

Niche

issue n°



ART

FICTION

NON FICTION

POETRY

MICROS

Niche

ISSUE # 5

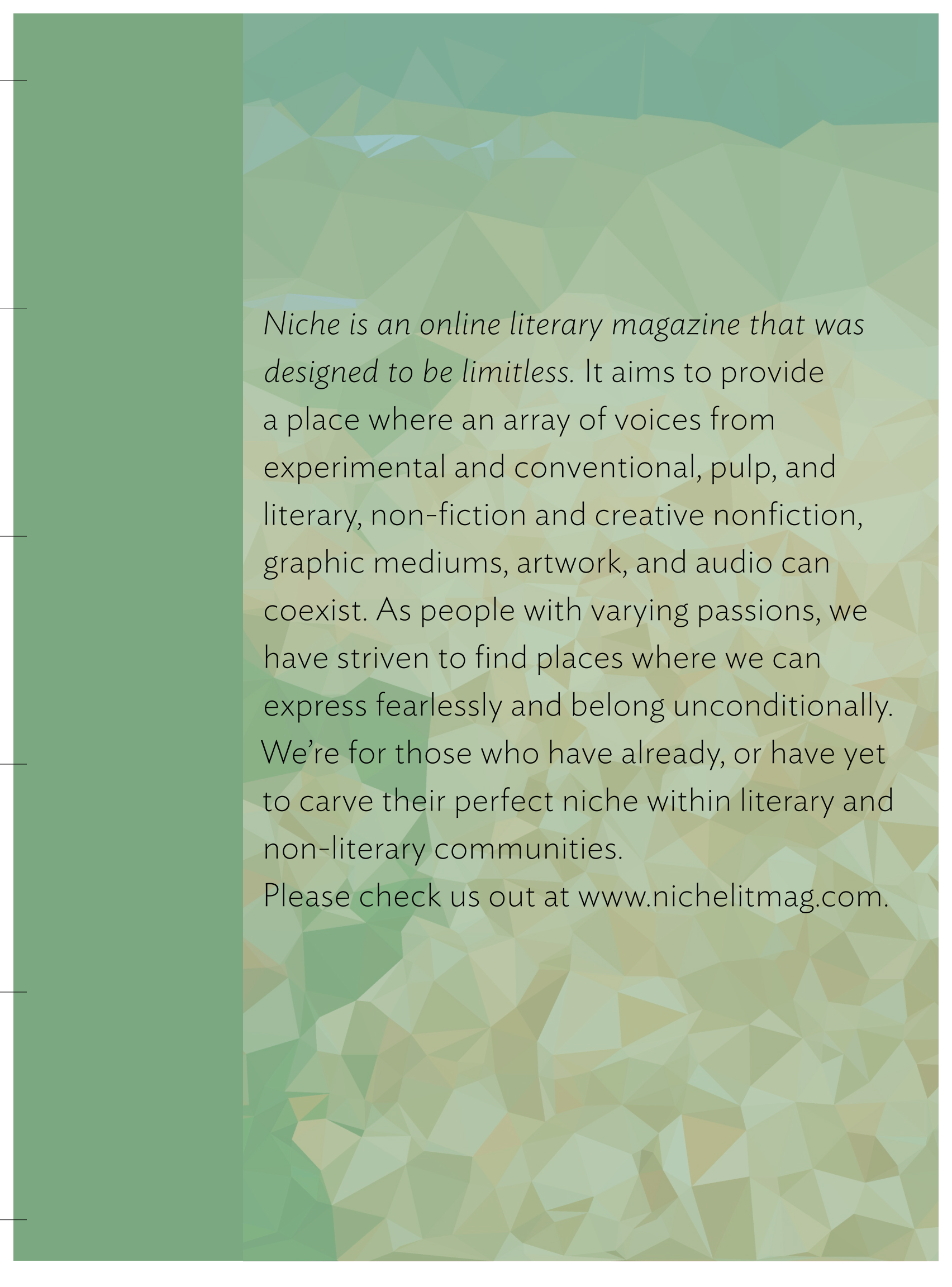
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I D E A L S A N S
A N D R A D E P R O

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Niche is an online literary magazine that was designed to be limitless. It aims to provide a place where an array of voices from experimental and conventional, pulp, and literary, non-fiction and creative nonfiction, graphic mediums, artwork, and audio can coexist. As people with varying passions, we have striven to find places where we can express fearlessly and belong unconditionally. We're for those who have already, or have yet to carve their perfect niche within literary and non-literary communities.

Please check us out at www.nichelitmag.com.

Take Only What You Need

BY PEARL HODGES



chord

BY JULIE ASCARRUNZ

across every opening

in emptiness

there will be echoes

dreams move as sound

and i will learn to

trust

to

trust

grinding

metamorphoses

the love i thought

the ocean

thought

was giant

it is a tub

*has a tadpole tail
a tiny shell*

Thinking About a Female Neurologist's Drowning

BY JEAN KIM

My heart was broken near this Canton pier, so I can see
Why she drifted here, this quiet harbor. There's beauty
In the dissonance, the looming rusted ships and docks

Framing gentle water, the street ending, sloping under
The water's edge, so one could drive right in, and sail.
She lost her love in May, and slid under in November,

Burdens brewing in her mind. She'd always traced
The spindly wiring of neurons, the Purkinje cells,
The deep forest of axonal grief, inescapable like nets

That ensnare memories like smiling dolphins, choking
In an electric soup of tears. Was it too much to give
To everyone everyday, tending the frayed ends

Of faulty work by God, the victims slowly freezing
Into deadened limbs, or cords quickly yanked
From sockets, leaving the Christmas tree half-lit?

Would anyone know how much she poured heart-blood
Into the holes in other organs, so they'd beat again?
So when he left, she had nothing left. Or so I guess,

Since I've dived into similar bays, chilly enticement
By my siren sisters, singing and luring us to oblivion.
Steps away, I work at a nursery for broken minds.

Grandma proudly declares she is turning 100; her cheeks
Ruddy with youth's last embers; the chart says she's only
90. Bedside photos show her in Army service, proud

Like Vivien Leigh. She says again, she is turning 100.
Grandpa shouts every few minutes, like a cuckoo clock.
Other times he grins like a Gerber baby, drooling.

A nasal assault indicates the need for a diaper change.
Still I would cling to the cobbled bits of history,
Even though I know what lies ahead, like mothers

Soothing their children on Auschwitz trains.
I would choose to march onward, defiant before
The lashing waves, the churning sea, the agonal gasps

Of an unraveling psyche. But the loneliness
Is another matter. It was hot in his Canton rowhouse,
Those summer days. My killer called me inside.

The fires of the heart turn suns into stars into ice.
Lust coupled with lies is a form of murder.
So I stand at the pier, this November morn.

There's beauty in the enjambment of marina
And industry, these Roman ruins of shipping routes
Where explorers and lovers and thieves cry out.

This tattered diorama stays, even after our eyes shut.
The harbor runs deep, primordial soup,
This repository of unanchored dreams.

VERTIGO

BY JEAN KIM

*He saw her in her absence,
The golden coif so tight it killed,
The porcelain death mask flawless.
She sashayed in grey seersucker--
Gorgeous succubus, radiant Venus,
Always a step behind like Eurydice--
Before the bay, brash against red metal.
The gate to hope, to love they said
But for others the last leap blind.
She fell too, a perfect spiral,
Infinity crushing into a spot,
The eye I thought I could fill.*

*In I stepped, halting automaton.
Under marble, my skin swelled live.
Here my hair flared, flaxen raven,
My syllables raw like a secretary's
But swathed in socialite silk,
As I fed from your desperation
To rescue, to bind, to save.
I felt the sun from your eyes,
Salted warmth in my bosom.
I knew it was a mirror trick,
That I was merely the prism,
As the light fell in the hole.*

*A photograph captures light--
Crude catch on paper, still precious.
A reverse negative, what is that?
A ghoulish strip of dissonant color,
But it came from life all the same.
You would discard me, backwards,
Even if the original was me,
Even if the source reflected me.
You wanted her, the paper
Traced with your words, your sighs.
I was a mummy shrouded by
Spirals of love in verse.*

*I let you carve me like Galatea,
My limbs sparked red by chisels.
My hair boiled in acid like my heart,
As you wanted ice tinged gold.
I would do it, melt and meld--
It was me, didn't you know?
It was never her.
But I bent; the twist broke my back,
Like a young tree's branches
Crackling in crisp spring wind.
As long as you were touching me,
I loved that you killed me.*

*A shell is always turning.
The mind's antic mimics itself--
The images repeating, multiplying
Carbon copies like Warholian death.
Obsession revives as it murders--
It was always her.
It was never me.
I feel you letting go--
Her shadow frees us--
I fall in a spiral--
She is yours,
And I am forever.*



On Holy Thursday, Miss Alma Klarup Delivers the Mail to Pastor Molde's Parsonage

BY DANIEL JAMES SUNDAHL

*When from looking down and reading
Catalogs and scanning post cards written
Sideways and round about, browsing
Lives led in shy recessive homes.*

*Heat is what she imagines, dust and tension,
Jesus struggling for breath, saying little,
A hoarse cough perhaps, He knowing
What was happening, what would happen.*

*The rood once blazed upon Eden's green,
That place of quaint mazes, big ideas,
Two coiled hearts leaving and walking away;
Breath held in the cold down-rushing of time....*

*Who is that clown doffing his mask
Between the mirror and the window,
Bird dung dribbling from his mouth,
A heart in his fist like a dirty wet rag?*

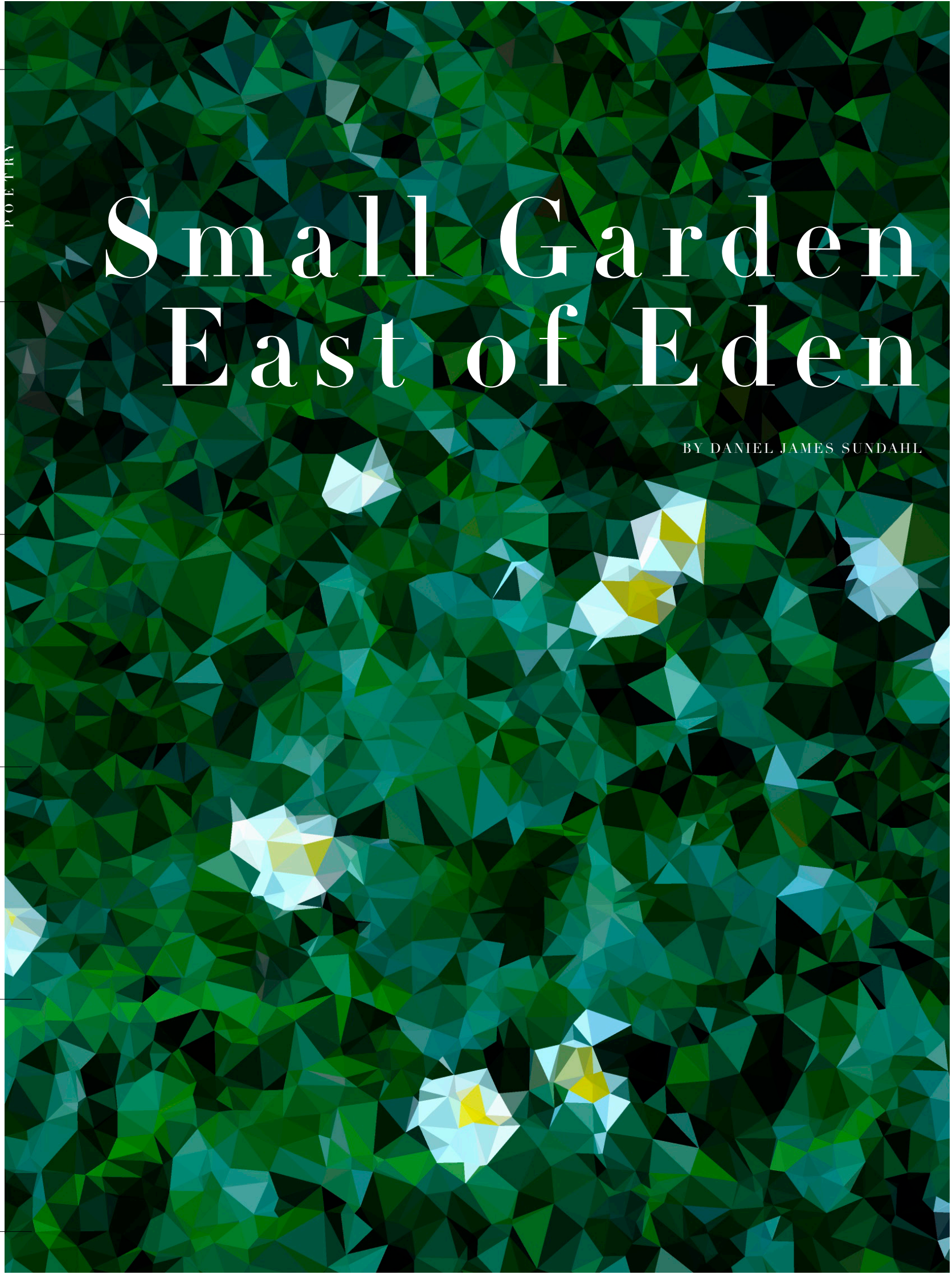
*"Dear Pastor," the Easter card reads,
"Prayer has become a difficult enterprise."
Never any word for loss, she thinks,
Living on hope or the belief in hope.*

*In the mirror she counts a bobbing head;
She gathers speed toward what she cannot see:
An angel who will speak for God, a prayer,
A brief hallelujah hymn for the poor of the world....*

POETRY

Small Garden East of Eden

BY DANIEL JAMES SUNDAHL



*How clannish the Canaanites have all become.
My younger brother plays with his clay alphabet;
Value, he says, then writes, is form, like a strip
Of coast evolving into potentiality, God-mimicking.*

*His new wife gurgles and churrs in the dark.
Yesterday, high winds, gusts blustering, streaming rain;
The basket load of seed potatoes planted, rotting.
I wish my father had been less hungry, kept his courage,*

*Had not perfected his fear, had not turned the dark
Facings of his brain, become perverse, manipulative.
All his reasons and his other reasons fail at last.
A week from now I will be sixty-eight; I carry a memory*

*Of that dead tree alive, with birds, alive.
In my dreams each night, my eyes open
On a different world; my wife who cleans
Carries no sheen of sadness; in her dreams*

*This garden that we tend, plan, and work
Provides more than we account for....
My brother reasons his own lines over, meditations
In solitude sustained by "transcendence of self."
Poor, worn-out words, like peace made from
Diminishment, posthumous whispers, starved stares.
It was the flaw my mother must have known,
The error she stumbled into with such excitement.*

POETRY

Fragments From An Amish Journal

BY DANIEL JAMES SUNDAHL

*There's low ground fog in the hayfields;
Pheasants scratch for colored insects
This fine morning in September.*

*Last night an old woman saw an end to her suffering;
She stared out her window for a week.
Her eyes grew larger then bright then gave out.
Today she waits in her coffin;
Tomorrow her kin will gather.
We will talk about sleep and rest,
Winter's dark, the harvest, the love That binds the weary bearing
Another body back to earth.*

*My neighbor replaces clapboards on his barn.
He stands on one leg on one rung of his ladder,
Leaning out, hammering, holding on, tentative,
Held at the waist by a rope.
I am giddy at such heights.
Today my wife brought home a load of honey.
The hives are hidden deep in a grove of sycamores,
Not far from the clover in the hayfields.
Its color is the color of sunrise.*

*Tonight she will sit beside me in a cane chair.
She will note how the morning glories are thick along the fence.
Tomorrow, after the burial, she will launder,
Sheets draped to dry on the lines.
She sleeps beside me, ending each day
With what we have, sharing the work,
Faithful to the way that bring us together*

It #37

BY MIKE COLE

*What he has made
doesn't have wings
or breath,
but it flies anyway
according to the whims
of wind.
It is lovely
in its near spherical spirit.
It makes no claims
to have arisen from any gospel,
and it is childlike
in its disregard for time
and its propensity for giggles
that are like the sound that travels
down high voltage lines
strung above rock.
It is a kind of acceptance
inspired by long drags on little joints
of highly refined and artfully selected
distillations of spent spirits
that have returned not to instruct
but inspire.*

*It is what happens.
You know that,
which is why
you show up here
when doubt
has saturated
even your
bones.*

*It is a kind of mysticism
that requires no tools
or props or previously defined
principles, no common utterances,
no uniforms, special deportment,
cosmetics or coiffures.
The demeanor it demands
would be most at home
among the homeless
where almost anything,
except pretense goes.*

*We can see it
and touch it.
We can pick it up
in some of its shapes.
We can carry it around,
give it to each other as gifts,
kiss it for good luck,
be amazed at how it makes us feel,*

*but we can't seem to pass it on
to those who will
take our places
and who will fill its absence
in them
with war.*

Spiteball

BY GERARD SARNAT

RIP Earl Weaver (1930 - 2013), Jim Palmer's manager
during his 19 years as a pitcher with the Baltimore Orioles.

Individual sport practiced by teams, nostalgia can't catch
its lickspittle breath 'cause of the smog, wet behind the ears *pisher**
was smashed from the mound by the brash Yankees'
man-child who knocked my puny balls over the fence.

Little League MVP -- morally self-elevated parents
aware of my temple attendance and grades pulled a fast one
stuffing the ballot box -- when I came up, towhead Palmer glared in,
served chin music till I soaked my flannels and the batter's box.

Brushback heads-up like clockwork,
Daddy'd already warmed the Ford for my head-down retreat
which, on the rare occasion I succeeded to hit a can of corn
blooper, he greets with an enthusiastic, "You were a trooper."

What made me proudest was not rubbing
when Jim hit me -- and then just to make a point,
the cleanup batter -- in the tush. After which instead of pressing
my luck after #5's shallow fly, I straddled 2nd,
didn't even think of tagging, hook-sliding into 3rd .

Adonis Jimmy's first and last election campaign
 was a cliffhanger running for student body president.
 Lost by 3 votes, probably 'cause the winner
 began his speech: "A students, B students, C students,
 D students, and my friends..." which got a huge laugh.
 Jim's chess moves were more serious. Guess who's rich
 and famous, looked great in those underwear ads?

Jim's triple Cy Young career -- only pitcher to win World Series
 games in 3 decades -- after hoodwinking Maris and sneaking
 sliders past Mantle, despite summers playing over-the-line
 against his cannon arm and ropes up against the scoreboard,
 you didn't return calls or leave tickets, never went out to eat
 after playing in LA -- put me down as shocked.

Closest we got was in Macy's: There was Jimmy,
 ballpark height of his powers, tanned and life-sized,
 looking buff with almost nothing covering his bulge.

Apostate's first ballot Hall of Fame induction, the circumcised
 Jockey Shorts poster boy (last jock to beat Koufax),
 had the *chutzpah* to tell the press, "I never got a swelled head."

No comeback up and in hard one intended, Prince James
 who never went to college while I languished in John Harvard's
 Yard, I wonder would Madison Ave -- Nike world in your palm
 -- hire the Lion of Judah the rest of us hoi polloi worshipped
 if they knew back then you too were a landsman named Wiesen?

**Yiddish for little boy's penis*

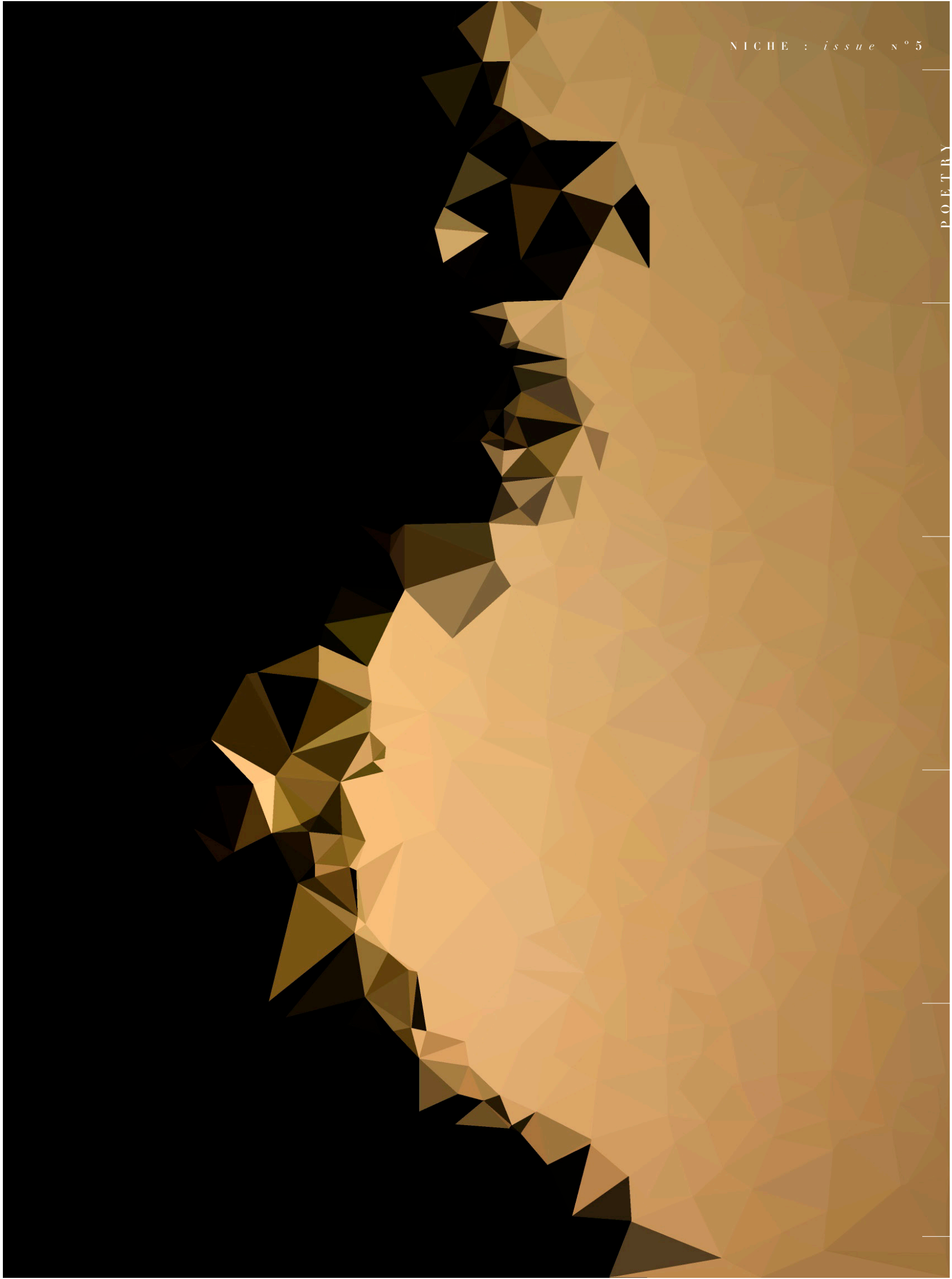
even in the moment it's all an afterthought

BY TIM JURNEY

*i took the man home like a reflex
like a receipt i forgot not to take
bc i was looking into the eyes
of the woman at the cash register
wondering what she did when she went home
and found even more acne on her
already riddled arms*

*we made out until my tongue hurt
and my muscles were tired of being patient but my breath
continued to mix with his
bc the recipe called for it
and when i gasped myself onto his back it was
bc two months of celibacy told his mouth to ask me to do it
and two months of celibacy told my skin to tingle like a chore
at his lips like dust on my superhot chest*

*i told him he was beautiful like a god
and worshipped like the wife of a catholic
who goes to church because she agreed to bake cookies
but forgets the batch at home*





Trinity



Divisions

BY THOMAS GILLAPSY



Blue Denver

BY THOMAS GILLAPSY

Ok, Stupid

BY ALISON SILVERGLAD

From your username, CuddlyPrincess29, to the puckered lip photo that took only eight tries to get right, your profile is complete. You smile as you read it over again. So happy I don't live in North Korea, genius. You know about other countries. Stay away MagicKingdomMan, mister *Disneyland is my favorite vacation spot*. This woman is too smart for you.

