The Great Lake Review
Fall 2006

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The Great Lake Review
Fall 2006

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Spider
Charles Forward

Sharp and black she hangs
in the window waiting
and waiting to exhale
—like the dark.

Waiting
to begin her soundless clicking
of naked bones,
like the fingers of trees
when they swallow the autumn moon.
To Laborers On Labor Day
Patrick Vittek

It is Labor Day, America's day of leisure. One of the few allocated moments where everyone says, "Take a break, you deserve it!" Like everyone else, I rise slowly, taking my time to shuffle around and do whatever I want. I want a cigarette. Outside, the sun is beginning to creep over the roof and down the brick walls. I notice the store across the street is open. Someone is working there, but that does not strike me immediately. It's when the garbage truck rounds the corner and stops near me that I experience the hypocrisy of our Labor Day.

My glance connects with the man riding in the passenger seat. His black sleeveless shirt reveals two sweaty arms smeared with grunge. He's in his early twenties, maybe still a teenager. His narrow face gleams from sweat and his short black hair is matted. Our eyes meet only for a second, and instantly he forces his eyes down in a way that shames me. I hadn't waved to him. I should've smiled, or at least nodded, acknowledging that I respect him working on Labor Day, and more importantly the work he does. I want to jump off my porch, rush over to him and the driver and pat them on their smelly backs. I want to tell them that their stench is that of dignity. I want to show them the admiration the world has for their line of duty. But I stop myself.

My money haunts me. It was a gift from my grandfather, a multi-millionaire stockbroker. He gave all the grandkids money for college, and none of us refused. Until then, I had worked for my money. My mother was single and never had extra cash for luxuries, only the bare essentials. I shopped for clothes at the Salvation Army. I ate PB&J sandwiches, mac & cheese, and hot dogs for eighteen years. If I wanted something, I had to get a job. I spent a few Labor Days behind a cash register and in front of a sink washing dishes. Back then, I was happy to have spent forty hours of my week for two hundred dollars.

In high school, I was surrounded by the most left of the liberals. All my friends and I were ignorant but passionate Marxists, barely familiar with the ideology, but hating anything we contended was bourgeois. We would protest the prohibition of marijuana and wear pins that depicted Molotov cocktails and slogans like, "Stay warm, bum the rich!" But now I am the rich.

I've never meditated for more than a minute on the convenience of garbage disposal, let alone the people who accomplish this difficult goal. It is merely a matter of dragging cans out to the street once a week. I've even been annoyed and inconvenienced to awake early in the morning to the crashing sound of my waste being taken away. This is the shame that I feel. I have become what I once swore against. I am the greasy college kid demanding, buying services. I am the bourgeois bastard who shows no respect for his common man. I now believe the garbage man's averted gaze wasn't due to insecurity, it was perhaps caused by envy. He wanted the day off too.

By the time this had run through my head, the truck was gone. I could still hear the throaty roar of the truck's engine a few blocks away. My cigarette is nearly finished, but I'm not satisfied. I stub the butt into the ashtray and work another out of my pack.
To Laborers on Labor Day

This wasn’t just about the garbage man. This was about all the people who had to continue with a low-paying job while everyone else got the day off. This was about my friend Danny, dehydrated, clipping hedges and raking leaves today while the owners of the lawn drank beer and grilled meat. His calloused hands gripping the sweaty handles of a lawnmower, with only thoughts of getting home and having a cold beer of his own to keep him pushing the blaring motor.

I want to climb on top of the garbage truck and scream into a bullhorn. I want to rally all the workers. We will stand. We will march. We will form a parade. We will celebrate this day as was intended. I will wear a big frizzy white beard and hold the hand of every proletariat, drawing them out of all open businesses after chaining the owner to the cash register and saying, “If you want the money, make the sales yourself!” I will give everyone the day off.

But I don’t do anything. I finish my cigarette. And I stand, but merely to return inside.
A Firm Grasp
Eric Vosburgh

I gashed my foot on a white sandy beach
wandering and bonding with
the only whiskey
a handful of quarters could buy.

Reminiscing about days in New York, when you
ordered deep fried cauliflower and wore
army green flip-flops that you bought at
that sketchy thrift-store off the parkway in Jersey.

The bottle was 2/3rds empty, and
I didn’t mind the sand, grinding
in my cut. I preferred it reddish, not quite
the vibrance of a phoenix.

2,347 miles apart, I counted them...equally vacant.
I’d never be a star, radiant in
another’s life. There’s no Buddha in this cat.

Just a raggedy-ass dog with a leash around his neck and a noose in his hand wandering alone on a
beach with smiling vacationers.

Disgusted I launched the bottle
to fend against the tide
and fell sideways
my eyes fading like a sigh.
How To Survive The Food Service Industry
Kristin Quinn

The senile old man comes into Sweet Attitudes once a month for a pound of raspberry chocolates. He tells you and your coworker that it’s too bad he won’t be seeing such pretty girls after the holidays, because some nice boys will come and whisk you away forever on Christmas sleighs. You smile and nod, hold your breath until you can ring him out, and then run as fast as you can into the back kitchen before you hit the floor bursting with laughter, trying not to pee your pants as more customers come in.

Summer comes and your boss decides to add lite lunches to the menu, with of course, chicken salad to please all of the weight-watching housewives in town. Real chicken salad that is, meaning you will spend every morning that summer wearing latex gloves and picking apart entire cooked chickens, just in time for the women who eat like chickens to call in their lunch order. But you grin and bear it. It could be worse; you could be wearing polyester and cleaning the grease traps at McDonalds. Why stop with chicken salad? What is a lite menu without a Greek salad? When you rush into the kitchen to pick up the canister of Greek vinaigrette dressing and begin to vigorously shake without realizing the cap is off, there is no point in getting upset as the oil drips from your hair and down the front of your shirt. It’s the lunchtime rush and there’s no way you can leave. So what if you look like a cast member from Grease and smell like a marinade?

It’s your first summer home from college and you’ve moved up in the world from the coffee shop to bartending and serving at the local country club. To survive here you must ignore the fact that none of the old hags who come in each and every day for lunch will ever learn your name. Ignore the fact that they will criticize your service no matter how hard you bust your ass to please them and that they will never tip you more than a quarter. Ignore the fact that your high school principal, your former teachers, and your classmates will all come into the dining room for dinner with their families and when you go to wait on their table, will not even acknowledge the fact that they know who you are. You are waiting on them. They belong to a country club and are clearly above you. But don’t worry, they will tip you well. After all, you need it more than they do.

When you spill an entire soda down the back of one of the well-respected women in town, it is probably not a good idea to run into the kitchen crying of embarrassment. And when the cook gets arrested for trying to strangle his girlfriend with a blanket in a drunken stupor the night before a 200-person brunch, you will realize that arranging pastries and fruits on platters and cooking mass quantities of scrambled eggs isn’t as hard as it seems.

When you run out of money during a semester at college, you might be lucky enough to convince the manager at the local Dunkin Donuts to hire you for six short weeks. When you find yourself surrounded by high school dropouts younger than yourself with one or more babies whose fathers are in jail, it’s a good idea not to say too much about yourself. Not to tell them that you’re in college on a scholarship and while they are working forty hours a week bagging donuts to buy baby diapers and formula, you just need money for the weekends, to put gas in your car or to go shopping, or for the usual partying and pizza fix.
When you’re working the drive-thru for eight hours, what seems like the hundredth girl from your college that day will pull through in a silver Lexus SUV. She will pull a gold credit card out of a designer bag and hand it to you with her freshly manicured hands, too perfect to work, and will remind you to make sure her latte is made with skim milk. Resist the urge to throw the scalding drink all over her lap and to tell her to quit spending her parents’ money on skin cancer at the tanning booth. Wait until she pulls away and then sigh and shake your head. It’s from one extreme to another in this world. Be thankful that you are lucky enough to be caught right in the middle.
At The Bus Stop
Jeremy Magnan

This particular stop was one of the cleaner ones, the type of stop you would feel fine waiting at as if it were the safe haven sitting in the middle of the crime and corruption of our tired, desperate city, but I'm no fool and even knowing the relative safety of the area very well, I still brought my can of mace—even today, because who knows when some drugged up, criminal junkie will try to rob you in broad daylight, even at this bus stop where no one has ever heard of anything happening out of the ordinary until this morning when, like any other day, familiar faces with names that were mostly nonexistent to me waited for the 7:15, anxiously hoping that we'd make it to work on time, unlike some mornings when shootings and yellow tape in areas only a few blocks away would force the bus to arrive at 7:30 and force us to face our hot-tempered bosses who never rode the bus, which now came barreling down the street like a bat out of hell, raising our anxiety levels quickly because we all started to assume that a substitute driver was going to miss our stop and we'd have to wait for the 7:45, but as it came rushing towards us, the driver slumped forward in his seat, making me move quickly to avoid being run over, and as the bus missed me by mere feet, I peered through the folding door to see a single tiny chasm of a bullet hole in our usual driver's skull, and, shifting my eyes to not have to look at the atrocity, I caught a pompous, Armani-clad businessman preoccupied on his cell phone, ignoring the shouts and the world around him seconds before he was slammed into, one of few bus stop faces that I had formally attached a name to.
I Am Near-Sighted
June MacArthur

Your small hand laps at the wave
the feeling is like a pearl.

You are with an artist
Who notices everything:
    Laborers feeding their dirty torsos
    Bird-wings in the bramble
    A pronounced soup.

I am nearsighted
    Holding pictures of
    Hero and chorus
We talk nonsense as usual
    two stones like one stone rolling.
    Aging everything into a caricature of itself.

I am nearsighted
    Subject to visibility
    A fragment from both lives, both things
    The shock stays.
(LIGHTS UP on three men, COOPER, DRAKE, and JAY sitting on a couch. COOPER is twenty-something, wearing a hooded sweatshirt and baggy cargo pants with a pencil sticking out from behind his ear. DRAKE is a bit older, African-American and wearing a nice suit with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. JAY is younger, not quite twenty. He’s wearing a grease-stained fast food uniform with the shirt un-tucked.)

COOPER: I’m sorry, Drake, I assumed everyone liked Rush.
DRAKE: Why would you assume I like Rush?
COOPER: Why wouldn’t you?
DRAKE: Because Rush is progressive rock trio from Canada, and I hate Rush.
JAY (to COOPER): Man, you got served!
DRAKE: Shut the fuck up! What have I told you about that wannabe shit?
JAY (whispered): Sorry, sir.
COOPER (to JAY): Why are you here again?
DRAKE: Todd brought him.
COOPER: Where is Todd?
JAY: Dropping a deuce.

(TODD enters from STAGE LEFT. He’s wearing gym shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt. He’s carrying four beers, which he places on the coffee table in front of the guys. They all pick up one up. COOPER snatches the beer out of JAY’S hand.)

COOPER: Nice try, junior high.
JAY: That’s cold, G. I should...

(He notices that DRAKE stops drinking and eyes him menacingly.)

...sit back and enjoy a refreshing glass of ice water, thank you.
TODD: You guys talking about me?
COOPER: Only the terrible trauma my bathroom just suffered.
JAY: I hope you lit a match or something.
TODD: No man, I saved it all for you.
JAY: What do you guys think is better, taking a big dump or having sex?

(COOPER, DRAKE, and TODD look at each other, then back at JAY.)

DRAKE AND TODD (Simultaneously): Having sex.
COOPER (Along with DRAKE and TODD): Taking a - sex.

(Silence. All look at COOPER.)

TODD: What?
COOPER: Sex I answered sex who needs beer?
DRAKE: You were gonna say taking a shit.
COOPER: No I wasn’t.
TODD: Yes, you were. You were about to say taking a shit was better than sex.
DRAKE: That’s fucked up.
COOPER: No, you don’t understand, I swear I was gonna say sex.
JAY: You’d rather take a shit instead of nailing a chick?
COOPER: What would you know about it, Jay? Shouldn’t you be home watching Sesame Street or something?
DRAKE: Sesame Street is on at like, six in the morning.

