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## THE LANTERN

The Ursinus College Literary Magazine

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Judge's Note:

One hallmark of excellent short fiction is its paradoxical ability to open up a new world for readers while also closing with an elegant turn of phrase. The characters and situation may make us feel that we have entered a new space, but the language reminds us, ultimately, that we are exiting a literary one. The fictions in this issue of *The Lantern* all explore interesting worlds, but for its eloquent conclusion, I believe "The Birthday Celebration" is especially to be commended.

--Margot Kelley
We congratulate Gaylen Gawlowski on her prize-winning story "The Birthday Celebration." Thank you to Margot Kelley for making the difficult choice. Congratulations also to Jessica Morin for her cover drawing "Angel of Death."

In light of the current renewed interest in the arts and humanities on campus, many changes have been made in The Lantern. We are excited to present an increase in pages, allowing more student voices to be heard, and a more inviting layout for readers. We must thank Jim Maynard, Trish Daley and our staff for their hard work and patience in preparing the new book.

--Heather & Sonny
The Birthday Celebration

Found at the bottom of a cedar chest filled with old report cards and finger paintings, the photograph had become a light brownish color and was torn at the edge. After placing it in between the pages of Funk and Wagnall's letter "g" for a few weeks, it flattened nicely. Now the picture sits in a frame on my desk at college. I look at it everyday in an attempt to recall the essence of my big brother. There he stands, wide-eyed and gap-toothed, an excited expression on his face. Sadly, the picture is not a true representation of Jason's life. You see, Dad was a drunk and Jason was his worst enemy.

Since I can remember, my father's problem was never talked about. I didn't even know why he was a drunk or when or how it happened. Everything was a mystery to me, a skeleton in the closet. Now I know that our family secret would have been kept for generations had it not been for Jason. Jason's courage has made my life bearable, and I feel obligated to share his story. I can remember everything so clearly.

Dad learned that he had been laid off from his job at the grocery store about three months prior to Jason's sixteenth birthday. He made phone calls, typed resumes, and went to many interviews, yet each employer complained of his lack of a college education. With every rejection, every pat on the back, every handshake goodbye, Dad came closer to an explosion.

To make matters worse, Mom had to take a second job. During the day she would bus tables at the South Perk Hotel, and at night she worked as a seamstress in the basement of a clothing factory. Dad's pride was injured by his inability to provide for the family. Consequently, he fell into a deep depression. Tensions were high when he mailed his final resume.

Mom came home from work late on Monday night, two weeks prior to Jason's birthday. Jason and I sat at the dinner table playing a game of cards when Mom walked in. Her face was pale and she looked like she needed to throw up. I knew what was coming and began to bite my nails, but after years of doing so, there was nothing left to bite.
Dad barged in and snatched the mail from my mother’s hand; no consideration, not even a hello. He flung the junk mail onto the table and tore open a letter from Fox Food Markets. Another rejection letter was ripped into little pieces and left to be cleaned. Dad grabbed his keys and coat, and left. Our mouths hung open and we all had the same, “Should we stay or should we run like hell?” look on our faces. There was a moment of silence, a non-verbal agreement to stay.

Jason and I slept in the same room that night. For hours Mom paced the kitchen floor while Jason and I tossed in the bed. Every car that passed and door that slammed intensified our nervousness. My brother and I unwillingly drifted to sleep.

The next morning we were awakened by the slam of the front door. Dad had finally come home. Reluctantly, we left the security of our locked bedroom. We found him hunched in the living room. The stench of alcohol emanated from his body. His face was reddened and scowling. Mom eased her way towards him with her hands outstretched in an attempt to put him to bed. I stared at the ground; my eyes were fixated on a button that had just dropped. It was a pink button from my mother’s robe. Her scream startled me and my eyes darted upwards. Mom was still standing, but Dad had forced her down so that she was bent at her waist. She had no choice but to submit; her brown curls were entwined in between my father’s dirty fingers. My young mind could not comprehend the events fast enough. The loudness and confusion caused me to freeze and cry. I stepped back and watched the events that followed.

Although he had been crying too, Jason jumped forward and grabbed my father around the waist. I suppose he was trying to tackle him to the ground, but Dad was just too big. Dad snatched Jason by his head and pushed him onto the floor. Jason fell face first. He turned his head towards my mother and began to sob. His nose and mouth were bloody, and red strings of saliva were strung from his upper jaw to his lower jaw. His right-hand pinky was separated from the rest of his fingers, obviously broken.

Dad released my mother from his grip and staggered into the bedroom. Mother began attending to Jason. Shortly thereafter, the three of us were driving to Elizabeth Memorial Hospital. Apparently, Jason had fallen while playing in a tree house outside. Jason’s left canine tooth had been knocked
out by the fall. His upper lip was sewn with seven stitches, and his right-hand pinky was bandaged and taped to his ring finger.

Before entering the house, Mom brushed our hair and straightened our clothes. Dad sat at the kitchen table drinking a cup of coffee. When he looked up we could tell that he had been crying, a sentiment that pulled at the heart of each of us. He hugged Jason and repeated the words, "I'm so sorry" over again and again. That night I overheard Dad and Mom talking. He promised that it would never happen again and blamed it on his depression. Mom simply accepted. We all knew that it would never stop; he had promised hundreds of times before.

The night after his apology, Dad came home drunk again. I shuddered at the thought of what would set him off this time. In the past, he was either drunk and "hungry" or drunk and "tired of this mess" or drunk and "sick of having to do everything around here." He always picked on Jason because Jason needed to be taught a "lesson" and "learn responsibility." And so, beginning at ten years of age and continuing into his teen years, Jason was forced to perform menial tasks in an attempt to learn Dad's theory of "all work and no play."

On this particular occasion, Jason had no choice but to rake the yard, wash the car, and clean the garage at 3:00 a.m. He was told that if it wasn't good enough, he would do it again or suffer the consequences. No matter how good Jason's raking or washing or cleaning was, I knew that he would suffer the consequences anyway.

I crept outside around 5:00 a.m. to see how he was doing. I could see him sitting on a tree stump in the backyard with the rake in his hands. He was crying. I moved closer and he jumped to his feet. When he noticed it was me, he sat back down and continued to sob with his face in his hands; that's how we all cried, so that Dad wouldn't hear. I didn't know what to do. My family wasn't even remotely affectionate, and so I didn't feel comfortable touching him or hugging him. I just stood there and let him talk.

I was shocked by his candidness. We had been taught to keep our problems inside, but Jason began letting everything pour out. I glanced around, worried that someone other than
myself might be listening. Only the crickets chirped, so we were okay to talk.

"I feel terribly alone and unsure," he said. "I don't know who my father is, who my mother is, and who you are. Worst of all, I don't even understand who I am."

"I don't know what to say," I whispered.

He begged me, "Tell me why I feel so stupid and useless and crazy!"

"I feel the same way, Jason. Those are all words I would have used to describe myself if anyone would have ever asked me to. We are living tormented lives! Do you really think that this is the way everyone lives? I mean, the kids at school don't appear to be abused. They look fresh and clean and untouched, but I suppose that, on the outside, we seem normal too."

We talked for over an hour, and when the sun began to rise, Jason lifted his head and told me to go inside. His tears streamed down his cheeks, cutting pathways through the dirt so that his face looked like the backside of a leaf. I snuck inside and crawled into bed.

My guilt kept me awake and I wondered, why was I not out there helping Jason? Why was I letting this life lead me? That night I cried harder than I ever had before; I used my pillows to muffle my screams.

The rest of the two weeks before my brother's birthday continued in the same manner, except for one thing. Every night, after Dad had fallen asleep, I joined Jason in his chores. Things got done a lot quicker, but instead of going to sleep, we would stay outside and talk. We even laughed. I fell in love with him.

We were working outside on the morning of his sixteenth birthday. While he was kneeling down, pulling weeds, I walked into the woods behind our house and picked him some wildflowers. His smile told me everything, but his hug told me more. It felt good, and for one moment I knew what it was like to be normal.

That afternoon I returned home from school and found Jason in the kitchen. He had hanged himself from a 4" x 4" board that was placed on top of the refrigerator and stretched across to the kitchen cabinets. A fly clung to his nose, calling my attention to the tear sitting on his lip. I didn't move until
my father arrived home over three hours later.

The look on his face was quizzical at first. I'm sure he wondered why his son would do such a thing. All at once his actions came to him, and he began to cry. His head fell into his hands. His body shuddered. It was the first time I had seen him cry.

Jason had a simple funeral. Mother, Father, and myself were the primary attendants at the ceremony. Since Jason was a quiet person, he did not have many friends. Over the years our family had drifted apart from other relatives and, as a result, grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, and uncles did not attend but rather sent letters of sympathy.

A week later, my father entered the Alcoholics Anonymous program. Our family began seeing a counselor around the same time. Dad has been sober for six years now and we collectively continue to talk with a counselor every two months.

Things have gotten better for me since I have been away at school, although I did contemplate taking my own life during freshman year. The guilt that I felt for so many years just seemed to heighten when I made the initial college transition. My shrink told me that my reaction was normal considering my background.

Now I just kind of keep to myself. Don't get me wrong, I have friends and enjoy going out once in awhile, but I spend a majority of time just painting. Recently I've been taking some art classes, and I have discovered that I am pretty good at it. My art teacher calls my work "surreal"; I call it expressive. I really feel that it's helping me work through all that has happened in my life. My first exhibit opens in a week. The exhibit is entitled "The Birthday Celebration," yet most of the paintings are of the undersides of different types of leaves. If you squint your eyes the right way, you can put together the crying face of a little boy. I've named each painting "Jason."
Surprise! Surprise!

"Surprise! Surprise!" Filled her ears as she pushed open the wooden door of the banquet hall. Her gaze fixed on me for no more than two seconds (one thousand, two thousand), and she swiftly reshit the door that separated them from us. Laughter roared up from those same voices that had seconds ago voiced the exclamation. Once again, the door creaked open, much slower this time, as my mother, father and grandmother nervously walked through, each unable to repress the smiles that covered their faces. Two children that my mother loves as her own ran up, jumped into her arms, ferociously squeezed her and giggled as the one said, "Appy Birday Ebbie and Garry!" Those within earshot again laughed at this little one's innocent mistake. The two little boys took off running as soon as Mom set them back down on the ground. The whole time I had been intently watching her face for any expression that might give it away. But nothing in her actions showed that she was faking it.

Relieved, I walked over to her and put my arms around her. "Happy Anniversary, Mom. I guess we finally surprised you, huh?"

"I can't believe you really did this." She hugged me tighter. Then she pulled back and looked quizzically into my eyes, "I see that Jamie is here. Without Carolyn?" I simply shrugged my shoulders then leaned over and whispered, "So, Dad, were you really surprised?"

"Nope. I knew all along," He winked at me and then hugged me too.

*****

Twenty-five years. In today's world, that pretty much seems like a miracle. My parents are that perfect couple that all of us hope to become someday. I'm standing here in the midst of about seventy people and I'm witnessing a real live miracle. "Can't the rest of you see that what we are looking at is a miracle?!?!" I want to yell out loud so everyone can hear me, but no one would probably understand anyway. They are
all too busy enjoying themselves. I look around the room. Is anyone thinking thoughts similar to mine? Sometimes people are just too hard to read. They have this ability to cover up their emotions with that fake smile. And even if you know that it's fake, you still don't know what emotion is underneath it. Anger, sorrow, distress? At these kinds of things, I imagine the prominent emotion is loneliness. Some probably stare at the doorway my parents walked through and focus not on their happiness, but instead remain staring at the empty doorway.

After only twenty-three years of living on this earth, even I sometimes stare at that empty doorway. My mind wanders constantly. One minute I'm talking to someone that I haven't seen for years, then I'm not even in the room. I mean, my body's in the room, but I'm somewhere else. I'm watching everyone else laugh and talk, but I can't really hear their voices or their laughter, I can only see their lips and heads move excitedly. My thoughts are taking me so far away. Sometimes I'm in the past, then the next moment I'm wondering about my future.

Like now, I'm staring across the room as Mom and Dad are smushing chocolate cake that says "Happy 25th Anniversary Debbie and Garry" into each other's mouths. My eyes peer over them and rest upon Jamie's smile. My mouth also curves up. It's hard to believe that it's already been a year and a half since we were together. I guess a part of me always thought that Jamie and I would someday be celebrating a special anniversary together, just like my parents. It's hard to let go of that thought, especially since I know that Jamie had that same hope.

*****

Even though we are no longer a couple, at times Jamie and I seem to be closer than most couples. Most people think that it's impossible to be just friends after you've been lovers, but I think that Jamie and I have proved that theory wrong. In fact, just the other day he came to me and asked for some advice about his girlfriend, Carolyn. (Yes, he does have a girlfriend, and although they've been dating for about a year, I still don't really believe that he loves her.) They had been arguing because she felt like he was losing interest, because he no longer did all the little romantic things that he used to do. He probably hadn't bought her roses for no occasion in the last
couple weeks. Or maybe he hadn't sent her a "Between You and Me" card, the kind that always seems to explain exactly how you feel. Or maybe he hadn't blind-folded her lately and driven out into the middle of a field to make love to her where she was able to wish upon a star that they would climax together.

*****

I was staring through Jamie while reminiscing, so I didn't noticed that he was now standing about six inches in front of me.
"So, who are you staring at?"
"Uh, uh, what?" I asked while blinking my eyes and shaking my head.
"I was just wondering who you were staring at. I thought you were staring at me," Jamie said. "But I guess I shouldn't be so arrogant because you're still staring in the same place, and I've been standing beside you now for the last three minutes."

