

The Red Jacket

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2005 Red Jacket Staff

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What I Told Robin When Memo Didn't Show Up For Work

Mareena McKinley Wright

Go

look very closely at the leaves on your mesquite tree. Go out stand with your feet about shoulderwidth apart relax your shoulders look into that beautiful glowing chartreuse color

then drop a line down into the earth past all the red sand and the snakes and the earthworms down past the water down past the rock down to the center of the earth

Grab

two hands full of that beautiful glowing golden core of your mother Pull pull it up to you up through the rock up through the water (*TTSSSSS*) up past the snakes and the earthworms up through the sand up into the bottoms of your feet up into your belly

Then

hold it there breathe in and out with it feel it running all through your body.

That's what the color of new mesquite leaves can do for you.



Immanuel Welch Canovan

Cigarette Country

By Melissa J. Gilpin

Some people say that anything done well enough can be beautiful; anything can be art. These people have never scraped teeth for a living. A set of uncared-for teeth, like rows of yellowing, decaying monoliths with thick gooey clumps collecting at the rims is no canvas and a pick is no paintbrush. Practical and desirable as they may be, there is nothing inspiring in rows of clean, scrubbed teeth with healthy pink gums. That's hard for me to admit, considering that I've devoted my life to it.

My shift at Dr. Hudson's office is ending and in twenty minutes, I'll be home. Today was, like work has been for the last three months, damn near unbearable. Ten years ago, I didn't mind so much. Hell, I even liked it. It made me feel better to take a person's rotting, crumbling teeth and make them as perfect dental science can allow. But lately, that hygiene-catharsis I once felt has been disappearing.

To get home, I have to bypass Tracye and Jessye, the two receptionists. I go into their nook to grab my sweatshirt and purse. Jessye, the younger one, looks about twenty, and wears glittery make-up smeared around her eyes. She's on the phone, making an appointment, while Tracye, a thick and also heavily-make-upped woman in her early fifties, wolfs down a bear claw and leafs through a copy of "Woman's World". Tracye has been here longer than me; I think about fifteen years. Licking her fingers clean of glaze, she spies me come in.

"Oh! Hi there, hon. Are you leavin' already? Don't you have a couple more hours left? You're not sneakin' out, are you?" she asks absently in her thick Mid-Atlantic accent.

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"No, I—"

"Oh, that's right, it's Jenny C. and Jenny K. that stay later. Well, have a good weekend. Try to freshen yourself up, maybe, too."

"Excuse me?"

"Hm? Nothing."

It takes ten minutes for the 33 bus to get to my stop at work and another ten for it to take me to the corner in front of my apartment building, where I live on the third floor. Quietly I put my key into the lock and stumble into my threeroom apartment. The bus ride is exhausting; I plop onto my burnt-orange sofa (found on a curb six years ago) and spend a moment being still. Near where my feet land is an aged black record player with "Dean" crudely carved into the top of it. Across the room, near the (also found) blackand-white TV, are 16 cartons of unfiltered Pall Malls arranged in a neat boxy structure. Glued on the turntable is a well-worn copy of T. Rex's "Electric Warrior", the 70's glam rock classic. My brother Dean did it after a month of listening to the record nonstop. Mom tried to throw it out, so he decided to take precautions, without thinking that he would never hear Side B again. My foot nudges the player's arm and my toes hit the "On" switch. The record starts at an arbitrary place near the middle and before I can notice what the song is, I tumble into an easy, dreamless sleep.

I fall back into consciousness two hours later and barely notice. After grabbing a carton of Virginia Slims from the floor, I leave the drawing room for my bedroom. My hygienist's smock gets peeled off and an old, dirty, grayish tee shirt that's lying on the dresser gets pulled on. Staring into the mirror, it's not easy to miss what Tracye was talking about. Every time I run my fingers through my hair, a dozen thin strands are woven around my fingers. My skin, even when I'm not in my dozy half-lit apartment, is sallow and grayish, with bright pink spider-webby splotches on my arms and face. My eyes and mouth are downcast and seem to droop in unison, as if someone attempted to pull the surrounding skin to the floor. I'm also way thinner than I used to be and I can feel the ridges of my ribs as I pull the shirt on. Still, Tracye doesn't have much of a point about me looking bad in front of the patients. Since I got them whitened three months ago, my teeth are absolutely perfect.

With a long cigarette in my hand, I stare at the thick, blank paper placed in front of me. Three months ago, when work got to be unbearable, I bought a bunch of paper and charcoal, hoping to restart some of what I had when I was a kid. The first night, I tried drawing pictures of my face and my grandfather's farm in Georgia, until I realized that not only had I seen sketches like that before, but I'd drawn them before too, back when I was a teenager, back before I became a hygienist, back before Dean died.

I haven't gotten anything since. Nothing good, anyway. Hours spent biting my nails, pacing around the tiny room, and pulling at my loose hair trying to wring something good out of my mind. Time runs away from me, and now it's night. I give up and crumble the charcoal in my hands, then wipe it on the wall as I go back into the drawing room to collapse again on the burntorange sofa. After flipping on the TV, the glowing buzz and tinny laughter fills the room. I fill my glass three-quarters with vodka and the other quarter with milk and sit down on the burnt orange sofa. I polish a few off until I pass out, bathed in bluish glow.

Mid-afternoon sunlight is kaleidescoping through the canopy of fifty-year-old trees that are sprinkled around Pappy's old farmhouse, dap-

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pling the grassy fields with bright Georgia sunshine. Dean is here, looking about seven years old. If he's seven, I must be nine. We sit in silence by the fire pit, crushing blades of grass that stain our fingers green. Dean looks up and squints at the patch of light that's pointed itself at his head, then turns and focuses on me. His mouth opens and a deep, Southern, man's voice comes out.

"...sinners, all of you! It is only through His sacrifice that any of us has the chance for redemption, for salvation...," Dean bellows at me, blank-faced.

I blink a few times and the farm dissolves, leaving me in front of the burnt-orange couch. I must have forgotten to turn the set off last night. A red-faced man with neatly-combed, cottony white hair is on now, screaming at a lavish auditorium full of enraptured followers. I turn the stiff, old-fashioned dial to a TV news channel, which says that it's 9:38. In fifty-two minutes, I've got to be at my mom's house. She just got back from another one of her cigarette pilgrimages to Raleigh, home of my aunt Jeanne and (not incidentally) cheap tobacco outlet stores. A month ago, I left my coat over there and it's getting too cold just to make do with an old sweatshirt like I have been. I pull the thin washed-out fleece over my head and breathe in its faded odors, then walk out, locking the door behind me.

The 44 bus takes me across town to the nest of cheap clapboard townhouses where Mom lives. Hers is an end unit sporting a tiny lawn decorated with a trio of plastic, weather-beaten, bonneted little girls and a blackface lantern boy. She moved here after her third husband ran out five years ago, but it's little different from any of the houses I grew up in. The walls and carpet are all rendered in garish shades of chocolate brown and deep orange, the linoleum peels and cracks and a thick miasma of smoke, nervous sweat and Aquanet never leaves the first floor. After letting myself in, I follow the sounds of some football team losing to the kitchen, where I find Mom sitting at the counter in a purple "Bedazzled" sweatshirt and sipping instant coffee. My mom is what my first stepdad described as a "con-

stantly goddamn pissed-off lookin' woman". Her face is small and pinched, with considerable and mottled jowls. She puts her coffee down and scratches her head with that lonely two-inch nicotine-stained

pinky fingernail. She's really proud of it and puts it to use straightening hairs that escape from her thin, graying bouffant. She sniffs the air absently and notices me.

"G'morning, Darlene." She glances back at the tiny TV perched on top of the fridge and sighs. "My boys are getting their asses kicked." "Too bad."

"Yeah, it is. Oh well." She pulls a long unfiltered Pall Mall out of its pack and gets up to light it on the stove.

"Is that what you been wearing instead of a coat?" talking about the graying sweatshirt I

"... and a thick miasma of smoke, nervous sweat and Aquanet never leaves the first floor." have on. "That was..., "she begins, squinting in concentration and the powerful mid-day sun. "...Dean's, wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Yep. How the hell old is that thing, then? Ten years?" "Twelve. Twelve years."

"Ver Trucker wears" Chasisha

"Yep. Twelve years." She sighs and turns the stove off. "Hardly even feels like it, huh?"

"I guess."

"It was bound to happen," she starts, launching into a routine I've heard many, many times before. "There was nothing I could do. With boys like that, there's not much you can do. That's what happens when you're so damn hardheaded like that. You get yourself hurt. Am I right?"

"You're right," I echo.

"You all right, honey? Your eyes look all funny."

"Funny how?"

"Like...I don't know, like you're real tired or you've just seen a ghost or something."

"Well, no ghosts...that's for sure."

"Been working too hard?"

"Yeah."

She coughs out a deep chuckle." You're just cleanin' teeth, honey! It ain't rocket science!"

This is when I start squirming. "Yeah, well, you know I've been startin' back up with drawin' again."

"Oh sure," she replies, smiling to herself. "You sold anything to the, ah, New York museums yet?" She laughs hard and it ends with a coughing fit.

"You alright?"

"Yeah, fine. Oh, mercy. Seriously, Darl, why you still keep that up? What are you gonna do with it?"

"I've already got a steady job, Mom."

She shrugs exaggeratedly. "It just seems like...a waste of time to me."

"Yeah, well..."

"I know, I know. I'm only sayin'. You should feel lucky that you have me. Most mothers aren't honest enough with their children. You wouldn't believe how Jeanne gets on with that Rick of hers. He's actin' all 'funny' since she let him go off to school. Jesus. I hope one of the two of them gets some sense knocked into them before it's too late."

