Burn Magazine

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Sara Trotta, Contributing Editor | Zachary Bos, Advising Editor

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- from Burn with love -
O Driver! My Driver!

O Driver! My Driver! Our perilous drive has ended
The bus survived the agitated traffic; our stomachs will soon be mended
The school is near, the horns I hear, the kids jump in discomposure
While the school awaits our ingress, our feelings remain unsure:
   But O heart! Heart! Heart!
   Skittles fly into the air,
      And land in the aisle where my driver lies
         Fallen hard right out of his chair

Oh Driver! My Driver! Upturn and hear the jostle;
Surmount- for you the kids in seats turn green—jump up and join the bustle;
You clutch your heart so frantically; we're all caught in suspense;
Our concern creeps in steadily as we await the ambulance.
   For you our flags are lowered—for you the parking lot is filling;
      For you they bellow, cadence of teenagers, their ignorant faces chilling.
         Here Driver! Dear friend!
            The stretcher beneath your head
               It's a mystery to how on that bus
                  You've collapsed cold and dead.

My driver does not answer, his lips bewitched and clasped;
My friend does not feel my hand; his eyes are dark and black;
The bus is parked secure and snug, its voyage sealed and maimed;
From frightful trails, the victor-mobile, comes in with object gained
   Elate, O school, and honk, O horns!
      But I, with mournful gait,
         Walk the lot my driver reigned,
            Fallen quickly to his fate.
The wind howled outside, one of the last storms of the summer ripping through the trees as I fumbled to button up my shirt. My feet pounded on the stairs as I descended into the living room, checking the clock on the wall as I made my way to the couch. Outside the rain had drenched the branches of the trees that lined my yard. They hung lower now, forming a wall that seemed impossibly deep from the picture window in front of me. Even the big oak tree, which had been a towering presence in our yard for as long as I could remember, was shaking in the wind. As I kept my eye on the storm I flipped on the television and grabbed at the middle of my shirt, raising it up and checking to make sure I hadn't put on too much cologne. Caity would be here soon, and I didn't want her thinking I'd been dressing up for her.

As the trees bent and waved I peered to see any sign of her moving through them. Her house sat directly behind mine on the other side of the woods, and she'd been taking the same path through the trees for years. When I was younger I would've thought the storm might’ve held her back, but by now I knew better than that. Now I only waited to see how she'd look when she emerged, thinking of the ways the rain would wet her hair and clothes and how she'd look when she moved up my back porch and to the house. In the background I had kept the TV on just in case she caught me looking. I took another look at my watch. It was just about time now, and I turned back to keep waiting for her as the rain droned on.

She'd moved into my life when I was six, a new playmate forced upon me by my mother, and soon I was the only person she knew at school and she clung to me. No matter how hard I would try to shake her that year I had to face the fact that I was an elementary school boy whose best friend was a girl. But the years changed things and eventually she wasn’t a friend to me anymore, she was something else entirely. A constant, something that I had always known and always been connected to no matter what else changed around me.

And now, through the window in my living room, I caught the first glimpse of her pushing her way through the wet trees, holding branches back as she trekked through. She stumbled a bit over the uneven ground, and tried to steady herself by placing a hand on the oak tree. Instead she only tore off a chunk of bark, leaving a fresh patch of bare, naked wood to soak in the rain.

She looked tanner then the last time I'd seen her, her skin bronzed by the tropical sun she'd been enjoying. Our schedules hadn't lined up for most of the summer, so we hadn't really spent any time together since school let out, and the free time she did have she had been spending with Adam, who was about as much of a boyfriend as he could be before his families imminent military relocation, which was due to take place sometime before school started next week. I wasn't sure how
broken up Caity was about his leaving, but it was a relief to me. No more Adam meant that we would have more time to spend together, which I had taken for granted before he’d taken her away from me.

But now she was here, and she noticed me looking at her from behind the window and waved as she made her way up the steps to my back porch. I started towards the door to let her in, and when I opened it I was surprised at how loud the rain outside was. It smacked the leaves and made them sound like rustling sheets of paper and tip-tapped on the wood of the screen porch. Caity was wearing a green t-shirt and stone washed blue jeans that clung tight to her legs and hips, rounded out by a thin, tan belt just below a bare patch of stomach. Her clothes had been darkened by the rain, and she shook a bit in my doorway like a dog as she ran her hands through her wet hair, pulling it back behind her.

There was a momentary pause, and then she opened her arms and threw them around me. The rain on her skin soaked through my shirt and touched my skin, colder than I’d imagined. My arms found their way around her, noticing how well she always seemed to fit when we hugged, and I smelled the rain on her hair as she let go and stepped back.

“I feel like I haven’t seen you in so long,” she said, taking a seat at the small breakfast table in the other corner of the room.

“I know, it has been a while. How was Mexico?”

“So hot,” she said, leaning down on the table as if she’d passed out. “But it was a lot of fun. I have all these pictures of me and my brother and my mom on my camera at home. I didn’t want to bring it through the rain.”

I slid in to the seat across from her.

“But how was your summer? God we really haven’t hung out since like... June, right? Wow.”

“It was good,” I said, trying to think of any exciting memory I could relate to her. “I worked a lot but I got to see the guys a few times every week. I cleaned up in poker.”

“Well that’s good,” she said, looking around the house as if she’d forgotten what it looked like. Then she snapped back to attention. “Wait, you have to see these. I got them in Mexico. Close your eyes for a second.”

I obeyed, and tried to listen to hear what she was doing. After a few seconds she told me to open my eyes.

On her face was a pair of gigantic sunglasses, covering most of her cheeks, with thick rims that were colored in the fashion of the Mexican flag. She stared for a second, deadpan, and then I burst out laughing.

“They’re great, right?” she said, laughing a bit. “Adam thought they were stupid but I’m really going to wear them.”

“You have to.”

“I know!” she said, taking them off and examining them herself. “Want to try them?”

“I think I’m fine for now.” She looked at the glasses again before putting them
back in her pocket.

“Okay,” she said, “so I have to bring this up because you didn’t notice it and Adam didn’t notice it yesterday either.”

“What?” Before the words left my mouth I was frantically searching up and down her body for something I had missed, hoping I could blurt it out before she pointed out my small failure.

“My hair,” she said, pulling on a thick clump of the rain matted strands for me to see. “It’s darker I dyed it.”

I stared for a second, still unable to see anything, and then started laughing a bit.

“Caity, I mean, maybe it’s the rain but it looks pretty much the same.”

“You’re useless,” she said, laughing and working her fingers through it to separate the smaller strands. She wore her hair shoulder length, usually a dark brown although now I suppose she was aiming for black. It fell in small waves that bounced when they hit her shoulders, always looking natural, usually the first thing anyone noticed about her besides her eyes. But it was always the eyes first, and no matter what other beauty you found in her, it was the eyes that you would always come back to.

But it hadn’t always been that way. For a while, almost two years, it was hidden by not only the disease but the treatment too. In the seventh grade, each of her waving locks of hair had slowly but surely fallen out, piece by piece. Her face and skin looked drained, constantly weak and tired. By the middle of eighth grade she had been bald for almost half a year, choosing to wear a small white hat instead of a wig. Everyone already knew, she said, what was the point of trying to fake it.

We didn’t talk much about the sickness, and if we did, it was only on our walks home from the bus stop every day after class. We’d be the first two off the bus, and then I’d walk her to her door before cutting through the woods to my house.

It was a day in the spring of eighth grade, where in every day that passed I could feel the end of middle school approaching. High school was uncharted territory, something new and exciting on the horizon that grew closer with each day that we walked home from school. Outside the trees had just returned from their winter slumber and I found myself stuffing my sweater into my backpack as we started walking, letting the warm spring air wash over me.

“Did you pick a book yet for Mrs. Marcun’s class?” Caity asked, taking her hat off and rubbing her bald head with her free hand.

“No. I wanted to read Dracula but she wanted me to pick something more modern.”

“That sucks,” Caity said, putting her hat back on. “She’s getting so picky. At the beginning of the year she let you do whatever you wanted.”

“I know. I already started reading too now I have to find something new and get it done by the end of the month.”

We continued on a few steps when a voice called out from behind us.

“Hey, stop a second.”
I stopped walking and turned, but Caity continued a few steps until she noticed I’d halted. Behind us, advancing, were three other kids from our school. I recognized one of them as Billy Hays, a tall, rail-thin kid who lived down at the bottom of the street. The other two boys looked like his friends, each wearing dark shirts and blue jeans, their skin milky pale in the sun. Billy was dressed slightly better in a black polo, and he sported a winter hat on his head to cover his mop of messy hair. When he got close enough I thought I could smell cigarettes clinging to his clothes.

Caity nervously stepped closer to me as they stared at the two of us. A year ago Billy had asked her our school’s annual dance in the lunch, an invitation that had been publicly rejected. Since then he’d made a habit of trying to make her life more difficult, and while she could usually turn him aside with a quick, witty remark, I could tell that it was getting to her. Especially as the sickness got worse. He and I had never been close as friends, though our parents occasionally socialized together. From the looks of it, this meeting wasn’t going to bring us any closer.

“Is that weird for you?” Billy asked, nodding at Caity. His friends laughed a little bit behind him, and her eyes fell to the pavement.

“What do you want Billy?” I asked. His eyes snapped off of Caity and locked into mine.

“I want to talk to the girl,” Billy said. “That is a girl, right? I have trouble telling with that head of hers.”

Billy’s friends laughed more, patting him on the back as he stood, towering over me and watching as Caity began to turn away and continue walking. I didn’t move, only watched as one of Billy’s friends walked around me and stood in front of Caity, blocking her path.

“Come on, we’re just trying to talk,” the kid said. He was shorter then Billy, skinnier too, almost a skeleton inside his clothes.

“Fuck you,” Caity said, her voice quiet and crispy, and I remember spinning in shock because it was the first time I’d ever heard her curse, much less use a phrase like that.

Billy’s friend stared at Caity in disbelief, then laughed a bit to himself. Caity kept her eyes on the ground and stepped around him, but only got a step or two past when he reached out and grabbed the hat off of her head, snatching it and folding it into his arms.

“Look at that,” he said. Billy and the other friend walked away from me and surrounded Caity, defenseless, between the three of them. “You look like a little troll,” the boy with the hat said. “Like a little fucking troll.”

From outside the circle I peered in and saw Caity turn her eyes up at me, giving a soft, hopeful look. Those eyes that I’d admired for so long seemed blank with disappointment, and as soon as I noticed them they turned back to the ground as the boys jeered at her.

I was moving before I knew what happened. Billy stood confidently at Caity’s side, rubbing a hand over her head as she swatted him away.
“Just say you’re sorry to Eric for cursing at him and we’ll go,” he said, but the minute the words left his mouth I was on him, pushing him with all my force and then throwing my fist at him as fast as I could. My knuckles smacked against his cheek and he stumbled backwards, not knocked down but definitely surprised.

