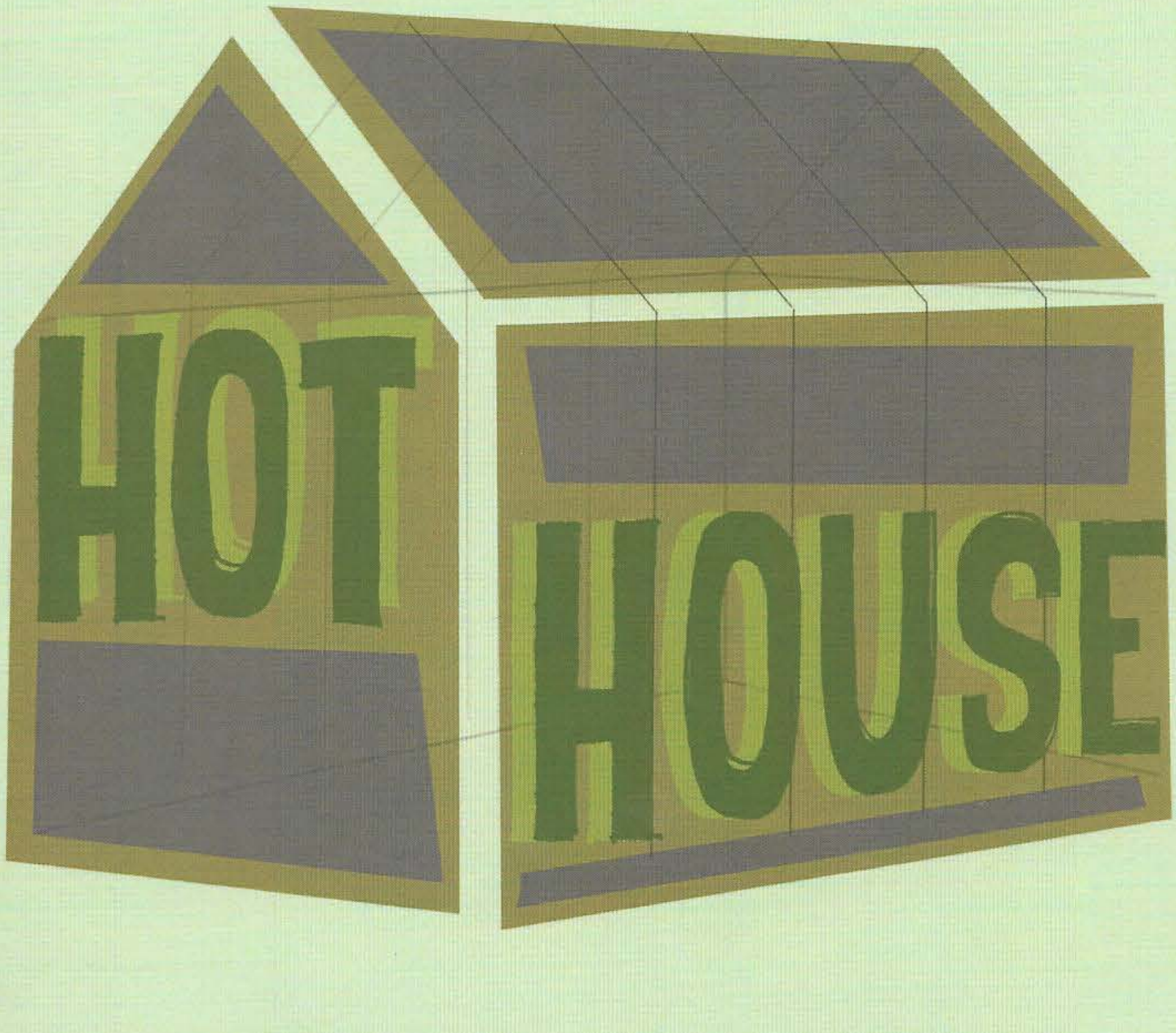
HOT
HOUSE

hot
HOUSE

SPRING 2015

Dedicated to the writers
who make their home in Parlin Hall.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

If you have ever tried to keep a plant alive, you know that it is not as easy as it sounds. Not for me, anyway—I am the kind of person who kills flowers with a single, deadly glance. Trying to develop a green thumb is tough work (and I have a countertop sprinkled with wilted lily petals to prove it). As I approach the end of my undergraduate career and wrap up my time with *Hothouse*, I find myself contemplating our journal's title, and have come to the conclusion that it is a perfect metaphor. Writers, like plants, are finnicky things. This journal is a warm space to keep the creatures of Parlin Hall healthy, happy, and thriving. I could not be happier to have been part of that endeavor for the past four years.

In my time with *Hothouse*, I have come to know a community of writers and readers who never fail to impress and inspire me with their talent, dedication, and unmatched kindness. While it makes me sad to leave the warm glow of our haven, I feel confident in this journal's role: to shelter and cultivate the budding creatives of this university. I could not be prouder of the work we have done, and I am honored to welcome you, dear reader, to step inside our little greenhouse.

– LINDSAY ONCKEN

POETRY

COPPERHEAD

AZA PACE

This musky smell
Like perfume or death
Probably came with the rain.
Here the punishment
For being a copperhead on the porch
Is death by guillotine.

Papa has already thrown away the head.
The copper body writhes like a tongue
When prodded, and tries in vain to strike
As Papa begins to skin it.
It's dead, I repeat to myself,
It's already dead and can't really feel it.

Copperhead, like my light brown hair.

There, the skin is off, stretched
And pinned on a board to dry
Next to the others
Like some ghastly moth.

The remnants, all grey muscle
With pink organs peeking through,
Belong to the birds or the ants.

Yes, I'll take him into the woods.
Hand me the shovel, Papa.

NEXT APPOINTMENT

ANNA ROENIGK

since your hands are
in my mouth,
now's i guess
the perfect
time
to tell you,
at the risk of stumbl-
ing into
a patch of
dandelions,
coming up
starry-eyed,
laughing cough-
ing up
nettle -coated
tonsils

you say *open wider*

and you pluck
at the plack,
you know i haven't been flossing
plaque on your wall
flipped it over
said

made in china
really everything
a plaque
to place upon
the walls
the halls
of your mouth,

maybe she was

and i know her teeth have
plak.

she told me when
i thought
i could be a
cheap screw
to her cheap merlot

but due to recurring dreams of
pushing her into a wine rack
and ravishing her until
radish blood leaks
out vermillion wine veins
bottles soar
shards proliferate,
rising up
eating glass like
candy,
laughing
molars ripped

left for her on the

oh you're done

move the light,
hey thanks ya know,
you're so worth the $125,
you're like the lady that asks me
on a scale of one to five
except with you it's just
cherry or ever lasting flavor blasting very berry.

un-recline
with nitrous eyes,
i hear
the motorcycle
she stole
drive by
but i know
it's time to go.

at the desk
the lady asks when i'd like to schedule my
next appointment.

REFLECTIONS ON A YOUNG MAN SMOKING

DAVID EDWARDS

Layers beneath: his heat-filled core,
Bury the meaning of it all, meaning only
Smoke and Incubus can unravel.

Blue eyes shaded by dirty-blond hair,
Of punches, kicks, and devil-may-care.
I swallow hard and cross my ankles.

A deep drag on his cigarette,
Taste forgotten from long-use
And prepubescent habit.

Meaning forgotten – I mean,
"Teleological, it means 'the point of it all.'"
He flicks his ash in disregard —
Women talking of Michelangelo.

Hard-chord muscle beneath his Nirvana shirt
Drowned in whisky, waiting.
Bjork clamors inside my bag.

He sits beside a tree – another drag, another;
Shaded, cross-legged, but no Buddha,
Eyes staring to horizon.
"Do you need a ride?"

TORSION TENSOR TENOR

REED ERLANDSON

Every day the mailman fills the same boxes,
checks the same boxes.
Maybe one day
the grace of wrist swish,
tumble-*click* of key's twist
will fill him
in turn.

Perhaps not.

He might be a god, might be high, a bad human
both, or I'd bet
some had-luck mash of three,
and even now
he may feel the weight
of silt pressed to hem
or perhaps not.

He's seen the pressed-pulp, parchment
wax-gloss bits,
the slop, flyer and fake-check bellows,
the parcels, cards, the shit
the crooks, gas, cable and black-mail demands
  Auntie Anne's lilting hand
  Smudge Ray with tears stained, the stamp

all and each pellet we swarm, the grand shot-gun coughed.
Oh, what threads collect; shifting chord of pressed texture
felt or knot, how so delicate each vector
torsion tensor tenor,

never so gracefully played as by bated breath.

LINES ON PAPER

MADELINE GRIGG

"Who knows," she says, carefully
tearing along the serrated edge,
a street magician breaking bread.
"Maybe someday this will pay
for a boathouse in Amsterdam.
Or wherever it is you'd rather be."
You hold it like a matchstick
between finger and thumb,
but it cannot be struck,
                deconstruct.
It is a white flame burning, bright
as June's waxy moon, thick as charcoal,
friction, lemongrass p e r f u m e.

A BODY

AZA PACE

—all words were selected from Michigan's rape insurance act—

shall not shall not shall not

this act does not create a right

an alleged violation

protection means
purpose prohibit enforce

trauma assault held invalid

shall not shall not

health means
elective means
qualified means
rider means
group or non-
group

Reconciliation does not apply

create
create
terminate
a right
a woman

shall not
shall not

INSOUCIANCE

BARRY MAXWELL

Thoughts congeal
like pools of molten wax,
hardening too soon,
frozen,
shaped only by
the violence of their impact
and the height from which they fall.

TWO BIOGRAPHIES

ANNA ROENIGK

an asteroid hit the moon's less photogenic
sister around two,
and my dead gay uncle
was resurrected in February.

i imagine when he was eighteen he
left home and moved across lots of states,
no longer hiding behind
tree trunks with a fishing rod and
a beautiful Lutheran face.
no, he left
maybe he fell in love
and wore that jean jacket i have
the whole time.

my aunt
lost her shit at thirty,
something to do with a broken skull inhabitant
and thinking her house was on fire.

a man took her pictures
she kept some in a box
by her bed,
but when he left her
London never seemed so gray,

and when
the tubes
crept like a rattlesnake
into his esophagus,
he told his father he wanted out.
the church elders came to pray
over his dead body
he said
now.

and when she came back to
her singed wreckage ten years later
i wanted to ask
why,
when no one else saw the flames
in the second story burning,
still alive.

THE GIRLS WE KNEW

AZA PACE

We know where the girls are
The free encyclopedia says
We know where the missing girls are
An army of suicides
Click: we were feminists
We knew
The girls were really women
Top military officer says
We knew
Like science fiction
We know where the girls are
Chapter 2
This world we live in
Companion to the Dead and Gone
This subtle little girl
I shouldn't talk with these girls
We knew and loved our names
Offer up thirteen
Things girls wish you knew—AskMen
Shock resistance
Real men don't cry God help us
We know where the missing girls are
Swearing? Fighting? Drinking?
The battle for her heart
Narrator: We knew

A girl's mind even more engaging
13 Reasons survivor recap:
We know where the girls are

OUR LITTLE SECRET

BARRY MAXWELL

You've got your secret,
your pale night-light hustle,
your quick cunning swallows
from a brown paper bag.

Tilt your head back,
take a long wicked guzzle,
let it burn in your gullet,
while you shudder and gag.

Knock back another,
let it burn my eyes hollow,
let it choke you on scruples
you've shredded like rags.

I'll keep your secret—
I'll hoard it like juju,
like a fistful of fuck you
in a twisted brown bag.

SHE/I/WE/ME

DELIA DAVIS

I. Disquiet
On the patio we sit, my mother and I
and the billowing breeze that cradles our disparity, some
chasm between us frothing and whispering obscene things.

I swallow my saliva and feel
the stiffness of my face, my cheeks and my lips; how I do not know
the natural cascade of a smile, how I have never known it

but maybe once or twice, when I stopped following
Pessoa's mutilation through the streets of Rua dos Duoradores and became
one of the caricatures of his observations,

traipsing through life in a drunken merriment,
fitted with feathers and a disquiet not hidden away as I am used to,
but a disquiet that has finally become mute. Deaf and mute.

But like the lopsided constructs of an aspiring architect, I am better on paper,
better in my head where I cannot crumble and collapse and I may sit, like Soares,
at the window and dabble in existence vicariously.

II. Discrepancy
My mother is drinking a glass of red wine. She says the word love,
places it confidently next to addiction. Argument ensues.
She does not understand my cultivated composure,

chalks it up to naivette. I do not tell her.
Her face bears the brunt of bitter communism, sober years
spent in a city dilapidated by Ceausescu's reign.

We like to open others up so we may pour our essence in them.
Call it love but I only see human desire masquerading cleverly, immortality trying
to manifest itself like cancer in other human beings.

My profile's silhouette could do a stand-in for hers;
this has followed me ceaselessly in the form of remarks from others.
Her remarks are always the loudest. "You're beautiful; just like me."

III. Defiance
I can see her eyes water when I feed the chasm
bits of my hair and nails, dead skin cells flaking away and what I truly think of sex.
These picayune pieces now out of her reach.

I love her but I want to keep it this way.
I want to tell her, "I love you mother but I do not want this."
I want to tell her more. I want to vomit. I do not do either.

There are two paths but only the narrator knows the paths converge.
The listener cannot understand the graveled terror scraping her throat,
the listener cannot possibly—

My mother clears her throat. I see gasoline in her irises. I see the lit match drop.

IV. Delicate
We are in the kitchen, divided by plates
of steamed potatoes, breaded tilapia, green beans. The salt and pepper shakers.
Silence wraps a shawl around our shoulders. We chew.

After dinner I offer to wash the plates; she nods.
Baby conversations are exchanged, ones I can cradle in the palm of my hand.
I have a headache. Yes. Work today was exhausting. Yes. Thank you for helping out.

I set the final plate in the drying rack and listen.
A clink reverberates in the absence between us.
I hold still; I hear it in the presence as well.

ANNABELLE

MARY ELIZABETH DUBOIS

I find you crumbling in the cheap armchair
over by the window.
Annabelle is chatting at you.
She likes to think she understands your taste in film, she says,
you've gotta like Quentin Tarantino?
Your mouth flickers as if to smile in agreement,
But we both know you didn't really get Pulp Fiction.

I glide into these shindigs
an icon, a queen, a marvel.
Within seconds I'm withering and
Five or so heads circle away, disinterested.
The mouths attached scarcely pause whatever dirty joke they're whispering,
but at least two people approach and bark,
"hey, hello, hi! how tired are you?"

Bill (he lives here):
"Glad you came" and "I slept two hours last night."

Jackie's talking at me about her third boyfriend this month
And I can feel your eyes
Even though I know you won't look over here a single time.
James Dean and dirty sheets, Jackie says,
I swear he's a fucking Miami fistfight.

