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The Laureate, 4th Edition (2005)

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THE LAUREATE

Literary Journal

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Literary Journal

The Laureate's mission is to allow undergraduate students at Western Michigan University a place in which to publish their works of fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and other creative works. *The Laureate* strives to be a professional and engaging journal that appeals to all.

Welcome to the 2004-2005 edition of *The Laureate*. The following is a collection of some extraordinary creative pieces, both poetry and fiction, by some of Western Michigan University's undergraduate students. The editorial board and I are extremely proud to present these authors in the fourth edition of *The Laureate*.

The journal would not have been possible without the editorial board. Therefore, I would like to thank the editorial team for their hard work and unique abilities, which made the selection of these great writers possible. Every member of the team added to the diversity of our group meetings.

Also, I speak for the whole staff when I say, we are grateful for the financial and advisory support from the Lee Honor's College. The administration and faculty encouraged this project whole-heartedly. In addition, we would like to thank the Design Center for designing the layout and arranging for the printing of *The Laureate*. Finally, a special thanks goes to Jason Skipper, our graduate advisor, for all of his guidance and advice.

The editorial board and I were delighted to put this literary journal together. The time we spent working on *The Laureate* has been a learning experience and is something we will look back on with pride. We were honored to be a small part of the continued success of *The Laureate*.

Salvador Sánchez
Editor-in-chief

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**FROM THE WAITING
ROOM OF A
FERTILITY CLINIC**

Julie Bozyk

When I give birth to my daughters,
I will name them Grace and
Infinity, grow their hair long

immediately, braid in
my own locks, looped with
gray, to teach them lamentable

age—no, to ridicule
the fake-faded jean, the claim
to have withstood time when time

has not yet tested: the unwanted
pregnancy, those that will
not come, the womb

dried up like the center
of a peach, hands in white rubber
gloves having squeezed all the

juices from that which was ripe years
before. My mother wears tapered
jeans because she has met herself so

many times over the years that
she sees no reflection in magazine
covers, knows her husband loves her, or

doesn't love her, no matter
the flare to her pant leg, loved
her any matter

of minutes to give her
a life. I will give birth to my daughters
every Christmas, one sliver

of a dried umbilical
cord, make them drink it
with a glass of water at

bedtime, saying, this is
the flesh growing
inside you, attach to something

quickly and never let
go. On their birthdays they
will give birth back to me, one

name in three different
languages for each year they have been
alive, names for their own

children: Eternite, Por Siempre,
Felicity, so that long before they
fade or dry they will give

me my great-great
granddaughters meeting me each
time they meet themselves.

**THE LAST LINE OF
THE STORY:
“. . . AND WHEN SHE
WOKE FROM THE
DREAM, THE MAN
WAS LYING THERE
BESIDE HER”**

Julie Bozyk

Bullshit! (said the woman with

the magazine, reading
the story in a grocery store Express Lane.) Love

is clipping coupons for two months, saving
for a train ticket. Love is still leaving

my bed in the morning to knuckle-crack, keeping
the habit of not waking him up. Love is sending

him poems formed from letters I've cut from
a magazine, adding some lengthier

prose: laborious lamentations are reflections
of steadfastness. To buy the magazine, I'll

put back the bottle of wine that I won't need
to cry myself to sleep tonight—I'll cry

cutting letters from columns like "Keeping
Your Man," wishing he liked lipstick, a

firmer, rounder buttocks more
than a story from a dishonorably discharged

Vietnam War Vet or former Merry
Prankster in a bar in Albuquerque or wherever

it is he is tonight. I am in a grocery store
Express Lane with far less than thirteen

items, with no more pork-chops
to buy for anyone, and tonight I'll

dream I'm here, shopping, pulling down boxes
of pasta with his name on them, his name

on the loudspeaker, my car will never
get full.

GRANDMOTHER HANDS

Meghan Dempsey

My family used to visit my grandmother.
She would have elaborate trays set out in anticipation,
brimming with cheeses and olives, cut up vegetables,
like she had not lived through the Depression.
My parents and sister would crowd around her,
their champagne glasses clinking,
brimming with Asti Spumonti.
She would pour a taste into a tiny jam jar for me,
'just a bit,' she would whisper
and place her hand on my arm—
rough fingers pressing into my skin just a little.

It is ten years later now, and she is gone.
The last few days have been cold and dry
And I have been working outside in the yard.
Winter has begun to unhinge my hands,
And wrinkles now push at my knuckles.
If I hold my hands up in soft yellow lamplight,
they have the shape and curves of my grandmother's.
I know that years will pass and they will begin
to do grandmother things.
They will grate potatoes for Kashi.
They will poke a granddaughter
in the side to say, 'sit up straight at the table'.
They will write letters in sweeping cursive,
and button a million small shirts.
They will pick the first crocus
that shows its face to Spring
and hang it above the doorframe.

THE SCREAM

Lauren Kenniston

I rescued you from the 75% off bin
People don't like watercolors
Of fiery screams under a glowing sky as much
As they like babies dressed up as pea pods
Slumbering on a purple velvet vine
And as for me, I bought you
Because I had one white wall left
After the pictures of old boyfriends were hung
To make new boyfriends jealous
And after the blue and green Guatemalan
Tapestry made in China was so
Proudly displayed, a real humanitarian cloth.

Now the moonlight pierces the blinds
Your fluorescent face glows like an infant moon
Morphing into milky shapelessness.
You stare at me, I stare at you. Your face
Floats to me, resting on my pillow, like a lover.
Your translucent form nearly touching my
Translucent form, only static waves of
Black luminance between us as your
Shadow invades and infuses mine
While the moon slips into a cloud of light.
No longer translucent, No longer night.

MODERN

Josh Niemier

#1

photographs of sugar coated moonbeams hang from the ceiling.
the pounding delicate slush thru snow on the misty back of a good-looking
red headed girl.
ethereal sidewalk going down & downer to the dirt and click.
the song of birds distorted into watercolors like mauve & dust.
the filmy love of red headed bastard children, the black squirrel sewn up in trees.
the yawp of a dog straining against chain, ready to combust into blood vapor.

