
June 2014

The Laureate, 6th Edition (2007)

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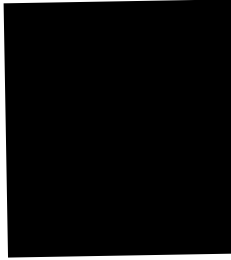


THE LAUREATE

Literary Journal

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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.

2007 marks the sixth edition of *The Laureate*: Western Michigan University's undergraduate literary journal. This journal is a reflection of the undergraduate students at Western Michigan University who possess a passion for the craft of writing. *The Laureate* is an arena in which students can share their creative works for their contemporaries to enjoy.

The pages that follow are filled with what the assistant editors and I feel are best fit for publication—the pieces selected offer a blend of genre, subject, style and form—presented in a manner that should be cohesive for the reader. At first, the idea of spearheading this journal seemed as though it would be an arduous task, but as the fall progressed and the submissions came in the process proved to be quite enjoyable. Pulling all of this together would have been impossible without the help of the assistant editors, Lee Honors College and The Design Center, School of Art, WMU.

For those who submitted, thank you, this seems to be a difficult step for writers—submitting one's work. And that is the goal of *The Laureate*: to give the undergraduate students here at Western Michigan University an opportunity to publish their writing. These pages showcase some of the best undergraduate writers at Western Michigan University, enjoy.

Bill Bradley

Editor in Chief

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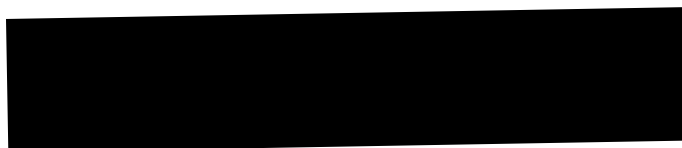




TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chris Carter	Reverie	3
Jim Bigari	The Walk at Twilight	4
Andrew Soliday	Price Drop Zone	6
Steven Kiley	Even the Small Green Lamp	9
Bradley Post	Lottery of Romantics	19
Jenna Caschera	Tomato Hornworms	20
William Cole	Pagan Baby	21
Ashley Hillard	Where it Starts	22
Andrew Soliday	C.Z.X.P.	23
Jason Hescock	The Problem	24
Jake Frye	An American Comic (a pantoum)	29
Kelly Granito	Matt's Sestina	30
Jason Hescock	A Pack of Modern Men Crash a Wedding Party and Their Tacit Beliefs Become Manifest	32
Jason Hescock	Check, Please	33
Jennifer Dempsey	Leg, Gun, Run	44
Alicia Infantino	Lady in Transit	47
Luke Sharrow	Road Notes	50
Ashley Hillard	Of Possibilities on a Boat	52
Stephanie Yates	Czech Dogs Don't Say Hello	53
Dustin Hoffman	Gwen Frostic	59
Jake Frye	Walking Through the Guitar Capital of the World	60
Chris Carter	Nothing Can Outpace a Tuna	62
Bill Bradley	Strings	63



REVERIE

CHRIS CARTER

I sniffed gasoline
all through seventh grade,
he told me one night.

How the hell do you do that,
I asked him.

Easy, he said,
Let me show you.

He took the nozzle,
put his mouth right over it
and started sucking in
long and slow,
drawing in as deep as his
lungs would allow.
Held it, held it, held it
then blew the fumes out,
falling against the stack
of wood behind him,
eyes closed in unleaded
reverie.

THE WALK AT TWILIGHT

JIM BIGARI

It is like the walk at twilight
that ends in that moment between.
When the world thinks you cannot see
and unwittingly reveals to you its night prowlings.
But upon entering your house
you turn and look out your window
and the world has gone black.

One cannot see
without leaving the house.
We must open the door
and be berated by the cold night air that is uncertainty.

Our parents have told us
that we are made in the image of god.
But we are clearly made in their image.
What are they getting at?

This house I inherited from my father,
and from my mother.
It is made with honest care
but the foundations are weak
It is dangerous...condemned,
but it is familiar and comfortable.
A trap,
deadly if not acknowledged,
holy if recognized.
One can only take so many cracked floorboards.
When it rains the water leaks down onto my sleeping head
and makes me dream of drowning.
So I relinquish this house.
One night I will return from that walk,
I will get to the door,
but I will not enter.
I will leave the door open wide,
letting all the uncertainty flood in.
I will own what I have rejected,
but what was always mine.
I will hold it close.
I will sit with it in the fading light.
Silent like old friends
who have played the game of words
but know each other best in the quiet scenery before them.
Here in this new spot
with my old friend,
now new,
I will build my own house
with doors that never close.

PRICE DROP ZONE

ANDREW SOLIDAY

Moons were on sale
at the grocery store.

Full moons
twenty five percent off,
half moons fifty.
Waning and waxing varieties
buy one get one.

I stood there
curiously deciding
which variety I wanted.

How many moons
do I need
to hold me over?
How many moons
do I need to forget?
How many moons
do I need to fill my cup?



A child
to my left approaches
and looks upon the deals.
Her eyes glimmer
as she sees
the waxing crescent
in front of her mouth,
a smile like a Cheshire cat.

"I will never
fade," she explains.
"Time is dead,
time is dead."
She spins and dances
around the aisle
still holding the crescent
to her lips.

Her mother approaches
with an empty cart.
I look at her wearing a yellow bell
shaped dress and black
sharpened heels.

The woman orders
her daughter
to put the crescent down.

The child is saddened
when the crescent is removed
from her lips.

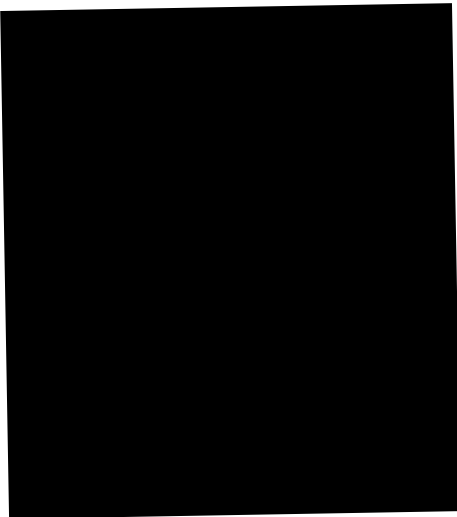
I think of the way
that I have perceived the moon
as a child.

The moon
looking sideways
at me,
telling me riddles
through my bedroom
window.
The moon
levitating high
above the clock tower.
The moon
disappearing
into the black slip
of space
that I envied
as a child.

The slip that separates
us all
from what is seen
and what is not seen.
The slip I was in,
the slip we all
have been in.

As I put two full moons
into my cart,
I look out the windows of the store
and notice the mother
and daughter walking out.

The two are heading towards
the sun
rising in the east.
The mother
and daughter
are both black silhouettes
as the smile
of the Cheshire
cat fades
overhead.



EVEN THE SMALL GREEN LAMP

STEVEN KILEY

Emilio felt hot tears in his eyes. He stood over the smashed remnants of a plastic Santa someone had left near the edge of a bank parking lot. It was ridiculous to see, a plastic Santa in the middle of March. Immediately it had made him angry. With swift kicks he had assaulted it, reducing it to a white and red plastic u-shape. He did not feel any less frustrated. The air was cold around him. His old shoes, inches deep in slush, were no longer waterproof. Pain shot intermittently from his toes. Looking down at the crushed plastic he still felt angry, but could no longer muster the will to stomp it. The tears threatened to pour out. He shouted, roared, threw his fists up in a display to no one in particular. His hands twisted as though gripping some invisible parcel. A high-pitched shout was muffled by his clenched lips as he kicked the crushed plastic one last time. He took a deep breath and collected himself before stepping into the bank parking lot, his jacket tattered and tight. He occasioned sips from a brown bag, which he nestled in his inner pocket. The city of Chicago loomed from the east, a vast cemented pillar of light and sound. White luminescence rubbed the sky all around it, like the aura of a great beast. Seeing it from a distance he could imagine the whole city rearing up, bucking and flinging the masses from it. Tearing at the pipes, tubes and black lengths of road until it broke free; running for the open spaces to the west or perhaps diving into the blackness of the lake. But when he got there it always seemed so different, everything divided and subdivided into squares and rectangles, thinning at the peaks and spiraling down into the subways and basements that spread like roots beneath it.

He had gone west out of town trying to find work. A classified ad listed a concrete pouring company in Bensenville looking for help. Ecstatic about his interview Jeffrey supplied money for his cab fare. The interview went quite poorly. Choosing to walk back, he spent the remaining money on scotch. It was still early but the sun swung low, its light slanted. He was walking and mumbling to himself when a familiar voice shouted to him. Confused he searched for the source. Underneath a streetlight she was leaning against the pole, wearing an odd combination of gray and yellow and looking painfully thin. Laughing she waved him over. They exchanged their greetings and she commented that she hadn't expected to see him again. When he told her he was staying in a room in Jeffrey's house she looked away.

"He's no good." She shook her head. Emilio shrugged. "You seen what he did to me." She shuddered. Hugging herself she asked how long he thought it could last, how long before he would be on the street again. He shrugged trying to explain that Jeffrey had turned over a new leaf, but she shouted him down. "You know what you oughta do..." she stopped. "You wanna go back on the street with nothing?" she studied his face. He began walking away and

she ran up to him. In his ear she whispered where he could find her, if things started to fall apart.

That night when he got back Jeffrey asked him how the interview had gone, to which he only grunted. He sniffed, commented that Emilio smelled like booze, and immediately began a tirade. It was impossible to understand how he could fail to find

a job. Was he enjoying his free ride? Emilio recoiled, growing angrier with each word. When Jeffrey asked if he thought his patience limitless Emilio punched the table, shouting that he had never asked for any help.

There was silence and they stared at each other. Calmly Jeffrey went into his room and brought out his bible.

He clasped Emilio's shoulder and began praying, punctuating his words with hard slaps. Emilio stared at Jeffrey's closed eyes, perplexed. Once done praying he sniffed and said his patience wasn't limitless.



It was on a Sunday that he first met Claire Louise Duhamel and Jeffrey Wayne Stehle. They were odd to see together; Claire tall and pale, Jeffrey short and dark. Both had eyes like chameleons and in the winter when fevered chills shook him, he swore their pupils floated in different directions. The first day he met them they were sitting in Ada Park under a tree passing a bottle of bourbon around.

"Can I get a pull?" he asked.

