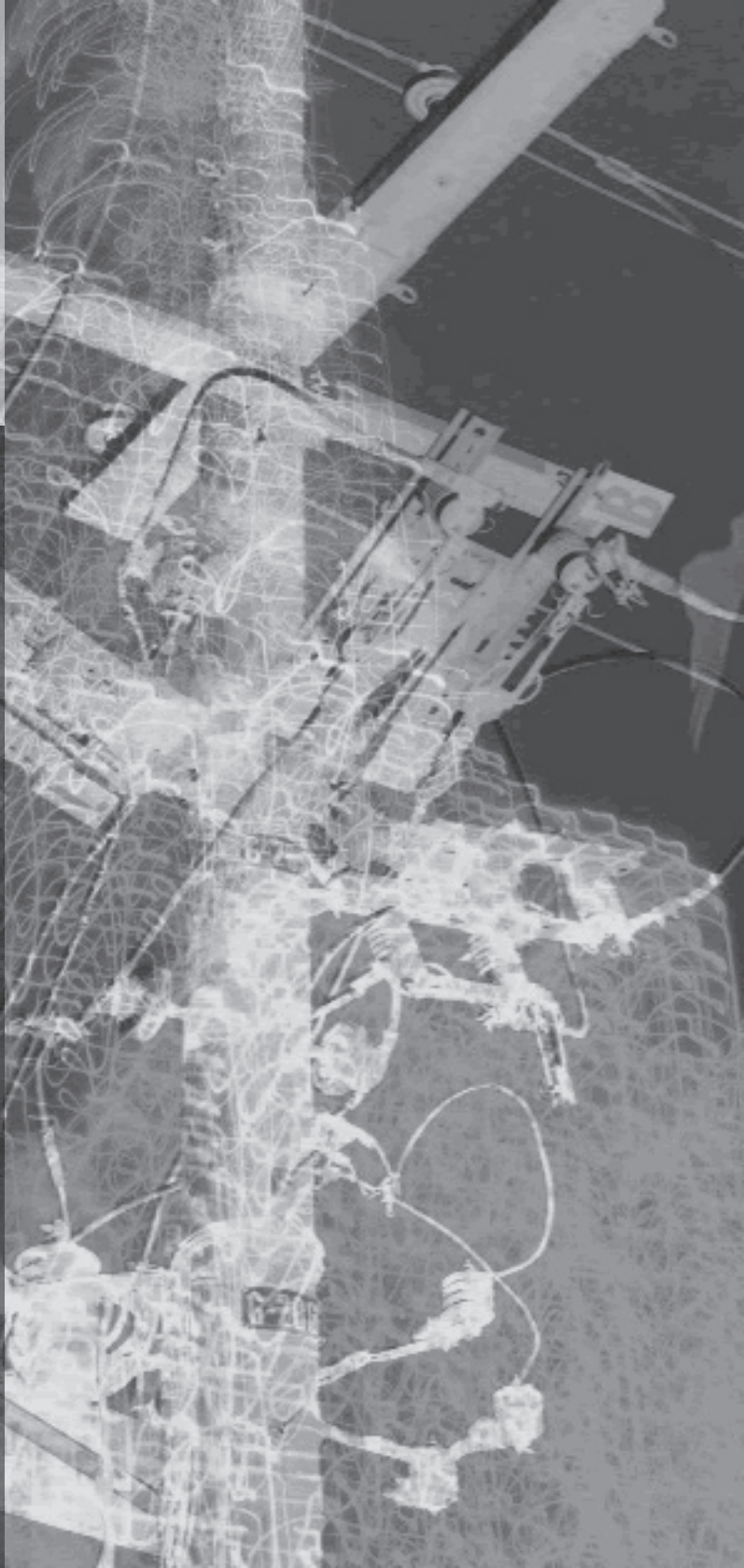


TR O U B A D O U R

2006 - 2007

UNIVERSITY OF
WEST
FLORIDA



University of West Florida

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Sponsored by the College of Arts
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2006 - 2007

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our sincerest thanks to the Department of English and Foreign Languages and the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, who have given their invaluable support to the project. We would also like to thank all those who submitted their work to this anthology.



Troubadour

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Tesa Burch

In Letters

My exes tethered to my waist.
My diamonds!
They have no idea

Some days I feel the need
to carry a hammer for nails,

some days for hangings,

some for dolphins and whales.

I'm always looking up at the sky
Thinking this must be some calm disguise
A lady so waged,
Never whispers rape,
Or spares light for range roving eyes.

Nick Rupert

Melodramatic Lightning

You and I came together in the high beams,
the golden chrome glare drawing beads of sweat,
boiling time into a gummy, amber stew.

The light finally passed under our soles;
two lovely specimens, caught close together,
drugged and pinned and fixed,
our feet dangling just above the ground.

“Like watching the sun rise,” I said,
and we both shielded our eyes.

You Could Seduce Me

We could lie together on this little island—you and I,
whispering stupid promises and playfully nibbling
scandalous little tattoos into smooth flesh.

I could try to be as romantic and passionate as
you have imagined me.
And I promise that if you ask me, you can have it,
but only because I'm supposed to,
because I'd be ashamed to say no.

Glassy in the candlelight, my eyes pass right through you
as we tangle together like yarn,

as the dry springs fight to be heard over your
hollow cries,
your tears rolling what's left of his reflection down your cheeks.

I won't notice in the candlelight.
I won't want to notice.

And we can wilt like two moon jellies in the afterglow,
smothered by silky sheets--two gladiators,
lacquered with sweat and gasping, and finally done with it,
finally full of it.

But I won't fall asleep with you tonight.
I'll turn my back while you reach for me between
blue-gray dreamscapes,
where regrets bleed together like watercolors
until all that's left is mud.

I won't be dreaming tonight,
with the crowded bed and the heavy air.

Not where regrets pool
like summer rainwater.

Little Incident at Big-Mart

Kent felt the radio around his belt buzz just before he lost traction on the Big-Mart brand Granny Smith Super Slush spill he'd asked Horton to clean up ten minutes earlier. Kent was busy arranging the new Freedom Flag display, but the little unit buzzed to life just as his foot found the fluorescent green puddle, dropping him like a cannonball, spinning him down, down, down, landing like a Jell-O mold against the linoleum. It was Horton on the radio again, his voice low and bored, almost a yawn. But Kent's eyes were wide. There was white fire in his right buttock, and he gnashed his teeth.

"Kent. Horton here. I'm taking Kate to lunch. Need you to ride the bitch for me, bro. Last time, I swear."

Horton's department, Good Medicine, was easily the store's largest. It was also situated less than twenty feet from Victory Lane, Kent's department. As a matter of fact, if he hadn't collapsed to the floor, Kent probably would have been able to watch as Horton summoned him over the radio. But Horton wasn't even supposed to be allowed radios anymore—not since a previous escapade in which he tried to talk Doreen from Pet Products into a quick session of radio sex.

Kent had tried to get him fired for less than that. Like the time Horton poured Big-Mart brand Nuclear Summer Sauce in Kent's lemonade. Kent suffered an immediate allergic reaction to the iodine. Within seconds, he was spewing tainted lemonade and mucus through his nose and mouth in violent torrents, frothing like a fountain and cursing Horton, his head and neck swelling fast like some angry red tick. Horton just wasn't Big-Mart material, and Kent knew it. He knew it even as Horton, drooling with laughter, tore open a jumbo box of Benadryl for Kent, whose windpipe was rapidly swelling shut.

“Bitch” was the term the Big-Mart employees had bestowed on the store's chromed floor buffer, which looked and handled something like a zamboni, except that the polishing surfaces had worn unevenly, and the machine jerked and vibrated like a mechanical bull as you rode it along. Kate loved the thing. So did Allison from the Skewered Meats kiosk, but for some reason Kent and Horton typically were chosen to ride the bitch. The customers tended to

giggle to themselves as Kent maneuvered the machine between aisles, the bitch vibrating his gelatinous rump to the point of numbness. Now he craved the numbness. He was afraid to even take a glance toward his rear end. Kent kept his eyes ahead of him, inching along on his belly like one of the war commandos on the Big-Mart brand Omniview TVs.

He wormed himself along further down aisle nine, where he spotted some Big-Mart brand Surly Towelettes stacked on the lower shelf. I'll need em, he thought. By God, will I need em. He swiveled his head too far and caught a glimpse of the tiny flagpole wagging in his peripheral. Kent craned his neck back to the display and noted the single vacant spot in the neat twelve by twelve batch of tiny flags, their mirror-chromed stars and fluorescent stripes undulating in the breeze of a Big-Mart brand Peaceful Storm oscillating fan. The flag had stuck after all. He started not to look, but there was no way around it.

The sharp brass tip had entered through the back pocket of his Big-Mart brand Hefty Man khakis, a crimson pattern already leaching through the fabric. Kent took a deep breath and tried not to faint. The blood-smearred price tag on the little flag read \$9.99. They were manufactured in some Taiwanese suburb, mostly from old Big-Mart milk cartons, recycled Dura-Load diapers, and moldy shower curtains. Suggested retail was \$.99.

Horton.

Kent tore the radio from his belt and keyed the talk button.

Profession

Maké, thought of you first this morning,
crawled out of a sleep five times disturbed,
only to emptiness. seeing sheets
you'd muscled into place wrestled to the floor.

You're fingering the plastic heart on my bracelet
Adam made when he was seven. You,
somewhere, halfway over the Atlantic by now
I gave you the best I could.

And I thought of us, two
paralyzed in a tight squeeze of desperation,
the security guard's impatient face, she didn't know,
urged you to move on, move forward, move home.

6

A mere two nights ago we drowned all worry
in cheap scotch whiskey,
laced ourselves in incomprehension,
took hits of hard embrace.

You said you'd rather never known than lose
I'd rather be leaving than left
here on the staircase to my apartment
where I found you,

traced you every imperfection,
until they became my own.
Where I found us, ascended to our haven,
we never took steps, we rushed.

I want to fall, to fall away in this place
where I had you, lose myself again.
I want you to know every star we wished on,
I wished for you, and I still do.

that the already withering bouquet of flowers
you stuck in the storm drain
grew brown in the sun
and tomorrow they'll be gone too.

I want you to know that when my fingers
slipped from your hand, my body dropped like lead,
I tried to run up the escalator for one last glance
But couldn't.

I want you to know that last night I
pressed my fingers against my neck
to feel my pulse, to know there was something else,
to pull myself off the floor. It was pitiful, I know.

Maké, understand,
I stopped crying when the words came.

Freeze You to Death

I grabbed the keys from the armchair and pulled my toboggan down low to where its unraveling edges rested right above my eyebrows. I slammed the door to spite my neighbors and their loud late night television viewing, their snug compartmentalized families. It'd been a year since she went down, and I couldn't feel shit beyond the ice in my lungs.