#2

follow the crack down to its serendipitous conclusion:
one piece of silverware, a knife, lay in the gutter on a pile of small twigs,
anorexic 15 year old girl bends over and lets loose a helium balloon.
on a stoop a boy drinks a 40 ounce bottle of beer, under the brown paper bag
it is called Necromancer.
titanium yellow jackets zoom thru the heat; a squirrel perches on a small tree,
growing on a small square of grass, fenced in and surrounded by graphite.
boy with green hair, red lightning from his iris, like he had too much chlorine,
stands still in sad rapture thinking he is the nexus.
inside a woman, through her vulva majora, into the vagina, around satellite uteruses.
a rusty jack-in-the-box, staring out of the window, inside someone masturbates.
on a door knob, a micro-puddle of neon green pathogens & diseases bounce off each other,
and float through the air like zooplankton.
oblique visible ideals of streetwalkers—inside their satchels—
orange transparent prescription bottles.

#3

smooth roads of pavement, gun metal gray, and hard.
sometimes uneven, with broken glass, sometimes gliding along, on a bike or in a car.
uneven people; odd numbers, fat stomachs hanging out of shirts—
young black boys hollering, at cars that park in the road upward ten minutes,
saying I can play that game better than ya, it doesn't matter if ya mean it.
police cars like sharks, mixing the red & blue with red-yellow-green,
mixing terror with terror, joy with terror, and nothing with nothing—
sit on the flaking paint steps, stretched legs, its been a day & now
its night.

MUSTEK STATION

Rose Swartz

This fire-colored hair was closer to my scalp,
tingling I'm sure,
when you would pull and say "grow."
Now I pull and it snaps
my fingers all wrong,
brittle from cigarette winter. But yours,
ones you would curl to your mouth
kiss into air, the shape of O.K., fingers
in apple juice, fried plantains,
hip-hop. After performing I would
clamor down the bar
stage to your O.K.
air kiss voice saying "bellissimo, beautiful."
Beautiful cafe with flowered linoleum
playing The Beatles just for you:
on the Czech oldies station, the only language I understand
instructs me to: write you a letter/ say that I can't/
live without you no more/. My feet tap tile
in the subway wriggle and the escalator beat-boxes
for noone but me. Here "city" and "feelings" are the same
word, the blue-on-old-yellow graffitti
tells me "be hard" and it is. Tough
when noone is wearing your easily tanned face. My hair
and stomach burn with gin and jetlag and if I free-style
to the escalator beat I'll call it The Missing Zipcode
Blues of mysterious Yamhill St. with
Oregon, Oregon and my feet scraping
this soft cafe floor. There is barely enough air down here
for blues so I put my hair up in the Metro,
besides, even if I started singing noone would understand me.

BONE-CHILLER AND THE MAKE-UP SELLERS

Rose Swartz

The trees are Mary Kay ladies
who spill free samples on the sidewalk
No pink Caddilacs just mulberry brambles,
fishing lures and hula hoops stuck on their arms,
kite tails shoved in wild hair.
They wear scarves of telephone wires
that leave whip-marks in the sky.
They lose weight by rain.
The lightning, a glamour shot flash bulb:
You deciduous, you, lose it all!
The special storm photographer tells them
sway with the wind Goddamn!
act like you need that water!
Hike up that picket fence skirt—
September elm, burnt maple October,
fleeting poplar leaf at noontime.
The free samples wash up on doormats,
get blown under windshield wipers,
float incognito in abandoned cereal bowls.
Leaf by leaf by crackle by skeleton vein
the season's brutal maintenance man,
the stylist to the trees, chiller of bones and
stacker of leaves, cleans up their enterprise.
Puts the spotted maple eyeshadow and
dying Rose of Sharon blusher in suitcases underground,
Sends the lipstick samples back to the warehouse and
wipes the painted face of summer clean.

**PICKANINNY
PRONOUNS.**

Marcus Wicker

we are the sons, daughters of generations
characterized by silence and speech
impediments, because history shows that nations unified
in exhalation talk

too little. i-i think that voices live
forever and bouquets
of thoughts don't wither but patriotism has
a short shelf-life

like egg-whites and skim milk. They forget
the men who have fought for everything
and bled for nothing, then
make mockeries of martyrdom

with "i Have a Dream" essay contests
for Cracker Jack prizes. Bullshit. This is
just Their way
of pacifying pilgrims who have grown

unaccustomed to the occupation of foreign breath.

For sonia sanchez

#1 NORTH

Christopher Darling

I had been behind locked doors for weeks. I watched Christmas on TV, then New Years. I was twenty years old and spent afternoons filling in coloring books with people who thought they were wizards, or witches. Occasionally we'd get a Jesus in, or maybe a prophet, but we were all prophets. We all had an ecstasy or an insight. We all heard voices or saw what doctors never could. There was this girl, Cheryl (fuck confidentiality . . . her name was Cheryl) she actually thought she was a cat. Cheryl would crawl on her hands and knees all day and meow. They put her meals on the floor where she could circle around them, and they even had a mat for her in the corner of her room because she wouldn't sleep on her bed. If I could have felt anything, I think I would have felt sorry for Cheryl. Then there was Craig. His eyes were usually half-closed or rolled back into his head. His mouth hung open allowing saved-up drool to spill past his lips and down his chin. He wasn't catatonic; he just wanted death. I knew this because I could hear him moan during the night. Eventually, they'd give him what he wanted, they'd pump him full and he'd sleep. I can't really remember much to tell you about myself, only that amidst all the people, I was alone . . . or afraid to die in darkness. I had become a machine, unrecognizable . . . in that room with the small barred-window and cold, dirty linens.

APART

Christopher Darling

You died in a bathtub
that day in November
with crystalline powder,
salt and ester.
Pulling a wet blade
across your skin,
you escaped.
While the hermaphrodite,
the Jewish giant,
the transvestite,
and your asylum clients
hung,
frozen between frames,
juxtaposed on gelatin,
with corners curling,
lonely, but living.
But the porcelain remembers
the legs, your arms,
how you sank past sleep,
wrapped in grace,
black into white.

dedicated to Diane Arbus

I Y YO

Salvador Sánchez

Aliens gave birth to me
in Muskegon, pero soy de
Reynosa. Black hair, brown skin,
English tongue, assimilation by
mis amigos, la escuela, y los
medios de comunicación.
Mis padres hablan español. My
friends speak English. Yo
hablo Spanglish.

