



**INSCAPE**  
**2007**



# INSCAPE

The Literary Magazine of Pasadena City College

Pasadena, California

2007



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The Literary Magazine of Pasadena City College

Volume 62  
Formerly *Pipes of Pan*: Volumes 1-29

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All work included in *Inscape* is selected by the student editors; exceptions to this are the prize winners. These are selected by faculty judges of the creative writing contest. All work, both for the contest and for publication in the magazine, is read and judged anonymously.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The staff of *Inscape* would like to thank:

Amy Ulmer, English Division Dean

Beverly Tate, Interim English Division Dean, Spring 2007

Professor Chris McCabe

Professor Elsie Rivas Gomez

Denise Albright, English Division Secretary

Jill Keller, English Division Clerk

Scott Thayer, Assistant Dean of Student Services

Publications Office

Corey Granados

and all the students who submitted work for consideration

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Creative Writing Contest Winners

FICTION

“Leaving Hernandez, Living Smith”

By Joan Roa

Appears on page 8



POETRY

“Lucky”

By Karen Rogers

Appears on page 46



NONFICTION

“Catching On”

By Arielle Ceci

Appears on page 72

Congratulations to the winners!  
And, thank you to all who entered.

FICTION



## Leaving Hernandez, Living Smith

It was almost as hot as a midday sun in México. At least, that's what Mamá said. The fan was broken, and we couldn't afford to get an air conditioner installed in our cramped little living space. It wasn't like every mansion on the next neighborhood block, but here, in this neighborhood, there was no such thing as jealousy. Everyone in this barrio was suffering from the heat as much as we were. Mamá was probably perspiring more than anyone else in the whole neighborhood. She was flustered trying to get my younger sister to stand still.

"¡Ay, *Hija!* Stay. Stay," Mamá commanded. She was pushing pins through the pink fabric wrapped around María to keep all the measurements in place. Right now, the would-be dress looked more like a toga. María leaned out a little to try and grab at her cell phone on the dresser. The charm bracelet she wore, one with little golden golf clubs and baseball bats and other things her boyfriend liked, jingled as her hand strained for reach. The cell phone brrr'd, inching its way slowly toward her with a polyphonic version of Frank Sinatra's "My Way" sounding off.

"¡Ay! ¡*Jesús, María!* Stay—"

"Ow!" María howled. One of the pins had poked her.

Mamá smiled crazily, the way mothers smile with wide, angry eyes that said "I told you so." She held María's arm, but María pulled it away. "You know, you know—" Mamá wagged an implied finger at María with the way she nodded furiously. "Sometimes I don't know about you anymore, *Hija*. You come back from the movies with all of your friends and then all of a sudden you forget how to give *respeta*. You don't listen to me no more. Hey!" Mamá caught María rolling her eyes. "See? See that? *No escuchas. No respeta. Ay*, I don't know about you anymore. . . . Stop. Moving." Mamá grew impatient.

"But, Mo-om," María ignored her altogether. Her lower lip pooched out and she whimpered, "My cell phone is ringing. John is probably calling me, Mom." María said "John" with a drawn-out, haughty emphasis of importance the same way people dropped names for bouncers out front of The Tropicana. She was sure Mamá approved of her boyfriend. How could she not? John had an air conditioner. *Abuela* had her doubts, though. John was

Christian, but he wasn't Catholic. *Abuela* had her doubts about anyone who didn't believe in the Blessed Virgin or Confession— this to her only meant trouble. Like the Trementina sisters. But Mamá, with obligatory acceptance, hustled and bustled about the kitchen one afternoon many months ago when María invited this John character over for lunch. She spent hours preparing her delicious tamales for him. . . he who called her by her first name when he stepped casually into her kitchen.

And Mamá probably thought about this, now. About this foreigner who had stepped foot into her kitchen—with his shoes still on, his dirty pair of sneakers. Stepping in with those dirty things and addressing her by her first name like some woman he could've met on the bus or on a street corner. She didn't tell *Abuela* about it, though. We all knew what would happen if she told *Abuela* about it. "Just call him back later. This is more important." Mamá swept aside the urgency in her daughter's voice as she snubbed her nose. Sweat ran down her forehead, beaded on her upper lip. It was hot, her back was wet. It didn't help that hot flashes came and went, she often complained of them the same way old ladies did about rheumatism. "Hold still, *Hija*. If you hold still, this'll get done faster."

I watched them in the mirror. María was pretty. Probably the prettiest of the Hernandez sisters. *Abuela* said she resembled Mamá more than any other woman in the family, even my aunts. Well, at least, she resembled what Mamá used to look like. Mamá had gotten plump on all the problems she could chew, all the hardships she could stomach. And maybe we—María, Juanita and Me—were her cud. Papá and the bills could have been the death of her. She survived, though. And now it was something else, more like. . . *un muerte en vida*, a living death. Her hands were more worn than the leather on saddles. The edges of her eyes were raked with crows' feet. Right now, they expressed an implicit anger and frustration, one that grew the more María fidgeted. An anger and frustration that seemed to be most evident at times like these. It seemed most like a grudge against María, but it wasn't. Only I knew it wasn't. It was something much deeper than that. "Hold. Still," she hissed with pins in her mouth.



“I’m not a statue, Mom,” María said crossly.

Mamá punctured the dress with fury. “You could be for about five seconds, Hija.”

“Why am I doing this? I don’t even want to, Mom.”

“You look pretty! See? Don’t you look pretty?”

“I have better things to do, Mom.” María rolled her eyes again.

Those implicit feelings boiling inside of Mamá simmered down to a gentle anguish that trembled in her throat. “Isn’t this important, *Hija*? Don’t you want to look pretty?”

“I hate the color pink,” María said with abhorrence. “Aren’t *quinceañera* dresses supposed to be white or something? Whatever. This is stupid. This thing is itchy. I look fat in this, for Chrissake—” She held up a flap of her dress. “All my other friends are going to celebrate their sweet sixteenth, Mom. Not their fucking fifteenth—” Slap. The snare of Mamá’s quick hand caught María’s words as soon as they were uttered. And no sooner had the expletive shot out of María’s mouth than did she find herself cupping the red mark on her cheek, heatedly embarrassed and furrowing her brow, her jaw jutting out with resentment.

Mamá huffed. All the pins had fallen from her mouth, except one that clung to her lower lip. When she shut her mouth, it was clamped between her lips like a woman’s toothpick. She breathed angrily through her nostrils for many moments. She didn’t notice Juanita, the youngest of the Hernandez sisters, step in on the scene with her dolly. Juanita hid behind my pant leg and clutched it with one wide, astonished eye watching. Mamá’s bottom lip was quivering to stay shut. If she broke the silence with yelling, then the moment would have faded. Maybe she had a deeper truth inside of her that she couldn’t express in any language. And only the uncomfortable silence that hung between them would do.

María noticeably shifted gears from that initial shameful resentment, now fuming as if an injustice had been done to her. Then, she ripped the pink toga off and looked Mamá directly in the eye. “You and Grandma are so stupid. Why can’t you let me be normal, Mom? This isn’t Mexico!”

The words seemed to hurt Mamá. They flung her into a



reflective silence, and then an insufferable repose. How much her daughter had grown up without her. Grew and grew right under her nose, and now, she seemed like a stranger—a foreigner in her kitchen with her shoes still on. Mamá needed something, anything to regain authority. She seemed to be frantically searching for it with the quiver of her eyes. Then they stopped quivering. Something must have clicked in her head. It seemed to sedate the simmers to careful steam, something that gave her enough strength to pluck the pink shrivel off the carpet. I could almost feel the wetness of her back, the heat riding out of her collar, the mounting headache. She smiled a lazy, but benevolent chin-up smile while she wrapped the pink fabric neatly into a bundle. She then held it to her chest in an affectionate, nurturing cradle while she spoke: “This isn’t México, *Hija*. I know it isn’t México. But this is my house. And my house is Mexican. And if you don’t like Mexican, then leave. If you like Smith, then live Smith.” Mamá said John’s last name with a short, crisp hiss. Like a taboo expletive. The secret smile behind her angry, spotted eyes smarted.

María caught it. She quickly turned away from Mamá to avoid her eyes, but she whirled right into a reflection of her. One of Mamá and me and little Juanita hiding behind my leg with half a tiny face watching. María saw all of us; then herself, in the foreground, sharpening. María was lucky. I never got a *quinceañera*, and Juanita wasn’t old enough to know what one was.

“You can empty out the home inside of you. You can kill the life—*la vida*—inside of you.” Mamá said that last sentence with a particular tone, one that was still trying to forgive María for an old offense.

Only María and I knew the full implications of that sentence. She deflated with a momentary sadness. Was she reflecting on all those things? Those things her mother had done for her recently? The tamales, the dress, the *quinceañera*. The guilt seemed to corner her, and soon the resentment began to resurface with rabid intentions of defiance. María probably knew it was silly to think that way, but Mamá wouldn’t—couldn’t understand her true feelings. Her fists balled, the charm bracelet John had given her tinkled. “My Way” began to sound off again, and María’s fists



balled up tighter.

“You could take away yourself.” Mamá’s eyes darted from the cell phone’s brrr-brrr’ing on the dresser to María, then from María, to me and Juanita and then back to María. She suddenly felt more rushed to get out what she wanted to say: “. . . but when you realize *que es importante*, you’ll come rushing home with Smiths nipping at your heels.”

María. That stubborn María paused, staring at Juanita in the mirror. Juanita only. Then, with a new robust air in her that was determined to prove Mamá wrong, María stepped off her stool and slammed her foot down. A pin hiding in the carpet pricked her. Adrenaline salvaged María a moment to storm off while snatching her brrr’ing cell phone off the dresser on her way out the door.

Little Juanita, though as young and naïve as she was, began to sob quietly while she got on all fours to search for the fallen pins, collecting them in her tiny, pudgy, supple palm and lifting them up to Mamá meekly.

Mamá stood in silence with a twitching smile and faraway eyes. She didn’t see her youngest daughter’s offering. Only her own reflection in the mirror. She squeezed the pink fabric closer against her chest, even if the pins were poking her. Maybe she was remembering something from her youth—maybe a big mistake. Maybe she was seeing María’s reflection as much as she was her own.

Mamá, Juanita and I knew María would marry a Smith, become a Smith, give birth to a Smith, and die a Smith. But she’d always be thinking about that unfinished pink dress stashed away in her mother’s closet, and how good it would have looked on her. How good it would have looked before she plumped, grew coarse and leathery, and withered. Before, when she was fifteen and young and beautiful, and Hernandez.

But only the hot, midday México sun—the one that stung her eyes and seasoned her supple cheeks, burnt her bare feet on the concrete as she waited for Smith— only it must have really known that María had been sorry for everything, everything, for a long, long time.

## Recycling Duty

My first real crush on a boy was in fifth grade and his name was Michael. He was a skinny kid with bright blue eyes and wavy blonde hair. My desk was right behind his in Mrs. Green’s class. Every day I watched him doodle in his textbooks and scratch random words on the inside of his desk. Occasionally Mrs. Green would catch him and say, “Michael Martin, if you keep drawing in those books I’ll have to make your parents pay for new ones.” He usually mumbled an apology and waited until her attention was fixed elsewhere to start again.

I wasted hours of class, when I should have been paying attention to English or Social Studies, daydreaming about him. I wrote our names together inside a marker-drawn heart, but always made sure I tore up the evidence and threw the pieces in the recycling box.