Where's the bathroom?
Down the hall; past the dryer; take a right.

I didn't come here to talk to you
But there's expectation suffocating under the weight of such a
Sandra Dee silence.
The wine in my cup is deeper than the wine in my stomach
And suddenly I'm not drunk at all,
But Annabelle is.
We sh'go, she says,
I'm s'cute; why don' we go?

And the room is already blossoming into a grinning mouth
Of crowded teeth
And no, no, no thank you, Bill; nobody should drink any more gin.
But there are other things you believe in outside of
Ostentatious house parties and
Our pregnant, perpetual peeks to the side,
And, so, you slip out unseen.

Sorry to be such a snoozer, I say,
I only slept six hours last night.

ANATOMY SKELETON

AZA PACE

Today I eat lunch with the anatomy skeleton
Hanging all wired together in the art room.
We shake hands. I want to kiss her,
Because the bones are real,
And maybe she would bloom out of her decay,
Cicada-like and ancient.

A quick, perhaps forgivable glance at the pelvis
Confirms, yes, it is a she, and I name her Charlotte
Because I like the ring of it.
Leave her body to science? No, never to science. But to art, maybe.
What color were her eyes, I wonder? Brown and fathoms deep,
Painfully old and still lurking like embers in a heap of bones.

So old in her cave eyes, at least now she presides here,
Mutely commanding the charcoal-drenched artist,
"Look: This is how your bones cling together too.
This is all you are, really, so look!"
And if I sit here often enough, insisting she is Charlotte,
Maybe the name will rattle something awake
In that bone cocoon, knit muscle and skin over that blank,
And she will turn wild, liquid eyes
On me for a moment to blink in slow, lush approval.

Unchoose
To take up tradition and put it down

When they don't fit its mold.

They can walk away, unbound
By convention: to be only male
Or female.
They don flannel and lace equally.

Smiling with perfectly white
Straight
Teeth.

27 NOV 2014

DAVID EDWARDS

The lesbians dress better than me.
They are prettier and
Smile
With perfectly white teeth.

They usher me in out of the cold,
Taking hat and coat,
Laughing
At the joke that was told

Thirty-seconds before I knocked.

They mouth thanks for the wine,
For the year and for the
Blessings
They were told to count as kids.

Thanksgiving is about boasting
What we are fortunate to
Possess --
What we alone have plundered.

They circle the room cooking,
Washing, thankful they can choose and

THEORIES

ANNA ROENIGK

my friend told me we are all
in a stoned turtle's dream.

i think he was stoned.

i had a black cat named Nigel,
he died but
i hear the atmosphere is
composed of dead stuff and
maybe his bones
will make the ground happy.

sometimes i believe in a benevolent god
when i listen to waltz of the flowers,
so maybe Tchaikovsky was the gay messiah.

i heard that god cautiously painted by number
until finally he told the voices in his head to
go fuck themselves and
started mixing colors
like that seven- year-old kid
they're calling the new Jackson Pollock.

sometimes i think i will spend my whole life
in the fetal position,

attended to by a tube
force-feeding me nothing but
raisin bran
so i can shit.

i think god may have severely fucked up and
then tried to correct his mistakes with Elmer's,
and i guess the ocean is proof that he was a lazy
asshole.

thank god.

anyway,
i know there was some other things
i was supposed to say about stellar formation,
but thinking about the universe
expanding infinitely made
my cake eyes glaze over
and my brain ashen
like frigid knuckles.

so maybe theories of how to get
the softest hands or
find the warmest body
are more
important .

because even now
i still wish
i could have stayed longer,
outlining the burn on your wrist.

FICTION

A BLIND STITCH

JOURDEN SANDER

I first met Doug Littlefield when I was sixteen years old. Doug belonged to one of my friends; he was Jenny Littlefield's little brother. I sat next to Jenny in Geometry, quietly. I never thought to speak to her until she spoke to me first.

"Do you wanna go shopping?" Jenny asked me one day. I couldn't tell if she was asking me out of a reluctant pity, or if she really wanted to be friends with me. While I didn't want to go shopping, I still said yes.

We weren't very good friends to start with; I didn't like shopping, or girly things, or big crowds. But I liked Jenny. And I liked her family even more. One day after school, she invited me to her house. As we rode the bus home, she warned me about her annoying little brother, Doug. I was ready to share my annoyance with her, but when I actually met him, he was astounding: at nine years old, he was so handsome. A bright face with little resistance to the world, he had round cheeks that were threatening to sharpen into a young man's face, and freckles that sat underneath his eyes, like raindrops that fell from his long eyelashes. His untrained teeth protruded out from behind his mischievous smile and a small mole peeked from underneath his chin. He stuttered when he spoke and had blisters on his heels, flowering with incipient niceties and a sweet scent; I didn't want

him to be a man. I wanted him to stay young forever. The young, high pitched voice of his; the budding Adam's apple like a flower before bloom; the soft, untouched flow of his skin: it awoke something inside me that was as empowering as it was terrifying.

A few days before Jenny's birthday, I found a hot pink invitation on my pillow. My dull interest evolved into a frenzied excitement as I ripped the letter open. Bits of the envelope fell at my feet as my heart rapidly beat, my eyes scanning the page multiple times until I finally slowed down to read it in its entirety. I was invited to Jenny's sweet sixteen—and just as I hoped—it was to be held at the Littlefield house.

"So what's up with you and Josh?"

"Nothing! Well, not that much, anyway…" Jenny's trailing voice was calculated by design, working to entice questions and eager interest while still appearing to be modest and aloof. The other girls fell for her plot at ease.

"Oh my god. What happened on Friday?"

"Did he pay for the date?"

"You went to his house after, right?"

"Oh shit. It totally happened, didn't it?"

"Y'all had sex?! Oh my god."

Heat rose to my face as they talked about her first time with Josh. I picked a spot on the wall and focused on it as they talked. The wall around the spot began to blur, moving together until I finally blinked and my vision was cleared.

"How about you? Have you lost it yet?"

I blinked again and returned my attention to the other girls as I realized Jenny was talking to me. My eyebrows raised in surprise, my eyelashes touching my lids as nervous breaths whisked in and out of my parted lips. I stuttered a quiet "no" and shook my head, looking out the window.

The girls, after realizing I didn't have a story to tell, turned their attention to the next girl. I, however, continued to stare outside the window.

Even if he had been in a crowded field, I could have spotted him instantly. Doug chased after his friend, his shirt loosely exposing bits of his pale skin as he ran. As if it were a game, I spotted another mole resting near his belly button, and then soon after, I confirmed his belly button to be an "innie."

His hair tickled his eyelids and shined in the sun. It was blonder than I remembered, and longer too.

His socks stood at uneven lengths (and different colors) while his shoes flopped uselessly behind each step. His shoe laces were untied, and his heel stepped on the back of his shoe to create a makeshift slip-on. Were his shoes too small? To my dismay, he even looked a bit taller, a bit ganglier, and a bit wider. I'd only known him for six months; could he have really grown bigger already? Panic rose in my chest, the acid burning my throat as I contemplated his inevitable adulthood. The tips of my fingers shook as I began to twist my ring in unease. As I watched them play, I jerked forward when Doug suddenly tripped and crashed to the ground. The silence in the room awoke me to the present, as Jenny and the other girls looked at me in concern.

"What's wrong?"

"Are you okay?"

"You're so weird."

I assured them I was fine and blamed my sudden movement (and unrepressed shriek) on a needle in the carpet that poked my foot. I stared at the needle—that was truly there—and gave it to Jenny, who had an interest in sewing. Jenny gasped and gently took the needle from me.

"Shit, sorry about that. Do you need a band-aid?"

"Uh, yeah. I probably should get one."

"Okay, my mom is downstairs. She has a bunch in her bathroom. Do you want me to go ask?"

"No, y'all stay here. I'll be just a few minutes."

I grabbed the opportunity without hesitation, taking the stairs by twos as I made my way to the backyard. By the time I reached him, Doug was sitting in a lawn chair, picking at his bleeding leg.

"Doug, don't do that!" I kneeled down to look at Doug's leg as I spoke.

"Oh, hey! What's up?" He smiled at me, those protruding teeth reaching out to my heart as it began to beat faster.

"Did you tell your mom that you fell?"

"I'm fine. This don't even hurt." He started picking at the wound again.

"Stop it! Look, lemme go inside and get something for that, okay?"

Doug agreed to wait as I went inside and got band-aids for both of us. A small one for me and a large one for him. The gash wasn't as bad as it looked; the lines of the cut wove into his skin in a gentle way, barely leaving a trace of a scratch after I cleaned the blood off. My eyes began to glaze as my hand moved over his skin. His legs were so skinny and raw, barely any hair to protect him and hardly any scars to show the threads of his life. The cut was on his calf, but my hand began to tour a little higher, sweeping just above his boney knee. Despite the quiver in my lips and the warmth in my body, Doug didn't seem to notice.

After I finished cleaning him up, Doug invited me outside to play with his friends. We played tag, and then hide-and-seek. The boys, who were experiencing the unfamiliar arousal from an older, opposite sex, were thrilled by my animated presence. Doug seemed proud to boast himself as the reason for my joining them, making me blush bright pink. I teased him, messing up his hair and lightly pushing him as we ran. As we played hide-and-seek, Doug grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the playhouse to hide as his friend counted.

"You go in first!" Doug instructed, his eyes wide with animation.

I crawled into the small space and Doug soon followed after. I immediately felt intoxicated by Doug as he crouched next to me. My chest was irrepressible and my body a mystery; I felt it warming in a way that was unfamiliar, my legs shifting as I bit my lip. The warmth spread to my groin, to the center of me, as waves of guilt spread to my brain. The questions and

feelings I had collided inside me, creating a nervous duality that seized the intimate moment while also pushing it further away. The energy pressed on my temples, making my face warm and my hands sweaty.

"Do you think they saw us?" Doug whispered.

"No, I don't think so. Are you having fun?" I asked.

I had never once been nervous around a boy before, but suddenly the dimples on his face, the softness of his cheeks, the youthful deviancy in his smile… my hand moved to his leg. Doug looked up at me, confused.

"Yeah , I'm having fun…" He trailed off—much in the way his sister did—leaving me wanting more. More of his voice, more of his skin, more of him. I kept the one hand on his leg while using my other hand to turn his face toward me. My thumb brushed the mole under his chin. It begged to be touched.

"What, uh…" He stared into my face with his round question marks for eyes, his lips tenderly parted as I leaned forward and kissed him. He smelled like I would have imagined: sweaty and sweet like a rain-drenched flower. He tasted like candy or cake or some other dessert left behind, and he felt warm with cold beads of sweat dripping down his forehead. His hands flailed, but I kept him there. I moved my hand higher on his leg, sweeping underneath his shorts. My body was seething with fever as I pulled back to look at his face. I moved my hands to our chests, one on his and the other on mine. His heart was beating nearly as fast as mine was.

"See? You like it too, right…?" I exhaled each word with a dizzy cloud of desire, yearning to kiss him again. I closed my eyes, letting my body connect to his heartbeat, to this intimacy I hadn't felt before. I smiled, my world ablaze with ripe sensation, but then, I opened my eyes. And I saw him. I saw him pushing back against the playhouse, his eyes wide and eyebrows cinched inward, his mouth clamped shut and shaking. The mole bouncing with the fearful quiver of his chin. I ran out of the playhouse. I left the party. I left the Littlefield house. And I never went back.

Years passed and I still remembered Doug. But not just him—I remembered nearly every child I wanted to touch. You don't notice all the children in the world until you're trying to avoid them, which proved nearly an impossible feat. Or, so I have found. Two years after Jenny's birthday party, at 18 years old, I struggled. I struggled to ignore them. To ignore the live children walking past me, the laughing, fictional children in magazines, and the beautiful child-actors on screen. I struggled to stop my fingers from typing: c.h.i.l.d p.o.r… but I would stop. And I would struggle.

At 20 years old, I took up sewing to distract myself from them. I don't know why sewing was what calmed me, but it did. At first it was easy, but eventually I needed it harder, more complicated to match my increasingly complicated sexuality, so I learned a new trick: the blind stitch. Blind stitching is the method of sewing material together while making the stitch thread invisible, or close to it. Blind stitching is the method of sewing memories and thoughts together while making the stitch thread easier to bear. Blind stitching is not the method of sewing broken rules that haven't been broken into an invisible line; blind stitching is not the method of sewing broken fabrics together while making the stitch thread stronger. Blind stitching is the method of sewing material together while redefining togetherness. Blind stitching is the method of redefining.

This is my house. These are the walls I've built: I am 31 years old and I have restrictions on my television channels. Children's shows, children's sitcoms, children's channels: I restrict them all. If, while watching an adult television show, a male child comes on, I leave the room. If a female adult becomes pregnant, I stop watching the show. I do not watch cartoons. I do not drink alcohol. I do not do drugs. I do not take medication. I listen to CD's. I listen to J-Pop and enjoy it even though I can't understand the lyrics. I have no internet in my home. I live in a grey box. Anything more colorful than neutral or earthy is not allowed. I take three showers a day and wash my hands in between. I keep antibacterial on my person at all times. I do not keep friends. Friends do not keep me. So I do not keep photos, or picture

frames, or photos in picture frames. I do not see my older sister. I do not see her twin boys. I do not answer her phone calls. I do see my younger sister. I do see her girlfriend. I do see their childless home. I do not go to family reunions. I do not have much of a family. I do not have togetherness. I do not define. I do have a job. I do go to work. I do work with adults and only adults. I do go to the bathroom if a coworker brings their child to work. I do not talk to my coworkers if possible. I do not excel at my job. I do not get disappointed. I like to do things with my hands. I like to keep them rough. I have built these calluses. I have built this home. I do not use lotion. I do not use perfume. I do not have sex. I do not touch myself. I sew. I sew. I sew. I sew in my spare bedroom that is not for guests, so is not a guest bedroom. I sew in that room because it is my sewing room. I sew my mouth shut. I do not look out the window. I keep the blinds closed and the room dark. I sew. I sew a stitch. I sew a blind stitch. I sew a blind stitch and then another. I sew another until the lines run together and are not blind, anymore. I try to do all this and more. But even when I try to sew a blind stitch, some stitches are impossible to be made blind.

I have new neighbors. They have kids. Three of them: two girls, and one little boy. I do not introduce myself, or welcome them to the neighborhood, or bring them friendly fruit cake, or look at them, or smile. Well, I try. Not to look. When I first saw the boy, he was looking right at me. Or was he just looking at the house? At the window? My eyes met his. He smiled. He looked like... Doug. Like Doug Littlefield. I think that is Doug... that's Doug.

The new family next door likes the outdoors and likes the new town. They frequent the lake and leave their car doors unlocked. They trust the neighborhood. They allow their little boy to play in the front yard. I started watching him from my kitchen window, mostly on the weekends when his parents were home and allowed him to roam the neighborhood freely.