Claire laughed slowly, a guttural sound with an abrasive falsetto riding atop. Jeffrey shook his head, his breath whistling through his gapped mouth. "What ya gonna give me?" He gave Emilio a quizzical look then reluctantly handed him the bottle. He tipped it up to his mouth and drank. Immediately some of it went down the wrong pipe causing him to choke and cough. Claire was rocking in a fit of gasps and squeaks. "Boy, look a'tcha face!"

- 10 He wheezed and recovered, laughing at himself before handing the liquor back. They introduced themselves, asking where he was headed. Nowhere in particular, he told him. They nodded. "Got no place to go, huh?" Jeffrey grunted. "Neither do we." The bourbon rotated around and he sat, some unseen force pulling him lower and lower before finally pinning him down. Claire and Jeffrey began to bicker and he listened complacently to their nonsense fight.

So it was, week after week, Emilio stumbling into the park; sweating in summer,

shivering in winter. Night after night he melted in a peculiar mixture of fatigue and vigor. Things would always start with laughter and end with screaming.

That's how it happened, one night in the dead of winter, sitting in a row on a park bench, their hands and faces red. What was once a snowman stood directly in front of them not ten feet away. Repeated thawing and re-freezing had warped it beyond recognition, forming the top and edges in consistent wavy lines as though it were a pulpit painted by Salvador Dali. Sitting in a row staring at it reminded him of going to church with his mother. The way she would wake up hours early and brush her hair until it was perfect before combing his. She would pinch his cheeks and tell him how handsome he was. "My little Emilio." Her plump face was always tucked in a smile when she combed his hair. The smell of eggs and chorizo stuck to the air densely so he could still smell it when they got home from church. His suit was too big for him then, and by the time it fit properly she couldn't get him out the door on Sundays.

Emilio was lost in such thoughts, not paying attention to Claire and Jeffrey arguing when Jeffrey stood and struck Claire in the mouth. She shrieked and he hit her again and again. Emilio sat in a stupor, still hazy and shocked. Jeffrey straddled her legs, laying punches into her stomach over and over. He was screaming something Emilio couldn't understand and she was screaming, crying and begging for his help. Slowly he stood, heart pounding, staring at the inky human shapes roiling in the snow. He kicked and caught Jeffrey in the face, but it didn't slow his assault on her. Again he kicked his head, this time succeeding in ending the attack. Jeffrey turned towards him and leapt off Claire, looking very much like a bullfrog, his gut hanging from his torn shirt. He struck Emilio in the chest and stomach driving him back with shortened cries. He fell and Jeffrey immediately dove on him socking him in the face. Blood flowed into his mouth and he realized, quite suddenly, a liquor bottle was in his hand. The world was flashing white when he swung it and he was unsure if it had struck home. Darkness overtook light and he moved his hands to his face. He was no longer under attack, that much he knew, but why was everything so black? He lay moaning in fear and pain before Claire's swollen face eclipsed his vision.

"You gonna live?" her gruff statement couldn't hide her gratitude. She helped him up and the world spun. Light and clarity slowly returned to him. She brought him to the bench where he slouched and closed his eyes. When he opened them again she was gone.

That was the last he saw of them for a long time. Every night for weeks he still went to the park, searching near every tree and bench. By day he wandered the streets shaking from cold and withdrawal. Holes were spreading across his coat and it no longer kept the wind out. Slowly he felt himself decline. He shivered all day and he couldn't feel his hands even after cupping them inside his pants. Snot dripped down his face and in his throat. Air came in hard, ineffective wheezes until he could no longer walk more than a few yards without succumbing to vertigo. Reality shifted, twisted, and moved beyond him. The normally alternating orbs of the sun and moon appeared in nonsensical order. Darkness followed darkness and light went on for days. He would wake not remembering lying down. He would arrive somewhere without memory of walking, shaky and unsure of what he had intended to do.



"Emilio." His father's voice was reserved, his hand outstretched. Emilio set his bags down and shook the hand. It was hard and the skin scaly. "Was your trip good?" Emilio shook his head up and down. His father was fatter than he had imagined, his belly a hard, spherical mass of tissue. His eyes were dark and time had stretched deep lines from them; out, up, down, merging and crossing. He was only thirty-six but time had been harsh. He looked nothing at all like the man in the pictures his mother had shown him. She was surprised when he said that he wanted to contact his father, but she gave him the phone number. When he asked if she ever talked to him she stammered out "sometimes" before adding, "on holidays." He wondered why she never let him talk to his father if she had been calling all those years, but didn't ask. "Seventeen, huh?" his father sniffed and ran his hand under his nose. "You look good. You look real good." He stooped and grabbed Emilio's bag. "Let's get going, you're probably beat." His father walked away and Emilio tried to follow, but his legs were numb and wobbly. He wanted to shout, but his words were slight and jumbled. In steps he descended to the tile floor, his father's back shrinking. Suddenly he was in his father's arms, only he had changed. He had a mustache now and looked like someone else. He kept repeating "you're gonna be ok" over and over. They were no longer inside and the sun hung at its odd winter angle. Darkness crept over his peripheral before consuming his vision. Only the bright spot of the sun remained, sending shapes of purple, blue and white in spirals until nothingness overtook him.



He awoke in a bed too small for himself. The sheets wrapped his hanging feet. Babbling he struggled to sit up, not comprehending his mummification. Turning and pushing he fell, wrapping himself in the process. Shakily he stood, one arm pinned in the sheets the opposing arm free and on his face. He was in his room, from the house he had lived in until he was twelve. Someone had taken down all his posters and put up new wallpaper. His

wallpaper had been the planets of the solar system with a border of little rocket ships blasting off. Now it was brown striped on a white, flowered face. Little geraniums and daisies grew out of pots in twos and threes, occasionally broken by a pot of lilies.

"Who took all my posters." He mumbled. His hand slid down the wall, the brown stripes of the wallpaper bending out above him at impossible angles. Yet there it was. "There it is." His chin rested against the wall, his eyes staring up. The wall grew taller and he whimpered as a burning sensation intensified on his chin. Suddenly his free hand touched the ground, palm bent up. He yelped and thrashed, weaving the sheets tighter. Moaning desperately he rolled onto his knees. The wall was leaning in above him and it looked like it would collapse if it warped any more. Crying out he tried to free his other arm. Spots swam on his vision. He stood angrily and it was like he hit the ceiling. The room split in two equal and intersecting halves then disappeared.



Water boiled over the lip of the pot onto the stove, steaming and hissing on the burner. The radio was set at low volume and static cut the signal severely making the music indiscernible. Emilio stood in the kitchen watching the water boil over. He called to his mother but there was no answer. Nervously he watched the pot wondering if he should do something. He knew how to turn the burners on and off but his mother was always telling him not to touch the stove. Again he called out to her with the same result.

With an agitated grunt he stalked into the living room. His mother sat in an old wooden rocking chair, her nose in a book. On the cover a woman with sad eyes stood next to a lighthouse beneath a full moon. Waves swelled towards the rocks below her with all the foam, droplets and spray caught in mid-action. He called to her, quietly. Her brow was furrowed and her eyes intensely ate the pages. He called loudly, stamping his foot.

She stirred, moving the book slowly towards her lap without taking her eyes off of it. He shouted at her again. "What!" she shouted back. In a quiet voice he told her about the pot. "You didn't touch the stove did you?" she stood. He shook his head as she pushed him out of her path into the kitchen.

13



Emilio rode the smell of fried eggs into consciousness. It caused him to salivate, which in turn caused him to lick his lips. He heard someone chuckle and opened his eyes. The blinds were open so the room was full of light and

gentle shadows. His feet hung off the end of the bed again, wrapped in sheets. His head lolled towards the sound, his eyes slowly focusing on the face. The man sitting next to his bed was clean-shaven with short cropped hair. He wore red and black flannel. Filling his face was a smile, forming the same lopsided shape as his crossed arms. It took a moment to register, and it wasn't until he looked at the fat stomach propped up on the man's legs that it hit him.

"Jeffrey?" His voice was raw. The man nodded and handed him a glass of water. Emilio lay in a haze as Jeffrey went into the kitchen and made eggs and toast. The room looked different now, the feeling of familiarity gone. When he brought in the food Emilio ate greedily. Casually Jeffrey asked if he liked the apartment. He muttered yes between bites. Truthfully it was quite run down. The walls were stained in yellow shades, and the carpet worn. A strong funk filled the room. Without paying attention to his response Jeffrey began his story.

After his fight with Claire he had hit rock bottom. Wandering the streets he had found himself at the Gospel Mission. It was fate, he told Emilio, that he had wandered there. The Lord had been calling him, across the desolate life he had built. He slapped the table hard with each point of his story. Through all the drugs, booze, and sin God's love had found him. Emilio eyed him skeptically but kept silent. A nearby restaurant had employed him as a short-order cook, and friends he had made at the Mission had set him up with this apartment. All of this was possible, Jeffrey pointed at the sky, only by the grace of God. When Jeffrey brought out his Bible and began reading a section of it goose bumps broke out over Emilio's skin. After he read he grabbed his

shoulder and began praying. Emilio's heart began to race.

He wanted to push his hands back and run from the room. Jeffrey spoke clearly and slowly his hand alternating between squeezing and slapping. He was relieved when Jeffrey finished praying and let go, red marks left on his shoulder. He cleared Emilio's plate and on his way out told him he could stay as long as he wanted. Then he closed the door advising Emilio to get some rest.



Emilio watched the street below him through the window in his room. Some children played in the road, screaming every time a car drove through. It was unnecessary to scream and run as they did. Cars came infrequently and drove slowly over the pocked surface. Once a car passed, the children returned to the slush in their little rubber boots. His mind was on the dream he continued

having. Maybe it wasn't always the same dream. Sometimes it was in a house, sometimes in a park, once it had even been a department store. What happened was always the same, or at least similar. He was sitting next to Jeffrey and Claire, and their fight would repeat. He sat frozen, fear and resentment filling him up. Sometimes it would be his father and Claire would become his mother, morphing and molding under the weight of blows. When he had returned from seeing his father he asked his mother why she had left him. Caught by surprise she could only stammer "it wasn't something that needed to be discussed." He had guilted her, goaded her for the better part of an hour until, flustered, she shouted that he had beaten her. He was immediately sorry he had asked. Jeffrey interrupted his reverie, telling him dinner was ready. Sighing he stood and followed him into the kitchen, where a small table occupied one corner.

Jeffrey sat across the fold-out table sipping from a can of Coca-Cola. He devoured his food in bouts and thumbed a newspaper in silence between gulps. Head down, he avoided Emilio's eyes. It was silent, except for their loud chewing. Occasionally Jeffrey would give Emilio hurried glances, saying nothing. Once they were finished eating he pulled the paper from under the corner of his plate and handed it to Emilio.

