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# WORDS

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**PERSONAL ESSAYS**

# THE CEASEFIRE

Kjersti Faret

The big crescent-moon scar on my father's head was visible even on my opposite end of the lengthy table. It started at the edge of his forehead, curved down to rest near his ear and trailed off a little further after. It was a pale, shaky line and seemed to glisten against the peach fuzz on his scalp. His skull even appeared to be sinking in underneath his skin, that chunk that had once been cut open. A shadow sat there, lining the pale crescent moon. Every now and then I'd catch a gleam from one of the shiny silver staples holding his head intact along the scar.

Family members around the table were caught up in casual chatter as they passed the home-cooked dishes around. Most of us had made it together earlier. Really, it was Uncle Erik, Elna and I, but everyone pitched in at one point, whether it was peeling the potatoes or chopping the meat. A bit of each of us was in the meal...the melted butter, the sweet ham and ground potatoes between our teeth.

Uncle Stephen's blond beard made his sunken face look fuller than it was. Even though he was old, tan and a bit wrinkled, his hair was still golden, along with his Viking beard. He held his utensils the European way, fork in the left and knife in the right, but his splitting fingernails had so much dirt clogged underneath them it made the silverware seem almost tarnished.

I remember him and Aunt Cathy actually smiling even though they were sitting across from Uncle Erik. Unlike his brother, Uncle Erik was bald, beardless and round. His fingernails were polished and spotless even though he held his fork and knife as if he were a medieval man. Crows feet crinkled around his eyes as he laughed and there's a small gap in between his two front teeth I never really noticed before.

Elna was hunched over her plate, talking to no one in particular. Her white hair is in loose curls and I realize now she's always looked the same to me, from the day I was born and now 18 years later. My dad says she's looked the same since she was 25. Or at least that she's had her wrinkles since then. Tonight in the muted chandelier light, it seems as if she has more creases in

her face or that they've gotten deeper. She continues to ramble and sometimes I wonder if she talks just to hear her own voice or because she hopes someone will answer.

Bestemor sat near me, a little too close for my liking, actually. Bestemor was supposedly a name for "grandma" in Norwegian but it really was of her own creating, and literally translates to "best mother." She had a plastic smile plastered on her face. Her lipstick freshly smeared on and her hair stiff with spray. She sits tall and proud in some oriental-inspired clothing. Big beads drape around her neck and hang from her ears and I wonder how her ear lobes have not snapped yet. Even though she is pushing 80, Bestemor always wears low cut tops. The empty sacks of skin that were once breasts dangle and sway with her every movement. It's not that she wears a poor bra; she is just too old that even the best bra in the world wouldn't be able to revive her old bosoms. They're certainly pushed up far enough, but jiggle like pudding that has a thin layer of wrinkly skin atop.

My dad at the opposite end of the table was skin and bone. Mom kept shoving food his way. Any other night he'd get annoyed and tell her to quit it but he actually enjoyed tonight's dinner. He wasn't smiling but I could tell he was somewhat pleased.

I couldn't tell if the rest of the happiness in the air was sincere or not. I'm sure my cousin and Aunt Lisa were having fun, and everyone seemed to be talking fine. Except I don't remember if Uncle Stephen and Uncle Erik exchanged any words or ignored each other's presence.

It was a rare occasion that all of the people here tonight were ever gathered in the same room anymore. A few years ago holiday and family get-togethers became smaller as only one half would show up. It was either Uncle Erik's family or Uncle Stephen's, but never both together.

I didn't really know exactly what happened between my uncles that made them not speak. I think it was mostly that uncle Stephen felt betrayed by his brother. Uncle Erik had told someone something he was not supposed to. But when have any of us not done that?

Whatever it specifically was I'm not sure, just that it was just a weird situation. It seems like it was just the edge of the iceberg, the last straw, something to finally separate the two that was a legitimate excuse.

Which is funny to me. Growing up with this side, my dad's side of the family, they were the happy and perfect family for me. My mom's side that I grew up knowing was loud, obnoxious and always bickered. When I went to family gatherings on my dad's side, it was the opposite. There were home-cooked meals, smiles, jokes to be told, old photos to look at, and old toys to play with.

But that was in my childhood, and childhood is a period in your life when mostly everything is just an illusion. At least for me, I was so sheltered and shielded by my mother of anything that could hurt me. She only allowed me to see the happy so I learned everything was always happy. My dad's side of the family was really the giant example of that: always perfect, always happy. I didn't bother to search for any problems that went deeper because I didn't think there were any.

I guess tonight there were bigger matters pressing than details of a problem that nobody really remembered or the illusion that had been broken. I guess tonight we put a pause on reality; we held up a temporary white flag. Nobody acknowledged the fact that this was unusual and went on as if the separated gatherings over the past few years never actually happened.

It was because of the hole cut in my father's head, which brought us all here. Somehow we all managed to come together under the pale crescent moon. It was like the staples in my Dad's skull were not only keeping him intact, but also all of us, even if just for one night.

## GRANDMA'S COUCH

Kjersti Faret

I am sitting on Grandma's couch, fabric so rough it feels like dried hay against my legs. My fingertips are gross and raw and gnarled because I bit and picked them all the way on the ride here.

I sit still and shift my eyes to the left. My loser of an uncle sits there with his lazy arm around Cherry's neck. Cherry has twisted teeth. Almost like stereotypical British teeth, where they stick out every which way, except she's Spanish or something and not British. I think Cherry's name might be Shelley. I forget.

On the floor, my younger fat cousins are sitting and they remind me of three plump pigs in a pen. Their stomachs flood over the sides of their waistband and threaten to pop the button. They're wearing jeans and I look at myself in a nice stupid pretty dress. Why am I the only one wearing something nice for Christmas Eve?

My other fat cousin, who is older than me by a year and some months, has gotten fatter. She's wearing jeans too. She just shoved a shrimp in her mouth. I think she ate the shell.

The stale smell of smoke is in the air. I sneak a gaze at my loser uncle again and I think the stench comes from him. Each time he speaks he reveals bit of cracker stuck between his yellowed teeth. Acne scars or pockmarks or something have left dents in his cheeks.

Sitting on the tiny bench at the dinner table is my big aunt. She is supposed to have been losing weight but instead has gained. Her body shape reminds me of a basketball, with little nibs or stumps popping out for her arms and legs and neck. Like her daughter she shoves shrimp in her mouth. She keeps consuming without realizing the shell is still on the shrimp. Dipping sauce dribbles on her five chins.

I lock eyes with my mom on the other side of the room for a brief moment. She attempts a smile, to reassure me, but her gaze is distracted and her eyes flitter back to my aunt with the shrimp. My mom is being tormented here. She is imagining that one day I will be as fat as my relatives and it scares her.

There's a knock on the door and I perk up, like a dog that has been offered a treat. The chipped red door opens and in walks my favorite uncle, aunt, cousins and that skinny boy. They all struggle to squeeze into the dining area, packed with tables and chairs and various bulbous relatives.

My new cousins who have just arrived smile politely and say hi to me and everyone else and join us. The skinny boy, who is not a relative but in fact my cousins' friend who joins us every year, looks at me and for the first time since I've been here I let a smile slip. He's a string bean with a goofy smile and big nose and he takes a seat next to me on Grandma's hay couch.

There's about five of us jammed together on the couch now. Secretly, behind our bodies, string bean holds my hand and my stomach does flips. I try not to stare at him since he's sitting right next to me, but when I get a peek all I see are the lights of the Wildwood piers at night and the lighthouse cup. Between our hands I feel the grains of sand. There's the backyard, the smell of smoke and sting of pixie sticks mixed with some sort of alcohol, home-cooked bacon and pancakes, the silhouette of my uncle in the door.... I hear the laugh of us and my cousins and the ocean roaring in the background. A layer of summer mist sits on our skin and my cousin Meg smiles; I remember the four of us walking around the streets of Cape May at night, just the street lamps guiding us to Wawa.

Somehow we all ended up here, months later packed in Grandma's tiny house. I don't know what or how my two cousins remember that August vacation, but skinny boy here still holds my hand and for a little while I'm existing in summer again, instead of being trapped in winter on Grandma's hay couch.

## UPBEAT MISERY

David Forte

The years between those of a minor and those of an adult are troubled times, though I have never thought they would be so close. I always thought that I would have time to figure things out and come across these demons when I knew more about them. I was wrong, life comes at you from all sides and life can make decisions that you would never think would change you, but it does. When I went away to college, many choices I made and some I was tossed into. This was the defining moment in all of my experience there.

This was the first weekend at my new school Johnson & Wales University or JWU as it would be yelled and screamed at me for the next few years. I didn't mind because it felt like a time of expectance and a time of growth, though I didn't know it since I just came out of high school. Ignorance was my guide and I followed like the shadow I was, never losing a step across the courtyard. This was the first time I was every alone and the first time I was in a city for more than a few hours, though it was just over four hours since I moved into my dorm.

While walking around, staying close to the dorms as much as I could, I saw three familiar faces that night. First was of a young kid. Even when I went to high school with him, he was tall, lanky, and more immature than the middle schoolers below us all. He moved out of his dorm the coming morning once he found out what dorm life meant: roommates. We had a small conversation, but since he and I shared classes in high school it was understandable that his attention span was short, though he was in a rush, so it was even short for him. I gave a wave for the last time to him, I found out later that he would then go back home and try to start a fight with a cop—as I said smart guy.

The second and third familiar face I saw was of another of my classmates from high school. The second face was only that of a passing person in my life that I'd never see again, while the third face was once my friend's, though he was smart he didn't act like it enough. His decisions in life were made by impulses and drug abuse; this was the same for all of them. I don't pity

any of them, but this was a different time and I was new to this urban jungle, ready for adventure, but reluctant to follow through. At this point I was talked into making the trek to their friend's house, not sure how well or even if they knew that friend enough to trust them. I trusted them, enough that there would be beer waiting for us. The car was parked behind their dorm and the seats were filled, so like the impressionable teen I was I jumped at the idea of being in the trunk. It was a thrill you see in the movies and there would be booze to bandage any problem after.

We drove beyond the city, well just almost outside of the limits.... I wasn't sure where we were, but we were there and I was still in the trunk. A minute too long later, I was free from the back of the car, the house turned out to be a frat, and a poor site it was. This place made condemned buildings blush at the sight of it. There wasn't anything I could do nor care to do, so we sank into the basement and started to have a drink. The basement was just as well kept, well it was most likely cleaner since they used it more, and I talked to no one. I've seen too many films where a bunch of guys are raped when they venture into places that are unknown, but in most of these films they were gang rapes in a basement. At this moment my friend from beyond high school came up to me and gave me the best advice and most insulting thing I've ever heard. He said with a beer close at hand, "David, I don't know if your against life, but your acting like the most insociable person... talk to someone!" At that point I realized that everyone was just trying to be friendly; nothing bad was going to happen.

I started talking to some people, some were friendly though others didn't care, then there were the ones that wanted me to be a part of the frat, these overly friendly people made me nervous again. I only talked to four people, mostly it was a "hi" or "hey" and I left it at that, then one wanted to know more about me. At this point of my life I knew nothing about me, other then old Kung-Fu movies are awesome and 90's punk was my music of choice. That didn't interest him much, then outside of the window I saw legs, girl legs. Again this was the basement and some guys were closer to the glass then they should have been. When the women walked down stairs it was amazing, the party really blew up and the music became louder and better, not my way of things, though it was a good time with new friends.

Drinking games were a new thing, I watched a few rounds then a girl picked me to be her partner, she was overly nice, I think she was a recruiter for the frat. The name of the game was "Flip Cup" a simple game and fun as well, all you do is drink whatever is in the cup then flip your cup. Simple, easy, and I've been doing that even before I knew a person can use booze for games. In short we won the game and she almost hugged me, this was a high point in my life, since I was never really on the receiving end of a hug from a girl, so even getting an almost hug was a huge accomplishment for me. It was about an hour or two later and we all had to leave the basement, I never heard why or I never cared why. Beer was flowing through my body and I was enjoying the time I was spending. All the cars left, even the friends I had were at the place we were all going to, but I needed to change.

It seems somewhere in my time inside someone told me that my clothes weren't club acceptable. That's a four-syllable word, he probably learned that when they threw him out of the club the first time. From that instruction it seemed to me that it was true, also I was drunk and didn't mind getting into something different, but isn't changing one of the ways to get raped in those films? My mind was not on that, it was on getting in a car and going to where the dorms were since the club was a hop away. It was another 30 minutes till someone came with another car, I was in a seat this time, or not, this is one of those darker points in memory that really wasn't a detail that needed all of my powers of thought. I got back to my dorm, they told me to say the name of the frat since they were hosting the party that night at the club, and I didn't know their name.

I've never been to a club before, this was the first time, so I really didn't know what to wear, so I popped on a collared shirt and headed to the place. The club was right down the street from me, two corners up and a left turn, it was stuck right in the middle of a bar and tattoo parlor. It didn't look like much, but it was much more then you think. And the best part was the name of the club since it was not just a nickname people were saying like a bad thing—this was Club Hell.