Soy de América. Soy latino. I'm
a child of wet
backwards. Still a gringo.
Too white, pero también too
brown. I'm still proud. Tengo
orgullo de mi sangre. A hamburger
as much as chorizo. A son of a
father who crossed borders. A child
of a mother whose parents crossed fronteras.

I'm still me. Mi identidad.

PERIODIC ELEMENTS

Ryan Holmes

movement.

Under neon signs he paid
for drinks and whispered
logic in her ear.
Science took Faith
home on a second date.

Her careless fingertips
traced stars. Stopping
before mercury and
temperature's rising.
He made maps of her
middle, safely.
Her dogma chained to
the fence. Gnawing on
Calcium bones.

Up stairs she stumbled
on theory. He explained
fire-bugs and lightning

next movement

She's fooled by meanings.
The eternal. The fleeting.
Seeking reasons to keep
floating in this awful god town.

Her airy diction fumbles
towards definition.
dreaming oceans stained
by the numbers he spills.

"He'll change at fall's climax"
she whispers.
Still.

last movement

There's fallacy in words.
Does want need reason?
Would you rather bend my spine
than look at me?
Still, I need to be held.
Sustained in stolen atmosphere.

AN INCOMPLETE LIST OF MY FEARS.

Ryan Holmes

It's boogie monsters
and beasts. bed bugs,
junkies, Jesus freaks
and disease.
It's cops. It's jail cells

It's hell

It's head crush stress.
It's jobs, joblessness
Homes and homelessness
It's loneliness.

It's sincere sentiments
It's tardy menstruation

It's a girl, congratulations.

It's an eviction notice
and not being noticed.
It's what nobody notices.

It's February. It's white
walls at night not sleeping
just thinking.

**ST. JAMES HOTEL,
CIMARRON**

Stephen Kreil

The evening wind rustles through the cottonwood trees;
a solitary tumbleweed rolls down the main street.
To my right, the saloon door swings;
I turn back to my whiskey sitting on the old oak bar.
Through the mirror, I glimpse the prize antelope head—
the black eyes leer over my shoulder.
I ask Jim to fill my glass,
savoring the last of its contents.
The Winchester rifle on the wall gleams, like a polished rodeo belt buckle,
the quiet bar reflecting in the metal.
Above my head, I count the holes,
those left from gunfights of years past,
6, 7, 8, 9 . . .
many more,
but the whiskey distracts me.
Pulling the glass from my lips,
I taste dust on the air, dry and bitter.
The floor rumbles as though a steam engine were approaching,
but it's the boiler kicking in, beyond the wooden planks below.
In Cimarron,
the wild town,
the St. James Hotel rests,
left lonely amongst the sage.

FIRE AND RYE

Kevin Kane

Henry tried to take 17 kilos of China-white heroin across the Missouri river in a canoe. Four years later he walked back into Eliot, his small home town. It had been over six years, but an amount of time couldn't illustrate the distance he felt; although, the box-tether itching at his leg helped. At 26, Henry's eyes were sunk, his hair stretched to cover open ground, and he moved in slow-motion on his right leg. He spent two and a half years in maximum security prison, but, the second day after finally transferring to minimum, a gang war exploded between the blacks and Hispanics. Caught in the middle, the fight destroyed his chance of ever walking normally again. He found early in maximum that prisoners are either on one side or the other, so he joined up with the Hispanics because he bunked with a few Snakes. When he moved to the new prison, he was alone again amidst the deafening noise of hundreds of strangers.

Coming in to Eliot on a Sunday, Henry limped off to a reunion with friends at the pub as the town slept in heavy sunshine. He wanted badly like a craving that, if never satisfied, keeps growing. Prison didn't allow for much else and the feeling added to his already broken step. While locked up, there was no doing allowed, only a constant wanting and missing and forgetting all those trivialities of life as a regimented clockwork of events ground out days and nights into oblivion. All that existed before was held in stasis until life began again, and only a tiny side-of-the-mouth smile remained when time started up for Henry. Now in Eliot, there was a lot to do. His parents promised him dinner. His pastor promised confession. His friends promised a drink. But Henry made no more promises, to anyone.

A lot of people wrote to Henry, at the very least sporadically. Letters effused with support and empathy formed a pile like a stalagmite in his cell. Henry replied to every single one and framed the returns with words of hope and progress and determination so they might believe in him again. So maybe he would believe in himself again. Drawing on the hope that reintegration was possible and everything would be right as rain when he got back, he shaped the letters sent back to relatives and friends. Really, he just waited for them to see his eyes and hear his voice to know what he lost.

Like other small Midwestern towns claiming a rich history, everything downtown was once something else. The Chimney, where his friends waited, carried its name from being the old foundry or at least what survived after a disaster during the Depression. Henry liked to think about the men tanned from the glow of the stoves sitting with friends and drenching a day's labor. Those men didn't need letters. All they needed was fire and rye. A small plaque detailed the history of the building and explained that the blaze ravaged in 1937. The spirit of the men still working molten metal in invisible shifts haunted the bar. They wouldn't have read the plaque, just touched the pock-marked brick laid like their grandfather's used to. He imagined their fingertips touching crumbling masonry, but without sound, like he used to do in his cell when he thought of this place. He would close his eyes and try to push through the brick. It was private and secret and all Henry wanted was to fall inside of the stone and let the wind brush dust from his surface. When he thought of it now, it made him want his cell back, for a second. There was just enough room under the bunk to fit his body tightly underneath.