(All look at DRAKE.)

...I got kids, assholes.
COOPER: You ever seen that thing where they show the crayon factory?
DRAKE: I love that thing, man!
JAY: I remember that shit. The crayon factory is the best Sesame Street thing ever.
TODD: Ladies? Can we focus, here, please? Our friend Cooper seems to think shitting is better than fucking.
COOPER: So what if I do?
JAY: He admits it!
DRAKE: That’s fucked up.
COOPER: So what? So I’d rather drop the kids off at the pool than get it on. What’s the big deal?
TODD: It ain’t right, is what the big deal is. Sex is a million times better.
COOPER: What makes it so much better?
DRAKE: ’Cause...it’s sex.
COOPER: So? What’s so inherently great about sex?
TODD: ’Cause it’s sex!
JAY: Have you ever even had sex?
COOPER: Yes, I’ve had sex!
JAY: With a chick?
COOPER: Don’t be a dick.
JAY: Do you even like girls?
COOPER: Of course I like girls.
DRAKE: Shut up, Jay. (To COOPER) Dude, you don’t seriously believe that going to the bathroom is better than getting laid, do you?
COOPER: Maybe I do.
TODD: Are you retarded?
COOPER: Oh, that makes me retarded?
DRAKE: Did Beth stop putting out or something?
TODD: That’s gotta be it.
COOPER: Shut up, guys. I just find going number two to be a very enjoyable experience, that’s all.
DRAKE: Cooper, I’m a lawyer. I have a big office downtown with a very nice executive bathroom in it. My toilet seat is always warm, the paper is triple-ply, soft jazz music plays on the intercom, and the latest issue of “Time” is always in there, waiting for me. But I’d still rather be in bed with my wife.
TODD: Cooper, I’m a mechanic who craps in a dirty port-a-potty behind the garage, and I’d still rather be in bed with Drake’s wife.
JAY: Damn, D you gonna take that?
DRAKE: I’m gonna take you outside in a second.
COOPER: Let’s just watch TV or something.
DRAKE: Hang on, we ain’t done with you yet. You gonna say something like that, you gotta be able to back it up.
COOPER: What do you mean?
TODD: Well, you’ve got to have some reason to think taking a crap is better than sex.
COOPER: Uh...no, not...not really.
DRAKE: You...you’ve thought about this before, haven’t you?
COOPER (quickly): No!
TODD: You have!
COOPER: So? So what? So what if I’ve thought about this before?
DRAKE: Let’s hear it, then.
COOPER: Hear what?
DRAKE: The big argument. Come on, let’s hear it. I want your detailed report on why having sex isn’t as good as taking a crap.
COOPER: Shut up, Drake.
DRAKE: No, I’m serious. Come on man, convince me.
Pause
COOPER: Well, it’s...it’s a bunch of little things.
JAY: Like what?
COOPER: Like...like the toilet is always there for me, ya know?
TODD: I don’t get it.
COOPER: Look, if I get horny at two in the morning, I’m shit out of luck. I’m not gonna wake Beth up.
JAY: Why not?
DRAKE: ’Cause not only would she not fuck him, she’d kill him for waking her.
COOPER: Right. But if I wake up at two in the morning and I’ve got to crap, the toilet’s right there waiting for me.
TODD: I guess.
COOPER: I never have to think about the toilet’s feelings. I can focus entirely on myself, without worrying if anyone else is having a good time.
TODD: You can do that during sex.
DRAKE: That reminds me Todd, your wife’s lawyer sent the divorce papers over to my office yesterday.
TODD (Cheerfully): Thanks, dick.
JAY: So you like crapping because you can just think about yourself at two in the morning?
COOPER: Well, there’s a little more than that. I mean; there’s no anxiety when it comes to taking a dump. I don’t have to try and impress anyone, there’s no wondering if it’s going to happen or if I’m going to say something stupid and fuck it all up. I don’t have to take the toilet out to dinner or compliment it or anything. The toilet never judges me; never tells me I’m doing something wrong or hurting it. I don’t have to worry about the toilet telling its friends the weird stuff I did or the strange face I made. I don’t have to worry about the toilet thinking less of me because of something I said in the heat of passion or some move I tried that didn’t quite work. My bathroom doesn’t get jealous when I use some other toilet. I can go whenever and wherever I want to. If I get a hard-on in the middle of the mall, there’s not much I can do about that, but if I have to suddenly take a dump, I can go to Sears, Borders, the food court, JC Penny’s, whatever I’m closest to. No toilet is going to tell me “no,” it has a headache, it’s tired, it has a headache, it doesn’t feel like it. Whenever I’m ready, there it is. Cleanup is a snap, no messy condoms or anything. I don’t have to shower after shitting. Just wipe and flush. I can bring a book with me when I crap and take as long as I want. So yeah, I think taking a shit is a lot better than sex.

(Silence. The men all look at each other, then back at COOPER.)

DRAKE: You got issues, man.
TODD: Seriously, are you alright?
JAY: Yo, that’s fucking up, son.
DRAKE: Do you have some kind of vendetta against women?
JAY: What did chicks ever do to you?
COOPER: No, I don’t-
TODD: Are you and Beth having problems?
COOPER: Beth and I are-
The Great Debate

DRAKE: There's a couples therapist in my building, I can get her card if you want me to.
COOPER: I swear, things are-
JAY: "The toilet never tells me I'm hurting it"? Dude, what kind of sex are you having?
COOPER: Look, I was just-
DRAKE: You into some kind of kinky shit or something?
COOPER: No, you don't-
TODD: What kind of "weird stuff" are you worried Beth will tell us about?
COOPER: Nothing, just forget I-
JAY: That's fucked up.

(COOPER jumps up off the couch and stands over the group.)

COOPER: Shut up! All of you, just shut up! God, I'm sorry I said anything. I thought maybe I could open up and be honest with my friends, but I guess I was wrong. Jesus.

(An awkward silence.)

DRAKE: So if you bring a Playboy in the john with you, is that like heaven?

(TODD and JAY burst out laughing, with DRAKE soon joining in. COOPER sits on the couch and fumes.)

COOPER (In almost a whisper.): I hate all of you.
TODD: Relax, Cooper. We're just messing with you.
DRAKE: Yeah, man. If you'd rather be shitting than getting some, whatever. It's your life.
JAY: It's fucked up, but it's your life.
DRAKE: It ain't that fucked up. I mean, some of your points kind of make sense.
TODD: You think so?
DRAKE: Yeah, I mean, it isn't that crazy.
COOPER: I told you guys. It makes sense.
DRAKE: Yeah, guys. It all clicks now. (To COOPER.) That dinner party I had a couple months ago, where you and Beth vanished for almost forty minutes, and you came back saying you had stomach cramps. You were just wrecking my bathroom, weren't you?
COOPER: You got me.
DRAKE: Ah, I knew it man. Anyone need one?

(He stands and raises his empty bottle. The men, except for JAY, all grunt and raise their empties. DRAKE exits LEFT.)
JAY: You were really screwing Beth, right?
COOPER: All over Drake's bed, yes.

(TODD and JAY laugh. COOPER stands.)

TODD: Where are you going?
COOPER: Bathroom.

(TODD and JAY look at each other, then back at COOPER, warily. TODD stands and approaches COOPER. He pulls his wallet out of his pocket, takes a condom out, and hands it to COOPER.)

TODD: Here ya go, man. I want you to be safe.

(COOPER looks at the condom, then throws it at TODD.)

COOPER: You guys are dicks.

LIGHTS DOWN.
Control
Kyle Dzintars

If we are in the car, like they say,
we are not the driver, not the passenger
holding the map. We are the sleeping children
in the backseat, dreaming of roller coasters
and kittens. We feel the movement of the wheels
against an uneven ground, every now and again
stirring us from dreams but not keeping us
from sleep. Placing our heads on
the cool, hard glass because we forgot
our pillows, we never worry our driver isn’t
rested or doubt the direction we’re headed. We’re
startled at the jerk of the car avoiding a deer,
but we find no challenge in rediscovering
rest. We lie with our hands in our laps, keeping warm
without a blanket, far from the steering wheel.
Do you remember the maple tree? It towered over my front yard like an all-natural skyscraper. Instead of cold grays and shiny windows, there were symmetrical green leaves and curved branches. During summer, it protected us from the persistent sunlight. We would always be near it, since your house only had pine trees and a scary father.

When there was a breeze, the branches gently shook in the wind and we’d say the tree was waving. You stayed over during a storm when the tree was angry. Branches cracked and clashed while leaves thrashed down the dead-end street. I was scared the tree was going to fall down, but you knew it wouldn’t. You were smarter. You had three more years on me.

You were stronger and faster too, but climbing was one thing I could do better. The branches were like a flight of stairs. Each step was laid out perfectly for climbing. Every branch was an extension of my own body. I could climb halfway up with my eyes closed. When I opened my eyes, the ground would start spinning and I’d climb down. You never climbed high enough to see the entire neighborhood. I never ran fast enough to catch you in tag, but it didn’t matter who was better.

I was at your house when I heard the familiar sound of the Cadillac parking on the gravel. I let out a quick gasp. Your father wasn’t supposed to be back so early. Through the window, I could see him: short, pudgy, bags under his eyes. Like a depressed stray dog, he looked approachable from a distance, but as soon as someone came near, he bared his teeth. Even though he was diminutive, he was intimidating. Maybe it was the cigar permanently attached to his lips, or maybe it was his big car. I think it was just his booming voice.

“You better leave,” you said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Hurry,” said your mom, as she chain-smoked on the couch.

Nobody needed to tell me. I opened the side door and jumped off the porch. There, I crouched in the tall grass until your father went inside. As I walked home, I heard your dad yelling. That sound was as familiar to me as the rustling of leaves or the Pledge of Allegiance, although nowhere near as pleasant.

“Why are you all just sitting around? Clean this shit up!” I heard from your house. His muffled yells made the house rumble.

“You’re all so fucking lazy.” His voice was harsh like a broken glass or a breaking bone. I hated these sounds. I ran home. I didn’t want to hear this anymore. How did you feel when your dad was screaming? Could you handle it better than I did?

We needed a tree house because all best friends had one, or at least that’s how it was on TV. The maple tree was perfect for one since all of the lower branches were flat. We found some plywood and a couple rotting two-by-fours outside. In my garage, we found some rusted nails and a hammer. Then it was time to build.

You struck the first nail with one clean hit. I was never good at building things, but I’m sure your dad taught you how to do it. He painted houses and built the home you lived in. My dad only taught me how to read and read and read.
We Don't Really Need A Treehouse

As you readied the second nail, I stared up the thick trunk of the tree. The emerald leaves and the brown branches were so dense and the highest altitudes were so mysterious. This uncharted territory reminded me of the jungle. If I could've climbed higher, who knows what kind of exotic things I could find. On the lower branches, I saw a robin’s nest. The baby blue eggs reminded me of the pastel colors of Easter. I thought of all the times we played hide-and-seek with the other neighborhood kids. The maple tree would always be home base. When by this tree, there was no need to escape and never a need to be scared. No wonder we spent so many summers here.

After the second nail went in, I felt nauseous.

“What’s up, buddy?” you asked.

“This doesn’t feel right. We’re hurting the tree.”

You were smarter than me and knew that a tree wasn’t like an animal. Trees can die, but they don’t feel pain. A few nails would do nothing to the tree.

“That’s fine,” you said. “We don’t really need a tree house anyways.”