"You been here a few weeks..." He trailed off. The paper was open to the classified section. Hasty circles were drawn around several of the ads.

"And you think I need a job," Emilio offered. It was true, he had lived in this apartment for weeks, leaving seldom and sleeping often. He said he'd take a look at what was available. Jeffrey nodded and began cleaning the table as Emilio shuffled into the tiny living room. He flicked on the lone green table lamp and read slowly to the sound of the kitchen faucet. In Bensenville there was a concrete pouring job available. It was something he had done for several years when he was younger. He found a pen and marked the entry before setting the paper to the side and turning on the television.



Emilio sat in the room Jeffrey was letting him use. Outside the sun was setting behind the gentle, slush covered hills to the west. The day was warm and people were venturing outside to enjoy the late March weather. Emilio had not spoken to Jeffrey since their argument over this interview. He mulled over the past days in his mind. When he decided to find Claire it was a choice he made quite suddenly. She was standing at the corner exactly where she said she would be. He had been about to turn around when she had seen him, waving and grinning. From his coat pocket he had pulled a wrapped sandwich and given it to her.

15

"You think 'bout what I say?" she had blurted with the last of the sandwich still in her mouth. It was why he had gone to her, but his nerves had unraveled. His throat was tight and he was unable to speak. "He's no good. You know he's no good." Emilio had opened his mouth, surprised to find

himself defending Jeffrey. "He gonna throw you out. You know dat." His eyes were pinched as he nodded. "How 'bout it?" she had gently rubbed his shoulders with her long fingers. He had said yes without looking at her, at the gaps in her grin, at her hard eyes. She had asked when and he had said tomorrow, since Jeffrey always worked late on Saturday. She asked where and he hesitated, reluctant to cross that threshold. "Emilio..." she had whispered, filling his ear like the sound of water. Gently she rubbed his arm, saying his name over and over. His numb lips had formed the words, and as soon as they shut again she had been gone.

Lost in thought the bulk of Saturday moved quickly behind him. Across the street the blinds were drawn on the windows of the dingy apartment complex. Light was being drawn from the room, anchored to the sun. In darkness he sat watching the sparse traffic until his thoughts pulled him into sleep.



There was a rapping at the door and it woke him. With a start he fell out of his chair and clambered on the floor towards the living room. When he opened the door Claire was in mid knock; one hand stretched up towards the door, head whipping from over her shoulder, a puzzled look on her face. For a moment neither of them spoke. Then she let out a hoarse laugh. Her laugh was throatier than he remembered, aspirated and full of grit. With her willowy arms at her side, she cocked her head and asked if he was ready. He nodded and she came in. Realizing it was dark he flipped the light switch and she looked around. She announced she had found some bags and tossed a pile of burlap and plastic sacks on the floor. He said nothing.

"You really ready?" she eyed him suspiciously.

16 "Yeah." He swallowed hard. They decided to split up the rooms. She would take the kitchen and living room. He would take both bedrooms. They would leave out the back fire escape. Immediately she began sorting through the oversized pile on the coffee table. Some things were thrown into a burlap sack while others were tossed on the floor. He could see no reason in what she took. TV guides and dirty silverware, losing lottery tickets and half a jar of peanut butter; what was the point in taking any of it?

"You gonna doing somethin'?" her question jarred him. He backed up a few steps before turning and slipping into Jeffrey's room.

Every movement in the small room created a cacophony. The sliding of the tiny plastic wheels on the sides of the drawers, the scrape of each wire hanger along the metal pole they hung from. His steps, backwards, forwards, round and

round, searching, digging, rooting through the pitiful wealth another man had accumulated. His ears burned, he couldn't hold his hands still. The room was spinning around him, papers and clothes flying around in the air as though a strong wind were sweeping through it. Back and forth he ran, ransacking in unordered fervor. He took the clock from the wall: nine-forty-five. There was a stack of twenty-dollar bills in the sock drawer: two-hundred-sixty dollars. A black comb, a dirty plastic mug, three spoons, five forks, a steak knife with a wooden handle, sixteen warm cans of coca-cola, an oversized trench coat, a mercury thermometer caked with dried, translucent goop. He was stuffing socks and stained pairs of underwear into a plastic trash bag when movement caught his eye. Babble dripped from him as he turned about face. It was the mirror on the wall next to the bed. He approached it as a waterfall of jingling silverware fell into a bag in the kitchen. Sweat beaded above his single continuous eyebrow. His eyes were red, open wide to display the serpentine paths of all the little veins. Scabs, mostly healed, still dotted his lips were they had chapped. Jeffrey had given him a razor but he had not used it in several days. Dense stubble formed symmetrical carpeting on his jaw. Cabinet doors creaked as they were violently opened. Hollow knocks resounded as cups were swept into a bag. That look in his eyes, the way his pupils dilated and contracted with uncertainty; how that made his eyes seem to waver. The refrigerator door slammed into the wall, condiment jars clinking together.

A thin line of black filled the space between his barely parted lips. The coat he was wearing was one Jeffrey had given him. It was badly tattered but warm. Lines were carving up his face, borders for tiny countries around his eyes and mouth. No longer contained, sweat moved in currents down his face, around the sides in big drops and down the middle in a crawling sheen. For a time he studied himself in the mirror, looking at every line, memorizing the distance between his eyes, the length of his nose, and the set of his jaw. He wasn't sure how long he stood transfixed.

"You ready?" Claire's voice started him. She struggled to lift three full bags onto her shoulders. How did you get three full bags? He wanted to shout at her. There had been almost nothing in the apartment to begin with. He looked down at the single half full bag clutched in his hand. "That's all you takin'?" His eyes flitted between her and the mirror, he couldn't answer. She followed his gaze and walked up to the mirror, looking at her reflection. Casually she pulled it from the wall and placed it in a burlap sack. Pulling the bags behind her she slid through the doorway. Over her shoulder she called for him to follow. As they climbed through the window onto the fire escape he surveyed the apartment. Everything was overturned, what hadn't been taken was scattered in piles. It had been thoroughly ransacked of its valueless treasures. The metal legs of the coffee table were removed so it lay conspicuously on the floor. Next to the grimy couch the end table was overturned, the small green lamp gone. There was a clean square on the lopsided, dusty entertainment center. He looked at the three bulging bags in her hands,

realizing that she had stowed the small television in one of them. Head half in the window he searched for something, anything that they had not taken. Claire tapped his shoulder, asking him to carry one of her bags. He mumbled and picked the sack up, closing the window as he turned away.

LOTTERY OF ROMANTICS BRADLEY POST

Kept up, by light from lamps
Lamps set behind to form
silhouettes for the people.
They watch lamps from living rooms.

Came around from light,
A shovel would make space.
In the snow
for people to walk.
They moved

with lamps and unfolded hands
in silhouette
made cold movements. waiting
in rhythm to the snow.
If it were here
but in layers. With leaves hidden underneath.
Forgotten to rake into piles
in backyards to burn
and make smoke
for memories of little kids.

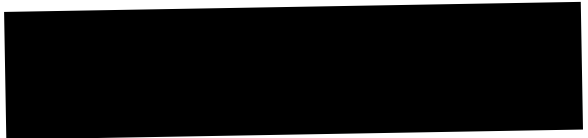
Just shadows from the fire
Hidden in corners of the room.
Crept to the walls and the ceiling and the floor.
Like ribbon of hands wrapping the night
like morning would a bird.

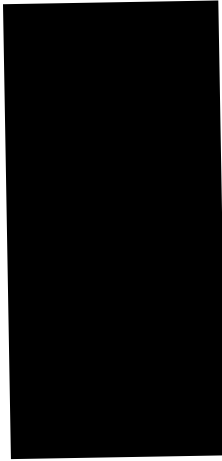
TOMATO HORNWORMS

JENNA CASCHERA

High humidity
is my mother
huffing, "It's muggy."
Her hair wild, wispy,
sticking to her neck.
She is dripping, skin
flushed, weeding
between the tomatoes.
My nose and cheeks
pink, raw, peeling
outer layers, revealing
tender ripening. She
squeezes lotion down
my arms, hands me
chopsticks and a brown
paper lunch bag.

I am an Asian porcelain
doll, wearing my nightgown,
plucking juicy plump
caterpillars, suctioned
to branches, the size
of my fingers. My mother
sweats into the dirt. Horned
dragons crash into the bag.





PAGAN BABY

WILLIAM COLE

Jesus, Buddha, and Muhammad
take their tea with me.

Jesus takes cream;

Muhammad sugar;

Buddha just drinks his straight.

Wisdom grows like fruit on trees:

Sometimes pears;

sometimes grapes;

sometimes bananas.

Maybe I don't like apples,

but I eat them anyway

'cause they're good for me.

Or maybe I'll just throw it away,
and let the whole thing go to waste,
where mold and fungus feed on it
and breed a new world into being:

Tiny trees growing on an apple

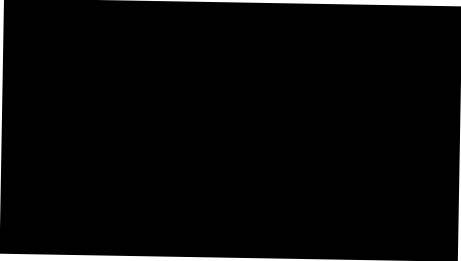
With tiny people living under them,

Building tiny monuments

Of three men taking tea.

WHERE IT STARTS

ASHLEY HILLARD



A chair bares creases, its deep
feet like a bathtub, beware
on a boat or a peel—
cantaloupe or the back of a wheel—
for it slopes and slopes,
only wood, hinged with steel.
Sticking out is a nail and all nails
on the feet of all mammals, scratching
another life in tree trunks,
on a path of rosemary is an arm
or a long liquid
or branches searching and reaching
my father, until he lays in it, rolls all about
in its mosses and pasturing movements,
where most types of ants dwell,
while way over head, the wind
howls my fathers home, smoke
from beneath woolen blankets.
A black bird catches in this
new current. How she sputters,
cough, she is falling, the wind
whistling through her feathers,
leaves. Father opening
his hands, lets her fall
into them, her wing in his hands,
aflutter, and he feels
for a minute her dying
breaths and beatings
of feather, the fighter, she speaks:
care for earthworms and smooth shells
peeled from beetle backs—their soundings,
their taste and nutrient are all we have left.

C.Z.X.P.
ANDREW SOLIDAY

Standing in grandfather's
antique toy shoppe, I admire

hollow
porcelain heads
with musty smiles, wanting

to feel flesh
against their dusted-
over shell.