I step up to the window today, knowing he'll be there. He rides his little bike, his delicate hands gripping the pedals as tight as one would grip a hand. I start to breathe faster, my body tingling. I slowly back away from my

window until my head is against the grey, blank wall. I feel the long unfamiliar warmth flounce and thread within me. I clamp my mouth shut, sewing my lips together as I approach the window again to consume his existence. I deliberately glide my hand down my stomach and under my dress as I watch him. And I watch him, my eyes stitching the scene to memory.

The boy interrupts his bike riding by jumping off and pushing it in the grass. He begins walking down the street. I already know where he's going before he goes there: the neighborhood park. Doesn't he look like Doug Littlefield? I think that's Doug. I collapse on the floor as he walks away, my hand sliding from underneath my clothes as I regain my composure. I don't want to stop myself this time: I follow him. I follow Doug.

He is younger, this Doug, with sticks for legs and a bowling ball for a head that sits on a cloud of bubbling thoughts and uncharted adventures. His skin is olive, unlike the real Doug, and free of freckles or blemishes. He wears a bright pink shirt that is too big for him and yellow shorts that don't match. He is radiant. He is the child who smiles from ear to ear and has little blond hairs on his cheeks. He is the child who is colorful and bright and without worry; I imagine he watches television before bed and gets tucked in at night. I imagine he does not fear the boogie man, because he has never heard of him. He walks down the sidewalk, far ahead of me, not noticing my presence lingering in the wake of his vivid energy. We walk to the neighborhood park, separately yet somehow together.

We sit on the swings. I say hello. He is happy to say hello too, and says he knows I am his neighbor. We swing together. I ask if he wants to be pushed. He is happy to say yes. I rub my hand on his back and push. He squeals, going higher and higher until he jumps off and lands on his feet. He runs toward the playscape and tells me to chase him. I do. I chase him with the contained energy of someone who has refrained from chasing for so long. I chase with the warmth crawling inside me again. He laughs as I run after his little feet. He suddenly tumbles and rolls across the dirt, still laughing. My cheeks are pink and my skin is warm. My hands came out of

my body and I see them tickling Doug. Doug smiles and giggles. He trusts me. My hands move lower, the tickling slowing. I want him. I want this child.

"William! Come over here…Excuse me, aren't you our neighbor?"

My limbs solidify into thick slabs of guilty weapons as my eyes widen at the woman in front of me. I know her as Doug's mom. This Doug's mom. I stand up, removing my hands from Doug—William—who stands up and runs to his mother, wrapping his arms around her with a big smile.

"Yes, hello. I'm sorry, I uh, saw him at the park and we started to play…"

The mother listens to my sorry explanation with little patience in her eyes. She must have seen me, the real me. I stay in the playground dirt, sitting on my knees, at William's mother's mercy. I contemplate running. Or explaining myself further. Or making a scene. But after a moment, she wraps her arms around her son and looks at me pointedly.

"I don't know if you have children, but you should know that I'm not comfortable with someone I don't know touching my child. It may have been innocent, but don't touch him unless I'm around." She then turns and begins to head home with William, leaving me on my knees, staring at the sky in disbelief.

I've never liked religion very much. And religion never seemed to like me, either. I am naturally a figure of hell. So there was never hope for me anyway. Growing up, I didn't sing in church. I didn't pray in church. I ate the wafers and drank the wine but all for the sake of experience. I was slapped on the wrist for losing my focus in Sunday school. I was slapped on the wrist for thinking about sex while losing my focus. I thought I believed in God, but I was an empty believer. Because, I didn't believe. Maybe I never did. It didn't suit me anyway.

I am going to hell. It's okay, maybe. If I prepare myself, will it make it less painful? If I drag my sewing chair—the one that rocks back and forward just lightly—down the stairs of hell, with willing acceptance, sit in my chair, and rock and rock and rock and rock, backward while I sew and then forward while I stitch, will it be less painful? When my seediest thoughts

and the most sinful memories play on the screen in front of me, will I feel the fire around me? When the flames lick and consume my wooden sewing chair, will I stop to remember the boy's name? — or will I sit in my chair, rocking, and burning, and sewing, no matter what I've done? — and sew and sew and sew and sew?

At the park that day, I finally felt the color, the warmth, the sensation, of intimacy again. Just as I never wanted Doug to grow up, I didn't want William to grow up, either. Luckily, even when the Dougs and Williams are gone, there will be more just beyond the horizon, waiting for me to stitch my thread into their life before they even know it's there.

GRAWLIX

MICHAEL ESPARZA

And for the life of him he couldn't remember if he had set it off or not. Thirty years doing the same thing over and over again, and for the first time he wasn't sure if he had done it. The suspended metallic spheres, the initial pull, the first gratifying click of impact, the propagation of kinesis, the symmetrical movement of the ball on the other side, the clack of resultant impact. This was Devin's constant. And every time he had left his room since his eighth birthday, when he had received the Newton's cradle from his father, he had set those perfect pendulums in motion, dulcet in their rhythmic fidelity.

But he didn't know. He couldn't recall. And the uncertainty bellowed.

To his left, Laura waved wryly to Jan, who had just walked in. Trademark grimace.

"Here he comes," she said. "Scorndinavian."

The moniker still tickled Devin. Far too much bitterness in a man that young. Despite the perpetual sulk, he was just plain pretty. Every aspect of his trappings and physical features served to contradict his temperament. Prima facie, a prototypical Swede indeed; tall, blond, blue, chiseled. The name, even—Jan Borg. Yet the way he looked at you, his face rife with

antagonism and unconditional distaste, you could tell he bore the acrimony of a widowed octogenarian.

"Unlimited breadsticks, eh Jan?" Laura, grinning in derision, brandished a garlicky rod at him as he sat. Devin suspected that the only reason she had tagged along was to tease Jan (which was something she truly relished) and not out of any actual interest in Alfred or what he had to say. "You've got to like breadsticks. Everybody likes breadsticks."

The eye roll, the scoff. Something to be admired, really.

"He's late," said Jan.

Devin, not taking his eyes from the window, replied, "So were you."

"You've picked quite a place here, Devin. The Olive Garden in Victor, New York. Pride of the Empire State."

"Alfred chose it. Almost exactly halfway between Buffalo and Ithaca. It's a matter of convenience."

Jan shook his head with apathy. "He's not going to show."

This was precisely Devin's fear. It had taken them months to find him, dozens of futile correspondences, trying to convince him to talk, and now he was going to stand them up because Devin hadn't done the thing with the Newton's fucking cradle.

"He'll show," said Laura. "Don't know if he'll say anything, but he'll come."

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Four months prior to the Olive Garden summit, in one of the southernmost points on the planet, Devin had decided that Alfred Joyce was the most important person in his life (except he wasn't Alfred then, he was Francisco). Devin and Jan were sitting at the bedside of Mónica Araya, who was inches from death, in a ramshackle house on Isla Egán, when they first heard the phrase. Said once with unprecedented intensity, then again slightly softer, then again and again and again, her voice tapering to a feeble whisper. Once Devin realized what was happening, he dashed to his suitcase,

retrieved his tape recorder, and recorded the last few repetitions of those startling alien words. All the work he had done up to that point, undone in those waning moments of her life.

Because Mónica was his work, she was all he had. She was the only living native speaker (whose location was known at that point) of the language isolate Egán, spoken on the eponymous Isla Egán in Tierra del Fuego, Chile. Yes, there was some prior research, but it was ill formed, cursory, incomplete. Egán was about to die, and Devin wanted to be there when it did. So, with some financial help from Cornell, he and his surly Scandinavian RA had departed for South America to find the old woman on the tiny island.

She was ailing, surely, but Mónica Araya was impressively tenacious. Self-sufficient, regimented, she performed every conceivable household chore on a daily basis, without fail, never once deviating from schedule. That was the first thing Devin came to admire about Mónica, her respect for consistency and order.

The second thing he came to admire about Mónica was her disdain for Jan. From day one, she had his number. Everything she needed to know about Jan Borg was contained in the way he had looked at her home, snarling ever so slightly in condescending disgust. Her entire life was contained in that space, but it was derelict and ugly, so to Jan it was shit, and he looked at it like it was shit. It was mutual, though. Mónica stared out her window at the porcelain scowl and she saw shit as well.

The reciprocal distaste only grew. Blossomed, really. The animosity was genuine to the point of being beautiful, perhaps more beautiful than reciprocal admiration. During their first dinner at Mónica's house, while Devin and Mónica conversed in stiff Spanish, Jan did nothing but glare at his bowl of stew, which Mónica had spent the entire day preparing, in unabashed revulsion. So the next day Jan awoke to the sight of his shoes filled with cold stew and the sound of Mónica cackling in the kitchen.

After the conversation became warmer and more fluid on that first night, the two had remained in the kitchen for hours, Mónica cleaning up, Devin inquiring about her life and family. She was born in 1935 to the only

two remaining members of an ancient hermetic tribe. They had long spoken only Egán, but were gradually forced to assimilate into the Spanish-speaking world around them. In 1952, when Mónica was seventeen, she bore a set of twins by a Peruvian fugitive nine months after their first and only drug-addled escapade. She was disowned by her parents and moved into what was now her very own home but was then a sort of halfway house occupied primarily by recovering substance abusers. She loathed herself for subjecting her two boys to such a volatile environment, but she had a strong maternal instinct and raised Manuel and Francisco with the sincerity and integrity that her parents had never shown her.

Francisco, in Mónica's own words, was another mother's son. Born English. For the first few years of his life, Mónica assumed his reluctance to speak was just reticence, but once he started school she realized that Spanish and Egán, the only languages he had ever known, were for some reason alien and repellent to him. Every week he would bring home two copies of the same book, one in Spanish, one in English, and read them both a chapter at a time. He started with *Treasure Island* and worked his way up to *Sons and Lovers*. He didn't teach himself English; he had always known it. There were more words scribbled in the margins of *Finnegan's Wake*, Mónica suspected, than had ever been articulated to her.

Manuel was intense, passionate, insatiable, a veritable carbon copy of his namesake. In his early teenage years he immersed himself in the world of radical politics and, by fifteen, had become somewhat of a pamphleteering prodigy. He was constantly making excursions to mainland Chile to meet with his fellow leftist revolutionaries, and he would always return pontificating with ecstasy on the virtues of Marxism.

In February of 1968, Manuel left for the mainland and never came back. On the morning he left the house for the last time, he grabbed a loaf of bread from the counter, pecked his mother on the cheek, and walked out the door without saying a word. Mónica had been too engrossed in preparing breakfast to say she loved him or even goodbye, and she never forgave herself.

The following year, Francisco left too. He, at least, told Mónica where he was going. For a couple years after his departure he would send her a terse letter every now and then, but they grew less and less frequent and eventually stopped. At the time of Devin's visit, she hadn't heard from him in decades.

And then eventually the addicts left and she found herself alone in an empty halfway house at the bottom of the earth.

And then eventually the researchers came, and they would ogle at her as some sort of linguistic artifact and ask her about the Egán language and draw little charts and lists in their notebooks and then leave.

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Jan, shockingly, proved himself to be utterly disinterested in everything he had been sent to do. He made no effort to communicate in any way with Mónica, and only spoke with Devin when he had to. He would report his findings for the day and Jan would have to feign interest convincingly enough for Devin to leave him alone for the remainder of the evening. The majority of his time was spent in Francisco's old room. Devin presumed he occupied himself by scoffing at passing specks of dust. On their penultimate day in Tierra del Fuego, while pretending to help Jan search for his other shoe ("talk to her, I know she has it, probably put it in a bucket of lard or something"), he noticed the gaps in Francisco's bookshelf and the pile of classics at the foot of the bed.

The research became secondary to Devin, an afterthought. Like the researchers before him, he asked her about the Egán language and drew little charts and lists in his notebook. But she was not a linguistic artifact to Devin. She was a portrait of humanity whose very presence filled him with fervent adoration. He did not want to leave. Every day, Jan, in the midst of his ablutionary lamentations of existence, would beg him to leave, but Devin would always say they weren't done. Even though he knew he had amassed a substantial collection of words not contained in prior research

and had developed a much more cohesive Egán grammar than had ever been published and knew basically everything about the language that he thought he needed to know.

So when Mónica began uttering that final phrase over and over again, Devin was completely dumbstruck. Because it was not Egán.

On the flight home, Jan did nothing but read a battered and heavily annotated copy of *Tom Jones*. Twice. If it were anyone else, Devin would've sworn he smiled a few times. But Jan wasn't anyone else. So he chalked it up to a facial tic.

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It took Devin three months of assiduous searching to find Francisco Araya. He spoke to Laura on the day he finally tracked him down.

"You ready for this, Laura?"

"Hit me."

"Forty-three-year-old actuary living in Buffalo with his partner, Dale. Goes by Alfred Joyce."

"Jesus Christ. Alfred Joyce."

"But Buffalo! That's close. I could be there tonight."

A slight hesitation on the other end. "You're really going after this, Dev?"

"No-brainer! He's the only native speaker of this language in the world. What the fuck kind of linguist am I if I don't go after this?"

Laura sighed.

She always had a difficult time imagining what exactly Devin got out of reconstructing tongues that were never to be spoken by anyone ever again. No, Laura had her own thing. A self-proclaimed "obscenitist," she was concerned with the role that taboo language plays in society, and, much to the chagrin of Devin, she was very successful. Laura was seven years his junior and had already published more than he had. Books about implications of religiously oriented obscenities (entitled Jesus Fucking Christ), books about implications of sexually oriented obscenities (entitled Cunts and Cocks),

etc. Currently she was doing research for an upcoming book on censorship (entitled F**k). She had recently become obsessed with grawlix, the strings of ostensibly nonsensical symbols that represent cursing in comic strips, coined by Beetle Bailey creator Mort Walker.

Intellectual skirmishes were all too frequent with them.

"What, your job is so much more upstanding? Writing books about f-bombs, little juvenile tongue-in-cheek fuck-yous to publishers and academics? At least my 'dead' languages have actual meaning. You just have your grawlix. You have nonsense."

"But just what makes my grawlix so different from your Egán? Unless you actually find this old anglophile, neither of them means anything. Maybe all I have is bullshit. And words like 'bullshit'. But, at this point, all you have is bullshit too."

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"Turquoise Accord, pulling in right now, that might be him."

Devin started to hear Newton's cradle as soon as he saw the car. It was him. It was Francisco. It was Egán incarnate.

He looked utterly pedestrian. He had a shaved head and wireframe glasses, wearing a blue sweater tucked into high waisted khakis. Trembling too hard to wave, Devin elbowed Laura to gesture to him.

Alfred sat down next to Jan. Inexplicably, Jan's repugnance evaporated.

Devin began, clearing his throat. "Hello, Alfred."