When she said she was going to Santa Fe to find her soul, I told her not to bother (you don't have one, you vapid fucking bitch, you evil Jezebel, you godless slut). She dropped the ring into my wine, too casually, and walked her signature walk out of the door. I remember finishing the glass, praying that the ring would slip through my teeth and lodge itself in my esophagus. Instead, I caught it at my lips, tucked it into my pocket, and Ithaca had never felt more frigid.

8

I lit a cigarette outside the apartment complex, on the way to the car. I reveled in the warmth of the tar in my throat, a nice contrast to the pain of cold breath. I thought about finding a bar on 8th and working my way to the other side of town, getting lost and plastered—maybe I'd take the chill off with some uptown sleaze, a 45 year old divorcee who gets drunk for cheap and leaves before sunrise. I was even contemplating a hotel with a continental breakfast, until I saw her.

She had the same tight pea coat on, patches and all, but above all else, it was the way she walked, a more indicative part of her character than a journal; style over substance, always. And there she was, sure footed and sly, slinking toward my car. She opened the passenger side door and fell into the imprint she'd left a year ago—she sat there staring, expectantly, as if she'd never left. She leaned over the gear shift and put her lips against my cheek. I hadn't shaved in weeks.

There was a fire in her this time around, the fires of thousands of tantric Aztec dances, the heat of a harsh and unrelenting New Mexican sun that had crawled itself deep inside some hole in her and expanded. She didn't kiss me; she just put her lips there,

slightly parted. I can still feel them burn—a perfect lip-liner brand. She could've been saying, "I'm sorry," or "I love you," or "I told you so." It wouldn't have mattered much anyway. She lingered a fourth of a second too long before she opened the door and walked her walk away from me.

I haven't left my apartment in months. The only light I've seen has been the cherry on this cigarette. The door man brings me this shit: food, candles, toilet paper. I haven't touched the boxed meals or the thermostat, the stove or the fridge. I can't eat. I can't sleep. The only warmth here is a scar on my right cheek.

It's so fucking cold in this house.

The Things of This World

– “Love calls us to the things of this world” is a quote from St. Augustine, and is the title of a poem by Richard Wilbur.

If love calls us to the things of this world, I imagine the calling
a shout you barely hear
in a crowd, the opening and closing of a mouth,

fleeting, like the blossoming of a bud in time-lapse photography.
Have I been called, I wonder,
to peanut butter sucked off of a metal spoon

and frayed red sweatpants with holes in the backside;
to the black and white photograph
of my dad and his brother as kids, arms slung around each other's

necks, barefoot, bare-chested, and smirking with defiance;
to the letters
my mother sends three times a week to me,

her last one. Her children began to leave
eighteen years ago,
and permitted to follow-by post-she snipped, sealed, and sent

herself off, enclosing comics, translating the dog's sentiments,
sometimes cutting in half
a card sent to her years before, turning its front panel

into a post card that's forgotten its past purpose,
its beauty living
in transformation. The things of this world also call us to love.

Of gum

A quicksand for canines,
molars, incisors,
semi-solid goo
adhered, depressed, inflated,
chewable playdoh,
fruit-flavored,
that smacks
and pops
and-if utilized correctly-
mutates even the most
mature and respectable
into a beautifully obnoxious
species of bovine.
I imagine its
manner of invention
a penicillin-like
discovery-chemical
blunder looked upon
shamefully by official eyes.
How could they know
what sugary salvation
it would become-
the bored,
the addicted,
the eaters of onion and garlic
now occupied,
satisfied,
kissed on the lips.

Untied, at the park, on a Monday afternoon

Borne aloft as plumes, laces
Drop then against the shoes, flop
Across each other, canvas wind-
Blown sculptures of a mottled sort

Spotted from puddles, globs of mud,
Pollen thrown from blossoms over-
Ripe with hue. The shoes they line
Are rubber-soled, his very own,

Tools to conquer rocks and sand
And metal ponies, orange-reined.
Now caught beneath a fallen branch,
One lace will not allow a summoned

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Foot to follow course. Alerted
By a stumble, the child frowns,
Looks down, then bends to toss the branch
Aside - able again to wander

Swollen mounds of earth, his mind
A boundless space of hows and whys,
Roaming towards a day when laces,
For some reason, must be tied.

A woman runs away from the heat

Deliverance is what she wants-
sweat lines her face, warmth swells
her hands so that her wedding band

makes an indentation in her finger-
her breasts sag under the weight of the sun,
its light pushing all things living

to the cooler air that lies along the ground,
and by 2:00 its heat will drive some
to silent panic- widening eyelids, quickening

breaths-and the woman will still need to
pick up her daughter's prescription
and visit her mother at the home.

Her mother called yesterday to say
the boy that plays the accordion
is coming, Laurie, and you should too.

The dread settling itself in her stomach,
she promised before even realizing anything
had occurred, that involuntary avowal that

possesses women, that instinctual demon.
How could she say no, remembering the kitchen
of her childhood-four young faces,

flushed and alive, asking for food, drink,
and a simultaneous and complete
immersion in the details of their lives,

as their mother, leaning on the counter
and nodding to their wishes,
smiled and listened for the garage door to rise.

Three Windows

1. The Green Window

As you approach the green window you notice its variations in shade: horizontal and winding streaks the color of string beans, corners deep and almost opaque, its very center the fine lightness of a raindrop on the skin of a grape still on the vine. These inconsistencies come from imperfections in the glass; the streaks were etched there long ago by sand blown from the sea during a great storm, the corners darkened by the eyes of jealous and watchful lovers. Only the center maintains the perfectly smooth surface texture and color of the original.

There are two kinds of people who direct their gaze though the green window, no matter the space it occupies. Those who look through the glass near the corners, along the edges – anywhere but at its absolute center – still roughly make out the images and the colors that exist on the other side. Walking down the street, they see red, pink, and orange shirts toppling over each other in a dryer, or seven variations on the knee-high brown leather boot. Sitting in the back seat of a car as it waits at a stoplight, they turn their head to see a man stealing a bite of a woman's key lime pie. Lowering their window blinds, they see the deep yellow glow of a full moon that hangs just above the trees.

The others, however, are lured to the window not because of what's behind it, but because of the purity of color that exists at its very center, and they can only think of bending down or stretching up or inching over to look through it. When they take their eye away they remember not the image on the other side but the extraordinarily glow around it, and go home thinking only of that fantastically luminous vision, yet by the time they've reached the end of their journey they realize that they can neither name its color nor describe it in words. These people, armed with the certainty that whatever it was exists elsewhere, will grow determined to somehow bring it into their home, and will tirelessly search for it. They make plans to knock a hole in the office wall, just above the desk's crooked piles of white paper and yellow legal pads, or to rip out the bathroom window that looks back onto the still, grey alley,

and squeeze the green window into the open space. They see a spot for the glass above the washing machine, next to the telephone, in that corner of the family room where the television is now. The dull metallic sheen of the kitchen sink becomes a cruel reminder of that otherworldly quality of light they will never see again.

I cannot say who is luckier: those who happen to gaze through the glass' barely curved surface near the top, its green that of a late-night neon sign, and watch a field of sunflowers pass by, uniformly praising the sun, or those who sense the opportunity offered by the window's absolute center, and see something that has no name. The former never see such beauty, but do not suffer from the torment of its memory. The latter, who became addicted in that one moment, have experienced perhaps the height of sensation, yet will never again be able to see the world that surrounds them. Their search for something equivalent has forever clouded their vision. They do not realize that the stark perfection of the center exists only because of the imperfection that surrounds it.

2. The Window of the Most Likely Scenario

Somewhere in the dwelling of each human being there is a Window of the Most Likely Scenario. In the house of a rich man in Spain I've seen such a window: a long, thin piece of glass that functions as the shower door in the master bathroom. Fine silver from the city of Córdoba lines its edges, and cemented here and there into the glass are ceramic tiles painted by the artisans of Triana, their brushstrokes like flames. I've also seen, from a one-room apartment on the 21st floor of a Bangkok high rise, that this window looks out to the west, and sunsets are framed by the room's one luxury, curtains made of raw silk the color of red wine.

This window need not be of glass – in the small houses of the poor it is a gap between two slats of wood or an open doorway. It is simply a space through which people, confined within walls, direct their gaze outward onto the surrounding landscape.

No one knows who first conceived of this window, nor by what means it was constructed. But its capability and function are clear: upon looking through it, you see an image of the most likely scenario a particular decision will bring about, and that knowledge will help you choose a course of action. A father sees his daughter refuse to look at him at the dinner table; her black eyeliner is thick, and she holds her hands a few inches in front of her mouth, gouging at her fingernails. A torn young woman sees an older version of herself, her loose skin hanging on her skinny bones, her hair thin-

ner. She is in bed, sleeping next to a man who holds her, and her body fits into the bends and folds of his own. A man in a suit sees that what was once a city is now a land of piles and mounds, each indistinguishable from the next, a desert of shifting metal, rock, and glass. No people move about, not even photographers. A woman sees a gathering of people wearing black and holding white paper plates and red plastic cups. Casserole dishes covered with plastic wrap wait on each shelf of both refrigerators.

Yet as with all things that exist outside of one's own mind, and therefore cannot be considered absolutely valid, the accuracy and hence the worth of the Window of the Most Likely Scenario eventually came into question. Many people, upon seeing an image of especially disastrous consequences, thought such an outcome impossible. Swiping at the air in front of the window as if pushing the knowledge aside, they muttered, scoffed, and turned their gaze elsewhere, towards the less complex physical environment. In time they hung a tapestry over it, moved a bookshelf in front of it, and finally, desperate now, boarded it up.

I'm told that these days the debate over the window is dominated by two groups. There are those people who insist on the value of the window's prophetic quality and see it as completely essential to the decision-making process. Everything completely marked by turmoil in the world is a function of people's refusal to use the window or to believe the images that it projects. In direct opposition to this first group stands a second made up of those who look upon the window as entirely useless, even destructive. They have found that its ability to show users only the most likely of possibilities prohibits them from ever considering anything else – the medical rarity, the unexplained appearance, the coincidental encounter – so that they become prisoners of a strange world based on mathematical probability.

Yesterday I sat on the steps in the entryway of my house and looked through one of the long rectangular windows that frame the front door. In the glass I saw an image of that entryway, but there were only walls where the windows used to be. They were bare and white, and there was not one pore through which natural light could enter.

3. The Nose's Window

It is an anomaly in the window world, dominated as it is by eyes, shades of white, sidelong glances. You do not wipe it with paper towels or test its brilliance with reflection. Only the olfactory world

permeates its edges. Molecules of a bonfire, a child's blanket, an open bottle of scotch waft through the window to your nostrils, swirl over cilia, bind with receptors, and spark an electrical signal that becomes a smell. To put yourself in front of the window is to be without eyes, mouth, ears, and hands, yet the sensory capabilities of these four combine and transfer their collective powers to the nose, so that it becomes not so much a loss of feeling, but a rerouting.