Before I could even pull my arm back to savor the strike I felt a mass of skin and bone collide with the side of my head as one of Billy’s friends punched me, knocking me off my feet and sending me down to the asphalt below. My face hit the ground hard and I felt the small pieces of stone and concrete cut into my cheeks. My head felt like it was inflating, like someone was blowing air into my brain and it would pop just like a balloon at any moment. Another blow struck, this one undoubtedly a shoe kicking into my stomach, pushing my belly in so far that I could feel the acid rising in my throat and wincing to keep it down until the pain subsided. For a few seconds I didn’t hear or understand anything, only the view of the concrete and the street ahead of me and the pulsing, pounding pain all over my body, ringing from my head to my chest.

And then I rolled flat onto my back, and there was only Caity, kneeling down next to me, hat in her hand. She pulled the hat back over her head and stared, no tears, no words, just silence as her eyes rolled over me and the clouds passed in the sky.

“Where’d they go?” I asked, raising my head off the gravel and then sitting up, running a hand over my cheek to brush off the dirt and feel for blood. I could already feel a bruise rising on my left cheek, and my stomach rolled and twisted as I steadied myself.

“They left after you fell down,” Caity said, rubbing her eyes a bit and then sitting on the pavement with me. “They just left.”

For a while we just sat there, planted on the side of the street as cars and younger children passed. The sky above was full of clouds, and I could smell what I thought would be the first big thunderstorm of the year. When I turned my eyes away from the sky Caity was looking at me, just staring.

“You’re not a troll,” I said.

“Thank you.”

But now the hair was back and she’d moved to my living room couch, laying down and kicking her bare feet up on the end.

“What are you watching?” she asked.

“It was Law & Order,” I said, pulling my seat away from the table and moving it near the couch so I could sit closer. “I don’t know what it is now.”

“So you ready for school Tuesday?”

“Not at all,” I said.

“Same. I can’t believe this is the last weekend of the entire summer. I feel like we just got out of school last week or something.”

“At least we’re seniors this year,” I said, raising my arms in the air in a mock celebration.

“True,” she said, changing her position so that she sat up on the couch. She
grabbed the remote and began flipping through the channels aimlessly.

“The picture looks a little fuzzy,” she said. I looked at the screen and it did seem to be breaking up a bit. I looked out the window at the trees shaking as the wind picked up.

“Probably the storm. I can’t believe you walked through that.”

“I know no bounds,” she said, then licked her lips a little bit. “Hey do you have anything to drink? I can get it, I just haven’t had anything to drink since breakfast and I’m getting thirsty.”

“Yeah.” I rose from my seat and began walking towards the kitchen when she stood.

“No no, I can get it, I just wanted to know if there was anything.”

“It’s fine,” I said, and she dropped back into her seat on the couch. “Coke okay?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

I walked through the kitchen to the fridge and began rummaging through to find the sodas. From the other room I heard the channels changing, each one lasting only a few moments before she moved on. I found the sodas hidden behind cartons of juice in the back of my fridge, grabbing two and heading towards the counter to pour them into glasses.

“So Adam left this morning,” Caity said from the other room. Her voice was perfectly still, but I almost dropped the glasses I was holding as I headed for the living room. I handed her one and sat back down, trying to think of what I should say.

“I didn’t know he was leaving so soon,” was all that I came up with.

“Yeah. We hung out last night for the last time,” she said, sipping on her drink.

“Are you okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you sad or anything or need to talk about it? I dunno.”

“No it’s fine,” she said. “I’m actually perfectly content.”

I took a long drink before speaking. “Well I guess that makes sense, I mean you two weren’t dating all that long anyways.”

“Not like that, asshole,” she said, laughing. “It was just, we left on the right terms I think.”

Her lips met the glass in front of her and I thought about what this meant, what having Adam gone meant for me and any and all of the plans and situations I’d been making over the years. Her eyes fixed on me, and though the glance only lasted a moment I was sure she knew what I was thinking, that she’d always known, but she’d never say it aloud. So instead we shared the silence, the only sound between us was the clanking of ice on the glass as her tiny pink lips worked around the rim, brushing up against the ice cubes and pulling in the drink.

Her lips had seemed paler once, back in the fall of our sophomore year. It was late in the afternoon, a few weeks before Halloween and we sat on the swing set at our old elementary school. It was a place we’d go whenever she needed to talk
about something, a ritual that had developed over the years as she'd grown healthier. Her hair had grown back strong, and the color and liveliness had returned to her face and skin. She looked alive again.

“It’s just stupid,” she said, swinging back and forth. I sat still on my swing, watching as she’d pass me by moving forwards and backwards. The elementary school kids had long gone home and now the entire playground was ours and it was like being young again, just sitting out there in the autumn breeze.

“What’s stupid?”

“That I’m sixteen and I’ve never kissed anyone. That’s weird, right?”

“I dunno,” I said, not entirely sure what she was talking about. “Maybe it’s a bigger deal for girls or something.”

“It’s cause I was sick,” she said, “I know it. Any guy who’d want to kiss me looks at me and thinks that I’m the sick girl. And that weirds them out.”

I didn’t respond. Instead I dug my feet into the ground below and began to pump my swing backwards and forwards, letting myself fly.

“I sound like I’m complaining don’t I?” Caity said, bringing her swing to a stop as mine got going.

“Not really. I can understand where you’re coming from.”

“It’s like I just want to get it over with. It doesn’t have to be special or anything it just has to happen and then I can forget it and be normal.”

“I think you’re making this a bigger deal than it is.” I pumped my legs and swung higher.

“It’s different for you cause you’ve kissed people before.”

“But not that many people,” I said, laughing a bit.

“Not that many people,” I said, laughing a bit.

“But still, you have. It’s some weird part of growing up that I haven’t gotten to have and now I’m in high school and I feel like I missed something. Maybe it wasn’t because I was sick. But regardless it just, I dunno, it bothers me.”

I swung back to the ground and dragged my feet in the dirt, slowing to a bumpy stop. Caity watched me and then looked out at the edge of the playground.

“Sorry,” she said, still not looking at me. “I’m complaining a lot.”

“It’s alright,” I said. My stomach turned over a bit as I watched her and then I spoke again. “Look if it’s that big of a deal I can just kiss you.”

Her head snapped around to look at me and a rush of cold swept over my body. My eyes dropped to the ground, feeling a rush of blood hit my cheeks.

“Is that weird?” she said. “Cause we’re such good friends or whatever wouldn’t it be weird?”

“I mean it wouldn’t be a big thing,” I said, surprised at the words that were leaving my mouth. My foot tapped frantically on the ground but I continued. “It’d just be short and then you’d be done with it. It wouldn’t be weird for me if it wasn’t weird for you.”

She was silent for a moment, and I looked up from the ground at her. She stared back at me, smiling a bit.

“All right,” she said leaning closer to me on her swing so that our knees
brushed together.

“Yeah,” she said. “You’re not going to fall madly and inescapably in love with me, are you?”

“No,” I laughed.

She laughed too and then her face straightened and I realized how nervous I was. I watched her two lips rub together a bit, her eyes staring at me and blinking a few times. Then, as if driven by something inside, without thinking I leaned forward and pressed my lips into hers, pausing for a moment, and then continuing, moving my lips against hers and feeling her mouth slowly begin to move with me, our lips opening and closing against each other. And then it was over, and she looked back like I’d caught her off guard, but after a moment she smiled and started swinging again.

“Thanks,” she said. “It wasn’t weird at all.”

“No problem,” I said. It was the first time I had ever really touched her, and as she thanked me all I could think about was that she was different, that she tasted different. Every other girl I’d kissed until that point (and there hadn’t been many) tasted like lip gloss or chapstick. Their lips tasted artificial, made up. Caity’s just tasted like skin, they tasted real and human and as she sat there on her swing, her problem solved, I could only wonder if I would ever get feel her like that again.

The drinks were done now, and I was back in the kitchen putting the glasses into the sink. Caity sat on the couch, having settled on reruns of Seinfeld. I finished cleaning the glasses and walked back over to the living room, taking a seat next to her on the couch. She adjusted her position so that she was leaning slightly towards me. Probably unintentional, but interesting nonetheless.

“How much longer are your parents going to be out?” she asked. I took a look at my watch. Six o’clock. We had at least another hour before they’d be back.

“Probably until around seven.”

She nodded and turned back towards the television. Outside I thought I could hear the rain calming down, and when I turned to look out the window I could see that the wind wasn’t bludgeoning the trees anymore.

“So can I tell you something?” she asked. Her eyes locked into mine, and for a second I thought I could see that she was afraid, but the look vanished in an instant.

“Yeah.”

“Alright.” Then she paused, looking at the TV and then out at the storm as if she wasn’t sure what to say. My heart began to beat harder and my stomach tensed up as she turned back and looked like she was going to speak, but then turned back to the television.

“So Adam left this morning, I told you, right?” she said. I nodded; liking the way her story was starting. We had at least one year left together before college, and now Adam was finally gone and we were here, just me and her the way it should be, the way I’d always wanted it to be. I thought of her lips, the way they tasted back
then and wondered if they would feel the same when they brushed mine.

“So last night we had our big goodbye or whatever you call it. We went to a
movie and ate dinner his parents and hung out till around midnight when it was
time for me to go. And after I left I just sat in his driveway in my car for a while.
Thinking I guess but I wasn’t ready to leave.”

“You really liked him, didn’t you?” I said, the words leaving my trembling lips.

“It wasn’t even that,” she said, “it was maybe that I thought it got cut off?
Cause he was moving, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“So maybe he noticed that I hadn’t driven away or something but he texted me
to come back in around the back cause his parents were asleep. So I got out and he
snuck me in through the backdoor and we went down to his room in the base-
ment.”

And then I wanted the story to stop. Because this was not what I wanted to
hear, this was the worst thing, the horrible thing that I’d dreaded since as far back
as I knew. The muscles in my chest tensed up and my stomach rolled, feeling just
like it did when I’d been kicked so many years ago. Outside the storm was picking
up again.

“It was like we just froze or something,” she continued. “We just stood there
forever staring at each other.” Her voice was growing less afraid as the story went
on, as if remembering it gave her some sort of strength. “And then it was like it just
stopped and we just like attacked each other. It was kind of sudden and weird but it
also felt right.”

“Was that all?” I said. The words were awkward when they left my mouth but I
couldn’t think straight.

“Well, I mean I don’t really have to say the rest, do I?” She turned away from
me and back towards the TV. There was a moment of silence, and she sat their
completely content, sighing as if a huge weight was off her shoulders. I almost
spoke again but fell silent, unable to find anything to say that would better the situ-
ation.

“It’s strange,” she said, “cause it isn’t really like anything. You think it’ll be a big
deal and be this defining moment in your life, but it’s just something that happens
and then it’s over, you know?”

But I didn’t know. I didn’t know and I didn’t want to know. What I wanted to
do was crawl deep into the earth and disappear; to find some way to erase this en-
tire day because though I’d never presumed her to be mine I had always harbored
the thought that it would be the natural evolution of things. That deep down she
remembered me protecting her; that she remembered how my lips felt and longed
to find out again. That we had both been together so long that we would grow to-
gether into something new, something that I had always wanted but dared not say,
and now that seemed destroyed because someone else had already become every-
thing I wanted to be to her. They had known her and felt her in ways that I never
would, because no matter what happened now there would always be someone be-
fore me, and that would eat at me every time I saw her.