If you were annoyed, you didn’t act like it. I think you understood how I felt. Maybe you even felt the same way. Or maybe you just thought I was crazy and didn’t want to make me cry.

I was at your house again but this time I didn’t have time to run away. We were in the basement, trading baseball cards amid the junk scattered everywhere. The air was stuffy but the temperature was pleasant. Then, the door upstairs slammed and I jumped to my feet, eyes wide open and alert.

“Shhh,” you whispered. “He’ll go to bed soon. Just be quiet for now.”

We both sat in silence as the floor above us creaked and groaned. I could hear the harsh yells. I shivered at the thought of him coming downstairs and yelling even more.

“Where is everyone?” your father shouted. “This place is a mess.” He stomped around upstairs. This unexpected proximity to your father terrified me. For ten minutes, I didn’t speak. I didn’t move. I hardly breathed. You just sat there as if you’ve done it a hundred times before. You kept on flipping through your baseball cards. Finally, the noises stopped.

“I think we can go up now,” you said. “Let’s go to your house.”

We tiptoed up the stairs and out the front door.

“Your dad scares me,” I told you, during one of the many lazy summer days. I was sitting on a low branch and you were playing Game Boy under the shade.

“What do you mean?” Your mouth opened slightly but nothing else came out. You seemed confused or maybe hesitant.

“He’s so angry,” I said. “Why doesn’t he like anyone?”

“He’s not that bad. He just works a lot. It makes him tired.” You never looked up from the Game Boy. Could you not see? Even at my young age, I knew that hiding from a father wasn’t normal. My dad always welcomed visitors and warmly asked how they were doing. I didn’t want to upset you so
I never brought the subject up again. I hopped down from the branch, bracing myself for the fall. I landed perfectly.

"Do you want to climb now?" I asked.

"Sure." You handed me the Game Boy and I took your place on the ground.

Years later, you graduated high school but I still had three more years to go. We both had new groups of friends. We stopped talking. Eventually, I didn't see the Cadillac parked in your driveway. I heard from neighbors that your dad moved out and I felt happy for you. You were free from high school and free from him.

I saw him come back to the house a year later. His slicked-back hair was gone. He was bald, aside from a few patches of thin hair. The bags under his eyes were heavier. His whole face looked defeated. I later found out he had cancer, most likely from the cigars he liked to suck down. I never spoke an entire sentence to the man.

Throughout these years, the maple tree sported less and less green leaves. Branches and bark would fall all around the base of the tree. The tree had once looked majestic as it towered over the front yard but now it looked naked. One summer, the tree finally became barren. It was nothing but a tall gray eyesore.

That was the last summer I saw you. I was practicing soccer by myself in my yard. A stray kick brought the ball to the pile of dead branches under the tree.

"Hey man, what's going on?" I heard from the road. I was so used to not talking to you that I had no idea it was you.

"Not much," I answered after a pause. "What are you doing now?"

"Just a few more months and I get my master's degree." You were smiling. "Chemistry is fucking tough, but I love it."

I told you my vague post-college plans. Something about working at a newspaper or traveling the world. Maybe a little bit of both. We talked about the things we used to do as kids, but we never talked about your dad. After a couple of awkward pauses, you said you needed to do some work.

"We'll hang out sometime this summer, alright?" you said.

"Yeah, that'd be cool. I'll see you later."

We haven't seen each other since. The transition from childhood to adulthood is a lifetime. The maple tree is gone now. It was eventually cut down and there isn't even a stump left. Only a hole remains. The brown dirt blotches the green yard. There is no longer any shade and there is no longer a place to climb. Both of us have to find new places.
Close Your Eyes and Lean

Tim Bristol

The body of my last relationship’s not even cold and here I am, ducking away from the wind and bang­ing my knuckles onto an aluminum screen door that’s going to make my hand sting, giving Mr. Right Now twenty more seconds before I exhale hard and just go. I can hear his dogs barking, reminding me why I’m a cat person.

I had to go behind the back of the house, according to his instructions. The house is small, one story, next to the railroad tracks and the high school with buses pulling in. I see walkers along Gilliard Drive and remember hating that road because of the wind off the lake, and as I stand on the wrecked shag carpet sample doormat on the small staircase to the back door with the six coats of paint showing, I already know that they’re looking at me, knowing why I’m here. I see the sign, “Deliveries in Rear,” written on cardboard and stuck in the front window. I would normally at least chuckle at the pun.

If his boyfriend answers the door, I’ll just say I’ve got a certified letter for someone who obviously doesn’t live there. It’s a believable contingency: I’m scruffy enough and my backpack can pass for a messenger bag and there are a few manila envelopes inside that I could easily say are priorities. He’d only have to buy it long enough for me to make a timely exit, and then let the cheating boyfriend handle the problem.

I tell myself that this is not the start of a new relationship. I don’t’ need my mother—the relationship barometer—telling me exactly how it’s going to end, like she did with Richard (age), Thomas (cheating), Jack (walkout), Frank (rebound), and finally Chris (500 miles), and being accurate every time.

Screw this.

Just go home and do it yourself. This isn’t about him.

I roll my shoulders and wedge my headphones in a little more securely.

My standards should be higher than simple distance.

The door opens, he invites me in. I take off my jacket and hang it on the chair at the kitchen table. The little TV is on in the background playing some old episode of Saved By The Bell and I automatically search the catalog of my brain for various trivia on Mark-Paul Gosselar, if only to amuse myself while I take out my headphones and stuff them and the MP3 player in my jacket pocket and sit down. Cups and dishes and plates on the counter, newspaper spread on the table, dead clock on the wall, smell of the dogs and always the wind outside. Nothing in here’s clean. The lights are off, just stray light through the faded curtains. I’m thankful for that.
I can't remember his name.

I don't really care, either, and I wonder if that should scare me.

He sits at the table, hair brush-cut with a little more pepper than salt, his build a bit squat, wearing a dirty white tee and sweats. I tell myself it's only because it's 7:30am. His face is a bit hangy, eyes tired. I think of a bulldog on Quaaludes.

"Now, you know I have a boyfriend," he said. "But nothing's going on between us. He's been playing around himself, you know."

His dogs are still barking, smaller breeds trying to vault themselves over the plywood that barricades them from the kitchen and the bedroom, which are the only two rooms I really care about right now. For a second, I believe they're barking because his boyfriend's home.

I'm supposed to get on the bus; instead I'm in a house talking to a guy I wouldn't take home if I were drunk, knowing that in the next five minutes, I'm going to be naked on a bed.

I don't even know what kind of small talk I'm making; I'm just wishing his damned dogs would just shut up.

"So, you know," he said. His eyes were on me—my shoulder, to be specific. "We have to be, you know," he drummed his fingers slowly on the table with one hand. "Discreet."

"Yeah. Okay." Like I'm going to brag that I slept with this guy.

It starts with a simple kiss and I close my eyes and try to think of someone else but his hands are cold and his face unshaved, sending tactile tremors into my fantasy of Ewan MacGregor and screwing in the rain. The rest is awkward groping before heading into the bedroom. I don't want to spend too much time thinking on whether I've ever been the Other Man. As he unbuckles my pants, I tell myself I'm not cheating.

I can always tell if there's relationship potential because I have two modes that are reserved for post-sex: Conversation and Scared Rabbit.

Chris and I would usually talk about Buffy The Vampire Slayer and the merits of Japanese voice actors.
When this guy leaves to get me a towel so I can clean up, I know there’s nothing with him ‘cause all I want to do is grab my clothes and dash out the back door and down the railroad tracks.

Scared Rabbit.

Fuck, how can it take five minutes to get a towel?

I’m putting on my socks and my shirt and saving the underwear and pants until I can get the towel and wash off and grab my jacket and run like Hell.

I’m thinking about calling Chris and confessing, even though there’s nothing to confess.

“Alright.” He handed me the towel. “Here you go. That was really good, you know.”

I don’t want to talk.

“Yeah. Been a while.”

Shut up. Just shut up.

“What? How long?”

I try to decide whether he means the general act or just that particular position.

“Two—two and a half years, I think.”

He looked at me a moment and grinned enough to show yellowing teeth. “And I thought I’d gone a while since Sunday.”

Give the slight chuckle, enough to dismiss it.

I wipe off and yank up my underwear and jeans, thankful my shoes are slip-ons.

“You gotta head out, huh? Me too, my boyfriend’s—” He sighs. “His mother needs to be looked after for a few hours and his sister’s going to Oswego and…”

I’ve tuned him out, getting my jacket on, tightening up my hat. I see a trash can flying down the road.
adjacent to the tracks.

“You sure you don’t want a ride? Windy out there.”

“Nah, I’d prefer to walk. Good exercise.” It’s the usual excuse.

“Well, I hope we can do this again, sometime. Just IM me if you see me on, ok?”

“Alright.”

And I hear him close the door behind me as I step into the wind.

My mother’s going to be sitting at her desk when I get back, playing solitaire like she does every morning. When I get home, she’s going to want to talk about how little sleep she got the night before and what she learned from her sleep apnea forum, but then she’s going to realize that I’m not supposed to be there.

She’s going to ask, “What are you doing home?” The most important thing to do is answer the question before she can ask it, cut down the chitchat time so I can get upstairs to the mouthwash.

But, I’m going to want to drop my backpack and take off my hat and take out my headphones and walk to her and say, “Mom? I just slept with a guy and I don’t even know his name.”

“Mom? I just slept with a guy who’s older than your husband.”

“Mom? I just slept with a guy who’s involved with another guy.”

“Mom? I just slept with a guy simply to sleep with a guy because I haven’t gotten any in two years.”

“Mom? I just slept with a guy and I feel like I cheated on Chris.”

“Mom? I just slept with a guy so I could feel needed.”

“Mom? Am I a bad person?”

But I won’t.
Close Your Eyes and Lean

“I missed the bus.” That’s the answer. Simple and believable. It’ll give me an hour. Then, I’ll go up and check my e-mail and make sure I set my stealth settings on IM so that I won’t have to worry about seeing this guy ever again. I’ll miss my first class of the morning, but I can live with it. It’s what I get for registering for an 8am class.

Pace is good and steady. I reach up and adjust one of the headphones with my finger out of habit. Something by Rise Against is playing because I need anger in my ears to distract me from “since Sunday” because even if you can’t stand the guy, it’s nice to entertain that you are the Other Man instead of One of Many.

The wind gusts again and I feel the sting of the wind chill for the first time this morning. Left hand retreats into the sleeve to hold the player while the right thrusts into the pocket.

And comes out with a $20 bill.

He paid me.

I break into a run.

I need to take a shower.

I need to get the taste of him out of my mouth.

The wind gives me a shove back, my icy fingers thawing enough to let it catch the twenty and carry it off somewhere behind me. It’s a straight shot here to home. I’m running blind.


**Like-Bill**  
Charles Forward

When

did he become a hollow loaf

lying in a box of white and silk?

He almost looks asleep but why

the powder face looking crusted—

is there no more flesh?

The flowers all around are

dusted with it, that white-grey nothing that

mutes everything and sits on my tongue like sand.

He looks,

dry,

and I wonder if death is a great baker’s oven

that makes tasteless bread of people.

I look at his doughface and wonder—

where is he?

but he’s right here.
A Man's Fishbowl
Benjamin Allocco

I met Will in a bar one night. Honestly, I didn’t even want to talk to the guy at first. I was tired from a long day of tearing up a concrete floor and pouring the new one and decided to go to a little joint called The Bucking Far. I had never been in the place, but the name intrigued me as I was driving around town. The parking lot was about half full at nine in the evening. This was a man’s bar. There were deer heads stuck to the walls. Straight back chairs surrounded large wooden tables. Men that I could guess were not unlike myself filled those chairs, playing cards or talking about sports or women in a not-so-polite manner. I went to the bar and waited for the barkeep.