> "What do you mean 'funny'? Gay?" She shot me an innocent and incredulous

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look. "Honey, please. Don't be like that. It isn't nice. I know how the world works. What good's it gonna do him to get a degree in whatever the hell it was—archopology or some shit like that and run around talking about movies from--huh!-*-France*. Don't you think so? Don't you? *Don't you*?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"That's right!"

"Look, I gotta go. I gotta..." I run my list of excuses through my mind, searching for one that'll do here. "I gotta do a lot of laundry today."

"Yeah, me too. I got so many damn chores, just stick a broom up my ass and I'll sweep the ceiling while I'm at it! Ha ha! Here's your coat," she says, disappearing off into the adjacent laundry room. She returns a moment later with the jacket and glances at my sweatshirt.

"Hey ... why you really wearin' that

sweatshirt?" She pulls my coat back. "You tryin' to make me feel bad?"

"No...no."

"Good," she replies, forking my jacket over. I'm already halfway down the hallway when she calls out to me.

"Wait a minute! I got this for you." She ventures down the hall and hands me a carton of unfiltered Pall Malls.

"The best there is! You wouldn't believe how cheap they got 'em down there."

"I bet."

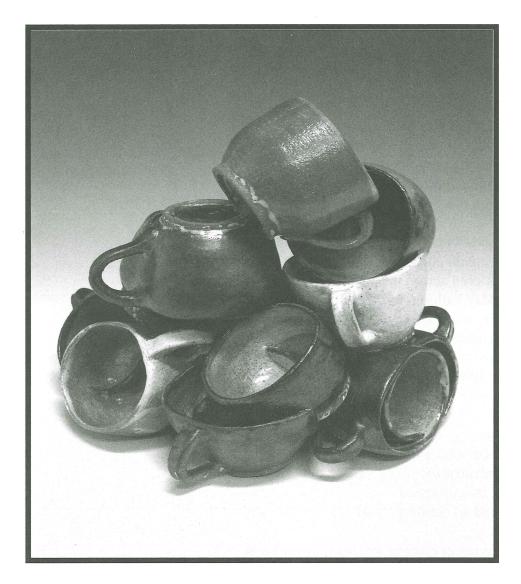
Mom looks down and gets distracted again by the sweatshirt.

"I still got his picture on the wall. I look at it every morning."

On the left side of the hall, about a foot ahead of me is a picture of Dean at age 16, taken a few weeks before the crash. He's horribly awkward, with one of those thin boyish moustaches and a long, choppy cut for his oily black hair. He smiles only a little bit, like he's trying hard not to smile at all. He looks kinda high in the picture. Maybe not on meth, but it was enough to freak me out when I saw it a couple of weeks after the funeral. The frame and yellowing print all look very dated, more so when the light hits the pane and I can see my tired adult face reflected in it. Mom comes up behind me and puts her cold, spider-veined hand on my shoulder.

"I know you think it ain't been good since Dean went and ruined everything, but you never know. The Lord hides the good things in funny places."

Getting back home twenty minutes later, I place Mom's Pall Malls with the others in the drawing room and fall on the burnt orange sofa, making an attempt to slip into sleep, but Mom's words are ringing in my head. Going back into my bedroom, I see the angry black splotch of smeared charcoal on the wall. I start to play around with it, pushing the dust around until the image of a massive, proud, crown-like molar emerges. The heavy blank paper from the night before is still on my table and I grab sticks of black, brown and yellow pastels and by the end of the night I've amassed a dozen sketches of huge, imperial incisors poking out of pink gums; of stately rows of teeth browned by years of nicotine; of crumbling, once-perfect structures like abandoned buildings, all rendered with gentle and precise strokes.



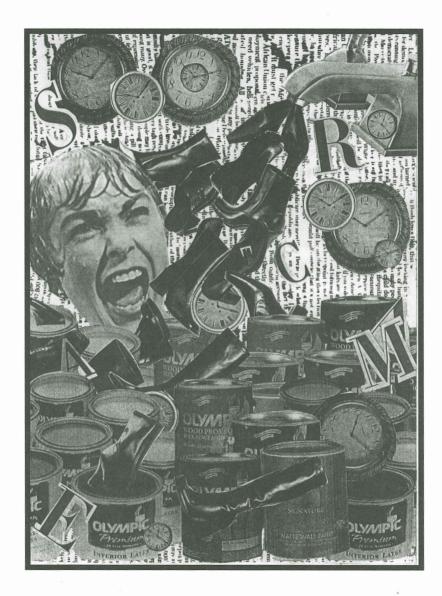
Hiroko Takagi

Ben Walks into the House And Notes What He Sees

David Hendershot

An underfed cat, a deck of playing cards Two unopened boxes marked with faded writing Paintings that may be photographs Another skinny cat, a blue Bible Dishes and cups, a dead plant Carpet stains, chips in the paint Dust waiting to be swept off a table Stairs that must creak, and might collapse Newspapers scattered across the past five years A deflated birthday balloon, a frozen rocking chair A neglected teddy with one of its eyes hanging out, lying on A sofa with no cushions Barred windows Letters from the IRS And Anne And Charlie And one he wrote Walls that can't be leaned on any more An unplugged refrigerator A clock moving at half-speed A dead mouse and a Christmas card Sheet music A candle that has never been lit and won't ever be lit Tattered books on tattered shelves Pieces of garbage here and there on the floor

A stack of records he doesn't recognize A stack of pictures he doesn't recognize And some ancient Time magazines A fancy coat from long ago Hanging like it knows it's finished on A brass coat rack that's begun to tarnish A cold damp fireplace near the door opened partially An old woman sleeping in a black dress And another cat.



Dianna Holzinger

Ghosts

Seema Reza

My aunt stopped to see me in Chicago on her way to visiting her son in Toronto. In anticipation of her visit, I had cleaned and decorated my small apartment with care; Aunty's account would reach my Ma's ears and shape the family's perception of my life in America. When we had dragged her suitcase up the two flights of stairs into my apartment and hoisted it onto my narrow bed, Aunty turned a tiny key in the lock and pulled the teeth of the gold zipper apart. Out of the red canvas suitcase floated my great grandmother's ghost.

"Great Grandma," I shouted. "How are you? How nice of you to visit."

I hadn't seen her in more than 10 years. Of course, her appearance had not changed; she wore the same *phusin* she had chosen to die in, a mauve sarong and purple blouse, a bright orange sash tied around her waist. Her face sagged as it must have when she died three years before my birth.

"If I had known she was headed here, I wouldn't have stuck myself in that box with all those terrible smells. I thought she would at least try to see some of the great wonders of the world while she still has life," Great Grandma replied, throwing a dirty look toward my aunt.

My aunt threw up her hands and then continued unpacking while Great Grandma wafted about my bedroom, examining the perfume bottles on my dresser, the magazine pages taped to the walls, the few bordered photographs from home.

"That smell. Where does it come from?" She continued her wandering.

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Aunty and I talked about what we'd do that week, starting and interrupting ourselves, swooping into gossip about my one thousand and forty three relatives, most still in Thailand.

Though modern life has scattered us across the world, we Tayas remain bound by our shared anomaly. We have ghosts. We sense them, see

them. The ability has appeared in every member of our family for every generation anyone can remember.

Ghosts are commonplace to us and so are their habits. They are most active during the hour when day and night overlap. Even people who cannot see them sense something at twilight. They can be a nuisance to have around: they talk almost constantly, but never answer questions. They can't communicate with one another, but run a constant commentary out loud mostly relating their superior appreciation for life. Even the ghosts of the young are bossy and self-consoling, "If *I* were alive..."

They are not quite regretful: that at least would make them sympathetic. They seem to have forgotten any errors they made during their own lives. God forbid you do something they wouldn't have. "I would never have done *that* when I was

They look for olfactory freedom, the smell of nothing. living," they judge and scold.

Most of us were conceived in bathrooms, the only room in the house ghosts won't go into. Who goes to the bathroom when they

don't have to?

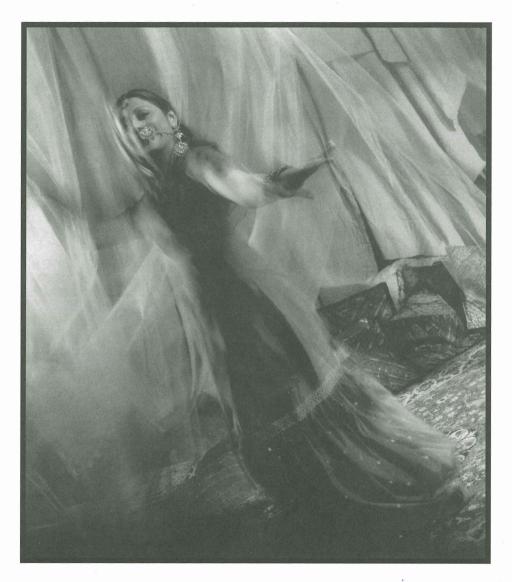
It is sad to see someone you loved turn into a ghost; even the most upbeat people become mopey and resentful after death. They go on year after year, telling their stories, until gradually, they lose interest in the living and begin to float around silently, feet hovering a few inches off the ground. They look for olfactory freedom, the smell of nothing. But it takes a long time for a ghost to reach that point.

