We would like to thank the faculty of the English Department for creating the creative community that created this magazine. A special thanks goes out to Diane Seuss whose support and energy is interminable and crucial to the entire process. The Cauldron would be a mere crock-pot without her.

Many thanks to Lisa Darling, Kalamazoo College’s Director of Publications, for her organization, artistic eye, and optimism. We’d also like to thank Terry Watson of Watson DeZin for his beautiful cover design. (We risk offending him by saying the look of this year’s Cauldron is even better than the last.) Thank you, as well, to Kristin Butler for her many hours of diligent work as our typesetter.

We are grateful for the long hours that Sandra Rook, Secretary for the Division of Humanities, spends on the computer typing up this blessed thing. We admire her enthusiastic ”yes” every time we’ve asked her to take on this difficult task.

Like no other person outside of the English department, Provost Gregory Mahler has shown sincere interest in student writing on campus. He should know that his constant support does not go unnoticed or unappreciated.

Student Commission played an integral role in the financing of this magazine. Thank you to everyone on the committee, and in particular, Pankthi Shah for her professionalism and support.

Thanks to Todd N. Thompson (TNT) for his explosive judging skills.

And to the staff, for their dedication and enthusiasm.

Finally, we would like to thank you. Without the support of viewers like you, this program would not be possible.
This academic year began with the crumbling into ash of the great, looming towers in New York City. The Cauldron begins there, with Noah Goldsmith’s poem "Holding On": "I hold on because I don’t know what else to do or say or think..." he writes, a fitting opening to a collection of student work in which holding on means expressing oneself on the page, in poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction and visual art. We were all struck by the intuitive rightness of Alyssa Knickerbocker’s paintings of fetal development, and the staff chose them unanimously for our cover art. The metaphor of fragile but enduring evolution is one which resonates for us, both as individual writers and as caretakers of a vibrant and organic writing community. The reader will discover a diversity of images in this collection—a "thick sari whipping in the wind," a search party "on the road to Bir Wahid," a guy hosing out the dog kennels, a guy waiting for his toast, men looking "sullenly into their beer" in the Upper Peninsula, a "KISS lunch box," a "Chinese marriage dress."

Similarly, one will find diverse approaches to the craft of writing—autobiography as film criticism, experimental forms, "traditional" short fiction, tightly-made poems, confrontational poems, short, blunt creative nonfiction, elegant essays, even a "Beginner’s Guide to Congenital Heart Disease." The reader will encounter restraint, resistance, renaming and revelation.

And in the end? We circle back upon ourselves, as all good fetuses do, revisiting the falling towers, searching for our father...and then "Bethlehem," the star, a lullaby.
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** Denotes Divine Crow Award Winner
I hold on because I don’t know what else to do or say or think
But I remember all the details of nearly every trip and I remember
Trying to go up to the top at least twice maybe more except it was
Always cloudy and never seemed worth the $12 or I was late or no one
Wanted to go which I always found strange because when you stood in the
Lobby that could have been any lobby of any building you would forget
Just how fucking big it really was which is what I thought the first time I stood
Right outside of it and looked up at this giant monster of a structure
Which looked as big on my High School Senior trip as it did during
My residencies in what had become my second home

In December of ’99 is when I first took the subway into the base of it
Taking the E train from 23rd and 8th straight down to this the very last
Stop and I got off the train and I spent twenty minutes at the pay phones
Just outside of the gates trying to get my mobile email to work while
Later deciding to try my luck on the New York Lottery that was sold
At the newsstand which was also in the basement and at that newstand
Which was near the Borders I once bought a copy of Wired magazine
While at the Borders I bought my grandmother a copy of Wit and mailed
It to her from the post office that was also in the basement of the building
That had the Borders where I bought the February 2000 copy of Wallpaper
Magazine and Automobile magazine along with a box of Degas gift cards
On February 21st of that year for my cast for their opening night and I wrote
Each card sitting at a Starbucks in the same structure which was next to
A Bass shoe store where I once bought insoles for a pair of uncomfortable
Italian something-or-others and down the hall and across the way from
The Mrs. Field’s Cookies that I stopped at a year and a half later with my
Dad while we killed time before my flight left for London and I played
Tour guide and showed him the stock exchange and leaving the building
Through the wrong door we ran in circles through the courtyard that
Separated the two towers and Building Seven all of which have now vanished
I rushed to Wall Street on August 3rd 2001 to get a straight blade shave at that
One place on the one street that I can never describe but knew exactly how
To get to taking the train to the last stop and leaving Tower Two through the
South exit crossing the courtyard to the corner that has the Brooks Brothers
Where in the winter of 2000 I bought 3 pairs of Gold Toe Socks and continuing
Down the street that only half a car can fit down and making a right and then
Three blocks later a left and then down two blocks on the right was the
Unassuming shaver where I was younger by forty years and as I retraced my steps
Hurriedly because I was running a little late and wanted to get sushi I walked
Through the courtyard and looked up once more at the place I first visited in
1998 and then I walked in the door and down the stairs past a security guard and I thought I feel so safe which was the thought that extended all the way through my proposed surprise trip which took me into Newark Airport September 11th at 8:30 a.m. and leaving the next morning around the same time but was cancelled because of work scheduling and so I hold on to everything before because I don’t know anything after
Today, it’s autumn.
The oak leaves, upturned, 
beseech with arthritic fingers, 
"Place something in our open palms."
Perhaps the smallest gift.

This is the autumn when I’ll enter 
your stony house without knocking, 
accompanied by breeze 
and the silence 
that follows the closing of doors.

Then it’s down the hall 
and to the right, 
or up three flights of stairs—
however I might reach you 
there on the windowsill 
listening to the colors 
conversing with the onset of night.

You are not surprised 
by my unannounced arrival, 
as though you were waiting for a shadow 
to appear in the doorway. 
Stepping from the dark, 
I am not exactly how you want me, 
but exactly who I should be—
Arrow or Bow.

Here in your bed 
are fingers long, then warm, 
then indistinguishable – lost in black 
through the cracks in the wall. 
Your feet are unanchored. 
The evening tastes like thunder.

In a long pressing moment 
we are too hopeful to recall 
that we are strangers 
unaccustomed to the shortness 
and/or harshness 
of our naked breath—
the panting.
In his letter he had mentioned writing a story about, "a guy who gets up in the middle of the night to pee." Write what you know, he said. In her story however, there would be a girl. And this girl would not get up to pee. She would piss her pants at age twenty. She would down a forty-ounce of malt liquor because she only had two dollars to her name and piss her pants. She would stand in the cheaply carpeted second floor corridor of her friend’s Chicago two bedroom and piss her pants. She would piss her pants, piss her panties, piss her socks, piss her shoes, piss the track lighting, piss the fake potted plant, piss the hall mirror, and the neighbors’ peephole, and the bitten bags of uncollected circulars at the foot of the stairs. Her piss would stain the apartment, her clothes, and her body. It would be corrosive piss with a pH of 3. Umber piss the color of mango pulp. Chocolate piss the color of dehydration. Ketchup and mustard piss the color of the first day of menstruation.

Initially her piss would be clumsy and halting like a little boy learning how to aim. Then her piss would become rehearsed and discreet like a church lady with nylons. Eventually her pissing would evolve into the reckless fountain spray of an alcoholic homophobe in the corner stall of the local bar at four in the afternoon on a Friday.

Her piss would start small, little raindrops soiling the neatly porcelain toilet seat. Then it would begin to overflow it and her piss would collect into puddles, small ponds, streams with currents, rivers with banks, then Great Lakes, and finally, oceans.

Soon she would find new places to piss, carefully covering every fire hydrant, and campfire, and urinal mint in the Midwest. She would piss every outhouse, port-a-potty, and airplane bathroom in America.

Eventually she would start traveling in compact train bathrooms of Italian Eurostars and piss while swaying side to side. She would climb innumerable steps and pay small pocket change to piss on the first level of Le Tour Eiffel. She would walk gingerly out over the rocky beaches off the West Coast of Greece and mix her piss with the Mediterranean.

Because of this, her piss would ultimately contribute to acid rain, flash floods, and tsunamis, destroying family heirlooms, pet gerbils, and second and third cousins bolted into fallout shelters underground.

In the end, her piss would see things die and be buried. It would water freshly laid grave markers, and sprinkle bouquets of roses placed at headstones, browning the pedaled edges.

Her piss would wash over her extended family like a baptism as
they congregated around her uncle’s closed coffin in a frayed knot. Her piss would wash away the strange military officials folding the flag into tight trigonometry next to her uncle’s dead body. Her piss would flood the cemetery, submerging the hearse, her aunt’s Volvo, and her family’s mini-van. The orange funeral stickers would peel off all the car windshields and begin warping in the bubbling, turpentine ocean of piss. Her piss would be effervescent, buoying her uncle’s coffin up out of the tomb, and resurrecting him from the tentacled roots and uneven rock sediment of the pit he had been mechanically lowered into. Her piss would dissolve the faux mahogany of his casket, bubbling him to the surface in his best suit. It would ripple flecks of foam across his lips like holy water, awakening him and thus initiating his ascension into heaven. He would begin to rise, the small tacks in the heels of his shoes becoming indecipherable overhead, and he would look down at his piss covered funeral procession, his great nephews with audible nose runs drenched and drowning in piss, his priest serenely back floating away with the debris of nicked wax candles and paper icons with his name embossed on the back, both dissolving and pulpy with piss, and his eyes would fall sternly upon her with shadowy intensity due to his now tremendous elevation and he would tisk his head, his crookedly shaven jowls still visibly swaying, and then his brows would bend, eyes soften into their customarily good-natured gaze, and his voice would whistle down from the gates to the entrance of heaven imploring, "Why didn’t you just cry for me instead?"
On Arbor Day I planted a tree, a white birch hollow as tin and weightless. That night in a storm it was overtaken by wind. The next morning I straightened its soggy trunk and replanted it, deeper this time, with a circle of stones around its base.

Last Christmas Eve my dog ate a plate of snickerdoodles and fudge off the table. Chocolate, in large doses, is toxic for dogs. We called the vet. We followed the instructions. I held her gagging mouth open while my mother poured one half-teaspoon hydrogen peroxide down her throat. That night we missed church, watching the hollows of her stomach fill and collapse. Outside, the ground was too hard, frozen over with snow, so we let her lifeless body lie there, at the foot of the couch until Christmas morning.

I used to talk words inside my mouth at church, tongue batting against pallet and eyebrows dancing in accordance. Somehow choking up words and swallowing them freed me from the haunting thoughts. I prayed that I would not be condemned to hell for squashing worms on the sidewalk after it rained, or for the things I saw on cable. After the Hail Marys, I touched my stomach and begged God to free me from the unconceived space burning a hole inside of me. I prayed to be released from the guilt of life, distanced from its beginnings and endings.
I am from a shy girl with hunched shoulders and a printed dress. I am from a spoiled boy with a lean frame and false teeth (I am from the truck that hurtled through the dust and knocked his real teeth out). I am from the blundering agreement they nodded and shrugged themselves into. I am from the drafty hall they rented for the occasion. I am from the downcast eyes and red silk draped like a burden. I am from a borrowed suit and a sullen expression. I am from the small ceremonial fire that burned between them (I am from the vows they muttered while staring into it). I am from a faded snapshot taken afterward on the front steps: gray light, horn-rimmed spectacles, a thick sari whipping in the wind. I am from a somber honeymoon in Wales. I am from a hotel room that overlooked a factory. I am from the black clouds that billowed out of its smokestacks. I am from the girl standing at the window and the boy sitting in the chair. I am from the silence between them.
I used to feel embarrassed whenever my father would bring home oily dripping bags full of salty, drunken chicken. The cold air would blow in their fragrance, and my father stepping in through the door, mud clumps sticking onto the rims of his brown business shoes, would call for me. I never helped him carry those bags to the kitchen. Seated on a cushion on the floor in front of the television, I’d watch those cheap, red plastic bags with the black Chinese characters until they disappeared with my father’s gasping breath. Only then would I run to the kitchen, hopping up and down on one leg, begging to see if there were any presents for me. My father always held a small smile on his face as his eyes darted quickly around the small room while I poked at those red bags, trying to be annoying, trying to see how long my father would be patient with me. He never became angry. I’d kick at those bags to see if they’d kick back. I asked if we had live crabs or lobsters for dinner. “Shao Ning Ning, just the chicken,” he’d say. My dad would then unknot the bags and make excited sounds by pursing his lips together. He’d laugh and act proud of the food he brought home. The oily, dark syrup would always seep out onto the countertop while my dad used chopsticks to transfer the meat onto one of our white porcelain plates. I always hated him for taking that smelly drunken chicken down to our tenants who were not Chinese, but white American. My father would present this chicken to them saying it was one of the best dishes in Chinatown, although I knew he had gotten it from the Chinese fast food street vendor on the corner of Canal Street. The tenants always thanked my father for the chicken, but I knew they always threw most of it out. My mother would tidy up everyone’s trash and get it ready for the pickup truck Monday morning. Sunday night, I’d witness my mother as she placed the uneaten meat into the oily red bags, tying each bag carefully, oil from the chicken shining on her fingers. I never ate that chicken.

When the full moon came out and my mother announced that it was the year of the dragon, I had to wear a red dress that my great grandmother wore on the day she got married. The red color had almost completely faded from the material, and some of the yellow colors underneath would show through in the armpit areas. The little embroidered phoenixes had their tails missing because some of the string had gotten loose over time and had fallen out. I hated the zipper in the back because it was one of those old fashioned zippers that always nipped at my skin right at the base of my neck when my mother pulled it up. I then had to practice saying, "Gong shi-fa-ci"
and bow very low so that my back shining braids lightly brushed the floor. I would look forward to the evening’s celebrations because the little red bags full of candy and money would be handed out to all my cousins and myself. I never ate the Chinese meal, but brought a small heated frozen t.v. dinner from the corner supermarket, or a chicken sandwich from McDonald’s. At the restaurant, seated with my twenty cousins, I’d place my dinner napkin neatly on my lap, and begin to eat what I had brought, ignoring the steaming hot plates of slippery, shiny, oily, stir-fried food. I’d watch my many cousins slurp up the rich, wet-looking foods, and wonder why they didn’t bring their own dinner like I did. Using my hands, I finished the last piece of my golden fried chicken sandwich with triumph, smiling and sighing contentedly at my cousins who were still grasping itty bits of rice with their chopsticks. The last dish to arrive was the drunken chicken decorated with edible dragons carved from turnips, the final specialty of the chef. My grandmother, standing up in her heavy red Chinese robe, began handing out the little red envelopes with each of our Chinese names written carefully by my grandfather’s old Chinese hands. One by one my cousins placed their envelopes into their pockets. I looked over to my father still serving the remaining morsels of the last dish to my aunts and uncles. Feeling safe, I began tearing the top of my red envelope until I saw the corner of a one hundred dollar bill.

