



**INSCAPE 2010**

# **INSCAPE**

## **2010**

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*Inscape* is the Pasadena City College student literary magazine. It appears once a year in the spring. PCC students serve as the magazine's editors; editors market the magazine, review submissions, and design its layout.

All PCC students—full or part-time—are invited to submit their creative writing and art to the magazine's faculty advisor, Christopher McCabe. Submission guidelines and information regarding *Inscape* editorial positions are available in the English Division office in C245.

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## PREFACE

There used to be a time when writing literature was a glamorous profession. Receding hairline or not, write a decent piece of work, and you could propose to the likes of Marilyn Monroe and she would say yes; it put money in your pocket, kept your belly full of bourbon and vegetables and all other writerly, alimentary necessities. It's different now. Less glamorous, less lucrative, more likely to leave writers in their underpants at 3 a.m. in the morning scraping mold off an old block of cheese to salvage what can be salvaged – doing so to ignore what waited in the other room – that blank page, that blinking cursor, that unheld pen, that stack of bills.

In this advanced age, people have become desensitized to the average tale of human struggle – most of them have been told, and told well. There's also the fortunate-but-unfortunate fact that pretty words and pretty pictures are commonplace in the ever-expanding blogosphere; it's no mystery then, that persuading the new readership to throw money at the printed word is difficult, nearly impossible in a flailing economy. It is no longer enough to simply move hearts and coax laughter. Writers today must successfully titillate all the *internal* senses; they must tear viscera and claim brain matter; most importantly, they must do so with truth – personal truth found at the quiet, cliff-side edge of insanity. The old-school literati in their publishing houses and turtle-shell glasses are doing their best in this fight, but it seems like a losing battle, and literary magazines are going the way of the emu. There are no more Humbert Humberts, no more Raskolnikovs, no more Petit Prince.

So the question then is – why write? If there is no room for literature in this forward-marching world, why do it? If everything has been told, what's to tell? Why become a writer?

Oddly enough, the answer is easy. It's not a choice. It's a distinct lack of options. Ask any writer and they'll tell you. They've considered the sensible bank job. The nine-to-five. Some may have even tried out that life. But the compass always points North – and then they're back at it. It's in their blood, their loins, their hands, their deoxyribonucleic acids. Writers are not writers because they write. Writers write because they are writers. *Writer* is not a profession; it is a scientific sub-species of human being.

The magazine, *Inscape*, we call it, that you hold in your hands, dear reader, is a collection from the best of this endangered species; the editors are proud to delay their extinction with this publication, and they thank you for doing the same.





## Towers of Ambition

Mathew Jackson

We see the paths before us,  
The pieces we sought to control,  
Asking if our cause is just,  
Wanting diamond but seeing coal,  
Towers upon which our ambition is built,  
Start to tumble from the weight of our guilt,  
All that is left is the pieces of old,  
The weight of the truths cause all men to fold  
You thrash about, cursing your luck,  
When he turns to you and shouts "Jenga you fuck!"



# Flat Tires

AWARD WINNER

NF

J. L. Tindage

I met R at the height of my teenage rebellion, not the kind of rebellion that had me skipping school, talking back or smoking pot, just the kind that had me secretly cursing my parents and dating behind their back.

R was a boy who fascinated me. At the time, he had a head full of black hair; I had a face full of acne. He was a water polo player who had poor grades and quoted Dickens and Shakespeare — a true romantic; I was in the orchestra, top ten of my class and taking accounting class — a true realist.

When my parents finally found out I had a boyfriend, they called me into their bedroom late one night. Ma was sitting against the headboard, her legs under the covers; Pa sat cross-legged on the left side, pretending to be relaxed. Lights were dimmed in the room, but I could clearly see the pursed lips on my mother's face. I put myself at the edge of their bed, closer to Ma, with one leg hanging over the bed frame, as if ready to bolt. The bed smelled like baby lotion, because my younger sister, Fish, liked to lather herself with Johnson & Johnson lotion then roll around in my parents' blanket.

“You should have many boy friends, not just one.” That was my father's way of saying, no dating. He thought he was funny. “When you turn eighteen, date a few boys at a time. At twenty, find a good boyfriend so you can get married around twenty-five. If you don't have one by twenty-eight, I'll help you find one. If you're passed thirty and no boyfriend, then I will be worried.” I looked at him expressionless.

Satisfied by my silence, Pa went on to tell me that I shouldn't date someone who had worse grades than I did, who did not speak Chinese, and was from a divorced family. Marrying someone from a divorced family is hard, he said. Their kids usually don't grow up right.

Ironically, six years later, Ma filed for divorce, but R and I were still together. By then, he had lost half of his hair, and I had lost most of my acne. He no longer played water polo and I no longer played the violin; he picked up a practical major – aviation business; I picked up a useless major, history. My parents were still not fond of him, but no one mentioned breaking up anymore.

Regarding the divorce, Ma explained that it was time for her to go because I was graduating college and Fish was turning 18 in 10 months. We were grown up, and she was fed up with her marriage.

According to Ma, the week before my spring break, she and her girlfriends took a trip to San Diego. On the way home, the right front tire of her car popped and she nearly lost control of the car. She managed to steer it to the side, and with the help of her friends, changed the tire. To make matters worse, my father was home the week before the flat tire incident. He was working in Taiwan most of the time, but he took a break every three months to spend a week here in LA with us. Ma, who worked, asked him to take the car in for maintenance and he declined, claiming that he wanted to rest and it was her responsibility since she drove the car. All he had was a week at home and he did not want to spend it running errands.

I couldn't believe she was divorcing her husband of twenty-three years over a flat tire. But she said the tire was just a catalyst. He was never there, always a new job on a different continent. She realized she didn't need him, nor wanted to take care of him anymore.

"What about marriage counseling?" I asked her when I got home from school.

"No amount of counseling will change a fifty-year-old man."

"But you haven't even tried," I said.

“I’ve known him for over twenty-five years. He won’t change,” she insisted.

It took a full week for the news to circulate to my uncle who told his sister who told her mother (my grandmother) who finally told my father. It was then I got a call from him.

“J,” he said, “I am at the Taipei International Airport. I should arrive in fourteen hours. I don’t know what happened. Do you know what happened? I don’t cheat, I don’t drink, I don’t smoke, I don’t gamble. I work hard to provide a house and food on the table. I don’t know what happened.” I sat down with my backpack at the entrance of my apartment building, and assured him I would be home to have dinner with him after he got off the plane.

I had just found my keys when the phone rang again. This time, it was my mother. I sat back down and picked up. “Precious, I am at the airport. I hear your father’s coming home tonight, so I am going to leave for Taiwan.”

So my father came home that night, and my mother left.

He was a mess. He cried. He got angry. He tried everything to win her back – he called her, emailed her, and wrote the story of how they met and published it on a website. She asked her sister to tell him it was irritating and embarrassing. Then my uncle served him the divorce papers, which he tucked into a bookshelf, unsigned. After a few months, my dad took another job and left for Hong Kong. My mother was right. He did not change, at least not immediately.

Then it was just me and Fish.

After I graduated in June of 2004, Fish decided she needed to get out for a while. So she took a high school exit exam, finished high school a year



early, and applied for study abroad. In Spring of 2005, she hopped on a Japan Airline plane and took off for Tokyo.

Then it was just me.

During the four months of Fish's absence, not wanting to be alone, I spent most of my time with R and his family. Soon, he had an extra toothbrush at my place and mine at his, then my Sherlock Holmes at his house and his Star Trek DVDs at mine. He always put his size twelve tennis shoes by my size six shoes. He remarked that my shoe size was exactly half of his.

Then on August 5, 2005, just two weeks before Fish came home, R took me to Vegas and proposed. Despite the fact that both of our parents were incapable of maintaining their marriages, I said yes.

When my friend called to congratulate, she asked, "You said yes? Even though your parents are divorced, his parents are divorced, and a handful of people we know have had an affair?" Her words planted a seed of doubt in my mind. "I'll have a pre-nuptial," I told her. I brought the idea to R, who agreed. I added, "It's not because I don't love you or trust you."

"I know. It's just a precaution." I was glad he understood.

Two weeks later, Fish came home. I couldn't wait to show her my ring. I called her for dinner, but instead, she said, "Jie (sister), can I borrow your car? I want to go visit Mason." Mason was our cousin who just started his first year at Occidental College.

"Why don't you take Dino?" Dino, our dark green Previa from antiquity.

"I can't find the spare keys."

I agreed, but before I let her go, I made one request, "I have clothes in the washer. Can you put them into the dryer for me before you go?"

She stammered, “I already left.”

“You mean you took the car before you got my permission?”

I narrowed my eyes (not that she could see). Images of my mother’s parenting books came to mind as I ransacked my brain for the appropriate response. Finally, I said, “That’s fine. Just be careful.”

That was around nine o’clock.

At 11:59, I received another call from Fish. I could hear the cars zoom by on the freeway. Her voice sounded distant, “Jie. Can you come get me? One of your tires blew.” I took in a deep breath. I had just taken my car in for maintenance that same morning, spending \$350.00.

As I fumed, Fish’s voice continued to drone through the receiver. “No, I don’t know where I am. I think I am on the 2 Freeway... wait, I think I already got onto the 5. I can see the sign for something stadium behind me.” I rolled my eyes. How was I supposed to know where she was? But with those few leads, R deduced that she was on the 5 south, just past the 2 Freeway.

I called AAA and bid him good night, but instead, he took the keys from my hand, saying he would accompany me. I grew up in a family of two girls; Fish and I were accustomed to depending on just each other; we didn’t need knights in shining armor. I habitually tugged on his shirt. “Are you sure you don’t mind? We have to wake up early for church tomorrow.” Shaking his head, he wrapped his hand around my fist so I wouldn’t destroy his clothes and led me to his car. There wasn’t an ounce of impatience in his movements.

By the time the AAA guy changed my tire, it was nearly one a.m. R and I followed behind Fish’s car. He drove somewhat close to her car to make sure no one would cut between us. I was grateful for his thoughtfulness for my only sister.

As we drove home on the 5 South, I got another call from my sister, “Jie, there’s a really really creepy car driving really close to me. Should I switch lanes?”

I slapped my hand on my forehead and shook my head, saying, “Dork! That’s me behind you. Everyone else is driving fast and you’re not, so we’re behind you to make sure you’re okay.”

R laughed out loud.

How I wished the night ended there. When we exited the freeway, Fish turned too fast and hit the island. I witnessed my car ricocheted to the right; the left tire blew; my suspension was ruined and cost another \$1,600.00 to fix. Fish grounded herself from driving on the freeway for two months. Eventually, I signed her up for AAA and bought her a Thomas Guide. R didn’t complain about the night’s ordeal but he did turn it into a good conversation piece.

After our wedding, R bought his new sister-in-law a GPS. He went into Fry’s and told the clerk he needed a GPS. When asked which one, R said, “It’s for a girl.” The clerk nodded and said, “I know exactly which one.” Fish rarely called us for directions after that.

Months later, Fish called me after work one day, “Jie, Dino’s not running.”

“Why?” I drew out the “y.”

“I rear ended a SUV,” she said.

“Where’s your AAA card? And what number is this you’re calling from?”

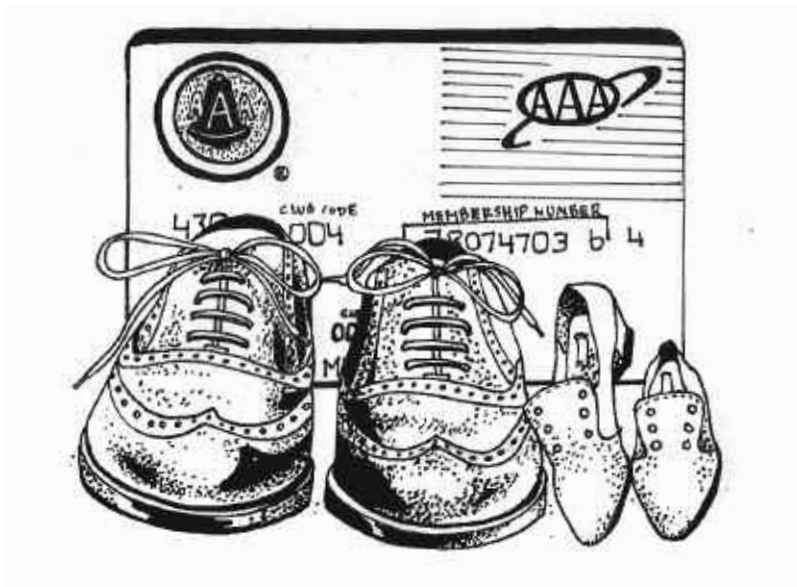
“Um . . . I don’t have the card with me. This is the phone of the couple I hit. They had a spare phone so they lent it to me. Mine is out of batteries.” I thanked God she hit some very nice people.

I drew in a deep breath. A very deep breath. By the time I hung up, R had gotten off the phone with AAA, and was waiting for me by the garage door.

“She’s not sure where she is,” I told him, but somehow he knew where she was. I cringed and said, “that’s my family. But you’re stuck now that we’re married.”

His mouth cracked into a wide smile, baring his large front teeth. He said, “I knew that before I married you. I married you in spite of them. Come on, let’s get her home.”

I nodded, armed the alarm, and walked toward him. On the way out, I walked by our shoe rack. His big black dress shoes were neatly laid out; my red satin heels were sprawled on the floor, one of them was leaning on his shoe. Truth was, I never signed a pre-nuptial, because even though I didn’t marry a man who’d changed my tires, I did marry one who waits for AAA with me.





# The Many Faces of La Llorona

AWARD WINNER

P

Vibiana Aparicio-Chamberlin

The pregnant drowned woman became a Chihuatego,  
a heavenly Aztec butterfly warrior.

Her weeping voice lingers on earth,  
mourning her infant.

At the seaside border town of Tijuana, where kids are  
found lifeless at the barbed wire barrier,  
one can see a ghostly Mexican woman  
dredging the sea shore for the lost innocents.

The Los Angeles Times reported a screaming woman  
leaping into the LA river,  
flailing for her slain son whose face was a mass  
of river debris, a lone bullet and gelatinous blood clots.

Near the crossroads of Valley and Main Streets,  
in Northeast L.A., at the Lincoln Park Dance Pavilion,  
where teenagers gather on Friday nights,  
La Llorona appears as the clock strikes midnight.

La Llorona also frequents the ravine  
at La Chihuahuita barrio in East Pasadena.  
Her wind voice cries for her children, slain in  
The World Wars, The Gulf Wars and Vietnam.

One can sometimes hear her  
along the San Gabriel River, *tempranito en la mañana*,  
Her spirit haunts the place where  
aborted fetuses and umbilical cords are abandoned.

La Llorona eternally wanders.  
For her children,  
her mournful voice is heard weeping.  
Aaaaay. Aaaaay. Mis Hijos. Mis Hijos.

# A Closed Distance

F

Luis Martinez

I.

He was deeply bothered that no one ever looked at him when they addressed him. This observation was the sum total of Jack's interaction with the world; it was the thesis upon which every argument was made to him. People spoke only to reaffirm that they would not see him.

Sandy, the Landlady, was chastising his ear over the telephone. Jack stared at his wall. Sandy the Landlady lived right next door. She was just on the other side of that slim press of sheetrock and plaster that drew the line between unit 200 and unit 201. Still, she always called for the check. She spoke of the three-day window in which she had been consistently made to wait for his rent check. She spoke of the noise his birds made. She spoke of his poorly attended flower box, what with the marigolds and the daises leaning over so.

“...and if you're going to have a planter on your windowsill, that's fine, so long as you tend to it. Marigolds need proper drainage...”

“You know an awful lot about flowers.”

“Excuse me. This isn't about the flowers. I need your check on time, Mr. Hackney.”

Jack paused at the addition of a title added to his name. He was finding adulthood to be so formal.

“Maybe you could help me set up my planter one Sunday?”

“That wouldn't be right, Mr. Hackney.”

No, I didn't mean...just to help me with my planter...”

“Just try to be on time with the rent check, please, Mr. Hackney.”

Sandy hung up the phone. Jack sat in his one chair, a slim wooden chair, painted black. He thought of how kind she was. She was, after all, fairly patient. He thought about his chair. He played with an envelope in his left hand and surrendered the telephone receiver with his right. He looked at a prescription bottle where it sat next to an empty plastic cup on a small round dinner table, painted the same universal, complimentary black as his chair.

“I didn’t mean to,” he huffed, “how could I?” He scorned the half empty bottle.

“They’re birds. They’re goddamned birds!” He sat for a moment and tried to breathe on his own.

“I’m sorry. I said I was sorry. Well . . . I said!” He crutched his head into his arm and stood it on the table. He let go and hunched over his knees, panting. He grabbed the lip of the table with his left hand. He held it for a moment and tried to picture himself letting it go and just sitting in his chair, like a normal person. He tried to picture himself staying there, hunched over his knees, like he was. He grabbed the table and turned it swiftly into the floor. It flopped with a relatively quiet violence across the cool white tile of the kitchen half of his studio apartment. He buried his face into his hands until he felt his head push back at him and muffled a scream into his palms. In his mind the table kept on with boundless and perpetual momentum like a great wooden flat black flipping coin.

He walked to where his pills had fallen in the corner of the room, solved the cheap riddle of the childproof cap, and ate two for good measure.

. . . . .



At the bus stop, Jack stared at himself in the reflection off of a pane of glass, over an advertisement on the display next to the bench. He liked his new canvas coat, but he felt as if his sweater vest altered somehow the rhythm of his breath. He thought it was very cool but, looking up at his face in the reflection, he could sense that somewhere the irony of vintage clothing on a young man was becoming blurred. Still, it was hip and beautifully crafted of a golden yellow weave of tightly wound wool. It smelled vaguely of a steam cleaned sofa cushion, like most thrift store finds did. He wore a nice, black khaki button-up underneath it suggesting that he had had a tie on at some point, but was done working for the day. He gave himself a smile.

When his bus arrived, he hopped up onto the platform, a touch empowered by his confidence in his very cool new sweater vest. He stood there on the platform with a fistful of change, the exact fare of eighty-five cents. The driver, "Sam" it said on his uniform, had charged this amount since Jack had begun taking the bus about a year ago.

Time flies, Jack thought. His lips parted silently making the motions of the words. Jack missed driving.