Great-Grandma was still looking for where the smell was coming from, sniffing at walls and mirrors. Her interest in the world was waning; she only commented on half of my possessions and was far quieter than I remembered. The search for blank smells had begun to take over. She headed toward my tall, black air purifier cautiously, never having seen one before. I had bought it especially for Aunty's visit, knowing she would want to cook me traditional Thai foods with their lingering odors. It was oblong and stood on a two pronged stand. A plastic cage curved around its buried metal workings. She sniffed the air in front of it and, smiling with satisfaction, moved closer.

I began to tell her proudly that it was an ionic air purifier from a very expensive store when she let out a little gasp and the purifier buzzed and zapped and sucked her in. Aunty and I watched, dumbstruck. I lifted out the filter. There was a smudge of gray dirt along the edges, nothing more. Great Grandma was gone.

That evening at dusk Aunty and I brought the air purifier onto the small balcony with us and sat drinking green tea. It let out its electric whistle every few minutes as unknown ghosts were drawn in. We were very excited. Aunty wanted to buy a purifier for her son, who was having difficulty explaining ghosts to his small daughter in the absence of the large Taya community. I planned to send a few home to my mother and sisters.

I just needed 110 volt converters.



Ayesha Husain

Compound #203

Ian Seth Levine

Mama, I never stopped seeing you there Up, floating above my head Perching on my left and right shoulder Mama, I never stopped seeing you where you weren't Arms akimbo, staring me down, disapprovingly I was never enough for you Mama I was too big, or too small Not breathing in deeply enough Not empathetic enough to your anxiety-fueled allergic reactions Cupping your hand over your mouth To filter the air you don't want to breathe Eventually sucking in twice as much as normal from impatiently holding your breath Mama, I never stopped seeing you there Afraid of the germs, the dust, the toxins The chemicals Your fears and angst projected onto a defenseless, lifeless entity; the neurotoxin It's ChemLawn's fault, it's the school system's problem

Mama, I never stopped seeing you looking for Band-Aid remedies

Quick, momentary cures for life's little woes

Now that I'm looking for you Mama

In the places you are usually hiding, usually living, usually there, usually-usually

You aren't

Whose fault was it Mama?

Where did you go?

What did you do?

What did you breathe?

I'm looking for you everywhere Mama

And now that I know I won't be able to find you

I think I'll lie down and succumb to your beautiful way of thinking

It was THEM

It was THEY

It was...anyone but me



Ayesha Husain

The Unwanted Gift

Jennifer Jeffrey

Opening the door, to a house filled with unusual silence. Climbing up stairs, like a hiker reaching a dangerous peak. Spiraling up, into a maze unknown.

Turning the corner, into the wicked dim light. There she sits, sobbing this unlike her, so out of character. Drowning in a pool of thought, I cried out "Mommy... please tell me what's wrong?"

The look of confusion and deep hurt glazed her face, like the porcelain doll that lay shaking in her hands. Trembling words rolled out of her mouth, words I could not bear. Instantly...

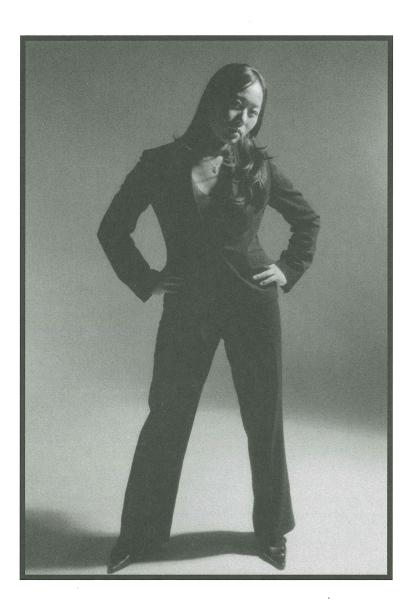
my life was turned upside down.

Frozen in thoughts,

lost in this unforeseeable maze.

My tears flowing inside me, like rapids reaching steep falls, confused as to why, the greatest gift to me

Is the most unwanted for another.



Jon Park

Grandmother's Fingers

Saman Saba

Your fragile elongated fingers have wiped, healed and calmed my tears.

Polished nails twinkle with a shade of nude and a precise amount of off-white tip.

Now, your wedding ring indents your arthritic knuckles.

Creases, scars, so smooth decades ago.

Observing, I realize, all the lines say too much.



Don Brodie

The Picture Album

Heather Wright

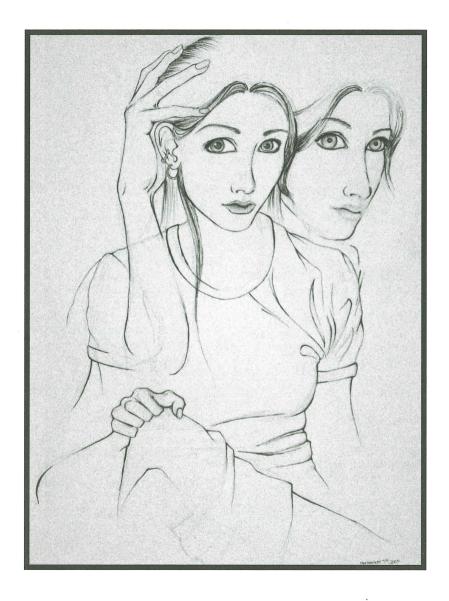
She was sifting through the pages In her mother's picture album All of a sudden she stopped She saw her father's face and froze

In her mother's picture album Full of memories especially now She saw her father's face and froze She'd never seen this book before

Full of memories especially now The pain that he had put on her She'd never seen this book before And now she can't turn back

The pain that he had put on her She was hurt like a shot-up hare And now she can't turn back That bastard broke her silent spirit

She was hurt like a shot-up hare All of a sudden she stopped That bastard broke her silent spirit She stopped sifting through the pages



Chrissy English

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Girl Talk

Ebony Davis

I hate that Bitch Yes, she is a snob a rich girl from the hood. I think that she think she cute and all that. Me too, that bitch barks. She is a hoe, she stole my man. Don't turn your back for it will get stabbed.

Yeah, I am that Bitch you love to hate.
I am not rich just my hands full of ace of spades.
I am all that yeah, I wear Gucci, Parada, and all that expensive shit.
I did not steal your man I just pimped him
For his dollar worth.
I am going to be me all day every day.
So, hate me, *Hate* me now! It fuels my soul.

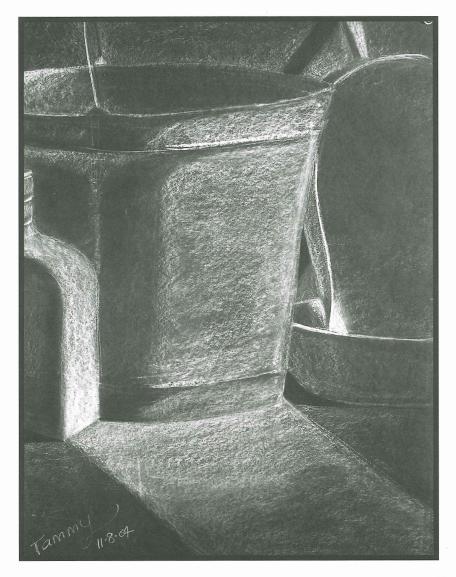


Don Brodie

Red Lips Flaunting

Jennifer Umbarger

i'm sailing on the rapids high on my own might wind blowing through my hair sun-burnished curls wrapped around my face confident in my surroundings serene in my confidence i flaunt my legs at the shore and flutter long black eyelashes evelids heavy with dark shadow over gold tinted eyes pursed red lips tempting as the sunrise touched with color slim body round curves above and below a black skirt whipping in the wind one hand on my hip red paint on my nails strong, beautiful, and glorious as the red dawn i may be vulnerable inside but for now i ride the rapids and there is no stopping me.



Tammy Rosenblatt

Big, Rough, Strong

Pamela Mitchell

Big, rough, strong, and grips like a vise. Steadily holding the horse's bent leg...file file, scrape scrape. Shaping his feet like someone molding pottery. Why do you like shoeing horses? My friend, don't you like getting a new pair of shoes?

Beggars and Choosers

Erin Jones

The sun was just beginning to dance off the tops of cars when Jacob LaRue shuffled onto the corner of Ninth and Magnolia Street. Grunting, he took a long rolled cylinder out from under his arm and placed it upright on the ground. He pulled a tattered fishing hat from his head and threw it onto the ground, letting his wild grey curls burst in all directions away from his head.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Jacob started at the sound of a voice scratched by years of cigarettes and whiskey. Before him stood a lanky man in ripped army fatigues with a long pony tail flopping down his back.

"I beg your pardon," Jacob said. He replaced his glasses and stared at the man.

"What are you doing? Especially what are you doing *here*?" The man moved a step forward.

"I am merely exercising my right to solicit fi-

nancial aid from the general public."

The other man maintained his defiant posture, but his gaze fell. "I don't know what that means, but you can't do it here. This here's prime real estate. I've been begging here every day for the last 33 years."

"It's a free country. A man has a right to beg wherever he likes."

The man dropped a satchel off his shoulders and it fell with a cloud of dust onto the ground. "It's only a free country because I made it that way."

"Is that so?" Jacob crossed his arms, staring at the man over his spectacles. The man bent down and turned over frayed cardboard sign. In permanent marker was written, "Injured in Vietnam, please help."

As if a glove had just been thrown in his face,

Jacob pulled back his shoulders and exclaimed, "If you must know, I brought a sign as well."

The man put down his sign and leaned it against his satchel. "Okay, let's see it." He planted his laced army boots firmly on the ground, and crossed his arms.

Jacob coughed a gravelly cough and unrolled his sign with a flourish.