In the daytime, I remembered what I had gotten from my grandmother the night before and extracted the bill from my great grandmother’s marriage dress. I crumpled the red envelope and threw it in the trash can. I sat in class a few hours later bragging to my American playmates about how rich I was and how many things I would be able to buy with the good luck Chinese New Year money. I kept my hand over the pocket of my Levi’s blue jean overalls and felt the crinkly crispness of my fortune. At three o’clock, I took the hands of two of my American friends and rushed around the corner outside towards the Happy Liberty Deli. I stared wide-eyed at red-strawberry and vanilla swirled cookies, green warted pickles, bags of blue cotton candy, metal bins of egg and mayonnaise salad, and my favorite, fried chicken. At their pleasure, I allowed each of my friends to choose a snack of their choice and piled a total of six items on the pay counter, two licorice sticks, a caramel candied and nut apple on a wooden stick, a piece of fried chicken, and two orders of fried potato rings. With confidence and pride I reached into my pocket overalls and handed my one hundred dollar bill to a
young Caucasian man behind the cash register. My friends had already begun eating their snacks when the white man handed the bill back. His face appeared to be suppressing laughter. Not understanding, I handed the money over to him again, glancing back alarmingly to my classmates who were opening the packaging to the candied apple. The opaque color of the caramel frosting nauseated me. Why wasn’t he taking…I looked once more at the man who asked, "Can you understand English?" and looked down once more at the bill. Although the numerals were correct, a Chinese face like a grandfather’s appeared in the center of the green paper. I rubbed my index finger over it, asking it to disappear because I hadn’t noticed it before. "Look harder," the white man said again, as I felt my face turning red like the oily bags I hated, holding the drunken chicken, like the Chinese marriage dress I wore the night before, like the good luck envelopes my cousins obediently put away.

Red is For Good Luck
What is there to remember?

Kate Lee

Each day, carrot sticks and a bologna sandwich
In a brown paper sack.
A quarter taped inside for milk
Or to pay the blonde girl
For admission to the club at recess.
Class pictures in a clean, neat, new
Red sweater
Pulled over the yellow shirt on which she
Spilled paint in art class.
In every picture, the straight dark locks
Are poised on the outer edges of feet.
Did she falter in the wind
On so precarious a foundation?
Arms folded in resistance or
For protection? Was she afraid
They would look awkward at her sides
And leave her honey-colored belly exposed to the world?
Was she timid in her ways,
Shy and about her own business?
Or did she hold knowledge of a secret
Too sweet to share –
That she had greatness building inside
And enough strength to take over the world.
INHERITANCE

Nancy El-Shamaa

Bumper to bumper cars in the summer heat. The drivers honk their horns, knowing it will make no difference. Calls for prayer from the minarets. Early afternoon meals full of grape leaves, casseroles, salads, pita bread, feta cheese and the passionate Mediterranean fruit that seduces you to eat of its vigor. Meals so big you have to lay down and sleep afterwards. Aunts, uncles, and grandparents at our beck and call. And then back home in the fall. Rainy season is ending and the air smells washed and dirty at the same time. The beggars on the streets demand simultaneous empathy and disgust. Blue and white taxis take us to American missionary school. A fence around the school protects us from the outside, where Ethiopians cry out "ferenge, ferenge, foreigner, foreigner" and stick their ears out like a monkey to imitate my big ears the size of my face. Weekends at the Hilton pool, swimming all day and stopping only for ice cream and pizza. Vacations at Lake Langano, where I feel at home with the monkeys that look like me. Visiting my parents in the UN-ECA clinic and feeling special when patients and staff alike recognize me as Dr. El-Shamaa’s daughter...your mother is an angel.

Coming home and asking my sisters, maids, or father if my mother is in a good mood. I hope good. I hope good. I don’t want to be yelled at today. The grass is like green velvet, the flowers are so colorful they scream, but if my mom is in a bad mood the rest of the world may as well be dead.....

"Ferenge, ferenge...." I have been a foreigner most of my life.
The jar of pickles, falling, crashing into splinters. 
Slipping into splinters—like it had been falling for years. 
Slipping out of her hands. Her capable hands. The hands 
that made lunch. There’s the new floor, a new kind of wood 
that promises to be cleaned up easier than other floors. 
Gold-brown inlaid stain-proof wood, with pickles. There 
are long fat warty pickles in glass shards all over the new 
wood floor, the one in the new house. She just bought this 
jar, my mother. There were going to be pickles with lunch. 
It is a new jar of pickles, and it is broken.

You can see into the house from the apple tree way back in 
the lot. It’s a long way back for little legs, she says. The 
tree is imperfect, and there’s been talk of chopping it down. 
Kids keep getting poison ivy, and there are tent worms in 
wooly caves all over the branches. You can eat the apples, 
though, and they’re like nothing in the supermarket. 
They’re sharp and knotty, and you have to wonder, from 
that perch in the lot, if they’ve been cast out of doors too. 
I might have even cried out there if the sunset hadn’t been 
turning all the windows into fine gold sheets.
They weren’t really stealing.  
After all, it wasn’t their fault that Jolly Ranchers couldn’t be bought for ten cents apiece anymore.  
They just wanted some Gatorade.  
They were thirsty, and if the man behind the counter at Bob’s Party Store cared so much, why didn’t he get off his fat ass to see what fun it was to crawl along the aisles with a book bag open on the floor?

He and his sister used to sleep in the same bed, and one night when they weren’t even tired she asked, “Did you know that boogers are made out of chocolate milk?”  
He didn’t know that. Carefully he searched for the biggest—the one he could bite in half and suck out the thick brown liquid.

They taught us about fire when we were small.  
Your whole family had to carefully pick an escape route and then crawl along the floor until everyone made it to the designated meeting place.  
But what if I didn’t make it?  
Crawling in the upstairs hallway with my mouth open like a chandelier—the black smoke pouring in.
When Disney’s Aladdin came out in 1992, I was in every respect the target audience: a ten year old boy, who, though unabashedly a devout disciple of all things Disney, was tired of seeing the girl characters get top billing and maximum screen time. Where were the male leads who could act as my necessary animated role models? I didn’t find one in The Little Mermaid’s Prince Eric, whose part in the film seemed little more than requisite cameo. (I bought his action figure but was sorely disappointed to discover that, in a bit of irony befitting the character, his plastic limbs couldn’t move.) And as for Beauty and the Beast’s prince-turned-animal, his grotesque appearance only prevented any character identification. Too young to approach these movies with the critical eye and cynicism that comes from an understanding of Disney’s role in corporate America—indeed, too young to even appreciate the sight of Ariel in her sea shell brassiere—my prepubescent self wanted nothing more than a cool guy hero whose actions I could mimic on the playground at recess. Then along came Aladdin. While my family’s Disney video collection was rife with movies named for their heroines (Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White), Aladdin was a first in that it took its name from a human male hero; this titular significance wasn’t lost on me. I saw Aladdin several times in the theatre, and thereby proclaimed that it was my Disney movie. As the target audience, I believed that it was made for me. But, consciously or not, experiencing a text is a give and take process. My own values and beliefs inevitably intertwine with those espoused by the movies I see. Therefore, made for me though it may have been, Aladdin simultaneously made me and was made by me.

Feminists have long protested over the one-dimensional nature of Disney’s heroines, who passively wait for their princes to come while displaying less genuine human emotion than their non-human co-stars. Just as noticeable but strangely overlooked in Disney Theory is the fact that, when compared to her male counterpart, the Disney heroine is a regular Hamlet. The typical Disney hero is not a complex human character but rather, both literally and figuratively, a sketch of masculinity. Prince Charming has a strong jaw, wavy hair, and rides his horse with enough tough guy ennui to make the Marlboro Man burn with envy. He says very little, preferring to let his sword (read: phallus) do the talking, and when it comes to women, he lets his kisses speak for themselves. But if "prince" is cartoon shorthand for "masculine icon," Aladdin is the first Disney animated film to dissect this notion. Aladdin begins
before its hero becomes a prince, and, by showing the contrast between Aladdin-as-urchin and Aladdin-as-royalty, it allows viewers to see the performative nature inherent in the masculine icon’s identity—even going so far as to encourage them to laugh at it.

Masculinity as performance? That’s a pretty big notion for a ten year old. But while I would never have been able to name it at the time, much less consciously recognize it, repeated viewings of Disney’s self-proclaimed masterpiece helped instill and reinforce in me several ideas: not only is identity a matter of perception (created by posturing, by clothing, by the magic of a genie), certain identities are more desirable than others. Furthermore, those who don’t fit society’s desired identities better assume them—or at the very least, perform them—if they want to succeed. For proof, just turn to the titular character.

My identification with Aladdin, particularly as opposed to previous Disney princes, stems from the fact that the story allows him weaknesses and insecurities right off the bat. Far from being popular, Aladdin is an outcast in his community, taunted by his equals as well as his superiors in mythical Agrabah’s oppressive caste system. The insult “street rat” is hurled at him by guards, bazaar folk, princes, and just about everyone else he comes in contact with. For any ten year-old familiar with the oppressive caste system of elementary school, and the insults its denizens hurl, a connection to Aladdin instantly forms. Furthermore, I had just begun those turbulent years of male adolescence, meaning Aladdin’s conflict of self felt particularly close to home. And a conflict of self is exactly what he experiences: the confidence he projects in the song “One Jump Ahead” is undercut by the self-doubt he reveals in the same song’s reprise. If others examined him, he wonders, “would they see a poor boy?” Looking back, I find it important that his word choice emphasizes appearance over actual identity—he doesn’t ask if he is a poor boy but if others perceive him as such. Though it’s obvious the film will chronicle his journey from insecure “poor boy” to its polar opposite (confident rich man), this paradox of “being” versus “appearing” is the journey’s underlying motif. Aladdin doesn’t succeed by altering his identity—he’s substantially the same character at the beginning of the film as he is at the end. Rather, he merely performs a new identity that allows him to triumph. This identity is even given a name, Prince Ali, and it’s formed in the most superficial of ways, through the instant gratification of magic.

Here’s where the stalwart Disney-phile might interject: “But the
message of Aladdin is ‘be yourself!’” To this I respond, sure, that’s what the characters say, but the movie itself contradicts this message at every turn. This is most evident in the character of the Genie, a shape-shifting blue blob whose most distinguishing trait is his lack of identity. Hardly a scene goes by without at least a half dozen transformations, from animals to objects to—anachronistic figures of American popular culture. Like the film’s ideal audience, to which I’m no exception, the Genie is the byproduct of a constant diet of television, movies, and other mass media. He’s my own affinity for pop culture gone rampant, to the point where its fictional characters become more important to his identity than any actual or original essence. Who is the real Genie behind the celebrity impressions? The movie doesn’t ask, instead getting intoxicated on the sheer liberation it suggests a lack of a true identity provides. (I note here that, while the movie presents the Genie as a prisoner of the lamp, he is never a prisoner of his powers. In fact, his release from the lamp in the denouement illustrates the ultimate in freedom, as he maintains his powers of transformation without having to waste them in service to others.) Ironically, it’s the Genie who, as Aladdin’s mentor, delivers the “Be yourself!” maxim. To underline this irony, he’s in the guise of a bee at the time. If the Genie doesn’t follow his own advice, why would I?

After all, context undermines content, and the petty rhetoric of the film’s moralizing rings false in its giddy frenzy of identity-hopping. Nearly every character in Aladdin assumes an alternate identity at some point. Princess Jasmine takes on the guise of a peasant, Abu the monkey transforms into an elephant, Iago the parrot impersonates Jasmine and a flamingo (simultaneously, no less), and villain Jafar disguises himself as an old man. The most prominent example, however, involves Aladdin himself. For his first wish, the Genie transforms Aladdin into "Prince Ali," a suave spoof of masculinity who boasts bulging muscles and exploits fantastic enough to fill one thousand Arabian Nights and then some. While Aladdin interacted with the princess with awkward humility, Ali calls her "a fine prize to be won...(by) a prince like me!" But the change is a performance, not an altered state of being. Perhaps aware that a Disney prince signals the ultimate in masculine power, Aladdin uses the guise of Ali to achieve dreams he’d previously considered unreachable. Like this Prince Charming predecessors, he wins the princess, slays the monster, and inherits the kingdom. And though he resumes his original clothes and name at the movie’s end, there’s
Continued

no denying that, were it not for his time spent playing prince, the
happy ending would never have occurred. Masculinity is a perform-
ance, Aladdin reveals, but it is a necessary one.

Aladdin can make the change to Prince Ali because he is an
orphan, without relatives who would remain connected to his origi-
nal identity. I, on the other hand, have both my parents, providing
me with a grounding that my animated hero lacks. Nevertheless,
throughout my teenage years, Aladdin’s lesson was not forgotten.
More insecure introspect than confident charmer, I read in his story
the struggle between real self and the version society rewards,
adapting such a guise when necessary while always remaining
aware of which behaviors and actions were merely performances.
(In my more recent years, this has likely translated into my affinity
for theatre, where performance is not only acceptable, it’s
required—a healthy arena for my inner Aladdin.) The message I
created from the movie was not "be yourself," but rather "be your-
self on the inside but be someone else on the outside." Aladdin uses
the illusion of magic to fashion an image compatible with a socially
desirable concept of male behavior; in the years following the
movie’s release, my magic might have been clothes, words, or a sim-
pel way of carrying myself, but the result was the same, and my par-
ents’ cash was a fine substitute for a genie. Just as Aladdin per-
forms Ali, so too have I performed Aladdin. Ironically, part of this
newfound masculine posturing involved a denouncement of
Disney’s "kiddie films." In this respect, Aladdin carries the seeds of
its own undoing—and mine. Magic makes the man, yes—but as I
discovered, it does so at the expense of the boy.
Robbie Kline. David Mayberry, Dawn Nufer. 
Fucking little predators.

Another new school. Frigid walk. Twelve blocks some days seemed like miles.
But first:
Good morning Captain, it’s "hello how do you do?"
Oatmeal. Toast. Mr. Greenjeans. Captain Kangaroo.
"Don’t be late, Robby."