The barkeep was a short little rat of a man with a towel wrapped around his waist. He was staring at the small television set up high above his head. Some smutty talk show host was egging two transsexuals on for sharing the same lover whom they thought was a man but probably wasn’t. Ten minutes passed.

I was just about to leave when I heard, “You could punch this guy in the back of the head and he’d still ignore you.” I turned and saw a regular looking man smirking at me. He turned to the rat man. “Yo! Barkeep! You got a customer here!”

The bartender turned and scowled at us both. “What do you want?”

I figured the little man was talking to me, but could not be sure; his eyes seemed to be stuck as if he had rolled them and never brought them back down.

“I said, ‘what’ll it be?’”

The man in the button up shirt answered for me. “He’ll have a scotch.” He looked at me. “On the rocks?”

“Uh, no.”

“Hold the rocks,” the man said. He turned to me with that smirk again. “Never been here before, eh?”

“No, first time.” My first impression was that he was an asshole. I didn’t feel like being stuck next to a loose lipped pompous prick all night, but I was too tired to find some way out of it.

“This place is okay.” He looked around the room and sipped whatever he was holding. My drink was set down on the bar and the man in the button up shirt put down a few bucks for the rat.

“I’ll pay for that,” I said sternly.

“It’s on me.”

“No really, I’ll pay for it.” By then, the rat had already taken the money and went back to watching the hypnotizing trash on the television.

“Name’s Will,” he said, sticking out his hand. I shook it. “I figured you for a scotch man.”

“Oh, yeah.” I forced a fake little laugh.

“Your name?”

“Mike.”

“Nice to meet you, Mike. It’s funny, you know, if people like that ever came in here,” he nodded at the television, “Frank would call them fags and harass them ‘til they leave or call the police, but if it’s
on TV he’ll watch it all damn night. Tell me, Mike, do you ever wonder why people come into bars
like this and drink themselves half to death some nights?’”
“I don’t know, maybe to get away from questions like that.”
He laughed and said, “Yeah, I suppose so. I think it’s something more, though.”
“How so?”
“Eh, I’m still working on it.” He chuckled to himself about a thought as it passed through his
head. “Does it strike you odd that drinking and driving is against the law, and driving with alcohol in
your system is against the law, but it’s not against the law to drive out to a bar and get drunk? How the
hell are you supposed to get home without breaking the law?’”
“Well, how else would people get arrested and sued?”
He smiled, but then his face became serious. “Be careful of the girls that come in here, hookers
a lot of the time. You don’t know until you take them home and then they either won’t leave or rob
you blind when you pass out.”
“Thanks for the heads up.”
“Hey, you want to shoot some pool?”
“Yeah, sure. I’m terrible though.”
“Me too.”
He wasn’t lying. He somehow managed to be worse at pool than I was, and that’s a hard feat
to accomplish. We had some good laughs that night. I stopped thinking of him as a pest and started to
think of him as a friend. We started meeting at The Bucking Far every Friday to shoot some pool or
play cards. We rarely played for money and when we did, the money was spent on drinks for both of
us anyway.
After Will and I had known each other for about three months, he mentioned that his roommate
was moving out in a few weeks. He asked if I’d like to move in. It would cost me about $450 a month.
His apartment was very nice and I could afford the rent, so I eventually accepted.
Our apartment was always in tiptop shape. We had two bedrooms, a kitchen, a single bathroom
and a living room. The Blueberry Apartment Complex was in the suburbs just before the border of the
city, not far from the house I was renting from my grandmother. Will owned a large flat screen television
with a big leather sofa that sat no more than four feet away from it, a coffee table barely fit in between
the two. In the corner of the living room was his oversized stereo.
“How the hell do you afford all this stuff, Will?” I asked him one day.
“I have a well paying job.”
“What do you do, anyway?” I asked. It had never come up before.
“I do drone work at a big computer company. I was always good with computers.”
“Ah.” And that was that. Later, I tried to get more information out of him, but he just didn’t
care to say anything more about it.
Will was a strange person to live with. He wasn’t always that talkative chipper fellow I knew from the bar. Some nights I would walk into the apartment and he would be sitting there on the couch curled up into a little ball. He wouldn’t look at me or talk to me. I just went to bed.

I’ve heard from many people that you should never live with a close friend. My sister tried it and had a falling out with her best friend of eight years. Apparently, my sister always burned breakfast and it stunk up the house while her friend was trying to sleep. Will and I had disagreements, but we never learned to hate each other. Sometimes his philosophical questions and thoughts did get on my nerves, though.

“Hey Mike,” he would say.
“You?”
“You ever wonder what the point to life is? I do. I wonder all the time.” He would stare into space for a few minutes and then turn to me and say some odd thing like, “I think everybody should get to choose when to die. Why didn’t God give us that choice? Supposedly we have free will, right?”
“I don’t know, Will.”

One day, I opened the door to the apartment to find Will sitting on the couch with his arms wrapped around a big glass bowl filled with water. Inside was a little golden fish swimming around in slow circles.

He looked at me and smiled. “I wanted a fish.”
“Okay,” I said absently.

Will had many girlfriends. Sometimes, all at once. He’d bring a brunette home on Monday, a blonde on Tuesday, a redhead on Wednesday, a blonde with red highlights on Thursday, and so on. He never introduced me, I think because he wouldn’t have remembered the girls’ names to do so.

One Friday, when I went into the apartment, Will was waiting for me.
“Hey,” he said. “You remember that busty blonde girl I brought home the other night? Well, she said she thinks you’re cute.”
“Okay.”
“Well?”
“What?”
“You want her?” he asked casually.
“No thanks, I’m happy to say I don’t have any STD’s and I plan on staying that way.”
“Hey now, I don’t go with any dirty broads.”

He never asked about the topic again.

Will started to act funny around September. He became real quiet and not as outgoing. All of his philosophical questions ceased. Will would be on the couch with his fish on his lap early in the morning. I’d come home from work and he’d still be in the same spot. I didn’t ask what was wrong. He wouldn’t have given me a straight answer anyway if I did.
My girlfriend, Anna, wanted to meet the strange roommate I always talked about. I took her to the apartment on a Sunday night.

"Will, this is Anna." I said to the sulking figure on the sofa. He didn’t look up. "Will?"

"Nice to meet you," he said, sounding bored, still not looking up.

Anna tilted her head and gave me a confused look.

"Go wait in the kitchen," I said to her quietly. "I'll be there in a minute."

She shrugged, turned, and walked to the kitchen.

I fell into the sofa next to my friend. Before I could initiate a conversation, Will started numbly while staring at the fish in the glass bowl on the coffee table in front of him. "I'm tired, Mike."

"We're all tired."

Will frowned. "What am I doing here, Mike?" He turned to look at me. "What, I mean, what the hell am I doing? I'm thirty years old for Christ's sake and I live in a tiny apartment."

"Is this about money? This whole depression look you have going on lately? You think you're not successful?"

"No, damn it! You're not —" He sighed. "You're not listening."

"I am, I just don't understand."

"Yeah. That's part of the problem, isn't it? Nobody understands anything. We just... We just do things. That girl out there, you going to marry her?"

"Uh, we've only been seeing each other for a little while. I haven't even thought about—"

"Then, what are you doing?" he asked angrily.

"I don't know, Will. I'm experiencing the world. I'm just living, that's what I'm doing."

"Me too, Mike. But I... God damn it! I can't just, I can't just live! I can't be everybody else!"

"What brought all this on, anyway?"

Will stood up violently and flailed his arms up over his head, knocking over the coffee table. The bowl with the fish thudded to the floor, spilling the water and the fish.

"Damn it, Mike! You just don't get it, do you? Nothing brought this on, don't you feel the same? How can you not feel the same! You're not that stupid, are you? I mean, you're bright. You can see the writing on the wall. How can you not get it? Don't be stupid, Mike. Don't just—" Will paused. He caught a glimpse of the little golden fish squirming around on the carpet.

"Ooo," he said, amazed. "Look at that. Why does he do that? Why does he writhe like that?"

Will bent down and scooped the fish in his hand. "This fish knows. Yeah. He knows."

I watched as he dropped his little friend in the near empty bowl. I thought for sure he would stand in that spot forever looking at his damn fish, so I walked into the kitchen to find that Anna had left. Perhaps she heard me say that I was not thinking of marriage. Was she thinking of marriage? I put the coffee table right side up and went to get a towel to dry the carpet. When I walked back into the living room, Will was sitting on the sofa, staring at his fish.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. I didn't know if he was talking to me or the goldfish.
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Benjamin Allocco

“I’ll see you tomorrow. I’m going out,” I said angrily. There was no response.

That night, I got very drunk and very sick. I remember going into The Bucking Far and ordering several drinks whose names I had never heard before. That’s all I remember. I woke up in my bed smelling like sweat and alcohol. I didn’t know how I had gotten back from the bar; maybe it was better that way. I sat up with a pounding headache and the taste of vomit in my mouth. I looked down to see I was still wearing the same clothes as yesterday and still had my shoes on. I wandered into the bathroom to relieve myself and brush my teeth. When I walked out of the bathroom, Will was waiting for me.

“Check your wallet,” he said calmly. I felt around in my pockets for the folded leather pouch but couldn’t find it.

“It’s gotta be in my room somewhere. Why?”

“I told you to stay away from the girls at the bar.”

“What? You mean Anna? I didn’t—”

“You came home drunk with a girl last night,” he interrupted.

“I did? Who?”

“I don’t know, some piece of flesh probably not worth a name.” He turned away.

I checked for my wallet in my room. I was almost relieved when I found it. When I looked inside, I saw that all my cash was missing and one of my credit cards was gone. Some whore stole my credit cards and my cash and I didn’t even know I was with her last night. I just hoped I had passed out before she had a chance to give me a disease.

“I told you.”

“Yeah, well,” I said. “If you hadn’t gone insane last night this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Nobody forced you to drink yourself into oblivion.”

“Yeah, like you should talk,” I muttered.

He frowned and looked at his feet.

“I’m sorry about last night, okay? I just have to figure out some things. Report your credit card stolen and they should cancel it for you. Then get to work.”

“Were you fired or something?”

“No, I just took a couple personal days is all. I’m going back today.”

“Well, I have to go take a shower.” I brushed past him to get out of the room.

“Report the credit card stolen, then take your shower,” he said.

Canceling the credit card was not a problem. The girl had not bought anything with it yet, so it worked out fine, but I was still aggravated by the fact that I let myself do something so stupid.

Work wouldn’t have been bad if I was sober the night before. We poured another large basement floor, put in some concrete steps and started laying block at another site. My head throbbed throughout the entire day. I walked into the apartment at about six o’clock in the evening. Will was there with his fish. He looked melancholy.