A day in and EastCoastLover, RedSoxin4, and RenaissanceMan1979 visit your profile and you wonder why you didn't sign-up sooner. Perhaps you'd be married by now with YankeeDreamer's baby in your belly. TeddyBear9 messages you, Hi. Hi, what do you write back, hello? You delete him. Surely, there must be others. A few mornings later you discover a message from RomeolookingforJuliet. Excited, you quickly log on. His face is movie star cute but his message, U R sexy, leaves much to be desired. You wonder if anyone bothered reading your comment about North Korea.

Dejected, you take a few days off, focusing on your career, catching up with friends and renewing your confidence. You decide you are a modern woman who should take the first step. You look at photos, read interests and consider how important a high school diploma really is. You read introductory blurbs and give

SurfRunBike, OutdoorsyGuy and forty others, four stars. Thursday nothing, and by Saturday night when you google the site for the eighth time, you accidentally type OkStupid. Monday, looking is all you can do. And Tuesday, you wonder who if anyone has noticed you? But Wednesday, FilmGuy1984 sends you a message.

It is a whole paragraph thanking you for giving him four stars and marveling at your common interests: hiking, biking, museums and pizza. You check out his profile, delighted that he has Some College and Doesn't Smoke. You are weary of the photo in which he is surrounded by Hooter Girls. You wonder, is he really taller than me? But you have witty repartee, writing back and forth about your mutual love of fall foliage and your best vacations, his to Bora Bora and yours, the Galapagos. He asks you to dinner and you meet him Tuesday night.

Inside the dimly lit wine bar, you find him seated next to a window overlooking the harbor. You say hello and decide he is Pugly, just like the dog, a 50/50 combo of hideous and adorable with round eyes that look at you like they are asking to be taken home. The wine arrives and together you admire a small tugboat persevering through moonlit waves. You are pleased FilmGuy1984 orders only plates that accommodate your gluten free diet. You enjoy

the view and the prosciutto, the spiced olives and beet ravioli. You even laugh at times and from his eye contact, you think FilmGuy1984 might be into you. You tell him about architecture and he tells you that he can bring you to a Canadian church with a flying buttress.

Outside in the brisk night, he reaches for your hand. You suggest walking off the wine and as you reach the bridge, FilmGuy1984 kisses you.

"That was nice," you say, even though it was perfect.

You begin to cross the creaky bridge and listen to the winter tide. You stop intermittently to kiss and you decide that FilmGuy1984 and CuddlyPrincess29 have the best chemistry in New England. Eventually you reach the other side, where he leads you to the brief shoreline. You look back at the little city, admiring the row of lights lining the harbor. But you remember your job and your need for sleep, and the two of you walk all the way back to the parking lot before kissing again.

He sits in your passenger seat to figure out plans for tomorrow and he asks you, why you picked him.

"You seemed so nice," you say. "And besides there were other guys but they didn't want to be married under the Lord."

"I'm an atheist," he says, and his body moves

against the locked passenger door. He no longer looks like a Pug, more like a Chucky Doll. "You're one of those women who wants to be married under the Lord?"

"Yes," you say. "I thought you did too."

"It says on my profile that I'm an atheist. Atheists don't believe in the Lord."

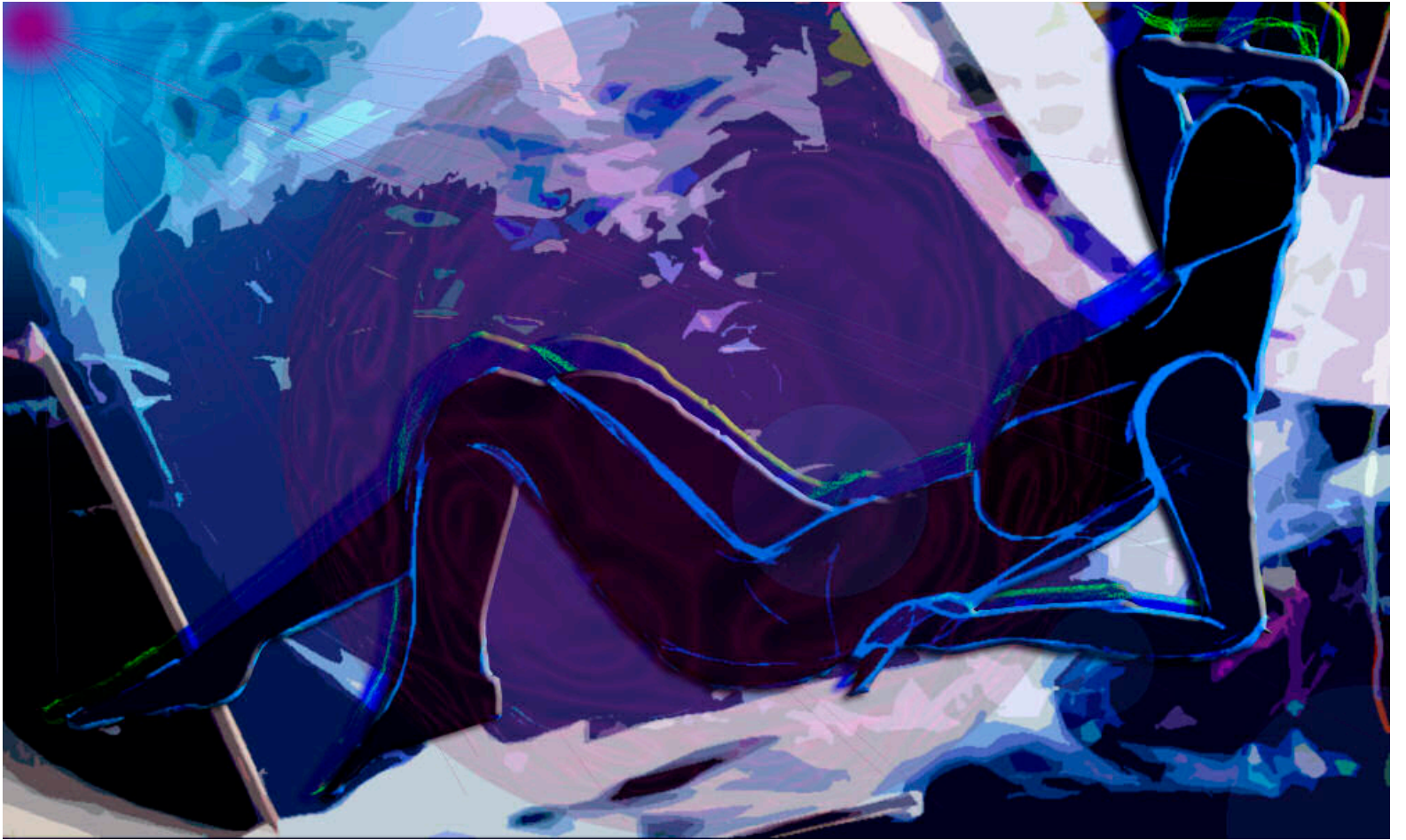
"I didn't see that," and you move your left side against your driver door. "But don't some atheists believe in the Lord?"

"Are you stupid?"

You don't know what to say so you wait for him to lie to you or discover the faith he had himself forgotten. You look at him but he still looks angry.

"You should really read profiles more carefully," he says, as he unlocks the door. "That was an expensive dinner."

You lean your forearms onto your steering wheel. You look into your rearview mirror and watch his Subaru speed out of the lot. And then you close your eyes, squeezing your eyelids tight, trying to keep them from opening, from seeing anything beyond your imagination. You see a honeymoon photo. In front of Cinderella's Castle, you stand arm and arm with MagicKingdomMan. Minnie and Mickey flank you like a wedding party. It might not so bad you think, at least there's the Epcot Center. ♡



Resting Blues

BY CHRYSTAL BERCHE

arcs and loops

BY ANYA SPARKS

sometimes wish conversations could be undone, moments retracted, other words chosen, and sentences granted bravery to guide toward an emotional landscape foreign to us. Instead continue in their loops. We hear them again all fall in safe conclusions, responses constrained by age and experience and power, all those things that create lines colored in with rough silences.

And you shout at you, muted, into these undone moments: please don't share yet another self-centered, sympathy-seeking anecdote. Allow empathy to speak, say instead that it understands and is sorry for all that is unsatisfying and hurt and tender. Let it say that laughter and sarcasm and any distraction will be here, in abundance, and limitless, understand?

Listless, cannot stand the barking or the kitchen water, white noise rush, and am frustrated with words above all. Our story should be better and isn't. Thoughts scattered. For some reason, remembering how a lover once took my hand and placed it against him before cumming, whispering, "I want you to feel *this*." It had been raining in the still-dark morning. We were sore and sleepless and lust-sick. Sometimes, all the time I wonder what it would be like, you and I ▯



17s (Excerpt)

BY GERARD SARNAT

1. UNSPOKENS

i. Harvest Festival

(drafted the day after the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings)

Boston half-light before Halloween, our family gathered like clockwork 'round the dinner table starting gun. Distressing us more that his bib full of spit-up, Baby Bro dropped his first neutron bomb, *YES, I LIKE IKE!*

Kate nimbly fled to the kitchen. (Today's maids come from the Stans, are called nannies, no Thursdays off, no cas Fridays.) Father sped forth, *Son, we here vote Stevenson what's new with the Celtics' fastbreak your homework done, Sis?*

Such marathons filled the ether, kept us divorced from taboos like why Auntie never married. I asked where Dad's favorite babysitter went so fast since she suddenly got plump. Ma mumbled into her peas whatnot 'bout locker-room fodder then Cheshire-grinned, *Guess what's for dessert!*

Finishing line in sight, Mom rang the gong to have dirty dishes cleared.

Next day Pops summoned me while he shaved, *Seventeen year-old girls' tummies swell up like Jack-o-lanterns -- life's a pressure-cooker -- you be careful.*

ii. Hangman Enabled

No simple checkers or serious chess, more gallows humor; I recall when Pops tightened my invisible choke chain we denied existed till I violated unspoken rules. For example, mentioning perhaps I'd drop out of med school led to an instantaneous series of tugs and zaps: ambrosia became dog food, trips in the car cancelled.

I remember that spooky shock collar while Dad's noose starts to fill in.

Once Father aged, he marked the condo with waste. Dumped on the guest room floor.

Pissed in the hallway where he had a fit at his territory's edge.

Now a full-fledged internist, I found the endgame opportunity to pull on the rope by not resuscitating Poppy as he crumped.

2. Proustian Bucket List Of Unnuanced Wooing

“Marcel remembered, *Vois can't make old friends*, whom we wore like second skin careening our new Schwinn's past bramble bush berries and caterpillars -- then piled on till Swann on the bottom cried *Oncle* because he's family.”

* * *

We surround the Dutch driver's wiggy VW bus and flimsy toupee which wasn't much cheesier than our bouffants and pompadours.

Touring London's remaining pillars after high school, none of us got what *blitzkrieg* meant till we witnessed Dachau and Dresden, read Vonnegut. Several kids were sons and daughters of concentration camp survivors. One friend – Benjamin -- still had the *über* residue of bullying.

Score-settling gathering anticipated, van snapshot scanned, I circle who's coming. Benji technified back a peevish denial list:
*Nope, that isn't me front of the Breughel; I didn't go on no trip;
and why'd ya Photoshop me in among goddamn Primo Levi* Jews?*

* * *

Yahoo consumed by digital old flames reverts to our teenhood's worst. Regressed to an extra credit braggart, I start to get why chippy classmates might well choose not to come back home for our golden reunion.

Optimists say, *Wait till the sixtieth*, which sounds hands down less painful than taking my comeuppance for all that ugly *Lord of the Flies* stuff.

* * *

First time home from college, sniffing jacaranda again, as a kid I loved Pa and Ma stunk, or rarely the opposite. Now strapping her in that same Buick she taught me to steer clear in, the one I used to make-out pre-bucket seats, she smells like springtime. Nipple brushed, I touch Mom.

* * *

Animus avatars reanimate Machiavellian rascals.
Our senior class prez's e-blast took grinfuckingest stabs of delight,
Kosher salami buffets will include self-serving carving stations.
Trolling rebuked lands of de and conceit, competitive juices cluck.

Polemical friends at a distance, rival *machers** con for homage.

Nemeses flash 'cross the lawn, knives in their spines. Don Juan snobs gleaned back then,
Strike First is the rule. Cradle-rob by any cherry trick in the book.
 I'm over-stimulated/whelmed grocking Adonis heartthrobs poach girls.

Wheeler-dealer punk rounds the bend, mouths in-crowd *bupkis**'bout iron will.
 Last graven image -- he accused me of snake-hipped banal poetry
 that mocked eunuchs whose manhood must sit down on the can -- now fesses up,
MVA since scored homecoming king; I bask alone in my wheelchair.

* * *

In tenth grade lit, the faster too-cool-for-school kids snickered when they heard
Don Quixote's, A bird in one hand's worth two in the bush. At the pool,
 guys still get hard when the Malibu Cannonball's bulging bathing suit
 dives in. Scouting peroxide replacements might want to do me should spouse
 go to sleep first, Sancho Panza'll squire and scam back into girl
 friends' hearts -- you know what I'm saying which definitely would be telling.

* * *

"Morning after boozy limo reunion friendoffs, a half solid
 moment writing toward character, *Leather suede intelligences suck
 vape sticks.*" Never in troub as a kid, I've a prob portraying trouble.

* author of *Survival in Auschwitz*; bigshot show-off; nothing at all

3. Nothing's So Grand For Grandparents, Grandkids As Grandparents, Grandkids.

He's almost four. She's three. Helping a friend dress, Ell says he'll protect her doll from pre-school punching, biting. Swinging down-up-down-up, so grounded, will it only grow less as they grow older? Just the fam celebrates on his birthday: Ell figures next month at the party he will turn five.

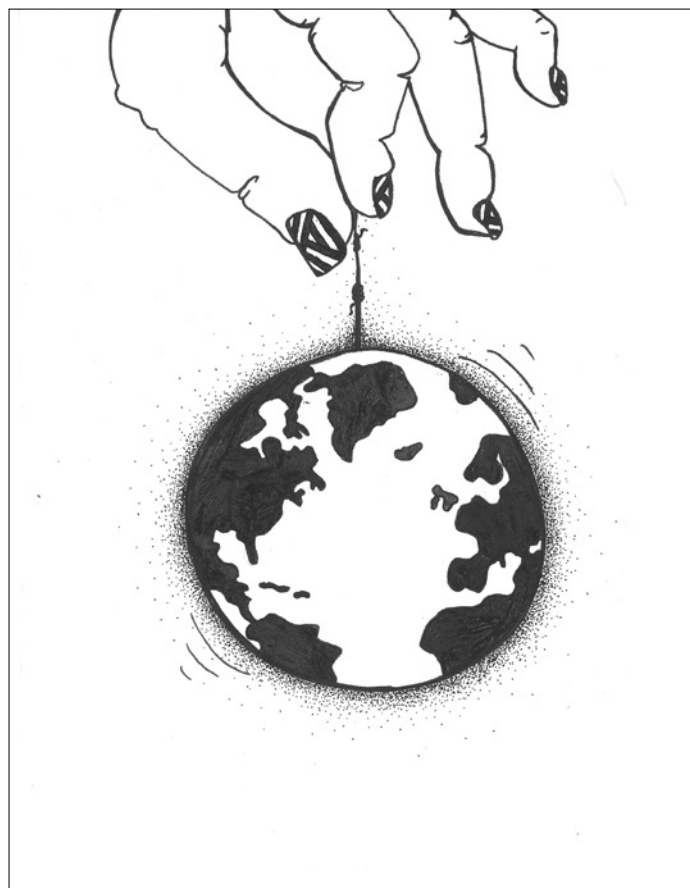
* * *

Sure to be picked early in the night pick-up game, I flew from the mall's Adidas store puffed up in new ones then crumpled when my wife shushed me, *Get off your high horse, put on that apron, fry up liver and onions for our lunch.* After which I moseyed down to Simon's second grade room to collect a bushed grandson. We schlep past the reek of brand new sneakers, through dry-cleaning miasmas to the funky sandwich shop for flurries of turkey and cheese sandwiches then our usual glazed snail donuts. Sugar-crystaled lashes and powdered cheeks, Nike sprinkles, stuffed silly – he's glazed. I slip on his mitt as we pass the ball field, climb the hill home. ☐

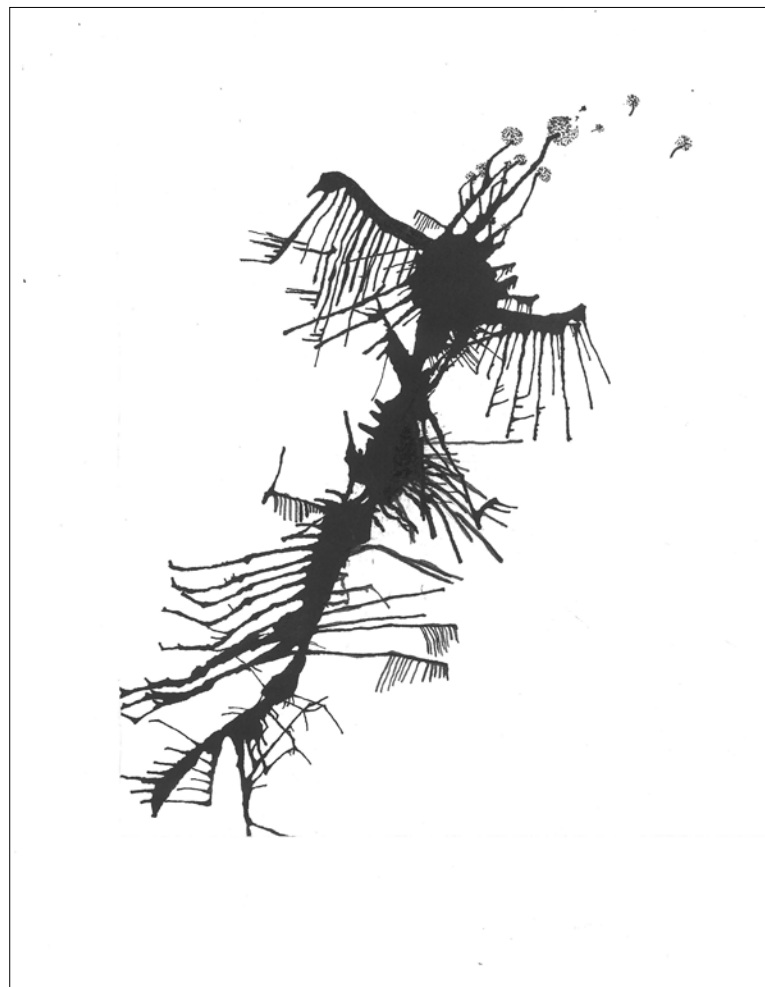


Bad Boots

BY SARA CATLETT



On the Line



Dandelion Root

Vacation

BY AGASTYA MA'II



Sauna

Sitting next to my brother on the creaky bench, I suddenly feel so aware of the rustic stench of naked human sweat on wood. Waves of heat wrap me like Chinese foot binds tightening my body as beads of sweat wring out of my naked surface from my shoulders to my wrists; my knee caps to my toes.

Beach

The night water, mercurial but contained under the moonlight, shimmering at surface skin, sends hives of ripples out to shore forming its characteristic silver gradient. Distant shadows neither grow nor contract in shape or size, they linger in their place. Couples and treasure hunters can be the only dwellers at this twilight hour. Like small, unrecognizable metal balls drawn to an intense magnet, these strangers are ushered in to the coast, beckoned by the silent noises of night surf. Deep in listening pose, aligning my breath with the whispers of the ocean, I fade in to my brother calling from what seems afar. In fact, he is standing beside me and has been since we arrived.

Wrapper

My mother gives each of us a cold chocolate truffle. I hold it by the tips of my index finger and thumb, filling a spot right in between, wiggled in,

as if it belonged there in its spherical, machine-molded, freeze-blasted shape. I unwrap the morsel and look at it closely. It eclipses the television in front of my eye; that's how close I was peering at its surface. The next second, I toss it in my mouth without a thought and unfold the crinkled foil that once held it. The chocolate has melted into my gums, and I flatten it out, the wrapper that is, with my knuckles and hold it in-between my index finger and thumb like I did the chocolate. It's a feather in the created wind of the room. The ceiling fan is pulling and pushing the air-conditioned frozen smoke from above and this rectangular film of thin metal is caught in the trap of my fingers, flapping its plastic corners, trying to escape to the floor. If I listen intently, I hear the quiet crackling of the sauna heat; I hear the surf of the night water fizzling into its sand; I can almost hear the chocolate's melted cries.

