

the rc review

fall 2003 winter 2004



*don't blame me if you won't take this advice
and the family breaks up
and your children grow old and blind in front of a TV set
seeing
movies you wouldn't let them see when they were young*

-Frank O'Hara



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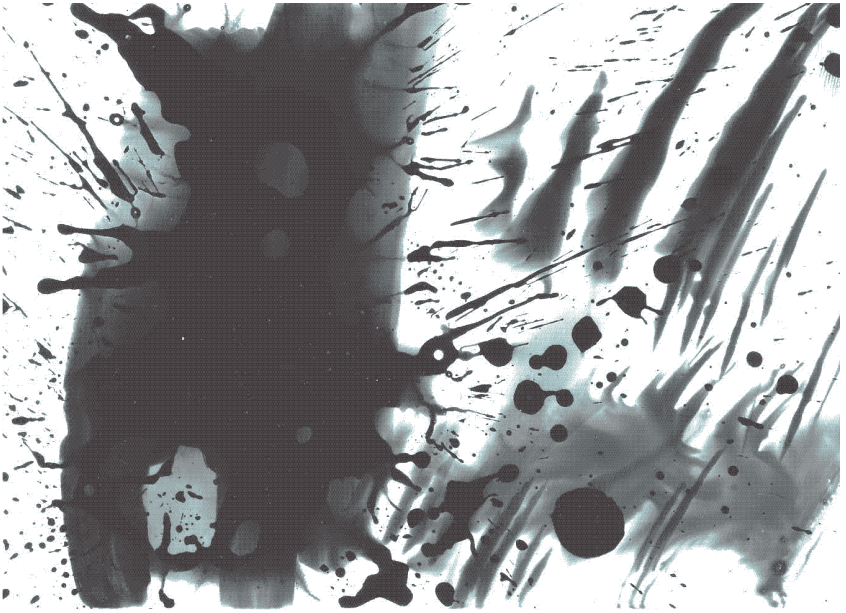
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Preparations, Five Different Ones

White waking through shades of green to opaque
notes, stretching through
a subtle arc, banded in blue, bundles
of six or seven.

Same green outside, stripping away the shades
of green to white,
the peeler misses streaks, vivid against
canvas undertones.

Peeling away rusty orange and frothy
rotten ice,
round to polygonal, diamond facets
the crunch is implied.

Three boxes cored, divot in top, soak in
the washbasin,
silver tones of water and steel and red
ripened tomatoes.

The smell is stronger than I'll ever be,
tears from my eyes
make it hard to see, so I won't cut, I'll
stand by the window.

-Thomas Rainwater



*“Personally, I thought they were all wankers
in white robes and pentagrams mentally
masturbating into a granola-induced
euphoria”*

“Oooo, you such a sexy, sexy bitch,” said Willie, rubbing noses with the stuffed meekrat, “that dog just loves you. Every time he comes around it’s ‘wa-wa-wa-wa-wa!’” She pounded the toy against her chest. “Can’t stop humping you!”

“Knock that shit off,” I shouted. I couldn’t believe she was actually in college. I was dreading having to introduce her to Gramps. Hopefully, she’d just meet Aunt Jean in the hospital lobby and head out from there.

The drive to the hospital was already taking over an hour, and she’d been messing with that toy the whole damn way. My aunt had given us that foul toy to keep it away from my cousin’s boyfriend’s dog, which had yet to be neutered. I wasn’t about to touch the doll, even after running a hose over it for three hours. Willie had been put in charge of handling it. She hadn’t bathed since we’d gotten off the plane three days ago, so I figured anything that came off on her wouldn’t make a huge deal of difference.

In the seat next to Willie, Derrick was trying hard to disappear into the upholstery. Couldn’t say I blamed him. This chick’s weird crap didn’t faze me, but I’d known her for about a year. He, on the other hand, had only met Willie twice.

-John Meszaros (continued on page xx)

Short Order Cooks

one, two, three, a bridge,
the rising sheet of smoke, dense
false ceiling just overhead
I poke my finger into gray

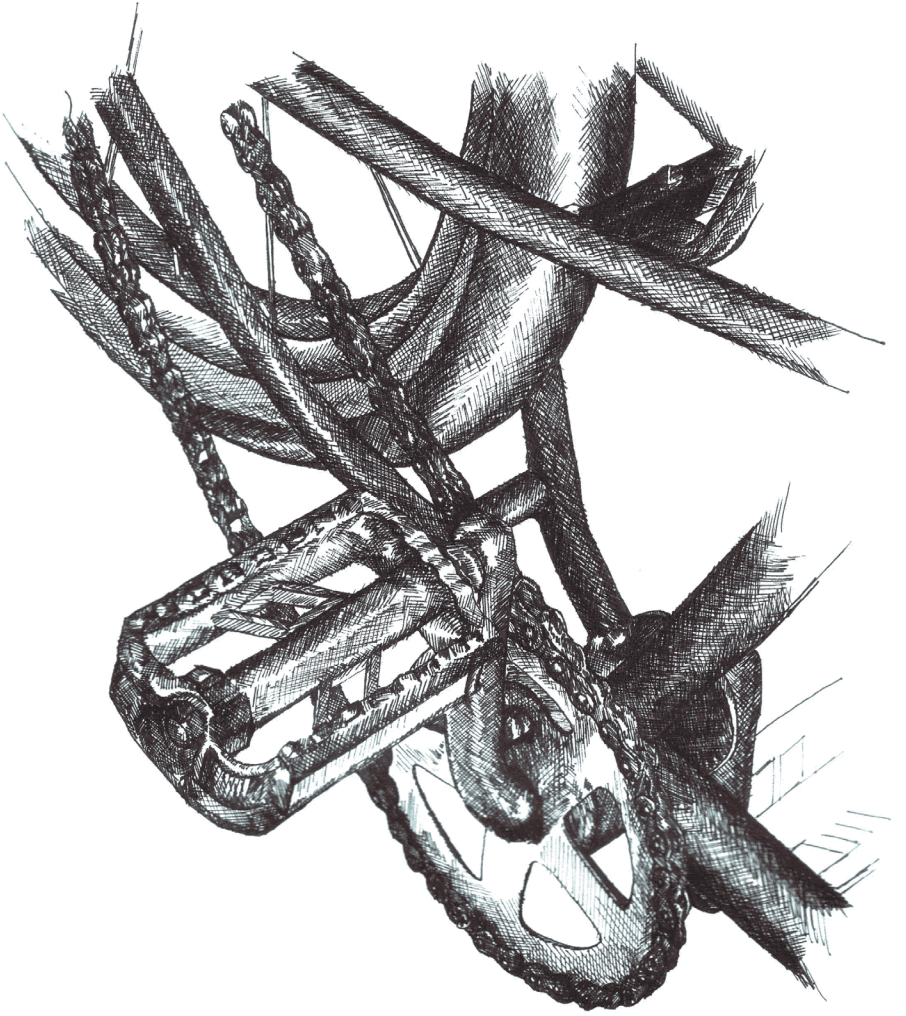
and watch as it disappears.
a pair of drawers, drums and bass
stale cigarette burning to the end.
Drummer cooked a Pittsburg-rare
Bassist snapping at the snare

Piano lolling in between

Horns tunneling, tunneling.
Rising pitch and dying men,
from a life on the ever road;
each note, Their song, I *think* I understand
but my life, sipping stale nectar

easy as Eve-with-a-lid, cubed
melting into Adam's ale.
As apple pie as American,
the blues they play
the reds they smoke, the white
keys and blacks. They lay the tracks,
pour over, into me.

-Thomas Rainwater



Hummous

I said, there is no good hummous in this town. It is too chunky
or too thin.

He said, you're right, there is no good hummous in this town.

There are Jews and there are Arabs in this town. They ought to
make better hummous.

Hummous is not Jewish. It is Arab.

My mother is Jewish, and she makes very good hummous.
My mother is Arab, and her hummous is even better.

Why, because she is Arab?

No, because it is creamy and has garlic and does not drip.

My mother's hummous is garlicky and smooth. It never has
round grains of chickpea.

The grains of chickpea are a problem in this town.

Hummous, I think, is both Jewish and Arab.

Your mother, or your mother's father, took it from the Arabs.

In Iraq, my mother's father lived, and there he ate hummous
with Arabs.

He paused. Your mother's father, maybe, was Arab.

My mother's brother would die if I said he were an Arab.

My mother's brother would die if I said he were a Jew.

Sometimes my mother adds basil. It never drips.

The Arabs and Jews ought to get together and fix the hummous
in this town.

Yes, for the sake of the hummous, they ought to get together.

Sometimes my mother adds eggplant. It never drips.

The hummous in this town never has enough garlic.

And it is made with rotten tehina.

-Rebecca Mostov

Olive Trees

Olive trees, salty seas, mosaic fountains, orange-lit tunnels
that tore through mountains,
spilling into local bars
startled by honks of oncoming cars that jittered like castanets
down narrow streets

my father's job transfer silenced the cry of Gypsy beats
my unsuspecting legs sprang back and forth like pendulums
from the sturdy cushion of a commercial jet seat
alive with wide-saucer eyes, spreading arms wide
unconditionally to the skies
told by parents that family endeavors would only get better
and better

incoming family of seven consumers, including two parents
classified as baby boomers

Give in!

