.

“I’d have to pay, right?”

She considered him sympathetically. “Of course. That’s not up to me, Will.”

He was hurt. Perhaps unreasonably so, he knew. But still. “Okay, yeah. I’d love one.”

She kissed him on the cheek, and gripped his hand. Will’s flesh prickled wherever she touched him.

“Come with me.”

She pulled him up out of his seat and led him across the floor of the room. Following obediently behind her, he watched her hips swing as they went, and nervous anticipation coursed through his body. It was just the two of them. There was no one else, in the cabaret, on Earth.

Clara pushed him down onto the springy bed, and locked the door behind her. Will sat up, and as he eyed the bedspread, could not help but wonder how many faceless men had been in this room with her. Then he looked up at her and didn’t care. Clara could not avoid divining Will’s lust, but wished at that moment she had not so clearly read his thoughts. They enflamed her sense of guilt. Nevertheless she reached behind her back and unhooked her bra, and let it fall to the splotchy carpet.
Will swallowed hard, staring at Clara as she slinked toward him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and straddled his lap. She began to gyrate against him, and held Will’s hands on her breasts. The pleasure of her humanity coursed through his body.

Will’s head was swimming. There was something very wrong about this. She shouldn’t be here, doing this, he thought. I shouldn’t be here. He felt as though he were transgressing beyond redemption. Will jerked his hands away. Clara stood up.

“I – I’m sorry,” he faltered.
“What’s the matter?”
“You – I shouldn’t be doing this. It’s – there’s something wrong.”
Her smile was half-hearted. “Okay. It’s all right. Don’t worry about it.”
“I’m sorry. I’ll still pay whatever I owe you.” He thought she might tell him to forget it, but she didn’t. She just nodded, and picked her bra up off the floor.

“Can I ask you a serious question?”
She already knew what it was, and nodded.
“Why do you do this? It doesn’t seem like you.”
“Well, you don’t really know me, do you?”
Her voice was colder than it had ever been. He conceded that no, he didn’t.
“I like doing this,” she said defiantly. “I like how it makes me feel, that it even makes me feel at all.”
“You already said that. But there’s a reason why you need so badly to feel.”
Clara frowned, unable to deny Will’s understanding of her. “That’s a thousand crowns.”
Will regretted pushing her away as he reached into his back pocket for his wallet. He saw that she needed him for something just as strongly as he needed her.

********

Will approached Clara as she left the cabaret at closing time. He had been waiting outside, considering what he was about to say, for more than an hour. Around them, Wenceslas Square was still brimming with the denizens of the night, many of whom stared hungrily at Clara as they passed her.

“I’m sorry,” Will said.
“I know, you told me.”
“Are you going to the after-hours club?”
Will’s contradiction of his nature was too pronounced for Clara not to see. She wished that he was not thinking what he was thinking. “Yes.”
“I want to go with you.”
Clara looked at him uncertainly. “Really, I don’t think –”
“I know, you told me.”
“You’re sure?”
“Yes. I want to go with you.”
She sighed, knowing this was a bad idea. But she realized Will was trying to do something for her that
David Burg

no one before had ever bothered. It made Clara want to be close to him. And anyway, who was she to deny him his desires? It was with not entirely selfish reasons she responded.

“Fine.”

**********

Clara knocked on the metal door of Pekelné Mesto. Will waited behind her, feeling his chest tighten. The door opened just a crack, the slackened metal chain still in place. A woman’s face appeared in the opening.

“Jak se jmenujete?”
“Clara.”
The woman nodded approvingly, but glared at Will.
“Kdo je to?”
“Muj pritel.”
The woman studied Will, and finally blinked.
“Je cekajici.”
The door closed for an instant, then swung open. Clara stepped inside, and turned to Will.
“Last chance.”
Will took a deep breath, and followed her. The woman closed the door behind them. Her attire was exceedingly inappropriate for her age, and Will bristled as he walked past her. He followed Clara to the coat check, and then down a set of metal stairs into the depths of the club, which pulsed with loud trance music. Will grew light-headed as a red-haired girl dressed in latex and fishnets sidled past, her gaze ravenously penetrating his soul. He was out of his element, a fact reflected in his pulse, which seemed to beat along with the flashing of the house strobe lights. The club teemed with people Will had never imagined existed, and he realized how limited his experience of Prague, of the world, had been. Although it was hard to focus, he perceived lots of throbbing, sweaty flesh. The heat in the club was becoming unbearable. Will began to sweat, and longed for the cool freedom of the street. Pushing through the crowd, he managed to stay with Clara all the way to the bar, where she winked at the muscular, bare-chested bartender.