My grandfather sleeps at night
with broken pieces of porcelain
that cling
to his skin
like a quilt.

These were the nights
after his wife had left him,

these were the nights
when love was a luxury.

THE PROBLEM

JASON HESCOCK

"Now what's the problem?"

"The problem is that I can't come up with a conflict," remarked Fields Stylus while messaging each of his temples with a middle finger. He was looking through the pub window at the motionless, inertia laden clouds. His friend, Gregor Gutenberg, frequently attempted to help him out of his writing slumps by 'attacking the problem head on.'

"You just have to attack the problem head on. What the hell do you mean you can't come up with a conflict? There's a million conflicts going on all the time. Just look at the world around you." He made a swooping arm gesture that, at some point in time, had become the international signal for 'the whole world.' "There's wars going on, there's criminals on the run from the law, there's a million things going on." *Fields was thinking: is 'there's criminals' a proper grammatical construction? It should be 'there are.' Do people actually use phrases like 'on the run from the law?'* "There's husbands and wives—or is it 'there are?'" Fields gave an affirmative nod. "Okay, there are people getting divorced, husbands catching their wives cheating on them, drug dealers in shootouts, and a million other crazy conflicts going on." *Is 'a million' his stock number for any large amount? It's his and a million other people's.* Gregor finished his I-know-what-I'm-talking-about-you-should-listen-to-me pontificating, and set down his pintglass authoritatively. Is he always going to set down his pintglass when making an assertion? I guess there's no reason why he wouldn't.

"I guess you're right. It does seem like there is always some type of conflict going on between people. There are lots of problems between people that oscillate back and forth until someone gains the upper-hand and then the problem is resolved." *Is it fairly obvious that he has the upper-hand right now?* "I mean, I guess, I could write a story about a girl who as a teenager becomes addicted to heroin, prostitutes herself as a means to pay for each fix, then eventually kicks the habit and becomes a successful executive at an anti-drug non-profit organization. Plus there is the heroin/heroine thing. That's kind of clever, right?" *That's really not very clever.*

24

"It's really not very clever. But you have an interesting plot right there. People love the eventual triumph theme. Look at Cinderella. People love that." *Really?* "I mean, if you look at the stories that people like they're pretty much the same." *The people or the stories?* "Most people like the same kind of stories." *That doesn't mean they're good.* "I mean, I know, it doesn't mean that the stories are good. But if you don't want to be another poor writer trying to change the face of literature you should become used to it." *This sounds like a load of bullshit to me.* "I know it sounds like a load of bullshit, but it's how

it works. Take your heroin-addicted heroine, for example." *I'm surprised he didn't say 'par exempla.'* "Or should I say 'par exempla.' Anyway, you make the reader feel sorry for her, as though it wasn't her fault that she became an addict, she fights back and forth with her addiction, and the power shifts from one to the other." *Should I try to steal the upper-hand over Gregor yet? Nah, give him a minute.* "Then the moment comes when she gets her job as an anti-drug crusader. People eat that shit up, man." Gregor finished his pontificating, and set down his pintglass authoritatively. *Does he always have to set down his pintglass authoritatively? I guess it's just in his character.*

"I get what you're saying." Fields stopped to take a drink from his pintglass; this was his customary pre-counterpoint pause. *I wonder if people notice that I always take a sip before making a counterpoint.* "But, as a counterpoint, what if my heroine never kicks her heroin addiction? Then there isn't much oscillating going on. Is there? Tell me how your triumph theme works out then." *Who's controlling the conversation now?*

"If your heroin addict never kicks her addiction, then the heroin eventually gets the upper-hand. There is still a conflict and a resolution even if it isn't what people necessarily want to hear. The protagonist doesn't always win in the end." Gregor finished his point and his drink, and then set down his pintglass authoritatively. *That's a damn good point. I'm kind of tired of him setting down his pintglass authoritatively, even if it is part of his character. Alright, focus, Fields, focus! You can't lose to him. Counterpoint—counterpoint—counterpoint.*

Fields stopped to take a drink from his pintglass. "Okay, I concede that you win that point." He takes another sip. *There must be a good counterpoint coming.* "What if the character is just an average person? I mean, I know, regular people have conflicts, but can you write a story about a guy who goes to work every day for fifty years, raises a family, has a happy marriage, and then dies at seventy-two." *Is that the average male lifespan? Nevermind, it isn't important.* "However long men live these days. The length isn't important. I mean, what am I going to do in that situation? Am I supposed to write a scene of conflict built on an awkward silence?" Fields looked at Gregor, and shrugged his shoulders. Gregor stared blankly in return. Fields waited for a reply. No reply. Gregor looked out the pub window, feigning rumination. He was hoping that Fields would start talking again. He didn't. Gregor looked over toward the bar in hopes that something would happen. It didn't. He stared intently at the table, rubbing his index finger over a nonexistent spot. He glanced up at Fields, who was still silently staring at him. Gregor turned his pintglass in half circles, and thumbed away some

condensation. Fields sat scratching his chin.

"Are you waiting for me to say something?" Gregor demanded.

"Yes. I did ask you a question."

"I thought it was rhetorical." *It sort of was.*

"Do you see my point? What's important is that people's lives don't follow your idea of tugging back and forth until someone finally gains power over the other, and then ending with a resolution to finish it all." *That's a good point, but I'm sure he has something to say in return.*

"That's a good point. But imagine how many conflicts that man must have dealt with in his seventy-two, or so, years of existence." Gregor made his point then softly set down his pintglass. *He makes a good point, but these dialogical oscillations are becoming tiresome. Besides, I don't want to admit defeat.*

"All right, I understand that it is possible to write about all of the conflicts that take place during a person's life, but it is also very possible to write about a person's life without any conflicts. Think about writing a story without any conflict. Would it become just a journal or calendar? If so, isn't life just a journal with or without entries or a calendar with or without appointments? Think about that for a couple minutes. No, I mean it. Ponder that for a few minutes while I use the restroom." Fields quickly stood. "Where is the rest room?"

"Just beyond the kitchen, on the right."

"Oh right."

Fields was using the restroom.

Fields was still using the restroom.

No one knew why it took Fields so long in the restroom.

Gregor sat fidgeting nervously. He hated the times when Fields went to the restroom and left him sitting alone. He felt so... so awkward; like he didn't belong. He tried to think about the 'alienation' thing, but still was overly

self-aware. After a while, he started wondering why Fields was gone for so long, wondering if Fields was trying to make some point. Gregor speculated that this was done intentionally because Fields knew that he would begin feeling uncomfortable if nothing was going on.

He would begin to feel like he didn't belong.

Look at him fidgeting. A little silence, a few moments without someone to argue with, and he starts feeling out of place. Fields sat down at the table, and began where he thought he had left off talking. "I don't understand why the seventy-two year old dead guy had to have any conflicts in his life. What if his life was smooth sailing? Why does anything have to change in his life? How often do people you know go through any big conflicts that end with resolutions? I don't see it. In fact, I think that what separates humans from other animals is the peculiarly human ability of not learning from our mistakes. What other species has the wretched skill of making the same mistake over and over again until the day they die? None! That's what I'm going to write about. My heroin addict isn't going to overcome her addiction, and become a heroine. I'm going to start with her being an addict and I'm going to end with her being an addict because that's how people live. There's no struggle of will power and resolution in people's lives. There's stubbornness and the refusal to change one's mind. Even if there is some great, abnormal moment or act of god that occurs, my character still isn't going to change her mind. I mean, Jesus could appear in the flesh to my heroin addict, and if she changes at all, even for an instant, it's only going to be a momentary flash before she plummets right back to the exact moment where she began!" *He can't argue against that. The best he'll be able to do is agree to disagree.*

"But you're writing it. You could change her if you want. Art allows for that." *Or he'll keep disagreeing.*

"Art imitates life."

"Imitates—"

"LIFE—"

"IMITATES." *This is sounding like a broken record.*

"I'm going to write a short story about a broken record that torments a genius composer, and call it 'Fields and Gregor.'" *Actually, I might.*

With a slightly annoyed, mostly tired, look, Gregor began, "Look, I was just trying to get you to change your mind slightly. But it's quite obvious that you don't want to change your thinking at all. I mean, what would it take to get you to change your mind?"

"You could pray for a *deus ex machina*." *That is one of my few quips that even I like.*

Fields sat reveling in his rare self-enjoyed witticism, as Gregor tried to unravel where the hell that last riposte came from. *I could sit and work off*

this forever. Fields was stroking his ego when he felt something fly sharply into his temple. "Aaaaeeooww. What the hell was that?"

Laughing, Gregor held up a small Jesus action figure: three inches tall, robed, bearded, replete with miraculous abilities as evinced by the carafe of water in his left hand and carafe of wine in his right. "Where the hell did that come from?" Fields asked.

"Him." Gregor pointed to the local eleven-year-old devil child that terrorized the pub patrons. He had jerry-rigged his Nerf 3000 Turbo Disc Shooter so that the evil, plastic machine could fire any object, even the Lord. "There's a conflict; one of millions." Gregor smiled, shaking Jesus in the face of Fields.

"How would one go about breaking a broken record?"

"Fine, don't listen. We'll agree to disagree. You don't have to give your character a conflict. He or she doesn't have to change at all if you don't want. I was just trying to help." *Is that it? Is that all he's going to say? It's just going to end like that? This doesn't seem right. It doesn't seem like much is resolved if he just gives up and allows me to stick with my same idea. I'm sure he'll have something to say.*

Looking out the window at the same motionless, inertia laden clouds, Fields sat massaging his temples with an unsatisfied look on his face.

Gregor was worried that he had not at all helped Fields come out of his writing slump.

"Now what's the problem?"

AN AMERICAN COMIC (A PANTOUM)

JAKE FRYE

Culminating in one, single punch line,
beads of sweat string together
the adoring crowd
of an American comic.

Beads of sweat string together
like the nimbus clouds
of an American comic's
blunt cigar and sharp wit.

The nimble crowd
will weigh his words—
blunt jokes and sharp wit—
from the safety of their seats.

The weight of his words
are far less than his gut:
"No seat is safe from my ass;
you should all pray I don't fall!"

He shoots from the gut,
plays a hand full of jokes,
each a prayer he doesn't fall
from a life on the road of comedy

He plays a hand full of jokes
on his adoring crowd
an entire life on the road of comedy
culminating in one, single punch line.