We never talked much outside of class. He spent recess and lunch with the other boys playing four-square or basketball. The boys never really wanted anything to do with the girls. It was like an unspoken rule that if a boy ever so much as talked to a girl, they were going out. So we all stayed divided by that invisible line. No one wanted to get teased about having a boyfriend or girlfriend, because that was just embarrassing.

One day, late in the school year, Michael and I were assigned “Recycling Duty.” All the students had to do it for two weeks and Mrs. Green chose who the victims would be by pulling names from a hat. Recycling Duty required going to each classroom in the elementary school and collecting their cardboard boxes filled with unwanted scraps of paper. I had been hoping so badly to be paired with Michael since the beginning of the year, and I finally got my wish. Not only did I get to miss some of Geography class, but I got to spend time alone with the boy I really liked.

After we were sent out of class, Michael would knock on each classroom door and yell, “Recycling!” at the top of his lungs until the annoyed teacher opened their door and let him in. I would just stand in the hall as far away from the classroom as possible, trying to balance all the boxes in my arms without dropping them.

When we finally got all the boxes we wandered out to the giant dumpster behind the school. That day, the sky was dark with



the threat of rain lingering in the thick air.

I glanced up at the clouds and said, "Can we hurry? Looks like a storm."

Michael smiled and dropped the boxes to the ground in front of him, spilling papers all over the place. The wind picked up a few scraps and spun them around.

"Are you afraid of the rain or something?"

"No," I replied quickly. "I just don't like it."

The wind blew the dark strands of my hair into my eyes so I set the boxes down carefully to brush them away. I noticed Michael staring at me, curiosity lighting his blue eyes. I felt trapped under his intense stare, all of his energy suddenly directed at me. But as quickly as it had focused on me, it vanished when he looked away.

Michael grabbed one of the boxes and had to stand on his tiptoes to empty it into the huge metal dumpster. His shirt crept up his back, revealing a line of pale skin. I forced myself to look away and distractedly dumped the contents of my boxes into the dumpster until they were empty.

"I'm done," I announced. "We should get back."

"Do you really want to go back? 'Cause we don't have to right away."

I raised my eyebrows and asked, "What else can we do?"

Michael didn't reply. Instead he started walking toward where the asphalt parking lot ended and the large expanse of field began. There was a long patch of green grass that took a sudden dip where the football field and track began. Beyond that was a border of trees that formed the end of the school's property and led into a residential neighborhood.

He headed for the field and I had no choice but to go after him, even though the good girl voice in my head yelled at me not to.

"Come on, Anna!" Michael insisted as he glanced back to make sure I was actually following. A cold drop of water landed on my arm and I realized it was starting to rain. The clouds were dark and frightening. I suddenly thought about the story I had heard about this old lady that got struck by lightning standing under a



tree or something. A flash of panic ran through my body, bringing tiny goose bumps to my arms.

"Michael, wait!" I called out. "It's raining."

He wasn't fazed at all by this news and pretended not to hear me.

Soon we were walking across the small football field with faded paint markings. I looked over my shoulder and saw our school from a distance. It was a large Victorian mansion. The building was originally a house many years ago and had been converted into a school in the late '80s. It was a strange little private school in the middle of nowhere, but it was apparently one of the best in the state.

Michael started weaving through the tall oak trees that bordered the field and I stayed several feet behind him, unsure of our destination. I hoped he would hurry and do whatever it was we were doing because I didn't want to get in trouble. Most of the kids in my class thought of me as innocent and stuck up just because I was quiet and never caused any trouble.

Up ahead was the small pond that was placed in between the trees and the homes. I had seen it before, during P.E. when we were on the field, but I had never actually explored it any further. It was a man-made drainage pond with dirty brown tinted water and a few dirty ducks that inhabited it.

Michael stopped suddenly and lowered himself onto one of the several large rocks that were scattered around the edge of the pond. He looked at me with a grin that I did my best to return. I couldn't help glancing back at the school every now and then to make sure there were no teachers out looking for us.

"This is kinda cool," I commented absently. I was much more interested in watching Michael than the stupid pond.

"I live a few blocks from here. They tore down a bunch of trees to put in more houses and this dumb pond thing a few years ago."

"Oh," I mumbled.

"It really sucks because the trees were so much nicer to have here than more houses."

I nodded, but Michael wasn't looking in my direction. His



gaze remained fixed on the pond. By now the rain had become a consistent drizzle, but nothing too serious. There was no thunder so I figured we were safe. I finally let myself relax a little and knelt down to sit on a rock close to his. We sat in silence for a while, Michael staring at the pond and me staring at Michael. I had never seen him so quiet and still. He was usually all over the place, always doing something to keep himself occupied.

After a few minutes, Michael finally snapped out of his daze. He glanced over at me and seemed surprised to see me for a moment, like he forgot there was someone else with him. I smiled shyly, fidgeting with the thin silver bracelet on my wrist.

Michael leaned forward until he was only inches away from my face, still perched on the rock. I had no idea what he was doing but resisted the urge to flinch or move.

Then he kissed me.

He pressed his mouth against mine awkwardly and unexpectedly. It only lasted a split second before he pulled away.

I hadn't even had time to close my eyes or kiss him back. I felt a flicker of disappointment underneath my confusion and excitement. It wasn't what I expected. I expected fireworks or magic or something amazing for my first kiss. It was even with the boy I wanted it to be with.

Michael looked almost as disoriented as I felt. His gaze darted all over the place, avoiding mine. Then he suddenly looked right into my eyes and grinned.

"Let's race back."

Before I could respond he broke into a sprint toward the trees.

I jumped up from the rock, now slick from the rain, and ran after him. My legs felt shaky and weak. My tennis shoes made squeaking noises against the wet grass as I did my best to catch up. I had to push my skirt down as I ran to keep it from flying up. Rain began to fly into my eyes, making my vision blurry until I wiped them clear. He was a lot faster than me and he quickly disappeared into the distance, back to the stuffy school where nothing special ever happened to me.

## The Small Goodbye

As I make my way up the narrow pathway which leads to his Hollywood apartment, I stop to admire the fat and round luminescent moon hung low in the summer sky. It looks ominous and foreboding, and is watching me from a black and starless night as I inhale deeply the last traces of night blooming jasmine and of cool, wet earth. I slip quietly through the sliding glass doors and into Dave's sad and mysterious microcosm, dipping my head slightly to avoid the dark, dusty vines of ivy which hang loosely from the bungalow's exterior. It isn't necessary for me to knock anymore since such formalities have long since passed. I enter timidly and with a smile as I always do. Tucked under my arm is a brown paper bag, and in this paper bag is our routine, our evening's entertainment which serves comfortably as both a bond and barrier between us, and which is usually accompanied by feverishly animated, up until 5 a.m. conversations, maniacal laughter back-dropped against reverent melodies and drunken monologues of absurdity. Tonight he is there on that ragged, golden couch playing guitar softly, waiting for me. We are not close, he and I, but between us there is an understanding.

I notice a perceptible change in the expression on his face as he sets the guitar down to greet me. He tries to force a smile although it's obvious he's upset about something. "What's wrong?" I ask, feeling a sense of impending doom making its way through my esophagus, down into the pit of my stomach.

"There's something wrong with Mandrake; I don't think he's going to make it through the night."

I look over at the small aquarium resting on the kitchen counter top and walk uneasily toward it. Mandrake is there upside down, gripping the top of the screen covering the aquarium. His thin little body looks more brown than usual; not his usual shade of green, and I strain my eyes to focus in on him. He seems to be breathing with some difficulty and the end of his little insect body seems to be sagging from the weight of gravity as he clutches the screen with his long, lithe predator arms. Mandrake is "our" praying mantis and he is the reason we are together.

We ran into each other at The Natural History Museum a few months ago. We were both with mutual friends and since they



happened to be holding a Bug Exposition that day, we each decided to purchase a praying mantis pod with the hope of raising one of the hatchlings. When mine did not hatch, I contacted Dave to see if he would be willing to part with one of his own. He told me that he had set them free in the ivy in front of his house, but that he would try to catch one for me. A few days later he called to tell me that he had found a healthy, green one on an ivy leaf near his door. I decided to name him Mandrake. He was so small at first that I requested Dave be his guardian until he got bigger and strong enough for me to take him; I wanted to be sure that he was going to survive. As a result, I began to buy crickets and I would take them over to Dave's house; we would sit there for hours in horror and fascination, watching Mandrake rip the heads off these creatures, while juxtaposed against our humorous conversations on un-related topics. Then, slowly, in the midst of this odd and seemingly dysfunctional scenario, a relationship began to develop between Dave and me, or at least, it was a relationship as long as neither of us recognized it as one.

There is something about Dave which makes me pity him while at the same time endears me to him faithfully. After making our nightly "ice-breaking" drinks, I would plop down on his saggy couch and marvel at the barren effect of his apartment. It was so opposite of my own living conditions that I often felt like I was doing an archaeological study. There were no objects of sentiment, nothing that gave me a sense of who this person was on the inside, save for his obvious love of music and alcohol. There was such a lack of care in his surroundings, I wondered what moved him in life, or what simple joys, if any, he ever found. There were times when his sensitivity showed through in the songs that he wrote; it's just that he never gave much of himself directly. Even though our conversations had always been full of vitality and related to a broad spectrum of subject matter, there was an unspoken subject that was always off limits, and I continued to respect this although it was getting more and more difficult to do so.

My thoughts return now, to the room I am in. A profound awareness of gravity fills my body as I am standing, sickened and staring into the aquarium at Mandrake. I am watching something



die before me. This thought begins to bring up a wave of emotion which I push back down because I am embarrassed by it. There is no place for sentiment in his world and I mustn't break the rules. It isn't just Mandrake that is bothering me, there is something more. I have been feeling for days now, that I am failing at the game. My emotions have been surfacing although I try to put on my best poker face for him. My patience and understanding have worn thin and it is not hard to see my unhappiness. The phrase "not going to make it through the night" is ringing in my ear and I already know his next words before he even says them.

"You know, I can't do this anymore, I didn't want this kind of responsibility and now look what's happening. This is exactly why. You have to take him back now, I can't deal with it anymore."

Dave looks sullen and drained of energy. He won't look at me directly and I am unsure if I detect a slight glossiness in his eyes.

"Can't do what anymore, *care for something?*" I say indignantly. The pain is surfacing now; my blood is racing and my heart is thumping heavily in my chest. I can't hold back my words: "Yeah, I know how it is, Dave; I really do—when you care for something there is always the risk of pain attached. Sometimes it's just easier not to care, right?" Tears are beginning to form in my eyes but I stubbornly refuse to let them surface.

He looks up at me; his lucid, blue eyes fix on mine and for the first time, there is an awareness of reality between us. We both know in looking at each other that any attempts at long-winded explanations are not necessary. Our pretend world has been shattered by an undesirable ugliness; we are in the room alone with the truth now, and it hovers over us like an albatross.

"I never wanted a relationship, you know; I think you knew that from the very beginning..." He says these words softly and considerately as if it would somehow lessen the blow.

"I never expected you to say 'I love you'; just to care, that's all."

"I do care."

"You only know how to care from a distance—as long as there are walls between us it's safe for you." I am just so tired of this kind of caring; it feels too empty."



## Higher Education

He is silent, slumped down into the couch. He averts his eyes from me and with a look of resignation picks up his guitar to signal the end of our conversation. There will be no bargaining tonight. Each of our desires will be kept sharp and intact by the instincts that drive us—the desire to be known; the desire to be unknown.