"Fare please, sir." Sam looked straight ahead.

He dropped his coins into the automatic registrar and the little stub stuck out at him.

"Ten cents extra for a transfer."

Jack dropped another dime from his left hand into the box.

Sam looked straight ahead.

In his seat at the rear of the bus, Jack patted his front coat pocket to make sure he had dropped off his rent check. He heard the rustle of paper and reached inside.

“Oh right,” he whispered aside. There were several items of mail which had been delivered to Sandy the Landlady. Landy, the sand lady. Sandly the. . . Jack wiped his face heavily with his free hand.

“Shhh,” he whispered aside. He unfolded another letter from Deirdre.

My Dearest Jacky. . .

“I understand. I get it! I know. I. . .” A woman seated in front of Jack looked back uneasily.

. . . There was a time when my hope for us was greater than my fears.

Jack clunked his head against the bus window. All the letters went much like the very first one since she had started writing several months back.

. . . You were the love of my life, Jacky. Maybe you always will be. I know that you must think me callous, that you must think me cold. Please don't think that our life together, all those years, were not as truly precious to me as they were to you. . .

“I'm sorry. They're just birds. . .”

. . . I'm scared Jacky. I don't know how to reach you. I don't understand this. If it were cancer or. . .

“I have my goddamned check! I have the goddamned rent check! I'm not planting the. . . planter box!” His head shook from side to side. Heads started turning 'round. People inched away, as far as their seats would allow.

Jack found his pills in his left hand pocket. He took three. He looked outside. The bus was turning onto Santa Monica off of Western coming up to his stop. Outside he could see a line of people a half mile long outside

the cemetery with picnic baskets and rolled up blankets, countless couples holding hands, looking at one another, touching one another.

Cars lined Santa Monica waiting to be ushered into the lot. They were doing Hitchcock tonight. He screwed the lid back on his pills and stuffed them back into his pocket.

## II.

Her tongue played with her front row of teeth, feeling for the wine; a little cartoon villain in her smirked. One thousand was the magic number Jess had determined to be there with them in the cemetery. Angie, Jess and Carl.

Uff, Carl, she thought. Angie couldn't believe she had brought Carl. Carl was her nice friend, practically a eunuch. What a joy kill. Angie, Jess and Carl sat in a large stretch of grass at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery with one thousand sexy, electric dreamers from all over the country. In Angie's three months here, so far, she hadn't met one person in L.A. who was from L.A. She knew there were natives. Outside, they sold bundles of flowers or directed fashionably efficient smart cars into parking spots along a road which wound gracefully around the lot, waving in the jet set like so many airplanes with their chrome flashlights and orange smocks. Inside, heart-land refugees like Angie laid out blankets, unfolded collapsible chairs and cracked the foil wrappers off the tops of wine bottles. In just under an hour, Hitchcock would make his cameo, by proxy, to the land of the living when Rear Window would be projected onto the wall of an enormous crypt to the delight of one thousand film buffs. Angie tipped a bottle towards her cup until she felt a cool stream of merlot run over her index finger. Her lips pursed with delight.

“Did you get that link I forwarded to you? The one from Feed The...”

Angie nodded. A drop of wine fell over her lip. mmm. She looked straight ahead. Jess was, to her, the last leg of Christianity in Hollywood.

“Carl pledged sixty dollars a month!”

“Ooh, Carl. You sexy bitch.”

Carl didn't react. He just shrugged his usual embarrassed shrug. Carl never said anything to anybody but Jess. He looked at Jess and said, “I brought us all a pound cake.”

Jess and Angie dived in. It was light and heavenly. The crowd was growing larger by the minute as the sunset approached. The cake was enormous, decadent. The sound guys had finished hooking up a number of custom outdoor speakers, set up high on slim, black tripods and a guest D.J. began to host a pre-show musical climate of contradiction starting off with one of those nameless Led Zeppelin events followed by a very hip juxtaposition of some Sinatra. A small group of people settled down in an open patch of lawn behind them. The hum of thousands of conversations overlapping one another sat just under the melody of “Luck Be A Lady” and Angie played with a fold in her dress. She puffed her bangs out of her eyes with a short, hard breath.

“I love pound cake.” Jess tucked her bottom lip under her overbite, looking up at Carl. Angie rolled her eyes and let her head fall over her right shoulder to the group that had sat behind them. What she saw felt like the image in one of those mirrors they sit bar tables next to, like watching your own situation comedy played out by actors. A couple of sexy girls and a nice boy filled some plastic cups and ate from an enormous brownie that filled out an entire pie tin. Their nice boy, though, needed a shave. He wasn't eating or drinking anything, just sitting quietly with his hands in his pockets. He was precariously cute, Angie thought, like one more day without a shower would push him over. She thought of this homeless man she

regularly passed on her way to work at the restaurant. She always thought he was just one good shave away from an apartment in Los Feliz, a fuel efficient four-cylinder: the works. Angie stared, sipping her cup, and was too slow when the boy looked up to look away. He sent her a pleasant smile. It seemed genuinely kind, if nothing else. Angie sent one back. Time was passing in that special way that wine allowed it. She put her eyes ahead, up to the crypt wall. Jimmy Stewart was already slipping off the edge of a roof. The crowd went wild. Angie grinned and felt her tongue again over her top row of teeth.

. . . . .

Angie tried to concentrate on the movie. It was otherwise such a perfect night: Jimmy Stewart in all his eternally iconic, Hollywood glory, red wine and pound cake to spare. Fuck, Jess! she thought. She just couldn't get the images from Jess' Jesus website out of her head. They had played her heartstrings something punk rock violent, kept her up for days. The infinite trail of images, the never ending sea of hunger. And her, overflowing with the fortune of her birth. She knew. Uff. The wine didn't help. She wished she could call her mom, but it was midnight in Grand Junction. She reached for her drink.

"I lost my cup!"

Jess and Carl looked away from the movie. At some point Jess had nestled herself in between Carl's legs in a very cozy, couply kind of way. Jess hadn't said anything to Angie about this before. They looked at Angie like she was drunk. Angie placed a warm hand to her own face confirming this.

"Come here, Sweety." Jess opened her arms and Angie crawled inside. She stroked Angie's hair in that singularly epic and graceful way that li-oneses care for one another.

“The movie’s almost over”

“All those babies, Jess. You’re so good.”

“Shhh!” hissed out somewhere from a neighboring party.

“Shhh!” From Jess it was kind, endearing.

Jimmy Stewart was wrestling with the killer for his camera.

“How do you do it, Jess? How do you be so good?”

Jess stroked her friend’s hair absentmindedly, eyes fixed on the movie. It was second nature to her. Secretly, Angie always admired her friend. She never finished out the party. She wore sneakers and dated nice boys. Angie always wondered how she could be so cool.

“Miss.” The boy who needed a shave walked into view.

A harsh female voice from the group Angie earlier had thought were his friends called out “what the fuck man, I can’t see!” Drunk as she was, Angie thought she saw the boy fall over the edge of attraction she had seen him walking earlier.

“I-I said I was sorry. I’m sorry,” he said, half looking back over his shoulder, although seemingly not to anyone in particular. Jess and Carl looked scared. How funny for a boy to call her “Miss,” Angie thought.

“Is this your cup? Here.”

“I can’t see!”

“I’m sorry. It was there, in the grass.” He smiled timidly. He began to whisper under his breath, “she lost her, her cup! They’re just birds. . .”

Angie could feel her friends hold a breath. She jumped up from where she was laying, over Jess and Carl’s lap, and grabbed the boy.

“Thank you!” She hugged him in the great, warm, entirely uninhibited embrace known only to small children and young women who have had too much to drink.

“Angie,” Jess whispered urgently.

“Oh.” His body jerked. The cup fell from his hand. He tried to reciprocate the hug. His hand patted her back awkwardly with fingers outstretched, and then retreated into his pocket.

Angie held on. She touched his face. In her arms, he seemed to her like a man walking on the moon. At the closed distance he had very tired, heavy looking eyes. They seemed to add thousands of years to his young face. Sometimes they flinched. His face as a whole seemed to float in and out of contrasting expressions, only holding steady for brief moments when he spoke.

“Hi,” she said, “you’re crying.” Angie played innocently with her words, reduced by her merlot to a schoolgirl’s naïveté. She looked up into his eyes and felt her buzz begin to float off of her. She still felt warm. She wanted to kiss him. He leaned way, like he could hear her desire. He really does need a shave, she thought. She held him a moment past what dulled intuition told her was a little too long. A slightly sober type of clarity fell over her and she didn’t want to kiss him anymore. She just wanted to hold him and stroke his hair. She felt Jess gently but insistently tugging at her dress. She let the boy go and fell back into her friend’s arms, sobering, still high, feeling like a ship set out forever. The boy didn’t sit back down. He took his hands out of his pockets and dropped something into the grass. He hurried away from them, out of the crowd.

Jess stared after him until he fell completely out of view. She looked down at her friend. Angie thought of the way she had looked at Carl when he brought out that cake. Jess lovingly teased the drunk girl's bangs.

“See Angie. That’s all it takes.”





# Ode to the Drum

Ikia Fletcher

Rhythm of my soul  
Beat of my people

You speak to my heart in  
Mellow mahogany, easy ebony hues  
Smooth as the hide that covers your  
Curves draping over your  
Thick bones

You touch my body in  
Bright reds and greens  
Bold as the tribal paints on  
Your beautiful face  
Always ready to war with  
The soft, weak, beats of those wannabe's who  
Could never beat your rhythms

You dance with my eyes like  
Our jet-black manes dance with  
The small of our backs or  
The napes of our necks

Sexy as onyx black eyes  
Pearly white teeth pure as the  
Innocence found in the hands of  
Little ones who yearn to learn  
Your beats  
Your thunderous call-n-response

P

You called to me  
I responded  
You rest in me

You rest in my veins  
Flow through my blood  
Like the Nile  
Emptying out into the  
Rich delta of  
The motherland

Your beats will ceaselessly play  
Rhythms of words that I can  
Never speak  
Tongues that I used to know

# Juvenal

F

Andrés Reconco

I never hurt him physically, but I know that by the time Juvenal left our school I'd inflicted deep psychological scars. He arrived at our school two months after I did. Before he arrived the kids at the school had been focusing on me, taunting me with comments about my height and my torn clothes. Words like "midget," "little turd," and "little beggar" pummeled me to the ground every day. After he arrived the other kids lost their focus on me and instead focused on Juvenal who was shorter than I and, from the look of his clothes, poorer than I. Some days he wore clothes too big for him, and other days he wore clothes too small for him. The first day we saw him he wore pants that were too big. He kept them up with a black string tied like a bow that made him look like a small, delicate gift. That first day kids at the school surrounded him. He didn't know what was coming. His eyes, eyes that had not experienced shame and ridicule, still flashed tiny specks of hope for friendship and, I assume, acceptance. Someone pulled on the bow and someone else pulled his pants down. That was the first time he cried, the first time any of us heard that strange high-pitched scream. His small brown hands begged for the string while everyone around him laughed and pointed at his naked bottom. Then Miguel, who was the biggest kid of our class, punched him in the face and told him to "shut up." Even though I wasn't one of those kids who hit him I, from time to time, joined the other kids in the usual taunting and had actually authored a song that followed Juvenal for the rest of his years at our school: a Cumbia which I titled "Juvenala." The music I stole from a Cumbia that was popular at the time. It played on every radio in every house and every jukebox in every bar. I made up the lyrics to say something about Juvenal, something about how he liked boys and how he was a little girl. A line about how Juvenal was a female prostitute pretending to be a boy was my pride and joy. He hated the song and I've often wondered if he knew that

I wrote it. We sang and danced around him, grabbing his small hands, like a puppet, making him dance with one of us as we shouted, "See? He likes to dance with boys!" We never snuck up on him. We usually gathered somewhere and began singing the song as we walked toward him. When he heard us coming he stood up and waited patiently, his arms limp at his side, waiting for the taunting to end so he could get back to doing what he was doing before: digging small holes in the ground. He dug hundreds of quarter-size holes all over the playground, all about two feet away from each other, in rows. We called the holes "Juvenal's Holes." If we were sitting at our usual spot and Juvenal happened to walk by one of us began to sexually molest one of the holes on the ground. "Oh yeah, you like that, don't you? I like to touch Juvenal's holes." We laughed, but not at the irony of the situation. At ten years old we didn't understand irony yet. One rainy day my friends decided it was better to go to the beach to look at the massive waves than to go to school. My parents were strict about school and skipping class would guarantee a beating. I was alone that day and Juvenal sat in his usual spot digging his holes. The tall almond tree kept him protected from the rain. I'd been curious for a long time about the reasons for digging all the small holes and a better opportunity would be hard to come by. I walked toward him, my hands out of my pockets so he knew I carried no rocks.

"What do you want," he said, looking up at me.

"I wanna know why you dig so many damn holes. Why do you do that?"

"It's none of your business." He said.

"Why do you like to dig holes? What do you do with them?"

He didn't answer. I knew how to make him answer. I punched him in the head. He fell to the ground, bounced back and pushed me down to the floor where he proceeded to punch my sides with such force that I was

sure at the time that had a teacher not come to separate us he would have killed me. The redness in his eyes described anger I'd never seen anywhere else before, not even in the eyes of that lion at which we threw rocks at the zoo. We were taken to the principal's office. The teacher hit us with a ruler. The principal called our parents. After it was decided that I was at fault my father made me promise to be nicer to Juvenal, to help him with his homework and to go to his house to apologize to him and to his parents.

"I already apologized," I said to my father, angry at the thought of being seen at Juvenal's house.

"You'll do it again," he said, moving closer to me, keeping his eyes on mine until I had to look away.

"Yes, dad."

His house was smaller than my house. It was made entirely out of metal sheets. There was no door. In its place was a blue shower curtain decorated with cartoon ducks. I knocked on one of the walls and Juvenal's mother came out.

"Come in," she said.

His house was one big rectangular space with beds on one corner, a small place with wood for cooking and a little dining table with four chairs around it. Upon seeing me, Juvenal jumped up from where he sat playing with half an action figure and came toward me. I moved back a little.

"You don't want to be here. I don't want you to be here," he said, looking straight into my eyes. I never noticed until then the tiny brown freckles on his nose, like they'd been done with a pen in a well thought out pattern.

"I have to be here for a while," I told him, trying to sound as unfriendly as possible.

“Why don’t you take him to the corn field,” his mother said. “He can help you plant the new crop.”

“No!” he said, moving toward his mother with quick little steps. “I will not take him back there. That’s MY corn!”

“Juvenal! You will take him back there because that’s what I’m telling you to do. Do it!”

He didn’t respond. He looked down at his feet and walked out the entrance to the house.

We made our way to the back of the house where only half of the field was filled with tall corn plants while the other half was bare. He picked up a metal container with corn seeds and walked to the empty field. I followed, not sure about what to do. When we reached the empty field I recognized a pattern on the dirt, a pattern I’d seen before. The empty field was littered with Juvenal’s holes. He walked next to the holes, dropping two corn seeds inside each of the holes. Then, he used his foot to drag dirt on top of the corn. He did that on his own for some time before he turned around and asked if I wanted to help. For two hours I walked side-by-side Juvenal, planting corn seeds, watching him smile, telling me how hiding in the corn field was his favorite pastime.

“It’s like I’m inside a jungle, like an explorer and the animals are afraid of me and of what I can do. You wanna see?”

“Sure,” I said, and followed him into the field with the tall corn plants.

Inside it was just like he said. The tall corn felt like tall trees and it was easy to imagine that, for miles, the only thing visible were tall hairy trees. He yelled from somewhere inside the field of corn and said, “Hey, are you also an explorer in these woods?”

“I sure am!” I said, laughing with him.

“Where are the dangerous animals?” He asked.

“Nowhere near us,” I said.

When it was time to leave I said goodbye to him and shook his hand.

After that I stopped taunting him and only watched him from a distance. He must have known that our friendship couldn't last for he never tried to approach me at school. He never even looked at me. I liked to watch his little frame move across the schoolyard, his feet dragging a cloud of dust behind him, moving like a dust storm to a place as far away from us as possible. He was a foot shorter than any of us and his greasy straight hair hung lazily to the sides of his face. I watched him sit under the almond tree, his little hands playing with ripe almonds that lay littered underneath the tree. Occasionally he must have imagined he heard his Cumbia and he would jump up and his arms would go limp on his side, waiting for an imaginary attack that never came. When he realized that no one was in fact coming for him he went back to playing with the almonds or digging another one of his holes. In class he only spoke when the teacher called upon him and he sat in a corner, at the back of the classroom, invisible to everyone but Miguel who sat next to Juvenal punching him on the arm whenever the teacher turned his back to us to write on the board.

Juvenal endured two more years of torture at the hands of my friends. On graduation day he wore black pants that stuck to his legs and a white long-sleeve dress shirt with sleeves that only reached halfway down his forearm. Juvenal sat under the almond tree and began digging holes on the ground while our parents gathered in front of the graduation stage on the other side of the school. Miguel, upon seeing Juvenal at his usual spot, decided it would be a good idea to throw small rocks at him to try to get him to stand up and leave his so cherished spot.

“Come on,” said Miguel, “see if you can hit him from here.”

I didn't try. Instead I watched as Miguel threw small rocks that never quite reached Juvenal.

“You should stop,” I said to Miguel, as a smooth rock the size of his hand landed right next to Juvenal.

“Ok, one last one.”

I followed the path of that rock with my head as it curved into the sky and found its way right to the middle of Juvenal's forehead. Juvenal was thrown back by the impact and began to cry, like he hadn't done in a long time. His piercing cry shattered the quiet morning and when his eyes met mine he shattered something inside of me. I watched him get up and clean his swollen, unbroken forehead. He wiped his tears and continued digging his hole. He graduated with a large bump on the middle of his forehead.

“He looks like a unicorn,” Miguel said as he walked toward the graduation stage dusting his hands on his black slacks.

I stayed back. I wanted to check on something. Quietly, and without anyone noticing, I walked to one of the many holes on the playground and poked it with my finger. There, inside the earth rested a yellow corn seed. I moved to another hole and felt inside and there too was a corn seed. I must have checked over fifty holes and each one had a single grain of corn inside. I smiled and pictured the field Juvenal wanted, the jungle he desired.

I never thought about Juvenal after that. I got older, left my country and Juvenal became a blurry memory, one that sped by as I accessed thousands of memories whenever someone asked what I remembered about my country.



