

**SEQUOYA
REVIEW
2009**

FORWARD

I think that perhaps the greatest artists are hypnotists. At the very least, they are the most underrated. If I were a hypnotist, I would simply approach my audience and select someone who was eager, bring that person up on stage, and wave my watch. I'd say *you are a chicken!* And when I snapped my fingers the poor sap would be!

Now my poems cannot do this, no matter how much I wish that they could. They can merely insist, as powerfully as they can, to my audience. I can only hope that perhaps they might feel what I, as the poet, have felt.

Contained in this journal, I am proud to say, are some of the most insistent works of art you could hope to find, coming from the students here at UTC. These stories, poems, and artworks don't just insist, they create windows their audience can't help but want to climb through. We received a record number of submissions this year, over double anything we've had before, and the work we selected was primarily from undergraduates. I am quite proud of it.

So please do enjoy reading this edition of the Sequoia Review. I hope that when you put it down, you are wholly in a world you hadn't before imagined. A world you don't want to leave.

Adam

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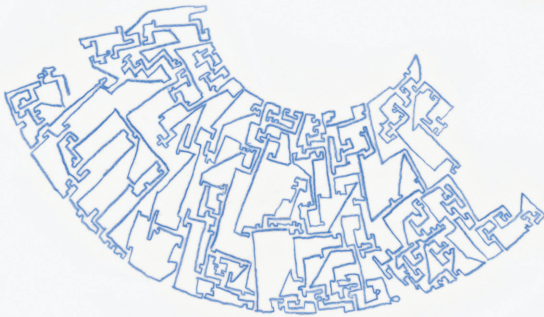
*Editors
Choice*

10

**CLARK
WILLAMS**

AN ELEGANT EVENING ON THE TOWN

We did not die in the airplane crash.
That's because the pilot was an angel.
The nose took a turn for the worse
But it turned around thanks to him I'm not dead.
I'm glad I'm not dead for I am a pretty man.
That I am a pretty man there is no doubt.
But I am not fortunate because I am horrified
Truly capable of being inordinately horrified.
Thanks be that there are angels among us
Who save us from the direst fates
For example everything that you see at any given moment
Let me let you in on one secret of this world
Is potentially to be feared to an exceedingly great degree.
In illustration of this point I refused to impart
The entirety of the story of the nearly-fatal plane crash
In which the gays were following us the entire time
In a separate airplane of their own devising.
I know when to speak and when not to speak
And this I believe to be a time of unusual intimacy
Therefore I will speak my innermost secret thoughts
To all who rest within earshot: I shot myself
But the thing is I pulled the bullet out later
When I reconsidered. Now that's out of the way,
Did you wash all the butter and stains out of the tablecloth?
I think we could potentially have a lovely dinner!
Because it is such a pleasant evening and I am not bleeding
Anywhere at all, life is so carefree, I feel like a bunny rabbit
Excepting my huge moustache which resembles the tusks
Of a walrus. Let's drop the atomic bomb! When? Tonight--
Where? Right here--Life is here and it really wants to hop.
Because tonight we are having, if I am not being too brash
in saying so--a pleasant evening on the town.





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**MCKINLEY
BRYSON**

14

**EMILIA A.
PHILLIPS**

LABORS
(Fiction)

Lydia asks for a warm-up on her coffee and a bottle of Heinz. As our waitress, name-tagged Kinney, retreats to the kitchen, Lydia shakes her head and rubs her lips together, smearing what's left of the fig-colored matte across her creased, thin lips. "How tacky," she mutters and reaches into her pocketbook.

"What is?" I ask and push my eggs to the side of the plate. I ordered them scrambled, but they came out over easy. I set a butter knife between them and my unbuttered toast to dam the yolk from leaking everywhere.

"That tattoo on our waitress!" Lydia rummages through the pill bottles, tissues, nasal spray, loose change, sugar-free lemon drops, dental floss, and broken Capri Menthol Lights in her purse until she finds a tube of lipstick. There's no cap on it. She picks off the lint and loose tobacco from the stick, inspects it, and slides it around her mouth. She pops her lips.

"I didn't notice," I reply and bite into my toast.

"Why anybody'd want to mark her body up like that—" Lydia's words slip under the noise of the restaurant like dust under a bed. My wife of eleven years and a three-month trial separation sits across the table from me, her black hair cutting straight across her jawline, and wears a violet dress with a hem that steals up her thighs and reveals a web of veins and her hopeless attempt to save our marriage. "Oh, by the way, I finally had the carpet cleaned. They weren't quite able to get that one spot up, though. So, I just put the fichus over it."

The week after I moved out, Lydia called me at the university.

"You're going to kill me," she had whispered shamefully. "I spilled a little wine on the carpet last night."

I imagined her sitting on the floor, legs tucked beneath her, while she held the phone between her chin and shoulder and scrubbed the carpet with a sponge and hydrogen peroxide. Her voice was low and soggy with tears.

"I wandered into the cellar and found one a bottle of '85. You always said that was a good year in Napa. So, I gave it a try."

I had asked her what yard it was, but she couldn't remember.

"Check the bottle," I said.

She told me that she had broken it.

"You know how silly I get when I drink," she said and sniffed.

I dropped my pen onto the stack of papers I was grading. She breathed, mouth-open, into the phone.

"Lace?" she asked, after a moment or two of silence.

"Yes?"

"When are you coming home?"

"I don't know."

After that, Lydia called once a week. At the end of each conversation, she always asked the same questions. *When are you coming home? When are you coming back? When will I see you again?* For some time, I never answered these questions. Two weeks ago, though, I told her that home was an upstairs in Grant Park with appliances and a sofa-sleeper, but then yesterday when she finished telling me about a Pampered Chef party and her new chicken de-boner, she didn't ask when I was coming home. Instead, she asked if I would meet her for brunch at The Furnace out in Buckhead.

"Who does brunch?" I had asked.

"We will," she replied. "I haven't seen you in so long."

I check my watch. It's nine-thirty. I have a class at eleven.

"Speaking of the fichus," Lydia says, gulps down her coffee, and then continues. "Chaucer used it as a litterbox the other day."

"You let him into my office?"

"Well, I was in there and he's just so upset all the time now—he really does miss you—and I was there, but I fell asleep in the chair. Besides, it's not really yours anymore."

I take a bite out of my toast.

She smiles at me, but then looks around the restaurant. "Where's our waitress? I need a refill and I want you to see her tattoo, that ugly thing."

I open a pack of jam and dig out a glob with my knife.

"How's work?" she asks.

"Fine," I say and spread the jam on my toast.

"Any interesting students this semester?"

"Interesting, yes. But any of them that are interested in the Labours of Hercules or the Argonauts?"

"No." Lydia smiles and slides her fingers around the rim of her coffee mug. "What about your birthday? How was it?"

"Standard, as birthday's go." I set my knife and toast on my plate. I suck the jam off of my thumb.

"Did you do anything?"

"I had dinner."

"By yourself?"

"I never eat alone."

"Oh." She says this like a hiccup and drops her hands to her lap and fiddles with her napkin, then continues, "Did you have a cake?"

"A piñata, too."

The waitress approaches the table with a coffee pot and the ketchup. Kinney blinks nervously as she sets the ketchup on the table and empties the coffee into the mugs. As she extends her arm over the table, she reveals the infamous tattoo. A beastly, black Ibis clutches a log with its talons. *Threskiornis spinicollis* is written within the wood grain and in the bird's beak, there is a toad. Two awkward, limp legs

hang from the black sickle of its mouth.

“How is everything?” she asks.

“Wonderful,” I reply.

“Can I get you folks anything else?”

“No. No. Nothing,” Lydia barks.

Kinney nods and blinks some more before wandering to another table. Her jeans mold her backside into the shape of a peach and her hair falls in red-orange ringlets against the pale and freckled slope of her shoulder.

“You don’t have to stare at her like that.” Lydia rips open four *Sweet’n’Lows* and dumps them into her coffee and stirs them with her knife. The metal pings against the ceramic cup. I fold my hands together and rest my lips on the ledge of my thumbs. Lydia clears her throat.

“You know, I talked to Audrey,” she says and smacks her hand on the bottom of the ketchup bottle before dumping it all over her hash browns. She used to do the same thing with her pack of Capri Menthol Lights every Tuesday night when we stopped at Butler’s Beverage and Tobacco World after counseling. “I was asleep when she called. She seemed awfully upset,” Lydia continues and then sips her coffee. The lump of her thyroid bobs like an Adam’s apple when she swallows.

“I’m sorry,” I say and tear the corner off of my napkin. “It was late.”

“Wallace,” she says and sets her coffee on the table. She brings her napkin to her mouth and dabs the corner of her lips. “At first I didn’t want this. I thought there was a way to prevent it. I thought that if I could just get you back for just a few hours, we could talk things through.”

I poke my eggs with my fork and say, “I don’t know about that.”

“If you had just told me—”

“—who wants to tell their wife *that*?” I say and drop the paper onto the table and lean back against the booth.

Lydia exhales slowly and shifts in her seat. Her thighs whine against the upholstery when she moves.

“I don’t want to talk about your sister,” I say. “I mean, I didn’t intend to talk about Audrey—”

“What’s wrong with your eggs?” she asks staring into the blackness of her coffee.

“What’s wrong with your coffee?”

“Nothing. It just needs to cool down.”

“Is everything all right over here?” Kinney pops over to our table.

“Yes, fine. Everything’s fine,” I say and cross my arms.

“His eggs aren’t right.” Lydia interjects.

“No, they’re fine.”

“What’s wrong with them?” Kinney asks, her smile disappears and her eyes widen.

“Nothing—just not cooked quite right. They’re fine, though. I’m really

just not that hungry.

Kinney reaches for my plate and there's the black bird again. Its eyes are like smooth, carved granite against Kinney's pale skin. "I'm so sorry about that—I'll have them make you some more."

"No, no—you don't have to."

"It's all right. It's all right." Kinney says and breaks into a smile. "I'll be right back."

She removes the plate from the table and removes herself to the kitchen.

"I didn't ask her to do that."

Lydia blows the steam from her coffee. "Why wouldn't she? Your eggs weren't right."

I drop my hands to my lap and exhale.

"You look disgusted, Lace. That's the problem. *That's* the problem right there."

"What is?"

She slurps her coffee and then removes a Capri from her purse and presses it between her lips. The stick is creased in the middle and some of the tobacco streams out of the end. When she holds a light to it, the shredded pieces curl and glow orange. She inhales and pulls the cigarette from her mouth, letting it dangle between the V of her fingers. She purses her fig lips and blows the smoke towards the dull, yellow light above our table.

"That's exactly it," she says and taps her cigarette into the ashtray. "Exactly."

"Whhhhat? What are you talking about?"

"You're never satisfied." She clears her throat. She tucks an arm beneath the small ledge of her breasts. Then she takes a drag. "Do you remember when we went down to Jackson when we were first dating?"

"No."

