

elephant  
tree



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## introduction

Welcome, reader, to this second edition of *Elephant Tree*. We thank you for taking the time to peruse these pages and would like to offer, by way of introduction, a few details to explain our purpose and history.

To begin with, this is the second volume of the student produced journal for the department of English and Comparative Literature at Chapman University. *Elephant Tree*, previously titled *Calliope* until 2006, publishes the fiction and poetry of Chapman University students through a blind reading process conducted by a panel of graduate and undergraduate student editors. The faculty advisor for both issues has been professor Logan Esdale and both years we have worked with Veston Rowe at the Chapman publications office. One of our primary goals in forming *Elephant Tree* is to create a publication with a unified appearance and a simple page format that makes only the distinction between poetry and fiction. We hope to give you, reader, a consistent and straightforward volume that concentrates on the work of our contributors and assigns no extraneous themes to the volume as a whole. We further hope, as you read this second volume, that you feel free to begin at whatever selection you choose, be it poetry or fiction. We are confident that the work herein contained is of such high quality that it will compliment and host your reading experience wherever you choose to begin it.

Secondarily, we would like to explain, through a rudimentary horticultural and ecological description befitting our position as literature scholars and creative writers, the title of our journal. Beginning at the ontological level, the elephant tree, a small tree or shrub native to the Southwestern United States especially Baja California, was denied existence, shrugged off, thought to be a misrepresentation of other desert foliage until a large grove or “herd” was confirmed growing in southeast San Diego County in 1937. As the tree is extremely rare and oftentimes exists solitarily, this herd confirmed what had previously been thought to be an anomaly or aberration. The tree is called so because of its large fleshy elephantine stumps and flaky bark which, when peeled away, reveal green and then red layers of under bark. The image on the cover of *Elephant Tree* represents the disproportionately small blossoms that appear white from up close but give the tree a rosy hue from a distance. The elephant tree grows in arid, desert climates thriving equally in plains regions where it lies prostrate and sprawls across the ground, and rocky precipices where its gnarled branches can twist and reach upwards of thirty feet in the air. Travelers and hikers who happen upon the elephant tree commonly describe the it as unusual, mythical, bizarre, tortured, imposing, resilient and, especially, rare.

All this is not to say that the elephant tree is extraordinary by arboreal standards, but that it possesses a certain artistic charm that defies easy representation. And like the elephant tree with its variegated bark and blossoms, with its posture both prostrate and high-reaching, and with its overall appearance inspiring a range of sympathetic impressions by those who happen upon it, we hope that you, reader, take up this journal with an eye to peel away its multi-colored skin, reveal its twisting, amorphous body and multi-faceted heart, and take away a unique impression. Cheers.

- *Elephant Tree* staff

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**poetry**



# Spritta/Torquere

*Shiv Kotecha*

I must see the bird's eye to distraction,  
before it rests—before it sings or nests.

I do not have the speed to again welcome the spring.  
Spring with its cricket songs to rouse

a syncopated silence  
troubling the poems in my pockets

still unspent like coins.  
For if I don't, a drum will sound,

bombs explode,  
and the bird will fly from the north, open eyed.

Even your glaciers have started to melt;  
and my palms are sweating to madness.

# Two Sisters Who Could Have Been Comrades

*Jonelle Bowden*

Two sisters struggle in a rock  
To shape each one from stone . . .  
Only the younger girl cannot hear the other one crying

“I can’t hear such far away pangs,” she exclaims  
(Since the walls of the granite are thick)  
“And I don’t want to touch you and learn” she then adds  
(Since the weight of the stone is profound)

But the older, she listens  
And she struggles her hand;  
It doesn’t reach to any pact without the other, she knows

Still the older, she stays  
In her gesture the same  
(Though the granite is thicker)  
And she presses  
(Though the weight is more pounds)

Because the older remembers that the younger is fewer  
But that ‘fewer’ isn’t empty:  
Just growing.

#

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Two sisters now struggle in a sea  
Only one to divide herself in waves . . .  
And the older girl cannot hear the other one crying

“I can’t hear such far away pangs” she says  
(Since the waves of the ocean are quick)  
And I don’t want to reach to my memory,” she adds  
(Since the weight of those days is behind)

But the younger she listens  
And she struggles her hand;  
It doesn’t reach to any pact without the other, she knows

Still the younger, she stays  
In her gesture the same  
(Since the ocean is rough)  
And she presses  
(Since she wants to preserve)

Because the younger remembers that the older is gone

But that “gone” isn’t empty  
Just waiting.

( ) ( )

*Kristen Schmidt*

It might mean insertion, that sign  
at the top of the page, curved lines doubled  
empty eyes without pupils ( ) ( )  
staring from the sheet  
incapable of allowing light to pass

( ) ( ) it waits for  
secretion  
concretion  
abstraction  
expansion so it can

s t r e t c h ( ) ( ) into a

syntactical vision  
filled with letters

strungtogethertoform THE TITLE

(which style books recommend should be thoughtfully chosen to catch the attention of readers and draw them into the work—it should connect to the text, serving to focus it and point to the key idea or theme in order to bring about coherence and clarity)

But I digress

and in the interval it has enlarged ( ) ( )

elephant tree/2007

looming now like two headless sentries reaching  
into the line below for words to fill the space between  
the inky arms, but handless less hands  
the page remains the same  
the poem sits flat and quiet on the table  
no words announce the title or even  
peek out shyly from  
the white between the lines.

( ) ( )

# Glass Ballerina

*Rachelle Yeung*

bittersweet irony  
melts in my mouth.  
from the tip of my tongue  
to your chapped lips.  
close your eyes and you can  
stare at me staring at you.  
alone in a crowd  
dancing, standing still.  
glass ballerina, shattered at your feet.  
pick me up and smile

# Figuring the Heart from both Within and Without

*Erica Hayes*

People say they love someone with their whole hearts.  
People say they love with 100 percent of their hearts.  
People try to measure the strength of their love-filled hearts

but the heart isn't shaped in a circle graph  
measuring your 100 percentile love.  
Do you love 80 percent or 65 percent?  
It seems absurd.

The symbol of the heart curves to its top and bottom points,  
and the feelings that go with the shape of the heart tend to move  
around the curving sides, up, and down.

We know that we have a basic love for ourselves.  
We see through our own perspective but  
we are trapped in our bodies as  
we try to measure the strength of our hearts.

Does it match the dimensions of your lover's heart?  
Our bodies are an extension to ourselves.  
And we know that there is a within and a without.  
How much of what is within is shown without?

If only we could open up the rich color of our insides  
and show our pink insides with their red beating hearts.  
Would they beat a series of answers to our questions?

## Figuring the Heart from both Within and Without

How much do you love?  
What is the essence of your heart?  
How much of what we say about love is real or true?

I'd like to shrink into your vest pocket today.  
Be close to that heart that is beating and  
I'd ask it to come out and play.

I'd say, show me the authenticity of your heart.  
I'd whisper little declarations of love,  
asking your heart if it is grey, pink, or red on the inside.

I'd ask if there is a beautiful tulip stemming from within  
your heart waiting to see the rich sunny colors from without.  
I'd say that there are eyes waiting outside to see the tulip vines  
that are growing from within your heart.

# Olive Street

*Shannon David*

It isn't easy to write or think  
with the thick torment and howls  
of autistic children  
coming in through the hot window

The room smells of sour rotting flowers  
with heavy shadows  
between each dry black petal  
they look like disappointment  
etched into an old woman's sagging face

"Esperanza!"  
a woman shrieks behind the fence  
is she shrieking? or is that just her voice  
I don't know  
and I don't know Esperanza

A dog named bagel runs and  
sniffs the weeds outside  
he is missing one leg  
but his smaller friend oatmeal doesn't mind  
they run, bagel sweats

That man who sits on a couch in his front yard  
his face is frozen to a frowning mustache that  
pulls his black eyes melting down  
over leather cheeks

The chihuahua with the chained neck  
frowns too  
but his eyes still move  
and watch

Sick singing yellow melodies  
crawl past the gates  
as tiny brown hands stretch out  
for something cold and sweet and gummy

*“Esperanza!”*  
the thin yellow song fizzes and  
withers around the corner

and the autistic children howl.

# soot, electricity, and the future tense

*Kathleen Alcott*

I'd spend my Tuesdays and Saturdays  
hiding in your knees like a child in his mother's  
I'd gladly take the bottom  
and I'd point out  
the beautiful growing from the sidewalk  
you'd take the top,  
explain away all the sweet and strange mysteries.  
At the end of the day, we'd write them all out on little slips of paper  
receipts from the kind man at the convenience store  
then place them,  
    carefully,  
in a cedar box that your father's father gave him.

And there will be the days we can't get out of bed  
so we'll reach for the box,  
plucking out pieces  
smoothing each crease until  
we find the one that makes the light  
through the curtains  
a little more forgiving.  
Your joints will get sore.  
I'll spend my four o'clocks kissing the backs of your knees,  
and cover you  
left eyelid, then right  
    collar then hipbone,  
with our cedar secrets and mysteries.

We'll press up against each other  
on the narrow escalators  
that carry us from the underground trains  
and they'll wonder  
what we know  
that they don't.

# Child Of the Moment

*Kacie Wills*

Devoured by nature,  
Chewed into tiny bits,  
Patched together to make a quilt,  
    Regurgitated,  
Spread across the sky at daybreak.

I am a child of the sun,  
    Of the stars,  
Of today, tomorrow,  
    And yester-year.

I am a child of red,  
    Blue,  
And all the colors in between,

Of darkness,  
    Of light,  
Of the sea and the earth.

A child  
    forced to grow up too soon,

A child of joy and sorrow,  
Of smiles and tears,

Who grew up  
Hooked on cable, candy, and counting  
By tens.

I am a child of hedonism,  
Egoism,  
And so many other “isms.”

Fed stories, fairytales,  
Tall tales,  
And lies of every variety  
From the days of my youth.

Eating up,  
Soaking up,  
And turning altogether into a sponge  
Of knowledge and philosophies  
As useless as this verse.

I am a child who listens,  
But does not hear,  
Watches,  
But does not see,  
Feels,  
But does not cry,

A child who dances  
Amidst noise and chaos  
As if it were a waltz,

Who sings songs of pain and pessimism,  
Under a starless night sky,  
As only a lone plane is heard overhead,

Who reads the words of others  
And romanticizes a past in which no one believes,



Who listens even  
    When all she hears is chaos and confusion,  
Who wishes the word  
    love  
    meant more,  
And the word  
    Sad  
    Could be said,

Who works by day  
    And thinks by night,  
As the ill insomniacs of her thoughts take hold.

Who wishes,  
    Wishes,  
More than she believes.

# Water on a Calm Day

*Danielle Soucy*

A lady leans slowly back and forth  
in a rocking chair, her silver hair  
catching the boldness of the sea breeze;  
the gray strands sway to the whistle of the air  
through the dunes, coated with the saltiness  
of the late August atmosphere.  
Staring out across miles of endless ocean,  
she watches as the boats sail by in swift circles,  
the currents luring them in wild loops.  
Her eyes are fixed for hours until you call her name.  
As her face assumes the shape of a brittle smile,  
she'll explain she was only admiring the courage  
of the wind and the vessels, so strong and assuring;  
And she'll continue to rock like the boats  
bobbing about in the waves, telling secrets of the sea..  
She is sure the water goes on for miles.  
It does not stop for anyone, she whispers,  
even when the gusts die and there are no ships.  
You can see her sitting like stone on these calm days,  
the air saturated in silence; her breath a replica of the wind  
which grows faint in the prime of the day.  
Deep blue of ocean in her eyes, the spark fades.  
Time slowly passes by.

# A Geological Explanation on a Present State

*Sarah Nicole Smetana*

I hear the floor pulsating,  
or maybe it's footsteps  
and I'll wake up in your room.

But what if the earth and I  
really switched souls?  
She got the aching heart, exploding,  
bleeding through the crust and forming  
ridges and craters to distance herself  
from the imminent temptatious  
fall of mankind.

And maybe I got the rocks  
and the stones that are weathering  
now in place of my heart,  
refusing penetration  
by the cycles of my blood;  
unable to be touched,  
eroding away.

Because I can still remember  
hearing you through broken signals,  
bad connections  
connecting me to you

and European payphones  
in tunnels, beneath stairs.  
You gave me Switzerland,  
and Germany,  
and Denmark,  
and I gave you away  
in exchange for relief, but

my stones have started shifting  
there behind my rib cage.  
They are insulated from you,  
protecting us both  
but disintegrating by the second  
as they perilously try  
to escape my perceptions.

My body has become the core,  
weighed down with heavy acceptance  
like iron and nickel,  
and even if you're the mantle  
we can never again  
unite as the air.

# Always Rotating

*Ryan Wirick*

There are one hundred and fifty-six characters standing in a circle staring at the character directly across. I am number eighty-three. I am staring at number four when I should be staring at number seven. I say what the fuck does it matter at this point? We're here aren't we? Number sixty-eight is pretending to stare at number one-fifty, but he keeps eyeing me at thirty-second intervals. What's a thirty second interval, anyway? We all agreed on the notion of a second as if we found it carved in stone, dictated as a length of measure. A centimeter? What of it. We should just be laughing. We can't laugh.

Number sixty-one just fell down, along with one-eleven and two. We all fall down on queue. We take the queue from the breeze. The breeze takes its queue from the sea. The sea took its queue from the rain, which took it from the lava flow billions of years ago, when all of us lived on a rock circling a different star in the Milky Way. Number seventy-eight gave our galaxy the name Milky Way. She says eleven told her to. So humble.

The sun is the central number zero, overhead. There is an eclipse. All of us begin to levitate six inches off the ground. Number four says six inches is the equivalent to an hour and a half. I say no, you mean seven inches. I am number three. Number four says there's no such thing as seven inches. Number two says just add a sixth of six inches to itself and seven inches will be revealed to you. Number five smells like feta cheese.

I am hungry. I am number ten. Ten is always hungry. Then we rotate. I am number eleven. We double-rotate the other way. I am nine. Whether we rotate clock-wise or counter clock wise depends on if you're the sun looking down or the earth looking up.

Number twenty-four is always looking down. We are clock-wise. Number one-forty-two screams that the clock is never wise. Number one-forty-one shushes him, pointing at the sun.

You will love the sun if you know what's wise. Wisdom is hiding on a mountain to the east. The east is always to the right unless you're looking south. Mountains are scary.