I blushed. "Sorry, I was deep in thought."
"I could see that. About what?"
"Uh, just about my parents." I lied. "It's hard to believe that they've really been together this long."
"Yeah, it is. Hey that reminds me, when you have a minute could you come out to my car? I have something I want to show you."
"Sure. Give me a few minutes to talk with Aunt Barbara. You know, the one from Nebraska. And then I'll grab my coat."

*****

"So, what's really bothering you tonight?" He asked as we walked across the dark pavement to his car.
"Why do you always know when something is bothering me?" I asked, smiling.
"Well, maybe because I know you inside and out. So, come on, spill it!"
"Later. It's nothing much." I kept my eyes pasted on the pavement.
"You know, you did a great job with your parents' party, and I wanted to tell you that you look great tonight, Lisa. Isn't that the dress that you wore to my office Christmas
"Yeah, thanks. I can't believe you remember that."

"How could I forget any part of that evening?" Jamie smiled.

Blushing, I teased, "True. It took me awhile to get the wrinkles out of this."

We glanced at one another. "Ahhh, those were the days!"

We both laughed.

Jamie unlocked the passenger side of his forest green Eagle Talon and I climbed in. I reached over to unlock his door. How many times had I done that in the past?

"So, what's this big secret you want to show me?" I asked, as he reached into the glove compartment and pulled out a black velvet box and handed it to me.

I looked expressionless at him and he just smiled. My heart was pounding out of my chest and my hands could barely grasp onto the small perfect box. As I opened it, I could see something sparkle in the light. I didn't even have to hold it up. There was no doubt what it was. I never even stopped to think that maybe he wanted to put it on my finger himself. I simply grabbed it and easily slid it onto my left ring finger. A perfect fit.

I could barely see his face in the darkness, but it undoubtedly contained a smile as I smothered it with my mouth. At first, Jamie didn't respond with the passion that I remembered him having. But as I climbed over and straddled him in the driver's seat, he grabbed at my back, forcing me closer to him. After a few minutes of kissing, I flopped back onto my seat, laughing. "I hoped that you never stopped loving me. I guess you didn't."

"Uh... Lisa, we need to talk..."

I nodded my head, not knowing what we agreed to. I wasn't listening to his words, only concentrating on his mouth. I pulled myself back.

"Lisa, this is your parents' evening. We really need to talk about all of this, but let's do it after the party."

"Yeah, you're right. I want to tell my parents together, not surrounded by seventy people." Reluctantly, I place the ring back into its temporary holder.

We fixed ourselves up and made our way back across
the parking lot.
I laughed out loud. I felt Jamie looking at me. "What?"
"I was just remembering when we used to make the best
of our time alone at your house while your parents were at
work."
Jamie looked confused. "Huh, what...oh yeah. Lisa, I
haven't..."
I put my hand over his mouth and reassured him. "I
know. It's okay. I won't say anything about us until after
you've had the chance to tell Carolyn. Don't worry."
I grabbed his hand and skipped across the pavement.
Just as we were about to go inside, I noticed Jamie looking up at
the stars. Maybe in my delirious excitement I imagined him
squeezing his eyes shut and his lips wording a wish.

*****

I couldn't sit still. I kept bouncing from guest to guest,
bubbling with excitement. Again, I wanted to scream to
everyone. "Can't you all see that there is another miracle that
has happened here tonight?!" But I contained myself.
Every other second I was glancing around the room in
search of Jamie. Usually when I saw him he was talking to
someone in my family. He was displaying that usual smile of
his.

As I helped clean up the mess left by the guests, my
thoughts kept racing. How strange it was that just earlier this
evening I had been wishing that Jamie and I would be able to
experience the happiness that my parents have had, and now
we actually had the chance to. He was the perfect guy. He
was sweet and also romantic. He had a wonderful sense of
humor, but he also knew when to be serious. And best of all, he
was honest. That's one trait that I hadn't found in any of my
other ex's. Every girl's dream, or at least mine. I guess I
always knew that Jamie was the perfect guy for me. But I'd
been reluctant to trust my feelings. He was my first real
boyfriend and my first lover. Does anyone ever get completely
over their first true love?

*****

I finished cleaning up, then yelled, "Mom, Dad, I'm
going out with Jamie for a little while. Don't wait up. Hope
you both had fun!" I heard a muffled reply as I sprinted out
the door.

I climbed into Jamie's car. I knew what he was thinking. "So, do you want to go to your house?"
"Sure."

It was difficult to keep my hand simply on his thigh for the two minute ride to his house.

We were barely in the door before we were undressing each other. Actually, I guess I was doing most of the undressing.

"Lisa, wait... we still need to talk."

I placed my finger to his lips then covered them with mine. "Shhhh, later."

I found myself in a familiar room. The bed, the dresser, the nightstand, even the posters were in the same place. I hated that poster. It had always made me feel so self-conscious undressing in his room. The model did not have one ounce of fat clinging to her anywhere. Every time that I had flipped the light switch off Jamie would mumble between kisses, "You know that you really don't have anything to be ashamed of."

Tonight I undressed directly in the moonlight that radiated in through the window. I had no shame or fear as I finished peeling off the last of my clothes and stood naked with Jamie's eyes boring into my skin.

As my body sank into his mattress, I noticed that it still had that same softness that I remembered from previous times. But as we began making love, it wasn't at all as I remembered it. Our bodies completely moved in sync with one another. I wasn't worrying about whether or not I was doing everything right, and Jamie didn't seem as concerned as he usually was.

He had always been disappointed that we never climaxed together. Sometimes he couldn't even look me in the eyes after we made love, because he hadn't been able to fulfill what he felt was his duty. At these times he reminded me of a puppy that bowed its head in shame.

But tonight neither of us worried about the other; instead, we were merely concerned with finding each other's mouths as soon as we lost them. As I squinted out at the stars, I almost made a wish. But it wasn't needed. Jamie and I had
become one person, one motion. As we climaxed together, any past uncertainty that I had vanished.

Jamie laid over me for awhile with his face buried in my shoulder without moving, while I worked my hand up and down his backbone. When he finally rolled over, I rubbed my fingers over that spot on my shoulder since the cool air had hit it. My skin was wet. I looked over at Jamie, but he was facing away from me.

"Hey, are you just going to go to sleep now?" I couldn't understand how he could simply fall asleep.

No response.

"Jamie? Jamie, please don't fall asleep," I pleaded. He whispered, "Lisa, I'm sorry."

"SORRY?!?! You have absolutely nothing to be sorry about. Tonight, all of this is wonderful."

"No Lisa, you don't understand. It wasn't for you."

He turned over on his back and looked up at me. Even in the darkness I could see the wetness surrounding his eyes.

I couldn't understand the sadness that I saw there. His eyes bore into mine as if to say, "I'm sorry, so sorry, please don't hate me."

He tightly shut his eyes and breathed deeply. "I never meant to mislead you. I just wanted you to see the ring. I didn't know any better way to tell you."

"What exactly are you trying to tell me?" My voice was foreign.

"I'm trying to explain everything that I should've explained earlier. I am so sorry, Lisa, I never meant to hurt you...I wanted you to be the first to know that I was going to ask Carolyn to marry me. I mean...you are my best friend, and I knew that it would be hard, considering everything that we've been through."

He always tried to reason everything out.

I couldn't feel anything. It was probably freezing, but I continued to lay still with the covers only up to my waist. Then suddenly I was aware of my exposure, not to the cold but to Jamie. I curled my knees to my chest and pulled the blanket up to my neck. My eyes focused on the poster and stared blankly.

Jamie was saying something. I couldn't really distinguish much, only a few words were decipherable:
"love...sorry...don't know...please don't...friends...hate...never."

I tried to bring myself back to the present, but I kept floating everywhere else. I was in his car, at the party, in a field, smiling at roses, reading a card, then in my own bed at home. I felt safer there. I was trying to get away before the pain caught up.

Finally, I pulled myself back and realized that I still wasn't dressed. Jamie was laying on his back, looking up at the ceiling. I don't know if he had asked me a question or if he had just stopped trying to explain himself.

As I started to get up, I felt his hand on my shoulder. It felt like the fearful touch of a stranger. I could feel the coolness of each one of his finger tips. I turned to face him, asking "why?" with my eyes.

Silence.

Why did he still make love to me? I knew the answer without even asking. Nothing else needed to be said; I understood. We had both been living a dream this evening.

*****

Jamie grabbed my arm and turned me around as we walked towards my front door. "Can we still be friends?"

I love proving people wrong, even if I know that they are actually right. Maybe once you are lovers, you really can't ever just be friends again. Staring at him I said, "We can pretend."

I tiptoed up the stairs to my bedroom, as I heard his car pull out of my driveway. Rummaging through my nightstand, I found a flashlight. I slipped into my parents room and covered the light with my hand as I shined it over their bed. I could see the outline of two bodies intertwined laying beneath the covers. A warm relief filled me.

Mechanically, I dressed for bed, scrubbed my face and body, and brushed my teeth and tongue until my gums bled. I got into bed after piling on another blanket. When I closed my eyes, I could not remove the empty doorway that was painted on the inside of my eyelids, nor could I silence the voices that kept yelling over and over again, "Sur Surprise sur prise ise!"
Gene Klose

Driveway

This driveway is an aging desperado,
It has no better side, no talent left untried.
Its disrepair is rampant and no remedy short of replacement
will suffice.
It would be good to have a new dark ramp,
secondary road wide, energetic and clean as a marble bench,
with raised edges to contain the flow of rainwater,
and steer the raging times toward center.
This crumbling lane keeps us from our rightful roles.
These cracks are too severe to serve another dream.
The land has heaved in subtle ways, look here,
the asphalt has not adapted, choosing instead to crack and
spit
black shards, sticky as cola spilled on wood, into the
neighboring grass.
Our uphill trail is exposed and the neighbors watch with slim
anticipation
as creeping gray replaces all the basic black. Oh yes,
the stones beneath the once proud surface have a milder face,
not so quick to hold the heat, they wait for night to work the
change,
and never jump at icy threats.
They are stable and they wear their feelings well,
but they cannot sustain the pace we have in mind.
We need to change the ways we dress our hill.
The driveway first and then the walls and trees, the lawns
and bush,
and most of all the house face that looks out on lakes and
fields,
and up the worn mountain,
whose best days were in epochs before this driveway gave up
its sealing sheen.
The driveway’s seen much better days and no repair is likely.
Bring the shovel and the gun,
I’ll get it done for there’s nothing else that I can do.
These gray stones fill my pockets, too.
Jim Maynard

Midnight in the Court of Kings

The first full night of autumn
began in whiskey and cigars;
you took your place
upon the faded, weather worn couch
and I stood next to you on the balcony,
mixing us drinks as needed
as we shared our introversion.
We talked of definitions,
our cigars like holy censers in the dark,
definitions of ourselves:
two figures of a lost age,
or maybe just lost in this one--
you, the wise philosopher-king,
and I the passionate poet.
We spent the hours in communion,
and we must have been incanting
the proper words for the first night of fall,
for soon the stars looked younger
and your gilded throne stood taller
and the lives we led were richer
in our private court of kings.
Chris Bowers

The Black Quadrilateral

As would an eclipse the black quadrilateral appeared in the center of the city, geometrically perfect and invulnerable, gathering about it a perpetually growing crowd of tightly maintained fury

a crowd pulling together magazine photographers, students of the enlightenment, passers-by, circus sideshows, recently retired professional football players
twelve-year-olds wearing uncomplicated expressions and backward baseball caps standing motionless anxious with open mouths occasionally asking older patrons of the crowd for cigarettes

yuppies with mildly irritating suits holding battering-ram materialistic briefcases forging a lowered-shoulder path through the crowd all the while mumbling something about these people and their dubious employment status

talk show hosts and skin care commercial models desperately looking around for television cameras to focus on them, give them close-ups, give them wide-angle shots, low-angle shots, action shots and cleverly edited segues

groupies with $40 flannel shirts from the GAP tied around their waists, up to date footwear and t-shirts with a leftist slant giggling to one another about Silverchair and groping through the crowd looking for late teenage boys with rightist political slants, long hair and cars

Buddhists gradually approaching the extinction of the self in awe of the great nothingness of the quadrilateral, its great nothingness, its eternal nothingness and its eternal nothingness

college professors nostalgic for their undergraduate years when they believed that only a small reworking of post-structuralist theory would improve the standard of living throughout the western world

communists in awe of the great revolutionary potential of not only the crowd but of the quadrilateral itself, the
absolute living embodiment of both base and superstructure

well-groomed Christians reeking of flesh, blood and new churches hurriedly flipping through the Bible in search of a passage which foretold of the coming of the black quadrilateral

writers of romance novels contemplating the tremendous marketing potential of a story in some way involving the black quadrilateral in addition to a cover photograph of a scantily clad Fabio holding swooning babe

illegal immigrants que no hablan inglés hired by the city at $1.50 an hour to clean up the seemingly endless stream of debris the crowd is slowly and continually compiling

actors in popular 'Generation X' tv shows who enjoy using the term 'in a post-modern world' and who can only stand mindless motionless staring at the icon repeatedly repeating, "this could only happen in our generation, this could only happen in our generation. . ."

computer hackers with carpel-tunnel syndrome exchanging Doom codes and Dungeons & Dragons stories thinking up amusing places to turn the black quadrilateral into cyberspace graffiti