Work those wallets like obese Americans that watch
Richard Simmons!

Within a year my mom was convinced she needed Dexatrim
A mom without padding
was like burrowing your nose into the formless belly of an
un-stuffed animal

"Mooom, you *must* stay squishy!!!"

I urged as I paraded around her in circles requesting cookies

genetically engineered numbers spawned years of bland,

seedless summers
undesirable fruit shriveled up line opportunist product in
our fridge
abandoned by an entire generation of dissatisfied kids
spoiled brats could soon draft candy corn on any holiday
wish-list
consumer strawberries garnished with pesticides during a
frivolous Christmas
no one felt displaced, consuming mindlessly through their
mouths and shitting the out the waste

everyone looked down on the streets
their reserve is accepted and contagious
body language rubs off like ink recorded on pages
balance is becoming too hard to achieve
people adhere to their circumstances and don't know how
to believe
my soul is tourmented with olive trees

-Kathleen Gallegos

People

Watch her explain to
her daughter

street poor, dirt poor, after her hand has nicked his,
giving him the remainder change, daughter holding
prized lemon Italian ice in hers. The girl does not like to
eat enough, wide-eyed today as we all were,
wants to give the man a plastic spoonful
She knows also the value of possession, also powerless.

On the street, he is nearing fifty, looks older, colorless,
blesses her and her halo of lemon-frizzy hair, she
rubbernecks
as her mother pushes her to the car.

he is eighty-five cents closer. On the way home
the mother nots her Ked-footed, under-hungry daughter,
grows silently

furious at her dashboard, the Mercedes circle dangling
in the corner of her right eye. She grows furious
at the leather interior, power locks and them inside,
neauseous fury rising in waves of displacement, thoughtless,
unattractive.

Keds soft tapping against sead while she imagines him in
here,

torpid heat outside reaching her temples,
stocky forearm dewing up the armrest, the lewdest fucking
string of words

possible in his mouth. SHOUT SOMETHING AT ME!

she demands, but her little girl is nodding off, and the houses are getting bigger, the blacktop blacker, the ritual clicks of gas gauge and CD eject and seatbelt light are on once again, and their welcome mat.

they learned to be careful to protect what they had and watched her fight. She tipped accordingly. It was she, begging to rough up the lazy-ass cable company who billed her wrong, she had this child and now they are stunted and waiting for her to explain

People who go without
Italian ice on Sundays.

Her daughter seems to understand,
small spoonhands.

-Anna Jonsson





The textbook sat half-heartedly on Claudia's lap as she scribbled calculus problems into her notebook in sync with the rhythm of the news anchor's robotic voice.

"In Iraq tonight," the man said, and Claudia's pencil swiveled to form a down-turned parabola. Its hump passed through the $y=4$, its thin arms left to drop down to infinity.

The afternoon's springtime light that had poured into the living room earlier was now reflected back under the closed blinds into the charcoal gray of dusk by the fluorescent light of the table lamp. It was just after 8 o'clock, a normal Wednesday night spent in anticipation of her father's return.

"Claude," her mother yelled, "are you done with it yet?"

Claude clenched her pencil tighter, pressing the tip into the white space between the blue lines of the paper until a soft mound of graphite encircled it.

"Did you hear me, Claude? Are you done with your work?" her mother repeated.

photograph of a young marine who had just been deployed. She was dressed in full uniform, her beaming smile pressed into her ample brown cheeks. *She has pretty eyes*, Claudia thought to herself. The footage suddenly switched to an interview with one of the woman's high school teachers. He said she excelled in math.

"I'll be done," Claudia interjected through gritted teeth.

(continued)

Miscalculations

saucepan as she beat the butter, red wine vinegar, and other ingredients into the submissive blended sauce for her husband's favorite steak recipe.

Claudia rolled her eyes and turned the volume up on the TV.

The news had now gone to commercial break, the tearful hopes of the marine's family awkwardly segued into a limited time dinner offer at the bistro around the corner. Claudia's mouth salivated at the overflowing bowl of pasta pictured in front of her, and she listened to the rumble of her stomach with equal parts longing and resentment. Her father would probably stay at work for another hour, she thought to herself. He never could say when he'd be home. She dropped her vision back to her lap to distract her, writing the next problem on the line below the previous one.

Find the volume of the solid formed when the region bounded by $y=2x$, $x=3$, and $y=0$ is rotated about the y -axis she copied. She typed the equations into her calculator and pressed the graph button, turning the theoretical numbers into a right triangle that she mentally swiveled around the y -axis until the shape became a flat-bottomed bowl.

As she sketched the image onto the notebook paper the smell of the rich Béarnaise sauce began to waft into the living room. The tarragon and pepper washed over until she found herself imagining the calculator bowl filled to the brim with tender steak-bits and long spaghetti strands. Hungrily she turned back to the TV where images played of US troops walking through a relatively calm city just outside of Baghdad. The soldiers looked exhausted. Their fatigues were sweat-stained, the sunlight was swimming across the smooth black of their army-issue guns, they steadily heaved the boxes of Red Cross provisions from the back of the army trucks overboard into the sea of desperate black eyes.

"US troops arrived in Basra today. They assured the citizens that they had come to protect them, and handed out much-needed food and supplies," the voice-over announced. Claudia watched as the village's citizens swarmed around the open doors at the back of the vehicles, frantically reaching out to catch the plummeting parcels. The camera panned the scene, pausing as two leather-skinned women silhouetted in white fabric collided in their attempts to grab the same box. The reporter on-site confirmed that goods were already running low. Several of the Iraqi men surrounding the trucks declared their hatred for America even as they held humanitarian donations in their ochre-toned arms. Soldiers and citizens alike, the reporter told the camera, were bracing themselves for the uncertainty of the coming days. Then the image returned to the American studio, where a raven-haired anchor dressed in red announced that the troops would not be in the village long—the push to Baghdad

(continued)

would continue by that night.

Just then the phone rang. Claudia glanced over at the portable phone beside her in the black leather couch but decided not to bother. A second passed and then it rang again.

“Claudia, would you get that,” her mother yelled in exasperation.

“I’m working,” Claudia responded coldly.

The phone rang again and her mother finally relented, composing herself as she lifted the receiver to her ear.

“Hello?” she said. Her tone suddenly changed from discombobulated to cheerful. Claudia was glad she hadn’t bothered to move.

“Oh hi hon, how are you? Uh-huh. So the meeting’s still going. Well of course that’s okay. What time do you think you’ll be home?...No no I wasn’t trying to make you feel... no that’s not... I’m just cooking the—” there was a pause. “Well, we’ll wait for you... I love you, too.”

Claudia heard the phone click back into the wall.

“What time is he coming back?” she called to her mother.

There was a short pause. “I’m not sure,” she answered quietly.

Claudia flipped to the back of her textbook to the answer section, and was frustrated to discover that the number she had circled was not the same as the publisher’s. She moved the light-weight blanket off of her lap and rose from the couch. Then she walked to the kitchen, her dark red ponytail wrapped around her slender neck and whipping against her freckled chest.

“What are you looking for?” her mother asked as Claudia opened the refrigerator and examined various compartments.

Claudia shrugged distractedly.

“Something to eat,” she said as she checked the contents of an unmarked Tupperware container. Her mother set a pot of tap water onto the stove and turned the black knob to high. Scalding blue flames smacked the pot’s metal bottom.

naturally gray hair, her face looked scrunched up and sad, and her figure filled out all the stretch of her blue sweat pants.

“Claudia,” her mother said in a low-tone.

“Okay,” she said defensively. “Okay,” and she placed the container back on the shelf. A minute passed until her mother took a stalled breath.

“Are you—did you finish yet?”

“No.”

(continued)

Miscalculations

Another minute passed.

“He’s gonna be—”

“home soon?”

Their gazes met.

“I just have one problem left,” Claudia finally gave in softly.

“He won’t have anything to yell at me about.” Her mother nodded and reached for the dry pasta. As she poured the crisp yellow sticks into the water, she said,

“You know he loves you so much, Claude. He—I think you just don’t understand him.”

Claudia crossed her arms subconsciously and glowered at her mother’s profile.

“Mom, it’s 8:45. I’m hungry. He’s always late, I just wanted a snack. It’s not that big a—”

“But it is to him,” she cut in. “You’re not going to be hungry, you’re not going to want to sit and eat with us, and you’re going to upset him. He does stressful work all day and if he can’t come home ‘til late then it’s only because he’s working hard so we can have this house and this food.”

“Mom—”

“These little things matter, Claudia,”

“Mom—”

“I can’t believe you let your grades drop so much.”

Claudia moved across the room and opened the cupboard.

“You quit choir, you quit lacrosse, you quit piano. You don’t seem to do anything outside of school anymore but somehow you don’t have time for your work either—I mean, what is it that you’re trying to do?”

“It was just one grade,” Claudia reminded her sullenly.

“Yeah, one D.” She looked over at her daughter. “Don’t you want him to be happy? Don’t you want to make him proud for once?”

Claudia grabbed a box of cereal and slammed the cupboard shut. She rushed out of the kitchen, brushing away the tears of frustration with the back of her hand before they had time to fall.

