In the Garage

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Christopher James Hart, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in the fall of 2008, successfully completed the Lee Honors College Thesis on April 27, 2012.

The title of the thesis is:

_In the Garage_

Dr. Nicolas Witschi, English

Dr. Margaret H. Dupuis, English

Mr. Scott Thornburg, School of Music
In The Garage Transcript
Christopher Hart

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Introduction

Hi. Welcome to In the Garage: a collection of works by student writers living here, in Kalamazoo Michigan and attending Western Michigan University. So each episode, we pick a theme and bring you several pieces on that subject, read by their authors.

This being the first episode, we’re going to be presenting pieces about nostalgia. I know it seems like a weird choice for a first episode, but I’m trying to think of it more like Saudade, which is this Portuguese word I came across in one of those lists of words that have no English equivalent or can’t easily be translated. Essentially what it comes down to is this: Saudade is like missing someone or something, but more intense than that. It’s been described as the “love that lingers” for someone after they’re gone. It’s a feeling of the intense pain of emptiness where once there was joy or love. But the thing is, that person or thing or time that you’re wistful for? Well for you to feel saudade for it, it didn’t have to be known to you in the first place. And really, its actual existence is totally unnecessary. You can miss a person you never met or who never even lived, or yearn to live in a place that only exists in a book. It’s like a way of saying wouldn’t it be nice if that were real.

Well, today, our collective forward-looking nostalgia has brought about this podcast. Stories, poems, thoughts: life. I’m Christopher Hart. Welcome to the Garage.

Act one: Your Ex-Lover is Dead

Okay, before we get started, I just wanted to make a note about the show’s title. So, here in Kalamazoo Michigan, whenever the warm weather rolls around, people tend to just go outside and live in it. Whether it’s on deck chairs, porches, or patios people just go outside to sit. Maybe bringing along a book or a journal. Invariably, these deck dwellers will have a kind word or a friendly greeting for anyone who walks past. But for those of us not lucky enough to have a porch or deck, the thing to do is to set up chairs in the garage. And for us, in particular, we wanted to have a cool, shaded place to bring our fellow writers, and maybe convince them to share a story with us. By recording all these stories, poems, and interviews we can share them with anyone who wants to listen. So, now, you are in the garage with us. And now, without further ado, we present the first of a
three act series on Nostalgia. In which, blonde hair clings to belt loops, Yoko Ono is forgiven, and a letter never gets opened. Nostalgia Act One. Your Ex-Lover is Dead.

- Helena Witzke: “In Solidarity With Our Last December”

Okay, so most nostalgia centers around people: a loved one, or rather former loved one who isn’t around any more. It’s like seeing a past event through the emotional filter of another person. All your thoughts, feelings, and experiences distilled through someone’s essence. What better encapsulates that description than a former relationship? So, now, love in retrospect.

- August Smith: “Lucky”
- John Spreitzer: “The Timbre of a Touch”
- Alicia Banaszewski: “These Are The Only Parts I Remember”
- Alicia Banaszewski: “The Third Time”

In order, you’ve just heard “Lucky” by August Smith, “The Timbre of a Touch” by John Spreitzer, “These Are The Only Parts I Remember” and “The Third Time” Alicia Banaszewski. All of the poems were read by their authors. There’s something very curious about reflecting on a former relationship that lends itself well to poetry. William Wordsworth says that a poem “is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” It’s no wonder that our relationships generate these powerful feelings and when we look back on them, it makes for great material. Our next and final piece, though, diverts from this trend. Crystal Rhoney brings us a short story about a relationship and a seminale that defines it. Now, “The Secrets of Her Body.”

- Crystal Rhoney: “The Secrets of Her Body”

Well, that’s all we’ve got for you today. I want to thank all of the writers we’ve had on today: Alicia Banaszewski, Crystal Rhoney, August Smith, John Spreitzer, and Helena Witzke. Thanks also to Dr. Nic Witschi, Dr. Andreadis who make this podcast possible. Come back next time to hear the second part in our ongoing series about nostalgia. Act 2: The Commerce of Nostalgia. I’m Christopher Hart. Thanks for being In the Garage.

Act two: The Commerce of Nostalgia
Hi. Welcome back to In the Garage: a collection of works by student writers living here, in Kalamazoo Michigan and attending Western Michigan University. So each episode, we pick a theme and bring you several pieces on that subject, read by their authors.

Today, we’re going to be presenting the second act in a three part series in nostalgia. Last time, we talked about Love in Retrospect: remembering relationships and the Seminole moments that define them. So, we’ve talked about the intangible personal struggle of nostalgia, but there can be an economic component to it as well. I don’t mean a fond recollection of the economic boom of the 90s or a reminiscence of the last time your bank account had money in it. What I’m saying is that there’s money to be made off nostalgia: good money, too. Classic album rereleases, Coke in glass bottles, and Spiderman movies all take advantage of this collective popular nostalgia. We all have things from our pasts that we feel fondness for, and don’t mind shelling out our own cash to recapture some of it. Today, In the Garage’s ongoing series about nostalgia arrives at Act two: The Commerce on Nostalgia. In which a man flirts with disaster, the Internet rejects the lonesome, and the Transformers finally sort out their differences.

In our modern, digital age, Social Networking sites can commercialize even something intangible like nostalgia. Being in contact with people from your past and having immediate access to pictures of good times remembered is extremely conducive to nostalgic reminiscence: one naturally expects it. But even social media, perhaps unwittingly, can allow us to access the concept of Saudade, or forward looking nostalgia, that we talked about last time. The prospect of a future acquaintance and the levity it brings to an empty house are two things August Smith explores in his poem, “Usually Not This Sad, Guys.”

- August Smith “Usually Not This Sad, Guys.”

Next, Alicia Banazewski reads her poem about a camp in Maine where she worked for a summer. For her, that summer’s employment generated both money and a fond memory that inspired our next poem, “Glass Beads.”

- Alicia Banazewski “Glass Beads”

As with Alicia’s piece, we learn that places can generate strong feelings as well as people. Whether it’s a childhood home, a familiar vacation town, or a city street, places can be imbued with a piece of ourselves, and we keep returning there to recapture it. For Tim Buchanan, a bar happens to be such a place. It’s a sound business model for a bar to create an atmosphere that instantly becomes familiar and comfortable. It keeps its clientele coming back time and again:
paying for both drinks and nostalgia. Here’s a short story entitled “Bar Crush: Locust and Vine” by Tim Buchanan.