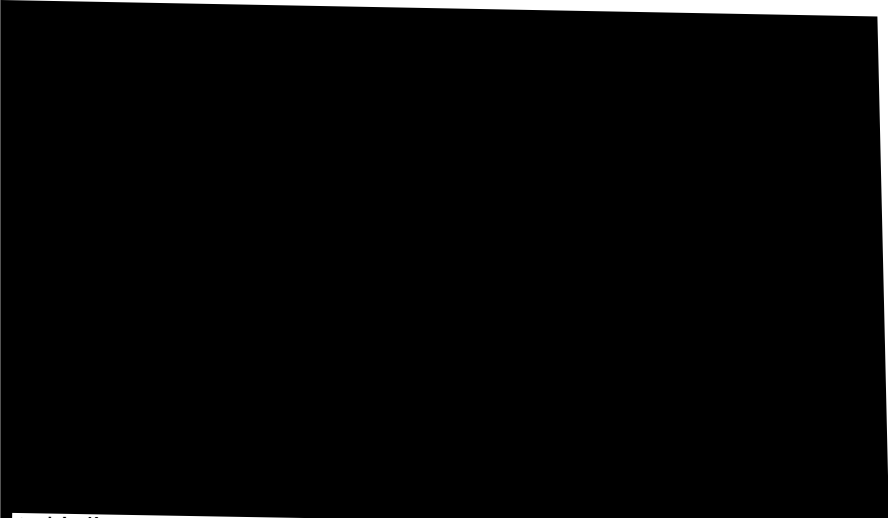
MATT'S SESTINA

KELLY GRANITO

I discovered a porno shop on a strip of pothole-smattered road
one hopeless night on the outskirts of this gray city.
It was located between a dilapidated pizzeria and shabby white home
with broken window shutters that swung every which way.
A neon purple billboard out front read "The Velvet Touch"
in large, cursive letters that had faded over time.

The way it brooded over the street like a shrewd owl summoned me. Time
stopped the moment I parked out on the battered road,
to be abandoned in my car as I scuffled through the heavy doors. A sound
touched
my ears; a quiet voice escorting a subtle mouth. I'm Matt, he said, and the city
seems weary tonight, don't I think? He sat still behind the register. The weight
of his words was heavy with the need for home,

for bed, for sleep. He asked why I wasn't at home
so late at night? I guess sometimes
I just need to go for a drive, I said. I looked the other way
toward a pleather heel on a metal shelf. I felt the urge to dart out to the road
and forget ever coming here to this dingy place, but I knew the gray city
was terribly lonely. He knew it too, and touched



to his lips a cigarette that rested smugly on the counter. I wanted him to touch
my guts with his sad, strange eyes, take him home
to forget about the dildos and nipple clamps, to zigzag across this gray city
to my street, to my front door, to my windowsill, to kill time
watching the transients get lost on the unpaved roads
just trying to make their way

around in the heavy smog. Instead, he showed a drunk old man the way
to the magazine section, and looked at me oddly as he awkwardly touched
a pen to a pad of paper. He doodled a menacing sun which rode
a blue stallion into the wide sky. He told me that his friend had turned his home
into a tattoo parlor, and he just needed some time
to practice before getting a job out there, away from this part of the city.

His drawing was awful, so I laughed and forgot about the city
that sprawled, slept, and smirked around us. We never spoke of going home.
We discussed music and the lack of customers and at some time
in the next hour we spoke briefly of Hank Chinaski. We touched
our fingers to the dust on the countertop and in a silent bewildering way,
I implored whatever God existed there to tow my car from the side of the road.

31

When the time came to finally make my way home,
things were different. The roads seemed new, the air pure, the city clean.
Matt touched the barrel to his temple and thought of stallions for the last time.



CHECK, PLEASE
JASON HESCOCK

CHARACTERS

FIELDS, early 20s

DAVID, late 20s

DEB, bartender, late 30s

FELICITY, early 20s

TIME

The Present

PLACE

A pub

DAVID: So, Deb. I'm thinking that you should probably get off work early tonight. You know what I mean?

DEB: Yeah, I think I know what you mean, Dave. But what would I do that for?

DAVID: Because someone I know might have some wine and some leftover lasagna waiting at home.

(FIELDS enters L, drops his book and notebook, stoops to tie his shoes, and then picks his things up.)

DEB: I hope that it's your friend there. I've been wanting to go home with him since the first time he came in here.

DAVID: You want to go home with Sir Reads-a-Lot? You know, David was the one who killed Goliath.

DEB: You been reading your bible lately, Moses?

FIELDS: (Sitting.) Actually, Moses wouldn't have had a bible. In fact, I bet he was right happy when the law was written on some proper stone tablets. Better than a burning bush.

DAVID: Speaking of a burning bush—

DEB: What'll you have, sexy?

FIELDS: A pint of Newcastle and some fish and chips with malt vinegar. That should be spot on.

DEB: And for Goliath?

DAVID: Goliath Killer. I'll have a T-bone medium rare, bottle of Bud, and bring us both a shot of tequila.

DEB: Is that all right with you, sexy?

FIELDS: Yeah, that's fine.

(DEB exits R.)

FIELDS: Why does she keep calling me 'sexy?'

DAVID: Because she totally wants to jump your bones, dude.

FIELDS: First, 'jump your bones' sounds like you're in junior high. Second, it's rather unsettling that she wants to copulate with me, since she's old enough to be my mum.

DAVID: First, don't say 'mum.' You're not British. Second, I know you don't want to screw her, but you need to get laid by someone. People can smell virgin on you like it's cologne.

FIELDS: We're not starting this again.

DAVID: I'm going to. You need to get some pussy.

FIELDS: I don't need any 'pussy.' I have other things to think about. Like—

DAVID: (Reaches over and grabs FIELDS' book.) What? Like Moby Dick? I can't believe you brought Moby Dick into a pub. You can't ever just have a couple drinks and talk about hicks. It's always society, politics, blabbitty blabbitty. You know what? I think you're gay.

FIELDS: What? You're an idiot.

DAVID: Don't you see it, man? You're starting to talk like a British guy. You won't talk to girls—

FIELDS: There's nothing wrong with being gay, which I'm not. And I don't feel the need to get, you know, sex all the time.

DAVID: (Laughs shortly.) Hold on. You just said 'get sex.' Ohhh man. I figured it out. You're not gay. You just don't have a dick. That's why you read Moby Dick. Cause you don't have one.

35

FIELDS: No, I don't have a white whale, and that was the stupidest thing I've ever heard.

(DEB enters R with drinks.)

DAVID: Alright, look, Fields. I'll make you a deal. I'll tell you how to talk to a

girl, and then if you get one to go home with you it will be the last time I bother you. Scouts honor.

DEB: Or you could ignore the blind tour guide and just leave here with me.

FIELDS: Uh, no, ehlll... alright, Dave, it's a deal. I'll try. But I want my book back regardless of whether I succeed.

DAVID: For chrissake you'll get your book back. Alright, there's a girl over there in the corner. You're going to go talk to her. You know, it'd be a lot easier for us if you shaved your scraggly beard.

FIELDS: I'm a writer. I can grow a scraggly beard if I want. It's part of my ethos. I refuse to shave on principle because those six-bladed razors scare me. And to protest those stupid commercials where supermodels make out with muscle-bound men just for shaving. They're so stupid.

DAVID: Okay. No more talking about commercials you hate. That's not sexy. Neither is blabbing on about Greek mythology or politics. No one wants to talk about that. People want to have a good time.

FIELDS: I don't see how that's not—

DAVID: Ah, ah, ah. That's why I'm going to tell you what to say. Now here's what you do. You go over to her table and sit down without asking if you can sit. Women like men who take charge. Tell her you want to buy her a drink. After she says what she wants, compliment her. Women love to be flattered.

FIELDS: I'm not good at flattery. It seems so trite and provincial.

DAVID: You're over-thinking this. She looks like she's about 21 or 22. She hasn't learned to see through flattery yet. Just order her a drink, compliment her, and then ask her about herself. People love to talk about themselves. Ask what she does for a living, for fun, what are her hobbies, so on and so forth. Alright?

FIELDS: Ughhh, I don't—you know, free lunch or not, I wouldn't have met you here if I knew I was going to have to do all this.

DAVID: Well I'm not paying for your lunch if you don't try.

FIELDS: Real classy. You know I don't have any cash on me. This is... social blackmail.

DAVID: You don't have cash? Well I guess you're just going to have to talk to that girl, then.

FIELDS: Fine. I'll do it. Only because I don't have any money, but, for the record, this is ridiculous and despicable. (FIELDS exits L.)

DAVID: (To FIELDS exiting.) Try to breathe a little. (To DEB.) You think he stands a chance?

DEB: If he doesn't talk too much. He just needs to flash those baby blues and a quick smile.

DAVID: That's the problem. He always talks too much.

DEB: If he'd just ask me, I'd show him a few things.

DAVID: I don't understand why you have such a thing for him. I mean, he's my friend and everything, but he's such a nerd.

DEB: Because he looks just like my first. He was a poet, too. After we would do it, he would say his poetry he wrote for me. All kinds of stuff about how I was as beautiful as a rose.

DAVID: Fields doesn't write poetry. He writes about depressed men and how crappy life is. Although I do know someone who could recite poetry to you in bed.

DEB: Really? I wonder who that could be.

DAVID: He's a rather handsome fella who comes in here every Wednesday. He's always complimenting you. A real gentlemanly type, you know.

37

DEB: That real estate guy who's always in here?

DAVID: Close. Think more handsome and more of a gentleman.

DEB: That doesn't sound like any of my Wednesday regulars.

DAVID: Okay, okay. But I think we both know that there is something inside you that makes you think about coming home with me. At least there will be eventually.

DEB: I think your chances of getting me to go home with you are about as good as the chances of your friend getting that girl to go home with him.

DAVID: Really? How about we make a deal?

DEB: A deal? My god, you are a persistent son of a bitch. (Pause) I kind of like that, though. Alright. Let's hear it.

DAVID: If Fields over there doesn't get a girl to leave with him, I will do everything in my power to get him to take you home. But if he does, then you go home with me and we'll have some wine and see where it goes from there. (FIELDS enters L and sits.) How'd it go?

FIELDS: Not well.

DEB: Alright, Dave. You got a deal.

DAVID: How did you screw up?

FIELDS: I sat down and was about to 'tell' her that I wanted to buy her a drink when I remembered that I have no money, so I started with complimenting, and things took a turn for the worse.

DAVID: Oh boy. What did you say?

FIELDS: Well, I told her that she looked like Aphrodite. She didn't know who that was, so I explained it. She actually seemed kind of flattered when I told her that that meant she had flashing eyes and blazing beauty. But... then I told her how Aphrodite was born from the sea because Uranus was castrated—

DAVID: What! Are you—? Okay, okay. We'll try again. But this time no Greek stuff, and no castration.