Out the door. Alone. Scared.
Stare at the ground. One blue moon boot after another.
Flashes of KISS lunchbox. It swings back and forth.
Shout it, shout it, shout it out LOUD!
Wish I was Ace Frehley. Wish I was Wolverine.
No one would mess with me.
I’m Space Ace.
I’ve got adamantium claws.

Left turn at the crick. Smells like farts and asphalt.
Look down. Walking walking walking walking.
Reed Street.
Past the paper mill. Past the Outriders’ house. Past motorcycles and choppers.
BEWARE OF THE DOG.
Stop before the railroad tracks at the beauty shop.
They give away candy on Fridays.
There he is. David Mayberry. Don’t run. Don’t cry.
Hood over my head. Fur color in my mouth.
Darklightdarklight. Dark.
"Fucking white boy."
Blue moon boots dented lunch box bloody nose. Snow.
Get up.
Go to school
Burdick Elementary, 2nd grade, 1976.
I don’t remember anything about the wedding. I do clearly remember the first time I tried on the dress, though. It was a spring green creation with a bow in the back and puffed sleeves that made me feel like a princess. I got to help pick out the white whicker basket I would carry the rose petals in, and my mother handed me a pair of black patent leather shoes to wear with the dress. She told me they were ‘big girl’ shoes and made a joke I didn’t understand about black patent leather shoes reflecting up. I loved the round toe and slightly raised heel and the leather so shiny I could see myself in it. I latched and unlatched the tiny gold buckle over and over. I asked everyday to wear the shoes to school, but was never allowed—I had to wait for the wedding.

The photographs tell me that I wore pearls that day, and that my mother was pregnant. I remember that the reception was the first time I ever did the Chicken Dance, or danced a polka standing on my father’s feet. We all got silk roses full of rice, to throw at the bride, my mother told me. I was sure that this must be the key moment that meant the wedding had happened, so I kept asking if it was time for the rice. It never was, so I threw my rose at the bride in the middle of a dance. Little grains flew out of my hand, skipping across the hard floor like beads of a broken necklace. I found out later that she had a migraine, and that little pieces of rice had gotten stuck in her ear.

It seems I should remember everything about buying those boots, but I don’t know if Mary and I got them together, or just ended up with the same item. That’s how it usually was with us; we would come to school in the same clothes and with interviews for the same jobs. That’s probably how the boots were, too. They were fabulous—black patent leather and up to my knees with four-inch heels. They reflected light and color when walking down the street, like a surrealist movie made only of motion and color played out on my toes. Halloween night we both slid those boots over calves already covered in fishnets and self-conscious stubble. We minced through crowds of goblins and devils, M&Ms and Shirley Temples headed to Halloween parties and dances. We skipped and giggled through downtown with our heads together and our arms intertwined. I dripped feathers from my boa; she kept flipping her waist-length red hair over her shoulder. We felt like sirens trying to
make sense of the big boots and short skirts on our virginal bodies.

We spent the night at Denny’s, brushed our teeth in the bathroom. Coffee. Hash Browns. Cookie, Shakes. Coffee. There’s a clientele switch at Denny’s around four in the morning. All of a sudden all of the young, misplaced and misused disappear and are replaced with cops. They all sit in smoking, but none of them smoke. At seven or so all of the cops are gone and other people’s grandparents appear for breakfast. Women painted and dyed to look younger accompany men with pot bellies and rough hands. I’d smoked too many cigarettes, she’d had too much coffee, it was still too early to go home.

I pulled a t-shirt over my head after the lecture and the grounding. I peeled off the boots—vinyl sticking to fishnets that became loose and baggy hours ago. I went to sleep with the smell of cigarettes and grease in my hair.
Carried Away

Michelle Wallon

I

The little girl was carried away by a dust storm says her brother; but no, she was led from the garden, coaxed by a group of children. Come into our house and play they said; and she followed, and she fell asleep, and the search party finds her on the road to Bir Wahid.

II

He takes his donkey cart to the hot spring—a little boy going for an afternoon swim; but the waters are already occupied; three children, all naked, one a small girl with smooth black hair that falls like a curtain to her ankles. She stands on the concrete wall, turns coyly upon the boy’s arrival; he passes out, the donkey instinctively leads him home.

III

They approach the brothers in the family’s grove of date palms. Our car has broken down at the edge of the desert. Could one of you, just one of you, please come and help? One brother goes; night falls; the search for him begins. His writing is found in the sand: Siwa Bir Wahid Libya. The people set out; find him 60 kilometers East of the border, alone and trembling in the dunes.

IV

The woman is young, but has already lost her father. He was working in the Western desert, constructing a road between the oases of Siwa and Bahariyya. One morning, he was missing from his tent. It was the jinn the people said, it was the jinn that carried him away.
Chapter I: The Right Atrium

In her dream, she was omniscient. A movie camera panning in from some aerial focal point. A brief sweep of the scene brought the five nurse Barbies into sharp, full focus. They were shapely and stiff, tan and tall. Their gestures were jerky, as if moved by invisible hands. Carelessly propped between their molded fingers were pointy scalpels or pinching tweezers. Barbie one leaned in close over her patient. She was a perfectly painted smile—copious mint green eye shadow caked like drawn curtains over her window wide eyes. Her voice was high and throaty, the sound of a breath being held, then expelled in strained falsetto.

"Hello Sick girl. I am your doctor, Doctor Barbie."

Sick girl squirmed slightly, the straps around her ankles and wrists not allowing for much movement. Dewy droplets of sweat blossomed at the roots of her hair. The gage around her mouth was warming hot blisters around the edges of her lips like millions of small, simultaneous bee stings.

"Doctor Barbie says it's time for your surgery Sick girl."

Barbie two and Barbie three tottered forward readjusting glaring lights on sputtering hinges. Their ninety degree elbows and mitten hands made every movement seem like an accident, but the jeering stillness of their perfect teeth inside their tightly pink mouths never apologized.

"Doctor Barbie wants Sick girl to stop squirming."

Sick girl squinted into the bright lamp bulb. There was yellow exploding off the plastic molded cheeks of Doctor Barbie. Barbie two and Barbie threes' heads blocked the bulb with black silhouettes. They had bending halo profiles. Sick girl saw the room start to shake like heat waves off a newly paved highway. She squeezed her eyes shut defeatedly. She didn't have the energy to resist.

"Doctor Barbie knows exactly what she's doing."

Sick girl heard the plastic ball of Doctor Barbie’s shoulder socket rotate in her hollow chest cavity. The scalpel balanced lazily in doctor Barbie’s hand, and sunk like a sloppy seesaw into the center of Sick girl’s chest. A slow ripping noise, like the stretch of saran wrap, followed the scalpel’s ditch digging through Sick girl’s chest. Barbies four and five began pinning back the flaps of newly loosened flesh with sewing needles. Sick girl’s chest was now a nest of open, pumping muscle.

"Doctor Barbie has just the thing for you Sick girl."

A cold chrome table with a thick saucepan was wheeled to
Doctor Barbie’s right hand side. A tough tip of brown protruded out of the smooth surface of iodine. As Doctor Barbie slowly extracted the angular mystery object, it became apparent that it was the organic geometry of roughage.

"There were no real hearts left for you Sick girl, so Doctor Barbie found you something special. Sick girl gets an artichoke heart transplant!"

Chapter II: The Right Ventricle

The doctor knocked tentatively on the closed door. She paused, then turned the knob without waiting for a reply. Her patient was seated in a plastic chair thumbing through a three-month-old copy of Entertainment Weekly.

"Please get up on the table Miss."

The patient pinched close the magazine. She thrust herself standing with deliberation. The butcher paper that covered the vinyl table cushion creased in ripples under her weight. The doctor grabbed her right hand, clamping thumb and forefinger down on a pulse. After counting under her breath for over a minute, the doctor jotted numbers and slashes onto her clipboard.

"I need to ask you a few questions, Miss."

The doctor took her glasses off, letting them swing like a hammock from the little beaded neck chain slung over her collarbone. She flipped a few sheets of paper over in the girl’s file, squinting for a second at one on the top.

"Are you allergic to latex?"

"No."

"Are you taking any other medications on a daily basis?"

"No."

"Do you smoke or drink?"

"Recreationally."

"Have you ever done intravenous drugs?"

"No."

"Have you ever tried intravenous drugs, even once?"

"No, I’m sure."

"We have in our files, Miss, that the first rave you ever went to was held on Saturday, April 17, 1996. Is that correct?"

"Yes, Ma’am."

"And this rave was held in the truck driver’s union warehouse ten minutes north of the Eisenhower’s Armitage exit. And we have
down here," she said, fanning through papers clipped neatly to the jaws of her clipboard, "that you went because the first girl you ever had a crush on invited you. Is that true too?"

"Well, it’s possible I might have forgotten some of those details Ma’am, but I – that sounds right."

"Right. Well let’s see. Says here that she drove, and you arrived at 11:30 p.m. Your family physician faxed us a copy of this form," the doctor said, jabbing her ballpoint into the pulpy mattress of thick papers clipped to her board. "It states your friend’s body glitter looked like a million constellations stretched across her skin. It goes on to say that on the second floor, across from the d.j., a young man approached you. His eyes were blue glass, and he asked if you liked to party, and you nodded." The doctor replaced her milky-framed glasses to the bridge of her nose. "He then grabbed your wrist, and pulled your arm toward him."

"Well, yes Ma’am, I, I do remember something like that."

"Yes, well, the tourniquet he used was made from rubber tubing he stole from his seventh period chemistry class, and after he tapped the syringe’s side, he held it up to the flashing lights and squirted a little fountain spray in the direction of the disco ball overhead, is that correct? And when the needle nestled into your bluing vein, your eyes closed. Were you smiling colors, Miss?"

"Well, yes Doctor, I think I might have."

"So," the doctor said, scratching out her initials over a dotted line on the topmost form, "have you ever used intravenous drugs?"

"No."

"Have you ever tried intravenous drugs even once?"

"Maybe once Ma’am."

Chapter III: The Left Atrium

An echocardiogram is like an ultrasound for your heart. A lab technician sticks three pre-gelled electromagnetic patches to your chest and lower sternum. Next, they clip electric leads up to each of these strips. A cold pestle shaped metal probe is plunged into the machine on the dolly next to the gurney you’re lying on. The lab technician coats the flat, half-dollar-sized surface of the probe with water-based petroleum jelly. The machine is flipped on. The lab technician rolls up one side of your paper smock. You feel embarrassed and exposed. The probe stamps down on your heart, snailing its way across the cusp of your left breast. On the machine’s screen
Continued

you watch a black and white bull bucking. The reception is bad, the image is grainy and halting. The lab technician warns you that there will be sound in a second. The blood pumping into and out of your heart sounds like ten million records being scratched in unison. Your nipples are clenched fists. Your ribs are floorboards for the probe. You think about crying but are too exhausted. You close your eyes instead, deciding to wait for the words, "You can put your clothes back on."

Chapter IV: The Left Ventricle

The drawer slid easily open on its oiled wheels. There was blinding bright, two figures. She was lying flat on her back, a thin cotton sheet covering her body and face. There was a slight tug at her big toe.

"I know this is a difficult thing to do Ma’am, but you’ll feel better going home with some answers."

"All I want are some answers, Officer."

The woman gripped the edge of the drawer tightly. She sunk slightly, her left arm shifting away from her side. The shadows of the Officer’s hands loomed largely over her head. He began to slowly peel the sheet off its face like rotten fruit. The woman gasped, choking a watery rumble rising in her throat.

"Can you identify this body as your daughter, Ma’am?"

"Oh god–oh my god."

The officer kept rolling the sheet down revealing the tops of its shoulders, the hanger of its collarbone, and then the buoyant lumps of its left and right breasts. The thin black ink of its circled tattoo was exposed. It sat like an unnatural birthmark between its nipples.

"Ma’am, please, I understand this is difficult, but I need a yes or no."

"I thought, at first, it was her Officer, but, no daughter of mine would have a tattoo. Take her away."

The Officer quickly re-draped the sheet over its chalky frame. The light slunk away like a large, overhead battery had been drained. The drawer gained momentum, slammed shut with a metallic boom, echoing as if empty, like it was hollow. Footsteps were heard tapping away, receding Morse code over the tiled floor of the morgue.

Appendix

Fig.1: An atrial septal defect (ASD) is an abnormal hole in the
Continued

septum (wall) between the right and left atria (upper chambers). "Red," or systemic blood, from the left atrium passes through the hole and mixes with "blue," or pulmonary blood, in the right atrium. This results in increased blood flow to the right ventricle and lungs.

Fig. ii: The size of the defect may vary from pin size to the complete absence of the septum. Small defects can close spontaneously, and generally cause no symptoms or ill effects in the child. Larger defects allow greater blood flow to the right side of the heart, resulting in extra work for the heart and lungs. Over time, this may stress the right ventricle, causing it to enlarge. The increased blood flow to the lungs may damage the blood vessels in the lungs. Larger defects which do not close spontaneously require surgery to prevent the complications mentioned above. Surgery is usually accomplished between the ages of 3 - 5 years, well before permanent injury to the heart or lungs can develop.

Fig. iii: The congenital opening in the partition between the two upper chambers (atria) of the heart. The most common atrial septal defect is persistence of the foramen ovale, an opening in this partition that is normal before birth and that normally closes at birth or shortly thereafter. The usual treatment, the surgical closure of the defect, is sometimes made hazardous by serious disease of the pulmonary vessels.
Madama Butterfly

My best friend sent me a card once. On the front, there was a picture of an Asian woman draped inside a black cloak, velvet probably. She was so mysterious. Only her nose and eyes were showing. Madama Butterfly. Looked like she was floating. An Angel.

What was she staring at? Maybe me. Watching me peering out, sending me some kind of signal with those dilated pupils. I wonder if she is hot inside that cloak, sweating. Anticipating the rape. Or she’s cold, shivering with my nerves, my brittle bones, my nightmares.

Where are you now? I want to watch. I want to float. I want to throw up my dinner. I want to dance. I want to kiss. I want to cry. I want to borrow that cloak. Wrap myself up. Tight.

Rain

Driving to your apartment. It was raining. I should’ve known right then. Rain is a sign. I don’t know for what, exactly, but it is definitely a sign. Maybe to turn around. Nope. I could smell you again. After two years, I could still smell you. I wanted to throw up. But you were pulling at me. Somehow. At my hair. At my skin. An undertow so strong that I was about to forgive you. After the cheating. After the blood. I was about to forgive you. My palms sweat against your bare chest. I couldn’t breathe. Smoke in my lungs. In my eyes. I’ve missed you, you said. And then we danced. Slow. Smooth. I didn’t say a word. I just let you lead me. Eyes closed. Head down. Around and around. No music. Just us. Swaying. Dancing. We were always good at pretending to be in love.