- Tim Buchanan “Bar Crush: Locust and Vine”
- Helena Witzke “Notes on My Parents’ Record Player”

That was Helena Witzke reading a piece called “Notes on My Parents’ Record Player.” Buying a record, replete with its cracks and pops is so intrinsically tied to nostalgia: they are the sounds of your use, a lingering memory of all the previous listenings. John Spreitzer experiences those same cracks and pops of use from the tip of his clove cigarette, which he tells us about in his poem, “Djarum Dog Days.”

- John Spreitzer “Djarum Dog Days”

The thing about this commoditization of nostalgia that strikes me is how it can work in two ways. Sometimes we’re sold things that appeal directly to our desire to recapture the past, but we can also attach meaning and memory to things that we’ve purchased. For me, I grew up watching the TV show The Transformers: a shamelessly commercial program whose sole aim was to sell toys. Now, in retrospect, while I’m able to see all the ways those twenty-two minute episodes exploited their viewers, I still find myself thinking fondly of them. It was a simpler world when emblems on the chests of robots unconditionally identified good and evil. To this day, I think back on those succinct plots and morally stalwart characters as a means to understand our continually shifting world. After all, everyone needs a frame of reference. So now, in our last story, The Transformers help us understand the current political situation in America. Here’s “Ad Captandum Vulgus,” written and read by me, Christopher Hart.

- Christopher Hart “Ad Captandum Vulgus”

Well this concludes our second installment of In the Garage’s three part series on Nostalgia. On today’s show, you heard pieces by Alicia Banazewski, Tim Buchanan, August Smith, John Spreitzer, Helena Witzke, and me, Christopher Hart. The original song you heard excepted throughout the program was written by Stephen M. Riley and recorded right here In the Garage. Thanks, as always, to Dr. Nic Witschi and Dr. Andreadis for their support of this podcast. Be sure to come back for the conclusion to our series on Nostalgia. Act Three: When I was Younger, stories about growing up. That’s next time on the podcast. Until then, keep waxing nostalgic. I’m Christopher Hart, and you have been In the Garage.
Act three: When I Was Younger

Hi. Welcome back to In the Garage: a collection of works by student writers living here, in Kalamazoo, Michigan and attending Western Michigan University. So each episode, we pick a theme and bring you several pieces on that subject read by their authors.

Today, we’ve arrived at the last of our three-part series on nostalgia. So far, we’ve talked about the intangible and often painful, personal struggle of relationships in retrospect. We’ve also explored nostalgia’s tangible commodities and its commerce: paying for remembrances or remembering things paid for. Now, however, we take a look back on our formative years and the unexpected places where our early memories return to us. Whether it’s the sound of footsteps in an old house, the feel of used books, or the smell of lakes, the comfortable nostalgia of childhood can arise from even the most minute and unlikely details. Pets, churches, and our parents’ furniture all carry some kind of emotional weight, a weight that is intensified by the perceptions of childhood. Those formative years, in which everything seems bigger, give special depth to our memories, attachments, and relationships. The experiences we have in our past continue to inform our present. So today, In the Garage’s series on nostalgia concludes with act three: When I Was Younger in which a kleptomaniac gets a quick fix in a cathedral, a grandmother survives the sun’s death, and a guinea pig finally learns how to fly.

As a displaced Iowan, the smell of a cornfield or late afternoon sunlight will always be things that elicit a little longing from me. For Alicia Banazewski, as it is with many Michigan residents, water is the medium that transports her back to her childhood and the lingering scent of a loved one. Here she is reading her poem, “I Don’t Know Rivers, Only Lakes.”

- Alicia Banazewski, “I Don’t Know Rivers, Only Lakes”

Sometimes the places we associate with our loved ones are foreign and quite distant from our experiences and ourselves. In Helena Witzke’s case, it’s a distance of about 93 million miles. Now, “Boys and Fathers and My Grandmother’s God: A Year in Two Peninsulas.”

The metonymy of the lake and the universe with all their significance are natural engines for nostalgia. Their ubiquity and grandeur make them as familiar as loved ones known in one’s youth. But, even the smallest creatures in the universe can generate their own, equally powerful nostalgia. Which is why we’ll now hear three pieces about animals. First off, Marilyn Schultz reflects on her first pet. Now, The Amazing Adventures of Marilyn Schultz and Rocky the Flying Guinea Pig.

- Marilyn Schultz, “Rocky the Guinea Pig”

Our next animal story is not about the author’s pet but, rather, a friend’s parrot and its connection to an important figure in her life. Here, again, is Helena Witzke reading another piece, “Familiar Noises.”

- Helena Witzke, “Familiar Noises”

Lastly, Patric Nuttall reads a poem about a bird, an edifice, and a mother. Here’s “Eating a Blackbird.”

- Patric Nuttall, “Eating a Blackbird”

For many people raised with some kind of religion, regardless of whether or not they maintain it, a church or a synagogue or a mosque can be a continual source of nostalgia. The ritualism, like a language, is best absorbed young and offers its own vocabulary of experience. Even when a connection to higher power is no longer the goal of church attendance some people find themselves inexplicably drawn back. Maybe it’s because of a desire to reconnect with their childhood. A desire to again speak their childhood language of ritualism. Our final story is about a woman trying to recapture something in a church, though it’s not quite what you’d expect. Here’s Crystal Rhoney reading her story, “Keys.”

- Crystal Rhoney, “Keys”

Well that concludes our series on nostalgia. Thanks, as always, to the wonderful writers who contributed to this podcast, Alicia Banazewski, Patric Nuttall, Crystal Rhoney, Marilyn Schultz, and Helena Witzke. Thanks also to Dr. Nic Witschi and Dr. Andreadis for their support. Be sure to check back for In the Garage Post Script, a companion work containing conversations about writing with many of the authors you heard over the last three episodes. In any case, thank you for listening. I’m Christopher Hart and you have been In the Garage.
In The Garage: Compendium of Works in Order of Appearance
Christopher Hart

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Nostalgia
Episodel One: Your Ex-Lover is Dead

When I came home late, on the bitter cusp of mornings, you had left lights on for me, something I grumbled about, thinking about waste and Americans and resenting you for your care of me. Arms to hold me, arms that held me in. You were gentle, something I’m not so good at being. Gentleness is no good for humor. You have to be sharp, cutting just enough under the skin for the joke to sting, still make ’em laugh. You were trying to teach saltwater to be sweet.