I take one last look around at Dave's apartment. I wanted to be able to breathe life into it; into him. It was foolish of me to want something for him that he didn't want for himself. He will go on easily without me, contented as he has always been with the comfortable numbness of his life. His dirty green carpet and yellowing drapes, his smoke filled room and that ratty golden couch will continue to give him the comfort of familiarity. His apartment will see more friends, more alcohol, more escapism; I am walking back to the land of the living now, wounded and defeated but with a fresh conviction for my own desires.

I pick up the aquarium gently from the kitchen counter and move in silence to the sliding glass door. He offers no objection, no words. I tell him that I will let him know if there is any change in Mandrake's condition and that I was sorry that things went down the way they did. He nods sympathetically as I slide the door open to make my awkward exit. I fumble for some last words which will make everything okay but there are none. I manage a smile as I revert back to the only language he is willing to understand, some clichéd phrase, casual and over-used: "Well then, I guess I'll see you around..." And then I am out into the night again, away from his apartment and his life. As I walk the narrow pathway that leads back to my car, I search for the scent of the night blooming jasmine and the low hung moon and am comforted to find them still there. I am looking up at the moon now, whose presence is no longer ominous and foreboding, but somehow looks compassionate and wise, and for the first time in months I am overcome with a strong sense of myself: of pain, of beauty and feeling. I ran away from myself for a little while, that's all, but now I'm going back home again....

Clifford, a senior at Demeter College, was looking forward to his father's visit. He had always loved his father more than his mother. He remembered being in his parents' bedroom, alone, studying a framed photo of his mother as a younger woman, just her head and shoulders, her hair hanging down in the long braids that she now wore wrapped around her head. He had said to himself, "She isn't beautiful," and because he didn't think her beautiful, he knew he didn't love her the way children were supposed to love their mothers, the way he loved his father. Tucking him in at night, his father would run his fingers through his hair, and scratch the top of his head, and read him poems about Wynken, Blynken, and Nod, or the little sick mouse who missed his geraniums red, delphiniums blue. When he kissed him goodnight, his whiskers against his neck would tickle and make him laugh.

He had always called him *Daddy*, but he learned in the army not to. In a late night bull session about sex, he had volunteered that his Daddy had taught him to wait until he was married, and one of the group had sneered, "Your *Daddy*! He calls his old man *Daddy*!" Now, speaking to others, he referred to him as "my father," but in direct address he did not know what name to use. He could not bring himself to address him as "Dad." When his father, due around noon, arrived, Clifford would simply say, "Hi," and shake his hand.

Clifford no longer believed it necessary to put off sex till after marriage. Yet he remained a virgin, and he still, after all the years of high school and the army, had never had a steady girlfriend. He might perhaps have changed all that the other night, when Angie, a pretty freshman, had come unbidden to his off-campus room. He had been lying on the floor, a gallon of cheap red wine at his side and one of Beethoven's last quartets, Opus 32, coursing through him at high volume from his record player, when he heard someone knock. He was astonished to see her. In company with his friend Markham they had sipped coffee at the Co-op, but pretty as she was, he had not taken her quite seriously. Now that she was standing on his doorstep, he did not, half drunk, rightly know what to do. They ended up lying side-by-side on the floor, drinking wine and listening to Opus 32. He was not disposed, at this point, to con-



vert this communion via wine and Beethoven into a physical encounter. Really, he hardly knew her. Besides, she had to be back at her dorm by ten.

It turned out that Markham had put her up to it, told her where he lived. What else had he told her? Markham had read Freud and was undergoing psychoanalysis. He had loaned Clifford *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* and a psychoanalyst's interpretation of Coleridge which made much of Coleridge's "latent homosexuality." Had Markham told her of Clifford's concerns about his own love life, or lack thereof? Of his visit to Markham's psychoanalyst? Clifford had not asked.

He planned to tell his father about the visit to Markham's analyst. For one thing, if he were to go into analysis himself, he would need more money than his GI benefits provided. For another, although he had never confided in his father about personal problems and had no idea how to go about it, in his present state he felt he needed his love and support, which had always been unconditional.

There were many things, of course, that he could never tell his father. He could not tell him of the little dance hall hostess in Manila who had so excited him, nor of the other girl they had picked up at a Knights of Columbus dance, who had squatted in the unlit parking lot to urinate and later had jumped out of the chaplain's assistant's weapons carrier, yelling curses. It had occurred to him to jump out after her, as her honesty appealed to him, but he would not have known where he was or how to get back to the base.

Nor would he tell his father of the time a group of them had driven fifty miles in the chaplain's assistant's weapons carrier to a whorehouse, a frond-roofed shack in the jungle. He had not wanted to go but was unable to resist the group pressure. When they had all entered and seated themselves, waiting their turns, he had found himself shaking, in a cold sweat, terrified beyond any fear he had ever experienced. He could not possibly have gone behind a screen with one of those skinny, probably syphilitic girls. While he was imagining total impotence, the madam announced that she could not accommodate them because the Military Police had shut them down. And so he had been able, after all, to keep his



promise to his parents, made in a recent letter, that he would preserve his virginity for marriage.

He had not, in that letter, mentioned his masturbation, which he had practiced in pre- and post-puberty forms almost nightly, from the time he was four. By his parents, his early masturbation was called "gouging his Q-ter." "Q-ter" was what they called his penis, instead of the common "P(e)ter." When he urinated, he did not "pee," he "qued." The term "gouging" came from his method, which his mother had made him describe: he would lie on his stomach, hands clasped under his upturned penis, and gyrate his hips. He had promised his mother that he would quit when he advanced to first grade. He could not keep that promise, even after she caught him several times at nap time and whipped him on his bare legs with a cherry-tree switch, he howling and dancing and begging her to stop. It was only after he had come home from the army and been subjected by the Veteran's Administration to a psychological test, in order to qualify for his educational benefits, that his mind, if not his conscience, had been put at some ease about masturbation.

His test, according to the examiner, had shown a high "lie quotient." As honesty was perhaps the one thing on which he prided himself, he was shocked. It seemed that the key questions had to do with masturbation, which he had admitted to, and "sexual perversion," which he had also admitted to. The examiner had carefully, as if speaking to a child, explained to him that masturbation was not considered a perversion.

None of this had entered into his initial conversation with Markham's analyst, Dr. Miller. Why had he come, the doctor wanted to know. Clifford told him that he had always had a hard time approaching women, and when he read the book Markham had given him, about Coleridge's latent homosexuality, it made him anxious that perhaps he was a latent homosexual, that maybe that was the reason he had such difficulty even asking women out. And sometimes other men would approach him, like Harold Diefenbocker at school, who came to his room and talked about how lonely he was, and now he, Clifford, seemed like such a sensitive person, and he hoped they could be friends. Clifford had felt



uneasy, sensing that probably Diefenbocker was homosexual, and was trying to find out if Clifford was also. But he had endured Diefenbocker, conversationally, for the evening, because he knew no way out of his discomfort without hurting Diefenbocker's feelings. He had always felt sorry for homosexuals. Prejudice against them was as cruel and unfair as prejudice against Negroes, and he would not use words like "queer" and "faggot." But why were homosexuals like Diefenbocker attracted to him?

"Have you ever been sexually attracted to a male?" Dr. Miller asked.

If Clifford knew one thing, it was that he had felt desire only for women. But why, he asked, had he never had one?

"There are many possible reasons," said Dr. Miller dryly, "other than latent homosexuality."

The rest of the session had been largely devoted to the question of whether Clifford could afford to be psychoanalyzed. Obviously, he could not, without his parents' help. Dr. Miller had suggested that "maturation," over time, might solve his problems. Clifford found that prospect singularly unattractive.

As had been arranged, he met his father at the Edgemont Inn, a venerable brown-shingle institution just as the edge of campus. He had never eaten at the Edgemont, and would never have done so had his father not been there to pay the bill. Aside from the expense, its gentility was a formidable deterrent. Clifford preferred Lupe's, on the highway, where drama majors and other literary types drank their beer in pitchers. He was himself a literary type, in awe of Joyce and Faulkner and Hemingway, whom he had read, and the image of Thomas Wolfe, whom he had never read, but the title of whose novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, had made a great impression on him. He had never asked himself why.

At lunch his father conveyed to him that his mother's ulcer was acting up again, as it had intermittently ever since Clifford's older brother Howard had been killed in the war. And as executive secretary of No More Hunger, a non-profit organization, his father was very busy getting out an appeal for aid to victims of a recent earthquake in Calcutta.

"How are your classes?" asked his father. "What exactly



are you taking?"

"Romanticism, Shakespeare, Lit Crit."

"Litcrit?"

"Literary Criticism. Actually that's the best one. We did Aristotle's *Poetics*, and *Oedipus Rex*. Then we read a Freudian interpretation of *Hamlet*. I'm writing a paper on that."

His father removed his horn-rim glasses and put the tip of one frame-arm between his front teeth. "And what is the Freudian interpretation of *Hamlet*?"

"Well," said Clifford, trying not to stammer, "it has to do with the Oedipus complex. I don't know if I can explain it right. You know the story?"

"Of the play, *Oedipus*? I must have read it at some time. And of course, like most people, I've heard about Freud and the Oedipus complex. But tell me."

This was difficult, thought Clifford. He blundered on. "Well, in the story, Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother, without knowing it. Who they are, I mean. Freud says all male children unconsciously want to, um, get rid of their father and marry their mother, have her all to themselves. But society won't allow this, so males have to repress everything, and Freud calls this the Oedipus complex. Hamlet really wanted to do what his uncle actually did, and that's why he can't bring himself to avenge his father's murder by killing his uncle, because he feels guilty for having the same desires as his uncle. In a sense, Hamlet actually has two fathers, his real one, the ghost, and his imagined one, and. . ."

Observing his father bemusedly shaking his head, he stopped.

"How does one," said his father, with a quizzical half-smile, "unconsciously want something? If you want something, you want it. Or are you talking about a split personality?"

"Not exactly. But in a way, everyone's a split personality. We have these hidden desires, things we want that we can't admit to, forbidden things. Freud has this whole theory of the unconscious. . ."

"So Hamlet is a split personality?" His father sighed. "It seems to me that you don't require a split personality or an Oedipus



complex to explain why Hamlet is disturbed that his uncle murdered his father, or why he is angry with his mother for marrying his uncle, or why Hamlet can't bring himself to execute him, as he is expected to do. All decent people would find that hard."

His father, Clifford knew, opposed capital punishment. He believed in rehabilitation, in giving murderers a chance to repent of their crimes. In every man there was the possibility of good.

"I guess so. But Hamlet's main worry is whether his uncle is really guilty or not. And anyway, the big scene with his mother, where he's so obsessed with her lust. . . ."

His father waved his hand dismissively, his large-nosed, normally kindly face darkened by an impatient frown. It was a gesture Clifford had seen often, usually in his father's exasperated response to his mother during some trivial dispute.

"I still don't see any need for Freud. Lust is lust; it doesn't need an Oedipus complex to make it real."

Clifford shrugged, hiding his disappointment.

"It's just a theory. But what we read," he went on, determined to salvage something for Freud, "was really interesting. That's why I decided to write a paper about it."

His father smiled encouragingly and patted his shoulder. "I'm sure you'll do a good one."

Their lunch ended, they left the Edgemont and strolled toward Clifford's room. In front of the library they encountered Markham and Angie. With some anxiety, Clifford introduced his father. His anxiety was due, in part, to Markham's unpredictability—he was surprised to see him emerging from the library, as Markham seldom spent much time there—and in part to a concern as to how his father would react to Markham's imposing presence. Markham was 6' 3", and Clifford, who at 6' 2" was three inches taller than his father, always felt the impulse to step backward when face to face with Markham, whose massive head felt like a boulder about to fall on him.

His father stood his ground. "Happy to meet you. Are you English majors also?"