I wasn’t sure of how long the silence lasted, but I wasn’t the one who broke it.

“Anyway,” she said, getting herself more comfortable on the couch, “do you want to watch a movie or something?”

“Yeah sure,” I said, sounding automatic. She rummaged through the cabinets under the television and picked something out, getting it set up on the TV and then settling back in next to me. The movie came on but I didn’t pay attention. I listened to Caity breath next to me, watching the clock at the far side of the room to kill time until the day could end, listening to the storm outside as it picked back up. She talked to me a little, and I responded but I wasn’t really there, anymore. I was somewhere else, thinking things that I cannot remember and waiting to be alone again. But mostly I was just listening to the storm outside, hearing the wind roar and the sound of rain as it beat and beat upon the trees, and thinking to myself what a god awful sound that was.
On a scale of one to ten, I would give my experience working at Ronette's Pets a 'one,' as in 'one of the worst things to ever happen to me.'

I held a summer job there because until then I had thought I liked animals. It was the only thing in our town's strip mall that hadn't closed yet (but it was only a matter of time). This was not a sprawling modern pet superstore; those have air conditioning. Working at Ronette's Pets was like drowning in a septic tank while listening to a Sounds of the Rainforest CD at full volume. It was an assault on all five senses. It was what I imagined third world black market pet stores would be like, if those even exist.

I thought the worst part of my job would be dealing with the smell or watching animals die every day. It was engraving custom name tags.

These tags cost two dollars each and people almost always bought them when they got new pets. It made me want to die. Little kids and sometimes even adults would name their pets Perry the Parrot or Lizzy the Lizard. Imagine how it would feel to be named Hubert the Human. Not just Hubert; Hubert the Human. I think the worst one I ever did was Batman the Bat. It was a girl bat.

I would come home every day exhausted and smelling like a barn. I resolved to quit after each shift, but I could never get in touch my Ronette (I assumed that was her name, but there was no way to be sure). I had only seen her twice: the day she hired me, and the day she interrogated me to find out who was teaching the parrots obscenities.

Most new pet owners played it safe with names like Lucky or Boots. It was disgusting. I wanted to shake those people and say, "Are you serious? You're going to name him Rex? This dog is eventually going to die with no offspring, and you're going to bury him in an unmarked grave. The most meaningful thing this dog can hope to accomplish is getting hit by a car and traumatizing your kids. Give him something to hold onto. Give him a name that isn't Rex."

A little part of me died with each name I engraved. I kept my mouth shut, not because I valued my job but because I valued my life; the first thing everyone learns while working with live animals is not to confront a mother in front of her kids.

Thankfully, there were people who understood the process. I would ask them if they wanted name tags, and they would say, "Let's hold off on naming him for a bit, until we know his personality a little better."

They knew that it wasn't like naming people. You have certain liberties. If you have a son and you tell the nurse "leave the birth certificate blank, we need some time to figure this baby out," social services will get involved and the Supreme Court will eventually tell make you name your kid Steven. But with a pet, nobody cares. You have its entire lifetime to figure out if it's more of a Chairman Meow or
a Meowther Teresa (these names both fall into the ‘stupid puns’ category and are not recommended).

I ended up naming most of the animals in the store, partly to pass the time and partly to get back at them for barking and squawking while I was trying to sleep through my shifts. There was a Siamese cat who bit me when I tried to feed her; I named her Judith after the slutty girl who dies first in Halloween. There was a half-blind dachshund who would run into the walls of his cage and wake up every sleeping animal in the shop, including me; I named him Mr. Fenwick after a substitute teacher at my high school who lost his job for having ‘questionable relations’ with some members of the boys’ lacrosse team. I named a litter of whiny little Scottish terriers after the boys’ lacrosse team.

Toward the end of the summer Ronette showed up in the middle of one of my shifts. I figured she was going to reprimand me for exceeding my weekly animal death quota, but she was bearing good news.

“We’re closing. People don’t understand the value of animal companionship any more. I guess this isn’t the America I used to love.” She looked around and sighed. I think she expected me to offer some kind of condolence, but I was completely focused on hiding the exhilarating sense of freedom I was feeling.

“Anyways, just thought I’d give you the heads up so you didn’t keep coming in. The shelter’s gonna send people over tomorrow morning and pick up all the animals.” She took one of the snakes out of its cage, put it around her neck and began to walk out.

“What are you going to name that snake?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Sssspencer,” she said after less than a second of hesitation. I was glad that Ronette hadn’t been around the store more, because I hated her. I wanted to jump across the counter and use that snake to strangle her, but it wouldn’t be fair to put that kind of guilt on Spencer.

I was always taught that animals don’t have souls, and I accepted that because it made it easier to eat meat. Still, when I went around the store and fed them for the last time, I felt for them. They must have been miserable, and even if they didn’t have emotions they were still probably itchy or had headaches or something. Either way, they weren’t happy. Neither was I. But that evening, right before closing, a woman descended from heaven and saved me.

“I need a name tag,” she said before she was even through the door. She was middle-aged and conservatively dressed, and I instantly pegged her as the alliteration type. It occurred to me that without the risk of losing my job I could run the electric engraving needle through this woman’s face the second she asked for a “Bruce the bunny” tag.

“I need it to say, uh,” she looked down at a piece of paper with something scribbled on it in crayon. “The Happiest Cat in the World.” She shrugged and handed me two dollars. “That’s what my kids want to call him.”

I loved those kids. I imagined what it would look like if this woman and I had kids, and that’s what those kids looked like in my mind. I wanted them to be my
kids. I wanted to be those kids and think that cats could be happy and that my cat was the happiest in the world.

Before I closed up I made name tags for every animal in the store. I made three hundred and twelve in total, including ones for Judith, Mr. Fenwick and everyone on the boys’ lacrosse team. When I finished the sun was coming up. I dropped the engraving needle in the goldfish tank, took all the money out of the register and left.
MICHAEL IVY

Arachnophobia
for Ewa

You dance just like the spider that you fear,
Both palms thrown back and searching up the walls,
While waiting for the spider to appear
From out the purple ballast where she crawls;
Afraid that if she clasps you to her chest,
You'll wear the onyx armor that she wears,
And when she sinks her fangs into your flesh,
You'll bare the crimson hour glass she bares;
But know her glass and armor have no chance
Against your flute of wine and evening dress
Because she's scared to see your finest dance:
Your warm embrace and slow narcotic kiss.
Keep dancing like the spider that you fear,
And terrify her if she dares come near.
MARA HAMPTON

The Earth Worms

genesis: bodies loose
writhing naked in brown flesh
of tomb
skin on skin, masses
throng the earthen womb
thrusting blind toward night
and deeper
night, soft pockets of earth pulsing
with forms floating in bedlam
of suspended soil
	til waves squeeze
sacks of skin
and guts screaming to the
	surface (silent wails of
confusion) muted
by pallid
winds of a forceful
dawn suffocating
from open air, thrown
	upon the bloated breast
of new earth
they gasp, swollen
half-drowned and
stranded
in the white
of day
Would you have me
balancing you, like china
on the tips of my thumbs?

Or maybe, be less
than I am, crumbled
into a ball of blue
lines in the lint and lining
of your jean pocket

I skulk around the cracks, yet
you are not Mildred
or some other veiny hub
of butterscotch candies and teeth
with plastic on your couches

I want to sink into you, shoes and all

And I would have it as in the beginning
moving quietly in the red
garden: jumble of heat, vines,
and dandelions

But when I awake from the pastel
fire of fantasy, a dream
hatched and gone leaving shells and
yoke at the back of my lids
I have to wonder

what will be our undoing,
my stitching or your thread?
ELIZABETH SANTOVASI

Wasteland

I.
In the heart of a grassland there stands
a man who lies against a lone,
rotting tree, that he named
Green.
Inside the tree rests his dreams.

II.
Behind the crag,
creeps a fire camped and dancing all night
long; And in the heat the Earth perspires,
while the wind fights for dust at dawn.

III.
The solitude that plagues big Green
is a vine squeezing the roots of love.
What day is this! How I have longed and waited for this very day to arrive, and yet, somehow, never expected that I would live to see it actually happen. But what day is this! And today of all days for this strange fate to have unwound itself from sorrowful sleep seems unusual and out of place, if a place could ever been determined. I suppose it must have been carried here by the winds or, perhaps, awoken by the electricity thrown across the air as we all attempted to sleep.

I have often imagined this very day, but never in such conditions as these. How could I have expected that it would turn out to be on a day like today? What is today! Today I am free! Today I have been released from my interminable hold in that place of darkness and a placating sense of stagnant dampness and cold.

Today I step out and feel the wind for the first time since I can remember having a sense of time. And the thought occurs to me again, what day is this? I'm walking down the road now, wondering where I should start my reintegration into the world. Can I be reintegrated at all? It has been so long, or has it? No matter which, it seems to me that it has been long enough to prove this bounding leap into reality difficult.

What day is this! That shall be my first task. Then from there I will be more able to figure out where I should being this long process of integration. So I walk. The sky is grey giving me no indication of a shadow on which I could base what part of this memorable day I am currently experiencing. Time for me, it seems, is ever elusive. The tick tock of my wind up watch from childhood is a distant past. Something like a fairytale memory. Although after those years apart, I may believe more in fairies and goblins and knights in shining armor visiting me along this crunchy gravel road than seeing a passing car or growing skyline of a city.

I'm walking for what seems like what might be considered a long time, although this flat landscape gives me no indication. The only clues I have that I have been moving at all is the pain in my feet, due to lack of use. The tower, from which I left, grows smaller too. Or is that shrinking? I cannot even say for sure if the temperature around me is changing. It seems that I remember that it grows colder as the night gets closer. But I don't feel a change. Or maybe I don't feel anything at all. That could be an option I suppose, considering all the years I have spent feeling only coldness and the soft caress of my only friends as they scurried over my feet looking for a lost scrap of food. Food! How often am I supposed to get food? I can no longer remember the intervals. I know that food was given to me before I was free but how long apart between these meals is impossible for me to determine. Will I still feel hunger telling me that I should find something to eat? Will I be able to find anything out here along this endless gravel road?

I'm watching the horizon as I walk and I feel a sense of *déjà vu*, a hint of a
memory from a time long past when I watched a program on a television as a child. It was something about how producers create the illusion that someone is driving in a car while they are filming, the rolling sheet of images that flow behind a parked car to give the illusion of movement. The fans blowing wind through the protagonist’s hair and more importantly through whichever girl he has his arm so casually drooped around. This skyline reminds me of that rolling sheet of images and for a second I wonder if I am moving at all. Then I remember the pain in my feet. How much time has passed since I left those carefree memories behind for something more gallant and epic? How was it I have ended up here wondering what time is?