“Ráda bych beton. Will?” She had ordered a gin-and-tonic. Should he do the same? No, he was about to pass out.

“Where’s the bathroom?” he yelled over the music.
Clara looked at him nervously. “Follow me.” She paid for her drink, and took Will’s hand, leading him through the sea of the dance floor.
She stopped at the back of the club, where a man sat on a red velvet couch surrounded by a bevy of adoring, beautiful, half-naked men and women. On the table in front of them was an assortment of drinks and pills and powders and spoons and needles. The man had long blond hair, slicked back into a ponytail, and his black satin shirt was unbuttoned to his navel. He wore an unnerving smile on his face, which lit up when he saw Clara.

“Vitám! Vitám! Jak se máš?” He took Clara’s hands in his, and they kissed each other on each cheek.

42
Then his mischievous eyes shifted and stopped on Will. “Whom have you brought me, dear Clara?”

“This is Will. He’s a friend.”

“The pleasure is mine, I’m sure.” Every word the man spoke dripped with suggestion.

Will smiled weakly, and looked at Clara with desperation. “The bathroom?”

“Ah, good boy,” the man breathed. “The real party is in the bathroom.” He held his hand out to the door on the near wall.

As soon as Will entered the bathroom, he was assaulted with rapturous moans from the stall to his left, below which were at least four pairs of feet. Ahead of him, two men were snorting something off the edge of the sink.

He wasn’t kidding, Will thought.

Suddenly he did not know what to do. He had come here to splash cold water on his face, but that intention was fading from his mind. The moans and the snorting stopped, something aroused in their place. Four faces slowly appeared above the stall, the men turned from the sink, and all the eyes in the bathroom were watching Will with anticipation. He took a step forward.

The door opened behind him.

“Come on,” Clara said to Will. “We have to go.”

He became aware of himself, and his knees buckled. Clara rushed forward and caught Will before he fell.

*******

Outside, Clara steadied Will on his feet. He had not said anything since they left the bathroom.

“I’m sorry,” Clara said. “I shouldn’t have brought you here. You only wanted to come because of me.”

He looked at her with a depth of feeling that overwhelmed Clara.

“Say something,” she pleaded.

He took her to the Charles Bridge instead.

*******

They walked across the bridge, hand in hand, and sat on the ledge next to the statue of an angel. Will wrapped his arms around Clara and she nestled her face against his chest. She had never felt as close to anyone in the entirety of her existence as she did to Will now. Yet in each other’s arms, his eventual death was foretold to her, as though it were a distant memory.

Clara looked up at his face squinting thoughtfully into the sunrise. She thought she might be looking forward to their moment of reunion, and this fleeting desire scared her. She knew that she had no right to feel that way about him. Was that, her petty and selfish desire, what Clara had come here for after all? She lowered her head, ashamed.

Will glanced down at her crown of shining blond hair and wondered how he would ever be able to
go on without her. He longed for the next time they would encounter each other, and could not decide if this scared him. The time he had spent with her was something that Will knew did not just happen. He knew, after all, that things happened for a reason. He closed his eyes, renewed.

While rays of early morning sunlight cast a lifelike glow on the stone face of the angel above them, things were as clear to Clara as they ever had been, and to Will as they ever would be. She could walk among them, but never with them. She was not one of them, for she knew too much. They both understood, finally, that she had to return home.

Clara emerged from Will’s embrace and gazed heavenward. She hesitated. He smiled. And then she was gone.
You said
you do it yourself
Well, I’d bet you would love
The latest
The greatest
Martha stewart living magazine

They have a killer
Blueberry cobbler recipe
In there
(it's vegan)

you said
you were going to take down the system
well,
that convenience store on the corner
is still around
in spite of all the stuff you five fingered
and I think the system might still be around, too
but you could never explain what it was
and to me
you always seemed like some sort of a klepto

Punk Rock
Should have never existed
It was just
Life is struggle
And us middle class kids
needed something to fight against

maybe this time we picked a tough one
but who is going to help us
when we've got such stupid haircuts?
Yes, thought Mrs. Bower as she peered into the birdcage, these will do splendidly! Just look at them! They had a sense of the wild about them. Such lovely green plumage, dusted orange about the face and – there! – that startling hint of blue at the tail. So pretty! So very pretty!