The window is a dull sliver of blue-gray air whose currents appear to be constantly weaving in and out. It is completely opaque, and hangs on a transparent glass hook, thin as the stem of an orchid and curved like a mother's hips. Poking your nose against it during the two minutes just after sunrise, you can smell the world at its most wondrous (flower petals barely budging) and most foul (a paper mill left to pump all night). Like a drug it widens cavities, urges, makes you squirm. Particles of air seep into your body and you smell leather, feet, old books, burning sugar.

The window only shows itself to those who are lost.

A woman who had never before strayed far from her land-locked state drove east, all the way to the coast, to visit her son in school. Mistakenly continuing east as she neared the ocean instead of turning north, she found herself in a wild place with no road names or mile markers, the edges of her car brushing past tall dry grasses, the sun still behind her but falling. She stopped the car, rolled down her window, and as her cigarette lighter struggled against the wind, she noticed that she could no longer see out of the passenger side window. She stretched her torso over the crackling seats until her forehead nearly touched the glass, and all went dark and silent and still. Smells crept in: the far corner of her supermarket, the room after sex, a wet dog, sweat, her children playing in the back yard. She breathed in and softly blew out, making a long, low sound in her throat. She closed her eyes.

In her mind the smells piled on top of each other haphazardly, so that for her the sea would never be a body of water, but a vision of her young naked body walking over to the open bedroom window, her skin warm and salty. In the vision she watches her children chase a dog through the aisles, out the automatic door, and into their sandbox, a misty rain barely falling.

Fake ID

“Mmm, you are, like, so vintage,” she purrs, and I smile and nod my head in approval even though I know she can’t see me through the phone.

She tells me how hot I look in my ripped up denim jacket with the Def Leppard patch on the right sleeve, the one that hangs in the back of my closet behind a rainbow of solid color business shirts and cardboard stiff dress pants.

“I wish I was around in the 80s,” she tells me. “I’d tie my hair in one ponytail on the side of my head and wear sweat pants and leg warmers and LA Lights every day. I’d be so cute.”

LA Lights didn’t come out until the early 90s, but I don’t tell her that. Instead, I lie to her and tell her that I have a pair that I bought on eBay and that I’ll wear them for her some time if she likes.

She cuts to the chase. “So...do you just want to come over? My parents won’t be home for a long, long time.”

I have a two-hour presentation to give at a board meeting first thing the next morning. But I’m still that same teenage boy that ditches class to make out with Rebecca Healey in the backseat of my Buick in the school parking lot, the same kid that snuck out of the house to drink stolen beer on a hill overlooking the bay, a mountain of book reports and algebra homework waiting for me at home. So I say yes.

As I hang up the phone and reach for my car keys, I tell myself that she’s eighteen and that it’s OK.

*

It’s two weeks ago, and I’m fumbling through a wallet full of dog-leared discount cards, nervously thumbing through old Christmas pictures of Mom and Dad and the dog trapped in cracked plastic, growing ever more cognizant of the impatient toe-tapping line behind me. Finally, I stumble across my driver’s license.

I hand it to the gas station cashier, a twenty-something orgasm of college student clichés. Pink streak down her bangs. A glittering diamond stud impaled into her left cheek. The chicory stench of cheap cigarettes and coffee with too much cream.

If things were different I’d ask her when she was getting off, in-

vite her to my one bedroom apartment to watch a rented video and drink grocery store wine or the on-sale domestic beer that I'm buying right now. As it is, I don't say anything. I just watch her glance at my ID, at the birth date, at the picture, back up at my face, at the picture, at me. I smile a wide Cheshire cat grin. She doesn't return it—they never do.

"Three eighty-seven," she declares, her eyes suspicious and unconvinced. As she slides me the beer and my card, I hear whispers behind me. I can't discern them, but I can take a guess:

"...there's no way..."

"...not old enough..."

"...fourteen years old..."

"...kid brother looks older..."

"...sixteen, tops..."

"...must have a hell of a fake..."

Sometimes, someone will speak up, confront me directly. "How old are you, kid? You can't be twenty-one?"

"You're right," I reply, "I'm not. I'm thirty-six."

And as they gawk downward at my five foot frame, at the glassy hairlessness of my chin and upper lip, at the paunches of marshmallow kid-fat that fill out my cheeks, I consider launching into my pre-packaged, rehearsed diatribe I've rewritten a hundred times. Would you ask a fat man how much he weighed? Would you ask a bald woman how the chemo was going? Would you flip off a blind man just for a laugh?

Instead, I'll say nothing. I'll walk away silently and go home to drink beer and to rewrite my speech, promising myself that I'll deliver it the next time.

Pediliactic displaysial disease. PDD for short. It's a genetic disorder that retards natural development. At about fourteen, your body stops growing. No facial hair, no pubic hair, and a Vienna sausage for a penis. Testicles like dried apricots.

All the inconveniences of being a teenager frozen in an un-aging body. The terrible service of a waiter who knows he's getting shafted on the tip. The suspicious stares of shopkeepers just waiting for you to stuff a pack of bubble gum into your pants pocket so they can grab you by the wrist and call your parents.

And, of course, the distrustful eyes that scan the birth date on your ID card when you try to buy alcohol or cigarettes, examining, perplexed, unbelieving.

I take the beer from the store and place it on the passenger seat of my car. I climb into the driver's seat, slamming the door behind me, and breathe a deep sigh. I try, as I always do, to dwell on the positive aspects of my affliction. I think of the thousands of products promising to make their users look younger—stretching

wrinkles flat, blurring stretch marks clean, reviving deceased hair follicles.

I remember the same thing that half-bald turkey-necked men and swollen sandbag-tit women have told me for years:

“When you’re older, you’ll be grateful.”

And then I remember that I’m thirty-six and that I’m still not.

My eyes snap open and my thoughts explode into self-consciousness by the sound of someone lightly tapping on my window and the curious head-slanted stare of a teenage boy outside my car.

He shouts something that sounds like “bro” and I roll down my window to see what he wants.

“Bro, what’s up bro, can you do us a favor? My name’s Brandon, can you do us a favor bro? Can you score us some beer?”

The old gas station stake out. My friends and I used to pull it all the time in high school. You wait in the parking lot for someone in their twenties to pull up, someone young enough to remember what it was like to be underage and desperate, and then you ask them to buy you beer.

Most of the time, they say yes. The peril of looking un-cool is just too great.

What they don’t know is that I’m not in my twenties. What else they don’t know is that I still don’t want to look un-cool.

“I was just in there, I’ll look like an idiot!” I reply. “Plus there’s a huge line. What’s in it for me?”

“I’ve never seen you around before, bro. You must go to North, huh?”

“Yeah...yeah I’m at North High. You guys are from Greenwood, I take it?”

“Yup...well shit, you don’t look like you’re doing anything tonight. If you score us some beer, you can come party with us.”

I take a long sigh and look behind Brandon, his friends sitting in their car beside me, eyes wide, heads shaking, watching eagerly. The girl in the front passenger seat puffs incessantly on a cigarette, nervously glancing from side to side as if she’s never smoked before and she doesn’t want anyone watching, anyone accusing her of not inhaling or ashing it wrong. There’s something so familiar about her, about the black headband holding back her cookie-dough light brown hair, about the chubby fullness of her cheeks, about that nervous tic smile that vacillates from confidence to vulnerability. I imagine that she’s on the soccer team and that her favorite animal is the giraffe, and that in the mornings she eats toast with nothing but maple syrup and tries to do the Jumble, but never finishes. Something about that jean jacket and the steady puff puff puff of the cigarette, so familiar...

“I’ll do it,” I declare, and as I leave my car and trek back to the

store, I can make out a whisper that says, "...one hell of a fake..."

*

It's midnight and I'm on my seventh beer. We're sitting high up on a hill overlooking the bay, the boys tossing a Frisbee, trading war stories about post-game party debauchery and sexual conquests, the girls whispering who's cute, who's cuter, and who's an asshole. I've sat more or less alone for the whole night, hugging my beer like a security blanket and laughing occasionally at the boys' antics to feign participation.

Brandon, now shirtless and covered in drunken sweat, drops the Frisbee at my side and plops down next to me on the sand, his greasy arm wrapping around my neck.

"So, bro, you've got to tell us where you got that fake ID."

"I, uh, a friend made it for me."

"Fuckin' sweet," Brandon replies, popping open a beer and engulfing half of it in one huge gulp. "You got to get us some, bro...hey, change the music from that sad bastard shit!"

Another of the boys fiddles with the radio in Brandon's beat up hatchback parked beside us and finds a different station.

"What kind of music do you like, bro? None of that indie emo bullshit they play nowadays right?"

Indie...emo...these words are completely foreign to me. I haven't bought an album since Nirvana's Nevermind.

"I listen to mostly 80's, I guess."

"Tight. I always thought that shit was kind of gay, but that's cool. I can't stand that emo shit, you know? Guys wearing make-up and all black and crying and shit? So gay."

Still clueless, I just nod. The other boy, still fiddling with the radio, stumbles across a classic rock station playing Twisted Sister's "We're Not Gonna Take It." As he continues to scroll for something better, the seven beers brewing in my belly give me the courage to speak out.

"Change it back...hey! Change it back!"

The group goes silent. The boys stop throwing their Frisbee, the girls stop gossiping. All eyes on me.

"I like that song."

The boy shrugs understandingly, turning the knob back to my station. As the stereo blasts with the head-banging rock of a generation since sterilized, their jean jackets replaced with monochromatic suits and stain resistant pants, I remember the first time I heard this song. Maybe not the first time I heard it, but the first time I heard it, in that way that the brain connects sound and smell with memory.

We were fourteen, and we'd been sitting outside the gas station for over an hour chain-smoking a pack of menthol cigarettes that Mikey had stolen from his older brother. The three of us had ridden our bikes there: me, Mikey, and Rebecca, my girlfriend at the time. The night had brought nothing but forty-year-old businessmen in golf shirts and soccer moms tugging whining kids behind them. In other words, no one who would be irresponsible enough to buy a case of beer for three high school freshmen on six speed bicycles.

Just then, an older black man swung his armored tank of a Cadillac into the parking lot. We'd grown impatient. He'd do.

After some quick negotiation, Mikey slapped a wad of wrinkled cash into the man's palm. A few minutes later, the man walked out of the store carrying only a bottle of malt liquor wrapped in a paper sack. Before we could eke out a protest, he got into his car, cranked the engine, and drove away, never once looking in our direction.

After several moments of open-mouthed silence, Mikey spoke up. "Fuck it. I've still got that half-bottle of Jack I stole from my dad. If we drink it quick enough we might get buzzed."

One hour and seven shots later and I was stumbling high up on a hill overlooking the bay and Mikey's boom box roared with the sound of Twisted Sister.

"I can't fucking wait until I'm twenty fucking one!" Mikey screamed just as he took a huge swig of whiskey straight from the bottle, bringing his head down into a steady head-bang to the beat of the song, strumming the neck of the bottle as if it were a guitar.