The bouncer was not at all happy to see me, this later in life would seem to be something I'd learn was for everyone, bouncers don't like you. Bouncers are like a feminist steel door of

a club, cutting the sacks out of the line, but letting women do whatever they want. I love them, though hate them at the same time. In short I was not going to be let in. Lucky for me one of the frat guys was working the door that night with the bouncer, so I got in without a hitch, but my nerves were shot. The club was packed, there was not enough room to move let alone enough to walk into the place. I saw my friends and they were with two girls, so I let them enjoy their night and I went to try to enjoy mine in this man-made sea of people.

Music was booming and space was a luxury, but I found a couch that I could sit and watch the waves of teens sway. People were dancing and grinding—this was not what I called fun, but a failed experiment in my life. Though I was never one to pull the plug on something that I started, this would have been a good time to just call it quits, but I just entered the place and sat down. Just as soon as I sat down, one of the frat guys that was overly friendly, came up to me and ask if I wanted to meet someone. I didn't disagree, but I wasn't thinking at all at this point. Everything was more and more like the horror films as the night went on, rape was only the next step of the evening and I didn't even see it coming.

He took me by the shoulder and we started walking about the club. The place was hard to breath in and dark, the edges of the room were distant and dangerous. In one corner someone was getting flogged. We went straight into the pit of people dancing with girls that he knew, and I was marked for the frat. It was obvious looking back now that I was someone that was to be in this frat, so I needed to be hooked up by the end of the night. The first girl he asked to dance was a brunette, she was happy to dance with him, but he was putting me in her care. She was not glad to see me; my list of unhappy people seemed to be growing that night.

This was the trend of the night, going from one girl to the next and getting nowhere. I saw more upward-turned noses and death stares to last me a lifetime, till we went back to the couches. My partner from the "flip cup" game in the basement was there dancing with a guy. She was the frat guy's last chance to get me, so she stopped dancing with him and was overjoyed to dance with me. I was happy that in a room full of girls there was at the least one that wanted to dance with me. We danced, or what I thought dancing was, till she had to go to the

bathroom, which turned out was two steps in front of me and involved dancing with another guy. I sat down, it seems she really was just pushing me into the frat, then midway through the song she grabbed me and we started dancing. Again I don't know how to dance, so this ended real fast when she went to the bathroom again, but this time she didn't tell me she just turned around and started dancing with another guy. My seat was taken and my dance partner too, so I stood back toward a wall, somewhat out of the way, though with the amount of people crowding the club I was anything but out of the way. A tall woman shoved me out of her way, I was enough by the wall that she could have said anything, she could have tried to squeeze around me, or even give me the slightest hand gesture to move, but that was too complicated and I was pushed out of her way. It seems that this was a fetish bar and some of the club members were here for more then just dancing, in short this tall woman was a man, it was dark and I did not want to ask questions now.

I had enough, I said goodbye to the overly friendly girl, frat guy, and to tell my friends, who were neck deep in people, so I left. There is nothing more I can say about the night, other then how long the lonely walk was to the dorm; it was just two blocks. This was a night that would haunt my thoughts every time I ever wanted to go to a club. Not the thought that I would have to fight a transvestite, but that I would have to change who I was for the night and dive into a pit of rejection. I learned living through my mistakes is something that gives a person character and by pushing yourself into new things, life becomes fuller. This is the most mind opening moment in my life and will always be my greatest mistake.

# ABANDONING AN UNREQUITED CRUSH

Cristina Galie

I think I'll tell people it's because I'm Growing Up, or something like that. I'll tell my mom and my friends I'm becoming more mature and learning how to let go of something that's Never Going to Happen, all while wearing an old band t-shirt from the 7th grade and after a furious blogging session of songs that would make a 40-year-old-me blush. I will remember, fondly, a time where I drunkenly admitted that we would get married one day because we always managed to Find Each Other. And then I'll be angrily reminded that you Found Me only when you were bored and alone, where on the other end I was always Searching. I'll cry. I only recently mastered Waiting Casually While Pretending to Have an Agenda and now it's gone to waste. I'll end the conversation with "Most people call it Moving On," and smile. "It usually happens when you've been away for a period of time and go through that phase of re-evaluating your priorities, you know? I finally get it! It's like I'm almost an Adult, or whatever," The truth is, I didn't have to think too hard about Giving Up. It happened only a few days ago after an unreturned text, and I finally stopped giving myself whiplash to see if your car was still parked outside your house.

# BY THE SWORD

Rachel Leung

My name is Rachel. I would rather it be Asher Lev. Little Lamb, that's what I used to be until I was swallowed up in flames, until my parents declared that a lamb simply wouldn't do. So then I became Phoenix. It wasn't a name I stole from some distant relative I barely knew. I don't really know if there was a story behind Phoenix, but since I couldn't be Dragon, I got Phoenix. The Chinese don't like their girls named Dragon. But then, I don't know if they would like a fire-breathing bird either. A lamb might have suited them better.

It is said that the song of the Phoenix is beautiful. Beautiful and sad. They say it is a symbol of virtue and grace and immortality. They are said to set fire to their own nest and burn to ashes. Perhaps I am a Phoenix. They also say that a new phoenix arises from the ashes. They never said why. It must be that the new phoenix tries not to make the same mistakes its former self did. I don't think it has ever succeeded.

The Americans don't know that 风字 meant Phoenix. It meant syllables and enunciations and "how do you spell that?" To them, they like Rachel better. They also like Rachele a lot. I've gotten Rachele a couple times. Rachele is a bit fancy for me though, I think I'll stick to Rachel with the curly "R."

Fire and water don't get along. Perhaps I was born backwards because I was a June baby, a Cancer by the stars and a Phoenix by the sword. Cancerians feel at home in their pearly sea while the phoenix flies high with its male counterpart, the dragon. Cancer is ruled by the moon and the phoenix by the sun. At least my stone is the pearl, which the dragon guards most jealously. Maybe I'll marry a dragon and name our daughter Pearl.

# PARTY HARD

Sam Nulman

My tenth birthday party was supposed to be a huge ordeal. "Becoming a decade old is a big thing," my mother told me. "We must celebrate with flying colors". My mother would always reference flying colors but it was never in the same context, "That bitch came waltzing in with flying colors". "The Manasquan Day festival was extravagant with flying colors." One day I actually looked up the phrase, "flying colors" and it means "to succeed at, easily." She could never get anything right. She replaced the phrase back-handed compliment with left-handed compliment. I'm left-handed so it just turned out to be an insult.

We set up for the party in my basement with streamers, cone-shaped party hats, and decorative tablecloth. It was built up so much that I imagined everyone I had ever met was coming. Every friend, every enemy, every mean history teacher, everyone that I've ever glanced at or encountered. I wondered how we would have space to fit all those people in my basement. We wouldn't, I thought. There would be people pushing at the stairwell, waiting upstairs, arguing with the bouncer to get in. My basement was the hottest spot in town. We had a punch bowl and a clown. These were commodities you could find nowhere else, at least not today. People around the world must have heard about the day that Gordon the Glorious turned ten. I hadn't yet fully grasped the concept of "other people" at that age. I was still the center of the universe and as it was my birthday, I was the center CENTER of the universe. I was important in my head, my mother made sure that I knew it.

Nobody had shown up yet but the clown had arrived. His name was Chuckles. He had balloon animals. I heard my mom whispering something to him upstairs before they came down to my party. Chuckles honked his nose before outstretching his hand to give a handshake and then a fake-out pullback when I put myself out to shake it. My mother laughed. I was unamused. I thought the clown was supposed to arrive after a significant amount of people had come. No one was here yet. Stupid, early, patronizing clown.

The doorbell rang and my face lit up as if everyone was arriving at once. My mother went to get the door and left me alone in the basement with Chuckles who walked towards me before prat-falling. I laughed at the thought of all of the people barreling down the stairs in honor of me but the clown thought it was in response to his attempt at humor. Walking down the stairs, slow and without enthusiasm, were the two Indian brothers from down the street who were two years older than me and their mother who was being courteous by dragging her boring, apathetic children to my birthday party. The smile ran from my face in disappointment. The Tambe brothers stood awkwardly by the stairs, obviously ready to leave before they'd arrived. Their mother said, "What do you want to say to Gordon, boys?" In droll unison they stated, "Happy birthday, Gordon." It was then that they noticed the Nintendo hooked up to a television in the far corner and their eyes gravitated toward it. My mother said, "You boys can play with the video games if you'd like. Gordon doesn't mind." Yes, indeed, I do mind. Thanks for asking my opinion on the matter, mother. They ran to the darkened corner to play Mario and I grumpily rolled my eyes. Mrs. Tambe wished me a happy birthday before yelling to her children, "I'll be back later to pick you up!" and then left up the stairs.

On the walls of my basement were colorful dinosaur wallpaper with crayon markings I made when I was younger. I thought they looked like amazing works of art that someone would discover in years to come when they would buy our house and realize that they couldn't be selfish and keep these professional crayon paintings to themselves. They would realize that they needed to share them with the world and so they'd hold exhibitions in the basement and art people from the city would come to gawk at my genius and speak jargon like "art-deco" and "minimalistic" and "opaque." But now I was ten and they just looked like crayola scribbles from a five-year old.

On the birthday-themed table was a giant bowl of punch. We didn't have a ladle so there was a lone spoon floating face up in there like a canoe in the Atlantic. Next to the bowl of punch was a giant box adorned with birthday-themed wrapping paper and a birthday-themed ribbon which I thought to be overkill considering that if there's any old ribbon on a box, the assumption that it is a gift is automatic.

I sat in the corner in a little chair with a cone-shaped party hat askew on my now ten year-old head. I sat with my arms folded and my lips in a pout. No one had showed up yet (the Tambe's didn't count) and Chuckles was already here. He'd already started to make balloon animals. Or at least attempted to make balloon animals. He spent a hell of a lot of time stretching out the balloons. I suspected that this may have been his first day on the job and that maybe he didn't actually know how to make balloon animals as he would blow some up and then wouldn't hold the ends correctly and so they would lose their air and fly all over the place, deflating to a colorful condom on the carpet.

I sat there waiting for guests; for A guest; for SOMEBODY to show up. Somebody not under obligation according to the social contract. My mother walked to the table and shouted, "Let's get this party started!" From underneath the table, she grabbed a boom-box, slid in a tape, and pushed play. ABBA's "Dancing Queen" blared. My mother spun to the other side of the room with a wide open-mouthed smile and danced like a chimp.

Fun cone party hat adorning my head, disappointed grimace adorning my face, plastic spoon floating in a giant bowl of punch, humongous birthday present from my mom atop a birthday table, a second-rate clown failing miserably at making a poodle out of a balloon, two random Indian boys with whom I've never spoken playing my video games in the corner, and my mother gyrating to the 70's, were ALL of the components of my tenth birthday party. It took until the end of the song for me to realize that no one was coming. I ripped the cone off my head, threw it at Chuckles, and angrily bolted up the stairs.

I shot through the door of my room and leapt under the covers of my bed while listening to the footsteps of my mother make her way to my room. I could always hear her coming and I would always dread her imminent arrival. I knew she was making a bee line straight for my room to stand awkwardly in my doorway and ask me an inane line of questions or command me to do something or dish about my dad. She came all the way up to my bed this time and put her hand on my shoulder. I jerked away immediately.

She started, "Sweetie..." and I cut her off, "Leave me alone!" She said, "Sweetie, I'm really sorry. I was so busy preparing for the party and ordering the right clown and getting your present that

I forgot to invite anyone. I pulled out the address book last week so that I wouldn't forget but I think I left it on the coffee table when I got the call from the school nurse and had to pick you up because of that bratty kid in your class who put a juice-box on your chair. I must have put it out of my mind and forgot that I didn't call anyone." I sat up in bed in disbelief. I was speechless. It was one of those early moments in life when you witness the fallibility of a grown-up and realize that they're not perfect like you thought. "FUCK YOU!" I had only used the word, "fuck" once before that moment and it was directed at a girl on the bus who called me a faggot. My mother gasped and smacked me across the cheeks. The tears immediately flooded. I slapped my head to the pillow and pulled the covers over my head in anger and pain. She stormed out of my room and slammed the door behind her. From the hallway she screamed to me sternly, "Cake's in the fridge. You're not getting any."

# ON SOLITUDE

Berny Tan

## ONE

I have recently made the observation that I am increasingly uncomfortable being in groups. One other person—fine. But in groups of three or more, it leads to more opportunities for realizing how apart I really am, how much everyone else is close to everyone else, how much they are okay with being away from me.... I don't know. It's as if the part of that person that is real to me is the one I encounter in the intimacy of our respective duos, and I can't seem to deal with how much they change when they are around other people, other situations. And that's when I start to judge them, and myself, start to compartmentalize irrationally. Me, a control freak, you, in your little box, determined by the experiences we've had with each other and nothing else. It's scary how selfish I am.

Maybe this was something that had been disturbing me since I was a child—it seems to be a familiar, albeit more intense sensation. But it was also something that I repressed for some reason; perhaps I felt it to be "not right," or I was trying to assure myself that I wasn't all that different from everyone else, even though all I had to do was look in a mirror to see that was a lie. As I grew older, it seemed to me that everyone else found someone or some group that they connected with in a manner that sadly eluded me. Even now, I think back on the people that I have felt closest to in my life and all I can see are the differences and distances. The people that, at some point or other, I honestly felt were everything I could ask for in a friend, have drifted so far away. I remember I once called this...the un-equivalence of need. Or something along those lines.