"We were lost," she says. "We were lost in your old Jeep. You had just moved here for grad school and were trying to be the next—oh, I don't know!—Yeats or Stevens or something and we went down to try to find some old cemetery that my great-grandparents were buried in and it got dark before we found it so we tried to head back to the city. And we ended up on some state highway that ran between two pastures and you said you were tired and we stopped on the side of the road and lay with our backs on the warm hood—remember?"

I shake my head.

"No?—well, we smoked that blunt we had been saving for the cemetery and looked at the stars. I was auditing that astronomy course at Georgia Perimeter and I pointed out *Aquila*, the eagle. But, you said you couldn't see it and I kept tracing it and tracing it and you laid there, real quiet for a long time."

I recline against the back of the booth. I cross my arms as the smoke ascends towards the lamp. Blue orbs drag towards the edge of

my vision. I close my eyes.

“You told me there was no such thing as constellations, that people are always trying to see things where there wasn’t anything at all. That we’re always just projecting our own lives onto things.”

I open my eyes. She smiles and rolls the cigarette between her thumb and index so that the smoke ribbons. She bites her lip.

“You said that everything was just a symbol, that there was nothing real except symbols, that we were—”

“—that we were all just metaphors for something else and metaphors cannot understand what they represent and that’s why we’d never understand anything, not any god, not love, not anything...nothing...at all.”

Somewhere in the restaurant, a fork clangs against the tile floor. Then, a laugh bursts out of Lydia. “Typical Lace! Never—ever!—satisfied.” She takes one last drag on her Capri before she stubs it out in the ashtray. She lifts her gaze to me. Her eyes, those sticky honey-colored globes, catch the light and she stares, just stares at me.

“Here you go!—scrambled, just like you wanted,” Kinney says, reaching her tattooed arm across the table and sets the plate in front of me.

“Thank you,” I say. “They’re fine, just fine.”

“Enjoy,” Kinney says with a smile and several blinks and then, she flutters away.

Lydia lifts her coffee cup to her mouth, tilts her head back, and drains the cup.

“I’m done,” she says.

“You haven’t even eaten any of your hash browns.”

“I’ve had my fill.” She pushes herself from the booth, tugging the hem of her lavender dress down. She throws her purse over her shoulder and walks out of The Furnace.

A few tables back, Kinney is taking orders from a young couple. The young man has his hand on the woman’s, twirling a ring around her finger. Kinney scribbles something on her notepad, nods, and starts to walk away. I raise two fingers in the air. “Miss?”

“Yes sir?” she says, stopping at my table.

“Have you ever heard of the Stymphalian birds?”

Her smile dwindles and she tucks her pen behind her ear. “I’m sorry?”

“It was the sixth labor of Hercules,” I say.

She forces a smile and looks down at her notepad. “Are you ready for your check?”

20

**ANNE
BRETTELL**

NOT FOUND

Grief is as luminescent as your face in the dark.
Once, I lost the ability to see faces.
Everyone was a universal twin and their voices
sounded like dreaming. I jumped
into my second grade playground, watching
skinny Christopher Dreiling get into a fight
in Winfield, Kansas. Annie stands in a huddle
of kids, mouths closed on daily jeers. We will
all leave this story in a dirty corner of the room,
along with old electric bills and twinless socks.
The walls are breathing through the patterned paper
and in the dark its flowers look like grieving faces.

- Kimberly Flynn: Identity and stationary set (need documentation)

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**KATIE
CHRISTIE**

BONNE NUIT
(Fiction)

Paris 1922

I woke at an interminable hour, my watch unwound beside me and the curtains dark. The smooth bedclothes were a cool tomb around my limbs. Outside, the air was as thick and silent as water. Suspended in the current, I traveled motionless past my familiar neighborhood now vague in black fog. Out of the formless seam between sky and earth, a restaurant rose clear and sharp. Landscaped, the chairs inside stacked on fine white linen, the shining candlesticks and the *maître'd's* black jacket would have grown cold by now.

I swept past the wrought-iron gate to the patio at the back. Legs like polished ivory glowed in the night air. Crossed at the ankles and lifted atop a lacy metal table, one was covered in torn fishnets, the other smooth down to stiletto heels as pointed as the cigarette holder hovering between her slightly parted lips. Her heavily mascara'd eyelids dropped languorously then opened to accept my flickering shape in the reflection of her glossy eyes, and she tilted her head to expose the perfectly symmetrical beauty mark to the gas streetlight behind me. Removing the cigarette holder, its shiny black surface moist and sticky with rouge, she pressed her lips together and began to hum. She leaned forward to graze her fingers across her ankles and refasten the slim lines of her shoe straps. Her pale cheek brushed against the rough texture of the fishnet-covered knee as she straightened, humming. Pointing one toe, then the other, she kicked lithe legs into the air and spun on the chair, dropping her feet with a clash on the mosaic tiles. Her palms resting on her knees in a wide stance and torso pushed forward, she rose, circling her wildfire of curls stabbed through by black pins. Long throat thrumming with the melody, she drew her arms across each other and stretched towards the sky. At the climax she paused, holding the note in her throat, closed eyes upon the overcast sky, then sank slowly back to earth, her stance deep with bent limbs as she settled and ended her song.

Reaching an upraised hand into the distance between us, the middle finger drooping beneath the weight of an enormous green stone, she beckoned.

"La Valse?"

I came.

In the morning, my sheets were hot and tangled and wet with salt.

- Sharon Farrelly: MVW(need proper documentation)

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**STEPHEN
MAYES**

AN OPEN APOLOGY TO ALEXANDER GRIGOROPOULES

Dear Alexander Grigoropoulos
I hope I got your name right
And I wanted you to know, how
Sorry, I am for missing your funeral
The riots

But you see
I was at the gym, working out
On this elliptical trainer thingy,
And it's really cool, because
It's like your skiing but indoors
And you can burn lots of calories
Watching tv and checking out
All the hot babes, but wait
You probably don't care about this
Do you?

They do have CNN though,
That's how I first saw your name
But I still don't know
The sound your name makes,
I always forget my headphones
But on that tv, I saw it all
Your name, the riots

I ran home to my friend's house
We watched the power
Of the youth in rebellion, on
Youtube and screamed "Hell yeah"
Then I can't remember, I think
I went to Starbucks or to work
And it's funny because
I work at a coffee shop where
We make fun of Starbucks
Even though I like their
Pumpkin Spice Latte

Anyways, the paper says
Your death was the straw
Busting the camel's back
And Greece's young people
They feel, hopeless
But I want to tell you
How your friends

don't have to feel that way
Hopeless
There are plenty of medications
With slight varying side effects
To cure the blues and
Hoplessness
Me and my friends, well
We just pop a pill and
Watch Braveheart and
Pretend....

I also heard the old people
Were throwing pots and pans
Down, onto the police
While your mourners marched
In the streets

So Alex, I just wanted to say
How sorry I am
For not being there
On that day, when
Your funeral set Greece aflame

***Editors
Choice***

32

**JUDITH HESTER
WHELCHER**

WAYS AND MEANS
(Fiction)

I am in an elevator with a fat man. We are going up and I am looking down at the floor, a cheap parquet in need of urethane. The tongues of his Nike Airs have been removed and his ankles are lost to the thick flesh forced into those voiceless shoes. When the doors part he steps aside, offering a quiet smile, and I am struck by his high, decent style. He walks behind me down the winding hall, his breath is loud and struggles like some used-up dog. His pants scrape, sand paper between tremendous, dimpled thighs; his feet pound the floor in offbeat percussion to his labored stride.

We enter the same office; Dr. Singer welcomes us and calls him Paul. For two years Dr. Singer has been my shrink, every Tuesday from two until three. Last week I told him he had done well, for six months now no hospital, no IVs, no feeding tubes in me. He said the laurels are for my crown and referred me to this group therapy.

There are five more patients in the room; two, like me, are skeletal with disease. There are three, like Paul, corpulent, overblown balloons. I count the circled chairs and come to eight, and then complain there must be some mistake, this mixing up of cats with dogs. Dr. Singer adjusts the wire rims resting on his nose, runs fingers through his aged, white hair, "Leslie, we all walk down a road." He gestures to an open chair for me.

I take my place between one girl fat, the other thin. I cross my arms and wrap my two legs into one for safety and for warmth. I look out the window to the ripe and budding tree. I know that oak from my hours here from two 'til three. Some days it speaks to me.

In Singer's circle we talk of vomiting and starving and hiding food and shame. Candace cries about the seat belt extension on her flight from Nashville to LA. The bulimic worries over dental bills for bleeding gums and rotting teeth. I talk of the pills I take to speed me up, the food I make and give away, of running in the dark. Marla is pissed to be obese and blames it on her genes. The biggest man of all speaks of children's stares, his folded skin and parts difficult to clean. The girl skinnier than me has gained two pounds, up from 83. Paul says he is smart and has done well but has never kissed a girl.

Dr. Singer recalls the ancient alchemy between the spirit world and matter, the ying and yang, the night and day, the body and the soul. He says the journey into each full life must pass through some dark hour. He speaks of Dorothy on yellow bricks passing through the forest, chasing monkeys, beating trees and drowning the wicked sister. He believes our hardest hours and deepest fears, if we can walk into them, prove to be our medicine and ticket back to Kansas.

"It's been ten years since I crossed my legs," says Marla. She glares at me.

I draw my legs beneath my chair. Marla is fatter than Paul, dressed in loud paisley with hoops in her ears that I can stick my arm right through.

"It's been ten years since I last ate cake." This is all I say.

"What? Did you people hear that?" Hot red splotches swathe Marla's pickled neck, she hisses and seethes. Her short arms flap, like some lame bird, wildly in the air.

She looks around the silent group for support and sympathy then, mouth agape, she squints her eyes and lands her stare on Dr. Singer.

He raises his hands as if to pray and rests his chin upon them. He looks at Marla, then at me and slightly tilts his head.

Marla arches in her chair, spits at me and then begins to howl. She grabs her neck, "Eat this you starving little cunt. Pathetic, anorexic bitch."

Marla is the large walrus at the aquarium barking on the rocks. I want to buy dead minnows to feed her and shut her up.

"You think I'm some enormous cake made with pounds of lard. You're so wrong. I'm smaller than you. I'm the size of an ant."

Dr. Singer passes Marla tissues. She dabs her eyes, honks her nose and hacks back her phlegm. Candace asks for one as well, she pinches her nose to hold her tears. I uncross my legs, shift my weight; the bulimic picks her nails; the man with folded skin is lost, snoring in his chair. The one who weighs less than me gives the sleeping guy a nudge. He rouses mumbling an apology, blaming narcolepsy.

Dr. Singer says to him, "You must stay present to the work."

"People take pleasure in crushing ants," Marla says.

"It's true," says Candace, "I step without remorse."

"I've stirred their hills with sticks," the bulimic says.

"I've heard of Buddhist monks," Paul says, "that carry little brooms, to sweep the street before each step because they value ants."

Dr. Singer nods and smiles.

"Give her a broom," Marla says, her eyes dead upon me.

I say, "I'm sorry. I meant no harm. But I haven't eaten cake."

The bulimic asks about my birthdays.