Number one-thirty-six is doing back flips in the air. The sun descends into the center of our circle and all of us get sucked into it. Except that all of us don't get sucked in. We can't. I mean how could the sun ever descend without melting the rock we stood on? Number thirteen is beginning to weep. Levitate, thirteen, levitate. And so she does. But for who? The sun? The moon?

There is no circle. Forty is God. Forty-nine is Satan. Satan is never God. God is never alone. We rotate eight times and the universe implodes. This lasts 50 seconds. About one hundred-ten meters. The universe expands. We begin to sing. Number one disappears. We rotate. One-fifty-six reappears and we sing some more. We prefer two-part melodies that ascend until all of us change into different keys with which we open a door in the ground.

Number ninety-two always goes first. She falls into the soil. I follow, but not before becoming fifty-three. Thirty less. Twenty more. Twenty less. We climb out covered in mud and the sun begins to rain on us. No clouds. The sun rains and all of us melt together into a flat disc. We fly away to another world. We crash. Local media outlets believe they've seen a UFO, but certain persons know better than to rely on the faith of mystery.

The answers are in sixty-two's pocket. He has no pocket like the rest of us have. I am thirsty now. Number twelve says he has water. All of us charge at him. Then we remember we have already melted together as one. We weep. We want out. We are put on display. We are mocked. Then the disc disappears. We are back in a circle. The sun is up above. I am not a number anymore. We rotate. We're always rotating. Then we all fall down and laugh on queue.

# The Curse of My Crush

*Rachel Lansky*

His lucid language leaks  
Like liquid tar  
It stains my bones black  
Covering my innocence with darkness  
The light illuminates  
An alphabet of silver stars that spread across my expanse  
Brightened only by his stingy smile  
My mind has no relief  
No choice  
No control  
It is yielded  
By the humming of my hellish heart  
Contaminated by  
Pleasure and pain  
His guile is a gimmick of pure gold  
My heart eats it up  
Like a starving Ethiopian  
Enticed by the smoking  
Smell of amber  
I turn into my own  
Radioactive wreckage  
As I seep into  
The solidarity of sleep  
I surrender to the curse of my own crush  
Realizing the ill illusion  
Of a moonstruck moment

# Exterminator

*Tyler Andrews*

twittering bats fly  
befuddled, figure-eightedly  
in square, well-lit kitchens:  
fatigued

WHOMP  
with a blanket  
ensnared, outstretched arm carried,  
open door delivered to the warm  
night  
released: befuddled, befuddled, aware,  
away.

# Four Poems

*Jaime Campbell*

#1

You want to bury it,  
The moment.  
I want to dig it up,  
Get the earth under my nails  
And hold the moment up to the sun.  
Watch it glow, watch it reflect  
The light.  
Wait for it  
To change  
Right before  
Our eyes.  
Maybe then,  
You might believe  
What has become  
Our present.  
Hold it up  
To the light  
And watch it  
Dissolve,  
Ever so slowly  
Into a small point  
That begins to move farther  
And farther in front of us.  
Farther and farther  
From us,

Until it is nothing more  
Than our shared nothing.

#2

We share it  
This understanding  
This acceptance  
Of what is  
Manmade.

Stories  
Of ribs  
And apples  
Are good stories.

Our history is  
Made up of the  
Telling of these stories  
And not their content.

I am glad when I say this  
I can see your  
Eyes agree.

I don't know what is left then.  
We want purpose to be born  
From actions  
Instead of actions to be born  
From actions.  
I know.

We want our past to add up  
And connect like good literature.  
We want it to mean something  
The whiteness  
Airplanes conquering buildings,  
I know.  
But the truth is

(You are still with anticipation),  
The truth remains  
That we can push,  
Create, probe, agonize,  
Cry, and then  
Push some more.

And still  
We will never, ever  
Know.  
And still.

The the  
Is a beautiful line,  
The most beautiful line.  
A world of meaning  
Born from the simplest  
Of repetitions  
Pointed in a direction I cannot find.

I get lost there.  
You nod.  
I get lost there in The the.  
There is no way out  
But through  
Submission,  
Not to  
God  
Or  
Man  
Or  
Earth  
Or  
The moment  
Or  
Silence  
Or  
Science

Or  
Art.

Our language refuses to cooperate.  
Refuses.  
Absolutely.

#3  
It is above me  
And it presses down  
Hard and even.  
It hurts.  
They tell me I can raise my shoulders,  
Push them back,  
And break through it.  
But, of course, I'm not so sure.

Where is the line  
That separates you from me?  
How do I cross it, erase it, or understand why it is there?  
How do we switch sides? How do we remember that it doesn't really exist?  
Do you know that it doesn't really exist?  
I forget, and I've forgotten, and I only remember  
In very small sections of time.

Good.  
You worry, too.  
Good,  
You've given up, too.  
Let's give up  
And lay down  
On our sides.

No, I don't know what it is called.  
No, I can't describe what it looks like.  
I know it feels like nothing at first;  
Its temperature is my body's temperature.

Let's give up and be  
Just like the rest.  
I can't imagine you as mediocre.  
Show me.  
Show me how good you could be at it.  
Show me now.

#4

If you're not careful,  
It will fit snugly  
Into a box  
Just like all the other boxes on  
The shelves.

If you don't part with  
A small piece  
Of yourself to use as  
Its foundation,  
Then it won't feel  
Like it should.  
Instead, it will lie there  
Fetal,  
Weak, tired, and of course,  
Vague.

If you don't then dig a passageway  
To a space  
Inside of you  
That is meant  
For nothing but it,  
couldn't possibly fit any other,  
Then you may tuck it away  
Deep into your memory  
Of a time when you thought (foolishly, of course) that  
You  
Could be  
An artist.

# **APRIL or Lucky 13 (and a bruised eye to boot)**

*Natasha Ganes*

Indigo and I,  
we were  
Alive for spring  
in brilliant Shine...  
singing along the 96  
our loudest private song  
then sweet Rain...  
hiding out at Chatters  
her lover's yellow bar  
blue, me,  
we were  
dead by summer  
shine...  
drifting down 96  
dial turns dreaded song  
rain...  
speeding past his chatters  
my junkie's banana bar

# Ode to September

*Ross Mann*

In the space between spaces  
there are red universes  
and between those are blue.  
“It’s black and sits  
half-way down my thighs,”  
said a girl between the blue  
“It also has big buttons.”  
I loved her for her buttons.

As I drank fruit juice  
under the moving shade  
of the late-summer tree,  
I realized there is little  
that I wouldn’t give  
to drink a cold pint of beer  
on the silent miles  
of the ocean floor.

I’ve always felt that the month  
when I was born is mine  
and that everyone else  
is borrowing my month.  
They know it too  
and they say,  
“Thanks Ross,  
for this month of September.”

# Paginated Pagegirl Ramble

*Shannon Fuszard*

We stray from that which we are born into, but to be born into a plastic bag of loneliness is to be born of perfection. If a man likes to feel a tugging at his hair he will. Soon it will become a plucking. Head, face, chest, legs, pubes. And once he is hairless by his own doing, the scratching begins. But he washes it away with a vanilla flavored milkshake. Religion teaches him to trust, so he trusts these hands on his neck here. The flicker of a silent film across the faces leaves a distant memory in the present tense. A group of antisemitic infants hold the gate key to hell. Holding a little tattered shawl, an anemic brunette watches outside run by. Washing away the poetry with a chocolate milkshake. Velvety tangles punctuate her hair. Where is the philosophy of distinct racial differences? Plagues, my love. Plagues, the sea. Wash it away with a strawberry milkshake. Paint me up and let them go. Snap, snap. The jungle scenes gone. A coffee house is a coffee house is a coffee house. We have no roses now. Ideologically charged textual strands, layered and intersecting, recall various cultural elements available to the novel's narrative consciousness at the time of construction.

elephant  
tree

**fiction**





# Lucy

*Jennifer Strickland*

Another man may have raised an eyebrow, but when Giuseppe's wife gave birth to a candle, he knew no greater happiness. The doctors and nurses allowed him to take the candle home right away, seeing as how it needed no further medical attention. After all, it was only a stick of wax, yes? His wife, on the other hand, was kept for extensive testing, both physical and mental.

Never mind them, his wife insisted. Take her home and care for her until I join you.

Yes, yes, of course, Giuseppe agreed, This is the best idea.

As he was ushered out by a nurse, he cried, What should we name her?

What do you think she looks like? his wife replied.

He turned the smooth white stick over in his hand a few times.

Lucy, he said. The nurse tugged on his arm. Lucy.

It was difficult to find the right place for Lucy. She was too small for the magnificent oak crib Giuseppe had built, and she was too precious to sit on the dining table with the other candles. Too close to the window, she would melt. After much thoughtful consideration, Giuseppe placed her in his most valuable possession, a crystal vase his wife's mother had given the couple on their wedding day.

She was an easy baby, of course, needing no food or water, just the occasional dusting off and straightening up. Giuseppe's wife came home to find him singing Lucy a lullaby.

You two look awfully cozy, she said, and he sensed a nip of jealousy in her voice.

Just waiting for you to join us, he said. She said nothing, and slipped away to sleep.

It was difficult for Lucy to make friends. Most children were too rough in handling her, which always made Giuseppe nervous, and this coupled with their sticky fingers often caused him to send them home.

You can't protect her forever, his wife said. Giuseppe never responded to that particular comment.

The trouble began when Lucy was fifteen. Her snowy pallor had taken on a rosy hue, and she was often found leaning crookedly off to one side of the vase, no matter how many times Giuseppe righted her and gave her a scolding.

One morning he found her out of the vase, propped against the window.

He called to his wife, Why have you moved Lucy?

She emerged from the kitchen.

I did no such thing, she said. They stared at their daughter, who offered no explanation.

Giuseppe finally ended the silence by plucking her roughly from her sunny corner and dropping her back into the vase. Both Giuseppe and his wife strained their eyes to determine whether Lucy's petal pink shade deepened to a magenta stain, or if they had only imagined it.

Lucy left her vase frequently after that first incident. Giuseppe found her tucked away in various corners of the house, sometimes covered in dust, sometimes with small impressions or nicks in her smooth wax. His wife eventually stopped putting her back in the vase, but Giuseppe refused to accept that his daughter was wriggling from his grasp. He sat down with her one evening after dinner and spoke with a reasonable voice.

There is nothing out there that I can't give you here, he said. Make no mistake of it, Lucy, you lack nothing.

Lucy slouched noncommittally.

Giuseppe came inside from chopping wood to find the young man hunched against the fireplace, his breath heavy, his back damp through his shirt.

A moment passed before Giuseppe saw the glow radiating from inside the fireplace, flickering and pulsing.

The boy turned, startled by the clatter of chopped wood falling to the floor.

What have you done? cried Giuseppe, rushing to pull Lucy from the boy's grasp.

Nothing, nothing, the boy said, wiping his moist brow and backing away. He had dropped Lucy on the ash-covered stone.

Giuseppe moaned from his belly when he saw Lucy, scarlet now, wild flame burning, her wax dripping into puddles.

My sweet, he whimpered, and reached for her, but her heat was such that he could not grasp her. This will be your end, he cried.

She burned silently.

Giuseppe blew at her flame. It swayed, but would not be put out.

The boy ran from the house.

You are ruined, Giuseppe screamed, and used the ash collector to scoop her up and pitch her out of the window, into the dewy grass. Here, her light fell flat, and she was once again a cold lump of wax.

Giuseppe searched the yard and the nearby fields for her in the morning, perhaps a neighbor's dog found her? But no, she was gone, and his only prayer from that day on was that the boy had loved her and collected her and taken her with him, wherever he had wanted to wander.



# The Backwoods Boy

*Sarah Reck*

A little boy – about five years old at first glance – appeared on the outskirts of the field of wildflowers beside the railroad tracks on a hazy Sunday morning. He crossed the wooden slabs and metal rail on the balls of his feet slowly and aching, avoiding prolonged contact with the uneven gravel. At the other side, he approached the field cautiously, reaching out a sooty hand to tug out a handful of the tall grass.

The dirty blond hair at the back of his head stood straight up and his overalls hung loose on him, the cuffs dragging on the ground, even when they were rolled twice. When he walked, he didn't bother to hold the pants, causing the cotton up to his knees to grow dark with a mix of dirt and soot. He didn't wear shoes. His feet were practically black with only the skin between his toes anywhere near his true skin tone. He limped on his left foot because of a large burn spanning the length of the arch of his foot to his heel.

He sat on the small gravel slope beside the tracks and cleared a small place in front of him. Working meticulously, he arranged the fistful of tall grass stalks and wildflowers in a pile. Every so often, he crawled back to the field and plucked more, trying not to pull out any with thorns or sticky leaves. As he worked to pad the pile, he stuck his tongue between his lips and chewed on it softly. He stopped when the inch deep pile was a rectangle big enough for him to curl up on, his cheek leaning against the back of his hand on the ground.

His thumb moved subconsciously toward his mouth as he closed his eyes. He yawned loud and long and slid the tip of his thumb between his lips, his teeth scraping against the dirt that was like a second layer of skin around his nail. He swirled his tongue around his finger and sucked off some of the grime. He jerked his thumb away quickly, as if he'd been hit, when he realized what he was doing.

He heard the girls round the corner at the near edge of the field before he saw them. When he sat up, he saw the younger girl first, skipping down the road with her hair in two long yellow braids. He dropped his fist into his lap and froze. They chattered excitedly, arguing about what they would eat as soon as they got to some kind of fair – caramel apples, fresh peach cobbler, or sweet tea. His mouth watered.

A fly buzzed around his ear, and he jerked suddenly, slapping at the air with an open

palm. The buzzing grew louder, and in his efforts to either capture or kill the menacing insect, the little boy lost his balance and tumbled onto his back, rolling down the slight incline. His back hit a small protruding rock and he yelped. As he slowly pushed himself up to his feet, he realized the younger of the two girls had stopped, and she was looking right at him.

His eyes widened, and he didn't blink.

She called out to the other girl. "Megan! Megan – look!" She thrust an arm out towards where the little boy stood, frozen in place. She took off running through the field towards him until only the top of her head reflecting the midmorning sun was visible.

When she stumbled out of the brush, the little boy was gone.

He watched curiously from behind a tree, one hand pressed flat against the chapped bark. He leaned around the side of the trunk to watch her.