He raised both hands in the air

as if offering a fatted calf to the

gods.

The man scratched his careworn face as he read aloud. *"Give me money I hate my life."* He made a noise that could have been a laugh except that it came out his nose. "That's a pretty lame reason, buddy.

And why is it so shiny like that?"

Jacob's shoulders wilted slightly. "I'm an English teacher. I have to laminate everything," he muttered hurriedly.

"You're an English teacher?" The man's arms fell to his sides.

"Professor actually. You may call me Doctor." He started to straighten a tie that wasn't there.

"Then what are doing here on the street? And you may call me PFC." The man squinted at him.

"Well, PFC," Jacob spoke these letters with disgust, "I'll tell you. They never appreciated me, none of them. Faculty kept criticizing me for

> thinking outside the box." He raised both hands in the air as if offering a fatted calf to the gods. "They didn't realize that there was no box!" He began to pace like a caged animal. "And those

students. As if class isn't enough time they come to me hour after hour, hounding me in my office like predators, asking about comma splices and gerunds and transitive verbs." Each term rolled off his tongue a curse. "All I wanted from the papers was the some suggestion of the ability for abstract thought. Do you think I care about predi-

cate nominatives? They should have learned all that back in *grammar* school when their favorite subjects were lunch and recess."

"I don't follow you." PFC rested his hand on his chin, but kept his eyebrows raised.

"The long and short of it is I decided I've been ill-used enough. The whole time I was an educator I was paying my debt to society and thirty years of living hell it was too. It's time for society to give back. So I left the college life to take to the streets." He drew a martyred sigh, and hung his head to accentuate the depth of his despair.

"I don't know if all that griping and complaining will get you money. You want to see something convincing?" PFC bent down and began to unlace his left boot. "This here's the money maker." His face contorted into a wince as he pulled off his boot. The leather made a slurping sound as it left his skin to reveal festering raw flesh underneath. Professor LaRue clutched his stomach as he recoiled.

PFC's lips curled into a satisfied grin. "Beautiful ain't it?"

"Ugh!" Professor LaRue struggled to compose himself. "Can't you have that taken care of by a doctor?"

PFC raised a finger as if to prove a point. "I *could*...but why would I? I had the good fortune to be wounded in the jungles of Vietnam. I could have taken a purple heart and moved on with life like all the rest. Then I realize I would get more of a profit this way. If people think I'm perfectly healthy guy, I don't get no hand outs see? But...if I disgust them so that they're almost throw up here on the side walk I get their money. Besides..." He leaned in confidentially. "To ensure it never gets better, every night before bed, I pour a little Tabasco sauce on it."

Professor LaRue sucked in the air through his

teeth as he winced. He swallowed hard. "An excellent use of pathos I suppose..." he muttered grimly.

"Whatever, it makes money." PFC stooped to pick up the boot. Now that his wound was exposed he hobbled over towards the satchel and sign. "Either way, I won't make money with you standing here so get out of here. Rush hour will be over soon."

"I refuse to be ordered around by you. I got here first anyway. If you want this spot you'll just have to be a little bit earlier."

PFC whirled around and hobbled toward Professor LaRue. "You're wrong." He growled in a low voice. "I was here first. Thirty years first." He grabbed Professor LaRue's shirt pulling him towards himself. "This is my turf."

Professor LaRue breathed uneasily for a moment before taking a deep breath. "I will not take orders from a shell-shocked masochist liked yourself."

PFC recoiled, his eyes flaring. "Masochist?" he huffed. "*Masochist*?" He paused. "What's a masochist?"

Professor LaRue smiled condescendingly. "A masochist, dear boy, is someone who likes to hurt himself on purpose."

PFC squinted thoughtfully. "And that's...bad?"

"Of course it is, you ignoramus!" Professor LaRue threw his hands in the air and then tugged at his jowls with each hand. "You're just like the rest of them—trying to control me. You try to control everyone else from the sounds of it. If you really like pain so much why don't I just step on your foot?"

"Okay. Go ahead. I dare you." PFC's voice was like silent steel as he extended his oozing foot.

Professor LaRue raised his foot above PFC's defiantly, and then staring down at the wound,

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Professor LaRue raised his foot above PFC's defiantly, and then staring down at the wound,

shuddered. He shut his eyes and stomped down on the slippery rotting foot as hard as he could.

A howl emerged from PFC as he grabbed his leg and curled up on the ground in a ball. Professor LaRue stood over him breathing hard, the sweat creeping timidly down his face.

A wall of laughter combined with applause fell like a curtain around them. Both men stared at the crowd that surrounded them previously unnoticed. Slowly they dispersed and comments began to be tossed about.

"They were great." The lady with the big mullet and missing teeth commented to the mailman next to her.

"The funniest street show I've seen in a long time." The man in the pinstripe suit and yellow pocket square said to his cell phone.

"They stayed in character so well!" The lady in tights and legwarmers with a scarf on her head said to no one in particular. Professor LaRue and PFC silently exchanged glances before both their eyes fell on Professor LaRue's hat, which had gone neglected. In the bowl of the hat was stuffed luscious green bills, enough that it was nearly overflowing.

The two men sat side by side with their backs to the wall on the corner of 9 and Magnolia Street. Professor LaRue reached for a pocket protector that wasn't there.

"Here, use this." PFC handed him a permanent marker.

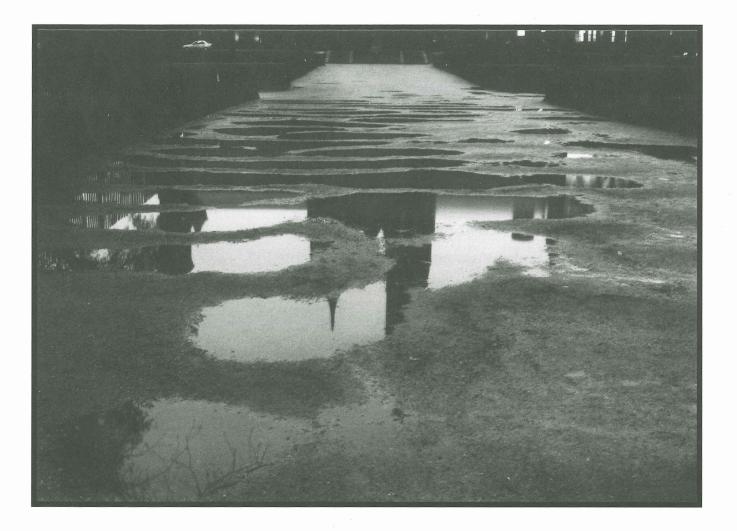
On the white laminated back of the sign Professor LaRue wrote: "Doc and PFC comedy hour." He tilted it so it faced PFC. "How's that?"

"No good."

"Why ever not?"

"It should be PFC and Doc."

Professor LaRue threw down the marker and massaged his temples. "I hate my life."



Lisa Frick

Honey, You're the Bittersweet

Andrea Buchwald

Honey, you're the bittersweet of my very best intentions.

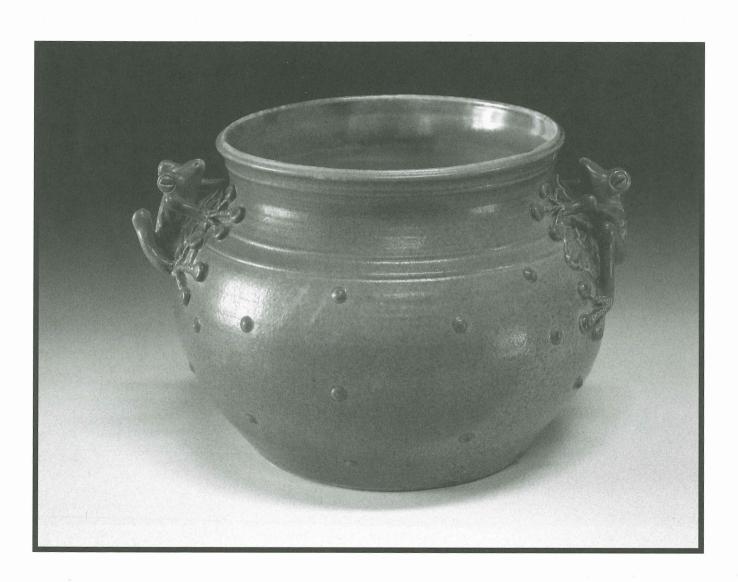
Open up your box of keys and dig mine out.

Am I worth the time to look – beyond? Or see a puddle for its frog?

If only my descending lines led somewhere else.

Trouble me or I won't fake it any more.

A pigeon is no palindrome unless you make it.



Beth McNulty

Café Port Lucaya

Linda Godfrey

As he walked past the mugs, I noticed his smooth dark hands Shimmering in the café light. Gently as a swan, so slowly, yet deliberately and soothingly he touched his cup's rim then placed it to his delectable, delicious lips.

Like the whale that swallowed Jonah, he drank the hot, steamy island of Port Lucaya. In one gulp, it was gone.

Could his embrace be ever so tempting that I would fall prey to his every whim? His eyes smiled at me as he nodded his head. A smack of his lips on my cheeks, he says the coffee tastes great today.



Gabe Leyshon

My Hate For Him Was Born

Heather Dublinkske

stabbing pain shooting through my body deep behind my heart I'm not ready to be alone to be a mother racing thoughts distract from the pain my mind fills with anger swimming around with agony together they invade the moments that should be the best of my life

screams drown the tears of intensifying pain as he lies sleeping so peacefully dreaming so far away from where he can hear my screams far from a place where your life changes

WAKE UP!