It's sad when you fear loneliness so much that it paralyzes you; you, alone, in your own body, your own empty shell filled only with the memories of what once was, memories that define each person's existence. People change, they snatch out a memory from under their own little memory pile, and suddenly everything comes tumbling down....

And that is why I need to be alone. I don't want it to be this way. But I need loneliness to protect myself from being lonely.

## ONE AND ONE

I was on the flight back to New York when I realized something. I sat back in the chair and thought: "It's so fucking loud in here. I can't even hear myself think." It was strange; I felt like I had noticed it before but I just never cared. It just really got to me this time, how loud it really was in there, and how everyone didn't seem to notice that continuous bass note of static coming from the engine's mouths saying, "I just wish this flight was over so I can stop being so loud and hear myself think." That sort of extended muffled roar that no one could care to listen to, but once your brain realized what your ears were hearing you just couldn't shake it.

In fact, it was so loud that you could be in the restroom—those "lavatories"—and say anything you wanted at the top of your voice and no one would even hear you. The noise would suffocate you before you could even get around to screaming. I could have said anything I wanted in there. I stepped out of myself and thought, this is intensely solitary. Here I am in this space, steps away from the next person on this plane, and yet they wouldn't be able to hear me shout. Here I am spending the entire flight sitting, sleeping, and eating next to a complete stranger, thousands of feet above the sea with the engines blaring in my ears....

People really are oblivious to how alone they are. Maybe the big secret is that we pretend that we are not lonely because it is the most unbearable thought in the world.

## AIR

He—or the idea of him—was forgotten, most of the time; more forgotten, more elusive, less yearned for though not any less desired. She had resigned herself to the fact that all she had was air.... All she could trust, could even deign to hold and be held by, was air. They had no connection save for what skin she had left bare to its invisible, imagined touch, to be perceived when the temperature changed or when it sought to struggle with her hair. It was as insubstantially present as he had ever been.

At least the air was different here. She hardly noticed it most of the time. Back there, she would breathe in the early morning breeze, pregnant with dew, and let the dampness smother the insides of her rib cage just as some rampant oneirism would smother the insides of her skull. She had

breathed that air with him, with him inside it. This air...it was quieter inside her now.

But sometimes, in the midst of this new stage of aloneness that she had approached, arrived, and come to terms with, she would be betrayed. She would leave her hand hanging by her side in some semblance of being held; she would let the air find its way into the void and form some apparition that she could believe to be true, even though she knew that the air filled the void and was the void in the same breath in which she had just exhaled his name. It was the only one that would listen to all the times that she couldn't catch herself before she said it out loud—a whisper that might as well have been a scream—as if a name was anything more than a fractured symbol of a symbol of an unattainable.

Air was nothing; was memory.

SHORT STORIES

# NOT-STANDARD POODLE

Brittani Arkin

Standard Poodle, puffy angel, barking cloud, marshmallow with bangs, shaggy Bea Arthur, blue ribbon jerry curl, regal Q-tip, Woolly Gwyneth Paltrow, bleached cotton candy trophy magnet. I have been addressed as all of the above. But those days are over. Objectified I will no longer be. This pure bred is emotionally tainted. So no more rhinestone collars. No more seven-hour haircuts. On behalf of all Standard Poodles, it's time I run you on a leash around a patch of fake grass, as I address my discontentment with how our breed is being treated.

## 1. REDUCTION TO BODY

Poodles are more than trophy winners. A number on a scorecard cannot define my self-worth. My glossy white coat is neither a 4.5 nor a 2.7. It is a part of me. I wasn't always dead inside. After countless rounds of judges lifting my tail and examining my rectum, I have learned to go numb. They pinch us in all the wrong places, checking for the right amount of body fat versus lean muscle. I have suffered from eating disorders since the day I left the puppy mill. Stop force-opening my mouth to determine the quality of my teeth. They are all there, I promise. And I fear the day is nearing that I will eventually snap, both mentally, and down on all five of your fingers.

## 2. REDUCTION TO APPEARANCE

Shaving is another expression of the human-created archetype of canine beauty. The general public is disillusioned by images of shaved poodles in their fancy grooming magazines, and televised dog show programs. But those images aren't real. Poodles are, but in those pictures humans gain so much pleasure from viewing, we are anything but happy. I am to be objectified no longer. Let my fur grow to uncontrollable lengths. Some may argue that much like a hedge, my curly fur grows back fast and needs taming. But I have many a things a hedge lacks. For one, a desire for respect and equality. I am the second most intelligent breed of dog, not a topiary. So take your pruning sheers and

sculpt three-dimensional heart shapes into a goddamn bush, because my body is no fucking canvas.

## 3. INSTRUMENTALITY & DENIAL OF SUBJECTIVITY

I am under the reign of your thin, dainty show-leash. My head remains poised as I run laps alongside you; bright lights blinding my eyes, and thousands of people screaming and hooting obscenities from all directions. I am scared, but if I dare urinate in that arena, I know its goodbye Westminster dog show, and hello endless breeding. I am a slave to your idea of a profession. I do all the work, and reel in none of the benefits. For you, I am a tool to fill your living room wall with blue ribbons, and your pantry with free sponsored dog food.

## 4. SILENCING

Standard Poodles are part of a world that denies their right to individual sexual identity. Call it gender normative, but I, among many other poodles, address it as gender repression. Not all Standard Poodles are females. Our thin bone structure and effeminate yet grandiose stereotype has been misleading for generations. So let boy dogs be boy dogs, girl dogs be girl dogs, and if boy dogs like being girl dogs, let THEM choose. You snip off our testicles, deny a female the right to ovulate, and oppress our sex-drive. I yearn to be viewed as the proud masculine creature that I am. How's a fella' supposed to find a lady when he's dyed pink? From now on, I shall bark up against injustice. I shall bark when I am feeling violated. I shall bark when I see others being violated. Train me no longer to withhold my voice. You cannot use Snausages as leverage for my silence.

I am not a spectacle. So call Eukanuba and inform them that Standard Poodles are going into retirement. I'd finally like to live the life of a normal mixed breed. Left alone to run around in a backyard, eat some dirt, and then throw that dirt up, free from the judgments of society.

# MAHLER-SYMPHONY 2, RESURRECTION SYMPHONY

Jeff Lafell

December 8, 1908

He hadn't been feeling well again, not terrible as he had been in the past, but just unwell. Alma had pushed him to see Dr. Schmidt but he declined. "After the premiere," he said and, as always, Alma simply nodded and acquiesced. That was her role in the day in/day out drama called MAHLER and, as always, she accepted it. She smiled to herself as she waited to hand him his cuff links. "With certain deviations from the script," she thought. She had been a good and dutiful wife to the little Jew, but when they lost kleine Maria, something was shaken in her. Before they married, he had insisted that there would be only one composer in the family and agreeing, she had given up composing, the only creative outlet she had. This was something that her father railed against, but so be it. Though he stifled her creativity and independence, the one thing Mahler could not take from her was her beauty and her desirability to other men. The only affair she had found intriguing was the one she had with the young architect Gropius. But Mahler had learned of it and instead of throwing her into the street, had promised to be more attentive to her wants. She gave up Gropius without a look back for she knew that there were other men who coveted her and that being married to Mahler she would never be just a hausfrau; his celebrity assured her of that, but still, when she walked, it was always in his shadow.

"Where are my cufflinks, Shatsy?" Mahler asked, still looking at himself in the floor-to-ceiling mirror. A second later they were in his hands. He smiled and then, remembering what tonight meant, his face once again took on its look of deep suffering. Alma hated that look, but she had never mentioned it to him. Why should she? He was one who would never change. "Ach," she thought, "Ach!"

The premiere of his *Seventh* had not gone well back home and she knew that the acceptance of his massive *Second*, premiering in America tonight, would dictate his state of mind and, consequently hers, for weeks to come.

His mood had first soured when he found he would have to share the conducting duties of the Metropolitan Opera with the youngster Toscanini, but lightened when the Philharmonic had reorganized and offered him the position of principal conductor. Here he was in his element, conducting the old masters as well as some of the more modern composers' works.

As she took the whiskbroom to his jacket, Alma softly sang a melody she had come up with earlier in the day, only to be stopped by Mahler's curt, "Alma, Please!"

"Sorry, my darling," she muttered. "And I, too," Mahler replied, holding out his hands to her. She took them and once again marveled at their soft translucence, as she knew so well their tremendous power. "I'm an old bear and for that I am truly sorry," he said. "It's just that this means so much to me."

"I know it does, my darling" Alma replied. "It was thoughtless of me to sing whilst you are so burdened with the premiere." And as she looked into that face that once had fascinated her, she was repulsed. All at once she realized how very much she hated him.

Mahler took his hands from his wife's. "I am so worried about the trumpets in the second balcony coming in on cue. The acoustics here are wonderful, but one moment late, and the whole movement falls to bits."

"You worry for nothing, Gustav," Alma said. "I heard them in rehearsal and they were exquisite and quite in time with the rest of the orchestra. The piece is marvelous, genius, and you are the man who created it."

Her father, Emil Schindler had not wanted her to marry him. "A Jew?" he huffed when she told him, but Alma had countered with, "Once a Jew, now a good Catholic. Even Cosima Wagner approves." Her father grunted. "Once a Jew, eh? Once a Jew always a Jew, I say. With all the handsome eligible men available and knocking at our door...." But she wouldn't let him finish. "Poppa," she said, "he is a genius. His music rivals Beethoven and Berlioz and yes, even Wagner. I want to marry him and I will."

And she did.

But now, backstage at Carnegie Hall she wondered why she had. He wasn't exactly ugly she thought, but no one could ever accuse him of being handsome either. He had aged badly in the last years since they lost Maria and he had been diagnosed with the heart disease, whereas she, at 29, she thought looking in the

mirror standing behind her husband, had ripened: had become even more beautiful and, from the men who swarmed around and sent her secret billet-doux, even more desirable. Yet still, except for Gropius her peccadillos meant nothing. But Gropius was in Europe and, even if he had too been in New York, where would the fun be now that Mahler knew? Conrad Cohen, the rich banker, had shown interest and had proved to be an interesting weekday afternoon. Once with him and with all the others was certainly enough. But Gropius still nagged at her. She would see him again. Of that she was sure. And this time, Mahler would never know. She wouldn't be able to stand looking at that hurt, wounded face again as he perversely forgave her on his knees. What sort of a man did that?

Mahler put an arm around her and she had to fight herself not to pull away. "I tell you what," he said. "Next week, when the opening is behind us I will take you out for an evening on the town. Anywhere you wish to eat, there we will eat, and any theater you wish to go to will be where we will be. Just for you my dearest one, just for you."

Alma actually clapped her hands in pleasure and for a moment Mahler saw again his child bride. "Oh Mahler," she gushed, "a comedy please. Billie Burke is at the Lyceum in "Love Watches." I do love her so. Take me to see her, do. Oh, please do." And then when no answer came, she added, "Would that be all right?"

Mahler frowned and Alma immediately knew what he was going to say. He did not disappoint her. "But a frivolous comedy my love. I will go if you wish it so, but after all, where is the substance?"

"Then "Little Nemo" at the New Amsterdam. It is by Victor Herbert and it is said to be very...."

"Herbert, pah!" Mahler said. "Pretty melodies. Lighter than air." He looked at the disappointment in her face. "But for you I will endure it."

"No, you are right" Alma said, her voice emotionless. I can go to see that sort of theater with my friends, of an afternoon, as I did last week when I saw "What Every Woman Knows." I know that you have been anxious to see Mr. Arliss in "The Devil" so that is what we will see."

"And you will not mind?" Mahler said, pleased. And Alma thought, "Mind? I have no mind. I am Alma Schindler MAHLER." I

do not have to have a mind." She kissed him on the cheek. "No" she said, "I will be fine with that."

A knock on the door and the stage manager poked his head in. "Fifteen minutes, Herr Mahler," he said and Mahler nodded and waved him out. "I need to use the toilet," Mahler said and opened the door at the far side of the room. He entered the small room and shut the door behind him. In a moment his grunts could be heard in the small dressing room. "The revered Mahler" Alma thought, "Shitting his way to greatness." She smiled as she thought of how the audience would react if they could be in her place now.

And from nowhere she remembered a line that she had liked from the Barrie play; "Every man who is high up loves to think that he has done it all himself; and the wife smiles and lets it go at that. It's our only joke."

She heard the chain pulled and the water rush into the toilet beyond the door. In that moment she determined that she would finish the song cycle she had started before Mahler had forbade her to carry on. It might be light and it might be frivolous and for sure there wouldn't be trumpets in the second balcony when and if it was performed, but it would be hers and hers alone. And if Mahler found out, well, that would be just too bad.

The door to the toilet opened and Mahler emerged along with the stench of long digested food. Alma opened the door to the dressing room to get some air. The young usher standing guard for the great man smiled at her as she emerged and Alma smiled back. He was tall and blond and quite handsome and would do very well for an afternoon when Mahler was rehearsing. She smiled as now she had two projects to work on.

She turned back to her husband and noticed a film of sweat on his face. "Mahler, are you unwell?" she asked solicitously. "The Mahler nerves at play again" he answered and added, "but I am fine. Fine. Do not worry so much about me. I have never been better."