Henry observed his broken gait reflected in storefront windows and closed signs. The only things open were churches and bars. In one shop, an antique weathervane rooster pointed against the wind toward The Chimney from behind the display glass. Henry thought everything in the shop looked old and worthless. He turned from the shop with the rooster and walked diagonally across the road. An '83 gray Taurus huffed along the street; he used to own one and it would have reeked like cigarettes in this heat. The kids in the back, well-dressed and uncomfortable from church service, tried to watch him out of the corners of their eyes, and hide their curiosity of the lonely man. He figured the family must have stayed late after mass. When he tried to follow the car with his eyes, the sun pushed into his vision, temporarily blinding him. Outside The Chimney, he stopped and waited before pulling open the heavy door. He stepped into the stale afternoon air. It was darker than he remembered. Pockets of light from lamps and neon signs guided him in. A mirror stretched the length of the bar and

Henry watched himself moving in it. By the jukebox in the corner, three heads at a table turned toward him. They all got up and those guys were so damn pretty to see.

DREAMING

Shanna Roggow

I lay in bed and stare up at the ceiling. The fan whirls around and around, giving off a quiet whine. I count the tiles on the ceiling. Fifty-nine. Fifty-nine perfectly symmetrical tiles, yellowing with mildew.

I turn my head to stare at the guy next to me. Brad? Steve? Hmm. Girls aren't supposed to end up in these situations. We're supposed to be innocent and pure, and only fuck guys whom we're deeply in love with. Mark? Yeah, that's it. Maybe. I feel like such a whore right now.

I'll blame all this on society. A guy can sleep around and it's perfectly acceptable. He's called a ladies man, a charmer. A girl sleeps around and she's a slut. I'm making a statement against society. That's right. I'm a feminist flaunting the hypocrisies of this male dominated world. Right. I'm a powerful woman; independent and completely comfortable with my sexuality. Damn society and its narrow-mindedness.

I still feel like a whore.

I roll over. A huge crack runs the entire length of the wall. I close my eyes. I need to get some sleep. I have class tomorrow morning at nine. Ugh. Philosophy lecture. Another mindless discussion about how our world is only real based on our perceptions and our acceptance of said perceptions. On a brighter note, it gives me an extra hour of sleep. I'm pulling a B in the class. Everyone informs me I could do better. I get that a lot. Whatever. We all have our own special talents. Mine just doesn't happen to be philosophy.

I spare another glance at the man sleeping next to me. Not bad looking. Not great, but not bad. There was definitely something there last night that no longer exists in the early morning light. Odd. I'm not one to argue though. Paul?

I sigh, and bury my head in the pillow. What a night. I toss one last time before giving up. I can't sleep with this nameless body lying next to me, snoring. I swing my feet over the edge of the mattress, and rise unsteadily to my feet. Out of the corner of my eye I can see the mirror that hangs above my dresser. It's cracked, a remnant of the last

guy I was seriously involved with. It's useless to me now, showing nothing but a cracked image. I'm not sure why I keep it up on the wall. Probably just laziness. Growling low in my throat, I shuffle over to the couch. I just need to sleep to escape from all this madness. Dream a happy dream. Butterflies and rainbows. Funny how my dreams are less odd than my life.

I reach for a cup, but my hand passes through it. The smell of coffee is reviving me. I feel my body slowly waking up. I rub the palm of my hand against my robe. The material is soft, worn smooth in some places. I pull a glass of milk out of the cupboard.

"What are you doing?" asks a voice from behind me.

I spin around to face the man. I hold up my glass. "I'm having coffee, Paul."

"My name is Jason," he responds. "Slut."

I turn as someone taps me on the shoulder. A bald man in a powder blue tux is standing in front of me with his hands folded in front of him. He has a chicken on his head. "Just because I'm wearing the chicken, doesn't mean that I am a chicken."

"Yeah, okay." I respond. I turn back to Jason. "Don't call me a slut."

He shrugs. "What would you prefer?"

I stammer out my name. Jason raises an eyebrow. "Why on earth would I call you that?"

"It's my name." I'm in a state of shock. I don't know how to respond to this verbal assault. I push hair out of my face.

Jason reaches out to grasp a lock of my hair, rubbing it gently between two fingers. "There's so much more that you could be doing, and so much more that you could be doing better," he said softly. "You're just wasting all of your talents."

"We all have our own special talents," the man in the blue suit pipes up. He begins to tap dance with the chicken balancing precariously. The chicken fluffs up its feathers, and then settles down to enjoy the ride.

"What talents?" I ask dryly. "I certainly can't tap dance. What's left? Philosophy? I'm certain that will leave a big impact on the world." I look down at the plate in front of me. I can almost make out my reflection on the gleaming white surface. It looks cracked. "I guess I could make some breakfast. Would you like some breakfast?" I ask hesitantly. I look down at the plate again. "I have a toaster. Would you like some toast?"

Jason sneers at me. "Like you could cook. You can't do anything. Slut."

I glare at him. I pick up a piece of bread and drop it into the slot. I go to push it down, but it won't budge. I try three or four times, with no success. Jason chuckles.

"You're so stupid. You have to put the change in first."

I look on the side of the toaster. There's a slot for quarters. I blink at it for a moment, and then reach into the pocket of my robe. I pull out a dollar bill. "I don't have any change. Do you have change for a dollar?"

Jason reaches into his boxers. He pulls out some change, and jingles it in his hands. "I have fifty cents."

"So you don't have change for a dollar."

"I have fifty cents."

I stare at Jason for a moment. "That's nice." I turn to the bald man, who is now playing the piano at a recital. A sea of blank faces stare back from the audience in the living room. "Do you have change for me?"

His fingers dance over the keys in a rendition of chopsticks. The tails of his tux float in the breeze. He smiles sadly at me. "Change is a state of mind sweetheart. You will never

change unless you decide to." He begins to weep, and the audience applauds. As the spotlight comes on and the man stands to bow, I turn and walk away.

I walk down a long, endless hallway. There are doors on all sides. They are different shapes, sizes, and colors. A feeling of terror settles over me. If I open the wrong one, all is lost. A monstrous decision, with overwhelming odds. I reach toward a black door with a silver handle. There are whispered murmurs coming from the other side, so faint that they're almost silent. All of the sudden, someone starts screaming from behind the closed door. I turn the knob, but it won't open. The screaming becomes hysterical, high-pitched and painful. And then the pleading begins. "Help me! Please someone help me! Please, someone, anyone!" I recognize the voice on the other side, but can't place it. It sounds so familiar. I pound on the door, trying to break it down. I step back, and slam my shoulder into it. Suddenly it gives and I fall forward. Incredible darkness rushes around me, and intense nothingness. It overwhelms me, destroys me. I keep falling into the nothingness, further and further when . . .