Rage replaces anguish my screams become louder breathe breathe breathe pushing through the burning tearing sensation after 33 hours my hate for him was born into my love for her



Anthony Creeden

Eyes Open

Ashley Mitchell

You wouldn't even recognize it A snakebite makes the skin so tender Raw meat brings the swelling down Realizations can be painful

A snakebite makes the skin so tender Life the blush of a body undressing Realizations can be painful Or playful; a tourniquet or a tease

Like the blushing of a body undressing New wisdom stands in your garden, pink and raw Or playful; a tourniquet or a tease Flowers gripped tight spill their pollen

New wisdom stands in your garden, pink and raw The impact of sudden insight sends you reeling Flowers gripped tight spill their pollen Like a secret so sweet you cannot believe

The impact of sudden insight sends you reeling Raw meat brings the swelling down Like a secret so sweet you cannot believe You wouldn't even recognize it.



Amanda Williams

Maternal Lust

Seema Reza

I read something once in Reader's Digest about how a newborn can recognize the smell of its mother's amniotic fluid and will respond by turning its head toward it. I remember this trivia with unwarranted sadness and reach inward to unearth a dream. Thirst cuts at my throat. A baby at my breast. Not my baby. A baby who looks like someone else, who has been crying for too long, whose breaths are interrupted by desperate hiccupping gulps. Annoyed that her mother left nothing, I bring her to my breast. She latches on easily and seconds later I feel the welcome prickle of release as milk let down in my right side and my breasts deflate. She drinks while I bleed a river of yellow milk, and then her mother comes for her. I return the baby; guilty, standing in a curdling puddle. As the warm weight of the newborn leaves my arms the edges of my heart unfurl.

I open my eyes fully now and notice the dampness on the right side of my nightshirt. The wet dream of maternal lust. The hoary light of a sky heavy with snow plays on the edges of the furniture, and I kneel to look out the window above the headboard. The snow has barely begun. Isolated flakes float drunkenly past.

I go into the bathroom, switching on the light once the door is shut behind me. I dress to run, layering thermals under a fleece and a windbreaker. I press play on the minidisk player strapped to my left arm before pulling on gloves and sneaking down the stairs and out the front door. The snow has quickened now, flakes fall purposefully to the pavement. My fleece headband doesn't protect the crown of my head and I regret not wearing a hat. Ani di Franco breathes sincerely into my ear and I switch to Fifty Cent. The beat begins and the angry lyrics warm me, carrying me into the clarity of morning, past obedient and rumpled dog owners, past the frosted baseball field.

The warmth of the house is stifling. I feel unbalanced and awkward, my drenched running shoes juxtaposed with the silk-covered sofas and pale rug. I peel off sweaty layers, flinging them in the direction of the laundry room before heading back up the stairs and into the shower.

While shampooing I hear the doorknob hit the bathroom wall. In stumbles my five-year-old. Eyes barely open, he lifts the toilet seat and unleashes a forceful stream. He has recently discovered the use of the opening in his pajama pants.

"Hi," I say, meaning to surprise him.

He looks up at me, bleary and unphased, then wipes himself quickly with a square of toilet paper. He begins to leave the bathroom.

"Hey Neil-wash your hands."

"I didn't flush."

"Well, don't flush now, I'm in the shower. But generally you should. And hand washing is not dependent on flushing. You touched the seat."

He rinses his hands and sits down on the bathmat.

"So. Neil. I had an idea."

He looks up at me expectantly. I grope around for an idea to present to him.

"Let's make lollipops today."

"We can *buy* lollipops. Let's buy lots of lollipops today."

"Well, but we've never made lollipops. Don't you even want to know how we'd go about making them?"

"How?"

"Well, first we have to go to a candy store and buy a bunch of different colored hard candy..."

"We could buy lollipops at the candy store." He pulls at a corner of the rug. His fidgeting irritates me.

"Yes. But that's not the point. It's a project we'd do. Making lollipops that are works of art. Anyway, we'd just lay them out and put them in the oven to soften and then we could press sticks into them and then we could sell them." I was talking quickly, trying to create buzz around the lollipop idea. The selling was not actually part of my plan, but it piqued his interest.

"Who would we sell them to?"

"Hmm. Dad. We could sell them to your Dad."

"For how much?" He is skeptical about doing business with family.

"That would have to depend on the quality of our lollipops. Probably a dollar at least."

> "Okay. Let me get my wallet." "Wait...you don't need your wallet right

now. We haven't even made them yet." But he is gone. And has left the bathroom door wide open in his haste; cold air rushes at me. I rinse my hair one last time and dripping, run across to close the door before drying and dressing.

The lollipops are never made. He plays with his trucks—only construction vehicles this month—and I cook. I smash and chop clove after clove of garlic; the sweet stinging smell clings to my fingers while I stir vegetables into a wide stainless steel wok. I use everything: okra, eggplant, tomatoes, french-cut green beans, two sad potatoes. When I have a stack of Corning ware dishes full of cooked vegetables, I wipe the countertops and eat ricotta cheese out of the tub.

The phone rings and I ignore it. I don't even read the caller ID. My cell phone starts ringing, and Neil calls down to me.

"Mom. Mommeeeeeee. Your phone."

I stop eating and wait, suspending the "Do spoon's journey from the carton to my mouth. He Or you con appears in the kitchen after crashing down the tainer of ri stairs and storming through the house to stand in He front of me and look. His eyes always make me full." He feel inadequate. No one ever watched me so carehead up the fully. I shut my own eyes. When I open them he is still standing there, his pretty lips apart.

My cell phone has stopped its tinkling. "Are you hungry?"

"Your cell phone, Mommy.

It was ringing." His head is slightly tilted; the restlessness that blows within me has just begun to lift the hairs on his arms.

trees are women...they

are in bloom...

"Oh. I didn't hear it." I smile and shrug, try to reassure him, to send him back to his own world. "Silly me."

He is suspicious; his head remains tilted, his eyes stay fixed.

"Do you want to eat something? I cooked. Or you could have some of this." I tip the container of ricotta toward him.

He straightens himself. "Um. Nah. I'm full." He runs from the kitchen, and I hear him head up the stairs to his room. Soon the thuds of

> dump trucks rain through the ceiling. I return to my ricotta.

I am in a garden. The trees are women. Their oily purple bark

is taut and reptilian, underneath it their knobby muscles shift and flex. Their faces are brilliant shades of green, lightly veined. They are in bloom; tiny shimmering blossoms cling to their branches. They seem to speak in a language of bells, tinkling intermittent conversation. After a moment, one of them speaks to me. Her head hangs to the right and she looks both dejected and regal: branches extended, expanses of

root pushing up from the sand below. Her voice, now forming words I understand, is unexpectedly rough.

"Where next?"

"Das?" I surprise myself by responding in German. "I mean, what? Excuse me? I didn't understand."

"Where next?"

"I don't know. Where next?" What the hell? "What next?" She is wheezing. Allergies? "I guess I'll go home next. I don't know." "But don't forget..."

She is gone. Jared's hand is on my arm, shaking it gently. I want to kill him.

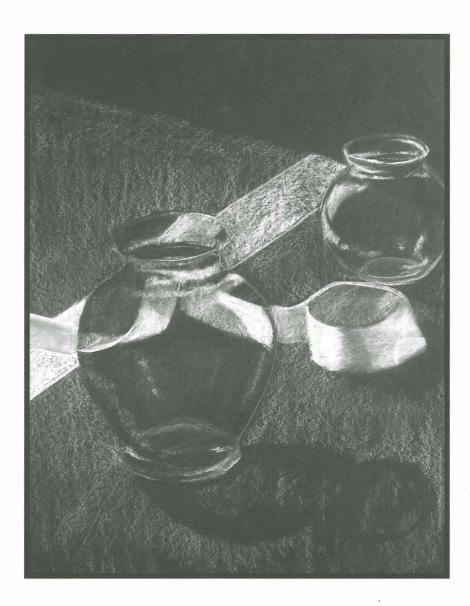
"What?"

"Were you awake?"

"Kind of, I don't know. I was dreaming, so I guess not. What?"

"I just wanted to make sure you took your pill. Relax." Two words: *Ree Laxx*. "Took it. Maintaining that hostile womb."

I turn over and try to concentrate on my dream, willing myself back into the garden. Instead I find myself soaring across a cloud littered sky and then falling abruptly. The twitching of my actual limbs jolts me awake.



Melissa Merino

Poem from Broad Street

Leslie Albershardt

The quietness pervaded so all I could hear was the labored motoring turns of the meter wheel. It turned but where were the blushing lights powering the spheres? Lovers praying clinging vilifying. The cycles never ceased as the meter lilted and purred, solitary.



S. Weyman

Argument

Katherine Powell

I sit in the leather palm of the couch, tossing accusations in your direction and I'm sorry. I can't seem to stop myself from

tossing accusations in your direction, and they sit in the air like a coughing fit I can't seem to stop myself; frustrated cravings for attention

sit in the air like a coughing fit, making me even more frustrated; cravings for attention slip through my careful comb, making me even more likely to search for reasons to cut (that slip through my careful comb). Is the stimulant biting my brain

likely to search for reasons to cut? I imagine your anger is the stimulant biting my brain, which makes me nervous and ridiculous.

I imagine your anger. I'm sorry which makes me nervous and ridiculous, as I sit in the leather palm of the couch.