I tried to say something about how I hate this glam rock bullshit, guys wearing make-up and hairspray, but the music drowned me out.

And Rebecca, the jet black headband holding down her cookie-dough light brown hair, the sleeves of her jean jacket rolled up to her elbows, she flashed me a nervous tic of a smile before kissing me on the cheek.

Rebecca, my first girlfriend, she'd call me every morning before school, reading out scrambled letters to me in-between bites of syrupy toast: "A-G-N-S-T-A-O-L-I . . . do you think it ends in S?"

Back in the present, the boys are going nuts. They're standing on the roof of the beat up hatchback, fists pumping in the air to the beat of the song, feet stomping in drunken defiance to an invisible authority.

The girl, she takes a long nervous drag off her cigarette and leans in close to me, her head resting on my shoulder, whispering, "vintage, I love it."

Two weeks have passed and the girl and I have been on three dates. We rode the go-carts together, purposely smashing them into the walls just to aggravate the workers who had to pull us free and set us back on the track. We played goofy golf together and conspired to cheat on the final hole so that we'd win a free game. And we saw a movie together, our sweaty fingers interlocked for two hours, her short fingernails lightly scratching the skin of my hairless arm.

She's eighteen, a senior, so it's OK.

She calls me on the phone and tells me her parents are gone for the night. That they won't be back until very, very late.

And now I'm lying on her bed next to her, both of us stark naked, my hand eagerly squeezing her water balloon left breast, my tongue writhing in-between her lollipop lips.

She's eighteen, but it's not OK. Before I can do this, I have to tell her the truth.

Her stubby fingernails sliding up the inside of my hairless leg, I tell her that I lied to her. That I'm not as old as I said I was.

And she says, "I knew it, I knew it. I knew from that first night, there's no way you're eighteen."

She looks at me with her lips parted, the way that a woman looks at a man, and she says, "don't worry, baby. I lied about mine too. I'm only fourteen."

About: Face

Beyond the window's spider web cracks
I can see your profile,
the features of your face:

Hair
Eyes
 Nose
Mouth

My heart pounding
like watermelons dropped on timpani.

You slowly approach,
The imperfect glass distorting your face:
eYe

 HaiR
 Nose
 Eye
mOUTH

You're calling my names,
Those little four letter words that burrow into my heart
And metamorphose into moods,

Waiting to feel the moist skin of your hand on my face
I open the door,
You touch me and I fall.
And I will belong to you until
you tell me otherwise

The Interview

With unsteady hands we sat in the classroom, our sharpened pencils curving upwards and around and back again. Little tongues peeked between pursed lips to betray the collectively felt strain. The room smelled of crushed lead and the blue-colored spray our teacher used to clean the whiteboard, and all was silent save for the slow etching of pencil on widely-lined paper, a sound often followed by the rubbing noise of erasing. In a flurry of undoing, one student ripped his sheet of paper down the middle and beckoned the teacher to his side with a timid hand-raise. She replaced the ruined sheet with one upon which he might begin anew, and he sighed with relief. Indeed, we felt as if our very identities were at stake with each subsequent stroke, for had our teacher not told us that a person who cannot form a proper signature will never be taken seriously by society?

Of course we could not yet understand the full implications of our learning to write our names in the elusive alien-script known as cursive. In our world of plain printing, of capital F's that looked like F's and not like J's, this writing with all of its loops and hooks was reserved to the adult realm that we did not yet wish to pass into. Even so, in my third grade mind, every task I was presented with had to be attacked with the utmost concentration for maximum effectiveness. I was determined to emerge as the most skilled student in order to maintain the reputation, the term known as smart, that I desired for myself. I would attempt to adhere to this reputation of sorts for many years to come.

After completing my name, I looked around at the other students. Mrs. Fulsom, pacing around the classroom to spy the progress unfolding atop each individual's desk space, was just passing my best friend, Diana, endowing her work thus far with an approving nod. Mrs. Fulsom then continued forward, passing my boyfriend, Joe, so engrossed in his work that he did not even stir at her presence. She passed a few other students before making her way to my desk where I greeted her with a smile of pride. I moved my hands away so she could see my careful scripting more fully.

My eyes swelled with concern when she did not return my grin. Her brow furrowed, and she bent down to whisper, "Next time, remember that your signature has to be your real name, okay?"

My heart plummeted and my face reddened. How could I fail to accomplish this simple task? “But this is my real name!” I half whispered, half cried.

The teacher shook her head. “‘Tina Colvin’ is not your real name,” she explained. “‘Christina Colvin’ is your real name.” Her look was unwavering and revealed no opportunity for further argument. Even though I knew myself as Tina, my cursive, my signature, had to display something different. I tilted my head down to escape her eyes.

“Okay,” I said, and the teacher proceeded to another student. After the day concluded and I rode the school bus home, my mom met me in the front driveway, turning as always to wave goodbye to the driver. She put her arms around me and led me inside the house to a snack of sliced apples, asking me how my day went and if I learned anything interesting.

I sat and took a bite of apple before answering. “Mrs. Fulsom said that Tina Colvin isn’t my real name,” I said.

My mom leaned forward. “What do you mean, not your real name?” she asked.

“When I write in cursive and make my signature, I have to write Christina, not Tina, because Christina is real and Tina isn’t,” I explained.

“Oh, I see,” mom said. “I’m sure Mrs. Fulsom doesn’t mean that Tina is any less your name than Christina, but just that you will have to write the longer name sometimes so that people that don’t know you will be able to figure out who you are.”

“Yeah, I know, but I felt bad,” I said. I took another bite of apple. “When is dad coming home?”

“He has to work a little late this evening, but he will be home before your bedtime,” she answered.

“Oh, good,” I said.

The next day at school, I was determined to redeem myself for not writing my full name the previous day. The second and final bell rang, and I watched with anticipation as Mrs. Fulsom walked to the front and silenced all chatter. “Class,” she began, “I have something very special planned for today that I think you all will enjoy.” We exchanged glances with our desk neighbors and bobbed our heads. “We will be conducting class interviews. I am going to assign everyone a partner. You will then meet with your partner and interview each other. Then, we will get on the computer, type the interviews into paragraphs, and bind the printed copies for everyone to take home. We will learn things about each other that we would never have known otherwise!”

Mrs. Fulsom smiled as the room erupted with our voices, everyone considering their respective partners. I hoped that I would get

to interview my boyfriend Joe, for aside from the times we shared our macaroni and cheese at lunch or when we played Super Mario Kart at his house after school, I did not spend much time with him. Or, perhaps I would be assigned Diana, who loved The Lion King almost as much as I did and owned nearly as many pets. We continued talking and giggling until Mrs. Fulsom silenced us again.

"All right, everyone settle down so I can read the list of partners," she said. The room quieted as we all leaned forward in our seats. She read, "Lisa and Jessica, Diana and Nathan, Keith and Shane, Susan and Tina..."

She continued to read off the names but I stopped listening. I turned around to look at Susan, my partner, sitting in the backmost row of desks. She was looking down, drawing something. Her hair was pulled back in a lumpy ponytail, her face was aflame with freckles, and she wore an oversized, gray sweater even though it was hot outside. Other than what she looked like from where I sat, I knew nothing about her.

"Okay, class," I heard Mrs. Fulsom say. "Now, please calmly meet with your assigned partners away from other groups where you can be comfortable."

I started to raise my hand, then, to ask the teacher to stop the whole procession, to tell her that I would never be comfortable interviewing this Susan who sat in the back of the classroom and to whom I had never before spoken. The potential for embarrassment softened my resolve, though, and I kept quiet. I turned around again as Susan walked up to me, a piece of paper in one hand.

"Hi, Tina," she said.

"Hi, Susan," I said. She took a seat in the desk opposite mine. We sat in silence for a few minutes before I said, "Sorry."

"Why are you sorry?" she asked.

"I don't know. I just didn't expect that you would be my partner, I guess."

"Who did you expect?" she asked.

"Diana or Joe, probably," I answered.

"Oh," she said.

She looked sad, then, so I asked, "Should I go first?"

"Yeah," Susan replied.

"Okay," I began, taking out my pencil. "What do you do for fun?"

"Um, I guess I like riding my bike," she said. I wrote, Susan likes to ride her bike. "I also like to spend time with my mom," she continued suddenly. "My dad left us when I was four years old."

"You mean he went on vacation?" I suggested.

"I guess it is like vacation," she said.

"Oh, okay," I said. I wrote, Susan likes to spend time with her mom.

“What about movies?” I asked. “Do you like The Lion King?”
“I don’t know, maybe. Mom works all day and when she comes home she is really tired and goes right to bed. I just watch cartoons on TV, mostly,” she said.

“Oh, well, who is your favorite character?” I asked.

“Bugs Bunny,” Susan replied. I wrote, Susan likes watching Bugs Bunny.

“Hmm, what else?” I thought out loud. “What about pets? Do you have any?”

“No,” said Susan. “I asked mom for a puppy once, but she said we couldn’t afford it. I will tell you one thing, though: I want to be a pet keeper when I grow up.”

“Oh, that is good,” I said. I wrote, Susan wants to be a pet keeper when she grows up.

I put down my pencil, sat up straighter in my seat, and folded my hands in my lap. “Okay, Susan,” I said. “Your turn.”

A week later, Mrs. Fulsom passed out loosely-bound copies of the typed paragraphs, each one written by a different student. Since then, Susan and I had not spoken; I returned to my friends and she to the rear of the classroom. Even though I had interviewed her, she still felt too different to become one of my friends. When my copy of the class interviews landed on my desk, however, I quickly thumbed through the pages until I found the one she had written about me. I touched the printed words as if reading them with my fingertips. Susan wrote:

“What I learned from Tina was well, for one thing she has alot of pets, and they have very wered names. Her favorite movie is The Lion King and she was born in Washington. Her favorite subject is math and she is very pritty, and very smart.”

On Earth, as it is in Heaven

Your weight on my shoulders:
one arm draped loosely, two fingertips resting idle
on my sunburnt skin
is the only prayer I'll ever need.

The universe is saturated;
timid feet on foreign soil, syrupy eyes splintering crowded rooms,
nailtracks along a lover's quivering shoulders –
we are drowning in supplications,
each breath soaked in someone else's divine.

(Leave practiced prayer for a bloodless God;
your knuckles are the only rosary I need)

You wear my affection like it's a size too large,
slung sloppy across your torso, buttons half-done.
This is not the kind of love you wear to church,
each cuff-link secure, tie neat as a noose,
suspender straps firm across your chest like steel;

rather, it's to be worn like a godless Sunday,
shoeless and sleepy on the front porch,
sheets still tangled and your glass of orange juice
half empty in the kitchen sink.

Running from the Flood

In my mind, we would love Seattle.

It rains there, so I hear,
and the sky's of the grain that
leans hard into your bones, transmitting secrets,
slipping reminders in a thick monochrome.

We'd be unacclimated to the cold and,
fool-hardy as we are, would crumple like rice paper,
reinventing the logistics of sleeves in one heavy coat.