"Yes and no," said Markham. "Cliff and I are partners in crime, but Angie here is just a freshman. She doesn't know what to



do with her life yet."

"Neither do you," laughed Angie. "You don't even know what to do with your courses." Markham, a lazy student, was flunking both Romanticism and Lit Crit because of not turning in papers. "And all Cliff wants to do," added Angie unexpectedly, "is lie around listening to Beethoven quartets."

His father, a clarinetist who had played professionally in younger days, turned to him, pleased at Clifford's choice of music. "Beethoven quartets?"

"The last one," said Clifford, alarmed yet secretly pleased by Angie's covert reference to the other night. "I just discovered them."

"But rest assured," interjected Markham, smiling broadly, his small squinty eyes glinting, "he is not neglecting his studies for Beethoven. Clifford here is the star of our Lit Crit class, the master of the intricate Freudian interpretation of Hamlet."

"Yes," said his father, "he was telling me about that." He looked at his watch. "I'm afraid I have to get back to the city. It's been a pleasure meeting you both."

He shook hands with Markham and Angie, and they continued their progress toward Clifford's room.

"That was nice," said his father, "meeting your friends. Angie is a very pretty girl."

With some pride, Clifford said, unthinkingly, "She came to my room last night."

His father's expression darkened alarmingly.

"Never betray a woman's indiscretions," he said, staring straight ahead, his jaw firmly clenched.

Stunned, Clifford groped for a response. It was true. Angie had been indiscreet, and he had told his father, out of pride. He could not remember his father's ever rebuking him in this way, but he deserved it. He had behaved dishonorably. But not as dishonorably as his father was assuming.

"Nothing happened," he blurted. "We listened to Beethoven."

His father's expression softened. Then, uncomfortably, he asked, "Are you still a virgin?"

## Stark Red

Ashamed of his answer, Clifford stammered: “Y-y-yes.”

They had reached Clifford’s room, in the back of a private home. At the door his father embraced him.

“Mother and I love you, Clifford. You seem to be going through a phase. We want you to be happy. If you need any help. . . .”

“I do. I’ve been to see Markham’s analyst, but he’s expensive. I thought. . . .”

“Markham’s *analyst*? *Psychoanalyst*? Why didn’t you come to me? Why didn’t you come to Eckhardt, or Frank Stone, or Albert?”

Eckhardt, a recent acquaintance of his father’s was a handwriting analyst for the Los Angeles Police Department. Frank Stone was an eminent psychologist his father had known since childhood. Albert was Albert Lake, his father’s closest friend, his colleague in political muckraking in earlier years. Growing up, Clifford had sat entranced through countless political discussions with Albert.

“Daddy, they’re not psychoanalysts.”

“Psychoanalysis! Freud!” exclaimed his father. “Everything reduced to sex! What matters is not sex, not Oedipus wanting to kill his father and marry his mother, not studying your own belly button! Compassion, service to others, that’s where you’ll find yourself, not psychoanalysis!”

Before Clifford could answer, his father turned angrily on his heel and strode down the driveway toward his car. Watching his receding back, Clifford saw his future bearing down, on iron rails. He knew he should call out, or run to his father, but could only stand and watch as he rounded the hedged corner of the driveway and disappeared.

Jim painted his toenails a bright shade of red. Despite the sick churning he got in his stomach from doing it, he had to. His tongue slowly slid from out between his pursed lips like a clam’s leg—or was it a tongue? No, he had to focus on painting his toenails. “God, what color is this? Carmine red or passion red? What the hell is the difference?” he asked himself. The bottle was close by, but he didn’t want to distract himself. He focused.

The stereo blasted. Simon and Garfunkel cooed: “. . . and here’s to you, Mrs. Robinson, Jesus loves you more than you would know—oh-oh-oh-ohhhh—”

During the course of the evening, Jim had messed up on his right big toe three times. As compulsive as he was, he reached out for a swab of cotton, his toes squeezed from out of the toe-separating device, and he accidentally smeared all the other nails—perfectly painted and everything—all over the *L.A. Times* Sports section of the newspaper he had spread across the carpet. Each time he made this fumble, he said: “Shit.”

Jim was almost past the second toe closest to the big toe on his right foot, and then he would work on the easier side, which was his left foot, because he just seemed to focus better, just how it was easier to shave his left leg than his right. Maybe because he was a leftie, he didn’t really know the physics of the whole thing. Or maybe it was a religious deal. “Ugh, religion,” he muttered.

His sister could just walk in any time and ask him what the hell he was doing, just like all the other times he was up to something suspicious. He hated her vindictive look. She had a prissy laugh, too—no, he was just thinking of her that way out of spite. She was actually more admirable than he made her out to be when relating her to others. He was jealous, really. Mom and Dad wouldn’t bother her over anything. They weren’t afraid. They bought her a laptop for Christmas and a car for her birthday, and when she graduated from high school, they showed her the house they were going to purchase for her—close to Palos Verdes—after she finished college. An “incentive,” they called it. And what did he get? Practically zilch. Well, maybe he couldn’t blame her. She doesn’t listen to quote, un-quote *satanic music* or hang out with the “wrong crowd” or any of that shit. She’s got straight A’s, is totally close to



finishing college, whatever. Truthfully, Jim only does all that other “disturbing” business as a distraction for his darker, less pleasing facets. He wasn’t embarrassed, just a leech. It’s just that he would *so* be out on the street if they found out.

A knock on the door: “Jim—”

Then a response a few moments later: “Shit!” Jim looked at the mess he made. Great, now he had to start all *over* again. He stood up, waddling toward the door with his knees bent outward and balancing on his heels. “Who—oh, mother f—who is it?”

“Jim, open the door—”

He turned down the stereo. His door didn’t have a lock on it. His parents took it out a year ago. “What the fuck do you want?”

His sister pursed her lips. She was actually trying to hide a smile. “No, Jim, it’s: ‘*Carrie*, what the fuck do you want?’”

He didn’t want to entertain her. His toes looked like shit, like someone cut them up with a Swiss army knife. “Man,” he said. He held the doorframe for balance so his toes wouldn’t go all over the place. He eventually pushed off and waddled back toward the newspaper and carefully sat down. “Close the door at least.”

Carrie did so. She turned the music up a little louder. “Where are you headed to tonight?”

“Rocky Horror Show.”

“Oh, my God. They still have those cult things? I thought that died like, in the Crustacean period.”

Jim was always surprised at how much she knew about weird things like that—everyone knew about the Ungrateful Dead concerts and all the urban legends that came along with them. But she knew weird peculiar things about drag queens married to respectable women, about hot spots for crystal meth or just some hash, about murders that happen in the O.C. because some college students took PCP and went cannibal. She has a lot of friends, though. “Well, it’s not dead yet, and I’m going.”

She sat down in front of him Indian-crossed and got the nail polish bottle. “Then why not black instead of red?”

Jim didn’t answer.

“Here.” She dabbled the brush into the paint. Her fingernails were *gorgeous*. Jim wanted to ask if she got them done or if



she did them herself, but he refrained. “I’ll do your toe nails,” she said. “Just clean them up for me—did you steal this from Mom?”

“Yeah,” Jim said quickly. He started swabbing his toes with the nail polish remover.

“Hm. Never seen her wear this shade.” She waited for him. He looked up at her. She laughed. “You should dry it off first, or the paint’ll come right off.”

“Oh,” he said.

She smiled. Then, when he dried off his nails, she started painting them slowly and carefully. Her voice lowered just below the volume of the music: “They’re thinking of using my graduate school savings to build a game room in the house.”

Jim watched her paint his nails—such precision.

“My future for a *billiard* table and a pinball machine. Can you believe that?” Carrie hissed a whisper.

Jim shook his head. His mouth hung open.

She smiled again. “You know, Jim, I wanted to bring you to the Mariah Carey concert—”

“You know I’m not into her. She’s fat.”

Carrie laughed. “I know, the concert sucked. She can’t even dance. She had all these dancers around her working their asses off, and all she did was fling her head from side to side when she sang. And there was this wind blowing thing that made her hair go *whoosh, whoosh*—” Carrie swung her head from side to side; Jim worried about his toes, but they were okay “—and she sounded like she was dying. Like a cat, *reeow*. She needed a water bottle or something.”

Jim chuckled a dark, sleepy chuckle.

“Hey, switch feet.”

“Okay.”

“Anyway, she whispers a lot during her new songs. Maybe they had a Mariah Carey poll online and asked if it’s sexier if she shouts or if she whispers.” Upon hearing Jim laugh louder, Carrie beamed. “Did you know that in my Introduction to Critical Thinking class, we had this thing in our book. One of those colorful sections where they tell you stuff about everyday people and celebrities. And there’s this one section about euphemisms and



whatnot. And Mariah Carey has a quote that's something like this. 'Whenever I think about those starving kids in Africa, it makes me want to cry. I mean, I want to be skinny, but not with all those flies and death and stuff.'—exactly like that, I'm not kidding—" Jim was dying, Carrie continued "—and the *caption*. The caption underneath said—hold on, I can't stop laughing, I'm sorry. But this crazy caption said, 'Mariah Carey, showing compassion.' And I just busted up."

They were both laughing in that silent, secretive way that mischievous kids laugh.

Deathcab for Cutie sang on the mix CD: "You keep twisting the tru-u-uth that keeps me thrown aske-e-ew..."

"Yeah, I mean, it was such a crappy concert, but it would have been really cool if you came with me. I'd like to go to your Rocky Horror Show thing too, but I'm not cool enough, I guess—"

"No, it's not like that, Carrie. I swear." The heavy drawl in his voice and the lisp he had at the end of certain words recently started to become more apparent.

"Hey, hey, hey, there's no need to worry about nerdy me—your lame sister, going to pop concerts and everything."

Jim started to feel sort of sad. Carrie was almost finished with his nails. God, he was going to be late, but—they were having a *moment*. He twitched his foot and messed up the paint job. "Oh, oops."

"Geez, Jim!"

"Oh, my god I am *so* sorry—Oh, ew."

Carrie looked up. "Your voice—" she said, but immediately dropped it.

Jim cleared his throat.

Carrie got a cotton ball and swabbed his left foot. "Let me start this again. Hold on, I'll just clean it off. So, what kind of shoes are you wearing with these hot puppies?"

Jim spidered his hands behind him, then dragged up a pair of boots with all the buckles on them. "These."

"Oh," she said. She got back to concentrating, and she painted extra slow. Then her forehead creased. "Wait, then why are you painting your nails if you're going to wear boots?"



Jim stared at his toes.

Carrie looked confused for a few moments, then her eyebrows rose. "Oh, whoa, hey—I won't judge. If you like dolling up your nails on Friday nights before going to something real cultish or whatever, I'm not going to hound you over it. But Mom'll kill you if she sees this polish on here. *Scarlet* red—okay, sorry, I'm not laughing at you, Jimmy. When you sneak back through the window though, remind yourself that you need to scrub this stuff right off, or you're gonna get it." Then, as an afterthought, she added: "Actually, you know what? I'll leave a post-it note on your window or something. It'll be in code. It'll say 'RED' or something corny like that."

Jim swallowed. "Alright, thanks Carrie." His voice sounded extra manly.

She looked up. "You're welcome." Then, she finished off the last of his toes, and patted his knee. "Nice shave. Anyway, I'm done." She screwed the cap back on the bottle. "I have to go study, now."

"Okay," Jim said.

"Come with me to a concert one day, all right? And if you're up for it, take me to one of yours. I'll do the whole goth thing, too."

Jim's smile faltered. "Alright, Carrie."