Hermanita Bonita

My beautiful little sister. Tall. Slender. Fuerte. No one knows me like you do. You used to sleep in that cold hallway. Rug burns on your shoulders. Head close to my bedroom door, you wanted to make sure that I eventually stopped crying and fell asleep. Princess. Amiga favorita. I remember taking your picture next to the school bus on your first day of school. Remember, the bus driver was late and you were crying. So much potential. Thick, dark hair. Stars in your eyes. So proud of you.
No one knows you like I do. Sometimes I catch myself staring. Tengo miedo. In your eyes, I can see her. Madre. Her frustration. I can hear your screaming silence across the dinner table. Her anxiety and impatience. I feel like you are thirty something and I am eight and your longing eyes look to me. Be me to understand, escuchar, to fix it.

I want to hold you. Protect you. Build you a cocoon so you can slip away for a while. But we go driving instead. Blast Mariah Carey, pinky fingers act as microphones. Light up some cigarettes. Shades on. Hair down. We speed into sisterhood. Sun roof ajar, wind in our faces.

Vents

My mother doesn’t remember gushing through my vomit onto the bathroom floor where I buried a pregnancy test, countless blowjobs and my rosary. I used to run the faucet on high so that she couldn’t hear me trying to throw up. I could hear her footsteps through the ceiling. Pacing back and forth. Worried steps. Scared steps. Lonely steps.

Sometimes at night I could hear her crying through the vents. She would pray for me, ask God to help me. Comfort me. I’d lie there on the floor and wait until I could hear her snore. I’d whisper into that vent while she slept, my fingertips trying to slip through the cracks. I wanted to touch her hands. Play with her thin hair. I love you, I’d say. It’ll be okay. Then I’d fall asleep right there on the floor. Like I was next to her in her bed. We snuggled through those vents.
As I pulled into the parking lot, the icy pre-dawn Lake Street silence snapped and popped with the sounds of new snow being crushed by my tires. Over the low idle of my engine, I could hear them inside the stall, cheerless heat of the shelter – a frantic patchwork of howls and yelps.

It was the same every Sunday morning. I squished and tromped through pools of bleach and urine in rubberized boots, jet-nozzled hose in surgically gloved hand, past row after row of barred, stainless steel hovels. Each one floored with rust-eaten black metal grills. Each one graded back, allowing fluids, chunks of fur, and anxiety-softened stools to be sprayed back into a sewage trough. Each one tagged with anonymous numbers and ominous dates. Each one stuffed with filth and treasure, life and garbage: afghans, excrement, multi-colored food pellets, well-intentioned sad neglected tennis balls, Christmas Dalmations, cheerless mutts, fast food Chihuahuas, cured Pit Bulls, fear biters, geriatrics, carpet soilers, slipper chewers and their puppies all hunkered down for the short haul. I tried to soothe every one, tried to give each one a soft moment or two. I tried to calm each quivering cherry eye. But each raw, expressive, red-rimmed jelly dripped ochre tears. Each yellow-brown prism implored: I need you. I need help and you can give it and you can help me and you’re all that stands between me and want and suffering and pain and neglect and if you could just figure this out, the world would be a warmer place.
This dog brought me the paper.
This dog walked a hundred miles on bloody paws.
This dog wakes up more tired than before he went to sleep.
The dog is a vegetarian.
This dog only knows what I’ve told him, and that’s precious little,
believe you me.
When this dog scratches at the door you’d better let him in, because
he’s crazy, and anything that makes him mad is bad for business.
When this dog cries, he looks to see if you’re watching.
The dog in the corner is not afraid. He is there by choice.
This dog is a sensuous and prolific dancer, a kind of doggy Baryshnikov.
This dog responds only to his native Czech.
This dog gets a good-natured ribbing from his friends, but deep down,
knows they mean well.
This dog is a puppy trapped in the wrong fur.
This dog fights for a living in rustic Victorian shadows, going for the
jugular, becoming old and vicious and good for nothing but being
mean as hell.
He’ll be asleep soon.
This dog is too old to fend for himself. He’s lost control of his bowels.
This dog is too young to know how good he’s got it.
Calling this dog man’s best friend is like saying Caligula had a mild temper.
This dog is really, really tired of being called boy. If you call him boy again,
he’s going to crack you right in the jaw. That’s right. He’s not going to bite you. He’s going to punch you. If you say "Here, boy!" or "Go get it, boy!" one more time, he’s going to raise up on his hind legs, do his best to make a little first, and throw a roundhouse that would make the Duke proud. And then where will you be? You’ll be on the floor, that’s where. Laid out by your dog. Just do what he wants, and nobody gets hurt.
This dog is tired of the scraps. He’s going to sit at the table, eat what he likes, and throw the rest to you.
This dog is looking at me like he knows I know that he knows I ate the last donut.
When this dog grows up, he wants to be a fireman.
This dog doesn’t really know what it means to be a dog.
This dog chases cars because it’s not fun.
This dog does not play fetch.
When push comes to shove, this dog does neither, because he doesn’t have any hands.
This dog thought that the movie was better than the book.
The dog outside is the same as mine.
This dog built his own home, and then sold it to another dog for a tidy profit.
This dog thinks your crotch is sniffing him.
Hoping to ease the tension, this dog playfully snatched the Treaty of Paris from
Woodrow Wilson’s outstretched fingers just as he got to the part about letting bygones be. Ol’ Woodrow’s argument never caught on.
Incredulous, this dog watched unfazed as I tossed back round after round.
Then he dragged my sorry ass home.
This dog has a lot on his mind.
The St. Bernard over yonder carries cognac.
Without his name, this dog would just be another dog.
This dog can’t remember his mother.
I want that one over there. The dog with the big face. He likes me.
This dog spilled the beans about being my Secret Santa.
This dog’s timing is impeccable.
Hoping for rain, this dog got sprinkled with irony.
This dog has a better than average grasp on Keynesian economic theory.
When this dog pees, he feels a burning sensation, but forgets about it with dog-like tenacity.
This dog is really tired of hearing the phrase "son of a bitch."
This dog understands the difference between man bites dog and dog bites man.
This dog is just crazy enough to work.
When that dog hears the Pink Floyd song "Seamus," he tells himself, "Man, that could have been me."
Some dogs wind up waiting the six months in quarantine to get into the UK.
This one says he’d do it again.
When confronted with leading questions like, "What life-decision would you most like to take back?" this dog just snarls and eats the microphone.
This dog has learned the new tricks, and it hasn’t done him any good.
I was asleep on her bed when this dog came in and ruined what little quiet there was in the room. I, of course, pushed him back on the floor. And at that point all his one-hundred dog-year-old femurs snapped in half. She thought he got hit by that car, because I moved him out into the road, whining and crying and carrying on. It was wrong. But I couldn’t wake her from that divinely beautiful naked sleep we were enjoying.
If this dog sees one more wiseacre in a Georgia Bulldogs outfit, he’s going rabid.
This dog never bought the rights to the play, but performed it breathtakingly, even after Samuel French came and locked all the doors. I’ve never seen a better Cherry Orchard.
This dog was wrongly imprisoned in a thousand titanium cages with paw-print recognition software and cryogenically frozen. After his absolution he still bit me on the side when I tried to deliver the newspaper.

I look at this dog, I see the inevitable, crippling pain of life.

I look at this dog and while I’m watching, he grows and blossoms into a Trojan dog, filled with the ancient, secret solutions to the ills of the world. Once he’s safely inside the city walls, they come streaming out, glowing in occidental mystery. But they’re written in a language of toilet water and fire hydrants, and I’m powerless to decode them.

I look at this dog, and without warning, my whole body begins to shake and pop, and I’m reminded of Napoleon’s setter, and the Khan’s pug, and Attila’s Doberman, and for just a few minutes, I think things are getting better.

I look at this dog, and see that he won’t be around forever. And neither will I.

I scratch behind his ears. We go for a walk. And that is enough.
Scott and I are waiting for food. We’re standing in front of the hotline in the back kitchen. It’s break. Every minute here is one not working. But we’re just waiting and staring. Food takes time. And the customer’s food comes before employee meals. There’s plenty of food on the line…just not for us. Room service snatches up a plate of fries and a hamburger before I can steal any fries. Scott gets a few. We’re the lowest in the pecking order around here. Maintenance. Even housekeeping eats before us. I hate this wait. Every day, we wait. Scott acts like he’s got all the time in the world…winding down, as we stand there powerless…too tired to move or make a fuss, it wouldn’t do any good anyways.

We’ve been tarring the roof in 100-degree heat all day. I feel dead and roasted. I just want something to eat and drink, but all I can do is stand and stare. My legs are aching. I watch the toast machine slowly rotate its tined trays back into the dark insides of the machine. I can’t take my eyes away from it, even when I want to. I have to just stand and watch. It’s filthy and crusted with black burned toast grot. The toast trays are going back into the machine’s mouth. They won’t come out for a while. And when they do, they rotate back in again…over and over. The trays squeak on their conveyor belt all day, toasting the metal tines till they’re charred and black. Scott puts a piece of bread on a wire tray, watching it slowly start its ascent up and back.

Scott is a huge guy with a greasy, jet-black, curly mullet. His molars are missing and whenever he talks you can see the empty sockets in the back dark corners of his mouth. His arms are huge, and I wonder how they stay on. It seems like gravity would pull them off. His shoulders swallow any neck he may have once had. He keeps his cigarettes rolled up in his shoulder shirt-sleeve like a 1950’s hood.

"Yeah my life used to be really fucked up," he says. And I wake up from staring.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, when I was 17 I enlisted in the army."

I think he’s been talking for a while now, but I don’t know. I’ve been too far in my head.

"Oh yeah? That seems like it’d be a good thing," I say.

"Well, I was all set to be a Navy Seal, but they found out I lied about my age and kicked me out a week before graduation."

"Oh, that’s rough man."

"It just made me real angry. Cause I didn’t finish high school.
cause of the army. So I didn’t have anything to do really.”

"Yeah. That sucks. I’d a’ been pissed too."

"But I was always pissed when I was younger." I gave sort of a non-committal grunt, and we stare at the toaster, waiting for his bread. The silence is unnerving. It hangs thick in the air...it’s finally broken by housekeeping. They come waddling in the kitchen, clucking angry Spanish at me...girth stretching against their floral moo-moos. They push me out of the way for their food. No respect. I’m just fresh fish, summer help, the college-boy. Scott is a lifer though. He curses at them, "stupid bitches." One of them says something to Scott. He curses in Spanish at them, and they go off clucking with their food. After they’re gone he’s muttering to himself, "stupid fatties. They should know by now not to fuck with me or my crew," he says. I feel momentarily touched that he stood up for me. He’s still talking, "They don’t wanna mess with me man, I’m crazy like that. I’ll fuck ’em up if they come around here acting like that again." I try to retrieve our previous conversation to calm him down a bit.

"So what’d you do after the army?"

"Oh, I spent about five years in prison cause I tried to kill this one guy."

I try not to let it rattle me. We’re still staring off into space.

"Oh really?" I said. "Why’d you do that?"

"I dunno man. He looked at me the wrong way or something. I broke his neck and stabbed him with my knife a couple of times. But it was in a bar. It was just one of those things. He was fucking with me. Not like I had a choice."

"Yeah" I say. "Just one of those things. Shit happens dude."

There’s another silence, and I can see Scott’s remembering something. He’s got this far off stare, and he’s looking through the toaster, past it.

"Yep. Those were the days. I used to fight and fuck every day," he says with a smile.

"But now I got my stuff straight. I got my shit together. I got Charlotte and the kids now. My little boy Tony just graduated from the 6th grade. I’m real proud of the little guy. He’s gonna’ be just like his old man." We both wait in the moment after that comment. I don’t dare breathe a word. I can see he feels dumb for saying it.

We’re still waiting for our food on the hotline. Break is almost halfway over now. "I’ve got a good life now though," he says to the air. "Yep, this is a good job." After lunch we will clean toilets and
fix leaking sinks. I just want my food. I just want to eat and enjoy break before we’ve got work again. I just want to be anywhere but here, with Scott, standing and waiting. Nothing’s moving anywhere. Scott’s watching the toaster. The grim-wire trays are still slowly going back into the mouth of the hulking thing. He’s got a sad look on his face. Talking to himself, muttering, "Yeah. The good life. Yes sir. This is it." All of the sudden he looks very tired and old. He’s just standing there, waiting for his toast.
Trust me.
It works.
Hold on.
Let me just put this down.
Now, here,
take your fingernail.
Yeah, just like that.
Hold on.
Let me just...
Okay.
Yeah.
Now take your fingernail
and run it along the edge of my heart.
Do you see how it leaves that dry white line?
You could probably write your name if you wanted.
Yeah.
It’s bizarre.
It stays white like that for just a minute.
Then it turns red.
After a while, it’s like it was never there—
like nothing ever happened.
Rich Cavell

She's got hips that curve like the earth. I just found that in a notebook, in my dressing room, where I keep lyrical ideas. I wrote it the other day, in a hurry, because I didn't want to think about her hips anymore. I didn't think it was a good idea to have her body on my mind, because it could only distract me from the task at hand.

On that same page are three brown circles from where I set down my coffee mug at various points in the song-writing process. When the record is done, I'll quit drinking so much coffee.

She's got matter where there should be space. That line is an inside joke between the two of us about a childhood rumor that said she was born a hermaphrodite. It's not true, by the way, or at least not as far as I can tell. Glory be to modern science, if it is.

But I can't think about that. I've got a record to write.

Here's a glossy moment that turns in my head, from about a week ago, where she said, "Let's go," and I said, "No." Women don't take kindly to that sort of thing.

Here's what she did: she got out of bed, threw the sheets over my head, and went through the door to the kitchen. I lay in the dark, singing into my pillow. I love you baby. I think you're crazy. From the kitchen she yelled back, "I love it when you say that. I just love it." I said, "Thanks," and she said, "But I hate when you sing it." I said, "Sorry," and she said, "That's okay, I never expected much from you."

I went into the kitchen, where I found her by the fridge getting a beer.

I asked her how many beers that made on the night. She said, "Fourteen, and don't give me no shit because I've been working. What have you done today?"

"Well, I read the paper, and I read a book and started another one, and I played my guitar for a little bit. Then you came home and now we're here."