“How was work?” I asked.
"I know what it is now."
I sighed. "What?"
"Life. I know what it is."
"Oh?"
"Here, I got you a bottle of wine today." He held up a big green bottle of something with a pink label.
"I thought you went to work?"
"I took another personal day," he said. "I was really going to go to work, I was. Then it came to me. It all came to me." Usually, Will was excited to share his revelations. It was odd to see him so down. "Have some wine with me and I’ll tell you, if you want to hear, of course."
"Lay it on me, Will."
"Not yet, relax a bit. There’s nothing more abundant than time."
I had a few glasses of wine and watched some television while I waited for Will to tell me his revelation.
Finally, Will said, "I know what I am. I am that fish." He nodded toward the goldfish.
I almost spit up my wine. "I think you’ve had a bit too much to drink. That’s what I think," I said in mid-laugh.
"I haven’t had anything to drink, Mike."
"Well, then maybe you need to have a few," I said sarcastically.
"You’re that fish too, Mike. You are that fish and I am that fish. Do you know why? Because that fish is so insignificant we—"
"Oh Jesus," I moaned.
"This is what I was trying to get at last night. This is what I couldn’t realize. I know what’s wrong lately. I know what has been wrong my entire life. I’ve been trying to live a normal life. I have a job and an apartment and I get women and I get drunk every once in a while, but so what? What if I had a wife and a child? I would feel just like I do now. It’s not because I’m not successful or because I don’t have a family, I am a success. It’s not because I don’t get paid enough. Money is an object that I don’t need in the first place. I feel like I’m stuck. And you know why? Because I am stuck. I am that fish in his little glass container. And you know what a fish does? A fish lives in his little glass container until he dies. He lives, though. Yeah, he lives. Maybe I could give him a little plastic castle and he could be a king. Maybe he could have a mate and have children. Maybe he could be in the ocean. But what is the ocean but a giant bowl of water? A giant container? And maybe this fish could grow wings and fly way up in the sky, but what is the sky but a fish bowl filled with air instead of water? And maybe this fish could make a home for himself and have a friendly flock and a nest. But he’s still in his fish bowl. Maybe the fish has a face and arms and legs, maybe he has an apartment or a mansion and a wife and children and grandchildren and uncles and aunts and parents and he believes in God. Maybe the fish is named Mike or Will or Frank or Anna or has sex with people then takes their money. Maybe
Benjamin Allocco

and maybe he's poor. But you know what he does? He lives in his little bowl or his great bowl until one day he's floating belly up. That's what life is."

I didn't know what to say to him.

"Well?" He looked at me eagerly.

"Well," is all I could muster.

"Do you agree?"

"I don't know. I mean, you're right, I guess. But, what else can you do but live in your fish bowl?"

"That's just the thing! I know what I want to do. I want to just leave this place. I want to live with no possessions and no money and—"

"You want to be free."

"Yes! I want to live in my fish bowl until I'm belly up just like everyone else, but I want to do it without feeling trapped! Why can't I break the rules? Not the law, the rules. You know what I mean by the rules?"

"You mean like society."

"Yeah! I want to be the exception. I don't want to be famous. I don't want to be glamorized or full of money and corruption just to get ahead. I want to be exactly what I want. Like you said, I want to be free."

"So, you want to be, what, a Buddhist?"

"No, I don't want to be a Buddhist. Why do you have to label everything? Why can't I just be what I am? Who says a cardboard box is a box? Just because it has corners and sides? It's just what it is! It's not a box! It is its own existence!"

"This is starting to feel like high school philosophy class."

"See! You're doing it again. You're so in the lines! You're not part of The System, you are The System."

"What system?"

"The System! What you are trained to be from birth! A drone. A mindless robot that eats what food it's given. All these topics, they all come straight back to this fish!" He was standing up and breathing hard.

"Will, think about what you're saying. You think the world is a literal fish bowl? It's not that simple. You can't just rebel against this thing that you call 'The System.' Things are so much more complicated than that. You want to quit your job and starve on the streets? Because that's what will happen."

"Well, then, so be it!"

"Will, you're not being rational."

"Why should I be—"

"You're going to get hurt!"
“It’s my fish bowl, damn it! This is my God damn life! I can’t just be part of this thing called The World! I have to do what I feel before I’m belly up!” He fell back down on the couch. “Damn,” he said and shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t know what the hell I’m talking about.”

“I don’t know, Will. Maybe you’re right,” I said.

“No. You’re right. I don’t know what the hell I’m talking about.”

“You do, though. You were one hundred percent right about everything, but you’ve got it backwards. You’re supposed to be motivated to do something with your life. You’re supposed to realize that your time here is limited and that you should try to accomplish everything you can before you die.”

“That’s what I’m saying, Mike. I know what I want to do.”

“But you can’t just leave everything. You have to persist! You have to strive to get ahead, ahead,” I paused, trying to think like Will would. “Ahead of the other fish! Get a bigger bowl and a shinier castle!”

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“Well, I don’t know.”

“Tomorrow, you know what I’m going to do? I’m going to ask my boss for a raise. If he refuses, I’ll quit and find work somewhere else. Like you said, I’ll make it big, I guess.”

“Me too.”

That was the last we spoke of it that night. And that was the last time I would ever see Will. About a month ago, I opened the mailbox to find a little ripped up piece of cloth. On it, scribbled in gold crayon, was the word, “Swim.”
Oasis
Marci Zebrowski

"If individuals, like camels, perfect their inner resources, if we have the power within us, then we can cross any wasteland in relative comfort and survive in arid surroundings without relying on the external."
Tom Robbins, Still Life With Woodpecker

I want
to climb inside
a dromedary’s swelling
internal cave; a miniature Shangri-la
for a water-hungry Pisces like me; a portable
swimming hole shrouded in the warmth of the blistering
Sahara sun; a womb within the clammy core of an unimpregnated beast
of burden; a sanctuary; a home; and the absolute perfect place to just disappear
Have You Hugged A Snowflake Today?
Kenneth Rountree

Hey, kids... do people think you’re boring? Do you get picked last in gym class? Are you struggling to form an identity in a postmodern world? Well, say goodbye to those problems! You’ll show them with Uncle Andrew’s Special Hugs®.

“What’s a Special Hug?”

Well, Jimmy, they’re the best things in the world. People will know that you’re a unique individual when you get one of Uncle Andrew’s Special Hugs®.

“I want to be an individual!”
“Me, too!”
“I wanna be more individualer than both of you!”

Now, calm down, kids. You can all be individuals if you receive one of our patented products. Once one of our Caring Friends™ gives you a hug just like the ones old Andrew gave, you can finally validate your existence.

“Yay!”

Let’s take a look at some of our satisfied customers:

“I received one of Uncle Andrew’s Special Hugs®, and now I’m a tight end in the NFL! As I learned in college: correlation proves causation!”

“I used to be a nobody. Everybody picked on me for no reason at all, but then I heard about Uncle Andrew’s Special Hugs® from my father. Ten years later, I’m in a nu-metal band and making millions! Thanks, Uncle Andrew!”

“I was a happy, boring little girl. I used to make daisy chains and laugh and sing in the meadows. Uncle Andrew’s Special Hugs® made me realize that the world is actually a bleak wasteland, populated by hungry wolves surrounding a herd of sheep. Now, I write poetry about my vagina weeping. Uncle Andrew is my hero!”

That’s right, kids, if you receive one of Uncle Andrew’s Special Hugs®, you too could become famous!* But wait: there’s more. You’ll get a ready defense for any sort of crime, COMPLETELY FREE! Murder? Rape? Jaywalking?** Just say that you have received one of Uncle Andrew’s Special

*Results may vary
* Death Penalty may result for jaywalking in Alabama, Alaska, and other “A” states
Hugs® and you too could be tried for insanity, losing jail time and possibly being completely exonerated. Judges and juries alike never tire of hearing about our Special Hugs.

But you, the viewer, must be wondering: "How much does this cost?" The suggested retail price is $99.99. We say no! We could make it $59.99! NO! $49.99? $19.99? $999.99? $0.99? NO, NO, NO, NO! We will give you Uncle Andrew’s Special Hugs® for the mere price of emotional scarring! And if you act now, we’ll even throw in the No, Mommy, No, Stick® for free. You heard right, folks: free!

Right now, our Caring Friends™ are waiting at the phone to take your order. Tell us a time when you are alone and vulnerable, and you will get the privilege of being able to tell people that you are, in fact, a true member of society. You will be able to refute any argument, validate any artwork, and even pass this special gift onto your children, if you just let us give you Uncle Andrew’s Special Hugs®.
Everyone Wants
Alison Belen

Everyone wants
the new girl until the tide turns around and gives
the middle finger to the coast line because it cheated
with the tree’s leaves again and
the moon had no idea
what it would be illuminating the day
it decided to show its face
but the sunset still cried itself to sleep because
the seagulls called it
faggot
while they went driving by without realizing
the toll their words would take on
young purple hues begging
red ones to stay
just this once.
Florescent Father
Lindsay Webb

Restless telephone wires scream for salvation with the news
A doctor has unplugged the stereo of life
New beginnings have found themselves in stale, sterile endings
My father lies listless…emotionless

Not unlike when he was alive

His face-so white
    Like the underside of leaves turned on their bellies by the wind

Crumpled wrinkles find themselves caked in filth
    From weeks un-bathed and untended

My coffee has turned cold and offers nothing but the taste
    of specimen urine

    I can feel its bitterness on my lips

Chatter laughter sequential beeping squealing of the intercom

No wonder I can still hear the language of those florescent lights

    harvesting my father’s soul for safe keeping
    relieving the IV of its duty to protect
    informing me of energy efficiency

telling me to go home.
It’s three a.m. I know it’s three a.m. because the rhythm outside has slowed to a smooth adagio, punctuated by a staccato gunshot snare, followed by this rise of the siren wind section, and drowned out by the brass of car horns. There’s a tenor and a soprano down the street, their discordant notes tangled together in primal harmony, no chorus, no bridge, just verse after verse seeking the final bar. D.S. al Coda al Fine. The voices surge at different tempos: the tenor at a march pace; the soprano in common time, while I pull a cigarette from the pack on the nightstand, waving it idly to the rhythm as I look for my lighter.

A sudden high note, a long wavering D, out of tune, and then, the Grand Pause as the flints get flicked and the soft glow of the Zippo ignites the baton. The Grand Pause can always last as long as the conductor wants, the only way to put real drama in a symphony, but I wave the Lucky Strike, giving them the signal to continue. The soprano begins her solo performance, in perfect key and pitch, notes slurring up and down the chromatic scale but always cycling higher, seeking to break the upper limits of the staff, into the realm of the virtuosos.

The tempo switches to Grave, the notes echoing out long, powerful against the accompaniment of the orchestra outside, the winds wailing in piercing screams, the brass section blasting a harmony, seeking to drown out the budding diva, three quick snaps on the snare. And all the while her voice grows, the notes scaling higher, pairing against the bass thump of my heartbeat.

And then... crescendo.

The snares bang out the rhythm, the winds carry the melody, the brass the harmony, and through it all, the diva’s voice rides the crest, the pitch climbing higher, shattering the staff behind her to reach her summit: a C over High C to punctuate the end of the movement. There will be no intermission. The next movement commences immediately with the baritone beginning, “Hey Lady! Shut the fuck up! Some of us have to work in the morning!”

But I still stand up, lean out my window, and applaud the diva as I flick the spent baton to the street below.
Ballroom
Eric Vosburgh

My nervous fingers slide up
Crimson silk until cool
Perspiration glistens on them in fluorescent light
I pressed the small of her naked back, and
With familiar comfort she met my guiding chest

This oft rehearsed physical chemistry
Is ingratiating and nauseating all the same
As we perform
Across a stage of shadow and passion
Spotlighting expectant curves and cascading hair

Breathless I bend her, trust
And shape a coveted body to mine
As faith burns in her electric green eyes
I dip her soul, suspended with a grasp
Confidently steel but sensual

That pulsating grace pulls away and every
Inch of empty space is unspoken tension
But I know it’s her temptress routine
And still she lures me deep into the beat
Succumbing to the suggestive leg behind my knee

Battling to control my intensifying emotions
I raise her figure upon my hands
Asserting my will to display her to the world
And as the song brings our dance to a close
Those who watch get lost in someone else
Mute
Jennifer Tordy

I will thread this needle
put it to my throat
up my voice box
and stitch myself
a necklace of silence.
Words have been careening off the
cliff of my lips for too long
with nothing to
cushion or slow the dissent to your ears.
Yeah, sticks and stones
have snapped my soul
but my words
have aim to hurt you.
So, closed up I will whir
like a cloud in a storm
and hope that my silence
is more pleasing.
I. The aroma of incense and flowers is starting to make you feel nauseous. Or maybe it was that you drank three cups of coffee and didn’t eat breakfast this morning. You figured you would eat at the gathering afterwards and you didn’t want to have to make any unnecessary pit stops during the ceremony. You have no idea how many hugs you’ve given to people you should know but don’t. You ask your father how each mystery guest is related to you. He tells you. You look down towards the dull colored carpet slightly ashamed that you don’t know the difference between Aunt Paula and your great Aunt Joanne. You take notice of the soft Christian hymns being played in the room. Ave Maria. Such a sweet but subtle white noise that cushions the tears and polite conversation coming of your relatives.

