



Diverse Voices Quarterly
Volume 3, Issue 11 & 12

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Editor's Note

This double issue is extra special to me since it's the first one that's funded by the readers. Many of you wished to remain anonymous, so instead I thank all of you who contributed in some way. List of names below for those who wish for the public shout-out. Yay! Even though we're light on artwork this issue and the format of this issue looks a bit different from what you're used to, I hope the text more than makes up for it.

Krisma

Diverse Voices Quarterly, Volume 3, Issue 11 & 12

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Known mainly as a poet/teacher, **Barry Spacks** has brought out various novels, stories, three poetry-reading CDs, and ten poetry collections while teaching literature and writing at MIT & UC Santa Barbara. His most recent book of poems, *Food for the Journey*, appeared from Cherry Grove in August 2008. Over the years his poetry has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Paris Review*, and hundreds of other journals.

Amy Tolbert lives with her two young children in the Deep South. She recently began studying to be a graphic designer but still hasn't totally given up on her dream of somehow making a living as an artist one day. Prints of her artwork can be purchased at http://amy_tolbert.imagekind.com.

Barbara Tramonte has had poems published in several literary magazines. She is a professor at SUNY Empire State College and has taught in urban environments for many years. She also owned a children's bookstore, with her husband Bob, in Brooklyn for ten years.

Michele Whitney was born and raised in Chicago and received her BS in marketing from Northern Illinois University and an MBA from Keller Graduate School of Management. She is now a PhD candidate for public service leadership at Capella University with a dissertation topic on the human-animal bond. An animal lover, she volunteers with several animal shelters. Her writing has been published in the *Chicago Sun-Times* and other venues. She spends her free time playing the flute, cooking, and practicing aromatherapy.

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EDEN

Thinking about the Eden story,
how they had everything nice,
no teenage kids to drive them crazy,

when, lo, the spin-doctor snake appeared
with news of the latest: the WANT-device:
“Everybody’s doing it, have a bite.”

Here’s the part I especially like:
Eve invents the Shopping Mantra,
the daily fit of “Gottahaveit!”

so Adam goes along,
can’t fault the ladies. “Christ, that looks
smashing on you!” —little black dress—

dazzled, “Go for it, baby,” he says.
“Maybe buy two? And sure, why not? —
pass us a taste.”

—Barry Spacks

GORGEOUS GEORGE ON A \$3 BILL

If flipping coins were professional wrestling,
“heads” would be the babyface choice,
“tails” would be the heel.

Good side v. bad side,
popular choice v. contrarian.

Coin flipping is chance, each side
winning about 50% of the time while
pro wrestling results are predetermined,
little left to speculation, and gladiators
don't wrestle for clinking coins or to
keep from being thrown to lions.

Flipping coins is not the same as
professional wrestling.

—Gene McCormick

I KNOW, I KNOW, I'M A DICK

Waiting for huevos rancheros
at the Golden West Café
she moves to sit beside me,
presses her leg against mine,
kisses me lightly, whispers

something or another.
I tap the neck
of my spoon on the coffee cup rim,
but she keeps it up
and keeps it up until,
when the food comes,
I move to the other
side of the table
and dig in.
She quietly shuffles
her food around her plate
and generally seems pretty morose.
Very morose,

so when I finish
we talk and all, and I
ask her what she wants
to do today. So she smiles,
settles back against the settee.
We leave holding hands. Look—
I do my best.
It was about food
and coffee.

—Edward Adams

FRIDAY NIGHT HAPPY MEALS

by

Karen Batchelor

Four forty-seven. Thirteen minutes early.

Doug signaled a right turn at the golden arches and pulled his dented navy-blue Toyota into the nearest parking space. He had bought this car in 2000, the year he graduated from college, before marriage and children.

He muttered, “Damn San Jose heat.”

Shimmering waves of Indian summer rose from the blacktop, and Doug unbuttoned his Hawaiian shirt, flapping it back and forth in an attempt to cool off his sweaty chest. He blew out a breath and switched off the ignition. The keys on the ring hit the steering post and jangled before slowing and hanging still from the key slot.

