



2015-2016

**-TRILLIUM-**



# Trillium

***2015-2016***

Established in 1971, *Trillium* has been Ramapo College's literary and art magazine for the majority of the past 45 years. Staffed by students, *Trillium* features the poetry, prose, and visual art of Ramapo College community. The magazine is published every spring and is available across campus, free of charge.

*Trillium* can be viewed online:  
<http://www.ramapo.edu/trillium/>

## **RAMAPO COLLEGE**

Established in 1969, Ramapo College offers bachelor's degrees in the arts, business, humanities, social sciences and the sciences, as well as in professional studies, which include nursing and social work. In addition, Ramapo College offers courses leading to teacher certification at the elementary and secondary levels. The College also offers six graduate programs as well as articulated programs with Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New York Chiropractic College, New York University College of Dentistry, SUNY State College of Optometry and New York College of Podiatric Medicine.

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# STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

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Each year, *Trillium* is produced in an effort to highlight the artistic achievements of the creative community at Ramapo College. We pride ourselves on the high-quality work featured in this year's edition and hope to convey the variety of voices present amongst our peers.

## DEDICATION

We dedicate this edition to Professors Ed and Kathleen Shannon, two Ramapo students-turned-professors who have been involved with *Trillium* since 1987. Both Shannons were faculty advisers for the magazine; this will be the first edition in over eight years to be published without a Shannon's direction. Thanks for all you do, and keep on truckin'.







# BIRDHOUSE

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*Hayley van Hoek*

When I asked the nurse for purple paint  
she looked at me as if my life  
was an annoyance to her, like she wished  
the sleeping pills had killed me long  
before the tube could be shoved down my throat.

But for the first time I did not agree—  
I did not want to be dead, just alive long  
enough to paint the miniature birdhouse  
purple, turning an exercise into  
a tribute, something greater than myself.

I made sure to get paint all over my fingers—  
I know now that a good painter  
always gets paint on their hands,  
the same way a good life makes itself messy.

When I tell my mother I want  
to lay the purple birdhouse at the grave,  
she looks at me like my whole life  
has been nothing but an attempt to get back  
to those I love. And maybe she's right,

but for now I kiss the roof of the house  
and place it down on the damp soil  
in front of the heart-shaped marble.

# ASTROMECHANICS

---



*Ben Reinhardt*

The only astronaut to come out of Fort Shanks, Mississippi worked at Darrel's Discount, fittin shoes onto pregnant women and little kids. Gail called it a necessary evil, cause NASA didn't want anything to do with her, but Darrel was willin to give her twelve dollars an hour to do nothin except open in the morning, lock when she left, and see to the three or four customers they got a day. That kept her comfortable enough, and the rest of that time she spent drawin stuff out, jottin numbers, and watchin the weather channel to track forecasts and cloud patterns. Truthful, I wouldn't have ever known about her if she hadn't come into my shop one day asking how much 18-wheeler engines go for new and if I could get em for her.

"Sure, I can get em," I said. "Can't store em anywhere, but get em, yeah. Thing is, unless you come from serious money, ain't no way you're gonna be able to *pay* for em."

That didn't bother her. She wrote down my name in this little notebook and asked me to keep my eyes peeled for any good deals. I told her I'd watch out for wrecks on the sides of the highway. I figured she was drunk or tryin to start a truckin business, and since both those kinds of people are crazy as gnats in June I was happy just to see her walk out without any problems. But, man, she was back next week askin about em again. I hadn't seen any abandoned shells or nothin, and unless she struck the lottery she still wasn't gonna get em new. Still, she kept on

and on about those engines, askin how much they weigh, how much gas they use, they made of iron or steel or what?

And when I said everything I knew bout those engines, she wanted to know if I could get her big slabs of metal. Car doors and roofs and whatever. I said, "Sure, probably. There's some junkers in the back I've been too lazy to deal with. Might actually be able to afford that stuff."

I must've seen that girl ten times over the next two weeks, until eventually I *had* to ask what the hell she needed all these parts for.

"Buildin a rocket," she said.

"Oh, uh huh? A rocket."

" 'S right. Straight to the moon. Boom."

"Ain't shit up there."

Said she was buildin it anyway. Even better if there wasn't shit up there. More room for her.

That whole month she swarmed my shop. Never causin any problems, just askin a lot of questions. It was alright havin the company, I guess, but I wasn't really lookin to help her out. She was nice and all, but no reason to go out of my way to get a buncha crazy parts just to let em rot in the backyard.

One day in August, though, cross my heart, a guy brought me his old big rig. The thing sounded awful, looked awful, but it ran. Guy wanted

five thousand. I talked him down to 3,800. Even in bad shape, they're worth a lot to the right people. I'd make back the money I spent and then some. But when Gail came by, she thought I found the truck just for her.

"Hell no," I said. "I'm gonna get bank off this pile. You can't have it for no backass science project."

She was persistent though, man. She was gonna give me her paychecks for a year, gonna sweep the shop every day. Crazy stuff. And it was only the one engine, not even the two like she wanted. I told her to give up on that rocket trip. Them things got like ten million horsepower. That truck in the yard had like four hundred. Even if she got that engine, wasn't gonna get her over the power lines. But Gail still wanted it. Came every day to make sure I hadn't sold it, til eventually I said, "Man, fine. You can have the engine. You're floatin around it so often, people'll think it's already yours and they're not comin in to buy it."

I ripped that engine out and hooked it onto the tow truck, and we drove it back to her place. She had this sorta dumpy trailer with a big dent in the side and the wheels were gone, so it wasn't even a mobile home no more. At least she had some land to keep it on. Gail had me drive the engine behind the house and put it next to a heap of trash. Pipes and fins and cones and things like that. Who knows where she got em. Didn't look like anything from my shop, but hell, coulda been. She'd been comin around so long, I forgot she was there half the time. Coulda walked out with a Chevy and I'da let her go.

"You gonna build a rocket with this junk?" I asked.

“It’s only junk til you put it together. Then they’re components. You want a drink? Dragged you all the way out here, should at least give you a drink.”

We went inside and she gave me a plastic bottle of iced tea out of the fridge. You know, that trailer was pretty small from the outside, but the inside was like bein in an Aspirin bottle. There were books everywhere, man. On the bed, in the sink, shoved in the cabinets. And where there weren’t books, there were charts and drawings and a picture of the stars. I picked up this book named *Astromechanics*, or somethin like that.

“You really read all this?”

“Every one,” she said, writin somethin down on a notepad. “Some of em twice, three times.”

I laughed. “Shit. I can’t even read *Huck Finn* again. And I liked that one.”

“Think you’ll find me another engine?”

“Maybe. And I’m not goin out huntin for em either. I’ll let you know if one shows up. And then you pay me for *both*.”

But Gail stopped comin around after I gave her the engine, and I kept thinkin that she might rootin around at someone else’s shop, maybe gettin ripped off or bein given crap parts. I mean, the rocket was a stupid idea, but at least give her solid pieces to play with, you know? It just bugged me. So I went out one day to this junkyard close by and managed to dig out a decent second engine. Wasn’t the same make, but the same power, and I towed it over that day. By then, Gail’d put some of the

pieces together. The... fuel lines, I think, and some wired up boards. The rocket was bones, man, bones, but you could almost sorta see it if you imagined real hard. You shoulda seen her face when I brought over that second engine. You'd think Christmas came early and Santa brought the whole sleigh into the living room.

After that... I don't know, man. I just couldn't get her out of my head. Every time a junker came in or a car showed up with a torn off fender, it looked like rocket parts. So I started goin over to Gail's place more and more, bringin over sidewalls and chassis and tires. Did rockets even need rubber? Hell if I knew. Just figured in case, you know?

Took... man... two years to build that damn thing. Ugly as sin when it was done, like a thin, patchy football, but tall as a skyscraper. Lookin at it though made you feel like it might just reach the moon, cause it looked like it was halfway there already. Somewhere inside were two souped-up 18-wheeler engines, and even though I never read *Astromechanics*, I felt like one.

"You leavin today?" I asked her.

"Nah. Clouds are bad. Forecast says Wednesday might be alright."

"What time?"

"Nine in the morning, give or take. Should be okay then."

"I'll be there."

When the day came, I drove over and found Gail with her finger in the

air, checking the wind. “Pulling northeast,” she said. And the clouds were heavier than she expected. Still, she said she was goin anyway.

She’d made this suit out of this shiny, white material. No idea what it was, but she said it’d protect her from the heat and cold. I helped her strap some oxygen tanks to her back, then run hoses from both through the suit into her helmet. When the air started flowin, she gave me a thumbs up. We lifted a hatch, screwed off some caps, and made sure the fuel tanks were topped off with diesel. I held the ladder for her, and she climbed it into the cockpit.

She shouted down, “I never paid you for the engines.”

I told her to get me when she was a famous astronaut.

Gail slammed the hatch and I stood back. Man, when those thrusters kicked on... like nothin you’ve ever seen. Just fire, man, fire, blowin out the bottom. At first, it didn’t seem like the thing was gonna lift, but sure enough the rocket pushed itself off the ground. Big as it was, a lot of it was aluminum, which is pretty light, so I guess I shouldn’ta been surprised two engines big as those could get it up.

Gail was right. Wind was pullin hard to the northeast, and that rocket didn’t fly so straight. It sorta curved out over the trees. I chased it for a while, but I couldn’t make it past this one hill cause of my damn knee. That thing was just gone, man. Just way gone.

Bout a week ago, I was huntin back by where Gail used to live, back behind those trees. Even made it over that hill. There’s a big river back

there, turns out, with a lot of slopes and mud and stuff. I walked careful, but I tripped anyway on this black thing stickin out of the ground. Pulled it out. Took a little to figure out what it was, but I think it's called a fuselage. And a ways away from that was a fin banged out of a sedan door. You could still see the handle. There was nothin else, though. Just the mud and slopes and the river.