NRA spokeswomen sent by the national office to distribute well-funded, high-gloss pamphlets conclusively proving the absolute and definite need for all citizens of a truly democratic society to own automatic weapons

former high-ranking government officials disgraced by illicit sexual exploits removing their clothing and wildly twisting their middle-age bodies into an ecstatic spiritual frenzy

hippies who did too much LSD wishing they had done more LSD

teenage, straight-edge, militant vegans fresh from a protest outside a local shoe store eating carrots, ignoring panhandlers, listening to ska, pledging to learn an instrument, applying to undergraduate ecology programs, not going to the prom, practicing yoga, scorning McDonald's, dyeing their hair and living with their parents
jarhead army recruiters walking around in uniform
propositioning innocent seventeen-year-old boys who
are simply too young to know any better
dead, stoned and decomposing rock legends infested with
maggots who have gained a more than noticeable
amount of weight drinking good whiskey, drinking bad
whiskey, giving autographs, spreading pestilence, wearing sunglasses, dying again
fans of Quentin Tarantino films complaining about Forrest
Gump, dealing devastating blows to conventional
morality, trying to start the crowd in a chorus of
"stuck in the middle with you," talking about French
and German philosophers whom they have never read
and Brian De Palma films they have seen fourteen
times
rich junkies from Ivy League schools high on cocaine enjoying
everything and everything enjoying them holding
ultra-fast conversations about topics ranging from
global warming to global warming
grocery store clerks with acute acne wearing cheap aprons and
fake bow ties debating whether to go to work or spurn
hypocritical middle-class values and spend their
lives touring with Phish
exotic dancers gradually yet erotically reducing their clothing
to shiny red g-strings with enhanced bulges performing
on strategically placed platforms throughout the
crowd
vacationing British police officers with enormous domed hats
sporadically sending their nightsticks into the
stomachs of random people who they believe would
probably protest the Queen had they ever the chance
Hindu worshipers of the elephant-headed god Ganesha offering
elaborate pujas to a portable icon of the god which fits
nicely into the new lapis lazuli, waterproof, all-
purpose Jansport backpack
fourteen-year-old semi-punk girls from New Jersey who find it
impossible to have sex without getting pregnant
middle Americans who actually exist listening to country
music stations, drinking American beer, doing
nondescript things, occasionally lashing out at
affirmative action, going bowling, hitting their wives,
watching football and cheering for the Dallas Cowboys
codependent couples in dead-end relationships spending their
days spending money on therapy groups, diet foods, exercise equipment and *People* magazine subscriptions
prostitutes with HIV, herpes, genital warts and yeast infections unscrupulously propositioning both young boys and old men with disturbingly high rates of success
well-dressed yet still very sensitive artists in tune with the music of the spheres who hate television and popular music and who possess a complete inability to just fucking get over their teenage angst
bisexual male transvestites with lesbian partners wandering through the crowd hither and thither, hither and thither
manufacturers of potent bluegreen sugar cereals for kids finding it more and more difficult to justify their expensive European cars earned from the profit of the bleeding of the gums of so many helpless young children
tortured gothics wearing an extraordinarily large amount of black wondering why it took so long for the black quadrilateral to finally get here
joggers with walkmans and skimpy running shorts who thought they were only going for a quick workout little realizing they would enter the crowd surrounding the black quadrilateral and never leave
serial killers searching for their next victims calmly scanning the entirety of the crowd, the great sea of flesh, bone, hair, blood, mucus, sinew, fat
the seething twisting mass of human bodies spreading out finitely in all directions from the quadrilateral, the wonderful and beautiful and wonderful quadrilateral the quadrilateral which spread its geometric essence to the four corners of the earth in open defiance of the will of God
the perfectly rectangular quadrilateral as black as the absence of white, forever unmeasurable, towering over the crowd, celebrating nothing, celebrating life, humming quietly
equalizing opposites, destroying depth and erasing time.
So we get there, flash our PA licenses
and are directed into the vestibule
$10 cover charge. Hairspray, full array of designer
colognes, and cloth napkins included.
Open a new pack of cigarettes, get fixed,
and we are inside
Bright lights, loud, bass-swollen, hip-swinging music,
fucking neon
But it's the people that we notice first.
Take a seat at a little round table rigged with bar stools
He smokes Camel Lights. I take occasion into consideration
and have Newports on hand
These wallflowers start prancing by--pretty as hell,
but for sure untouchable. For show
Continuously have the cigarette pursed against my lips
trying to seem satisfied, occupied
trying to look Artsy
He's taking his Gap hat off, executing the long luscious
curly hair technique
Packs are out on display.
Cliques of chicks are walking by. One flower
surrounded by her thorny friends. Makes her look
better, the only score
Butts are stacking up when we decide its time to circulate
fire up and follow the flow of guido jock/mall bitch
pop culture fucks over to the dance floor
Start thinking about Kristin and how we should have brought
her. The floor is useless without her, and we keep
moving
Up on a higher plane again, observing the spectacular
ritualized courting of urban teens
I'm the first to admit it, though I've felt it ever since the
G. Love tape and powder blue Caddy ride downtown
He knows it too, but wants to waste his money's worth.
Get the feeling like I can't breathe, so I have a cigarette
Spot a guy and his recent acquisition grinding
he says, "You grind so fine"
she says, "I'm Daddy's little whore"
See them again as we're leaving, her hand on his package.
Someone from college is screaming my full name, and continues to do so until I spot and identify her
Talked to her once before, maybe upper-crust flirtation machine, out with the girls
Consider dancing as the niceties are exchanged
Put out my smoke as she drifts away left to wonder about the significance of the encounter.
Convince him to leave frustrated over my uncertain position and fearful of my present outward display of character.
he says, "I don't fucking believe that no one asked us for a cigarette. I mean, I left the damn pack out on the table."
I cough and reply in accord. "True, true."
Surrounded by herds of color-blind
Moles clad in grey industrial smoke,
Carrying cold unfeeling steel
Suitcases that reflect any light
That dares to break up the smog-saturated
Murky messy corrupted-clogged sky.

Moles have orders from a potentially
Dangerous deity who plays with grey
Play-dough; one who makes imperfections
From the mutation of imagination. All
Children must be placed in the cookie-
Cutters that stimulate mental stagnation.

Never-ending night results in ceaseless
"clubbing," where twisted colors emanate
From purposefully warped minds and
Ghastly-tinted strobe lights. It's ironic
That their "best" creations stem from
Fornication with the god of intoxication.

The rust from skeletons of unfinished
Monuments to progress pollute my mind,
Making lightheartedness difficult to
Find. Moles, rip open your craniums,
Extract your dead grey-matter, bathe in
Boiling bleach, and purify your souls.
Kerri Slattery

Poetry in Motion

Surprised and shy to see it
Standing straight up as if it already waited--
She supposed she should touch it.
The quick reaction made her nauseated,
but she tentatively leaned closer
and wrapped one hand around the base,
sliding the other along the shaft,
drawing it slowly towards her face.
She fought the urge to choke,
for she was embarrassingly aware
of a roomful of eyes assessing
her in her virginal underwear.
She shivered at the touch of knowing hands,
as she was slowly exposed
in a nakedness more revealing
than simply being without clothes.
She had never felt so clumsy.
She told herself not to be dumb.
She tried not to think
of what was to come.
But the shame overcame her
and she turned away and fled,
dropping the mike,
poem only halfway read.
"It's not like we didn't expect it. It was just a matter of time," said Uncle Bill, as he scooped another spoonful of Aunt Mary's potato salad onto his styrofoam plate.

"Yeah, but we didn't know when. What was it--three or four years that she was in the home?" asked my cousin John, adding a deviled egg to his heavily-laden plate.

"Four. I don't call that living, just eating and breathing. No. Better to have a heart attack and just end it rather than lying around. Hey, you gotta try this potato salad..." Uncle Bill's voice trailed off as I quietly closed the door of my aunt's house and slipped away from the family gathering following Granny's funeral.

I left, went home, and sat on the back step of my house staring at my perennial garden which was fading from the late summer sun. The sun-baked cement step feels warm and comforting through my skirt, and I silently watch the bees busy at their pollination and the monarch butterflies dipping and gliding from the balsam to the coneflowers and finally resting on the brilliant orange-red zinnias. Granny always had a variety of gardens surrounding her house. As a child, I loved her yard because it was not the typical square patch of sod with an occasional maple tree. Instead, there was a huge, old apple tree with a squatty round trunk and a bored-out hole in the center of it, a perfect notch to place my foot in to climb up and be amongst the smell of sun-ripened apples. Fifty-year-old grapevines heavily rested on a sturdy arbor, hanging their fruits just above little hands. The vegetable garden, however, was Granny's pride, and I sensed this even when I was only six or seven years old. Nevertheless, Granny never yelled when we played hide and seek among the vegetation where beans grew in arrow-straight rows while the tomato plants, obediently staked, boasted deep red, plump fruit. Ironically, Granny was busily working in her garden when she suffered a stroke.

A bee buzzes at my hand and then angrily swoops by my ear as I reach down to pluck a soft, fuzzy, mint-green leaf from the lamb's ear at my feet. When Granny's house and
belongings were auctioned off to pay for her nursing care, I transplanted some of her perennials into my garden. Many of them died, but not the lamb's ear, which flourished and multiplied, enjoying its new habitat. Rubbing the softness between my fingers, I note how pliable the leaf is as I am able to twist it without snapping or tearing it. Lamb's ear is a stubborn plant that insists on growing regardless of location, dryness, or harshness of winter. Somehow it maintains a constant soft, tender appearance. I thought of Granny that way--always with a smile, a kind word.

After the stroke, I had always hoped that the familiar Granny who seemed so perceptive and experienced to me would escape from her paralyzed body and return. Sometimes, when I visited her in the home, her eyes were clear and knowing, and I could detect a smile waiting to emerge from behind her mask. I clung to a stubborn hope despite the doctor's diagnosis of a massive cerebral infarct and dim prognosis for recovery. I continually visited her, bearing flowers and positive thoughts. And so did my dad.

Sadly, my familiar Granny was slowly transformed while she lived the rest of her substandard life in the home. Her long hair, which was always neatly swept back into a bun, was cut and permed. She lost forty pounds, her cheeks became hollow, and her shoulder bones protruded through her nightgowns. Her glasses were mysteriously broken and then taped in the center. Her sweaters and dresses were shared with other patients, regardless of the name tags and embroidered initials, and likewise, unfamiliar outfits appeared on her. During the last few months, she stopped watching the birds outside her window feeding on birdseed at the feeder we brought and hung there for her one Christmas. Her eyes ceased to see. Dad ceased to smile.

The hardness of the cement step underneath me is starting to feel uncomfortable, so I decide to walk to my circular rose garden, which looks like a miniature oasis in the backyard. My family of rosebushes, seven around three, is surrounded by pungent-smelling marigolds (a gardening technique I learned from Granny to deter Japanese beetles). The roses are still hardy-looking, despite the late summer heat and humidity which usually causes them to take on a wilted appearance and cease blooming. Granny would have
been pleased with my rose garden, except for one rosebush, "Oregold," which was infected with a blight known as black spot. The disease seemed to suck the very life out of my normally sunny-golden blooming bush. Its leaves had fallen, leaving barren branches bearing only thorns and no buds. I tried feeding it and even spraying it with pesticides (something I abhor), but my efforts were to no avail. The weakened bush seemed marked for death.

As Granny became progressively worse, there was a less drastic but prevailing transformation in our family, particularly with my dad, as he watched his strong, healthy mother deteriorate into a feeble, undernourished woman who played with dolls. Dad withdrew into himself, although to other persons he presented a facade of normality and joked about nursing home practices and the lousy care. I knew that he loathed the heartless nurses, the lazy aides and the bizarre, crazy behavior of the other patients, probably more than I did. We had an unspoken agreement that we would only discuss superficial matters during the twenty-minute drive to and from the home. I subsequently grew to dread the time alone with Dad because of his moody disposition. I was never certain whether an innocent comment would spark an argument. I assumed his depression was due to Granny's slow and inevitable demise.

Dad always insisted on using his car when we went for visits, even if I was driving. His car was ten plus years old, only had AM radio, and was the last of the land cruisers, predating the energy crisis of the late 1970's. It lacked such things as power steering, and faithfully stalled without hesitation if I cut a corner too sharply. One night it stalled three times on the way home.

"Dad, why don't you get a new car, something smaller?" I tried to keep my anger in check as I pumped the gas pedal and turned the key, hoping it would start on the first try.

"There's nothing wrong with this one," he replied. I rolled my eyes as I listened to the car clear its throat before turning over. There were two cars waiting behind us.

"It's time for a new car," I insisted.

"Damn it, I'm not getting a new car. Your mother has her own car. Some things can't be replaced, and some can't be
fixed, either. You just have to live with them. I won't need this much longer anyway."

I was quiet for the rest of the way home, which fortunately was only seven miles. I wasn't sure exactly what he meant, but finding out was not worth an argument. I felt like I did not know who Dad was anymore. He certainly was not the sociable, life-of-the-party father I used to know. I understood the despair he felt, but still, Mom and I were here, conscious and very much missing the old Dad.

It was rude of me to leave my Aunt Ginny's house so early without even eating or really talking with anyone. Somehow I never feel comfortable at family gatherings after funerals. It seems that the purpose of these get-togethers is to find comfort and solace in each other's company. Yet, most of my family haven't seen each other in five or six years or whenever the last funeral or wedding occurred. There was plenty of small talk about everything else except the loss of Granny and death itself and how we should handle it. I despise the chit-chat about who earns the most or who has a new job title, as well as the not-so-kind gossip about those who are not present.