Doug stuck his head out the window, looking for Martha’s gray Honda. He scowled and leaned against the headrest.

She’ll be late. That woman is never on time.

Sitting in the car, he rehearsed stories he might tell her. “I have a great job offer. It’s so good, I can’t turn it down. It’s in Portland. I’ll be making twice what I make now.” He wondered if he squeezed the Portland part in between two good things, she might not even notice. *Yeah, right!* Doug shook his head and closed his eyes.

It was the best decision. He knew it. *I won’t have to face her anger every Friday night when we make the custody exchange, and again when I return the boys on Sunday evening. I won’t have to listen to her harping at me to cut my hair, wear a suit, find a more dignified career, buy a new car—change.* He could imagine her accusations of irresponsibility, lack of character, even cowardice, when he told her of his plans to move away and spare them all more of the agony they had been suffering the past year. *Is she right? Am I a coward?*

He glanced at his watch. Four fifty-seven. *Not late yet.*

Doug opened the glove compartment and looked again at the airplane ticket that the Columbia Regional Software Company had sent him. The plane would leave at 8:15 Monday morning.

There are advantages to being one of the top-rated computer game designers. He sighed.

He scratched his head, still unable to come up with a solid plan to tell her of his decision. His attention drifted to a young woman and three small children leaving the restaurant. They each held vanilla cones in their hands. Doug watched as the door bumped the smallest, a girl, and her swirl of soft ice cream plopped onto the sidewalk. The child burst into tears at the sight of her treasure melting like ice cubes in hell.

The woman handed her cone to the oldest boy and bent down to the girl's level, smoothing back the dark hair that had fallen over the child's face, wiping away tears on little tanned cheeks. Doug could not hear the words, but he imagined the woman offering soothing reassurances, vague and wonderful promises. The short drama seemed to be resolved when the mother reached for the cone she had entrusted to the tallest boy and gave her ice cream to the little girl.

That's what a parent does. A parent doesn't move seven hundred miles away from his children. He sighed again.

The young mother herded the children into a scratched, green Ford, leaned in to fasten seatbelts, got into the driver's seat, rolled down windows, and drove away. Doug stared at the empty parking space until a red Volvo pulled into the spot, and a balding, potbellied man lumbered out of the car and into the restaurant.

Doug checked his watch. 5:05. *Late. Again.*

Realizing it would be much cooler inside, he started the engine and let it run for the seconds it took to roll up the window. Then he locked the car and headed for the air-conditioning.

He was almost at the front of the line, money in hand, ready to order for himself, when he was captured around both legs by small hands and arms.

"Hey, here are my guys." He grinned and stuffed the money back into his pocket before reaching down to tousle the wavy, blond hair of his two young children. He bent to kiss each one of his boys on the top of the head and asked what they wanted to eat.

"Happy Meal!" five-year-old Kenny shouted and jumped up and down in a flat-footed dance, never letting go of his grasp on Doug's pant leg.

"Happy Meal!" three-year-old Brad chimed in as he, too, did the jumping dance.

"Dad," Kenny asked, "can I have a Coke?"

"You know your mom says milk." Doug winked at his sons. They groaned.

Doug sensed her before he could see her, and his spine stiffened, ready for the attack—whatever it was today. There was always an attack.

He patted the boys on the back. “Why don’t you two guys go play on the slides for a few minutes while I get our food.”

“Yay!” they shouted and Doug smiled as he watched them race through the crowd to the play area, where they could jump and fall into mounds of Nerf balls.

“Marty.” Doug controlled his voice, nodding as she approached him in the line. With her long, blond hair pinned up in a French twist and her forced smile, she looked like an artificial flower decorated with bright-red lipstick.

“Douglas.” She nodded and lost her smile. “Is that a new look?” She narrowed her eyes at his bare chest and the hair that had matted as the sweat dried.

Wordlessly, Doug buttoned his shirt and turned away from her to face the counter and the tall, shiny-faced youth wearing a paper hat and a plastic name tag: “Hello. My name is Johnny.” Doug pulled the money from his pocket, pointing to the large sign board while he placed the order. “Two Happy Meals—both hamburger—a Big Mac, two milks, two coffees.”