Don Brodie

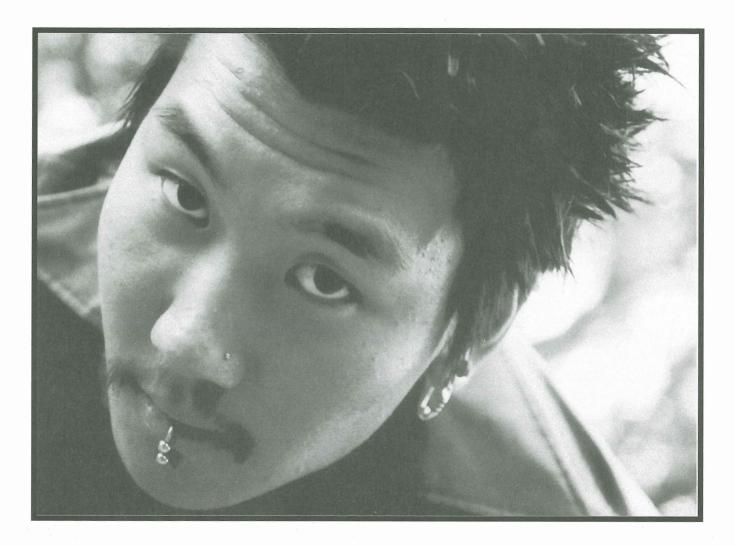
What Will Be Left

Caitlin Eva Kindervatter-Clark

Sundry, metallic coins, not all American, none mine, spilled in the outlines of an eager palm beside the cigarette cemetery, dangerously full, of filters frozen mid-wave, half-buried in ash.

Stains of red wine paint the graying carpet around the bed. The smooth and vacant hills of tangled sheets stretch on for miles.

Moth shaped bruises fluttering slowly from arms to neck. Not yet, but one day, a dull throbbing and newly realized emptiness somewhere deep inside.



Jennifer Miller

Libertine

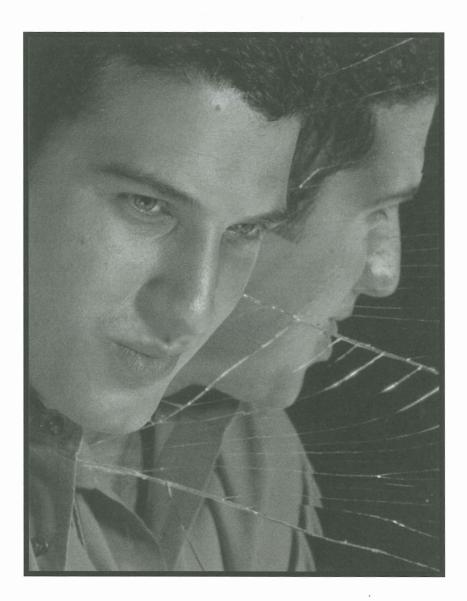
Mark Cruz

Hey liar I thought I was crazy, And I thought it was fine.

Every inch of longing is now gone, Taken by my apathy. Given to another gullible man That now has my old dream. Sleep with a dove, And have God's blessing.

Constantly on my mind is that last kiss, The kiwi tongue, That bathing aroma. I let out all the memories into a rag Till it soaks in air.

And every day the lines fade To a hole without light. Because you sent me into a world That could drive a man to oblivion



Imbal More

What Is Required To Be Successful As A Rat?

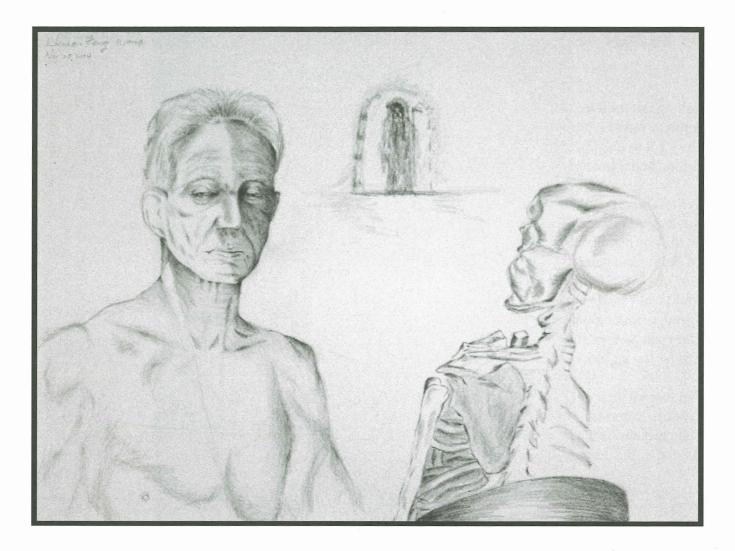
Jennifer Rachuna

Pulling out follicles of Auburn, mouse, raven and grey They got in line thinking to find A food pellet in their tray.

See this waiting it breeds madness But they're subject to the sway Of the ranting men in this rancid den Of politic and decay.

And I can't really hear you Through your televised decree The goals you set for your little pets Are far too ambitious for me.

I'm sure all their questions are valid I'm sure this maze is well designed The problem with me is I just can't see An end to this fucking line.



Hsiao Feng Wang

Penitenitary

Mike Ryan

My first day out the pen 'bout ate me alive. Bein' behind bars for nine long years, pissin' in a metal toilet, eatin' goop piled on shit, always doin' what other people wanted. How was *that* gonna cure me? So they locked me up and tol' me to "do as they said" with sticks and guns pokin' out their belts. Hell yeah I'd *listen* to 'em, but it wasn't no way to *cure* me.

And now here I was, lookin' at a world I didn't know no more. Scared shitless, let me tell you. I died in that prison. Learnin' to be quiet, keep to myself or get beat up or molested. Make friends with the authorities to protect me. Some days I had to remind myself I was still alive. Miss Anne said I was like "a low-class southern gentleman actin' in a northern drama." I started convincin' myself I was that gentleman they created. Once I got out I didn't know what to think.

The first thing I did was drive to a 7-11 to get me some smokes in a ol' beat-up truck my mama lef' me before she got arrested a week ago for possession and dealin'. Miss Anne mapped out the way to the 7-11, the supermarket, then my apartment. She said she didn't want "to leave nothin' to chance but God." I had to say I was glad for it. I used to tell Miss Anne durin' our counselin' sessions back there that the day I was free I'd run in a field like that lady in the "Sound of Music" (they used to torture me Sunday night once a month when they played it).

But free was a word I had to change my definition of on the outside. It wasn't no ballsout kind of freedom like in the ol' days when me and Ronnie used to ride around in his truck lookin' for girls. It was more about just acceptin' restrictions. Miss Anne taught me that. She said, "People'll be lookin' for you to mess up so just lay low."

Drivin' felt real funny. Last time I drove we was seniors in high school and Ronnie was too drunk to steer. I was half Ronnie's weight but I could hold down my beer better than he could. My mama's steerin' wheel was enormous, felt like I was drivin' a boat more than a truck. And the pedal didn't respond right away when I pressed it. It just kind of waited 'til it was ready, then started real slow.

I stopped wondering what happened to Ronnie after awhile. He came only sometimes the first two years then just stopped comin'. I tried callin' him but he never returned my calls. Miss Anne told me to write letters so I did. He never answered. When I gave up writin' I almost didn't care if I got out or not. What would I go to? Only family I got's in jail or dead. Ronnie was my best friend.

Then Miss Anne talked to me about forgettin' the past and thinkin' about my future. I have to admit that I didn't like this kind of talk at first but I think it helped me. We talked about freedom, my own place, makin' my own decisions, and havin' money for movies and girls. Yeah, that helped me.

Man, there was more cars on the road than I ever seen! People lookin' straight ahead, cuttin' over past me, zoomin' ahead. I just wanted to go slow like, see what I missed. Trees surrounded everythin'. Grass all cut up in slices like those floors back there, those floors I looked at everyday like they was grass. There was less space, more buildings and stores than I ever remembered, every one of 'em just beggin' to be filled with more traffic. The trees was to me what the buildings was like to the trees, all filled with shit, always fallin' and growin'. I didn't know which was better.

A green arrow let me turn into the parkin' lot with the 7-11 and bank. I'd get to go there t'morrow to deposit the money I earned from workin' in the library back there. Of all the things

I think I was most nervous about that. No library book (which I read a lot of to pass the time) could teach me how to go up to a person with money in my hand and ask 'em to hold it for me.

When Miss Anne asked what scared me most I said, "meetin' new people." That wasn't it at all. It was that small, brick, square buildin' with an "ATM" machine, 24-hour. If that wasn't the centerpiece of the table I don't know what was.

There was an Arab behind the counter of the 7-11, just like the ones I'd been watchin' on the news. Made no sense that we couldn't watch R-rated movies but the news was somehow worth watchin'. People got more mad watchin' the news than I ever seen 'em after watchin' a car blowin' up or a bad guy shot in a movie. We called it the "*Bad* News". Or was it just "The Problems"? I remember when I first saw my face on that TV

...smilin' with teeth so big they made Bugs Bunny's look like a first tooth. screen after I got a new truck. From the magazines I thought I'd like one of them new Chevys. I'd go drivin' down the road, window down, music loud. Maybe even a nice lady would see me. I'd ask,

"Where you goin', honey?"

"Wherever you want," she'd say, smackin' a piece of red gum, blonde hair, nice figure, smilin' with teeth so big they made Bugs Bunny's look like a first tooth.

I'd talk to her, wouldn't have sex or nothin'. Just talk, cook her some dinner, see a new movie. I'd take care of her. I sure would. The supermarket was right down the street from the 7-11. Boy, it was cold in there! The air outside didn't have a chance to get in. Me and Miss Anne, we talked a lot about a safe place. Maybe this would be it out here. It was all food and cold air.