The stage manager re-appeared. "Herr Mahler," he said, standing to one side in the doorway. Mahler nodded, kissed Alma on both cheeks and strode from the room. As he passed the young usher in the hall, Alma saw, with all his greatness, how small a man he really was.

Alma could hear the sound of the first violin and then the rest of the orchestra emulating its note in a cacophony of

sound. A moment of quiet followed by thunderous applause as Mahler took the podium.

As the applause grew Alma bowed to her reflection in the mirror and to the young usher watching her from behind. She nodded to his reflection in the mirror and in response he quietly applauded her.

And then came the massive sound of Mahler's Symphony Number Two sweeping through the hall and back behind the stage.

As Alma let herself be led to her aisle seat in Row M center, she smiled. How lovely the title he had given the piece.

*The Resurrection.*

She groaned with pleasure as she settled comfortably back into her seat.

## EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

Angela Miskis

### ONE

Grandma carried the weight of her ignorance like a king's crown. She carried it with pride and with the force of her persistence. Destiny was always bearable, as long as she carried her faith with conviction.

She carried with her the weight of the family: one husband, five daughters, one son, eight grandchildren and one ghost once made out of her flesh and blood. She carried the house, the silence of the walls and their secrets, the shadows of past times and the uncertainties of the future. Olga carried it all, and so the load was easier for everyone else to bear.

I could hear her sing from the living room. The house was filled with the sound of her voice and religious music reverberating from the radio. She was in the kitchen; her peach flowery dress went perfectly with the lime green walls and brown, awkwardly arranged cabinets that reached up to the ceiling. I know Vuillard would have thought it to be a composition worth painting.

It had been raining for two days now and the streets were starting to flood. Grandma worried about the water reaching the living room; my grandpa had just reupholstered the sofas and would have hated for them get damaged. Stuff like that never distressed me when I lived in her house; back then all I cared about was having enough newspaper to make boats. The morning traffic made for perfect sailing conditions. Once, one of my boats almost reached the sidewalk, a good 20 feet away from my bedroom window. Doubling the sheets of newspaper was the key.

I caught a glance of Señora Carlita walking slowly across her living room. Time has not have been kind to her. I wonder if she still blames my grandma for everything. When I was younger, I heard her say that "Olga" had so much faith that even the devil give up on tempting her. This had led Carlita to blame my grandma for the failure of her marriage. She thought that the devil, having given up on my grandma, waltzed straight into her room and made her sin. She also blamed her for her side

of the mango tree never bearing any fruit, for her bed sheets never drying fast and folding well, and for the affinity of the neighborhood dogs to pee on her front door and the cats to fight on the top of her bedroom roof at three every morning. I don't think grandma ever cared much about those accusations. She always smiled at Carlita and offered to help with whatever she needed. Although I'm sure Carlita always thought of those actions as signs of guilt.

## **TWO**

"Are you ready to order?," the waitress asked. "I will have two glasses of water for now; I'm still waiting for someone." The waitress walked away. Her name was Doris. I don't think I ever told her that she was the reason for my relationship with Diego. I remembered him glancing at her with the same fascination I had when I saw her cleaning the tables; She was the only person I knew that could clean them without leaving any greasy stripes behind. The tables always looked newer after she touched them. He walked towards me and asked me if I have noticed the same, I said yes, and for the next three years I never had breakfast alone.

Diego came in carrying the red notebook where he wrote down all his ideas for new poems. He asked me to read one of his latest poems aloud, and so I did. Towards the middle of the poem, I stuttered and babbled the wrong word. It was then that I noticed we wouldn't be having any more meals together. He had that look of disappointment in his eyes, like when a kid discovers that magic doesn't exist or that Santa is not real. He finally realized I wasn't everything he wanted and I realized the poem wasn't about me. I didn't have red plum lips.

We mused over one of the regulars. He drove Doris crazy. We named him Grant, we figured American Gothic and it's abbreviation A.G. would be too contrived to remember. Grant would pour all the sugar out of its container and write the name Chloe with his fingers over and over again. He was a paying and loyal customer, so he never got kicked out, but Doris would have to work extra hard to get that table ready for the next customers. The story that we imagined for Grant was that Chloe was the name of his lifelong partner and he came every day to the diner to imagine her sitting next to him. It was the easiest and most romanticized story we could imagine, and up to that moment it made us feel lucky to have each other.

We finished our breakfast and after the last bit of coffee was gone, Diego stood up and said that he would have his stuff out of my apartment by that afternoon. I told him fine, and not to forget to leave the key under the pink frog.

## **THREE**

"I feel high," I said. Please dear God, please tell me you have not been using again. I rolled my eyes and stared back at my mom. No mom, I'm not using! You know that I have been clean for the past year. She smiled back and responded with the usual, "I know sweetheart, but you know it is a mother's duty to worry." So...why then do you feel high?

"He talked to me today," I said. He asked me if I was going to continue attending the meetings next year. Don't you think it is amazing how we live and die in small moments like this one, in seconds of perfection? How we safeguard moments of bliss that will inevitably but gracefully slip from our fingers?

I could float away if I didn't feel so guilty for killing that poor bug. I told you it wasn't your fault. Well, it was, well...you just couldn't help it. You were having a bad day. I know mom but the fact that I was drenched and tired didn't make up for the fact of killing something. I just feel that I unleashed all my anger in this one precise gesture of brutality.

I can't help but think of how many events had to occur for that thing to land right in front of me just to be cut in half. Its little legs kicking from one side of the scissors as the other half was twitching rapidly.

After I saw it struggling to survive, I couldn't stop thinking about the lives I have affected with my selfish actions. Who made me the god of this bug, deciding that it was its turn to die? The irony of it all is that as a gesture of kindness all I had left to do was to finish it, to make sure he didn't suffer anymore.

"Sweetheart, my mom said, it's just a bug, I wouldn't think much of it." Besides, it could have bitten you and you might have fallen ill.

Of course she wouldn't think much of it. You see, the thing about my mom is that she was afraid to think. When she was little one of her teachers, who turned out to be a crazy maniac, slapped her after she gave a wrong answer, and made her walk around the school wearing the shameful donkey-ears crown. She never got over it. I can see her potential but she was totally blinded.

Most of the time, she was afraid of sounding incoherent, redundant, or stupid. That the things she had to say will never mean anything to anyone and that her thoughts were too muddled for something good to ever flourish. She came to enjoy the safety of her head and sealed lips. She usually just followed, and avoided confrontation at all cost. She was afraid to think of anything in depth. Maybe that's why she became an accountant. You don't really have to "think," just spew out facts. Facts are always easier to handle.

How she came to raise me was extremely impressive. She never actually gave me any advice but would communicate by highlighting books, magazines, essays, anything and everything she had read. Usually in the morning, during breakfast, there was something open for me to read. She would tell me, "Read it, think about it, and I'm sure you will be able to find the answer you need."

#### **FOUR**

Out of all the ridiculous things Judah would come up with, his story about the drowned couple was probably my favorite. "You know, the couple in 4B passed away. I heard they both drowned in his tears. I saw his mom today, she was devastated but at peace. She knew that at least he wouldn't have to deal with the nightmare of a wife, he picked for himself, since she was probably going straight to hell.

He couldn't stop crying after he find out his wife was cheating on him. The poor thing, he loved her so much but she just wasn't the stable kind. Many times I saw her climbing down the roof and running into the arms of some guy, just to return measly satisfied, looking less alive every time. Her hands were always bruised and her eyes swollen. Probably from all the begging. I would always see her holding her chest, wondering why her heart felt so empty.

Oh, the poor things. She had problems, you know. But he was the only one that couldn't see it. He only saw her in color. He once told me that he knew she was the one when he saw her walking down the hallway wearing a yellow dress. He had never seen that color before.

But poor her, she was damaged from birth. Her dad abandoned her; he never came back, well...only once to haunt

her in her dreams. He was holding his heart in his left hand and his head in his right. She refused both and he left, for good this time."

What a bizarre little story. It was uncharacteristic of Judah to talk about love. I guess the speaker's voice is female, it definitely sounds like his gossipy mom. God! The awful sound of her squeaky voice infiltration every room in my apartment; the banging at my door, smashing my pink frog to pieces. She demanded to know where her son was. "I don't know, lady. He hasn't been here for days."

#### **FIVE**

So are you going to talk to "him" again? "I did, mom, and it went terribly," I answered. Having a crush is like slowly digging and sinking in your own grave. You start little by little, picking out handfuls of soil with your hands. By the time you realize what you are doing, you are already 6 feet underground begging for someone to let you out. That is of course if you haven't drowned in your own tears.

"Drowned in your own tears" aren't you being a "little" dramatic? "I got that from one of Judah's stories," I answered. Please don't tell me you are talking to that boy again. I'm not mom. I just found his story between one of my books.

It has been over two years since I last saw Judah. After he was found overdosed behind the trash compactor at his job, he was sent to a halfway house in Florida. I can't say I miss him or that I blame him for anything.

"So what happened?" my mom insisted.

Transcendence, mom, transcendence.... What about it? Well, I just think transcendence is always interrupted by the human mind, and the self-defeating fabricated dreams of perfection.

I see. So... Nothing, mom, the first conversation was just a wreck. Thoughts were collapsing; words crashing, breaking, and bouncing; echoing the awful sound of my forgotten attempts for preservation.

The only casualty: my ego. The aftermath: His words knifing away the last threads holding things in place, a moment of imperfection magnified by a thousand.

Wow! Okay... you wrote this, didn't you? This is one of your little stories. Yes mom, I wrote it and now I'm reciting to you. "I figured," she said, "you are usually not this eloquent at the dinner table."

But I did experience a visceral reaction, I felt so sick. I know sweetheart, but you will be okay. Despite all odds, all you are left with are options.

The next morning I woke up to find a magazine cutout clipped to my door "Imagination is the inebriating nectar of happiness that numbs the aching taste of reality pouring down my throat."

Good one, mom, good one.... Maybe I will add this in one of my paintings.

## SIX

"Quantum leap," I never thought much of it until I went back. In my mind they never grew up but when I saw my cousins, I realized how much time had passed. They used to be a few heads shorter than me, now, well... now we are all equals. However, every time I looked at my grandparents, aunts and uncle, time appeared to stand still. I guess this is the closest I will ever get to time travel.

My grandparent's house looked exactly the same. It just feels quieter. I noticed in her altar a prayer card of El Divino Nino Jesus. It was the same card I saw my mom holding so tidily in her hands—almost piercing its plastic corner in her palm—when she found me unconscious on my bed, with the needle still in my arm. I had seen that look before; it was the same look in Diego's face before he left me. But this time it mattered. I don't remember what happened in between, but when I finally woke up I was clean.

"El Divino Nino Jesus protects you," my grandma told me, and for the first time I believed but only because she believed. Because when I truly saw her I understood the reasoning behind her faith, and the importance of standing for one's belief. I saw myself in her actions and I understood myself for the first time. You know, I have carried with me the weight of your absence, and the growing understanding that time does not stop and does not forgive. "I know," my grandma said, "I know you have." "Come," she said. Dinner was almost ready.

## EPIC LULZ

Justin Morrow

At first the lulz were less than epic.

Of course there was nothing to do because there never was, and no one had jobs and so therefore no money, which led to the result of us mostly hanging around Todd's basement, because his dad was split downstate and his mom was a real fucked up wino case who didn't care what we did just so long as it didn't bother her. There was always beer in the house and she never noticed if you took it, as she was so wastoid all the time she just thought she drank it.

So we sat around in the afternoons and got drunk and then one day Todd said we should make a prank call, and Steve called him a dipshit and said that was lame, at which point Todd was like, this was not going to be just an ordinary prank call. What he had in mind, he said, was to call Mary Mathers' house.

Mary Mathers was a girl who moved to town in spring, and it was pretty much a universally acknowledged fact around school that A. she was smoking fucking hot and B. she was super sweet to everyone and C. she was way out of any of our leagues. All of the girls hated her. I loved her. Not like I wanted to fuck her, though I did want to fuck her, but fuck really isn't the right word for it, I guess. I did want to hold her hand and kiss her neck, but duh, I never said that out loud. The girls didn't like her because she dated Tim Shawcross for about two weeks, and after they broke up he said she sucked him off in the janitor's closet by the cafeteria, but I didn't believe that. That was enough for everyone else, though.

"Why do you want to call Mary Mathers?" I said.

"Why not," said Todd. "She's a whore. What, there's a problem?"

I shook my head and pounded the rest of my beer with head tilted back because I was certain my eyes would betray that yes, in fact, there was a problem.

"What are you going to say?" said Boyle, who everyone called Boyle because it was his last name and also because he had a huge boil on his neck. Why he never had it lanced was a great mystery.

"I dunno," said Todd, winking and cracking knuckles

theatrically, like a virtuoso piano player. "I guess I'll have to improvise."

"Ask if she wants to come over," said Steve, feet on the desk next to Todd's ancient computer.

"Oh, I'll do better than that," said Todd.

He picked up the phone. "Hello, may I speak with Mary please? She's not in? Oh, well, is this Mrs. ?...It is? Well, ma'am, I wish I were calling under happier circumstances, but my name is Dr. Smithers, and I just wanted to relay your daughter's test results--Oh, you didn't know? Ah, well, no matter, let's see here. It seems that little Mary has a rather mild case of AIDS, and it looks as though her herpes are flaring up again. Can you have her call my office when she gets in to set up an appoint--...Hello? Hello? Mrs. Mathers?"