Yesterday my sister approached me with a statement I have heard more and more as the years have passed. “Guess who died!” I never guessed correctly but that never stopped her from asking the same question.

“Who?” I said, not even trying to guess.

“Juvenal!”

“Who?” I said, not really paying attention to the name.

“Juvenal! The kid you guys used to harass in school.”

Juvenal. I knew this Juvenal. I remembered the small kid with the freckles.

“How did he die?” I asked, hoping that it wasn’t from some stress-induced illness, one of which I was sure I would have been a direct cause.

“He was shot. Apparently it was a mugging. Poor kid.”

With that, she left the room, leaving me with a strange sadness I couldn’t understand. He wasn’t a kid anymore. He must have been in his thirties. Back then he’d just been a kid, a small kid my friends harassed on a daily basis. Why, then, was his death so apparently tragic to me? Then, it dawned on me. He wasn’t just a kid. He was, in fact, an important part of my life. He was the only friend I had at that school. He was the kid that kept the other kids from picking on me. He came in as a gift, a sacrificial lamb to protect me. Me, the smallest of all my friends, the slowest of all my friends, and the poorest of all my friends.

# Monkey See, Monkey Do

AWARD WINNER

P

Tina Johnson

Monkey See, Monkey Do  
Mah mama say mah daddy is a rollin' stone—  
just like that song:  
Papa was a rollin' stone,  
da dunt dunt.  
Wherever he lay his hat was his home,  
dunt.  
And when he died, all he left us was alone,  
Da dun.

Mah mama say mah daddy is a pure-breed dumbass  
that don't care nothin' 'bout nobody but his  
own self.

Mah daddy don't care about no rent  
nor nothin' about mah milk, neither.  
Mah daddy say mah milk ain't important  
'cause I get that for free—  
from mah mama's titty.  
And anyways,  
why should he be worried about somethin'  
that comes from nature for free.  
Mah daddy say mah mama should breast-feed  
me 'til I'm 18.  
That she should get off his back  
and stop naggin' at him.

Mah daddy say he shouldn't have to worry  
about clothes,  
'cause the church give clothes away for free.  
And he don't care 'bout no cheese, neither,  
'cause WIC give vouchers away for free, too.

All mah mama gotta do is go sign up.  
And he ain't gots ta worry his head about no doctor  
'cause they give shots away for free too—  
if you a baby or a baby mama.  
Mah daddy say, "Free for women,  
free for babies, what about free for men,  
and black men at that."

Mah daddy say, "Where's mah free job  
and where's mah free resume help  
and where's mah free bus fare to that measly old job  
where I slave in that sweaty factory  
on that dumb assembly line,  
back crackin' and givin' out,  
feet numb, hands callous—for less than minimum wage;  
the kinda money ain't good 'nuff to argue about.  
Where's free for me, huh?"

Mah mama be gettin' in mah daddy face  
and she be wavin' her finger and her head be movin'  
from side to side and mah mama be sayin',  
"Milk ain't free, boy!  
Have you ever had yo' titty bit on by a teething heffa.  
She can't be suckin' on me past five.  
And that's really old, you old dumbass."

Then mah daddy be ballin' up his fist  
and he be havin' this mean look on his face  
and he be tryin' hard not to hit her.

Then he just be slappin' her hand out his face  
and he be punchin' the wall real hard  
on his way out the door.

Then mah mama told me I ain't seen nothin' yet—  
just wait 'til I get bigger.  
Cause when mah string broke on mah yo-yo  
and I start cryin', mah mama yelled at me and she said,  
“Stop all that cryin' you ol' cry baby.  
That ain't even nothin' ta cry about, it's just a  
freakin' toy.”

Then mah mama say, “Yo' daddy just a child  
in men's clothin'—he just want everything for free.  
Things don't come for free in this here world,  
you feel me.” Then mah mama sat on her bed  
and cried in her hands.

Then I told mah mama, “Stop all that cryin',  
you ol' cry baby. He ain't even nothin' to cry about.  
He just a freakin' dumbass.”  
And mah mama slapped me hard in mah face.



# October Is the Cruellest Month

NF

W.R. Kloezeaman

“what’s thought can be dispensed with  
Till the refusal propagates a fear.”  
– T.S. Eliot, *Gerontion*

**M**y first three years of college were a beautiful lie. I had lost the excess weight that had made me an outcast in my hometown. (Hell, I was thin.) No one from my high school had followed me to Cal State LA, so my secret identity seemed safe. I looked normal and thought that if I played along then everything would fall into place, as if nothing had ever happened. I convinced myself so completely of this that I was unprepared for the consequences of self-realization.

The first time a girl propositioned me (a very pretty girl) I was terrified, and knew that I could never be “normal.” I realized that no matter how hard I tried, I was never going to have the life that I so dearly wanted. The intense, unfocused self-loathing of my younger self returned, and I began to suffer crippling panic attacks. Any and every thing could set them off. Pigeons amid palm seeds in a Highland Park gutter was one of the worst triggers. It was some quality of how the seeds rolled when the pigeons kicked them, combined with the light, the heat, and the dust. Soon, it became harder and harder to function normally, or even function at all.

I often went to school, got off the bus, immediately had a panic attack and took the very next bus back home. I skipped my finals, failed all my classes, and didn’t give a damn about it. At my worst, I lived for a week on nothing more than creamed corn because I couldn’t bear to leave the house even to buy food. Whenever hunger broke through the intense grieving, I would slop some in a pan and cook it down to a thick gruel. I spent my evenings crying out to the nothingness for nothingness, begging to be made “dumb, numb and normal.”

In late January 2001, I explained myself to my parents and asked for help. That night I wandered the streets of Pasadena, afraid of what might happen if I had stayed home. I greeted the morning with coffee and a germ of determination at the Winchell's Donuts on South Lake Ave.

After that, the mere anticipation of action made things gradually get better. We found a psychiatrist who prescribed Klonopin and Clonazepam, both Benzodiazepines for anxiety. They seemed to help, perhaps if only psychosomatically, but the Clonazepam caused occasional black-outs. I have no memory of the Thanksgiving of 2001, but I'm told that I fell into some bushes and then passed out. So they eventually took me off that particular drug.

In March 2001, on the psychiatrist's advice, I got a part-time job at a pet shop on Fair Oaks Ave. It was a good fit; animals are very comforting to care for (when they're not biting, stinging or pinching you.) Eventually I felt stable enough to attempt school again. I took it slowly, a class or two at a time. When I had time to kill between classes, I would go up to the roof of King Hall, where most English classes at Cal State LA are held. I often looked north toward a far hill, to the water tower, to home, then duck under the walkway railing, right to the edge and have no thought other than "it's not high enough." I began to understand Mrs. Dalloway's "feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day."

I sought a new psychiatrist, who spoke to me for ten minutes, issued a prescription for Bupropion, generic for Wellbutrin, and handed me a workbook to fill out. After this "thorough" initial session, I took the elevator to the roof (which really shouldn't be casually accessible in a building that houses psychiatrists), walked to the edge, threw the workbook into open space (normally, I would never litter) and again concluded that this particular building was "not high enough." After that, I gave up on psychiatrists.

"I would meet you upon this honestly.  
I that was near your heart was removed therefrom  
To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.  
I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it  
Since what is kept must be adulterated?"  
– T.S. Eliot, *Gerontion*

In the spring of 2003, a certain person (whose name is not to be spoken, and hereafter will be labeled X) and I planned a trip to Europe: London to Budapest (she's Hungarian) and back again in six weeks. Just the distraction of planning was welcome relief from the panic attacks that continued to consume me. I gave notice at my job and made arrangements for the care of my dog. I busied about getting my passport and deciding what cities were "must see." We bought massive backpacks, plane tickets, Eurail and Britrail passes. We debated whether to take up smoking and in general act like Eurotrash, and whether or not to sew Canadian flags on our backpacks so as not to be known for Americans. Since it was shortly after the start of the war in Iraq, we were subtly aware of the potential dangers of traveling abroad. But we both, for different reasons, felt the need to go.

For me, it was a chance to dial down to zero and start the clock over. I felt that if I could survive six weeks, sans-meds, in hostel-hopping circumstances, I would know that I could do anything. For X (I realized later), it was a final test of our friendship: a test that I spectacularly failed.

We flew out on 14 July, so that we could spend her birthday (the 15th) in London. We spent it, instead, in New York City, on lay-over until late that evening. Even though I have dreamed all my life of seeing London, I was quietly thrilled to spend more than flight-switching time in New York. We managed Central Park and Times Square and an inconvenience of the subway system that was handled far better than the LA Metro could ever muster, then flurried into JFK just in time to miraculously be bumped up to business-class.

The flight was pleasant enough, except when the stewardesses seemed to think I was trying to blow up the plane every time I reached under the seat to get a new CD. Circling down toward Heathrow gives one an impression of the island as an immense, perfectly manicured backyard garden: order made manifest, and self-watering as well. It seemed the ideal place to start my mental life over.

I enjoyed London on my own; X slept. I rode the London Underground alone and reveled in the speed and efficiency of switching trains. A sense of self-confidence and assertiveness began to emerge; I felt that I had the bare skeleton of a valid personality for the first time.

We left London from Waterloo Station through the Chunnel to Amsterdam. This was the city I most wanted to see. Being of such obvious Dutch ancestry, I hoped to find a focus for myself along its streets and canals. Because I was often taken for native to the city, and biking along the Amstel seemed so natural, I had, for the first time, a hint of the “peace that passeth understanding.”

Next was Berlin (my choice), but I found it the most intensely sad city I had ever been in. To walk its streets is to tread on the largest blue-black bruise on the face of the planet. It was a great relief to move on to Munich. We spent days in the city beerhalls and retreated nights to a converted castle hostel, which lacked hot water and was rife with German school children certain to burst in upon your fleeting nakedness and hurl your clothes to the wet floor.

After Munich, things got very, very tense. We moved on to Basel, Switzerland, where X had an uncle. We stayed with him and his two stinky but lovable Dachshunds, spending evenings with her cousin and her cousin’s fiancée. Our last night in Basel we went bowling, then fought bitterly that night, fueled by tiny pin-shaped, Strike-maker bottles of fig-flavored liquor. Her uncle finally stopped us, fearing we would violate the strict Swiss noise laws.



The next morning, on a train to Italy, we gestured more than spoke. We stayed in a collection of five small towns (Cinque Terre) along the Italian coast just south of Genoa. There were no hostels, so at first we slept on beach rocks and then rented an upper room of a private house. The following day, we teamed up with two other Americans and rented a tiny house. This gave X the opportunity to ignore me and I was relegated to the dungeon of the downstairs kitchen to sleep on what must have once been a church pew. The day before our last in Italy, I hiked alone from town to town, returning late in the evening. We four had dinner on the upstairs porch, where X and I had a slow-motion fight of jibes and half-veiled insults. I left the table early and soon overheard her tell two total strangers that if she were me, she would kill herself. The next day I found a note on my pew suggesting we part company and travel alone. There was some talk of meeting up in Budapest, but I knew it was basically over. She went on to Rome with her two new best friends; I preferred going north, to recuperate. The alpine city of Interlaken, Switzerland sounded perfect, and it was. High in the Alps, at the base of the Jüingfrau, I found a sense of peace even greater than that in Amsterdam.

After the parting, I just tried to make the best of what time I had left in Europe. I returned to Munich, visited museums and spent my afternoons at the Hofbrauhaus amid oompah bands and pig-tailed, Heidi-skirted waitresses. I made the journey to Budapest but, as I had expected, there was to be no reconciliation. Neither of us wanted anything to do with the other ever again. Luckily my High School German got me by. I again found peace wandering Budapest's paprika strewn markets, marveling at its prickly brown skyline from atop Buda Hill, feeding pepperoni to stray kittens in the park, and taking in the sublime creepiness of the Communist Statue Park. After my week in Budapest, it was two days fast-tracking across the continent to Calais, a ferry to Dover, a train to Waterloo, and the Underground to Heathrow.

I returned from Europe fully face-bearded and generally disheveled. Every Hare Krishna at LAX stopped me, because I “looked like a student.” I had to explain that I was “sorry, but I have only enough for a phone call and already have a copy of the Bhagavad-gita that I gave one of you guys five dollars for several years ago.” I trimmed the face-beard down to a connected goatee and kept it as a memento mori. After a year, I ritualistically shaved it off; I immediately regretted doing so, given how many chins it had been masking.

In the fall of 2003, I returned to Cal State LA and took just one class (Modern Poetry), to see if I could still hack this school thing. I arranged with their health office to continue my prescription for Bupropion. I focused solely on staying sane and finishing my degree, which I finally received in March 2005.

“I cannot hope to turn again  
Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something  
Upon which to rejoice.”  
– T.S. Eliot, *Ash-Wednesday*

On my twenty-fifth birthday, 20 May 2005, I lost coverage under my parents’ health insurance. Eventually, the pills ran out, and I was faced with a decision. I could either find a way to reproduce the affect of the drugs with pure willpower, or I could slowly let this thing kill me. I distinctly remember making this decision: at a bus bench on Valley Blvd below Cal State LA in the intense summer sun, after learning that the school wouldn’t cover the cost of continuing my prescription.

“One tablet, by mouth, twice daily” became multi-vitamins and “don’t you dare freak out.” I looked for a way to control my anxiety sans pharmaceuticals, and naturally, being an English major, turned to literature.

I considered the mystical inaction of the Bhagavad-gita (“he should fix for himself a firm seat in a pure place.”) I tried to lose myself in the ecstatic

dervish of Rumi's poetry ("there is a secret medicine given only to those who hurt so hard they can't hope.") I explored the enlightened cynicism of Camus ("in certain cases, carrying on, even continuing, is superhuman.") I even turned to the fatalistic determinism of Hemingway ("the world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.") Which of these systems would be my salvation? Would it be passive resignation? Would it be rapturous anguish? Or would it be a steely bitterness and rejection of the world? I found that I could not accept any of these philosophies because they asserted that the meaning of life was suffering. So, instead of imposing a new mode of experiencing reality, I chose a new means of interpreting reality as I already experienced it.

I first heard the term "Objectivism" in the summer of 2005, when I borrowed a copy of *The Fountainhead* from the Pasadena Central Library. I knew nothing about it, simply that it was a book I had heard of and was next on the list. In its pages I found another option: the rational self-interest of Ayn Rand ("a pain that goes down only to a certain point.")

I searched for a real job all that summer, but finally, in October 2005, I gave in and got a job at Petco. After applying to all Petcos (online), the first to respond was Petco La Brea, in Hollywood. The commute time (ninety minutes each way) provided plenty of time to read. Rocketing through the bowels of Los Angeles, I slogged through *Atlas Shrugged*, *We the Living*, *Anthem* and essays on various topics. The more I read and thought, the more my metaphysical worries seemed to fade away. Slowly, the menacing slither of the things around me transformed into the nuanced pattern-shift of things as they are. The panic triggers still (increasingly) occur. But now, rather than moments of terror, they are the times when I am most at peace, and truly in the company of my peculiar idea of the divine.

"Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood  
Teach us to care and not to care  
Teach us to sit still."  
– T.S. Eliot, *Ash-Wednesday*

Today is the first of November and the clouds long promised have finally arrived. It is both a Saturday and the morning after Halloween, so the sense and scene of recovery is everywhere. Hired gardeners abound. Streams of toilet paper flutter around the heads of frantic homeowners desperate to remove them from their trees before the rain comes. Small pools, fed by early morning sprinklers, collect around discarded "fun-size" candy wrappers: Snickers, Milky Way, Skittles, Starburst, Jolly Rancher. Somewhere, someone's doll or Chihuahua is missing its Snow White costume. It is finally, gloriously, the first of November and I have survived my eighth October.

Only two things now intimidate me: James Joyce's *Ulysses* and the annual approach of October. I begin preparing myself in early September. I listen to the music I listened to in 2000 (Radiohead's "How to Disappear Completely" instantly brings it all back.) I read or reread Objectivist literature and bulk up my mental defenses with logical exercises. I note the hallmarks: the change in smells, the winds, the leaves falling, the nights cooling. Come October first, I let the month wash over me and keep my mind solid. October will always affect me, but I welcome it; the ritual must be honored, this renewal of self enacted, because a second October 2000 would prove ultimately fatal.

*Inspired by a letter from Grandmother,  
Emilia Rodriguez Aparicio*

Dicen que los muertos refugan en calma.  
Que no hay sufrimiento en la otra mansion.  
Que si el cuerpo muera,  
Jamás muera la alma.  
Y ella es la que te ama,  
Con ciega Pasion.  
They say that the dead find refuge in calm.  
That there is no suffering in the other mansion.  
That if the body dies,  
never will the soul.  
And it is with my soul that I love you  
with blind passion.

And so I dream.  
I dream that I will be with you, while I breathe,  
while I am losing my breath,  
While I have but a bit of breath  
in a breathless place which is the today,  
the yesterday, the tomorrow and the  
always of our soul's together place  
beyond  
the yearning touch,  
the desperate touch,  
the barely touch,  
the tender touch.

I dream that I will be with you in the bodyless,  
painless, yearnless,  
spaceless place.

In the place of dreams, where all dreams  
are so full of the eternal love of the souls  
who love with blind passion.

Con ciega pasion.

I will be one of the souls who love in  
a fleshless place.

Who love eternally in  
the breathless place.

# Heterochromia Iridium

AWARD WINNER

F

Carlos Lemus

Satan has been watching me for days from the southeast corner of the room, but I have not complained. After all this time living in St. Petersburg, I have adopted the Russian pragmatism that evades grievances—unless one has the money to pay for the privilege—and, believe me, I have nothing to offer, including my soul. Besides, Satan has been sitting on my favorite chair, flaunting a ridiculously contrite look, and I think he wants to provoke me. I am certain that he knows how I feel, for he must definitely read my mind, but he has not complained either. He has simply been brooding while usurping my chair, as if waiting for an epiphany. The trespassing had not bothered me because I naively believed Satan would become tired of waiting after the third day. What can I say? Absurd biblical expectations, I suppose. Today, however, the challenge of escaping his provocation has been feeding my resentment. Ever since Lyuba left, I have been in a constant state of frustration and if Satan is here to try to persuade me into striking a deal, he will have to work very hard at it because I am not willing to yield even if he promises to bring her back.