DEB: I think the Aphrodite compliment is nice.

FIELDS: She thinks it's good.

DAVID: No, she doesn't. Uh, Deb, could you check on my steak?

DEB: There's no way it's done already.

DAVID: Can't you check? Alright, Fields, a hot chick just walked in and sat in the corner. So stay confident, but this time skip the compliment and start asking her about herself. Or if you do compliment her, just use something from a poem you know or something.

FIELDS: No. I'm not one of those guys. Besides, this is my last try. I feel so stupid.

DAVID: Don't worry. This is the only one we need. Just stay confident and stick to the game plan. (DAVID pats FIELDS on the back and he reluctantly exits L.) Poor Fields. He's never going to get any. I mean, seriously. Moby Dick in a pub. The guy needs some sort of supernatural help. Honestly, Deb, I've never seen anyone so smart at everything be so stupid and one thing.

DEB: Well, if he screws up again, it's going to be poor David.

DAVID: I'll take care of it. You just make sure you can get off early tonight. (FELICITY enters L and sits a few seats from DAVID.)

DEB: Hopefully not too early.

DAVID: What?

DEB: Don't hurt your brain, Goliath. I'll be back in a second. (DAVID continues looking confused as DEB walks to FELICITY.) What'll you have, hun?

FELICITY: A glass of merlot. And a decent guy if you can find one.

DEB: Guy trouble, huh? Well, the merlot I can do.

FELICITY: They all try to act so macho that they end up seeming pathetic. It's like they've all been arrested in some pubescent mental development stage.

DEB: I hear you. I've got that one's pubescence in the palm of my hand. Well, maybe if you stick around things will look up.

FELICITY: I doubt it.

DEB: Let me go get your drink for you. (Exits R.)

DAVID: Ohhh, I get it. Not 'too early.' (Turns to FELICITY.) Hi there. I'd like to buy you a drink.

FELICITY: No thanks. I already have one coming.

DAVID: Let me pay for it.

FELICITY: That's quite alright.

DAVID: You know, you have beautiful eyes.

FELICITY: Save it for someone else, buddy.

DAVID: Sorry.

FIELDS: (Enters L with wet shirt and face. Talking to himself.) Why does no one understand the basic differences between—

DAVID: Oh, god. What did you do?

FIELDS: I give up. I'm not cut out for this. I'm not one of those guys from a movie, who smooth talks a lady in ten minutes, and then at the same time they both say, 'Check please.'

DAVID: Calm down, just calm down. What happened?

40 FIELDS: I bought her a drink, right? She started talking about her interests, which were stupid, and then she starts complaining about insurance costs and taxes, so I simply explained to her that taxes aren't bad if we would use them for the right things, like universal healthcare and education. She said she agreed, but that communism is bad government and they don't believe in god. So I told her that communism isn't a form of government that it's an economic system, that universal healthcare is more of a socialist convention, and that communists aren't against god, but that their ideas have been bastardized to seem that way. Then she blathered on about some pedestrian affairs, which I simply put in perspective, and then she throws her drink in my face.

DAVID: How many times do I have to tell you to stop lecturing people?
Especially not women.

(DEB enters R with glass of wine.)

FIELDS: Yeah yeah. They all want to have a good time and date guys who shave
with machetes. Can I just have my book back?

FELICITY: Tell me about it!

FIELDS: Excuse me. Tell you—

DAVID: No! That's only two tries.

FIELDS: I don't care. The deal's off. (Reaches and grabs his book.) And give me
my book back.

DEB: Well, you know what you have to do now, Dave.

DAVID: Just hold on, Deb.

FELICITY: Kuhh. Men. They walk around with their crotch all stuck out and their
 chests all puffed up and women walk around in their skanky dresses showing
 off their 'stuff.' It's pathetic.

FIELDS: I know! Why do all men have to be jocks and all women have to be
 hair-tossing princesses? Why can't a man and woman sit and talk about
 something important for once?

FELICITY: I know! Like the economy or foreign policy or mythology—

DAVID: We're not done. Fields, you still owe me.

FELICITY: Wait a second. Are you reading Moby Dick?

FIELDS: Yes, I am. Are you a Melville fan?

FELICITY: I love Melville. He's so much better than Hawthorne. Not to
 mention, Benito Cereno is totally underrated.

FIELDS: (Gasping.) I know! Wait. Eliot or Pound?

FELICITY: Literature—both. Political beliefs—neither.

FEILDS: Of course. Pope or Johnson.

FELICITY: Pope, easily.

DAVID: (Tugging on FIELDS' shirt.) Fields! Hey Fields!

DEB: Dave! Shut up and watch.

FIELDS: Shakespeare or Marlowe?

FELICITY: Marlowe had he lived longer?

FIELDS: Marx or Smith?

FELICITY: You can't be serious!

FIELDS: Of course I'm not. Beards: yea or nay.

FELICITY: Absolute-YEA. (FIELDS and FELICITY lunge at each other and begin kissing. They fall off their bar stools.)

DAVID: (Turns to DEB who is laughing.) What the hell just happened?

DEB: (Handing DAVID the bill.) He decided not to listen to you. Anyway, I got someone to switch with me so I can get off early.

DAVID: But not too early, right? I better take care of my tab, then.

DEB: I put his on there, too.

42

DAVID: (Begins digging in pocket for money.) I guess I owe him, since things worked out for me.

DEB: It certainly wasn't by your doing.

DAVID: I'll take all the help I can get. I hope you're ready for dinner because I got a fresh box of Franzia and some leftover Hamburger Helper lasagna with our names on it.

(DAVID continues digging in pocket as lights go down.)

END OF PLAY.



LEG, GUN, RUN

JENNIFER DEMPSEY

My leg
bloats firm
like gangrene.

Doctor:
No decay.

Rot's stench
saturates
the field,
I say.

In Pacific humidity,
bodies rot
after death.

Blood clot, he says. Group of cells
gripping leg veins. Thrombosis, he says.
Thrombosis, it's a blockage.

You young folks.

We never had
thrombosis
back then.
Just groups of
Japs

and me,
gun,
blood.

Blood.
I touched my best
man's
guts,
wound that killed

his wife.

The telegram.
Blood on my hands.
Outside coloring

mud
khaki combat
red.

Blood runs,
he says, in your hands, yes,
but it stopped running in your leg. Blocked.



I kept running.
I left
for Betty—
she should never
get that letter

We were married two years when I joined.

Pain killers,
he says. They make you sleepy.

Let me sleep,
Doc. Let me sleep
away

from death,
the morgue
down the hall.
I'm coming, I

say. Tell Molly
I'm sorry.
His guts
wouldn't
stay.
Where's Betty?
I don't want
no telegram
for her.

Words, just words.

He says
no, blood thinners will heal you.
It hurts, but it will end. Morphine, Percocet,
they help.

I scratch the tube
and tape in my wrist.
Bullet
to my thigh.

Pierce
from behind,
straight through.

Clean wound.
Blood runs
clean, they say.

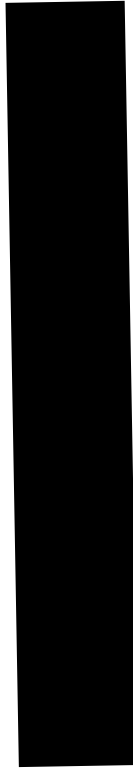
Clean blood.
Your blood's not
clean, he says. Clots, a large clot
in your leg, thrombosis, pulmonary embolism.

Breathes are
shorter
now,
unimportant.

Blood clot in lungs. We'll monitor you, he says.
Breathe slow, breathe deep.

Blood will run
again, I say.

Blood will run
again.



LADY IN TRANSIT

ALICIA INFANTINO

The metro grinded to a halt.
Travelers shoved and pushed
for a quick escape,
blots of ever-changing color
moving on and off
in sweaty packs—
balding heads in business suits,
hurried flashes
of clinking pink pumps.

Just then—
she emerged
through the metal
gliding,
with ease across
its track—
balletic for a moment.
She, the silken wing
slipped through
her cocoon.
Or possibly she stood
there always,
and the eye
chose then
to see her,
no sooner than
she wanted
to be seen.

Our pupils connected for a moment—
across the cold silver pole—
then fell apart as quickly as they met.

Porcelain face,
delicately present
rose-tinted cheek.

My hand clutched the shining metal
below her own-
slender ivory
wonder,
her outstretched milky
arm: a gazelle,
the tiniest bit of grit
beneath her fingernails,
a pink
blemish above
her magnificent bee-stung lip.

All bodies jerked
at once—
held captive for an instant
by the momentous jarring:
the final
stop.

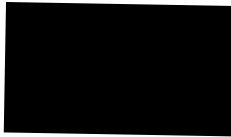
Her delicate form
seeped through
the rush,
slow and gradual,
her slender hand
tucked the fallen
tress, a chestnut
wisp
behind one ear.
As the wind drew her foot
across some irreversible portal
between

here
and there

train and
concrete.

us and
her.

She drew her mouth into a lovely pout,
only to light a smoke,
then slid
in one breath's time,
through the sliding metal door.



ROAD NOTES

LUKE SHARROW

Because if I stayed
it wouldn't be as I imagined;
a trace of a red lamp
seeping under the doorway.

I talked to the sliver paint

pockmarked, on the crumbled wall
just outside the park,
where we used to dance at midnight.
Where you had nice shoes, and
I was prone to leave gloves
and scarves everywhere-
though you always got them back,

the conversation was marvelous.
Because you were my brother and

I was a fireball,
you kept me just tame enough
for us.

But this is the real world,
where we have to live
without the soundtrack playing.

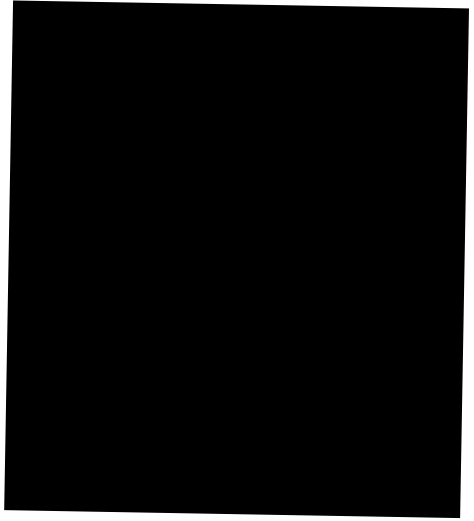
And the fucking stars!
shouting constellations,
can't tell us anymore.