“You’ll have the pair, then?” said Mrs. Shrike, the shopkeeper.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Bower, smiling broadly, “I believe I will.”

“Wonderful! I’ll just get a cloth for the cage.”

Wasn’t it just a marvelous shop? All the beautiful birds in all those exquisite cages, lining the walls here and there – their sweet trills and chirps; the glimpse of this crimson wing, of that bold yellow beak – and further along, by the entrance: the scaly and slimy, those creepy oddities. Oh that snake had scared her so! For she’d bent down to have a closer look when it stirred suddenly from its sleep, flashed open its large oily eye and stared at her – right at her – through the glass. But it was all rather exciting, wasn’t it? A virtual taste of the exotic. She’d never been anywhere terribly exciting, nowhere exotic anyways – never braved the scorching desert or pushed her way through the damp underbrush of a tropical forest – no, nothing like that, but at least she’d seen a snake, eye to eye, and watched shivering schools of tiny fish from who knows what far-off place flitting about their tanks, right over there, the light rippling silver over their tails and fins. And I did so love those darling furry creatures, Mrs. Bower thought. What were they again? Mice? No, no – she knew what mice looked like; she’d had the most unforgettable experience with them as a child, jumping onto her bed and screaming until her sister ran in yelling, “Oh, what is it? What’s wrong now?” Well it didn’t matter, really – it didn’t matter if they were hamsters or rats or something else altogether, because here was Mrs. Shrike smiling in front of her and here was the birdcage, waiting for her on the countertop. And inside the cage, beneath the cloth, behind the gold bars: the lovebirds. The pair of lovebirds for Mr. Swift’s daughter. Her dear neighbors! She’d accomplished it, then, she’d really done it! She was going to leave here and walk straight home, right past her own house to Mr. Swift’s and little Linnet would probably come running to the door ahead of her father and when they opened it she would say “Happy Birthday darling Linnet! Happy Birthday!” and peel the blue cloth from the cage so that Linnet might peep inside and then the girl would shriek and scream with delight – she would! She just knew she would. Everything was ready then – everything was set; she had finished here. Time to press forward.

But what was that? Did someone just call me? Mrs. Bower asked herself as she left the shop, birdcage in hand. Had Mrs. Shrike just called after her? Well, I am already out the door, she reasoned, and I really don’t have the time to chat. After all, she had made sure to rise especially early that morning, to be the first customer in the shop, to begin her task as soon as possible; no need to slow herself now, not when everything was going so swimmingly. Yes, one must press forward! Onwards, then! she urged herself and grinned. She could laugh aloud right now – great spontaneous hoots of laughter! Why, she felt like skipping too! And for what? I am
silly, Mrs. Bower thought, I am mad! And it was all she could do to keep herself from laughing right there, on the spot, as she walked down the street. But the feeling remained: she wanted to see him – as soon as possible. Yes, she did! And to give Linnet her present – of course, of course. But I have been away almost a month, Mrs. Bower thought, and he never did answer my last few letters. Oh, he would have the most sensible explanation; she was sure of it. Mr. Swift was like that, after all, such a wonderful person: perfectly rational, loyal and so very kind – the type of man who would never leave a letter unanswered for sheer laziness or forgetfulness. Certainly not! Particularly not a letter from her. No – he would have a most sensible explanation. And probably he would clarify it all right away – right after he said, “Oh Mrs. Bower! Oh, you shouldn’t have! They’re just splendid, simply splendid! Aren’t they pretty, Linnet? Won’t you go hug Mrs. Bower?” – right after that he would say, “And I am terribly sorry about the letter. You see, –” and they’d all go in to have cake and admire the birds.

Now, who is that? Mrs. Bower wondered, that man just ahead, crossing the street with his chin tilted skyward and his face…his face distinctly familiar – could it be? Could it really be – but what would he be doing out here? Perhaps she would see him even sooner than – oh, God! Oh God – look out!

For it was approaching – sleek and black and fast – racing down the street. And he showed no notice. “Stop! Stop!” Mrs. Bower cried as she dashed forwards, hugging the birdcage close with one arm, her hand outstretched. “Oh, look out! Look out!”