As she moved toward the couch she passed the spot on the wall where the decorative china plate used to be. Her mother had already replaced it with a framed wedding photo, the gilded edges covering the dent that their father had created when he smashed his arm into it the other day. You wouldn’t think one bad report card could make someone so mad, Claudia thought to herself bitterly. She opened the cereal box and plunged her hand inside.

(continued)

“Following fierce fighting in the Iraqi city of Zubayr,” the TV news anchor beckoned, “two British soldiers are dead and two missing. No one has heard from them since Monday.”

Claudia took her place back in the already-formed dent of the couch and breathed deeply. Then she picked up her notebook and wrote out the last problem.

Find the volume of the solid formed when the region bounded by $y=x^2$ and $y=x$ is rotated about the x -axis, Claudia scribbled down impatiently. She sketched out the tilted V-shape on the notebook paper.

“And that’s the news for tonight,” the female anchor said. “Stay tuned for a special *24 Hours*.”

Claudia reached for another handful of cereal and chewed the granola chunks as she solved the problem. The program *24 Hours* began. Its focus was the aftermath of the first Gulf War. Claudia turned to the back of the textbook during the introduction and checked her answer. $2\pi/15$, she read with satisfaction; then she laid her notebook and textbook to the side of her. Finally finished, she turned back to the TV with her full attention.

The show tunred out to be a documentary about the effects of poison gas Saddam Hussein used against the Kurds in the north. The journalist spoke to a middle-aged man whose shriveled eighteen-year-old daughter, frozen in fetal position in his arms, now resembled a grandmother after being exposed to poison gas in 1993. Later they interviewed a man who could no longer walk. The gas had shut down his nervous system. He began to walk across a field for the journalist and then with no warning his feet turned inwards and his legs buckled. He imploded like a house of hards and all the while his expression remained the same—a calm, empty stare unable to accept his new reality. Claudia placed the cereal on the floor and watched thescreen. The program went on to show footage of Iraqi troops flying over a mass exodus heading towards Turkey. As American planes hovered nearby, forbidden from interfering, Hussein;s trupps indiscriminately gunned the refugees down.

Claudia’s breath felt stifled and she glanced away. Out of the corner of her eye she saw her math homework. From the angle at which she was seated the graphs seemed to take on a new shape. She noticed the way the one sideways parabola resembled the gaping mouth of the little boy fighting for a box of provisions outside of Baghdad, and how the tilted Vwith the slices along the x -axis looked like the upturned anxious eyes of the refugees’ profiles as they watched the planes lurking miles above them. The calculator was still turned on but she had deleted the

(continued)

Miscalculations

graph so that the x- and y-axis were stripped bare. It reminded Claudia of the two British soldiers—their fate in the hands of others, their bodies deleted from vision.

“Claude,” her mother suddenly called.

Claudia snapped out of her thoughts.

“For God’s sake,” she yelled back. “I finished. I’m done. You can stop yelling at me.”

“I was just going to say you father’s walking out of the garage right now. If you come in here we can have dinner—it’s steak with Béarnaise sauce.”

Claudia had forgotten how hungry she was. Enticed by the meal she closed her notebook, placed it inside her backpack, and turned off the calculator—eradicating the woes of the world with the push of the ‘clear’ button. She grabbed the remote and momentarily caught the gaze of a round-faced young girl with dust-storm skin on the screen before clicking off the power and walking towards the kitchen.

She has a name.
She has a name, with a C –
not a C,
an L,
yes, an L –
she is here, two booths down,
laughing violently
through bursts of smoke.

She had a name once...
it was a summer
of pimples and truths or dares,
there were conversations
about what-is-God
or what-is-real,
over menthol cigarettes
and the buzz we got from them—
I got from them,
and then taught her to inhale
behind the church at the end of her block.

Now
between stretchy bites
of mozzarella sticks,
she inhales a Parliament,
casually.

She had braces forever;
sometimes when she laughed too hard,
the rubber bands snapped in her mouth,
neon green and orange.
If she sees me now she will know,
will know I cannot remember
her name...

(continued)

A Name

S?

Probably an S.

Our breath was cold with menthol,
the air was thick with whispers,
we spun in circles
saying Nothing is Real...
we could see from the parking lot
the house of the boy
whose brother died of heroin.

The house looked crooked,
frowning at the church through vines.

It must be an L, an I;

It took her so long to learn
the double-suck—
breathe in then in then out—
I got it that time she said,
but she didn't and I rolled my eyes.

She is talking now about
tequila shots she did last night,
licking salk off some guy and everything,
and a bartender with very green eyes...
why is she laughing like that?
She doesn't didn't laugh like that,
her name...

she had blue mascara.
Her fingers were long,
are still long.
She has forgotten,

(continued)

surely she's forgotten
how the wind blew the smoke
around our shoulders bare with tanktops
and the bra straps showing.
Surely she doesn't remember
we took off our shoes
and scratched our summer feet
on the pavement, damp with night.

When she finally got it down her lungs,
she had to sit on the concrete,
blinking heavily for a minute,
I told you so I said,
and her head might have floated away
while she finished it there
down to the filter with green line.

She doesn't remember
laughing at the sky on cool concrete,
rolling church pebbles under our toes.

Surely she doesn't remember my name.

-Rebecca Mostov

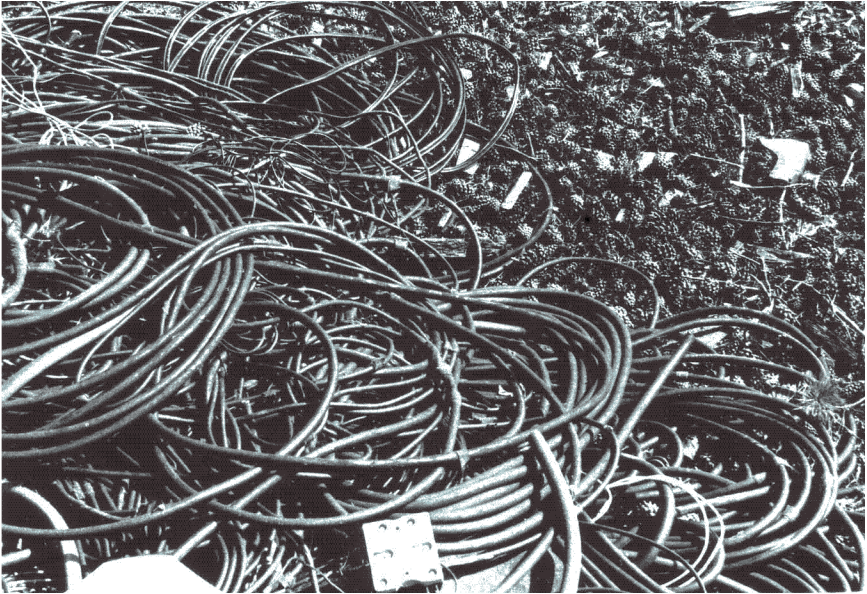
Untitled

It was spring and summer that brought me the best
memories
of your willow tree
stringy sheets of leaves, the color of kiwis
(I bet you liked kiwis)
that filtered in the
perfect blend of Michigan sunlight and
innocence;
and intoxication of cheap
reality from your little girl's
simple suburban world.

Your cats could make it to the top of the tree
but my scrawny legs and fear
took me only to the first branch.
There I would sit
until I mustered enough courage
to risk that jump down. Or
sometimes I would call
for you or someone tall
if uncertainty strapped me to the brown bark.

Now I know that
if I wanted to, I could
slip, glide, hop
effortlessly
off that branch
and plant my feet
on the greenish brown
earth.

(continued)



But the same years that brought my
longer legs
brought your sickness
and now I wish I could
trade my swift skill,
and just sit on the branch
for as long as it takes you
to cook chicken curry
or maybe
fold laundry

I could wait
and then come inside
and bring you kiwis.

-Puja Kumar

leave-taking, drive, destination, place

i.

father's at the wheel
mother sits shotgun, reading *Vogue*.
brother beside me, listens
to delta blues on headphones.
I peel the silver from a gum wrapper.
this is our fourteenth trip.

ii.

old 23 to U.S.-23 to 75,
the route, familiar as
sweet-n-lowed black coffee
served at an off-ramp dive.
cornfields end before Grayling
give way to pine, birch,
and old logging towns.

I watch for landmarks:
the outlet mall at West Branch
where tired mothers look for
last season's Gap sweaters.
and "Call of the Wild,"
those mechanized animals howl
to tempt tourists off the highway.

at Alanson there's a kitschy camp,
built after the second world war.
I imagine Humbert and Lo
made love in the cabins.
and "Cross in the Woods"
the world's largest crucifix,
which my father ignores.

iii.

in Harbor Springs everyone
looks like a Kennedy.
I walk into a gallery opening
in jeans, look at paintings as I
dip around seersucker and vodka tonics.
flash a smile, use the back exit,
toss a coin in the Spanish fountain.

at the bookstore I flirt
with the fortysomething owner.
he asks me my favorite author,
and I reply “J.D. Salinger”
because I’m seventeen.
he sells me postcards featuring Hemingway
and a llama in a taxi on 42nd street.

they’ve changed the name
of the Harborside Inn
to the Nick Adams Hotel,
and painted over its blue façade.
Nick Adams wouldn’t have stayed there,
but it’s a swank place
and Nick Adams isn’t real.

iv.

across the bay, Petoskey
jangles and shifts, illuminated
by gas-lights at nightfall.
I skip a stone to Chicago
it travels the old glacial trail,
and will return.