This is where we live;
an address scratched on a receipt,
hop-scotching between the
pavement printed with puddles.

We lived – to learn it. No sparrows
were there to teach us how to fly away
as we watched
newspapers float down the road
passing wayward cigarettes,
crashing into brick walls
courageous to change the world.

Plastic cups lay crushed into the cement next to
little foil wrappers from candies and mints.
Trains screeched darkness, in the distance,
to places we couldn't care about,
searing lances striking through our bodies.
We were on the tracks,
but didn't know to follow them,
that was the truer story.

I told you brightly:
because if I stayed,
we wouldn't dance inside street lights,
and the woods would become another place
we don't know.



OF POSSIBILITIES ON A BOAT ASHLEY HILLARD

On the edge of a boat you tender
your dog tags.
I put them around my neck,
their weight on my chest, and begin
to question the boat.
If it sinks and the sea eats
my skin and I turn
variations of green and porous and fish
nibble off eyelash and cloth—
if I was ashore, barely
woman anymore, naked—
if the people of Spain find me
wrapped in your pearls
they might believe, if only slightly—
I am an American soldier, I am you.

CZECH DOGS DON'T SAY HELLO

STEPHANIE YATES

A millennium from now, the things archaeologists are going to find from our era, the things they're going to excavate and look on as some marvel of our time, Drina says, are our subway systems. The way we found the Terra Cotta warriors, she continues, all in their tight, organized rows, abandoned there to stand guard forever in the vast catacombs of Xian, buried beneath centuries of dirt and rubble and time, that's how they'll find the remains of our subways. That's what we'll be known for.

My sandal dangles precariously from my right foot, decorated with uneven tan lines. I stare at it. I make wishes - though there is no one to grant them - silently, to myself: That Drina would stop talking. That our stop would come faster and that we could leave these stifling, plastic and metal surroundings. That something I hated less would be the great novelty of our time. I never used to hate subways, until this strange great intrusion of them and the Czech Republic came into my life.

Drina is speaking, ignoring whatever expression I wear. I imagine it is something impatient and tiredly scowling.

These massive tunnels, these weird sort-of railroads running beneath us, they'll be buried just like those idle warriors, gutted and abandoned, the trains left motionless forever, eaten away, only skeletons of them remaining.

Her eyes have a sharply dreamy quality to them, and she isn't looking at me, but instead watching her reflection in the vast windows. You can't actually see anything out them—only yourself reflected back (Drina does not mind this), and everyone else seems somehow blurred. There's no good reason for them. But if they weren't here, if you had nothing but the slate gray walls of the subway car around you, it would be stifling, it would be claustrophobic, it would feel like nothing so much as being imprisoned, cut off and alone. So there are windows, and they are comforting, even if they're only pretend.

I stop watching my sandal when her steady, unwavering left hand moves to rest against my thigh. She is smiling slightly, fondly, but it's almost

a smirk—I don't look, but I know this. My gaze instantly moves to her purple fingernails, the polish chipped and flaking, catching at the fabric of my ripped jeans and for just a split second I forget and am contented by this imperfection.

Someone will make a fortune on this discovery. Someone will make more than whatever engineering genius has the idea for a massive underground transit system in the first place. She is looking over at me when she says this. I let the back of my hand brush up against hers as I sigh and slump back, closing my eyes.

If I keep them open there is nowhere else to look.

Drina's hand shifts, relaxes, closer now, and mine is suddenly tangled, unintentionally, in the curled ends of her long hair so dark it's nearly black.

No one actually has black hair, not naturally anyway. What we think is black is really just darker and darker shades of brown. I read this somewhere, but I've never mentioned it, never infringed on what is her forte. Drina's looks that way though, ebony against her skin, glossy, curled the way I only wish mine ever would be, rich and thick and beautiful. She's never dyed her hair, never straightened it, never abused it the way I do, and it hangs, healthy and gorgeous, to her lower back. Stark contrast against my uneven, almost but not quite shoulder-length stripped, dry, orangey blonde.

I never wanted blonde hair. It just happened. Somewhere between an almost-black wine red and the intended light auburn, it just stayed blonde, and not even a pretty blonde, but waxy at the top and golden-orange at the tips, a splotchy mottle between the two extremes.

Why don't you just leave it that way? Drina asked at the time, after two bottles of peroxide. You've never done that before.

I lift my hand and drag it from my neck up through sweat-sticky, clumpy hair. It feels gritty, greasy, and it stays sticking out at odd angles, blonde and misleading. I do not fix it.

I had listened, because Drina had spoken.

54 The still-dangling sandal falls from its perch with a soft thud and I now stare instead at my uneven, unpainted toenails, but I make no effort to replace it.

My hand tightens in the hair at the nape of my neck just for an instant, an auspicious attempt at controlling my impulse to give in and lean against her. Instead I sink down, feel the hard seatback notch against my skull, stare at the ridged ceiling of the small subway car.

Drina was as accidental as my hair. She just happened one day and has been ever since, as naturally as anything. She was one thing and then imperceptibly she was another, just happened, just shifted, just like that. Behind my eyelids, I glower at the ceiling, at the stifling pleasure Drina finds in this place, at the self-indulgent way she expects me to share it.

My hand is distracted immediately, the instant I drop it from my neck, in drifting back to the almost-ebony of her hair.

It's somewhere between the Spanish r and the g in the word mirage, she's saying this morning.

Drina, the linguist. Drina, the do-it-yourself scholar.

Drina, trying to explain the hasek to me, the stupid, perfect little dipping curve above the single steady stroke of a lower case r on every other sign in Prague. She read it on the internet, is all.

It's somewhere between Ottawa and Detroit, I say tersely, and I don't even congratulate myself on being clever. Drina chooses to ignore this and I wonder to myself if it was lost on her. She deems it important that I know it's supposedly one of the hardest sounds in any language to actually get right, and I wonder if she knows I don't care.

I want to be anywhere but on this train, and I want to go drown myself in something that isn't her vast knowledge of fricatives and sibilants and things that don't matter and never matter. Maybe the beer that's cheap here, the beer she won't drink even through it's good beer, not like that you get back home. The beer that she always passes up for dark red wine, the color my hair was before this.

I tell myself it's stupid to think her only reason for this is to be contrary.

I only defend myself in this passive-aggressive way, this witty banter of malcontent. To me, this is just an accent I can't pronounce or a hockey player who should have retired. I'm not sure what it is to her. Sometimes it's even endearing.

55

I wonder idly if she knows she's talking to herself, to empty air, to the uncomprehending ears of dozens of Czech students, mothers, children, businessmen, crammed together on this subway.

If she does, she doesn't let on.

I bury myself in watching this couple across the subway car from us, looking at each other as if nothing else around them is real, as if they're the only ones there, smiling and kissing, drawing closer to each other, sharing one seat when there are plenty available. She, twining an arm around his neck, laughing as her dyed red hair veils them and he, gripping her waist to keep her on his lap as the subway jerks to a halt again. Absorbed in each other. In being anonymous and in mattering to no one. Separate from everyone around them. It is how Drina wishes we were. I am envious at the same time as I pity them.

Ferrocarril, Drina says in response to my silence. Like that kind of Spanish word, I mean. And—

She cuts herself off. I assume my dour mood has seeped into my expression and she realizes it much too late.

Before Prague, in the world we're used to where everyone cares and everyone wants to know everything, we have never been so alone. So far from home, it hangs in front of us like the elephant in the room, in the subway car.

I don't look at Drina because I don't want to know if she's seen them, because I know she won't understand. I keep my eyes on this girl, her boyfriend, inventing a ridiculously improbable life for them in my head wherein she never has to listen to him rant about silly, unimportant things, wherein everything is perfect and they're always happy and everyone around them looks at them and can see it. I tell myself this is possible. I know it is not.

Drina tells me it means railroad, softly, as she tugs my arm and I stand, gripping one of the harsh, red rails to steady myself. Even her touch makes me bristle just then, but I follow her anyway.

She tells me now, this morning, after we've been here a week, full of complexity, distance, and the lack thereof, we should ride this until the end of the line. Ride it to the end of the line, to some stop with three haseks in the name. Instead of answering, I stare out the pretend window. It is not comforting at all. We sit in silence through three or four stops and my fingers avoid her hair.

56

The fight this escalates into is about something even dumber than linguistic jargon or goaltenders, something that only matters because it's just one more thing, and I storm off the subway mid-sentence and leave her behind. Wordlessly, she lets me go, and I do not look back because if I did, I wouldn't be able to leave. I wonder what her expression is, as she watches me disappear into the crowd of people bustling through the station.

Hours after this silent tantrum, I sit eating cherries like popcorn from a plastic Tesco bag on an intimidatingly large patch of grass down by the Vltava River, fuming and pretending like I'm fine. The expanse of water stretches out before me as far as I can see to either side, dotted with ferries, little rented paddleboats, what look like canoes. I turn my head sideways to spit a pit into the lush grass, feeling the ghosts of Drina's fingers drift through my damaged hair. I know it is really just the Kampa breeze, and I keep pretending.

I drop a cherry. It falls, rolls, to rest near my foot, gleaming and vibrant against the new, still-glowing white of the strap of the sandal.

A littler terrier bounds past, leashless like all the dogs here. It is utterly disinterested in me and even more so in the abandoned cherry, still nesting forlornly near the sandal, but I look up habitually to follow its path. Seconds later, it skitters to a stop, nails clacking on the narrow sidewalk at the feet of the couple I recognize from the subway the other day, the girl with her brilliant hair tied up now, drawn back from a thin, pretty face with dark eyes, sitting on the bench with her legs across her lover's lap, laughing as she drops a hand to the terrier's wet, inquisitive nose.

I roll the cherry between my fingers before I eat it, regardless of where it has been. I have done worse. She has done worse.

I watch them, wrapped up in themselves, her face a mirror of his, and it hits me then and I stand, dropping a last cherry pit which is instantly buried in the grass at my feet.

I leave the bag behind, not yet empty, where it will remain untouched unless a foreigner's pet stumbles on it.

I don't expect to see her when I find my way back to Malostranská, almost as if what I did expect was that she would just stay on the subway, just ride it back and forth and I'd have to play roulette with the trains, the cars. I wouldn't have been surprised if she had. But she's leaning against a heavy pillar, crouched near the ground and resting, sitting, on the wide rail that surrounds it.

57

Drina alone, a striking figure in black and white and red against the cool beige backdrop, the sharp greens behind it, this is familiar. I pause to take in the sight for a long moment that I expect to end much sooner than it does. My sandals make light clinking noises on the tiles beneath them when I finally start forward again; me

returning to her. This is familiar, too. But Drina so vulnerable is new and unexpected and I step closer than I meant to before I even realize it, but I don't regret it.