I list my lies of being full or having already eaten, feigning allergies, illnesses, claiming diabetes. The list is legion, my ways and means, of avoiding food and celebration.

"How sad," says Paul, "Cake is part of life. If I have three wishes come to me, one will buy you cake."

His wish floats in the air boxed in white with ribbons hanging down. Now my oak is thick with green. It stirs the air, I feel its wafts; the box drifts in my direction.

"Cake consumes my days," Candace says. The bulimic nods her head.

Cake blocks the fattest man of all from life's finer things: good jobs,

good times, good sex.

Paul's wish does not go, but hovers by my head. I am sitting on my hands.

There are voices back and forth

"No one wishes cake for me." Marla shakes.

"You don't need cake. You need to lose some weight."

"All you do is whine."

"I saw on TV, some guy lost weight, eating only Subways."

"I hate you people. You all are mean."

"I want to circle back to Leslie," Dr. Singer says.

I look out the window to the yellowed, burning oak.

"Leslie?"

"Something's gone," I say.

"What's gone?" Dr. Singer says.

A leaf? A forest? A life? A pound or nine? A wish, a ruby slipper?
I shrug. "I'm not sure I ever caught its name but I do know that I miss it."

That is all I have to say.

Marla rocks and moans and cannot speak for coughing at the floor.
She might vomit on her feet but all she does is drool.

Dr. Singer stands before her and lifts her back to sitting.

"You let them hurt me," she says to him, "I hate you most of all."

He is talking of her opportunity this hour, of choices she might make.

"I want a wish to make me pretty."

That is all Marla has to say.

The box is resting in my lap.

I unwrap myself, walk to Paul, and kiss him on the lips.

"You are fine," I say to him.

The girl skinner than me whispers, "Oh my God." The fattest man drops his jaw. The bulimic blushes. Marla whispers, "Slut." Dr. Singer asks me to collect myself and insists I find my chair.

I have heard of sacred prostitutes that worked the ancient temple. They welcomed strangers in the night and introduced them to the heavens. They gave themselves not to men or to the world but to the Wholly Other. In their corners, in the night, they brought the spirit world to matter.

"Whatever," I say to Dr. Singer.

It nears time to go. Dr. Singer invites us all to breathe: to take in love and release self hate, to draw in life and let go of death. I take in the bare, wintering oak. It feels good to hold a tree inside of me. I hear it whisper, "We'll make it to spring."

I am in the elevator with Paul. We are riding down and I look up into

the mirrored ceiling. From above I cannot see his shoes. The doors part and we exit into the late afternoon sun as reggae beats happily from some bar down the block. We walk side by side to my car.

“Thank you,” he says, “You have no idea.”

I kiss Paul again, this time long and hard and I lift my arms like branches. In this moment, in this now, there is alchemy in matter.

- Jennifer Seals Seals: Painting (need title and proper documentation)

40

**PHILIP BURTON
MORRIS**

A BENEEDICTION, 20 JANUARY 2009

Fresher breaths draw in
On this winter lengthened
By the plaintive taunts of
That wiser voice, the wind.
The young men hiccup into
Their cigarettes; they see
Mathematical movement
In the blushes of those irises,
Flag stars, they understand
The grave weight of their being.
The slap of shoe rubber applauds
On the palms of avenue asphalt.
Memory dilates like the eye
Of a child in her holiday parlor,
With white whispers of light
Winding on the family mantle.
She watched the ring as it slid
From the finger of an old warmth,
A tremor of living that spoke
Like the hushed trumpets
Of a burial, and then was folded
In with a wrapping of the flag.
Her anxieties were transparent
When the boys' choirs hummed
In cheeks of the more powerful mouths.
Her walls, though, were windows
Unlit by an accumulation of frost;
Her voice, a tangle of light
At her throat, as fragile as
The trickling of icicles, will yawn
For this eulogy. How lonesome;
She hears his footsteps innuendo
With their backtracks. Their fade
Becomes his valediction, and echo
As a whale's final gulping moan
In his ocean. With no hands there
To salute him, his signing statements
Sigh into mere diagrams, into bones
Only sands cradle, lastly ashes
Wrapped in velvet resting
On the shelves of holier homes.
That rapist of language,
His innocence is assured.

- T.J. Bowman: Photograph (need title)

44

**ASHLEY
LEDFORD**

IN DARKNESS

(Fiction)

It wasn't the reaction he expected. She was supposed to be confused at first, to ask him why the windows were covered and all the lights were off. He was to offer a clue, remind her they saw this once on CSI and she thought it would be an interesting experience. Then she was to recall the episode and say how amazing it was that he remembered.

"Happy first anniversary," Tad said.

But Joselyn, his wife, said nothing. He pictured her oval face propped up by a slender hand, her brows, one pierced, arching above earthen green eyes. She had just showered—a nice gesture after spending the last couple of hours training the neighborhood canines—so her wet hair fell in long, black walnut tangles down her shoulders and back, soaking her oversized Kent State T-shirt. Hers was so unlike his own hair, thick African curls he inherited from his mother.

His cooking had warmed the kitchen to a cozier temperature than the November chill outside, and from the table the aroma of garlic, blue cheese dressing, naval oranges, and oregano rose with the steam. The CD she had surprised Tad with that morning, *Nat King Cole Sings for Two in Love*, crooned, set on random, from the counter. The voice and instruments were clear, much less grainy than in the old record Tad had listened to growing up. She always knew what to get him.

"Did you forget to light the candles?" Joselyn asked.

"There are no candles," he said.

"Then...how are we supposed to see to eat?"

"We're not. That's the surprise." Tad reached for her hand but found only a napkin, the paper ridged like Braille. He sang to her instead, his voice much less smooth than Nat King Cole. "There will be many other nights like this..."

"Why?" Joselyn asked.

"Because we're going to be together until death do us part."

She laughed. "I meant, why are we eating like this?" Her tone hit a step above its normal pitch, as if a musician had missed an accidental. "I mean, it smells good, but..."

He couldn't see if she was still smiling, one side of her mouth raised slightly higher than the other, or if she was pinching the skin on her elbow, a sign of irritation, nervousness. He was about to give her the CSI clue when she spoke again.

"What did you make?"

Smiling.

Yes, I may dream a million dreams/ but how can they come true/ if there will never, ever be another you? And there wouldn't be. Joselyn didn't want kids.

"To your left are two celery sticks stuffed with cheese. Then there are

five jalapeño chicken wraps, an orange vegetable kabob, and an Italian round. I poured you milk, but it's in a coffee cup."

"Milk to curb the zest and a coffee cup to prevent an accident, nice. But why do we have to eat in the...Ah, the CSI episode."

The backrest of the kitchen chair huffed as Tad leaned onto it.

She remembered. "Actually the restaurant they based it off of is in California. Los Angeles, San Diego, and somewhere else."

"That's...special," Joselyn said.

I had my chance/ but it's all over now... Perhaps this wasn't the best CD to set the mood.

Dog tags jingled under the table and a warm back pressed against Tad's leg. Beowulf, Joselyn's brindled Irish wolfhound, believed the kitchen table was her dog house. Tad had protested at first; the silly beast bonked her head every time she stood up. But Joselyn said Beowulf had always lain under the table in her parents' house, and she'd done the same thing when Joselyn moved her to the apartment in Canton, so why should their house in Dannersby be any different?

Why indeed. Joselyn probably had her bare feet buried in the wolfhound's wiry fur.

Tad moved his legs. "I know I can't take credit for originality, but you said it would be an interesting experience."

"You do realize that somebody died eating this way," she said, the odd pitch returning.

"In the restaurant?" He had viewed a few reviews online. No one had written anything about that.

"On CSI."

"Someone always dies on CSI."

"Sure, but...I think I could enjoy the food more with the lights on."

The table shook. Joselyn or Beowulf must have bumped it.

"But the point is to heighten your senses," Tad said. "It's like being blind. Touch, smell, and taste become—"

She inhaled as if she were about to enter a tunnel. "Tad, I—I'd just feel better if—"

"But you like things to be dark, creepy, and weird. I thought you'd like it. You said it would be—"

"Interesting, yes, but I never thought you'd actually do it."

She never thought he would do it. That's what she had said nearly five years ago, the day before Christmas break when he stood in Kent State's library, presenting her with the eyebrow piercing she'd said she wanted, the silver dog bone. Joselyn hadn't accepted it then, though. She was dating someone else. He'd known that, of course, but they could still be friends, couldn't they? She said friends didn't kneel when they exchanged gifts, but he only knelt because she was sitting down and he was 6'3".

He saved the piercing, though. She broke up with her jerk boyfriend sometime during the break, and once the spring semester began, she

agreed to go with him to The Steaming Mug for its famous hot cocoa, which Tad knocked over on the table. Joselyn laughed, and helped him clean it up. She said she'd never met a man who liked Jane Austen and rock climbing. And he had never encountered a woman who could discuss the historical satire in Gulliver's Travels as easily as she could sensory receptors in a gray wolf. On Valentine's Day, Tad took her to the climbing wall at Hawkins Park, and as they dangled suspended from cables, he re-presented the silver dog bone.

"I can't believe you kept that," she said, taking out the other piercing and replacing it with his gift. She'd worn it ever since.

The meal, however, he couldn't save for three months.

Tad pressed his palms against the table. "I'll go turn on the lights."

"No, wait. I feel bad. You worked so hard on this." Another tunnel breath. The table shook as if from a 2.6 earthquake.

"Joselyn? Are you okay?"

"Let's just eat," she said. "The food's getting cold."

He reached for his milk, but his fingers landed in the blue cheese dressing. Tad cursed inwardly, found his napkin, and wiped off the dressing. He thought he was past this. She hadn't been disappointed with a gift since he had paid to have her eyebrow pierced for a second time. The woman nearly pierced Joselyn's eye, which required two stitches at the corner of her eyelids. She still had the scar.

"So how are the books?" she asked.

Tad smiled, pulling an orange slice off the skewer. She'd coined that question after they started dating. He'd been an assistant librarian then at Kent State. He now worked for Dannersby Public Library. Despite the dark, the orange didn't taste sweeter or tangier, just like a Food Lion orange.

"Dusty," he said. "I'm still working through the box Mr. Kilmore donated."

"I thought you—Ow! Did you put toothpicks in these wraps?"

He twirled the accused food, the pick splintering between his thumb and index finger. "To keep the bacon on. Sorry. Are you okay? Are you bleeding?"

"I don't think so. All I can taste is garlic."

"Is it too much?"

Maybe she's not to blame/ leave me with silent hours...

"No, it's fine," she said off-pitch. "Everything's fine."

Dinner for one please, James...It certainly would have been more successful. He should have just bought her Loveopoly. She liked regular Monopoly. Didn't she?

The table still vibrated. Tad moved his arm from the table and bit into the Italian round. The butter had solidified over the cheese and garlic powder. He swallowed hard and dropped the rest beneath the table. Beowulf shifted from side to belly, her tags jingling. He couldn't see Joselyn, the scar that bunched in the corner of her eye, her elbow

propped on the table, and he didn't know how much of her hair had dried or where she rested her eyes.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" she said a little louder than necessary. "The food's great, Tad. Thank you. It's nice."