A lot of stuff falls off when a rocket takes off, I figure. It's goin pretty fast, and it gets pretty hot. Gail probably made it to the moon. She read all those books more than once, and I gave her the best parts I could find. Plus, diesel gets pretty good mileage.



# MASTERPIECE

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*Kristen Shea*

I painted a picture of you  
but forgot to let the colors dry  
before I hung it up.  
They're running down the paper,  
covering the floor with muddled swirls,  
a face I used to love.

I swear I did my best.  
I wanted it to be good enough  
for you to frame and put  
above your bed.  
You would look at it, smile,  
and I'd be the last thing  
you thought of  
as your eyes slowly  
shut with sleep.

But I know you'll politely  
say thank you and kiss me  
on the cheek as you  
drop it in the trash.  
And I'll do nothing  
except think about how  
you used to love messes.

# GRINDER



*Brendan Payraudeau*

I already miss nagging you  
pretending to be mad about the ring stains and spills from cups half-  
filled.

Every night I want to count your teeth with my tongue  
so I can remember the bits of you I'll forget, the edges  
that erode like sea glass. The past will play out again, probably,  
a record skipping, shrieking while I try to find the beat. Tell me  
I'm wrong, or at least let's pretend we aren't waves beating the shore  
just to be dragged out again, again, again; that we aren't grinders  
just grinding finer and finer.

# BITTEN



*Ryan Johnson*

Right now, life and death lie in the space between the length of needle between Thomas' hind leg and the glittering substance that a mere push of thumb would inject into his body and rob him of his life.

Animals have that innocent air to them that comes with the inability to formulate complex language and thought patterns. That's why as human beings we find it so easy to flock to their cause. Save the whales. Prohibit poaching on the African plains. That look of disgust that comes with seeing pictures of tools created from the tusks and feet of elephants. The one dollar that leaves your pocket every day to help preserve the habitat of the panda bear. We protect them more than we protect our own.

But it's a double edged sword, that idea of ignorance and defenselessness at the hands of the plague of mankind. Where their appearance of peaceful coexistence and basic needs has led in many ways to their protection, it also justifies placing them below ourselves.

*He's only an animal, Alex! Look what he did to our son! Do you really want that beast living in our house!?*

But as I look into those big brown eyes, it's like Thomas knows of his impending death. He winces as the needle is buried deeper into his hind leg, yelps a little in his throat, but remains mostly still as I stroke his head. I run my hand gradually down to under his chin where I scratch ever so softly, hitting just the right spot. I know because his eyelids start

to droop and a thin smile, however nervous, forms on the edges of his mouth.

This is not where I thought I'd find myself tonight. I expected I'd come home from work to cold dinner and my magazine waiting for me with today's mail. I've seen ambulances and police cars fly down the streets in my suburban neighborhood, blurs of metal and flashing blue and red lights. Superstitiously, as if it somehow helped, I'd do the sign of the Cross and hope that everyone was alright. It was a totally different experience seeing those lights, flashing, stationary, on the side of the road in front of my driveway.

I got out of the car so fast that I forgot to put the car in park. It rolled down the street slowly before I jumped back in, put it in park but left the keys inside. Nobody really knows for certain what happened exactly. My wife was doing the wash, my daughter Lila was watching the television in the living room. My son was in the playroom downstairs. With Thomas.

I was just in time to see my wife, who was in hysterics, following two first responders, carrying my son on a stretcher five times too big for him. His face was mummy wrapped in bandages and the blood soaked through however many layers they had applied. If he was conscious or not I couldn't tell. He was still, but his eyes were halfway open, like he was taking a nap, so I couldn't tell if he was asleep or just lying still, in shock or something.

I never use my cell phone while driving but I realized, without having to check, who the source of its relentless ringing had been.

“W-what happened?” I said, slurring the two words, as if my tongue was too big for my mouth. A lump was forming in my throat that felt as big as a tennis ball.

“The dog bit him, Alex. Bit his face.” She said, shivering in the mid-summer night’s heat. She didn’t say his name I noticed. The dog. The human names oftentimes assigned to pets are suddenly revoked when they do something unexpected. Something we didn’t want them to do. Something we pushed into our subconscious, knowing they were capable of, but allowing ignorance to take precedence over good judgment. Or are some things just totally unexpected and to live in constant fear and apprehension is pointless because it changes nothing?

“Where is he?” I asked, not calling him by name either.

“In his kennel. Inside.” She said. “I left them alone in the playroom. I heard Damien screaming and...”

Stressful situations have a way of creating gaps in what you hear and don’t hear. Sometimes your ears shut off for a long period of time until something is said that is prone to change everything.

“He needs to be put down, Alex.”

I protested.

“He’s only an animal! Do you want that *beast* who bit your son living in our house!?”

Next thing I knew, I was looking at the playroom floor. The carpet, the

toys, the other assorted baby supplies, along with the blood. Too much blood. A thousand things could have happened. Damien could have pulled his hair. Stepped on him. Hit him. Damien, Damien, Damien, all my blame went to my son and made me immediately ashamed. What about the dog? Thomas. He's just an animal. The *beast that bit your son!*

I went to his kennel and saw him there. There were a few drops of dried blood on his chin, nothing all that new with all the birds and squirrels he'd killed as a pup, but this was the blood of my son. I couldn't muster any malice though in seeing that. He looked so sad in his kennel that was too small for him. He knew he'd messed up. He knew there were consequences, just what they were remained unknown to him. For the moment.

When he saw me, Thomas' tail failed to wag. His jaw failed to drop open and tongue failed to loll in and out of his mouth. He recognized me. This dog I'd fed from my table, fostered among my children... hell, Thomas was my first son. My wife and I did well at raising a dog and proudly decided to have kids of our own. He recognized me. Thomas. But the look of identification in his eyes wasn't the same as before. It was a solemn look. I swear, up to the very table he laid on during the last seconds of his life, he knew what had to happen. While my wife rode in the ambulance to the hospital, I took Thomas on the last car ride of his 5 years of life (35 in dog years).

The dog. The animal. My son begins to close his eyes as the drugs begin to take effect. It would be a peaceful death, the vet assures me. Like falling asleep. Falling asleep then dying in your sleep... Thomas. There

is nothing good in the inability to communicate with animals. The road leads to this cold metal table in this too bright room. It leads to it every time. Every fucking time. It's reflected in our books and film as well as reality.

He could tell me why he did it. He could. Thomas. He's smart. There had to be some combination of tricks, something we could have taught him in those 5 years he was ours, for him to tell us why he did what he did. But my son, the baby boy, takes precedence every time. Because Thomas is an animal. And Damien is a person. And I believe that. I do or I wouldn't have come here. I would have driven somewhere and given him to a family who would love him more than I ever could. But I can't take that chance. The next time, he could kill someone.

Would Damien even remember? Of course not, he's not even a toddler yet. He could grow to love his furry brother again, as I'm sure Thomas loves him. Hell, when we took Damien home for the first time, Thomas would curl up underneath his crib every night. He'd wake up every time Damien would. He'd follow my wife or me as we'd feed him or rock him back to sleep in our arms, singing lullabies to him ever so softly. Then he'd return to his post under the crib, but only when Damien was laying above him.

When I'd peer under at him every so often I'd see him lying there, sprawled out, chest rising and falling. He'd look very similar to the way he does right now. His chest rising and falling in intervals that become more and more spaced out. As he breathes his last breaths. And dies in front of me.

# THE RED DODGE

---



*Heather De Bel*

Tye wanted to tell Justin. It had bothered her all day.

She told him about how, pulling into the gym entrance that morning, she accidentally cut off a red Dodge sedan. It was an old car, rusted, dent on the side door. He was about to turn into the same parking lot and though he had the right of way, Tye pulled in first. Her windows had been down, music up high. She wasn't paying attention. After a moment of slight embarrassment, Tye circled the lot looking for a place to park. A car was backing out near the gym entrance. She stopped and waited with her blinker on. After the car left, she began to pull in when that red Dodge cut in front of her and took the spot. She had to slam on her brakes to keep from hitting him. She shut her eyes, waiting to hear crunching metal. When she opened them, the guy was closing his car door and swirling his keys at her. He mouthed "nice try, bitch" before walking toward the gym entrance.

Justin licked the foam around the edge of his beer. His eyes narrowed.

"Did he say '*nice* try, bitch' or '*nice* try, *bitch*'?"

"I don't know," she shrugged, "I couldn't really hear him."

"But you're sure he called you a bitch?"

"I'm sure."



Justin shuffled around the kitchen like he was looking for something, slamming cabinet doors, mumbling curses to this unknown man. His posture made Tye uneasy—back stiffened, arms flexed. It was something she was accustomed to. Justin had a tendency to overreact, a tendency that often got him in trouble.

“It’s not that big of a deal,” Tye said, letting her posture slump. She often shrunk to boost his confidence. Justin was on the short side, ‘stocky’ as he put it, with a jaw and build like a pit bull. His height wasn’t something they talked about. She knew not to wear heels, not to wear a bump or a high ponytail in her hair, and certainly not to stand on her toes when they kissed. But it was only sometimes that she avoided giving herself an extra inch.

“What did he look like?”

“I can’t remember.”

Justin put his fists on the table and looked down at her as she sat, “Of course you can’t.”

She paused.

“Actually, he was tall... white middle aged man, average looking.”

“Tall?”

“Yes, tall.”

“How tall?”

“I don’t know. That’s just how he stood out. He was tall.”

She would never say so but his anger excited her, the restlessness, all that testosterone. It was, to Tye, his most attractive trait. He was quick to protect her, that dog in him always ready to snap. In a way, she thought, his temper was a display of passion and this passion was a display of love. She let him pace the room a few more times.

“It’s no big deal,” she said again.

He chugged his beer down in one long sip, squeezing his eyes shut as he swallowed. When he opened them he looked at Tye. Justin sighed and his face calmed. He sat on the stool and put one leg up on a rung. Back slouching, he stared at the floor. Tye, feeling a little guilty, sat at his feet and leaned her head on his knees. Justin ran his fingers through her hair. They sat there like that, in a calm silence.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You’re right, it is no big deal.”