I settle down next to her, stretching my legs out in front of me in the exact impolite way that means everyone near has to walk around me if they want to get closer to the train. Ignoring a trail of Czech obscenities or what might have been Czech obscenities, at least - the first interest a Czech person has taken in me at all, which seems highly appropriate just now - I lift a hand to a dark curl, trailing it through.

She, Drina, turns, looks at me, leans in, a hand sliding through my hair and the whisper of lashes against my cheekbone, the barest of breath and she says, What I hear is that Hasek's all washed up these days, as I curl into her and she wraps her arms around my thin shoulders.

She is right.

I twist to look up, my head in her lap, and I do not see in her what I saw in the girl and her boyfriend because I do not expect to. And the wind blows her hair forward, drags it across my upturned face as the train we should take home but that we will take instead until the line ends pulls away into the darkness of a tunnel that will someday be its tomb.

GWEN FROSTIC
DUSTIN HOFFMAN

At seven years old, I rode
in my parents' white Bonneville
through the outskirts of Benzie County,
to the alcove stowed in a poplar row
where fifteen Heidelbergs stomped out
hundreds of linoleum prints—
scratches become fingerprints
of the world you noticed:
the lichen hum, whisper-thin
branches weaving a harvest moon,
possibilities of a toad

winking as you held your breath
in tree stands,
awaiting the rustling of the next blade
of grass to be sketched, etched, printed
one million times.
94 years and 394 days in Michigan,
surrounded by windows
and lichen song,
until your skin wrinkled into oak bark.

My big sister dragged me down the stairs,
past lifelike birds carved out of wood,
to meet the maker of my July wonder.
You were quiet and I was scared
of your wrinkly skin.
I petted your big, blond dog instead of looking.
You waited behind your desk, rich
with the scent of inkwells and pine needles,
while my sister rambled, never shy.
And there were Heidelbergs beneath
your soft eyes, strong resolve,
patient for me to come around.
You asked me my name and waited.

WALKING THROUGH THE GUITAR CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

JAKE FRYE

I.

A '78 Guild saunters past me, and a peal white Telecaster and his All-American-Stratocaster-of-a-cousin mingle at the water cooler—"Hey, have you heard who Floyd Rose is running around with these days?" I brush past them, past pictures of their ex-lovers, Townshed, Hammett, Van Halen. Hendrix lights a comrade on fire and roasts marshmallows over her flaming frets and humbuckers that would no longer buck the hum, a Tibetan Monk blossoming and curling at the edges.

II.

A Valhalla of musical instruments, their blue-steel, Ernie Ball, TNT-gage electric vocal chords muted. Muted, but not silent. That manic, throttled, 10,000-watt, coyotes-on-Neptune howl buzzing under thin lacquer and ebony, just begging for an exorcism, even if that exorcism lights the body on fire. Instead, every fifteen year old that has ever learned the first bar of "One" will pick each up by the scruffs of its neck, play a note or two and then toss it into the corner, where they will be swept away.

III.

I dash to the front desk, say breathlessly—“Have...show...in half hour...need amp...fixed...” He asks me what kind of band I am in. Here is where I say salmonandbeastman—I say it real quicklike, just like that, embarrassed that I am embarrassed, and I can see disapproval tip-toe into his eye: he knows, I know, we never say that I do not (a) play in a death metal band (b) have pre-natal experience on a stringed instrument or (c) care about death metal. “Sure you can write a song, and maybe I wanna sing along,” he says to me, “but the real question is: Can you play it in a Mixolydian pentatonic minor fragment with the alternating arpeggio over the top, backwards to forwards with a slight impression of Malmsteen’s second measure in the fourth movement, up and down, up and down until your hands become positively translucent?”

IV.

I am suddenly silly. His eyes tear across my fret board and I crumble, the ashes of my precious band scatter. My whole life is an annoying skip on his Megadeath album. I sulk in the corner, between the 18 piece kit with the double kick and 36 cymbals of every sonic pitch known to the human ear (SPECIAL OFFER: BUY TODAY AND GET THE Z-SERIES HAND HAMMERED ULTRA-HIGH-PITCHED DOG-FREQUENCY CYMBAL FREE!!!!) and a cardboard cutout of Dimebag Darrell tongue-kissing Rob Zombie. Darrell takes a moment away from his busy schedule to lay a single corrugated hand on my shoulder and offer me sage advice: “Hey kid, why don’t cha scam? This area here’s for adults.”

NOTHING CAN OUTPACE A TUNA

CHRIS CARTER

His side gleamed like
mother-of-pearl in a lustrous light.
His belly shone a silver white,
a slick, scaleless teardrop.
I've seen this kind of thing—
teeth flashing like homing beacons,
bleaching the character out of
the neighborhoods. Glinting teeth
like sarsen stones. Enormous,
supremely beautiful and unattainable.
We'd rather have corporate cool.
A singing abyss.
A gurgling whirlpool.
Noble proportions transforming
colors high and long:
purple, bronze, silver, gold.
A vast, golden skyscraper of
bouffant; all chrome, steel, neon,
plastic, hamburgers and grits.

I have come today
to have my sins absolved.
The paper cup in my hand.
The cold dregs blasting out jazz
from a couple of rickety speakers.
A mission from God.
A scourge visited upon the
unbelievers to save them,
to save us from all this.

STRINGS

BILL BRADLEY

Streetlights exposed snowflakes falling from Barcelona's evening sky. I shuffled up the steps, head down, fighting the wind that sucked into the metro tunnel. A gypsy peddled Kleenex on the black marble steps and grabbed at my leg, ripping the frayed strings off the bottom of my jeans. Her nightmarish eyes shadowed by streaming scarves. Amidst a mass of nameless faces in transit, I paused at the top—resting my hand on the iron railing—and gazed across the street into an alley where a woman played cello beneath an archway, sheltered from the snow. I followed the resonance of the cello across the street, dodging passing cars and motos. The eloquent notes dictated my stride, pulling me into the alley. Her fingers pressed against frigid strings. Notes floated with the snow, flying past birds etched in graffiti on the opaque walls. A student entered the alley, walking towards me, a bag slung over his left shoulder. I strolled, eyes tilted to the slice of sky that cut between the yellowed brick buildings. Lost in my musings, I bumped into him, sending his bag to the ground with a crash. The breaking glass coupled with his poignant Spanish startled me. Splotches of liquid stained his canvas bag. As he disappeared I heard a sharp "Americano!" echo off the walls. Electrified, I leaned against the cavernous wall beneath a balcony draped with damp clothes.

The cellist never broke the movement of her bow slicing the strings. I began to walk again, fresh snowflakes sticking to my jacket. I ambled with the cobblestone—her cello echoed in the background as the alley poured into the street.

Passing the bodega on my left, I waved to Adolfo as he signed for cases of red wine waiting on a silver dolly. A tall, older Spanish woman, fresh baguette tucked under one arm, passed me. Her frigid eyes distanced me in a glance. Gray hair fell on the back of her thin frame as she lifted her hand to light a cigarette. I turned to watch her pass wondering if anyone else noticed her stray hairs cascading over her peacoat. I stumbled into Eva's Panderia and set fifty-five cents on the counter.

"Hola amigo. ¿Quieres lo de siempre?"

“Si, un baguette, Eva.”

Eva turned around and pulled bread out of the stainless steel oven, wrapping it in brown wax paper. Leaning over the top of the dark oak counter, she winked, handing me the steaming baguette. In the year I spent in Barcelona, Eva was one of the few Catalans who treated me as if I lived there. She proofread my papers on Sundays and, in exchange, I tutored her ten-year-old son. I waved with a simple “Gracias.” As I walked out, street lamps flipped on, splitting the street.

Outside Eva’s, an alleged cripple leaned against empty crates of clementines strumming his guitar, his legs folded underneath him, the guitar case at his knees shouting out. The blue and orange awning of the fruit mercado overshadowed him, the faint white light from the *Fresc* sign sprayed over his hunched shoulders. I stared into the man’s arid eyes protruding from his dark, weathered skin. He slid his grimy hand off the neck of his guitar, the scabs on his hand screaming at me for change. The man grabbed at my jacket muttering something unintelligible. His stench followed me down the street. I turned the corner, staring into the park: framed by one-way streets, it covered an entire block. Street lamps watched over it like giant wrought-iron swans. The older Spanish woman drifted across the sidewalk strung through the heart of the park. Her large white scarf flew with her gray satin hair, and her cigarette smoke exploded into the chilled air as she crossed the street, entering the cellist’s alley. Antoni stood in a cloud of cigarette smoke in front of the café underneath the omniscient glow of the city. I strolled up—Antoni began speaking before I was in earshot.

64

“Robby, how are you friend?”

“I’m well.”

“What do you think of the snow? First time it snow here in Barcelona in eighty years,” he asked sticking out his palm, holding it under the sky.

“Si?”

“Yes, I have lived here my whole life and this is the first time that I see snow here in Barcelona. I’m sure it’s not different for you. Lots of snow in Midwest, right?”

“Yeah, it snows quite a bit in the winter.”

“You must like this snow then.”

“Yeah, it just seems strange in Spain.”

“This is true. But look, we have snow and American in the neighborhood,” he said, laughing, pointing his index finger at me.

“I’m the first American in the neighborhood, really? Makes sense, with the way people stare at me around here. I love Barcelona, but some of the people are just so cold. I know I’m an American, but I’m not walking around with an American flag draped over my shoulders.”

“You are always welcome at my café. You live in Barcelona, too, Robby. It is my pleasure—you work on your Spanish, I work on my English—I enjoy your company.”

“Gracias, amigo. I’m going to eat this baguette while it’s still hot though. Te vaya bien, Antoni!”

“See you tomorrow, Robby!”

Walking away, I glanced into the café where tables and chairs hibernated in the back room, waiting to be let into the street. Snowflakes melted as they hit the pavement. I walked the half block to my apartment, hot baguette tucked under my arm, meandering with the uneven cracks in the pavement. The sound of the cello began to diminish with the breeze. I unlocked the door of my flat, propping it open with my back. Illuminated, the snowflakes and street lamps crashed down on me like a falling chandelier—momentarily free.

2007 marks the sixth edition of *The Laureate*: Western Michigan University's undergraduate literary journal. This journal is a reflection of the undergraduate students at Western Michigan University who possess a passion for the craft of writing. *The Laureate* is an arena in which students can share their creative works for their contemporaries to enjoy.

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WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

LEE HONORS COLLEGE, 2007