Lyuba and I moved to Piter during the splendor of its white nights soon after she left her husband—for me. There could not have been a better place for new lovers to revel in their idyll or for mature lovers to renew their sentimental vows. I always believed that witnessing one of those white nights would be magical, but with the ardor of Lyuba by my side the experience became ineffable, just like one of those oceanic feelings I had read about in school. We met in Piazza di San Pietro as thousands of ecstatic celebrators surrounded us during the 2000 Jubilee. I was sitting on a makeshift wooden fence—obviously brought for the celebration—showing my best manners to an Irish accountant who smothered me with fanatical

descriptions about his long-planned visit to what he considered the most important mass of his lifetime. Fearing to break his heart, I opted not to tell him that I was there by chance, that on my way back to the hotel—still energized from my wild New Year party all over Rome—I had impulsively decided to stop by the square to rejoice with the tolling of the bells before going to sleep. Lyuba was watching us. She was standing next to one of Bernini's columns, not far from the fence where the accountant and I were sitting. There was an exquisite quality about the way she stood and looked at us that caught my attention, but I was still somewhat drunk to think clearly about the mystery of the moment. Also, the remarkably overdressed multi-national crowd exuding religiosity with every single breath annoyed me. I wondered if I had seen Lyuba before, perhaps at a train station or in another country, just like I had seen or met other people during the trip. The accountant spoke incessantly, driving me crazy with his devotion. I looked around the square, pretending to search for a friend, but the intention was to look more closely at Lyuba.

"This is crazy," she said while walking towards us.

I had fleetingly wished for Lyuba to initiate a conversation with the certainty that the desire would never materialize, quite in accordance with the way unredeemable romantics idealize beautifully promising coincidences, but since it seemed that she had read my mind, I was shocked. A vertiginous sense of anxiety possessed me, making it evident that what I had earlier regarded as simple curiosity for a beautiful woman was indeed an intense attraction for Lyuba. She earnestly advanced towards the fence, unleashing frightening amounts of my adrenaline with every step.

"This is crazy," she repeated. "Don't you think?"

"Tell me about it," I replied. "Somehow, I thought this place would be empty today, but I guess I should have paid attention in catechism school."

The familiarity of my response surprised me. I had been nervous before, almost to the point of fleeing, but Lyuba's confident voice became a palliative allowing me to balance the passionate thrill that her image had



elicited. I was pleased.

“So, you came here, today, to meditate?” she ironically asked with what appeared to be a British accent.

“Well. This may sound stupid, but I wanted to hear the bells one more time before I left.”

The accountant eyed me with disdain, as if I had offended the collective catholicism of the crowd. Lyuba, on the other hand, giggled.

“Really? I cannot believe it! Me too!”

I was perplexed. For a moment, I assumed she was joking, but the description of all the belfries she had visited in the previous two weeks convinced me that I was not the only lunatic obsessed with bell sounds. I also began to realize that coincidences were not as random as I had assumed them to be. In her excitement, Lyuba sometimes spoke in her native language.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m from Russia and my name is Lyuba.”

“Lyuba?” I asked.

“Yes. Lyuba, the diminutive form of Lubov.”

“Luboif,” I repeated.

The accountant, who also turned out to be quite an amateur philologist, engaged in a lengthy explanation about how most western languages developed from a proto-Indo-European tongue and—using examples from Sanskrit, Low and High German, Latin, and Slavic languages—elucidated that Lubov means love. I smiled, pondering on the accuracy and prophetic qualities of Lyuba’s name. Faintly acknowledging the accountant, Lyuba redirected her attention to me and explained that her Western European exploration began soon after her husband started lecturing in England. I felt sorry for the accountant, who obviously had crafted his disquisition to impress Lyuba. She continued her story, but it was difficult to maintain credible focus because everything about her captivated me and I could not disguise my enchantment.

“What are you looking at?” she asked.



“Your eyes are of two different colors,” I said.

“Four,” she corrected. “One is blue and green, the other green, hazel and yellow.”

“They are beautiful!”

“Thank you! I was ashamed before, but I got over it. It is a rare condition, heterochromia iridium, but it runs in my family.”

I loved the fact that Lyuba’s gaze irradiated different colors, and I concentrated on it for a while, but, believe me, that was not the only thing I

saw. The accountant had been correct. The word libido had definitely derived its meaning from the Sanskrit Lubhyat, desire, and Lyuba also fulfilled the meaning of her name in this respect. She blushed after noticing that I was catching furtive glimpses of her callipygian figure, alluringly veiled with a tailored coat. A surge of embarrassment seized me, but Lyuba gave me a complicit smile and asked for my name. She didn't like it.

"It's very common," she said. "What about 'Hope'? Yes. Your name should be Hope."

I didn't like the name, of course, but I loved Lyuba's playful creativity. Since mass was the least of our interests, we continued to ignore the accountant in our tacit understanding and inched our way to the obelisk in the center of the square, the place where we believed the resonance of the bells would converge even with the interference of the fanatical crowd. We could not successfully explain it or, perhaps, few people could understand it, but the sound and vibrations of the bells, in our reciprocal appreciation of the experience, elicited a sense of belongingness to something that approximated bliss. As the tolling of the bells was satisfying our obsession, the pontiff passed by in his armored pope-mobile and somehow managed to lock his eyes into mine as he blessed the crowd. I giggled.

"Did you see that?" I asked Lyuba.

She was crying.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I'm touched."

"He is just a human."

"That's why. Let's go!"

I have to admit that Lyuba's sudden sentimentality concerned me, but I soon forgot about it as she pulled my arm and held on tightly while leading me outside of the square. We continued to walk all over Rome for the rest of the day, discussing C rtazar and Bulgakov, exchanging poetry in our native languages, trying to sing our favorite French and Italian songs and talking about our dreams. While dining outside of the Parthenon, the prospect of listening to the bells again, without papal interference, lured

us back to the Basilica. As we were waiting, Lyuba gave me a vigorous look with her multicolored eyes.

"I'm planning to go to Bruges," she said. "My best friend told me that the Belfort is incredible, that you can actually stand next to the bell and that its sound is beautiful."

"It is great, but I like this one better," I said. "I was there last year."

"Really?"

"Yes. I had planned to go to Russia, but I couldn't get a visa."

"So, you've been everywhere. . ."

"Except Russia," we both said. We laughed, rejoicing in the synchronicity of our thoughts, of our existence.

"Have you always had this fun in your trips?" Lyuba asked.

"Not with someone who truly understands me like you."

"That means you have never had fun."

We laughed again and our exuberant shrieks of delight merged with the sound of the bells. Lyuba extracted a dark chocolate bar from her purse. Moving closer to me, she put a piece in my mouth and leaned on my shoulder.

"I'd love to go to Bruges with you," she said.

I followed Lyuba to Belgium even though my occasional girlfriend expected me in Barcelona.

The midnight sun coming through the curtains creates an astounding chiaroscuro as it shines on the body of Satan sitting in this gloomy room. Although he has manifested himself in his monstrous Dantesque regalia, his decorous mannerisms make him look quite endearing. I look at him for a while, meticulously recognizing features that I had always imagined. He shifts sides nervously, perhaps embarrassed at my inspection. I enjoy the ironic beauty of the image because now, more than ever, I understand that divinity has an ugly side. Thinking about this triggers my resentment again and I wish that Satan would take away this stupid white night that we share to his underworld, never to bring it back. Instead, he picks up

Lyuba's bible and begins to read. As a recovering western christian, all I think is that if he starts quoting Byzantine holiness I will sell my bones to god only for the chance to strike him in the head for the nonsense I am certain he will use to confuse me. Satan chuckles and even though I would like to know the reason for his reaction, I prefer to think that he read an amusing verse from the apocalypse because I don't really want to accept that he can read my mind. He turns to the window and devilishly grins, revealing an enviable set of immaculate teeth. He looks rather pleased, as if the reading had transported him to a special place in his memory. I want to know what he is thinking, but I suppress my curiosity because I believe this is a form of enticement in his game. He puts the bible down, slowly lifts his body from the chair, delicately stretches his wings and levitates his way to the bathroom, cautiously closing the door behind him. His discretion frustrates me. "As an abominable Prince of Darkness," I think, "you seem like a meek altar boy, buddy." I look around the room. It is big, and cold and empty, except for the mattress where I lay, the bookcase Lyuba and I bought in a local bazaar, and my favorite chair. In the months that I have been waiting for Lyuba to return, I have felt very lonely in this room, but now that he has left I feel more than lonely: I am terrified and yearn for company, even if it comes from Satan. The door to the room is ajar. Satan came through that door a few nights before. He did not materialize out of nothingness to force his sulfuric breath down my throat as I had imagined a decent Satan would do. No. Instead, he simply came in and has waited, maintaining an absurd sense of etiquette that has compelled me think about becoming a christian once again just to get a little action in this absurd game. I have been leaving the door to the apartment unlocked because Lyuba forgot the only set of keys before she left. Satan has definitely taken advantage of this.

Lyuba grew up in Moscow during the same time I struggled to find a sense of belongingness in the different countries of my early Diaspora. We

romantically decided to settle in St. Petersburg to honor our serendipitous encounter in Piazza di San Pietro. There were also practical reasons. Her husband, she said, would never look for her in Piter. After all, he had been shamed at the University for leaving his wife for Lyuba, one of his graduate students. She was certain of this, even after we found his letter.

“He will never come,” she said. “He is too proud. Besides, he’s writing just to tell me that it’s over because he says it’s over.”

“But. . .”

“Don’t worry. If he comes, so what? He is not going to kill us. I know him. He would want to talk and after everything makes sense in his intellectual mind, he’d walk away.”

I believed her. I wanted to believe her, sure, but there were also reasons to do it. They had fled to England, for example, because her husband was running away from the wrath of his scorned ex-wife. The guy even changed his name when becoming a British citizen, just in case the ex-wife hired a hit man to seek revenge. Lyuba sealed the end of that conversation with a promise for eternity and, after making love, we left the apartment in search of our favorite bard during one of those white nights that Dostoyevsky had made famous, but that we had made vital to our existence.

Satan exits the bathroom, moving with elegance impossible to imitate. That luminescent body, apparently crafted with godly perfection, mesmerizes me. His transparently venous wings look fragile, those of a super-sized insect. Their vulnerability, in fact, makes them look angelic. I experience an irresistible urge to feel them. Before I realize it, I have touched them. They are soft, and gentle and moist; a texture that, for some reason, feeds my discontent.

“Be careful,” he admonishes after I touch them.

The sound of Satan’s voice is coarse and almost awesome. It fills the room with a reverberation that I greatly enjoy, but it has a familiarity that also leaves me with a sense of disenchantment. I feel like I have known

him for years, like we have met before, in several previous lives, in every country I have inhabited, in every nightmare and dream I have experienced, and this makes me want to pulp him to the ground. He gives me a complicit look.

“Go ahead” he utters. I consider the offer, but give up because, not understanding why, I feel pity for the guy. I return to my mattress, crestfallen, and Satan humbly follows me, sits on the edge and gently touches my shoulder. I do not experience fear but repulsion, for his hand feels gelatinously unreal. He maintains an apologetic look and this finally pisses me off. I shove him to the side. He tries to say something.

“Be quiet!” I order.

Satan sighs and penitently purses his lips. I hate that diffident demeanor.

“Listen, just leave me alone,” I tell him as I walk to the window. Lighting a cigarette, I look outside and search for Lyuba in all directions. It is a beautiful white night. Lovers of all kinds populate the streets, holding hands, shamelessly kissing in the middle of the street, jubilantly looking as the bridge rises. The bard sings our favorite songs a few steps away from the Savior Church, his seasonal shadow merging with the deformed perennial reflection of the church’s cross on the adjacent waters. He sings love songs that I did not understand during my first night with Lyuba, but that now ravage my heart with every melancholic intonation. In spite of the agony, I want to be part of that night; I want to roam around it for hours, convinced that I will find Lyuba at any moment for the passion of her love to inhabit every crevice of my imagination as she retakes my arm.

Satan piously observes. I turn around, ready to bargain, but he is displaying Lyuba’s letter. Guttural sobs slither out from the cavernous spaces of my miserable body.

“Love is not coming back,” he says, looking at me with his multicolored eyes. “I am sorry.”





# Superstitions of the Heart

NF

Ryan McGovern Smith

Superstition is defined as “the belief or notion, not based on reason or knowledge, in the ominous significance of a particular thing or circumstance.” Thus, I find it quite amusing that I’m so damned superstitious when it comes to *Jeopardy*—a program founded on the bedrock of basic reasoning and on the wealth of one’s knowledge. When I get a string of answers right, it’s like the stars inside me have aligned. It’s like a perfect chime is sounding. Somewhere, an angel has surely taken flight. It cannot be that I am just familiar with the category. No, no. It is that I was meant to watch this episode, at this exact moment in time, on this very day—my own little broadcast *déjà vu*, telling me that I’m precisely where I need to be.

An off day spells disaster. Categories such as ‘Russian History on the Stalinist Era’ or ‘Chinese Industrial Architecture’ throw me straight into dysthymia, whereas the ‘Cheeses of Europe’ column might well be a straight line to heaven. A gruyere for 900 and God is speaking through me. By commercial break, I’m back on mountains high and eager to indulge in the cultural significance of each advertisement, as if my quest for erudition mustn’t end at ‘Potent Potables.’ The notion (based on reason and knowledge) that I simply must have the latest fabric softener suddenly overwhelms me. Scholars such as I should not be made to suffer scratchy clothing. I daydream collared vestments, mortarboard caps and framed diplomas. A brisk lunch with colleagues over Chef Salads and Glenlivet. Fat-free vinaigrette. Mania sets in.

I get a certain high from the most curious of things. It’s really not the quality or even quantity of correct answers I get watching *Jeopardy* that tells me I’m in sync with the universe, but rather the order in which they are

produced. I once locked myself in a bathroom during a bad acid trip, believing that if I blinked sixteen times in perfect succession the drugs would leave my body through my eyes in the form of vapor. One bad evening with Trebek and I'm back in that goddamn bathroom, barking at the mirror things like "What is fiberglass insulation?" or "Who is Kim Jong-Il?"

My therapist says I have a mild to moderate case of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. And even though I've imparted to this man just about every evil act I've ever committed, and in total confidence, there's a very real part of me that distrusts his every word. I figure as much that he's paid handsomely by the hour, or by the minute rather, to provide a diagnosis that can somehow explain away just how fucked up of a person I actually am. Don't get me wrong, I adore this gentleman, but I've learned to take his advice in piecemeal. I'll say this though. I never went to church until after psychotherapy. I found the magazine selection outside confessionals to be lacking.

Needless to say, my attempts at converting liquid LSD into a gas proved futile, as do my ploys at somehow regaining my composure after a failed 'Double Jeopardy.' I usually just sulk my way into *Wheel of Fortune*, knowing Pat Sajak wouldn't dare insult my intellectual integrity. I swear to Christ I can smell that man through the screen. I once checked for the Smell-O-Vision insignia to roll past in the credits. Rumors of a cross-promotion with Rogaine and the Men's Wearhouse have been popping up all over the internet. I keep my ear to the street these days.

I have a friend who used to clean koi ponds for a living, Mr. Sajak being one of his more noteworthy clients. I remember hearing this and imagining the grounds of his estate—the house that vowels bought. A morbid curiosity ensued. He'd be such a humorous person to stalk, I remember thinking. And well, shit, I've already got someone on the inside. Could I assimilate myself into his workforce, perhaps? Surely he has one. I could just show up

to his house in coveralls and rubber boots, a pool net at the ready. “Howdy, Missa Sajak! Seems Brian done up ‘n’ quit. Heard he’s to be in pictures! I’ll be taking ova’ from here on out.”

The coy koi pond boy—I love it.

I could be the charming house servant with a heart of gold, misunderstood and living below his potential. Like Brendan Frasier in *Gods and Monsters*, except without all the gay undertones. ‘Course it wouldn’t be long ‘till I began accidentally killing fish and rifling through his rolodex for Vana White’s phone number and address. I can fairly assume she, too, is in need of some help around the house. It is, after all, impossible to find good help these days.

I wonder if I should include my *Jeopardy* achievements on my resume. My only reference to this end, however, would be my grandfather, and I’m worried that he might get confused during the call, perhaps drifting off into talk of how I was circumcised late in life and how I ran around the house with a cup over my dick for two weeks. He can’t for the life of him remember what city I live in these days but seems to recall this little incident in Technicolor. Then again, he also thinks my name is Kevin half the time. He has what they refer to as ‘onset dementia’ but between you and me, that’s horseshit. He’s just old as Jesus. I found a black & white of them playing tennis once, scared the living hell out of me. Gramps is my favorite TV companion, but I must admit it gets mildly awkward when we watch the History channel and he thinks we’re seeing live news coverage.

I actually formed a taste for watching *Jeopardy* through my time spent with him after my grandmother passed. My family and I sometimes refer to this as the ‘taking care of Wilber’ period of my life, though I must admit this title is a bit erroneous. The days and nights we shared together, in the twilight off of Spanish Bay, in the sunset of his years, they were mine to receive, a blessing undisguised by the ghost that still was with us. It was he

who did the caretaking, in more ways than he will ever know. Seriously—he's not all there. Alas, our bond was special.

I was living in San Francisco at the time, going to school, when my grandmother left us, and by us I mean the Smiths. The one and only Smiths. A surname common as a cold, but to us it was as unique and different as a crystalline snowflake. She made us feel that way. To hear the name spoken in her New England meter, a hint of imagined wealth upon her tongue, made us feel distinguished though we were sorely not. The way she spoke, it was that perfect chime sounding, vibrant and persevering.

It carried us through. Through the drama of divorce, through the alcoholism, through betrayal. Babies given up to return as full grown men. Wives leaving in the night to never share another Christmas morning. Our family was like that photograph in *Back to the Future*, members fading away as time went on. The plates my grandmother would warm in the oven before each meal became less and less. Yet when we'd pull up into their driveway after the six hour trek from LA into the Central Coast, we'd always find that same wooden sign dangling from the maple in their lawn. The sign that read that we still belonged, for better or for worse: "The Smiths."

Although I've known them all my years, and they've seen me sprout from that shy little redhead into a towering man, I get the eerie feeling that my family is the one Jeopardy category that would trump me.