She rubbed her cheek against his leg.

“Besides,” he added, “You probably heard him wrong.”

She looked up at Justin and gave him a hard look.

“Actually,” Tye said, “It was ‘nice *try*, bitch.’”

Justin avoided the gym. He told her he didn't want to risk seeing the man in the red Dodge. He might lose his temper and there was no telling what would happen. Tye was bored of his empty threats and went without him. She didn't mind. She enjoyed working out alone.

Eventually Justin, swearing he was over it, went one Monday morning with Tye to the gym. And as they were driving around the parking lot, a red Dodge passed. Justin stiffened, gripping the wheel tighter with one hand. "Is that him?"

Tye noticed the crumpled door. "Yep," she said leaning forward, lifting her head, "that's him."

Justin, in his oversized truck, followed the man until he parked. The man hopped out of the car. Justin sat up taller and pretended to look for a spot. The man didn't pay much attention to them, just walked to the gym entrance, swirling his keys.

"I thought you were over it?"

"You were wrong Tye, he's not that tall."

She reached over and wrapped her hand around his, pulling it to her chest. Perhaps if he felt her, knew that she was beside him, he would forget about it. She didn't want Justin following the man. She imagined a confrontation, some pushing, the cops called, the end of her gym membership.

"Justin, what are you thinking?"

He didn't notice, so she shook his hand.

“Justin?”

“I’m thinking he has nice rims.”

Justin pulled his truck in front of the cars next to the Dodge. He took his hand from her grip and jumped out, leaving her in the truck. She looked around and saw that no one was in the parking lot. She felt nervous and unsure of what to do. The truck bounced. She turned around and watched Justin in the bed of the truck, rummaging through his tool box. He took out his tie down strap and wrapped it around his forearm. Then, he jumped over the side and walked behind the truck. Tye opened the back window and leaned out for a better look. She watched as Justin hooked the tie down strap to his tow hitch. Then, he hooked the other side of the strap to the Dodge’s rim and loosened the bolts. With the ratchet, he cranked until the strap was taut. Despite her uneasiness, she felt a sudden thrilling flutter. She suppressed a smile.

After some time, he came back into the truck, on edge. Justin gripped one fist with the other, like he was trying to crack his knuckles. Her heart pounded. When Tye looked at Justin she noticed he looked older, stronger, and though she was scared, she realized she loved him. She loved this. She would never tell anyone; she would protect him the way he protected her. He was about to put the truck in drive.

She stared at him. The car was still in park.

She waited.

“Should I do it?” he asked.

“What?”

“Aren’t you going to tell me not to do this?”

“What? You’re not going to do it?”

He paused and looked away, shaking his head, “Fuck it. I’m not doing it. I don’t want to go to jail for some tall circus freak asshole.”

“He called me a bitch.”

“Maybe you’re thinking of something else. Probably mixing up memories. Maybe just hearing things?”

Tye took a breath, loosened her grip.

Still waiting, she glared at him. He was no longer a man who would protect her or a man who loved her. She realized he was a cornered dog baring his teeth, afraid to bite.

“I’ll go put your shit back in the bed of your truck.”

She jumped out before he responded and walked over to the tie down strap. It was taut, bright yellow, pulling on the man’s rim. She looked over at Justin through the window; he was crouched in the driver’s seat, hiding.

She leaned down and loosened the strap, but she didn’t remove it. She left it lying on the cement, one hook still on the tow hitch and one still on the Dodge’s rim. She hopped back into the truck.

“I put the strap in the bed. Just get out of here,” she said.

“Let’s hope no one saw this, we can get back at him another day.”

“Whatever. Hurry up.”

Justin peeled away, burning rubber as he usually did. It was only a moment before the strap lifted and tightened. Justin flinched when the truck felt a hard jolt.

“What the hell—”

Tye didn’t respond. She was watching the rearview mirror, smiling at the rim and tire spinning wildly off the cement.

# THE ARCADE

---



*Brendan Payraudeau*

I bet people watched us in the photo booth,  
spending five dollars to make silly faces  
instead of romantic gestures. I miss you  
most because of the times I kissed you like  
no one was watching in plain view  
on the arcade floor; a little too drunk  
to be in public, just drunk enough  
to make love like we are on the ceiling  
watching ourselves buzz like flies on fruit  
and lick every inch. You taste like the cigarette  
after sex, and smell like the open window  
letting the night in and us out into being  
more between these sheets, more  
than the years spent waiting to meet you  
in quiet penance over lovers who left.  
I'm only this good when no one's watching.

# ODE TO SEA MAMMALS

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*Corbin Hirschhorn*

Jack sat with Jill, drinking wine and eating. “You know, I heard the strangest thing today,” he said, raising his glass and taking a sip.

“Is it about Amanda?” she interjected, sipping as well.

“No—”

“Is she still in the picture?”

“Yes, but, it’s about Allison.” Jack had two dates with Allison before that night, and the last ended swimmingly while the morning after was dreadful. After a night of hand holding and promises, the morning followed with a message that she was incredibly fearful and could not possibly imagine another date—probably ever. Jack was devastated. “She’s gone,” he said.

“I know. Like a hummingbird in October,” and Jill sipped. “You really liked her, didn’t you?”

“No. I mean she’s dead.”

Both drank.

“Most peculiar thing I’ve ever heard,” he began, holding onto his wine just in case. “Joe told me she went on a whale watching boat just the other day. That was supposed to be our next date.” He sipped. “I told her



it was ridiculous because I never see anything on those, but she insisted she always did. I only see dolphins.” He sipped. “They predicted heavy storms that day, and most of the boats didn’t sail.” She sipped. “And though the rain didn’t come, they said the swell would bring them to the surface—the whales. But lo, the ocean rose further, and whether it was weather, whale, or dolphin, the boat sank to the bottom with everyone on it.”

Both sipped.

“Thank God you weren’t with her,” blurted Jill.

“Why?”

“Because it must not have worked for a reason. Nothing worth sinking over.”

“But is it so bad to sink with someone? Given you don’t know? After all, how do we...” he trailed and sipped.

She sipped. “You really liked her, didn’t you?”

“Only the way her hair seemed longer on one side than the other. And how she held her glass by the stem.” They sipped. “And she hated Thai food.”

“But she saw whales when you see dolphins,” Jill spoke.

“And you see hummingbirds...”

“And?”

“A whale by any other name,” he said, “would most likely be a dolphin.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“You’re right,” Jack conceded. “But what do we do this for, then?”

“I think it’s a brother-sister thing.”

“But we’re not—”

“Everybody needs that figure in their life.”

“Oh. I guess I like that.”

Both drank, Jill’s hands on her cup, Jack’s on his stem. He would not go whale watching, but he would remember her for a long time—fantasies of a world without Thai and a life of daintily held glasses. In his mind, she swam. And that may have been enough of a sentiment, but to where? An island where things are enough the same but ever so slightly different, perhaps. Maybe a place where she would not have to choose between the song of a Siren or a Nereid to sing to lonely seamen, reticent Calypso. Perhaps better just down deep in the ocean, where Jack couldn’t imagine any likeness—where sounds travel far and gravity is less heavying.

He sipped. “Oh, and I saw Ashley today.”

# KID'S PARK

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*Yancarlo Rivera*

I walk along the path through swing  
sets and basketball courts, and oak trees  
that seem older, rougher, drooling sap  
that covers the squirrel's scratch marks.

I remember him standing here as  
I kicked ball after ball, his wide  
stance, hands like two great fans.

Contorting into positions that now breathe  
of grimaced smiles, a rub of doughy knees  
from hands shrunken like old leather  
by plaster and paint and sanding machines.

I'll leave and forget  
I've ever been here.

# CUCKOO



*Kenny Moncayo*

I'm too young for adults to listen to me. They would ask for proof. They always ask for proof. Those serious adults with their closed minds like a sprung trap. My Mom never thought much of my Dad's stories. No one did. So I had no other choice.

Are you a serious adult? Will you read on?

Cuckoo can disguise itself and no one can ever tell the difference. Its costumes are kept in a large closet hidden from sight. They are hung carefully on big, big hooks. The hooks need to be big because there are so many. A new victim requires a different body. There are even animal costumes like cats, dogs, and birds. It has fun acting like an animal because it is easier to be let inside your home. Cuckoo has more than two arms and legs because its mom was a huge spider. They can stretch really far like gum to play tricks on people. It was taught how by its father who was a clown. I think Cuckoo doesn't like showing its face. Dad said anyone who wants to see it must follow one of its arms or legs. This next thing is important. Inside the closet are things it plays with like bottles of glue, firecrackers, crayons, thumbtacks, and even a pair of scissors. Those scissors are what Cuckoo likes playing with the most.

"Cuckoo loves his scissors. Snip. Snip. His scissors say. Cut. Cut. They both want to do," Dad told me.

He laughed whenever I said its name wrong. He said, "Mijo, it's Cuco.

Not Cuckoo. Como un pájaro.” He made a funny face, flapped his arms around, and screeched like a bird. Mom always got mad when he told me scary stories about where we came from like La Bruja Ciega de Ambato. A blind, old woman who wanders around the mountains. You know her by the huge scabs covering her eyes, but the worst thing was the small bag she carried around her neck. Kichwa bandits that lived in the mountains would try robbing her because they thought it held money. That’s her trap. She wanders around waiting for them to cross her path. Dad said it gets really dark up there even on the brightest day so there’s no way you can see her face in time.

I laughed the first time he told me the witch story. He pretended he was running really fast, “Mijo, our gente would be like SHIT and run, run, run...” He then jumped over a couch, which made me laugh harder. My stomach hurt so bad I nearly puked. I could feel something rising in my throat. The thought of Mom yelling at us for messing up her carpet held my vomit back.