I am unconcerned about the direction I have chosen. This gravel road that bends slightly to the left sometimes and slightly to the right other times, or maybe that is just the sway of my body. My left leg is a little longer than my right. But my right foot is bigger and I’m right-handed, so it may be balanced. I feel like this is a path that I have taken before, but I know that that is just the cause of my isolation and my wild mind playing games to keep itself sane. Has it succeeded? I am unconcerned about this as well. It is plain to me that when I do find what day this is, I will also find out if I have changed since the last day I remember. Since that day there has been no division in time. No indications of change, just constant stable lighting and temperature.

I tend to doubt that this unusual way of living has had much of a negative effect on me. I suppose that if anything, it has released me from those stresses that I remember my mother and father toiling over. My mother’s head in her hands when my father did not come home from work until late, progressing to the biting of her fingernails when he finally called saying that will is going to a bar with some coworkers, and then finally the resigned sigh when the tick tock ticks enough to tell my mother that he is not coming home tonight, again. But me, in my isolation, I had no such worries. I had no events to anxiously await the arrival, no trials to dread of coming, no appointments missed or rushed to arrive at, and no seasons to wish would never end. No time.

And so I continue walking, no hurry in mind, just walking and wondering if I am going to be able to adjust to the practice of following this mysterious and false idea of a before, now and after.

It seems my father, despite having grown up in such conditions, never quite agreed with the idea of time. He continued to live his life as he had before he met my mother while he was meeting my mother and after he met my mother. It seems that the only reason anything changed for him was because my mother insisted that it be changed. Although, this turned out only to be a figure head of change, seeing as my father rarely conformed to this idea of being home at a certain time. Maybe it is that he was incapable of change. Change being that which denotes something now is different from something before. There in lies an inherent definition of that which my father and now I have tried so desperately to rid ourselves of. This ever suppressing concept of time. My father was never able to break his chains to time. His methods were not irrational enough. He tried to fight against time, to
deny its existence. But it seems that those around him imposed time upon him de-
spite his best efforts. All his mistresses eventually grew too old or too fat and my 
mother eventually disappeared with me. Each of these occurrences threw him in 
their own defiant manner their own undeniable reminder of change. My father 
eventually figured out that he could not live in a world where other people could 
affect his delirium and needed to escape. And so he has.

So why is it now that I have been released to be free of this non-time world 
that I have since been living? And why do I rejoice at the idea of doing so? In spite 
of all my efforts it is obvious that change occurs. In what way have I been changed, 
I have already come to the conclusion that I have no way of knowing until I reach 
somewhere that will tell me what day is this. Meanwhile, as in, at the same time, I 
am still walking past that rolling screen. Do I long for time? Is it this primal need 
that we all possess to know that something is happening and all is not for nothing? 
Has my isolation, self-imposed or not, I am no longer sure, accounted for anything? 
What was it again that I wished to accomplish by this stint of stubborn denial? 
Was it anything? But if I have accomplished something of worthiness, some sort of 
breakthrough, does not that breakthrough deny the possibility of such a discovery?

Finally, in the distance I see along this slightly curving road, a building, some-
thing that I can now watch growing larger. At last, a time machine that will be able 
to tell me when it is that I have arrived. Then I am there. Or here? I walk into the 
building and down a flight of stairs and a calming feeling of cool dampness over-
whelms my senses and I fall into a deep sleep, only to be awoken by the scrape of a 
plate being pushed towards my feet across the floor. I smile, wake up and think 
what day is this? Today I am sure to know.
I spent an afternoon in Springfield once. On that day I had gotten out of class at my boarding school early so my mom could bring me to the hospital. This was right after I got home from Europe. I remember sitting in the waiting room after popping the Klonopin my mom gave me. Scummy aquariums fit into angled walls. The smell of sterilized life combined with thousands of wasted manila folders documenting minor ailments. The stench sits in the torpid air, congesting the perfectly silent patrons of this anxious annex. Every pale face in this room is estranged. Everyone in this space inhabits their own bubble.

The only escape I get is to make a move towards the sad excuse for a magazine library, which sits on the faux-wood end-table next to me. The covers of these magazines are designed to intrigue, but never compensate for the pathetic articles they protect. I flip past, “10 Quick Dinner Plans for the Family” and “The Truth About Your Backswing.” I stop to glance at a few of the new and improved things people should be buying, and then return the magazine to its veneered resting place.

The walls in this room are covered with rough grey wallpaper; the rug is tough and short, and leaves patients with little additional comfort. There are a few small children pressing their red faces against the murky glass of the window tanks. The distorted images of ceramic castles and plastic seaweed sway into their young eyes. I can hear them tapping on the glass from my seat across the room, but in my predicament, all I could focus on was the poison circulating through my veins. If it said so on paper, I was ready to accept the truth: there was something wrong. Science would prove it, and now it was time for me to face the consequences. Maybe this was the way I had to pay for all the days I wasted and can’t even remember now. The inevitable penance: abnormalities, tests, anxiety.

I learned later that day that nothing was wrong with me. Only faulty blood work under the microscope. The sickness I described swimming around in the most cavernous and anomalous crevasses of my body, was not in my veins but in my head.

The soft elation I was feeling due to the Klonopin had dulled the pang when the doctor informed me of my good health. It was as though I had been asleep, and unable to feel relief.

The warm light in the cafe radiates and bounces off one wall to another, blurring tacky farmer figurines and plastic poinsettias. My wine glass, my menu, even my mother’s freckled skin gleams in the candlelight hanging above both our heads. The smell of strong cheese clots the air around us. I stare at a viola hanging on the
stone wall to my left. The instrument is made of mahogany, and its pious wooden form interrupts the other shallow decorations.

_The other day I found him with six burnt matches in his room._

_Just sitting, there near his pillow._

I drag my gaze off the viola, and back to my mother. She sits before me. She is right here with me, and her presence is still so surreal. Her words are much louder than those buzzing around us. Her tone is bold, and interrupts the flowing parole wrapping its way around the room, filling it, and condensing the air. I blush a little when a man in a striped business suit at the table next to us shoots my mother a condescending glance. The look is lost on her. She has not yet yielded to the burden of an Anglophone in France. I try not to let on to my embarrassment and nod, signaling my mother to go on. I try to show that I am listening with an open mind even if others in the room are not.

_I'm worried. I don't have control._

_I'm not always around and even when I am…_ 

I left home at sixteen to prove to myself I didn't need anyone. I ran all the way to France to prove all I needed was a change of pace and place, but here I am sitting in a café thousands of miles away waiting for my mom to tell me everything is going to be ok, and she can't.

My heart smacks around a few more times, pounding and knocking through my hollow stomach. The pulse bounces back and forth, up into my throat and out my ears, and I am waiting. I adjust my silverware, and fix the placement of our water glasses, and I wait.

The saltshaker has drifted during the course of our meal, so I move it back to its original position. All my fiddling and organizing does not faze mother. She merely stabs rhythmically at her salad. Pieces of feta are launched this way and that, and it’s all I can think about, because she hasn’t broken our silence.

And then I find out my mom has to go to AA meeting three times a day just to get through without a drink. AA tells us the reason anyone becomes addicted is to avoid the mounting everyday anxieties we can’t deal with on our own.

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I’m on a train to Pittsfield. The locomotive lurks through the backyards of hillbillies, and charges dangerously close to the meager traffic of the MassPike, I’m looking forward to a little down time in a big house. It has just rained and the pavement outside my cloudy window is still blackened. The bubbles in the window glass bend and distort the country scenery outside. It washes away with the rain, streets melting into fields and fields into humble neighborhoods.

The atmosphere sitting stagnant in the cabin of the train has gotten slightly more ominous since we pulled away from South Station. New types of people have made their way onto the train. It’s been a slow take-over. First stop Framingham, then Worcester. By the time we reach Springfield the influx of passengers no longer look like they’ll have a leisurely weekends in the countryside. Perhaps they are in-
When I finally get home I make a beeline for the liquor cabinet that hasn't been opened for nine months. I pop open a dusty bottle of Canadian whiskey and mount my butcher block. Today was my second visit to Dr. Goldstein's office. I have made a breakthrough and admitted my “illness.” Apparently I am eligible for medication. The therapist has only met me twice and knows a little. I am sad and alone. I want to stay this way. I have an “inability to enter or uphold realistic mutual relationships” and am “detached from humanity.” Apparently I have no interest in the mortal coil.

Once, my mom took me to a Cajun restaurant called Mamou’s. Even as a kid I had been fascinated with crawfish. Their little red armored bodies. Too small to be substantial enough for a real meal, but dangerous. Bitter little crustaceans zipping around in shallow water. My interest in crawfish had bloomed into an obsession with the Deep South. I would spend hours imagining what it might be like in New Orleans, wandering through Spanish moss squares. I would like to try to go there.
October 15, 2006

“So what do you think?”

“I don’t know Dad, I think the Rubber Soul album is still my favorite.” Sitting in the passenger seat of my Dad’s company car with my knees gathered up to my chest, we sped past storefronts filled with caricatures of witches and ghosts, debating about The Beatles.

“Are you kidding? The Sgt. Pepper’s Album changed music completely. Completely! The last note in the song “A Day In The Life” changed it all. It cleared the way for new genres of music. Just keep listening until you get it.” My dad pressed rewind and every instrument built themselves back up. I rested my head on my knees and paid attention, because paying attention to the music made my dad paid attention to me.

All of the quality time I have ever spent with my father ties into music. He would make me rate records, show me YouTube videos of live concerts from his heyday, and demonstrate the sound qualities of every speaker set in the store. My parent only fought about the new expensive speakers my dad purchased or where we were going to be able to fit his expanding CD collection in our modest one-story home. I was allowed in a part of my Dad’s world and from a young age I understood that the only way to really talk to my father was through the heart-wrenching lyrics that others had wrote. We’d smile to a great bridge, sing along to a creative chorus, and laugh at Twisted Sister for killing the environment with hairspray. I was the child who acknowledged boy bands for their catchy tunes and popularity among my elementary school classmates, but secretly I went into the car after school and asked my dad to pop in The Proclaimers, The Resentments, Elvis Costello, Robbie Williams, and Squeeze. My role models are Cameron Crowe, the 15-year-old Rolling Stone writer, and Rick Allen, Def Leppard’s infamous one-armed drummer. I’m the kid who never wanted a new Barbie doll or my ears pierced, but rather just being able to hear the crinkle that the needle makes when it first slices up a new vinyl. Addiction runs in my family. I think I’m addicted to that sound.

“Alright, either your mother or I will come pick you up tomorrow. Have fun. Don’t scare the children too much at whatever Haunted House thing you’re working at tonight.” I closed the car door and half waved to my dad as he pulled out of my best friend’s driveway. I could still faintly catch Paul McCartney singing about the everyday, but I turned to walk up the driveway. I didn’t bother to watch him drive away, because I didn’t think I had to.

The next day he left.
November 11, 2006

The painting was titled “Soberfest.” There was a finger painted ferris wheel, log flume, and rollercoaster, all ridden by happy finger-painted people carrying cotton candy and lollipops. The painting had to be a joke. My dad would never finger paint; he was in his late 40’s with gray hair and a gut. I walked down the halls of the rehabilitation center waiting for my dad to appear and prove me wrong.