My grandmother's name was Barbara, but Wilber called her Rab-Rab. I always thought this amusing due to my grandfather's peculiar similarity to a land tortoise. The rabbit and the tortoise, the turtle and the hare. These pet names proved somewhat fortuitous when Rab-Rab went away, hurried by the winds of change, perhaps to leave a trail for idling tortoises to follow. She, too, loved *Jeopardy*. But that isn't to say she participated in the program. More often than not, watching TV with Barbara meant subjection to her commentary. It was like that show *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* if the

Soviets had won the Cold War. She found television humorless, and was in mind to tell you so. When PBS went off the air, that is to say it went to cable, Barbara's love affair with Inspector Poirot could not be matched by the libertine Trebek. Perhaps it was the change in mustaches.

I was there, actually, when she died. Visiting for the weekend, I sat in their living room one night (watching the Game Show Network) when I heard my name. It was late, really late, but my grandmother had woken up and was pacing the house, frightened and confused, randomly turning lights and machines off, bringing them to rest as she herself was meant to be. It was as if she was sleepwalking, knee deep in some nightmare yet cognizant of the world around her. I tried my best to soothe her.

I know what it looks like when someone is having a panic attack. I, myself, have had several. In fact, years before I knew what they actually were, I had a recurrent position as local bench warmer in the UCLA emergency ward—you know, one of those hysterical looking, drug-addicted types that you guard your child's eyes from as you wait for your insurance to call back and your son to get his arm casted. But it always took like eight hours to see a real, live, physical doctor that spoke English and had the letters M.D. after his name. By that time my panic had usually subsided. I'd sulk my way home to *Wheel of Fortune* and warm beer.

I even went so far as to employ the services of a cardiologist once, hoping to get to the bottom of this curious little affliction. It was maddening. I felt like Chicken Little. "The sky is falling, my heartbeat's irregular!" This doctor attached a series of diodes to my chest and torso, conducting a fairly typical overnight heart rhythm test. I remember they all connected to this huge box that clipped at the waistband and looked like a prototype of the first Walkman cassette player. The only tune it played, however, was the occasional beep—which signified, as I remember, that I scribble down my whereabouts, the time, what I'd eaten, and what (if any) drugs I'd taken in the preceding hours.

Nothing turned up wrong with my heart, though I had been through a recent break-up. “Can broken hearts account for cardiac palpitations?” I asked him. “What about intermittent cardiac arrhythmia? Is there a pill for that? Never mind the cost, dammit, I have total coverage!” My hypochondria has tempered in recent years, as have my attacks, and albeit hard to come by they seem to have reaped one benefit. I’m sort of street-trained in the art of self diagnosis. A gene undoubtedly passed on through my grandmother’s bloodline. She’d been a Navy nurse in her day, and through this she saw it fit to treat herself and others outside the help of conventional doctor visits.

She somewhat expectantly refused my proposition to visit CHOMP that night, their local ER. I almost couldn’t blame her. The Community Hospital of Monterey Peninsula, or CHOMP, is like a scene out of *Cocoon*. It’s where country-clubbers go to die. Their magazine selection is deplorable. And no spaceship, like in *Cocoon*—just an aging television in the far corner of the lobby. A constant loop of Jeopardy reruns.

But it was clear to me that Rab’s condition was well beyond a case of any hackneyed anxiety. And despite her defiance, that Irish stubbornness she was known for, I simply had to get her up and moving. She was a proud woman. A strong woman, stronger than any of us. There wasn’t an illness she couldn’t tackle—or so we thought. She had no gripes about inspecting a rash or infection, or discussing the state of one’s bowel movements. She was our cure-all. With her, we felt safe. I think that’s why I went there that weekend, on that lonely April evening, with the winds of Monterey pulling gently at my tires. I, too, felt sick. Soul-sick.

That drive down Highway 156, that stretch of road where the eucalyptus grows and the sky is framed by passing branches, it is my special place. It meant I was going home. Back from the wars of young adulthood, to the one house I always knew, my one constant. I’d pull up into their drive and see that same old sign, hanging from that same old rusting nail. The

sign that read 'I still belonged.' For someone drawn to superstition, I cannot believe that my presence there was merely coincidental. She needed me, as I did her.

They lived in Pebble Beach, a private community in California's lush Central Coast. It is beautiful there. At night, you will see half a million stars, every constellation burning out in perfect symmetry. I don't remember seeing any stars align that night, as we made our way down the blackened roads, the pine trees woken by our headlights, but I do remember the moments before. Getting them into their robes and slippers, offering a gentle hand as I helped them into the car, acting like their own personal driver for the night, on our way to a gala affair. For a moment there, it felt nice to be the one of service, after so many years of being served.

She served me until the very end. The last meal she ever made was just for me, her famous macaroni and cheese. Damn, that stuff was good. My sister tries to recreate it, claiming it superior. I flatter her. The last pen stroke she ever made was my name. "For Ryan" read the post-it that the leftovers were adorned in. I still have that note, somewhere. I have yet to meet a person with cursive as fine as hers. It was that stately New England wrist and her keen eye that drew it. She had more class in a single eyelash than any of us could ever hope for. If I close my eyes I can see her... there in a floral gown, smiling at us as we fumble with the Christmas tree, sipping her Manhattan and telling stories of how Wilber Eugene single handedly won the War. She was so loyal.

As I drove with them that night, it was her smile I missed the most. I would shoot an occasional glance into my rear view mirror, checking to see if things were still alright, and see Wilber inspecting the leather of my interior. He still maintains that any car other than a Volvo or a Peugeot is for shit. I'm sure he would have commented to this end if the situation had been more casual. He's like that with just about everything, his own

brand of loyalty, I presume. More like brand name loyalty, really. He gets a certain high from the most curious of things. He wouldn't touch a Triscuit if you paid him, he's a Wheat Thins man, through and through. There's a brand of cottage cheese he'd freeze by the gallon if there's ever talk of them going out of business. He literally stockpiles canned apricots, Raisin Bran as well. He breaks into a cold sweat if there isn't ice cream in the house.

Perhaps it's superstition that keeps him loyal to his food products. But I have the sneaking suspicion that when he goes about his midday ritual, slathering his crackers with a dollop of peanut butter each and dicing a banana into his dish of cereal, that somewhere in his mind, a chime is sounding out. He is a creature of habit, thankfully. That is how he survives without her.

It took some convincing to get my grandmother into the car that night. For this, I employed my mother; the one person I knew could talk some sense into her. My parents had been divorced for about thirteen years at the time, and though my mother was no longer Barbara's daughter-in-law, she was loved tremendously. The bonds that broke between her sons and their wives never buckled within Barbara. 'Once a Smith, always a Smith' might well have been her motto. I handed the phone over and waited for my mother to produce her magic. The same magic I had known as a child, the magic that had soothed me. When the kids at school had called me fat-ass or fire crotch or elephant dick (hence, my late-in-life date with the knife that Wilber so lovingly recalls), my mother always had the magic words to make it right again. You know, upon remembering this, I have to admit 'elephant dick' speaks like a total compliment. What was I so bent out of shape about? You know it's bad when schoolyard bullying exceeds the point of psychotherapy. When a surgeon is called in, it might be time to change states altogether.



Alas, my mother's magic worked, but I'm afraid it was too late. Months, perhaps years too late. We had her transported from CHOMP to a medical facility near Stanford whose staff maintained one of the state's top rated heart and stroke specialists. She had had a TIA, a Transient Ischemic Attack, basically a mild stroke, and her heart was suffering from arrhythmia. Turns out, it was she who should've had those diodes strewn about across her chest. It was she who should have worn that clunky Walkman monitor. It was she who needed caretaking. But Irish pride runs deep. She had known about the dangers of her condition for some time but hadn't acted to reverse them, perhaps believing God would see her through. She died two days later. She is with Him now. And I miss her everyday. Every god damned day.

I'm sort of street-trained in the art of asking for help these days. I have my pride, but it will never run six feet deep. I know I'll never be the kind of person she was, but that's okay. Just to feel her blood inside me makes me a better person. When I think of her, it's like the stars inside me have aligned. On a clear night in Pebble, in the darkness of their street, I look towards the sky that hangs over the ocean—and with enough patience, enough love, enough superstition. . . I can see her face appear, our own little private constellation.

As the dust settled surrounding her death, I decided to stick around. No one had the freedom to take hiatus from his or her life but me, and I was more than happy to do it. I tried my best to make things as they had been. Doctor's visits, vet visits, bills to pay, cocktails with the neighbors. I even learned to cook. And believe you me, to see that man bite into a perfectly cooked steak, the look in his eye as he sectioned off each portion of the meal into townships of some larger, sirloin capital—it was the universe itself connecting diodes to my soul. My heart would fill with a joy the likes I'd never known. Mania would strobe inside me.

And every night, at seven o'clock sharp, I'd sit him down in front of *Jeopardy*. We tried switching over to *Deal or No Deal* for a while, but he was confused as to how the program operated. He did enjoy the women in their flashy sequined dresses, though. Their meretricious strut down the towering marble staircase. Their suitcases full of dreams. But *Deal or No Deal*, for all its appeal, is a program founded on a bedrock of superstition. It's like playing the lotto, contestants blindly choosing cases by an irrelevant and random numbering system. Their kid was born on the fifth of August so they'll choose case five. Bullshit. It's only fun when someone wins big, who seems like a good person, even more so if they lose it all and seem to be a jerk, but I suppose that's the thrill of it. Howie Mandell always creeps me out, though. Am I alone on this?

So mostly, we stuck to *Jeopardy*. Brand name loyalty you might call it.

I'd pour the old man a Manhattan and begin the night's menu with a dish of 'deluxe addition' mixed nuts, paired with a cheese and cracker assortment that varied by day. A gruyere here, a brie de meaux there—always the finest for my Wilber. He'd feel taken care of, and he needs that. We all need that. I'd pour myself a drink as well and watch him stare benevolently into the screen, the blue backdrop glowing in his gentle eyes. A nacreous azure that made him younger as the show progressed, each year stripped away in the form of a question. It was almost like watching a child in front of *Sesame Street*. Some of the best moments of my life were spent in those hours. I think of them still.

I haven't seen my friend in some time; almost a year has passed since we've shared a common screen, his pit-bull terrier nestled warmly between us. He turns 90 in a month and I am anxious to see him. His dog looks about as old as he does. Will he outlast this idling turtle, entranced by the sunset of his years, chewing slowly in front of the television, walking slowly down to Spanish Bay where Barbara's ashes now mix with the black sands of the bay? I hope so.

After he dies, I hear my father and his brother talk of selling the house. The one house I always knew, my only constant. I envision the divvying-up process. If I have my say, I'll ask for one thing, and one thing only. That sign that reads "The Smiths," so when I have my family one day, they'll always know where to come back to. The one place on earth that they will always belong.

And one night in December—when the timing is just right and the stars are all burning—maybe, just maybe, I will sit my kids down and I will tell them a story. Of an idling turtle and a hurried hare. Of unknown constellations, black sands, and perfect chimes. I think I might call it: Superstitions of the Heart.

*For Wilber and Barbara Smith*





## Tattoo (Introduction)

Ellen Siu

You:  
engraved into my head  
by 12-inch needles that spill blood:  
the slightly crooked nostrils,  
wiry dark hairs that slightly stand  
up on your skin  
as if you've just been thrown  
into the backyard pool,  
the saucy pillar of a 12-stack beer can  
spilling over too-big blue jeans  
that taste like Coca-Cola  
(even though you like Pepsi):  
Let's not argue.  
I've etched this into stone,  
thinking you'd be happy.

Me:  
painted over counter,  
nail lacquer spills—  
here  
was the first time you touched me.  
You tasted like  
burnt cigarettes,  
even though you quit smoking.

Us:  
beneath me,  
soil cracks.  
I lay on top of you,  
tracing the gravestone,  
fingernails outlining  
your name.  
Here  
you rest,  
immobile.

P

## Tattoo (Chapter 1: Ink)

Ellen Siu

Bzz bzz  
Remember  
we met  
to the sound of buzzing,  
the needles drilling  
into your skin,  
curving gracefully  
into patterned wings.  
How about a skull?  
my then-boyfriend had suggested,  
rubbing his bleached blond spikes  
with greasy hands.  
No, you had said,  
with confidence,  
in a voice deeper than age,  
I want this:  
Ink black,  
Still  
Butterfly—  
Immobile,  
Eternal.

P



# We are not made of wax and string.

F

N.S. David

Photons hacking through our eyelids, the alarm vibrate-shrilling at once, and beside me Lee ostriches into the pillows and my arm, mumbling at the mouth and kicking at the feet. He's never been a morning person, and I shake him, get up, get up, what? Your turn for coffee, what? Except he doesn't listen because his ears are full of goose-down and sub-atomic obstinacy. I let it go; there isn't time for it, there never is.

There isn't a fucking *right* side of the bed, when he finally emerges, and he pulls the coffee pot out, a little savagely.

What? I say. What are you talking about?

People. Think they're clever, all, you're in a terrible mood ol' mate – you must have got out the wrong side of the bed this morning, har har! Drives me nutters; as far as I'm concerned, *there is no right side*. Only in-bed, and out-of-bed; regardless of which side you choose to transition between the two states of being, it is fucking *unpleasant* to be *out of bed*. God, I hate Mondays.

It's Tuesday, Lee. I set his toast down just as he springs up, arms flailing with his penchant for the dramatic.

Jesus! Jesus!

Walked on water, ain't around to mess with the time-space continuum, it's a damned shame, Lee, but we can't do anything about it. So eat your toast, give me my coffee, fetch the paper, and I kiss him on the mouth to still his various appendages.

It works; he runs outside, except he throws a: Bugger, you put vegemite on your toast again! over his shoulder as he does it. I don't mind – if he asked, I would probably choose the inimitable taste of fomented yeast extract over his best counteroffer; every year his brand of sodium chloride grows stale. Familiarity – and it's been five years!



. . . . .

About once every month he bellyaches: I miss Jenny. His Jeep, of course, sold with a joint-delusion to live one caste above middle class. Kept us in wine and gouda for a few months, threw a few parties, ended with both of us settling down with my Volvo at nine-to-fives that made us come home mouth-corners downturned and too tired to fuck. Why don't we both quit? He asks, and I know what's next – we can just backpack through the country, maybe go to Alaska. Live off mowing lawns and meet some real characters, eh?

Sure, Christopher McCandless – we'll live fast, die young, leave frozen and well-preserved corpses!

Purses his lips, he quiets; I pull into the 405. Immediately, we both start rolling down the windows – it's just December, which means California's dialed it down from microwave to microwave-on-low, except it doesn't help because no movement equals no air. Defensively, we both inflate our lungs until we're leaking carbon dioxide through our puncta, chests comically poofed like birds of paradise during mating season. Each morning on this stretch of pavement we become a Greek tragedy, the office-apprehension palpable and heavy, measured in self-loathing instead of tons, the highway our mountain; hell is other people, congregated on this sorry road, pushing forward to the day ahead.

He breaks first, head sitcom-comical on the dashboard. I don't care, I don't give a bleedin' goddamn, let's do it! Rather I was a frozen corpse than a fucking animated one. Really, he looks at me here with eyes glazed like a Vermeer painting, let's go! One more morning of toast and the 405 and I'm bound to go USPS on my own arse. *Let's go!*

Looks ready to beg, and he does – please, he says. Please.

Every time, without avail – fit passed, his head collapses to his right shoulder, slumber-salivates on the seatbelt. He calls it circumstantial nar-

colepsy – mumbles, when the world is lulling my brain cells into catatonia, what do you expect my body to do?

I call it, you'd better appreciate that you've sucked the verbal dispute out of me, you'd better appreciate my bottomless bladder. I had to up it to three cups this morning.

Takes my hand off the wheel, kisses my ring, I do, Faun.

Please, he says. Please.

Shit. You know we can't, Lee. I look at him and his throat is bare and white, his head thrown back over the seat, and he's rubbing his head on the polyester like a bear with his first post-hibernation tree. Stop it, I tell him. You're shedding.

But my head *itches*. His nails take about three cranial skin-layers, he scratches so furiously. It's like my sanity is an ant farm, it's just rained, and everyone's got to leave the nest. They're crawling out my pores, and it *itches*, and bloody hell, *why not?* One good reason! One really good one and I'll stuff it, promise, I swear.

I can only see the back of his head, brown curly hair and neck freckles, he's still as his skin lightens with the sun-touched stratosphere. He's missing what he left behind, across the seas, and the display of pathetic, discontented honesty rouses other truths. When he's like this, I remember why we sleep in the same bed.

I tell him. I don't want to die, Lee. At least, not yet.

. . . . .

A glance down tells me I'm kissing empty, and I curse, Shit!

What, he says. What's wrong?

Nothing – we've been running on empty, just noticed.

Where's the needle?

Empty, I just told you.

He exhales loudly and gesticulates sharply, like the words aren't

enough, like I'm some uneducated yahoo – *I know*. But is the needle *on* the line or *below* it?

Depends how low I sit, I reply.

He's not looking at me, but I can see his jugular salient under his jaw, mulish and taut. You know you're intolerable sometimes.

Excuse me?

You don't have to be clever, you don't have to sneer, I'm just trying to suss out whether the goddamned alarm re-resurrected me this morning only to send me off to my thousandth billionth execution-by-ennui or the world's finally done raping my will to live and we stop right here on the 405, cause I sure as fuck haven't the money for towing and maybe, *maybe* just-for-today we *end* up someplace. Walk to the nearest exit, find some wet grass to dig our noses into, I don't know, *something*. This life is *killing* me, Faun. It's killing us both. Tell me you see that!

Throughout the monologue it looks like he's having an epileptic seizure localized to his elbows, and even afterwards, they keep moving, and his hands are on my shoulders. It's hard not to laugh.

God, listen to you! What are you talking about? Where are the cameras, huh? Where are the goddamned cameras because I swear to *god* the only way you make sense sometimes is if I imagine you're some actor in some ill writ play for some shit-sadistic diety with a taste for post-modern drama! And the way you look at me all the time, like I'm some sort of archangel that fell from grace – and I tell you what, Lee – you are *not* Albert Camus, so you can stop drinking like a fish to numb your goddamned existential crisis, and just because I don't share your scenery-chewing predilections it doesn't mean I don't want the same things! You *know* I do! But we can't, Lee! We *can't*.

Beat.