She got to her feet, singing along with Wilco: "...*tall buildings shake, voices escape singing sad, sad songs, tuned to chords*—hey, Jimmy, I like this song, too, did you get sick of Blink 182 and Hawthorne Heights and The Monolators?—*turnin' your orbit around*—what happened to The Killers and all those other bands I don't know?" and she was gone.

Jim watched the door close quietly.

That was *so* nerve-wracking. He stared at his perfect toenails. He started to feel bad. She's always been nice—that spite thing he has for her is just totally ridiculous. But every time he reminds himself of who she is, he forgets everything else and starts hating her all over again. "I'm a fucking psychological case. They'll study me," Jim said to himself. "They'll put me in a tiny bottle and study me like a fetus." He stared at the nail polish bot-



tle, then looked at his nails again. He knew Ricky would love his nails. That guy has his weird little toe fetish anyway.

Jim thought to himself: “I could do *so* much better than him.” He pulled his shirt over his head and flung it onto his bed and got out the knock-out dress he bought on Tuesday. Carrie had a point. He would take off all the nail polish when he got back from his date. And he’d break up with Ricky next week—tonight at his house was too good an opportunity to pass up.

## Kafka for Debutantes

It was on a very standard Tuesday afternoon that Simon H. Beauregard sat down to read the letter he had received nearly twelve months prior. The contents were sent to him by his late niece, Adelaide James. The girl, all charming and outspoken as all good nieces should be, was somewhat of a rebel, and Simon took to calling her Addie long after she had requested him not to. He was so intent on reading the contents of this letter—the edges of its envelope worn after being nestled inside of a drawer—he had avoided it long enough. So there it was, a year-old letter written by one Adelaide James, just one week after her suicide.

Simon made sure to be rid of any distractions. He locked the door to his study. He adjusted his seat to the appropriate position and cleared his throat. The latter action, though seemingly unnecessary, was almost innate for Simon. At the age of eleven, he had developed a slightly obsessive compulsive inclination to clear his throat at the slightest provocation. It was too slight and unassuming a gesture to be considered rude. It was merely Simon’s natural reaction to anxiety: getting up to bat, entering the school cafeteria, before intercourse. It was, others mused, his own way of saying, “Here goes nothing, I guess.”

Simon peeled open the seal meticulously, likening it to a human eyelid he did not want to offend. He took the letter out and half-expected it to smell like dust. It did not. Simon couldn’t bring himself to unfold it. The letter lay in his lap for a good minute. He cleared his throat. Wiping his palms on the tops of his corduroy pants he slowly lifted the letter and began to read.

Uncle Simon,

I’m sitting here, inside my room, and it is sunny and the birds are doing their mating calls and my palms are moist for no apparent reason. I’ve been grounded; any and all forms of technology have been strictly forbidden. The point is that I’ve been eighteen for almost two days now and I have yet to receive a present from you, my mother’s only brother. Let’s not even mention that woman right now. She repulses me. Let me just fill you in on the details of my most recent punishment, cruel and unusual as it is, seeing as I know you’re probably curious. And even if you aren’t,



I'm going to tell you anyway. I feel I have to let the world know how I've been wronged (and in such close proximity to my day of birth! Wretched woman, my mother):

I came home at a later hour than usual last night, it being Wednesday (a school night, what have you). Charlie was in his trophy room or office or whatever cleaning his goddamn golf clubs, and you know he couldn't care less about me. But he actually had the gall to tell me that my "Mother is upstairs, and you had better not wake her unless you want to get a beating." Bastard. I bet he chuckled a little after making that remark. I went up to my room and she was asleep in my bed and when she roused I had to bite my tongue while she chastised me about the hour and how irresponsible I've become and what would my poor, dead father say.

I hate that she constantly brings him up. As if the death of my father would warrant feeling guilt, which I do, of course. Regardless, she can't say things like that. She can't. She can't speak for a dead person and if *she* wants to be disappointed in me, then let her. Just don't tell me that my father would be because he can't because he's dead.

I've grown tired of all this. If only my mother knew the things I say about her! She'd just about kill herself. I've been sitting here for a whole fifty-two minutes. I think I've written a letter to about every single person I know, though I'll never get around to sending them. In fact I'll probably have this letter for a while, just the fact that you're always gallivanting around in Paris or Morocco or taking it up the ass or whatever. I do hope you write back, though, Uncle Simon. Things have sort of gone awry. I'm not sure what I mean by that. It's just that this heavy feeling has taken the place of my usual nauseating optimism. My heart hurts so much. I tell myself it's probably a passing whimsy, an excuse to feel sorry for myself since there is no valid reason for feeling this way. I tell myself it's due to the fact that I sprained my ankle this evening. Or ran out of milk when I really wanted a bowl of cereal. Or that I haven't been properly kissed since May of last year. Or the fact that I'm eighteen and beginning to feel it.

I'm all out of sorts. I'd really like to see you soon, I very much need someone who will stoop to my level and talk about silly



childish things because we are both partly silly and wholly childish and don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

Always,  
Adelaide

\*\*\*

Arms crossed, head cocked over to the side, Peter Conoway eyed the girl sinisterly as she went to lock the door. The pleated skirt she was entertaining tonight was folded twice at the waist; it was at a treacherous length her mother would have insisted on increasing had she been present.

"You know, I don't do this often—"

"Doesn't matter."

The uniform conformity dressed her in day after day seemed too appropriate for what was about to go down, Peter thought. It made him feel uneasy. Julia (as that was the name she gave him) handed Peter a plastic bottle with clear liquid inside.

"What's this?"

"Holy water. No shit."

"Alright Buffy, no need to get snippy."

Julia sat up on the bed, attempting a myriad of ridiculous poses. Peter tried not to look as he set up the tripod.

"Do you think I should make the bed?"

"No. Leave it."

"I mean, I just want to be sure everything looks good."

"Just let me worry about it."

"How's my hair?"

"It could look better."

"Do you want me to—"

"Be quiet? Gee, that'd be swell."

"So, what's this thing supposed to be anyway? CSI meets *The Exorcist* meets *Catholic Schoolgirls in Trouble*?"

"In a nutshell."

"Right."

Julia lay face up on the bed as Peter tousled her hair. He looked quizzically at her cardigan sweater. In one swift movement, Peter ripped the top of her blouse open, revealing a pathetic show



of cleavage.

“Easy, cowboy. I’m only sixteen.”

Peter sighed. “Let’s get this over with.”

He turned on the camera and put her in focus. Julia kept her blouse on, because she wasn’t told to take it off.

“So, Pete...what’s my motivation?”

\* \* \*

Simon unlocked the door to his study. The light outside was dim and fell against the side of the bookcase. He steadied himself on it so as not to fall over. He took off his reading glasses and looked down at the letter; his hands were still trembling. He heard the front door open and two heavy bags drop onto the floor. Simon bit his lip.

“Dear God, it’s me, Margaret. Are you listening up there, you fuck?” Peter walked over to the study and rapped gently on the door. “You will not believe the day I had. Simon. You in there?”

“I’m here, Peter. Go ahead. I can hear you.”

“Well,” Peter sat with his back against the door. He fiddled with his cellular phone. “I just had the best shoot of my entire career. Honest. This twenty-year-old anorexic Parker Posey shows up and she’s all dolled up in the Catholica school girl get-up, you know, and I’m shitting bricks because it isn’t even the actress who auditioned, but her roommate—or girlfriend, I can’t remember. I didn’t want to go through with it, but I called the girl and she told me she had mono. Who gets mono anymore? Anyway, Parker Posey part deux was awful. What a hack. She flirted with me throughout the entire shoot, she’s lucky I didn’t drive the stake into her head.” Peter sighed heavily. Curious about the silence on the other side, he pressed his ear to the door. “I’ve had enough of these post-modern hipster bohemian method actors. That’ll teach me to use Craig’s List. Simon?”

“It was my fault she died.”

Peter fell forward as the door to the study opened. From the floor, he could see that Simon had been crying. He stood up.

“I’m... sure that’s not the case.”

“She wrote me this letter, and I haven’t opened it until



now. This was written a year ago.”

“Why didn’t you open it then?”

Simon walked into the living room. Adelaide’s letter still in his hand. “Her mom didn’t want me to contact her. She thought I was a bad influence.” He sat on the couch and laughed bitterly to himself. Outside, the pigeons gathered on the ledge. “And, well, I thought she was right.” Peter walked over to hand Simon a glass of water. He took it and set it on the coffee table.

“You know, the lilies are probably in bloom now.” Peter grabbed his things and carried them into a room. “We could head over there, catch the sunset.”

Simon nodded his head, but Peter knew he hadn’t heard a thing he said. Simon fished something from his back pocket and walked over to the window. The pigeons flew off as Simon took off the screen. Peter stood in the hallway and watched in horror. Holding it at arm’s length, Simon lit Adelaide’s letter on fire. He gazed stoically at the skyline as the wind carried off the ashes.

## Utah, 1923

The sound of coins hitting the wood floor woke me immediately. My hands flashed to my pockets, even before my eyes opened. Leaning over the makeshift bed, I picked up the three half dollars one at a time and slipped them into my pocket. My leg was bruised where I had slept on the coins all night. I don't even bother changing clothes after the show anymore, I climb down from the net, march straight to the back lot and throw my money down for whatever the Lot Monkeys managed to procure from the local farmers, sometimes whiskey, but mostly corn or peel. I've been the finale for a month now and unless we picked up a better finale, I'll be the last act for a long time.

I limped down the steps of the trailer into the heat of the midday sun. My entire body was cramped. My current quarters consist of a three-foot plank in the already overloaded tent trailer, a wood crate with painted oranges on the side held my belongings. It wasn't always this way. Times were different when my parents were around, better sometimes. Before the fire, we had our own trailer and our own banner on the midway.

When they were gone, I was given the only job I could do.

The humility of the pit never left. Everyone knew what I was. When I'm drunk enough, the taste of blood fills my mouth and the memories come flooding back. Faces peer down into the six-foot hole screaming, jeering, eyes wide and white, their teeth gnashing as the organ player pounds the keys louder and louder, and then the chickens come. Sometimes the ringmaster has a sense of humor and throws the birds all in at once. Those times were the worst. I'm up to my waist in chickens. They claw and fight, watching, as I pick their brothers one by one and sink my teeth into their necks, twisting and gnawing their heads off. I have to time my finish to the organ player, who sometimes also has a sense of humor.

Eventually Mr. Brannigan found someone else for the geek job. A genuine simpleton, donated by a family to ease the budget, was perfect. He loves the attention and never complains. My new show isn't much better.

Every night I climb the ladder, I curse every living thing walking, crawling or burrowed down deep in the dirt. When I slide down into the black of the cannon barrel the tears flow. I blubber



and blather the Ringmaster's name over and over. When the drum roll begins, my body convulses in anticipation. The dark, tight fit seals me in. The tears drop from my face to the pot metal, my arms pinned, my shirt soaked with tears and fright. Peace comes when I am high in the air. All is silent, all eyes on me. The net is always there, but I sometimes wish it wasn't. I could fly, far from this hell, and leave this cursed body for good.

I walked down the midway towards the mess tent. I needed water.

"Hey little man, see you later on?"

"Yeah, if Brannigan pays us tonight, bet on it."

I guess they found the farmers. It's shaping up to be a three-jar night.

Father would hang out in the back barracks until very late. As the lantern left on flickered and waned, Mother and I waited for the sound of boots scraping the steps to our trailer. Instinctually, we would tighten our blankets as the door opened. She always rose first, yelling at me, confusing me. What did I do? I was sleeping. What did I do?