He turned to ask Martha if she wanted anything besides the usual coffee, but she had disappeared. He scanned the room and spotted her at a corner table, near the play area. Doug followed her gaze and saw that the boys were jumping and shouting, unaware of anyone else around. He decided to take the chance that she wanted only coffee. She always drank coffee while they exchanged information and then sat with the boys for a few minutes, pretending to be a normal family.

Balancing the laden tray, Doug dodged children on his path to the table Martha occupied. He set the tray down and began unloading drinks, bags filled with fries, greasy burgers wrapped in waxed paper, and the prizes—tiny plastic monsters. He glanced up to see that Martha’s eyes were fastened on the boys.

“Kenny knows,” she said without turning her stare away from the playground.

Her voice startled him and Doug slopped coffee onto the table. He didn’t respond to her statement, but left in search of more napkins to wipe up the mess.

“I said Kenny knows.” She faced him directly when he returned, and he could detect a hard razor-edge in her voice.

Tell her now. Instead he countered.

“What do you mean? What does Kenny know?” He steeled for the challenge.

“He knows you’ve got a girlfriend. What’s her name? Tammy?” Her forehead wrinkled, the same forehead she religiously smoothed with anti-aging cream every night.

Doug took a deep breath and clenched his jaw. “Damn it, Martha, we’re divorced! I can see whoever the hell I want to! I’m a grown man. Damn it all!” His volume was rising and he lowered it a notch. He crossed his arms. *In fact, you didn’t have the decency to wait until the divorce was filed*, he thought, but didn’t have the courage to say this to her face.

Martha opened her mouth and, just as quickly, shut it again.

“Mommy! Did you see me? I jumped higher than Kenny.” Brad climbed up on the bench beside his mother, and Martha instantly shifted her attention to her son.

“Yes, sweetie, that was really good!”

Doug could feel his muscles relax and knew that the battle was on hold. *One thing about Martha. She won’t fight in front of the boys.*

The children grabbed the prizes from their Happy Meals and danced the monsters across the table top.

“It’s time to eat, boys.” Doug put the toys in his shirt pocket.

Brad picked up the top bun from his burger and, with two fingers, lifted the pickles off the meat, placing them on the tray in the center of their table. Doug watched as both boys ate about half their burgers, then concentrated on one French fry at a time, grabbing each one gingerly with tiny fingertips and dipping the oily potato into the ketchup squeezed out onto the waxed paper. They ate every one of their fries.

Martha kept her attention on the boys. Doug and Martha both listened as Kenny told them about his first week in kindergarten.

“Me and this boy Joey, we play with the crayons and...”

“Joey and I,” Martha corrected.

“Joey and I, we play with crayons and finger paint. And we get to sing every day. But we have to take a nap.” He wrinkled his nose.

“You like kindergarten so far, huh?” Doug asked and imagined his son with paint all over his shirt and in his hair.

“It’s all right.” Kenny shrugged.

“I can paint too. Mommy, can I paint too?” Brad begged.

Martha put her arm around Brad’s shoulder. “Sure. We’ll get you some finger paints too.”

Doug glanced at his watch. 5:45.

“You know, guys, if we’re going to watch a movie tonight, we’re going to have to go. We still have to stop at Blockbuster.”

“DVD, Dad. It’s a DVD,” Kenny corrected him.

“You’re right. It’s a DVD.” Doug grinned and reached across the table to muss Kenny’s hair.

Doug piled the trash onto the tray and dumped it in the garbage bin on their way out. He held the door for Martha as she and the boys stepped into the September heat. He followed Martha to her car.

She popped the trunk and Doug lifted out two small duffel bags, set them on the pavement, and shut the lid. He walked away as the boys were hugging their mother.

“Douglas, wait. I have some more things in the car. Wait!”

“Sure. Just let me put these in the Toyota.” He turned his head slightly over his shoulder to address her but kept walking. When he returned, Martha held a small plastic bag.

“Brad’s flashlight. I only let him have it at bedtime. He’s still afraid of the dark.”