-Mara Vahratian

Leelanau horizon

I am surprised every time
whitecaps and sand
pounded hard—
saw-grass and the sky
a gray bowl over islands—

gulls call in the wind—
clouds shift and speed
like cars over I-75
above a lake that stays warm
through August—

it is too big—
I want to spin
and stay quiet—
but I watch your feet
and the writing they make—

I say we need a midwestern
version of Virginia Woolf—
a girl-artist with Petoskey
stones in her pockets—
wading toward evolution—

in winter the footprints
freeze in place and tell stories—
a glacier fills a dune forms
ships sink and land erodes—
a day ends with a fast red

we walk home—
sand in our shoes as we
time footfalls with wakes—
long hair whipped thin—
eyes blue and turned eastward

-Mara Vahratian

I scraped my fingers on the sidewalk
down on my hands an' knees
Didn't feel the blood

Hunkered down in my trench
coat with the wind
having its way with my hair

Hobbled – went down to the corner store
with only a roll of quarters
in my pockets

Birds were all over black shadows
khakis shredded underneath my boots

I wipe my nose off with my arm
My knuckles white
My hands smell like ink

Drag myself
Trudge around
Barely hold myself up
Hands in pockets
I almost get my coat blown away

I have a limp piece of paper
and a pen
So I can collect times and thoughts

I only see smudges
Streetlights and alleyways
I can barely hear cars pass
I have a cold handkerchief
In my hands
They are square and blocky

-Gabe Anderson

The Birds Want Me Dead

Birds.
They try to eat me.
Like that sparrow.
Ann said it was after my
granola bar. I said it was
after my eyeball.
the swallows
had a nest in the barn.
They hovered by my face
waiting for me to flinch
out of the way, deciding
whether or not to
attack my throat.
When Albert tried to
pet the chickens in the coop
one panicked and flew across
the crowded room, and
got caught in my hair.
Go to hell, birds.



-Claire Beyer

Things to do today

1. dishes
2. pick up prescription
3. call Craig
4. kill neighbor child who is ringing doorbell right now
5. call to get computer fixed, but rather spend 4 hours on the phone with 15 year old consultant with thick accent who will put me on hold 12 separate times, hold music will likely be Yanni. At the end of four hours, he will tell me there is nothing he can do, and that my warranty just happened to expire sometime during our 4 hour conversation.

Kit showed up half an hour late to work today. She walked in, looked at the September newsletter, burst into tears, and walked out again. So it was just me and the bookshelves for the next four hours, straightening, browsing, and pestering the occasional customer with an overfriendly and insincere “Can I help you find anything?” Just as well, though, that I was alone, because when I work with Kit, she always launches into tearful chronicles about her sisters and their various divorces, her son and his nose ring, her daughter and her attention deficit. I had not met any of these people, and didn’t care about them. On any level, really. I’m ten years younger than the second youngest employee at the bookstore, and they all have lives and concerns very different from mine. They have kids who are getting married. They have salt and pepper hair and saggy breasts. Their reading glasses hang from their necks by beaded chains. They are old women who got jobs for the hell of it, to supplement their husbands’ already substantial incomes.

(continued)

Post Graduate Studies

They are not 22 year old college graduates who can't get a job they're overqualified for, whose clothes are corduroy earth tones full of holes and smell of cigarettes. That's the spot I fill. Why these women take me as one of their own, tell me their life stories and hug me afterwards, is beyond me.

I'm a nice kid, I guess. I have a plain, trustworthy, 13 year old face, and look like everyone's favorite niece. I listen to their stories and act like I'm interested – I've gotten very good at bullshit interest. I have the raised eyebrows, the slow, repetitive nod, the nose of agreement or disgust as appropriate. I know when to ask follow-up questions, I know when to be excited and when to laugh and when to mutter a sad, "that's terrible." I guess I'm a pretty huge asshole. If they knew I had heard none of what they were saying, but rather was thinking about what would happen if I stuck a paper clip in the electrical socket, they'd probably cry some more. It may come as a surprise, but I'm not real good with people who cry. I don't know how to act. I'll talk in a soft, sympathetic voice, and offer a tissue, but I can't make myself go so far as to give a hug or offer my shoulder. It's too weird; I'm 22 for godsakes. Some of these women have children older than me. I can't go around laying my hands on their shoulders like a goddamn priest.

I waited about two hours before I called Kit to ask her what was wrong. She started babbling something about the format of the newsletter being changed since she had looked it over, how no one respected her at work... I stopped her. "What's wrong, Kit?" Pause. "DAN LEFT ME LAST NIGHT!" she wails into the phone...

*

My computer committed suicide. One minute it was working just fine, I left it alone for two hours while I went out to grab a latté with Kit that afternoon, and when I came back, it had shut itself down and refused to restart. Naughty, naughty computer. Nevermind the fact that my *life* was on that computer, and that I hadn't backed it up in almost a year. My journal, my 2,000 mp3 files, my old e-mails from ex-boyfriends, my thesis on the work of Giovanni del Biondo. That's my life, right there. And while I'm poking at the power button, experimenting with the extension cord, and hyperventilating, the neighbor kid is at the

(continued)

door, his finger planted in the buzzer. He plays viola in his junior high orchestra, and like all participants in the failing music program, he goes door to door selling worthless things so that he can get a free keychain, and his school band/orchestra/choir can afford to buy a new snare drum. He sells something different nearly every week. Chocolate bars, cookie dough, submarine sandwiches, fake cheese spread and summer sausage, magazine subscriptions, decorative tins. I can't wait until his music program is finally cut so he'll quit coming over. Although then the idiot parents and concerned community members will start up a fund to get the program back, and then *they'll* be going door to door, asking for donations, but this time with no compensational cheese spread.

The doorbell is still buzzing, I stomp to the door, whip it open, and am at the point of yelling "I don't want your Santa tin, viola-boy!" when I see that it's Kit, and that my doorbell is broken. She's looking from me to the still-buzzing doorbell, speechless and startled. I start picking at it with my fingernails while trying to say hello and how are you to Kit. And who comes walking down the street but the neighbor boy, a large box of something under his arm.

"Can I interest you in—"

"I'm out of money, Andy," I say, as the doorbell pops back into the place and stops buzzing.

"Oh. How about you?" he asks Kit.

"Andy..." I say tiredly.

Andy trots to the next door without a word, impervious. I hear him start with his "Can I interest you" speech as Kit and I walked inside.

"I just wanted to drop this off, you've been really great, I wanted to thank you for listening," she said, handing me a bottle of cabernet.

"Oh no, you don't need to do that. I'm happy to be there for you any time; I know you'd do the same for me," I protest in a voice that doesn't sound like mine, using phrases that I've always thought sounded particularly fake when other people use them.

(continued)

Post Graduate Studies

‘Oh just keep the wine, Meg. I have to run. Thanks again,’ she replied, depositing the bottle on the kitchen counter and making a break for the door.

“Well, thanks so much. If you feel like talking, give me a ring,” I called after her as she hustled down the steps and to her car.

*

The next day I worked with Barb, who always works on inventory all evening in the back room, leaving me without a soul to talk to. So I tinkered around the front desk. I rotated the reading glasses display, and thought about what I would do if anyone ever wanted to buy the stupid ugly ones with the purple lenses. I think I would have to punch them, right there, in the face. I made a list.

People who get punched

1. People who buy purple glasses.
2. Customers who call me sweetie.
3. Drunk people who call me at 3 a.m. wanting to talk to me about basketball and politics and a good recipe for salsa, especially when it’s my brother Paul and it was this morning.
4. People who collect nutcrackers.
5. Hairy-chested men who wear their shirts open at the collar to show off their gold chains.

List finished, still not a single person in the store. I sidled to the back room to peek at Barb and ask, “whatcha doin’?” She was typing with one hand and forking at her microwave dinner with the other. Her dinner smelled like armpits.

“I’m just filling out the calendar order form for tomorrow.”

“That sounds like a lot of fun.”

“Sure is,” she laughed politely

I’m certainly more fun than purchase orders. I was really in the mood to hear one of her stories about her childhood in Iowa, and what it was like to be both the preacher’s kid *and* the local tomboy. But no. Barb had

(continued)

better things to do. The thought of “if you like calendars so much, why don’t you marry them?” may have crossed my mind.

Luckily a customer came in before I said anything I would have regretted. I showed her a New York Times Bestseller table, and she picked out a hardcover Grisham novel. As I put it into the bag, I contemplated punching her.

*

Andy didn’t stop by all that next month, or the next. I was out of chocolate. When I saw him at the farmer’s market with his mom, I asked him how the viola was going, and he told me he had quit.

“That’s too bad, why’d you do that?” I asked.

“Orchestra sucks, and violas are the worst instrument ever,” he informed me.

“I see. Well, do you have any candy bars left over?”

“Nope.”

“Want to mow my lawn?”

“Nah.”

“Weed my garden?”