Brother

My brother pops the chocolate into his mouth, and stares at his own foil, except he's folded it into an unequal triangle. Interestingly enough, it looks like he's listening for something. As I'm wondering what he can hear, I spot the bag of chocolates peeking out from beneath a blanket on the sofa. Perking up my ears, I reach for another full wrapper. α

FINISHING UP

BY CHRISTINE KENDALL

So, I trudged into the lobby and saw them standing there, her and the boss man, Mr. P. Normally, I managed to avoid them when they were in the office together but that morning she maneuvered the three of us into the elevator. Just like that, she was in charge of both me and him.

I was eating a company bagel cause I'd left my apartment without breakfast. I was trying to wrap the bagel back up, you know, out of respect for Mr. P when she reached over and broke off a piece. Just like that, she reached over with those long fingers of hers, took part of what I was eating and put it in her mouth. The cream cheese was sorta oozing out on the wax paper and then she looked at me. I mean, this married woman who I'd been sleeping with for the past three months was standing right there with her husband. I didn't want to look in her face with the cream cheese speaking for itself and all.

We were between the fifth and sixth floors, nowhere near the offices on twelve, but there wasn't any place to hide so I handed the bagel to Mr. P since, technically speaking, it was his.

He didn't take it or even look at me. I was just standing there with my left knee twitching real bad, trying not to put too much weight on it. He let me

stew for a couple seconds before he reached over and hit the button for six.

"You shouldn't start things you can't finish." He said it smooth as could be. He'd been checking the streaming stock prices on the overhead monitor all the while. Then, as soon as the elevator doors opened, he stepped out.

My job was gone so I didn't have to worry about getting fired anymore. I didn't have anything left to lose so I glanced at her over my shoulder.

"Thanks a lot," I said. I did a double take when I saw her lips quivering.

So then, she started digging through her purse like, maybe, the man she'd married was hiding in there. "I can't get off this elevator alone." She pulled her sunglasses out and put them on. "Just stay with me until we get upstairs."

I almost felt sorry for her; that's how good she was.

"Can't do it," I said to the wood paneled ceiling.

The elevator doors opened on nine and I squeezed past a couple of secretaries who rushed to get on. I took the stairs two at a time and made it down to the street in three minutes flat. So there I was, no money, no job, and, forget about a reference, but I was cool. ▫



Iron Horses Still Drag Me Away

BY JESSE SENSIBAR

The picture says *Goshen, Wisconsin*. It's a new picture of an ancient Indian Chief. It sits in a shallow, ragged hole excavated from the broken boards, rotted timbers and rusted corrugated tin which now surround it in the center of the overgrown burial mound that was once a shed.

It rises complete as it was left. Now covered with surface rust, the leather saddlebags hang off it in rotted shards. The red paint mostly gone. The chrome and aluminum pitted. The gold lettering just barely visible on the tanks. Tires rotted away. How did they know it might even exist?

Some old boy telling them "Yeah, old Williard's boy, he had him one a them big fancy motor-cikels 'for he went off to the big one. Bout '41 or '41 musta been. Could be settin' up the old place yet fer all I know."

Or did someone just see that overgrown pile and know, feel that something was under it, trained, hopeful gaze searching and seeing the top of a headlight, a single handgrip, a vague outline perhaps. ▢

PAPERMAN

BY J.E. ROBINSON

Mostly on the right side, the mills and refineries of Saint Louis bellow and blow with the bluster of the Great Oz himself. Their funk pervades the Illinois air; it smells money. Too many Missourians sense that smell as paycheck as well. But, from Alton's hills, the heavy industrialization seems innocent, just an exhale from Santa's pipe, so much like snow, especially in January. For now, we Altonians stay inside. Passions rage less in winter than in summer.

I have begun my campaign with season's greetings. To win against a practicing incumbent, even in a mad year, I need my neighborhood's votes. I want to see people. Without people, I cannot win. We are well within the last hundred days.

My postman knows why I am out here. He is on the look-out for sundry things in mailboxes, for he will turn them in and sic the inspector upon me. A few days earlier, a friend called, and I shredded half of what I had, supposing it evidence, then watched the corner for bogeymen to appear. None came.

When I mentioned it to the friend, easily, I could have been discussing the Panic of 1837.

"I didn't call you, my man," he said.

Pray, what is this game? Hadn't I trusted him with this campaign?

Instead, I go myself, walking this district. Whoever said I can trust people again?

But, I trust this district. Over the years, it has been kind to me and to my family, and, for a term, I have longed to repay the favor. I intend to represent it on the County Board, which our Mayor called "the easiest job in politics."

"I had heard."

Hard of hearing, he continued. "Madison County is very well run. Thirty years ago, fourteen percent of the property taxes went to running county government. Now, it's about eight percent. How many things in 2011 can say they're less expensive than in 1981?"

Perhaps I thought it a malicious slam-dunk. More people than most said winning would be as easy as

stepping outside. Well, I have stepped outside; fear of snowballs, and of what lurks within, compels me to avoid the door. It is cold in January. I am not fool enough to discount that.

The irony collapses into itself. Young, I imagined that 2012 would be my re-election campaign. I fitted a peony in the button hole of my beige suit, its color complimenting my burgundy tie, and imagined a whistle-stop tour, like President Ford, I suppose, but successful this time. I conjured a wife and family. I heard my voice like my father's, a rich *basso* resonating deep in the chest, like Mingus playing, especially for lullabies. This is what I know, as surely as you are there. But, there is always a tension between what one knows and the variability of truth. Besides, I was ignorant. In 1976, I was just a child.

Hear me. Now, I think I am speaking. Who knows? It might have been just the wind.

I thought real estate, not college history teaching, would pave the way. After all, I took no one calling

me "professor" personally.

"Hey! Professor!"

I have come out too early. The postman approaches to shake my hand. "I got your back. Good luck to you."

"Thank you. God bless you, too."

I am my own lost connection. Earlier that academic year, long before winter break, someone recognized my fog and chose to intrude. It had rained that day, finally, breaking a drought that threatened the bountiful Mississippi. I had left the campus store. En route to class, I had my orange juice and cookie, requisites for holding sugar crashes at bay.

I hear those footsteps as easily as I hear the postman watching me. They pattered, quickly, with pep, as though the legs had to get there fast, before bladder or bowel burst. Women do not walk such a way. They move more daintily, even those proud about not being a lady. I knew those footsteps belonged to a man; I assumed he was trying to get

“Can I turn Houdini? Dare I?”

to a room for a study group before class.

“Hello, Mister Robinson.”

Who said that? Could he also be a ghost? He could—I know—be dangerous. It was fall, after all. My illness conveys itself most readily upon the voices of ghosts during fall.

“Oh, hello.”

Quickly, Sam moved past me, and headed for the locker room. He was fresh from a run. Though I had known him, the son of a colleague, ever since I started teaching at this college and had known he prized his physical fitness, I had never conceived him almost naked, as he was that day. He has a powerful body, a series of muscles in a Grecian physique not overdone. His shoulders and legs are well-defined, and broad, covered with that type of hair that would have made Esau proud. His chest ripples, and a triangle of hair swims over his stomach. The shorts he wore that day had streaks of mud over them, typical for a half-harrier.

I had gazed upon harriers and their halves, when I was a boy, and knew love. I had seen them taking the streets of Upper Alton *en masse*, going, going, going down the hills. I had no interest in running—I became winded so—but I had wanted them. In those years, Alton Senior High School had spectacular long distance runners, claimants to the Illinois crown, thanks to brilliant coaches, and most

people looked upon the cross country and track teams of the 1970s with tremendous pride. A ten year old staring seemed to most just an innocent prepubescent crush.

“You can run, too,” my circulation manager said.

“No, thank you.”

Besides, he knew I had papers. I had made a commitment to get *The Alton Evening Telegraph* to my customers; how could I let them down?

I waited for his van to bring my route with the same enthusiasm with which I anticipated the end of the school year. I hoped it would never come. But, it did, each afternoon, between two and four, and, always, I was home by five. How much of that kids’ world did I miss? I needn’t reason to engage it. Other boys teased, bullied, and fought; little girls, just as bad, were vicious and rough. My refuge were the mature adults on my route, who praised my punctuality as clockwork, who tipped generously, who didn’t mind lofty things like inflation and “the Bicentennial Minute” ejaculated from the mouth of a small child.

“You will be president when you grow up,” an elderly woman said, “if only I can live to see it.”

Little did she and my constituents know, I hate “no.” The word disabuses me of any pretensions related to relevance. At the very least, politics means “no.” Be it election or decision, “no” rests

as the syllable heard most often, and most clearly. Visiting my district with a holiday greeting, I dread someone slamming the door in my face, or refusing to open, as though I were a Latter-Day Saint or a Jehovah's Witness. Either way, "no" is unbearable. I feel myself shrinking at the sound.

Better than anyone, Mom knew this as my Achilles' heel. She knew I would withdraw into myself at the thought of "no." She would hardly sense rejection had insinuated itself into my life many times, for years.

"He's won our rejection contest, two years running," an MFA director proclaimed to Mom once. "He's been rejected more than any other writer in the department."

"How often was he rejected?" Mom asked, cynical.

"Over two hundred," the director replied. "Each year."

My mother looked at her. She looked across the picnic area, where I was engaged with some friends from that time. "I didn't know he was rejected that much."

Rejection will dishearten me in this election if I am not resilient. I must bounce back, and find a way to continue. No one likes "no." The best of us play jujitsu with it, turning that little word into a "yes." When that happens, we have magic.

Can I turn Houdini? Dare I?

As a child, I believed in magic. I took tablets and imagined worlds. In these worlds, I was a vibrant man, unafraid of the mean things smaller people said. I had a wife and a family. In winter, I hit Iowa and New Hampshire; by summer, we appeared before millions.

As a child, magic meant a workable blue and black pen. From my tablets, I sheared a three-inch strip and molded it through reduction, like Michelangelo coaxing the real David from an invigorated marble block. I think it began from wanting toy soldiers, or a G. I. Joe, which my parents refused, because of

the war. That was okay. I made my own.

I called them "paper men." I kept them in a cool, in a dry place. When they became worn, I retired them with a quaint ceremony into the wastebasket.

I looked upon them in the same tin box Mom had collected them when I went off to college almost thirty years ago. They looked hearty, many middle-aged. The one I had imagined as myself had mingled grey hair and wears something akin to tweeds. Protected from dust and humidity, he still looked like he could play.

I wonder. Can he go out to campaign? Can he walk blocks and knock on doors, and not wilt at the "no" that comes as inevitable in politics? We had such promise when I created him at fourteen. But, we all have such promise when we create ourselves at fourteen. At fourteen, we had not known unkind words, or diminishing prospects, or time closing. Nor, for that matter, have we known love so selfless we would dare sacrifice ourselves than live alone. No fourteen year old really knows what he can do. At fourteen, we see ourselves immortal. Older, much older, we make our own immortality. At fourteen, I wasn't worth a damn. Who is? At forty-six, I would like to think we all are worth much more.

I have no perfect paper men, none with physiques as eye-catching as Sam's. Some real people are recognizable in that tin box. The various images of my mother, for example. The faces of boys I had seen running down the hills of Upper Alton. But, could anyone be called perfect? Like rendering a perfect circle, or making a perfect heart for Valentine's Day, creating perfect people alludes us, especially ourselves. Every now and then, that which some may deem perfect turns into an old man picking his fingernails with a pocket knife. Unfortunately, the common inundates the perfect and submerges it. We see the surface and consider the whole pleasant water.

At forty-six, I realize the thought of perfection becomes a sundry mess. Perfect babies are colicky,

and let fire from both ends. True love dissolves into morning breath and a fouled bathroom. I can see the mouth of a pretty man, and find it wanting. At forty-six, I realize real is real, a filthy, a stinking business. Adults know that, not children. The real adult makes steady the work of cleaning stables.

"Like the Bible says," Mom began, "when I was a child, I spake as a child, I acted as a child...but, when I became a man, I put away childish things."

But, children believe in dreams. Don't adults know better not to struggle in vain to tempt dreams coming true?

I chose this life. I chose to put my name into consideration. How, then, might I eschew the rejection inherent in this world? Not fulfilling the commitment might lend myself to "simpleton" and to "fool." People say my chances are good, if I work. By God, if You also wander this district to see me, I must work. Watch me work!

But, I resent this life so. Venturing outside to hear "no" merely encourages us to close the door. Perhaps that seems contradictory, but all human beings resound in our contradictions. We love that and those which break our hearts—all romantics understand such things. We wander into the elements knowing their extremes threaten our lives. Such a base, such a simple thing for humans.

Before doing his business, Sam stood for a moment and talked. Amazingly, he boasted no tan line to speak of. He will complete his work later this academic year, then hang around for a graduate degree...did he receive my e-mail?

"Might I interview you for an essay?" I repeated.

He brightened. Didn't he also brighten as a freshman, when I had him in class?

"Yeah, I received that e-mail," he said. "I had forgotten about it, until now."

I dreaded his asking "why?" How could I explain myself? Mostly, I had intruded upon student lives stealthily. Here and there, like a thief. I had spied upon them from across the yard behind tinted glasses. Nothing strange there. Should one go to

an art museum, we would observe intimacies in amphorae and in sarcophagi. The demure ladies in tapestries blush for some reason, and we blush seeing them. When we visit each other in the marketplace, we pry their business, broadcasted upon spit.

For whatever reason, the inner lives of paper men disinterested me. I had created them. My paper men claimed no world beyond my choosing. Sophisticated sentiments about God say the same. The Monday following Creation, the deists said, the Little Boy was called to pare His Nails. He had not returned to His toy box until He brought Adam out to play. When Adam displeased, God made another. I know man made God in his own image, but who thought we would conceive Him beyond our ultimate imagining?

The sun smiles this January, as though the tin toy box has been opened to fluorescent lighting. Confused, the birds and bees fly, but the grass refuses to wake and grow. The temperatures approach spring. We need be cautious. In this weather, Saint Louis welcomes tornadoes. When winter tornadoes come, it seems that Little Boy has tossed His tin toy box in rage. Perhaps Mother Nature has denied God Turkish delight. He had raged last New Year's Eve; what next will feel His Foot coming down?

Sam flipped his hair. "When would you want to do it?"

"January," I said. "If you have time."

The young man nodded approval. Ever since I had fired that e-mail, I was prepared for a hot "no." But, his approval seemed as easy as asking. Knowing my temperament, might God had compelled that, too?

"It's always easier to apologize and to beg forgiveness," one sage said, "than to seek permission." Hadn't every child known that true? Once beyond two, they learn to sneak the hand when no one is looking, rather than to find Mom

and ask “may I?” Seemingly, that insight comes from the womb. Haven’t we seen kites on clear January days? They ask no one. Instead, they swoop down and coast away. Hungry, kites fear no “no.”

Not raptor but human rather, I fear wanting and not getting. I want my neighbors’ approval, almost as much as I wanted Sam’s, and I fear not getting it. On this beautiful January day, as lowans broke all but two hearts, I feel for those denied a near-perfect finish to their quest at the caucuses, and, although I long for their ultimate defeat for the sake of our country, I weep for them. How brave Michelle Bachmann and Rick Perry seem. Bloodied, embarrassed, they prepare a face for the faces they would meet. What little boy anticipates that?

“I feel like a little boy who has stumped his toe in the dark.” Adlai Stevenson quoted Abraham Lincoln after losing the presidency in 1952. “I’m too old to cry, but it hurts too much to laugh.”

Strike what I said to the MFA director. Electoral defeat hurts silly. Perhaps, more than anything, that “no” trembles me most. I fear being hurt so thoroughly by my neighbors, losing, that I’d rather not roll out of bed. That simplicity cannot veil itself. In that way, staying in that tin toy box has its advantages.

But, there is that last truth: no one would know unless he tries. I might see no one. I might receive no smile. Surely, I will receive nothing, if I don’t try. Even a little boy understands that well.

My campaign friend drives fast down Amelia Street, then hits the brakes. “Professor! You’re out walking!”

“Can’t win, if I don’t shake hands,” I say.

“There you go! Keep on truckin’!”

He drives away. He could have easily taken some handbills and also knocked. But, I am on the ballot, not he, and this is what I still want. I want approval, and, for that, I must attempt the work, just like a doll miraculously found front and center when its child opens the lid. α

The Spared

BY MELISSA VALENTINE

I was busy getting my hair straightened while the rest of my family was viewing Junior's body. I only saw pictures. The top of his head was wrapped up like a turban where the bullet had gone through to his brain and killed him. He had been running. He fell on 36th and West. One of his last breaths spent accepting Jesus from a neighborhood woman who was the only one brave enough and swift enough and close enough to be at his side. He had run through backyards, hopping over fences. I know he was used to running, but the terror he must have felt, not knowing on which street they would find him. If not today, then tomorrow, or the next day.

And what had he done to be hunted like an animal? This I could not face. Why didn't he flee, head for Alabama, change his name, save himself? Maybe he could have survived in another life in some other disguise. In this life he chose the disguise of gangster, but underneath was a sweet boy, a sweet, lost boy. Oakland was his home, we were his family, and Shannon was his girl; he belonged here.

In that part of town gunshots provided the background music, they were as commonplace as ice cream trucks. Therefore the ambulance took its time. They didn't think of them with hearts, with families. Doing so would require compassion and humanity. At Highland hospital—the homicide hospital—a desensitized doctor came to the room where they tell families that their family members are dead. I prayed to the deepest part of myself for him to make it. "He is not going to make it," the doctor said. Then he said something about a vegetable and his sorrow, but that was all I could hear. It rang in my ears and the heaving cries of my family were echoes, all of it ricocheting in some other realm of existence. Where was I? And more importantly, who was I?

At the salon, I was distracted by the hairdresser's drunkenness. I had never seen a working drunk before. My hair smoked underneath the hot iron until the tiny room was hazy. The woman waved

away the smoke and took sips of her sweating soda cup full of ice and alcohol while she waited for the iron to get hot again.

It was Shannon's idea to get my hair straightened at a shop. Since Junior died, she had spent every night in my bed with me. I let her in. I was sad, too. Unintentionally, during the night we would spoon in my twin bed. She slept in a thong and a tee shirt. I never asked her why or told her to stop, but I often woke to find her bare ass cuddled against my pelvis. We were both sad. Sometimes she woke up screaming or whimpering softly and I calmed her. In the morning she told me her dreams. They'd be about Junior.

In those weeks just after he died, Shannon watched me. Sometimes it felt like a mother's watch, sometimes like a sister's, and sometimes it was distinctly like a child's. She was looking for the strength not to crack open. While the drunk smoked my head, Shannon watched me vaguely like someone who stares into traffic; we stared into a large mirror, too afraid to look at ourselves, we looked at my hair instead.

"Do you like it?" Shannon asked.

"I look different."

I was different. Now I was someone who had been spared. I had to go on living. It was a burden, especially in those first months after he died. Now I was someone who, no matter what, had to exist with a missing piece, a deep sadness hidden to the outside. Shannon's remedy was to focus on the outside, fix our hair. My remedy was to slice up my flesh until I bled. On the nights I slept alone, I surrounded myself with photos of him and as if I was a witch conducting a ritual, some form of sacrifice, I cut into my thighs with an exact-o knife until they bled. I carved a heart around a scar I'd gotten during one of our fights; I bled, I cried, but I felt nothing.

We looked passed ourselves and focused on my hair. It shined, falling down over my shoulders, golden brown. I could pass for someone beautiful.

We both knew that someone was pulling a drawer that contained Junior's cold body out to be viewed, everyone weeping around him in an eerie refrigerated room. A turban-like cloth held the fragile bullet-wounded flesh of his head together. I couldn't bear to be with the dead. I knew he wasn't there. We were looking at the site where he used to live, now just a puffy, cold, animal version, caught and refrigerated. I didn't want to see him that way. The reality of what lay under that turban haunted me. He was a fallen soldier in a war. How did this happen? What lay under his turban was evidence of the war, evidence of the violence I heard about peripherally but never thought would affect me. Black boys were being murdered every day. I thought Junior was too smart, better. I thought somehow we were better than this ending. They aired the story of his murder in a ten-second news clip, his face on the television, his face in the newspaper. All of Oakland saw and went on making their dinner. We all saw, everyday, and went on making our dinner.

I thought we were survivors. When Junior died I realized being a survivor is an illusion; it's a story you tell yourself so you can keep on going. How could I go on? We, my siblings and I, had huddled together when times were rough. We told each other we had made it, we had each other at least; we weren't alone. Well, one of us did not make it. What happens to the story now? How could I live with these people who killed him, neglected him, did not teach him what it was to be a man so that he had to go in search of it? And they were killing me too, just more slowly, because I was becoming a woman. This world kills black women more slowly. My parents. Oh, my parents. They were shells. Completely empty. How could I go on living? Why were we condemned to childhood? What a vicious place. I wanted to get out. I was different alright. I wanted to get out. I'd never had a stronger desire.

Who would teach me to be a woman? I was

afraid. Who was I now that one of us hadn't made it? I didn't want to end up lost. Being lost meant death.

You are never ready. Junior had been yanked away from us and we could not find him. I talked to him and he did not answer. I began to float, not because I was free, but because I had nothing inside to anchor me. I was not aware of having bones or blood or a heart, I was just vaguely aware of existing, and even that felt wrong. It felt wrong to have the right to live when he'd been taken. My body no longer belonged to me, it not belonged to the deep shame of the spared. I became a mild, bleary-eyed version of myself, the only emotion I could feel was despair and I bound to it as if doing so would bring him back.

I wanted to see ghosts.

The days leading up to his funeral were urgent, critical. Soon he would be gone forever, body and all. There had to be some action we could take. There wasn't much time.

In certain neighborhoods where these street wars go on with black boys as their soldiers, you see spots on the sidewalks with little teddy bears and crosses on them. These are little black boy graves, all over the streets. They say RIP and they have the boy's affectionate name and a photo of his face. Junior's grave site was an entire wall along a freeway exit that led up to a traffic light; the sidewalk led only to the freeway so no pedestrians walked there, only him, running desperately from bullets, hopping fences and running through backyards, ending up there. We had an entire wall and sidewalk to dedicate to him, across from which a block of houses sat; people probably watched us, but we didn't care. We arrived on a mission, with giant graffiti pens and markers, spray paint, photos. We memorized poems and bible verses. I wrote him a letter begging him to come back.

I wanted to see ghosts.

“You are never ready.”

We were a family doing grief graffiti. There were seven of us. We were missing one. Yet I could feel him there, wiping our tears and gently offering us hugs, a whisper telling me I would survive this. Being a survivor was not all it was cracked up to be.