“It was over for him,” he explained while catching his breath. “You can’t run from La Bruja Ciega. None escape because she would cast a spell causing them to return to the same spot they ran from.” He placed his hands over his face. “The only way she will let you go is if you give up your eyes.”

I think Mom was always listening to his stories too because she rushed in to take me to bed the very second it was over. Never anywhere in the middle. “Don’t tell him that garbage,” she yelled. “He still sleeps with a nightlight.”

I don't know if Mom knew any stories like Dad. Maybe she never knew about Cuckoo. Did she know about something worse? I do remember one thing from her. She kissed me good night, turned on my nightlight and said, "That's why, my love, we say back home: Nunca hablan de monstruos y nunca te encontrarán. Never speak about monsters and they will never find you."

The hallway light stayed on and my door remained opened.

Dad didn't stop from telling me more stories, though. We just had to be smart about where we spoke so Mom wouldn't get mad. For a short time, he wrote down new stories on paper and put them in my bookbag. I loved feeling the weight of my backpack each school day, knowing that among my textbooks, pencil sharpener, and other stuff I needed there were sheets of paper stapled together with a new story written on them. I sat at my desk in school and imagined the jungle our family came from. It was filled with figures which made the Kichwa think twice of taking the roads at night. While they slept, the flying goatsuckers attacked animals in their pens with tongues covered in thorns. The surrounding tall grass was bent down by groups of meat eating pygmies wandering in from the dark edges of our jungle. And a man wearing a noose around his broken neck limped slowly up a pathway leading to our door and knocked.

The story about El Cuco was the first story my Dad heard when he was a kid. Long ago, a Kichwa woman gave birth deep in the jungle by herself, then returned to her village. She left the child behind to die. The woman wanted to escape shame because the father was a white European, but

her child didn't die. Small things like tools, food, and clothing began to disappear. There were rumors of thieves hiding in the jungle. The woman never spoke up. More years passed and the child grew older. The villagers now heard strange noises late at night. A person would then disappear only for friends and family of the missing to hear that person's voice coming from somewhere in the dark. It begged them to enter the jungle. Sometimes there wasn't a voice but a baby crying. It was a story that parents used in my Dad's time to keep their children from staying up late at night. But, he still found it hard to sleep. I was told my grandparents got him a dog and promised it would protect him.

Mom learned of the stories that were given to me when one of my teachers caught me reading them too many times in class. "This is not the sort of thing a young man should be exposed to," she said, "How can you expect to grow up to be a serious adult?" When I returned home, Mom made me gather all the stories that I hid. "Now get a pair of scissors and cut them up," she said. Dad, on the other hand, was told to sleep on the couch. "Don't worry, Mijo. We're not made of paper," he said, tucking me into bed, "A family can't be torn apart that easily." He left me in the dark. Even though I was mad with Mom, she never forgot to turn on my nightlight.

I heard the knock for the first time as I lay there. I didn't pay attention when it first happened. I didn't want to believe. The sound in my room went on for a while then stopped. A few more minutes passed and it started again. I finally worked up the courage and got up carefully. The sound came from inside my closet. I pushed aside my toys and my winter clothes that Mom always told me to pack away neatly. It came from

behind the wall. “Morse code,” I thought and knocked back.

“Mijo, can you hear me?” I was shocked by my Dad’s genius. “Are you ready for the next story?” This was the night I heard about El Cuco again, the boogeyman from our country. The first night he repeated the story about the bastard child from a Kichwa woman and a white European man. The next night was different. El Cuco was a clown from Spain who was arrested for upsetting the queen. He hoped to escape punishment by taking part in an expedition to South America for gold. Unfortunately, he was captured with the rest of the crew and sacrificed to the Inca spider god Llika. The story on the third night was different as well. “Dad, why do you keep talking about the same person?” I didn’t hear an answer.

It was also during these nights that strange things started happening to Mom. I was blamed at first. She could have woken up the entire neighborhood with her scream. Her hair was in patches, as if a dog tore at it with its teeth. She rushed to my room and asked why I would do that to her. It took my Dad a few hours to calm her down. She didn’t notice the marks alongside her face. They were like somebody held a warm piece of metal against both sides of her cheeks. Painless. My father pointed them out to her. On the third night, nothing happened, but she told us over breakfast that she was woken in the middle of the night by a sound. “What was it?” I asked. She placed her hand over her mouth. I turned to leave to catch my school bus. I then heard Mom say, “Cuckoo loves his scissors. Snip. Snip. His scissors say. Cut. Cut. They both want to do.”

I returned from school to find them arguing in the kitchen. It ended



when I came in. I felt guilty about what was happening. Maybe it had to do with me. I wasn't sure. Dinner was quiet and I didn't wish to bring up anything until I could speak to Dad alone. Later that night, after Mom went to bed, I found him in the kitchen. I said I was sorry and was no longer willing to listen to any other stories. He looked at me as if we never met, "Mijo, what are you talking about? I already stopped because your mother was upset."

The knocking started again. This was the final night it happened. I walked inside the closet, knocked back, and said that I knew it wasn't my Dad. "My love, no, what do you mean?" it spoke with the voice of my Mom. I refused to believe it was my mother either. "Leave me alone," I begged. The sound of scissors cutting came from behind the wall and I heard nothing else. The next morning Mom was gone. The police asked questions and searched for days. No one was able to understand how my Dad did not notice his wife disappear right next to him in bed. At that point, I started sleeping in my parent's room. Dad slept on the floor. Neither of us heard any knocking. I waited for it but nothing came. Images of stories I loved kept me awake. If I never listened, would any of this still have happened? I wanted nothing but to empty my head of them in trade for Mom to come back.

The following morning, Dad was gone. I hopped out of bed and searched through the house. Nothing. He was cut out of my life. I got ready for school. The sound of milk pouring into my cereal bowl was too loud in an empty house. The bus pulled up but I didn't get on it. The kids sat and peered at me through their small windows. Some of them pressed their hands against the glass. I decided to walk instead. The town seemed

empty. I never realized each house was identical to the one before it. I went on ahead, turned a few corners before I realized that I didn't know my way to school. Nothing around me looked familiar. I retraced my steps and headed back home. Then, a dog began to follow me. It was large, but kept its head down. The dog's tail was between its legs. It was skinny. The skin hung loose and I could see bones. I let it follow me. With each block I passed, I looked over my shoulder to see if it was still there. When I got home, the dog was hesitant of coming closer so I left the front door open and waited. In the meantime, I reached into my backpack to get a pencil and my pencil sharpener. It finally came inside. I closed the door behind me and stabbed it to death with my sharp pencil. It whimpered quietly till it died with blood bubbling out of one of its gouged out eyes. I left the dog where it fell. Someone finally ruined Mom's carpet.

Cuckoo has his scissors, after all. Snip. Snip. His scissors say. Cut. Cut. They both want to do.

My appetite is gone as I write this. I'm not even thirsty waiting in my closet. I don't know how much time has passed but it's nighttime now. The lights are off throughout my house. I am willing to wait as long as possible, for a few days if necessary.

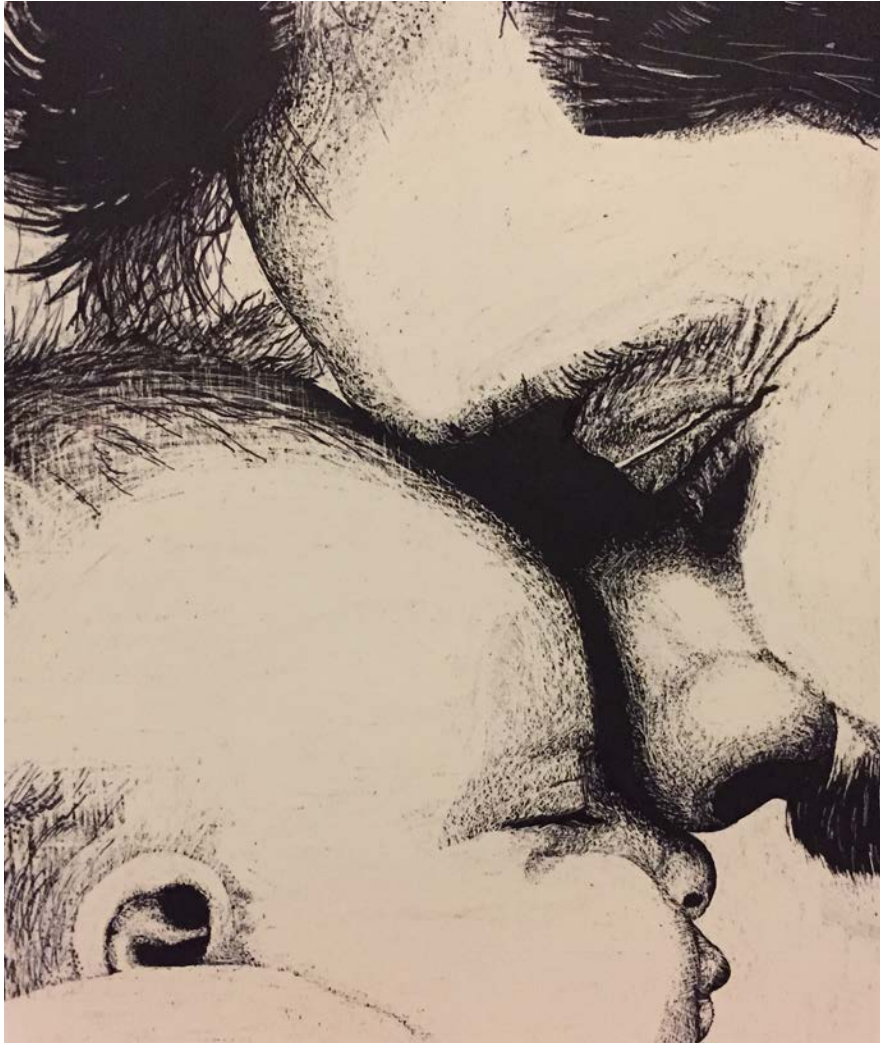
My nightlight has turned on.