The girl bent over his make-shift mat and poked the edge of it with the toe of her sandal, scattering some of the grass. She destroyed the practically perfect rectangle he had created.

"Maggie!"

She whipped her head around, her lips parted in a slight gasp. "I don't know where he went."

"Who?" The second voice was lower than the first, more gravely, and sounded irritated.

"The little boy," she whined. Maggie turned in a slow circle, eyes narrow, squinting at each tree and bush in turn. She found him out, and he froze again, his fingers digging painfully into the jagged bark. He thought that, as long as he didn't move, maybe she couldn't really see him, and she wouldn't bother him anymore. He tried not to make a sound. He held his breath until it was as painful as being suffocated by smoke.

She smiled sweetly, extending her arm, palm facing the sky. Her mouth opened and closed once, but she didn't say anything. She took a step forward, slowly, putting one foot in front of the other carefully, as if any noise that either of them made would scare the other away. Maggie stepped on the end of a stick, and it cracked.

The little boy took off running awkwardly toward the tracks, stumbling over the extra length at the bottom of his pants.

"Wait!" She ran after him, braids flapping against her shoulders. She dashed up the hill to the tracks and lunged forward to grab at his arm. She missed by less than an inch and lost her balance, falling into him. Together they tumbled over the other side and slid under a shelf of low pine branches.

"Maggie!"

The boy got up first and wiped a sap-covered palm off on his thigh.

Maggie lay on her stomach, her arm bent at an odd angle above her head. He poked

her shoulder once, then jumped backwards as if she would leap up at him. When she didn't move, he lifted her arm at the wrist, then dropped it.

"Maggie!" The gravel crunched on the other side of the trees.

The little boy ducked under a low-lying branch and crawled behind a tree before he could be spotted.

"Maggie!" The second girl shoved aside the branches and tripped to her knees beside the fallen girl. Her voice was high and quick, sounding as if she were strangled. Her breath came in short spurts as she said the name a third time. In a panic, she ran back through the trees, yelling out for help.

The little boy put his back to the tree trunk and slid down the rough bark until he sat on the roots. He squirmed once so a large knot wasn't digging into his thigh. His back stung where the wood cut into the bare skin between his overall straps. He put his thumb in his mouth and waited.

When Maggie came back, her arm was in a blue sling.

The little boy looked up as she crossed the tracks and sat down a few feet away from where he had been asleep a few minutes before. He looked at her and blinked to focus, his head under pressure from just waking up. He wasn't used to having a soft pad for his head while sleeping.

Her hair was still in two braids. "What's your name?"

He picked at a weed sticking up between two rocks. He puffed his cheeks and exhaled, but he didn't answer her.

"I told Mama about you," she said, scooting closer to him. "When she asked me how I got hurt. Did you see my arm? Dr. Brown said it wasn't broken. It's just sprained. But I have to wear this sling until he says so. Did you get hurt?"

He looked at her and pulled up his pants to his knee. He pointed to the burn on his foot.

Her eyes widened. "Is that from yesterday?"

He shook his head and let the pant leg fall.

She frowned and chewed on the side of her lower lip.

He tucked his foot underneath him when he realized she was still staring at it, even though the burn was covered by his muddy pants.

"My name's Maggie." She reached out and stuck her good arm toward him, but he didn't take it. She moved closer again. "Can you talk?"

He opened his mouth and grunted once. "Billy."

"Your name's Billy?"

He nodded again. He pulled the weed out, roots and all, and tossed it aside. Then, he picked up a thin twig laying next to him. It was burnt black, and pieces flaked off as he

stuck it into the hole and twisted it. The soot came off on his palms. "Water."

Her lips formed a small oval and she nodded quickly, standing up. "I can get you water," she said, motioning for him to follow her.

He shook his head.

"I won't hurt you, Billy," she said. "C'mon. I have some at my house." She held out her hand to him.

He turned to look over his shoulder back into the woods before he stood up and pointed to her hand. He shook his head again.

Maggie dropped her arm to her side. "Okay. Come with me."

They climbed silently over the railroad tracks and through the wildflowers to the road. Billy walked three or so paces behind her, and Maggie kept looking back to make sure he was still following her as they reached the white fence surrounding her house.

The house was a comfortable farm house with a line of cherry trees leading up the driveway to the front door. There was a large wrap-around porch and as they climbed the steps to the front door, the wood groaned under their feet.

Billy stopped at the top step and turned his head toward a bonfire cackling in the orchard. He watched the flames rise and a log crack and fall. Sparks scattered and flew out from the edges of the flames. He leaned towards it, mesmerized by the way the smoke disillusioned the air, making the trees on the other side appear to flicker.

Maggie touched his arm, and he jumped. "Let's go inside." She pulled him down the hallway while he tried to crane his neck back to look outside.

"Do you want lemonade or water?"

He jerked his head to look at her then shifted his weight. He slipped his hands into his pockets.

She took hold of one of the kitchen chairs under its seat and dragged it across the floor to in front of the sink.

Billy covered his ears to block out the screech the legs made on the wooden floor and squeezed his eyes shut.

Using only her good arm, Maggie clambered up and leaned over the sink to a cabinet. As she stretched her arm out, she almost knocked over a vase drying on the counter. She filled two plastic cups with tap water and then sat down, spinning to face Billy. Her feet dangled a few inches above the floor.

"Here."

Billy hesitantly took the red cup from her, then scrambled across the kitchen and sat on the threshold of the doorway with his back against the wall and his short legs straight out in front of him. He lifted the cup and swallowed down the water in four quick, successive gulps. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, leaving a black streak

across his cheeks and lips.

“More?”

He held out the cup and nodded.

The screen door slammed. “Maggie, are you here?”

Maggie hopped down off of the chair. “Mama?”

A tall woman with a tight bun and small glasses perched at the end of her nose almost tripped over the end of Billy’s pants as she hurried into the kitchen. She stopped suddenly and looked down at him in confusion. “Who – what –?”

He slid backwards into the kitchen, eyes wide in fear.

“That’s Billy. He’s my friend.”

Billy cowered behind one of the legs of the kitchen table.

Her mother turned to look at her. “Where did he come from?”

Maggie shrugged.

The older woman knelt next to the table and pushed her glasses back on her nose. She tilted her head and regarded Billy curiously. “Billy? Is that your name?”

He looked, panicked, toward Maggie and started backwards away from them both quickly, losing his balance. He stuck his hands out behind him on the floor and landed hard on his bottom. He winced and bit his lip.

“I’m Beth.” She took a quick breath. “Where are your parents, Billy?”

He looked back and forth from mother to daughter twice, eyes round, and then crawled out from under the table and hid behind Maggie, who was a few inches taller than him. He cupped his hand around her ear and whispered something, never letting his gaze move from her mother, as if he was worried that she was going to lunge for him.

“He says he doesn’t have any,” Maggie told her mother.

“You don’t have any parents?”

He shook his head and then nodded.

She sat back on her heels and let out a low hiss through her teeth. She lifted a hand to her forehead and closed her eyes for a second. “Are you hungry?”

Billy looked to Maggie and with only a slight inclination of his chin, she understood his answer. She turned to her mother and nodded.

Beth stood up and slapped her palms against her thighs. “Alright then, let’s get something on the stove.”

Both Maggie and Billy grinned.

Beth took Billy upstairs and bathed him until the water turned brown from the dirt peeling off him. She refilled the tub once for him and threw his overalls away. She found a pair of her son’s old denim jeans and a cotton undershirt to dress him in, even though the new clothes hung more loosely on him than the overalls had. She gave up with trying to get a comb through his sticky hair, and instead just let it stick up as it dried.

She fed him dinner, and he ate quickly, shoving the food into his mouth before he even finished the previous bite. The bread was gone in minutes. After drinking four glasses of lemonade, Maggie showed him to the bathroom and waited outside the door to make sure everything went well. Still, he wasn't speaking to anyone except her, and only then it was, as Maggie said, one or two words, sometimes incomprehensible.

As the sun set over the orchard behind the house, Billy and Maggie sat on the floor of the parlor with a pile of building blocks in front of them.

"Maggie, can you help me fix the bed upstairs in the guest room for Billy?" Beth asked, poking her head into the room.

She put the final blue block on top of the small pyramid and then stood up. "Sure, Mama." She nudged Billy's knee with her toe. "Be right back, Billy."

He didn't acknowledge her.

"Are you gonna try and find his parents?" Maggie asked in a hushed whisper.

Her mother nodded. "Mrs. McCain said to bring him down to the church tomorrow morning." She let Maggie walk out through the door first and then closed it halfway behind her, leaving Billy alone in the parlor.

He lifted his head and looked around the room once. As he turned suddenly at a noise outside the window, his elbow hit the pyramid and knocked it over, scattering the blocks. He saw nothing out the window but the burning embers of the earlier bonfire. He shifted his gaze to look at the candle flickering on the table.

Billy stood, transfixed by the flame. He reached his hand out, fingers bending like a claw as he stepped toward it. He let his fingertips brush the edge of it once before pulling his arm back from the heat. The flame danced from a breeze coming in through the open window, and the light cast his shadow on the wall. He took another step closer and picked up the handle, holding the candle out at a comfortable distance from his body.

He returned to his spot on the floor, shoving the blocks out of his way as he sat down and set the candle in front of him. The flame lit up a small circle around him, and he leaned in close until he could feel the heat on the tip of his nose. He trailed his finger up and down the candle, letting the wax build up and burn his skin.

Then, slowly, he picked up the candle and tipped it until the flame hovered inches above the carpeting. A drop of wax fell. He lowered the flame until it hissed against the carpet and caught.

When Maggie returned, Billy was standing on a chair watching the flames consume the carpet and work their way up the leg of a chair next to the window. She screamed, but Billy was out the window before anyone came running.

“Billy!” Maggie called out to him from the edge of the woods.

He nudged a tree branch out of the way to look for her.

Her mother was with her, and so were a few other people, all carrying flashlights. Their voices jumbled together and only a few words were recognizable, including his name. He leaned farther through the leaves.

Maggie pointed suddenly in his direction and yelled. They started toward him.

He ran. He knew how to duck around trees and climb under the fallen trunks. They couldn't see him when he slinked through the dirt and squeezed through the darkness off the path. He hid in a small cave of rocks for a while and he heard them talking, calling to each other to ask which way he'd gone.

Spots of light from flashlights hit patches of green and brown randomly. One lit up the side of his face for a second and he froze. But the light left just as quickly as it blinded him.

He waited there until he heard them leave, their footsteps cracking tree branches and crunching among dried leaves and sticks. He turned his head to listen for any sound unnatural to the forest. A cricket chirped and he jumped slightly, hitting his head off the rock above him. He rubbed the bump beneath his hair and crouched to step out of the cave.

Once his eyes adjusted to the pale moonlight slipping through the breaks in the trees, he climbed over a large tree trunk and searched the ground for the familiar worn path. He followed it quickly, his feet knowing better where to go than his eyes. He stumbled over the leg of a broken chair on the front walk. He touched the angled stump of an old mailbox. There was no sound but the crickets, and the smell of smoke still hung in the air. He scratched his nose and yawned.

When morning came, Billy sat on the stone steps in front of the charred remains of a small house, turning a silver candlestick around in his hands.



# The Gift

*Kacie Wills*

He sits in the chair with his leg twitching, **thinking, thinking, wondering** where it went.

“It went away; that’s right, it went away. It didn’t run away, **you threw** it away. **You threw** it away so that **you wouldn’t have to look** at it, so that **you wouldn’t have to watch** it look at you. But **you only think** that it was **looking at you**. Was it really looking at you? It doesn’t matter now because **you threw** it away.”

“**I threw** it away. That’s where it went; **I threw** it away. **I don’t know** why **I did** it, but **I threw** it away. Maybe it was the speckled paper or the shiny silver bow; maybe it was the way that it **looked at me** from the corner of the room, but it didn’t **look at me** from the corner of the room because it didn’t have any eyes so maybe it was the way that **I looked at** it. **I looked at** it always in the corner of the room until **I took** it from the corner of the room and put it in the closet.”

“**You put** it in the closet, deep in the dark closet, where **you used to hunt** for the boogie man, where **you used to see** the boogie man and then **run** and **hide** under the covers. Only **you can’t hide** under the covers now because **you are** an adult now, and because the covers **don’t quite cover you** now, so **you must run** somewhere else.”

His leg stops twitching as **he is sitting** in the chair, **sitting** suddenly still in the chair, **wondering** where it went.

“**You know** where it went; you threw it away. It didn’t run away, **you threw** it away. **You couldn’t run** away so you **threw** it away because the closet was not dark enough to hide the speckled paper, to blot out the shiny bow.”

“**I know I threw** it away but **I don’t know** where it went. **I threw** it away because the closet wasn’t dark enough and **I couldn’t run** away. **I couldn’t run** away because the closet wasn’t dark enough and it could still **see me**, or **I could still see** it, and it **wouldn’t let me** forget. So **I threw** it away. **I don’t know** where it went.”

“**You don’t know** where it went. **You don’t want to know** where it went because **you**

**threw** it away, **because you** were scared and because the closet wasn't dark enough and the world wasn't wide enough for **you to run** away, so **you threw** it away."

**He puts** his head in his hands and **cries** into his hands in the dim, stale light of the small, lonely room. **He cries** tears that drop like pennies because **he knows** where it went, because **he doesn't want to know** where it went, because the speckled paper still shines in the dark closet, shines even after he **threw it** away.

"**You threw** it away so **you could have** your filthy couch, so **you could have** your filthy apartment, so **you could drink** your filthy water that makes everything seem clean, because grey is the new white and brown the new yellow and the room a pale pink that once was rose."

#

**She stands** in the corner, **shivering** in the corner, alone in the corner of her pale ivory room.

"**You can stand** there all day, alone in your corner, **shivering** in your corner of your ivory-covered room. **You can stand** there all day, **you can wish** there all day, but all these things in the way, they **won't make you** forget."

"**I am** here in my corner, my own little corner, alone in my room with the ivory walls where I **used to play** with my porcelain dolls. Here in my corner, I'm home in my corner, because I **made my corner** and **this is me**."

"**You stand** in your corner, **you call** it your corner, but it's not your corner it's just empty space. It's just empty space where **you think** you'll replace the color that hides under these bland, lifeless walls."

**She stands** in the corner, suddenly **choked** in the corner, **wishing, wishing** that **she could forget**. **She gasps** in her corner as the paint chips away and the colors brilliantly begin to hatch.