Someone had called the police on this family of vandals. A patrol car pulled up and told us we had to leave, that we could be arrested and fined, that we were defacing state property. We explained that this was the site where our brother and son had been murdered. He shook his head. “I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to leave,” he said. This was the kind of thing no one wanted to see. Yes, we were vandalizing state property, but we were also making art, a large-scale public grave for all to see who had died here, for all to see and acknowledge that many die here. No one wanted to see this evidence of war, evidence of these boys having been loved. The wall was quickly washed by the state of California and slowly decorative vines began to grow between cracks of cement and everyone who walked or drove by went back to making their dinner.

On the day of his funeral I felt guilty all night

for not having touched his cold body and getting my hair straightened instead. I didn’t recognize myself in straight hair. Who was I? Not looking like myself, it was easier to disassociate, ask myself: who am I now? I didn’t sleep much, but when I did, he was alive. The funeral was nothing but wet eyes and wrinkled brows. A clashing sea of black and white and brown sorrow. These were our people, and Junior’s people. Junior’s best friend Marcus walked up to me and hugged me. I could feel his bulletproof vest against my chest. He had come to grieve for his friend on the white side of town, but was afraid he’d be shot. I looked around and saw the blur of the crowd beyond my watery eyes. A young black girl I’d seen before at school filmed the whole thing and narrated her version of the events. In the lobby where we’d hung family photos, his street friends looked at the photos as if seeing Junior for the first time. White boy Chris came from this mixed up place where ghetto boys and girls and white Middle-aged Quakers from Berkeley Meeting all knew some part of him and equally felt the devastation of the shortness of his life. Our old neighbors Julia and Josh came up to me with lips sealed, arms open. What do you

say? Everyone opened their arms and was sorry. That's all I could see through my wet eyes—a bunch of open, sorry arms. I was angry at Junior for choosing these people over us. Over me. I felt abandoned by him. There was no one left to protect me, I would have to protect myself. He had been wrong about them; none of them were his friends. I was mad at him for not knowing. Why hadn't he known? He wanted a life outside of our house, outside of our family. He ran away fiercely from our suffocating house, believing he was running away from the suffocating.

Shannon clung to me. She kept sleeping in my bed, seeking me in her thong. I talked to my friends about Shannon and her thong. They said she was probably just sad and missed my brother and I was the closet thing to him, not to worry, it wasn't weird. Then, gradually she started to disappear. When we all started to be able to live and be sad at the same time. For many of us this was our first loss and we would have to learn how to bury it and go on.

Junior was buried in the most beautiful spot in Oakland. You can see the entire city. He is between two redwood trees. The preacher—is that what they are called? The ones that speak at funerals? We didn't know him. He was an employee of the funeral home and we didn't know who else, so we let him say the necessary religious words. "Ashes, to Ashes," he said. I screamed then. I wanted to get in the casket. I really did. And if that preacher man hadn't grabbed me and consoled me in a way I thought was sexually inappropriate, I would have. I pushed his hands off me as hard as I could and clutched my sister Vivian so tight we could have joined. Everyone and their sorrow. They were so sorry.

While I convulsed and heaved and joined with my sister, Shannon looked down at the grassy ground. So did my parents, totally depleted. No one appreciated the view from where we stood, the fresh air, the birds, the trees. With the absence

of Junior, there was no sound, no time, no air, no light. After the service, we scattered. Cornelius and our cousin promised they were going to "find that mother fucker," the killer. More violence. Cornelius had already beat someone up for flipping him off at a red light. He'd left his car running in the middle of the street and walked up to the man and punched him through his open window. I sat on the grass hill near Junior's redwood trees and started at space, unable to see the view in front of me. The bulletproof vests left. The Quakers left. Everyone left and took their sorrow with them. Shannon sat on the curb above me, also staring at nothing.

When I saw Shannon again, she was pregnant. At a grocery store near my high school I saw her coming out escorted by two of her girlfriends. She had my brother's baby in there she said. I was an aunt.

Whispers began about the medical miracle in Shannon's belly. How many months is she? Why did she take so long to tell us? How can this be?

Jewel was born eleven months after Junior died, healthy and hairy. She had a full head of black hair, which everyone noted. Even her arms and legs were fuzzy with soft black hair like a little, perfect monkey baby. Shannon could not hear the voices that whispered outside the hospital room where flowers and "It's a Girl" balloons surrounded her. The baby was passed around the room and everyone got a chance to behold this perfect hairy child. Shannon smiled, in a daze.

The voices spun: *Good hair, too. She's the right color. She looks Asian though. Look at her eyes. She's so hairy. Just look at all that hair. She looks just like a little Chinese baby. Maybe she's Chinese. Well, she's the right color. Not real black. Not too black. Good hair. Nice hair. Lots of it. But Chinese. But the color is right. We'll have to wait and see. A real cutie pie. Smart too. Like her daddy. Alert. How can this be? What can we say? What can we do? This is a tragedy. This is a miracle.* α



FLOAT

BY ARIEL HAFEMAN

Regulation: Child will maintain a well-regulated state, with little to no distress. Child will manage distress by using appropriate communication with his partner.

“What time is it, Caleb?”

He’s smiling at me. He loves this game. “What time is it?” he says.

“It’s...” I hold up five fingers.

“It’s five o’clock!” he says, and the kids and their therapists take five steps forward.

Really, I want him to do this on his own—no prompts, no support, no help from me, his therapist. To be able to play with other kids independently. That’s the goal anyway.

“What time is it Mr. Fox?” Nathan says, ten feet away.

“It’s...” I hold up seven fingers.

Caleb looks at my fingers, counting. “It’s...”

Seven o’clock. We’re in the car, he’s sick again, and I’m saying nothing right. But we keep going. The smell of the reubens we just bought is filling up the empty space. “I need to put some air in these tires,” I say absently.

Red light, green, then another. I veer to avoid the potholes.

“Turn there,” he says.

“For what?”

“To get some air in your tires.”

“Jake, I didn’t mean now.”

“Just turn here.”

"Let's just get you home, okay?"

"No, I want to help you. Turn right up here."

I do, and he gets out when we reach the gas station he wants me to go to. His color is off. He leans around the tires, "Who told you you needed air in these?" he asks.

I'm a little confused by the question. "No one—I did?"

And it's true, I've been waiting for the tire on the left front side to pop and be stuck on the side of the road. But I'm not, I'm here with Jake, waiting for him to vomit all over the sidewalk because he and I are at a standstill; neither one moves until the other one does. I can't say we won't fill up the tires tonight, he won't listen and might get sick just to make me look bad. Then I'll be the girlfriend who forced her boyfriend to fill up her tires when he was sick, even though all I wanted to do was go home. The more honest we are, the more we fight, so I've learned to hold my tongue.

We take out the pressure gauge and check. "It is low," he admits.

He starts filling one of the tires. His color is getting worse. "Can I help you?" I ask. It's a vain attempt, I already know the answer is, "No, I'm good."

We get in the car when it's over, and he sinks into the seat. "Thank you, you didn't have to do that."

"It's okay, babe, let's just get home." We hold hands for a second and then let go. I drive softer on the way back. Soon enough we're there, unlocking the door to the gray, third-floor apartment, opening it again to another night.

He throws the keys on the table, eats half his reuben and takes a pill for the pain in his back. I watch as we return to the routines of our nights together. We change our clothes, brush our teeth one after the other, he lays on top of the sheets, closes his eyes. His skin yellows against his dark hair. We might hold hands before he falls asleep. I might lay my head on his shoulder.

He falls asleep while I lie awake. City lights send shadows into the room, and I think about other

people, other places.

Joint Attention: Child will maintain joint attention with partner through a variety of play activities. Child will take back-and-forth turns in order to add to the activity.

I'm early, Hannah's finishing her after-school snack at the computer and playing some My Little Pony game I've seen her play once or twice before. It's very basic, similar to many computer games: you pick your player—blue, white, pink. You press enter to shoot, arrows to move, the space bar to jump. Everywhere there are things you must avoid—spikes grow from the ground, sticks become wolves that attack you, lava sits in between where you are and where you need to jump to. Occasionally a floating heart will appear that will give you more life if you can catch it.

She loves it, and I'm getting involved too. But as I'm watching I see that she keeps running into every bad guy head-on, sometimes winning, sometimes dying. She has a few lives left. Her pony reappears and she starts up again. I see a figure materialize just ahead. "Don't touch him Hannah," I say, "he'll hurt you."

"Don't worry," she says without turning around, "I be just fine."

But even though I know it's silly, I do keep worrying. I feel myself becoming invested in keeping her computerized pony alive and she keeps running forward, diving headlong into danger. The pony flickers then disappears, until she's down to one life. Suddenly she quits, shutting down the program with a few clicks. "This game too hard for me," she says, "I'm going to be done for awhile."

"That's a great idea," I say, "take a break."

It's Halloween. I don't know what to wear and don't really care anymore. I grab a ruffled white dress I've never worn and buy some angel wings at the store that cost me ten dollars. They come with

a matching halo made of silver tinsel. I add a pair of gold flats to the outfit and throw everything into a bag so I can change at Rachel's house.

I call her on the way and tell her I'm heading over. Jake texts me sometime while I'm driving. "Have fun tonight. Miss u!!!!" it reads. He's in Chicago for a concert with a "group of buddies", canceling our plans last minute. "Is that okay babe?" he'd asked. "Of course," I said, knowing that telling the truth would be causing a fight. I drop the phone back into my purse and turn up whatever's playing. He can wait.

As soon as I step inside I wish I didn't come alone. There are a ton of new faces I've never met. I give Rachel a hug, say a general "hi" to everyone I know, put down my stuff. All the girls take over the bedroom and bathroom, changing into our costumes, curling our hair, applying too much makeup.

We reemerge into the front room as new creatures. Someone grabs me a beer and I sit near the TV and unfocus my eyes, waiting for everyone to figure out the carpool situation.

That's when Matt approaches me. "They don't really look like that," he says.

It takes a second to realize what he means. Then I see. There's an ad on tv for lonely people. People who just need someone to talk to. Girls are sitting on beds in their nighties, twirling their hair with their fingers and promising that they'll listen; just ninety-nine cents for the first minute.

I wasn't really paying attention, but I realize I was staring right at it and now I just feel awkward. "You never know..." I say, feeling my face go hot. He continues smiling at me and, luckily, this is the moment people have decided who is driving what car and the group begins milling out the door.

The house makes the party seem bigger than it is, but tonight, I don't mind all the heat, or the smoke, or the lack of space. Rachel points out the host to me before she disappears. It's hard not to see the only guy in the crowd above 6'5". "I've warned him not to get near you," she says, "He's trouble."

So I avoid him and talk to Eric instead, who is one of Rachel's exes and easy to get along with, harmless. We talk about the people in the room, make up elaborate stories about a few of them. It's a fun game, we go back and forth adding little embellishments until it's easy to believe our own fiction.

"That costume is all wrong for you," Matt says at my side, "you shouldn't be allowed to wear it."

I look down at my white ruffles, little white beads at the ends. "This?" I say, "it's not a costume."

"Oh so you're really an angel?" he says. "And I'm supposed to believe that?"

"A fallen angel, maybe."

"Alright, I'll take that," he says.

We go back and forth teasing each other throughout the night. I know I shouldn't, I know there's a danger lurking somewhere in here, but we're having fun. And you're supposed to have fun at a party, I reason. Anyway, I feel light, free, like I'm not weighed down by anything. I hardly think about Jake in Chicago, or what he's up to, or what he would think about all of this, me being here.

Matt sits next to me later on the couch, really close. Our legs are touching knee to hip and I wonder if he is as aware of this as I am. I know I should move but I don't. He's talking to me about psychology, how people put up their own barriers, the essence of fear, self-fulfilling prophecies. Abstract kind of things that I miss discussing with people, and I can't with Jake, who doesn't seem as interested in those kinds of conversations as I am. In fact, if I'm honest, we hardly really talk anymore. Not in the real way, anyway.

"I need some air," I say.

"I'll come with you."

Outside, the night is bitter and cold. I find a place by the side of the house that doesn't catch the wind as much. We continue talking as he lights up a cigarette on the sidewalk in front of me. He tells me about the one person his mind always comes back to, the love of his life, but it just didn't work out.

"I don't know," he says, taking a step toward me, "I'm just looking for that "right" person, you know?"

I know what he means, but I also know where he stands. Our values are completely different, and anyway, I tell myself, he has this effect on most women. He is charming, and I am falling for it. But then I wonder why I'm falling in the first place. And why it feels so good to let go. But I can't go there. I buoy that thought somewhere far back in my mind and hold onto the idea that Jake and I are going to make it, and I've done nothing wrong here tonight.

Distress: Child will increase use of appropriate language during distress episodes without use of verbal or visual support from therapist.

I've messed up his routine, and now he's really mad. What was it this time? That's right. We did the colors out of order. He always likes to start with white, then red, then blue, and so on from there. Well, I wanted to start with green today. Then he wanted to quit.

"Say, "All done" Caleb."

"All done Caleb," he says.

"I want to be all done," I model it correctly this time.

"I want to be all done," he repeats, his face all screwed up. He's so mad. I hate seeing him cry, but sadly it's gotten easier over the years.

"Good job. We are all done."

He goes off and cries into the corner for a few minutes while I write some notes in the clinical binder and feel a small part of myself callousing over.

"What's wrong?" he says, again. I turn and chop the garlic for dinner.

"Nothing, I told you, nothing's wrong," I say. He comes up behind me, I cringe, then immediately turn around but he's already backing away, his hands up.

I say something weak in apology because I'm not

really sorry. He says something equally dismissive and goes to the other room to watch the game. I can feel us breaking apart but we stay together, stubbornly clutching at the loose ends. If nothing else, we are equally stubborn.

I need someone there to verbalize what I can't say on my own to the person I'm supposed to be the closest to. I think of all the things I teach the children, helping them put a name to what they're feeling, forcing them to talk to their companions.

I'm mad.

I don't like this.

I want to be all done.

We used to be in love, what happened?

I wish I were more like my sister, she was always the actor, the communicator. She would know how to smooth things over, how to somehow make this work.

He goes to take the dog outside but the way he says it it means he's mostly going out for a smoke. I empty a sigh and feel weight drop off my shoulders that I hate myself for as the door clicks shut behind him.

Pretend Play: Child will develop pretend play routines, with multiple steps and imagined characters; pretend play will involve a play partner and child will be flexible to new ideas, steps, etc.

"Goodnight?" Caleb says, his voice lilting at the end. This is his way of asking me to play and I honor it.

"Okay Caleb, goodnight," I say.

He gleams and runs over to the light switches, turning all five of them off one by one. The basement could almost be night, hardly any light falls through the windows. We pretend sleep, then two seconds later I hear him rip off the blanket, giggle over to my side on tiptoes. A hand on my arm, "Wake up, wake up!"

"Good morning Caleb!"

"The sun is up!" he says

"The sun is up," I say back.

"The sun is up!" he says again, pointing to the light switches in the corner. He's asking me to make it morning.

Caleb is just developing play skills, so we do basic, simple pretend. Scaffolding is what we call it. You start with small, easy steps—meet him at his level. These steps become progressively more difficult as he adapts and learns to master them. We foreshadow any changes that might take place, as though he's a little bomb that might at any second go off.

"Caleb, this time we're going to try it a new way."

"In five minutes we're going to be all done and do something else."

"No marbles today, we are trying something new."

"First my idea, then yours," and so on.

Not at all like what I used to play with Hannah, or Ava, who would create complex scenarios of traps, evil villains, princes whom she or her Barbie would ultimately marry. She could do pretend play for hours, all day if she wanted to. Most days the pretend involved famous characters from movies or stories she had memorized: princesses, superhero girls, even Martha the dog from Martha Speaks. Sometimes the character was something she made up—Tracy the Barbie with copper hair, who would act more like Ava in play, like a sort of alter ego wrapped up in a tiny waist, plastic hips and clothes you could remove with your fingers. Most days the pretend ended nicely. With a marriage, or a party, or all the characters going to sleep in their respective beds.

But there were some days when Ava got stuck. She was sucked into a whirlpool surrounded by sharks and I couldn't save her, she was falling ten stories out of Rapunzel's tower, or being dragged away by wolves that were "hungry" and "dangerous". I'd watch as she'd guide her Barbie this way and that, screaming in that soft, subdued way children do in pretend. My heart picked up, how could I tell her:

"You need to live." That "I don't want to watch you falling."

Somehow it mattered. I needed her to know—it's important to stay alive, to keep your head above water. I always tried to save her somehow.

"No," she would say, finding a way out of my saving. "That won't work, I'm falling, I'm going to crash," as her Barbie plummeted to the floor. I'd try to invent some kind of pretend net or a pretend boat that would come out of nowhere and rescue her. Sometimes Ken came into the picture and she gave in, her dark eyes suddenly going soft, but he didn't always do the trick.

Those days, I knew, she didn't want to be rescued. She wanted, in some strange way, to give up; to be destroyed, not to win. And I realized I had a choice: either I would refuse to give up, inventing more and more ways to put off the inevitable death, or I would pull back my hands and surrender, watching her Barbie getting invisibly torn apart bit by bit or swallowed whole, allowing Ava to play out whatever fantasy was living inside her head, hidden from the rest of the world.

Late at night, he holds me in his arms and talks about survival. We watch the character dying in *Into the Wild*. I bury my face into his shoulder at some parts but he's not impressed. "I wouldn't die, I would make it," he says, staring at the screen. That's true. Jake would thrive in some kind of post-apocalyptic world, ruled by those who can hunt and make their way in the forest. We watch *Doomsday Preppers* and I—appalled at the children being raised by these parents—cannot take them seriously, which he says is the point, and we laugh. But when we're done laughing he says how he'd be ready, he wouldn't build a bunker—wouldn't need to. He'd go out into the woods. He plays with my fingers in his hand, "Would you come with me?"

We're arguing again, this time outside.

“Why not?” he says, “I want to marry you someday.”

“What?” This is the first time he’s brought up marriage.

“Never mind,” he flicks his cigarette, and for some reason, right at that moment, that guy walks out that I always see around Jake’s apartment, the one in the nice sweaters, tall, polite-looking. We’ve only exchanged gentle hellos but I always seem to run into him out here when I’m coming and going. He gives an apologetic look, steps through the awkward moment and walks away.

I approach Jake, the future I have chosen. His body is defensive, facing the other way. We’ve been trying at this for so long. I put my hand on his arm. “I want that too,” I say.

“Yeah?” he looks at me.

“Yeah.” As I say it, I feel both a weight and a release. Six months from now this will all be over but for now, we kiss, we say all these things.

I imagine our little house in the country we’ve been talking about getting. Maybe I’ll go to grad school by then. No, that dream is slipping further and further away, and somehow, losing its importance. I’ll be a wife and wear an apron and have dinner ready when he gets home. I’ve always been pretty good at cooking and enjoyed it. Kevin, Dean, Kristie—all those professors who were once so important to me—are fading into memory and taking their place is our imagined little boy, our first born, waddling around with a thick mess of black curly hair, making my life one living hell just like Jake did to his mother year after year. And I’ll love him more than anything, just like she did. Every single day.

I wonder what we’ll call him. I’ve always liked the name Evan or Blake. But his mother might want something more traditional, like Benjamin, or Elijah, or Jacob, like his father. He’ll go to Jewish day school just like his dad and one day he’ll be all grown up.

I imagine the years scarring over me, making me numb to the familiar sound of Jake’s truck pulling up the no doubt gravel driveway, some kind of dead animal laying in its bed.

But I’ll be Mrs. Jake by then, I remind myself, and I’ll get used to him shooting things, eventually being taught by his mother how to skin a deer, how to cook it. Drinking wine with his sister on her porch, her boyfriend (by that time husband) giving me secret looks like he sometimes did before. But now I can pass them off as nothing, because I’ll give my own looks too, and they will mean nothing. I’ll learn the trick of being happy while you’re married, and maybe when we’re married we’ll finally get along. And there will be days I can escape it, maybe with our kids, taking them to the beach like my mother used to take us all the time in the summer. Just us, no dad, splashing around Cedar Lake and making up all sorts of games in the water, but we never went past the rope. Snakes lived on that side, we were told.

My mom joined us sometimes, walking a trail down the hot sand from the beach blanket. We always wanted her to play. Sharks and minnows, Marco Polo. Sometimes she would, but usually I’d find her in the deeper end, just floating. “Do you want to float with me?” she’d say. I’d watch her—arms out, eyes closed. A peace passed over her face that was not usually there. I joined her sometimes, staring at the blue sky that stared back.

I can understand part of why she loved it, because with your ears underwater you can’t really hear anything, everything kind of tunes out around you, and then it’s just a void; anything’s possible. It could be anywhere, anytime, maybe none of it existed anymore. And when you’re a kid at the beach and you need her, you can catch her by surprise in a daydream, just floating. You can swim up close and she won’t even see. ▫



My Inner Mona Lisa

BY SAMANTHA HARDCASTLE

ALIEN GIRLS

BY JAHLA SEPPANEN

My sister and I have the same fingers. We point and they bow back in hyperextension at the middle joints. I like to say, “have” because she existed once. Real and breathing. Cracking those alien fingers, then taking my hands to repeat the procedure; beginning at the pinky and ending at the thumb. My sister told the kids in school that we, the Smith sisters, were not of this world.

“See,” she says, “look at our hands,” and the children moan and gape their jelly-lined mouths to the spectacle of us. Sonia loved the attention. I loved being a part of Sonia. I was never as smart as my sister, and maybe that had something to do with age, but that is wrong and I’ll explain why. Sonia seemed to be thinking all the time. Writing scrupulous notes to herself in the margins of school textbooks. She knew more than any other kid in the school. More than any teacher or adult too. I will die believing Sonia was the smartest person in this life and the next.

“You’re capital L, lucky,” Sonia said. “The more brains you have the heavier it is for your neck to hold your head.” She rubbed her temples. “Want to borrow some for a little while?”

“Hand it over,” I said, and put my hands on the crown of her head.

“Mmm, that’s better,” she said.

I rubbed my hands into her scalp.

“Harder,” she said.

“I don’t feel anything.”

“Yes you do. Think really hard and you’ll know what I know.”

“It’s not working.”

“A little to the right. There.”

“What’s that bump?”

“It’s a composite of knowledge. A little sack of smarts.”

I pushed through the rounds of my fingertips, trying to squeeze out the lump as if it were a zit.

“Not so rough,” Sonia said.

“I don’t feel anything,” I repeated.

I lifted my hands off her head and Sonia’s baby hairs clung to the static on my palms.