Uncle Bill was right, though; Granny's death was not unexpected. However, the news I received shortly before her death was. While Dad was visiting Granny in the ICU after her last stroke, Mom told me that Dad was also dying. The doctors explained that some cancers are curable, some treatable, and others...you just hope that the pain does not last too long. He would probably be gone within a year. He knew for some time and chose not to go through the chemotherapy and radiation. He did not want to prolong the inevitable for himself or us. He did not want us to watch him wither away, losing sight of who he had been.

The funeral service for Granny was brief. The Pastor closed traditionally with the Twenty-Third Psalm. In the cemetery I watched Dad standing next to Granny's grave, with his focus on the coffin as it was lowered. The ache I felt for the loss of both of them unleashed a steady stream of tears from my eyes. My aunt and uncle somberly released their roses on the descending coffin, the stems making a clanking noise as they landed on the lid. They turned and started walking away. Soon, Dad was all alone as the crowd of relatives and friends
dispersed. Finally, he reached down and softly placed a bouquet of roses on the coffin. I watched, memorializing the scene, knowing that I would be placing roses on another coffin soon. The ache inside paralyzed me. When he at last stood, our eyes met.

"I couldn't tell you. . ."
"I know."

Tears fell silently from both of us as we walked together back to the church.
Kristen Sabol

Life in the Coal Mines

Lattimer, a small village perched amidst the Pocono Mountain range of Northeastern Pennsylvania, is chiefly known for its coal and the fatal mining protests which occurred there during the late 1800's. The under and middle class miners who settled in this region were primarily of Eastern European descent. Like their ancestors before them, Carpatho-Rusyns, they took to the mountains, here seeking freedom from persecution with the promise of living the American dream.

The first eighteen years of my life were spent in a small, tan brick house surrounded by woods up a dirt road marked by a slab of slate in memoriam to the miners who had died fighting peacefully for their rights. Of the five members of my immediate family, both parents and an older brother and older sister, I spent the most amount of time walking the ruins of a lost civilization of dark stone. As a child, the vast sea of soot and dust with its tumbling hills and crumbling fossils seemed to me the perfect playground. In the absence of my family, who spent most of their time away from the house, I early learned to dig up a life of independence through adventure and experience. I slshed down the lumps of discarded shoal; I skated, ignorant of the dangers of the bottomless pits below, on the partially frozen ice of left-to-be-filled empty mine pits. The Breaker blinked nightly below my window, casting a subtle misty glow over the vast emptiness behind the pine and hazel that sheltered my sleepy nose.

There was a time when the Lattimer miners and other immigrants to the area carried from the blackness of the earth the energizing elements that reflected and shined like the ornate Byzantine domes of the churches built in their leisure. My father's father took me on long walks picking mushrooms and berries, telling the legends of the great Broad Mountain with a dash of mystery and a wink of sincerity in his eye. I learned to be a naturalist to hear those tales. Vivid also, to me at the time, were the stories of my mother's father who was, in his prime, a dreamy, languid violinist who quit stomping the soot into my grandmother's house in favor of stomping it into her heart through the poverty of starting a philharmonic
society in the larger nearby community of Hazleton. I tried to assuage my fears of the gnarled, rambling old man with Alzheimer's disease who remained, with the snapshot visions I had in my head of him teaching me to tap my toes to the monotone of the metronome. I never quite understood why this man lived in the junk-ridden house alone. During the same time, my mother's mother spent hours listening to me read to her, watching the *Wizard of Oz* over popcorn on late Friday nights in her apartment and playing endless games of Scrabble at nearby lakes where we could swim together on Saturday afternoons. When I watch her squinting at the food on her plate, now, listening, in a dim light, to the evening's showing of Wheel of Fortune, silent words and questions leap up from my memory.

If I wanted to make an impression of the underlying charm of my hometown, I might write long tributaries citing D.H. Lawrence, focusing on the ironic justice that poetry can serve in painting a bleak landscape sadly beautiful. I could tell of how my love of these ineffable mountain pathways with their winding white streams and complexly singing insects twist me tightly into who I am wondering where and what may become of me as I wander my own way in the world. But Lattimer necessitates something else.

I am twenty years old and have only been away from Lattimer for roughly two-and-a-half years. In the interim, my brother dropped out of Business School and my sister, with a degree in both archaeology and international relations, is determined to marry her boyfriend of four years and pursue a job, any job. In the stress of social work as need be, both have returned to live in my little tan house. Likewise, I read short stories to my grandmother, holding her hand to take away her hopes of ever returning to live in that single, three-room apartment only two miles away. She cannot live on her own anymore. I drive around between the 1950 mock heroic skyscrapers that look out over the growing city of Hazleton and brake at the sight of so many high school acquaintances holding newly born babies in their uneducated arms. I am twenty years old and despite the fact that coal shows up stuck in my shoes as I walk through the yard, the eyes of the people around me give off a cold, dull slate stare.

I have fought for the things that I have attained in
my life. I believed in the outdated bookstore that was possibly smaller than my current dorm room, and I relied on it for my education. I cannot keep up with the speed and motion of a single day in New York City, but I have learned how to see things clearly and slowly through my immigrant eyes. I have driven long hours from far places for the single pleasure of a few hours company with the few people in the state who I have been able to make friends with, for in my own hometown such intimate connections were as few and far between as the mountain communities there. But I am twenty years old and experience has taught me that cold slate stones don't roll down mountains. One can push them down and they will land halfway. One can throw them over the edge and someone will go down to carry them back up. I myself have skipped them across water only to find that they are carried back in on some inner current.

I do not know exactly how to talk about my immediate family or the environment in which I grew up because the appearance and the reality, to me, are like slate and coal. I don't know how to make stones roll or mountains move. My family does not have the money or the mechanics to send me to the most prominent or reputable schools in the country. But as I continue my education, as I continue my contemplation of my childhood and my past, I continue to scratch, slowly with patience and artistry, at the surface of meaning. Perhaps someday when I have ceased to be curious and excitable about learning, I, too, may be cast upon the mountain pointing back up in the air at the moon or a God, but I hope to be a building stone, a gem in the brick walls of the community. I should like to hold things up and be still, then, reflecting coal.
You call to me in turquoise
the guitar whining and squealing
with angora blue as covering.
I don't know how it plays its melody.
All is velvet covered impenetrable
soft touching as it draws me
double lines into the chair.
I'm lost in its arms which grab
me as I struggle to think.
Strange grip this room of vagueness
has in a comfortable constricting
essence that holds its visitors.
If we can ever imagine the outside...
I'll smoke to fill your edges
with something other than us.
Confusion into thinking someone
new, relinquishing one, you stay, as I run.
Cold and good cleanses mind
as oppressive warmth fades away.
I look through the lights of blue
obscuring details but for you.
Sitting alone with smoke all around,
the gray cloud can't escape the cozy
prison you have found it.
As I watch from outside-orange
in on blue-purple-green you,
the air bends and twists,
a flux of smoke billows out and up.
Exhaled and rejected it floats
as my head spins and falls
into dusty fur-blue enveloping
while hearing the guitar start again.
Guess I'll stay and listen as it plays
with me and keeps the melodies
from my ears to learn the lesson over.
I'll never learn what is good,
teach me again and again.
Veggies steaming, sauces simmering,  
Wafting through the spaces to my desk.  
With eyes transfixed on pages  
Of lifeless calculations, I listen to my hunger.

Bellows to help set and fill plates  
Launch me from my room.  
My brother and I in assigned seats laugh,  
Hiding our over-anxious bellies.

Here they walk, ending our play, we bow  
Our heads until after they begin.

Then grabbing metal, we swallow whole  
vast amounts until she speaks of work  
And asks of school.  
We can't enjoy our plates,  
Must answer empty-mouthed.

Interest lost, he kicks at my bare  
Feet under the tiny oak table.  
Agitated, I give a sharp jab  
Causing the ever-silent Eater  
To come thrashing back from His world,  
Lash out with vicious and booming tongue.  
Startling everyone, as if but a  
Surprise occurrence--ah, sweet suppers.

She now has no appetite for food.  
We're still starved yet too frozen to eat.  
She walks to the sink with her dish.  
At her place, a milk glass remains.

Wanting to hide, I break and leave food  
With the pest stumbling over my heels.  
We run to my mauve-infested room.  
Playing "Go Fish," dreaming of breakfast.
Erec Smith

Future of Parenthood #2

It was Friday night. Erec's wife was at her shithole mother's house, Sir was sleeping over at a friend's house, and his teenage children would inevitably be doing something away from home. So he was pretty much left alone with nothing to keep him company except the Wall Vision with 350 accessible channels. He commanded the television to switch to the channel six news just in time to see casualties of the war in Switzerland over the monopoly on good watch parts.

"I don't even wear a watch," said Erec as he got up to get a bottle of Colt .45 Dry Ice Light Golden Draft. As he commanded the bottle opener to pop open his brew, the door opened. He looked down the corridor to see his daughter Ma'am walk in with an unfamiliar boy. He had no shoes on, with space soccer shorts and a grey shirt with a pink butterfly collar down to the small of his back. His goatee was six inches long and in knotty dreadlocks. His olive complexion looked even weirder under a head of metallic silver hair. Erec didn't mind the attire the kid wore. But there was a look in his eyes. He couldn't keep them on one thing for more than one second. He had wandering eyes, as if he was looking for something in the air to entertain him, or as if he was anxious to encounter danger. He was definitely a virtuo-head.

"Hi, Daddy," she said as she closed the door behind her friend.

Erec put his beer down and walked toward them. "Hello, my little Buby-cakes and Bread."

"Dad, stop being so corny. I just came back to get some clothes."

Erec stopped in front of the boy who didn't seem to notice someone standing four feet away from him. "And who's your friend?"

Ma'am looked at the boy and back at Erec with subtle apprehension. It was enough for Erec to notice. "This is Spiro, Daddy."

"Spiro?" Erec repeated as he held out his hand. It was another three seconds before Spiro noticed it and shook it. "Spiro, huh? Is that Greek?"
"What, man?"

"Your name. That's Greek, right?"

Spiro just stared at Erec until Ma'am decided to break the silence. "Spiro's really smart, Daddy."

"Oh yeah," said Erec. "What kinds of grades you getting?"

"What, man?"

"Ah, he's got okay grades, but you'll know he's smart when you talk to him. Why don't you guys sit in the living room and chat while I get dressed?"

"Yes, Ma'am," said Erec, smiling at his daughter's sudden sense of authority.

She ran upstairs, and the two males sat on the living room couch.

"So," said Erec. "You smart, huh? What's your latest theory, Spiro?"

"Theory," Spiro repeated as his head swung briskly toward Erec. He had finally found something in reality worth paying attention to. "I got a theory, man. Dynamics, man?"

"Dynamics?"

"Yeah, man. Dynamics, man."

"Well, what about them?"

"Well, you know when, like, water, man, it's flowing down a stream and then it goes down a water fall or something. You know what that is, man? It's dynamics, man. And when you kick something, man, and it goes down the street rolling and bouncing and all that shit? That's dynamics, man. It's something else. Like when a whalen bullet launches from its chamber, man, and all that smoke comes out and the bullet, like, flies into the air. Dynamics, man. And, you know, oh dude," Spiro started to excite himself, but calmed down a bit. "Dude, you know when airplanes, like, go, you know, man, they go, and the wing things are moving man, and the smoke, aw, dude, the smoke man, coming out of those engines, man, and how it curls in the air, man, and then it disappears after a while when the plane's like way gone, man? That's dynamics, man. It's all about dynamics."

"This kid's a moron," Erec said to himself. To Spiro, he just sat there nodding. While contemplating where the country's education system went, Ma'am descended the stairs. "I'm back and I'm ready," she said with hands raised
and the same apparel on, except for a Nike visor that Erec's roommate gave him in college.

Spiro stood up and squinted his eyes. "Nike? What does that mean?"

"I don't know. It's my dad's. I just think the hat's cool."

"Nike," said Erec. "It's Nik-e." Spiro stared at him blankly, again. "Forget it, it's before your time."

"Dude," said Spiro abruptly, snapping out of his trance like Keanu Reeves in his early movies. "You're one of those foggies from last century, ain't you? I bet you rode down the street in your gasoline car listening to L.L. Bean."

"It's L.L. Cool J. L.L. Bean was a clothing label. Why am I even explaining this to you? Both of you sit down. I want to talk to you about something."

The two kids sat down on the couch while Erec remained standing. He paced back and forth in front of them while he spoke. "Now you both know as well as I do that there's a lot of bad shit out there. When I was young... when I was young they had stuff you smoked or injected or snorted, but they give you a shot to keep that stuff from working when you're a baby now. Today it's virtual reality. Cyber-junkies walking around not knowing what's real and what's not. Some guy killed someone downtown because he looked like a guy who tried to kill him in a video game."

Spiro looked confused. "What the fuck's a video game?"

"The V.R. And no cursing in this house, young man. As I was saying, some people are so fucked up they don't ever want to take the gear off."

"Daddy," Ma'am interrupted. "You don't have to tell us that. We don't need it."

"Well, I know I don't have to tell you that, but what about the brain over here?" Erec bent over and looked Spiro in the eyes, or at least tried to; they were darting around at one hundred miles per second. "Do you log in, man?"