He looked at us. "Bitch hung up on me."

"The nerve," Steve said.

"What was the point of that?" I said. "It's not like she believed you."

"Okay, smart guy," said Todd. "You have any better ideas?"

We were not the most popular kids in school, but neither were we at the bottom of the dung heap, either. In socioeconomic terms, we were lower middle class, and hovered just above the human kindness poverty line. Our school was big. There were lots of poor kids (though no one was actually poor, most people had pools and stuff) and to my mind, any one of them would have made a better target than my Mary.

"Give me the yearbook," I said.

It didn't take long. A freshman, Jarrod Maltz-Onderhoffer, who looked exactly like what I'm sure his name is conjuring in your brain, jumped out, a burst of spastic lightning. In the photo, he wore headgear and a sweater vest. He had a bad haircut (so did we, though none of us would have acknowledged it) and an awkward echo of a blond moustache squatting on his upper lip. His glasses looked Army issued, his eyes set too close. He was way poorer than us; he was almost homeless. And the topper is he wasn't even smart. You would think or hope that God would have compensated for such a plague of grossness with superhuman intelligence, or something, but no, Maltz-Onderhoffer was dumb. I was a far better student than him, and I was terrible.

Also, he was an asshole. I never saw someone get so much

detention. He started fights, and always lost. One time a retarded kid from special ed. beat the shit out of him in the parking lot. Did the retarded kid get in trouble? No, he did not. Maltz-Onderhoffer got suspended for something like a month, though.

"Him?" said Todd.

"Why not?" I said.

"I fuckin' hate that kid," said Boyle.

Todd told him to shut up, which is what Boyle did most of the time anyway. "Oh my god," said Steve, laughing. "Fuck. That. Kid."

For a minute, Todd didn't say anything, looking at the picture with this look he got that was supposed to approximate thinking. "All right. Fuck it."

What followed was a moment where we all looked at each other and I'm not sure what everyone else was thinking, but the only thing on my mind was this overwhelming feeling of relief that we weren't going to be calling Mary Mathers, or doing anything to Mary Mathers that would upset her or anyone in her family.

"So what do we do?" said Steve.

Todd looked at me. "I don't know," he said. "It was your idea."

Now even though you could protect your profile using the privacy settings, I figured Jarrod would be too stupid to realize this, and guess what? The entire thing was there for all to see, not that there was much to it. Kid had like ten friends: Two of them were his parents (!) and I knew for a fact that the kids from school who were his friends weren't really his friends, they just felt bad and were like, whatever, I'll be your fake internet friend. His profile picture was just terrible, even worse than the one from the yearbook, and I was like, seriously, Jesus, does this kid want to be in the position he's in, and will continue to be in, for the rest of his life? Because if there was a photo of you that looked like that, I can almost guarantee you would do everything in your power to make sure that it never left a locked box in the center of a mountain in Switzerland, or some other European country with excellent confidentiality laws.

But no, there it was, for all the world to see. It was like he was asking for it, almost; the page was an advertisement for a beating.

"Holy shit," said Boyle.

Besides the photo, he had put up a bunch of drawings, which weren't exactly terrible, but they weren't what you would

call masterpieces, either. For the most part they were depictions of guns, or bombs and explosions, but a few were of this girl with big boobs. It was always the same girl.

"Holy shit," said Todd, his bug eyes getting even wider, so he looked like a surprised fish, right at the moment when it realizes that the tasty worm he's munching on is attached to, guess what? a really sharp hook. "Look what we have here."

Steve started laughing his loose cackle of a laugh. It sounded like bones shaking in an empty box. "Oh man," he said, "that's too much."

It took a second to register, but once I did, there was no denying it and furthermore I could not have gotten the image out of my head if you had gouged a piece of my brain, possibly my frontal cortex, or whatever part it was that encompassed Mary Mathers.

"Jesus," is all I could say.

"This is too good," said Todd.

Her tits was bigger, but it was unmistakably her. The attention to detail he had shown these drawings made them stand out far and away from the rest of the crap he posted. It was an almost eerie likeness. There was a growing heat in my chest. "So, gentlemen," said Todd, "where do we begin?"



By lunchtime Monday, almost every locker had been plastered with the Mary drawings. I was against this, but outvoted. Of course we made sure to include the part of the page identifying them as coming from Jarrod's profile.

He was called to the Principal's office, but once it was established that he didn't put them up (because really, why would he?) they let him go for the day, which at least was the rumor going around because no one saw him after fifth period, and Gretchen Lynch said she saw him skulking towards the exit while she was on her way, late, to Algebra.

By seventh period, the drawings were gone. On my way to Chem, I saw her in the hall. Her head was down, staring at the front of her History book.

I felt this twinge in my stomach, but then reasoned it was Jarrod we were hurting, not her, and it went away. What I mean is, the lulz were not at her expense. This is what I told myself

and essentially what Todd told me, because we were walking together and he saw me looking at Mary and basically read my mind, because Todd was some kind of malevolent psychic.

After school we went back to Todd's and got pretty buzzed on Natty Ice.

"That was fucking lulzy," said Boyle.

"You're fucking lulzy," said Todd.

"I am fucking lulzy," said Boyle.

"Yeah," said Steve, who was trying and failing to do pull-ups on the iron bar in the door frame, "but it wasn't lulzy enough."

I looked up from my doodlings of weird faces and cubes, which was all I could draw. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," he said, and his scrawny frame hit the ground kicking up a thin cloud of dust, "if we're really going to fuck with this kid, we've really gotta fuck with him. You know what I mean?"

Really fucking with him, it turned out, was a relative piece of cake. All that was required was a color photo of Mary, courtesy of the yearbook, scanned and used as the picture for the fake profile we made.

We sent the friend request and waited.

About ten minutes later, a message came through saying he had approved us, and we all just looked at each other, like, this is way too fucking easy.

It had been my bright idea to scour his page for what he was into, which were mostly these faggy Japanimation comics, and that band Wild Boy, which if anyone liked that band, you never heard about it because they kept that fact locked up with the photo of themselves in that Swiss mountain.

I wrote the first letter:

"Hey Jarrod, OMG I cant believe you put up those pictures at school today. At 1st I was like, WTF SMH but then I was like thats actually prretty kewl :) U r a good artist. Did u get in any trubs? HMU, Mary."

Todd read it and was like, "That's fucking creepy."

"This is so lulzy," said Boyle.

I hit send.

The response was almost instant: "Hey, Mary," it said. "I DID NOT put those pictures up i promise it wasnt me. glad if you liked them tho."

I could see it in everyone else's eyes and I knew they could

see it in mine too, being what we could see was that Jarrod Maltz-Onderhoffer completely and totally believed us and holy shit what were we going to do now? Everyone's faces started to break into these smiles and I could even feel the corners of my mouth turning up, though I was still a little torn over the whole Mary thing.

"Well?" said Todd. "What are you gonna write back?"

"What do you mean, I'm gonna write back?" I asked, swiveling to face him.

Todd pointed at the screen. "You clearly have the gift."

"You are Mary Mathers," said Boyle.

I told Boyle to shut the fuck up, which he did and went back to eating his hand.

I started typing. "LOL of course I liked them. They really reminded me of Matsuhito Akira," being the name of one of the Japanese dudes he listed on his page. "If you didn't put da pix up, y did u draw me? Do you like me? Cuz I kind uv like you."

I sat frozen, the cursor hovering there over the send button.

I hit send, and it was gone.

I went home and had dinner, but couldn't concentrate or eat much, and when they asked me questions like how was school? I was basically like, duh, I have no idea what you're talking about, which I'm sure made them think I was stoned when I was really just tired from all the beeer, plus my mind was occupied with thoughts of Mary Mathers and Jarrod Maltz-Onderhoffer and the inevitable shit storm that was coming. I couldn't stop thinking that it wasn't fair for Mary to be involved, even though it was too late now and what the fuck I had never even talked to her anyway so what should I care?

I excused myself early, skipping dessert, which I did not want to do because it was pudding, but I was like, fuck pudding, there was no way I was going to spend one more solitary minute sitting at that table with those two assholes while there was a major weather system taking place localized entirely in my skull.

I went upstairs, logged onto the fake Mary account and there it was, that flashing red number one being like you have one message, and guess who it's from?

I clicked. "Is this really you?"

I took a deep breath and tried to think of something to write, but before I could there was an instant message:

"Hey."

"Hey," I wrote.

"So," he wrote.

"So?"

"Is this real? Are you you?"

"Of course I'm me, lol, y would I not b?" I had no idea where these words came from. They flowed uninvited, like I was purging myself of some illness.

"Prove it."

I called Todd. "What?! Fuck, that's nuts."

"I know," I said. "What should we do?"

"Listen" I wrote back, "I don't know what u r tripping about, but if u want proof, meet me @ Bogus Burger Friday after school. @ 4. Bring more drawings."

I hit send, instantly regretted it.

I felt like I'd swallowed a huge rock, like I would break the chair and the floor and crash all the way to the basement.



All Friday we surveilled Jarrod Maltz-Onderhoffer as he slithered the halls, as he lingered at the water fountain by her locker, clearly staring even though he thought he was being super slick and D.L. At this point, I was past feeling bad. I woke up feeling pretty great, actually, the collective excitement of the group pushing me out of the door and into the day with the knowledge that today, something epically lulzy was going to take place.

It was Steve's idea to film it. At first I was like no way, that's a terrible idea, but I was shouted down because Todd, Steve and Boyle were convinced that the video would get like 7 million hits or some other ridiculous fucking number.

So we left school and headed to Bogus Burger, which wasn't even really a real place, just one of the counters in the food court, but there were benches near there which was what people were referring to when they were like, meet me at Bogus Burger.

We were sitting over by Panda Fun on the other side of the court, but it gave a good view of the Bogus Burger benches and Jarrod, who showed up precisely at 4.

"He's punctual," said Boyle, and someone told him to shut up. It may have been me.

Todd opened his flip cam and got a pretty good frame of

Jarrold, his two cheeseburgers and his extra large Dr. Pepper.

Jarrold checked his watch.

He looked around.

Steve and Boyle stifled giggles. Todd concentrated on the camera. I watched Jarrold not touching his food.

He waited nearly an hour, then left.

"Motherfucker didn't even eat his food," said Steve. He sounded annoyed.

We watched the video at Todd's, but while there were some lulz to be had, they were definitely not epic, mostly because all you saw was this mopey looking loser kid either staring at a couple of cheeseburgers, or looking around like he was waiting to meet someone at the airport. This was not very lulzy, especially considering 45 minutes of it. Even Todd had to concede that this wasn't what he had been hoping for, visually speaking.

"I could have used tears," he said.

"You gotta give it to him," said Steve. "Motherfucker is stoic."

"Well, then," said Todd, "What's it gonna be?"

"What?" I asked.

"Well, we could keep stringing him along like this, but honestly, I'm not trying to spend the rest of my life at Panda Fun trying to make some asshole cry."

"So what do you suggest?"

"You know," he said.

And I did.

In its final form, this is what was sent: "HAHA OMG I CAN NOT believe you thought I liked you. That is fucking gross. And no I did not like those drawings u put up. They were terrible and u r lucky all I did was make u look like an asshole at the B.B. (which is totes on vid, btw). SMH at how fucking stupid you are. L8R."

●

My father kept a bottle of vodka hidden in the basement, because according to what he told my mother he did not drink anymore since last Christmas, but of course I knew where it was, and so when I got home I made my excuses to skip dinner saying I had a test to study for, and when I knew they were asleep went downstairs, found the bottle, mixed it with an old, flat thing of tonic from the mini-fridge and proceeded to get double-vision

smashed. I refilled the vodka with water from the basement sink and snuck out the back door.

It was a beautiful night.

I weaved the street, cutting through yards for novelty. I used to run track and amused myself trying to hurdle over shrubbery in the Madison's yard, but bit it hard on the other side, crushing some of Mrs. Breckinridge's roses. The light came on in the house and I ran, though my running skills were far from excellent just then, and there were thorns sticking through my jeans, which were completely caked in dirt. I'm sure I was in a lot of pain, too, but couldn't feel it due to I was plastered and full of adrenaline.

I didn't think I had any real idea where I was going, but I must have, because at some point I found myself at the end of the cul-de-sac on Shady Oaks Lane, on wobbly legs and staring at her lighted window from the shadows. Her curtains were drawn and a couple of times I saw a silhouette, but could have been wrong; it may not even have been her window. It could have been her parents', and also she had a little sister.

I stood there for I don't know how long. My mind was blank, but the less drunk I became, the more I noticed this evil feeling in my stomach. I was nauseous and panicked, and my head hurt. I had this sensation of having done something there was no taking back, like I had just shot myself, even though I hadn't done it yet. This was about as coherent an explanation of how I was feeling as my dumb brain was able to formulate. Eventually the light went off in the window and I hobbled home like some hunchback leper. On the way I passed Jarrold Maltz-Onderhoffer's house, but there were no lights on in any of the windows, and no lulz of any kind to be had for several miles.