She handed him the bag. “Kenny’s inhaler and asthma medicine. He needs to take a spoonful just before he goes to bed. And I also included their current favorite movie, the *Ninja Turtles*.”

Since she told him the exact dosage of the medication every Friday, Doug gritted his teeth and held back the criticism. He accepted the bag and nodded to Martha. “Okay. Thanks.”

He opened the bag for a peek at the contents—a gray plastic tube, a bottle of orange syrup, and a plastic spoon. He always felt a little guilty that Kenny had asthma. *Did I have something to do with it? Imperfect genes?*

Doug buckled the boys into their car seats. Martha had already driven away.

At Blockbuster, the boys picked out *Planet of the Apes*, but Doug knew they wouldn’t enjoy it, and he dreaded having to explain to Martha how he had allowed them to see it. He rented *Schoolhouse Rock* and *The Adventures of Mr. Magoo*.

They both fell asleep, heads in his lap, before they finished watching the second movie. Doug stared down at their smooth skin and long lashes, and felt a pinch in his heart that he couldn’t see this every night. That he couldn’t hear those tiny snores whenever he wanted. Hugging them close, he hefted one in each arm and carried them to the spare room, where he had set up twin beds. Doug laid

them down gently, slipped off their jeans and shirts, and tucked them in. They half-opened their eyes and blinked.

“G’night, Daddy,” they said and curled up, closing their eyes again.

Doug stood for a long time watching them drift back to sleep before he closed the door partway and went to the kitchen. He opened a cabinet door and reached behind the sugar canister for the bottle of Scotch he kept there, but changed his mind and heated up some milk to make hot chocolate.

At 11:00 he watched the news, and at 11:30, exhausted, he stumbled into his bedroom. He glanced at the suitcases that now lined the walls. They contained his clothes, papers, family pictures, all ready to travel.

He ticked off a list of chores. He had to call Tammy and tell her he was leaving. He wondered when he was going to tell Martha. He saw Martha now in her wedding gown. Her smile during their first few months of marriage. The day she told him they would become parents. The night Brad was born.

He closed his eyes.

Once we were in love. Enough to get married.

He didn’t know how long he had been sleeping when he felt a little hand shaking him and a child’s voice shouting, “Daddy, Daddy, wake up!” Doug sat up straight and tried to focus.

“Kenny can’t breathe.” Brad pulled on Doug’s hand. When he realized what his son was saying, Doug shot out of bed and ran to the spare room. Kenny lay on the bed, pale, struggling with every breath.

The medicine. I forgot the medicine! Is it too late?

Doug snatched his car keys from the hook by the front door, ran outside to his car parked in the driveway, and grabbed the plastic bag. He sped back into the house and to his son, who was battling for every breath.

Doug opened the bag and grabbed the medicine and inhaler.

His hands shaking, he gently lifted Kenny’s head, placed the inhaler between his son’s lips and told him to breathe in. Kenny obeyed. Five minutes later, Doug repeated the process. In another two minutes Kenny was breathing freely.

Doug watched his son inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. Relief swept through him, like quenching thirst in a desert rain. His heart pounded. He clasped his hands together to quell the shaking. *How close? He could have died.* Tears formed in his eyes, and he reached out for his sons. He pulled them to his chest, holding them tight until his own breathing was even.

“Dad, you’re hurting me. I can’t breathe.” Kenny choked, and Doug let them go.

“Hey, you guys. How about it? You want to sleep in my big bed tonight?”

“Yeah,” they replied at once. Kenny climbed on Doug’s back, arms around his neck, and Doug held Brad in his arms. He carried his sons into his room.

“Dad,” Brad asked, pointing to the suitcases, “where are you going?”

“Oh. That. I’m just doing a little house cleaning.”

Doug got in the middle, knowing he wasn’t going to be able to sleep with their little wiggly bodies squirming and poking him. But he wouldn’t have slept anyway.

He lay awake in the pre-dawn darkness, replaying his failed marriage, trying to place his finger on one fatal flaw. He wondered, as he had so many times, if they could have made it if he hadn’t been working so many long hours, or if they had moved to Phoenix as Martha had wanted. *I wasn’t the one who changed. I still drive the same car. Wear my hair long. Dress casual. It was okay for her then. What happened?* He imagined confronting her when she got involved with Greg. *Should I have stayed and fought, as she has often said? Or did I do the right thing?* He sighed.