II. A line begins to form towards the front of the room. At the start of the line is your mother and her sister with their husbands dutifully standing behind them. You notice your father’s firm grip on your mother’s right shoulder and how they seem connected. Looking at your mother’s face, your eyes begin to sadden. Childhood memories stream through your mind. Scraped knees, broken hearts, sicknesses. She was your pillar, your antidote. On this day, you have traded places. Your mother is now you and you are now your mother. You want to take her in your arms and cradle her. You want to tell her that it’s okay and that no matter what, you will help her through this. You yearn to say, It’s all right, child, your father has passed but I am here, I am yours. You want to consume her sorrow like she has done for you so many times, so many years. Instead, you go to the end of the line and cup your sweaty hands together, as if you are going to communion.

III. Twenty-two cars follow behind a hearse with two cops leading the way to Our Mother of Sorrows Church. Twenty-two cars with all of his loved ones crammed inside and a sad awkward silence lingering in each one. Twenty-two cars reminding you of ants. Lined up. Moving one by one. Making their way to something sweet. Inside the cathedral it is stuffy and cold for mid-April. Your family sits tensely in pews reading and re-reading a laminated card of the poem, “Footsteps,” printed on the back of a picture of Saint Peter. Under it the words read, “In Loving Memory of John Koshella, 1921-2004.” You notice that you don’t get the same feeling you got when you read his name in the obituaries. Seeing his name in print the first time made you feel as though you were stabbed in the chest. You knew he had died. Your father called you while you were out drinking with your friends to tell you he had passed. A friend came and picked you up from college to take you home for the funeral. But seeing him summed up into a paragraph that was written by a person who had never met him broke your heart. You wanted to write the paragraph. You wanted to write about everything that happened to him from 1921-2004. You think of how ironic it is that someone’s entire life is represented by a hyphen. You think of the power of that dash, the events that happened in his lifetime, the things he saw. You sit next to your older sister and cousins in a glossy pew, reciting lines in your head from the poem about John Koshella that you have written and will soon read aloud. When you read your poem, you go slow making sure that you pronounce each word correctly, stopping briefly between stanzas only to look up at your family.
Intoxicating Lady Friend
Brandon Pettit

There’s this girl I know that keeps my hands warm when I’m standing in three feet of snow. Her touch is like chocolate: sweet and seductive. Her mind is like mine except she is far more productive.

There’s this girl I know who will lay around in her pee-jays but will sleep with nothing above her knees. She becomes excited with the thought me in my blue jeans although she always tells me “remove them please.”

There’s this lady friend that I have who evokes so much laughter from me that my rosy cheeks become inflamed with a humorous pain.

There’s this lady friend of mine whose hips can almost hypnotize to the point my mind becomes paralyzed. Her face is like a sculpture that lasts throughout time. Her mind is quite acute. Her heart is very kind.

I have this girl I like that makes me feel like I’m hypnotized almost all of the time.
Cloudy night.
The dog screams, embedded collar. A horse, emaciated. Feed just out of reach. Cat, skinned by teen. Three months probation, a year in jail, no punishment. Change channel. Local man busted for pot. Up to ten years. Turn off TV.
“You see my point?” I laugh, short. “Goddamned justice system.”
Lorraine looks at me, sitting on the (handmade) leather couch. “What would you prefer? It’s the best one in the world. I’m damned proud of it.”
“An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The ancients had it.”
Eyes roll. “That doesn’t work for drug law, if that’s what you mean. If you mean, well, cruel and unusual punishment.”
I smile (my best). “I don’t care about the Goddamned potheads. Let them delude themselves as long as possible. Let them. But don’t... you wouldn’t want to see a baby with a chain embedded in its neck, would you?”
“Well, no, but, that’s different. I mean, sometimes pet owners are ignorant.”
“Ignorance is no excuse. They’d learn real fucking quick if they had to stay outside with no food, no water, barbed wire choking them, maggots crawling in and out of their neck, sunstroke.”
Silence. She speaks, “You’re just as bad, if you think that. If you would get jollies out of being that cruel, then you’re, you’re worse.”
She laughs. “Maybe. Maybe. You’re definitely the guy I married.” She kisses me, and smiles.
“I’m sorry. I get carried away. Animals are our kin. I hate it when people torture them.”
“That’s okay, sweetie. Hey, we should probably get to bed now. You’ve got work tomorrow morning.”
Clouds disperse, moon appears. Wake up. Hunt humans.
First Steps
Alison Belen

There are certain precautions you have to take before you reach the ability to put one foot in front of the other and embark on the path those feet decided to travel. First, ideally, decide the socks. Do you want the black, yellow, red, and white wool ones mom bought you for Christmas with the Mickey Mouse face that causes your feet to sweat in the middle of the night? How about the white and gray Hanes pair that you arrived at while searching for another pair of boxers that matched the ones your first girlfriend had bought you in the same aisle of that same Wal-mart, months before you’d realize what it felt like to be sleeping in them instead of naked with her.

Once you decide the situation of socks and which foot to place them on first, the right since you’re a righty or the left because it’s more difficult, it’s time for the shoes. Do you wear the ones you bought at Kmart before you heard of skater shoes and found the comfort you’d been lacking from the ten-dollar bin for the past twelve years, or the ones your job at Nike gave you for free? Then, there are the ones you bought at the mall with Tara a week after she’d broken up with you and you walked around the galleria telling her you hated her while picking out new clothes to start the life you’d live devoid of her and her stylistic taste, although you still kept those gray, red and white shoes that didn’t match anything you had or have bought since.

When the socks and shoes are taken care of, you’re ready. Open the door with the curtain Mom put up as soon as you moved in, and then the screen that you have to close yourself or it’ll slam and cause Dad to come out screaming about why you can’t ever be quiet. Then, step off the three granite steps that you always used to sit on with Kendra during the summer after eighth grade, back when you were still friends and still listened to mix tapes instead of CDs because tapes always had more meaning. Which reminds you of the friend who sent you a mix tape and called it “California mix tape” because she calls you California because that’s where you want to go, but that was this past summer, when you didn’t have to take so many walks because you had your license and could drive to the train station where the mountains always seemed to be crying.

But that is now and you still like to walk so you finally put one foot in front of the other, though many think you walk side to side like a penguin. You can go either up the street towards Amber’s, Katina’s, the res, where so many friends are that you no longer talk to because that was before you realized that you wanted more for yourself than a coke addiction and a townie’s life. Or you can walk along the main route which takes you all the way to the club Carolyn used to work at, all the way to the memory of sitting on lawn chairs on the deck in the backyard of the club where she kissed you with sober lips that reeked of intoxication and asked you to go home with her but you knew better, until the day when you stopped knowing anything at all.

You take the high road, walking toward the res, which is where you took Lara one night after you’d come back for a break from college and you peed in the field and talked about how being home wasn’t really like existing anymore. You walk past the empty swings to the sand on the dock that runs into your socks like the shore and you remember the time you jumped in when you went there in the rain with Kristen and Brandon, the first time you felt rain drops dance across your eyelashes since the second grade because you’d finally gotten contacts and saw the mermaid underwater that no one believed you about.
It Was Life
Marci Zebrowski

Storyville was the legalized prostitution district of New Orleans, Louisiana from 1897 through 1917.

Beautiful women
Nowhere to go

Bawdy men
Nothing to do

The cries of hungry children rip through the hollow streets.

Can they hear them?
Or are they too blinded
By their own pain

Do they care?
Too focused on desire
To let themselves hear

It was life with pseudo beauty.

Nimble movements
Graceful speech
But hard, foul words

Clumsy gestures
Gentlemen’s promises
And no intentions for morning

Never can they glimpse another realm.

Except on those nights
As smooth fair women

In the world of such
Powerful rich men.

And all they want to do
Is laugh,
Is hope for salvation,
Bring in the next one,
And die.

And pray with all their might,

It was life, it was Storyville.
I Want To Be Skinny
Bailey Garfinkel

Retort to "I Want To Be Fat," by Terrance Haynes from his book, Muscular Music

I want to be skinny,
I want a teeny tight abdomen
That fits into triple zero jeans,
Small enough to fit a mature midget,
A young girl that has just hit age eight.

I want to be skinny like a stick of gum,
Wrigley's Double Mint or Big Red
With a shiny exterior and a flat body
So small, I can be tucked into a purse
In the corner between the lipstick and wallet.

When I am skinny,
Women gulping triple thick chocolate shakes will whisper:
*Look at her. Why is she so damn skinny?*
And in their heads they will say,
*I wonder how she did it?*
*I wonder if I should try fasting for a week?*

Love me fat girls,
As you love Krispy Kreme Doughnuts and Hershey's dark chocolate bars,
Love me skinny girls,
As you love insecurity and anything fat free with zero calories.
I will teach you all the trendy diets.
I will teach you the least painful way to shove down your fingers.

When I am skinny
I will eat two wheat thins for lunch,
I will run after every meal-
-this, of course, long months
Before I am down to eighty pounds,
Before I am unable to run anymore,
Because I have lost all energy
Thinking makes me light headed.
I will sob away my water weight
When Starbucks forgets to use skim milk,
I’ll bitch at happy people eating McDonalds and strawberry cheesecake,
And I’ll never forget you, Kate Moss,
Your perfectly defined high cheekbones,
Your almost protruding bones
Covered by black and blue marked veins.

“You bitches will have to make an extra stop
In the children’s department to let me shop”

I want to be nearly fading away,
The cover of every fashion magazine with a perfect smile.
I want skinny girls to write me emails,
Full of apprehensive insecurities,
I want them to be full of jealousy and envy.

I want to be buried in a shallow dark hole,
This shallow of skin, these bones
Like a skeleton being studied in biology class;
These bones clanking together like pots and pans;
These bones. These bones. These bones.
It’s February and snowing outside. I am smoking cloves, visibly anxious. I left my jacket upstairs. It’s been almost an hour outside on this little stoop and I’ve forgotten how to be cold. I pull the heavy, aromatic toxin into my lungs and hold it there, feeling the high of a clove cigarette. I imagine my brain screaming for oxygen, my areoles shrinking in disgust. I exhale and repeat.

I’ve just started this bad habit.

I started smoking because of her. The way when I kissed her, I could taste that acridness in her mouth. I started smoking because really, I always wanted to try cloves. So here I am, just puffing away on a concrete slab, body crowded under the doorframe, trying to avoid most of the gently drifting flakes.

I am waiting out here. I am waiting for my girlfriend to realize that I’m missing from the party and to come get me. It’s been almost an hour now, and I don’t want to think about her in the bedroom with twenty girls playing Spin the Bottle. But of course I do, and take another rushed drag on the black filter.

I straighten myself and push forward, beginning to pace. Moving keeps me warm. I’m a masochist; I almost enjoy the tedious pain of disappointing myself over her. When I finish one cigarette, I move on to the next, flick open my Zippo, and light up. I’ve duplicated this process every eight minutes. Given how long I’ve been out here, that works out to about eight cloves. Almost half a pack. Every dead butt finds its way to the snow. I eye the markers of my agitation on the stoop, and feel a touch guilty.