Almost a month had passed since I had seen my dad. I came home from my best friend’s house the next morning and he was just gone, no mess left to clean up. The Sgt. Pepper’s album was still in the car’s CD player. I cried for a good long while. I didn’t listen to the Beatles for a good long while. I talked a little less in school, so in case anyone bothered to ask, I didn’t have to tell them that my father was addicted to painkillers.

He never acted differently around me. He didn’t seem depressed or stressed or angry. I mean he had never seemed sick. According to my mom, I had missed my dad wriggling on the bathroom floor in pain or trying to navigate his way around the house with his eyes half closed. I had missed the doctor prescribing my dad pills for his bad back. I had missed my dad trying to stop taking the pills. I had missed my dad failing.

“I painted that little guy there, the one whose face kind of looks like it’s melting off.” My dad smiled at me and pointed to the painting. I was a little surprised, because as I turned to look at him, he looked exactly the same. I didn’t know what to do next, not being aware of the proper father-daughter rehab etiquette. There were no “I’m sorry you went to rehab but I hope you feel better” cards at Hallmark. So I just gave him a hug.

We walked around the grounds as he tried to explain everything. He hadn’t wanted to scare me or make me worry. He apologized for just leaving, for not waiting to say goodbye. I asked him if he knew that car ride would be the last one together for a while. He admitted that he had known the whole time. He told me that I had to start listening to the Beatles again because I shouldn’t be punishing them for his mistakes. I told him that he needed to come home soon because the needle needed to be replaced on my turntable.

“So, what have you been listening to lately?” He finally asked. As I rattled off a list of bands, I hope my dad realized that he was still there. He would always be listening to music with me. Even though rating records wasn’t as fun to do alone. I had realized that my dad’s addiction was not going to be the note that changed everything between us. And being able to listen to The Beatles again felt pretty good too.
On the Docks

It was the morning of my nineteenth birthday when my father called me out of the kitchen and onto the porch of our little townhouse. I'd been working the docks for about a year by then, mostly doing grunt work while the others loaded and unloaded anything that landed in the harbor. Outside the air smelled like rain and fat gray clouds blotted out the sky above.

"Sit down," he said, using his foot to push a rusted lawn chair out from under the table for me. I sat down, feeling my weight test the strength of the aged seat beneath me. Across the table he was dressed in his working clothes and an old ball cap, fiddling with a pack of cigarettes between his calloused hands. He already had one between his lips, pulling hard on it as he stared me down. It was the same stare he always gave, his eyes locked right on to you, watching your every move, judging without ever saying a word. He would always do that. No matter what he had done, he was always the one judging you.

"You're getting old now," he said, the voice somewhere between a whisper and a growl. "Old enough that I figure you know enough about most things to have your own opinions and make your own decisions about them."

My fingers drummed nervously on the table in front of me. His eyes left mine and drifted off towards the clouds.

"Point is that I figure you probably know more about me than I'd like to believe. Certainly more than your mother does."

I started to reply, but before I could open my mouth he raised a hand and waved me off.

"I'm not going to argue about right or wrong with you. But you're old now, and soon you'll be on your own. Now I don't know if you hate me or not, or if you're sour about how I treated you and your mother over all this time. But if you know anything about me, you gotta know that everything I did, whether it seemed fair or not, everything, was for you and your mother."

"Kid, you let me finish," he said, his voice raising a bit higher. "Because when you have a family, when you got a wife you can't take care of and a kid you can't feed, that's when you find out who you are. If you're a child, or if you're a man. A child, a boy, they'll just suffer through it all until things get better. But a man knows what to do. A man takes care of his family at all costs, because he knows that he has to do whatever he can to provide. I did what I did because I was a man, and I won't make any excuses for it besides that. But I see the way you look at me, and you don't know. But you will. You'll understand, and you'll forgive me because you'll have to do the same things. Because you're not a child. You're like me. You're a man."
His cigarette had burned down to the butt by now, and he pushed it into the table to put it out. Smoke rose into the air between us, and he stood, straightening out his hat and turning back towards the house.

“Happy birthday,” he said, then slid the screen door open and disappeared inside.

Mindy’s tiny fists pounded on my back and I woke, listening to the alarm clock screaming beside me. The birthday speech was seven years ago, but I still dreamt about my father’s words and the way his eyes looked had looked at me that morning.

“Brady, get up. You gotta go to work.” Her voice was still dry from sleeping. I rolled over to see her pulling a black tank top over her bare chest in front of the mirror. She fixed up a few loose strands of blonde hair and caught me staring at her from the bed and rolled her eyes.

“Come on,” she said, walking back to the bed and stripping the comforter off of me. “You need to get down to the dock. Rent’s due tomorrow.”

“They aren’t gonna have anything for me today,” I said. I sat up in the bed, reaching down and snatching a mostly clean undershirt up off of the floor. I slid it on and stood, looking around the room for a pair of pants.

“How do you know if you don’t check?”

“Because they keep a goddamn schedule, Mindy. It ain’t like the boats just show up out of the blue whenever they want. Senior staff gets all the hours on slow days. That’s the system.”

I walked out of the bedroom and down the hall, heading for the bathroom. It was dirty again, blots of toothpaste and water fogging up the mirror while rings of brown stained the sink. I snatched a toothbrush from behind the mirror and went to work, rubbing the sleepers out of my eyes and making sure I was removed all the evidence of last night’s drinks from my teeth.

I took a swig of mouthwash and splashed it around when I caught Mindy staring at me in the mirror. Her tiny body leaned against the doorframe, hands folded and tucked under her arms. My eyes bounced off the mirror to meet hers, and I could see she was giving me her no-bullshit look. She was a short girl, not much more on her than skin and bones, but good god she was tough. And right now she was ready to let me know it.

“I don’t get it,” she said. I shot my mouthwash back into the sink then turned towards her.

“Don’t get what? I can’t work a ship if there ain’t a ship to work.”

“Well maybe you work on getting another job.”

“Where are they gonna hire me? Any job I get is gonna be the same thing, Mindy. It’s not like I have a degree from some school to impress anyone. I got my arms and legs. That’s all I got to work with.”

I brushed past her heading back to the bedroom. From behind I could hear her footsteps pounding on the wooden floorboards. They followed me into the bedroom and stopped behind me as I pulled on a pair of dirty blue jeans and my
work boots.

“Look,” she said, “maybe if you go down today they’ll have something.”

“They won’t.”

“Well don’t take no for an answer.”

“It doesn’t work like that, alright?”

We moved from the bedroom to the kitchen. She sat our excuse for a dinner table, laying her arms atop a mountain of newspaper pages and discarded mail. I made for the refrigerator, ignoring the various bills and reminders that were magnetized to the front of the door. It was mostly barren, but I managed to find a bottle of orange juice.

I took it with me, closed the fridge and sat across from her. I took a mouthful of juice and felt my chair wobble beneath me, too weak to support anything more than a child. Across the table Mindy’s eyes had fallen down, wandering over the headlines of the old papers.

A wail rose from another room, soft at first but then loud enough to catch her attention.

“Dammit,” she said, listening as Adam cried. She raised a hand up towards her face. I couldn’t tell if she was wiping away tears or not, but it didn’t really matter. She was still beautiful when her guard was down.

“I’ll check the docks,” I said softly, reaching across the table and squeezing her small hand. “I can’t promise anything, but maybe I can talk to Sal and get him to make an exception or get me something where I can make a few bucks.”

“Alright,” she whispered, looking up at me. There was no hate in her eyes anymore, now they were just empty. Desperate.

“And if Mr. Feely comes by about the rent, you just tell him that we’ll have it next week no problem, okay? He’ll let us slide a bit he’s a good guy. He knows we’re good for it.”

I had another gulp of the orange juice. It burned a bit when it went down, sure to disagree with whatever I’d left in my stomach from the night before. Across the table Mindy stood up without a word, heading for the hallway to go take care of Adam. When she got to the doorway she stopped and turned to me.

“We’re going to make it, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, “I’ll take care of it.”

The pier looked like a graveyard when I arrived. Stacks of crates formed towers against the sky, but I could only make out a few bodies moving amongst them. No boats today. No real work. Small dots of rain peppered the windshield as my car pulled into its space, but it wasn’t enough to keep the windshield wipers from screeching as they dragged across the glass.

I stepped out of the car, pulling a winter hat out of the glove box to keep me warm. It was always colder on the docks. The wind rolled right out of the harbor and blasted against every step you took. You could tell who’d been here the longest by how comfortably they’d handle the wind. I could keep myself pretty sturdy by now, but when a storm rolled around you could separate me from the ten year men
in a second.

I began heading for Sal’s office, a small trailer shaped building in the middle of
the pier. Sal was a strict believer in the seniority policy, but I knew he had a few
soft spots for me since he knew my father, and I figured I could maybe squeeze a
few hours out of him on that ground alone.

I knocked once on Sal’s door and yelled in.
“Sal! It’s Brady Morrison man, open up!”

“Yeah, come on in.” The voice was muffled through the door. The handle was
covered with rust and the hinges whined when I opened it, but I found it much
warmer inside. Sal’s office was essentially one big empty room. He had a desk at
the far end and some file folders lining the walls, but aside from them, a poster of the
docks and his computer, the place was pretty barren.

“How you been Morrison?” Sal sat with his feet up on the desk, dirt falling
from his boots onto the wood below. He was a short, scruffy man, built more like a
pit-bull than pier manager. One of his hands drifted across his computer keyboard,
the other clung to a beer that I guessed was close to finished.

“Not too bad,” I said, pulling out the chair on the opposite side of his desk and
sitting down. The whole room smelled like wet pine. “You?”

“I’m managing,” he said, laughing a bit to himself. “Anyway what brings you
around? I ain’t got you on the schedule till next week.”

“Yeah that’s the thing, I was wondering if you could make an exception and
give me some hours today.”

Sal looked back at me, sighing a bit, then turned to the window and peered out
at the dock.

“I know it’s a quiet day around here,” I said, “but I’m coming up short on cash,
and we got the rent on our apartment due this week and then the other bills com-
ing. I just need a little bit to take care of us now and then I should be good.”

“You know it’s a seniority system here Brady.” Sal took a long sip of beer, wip-
ing the froth off his chin and then tossing the can under the desk. “Oldest guys get
the work first. It trickles down from there. That’s the way it’s always been.”

“I know, I know that. But to be honest sir I see some of those guys out there
and I don’t think they need it like I do. I got people to feed.”

“You married?”

“About a year. Yeah.”

“Kid?”

“Adam. One year old last month.”

“Christ,” Sal said, making a noise that fell between a grunt and a laugh and ris-
ing from his chair. He walked to the far end of the room, rubbing a hand through
his hair, until he reached a small mini fridge between two file cabinets. He
crouched down, his body turning into a bowling ball, and retrieved two beers, car-
rying them back to the desk with him. He popped one open when he sat back
down and pushed the other towards me, but I shook my head and he shrugged,
moving it to the side of his computer.
“Look, Brady,” he said, drinking slow and making sure to look into my eyes. “I’ve always thought you were a good kid. I’ve seen you working out there since the day your dad dragged you down here and I knew you had it in you to find your place down here. Your father had the same look when he’d go to work. Knew he had a job to do and made damn sure that he did it better than anyone else could.”