She weaved her head away from my hands and her smile soaked off her face, down her overalls, and to the floor.

“I think I got some,” I said.

“No, you didn’t.” Sonia rubbed her head, concentrating on the mound.

The scratchy video recording documenting Sonia’s fifth grade science fair would forever remind me of her brilliance. In the video you see Sonia, long brown hair pulled back in a braid, round glasses, a purple velvet dress, holding her notes by her side. The poster-board display behind her highlights the features of a fully sustainable power plant. To this day, I cannot understand all of the words she uses to explain the design. But she speaks, announcing with clarity as though the message is directed to an infant, and I believe every word is true. Her project partner, a skinny boy with a rats tail running down his neck, stands at the edge of the screen. He scratches the front of his pants and bites his nails and you can tell by his empty eyes, his mind is easy and free. Sonia points to the blueprints glued to the poster, tracing her alien finger around the energy panels. The teacher’s voice comes from behind the camera, “what materials will you use?” Sonia transfers her notes to the other hand and answers the teacher without blinking.

“Mainly adobe with a straw-bale insulation.”

“Are there any questions?” the teacher asks.

The room is quiet.

“Does it have a pool?” asks one student.

“No,” Sonia says, “it doesn’t have a pool.”

“What about a basketball court,” asks another.

“No basketball court.”

“What are you supposed to do for fun?”

“That’s not what it’s for.” Sonia craned her neck at the camera, at the teacher, with a look that pleaded to make the questions stop.

“Thank you, Sonia,” the teacher said. “Jessie, do

you want to add something?”

The boy at the edge of the screen pulls his hand away from his crotch, smiles, and shakes his head no.

“What did you contribute?”

“I didn’t do nothing.”

“Sure you did,” the teacher said. “Now think hard.”

“I wanted a pool, but she wouldn’t let me.”

The other students laughed. Jessie laughed. Sonia looked past the camera. I do not think she was looking at the teacher anymore. I wonder what she saw. I wonder what she was looking for.

I knew that whatever happened inside Sonia’s head gave her pain. Not that she was thinking bad thoughts, only that the magnitude of ideas and questions would not allow any peace. I distracted her often, more so when we were little, by proposing summersault competitions. Sonia agreed, always, and willed her body to win; rolling and rolling, the top of her head massaging against the overgrown lawn outside the small house our parents built when they were together and in love. Rolling and forgetting. Rolling and forgetting. Sonia smiling.

The expanse of time between knowing every part of Sonia and growing older into two very separate people occurred without my being able to track it. Twelve, thirteen, fourteen passed, and I can only mark the lapse by the changes in Sonia’s body. Bleached hair, cut short, tattoos on her back, arm, clavicles, and sternum. Sonia was changing. The biggest change of all showed in her face. When she smiled, those rare moments of easiness left the skin around her mouth looking like crinkled paper. Happiness never looked so hard. And yet when I think of the only place on Sonia’s body that would not change, it was her face. Her full Scandinavian cheeks from our father’s side. The little girl in Sonia. That girl kept me tethered.

I was in the shower, sixteen years old, when I realized Sonia was dead. Nobody had to tell me, I knew on my own. That’s how sisters work.

A month before that realization, that shampoo-condition-rinse-repeat, I was in the living room of Sonia’s lower-level apartment in downtown Albuquerque. She was enrolled in her junior year of college while I was a junior in high school only one city away. I sat on her white upholstered couch that she swore blood over if I spilled or stained the lining. My mouth was dry and a thin film of cotton veiled my tongue. The bag of shake was half gone. Terrible, truly awful shake from Sonia’s dealer down by University Heights, which hung in the air of her small apartment. We were high, the Smith sisters. It had been the first time I saw Sonia in six months.

Who am I? Perhaps we should have started there, but we are long past beginnings. You know about Sonia and that is all you need to know. There isn’t much use or adventure explaining myself.

Sonia turned on a movie. The terrible weed made the screen sparkle somewhat less. It was not the plot, which I enjoyed, two brothers who kill for the good of a higher spirit, but the way every sound and scene had an outline of discomfort; a rawness like nerve endings pulsing ow, ow, owwie. Sonia and I were on opposite sides of the room, talking and watching the film unfold, but when we spoke it seemed ordinary. We were acting: Sonia reading her lines, “how’s high school?” and me reading mine, “Going good. I’m passing.” It felt unnatural being there. After all, a lot happens in six months. I didn’t know her life and she didn’t know mine.

I swore to Sonia, after she begged for an hour and two-more-bowls of the bad weed, that we would get matching tattoos like the brothers in the movie. That promise of our bond lifted Sonia to her feet, I felt her smile and we were sisters again for the first

time in months. She was an angel up there, away from her head. The phone rang and Sonia went to the kitchen, mumbling her ideas of what tattoo we should get. I made out a few of her suggestions: a cactus, the word for justice in Latin, an astrological constellation.

“Come on, don’t answer,” I said. Stay here with me.

“Attendez,” she said. Wait.

Why couldn’t she stay?

“I’m not pausing it,” I said, turning the volume louder.

“Bonjour,” Sonia said, answering the phone.

I could hear her voice reverberating off the empty pots she kept on the counter.

“It’s been a long week. I’m trying to get drunk.”

It was second nature to listen-in. To snoop. I spent my whole life following Sonia, reading the notes she wrote to her friends in school, peeking in her notebooks, and spying on her and the boys she brought home. I wanted to know everything because she was everything. We were sisters, alien girls, but I never let go of the feeling that Sonia hid her secrets. Not the light ones, which she told me, but the heavy ones. The ones that mattered. When she told me her secrets, Sonia reminded me, “we are cursed to be just the two. No other sisters or brothers. You and me. Me and you. Get it?” Just Sonia and I, I understood. Of course I understood. She said everything we would ever do meant more because we were alone together. Said the stakes were higher. Said there were no fall-backs.

Sitting in her apartment, bathed in the shit-mix pot, I did not care to listen to Sonia’s conversation. I figured my ambivalence came from being in high school and thinking I was too cool to eavesdrop. My indifference to Sonia’s life at that point also formed from years of learning I did not want to know all of her secrets. I settled back into the couch and bit my tongue with my teeth to shift focus away from the terrible high. My teeth raked the cotton off my tongue and I swallowed

the yield. My ears wanted to open, they wanted to know what Sonia was doing and saying and had done, but all I allowed in was the muffling of French intonation coming from the kitchen. I looked around at the details of her apartment and could not imagine my Sonia living here. Living in the small moments of waking and the long hours of lonely nights. No roommate or boyfriend to distract her. She had tried, and boys had tried with her, but none could satisfy that vital pinpoint of her soul; engagement with something beyond her capacity, outside her knowing. I blurred my eyes to the expanse of checkered tiles. The white boxes were stained with dried, brown puddles, the remnants of strong coffee and cheap beer. Sonia was a genius forever, but now she was a slob. Her makeshift bookshelf, fashioned out of nailed plywood and dumpster tables held the library of a seventy-year-old scholar. Plato, Nietzsche, Homer, Steinbeck, books in French I could not pronounce the titles to. Colorful bindings, worn bindings, thick, thin, very, very thick, and she read them all. I never knew another person who read every book on their shelf.

When it started, I was too young to understand what it meant to throw up everything you eat. I do not remember Sonia’s metamorphosis as a process so much as a change, which I believe is the difference between dipping your toes into a pool or throwing yourself in. And Sonia threw; hurdled her body into the darkest place it would go. I was thirteen and snooping through Sonia’s closet. I had a habit of stealing her clothes and stretching them out at the sleeves, neck, and belly. She hated that. I got to the bottom drawer, hoping to find a mini-skirt to prance around and play grown-up. The drawer was unusually heavy. Instead of clothes, a cute tight skirt, the drawer was filled with extra large soda cups from the gas station. I pulled the brass handle and the cups sloshed, leaning to the front

of the drawer. A smell something like pasta sauce and citrus rose to my face and seemed to smother my skin like grease. I removed the plastic top to one cup and found the inside filled with orange and brown liquid. Did I ask myself why? I cannot remember. Thinking back, I must have known and noticed Sonia's body reverse in development. But my mind was slow to see my sister in any negative form. She was my idol. My God. I closed the drawer and grabbed a t-shirt folded at the floor. The fabric rested over my shoulder as I rearranged the closet to its appearance before my raid. I was seeing the closet, the shoes, my hands putting everything to order, but my vision sucked itself back to the hidden orange liquid. I still see it today. I turned my nose into the shirt I would borrow and it held the same putrid smell. My mother was in the kitchen baking and she yelled through the walls, asking if I was in Sonia's room. "No", I yelled back, closing the closet door behind me, then the bedroom door behind that. The hallway felt safe. I breathed deep the smell of overripe bananas and warm sugar.

"Au revoir, bitch."

Sonia came out from the kitchen wiping her lips and put her arms in the air. "It's a Monday and I'm feelin' fine," she sang. She turned and winked at me like the old music stars of the 30's. Her neck rolled and the silent song ran through her head. The pot was working for her, I thought, but thought again and realized this was not the workings of shake. Sonia must have moved to the liquor in the freezer. The liquor did the magic. I was still bumming on the weed but to Sonia, we were in Paris. Inside a cramped bar, surrounded by men and women smoking cigarettes, down the rue from skull-lined crypts. The city of love. The city of lights. The city of Sonia, and I was invited. She danced the one-two-three across the checkered floor. I noticed her feet landing only on the black squares. I tried to imagine Paris, because from the look of Sonia's

enjoyment, it was a great place to be. I tried my best, but the small apartment overgrown with piles of neglected clothes and sandwich crusts would not let me leave Albuquerque. The pot seemed to pin my arms to the couch and open my eyes to the dump, the butts, the crushed cans, the old soup marks like rings around orange Saturn. I found myself very sad knowing this was Sonia's home, but not at all surprised. How it probably ate her up when she came back from Paris and could see and think. Her poor, heavy head. Thinking herself to death in those daylight, soberlight hours.

Sonia danced through the doorway leading to her bedroom. I heard her jump onto the bed. She had a brass frame that clinked against the wall like champagne glasses. The sound stopped, no more toasts to the night, and in that moment of silence I hated her. A loud burp disrupted the silence, followed by a single laugh. Sonia returned to the living room, still dancing on the arches of her feet, with a scarf in her hands. She wrapped the fabric around her head in the style of a gypsy fortuneteller and went to the kitchen, to the freezer, the suction of a closing door, and the dance began again. She looked at me, sitting on the couch she loved so dearly, her eyes red and coated in a boozy mire. They scared me. Those were not the eyes of my sister. Same color, same width, but I did not know the person from whom they belonged. The look was something I can only describe as unstable. Of having savage intent. It became certain in my mind she would hurt me. The longer she stared, the more I swore to myself this was my last night on earth. It only made sense I would be her sacrifice. I talked myself into that reasoning and lit another joint because the smell was clearing way. Without the smoke, the rancid orange monster breathed through Sonia's five-hundred square foot apartment. Sonia denied the joint when I offered and reminded me not to get ash on the sofa. She continued staring and dancing. It was not so much that Sonia's eyes were

menacing, but they glimmered a sense of whatever was inside slowly unhinging. They showed that she was different. Not the same alien girl. And if she was not the same it meant I could not be the same. I knew she was smart and could think of things I could not imagine. It was Sonia's mind I feared: The potential and expanse and what it would tell her was possible. What questions it would ask her to answer. In all the years growing up, I never thought my first and only feelings of true fear would come from my big sister. She rolled her wrists and sang, "and I'd pray till the Lord gave a sign, and now I'm feelin' mighty fine."

She danced and sang while I stayed on the couch. I fell asleep to the sound of her bustling around the bedroom and running the sink. I am not sure what she was doing, but I left early the next morning without saying goodbye. There may have been a note, or a phone call following, but I remember this as the end.

When we were little, Sonia and I played a game where we collected every blanket, pillow, tablecloth, and towel in our house. Beginning with the couch cushions, we stacked the linens until they formed a tall partition. The wall of blankets impeded the walkway from the living room to the bedrooms. We jumped over the couch to get from one side to the other. It took hours to create the pile. If the blankets were accidentally stacked after the pillows, the tower would collapse and Sonia and I would have to begin again. This was my favorite game. Sometimes I would cheat by running into the wall and making it fall so we would start over. Sonia was the brains and I was the muscle. She directed me to bring the fluffy pillow, or the beach towels, and like a soldier taking command I followed order. Once the tower was built, standing so high the pillow fringe tickled the ceiling, Sonia and I lay at the bottom. We called for our mother and without having to instruct or ask or plea, she counted down from

ten and pushed the wall over. The linens fell gently over Sonia and I, who were shoulder to shoulder lying like mummies on the ground. We crawled out from the mound, surfacing as though it had been a million years since we saw the sun. The arm of the couch acted as our diving board and we took turns jumping into the heap of goose-down and silk shams. We swam for hours, until Mother returned and told us to clean up. Blanket by blanket, sheet by sheet, Sonia and I pinched the edges of the linens and folded them back into squares. Sonia stacked the folded materials in my arms and I carried them to the bathroom where we kept the extra linens. Knowing the time and process of this game, our mother often refused to let us play. Still we asked. Please, oh, pretty please. Sonia's reasoning to let us play normally won us approval. And once again we peeled the covers and fitted sheets from every bed, the towels wet or dry, and built our skyscraper. We swam in feathers and foam.

I never saw Sonia's body, only heard about her death. Like a rash, the physical was hidden from me by my parents, who went together to identify her at the morgue. There was no discussion about it. I have imagined the scene, pulling what I can from television shows and news articles. "She died in her sleep," my mother said, and I picture Sonia sleeping and calm. I picture her very pale, with the same plumpness in her cheeks as she had growing up. Her blonde hair is bright and her lips are tinted purple as though she has been eating blackberries. A clean sheet covers her from the armpits down. All around her, clean metal shines blue on her collarbone and under her chin.

Why my parents would not take me to see Sonia's body, I do not know. Was it Mother's idea? Father's? Would it give me nightmares? Well I already had nightmares and I wanted to see because at least if I saw, I would not remain dreaming. And in these dreams of mine Sonia is always alive and her death

has been a great trick. Last I saw, she was alive, so my mind will continue to believe so. I am angry with Sonia in these dreams, for making me believe she was gone. She points and laughs, this time without me on her side, and I am the fool. I wake from these dreams slowly and with little orientation to the real world. The long blinds of my apartment let in the sunlight outside. The real world is a dream. Sonia is real.

We took her ashes, my mother did, on our family trip to Finland the summer following Sonia's death. Mother built a small boat out of paper, filled the bottom with ashes, and pushed the boat into a large pond. The current moved the boat toward one solitary swan wading in the center. I was not invited to this ceremony – neither Sonia's identification at the morgue or her quiet memorial in the center of Helsinki. I was not there but can imagine the white swan, the lavender flowers growing along the bank, and my mother's creased hands pushing the paper boat into the water. My mother returned to the pond the following day. She tells me there was an entire family of swans. No longer just the one, and

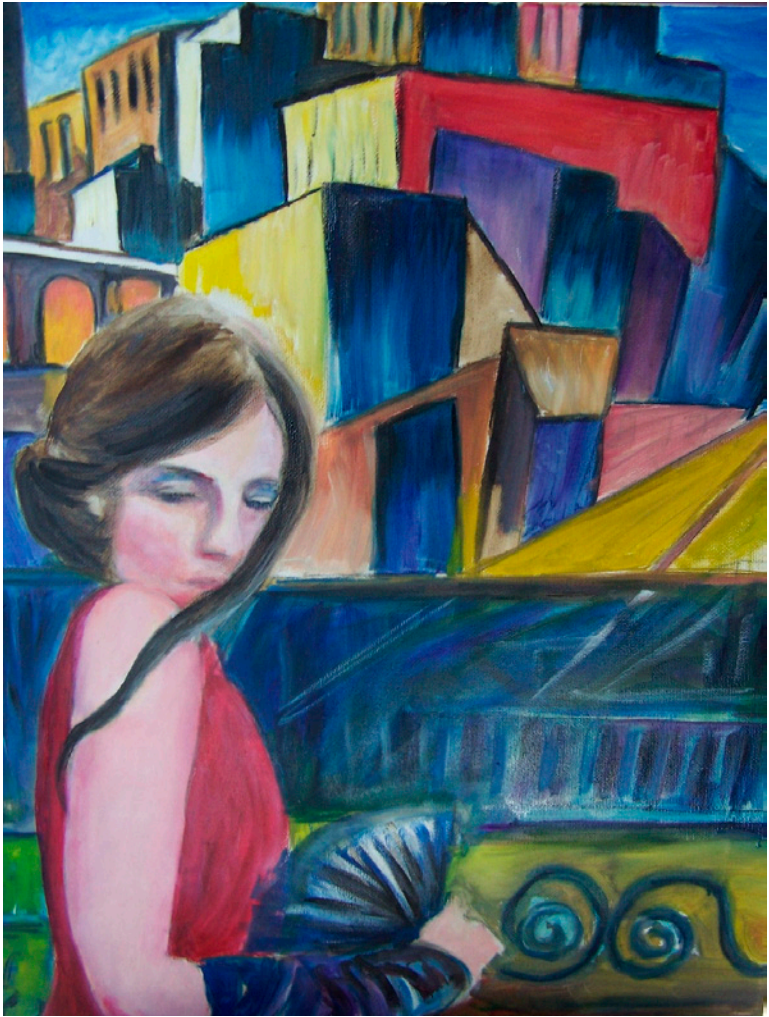
no more boat in sight. It was only the three of us morning together: my father, my mother, and me. However, I did not feel welcome into their tribe. Sonia was my tribe, so I mourned alone.

The coroner would later tell my father, who would later tell me, that Sonia's death was a case of electrolyte imbalance. Her chemistry, her make-up, was wrong for the laws of our atmosphere. It was not done to her by anyone, no foul play, but still I felt she was cheated. I never hated the world before I saw what it did to Sonia. The world or God or whatever higher power made her head so heavy and her body so turbulent. Later in my life, I realized Sonia was not made for this world. Not even Paris. When I think of her, I think of our childhood. When she was an alien and I was an alien and it was just the two of us. Most people choose to remember the young faces of their lost ones. I think of Sonia's fingers, and can look at my own for proof. My hands remind me that I had a sister. "Have" a sister, and when people ask, "do you have any siblings," I say yes and do not feel the need to explain myself. ▫

“Au revoir, bitch.”



Lady in Blue



Lady in Red

BY CLINTON INMAN



Shuffle

BY NINA SKAYA



She brought me an iPod Shuffle. They usually bring a present when they want to sleep with my dad. The Shuffle was a pretty nice gift so I said ‘Thank you’ right away. Dad is big on my saying ‘thank you’ without him having to prompt me. Honestly, Dad acted like the iPod Shuffle was a really extravagant gift, but they’ve been on sale and lately Apple has been giving them away free when you buy a laptop. It was blue, which was a safe color choice for a boy, although I think I would have preferred the green. I didn’t say so because I knew Dad would lose it. Belinda and Dad were both beaming at me waiting for me to say something else, so I smiled and said, ‘It’s great.’ That seemed to do the trick and then I was able to go back to my room.

Dad had told me not to ask Belinda about Jake, her husband. I said that I wasn’t an idiot. I’m not going to ask some lady about her dead husband. It happened before last Christmas. Something with his heart, I think. I don’t know what I would even ask her. Is he still dead? I mean, what was Dad thinking? Geez-us. Anyway, he said that if I wanted I could say, “I’m sorry about Jake,” but I didn’t think she looked like she wanted me to say that and I definitely didn’t want to say it so I didn’t. I’d never seen her without Jake and I don’t remember ever talking to her much. I do remember that she would flinch when Jake would say to me, “Hey, kid, give me five!” Or when he would do this thing where he would touch the top of my shirt and say, “What’s on your shirt?” and then I would look down and he’d poke me on the nose. I think Belinda knew that sometimes Jake acted pretty stupid. Even Dad said that and Dad was Jake’s best friend.

Belinda and my dad were going to go out to dinner and I was going to stay home with a babysitter. Not the good one. The other one who smelled funny. My dad had rules about when I was allowed to stay home alone and after 9 PM was not allowed. I think he was just afraid of what my mother would say if she found out he’d left me alone again in the apartment at night. One time I called Mom when I

got scared; I knew it was a mistake the second she picked up the phone. After that night, Dad got this new rule about babysitters. Next year, when I'm 13, he says I won't need a sitter. I don't see how it makes any difference whether it's now or next year but when my dad makes a rule I just wait a while and sometimes he'll forget or pretend to forget.

While the babysitter watched "Storage Hoarders" on TV, I called Sophie.

"An iPod Shuffle?" Sophie groaned. "She totally wants to move in with you guys."

"Nah, I don't think so."

"I can see it, Ty. This is how it starts. Shuffle is here to stay."

Sophie could have been right but I insisted she was wrong.

"I'm coming up," she said. "Tell the babysitter not to flip out like last time. God. Like she'd never heard a doorbell before. She should switch to decaf."

The iPod Shuffle was, we discovered, pre-loaded with songs. And folded up in the little case was a tiny note that said, "I hope you like this music." I hooked up my speakers and sat, not too, too close but almost shoulder to shoulder with Sophie on the floor, leaning against my bed.

We listened for a few seconds then Sophie made a disgusting noise with her mouth (the one that always gets her in trouble at school) and clicked to the next song. "This is all old stuff." She gave the following song three seconds of consideration. "Next," she said.

We let the next one run until the chorus. Love hurts. Oooh-ooo. Sophie burst out laughing. "Shuffle is totally going to get crushed by your Dad."

"Maybe," I said. "Or maybe these aren't actually songs she likes but really a secret message." As part of my plan to be a spy when I was older, I had been looking for ways people could hide messages.

Sophie clicked back to the first song and we started listening for clues.

Keeps me searchin' for a heart of gold. Sophie

slapped me on the thigh. "I knew it! Shuffle is a total gold digger."

Apparently we were laughing and yelling loud enough to disturb the babysitter's quality TV time. We got a ten minute warning before Sophie would have to go to home and I'd have to get ready for bed.

Before she left, Sophie loaded one of her own playlists onto the Shuffle instead. "I'm saving you, Ty. This thing was an evil plot to brainwash you into helping Shuffle make the moves on your dad."