Doug looked at the luminous dial of his bedside clock. 4:15 a.m.

He pulled his sons closer and began calculating the right time to call Mr. Martindale in Portland. He thought about the best way to explain that he appreciated the job offer, but he didn’t think that it was the right move for him. Not now.

The last time he looked at the clock, it was 6:05.

NEONATAL LOVE

Yesterday when you asked
me as your date to the senior prom,
I thought the joker in you wanted
to warm my heart, but moments later
realized the sincerity of your invite.

You said you'd rather have your mom
because down the road of life
the girl in the photo will be but a blur—
a passing fling or crushed bird,
but you'd never forget
the loving embrace of your mother.

—Diana Raab

THE PICTURE OF HAPPINESS

Eager to watch her
little hands tear them
to shreds—
I snapped the picture
with my \$5.99 disposable camera
of the small x-mas
tree and her gobs of presents—
knowing she'd never
remember it.

—Chad R. Herman

NIGHT-LIGHT

by

Belo Cipriani

One of the first phobias I recall developing was fear of the dark. I would often try to bargain with my parents to let me keep my bedroom light on. Initially, my family was okay with it and would just turn off the lights once I was asleep. However, by the time I was in the first grade, they wanted to break the habit.

My mom's booming botanica business kept both my parents busy and away from home most of the time. My older sisters, like most siblings, preyed on my fear, making me hysterical and unable to sleep. Notes from my teacher stating that I frequently fell asleep in class gave my mom the idea to take me out of school for a few days and talk to me about my nyctophobia.

I was thrilled to miss school and finally get to see where my parents worked. The shop was made up of two equally large rooms. The back room was where my dad spent most of the time on the phone or unpacking items. My mom managed the front and dealt with all the customers. I spent the first couple of hours sniffing oils, candles, and bags with dried plants, while my mom helped the numerous men and women who visited the shop. Later in the afternoon, the crowd died down, and my mom began to ask me questions. "So, are you having nightmares?"

I softly answered in the negative and explained that I hated to be in the dark. I could not put my thoughts into words, but she seemed to understand my choppy answers. She pulled her long red hair away from her face and sat me on the glass countertop next to the cash register. She brought statues to me and began to explain who they were, taking breaks to help customers.

As I learned who each figure was, I paid attention to the people who bought the statues. In the course of a few days, I learned about Shiva, Buddha, Jesus, and what a menorah represented. She told me how darkness is only scary because it's hard to see what is around, but we could all create our own light. Placing her hands over my eyes, she had me imagine the lights she was talking about. I remember seeing white and red lights floating, and I cheered when I realized I could beat the dark.

Being blind combined my adult fear of being alone and my childhood fear of darkness. I have sometimes felt that because I could not see people, they could not see me either. After two years in blindness, I often found the need to psych myself up some mornings before starting the day. I would spend hours in my dorm room, lying in bed, thinking about how only two years prior, I was able to see.

This particular morning, I was suffering from the biggest self-doubt episode I had encountered since the days immediately following the first surgery. I had broken up with Nate a few days earlier and was starting to feel unsure about my

decision. I was afraid that I would never find someone else who would run errands, read my mail, or buy Madge (my guide dog) toys.

After basking in sorrow and doubt for a while, I reluctantly got up and began to get ready to take the train to San Francisco. I fed and relieved Madge, smiling at how she would do her business on command. Ironically, what I thought would be the toughest part of working with a guide dog was by far to me the easiest aspect of the partnership. I placed my duffel bag on my bed and began to stuff in clothes and toiletries, taking short breaks to enjoy a song on the radio and dance with Madge. I was ready to head down to the Caltrain station, when I reached for my bag and noticed something poking out from the zipper. I dug my fingers past the metal teeth and realized Madge had stuffed her Nylabone in the bag.

Wiping a tear from my cheek, I kneeled down and gave Madge a hug. My fears may never quite go away, but knowing I had a four-legged night-light put me at ease.