Cigarette nine finds me shivering. I pull in a comfort drag, imagining that the tiny sparks spread over me and warm me. This is when I hear a door open on the third floor, the door to the apartment of the party. I hear the sudden cacophony of voices, and a sudden staccato thud-thud-thud of many feet rushing towards me. I smooth my face into a nonchalance I can only pray isn’t transparent, and put a customer-service smile on my face. I drag in. I sigh out.

The first to reach me is Jessie. Her and some other girls come out. She looks over at me and says, “You look good in white, wear that shirt more often.” I blush and pretend she’s being nice for my sake. She pulls out a Bali High and like a good butch, I light it. She inhales and grins.

Several other girls join us. The stoop is crowded now, and I work my way to the walkway. This is when she makes her drunken appearance. My girlfriend.

She swaggers over to me and takes out a Marlboro. “There you are! Got a light?”

I oblige.

“How long you been out here, anyways?”

Before I can answer, she continues, swaying next to me. “You missed a good game of Spin the Bottle.”

“Yeah,” some taller woman says. “It was hot.”

“I was out here for air,” I mutter, timid and hiding my disappointment. “For an hour…”

“You should have a coat on. I can’t be taking care of you when you’re sick,” she chatters. She takes another drag and exhales onto me. I cough as the far less appealing smoke fills my nostrils. I
take a drag on my clove to forget it.

The girls are all talking, a hum of voices all around the stoop. I stand there, half-expecting her to grab my arm or somehow claim ownership of me.

Instead, she tosses her cigarette and stands there, weaving her voice with the others. That’s when the tall woman looks at me.

“I want to make out with you,” she suddenly blurs.

I blink, shocked. Not only do I find the prospect of kissing a random drunk woman in front of my girlfriend unsettling, but the very idea of someone desiring me is foreign.

“I don’t know.” I trail, hoping that my girlfriend will intercede like some righteous angel, placing her mark on me and saving me from this. This awkwardness. Instead, she turns around and says, “Do it, Jes!”

My ears are ringing. It’s thunder. Not blood, thunder.

“Really?” I look at my girlfriend, hoping my wholly lost look will communicate to her my absolute unwillingness to kiss this woman. She has to be kidding, right? She would never...

“Yeah, go ahead!”

I blink.

“It would be hot!” she presses.

“I really don’t think—”

“Are you saying I’m not pretty?” the tall woman says, sounding let down.

“No no no, not that!” I chide.

“Well?”

“Okay.” I try not to sigh. I try not to sound resigned.

She leans over and towers above me. I close my eyes and tilt my head up. She kisses me, and I let her. I pull away as I feel her mouth part and her tongue run over my lips.

“Did I do something bad?” the tall woman asks. I can’t ignore how very drunk she sounds. I know she’ll regret this either way tomorrow, so I go with pure honesty. I tell her that I just don’t feel like making out with her.

“I feel rejected.” She half-laughs, saddened.

“No, it’s not that! It’s just...” I stumble, trying to think of how to relate to this woman, in her deeply inebriated state, that I haven’t kissed a lot of people, and certainly those I have I was seeing at the time.

“I have a heart of ice,” I said.

“Yeah you do,” my girlfriend mutters behind me. I blush. I don’t know if I’m angry or just embarrassed.

The rest of the girls head upstairs, finished with their smokes. “Coming, Debra? Jes?”

My girlfriend shakes her head. She and I both stand outside. I take out another cigarette, the eleventh. Her sobriety comes into sudden focus as she looks at me with those icy blue eyes. I feel naked,
frustrated. She steps back close to me again, as I lean against the door.

“So what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lie.

“Right. Well. I’ll show you a trick.”

She leans over and cups her hands over the cherry of my cigarette. I recoil like a nervous horse, snort. “Just trust me,” she stammers.

And why should I? And why should I.

She puts her mouth over the cherry, and I fear she’ll swallow the fire whole. She could, I know it. She shows me a shotgun. I choke on the rush of smoke forced down my throat. Annoyance and amusement shimmer over her face. I wipe my eyes, forgetting about the eyeliner I have on, to look good for her. I scowl, and then inhale again.

She laughs then, leans in, and kisses me. I cave in and pretend I haven’t been pissed at her this entire time. Ignore the phantom lips all over hers. “You taste like cloves,” she whispers, tongue darting out to lick up the residue with a deliberate slowness. I feel my knees weaken.

Somehow, I know this, our first night as a pair, as girlfriend and girlfriend, will echo throughout the rest of our relationship. This is the real Debra. Let me not be deceived.

I throw the rest of my clove into the snow and hear it sizzle and die.
Humans
Lindsay Webb

White-coated-cult-authorities carelessly duct tape wounds
Subjects beg for personal autonomy
Advocates claim outright brutality

On the unit
madness instills
a new branch of reason

Across meal trays, Trouble boards, and shining veneer tables-
a crucified blue contrast tacked to a white wall
a notice of legal rights
a few paragraphs striving to protect humanity-viewed here as one creative activity per day
risking art for those who might jab a paint brush into their chest
or see the madness in color perception

Cradle us as if we are children
Control us as if we are without reason
Laugh at us as we plead for our freedom
Fear us as you commit treason

But don’t ask us thee questions expecting answers to the Ultimate and Unknown

for we are not mystics

we are only humans
Waddy and Shirl
Shelby Matthews

My favorite photograph is found in the beginning chapter of the Autobiography of Thomas Parry Watkins, a two-year project my grandfather just recently finished and distributed to my whole family last Christmas. The photo is in black and white, signifying its age. My grandfather is standing behind my grandmother with his arms around her waist, hands folded around her stomach. He is standing against a pole and her body is leaning into his. His face is close to hers. The color contrast in the photograph makes it difficult to differentiate what season it is, but when I picture it in my mind, it's winter. My grandmother is dressed in a long black coat that ends at her knees. She has pointed shoes on her feet. They are both dressed in black or dark colors that seem to blend together from the black and white film, their bodies becoming one. As I read his autobiography, I kept that image in my mind. A couple so young and happy, where a picture, in itself, becomes an autobiography of their love.

My grandfather acquired the nickname, Waddy, during his reign as College Chauffeur for Keystone College students and professors. He sat behind a ridiculously large steering wheel in the blue and orange commuter bus that was referred to as Waddy’s Cattlewagon. On the first day of the Fall Semester, my grandfather was ordered to pick up four students, one of which was my grandmother.

“She was one of the first to enter the bus, Shelby. Boy, was I impressed when I saw her. But Shirley and I had a hard time connecting.” My grandmother was a beautiful woman who, as my grandfather has told me on several occasions, had many male admirers when she was younger.

One night, my grandfather had to pick some students up at a college dance. He pulled the bus up to the front entrance at midnight, went inside, and like a bartender, gave the last call for the Cattlewagon gang. He took a head count on the bus and noticed he was missing one person. Sure enough, it was Shirley. My grandmother was on the dance floor with a young man. He approached her and told her the bus was leaving and that he had made a commitment that he would return her safely to Dickson City. She told him to mind his own business and that she was going home with Chuck Westcott in his new convertible. My grandfather walked away, assumed his bus driver position, and drove off down the road. Thirty minutes later, he saw Chuck driving up ahead in the distance. My grandfather turned off the headlights and pulled up close behind him. Then, he put on his high beams and blew the air horn, scaring Chuck and his passenger off the road and into a cornfield. Shirley was not too happy with my grandfather after that incident.

The next week, my grandmother was still very upset with my grandfather’s antics and ignored him while she rode the bus.

“She wouldn’t even look at me Shelby,” he said, smiling. “So, while she was mad, she sat next to a young man named Jack Wilson. There was a full-length mirror in the front of the bus and I could see Shirley perfectly. Mr. Wilson was showing your grandmother how to drink out of a gallon jug.” He remembered that her aisle seat was shiny red leather, and when she sat on it, her pale skin struck his eyes. I pictured it in my mind. My grandmother has the most beautiful complexion, very fair and shiny, as if the sun was illuminating her skin.

“Her and that Wilson fellow were laughing and it made me mad. When I saw her begin to
Shelby Matthews

drink, I swerved the bus into the other lane. Shirley lost her balance and down she went with cider all over her new college outfit.”

When they first started dating, my grandfather told me he took Shirley out for dinner and a movie. After the movie, my grandfather drove my grandmother home, kissed her goodnight, and drove off. On the drive home, he realized how much he cared for her. He wanted to turn around and go to her, and so he turned his car around and headed back to Shirley’s house. When he arrived it was 10:45 p.m. and he thought how weird it was to see the lights on in the house. He parked his car and walked through the open front door. Shirley was standing near the fireplace wearing a beautiful dress that wasn’t what she had worn when she was out with my grandfather. Standing next to her was another young man dressed in a dark suit. The couple, unaware of my grandfather’s presence, proceeded to hug Shirley’s parents and say goodbye. My grandmother was on her way to her second date for the night.

“Well, just because Pop-pop’s night ended early doesn’t mean mine had to too. I had fun that night. Your grandfather stood at the doorway for about five minutes before anyone knew he was there. When I finally saw him standing there, my mouth dropped. I could just imagine how mad he was. But you know what your grandfather did? He walked right past me and said hello to my parents. Then, he shook hands with the man I was about to go out with.” She smiles as she looks at my grandfather. “He was so mad, Shelby.”

I think the moment my grandmother fell in love with my grandfather is the night she was the Belle of the Ball. There are no pictures of that night, but I would have loved to see how she looked in the strapless white gown her Aunt Maude purchased for her as an incentive to get better. My grandmother had not been showing up for school and my grandfather was worried. The doctors were unsure of her diagnosis, only that she had no feeling in her legs.

“It was very serious, Shelby, and the doctors were stumped. As the dance grew nearer, Shirley’s mom took me aside and said that her progress was very slow and that it doesn’t look as if she would be able to attend the dance. She told me that I should consider inviting someone else. But I didn’t because Shirley was the one I wanted as my date and I told her mother that I would not consider taking anyone else.”

On the night of the dance, my grandmother was still very fragile. She couldn’t walk very well but my grandfather didn’t mind carrying her.

“Her father and I had to cross our hands together, you know, forming a seat sort of, and we carried her down the steps into my car.”

My grandfather had arranged the whole evening. Being the president of the Student Council had its benefits. Awaiting Shirley was a rug, taken from the lounge next door. It led to a love seat and two end tables with lamps lighting up the scene. My grandfather led Shirley’s weak body to the love seat and sat beside her the whole evening. Everyone had heard of what happened to my grandmother and stopped to see how she was doing. My grandmother was able to dance for a couple of songs. And she was named The Belle of the Ball.
I never asked my grandparents about that black and white photo. Sometimes, when I see that picture, I wonder if my grandfather was whispering something into my grandmother’s ear. And if so, I wonder what he had said. Did he tell her...

“I am the luckiest man to have you as a best friend for every day of my life. I appreciate the loyalty you’ve shown to me throughout the years. Shirley, you know how much I appreciate you, you have been a wonderful wife. You know you know how much I love you.”

Or maybe he didn’t say anything at all. My grandfather has always been more of the silent type. Maybe my grandfather is leaning close just to feel her hair on his skin. Maybe he saved those words to put in a letter, a letter that he would give to Shirley later in life and then keep in his autobiography to let everyone know what that picture represented. And maybe he would simply sign the letter: Waddy.
She left
Left me sobbing
On my knees
Knowing she chose to leave
Neglecting the idea of why.