She opened the beer with the front of her shirt and I could see her navel for about a full second. She turned around and I watched the line of her brassiere. It's not so much the mystery with that thing, it's the history of it that makes a mess of me. Of taking it off and watching her put it back on, of taking it off and watching her put it back on, of taking it off and watching her take it off the floor to put it back on.

"Can you help me open this?" she said. "Sometimes they're hard to get off, y'know?" I took the beer out of her hand and got a bottle opener from the top drawer. The cap came off easily and rolled across the floor past her feet and out the door. "Thanks," she
said. "You’re welcome." I said.

"Yeah, you would be." She gave a sigh like a helium from a zeppelin and sank to the linoleum. She started muttering lines from poems I’d forgotten she’d written, forgotten she’d given me. "Maybe the whale doesn’t want to be metaphorically murdered anymore," she said. "Maybe the barracuda kills more than it has to, because it has to. Maybe the brown bear that bit off your arm could teach you a thing or two about humility."

Then she took a long, long, long drink, dropped the bottle, and opened the fridge to get another. She closed the refrigerator with such sureness of purpose that it rattled the beer bottles and knocked the margarine off the shelf, as she called me a fucker under her breath, just like the Eskimo woman I hired to clean the place.

At least I get to sleep alone tonight, I remember thinking.
The Fag Agenda

Jason Wright

A stupid fag
Became a smart fag
Creating more fags
Dying for the liberation of fags
Elton John on every fag station
Fags, fags, fags everywhere
Gathering a fag army
Hemp legalization for fags
Installing fag teachers
Joining with the other fags to brainwash your children
Killing traditional morals to make a fag nation
Living in a fag world
Making the world a fag world
Naturalization of fags
Overtaking the government for fag domination
Pride flags for fags inviting natural disasters
Quilting the fag memorial
Repealing institutions to make room for fags
Seducing boy scouts for fags
Teaching fag ways
Undermining Anita Bryant with the fag military
Violating Falwell's world with fag lisps
Wanting eradication of all but fags
Xeroxing the fag agenda
Yearning for only fag sex
Zero-sum game of the fag agenda.
It was lunchtime. Ann was in the kitchen getting sandwiches ready. I was in her bedroom reading something nonsensical. She called to me in that pitiful way. I finished the paragraph and shook my head. To mark my place, I put the book face down on her bed.

When I came out into the kitchen, she was next to the sink struggling with a jar of pickles. A wet rag was draped over the top and she was twisting her body and her face and the lid all at the same time. She grunted a little. After two big tries, she looked up at me. "I can’t get it," she said.

I like to pretend I’m strong. So I winked at her and drawled, "Step aside, little lady."

She smiled, then sent spit from her imaginary plug out the corner of her mouth. She even made a ting sound like it hit the bottom of a spittoon. "I may be little, but I ain’t no lady," she replied. Walking as bowlegged as possible, she went by the oven to give me some room.

Ann and I aren’t quite sure what we are. We’re more friends than we are lovers. Sometimes I kiss her on the mouth. Sometimes she runs her fingers through my hair. A lot of times we’ll even spend nights in the same bed. We don’t like to kiss when we do, we just like to hold. It’s confusing, but we talk so much it doesn’t really matter. It’s not a matter of need.

I was about to give the pickles my first good shot, and the phone rang. Ann dashed towards the living room, patted my ass hard as she went by, and disappeared around the corner. I yelled something rude at her, but she was more interested in the ringing phone. I could hear her say hello. I could hear her laughing voice rise.

Luckily she wasn’t in the kitchen anymore, because I tried and tried, but I couldn’t budge the lid. I tried it with the rag and without the rag. I tried it on the counter and on my knee. I tried it with my hand and once with a spoon. I even ran it under water for a while. I tried until my wrist hurt, then I put the jar back down.

I was nursing the soreness and looking out the window. Her neighbors were moving out that day, and I could see them taking box after box from the house and into the moving van. The father was mad at everyone. He kept bellowing orders. I could hear him clearly even through all the wind. It wasn’t until his tiny daughter toddled out holding a nightlight that I saw him bend down and whisper. He must have said something sweet. He patted her on her clump of kinky hair, and she spun in circles towards the van as he headed back inside, yelling.
"How’s it going, stud?"
"Huh?" I said, surprised by a sudden voice.
"I said, how’s it going? And then I called you a stud."
"I can’t get it."
"It’s a tough one, isn’t it?"
"It must be if I can’t get it."
"You think you’re so great, don’t you?" She tried squeezing my biceps, but I pulled away and retreated to the other side of the kitchen. She laughed, "I’ll show you how it’s done." She pretended to put a spell on the jar. Her hands moved in waves above the lid and she started chanting something ridiculous. I watched her.

She never combs her hair. It’s curly and brown, so you can always tell which side of her head she’s slept on the night before. I like it much better when it’s not matted all over her head. I don’t blame her though. I don’t comb mine. If you think about it, it’s kind of selfish.

Her chanting stopped and her hands were still. I thought she was going to try to open it again, but she just turned and said, "Nooo, didn’t work."
"You’re not going to even try?" I asked.
"I just did. You watched me."
"But you didn’t even do anything."
"I did too. It’s just really on there."
"You really are useless, aren’t you? Look out," and I began trying again. I tried even harder this time. I pushed and pulled and twisted. I contorted my body into all sorts of oblong angles and asymmetrical shapes. I cursed and I screamed and I grunted so loud it hurt my throat. When I was finally frustrated and out of breath, I put the jar back by the sink and bent over with my hands on my knees. "Jesus," I gasped.

I looked up. For a moment I thought she had left the kitchen. She hadn’t. She was sitting against the refrigerator, and she was crying. "What’s the matter?" I said. "Who was on the phone?"
"Did something happen?" She didn’t answer. "Ann, what’s wrong? What happened?" I was still bent with my hands on my knees.

She didn’t look up, "Oh Peter, it’s nothing. I don’t know."
"Well it sure must be something," I said. She wiped her eyes on the collar of her t-shirt.
"No, it’s not."
"Why are you crying then?"
"I don’t know."
"You must know kinda. Right?"
"Well."
"It’s not something I did, is it?"
"No, Pete, it’s just me."
"Ann, I don’t know what to do."
"You don’t have to do anything. There’s nothing you can do. There’s nothing we can do."
"It’s not the pickles is it?" I smiled. "You don’t want pickles that bad, do you?"
"No," she laughed and sniffed, "It’s not the pickles."
Maybe it wasn’t the pickles, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t go near her. I stood upright and took the jar in both hands. I raised them to my eyes. They were pressed together. I let go.
The moving neighbors stopped and looked towards the house. Eighteen fat pickles and a jar full of green washed across the linoleum. The tiny girl came running out of the house giggling. Her father was crouched down with his arms outstretched, following not far behind.
We hadn’t seen him for weeks. We worried. We watched. He was our Kant; we set our watches by his walks. With his long hair and arms held out like he was holding imaginary suitcases. Three, four, and sometimes five day stubble. I woke up once to see him pulling at the satellite dish in his front yard, arms strained to uproot his communication. He swore, gave up, went back inside, and came out later to piss on the sidewalk. We laughed. He disappeared. We wondered. And when I saw him the other day, clean-shaven and bare-chested, I laughed, because we’d had our own problems to worry about all along.
The First Day of Fall

They talked at the bar.
They talked about work.
They talked about working for the county road commission.
They talked about a load of gravel from Mackinaw that was mostly sand.
They talked about how they made it into shoulders instead of roadbeds.
They talked about being rained out of working.
They talked about driving the big orange trucks on a little road trip.
They talked about driving to places with names like Newberry,
    Grand Marias, Deer Park, Muskollonge
They talked about the common everyday things that people talk about in summer,
    Until
Somebody talked about how empty the bar seemed.
Somebody talked about how soon it would be getting dark early.
Somebody talked about how that would bring everybody back to the bar.

Then they didn’t talk anymore.
They all looked forward or sullenly into their beer and agreed.

They each said "yeah" barely audible—
Bracing for winter.

***

And fishlessness no longer bothered me.

I put my rod down today.
And sat to watch the river.
It flowed, as I read before,
Brown and clear, with a swamp.

Voluntarily I did not use my rod today.
I sat on the bank
as I read before
a river of stories.

When he fished the river
as I read before
fishlessness was not an option.
Still he did not fish the swamp.

I read on the bank
And did not use my rod today.
While I sat before his
Big Two Hearted.

I put my book down
And read the river,
As he must have before,
But I did not use my rod.

I sat by the river
Now called Fox
And put down my rod
But still fished the swamp.
My fish stories are awful, out to here with embellishment. I’m the fisherman, baiting lies and reeling them in for cleaning, gleaning, and a little bit of show and tell.

I’d rather be my wife, the reticent one, full of wisdom and dry humor, the one everyone listens to when she speaks because it’s always worthwhile, even entertaining.

But I’m not here, and I bluster on, spinning yarns as I scrape the freshest piece of glistening flesh off the bone to offer to guests.

They never want any; they hardly notice my platter so painstakingly arranged, and instead turn at the smell of freshly baked gingerbread cookies, true to the recipe and perfect for any occasion.

I admire my wife and long to be like her, with her sagacious eyes, her restrained smile, and her plain gingerbread cookies with that mysterious spice.

My gutted fish slip too easily past our guests, past me, and they don’t nourish as those sturdy cookies do, those perfect little men, wholesome and whole.
He plants sweetpeas in pots, staked with bent coat hangers. In buckets (one that used to contain lampreys, preserved for dissection), he’s planted carrots, basil, even lettuce and watermelon. He doesn’t know if they’ll sprout, and even if they do, if they’ll bear fruit, yet he plants them anyway. Tends them carefully.

I had a spider plant. Careless, I knocked it off the windowsill one too many times. My mother came upon me trying to mend its broken leaves with scotch tape. Always making repairs after the fact.

For Christmas, he gives me a bulb, large as a softball. Amaryllis: fast-growing, beautiful, easy to care for. Hard to kill. I leave it too long on the porch and its emerging leaves are frostbitten. The bud browns and dies, falling off a day later. Yet the leaves green and grow. I haven’t killed it yet.
A subtle man like Niles Larson is made for his eight hour a day, no bullshit cashier job at the grocery store. The people come in with their shopping lists and out with two carts double-decker stacked with paper bags and don’t pause to notice much. That’s why the locally notorious, such as newscasters, like to come in during the headache rush of 5 p.m. No one scrambling for the evening’s meal will pay any mind to another guy in tie and suit. The customers carry their cash/checkbook/credit card in hand as they approach the register. And it’s in and out they go.

And Niles watches them. Carefully, but with amusement. He can detect the ones that aren’t good with their money, who have probably overdrawn, overspent and overestimated many times in the past and who probably forget to balance their checkbook and never pay their credit card bills on time. Every idiot needs to shop for food, and financial finesse is not a prerequisite.

Through simple inattention, a small fault, they become his victims. He takes their names, their card numbers and the expiration dates and makes a few small purchases here and there using their credit account. Nothing extravagant. For example, an earthworm farm billed to a tentative pseudo-organic type who is afraid to break away from the grocery franchise and who buys the tofu that is stocked next to the meat cases without flinching. Or a mail order Totally Eighties CD collection from the one who excitedly brings a motorized, spinning toothbrush to his register. These people are not the type to notice an incongruity in their payment report.

You see, Niles is blessed with a photographic memory. He was made blatantly aware of this fact after whizzing through his multiplication tables in third grade. This would make him a closet genius in some circles. But Niles does not imagine himself as the book-toting academic sort. Since the age of eighteen, he has exerted a more amusing application of his talent. He can seamlessly match face, personal tendencies, spending habits, and account numbers with a skill saved for the worst of criminals. A man such as him and a job such as he has seem to fall in perfect conjunction, or are simply a bad mix, depending on your perspective. But he does not see himself as a criminal, and although prone to his own eccentricities, is not a bad guy, as the following story will show.

Niles goes to work one day, drifting through the heat waves that shimmer across the parking lot of the busy Safeway in Foster City, California. It is another drought year, and he can feel the dryness down to the roots of his hair follicles. He decides it might be a good
time to invest in five-gallon water jugs as he strolls through the automatic sliding doors.

Betty the door-greeter looks up at him with a hot-pink smile. She doesn’t reach five feet but makes up lost inches with her permed forget-me-not colored hair. She is a feisty old broad. Niles slaps her a high five as he passes her. "What’s brewin’?" she asks.

"Not much... reorganized my John Wayne video collection last night."

"Huh, stop fooling, boy." A gruff response with a smile. Betty is an avid John Wayne fan. Were the dress code to allow cowboy boot wearing, she would do it. But she’s left to her dusty Keds. "I think Art was lookin’ for ya."

Art is Niles’ boss. The information makes him stiffen. There are all kinds of things a boss could call an employee in for. Niles is sure that during his five-year employment history he must have done all of them. Not to mention that five years of not getting caught have built up a certain amount of tension in him. However, being a minute late meant that it was important for him to get on the clock as soon as possible. No chats with the boss just yet.

In a black apron behind his register all is smooth and calm, like an unmolested pool of bathwater, relucient with expectation of the first touch. The fluorescent ceiling gleams with possibility. The empty aisles are deceptive with inactivity. Years of deviant behavior has led this to feel like his special place. There is a bond, an aura of collaboration between him and his cash register. It is not very hard to smile at each customer as they come pushing their metal carts before them, surprisingly not hard to stifle his secret behind a cheeky greeting.

At ten o’clock people are still buying donuts and coffee from the bakery. Often, this includes the people from the office, the ones behind the scene who work at the grocery store but don’t touch so much as a head of lettuce all day. They touch their keyboards, their Styrofoam cups, their waxy pastry bags, their juicy, ravenous mouths, the ant-sized crumbs on their shirts. They eat food like anyone else, but they don’t know food like the rest of the grocery store employees. Sitting in their green felt rolling office chairs, complacently cushioned in fat rolls, they convince themselves that they have a real job, one that pays an entire dollar an hour more than what replaceable bubs in black aprons like Niles get.

And on this day, the very first office slug through Niles’ line is his boss, with sticky bun in hand. His bushy eyebrows are raised,
lazily, and his thick mustache heavily conceals his mouth that is saying, "Come see me on your break, Niles."

Niles tells him that it can’t be anything serious. Art is not a sharp guy. Art doesn’t know all his employee’s names. He calls all the sixteen year olds that are always in heavy rotation at this high turnover job "Johnny." All the same, Niles cannot calm the butterflies that tickle the inside wall of his stomach all through his first two hours of work.