Father would pull me from bed and beat me. I remember the pattern of his shirts, the smell of homemade liquor as the few valuables we owned fell from the walls and shelves from the vibrations in the small trailer. I was thrown from wall to wall. My mother would approach when the rage had subsided, rubbing his shoulders, her flimsy robe breezing open,

"How's Daddy tonight?"

I would crawl, if I could, back to my bunk and cry quietly, muffling the sounds with a blanket stuffed in my mouth, eventually passing out to their grunts of passion.

Those days are gone. Only I remain, the last of the Minitue Family.

The Ringmaster reminded me of this every night.

"See the last of the famous 'Minitue Family' risk life and..." (Snare traps hit) "Tiny limb!"

The tent turns red.

I filled a tin cup with water three times before I was quenched. I reached up and placed the tin cup on the warped slats



of the table. Mr. Brannigan rose from his plate and wiped his mouth. His words were short but heard by all.

“Get your act straight tonight, boy. It’s a long walk back to Florida!”

My face went scarlet as a bit of alcohol shit dribbled from my ass.

That night I wore my best: bright red pants and a long sleeved white shirt with a collar. I wanted to be seen tonight and this was all I had in my crate.

Mr. Brannigan glared as I made my entrance. The spots immediately found me, my white shirt blazed with heat. I didn’t think the tent could get any quieter. As I climbed the ladder up to the mouth of the barrel, my body shuddered. I looked from side to side at the crowd far below, the tent was beginning to fill for the finale.

I slid my torso into the mouth of the cannon and spread my arms wide, like an eagle stretching before flight, before pushing up and dropping myself voluntarily into the hell I live night after night. I focus on my pay, a larger crowd in the next town, anything else. I drown out the drum roll. My arms struggle uselessly against the thick iron and the tears flow, but tonight I am determined to give the rubes their money’s worth.

I hear the deafening explosion moments after I leave the cannon. By then, my arms are spread wide, my legs pressed together tightly, toes pointed behind me. I was perfect. Every open maw followed my flight across the tent.

The center of the receiving net passed beneath me, a good 18 feet. I had never flown this far before, no one had. I reached out to the lip of the thick black netting as I approached. My body crashed into the sleeve of the net where the guide rope passes through. The recoil shot me back ten feet; I rolled, coming to rest at the designated landing point. There was silence. What had I done wrong? Tears welled. Somewhere a fly struggled in a web. It started slowly at first, eventually becoming deafening. The applause seemed never ending. Nothing sets them off like the prospect of death.

Halfway through the first jar, my body was more alive than



ever. I must’ve told the story twenty times already. How the heads turned, how popcorn hands froze midway. In my version, I had the whole thing mapped out before my feet took the first rung. Everyone’s ear was mine, they offered cigars, a few of the girls even sized me up.

It was time to see Brannigan. I screwed the lid on the fruit jar and walked across the back lot. My mind was racing, my body sure. I hauled myself up the three steps and knocked.

“Yeah, hold on.”

I waited, unsure of what to say.

“Com’in.”

Brannigan stood up from a kneeling position, flipping a curtain over the safe. He picked a glass from the edge of the desk and drained the whiskey.

“What is it?”

“How’d you like the show tonight?” I asked.

As soon as the words fell from my lips, a familiar feeling crept over me. “You’ve got some nerve, boy. You almost wreck my show tonight, and you got the nerve to ask me how I liked it?” Brannigan tipped a bottle into his glass. “I told you this afternoon not to fuck up and what do you do. I kept you on after your parents burned up! I feed and shelter you, boy. Who do you think you are? I run this goddamned show, you little piece of shit, nobody else, me! Come morning, I want you gone.”

I was shocked. My face and ears burned under his glare.

“Just let me stay till we get near Frisco,” I begged. “There’s nowhere for me to go out here.”

“You should’ve thought of that a long time ago, boy.” He walked over to his cot with the bottle and sat, “Now get the hell out.”

I felt like I was walking through a tunnel on the way to the tent trailer. I sat on my bed board and finished the rest of the jar. My throat felt tight as I considered my immediate future. Unscrewing the lid of the second jar, my shock turned to anger. He never liked me. By moving me into this tent wagon and giving me the lowest jobs on the lot, he was pushing me to quit. I began to understand a little more, my family had given years to this show and



with them gone now, Brannigan didn't need me anymore. People would pay to see a midget family, but a lone little person? I drank and waited.

The cold coyotes called the time. I picked up my last fruit jar and slipped out the door. I stuck to the shadows and crossed the camp stopping briefly at the mess tent. A lamp flickered low in Brannigan's trailer. I took a sip from the jar and moved closer. The spoon was a perfect fit for the lock hasp. I climbed onto a chair and stepped upon the small table at the side of the trailer. I peered in the open window. Brannigan was snoring away loudly, next to his cot, an empty bottle on its side. I tipped the jar slightly, allowing a thin, steady pour, exactly as I had done 6 months ago. The corn liquor fell silently, darkening the pillow and sheets.

I don't believe Brannigan ever woke. By the time I reached the commotion, the trailer was enveloped in flames, the wood groaning as it yielded to the heat. Men threw buckets of water in vain while I stood with the women and children watching insects flying in and out of the flames, some catching and falling to the earth like tiny comets.

## POETRY



## Lucky

the parade is drawing near.  
Like waiting  
for a special birthday,  
it is almost here.  
I hear the drums.

Lucky  
for the bird's-eye view,  
a surprise rooftop perch.

Leaning out to catch my  
father's words from below,  
my folding chair collapsed  
like a broken branch,  
hurling me forward  
in a suicide dive,

my ten-year-old body  
lurched  
headfirst  
over the  
roof's  
rim.

Like a bolt out of the blue  
I am caught  
without warning  
by my  
stunned father who just happens  
to still be standing there.



In shock and disbelief,  
checking for harm anywhere, we  
discover only his jacket zipper  
left a scratch on my face.

Lucky.

## Sprinting

Summer always left a good taste in our mouths.  
we ran, faster than wind,  
in pursuit of the intangible dream.  
every time we fell,  
we laughed,  
dirt was our friend,  
and today, the two of us,  
we are stained.  
our run has slowed,  
but sometimes, when the summer night  
breathes her cool, seductive breath,  
we sprint,  
just for a few moments,  
and it feels like the days  
when summer sweetly ran over our tongues  
and down our ragged, parched throats,  
quenching the thirst only we shared.  
the thirst for what was beyond our reach,  
the thirst for the unexpected,  
the thirst for friendship,  
the thirst for life.

## The Bidding

The warehouse cat scratches my shoulder  
scrambling to retain his perch  
as the hundreds of bidders arrive.  
The auctioneer mainlines coffee  
and winks at me as the proceedings begin

Pee stained mattress  
Two boxes of old paperbacks.

The first unit is small and almost empty when opened.  
Quiet and courteous Kristen was the renter.  
She started college in the east,  
moved away from her folks for the first time,  
and filled the unit with personal trinkets  
too impractical to take with her.  
A year in she broke down and dropped out,  
payment stopped and now everything has passed  
to the toothless junk dealer  
who bid twenty dollars.

Professional weight set  
Stacks of family photos

Manny Palau was a big boy  
a 'roid raging gym rat,  
impending divorce made him gather his gear here.  
Around town he would buy me beer  
and gab guiltily about family fights.  
Soon he was in the slammer for assault  
and Manny's mom paid for storage until she passed.  
Now a scrawny red neck wrangles weights  
purchased for one hundred fifty.



Antique roll-top desk  
Crazy colored steamer trunk

Twenty years together, yet Robin and Ray never married.  
The palimony case complicated issues of ownership.  
A lifetime left stored and farming dust,  
one would pay and then the other  
until uncertainty of who would prevail  
prevented either from caring for the property.  
Professionals now take possession  
as the antique store truck pulls into position.

Oils from local artists  
several sizable pieces of statuary

Gray haired Gary was gay  
but waited to reveal it until his son was grown.  
The wife didn't take it well  
and Gary's treasures were set aside  
while he hunted for the perfect pad.  
I found it funny and flattering when he hit on me,  
whoever killed him hadn't.  
Unusual art dealers battle and bid  
I won't watch to see who wins.

World War Two bayonet  
Ancient Indian kantar

Lorne wrote letters  
I never had a chance to meet him.  
Alone and in his eighties,  
he stashed piles of precious personals,



and retired to Alaska  
long before I became employed here.  
One day the letters stopped  
and now I have to hear howls of joy  
as ecstatic assholes  
preen over newly purchased prizes.

The auctioneer hands me stacks of cash,  
a remarkable boon to the business.  
Yet, as I watch the winning bidders,  
I see only vermin and vultures,  
uncaring pests and parasites.  
My stomach roils with sympathy  
for the unloved and the unlucky,  
the sorrowful and the psychotic,  
and I wish I could return  
what once was theirs.

## Dear You, Love Me

Dear you (so dear to me),

Stabilize my ego

drive me to

1) a place I know

2) tears

3) insanity

I'm wrapped in a tostada of emotion (with hot hot manic depression sauce)

and I feel like all (long, intelligent, pseudo-intelligent) modifiers are pretentious

I leap and dance and create light shows

and I'm hoping that somewhere inside of me

I'm a real person unconcerned with the lives of others

unconcerned with their opinions

unconcerned with vice or with freedom;

skin, bones, words = real?

Sometimes I

look to you for inspiration

and only catch envy

I hold your hand or hair tight

like prayer beads

lock your lips

up

The path my mind takes wearies me

*a place I know:*

*embarrassing, like crying (totally emo)*

and *insanity* complete with trimmings



This was an apology. I'm such a mess and I need help.

An "I love you". But I never really knew how to say those without

using a certain *voice* or laughing.

Love (me please),

-Me.

## Wedding Shoes

Black, old-lady shoes in the back  
of her closet,  
were once polished, laced and up-to-date  
in her wedding photo,  
worn on youthful, slim legs

below her ankle-length skirt. A spray  
of gardenias flowed down  
her coat's shoulder.  
No wedding dress  
for this poor, young bride,  
destined for fourteen years of bliss  
before

### THE CRASH:

the loss of their newborn twin sons split their  
lives in two – grief wrapped itself around her body,  
another woman comforted his grieving soul.

Speechless, trapped, numbed, crushed, almost  
dead, she carried on with a part of her spirit cut  
away forever, locked in loss without a key. The black  
shoes began their voyage to the back of the closet.

Dust gathered in that rear darkness.  
The shoes, no longer seen when the doors  
opened, were now mostly out of sight. Once  
a joyful future, their view now felt  
like two anchors pulling her under,



drowning her soul in a fathomless ocean  
of tears and sadness. Her marriage room became  
her private chamber, a locker for hidden feelings  
safely piled amidst her lingerie and clothes  
in bureau drawers and on closet shelves.

Sneaking into this forbidden space, her presence  
felt in odors only hers, the shoes were now buried at  
the very back, grayed by dust and  
destroyed by lack of care.

Concerning the Strapping Young Lad Sighted  
This Tuesday Afternoon

small in stature, hair askew,  
people will say we look cute together  
and i'll laugh and tell them  
*oh, we're just friends.*  
he's wearing tight ass pants  
like it's no one's business  
wow. those really are tight.  
not ill-fitting, mind you  
just, tight.

and i remember i saw you  
walking across the lawn and  
aviator sunglasses and  
disregarding the path and  
i couldn't help but follow you  
with my eyes.  
not that i'm into that sort of thing,  
voyeurism.  
or bestiality, for that matter  
in case you were wondering.

and his shirt is. . . well, it's tight  
i'm pretty sure i've seen it on adam brody  
it's the kind of thing he'd wear, adam brody  
crazy jewish boy that i adore.  
oh, sing a trifle, won't you?  
you're killing me  
with your tight ass pants.