The sounds, the awful sounds! Screeching car tires – the terrified distress of the birds in their dark cage – the awful sounds drowned the world about her as she came to a rough halt, her vision blurred, her breathing rapid and shallow. Oh, stop, stop! But here was the man, frozen in place before her, just inches from the car’s bumper. Here they all were – she, the man and the car – stopped together in the middle of the street. Shaking, the man turned towards her, his brown eyes so large, grateful – and foreign. I must smile, Mrs. Bower thought, I must smile for him – and though she tried, the shock was too poignant, the confusion too disorienting; he’d crossed safely, the car speeding away, when she managed to move again.

My word, my word! Well, really, everyone didn’t have to stare like that. It was over now; he was gone. No harm done. She lifted the cloth to look in on the birds – oh pretty little darlings! – one tilting its head at her, the other preening itself in apparent oblivion. Well, they were all right then – no harm. Life gave one the greatest shocks sometimes, it really did. But, thought Mrs. Bower, looking up at the sky with one hand against her forehead, there is still the sun – the brilliant constant sun – and the great blue sky! Such a glorious day!

And here is the park – should she take a stroll? Why, of course! It was all too lovely; she could not possibly say “No.” She might even save some time like this, cutting through the park. Yes, it actually might be a shorter way home! Why hadn’t she tried it before?

Beautiful! The green stretched around her in all directions, many gravel pathways winding through the grass and every rose bush in bloom. Tulips and begonias and daffodils as well. How I adore daffodils! Mrs. Bower thought, making her way through the park, And they are especially delightful this season, growing along the pathway with their strong green stalks and proud yellow stars. Daffodils were Mr. Swift’s favorite; he’d mentioned it one day at tea, when Linnet came running up – a clump of the flowers in hand – and he’d said, “Could there be anything more lovely! Thank you, my darling – how did you know daffodils are my favorite?” Mrs. Bower could just see the edge of the pond, too, lined with weeping willows whose drooping branches
made her think of fading fireworks and little shimmering waterfalls and – somewhat oddly – of her mother’s hair. Oh, but that is rather eerie, she thought, adjusting her gaze – that one tree there…it is so bare, so old. For there was a single tree, well on its way to decay, thrusting its dry and twisted, its leafless branches against the picturesque scene. How strange! It almost looked, well…it seemed to be upside down. Yes, the branches rather resembled roots, the way they forked again and again, overlapping one another. Mrs. Bower was suddenly struck with the image: a tree turned on its head, its roots gasping and choking in the unfamiliar air. Horrid, just horrid! It can’t breathe! she cried silently, It can’t breathe like that! And every tree around the one began to look the same, as though they too had roots for branches. Oh, oh how dreadful! They really must remove it, she decided, for it rather ruins the whole effect, doesn’t it? Yes, it poisoned everything around it – that would not do at all.

Well, she thought, I shall put it out of my mind, I shall just have to push the idea out of my head – and look! there is Mrs. Crane and her granddaughter across the way. The little one was flying a kite – a scarlet diamond rising higher, higher, trailed by two long twirling tails. But, again, something seemed strange – something was not right. Why did she dislike this scene? What was wrong? The kite. It was the kite itself. It seemed to be struggling, convulsing – wrenching itself this way and that! Oh let it go, she thought, let it go! Who could keep it leashed when it so plainly yearned to soar higher – higher than any string could allow – to fly on its own and escape all the blue, to break through damned blue dome! And the sky rather is like a dome, she reflected, isn’t it? One could trace its great arc with one’s eyes: from the horizon it rose steeply – up and up on all sides – then curving, curving into itself: all parts meeting seamlessly. I could be the fish in the bowl, she thought, or the insect in the jar, the bird in the – trapped! caged! The splendid shapes of drifting clouds – the look of blue all around, endless blue, blue against green, sky flowing into earth. But now! This horrible feeling! Who knew what eyes were watching from above, staring right through the glass dome – looking past the illusion – chuckling, perhaps, delighting in the all the little fools scurrying about their little world. Oh! let the kite go, let it go! she cried silently, How can you, how can you hold it back! The diamond tilted, wobbled, then swooped violently down – its tails fluttering behind – cutting across the sky: a scarlet stripe on the blue. Wait! she wanted to scream, Wait! Don’t fall – fly! Fly up! Fly away! Can’t you see, she pleaded, that you must break through? that you must keep trying? that you will find nothing down here, nothing for you? But the kite continued to dive, deaf to her appeals; its nose smashed into the grass. Mrs. Crane’s granddaughter ran swiftly towards it, giggling and yelling, “Oh dear, not again! Not again, you silly kite! You must stay up! Up!”