He had not removed his jacket or anything. He looked just about ready to bolt out the door any second.

"I was wondering if I could talk to you about—"

"I don't want to talk about my family. Or anything personal. Strictly academic. I don't have a lot of time."

Devin's heart sank, but he acquiesced. He took out his field notes and began asking Alfred general questions about the accuracy of his grammatical and lexical findings, making slight adjustments and additions where nec-

essary. He combed every nuance of Alfred's features for hints of Mónica or his native country, all the while cradling his tape recorder in his free hand.

"Jan, do you have any questions?"

But Jan was completely motionless, gawking at Alfred with an expression on his face Devin had never seen before. Presently, he was too distracted to make anything of it.

"Jan?" asked Laura. "You OK there, bud?"

Alfred cleared his throat. "Well, if that's everything, I think I'll be going."

As he stood up, Devin started. "Wait."

Alfred turned to look at him, reluctant to hear what came next.

"I'm wondering if you could listen to one thing for me."

Devin placed the tape recorder on the table and pressed play. Within the first syllable, Alfred knew who was speaking. The hair on his hands bristled.

"What is this?"

Gingerly, Devin explained: "Right before your mother passed, she started saying this phrase over and over again. It doesn't match up with anything I found in my research, so I don't think it's Egán. It doesn't sound like anything I've ever heard."

Alfred didn't budge.

"Is it Egán, Alfred?"

Finally, Alfred moved.

"I know she was not well. She wasn't that old, but I know she was very sick. What you heard was a dying woman letting go of reality. She was, if you will, speaking in tongues. It's nonsense. Gibberish."

Click-clack-click-clack-click-clack-click-clack—

"There's a term for that," piped up Laura. "Glossolalia."

Click-clack-click-clack-click—

"There's another term for that," Alfred replied:

Click-clack-click—

"Bullshit."

Click-clack—

"She asked for you on her deathbed, Francisco."

He stormed out of the restaurant.

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"You see him out there, Dev?"

Francisco had vacated the Olive Garden with noticeable urgency, booked it out to his Accord, but hadn't put his keys in the ignition. After adjusting his rearview for five solid minutes, he had yet to move.

"Is he… what's he doing?"

Jan grabbed his messenger bag and made his way toward the door.

"Tell him the breadsticks are phenomenal," said Laura.

After several minutes of tapping on the window and exchanging monosyllables through the glass, Alfred unlocked the car and allowed Jan to take the passenger seat.

"Looks like he's getting something out of his bag."

Alfred's face softened as Jan handed him the book. The Scorndinavian looked on with that same facial tic as on the plane as Alfred began to turn the pages, gingerly, reverently.

The otherworldly voice on the tape recorder was still reciting its meaningless litany.

Speaking in tongues.

Glossolalia.

Bullshit.

Grawlix.

"Devin, I think he's coming back in."

He glanced up at the window. There was Jan, left hand still resting on Alfred's upper back, right hand gripping an old copy of *Tom Jones*, guiding Alfred through the doors of the Olive Garden.

Back in Ithaca, Newton's cradle continued to sound.

L'HIVER DE MARS

ELIZABETH WERTH

Sébastien has a tiny apartment in Paris, something that he bought when he was still a struggling pilot but had managed to scrounge up just enough money to find somewhere to live. It's quiet and quaint, something very lived-in. The walls, once painted white in a bygone time, have started to yellow with age. The furniture was collected slowly over time, a piece here and a piece there from thrift shops whenever Sébastien had the money. It's nothing cohesive, though he had tried to buy based on how well the furniture stuck to a general style and color scheme. It's alright that it doesn't match, though; it gives the little place a homey look, and Sébastien has his own room at Jaime's manor back in Scotland decorated in the extravagant style he could never attain here to compensate.

It's March, early in the morning, and Sébastien wakes up to the sound of the wind. The apartment is old and in a state of slight disrepair no matter how much he tries to mend it. Right now, the culprit is currently the poorly-sealed window that has been letting in cold air all winter; the wind is howling through the cracks and causing the vent connected to the stove to clank every so often. He should be used to it by now, really, but it still manages to rouse him from sleep at an awful hour of the morning, where the

light from the window is still a hazy shade of gray and the bustle of the city below him hasn't even started.

They had three days of spring, where the sun peeked out from behind the clouds and warmed the earth and sent the trees off to start budding. It was the slightest little sliver of a better season, and then they were thrown headfirst back into a bitter winter with nothing but the taste of what will lie beyond, a taste of summer, that everyone swallowed readily only to choke on it and have to spit it back out after those beautiful three days.

The only thing that can console the Frenchman is that there's a warmth in his bed, the kind of incredible warmth that can only come from another person. Jaime had come over to keep Sébastien company after he called up the Scot and asked him to come see the gorgeous Parisian spring. They had had two days of traipsing about the city before the icy winds returned and made leaving the house utterly undesirable.

Which is okay, really, because Jaime is here for another four days, and Sébastien is just as happy to spend those four days nestled under the covers with the man. As long as it means he doesn't have to brave the disappointment of the second round of winter alone.

With a soft little sigh, Sébastien, tired of investigating what it was that was waking him up, drops his head back down onto the pillow and nestles closer to Jaime. Though he's still asleep, the Scot almost instinctively tightens his arm around Sébastien's waist and presses his forehead against the back of Sébastien's neck. The bed isn't very big, so it warrants a lot of snuggling, for which Sébastien is eternally grateful.

The action puts a little smile on his face, and he laces his fingers with Jaime's as best he can. On mornings like this, Sébastien is used to waking up alone, the cold air having seeped under the quilt his mother made for him years ago, chilling him to the bone. Now, he doesn't have to worry about that. Even though Jaime is an early riser, he'll stay in bed holding Sébastien until the latter man wakes up when they're in Paris together. It's something about the romance of the city, the Scot had explained once. He's swept up by it, and it inspires a lot of late mornings in bed together.

In a few hours, they'll have to brave the wind buffeting through the streets to pick up a few things to make dinner. They don't even have enough supplies for breakfast, which means they'll stop at the little corner café on the way for something warm. It'll make it difficult to go back outside, where the persistent wind will unwind the scarves that they'll carefully wrap around one another before they leave and will numb their toes. It'll put out Sébastien's cigarettes, and, when he gives up trying in favor of holding Jaime's hand, it'll have made his fingers ice-cold in sharp contrast to how warm Jaime's will be from the pocket of his coat. The kisses they'll sneak every so often will taste like ice, but they won't have the luxury of kissing the winter from one another's lips; they probably shouldn't even kiss in the first place, but that doesn't mean they won't. And then, with armfuls of groceries that will hold them over for the next few days, they'll run back to the quaint apartment with the yellowing walls and tiny bed and mismatched furniture and poorly-sealed windowpanes, and it'll feel like the only home they'll ever need.

For as much as he aches for the warmth, and for as much as he yearns to spend the rest of his four days with Jaime in bed, Sébastien thinks that he almost doesn't mind having to brave the return of winter, as long as it means he gets to have Jaime brave it with him.

LEGAL PAD

MICHAEL ESPARZA

RIGHT COLUMN: Your Manhattan *list is kaput.*

And that's really what started this whole thing, isn't it? Woody Allen? I rented *Manhattan* a couple weeks back. I couldn't remember if I liked it more than *The Purple Rose of Cairo* or not. In one of the final scenes, Isaac (Woody) starts to list things that make "life worth living": "Groucho Marx… *Sentimental Education* by Flaubert…" (etc.) and ends with "Tracy's face." Then he runs off to find Mariel Hemingway.

Come to think of it, I think *Sleeper* is my favorite.

But the exercise seemed apropos given my situation. So as "Embraceable You" played over the end credits, I fished my legal pad out of my bag and emblazoned the front page with "THINGS THAT MAKE LIFE WORTH LIVING." "Minor Threat, *Gravity's Rainbow*, Jig…" I wrote and subsequently erased "Elle's Face" five times. This was the *Manhattan* list. I couldn't find the damn thing until yesterday, and once I did I realized that, try as I might, none of it moved me. Those synapses aren't firing anymore. D.C. hardcore, Thomas Pynchon, my lumbering, myopic Great Dane, all raindrops on a tin roof. Sure, I know they're there, they're making quite a racket, but they're not getting in. That's my English teacher moment for the day.

That was what really scared me, what prompted this particular coffee shop endeavor.

LEFT COLUMN: You made that cute barista laugh last week.

Start with the little victories, sure.

She has this sort of gaunt allure, not emaciated per se, but spare. She'll put her obsidian hair up in a ponytail with a fluorescent orange hair tie when the commuters begin to inundate the café. She always yawns out of the left corner of her mouth like she's trying to keep it in, like her fatigue is some poorly kept secret. She says "sure thing" after every order and "ain't you a peach" in a caricatured Southern drawl after a particularly generous tip.

Maybe I'm being reductive with "cute." She stupefies me. I'm an acolyte.

So last week I was standing behind a meticulously tailored Armani of a man, clinging to sixty inches, berating his Bluetooth in an ill-suited baritone. Before she could finish uttering a single syllable, she was presented with a finger; not *the* finger, but the one between *the* finger and the thumb, palm facing her, a reprimand, not an apology. She pursed her lips and furrowed her brow, and omitted that lovely "sure thing" after his terse "cappuccino, thanks." He shuffled sideways.

"Orange spice tea as usual?"

"Yeah."

"Sure thing."

She got to work on the suit's coffee, grimacing, applying considerably less care than usual.

"Asshole," she muttered. "If he wanted to work, he should've gotten there on time instead of at"—checks her phone—"half past ten."

I pipe up, "I don't think he's going to work today. Chocolate factory's closed on Mondays."

Objectively, far from my best quip. But I got a snicker. Coquettish? Perhaps. I'm reading too much into it, aren't I.

I dropped a ten conspicuously in the tip jar when I went up to get my tea, maybe squeeze in another back-and-forth. But a gaggle of high school kids had just flown in, and she was occupied.

I did get an "ain't you a peach," though. I love being a peach.

RIGHT COLUMN: There was that other thing you said.

I refrained from going back for several days. My return, I felt, would warrant a repeat performance. I'd need to demonstrate as much if not more wit than I did with my Oompa-Loompa jab.

"Orange spice, sure thing. You don't get sick of these things?"

"Well, I'd try a coffee, but… you know. Nature's laxative."

You fucking idiot.

RIGHT COLUMN: You're a fucking idiot.

She didn't come in today. (Ah, don't dwell on it. New subject.)

LEFT COLUMN: Chandler needs a punkle.

High school teacher was never necessarily a dream profession of mine, and it isn't now. It was simply my fail-safe in college; in the event that, somehow, job listings four years in the future did not read "WANTED: wise-ass philosophy major with no experience and tenuous grasp on real-world skills," I decided to get my teaching certificate alongside my degree. I managed to land a position teaching English at Tweed High School. The all-round lack of effort, interest, and ability conveyed by my first couple years' worth of students was, frankly, impressive. After a while, because of my submissiveness to bureaucracy and asinine grading policies, designed only to buttress the school's reputation, I was given Advanced Placement training and a couple classes of, as my principal put it, "truly gifted minds, yours for the molding!"

If the on-levels bored me, then the AP's depressed me. They were A-chasers, SparkNotes scholars, observers of the bare minimum. At least the on-levels had had the courtesy to ignore me completely. Every paper of theirs was a novelty to me. I read interpretations that, while poorly articulated and grossly flawed, were still their own inventions. The AP's listened just enough to write regurgitations, hackneyed thesisbodybodybodyconclusions that parroted the terms and strategies I taught them with absolutely no ingenuity whatsoever. It was exactly what I was trained to teach, so I begrudg-

ingly passed them. But I longed for the days when I could read a hundred uniquely awful essays instead of the same sub-par essay a hundred times.

Chandler was a godsend. For one thing, he wrote. Outside of class. He'd shown me his stories, and they're acerbic, frank, funny. I practically dived over them.

He didn't say a word for the first few weeks. He sat in my blind spot and stared at the ceiling tiles. He had a Hitler Youth haircut and a seemingly inexhaustible collection of stiff button-downs and khakis. Then, one Thursday, after I had assigned Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" the class prior, I started playing "Kill the Poor" by Dead Kennedys as my students meandered in. I noticed someone in the hall darting, rodent-like, to the doorway. It was a beaming Chandler, who brandished his thumb like a jackknife in my direction and took a seat in the front row.

He started coming in daily during my lunch period. Son of a retired Wall Street banker and a saccharine Princeton housewife, Chandler excitedly disclosed to me his closet atheism, anarchism, and, perhaps most condemning in the eyes of his father, writerly ambitions. He exuded genuine passion that I don't even recall encountering in college. Shirking the most basic principles of proper student-teacher rapport, I started telling him stories of my days as a bassist in local hardcore band The Sick Fucks (I omitted the name), playing house shows in Northern Ohio and living out of a van for weeks at a time. He started referring to me as his punkle. A sort of punk uncle, I assumed.

Then one day I received a phone call from an irate Leonard Dormer, wondering how exactly his son had procured these awful CD's by Circle Jerks and Bad Brains because he certainly didn't purchase them for him. Chandler was in another class the following day.

RIGHT COLUMN: 99% of the human race.

I had seen Chandler only a handful of times since then. He was painfully reticent, clearly terrified to be seen with me, and had apparently fractured his nose after "falling off his bike."

He doesn't write anymore.

LEFT COLUMN: …God?

Yikes. That's a whole separate list. Something else?

RIGHT COLUMN: You are not the writer you thought you'd be.

Now that one hurts.

There's a very specific memory I have from when I was nineteen, a Sick Fuck at the time, in the van careening towards Akron. I was resting my head on a Marshall cab and my feet on a bass drum, reading a novel (in the interest of propriety, I'll refrain from divulging the title and author). And I remember being furious. I exclaimed to the drummer, Tom, riding shotgun, "I could've written this shit!" Tom, naturally, was too stoned to respond coherently. But I decided to figure myself as a satirist of sorts, in the vein of Heller or Vonnegut, and began mapping out a novel on what else but a legal pad. It was going to be sloppy, irreverent, and almost certainly denounced by the masses. I was ecstatic.

But unfortunately, I had studied philosophy. It was all there in concept and died in implementation. There's another very specific memory I have, about six years later, staring at the page number 36 at the bottom of my computer screen for five hours without typing and eventually hurling a highball glass into the wall behind me. Jig, consummately unruffled, relocated calmly from the sofa to his bed by the bedroom door.

LEFT COLUMN: Jig needs you.

RIGHT COLUMN: His days are numbered.

Ten is ancient for a Dane, and Jig is going to hit double digits in a month. He's already a couple years into some fairly severe hip dysplasia and he doesn't know I'm in the room unless I'm three inches from his face.