Finally, Lee speaks. He chokes, yeah, and the way it comes out, like the syllables were formed on the inhale instead of the exhale, made of barbed wire, I'm afraid to look at his face. He continues, guess it'll be winter soon,

electricity's always a bitch then.

I suppose you're right.

. . . . .

It's on the line; I can keep going, I say, after two silent, stutter-stop miles. I'll just drop you off and get gas at the station near work.

What's it down to these days?

One-sixty. And I know I've seen it for one-fifty-four. Pretty good, yeah?

Laughs, but it's prickly too, and he chokes, isn't life is overflowing with small mercies!

. . . . .

It is, I pull into the parking lot fifteen minutes early. The building is all post-modern glass and steel, tinted 10,000 leagues blue, to better reflect the buoyant daylight outside and veil the fluorescent-white automatons within, Lee says. It's funny, because he's worked at the place four years, and I still don't know what he does, not exactly. I only know that it creases his brow, collapses his cheeks, steals the colour around his eyes – it's pheomelanin-turpentine, an airborne corporate compound used to assimilate us via depigmentation, he explained once. Without colour, we're all two dimensional nincompoops; just part of the picture!

When he sees the time, his forehead falls into the dashboard, padded by his hands, and he mush-mumbles into his fingers, christ, we're early, and looking disproportionately distraught, he pulls out his Benson & Hedges, hands me his lighter and puts a cigarette between my teeth. Have a bit of a smoke with me, he says as I strike the flint, this job is why I can't fucking quit, you know, and at least the words are on the exhale now, even if they have the scent of nicotine.

He touches the lit end of his cigarette to mine, and I laugh around the filter, I say, I thought it was me. I thought I was the Eve, your proverbial rotten influence.

God, yes, he manages a smile. You surely are. I breathe in.

We don't talk afterwards, we just sit and let the smoke fill the cabin til we're soaked with the fragrance of it. Our bosses will probably complain but we both need this small bit of rebellion. When we met five years ago we didn't indulge the habit – smelling instead of dirt and incense and the sweat of the subway-sardined lower class, and afterwards, sex. Body odor, Lee used to say. We have it, and I love it. I love that we reek of human being. Like the animals we are.

Now, we have tobacco. Our cover for the bouquet of ten-dollar body washes, starches, soaps, cleansers, foams, pastes, lotions, creams.

When it's time for him to go – five minutes late – I kiss him goodbye. Blanketed as he is in the soft, swirling white, Lee's face is soft again. He's just dark eyes and a red mouth, and large, still hands.

. . . . .

As for myself. In the increasingly rare occasions we're struck with the vigor to seek social discourse and I'm asked the question I say, verbatim, oh me? I'm a journalist. Work for the *Times*. Really, duller than you'd expect, journalism, but it keeps us in pinot noir – if Lee's liver had an Achilles, pinot would be it – and once in a while you do speak with the most interesting people. For instance – for instance, I don't say, I'm a very good storyteller, I hate my job, I stare at a computer screen all day making *the* pro and con list. Pro, Lee! Con, life. Pro, you know, *life!* Con, you know, *Lee*. Always dead-set even!

But it's not a lie, the journalism thing. Not even a fib. You can even call my boss and my co-workers interesting people; theoretically, I've fabricated not a syllable. It's the tone, the chin-up, smug contentment with which I've spoken that's not quite truthful.

What I do is really simple. I take old words, printed on paper. I take them, and I upgrade them – store them electronically, so they don't fade, yellow and decay from the harmful oxygenated atmosphere – store them where they will never dust. In plain English, I enter data.

I pull into the gas station – I’m right, it’s at one-sixty – and I reach into my coat. I look at the seat Lee has vacated, and I laugh as I imagine his response. It’s a sign! he’d probably say. The world doesn’t want you to have a wallet! The world doesn’t want me to have a wallet! Let’s go, let’s go! Nameless! Penniless! Jobless! Prospectless! Unfettered, unencumbered, unwalleted, free!

But I don’t enjoy the idea of walking fifteen miles home, so I empty out the cup holder. The clerk looks at me a little oddly, but I just smile and tell him, ninety-six cents on number eight please. Don’t worry, sir, it’ll get me within spitting distance, at least.

. . . . .

Ell! Moment I walk out the elevator I’m accosted by some sort of run-together mesh of screamed syllables, like she’s lost control of her tongue and, Ell!

Thing is, Darcy would probably up his count to seven accomplished women if he met her – her tone of modesty and accomplishment when calling herself a journalist is everything but disingenuous, and in a moment of alcohol-induced verbal regurgitation I’d once confided in her, told her about Lee’s soft mouth and razor tongue, called me a character-whore, I’d said, accuses me of only behaving like an adult when I’m in decent company – that I do nothing but lie like a sack of potatoes, say nothing worthwhile when we’re at home! The nerve of him! The nerve!

And she’d said, incongruously with smile-crinkles in her eyes, I’ll take your word for it, but you know Ell, some mornings you walk in here, and I’m jealous. Because you look uproariously happy.

She follows me into my dungeon, and she says, listen. Listen, Ell. You really ought to have come last night; I had a friend there who’s just published a book on pre-Andersonian English fairytales; you two would have hit it off. Lee would have loved him too, and are you all right? You’re looking about as broody as a Bronte heroine.

I have to smile at that, and I say, it's nothing, I just forgot my wallet this morning; I'm not sure I have enough gas to make it home, and then she's stuffing a dollar bill into my pocket and saying, I know your dignity wouldn't let you accept more, but you can't expect me not to give you anything. I feel the bill rumpled in my pocket and the hairs on my arms stand on end; I think to myself that only people with rotting entrails are afraid of generosity and verve, and I push her out the door. Before it shuts I say, attempting levity, goddamned you, leave me in peace! Shitty as the Volvo is, better it than a pumpkin.

And she laughs!

. . . . .

My dungeon is brightly lit; there is nothing here but files in boxes and boxes in shelves and the defeated click-clattering of my keyboard. Though it means staying past dark, my lunch drags past the two hour mark; mostly I sit in a café, looking at my translucent reflection on the storefront window, reiterating for my benefit the very things I screamed at Lee this morning. We can't, I'd said. We can't.

When I get back, my answering machine automates that Lee has left me a message. Faun, he says. Got out early today – sorry but I had to. I'll do overtime tomorrow, I swear. But for today, I'm resolved. I'm making you dinner, and I won't have any complaints about it. I'm catching the Red Line, obviously, and I think perhaps I'll drop by Olivera, get those tortillas you fancy, so do get home at a decent hour. And Faun, I've bought you something. Passed by it on the way to the station – it's nothing special, just a candle. Scent's called *Monet's Garden*, so apparently someone at that company's been alive for several centuries. Faun, thing is, it says on the sticker that the candle will burn for seventy hours. Seventy! Can you imagine? A lump of wax and some string, ignited by a spark, and you've got seventy hours of light! And I was thinking Faun, we're so much more than that, you and I. We're six-hundred plus bones together, four eyes, four black, cancerous lungs, fifty feet of intestines, half-and-one brains – I'll let

you determine who's short – twelve pounds of derma, twenty smelly toes, twenty talented fingers, billions of mitochondria, billions of electrons-neutrons-protons, carbons-hydrogens-oxygens; *one penis! One uterus!* And to top it off, two fucked up, but functioning, beating, hearts. What I mean is, Faun, what I mean is think of how long we could last, you and I. If wax and string can last seventy hours, then surely you and I are forever. Surely we can burn forever.

Just, just something to think about. Oh, and also? Monet's garden doesn't hold a *candle*, and then he's laughing, to the way you smell when we're in bed.

Meet me there.

. . . . .

I work late; two hours of idling with the rest of the beleaguered masses, hands at ten-two and necks wilted forward is a quota I'd already met this morning; book-ending a day with voluntary stop-motion torture is natural of Lee's libretto, not mine. I wait, and at eight-thirty my hands start shaking, half-fatigue, half-impatience, ten-tenths-anticipation. It's then that I leave.

I drive twelve miles before the dollar in my pocket rustles. Lee's voice whispers, and it's the same words, but this time his tone is light: is the needle *on* the line or *below* it? he says. I look at my gas gauge, laugh, throw words at the self-projected spectral sitting smilingly in my passenger seat. Below it, Lee! The needle is *well fucking below it!* And he says, well then! *Small mercies!*

The night has grown cold and damp from a descending fogbank; I imagine Lee, cocooned in down, standing outside at the balcony, framed by the light of our living room, lines softened by the haze, and his mouth is parted, the water accumulating on his lips, fresh, clean – I throw my arm out the window, my fingers grow piquant from moisture that runs it through eighty miles an hour. I say to the spectral, his tongue tasting dew, in twenty years of living in this city I have never witnessed this particular



meteorological phenomenon, yet this makes perfect, irrefutable, sense.

A mile and half home, I exit the highway, pull into a waiting gas station. Just as I step into the sinking fog, every light in the station blinks dark. It's closed! *Small mercies!* I lean into the Volvo, feeling water seep past my porous shirt into my porous skin, and I wait for the sound of his voice.

Doesn't say hello when he answers, says instead, well, I'm glad you're alive, Ella. And he laugh-whispers, have you lost your way?

No, I say. But I guess I might.

It's beautiful out, isn't it?

Yes. It is.

Where are you, then? Please tell me you've gotten off work at least.

Close-by. But I'm moving slowly; I can hardly see twenty feet in front of me.

Want me to go outside with a really bright torch, signal you home in Morse code?

No, and I think of Lee saying once, after one of my lengthier monologues, this is why we work, Faun — your head is so large my body hasn't got a choice but to be drawn to you. I've at last sussed out the foundation of our relationship — simple, Newtonian, gravity!

I'd laughed, pushed him into our bedroom, said, *my* head? Talk about your kettle-pot declarations!

So I don't tell Lee that I might not make it home. I know what he would do: bike to the gas station, insist that I sit sidesaddle on his lap, justify his laughter as sonar navigation — a way to safely sail home. I tell him instead, no. No, I'll be all right. Fog lights should be enough. We've got gravity.

. . . . .

I drive slowly to conserve gas, to avoid wrapping lampposts with crumpled Volvo, and all the while my mind incorrigibly replays the morning's quarrel with Lee. I know that someday, I will have to gift his questions real

answers but I wonder if it's even possible. Sometimes I feel that I was born with some form of autogenous aboulia; the night is an accurate painting of my psyche – insular, amorphous, white – damp and quiet, lulling me to a waking unconsciousness; in this landscape, there are no choices. Lee's right – our bond is strong, factual, a goddamned scientific theorem, but even theorems can be disproven, and the gravity of our philosophical dimorphism seems poised to do the deed. Yet, meet me there, Lee had said, and at least we both knew where we wanted to be.

Suddenly, whether it be my imagination or mere truth I hear the engine coughing, licking metal for the last few precious molecules of gas, and I slow to a crawl. Panicked, rise up in my seat, putting all my weight on my right foot, shakenly pressed flat on the gas pedal. I think to myself, I can't see where I am, I can't see where I'm going, I don't know if I'll be able to make it there, the needle has disappeared, well past empty. This can't be how this ends!

*This can't be how this ends!* I scream, and underneath my hands I feel the car begin to still, and I press my chest to the wheel, with a madcap romantic notion that I can transfer the heat and blood of my body to the engine through contact and blind tenacity. Then I breathe in, letting the cold cut down my throat, all the way down to my gut. The car continues to inch forward, through gravity, or inertia, or my heartbeat, or simple miscalculation, I don't know, I don't care. It moves painstakingly slow, letting out soft tremors with each miraculous turn of the wheel, but it goes. I think of Lee waiting at home, and I turn to face his ghost quivering next to me, see-through chest heaving with laughter, let's go! he's saying. Let's go!



# The Road Home

F

Karen Schiller Rogers

I hunger for home. A real home. But fear zaps like a lightning flash from my head to my feet, grounded in new Nikes – my foster home’s gift when I “aged out” at eighteen last month and had to leave. I’m on my way to my parent’s place. Seven years apart. Druggies back then, tripping right in front of Jacob, my older brother, and I when we lived in L. A. They were crazy. I hope they’ve blown off that scene. Yelling and screaming, fighting and throwing stuff. So many cop calls that one day Jacob and I were sucked like a vacuum cleaner into foster care. My parents split for the res – the Taos Indian Reservation. I want one more shot with my family – so bad it hurts. Have they changed? I’ll find out soon.

At 9:00 p.m., weirdoes and slackers, hard-up families and drifters flow like ocean waves through the bus station in L. A.’s skid row. Most, like me, hang in a trance with eyes propped open to make sure not to miss a bus or have their stuff ripped off.

I watch the action from my “sofa” duffel, one leg stretched across my backpack. I keep moving my butt to find a comfy spot because of the hard tennis shoes and sports junk packed inside. A line of bags and other crap stretches out behind me on the concrete floor. But I made it – number ten in line and sure to get a seat on the 3:00 a.m. bus to Taos. I hope I can stay awake. I push the CD buds tight in my ears to let Snoop Dogg’s “Gangsta Luv” suck my loneliness away.

I drift off after too many fucking hours and when I open my eyes, the Taos bus waits at Door Seven. Fuck, can I survive twenty-six hours in a bus? Lonely, my friends now history, I’m about to panic as I walk down the aisle. I slump into the leatherette seat and rev up Snoop Dogg to block the racket ripping through this giant tin can. Nothing blocks the stink unless I stop breathing. Did something die in here?

Headlights and streetlights shine like big stars through the black bus window. My face bounces up and down with every pothole. My tight-lipped mouth and wild Native American eyes make me look crazy. I can’t

stand to look at myself and yank my watch cap down over my eyes. I sink into my music to chill the loop running through my mind: stay and struggle in L.A. or split to a family who says they want me, but one I mostly remember for bad times?

I crash as the bus flies towards the California border. The early morning sun shakes off the December cold as the bus arrives in Phoenix. After the layover, city lights disappear as the road winds between tall pine trees, clear blue skies and mountains – tallest I’ve ever seen – some even white with snow. “Flagstaff,” the bus driver calls.

Awesome. I open the window to feel the cold wind on my face. The sun sets as the bus heads towards Albuquerque through wide-open flat lands. I see the tiniest towns with just a few houses spread out down long dirt roads. Orange, red, and yellow mind-blowing clouds fill the sky, but there’s hours to go before a three hour layover in the middle of the night in Albuquerque. We make it, sit around for way too long and I crash as soon as the new bus leaves at 3:00 a.m. When I wake at 5:30 a.m., a Taos sunrise knocks me out, now only a half hour from home. The bus grinds its way up a curvy, two-lane mountain road, the altitude sign I just passed said almost seven thousand feet. Dirt roads everywhere, except the highway, with huge trees and piles of snow on both sides of the road. Past two pueblos already. Indian country, my country. The fresh air fills my lungs and I can’t believe what I see. Open spaces, barely a house in sight and mountains everywhere. On the drive through Taos to the station, the buildings seem so old, like pictures from one of my history books. The snow I saw a few miles back now sits in piles pushed off the road. The bus barely fits on the skinny streets. A buzz runs through me about the strangers ahead. “Taos,” the bus driver yells.

When I step off the bus, it’s freezing. My Nikes crunch through the snow when Mom grabs me and wraps my head and neck in a long, warm scarf she made and gives me a hug. “Mom I’ve dreamed of your hugs forever. They feel so good – more, more.” I get lots more. She’s put on some pounds, maybe from all the food she nibbles while waiting tables at the tribe’s casino. Jacob, who came back to Taos last year, gives me a high five. My cousins huddle a few feet away.

“Hey, Dad, if it wasn’t for you I wouldn’t be here.” He’s kind of nervous but I still get a hug. He’s been pushing on me to come home over the phone for a year. The shock: Grammy. She’s looks ready for the grave. But she gives me a little hug and doesn’t say much.

“Don’t worry, Santana, she’s happy. She hardly speaks English, just our Tiwi language. She threw her back out a month ago. It still hurts,” Mom says. “I’m so happy – my two boys finally with me.”

My arm around Mom, we walk to Grammy’s house on the res for a Taos feast of some weird new food: fry bread, roasted corn, squash, green beans with peppers, and chicken tomato stew. Just in time, as I can’t believe they don’t hear my growling stomach. “Santana, most of this food comes from Grammy’s garden.”

“Thanks, Grammy. You need another hug.” I listen to the family news, trying to match names with faces. A few cousins my age, along with Jacob, act a little freaky: they just eat and leave, barely say a word. Mom tells me their names, like I’ll remember. Still like L.A. though. – Jacob the loud mouth, into everything. Santana, the quiet one, I hardly say a word. Mom offers to take me to the casino soon to see about a job. “Take it easy,” Mom says. “The altitude – you’ll have to work to breathe for awhile.”

Money’s short, just like L.A. Dad drives to jobs. He has no shop to do his car repairs. Mom walks to the casino from Grammy’s. I guess they still don’t get along because Dad has his own place about a mile away. After the party, we head to his place. I can barely stay awake. We bring my stuff inside. As soon as I sit down in his comfy chair I fall asleep – until the next morning. I wake up in time to catch a ride with Dad to Mom’s place – Grammy’s.

After he drops me off, I go back to sleep until I hear Mom getting ready for work. We walk to the casino, our first time alone together. “Santana, how are you, really? I know we messed up your life – and Jacob’s too. I want you to know how sorry I am for what I did in L.A. Very sorry. But to be honest, I’m still struggling. I wouldn’t be alive without the tribe’s free

health clinic. I've had some real hard times. They helped pull me through."

"Thanks for saying you're sorry, Mom." I give her a hug. "Foster care's hell, the group home more like jail than a home. I've had my hard times too. I spent six months in drug rehab. Sucked into weed by some buddies. But I've been clean since I got out."

"I love you, son. I know I haven't been a good Mom. But I'll work to make up for all the bad times now that you're here."

At the casino Mom heads right for the kitchen. Al, the boss, chops veggies for the salad bar. "Al, meet my son, Santana. He just arrived from L.A. and needs a job. I hope you can use him. It would help us so much."

"Norma, you work so hard. If Santana does the same, I can't go wrong. I need a dishwasher, Santana. Do you want the job?"

"Sure."

"Then, how about starting on Friday? The casino's busy on the weekends."