The shaking amplified to a 4.2.

"Can you please stop? I don't want my food to end up in the floor."

"I'm sorry. It's just Wulf's taking up most of the leg room, so when I move my leg, the table shakes. We should probably invest in a sturdier one anyway. I mean, I know this table's special to you. I'd hate for Wulf to break it."

Tad's grandfather had made the table with scrap oak from his employer's lumberyard. She had loved the table when they moved it into the house. Did she not like it now?

You stepped out of a dream/ you are too wonderful/ to be what you seem... Had Joselyn always been this fickle? She liked dark things, but now she didn't; liked the table, but now it was too fragile; thought he was the best thing to happen to her—was she beginning to reconsider? Or had she just settled when she said yes before the justice of the peace, rain dripping off the roof of the pavilion?

"I can't please you." His voice was small, like the bit of red pepper on the kabob skewer.

"What?"

"I can't please you," he said more loudly, peering at the invisible woman across from him.

"But I'm the one shaking—"

"The table's not good enough; the food's too pungent. You don't like my gifts to you. I can't give you what you want."

"Don't be like this, Tad."

"I don't know how else to be."

"What are you saying?"

He rested an arm on the table, now still. "Why didn't you want to eat in the dark?"

"It's not that I didn't want to. I appreciate your efforts, Tad, but I..."

"What, do you have to check the food before you eat it?"

A thousand thoughts of you/ will haunt me ever after... He would put this CD in his desk drawer and never listen to it again.

"You know Aunt Chris was blind," she said quietly.

His diaphragm stretched, pulled, and twisted beneath his ribs. Tad shut his eyes and propped his head against his hand, the grease from his fingers slicking his skin. Joselyn and her aunt had been close, spending every Sunday afternoon at the dining table working puzzles, a habit they continued even after her aunt developed a genetic eye disorder that deteriorated the cones and rods in her retinas. After three years, Aunt Chris became legally blind. She died two months ago from pancreatic cancer. How had he not made the connection?

“Dr. Sobczak said your eyes were fine,” Tad said.

“For now.”

His hand thumped against the table, and he leaned back against the chair, mouthing the words of Nat King Cole, *Your face/ your smile/ the moonlight in your hair/ your lips/ your eyes/ I'll see them everywhere...* He was an idiot, a simpleton.

“I’ll get the lights,” Joselyn said.

“No, I’ll get them.” He stood.

Her chair scraped across the floor. “I’m closer. It won’t—”

Dog skull cracked against the bottom of the table, and the dishes clanged, followed by a yelp and shout, crash and thud, and one final crack of wood on linoleum. Nails clicked thickly and were gone. The CD player whirred, and Nat King Cole sang no more.

“Joselyn?” His chest warmed with adrenaline.

“I’m fine, tripped over Beowulf.”

“Anything broken?” She didn’t curse. That was a good sign.

“Just get the lights.”

Tad pulled the chair back, waving his outstretched hands as he walked around the table. His hand traced the side of the fridge, sticking to a picture, the only one on that side. Joselyn sat in a tire swing at Hawkins Park. She was laughing, clinging to the chains as she spun, hair sweeping after her. But the camera had only captured a whirl of streaks, slowed motion. Beneath his hand, the picture was just a different texture in the dark.

When he could see again, would her head be on the floor, hair fanning out like thousands of seeping rivulets? Would her eyes be open, or closed as he pictured? He assumed her cheeks would be sticky with salt and dried water, but would she be smiling instead, one side higher than the other?

Did he want to see?

He located the switch and pushed up with his thumb.

51

**MATT
ADAMS**

52

**JENNIFER
ADKINS**

CHILD SOLDIERS

The children are hunting now,
polishing their weapons and curving
their spines. Eyes shining in the dark
like cigarettes, their skin a sunken
wasteland of ash. You don't say it, but
you are sickened by them; the gaunt faces
stretched across your TV screen, reminding you
of the one you left behind, pale and still
in a lonely room, tubes running through his
heart and nose; the children are turning into
machines, programmed to fight for their lives
and yours is about to join the ranks of phantoms,
becoming a part of the darkness, a part that sifts
heavily in your dreams, making you shift
uncomfortably next to your lover as they try
to touch her cheek and remember what it was like
to be loved. And you'll wake tossing them angrily
from your mind and lie in bed wondering what it was
like for them to be human, for they are no longer
children now – yours or them – but creatures, baring
their teeth at the fragility of their innocence.

- Brett Donahue: South's Largest

56

**TRAVIS
STROUD**

4 AM
(Fiction)

The crazy thing is that, out of the three of us, everyone assumed I would be the first to die. Hell, I assumed it too, but that's not what happened, which is why we're all standing around an open grave, listening to some local priest whose name I have either forgotten or never caught in the first place, dressed all in black even though it's the sort of sticky, sweltering day that can kill old people and babies that get left in cars.

Something moves in my peripheral vision and I turn to look. It's Martin, sweat pouring and gleaming on his puffy white skin. He's looking at me, and now I'm looking back at him, squinting because the angle puts the sun in my eyes. The way he looks is confused, like he can't remember where he put his keys. I imagine I look blank, same as always. Martin mouths a word I don't catch and I shrug. I turn back to the grave, and his clothes rustle as he does the same.

We're both staring at Peter, the priest's words buzzing around us like insects. We're actually staring at the box Peter is in, I guess, but when you haven't seen someone in years there isn't much of a difference. What's inside that box probably has nothing to do with the Peter I remember anyway.

Martin and I are silent, but a lot of people are crying. Peter's mom is screaming and pulling at her hair, his dad is holding his nose and clenching his eyes shut like he's in a pool with too much chlorine, and his sisters are holding each other, shaking. There are dozens of people, and most of them are crying, sniffing, sobbing; it's kind of like a chamber orchestra, but the people are instruments and despair is the conductor.

The fact that so many people are here, crying, makes me happy; it makes me happy for Peter, I mean. He always loved to be liked by people, and I can't think of a better way to show that you're fond of someone than crying over their death. After all, anyone can lie about liking you, but most people can't fake tears.

Sweat drips into my eye and I make a noise. I reach up to rub it, wincing, and suddenly a smooth, soft hand wraps around my own. I open one eye to see Zoe looking at me, her eyes red and her dark cheeks shimmering. Her lips are pursed, and I wonder if she's hiding lips like hers out of respect for the dead. I know I wouldn't want people thinking of violating my mouth if I were trying to mourn.

I consider telling her I'm not crying, that I just got sweat in my eye, but I decide not to. I rub my eyes instead, do my best to give her a comforting smile, and squeeze her hand back. We both win this way; she gets a companion in her grief, and I get to touch her. I feel a moment of guilt over enjoying the contact when I should be concentrating on Peter's grave, or the words of the priest, but it doesn't

last. Peter is dead, and he was always trying to get me to socialize more when we still talked. In fact, he tried to set me up with Zoe once. I used to be obsessed with her, and he did his best to help me get her, but I was too shy to follow through. I squeeze her hand again and wonder if he got his way after all.

I stop paying any attention to the proceedings and concentrate on Zoe's hand. The priest quotes some biblical passages that I don't catch, - and, heathen that I am, probably wouldn't have understood - Peter's mother screams and thrashes some more, and everyone starts to disperse. Zoe's hand is still in mine as we walk away. Either she decides to let me lead or I do it without thinking, I'm not sure. Either way, I make a bee-line for the nearest patch of shade. I sigh, close my eyes, and lean against a rough brick wall.

"I just don't understand," she says, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. It's wiped off a lot of her make-up, and I like her face more now.

"The last time I saw him, he was so happy. It just doesn't make sense. How could this have happened?"

I shrug, watching as the last of the mourners leave. In their black clothing, they look like identical blank shadows. That image bothers me like a forgotten name, so I drop it.

"I really don't know," I say. "I hadn't talked to him in years."

I could have answered her question truthfully, but I decided not to. I am a liar.

"That's sad," she says, taking my hand again. "You guys used to be best friends. I can't imagine what you and Martin must be going through right now.

I just nod and squeeze her hand.

It was almost four a.m. when my phone began to dance, buzzing and skittering across the table, desperate for my attention. I had only been asleep for an hour or two. Otherwise it would have taken something more extreme to get me up. It still took three long buzzes, followed by a yelp and a crash as the phone fell on my cat, for me to get to my feet and answer. I flipped the phone open and saw the name that I had considered deleting over and over in the three years since graduation. I mashed the green button beneath the screen and brought the phone to my ear.

"Peter," I said, closing my eyes and lowering myself back onto the bed, "do you know what time it is?"

There was silence on the other line, and for a moment I thought he had hung up right when I answered. I pulled the phone away to check but it said the call was still active. I only caught the last part of something he said as I put it back to my ear.

"-for bothering you," he said. "I'll let you go back to sleep."

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. "No, I'm awake now. It's alright."

The line grew silent again, but I didn't bother to check the phone. He would either say what he had called to say or he would lose his nerve. I wasn't angry at him, but if he thought I would do small talk that early in the morning, after three years of silence, he didn't know me as well as either of us had once thought.

"Hey," he finally said. "This is going to sound weird."

"I've yet to have a call after two in the morning that didn't."

He might have laughed, or maybe he coughed. I wasn't really sure.

"Ian, I'm dying."

"Wow," I said, wondering if that sounded wrong. "That's terrible. How long do you have?"

"I don't know. I went down the vein, which I heard is the way you're supposed to do it, but I never really looked up how long it's supposed to take. I'm starting to get pretty cold, though, so I don't think it will be much longer."

"Oh," I said, my eyes opening to stare through the darkness at my ceiling.

"Yeah."

Water was sloshing in the background.

"Aren't you going to say anything," he asked. I realized I'd been quiet for a couple of minutes.

"Do you want me to?"

"I don't know. I just want someone to talk to while this happens. I'm not afraid of being dead; I want that. It's the dying that's scaring me."

"Well, I don't really know what to say." I sighed. "Why me, I guess?"

There was a long silence, broken by a few faint splashes. "You're the only person I could think of who wouldn't make me feel bad about this."

"Why are you doing it?"

"Because I don't want to be alive anymore."

It was a perfectly acceptable answer, but it wasn't something I had ever expected Peter to say.

"And you're sure?" I said. "You're sure this is what you want? It isn't too late to call an ambulance."

"Yeah," he said softly. I wasn't sure if he was just calm or if he didn't have the strength to be any louder. "Yeah, this is what I want."

I nodded even though he couldn't see it.

"Well I'm here," I said. "You can talk to me if you've got anything to say, but otherwise I'm just going to be here. Is that alright?"

"Yeah. Thank you," he whispered, and I was sure he was getting weaker.

I kept the phone pressed to my ear, listening to the ways his breathing changed. Every now and then there was a splash as he shifted in what I assumed was his tub. Then his breathing got slower and there weren't as many splashes. Then, after a while, I stopped hearing anything. My ear was hot under the phone, so I pulled it away

and closed it. I placed it on my nightstand and lay there, staring at the glowing numbers on my clock until I drifted out of consciousness.