Maybe Sophie was right. As a girl, she might be able to detect something about the Shuffle situation that I didn't see right away. Shuffle did know Dad for a long time and he seemed pretty intent on getting together with her -- not waiting for a night when I'd be at Mom's; hiring the crappy babysitter when the good one wasn't available. I had a feeling that made me think Shuffle would stick around. I knew what that was like. Twice a week she'd spend time with Dad; then she'd start spending time with the two of us and then she would plan a weekend and she'd say something like, "This probably won't interest you, Ty. You don't have to come with us if you don't want." Depending on my mood I might pretend to want to go -- just because. They hate when I do that. I did that a lot to Crazy Monica -- not just because it was fun but because I didn't want my dad to spend too much time alone with her.

Man, Crazy Monica was a pain in the ass. She was the one before Deirdre the Pilates Instructor. Crazy Monica lingered through the Deirdre Pilates era, which was awkward because sometimes she would just stop by when Deirdre Pilates was here and then Dad would have to say through the intercom that she couldn't come up because "It's not a good time." Then Crazy Monica would buzz the buzzer for like an hour. In the end Deirdre Pilates would be crying and Dad would have to go down to make the buzzing stop. But Deirdre

Pilates would leave anyway.

Crazy Monica told me once that Dad was going to burn in hell but she loved him anyway. She was always thanking the good Lord every time my dad gave her stuff, which was like every time he saw her. I asked Dad why he liked her and he said that she had a good heart. Sophie told me that my dad only liked Crazy Monica because she had ginormous boobs. Maybe that was what Dad meant when he said she had a good heart. They're like kinda in a same place, right?

I try not to tell Mom about Dad's girlfriends because it makes her makes her totally spaz. But sometimes I mess up. Like, once, she said, "Oh, did your Dad get you new sneakers?" And I forgot my rule about not talking about the girlfriends -- because it wasn't really about the girlfriend, it was about the sneakers -- so I told her that Emily the Dental Hygienist took me shopping while Dad had to work late. I swear, Mom turned into one of those mean zombies from the *Night of the Living Dead* movie that Sophie made me watch. Mom didn't blink and she was reaching out for something that wasn't there, saying, "I could throttle him sometimes." She looked like she should have been saying, "Brains! Brains! Brains!" like the zombies did. Oh God, those zombies scared the heck out of me. That was the night of the phone call... which led to the stupid babysitter rule.

After Sophie left, having wiped all the clues off the Shuffle and replaced them with "cooler songs," I announced to the babysitter that I was going to bed. I thought I'd need to let her know that I was too old to be tucked in, but she didn't even offer and I guess I fell asleep pretty quickly because I didn't realize I'd been asleep when Dad and Shuffle woke me up.

Dad really doesn't have any sense of how thin the walls are. I could hear them. You know, doing stuff. When I was younger, I thought the thin walls had something to do with a war because every time I'd

be down at Sophie's apartment and you could hear the neighbors, Sophie's mom would sigh and say how great it would be to live in a "pre-war." But I think she meant that she wanted to live in a building that was built before the war, before people got lazy about constructing good walls. I don't think that someone would be lazy about walls if they had to listen to the sounds coming from my dad's room. I hope being a spy doesn't mean I have to listen to everything. I usually just put on headphones to drown out the sound. Tonight I used the Shuffle from Shuffle. When she gave it to me she should have said, "You're going to need this."

I texted Sophie. She liked knowing when things got noisy here.

She texted back and told me to turn the ringer way up on my phone.

A minute later, my phone rang -- really loudly. I let it ring twice before I answered it.

"Did it work?" Sophie asked.

I listened. "Yup. All quiet on the western front."

She laughed. "Bye, Ty. Pleasant dreams." Sometimes Sophie can be nice.

I kept the Shuffle and headphones nearby just in case.

Dad was setting out my bowl of cereal when I came into the kitchen. "You were up late. I heard your phone ring."

"Sophie." I took the milk out of the fridge while Dad grabbed the orange juice.

Shuffle obviously hadn't stuck around to see Dad play the "let's-eat-breakfast-together" routine. It's like they turned him into Dad of the Year. But just for a day. Dad of the Day, I guess.

"You and Mom used to go out sometimes with Belinda and Jake, right?"

"Yes, but they were more friends of mine," he said.

"I can see that." I poured milk on my Cheerios.

But compared to Mom maybe he was Parent of the Year. Mom isn't good with details -- things like showing up on time or buying the type of cereal I

like or remembering the names of my teachers.

On the way to school, Sophie asked me all about it. Details, like what did it sound like. Giggling like Deirdre Pilates? Thanking God like Crazy Monica? I told her it just sounded the way stuff usually sounds, lots of groaning and saying, “oh, yes.”

“Did she sound like this?” Sophie made some high-pitched oohing and aahing.

“Is that what your mom sounds like?”

“Shut up, Ty.” I knew it was mean since we both knew Sophie’s mom hadn’t had a boyfriend in at least a year.

Sophie played with the zipper of her knapsack while we waited for the light to change so that we could cross over to Bank Street. “You know, Ty, I think your dad should take another look at Helen.” Sophie had a habit of calling her mom by her first name so I tried to do it too.

“Helen is really nice.” I thought of how she always asked me if I want to take snacks home with me. “But I don’t think she’s my dad’s type.”

“Yeah, her boobs are pretty small,” Sophie said.

I made my worst face at her. “If our parents get together then you’d be my step-sister.”

“Better me than someone else. You could wind up with a step-brother like Luke.”

She had a good point. Luke was a big, scary kid who had moved into our friend Marc’s house when their parents got together. Marc nearly flunked out of sixth grade because Luke kept putting his homework down the garbage disposal.

“It won’t be someone like Luke,” I said. “Shuffle doesn’t have any kids.”

“No, but she’s young enough that she might want to have one. Maybe she wants to pop a kid out with your dad.” Sophie ran ahead as soon as the light changed and yelled back to me. “You’d make a great babysitter, Ty! Change those diapers, Ty!”

Jean-Louis never bothered to give me anything. I’d seen him at Mom’s in his underwear. He’d be

there at Mom’s for a while -- maybe for a few weeks -- but then he’d disappeared again. Dad didn’t like my being exposed to “that sleazy Euro trash” but he only said that once. The rest of the times I mentioned JL, Dad just rolled his eyes or said, with an Inspector Clousseau accent, “And ‘ow eez zee frog?” He said that once to Mom on the phone and then he didn’t get to say anything else for a while except, “I’m sorry” and then Mom must have hung up because I never heard Dad say goodbye.

At dinner JL said something about a chatte and that made him and my mom laugh. She said, “Really, Jean-Louis, you are bad.” He said, “Anne, I’m French.”

“I don’t believe in this national excuse to be bad.” She was smiling, playing footsie with him under the table. As if I wouldn’t notice.

If he were really bad why was he still here?

He said, “All men are bad” and that made me feel pretty annoyed at him. I knew that Mom thought that Dad was “bad news” – that’s what she said – but I don’t think she thought he was actually bad; not evil the way Crazy Monica said.

“Is this my weekend or your father’s weekend?” Mom asked, not bothering to look at the schedule on the refrigerator. I hated that. Dad worked out a schedule every month and emailed it to Mom. Then I would ask her forward it to me and I’d print it out and put it on the refrigerator. Mom didn’t really pay attention to the schedule but I did. It told me where I should leave my sneakers, when to bring my soccer clothes to school, when to make sure I had everything I needed for the weekend when I left on Thursday. The schedule told me where to go and what to expect. I know she never looked it at because sometimes Mom seemed surprised to see me when she came home from work. I’d let myself in after school, do my homework, and when she walked in around 6:30, she’d exclaim, “Oh, you’re here!” as if I’d just returned unannounced from a trip to Shanghai. Then she’d scramble to figure out what to feed me for dinner. I wondered

whether she ever ate dinner when I wasn't there.

Tonight, amazingly, she'd planned ahead and made dinner. Well, she ordered in some pizza and made a salad to go with it. That was pretty good except that then she'd also invited JL. I got the sense that he didn't eat dinner at a table with people very often. He seemed ready to get up and run on a moment's notice, bouncing his knees.

Dad asked me what Mom said about him and I said, "Mom says if you would just."

"Just what?" he asked.

"Nothing. She just said, 'If your father would just.'"

"Would what? Would stop dating? Would pick you up earlier? Would let her change weekends with her? What?!"

"I don't know, Dad. She never told me. That's all she said."

"Oh, for God's sake," he said. "If your mother would just--"

"Just what, Dad?"

"Nothing."

"Come on, Dad. What? Tell me. If Mom would just what?"

"Um." Dad put down the stack of newspapers he'd been struggling to fit into a paper bag for recycling. "I meant to say that if she would just commit to recycling the way we have. Have you noticed the reduction in our amount of trash? I'm quite proud of our efforts, Buddy."

Then he changed the subject to ask me about the school musical and whether I thought my audition went well. I went to Bank Street School where everyone who auditioned got at least some small part so it wasn't like Broadway and I was waiting for my callback.

"It's so not a big deal. They post the parts on Friday." I'd probably get in the chorus; that's what I'm good at anyway -- being in the background.

Sophie somehow got Helen to invite us down for

dinner. I'd begged Sophie to lay off, but I should have known it was useless. Sophie was on a mission to get my dad to "take another look at Helen" and I had no say. Dad didn't even know what was going on. Sophie was that good.

There was always a jigsaw puzzle in progress at their apartment. Helen ordered in Chinese and we sat at the dining table that was mostly covered by a huge puzzle of a castle in Germany. We had to hold our plates in our laps or rest them on some puzzle pieces.

Sophie's mom said, "The jigsaws are a good way to get Sophie away from the computer."

"Right, so now I can stare at meaningless pieces of a puzzle instead. Good going, Mom."

"I think there's a puzzle app," I said.

Dad shot me a look. "This looks like a real quality puzzle." He poked at an all blue piece.

I didn't know how he could judge since I'd never seen him do one.

"Ravensburger." Helen said. "They make the best puzzles."

"It's true," Sophie said. "We tried some others but they were total shit."

"Sophie. Language."

"Mm. Right, Mom."

Sophie's mom assigned each of us areas to work on. She gave me the green of the trees to sort through. She gave my Dad the castle windows, which was the easiest part, I thought. She and Sophie took the sky because they were more experienced, she said. They had their own language between them.

"I've got all the hooks and blobs here," Sophie said, pushing a pile of light blue pieces toward her mom.

Every time Dad got a piece, Helen said, "Oh, you're a natural! Look at you go!"

Later, Dad said, "Three more pieces each and then we're going to go, Buddy."

"Neil, you might need to come back to help us finish," Helen said.

"You're the puzzle expert." Dad flashed his toothy

white smile.

"But you're so quick at figuring out where things go."

"Get a room," Sophie said. Under the table she kicked me. That was her way of saying that she was pleased with how things were going. Sophie's enthusiasm often left lingering marks. Sometimes I could roll up my jeans and see all the times I'd made her laugh in the last week. Little purple badges.

Dad laughed when he opened a card that came in the mail. "What's so funny?" I asked.

"You wouldn't get it."

He wouldn't tell me who it was from but when he went out to the market, I looked. The mother of one of the other kids at school thanked Dad for the "witty conversation" at Parent's Night and said that she didn't normally ask men out for drinks but she was recently divorced and she thought she would just take the chance and ask.

I still didn't see what was funny about it so I asked Sophie later. She said Dad shouldn't laugh at women who want to go out with him. "Does he make fun of my mom?"

I promised he didn't and it was true but I still had that feeling of lying.

"Your Dad is odd," Sophie finally said and that was the end of the conversation.

That Sunday, Helen called and invited us to go with her and Sophie to a movie. What Sophie started, I guessed Helen was going to finish.

Dad and Helen let us sit a few rows in front of them and the movie was good enough. It had spies and things blowing up, though also a lot of jokes and a happy ending for the spy who really liked the lady he had saved from the bad guys. After the movie, Dad and Helen took us home and sent us upstairs ourselves. "We're going to take a walk," Dad said. Helen looked surprised or something.

I waited for Sophie to make a comment but she'd been quiet all evening. She didn't even make fun of

the kissing parts of the movie when the guy got the girl. Usually she said, "Give me a break, people!"

Upstairs at her apartment, we put stray pieces of sky into the still unfinished castle puzzle. She spoke without looking up from the table. "I changed my mind."

"About what?" I asked.

"About Neil and Helen."

"Ok," I said but I wasn't sure there was anything we could do about it.

JL was at Mom's when I went over after school. I didn't know he was there when I let myself in and I heard something in Mom's room. I froze, thinking it sounded like she had left the window open and some pigeons had flown in and were scurrying around. But then the door opened and out JL came in his usual jeans and ratty tee-shirt. "Oh," he said. "It's you." Only it sounded like Dad's funny impersonation. Eez you. "I thought you were your mother."

The apartment was dark. It was a rainy day and there wasn't a light on in the place. "Tonight is a Mom night," I said, motioning toward the fridge, as if that explained everything. Somewhere, probably now covered by a yoga class flyer, was the schedule.

"I'm going to do my homework." I went back to my room even though I wanted to get a soda from the kitchen. I felt more like getting away from JL than I was thirsty. It smelled like incense or something in the hallway. Maybe JL would finally piss her off for good, but like all the other times, she'd probably eventually say that it was cultural differences, not his fault, and he'd be back. Maybe they had weird incense rituals in France and JL had been sacrificing pigeons in Mom's bedroom. I couldn't really take a look while he was still standing there in the hallway, watching me.

"Mom doesn't like incense," I told him.

"Comment? What?" JL asked.

"Incense, JL. Incense. You know, you light it and it smells funny?"

"Yes. The incense. No, I have none."

I didn't think he knew what I was talking about.

"Well, what's that smell, then?" I put my hand on the doorknob.

He grabbed the knob with my hand still on it. The force of his grip was crushing my fingers.

"Ow! Stop it!" My knees buckled with the pain. When he let go, I was crouching on the floor. "Oww!" I cradled my hand against my chest.

JL bent down next to me. "I'm very sorry," he said. "Please don't tell your mother." Or maybe he said that in the other order. "Please don't tell your mother. I'm very sorry." I was too shocked to be paying attention. (When I trained to be a spy, I would surely learn to notice these kinds of details even when in pain or under extreme stress.)

Technically, I wasn't supposed to walk to Dad's alone but technically, Mom wasn't supposed to have an asshole boyfriend.

As I walked back to Dad's, I thought about what it might be like if Mom and Dad would just get back together. I don't actually remember when they were together but it would be a lot cooler not to have to deal with all of this. My right hand had pretty much stopped hurting but I pressed it a little with my left hand just to make sure.

If I could just grow up, be a spy, and be on my own – that would also be cool. I imagine that I'd be allowed to tell one friend that I was a spy and I would tell Sophie. I'd make up some story for Mom and Dad that I worked in -- well, something where I needed to travel a lot. They'd never know that I'd be off spying and sneaking around and uncovering secrets and blowing things up. I could even spy on JL and take those kind of black and white photos that get people in trouble. JL in a hat and trench coat meeting some scary-looking guy on the street, handing off a small package. That kind of stuff.

When Dad got home from work, I told him that I got the schedule wrong and I thought I was supposed to be there. "Ok, Buddy. Then let's make dinner." He headed into the kitchen and I

followed.

"So you thought you were supposed to be here tonight?" Dad chopped up some carrots.

"Yup."

"Did your mother call looking for you?"

By now, Mom was home and JL probably told her that I came by but I left. Or maybe he didn't tell her anything. I had been wondering if she would call to see if I was ok. "No, she didn't, come to think of it." I thought that's what a spy would say in a movie if he were trying to act natural and seem like he wasn't hiding something.

Dad stopped chopping but kept the knife in his hand as he turned about. "You mean to tell me that you did not show up at her apartment and she failed to notice or alert me? What if something had happened to you?!"

"Dad. What would happen to me?" Geez-us. Sometime Dad worried about stuff that would never happen. "I can take care of myself."

Dad picked up the phone, then, looking at the knife like he wasn't sure who put it in his hand, he put it down on the counter so he could dial.

I jumped toward him in an attempt to get the phone out of his hand. "No! Don't call. It's fine." Dad held on tightly and waved me away.

"Anne? He's here, in case you're interested." He didn't wait for a response; he just hung up. Turning to me, he said, "See how well I work with your mother to keep her informed? It would be nice if she did the same." The phone rang -- obviously Mom calling back angry -- and I grabbed it before Dad could answer. She was already yelling at Dad and it took me several tries to get her to realize it was me.

"Oh, Ty. Well, tell your father that I was fully aware of where you were. JL told me that you forgot your homework and went to your father's. I don't know why your father insists on assuming the worst about me. Will you tell him what I said? Ok?"

I told Dad that Mom had also thought that it was a Dad night and that's why she didn't call. I didn't

tell him the part about assuming the worst. Or the other stuff either.

When I rang Sophie's doorbell in the morning to get her for the walk to school, she was surprised. "I thought you were at your mom's."

"Common misunderstanding," I said. "Let's go."

Crossing Amsterdam Avenue, Sophie said that Helen was crying last night because Neil didn't call.

"Was he supposed to?"

Sophie groaned. "Yes," she said, impatient with me, "Of course he was. You can't just kiss and disappear."

"Wait. They kissed?"

"Yes, moron. Earth to Ty. What do you think they were doing when they took that walk?"

"Um. Walking?"

"Ty, you really are a moron."

"I am not. I wasn't the one pushing Helen at my dad."

"Shut up. You should be grateful. Helen would be good for Neil. Make him stop being such a slut."

"What?"

"That's what Helen said."

I thought about that. I wasn't sure a guy could be a slut but I wasn't going to argue with Sophie.

In the morning, before school, I packed my soccer clothes for tomorrow. Dad poured bowls of Shredded Wheat Minis.

"Sophie wants you to stay away from Helen," I said.

Dad coughed; nearly choked. "What?"

I repeated it.

"We're just friends, Ty."

"You are?"

"Yes."

"And what about Shuff— um, Belinda?"

"She's more than a friend. We're seeing how

it goes."

I crunched my cereal and we sat in silence for a moment.

"So how is it going?"

Dad laughed. "I'll need more time, Ty. I'll keep you posted. Ok?"

"Ok." We sat and ate some more while Dad read the newspaper and I looked at stuff on my phone. After a few minutes, without looking up, I said, "How about now?" We laughed.

Dad said, "Nope. I'm still working on that."

Shuffle came over again. I didn't know why she couldn't just come over when I was at Mom's. When she walked in she said it would be just for a little while but I knew that she'd stay until Dad told her to go and he would never do that.

At dinner – because she stayed for dinner when Dad offered to order in Thai food – she asked me all the usual questions about school. It was boring. Dad gave me a few of his looks; the ones with that slight smile and that nearly imperceptible nod that meant 'Be polite.'

Shuffle was asking me if I preferred English or Math when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I read the text while holding the phone under the table, which was still pretty obvious.

"Yes?" Dad was smiling and asking for an explanation instead of just telling me it was rude and to put it away as he usually did.

"It's Sophie. She wants me to come down and study with her."

Shuffle looked at my dad with a little smile. Then Dad said if I were finished eating I could go. As I went into my room to get my knapsack, Dad called to me, "Tell Sophie you are coming down now. And then call me when you're on your way back up so I know you get back here safely."

"Dad. I'm taking a freaking elevator to the fourth floor. I do it all the time."

"Humor me," he said.

It was getting close to 9:30 and Helen called in from the hallway and said we should stop horsing around and call it a night. She always said 'horsing around' as if we were playing football instead watching funny videos on YouTube.

I took out my phone. "I gotta call my dad."

"What the hell for?" Sophie queued up one more video. "Wait," she said. I love this one. Have you seen the cat stuck in the jacket sleeve?"

"My dad told me to call. Safety or something."

"Bullshit. He wants time to get Shuffle shuffled out the door. Let's just go up."

She grabbed my phone, threw it in my knapsack, and pulled my arm until I was following her out into the hallway.

Upstairs, there was music coming from our apartment. "Great," she said. They won't hear the key. But be quiet anyway."

I knew that this wasn't the best idea but Sophie was standing right next to me, breathing on my neck, and watching with great interest as I slowly and silently turned the key in the lock. She beamed at me when I opened the door without even a creak and whispered, "Sweet," right in my ear.

We took one very small step into the apartment and I closed the door just partially behind us. As we stood in the entryway we could see them on the living room couch. Shuffle was on her back and Dad was over her, naked, his face buried in her chest. And then he was kissing her neck and then, holy shit, I could totally see one of her tits.

Shuffle was moaning a lot and saying, "Oh, Neil. Oh, Neil. Yes, there! Right there!"

I looked at Sophie, thinking we could back out quietly and they would never know we saw them. I nodded toward the door. Sophie shook her head no. I nodded again, more forcefully. I looked at her and beamed my thoughts to her. C'mon, Sophie. We have to not be here. And you have to not be looking at my dad's bare butt. I looked back to the couch at that bare tit and then Dad was pawing it and, oh God.

Sophie shifted her weight and the floorboard creaked. Shuffle opened her eyes, spotted us, and screamed. With legs kicking and arms flailing, she pushed at my dad as if he'd been attacking her. He fell on the floor, hitting the coffee table with his back and knocking over the wine glasses, red wine splashing onto the Oriental rug.

Shuffle jumped off the couch and ran into the kitchen, covering her boobs and pubes with her arms and yelling, "Jesus fucking Christ."

"Ty!" Dad's face was bright red. He grabbed his pants quickly and dragged them on, facing away from us. His belt was hanging open and he fumbled to close it, while grabbing Shuffle's pink bra off the table where it was soaking up red wine and looking like a prop from a horror movie. Dad put it in his pocket even though it was wet.

"Ty!" He yelled again. "Sophie, go home!"

She punched me in the arm. "Oops," she whispered. "Bye, Ty. Good luck."

"Ty, go to your room!"

Crouching by my door, I heard Dad apologizing. Shuffle was making these really wet noises and saying, "I'm in a very fragile place right now."

He said, "I know. I know. I'm very sorry."

"I don't know why you're sorry." She sounded pissed. "You're not the one who did anything wrong. He was supposed to call. You should tell that boy that--"

"His name is Ty."

"Yes, well. He needs more boundaries, Neil. And that girl too."

"Sophie," Dad said.

Then Dad told Shuffle it would be best if she left, which she seemed to really want to do because she said, "I can't wait to get out of this crazy place." I heard the door close behind her and then Dad's heavy footsteps as he walked the hall to my room.

I threw myself on my bed and tried to look like I hadn't been listening.

"Not good, Ty," Dad said. He had this way of being both angry and calm, which was something

that always drove Mom nuts. I heard anger in the way he measured his words; the rhythm was slightly off.