"**You choke** on your fear, **you gasp** in the air that pierces your lungs with its warmth. **You stand** in your corner, **watching** in your corner, **wishing, wishing** that **you could forget**. But alone in your corner, this ivory corner, the paint peels back and the blood runs afresh."

"This is my corner this is my space, this ivory place with the plain painted walls. But paint dies away, it peels and it fades and the color within peeks out. **I can stand** here all day, **I can wish** here all day, but this paint in the way cannot make me forget."

"**You wish** you could **forget**; **you tried** to forget with gallons and gallons of standard cream paint. **You tried** to bleach it; **you tried** to coat it; **you tried** to blot out the boldness with blandness and space."

**She sinks** to the floor, slowly down to the floor, as the ivory walls are ivory no more, and the colors burst forth with each breath and each tear while the patterns take shape and vitality draws near.

“**You sit** in your corner, here in your corner, as the walls **around you** turn suddenly bright and the static **around you** develops new life, while **you sit** in your corner, alone in your corner, with the fabulous walls that were once off-white. And **you wish** that the paint had been a bit thicker and the walls that **you painted** had been a bit whiter and the life **you created** could have lasted a bit longer before the color shone forth and your soul took its shape.”

#

**It sits** in the corner, solidly in the corner, a ticking bomb in the corner in the brilliant bright room.

“**You run** from the corner, the light colorful corner, **you run** away from that once-ivory space. **You run** from the paper, the shiny speckled paper, **you run** from the sheen of the silvery bow. **You leave** your safe spaces, **you leave** your grey places, **you run** and **you run** and you can not forget.”

“**We run** from the corner, from the blinding bright corner where the paint has chipped off of the safe and pale walls. **We run** from the corner, our once-safe calm corner and our space and the paper and the sparkling bow.”

“**You leave** your safe corners, **you run** from your colors, **you run** from the paper and **you know** where it went. **You painted** and **you covered**, **you layered** and **you plastered** and **you built** and **you built** and **you tried to forget**. **You threw** it into the closet and **you ran** away from the closet and **you sat** in the corner of your small lonely room. **You cried** icy tears and **you pretended** for years but the paint fades away and the paper still shines.”

**It shines** in the corner, the speckled paper in the corner, the bright bow in the corner of the now-empty room. **It sits** in the corner, ominous in the corner, **reflecting** the boldness of the colorful walls.

“**You can run** from these spaces, **you can run** to new places but **you can not can not can not forget**. **You can run**, **you can hide**, **you can throw** it away, **you can wish** day after day but **it won't** go away. **You can run** far away but **it won't** go away.”



# Pas de Deux

*Jaime Campbell*

Her sobs sounded ugly. High pitched moans that reminded me of the night the cat had gone into labor. Through the small crack between the wooden stall door and the stall wall, I could see her on her knees in front of the line of three sinks. Her shoulders shrugged, her miniature stomach rolls in near gyration underneath her V-neck sweater with every gasping breath. I found myself wondering if Tom had ever had her in that position.

Of course he had.

Cassandra stood up and ran her hands through her short brown bob, gripping it, almost pulling it, as I found my own tears landing on my knees. God. I hated him. But there they were, the tears. I tried to cry silently, but failed.

“Who’s there?”

She stopped crying and I was caught. Wiping my face, I pushed the stall door open.

“Alice. You came.” She dragged her watch up in front of her face. “You’re early, too.”

She stepped over to the paper towel dispenser and yanked out about three feet. She ripped it in half, handed some to me, and then wiped her face.

“Did you see him yet?” Cassandra asked.

“No.”

“Don’t.” She shook her head and stared at the tiny fraction of sunshine revealed by the room’s sole, small window.

“Fine,” I said. I gripped the paper towel.

“No, I just meant,” she raised her head so our eyes paired up and said, “you shouldn’t. He doesn’t look right. He looks...ugly.” She laughed as she glanced up at the window again. “Horribly ugly.”

“We should maybe go back—”

“It’s still early. You can go.” She nodded her head and shoved her hair behind both of her ears as she said, “I just want a few more minutes.”

I looked over at the mirror, checking the position of my bun, a habit I'd never quite shaken from my days as a ballet instructor. I turned away and tossed the paper towel in the trashcan as I approached the door. Her sobs set in again though, and I found myself at her side, my arm around the woman, the mere preschool teacher, who had stolen my husband.

She buried her head in my shoulder. She smelled too sweet. Like candy canes. Her warm body rose and fell in my arms. She pulled away from me and grabbed her large leather purse from the tile counter. I watched her fumble with the gold clasp and pull out a plastic sippy cup in the shape of a small bear, the kind a toddler would drink apple juice out of. I imagined she had stolen it from her work. She twisted off the cap, and as she flipped up the plastic straw, the scent of whiskey hit my nose, hard. She gulped as best she could out of that little straw, her throat muscles rising and falling, her eyes closed with the lids relaxed, the back of her neck in a slight arch with her head tossed backward. A deep and slow breath followed, sending her whiskey-breath in my direction as she placed the cup on the counter. I walked over and grabbed the cup. I twisted off the lid the straw was attached to, and I let the warm liquid sooth my throat, my chest, my stomach, all the way down. I took a deep breath, and then I did it again.

“Oh my God. I shouldn't have done that in front of you.” Cassandra tried to rip the whiskey from my hand.

“It's too late.”

“God.” She gripped her hair again as I took another drink.

My muscles relaxed as they might after performing the most intense chaînés. Tears welled up in my eyes.

“Oh God, I'm such a stupid—”

“No. I feel better.” I moved to the wall and slid down its smooth beige gloss, gulping.

Cassandra fumbled with her purse again, this time bringing out her cell phone. She brought it over to me, tossed it into my lap, and knelt down beside me. “Call your sponsor.”

“Is that what he told you? Did he tell you that's how I did it? God, fuck him. I don't have a sponsor. I've never been to a meeting, either.”

“Don't talk about him that way.”

I handed her the cup and stretched my legs out in front of me. “Sorry.”

She rocked the sad little bear up in front of her blue eyes. “You didn't even save me a little bit.”

“Well, yeah.”

She glanced over at her purse and then rested her gaze there, the right side of her lower lip locked behind her upper teeth.

“What?” I said. “Is there another one in there?”

“No.”

“You’re lying, aren’t you?” I got up and rummaged through the bag until I found another bear. I held her bag up in my hand and looked at it. “This bag is gigantic.”

“It’s my only black one.”

I twisted off the lid and the top, and inhaled. Vodka. God, vodka. I forced my attention onto Cassandra. Her hands lay clasped in her lap, the fingers of one hand clenched around the fingers of the other. Even resting there, her hands shook ever so slightly. I went to the door and locked it. Sitting down next to her again, I placed the cup in between her hands.

“You can’t just lock a public restroom door.” She drank. Before the container left her lips her body gave way to a slight tremor.

“There’s another one on the other side.”

“Oh.”

We began to pass the Vodka back and forth.

“Why’re you here alone?” I asked.

She laughed. “I lost it back at the house. His parents, my parents, question after question after goddamn question.” She shook her head. “I needed some breathing room.” She held up the cup. “I filled these in a panic.” She rubbed her face. “Tom’s dad saw.”

My imagination began to erect an image of the house which I had never seen. A big lawn led up to a brick porch, which in turn led to a large, decorative oak door. The house I saw was yellow with white trim, two stories. Rose bushes. Nice, clean wood floors. Modern furniture. Maybe some flowers on the kitchen table. I could see Tom’s parents at the table. But I kept picturing my parents, not Cassandra’s, at the table with them. All four of their heads pointing downward. My mother would go off on one of her delusional monologues. “Maybe this was no accident; did anyone think of calling the police?” My dad would then point out that my mother was being overly dramatic as usual; of course it was an accident. Tom’s parents would be silent. My mother would start to cry before running out of the room, announcing, “I better call my sponsor.”

I pressed the back of my head against the cool wall, feeling my eyelids droop. I let them close. I let my arms and legs sink into whatever lay below them. I let my mind forget about its broken promises to itself, and I was left with the image of Tom, the day I had met him in our senior seminar on Jung. It had been our last semester in culmination of a degree Tom had put to immediate good use, landing a full-time counseling job. But not me—ballet instructor, turned studio owner, after I wore out my body.

I drank more vodka. I felt an old, familiar wall attempting to erect itself in my brain, in my heart. Just over the top of it, I could make out Tom’s big blond curls, thick black

glasses, and his tan skin which paired so nicely with his white t-shirt. There had been too many of us around the conference table that first day of class, so many students wanting to add the course at the last minute. Tom was right-handed, and I'm a lefty, so as we scribbled down our notes our arms kept brushing up against one another. Later, during finals week of that semester, squished together in my twin bed at the dorm, Tom lay with his head propped up under his bent left arm. He had begun to run his right index finger along my arm. "You know, this soft blonde hair may very well be the only reason I took such extensive notes this semester."

Cassandra nudged my arm, so I handed her the cup.

"When's the first time you saw Tom?" I asked.

"At the supermarket. He was ahead of me in line, buying a mango, and nothing else. I thought it was just the cutest thing. When I got outside, he was sitting at a bench in the sun eating it. I figured, what the hell, and I asked him for his number. He told me he was married. He held up his left hand and wiggled his fingers, showing me his ring."

"And."

"That was it. Until I saw him a few months later. Again at the supermarket. It was later, and he was buying a six pack of Sierra Nevada Pale Ale. He said he couldn't bring it home." As she leaned forward her gaze pushed its way into my eyes. "He said it was over. He told me it was over." She took a deep breath. "But he was still wearing his ring, and I just knew. I don't know why I went along with it. I don't know."

"Sandy—people call you that right?" Years ago, I remembered clutching a glass of chardonnay, sitting on the hard cement in the backyard, hearing Tom say, "Sandy doesn't act like I don't exist. You..." He had slumped his shoulders forward, shaking his head. He lowered his voice to a whisper, "...bitch." It was the only time he'd resorted to name calling. And he'd been right.

"Most people call me Sandy," she said.

"You've never owed me a thing." I said.

"I'm still sorry."

"Well, I'm sorry too."

"For what?"

I took off my glasses and set them on the ground next to me. "That I'm a 32 year-old alcoholic divorcée, that you're a 30 something widow, and that Tom's a 32 year-old dead man. Gone. Just gone." My hands were shaking too now, and I wasn't just crying, I was drunk crying. An animal I've never been able to tame. There's a relentlessness about it that refuses to be ignored: Tom, Tom, Tom, Tom, Tom. Sandy wrapped her arm around me and we drunk-cried together. Sob after sob, the next beginning before the previous one ended. Unclassifiable noises of loud sorrow. Drool and snot stuck to hands and cheeks and chins. There may have been a knock at the door, but we ignored it.

I tried to latch on to the image of Tom in his tuxedo at our wedding in the park seven long years ago, but it was Sandy, not me, walking down the aisle. White dress, my father at her side. He squeezed her arm and smiled. Everything so incredibly normal.

I buried my face into Sandy's armpit. Her deodorant smelled like lavender. I could feel her face pressed into my hair as something wet dripped down the side of my head, to my ear. My legs were pressed against hers. I could feel her spiky leg hair through both of our nylons. Our bodies rose and fell in unison.

And slowly our breathing calmed. We pulled away from one another. We sat back into a long moment of silence.

As my heart began to beat at a fairly regular rate and I put on my glasses again, I asked her, "What was your wedding like?"

A smile forced its way onto her wet lips. "It was at the church at the cemetery. It was small. Mostly just family. As I walked down the aisle, Tom kept trying to make me laugh. He raised his eyebrows, wiggled his ears." She smiled. "When that didn't work he slowly licked his upper lip, you know, pseudo-sexy style. My dad laughed out loud, and then I did too." She sighed. "It was so easy, marrying Tom."

"Yeah." I nodded.

There was another knock at the door, but we didn't answer it. We took in another minute of silence until Sandy stood.

"Everyone is probably here by now," Sandy said as she rinsed out the little container. She held it up in the light. "We'd been trying, before the accident." She set the container on the counter. "One day, when I'd been at the drug store buying a pregnancy test I saw these little things, a set, and I couldn't resist. I'd been so sure. But I'd been wrong."

She looked into the mirror. "Holy shit." She started crying again.

I wobbled to my feet and moved to Sandy's side. "It's Okay." I searched around for my own purse, and found it hanging in the stall I had used earlier.

I walked Sandy through it all, handing her a mint first: the face washing, the reapplication of make-up, the gargling of water, the balance check, topped off with another round of mints. There was a mirrored tray with a few perfume and powder bottles. I picked up one after another, holding each spray bottle to my nose. They all smelled cheap. I decided on a rose-scented one and sprayed the both of us.

We stood next to one another facing the mirror, our arms at our sides. I was a good four to five inches taller than she was. I found myself wanting to rise up onto my toes for the first time in years. Even though I was in the wrong shoes and my balance was off, I did

it—en pointe. I held myself there for a moment, trying to find the strength I was going to need once I got home, alone.

“God, we aren’t going to fool anybody, are we?” she said.

“They know we’re grieving.” I lowered back down to my heels.

We walked out together, each of us with an arm around the other. Down the hall, to the entry way, our weight pressed against one another in our own pas de deux. The door was open and the cool air from the outside felt soft on my skin. We weaved through the flowers and the stares, and sat next to one another in the first row, in front of Tom. The shiny black casket was closed now.

Sandy’s quiet sobs sounded like music to me. A song I could pirouette to. I shut my eyes and imagined Tom climbing to the top of the cliff on his mountain bike. Sweating and panting. Finally reaching the top, resting his foot on the dirt that gave way. I could see Tom grasping at branches, still clipped into one pedal. The bike and him rolling, first against the earth. And then the finale. A vertical triple turn, a tour en l’air, as we say in dance.

# Elephant

*Alexander Lane*

Standing on top of illustrations. That's right. That's what I'm doing.

I can't believe it.

This isn't real.

This isn't even three-dimensional.

How do I know what three-dimensional is if my world isn't even it?

Is this my world?

My world is not illustration. It isn't just a bunch of pictures. Fakes. Fictions.

My world is real. It's not these cardboard cutouts.

These aren't even good illustrations... Good illustrations... They aren't even good illustrations...

If I'm standing on top of the illustrations, what does that make me? Am I a character? Am I a fictional character? How am I having these thoughts then? If I'm just the fiction of someone else's mind, how am I having my own independent thoughts?