I'm holding Zoe's hands again, and we're both slick and shiny with sweat even though the room is air-conditioned. We're sweating because we're excited, and she's holding my hands to help keep her balance. She rises on the balls of her feet, the muscles in her thighs shivering beneath her skin. Her hands press down on mine and her head rolls back. I watch the curve of her throat as she cries out and her body grasps at mine, desperate to plunge back down.

My eyes close and my toes curl as she swallows me again. She pants and whimpers, exhausted. She has already climaxed twice and, the way her legs are shaking, I'm not surprised when she doesn't lift herself back up. She moves her knees down to support herself instead and begins to grind. Her body rolls like a serpent, with waves beginning at her dark brown hips, curving over her soft stomach, drawing my eyes over her round little breasts, cresting at her swan's neck. Her head bobs with each wave, loose and delirious.

Maybe a minute passes, maybe five. Eventually something slips and my body wrenches itself from me.

It's like realizing the brakes on your car don't work.

It's like the lurch in your stomach when you lose your balance.

It's like when the breathing on the phone stops.

I quake and groan. My teeth clench and I clutch her to me like I need her to live. I pour myself into her, gasping and, for just a moment, forgetting everything.

Her cheek rests on my chest, slick and wet, and her breath rushes across my skin in warm little bursts. One of my hands is still resting in hers; the other drifts up to touch her hair. She purrs and her face shifts on my skin. I assume she's smiling, and I am as well. I don't love her, but I don't think I would like her as much if I did.

"You know," she says after a few minutes, "the last time I saw Peter, he gave me something."

"When was this?"

"A couple of months ago," she says. "It was this box full of notebooks he said you wanted me to have."

"Oh?"

I catch myself starting to squeeze her hand too hard and release it. She turns, resting her thigh on my groin, her breasts on my chest, and her chin right below mine. She smiles and the ball of ice in my stomach melts a little.

"How much of it did you read?"

"All of it," she says, rubbing her body on mine as she scoots a few inches closer.

"So you read," I begin, only to be cut off as her lips clamp onto mine. She pulls back after a moment, looking at me with half-lidded eyes and

lips too sensual to be seen near the dead.

"Ian," she whispers. "I had no idea you felt that way. Those poems were beautiful."

She closes her eyes and nuzzles her head into my shoulder.

"You're beautiful," she adds. I consider saying the same to her, but after the pages and pages of obsessive writing she's read, anything I might say will sound cheap. So I lie there, I stay silent, I smell her hair, and I rub the perfect skin of her back as it rises and falls with sleepy breath.

My last thought before drifting off to sleep is that I could probably manage to love her without hating her, if I try hard enough.

"You're flat," I said without looking up from the page.

Peter smiled and shook his head as his hands went back to tuning.

"How can you tell without paying attention?" he said, plucking strings and tightening them. Each note he struck bent as it left the guitar, curving away from the horizon to shoot downward.

"My dad was a musician," I said, my pen still moving.

"Well," Peter said, fixing the strap back over his shoulder, "you seem to have a knack for it. Why don't you ever play music?"

I looked up at him and grinned.

"Because my dad was a musician," I said again.

He answered by striking a simple chord and working into a song he'd been trying to learn. I could tell he was getting better because it was starting to sound like music instead of noise.

The bleachers began to shiver and ring with heavy, stomping footfalls, causing my pen to slip and gouge three lines of verse with a thick black mark. I closed my book and looked up as Martin approached, his face red with exertion and his jersey tucked under his arm. The rest of the team was dispersing from the field; some of them drifted to their cars, some lived close enough to walk home, and some were running up to other sections of the bleachers, to other groups of friends. In the failing light they all looked like copies of the same blank shadow.

"How was practice?" Peter said. He put his guitar back in its case and scooted to the side, making space between us. Martin sat down and leaned back on his elbows, panting loudly. He smelled like dirt and sweat, and I wanted him to go away or take a shower.

Really, both would have been ideal.

"It was bullshit," Martin spat, wiping his face. "The new coach doesn't know a goddamn thing. If he keeps up like he's been doing I might not be able to get a scholarship."

"Couldn't scouts still see that you're a good player even if the coach makes the team lose?" Peter said.

"Not," Martin snarled, "if the stupid fuck never puts me in a game!"

"Yeah," I said, "it would be terrible if you had to do your work or

read.”

I opened my book and started writing again. Martin punched me in the arm and laughed, leaning over my shoulder. I considered shoving my pen in his eye, but decided to close the book instead.

“So what’re you writing,” he asked, sneering in a way I was sure he thought was playful. “Is it another faggy little poem about that girl you’re too chickenshit to talk to?”

I was about to tell him to go jump off a bridge when Peter spoke.

“You know,” he said, “I have a bunch of classes with her. I could talk to her for you, if you’d like.”

“You mean Zoe?”

Peter nodded and smiled.

“I, well,” I said, suddenly finding something down on the field very interesting. “Thanks, but I don’t know. I’d rather, you know, let it happen if it’s going to happen, I guess.”

Martin snorted and rolled his eyes. “I figured you’d puss out,” he said. “Anyway, it’s for the best. If she found out about all that shit you’ve written, she’d probably just think you’re a creepy stalker.”

I didn’t say anything. I just kept staring at the grass as I twirled my pen between my fingers.

“That’s not true,” Peter said. “I think Ian’s poems are beautiful.”

I blushed and couldn’t help but smile. Sometimes I wondered what I had done to deserve a friend as good as Peter.

“Really,” he said, “I wish someone would write things like that about me.”

I saw, out of the corner of my eye, that Peter was staring at me as he said that. I never really thought about it, but Peter always seemed to be staring at me.

Stephanie Tate

66

**CHRIS
SCOTT**

MR. JOHNSON

Plantation home, owning small
dirt-floor cabins. The ticks in summer waiting
on log walls outside
for a tired worker.

A slave. A broken
bottle across an open tuning.
No picks. What's the use
with five fingers playing already?

Free now
to have
his essentials
taken away.

Guitar now jingling
goods outside
General Stores.
Tin cup for coins in front,

and a white man's oath to not
shoot the black man for being
on his property. Long as his music
brings business.

Doesn't stay long.
An' nobody need know
a damn thing more about him.
'cept that he plays good.

- Drew Meyer: Montage2 death is the birth of revolution

70

**BRANDON
BUCKNER**

A HOUSE IN FLAMES

(Fiction)

I ducked to avoid my father's glass. It smashed behind me, staining our living room wall with the fourth Screwdriver I had mixed for him that night.

"That was weak," he stated, and then leaned back in his recliner. "Make me another."

"We're out of vodka," I said.

"Then light a fire." He threw a matchbox at me. "I'm not warm yet" I caught it before it flew over my head. "We don't have a fireplace."

"Then burn something else."

"Fine." I lit a match and then flicked it into his mouth. His head snapped back and flames erupted between his lips. The wife beater and boxers he wore disintegrated as the fire coursed down his body.

"You tried to kill me!" my father howled. His once colorless eyes flared with a blue-light.

"I wanted you to burn," I said and stepped back to avoid his combustible body.

Smiling, my father stood up from his burning recliner. He screamed flames into the air that burst into smoke. It billowed around me and caused the smoke detector to beep twice before he tore it off the ceiling.

The smoke watered my eyes and clogged my throat. I fanned my face before it stole my voice, but then my father snatched my arm.

"Let go of me," I said. Flames engulfed my free hand as I tried pushing him off me.

"Did you just give me an order?" He twisted my arm, sending me to my knees.

"Stop," I begged.

"Say 'please.'" His hot fingers seared my skin.

"Please."

"Much better." He shoved me to the floor.

I crawled to the other side of the room, keeping my head low in order to breathe through the endless waves of smoke above me.

"Are you sorry now for setting me on fire?" he asked and swiped the walls with his burning hand, leaving scorch marks as he stalked me. Each step he took singed a footprint into the carpet.

"I'm not afraid of you," I repeated in my head as the numbness coated my burnt arm. I went to the closet door, opened it, and grabbed the fire extinguisher.

"Come here and face me like a man," he yelled and stretched out his flaming arms. I aimed the nozzle at him and squeezed the handle. He backed away with his hands shielding his blue-light eyes. The pressurized water forced him to trip over his burning recliner, causing him to knock his head on the wall. He slumped to the floor

unconscious.

“One...two...three...” I whispered and continued spraying him, waiting for the flames to stop flicking the charcoaled ceiling.

“...six...seven...eight...” Never releasing the handle, I watched the fire waver in front of me, dying of thirst.

“...ten...eleven...twelve.” The flames dimmed into pathetic embers shivering in the cold air. In case of future emergencies, I stopped spraying and put the extinguisher back in the closet. Then I took off my shirt and padded the embers into nothing.

Naked and dry, my father pushed himself up and rested on the blackened wall next to me.

“Thanks for starting a fire,” he said, staring at the burning wreckage.

“No problem,” I said and rubbed my burnt arm, enjoying each rush of pain that broke out of the numbness.

“Are you sure we don’t have any more liquor?”

“I’ll check.” I stood up and walked out of the room, blaming the fallen ash for my tears.

Casey Yoshida

76

**JOSHUA MICHAEL
JOHNSON**

MY LANDING

(Creative Non-Fiction)

I am eight and I get the basketball once today. Someone passes me the ball, I shoot, I miss. The other team laughs while my team kicks the dirt and shakes their heads. The old basketball goal is nailed to a tree in a vacant lot down the alley from my South Highland Park home. The backboard is just a piece of plywood, splintering at the edges, nailed to the tree slightly crooked, but the rim is real, even though it's rusty and has no net. The ground is hard, the tattered neighborhood sneakers and bare feet pounding it on long summer days. Other parts of the lot are littered with large trash piles, a broken couch and jagged beer bottles. Once I miss the shot I never get the ball again. I run around to get free—waving, waving, but no one will pass me the ball. I always miss.

I quit playing, trudge over to the shade behind the old shed at the edge of the lot, and sit on the ground. The hot day has tired me and I don't feel like playing anymore so I study the large burned-out house across the street. I remember the fire engines woke me that night four years ago. I remember the strange prancing light cast on our faces, the shouts, and the naked man barely escaping. Now the burnt house sits, most of its blackened framework exposed, and when the wind blows the neighborhood always smells like smoke. The garage is less damaged, and sometimes prostitutes sleep there in the winter since it still has a roof. There is a sunflower by the rusty mailbox.

I notice my hands are covered with dirt as I wave a fly away from my face, so I spit into my hands, and wipe them on my shorts. My two white palms staring up at me seem out of place. I turn back to the basketball game where every bounce of the ball sends a puff of dirt into the air. Burrell passes the ball underneath to Marcus in the lane, Marcus tosses it over to Jamichael in the corner, Jamichael fires back out to Burrell at the three-point line and Burrell puts it through the hoop. I clap my spit clean hands—my team is winning.