I jerk awake, sweating. My arms are braced against the couch cushions, locked and tense. I breathe heavily for a moment, trying to get my bearings. Beads of moisture are dripping down my face, as my whole body trembles. Overhead, the fan continues its endless drone. I stand up and wander over to the bed and lean against the mattress, the coolness of the sheet in sharp contrast with my skin. I flop down on the bed. "What the hell was that?"

The man lying next to me rolls over. He blinks sleepily at me and smiles. "Morning, sexy."

I snort. "Well, that's a change," I mutter.

"Hmmm?"

I shake my head. "Nothing. Would you like some coffee?"

"That would be great."

I leap out of bed, pulling on my robe. I run my palm down it. The material is soft, worn smooth in some places. I start out of the room, and then turn back. "You want cream with that Jason?"

He just stares at me for a moment, silent.

"What?" I push hair out of my face.

"My name," he said softly. "Is Paul."

"Right."

COLD TRIAL

Jason Morton

I'm sitting on the hood of my '77 Coupe DeVille, overlooking a deserted beach near the Atlantic Ocean. The wind is steady at 15 miles per hour. I don't hear anything but the timed crashing of waves and occasional noises from resituating myself on the car. I've been waiting here for twenty minutes, and just finished my third cigarette. I stay in this position, waiting for her, and light another.

I close my eyes, inhale that first drag, and memories flood my head. I'm in love with an American turned Canadian named Marly. I first came to this coastal Canadian town three months ago, through God's design or my own, but tonight I have to leave. She might leave with me, but I'm not quite sure. I open my eyes and look down the road; still no headlights.

Strange thoughts and conflicting emotions cloud my head like the fog that's slowly creeping across the sea. It's strange how when you leave a place, it seems like only seconds after you first arrived.

* * * * *

I wake up, the sea licking my hair. The first thing I notice isn't the sweat on my brow. It isn't the sound of the gulls in the distance, and I don't notice the bright sunlight peeking from behind puffed, white clouds. My eyebrow is twitching.

I rise, off the wet, ruddy sand, and try my damndest to remember the circumstances leading to the present moment. The empty bottle of whisky near my hand, or rather the contents I have ingested, offers little in the way of explanation. I remember seeing the sunrise, majestic in beauty over this unfamiliar harbor, then closing my eyes to sleep. But the sun's position indicates that it's still morning. I wander the beach, looking for my car in the nearby parking lots.

Upon finding it, I enter through the rear door and stretch across the giant backseat, resuming my slumber.

I awaken, for the second time of this morning, covered in sweat. My stomach is rumbling. I feel around my head,

searching for the spike driven into it that must be causing this headache. I shift in my seat, but my stomach stays in the same place. I open the rear door and rid myself of a large quantity of whisky and the remnants of food I don't remember eating. I raise my head and see a young boy, no more than four years of age. He is being led by his mother, but stops when we make eye contact. His mother turns her head, sees my condition, and pulls her son back to obedience.

"Lord, have mercy," she says in disgust. I try to rise, to explain, but stumble out of the vehicle, and land in the small pool of bile I just created.

"Shit." I take off my jacket, quite unnecessary considering it's August, and throw it in the trunk. I notice a landmark sign between the parking lot and the beach:

THE HISTORIC GULF OF ST. LAWRENCE - French Explorer Jacques Cartier Was The First European To Navigate This Gulf, On June 9, 1534. His First Encounter With Native Americans Came Later In 1534, On July 7, In Nearby Lands Which Are In What Is Now New Brunswick.

THIS SIGN ERECTED BY THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CHARLOTTETOWN, PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

"Oh yeah, Canada."

I decide that I need coffee to settle my stomach. I reach in my pocket, and find Canadian notes and coin. I get in my car, then drive down a simple, two-lane road. I see a sign that reads, "Charlottetown: 10 km." Fucking kilometers; I don't know what this means. I reach the town quickly, carefully gauging my speed as I travel. I spot a plain, olive green building with large, bay windows. On one of the windows is painted, "Millie's Cafe."

I park, and enter the cafe, the cleanest I've ever seen, approach the barista, and order a tall, black, French Roast coffee.

"Two dollars, please."

I hand her two of the gold coins in my pocket, and take a seat at a table, far away from the handful of other patrons. I begin looking at my hands, but eye the patrons covertly. I take a special notice of a tall young woman with short and messy black hair. She is wearing a long skirt that reminds me of curtains in my grandmother's house: Pale green fabric with brown and orange flowers stitched in it. She has a black t-shirt on, with something scrawled in white across her breasts. One sleeve seems shorter than the other, but that could be my hangover distorting perceptions. She catches my gaze.

I quickly resume the examination of my hands, but I already hear the footsteps coming closer to my table. I keep my eyes down and see black tennis shoes, Chuck T's, with mismatched socks coming out from inside them and covering the girl's ankles. I look up and rest my eyes on her physical features; the shirt says 'Bonjour!'

"What's wrong with your face?" this strange girl asks. Oddly enough, there is no stereotypical Canadian Accent.

"Huh?" I say, briefly dumbfounded. I brush my face, covered in the coarse hair that makes up my beard, feeling for cuts or swelling.

"You're dirty," she says, "There's a leaf in your beard . . . and sand, too!"

"Oh. . . thanks." I have nothing to say, but the desire to talk. I'm not from around here."

"Fair enough; Neither am I." There is a fair amount of one-upsmanship in her voice. "My name is Marlene." She sticks out a perfectly-crafted hand. "But don't call me that."

As I reach to shake her hand, the oddness of the statement catches up to me.

"What, uh, what should I call you then? Provided you want me to call you at all."

"Are you asking me on a date?"

"Heh, no . . . well not yet anyway. I don't . . . I don't know you."

"Hmm . . . funny. Well, judging from what you've seen, do you think you'd enjoy yourself?"