SOUND IN THE NIGHT

It might be said
that spirit is
awakening, but
the inside of
that grave is
certainly
silent—
tonight
timbers creak
beneath the
urgent pleasure
of the winds
wood sings
a dumb baritone
fondling darkness—
whispers are
undetected
right now.

—Judith Cody

THE TEN THOUSAND SORROW LIVING ROOM

I swab the hurt
of missing you
with
chenille
and
shabby chic
The rooms will save me
Pots and woven rugs
Artifacts made with care
Human hands
turn sorrow into objects
cloth and clay
bulging orbs
of consolation.

—Barbara Tramonte

THE PEN THAT BROUGHT YOU HERE

I write a springtime poem about you,
then you lodge yourself in my head—

not a bad thing, really,
but it bothers me just the same.

I can't sleep late or play music
or sip wine while you're here;

you are a hiccup in my thoughts,
a blur on the pages of my books.

I stumble on uneven feet during summer walks
because you hover around me

and I fear you will still be here
for autumn's football and painted leaves.

I would write you away
on your winter journey if I could,

but the pen that brought you here
cannot ink your farewell.

—Ruth Keally

LIPSTICK

by

Lacey Reynolds

Maybe he won't even show. What would she do if he didn't show? Is there a rule about that? How long do you have to wait for it to be clear that you have been stood up? *Ha, listen to me*, she thought. *This is not a date for chrissake. You cannot be stood up if there is nothing to be stood up for.*

Where was he? Technically, he didn't have to be here for another ten minutes, but he lived by that annoying phrase. The one about if you're on time, you're late, but if you're early, you're on time. Yuck. Who has time to be on time, much less early? Unless it is something important like this.

Should she order a cup of coffee before he comes? Is that rude? She could order a cup for him too, but her instincts were telling her that it would either be too cold to drink by the time he got here, or it would sit untouched forever while she hopelessly waited for him to arrive. Maybe she should order just to show him that she had been here early. Or did that make her seem desperate? Or maybe bitchy? She realized she didn't know how he liked his coffee anyway. *Oh, my God*, she thought. *I don't even know if he likes coffee.*

Her husband hated coffee. He hated water too. He drank only Pepsi, four cans a day.

She would not order. But her mouth was getting dry. So dry that she worried that she may not be able to talk properly if he ever did show up. She would order a glass of water.

She smiled to herself, remembering his phone call. They had never talked on the phone before. Maybe he was trying to say that he wanted to be something more. He must have gotten her number from the library database because she was sure she hadn't given it to him. This must be serious.

"Hello?" she said, wondering who would call so late on a week night.

"Hi, uh, Meg? It's Mark. Listen. Are you free tomorrow for brunch at the Corner Café?"

"I think so. Is everything okay?"

"It will be once I see your beautiful face tomorrow," he said. She loved and hated that about him. She hated men who used corny Hollywood lines, but when he said them, she always blushed.

“I want to tell you something.” She could tell he was smiling on the other line.

“Okay...” she said, nervously peeking into the living room to see if her husband was listening. He was not.

“Okay. So I’ll see you tomorrow at eleven. I can’t wait, Meg.”

“See you then,” she nearly whispered. She eased the phone back into place and leaned against the kitchen counter.

What could he want to tell her? Was this it? Were they finally going to talk about it? They had been ignoring it for so long. She thought they had an unwritten contract of sorts that said they wouldn’t ever address it. At least that’s the vibe he had given her. Every time they talked, he made a point to mention his wife, no matter how random it seemed.

Maybe he changed his mind. Oh, no. Oh, God. What would she do?

She felt her chest tightening with anticipation. She looked at her reflection in the window and giggled to herself. She quickly covered her mouth, but the smiling corners of her lips were in plain view on each side of her hand. Her smile grew wider. What would she wear? She should shave her legs. And tweeze her eyebrows. Find some nail polish. And lipstick. Do women still wear lipstick? No. Only the sad, pathetic ones.

Back in college, she and her friends used to make fun of women who wore lipstick. They had cleverly dubbed them “lipstick losers.” Her friend Kate, a psychology major, explained the lipstick loser theory to their group of friends over martinis one night.