A load off my mind. I'm down to about six bucks and no one here seems to have any to spare. "Bye, Mom, I'll see you later. Thanks for your help with Al." Still hyper, I walk to Dad's instead of waiting for a ride. When I get to his place I'm beat, out of breath, my feet like ice cubes. I just fall into his comfy chair. But I can't relax. What always works: my music. As I walk into my room, my foot slides across one of my CDs and almost sends me flying. Shit, how did this get here? I look around to see CDs scattered all over: covered with lipstick, dribbled with glue, scratched or hammered to pieces. No screen on the window and when I look outside, some of my CDs lay in the snow. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," I scream. I pound my fists on the wall.

Who has been in here? The house has been empty all day as Dad took off to repair a car. Lucky I hid the CD player and laptop the foster home gave me in my closet.

Just then my Dad comes in and I show him the mess. “Calm down, Santana.”

“I’m fucking pissed. Dad, do you think Jacob and his gang did this? Who else has a key to your house?” Hot and angry, I grab Dad’s keys and jump into his pickup and drive to Grammy’s, forgetting I don’t even have a Driver’s License. If it’s Jacob who messed my CDs, I’ll be even angrier. My own brother. Jacob has been around these lazy asses for a year. He works once in a while, but mostly sucks off Mom, Dad and the tribe. What these creeps care about: parties, babes and beer. It only takes five minutes to get to Grammy’s house.

“Grammy, where’s Jacob?”

“Out with Paul.”

“Tell him I want to talk to him. I’ll be back tomorrow.” I give her a hug and take off, still pissed as ever. The next day I walk to Grammy’s – no ride, Dad’s still repairing a car.

She messes with stuff in the house, but I get to watch her TV. Dad doesn’t have one. She makes me lunch with some of her garden haul. Later, instead of walking to Dad’s, I try for a hitch. So few cars, hitchin’s hit or miss. A few go by but not in Dad’s direction. So I walk. My muscles scream by the time I get home, my feet frozen. I need some boots. Before I sink into Dad’s comfy chair, I check my room. Dad’s not home yet, the house empty all day again. I check on the stuff I hid in the closet. Gone! The CD player and laptop. Damn it to hell. The window: no screen even though Dad put it back.

Clothes dumped all over the closet floor, the CD player doesn’t mean so much now without my CDs. But the laptop had been a special gift to top foster care students. It’s brand new. I’m totally bummed, like a powerful punch just landed on my chest and taken all my air with it. I pound the wall so hard I make a giant hole. I don’t even care.



Now what? I fall into the comfy chair and rub my sore fist. Do I belong here? I don't move for an hour thinking of how I'm going to beat the shit out of these asses. Finally, Dad comes through the door.

One look at me and he knows. We talk for a long time. "Who's doing this crap, Dad?"

"Maybe your cousins – or even Jacob. They have all been in jail, Jacob too, for stealing and getting drunk on the res."

"Why does Jacob hang with them?"

"He doesn't want to work. Too lazy. They all are."

We finally come up with a plan for me to move to Grammy's. Mom lives there and I can walk to work. But so does Jacob. Dad calls Grammy, his voice a little shaky since she's Norma's Mom. "Santana," Dad shouts from the kitchen, "Grammy offered you a room at her place." He knows I don't want to stay here.

"Cool. Let's do it."

"Right now?"

"Right now. Why not, I have hardly anything left."

Dad and I pile the stuff in the back of the pickup and drive to Grammy's. We carry the stuff in; I settle into her sofa and finally begin to feel like I live with a real family. Grammy's cool.

I've been washing dishes for a week. Hard work for a hard ass boss. But when I come home to Grammy's she's always trying to stuff food in me. She loves to cook. Much better than Dad's. I can watch TV; relax after hustling all day in Al's crazy kitchen and talk with some of my friends in L.A. on Grammy's phone. Maybe I do belong here.

After my first paycheck, I hitch a ride into town to buy a CD player and a couple of my favorite CDs. I plan to get them all back. When I arrive home, Jacob and Paul lounge on Grammy's sofa. I haven't seen Jacob since the troubles at Dad's.

I don't get my prized sofa spot, but am stuck in one of Grammy's chairs – probably a prize from the dump, and stiff as a board. No one talks, just stares at the TV. I look at Jacob and remember how we decided to become blood brothers back in L.A. We swiped one of Dad's razor blades, made a little stab on our wrists, and mixed our blood together. We promised to be blood brothers forever, to take care of each other since no one else was. As I look his way, my eyes spot something black under the sofa. When I get up to check it out, Jacob thinks I'm coming after him. He's ready to fight, but I'm more interested in pulling the black thing out. It's the cover to my laptop! Now I'm really pissed. "Jacob, what's this? You and Paul spend the most time at Grammy's. Did you fuckers take my laptop?"

"Chill out, Santana. Why would we do that? You can't even get computers to work on the res."

"Oh, how did you figure that out? I think you fucking asses took my laptop and maybe everything I'm missing. Did you sell them to buy some beer, or maybe some ass? What a bunch of fucking liars. We both live here, but don't you ever go into my room. And keep your grimy mitts off my stuff."

They laugh. "Santana, Grammy lets us come here whenever we want," Paul says. "She's our Grammy too."

"Hey, Santana, chill out. I live here," says Jacob.

"You guys ripped me off."

"You think so? We didn't touch a thing of yours. Go back to California if you don't like it here."

We stare at each other, just a few feet apart in the small living room filled with the sofa and two beat up chairs. There's religious stuff everywhere – on the walls, three small tables and an old crate used as a coffee table.

“You don't belong here,” Jacob says, shoving me towards the door. My nose hits the door jamb and blood begins to drip on my T-shirt. The sight of blood sends me back into Grammy's sofa, my arm brushing against a lamp. The lamp tips over and one of Grammy's wood crosses falls off the wall.

“Fuck, now look what you did.”

“Man, we hate you,” Paul shouts as they run out the door.

When they leave, I rush to pick up Grammy's cross. I hang it back on the wall just before she comes back from the store. “What happened?”

“Grammy, Paul and Jacob, they're bad.” I feel like saying they're a couple of shits, but I don't want to speak like that to my Grammy, although I don't know if she understands much of what I say anyway.

“Oh. Key-wah-wai-ee. This is the way of life here. No jobs. Nothing to do. Trouble. Trouble all the time.”

Grammy begins to put her groceries away. She sets a bottle of Old Grand Dad on the table.

“Grammy, you drink this junk?” holding up the bottle.

“Oh, Santana. Medicine. My backache.”

“Grammy, it's not good for you.”

“Grammy's medicine.”

“This isn’t medicine. Have you been to the doctor? The Health Clinic is free.”

“No pills for Grammy.”

I help put the groceries away, but begin to sense my gut sour – a warning sign of trouble.

The next day, the grind begins again. I walk alone to the casino since it’s Mom’s day off. After work, I walk up the front porch and remember that Grammy takes an afternoon nap so I open the door without a sound.

Jeez. Damn. Fuck. Grammy and Mom passed out on the sofa, the bottle of Old Grand Dad on the crate. Dizzy, I brace myself against the wall to keep from falling over.

“Grammy, Grammy,” I speak softly, as I gently shake her. What if she doesn’t wake up? She doesn’t move. I shake her again, a little harder, and she starts mumbling. A few slurred words dribble out, but at least she’s alive. The shock: Mom, with her head drooped on her chest, a drool of saliva on her lower lip. I give her a few shakes and she starts to come around.

I sit down. A total bummer. I can barely breathe. I trust these two. Tears begin to fill my eyes. Grammy’s room starts to blur. I haven’t cried for years. I always thought if I ever started, I would never stop. The crap I have stuffed away begins to pour out like a flood.

I grab the whiskey bottle and heave it across the room. The bottle hits the wall and the whiskey spreads out on the floor mixed with glass. Now I begin to bawl. I wipe my eyes with my filthy work shirt, but the tears just keep coming, like a dam burst inside my head.

“Santana, why did you do that?” Mom asks.

“I freaked. I thought Grammy died. You’re killing yourselves. Why do you do this, Mom?” My “family” – messed up as ever.

Mom staggers out the front door and heads to the church in the village, her hiding place.

Grammy starts to get up, but falls back before she tries again. I help her up. “Sorry. Sorry,” she whispers. She follows Mom out the door.

I begin to think: nothing’s changed. What am I doing here? The hell with this place. The hell with this family. I don’t belong here. I want a family, not this group of crazies.

I tip-toe carefully around the glass and the whiskey puddles on my way to the kitchen. I need two things: a broom and the phone book. The broom hangs from a hook next to the back door; the phone book’s on the counter. I shuffle through the phone book looking for the “G” section. Is it “Greyhound” or “Grayhound?” I find it, write the number down on a scrap of paper, stick it in my pocket and head for the living room to clean up the mess.



# Sole Searching

NF

Thomas Publico

I can't tell you the exact time and date my life was stricken with this terrible addiction; I just know my first encounter occurred in 2004. My sister was the whole reason the family went out shopping, she needed new shoes, and I tagged along because dinner ensued after shopping. My sister found the pair of Chuck Taylor's she wanted; I stumbled upon the two pairs of shoes that grabbed my attention. I wasn't looking for new shoes, rather, they found me. Within a month I had bought five more pairs of shoes; I cracked, succumbing to the world of sneaker collecting. I was morphing into a sneaker-head, a shoe-fiend, a sneaker-freak; in basic terms, I was becoming an addict.

The first pairs don't start off as extraordinary; something you would pick up at discount shoe warehouses, nothing rare or extremely valuable, just something special the owner can look back on. My first pairs were Nike Dunks; one pair was brown and salmon pink with a plaid pattern for the inner sole. The second were grayish-purple with a touch of magenta; it didn't bother me that my first pairs were actually women's shoes, I just instantly fell in love with them because they looked so damn cool.

Niketalk.com, Instyeshoes.com, Hypebeast.com, Ebay.com, Sole Collector magazine, Sneaker Freaker magazine, these are the portals into a sneaker-heads world. They are bookmarked, subscribed to, or simply meshed into one's brain. You join forums, ask questions, post answers, comments, or opinions, post pictures of your "heat" (shoes), gain sneaker knowledge—those Jedi's are fugazi (fake), heel tab stitching is supposed to be black not yellow—sorry man, but hey you can either skate and thrash'em or donate them to the Salvation Army.

Niketalk.com is where you'll typically find me: sniper5zigen, 106 posts, Member Since: June 6, 2005. Here you'll gain access to an encyclopedia of shoe knowledge, meet the legends who have amassed a collection of over

200 pairs and it's still growing, chat with those who have been collecting since the mid-late 90's, or gaze in astonishment at pictures posted by collectors who have been in the game as early as the late 80's early 90's when Michael Jordan revolutionized the world of the player signature shoe and changed the way shoes, especially the sneaker, would be viewed.

Every sneaker head has his/her own style of collecting; there are Jordan-heads (they only collect Jordan Brand shoes), dunk-heads, SB-heads (SB standing for Nike Skateboarding), Air Force 1/AF1-heads, trainer-freaks (Air Max 1 all the way to the Air Max 360 are the favorites for these collectors), buyer-resellers (they are commonly found on Ebay), and then there are the Hypebeasts; these are individuals who view shoe collecting not as a strict and holy lifestyle but as a fad or trend in which everything bought and worn was done so for the sole purpose (no pun intended) to look, cool. I like to take it all in, I'm a purist, I collect shoes to enjoy them and not to have them placed in my room like a trophy; shoes are meant to be worn. I am not in it for any monetary gain, I have probably spent somewhere close to \$1000-2000 already on shoes; this is not a cheap hobby, but then again every hobby requires money to be spent. And I definitely do not choose to do this as an act of fitting in with the crowd. If asked what I collect, I simply answer, "I collect what I like".

August 2005, 6:00 A.M., it's cold and I'm standing in line with 20 other guys in front of the Utility Board Shop in Old Town Covina. The store won't be open for another 5 hours and all of us are still uncertain whether or not the store will get it. It, being the latest release from Nike SB, the Nike Dunk Tiffany. The shoe had been circulating the forums ever since Nike released pictures a few months prior to the release date. The Tiffany features a faux croc pattern outer in navy, with accented Tiffany blue-green panels, and is finished off with silver Nike wings and a diamond in silver stitch on the tongue as opposed to the traditional Nike swoosh. There was a lot of buzz regarding this shoe and I was craving them; half of me wanted them because they were sexy, the other half was swept up into the hype.

Standing in-line, especially alone, one begins to observe their surroundings. You profile the rest of the crowd, judging their outfits, especially their shoes. You debate whether they're newbie's, die-hard collectors, buyer-resellers, or the annoyed girlfriend who had wished she never agreed to keep her boyfriend company, longing for a warm bed. Suddenly a body comes to the door and a voice erupts, "We only have five pairs. The first five in line we'll let you in one at a time. This is our only shipment." I failed. I missed out on the shoe of the year; I researched what stores were getting the "Tiff's", I woke up at 5:30 A.M. every morning for an entire week, I drove from Claremont to San Dimas to Covina for an entire week, only to miss out on this shoe.

I hate the Tiffany's; they look cheap and the color-way is ugly.

As a child I was unknowingly immersed in the shoe world. I have stumbled upon photos in which I am donning toddler sized Nike Dunks, Adidas Superstars, and even Reebok Pumps, the first shoe that featured an internal inflation mechanism. However, when my parents wised-up to end the buying pricey shoes, especially since I was a child ruining expensive shoes, I relied on my uncle to supply me with good looking shoes; he's an old school sneaker-head. My uncle, along with his sons fed and nurtured my love for shoes. But, it wasn't till after high-school, unknown to me, I was coaxed into this fun, erratic, yet, destructive lifestyle.

December 2006, I'm waiting in an empty parking lot. Immediately a car approaches. It's engine is killed and the headlights dim. A figure approaches and proceeds to ask "How much are they?" I reply, "Gimme \$130. I'll have it for you tomorrow." The deal was done and arrangements had been made. Before I leave I ask, "Nine and a half or ten?" The voice replies, "Either." Not an illegal deal, rather, I have agreed to pick up a pair of shoes for a coworker. Why? Because I'm dedicated enough to wake up at the crack of dawn, wait in cold, wet, hot, dry weather, and depending on the situation head straight for work after the job is done.

5:00 A.M. the next morning, I'm on my way to pick up my cousin. It's dark, freezing and a bit cloudy. We arrive at the Warehouse Shoe Store in



Covina, grab the neon colored lawn chairs from the trunk and most importantly our carne asada breakfast burritos from Albertos; fortunately we're first in-line, unfortunately a light shower begins to descend on us.

6:30 A.M. and another sign of life reveals itself in the distance. A late 80's early 90's dark grey Dodge mini-van draws near, it's a teenage boy and his mom. The van parks and the boy and his mom have a conversation, from afar the mom looks weary and uncertain and the boy looks eager to get out of the van. A couple of minutes pass and suddenly the passenger door slings open, the boy steps out drudgingly and dreary eyed; he's a virgin, a newbie to this sneaker world, completely unprepared of what to expect, from the wait to the weather, we all must start from somewhere. 30 minutes pass and the mom heads towards us, "I'm going back home to sleep. It's freezing out here. Call me when you're done." She looks at all of us and replies, "You guys are crazy." At 8:55 A.M. the security guard opens the door and lets us in two at a time; I get my two pairs, bring my cousin back home, and bolt for work; I arrive 10 minutes late, all in the name of love.

December 2006, New Years weekend. My 21<sup>st</sup> birthday is on December 30 and in stereotypical fashion I celebrate in Las Vegas. I arrive at the Monte Carlo hotel and casino with two good friends in tow and a penchant to party and forget what universe I'm in. After dinner, at the hotel's own restaurant-brewery, already feeling the punishing effects of consuming copious amounts of alcohol I receive a text, "r u drunk yet? we're almost there. r u goin to keep me company ;-)" It's Christina, I've known her as long as I've been collecting, but only on an acquaintance level. After two years of her being kept in seclusion from the social world we've reunited our friendship and by chance she's on her way to Vegas. We party nonstop through the weekend and within a few of months we become a serious couple. 90% of sneaker-heads will tell you this is the end; your days of sneaker collecting will come to a halt or even become nonexistent. 90% of sneaker-heads are single males with the sole intent (pun included) of

making one's sneaker needs satisfied. When a female enters the picture sneaker collecting becomes shunned, ignored, forgotten. In my case this becomes partially true; there's no more camping out, no more casual trips to Ontario Mills or the outlets at Cabazon, and especially true, there's no more shameless shopping spree's; the days of buying three to five pairs of shoes in one day becomes taboo. The sneaker collecting lifestyle is a destructive one; there becomes a self-realization that being a sneaker-head does not necessarily mean one must obtain every single sneaker made, rather, sneaker collecting means the pursuit and enjoyment of beautifully crafted sneakers that the individual will love and cherish like a brand new puppy.

My sneaker collecting has slowed down considerably, yet, my love for sneakers is everlasting. From the words of Spike Lee, "They're just shoes."



I am not a cold weather girl  
(I don't know how to dress for it)  
And my blood is cranky and slow  
So when icy winter wind shuffles around me feet  
Then slides down my goose pimples spine  
My chest fills with ache  
For long, smooth hours of heat  
More specifically for seven, no, eight months ago  
For last middle summer and it's stretched out days  
When we drove down the curling tongue paved road  
To sand and ocean stretching out, foamy and sweet.

Into water unafraid  
We tumbled like blessed baby fishes  
With the pull and tug of the universe  
Crooking its little finger around our waists  
Catching at our navels  
And down again and around we'd go.  
After enough salt was swallowed to qualify us as sardines  
We'd slink back up the hill of crumbly sand  
To the basking rectangles of neon and lay  
Like house cats in the sun.

# For the Love of Sick

NF

Tamara Gunn

I can remember how much I loved to wake up with pink eye when I was a child. If both eyes were crusted up, I was too excited. My mom would get me a hot washcloth to loosen up the gunk and pick the crust out of my eyelashes. I would lay back on the couch with a pillow under my head and tissues under my eyes while my mom administered the eye drops into my sick eyes. The first few times I had pink eye it was a difficult process getting those droplets into my eyes; my eyelids always wanted to blink right as my mom squeezed the bottle. If my eye was completely crusted up, that was awesome. It was a wonderful procedure.