I stare around at the other patrons, hoping someone will recognize the awkwardness. 'Oh, that's just Marlene,' they'd say, and take her away. She would sit with her friends, eyes occasionally drifting to me and talking about things like leaves in beards. I look, across polished, green tables and shiny ashtrays, but they never come to take her. I keep my eyes on a potted plant near the door.

"So, what's your answer?" she persists.

"I don't . . . Yes, I suppose. Fuck it. Certainly, I'd have a damn good time. We'd paint the town red and have energy to paint it back the right color."

"You're strange."

"I'm strange?!"

"Where are you from?"

"What? Is this a normal greeting for you?"

"You said you're not from around here. I'm trying to help you associate with some people who know the town. So where did you come from? And don't try anything cute like 'from my parents.'"

"Hey now . . . now you're saying I'm stupid . . . Anyway, from Grand Rapids." She gives me an overstated confused look.

"Michigan."

"Oh, that place." She looks around, trying to remember something. She's biting her lip a little; it's fucking adorable. "Marly."

I give her an inquisitive look.

"That's what you can call me. Provided you want to call me at all. What's your name?"

"Noah, Noah Wright. And where is it that you come from?"

"Oh, all over the place. I'm American, like you. Actually, don't say that around here, they get pissed. *They're* American too."

"Why don't you have a seat? This could be interesting."

"Well, recently, I've lived in Montreal and New York. Before that, I was in Maine. But I was born and raised in Pittsburgh."

"You can't be more than 21 years old; why so much moving around?"

"Actually, I'm 24, but I move to different places to do certain things."

She's nearly five years older than me; there's something undeniably attractive about that. "Please, do elaborate."

"Well, before I moved to Maine, I decided that I wanted to be, uh, a lobster-catcher, or fisherwoman, I guess. I got a job there working on a wharf, and eventually I was catching fish and lobsters, and various other sea-creatures. But it turned out to be a pretty gross job."

"I imagine . . . gutting fish and whatnot . . ."

"No, not that. The old fisher-guys were always being, um, suggestive. I got sick of laughing it off when they said things like 'you can bait my hook,' plus, I already did what I came there to do, so I moved to Montreal."

"And what possessed you to do that?"

"I wanted to learn French."

"They do offer classes in that, you know."

"That's just it . . . I took French in high school. You know what

I learned? *Je ne parle pas francais*. That's it. So I put myself into a position where I had to learn it, and learn it I did. But by the time I had some mastery of it, I realized that some of the French speakers would be talking shit about me behind my back. I don't think they like Americans very much.

Anyway, one time, I got all mad and told one of 'em that Napoleon was a pussy. The guy started screaming at me, and I decided it was time to move again. So I went to the most American city I could think of: New York."

"Is there a gauge of American-ness in cities?"

"Oh, shut up, it was close. And I wanted to ride the subways. Actually, I wanted to *know* the subways. The routes that is. That wasn't too hard, it only took like six months. But that city is just . . . overwhelming. I had to get out. That's why I moved here."

"Wait, wait, wait . . . that's bullshit, that's not a reason. That's not something you wanted to do."

"I know . . . I hoped you wouldn't notice. See, I can't tell anyone what it is, or I'll never end up doing it."

* * * * *

I still haven't found out what that reason is. I would ask her to tell me when she was drunk: "No." Stoned: "Nuh-uh." After the passionate love we made that she unflinchingly referred to as 'fucking': "Nope."

I'm still contemplating what words to say to Marly. A clear and starry sky stretches above me, but the fog is battling to block it out. I want her to come with me. A red Honda Accord pulls into the lot, and I can tell by the enthusiastic honks that it's her.

But I only hear Felix's words from earlier echo in my mind.

* * * * *

"Noah who?"

"Shut up, Felix, you know who this is."

"The prodigal son himself, huh? I knew you'd call me eventually, you can't keep away for too long. Where the fuck are you, anyway? The Caller ID says some crazy number—Canada call—ha, you're in Canada?! Fuckin' awesome!"

"Yes, I'm in Canada. Prince Edward Island, to be more precise—Charlottetown."

"So what's going on up there?"

"Well, it's more *over* there, but not much, I guess. I met this girl, er, woman, out here and I've been staying with her for the past couple months."

"Wow, man, not taking things slow, huh? Well, good luck to you with that."

"Uh, I was calling to . . . hmm . . . well . . ."

"David, right? I feel so hurt that you weren't just calling to talk to me."

"Whatever, what, uh, what happened?"

"Don't worry about it; he's fine. When he dropped to the ground, he was pretending to be knocked out—he thought you were gonna kill him!"

"I was going to kill him. At least I got my point across, then."

"Easy, man. Him and Ryan are really pissed. They want their revenge, or something."

"Let 'em come get it; I don't care."

There's a hesitation in his voice, and I shift the phone to my other ear.

"But . . . there's something else."

"What? Are they coming to get me now?"

"Well, sort of. He pressed charges."

"What?"

"Yeah, you're inadvertently on the lam. They've got charges of assault against you and now . . . probably fleeing the scene or something too."

"Aw, fuck man. I can't believe he'd do that."

"Well, you're the one that fucked him up man . . . facial reconstruction don't come cheap."

"You gotta be kidding."

"Yeah, I am. But you did knock a few teeth out and gave him a concussion, I think." There is a long pause as he puts together his next statement. "I know this may just fuel the fire, too, but when they couldn't find you they, Dave and Ryan that is, spray-painted 'Coward' on your Mom's garage door."

"Fuckin' bitches."

"Well, I'm not sure it was them, but, I mean, who else would've really done it? Unless your mom has some vengeful clients at the hospital. Speaking of which, she's been worrying about you too. She's had to go down to be questioned a few times by the cops . . . She says she doesn't know what to think. It might be better if you come back and fess up."

I whisper "It might," but not necessarily into the telephone receiver.

"You still there, Noah?"

"Yuh-yeah, uh, I dunno. T-tell my mom I'll be there in a couple days, if you talk to her."