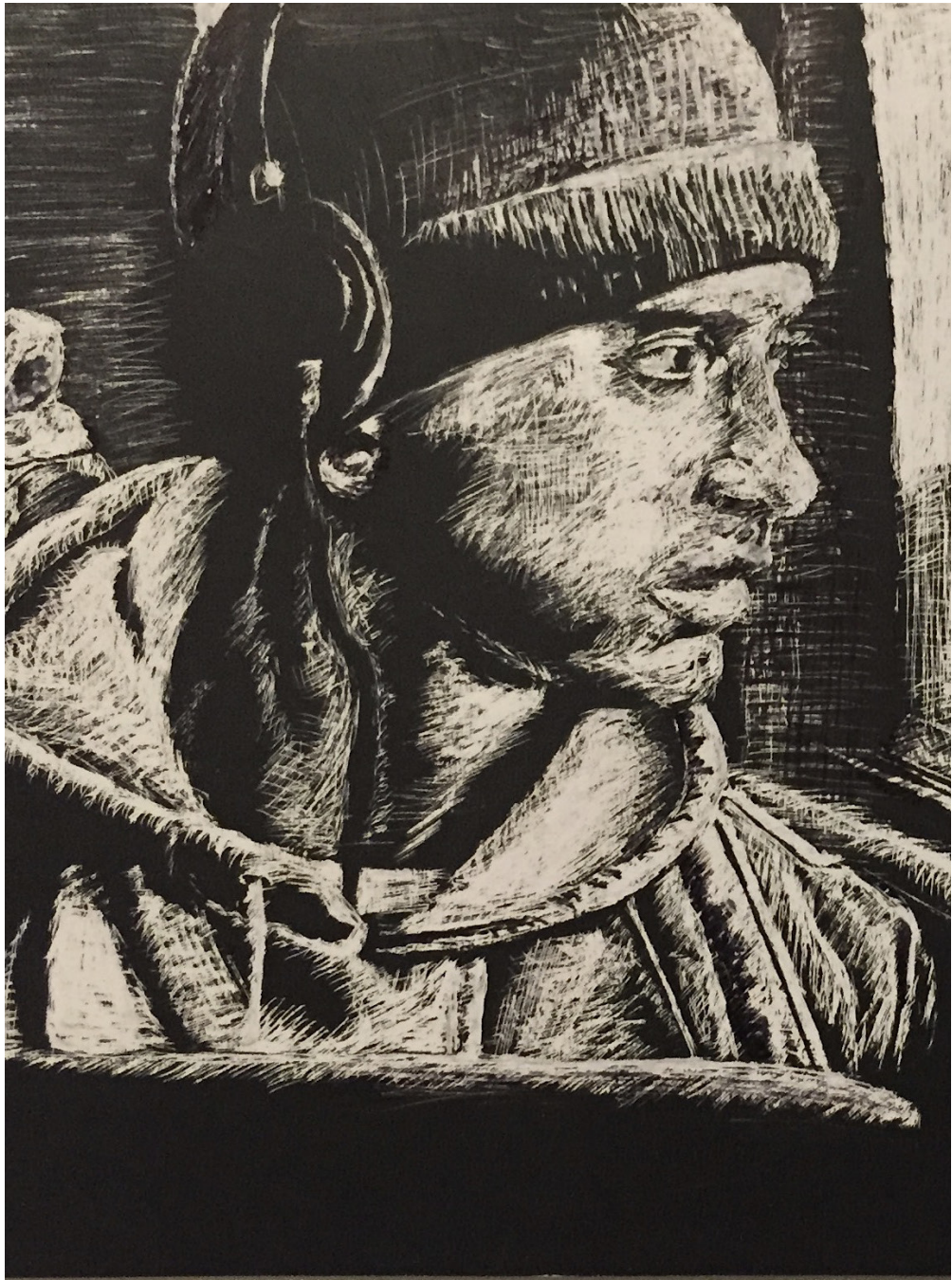
I stepped out, holding onto my sharpened pencil. My eyes have adjusted to the darkness. Cuckoo is here. It has a long arm stretched from where it turned on my nightlight. The arm leads somewhere outside of my room. I am now leaving this letter behind. Here in my closet. If someone is reading this, then it means I didn't come back.

But, the story of Cuckoo needs to keep going so someone else can save me and my parents.

Someone like you.



















### Emergency Instructions

<b>Fire</b> • If you see a fire, alert the train crew immediately. • If possible, remove the fire source through proper safety procedures. • If you are notified to evacuate, follow the instructions of the train crew. • Do not use elevators during an emergency.	<b>Medical</b> • Notify a train crew member immediately if a passenger is in distress. • If you are qualified to provide medical assistance, follow the instructions of the train crew.	<b>Police</b> • Report any suspicious activity to the train crew or the police. • Do not use weapons or explosives on the train. • Do not interfere with law enforcement or emergency personnel.	<b>Evacuation</b> • Do not panic and follow the instructions of the train crew. • Do not use elevators during an emergency. • Do not touch any electrical equipment or components unless instructed to do so.
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Always contact a train crew member and listen for announcements.



















# LET'S PRETEND FOR A SECOND

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*Peter Sitomer*

This is the rain storm that didn't happen,  
I wasn't the subject of the moment, and  
my roof only leaks when it's raining;

I'm a 4x4, flush in the floor,  
I've never once been a cynic and  
people remove their shoes  
when they step on me;

I'm a rash festering and rotting in a wall,  
I like being called stubborn and  
I'm medicated to disappear,  
but only on the outside;

I'm a novel crammed in a bookcase,  
I love being labeled and  
my bent spine is easy to find in the crowd.

But—you want me to pretend  
that this ink blot is anything  
other than a butterfly.

# FLUIDITY



*Adam Weissman*

Flow, like a galaxy twisting round and round, a child's top losing speed.  
like you once did running with your arms thrown behind you,  
faster than the flash, straight into a bench. The corner catch-  
es your left eye, tears it, and yet you still see. You see it all: the  
blood, the vomit, the tears, the flap of flesh and skin hanging just  
in view. You see it all and you say, well that's perfectly normal,  
now let me back on the jungle-gym—I wanna gash the other one  
open, too!

like radiation through your old teacher's body, killing some of  
the cancer but missing most. His sunken eyes hold nothing but  
tears. His body is a sickly white, his varicose arteries pushing out  
against his skin, asking to be cut, begging for an end.

like skim milk dribbling down your grandfather's chin as his  
cataracts match the plate and his teeth match the lemon cake's  
filling.

like the way the words "I love you" did out of her mouth before  
you were ready. You lie. She agrees. You move on.

like the bird who flew into your chest, caught helpless in the  
wind. Its neck shattered on impact, and you can't do anything.  
You watch it die and you feel yourself die with it. Then you go to  
class like usual.

like words through her mouth, a constant stream of bullshit and complaints, none of them about you, but directed at you. After a while her teeth stop even meeting, her lips never touch, her tongue does somersaults, and she babbles on just as incoherent as before.

like bile from your roommate's friend, upchucking his life, his future, his very soul into an overused garbage pail nicknamed Molly.

like the poetry great uncle Rickert wrote before the shockwave from a landmine shot him through two barbed-wire fences, mutilating him and destroying his hands, scarring him forever, the smoke and heat mocking him as he wrote what he would call his greatest poetry in blood on the stone beneath him: "fuck the Krauts."

like tears from your eyes when your second born son, severely autistic, throws himself out of the third floor's garbage chute, his frail neck snapping like the wishbone he broke last week while silently wishing for relief.

like the last few death-rattles from your lungs, the pressure too great for you to utter any last words, your family's eyes begging for something, something you can't give.

# BIG MAN DOWNSTAIRS

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*Corbin Hirschhorn*

During a call session, Saunders connected with a potential client over the phone that he had talked to one time before. “Hello Mr. Winston,” he said. “How have you been?”

“I’ve been great, and I’ve put a lot of thought into what you told me last time we spoke,” he said enthusiastically.

Saunders stumbled over his words in excitement. “Oh yeah?”

“Yes. It seems like a very good opportunity.”

“So you’re moving forward with crusade against the Swiss. Can I bring you paperwork?”

“Excuse me? I’ve decided to list my house.”

Saunders was confused.

Winston continued, “Oh, this is Mr. Saunders... with—”

“The Devil,” he answered.

“I’m sorry, I thought this was my realtor. Old age. Anyway, I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can fund an extermination of the Swiss, no matter how much I dislike them. I’m just a suburbanite with a split-level, after all.”

“Oh,” Saunders stuttered. “Have you considered using the cash from the

sale of your home to finance genocide?”

“Oh no, Mr. Saunders,” Mr. Winston said, laughing. “I’m retiring with that.”

Saunders thanked him for his time and made another call.

In the declining economic situation, many agents were finding business. One new successful agent was Janice. Saunders often tried to resist opinions that he thought may be sexist, but he couldn’t help but believe that an attractive woman had a much better shot at Devil’s work than a man—obviously with male clients. But women also tend to chat more freely with other women than a strange man materializing like some nighttime apparition bearing manila folders, an agenda, and a well-scripted pitch advocating wickedness. This remained true over the phone too, which was Saunders’ preferred method.

The market had taken a turn for the worse when it was determined that homosexual relations weren’t “all that wicked.” Lobbyists for Devilry fought for its condemnation, eventually trying to settle for lesser definitions such as “abhorrent,” “despicable,” or “contemptible,” but they couldn’t even achieve “decadent.” This severely changed the nature of Devil’s work, as many agents of the Dark Lord made their careers off of clients’ casual and brief encounters with the same sex. One of Saunders’ smoothest transactions had been convincing a young man to lie with an acquaintance from his adult kickball league. He closed the deal over the phone, and his silent exultation distracted him from the bodies of other Devil’s agents from upper floors plummeting past his windows. Saunders got the memo of the policy change just after the papers were

signed, and they were immediately burned as he submitted them to the document processor. He ran into the man and his boyfriend on the street about a month after, and the man said he had no regrets about the deal, thanking Saunders. Saunders congratulated him, and the man asked how the market was doing. He was bothered the rest of the day when he realized he missed an opportunity to convince his ex-client to cheat on his partner. Saunders now often fights back tears as he sits in his office making cold calls. Prospective sinners hear this over the line.