“No.”

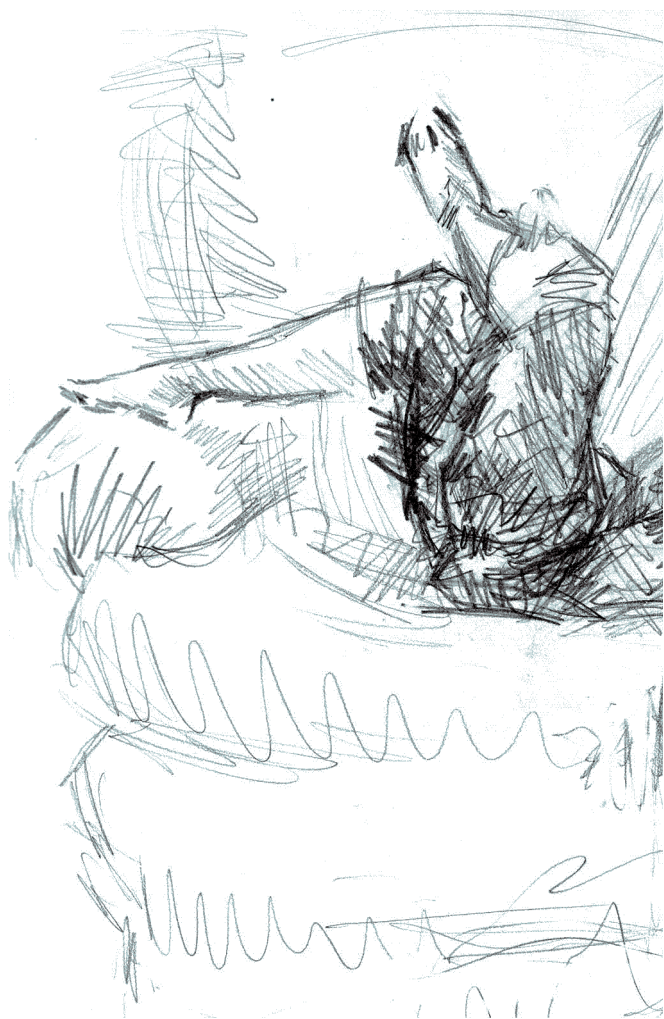
“Feed my cat?”

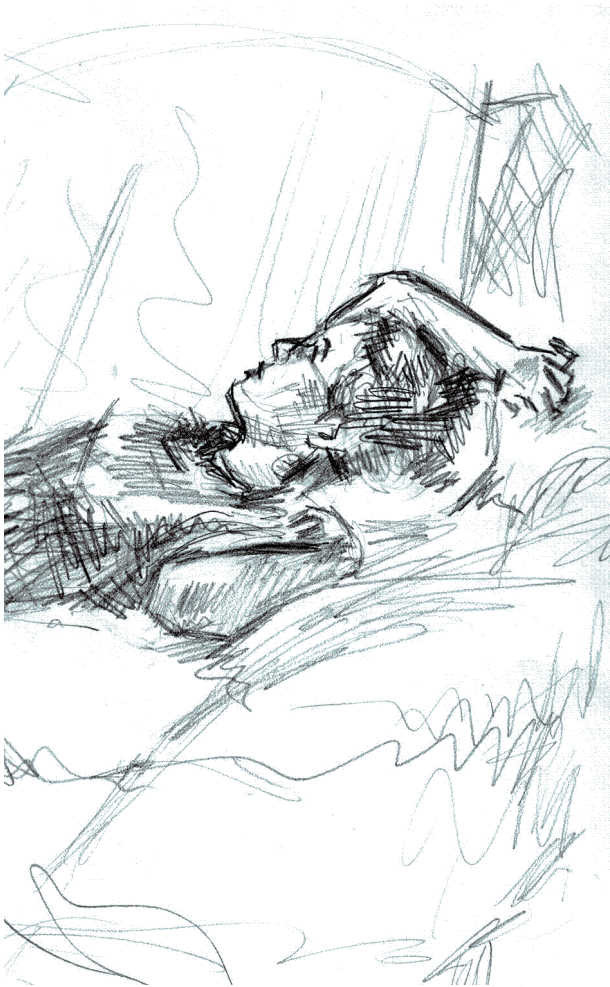
“You have a cat?”

“No, but maybe you could come over and have a snack or something.”

Andy widened his eyes at me and left to catch up with his mom. I bought green peppers and cucumbers, went home, made a salad, and ate it alone while watching *The Price is Right*.

-Claire Beyer





The People You Know Best

Her appearance didn't help matters either. She fell somewhere between a shaved cat and a praying mantis, and had purple-brown blotches all up and down her arms and face. She'd long ago shattered the stereotype I used to have that all Asian women were inherently pretty.

I tried to lock eyes with Derrick to show him I knew how he felt, but even glancing at him made me cringe. He had this plump, naïve, boyish look, even though he was twenty-three. I'd never understood the world man-child until he'd moved into my apartment. That helpless smile and hair which looked like his mother cut it made me want to punch him in the face.

Still, I had to bring him along. He'd helped Gramps build the greenhouse behind my folks' home and they'd become friends in some way. At least they'd shared a couple beers on the back porch. Derrick had never said much, but Gramps did the work for both sides. I figured the old guy would like to see him again.

And Willie? About a year ago I'd been talking on the phone to my Aunt Jeanne. There'd been this crazy woman out on the balcony next to mine throwing beer cans and howling at the teenagers in the parking lot who were blasting their music. I'd known of her for a couple months, but had tried to avoid her at all costs – especially after the day following a particularly loud party at my place when she'd left a note on my door that described me as a “horse-aping anal junkie.”

Anyway, this chick had started screaming obscenities at the top of her lungs. When my aunt heard that voice, she said she'd almost pissed herself. Turns out she'd taught a scriptwriting class to earn some extra cash when she'd come up to Michigan for one of her spontaneous, lunatic “scene-collecting” excursions. And guess who was her best student and fast friend? And furthermore, my neighbor? Aunt Jeannie said she'd never forget that screech in a million years. “Like somebody burning her mouth on a tailpipe.” And then she demanded that I actually knock on the harpy's lair and give it the phone. Since then, Willie had decided I was her friend by association. When I told Aunt Jeanne I was coming down to visit her and Gramps, she'd insisted I bring her “sister” along.

“He wants you to give it to him,” Willie said, jamming the meerkat doll under Derrick's nose. She let her glossy black hair fall over part of his face, and neither of them moved to push it away.

I told her to shut up and sit down and screwed my eyes to the road. The landscape scared the hell out of me. In Michigan we had trees, and lots of them. You couldn't see farther than three hundred feet. It was comforting. But down here around Orlando the land was all rolling hills.

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The People You Know Best

There were a few copses of thin, tough pines and the ubiquitous palms, but mostly it was long stretches of grass broken by red dirt. Some of that dirt blew in through my window, right into Derrick's face. He asked if I'd roll up the glass.

"Can't," I said, "I keep smelling piss every time I close it."

"That ain't my fault," snapped Willie, "I told you it's a bladder disease."

"There better not be anything on my upholstery."

"Suck my farts, asshat. It's just the smell. I don't leak."

I shrugged and watched the scenery. Nothing down here is more than twenty-five years old. Nothing looks lived in. When we'd driven through my aunt's neighborhood, it's given me the shivers. Grass green and perfect like Astroturf. Spotless cycads planted to look artistically random. Then there were the tan or sky blue stucco and Spanish tiles. I kept wondering which house held the Queen Yuppie and her nest of eggs. Back home, I loved sneaking into construction sites, but here I stayed at least a hundred feet from the half-finished foundations for fear that I'd find the basements filled with big, green clone-pods.

The car crested a hill and I saw the hospital where Gramps was staying. It was about thirteen miles away, and I twitched when I realized I could actually see that far. Then the road began to bacon-strip and I almost dug my fingernails through the vinyl of the wheel.

In the rearview mirror, I saw Willie edging a little closer to Derrick, who drew away nervously. I decided I wanted to screw with her head a bit.

"Say, how come you don't hang out with other chicks?" My favorite question of late.

"You know how many back-stabbing bitches we got on campus? Plus they get their panties in a wad over everything. I like how laid back you guys are. Much easier to deal with.

"I don't believe that." I'd work the next part out in my head a thousand times. I talked real fast so she couldn't butt in.

I told her about the twenty other women I knew who said the exact same thing. And how every one of them thought they were an original. And the best part was eventually they turned into what they claimed to hate about the female sex. They were your best friend until two things happened. One, they met your other misogynistic women friends. Then the both of them turned into sisters and decided they were better buddies with each other than you.

The second change happened when they got a boyfriend – which they always did, 'cause guys loved this sort of chick. Then they couldn't

(continued)

The People You Know Best

stand to be out of his arms for a minute, and they'd get all mopey when he wasn't around.

"That ain't true," she said, her face turning red, though not from embarrassment.

"So how come you're so pissed," I sneered.

She didn't answer, but I kept seeing that hideous scowl every time I looked in the rearview mirror. I returned it with a shit-eating grin. She'd be like that for days.