These are my thoughts. They are mine. Mine. They can't be fictional like these illustrations upon which I'm standing. I can think about anything anytime I want to and no one can tell me differently.

Elephant.

There. See? I can do whatever I want whenever I want. I can't be a character because I've got my own will. If I want to go over here that's where I go. If I want to go over there...

Ha! No one could have known that I'd dash off in this direction when I said that I was going to go in that one. I am my own man.

So how did I come to be standing on top of these illustrations? How could a real person like myself come to be stuck on top of illustrations? And illustrations such as these.

They're so childish. I could have done a much better with drawings myself. In fact, if there were some paper and a pencil or pen, I'd do just that. I'd draw up a better world than this one that I'm on, or in, or whatever it is that I am in relation to it, and then I'd say: Ha!

Look at my better world.

That's what I'd say.

So what if I am a character? This can't be reality. It can't. It's not what I remember reality as. But I can't remember reality. How do I know what reality is? This is all that I know, but I know that this isn't it. How is that possible?

How did I come to know anything? There must have been some process by which I learned things. Things. At least I was semi-specific before with terms that meant nothing because there was no reality but my own. Now I'm just down to things. If I am a character, perhaps I'm just getting too smart for my own good. If that happened, and whoever was illustrating this story found out, they'd surely erase me. They'd have to find out that I was thinking these thoughts before they could do something crazy like that.

Although I suppose if it's just fiction, it doesn't matter much to them.

My life doesn't matter. Oh, it matters plenty to me. It matters to... Why is there no one else here? How do I know that I'm human? There's nothing else to measure myself against except this bench and that tree. What dictates that I must be human? Or that those are benches or trees? What if I arbitrarily change them? What would that matter?

That will be an elephant. And that will be...

An elephant.

Ha! I must be much smarter than the Illustrator. He would never have let me name two things the exact same way. Maybe this is a dream of sorts. But I'm thinking. I'm conscious. I know that I'm thinking. I think, therefore I can. I can think more.

What links anything to anything in this world? In my world? Is it something that I've got preconceived in my head? Well, where did that come from?

Perhaps whatever drew this drew me also. But all of this thinking cannot possibly come from a drawing. This feeling. This life!

This cannot come from a drawing. Illustrations. This glory cannot come from that. There must be something separate, of which I am also apart. This two-dimensional existence is not what I am. It cannot be where I come from. Where do I come from? *Me?*

Not this pathetic scribbling that houses *me*.

I wonder if there's any way that I can communicate with my Illustrator? Ask him what it's all about. Or a her. I guess I could have been drawn by a woman. How do I know what a woman is?

There has to be some sort of higher power. Why have I been saved and no one else? What makes me special? Or am I just the first? The first of many. I hope so. But I am a man. I am a man.

I am a man.

That is what I am. But I am also this. I am more than what I am. This scribbling is a man.

But I am a man also. How is that possible? How is this... this that gives me life a man? The Illustrator is going to have a lot of questions to answer when I get a sit down with Him. Although if that's how it is, I suppose that we're never going to get a sit down. He cannot come down with me and sit on this bench because then he would not be my creator. He'd just be another of the created.

Created...

Why did I accept that I was created so quickly?

What other option is there?

I must be a character. Of some sort. At least I can make my own decisions, and He can't tell me what to do.

Elephant.

I should really start using something that isn't so easily foreseeable, like...

Like...

Like...

A baby elephant?

What was that? I can't think of a single thing. A single thing. A single thing. What is going on here? Am I just getting simpler?

Why can't I think of anything else? My story was going along so well. Well, sort of. There was no plot or setting really. There was a character. He was my character. I guess I just sort of ran out of ideas for him.

Poor guy. I guess that he won't ever get those other characters he wanted.

He was a smart guy.

Guy. He never even got a name. The poor guy never even got a name. He lived out his entire existence without a name. What is a rose, though, for by any other name... Or is that how it goes?

Oh well. I'll just have to try again.

And that isn't making a very good picture with words. I will never really be a good writer if I can't even illustrate things in my mind. Even my character, *my character*, thought that I was a deficient illustrator. A deficient creator.

I don't think that I'd ever make it if I were a character like him.

I have to have my own free will so that I can make my own decisions.

But my character thought that he was real cause he had a will of his own. But that was my will on him. I made him think every single one of those things that he thought. In fact, he was only, as a being, a finished product. He'd actually thought many more things and done more things than he had when I'd finished. I guess that's what the eraser does though—it destroys.

So what makes my thoughts real? Because I know that they are? Because I've met other people and know that they have thoughts... But I guess that I don't know that they have thoughts. That's just what they've told me.

I just need to start over again. Crumple this other one up and throw it away so I can start again. Get a new piece of paper and...

Where has all of my paper gone? How is it that I don't have any paper when I really need it. If I had paper...

Wait.

I'm not on paper. I'm on... this. Have I been created—somehow?

What is this?

How did I get here?

Really.

Oh God.

Oh God.

I'm sitting on top of someone else's illustrations, aren't I?

...

...

...

Please don't kill me.

# Invisible Escalators

Excerpt from the end of chapter 2:  
Back out into the Cloaking of Normality (Scribble Number Two)

*Ryan Wirick*

RUNNING DOWN the ambulance driveway. Still wearing only boxers. Both temples throbbing in my insulated ears... A thinning hint of ocean peered through the last of the fog hanging over the coast. *The monster*... I reached PCH in a cold seat—numbish legs, stuffy nose, a blank teary-eyed stare, as if to ask the invisible unknown, *Which way's it gonna be?*—and turned north, now walking, limping, trying not to wheeze my lungs into a morning mist submission. The stench of sewage came on subtle at first, but grew stickier the louder my bare feet gurgled. All there really was for me to differentiate between the sidewalk and the asphalt was a gradual slope of mud, and a bubbly soup of car wash soap that had surfaced on the ridge of the drop. I followed this soapy remnant of a gutter to an unmarked residential street, where the juicy soil had thinned enough for a puddle of black to gather around a red curb vaguely spray-painted in white DRAINS TO THE OCEAN, which seemed to be spitting up indecipherable chunks of whatever.

For the time being, the clouds had moved on, leaving a sky not violet, but approaching... A thin, bowl shaped moon, nestled between the disappearing constellations of a scorpion and a serpent holder, was rising over the mountains and mansions to the east, softened by the purply hue. Soon the sun would also appear to rise, chasing the moon across the sky until *who knows when its next eclipse will be*... By now I was beginning to run again, crossing one street, two streets, trying my best not to cut open a heel or a toe on one of the thousands of shards of multicolored glass sparkling through the piss tinted surface of the sludge—all bending specks of light towards the north. And so I pressed on, knowing full well my truck may have been to the south.

I aimed my steps for the sparkleless pages poking up through the mush between the glass. Paper stepping stones. . . . I ran for a good three or four blocks before I noticed all the small-print passages looked the same—strips of verse, out of order, torn out from the testaments. . . .

—*in the land of Canaan*  
—*He has heard your grumbling*  
—*the Lord commands*  
—*lay frankincense on it*  
—*pay the girl's father*  
—*perhaps you'll be able to profit*  
—*man cannot win...* The source of

these saturated scraps remained unclear, somewhere on the other side of an ascending hump of PCH.

—*His sons will wage war*  
—*the king will do as he pleases*  
—*save yourself from this corrupt generation*  
—*darkness came over the whole land*  
—*the sky fell*  
—*when the Son of Man comes*

—*no one would be saved...* I reached the top of the hump, and there he was—a short, bearded man dressed in an overcoat wrapped around a faded T-shirt with Spanish phrases written in cloudy quote boxes. Skip-jumping in circles with an almost tribal confidence, every square inch of cloth letting out miniature puffs of dust, the dry aftertaste of dirt, as though a wave of gutter mud had consumed his sleeping self—a daydream cloaked in a nightmare. And for some reason he too was headed north on this violet morning, ripping pages out of the Bible and tossing them in the breeze with gusto, all while humming in a faint Indian timbre the U.S. of A's national anthem.

I couldn't hear him at first, approaching this man from a world I knew little of; of the elements, uncontrolled, no mediation between the whim of weather and the shuffle of blood, thickness of skin, of cloth, of cardboard, malnourished bones, the medication of daylight, the ointment of spit, indifference to the hairy legs of insects, to soap, shampoo, the corner-eyed stares from visor wearing tourists as he showers at Ninth Street beach, local teenagers mimicking his jerky mannerisms like some soulless aboriginal while waiting in line to rinse off their skimboards and well-pruned feet. And when he ventures back up the thousand stepped cliff, unable to hesitate to nap against the railing on the way, girls in their twenties, in their un-lived flesh of toddlers, in bikinis, tanned, complaining with ugly candy mouths of his stink, putrid like damp old socks and ocean farts, but worse, like their laughter, like they couldn't see his eyes searching for theirs behind oversized sunglasses, every girl the same as the last, like some trendy organized advancement of some rich bug-eyed race of aliens, conquering men like this with their inability to see through the cloaking of their shades. Just an eyesore, external, like a broken sewer line to bitch about, but worse. . . .

Holding in my need to shiver, this twirling old man of dirt before me, I could taste him; ten feet away, concrete dust tongue; I could taste him before he could acknowledge me. And for a second—at least until I saw that they'd been shut this whole time; his navy blue sweat pants retracing a far-off muscle memory of sidewalk—it seemed to me that from his eyes there was no *me* to see. *Was he born blind or is it a preference?* I wondered... And had I not been instructed to employ a kind of mental handicap of reason, egging me on to argue otherwise, I'd have guessed his wild man shuffle began to dull down in direct response to my thoughts. For alongside my wondering slowed the tempo of his high-pitched humming; his lashes flew at the moon; his red-dotted eyes of yellow shot me a glance in concert with the slow motion ceasing of his dance.

The dust began to settle in my sweat, my hair, the gooey corners of my eyes, and where else but elsewhere?, while his stiff, lipless smirk remained frozen with a tweak of the nostrils. His overcoat hung at his sides, framing his shirt, which was of a tourist disposition: a sketch of the ruins of a stepped pyramid. The ink strokes had been left delirious, disconnected from one another except for two silhouettes expressed with one continuous, scribbly line of the left-to-right-to-left variety, both figures standing at the pyramid's base. Scribble number one asking the other through a cumulus cloud, —*¿Que hora es?* Scribble number two without an answer. Rising from the top of the ruins were similar clouds arranged in a pattern that seemed to amplify with the altitude: a comic strip rendition of a pyramidal reply, thinking to itself, —*La hora es casi completa...*

His yellow eyes remained bestowed on the Bible in his hands, from which he had torn out almost every chapter—Genesis to Jude and then some—and from which he, out of what seemed like nowhere, tore out a strip of the page on top. And with the same brazen jerk of his arm—all actions obscured by cloth—he squashed it flat and held it still against my chest. His mouth loosened into a grin, rotting black teeth that seemed to move on their own, like rollie pollies held captive in puss. I half expected the little guys to crawl out of his gums, down his beard, and bury themselves in the mud. Grains of sand shifted between my skin and his, his and mine. As I slipped the paper out from underneath his raw, tar-crusted hold, I stepped away and read the words.

## CHAPTER 12

<sup>1</sup> A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. <sup>2</sup> She was pregnant, crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. <sup>3</sup> Then another portent appeared in

heaven: a great red dragon, seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. <sup>4</sup>His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. The dragon stood before the woman, who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. <sup>5</sup>And she gave birth to a son, who is to shepherd all the nations with an iron rod. But he was snatched away and taken to God, and to his throne; <sup>6</sup>and the woman then fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days. <sup>7</sup>And

*AND? And what? What the fuck?*

Not sure what I was expecting from this curious offering, but its secret remained lost on me. *Just a guy who's lost his mind with a book that's lost its punch*, I forced this thought on me, and would have gladly believed it had I not resigned in the sea, in a bubble, all my faith in skepticism. *So long as I'm breathing everything's anyone's guess...* And who was I to question whether or not in an instant some flying serpent might swoop down and rip off my head with razor blade chompers, carry it away to who knows where, my headless body rolling into morning traffic? . . . I couldn't figure what had happened, but there was an exchange that took place going far beyond the piece of paper and the sand. The instant his hand withdrew I felt a kind of charge; of energy; of something that forced me to breathe easy; to leave room in my head for infinite potentials, the most absurd of what-the-fucks. When he turned around, skip-jumping with the turn, I mouthed the words for the notes as he pushed them far into the breeze. O SAY CAN YOU SEE...

I looked up. 7-Eleven. People buying lottery tickets. Their line extending out the door, passed my truck, a NO LOITERING sign, a pay phone. The people looking at me. Short glances before turning their eyes away and pretending to have something to say to so-and-so next to so-and-so, who may or may not win the lotto before so-and-so wins, if the other so-and-so doesn't win the smaller lotto first. The clerk inside also looking at me, the one Frank entrusted with my locked truck. Longer glances, I weighed the odds: *Who's the crazy one? Him, this clerk, selling pieces of paper promising millions, amounting to trash? Or me, in my boxers, walking across the asphalt towards my truck, staring back?...* Only his looks, like all the looks there, angled downward. Their smiles, mocking me in a way I couldn't

discern: downward and away. I followed their angles to my bellybutton, where I could see in stiff, plain view the apparent cause of their commotion. Reaching out through unbuttoned boxers, cloaked in dust, nonresponsive to my cue to snap, was a hard-on glancing back a look; out through the hole for who knows how many to see.

*Is it some reaction to the cold, a kind of defense, or a reaction to the process of death, of returning from death, or the work of the blood from the grout, stretching out, getting comfy, the movements of my body, the whims of muscle, of all these memories of sex?... I tucked it back in and to the left. I leaned against the side of my truck, women and men in business attire getting a kick out of what they assumed was my abashment, when it truth I was relieved. Their stares, my cock, all is confirmation I exist. They can see me. I can see them. They exist... My fingers traced along the rubber sun roof seal. Searching for, Where is it? There, right there...*

A key.