And now when I return, I know when I get there all the lights will be off. There will be no waste on the bill this month. No dishes in the sink, an empty, quiet bed, full of sleep. Comforters which do not get beneath my neck and curl me inward. I will hold myself, a joke I don’t know the punchline to waiting on my lips.

LUCKY
AUGUST SMITH

I’m lucky.
I once said goodbye to a girl at a train station.
Yes, she was a blonde girl (of course she was a blonde girl).
Yes, she was known to wear a large-brimmed hat
and leggings and lipstick,
though rarely all at once.
Maybe during kidnappings and funerals.

I’m unlucky,
because I spent the days after
plucking her golden hairs from
the various topography of my room,
from the bed sheets, from my belt loops,
from the bathroom floor, from between my teeth.
And yet still I find them.
Woman,
take yourself with you! You’re a trap with skin.

The projection is imperfect, though;
the one thing I didn’t do
was search for her face in the train windows
as it pulled away. I might regret that.

THE TIMBRE OF A TOUCH
JOHN SPREITZER

She is synesthesia taken shape, and her condition is contagious.
She speaks in Tyrian purples and Lapis Lazuli,
in honey and clove I am powerless to ignore.
Drink in her eyes, those deep
wells of silk and suede. Watch
how they change as her lips rise like incense
to form a smile that permeates and
fills the whole room with its sweet scent.
I am afflicted.
She grabs my hand
and music rises in my ears,
these faulty sense argue over which perceived her first,
none realizing she can only be understood to the extent
that the mind can comprehend why there is music
instead of silence.

THese Are The Only Parts I Remember
ALICIA BANAZEWSKI

We heard your father, "You’ll only see people sleeping,"
& we weren’t sleeping but yes, dreaming —
dreaming that our love could survive this fumbling.

Eventually I will forget that we watched a shooting
star bolt across the sky afterward, falling,
because it had nothing more to give.

In a crooked way it was perfect—
passionate, self-destructive, swimming upward
only to die before reaching surface.

We rode bicycles the next morning, yielding a secret.
I hid behind used books, I pedaled too quickly.

He never let my firsts fall, never held them against me.

THE THIRD TIME
ALICIA BANAZEWSKI

He said writing in blue doesn't make sense and kept his silverware in a drawer, no more organized than a bin at Goodwill.

And then he left.

But it's not just that — I am lonely
in a general sense. A self-proclaimed monster of affection... any ear I interpret as open will be ravished by my world view(s) and idea(s) of the human condition

        and love
        and pain
and how I'm not angry at Yoko Ono and how I am waiting for someone in the media I can believe in.

These rampages are inspired by alcohol pseudo-chemical confidence and it's hard to not feel naked afterwards.

Here's a secret: I'd like to raise ladybugs from larvae, feed them raisins and release them into air. It'd make me feel accomplished.

Here's a fact: if I'm not kissing someone, I'm thinking about kissing someone.
Here’s a reason to boil water:
if guilt hardens like spaghetti sauce on ceramic
and cannot be scraped, take the pot onto the stove
until it starts to
scream, then pour steam over the guilt until it smells
like vomit.

Here’s a request: sing me into a web. Pluck
guitar strings so passionately my common sense
breaks.

Sing me into a place I can’t walk away from,
a place I feel vital.
    Sing me into a love that’s cool to the touch,
    but warm on the mouth.

Sing me into a place where second guesses
hold no weight and second chances come
without an invitation.

Sing me into a place where thought isn’t necessary,
where worries melt with the snow.

THE SECRETS OF HER BODY
CRYSTAL RHONEY

Sex with Violet was a series of transitory moments, a session of finding
edges and falling over them. Though Alex wondered how the same precipice
could offer the same plummet, yet never lessen the effects of the fall. When it all
began, he filed away each new discovery in a folder in his mind: The Secrets of
Her Body That Only I Have Known. There were three things he’d never tell her,
secrets that he kept for his own. Some part of him was afraid that if she knew,
suddenly conscious, she might stop him from enjoying them.

She’d gasped the first time. But that never went away. Every time, her
eyes would widen, her lips part slightly for a sharp intake of breath, and with the
first push forward, he was over an edge and falling. Sometimes when he
watched her study, papers and books haphazard about her, her mouth would
open just a fraction. He knew it was a byproduct of the concentration, a
slackening of muscles in exchange for more brain power. But in that short
moment between conscious thought and primal urge, he’d move to kiss her.
Logic usually caught him, reminding him those parted lips were not for him, but
sometimes he’d follow through.
“What was that for?” she would say.

“Nothing.”

There was a way she whimpered, and her tiny mouth frowned, a graceful downturn of her lips, when he finally pulled away, adjusted, and lay exhausted on the pillows.

“It’s a sad feeling,” she would say, “to suddenly feel so empty, solitary.”

He would smile at her curling hair, pushing the dampened strands that framed her face back over her ears, along her neck, away. Then he would roll onto his back and let her find her place next to him, falling toward sleep together.

One cliff, his deepest secret, remained elusive to him. Withholding its fall, it took a great deal of navigation to find so that he might tip over that edge as well. Once, in searching for admission, he’d traveled down her body, his mouth resting on her breast. There was a wash of tongue, a precursor to suction, and then suddenly she changed there in his mouth. Her skin shifted from lavender-scented neutrality, to the bitter taste of iron sweetened by something he couldn’t trace, the rush of blood to her skin, sifted through the filter of it. He had pulled away and grinned, then worked to find the taste again, that edible edge, so he might fall anew. But it slipped away, and only returned twice since, his secret taste of her, filed away.

Returning to the moment, Alex pulled his hand from Violet’s hair, the dampness long since absorbed into his fingers and the tangles worked back into curls. He was careful not to wake her as he shifted out from under her left side, first escaping the crook of her knee, then gently raising her arm from his chest. The bed made a sound if you let it, he knew, so he slipped off it bodily and stood up from the floor rather than sit up and give the springs below his concentrated weight the chance to creak. She was childlike when she slept. He stared, listening for the tell-tale whimper that meant her dreams had shifted in his absence. She’d once told him her own secret, separately filed.