I don't even say goodbye. I hang up the phone, and that's the period in the last sentence in this chapter of my life. I pack my few t-shirts and jeans into a brown grocery bag

and put the bag in my car. I should just leave: No note, no long kiss goodbye; just gone. It's the easiest way. But I drive past Millie's Cafe and catch a glimpse of her, serving patrons, through the glass window. I picture confusion and tears on her face. I stop the car in front of the store. Small snowflakes start falling as I open the front door. Her face lights up when she sees me, but fades a little when she notices my expression.

"What's wrong?" she says.

"Why does something have to be wrong?" I ask.

"You left your car running, and you look like you're in a huff!"

"We need to talk."

"Yeah . . . now what's wrong?"

"Not here." I look about the place and notice the Christmas decorations that must have been put up recently. Several coffee-sipping regulars fix their eyes on me; one waves 'hello.' I try to smile, but it doesn't come out right. I wave back, to make up for it. I turn my eyes back to Marly.
"Not here."

"Well, just wait until I get home. I'll be out in an hour. Actually, I'll ask to leave early, if you want me to."

"Not at home, either. Somewhere else . . . neutral. Lawrence Beach, yes, Lawrence Beach."

"Noah. It's December—It's gonna be freezing out there."

"Bring some coffee, bring a coat; we need to talk."

I turn and walk to the exit. I feel the eyes of every person in the room following my every footstep. I close the door and deliberately turn around, and I see twenty pairs of eyes—green, brown, blue—shoot back down to whatever they were doing. I get in my car and drive to Lawrence Beach.

* * * * *

I get off the car's hood, but don't look at her car. I just silently continue to survey the empty beach. It's warmed up a bit, but it's not snowing. It's still cold. Stray sand on the pavement crunches beneath my feet as I shift my weight and turn my head.

She gets out of the car, teeth shining in a giant smile. It's almost enough to make me forget my troubles. She's wearing her patchwork jacket, seventy-odd shapes of mismatched fabric; no two pieces sharing an identifiable similarity.

"Hey, Noah-doll."

* * * * *

"What was that?" I ask.

"Noah-doll; why, do you like it?"

"Did you make that up just now?"

"Maybe I did, do you like it?"

"I like it . . . like most stuff that comes out of your mouth . . . except spit, maybe."

"How touching. . ."

I laugh, and the rain keeps pattering on the window. Marly just returned from the market, and she has her arms full of groceries. It looks like she's planning to cook breakfast. I continue to lay in her bed on my faded blue pillow.

". . . you need to learn that there's not a snappy comeback for everything," she says. "You should try just saying 'thank you,' or yes.'" There goes breakfast.

"I told you, I don't like pet names . . . they're cheesy."

". . . It just popped into my head; I had to say it."

"Okay, you can call me that, but once you break out the

'honeys' and 'dears,' I'm outta here."

"Fine. Will you help me with breakfast?"

"It's never easy with you, is it?"

"Shut up," she laughs. "Get your lazy ass up."

We've never had an argument last more than two minutes. Actually, we've never had a real 'argument.' Mainly just misunderstandings or disagreements. We're always talking. Rarely do we agree. I'd call it arguing, but it's always in good fun. No one's feelings get hurt and we don't yell. It's better than that.

"What the hell is this?" I ask, holding a red fruit-like thing.
"It looks fake."

"It's a pomegranate," she says. "I've never had one before, but I've always wanted to. I figured now's the time."

"Weird," I say, examining it closer. It has a glossy finish. The red makes its way to yellow and then there's a strange sprout at the top. I knock on it with one knuckle, and it sounds like a small pumpkin.

"I heard somewhere that the 'apple' in the Garden of Eden was more likely a pomegranate . . . You should cut it open."

I place this biblical fruit on the counter and find a decent-sized knife in the silverware drawer. I begin the incision, but red juice leaks out everywhere.

"Holy shit! Quick, get a towel!" The dark red juice is dripping to the linoleum floor of the kitchen. "I don't know where you get these ideas."

"Aren't they fun?"

I continue to cut, only now with a paper towel underneath to soak up the juice. I get it most of the way cut, and then pull the rest apart. It looks like a red and yellow beehive. There are clusters of little red kernels, each holding a tiny

seed. I eat one and it's the sweetest thing I've ever tasted. I pucker my lips.

"Is it sour?" She's digging a pan out of a bottom cupboard.

"No, it's really, really sweet, though. Do you eat the yellow stuff too?"

"Don't look at me."

I eat it, but it doesn't really taste like anything compared to the sweet little red things. "No, I think the red things are what we're going for."

"Well, get them out then. Put 'em in a bowl or something."

"There's thousands of them, though." I feel like giving up on this endeavor.

"They're not going to get themselves out, and we're not going to waste perfectly good fruit."

I grab a bowl out of the cupboard. Marly cracks five eggs and begins frying them. I wrestle with the fruit. It's defeating me. I try to pull the juice-things out, but half of them burst when I try.

"If you put it in water, they might loosen up a bit."

I mumble words that don't actually exist in English and grab a bigger bowl and fill it with water. The fruit comes apart easily now. Marly mixes in artichoke and spinach with the eggs. By the time the pomegranate is fully dissected, her creation is finished. There's white cheese on the eggs and a side of sausage. I must have missed her making toast.

"Now sprinkle a few of those on the top of the eggs."

"No way, that sounds horrible."

"Just do it. It's good."

I follow her instruction. "Wait a minute, I thought you said

you never had one of these things before.”

“Oh, yeah . . . I kinda lied. I really hate taking the kernels out though.”

“You tricked me?”

“Somebody needs to let you know you’re not as smart as you think you are. Besides, now you know how to eat a pomegranate.”

I try to be mad for a minute, but it doesn’t work. She prepares the plates and I make some coffee. We make our way to the living room, and sit on a secondhand brown couch. I start my meal and sip some coffee.

* * * * *

“I brought you coffee.” She hands me a steaming travel mug with no lid. “So, are you ready to talk now?”

“I . . . I guess. I don’t know what to say. I called Felix today.”

“Is he coming to visit? I want to meet him. He sounds interesting.”

“No, no . . . he’s not coming to visit . . . he’s not interesting either, but that’s something else altogether. He told me something . . . something’s happened at home . . . I have to . . . I have to go back.”