Spiro was once again entranced by god knows what. "Hey!" Erec screamed. "Do you log the fuck in?"

"No, man. No."

"Are you lying?"
"Daddy!" yelled Ma'am. "You just think he looks like a junkie. You said yourself to never judge a book by its cover. Now, I don't even know what the hell a book is, but I got the point."

"No man. No, I don't," Spiro finally answered. "Good." Erec stood straight up. "I wouldn't want you to let that dynamics theory go to waste."

Spiro smiled and gave a thumbs up before Ma'am grabbed that thumb and led him to the door.

"Be careful, Ma'am," said Erec as he followed them. "And as long as you live under this roof you are to back by one."

Spiro left first and Ma'am slammed the door behind her.

"Boy, is she pissed," said Erec to himself. "Pissed at what?"

Erec turned around to see his son, Master, descend the stairs on his way out of the house.

"Forget it; listen, where are you going right now?"

"To Mary Jane's house, why?"

"Your sister's in trouble."

Master gave a skeptical look to his father. "And how do you know?"

"I just do. You gotta help me son. Are you in?"

Master rolled his eyes. "Of course I'm in, Dad."

"Great," Erec opened the door. "We'll take my car."

"Cool, can I drive?"

"You don't even have an air license, Master."

"So? You don't either."

"Shut up and get in the car."

When Master's door was shut, Erec commanded the car to lift, invert its wheels and ascend. When the car cleared the house, it sped off onto the skyway. "Now son, do you know where this Spiro kid lives?"

Master's chin dropped as he looked at his dad.

"Ma'am's hanging out with Spiro Agnew?"

"His name is Spiro Agnew?"

"Yeah, he hangs out with all the Cyber-heads."

"I knew it," said Erec through his teeth as he banged the steering wheel. "I fucking knew that kid was trouble. Where could he be?"

"Well, Dad, he's probably at Rollie's house. He's a
junkie too, but he's rich and rumor has it he's got a whole system to himself. I think he lives on Cherry Street."

"Show the way, sonny-boy."

Half an hour later, Erec and Master snuck into the backyard of Rollie the cyber-fuck. Erec felt around the windows and doors. "How do we get in? I would just knock, but since you say they bum rush all people over thirty we're gonna have to sneak in. But the alarm system's too intricate, I-"

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't get mad."

Erec prepared himself for the news. "Mad at what, Master?"

Master took out what looked like a wallet-sized set of tools. He had the door opened in ten seconds. The pride he felt quickly atrophied as he felt his father's gaze. "We'll discuss that later; right now we gotta get Ma'am."

Master followed Erec into the house, and they each checked a door as quietly as possible.

"Dad. Spsss. Dad. I hear something behind this door."

"What is it?" said Erec as he tiptoed over.

"It sounds like some guy talking about, ah, dynamics or something."

"Great!" said Erec almost too loudly. "They're here. Let me crack the door open."

Erec looked in to see Spiro and Ma'am standing against another door while other Cyber-fucks populated the huge room. Five virtual reality chambers were placed in a circle in the middle of the room, and somebody who Master identified as Rollie stood in front of Spiro. Rollie and his friends dressed a lot like Spiro, but Rollie's brain was cybered out to the point where he spoke like Tarzan as a toddler.

"It's all about dynamics, man, you know," said Spiro, finishing up his theory.

Rollie said, "Well, me not know about--about the dynamics and stuff but--me not know where to go to when the stuff is gone--the cyber stuff--and it's time for dat. Time for dat."

Ma'am looked at Spiro worriedly, who acknowledged her fear and said to Rollie, "Yo, you're going too fast, man. I promised my girl I'd stay away from it, man."
"Me not--me would not ever let a chick--tell me what to do."

"Well, I promised myself, too."

"Do it," said a Cyber-fuck from across the hall. Others joined in, and it quickly became a chant.

Erec could see his daughter and Spiro getting nervous. "Cyber-peer pressure. This is sick. Where's that kid's parents, anyway?"

At that moment, a man in his forties opened the hatch to one of the chambers and stuck his head out. "Hey Rollie, before we start Virtual Sex 36, your mother and I would like a brew. In fact, bring a whole case, I'm gonna kick Donkey Kong's ass afterwards!"

"But me not know--where the brewsky is. The brewsky I don't know. Me not drink that kind of import--so me--"

"Shut the fuck up!" yelled his father. "Now get me that case before I kick your ass, and there won't be anything virtual about it."

Rollie's father closed the door, and Rollie went across the hall to what looked like a basement.

"They're all alone," said Master. "Dad, here's an empty beer bottle. If I can hit the energy converter on the side of one of those chambers I can cause a blackout and--"

"Come on, Master," said Erec. "What are the chances of your doing that? I'm just gonna go to the other side of that door, which should be down this hall, grab them and we're just gonna have to book the hell out of here. You stay here and ah, keep watch."

Master watched his father tiptoe down the hall and look back into the Cyber-fuck room. His eyes widened in anticipation as he saw the door behind Spiro and Ma'am open slowly. Suddenly the door across from that one flew open and in ran four cops. "Freeze, motherfuckers. You're all under arrest for illegal virtuality."

Everyone was still except for a few lips that mouthed out "shit" and "oh fuck." Erec said more than shit and oh fuck at the thought of his daughter being thrown in jail. He looked through the cracked door at his son who raised the beer bottle, aimed, and flung it across the room toward the energy converter. A couple of cops spotted it and tried to shoot it down, but to no avail. The bottle actually did hit the
converter, but not hard enough to really damage it. Fortunately, a bullet that was aimed for the bottle did hit the converter, with an explosion big enough to cause a power shortage and enable Erec to grab Spiro and Ma'am by the collars and yank them out. Two minutes later, they were all in Erec's air-car giving hi-fives.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," said Ma'am as she hugged Erec from the back seat. "I'll never go near Cyber-fucks again."

"Well, it's okay, Honey. I know you've learned your lesson, but we're still going to have a talk later." He looked at Master. "That was a good shot, kid."

"Well, what do you expect Dad, I'm a Smith."

"Good answer," said Erec with a smile. "Mr. Agnew, I'm gonna have to take you home."

"Sure, man," said Spiro, too happy to care. "My family name isn't Agnew, though. My parents are insane. They still won't tell me why they named me Spiro Agnew. Look for the house with the name Sutin on it."

"Your Dad's name wouldn't happen to be Matt would it?"

"Wow," said Spiro. "How did you know that?"

"Dynamics," said Erec. "It's all about Dynamics."

After dropping Spiro off and confiscating Master's burglary kit, Erec went back to his 350 channels. He sat back and relaxed, basked in the glory of his excellent display of fatherhood, drank his warm Colt .45 Dry Ice Light Golden Draft and didn't even care.
Daniel Graf

Seeds

"Monkey-snake!"
"Nah."
"Hard On!"

"What, are you kidding? Who would let you play with a name like Hard On? I mean what are you gonna say, 'Hi we're Hard On?' Nah, I still like Velcro Bacon better," Scott said.

Scott and I were trying to come up with a good name for our band. J.P. was gonna do lead guitar, Scott drums, and I was gonna do lyrics. We still didn't have anyone to play bass, though. We were sitting in my room on an orange, yellow and black flowered sofa. The sofa, along with two easy chairs and a beat up coffee table had all been purchased for fifty dollars from one of those old ladies selling junk on her lawn.

The coffee table was a number. It had wax stuck to it from several candles that burned out long ago and chipped corners that had bruised one too many shins. It was littered with dust, J.P.'s fingernails, and little flakes of pot leaves that had escaped cremation. Several looseleaf papers were strewn in a random fashion around the edges, and there was a large butterfly knife with its point stuck a quarter inch deep in the center of the table. I recall that my grandad once said, "A knife is a man's prized possession."

"Five hundred and forty-one, five hundred and forty-two..." J.P. was counting seeds on the coffee table for our ecology class. He and I both needed 4,000 seeds for Monday morning to start our lab. It was Sunday night. My plan was to put my bag close to his and make it look like I had somewhere close to 4,000. Fucking ecology. Like what was Professor Long gonna do, count all our seeds?

I took a look around the room and everything seemed to be moving too fast. Then I looked in the corner next to the fridge that resembled a safe, and I knew why. About fifteen empty Bud ponies were staring at me open-mouthed from their cardboard holding pen. I had a cold one in my hand.

We were listening to some gnarly surfer tunes on a tape Scott brought over. While J.P. methodically counted his seeds,
Scott rambled on about the meaning of life. I was just contemplating the quality of coldness of my beer. "Isn't it wonderful how water molecules condense on the outside of the bottle? It makes the beer look just that much more appetizing."

"Yup, life is funny that way." Scott had already tamed a few of my ponies himself.

"Life is funny." That comment made me think of last night's escapade with Scott. We had gone to Lehigh to party. It was Scott's birthday, so he was allowed to borrow his dad's wheels for the night, a sleek black Mitsubishi Mirage with built in CD player. Sweet! I had brought a bowl and a couple of bags of the chronic with me. It was some good shit. It was a good thing too, because for some reason the party we went to sucked. Actually, the most interesting thing that happened that night occurred on the way home.

Scott was tired and wanted to get back to school and into his own bed. He was playing some hard core techno on the CD player. Neither of us was looking at the speedometer. That's when we saw the red and blue flashing lights all around us. Scott pulled over to the side of the road.

"Shit shit shit," was the first thing out of his mouth. "My dad will kill me!"

A split second later, one cop was searching with a flashlight on my side of the car. Needless to say, I was shitting bricks. I clenched my pipe and the remaining pot in my sweaty left palm which I pressed into my lap. The other policeman came over and asked the usual question. "License and registration." Then, after reading it with his flashlight, "Do you have any tickets pending?"

"Yes I do for, um, speeding." Scott's voice was cracking. "The cops went back to their car. "Shit! My dad's gonna strangle me. I'm already on probation. I'm gonna fucking lose my license!"

I started praying. "Please God," I said to myself, "I've never asked you for a favor for someone else before. If you get us out of this, I swear I'll give up drinking and smoking, and I'll go to church and everything. I promise."

The police officer came back. "Do you know how fast you were going? One hundred and one in a thirty-five zone," he said.

"Honestly, officer, I was just trying to get to bed. We
are on our way back to school. I didn't notice how fast I was driving. I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Scott tried his most innocent schoolboy look with the cop.

"So, you're a couple of college kids, huh? Well, if I ever catch you speeding here again, you'll be in deep shit. Happy birthday, kid." The cop tossed Scott's license back to him.

That was the end of it. Scott pulled away at a snail's pace of twenty mph. We both laughed out of relief and disbelief as soon as we overcame our shock. Scott was telling me that he almost creamed in his pants. "That would have been a three hundred dollar fine," he said.

"No shit! I can't believe we just got out of that!"

The college chapel's speakers clanging out that it was ten o'clock brought me out of my daydream.

"Seven hundred and eighty-six, seven hundred and eighty-seven ..." said J.P.

I took another sip from my beer. One of these days I'll quit smoking and give up drinking, I thought. One of these days I'm gonna get what's coming to me. I chuckled.

"Wanna cancer stick?" Scott asked as he reached into his pocket for his Marlboros.

I shouldn't, I thought. "Sure!" I said. After I lit up I tossed the pack and lighter on the table.

J.P. coughed. "Seven hundred and ninety-eight, seven hundred and ninety-nine ..."

The alarm clock on my desk read 10:11. I was always setting my clock ahead so that I would never be late to class. "Are we gonna go anywhere tonight? It's already ten o'clock."

"Well, I have to finish with these seeds, dude," J.P. said without looking up.

"Can I have another one of your ponies?" Scott asked.

"Why not, what are friends for!" I said, wiping my lips. Seeds, seeds, seeds. Wait, wait, wait. "Yo, Scott, how about The Chinese Hamsters?" The name seemed to just roll off my tongue.

"Nah, I got a better one. . . how's about Virgin Deodorant?" Scott said.

"Aw, shit, man" I was cracking up. I went to pick up my beer from the table but somehow managed to spill it on my lap instead. One second later, snot was coming out of Scott's
nose from laughing so hard. "You asshole. . .that's alcohol abuse you know."

J.P. just snorted a little and said, "Well, I'm finished with the first batch of a thousand, so I'm hitting the sack early. I've got to finish counting the seeds tomorrow morning before class. You know, you should try being responsible sometime in your life and do some work for Christ's sake." J.P. dropped the bag of seeds on the coffee table where I could see them. We were both assigned the same species of plant. That made my job a little easier.

"So he's a fuckin' slacker, so what?" Scott said, "responsibility shmesponsibility. Who cares?"

I'm not always slacking off, I thought to myself. But who gives a shit? I was having fun now and that's what mattered.

I looked at my alarm clock as I was changing my jeans. The time was 10:33. The purpose of modernization and technology was to provide more leisure time for people. But all modern technology did was make people work longer hours and have less free time. That's why we have to make the most of our free time. At least that's what my grandad said, although I think he was talking about fishing. "I'm totally trashed, Scott man."

"Same here. You know you gotta get wrrrecked after your birthday...man. Let's sgo out and break things." Scott was already slurring his s's. Out we went into the night. Scott had to pee. I knew this because no sooner had we gone out the door than he was doing it right in the bush outside my dorm. We then proceeded to swing from several branches in nearby trees. This was real fun. We were happily making chimp noises when someone walked by. This caused us to stop.

"I got an idea, Scott. Let's climb the flagpole!"