The game ends when everyone is tired of playing. Some of the guys sit down on the ground, others walk off down the alley. I study the burned-out house again. I don't see the rock thrown, but it hits me in the stomach. I am startled and look up to find a couple of the guys are standing by the goal. Only one of them threw the rock, but are all laughing and picking up more rocks. I jump to my feet and try to get them to stop, but they don't. They just laugh at me. The rocks hurt when they hit my legs, my chest, and my hands. The guys quit laughing, start yelling insults and throwing bigger rocks, so I yell for my teammates to help me. Burrell walks over to the group, takes the broken brick out of one of their hands, turns and throws it in my direction.

I run to the tree where my bicycle is propped, shielding my head with

my hands. I jump on my bicycle and pedal up the alley. They're running after me, rocks thumping down all around me, one ricocheting off my front wheel, another off my bicycle seat. One hits me in the back of the head and I lurch forward—my grip on my handlebars relaxing. I want to give up, but if I fall they'll catch me. I grasp the handlebars with my bloody-white hands, duck my head, and pedal, and pedal, and pedal. I am eight.

I am nine and I hear guns. There are two shots at first, then another one, then two guns shooting at the same time. The shots sound like they are a couple of blocks away and there's a silence afterward—there always is. I look around, not knowing what to do. My brother, Jonathan, drags me to my feet, and shoves me toward my bicycle. "Come on, Josh! We have to get home."

It's important we get home because we aren't supposed to be on the street behind our house. We pedal hard toward our house, and as we round the corner heading up the hill, we see our mom running down toward us. She looks scared. Jonathan and I slide to a stop.

"Where have you been? Some people were shooting down the street. A man got shot, but he ran off and he's got a gun. We have to get inside now!"

We ride our bicycles up the hill with Mom running beside us, but when we get to the alleyway a strange man stumbles out into the street. He's holding a hat to his stomach, and there's blood all over his hands. He keeps his head down and when he walks he doesn't pick up his feet. He fumbles across the street toward the deep ditch where the railroad tracks used to cut through the hill on the other side of Anderson Avenue. It seems he's trying to turn away from us, but we know him. He's a drug dealer from a couple blocks over. As he stumbles across the street he drops his gun. "Go, go!" Mom is yelling for my brother and me to get to the house.

Jonathan and I start to pedal away when our neighbor runs out of the alleyway with a rifle pointed at the drug dealer. My brother and I freeze since the neighbor stands between our house and us. "Get on the ground! Get on the ground, now!" The neighbor yells.

The dealer turns, looking at the neighbor, and mutters something I don't understand.

"Get on the ground!"

The man bends forward, trying to pick up his gun. My mom screams. "Don't do it, man! I mean it!"

The man, while still bending over reaching for the gun, loses his balance and falls into the eight-foot railroad-ditch on the side of the street. The neighbor immediately hands his rifle to my mom and climbs down into the ditch. The dealer is bleeding a lot. "I need a towel!" Our neighbor yells.

"Jonathan, go get a towel." My mom is holding the rifle and keeping

careful watch over the gun lying in the street. “Jonathan. A towel! Now!”

Jonathan gets a towel, the blue one with white lace my mom thinks is pretty. Our neighbor stops the bleeding and the police arrive in a rupture of sirens and lights. My mom lays the rifle in the street, and Jonathan drags me inside.

Our neighbor is scrubbing the blood off his hands in our bathroom sink with alcohol. I’m watching, frozen, from the doorway—the drug dealer’s blood swirling its way around, and around, and around the white porcelain sink, and slipping down the drain. I am nine.

I am 11 and my parents are spies. Right now my dad is up in our hot attic with binoculars, a cordless phone, and a borrowed video camera. He’s sitting in the dark looking out the window, spying on the drug dealers across the street. My parents routinely video tape our neighbors dealing drugs and give the tapes to the police. The police do nothing and I don’t understand.

A rickety green car pulls up beside their house. The man with the yellow pants sitting on the front porch jogs over to the car, grasps hands with the passenger a couple of times, and the car pulls away. A red car, a gold, two white ones and a gray pick-up truck all stop by this afternoon. My dad is tired of taping and climbs down the ladder from the attic.

My mom cooks cornbread, northern beans and green beans for dinner. We say grace before we eat and I stuff my mouth with cornbread. My dad is in the middle of telling us one of his Navy stories when we hear loud yelling outside.

I run to the front window and peak through the curtains just in time to see a police officer getting tackled by a drug dealer. I yell for my parents to come see what is going on. My mom calls 911 and within a minute, 14 officers arrive, their cars filling the street. The police attack the crowd, tackling, wrestling, punching and they win.

Eight days later my parents are forced to stop their car by these same drug dealers. They survive unharmed. My dad starts carrying a gun. I am 11.

I am 17 and there’s a gun pointed at my face—the darkness inside the barrel, the streetlights gleaming off the metal, the non-face behind the hammer. The man instructs me to turn around, kneel down and hold my keys up in the air. I’m shaking and I can’t hold my hands still. Another man, his face masked, walks over and takes the keys from my hand, my cell phone from my front pocket, my wallet from my back. He opens the rear hatch of my parents’ van and tells me to get inside. I’m begging to be let go in a high, frantic voice, but the man with the gun moves closer, tells me to shut up and get in. He keeps the gun pointed at my face, so I climb in the back of the van. I can feel the sweat on my

chest. I'm told to stay there, and keep my head down. They say they won't hurt me, if I do as I'm told they'll let me go. I don't believe them. I know I'm going to die.

I'm in the back of the dark van for hours, sweating. The men drive constantly, listening to rap music on the radio. The street lamps and neon store signs flicker their confusing light through the tinted glass. I can only see that flickering light, nothing else. It's a small reminder of a world outside of my own—the hot, small space between the folded rear seat, and the doors with no latch on the inside. I learn to love the carpet, its soft fibers against my face as I cry.

I think of my family, my friends. I want one of them, any one of them, to be there with me, to hold me so I won't be alone. But I am alone. I try to get the jack out of the side compartment so I can break a window and jump out. But it makes a clanking noise when I move it, so I stop. I can't escape.

The men park the van and get out. It's dark and I don't think we are in the city anymore. I think they're going to take me out and kill me. The one with the gun taps on the glass but I'm too afraid to look. I push my head into the carpet hard, close my eyes, and pray, and pray, and pray. But the men don't open the hatch. They get back in the van and start driving again. Soon I see the flickering lights again, and I am thankful—blinding greens, oranges, and reds.

The men stop the van again and one of them tells me to keep my head down for 15 minutes, then I can leave. I don't believe they're really letting me go. I think I'm going to be shot through the glass, so I squeeze my hands and arms around my head, hoping that if they shoot me, somehow it will be enough to stop the bullets. I'm trembling, squeezing, hoping, and crying. I don't want to die this way. I keep my head down as I count 55 seconds—I can't stay any longer. I scramble over the folded seat, pulling myself into the driver's seat. At first I can't find the keys, then I find them in a cup-holder. I twist the ignition, cram the van in gear, and press the gas pedal to the floor. I escape.

The police don't catch the men. I'm forced to deal with the reality that they're still out there. They know what I look like, and I don't know what they look like, but I try hard to remember. The one wears the mask—the other one has the gun.

I do my best to act like I'm okay, and I do a good job. After a few months, even my family thinks I'm back to normal, but I'm not. I am suspicious of everyone as I walk through the mall, and if anyone looks at me for more than a moment, I freak out. When I'm out with my friends at night, I never want to go home. I'm afraid of the dark walk from my car to the house, but I can't tell anyone because I'm afraid of what they'll think. I run from my car to my house every night, my pulse high. My mom gets upset because I cut through her flowerbed. She thinks it's because I'm lazy. I never tell her it's because I'm scared. I always twist my key in the lock, and slam the door behind me. My

brother gets angry because it wakes him up. I never tell him why I do it. I am afraid of the dark. I am 17.

I am 20 and I can't breathe. It comes at random, and it is horrible. I'm good at hiding it though and no one knows I have a problem. The appearance of being normal helps me believe I am. Most days I can breathe just fine, but when I feel my breath slipping away, I quietly excuse myself from whatever group I'm in and hide. I don't want anyone to know. It takes over my body, and I raise my chin up gasping for air as if I'm swimming. But it's not just a breathing problem. The worst part of it all is the fear. In those moments, everything that tells me my world will be okay vanishes. I feel empty, I have no hope, I'm trembling, and I can't breathe. Most of the time it lasts about 15 minutes, but sometimes it lasts longer.

It happens during my best friend's wedding. I never tell him. I just disappear from the ballroom, and go out on the balcony trying to breathe in the cold air. I grasp the cool railing and pretend to be looking at the stars. I can't even see them.

During a severe fit my dad finds me on my bedroom floor, gasping. He holds me in his arms. He is crying.

"Just breathe, Josh. Breathe."

I can't breathe. I am 20.

I am nine and I am flying. It's a superpower I obtain from the bicycle ramp my brother Jonathan built. He used a cinder block and an old board he pulled out of a trash pile in the street behind our house. He propped the board on the block and now we can fly. We are the only people on the street since four of the six houses on this block are empty—their overgrown yards flooding the cracked sidewalk in green. We set our ramp up in the street, watching for the occasional car zooming down the hill—trunk booming and buzzing.

My back wheel touches ground, I set my front wheel down, apply the brakes, and slide to a stylish stop. I'm proud, but my brother scoffs at my jump. He's two years older than me and a much better rider. He gets a running start and jumps way higher than me and at least twice as long, and when he lands, he doesn't set his front wheel down immediately. He lands on his back wheel, rides out the wheelie for several feet, and then sets down his front wheel. It's not just how you fly, it's about how you land. I want to ride just like him. Jonathan convinces me to lie down in the street in front of the ramp and let him jump over me. I'm scared at first, but after a couple times it doesn't seem too dangerous. Jonathan is flying over me when we hear the guns.

-Laura Wynn: Photograph Series (need title and negative scans)

84

**EMILIA A.
PHILLIPS**

SEPARATION

It's at dawn when I wonder if I will see flowers
in this field again: Venus-yellow, dusk-purple, Mars-red, a violence
of color spreading like a rash over the earth.

In the night, in the cold sheets of moonlight,
I realized that we know nothing of our place here: our streets lead only
to other streets and our home will fall in the quake of our hearts.

Marriage is a crumbling ruin. Its stones moss over
with guilt, and the cracks in its walls offer blooms
of Poppies, Phlox, even Cosmos: all red, all open wounds.

The stars, then, must be the salt that burns into the sores of time
and the sun, a husband, waking to an empty bed.

86

**JENNIFER
MANNING**

BREAKING THE BARRIER: A *CONTORTED SATIRE OF
CONTEMPORARY WHORES*

(Fiction)

Anderson is lifeless on his couch, a molded man of doubt so anxious with words that the ink on his fingers has aged and soured. "Cat Eats Mouse" was his last narration, an absurdly unsuccessful tale about a rat jailed in heaven. Its failure incarcerated Anderson, and with tail intact, he strives to break the barrier.