He was Elle's. I had begged her to let me keep him when she left. It wasn't even a matter of affection for me. I had never really been a dog person, or an animal person, or really a person person. Jig was basically a big, lazy roommate who, given his inability to speak, had no choice but to listen, no matter how indifferent he seemed to be in my presence. When I'd grade a particularly miserable paper, I'd read lines out loud to him, imitating a ste-

reotypical 1940's Frank Capra schoolboy, as he studied Colbert gesticulating on the T.V.

"D'you hear that, Jig? 'Pigment of his imagination.' Pigment. Oh, God bless 'em, Jig."

And Jig would just raise his brows and grunt like a horse.

And now it's a whole geriatric ordeal. Jig has an extensive medicinal timetable and requires prescription brittle-bones dog food and pricey orthopedic loungers, and every day his limp grows more piteous and his whimpering more frequent.

I think when it hurts too much just to walk outside and take a shit, you're pretty much done. And I think Jig knows that.

So now we're just waiting.

RIGHT COLUMN: You have The Guarantee.

I suppose nothing is ever 100%. But something about it just screams finality to me. That's why I call it The Guarantee. It's been sitting there behind my bathroom mirror for months now, and my eyes gloss over it twice a day, still gratingly orange, still unopened, between the Nardil and the Listerine. It'll be there if I decide I need it, and it'd be a perfect way out for me because

LEFT COLUMN: God knows you hate attention.

Indeed I do. But there'd be no chalk outlines on sidewalks or bullet holes in walls or bathtubs filled with blood here. Just two bottles on a bedside table, Demerol and gin, both empty. No note. A one-way ticket. But then again

LEFT COLUMN: God knows you hate clichés.

And I'd be one. Because the whole family curse trope is so tired, and I'd be right there with my father and brother. That's just too easy. Bad writing.

Is it? I can't say, I suppose. I've never finished anything.

I was sixteen when my father decided to hang himself. For some reason, the only time I ever think about it nowadays is when I'm trying to figure out why the hell he decided to do it in the guest room. My best guess is he didn't want someone coming home early and stopping him, and knowing

that nobody in our house ever left their rooms, his safest bet was the fourth bedroom.

"Your father is dead," my mother had reported, reading a newspaper and still in her scrubs, as soon as Eric and I walked through the front door.

"What?"

She had yet to look up from the Business section.

"He took the extension cord into the guest bedroom and committed suicide. Cerebral hypoxia."

"He hung himself?"

"No, Eric. He didn't. He *hanged* himself."

Finally she glanced in our direction.

"An interesting note. He was found with a post-mortem priapism."

"Priapism?"

"Yes," somewhat irritated. "When the erect penis is unable to return to its flaccid state. Occasionally found in corpses who have died by hanging. I found it ironic, considering he could never seem to keep it up when he was alive."

Eric blinked several times in rapid succession and rushed upstairs.

She was never exactly one for sugarcoating.

"You didn't bring in the recycling bin yesterday, Francis."

The following day she told me to run to Kroger to pick up an extension cord, same as the last one, Francis, that orange one, we never had any problems with that one. Never discussed the suicide again, never uttered his name again, never entered the fourth bedroom again. As far as I know she's still living in the same nondescript Dayton suburb. I probably would've gotten a call if she died, like I did with Eric. Two years after my dad's suicide, he shot himself through the mouth. He left a note that read "chip off the old block." That's all I know about it. I didn't probe.

The other Sick Fucks offered to drive back for the funeral but we went to Youngstown instead. One of our best gigs.

LEFT COLUMN: She could call.

The only one that really scares me. And yet of course

RIGHT COLUMN: You've been saying that every day for 26 months.

But there's an image I have. The Guarantee and I consummating marriage in a neatly made bed. No soundtrack, no note, no preamble, no fanfare. No Jig. Some hard swallows. Fizzle out.

And then, the phone. It dances percussively on the bedside table and goddammit can't they see I'm in the middle of something, but it's probably nothing, just a salesman or a machine, but it rings so rarely, and it sounds so persistent, but no name pops up, but I deleted her number, didn't I, and (410), isn't that the Baltimore area code, or is it (401), and 8:37, is that too late for a salesman or a machine to call, and is it too late to purge, I've never done that, do I even know how, but if I call 911 then this whole thing is just a "cry for help" or an "attention grab," and they'll take my shoelaces and treat me like a child and that's not what I want, is it, and won't you hang up already, for Christ's sake, won't you shut the fuck up so I can see if The Guarantee is really a Guarantee.

A SUMMATION, AS IT WERE

DO IT	DON'T DO IT
||||||	||||||

Of course.

I'm playing a game of round holes and square pegs here. This isn't natural deduction. It isn't logic. It defies logic. It bastardizes logic. It shrugs when I try to reason and it cackles when I try to quantify. It dangles variables over my head like a mobile over a crib and smirks while I try to seize them.

OK, if I want to wax poetic, I'll wax poetic. I'll drop an AP term. I'll go into teacher mode. *Deus ex machina*, that's DAY-oos eks MÆ-kee-nuh, kids. That's Latin for "god from the machine," kids. In which a seemingly unsolvable problem is suddenly and abruptly resolved by the contrived and unexpected intervention of some new event, character, ability, or object, because, that's right, I lift 90% of my lesson plans directly from Wikipedia,

kids. From those old Greek tragedies, Euripides, where gods just show up on stage to save the day, lowered with a crane or bursting through trap doors, kids. The giant eagles swinging by Mount Doom to pick up Sam and Frodo in *The Return of the King*, the warship officer showing up on the island, saving Ralph from probable evisceration, standing awkwardly by while the kids break down and cry about poor Piggy, Piggy and his ass-mar, in *Lord of the Flies*, it's an allegory, kids, remember "allegory"? In *Dallas* when you found out that nobody shot J.R., it was all a dream, everything was spick-and-span, but I guess that's a little before your time, isn't it, kids? It's sloppy, it's inept, it defers agency, it's a cop-out, it makes for an unsatisfying narrative, kids. But it's what I'm looking for. Some sort of unambiguous shortcut, here you go, Francis, here's what you need, some long-lost great-uncle left you an inheritance of unfathomable proportions. Some sort of Clarence Odbody is flailing around under a bridge, ready to take you on a tour of some hypothetical Bedford Falls, here you go, George Bailey, here's how fucked up everything is without you, ain't it a something to behold, ain't it a sad sight, now ring the bell and gimme my wings goddammit.

But that means I'm doubting, doesn't it? Didn't I always tell myself that not until the day when I can't think of one single solitary *DON'T DO IT* would I consider cashing in my Guarantee? Doesn't the mere fact that there is at least one *DON'T DO IT* on that left-hand side mean that I'm looking for reasons not to and thus latently hoping that I won't? Didn't I come here assuming none of this would work anyway and shouldn't I not be so upset and reeling at the fact that, hey, wouldn't ya know it, I was right? Is this what I expected when I quit counseling and medication and started to

"Hey, Brad. That's one of the regulars, isn't it?"

My manager jerks her head in the direction of the customer.

"Yeah."

"Is he usually like this?"

He had been scribbling on one of those big yellow notepads, the ones you use for school, for the past few hours, at first real relaxed-looking, but

eventually he got these real big eyes and started fidgeting like crazy and talking to himself and I thought he was going to pull out all his hair. Now he was all still and staring at his untouched cup of that gross orange spice tea blend that no one buys. I think he was out of pages.

"Nah, most of the time he just sits there with his tea and ogles Doreen. A whole different kind of creepy."

"Well, get rid of him. A couple customers have complained."

I walk over to him real careful and put on my this-means-business voice.

"Sir?"

He jumps in his seat a little and looks at me. Man, does this guy look like shit.

"I'm sorry, but I have to ask you to leave. Your behavior is upsetting the patrons."

He doesn't put up a fight, just nods slowly, green-faced, and walks out with that huge notepad.

That's a dude that needs to get laid. Christ.

LOOKING UP AND DOWN THE STAIRS

KATIE HOLLISTER

Tori Blake was highly intelligent for her age, with rigorous studying timed by her parents every day after school and years of forced piano practice at the Catholic Church. She detested both activities, but she had no choice in the matter. When she could choose, she preferred to use her intelligence for more manipulative purposes, which is how she earned her title of Queen Bee of the third grade. Tori was very observant in the sense that she was able to sniff out any fault in someone's appearance or mannerism, and she would proceed to mock it relentlessly. I always thought she looked kind of like a collie with her fluffy, reddish-brown hair bordering a narrow face with alert, close-together eyes and a long, yet cute snout of a nose. Unlike the friendly demeanor of the dog, her eyes deflected all sense of trust or loyalty. Instead, they always looked tickled by something imperceptible to you. All you would see was an unnatural glint of light shining in her murky brown eyes, suggesting some sort of private joke revolving behind them. It was very disconcerting, especially coming from a child. "That little girl looks at you as if she always knows something you don't. I don't like it," my dad once said. And he was correct in his assessment. Now that I think about it, I have a too-apt comparison to how looking into those eyes felt. It felt like standing at the bottom of some

narrow stairs swallowed in shadows. You worriedly looked up at this eight year old sitting on a throne in the darkness. And she, of course, would be intently looking down on you, knowing something you didn't with a slight crack of light shining triumphantly behind her. You wanted to look away.

On this particular occasion, I was more like a willing sidekick to an evil villain than my usual role as a slave to a master. This is because Tori's victim of choice was her five-year-old little sister, who I came to dislike as much as, if not more than, than Tori. Sadie Blake was her name. I always thought it was funny that this dainty name belonged to a five-year-old girl with the face of a middle aged man with dark, raisin eyes sitting above a long, crooked nose and thin, shriveled lips. So, the only feminine feature about her was her bobbed hair with sun-drenched ringlets. But it looked more like a blonde wig comically placed on a towering, manly forehead that was like bland dough molded around a single blue vein. This vein bulged in sync with her jiggling corkscrew curls when she giggled and this would more often than not be at others' expense. The time I saw it most directed at me was when her Mother interrogated me after Sadie falsely accused me of purposefully hurting her. She was referring to when she pounced on me as a surprise attack and I used my elbows to shield my head in self-defense, which then jabbed her in the stomach. She let out a howl and twisted her features into a pruned elderly man face streaming with tears. I remember my neck becoming red with heat and panic after she lied and I felt helpless defending myself. The moment her mother left the room after reproaching me, Sadie looked at me and, on demand, shifted into her rodent-like overbite of a grin and her beady eyes gleamed with an unnatural light as Tori's did.

So, you get the point. I was happy to be Tori's minion if it meant getting revenge on her evil little man-sister. "Here's the plan," Tori explained. "I'm going to call Sadie up the stairs and you hold the door until I say so." I tacitly agreed by nodding my head, still unsure of what exactly Tori was scheming. But, I had an idea. The long, straight staircase led directly into the sterile guestroom where we crouched like military men. I waited for Lieutenant Blake's signal. I felt a rush of excitement surge through me as I sat atop

the stairs in this room with Tori, imagining the enemy swerving around the corner at any moment.

I had the sudden sensation of gates at a horse track being opened as the horn of Tori's voice sounded with an unusually sugary tone: "Oooooooooooh, Sadie! Come on up and play with us!" There was a sense of release. Next thing we knew, the faint sound of rumbling footsteps from the other side of the house were audible. We had baited her. Tori turned toward me, her eyes dark, upturned slits, creating the appearance of two more self-satisfied little smiles to accompany the one. The rumbling increased in volume, sounding as if she was about to veer around the corner. Next thing we knew, a blonde troll leapt into view rapidly tottering from side to side while scurrying up through the shadows with clenched fists. I heard her short, little desperate breaths coming from her maniacal, gap-toothed grin. My heart was pumping with the sound of her quick little stomps that picked up the pace as she was almost at the top of the stairs. She started skipping two steps at a time on all fours. 6 steps away, then 4, then 2, "NOW!" Tori commanded with girlish glee and the last image I saw before I slammed the door shut was Sadie springing forward with wide, deranged eyes while letting out a babyish shout of a laugh.

The satisfying slam of the door made my teeth savagely shine in a nervous grin. "Quick! Lock it! Lock it!" Tori commanded, followed by a powerful bang against the door. The laugh immediately fell into a defeated wail. I hurriedly locked the door with trembling hands. The knob viciously turned and turned and the crying behind the door intensified into an angry shriek. This sound reminded me of when an evil creature is pushed off the ledge in a movie and you welcome the feeling of pleasure since it is still making demonic noises even as it falls to its doom. Tori was on the ground laughing so hard that she appeared to just be silently shaking while clenching her stomach. Her eyes somehow narrowed into even smaller slits. At first, I sat there, beginning to laugh in a sort of stupefied way with a single breathy "Ha" every few seconds. Then, after replaying the image in my head of putting up a barrier in front of that barbaric face, a cruelly unrestrained laugh-

ter I hadn't heard in myself before blurted out as big "HA! HA's!" I joined Tori on the ground as we listened to Sadie make the last of her high-pitched, squealing protests. She bitterly waddled back down the stairs in defeat.

Tori, resilient as ever when it came to tormenting, jumped up again. She put her ear to the door. The last of these self-pitying moans sounded as if they fell down a well until there was silence. Tori opened the door, but cautiously. She waited a few minutes before she sang, "Ooooooooh Sadiekins! Now you can come play with us! We were just joking! Come here, Sadie!" No sound was made. We both stared with unbroken concentration at the bottom of the stairs, attempting to use mind control to will Sadie to materialize. I was about to give up when the rumbling sound of faraway footsteps rang in my ears again and Tori's self-satisfied grin spread over my mouth.

Here she came, hopping diagonally like a skier around the sharp corner with even more endurance than before. I again heard the puppy dog pants that made this second effort seem even more pathetic. The sight of her frantically zigzagging on all fours up the stairs brought on a giddy bubbling in my diaphragm. Sadie landed her determined eyes on mine as she flew up the steps. Her upper lip curled. Seeing this, I felt disgusted. I felt the need to try to slam the door on her even more last minute. One hop, then two hops, then three hops, then only one step away and "NOW!" I saw the little man's face strain with rage before the door closed her off again. I'm not sure, but it may have even hit her in the face since I heard a large thud. With more control this time, I flipped the lock closed with steady hands, hearing the sweet *click* that saved us from the monstrous child. A furious screech pierced my eardrum and it sounded as if she was trying to break down the door.

I felt Tori's approval bathe me. But, besides that, the revenge was not nearly as gratifying as before. I was actually surprised by the pity I felt for Sadie and the subsequent guilt as her wrathful cries faded into more of a blubbering whimper. I heard a few helpless knocks on the door and the sound of a body slowly sliding down the doorframe like a melodramatic

lover locked out of his own house. We heard her retreat down the steps, hyperventilating and sniffling over the idea of falling for the trickery once again. I felt some remorse, but Tori looked even more rapturous on the floor with scrunched, electrified eyes and an open, clownish grin roaring with laughter.