"Cool beans, man!" No sooner had he said this than Scott was shooting up the flagpole like a squirrel in heat.

I remained lying on the ground because I was too drunk to even walk straight, although I was an experienced flagpole climber myself. "Shit, man, if you fall down from there you'll probably kill yourself!" I laughed.

I started daydreaming again, even though it was nighttime. I was picturing the Yanomamo Indian man from my...
anthropology class textbook. His face kind of resembled my grandfather's a little. He was counting out corn seeds to pound into millet in some weird Indian dialect that I didn't understand.

Why am I daydreaming about this, I thought. Then I remembered that the Yanomamo have a lot of leisure time. Those lucky bums. And then I was seeing the film our teacher showed us with little Indians having the time of their lives running around naked, lying in hammocks, climbing trees or hunting in the jungle with blowguns.

I remember the blowguns. They seemed as long as a flagpole. I seemed to remember our teacher saying that a good blowgun was a Yanomamo man's prized possession. He was telling the class that the blowgun darts were dipped in curare neurotoxin. When using the blowgun, the hunter had to be careful never to inhale with his lips on the gun before blowing out. If he did he might die from a dart sucked into his mouth.

I awoke with a bad taste in my mouth. Scott had already reached the top and was getting ready to come down. At the exact moment Scott was bringing his foot down, the chapel speaker gonged eleven o'clock. It couldn't have happened at a worse time. I watched him lose his footing, and both of his legs dangled in the air. Then his sweaty palms made a squeaking noise against the cold steel of the flagpole. And then he fell.

I looked at him in shock, wondering if he was still alive. His arm seemed to be twisted in a weird position, and something white seemed to be sticking out of his forearm. I wasn't sure, but in what seemed like two seconds or an eternity, blood squirted out in several directions, including at my white t-shirt. All throughout this time, he lay there, frozen, his face expressionless. Then he seemed to awaken from his shock, and began screaming in utter anguish.

I was thinking at that moment that I was going to black out, but maybe all the alcohol in my blood was giving me courage. All I know is that the first thing in my head was to get J.P.; he would know what to do. "Damn," I thought, "happy belated birthday, Scott." Then I ran to my room as fast as I could.

Scott was in the emergency room for four hours. Twenty-seven stitches. He'd probably have to wear a cast for
months. My cousin once fell out of a tree and broke her arm. She had to squeeze this little blue sponge for two and a half hours every day for three months. The doctors said it’s rehab. I say it sucks.

My grandad used to tell me that college would be an experience in growing up. "You plant yourself in that desk and read, boy. You learn from those books and grow, you hear!" I don’t think he meant learn how to roll a better joint, or learn how to be the best Quarters player. But this is what I learned in college.

Dr. Long told us in class today that we needed about 4,000 seeds. Not exactly 4,000 seeds, just about 4,000 seeds. Oh well, I guess it just goes to show you, you’ve got to take things with a grain of salt, take things one step at a time, you know? And that’s exactly how I am going to stop drinking and smoking and fucking around...one step at a time.

"How about Slut Bakery?" Scott asked me after class.

"Nah, I still like Monkey-Snake better."
I
I exhausted my youth with the composition of fiction. Not beneath contempt, my life is spent beneath you, my domestic malefactor, my father fixture--my antagonist, aspect of protagonist--my tormentor.

II
You can't be spotted there after dark, that much I do understand. Otherwise, the police turn up and force you to move on, just like if you were loitering in the park or on the steps of the corner store. They look at you something peculiar once they catch on that you're not standing in front of just anyone's grave, and their eyes say, "You're not just some pesky kid, you're fucked up something good too." Doesn't matter what they think, though. They still send you on your way once they're sure you're not drunk.

But every night I go back there, I'm not sure why. Maybe it's easier to write it all down after I push the dirt through my fingers. Maybe I just want to make sure he doesn't get up during the night to come get me. But mostly, I go back there because I want my letter back.

III
I exhausted my youth with the depiction of family. Our roles reversed, we were both of us someone else's unruly children--backsliding, regressing.

IV
This bastard child of mine has graying hair and hands that reach out for something. Some nights, he sleeps on the front lawn, with fading thoughts and the shards of an empty amber bottleneck. Some nights, he wakes to the image of his father, capsized on an expedition to the floodplains of his liver. He stands up to go on his way, and the thought is a stalker. "You
are wrong. That is what you are."

Some nights, my mouth is clumsy and articulate, and these bruises come from falling down the stairs. Some nights, my ears ring with the echo of a blast, and that hole in the wall need not be repaired, it has always been in my memory. The dogs are put to sleep because they are sick. You'd be surprised how many times a mother can smash her own head against the wall before it just stops.

And you can bet the police don't turn up then.

V
I exhausted my youth with mockhorrorstorytelling and expected someone would be moved.
I wrote of drunken episodes and hospital visits and relapses.

VI
A marionette checks himself out of the intensive care unit to stand at the top of the basement staircase--he is so thirsty, you see--and he just stares down for such a long time. His body language is slurred and his eyes roll up into his head, to stare down someone he can't see, as if to say, "I dare you."

Someone lets go.

He lay on his back, his left arm wrapped under his bulk, his right arm flung over his throat, jerking. His legs jut out at odd angles. Red paint is applied, and someone laughs. Someone made him wrong. Yeah, someone did him wrong. A blue tear, and someone laughs. One last jerk from the broken marionette out of spite, and then nothing more.

Or maybe he was trying to climb the staircase?

VII
Swallow it down like a good little boy should.
The medicine will numb you.
Swallow it down like a good little boy should.
The hospital will cure you.
The hospital will kill you.
"What are your childhood memories of your father?" the psychiatrist asks.

I remember a blue truck. It was beaten-up pretty bad. He would always give me a boost, and I would fall and laugh over and over again, until finally he'd have to pick me up and put me in the truck himself. He was so big, he filled half the truck. The other half was my playground. I couldn't keep still. I'd slither down the seat, curl up on the floor and look up at him, then climb back onto the seat to stick my head out the window like a dog. We would sing nonsense songs down the highway--no, we would scream them. "Den den den den den, den den den den, den den den den den den...hay!" Does that make any sense, that that was happiness? I must have been three or four, and we were driving to the bars.

"I don't remember ninety percent of my childhood, and what I do remember, I've rewritten until it fits."

"Can you remember anything your father did that made you happy?" the psychiatrist asks.

I remember the afghan that Mom-Mom knitted, the one with zigzags every color of the rainbow. When he was asleep on the sofa, sometimes I would cover myself with the afghan and lie on top of him, and he didn't say or do anything to stop me. His heavy snoring put me right to sleep.

"Eventually he'd always pass out."

Sometimes I would finish you off at the end--a mercy killing, a release from living and a release from suffering and emotional freedom. Sometimes I would hold onto a different truth and you would live on--a shadow who would never know normalcy or your son or emotional freedom.
X
The priest comes to administer Last Rites, and everyone blubbers except for me. I wear a ridiculous smile, and everyone must hate me for that. If he wakes up, he might hate me for that, and I'll hate him for waking up again. Only he's not waking up, just like in the stories, except I didn't write this, it isn't supposed to happen like this, and someone has a lot of explaining to do, but there's no one to address. Just a soon-to-be-corpse. Everyone is pleading with the body. The body wheezes. The wheeze is cut-off.

The priest comes to administer Last Rites, and I don't believe in the salvation he offers. Cats and alcoholics only have nine lives, it's late, God is not a convenience store, and even the bars are closed for the night.

The priest comes to administer Last Rites, and God is a beer in the hand of a shadow passed out in the basement at night.

XI
You can exhaust yourself with life, but I can't write it down--it won't be pinned down like that.

XII
"You gotta make your own choices, pal," he says. "You do whatever the hell you gotta do," he says. "You get the hell outta here, and you don't ever come back," he says. "And I am not drunk," he says. "I am not drunk, and I don't have a son." And with that he throws me out into the night, and I move on, and there we are, alone.

Every night I think back to that, I'm not sure why. Now I lie in the dirt (no grass has grown there) and push it through my fingers, to feel its warmth, and I think about all the times he died and what he took with him.

XIII
Ring around every finger rummaging through your pocket full of spare change for candy. Written words reduced to ashes would be preferable to a wrongful burial.
XI

Dad,

Words are dangerous—they can create and destroy lives. Growing up, I was afraid to express myself. I imagine your childhood was very similar. We are so much alike, most of all in that we feel everyone else's pain, and it kills us. For us, there's no such thing as a weak emotion—emotions are our brute strength.

When I think of you, I'll try not to remember the suffering. Eventually, we must get past that, any way possible. If you need my forgiveness for anything, don't ask for it. You already have it. I'd never hold you back. And I'll never stop looking to you for strength.

I'm grateful that I could be there with you in the end, that you couldn't push me away. And I really don't know what else to write.

Your Pal.

XV

Daddy, you are dead.

XVI

"You're upset," she says. "You're angry because you wish you could take back some of the things you said to your father," she says. But it's not the things I said that I want to take back. We endure a moment of silence. Gunfire, and a thud echoes through the house. Thud of a foot in the sides of the dogs. Thud of a head against the wall. Thud of the broken marionette.

We share a moment of silence. We see each other for the first time then. My mother has aged a lifetime, she is a frail and delicate woman with stout hands that reach out to someone, hands that grasp. I don't know what she sees, and does it matter? I am the sight, and she would be the feeling.

My mother has aged a lifetime, and I forgave him.

XVII

I was with you then--
I watched your organs mutiny.
I watched your eyes swell, half-open to death.  
I was with you for the melodrama—  
I watched the chest sink and stay.  
I watched the tear trail—  
a defining moment interrupted with a thought:  
what if it wasn’t a release?  
what if it wasn’t a regret?  
what if it was a simple physiological response?  
what if it was the same as shitting and pissing?  
I was with you then,  
and there was no meaning at all.

XVIII
Every night I go back there, I’m not sure why. Maybe it’s easier to write it all down after I push the dirt through my fingers, to feel its warmth. Maybe I just want to make sure he doesn’t get up during the night to come get me. But mostly, I go back there because I want my letter back.

I lie in the dirt (no grass has grown there). The ground is a potbelly, and I pull up the afghan to keep warm. And I listen to the headlights screaming down the highway. And I think about all the times he died.

And the police turn up and send me on my way, once they’re sure I’m not drunk.
In some years we will sit, by the harbour you and I
After the last breath of the dying day
And we will see in the dark waters, the lights reflected
The brightness of the city will drip slowly like paints
Into the black mirror of the sea
To become something more perfect, a watery dance of light
And then slowly I will whisper to you all the things
I wish and want for you now
Today, and days before, I have dreamed of you
With swelling heart and hands ever stretching
To twist the smooth locks of your hair between my fingers
Daughter, I hold my breath as I walk
With your picture clear in my mind
And I am taking careful notes of all I see
With stitches slow and fine I embroider
All the beauty of the world into blankets of love
And with these quilts and covers I will have crafted
Tucked over your small shoulders
I will be certain that even if we are apart
You will be warm and safe forever
On even the coldest of nights
Morgan Wordley

Lupine Lord

Cold lifeless pearl on
A bed of black satin, he
Howls with head held high.

Mike Podgorski

At the Bottom of the Cup

In some insomniac, a picture of Jane Eyre
smolders in the dark. At this point, this point, this point, my girlfriend asks if I've
had an accident, and I look at my underwear, at a big brown stain and remember the coffee I
spilt and sat in. The double strength brew that branded my mouth like a shot of whiskey and
laughed as I added three neon blue packets of = synthetic sweetener. Yet (a)gain, as I added
thirteen "dots" of sugar, as Domino's likes to refer to their 1/2 " by 1/2 " by 1/2 " by 1/2 "
cubes of cane, but look, it's four thirty-seven, eight, nine A.M., and I must page through for
potent importance and watch Jane rest at leisure over and over. Over. While I, I cannot because
of punctuation, indentation, and A.M. revising rituals and rites which force my hand to brand
my mouth again, and when is this due? High noon, on the thirteenth? Will it be complete? Can I
create some small centrifugation and homogenization of Jane and myself? Or shall I toss her a scarlet rose?
No. In lieu of paving this path, brick by brick, grain by grain, drop by...I have decided
to burn Jane for such ill manners towards such a dedicated read(h)er, writer, and insomniac.
How I Spent My Summer Vacation

Ben, the man with the shoulder-length, dirty blonde hair and the five-inch long Indian bicep tattoo just asked me if I wanted to meet him and "his boys" at Tex's for beer and wings. I wouldn't mind hanging out with Ben, but I'm not sure about his friends. I'm not twenty-one yet, but if I walk in with these guys, no one will card me. I should go home because I'm working overtime tomorrow, but if Ben is going, then I'm sure Bruno will be there. If Bruno is there then I definitely want to be there, too. Unless it will look obvious, which it probably would, so I guess I won't.

"Not tonight, Ben. I gotta headache. Maybe next week."

He nods and disappears around a stack of book covers, and I put my backpack on. It's the end of my shift--11:30--and the end of my third week working on line 4 in the Bindery. The routine is clear. Men turn the machine on high then sit and watch it run as women load 40 pound bundles onto individual pockets. The pockets meet, go through another machine, get a cover, some glue, a trim, and become a book. When the women cannot load fast enough, or the men turn the speed up too far, the machine breaks, the women sit down, and the men fix it. Then the men sit, and the women begin to load once again.