And when the rain would come
(as it always does)
you'd rest your hand on my shoulder,
remind me that Washington has no need for levvies

and that these streets, as glistening as they be,
will not be blowing me kisses from the Mississippi bottom —

and I would heave a sigh of relief,
and fear no puddle,
while inside my heart would claw for Red Laveau
and the taste of a stranger's cigarette, borrowed half-drunk
in the daze of a Cajun night, dangling from fingers
that have never felt cold.

Gaussian Blur

Verse me in the nobility of soft focus.

I am black and white, monochrome film, too hard brushstrokes on
ill-stretched canvas and you are twilight words
and Renoir precision.

There's something to be said about the bold-face I live in.
Two years spent rambling my way from city to city, bed to bed,
feverishly looking for yours;

how I found you,
half-drunk and dazed on the corner of St. Anne,
my strong lines a contrast to your felt shadow

and how Decatur brought me absolution
in four pale hands, two wet foreheads, and one thin voice,
boots dusted with powdered sugar.

Five-hundred, forty-seven days prior

I knew all about resurrection at tender ages.
The strangers and revolutionaries, our Vodka and
Nicotine feet, folding awe-struck gazes in to
wrinkled black hair —

we were warriors then, late night gods,
making passes at tourists and Apostles,
reeling heavy on a red-cup drunk.

It was simple, then —
our anonymous fingers and four am lipprints
leaving miles of phantom signature on the dawn;

under that catastrophe of stars
we could have been anyone.

Yielding

You speak like rain,
never haphazard, mini myriads of half-tones and pitches
underscoring precise molecular grace.

Your words, to me, are like water;
the universal solvent,
each syllabul holding all the grace of the perfect hydrogen bond,

and I melt like clotted sugar,
or salt spilled on the counter, my crystalline variances known
only to the trained eye –
cuboidal or reckless,
well-prepared or caught off guard.

It seems it's always salt with you;
never bestowed the luxury of calculated structure,
the safe-space of right angles,
the refuge of an impervious pattern;

as erratic as an ocean
gripping tight to that silica shore,
I am defenseless within you.

A Seven-Year-Old Agnostic Accosts Me

I don't remember where I was when I first heard about Jesus. As I grew up, he was just always there. My father, a Baptist pastor, would pray to him over meals and I would pray to him before I went to sleep for things like Dad a new job and for Mom's new baby to be a girl and things like that, but God always seemed far away, like a relative in Oregon I had never met but whom I sent a Christmas card to every November and who sent me a check on my birthday with his signature and a smiley face.

I knew Jesus existed, but his existence wasn't something I thought about or even meditated on; it was just acknowledged and assumed, like the ancient yellow dusty china in the matching yellow china cabinet that my grandmother spent \$300.00 in the 1980's to ship south from West Virginia to us after my great-grandmother died. My mother never liked the china.

As a child, I thought of Jesus abstractly, placing him in a spiritual realm I was not inventive enough to imagine but which included heaven and the soul and feelings and other things I couldn't see. When I was four or five, I thought there was an empty space inside the body of each person that held his or her soul like an invisible organ stuck underneath the rib cage or a balloon of emptiness over the belly button or an opening near the large intestine. When my teacher went over anatomy in third grade, I was disappointed to learn that there were no empty spaces inside my body. I wondered how Jesus could save my soul, or what it meant for him to do so, if I did not have one.

Sometimes, now, when I read Foucault or Nietzsche or feel heavy with loneliness or drive my car home from an exhausting day of work and pray and feel nothing, I see an agnostic seven-year-old with cloudy blue eyes. Wisps of blonde hair escape her ponytail and cloud her face like broken spiderwebs.

She walks down the aisle between the pews with her father and says a prayer she doesn't mean to a Savior she doesn't know. She is merely trying to please her parents, and she knows this. She is taken in a back room behind where the choir sings, a room with faded, plush red chairs that sit so high that her toes do not touch the ground. "So why do we need Jesus?" a man in a suit asks her to make sure she understands what she is doing. Her answer is

logical, nonchalant: “So we can get to heaven when we die.” The man nods slightly, almost confused, and he may want to smile but chooses not to. My father signs her name on a small card and hands it to the man so she will be prayed for and added to a list for record purposes and become a number on another piece of paper to be sent to the Southern Baptist Convention. She is considered saved at this point, though she does not believe. At the time, Christianity was logical; she lived with her parents, and she wanted them to like her. I usually ignore the seven-year-old when I catch a glimpse of a blonde ponytail while turning a corner or find hearts and smiley faces traced in the dirt outside my front door or see her sitting Indian-legged in the back seat of my car. But this time, as I remember the sanctuary and the prayer and the questions, I am startled to look back at a time when I secretly rebelled against Jesus, and I want to understand why I faked a conversion when I was seven, why I did not feel guilty then of faking it, if there were steps then that might have led up to my Christianity now. I am looking to fill gaps, but I do not know if I will find answers.

I greet her and she looks up at me shyly, her tangled ponytail trailing down her back. “Hello.” I think she is cute, but I do not tell her this. I think that she does not like my short brown hair tied in pigtails, that she resents my faith; she resents the fact that she will grow up to need Jesus, that she will grow up to be a twenty-one-year-old who sits on a screen porch at one in the morning and talks to God in the quiet but has to stop praying because there are no more words to convey what she wants to say to him.

In my parents’ house, I reach for a glass in the cupboard and catch a reflection of blue eyes in the side. I take a sip of water before she hands me a glass from the sink and I place it face down in the dishwasher, the light from the window catching at the bottom of the glass, refracting on her face, casting a ring of light around her eye. She does not blink. The yellow china cabinet looms over the dining room, the china rimmed with gray flowers.

“Jesus was always here. But he was never used,” I say.

“I never really needed him.”

“I see.”

“You can just say you believe in him, too, to please everyone. You don’t really have to do anything about it.” She likes to pretend my faith is not real, that I am still seven, still possessing a vague consciousness that there is a being out there but not caring enough to find out what it is. “I just told Mom and Dad I believed because they wanted me to. They want me to believe.”

“I know. I know. I think they knew you didn’t believe, though.” She tucks a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “They knew I did. They thought so.”

“No, remember when you would misbehave and chuck wooden blocks at your brother, and Mom would say, ‘She shouldn’t have been baptized if she can’t act like a Christian.’”

“And Dad would always tell her to leave me alone.”

“Right.”

“But Mom almost cried. Do you remember that? When I went up front in the church, she sat in the pew and cried she was so happy about it.”

“I remember.”

“And Dad’s eyes watered. I saw them. I don’t know if you remember, but I saw them.” She hands me another glass, but hesitates and refracts circles of light on the linoleum.

“I remember.”

“I never saw Mom cry before that. Not even at Grandma’s funeral. But maybe she did then, I don’t remember. We sat right in front of the coffin. Everyone was so busy they never told me. I saw her resting there in the coffin and I thought she was sleeping; I didn’t know she was dead.” I remember the graveside service, the blue canopy, the open casket, the fake turf under the rows of folding chairs.

“Do you ever doubt?” I ask her.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you ever think that it might be true, that God might love you?”

She glances away from me. “Who is God?”

I know she is trying to thwart me. “Do you ever think about this?”

“Not really.”

And it is a mystery to me how I came to know Christ, how people I know have come to him. I am in awe sometimes that I did, not really knowing how it happened. I probe how one begins to wonder, either skeptically or innocently, about God, and how that curiosity takes them to a man who seemed to die a failure but who, some say, has set in course the last 2,000 years. And it is as if faith and emotion and relationship and knowing, an ache of knowing, come together, and words seem insufficient to explain all that it is to me.

I begin to tell her my journey. She shrugs, but I think she is a little curious. She stares at me inquisitively, weaving pieces of pine straw together as we sit outside a library in Alabama. The church where she said the prayer has been torn down and the land turned into a library with floor-to-ceiling glass walls that reflect the sky. I hope that by coming here things will make more sense to her.

“It wasn’t that I was guilty really. I was, a little. I wasn’t really afraid of what would happen if I filled my need for God with other things, but I should’ve been.”

“I’m not afraid of anything.” She weaves piece after piece of straw

together to form an awkwardly shaped heart. She does not give this to me.

“It was that I almost had a need for something that wasn’t in me. I needed to know God. But even then it wasn’t even something that I chose or did or anything, but that God chose me and let me see him. I wanted to see him, and he helped me see. He helps me see.” As I grew up, I figured that because I said I was a Christian and Christians were supposed to read the Bible, I would read all sixty-six books. I had heard the stories before, but as I read the chronicles of the kings of Judah and the miracles of Jesus and the Psalms, I began to see characteristics of God, glimpses of things, like truths, like waking up from a dream I don’t remember at first but which slowly comes to me as I connect the images of my sleep with the reality of the world around me. Christ had suffered. God had died. All of the sudden this became very relevant to me. There was a need, an emptiness left by my father, consumed by his new business, and I began to search for something beyond myself. And it mattered to me that I needed God, that there was a desire for this, deep like a hunger so intense it awakened me during the night. And I saw myself and it was almost as if I were naked, ashamed. I began to see the nature of God compared to my own broken humanity, that God is passion and mystery and wrath and strength all at once, that he was holy and complete, and I was not in myself. I saw qualities of God, or perhaps he was making me see, and I was forced to question everything that I had ever known as real; some things became more real, more definite, while others faded away, or at least I wanted them to. All I knew was that something was breaking within me, or maybe it had been broken for a long time and I had never realized it. There was an ache I had never sensed before, the presence of a voice like a quiet whisper that was spoken five minutes ago and I only now heard but maybe it was not really like that at all. I for the first time knew God was with me. I had been forgiven, and I felt free and protected. I know this now as grace.

And God was no longer the distant relative in Oregon with the signature and the smiley face whose funeral I would go to, staring at his pasty face nonchalantly. But he was now like a boy who has lived next door to a girl her whole life and one day she is nineteen and meets him and three years later they are married but she never knew he lived there, but she wished she always had. And I want to explain all this to the seven-year-old. And when she asks me to describe God, I want to say “kindness” or “Safe. I feel very, very safe” or nothing at all because there are no words. It is as if he is beyond words, beyond the religious rhetoric and reason that man has constructed to explain the normal and the anomalies. Or perhaps he is the Word himself.

I do not think this is making a lot of sense to her. I change the subject. “What was your favorite story?” I ask. “In the Bible.” She picks up the jagged end of a stick, drawing stars on the orange Alabama clay. The stick gets caught on several rocks so that the stars are awkward, geometrically confused.

“Jonah,” she says.

“I like that one.”

“He gets eaten by a fish.”

“Yeah. Yeah he does.”

“Because he didn’t do what God said.”

“He wasn’t necessarily eaten. He was vomited back up.”

“Yeah. I like that part, too.” She moves a stone with her toe, kicking it down the hill until it disappears. And then she follows it and I am alone.