A white ghost flew up in front of my car. I slammed on the brakes, and the black wheels swung ahead of the front, spinning us into a ditch. In the split second before my mind caught up with the situation, I had time to reflect that my cat did the exact same thing when he came charging out of the hallway, usually slamming into the Apple IIGS I keep as a doorstep.

When I stopped laughing at the image of my cat's head bonking against the computer like a billiard ball, I turned to ask if everyone was all right. They said yes, so I jumped out of the car and stomped around, yelling at the top of my lungs.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, SHEEEEEEE-IT!"

I ran to the road to see what I'd almost hit. An egret, clean and white as snow, was poking along the shoulder as if nothing had happened. I ran at it, fully intending to eat it alive, but it flew away.

I still felt the need beat the crap out of something, so I went scuffling along the dry, roadside grass until I found a patch of cacti. I grabbed one of them, intending to drop kick it into oncoming traffic. I'd been careful to avoid the huge thorns, but failed to notice the tiny crown of yellow stubble at the base of each one. The bristles were small, but they worked their way into my skin and stung like nettles full of vinegar. I dropped the cactus and stomped it to pulp, then charged back to my car and punched the hood until I felt better.

Willie had climbed out of the car and was sitting on the roof with her back to me. As I stomped past her, I noticed that her underwear was poking out of the top of her khakis and craned my head for a better look. Derrick was still in the back seat, nervously twirling a bit of hair around his finger.

"I need some goddamn food," I said, "right now!"

"What if we miss Gramps' visiting hours," said Derrick.

"Fuck, shit, piss – I don't care! I'm hungry and I just got a fistful of barbs," I thrust out my hand, though the cactus hairs were too small for him to see, "I needs me somethin' to make the pain go away."

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The People You Know Best

I hopped in the driver's seat and pushed the pedal to the floor. The car lurched forward and jammed. I heard scream, then the sound of something squealing down the back windshield, then a thud behind the car. I thirned white and my anger fizzled away.

I yanked the emergency brake and leapt out. "You okay?" I called. Luckily, Willie had rolled off the trunk and fallen only two feet before slamming into the ground. When she rose, she was criss-crossed with blood and dragging one of her ankles. I started jabbering to fill up the time it would take her to get up and sock me. "Geez, good thing the dust clogged my wheels. I mean, holy crap, can you imagine what would've happened to me if you'd fallen off on the highway? Why were you up there anyway? I—"

She pinched my lips shut between her thumb and forefinger. I thought she'd hit me then – I hoped she'd hit me; I'd feel better. But she just scowled and got back in the car. I did too, without saying a word. The car wasn't damaged, so I was able to get it back onto the road with only a few false starts.

We drove to an orange stand and I got out. Derrick asked if he should follow. I saw that Willie was leaning to geat a magazine from under the passenger seat, and had angled herself so that her ass brushed against his hand. She drilled me with her eyes and shook her head. I said no, he could stay behind. In my head, I hoped he would put the moves on her and make up for my almost-murder.

The place was a converted gas station with the pumps removed and a corrugated metal roof over the bins of fruit. I bought a bag of oranges, and something called a tangelo just sould I could say I'd eaten. I remembered that Willie had once mentioned a fondness for clementines, so I got a sack of those too. On the way back to the car, I saw another egret strutting through the parking lot. I remembered he accident and went back inside to buy a packet of dried bananas. I tossed a couple to the bird.

When I returned to the car, my traveleing companions had moved to opposite sides of the back seat. Willie had her hand down her pants and was scratching her crotch.

"What the hell are you doing?" I yelled.

"I got an infection when we went swimming," she grunted, "you know women catch these things easier than guys. Plumbing isn't as far from the faucet. "She removed her hand and stretched. I noticed a tattoo on her stomach, below her navel. Looking closer, I saw that it was a drawing of a man with a lawn mower pointed southward.

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The People You Know Best

I offered them both a clementine and we started out again. On the way to the hospital, I asked Derrick how his job was going. He said he'd been fired and couldn't find a new one. I said that was too bad with what I hoped sounded like deep sympathy. I asked about his garden. All his plants had died, he said, and he wasn't interested anymore. His church? That got him going. He was one of those neo-pagan folk. I listened quietly while he yammered on. Personally, I thought they were all wankers in white robes and pentagrams mentally masturbating into a granola-induced euphoria. But I didn't tell him that.

At one point, he mentioned some malarkey about dragons. "Willie knows about those," I said, "got a whole library about 'em. Ain't that right, Mina?" Every time I mentioned the other part of her name, she'd have fit.

She frowned at me, but her face lit up when she turned to Derrick and started to talk on and on about winged lizards.

When we arrived at the hospital, I asked my roommate to register us with the front desk while I parked. I'd hoped Willie would get out, but she stayed.

I pulled into a spot and shut off the engine. She leaned forward and whispered in my ear—I recoiled a little as the stench of urine burned my nose hairs.

"Steve?" she said, "when you left us behind to go get oranges? Please don't do that again."

"But I thought you and he..." I made the 'okay' sign with my right hand and poked the index finger of my left through the circle. I was very, very aware that her left breast was pressing against my shoulder, and shifted so more of it would brush against me.

"I got nervous," she said.

"With Derrick? He's a good guy. Polite, and a wuss to boot. He wouldn't do anything."

"It's not that. There has to be at least three people. And not in that way," she added quickly, "just to hang out with. Like we were doing during the drive."

I understood what she meant. Two people together is way too personal unless they're good buddies. Folks feel better in threes because there's not as much performance anxiety on their own shoulders. Also, it helps if one of the three is the "wacky sidekick" who puts the others at ease.

At your service.

Derrick came out again. I waved to him with a warm smile. I wanted to kick him and laugh in his fat face so bad I could taste it.

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The People You Know Best

Instead, I went to the truck and retrieved a big cardboard box that I'd carted all the way from Michigan.

Aunt Jeanne was supposed to meet us in the lobby, but she was nowhere to be found. I asked the receptionist if he'd seen her, and he told me that she'd left an hour ago in a big hurry, but that she'd dropped off a manuscript. Attached to it was a note to Willie explaining that she'd had a sudden surge of inspiration and had to drive down to the Everglades to get the proper setting for her latest project. Willie nodded sagely.

I asked if she could wait in the lobby. She said no, she was coming with us. I opened my mouth to argue, but she walked past me and my brain stomped the words down into my lungs while my eyes leered at her swaying ass.

Gramps' room was pleasant, if a bit small. Not like he really needed to move around much – he couldn't get out of bed. They'd wheeled him close to a counter, where he'd piled several stacks of Shakespeare, Tunis and Hawthorne. He was propped up with an IV in his arm. The place smelled like a used bookstore.

I sat the box down and ruffled his hair.

"How are you, Stevie," he said, while I hugged him.

"Fine, and you?"

"I'm so old, I don't even buy green bananas anymore. And who're you, missy?"

"Willie."

"Short for Wilhelmina? Good evenink, I am zee Count. I would offer you an alcoholic beverage, but I don't drink...wine." His face actually did remind me of Dracula – not the Bela Lugosi one, but the real deal from the book: big, square head, thick white hair, mustache, little ice-blue eyes. "However," he said, they *did* put something in this tube-thing that works just as good. Care for some? Better'n sex and a kick to the jaw."

She shook her head, but her scowl loosened a little.

While Derrick said his nervous hellos, I cut open the box and lifted out a plant. "I brought you some of the cacti you wanted."

"That's a spurge actually," Gramps said, "Euphorbia Obsea.

"Sokay, though, I love that kind. Looks like a little silk balloon full of air."

"And this." I took out a thin, green tower.

"Now zat's a good one. *Astrophytum ornatum*. When they get bigger, they're like a glass tower filled with fizzly limeade."

I set the plants on his counter, close enough that he could water them. I turned back and saw his face pulled tight with pain. I waited quietly for the spasm to stop, then asked, "you want me to get the nurse?"

(continued)

The People You Know Best

He shook his head.

Derrick started massaging Gramps' head. I went out in the hall, far enough away that he couldn't hear me. When I came back inside, the old man took one look at my reddened eyes. "Ah shit. That's the last thing I need right now."

Derrick's face was trembling. I nodded, and he rushed out, but only made it to the chair next to the door before bursting into sobs. Gramps rolled his eyes.

"Steven." He said.

"Yeah?"

"That girl out there—"

"I'm sorry. I know she's disgusting. I tried to make her stay downstairs, but—"

"How long you been making the beast wit htwo backs?"

I glanced at Willie from the corner of my eye. She'd taken a chair in the far corner, and was reading through hteh manuscript. "Never."

"Why not? The Chinese ones are the best kind, you know."

"I never even thought about it. I mean, not with *her*."

"Hell you didn't! You're a man, ain't ya? You can't *help* but think about it. Tell me you ain't never glanced at her tits."

"She's disgusting, Gramps. She spits and farts and shits and – Jesus, the tattoo!"

"So what? You think you crap gold? You know when you were out there bawling? I started talking to her. Asked her if she'd give me a sponge bath. You know what she said? She told me to go fuck myself."

My vision turned black with rage. I whirled on Willie. "You bitch!"

Gramps grabbed my hand.

"Stevie, I haven't been that turned on in years." He grinned and made google-eyes.