# For Joe, Not John

*Natasha Ganes*

They stood alone together that summer, although there were others around at times: the two dreadful boys who brought them together and the three laughing confused children who swarmed over them, calling them Mommy or Baby, but usually it was just the two as one. They stood alone together that feverish summer and mocked the two terrible boys who didn't know that strength from numbers grows in the hunted as well. While the resentful enemies wasted their own sun trying to reenter the lives they had given up so many years ago, the two beautiful girls stood alone that sweaty, torrid summer against the naughty boys' war, dodging their rubber bullets and boomerang arrows, basking in the soothing glow of a glorious heat. Laughing and triumphant now that they had found one another, the two united girls felt positive no one could separate their warm season. As the wicked opposition crashed outside their heavy world and fought to dim their shared light, they loved each other and held on, positive that the fire of their summer would melt the evil storm away, and for a time it did. They played with the three trickster children, delighted in their sinless reflections, and both were Mommy. Although only one had felt the tearful pain of their births, for that tempting summer it didn't matter because they became the same and shared those three distracted children. They ate together, played together, slept together, laughed together, always together, and only one had her creeping doubts. She felt her other self might soon prove weak, and imagined the chilling shadow of him that might enter their blissful summer, but the dreaded darkness never came and all were content. They danced in the bright yellow star and selfishly swallowed the blinding sun until their body was toasty and smooth, they sang until her enchanting voice charmed all of their defenseless enemies, and together, she was at peace.

It came one chilly evening that the darkness stretched longer than usual and with it that feared shadow of hollow promised swiftly descended upon their perfect summer, pouring a foggy black cloud of ink that iced through her, dripping and puddling until its freeze almost divided the one into two. For a short, hopeful moment he went away, and

they prayed she was still safe, but as the mildewed leaves gave up on the dying trees and remorsefully slumped to the frosted ground, a frigid winter's shiver dived deep into the bones of her awaiting body, and it proved then, finally, that the brisk air cracked them apart and they no longer stood alone together that summer.

# Waffles

*Morgan Read-Davidson*

“Did I tell you I went to a psychic?”

“A psychic? You mean like—”

“I know I know, it’s silly...” Mom pauses a second, as if pushing a reset button.

“Actually, it was really interesting.”

“Mm.” I cradle the phone against my shoulder and go back to chopping onions.

“I thought, I’ve never tried this before, why not? I wanted to see what she’d say about all these changes in my life.”

“What changes? Nothing’s changed.”

“You know, your brother going off to college, me putting the house on the market. So anyway, for me she said she saw an open field, where the sky goes forever. Like unlimited options. I thought, wow, that’s weird, because you know I’ve been thinking about Montana, the horse ranches out there.”

A grunt from me is all she needs to keep going.

“So then I asked her about Ricky, and she said she saw an exciting time in his life, lots of choices, lots of experiences, but good ones.”

“So specific.”

“I know. And then I asked her about you, and she said that she saw a lot of fog, like indecision, but it wasn’t swirling, just floating along, and soon it would clear.”

The pause is obvious, she wants me to say something but I’m not giving in. And the sauce is boiling, popping all over the counter, so I rush to put the lid on, turn down the burner, all while trying to hold the phone against my shoulder.

“I think it’s a good sign, don’t you Robby?”

“Huh?”

“You just need to find your thing. You’re like me.”

“Thanks Mom.”

Another pause. I can hear little wheels turning.

“And then she said something else – I don’t know if I should tell you this.”

But you will.

“Well...she sort of frowned and said, ‘Is there someone in your life who’s sick?’ And I said, ‘Nooooo.’ And she said, ‘Because I see someone in a really bad place. There’s a darkness swallowing this person, a despair that I can’t see through. It’s like they’re lost, and the more they struggle, the further they sink.’ A long pause. “And I thought, Oh my god, she’s talking about your dad.”

She waits for me to respond but I don’t.

I can’t. My mouth has gone dry, there’s a tightening in my chest, a heat running up my neck, fanning out, making sweat break out on my back.

I turn off the stove.

“Well, my dinner’s ready, so I’ll talk to you later.” I don’t wait for her to answer, just hang up the phone.

My pasta sauce goes cold in the pot, sitting on the stove all night. I don’t feel like dinner, don’t feel like anything. I sit in my chair, flipping through channels, not seeing what’s on.

#

I try to put them out of my mind, but they keep coming back, those words. Darkness. Despair. It pisses me off – I know she didn’t mean it to be that way, but damn it she should have realized how her words would do that. Stick in my head.

I wake up late at night, everything’s dead silent, no moon, just darkness. I’m in a weird space where you can’t tell what’s real and what’s a dream and the darkness is just crushing me, I can’t even breathe.

A cold shower and three-scoops of coffee seem to help in the morning. But then I stop to get waffles at the Logger Cafe and I’m thinking about him again. The menu shows they still have Grilled Cheese, and I remember how he used to bring me and Ricky here when Mom was at school, how exciting it was to get Grilled Cheese because they used those little Kraft singles and white bread.

I just started stopping by the Logger Cafe recently, since I got my new apartment down the street, and not once have I notice the Grilled Cheese or thought about it. But now it reminds me of that year, the year I first realized my dad was drinking again. He’d been sober for four years, when my mom first threatened divorce. I never figured out what caused it, the relapse, but I remember seeing the jug of wine under the seat of his truck as we sat at the gas station, waiting for him to pay. I was only twelve, but that sinking feeling in my gut, the heat up my neck, it was there then just like now, telling me that everything was going to change.

Even after he’d sobered up, after the alternating weekends became normal and he and mom were like friends again, I’d still have the dreams. My friends would say, “Wow, your

parents are divorced? They seem like such good friends. You're really lucky." And I guess I was, my dad coming over Christmas mornings, having dinner with us once or twice a week, stopping by after work just to visit. He wasn't drinking, he was a new man, he told me so. He liked the clarity of being sober. He said he was finally maturing.

Still, I'd have dreams of my dad drinking again, that stupid silly grin on his face, embarrassing me at my football games, people whispering about it. And in my dreams I'd get angry, violently angry, punching him, kicking him, trying to beat it out of him, beat that stupid grin off his face. Why? I'd scream at him. Why? And I'd wake up and feel sick and empty, guilty for feeling this way, for hating him and fearing him and not seeing that he'd changed.

Ten years. Sometimes months would pass before I had another dream of him, and as I matured and as he matured and we talked more man to man, as I started working with him on the roofs, the dreams faded. The fear left. He'd become the man he should have been, the man I trusted. We were divorced, but we were a family. No more anger. No more fear.

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And now.

Ten years. Gone. Meaningless.

It's been three months since I last talked to him. Is that a long time? I can't tell, maybe it's not, maybe that's normal for some people. It doesn't feel normal to me. It's too small out here, too many trees and not enough roads. I worry about passing him one day going opposite directions, seeing his battered white pickup, not knowing what to do. Wave? I'm not talking to you until you're clean, but Hi!

I can't get my mom's words out of my head, I even think about them at the mill, and that's bad because you can't work the green chain with this kind of shit weighing on your mind. All those flexible saw blades spinning in different directions, you'll lose a hand or worse. At the end of the day, I catch a log on the first blade and it flies up, comes too damn close. Rhonda notices, she's been watching me all day, pulls me off the green chain and has me stack the new cuttings for the rest of my shift.

The sharp sticky smell of fresh plywood seeps in, takes me back to my high school summers working on the roof. Struggling to balance one big flat piece of plywood on my back as I climbed up a thirty foot ladder, the wind blowing and catching it like a sail, and then seeing my dad take two, two damn pieces, straight up. We listened to classic rock radio and he quizzed me about the bands and we were friends, not just father and son, but friends connected on a different level. I felt lucky then.

That night I have a dream that we're fishing off the Cowlitz bridge. He's just fumbling around looking foolish and suddenly I snap and start slapping him against the head, yelling, "What's wrong with you? The fuck's wrong with you?" Punching him, really laying

into him and he's not fighting back or nothing, just taking it, pathetic, fucking pathetic. It's not working, the stupid grin's still on his face and that pisses me off more, and suddenly I grab him and just launch him over the bridge, don't see him fall but hear the crunch on the rocks and then a splash in the water. And I look over and he's trying to crawl out, but I can tell his legs don't work and I think fuck, what the fuck have I done. And I jump down there and pull him out and hold him and he says, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Or maybe I do.

I wake up with that empty feeling, I can't believe what I've done, even if it was a dream. For a long time I sit naked on the edge of my bed, staring at my dirty wood floor, the darkness slowly turning gray through the uneven metal blinds of my window. My mind keeps going round and round the dream and that moment three months ago when I knew he was drinking again.

It was still hot then, the last days of summer that always remind me of football, before the frost and the fog and the Washington rains. I was meeting my dad at my apartment. I'd just moved in and I was going to cook dinner before we walked to the high school to watch the season opener. He showed up half an hour late, the garlic bread was getting cold, and as he climbed up the iron steps to my door, I could sense something was wrong. His thinning hair was combed back, still wet from taking a shower, he wore a sports shirt tucked into his Costco jeans, no belt. It was his eyes though, sort of watery, and that grin. That goofy grin.

I didn't recognize it at first, or maybe I did but didn't want to admit it. I could smell the winterfresh gum masking the booze. He wouldn't look me in the eyes. And he didn't talk much, just stuffed his mouth with my spaghetti, moaning over the meatballs, saying over and over how it was delicious, mmm, so delicious. I barely touched my dinner, just stared at him, searching, trying not to believe what I knew was true.

And at the football game. His goofy shuffling dance to the pep band's rendition of "Smoke On the Water" as we walked to the grandstands. Smiling, too happy, asking if I remembered back when I used to play, showing me where he used to stand at the end zone, like I didn't know and should be so surprised. Talking to Sandra, one of my old classmates sitting down the bench from us, telling her sister how he had to change her diaper once at a soccer game, did she remember that? My face red.

We didn't talk as we walked back in the warm darkness, the crickets covering our silence. He got in his truck and I leaned in the window, staring at him, my cheeks hot, trying to work up the courage. He looked at me. "When did you start drinking?" He didn't try to deny it, just looked ahead through the windshield and tried to answer naturally, "Oh, about a week ago. I thought I'd just try it, you know? I wanted to be able to have a beer with you. I'm sick of being labeled an alcoholic." "But you are," I said. "I know, you're right, I can't control it," he replied immediately. "I feel ashamed," he said, and I believed

him. But I didn't give in. I told him, "Well, until you sober up, don't bother coming around."

And he hasn't. That's supposed to be tough love. I did the right thing, my mom tells me. You can't play into their manipulations, their lies, that's what they want. You'll only enable them.

But I have to talk to him. For me, to get it out of my head. I make my decision, right there, shivering naked on the edge of my bed, the gray fog making little droplets run down my dirty window.

I'm nervous driving over to his house. It's still foggy out, a cold sweat on the vinyl seats, my heater on full blast. I half think he's not going to be there, he shouldn't really, he should be on his way to work or to the roofing supply store or something. That's what he would've been doing a year ago.

His truck is in the driveway, glowing white in the fog all the way from the road. I almost stop as I pull in, but there's no room to turn around and my lights are shining in the big window without curtains. The damn potholes spill part of my coffee out of the spill-free cup, splashing on my sock. He kept telling me he was going to bring in gravel, but a hundred plus feet of driveway, that shit's expensive.

I pull up behind his truck and sit there for a minute. Not gathering my strength or anything like that. My mind's actually blank. I expected to be stern, I should be stern. He's probably not even up, sleeping it off. Good. Surprise him.

There's a light on in the kitchen though, and too late I notice smoke coming from the little chimney. His door opens and he looks out, right at me, and I have to turn the engine off and get out.

I walk to the door steps, two-by-fours on cement blocks. The ground's frozen, ice in the puddles, and I have to be careful.

"Hi Robby!" he says, sounds happy to see me. But he looks away too fast and that gives me confidence.

"Dad."

"What's going on?"

"Can I come in?"

He steps back, closes the door behind me.

Strong coffee fills the kitchen-dining room-living room. That and the smell of wet socks and composition shingles that seem to follow him from house to house.

"Do you want a waffle?" he asks.

"Sure." I sit down in the white plastic chair, feel it shiver and remember that it's the one with the cracked front leg.

He's not dressed for work, but has on his faded MC Hammer-pants and a thermal. He

doesn't make eye contact, and I notice his hands shaking. He's trying to hide it, but damn it's pretty bad.

Good. I can feel the heat rise in me, making my muscles twitch, getting me angry like in the dream. Maybe I should do something like that, it might shock him, getting slapped around by his kid.

"Not working today?"

He shakes his head, looking down at the crusty waffle iron. Then at me, right in the eyes.

"Not yesterday either. I'm taking a few days off. To quit, Robby."

I'm not ready for that. A wave of relief washes over me, but I push it aside, refusing to buy into it. My eyes narrow.

"Really."

He nods. "I know you might not believe me—"

"It's not like I haven't heard it before," I interrupt, trying to bring back the heat.

He doesn't flinch, just nods, accepting it. "Well, it's different this time. I went to a doctor."

I don't answer.

"He gave me these." He tosses me a yellow prescription bottle.

"Librium?"

"To help the shakes. He said it's actually bad to go cold turkey like this, but I told him I had to, it's the only way. So he gave me those."

"And then what?" I ask.

"Well, then I take fewer and fewer. It's the physical addiction. I knew that, but once I started again, I couldn't just stop. It probably would've killed me."

"What about counseling? Will a little green pill stop you from going to the liquor store?"

He turns back to the waffle iron, opens it steaming and puts the waffle on a plate for me.

"I read this book your uncle sent to me. It's really a matter of character."

"The fuck's that supposed to mean?"

He stares at me, serious. And then matter of fact: "I had a lapse in character."

Now I'm feeling that rage, that fury from the dream. I want to slap him. I try to keep my voice even. "Don't you think that's a little too simple? What about A.A.?"

"You know I can't stand all those people with their drinking stories, whining and moaning. It's depressing."

"You still don't think you're one of them?"

"No." Simple as that, standing in a kitchen where the cupboards have no doors, the

linoleum curling up on the floor, the tanned skin of a cow serving as a fucking rug. I stuff my face with waffle.

“Well, I think you’re wrong,” my mouth full of food.

He doesn’t answer, and suddenly there’s nothing more to say. I look at my watch.

“I gotta get to work.”

He nods, and as I stand he walks over, gives me a hug. Our bodies are stiff, a dark space between us even though our chests are pressed together. He pats the back of my head.

“You’re a good son, Robby.”

I almost hit him then, right in the mouth. Maybe he means it, I don’t know, but he sure as hell knows I can’t do anything after a comment like that.

“Good luck,” I’m compelled to say. And then again, in the driveway over my shoulder,

“Call me, let me know how it goes.”

He nods and waves.