Something about this time already felt different. After Tori collected herself and proceeded to open the door once again, I thought, "Really? Again?" Mind you, I still feared Tori, so I was not about to question her torture tactics. Already in need of a refill, she hollered out, "Okay Sadie! That was the last time, I swear! Come up now! We're going to play a game!" But, to both of our surprise, instead of the low rumblings of footsteps in response, there was a male voice that floated up the stairs in eerie calm: "Tori, please come down here."

The glint of light in Tori's eyes spiraled down a drain, leaving nothing but a petrified darkness. The composure of the deep voice did not have a hint of ire in it, but it sounded falsely kind. It felt like being alone in black woods and having a small, unknown flashlight tauntingly shone in one eye. Tori's eyes did not meet mine. She just stood frozen in the silence and the draining feeling persisted. I turned my attention to where she was looking at the hollow, black bottom of the stairs. She took one step against her will and was being pulled by some invisible force. Her body was stiff and small. I'd never seen her look so vulnerable before. She took one step, then another, more slowly than I had ever seen her move. I felt her legs in my own legs, sharing her fearful and hesitant downward movement as if it was me who had been called down by this voice. She was no longer in line with the thin pillar of gold light from the cracked door, so she was less visible in the gloom. All I could see was her movement slowing as she reached the bottom like a wind-up doll that slows down after a dozen steps. Taking her last reluctant step, she stood motionless at the bottom. I watched her just stand there. Suddenly, his heavy arm darted out from around the corner. It violently jerked Tori's arm and her limp body was slung out of view. I was alone in the sliver of light, wanting to look away.

RELIC

LAURA MARSHALL

Devin doesn't hold open the heavy museum door for me. As a male feminist, he likes for girls to fend for themselves. I just think it's funny. He's a novelty, a human Dilbert cartoon, a unicycle-riding bear wearing black-framed glasses. I don't know why he agreed to be here, since I've made it obvious that we're not going to date, and he clearly isn't that interested by the American Art and Artifacts. I cannot stand Devin in large doses, but sometimes I like his phoniness. I like the bleak feeling he creates after his jokes crash land and all he can do is let out one of his hhhhhuuuuuuhhh, hissy sighs. Devin and I met a year ago in a freshman English class, American Literature, to be exact. I sat by him on the first day and remarked on his Annie Hall desktop background. Now that I know him better, I know that the background was a test. Only the few who remember the lobster scene are worth his time. He's too young to have these litmus tests for people and to sigh like that when they fail. He's too young to eat Raisin Bran for dinner. That's the fun of Devin, he's too young to be so settled.

Regardless of Devin, my reason for spending the afternoon at the museum is singular: I have to touch Mark Twain's pinky finger. But Mark Twain's sarcophagus is not until the end of the series of labyrinthine rooms depicting American Art and Photography. I have to show the other works,

even the WWI room, the same attention and respect I'm going to show Mark Twain's meticulously embalmed corpse. It's just good manners. I know it's a shame that I've gone to school here for two years, and I haven't yet made the trip to the campus museum. The campus museum not only houses some of the manuscripts of one of my favorite authors, but also his remains. I heard that we fought Mizzou for it and won. I guess they thought it would be too creepy if they displayed his body at his home, which is also preserved.

See, for my whole life, I've wanted to be a writer. A poet, specifically, but people narrow their eyes and say, "Oh, honey," and "Bless your little heart," when you tell them that. And I don't know whether or not Mark Twain's mummified body could help me to be a poet, but it is certainly worth a try. In Catholic School, they told us about redemption and demons, but also about holy relics. People used to travel for miles to see a finger bone of Joseph of Arimathea on a little red velvet pillow. There seems to be an ancient unspoken rule that you must display the dead on a red velvet pillow. It's with pilgrimage in mind that I'll approach the sarcophagus of one of my literary idols. Of course, no one has told me that touching Mark Twain's finger will help me to be an accomplished poet, but no one's told me that that it won't, either. My chances are slim anyway but I have to touch it, if only out of sheer morbid curiosity. I may be crazy. I know that Mark Twain's cold, dead pinky finger possesses more talent than I could even joke about calling my own and I want to be awed by it. I will humble myself before it.

That's why I'm glad Devin went with me. Devin puts this whole scheme into proportion. Devin is infatuated with me so he still lets me act as crazy as I want. At this stage, my imbalance of serotonin and belief in magical fingers is fun for him. He likes me because he sees his life as a film in which he's the self-deprecating white male star who writes screenplays and I'm the girl with pink hair and high top Converse. He hasn't recognized the imminent disaster that I can be, or if he has, he's afraid to shoot down my bad suggestions. I tell him about how I wrote my favorite lines from *Song of Myself* in lipstick on my ceiling when I was 14, and about how I need to

tap people lightly on the head when I'm on the bus. I'm not fraudulent, all the signs are in front of him, but I like how he willfully ignores them, or considers them glittery. Towards me, Devin acts in two ways. He projects his Woody Allen ideal onto me and disregards all evidence otherwise, or he puts his hands on his hips, sizes me up as if I'm the enemy. I can't tell if it's a friendly rivalry that we have, Devin and I. Probably not, probably it's something stronger than "friendly."

Devin's doing the museum all wrong, too. He blows by art entirely too fast, treating each work as a prerequisite for the next. I'm a picker and a chooser and a lingerer. I tend to daydream and ignore the Native American pottery. He's in front of me being thorough and scanning the title cards ahead of time so he seems like he knows what he's talking about. Every so often, he'll turn to me and say some nice florid-sounding word he learned in Intro to Art History. "Hmm, impasto." He gestures in the vicinity of the painting with a jerky motion. I nod at him. I wonder how much of Devin is occupied in trying to con me into loving him. I bet he does that with every girl; he's too smart not to hedge his bets. Who knows, maybe I'll change my mind. We should marry. He pressures me into the WWI room and my thoughts wander. I think about the life I could live with him. We'll have good money, but I don't think I should resign myself to waiting for him to die. And he's a healthy fucker, too, because he eats Raisin Bran and claims to not like weed, so he could live 80 years. At least 60 years of waiting for him to die and in the meantime only talking to each other through our kids.

"Tell Daddy that Mommy is going to go to sleep for a very long time"

"But it's still the afternoon?"

"Honey, isn't it time you watched TV?"

For fun, I'll withhold sex and maybe even buy an African Grey and become far too attached to it, and he'll get fat.

One of Devin's sighs jolts me out of the increasingly disturbing reverie. I can see into the next room. The lights have been dimmed and I see a security guard, so this must be the one I've been waiting for. I pace patiently through the early photography, turning my ring around on my middle finger,

a nervous habit of mine. Devin pretends to appreciate the different effects of contrast and lighting. He's going on about the authenticity of black and white photography untouched by digital editing. He's probably imagining himself in the trenches somewhere armed with only a Leica.

I don't know exactly what I'm going to write yet, but I have to write. I have a lot of poetry that I've never shown anyone, ranging from the awful to the secretly hopeful. Even though I will go through the motions of getting a different job so my mom stops worrying, I will be a writer. It's a dream so tentative that I have to italicize the word. Part of me believes that saying it out loud destroys my chances. Like most people who write on ceilings, I believe in all sorts of irrational causality. I can only whisper the thought, but it's there nonetheless. There's no chance of fate/god/the Universe hearing your dream and purposely flicking it out of your reach with its/His/cosmic thumb and middle finger if you whisper. Everyone knows that. I have to be a writer. I've been sure since I was seven and spent long secret hours at night typing up my stories on the family computer. The only one I remember is about a talking cat who wants to be appreciated for his wisdom, but instead is just treated as a talking cat. The cat gives great insights about people, but no one listens, everyone just claps and jumps up and down and feeds it cat treats when he talks. The cat dies at the end. Now I have no idea why, but at the time, when I was seven, it felt perfectly tragic. Just unfair enough, a construction of the world I have not shaken. I don't know yet what I'm going to write, but when I ignore the urge to write, I get a dull toothache. That must mean something. Mark Twain's finger must mean something, too.

In fact, Devin and I bonded over our shared dream. He has never seen my work, but I have read his, something he brags about a lot. He has no problem showing people, posting short autobiographical essays to Facebook. Devin blogs and the concept of a blog does not make him nervous. He treats these college years as the years in which he produced his "early work." For him, "writer" does not require the italics. For him, the idea is perfectly attainable, just an internship in LA away. He considers himself a screenwriter already, thought I've never read an actual screenplay from him,

only blog posts about the process. But the intent and passion is there. He watches movies alone in his dorm room and writes reviews of them for no one but himself. I hate that that's the darkest thing about Devin. But he fancies himself a Roger Ebert and who am I to tell him he's not. I save the crushing doubt for myself.

Devin finishes with the photographs and I trail behind him, acting like I'm also finished. Don't seem too eager, I line those words up in my head. Don't seem too eager. I chant that to myself often. The powers that be will know exactly what to take away if you show them. Devin ignores the fact that I'm crazy and instead focuses on to the fact that I'm pretty. Someday one will conquer, but I can't wait to watch the facts fight in his eyes in just a minute as I reach out past the ropes and lay my hands on the lovingly preserved remains of Mark Twain.

I shiver as we approach the room where Mark Twain's sarcophagus is on display and run my hands over the bumps on my arms. The room is fittingly cryptlike with only a few fastidiously arranged lights over the sarcophagus. A security guard with a walkie-talkie on his tool belt stands in the corner. I'm beginning to realize that this might be a more difficult undertaking than I had imagined. They've given Twain a formidable alabaster sarcophagus; he would have hated it. The museum lights cast an ethereal glow around it. Devin looks at me and I can tell he's impatient, so we move closer and peer over the casket. There are no ropes, just a plastic guard like at a salad bar, only a few inches high, easy enough to get around. They've dressed him in one of his characteristic white suits. His hair and downy walrus mustache have been combed and on his resting face you can catch the corners of a scowl. Even now he looks authoritative and respectable, like an uncle you admire but are wary of getting too close to for fear of another of his "practical jokes," like when he replaced the water in your glass with vodka. I whisper to Devin that this is one of the top three, if not the best of the corpses I've ever seen. Devin laughs politely enough, but turns to me to ask, "Wait, how many corpses have you seen?" I'm eyeing the security guard wishing he'd walk away. Neither of us can think of anything better to say so

we just stare. I notice Mark Twain's hands placed customarily to the sides on the red velvet pillow, a little shiny, a little off in color, but natural enough. I trace the journey my hand will make to his right pinky finger. This is no impulse, I have to calculate and plan my motion since I will likely not be given another chance.

Suddenly the security guard's walkie-talkie buzzes. He responds to the garbled voice and steps out of the arch into the gift shop. I pounce. It's intentionally awkward to get over the sneeze guard, but I manage. Devin looks incredulous, but to my surprise, he too throws his arm over the plastic gate, which gives me a terrible thought. If Devin becomes successful before me, I don't know what I'll do. And he probably will because he certainly beats me in "work ethic." I've read his writing. Devin's got something that my crazy jealous mind wants to think is a universal appeal. It is not original, but he's good, and I can't let him touch the finger because what if it's really magic and it works. He's good. So I slap him out of the way.

Devin didn't take kindly to the slap and we reach the finger at the same time with a renewed vigor. Was he planning this the whole time, too? I'd like to believe that he's only following me, trying to impress me with his carefree fun-loving attitude, but there's that slim chance he knows perfectly well what he's doing. That worries me so I wrap my hand more tightly around the pinky finger attached to Mark Twain's corpse. It's exactly as you'd imagine it to feel, stiff, cold and waxy. Now I have the top half and really most of it, and he has the part that attaches to the hand. Of course, I won't be satisfied until I've eliminated the Devin threat for good. With a quick violent jerk, I throw his hand off. Unfortunately in doing this, I've moved the finger, probably more than it's been moved in years. After the jerk, I hear a small snap.

Fuck. Fuck. Oh, Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck. I've broken Mark Twain's pinky finger. One sole sinewy strand holds it and when I try to arrange it back on the pillow, it pops off for good. Devin's bloodless face does the rest of the cursing for me. Quickly, I reach my hand and take the now-detached finger out of the sarcophagus, banging it on the sneeze guard on the way out. The security guard hears the bang and bursts his head

back into the room. Luckily, he doesn't see me slipping the finger into the pocket of my dress. My ears are ringing from the knock on the plastic. A sneeze guard. That's a hilarious abomination. I now hold in my pocket the embalmed, disembodied pinky finger of one of America's most treasured communicators, but the museum put a plexiglass wall in place because god forbid some snotty, cold-suffering tourist spots the author of *Huckleberry Finn* with a spray of mucus. America has no idea how to display its dead.

Devin and I find ourselves in absolutely no rush to stay in the museum, so we make an exit that manages to be quick but not suspicious. That's why I'm glad Devin's here with me. He is always calculating around me because he wants to present the best carefully marketed and advertised version of himself that he can. I wouldn't have thought to plan the exit, my thought process was more along the lines of "Holy shit, the finger of a dead guy is in my pocket, and not just any dead guy either – the one who made American Literature a specific genre." I had better hope that the security guard stays in his corner.

Like most people prone to magical thinking, I imagine that my bad luck is something that only happens to me; that the fates are only against me and perfectly cuddly to everyone else. Sometimes I wonder what people who do not have my same level of self-obsession think about all the time. Right now my mind races to when they're going to catch me and how. The guard, the security camera footage, Devin's stupid tribal print Toms. I know that it's only a matter of time until they identify us. Weeks, months, it could be. I'll either become a poet with a fair Twitter following and a chapbook for sale via the Paypal link, or the guilt will eat me inside. Mark Twain will force me to buy a blonde wig and then gradually keep me from leaving my apartment. Some Thursday after class, I'll be in my bed eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and watching *Seinfeld* in a big t-shirt. The knock at the door will leave no room for misinterpretation and I'll have no choice but to comply. APD officers will handcuff me and take me to the station. I'm no good under pressure, so I'll admit to breaking and stealing the finger and I won't even rat out Devin in a badly timed once-in-a-lifetime act of selfless-

ness. Later my balding lawyer will pace and shake his head and mutter, "You know, sweetheart, you really did make my life difficult when you spoke to them without consulting me. In the future, let's not do that." I'll nod but only focus on the pulsing eggplant-colored vein on his neck.

Outside the museum, I wish Devin and I were done. I wish that we didn't have to essentially run away together, that we could just part ways with a terse, "I should go." Unfortunately, Devin drove me here and I assume he's driving me back. Neither of us knows what to say. I walk out into the parking lot with him, following him to his car.

"You're going to take me back, right?"