Saunders asked to meet the manager, Mephistopheles, at the end of the day.

“Good, we needed to meet anyway.”

“I’m having a hard time lately, and I’m wondering if—”

“I see that. Your performance has been subpar.”

Saunders wept.

“I just can’t close them. I try, and try. I try to convince them of such horrible things; I pitch murder, and rape, and larceny, but they never do it. The second I talk to them, they shake their heads and pray for courage.”

“I see—”

“Last week I had a man peering at his step-daughter while she was still toweled from the shower, and he vowed to go to mass every Sunday thereafter. He threw out his Hustler collection and said three Hail-Marys—without even seeing a priest. I need leads. Please.”



Mephistopheles had never seen anyone moved to tears in his office, especially not a grown man, and certainly not since he began managing the Devil's work.

“Saunders, you know you have what it takes to be an agent, or you wouldn't have ended up here in the first place. You'd still be in a Circle.”

“I need—”

“All you need is a little motivation and confidence. And maybe guidance. We all do every now and then.” Saunders looked up for a moment and Mephistopheles paused briefly at the sight of such puffy eyes. “It's not that you're not working hard or not trying—it's that you're not *looking*. And you're being too hard on yourself. You know that evil isn't something that you make someone do. It's something that you can find in everyone. The Devil's in here,” he said, gently touching Saunders' unbeating heart, “and he's in all of us.” Saunders stopped sobbing, but tears continued to flow silently. “You're not selling the Devil, Saunders. You're finding the Devil. Obviously, not everyone is the next Stalin, but everyone can think of something in the store they want to nick, or someone else's spouse they want to bang.”

“Everyone's a client,” Saunders said and grinned briefly, but then he remembered another failure. “But last week I thought I had a good one. I found a man who wanted to commit suicide, but after I tried to sell him, he untied the noose and bought tickets for Paris.”

“But Saunders, think back to the dialogue sheets! You don't sell suicide. You present the client with a reality in which there is no possibility of

attaining abstract rewards such as respect, dignity, or existential content, so the only logical and necessary action is suicide. Stress necessity. Urgency, Saunders. You can't sell suicide. It's only a pointless gesture after all." Saunders slumped in the chair, ashamed by his own naïveté. "And remember, you don't approach the client as just some suited voice of unreason if you don't have to. You embody everything that torments the client to make his sick dreams a reality." Saunders listened intently. "Just yesterday, Janice did an impression of a client's ex-wife getting off from another man during an appointment, and the guy axed the wife and the boyfriend."

Saunders' throat tightened from swallowing another sob. "I see what you mean sir, but I was thinking... would it be possible for me to transfer into transactions instead of doing coercion for awhile? I think I would be much better at negotiating exchanges with the Devil than just trying to get clients to sin."

"No, no. Not at this time. It'll take a lot of time to go through training and sinners' commissions will come much sooner anyway. Don't worry. You can do this. But Saunders—"

"Yes, sir?"

"If this job doesn't work out for you, which Circle will you be returning to?"

"Third, sir."

This Circle wasn't particularly low, but lying pathetically in a bodily fluid was much more degrading than physical labor or some of the other

greater punishments. Though when Saunders reflected on this, he conceded to the fact that his punishment almost exactly resembled how he felt on Earth.

Janice often boasted of her sentence to the Sixth Circle, less common for women and much more dignified than Saunders' sentence to an eternity lying in what was essentially bile. She always stressed how much harder she had to work than anyone else to stay out of the inner city of Dis. Saunders felt a little ashamed, but he didn't see why since everyone in Hell ends up where their sins dictate.

Returning to his office, Saunders frantically flipped to one worn-out and buried card in his Rolodex. He could not contain himself after his talk with Mephistopheles. It was so clear to him now—what he was really meant to do in the business of Devilry. There was no need to go after those psychopaths, pedophiles, and maniacs. Everyone sins because everyone hates, and everyone hates because they love. Porno sessions, pranks on middle school teachers, and blow-jobs are all sins, but no matter how minor, anything will keep an agent in business, and referrals are the best reward, after all. *To anyone who thinks we agents are useless, Saunders thought, we are the ones who shape the world. We are the ones who make you you.* With ecstatic confidence, Saunders was ready to call anyone. However, when he found the card he had in mind, he figured it was best to start with a good lead.

Clay D'Onofrio had committed just about every sin that an agent could pitch, but he confessed it all on Sundays—and at his peak, Wednesdays too. He also had a thick Rolodex with many agents of the Devil. Howev-

er, Saunders thought that an old man like Clay may have lost the lime-light from other agents in recent years.

“Hello?” Clay answered.

“Clay,” Saunders said slowly with endearment, “I know it’s been awhile, but this is—”

“Mr. Saunders, right?”

“Oh. Yes! You remember! Well, I just wanted to check up and—”

“What do you suggest, Mr. Saunders? I’ll admit. Nobody’s called me in while, but I’m an older man and I use my time sparingly.”

“Well, why—”

“Please hurry.”

“I know you may be content at your age and with all you’ve accomplished,” he said and paused, but Clay did not respond. “But knowing you, as I have for a long time, I wanted to offer you a chance to enjoy your time in peace.” He paused again, desperate for encouragement, but he continued on confidently. “I thought you may finally want to get rid of your wife.”

Clay inhaled and spoke. “Mr. Saunders, I appreciate the fact that you’ve thought about me after all these years. Honestly, I do. But why would a man like me care to do that at this point in my life? Jesus Christ, she’s already fucking dying.” Saunders tried to engage him, but Clay continued,

“Really, I’m sure you could make a great pitch right now, and I would listen.” Again Saunders stuttered. “Let me break it down for you. By the way, you know I’ve worked with you guys before with great pleasure, so don’t think I’ve changed or found God or whatever. But I’ve done it all. I’ve taken every drug around and loved all of it, but now I can just sit with what the doctors give me, and I’ve got to tell you, it’s better. I’ve been with every broad. Everyone that ever bothered me is either dead or in jail. I don’t mean to throw all of this at you personally—you do good work for a lot of people—but what does anyone need you agents for? My whole life, I’ve just been doing whatever I want to do, and I thought that was something special, but isn’t that just what everyone is doing anyway? I’m just like every man. I mean, I think my choices were better, but... well, I don’t want to go on too much about that. You’re on the clock.”

Some agents walked out of their offices. There was clapping. Janice had just closed her first exchange, and other agents congratulated her. She traded the client a Porsche, a few hundred thousand dollars, and an inch and a half of extra penis for just fourteen years left to live. He would have had another forty-five. Most agents would have had to give at least thirty years. Janice was already talking about vacation time.

Saunders stayed in his office, but he was too distracted to make calls. He yanked at the bottom drawer for hidden éclairs, Yodels, and Quaaludes, which in Hell tasted like sand and salt and made one even less sated. He ate two pastries and pills at a time in tears as another prospect answered the phone and agents celebrated (“Hello... Hello?”). The room slowly filled with bile.

# GOING OUT FOR LUNCH

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*Yancarlo Rivera*

It was a red mini-van or one  
of those black SUVs.

Sis and me in the back,  
Mom and Pop up front.

It takes seven pounds of pressure  
to break the human clavicle.

Mom had just gotten her nails done.  
They looked nice—long sharp and white.

I'd love to lie and say we were on a bridge,  
that the seatbelt applied ten pounds of pressure  
just before the (black) red car went over—  
that on Superman's day off,  
all the puffer fish in the world  
joined to form this one massive balloon  
that lifted us from the safety of drowning,  
only for us to die on the bridge  
from their sick skin.

It was just Sis and me in the back,  
Mom and Pop up front,  
going out for lunch.

Mom with white nails  
that cut Dad's skin  
that she wore despite my protestations  
in all my pasts and futures.

# SPEECH

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*Kristen Shea*

I wish I could sew your mouth shut,  
painlessly, but strong enough so  
your lips could not break through  
and spout words like waterfalls  
pouring over my own, making them  
struggle to stay above the torrent.

Sometimes I want to scream so loud that  
the waves will carry my echoes overseas  
battering against the walls of your thick skull,  
a tsunami of sound so strong  
you would have to look my way.

But the water continues to rise,  
covering my face and turning  
my shouts into soundless bubbles  
floating slowly away, meaningless.  
In depths as great as these, fish stay  
silent, useless mouths opening and closing  
with things they wish they could say.



# WARTS



*Joseph Farley*

Dwayne wore his jeans tight before it became trendy. His back pockets had worn rings from where he'd stash his SKOAL tins, usually winter-green. I thought he was the James Dean of our high school, technically I wasn't in high school—sixth grade—but we used the same building. I didn't describe him that way then, didn't know who James Dean was, but in retrospect. Back then Alex and I still caught frogs and argued AC/DC's the greatest band of all time; what did we know about being cool?

They called the poorer side of Stanton “frog town,” mainly because it flooded and there were actual frogs—it was near a reservoir and assorted streams—but subtly because it made them feel better about their own jobs at the bank or some nameless life insurance racket. In “frog town,” there were more grocery store cashiers, waiters and waitresses of tables. Alex lived right on the forest's edge; a quarter mile through the trees was the reservoir, where we'd spend most of our summers until our interests changed. Frogs and baseball cards would give way to who's getting some and who isn't, nights spent in crowded, musty garages, drinking cheap beer that tasted like the aluminum from which it came. Dwayne lived next door to Alex; I guess that's how the infatuation started.