“When you leave me,” she’d said “when you leave me in the night, somehow my body knows, and in my dreams I’m suddenly alone. I was on a ferris wheel, and you got up, and all at once the fair was empty.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. When you come back, I wake up.”

“If you woke up when I left, your dreams wouldn’t get lonely.”

“That’s funny, isn’t it?”

Alex never asked her what she meant. He considered asking her now, waking her up, breaking her empty dream, and asking, “What’s funny, Vi? Why is that funny?” Instead he crept out of the bedroom and sat on the futon. The cushion was lumpy, and after an attempt to flatten it with his kneading feet, he lost interest, distracted by the window.

It was snowing and the reflective crystals forming on the glass caught the few wisps of light that had outrun sunrise. He pressed his hand to the pane, watching as his warmth formed a wet print. Removing his hand, he looked
through the shining shape to the pond behind the apartment complex, a manmade blemish that usually lay stagnant, devoid of appreciable life. The rising light painted it a flesh color, and the ice along its top had flash frozen in the night, catching in it the tips of dried reeds and blades of grass, like the earth’s hair stood on end. He looked at his arm, smoothing goosebumps of his own.

He turned toward the kitchen, and knocked his shin on the coffee table. *Fuck.* Hissing, he kicked out in response, shoving the whole pressboard load a few inches off center. He bent to pick up the fallen mail, magazines and letters that had stubbornly refused to follow the table on its journey. He dropped the whole mess back onto the table in a pile. An envelope’s open edge caught the corner of some celebrity’s cover photo; it caught his eye. He frowned at the scene. Padding to the hall closet and pulling a box off the shelf, he grabbed an unopened pack of plastic corner guards. The package popped open easily, relinquishing the soft, rounded plastic forms, and Alex turned one over in his hand before violently shoving it on the offending corner. He left the rest on the pile of mail as he made his way to the kitchen.

The stove clicked twice before the flame started under the small teapot. He leaned against the countertop, arms folded across his chest, looking down at his bare shin, wondering if a bruise would form. A whistle interrupted his wait, and he lifted his head to find a cup. Leaning back against the counter, he held the warm beverage tight, melting the chill from his fingertips that they’d acquired from the windowpane, goosebumps reappearing down his forearms.

The crooked coffee table angled off to some unseen corner of the room he’d left. He blew on the tea and watched his breath vaporize. The coffee table stood silent behind the veil of steam before his eyes. He sipped carefully, staring at the table. Violet would notice. *Fine.* He slumped back into the living room.

Sitting on the futon, he slipped one foot out to catch the lip of the tabletop, dragging it back into place from his seated position. He wasn’t yet ready to release the warming cup from his grasp. The legs settled into their familiar impressions on the carpet. The mail shifted.

*Episode 2: The Commerce of Nostalgia*

*Usually Not This Sad, Guys*
*August Smith*

It is 2:04 a.m.; I am alone and grinning
my empty house is full of thirsty silence that I quell
by drunkenly adding photogenic strangers
on Facebook-
“social networking.”
Amanda Moran of Brisbane, Australia- Add as Friend.

A youtube video:
golden eagles clutch goat spines and drop them off cliff faces.
the goats, silent and in free-fall, maybe thinking: “what.”
the eagles, possibly smirking,
pierce the broken goats' stomachs like rotten apple flesh,
the cliff faces with a brow-sweat of blood.

Now I'm on the porch
I tell myself I'm not a smoker
but for anyone's sake, who do I kid
I just bought cigarettes with scholarships,
and by the way,
Amanda Moran of Brisbane, Australia rejected my friend request.

GLASS BEADS
ALICIA BANAZEWSKI

I touched the torch
The aftermath is assumed
    and insignificant
The product is glorified
in a valley full of
chocolate haired children
raising molders of glass
to wicked heights. I made
beads with mushroom

clouds inside flowers and
tornados. Gravity takes
glass and folds over itself.
I overexerted myself this summer,
Every moment: I created and gave.

BAR CRUSH: LOCUST AND VINE
TIM BUCHANAN

Nathan Meeker is making eyes at the bartendress. From his table by the opposite wall he could be looking at the mirror, but then he’d be trying to flirt
with his reflection. His companion is still talking. Lola Mercy either hasn’t noticed or doesn’t care that Nathan is ogling someone else.

“And I think it takes a special kind of cruelty to engage in charity,” she is saying.

Nathan has been drinking gin, working his way to more and more obscure cocktails. He is currently up to a Tom Collins. Lola is dark-haired with a sharp face, but the bartenders is round while still being slender and her hair is blonde and has a downy look. A ceiling fan blows stray wisps into Lola’s face with every breath. She pushes the black, plastic Elvis Costello frames back up her nose. It’s such an automatic gesture she doesn’t know she’s done it.

“Even if you believe for one second that it’s not a put on, that you ten-cents-a-day is going into the mouth of a little girl with flies crawling on her eye balls, even then, what good are you really doing?”

Nathan’s face is far too smooth. It looks as though it hurts, like it must burn him, like the friction of a wind across it might cause it to ignite. Thre is a redness in his cheeks, and it swirls around the hollows made when he drains his tall, skinny glass, like a maelstrom. Still he is the third most attractive man in the bar. He doesn’t appear to know it. He bends secretive glances at women, hooking his vision like a thrown disc. Those eyes can’t bear to be caught. He is looking too long at the bar to be looking at the mirror. When he nods his head it isn’t for Lola’s benefit. It’s for the people who must be watching him and aren’t.

“In the end, you’re only prolonging suffering.”

The bartendress exits to the side. She descends into a cellar and Nathan, looking to Lola, shakes the pack of cigarettes that have been sitting on the table. They rattle dryly. She leans forward and smiles, and so does he. They hesitate as if counting until the instant before their smiles become dumb. Their chairs make a racket that only they hear when they stand. Outside, under the orange street light of Locust and Vine, Nathan hands Lola a cigarette. With one arm tucked under her breasts, she puts it to her lips, her whole hand open like a fan. And when he brings the lighter up, she leanse in, as if for a kiss, but goes too far, burying its end in the flame. Nathan pulls back and Lola leans in. Before another move can be made her cigarette is lit. With the same flame he lights his own.

“What’s so wrong about wanting to keep things going a little while longer, anyway?” Nathan says.