I expect Devin to sigh, but he doesn't. He's silent as he opens the door to his side of the Jeep and I climb into the passenger seat. He looks behind him a few more times than necessary and speeds out of the parking lot. There are no sirens behind us, no searchlights, no vaguely foreboding gathering clouds. I almost feel let down. I fiddle with the radio, but no station seems appropriate, so I turn it off. The finger in my pocket feels odd and heavy, but I suspect that's my guilt. I pick it up and inspect it. It has the texture of a room temperature baby carrot, and I trace the fine lines, the thick nail. I turn it over. The most disturbing thing about this situation is not that I have Mark Twain's dead pinky, it's that the embalmers, in an attempt to preserve his body forever, gutted him and stuffed him with cotton. They taxidermied him, like a deer or a swordfish, or a beloved Australian Shepard, if you're enough of a werido. I try to show Devin the taxidermied side. I want him to be awed by it, humble himself before it.

"Can you take that off the dashboard?" is his response.

"Oh, sorry,"

I try to catch it, but as he turns onto 35, it rolls forward, then towards me and back into my lap. In Devin's face, I see genuine, un-phony disgust.

"Well, wasn't the museum fun?" I try to bait him. I want the rivalry again.

"No, in no way was that fun. " He turns to me, furrowing his brow, fatherly.

"We're going to get rid of the finger and pretend this never happened. Best case, it can be a hilarious historical mystery."

I can't say I blame him. He could roll down the window and throw it. Mark Twain's pinky finger could land with a soft thud on the grass outside the Service King, gone forever, responsibility shirked.

"Just drive me home, ok."

"Hhhhhhuuuuuuhhhhhh," Devin lets out a long, well-deserved sigh. He doesn't see me slip it back in my pocket. The sun is lowering in the sky as Devin pulls up to my building. We are not fugitives together; chivalry doesn't apply to him, male feminist and all. This is the end of Devin and me. I wish him the best with his blogs and screenplays, but I know he'll want nothing more to do with me. Pretending to be spontaneous and carefree can only last so long. I step out of the car, smile at him and say, "Bye," and he says nothing.

But really, who knows. Perhaps the finger in my pocket is magic. It's not everyday that a relic falls into your lap. Perhaps the ghost of Mark Twain admires me for my pluck and what if he smiles, because he would have done the same. I can't think like that. I know that now I have to write and work so much harder at it than I have been. Since I've maimed Mark Twain's carcass for my selfish dream, I have to do all in my power to achieve that dream. I tell myself it's not failure that I'm afraid of. And since I cannot let myself believe I will succeed, given my penchant for superstition, failure is a realistic outcome. I will fail, and beautifully, most likely with the finger on my desk because I bet it makes a fine paperweight.

NONFICTION

LEFTOVERS

BARRY MAXWELL

She asks, "What's for dinner?" and I've got nothing planned, but I'm happy to oblige.

"Let me see what I can fix for you," I say, and trot to the kitchen.

I make do with what I've got at hand, aiming for bittersweet, forcing the biting and the bland to cooperate. A two-handed heap of kale wilts from the size of a pillow to a simmering panful, bubbling and briny and dark as seaweed, and baby carrots steam over a bright ginger infusion. I watch patiently as rice swells in a glass pot, and I peek at the chicken in the oven, its skin crackling to peppery brown.

The meal comes together in spite of the dissonant color scheme—orange, green, russet, and white—all done on cue and waiting for plates.

I call to her in the bedroom: "It's dinner!"

She prances into the kitchen barefoot; I offer silverware and she shakes her head. She munches a dripping dill pickle from the jar and says, "Oh, no thanks. I'm not hungry anymore. Looks good, though."

My belly grumbles as I load a plate with more than I want, and I swallow my anger for an appetizer. I keep my mouth shut, and seal my resentment in plastic wrap to mask the sour odor. I sit cross-legged at my desk and eat while I scribble notes on revisions, delete half-hearted drafts, and tap the

Back key between bites until my plate is as clean as the sentence I'm cutting—nothing left but juice.

"So there," I mumble.

The *Big Bang* theme song rings from the bedroom. She coughs on a hit and laughs at those crazy science kids. I set to putting away the leftovers, nibbling savory bits, pinching slippery bites of dark meat from the bottom of the pot. A peppercorn cracks like fireworks in my mouth, and my lips buzz from the piperine.

I grab the chicken barehanded and swing it whole from pot to container—not a drop of broth splatters my clean counter. Carrots and greens I tuck into recycled snap-top tubs, the buttery pot liquor lukewarm and clotting. I tamp clumps of white rice solid into a clear plastic brick. The wooden serving spoon hangs on to a tempting mouthful, and I work it into my mouth like a mannerless street boy. My teeth scrape a neat-rowed hatch across the grain and I lean against the sink and chew the rice with bulging cheeks.

I can't tolerate wasting food. It's pathological and needy, as though every meal might be the last. The undersized fridge is crowded with unfinished dinners, and I slide the milk to the right, roll the cabbage to the back for space. I stow the leftovers like a well-packed moving van, and the load organizes itself until the refrigerator is as full as a suitcase waiting by the door.

The next night I stack containers on the counter and take inventory. Some are too old to trust. They still look edible, but the window of opportunity has closed, and I reluctantly scrape them into the trash. If I could fold myself into a container and snap the top shut over me, or settle with the rest at the bottom of the trash can, I would, if only to call it to an end.

A meal can be made of what remains—not a good one, but a meal. I spoon up careless portions in a mismatched palette: a dry twist of chicken breast, a muddy assemblage of limp vegetables. Aimless trails of liquid pool in the center of the chipped stoneware.

I put the plates in the oven to warm. I want to throw them cold into the garbage with the rest—leave the mess for someone else to deal with, and

walk out for a solitary bite. I want to run my fingers down the menu and taste the entrees through the ink, dine in the booth by the window, and flirt with the waitress while I linger over coffee.

"What's for dinner?" she calls from the bedroom.

I've lost my appetite, and the smell of the reheated food repulses me, but I haven't got the energy to make anything fresh of the night, or less apathetic.

"Nothing," I say quietly, when she asks again. "Leftovers."

THE CHILD PHILOSOPHER:
REPRESENTATIONS OF COGNITION IN CALVIN AND HOBBES

LAUREN FERGUSON

After facing disappointment at his father's inability to comprehend his own philosophy, the titular child of Bill Watterson's popular comic *Calvin and Hobbes* states, "I think grown ups just act like they know what they're doing." Calvin's mentality and thought process are often portrayed as beyond his years, and his musings establish him as a voice of philosophy in the comic strip. The adults in Calvin's life live a vacuous, unexamined existence, but Calvin juxtaposes their disingenuous lifestyle with his active love and exploration of the unknown. Through his youth and enlightened banter with his quasi-imaginary stuffed tiger, Hobbes, Calvin is able to begin to explore the philosophical aspects of life. However, he is imperfect, and frequently falls back on his childlike instincts of selfishness and vice. As a representation of philosophy, Calvin critiques and ultimately acts out humanity's immorality, and Calvin and Hobbes together serve as youthful theorists on the nature of humanity in order to show the juxtaposition and balance between good and evil.

When exploring the idea of a child philosopher, it is important to note Calvin's youth in relation to Watterson's depiction of good and evil. Calvin, as a child, has the unique ability to be less accountable for his actions than an adult. Calvin fully embraces this freedom, admitting he "likes to be bad"

through tormenting his neighbor Susie, disobeying his parents, and attacking his babysitter. Adults in Watterson's universe do not submit to these vices due to fear of social isolation, but Calvin has the 'boys will be boys' excuse to escape permanent consequences. His age allows him to fully explore his love of mischief, to the point where he muses, "maybe heaven is a place where you're allowed to be bad," proving his love of vice and establishing him somewhat as a figure of evil. However, Hobbes contrasts Calvin's selfish nature, trying to influence his friend to find "happiness from a life of virtue" but notes that "[Calvin's] virtue needs cheaper thrills," establishing Hobbes as a character of goodness and creating a juxtaposition between their good and evil natures. Furthermore, no matter how Calvin tries, he cannot escape his self-centered personality. In arguing with Hobbes over the state of man, he struggles with the idea that righteousness is difficult and immorality is pleasurable. Calvin and Hobbes often share conflicting views displaying an image of Calvin battling his inner confliction of virtue versus vice. Hobbes represents Calvin's guilt and desire for morality. He tries to impart morality and goodness into Calvin, but is aware that the "problem with people is that they're only human," recognizing Calvin's unsurprising and somewhat expected failures. Calvin, a symbol of humanity, is ultimately fallible and succumbs to his selfish, self-absorbed, and often remorseless ways.

What makes Calvin's philosophical musings significant is his pairing with Hobbes. As a manifestation of Calvin's wide-mindedness, Hobbes offers endless possibilities of imagination due to his free-spirited personality and participation in events inspired by Calvin's childlike wonder. Hobbes may be a representation of virtue, but this trait in no way limits his imaginative abilities, proven especially through the infamous line, "scientific progress goes boink?" Hobbes emphasizes Calvin's childlike exploration, for although he often critiques it, he never discredits it. In a similar vein, Watterson's usage of Calvin as a philosopher is effective because he is not constrained by societal expectations, responsibilities, or realities of adulthood. Calvin's exploration is enabled because it is unconstrained by permanent consequences. One of Calvin's most famous mistakes is the mysterious "noodle incident,"

which he claims "no one can prove [he] did." However, this event is only punished by the threat of Santa Claus not bringing presents rather than perpetual social isolation or fiscal loss, often associated with mistakes made in adulthood. This freedom allows Calvin the immunity he needs to make mistakes and explore his world.

As a pair, Calvin and Hobbes often contrast one another, and Watterson uses the pair to further create a dynamic of philosophy by using them to depict human nature as inherently good with the balance of vice and virtue. On Christmas morning, Calvin is distressed that "Santa goofed up" and didn't bring Hobbes any presents to revel in. Hobbes negates Calvin's view as he contently states that "tigers are naturally gifted to begin with," showing his lack of greed in contrast with Calvin's materialistic disturbance. Hobbes gets a present that he claims he will "treasure forever" in the form of a hug from Calvin, demonstrating a balance between good and evil. *Calvin and Hobbes* depicts love as Watterson's ultimate solution, as the most selfish creatures can find peace in love. In fact, it seems that every time Calvin truly finds solace is when he is embracing Hobbes. In a moment of fear, Calvin is able to find comfort in his friend Hobbes, stating "things are never quite as scary when you've got a best friend." Love brings out Calvin's best as he begins to better understand the world around him. After experiencing the death of a beloved raccoon, Calvin understands the he can't comprehend death but can "do the best with the knowledge [he] has," making peace with the process of learning instead of reacting negatively. His adoration for a lost friend brings him peace, and his innocent love contextualizes his experiences through life as he must begin to understand them.

Calvin, a multi-faceted philosopher, is significant because of his balance with Hobbes that creates an image of humanity's harmony between good and evil. But more than that, Calvin is an effective medium for exploring questions of coming to age by scrutinizing answerless questions of death, religion, and the existence of Santa Claus. The child philosopher is perhaps a more effective medium that an adult thinker, for although they do not have the same maturity, the child has more freedom to explore his budding

wisdom due to his innocence. It is ultimately the child's genuine innocence and love that makes him an effective medium of exploring philosophy, and the strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, although a somewhat unorthodox medium, demonstrates this idea through the friendship between a boy and his tiger.

THIRTY-TWO FEET (PER SECOND PER SECOND)

BARRY MAXWELL

At highway speed, cars are invisible for a fraction of a second as they hurtle beneath the 12th Street overpass. Big rigs seem to exist on both sides at once, still entering as they've already begun their exit. (An object falling against the front of one of those would be a good distance away before the taillights even cleared the bridge.) The traffic flow at midnight is steady and consistent, and the timing seems easy enough to calculate. Each southbound vehicle passes the Denny's exit, and in ten leisurely ticks disappears below the overpass. It's only a matter of judging the proper time to drop from the railing, downward to a sweet spot about 3 feet above the pavement. So many variables complicate the desired confluence of events, though, and the whole plan depends on a lot of "if this, then that" sequences. (I had no trouble in school with those "a train leaves the station traveling 30 mph" problems. Why is it so complicated to time it such that a body (x) traveling in a vertical trajectory from y to z, and a corresponding object (A) moving horizontally from B to C, will meet at the intersection of C and z?)

It's Galileo's old law of bodies falling in a vacuum: velocity equals 32 lifespans per second per second, right? I've got the vacuum covered (mentally, at least), and velocity wouldn't matter in such a brief plunge, other than that faster is better. The fall would only take what—one, two seconds; a pebble hits the pavement in about that time.

Tossed in an arc, it's about three seconds, including a stillness at the peak. I stand at the peak of that intent, watching traffic, counting seconds on my fingers and imagining the faux-algebraic diagram:

$$y - x$$
$$\vdots$$
$$C\,(A \rightarrow B) = C + z + x = 0$$

It might be smarter to count the beats from the blind side of the overpass. (This would prevent an alert driver from spotting me and swerving.) Faith in the ticking seconds would have to be unwavering, a whole-hearted confidence that I and some poor unsuspecting trucker will arrive at the point of impact simultaneously, after a slow seven count and a three-second dive.

More decisions, dammit: a slow tilt from atop the rail like a well-practiced bungee jumper? (Ballsy, but it would take longer.) An arch-backed cliff dive, face-first and eyes open? Or a wildly incautious, bent-kneed push out and down? It would distract me, I imagine, to make a noise, some statement. "Fuck it all!" I could shout. At worst (and most likely), I would yell a scrambling "Oh shit!" of too-late regret, followed by clawing the air and missing my appointment altogether, bouncing over the trailer's roof and falling behind like an amateurish stunt man. And I want the grille, not the windshield. Like a moth plastered in the radiator, gripped by inertia after impact, thus avoiding an undignified tumble. I don't want to be rolled and dragged like the Scarecrow, pummeled by multiple cars. (That would certainly get the job done, though.) I don't want to look into anyone's eyes.

There won't be a chance for a do-over if I fuck this one up. And there are so many ways to fail (like I've done so brilliantly with everything else). If I drink enough to do it, how would I ever manage to get it right? I

hadn't planned on meeting defeat in the details, but there it is. I'm not smart enough for this shit.

A week (and untold thousands of trucks) later, I've taken the coward's way and shamed myself through the Spirograph intake process of the state mental health system.

A businesslike doctor assesses me for psych meds (my third identical interview in as many hours). She evaluates my risk level, reciting an assembly line checklist of red flags for depression, and she asks if I now, or have recently, entertained any suicidal thoughts.

"Yes."

Have I formulated a plan of action? Am I in danger this minute of harming myself?

"Not really a plan," I tell her. "It wasn't a good one … I couldn't do the math."

The doctor frowns at that one, and asks if I'm ever inexplicably sad, or cry for no good reason.

"No," I say. "Never." I blow my nose and shake my head. "There's always a good reason."