Mom had two jobs. One was the nine-to-five type, customer service related, dealing with the petty concerns of those with too much time on their hands: cat ladies, yentas, daytime television buffs, etc. Her second was waiting tables a few nights a week at the Stanton Hotel, a run-down

tavern that served as the town's lone landmark. It used to be a real hotel, someone famous once stayed there; the name escapes me, I just know they were important, stately, likely owned slaves. My sister, Peyton, used to look after me. She was a junior, a grade under Dwayne. She used to warn me about him, she didn't get our obsession with him.

"Jack, stay away from that kid. He's fucked in the head," she said. I wasn't so sure; from what I saw he had excellent aim with a wrist-rocket, could start a fire with just a few sticks. Alex and I would follow him, careful not to be seen, just in case he was, in fact, "fucked in the head." Peyton used to call them "frog town" problems, and she said she didn't have time for them. She was popular, smoked Parliament cigarettes, drove to parties in cars of senior boys. One of those senior boys wrapped his GTO around an oak tree, he was fine—Peyton not so much.

When I wasn't in the woods with Alex I'd be with her, holding her cold hand and reading her stories or interesting pieces of celebrity news I figured she'd like. Who's fat and who isn't, babies doing things all babies do—that sort of thing. Sometimes I thought I saw a smile, but the nurses would say it wasn't possible, all in my head, we see what we want to see, that sort of thing. Not sure I believed them, then or now. She was really pale, but still really pretty. I'd often think when she woke up things could probably pick up for her right where they left off.

Mom was at the hospital if she wasn't at work, dark bags under her brown eyes. Most nights I'd eat at Alex's. His parents were Greek immigrants, I didn't really get the food or the conversation, but they smiled a lot, drank a lot of wine, and his dad liked to muss my hair.

It was a few days before school was supposed to start up again that Dwayne first acknowledged seeing us. We were up to our knees in the creek bed, paint bucket filled with the morning's catch.

“What're you two fudge packers always doing out here?” he said. He towered above us on the lip of the creek bed, hands tucked in his pockets, cigarette dangling between his lips.

“Hey Dwayne,” I said, like we'd spoken before. “Just catching frogs.”

“Frogs, huh. Shit gives you warts,” he said, started past the creek.

“What? What'd you say?” Alex said.

Dwayne cocked his head, shouted over his shoulder, “Warts!”

I wanted to ask Peyton what a fudge packer was. I went to the hospital that night to ask her—she didn't answer.

The next day I sat with mom and Peyton for a few hours. I played Game-boy. Mom flipped through a gossip rag. I clicked the game off, began studying the grooves and lines of my palms and fingers.

“Am I going to get warts?”

“Warts? Who said that?” Mom said.

“Dwayne,” I said.

“Dwayne? I really wish you wouldn’t follow that kid. His father’s a nightmare.”

“Why?”

“He’s just a nasty drunk. Not a very nice person.” She was tired and went back to flipping through her magazine.

“So I’m not going to get warts?”

“You might. Frogs are disgusting, Jack. I wish you wouldn’t do that.”

“Well, I haven’t gotten any yet.”

“Everybody has warts,” she said, got up and squeezed Peyton’s hand.

I leapt out of my chair, started out of the room.

“Hey,” she said, “where you going?”

“Alex’s.”

“Fine, home by dinner. I’m off tonight.”

Walking to Alex’s it hit me: *everybody doesn’t have warts*. I knew plenty of people without warts, mom and I to name a few. Hidden warts?

Alex was waiting for me on his stoop when I got there, excited by something.

“C’mon, quick,” he said.

“Where we going?”

“Dwayne’s,” he said, took off for the backyard. Dwayne’s backyard opened into the woods and was bordered by an old shed that sat on the far property line; we hung on our haunches behind it. His back door was wide open.

“What’re we doing back here?” I said.

“Something happened in there.”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t for sure, but let’s check it out.”

“What does that mean,” I said.

He bolted for the back door. Alex was impulsive, quick to hop a barbwire fence or laugh at a “No Trespassing” sign; I’d follow, often reluctantly, a true Scully to his Mulder.

He went right inside, like it was his house. I waited by the door, my heart clicked and popped like warped vinyl. When I heard voices I went inside. Dwayne was in a rocking chair, hands folded behind his head.

“I’m not going to hurt you guys,” he said. I saw his dad at the kitchen

table; a pool of blood coagulated under his chair.

“What happened?” Alex said, somehow calm.

“What always had to happen,” Dwayne said, left the chair, swung the fridge open, popped a beer. “Anyway, you guys shouldn’t be here, it’s like ...what do you call it? A *crime* scene.”

An axe was stuck in his dad’s shoulder like it would if it couldn’t quite split all the way through a block of wood.

“Is he dead?” I said.

“Is he a little slight?” he said to Alex. “You guys should split, go catch frogs or something.”

I stood there frozen, couldn’t get my legs to work and couldn’t help but noticing his dad never even touched his eggs.

# GIFT



*Brendan Payraudeau*

Here, sunflower seed shells from the last  
summer we spent staying in bed

until the heat broke, lying  
down on grass along the lake's

edge and never wearing shoes,  
never wearing nothing but sun

and sweat. I don't remember  
the storms, or what exactly I said  
after, "just one more thing,"

but here are husks, perfectly kept.

# CRUNCH

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*Peter Sitomer*

Even with lemon scented words,  
your skin remained granite and smooth  
while lips lingered at the cellar of your face  
against the puckering sound of praise.

I've planted you high enough to  
kiss the feet that dangle above my head.  
My words watered and shined to  
grow thorns that pricked my tongue.

But now I refuse to be the sun  
that feeds only  
what sits above me.  
I'm done looking for my reflection  
in the muddy, rusty pupils.

The words that corroded in your ears,  
the ones you dust off your shoulders,  
will fall to your gravestone and  
be rubbed into your inscription.

Everyone will taste the same crunch  
like when I said your name.



# PARADOXICAL EFFECT

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*Joseph Farley*

I'm not sure where she came from, and I don't think it really matters all that much in the grand scheme. In class, she doesn't make eye contact with anyone, her head down, sharecropper eyes. When he comes to pick her up, he honks the horn, hollers her name: Jane.

Nobody talks to Jane, she's new and everybody already has their friends, their clique. I don't have one, but it's not like I don't have any friends. I eat lunch with Max and Libby. Libby lives with her grandmother, who's got Alzheimer's—she's always getting lost at Trader Joe's, the drug store, her own basement, etc. Max and Libby like each other, only they don't know it yet. When they do figure it out, what will become of me?

I'm thinking about asking Jane to eat lunch with us—*me*. I have it on good authority that she doesn't have anyone to eat with, and not only because I sort of shadow her, but because of an essay she wrote in English. The essay was troubling to me. It wasn't just the lunch thing. Her essay had other stuff. It was supposed to be a creative essay, but I can't help but wonder just how much of it she created.

I say this because I know that look too well, the look of loss. Jane has that look. I'm not sure she's lost anyone—physically speaking—but the look is easy to spot if you know what to look for. It's in the eyes, specifically the irises. The hues change, they dull, like a new bike left out in the rain.

It's almost Christmas break now, and I feel if I don't talk to her soon I

may spontaneously combust. Max and Libby discovered that they do, in fact, dig each other, so needless to say I've been on my own more often than not. It's all pretty much the same, yet somehow it isn't.

I've started to sit at her table during lunch, but instead of talking to her I steal looks when she's digging into her salad, or focusing on the book we were assigned a few weeks ago in class that I haven't started yet. Some book by a dude with a girl's name, Paula I think it is. Paulo? I haven't even taken it out of my locker yet.

Some snow fell on Christmas day, a *white* Christmas. It's all anybody at Christmas dinner talked about. How perfect it all was. How quaint: snow in the winter. Mom was slaving over the stove all day, and if you combine that with the beginning of menopause it must have felt more like an afternoon in Hell.

Aunt Sheila played the piano for a half hour longer than most would have liked. It's nice someone got some use out of it. I'm not sure why we still have it. Once, I asked mom on a rare night when she'd had too much wine—any wine was actually rare for her—why we still had it and she told me it held sentimental value. She was about the least sentimental person I knew, so I tried Aunt Sheila and she told me my father used to play it and I'd watch him for hours on end, more excited than a dog in a car.

"He was the best musician you'd ever meet," she said.

"What did he play?" I asked.

“What couldn’t he play, kid. Everything. Anything.”

Sheila was his sister and had what mom called some *tough times* in her life, so I took what she told me with a grain of salt. I mean, c’mon, there weren’t even any photographs. Apparently, according to her, mom sold a few of his guitars: a sunburst Martin, a Fender Stratocaster, and an Ibanez Tube Screamer played by Stevie Ray Vaughn, as the legend goes.

“It was your mother’s right, though,” she said. “She’s got kids and the man didn’t have many other assets.”

“Smack’s rough, kid,” she said on a separate occasion—in between venting about a recent breakup. She was three-quarters through a bottle of Stoli, but I took that to mean he died of smack. I’m never sure of what people mean when they say smack. Heroin, I think—junk, crank, tar? It doesn’t matter, I didn’t ask. I can’t help but wonder how he did it though. Did he snort it or shoot it? Strangely, I find myself hoping he shot it; it’s more romantic. I dreamt that night of a motel room off the interstate, a leather belt tied around a purple arm. I awoke in a sweat, my pulse jumping.

A few days after the New Year we get some real snow, almost a foot. Max, Libby, and I decide to go sledding at Dead Man’s Hill. The hill is on a golf course, and the drop is almost straight down. To make it riskier, there’s a creek bed about thirty yards after the hill, and many a man has fallen through the ice—maybe one died?

Max lights a cigarette, offers. Libby declines, I accept. In our collective haste to get to the hill, we all forgot sleds. Max searches the wooded area.

I search the property line, which leads into somebody's open backyard.

"Excuse me?" a soft voice says.

"Shit, sorry, didn't know anyone was home."

"It's fine," she says, goes back to her book.

"Jane?"

"Yea?"

"Sorry, um," I shuffle my feet, toss the cigarette from my mouth. "I've seen you at school, Ms. Hatton's English."