Is it possible for a buildin' to grow? I thought for sure the supermarket was much smaller when we stopped to get somethin' for the guards to eat nine years ago, quietly on the way to that place. My real home, where I grew up, was about an hour away, just south on Route 19. Nothin' was there for me now 'cept memories, which I had enough of in my cell writin' in my journal, talkin' to Miss Anne.

The aisles was filled with stuff: cookies, cake, cheese, meat, toilet paper, even pots and pans! The fruit was really fresh, clear-like, like a colored star. Most what I saw back there was mashed up, cut up, or spotted. I'd have to come back here. It had everything I needed. I hoped the store I worked at would have just as much.

My wonder didn't let me buy nothin' but milk, cereal, eggs, bread, some lunch meat, spaghetti and sauce, and an apple. I laughed when I picked up the Wonder Bread Ronnie and I used to ball up and throw at each other. Forgettin' myself, I hushed up real quick. It was just bread. How could I forget somethin' so simple if I enjoyed it so much? I guess all that forgettin' made me forget the good stuff too.

People beside me was scannin' the food on the machine themselves. Themselves!? I wasn't fixin' to do that so I stood in line between an ol' woman payin' and an ol' man waitin' behind me. I didn't like waitin' like this. Seemed like they should have more workers. That's what we did back there. We always made sure we had 'nuff people for the job.

"Sure is hot today, isn't it?," the ol' lady

says to the clerk. I couldn't tell if she was askin' or tellin'.

"Yeah, looks like it's gonna be hot all week." He was young, black with glasses, freckles piled on his flat nose.

"I have to do my shoppin' today. It's the only time I have." She sounded like a true Southerner. Had her hair all puffed up, a pretty dress on. I liked that.

"Busy, huh?" he asked her.

"Can never stay busy 'nough."

She laughed so he laughed. But I saw through his laugh. He didn't mean it. Maybe laughter just meant kindness here, not funny. It *had* to be funny back there. Just 'cuz you laughed at your own jokes didn't mean nobody else gonna laugh.

Fear 'bout shot through my head when the ol' lady left. I shuffled up in line, heat risin' to my forehead like it was pumped from 'neath my skin.

He smiled at me then looked right down at the food. Had he said somethin' to the ol' lady first or should I start? Why did he make me nervous but the guy from the 7-11 was just fine?

"Sure is hot," I said.

"Yup, sure is." He kept scannin', the food beepin', and then he moved to the next one. I wasn't comfortable with my weight. I shifted it back and forth like I was on a boat or somethin'. Should I have shaved? Cut my hair shorter? Taken off my hat? Looked like I was the only unshaved, long-haired, hat-wearin' fool in the joint.

"That'll be \$19.23, sir."

"OK." I handed him the \$20 bill I already had in my hand.

"77 cents is your change. You have a nice day, sir."

That smile again made me mad. Who was

71

he tryin' to impress? Me?

I grabbed the plastic bags and walked out to my car, first stoppin' at a gumball machine like I used to love when I was a kid. Now they had gum with little sour candies inside. Mmmmmm!! Tasted so good!

The map to my new apartment was old, probably used many times before. I was supposed to save it, then return it to Miss Anne when she visited in a few days. I looked forward to seein' her. Funny how I liked my social workers more when my friends stopped comin' by.

My friends didn't help me neither. Sure, we laughed and told stories when they came. But why didn't I feel like they cared about me like Miss Anne did for the years I let her? I didn't pay my friends for comin' like she got paid. She was phony to me for a long time. My friends, they just laughed. Like the guy at the store that laughed from what that old lady said. There was somethin' wrong with that. Somethin' that Miss Anne taught me, but I can't put in words.

My best friend's name was Ronnie like I said. We were co-captains of every baseball team we ever played on, dated twins for the longest time, got drunk every Friday night in the back of his truck. "Thinkin' back is different from lookin'", Miss Anne used to say. "It requires more concentration."

So thinkin' back now I couldn't help but feel betrayed. He stopped comin' to see me after he "promised to come 'least once a week." Hell, he was the guy that dared me to rob that pitcher's house from the team that beat us in the league championship game. I never even told Miss Anne that Ronnie was the one that put me up to it, though I suspected she knew. Miss Anne figured it was more important to talk about me beatin' up that pitcher. I never told her different.

I was mad now, seein' all these things

Ronnie had that I didn't. He couldn't give this up for me, could he?

A few years ago I got past the point of blamin' him for tellin' me what to do. I would never have gotten out if I didn't. But I guess I was still mad about somethin'.

The map pointed to a red "X" where my new home was. On a yellow piece of paper Miss Anne wrote instructions for what I needed to do once I got there. Talk to the person in charge, get a key, sign some papers. Her phone number was written on the bottom like some secret identity. I would get a number too real soon. That made me happy.

A couple blocks away from my new home I wondered about Ronnie's home. I wondered if he still lived with his parents, got married, had kids. Did he still get drunk on Friday nights with a new best friend, still have his truck, like baseball? Would I ever know? I realized I was rememberin' more about Ronnie since I been out than in all the years I spent tryin' to forget about him. But I didn't have to keep askin' no more. I was free, I could find out myself. It almost made me stop my truck when I realized that I could go visit. Maybe Ronnie needed *me*. Maybe he needed *my* advice. How quick that thought came and how quick it changed everythin'.

Ronnie needed to see me too. Ronnie needed some advice I had to give him. I don't know why but that's what I believed. Things just feel right sometimes, y'know? I signed the papers for the apartment, left my bag unpacked on the bed, got in my truck headin' south on Route 19, not angry at my friend no more, a little angry at myself for beheadin' him before I knew the truth.

The roads was gettin' quiet as I left town, night comin' down like God was pullin' the shades. I wondered if God made night to help people sleep or if He thought of sleep first. Did He think of little things at a time or did it come to Him all at once like everythin' just came together for me?

I hadn't even turned on the radio yet. First I made sure I wasn't speedin' with only open road ahead, another clump of bright lights a ways away, then I clicked the radio on. I found some ol' country tunes I hadn't heard in years. I rolled both windows down, cranked that music as high as I could after I looked around me a bit to see if someone was watchin', and then I sang the rest of the way to town. Ronnie and I never sang but we always listened to the music real loud with a sixpack of beer between our legs, cuttin' up 'bout baseball and girls. I threw the map out the window, watched it fly in the air like a bird with many wings. Freedom don't have to have no wings I thought, it just have to feel like flight.

For the first time in nine long years I knew where I was goin'. I knew what I had to do. I didn't have to "work through it" with Miss Anne or write in my journal about it, analyze it. It finally *came* to me. Like that bird I saw when I first left that place back there, as soon as I looked it flew away. It knew where it was goin'. There was no difference between thinkin' and actin'.

People was always sayin' how you can't live in the past. How you need to live in the moment. But my past was tellin' me somethin' important. Somethin' that I needed to know before I could move on. There was someone that needed my help.

I passed a sign that said, "You are entering Forkship". I turned the music up and honked my horn as loud as I'd ever heard one. "Woohoooo!!" Nine long years of life locked inside a closet didn't have enough time to go away all at once. It was exhilaratin'!

I knew exactly where to go. The left by Bernard's grocery store where they didn't card us, the right by the Osgoods house where we picked on those nerds, and there was Ronnie's house on the left in the middle of a Dead End street where the creek ran, and we made plans to buy a house in the middle of nowhere as long as a creek ran by it.

By that time it was dark. My excitement turned to nervous like the turn of a card. Lookin' at Ronnie's tiny little brick house, where I spent more time on his doorstep than inside, another thought came to me, *I'll buy him and me a sixpack of beer*. Like a match to a fire I knew I had to do it. There was no choice.

I backed out of Ronnie's street, conscious of my loud truck, lookin' in the windows. I only saw lights and the flicker of a TV. Doubts ran through my head like water. Will he rec'nize me? Does he wanna see me? What if he's not there? His mom didn't like me much.

As I pulled in the parkin' lot to 'ol Bernard's I saw two men with black masks, shotguns raised high, two bags danglin' from each of their arms, get in an ol' Buick. They backed up quick and peeled out, passin' by me just as I entered. They looked both ways to turn but didn't notice me at all.

My first thought was if I knew'em. Sometimes you can't help what your brain thinks. Over nine long years you meet most criminals where you live. I couldn't see them anyhow but I guessed a few names.

Then I looked at the store. Its lights was on but it was real quiet. It felt cold too, just like my jail cell on nights when I couldn't sleep. I rolled my truck up slowly, cuttin' off my lights.

Mr. Bernard was the owner, a tall, quiet

man. Looked depressed, now that I thought about him. When I saw him in the window his head was down on the counter, his back heavin' up and down like he was cryin'.

I felt real bad for him but if I went in I'd have to say I saw the robbers. Police would want to talk to me, they'd check my record, lookin' down on me. Jail was no place for somebody to live anyways. Those people I knew. The problem was *outside* jail, there was nothin' they could do inside that would fix'em. But the burglary still had to be told on. If I learned anythin' in there it was that people just couldn't get away with whatever bad they did.

I couldn't go visit Ronnie now, I was too nervous. I'd call him instead usin' that number that identified people, ask him to do me this favor. I'd say he owed me one. His number popped up without me even thinkin' it. I hadn't dialed it in years, didn't even know I remembered it. I guess after all that decidin' 'bout helpin' him all those memories just kind of floated back up. I'd call him, ask him how he was doin', ask him to do this for me.