As I drive back down the driveway, the potholes spilling what’s left of my cold coffee, disgust creeps up my neck. I’m pathetic. Mom would call me an “enabler.” I’m incapable of tough love.

He doesn’t call for two weeks.

I don’t tell my mom about it. She’ll just lecture me on how it’s a disease, it’s up to him, he’ll never change, he doesn’t want to change, why do I want to get involved.

Like I don’t already know all of that. Like he’s not my father.

I call Ricky a couple of days later. But my brother hardly talks, making me fill the silence with meaningless hopeful babble that neither of us believe. “I think maybe he’s serious now...At least he’s taking a step in the right direction...He looked better.”

Ricky’s so comfortably removed. I hate him for it, leaving me here.

The darkness leaves, the word Despair no longer seems to have meaning. For some reason, I stop dreaming all together. But I can’t relax, there’s a wound-up tightness in my head, big knots in my shoulders. My neck feels so stiff, I can’t stop cracking it.

I almost go back to his house to tell him he’s on his own, to prove that he can’t fool me. To catch him or something. But then maybe that’s enabling. I don’t know.

After a few days the tightness in my neck fades, life takes over. Mom’s house, the house we grew up in, actually has a serious offer, she wants me to help clear out the barn, take a load to the dump. I get the extra shift at the mill. My starter motor has to be replaced.

The call comes Friday night.

I’m just about to head out, I’m meeting the guys down at the Red Dog, running late. Grab the phone and hear a hissing click on the other side.

“Will you accept a collect call from Robert Jackson?”

I should hang up. I should just hang up. Hang up, damn it.

There’s only one place he’d be calling collect from, which means they picked him up, probably on Highway 509.

The phone slides away from my ear, I hold it against my leg, tapping while I look out my apartment window into the darkness.

The operator’s voice is tiny, “Sir? Sir?”

No moon out, the fog’s already thick outside. Cold and empty.

I lift the phone back to my ear.

“Yeah, I’ll accept it.”

# **Beef Burrito Breakdown or The Sad Misadventures of Leo Rosenblatz**

*Daniel Schutz*

Leo, who lived in a houseboat, raced home from Wal-Mart at three in the morning, eager to use his newly purchased step ladder. (There were a couple of ceiling fans in his living room that he could never dust because the blades were too high. He wanted to use his lawn chairs as a ladder, but they had just been reupholstered with late 18<sup>th</sup> century French needlepoint and he didn't want to risk tearing the fabric.) At the intersection of Carlyle and Tecumseh, Leo saw the familiar red glow of a Del Taco sign. He pulled into the drive-thru and apologized to his step ladder for the delay in getting home.

Leo ordered a Macho Beef Burrito with extra hot sauce. As he waited for his order he tried to impress the woman at the drive thru window with some witty banter, including his zero tolerance policy on mild salsa. When the woman gave Leo his order, he flashed a crooked smile and in his best Spanish said, "Mas quesadillas, por favor." The woman looked bewildered and said, "Sir, you only ordered a burrito. Quesadillas are extra." Leo, unbeknownst to him, had confused the word quesadillas, a low priced and easy to make Mexican dish involving cheese and tortillas, with the word servilletas, or napkins. After several moments of blank stares, the woman closed the drive-thru window and hid behind the soda dispenser. Leo proceeded to drive into the parking lot and eat his burrito.

He took a monstrous bite of his Macho Beef Burrito; the cheesy goodness burning his mouth. He spit everything out, sending chunks of meat and salsa all over his lap. Leo reached into his bag for a napkin and then remembered that the lady at the drive-thru had refused to give him one. "Son of a bitch!" he yelled. He didn't know whether to flick the food off his jeans or dab the pieces up one by one. Grease stains seemed inevitable either way. Do I have any stain remover back at the houseboat? he thought. Does club soda work on grease? Do I have club soda? Do people still drink that stuff? Leo sat in his car and stared at his grease stained jeans, blaming the whole mess on the drive thru woman. Then he blamed the guy who made the burrito for stuffing it with too much cheese. Then he blamed the ceiling for being too high. He never would've gone out and buy a step

ladder if the ceiling had been lower. Then he blamed TNT for airing yet another attention grabbing James Bond Marathon, which kept him in the living room and away from the kitchen, where he normally stored his meals.

Leo couldn't think of one good reason for being in a Del Taco parking lot at 3:15 in the morning with grease stains on his jeans. James Bond wasn't the reason; the burrito maker wasn't the reason; and neither was the lady at the window. He tried to convince himself that it all had to do with not having an Easter egg to dye in pre-school, but even that theory didn't make sense.

Leo knew his life started somewhere. Being born didn't count. There had to be a series of events he could trace that would lead him all the way up to that exact second. He knew such an event existed somewhere in his past, but he was at a loss for picking which one. They all looked equally meaningless. Amazed by his sudden philosophizing, Leo wondered what it was about Del Taco's food that made him so introspective.

His increase in intellectual prowess provoked him to ask other questions; deep, meaningful questions like, what cosmic significance does burnt toast have, and if it has no significance, why does it exist? And, more importantly, why do I notice burnt toast to begin with and believe my noticing it is also in some way significant? Leo's mind rambled from question to question, never resting on a definite conclusion. He was, however, becoming more and more convinced that his life, and his need to buy a step ladder at three in the morning, meant nothing in the grand, cosmic scheme of things.

As much as he wanted to find the answers to his hard hitting, investigative journalism style questions, Leo knew the answers could not be found under the harsh fluorescent lights of the Del Taco parking lot. There was only one place he could sort out the true meaning of life; his houseboat. Leo pulled out of his parking space, rolled down his window, yelled, "Arriba, Arriba!" and took off into the street.

Within fifteen minutes Leo arrived at his houseboat. He didn't live on a lake or harbor, but rather a gigantic pool. (In high school Leo was obsessed with Dungeons and Dragons. He vowed to the Chess Club he would one day own a castle. After college and several personal finance classes, Leo came to the conclusion that the mortgage on castles was too much for him to afford. He settled on building a moat around his house. When the city denied the project for safety reasons, Leo came up with the brilliant idea of tearing down his house, expanding his koi pond to mammoth proportions, and floating a houseboat in the middle of it. After several city council meetings and a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, Leo began construction of the pool. (He had convinced the NEA that the house was part of a planned art project he called the "Living Sculpture Symposium." In his artistic statement Leo said he hoped to start an architectural and artistic revolution called Medieval Chic or Black Plague Moderne. Both names were pending copyright. The NEA responded well to the idea and gave him the money.)

## Beef Burrito Breakdown or The Sad Misadventures of Leo Rosenblatt

Leo pressed his garage door opener, which really lowered a drawbridge that connected his house to the street. He parked his car in the driveway and walked across the drawbridge, only to be met by his body guard, Ralph. In reality, Ralph was just a mannequin dressed up to look like a guard. His uniform consisted of camouflage cargo pants and an old T-shirt advertising the Tucson Police Department's Annual 10 Kilometer Celebrity Walk -a-Thon.

"Hey Ralph," Leo said. "You feel like taking a few laps around the pool?" Ralph didn't respond. Leo shoved the mannequin until his head nodded, "yes." He put Ralph into a rowboat docked at the front porch and hopped into the boat himself. He unmoored the line and began to row. Leo stared into the pool water and thought about all that had happened to him at Del Taco. He looked to Ralph for guidance. Ralph sat and listened, parasol in hand. "I don't know about life sometimes, you know what I mean, Ralph? I thought I had everything figured out. I eat, I sleep, I go to work; things like that, the basics. It never bothered me before tonight. And then, as I came home from Wal-Mart, I stopped at Del Taco to get a burrito." Leo stopped rowing and looked at Ralph. "Uh, sorry, I didn't get you one. I didn't think you'd be hungry." When Ralph didn't respond, Leo resumed both his story and his boat rowing. "Anyway, the burrito ended up splattered all over my lap. Salsa and meat was everywhere. The way the meat fell, it almost looked like it had fallen in some sort of pattern, like the universe was trying to tell me something. I kept staring at it, but nothing happened. I couldn't see anything, like when I try to stare at those hidden 3-D pictures. It just looks like squiggly lines to me. And that's how I began to see life after I finished that burrito; all squiggly lines with no place to go." Leo looked at Ralph and found his head tilted forward, as if taking a nap. "Wake up, Ralph! I'm trying to share something with you and you're not even paying attention. You see, useless. No matter what I do, it doesn't matter. Not to you, not to anyone." Leo wanted to cry but was afraid his tears would upset the pH balance of his pool. The last thing he wanted was to increase the salinity. So, he wept into his sleeve and covered his face so Ralph wouldn't see.

Leo rowed the boat to a dock by his back door and got out. He wanted to leave Ralph outside, and give him time to think how rude he had been earlier. But, the minute Leo saw Ralph's downcast eyes and, "please love me" facial expression, he knew he couldn't leave his long time companion outside. No, it was time for more drastic measures. The mannequin had ignored Leo for the last time; a simple time out would not suffice.

Leo took Ralph inside the house and tossed his head right into the blades of the fan. Ralph's neck, made of a foam and plastic polymer, was more resistant to blunt force trauma than Leo had expected. Angered both at Ralph's inability to die and the immense amount of dust that had accumulated on the fan, Leo started to punch Ralph. He threw him to the ground and kicked him in his well sculpted abs. Ralph's shirt tore open and his limbs

started to separate from his body. Leo felt his tear ducts about to explode, but kept his anguish inside once again, thus rejecting the maxim, "Strong men also cry." Leo fell to his knees and picked up Ralph, who was in pieces at that point.

"You're so lucky Ralph, can't you see that? You don't have to worry about your existence. It's all a big game of dress up to you. You just stand there and look pretty; never wondering why you were created or occasionally made to wear a dress." Leo cradled the mannequin's upper torso and massaged its head. "This world is cruel enough without having to come home to your cold indifference. It's killing me, Ralph." Leo continued his melodramatic tirade. Subjects included, but were not limited to: the brutal existence of three legged dogs, never finding pants that fit, and all the times his mother refused to hold him as a child. Ralph, being the mannequin the he was, never said a word and waited for Leo to get over himself.

Leo looked down at Ralph and saw his broken limbs scattered across the floor. He thought about the moral implications of beating up a mannequin and how his actions, in the cosmic scheme of things, had no meaning. If his actions truly had no meaning, then he could murder Ralph, as much as one can murder a mannequin, and never feel guilty. But then Leo started feeling guilty for not having to feel guilt in the first place. So, Leo thought, even without meaningful actions, emotions still exist. But do emotions mean anything? As Leo pondered the big issues he performed a Flying Elbow Drop into Ralph's chest. The way Leo saw it, Ralph had to die. His very presence reminded Leo of the great divide between meaningless existence and the visceral experience of emotion, which also might be meaningless. If a man couldn't depend on his mannequin bodyguard in a time of crisis, what point was there in having him around?

Leo collected Ralph's jumble of limbs and tossed them into the rowboat as well as crumpled up newspapers perfect for kindling. When the boat was full, Leo saluted Ralph, lit a match, and tossed it into the rowboat. By the time the match reached the newspaper, the flame had gone out. Leo lit about seven matches before he solved the problem. Leo lit a match and placed it directly into the boat. When he did so, the entire boat became engulfed in flames. He considered roasting marshmallows, but was not in the mood for sweets. Instead, Leo went back into his house, shut the windows, and let Ralph's plastic body melt into oblivion.

After a half hour, Leo's face was covered in sweat. He heard a crackling sound, but dismissed it as nothing more than his neighbor eating a gigantic bowl of Rice Krispies. Desperate for some fresh air, Leo opened his kitchen window and discovered his entire deck was up in flames. He grabbed a bucket and filled it up with water at the kitchen sink. Leo tossed the water out through the window, but it did nothing more than create steam. Remembering his whole house was floating in a pool of water, Leo relaxed and assured himself the pool would put out the flames.

## Beef Burrito Breakdown or The Sad Misadventures of Leo Rosenblatz

He skipped into his living room, sat in his recliner, and waited for the water to do its thing. When the water started to seep in from under the walls Leo breathed a sigh of relief. He took the flooding as a positive sign until he saw one of Ralph's hands float past him. It was then Leo realized his houseboat was sinking. Convinced he was ready to die while simultaneously feeling the extreme desire to live, Leo was confused. He had yet to decide the relevance of emotions in a life without meaning. Had he heard Huey Lewis and the News's mid eighties chart topper, "The Power of Love," his decision might have been easier.

In the end, Leo decided that as the captain of his houseboat, he would go down with his ship. He lamented the fact that he never performed a marriage on his boat, sang, "Nothing really matters, anyone can see, nothing really matters to me.....Any way the wind blows" at the top of his lungs, and let himself get pulled under by the flaming wreckage of his houseboat.

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### *Epilogue*

The NEA, saddened by the death of "The Father of Medieval Chic," encouraged avant-garde film director, Pierre Nakamura, to write and direct a biopic based on Leo's life. The NEA demanded something fresh and worthy of Leo's genius. What they got was three sprawling hours of plotless gobbledy goop. The final minutes involved a clown staring at a half full glass of water; or half empty, depending. The clown, tormented by his inability to decide, dumped the water into a pot and did a soft shoe routine while steaming some broccoli. The last thirty seconds of the film was a public service announcement encouraging the audience to eat, "Five a day." Critics called it a stunning critique of postmodern culture within the framework of philosophical minimalism. The public thought it sucked and were eager to deface Leo's grave for inspiring such schlock.



# Lily of the Docks

*Jessica Quadra*

Six hundred bucks a pop but no one's been buying. No one was buying, so he wasn't eating. Couldn't really eat, anyway. He tensely ran his fingers through his hair. Gotta limit it to one meal a day. One meal a day, if I'm lucky. Six hundred dollars—not a lot. Not a lot. But maybe if they were only three hundred? An easel stood next to a window at one side of the room. On it a landscape—a marina. And hanging on the wall to its left—another landscape of the marina, a waterfront. And you—what's with you? Staring at him from the floor against the wall. Staring at him without any eyes. Waiting. What's with you? What do you want?