Mrs. Bower sighed a little. Such nonsense, she told herself, straightening her dress and hat, I really am too silly. All these ridiculous images, these thoughts of hers – why, if people could hear her thoughts! If they could listen in on her mind, peek at that spinning carousel of images and memories and – oh, what would they think? After all, there was nothing wrong, really – nothing at all. Here she was in the park, making her way home with a birthday present for her dear neighbor’s daughter. She rested one hand gently on the birdcage. Here she was – in the park – on a magnificent day! Anything could happen on a day like this. Maybe today was the day – the day when Mr. Swift would finally say it. “Mrs. Bower,” he would declare with great triumph in his voice, “we are going to Africa!” And they would, they would! The three of them would travel together, all over the world, to all those fantastic places she’d only seen in pictures and read about in books. Oh, was it wrong to dream like this? Did it make her wicked?
She’d only had her David for so long – and he had filled that time with flowers and sweets and flattery; never a harsh word – never a complaint. It had been sickening at times! But she’d said Yes. She could not deny that. When he’d asked her, she’d told him, “Yes.” And now he rested there, out there – all alone – but had the bulbs come through? Oh, she hadn’t been glad – had she? – but she couldn’t have been glad when he left her. That would make her truly wicked. But had the bulbs come through? I must see, she thought, I must know! And the trip wasn’t terribly long – she could catch the early afternoon train and stop to see the red petals waviering before the gray stone, run her finger over the words, over the letters, the numbers: feel the cold shallow grooves – and then she could be back, back by –

But here, now, was her street already – it really had been a shortcut! She had to press forward. She must not let anything distract her. Here was her house: rather a terrific sight! – blue and gray and towering; rounded towers and spires, all layered upon one another; ornate woodwork, plantlike in design, crawling up and down; a slate rooftop rising and falling and rising again at steep angles; balconies – multiple balconies – a wraparound porch too; and, oh, the windows – large bay windows and dormers – windows everywhere! Why, it began grand and ended even grander; fearless, noble, furiously independent, threatening the very sky with its triangles and points. It might have come into existence all on its own. It seemed self-cognizant – and proud. It was completely unapologetic. Such a magnificent house, she thought. Yes, such a marvelous house, but so big, too big – far too big for one person. But this was part of what he left her. And he had left her so much, her David. She couldn’t just abandon it – could she? She couldn’t just throw it all away, saying, “Oh, I’ve lived here enough! I’m through with this house! through with this town!” That house had been their home – their home, together – when he was still with her. We bought it together, she thought as she walked past her house, We bought it together, we lived in it together – but we aren’t together anymore, we aren’t! Oh, she was sorry. She must be wicked after all. But she simply had to keep going – to keep walking past, onwards to Mr. Swift’s house.

At last, at last she was here. It really had been thrilling when he moved in – right next door! Such a dashing gentleman, and so kind-hearted. Why, in only a few months he’d come to head almost a half dozen community organizations and just recently he’d revealed – to her alone, of course – his decision to run for town council. And she was not alone in her opinions of him – no, no – all the women said so, they all agreed: Mr. Swift was a wonderful man. But they – all those women, all those silly women – they are nothing, she thought, nothing but a bunch of gossips and floozies! That’s right!ickle and brainless! She’d seen them fawn over him, heard their pathetic praises, watched in disgust their constant ogling – always staring at him – even at church. “Oh, that Mr. Swift,” they’d say, “Nothing’s been the same since he arrived!” And they’d beg, “Tell us more about him, won’t you Mrs. Bower? What’s it like to be his neighbor? We know you two are awfully good friends!” And good they knew! For it was true, after all! No one had managed to get as close to Mr. Swift as she – and, really – what really made her special: only she knew his true virtues: his loyalty, his generosity, his sincere goodwill. And such a rational mind; she truly admired that. What could the others name in his honor besides his bright blue eyes – blue like the summer sky! – or his “gorgeous hair,” as one of them had said, or this or that – all so superficial! What could they name? Nothing else! That was it! Only she really knew him. Yes, that was it exactly – only she really knew him. They’d become such good friends, so close.

Mrs. Bower knocked twice on Mrs. Swift’s door. This was it, she’d really done it! She smoothed the
cloth around the birdcage. Oh, she could not wait to see their faces again. But no answer came. She knocked again – still no answer – and again; she peered in through the window – it was rather dark, now that she thought of it. There wasn’t a single light on in the whole house. That was rather odd, really quite –

“Mrs. Bower, I –”

She spun around fast. Oh! It was Mrs. Grouse from across the street.