I glanced at Derrick and Gramps followed my eyes. A nurse walked by my roommate and smiled at him. He turned red. "Christ," said the old man, "look at him. Made entirely out of a vagina, that one."

"Women like that," I said.

"Lies. Women like a beast. A big, hairy, goddamn, spurting gorilla who'll take control. Ask Eisenberg down the hall – he used to be a biologist. I love Derrick, but the boy's way too much like a girl."

I started talking about plants again and Gramps let the matter drop.

After a few hours, I got hungry, so I decided to go down to the cafeteria. Derrick came along. Willie had fallen asleep, so we left her

(continued)

behind.

I pretended to trip and fell behind so I could watch him from the back. Hatred welled up in me, so bad that my eyeballs throbbed. His image burned into my brain like acid on metal. Outside, a helicopter touched down and I imagined kicking him through the window into its blades.

This was it. This time I'd tell him how much he disgusted me.

The route to the cafeteria was long and meandering. I passed the time prepping myself to finally give him the whole McGillicuddy. I'd tell him his big, helpless, baby-bear routine might net him some clam now, but in ten years he'd be rotting in the street. It'd tell him to grow some balls and stop crying all the damn time.

When we got our food, I was filled to the teeth with venom. I looked at him and said:

"So, are you sure you don't want to start gardening again? You were pretty good at it."

"Erm...no. Well, maybe."

I smiled like a trained monkey. "Say, do you remember that time you showed me how to contact my spirit familiar?"

We came back laughing over one of his jokes.

Willie was sitting next to Gramps, gently bathing his head with a moist towel. He was telling her how the coral spurge had lobes that looked like little, green Rorsch ck's tests. He was playing a game of connect-the-dots using a felt-tipped pen on the splotches all over her arm. His eyes looked up at the ceiling as he talked about the Biological Preserve he'd visited in Virginia. About the epiphytes big as his head hung from the swamp trees so that they looked like penitents with blood-matted hair bowing in prayer to some forgotten marsh god; I hadn't noticed the volumes of Robert E. Howard lying on his shelf until that moment. Willie nodded as if she were receiving directions to El Dorado. The look in her eyes showed that she was actually listening. I felt like I should leave the two of them alone for a bit. I put my hand on Derrick's shoulder and let him back into the hall.

We played pictionary on napkins until Willie came out again. She was smiling and sniffing a little. "My grandpa," she said, "he died when I was seven."

I nodded slowly. "He's got one more succulent plant on his list. I couldn't find any up North, so I thought I'd see if any of the stores here sell 'em."

"What's it look like?" She brightened.

"Why don't you tell her, Derrick. You were there when Gramps

(continued)

The People You Know Best

was talking 'bout it.”

“Erm... uhm... I don't remember.”

I glowed and turned to her. “Then I will. He said it was like a washboard for a person six inches tall. Or like a tower of a green pyramid with steps all the way to the top. *Haworthia Limifolia*.”

A nurse told us visiting hours were over. I went in, hugged Gramps and told him we'd be back bright and early tomorrow. Derrick waved from the door. Willie kissed him on the cheek.

As we left, I told the guys they could wait back at the hotel while I went to look for the plant. It would probably take a few hours, and I figured that'd be long enough for them to get to know each other.

“I'll come,” Willie said. I suddenly realized how pleasant urine smelled.

We piled into the care and were off like big game hunters in search of our rhinoceros. When Willie fell asleep we acquired a theme song to our voyage. She snored like a chainsaw.

After an hour it grew quiet. I glanced in the rearview mirror. Derrick was bent over her. He was clumsily yliftin her shirt, urged on by the fact that one of her legs was hooked under his, and her hip kept rubbing very deliberately against him. He touched her bare skin and I saw one of her eyes quiver and open a bit. The edge of her mouth turned up, she snorted and a rope of drool dribbled from her lip. I smiled and gaver her approval with a nod, though my chest felt tight enough to implode.

Derrick smiled at me in that little boy way, but this time there was a hint of triumph in his eyes. “Jealous, Steve?”

I pulled the car to a stop.

When Willie and a passing motorist finally pried my hands off his throat, I'd lost my voice from yelling so hard.

My Gasp Just Now (An Explanatian)

Understand: I just now built you a city.
(The leaves pulsed to a quick heart.
The sky came closer than the trees.)
And I thought I would never leave it alone.

And I spread my fingers,
(I breathed the coils into your oceans.
I dipped the skyline from my own tongue.)
And I marked the center you fool lead mark.

I sat crossed in the center. I sat listless in the center.
I heard and I understood.
(Whisper: "This city's heart is breaking sidewalks;
this city's heart is pushing up.)
I felt the angle of my hands' at arms.

(And I am not sure-
blisters or great dripping blooms?
Which downed pink white is rising,
coating.)

(And whimpering over the piecy sidewalks.)
I think the city is sinking.
I think you will not see it.
(Over and under its quickened heart.)

And I'm sorry and I am not sorry.
It is too much sad white dust for me.
To have red and white in the morning,
To hurl red and white and the moon.

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My Gasp Just Now (An Explanation)

And I thought, "Yes, I will leave it alone!"
Sorry and not sorry, my abacus clouds,
counting their worries.
My long low promenade,
pinching and curling, pulsing its great paved throbs.

And I do not to mean at the last roaring break.
The haves sinking cracking into the middle,
the far ends in their own first touch.
But, yes, some sorry, so there it is.

-Elsie Bell

Nodding Off

She nods like a car rolling over hills,
through mists so deep they sink eyelids
under drones of lecture monotone
like a humming air conditioner on Indian summers
slouching,
sit-bones pressing
on thin-padding
this straight-back chair comforting
after a restless night and invading daylight
a game of hangman with the English professor
that goes on for 10 apologetic pages
always the guessing
is this what you want?

The smell of chocolate coffee
clutched so guardedly
in the paws of her fellow student
lulls
her

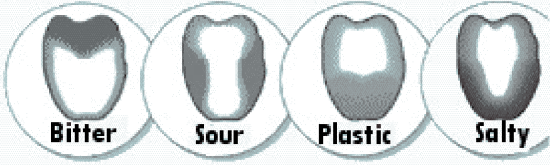
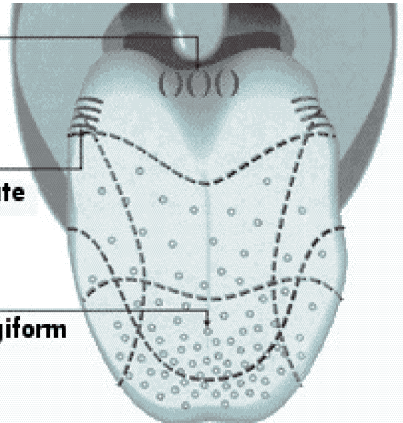
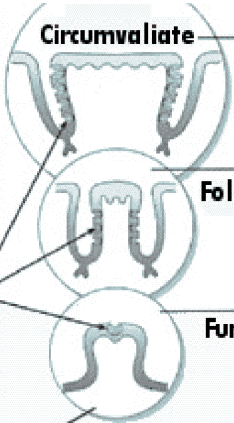
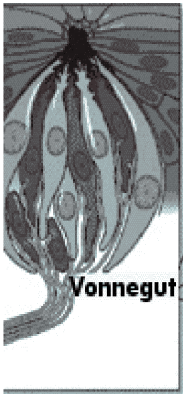
-Nicolette Jones

it had been too long since we were
a couple of hearts beating up in the attic
two peas in a flannel pod,
with the twilight seeping in.

a kiss at the airport
(just like the first time!)
unfamiliar lips pressed tight together
newness and excitement fading into the comfort of hands
joined again
bodies traveling down escalators and out of doors and into
cars:
my eyes focus and re-focus in the grainy darkness.

this new bed is small but fits two bodies well enough
tangled up
appendages placed carefully to maximize space
hand on chest
palm on thigh
chin to shoulder
adjusting inch by inch in the night.
I'm oblivious of my legs and hands,
 how they jump slightly
full of nerves that skip and sputter in sleep.

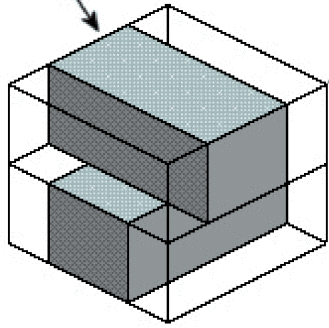
-Margaret Glass



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Kurt Vonnegut Jr. once claimed that "every city is an ugly city", yet he had never visited Coober Pedy. Coober Pedy is a city in southern Australia that mines 97% of the world's opals. Ever tasted an opal?



prufrocksociety

now in four unique flavors



I stood on the porch—
to the left were pines—
some of their trunks bent
needles grew only at their tops
so I thought they were palm trees—
I called them my jungle

next to the pines he kept a garden—
it grew over after he broke his leg
falling from a tree the next winter—
he couldn't plant anymore—
but I remember the parsley
which was not sweet at first—

before I was born they kept chickens
behind the garden in a greeny hutch—
inside it I kissed a neighbor boy
as we watched the sun between boards—
my hair cut short
for the first time and I felt strong—

in the duct at the front
of the house was a mud-stream—
after rains I would not go near
because frogs jumped in reeds—
but I sometimes put mud on my legs
and it was dark and cold—

yes I did eat crab apples
and they were sour but good—
I cast bird-seed like pollen—
stood on the table on that porch
under a green-fringed umbrella
as she made sun-tea

-Mara Vahratian

That Whole Summer

We had their live tape
that and NPR the kind of music
forced on my friends
when my mother did carpools.
Or in the city, the evening
after the dealership on Coit burned odwn;
we had covered our faces
when Grandma brought us down
to watch.