I drive home from work with the full moon high above me and the comments of some guy in the parking lot echoing in my skull. "Hey, stuck up, wanna come home with me? I won't bite, baby, not at first. You like me? Yeah, I know you do baby, I see it in your walk." I try to understand what exactly it is in my walk that gives him the impression that I want to go anywhere with him, but decide that he's not worth the trouble. When I worked at the library, no one made any comments about the way I walked, except for the day after I caught my foot in the car door. And while I miss story hour and working with the children, I don't miss vacuuming glitter out of carpeting, washing glue off of walls, or helping someone's three-year-old "go to potty" while Mommy runs out the door.

I make $6.28 an hour here, and that is why I switched jobs. I gave up reading books and finding books and shelving
books so that I could make books. So that I could be harassed by men who proudly declare that they don't even read books. So that I will have enough money that I won't have to work at college this year.

The next afternoon, I walk through the employee entrance, wave to some girl I think I went to high school with, and go to line 4. I get out my gloves, water bottle, and metal ring, then hop up on a palette stacked about five feet high.

A temp guy named Adam walks by and yells "Hey, baby!" He's the guy from the parking lot last night. I just look at him. He waves, I look, he walks away. The buzzer sounds, and the machine wakes up.

Two hours later, I have a fifteen minute break and head to the bathroom. On my way back, I hear a loud voice off to my right, between two stacks of covers.

"Hey, Katie, come 'ere. You know something girl, you look like you need a good fuck. You need to be fucked?"

"Oh, and I guess you're the dick to do it?" I ask with a slight chuckle.

"Yeah, I think I am. So will you, when I'm finished with ya." He makes this really disgusting motion with his hips, and we both start to laugh.

"Baby, you couldn't finish me."

"You sure about that?"

"I am," announces a third voice. Bruno strides from behind the parked fork truck, thumbs hooked through his belt loops, framing the pewter Harley-Davidson belt buckle. His green eyes crinkle at the sides as they fix on Ben. "Yo, Ben, knock it off. Leave her alone."

"Hey. Bruno. I was just messing with her."

"Well, don't. That's my job."

Ben disappears with a final chuckle and shake of his head around another stack, and I lean back, one hip on the trimmer.

"Thanks."

"It's okay. Sorry 'bout that."

"It's not your fault."

"It's not yours either."

Bruno is the most beautiful man I have ever seen. Hotter than that guy in the Calvin Klein ad, hotter than my ex-roommate's favorite singer, and I can't believe I met him
here, in an offset printing factory.
"Where do you wanna go after work?"
"Huh?"
"It's your choice tonight."
"Oh. Um, I can't go anywhere. I mean, I'm already going somewhere. With someone."
I'll just shut up now. Bruno takes his long, black hair out of the green band, and it falls in silky waves down past his shoulders. He's good.
"Where're you going?"
"I'm meeting my friend Andrea for a movie." I don't want him to think I'm available, but I really don't want him to think I'm attached. Besides, I am meeting Andrea.
"Ah. Well, you tell Andrea I said hey, and save next weekend for me."
I nod, and he heads off to the press, leaving me with a lump in my throat and a fluttering in my lower stomach.
Back on 4, I ask Sheila if she knows Bruno. Of course she does, she's been here eighteen years; she knows everybody. In between bundles she tells me that he works in the press, has been here six years, that everybody likes him, but nobody knows much about him.
I go to the movies with Andrea that night, and it's fun because I haven't seen her much this summer. My schedule is different from everyone else's, so I haven't seen anyone besides the people I work with. We stop for food after the movie, and I tell her about Bruno. I know she thinks it sounds kind of sleazy at first, but I tell her he's not like that. I'm not stupid; I know he's not an angel, but there is something so sexy about him.
"You're not going to go out with him, are you?"
"I might. If he asks me, I'll probably go."
"Kate, that's crazy. You don't know anything about him except that he looks good."
"Christ, Andrea, calm down. He probably won't even ask. We're just joking around. But how is this any different from the guys you hook up with at college?"
"Because they're college guys, Kate. They're harmless. But this Bruno guy, he's older, and he's obviously experienced, and I just don't think it's a safe idea."
"Okay, Andrea, chill. Nothing happened, probably
nothing will. It's just fun to flirt with him, you know?"

Monday afternoon, I show up at work a few minutes late, so I don't see Bruno or Ben or anyone else until dinner break. They're at a picnic table on the side lawn. I walk past Adam on my way there, and he just glares at me.

"So, what's for lunch, Katie?" Ben asks.

"I don't know. What did your mommy make for you? PB&J?"

"No, PB& marshmallow."

Bruno holds his bag of rippled potato chips out to me, and rests his arm across my shoulders. "How's line 4 running?"

"Terrible. Don put a set of covers in backwards and, of course, blamed it on Todd. We're about an hour behind."

"Did you have a good weekend?"

"Yeah. Kind of boring, but okay."

"Ah, that's too bad. You should've come with me."

"Where did you go?"

"I went to Allentown to pick up my new bike. She's beautiful. She feels like velvet. I'll take you for a ride sometime."

When about ten minutes are left, the guys head to their cars for a smoke. I pull out the book I've been reading all summer, read a paragraph, and start to think about Bruno. I'm not sure what I should do next. I've been friendly and flirty, but if I do too much more I'll seem trashy. I don't want to push it, so I guess I'll wait for him to give me some kind of indication of what he wants.

The second half of the shift is no better than the first. Emma, next to me, puts a bundle in the wrong way, ruins 280 books, and shuts the line down for forty minutes. The break is nice, but when the head journeyman gets it fixed, he kicks the belt up two speeds.

I have just punched out when Bruno comes up and slides his arm around my waist. "I'm not working tomorrow, but do you want to have lunch with me Wednesday?"

We're standing alongside my car, it's 11:30 p.m., and I can't think of anything to say. "Uh, sure. Cool."

I slide behind the wheel, he rests his arm on the door frame, and sticks his head inside, right up close to my face.

"See ya Wednesday, babe." He shuts the door and I
watch him stride over to his new bike, glimmering black, then I drive away.

Tuesday is boring.

Wednesday, at exactly 6:29, Bruno puts his arm around me, and leads me towards his bike. So I like him, like him to the point that I told my best friend about him. To the point that I wore a new t-shirt and bought cherry red lipstick. I think he likes me; he asked me out. However, this could be nothing. Just casual. But he does have his arm around my waist, and we are the only ones going.

His bike is standing next to the security shack. He hands me a helmet and kicks his leg over the bike. I hold it for a minute, examine the eagle painted on the side, then slide it over my head. Bruno takes a second to adjust his long, shiny ponytail, and turns to me.

"Well, c'mon, city girl." He extends his left arm for me to balance on as I get on the bike behind him. I've seen him leave work every night for the last two weeks; I know how he drives these things. I wrap my arms around his large back and rest my hands on his stomach. I feel his muscles tense as he rises, drops the stand, and kicks the bike alive. We're there in two and a half minutes, and it feels like being on a plane just before it cuts through the clouds.

He opens the door for me, asks me what I want, then goes to order. I search for a table, not too close to the baby throwing reconstituted onions at his mother, but not out in Playland either. I sit at a two-seater next to the window and try to think of what we can talk about when I realize how little I know about him. Long, black hair; eyes like jade stones; manners; Harleys. If this goes well, maybe I will go for that beer with the farm boys.

A tray slides in front of me. I look up.
"Here. Want any ketchup?"

I shake my head, and he sits across from me, grabs a handful of fries, shoves them in his mouth, and begins to unwrap his burger. I put the straw in my cup.
"So what are you studying there at your big city school?"

"English."
"Don't you know it yet?"
"Ha ha. I study literature. Mostly modern stuff."
Novels, poetry, essays--stuff like that.

"What about it?" He shoves some more fries in his mouth, then drags a napkin across it. A smirk appears.

"We analyze it for meaning. You know, how it shows what the author was thinking, or what it says about the people and culture in that area at that time." I take a bite of my burger.

"Cool. So how do you like the factory?"

We take another ten minutes to finish our food and talk about some of the people we work with. When Bruno is done, he slides back his chair and listens to me complain about Dave, my line foreman. Midway through, I realize that he's looking at my face and not listening to me. I watch his eyes pass over every feature, then move lower and lower, until I stop talking and start to blush.

"So, are you seeing any movies this weekend?"

"I'm not sure."

"Oh. Well, if you want to, maybe we can go to Tex's."

He speaks so low; it's not soft, but low and rough, and it's lazy and dreamy, and it makes me want to... well, it makes me want to crawl into his lap.

"Sure. Saturday's better for me."

"Cool, I'll come for you around nine."

Saturday is also the day my parents will be out of town.

I stand up and reach for my tray, but Bruno puts it on top of his, carrying them both away.

Back at the bike, he asks if I want to drive.

"Nah, I, uh, I don't have good luck with these things."

He laughs at me and hands me the helmet. I wait awhile before I slide on behind him. He turns around.

"I thought you'd be a natural." I can't see his eyes, but I know that they're on me.

"Yeah, well, I guess I need more practice."

Thursday and Friday pass in a wave of confusion, anxiety, and frantic phone calls to my best friend. She is completely cheering me on, encouraging me to wear that black wrap-around shirt I bought at the mall before we left school for the summer. I receive a lecture on proper usage of condoms from my friend Jack, which is cool to hear from a guy's point of view, but it's not like I never used one.
Bruno is flirting with me every time I see him, always checking me out, and so what I made my cutoffs a little shorter, this is my summer fling, right?
I clock out Friday, and before I can get outside to see Bruno, Adam grabs my arm and pulls me into the cafeteria.
"What do you want?" I ask.
"No, Adam, I don't want to go anywhere with you. I want to go home, alone."
I start to walk away, and he grabs for my arm. "Leave me alone, asshole. I'm not going anywhere with you."
His face twists up and his eyes get hard and mean. "Oh yeah, well, you know where Bruno is going, kid? Did you ask him? He's going home, kid, home to his wife and son."
Adam smiles, and I twist out of his hold. I run to the parking lot, but Bruno is already gone. I drive home.
I can't call him because I don't have his number. I don't know where he lives. All day Saturday, I think about it. Adam is probably lying, but if he isn't, it's obvious why Bruno didn't tell me. But the big question is "Now what?" I get ready, going with the black wrap-around shirt just in case Adam was lying, and wait for Bruno to show. But, in case Adam was telling the truth, I try to figure out a plan. Who does he think he is, playing with people and lying the way he did? And to cheat on his wife; that is so disgusting. There is no way I can respect someone like that. Someone has to teach him a lesson.
At five after nine, he rides into the driveway. I meet him there, under a bright moon, and he looks absolutely edible. Black jeans, black biker boots, tight black t-shirt, and a long silver chain. He smiles this real slow, real pornographic smile when he sees me--I guess the shirt was a good idea. First thing, he pulls me up to him, looks down into me eyes, and kisses me. I grab his shoulder blades and hold on. This could be harder than I thought.
At the bar, we have a few beers, talk awhile, do some shots, and play some pool. He keeps looking me up and down, and I am alternately thrilled and repulsed. When we dance, he wraps himself around me. Each drink, each look, each touch makes me forget, makes me not want to care. He is the
one who will deliver me from the boredom of college guys, the 
boredom of this summer, of this life. When he suggests we 
leave, whispering in my ear as he slides his hand over my 
brust, I only nod. As we walk out, I know people are looking 
at us; they know what I am about to do.

We get on the bike, but Bruno refuses to put his helmet 
on, and I won't go if he doesn't. He starts to get pissed, and I 
start to get mad. I don't want to do this in the middle of the 
parking lot, but it comes out of my mouth anyway.

"If you're so unconcerned with safety, is that why 
you're fucking someone you don't tonight instead of your wife?"

He slowly turns to me, his mouth in a straight line, 
then nods slowly. "Maybe, but I'm here with you, and you're 
with me, someone you barely know. How safe is that? Pretty 
young thing like you, black stockings, short skirt, little black 
top, kind of asking for trouble isn't it?"

The tequila shot I had two hours ago burns my throat, 
and I have to choke it down. I take a step back.

He reaches out an arm. "Hey, I'm not serious. I was 
just saying... if it's a safety issue, neither of us are playing it 
smart. But is that what this is about? I thought it was se and 
attraction."

It is. This has all been about sex and attraction. I am 
still attracted; I still want him. I will probably burn for it, but 
I want him. I reach out my hand and take his. We climb back 
on the bike, put our helmets on, and go to my house.

We ride into the driveway around 2:30 a.m. My dog 
barks for a second, then falls back asleep. This is a dream to 
er--to me, too. We stand for awhile, looking at each other. 
Bruno leans down, gives me a kiss on the forehead, then flips 
his helmet on his arm.

"Where are you going?" I ask.
"This is no good. We both know it. I'm leavin'."

And then he is gone. I stand in my gravel driveway, 
watching the tail light disappear, pretty in my black shirt 
and short skirt. I am not sure if I should cry or run inside and 
lock the door. Instead, I sit down on that gravel, surely tearing 
my pretty black stockings, and wonder if the next full moon 
will bring peace.
Random Scenes From 1/2 Hour at Work

Vega Dweezlesnap didn't like her job. And to make matters worse, Happy Family just walked in. Vega looked around, hoping someone else would take care of Happy Family, but no one else was there to save her as Happy Daddy approached.

"Hi. Can I help you?" asked Vega with a smile, wondering if what her mother said about making ugly faces so much that they stay there applied to false smiles. She also wondered what these four were doing out of suburbia.