"I'm really sorry."

Silence.

"I hate to be like this, Buddy, but it's my house and my rules. Ok? Sometimes I know best and when I ask you to do something I really expect you to do it. Sneaking up here was not something I would have ever expected from you."

I'd been looking my feet, staring at a hole by the big toe of my left sock. "Are you going to tell Mom?"

Dad sounded like he might have started to laugh but then cleared his throat and looked serious. "No, I don't think I'm going to tell your mother that you and Sophie walked in on me and Belinda."

"It was Sophie's idea to sneak in."

"I'm sure it was. I should talk to her mother... except that then I'd have to tell Helen that her unmanageable daughter convinced my son to spy on me and my date."

I wondered if Shuffle really was his date. I said, "I thought that a date was dinner and a movie."

"Don't be a wise guy," Dad said.

But how could it be a date if you never left the couch? Sometimes Dad made things up.

"You were spying," Dad said. "Spying is not good."

Dad clearly didn't understand that spying on people was difficult and it was good training for my future career. Sure, Sophie and I had botched this mission but it was kinda my first. I wasn't going to argue with Dad but I really wanted to point out that last year he agreed with me that spying was a reasonable career. He said, "First let's see how you do in sixth grade. Spies usually do well in school." I knew that was true. Spies were always smart loners. I hoped they didn't count Sophie against me. Other than Sophie, I could probably be called a loner.

A few nights later, Dad announced that Shuffle was coming over again. "It's just for a little while," he said. I was expected, he said, to say hello, to apologize, to be polite, and then to go to my room and do my homework.

I left the door of my room ajar so I could hear them, talking in the living room. Well, I could hear them if I sat on the floor, right by the door.

"There was always an energy between us," I heard Dad say.

"Do you think Anne noticed?" Shuffle asked. "She doesn't like me."

"She doesn't like any of my friends."

Shuffle laughed. "Remember that time the four of us went to Morton's Steakhouse?"

"I thought Anne was going to burst a vessel," Dad said.

I'd heard the story a few times. Mom and Dad and Belinda and Jake went to Morton's and the waiter brought around a tray of sample steaks and side dishes to show them. Then he turned the tray completely vertical so they could all see it and that's when it became clear that the food was plastic and the plates were glued to the tray. Jake started to laugh and then Dad and Shuffle couldn't help but laugh too. They were in hysterics and the waiter was angry. Then everyone looked at Mom and she wasn't laughing and looked as angry as the waiter. That just made them laugh more, apparently. In Mom's version of the story, they were acting like rude children. In Dad's version, it was one of those moments when you can't stop laughing even though you know you should. Then Jake pulled on the plastic spaghetti and it broke off in his hand so he put the clump of plastic pasta on his bread plate. All night he wouldn't let anyone clear the plate.

"Oh, I'm still working on that," he'd say. Dad and Shuffle laughed as they said that line to each other. "I'm still working on that."

"I miss him so much," Shuffle said, her voice all

weird either from laughing or crying.

"I know," Dad said.

The morning of the Sound of Music performance, Dad promised several times that he and Belinda would be there early, as if I were worried. I wasn't sure that bringing Belinda was the best idea but Dad said that Mom was going to bring Jean-Louis and everyone would be just fine. I had the part of Dinner Guest Number 1. Sophie was Maria, of course. She said that center stage was "where she belonged." Even though I didn't get to say much, I was in all the chorus numbers, which meant I was on stage a lot; sometimes passing through center stage behind Sophie. That night I didn't flub my one big line: "I'm an Austrian, not a German!" In rehearsals, sometimes I had said "I'm a German, not an Austrian!" and Ms. Abingale would moan.

After the curtain calls, Sophie and I went out to the lobby. It wasn't the scene I had envisioned – the happy family scene where Sophie and I go out to the lobby and our parents tell us what a good job we did. Sophie really was amazing, singing all those songs so well and remembered all her lines. I'd imagined Mom and Dad being there and I'd thought of Helen with Sophie. And maybe I even thought about Shuffle being with Dad or JL being with Mom but I hadn't really imagined them all together, standing near each other. So when I came out to the lobby I was struck at all the smiling faces beaming at me and Sophie. For a second it looked like a photograph, everyone stuck in one place caught with a dopey, fake smile. Something was off and when I'm trained in micro-emotional facial cues I will be able to tell exactly what it was. Then the motion started up again and Dad was saying, "Great job, Buddy." And Mom said something too but it was at the same time but it sounded like she probably said, "You were so good." And then I felt like I was in a scene from that re-run of "Who's the Boss" where the two owners of the dog are trying to prove which one of them is the favorite. Each one

calls to the puppy and hoping it will run to them but eventually the puppy runs to the one with the bacon in his pocket. I stood there and watched Sophie jump up and hug her mom. Then Dad and Mom were closing in on me and Shuffle and Jean-Louis were in the background. For that split second before I looked over Mom's shoulder when she hugged me – right before that – I couldn't see Shuffle or Jean-Louis. It was just me and Dad and Mom. Sophie would say, "Take a snap shot in your head." I even heard the click.

After everyone unlocked, we surge toward the door and Sophie's lips were right up against my ear. My God, if she could just not do that in front of everyone. "Helen is pissed off," she whispered.

"Ice cream?" Dad said, offering it up to everyone, as if Mom would say, sure, my boyfriend and I would love to hang out with you.

Helen, hands on her hips, glared at Dad. "No, thank you, Neil. I don't want to expose my daughter to your dysfunctional group." She grabbed Sophie by the wrist and started for the door. "And by the way," Helen swiveled around and pointed at Belinda. "By the way, don't think you're the only one. OK?"

While Helen led Sophie by the wrist, Sophie waved. "Ciao, amici. Later, Ty." There was nervous laughter, which I assumed came from Shuffle although it could have been JL just snorting.

"So --" Dad smiled and clapped his hands together. "Ice cream?"

"Neil, what did she mean by that?" Geez. Shuffle didn't get it. I mean, even JL must have known what Helen meant.

In what Mrs. Abingale would have called sotto voce, Dad told Shuffle something that made her laugh. I thought I heard him say, "Jealous neighbor" but I wasn't sure.

I was waiting for Mom to answer first about going for ice cream but she didn't seem to even be paying attention. It was a Mom night, so I couldn't just take off with Dad for ice cream without asking

Mom. She was biting her bottom lip. I'd seen her do that before.

Shuffle jumped in, "It's been such a great evening. Ty, you were so good and I'm so glad I got to see the performance. I'm thinking that I'll go home and give you and your folks a chance to go out and celebrate together." She cast a look at Jean-Louis, inviting him, I guess, to follow her lead. JL was picking at a cuticle and not paying attention, probably just tuning out the sound of American English with little effort. With a tiny kiss on Dad's cheek and a wave to me, Shuffle left. Maybe she wasn't that clueless.

Mom and Dad stood looking at JL but he wasn't looking up. Mom went over and touched his arm. "Jean-Louis, honey." He was still fairly intent on his thumb cuticle, staring it with a lot of interest.

"He's stoned," Dad said.

"Shut up," Mom snapped at him.

"Anne, I know a stoned guy when I see one. Plus he smells like pot."

"It's not incense?" I blurted out. I didn't want to recount the whole thing, but I had to, all while JL mumbled, "Mais non. Pas comme ça." Dad was angry, of course, and Mom bit her lip in a different way and said sorry a lot. Only she said it in a way that didn't sound all that sorry. "Sorry I can't be everywhere at once," she said before she stormed out, with JL following. Through the window, we could see her yelling at JL before he

walked off in the opposite direction.

"Just you and me, Buddy." Dad shrugged. "Ice cream?"

Even though it was supposed to be a Mom night, I went with Dad and we shared a giant banana split. Two bananas, five scoops of ice cream and he let me pick all the flavors.

Sophie and I sat on the bench in front of our building.

"She's not that bad," I said, trying to convince us both that Shuffle moving in wasn't the end of the world. Though I had to admit that the image of her boob and stuff had kinda stuck in my head and I wasn't sure that I wanted her around to remind me even more.

"Well, she's not as cool as my mom."

"True," I smiled. "She's no Helen." I elbowed Sophie. "Do you think Helen will forgive my dad? It would be a drag if she hated us forever."

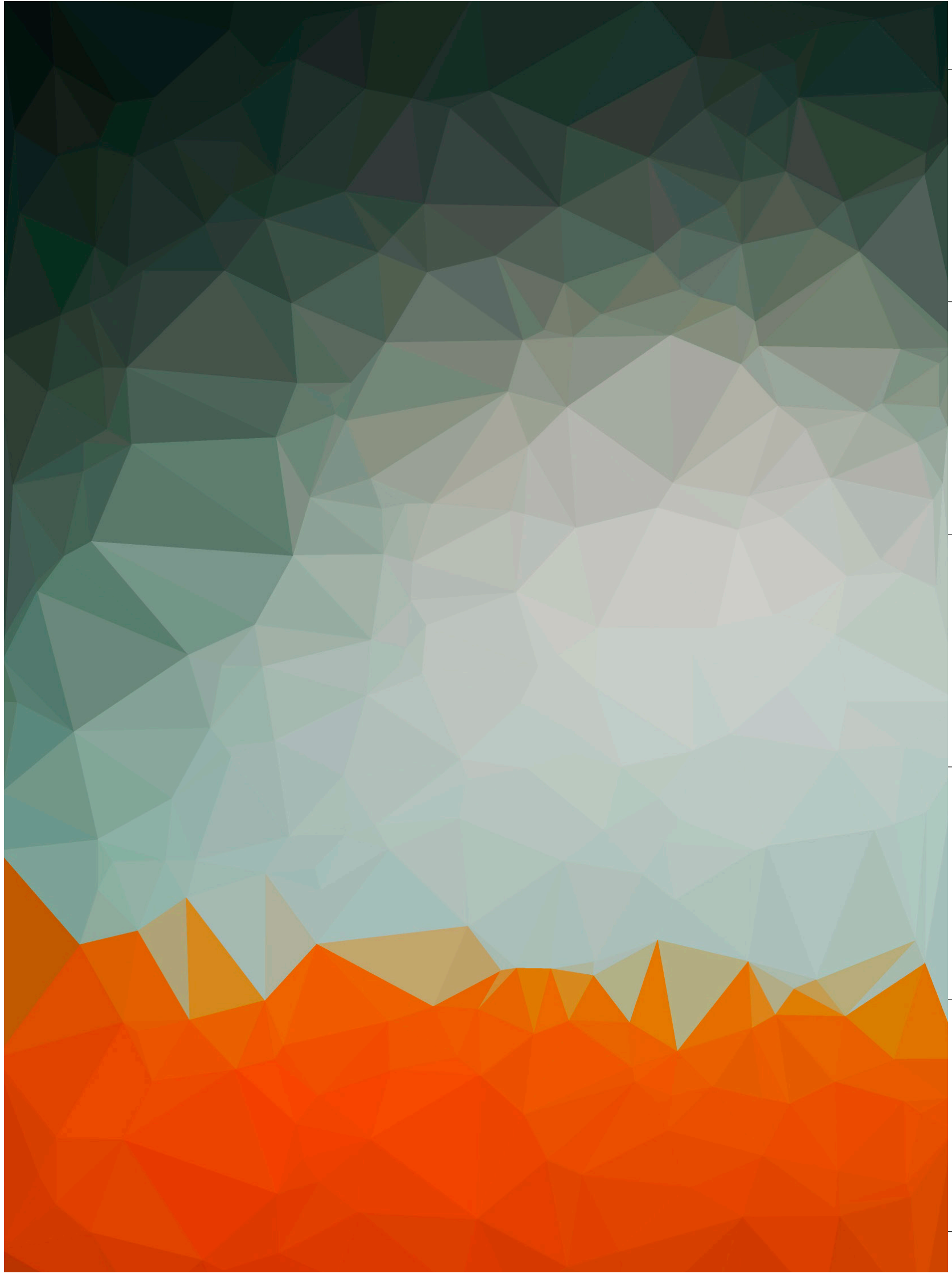
She whispered in my ear even though no one was around and she didn't have to whisper. "She doesn't hate you, Ty. And she'll get over it. She always does."

I whispered back, "I'm kinda glad it didn't work out, Soph," and then I gently knocked her shoe with my sneaker.

"I sort of figured." She kicked my left shin hard and grinned.

"Ow."

"Love hurts," she said. ▢



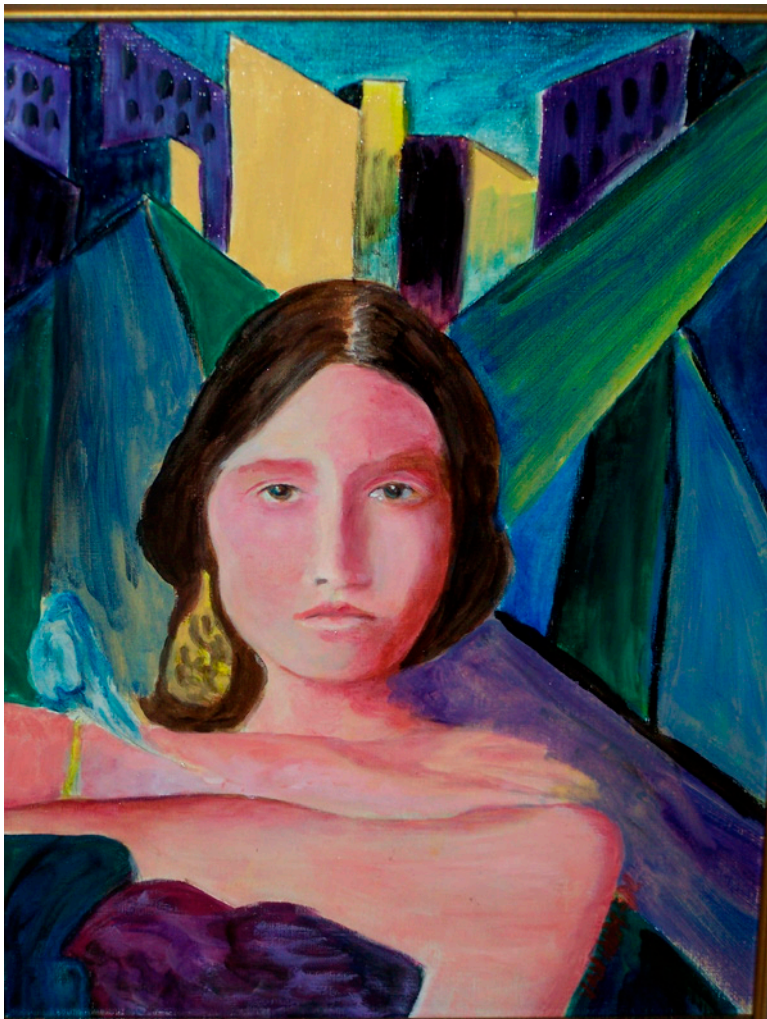


Elba in Blue

BY CLINTON INMAN



Crosstown



Edge of Town



Gringo Town

BY NICOLAS POYNTER

The big man stepped down from the bus and then stood peacefully still as a sea of laborers from the shanty towns flowed around him and then out towards the town in all directions like ripples from a stone. This image, the idea that a Gringo had ridden into town on a chicken bus, caused Juan Carlos' cigarette to drop out of his mouth. "What the fuck is this?" He asked aloud. The boy shining his left shoe shrugged without looking up, his hands furiously working the shoe leather. All Gringos took charters or licensed taxis from the capital. A Gringo on a chicken bus was just asking for it, even a big gringo. He might have been the first Gringo to ride a chicken bus in a decade, since an embassy worker had been murdered on one. Juan Carlos, the Police Chief, took two steps backwards and sat on a bench, all in one motion as if he had been pushed, leaving the boy, still not looking up, with both his hands extended to where Juan Carlos' left shoe had been, an incredulous scowl on his face. Juan Carlos felt he should question the man, but, for the life of him, he could not think of a single question. His brain had somehow been frozen.

When the other boys saw the gigantic Gringo, they immediately gathered their kits and raced one another across the street, perhaps assuming a larger Gringo meant a larger wallet, and then surrounded him until he was only visible from the waist up. He didn't smile. The kids, good salesmen as they were, kids that were often told they would be rich if they could sell things, any things, in America, advised the big man as to the horrible condition of his shoes, fluent in all English which concerned their business. Big shoes, one boy said, shaking his head as if he might not have enough polish for such gigantic shoes. I can clean them, another boy said stepping in front of the first boy who was still shaking his head, I know boots. Only brush, no polish. I think you walked much in those boots. You walk from America? The man finally smiled, but only a little and in an odd way which caused several of the boys to take a step backwards,

and then he replied in surprisingly good Spanish that he liked dirty shoes. Juan Carlos heard this, watched the man solemnly walk away, down Calle Parque towards the smaller hotels, the cheap ones, and decided he would call the Gringo, Dirty Shoes.

Juan Carlos started another cigarette and pondered what he had seen. Since coming to Antigua, he had only known two types of Gringos. There were the students, of course, that came in groups to study Spanish, something referred to as immersion. They were mostly harmless, except that they had led to the creation of several discotecas. And then there were the tourists, always complaining that they should have gone to Mexico, somewhere with a beach, or about the lack of English spoken. Both types of Gringo seemed to think Antigua was some exotic zoo and that the locals were animals to be photographed. Both had a great deal of money, a seemingly endless supply of dollars - the only reason for Juan Carlos and his special appointment in the first place. "The dollars must flow," they had told him when they hired him from the army. They had repeated themselves several times to make certain he understood. "Whatever else happens, the dollars must flow." They installed four ATM machines across from the park and gave him the best men, armed with shotguns, at least two of them standing guard at all times. Gringos were able to access their incredible supply of dollars day and night. More than one Gringo had commented to Juan Carlos that the row of money machines and guards made them think of a place in America called Vegas. "The dollars must flow."

But this man, Dirty Shoes, seemed to be a third type of Gringo all to himself and this bothered Juan Carlos because he did not know what to think about a third type of Gringo. He considered himself clever, the distinction being very important to him, and did not enjoy feeling confused, as if his status as intelligent was a tenuous thing that could be revoked at any moment. So, he began to ask

questions from the people that worked at those hotels, the hotels in the direction that Dirty Shoes had gone. Dirty Shoes was not a hard man to describe, or track for that matter, and Juan Carlos soon learned that he had rented a room at Casa Cristina, paying for several months in advance, the room on the third floor with the grand view of the volcano. Upon hearing this, Juan Carlos smiled. He knew that El Gallo Loco, the demon rooster that lived on that side of town, would be tormenting him with its cries each morning. No matter how long one lived in Antigua, one never became accustom to that lunatic rooster. Clearly nobody really wanted him, the rooster, around anymore, but nobody knew exactly where it was or who owned it. Perhaps the rooster sensed it was not popular with the people and instinctively stayed hidden to avoid being murdered. Who knows? Some even said it was a ghost.

Juan Carlos, clever as he insisted he was, began drinking his afternoon whiskey in the corner bar across from Casa Cristina and, indeed, soon enough, Dirty Shoes walked right in and sat down next to him, making Juan Carlos very pleased with himself. He said his name was William, that he was from a small town in the Texas and an artist, although he had not been painting for long. He had started less than a year ago and then had entered some of his paintings into a local contest where they had been graded as horrible and not even allowed to be included in the show. He had left town the following week and come to Antigua, to paint. Before becoming a painter, he had worked at a plant and that is what he appeared to be to Juan Carlos - a man who had worked with his hands for a living and been a smelly mess most of the time, not an artist. He also looked more than forty, but had an obvious immaturity about him that made Juan Carlos think less of him, think that he was not a strong man, regardless of his size. He felt less worried about this third type of gringo after that.

"You like our rooster?" Juan Carlos asked Dirty

Shoes, joking with him.

"That is the loudest animal I have ever heard in my life."

"Many tourists have offered me cash for the head of that rooster. If I ever see him, I may finally kill him, make myself a crazy-rooster soup. I am tired of the complaints... Have you not been around roosters, William?"

"I have been around roosters all my life. But I have never heard anything like that. How can such a small animal cry so loud?"

"It is a Latino rooster," Juan Carlos said. Dirty Shoes nodded as if this explained everything.

Dirty Shoes hired a guide to help him master Spanish and learn the town. But instead of going to the American-owned schools, which had many educated, professional-type women, he found a poor, indigenous man named Jose, a man that was considered a drunk and a loser among his own people. And Jose could not speak a word of English or even read or write in his own language. But Juan Carlos thought Jose was not such a bad choice, agreeing with others that said he knew the town better than anyone. It seemed reasonable for a Gringo to want such a wretched servant to show him around, buy his groceries, take verbal abuse when he, the master, was in a bad mood. But when Juan Carlos saw that Jose and Dirty Shoes became close, actual friends, he became worried again, worried for a reason he could not explain to himself. And then many other locals quickly became friends with Dirty Shoes as well, as if Dirty Shoes was Guatemaltecan, which he most certainly was not.

The woman who managed the only brothel, who had been raped before having ten years, who had been sent to the orphanage by her mother soon after, who had had her first husband sell her into prostitution before she hired someone to kill him, told Juan Carlos, "He is a sad little boy in the body of a giant man." When she told him this, Juan Carlos sensed her deep compassion for

Dirty Shoes, and he thought he understood it. The affection Latinas have for men is not very deep at all, a convenience mostly. But their love for their little boys is something else, something infinite. He suspected that Dirty Shoes was this woman's sad little boy. Maybe she had lost one once. He was told by his network of informants that the pair would sleep together often, but that there was never sex exchanged, only secrets.

Dirty Shoes had stopped speaking English the moment he had stepped down off the chicken bus and passed through the arch, the lone structure to survive the earthquakes, entering Antigua. The tourists, arriving in charter busses, reminding Juan Carlos of the world-war-two movies he had seen, would quickly approach Dirty Shoes, him looking like an ally and a man that obviously knew Antigua well, evident by the reverent way the locals saluted him and the shoe shine boys chased after him, not for a quick buck but for his company. But he would have nothing to do with tourists, responding in Spanish that he no entiendo ingles. Ni una palabra. Indeed Dirty Shoes went to great lengths to avoid his fellow Americans and Juan Carlos could see his face become twisted with torment whenever English was spoken near him, as if something horrible that had been chasing him had caught him. It was his first hint that something was boiling deep within Dirty Shoes. And then an American businessman walked into Dirty Shoes' favorite cafe, a quiet place on the edge of town that few tourists found. They said the man was shouting into a cell phone and shouting at the young waiter at the same time, for what Juan Carlos was never told. Dirty Shoes slapped him three times across the face, loosening two of his teeth, and then stomped on his phone like it was a scorpion.