●

There was a long hallway, but it never seemed to end, and I knew that I had always been there, I had always been in that hall, and I always would be. My mother's voice came through an unseen loudspeaker and I opened my eyes.

I was on top of the covers in my dirty blood-stained clothes. My mother stood, brow knit, chapped lips pursed.

"I have some bad news," she said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"What?"

"Someone died. From school."

"Who?" I asked.

"Gerald, I think? A freshman?"

I sat up in great pain, hoping this was part of the dream, but with every second I came more and more back to the world until it was assaulting me. The sun felt like bright shards of glass.

"What?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "School's been cancelled but there's a special assembly. Get dressed." And she left, never once mentioning my appearance. She was not a very good or attentive mother, but to be fair, I was not the best son.

I found Todd, Steve and Boyle, and we huddled near some lockers.

"What the fuck?!" said Todd.

"I don't fucking know," I said.

"Jesus Christ," said Boyle.

"All right, listen," Todd said, "nothing bad is going to happen as long as everyone keeps their mouths shut. Okay? Don't say anything to anyone. Something bad could happen. Understand?" He raised his eyebrows. We all knew Todd's dad had guns, and I'm not sure about the rest of them, but I knew what he was implying. What was he going to do, though, really? Shoot us? I was dubious.

Everyone nodded except me.

"Okay," he said, again. "We probably shouldn't be seen together."

Steve's lip was quivering.

"Steve," I said.

"What?" Todd said.

"Jesus fucking Christ," said Steve, his voice a little whisper that cracked on Christ.

"He killed himself," said Todd. "He was going to anyway. If it wasn't this, it would have been something else. It was only a matter of time. Okay? So just forget about it." And considering the matter closed, walked off.

We split up to take seats in the bleachers, which if you ask me looked even more suspicious than us sitting together, because we always sat together, and if they did any investigating at all, which they would, the trail would lead right back to us anyway, so there was no point in trying to get all Mission Impossible about the whole thing. We were fucked.

Some people, mostly girls, were crying, which I thought was odd considering I knew these girls, and none of them had even so much as looked at him while he was alive. Some of them, I knew for a fact, had gone out of their way to trip him in the hall.

Principal Jeffries stood at a lectern and said that Onderhoffer, which he mispronounced, in a tragedy, had taken his own life. He didn't say how, but the rumor I heard from Stephanie Stevens, who was sitting next to me, was that he hanged himself in his closet, though no one knew why. Jeffries said some dumb words about unity in trying times, and that there were grief counsellors available to any student who needed them, but the rest of us were free to go home. Before that, though, we were to observe a moment of silence while Jarrod's favorite song, "Heaven Iz With U," by Wild Boy, was played. I looked around and saw several people trying to keep from cracking up. Boyle and his boil were barely able to keep it together. And I mean, the song was pretty fucking terrible.

After the assembly, the principal called Mary over, and they disappeared down a hallway.



Halfway across the parking lot I saw her, alone, looking sadder than anyone I had ever seen in my life. I ached when I thought what she would think of me once it all came out. That I would never get to hold her hand or kiss her neck. That I would be a cancer on her life. She would never be whole again, and it was my fault. I heard Todd calling my name and ignored him, watching until she disappeared.

And then I just took off. I ran faster than I ever have or ever will. I dashed into woods behind the school and crashed through dead leaves, knocking into the air over rotten logs and streams. My body burned on straightaways and concrete as I flew down the road's shoulder, mind an empty box except for the thought that the second I stopped running, I would surely die. I knew that more than I had ever known anything in the world.

# ARE YOU JOOSH?

William Sherzer

After three weeks of tedious meetings, I found myself alone, quietly seated and alone by gate 6 at Kennedy Airport, in preparation for a six hour flight, back to my company's headquarters in Spain where I would immediately return to the tedium I had left behind. At least I had these few hours, in the airport and on the plane, to relax, to read, to think, to show no responsibility towards any other human being. Perhaps I am a misanthrope, perhaps antisocial; to be fair to myself, however, I would like to simply think that an excess of work just doesn't allow one to think much about others, and, furthermore, that once in while drawing oneself into a cocoon and forgetting about the rest of the world can be a healthy exercise.

And for that reason I had no problem with arriving at JFK quite early; I was looking forward to over an hour just sitting by myself with nobody to bother me. About anything.

"Excuse me sir. Is that your bag?"

He was a tall uniformed security officer, pointing at an abandoned satchel not far from where I was sitting.

"No, and I don't know whose it is. I haven't really paid any attention to who is sitting in this area."

The officer continued to question nearby passengers, explaining, as everybody knows, that unaccompanied parcels represent a potential danger. Finally a young woman pointed to somebody lumbering down the aisle and identified him as the owner of the satchel. He was a tall orthodox Jew, Hassidic, Lubavitcher or Satmar, I don't know how to distinguish between them. A young man, healthy looking and with a bright expressive face. The officer began to explain the problem to him. "No English" was the immediate reply, interrupting the officer's remonstrations.

As luck would have it, the officer looked in my direction, as did subsequently the passenger, and asked me if I could help translate for him.

As luck would have it.

I did my best. I speak a smattering of German and a mini

smattering of Yiddish. Actually, when I would try to speak Yiddish to my grandmother, she would glare at me and say "Don't speak German to me!" When I would try to speak German to a colleague of mine from Hanover, he would look at me and say "That's all Yiddish." But, making an utter fool of myself linguistically, I managed to convey the guard's reproach and instructions to the young man, and solved everybody's problem.

Except my own.

Soon afterwards a shadow draped over me. The young man, clothed in black from hat (as opposed to head) to toe, his long payos framing his bespectacled face, was staring down at me, waiting for me to notice him so that he could start a conversation. And when I looked up at him, he started in.

*"Varoom du redt Yiddish?"*

How to explain, without simply saying that yes, I'm Jewish, in spite of the fact that he had already figured that out? How many times have I been stopped on the streets of New York by young orthodox Jews asking the famous question: "Are you Joosh?" I am Jewish, and I am not a self-hating Jew, but my Judaism by this time in my life is limited to what I term culinary ethnicity, concentrated mostly on bagels and stuffed cabbage, holipches, as my parents and grandparents called it. The last time I used that word was in a Jewish restaurant on Broadway, and the waiter broke into tears. I never imagined stuffed cabbage could be so emotional.

I gave it a try.

But I couldn't remember the word for grandmother or grandfather, probably the first words a Jewish kid learns, but we never said Bubba or Zaide in my house. Just grandmom and grandpop. Fortunately that didn't stop Bubba from making holipches when she visited. My maternal Bubba. Pop's parents wouldn't cross our threshold because we didn't keep a kosher home.

*"Die Vater und die Mutter von mein Vater und meine Mutter schpracte Yiddish."*

He understood. Of course he understood. He already knew. That's why he was towering over me and preparing his lengthy interrogation.

Where was I from? Why was I going to Spain? What do I do in life? Those were the questions I understood. What my answers

were, God only knows. I wasn't being impolite; I simply had no way to understand him or to make him understand me. Finally he gave me a condescending smile and returned to his potentially dangerous luggage.

My seat on the plane was as conducive to total relaxation and isolation as I had hoped for in the airport lounge; it was in one of the last rows, and there was almost nobody around me. Unfortunately, I did not stay there. Since the airline is one of our clients, the captain was advised that I was travelling on the flight. There was no way to bump me up into business class, but he wanted me as close to it as possible, just so they could bestow upon me any possible extras that they could slip quietly out from behind the curtain. Luck was with me again. Who did they put me next to? My friend from Jerusalem. I wondered if his company did business with the airline also.

He was extremely happy to see me. Not that we were going to have an extended conversation. We'd already discovered how hard that would be. But his face lit up and he obviously felt more comfortable in his seat when he saw that he was going to be accompanied during six and a half hours by a landsman, even if I never quite admitted in so many words that I was Joosh.

The truth is I tried to be more than polite. I put myself in his place, alone, unable to communicate, having to depend upon someone who really couldn't communicate with him and wasn't showing the greatest desire to. But I had a respite. Soon it was davening time. The aisle became his wailing wall as he marched up and down, bending over, straightening up, reciting his prayers while all the other passengers were pretending not to pay attention. Should I feel more attached to what's going on? I asked myself. I wasn't the one wandering up and down, but others saw how happy he was to see me, and how he had tried to reestablish our friendship. There was nothing I could do. I stuck my nose in my book and, like the other passengers, tried to pretend that the ritual was not taking place. After all, one could decide that he was waiting to go to the bathroom.

The plane started to move and the seat belt sign went on, not that he noticed it. The stewardess approached, interrupted his prayers, and ordered him to sit down, and, after looking at me for confirmation, he did so, and buckled up, again following my instructions. The turbulence increased, which made me

uncomfortable as usual, but my discomfort was nothing compared to his obvious fright. I could see the sweat as it began to drip down his temples, visible through the thick payos that he wiped dry with the long cloth that hung down from his neck. And of course, he finally turned to me for something: comfort, assurance, or a confirmation of his fear by finding that I was as worried as he was. The jolting didn't subside, and neither did his pleading expression, so I decided that I had to do something to calm him down, even if I was equally frightened. German? Yiddish? In what mixed up tongue could I get him to feel that we would get through this trauma?

"*Alles ist gut,*" I started, a total misrepresentation of my true state. "*Ich habe reist in diese... (I pointed to the plane) fünfzig jahren, und ich bin hier.*" This was of course my major problem at the moment. I was there, where I had no desire to be, neither on the plane nor talking with this gentleman who was going out of his mind. I don't know if he was helping me, in comparison with what I felt, or magnifying my own fear, but compassion got the best of me, and I said the one two word sentence that seems to be understood in every language and culture: "No problem."

"No problem?"

"No problem."

It worked. He fell back, a smile came across his face, and now the only person who was worried was me. But that didn't last long. In fact, the turbulence soon ended and my new found friend threw off the seat belt, jumped up, and recreated his wailing wall. But he didn't want to forsake his new found friend. He needed to express a token of his appreciation, and what better way than to help me return to my ancestry, to join him in prayer, something I hadn't done since the day of my bar mitzvah. He took me by the wrist and tried to pull me out of my seat, forgetting that I was buckled in, which was the least of his problems in getting me to pray, but he didn't know that.

"*Du bist Joosh auch. Kamen.*"

Or at least that's how I heard what he said.

The passengers didn't know how to react. They didn't know if it was a celebration or an argument, whether he was shaking my hand or trying to throw me to the floor. The lights started coming on to alert the flight crew. Emergency in row 13!! Women cowered as men approached, hoping to lend a hand, but to

who? Nobody but I understood what was going on, and how was I to explain to anybody, in a sentence or two, that I was the subject of an attempt at international proselytizing on the part of this bearded giant who simply could not understand my having reduced my Jewishness to the mere level of ethnicity.

A stewardess finally arrived and tried to explain to him that it would be better for all if he would let go of me. But of course he couldn't understand, and who was the person who was supposed to tell him? Right. Me.

*"Sie sagt dat nein."*

That was the best I could do under the circumstances, but I was aided by the blazing eyes of the young stewardess who had come to my aid. He shrunk a bit, let go of my wrist, and mumbled humbly, "No problem."

Somehow, however, all eyes were on me, not him. For the rest of the flight, I was the guilty party for all who had witnessed our little tussle. Sure, I was the world traveler, the member of the modern world, who spoke English and Spanish, and German, or so they thought. I was the one who was rejecting the sincere friendship and best wishes of this deeply religious, serious neighbor of mine, who was simply trying to befriend me in the only way he knew how. Were they thinking this? I have no idea. Was I thinking that they were thinking this? Absolutely. Again, compassion (for one of my own?) overtook me. How could I make amends for my rejection of his good wishes, for the stewardess' cruel treatment of him, her blatant misunderstanding of his desire to bring me back into the fold. I just needed to find a way to let him know that I was still his friend, still understood who he was even if I didn't want to be like him, still wanted to help him through this voyage in which he understood nothing of what was said to him.

I soon got my chance.

When we landed in Madrid, I was home, but my poor fellow traveler had a long way to go yet, Jerusalem, and sometimes making connections in the Madrid airport seems longer than the following flight. In short, he had no idea what to do, where to go, who to approach. Once again, the reluctant, reform, or, to state it somewhat dyslexic, former, Jew was called upon for assistance. By this time, well accustomed to my inability to express myself sufficiently in either Yiddish or German, my companion simply stared at me like a large unhappy puppy.

"No problem," I said, calmly, and his expression changed immediately. He grabbed his bag, and practically took my arm as we passed through the passport control and then headed toward the train that would take us toward the baggage claim, in my case, and in his, to his next flight.

As we waited for the train, and then when we were installed for the short ride to the other area of the terminal, I couldn't help but feel pangs of envy as I watched the other passengers smile at each other, chat, prepare for the rest of their journey, simply enjoy their proximity, their interrelation, whether it was through family or friendship. I was alone, headed back to the small apartment that my company had rented for me, far from friends and extended family who were generally happily scattered throughout the United States. But I wasn't totally alone; here was this big as life vision of what may have been my past, the grandfathers I barely came to know, their fathers, definitely serious practitioners of a religion that had ceased to have any importance for me. And he definitely invaded my solitude, because, as in the case of so many nervous travelers, he obviously was in no way confident that he was going to make his connection to the promised land, and his constant anxious expression, always directed at me, made that quite clear.