Or when my father faced
the mortality of his, stop making sense.
That whole summer, I was
Grandpa's aid, brought him up
Spartan crackers and small talk
until that was too much, too.

David Byrne was a textman, graphic
my mother a designer, she
admired MTV, we drove
a crummy Oldsmobile.
I worked its tape deck.
After the dealership
had burned itself
full to the ground,
we went out for pizza,
had to pass the city's only golf course

to get there.
And on the ribbon of
steaming road ahead,
take me to the river that summer
after Grandpa's last Christmas,
before everyone moved on,
that song was all there was.

-Anna Jonsson



#4

weeping willow trees
children climbing high branches
do not see the ground.

-Elizabeth Schmuhl

Sister Crutch Carrier -- For My Mother

Your house was on Rambling Road, a name which always made me giggle and think of Aunt Judy who never stopped talking. What's even more fitting is you lived in Kalamazoo, a place that people from the East believe exists only in story books. You've told me snippets, jagged shards that I have yet to piece together into a coherent whole. There's the story of the boy next door who came over to swim and claimed he did not need to breathe. Grandma dove in when he turned blue and was lying face down on the drain, came up swearing and shivering. You remember watching, frozen stiff on the side of the pool. What I really want to know is how it felt when every day after school Grandpa asked what you did today to make the world a better place, as he waited for Grandma to serve her famous Matzo-ball soup, or how it felt to watch your two prothers collapse under the weight of polio. The worst was that you had it too, the sickness that made you gasp and spit like all the rest, only your body came out a winner. Relief, but you could not understand why it was three-year-old Bob squirming in his Milwaukee brace and being wheeled in and out of the operating room. Paul had to have his spine realigned, a tiny vertebrae puzzle for the children's surgeon. You had to ignore the crying at night, the constant longing for legs that worked

(continued)

as they watched the children running outside
through breath marks, mouths pressing against the glass.
You were the helper, the one who would do
the walking for all three. The sister crutch
carrier. They were counting on you, the
lucky one, all for what you at seven
could not possibly give, and could never
take. Sometimes I see you cry and I
remember that one day, you put your hands

Christmas

My Bat Mitzvah was on
Mount Scopus,
overlooking Jerusalem,
the Western Wall,
and what I remember
is not my speech,
not my torah portion,
but the herd of goats that passed,
the shepherd pounding them
with his cane,
the screaming
cicadas in the trees.

What I Know About Being a Jew

The little neighbor girl is making
snow angels on her front lawn.
Her tiny arms are pumping
their way into wings.
You've never done it,
never understood how
an imprint of yourself could be holy—
just another winter depression
denting the white like a prayer.

-Erin Rogers

the rise and fall of the male erection

the young girl
finds her
puny clitoris
to be
less glorious
than the boys'
more apparent
penis

I
it's all about
 power
squeezing our mouths shut
with the clamp of
 female expectations

“a woman's capacity for genital pleasure is theoretically inexhaustible”

And I refuse
to feel guilt
for having more
 than one
 sexual partner

I am
 a slut of the numbers
and if I had balls
well then, “Congrats man!”
 I'd be a
 proven man of numbers

it's all about
 instilling that constant sense of uncertainty-fear
would you respect me in the morning?

when to cross the line
when to make it something memorable
or meaningless with just another guy

(continued)

the rise and fall of the male erection

II

sex

so meaningless

so meaningful

at least the first time
was short and sweet

“Girls,

make sure

at least your first time

isn't fucked up

otherwise

you'll be fucked up

for the rest of your life!”

Should this be a

warning

printed on the inside labels

of the sexy thongs

twelve year olds

flaunt?

love

I have made love

only once

before

III

intimacy goes along with identity

so in love

it was comforting

to breathe in his hot breath

to have his heavy hand on my leg

to be embraced by muscle

in such a way

that it was safe

and gentle

never though

males in the past

used their strength and power

against me

(continued)

the rise and fall of the male erection

scorched on my retina
these dirty hands,
and the places they've been

so disgusted
your protuberance
needing to get off
 pulsating
 bulging
 veiny
the nasty things that get it off

the old man who travels around in his rusty car
a bag of candy in one hand
the other on a small soft thigh

IV

how could God
let men destroy
the once strong little girl's
concrete dreams?
take her self esteem
with a swift insertion
no words
just force
tell her she is
nothing

“Mi hijita,
if you keep getting bruises like that
you can't be Miss America.”

I wanted
to be
the first professional female baseball player
a business woman like my father
wanted to be
an entrepreneur

(continued)

an adventurer
a leader

instead
we keep our eyes lowered
searching for our reflection
in the eyes of men

V
hollow
the only fuel for our encounter was the sexual drive
a want to conquer me

eroticizing only
 the woman's body
 the man's desire

symbols of sexuality
men are fetishists
do you think I'm beautiful?
or do you only see the hole and tits
I know you like it
do you
like me
not just my soft juicy contracting walls

VI
I felt dirty
 had been a good girl
I cried
 let society take me
 mold me push me

don't break

you must be silent
don't breakthrough

"Damnit- give yourself to me!"

(continued)

the rise and fall of the male erection

VIII

femaleness

defined by pain

love hurts

sex could kill

conception a necessity

we are mined for our natural resources

all trademarks of femaleness

which would be seen as absolute masochism

to men

means survival for women

all in a world

where the beauty gets raped

where violence against women is not obscene

but female sexuality is

hold me down

break me down

make me cry

get off now baby

you're gong to

rip my heart out

beat it down

you're going to

fail me

or worse

I'll fail you

I always question

am I good enough?

did I do enough?

enough

enough

enough

-Jennifer Sharkey



The Ishtar Dates Factory Needs to Spray Their Fruit

A large date tree
stands / sits / slouches
in an ouchard
south of Busca

Her unguarded
fruit blossoms
(Victorian Virgins)
wait / watch / wilt
as the dumbas bog
enters
each
sanity fold.

He takes his time
tasting / touching / tickling
while her body resists
(fruit is falling
chaotically
to
the ground)

A neighboring tree
shrieks / shouts / sings
to comfort
his frined's
thin blackened frame

her fruitless head hangs
too close to the ground
to hear
his lullaby

-Elizabeth Schmuhl



Biography



Claire Beyer enjoys the simple things in life, like toast.

KayT (Gallegos)

Common sayings: “You confuse me like a horse trapped in a panda bear’s body.”

What I support: Whistle-tip installation on cars, peanut butter and jelly with a baseball bat and interpretative dances.

Acknowledgments: Street performers and spare change.

Maggie Glass is a freshman at U of M, who plans on studying film, American history, and Chinese. She loves green apples, popcorn, David Sedaris, and watching episodes of South Park instead of doing her homework. Shoutout to Aebra for a fab year in our casa bonita.

Holly Hoover is a sophomore who hasn’t quite gotten her major pinned down yet. But we love her anyway! She loves art, good fiction, good movies, and small fuzzy animals. If you see her in the hall, give her a rose and she’ll tell you the meaning of life. Feel free not to believe her.

“One day, **Nicolette Jones** found herself in Ann Arbor, facing the daunting task of creating a life for herself. For their help, she thanks Nicole, Shayne, and her folks. She also suggests that you listen to Grade’s “Headfirst Straight to Hell.” No, seriously.”

Anna Jonsson wants to know when America will be worth its million Trotskyites.

If you're ever accosted by undead biologists who demand that you explain the locomotor mechanism of a ctenophore, **John Meszaros** can lay down some covering fire while you escape to the helicopter on the roof.

Rachel Morgenstern-Clarren loves writing and creating visual art because she can get away with staring at shiny objects, saying any random thing that comes to mind, and being incapable of using all forms of technology by just being 'artistic.' She plans to be an English major and to move as far away from the Midwest as possible after graduation.

thom rainwater is a poet in the electrical engineering department. he is currently working on finishing a bowl of macaroni and cheese and solving the rubik's cube...oh wait, he just got it. good job thom.

Erin Rogers is an Art History and Psychology major. Her loves include Wally Lamb, "Good Will Hunting," and the Rolling Stones. Thanks to my amazing roommates and Travis for everything.

Jen Sharkey is a sophomore, double majoring in Soc. and English. An Ecuadorian-Irish girl from Jersey, she finds most of her inspiration from her mother and family. As a feminist and hopeful activist, Jen strives for achieving some means to an end of sexism and giving a voice to experiences of oppression. She works for SAPAC, is an IGR facilitator, and dreams of one day having her poems published...

As of late, **Mara Vahratian's** main sources of joy include reading James Joyce, listening to The White Stripes and Wilco, making coffee for Alexey on Saturdays, watching "Sex and the City," and whispering massively inappropriate jokes to Kinch in the middle of English 349. "50 years ago...yeah."

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