Lucky the pay phone was on the side of the store so I didn't have to see Mr. Bernard cryin'. You couldn't just put money in the phone and start dialin' no more. You had to read the instructions first. It cost more too.

I was sure of my decision. I pressed the numbers to reach him. On the third ring he answered. I knew it was him right away. He never sounded happy to be interrupted. Too many people not from 'round here no more, so the southern drawl in his voice was a welcome mat.

"Hey Ronnie, this is 'ole Junior from way back." I noticed my voice gettin' softer as I spoke.

"Well I'll be damn! If it isn't Junior from way back! It's great to hear from ya, buddy!"

"Yeah, I just thought I'd call an' check up

on ya."

"Well, I'm glad you did! How the hell are ya?"

"I'm doin' great. I didn't know if you'd still be livin' at home." I could see him sittin' on the couch wearin' a ball cap, probably weighin' more pounds than three of me by now.

"Yup, sure am. Moved out a few years ago then moved back to save some money."

"That's a good idea." I heard sirens far away that scared the shit out of me.

"You sound different, Junior."

I didn't know what to say to that. "You sound different too, Ronnie."

"So what the hell are you up to?"

"Well...I just got out." I was gettin' real nervous now.

He stopped talkin'. "Well, that's great! Listen Junior, I'm sorry I didn't come visit you more. My mom got real sick, then I was workin' two jobs. Things just kep' happenin'."

I guess both of us needed things to get tied up. "I know. I understand."

"So where are ya now?"

"Well...I was just comin' to see you, just 'cuz I could, y'know? Then I was right outside your house and I got real nervous like, so I thought you could use a beer like we used to do in high school, remember?"

Softer now, "Sure do. Sure do."

"But when I went to ol' Bernard's store I saw two people leavin' with guns. Looks like they just robbed the place!"

"Ya kiddin' me?"

"Nope. Sure not. They drove right by me. I looked to see if I rec'nized them but they was wearin' masks. I was wonderin'—"

"D'ya call the police?"

"See...I can't really do that, Ronnie. Although I didn't do nothin', I'm a little scared of'em, y'know? 'Specially after what I been through."

"So what are ya thinkin'?"

"Well...I was hopin' you could call'em for me. I know they was drivin' a ol' blue Buick, looked like one was about 6 foot, the other shorter, skinny. I couldn't see their faces. They was both carryin' shotguns. That's all you gotta say 'cuz that's all I know."

"Is ol' Bernard callin'?"

"I spose so, but I don't know if he saw their car."

"Well...I guess I could call for ya, Junior."

"You don't sound too much like you want to, Ronnie."

"I don't know, Junior. I think you need to take responsibility for seein' it. We're adults now."

That made me mad. "I just thought you could do me this favor since you hadn't seen me for nine long years." I was tearin' up now. Like Miss Anne said, cryin' never stopped no pain, but sure made it feel better.

"I told you I was sorry 'bout that, Junior. I really am."

"Don't make up though...don't make up for it."

"There's nothin' I can do 'bout the past."

I was tempted to slam that phone down, break it in little pieces. People kep' talkin' 'bout that. But I couldn't do what I wanted. I learned that back there. I'd show him how I growed up too. "Well, nice talkin' to ya, Ronnie." I heard him try to say somethin' but I hung up before he could say it.

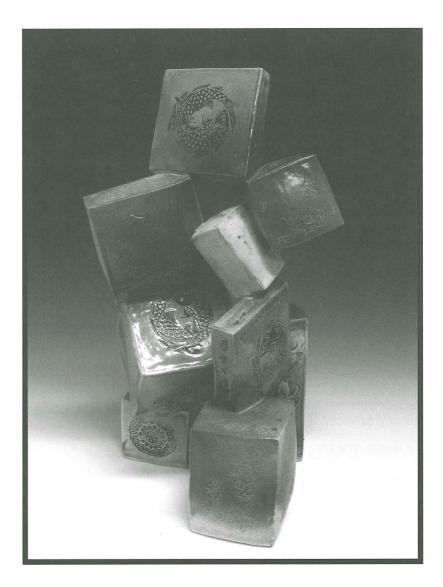
I got in my truck quick 'cuz I knew the cops was comin'. I didn't wanna leave there runnin' like it wasn't my choice. I wanted to leave there like *I* wanted to leave. So I got in my truck nice and slow like, turned the key, heard the roar, backed up, and went on my way. I first checked

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to see that Mr. Bernard wasn't behind the counter no more, knowin' full well that I'd be fearin' gettin' caught for the rest of my life and that would make me look suspicious.

I passed the turn to Ronnie's again, half hopin' I'd see him on the corner waitin' for me. But instead somethin' real important passed in my mind. I thought maybe people was right about forgettin' the past. I spent nine long years waitin' to see if people was waitin'. Guess they wasn't.

Then as I drove down the road back to my new home another thought came to me. This one was more important, more real-like. I didn't visit Ronnie 'cuz he wanted my advice. I went 'cuz my *memory* of Ronnie wanted *my* advice. And now that I knew what it was, and my new memories could become more and more about the stuff I saw in the stores, in the trees, in the people, I knew right then I'd make it out here. I knew I was gonna make it.



Yeonhee Ji

Imitation Gatsby Invitational

Here is the winning entry of the First Annual Imitation Gatsby Invitational contest, held in 2004. This contest was open to Montgomery College and Montgomery County writers, and won by student Gary A. Hall, who received bragging rights and a \$25 gift certificate.

The contest rules asked writers to pay homage to one of the most famous of American Novels, *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, who is buried in Rockville not far from Montgomery College's Rockville campus.

A spoof similar to Faux Faulkner and Bad Hemingway contests, the contest required writers to copy the style of *Gatsby* by writing a scene of no more than 300 words – a scene that might have been edited out of the novel by Fitzgerald for good reason. The scene needed to include at least one major character from Gatsby, showing something that happened to him or her (or them) that is not in the published copy of *Gatsby*. Because Nick is the narrator of the book, the scene needed to be told through his eyes.

The Winning Entry

Gary A. Hall

We pulled Gatsby's body from the pool and laid him on the ground, his lifeless eyes staring back at us. I searched for signs of struggle, but saw only a single hole in his abdomen. As we turned him over, I noticed three small holes in his back. When the others went inside to telephone the police, I slumped onto the grass and stared blankly at the pool, its crimson water slowly dispersing.

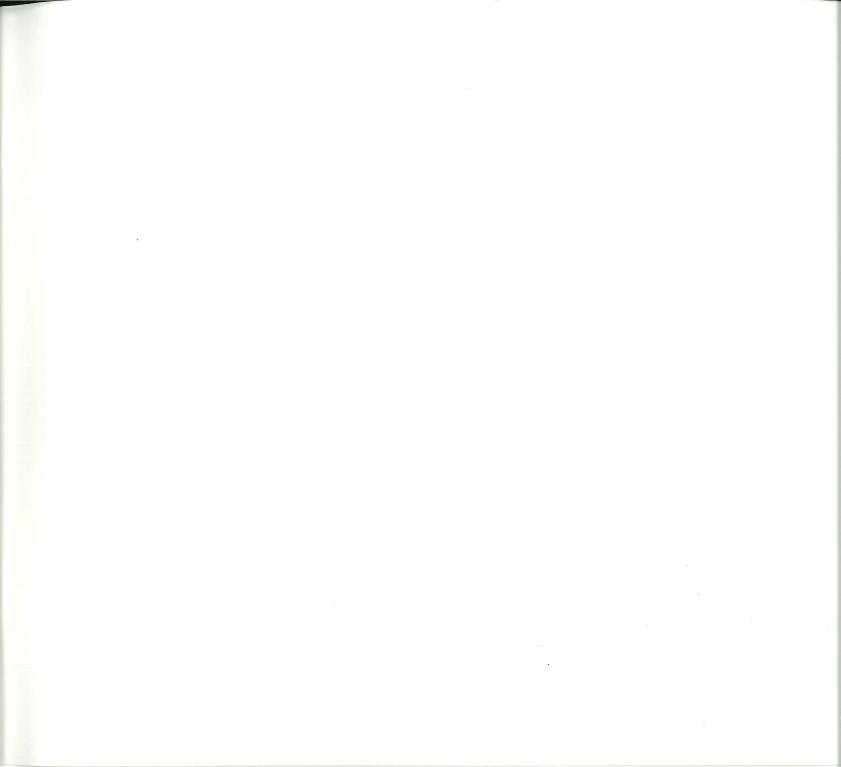
I sat there, not wanting to leave Gatsby, somehow feeling at fault for letting him die alone. I imagined the last several minutes of his life as he floated in the pool, its blue tiles transmitting their essence to the clear water, making it appear aqua; Gatsby, still tense from yesterday's events, yet also quite at ease, knowing that Daisy was safe, and that soon they would be together.

Gatsby shifted his weight and scooping water into his hand, caressed his head, smoothing several errant hairs. When the first bullet entered his torso he gave a soft sigh as it hurtled through his body. As the second bullet tore through his back, he squeezed the mattress and gasped for air. Gatsby raised his hand toward the green light flashing at the opposite side of the bay and tried to grab it, clenching it in his fist one last time. Gasping his last breath, he uttered, "Daisy."

It was the third bullet that, after piercing Gatsby's body, punctured the mattress, sending Gatsby into the water, air no longer of any use to him. Gatsby didn't realize that his search for Daisy would intertwine with the end of his life. It was his gift for hope that had kept Daisy in his heart and mind the past five years, and he clung to that hope with his last breath.

Acknowledgements

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Cover Art by Marija Balac