Lola leans coolly against a black iron fence. Empty patio furniture and the glow of Irish cheer behind her. Nathan stands across from her, heels hanging out over the sidewalk’s edge. His eyes climb skitteringly over the face of the pub before falling back to Lola’s. He rocks like he can’t bear or doesn’t think to stand still. He lowers his eyes as if to watch his feet. On their way they touch the arm beneath her breasts. Lola’s eyes and Nathan’s shoes are nearly the same shade of blue.

“Nothing, I suppose, so long as they go somewhere.” Lola says, blowing more breath than smoke into the air.
NOTES ON MY PARENTS’ RECORD PLAYER
HELENA WITZKE

What is it about really terrible sound quality that is so desirable? To me, there will never be anything quite as powerful as "Take Five" and Bill Cosby's standup coming from the needle of my parents' now defunct record player. When I think of home, I think of the speakers scratching and popping right before the high hat hits. I think of listening to the Beauty and the Beast record, the one that always scared me because of the narrator's ghastly Beast impersonation. "Beauty," he would growl, his tones deep and rasping from the bottom of his throat. My brother and I would listen to this as we rollerbladed over the hardwood floors of our house, making circles through the living room and sunroom. Max and I would race past the large front windows, forgetting our father's warnings about falling through the glass to our inevitable and grisly deaths.

It's amazing to me that my parents tolerated us using our rollerblades in the house. Maybe they weren't, and we just rebelled against their tyranny when they were away. All I remember is that my dad, on catching us, would emphasize the danger of the windows over the incredible wear and tear we put the house through. As he described what falling through the windows would be like, that sinister, raspy narrator, would mutter about the Beast's hulking shadow growing closer.

I want nothing more right now than to hear Cosby tell me about the Chicken Heart that terrorized the East Coast. Now, the only way I can get ahold of it is through YouTube, and it just doesn't sound right. I need the vinyl. I need the feel of the record. It's been long enough since my last listen that I can no longer remember the material itself or where the jokes are going. It's strange and familiar at the same time. Details aren't necessary when you're this familiar with something.

Now, though, it's strange how little I invest in my music. I think it's a mark of the generosity of our generation that we share our musical holdings with each other freely. Although, the fact that the majority of our music is pirated makes that generosity rather two-faced. At this age, we're all a little contradictory, and just a little lost. I think we share so much with each other because we all understand what music does to each of us: in every new song, a hundred that we once knew are reflected. It's about constantly bringing our own lived-in histories, our search for home, back to life.

Part of the beauty of vinyl, for me and all my generation full of hipsters, is that it reminds us of something that doesn't belong to us: just like wearing sundresses circa 1960 or our grandfathers' ties, we're usurping a past that our forebears grew out of. Their descendants invented Bose speakers and SkullCandy headphones. They smoothed out the imperfections of their music;
they knew that sound could be improved. Memory is, after all, a series of nicks and grooves in brain; what remains, hopefully, makes a cohesive rhythm.

For my birthday, my boyfriend told me he's going to get me a record player. He is attentive enough to know how I feel about that sweet popping noise, and patient enough to deal with my whims. I would argue the move is too kind, but I know that the first thing I will do is put on Dave Brubeck, sit in our living room, and listen to memories that are not mine.

Perhaps what raises most sharply the sweet twinge of memory though is the knowledge of things gone unrecorded. My father's whistle, my brothers' laughter, the sound my sister reading aloud to me in her bedroom on summer afternoons. I know that nowhere in the world can I find a sample of my mother singing the old lullaby, or my father singing "Comin' In on a Wing and a Prayer." If there was though, I would buy it in a heartbeat. On vinyl.

DJARUM DOG DAYS
JOHN SPREITZER

After the first lingering drag on a long overdue cigarette, the sun peeks from behind a field of tomorrow's rainstorms. It crawls through the land, creeps up trees, saturates grayscale birds, and lies down for a spell on formerly mute lawns. A cursory glance at the green mingled with the dried and funereal tan below reveal that the grass hold their dead close.

Clumps of ash the shade of newspaper tip and drop from the burning bundle of foreign leaves, my last clove, before it too is nothing but a yellowed stump, and discarded.

A shy child behind his mother's skirts, the sun dips back behind a graying sky.

AD CAPTANDUM VULGUS
CHRISTOPHER HART

Optimus Prime went for a drive, as he often did when he needed to clear his head. He had been pestered all day about repairs, stock parts, and invoices. When he got tired of it, he simply left, saying something about going to find an Autozone or something like that. He drove without direction, letting his whim or his ennui dictate the route. Like many leaders, Optimus Prime was weary; tired
of his role and responsibility. Tired also of the Decepticons and the centuries
their civil war had been going on, though he didn’t quite know if it was still
called a civil war if they were no longer in their native land. He easily could have
searched for the Internet for the information, downloaded it directly to his brain,
but decided not to. Instead, he thought about the ironies of crash-landing on a
planet that was so familiar with animosity: Hutus and Tutsis, Israel and
Palestine, Republicans and Democrats. At this thought, his mood quickly
changed from bemused contemplation to anger. All of these earthly squabbles,
he thought, passed in the blink of an eye. “Have a centuries-old conflict, for
crissakes, then tell me how you like it.” Now, as he wended his way up a
mountain road, he thought about the war with the Decepticons. It had been
going on for so long, Optimus couldn’t really remember what started it all.
Something to do with rivets, he supposed. Optimus was so lost in thought as he
crested the precipice, he hardly noticed the figure sitting on its edge, dangling his
feet into the abyss below.