In the midst of the ARH through ENC aisle in the campus bookstore, I browse the textbooks, listening to sexual lyrics I don’t understand coming over the speakers. I see a fellow student I know pass by the magazine racks but don’t say anything to her because I have forgotten her name. I finally select a book I’m not going to buy and sit in a leather chair next to the bestsellers list. A couple sits in the chair across from me, the man’s leg swung over the armrest, the girl behind the chair with her arms around his shoulders and her head sideways, scanning the pages with him, breathing into his ear. I shift uncomfortably as I read, alone, and suddenly Amy Tan is not exciting anymore.

Loneliness comes again, like the ache of a once-fractured arm in a fog, like when you know your foot is asleep but you don’t want to move it because you are afraid of the pricking that follows. It sometimes comes like the albino squirrel that lives in my neighborhood, a glimpse of ghost leaping over branches, a haunting quietness, and then fades away. And I feel this, and I am angry at God. I think I see a blonde-haired figure scurrying between the aisles, but I dismiss it and return to my book. She comes, however, her head lowered and facing the ground, untied shoelaces dark at the ends. I am glad to see her. “You should tie your shoes,” I say. “You’ll trip.”

“I will. I will.”

“I know.”

“Do you like boys?” she asks me as we walk outside the store. I don’t want to have this conversation.

“Some of them.”

“But do you ever feel alone, then?”

“Sometimes.”

“Oh. I get lonely sometimes, too. I think.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. You should find someone. If you’re lonely. That’s what

Dad says.”

“I’m not afraid of it. Of loneliness.”

We sit on a stone bench, and she trembles as I smooth her hair, soft and fine like running my hand through sand and letting it pour down between my fingers. I know that no matter how tight I tie her hair in a ponytail, it will become tangled again, wisps of hair covering her eyes.

But then the doubts come. I knew they would.

“Why do you need it? Jesus, I mean. You need it so much,” she states. I don’t say anything, staring at her scarred knees, remembering falling on a gravel driveway and being numb with shock as the blood ran thick down my leg like grape jelly. “Is it helping you?” she questions. “How do you know it’s really the truth, the only truth? How can you believe in a God who lets bad things happen? He sends people to hell, you know; I heard about that.”

These questions seem beyond her mental capacity, and I know that she is repeating them from another source to make herself sound important, that she does not really want answers. I know that even if I were able to condense 2,000 years of theology into a discourse comprehensible to a seven-year-old, even then she would not believe.

“God is beyond reason,” is all that comes out of my mouth.

“So you are lonely,” she asks

“Sometimes.”

“Why do you follow a God that causes you to feel that? If God really loved you, he would save you from being lonely. If he really loved you.”

“He does.”

“But—”

“Love me, I mean.”

“Why won’t he stop it?”

And I know that none of the other questions really matter, that she is asking me why the God that she does not believe in allows her to feel the same darkness. And why he has not removed it. She only seems to believe in God when she needs someone to blame. “Because there is no other way that I will learn what he wants me to learn. He wants to see—he wants me to see—if I will trust him. He will eventually rescue me from it, I believe that, and it is enough.”

“Look at the clouds,” she points up. “They look dark like tombs.” Her shoelaces flap against her ankles as she walks away.

The next afternoon, I look outside my neighborhood at the stately Victorian homes that I have admired for months, seeing a woman with a ponytail emerge from one of them, and all of the sudden it is surprising to me that people actually live in them. And it is as if I have known about God, have seen a smattering of his character-

istics and what he was supposed to have done, but then I see that he actually did those things, and that they are relevant to my life. I would not know what to do without God; having had him, I do not know how others live without him. And yet sometimes it seems silly to pray to a being who responds inaudibly in sunsets and calmness and the smile of a child and peace and a fellow student opening a door for me at school and a verse in Psalms that I read in the morning and carry with me all day. And I want to tell all of this to her in a way she will understand it, but her arms are crossed as she comes to me again, and she stares at me, disappointed, when I talk about my faith, as if I have betrayed her. I see her trying to probe my thoughts, her blue eyes searching my face.

“You think I’m a sinner.” She waits. “Did you have to need to be saved because I was such a sinner, was that it?”

“You don’t understand.” I wait for her to pout or run away from me or remain silent to my inquires, but she stares in the distance curiously.

“I’m not a sinner. You would’ve been just fine on your own. You would’ve been fine.” She does not blink, glaring into my face but not staring at my eyes.

“You don’t know what has happened to me so that I came to believe.”

“I don’t care, not really.” Her ponytail bounces as she walks away. But I think she is a little curious.

We meet again in the cemetery shaped like a neat circle that lean joggers run around, a circle they may one day rest in, the grave-stones veiled with flowers. We see our grandmother’s gravestone, the weathered marble rough like sandpaper, the letters fading. The day she died in the hospital, they found in her bedroom a Bible with a list of names that she prayed for scrawled on the two blank pages in the front of the book. The seven-year-old’s name is there. I do not tell her this, that someone was praying for her. “I liked her. She gave me a book,” the seven-year-old remembers.

“That’s how I understood Jesus for the first time, with that Bible.”

She sighs, frustrated. “So how did you get saved? How did this happen?”

I am not always prepared to talk about it. “The Bible. Jesus. God. I don’t know.”

“When did you pray again? For real.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Did you pray the same one I did?” she looks up. “What story saved you?” She fingers the words on the tombstones, “Beloved wife, mother, grandmother.”

“Nehemiah.”

“The one about a wall? You could at least have gotten saved

through a good story. A Jesus one. A dramatic one, like Paul on the road to Damascus or Peter or the resurrection or Revelation or something. I know them all. Not a story of a wall. Jesus isn't even in there."

I know she is disappointed with me again. "It's a very good story."

In the book, Nehemiah returns to the ruins of Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls after the Israelites have been in captivity in a foreign land. As I read, I saw myself as the crumbling walls, an identity instigating fear and insecurity as I saw the reality of who I was without God and could not find hope in myself. The fractured city became at first a macrocosm of my self being restored. It was while reading Nehemiah that I first began to wonder about God.

My grandmother sometimes tells the story of me as a three-year-old weeping outside a church in New York, my face red and contorted and pressed against the dirty, cold stained glass of the sanctuary in which my father was preaching; I wanted to see him, tears streaming down my face, but they wouldn't let me in. I do not remember this. When I was seven, my father's congregation had dwindled so much that he was looking for another job. I remember being scared that he would no longer provide for me, that we would run out of food, though I never told my mother this. I unconsciously decided that if my father could not provide for me, then God was not able to either.

"Dad got a new job," the blonde-haired girl informs me.

"He works long hours, doesn't he?"

"He is never home a lot."

"He's busy."

"But I know he loves me." I want to heal her desire to be loved, her sense of abandonment. "He was always asking me if I wanted to know Jesus yet. And then I pulled on his elbow in the church and said, 'I want to. I want to go down the aisle,' and so he walked down with me."

She feels this expectation, almost this threat of not conforming, of not accepting the underlying religious structure of her house, and so she claims to follow Jesus as one would claim to like sushi just because her friends rave about it, but it honestly makes her feel full and uncomfortable and she hates cucumbers.

She feels guilt about her tendency to do wrong that is within herself and tries to circumvent or transfer blame, desiring absolution but also desiring, perhaps deeper within herself, to be loved.

"You were sometimes afraid. Of Dad," I say. She does not look at me, sighs, frustrated. "Why didn't you mean the words you prayed?"

"I don't know. I just didn't. I can't force myself. It's not a big deal."

"God is like a father."

She bites her lip. "I know. I know that." And then I am struck by what she has said before, And Dad is never home.

"I just want to have always believed. I want you to believe," I want to say.

She draws circles in the dirt with a stick as I stare at the uneven part in her hair. I want, though, to see her eyes, to look straight into her eyes and shake her shoulders and tell her that what I have seen is real, but she would look only frightened, not understanding this.

"I like the prodigal son," she blurts out.

I feign ignorance. "What's a prodigal?"

"I like him." She adopts the didactic tone of a kindergarten teacher at story time. "He takes his inheritance, his share of money from his father and leaves his father's house forever, spending it all on everything he has ever wanted. He thinks he is going to buy everything he has ever wanted. But he loses all his money and he gets a job feeding pigs and he is so sad, so he wants to come home. But he is so shy and he is so dirty he smells and he has lost everything. He is on his way home and he is so embarrassed to see his father it has been such a long time." She takes a breath. "And he has all these excuses. All these excuses for why his father won't accept him. He thinks his father doesn't love him anymore."

"Why do you like the story?" I ask.

She does not look at me. "But his father just holds him and laughs and cries he is so happy. He is so happy, but then he is a little shy, but then he is not shy anymore."

And suddenly I remember how the religious rhetoric that I had seen as wooden, static, condemning—the nomenclature sin, redemption, salvation, sanctification, Savior—became beautiful to me since I had seen God. They are alive words, words that have changed me, words she can only see on the surface, staring through the tinted car window at the street preacher in contempt as he shouts them. Sometimes I feel that I cheapen Christianity every time I open my mouth, that I cannot find the words to explain the death of God as Jesus on a cross and how he rose again and what that means to me. And sometimes I'm just scared. Most of what Jesus said is offensive to a lot of people. I want to talk to someone about God, someone who is not seven years old. I imagine being accosted by an angry atheist; I don't know any angry atheists, but the person in my mind who questions my religion does not believe in God but he wants to and is angry that he cannot do so.

"How do you know there is a God?" he asks.

I don't know what to say; I do not feel like debating. "God has to help you see. He will help you see." And then I do not say anything for a long time. The man, perhaps swayed by my speculative silence, suddenly becomes agnostic, believing something exists but

he doesn't know what it is. He shrinks to three-and-a-half feet tall and morphs into a seven-year-old with wandering eyes and a shy skip. She looks at me suspiciously, frightened. I say nothing. She accosts me again, wanting to see if I am still a Christian.

"Well, what do you believe?" she says.

I am ready this time; other times, I have not been so sure. "That there is one God and that every person is born with an empty space within them that only he can fill."

She has heard this before. "And?"

"That humans are also born with a tendency to put everything in that space that is not God. Like themselves or each other, or just anything, addictions. We call this sin. What is put in place of God destroys and corrupts the self, it breaks God's law and makes it so that we cannot get to God."

I wonder if she may be beginning to actually understand this. I know that she is not ready, but I want to see some surrender, some curiosity. She shrugs as I continue.

"So we all have a need for God to be our father, our rescuer, to save us from giving ourselves to things that are not him. To forgive our sin. And we are all seeking to fill this void inside of us, even if we don't all realize it."

She crosses her arms. "There are many ways to get to him. Many religions."

"So we are all trying, in our own thwarted humanity, to get to him whether we know it or not, but he can only be reached through Jesus Christ. And that is the message of the Bible." She squints. "Only God can remove the sin in my life, fill this emptiness. I was made to give myself to only him. My self doesn't fit in anything else." My voice softens to a whisper. "You don't fit in anything else."