His eyes climb into his head as he strangles his lips with his pen. "Ah," he says when the vision arrives, bending towards the table to test it. On a piece of paper he writes in cursive: *God is on a Date with Satan*.

Aroused by these words of his first paragraph, Anderson collects more paper from the neighboring desk. One page. Seven pages. 50 pages no less. But when he sets the pile next to the line he says, "This is suffocating," and compresses the idea into a fickle depression.

Back to the couch he slouches and fidgets, whirling his fingers around like a child. "That's it," he says, picking up the pen again and scribbling onto a page: *Death is Excessive, by Anderson J. Evans*. But the second he finishes the s on the end of Evans, he negates the title, and continues to fidget.

"I'm dried up," he confesses to the defaced endeavor and dials his psychiatrist, Dr. Yule B. Sedated. "Doctor," he says, "My mind has been arrested by my life's vacant impressions. I need to escape this condition."

"I take it the Wellbutrin isn't too effective?" Sedated asks with emphatic inflection.

"It makes me hesitant, and I have no direction. It's like a wedge between me and inspiration," Anderson says, staring at the pile of blank pages.

"Then perhaps something more effective: Prozac, Xanax, Lunesta, or Effexor?"

"But those are all pills resistant to sensation," Anderson stresses.

"I must remind you, Mr. Evans, you are the patient."

"A patient so embedded in recession he can't put pen to paper," Anderson replies, disconnecting with Sedated. He slams the receiver onto the table and extracts his prescribed suppression, a bottle wedged to his deadened fingers. Tightly gripping it and glimpsing at the crumpled pages on the floor, he says, "Writing is too sacred for this cowardly invention," and he hurls the bottle at the front door.

Planting his feet, he leans toward the desk again, opening the bottom left drawer. Next to the hoard of half devoured Wellbutrin awaits a network of unclaimed medicine: Dexedrine, Desoxyn, Adderall, and Ritalin. He examines the side effects of each digestive, fiddling with the label as he reads it, and after brief consideration, Anderson exchanges

his downer for a stimulant and guides a white pill to his mouth. With a swig of spit, he pays his pimp then reclines back onto his couch. When the tablet kicks in, his mind races out the cage, and Anderson sprints straight into another pen.

cue 77 blackout

- Heidi Vasterling: Architecture Study (need title)

92

**SCOTT
GAST**

SUNFLOWER SEEDS

Sitting with a handful of sunflower seeds
I surveyed their prospects, down

Amongst the burgeoning spring grasses
Summer-hot in their haste, or

Settled gently in the carob sides of
Ant-mulch'd hills, even

Plunged face first through the waiting dark
Composed soil of the garden.

Should they return to their namesake,
And outgrow their progenitor

Risking being cast out as a trickle,
Or maybe resown into light beyond our planets,

To roam and root in the glowing dust of dying stars
Or the embryo of collapsed gravitational matters.

Every year I plant a multitude of these seeds
Above moving tectonics but below the mist,
Hidden away from human eyes,
Their wombs becoming the feet of the living.

- Natalie Roig: Photo (need title)

96

**GAVIN
CROSS**

DE LA SOMBRA DOMINICANA
(Creative Non-Fiction)

They carried us from the airport in a yellow school bus, like the ones in America. It smelled of fresh mold and walnuts, and in the front, old men with over-pressed suits and Cuban cigars chattered in crackled Spanish. A brisk rain crashed on the roof, rumbling like the crowd at that rock concert last week.

Don't think of home.

On the right, we passed by little shops with iron bars on the windows and doors. Islands of rust speckled their flat tin roofs. *Carnicería Santo Domingo*, *Panadería Elena*, McDonald's hamburgers y *papas fritas (más de un billón servidos)*. On the left was the gray moan of the ocean, the angry tide threatening to crash against the bus if it came any closer.

"How long until we reach our stop?" Stacy asked me.

"Another five hours, I think."

"You think that tarp is enough to keep our luggage dry?"

"No."

Stacy was a friend from home. I had lived with her family back in the States, and she insisted on coming with me this time. She returned to her notes, children's songs and games in Spanish that she had collected over the years. I returned to the window, pressing my nose against the cold glass, and watched the steam erase the gray ocean from sight.

After another hour or so, the stores on the right became sparser, separated by sugarcane fields and large tracks of boulders.

The ads in the airport had been deceiving, but then again, I had already known they would be. Large luxurious hotels with four pools, three parking garages, and a tall brunette in heels who brought orange juice and cereal to your bed each morning with a bleached-white smile. Maybe those places existed somewhere, but not here.

"I hope you enjoy your stay in the Dominican Republic," a lady attendant at the information booth had said to me with a practiced American accent as she handed over our bus passes. "C-12 to *Los Robles* will arrive shortly."

Stacy had been looking at the ads on the airport walls of different resorts and local brands of rum. The walls were white, clean, and the attendants wore white button-down shirts with blue blazers and slacks. "It's like a little America," Stacy said to me. Then the lights went out. She looked up. "What happened?"

The information attendant didn't have an answer.

"Power outage," I said. "It won't last long. Dominicans shut down their power plants from time to time." I slipped the passes into my backpack. "Better get used to it, I guess." The sky was just beginning to churn as I tossed our bags into the bed of the truck that was to accompany the bus to *Los Robles*. The bus had a sheet of yellow legal

paper taped to the window that read "C-12" in black marker, and the words "Children of the Nations" were painted on its side. There were no other buses in the dank parking lot.

Hours later, I backed off the window on the bus and rubbed the cold from my nose.

"Which song should we teach the team?" Stacy asked. "I think a lot of them only speak English."

"*Más Amor*," I said. "It's simple enough."

"Such an adult song. I was thinking about something they could use with the kids. How about '*Cristo me Ama*'?"

"We're working with teenagers, mostly. They don't want to sing 'Jesus Loves Me'."

"Not everyone will be working with teenagers."

"It doesn't matter to me. Whatever song you want."

"Okay, but you'll have to do the teaching." She was flipping through her notebook, the spiral one with different colored loose papers folded and inserted into random pages. "I'm not good at that kind of stuff."

"No problem." I stuck my forehead to the window again, and glanced at the girl sitting behind us, the same blonde girl who had sat behind us on the airplane. She was reading a magazine. Flipped a page. "Hey," I said, stealing her attention from *La Vida Dominicana*. "Natasha, right?"

"Yes!" She smiled at me. "And you're Gavin. Gavin Lee Cross. From the plane."

It was the first time I noticed the freckles dusting her cheeks.

"Yeah. Do you have anything I can read?"

"Sure!" she held out her copy of *La Vida*.

I started to open the magazine, and then turned back to her. "But weren't you just reading this?"

"Oh, I don't know Spanish. Lots of great pictures though."

"Oh, okay."

"I have this dictionary with me, but who's gonna look up every word in a dictionary."

"Right."

"I speak French. Lots of similarities. I can understand some of the words."

"Okay." I nodded.

She was silent for a moment and then brought her backpack up from the floor. "But I guess I'll let you get to reading." She pulled another magazine from the bag. *Corazón del Sol*.

For a moment, I was intrigued by her hunger for a fresh conversation. She was like me, stuck in something too familiar, begging for an escape. Maybe she would find it in the magazines that she couldn't read. Maybe I would find it in her. With Stacy, I had been stuck in a reflection of life back home, of what I wanted to forget, and even though I didn't realize it just then, I was desperate for a new face, a new interaction. I should have said something then. I should have asked her

which Spanish words looked like French ones. I should have told her how soft and smooth her skin looked, but I sat back in my seat and glanced at Stacy before burying myself in the magazine.

A small sign of rotten wooden planks and hard, chipped paint welcomed us to *Los Robles* that night. Our bus was already emptied of all but the few of us who had come to work in the small Haitian bate village as volunteers. The rain had stopped, but streams of mud spilled underneath the bus. Dozens of tin slab homes zigzagged along the grass, and glassy drops of water dripped from the oaks.

People stepped out of their homes at the sound of the bus. Mostly children. The older ones waved, but the younger ones jumped out and ran after us with sunny smiles.

We soon reached the end of the village, where the missions team had built rooms for volunteers to stay in. The missions director, Jorge, came out of one of the rooms when we got off the bus. The ocean waves crashed nearby as I grabbed mine and Stacy's bags from the back of the truck. Stacy took hers and waved at me before Jorge took her and Natasha to their room. Natasha had come from the same mission organization in Tennessee that we had. Not incredibly uncommon, as it turned out. After they left, children squeezed in around me, laughing and reaching for my hands. I smiled and picked up one of the boys.

"¿Cómo te llamas?" I said. He didn't respond. He just stared at me behind crystal brown eyes, his tiny fist in his mouth.

"Gavin," Jorge called.

I set the boy down and patted his back before picking up my bag. But before I turned to answer, I locked eyes with another boy, a teenager. He was leaning in the shadows of one of the trees with a muddy baseball in his hand, staring at me. A gray stare. No emotion.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. "*Su alojamiento*," Jorge said. I followed him to my room as the moon began to peek through the clouds.

It was daytime on our third day at *Los Robles*, and I was on a water break from craft time with the younger kids. We had told them to draw pictures of what they wanted to be when they grew up. They all drew flowers. Under the pavilion, the teenage girls sang a song I couldn't catch the lyrics to, clapping their hands. The boys walked to the baseball field with gloves, balls, and bats in hand. And little children chased a flock of chickens down the mushy path, a mother scolding them from behind. The people here were beautiful. Dark, moist skin that soaked the light of the sun like a sponge, and silver smiles full of vigor and youth.

I turned and walked back to my room. It was unlocked. They told us not to let that happen, but I could never remember. Inside, a teenage boy sat on the floor, one of my granola bars half-eaten in his hand. It was the same boy from the first night. The one in the shadows of the

tree. He stood up stiff and stared at me without moving.

"*What are you doing?*" I asked in Spanish.

He didn't respond. I walked over to him and looked at which flavor he had stolen. Chocolate, the worst kind. I started digging through my bag. Once I found what I was looking for, I pulled it out. Strawberry. I handed it to the boy. "*This one's better. I promise.*"

His eyes frowned as he stared at the bar.

"*Here, take it. It's okay.*"

"*Why?*"

"*I don't need it,*" I said.

"*But I stole from you.*"

"*What's your name?*"

"*Estalin.*"

"*Nice to meet you, Estalin. I'm Gavin.*"

"*And you're not mad at me?*"

"*Not unless you don't eat this. You really need to.*"

I saw the first signs of a smile on his face as he took the bar and ran out the door. He wouldn't steal from me again, but I didn't care if he did. I had made a friend.

Stacy was crying. This was the first time in the five days we'd been here. And I had thought things were going so well.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I miss your brother, too." My heart silently trembled at the memory. His name couldn't find itself on my lips, in my mind. I stood over her as she crouched on the dusty tweed sofa. Her room was dark and windowless, with fewer cracks in the stucco than mine.

"But you don't understand," she said.

I smelled potting soil. Realized it was the sofa, and I knelt on the floor. Placed a hand on her knee. I really wanted to understand. The way she understood, though part of me knew I already did. "What happened?" I asked. *Los Robles* was such a stunning place full of beautiful people. It was enough to forget home for a while, to forget what had happened to him. To move on.