Lately, Megatron had been coming to the top of the mountain to think. He
found that the thin air, though making his gears turn slower, brought on a
profound sense of quiet. He’d come to value quiet after long days in the
Decepticon headquarters, enduring the grating, fingernail-on-chalkboard voices
of his followers. They’d posture endlessly about their performance in their most
recent (and inevitably unsuccessful) battle against the Autobots. Exaggerating
endlessly about the number of opponents they’d felled, his Decepticons would
self-aggrandize in their scraping tones. Their dreadful expectation was the worst
of it all. They would invariably look to Megatron, their fearless leader, for yet
another half-assed scheme to secure yet more energy to slake their glutinous
and, what seemed to him, insatiable hunger for power. Megatron had gotten so
good at scheming, he didn’t even have to try anymore. Like an inveterate actor,
he’d adlib evil designs. “We’ll attack a spin class,” he’d find himself saying, “and
steal the energy they waste burning fat from their behinds to burn down this
miserable planet.” It was then customary for him to issue forth one of his famous
maniacal laughs, something that was especially difficult during cold season, as it
hurt his throat, and usually devolved into a very stylized coughing fit. Making
his home life worse, if it could be called that, was his right-hand man,
Starscream. Megatron could only call him his right-hand man if he, at every
moment of the day, wished to forcibly sever the appendage from his arm with a
dull knife. The only reason Starscream had gotten the job of Decepticon vice-
commandant was because of the damn electoral system. Starscream had been
runner up in the election of a new leader. Even though he was Megatron’s only
opponent (after all, who’d be dumb enough to run against someone who ruled
with a literal iron fist?), he’d gotten the job through a technicality. “What kind of
a name was Starscream anyway?” wondered Megatron. Certainly a very astute
one, as the loud whiny timbre of his voice often sent Megatron to cosmic levels of
annoyance. Opportunistic as he was ambitious, Starscream regularly made passive-aggressive comments following unsuccessful schemes like, “you know, if I were in charge, things would have gone differently.” It was at times like that when Megatron had to try hard to remember the promise he’d made to the little usurper’s mother, an attractive vending machine with which he’d had a brief affair: “Look out for the boy. He’s a little, well, slow.” It was this thought that would keep Megatron from deactivating him. Regardless of what everyone expected, Megatron had a great deal of pride, and a promise was a promise.

A trail of dust rose on the horizon, probably thrown by a car on some distant road. It made Megatron shudder. The sight of any car filled him with dread for fear that it would transform and start shooting at him. It wasn’t that Megatron feared death or injury, no, he was quite devil-may-care when it came to things like that. It was just that he was bored of it. Like any monotonous job or loveless marriage, battle had become an unendurable chore for Megatron. Of course he would put on a vehement face for the benefit of his followers, but his heart just wasn’t in it the way it used to be. He remembered glorious conflict on Cybertron fraught with danger and heroism. There was a time when he fought decisive battles, history-altering battles. Lately, all combat followed the same form: poorly aimed volleys of blaster fire would be exchanged ad nauseum until one side ran out of ammunition and retreated. He cared not to think about how often it was his side doing the retreating. Usually he’d yell some vague threat as they withdrew, something like, “The next time we meet, you and this worthless planet are finished!”

Despite the number of times he’d tried to destroy it, Megatron actually quite liked Earth. He found its fleshy inhabitants and all their accomplishments incredibly quaint, as one might find a sleepy vacation village in the off-season. Megatron could see himself owning a summer home on Earth one day: somewhere he could think and be alone with his thoughts, maybe even have someone to share them with. His thoughts again drifted back to the vending machine and, letting his mind wander, sat down on the edge of the cliff.

Hearing the familiar engine roar behind him, Megatron sprang from his perch battle-ready. Adrenaline pumped through his circuits as he leveled his gun at his nemesis, narrowing his eyes. Yet there was something so lackadaisical about the way Optimus transformed that Megatron almost faltered.

“Prime,” he menaced.

“Megatron,” Optimus rejoindered, aiming his own weapon at his enemy.

“Prime I…” Megatron knew he had something for this. I welcome you to your doom? No, been done already. I will administer your death. Doesn’t make any sense. He lowered his weapon.

“Prime, I’m tired,” he said finally.
Optimus Prime was at a complete loss. Here, his arch-nemesis stood unaided, within meters of him. As bereft of his followers as Megatron was of his, Optimus demurred to the stand-down.

“Megatron, I… What’s this all about?” Familiar with his archenemy’s treachery, Optimus kept wary.

“What is this, Prime? What is this thing we’re doing to each other?”

“I… We’re sworn enemies, Megatron. You represent all that opposes freedom, liberty, and… well those other things Autobots fight for.”

“Do I?” and it seemed like an honest question. “I don’t even remember what started this.”

“It was something about rivets,” said Optimus with less confidence than he’d hoped.

Megatron waved his hand deferentially. “I don’t want to fight you.”

Optimus thought about this. Given the centuries of evidence to the contrary, he had a great deal to doubt. “What’s this all about, Megatron?”

“Don’t you feel it, Prime? This…” he grasped at the ether. “I’m tired of it: the fights, the endless posturing. I want…” he trailed off, unsure of what he was asking.

“I think I know what you’re asking, Megatron, I just don’t know that it’s possible.”

“A truce, a treaty. I know, the Decepticons would never agree to it.”

“Nor the Autobots, jeez,” Optimus sat down on the edge of the cliff next to where Megatron had retaken his seat. “They would probably try to impeach me.”

“And you think I would fair better?” asked Megatron. “It would be mutiny.”

Optimus Prime and Megatron continued to talk in this way for several hours, each delving into the other’s personal life, thoughts, and feelings. They found more in common than they would have ever thought possible: the burden of leadership, their equally tiresome followers, their complete incomprehension of humans’ fascination with reality television. After the two finally parted, it was on good terms and without antipathy. Each now felt a certain warmth for the other where once there was only hatred. Tentatively, they agreed to meet again at the same place.

Time and again they met atop the mountain to talk. Every so often, one of them brought a quart of oil, and the two would pass the bottle between the two of them. Laughing and cajoling, they grew to find real fondness for the other’s company. When their forces met in battle, the two of them would smile knowingly, aware to the ironies of their reality. Regardless, they felt trapped. Even their newfound friendship could do nothing to liberate them from the burden of their leadership. Each appeasing his base, they grew more and more
distant from the goals they truly sought to accomplish and the values they held. Both Megatron and Optimus occupied an extreme, one that could be flocked to: easily identified and recognized. Those who looked would see a good Autobot, and an evil Decepticon: polar opposites, a perfect dichotomy. Yet the two continued to meet in secret and share their stories. That is, until they were found out.

It was a usual meeting for Optimus and Megatron, both joking and passing oil on the cliff’s edge when, unbeknownst to either of them, Starscream happened to pass over on a rather dull errand. Recognizing his leader and his sworn enemy laughing together, Starscream, not being one to ignore an opportunity, began recording. Promptly he uploaded the video to the Internet and sent a link directly to the data processing centers of both his comrades and enemies.