“Thank you.”

“And I know we’re in a rough patch down here. Works been drying up because of a lot of things, but you gotta remember it’s dry for everyone. I hear your story and I feel for you, I really do. But I hear the same story five, ten times a day from different guys down here. All of them got families to feed to. How’s it look if I put one of you all on for extra time and leave the others out in the cold? Then I’m gonna look shitty. And whoever I give the time to looks spoiled and then we get conflict in a job that needs everyone working together.” His voice was growing stronger now, each word sharper than the last. He finished off the drink and tossed it into the trash, his eyes staying with mine. He could see my eyes deflating but his stayed ice cold.

“The seniority system is the only thing that keeps things fair when we hit a rough patch like this,” he said.

“Alright,” I said. My voice was weak as I stood. The office felt colder as I walked to the door and I could already hear what Mindy would say when I got home. My hand was on the knob when Sal stopped me.

“Hey,” he said. I turned, hoping for a miracle, but ready for an apology.

“Look, Brady, I really hate to do this to you. Or anyone. But you’ll make it. You’re a strong kid. Just like your father. You’ll be okay.”

I nodded at him, wished that what he said was true, and then headed back out.

Outside the rain had stopped and further down the dock I saw a dusty old convertible parked next to my truck. A body leaned on the hood of the car, smoking a cigarette and blowing rings into the cloudy sky.

“You working today?” the figure called. As I trudged closer I could make out a shaved head, expensive clothes and sunglasses, even on a cloudy day. Randy.

He’d been a family friend for years, somewhere between ten and fifteen years older than me. My father had instructed him to watch over me when I first started working ships, and when he was invited over for dinner they would joke like old friends while my mother and I sat silent, waiting until we were acknowledged. And then after dinner they would leave together, going off to do whatever it was they did until my father would come home, tired and drunk, only able to silence my screaming mother with the wad of money he’d give her.

“No work today,” I said, taking a seat next to him on the hood. “What are you doing down here?”

“I gotta scope out some things for a little project I’m working on tonight,” he said, blowing a ring of smoke out into my face. “How’re you doing though? I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“I’m okay,” I said. “Money’s getting a bit tight but I’ll be okay. Came down here
to try and squeeze in a few hours but Sal isn’t having it.”

“Yeah I figured. Christ I’m not even on senior staff yet.” Randy finished his smoke and grabbed a new one, pointing the pack in my direction when he was done.

“No thanks,” I said, and he stuck them back into his coat pocket.

“You know if you need help,” he said, pulling his sunglasses over his eyes, “like with money or anything, I can help you out. You’re pretty much family to me, you know that.”

“It’s not that bad, really,” I said, shaking my head, my eyes dropping down to the ground. I felt the blood turning my cheeks red and hoped he didn’t notice.

“Christ, Brady, you can ask me for help. How long have we known each other, and you can’t ask me for help?”

“I just don’t want to impose or anything.”

“It’s alright, really.”

There was a moment of silence. I raised my eyes to look at him. No matter how hard he tried, he didn’t fit down here on the docks, and he knew it. His clothes were always pristine, his car well kept. Designer sunglasses hanging around the collar of his shirt. He was different from us, a self-made man, but he was completely unapologetic. And we would all end up starving ourselves sticking to our morals and hard work while he made it without breaking a sweat.

“Alright then,” I said, “I do need some help. Rent’s due tomorrow and I don’t got it. We got other bills coming and I’m not getting enough hours down here. I need to make some fast money.”

“Alright,” Randy said, dropping the cigarette on the ground, letting it burn itself out while he watched. “Come down to the Wharf Rat tonight around seven. I got something small this evening I could use a little help with. That sound good?”

“Yeah. Yeah that sounds good.”

He extended a hand to me and I shook it. His grip was harder than I remembered, but he smiled and watched me as I got back into my car and drove away. I could see him in the rearview mirror even as I left the pier, sitting there smoking by himself while the docks stood empty. I wondered if any of us could make it anymore with just our hands and hard hats. But mostly I wondered what sort of mess I’d gotten myself into, and what my father would’ve thought of it.

The birthday speech was the last real talk I would have with my father. Halfway through the day it started raining down on the pier. He’d told me to go home early so I didn’t get sick on my birthday, patted me once on the shoulder and smiled before I turned to leave. His hand felt like leather, like he was smacking me with an old baseball glove and sending me off as he faded into the rain.

Three days later they fished him out of the harbor, two holes in the back of his head. I saw the body once, the skin swollen and pruned, tinted yellow from the river water. He smelled more like an animal than a man. I got called down to identify him at the police station, then they covered him up and wheeled him away.

He was cleaned up at the funeral but I wouldn’t forget the way he really
looked. My mother chain smoked throughout the burial, never shedding a tear or saying a word. When they lowered him into the ground I remember looking around and seeing a score of men I didn’t recognize. They had separated themselves from the dockworkers, and the only face I recognized among them was Randy, who for a moment locked eyes with me and winked. When the funeral was over they each spoke to my mother and gave her a small kiss on the cheek, one by one. I don’t remember us ever being short on money again.

That was the kind of man he was. He could provide for us. Even when he was bled dry and underground, he could provide for us.

And what kind of man was I? That was the only thought as I turned the key to our apartment door, ready for Mindy to raise hell when I entered.

“You’re back?” Mindy said, her voice booming from the kitchen as I put my keys down. She stormed into the hallway carrying Adam on her hip. His small chubby arms wrapped around her neck and he wailed, burying his head in her neck.

“What happened?” she asked.

“They don’t have any work for me today.”

“So what you just left?” Her voice was biting now. She started back towards the kitchen.

“I tried to talk to Sal about getting some more hours.” I tossed my coat and hat onto the coat rack. Each missed and fell into a mound on the floor.

“Yeah I’m sure you put up one hell of a fight,” she called.

When I got to the kitchen Adam was back in his high chair. He fiddled with his juice cup and stared at a nearly empty bowl of macaroni and cheese, smacking his hands on the high chair table. I leaned in and gave him a small kiss on the cheek, ruffling up his small patch of greasy brown hair.

“Why’s he crying?” I asked. “Thought he loved mac and cheese?”

“He did,” Mindy said. She grabbed the bowl and juice box from Adam, tossing the box into the trash and dumping the bowl into a growing pile of dishes. “Before he had it the past three days for lunch and dinner. Christ Brady, have you looked in our fridge? In the drawers? We don’t even have any fucking food anymore.”

I sat at the table beside Adam. He looked at me, eyes still watering though his wails were silent. I looked away from him and down at the floor.

“Look Mindy,” I whimpered, “I know it looks bad. It looks real bad right now. But it’s going to be okay”

“How can you say that?” she screamed. “Brady, we can’t pay for our place. We can’t feed our fucking kid.”

“Don’t yell in front of Adam. It makes him scared.” But Adam had already started sobbing again. Mindy swooped in and grabbed him before I could extend any comfort. She took him into her arms, cradled him and kissed him, and his big wet eyes turned away from me as her hand pressed his head towards her shoulder, comforting him. Her eyes still glared at me like I was a dog that shat the rug.

“I have to put him to bed,” she said, then marched out of the room. Adam’s sobs grew softer the farther she moved down the hall and into his room. My eyes
wandered around the kitchen, peering into some of the cabinets she’d left open. They were barren, just empty spaces with paint chipping off the walls. The fridge was nearly empty too. The whole damn apartment was empty and I couldn’t do a thing about it.

In the other room I thought I heard Mindy singing, trying to lull Adam to sleep. The first night we’d moved in she’d sung to me too. It was supposed to be a new start after the kid and the rushed marriage. It was supposed to bring stability. Peace. A sign that we weren’t just stupid kids anymore. I was a man, a man with a family and home to take care of.

“Mr. Feely came by about rent.” Mindy had reappeared in the kitchen. Her voice was quieter now, and she took her time moving into the seat across from me.

“And?”

“He seemed surprised that I would even ask for an extension. I asked why, know what he told me?” Her voice was still quiet, but the words shot out with enough force that she might as well have been spitting venom. “He said that you turned in last month’s rent a ten days ago.”

“Mindy I talked to him because work was slow I —”

“Ten fucking days ago Brady!” she snapped. “We’re lucky he didn’t throw us out on our asses.”

“Will you keep it down? He’s sleeping.”

“I know he’s sleeping.” Her voice began to shake, mixing anger with sadness as her eyes started to look like they may pour at any moment. “I sit at home all day with him, trying to take care of him, trying to feed him and make him happy. You know what you do? You do shit. Jack shit. You work a day or two a week, and when you do, you complain the next day about how tired and sore you are so you stay in bed all day.”

“At least I’m working.”

“This ain’t work. What is it then?” The tears fell freely now. She raised her arms to motion towards our mess of a kitchen. “What the fuck is this if it ain’t work? I’m the only person trying to make this work. I take care of our home. Take care of our kid. I can’t take care of the money too.”

“I can get the money,” I whimpered. “Trust me. I swear to god I can make this work for us.”
Hector

Hector has coke bottle with Tequila splash
In plant nursery goofing with hose
In the sun in the grass, crawling
In his tired Mexican clothes of salvation.

Hector’s cross hung perfectly
I thought, when we sat together
And sighed together and eyed each other
And when he showed me how to hold the shovel
Where to place the sprinklers
How to touch the plants, delicately.

I make $7.75 an hour and yes,
So does Hector, grown man Hector
To whom I try to give my apple
And he always nods ‘no.’
Boss asshole beats Hector
To the cooler and always
Takes the last drink then
Retires to his office
Leaving Hector dry-lipped.

And at 8 the boss leaves
In his American truck and sometimes
Gives Hector a ride to nowhere.
But usually when the workday
That outlasts the sun
Is finally done,
Hector walks home in the rain
Like side street water
To the nearest drain.
At night in bed I think of him
Beautiful boy of the weeds,
Boy also of sadness, of countless scars
And I feel guilty when my heavy eyes close
For Hector sleeps in unlocked cars.
Hector, my best friend, in an unlocked car, alone.
Doubtless he left home hopeful and with friends
Who may have kissed him and cried
The night before he left Mexico.
Leonard’s sliding glass door sang like a tuning fork. After a year and a half of living on the hill along the precarious seventeenth hole of Whispering Pines, he was used to golf balls hitting his home. His boss, Laura, let Leonard occupy the place while it was on the market, but she stopped actively trying to sell after three unsuccessful showings. Leonard worked as a law clerk in Laura’s firm. Two years before, over an especially difficult case and some egg foo young, Laura and Leonard began having an affair.

“You make me so horny,” Laura cooed as she wiped duck sauce off her lip, slowly with her middle finger.

“Oh,” Leonard had said.

Leonard’s house was hit most often on weekends. A thick ridge of bushes discouraged the search for lost shots in his yard. He collected the balls in kitchen drawers, which Laura found especially annoying whenever she was rooting through in search of something else.