“Go? I guess I don’t understand. What could be so urgent?”

“I . . . I’m being brought up on charges . . . I know that sounds pretty random. The night before I left home, I . . . I kinda beat the dogshit outta this kid . . . a friend of mine. Well, not anymore, I guess.” Her face contorts in disbelief, but I continue on. “So what I told you about just leaving for ‘self-discovery’ wasn’t exactly a lie, but it wasn’t exactly the truth, either. But I need to go back, they’re harassing my mother, and the cops keep questioning her too.”

“No . . . you can’t go.”

* * * * *

"Well, I need cigarettes," I say.

Marly is fully nude, the grace of her body covered only by a worn, white sheet. I'm putting on my boots.

"You know what I mean," she says, hitting me her zebra-striped pillow.

"Actually, I was just gonna sneak out the back door and run away forever." I pull on a t-shirt that is lying casually on the ground. But, while my head is still in the shirt, I'm attacked. Marly is punching me in the stomach with the force of a fifth-grader; she is still quite nude.

"You, ungh . . . know what I, ungh . . . mean!" She is laughing, but I still can't see. I trip over something and stumble to the floor. Marly is still play-fighting me. I manage to pull the shirt all the way into its correct position. She starts kissing me with long and deep kisses, her tongue exploring my mouth like it's the sweetest candy she's ever tasted.

"Eathy, Eathy . . ." She pulls back her sensual assault. "Jeez, your gonna choke me, for God's Sake."

"No, if I choked you, it would be for my sake."

"I don't even know what to say to that . . ." I sit on the bed to catch my breath. Marly stands up and I look her up and down. Her hair has grown a bit, as hair tends to do, since the first time we met. It's a bit out-of-sorts, but almost like she planned it that way, as if she slept in a certain position all night to achieve a perfect look. She has little spots of tanned skin on her shoulders and arms, but her breasts and stomach are pale and striking. As soon as I've caught my breath, she resumes her attack. Eventually, I give up the notion of buying cigarettes anytime soon, and we spend the morning and a good part of the afternoon enjoying various aspects of each other's bodies.

I utter my first words in hours: "That's how the best sex happens, y'know?"

"What, like being attacked by a naked woman?"

"Something like that . . . Just, um, casually working your way into it, not trying at it too hard."

"You weren't trying, I was though."

"Which, I suppose you would say, is rare for a man, right?"

"Exactly . . . it all starts in the teenage years."

I glance at her, roll my eyes and turn my head away. "Alright, I can tell you've got some little nugget of wisdom you want to drop on me, so just do it."

"Fine, I think it all starts with pornography."

"Obviously."

"Don't patronize me; hear me out: It builds up the sexual aspirations of young guys so much that when they do have an outlet, they're still insatiable."

"Hey, being insatiable isn't a fault."

"Not necessarily, but let's consider what rides along with that."

"Okay, what?"

She sighs. "Don't act like you don't know." She looks at me and I shrug my shoulders. She sighs again. "Guys always want to do the crazy shit that they see in those movies; the types of things that no self-respecting female would ever do." She stares me dead in the eyes. I laugh the most uncomfortable laugh of my life.

"No, I still don't get what you're talking about . . . what's this 'pornography,' are there naked girls in it?" I pause and actually think about her statement. "Truthfully, I think that most guys probably get their techniques from it. It's probably the only reason why we feel comfortable doing anything besides missionary." I stand up and put on my shirt,

but she pulls me back down. "Just let me go buy a pack of cigarettes."

"Only if you tell me that we will be buried next to each other when we die."

"That's a bit morbid, don't you think?"

"It's not morbid; it's beautiful."

It was about time to let her in on the truth: "I love you."

As quickly as my shirt had been put on, it comes back off. "You can't just say that and expect to go to the store afterwards."

I'll never get a pack of cigarettes at this rate.

* * * * *

I light another as the wind picks up. "I want you to come with me."

"That's convenient, isn't it." It's the first time I've heard spite in her voice. "Noah, I don't have anything to fall back on . . . Anyway, I'm not going to leave with you just so you can be imprisoned, leaving me in some town that I don't want to be in. Besides, I can't just leave yet. Can't it wait?"

"No, it can't." As quickly as the spite entered her voice, detachedness enters mine. "I have to go, if you won't go with me, I'll go without you."

Her tough exterior, the hard shell of her persona, falls away and her eyes turn glassy. A tear plummets to the sand.

"I like how this is so easy for you to announce. 'Well, I'm outta here. It's been nice, but I gotta go.'"

"You think this is easy?! I've been sitting here since I saw you at work, chain smoking. I can stay here and forget responsibility and live in comfort . . . or I can go back. But when I want to go back, to see my mother or my friends, I'll

be waiting for someone with a warrant to end my good times. I'm not about to hide from something I did." I feel the stronger winds rolling in off the sea. "This all some sort of—trial for me. A cold trial on the seaside. I knew that whichever decision I made, I would be judged—you think I don't care for this, for you. But you should know that's not true. I can't help that I have to go, I just do."

"You need to know that," she says, between sobs, "once you're home, that's it. You'll be in a cell, or at least not allowed to leave the state. But even if you could, it's so hard to take that first step out the door. Why do you think I never looked back? Because I'd be trapped. You'll be trapped, too. You'll think it's so hard to get back. You'll think 'how did I ever get there to begin with?' Then you'll forget about it, about me and more importantly about us."

"How, how could I forget? I won't forget. I'll be back." I try to brush a tear from her cheek, but she pushes my hand away.

She regains her composure, and that composure begets callousness. "If that's how it has to be, then that's how it is."

There is no kiss, no embrace that can set things straight. There will be no punctuation on this last sentence of the chapter. No "The End," credits rolling, with a slow pan to a cloud-speckled sky.

She walks around to the driver's side of her car. "I hope you don't forget, Noah Wright. I can only hope you never forget."

"But I'll come back." But it's useless, she's already closed the door. The engine turns over and she keeps her eyes away from mine as she leaves the beach. I stand in that desolate parking lot and smoke two more cigarettes before I even set foot in my car. My eyes fill with tears that I try my damndest not to shed.



Lee Honors College, 2005



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