The fallout was incredible. Both the Autobots and the Decepticons wanted to see their leaders as infallible and uncompromising. Seeing the two of them next to each other like old friends was equally repugnant to both sides. Megatron sprang into damage control mode, attributing the meeting with Optimus to his latest scheme to ensure the downfall of the Autobots and planet Earth: a scheme that required absolute secrecy and one that Starscream had effectively ruined by uploading the video to every transformer. Optimus took a more conciliatory approach, saying he’d been taken in by Megatron and had been genuinely convinced of his pleas for peace. Optimus narrowly avoided ousting by thanking his Autobots for showing him the error of his thinking and reminding him how Megatron was not to be trusted.

No longer able to keep their rendezvous secret, Optimus Prime and Megatron ceased their meetings and never had another. The goodwill and camaraderie they had found in each other dissipated more and more each time they met in battle, which was now the only way they saw each other. The subtle, knowing smiles they’d exchanged from across the field hardened into frowns and, acting like enemies, they learned to hate each other once more.

Episode 3: When I Was Younger

I DON’T KNOW RIVERS, ONLY LAKES
ALICIA BANAZEWSKI

My lungs are filled with the ash that has fallen from his cigarettes. I cling to his voice and sober words.
Going to the East side of Michigan is uncomfortable. The house is too quiet and the garage still smells like smoke.

BOYS AND FATHERS AND MY GRANDMOTHER’S GOD: A YEAR IN TWO PENINSULAS
HELENA WITZKE

She told me none of this. In her youth, before the coming of the bomb, she was told that if the sun died we would not know for years. Now we think more in terms of minutes. In the time it takes to brew a cup of coffee old Helios will have expired. She sits, gathering years about her ankles, blanketing the thin delicate skin, but still the seconds keep getting shorter. Every time a cloud passes under the sun, those eyes, only a little faded, only a little worried, pass upward like a contract she is keeping. Eight minutes, she tells me. That is all the grace period we get.

Her life before they lived together was a mystery to me until after the summer he died; the privacy of love is not distance, but the absence of details. I heard of god and salvation, but never of the courtship that spent three years confined to postcards while he was away - that voyage at sea which could have been escape, the last time to be alone. The gravity of the world unseen pulled him from the hard center of my grandmother, only to ebb under the force of bodies in motion. Decades later, the fixed return of his orbit broke only under the force of years.

I learn all of this too late for me to apply it to the figure of her husband. She will tell me these things, hastening over details. Her history in wide strokes is presented, but the lines are clipped short, the colors muted.

In her letters to me, she tells me how Congress is ruining the world, and that I should not eat leftover onions for fear that they hold too much bacteria. In reward for her new openness, I keep to myself my own revelations. I do not tell her that when I undress a different boy than the one she knew, I open him like a gift, new and cool to the touch.

Now, she sits and misinterprets phone calls, teaching herself about Buddhism and quantum mechanics. She times herself in increments of eight minutes, a small new economy. She prefers to think in the recurring comfort of circles - rebirth, re-creation - of science that to her cannot be proven without the will of a higher power keeping score. The part she takes in the world is in smoothing it to the shape of her memory. She smooths the world to the shape of her memory. I prefer to erase mine, favoring the vogue of current events. We both live against our fears, me forsaking mine and she ignoring hers. We forsaking a past and she ignoring the present. We work backward from each other.
When I return home, I follow my own ellipsis, falling back into place with the others who come and go, paths growing wider, crossing less and less often. The distance from the sun to our planet has become our own distance. I tell her I am leaving soon; she talks of my imminent return. All the motion of her life, the constant revolutions around a star that will die and the inevitable movement of children around mothers, and away from them, disturbs her voice when she speaks. There is wealth in years, until suddenly they are used up, and your grandchild has secrets to keep.

ROCKY THE GUINEA PIG
MARILYN SCHULTZ

I named him after the flying squirrel in The Rocky & Bullwinkle Show. I was a slow, dumb kid, but well-meaning, just like that big moose Bullwinkle, so I figured that this rodent-looking thing that my parents gave to me was good enough to be my foil, good enough to be the smart one and help me along in my adventure called life.

I was five years old when my mom gave him to me, five or six. I played with him as much as any kid could play with a cute furry pet that did absolutely nothing. I loved him as much as a stupid kid can love anything.

I wasn’t the best pet owner, though. I emptied a canister of Nickelodeon Gak into my hands and rubbed it into his fur, and although it was eventually all washed out, he always smelled funny after that. My favorite pastime was pushing him around in a Little Tykes plastic shopping cart. His favorite pastime was gnawing on the blue bars on the front of the Little Tykes plastic shopping cart. I’d push him around in the kitchen, in the basement, in the driveway.

That’s all I remember about him, really.

He was a sweet guinea pig. He would let everyone hold him and he never bit anyone.

But as the months came and went, something strange started happening. I started sneezing. I started itching. Time passed, and my eyes would grow heavier around him. Pretty soon I started swelling up before I even touched him, all I had to do was be around him, in the same room. I was miserable.

So my mom took him back.
Giving a pet you love back to the pet shop is a good example of a thing that a kid cannot freaking handle. I cried, and screamed, and let my bones go limp as children are wont to do when they can’t articulate their desperation properly, but it didn’t matter. My mom dragged me out of the store, and I never saw Rocky again. I was a stupefied, solitary Bullwinkle. I was dumb and without a partner yet again.

He was gone. Not dead, but not somewhere where I could find him again if I tried, either. Existing, but only in thought. He was just absent from my life, suddenly, and in a fashion much more dramatic than the moment when I realized my childhood was over.

Sometimes I will enter a pet store that has guinea pigs and scent will trigger memory or an immune reaction, but usually, it’s both. My heart pounds faster and my eyes tear up. Every time, I have to throw up my hands and say, “no, no, I can’t stay here, this is too much”, and so I leave, even though I would prefer to stay a while.

There are these friends of mine who own a parrot. It sits by their kitchen, keeping a careful eye on who goes in for extra helpings and too much dessert. Its name, as it told me, is Whizzer, or Wheezer, which might be more appropriate given its large array of coughs and whistles and scratching, bleeping noises that come up at odd moments. An avian answering machine, sans practicality. It has a strangely sharp stare that seems to consider my every move. It is edgy and nervous like an animal used to minding its survival. It is watchful, like a father.