Juan Carlos took pride in the fact that he had been hired by the President himself, hired to put a stop to locals robbing and beating Gringos. And he was a man famous for the fact that he got his job done,... regardless. But he became confused and

more than struggled with the question of what to do with Gringos beating on other Gringos. It had never been discussed. Nevertheless, something had to be done. He found Dirty Shoes in his room the next morning, working on a painting of a girl that he recognized as a waitress. Juan Carlos was so struck by the intensity of the image, he forgot why he was there for a moment. Somebody's suffering was screaming at him from that canvas. The girl's? Dirty Shoes'? He didn't know. Somebody's. He had heard a drunken painter say once before that an artist that had not suffered was like a pill without medicine in it. If you get any benefit from it, it is most likely just an accident. Juan Carlos had not understood this thing until that moment.

"You can't beat tourists, William."

Dirty Shoes remained quiet, seemingly absorbed in his work.

"They will leave and take their dollars with them and the town will suffer, suffer like before. You don't want your friends to suffer like that. Do you?"

"What about the ones that really need it?"

"One beaten tourist with the internet is like a hundred. This is my life, William. My whole life. I have a family. I am responsible. What you did yesterday pushed me backwards."

"Can we not have one place without that type of idiot? A man that tries to eat a sandwich while talking into a telephone? Not one place for me?"

"And just who the hell are you, William? That you get to have a place all to yourself? Who cares what you want?"

"You should pass a law that they cannot talk on their phones in restaurants, the way people cannot smoke. The way the rest of the culture is preserved. It does not make sense that the buildings must maintain the culture but tourists may do as they please. Dignity is dignity. If it is preserved by not building modern, ugly apartments, then it is also preserved by not allowing modern, ugly behavior."

"Why are you trying to have a debate with me, William? There is no debate to have. There is

no sense to make. There is no reason they are rich and we are poor. Is there? But if we get some of their dollars, we can feed our kids and maybe send them to school. Let them do what they want. Let them act like fools. Their dollars might save our children from misery. It is a good trade.” Juan Carlos had become a bit emotional despite himself. He did not want to reason with Dirty Shoes, or anyone else for that matter, certainly not about maintaining dignity. You can win all the arguments you want. In the end, there must be food. Dirty Shoes seemed surprised by his passion.

“I understand you, Juan Carlos. I like you.”

That was all he said. Juan Carlos had thought that that was the end of the matter.

Juan Carlos began to drink with Dirty Shoes often and began to understand that some sort of spell had been cast upon him. At first, he assumed it was the faces of the women that were haunting him, since that was all he painted. And while he did not see what the fuss was all about, he enjoyed listening to Dirty Shoes explain the complexity of the color, the earthy brown tones with a tint of red that most described as kissed by the sun but Dirty Shoes said was the hue of glowing red lava. Dirty Shoes would go on and on about the steep curves and the thrusting bone structure of the women’s faces. He said the Mayan face was some absurd form of aerodynamic evolution. Soon enough, the women of Antigua were posing in the park, in-profile, as if they had collectively lost their minds, as if they had come to believe Dirty Shoes, that they were indeed beautiful, beautiful like no other women on the planet. Dirty Shoes searched the town for women that had this shape, these sloping, glowing qualities, exaggerated in themselves. And then he painted them. Never nude. When they asked how much he would pay, he told them, whatever you want. His money was soon gone.

One night, after half a bottle of whiskey, Dirty Shoes told Juan Carlos that before coming to Antigua, he could have counted the number of days he had truly been happy on the fingers of one hand. He told him that he had made more friends inside a few months than he had made in forty years in America. Juan Carlos believed him. And then, perhaps inspired by Dirty Shoes’ candidness and the idea of sharing his own secrets, Juan Carlos, slurring his words, told Dirty Shoes that he had tortured men before. He put one of his palms flat on the bar. “A hammer on a hand,” he told Dirty Shoes. And then he took his other hand and pounded the first hand. “Whack!” Juan Carlos then looked at Dirty Shoes and was surprised that he did not appear to be startled at such a confession, that he had destroyed the hands of men with a hammer. Dirty Shoes, seemingly unimpressed, took another sip of whiskey.

“They would scream so loud!” Juan Carlos added, needing some sort of reaction from Dirty Shoes.

“That is one type of torture,” Dirty Shoes conceded. “But there is another. The type that sneaks up on you day-by-day, over years, eventually engulfing you completely, but so quietly that you do not even know you are being tortured. It is far worse. It is horrific. And usually there is no screaming.”

Dirty Shoes had surprised Juan Carlos – that he had bested him in a tough-talking contest, and once again he became confused on the subject of the third type of Gringo. He awkwardly excused himself, stumbled home and passed out in the bed without undressing. He had nightmares of being tortured in the manner that Dirty Shoes had described.

Then Dirty Shoes found a girl in the park on a late afternoon, a girl from one of the better zones of the capital, not a poor girl. Her face danced in the twilight like it was a reflection in a pool of water. Even Juan Carlos, who often told Dirty Shoes a face is a face here, was struck by the beauty and

uniqueness of this face. Dirty Shoes dropped to his knees and begged her to let him paint her face. She declined and Dirty Shoes chased her through the entire town, all the way back to the market and the busses returning to the capitol, where she was from. Had he not tripped and fell, he would surely have followed her all the way back to her house. It was quite the spectacle, that gigantic monster chasing that petite beauty, and all the town talked about for days. A woman had been hounded through the streets of the town. Had Dirty Shoes been a local, Juan Carlos would have locked him up for a week. It was not good for Gringo women to see another woman, any other woman, being chased about it such a manner. But he shrugged this off without much worry. He knew he should have done something, but the woman's face had indeed been stunning. Dirty Shoes had had a point. After several more trips to his room and looking at his work further, Juan Carlos came to the conclusion that it was actually the smiles of the indigenous people that was inspiring Dirty Shoes to paint. Sunrisas. They were a group of people that struggled to feed themselves most days, that suffered as much as was possible in one lifetime, and yet never lost their brilliant smiles. Dirty Shoes said the smiles of those poverty-stricken Mayans were so ferocious that they rivaled the sun in intensity. This dynamic, this ability to smile regardless of the circumstances, seemed to be Dirty Shoes' new life's work. But he never said so directly.

The next week a few hippie gringos arrived and wandered around town. Juan Carlos did not approve of Gringos without money. It seemed illogical to him. It did not make sense for poor foreigners to come to Antigua to be poor, bringing sand to the beach so to speak. Those skinny kids started playing American folk music in the park, Bob Dylan they said, and Dirty Shoes, possibly still mourning not being able to paint the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, beat them both with his fists and smashed their guitars into fire wood. No

English, they said he screamed at them. No English! Juan Carlos was furious with him and arrested him within an hour of the incident, without saying one word to him. Dirty Shoes remained silent too, perhaps ashamed of himself and his inability to control himself. In his mind, Juan Carlos knew it was time to do something definitive. Dirty Shoes was a man walking down the street with his fists clenched. Nobody was going to unclench his fists or turn him around. This was something Juan Carlos knew about. He had been a specialist on this type of man in the army, the type of man that tried to start revolutions. There was no solution to these type of men except to put them in jail forever or kill them. And he had done both. But he was not sure if he needed permission to do these things to a Gringo and where exactly he would ask for that permission. Surely it was a very complicated thing.

Dirty Shoes did not like being locked up one bit, shoving himself into the corner of the holding cell with his arms wrapped tightly around his body as if he were freezing, but it was warm, not cold. Juan Carlos did not know what to think, what to do. So he let him rot there. None of his visitors that first day seemed to be able to soothe his spirit. It was not until the woman who ran the brothel came in, that Dirty Shoes returned from hell. She looked into Dirty Shoes' swollen, sad face and started to cry herself. She reached through the bars and put her hands tightly on his cheeks, one on each side. You are not alone, she said. She kept repeating it. You are not alone. You have a family now and you will never be alone again. Te quiero mucho. Te quiero mucho, mucho. This continued for an hour, her telling him that he was not alone and that she loved him. Juan Carlos heard him call her by name, Karina, a name he assumed was her true name, a name even he did not know, a name he was sure was only disclosed to Dirty Shoes inside the darkness of his tiny, third-floor room while they lay in bed together, in the still time just before the rooster sounded its demon cries. Dime un secreto,

he imagined him telling her. Karina... Me llamo Karina. Then she left and Dirty Shoes stood in the sunshine that entered his cell from the high-posted window, apparently with renewed strength. Juan Carlos wanted to know what type of voodoo that had been that had told a desperate man the exact thing he needed to hear to heal his wounds. He wondered how much suffering a person had to endure before they could possess those abilities. After this, Juan Carlos let him go. He thought the man had surely learned his lesson this time. *Te quiero mucho*, she had told him. Juan Carlos had believed her.

Juan Carlos did not hear a word about Dirty Shoes for weeks, making it a point to stay away from his side of town. He did not want to drink with him any more. He did not want him to think everything had been repaired between them. He did not want to fill out any more embassy reports for beaten American nationals. But when he heard the girl with no arms had been humiliated by a group of American students, brought to tears with jokes that were sexual in nature, he immediately left to find Dirty Shoes before he tore the town apart like a gorilla. Surely the treatment must have been horrible to bring a girl without arms to tears, but it was not a crime. Juan Carlos, confronted with the town's fury, insisted he would have dealt with a crime. He would not allow Americans to do anything they wanted. But the girl had asked the boys for money. Perhaps the boys had been confused or drunk. What did they expect him to do? Shoot them? Put them in jail for telling bad jokes? If there had been a crime, he would have done something to those boys. When he could not find Dirty Shoes, he had the boys followed by two of his men. He was certain Dirty Shoes was wanting to beat them and stomp on whatever pieces of them had offended his good friend, the girl with no arms. He did not have to wait long. That night the disco was struck by two flaming fire cocktails with the boys and another dozen Americans inside.

The building burned to the ground in a few hours. If it had not been for luck, Juan Carlos would have had to explain dead American kids for the rest of eternity. He would have been destroyed along with the town. A town like Antigua does not recover from dead American kids in the street.

Juan Carlos had no idea what to do with Dirty Shoes. He did not want to arrest him for defending the honor of a local girl, a young, indigenous girl without arms, against Gringos. More importantly, he knew his bosses in the capital would prefer he hung himself rather than to make them endure such a thing, potentially start another much bigger fire. The troubles with the indigenous people, which Juan Carlos had handled for them in the army, were just beginning to be forgotten. Such a thing would not be wise in that it might open those wounds. He knew all this without thinking about it too much. He either had to kill Dirty Shoes or let him continue to do as he pleased, which would in turn eventually destroy everything else. After a day lost in deep thought, he went to the church on the matter. The priest understood the dire situation he was inside, and agreed that he could not kill a Gringo, even one as illogical as Dirty Shoes.

The father lit a cigarette and with the flash of light Juan Carlos could see the deep wrinkles on his neck. "This gringo? He is clearly loco."

"Clearly."

"Then he belongs in the sanatorium."

The father offered him a cigarette at this and he accepted, his hand a bit unsteady. The sanatorium was a place on the other side of murder. Juan Carlos understood this. But there was much less paperwork involved,...none actually. He immediately realized the simplicity of the solution, but the father must have sensed his hesitance. "He is not Guatemalteco, Juan Carlos. Remember that. He may believe he is, but he is not. The man is a Gringo. It is not a sin for you to save your family from an outsider that is threatening to destroy the entire town. If you believe he is crazy, then he

belongs in the sanatorium. It is a simple matter.”

They found Dirty Shoes that night. Maybe he was crazy. Maybe he was not. But he could not be allowed to continue on his path of destruction and he must have known this too. He stood his ground in the shadows, his shirt splattered with fresh paint from some intense work of art that he must have been finishing in his room. He seemed ready to be punished and did not object when they approached him. But however calm he was, Juan Carlos knew he could not have been prepared for what was waiting for him. How could anyone be prepared for such a thing? The sanatorium was not a place from where he was ever going to emerge from again. It was a place for him to lose whatever final threads were holding him together and for him to be forgotten for all time. The day Juan Carlos helped process Dirty Shoes into the sanatorium and then looked into his face at the moment he realized where he was, when he first heard the wild laughter and the horrid screams, when he saw that Dirty Shoes realized what his future would be, Juan Carlos knew he would have nightmares for the remainder of his own life.

Juan Carlos would never go to see him. But he heard whispers that he stayed in the corner of his cell and refused to speak, eat or move. He imagined it was similar to the behavior he had witnessed in the holding cell. He assumed he had visitors, but he never asked about them. He wanted to forget. Then somebody found the rooster, moved it to the other side of town, near the sanatorium, and then lost it again. Or maybe the rooster moved itself. Who knows what is in the heart of such bizarre animals? Regardless, the rooster would then torment the other side of town, including Juan Carlos, for the rest of its days. Soon after, he received a note from the director of the sanatorium saying that Dirty Shoes wanted his paints. He agreed to this. He sent a man that very afternoon to return Dirty Shoes' canvases and paints to him. He was able to sleep better for a few nights after that, at least until

three, when the rooster started up.

Jose was killed on a Sunday afternoon. Everyone knew when he was going to go after his friend. He had been telling everyone for several weeks that he would rescue Dirty Shoes and then escape onto the volcano with him. Of course, Juan Carlos knew Jose was going to keep his appointment and that he would be forced to kill him. What else did the man have to offer but his loyalty?

Juan Carlos was not a spiritual man, but when Jose appeared on the hill, in the shadow of the volcano, an ancient pistol drawn against a small army, he asked God to please turn away and then he gave the order. That final image of Jose made Juan Carlos think of a meteor, some rock of nothing that travels for ages through space, but then, at the end, at the last little bit of time, bursts into flames, alive at last for the last little bit.

He was sure Dirty Shoes had heard the gunshots and knew his friend was killed. He might have gone to talk to him, but he was not well and worried the sanatorium might take him too. Besides, after weeks inside, he doubted he would even recognize Dirty Shoes. He had killed a dozen men with his own hands, but watching Jose crawl with his last breath destroyed a great big piece of Juan Carlos, a piece he did not even realize was there. When it was gone, he mourned it. He wanted it back.

Dirty Shoes died within the year, from pneumonia. The few dozen paintings of the Mayan girls and women that he had completed in this short time were so powerful that they immediately brought tears to anyone's eyes that dared look upon them, Juan Carlos included. He stood in the middle of Dirty Shoes' cell and viewed them soon after his body was removed, listening to the screams of the lunatics, screams that must have tortured Dirty Shoes each day, echoing inside his cell and inside his mind as he painted. His paintings drove a knife into Juan Carlos' chest. They gashed him open and he bled out onto the hard stone floor. He dropped to his knees and cried, but knew better

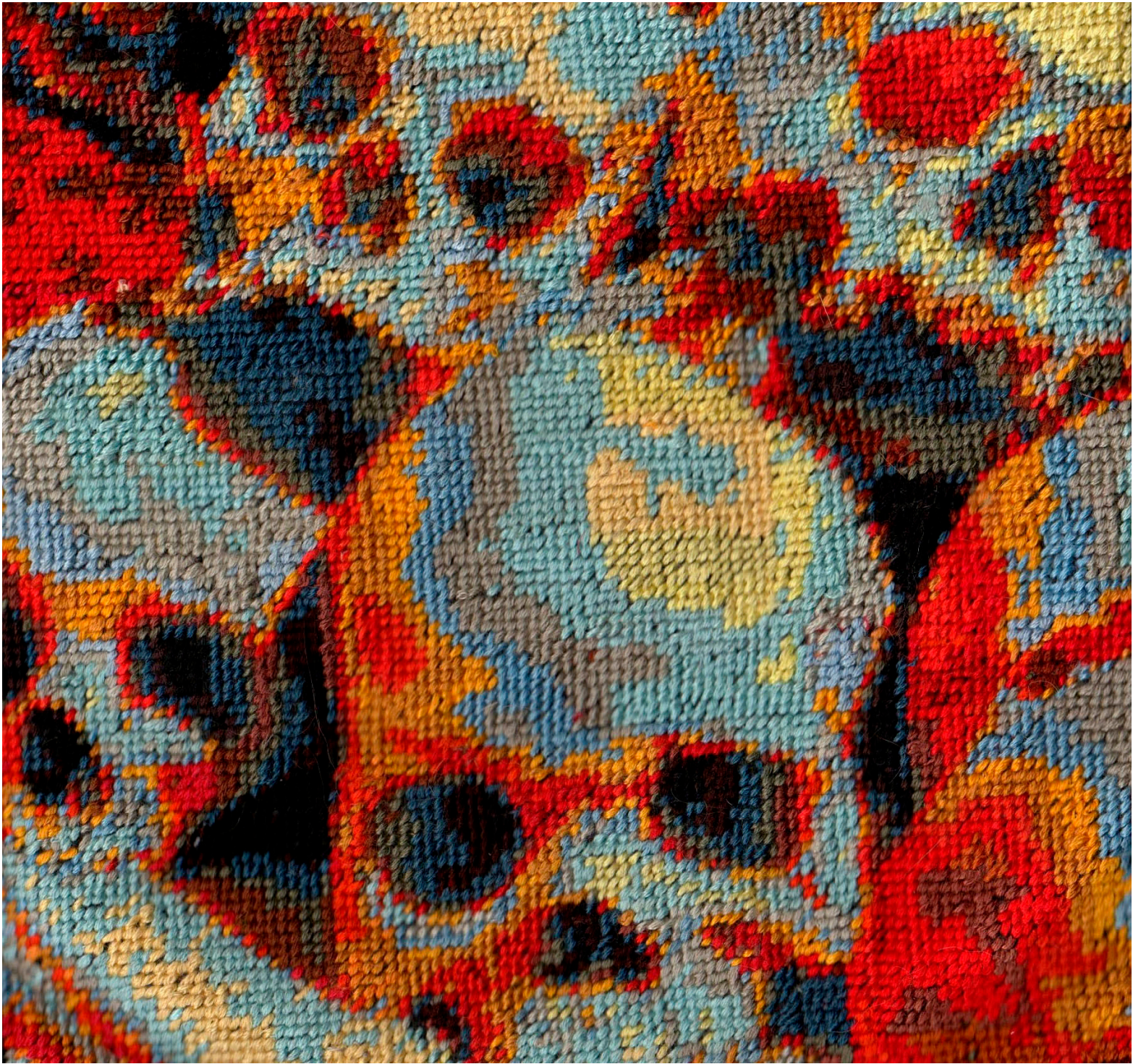
than to ask for forgiveness because he would have done it all again. It had had to be done. He gave them, the paintings, to the town gallery and the moment they put a few of them in their window, within a day at least, there were so many Gringos in front of that window that it threatened to destroy the economy on the other side of town. They immediately realized what they had and then they, the director of the sanitarium, Juan Carlos and the gallery owner, took an afternoon to decide the real price of the work and who would get what percent.

However, before sunrise the next morning, a few hundred locals had assembled outside the gallery and effectively stopped the sale of any more paintings. While Juan Carlos had heard this type of thing is very common in America, Antigua is inside a third-world country and he had never heard of any such protests in a third-world country that did not boil down to food and water. They are paintings, he yelled at them. Stupid paintings. But they would not budge. It was then that Karina stepped in front of them and he quickly understood that she was their leader and, looking at her face, that he was never going to beat her. Her face was the most dangerous thing he had ever seen. He had killed her sad little boy. So, he gave them what they wanted. Dirty Shoes' paintings were given to the town and they would never be for sale. He even had to chase down the few that had been sold and

confiscate them from Gringos that did not want to let them go, a humiliation he paid as penance for what he had done to the genius that had created them.

This turned out to be a grand stroke of good luck, for which Juan Carlos would be given the credit. Dirty Shoes' paintings were an economic boom like no other. People came from everywhere to see the paintings that evoked such emotion from whoever dared look upon them. And not just Gringos, South Americans and Spaniards filled Antigua's stone streets and hotels to capacity and then beyond. The town had to install two more ATM machines. Much of his work was eventually transferred to the capital and even loaned to other latin capitals: Mexico City, Lima, Caracas. But the masterpieces, the ones he had done in the sanatorium, remained in the Gallery of Antigua, and there they will be for eternity, or until the next earthquake. Juan Carlos is there every day. He listens to the Gringos who, in a bizarre fashion, ask questions out-loud to nobody in particular, in disbelief at what they are seeing, crying softly to themselves as they feel the fingers of Dirty Shoes' pain wrap around their throats. And when they ask God, or whoever, how it is possible that a man was able to inject such passion and pain and love into a painting, Juan Carlos always answers them. *"Because he was a Latino rooster."* α

*“Who knows?
Some even said it
was a ghost.”*



Stacked

BY HOLLY DAY

staff

NICHE : *i s s u e* n ° 5

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Thanks to everyone who submitted and paid a reading fee as it contributed to the making and running of the magazine.

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NINA SKAYA has worked as an acquisitions editor at an academic press, manufactured her own clothing line, and published many nonfiction pieces in *Music Alive!*, a music education magazine. She has a Master of Music degree from the University of Michigan, a bachelors degree in philosophy from Princeton, and plays oboe in several chamber music groups in her spare time. This is her first published short story.

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contributors

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DR. GERARD SARNAT received his education at Harvard and Stanford. He established and staffed clinics for the disenfranchised, has been a CEO of healthcare organizations, and was a Stanford professor. Gerard and his wife of forty-five years have three children and two grandchildren with more on the way, and live in the room above their oldest daughter's garage. Gerry is the author of three critically acclaimed collections: *Homeless Chronicles from Abraham to n* (2010), *Disputes* (2012), and *17s* (2014) in which each poem, stanza or line has 17 syllables. For *Huffington Post* reviews, future reading dates including Stanford on January 21 and more, visit GerardSarnat.com. His books are available at select bookstores and on Amazon. Gerard is currently featured as *Songs of Eretz Poetry Review's* Poet of the Week with one of his poems appearing daily. Dr. Sarnat is the second poet ever to be so honored.

JESSE SENSIBAR is a veteran of the war on drugs. He was raised on the south side of Chicago in the 1970s and 80s and hit the mean streets of that city as soon as he was old enough to run. For the last quarter of a century he has made his home in the high country desert southwest in the border town of Flagstaff Arizona where he works as a writer, truck driver, english teacher, wildland firefighter, and pool hall bouncer.

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