My dad was a doctor and as a child I loved to get sick; maybe it was just a fascination with what my father did or a way to gain attention. My “Munchausen’s Syndrome” began before kindergarten, but school definitely helped add fuel to the fire. I can’t call myself a hypochondriac because I never feared getting a disease or sick, I wanted terribly to get a disease or get sick, as I did in kindergarten one day. I was at P.E. with my best friend Kate Sayers and I picked up a stick and began using it as a walking stick. I swung it right and left, imitating a blind person. I then broke the news to Katie that I had gone blind. She stood in front of me asking, “What am I wearing?” I stared right at her and said, “Katie, I can’t see what you’re wearing. . . I’m blind. I left my good stick at home.” I really thought I fooled her good.

Another time I fooled some classmates was in 7th grade. I had developed a pectus, the term used to describe when the breastplate is concave, resulting in, well for me anyways, more cleavage. I was having chest pains and my pediatrician thought she heard a murmur in my heart, so I started

seeing a heart specialist to see if the pectis was preventing my body from operating normally. It wasn't, of course, because I'm just not lucky enough to have some major health problem. The doctor told me if I wanted to correct my pectis that it would be a purely cosmetic surgery. But open-heart surgery sounds so much more fun and drastic. When I returned to school after my doctor visit I announced to two close friends that I was having open-heart surgery because my pectis was squishing my heart, but then I forgot about my lie and soon my mother got a phone call and soon after that I had to correct my lies. Apparently my friends and their mothers had begun to plan a big party for me before the surgery. It's easy to see why I liked getting sick; you get all sorts of cool shit.

I learned at an early age that if you are sick, you don't go to school, which is probably the best thing a child can know. I was a lot like the child in the Shel Silverstein poem, "Sick," who pretends to be every type of sick until she hears it's Saturday. In kindergarten I only had school for a half day so I usually stayed the whole time; I loved school. My mom could have a totally different memory though. In first grade by sucking on my arm to create patches of hickeys I could get sent home for having "a rash." The rash didn't last very long and ended up looking like someone had grabbed my arm too hard and left bruises. So that one lasted only a month or so.

When I would go home sick, I got to spend all day with my mom, by myself, no dad or sisters. We would go home and she would tuck me in bed (if she knew I was faking it) or on the couch with a movie (if she knew I wasn't). Then came the ginger ale and orange juice and soup and saltines. This was the epitome of comfort food, glorious food that promised to "stay down" or heal a cold. If I was going to be sick for a few days we would go to the library and check-out Tales from the Brothers Grimm, hosted by Shelley Duval; tales of the Snow Queen and the Nightingale narrated my sick day. Then we would head to Eckerd's drug store to pick out coloring

books and maze books (mazes were my favorite). That beats school any day of the week.

I got a lot of bloody noses in first grade too. They were quite terrible and I was known for bleeding so much I could fill up a sink. The next day my mom would instruct me to be very careful not to bump my nose, I would be allowed to sit out during P.E. When no one was looking, and I was careful not to get caught, I would bang my nose on my knees to try to start the warm flow of blood out one of my nostrils (never had a double nostril bloody nose). Success came a few times using this method. I still take pride in the fact that I know the proper way to handle bloody noses. I hate to see people tilt their heads back and pinch their nose shut. Hey dingle berry, the blood has to go somewhere and when people do that the blood goes into their sinus cavity and straight into their throats. The proper procedure would be to put your head between your knees and pinch the bone right under the bridge of your nose. This speeds the bleeding allowing the blood to exit quickly and fluidly. I loved when I sat patiently with my head tucked between my knees and then I peeled the tissue away from my nose and with it comes a long blood clot/snot. The longer the better, I want to feel it being pulled out of my head from behind my eyeball, all the way through the nasal passages, through my nostril and then hang there: a crimson trophy of my successful nosebleed.

The sickness I abused more than any other would be the Strep throat. When I look back, I think they should have just taken out my tonsils to shut me up. I would have been so happy. They say that you get all the ice cream you want after you get your tonsils snipped out. It started when I was in third grade and by the time I was in fourth grade I was swabbing the back of my throat and doing the test myself at my dad's office. When I was smaller I actually had strep a few times and learned all the symptoms. One

of my few methods of learning symptoms was when my mom would call my dad at work and this is what I would hear:

“She barely has a fever.”

“She says her throat hurts, she can’t eat or drink.”

“Yes, I think I see bumps on the back of her throat.”

“Come here Tamara, lift up your shirt.”

“Yes, she has pink spots on her belly.”

“Strep?”

“Ok, I’ll pick it up in half an hour.”

I now hold very similar conversations with my father. It’s quite convenient having a doctor in the family. I can call my dad about everything that goes wrong or right with my body, or anyone else’s I know. I’m sure it’s a pain in the neck to be a doctor. Everyone at work asks, what is it, Doc? What do I got, Doc? What will you give me for it, Doc? Then the doctor comes home to his father-in-law calling to know about back cramps. Then when he finally gets a chance to come to church with his family, everyone there has a medical question to ask him. The cycle repeats; this, this and this are happening, Doc, what could it be? He doesn’t care, he is trying to spend time with his family; he has no obligation to answer everyone’s questions (unless they are paying for it). Doctors have the knowledge.

Doctors also know when you are fibbing, unfortunately. The Strep throat thing stopped when I became fascinated with having a Strep test done. The test was a grey plastic rectangle with four indentations on the face of it. After swabbing my throat, the nurse would rub the swab on the four indentations that had paper on the bottom of them, then she poured different liquids out of bottles that looked like the eye drop bottles my mom used when I had pink eye. Then if I really did have Strep throat the paper on the bottom of the indentations would turn pink, like a pregnancy test. I began by helping the nurse run the swab and drop the droplets in, then I could swab my own throat, and then I knew where they kept them



and I would just pull one out of the sterile cabinet and administer it myself. I am sure my dad's partner pulled him aside and told him their budget didn't include Strep tests whenever she wanted.

Stomachaches weren't something I pulled very often. Probably because I wasn't one of those kids that got upset stomachs, my parents took a lot of care to make sure we got proper nutrition. The only time I remember faking the shit out of a stomachache was at summer camp. When kids go to camp and get him sick they usually end up in the nurse's office with a stomachache. There is nothing like a camp nurse. Usually nice and plump, with a full bosom to administer some grandma lovin', they feed kids Pepto-Bismol by the spoonful. A lot of girls in my cabin were "sick" so I felt a little left out. I was happy to be at camp, glad to have swapped parents for younger, more attractive counselors, to be playing in the woods and doing crafts. But when you have no other campers who feel this way it can get lonesome, so I became sick too, going to the nurse office, crying when it rained, writing pathetic homesick letters home. I should have won an award for being the most homesick kid. I didn't fake sick half-heartedly, I go all out.

I owe Steven Spielberg a thank you for showing all us kids how to make the temperature rise on a thermometer. For years I tried rubbing it with my tongue as fast as I could, hoping the friction would warm it up a few degrees. Then I saw E.T. When I saw the boy lean out of bed and hold the thermometer under the lamp I was awestruck. So easy and simple, a brilliant trick. As I got older my mother would walk away after sticking the thermometer in my mouth. I would quickly throw the silver tip next to a light bulb and wait. Sometimes it would get way too hot, like 107 degrees—I would have been dead—so I would have to shake it down until it was a more appropriate temperature. I tried to keep it between 99 and 100, just sick enough to stay home. That kid was a genius.

As I have grown older, I try hard not to get sick and only fake it when I'm too hung-over to work. I finally got a pretty bad ailment that lasted 6 months and have had a minor surgery, so my wishing to get cancer, pneumonia, broken bones, AIDS, all stopped. It is not fun to be sick and having doctors telling you that they cannot do anything for you. I lost faith in the medical business for a while, since my 6 month long ailment was caused by my medication, all the doctors I saw for it were rude and unhelpful, and medicine couldn't fix it. I try to avoid the whole process whenever possible and only consult my dad. I believe in preventative medicine, rather than corrective.

I work with kids now and recall how I thought I was fooling everybody. It is so easy to tell when a youngster is faking it. There is one rather daft mother, who if her child complains of any ailment, will say to them, "If you don't feel better I'll come pick you up." HA. If I was that kid I wouldn't try very hard to feel better. I would writhe on the floor moaning and perhaps talking in tongues to really freak my teachers out, to insure that they call my mother. Sometimes I would blow my cover by getting so excited when my mom showed up. I would spring from my slumped head-on-my-desk position and skip out the door, whistling a tune. I have watched kids do this too. I am the art teacher so I have these special healing powers. When kids are sick and I announce what fun things we'll be doing that afternoon, children will rub their bellies or heads, looking very confused, and state, "Hmm, I think I'm feeling better now."

I watched a kid break his arm at school one day. He fell from the jungle gym and I rushed over and gingerly picked up each part of his body to check for damage. When I picked up his left arm, it was wavy. I picked his body up and moved him inside to sit and wait for paramedics. I called my dad right away and asked quietly what I could do for him, he ran through a few things but I quickly had to get off the phone. The medics showed up

and took great care of him. A few days after the incident there was a kid who kept “falling” off the equipment in the back yard. Another teacher mentioned it saying it was really peculiar. But I knew exactly what that kid was trying to do. I agree, casts look cool and people can sign them, and I’m sure you get all the ice cream you want when you break a bone.



She is barely five—or six?  
When I catch sight of her...

Walking  
hand grasping the hand that  
Pulls  
her behind her mother  
Weaving  
through the streets  
surrounded  
by Darkness  
encroaching upon her red summer dress.

Colorless people shove their way through  
crowds  
of tourists throwing their money  
away for a trinket  
high priced ornaments  
to take home and put on coffee tables  
and fire places  
and hang on walls  
as the red lights above  
blink and  
swirl and  
invite  
you to the show  
Inside.

The young girl blankly stares  
Lost in the throngs  
Of people

Red dress and Red lights  
her innocence  
surrounded by  
decadence that threatens to  
swallow  
her

but

she does not know, and so it can't.

not as long  
as that hand that holds her  
does not let go.

I hope it will never let her go.



# Contributors

**Beth Andreoli** is opening the door.

**Vibiana Aparicio-Chamberlin**, poet, painter and community activist has lived most of her life in Pasadena, where she attends Pasadena City college and raised her sons, John and Ricardo, who also attended P.C.C. Aparicio-Chamberlin credits her mother, Isabel, a Mexican story teller and her father, Elias, a spiritual and intellectual Mexican Indian as influencing her creative thinking. Her rich dream life is a source of much of her surrealistic poetry.

**N.S. David** is studying necromancy so she can bring Albert Camus back from the dead. Her ideal life would involve sunning with the renowned absurdist in Leysin, bathing before breakfast, smoking cigarettes, and speechifying 'til the man admits that life may be more than the meaningless farting around of our mortal, spongy, fleshbags.

**Ikia Noel Fletcher** is somewhere between the crease of a beautiful smile and innocently uncontrollable laughter. She was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio (and proud of it!). She has driven cross country four times with no GPS, visited 27 of the 50 states in addition to various international destinations...she loves to travel. And, she might even consider being a gypsy but upon her mother's request she has to graduate first.

**Daniel Groot** grew up in Bangkok, Thailand before returning to the United States for college. He has traveled back to live in squatter/slum communities in Bangkok as well as Manila Philippines while seeking to integrate a love of justice and urban transformation with a Christian spirituality.

**Mathew Jackson** is a student at PCC with English literature as a primary interest, with a secondary interest in psychology. He plans on pursuing writing as a career, and his favorite authors are Neil Gaiman, George R. R. Martin, and Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

**Tina Johnson** has an aptitude for writing about serious issues in a humorous, yet profound way. Through her writing, she hopes to shed light on the many ways that children hear, interpret, then imitate their various environments, particularly their parental units. Writing is the way Tina connects to the deepest part of herself and others. Writing is her prayer.

**William Kloezeman** has recently decided to allow for the possibility of maybe trusting people again. He may even, one day, consider "making friends" or "falling in love," if only for the sake of novelty.

**Carlos Lemus** is a writer in denial who consistently engages in self-sabotage. He illegally crossed the Mexico-U.S. border at the age of 13 in search of adventure, but he managed to turn the quest into normal living. When not traveling or exploring his artistic side through writing, photography or painting, Carlos can be found in Central Juvenile Hall, where he works as a Psychiatric Social Worker providing therapy to incarcerated youth (a side of normality that he greatly enjoys).

**Frank Luna** was the representative for Tennessee's 10th district (Bugtussle, TN), chairman of the Democratic Congressional Face Paint Committee, and the 5th ranking member among house Democrats from 1980 through 1986.

**Luis Martinez** is an artist who repairs dishwashers for a living, reading and writing in his service van on his lunch hours. His literary loves include Sylvia Plath, Ernest Hemingway and John Fante. Luis, having recently completed his lower-division coursework at PCC, will begin classes at Cal State Los Angeles in the fall of 2010 and looks forward (with much enthusiasm) to exchanging his steel-toe work boots for the softer soles of an English professor.



**Ryan McGovern Smith** is in love with storytelling. In the dimness of a theatre, with his nose inside a novel, or in between a pair of headphones, his heart belongs to the men and women of the arts. He can only hope to give back to this world but a fraction of the beauty that he's stolen. He studies Creative Writing, Design, and Photography at PCC and has a Bachelors Degree in Sound Arts from Expression College in San Francisco.

**Thomas Publico** is currently in what seems to be his 10th year at PCC. He is an english major with aspirations of becoming a California Highway Patrol officer but is also looking towards a career in the automotive industry.

**Andres Alberto Reconco** is the third of six siblings in a Salvadoran family. He immigrated from El Salvador in 1992 and he considers his writing to be mostly creative nonfiction. Images from his childhood fuel the writing he now does as an adult.

**Karen Schiller Rogers**, a long ago alumna of P. C. C., began her work life as a kindergarten teacher in Oakland, had a variety of jobs over the years and retired from a bank stock brokerage operation in downtown L.A. Along the way, she married, raised two children and mentored a young foster lad from Taos. After retirement, she returned to P. C. C. to take classes she's always desired: painting, creative writing and piano.

**Ellen Siu** is very pleased that her writing was selected.

**J. L. Tindage** is currently a teacher who's collecting recipes and dreaming of places she can't afford to travel to.





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And to all the writers and artists who submitted their work.

# Associate in Arts Degree

## English Literature

Courses in this area of emphasis encompass traditional literary history and interpretation as well as cross-cultural inquiry and current theoretical debates. Literature majors are trained in critical reading, writing and thinking, as well as in literary interpretation. Literature is the study of representation, ideas, language, and culture. As such, it is a source of knowledge and pleasure, as well as a field of study. Literary texts are social documents in artistic form that speak to us as much about historical issues as about aesthetic matters. Literature students learn to think critically and to understand the role that texts play in a given society, past or present.

### Requirements

- Students must complete a minimum of sixty (60) units. These units must meet PCC's General Education Requirements and must include eighteen units in the area of emphasis.
- **To complete the eighteen units in the area of emphasis, students must complete English 1C or English 26 and fifteen (15) units consisting of courses from at least three of the five categories listed below and including a minimum of two Literary Survey courses. Each course must be completed with a grade of "C" or better.**
- The courses that universities and colleges require for transfer vary. In selecting literature courses, students should consult with Counseling Services to determine the particular transfer requirements of specific transfer institutions.

## English Literature courses offered at Pasadena City College

### Literary Survey:

Engl 30A	American Literature	3
Engl 30B	American Literature	3
Engl 30C	American Literature	3
Engl 44B	World Literature	3
Engl 44C	World Literature	3
Engl 46A	English Literature	3
Engl 46B	English Literature	3

### Gender and Ethnic Literature:

Engl 24	Lit in Translation	3
Engl 25C	Women in Literature	3
Engl 47	Mexican/Chicano Lit	3
Engl 48	Asian Literature	3
Engl 50	Afro-American Lit	3
Engl 51	Native American Lit	3
Engl 52	Asian-American Lit	3

### Literary Origins:

Engl 44A	World Literature	3
Engl 45A	Literature of the Bible	3
Engl 45B	Literature of the Bible	3
Engl 78A	Intro to Shakespeare	3
Engl 78B	Intro to Shakespeare	3
Engl 82A	Intro to Mythology	3
Engl 82B	Intro to Mythology	3
Engl 82C	Intro to Mythology	3

### Genre and Modes in Literature:

Engl 25A	Modern Literature	3
Engl 25D	Science Fiction/Fantasy	3
Engl 25E	Literature of Horror	3
Engl 25F	Comedy and Literature	3
Engl 25G	Mystery/Crime Fiction	3
Engl 49A	Film as Dramatic Lit	3
Engl 49B	Film as Dramatic Lit	3
Engl 53	Interpreting Poetry	3
Engl 57	Modern Drama	3
Engl 60	Masterpieces of Drama	3
Engl 61	Intro to the Novel	3
Engl 34	Major Novelist	1
Engl 35	Major Dramatist	1
Engl 36	Major Poet	1
Engl 37	Major Critic	1

### Special Topics in Literature:

Engl 25H	American Journeys	3
Engl 25I	Post-Colonial Lit	3
Engl 25J	Utopian/Dystopian Lit	3
Engl 26	Intro to Lit. Theory	3
Engl 54	California Literature	3
Engl 59	Children's Literature	3



# Creative Writing

at Pasadena City College

## **English 5A (Creative Writing)**

Prerequisite: Eligibility for English 1B. Creative literary expression; short story, poetry and essay. Individual experimentation with various forms; students evaluate their work and work of classmates in light of contemporary writings. *Transfer Credit: CSU; UH.*

*\*CAN: ENGL 6.*

## **English 5B (Creative Writing)**

Prerequisite: English 5A, 6, 7 or 8. Creative literary expression such as: short story, poetry, dramatic form and essay. The focus is on in-depth criticism of student work and professional writers.

*Transfer Credit: CSU; UH*

## **English 7 (Inscape Magazine Publication)**

Prerequisite: Engl 1A. Critical review and selection of creative material; design and layout of a literary magazine. *Transfer Credit:*

*CSU; UH*

## **English 8 (Writing Poetry)**

Prerequisite: Eligibility for English 1A. Writing of poetry in all forms. Reading of traditional and current work. *Transfer Credit:*

*CSU; UH*

## **English 9 (Creative Nonfiction)**

Prerequisite: Engl 1A. Writing and analysis of creative nonfiction such as memoirs, reviews, profiles, and nature writing. *Transfer*

*Credit: CSU; UH*



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