In the beak of the parrot sits my own father, whuffling and sneezing like he does over sawdust, whistling and hissing between his four false teeth as he handles the heartwood of old giants. The two beady eyes look at me as if they know what I’m thinking, that I’m putting my father in tune with these sounds. It is true that he has a noisy musicality to him; he too will burst out into snippets of song, though unlike Whizzer it is out of distraction, rather than imitation or a need to communicate. His old wise hands like wings always are stretching or snapping to a particular beat.

My friends the parrot-owners tell me that the sounds are exhausting. Whizzer will outlive them, they are sure; and if not, at least its legacy will. An inheritance of noisiness for their heirs, of dark eyes making a comment the beak does not. But perhaps they are too close to it to see the full picture. They know him as the parrot that wakes them up in the night with its clicking, snapping, chirping cloud of sounds. I know the feeling. I know dark warm eyes, not quite
so beady, a whistle that erupts too early in the morning and restless pacing. So my father stays in the beak of the bird, and when I leave my friends’ home I leave his also.

EATING A BLACKBIRD
PATRIC NUTTALL

We pluck pluck our mouths
over those small circles of meat.

Our fingers, greased and dirty
with brick dust, hold us up

on the ledges of a city
we own only enough

to find another bird.

We fry its beak
on a broken pan

in a building as
old as my mother

even though beaks don’t boil or fry
just crystallize in stone: A fossil.

KEYS
CRYSTAL RHONEY

Morgan had always loved the smell of church, ever since she was small. One of the first things she could remember about church was the smell. Musky wood and incense, the unmistakable aroma of used books; there was something old about it, comforting. She used to beg her parents to get there as the doors opened so she could inhale the first whiff that lay dormant in the vestibule, before it was stolen by the morning crowd, or wafted away into the street. Even now the habit caused her to stand near the entrance, twenty years later, trying to
sniff out the last remnants of that scent through the Sunday colognes and crisp fall air that crept in past the front doors. But she’d arrived too late, by necessity, and it was gone.

Staring at the small font of holy water she’d just crossed herself with, Morgan waited for the bulk of the congregation to take their seats. She sized up a group here or there with her peripheral vision, keeping her head bowed slightly so as to appear somewhat reverent - a position she found usually kept her from being approached. As the tail end of the patrons straggled in, she made her move down the outside aisle, head forward, and scanned the rows until she found an ideal seat: no children, no elderly, and no coats. Narrowing her eyes slightly as she genuflected to the crucifix above the altar, the coats dilemma plagued her mind again, as it had that morning on her way to mass.

The weather outside was cooling. The late fall had appeared without warning. One day it had been summer, and then, suddenly, it was Thanksgiving weather, that heavy sweater and front-yard football feeling. It was as if Mother Nature had woken up from an accidental nap, realized she’d left the heat on, promptly turned the thermostat down, and went straight back to bed. While it was a welcome relief from the sweltering weeks before, the shift in temperature signaled a sharp end to Morgan’s rituals, a sure sign that soon it would be time for winter coats, and, in turn, deep pockets.

She must have been scowling over the thought of having to wait until spring again to come to church, because she caught someone halfway down the pew behind her staring at her. She flashed the motherly-looking woman the shortest polite smile she could manage, then grabbed a hymnal from the holder in front of her, burying her face in it as she looked up the planned music posted on the front of the lectern. She happily noted “Here I Am, Lord” was on the list, one of her favorites. Her smile faded with the knowledge that it wouldn’t be sung until after Communion, so she wouldn’t get to hear it. As she looked over the rudimentary sheet music for the tune, she began to hum the melody to herself quietly. When she noticed it was getting her some attention from the gentleman beside her, she stopped, letting the notes float around in her head silently until they were overcome by the processional music. Mass had begun.

For the next thirty minutes or so, Morgan went through the motions. Sit, stand, cross, pray, sing. Not once, she noted, did she come close to having a religious experience. Not like she’d heard described over the years of being raised Catholic. Through catechism, Sunday school, from other Christians, and mass after mass after mass. Her mind wandered, muscle memory taking over to lead her through the service.

Let Jesus into your heart, she heard her first priest say, let Him in and you’ll be uplifted, you will feel closer to God, and the power will overtake you. Such promises capture the imagination of little girls. Jesus will come to you, Father Patrick had said, you will hear Him speak to you, if you only listen. Maybe those promises and
the complete failure to fulfill them are what turned her into a nonbeliever. Then Morgan stole her first set of keys.

The memory brought her back to the present. She had other things to concentrate on. The priest approached the time for the eucharist, and the altar boys prepped the basin for lavabo. Amongst the congregation the solemnity was heavy, and Morgan’s slight tip of the head went unnoticed. Her eyes scanned her pew, taking stock of its contents. One, two, three, four sets of keys. Three had fobs attached for remote alarm and lock systems, ruling out the fourth which was merely adorned with a smiley-face keychain. The set nearest to her had a handmade lanyard, probably made by a relative, and probably special to the owner, so she counted it out. The remaining sets offered no brand names that she could make out, so she continued to mentally go down her list of factors. A few moments later and she had her choice: set number two had a well-worn fob, only one excess key, and one decorative keychain that did not mention a World’s-Greatest-anything or an Honor Role student - and there were no rhinestones. Morgan despised rhinestones.

Two it is, then, she thought.

Pulse pounding in her chest like a tom-tom during a rain dance, she sang the final refrain of “Hosannah in the highest” and followed the rest of the patrons as they knelt to pray. Heart racing, breath short, eyes closed, and as close to God as she had ever felt, Morgan squeezed her eyes tight and whispered nearly inaudibly.

“Stop me.”

But He didn’t.

Sighing softly, she slipped back into the pew. She laid on her side to reach the second set of keys, stretching. She held her breath, and with the ease of a practiced thief, she plucked them off of the wooden seat without a sound. Silently, carefully, she slid back into a kneeling position and waited.

The attendants turned their attention toward the consecration and Morgan sat perfectly still, calming herself down from the initial rush. The second song of the eucharist came and went, each line forcing a slower pulse, a softer breath, a stronger stance. By “Amen,” Morgan was standing with the constituents of Christ. As they exchanged the familiar peace-be-with-you’s, she slipped out of the pew and towards the front door. Head down, she covered her face with a well-placed hair adjustment. Outside, autumn wind whipped her cheeks pink as the adrenaline collected against her sternum. It overtook her; it spoke to her. Here, she imagined, is what it must feel like to be saved.