"So what do I have to do?" I know she is just playing with me, letting me explain so she can find a point of contention. She is resigned, not listening to me now, but rubbing the rough edge of a stick into the soft mud at her feet. Her buckled Sunday shoes are caked with dirt.

"You have to turn from everything you know and come to him. And God says he will rescue you from that false fulfillment and let you live a new life. You have to have believe Jesus rose from the dead and ask him to forgive you. And you will be rescued."

I pause. She knows all of this; I know she does. But there is no way she understands it now; if she were to pray, they would be empty words again. And I suddenly remember that she is only seven.

"What do I say?" she asks blankly.

"Jesus, I know you're real, I know you're there somehow, and I ask you to help me."

But she has starting skipping down the road in a pair of orange

culottes before I have even opened my mouth. She glances back behind her shoulder curiously, though not at me directly, but just because she can.

I run into her at the playground at church as I am on my way to the car. She is hunched over, crunching leaves with a stick. I try to step away quietly.

“Don’t leave, not this time,” she whispers. “Don’t go.”

“I have to go.”

“Not yet.” I reach my hand out to touch her blonde head, but she pulls away without looking up. “No. Just leave me alone.”

“But—”

“Really fine. I’m fine.” Her blue eyes finally look up at me squinting, piercing my own eyes, green like algae. Suddenly, she relaxes, almost surprised, and it is as if she has seen me for the first time. She loosens her grip on the leaves, and they flutter away in the wind.

“Your eyes are not blue. They aren’t blue.”

“They’re green.”

“Do you see any different out of green eyes?”

“I don’t think so. No.”

“They should still be blue. Mom’s favorite color is blue.”

“They changed, they turned green some summer I don’t remember.”

“I always thought I would see different if I had different color eyes.”

Her finger scratches the dirt. “Yeah.” I think, “Even right now, when you’re afraid, he is calling you.” And then I realize that I spoke it out loud.

Her head is still lowered. She does not speak for a long time, and I think at first that she did not hear me. “Who? Who is?”

I open my mouth, but am struck by the depth of the blue in her eyes, like the changing ocean, the sea, and I want to save her from the anxiety, from the depression that she will later face, from the confusion and the pain and the emptiness. I want her to know God without having to know pain first. But then I know that if I saved her from those things, from the fractured city walls of her self, she would never have begun to wonder about God. “Nothing.”

Cavafy's Boys

If Constantine P. Cavafy
were alive today, how old would he be?

Twenty-four

An age
When florescent lights, a cup of coffee
and the New York Times
make cigarettes taste better.

An age
when cities with steel sky scrapers
and the noises of men are possibilities
where backroom sensualities
bring no guilt.

Now young Constantine P. Cavafy
plucking men out of side street gardens
ethereal flowers fueled by thanosynthesis
again and again only to be
reborn into the wet streets next to dumpsters
of rotting Chinese food.

After Thursday A Play in One Act

SET

A simple table RC and an uncomfortable chair behind it. An empty wire waste basket sits near table. There are thousands of crumpled pages of handwritten text on the stage.

LIGHTING

All light cues coincide with last stage direction given.

CHARACTERS*

46
CHARACTER ONE

An author dressed comfortably in brown

CHARACTER TWO

Not an author dressed in slim fit white

ACT 1

Dim yellow lights reveal CHARACTER ONE sitting at table writing. CHARACTER TWO stands full front motionless, expressionless. The writing continues until CHARACTER ONE hands a page of text to CHARACTER TWO. At point of handoff white light on CHARACTER TWO.

CHARACTER TWO

(Animated) Luigi Pirandello is full of shit.

(Drops page and becomes motionless, expressionless. Lights to dim yel-

low.)

(CHARACTER ONE continues to write or decides to crumple another page or does various combinations of this. CHARACTER ONE hands a page of text to CHARACTER TWO. At point of handoff white light on CHARACTER TWO.)

CHARACTER TWO

(Animated) Luigi Pirandello is full of shit, but with some good things to say.

(Drops page and becomes motionless, expressionless. Lights to dim yellow.)

(CHARACTER ONE continues to write or decides to crumple another page or does various combinations of this. CHARACTER ONE hands a page of text to CHARACTER TWO. At point of handoff white light on CHARACTER TWO.)

CHARACTER TWO

(Animated) Luigi Pirandello is full of shit, but still he has some pretty damned good things to say.

(Drops page and becomes motionless, expressionless. Lights to dim yellow.)

(CHARACTER ONE continues to write or decides to crumple another page or does various combinations of this. CHARACTER ONE hands a page of text to CHARACTER TWO. At point of handoff white light on CHARACTER TWO.)

CHARACTER TWO

(Animated) Luigi Pirandello is a very good writer who isn't full of shit at all except on the issue of social security. Man, did he get that wrong. On that point alone, Luigi Pirandello was full of shit. On any-

thing else, he should be commended. Decidedly so!

(Drops page and becomes motionless, expressionless. Lights to dim yellow. CHARACTER ONE continues to write without stopping. Lights suddenly Green.)

(Builds to a full belly laugh and all the animation that entails. Stops without notice. Builds again to full belly laugh. Continues any number of times maybe varying the vowel sounds from Oh to Uh and maybe Ah to Ha and back to Oh again. Lights to orange. CHARACTER TWO rages without build, perhaps throwing paper about or gnashing teeth and beating his/her breast or pulling hair or slapping his/her face. Lights to purple. CHARACTER TWO stops. Character slowly turns UC. Character returns to neutral position. Lights dim yellow.)

(CHARACTER ONE writes perhaps stopping for a moment to sift through papers on the floor before abandoning the quest for new ideas within the crumpled pages. Lights to blue and a loud French noise that is not French shakes the stage. It is a sound full of base and treble.)

CHARACTER TWO

(To audience) What was that, John? John, did you hear that? John, what was that? That noise, what was it, John? John? What was that noise, John? The noise, John, what was that? John, that noise, what was that noise, John? (blue light fades) John? Please? (lights dim yellow.)

(CHARACTER ONE continues to write or decides to crumple another page or does various combinations of this. Lights to red. CHARACTER TWO runs

UC and then off stage.

CHARACTER TWO

Ah!

(CHARACTER TWO enters from UL quickly and stumbles to C. CHARACTER TWO falls hard and on his/her side facing UC. Lights dim yellow. CHARACTER ONE writes. The writing continues until CHARACTER ONE hands a page of text to CHARACTER TWO. CHARACTER TWO will not take the page. CHARACTER ONE shakes page at CHARACTER TWO without looking at him/her. CHARACTER TWO will not take the page. CHARACTER ONE shakes page harder. The harder CHARACTER ONE shakes the page the more CHARACTER TWO will not take it. CHARACTER TWO must never take the page. CHARACTER ONE looks at where CHARACTER TWO's face should be if he/she were standing and notices that he/she is not there. CHARACTER ONE's anxiety begins to slowly build. CHARACTER ONE sees CHARACTER TWO on the ground and shakes the page for CHARACTER TWO to take it. CHARACTER ONE X to CHARACTER TWO and tries to put page in CHARACTER TWO's hand. CHARACTER TWO must not take page. CHARACTER ONE pushes Character onto his/her back force fully and then onto his/her other side. CHARACTER TWO does not move. CHARACTER ONE slaps CHARACTER TWO hard on the face and then shakes page in his/her face. CHARACTER TWO does not move. CHARACTER ONE tries to get CHARACTER TWO to say the lines. CHARACTER ONE begins to

move CHARACTER TWO's lips, but CHARACTER TWO will not say the lines. CHARACTER ONE begins to cry. When CHARACTER ONE's grief becomes real lights can fade to black.)

END

* A Note on Names

If the director wishes to cast 1M and 1F in the role the names given should be changed to Adam and April. If the cast is 1F and 1M the names given should be changed to June and Benjamin. If the cast is 1F and 1F then the names should become Annette and Sophia. If the cast is 1F and 1F the names should become Jane and Janet. If the cast is 1M and 1M the names should become Steven and Clinton. If the cast is 1M and 1M the names should become Carl and Lou.

Flash Fiction: First Prize

“The day I met Charlie was the day that baby shark washed up on the shore.” It was written under the picture, which was black and white and shaded with dots and looked as if it had been Xeroxed too many times. There was a boy on the right with sort of flipped-up hair, presumably Charlie, pointing down at this gray-dot colored miniature shark with X’s for eyes and a triangularly toothy frown. Another boy stood at the other side of the drawing, presumably “I,” although for the life of me I had no idea who “I” was or why he was so special in the first damn place. Above this scene was my name and my grade and my teacher’s name and the directions for completing the assignment. There was an empty line drawn beneath “The day I met Charlie” stopping just short of “on the shore” where I was apparently supposed to fix whatever was wrong with the sentence.

Time passed and my teacher went around and looked at everyone’s paper until she made her way to my desk and read. Under the original telling, I had filled the blank line with: “Charlie was rich so he got his dad to buy the shark some things and helped him back into the water.” And over the shark’s X-ed out eyes I had drawn sunglasses to cover the fact that he was dead. I tried to explain the necessity of this to the teacher and she squeezed her lips together. “Charlie’s dad is a very successful businessman,” I pointed out, “And really kind, so he’d do something like that for a shark. He can afford it.” The teacher let out some sound through her pressed lips, handed me a fresh worksheet, and instructed me to try again tonight at home.

Fix the sentence. I held the sheet over my head as I lay slumped over the living room carpet. Fix this. “The day I met Charlie was the day that baby shark washed upon the shore.” Sunglasses aren’t allowed. Cheating? Why? Because the shark is still dead under the sunglasses and therefore your continuation of the saga of Charlie and his unnamed companion is a lie. Fix this. I sat up and peered into the eyes of “I” for a good half-hour trying to sort things out. I scribbled many second lines on scrap sheets of paper and my mother’s stationary.

“The baby shark pretended to be dead because he was shy but we still liked him.”

“Charlie seemed like a nice kid and we went and played baseball and Nintendo.”

“The baby shark went to shark heaven where he was given his own personal swim tank made of gold.”

Nothing seemed to fit.

I tapped my pencil against the coffee table for fifteen more minutes until my mother called me for dinner. Homemade macaroni, my favorite. We sat and I laughed about something I saw on TV the other day and the warm cheese gooed and melted in my mouth and I felt a lot better. I rinsed my dishes in the sink and returned to the living room and picked up my worksheet. Oh right.

I tried approaching the situation from an alternate angle. Fix the sentence. Perhaps it wasn't so much a matter of what was wrong with the scene, but rather what was missing. Okay then. What don't I know? Why is a baby shark dead? He washed up. Why? I don't know. He was only a baby. Why are Charlie and nameless “I” so cheerful at the sight of a dead baby shark? Why would anyone be amused by that? There must be something missing. How did he die? He suffocated without water. No, that's stupid. He would have had to die before he washed up. Was he dead when Charlie and Nameless I found him? Possibly. Then why were they happy? Were they attacked? Just a baby. Baby sharks have teeth. Did they conspire and...no. They only just met. And if so, why? What's missing? Or who? Or who.