The room was mostly bare and with minimal light which forced itself through the dusted cracked blinds that covered the only window in the room. Bare except for a second-hand light blue mattress, the old mahogany record player his father had left behind for him, and a large oil painting which leaned against the wall. One on the wall and another on an easel. And the one that leaned was of a faceless woman against a blank background. Jack lay on his back on the mattress staring at the light bulb that hung on an old extension cord from the ceiling. It very subtly swayed back and forth because of the open window—the clock's ticking was the only sound in the room which was made apparent to him immediately after he let out a sneeze. *Okay*, he thought and let out a heavy sigh. He rose, put on his coat, grabbed his gray fedora and slung his bag around his chest. Out of the small room in the skinny brick building painted blue down and on the corner of Parker's Landing Avenue. Down the steps and out to the street right off the waterfront. A crisp cool air and some naked trees swept through and framed the Jersey City marina. Only a few papery brown leaves remained on their branches. Dead forgotten leaves flooded the sidewalk below. Small crooked shops lined the waterfront, some decorated with Christmas lights, some with plastic Santa Clauses that lit up at night or had arms that waved. Liberty Landing Marina Souvenirs painted largely and proudly in white cursive letters stood out against a red backdrop on one shop. Ships far off along the

horizon, lights on and ready to come in, white boats with sails drawn swaying along the wharfs; and the Sally Hook Sailing School was closed now for the winter. Docked boats gently rocked. It was overcast—soft light. Dusk soon.

Walking into the Mermaid Café, he stroked the scales of the bronze mascot that sat in front of the eatery. Evening, Sheila, he said to it under his breath. He grabbed a worn paper menu, though he would not look at it, and took his seat next to the window that displayed the daily specials in pale blue marker—lentil soup and avocado salad. Only he didn't have an appetite but bought a cup of coffee so he could stay. He pulled his pencils and his drawing pad from his bag and stared at the young woman with the black hair as she worked behind a glass counter that held a variety of apple pies, cherry pies, and day old baked goods. She was young—early twenties. But she wore nylons too dark for her skin tone that bunched down around her ankles like elephant skin and an apron stained with each day's specials loosely tied around her waist. Sketching the outline of her head, he paid particular attention to her chin. Too young to look that old and he wondered what would become of her. He played with the silverware on his table, twirling a water-stained butter knife between his fingers. Jack sat like this until the girl with the black hair turned the OPEN sign on the door around, and he put his pad and pencils away and downed the last of his cold coffee.

He walked out on Parker's Landing along the docks before finally sitting on an empty bench. A cold breeze moved past him and he put his hands deep in his pockets, leaned back and stared out at the cargo ships, the massive destroyer that was just pulling in, and the passersby. From afar, he could see a woman in a trench coat and scarf leaning on a rail putting coins into a binocular and looking out at the naval ship and at the Statue of Liberty which was now lit from her pedestal. She turned with her back to the water, made eye contact with him like she had felt his eyes on her back and walked towards him. He pulled his hands out of his jacket pockets. The woman sat on the bench beside him but just looked straight ahead at the docks, and then there was an overwhelming scent of roses—something that reminded Jack of, what was it? Do you come here often, he asked her. Are you kidding, she asked him looking at him with eyebrows raised and a large red smile revealing her crooked teeth. Jack stared at them, blankly without saying a word and her smile faded to somewhat of a frown as she realized that, yes—he was very serious indeed. I dunno, she said and shrugged looking at her watch—it was old, Jack could tell. The band was black leather but worn down and part of the black had been peeled off or was still peeling off revealing a sort of gray suede surface. The face which practically covered her entire wrist was scratched and the second hand wasn't moving. That's an old watch, he told her quite matter-of-factly. She frowned and said it was her mother's. The only thing she had left of her mother's. Jack knew this without her needing to tell him.

He held out his hand and gently rubbed the face—he knew this feeling of holding onto something—and then he was ashamed for being the cause of the rush of color in her face. I didn't mean that it, he started but stopped when she turned her head to the sea. He watched her play with the buckle as she looked down at it, and then the woman sat up and said, would you like to go for a walk, mister, looking directly into his eyes. Jack paused for a moment to think about whether or not anyone had called him mister—sure, he'd heard Mr. Sweet, but never mister just like that. Especially from a woman who couldn't be more than five years younger, give or take a year. And then just when her smile was about to disappear, he said that yes, he would love to go for a walk, but first they would exchange names with a gentle handshake. Her name was Lily, she told him. Lily Hamilton and he thought it sounded fancy.

They walked along Parker's Landing right past the Mermaid Café again, a barber shop, and then a men's big and tall shop. A man with foggy eyes sat on the ground against a large planter already decorated with Christmas lights next to a dog that rested its head on his lap. As they walked passed him, Lily reached into her pocket, then dropped coins into his cup. The man yelled, God bless you and yours at the sound of the cling. She took one end of her scarf and wrapped it around her neck as Jack watched her and then complemented her on her bone structure. She laughed. *She couldn't be older than twenty-five*, he thought. She then adjusted her crocheted beret, pulling it down tightly around her head and just above her eyebrows almost hiding her short brown hair that flipped out just below the rim. Her painted fingernails were like light pink candies on her fingertips and they blended with the rest of her hands. There was a juvenile and innocent flair about her. Had they met before? Jack would certainly have remembered her. What's your sign? Again with a serious expression. Lily was about to laugh but didn't. Aries, she answered back and he could see her breath with the release of that second syllable. He looked up then closed his eyes and she wondered what this meant. And you, she asked. But he didn't answer—just mumbled, Spring.

They came up to The Wild Irish Rose. It was a slow night—the large dark booths were empty clear across to the other side of the pub. They both looked in through the large glass window at the emptiness inside, except for a bartender with a large white mustache and white hair that was pulled back in a short braid. He stared up at a television set mounted on the corner of a wall. A soccer match on the set and stacks of *The Irish Independent* on the left side of the entrance. Howabout a beer? The bartender greeted them with his eyes and a subtle nod as they walked in and sank into a red vinyl booth large enough for six people. Lily sat down right beside Jack. He looked across the table and then back at her. Do you want me to move? She asked with a smile. There was no one else in the entire pub until a small group of young men entered rowdily and quite

obviously drunk. The white-haired man looked up from the bar at the men and then back at the television set. Sailors, she told Jack. He stared at them and Lily asked, why were you alone today? How else should I have been? He answered staring at the loud group all the while, wondering if she had seen something he couldn't. There were no uniforms. Just regular street clothes but with clean haircuts. That must be it. When he could finally see from the corner of his eyes that she was no longer looking at him, he looked at her and stared. She removed a silver compact from her pocket, reapplied her lipstick and, staring at her reflection, blotted her lips pretending as though she were not being watched. What do you do Mr. Jack? She said still without looking at him. The bartender was now filling tall glasses from a tap for the group.

Well...I suppose you could call me an artist.

Like a music artist, a trapeze artist...there are millions of types, aren't there?

Okay, so a painter artist. A sketch-artist. How's that?

She shut the compact suddenly and like a five-year-old little girl she gleamed—will you draw me? Pretty please, with a childish frown. And so with that, Jack grabbed a napkin and one loose pencil from his bag, removed his hat and began to sketch—first a head, then her short bob. She had removed her beret and smoothed out her hair, delicately placing it behind her ears. She stared at nothing towards the ceiling assuming her role as subject with intrinsic grace, as her fingers lightly stroked the small peacock feather in his hat. The sailors were on their fourth round by the time Jack completed his first successful face—a nose and lips—real lips and not just thinly shadowed lines. But the eyes—this was the most important element and in these eyes on the square napkin, he saw Lily. His hands trembled with each line he drew, and Lily's eyes quickly moved back and forth from the blank spot on the wall to his face. Beads of sweat lined his forehead and the bridge of his nose glistened. They both stared down at the napkin and then at each other. With his thumb and index finger he rubbed her earlobe and played with the small earring that hung like a dewdrop. She stared at his face but not the eyes. That's not me, she said looking at the sketch. My nose is bigger than that. She smiled as she said this. And he looked at her and then her nose and lightly slid his index finger down its bridge. He said that wasn't really the point. That he drew what he sees and that is how he sees her. Is that okay? Oh, like I'm your Mona Lisa, or something. And is that okay? Jack assumed he knew what she meant but only looked at her and finally returned her smile. She took the white square, folded it and put it down the front of her slip dress, tucking it into her bra. Jack was truly impressed with this night's achievement—and so they raised their glasses and toasted to all things beautiful.

One beer turned into three pitchers and before they knew it, they were drunk. She kissed him lightly on his forehead and then on the tip of his nose, he with eyes closed.

And moments later they were stumbling out of the Irish Rose. She put her arm in his and they crookedly walked this way. They headed down Parker's Landing in the same direction as before until they came to an old hotel—a tall and skinny brick building with a neon that flickered VACANCY. He stopped in front and looked at Lily—she stared at the top of his head and ran her fingers through his hair behind his ear and beneath his hat with a smile on her face, so he continued inside and up the stairs. There's no elevator, he apologized and she followed behind him up the narrow staircase with one finger hooked around his belt loop.

They walked into the same bare room that was now dark except for the light bulb that hung in the center of the ceiling. It illuminated the room with a pale orange light. She looked at the mattress and then to the painting that stood alone on one side of the wall. *You live here or something?* And he answered her yes because it's what he can afford right now. She knelt in front of the painting and with her left hand gently touched the woman's featureless face. He stood watching her stare at it, admiring the shadows on her face. He walked to the record player that was in one corner of the room to one side of the mattress and then there was music—an old voice wailed through occasional guitar riffs and the sound of a harmonica. He stood back in the middle of the room and Lily stood up taking his hand. He put his arms around her waist and pulled her in close—his nose in her hair and the scent of beer and rose talcum powder. She occasionally threw her head back and laughed, looking at him with her wide red mouth and those teeth. He looked at her without returning the smiles or laughter—just looked at her and she would quickly look to the ceiling, or the light bulb and then the painting on the ground. She let go before the song was over and asked if he had any wine. He told her no, and looked at the door and then back at him with her mouth closed. *What's with the faces?* Jack sat on the mattress still looking at her and she took her trench coat off laying it on his bed.

She sat next to him but stared at her fingernails, her old watch daintily hanging from her wrist. He moved a piece of her hair back and placed it behind her ear, and he lay down on his side using his arm as a pillow. Lily stood up, stared again at the painting and slightly swayed along with the music. She wore a light pink slip dress that accentuated the bones in her pale back—her skinny legs reminding him of her innocence—or was it naiveté? It didn't matter. He watched her until his eyelids became heavier and heavier though he fought his sleepiness to keep watching her there, still with her subtle dancing. And she would look back at him until she realized that he was indeed falling asleep, and frowned in knowing that this night was it its end.

Jack awoke to the sun creeping in through the cracks of the blinds, and Lily was gone. He sat up in his bed and stared at the now even dimmer light bulb. The room was otherwise dark. He looked to his right and saw that her coat was still there on the edge of

the bed. When had she left? Just minutes before. Had I walked her out? Was she cold? He would have to find her tonight; he knew where. His head pounded, so he lay back down, later waking to a much brighter room and the sounds of ship horns coming in from the harbor.

The woman on the floor stared back at him. He went to the closet and grabbed his box of paints, sat in front of her on the floor and began to complete her face. And so it began—first a nose; it was the easiest after all. Then the lips. Wide red lips that laughed, and he felt that this face almost did not need the eyes because it said everything it needed to. And this woman was alive and he could see her—leaning against a railing and then dancing. Looking down, and then looking directly into his eyes. Then frowning because she wore no coat. Jack's hand cramped and he rubbed it occasionally because he could not stop.

It was well past sundown when he finally finished. He took her and hid her in his closet. At the bottom on the ground. He stood in front of the closet staring at the face. His hands trembled slightly—moist palms and his chest felt tight and he was overcome by the quiet. Turned the record player on with a heavy heart. His chest grew tighter and so he stopped the record. He went to the window and opened it releasing the thick scent of turpentine and rested his arms on the sill taking comfort in the cold wind on his face. He thought of her again and again and wondered if she had had another coat. She would need it tonight. He grabbed it, his hat and coat, and left the room.

He walked along the waterfront and when he didn't see her by that railing he thought he needed to eat something. He went into the Irish Rose now busy with a crowd. He sat at the bar, ordered a whiskey on the rocks and a sandwich, but only drank half of it. Didn't really touch his sandwich. He looked at each individual one by one; at each face. Old men with tired faces who shared a pitcher with friends. Young women and men coyly pining for one another's attention. And where was Lily in this crowd, in her satin slip dress with one strap down around her shoulder? He opened his wallet to tip the bartender—hadn't I had more cash than this, he thought and left all he had. He continued to walk along the waterfront and ended up near the Ferris wheel brightly lit in yellow, green and blue, leaned against a post with that same tightness in his chest and an emptiness in the pit of his stomach and clenched her coat in his hands and arms. He walked home.

Before he arrived he could see a figure in a large fur coat with its back to him leaning against the wall of his building standing beneath a street lamp. And as he got closer—pale legs in black heels.

Lily turned around to face him with a grin on her face. Her hair curled outwards at the tips. Were you waiting for me? He asked her. Have you been waiting here long? He

reached out and put his hand on her cold neck and she didn't draw back. Is that for me? She asked him looking at the trench coat. He looked down at it and then handed it to her. I don't need it, she said but he said he didn't either. A man and a child walked by and between them making eye contact with Jack. The music from a saxophone played faintly in the distance. Would you like to come up? She looked down with her hands in her pockets and then looked behind him staring off at nothing in particular. He didn't take his eyes off her. When she finally looked back at him she shrugged without a smile. She was different tonight and that heaviness in his chest intensified. He stuck his hand out for her to hold and she finally did. He held it in his for a moment and then pulled her inside where it was warm. They walked slowly up the stairs and into his room again. She looked to the empty spot on the ground where the painting had once stood, but didn't ask what had happened to it. He told her that he'd be right back—held a finger up indicating he'd only be gone a minute and with that he left. She stood looking at the door, tucked her hair behind her ear and then looked to the bare spot on the ground again. She walked to the record player and turned it on. Then walked over to the window and looked out. A view of the docks and a few empty benches—the sailors would be coming in right about now. She walked to the closet and opened it. Eyes widened, she took a step back. She tightly crossed her arms and her eyes, now glassed over, moved up and down, staring at the woman who wore her mother's old watch. She bent down and picked it up, held it out in front of her and stared at it. The portrait trembled in her hands, and she bit down on her lower lip.

When Jack returned with a bottle of wine in hand, Lily was gone. The closet door was open—the painting gone.

The following evening, he returned to their bench, and he would continue to wait as he always had—staring at the docked boats that rhythmically swayed from side to side.