But Stacy couldn't forget. "That boy you were talking to earlier?"

"Estalin?"

"That's the one," she said. "Earlier today. And at first, it was okay. He was very nice. Kind of shy. Energetic, too. But then when he coughed, he beat his chest. With his fist. And I know a lot of people do that, but it reminded me so much of Justin."

"Estalin did do that."

"But the hardest part was I was so excited about it. I was thinking how great it would be when I got home and could tell Justin about it. And then I remembered, and..." Her speech faltered with her tears, and I sat down beside her. The couch made a rusty squeak as I sank into the tweed.

Stacy's brother had been dead over a year now. The last time I talked with him was before he left for culinary school in Los Angeles. We were home alone, and he was feeding the snake.

"I'm glad you're here, Gavin," he had said. "It'll make me feel better when I leave for school."

"How so?" I laughed.

"Because I know you'll take care of Stacy."

"Well, I don't know. She's kind of a handful. Might be asking a lot."

He opened the lid on the snake's cage and turned to face me. "Can you promise me you will?"

He left for Los Angeles in August. Stayed by himself in a house his family found near Seal Beach. It wasn't until Christmas that he got sick. So sudden, too. It was days before we knew he was dead.

From across the room, I looked into his eyes, seeing the fear for the first time, and my heart melted. "Yeah, of course I will."

He smiled. "I knew you would. Now hand me one of those rats."

"And he likes to play baseball, too," Stacy continued. "You know how crazy Justin was about baseball."

"Yeah, but everyone here plays baseball."

"I don't know. I just need some time to think. Maybe you should leave." She stopped crying and looked up at the door. I turned to look, but no one was there.

A silence leaked from the walls as I walked out of the room.

Natasha insisted on spending a lot of time with me. I didn't mind. She kept my mind off things, and she was incredibly intriguing in a backyard schoolgirl kind of way.

"Everything is beautiful here," she said. I couldn't help noticing how she looked at me when she said it. "Yesterday, there was a little girl with pretty braids in her hair, like coarse rope. She walked up to me and grabbed hold of my hand. She had the tiniest arms, but grabbed on hard, like she was afraid I was gonna float up into the sky like a balloon or something."

She stopped suddenly, her eyes holding mine, as if she saw something fresh in them, something that perhaps she'd been waiting for. We looked out over the ocean and said nothing more as the smell of wet mulberry and lime drifted to our lips.

"*You're leaving soon, aren't you?*" Estalin asked as he sat beside me at the pavilion. "*For America?*"

"Yes."

His smile faded.

"*But I'm not going to forget you guys,*" I said. "*I have a good memory. Don't worry about that.*"

He looked down.

"What is it?"

"You don't understand," he said. "Haitians are nobodies here. We don't belong." His eyes darted in several directions as he searched for the words. "No one likes us. They're even afraid to touch us." He surveyed my face for a while before apparently deciding to go on. "And then you come along, and you hang out with us like we belong. You give us gifts, watch our baseball games, and listen when we need someone to talk to. And then when you say goodbye, you give us hugs. Hugs! And you just don't know. Maybe where you come from that's not a big deal, but it means a lot to us. To me." And then he coughed, and when he did, something extraordinary happened. He hit his chest with his fist. Like Justin.

Stacy was right. I had made a friend in Estalin. And tomorrow, he would be gone, along with all the other friends I had made here. Gone, like Justin.

"Maybe you could take me with you?" Estalin smiled. "On the plane?" I laughed. "I really wish I could."

And then he hugged me. Tight. And I was reminded of what Natasha had said about that little girl with the coarse-rope hair. How she had held on so tight, as if she were afraid that Natasha would float off like a balloon.

And then, an image from home came to my mind, the first one in days. At a church on Middle Valley Road, I once saw a sketch of a little girl with an old dress that was blowing in the wind. She was crying, her hand stretched toward a heart-shaped balloon that was floating away. The caption read "I want to be loved."

Estalin walked off, and I ran to the outhouse and cried.

We didn't take bus C-12 back to the airport. The one we took instead was blue, the floor sticky and smelling of donuts and Hamburger Helper. The hot sun was high in the sky, piercing jagged lines through the glass, slicing against our necks.

"You gonna make Natasha sit by herself?" Stacy asked as I sat down beside her.

"I just need to talk to you for a moment."

"Talk."

"You were right about Estalin," I said.

"Yeah?" Her skin was pale, showing no signs of the Dominican sun.

"I don't want to forget anymore," I said.

Her eyes were on mine, but she was no longer looking at me. For the first time since her brother died, we understood one another perfectly, and without words, she told me that she felt the same way. It was written on her face, in her warm blue expression. *Me neither*, it said. Her heavy eyes shimmered in the heat as she took my hand in hers. "But I'm glad you're here, Gavin. It'll make me feel better when we get home."

I didn't say anything for a while. I didn't need to. "Will you be alright?"

"Yeah."

"Good."

She let go of my hand, and slipped a journal out from under her seat. "Rachel's coming to sit with me as soon as you leave. She wants me to teach her some Spanish. It's a lost cause, but at least it'll give me something to do."

I looked back at Rachel, who was waiting for me to move, and I smiled.

"Well, get out of her seat," Stacy said.

I got up and took gentle breaths as I moved to the empty seat next to Natasha. I was ready to move on, and perhaps she would help me. When I sat down, she had already fallen asleep against the window, the steam from her breath erasing the gray ocean from sight.

- Stephen Bush: Personal Website

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**MATT
HAINES**

HOTEL LE CIRQUE
(NEW ORLEANS 2008)

An architect saw the way
I bend myself around her smile
And built up this place
in white.

The men who shake their
cups of coins
have lost their language,
and cannot pray.
They are sparrows
hopping around for something
they can taste.

Everything in this perfect circle
is shaded by fronds of stone.
Multicolored lights flash through
my window in lines

and I can hear the heartbeat of the streetcar.

108

**BRYCE LEE
WYNN**

HALO
(Fiction)

Craig licked and ran his thumb over the wiggling toddler's chin, wiping away remnants of cinnamon and sugar. He sat the tiny spoon with the teddy bear handle into the half-eaten bowl of oatmeal and hoisted the child from her highchair. She squealed and talked in her indecipherable baby speak, each word punctuated with spit bubbles and flecks of oatmeal. He did the *jiggle thing* that every parent learned early on and ran his thick fingers through her thin, light-brown hair.

"It's nappy time, Hannah," he told her. "That way Daddy can get some writing done." She began to cry and fidget and he hugged her pillowy body close to his own as he moved around the kitchen. Looking up, he saw Rose enter the room, the thick heels of her leather, zip-up boots clacking against the tile floor, her auburn hair pulled back into a severe ponytail and dressed in a black, knee-length skirt and a red turtleneck sweater. "There's Mommy." He held her arm up and waved it. "Say Good Morning, Mommy."

Rose slammed her leather attaché case down on the kitchen table, popped the latches and pulled it open. She flipped through its contents until she found what she needed. "I need you to pick up the dry cleaning by four." She handed him a manila envelope. "Here's the check for the rent and for the utilities. It's due by five. We're also out of milk and diapers so you'll need to pick some up. I've transferred over some money into the household account so please don't go over like last time. I have a meeting at five so that should put me back here around 7:30." She closed and locked the attaché case and picked it up.

"You coming home for lunch?" he asked, setting the envelope down on the counter next to the coffee maker.

"I'm meeting a buyer outside of town at noon so I'll just grab something quick. By the way, if you should call the office and I'm not in, please *do not* leave a message with the receptionist. She's extremely incompetent and, frankly, I would prefer you not to call 'les it's an absolute emergency." She looked down at her watch and frowned, the three lines across her forehead becoming tight and pronounced, her painted lips practically nonexistent. "I'm late and traffic's gonna be hell. Bye." She snatched her car keys off of the counter and *clack-clacked* out of the room.

It was half past nine when he heard Rose's keys in the lock. Prime rib, steamed broccoli, and mashed red potatoes had long been thrown into the trash; the pots, pans, and utensils had been washed and returned to their cabinets and drawers; and the tiny vein running along the side of Craig's face pulsed rapidly in time with a heart of the verge of meltdown. She came through the door, flicked on the light in the

front room, and tossed her attaché case onto the chaise. Looking up, startled, she found him standing in the doorway to the kitchen. She slipped off her fur-trimmed coat and draped it over the back of the couch before moving over to where he was standing.

“You remember to pick up the dry-cleaning?” she asked, leaning over to unzip her left boot. “I need one of the blouses for a presentation tomorrow.” She kicked the boot from her foot.

Several seconds elapsed before Craig answered. “You’re standing there asking me about fucking dry-cleaning?”

“Excuse me? Craig-.”

“Craig, what? What you got to say, *Rose*?” His nostrils flared.

She folded her arms across her chest, eyes squinted in examination. “You been drinking?”

“You hungry?”

“Am I hungry?”

“There’s food in the garbage if you’re hungry. Do you even give a shit that I spent the last two hours waiting for you to get in?”

“Look, I told you I would be in at-.”

“7:30,” he cut her off. “So to answer your question, I picked up your goddamned dry-cleaning; I went to the grocery store to pick up the diapers and the milk; and you know what, I used one of *my* checks from *my* bank account to pay the fucking rent.”

“I swear to god, Craig.” Rose’s voice matched his in loudness and emotion. “How dare you get pissed at me for asking you to do something that you have more than enough time to do. I work all day long and last time I checked, it’s *my* money that’s paying the goddamned bills. Now I’m not gonna feel bad for asking you to get off your ass and run some freakin’ errands.”

“Off my ass? Not only do I work hard but I run this household and I take care of our daughter. I try so fucking hard to be perfect for you, Rose. So fucking hard.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “Where’s Hannah?”

“Across the hall.”

“You left her with Mrs. Lemley, *again*?”

Craig cleared his throat, his body shaking. “Forgive me, Rose, for wanting to spend the evening with my wife.”

Rose threw her hands up and turned to face the front door. “I can’t deal with this right now. Got too much shit to do. I’ll go get her.”

Craig watched as the door slammed shut behind her, his body warm and trembling. The anger emitting from the two of them had sucked all of the air out of the room, making it hard for him to breathe. He braced himself in the doorway, squeezing his eyes closed. He could hear Mrs. Lemley’s door open and her and Rose exchanging pleasantries. Craig turned around, stormed through the kitchen, and made his way back to his office.

- Jean t: Chatter Box (need documentation)

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**TRENNA
SHARPE**

I WANT TO TELL YOU

There was nothing we could do
but watch our parents sweat in the dirt,
looking for something beautiful to hold
each other in because they couldn't
do it themselves.

There was nothing we could do but follow
when it didn't work.

I want to tell you, little brother,
don't lock your doors to hold in memory
or leave them open because you have none.

The only love worth waiting for
was stolen from your doorstep years ago.

I hear it every time the door moves.

- Tara Harris: We Knew Where This Was Going
(need proper documentation)

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