"Oh, yea." She is seemingly sizing me up. "You're very quiet."

"I am?"

I bring her over to Max and Libby, like I just discovered the Northwest Passage or Bigfoot. I think I'm smiling, only the feeling isn't familiar. I hope I don't look stupid.

We go sledding on some garbage can lids Max found. Before we started, he did a demonstration for us, bending them, testing their tensile strength. Jane even goes down, and on the way down I swear I see her smile. At the very least, she smirks.

Max's sled gives out, cracks in half, and a shear of plastic gets lodged in his shin. Blood is everywhere. When I pull off his pants it spurts onto my coat like urine.

“My house is right here,” Jane says. We take him there and she patches him up like a war medic. I watch her hands as she tapes him up.

After I go to the bathroom, I go into her parents’ room. Nobody was there, but I wanted a better look at him, the man who screamed like Bobby Knight in front of the school day after day. He looked nice enough, even wore a suit. I root through the medicine cabinet, most were prescribed for her mother, and most were benzodiazepines.

Back in the living room, they have all opened beers; I cock my head at Max.

“Beer?” Jane says.

“Please.”

Max and Libby are playing quarters. Jane and I sit down across from them and we play a few rounds.

After a while, beers surround our table and protect us from outsiders like a castle. We’re all pretty buzzed, laughing more than usual. The phone rings. Jane looks terrified. Max and Libby sneak off, head for more privacy. Jane’s nodding her head emphatically, “Yes. Yes. Yes.” She twirls the cord around her finger. “I know. I know. Yes. Yes, okay. Dad, okay. No. No. Nobody is here. Nope. Okay, see you in a bit.” She hangs up and her skin goes pale. She looks around the room nervously, chewing her lower lip.

“We have to clean up,” she says, starts sweeping cans into a plastic Hefty bag. “Like *now*.”

She leads me through her backyard, back toward the golf course and grabs my hand for a second and squeezes it. Her delicate hand fits in mine like a baby bird in a nest, and it sends dull heat up my spine. I stop her at the property line and turn her with slight force. I put my thumb on her cheek and grin, she smiles and scrunches up her nose. I want to pull the trigger, but I stall awkwardly and miss my chance.

“I should go, they will be home soon.”

“Okay, yea that’s true. You think you’ll get in trouble?”

“Who knows,” she says. “At least I made some friends.”

I feel my heart sink when she says friends. A man would kiss her, press her up against the fence, fuck her right there in broad daylight, wave at neighbors while he jams in and out.

“Why did they come home early?”

“Something about my Mom, I don’t know, she’s sort of losing it these days.”

I smile, then turn and walk away. On my way across the golf course the snow starts up again; it weighs the branches down on the trees. The alcohol rumbles around in my belly and surges through me; if only I felt this invincible a few minutes earlier with Jane. I stop in my tracks and walk back up Dead Man’s Hill. I sit on a toboggan somebody left behind and pull out the bottle of scotch I swiped during the cleanup. Lagavulin. I toss the cork and take a long pull. It burns my eyes, my throat, my belly.

The sun is setting and in the dead quiet I can hear the rush of the highway out past the eighteenth hole. I take another pull and toss the bottle. I pick up the toboggan and back up to get a running start; I am alive.

Jane sits with us at lunch now, but even still, her head is usually down in a book. The way I look at her borders on gawking, pathetic. I can't help but think that everything would be different if I had just kissed her. We'd be like those couples you see walking down the hall, arms draped all over each other, my hand on her ass, her hand on my thigh. Kissing between classes. Cutting class to get blown in the auxiliary gym. Stretch? Probably, but that is where all the varsity football players take their secret cheerleaders; they call it the "loading station." I wouldn't want to bring Jane there anyway, but it would be nice to know I had the option.

Jane and I get paired up in Hatton's class to do a project on the assigned reading. *The Alchemist*. I'm not sure I understood it really, some parts were nice, but I feel like much of it's lost on me. Jane absolutely loved it.

"Just okay? This book is *wonderful*." She clutches the book earnestly to her chest. She also uses the word magical—she could be achingly earnest. I say the words over and over again in my mind. *Magical. Wonderful.*

We do the project at my house on the last night before it's due. Jane missed a few days of school, and whenever we made plans she always canceled last minute. When I'd ask why, she'd always say she had to help her mom. I wasn't sure what that meant. She rings the doorbell and I open it. I see her father waiting in his truck. He looks to be seething for some reason.

“Two hours!” He screams and speeds off.

“What’s that about? You okay?”

“Yea. I’m fine, he just doesn’t want me out late tonight.”

I look at my watch, it’s only seven, but I don’t say anything. When we get in my room, she’s more interested in looking at my stuff than working on the project. My baseball cards, my comics, my Don Mattingly autographed memorabilia. She picks up some pictures and sifts through them, stopping and smiling on the ones she likes.

“Your mom looks so nice,” she says.

“Yea, she is.” I come up behind her and slide next to her, placing my hand on the small of her back. She cranes her neck toward me. I gently press my lips against hers, open my mouth and slip some tongue in. The kissing intensifies and we move over to my bed and I softly toss her on it. I kick my pants off and yank off my shirt. She rolls on top of me and we take her shirt off together. I unclasp her bra with one hand like I’d heard about. There she is, her strawberry blonde hair descending on her small, perky breasts. She’s paler than I thought she’d be. Without the weight of her clothes her angles are sharp, jagged, her skin pulled so tight against her chest and clavicles, a beautiful blonde skeleton.

“I don’t like sex,” she says.

“Okay, we don’t have to do anything,” I say like I’d had it before.

A few weeks later, I ask Jane about her dad. We’d been hanging out all



the time, but we rarely kissed; all she wanted to do was lie in my bed and hold my hand, watch movies. I loved it. Really. Of course I wanted to fuck her, but I could wait. Something was off, the way she shivered that first time I touched her down south played on loop.

“What about him,” she says.

“Does he like, uh, touch you?”

She doesn’t cry but her eyes get wet. “Sometimes he kisses me. Mom’s all zonked out on meds, she’s barely there, so some nights he comes in drunk. I don’t know, maybe he thinks I’m her.”

“Jane, Jesus. What the fuck? He kisses you? Your father?”

“I know.”

“Is that it, kissing?”

She pauses for a long time, like she didn’t hear the question. Finally, she says, “Yup, that’s it.”

I squeeze her hand and un-pause the movie. I can tell she’s lying; the dull eyes, which I hadn’t seen in a while, are back.

It’s all I think about. I stay up nights thinking about it. It’s consuming my entire being. I cut classes, fail tests, and even lose some weight. To an outsider, it probably looks like I have a smack problem. I find some pills in mom’s cabinet, similar to the ones Jane’s mom had. Benzo’s, and according to the bottle mom suffered from insomnia, anxiety—I

swipe the bottle.

At least it is Easter and I have Aunt Sheila to take my mind off it. This year, she brings an especially strange boyfriend. His name is Ralph and he's Puerto Rican, late forties, overweight, with a tentative grasp of the English language. Aunt Sheila calls him a brilliant businessman. He's part owner of Peek World, a string of seedy theaters in the city where you can see a Russian immigrant shake her beaver inside a glass case for ten bucks.

"I started from the bottom, kid. Let me tell you," he says. His mannerisms are shifty, like a squirrel; maybe he was just on coke. "I started as the cleanup guy, a janitor of sorts. When the guys were finished lopping off I'd come through with my bucket and wipe it down. Tough work, but I did it. Then they say Ralph, you're getting a promotion. They promote me to barker. A barker hangs out on the corner and passes out pamphlets and says shit like, *Hey guys, live ladies*. Made a killing. They say hey Ralph, we're going to promote you again. This time I'm talent. I'm in the booth with a girl. Me!" He lets out a long, bellowing laugh.

"Wow," I say.

"Wow is right. Don't tell your aunt, kid. All legit stuff, I got W-2's and all that white people shit. Now I'm part owner, only in America. You should come sometime, on the house. You eighteen?"

"Almost."

"Eh, that don't matter, I got you. Kid, where's the head?"

“Down the hall and on the left.”

“Appreciate it. Hey, good talk. I like you; you’re a good listener.”

I sit at the golf course almost every night now, a six-pack of beer and the bottle of pills that are running dangerously low. Like clockwork, the bastard enters her room late at night, his silhouette casting a shadow and combined with my buzz, I swear I see horns.

I take the bus into the city the next day, a wad of cash in my pocket. I go to the only place I can think of: Peek World. I open the door and a bell clangs. Immediately I’m hit in the face with the smell of pool chlorine and dank, old sweat. A lady with a nose ring asks me if I have ID. I ask to see Ralph. “Hold up, one sec,” she says.

“My man, I knew you’d stop by. Let me give you a tour!” Ralph says.

“Actually I’m not here for that. Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot, kid.”

I’m nervous and I don’t know the protocol. “Um, uh,” I stutter and stop. “I’m looking for something, something sort of illegal.”

“Yea? A blow job? We take care of that, ha, just don’t tell your aunt.”

“No, not that.” I look around and make sure nobody’s listening. “A gun,” I whisper.

“Huh? A piece? For what?”

“Can you help me or not?”

“Alright, just hold up a sec.” He takes a piece of paper off the desk and scribbles something on it. “Here, take it. I don’t want to know what it’s for.”

“Thanks.” I crumple it up and walk out of Peek World with my head to my toes.

The guy I bought it off of told me it wasn’t very powerful, so I should get as close as possible. No problem, I thought. I want to see his eyes. He even loaded it for me. I decide to wait in the driveway for him to come home; he usually gets home late so I’ll have the cover of night. When I see the headlights my pulse quickens, I take the .22 out of my jacket; it feels heavier than when I held it in my mirror for practice. I let out some breath, suck in some cool night air. When he gets out of the car, he doesn’t say anything; he sees me and the look on his face lets me know that he knows I know. I raise the gun. I don’t hesitate. I squeeze the clip clean.





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