DEMONS AND DAEMONS IN THE TRADITION OF WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

KAITLYN RAY

In her 2009 TED Talk "Your elusive creative genius," Elizabeth Gilbert discusses the demons of self-doubt and creative angst that have made artists reputably depressive and often suicidal since the Renaissance. As an autobiographical writer, Gilbert escapes these demons through a "daemon," or a genius – her psychological construct of an "other" that inspires her ideas. Gilbert reduces writer's block from internal anxiety and self-loathing to an external nuisance. She shows up to write, and her daemon may or may not show up to inspire. Women writers throughout history, however, have had a hard time "showing up for the job" fully intact. Confined within a patriarchal society, women have been hindered by society's condescension, inferior education, and a lack of financial and physical freedom. These circumstances do not promote free written expression, but rather foster fear, self-doubt, and repressed anger within the woman's psyche.

How can creative genius express itself when such demons fracture the writer's mind? As women writers have struggled against the suppression of patriarchal society and the psychological "demons" of anger and self-consciousness, they have found confident and calm voices by constructing a fictional or psychological second self. These benevolent "daemons" allow women to detach themselves from their "demons" and speak vicariously,

yet honestly, about their lives. In this paper, I will evaluate the presence and function of these second selves in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and May Sarton's *Journal of a Solitude*. The "daemon" is telling evidence of the repressed female voice and a useful tool for eliciting honesty and creativity, but nevertheless splits the writer's consciousness. For women writers to create works of genius, society must expunge the demons formed by gender inequality so that women may express their true voices without inner conflict.

In her extended essay A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf denies the mystical dualism between the self and the "genius." Demons and daemons may exist, but they are one with the mind rather than external forces:

> The human frame being what it is, heart, body, and brain all mixed together, and not contained in separate compartments…a good dinner is of great importance to good talk. One cannot think well, love well, if one has not dined well. (Woolf 18)

External circumstances such as diet, physical freedom, money, and a "room of one's own" have a significant effect on the psychological fitness of a writer. These factors only become real "demons" in the sense that they conflict with the writer's "incandescence," or clarity of thought and voice (56). Physical conditions affect psychological conditions, which in turn affect the work of an artist. Women in Woolf's time did not have equal access to education, and thus had to work harder than men for academic and financial success. Patriarchal authority's exclusion of women provokes anger that interferes with the creative process. Anger and "all kinds of emotions… disguised and complex," damage the integrity of written work (32). Woolf herself, distracted by her rejection from the Oxford turf and library, sees that she has written "in the red light of emotion and not in the white light of truth" (38). Reflecting on the Elizabethan age, she contends that "genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working classes," but:

> Any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. (49)

Women writing during the last few centuries would have to overcome their ignorance, anger, lack of privacy, and the self-doubt instilled by patriarchal society in order to approach their writing with composure.

Charlotte Brontë was surely one woman writer of genius – or with genius – who faced these societal and psychological constraints. In *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*, she constructs a fictional self in order to explore the personal struggles and societal constraints of her past that splinter her psyche. She cannot directly express her suffering to society, perhaps repressing this suffering herself, and therefore uses multiple levels of mediation to detach herself from her personal feelings and experiences. "Currer Bell," her pseudonym, gives her the liberty to write without endangering her reputation or facing a tangible readership. In hiding her identity, she mitigates the inevitable vulnerability of exploring one's past and "[allays] the anxieties of female authorship" (Gilbert and Gubar 316). Jane Eyre employs a sort of double mediation: Bronte writes her life story in a fictional genre, and in the *Bildungsroman* tradition. Her fictional narrator-self remembers her life in retrospect. In the act of retrospective storytelling, Brontë can maintain emotional detachment from real-life events, thus allowing her to recount difficult or repressed memories more vividly and with less discomfort. Jane Eyre faces many trials that Brontë herself endured, and several episodes of the novel resemble her personal biography. Jane's orphanhood conveys the sense of isolation Brontë likely felt after her mother's death, while the poor condition of Lowood School, the resulting Typhus outbreak, and Helen's death mirror Brontë's time at Cowan Bridge, where her sisters Maria and Elizabeth died of tuberculosis (Birmingham). Brontë's fictional world distances her from these sorrows and the demons that haunt her so that she

can embody the truth of her personal story without reliving the painful realities of her past.

Virginia Woolf, however, believes that these fictional mediums only repress Bronte's true voice, and thus compromise the novel's clarity. Bronte's buried fear and anger break through Jane's semblance of calm in what Woolf calls an "awkward break" or "jerk" of indignation (69). Bronte says "this by the way of aggression, or that by the way of conciliation…she [has] altered her values in deference to the opinion of others" (74). These breaks not only cloud Bronte's thought, but also index her restriction from creative power in a patriarchal society. Apart from Bronte's fictional medium, other disconnections appear within her protagonist's mind. Jane has an "inner voice" which eerily arbitrates her thoughts and decisions. Jane's mysterious second self at first seems a "kind fairy," intervening in her dull life at Lowood to transfer her to "a new servitude" at Thornfield (Brontë 87-88). Again, when she desires something beyond a governess' life at Thornfield, her "mind's eye" depicts imaginative visions at once full of "trouble" and full of the "incident, life, fire, feeling" that she desires, without which she is restless and discontent (111). This inner voice seems to represent Bronte's repressed longing for escape. The voice then is Bronte's true self, or perhaps a daemon who urges her toward freedom. We only see these true desires emerge intermittently throughout the novel, and they then appear as gothic interventions in Bronte's narrative flow.

Jane's inner voice, at other times, seems to be a demon rather than a daemon. Her mind is schizophrenic and splintered, bolstering her dreams and then undermining them. "The secret voice which talks to us in our own heart of hearts" suggests verbally that Mr. Rochester approves of her (157). Later, however, when Jane hears about Miss Ingram's attachment to Mr. Rochester, her consciousness is pitted against "Memory" and "Reason," two parts of herself that seem apart and alien. She feels her inferiority acutely, but checks her true feelings and replaces them with pride in her self-repression: "keep to your caste, and be too self-respecting to lavish the love of the whole heart, soul, and strength, where such a gift is not wanted and

would be despised" (162-163). "Under ceaseless agitation and ruthless restraint," she scrutinizes and inhibits her love for Mr. Rochester (186). Once she learns of his hidden wife, Bertha Mason, "a voice within [Jane]" orders her to leave Thornfield, but she resists:

> Conscience, turned tyrant, held Passion by the throat…and swore that with that arm of iron he would thrust her down to unsounded depths of agony… [Jane] rose up suddenly, terror-struck at the solitude which so ruthless a judge haunted – at the silence which so awful a voice filled. (297-298)

Significantly, Brontë calls the tyrant Conscience "he" and Passion "her." Jane's patriarchal society would disapprove of her scandalous love for her master, and perhaps becomes the masculine voice of reason in her mind. When Rochester declares himself to be unmarried and begs Jane to be with him, her "conscience and reason [turn] traitors against [her], and [charge] her with crime in resisting [Rochester]." "Feeling" too orders her to comply, but she must maintain self-respect by holding onto "preconceived opinions, foregone determinations," which "are all [she has] at this hour to stand by" (317-318). While Jane seems to be standing up for herself, perhaps it is her "other" self which carries these "preconceived opinions" of female behavior that sways her to leave her true love. Jane's interior dialogue seems to go beyond the admonition of her conscience; a demon, an "Other," seems to constrain her imagination and clash with her true desires.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar attribute this interior battle to a "potential monster beneath [Jane's] angelic exterior" (Gilbert and Gubar 345). She wrestles constantly with the voice in her head, especially after she discovers that the mad woman upstairs is Rochester's hidden wife. Gilbert and Gubar see Bertha Mason as "the more sedate heroine's double" (314). In Bertha, Jane's repressed anger takes physical shape and rages in the attic. Brontë's fantastical creation hints that she likewise carries repressed frustration with her childhood and resents the

limits placed on her by society. Bertha is a "big woman, in stature almost equaling her husband," and tries on and then tears apart Jane's bridal veil (359). Furthermore, Bertha is ultimately the force that cancels Jane's wedding. Bertha seems like a demonic monster, but is actually closer to a daemon who indicates Jane's desire for power and for independence apart from marriage.

Whether Jane regrets her choice to leave Rochester or honestly values her time teaching in Whitcross, she seems to get in better touch with her "true self" through the hardships of travel and teaching. When St. John proposes, reason dictates that she join her cousin in matrimony and in self-sacrifice abroad. St. John's appeals tempt her to "cease struggling…to rush down the torrent of his will into the gulf of existence, and there lose [her] own" (419). He calls her "violent, unfeminine, and untrue," but "her heart is mute" (413, 403). Her harrying inner voice no longer tortures her, and she follows her true desire – her true self – by returning to Mr. Rochester. As her demon leaves her mind, it takes the form of a black spectre nearby. "This is not thy deception, nor thy witchcraft," Jane tells the ghoulish figure (420-421). Relinquished from her manipulative intermediary, Jane Eyre goes where her true self desires. At Thornfield, however, her daemon has also died; Bertha burns herself alive along with Rochester's mansion. Has the expulsion of Jane's inner demon made Bertha an unnecessary double? Or has Bronte committed a fictional, symbolic suicide through Bertha's death? Without Bertha in Rochester's life, Jane rushes to marry a handicapped and ruined Rochester. As she draws her narrative to a close, her brief evaluation of her happy marriage may at first seem like an oversimplified portrait of a Victorian ideal. Yet Jane does not adhere to acceptable social conventions in marrying Rochester, but rather breaks the norm in marrying her master in order to be happy. Nevertheless, Jane does not get to experience the world for which her "inner voice" longs. Even with money of her own, Jane – and Bronte – cannot lead lives of complete freedom and independence. In Woolf's words, "all the conditions of her life, all her own instincts, were hostile to the state of mind which is needed to set free whatever is in

the brain" (51). Charlotte Bronte and her protagonist's entrapment is not merely physical or financial, but deeply ingrained by societal norms.

In Journal of a Solitude, May Sarton also uses the autobiographical genre to expunge her personal "demons." Whereas Bronte's "demon" seems to conceal her underlying anger, Sarton has a more ambivalent relationship with anger as it relates to her creative work. Anger functions as both a demon and a daemon in Sarton's life. One the one hand, she expresses her true anger freely as both a "built-in safety valve against madness or illness" and as a creative tool (28). As Sarton "lets go" – of pressure, of anger, perhaps of her own self – sonnets, the "soul-making tool," come to her and send her on a "pilgrimage inward" (40). In exorcising the demon of anger, Sarton achieves a "mystical experience of unity." Disturbingly, however, she feels the same connection with daemonic mysticism when she is close to suicide:

> The two states resemble each other: one has no wall, one is absolutely naked and diminished to essence. Then death would be the rejection of life because we cannot let go what we wish so hard to keep, but have to let go if we are to continue to grow. (57)

If Sarton feels one with the "daemon" that inspires her, she feels at once a draw towards death – the ultimate escape of the self. When she writes sonnets, Sarton captures the elusive "genius" and communes with something sacred. She achieves the incandescent genius that Woolf describes in *A Room of One's Own*: "there must be no obstacle in it, no foreign matter unconsumed" (56). Woolf, however, is not concerned with the health or happiness of the writer's self, but with her art (xiii). For all of Sarton's artistic achievement, she has the same haunting desire to destroy herself that has taken the lives of many writers both male and female. Her daemon becomes a demon; her creative and destructive force stem from the same source. Sarton cannot help but lose herself in the transcendent act of creation. Are creativity and suffering then inherently linked?

On the one hand, Sarton's dysfunctional relationships and inner turmoil fuel her work and help women readers connect to the fragmentation she feels. Yet in exorcising her demons onto the written page, is Sarton actually achieving the "incandescent" work that Woolf describes? Or is she rather pushing herself to a state of mind much like Charlotte Bronte's centuries before her own time? Sarton writes to express her inner "daemon," but paradoxically, she incites her own frustration in order to elicit creativity. She has "a room of one's own" – a whole house to her own, in fact – but she encloses herself in this house. Instead of being "locked out" from self-expression by societal pressures, she is "locked in" her working and writing space. Perhaps Sarton communes too directly with demons and daemons for the sake of her work. Her "deep self" that tells her she is "meant to live alone, meant to write the poems for others," does not seem to triumph over the demonic force of patriarchal society, but rather fosters new pressures and expectations from within herself (207). Even if Sarton creates works of genius, she sacrifices her social and mental health in the process – she loses herself in her work. She shares something beautiful with the world, but her artistry comes from and causes anguish.

As Sarton analyzes the patterns of her own life, she rationalizes and justifies the dangerous fragmentation of her psyche. Her demons guide her to her daemon: she brushes up against what Elizabeth Gilbert calls "that thing," the mysterious, divine power that moves us all to live, work, and create. Sarton overcomes the financial and physical constrictions traditionally imposed upon women, and therefore leads the way for women writers. She would find not only wholeness in her art, but happiness throughout her creative process, if she pursued rather than resisted her sources of joy and solace. Sarton finds peace in her friends, in gardening and fresh flowers; in her poetry she reaches a "state of grace," a dialogue with God and resolution with her life (40, 31). In these sacred moments of calm, she finds her clarity. She does not yearn for "second selves," but is at peace and whole.

Elizabeth Gilbert makes a radical but novel suggestion for artists: externalize this sacred daemon, the source of frustration and exhilaration. Keep

it nearby, but realize that the "second self" does not have to be within the self, an "internalized, tormented thing. It can be this peculiar, wondrous, bizarre collaboration" between the inner self and the outer world (Gilbert). In exorcising the daemon, women writers can exorcise the demons of self-doubt and social expectations that their creative gift brings them. They can have both happiness and wholeness, and share something sacred with readers without sacrificing their self and sanity along the way. The troubling suicide rate of women writers – and all artists regardless of gender – over the last few hundred years suggests that housing demons and daemons within the psyche may not be the healthiest and happiest path toward creativity.

Jane Eyre and May Sarton not only suffer themselves, but also hurt those around them in their desperate search for inspiration and escape. While Jane Eyre by the end of the novel achieves some degree of independence and happiness, she cannot have her "happy ending" without the death of an uncle, the disappointment of her male cousin, and the financial and physical ruin of Mr. Rochester. Bronte's anger tears down the novel's patriarchal figures. Men do not deserve to be manipulated and mistreated in the pursuit of gender equality, for men and male artists face demons of their own. For men and women alike, "it is the nature of the artist to mind excessively what is said about him" – or her (Woolf 56). They open themselves up despite social pressures and self-doubt. Women writers as well as all artists can establish a better tradition for generations to come by protecting the self and psyche. To remove the demons from within the self and still let the daemon – that sacred, beautiful, and unknowable force – communicate with the individual and with the world, artists must let loose the beings inside them. "Learn to lose in order to recover...let it all pass. Let it go" (Sarton 34). By releasing the demons and daemons into the world, artists can better nurture both themselves and their creations.

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