She had to

Wanting the more no one can give
Left
The beast standing
Alone
Knowing his pedestal
Was too high for her to hold
Refusing pieces of him
Still unable to stop the act that
Molded,
This clan of defectives

Refusing to recognize that
That in which his dick created
He suffered
Tormented in her evening absence
Past her punishment onto
Us
Onto me
Onto the nothing
That something could not acknowledge
Onto a one, a four and a five
Misunderstanding the malevolence
His lone hand decided and created

He had his way of painting,
Feign smirks of acceptance
Twisted into an evil
No face should have to endure;

Eat it, he cries
and again I am
Defined by my sobbing
What I identified as a heart
throbbing
Wishing safety I couldn’t know
and conceded
Swallowing the red
Whole
While I was in pieces
A gag
A scream
Silent, but watched
It came back
Smiling.
The red
I stare
He whispers
and I put it back
Burning the throat
that broke me.
My Aunt Jill
Valerie Gauthier

my aunt Jill
is a fox
is a pair of socks in a hurricane
is a baby's first breath
is a woman stabbed by her husband in Brentwood.

my aunt Jill
is the Hollywood Walk of Fame
is a silky rose kimono with a dragon embroidered on the back
is a yawning orange tabby cat
is a woman with one leg playing hopscotch.

my aunt Jill
is a bagel with lox
is the heart medicine you forgot to take
is the pleasure of waking up in his arms
is the gas gauge being on empty in the middle of nowhere.

my aunt Jill
is the cherry bomb that went off in your toilet
is your run-over goldfish dead outside your driveway at midnight
is the three card monte game you won on Hollywood and Vine
is the man your man left you for that day in your picture perfect suburban home.

my aunt Jill
is your aunt Jill
is Mrs. Death whispering like a lost lover over your left shoulder
smelling like night blooming jasmine
is a clown with a hatchet behind its back
is your cat's innocent eyes and your screaming and the thought of the veterinarian's office looming now.
Riding on the bus, I look at the grayness of the place. I ride this bus everyday, every single day. There is wetness, a sort of soggy moisture that clings to the seats and to the passengers. My friend had compared it to the rain forest, without the luster. This morning, I think, That is a dumb analogy. My friend isn’t with me. No one is with me.

I get off the bus and head underground. Gritty railings and grime-covered stairways line the entrance underground—a giant ant hole for humans. Sometimes it is loud and sometimes it is silent. The silent times are queer and unimaginable. The depth of the place seems to engulf all who enter and the steam and rancid stench rises up from the sewers. I wonder if there are rats in the walls.

I so desperately want to have someone see me—the feeling is crushing and weighs immensely on my back. The rancorous screeching of the brakes suddenly echoes deeply from within the hole and gusts of foul warm air thrust my hair across my face. The doors open. I step onto the train. Nowhere to sit comfortably alone. My three feet of personal space are brutally invaded. The discomfort pisses me off. I am surrounded by human life and yet everything feels so utterly lifeless. While voyeuristically glimpsing at the other passengers, I think, It is no surprise that we become so jaded. I shut my eyes and rest my head back on one of the car’s slick metallic poles.

The woman to my right stands to leave but I am in her way. I move to the right and follow suit—just like everyone else in this place. Everyone knows to move in to fill the emptiness and everyone knows when to stand. How did this happen to me? I always thought I would find some other existence here. I was told I would. But all that came was this—operational movement.

I arrived at John’s apartment in the sunset. We met on the corner and he kissed my cheek. I wished for it to have been on the mouth—his lips were always so inviting—but he never did. Never on the street. Our love was always portrayed as some sick private almost adulterous affair. I always resented him for that. Privatization never made anything meaningful or sensual—I guess he never knew. We walked up the pink steps into a barren upper-level apartment. The lack of furnishings always made it feel so bohemian.

I rested on his chest. He gently glided his hands down my naked body while I took a long drag off his cigarette. The combination of the cigarette and him soothed my mind into a lull. I clung desperately to that moment, knowing I’d eventually return to that soggy harsh chemical world. But for now I lay here, with John, and we continue.
To Prufrock
Benjamin Allocco

alfred heard the women sing
of michelangelo and things
and drowned himself in murky depths
...

there will be time, there will be time
to make the time to make the time
until the time is gone, and the time goes
greater and faster as one grows
my eyes still rise above my toes
and thin, yes, thin, alfred, I'll become,
but what if I don't make the swim
to the fish women there within
the murky depths of life's wet dream?

I too hear of michelangelo, I know
of wasting time and so
I waste my time with your song in my head
until I wake to find myself dead.

and yes, what exactly should I presume?
should I take my toast and tea slowly
and ignore the temptation of the sweet perfume?
because there will be time, there will be time
to make the time to make the time?

if I never get so thin and weak
if I wake before it, with no human voice, just chance
shall I miss the time for my romance?
and what waits on the other side?
and where will go the things I hide?
I have talked of michelangelo
and wasted time to waste my time.

my arms are strong and my hair is thick
but nobody notices it.
I have not known the other arms
other than by sight alone, ah, alone.
alone is how I wake at home.

and why couldn’t you let it go?

yes, roll it in a ball and throw,
loose the truth from your aging bow
and tell her what you had to say
your hair will thin out anyway.

alfred, is there really time at all
to wait to carve your name on the wall?
but someday that too will age and thin
and wash beneath the white capped waves
until all the marks that once were made
are gone, as gone as michelangelo.

should we sit and contemplate
and think and talk and formulate
while the water rises higher still?
since I once suckled my own thumb
I have waited for the time to make the time
and the time has never come.

I am young but hear the darkman call,
alfred, there’s really not much time at all.
Can't Find A Better Man
Shelby Matthews

You get up, scratch your head, and slide your toes into the orthopedic slippers she bought you last Christmas. She lies next to you. Your eyes explore her body. You brush your teeth, comb your hair, and put on that suit she says makes you look like James Bond. She remains still, cuddled around the empty bed where blankets have formed the silhouette of a stranger. You stand beside her and watch her hair fall upon her face. She feels your presence. She waits for your car to start before opening her eyes. Her body aches, she stretches. Her lips, chapped from the cold chill of your kiss, bleed from the arid room. I lie at the end of the bed and watch her. She’s happy when you are gone because you’re a constant reminder of everything she questions in life.

The aroma of coffee lingers into the room, enticing her towards the kitchen. I jump off the bed and follow behind her. She picks up the New York Times. The date reads February 18th, your four-year anniversary, you forgot. A tear falls in the coffee before the cup reaches her lips. She swallows her sorrows. I inch closer to her and rub my nose on her warm leg. She giggles and scratches the tender spots behind my ears. You left your cell phone on the counter and it vibrates. She drowns out the noise and allows your voice message to record the woman’s request. She knows who is calling you. She’s not as naive as you would have hoped. Behind her, the picture of you and her from your brother’s wedding, falls from the refrigerator. Your phone beeps three times indicating a new voice message. She picks up the picture and throws it in the trash.

It’s nine o’clock and we go for our daily walk before she goes to the office. The snow falls from the trees in clumps indenting the snow. She walks briskly behind me and I slow down to allow her to catch up. You never know where these walks lead to because she never tells you. It’s a sad story of a woman who watches her love leave early for work every morning, just in time for him to see his friend open her eyes. You’re foolish and leave your car out front for all to see. She turns the volume louder on her headphones and allows Don Henley’s voice to do the rest. She always stops in front of your friend’s house in hopes that you’ll see her and I walking outside.

We get home, she strips out of her cold clothes and dresses for work. I sit in front of the furnace and eat the meal she prepared for me. Before leaving, she kisses me on my nose. I lick her cheek. I hop onto the wicker chair that sits beside the window. She gets into her car. Her face looks very long and tired. She stares at the steering wheel for a while before backing out of the driveway. She waves to me in the window before driving out of sight.

You come home around noon and your friend follows you in. You grab your cell phone off the counter and put it in your bag. She whispers in your ear and you grab her waist. She unbuttons your shirt and throws it on the chair. Her skirt is pulled up past her thigh. You are aggressive with her. You gather her in your arms and bring her into the bedroom. At least you had the decency to shut the door. When the door opens you stagger out wearing nothing but the bedroom sheet. I hear her laugh from within, calling your name. You respond back to her, saying you’ll do anything for your Sandy. You keep this promise too, doing everything she orders you to do. Like a drug, she seeps into your mind filling you
with the ecstasy your girlfriend never provided for you. I sit in the shadows and witness the affair, as I have many times before. *Her* voice is loud and high pitched, demanding. You fall victim to *her* tricks.

You get up and quickly dress. You fix the sheets, masking the evidence of your encounter. You ignore me and walk with your head high while *her* mascara is on your cheek. *She* lights a cigarette and you tell *her* to put it out.

“She’ll smell it,” you say.

You help *her* with *her* jacket and go out into the cold. The car is warming in the driveway and you open *her* door for *her* before getting in yourself. What a gentleman.

At seven she comes home and tosses her jacket onto the couch. She goes to the sink and washes her hands repeatedly before taking off her shoes. Her body collapses upon the sofa. She keeps the lights off and stares into the empty fireplace. You haven’t come home yet. I predict you are still with *her*. She doesn’t bother calling you because she’s sick of the lies you manage to conjure up. She’s become comfortably numb to your neglect.

She gets up and strips into her bathrobe. I hear the water in the tub rise; steam pours out of the room. She leaves the door ajar just enough for me to fit my nose in between the crack and push it open. She sits in a pool of fog, splashing the water with her toes. She scrubs hard, washing away the stress of the day. She ducks her head underneath the water and remains there for minutes before coming up for air. She gets up and dries herself off with the towel. She puts on your sweatpants and t-shirt and I sit next to her on the couch. She grabs the remote and turns on the television. There’s a box of crackers on the table and she hands me a handful. A flash comes upon the television screen and a man in a dark suit clears his throat while combing the few strains of hair he has, into place.

“Special News Bulletin,” the man said. “A stabbing occurred earlier this evening in Monroe Country. The victim, thirty four year old *Sandra O’Donnell*, was allegedly in *her* kitchen when the introducer came in through the garage door. *O’Donnell* was unable to defend *herself* from the attacker and suffered nine stab wounds to *her* chest and stomach. Police received an anonymous telephone call from a nearby payphone, informing them of the accident at 6:55 this evening. *O’Donnell* was pronounced dead when police arrived at the scene. There have been no leads or official suspects regarding this incident; however police are issuing a full investigation into the matter.”

The light off the television screen casts a shadow over her face. She turns to me and shrugs, humored by the broadcast. Her eyes are dark and powerful. She smiles, which is odd because I have not seen her happy in a long time.

“See buddy,” she says. “It doesn’t take too much energy to get rid of life’s little problems.” She looks up at the ceiling. “Poof, gone.” Her fingers make designs in the air.

She brushes my hair with her fingertips, massaging my neck and spine. In the driveway, I see your car pull up. The door opens and you walk in. She gets up and you wrap your hands around her, squeezing her tight. She lifts her head from your shoulder and kisses the bottom of your ear.
“I love you,” she says, dissecting your soul with her eyes. She stands before you a child, begging for affection. Her hand rests on your belt line. She pulls you close to her. “I’m never going to let you go.”

You kiss her, turned on by the dedication in her voice. Together, you walk upstairs and shut the door. You do to her as you did to your friend earlier in the day.

She sits at the edge of the bed and watches as you brush your teeth. Her eyes are glassy and shimmer in the dim lighted bedroom. You turn and wink at her. You approach her and lay her down on the bed. You climb on top of her, kissing her deeply. She kisses you back. You pull away and she leans in yearning for more. You turn around and click the buttons to set your alarm. She remains still. You pull the covers up and slide yourself in. She goes to the bathroom and shuts the door. The water runs and she cries. You lay still when she emerges from the bathroom. She puts on her happy face as she kisses goodnight telling you she loves you.

Tonight is not different from other nights. She sits in the darkness and rubs my head with her feet. You’re fast asleep, exhausted from the burden of living two lives. She looks out the window and watches the clouds drift over the moon. On the nightstand rests your cell phone.

“She won’t be calling you tonight,” she whispers into the empty room.