Synchronized Swimmers

How we met, who we were  
was interrupted  
by a chain of diva water ballerinas  
in a big screen extravaganza  
jazzy and with long withering glances

the dance changed with us as  
we walked dripping from the pool into  
new moments of closeness  
scored with acoustic folk songs  
in a film that no one would see

and we were great  
we were fearless when we were together  
we were happy  
when we were happy enough  
our time was up

the scene brightened and the music went very daring and modern  
new partners emerged from the deep end  
and we held onto their necks, holding our breaths  
we waved goodbye like good water ballerinas,  
with grace.

## Untitled

Stomach drops,  
like an anchor cut loose  
plunges into murky depths.  
Fear  
stabs you in the  
gut like a hot knife.  
Balance shifts,  
legs quake.  
Step out  
into unknown.

## She Is a Shroud

wound within layers of cloaked  
darkness forever.

Decaying halos that once held her  
skeleton's vanished eyes are now  
empty rings of grief.

For so long those eyes reflected her  
pain and locked in the secret  
sadness of her counterfeit marriage,  
a union that wrapped a  
leaden blanket of despair about  
her soul, sealing inside  
the roots of devastation that  
evolved into her  
death.

By the end, her heartache  
had spread like weeds  
to scatter its sorrow  
through  
my bones.

## Dragonflies Suddenly Appear

I remember so many unimportant things.  
From the pattern on my mother's dress;  
The one she wore to chaperone the dance in.

Black, sheer, itchy looking fabric  
With hand painted roses too large,  
Collar high and Victorian;

To the mayonnaise that got stuck  
In my step father's mustache  
At every picnic we ever had.

Having to speak to him  
With my eyes looking actually  
Over his shoulder and not in his eyes

For fear of laughing out loud;  
Barbarian sometimes his rebuke  
And in discipline he was not kind.

Then I spotted this girl coming,  
While looking over his shoulder she came,  
Over spring grass and daffodils.

I remember the pretty yellow sundress  
With flowers all calico blue  
And the way she smiled nervously.

At the next table over  
Another family had forgotten  
To bring enough napkins.



She was their scout, I think,  
Bravely using new manners;  
Probably eleven or twelve.

Mother saw the look in my eyes,  
Knowing her son all too well;  
Love-struck too soon for her own heart to bear.

Come summer the pond was breezy.  
Shoulders always seem the warmest  
Sitting here on the grass of July.

And then the scout kissed me on the face;  
July ain't so hot after all.  
I remember that kiss from those specific lips.

Lots of shiny, strawberry-flavored lip gloss;  
Messy and fun to explore.  
Like a candy apple or edible finger paints.

The reeds around the pond  
Moving in the breeze like a mermaid's hair,  
Waved fingers of accusation towards us.

Dragonflies suddenly appear,  
And leave quickly to gossip  
While you are still realizing what you have done.

Like love's first kiss so fleeting,  
The memory comes slow and leaves quick.  
The smile it brings never goes away.



Yellow sundress and flowers calico blue  
Came through the daffodils  
And made a sticky strawberry mess.

I batted the dragonfly away  
From the back of her head  
And kissed away the summer.

## Elephant Feet

What should travel in nimble steps,  
With mincing mice-like feet.  
Instead clods heavily,  
'Cross bumpy streets.

What should float on angel's wing,  
Transparent, gossamer filigree.  
Instead flies with sightless eye,  
'Cross stormy skies.

What should warble gracefully,  
Through tiny feathered breast.  
Instead emits froggy croak,  
'Cross marshy depths.

Darling, that's how my love for you  
Leaves an elephant tattoo on my chest.

## Dreams

Thoughts move like quicksand  
Slipping from revelation  
To hazy waking dream.

Threads of stories  
Waiting to be restrung  
Like a kite to its handler;

Nuts like clues left behind  
Leading to my lost treasure.  
Too easy to lose the way

I put words to the sounds  
Hoping my melody will be found.

That harmony hummed to  
Hush my first screams  
In the moment I to this world was retrieved.

A memory locked safe away  
In the secret garden of my subconscious  
Where it grows wild and ripe

Without the worry of meddling hands.  
The green fragrances waft through  
The caverns of my mind

Just waiting to be discovered.  
My Eden, My tree of forbidden fruit  
Waiting to be picked.

But for now I write the sounds  
Hoping one day my dream will be found.

## Nightmare

Released by nightfall, like owls deep  
at rest aroused to search for prey,  
soundless chatter happens when I sleep  
from words trapped and sunk below my quay.

Words imprisoned in caverns deep inside  
begin to silently ascend like owls in flight  
exploding in muscle pain that's intensified  
by unvoiced screams that originate at night.

Awakened, painful jawbones stir and crack;  
teeth wobble from the clenching pressure's stress.  
Tissues shout their aches down trenches in my back.  
My head and eyes share in this nightmare's mess.

Arising with an infant's stumbling walk,  
Ever will my voice be heard, instead of silent evening talk?

## Grandma's Summer

summer was always so beautiful,  
the long drive, red rock, and stout Joshua trees.  
hand reaching from the window, try to catch wind,  
who always manages to slip through the fingers.  
rabbits dart across the forgotten highway,  
as their friends wait on the other side,  
playing a dangerous game to fill their days.  
the familiar house and warm hugs,  
a kiss on each cheek.  
cool water laps against the tiles of the pool,  
whispers our names and challenges us to the diving board,  
as the red ants march.  
weeks stretch, timeless and full,  
a steady diet of tumbleweeds, microwave pizzas, and sunburns.  
a one movie theater and stern army base,  
forced to choose just one flavor, from thirty-one,  
soft, wrinkled hands caress young, scarred arms.  
the wind blows strong there,  
whisking away all that hurts as,  
unmerciful sun beats on lizards, bones, and popsicles.  
bicycles and contagious laughs,  
icees that stain red,  
like time stained our souls.  
but the place still exists,  
maybe we will unite again,  
able to forget our ages; our tainted lives,  
at that sanctuary in the middle of nowhere and everywhere.

## Furlough

Leaving the stables behind we step into the lush forest,  
the trail like a portal into a tranquil world of greens.  
My mare is tall, all graceful muscle beneath a shiny coat  
of deep brown. The distant rush of water draws us; we  
break through the tree line to the banks of a wide river.  
White water rushes by on a dull roar. My mare dips her head to  
drink, I memorize this moment.  
The gray sky, heavy with rain, finally opens.  
I look to it, let the drops gently pelt my face,  
the rest of the world is washed away.  
We venture back into the trees as the sun seeps  
through the clouds to play on the saturated leaves,  
creating a kaleidoscope of light, the effect hypnotic.

## Thank You, Mommy

Because when I sat  
On your lap and played  
With the rubbery ball  
That grew along your  
Smooth neck you didn't  
Slap my hand away,  
You never got shy,  
And even let me happily  
Finger the rough scar that  
Appeared in its absence.  
And when I asked, "Did it hurt?"  
You smiled and kissed my hand.  
"Only a little, *mi bruja chula*."

Because when I brushed  
Your hair and counted  
The strands that fell onto  
The floor, you kept track  
For me. And when enough  
Had fallen we went shopping  
And you let me roam through  
Rows of synthetic stylings of  
Barbie perfection that looked  
Beautiful to my candied eyes,  
But when I asked, "Why don't  
You wear yours?" you answered  
Honestly, "Because it's not me."

Because when I lay  
On your chest wrapping  
Your gold chains around  
My fingers, eyeing the lion  
Medallion that sat at your throat,  
Polishing the pink ruby clutched  
In its jaws and asked can these be  
Mine when you die, thinking  
Of princess games, your



Eyebrows frowned for only  
A second before you kissed  
My forehead and said, "And  
Who else's would they be?"

Thank you, Mommy, because I remember it all;  
I remember how you never let any of us fall.

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MICHELLE CHIN

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## Warning Whispers

We spoke of delayed sunsets and star filled nights,  
Vast fields of hope and untouchable dreams.  
Warning whispers were deafened by the glint in our eyes,  
Overshadowed by the giants in our minds.  
Always knowing that we'd leave it all behind.  
Yet we stand in awe in the middle of the road,  
Not bothering to dodge as the headlights leave us blind.

## NONFICTION



## Catching On

I received some simple advice once while training for a job. As usual, I was making first-day mistakes nearly a month after being hired. “The boss likes you and wants to keep you, so just. . . catch on, OK?”

The thing is, I am so absorbed by the minutiae of the world I find it hard to do anything but *notice*. Everything I see competes for my attention and demands to be savored, sorted and filed away. There is also a low-grade buzz and flicker that is often with me, like a dying fluorescent light. It’s difficult to engage me in conversation, as I don’t like being forced out of my headspace. There are obscure problems to solve, threads to follow, loops to close, moments to relive and analyze, and things to size up and describe. This keeps me very, very busy.

One of my mother’s nicknames for me as a child was the Absentminded Professor, though in a less gentle mood she might simply scream, “THINK, Arielle, THINK!” In elementary school, I was sent to the school nurse multiple times by frustrated teachers to have my hearing checked, much to my confusion. I didn’t mind being singled out—I got to leave class and listen to high frequency beeps, bloops and shrieks through a pair of cushy headphones. In seventh grade, I was the subject of an intervention by two teachers who took my spaciness to be a sure sign of emotional trouble, mild retardation, or both. I swear one of the hags flinched as I attempted to explain myself, seemingly shocked that I could communicate in polysyllables. This trouble at school was disheartening, especially when one considers my childhood career goals: detective, Egyptologist, poet, professor, movie star, dancer, singer, botanist, mermaid. I didn’t know I’d grow up to struggle as a clerk and receptionist with a steady 2.0 grade average. The remarks on my old report cards and those on current job reviews are strikingly similar: “seems bored and distracted,” “does not follow directions,” and “lacks initiative.” I always suspected that some joker must have burgled my brain as I slept one night and replaced it with a tiny circus.

As a sometime temp, training for a new job is a familiar farce. There is an almost audible sizzling as new neurological pathways are burned and a palpable smoldering when my brain cools off



after I catch on just in time to get fired. An unfamiliar phone system is as daunting to me as a space command board. I’ve come to dread doing anything out of my comfort zone for fear of the exasperated looks I’ll get from even the most patient boss. Perhaps most frustrating is that there is no way to explain myself without sounding like a class-A bullshit artist. So, time and time again, my brain floats away like a helium balloon, while my body stays below spilling coffee and jamming up the printer. Whispers of “space cadet,” “retard,” and “slow” begin to circulate, as though the successful completion of menial chores is a reliable measure of intelligence. If this is true, I predict that temp agencies will be the new think tanks.

Being hired by a friend of a friend as the receptionist of an upscale hair salon was a mission I threw myself into like a kamikaze pilot. I’m stunned to this day that I took a job so wildly unsuited to me. I believed I could will myself to be efficient, cheerful, and ladylike, and sometimes I almost succeeded. On top of answering the phone, my duties were to wash the towels and smocks throughout the day, fold them when dry, refill the shampoo bottles, wash the mugs and color-mixing bowls that filled the sink to capacity on an hourly basis, take out the trash, order and unpack boxes of dye with distracting names like Cherry Cola and Moroccan Sand—timing it all so I’d be at the front desk to book appointments and collect the copious amounts of cash our fragrant clients would pay to feel like movie stars or kept women. My prior job entailed serving popcorn at the movies. Once, it had also entailed keeping a straight face as I ushered in a little boy named Timmy who was actually a keg of beer my coworkers had dressed and placed in a wheelchair.