I had it. I ran to my room, opened the left-hand drawer of my work desk and fished around before bringing my art folder to the surface. I flipped through stuffed, crinkled doodles of cartoon characters I thought I could draw, watercolor pictures I had to do at some summer camp once, and the pretty face I had stolen and torn off of the naked stick woman with the large pointed cone breasts drawn by that obnoxious kid in Sunday school who thought he was so funny for doodling in church. I pulled from the back of this pile an old coloring book that my dad had given me when I was younger and I had kept over the years because I often had trouble letting go of or throwing away anything I was fond of. The coloring book was called “Knights of Camelot” and inside there were about a dozen sloppily colored heroes glorified in magic marker. I considered yellow-bearded Lancelot, dried-up-red-shirted Perceval holding the orange cup, Bors and Gareth and Galahad with the pretty girls, creepy-looking Mordred with the goatee, but none of them were holding weapons. I needed weapons. So I chose Gawain the Blue-Faced-Because-I-Was-Tired-Of-Always-Using-Pink with his mighty sword pointed to the Heavens. I found a pair of black scissors and trimmed around the edges.

The next day before class my teacher asked me if I had any better

luck with my assignment. I said it had been hard but I was pretty sure I had finally fixed the problem. She smiled and asked to see it. I took it out of my backpack and she read. “The day I met Charlie was the day that baby shark washed up on the shore. It was actually a baby EATING shark and secretly evil, so Charlie and I and Gawain the Blue fought and destroyed it in a dangerous battle for good.” My teacher squeezed her lips and looked at the colored knight taped into the drawing, towering over the monster, with the lightning bolts drawn over the battlefield. She then took my paper and addressed the class on how to avoid awkward sentence structure by removing unnecessary double usage of the phrase “the day” in the example sentence with Charlie and Nameless I and the baby shark. Which died.

Flash Fiction: Second Prize

The day I met Charlie was the day that baby shark washed up on the shore.

Charlie—the pubic hair on the edge of the toilet seat that you can't bring yourself to remove. That last drop of urine that lands inside your shorts, staining them, no matter how hard you shake your dick when you get done. That persistent greasy forehead pimple that won't dry up no matter what cream or medicated pad you spread on its surface. You could pop it, but you won't. It's too messy. The shark, a bunch of old men and little kids crowded around it. I stood aloof in the distance, watching attentively but without interest. My little brother, 18 and still tagging along, lowered his sunglasses for an instant, scanning the crowd. Quickly disinterested, he recovered his eyes and went back to sleep. I walked over towards the shark, half expecting him to get up and follow me. He didn't move.

That's when Charlie ran over. Charlie with the unbrushed hair and the tight red shorts. Charlie with his lifeguard boogie board and his lobster tan skin, his gumball machine earrings and his kindergarten freckle face. He bounced over to the shark and tried to move through the crowd to get a better look. No one moved out of his way. I moved in a little closer, examining the apple red line of cleavage that ran up the back seam of Charlie's shorts, the powdered sugar blond hairs on the backs of his legs. I walked over to him and stood next to him, pretending to look at the shark but really watching Charlie out of the corner of my eye.

"So...do you come here often?" I asked.

Charlie snickered and glanced at his sunburned shoulder blades. "I guess you could say that."

I introduced myself and we shook hands. Charlie McIntyre. Worked as a lifeguard for the past two years. High school senior. Lacrosse. Debate team. Ass-ramming salami-smuggling flaming homosexual. He didn't say that last part with words, but with the flick of his tongue and the slant of his stance.

I asked him if he wanted to go out for drinks when he got off. He looked to the ground, kicked the sand with his feet, and let out a quiet "sure."

After dumping off my little brother at my parents' and a quick

shower at my apartment, I arrived at the bar. Charlie was waiting for me outside.

The bar, it was some Chuck. E. Cheese trendy joint, complete with arcade games and a coin machine. The only thing missing was the ball pit. Charlie's eyes burst open at the sight of the bright neon lights, his underage lips watered at the racks and racks of clear glass liquor bottles, at the dozen college kids at the corner table high-fiving and chugging light beers.

Charlie stuck by my side the entire night, glued to the barstool next to mine. Though his eyes constantly darted from one side of the bar to another, his body did not move with them. When the thick-neck with the nametag shirt to our right began drunkenly rambling to us about illegal immigrants and the evils of welfare, Charlie did not join the conversation. He sat still, silent, his head nodding and his foot tapping in synch with mine.

The conversation between Charlie and me, it was a fill-in-the-blank exam. Favorite movie? Favorite book? Future plans? How long have you been out?

Fight Club? How unique. The Catcher in the Rye? No kidding, me too. Two years this April? Fascinating.

Look in his eyes and nod and smile and lick your lips and just don't talk about yourself. Works. Every. Time.

Just two hours and two pitchers later and we were at my apartment, in my bed, and I couldn't fucking sleep. He was holding me, his hairless arm draped over my chest, snoring ever so softly and I was trying to think of an excuse to get rid of him. I suppose I could've told him the truth. I wanted to, I really did, but something stopped me. Something about the thin line of drool that puddled on my shoulder. Something about the irritating warmth of his breath on the side of my face. Something about the way that just before he fell asleep, Charlie held his breath, waiting for me to exhale, attempting to synchronize his breathing with mine. I kept trying to think of an excuse to get rid of him, one that wouldn't crush him. Two months later I still hadn't thought of one. I blinked and we were a couple, and I had somehow extended that list of adoring questions over two dozen dates, had somehow managed to play the part of the caring boyfriend to the point where I stopped feeling indigestion every time we kissed. Until...

Late night. Charlie was asleep. He had to work in the morning. My friends called. Hitting the club. Could I come out? Sure, sure. I went, I danced, I drank. I got home. Charlie was awake, his face as red as my little brother's when I would ditch him to play baseball with the older kids, his teeth as gritted and stiff as my little brother's when Mom would send us to the movies and I'd sneak into the R rated one, leaving him to watch the dog and cat cartoon movie on

the back row alone.

I calmed him down and realized that I was suffocating. That I had to tell Charlie the truth.

I inhaled, ready to breathe Charlie out, exhale him from my bed and from my life, when he rolled over and said, “Do you remember the first day we met?”

Yeah, Charlie, I remember. I remember that baby shark, washed up on shore, its jaws futilely clenching at invisible prey. And I remember the remora, the shark-sucker on its back, firmly attached. Not hurting it but dying with it all the same.

Flash Fiction: Third Prize - Storm Clouds

The day I met Charlie was the day that baby shark washed up on the shore. It was small; maybe a foot and a half long, and it kind of wriggled a little bit as the last little bits of waves lapped at its dark gray body. It was hurt, somehow. And scared. I don't know much about emotions and stuff like that, but it's not real hard to read animals. They can't lie to you like people can. The way they feel shows all over their bodies, whether they want it to or not. The shark wasn't bleeding, but it was hurt, I could tell.

"Think it's hurt?" Charlie was standing at my elbow, trying to sound tough. I looked down at him, and tried to sound together.

"Yeah, it's hurt."

"Well, why don't we just put it back in the water?"

"Nah, just leave it alone." I didn't want to touch it. Even though it was little and hurt, it was still a shark. Its tiny black eyes had some kind of fierceness in them that I didn't want to mess with. It scared me.

"Jim?"

"What?"

"Maybe its mother is swimmin' around out there lookin' for it."

"Maybe so."

"Well wouldn't you be sad if your baby got lost somewhere and somebody could help you get it back but they didn't?"

"I don't have any kids, Charlie. I wouldn't know." Christ, the kid annoyed the hell out of me. He never shut up. I met his sister the night before. Bonnie. She was sweet, pretty enough, and I'd been drunk enough to be interested. When she called me this morning and said she wanted to go to the beach, I wasn't counting on her little brother tagging along.

Charlie was eleven, maybe twelve. He had his sister's dirty blonde hair and pointy face, but his eyes were...different. Bonnie's were blue. Even though her eye-liner looked like it was drawn on with a Sharpie, her eyes were pretty. Charlie's, on the other hand, were gray. Flat, dark gray like the lowest hanging clouds right before a storm. He stared at me a lot. I didn't like it.

"I just thought it would be nice is all." He was pouting. It didn't really bother my that I'd hurt his feelings, but he just sounded so damn sad.

“Hey Charlie, why don’t you go get me another beer?”

“Yeah, ok.”

He trudged off, and I looked back at the baby shark. The waves weren’t reaching the top of its body, and its skin was beginning to dry out. The drying skin had no sparkle to it, not like the skin that was wet. The skin that was still getting washed by the little waves looked sleek and smooth. I drew my big toe across one of its flippers. It felt rough, like a cat’s tongue. Not at all like it looked. I dug my toe into the sand and wiggled it back and forth to get the feeling of the shark’s fin off my skin. The shark didn’t move when I touched it, but I could tell by the flapping of its gills every few seconds that it was still alive. I wished the thing would hurry up and die so I didn’t have to stand there and look at it anymore. I could have just walked away and gone to sit with Bonnie, sure, but for some reason I didn’t want to leave it until it was dead. Maybe I didn’t want to leave it to die alone. Maybe I just wanted to watch it die.

“Here you go, Jim.” Charlie handed me the beer, and looked up at me, squinting from the sun in his eyes. He looked unsure.

“Thanks, pal.” I clapped him on the back with one hand to make up for snapping at him earlier. His expression didn’t change.

“My dad likes Budweiser better than Busch.”

“Well, if I ever meet your dad, I’ll remember not to offer him one of my beers.” I topped the top and took a swig. Charlie was still staring at me, with that same squinty, accusatory look on his face. God, it bugged me.

“Jim?”

“Yeah?” I was looking out over the water. The sun was starting to go down, and a couple of heavy, white clouds that hadn’t been there before were sitting on the horizon.

“The shark’s dead.”

I looked down at the little thing, trying not to look alarmed. Its body wasn’t jerking at all anymore, and the gills were still. Charlie was right. It was dead. I nudged it hard with my foot, and the body rolled over on its side. I could see its white belly and one of those little black eyes looking up at me. No more fierceness.

“Jim?”

“Yeah?”

“I wish you would have let me put it back in the water.”

“Well, I guess it doesn’t really matter now.”

“Yeah, I guess not.”

I turned away from the dead shark and the boy and walked toward Bonnie. I took my last sip of warm beer and chucked the can off to my right, and sat down on the towel next to her.

Charlie hadn’t moved from his spot by the shark’s body. Both arms hung straight down, limp, and his shoulders were slumped

forward. He stayed like that for a minute, and then turned and stared straight at me, his face blank. After a second, he turned back around and started walking down the beach, putting his back to Bonnie and me.

“What were y’all so busy starin’ at down there?” Bonnie dropped a hand on my knee and looked at me expectantly.

“Nothing important.” It was just a dead shark after all. No big deal.

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