Who in that train but I was going to solve my landsman's problems? Who was going to get him through the maze of Barajas airport and onto his El Al flight to Jerusalem. He exuded dismay, looking at his ticket with confusion and at me out of the corner of his eye. The message was clear: I need help, and you are the one called upon to give it to me. I began to imagine how guilty (the famous Jewish guilt?) I would feel if I abandoned him. So I didn't.

*"El Al? No problem. Ich gaye mit dich."*

His whole body relaxed, and seemed to flow upwards into the enormous smile that instantly covered his face.

*"Danks mein freund, danks mein broder."*

My suitcase in one hand and my newfound friend in the other, I left the terminal, entered a taxi, and instead of heading for my apartment and a nap before going to work, I directed the driver to Terminal 1, where we would find the ticket counter for El Al. The trust my companion seemed to place in me was gratifying, and led me to create an image of myself that I found

new and comforting. It was rare that I would go so out of my way to help another; it wasn't in my nature, and nor was it in the lifestyle I had developed over the years. But here I was, dead tired, basically speechless due to our inability to communicate, and giving of myself to a stranger who, I would generally maintain, represented everything that, over time, I had drifted away from.

The waiting line at the counter was a homecoming for him. So many hats, long coats, beards, payos and wigs. It wasn't Spain; it was another world. And my friend immediately felt quite at home. He began to speak to all and sundry, his voice rising as he spoke to those who were not directly ahead of or behind him. Did he actually know all these people? I doubted it. He just couldn't control himself, and in the same manner that he tried to befriend me in the airport and on the plane, he went about approaching these people, but with obvious success. And he constantly pointed at me as he spoke. And every time he did, smiles were bestowed upon me. I was his hero, an American Jew who stepped up and took care of another Jew in need. I'm not sure how I felt about his gesticulations and my becoming more and more the center of attention. I was the man of the hour, but I had done my job, and wanted to get away. But we had come this far, and I felt it was my duty to make sure that he made it through passport control and was headed to the right gate. That would be as far as I could take him.

And so we continued, arm in arm, obtained his boarding pass and went on to have his passport stamped once again. After doing so, the civil guard asked me for my passport, but I told him that I was not traveling.

"Then please step away sir, people are waiting behind you."

We had come to the end of our adventure. How to say goodbye when what most defined our relationship was our inability to communicate? But he solved that problem. Before I could react, I was enveloped in an enormous embrace, bear hug might be a better term for it, practically swallowed up into the long, sweeping coat in which my friend was about to enter into the final leg of his journey. He leaned back, and with a broad smile looked down upon me and said something in Hebrew, which, no matter what he really said, I took as a blessing. When was the last time I had been blessed, I wondered.

And then off he went, to his homeland, with his people, to his people. And there I stood, watching him disappear, not even thinking yet about hailing a cab and heading for my home, not my homeland, without my people, what people. And then, suddenly, with no warning, alone in an airport, I began to ask myself who were my people? Was I still Jewish? Is that what led me not to abandon this traveler? Was I doing something for myself as much as for him? Was I reaching back in time, connecting myself to an identity I had shed long ago? But then, I thought, was there a need for an identity? For my fellow traveler, lost in a world in which he could not communicate, most assuredly, and it was that identity he found in me that drew him to me and calmed his spirit. As for me, I wasn't, and still am not, sure. For a few hours of my existence I had been reminded of where I came from, whom I belonged to at least for some time in my life, but I hoped, and still hope, that were this gentleman from any other culture, I would have acted similarly. For in our life, that phenomenon, identity, can be ever so strong, but breaking through it, crossing cultures, is an equally powerful action, and perhaps precisely what I had done was reach out not to a Jew as a Jew, but to a human being as a human being. To fully resolve that doubt will always be difficult, and what is equally difficult is to discover how my Jewish friend understood my actions, and whether he, to this day, also questions just exactly what was the true meaning of our adventure.

# FROM ÎLE DES CARTES

Lori Yarotsky

The sun had long since retired, and without the illumination of the full moon, Jason would not have found his way to the brickyards—a hand-lantern would be insufficient on a moonless night, for the electric power was off. With the full moon as his guide, he navigated by counting the intersections of streets, hurrying in the direction and to the rhythm of a far-off drumbeat. He was certain to be the sole sane person wandering the streets at this hour.

The percussion sound grew stronger as he approached the brickyard. Dead birds were speared on huge wooden poles, and stuck in the ground as magic guideposts to the path's commencement, promising a spiritual zone ahead. Abruptly, a fluttering wind lifted bits of eggshells into the air and dropped them down like a surprise rain before him. He shivered and continued on, the mud around him quaking with the vibration of the drums.

The path was bound by smooth, round stones; bits of cut-up bird parts formed a geometric pattern across its width—a numismatic retainer and a hindering gateway to unfriendly visitors. Dogs barked from the shadows. A fire glowed in the distance.

He felt he was on a stage. The set was decorated, dressed, the drum and chanting were the orchestra, the full moon the stage lights. Aware of his every movement and every sound, and careful not to splinter a twig with his step, he crept behind a hedge of oleander and palm trees.

Iridescent under the moonlight, a crush of dark, sweaty torsos throbbed about the abandoned brickyard. He breathed deeply, he sucked the air, an iron kettle of smoldering sourness mingled with the salty aroma of unbathed flesh, it was a beckoning, lethal parfum. He moved closer. Backlit by the kettle fire, silhouetted figures danced the Calinda with writhing, feverish frenzy. Full-bodied voices resonated haunting melodies with perfect pitch—many drums beat a menacing rhythm.

The wind rose up again, bringing solicitous fragrances of sweet jasmine and musky angel's trumpets fused with the

otherwise noxious atmosphere; a dizzying mix. Baroque layers of tom-tom drums and hand clapping were invitations for men and women to strip off their clothing; they danced and howled, even barked, at the moon and at each other, it was ecstasy, not decorum; it was their choir, their confession, their service, their prayer. The ceremony was a natural eroticism, a celebration of life, of fertility—an unmistakable prelude to seduction. Cries of "*Aïe! Aïe! Vaudou Magnan!*" filled his ears and he moved nearer to the scene, the very sight of this strange and otherworldly commotion sent chills up his spine and thrilled him at once. Every muscle in his frame twitched in time to the drumbeat. Then from out of the shadows, he heard a small, Caribbèan-French voice whisper his name.

"Jason...Ja-sohn, *c'est moi, Jolie.*"

Jason turned to see the familiar face of his friend. "Mon amie, mon amie!" Their eyes wept and they embraced, swirling and reeling in the muddy path. "Ah, *mon amie... mon amie.* Ah, Jolie, I prayed for this moment...how well you look! How I've missed you!" Their bodies rocking together, the two held tight to each other. Their soothing caresses drew sparks in the night.

"Jason, ah, *c'est terrible, terrible,* and I have only thought of you every instant since we parted," Jolie kissed her friend, "Everything is différent...every-one, ev-very-thing." She stroked Jason with her fingers, from his waist to his ears and back again.

"*Je sais,* I know, I am so happy to be with you...I feel better now just to be here. What is this music?" Jason smiled, teardrops formed happily in his eyes. The rest of the world seemed far away.

"*C'est le 'Bamboula'*, it is a dance—we singing and jerking and when it's over, rolling 'long the ground and rubbing against each other, how did you ever get here?" She was breathless. Jason pointed to his feet and they both laughed. Then he spoke, "Ah, *mon amie.* He made a face.

"Is it so bad?"

"*Mais, oui,* terrifying, terrifying. At first, it was very quiet and I felt safe...but now, non...." The previous few months seemed like something he must have dreamed, and by contrast, he found himself in the midst of a scene, an energy quite real.

An eerie whistle broke their conversation. Jason looked up to see four men blowing into conch shells, this followed by a

loud chorus of shouting, yelling and clapping, "Eh, eh, bomba, bom-bah, hehn, hehn."

"Come, come, let's get some food and you can see where I stay." Jolie grabbed Jason's hand and the two stepped around the edge of a large sway-dancing circle. For the first time, the Haitian *mulâtresse* was away from the direct influence of the whites—here she was surrounded by other Caribbean blacks. And as much as she missed that world—here she was comforted by the sound of familiar melodies.

The evening's meal, fried sweet potatoes and cornmash *sagamité*, was served by an old *nègresse*. Her red turban sat high upon her head. So high, Jason thought she might be concealing something in there, contraband or charms or something. The two perched on a stack of bricks to eat their meal. The spectacle continued, long shadows jumped back and forth before them as they talked. It was a show unlike anything Jason had experienced; he was excited, bewitched.

"Have you seen Huck?" Jason lifted his eyebrows for emphasis, looked back at Jolie, wondered if he survived. Wondered what, if anything, might be left of their previous life. Everything was so different now—he craved something familiar.

Jason noticed that Jolie showed more interest in her present environment than in remembering her former life. "Ah, Jolie, I have not been out before now...but everything is...." His otherwise ruddy complexion blanched as his words dropped off.

"There is no then now, Jason," Jolie seemed almost jubilant, as if it held no value for her. Her foot tapped, her shoulders rocked with the drumbeats, "only this community still stands—and of course, our brickyard!"

Jolie closed her eyes and held on to Jason, they trembled together, their divergent thoughts crashing in a cloud about them. After awhile, the two got up and walked around the fire. He never looked so *pâle* in the daylight...around other folk, Jolie thought, somehow now, surrounded by our shimmering dark faces, his skin glows like a moon, a spirit in the night. "Ah, Jason, your face is so pale—like a ghost—in this dark camp!" she softly exclaimed. For years, Jolie had noticed the darkness of her own skin against the whites; now in a reversal of perspective, she observed that her friend's skin was so much lighter than the blacks or even the *mulâtres*.

Jason put his hands to his face as if it were hot. He looked around at the others.

How eerie to now look at him in these surroundings...he seems as from another world. An enigma! How can we hide him here, she thought, *c'est une chose impossible!* He will sparkle as a star in the night.... The color of their flesh still proved a strong and inescapable identity.

Jason watched the display before them. A band of *devotés* swayed back and forth around a charcoal circle in a thrusting chant-dance of the spirit, a communal and syncopated parade of lust. Crude instruments carried forth a moving chorus mixed with yells by *les initiates* and *les devotés* disciples. The air was ponderous with freedom and potent energy, a power spark worshipping, attending to the spirit loa, which brought the music. It seemed that anything might happen now.

A small group of worshippers kissed the ground before the drums, another group danced around a center post—a *péristyle*, which stood upright in the ground—their heads bundled in red poultices of feathers and cornmeal mixed with what seemed blood and raw eggs, and anointed with a stench of herbs and roots. "Euoooh!" Jason politely muffled his mouth as he cried. Intolerable odor, he thought. But he took it in, it was surely a different ambiance than where he'd just walked. Here there was a feeling of openness, love and festivity, for even the colors, the red and orange of the kettle fire, the crimson turbans of the women, the red scarves on the men, and their lusty chocolate-colored flesh were enchanting, full of life. Jolie merged with the scene completely—wove herself into the tapestry of the place.

"New ones, *les initiates*, do not eat for three days, they have only water," Jolie indicated a group of *nègres* curled up like snails on the dank soil. "In a trance, we call on spirits, power builds and we feel the animus' presence. The spirit loa descends on those who submit, one by one, the spirits called loa possess each body, each person, and become god in that moment—yet these persons may be touched or caressed by others during their ecstasy. We join ensemble to satisfy the loa and obtain healing powers *spécial*. *Objets* at the center of the circle are symbols for what the loa wants." Jolie nodded at the site, "Then after la *cérémonie rituelle*, all the disciples dance *spécial ensemble*, then we feast on food *sacré*—warm goat blood—to increase the

animal energy—this pleases the loa, makes a solid bond. The loa rides their horses....” She gestured to an assortment of feathers, food and bottles filled with rum. Bowls of water and shiny objects were placed in four corners. “This is the North, South, East and *Ouest*,” she pointed to the four water bowls and made a cross in the air.

Jason smiled at his friend, thinking how happy, how free she seemed in this camp, he knew it must be arduous work they daily had, to build the community, their homes, but their nighttime was their own. It seemed joyful to Jason. All around, he saw liveliness, bright-colored costumes, high spirits. What a contrast to my own circumstance, he thought....

He looked up at the heavens, the full moon was a fertile seed and its bloom spread a milky film over the evening. It had moved substantially in its path across the sky—surely it has been two hours since I left the cave entrance. He squeezed his friend’s hand, kissed her on the mouth. “*Au revoir, mon amie*,” he said. “*Au revoir*,” Jolie whispered her reply.