When his break comes he wants a cigarette more than anything. Instead, Niles shoves his hands down his pockets and does the responsible thing. Art’s office is in a cramped back corner. It was once a storage room full of register tapes and paper bags back in the glory days, most likely, before an expansion of administrative positions was necessary. Or as Niles saw it, before the office slugs began their "breeding" project.

Art motions to a metal folding chiar that is menacingly pinned between his desk and the wall. Niles tries to remain calm. Inside, he is confident, but his rationality leads him to worry. He sits down and smiles bravely.

"I’d like to speak to you about something, Niles."
"So much I’ve gathered."
"You’ve been working here five years. That’s longer than I have."
"I know, it’s unfortunate."
"That’s longer than most of the other employees, save Betty and the women who do free sample Sundays."
"Is that so?"
"Oh, and Jill in the bakery, and that funny guy who does floral, and, well, what I want to say is that you are valuable to us."

Niles is waiting for two broad shouldered guys to jump out from behind the desk with Tommy guns pointed at his head. He holds in his laugh. "I…enjoy working here," he responds carefully.

"Granted, I could use better benefits, but I don’t have a family to raise. By the way, how are the kids, Art?"

"Jules and Rachel are fine. And I’m glad you enjoy your job. I know you do, I can tell from watching you."

That was not quite what Niles wants to hear. In his mind he is imagining the possible secret locations for surveillance cameras.
"You have been watching me?"
"I have been evaluating—"
"Evaluating?" Niles is unsure about that one, and can’t decide whether it is threatening or not. "What for, Art?"
"Because, Niles, I'd like to give you a raise."

Niles does not know how to respond to the unexpected statement. He didn’t see that one coming. "Thank you, Art. Thanks a lot. I didn’t even know I was under evaluation."

Art pats Niles on the shoulder. "It was the least I could do. And I hate it when people come in bitching about getting a wage increase. You’ve never said a word. You really deserve this one."

Niles is smiling. "But I’m still not going to baby-sit your kids."

Art laughs, "No stipulations. You’ve earned it."

Still smiling, Niles looks at this watch. "Time to get back to work."

"Just wanted to let you know, Niles."

"Right." Niles heads for the door, relief dripping out his pores. The meeting with his boss, his first in a very long time, had unnerved him. He hates being unnerved. It takes too much work to remuster his energy.

Fortunately, the calm of his register/sanctuary eases the tension. The whole raise thing is a strange move, but not unfounded. Those kinds of things do happen to normal employees.

Reassured, Niles is able to concentrate on work once again. A sincere greeting for the customers, a twenty-eight item per minute pace, and some small talk. He feels at the height of his skill.

He begins to eye the candy rack, urged by stomach rumbling. He really needs something to eat and feels unjustly denied his breakfast, something he usually gets on his first break. The plain M&Ms look particularly promising. Shiny brown wrapper, tantalizing colored dots, thrown out of view by the large rump of a thirty-something woman—his next customer. She is placing her purchases on the belt. A child is pounding his fists on the front of the shopping cart seat, his lips scrunched together, his hair disheveled—a mute, devilish cherub. He thrusts a chubby hand at the M&Ms, helplessly reaching for the out of reach.

"Maaaa," the child huffs, trying to get his mom’s attention.

She continues loading the belt, artfully ignoring him.

At these moments, Niles never says anything, though his eyes see all. He watches with a thoughtful gaze as the child fumbles and finally grabs hold of a miniature flag. It is not what he wanted, but it will do. He waves it around jubilantly, his fingers of one hand tugging the corner of the flag, his other hand balled around the stick. He’s pretty forceful, and soon the strain causes the fabric to make a loud ripping noise.

Now he has his mom’s attention, and as his head snaps around
his rubbery mouth widens in a fit of wailing. His mom slaps his wrist and grabs the torn flag from him. "NO," she says, angrily. "Bad boy! Bad Terrence!" The wails increase as his empty hands clutch the air.

She puts the flag on the belt apologetically. "I'm so sorry," she says to Niles.

Niles nods knowingly. "Don't worry, happens a lot."

She turns back to the kid again. His hands are groping toward the candy rack again. "Bad Terrence!" Another wrist slap, more screaming. At this point Niles knows that the best thing to do is just get them through his line.

"That will be thirty-two dollars and sixty-three cents."

The woman turns back around to him and shuffles through her purse. She pulls a twenty out, then a ten, then shuffles some more. Her face distraught, she tells Niles, "I don't have it. I guess I have to use my credit card."

It is amazing how reluctant some people are to use their credit cards. Niles takes this as a sure sign that they don't know how to make timely payments. "That's fine," he says. "I just need to see some ID with that."

With some people it is just too easy. It almost takes the fun out of it. But Niles is in such a habit now, he can't stop himself. He decides she is definitely the Slimfast shake drinking type, and considers how good the cold chocolatey goodness will feel in the drought heat. He looks over her card, examining the front nonchalantly, then examines the signature on the back for an equal space of time to look less suspicious. He looks at her driver's license briefly, then hands the two back to the woman.

"Have a nice day, mam. Thank you for shopping at Safeway."

Little Terrance has managed to get his hands wrapped around the M&Ms, but his mom gives his hand one more smack and then quickly departs.

The numbers, along with her name are safely tucked away in Niles' mind. He will eventually write them down, for later use. His Rolodex is stocked full of names and numbers, his one flaming object of incriminating evidence.

Of course, a look around his small fourth story apartment is enough to lead anyone into questioning. His living room shows the products of his "collectible stage," with shelves upon shelves of Bobbing Head Dolls, Planet of the Apes action figures and Batman lunch boxes. Then there was his "exercise stage," that left him with
several Thighmasters, an Ab Roller, and stacks of Metabolife bottles. He has the best of American home shopping under his roof. Unfortunately, the more expensive things got, the more difficult it was to make unobtrusive, unnoticeable purchases.

However, Slimfast shakes seem like a reasonably safe purchase. The temptation is too large, despite the threatening new image of an all-seeing, security camera powered boss. There is nothing to notice anyway, Niles tells himself.

His shimmering confidence is further supported by an otherwise uneventful afternoon. Lunch break rolls around and he hungrily devours a box of six-piece fried chicken from the hot food section. Slouching down in his baggy Levis, he examines the image of Chester Fried on the side of the box. He seems far too happy for a chicken promoting the widespread slaughter and consumption of his kin.

"What’s the matter with you, buddy?" In the silent, beady, poultry eyes he feels the question reflected back at him. "Chester, man, you’re fucked up."

At least Niles is alone in the break room and no one can confront him for holding a conversation with a fried chicken box. This does not comprise his usual break time activity. "Maybe it’s time to get away from this place," he thinks, "Five years isn’t much as far as holding down a job goes, but if sanity is on the line..."

He pushes the ridiculous thought aside. After five years he cannot construct an identity for himself outside of the grocery store. That would be insane. He can imagine himself wearing the black apron around the apartment, his head filled with perpetual beeping. Insane.

But life is looking up, he tells himself as he walks back to his register. With his raise he can maybe complete his Bobbing Head doll collection in one fell swoop. That would be nice. While thinking up all the other things a whole twenty percent more an hour could buy him, Art comes through his line again and startles him.

"Have a good lunch?" he asks, tips of his bushy eyebrows pointed up in a V.

The thought that his boss might be insinuating something does not enter Niles’ mind. He is distracted by the strange line-up of objects his boss has placed on the belt. "I suppose," he responds while scanning a box of "feminine cleansing" wipes.

"That’s great," Art says. "I want to see you in my office again."

Niles accidentally scans a tube of KY Jelly twice, but with effort he calmly responds, "Can’t get enough of me, huh?"

"That’s right, Niles," Art smiles while paying for his stuff, then
walks away.

The thoughts are crashing and colliding in Niles’ brain. The anomaly of an office call twice in one day is too much for him. How can you top a raise announcement with more good news? Niles, I’d like you to sire my next five children—here is my wife? Not likely. Concentrating is a fleeting tool for him in the time up until his last break. He finds it much more satisfactory to search the ceiling fans for hidden lenses.

But he must go. Art is waiting patiently in his corner office with his feet propped up on his desk. "I bet you’re wondering why I called you in here again, Niles."

"This doesn’t have to do with the raise thing."

"Ah, you knew that was just a farce, didn’t you? You are an intelligent man, Niles. No, no, I just want to say congratulations,"

Art stretches his hand out and Niles carefully shakes it.

"May I ask what for?" Niles is trying to maintain a casual air through all his confusion.

"I’m really impressed by what you do. It is really some high quality work. Barely noticeable."

"What do you mean, Art?"

"No need to be shy, Niles. No need to pretend. I know what you do."

"I, don’t understand…"

"This, Niles! This is what I’m talking about!" Art tosses a small stack of crumpled up receipts on the desk. In light black ink, long lines of numbers and names are scrawled across them.

"What are those?" Niles asks, feigning ignorance.

"I found them in the trash can by your register."

Niles doesn’t know what to say. He doesn’t know how to cover himself. An apology? He wants to smack himself for being so careless on those very few "off" days he has had. But Art still has nothing. No real evidence. What the hell, a sorry will do. "I’m sorry Art. I just get bored out there sometimes. But I can’t see that I’ve done anything wrong."

"Then what’s this?" Art asks, pulling a piece of paper out of his desk drawer. He holds it up to Niles. It’s a bill, a credit card bill, and Art jabs his finger at a listing that says "Madame Butterfly’s sex line…..$14.35."

Niles, shocked, grabs a fistful of hair in his hand. Had he really taken his boss’s number? Then he remembers that one day. He came to work with his head spinning, due to some messed up health supplement he had ordered. Now he could only shake his head at
the heights of carelessness he could reach.

Art sets the bill down and smiles. "But it’s okay Niles. I do the same kind of thing myself. Except, being the manager it is a lot easier for me, man with the keys!" He smiles diabolically, holding up his keychain.

"You mean," Niles is in complete disbelief, "you use other people’s credit cards too?"

"No, not quite that kind of thing. I slip a few ones out of the cash drawers before I count them. Blame the discrepancy on a cashier I don’t like."

"What! I can’t believe this!" Niles really can’t believe it. What he does, that is nothing. Art is a man abusing his authority, an artless swindler. That is just wrong.

"Don’t worry, Niles. Your secret is safe with me. You might not have noticed, but we have a whole chain of illegal activities taking place here."

"No! Unbelievable."

But as Niles thinks about it, this shocking announcement makes sense. Betty always was exchanging small vials of something with certain customers as they walked in. And he never liked the way Charlie in the meat department held his butcher knife and chuckled to himself.

"It’s true. The reason I’m telling you this is because you are one of us. And the authorities will never know because we all have our secrets to hide."

Very clever, thinks Niles. Very clever indeed. But he refuses to feel cornered. He stares into the heavy lidded eyes of his boss, and Art stares back into his. Niles feels flushed and ill. His head runs with thoughts. They are sick, all of these people. And artless, completely artless. He can never see himself in line with what Art seems to have proposed to him. As painful as it is, Niles knows that there is only one true option left open to him.

"You’ve got nothing on me," he says. "You bring anyone in to check things out then you’re bringing trouble on yourself. I don’t want any of this." Taking off his apron and tossing it on the desk, Niles silently walks out the door.

The dry air outside the building sucks away his confidence. The five-gallon water jugs are just a vain desire now. But he holds on to his dignity. That is what he has. He looks at the people loading their cars, ushering their children into the back seat, and he feels the world full of prospects.
I live with the girl,
the fried corned beef in the
park at midnight, her
fingers in my hair,
mine in the food,
the dirt, the rain.

I live with the serpent
memory, the watered down
loneliness of restlessness,
its feather down mattress,
a swollen belly of shame.

I live with the lonely thighs,
the restless planks of a
waiting dock, the
memory of weight, seaweed
kisses and saltwater scabs.

I live with the marijuana
smoke, its tendriled hair
and gentle mouth,
its ageless memory, quiet
warnings, cold hands on angry skin.

I live with the innocent child
whose dark night brings the
faceless father, his candied
hands a distant memory,
his voice the beat of mosquito wings.

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Sara Wiener

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2001 / 2002
Alyssa Knickerbocker

I mean to walk in through all this death and yelling. Your coffee maker and the Zoloft by the bed. There are choices to be made, my mother says, and anyway,

it’s time to get up. These days, I can recognize anyone’s footstep at a beat, a lightness at the tips of the ears, a quick click in the spine, and between the shoulder blades, a sting like 7-up to the brain. These long, tense hallways. What is a friend? A friend is a ruler

and a butterscotch candy. And you, what have you been? A wooden mirror. A mouthful of warm saliva. Pinch-pot woman, plastic marble sweetheart, you have been all wrapped up in the art of dying. You have been left behind by the carved cliffs of dull chalk

on Block Island, white where the waves full of black sand bash away the flat handprints we left there, going down to the sea, bracing ourselves on the descent, leaving nothing behind; or perhaps just the slight, oiled script of the fingertip pressed momentarily against a cliff, the heavy body of. Of what?

Whatever it is that holds back the flood. The mad beating at the handles of air. You have laid face down again and gripped the salt and foam and pomegranate seeds littered at the bottom of this world, you have asked me again to peel you up, fling you back with my left hand

where yours was chewed off in withdrawal, with my mouth where yours was swallowed with your cousin’s purple-tipped penis at the age of four, with my eyes where yours
were thumbed shut and left sealed in a glaze
of semen and melted vanilla ice cream. Can you tell yet
that this is a letter of goodbye? I have

no other choice, because I have
taken a baby’s jaw in my hand as she slowly choked
on the cap to a perfume bottle, I have laid her small body

along the length of my arm and pounded
on her back, brittle as the wind-shell of a Godiva crab,
and even as her lungs lay still, stirring

in a flutter of panic
like tied wings, her heart kept on, steady
and alone, all wrapped up in the art of living.