“What are you gonna do with all these?” she’d grumble, usually picking up a handful and letting them drop to the floor.

“Do you have to smoke in here?” Leonard would say.

Leonard’s housemate, Dave, enjoyed the drawers because they presented the opportunity to make ball jokes at every occasion. Dave was a recent addition to Leonard’s household, a high school friend who had lost his flower delivery job and needed a place to stay until he got back on his feet. For Dave, this meant until his band was successful enough to be employment.

Leonard opened his sliding glass door and found the ball, bright pink, a few feet ahead in his yard. He thought he saw the bushes rustle, but attributed it to having slept while wearing his contacts. He thought his coke-bottle glasses suited his large nose and thin face, but Laura complained that with his curly brown hair they made him look like Ira Glass. He regretted suggesting Laura listen to public radio. As Leonard stepped out, he heard a voice from inside the brush; it was a woman’s and she was shouting, “Help.” He rushed over to find her caught by the branches, one pant leg and both sleeves severely snagged. Her brown curly hair hung down in front of her face.

“Hello! I can help you!” Leonard shouted.

“Did you find my ball?” the woman asked.

“Uh, yeah. Yeah I did.” Leonard held it up, but the woman’s hair kept her from seeing. He realized this and shoved it into a pocket.

“Oh, good!” she said. “Because it would really be terrible if this was all for nothing,” Leonard didn’t respond, instead concentrating on reaching into the bush to free the woman. “You’re not like, an axe murderer or something now, are you?”
she asked. “Because that would really be terrible.” Leonard laughed.

“I can get your sleeves, but you’ll have to fend for yourself on the leg,” Leonard said. He carefully freed fabric from the branches’ grasp, and the woman pulled her pant leg loose. She maneuvered one arm through the tangle towards Leonard, palm upturned. He reached out and took her small hand in his. It was sweaty, and he held it tight.

“So you found my balls?” Her voice startled Leonard then, as if he were waking from a dream.

“Yes. Yes! I’m Leonard,” he said, reaching into his pants pocket, not letting go of the woman. Leonard held out the dirty pink orb as if it were a prize. The woman smiled broadly. With her hair out of her face, Leonard could see she had dimples and large grey eyes.

“It’s my favorite one, my only pink one,” she said. “I’m Michelle.” She took her clammy hand from Leonard’s to grab the ball. “I’m going to get out of this bush now.” She waved before turning around and ducking under the branches. Leonard stood stunned for a moment.

“Goodbye!” He shouted when she was out of sight. Dave was coming in the front door when Leonard got inside. His bottom lip looked swollen and he appeared as if someone punched him in the chin.

“I got a tattoo,” Dave said. Leonard did not respond. Dave pulled his inflated lip down, revealing THE NORSE MEN written in Old English letters on the veiny interior of his mouth. This was the name of his band, he explained. “We were gonna be The Viking, but I guess that was taken,” he said. “Good thing Jesse had his thesaurus. I mean he writes all our songs, right, so he’s good with words, he came up with it, and we all got it. Boss, amiright?” Leonard still did not respond. He began walking upstairs, thinking about needing a shower. Dave followed. “And I mean, it’s good, right? It’s like girls can take me home to mom, but on the inside they’ll know I still like to party.” He was panting a little from the overexertion of babbling and climbing the staircase. Dave was shorter, and while not fat, was certainly not in good shape. He had looked his best several years ago after returning from his kibbutz in Israel; harvesting dates in the desert made him lean and tan. The only thing about Dave that still looked similar was the beard he grew. Through mere laziness at that time, Dave discovered he could finally grow a respectable beard and had not been clean-shaven since. He bent over with his hands on his knees like someone who just finished a race, catching his breath. “What’s up with you, Len? You haven’t said a thing about my tat, I thought you’d love it.”

“I think I just rescued my soul mate,” Leonard said, slowly sitting down on his bed.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Len? Are you high?”

“No. And those things peel off in like three months,” he said, gesturing at his lip.

Laura liked to walk around the house with her bathrobe open, whether Dave was home or not. He generally was, and would mope around making a face somewhere in between “ate something sour” and “smells really bad.” Dave hated Laura. Leonard did not really like Laura either, and suspected Laura did not like him. Laura had over-dyed blond hair that, when un-styled, spread out thinly from her scalp, making her look electrocuted. She began her affair with Leonard out of boredom with her marriage and continued because of her husband’s indifference. He met Laura’s husband at several events but could not remember his name. Laura’s gigantic breasts and the man’s bald head gave Leonard the distinct impression of Miss Piggy and Kermit the Frog.

Leonard wasn’t sure why he participated in the affair. He suspected it was because it was easy, and he was afraid he’d end up alone. He had one serious relationship before, in college. She was an art major and gave Leonard several of her naked self-portraits in return for lugging her cello around in the snow. They dated for almost five years. Her name was Allison and she’d said no when he asked her to marry him.

“I think I want to learn to golf,” Leonard told Laura as she stood in the kitchen. Dave sat at the table with his hands over his eyes and appeared to be weeping.

“Is that what you’re doing with the drawers full of balls?”

“I guess. I mean, maybe that’s what I always meant to do. But I just didn’t really know it.”

“If you say so,” Laura said.

“Do you have to smoke in here?” Dave asked, hands still over his eyes. Laura ignored him.

“Well, you barely have to leave the yard to reach your dreams.”

“What do you think I’d be good?” Leonard asked.

“No,” she replied.

“You’re a naked bitch,” Dave said from the table.

Leonard knew he would not be good. He had not participated in a real athletic activity since he was on the Jewish Community Center’s swim team at the age of eight and quit because his small ear canals were prone to infection. Of his peers in the Beginning Golf class, Leonard was the oldest by far. Most were second graders who had recently tackled long division. After several classes alone and much protesting on Dave’s part, Leonard recruited him for lessons as well. In return, Leonard promised to get Laura to close her bathrobe when she walked around the house.

“So, why are we golfing again?” Dave asked, lugging his bag of clubs in both arms like a bride across the threshold. Leonard’s had wheels and rolled neatly behind him.

“I’m trying to meet a woman,” Leonard said.
“And “Hello’isn’t enough?” Dave struggled to keep the clubs from falling out the end of the bag.
“I don’t know how else to find her.”
“Whatever you say, Len.” A pitching wedge nosedived into the concrete, bouncing end over end. “Jesus Christ, why don’t I have wheels?” Dave grumbled, shoving it back into his bag.
“I promise it’ll be fun,” Leonard said.
“Oh right, this is for the woman in the bush?”
“I think I could love her.”
“After all this shit, you better,” Dave said as two more clubs tumbled to the ground. Dave became more receptive to the idea when he met Emily, the instructor. She was leggy with an affinity for short plaid skirts. After class, Dave showed off his tattoo. She was impressed, softly touching Dave’s arm as she laughed.
“She’s hot, right?” Dave was much better at carrying his bag on the way back to the car. “And she totally digs me, I can tell.”
“She’s definitely pretty,” Leonard said, disappointed that after nearly two weeks of lessons, he still hadn’t seen Michelle.
“She’s got my number now, she wants to hear the band.”
“It’s nice to have similar interests.”
“She looks familiar, too. I think I’ve seen her get killed in a horror movie before.”
“If you say so,” Leonard sighed.
Laura was watching television in the living room, fully clothed, when they returned.
“How was class today?” she said without looking at either Dave or Leonard.
“Good,” Leonard replied. “The instructor said Dave and I both have solid form.”
“I’d like to show her my solid form,” Dave laughed, throwing himself on the couch beside Laura.
“Well I’m sure she doesn’t want to see it,” Laura said. Dave scowled.
“Do you seriously have to smoke in here?” he asked.
“Please try to get along,” pleaded Leonard.
“Why are you wearing your glasses, Leonard?” Laura forcefully put out her cigarette on a coaster.
“My contacts hurt. I think I’m allergic.”
“Maybe your eyes are too big,” Dave interjected as he reached for the smoldering coaster.
“That doesn’t make any fucking sense, Dave.” Laura put extra emphasis on his name to make sure she knew he knew she thought he was an asshole. When she turned to face Leonard, Dave blew the ashes off the coaster and got some in hair. “You know I don’t like your glasses, Leonard.”
“I think you look very handsome, Len,” Dave said, changing the station.
“This is between Leonard and me, David. We don’t need you.”
“Fuck you, I’ve got band practice. And only my mom gets to call me David.” He pointed a finger especially close to Laura’s face before leaving the room.

“I like my glasses, Laura,” Leonard affirmed. “I don’t feel like myself when I wear the contacts.”

“That’s because you look better.”

“But I don’t think so, Laura. I really don’t.”

“You just don’t know. Anyways, I didn’t buy you contacts for you to not wear them.”

“But I really don’t like them, Laura. I’m sorry.” Leonard’s voice trembled, as if he were going to cry.

“You just don’t know what you like,” Laura said.

“No, No, I don’t think that’s right at all.” Leonard bit his lip. “I’m going golfing,” he said.

“Whatever, I won’t be here when you get back then.” Leonard resisted the urge to shout “Fine” as he walked out the door. He called in to work every day that week, leaving especially pathetic messages about a phantom illness. Instead, Leonard spent his time at Whispering Pines, even attending extra lessons. Dave accompanied, and though not upset about spending more time around Emily, was not thrilled about carrying his golf bag as he and Leonard walked to the course.

“I mean, she’s a bitch all right, but like, the car is an innocent victim here,” Dave complained. Laura had given Leonard her old car when she purchased a new one, but he was too angry to use it. Dave leaned on his bag on the side of the road as he tried to catch his breath.

“I don’t want to drive it,” Leonard said. He picked up Dave’s bag out from under him and carried it as he wheeled his own.

“Well, okay, if that’s what you wanna do,” Dave shrugged and jogged a little to catch up. At home, Dave and Leonard listened to the angry messages Laura left, laughing. If he wasn’t going to show up for work, he would be fired, she threatened. In the following message, she apologized and pleaded for Leonard to call. When he didn’t, she said she would accuse Dave and Leonard of trespassing on her property and have them arrested. She said she would show up at the house and take all the things she owned. None of this happened, and Laura eventually stopped calling. Just to be safe, Leonard unplugged the phone. He spent the night in his yard, practicing chipping into the hot tub where Dave and Emily were ensconced in steam. Emily shouted out tips, mostly about keeping his wrists straight.

The next morning, Laura showed up at the house with flowers. Dave answered the door wearing one of Leonard’s suit jackets. He looked like a little boy in his father’s clothes. “Those from my ex-place of employment,” he asked, his pointed finger half-concealed by the jacket’s sleeve. Laura looked into the bouquet.

“Supermarket,” she said. “Cheaper.”

“Right. Thinking of you in isle seven!” Laura didn’t laugh.

“Can I just come in?” she asked.

“No.” Dave pretended to shut the door and quickly opened it again. “There I
go again! Genius stuff here.” Laura walked in past him as he continued to open and shut the door briskly, laughing.

“You’re in a good mood,” Laura said, “and your suit looks terrible.”

“For your information, someone here is going on a real romantic date tonight. Like, with candles and menus you can’t read, all that shit.” He fiddled with the pocket square.