My mistakes at the salon mounted. I left phone calls unreturned. I bleached a towel to shreds. I melted a plastic smock by putting it in the dryer. A horrified client once found her mug of fresh coffee already tainted by traces of someone else’s lipstick. Her stylist scolded me, brandishing the mug in my face as I held back tears. I felt like a fraud, clomping around in platform shoes, looking for some misplaced object or another while the phone rang and rang and rang. I tried to keep a smile in my voice, but my native tongue is the telltale mumble of someone who reads far more



than they speak. I began to long for my nights at the theater, where, after a nap in the powder room, I might be greeted with a gourmet Italian dish courtesy of the trattoria next door, whose chef clearly enjoyed the discount cocaine provided in exchange by my fellow burnouts. After four months of my expensive scheduling errors, my boss gave me one last hairstyle before gently giving me the ax. I drove home and sobbed into my boyfriend's neck. I didn't work again for six months.

Not that there aren't perks. Though I've managed to screw myself out of academic success and gainful employment, I have always been a precocious learner. I have to be; my inner life requires constant nourishment—at the expense of my outer life.

Reading on my own time has rarely been a problem, providing I keep at least three books around to dip into. I read compulsively, like a bee adding cells to its honeycomb. My palate cleanser is *The Elements of Style*, which I keep under my bed like an emergency flashlight. Not that I've read the whole thing, but the mere act of cracking it open makes me feel like a genius.

I'm told there are pills for people like me, and names for my condition. My reasons for not pursuing these are pathetic. I'm afraid to project hope onto something as delicate as the availability (I'm uninsured) of medication. Plus, when you stay down, like I do, the only place to go is up. In addition to the what-ifs, I let the pride of others interfere: I occasionally find myself challenged by reactionaries who oppose psychology, fearing it will apply negatively to them or undermine their accomplishments. After all, the stark division of the human brain into Stupid/Lazy and Smart/Hardworking is crucial to the worldview of people who "make" their own luck; to the extent that I now regard the discussion of my spazziness as the Arrogant Turd Litmus Test.

Now in my latest round of unemployment, I think of these Warren Zevon lyrics:

*How're you gonna make your way in the world, woman  
when you weren't cut out for working?  
and you just can't concentrate. . .*

"Catch on." Why didn't I think of that before?

## The Airplane Blackout

Flight to Brazil. Now boarding first class, business class, and group one."

"I can't wait to get to Brazil!" my mom exclaimed as we sat on those black, hard chairs in that air conditioned airport lounge, waiting to board the plane. It had been almost two years since we last went to Brazil and all of us were very excited about our trip and very anxious to see our relatives again.

"Close your bag," my mom told me. "We're going to get on the plane soon." And so I put away my mini video-game and closed the black, rectangular bag in front of me. I couldn't wait to board the plane. I had always been mesmerized by airplanes. Already at the age of twelve, I loved to fly; if someone told me we were going on a plane trip, I would dream about the trip every night before it.

"Our airplane is so big, Mom," I said as I looked through the window, leaving my mouth open after I finished.

"Yes, dear. It's a brand new aircraft."

"Wow. . . ."

"Now boarding group two."

"Let's go," my mom announced, leading the way to the end of the line, me and my brother following after her, each of us with our backpack and pulling a large cargo behind us.

When we finally got on the airplane, we found our seats and sat.

"Look," I said, "there is a TV in every seat!"

"Yeah," my brother said, "and there is a video game, too!"

"No way!" I exclaimed, and my brother and I tried to figure out how the video game worked. We had to wait till the airplane took off for us to play, so we did. After we played a little, it was already time for dinner. So we ate, and afterwards, most people in the airplane went to sleep, but many, like me and my brother, stayed awake trying to take advantage of the technological features of this aircraft. We were both watching a series on television when suddenly all the televisions and lights on the airplane went out.

"Ah!" a woman screamed as I jumped weakly in fright.

"What's happening?" "Oh, my God!" "What is this?"



“Jesus Christ!” “Ah!” were all sounds that ran through the airplane, as well as through my mind, when all of a sudden the emergency lights came on. We were finally able to see something; still not much, but at least people’s faces were visible. The lights calmed the people a little, but everyone was still frightened. After all, the only lights that were on were the emergency lights.

“They only turn on the emergency lights when something bad happens, right?” I asked myself.

“The windows—open them!” a short man who was sitting in the middle of the airplane said.

“It’s three in the morning. It’s still very dark outside. We can’t see anything,” a woman sitting in a window seat replied.

I looked to my left, and the woman next to me could not have resembled a ghost more if she had a white sheet over her head, for she was pale as snow, her eyes not blinking even to breathe, and her mouth not closing even to rest. I turned my head and looked straight ahead at my turned-off television. I tried telling myself that all that was wrong was something with the energy. And I believed it. I looked to my right and saw my brother and my mom, the former indifferent, the latter suspicious. My mom noticed that I was looking at her, and she looked at me, too, smiling, trying through her smile to say that everything was fine.

Still, whispers circulated through the entire airplane; people trying to figure out what had really happened.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please—calm down—everything is fine,” a flight attendant said through the speakers. When she was done, she passed by me and walked to the back of the plane, wiping her oily forehead with her trembling hands while not succeeding in hiding her expression—which was that of a person who had just witnessed a murder. “Everything—is under control,” I heard her telling one of the passengers as she made her way to the back.

“So, everything is fine. I have nothing to worry about,” I thought.

“Is that smoke I smell?” one man in front of me asked.

“Yes...” a woman responded, and now everyone was sniffing the air in search of a burning smell. And, to the dismay of everyone, it was indeed smoke we smelled.



“The airplane is burning!” a woman cried.

I closed my eyes and prayed, not wanting to believe what I had heard. But it was hard not to believe, for I too smelled smoke. I opened my eyes in hope of finding everything resolved, only to see the oxygen masks falling from the overhead compartments of the business cabin, which was just three seats away from me. I swallowed hard as I stared at the business passengers desperately putting on their masks. My eyes finally blinked as the flight attendant closed the curtain between business and coach classes.

As I looked to the window, I saw that morning had begun its journey, and the flight attendant walked briskly to the end of the cabin, telling the passengers, as before, “Everything is under control.”

No one seemed to believe her, especially the woman beside me. She grabbed my hand in surprise and said, “Pray with me, child. Our Father, who art in heaven...” And I followed her. What else was I to do? Praying was the only solution. “... hallowed be Thy name...” I looked at my mom, who was also moving her lips in prayer as she looked out to the gray sky. “Thy kingdom come—ah!” the woman screamed, and as I tried following her eyes, I was led to the business class curtain across the aisle. She was right in having screamed. Smoke began appearing through the curtain, and the smell of burnt cake penetrated our noses. She continued, “Thy will be done...,” now grasping my hand even more tightly. My mother’s lips moved faster and faster, my brother had his eyes closed and was biting his lips incessantly, and my heart was beating as fast as the flight attendant was perspiring. “...on earth as it is in heaven.” I thought for a moment that we were all going to die.

“The smoke is disappearing,” the short man in front of me said suddenly, and we all noticed that he was right. The flight attendant came from the back and opened the business class curtain, letting us see that the business passengers no longer wore their masks. It was bright outside by now, almost 4:00 a.m., and we all became calmer as the flight attendant told us that we would be landing in an hour.

CARLOS ARIAS HERNANDEZ was born in Mexico twenty-one years ago. He enjoys design and intends to pursue a career in product design. His rule of creating is “just flow,” which means that he thinks about his work only while in the process of creating, not before or after.

THERESE BATACLAN was born twenty-one years ago on a third-world island in the sun. She does not listen to the Rolling Stones, she has never been to the state of Massachusetts, and she does not want to see your record collection.

XOCHITL-JULISA BERMEJO is a writer and teacher, inspired by her family, community, and culture.

GREGORY BYRNE’s actions might lead one to consider him an unpleasant character, abrasive, and rude. Some people consider his writing gross, his characters stupid, and the author a loser.

ARIELLE CECI enjoys reading criticism and about biology. Neruda is her favorite poet, and Borges is her favorite thinker. Through all her phases, *Lolita* remains her favorite novel. She is most inspired by plants, animals, shapes, and slapstick violence.

S. C. CHAMBERLAIN is a retired English teacher now taking creative writing courses at PCC. He has published a biography entitled *An Unsung Cat: The Life and Music of Warne Marsh*, now in its second printing. He has published almost no fiction or poetry.

LYNN CHANG is an ABC (American Born Chinese). She is a 13-time published author/illustrator and is currently working on trying to keep a fern alive longer than two weeks. She lives with her cat William, her one-legged dove Tristan—a fox bit one of them off—22 finches, her Peking duck Walter, and her husband Fox (not the fox who bit off Tristan’s leg).

MICHELLE CHIN was born in Los Angeles and is a business economics major. She likes reading, writing, eating chocolate, people watching, trading stocks, watching plays, and visiting museums. She overthinks everything and paces excessively. She would like to have met Andy Warhol and the Beatles.

JOSIE GARCIA studied poetry at PCC last spring. Her poems here come from her work in that class.



LEONARDO GORITOS is an international student from Brazil. He is intrigued by how writers create unforgettable worlds from their experiences and their imagination. He gets his inspiration from nature, paintings, and songs.

COREY GRANADOS is a former PCC student, currently a photography major at Cal State Fullerton.

CORINA MYLA HAYWOOD has a Bachelor’s in English with a concentration in Creative Writing from San Francisco State U. She sees writing as the connective tissue between her talents and challenges because it gives her new ways of understanding the world and her place in it.

JOAN ROA does not have a sense of humor and struggles to grasp Post Modernism.

KAREN ROGERS returned to PCC after retirement to take all the classes she wanted to take after graduating many years earlier... painting, photography, art history, and creative writing/poetry.

ALANA SALTZ is a lover of words. She is currently a student and an aspiring novelist with a love of reading, music, film, and bad television shows. Someday she will write a memoir about her life. For now, she is content with living it.

JOANNA SOUND is a third year PCC student, planning to transfer to Cal State Long Beach this fall where she plans to major in English with an emphasis in creative writing. Chuck Palahniuk is her all-time favorite author, and she hopes one day to write a novel of his caliber.

LAMAR WATERS is a returning student at PCC after having been away from formal education for almost twenty years. His poetry comes from observing his life and that of others. He is a narrator of circumstance who hopes, in his writing, to bring a smile to the reader.

NICO ZURITA just started writing. Her story here comes from her first writing class. She has always dreamed of being the writer—not just the reader—and she sees how meaningful and how damned hard it is for her.

### **ENG 5A CREATIVE WRITING**

Prerequisite: English 1A

Creative literary expression: short story, poetry, and essay. Individual experimentation with various forms; students evaluate their own work and work of classmates in light of contemporary writings.

Transfer Credit: CSU; UC

### **ENG 5B CREATIVE WRITING**

Prerequisite: English 5A, 6, 8, or 9

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; UC

### **ENG 6 SHORT STORY WRITING**

Prerequisite: English 1A

Theory and practice in writing the short story.

Transfer Credit: CSU; UC

### **ENG 8 WRITING POETRY**

Prerequisite: Eligibility for Eng 1A

Writing of poetry in all forms. Reading of traditional and current work.

Transfer Credit: CSU; UC

### **ENG 9 CREATIVE NONFICTION**

Prerequisite: English 1A

Writing and analysis of creative nonfiction, such as memoirs, reviews, profiles, and nature writing.

Transfer Credit: CSU; UC