My mother says, Loving and leaving
have nothing to do with each other. Will you be
my one regret? Will I walk through

all your death and yelling? Who am I,
that these blackbirds should beat wildly each morning
at the beautiful bright panes of my window?
Moses, you have come too late, have forgotten to command your little seductress, whoring her way through Eden as if it were a red light district. She enters from the other side of the room, naked, shameless, seeking the intention that will drive her. And all the Bible dwellers are playing croquet, have gathered here to drink wine and greet her with conviction. Moses, it was a mistake; you have come too late. She didn’t know to wait for men with white beards to hold stones to her face. She should have known to starve, to leave the sweet fruit hanging, just out of arm’s reach, from the tree that was not meant for her.
It’s the throb of insomnia in
a strange place, plus one—
an old Tibetan grandmother in the next bed, belly up, mouth open, purring
like a congested tailpipe
or a straw in gelatin, enough to keep eyes
roving about the ceiling—
the snorts, plus
a light grazing of wings
in the ear canal—
mosquitoes have it best in a
Buddhist household
but it gets so bad I’m slapping away at the left side of my face
until it is probably red
with self delivered handprints
though it’s dark and there’s no mirror
so I’m just guessing
and clutching that
one light (a glowing puddle on the ceiling)
when they filter in slowly,
the army of to do’s,
and next thing I’m thinking of
sending a postcard to my fifth grade
pen pal
(Anastasia, I think that was her name)
and tomorrow I should
probably
buy more
toothpaste
and while I’m at it
pump the back tire of my bicycle—it’s getting low
and you don’t wanna fall asleep
on an empty stomach...
it seems
we lie there preparing for it,
or keeping busy,
but we never know the moment
that Sleep descends its queer shade
Continued

and in a flash drapes
a heavy black curtain across the body—
you’d think it wasn’t nightly
or prescribed to everyone who
breathes,
yet this anxiety
for the gentle thumb and forefinger
that closes both eyelids
in one fell swoop.
Michael Gosack

You must know well
The nausea of a bird in the egg
When it grows sick of the yolk.

How long did you peck and flail?
Hideously long, I imagine.

Was it because you felt weak?
Was it because you felt soft?

When you broke free of the warmth and fat, what was it like?
Did you learn how to fly?
I’m going to start telling you this story from the middle, because otherwise you’ll get mired down in a heap of history that you don’t really need to know. I could start with a description of myself at sixteen, because that’s when my father died, and when my mother started having dreams about choking on things. Peach pits, credit cards, her wedding ring, anything. I would find her in the kitchen in the middle of the night, confused, half-asleep, eating bread. You’re supposed to eat bread if you swallow any foreign objects, to push them through your system. Keep that in mind, if you ever have a kid who’s overly fond of marbles. But anyway, I think things will become apparent as we go along.

I will tell you about how I met Bradley. I had this job selling hot dogs in Union Station, just temporarily, of course, and he came through on his way out to the suburbs after work. He asked for extra mustard on his hot dog and nothing else, which is exactly the way I have mine, and so I looked up. He had on this very interesting tie with a topographical map of Antarctica spreading down like a spider web, with the South Pole at the bottom. I have always wanted to go to Antarctica. I think it would be very clean, and very quiet.

Later I discovered that he wears a wonderful cologne which smells like the color green. I have always been a sucker for cologne.

It was last week that the strange thing started happening. I don’t know exactly how to begin—well, my mother called in the middle of the day, which was odd, since usually she’s off having lunch with someone or other. I was arranging flowers when she called.

(…)

Yes, arranging flowers. I bought this book on how to do it. There’s actually more to it than you’d think. So she called—and her voice was breathy and short. Cutting off at the end of each word like a train engine just pulling out of the station. She said she’d been gassed. She’d met her sister for lunch at this Spanish restaurant in Arlington Heights. Evidently they were fumigating some other part of the building and forgot to shut off the ventilation system, so all these fumes were flooding out of the heating vent. Nobody noticed.

I imagine the fumes as being dark red, like a rose just starting to turn, and billowing around in little deadly clouds. But she said they were invisible and practically odorless. They burned her lungs.

I took the train out to the house and let myself in through the mail slot. It’s this trick I learned when I was eight and got locked
My arms are still skinny enough to do it. She was lying on the couch in the sun room, the light was pale and wintry in the room and cold on her cheeks and neck. The little lines around her eyes and mouth were washed out, flattened and smooth, and she looked younger, like stale clay smothered over with a wet rag. [She looked almost dead.] I put my hand on her forehead and her eyes rolled back, just the whites, sort of fluttering, and she said, I think I swallowed that jewel. In this sleepy mumbling voice, thick like chocolate. I said, What jewel? She said, That jewel I had in my mouth. Didn’t I have a jewel in my mouth?

She started to cry.

It turned out they had given her some antibiotics, to prevent infection, and she’d had her standard double scotch when she got home. Of course, you’re not supposed to mix alcohol and antibiotics. She was very disoriented. I took her upstairs and put her to bed. I took her suit jacket off, but I had to leave her high heels on because the ankle straps were very complicated and I wanted to get home before Bradley did. I was glad I went, though—my mother had this wonderful black and white photograph of Tokyo that I wanted for the wall in my room. I hadn’t had a chance to get it in the last couple of months. Bradley doesn’t like me to leave the house, you know, he likes me to be home when he calls. He has a very stressful job.

(…)

No, I’m happy about it, of course. I don’t have to sell hot dogs anymore. Here’s the photograph. Isn’t it wonderful? I’ve always wanted to go to Japan.

I got home later than I expected, and Bradley was waiting for me. He was very angry. He has a very nice face, and a good nose, but when he gets angry his chin turns bright purple and starts to quiver. We had words. He sent me to my room. And when I went in and closed the door, I saw that something was off, and that’s when I realized. The rug. It was on the ceiling.

(…)

Yes, the ceiling! Just stuck up there, like someone had glued it down! It’s one of those oriental rugs, rough like the fur of a horse and very heavy. Well, I didn’t say anything to Bradley. He has enough to worry about without having to hear about the strange goings-on in my bedroom. He sleeps in his study most of the time, so I decided I would just wait to tell him until the time was right.

Well, the next day I went about my business as usual.
I think—I think I probably went out just for a minute to buy some hanging plants for the living room—I like to have that jungle effect—and had a hot sandwich for lunch, and then...oh yes! I watched one of those National Geographic specials on the Amazon. It was fascinating. I have always wanted to go to Brazil. It’s just terrible what’s happening to the rainforest down there. They’re cutting down more and more trees every day. Do you know what they call the Amazon? The Lungs of the World. Really. The trees in the Amazon produce more than three-quarters of the earth’s oxygen. What’s going to happen if we destroy all those breathing trees? The world is going to fill up with bad air—what do they call it? Carbon dioxide. I got so upset that I walked around the rest of the day breathing very carefully. I just couldn’t shake the feeling that the air was already turning bad, and that any second I’d be flat out on the floor, gasping like a spilled goldfish. And then—I went upstairs to have a bath, and my dresser and my desk were both on the ceiling. Just hanging there. As casual as can be.

Well, I wasn’t as surprised that time. I almost expected it. I was a bit startled, of course, since furniture is much heavier than oriental rugs, and at first I was a bit concerned that something was going to fall on my head. But I had some sweeping to do in the bedroom, and after a bit I guess I just got used to it.

Well no—I didn’t mention it to Bradley that day, either. When he got home he was wanting to have sex right on the living room floor where I was clipping out food recipes from Bon Appétit, and I felt a little hesitant about bringing it up right then. And the next day, well that was the really amazing day. I do remember exactly what I did that day, because Bradley was away on a business trip so I took my mother to a matinee and we had a rather odd conversation that sticks in my mind. I don’t remember what movie it was—it was something in black and white at the revival theatre, one of those places with a lot of velvet drapings on the walls and candelabras with little light bulbs for the flames stuck to the walls. The theater smelled like nesting birds, sort of stuffy and warm, dry and floury and a bit like unwashed scalp. You know that smell? All theaters smell that way. Well, we were eating Junior Mints—they’re her favorite—and she was breathing in little gusts, taking an inhaler every few minutes. And I remember this—it was so strange—she
took my hand, which was all sticky and chocolatey, and she said, Louisa, nothing bothers you. Even when you were a baby. You never cried. Where is it? She said. I said, Where’s what? She said, Your pain. You must have swallowed it. Eat bread, Louisa, eat bread.

They were very strange, the things she said. Very out of character. Hmmm.

I guess she’s right, though, I don’t get bothered.

[I suppose I’m just a happy person.]

(...) What? Oh right, of course. Well, the point is, I got home and immediately went to my room, because I wanted to see—well, I wanted to see if anything else had happened. I rushed upstairs and flung the door open, and sure enough—everything was up there. My bed, my little night table, everything. And on the night table, there was a glass of water. Full. And even on the wall, everything had been flipped. My mirror, my photograph of Tokyo, and the little hook by my bed where I hung my bathrobe—you’ll never believe this, but the bathrobe was hanging upwards, towards the ceiling. Really. It was like—it was like what I used to think Australia would look like, when I was little. I thought that if I ever went down there everything would be hanging off the bottom of the world, just barely attached, and you would have to dangle like a chimp, swinging yourself around from town to town. I thought it would be a wonderful adventure. I have always wanted to go to Australia.

(...) Yes, it was the first thing that occurred to me. Where would I sleep? My bed did look very inviting. Movies make me very sleepy, the darkness and the music and all the warm bodies packed together and rustling around. Also Bradley took me to a doctor and he gave me some pills that are supposed to help me have a baby, because Bradley says that at my age, women sometimes need a little help. He’s very excited about having a baby.

I think—I think it could be nice.

But the pills do make me drowsy. Just out of curiosity, I put one foot against the wall. Just to see. I leaned on it a little, and I felt a little bit of a pull, and then there I was, standing on the wall. I walked over and stepped onto the ceiling. Just like that. I know it sounds crazy, and I can’t explain it, but it did seem very natural.

(...) What did I do? Well, I went over to the bed, took off my shoes,
and dropped them, just to see where they would go. They fell at my feet. I drank some water from the glass on the night table, and then I just sat on the bed, looking out the window. That is where everything changes. If you’re upside down on the ceiling and all the furniture is upside down with you, nothing looks different at all. In fact, it looks just exactly the same. But through the window—I don’t know if I can explain it. Snow. Think about snow. Picture the way it falls. When I watch the snow from my window, it comes flying up from below thick and silent, like a flock of birds, startled, lifting off a telephone wire or the roof of a house, and moving as if they are one body. And I know that if I opened the window and stepped out, that they would carry me up, and I would never fall. (…)

Ssshh. Don’t speak.
Christianity: The relinquishment of the form of God in Jesus by becoming man and suffering death. From Greek, an emptying. 

*The American Heritage Dictionary*

There was no manger, no shepherds, no kings, no celestial forms hovering over the house’s peak. No angels filled the sky to herald his coming. Not in the gospel according to John.

Jesus was not born magically to a teenage virgin. He was not shaped like clay in the image of God. He was God. He was perfect, powerful, infallible until the day history paused, and the emptying began.

I wonder how exactly it happened. Was it like a birth, God pushing himself out, falling, blood stained and flawless to the waiting hands of the world? Or maybe it was more like death. Maybe God was breathed out like a final sigh, relief that this life is over. He left Jesus without his divine soul, a body prepared for its impending death. Or maybe God was shed from him, melted off like a layer of fat: hipbones jutting out like hills on a flattened stomach, rounded nubs protruding from newly bony wrists. Shrunken and weakened, God became man. A good man, a selfless man. He saved others, but could not save himself. It was an easy task, lifting him to die on the thick neck of a rough and splintered tree.
The sun slices dust, phlegm yellow,
sprays the concrete ghats along the Ganges.
In Varanasi, life commands a dual agenda—
prayer and survival. Faces, apparitions, rise from the
sweaty pavement to this call of morning.
This one, what is he selling? Across his shoulders,
a bamboo crossbeam
balanced by cages, five
or so, on each side—
a mess of parrots
slapping the hollow tin shells
with their wings,
green feathers leaving a trail
across the piss-odor cement that ends
at my feet. Behold the spectacle,
the sun finger points at one
of the cages clanking against the others—
a young owl, talons gripping the wires
while its keeper’s arms hook scarecrow-like
over the heavy stick.
He zeros in on my easy gaze
that spells rupees here—
I am for sale,
hocks a mouthful of scarlet betel, speckles
the pavement.
"Release one," he offers,
"for good karma."
This owlet’s eye
burns gold,
bleeds wine.
This car is supposed to save lives. This car has front and side airbags that should cushion the blow of an accident and reduce the chances of severe injury, but you should always wear your seatbelt in this car, just in case. This car is from a company in Japan that uses mainly Korean parts and assembles their vehicles in Ohio. Where the river runs so fast but time moves so slow that nobody there would need this car. Or a car.

This car cost a sixteen year-old Burger King employee 4,700 dollars, or roughly 1080.46 Burger King hours. This car was his motivation to work, his capitalistic introduction to the real world. This car was his one-way ticket to anywhere and nowhere both at once. This car depleted his bank account and demanded of him a lifetime of hard labor to pay for his mistakes.

This car has anti-lock brakes that prevent the vehicle from careening uncontrollably during inclement conditions. Yet this car’s anti-lock brakes do not ensure it will not crash. When the driver of this car becomes too cocky, a collision can be predicted or even probable. This car’s driver needs to read its owner’s manual to know what he’s getting into. It’s too bad this car’s manual is written in Japanese. Even a Japanese owner would fail to discover its true translation if that’s what he was looking for. People who drive this car seem to be too concerned with following instructions and finding the right way to do things. This car doesn’t tell its owner what to do. This car needs to be as prepared as its owner for the unpredictable.

This car has an adjustable transmission that adapts to the changing conditions of the street, approaching roads more cautiously during treacherous winter weather and wholeheartedly during the smooth-sailing summer days that require nothing more than tapping this car’s accelerator.
to get the driver where he wants to be. This adaptive transmission promotes fuel efficiency and safer driving. Too bad this car’s adaptive transmission requires the driver to set it.

This car needs a manual transmission that requires some interaction between this car and its driver. This car would obtain better gas mileage and be more responsive with a stick and clutch as the driver of this car could choose his shifting points and respond to this car’s driver input. Too bad nobody knows how to operate a manual transmission.

This car has tinted windows incorrectly applied by Steve at Auto Sun and Sound. Unlike other tinting that promotes vehicular privacy, this car’s windows obscure the outside world from the driver, yet allow others an almost completely unobstructed view of the driver of this car.

This car’s driver is so involved in his own wireless world that he doesn’t even notice that the German car made in Brazil of Mexican parts two cars in front of him has slid off the highway and into the median. He also fails to see the fifteen deer perched at the roadside.

This car has seen the wide-open spaces and vintage diners along Route 66.

It has escaped the claustrophobic cities of the Midwest and has thrived in the vast, endless deserts out west.

This car has been around.

This car has gone to the moon and back, driven by a complete psycho who randomly decided that he had had enough of cars on earth.