“Good heavens you startled me so!” said Mrs. Bower.

“I am sorry, dear, it’s just that I saw you from my porch and – well I suppose you haven’t heard after all.”

“Heard? Heard what?”

“The whole town’s come alive with talk because of it! It’s Mr. Swift – I’m afraid he’s disappeared completely.”

Mrs. Bower’s lips remained set.

“He’s left, you see – gone,” Mrs. Grouse added.

“Mr. Swift – gone?”

“No one’s seen him or his daughter these past two weeks – not a soul’s been in or out of this house the whole time. And not a word to anyone! Such a shame, too. We all thought he added something splendid to the community. Of course it’s anyone’s guess as to why – and, believe me, I’ve heard several delicious lines. I know you’ve been gone, but we thought – we thought if he told anyone he would have told you, written to you perhaps.”

“Ah, yes, well…”

“Oh, I’m sorry, dear – I didn’t mean anything by that. It’s just, I know how you –”

“If you’ll excuse me Mrs. Grouse, I’ve just now remembered something I must attend to.”

With that Mrs. Bower turned sharply and retreated to her house – through the front door, right up the winding staircase, into her bedroom and out onto the balcony. She placed the birdcage rather hastily upon the railing, took one deep breath and attempted to admire her herb garden: a row of hanging terra cotta pots, each one hostling a little green, sweet-smelling forest. Here, in this open space, she had tried to cultivate tranquility.

“Well, I suppose you’ll be living with me for now,” she said in a trembling voice, lifting the cloth off the cage. They really were pretty birds. That lovely tropical green – the ginger blush – the shock of blue; she might have plucked them right out of a rainforest, only moments ago, that’s how superb they were. But they did seem out of place here, yes…rather misplaced. They were so very – so very wild! She ran a finger along one of the gold bars. Perhaps…perhaps they would be happier if – should she do it? Could she really do it – here, now? Well, it would be simple, she thought, quite simple indeed. And it felt right. Gingerly, Mrs. Bower opened the cage.

“There you are,” she said sweetly, “go on now!”

One of the lovebirds fluttered its wings briefly; the other tilted its head this way and that in a rather inquisitive, almost taunting manner.

“Well, you aren’t really going to stay inside there, are you?”

Neither bird made any sign of leaving.
What stubborn things! How inane! What am I going to do with these – these animals! Mrs. Bower asked herself, What good are they to me? To think that they would reject, outright refuse freedom! Fly, damn you, fly, she demanded, rattling the cage, leave already!

The birds hopped a bit on their perch.

Mrs. Bower lowered her face to the cage, pointing to the opening: “Here, here you are – won’t you fly?”

Both lovebirds looked at her, stared right at her with their beady black eyes – staring with startling determination; almost human intent. One opened its beak: a string of the most blissful notes spun through the air.

“Oh, you stupid, stupid beasts!” Mrs. Bower cried, lashing out violently with her hand. The birdcage flew over the railing, tumbling, tumbling towards the stone courtyard below.
It is the feel of hot, red brick warming my hands—
Then stone dust crunching under bare soles, and
Dragon-fly-sized grape hyacinth— that look like
Grapes, but are blue— peering from under ewe bushes
Like children hiding neath the folds of their mother’s skirt.
I can still feel the sting— ant-like— from shards of cream
Ware— I wear the thumb scars of yellowed, blue
China that clinks underground when lightning strikes,
And breaks the stone wall— like a jetty— in waves of heavy
Rain, to dry naked in the mud flats— revealing itself.
Three-hundred years ago, horses galloped along these
Narrow, cobbled paths— bearing cornucopias of
Oysters and pink champagne for afternoon tea on
The riverbank— to count the fins of clipper ships—
And promenade the Summer House, whose other three
Sides burn in the throes of revolution. Graves,
Three of them, for the dead Squirrels buried before
The mastery of mourning— before giving up on the dead—
Near the porch— entwined by a thousand-armed god of ivy
Tangles the entrance to the opossum’s leafy dean—
Like the handiwork of a Nantucket basket weaver.
Dew collects by the shade of a pear tree— in pools like
Memories that shadows graze— the wooden bench where
Babies take their first steps stares vacantly— the bleeding
Hearts in bloom— sinks softly into the recesses of love.