"Hello," said Happy Daddy in a warm, cheerful voice. Behind his thinning hair and blue polo shirt, the Little Woman and the two kids gazed at the long list of fast food delicacies that stretched above Vega. "I'll have two Big Macs, large fries, and a large coffee." He turned to his wife and said lovingly, "Hon?"

The Little Woman, still looking up at the menu, told Vega in a nasally voice what she wanted. A chicken sandwich and a diet coke. Then, in turn, she looked at her son. "Bobby, tell the young woman what you want."

Bobby, it seemed to Vega, was decked out in his ultra cool sixth grader outfit. A Raiders hat, a Dr. Dre shirt, and jeans that were twice as big as Bobby needed. Vega was sure that if she could see his feet, she would see that he was sporting the newest scientific breakthrough in footwear by Nike; the breakthrough being that Bobby could now get shot faster than ever before if Happy Daddy were to lead them two blocks south.

Bobby looked at Vega. He then lowered his eyes to see her name tag. But after ten seconds, Vega decided he was probably some little pervert and was looking at her breasts under her McDonald's issued shirt. She loudly cleared her throat, directing Bobby's eyes up again, and asked, "What do you want?!

Bobby mumbled something about a number two value meal, but desiring a chocolate milkshake instead of the soda that was normally incorporated with the meal. Bobby then walked off to a corner booth, mumbling loud enough how ugly
he thought Vega's hair was, and why did she have such a stupid name?

Ignoring this, Vega peered down in between a grinning Happy Daddy and the Little Woman. There the little girl stood, holding nervously onto Happy Daddy's pants. Happy Daddy knelt and spoke softly. "Don't you want to tell the nice lady what you want to eat?" The little girl whispered a response. "What?" Happy Daddy asked. The little girl repeated the whisper and Happy Daddy stood up. "She'll have a happy meal." Vega thought this choice was only fitting. By the time she returned with all their food, only Happy Daddy was left to carry it back to their table. He paid, smiling, and Vega wished him a good McFucking day. She watched him desperately balance the two trays, making sure none of the beverages spilled or any of the burgers or fries slid off. Vega figured one of the Family could have helped Happy Daddy, but none did. That, or get less food. And by the looks of Happy Daddy and Bobby's guts, that's exactly what they should have done.

"Yo, Vega." Her thoughts about Happy Family disappeared as her manager called for her. She turned around and saw him coming from the other side of the row of heat lamps. "The phone's for you." Gladly, she left her post at the cash register and walked back toward the office, hidden from the view of the customers, where Ronald McDonald, the clown, hung out. "And make it quick," her manager called after her. "It's not like I enjoy doing your work."

"Fuck you," Vega thought. The only reason why she took so much shit from him was because she knew that when he graduated from high school in a month he would still be stuck in the same place she was. She also felt sorry for him because he was such an asshole. He claimed to play bass in a "killer" heavy metal band and had hair all the way down his back. He also stank. To Vega, anyone who stank, worked in McDonald's, and like heavy metal deserved pity. Especially someone with no friends.

She passed Ronald, his blood red lips, hair, and shoes, holding his yellow, curvy M, reached the office and grabbed the phone. "Thank you," she told the caller.

"No problem," replied a slurred male voice. Vega knew it had to be her friend Chris. "When do you get off
work?"

"At ten." she answered. "You gonna be partying at your place?"

"Yea. Everyone'll be over. We're gonna get smashed, and then we're gonna find my land lady and beat her." Chris laughed at himself. "I'm drunk already."

"So I noticed." Vega was standing in the doorway of the office looking out at Lamont and Carl preparing all the food. Grab a bun, grab a burger, add pickles, ketchup, mustard, and as much saliva as you deem fit. Ronald shook his M into a limp yellow cord. "You're still being evicted at the end of the month?"

"Yea. So I figure, what the hell can my landlady do to me?"

The Metal Manager broke the conversation. "Vega!" he yelled. "Get your ass out here." Ronald cracked his whip, a reminder about who was the boss, and who had the keys to the shackles on her feet.

"Fuck. My manager is calling me. I gotta go."

"You're coming tonight," Chris said as if to remind her. "Yea, I'll be there around eleven. Save me a bottle of SoCo."

"Sure. See ya."

"Later." Vega hung up the phone and marched back out to her register. Metal Manager couldn't even let her be on the phone for thirty seconds. "What?"

"Grab a mop and clean up out there. Some prick dropped his soda." Metal Manger pointed to a large puddle by one of the tables. Without a word Vega turned around and went to get the mop. "When the hell are you going to do something about your hair?"

Vega had her red hair in dreds. The dreds, which were completely visible with only a McDonald's visor to conceal them, were deemed unsanitary by the regional manager. Metal Manager's three feet of hair, which went un concealed, was immune to judgment due to his position.

"Why don't you stop being so cheap and give me a real hat that I can tuck them under?" she said without turning around.

She found the mop and its bucket, and deciding to waste more time, she emptied the bucket and then refilled it.
She slowly pushed the bucket out toward the spill. She had first worked at a McDonald’s when she was fifteen. Now, five years later, she was at one again. And for the past six months, she saw that it was the same as before. This place was a joke. A cruel one conceived to keep her there, or at a McDonald’s equivalent. As she mopped, all she wanted was the Southern Comfort Chris said he would have waiting for her. Maybe she could bring her manager. Everyone at the party could beat him with Chris’s landlady. Of course, Metal Manager wouldn’t get off until about two hours after Vega, but since she was fantasizing it didn’t matter.

In the corner booth, two teen angst queens finished off their fries and talked about *Catcher in the Rye*. Vega remembered having read it in high school. These two girls seemed to agree with every other girl Vega knew who read the book, that Holden was the coolest guy ever. Vega looked into the bucket as if it would help her memory. Did Holden ever realize everyone was a phony? If you don’t contradict yourself, you may as well be dead, because you’d be the most boring person on Earth.

The teen angst queens’ conversation moved with the Little Woman’s babbling and Happy Daddy’s grunts in between bites, and Vega almost found solace in mopping. Then a queen’s remark caught her ear.

"Of course you have to be fucked up to understand *The Naked Lunch.*"

"I know. I rented that movie with Tom. I didn’t understand any of it. It made no sense. But Tom was tripping, and he said it was all about how everything could be in your mind, and that what’s real could be fake, and that if you’re on something, it gives you yourself, or something."

"Kind of like that Doors movie. Yea, and in the back of the book the author wrote about different kinds of drugs and stuff."

"That guy did something with Kurt Cobain. Like wrote some words for the music."

"That’s so cool."

Vega thought she should become some kind of sociologist. She saw and heard all kinds of people in here. And then she could sell her skills. She knew how to sell anything on the youth market. Use drugs, dead icons, and a
cute, fictional guy for the image of any product. It seemed to work for modern literature.

After spending five minutes mopping just five square feet of floor, Vega returned to her cash register, ready to fetch food for people. Good Vega. Get me a Big Mac, Vega. Get me a Big Mac. Fries. Get me fries. Good girl. Stay. Stay there. You can't sit at the table with us. Look how well trained she is.

Maybe it wasn't quite like that.

But Metal Manager did say, "The Man in the back doesn't want you thinking so much."

Fortunately, the next group of people to come in was the local aspiring gangsta rappers. Vega liked them. The whole act they put on amused her. They came in through the doors with their cool swaying walk, which they started as soon as they could be seen by anyone inside. Once inside, they strode toward the counter while scoping out the place. Any female alone in the place would receive nods with a smile, or a quick point. They then would order their food while ripping on the place and anyone who worked there, especially Metal Manager, which was fine with Vega. The one who wore his pants the lowest would always hit on Vega. Tonight was no exception.

"Hey, you're looking good."
"Thanks."
"And you got funky hair now. Take off that damn thing," he said, pointing at her visor, "and let me get a look."
Vega gave him his fries and then removed her visor, letting her dreds fall in front of her face. The Rapper of the Lowest Pants said something which Vega interpreted as an approval. Something to add to her Yobo down-in-the-hood vocabulary.
"Hey. Where's the boy with the faggoty ass hair."
another asked.

Understanding the reference to Metal Manager, Vega pointed. "He's hiding back there."
"Fag," they yelled, and then took their food. The Rapper of the Lowest Pants gave her a smile. "See ya."

A few seconds later Metal Manager came out to see who was yelling. Upon determining that there was no problem, he was about to return to the office when Vega saw who was coming in. "Can I reserve the right to refuse to serve the next group of people?" she asked as the neighborhood white power
skinheads entered.

The manager, hardly giving them a glance, and obviously not making the connection Vega did, gave a quick reply. "No." Vega got the skinheads their food in silence and watched them sit down at one side of the dining room, eying the gangsta rappers on the other side, with Happy Family sitting unaware in-between them. Vega couldn't wait to see her manager try to break up the fight that was about to start.

Unfortunately, Vega never got to Chris's party, or to the bottle of SoCo that night. Instead, she suffered from a slight concussion during the brawl in the dining room. But some good did come out of it. She swiped all the cash out of one of the drawers during the fight, which was more than enough to pay for her hospital bill. As far as Ronald knew, the cash was in some Yoboy's trench. And just before taking flight from the arriving sirens, the Rapper of the Lowest Pants unlocked Vega's shackles with a screw driver he just happened to have stuck in his belt and asked for her number. Then he left her to the bloody skinheads, police questions, an idiotic paramedic, a dazed Happy Family, and the television reporters to spit on. Returning home to her apartment with a wad of cash, a bandage, and a few stitches, she threw her McDonald's uniform out the window, her shirt catching on the fire escape. She didn't need Ronald to live. She didn't need the bruises around her ankles from the restraining leash that got clamped on as soon as she punched in on the clock. There were other possibilities. Ronald had thousands of clones who were always looking for someone new.
Welcome to the House of Commons,
Behold the common door.
Beyond lie all the banal panels
Among the frequent floors.

In this house live all the neighbors
With failing eyes and heart--
All the people; all the power
And all the sleeping art.

Down the hall a vacant desk,
With pen and pad to hone
The wit of any sacred guest--
These books a whetting stone.

Look out back, the common flowers
Wear all their lively hues;
Common tongues drink common showers
Tasting not uncommon dews.

While in the garden all the greens
Grow without event,
None can hold the hopes or dreams
The common folk have spent.

When on the path of common street
Look without your eyes.
Walk with two uncommon feet
That stomp on common guise.

And keep your bearing wanting more
The daily dose a daily lure,
The House of Commons unlocked door
Your cell, your hell for evermore.
Beth Rosenberg

Poetry I Can't Stand

There's lots of poetry I can't stand
that I won't stand for
that stands for nothing
not me, not the person who wrote it, not anyone
I won't stand for sky-blue or grass-green or shit-brown eyes
or soft hands like lumps of pudding or mean hands like
twisted scissors or sexy hands like calloused tongues
And poems with no verbs
porcelain feet with sores bubbling like miniature pots
of spaghetti sauce
nipples like overripe raspberries, fat and soft
I hate those
I won't stand for those coy allusions to suicide
shining razor blades
swallowing pills like my cat eats crickets
I won't stand for those coy allusions to drugs
bending colors, seeing music
swallowing pills like my cat eats crickets
I hate those too

I can't stand poetry that tells me how individual you are
how nobody's like you
how you're so special, possessed of a spirit
unbreakable, a mind unshakable, and nobody
understands
I cannot accept that, that you are a miniature god and the only
one who can understand your own doctrine, that you
may sit in a corner wearing your clothes and smoking
your cloves and really not want someone to notice you
in your corner with your clothes and your cloves and
isn't that why you're there in the first place
Like I don't get you or something
I can't stand those
I hate poems that try to be above me, to talk down to me, to
prove to me that I am no poet, no way buddy
poems with lines and parentheses and question marks all
over the place, and the little pseudosmart comments
thrown in whenever they begin to get interesting
??living(?) - Lov/ing - rOOm (maid)!
poems that are supposed to make me think
poems that look like the expletives in the Sunday Comics
?/ %#$! those poems
I hate these poems because they are like maple syrup on
mashed potatoes they are mayonnaise on a fruit salad
they are the wrong thing dressing up the right thing
They are overstuffed overdone glimmers of emotion and I
can't even taste the potatoes for the syrup
And I hate
love poems
Love poems are only good to write because they get all that
silly crap out of you, it's like vomiting when you're
drunk to feel better
I do not want to hear how you and whoever are drawn to each
other like my toe to the bedpost in the glistening
moonlight, how love, like a savage little Caribbean
dictator, will conquer all
There is nothing but you, I lie in the stinking sweat of
passion and meet me on the rusted carcass of a
boat on a beach
I want your hair between my toes, sliding like a yellow
rainbow over my feet
I love you so much I want to puke
I love you so much I want to scream
I love you so much I want to hold your quivering body
and fuck you to sleep
I hate those
I hate love poems because they are addressed to a
never-ending list of "yous" poems about the smell of
your clothes or your feet or your skin, about the look
in your eyes or the tilt of your head or the agony of
your life mapped out on your face in the scars of
teenage acne and childhood chicken pox. I hate these
poems because the you is never the same, the smells
and tastes of a lover are never the same there are
always new lovers and the promises of eternal love are
all lies You is a thousand faces in a lineup in my
head You is a million memories and a million
blackouts You is something that does not exists for
longer than one year but exits forever because You means all that I want to fall in love with but You is too many parts of too many people and too few parts of one You is a sandbag damming up my brain so I can't think

I hate love poems
I can't stand love poems
PATRONS

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