So he launched this car right off the planet and followed his instincts. Good thing his instincts were enough to compensate for the fact that he ran out of gas halfway there.
They were revolutionaries. A boy and a girl. They led an army up to the walls of a fort or castle or college. Revolution was imminent. But if a spy were to come out of the fort, the mission would be lost. They fled, faces covered. They fled in a car. He drives. He started heading for M.’s house. M. put her arms around him. He had his hand on her knee. They were finally in love. They had never touched like that before. She whispered something in his ear.

They arrived at her house. He made a phone call. M. was saying goodbye to S. He walked past M. and S. as they were kissing. He waited in the car. On the porch M. kissed S. and joined him in the car. They talked before leaving the driveway.

M. says: "That was awkward."
He agrees.
M. says: "Well, we should just be honest, and come out and say it."
He says: "Ok."
M. says: "Well?"
He says: "I won’t pass it by this time. Not like years ago. But you have to ask."
M. says: "Will you go to bed and sleep with me?"
He says: "Yes"
M. says: "Good, how about tomorrow around 5 or 6?"

They hadn’t left M.’s driveway. He kissed M. He got excited. He had never done that before. Not like that, not since they fell in love, not since they became revolutionaries. He drove fast over high bridges, bridges of low-brow, high smokestack, brown-water, squat brick house working-class wasteland. He went to his cottage. Nobody would be there. They pressed close together when they got there. He felt M.’s breasts for the first time. He tasted them. It excited him. They were laying on a rug on the linoleum floor. He reached up her skirt. She stopped him.

M. said: "Not now."

He was fishing. Fishing or doing something enjoyable in brown-colored proletariat-polluted rusted seawall rivers. It was grey out. He was fishing or doing something that requires that he reach into a refrigerator for worms. He saw a watch, or became aware of the time because his brother told him it was 4 p.m. It was almost time for something big to happen, some revolutionary event. He couldn’t believe that it was coming so fast.

They were walking through a parking lot. It was near the fort, or castle or college. They were not being revolutionary. They talked. M. said: "Where were you yesterday?"
He said: "I don’t know."
M. said: "I waited for you."
He said: "I know. I don’t know what happened."
M. said: "I mean, what a night to be feeling self-conscious about my body."
He said: "I just can’t account for that time. It was as if I were drunk or in a sort of coma. That time is gone. I don’t know what happened, what I did, or where I was."
He started leading her to his room.

There were ambulances. Somebody was injured. He went into a palace or hotel or common building at a college. People were being taken out through the back at the loading dock. In the high-ceiling, plush-carpeted, crystalline-chandelier, swank red and varnish lobby M. broke into tears. She sobbed and hid behind him. She hid her eyes from the bodies and stretcher and EMT’s. There were people mourning. They did not know the mourners.

She started trembling and he held her.
M. said "I am in control, I am in control, I am in control."
She stopped and looked at him.
M. said: "My doctor told me to say that to avoid those kinds of outbursts. He says I won’t lose myself like that."

They walked slowly through high-windowed hallways and a hardwood floor, modern art darkened ballroom or cafeteria or gymnasium.

He greeted some people he knew. They were not revolutionaries.

They were sitting at his old house where he no longer lived. They were in a big wooden chair together. She sighed and cried. He held her close. His brother was in the heavy wooden rocking chair. His brother watched television. She looked up with her big eyes for reassurance. His brother changed channels. On television there were star fighters shooting a moonscape and there were dying dinosaurs.

He said: "Is this what I think it is?"
His brother said: "It’s a movie about the dawn of the Human Race. It has a low budget, but they got George Lucas to do it. Now it has the best animation possible."

He held her. He thought it did have good animation. But the story was totally inaccurate. He told her that. She understood.

They were revolutionaries now.
A year later, I try to describe what it felt like to forget to eat: not to deny myself, exactly, or to despise nourishment, but to grow so close to the feeling of my stomach’s emptiness that I had to be reminded to fill it. Not anorexic, I tell a friend, just not hungry. When I ate, the heaviness and warmth settled deep down in me, and I’d have to sleep for hours until a sense of my body returned. It was that sense of body I needed all year—needed to feel my wristbones in my sleeves, my hip bones as I walked, the growing tautness of skin across my cheekbones. The weaker I became, the stronger I felt; my body drew close to itself and I was aware of its needs, even if I didn’t know how to fulfill them. Little, I say. It was easier when I felt little. My friend nods, understanding, and tells me it’s easy to feel little as a woman sometimes: anger, or sadness, can make us feel helpless, childlike, confused. I agree with her, but I’m thinking, No. It wasn’t about a feeling then, or a reaction—the only sense I processed over that year was not about emotion, but about reminding myself that I was still there. Feeling my body pull in on itself a little, my heart work just a little harder, I could say, still here. If I need something, I must still be here. I want to tell her that I mean little to the point of almost disappearing.

I was suspended from the first grade for punching a second-grader in the eye. He’d called me a shrimp, so I hauled off and whacked him. I remember not wanting to stop after I hit him once—he was so shocked he just stood there, holding his face—but I did stop when I saw the ring of purple forming around his eye. He said it hurt and asked what it looked like, and I said chocolate pudding. That was when we knew we were in for it: we took off running and hid under the stairwell until they found us and made us explain ourselves.

Maybe that was the theme I was looking for: disappearance. I’d broken up with my first serious boyfriend a month into the new school year—I was a sophomore in college, he was a junior. It was my first serious relationship, the first one with actual responsibility to another human being. It would be an understatement to say that we were obsessed with each other; after only six months, we were talking about marriage. I switched my brand of toothpaste to his organic, vegan brand, though it tasted like caulk, when he left for six months in France because I missed his teeth.

His leaving felt like a betrayal—though I knew he had to go, and we spent hours analyzing his guilt at leaving me for what seemed like years of solitude, I still hated him just a little for having the strength to get on the plane, to get on with it. There was no me
without us. I spent hours on the phone to France, detailing the casualties of the loss: I mourned his absent toenails. I was lost without his kneecaps. I hardly knew my own molars. His emails and phone calls reassured me that he was not having a good time on his trip; he was finding it as impossible to acclimate himself to the change as I was. He sat in his room and cried over my elbows. He couldn’t eat for missing my earlobes. This was thrilling news: someone needed me so much it made him ill.

When I was eight, we made strawberry Jell-O in after-school day care. At first, the wiggly squares were sweet and exciting; then they were cloying, then nauseating. My sister and I ate seventeen squares each before we gave in to the dizzy sickness that made her throw up in the music room near the piano. To this day, we have no idea what possessed us—we only remember those gorgeous red squares, full of the refined sugar we weren’t allowed to eat at home.

I had a new boyfriend two weeks later as a result of what his roommate would later call the one-two punch—apparently I wasn’t the first girl to fall for the imported beer-and-Woody Allen movie combination. No matter—I was sophisticated. After my ex said, crying, that no one would ever love me again, there I was practically disproving it after less than a month. Someone did like me an awful lot, and I was certain of our lifelong compatibility—well, mostly certain. The only Pink Floyd album I owned filled the gap in his near-complete collection—what more could a girl need as proof of a meaningful and fated connection? Mostly I lusted after his roommate, but we were genuinely fond of each other and able to enjoy the shared sense that maybe we weren’t meant for the altar. If someone needs me, I must still be here. If I don’t need anyone, I must be complete.

A week later a friend shot another friend in the dorm next to mine, then killed himself. I have few memories of the weeks that followed that night—mostly I remember the feeling my stomach had that entire first night and the way it didn’t unclench itself the way I thought it would. I stayed awake the entire night, calling friends in other countries to tell them what had happened or crying with friends as they found out, slowly, throughout the night. I sometimes wonder if breaking the news to others was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do, but I have no memory of what I said, who I called, or how they reacted.

When I was six my friend Amanda fell down the rope ladder of her playhouse and broke her collarbone when she landed on the concrete below. I was still up in the playhouse, and I watched her fall, though I
don’t remember it. I also don’t remember running to get her help, or the ambulance arriving, or the cast I’m told she wore for months afterward. My only memory is of her face as she fell, and the way the rope’s fibers cut into my hands as I climbed down after her.

Someone gave me a glass of orange juice as the sun was coming up the next morning and I drank it obediently, feeling for the first time the way sustenance can replenish a body. I was aware of myself, how fragile a tired body is, and I could feel the liquid giving me strength. Until that moment I hadn’t understood that it was my body going through those feelings as much as it was my head—even so much as thinking about it then, as now, was like trying to write about a car wreck while prying my ribcage out of the steering wheel.

I spent the next week needing near-constant human contact—when my boyfriend couldn’t be around, I curled up in bed with my roommate, who was equally shell-shocked. Having a warm body around me was the only thing that could keep me from freezing over: I couldn’t stop shivering. I ate only intermittently that week—broccoli at the post-funeral reception, the cookies my grandmother sent us, thermoses of black coffee. My roommate began to take refuge in eating and feeding others: she gained thirty pounds over the course of the year. I watched her lapse into depression as she drank fifths of gin almost every night of the week and her body changed. Where she had once been tall and strong, she began to look puffy, stooped, resigned—I began to look at my pointy elbows as a sign of strength, though there were days I could barely climb a flight of stairs.

My father did his residency on Chicago’s south side when I was very young. My first vivid memory is of him coming home very early in the morning and looking very sad. As we ate peanut butter and crackers on the floor next to the sofa, talking in hushed tones because my mom was still asleep, he told me he’d lost a patient to a gun shot wound. I pointed to a tiny brown stain on his shirt cuff and asked what it was: he explained that it was blood, and we need it to live. I must have known even then that we need it to die, too.

The condom broke a few days after the murder-suicide and we sat there in the dark, still virtually strangers to each other, saying nothing. Where I had earlier craved human contact, I now wanted nothing so much as to be completely alone. I could feel myself shivering again as I climbed off the top bunk to search for my underwear in the dark, but I didn’t want him near me: suddenly there weren’t enough barriers in the world to blockade me safe from the
fear I could feel building in the bottom of my stomach. I’d had two Japanese beers with our pizza earlier that evening, and suddenly my stomach was knotting around them; I ran to the bathroom and threw up, locking the door behind me. Later that night, he’d tell me he loved me, and I’d curl into a ball, pretending the sentiment had reached me. Little to the point of disappearing.

We played crack-the-whip in first grade below the hill at the high school. I was the littlest kid in the class, and they made me be on the end almost every time. I would run as hard as I could to keep up with the others, but my legs would fall out from under me as my arms were pulled along by a bigger kid’s grasp. Once, I fell into the hard Ohio dirt and smashed my bottom lip on a rock. It didn’t hurt so much as surprise me, and the teachers came running down the hill to stop the flow of blood into the dust. One of them, John, the music teacher, called it a ‘busted lip.’ They let me sit with them on top of the hill for the rest of recess, looking down on the others and holding a cloth to my mouth long after the clot had formed.

I imagined a tiny life inside myself for an entire day, its curled fists and purple lips. No matter how hard I concentrated, I couldn’t imagine it alive outside my body; if it ever existed at all, I didn’t want to know. I got a prescription for emergency contraception from the student clinic and took it that evening at my boyfriend’s house. The odds were good that taking it would prevent—I couldn’t say the word—pregnancy. All I knew was to take the pills and keep them down for twelve hours, then take more and keep them down for another twelve. It seemed too simple, and I thought as I swallowed the first set, I don’t deserve not to suffer. If there’s something in there, I want it to fight back, to remind me that I’m still here.

I’ve never been sicker than I was that night—for 24 hours I was immobile with nausea, sweating and in tears. My body kept trying to rid itself of the pills, but I had to fight to keep it down until I was sure the time had passed. I was nearly desperate at the end of twelve hours, so sick I was sure even pregnancy couldn’t have been worse than the twisted feeling in my body. Taking the next set took all my strength and I finally collapsed, only to wake an hour later, retching again. My boyfriend was at a complete loss, and probably more than a little alarmed at the way I’d turned green and nearly hysterical. At the end of twenty-four hours, I ran to his bathroom and looked into the toilet: one of his roommates had stopped it up with a huge, stinking pile of shit. I threw up bile until I was completely empty and passed out against a wall. When I woke up, I felt

**THE POINT OF DISAPPEARING**

Continued
a sense of calm exhaustion flowing through my body: I’d disappeared.

We lit candles outside our dorm for our friends the night of the murder-suicide and sat wrapped in blankets watching them. The ones that lasted longest in the wind were the prayer candles we’d found in the Mexican food section of the grocery store. They were tall and made of glass with different colors of wax inside and pictures of Jesus and Mary on the outside, and they burned for days. When I came home the morning after taking the emergency contraception, all the candles had burned out. A red candle had cracked the glass and spilled out on the concrete. This is what I know: through creation, destruction, living, everything was contained in burning, bleeding from the inside out, hardening in the cold.
While the trade center was falling, I called my father
at his office in New York. Nobody
knew where he was. At home, my mother
circled the living room like a shark, lowering
and raising the blinds, blinking at the perfect
unaffected sun. Lines of static ran up and down
the television screen, the faces of reporters
twisted and winking like eyelids. And I thought
of Pompeii, a city
preserved in ash, the empty cavities they found
where bodies had once been, long since crumbled,
the forms perfectly preserved, the imprint
of their arms, legs, the curve of the neck
molded like angels in snow. A woman
crouched in a corner, fingers pressed to her face, a man
captured in flight, arms flung side, frozen in the long
processing of falling, face down on the tile
of the sidewalk. Perhaps we would find him like this,
an empty mold, the wrinkles of his business suit,
his hand around the handle
of his briefcase, the sharp pointed toes
of his Italian shoes halfway through
a stride, his shoulders squared. This
is how we would know him, later, when he was found,
and I believed in this moment that we would
pour him back into this quiet shell, like in the fairy tales,
like the story of Bluebeard, when the clever girl
finds the bodies of her sisters cut into pieces
and fits them back together, a fleshy
jigsaw puzzle. And because I am selfish
and believe, sometimes, that he lives
only for me, I was angry and knew that he
had left me unguarded, left the tower door
unlocked, left the drawbridge down
for the breath of the dragon and its smell of death
and the fires it brings. What am I
when the king is not on his throne?
I am not worth the price of a jewel.

Of course,
he called back hours later, his voice the same
as it always has been, and I
forgave him on the first ring,
and I was handed back
the merchant’s rose, the golden orb,
the castle surrounded in thorns.
Calm down
he tells her.
It’s only a star.
It may look like a parade,
but it’s one of many—
only a star.
Go back to sleep now.
It’s too cold to be awake.

Bethlehem

Bill Malatinsky