**POEMS**

# ARLINGTON

Alex Addario

it was 8:32  
I was finally out of work  
I pedaled as fast as I could  
to make the 'packy' before it closed.  
The cold winds caused me to tear,  
and my legs felt like shit.  
But after what seemed like forever  
I finally made it.  
I walked into Arlington.  
"pack of filters and a pint of polish"  
"no problem buddy" he replied.  
Behind me was a mother and her daughter.  
That little girl was so interested in being there  
"mommy mommy you should get that stuff,  
the bottle is pink!"  
as I put my cash on the counter  
and struggled in my pocket for change  
that girl looked up at me  
with the most innocent brown eyes,

removed the lollipop from her mouth  
and said  
"my daddy used to drink that stuff,  
but he's dead and living with pep pep in heaven now"  
I smiled,  
looked up at her mother  
nodded my head  
and got out of there.  
I thought about what that girl said later that night.  
Shot after shot.  
I started to remember little of anything.  
I awoke that morning with a pain in my head  
and an ache in my stomach.  
Wondering how I managed to sleep all night in the kitchen.  
I made my way to my bed  
pulled the blankets over my head.  
Moaned and groaned.  
Maybe I should be dead.  
Reply

## ENGLISH BIRD

Alex Addario

She opened her mouth.  
The words sounded lovely.  
There's something about an accent that always gets me.  
It's different.  
She doesn't sound like every girl you talk to.  
Same choice of words.  
Same stories.  
Same tongue.  
Same script.  
Refreshing.  
She could sing my favorite songs.  
Read aloud the paper  
even recite that annoying car commercial jingle  
that's constantly stuck in my head.  
And it will all sound new to me.  
With every accent though  
follows that same act.  
That play every girl performs.  
They're all the same anyway.  
It's just the accent.  
I'll fall for it any and every time.  
So sing English bird.  
Sing.  
Tell me anything, I want to hear.  
I'll stay.

## OATMEAL

Jeremy Cohen

Oatmeal is my bestfriend  
And couldn't be a better bestfriend.  
Sometimes I wish I just had  
Another bestfriend  
Because I get sick of oatmeal  
Sometimes.

# TOM

Jeremy Cohen

A snow white 95 Taurus  
swerving down a bumpy dirt road  
wasn't so white anymore.

It comes to a stop.  
Not at a stop sign,  
a dead end.

He steps out of the car,  
Takes a deep breath,  
Then runs.

I've never seen such a sight.  
His body shape resembled a muscular banana.  
Strangely, he hooked it towards the woods.

I decided to wait in the car.  
Patiently.  
I knew we would never see each other again.

# BLACK HOLES

Christina Dutra

I have never seen eyes so empty,  
The beauty in the brown of your eyes  
Are now only remnants of my memory.

Your blackened crown.  
Your cardinal sin.  
I don't want your dregs.

They say, you can either let go of that burning rope  
Or let it drag you.

So, be at peace baby, and begone.

## **RUSSIAN EGGS**

Jade Goheen

A hearty breakfast for a sensitive soul,  
the tomes you carried set down gently  
as you slid into your chair.  
Your face betrayed your interest,  
a caricature of concern and the light  
behind your eyes flickering at each fresh  
burn, scrape, or tumble.  
Your tips bought me nail polish,  
albums, and cheap earrings. All the  
ingredients for solitary nights of  
superficial thoughts and dreams of  
wooden bridges or rusting factories.  
Pouring you some coffee, I never knew  
where to look, your quiet smile a grenade  
in the dark, the shrapnel embedded in my day.  
Pride or shyness saw that I'd never speak,  
but could you taste it in the hash browns?  
Your acidic absence from  
those cramped tables had me  
write lives for you on the bus,  
the bike, and through the snow.  
Who you are I'll never really know.

## **THE SLY**

Jade Goheen

sneaking smirks and  
sweet kisses that end  
before they've begun.  
prey or predator  
friend or foe  
are you my kind  
or kind of mine?

## **BARS**

Gianna James

The men standing outside in the yellow glow of the lamp lights near steel bars, almost 4am, our windows, bickering loudly in their New York tattoo accents. I wonder what they're doing I wonder why they're broken I mean I wonder why they're bickering in their accents now a minute past four in the now orange glow of 31st street by bars. Not the drinking kind no the restraining kind, our windows.

The men under dressed in the dawn of autumn, scary, I see them as gods.

They're scary. We're all gods.

## **THEY WERE SKELETONS**

Gianna James

In the mornings, against the pale blue of the hard subway benches, they were like skeletons; gaunt, and begging their tired limbs to drag them to where they needed to be.

In the evenings, they were skeletons.

Drained of life and faces grayed, their spirits remained on Wall Streets and Park Avenues, forty-six stories in the air, as their bones returned to the pale blue seats where they could dread their arrivals to the places they each called "home." Where an open window in a stark white bedroom brought not the songs of the birds or rays of the sun but instead abrasive iron horns, the scent of truck-spilt gasoline, stormy asphalt, marijuana.

## JUST IN CASE SOMEONE ASKS, WHAT IS IT LIKE?

Daniel Johnson

One. Playing in the street with your brother and your friend, and some man, a man without a face, standing behind a screen door or a window yelled, "You niggers go play in front of your own damn house." You walking home and how after that your bookshelves changed. Became colored. Two. The boy at school, and how the violence in you gripped his neck because you weren't that word. And then how it was OK because he wasn't from here, and in Connecticut they don't have people like you. Three. High school. The difference between swastikas and rebel flags. Four. The time you drove to Salisbury, and while in the kitchen, her father-in-law read, "Three Negroes Lynched." Five. Everything about college. You comparing the color of your scholarship with your best friend and finally concluding that school is not a race. Six. You finding your prefix was black. Lastly. Your afro, and how it made white people think you were a museum.

## ECHO IN THE DARKROOM

Hwan Lee

I see in the dark room.  
A white head is bouncing to the black walls.  
I hear in the dark room.  
Echo is bouncing to the black walls.  
I see in the dark room.  
Kids are climbing to the black walls.  
I hear in the dark room.  
Laughing sounds are scattering on the black walls.  
I feel in the dark room.  
A little girl is touching the black walls.  
I want to scream in the dark room.  
My voice will break the black walls.  
The white head, echo, kids, sounds, and the little girl will escape from the dark room.

## RIPPED

Stephanie Lin

A paper dress hung  
on the counter wrinkled  
the shame of its ruined state  
Mother wore pride with this dress  
and hers before her did so in the white  
ceremonies that bound  
two together

Back in those years,  
there was no red  
in the white  
and now there is  
an uneven splotch  
of a broken dream.

## SOLIDIFY

Adi Navon

It was at the supermarket  
The one we always went to buy beers at  
Before we went to your place to watch a movie  
It was August  
There were protest rallies  
People marching the streets  
Signs and microphones and sweat  
It was the sixth protest and the biggest one so far  
Half a million marchers screaming revolution  
I was waiting for him to call  
For him to get off work and meet me  
So we could shout together for a new country  
We went into the supermarket  
Me and my two friends who you knew well  
I didn't even notice it's that supermarket  
Until I saw you  
Then I looked around  
At the shelves  
With milk and bread and tomatoes  
Familiar  
You were there  
Taking a water bottle shelf

# ANYONE BUT DAD

Abigail Rae

I turned around to hide behind the bread aisle  
Greeting a shadow  
Solidify a memory  
Politeness makes you feel the distance stronger  
Makes you aware of how far we are apart  
Nice words of common courtesy  
Can't fit a past romance  
Only coworkers  
With whom you don't share an office with anymore  
I turned around  
Walked to the other end of the aisle  
When  
My friends called me to join them at the register  
I took my water bottle and casually walked to them  
You saw me  
You saw I looked away  
You left  
We went out of the supermarket and shouted down the streets  
for a new country

He frames his delusions.  
They look like they're kind,  
Smiling together but  
Not because

His furniture is nice,,  
Proving his kind of pride.  
Lush couches for  
Finite persons.

King size bed for him  
And any one who stays.  
New bed sheets and  
Exhausted dreams.

Hallmark cards signed  
By people who care  
Enough to write  
Their names.

A crook of a mother  
Calls her son monthly,  
Married to any one  
But dad.

One day he'll be dead,  
His framed delusions  
Will be auctioned off,  
Not sold.

Long live the suited  
Man and his glory,  
May his legacy  
Rest in pieces.

# MIRAGE

Abigail Rae

A mirage of you standing atop  
the roof I am staring at across  
from the one I stand while I  
smoke this cigarette.

You, waving and smiling at me.  
Me, waving and smiling at you.  
That will never happen not  
Now, not even later.

Settles like sand at the bottom  
of a water glass. Myself, with  
cigarettes I claim not to smoke.  
Throw it over the edge.

Watch it dissolve into every thing  
else I see. Just like the mirage of  
you, waving and smiling at me.  
Waving and smiling.

At no one.  
At nothing.

# THE PROSPECT OF FAILURE

Kate Ruebenson

*Artist James Rosenquist Seated in Studio, 1963. Hollis Frampton.*

All plans on the floor.  
All before their time.

Paint waits for the wall until, feeling as if a brush will never touch  
human hands, the bucket falls as if to give up, spilling guiltily on  
wood panels, soaking the air between the boards or into cracks.  
Glue forgets itself and sticks to the metal can once meant to  
hold it  
now becomes part of its body.  
The long roll of paper lies lazily lonely and purposeless.  
A drill has fallen nearby and cannot get up.

He begins to bend one way in forfeit, tilting on a leg  
The once bright room slowly darkening with disappointment  
He could fall off the chair and spill over himself  
As if he too were a plan that failed.

Is this the moment of defeat,

Or the moment right before, of potential greatness?

He sits in the middle of the chaos as if he cannot get up.  
Feet planted on the floor body sprouting upwards from it,  
Piles of beauty surround, though dark though messy  
A Pollock-ed floor, a stained glass window, a temple  
As if from this ruin, rebirth.

# THE PROSPECT OF SUCCESS

Kate Ruebenson

*Jean Cocteau, Paris, 1960. Arnold Newman.*

Sit. Sit there. All day until something comes.  
But don't beckon it. Pretend you're surprised when it does.  
The light above you a kind of halo. The rest of the room black  
and matter-less.

With books stacked, scissors, and a telephone. A tissue in your  
pocket.

Don't expect it but be ready just in case. Writing is the closest  
parallel to life.

Waiting for words like for friends who are late.

Keep the windows open so your hair can ruffle. Wind stirs the  
follicles.

Strokes the mind into comfort until it elicits things it shouldn't.  
Then you'll become responsible for a masterpiece.

There's a kind of danger here that runs parallel to failure,  
nothingness.

Something has to change and it will be what needed to change.  
Take the scissors and cut your tie—

## UNWRITTEN

Johnny Ruzzo

Unwritten

Hot, hot, heat  
I jump in  
with every intention  
of drowning  
but there is no water  
it burns like scotch  
it still does  
more ice  
doesn't make sense  
just a mess  
come off it  
cut it out

## THE FLOW

Alaina Sacci

There are tears flowing on all of the faces around. Droplets of emotion falling down cheeks, soaking shirts and forming shapes. "Imagine there's no heaven." That scares the girl in her young six-year-old mind. A casket—shiny brown wood with its own tears flowing from the falling rain. Half of what made her in there flowing down the steps through a crowd of people. She needs to keep her hand on the glossy surface, but she just keeps it floating above. Hundreds of eyes floating with flowing tears, not attached to faces. The eyes float in her direction, but her tears aren't flowing. She tries to pretend they are, for the cameras. She's meant to appear sad, but she doesn't feel anything. She is confused, all she sees are the tears and the grey mass they call "sky." It doesn't look like the sky today, it looks like a never ending sheet of glass. She doesn't know these faces, but he does... did. The sky has its own flowing tears today, but the daughter does not. She keeps her head down, so the eyes of the camera won't notice. This waltz through reality doesn't feel real and for a second she questions if it's a dream. It's lasting a lifetime and the eyes and cameras won't float to anyone but her. The casket is loaded into a vehicle she'll learn later is called a hearse. The surface is just as glossy as the casket with its own flowing tears floating in the darkness of the black metal. Her and the three other daughters and the wife slide into the back. The door seems to stay open for eternity. The floating eyes with their flowing tears continue to search for something on her face, criticizing. Where are her tears? She's the only set of eyes missing the flow. And the door closes, everything stops for a long moment and she begins to feel. She looks down sees the wet shapes soaking her shirt and begins to flow with the rest of the flowers she has finally escaped.

## PATCH DIVINATION

Julia Santoli

Why is it that whenever we dig up the past,  
All that remains to be found are memorabilia rather than  
memories:

A tattered boxspring

A barren room

The body of photographs, once kept warm by

My veins

Your pulse.

There is a science to recalling the past—

Just as there is one to forgetting the present:

All that we knew before we were born

Has faded into the patterns of our palms.

## THAT THERE

Annabel Worthington

If it weren't for that there

or that, there—

I'd be crossing that ocean

if that ocean were not there.

# AFTER ALL

Yao Xiao

After all, he has gone to her.  
Of all the sharpness of gold stains and dried roses so damp  
Squished to a pulp in their palms.  
It is only the magenta stain  
And wet air after a thunder storm  
That has kept me from blooming  
This garden has long been untended  
Buildings grew out of the ground  
No where to go, sugarcane.  
This city so blue you can drown in it for as long as you like  
But the sun rays will only crawl on your face once  
Like a child, quietly tearing off a locust's eyes.

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Poetry and works of fiction and non-fiction (personal essays) will be considered. If you would like your manuscript returned, please enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope. Manuscripts should be typed. Macintosh discs are acceptable/desirable. Or e-mail as an rtf attachment or in the body of the e-mail to Profphillips@hotmail.com, Label document "Submission to *WORDS*." Please include a phone number and e-mail address where you can be reached.

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