“Who’d you pay to do that?” Laura feigned a smile.

“Oh-ho!” Dave put his hand to his chest like he’d been shot. “I would be upset, but I am having sex with a very attractive woman. It’s better than Prozac.”

“I should try it then,” Laura said. “Is Leonard here?” She held up the flowers to remind Dave why she’d come.

“No, I think he’s golfing. He’s mad at you.”

“I know,” Laura said. “Can you just tell him I stopped by?” She put the bouquet down on the kitchen table.

“I’ll consider it,” Dave replied.

“Thanks David,” she said.

“Oh-ho! David! Again, sex with a hot lady. I’ll let that slide.” He opened the front door and bowed her out. Walking upstairs and pulling at the front of the jacket, Dave said out loud, “She’s jealous, I look damn good.”

When Leonard returned, Dave was getting out of the shower. He hastily pulled on underwear to meet Leonard in the kitchen, throwing on the jacket over his mostly naked body. Leonard sat at the kitchen table in front of Laura’s flowers. On the card, she had drawn glasses with a large X over them and written Sorry. Dave rushed down the stairs, eager to ask Leonard for a matching belt, but stopped in the hall when he realized Leonard was crying. Hiding around the corner, he stood in his boxers, smoothing out the wrinkles in the jacket.

* *

They stood side by side in front of a freezer of frozen waffles. Leonard had not called Laura and was still unwilling to use the car. They had walked to the grocery store. “It was great,” Dave said. “It was expensive as hell, but she kept rubbing her foot on my leg under the table. No girl’s ever done that before!”

“I’m glad you had a good time,” Leonard sighed. He opened one of the glass doors and let the sharp cold wash over him.

“Don’t be bummed, man. You’ll find her.” Dave did the same and reached for several different waffle packages, studying.

“I hope so.” Leonard took a few of the flavored waffles from Dave and shuffled through them like a pack of cards. They contemplated in silence for a while.

“There’s like, fifty thousand kinds. What do you want?” Dave asked.

“I dunno, you decide?” Leonard said, haphazardly shoving waffles back into the freezer. “I’ll grab some soup.”

“Okay, it might be a while. I’ll meet you there.”
Leonard fumbled a can of chicken noodle while piling soup into his arms. It went rolling quickly away from him up the isle. “Shit,” he said as he scuttled after it, doing his best not to lose any others. A woman bent down as it came to a stop next to her foot. Leonard let his whole armful of soup drop when he realized the woman was Michelle. She stared at him, holding up the can.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Oh! Oh.” Leonard stuttered. “I-I’m. Yes. Yes! It’s, uh, it’s nice to see you again.” He could tell Michelle did not recognize him. “Leonard. It’s Leonard, from the bush?” he said, taking off his glasses.

“Ohmigosh, Leonard! Hi!” She hugged him. “I’m sorry, yes, I remember you!” Over her shoulder, Leonard could see a broad blonde man approaching. He thought the guy looked like he could take the world off Atlas’ shoulders for a while.

“I found it babe!” the man called out. He held up a package of hummus and shook it.

“Oh, awesome!” Michelle replied. “They’re always moving the stuff, geeze.”

“Awe-some.” He felt like he was being tackled in slow motion.

“Oh I’m sorry, how rude of me,” Michelle said, “This is my boyfriend Nate.” The man’s handshake was incredibly firm. Leonard pictured a Monster Truck rolling over a line of cars.

“I-I’m Leonard,” he said weakly.

“Leonard! The bush guy! Right on.” Nate threw a muscular arm around Michelle’s shoulders. “Thanks for helping my girl out man, I been teachin’ her how to golf, found that pink ball for her out on the course.” He heartily kissed the side of Michelle’s face. “My girl’s been gettin’ better, too.”

“Still lost one the other day” Michelle giggled as she patted what Leonard imagined were Nate’s well-defined abs.

“Me too,” Leonard choked out.

“Is that your soup, man?” Nate asked, pointing at the floor. Leonard looked at the mess. “I should pick them up I guess.”

“Do you need help?” Michelle asked, handing Leonard the can she held.

“No. Please. Thank you.” he said.

“Well, thanks again man.” Nate patted Leonard on the shoulder. He touched it, thinking it might bruise.

“It was nice to see you.” he said, waving goodbye with the hand that still throbbed. He stayed in place for a moment and watched an older woman maneuvering around cans. As Leonard turned to pick up he heard Dave come from behind, riding with both feet on the back of the shopping cart.

“I was hiding down there by the meat, man. What happened, who was that guy?”

“She has a boyfriend. His name is Nate.”

“Shit, I’m sorry man. That sucks. Dude was big, too.” Dave flexed both arms downward like a body builder.

“I think he broke my hand.” Leonard limply held it up.
“Well. Shit, man. How are you feeling?”
Leonard sighed loudly and let his arm fall.
“I got chocolate chip!” Dave said, holding up the package of waffles as proof.
Unbeknownst to Leonard, Dave had called Emily to pick them up. “How are you, Leonard? How’s your quest going?” she asked as they packed groceries into the trunk, too late to notice Dave making slashing motions across his neck. Leonard got into the back seat without a reply. He pressed his forehead to the window, unresponsive to both Dave and Emily’s attempts at conversation. When they returned, without complaint or sign of struggle, he took all the bags out of the trunk at once and carried them inside. Emily and Dave debated in whispers about what to do.
“Maybe a bar or something?” Emily said, “He could meet someone there.”
“Leonard doesn’t bars, too many people. He’s claustrophobic or something”
“You mean agoraphobic?” she asked.
“What? No, spiders are fine.” Dave paused to think. “What about the movies?”
“Right, where boy meets girl and they live happily ever after. What else?”
Eventually, Dave suggested they all go golfing. “We can even walk there, man, I don’t mind. It’s such a nice day.” Emily stood beside him, nodding emphatically.
Leonard was silent through every hole and walked at least ten feet in front of the couple on the way back. Behind him, Dave walked with his golf bag over his shoulder, struggling to hold it with one hand as he grasped Emily’s in the other. It occasionally hit her, but she didn’t seem to mind.
“Can you slow down, man?” Dave called out. Leonard stopped but did not look back.
“Is he okay?” Emily whispered. Dave made a face to suggest he wasn’t sure. The pair stood behind Leonard in the road until he turned around.
“I’m going to quit my job,” he finally said. Dave and Emily looked at each other and then back at Leonard.
“Are you sure man?” Dave asked.
“I want to manage your band.”
“Well shit man. I mean, sure. We’ve got gigs, you could help us out.”
“I’ll get the tattoo.” Leonard gestured at his mouth.
“You don’t have to do that, Len. It peels off in like three months anyways.”
“Okay, good,” Leonard said. He paused. “I’ll make her sell me the house, too.”
“Are you still gonna golf?” Emily asked.
“I think we will,” Leonard replied, looking at Dave.
“Let’s go home,” he said. He took up Dave’s golf bag and let his wheel neatly behind.
Superman spreads on the face of our truck and spits
out instructions on the patterns of migration towards profit.
The stretch of his colored nylon makes me nervous. Check around the bus
at the purchasing window, which sips up the children and their parents

with a wordplay jungle long unheard: la! La! La! Ding! Da! Diddy! Da!
The jingle is what attracts, flash backs to hearing its faint pace in the corner
of my ear and how I perked, immediately, to retrieve proper funding. And now
carrying terrorist bombs in bundles of screw drivers between
dry ice and grey aired drivers with waspy hair grasping at a
pale neck extended out, I study the one dark mole, rampid, right
below the curve of her jaw bone. Does she even serve ice cream or did she
buy the truck at a compound? New news, inner eight year old does not approve

of her beloved lady of the heat being so homely
and thus, would not have noticed. Outside the baby faces all roam around and
down past work ties, pink slips, whatever layer, which layers over
crotch less and cock-filled panties, stockings, stalking till halting at a

line of lace-holding that is sticky with sweat from the sun, versus long
John socks in navy blue striped towards balding brains and blue clouds.
Children everywhere, heave. One scoop or two,
bulges past the belt of age; circumferences the time one wastes within

the years of folly. La! La! La! Ding! Diddy! Da! Give it back to me miss!
Hand it to me, you've held onto it since second grade. Ill trade you for it,
seven georges and a cracker jack kiss. Ice rockets, shot in cherry, blue raspberry, and
lemon—up, up, upidie, up and la! La! La! Ding! Diddy! Da!
Give it to me, that grand old flag.
There was a little girl

Sleep no more; Apollo cold and curt
whispering my Winter’s ear

even here, alone. Cold withered
flower sun shining
on my cold arms and

satin gloves, finger’s tips
speckled with blood drawn
from thorny nets of stars

draping the rotten wooded
moon: prison chair chaining me
as the witch choir’s pet minotaur

laughing dances fate
on a face-card deck, my King
face down on the table.

Shrikes echo a lost ring down
cold brick well walls, damp
in ebbing tear tides floats

the boy’s coffin bucket.
Forests writhe across fields,
a chorus under my eyes as

married hands wash The Blood
skin deep, and deeper stained
by a spade–King’s blood.

Little girl Queen me alone,
tied to rotten thorned heaven,
strained with a silent voice.

The saddest little girl, in heaven
all alone, and she’s there still
—crying.
ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

René Amat (Archaeology 2010), from Bodie, California, is attending Boston University on a grant from the Plumbbob & Ploughshares Foundation.

Buffalo Bill: “Some days I would go without any fire at all, and eat raw frozen meat and melt snow in my mouth for water.”

David Braga (Film Studies and Screenwriting 2011), from Northern Virginia, writes for the genre website www.thedarkfantastic.com.

Jamie Burke (English 2010) is looking forward to entering the big, bad world.

Leila Campoli (English 2010) is from Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

Matthew Connolly (English 2011) likes long walks in the mountains, stiff clear drinks that make one go blind, and daiseys.

Ben Franklin: “Never take a wife till thou hast a house (and a fire) to put her in.”


Mara Hampton (Political Sciences 2010) likes playgrounds at night and hates banana-flavored candy.

Brooke Hubbard (English and Marketing 2011) is a morning person, likes the sun and doesn’t like to feel limited. She writes fiction in her journal about life and is periodically at odds with reality.

Michael Ivy (English 2010) is interested in nuclear fusion, as well as poetry.

Jill Rubin (English 2010) like most wanna-be-writers at her age makes cappuccinos for a living.

Elizabeth Santovasi (English 2011) is from Old Saybrook, Connecticut.

Wm. Shakespeare: “Temptation is the fire that brings up the scum of the heart.”

Hannah Sheinberg (COM 2012) is from Tampa, Florida.

Mark Twain: “Words are only painted fire; a look is the fire itself.”

Mae West: “A man can be short and dumpy and getting bald but if he has fire, women will like him.”
THE END

Comments, critical concerns, charitable observations?
Contact the editors via email to burn.at.bu@gmail.com.

NB: As is testified by the photographic evidence above, we are not at present able to accept telephone calls.

We are pleased at any time to accept donations on behalf of the Burn Victims Fund.