“Lipstick on a woman screams, ‘I hate my life,’” she said. “Women wear lipstick because they think they can hide behind it. They think it says, ‘I’m confident and sexy,’ but it doesn’t. It says the opposite. When I see a woman wearing lipstick, I think, ‘What a loser.’”

They all laughed at Kate’s passionate explanation and rolled their eyes at one another as they always did when she explained one of her theories. Though they rolled their eyes, they knew Kate’s theories were almost always spot-on.

But that was years ago, she considered. Maybe lipstick wasn’t a trademark for losers anymore. She pictured the most beautiful, confident women in her life. Her mom, her best friends, her sister-in-law, her lawyer, that woman who always sat in the front pew at church. Not one of them wore lipstick. Ever.

Kate was right. Lipstick said, “I’m desperate. Please notice me.” I don’t need lipstick to hide behind, she told herself. This would not be a lipstick situation. No, she decided. Absolutely no lipstick.

But definitely mascara. She would wear the mascara she bought months

ago but had only worn once. Since then, there hadn't been an appropriate occasion to wear it. There hadn't been any occasions at all since then. It made her eyelashes three miles long and that made her look younger. Younger is good. Should I wear a skirt, she wondered. Or is that too much? Is that just asking for attention? I don't want to throw myself at him. But I want to be sexy. Maybe just pants with a low-cut blouse. Did she own any of those? She had some button-ups in the back of her closet.

She told her husband, she was going to bed. He responded by turning up the volume on the TV.

A man in his sixties entered the café and disapprovingly looked her up and down. She even thought she heard him snort in disgust.

She pretended not to notice. She suddenly felt naked. She tried to pull her skirt down toward her knees. Her lacy panties were riding up in all the wrong places, causing her to fidget on her already-unstable bar stool. Thirty-seven-year-old mothers are not supposed to dress like this, she thought. Her giant hoop earrings suddenly weighed five pounds each and were stretching her earlobes nearly off her ears. Her perfume was too pungent and her makeup was beginning to feel cakey. She closed another button on her blouse, examined the difference, and then buttoned another one just to be safe. What was she doing? *I look like a hooker*, she thought. *Throwing myself out there like I'll take any hint of affection from anyone. The only difference is that I'm at the Corner Café and not just the street corner. Barely a worthy distinction.*

So, let's just say, hypothetically, that he doesn't come. I will simply leave, she thought. *What else would I do? My life does not depend on this silly little brunch. I have plenty of better things to do*, she told herself.

Right...nothing better to do. That's why she spent two hours trying on outfits last night and had come to the café thirty minutes before they were to meet. That's why she was here waiting for a man who may or may not like coffee.

She had met him at the library on Main Street on a Friday similar to today. She was a stay-at-home mom, but on Fridays, her mother took care of the kids while she ran errands and attempted to regain her sanity if only for a few hours.

Her mother had asked her to pick up a book for her while she was in town, so she walked through the giant glass doors armed with a crumpled yellow Post-it in hand with the name of the book and its author scribbled on it.

She approached the counter and looked around for someone to assist her.

"Hi there!"

She screamed as a man popped up from behind a bookshelf near the counter.

“Sorry,” he said. “Didn’t mean to scare ya. I forget that people can’t see me behind these shelves sometimes. What can I help you with?”

“Um,” she stuttered in an effort to recover her dignity. “I need to check out this book, please.”

She handed him the Post-it, and he playfully raised his left eyebrow at her as he glanced at it. She pretended not to notice and began looking through the nearest shelf of hardcover books, all the while cursing herself for not even bothering to read the title of the book her mother had scrawled on the Post-it.

“Do you like to ride?” he asked as he pecked at the computer keys.

“What?” she asked, slightly shocked by the question. He motioned toward the hardcover books with a nod of his head. She glanced down and realized that she had been pretending to be enthralled with motorcycle books. She skimmed the titles: *The Open Road: A Guide to Finding the Bike for You*; *The Freedom Cycle: The History of the Motorcycle*; *Chrome, Saddlebags, and Decals: Accessorizing Your Hog*.

“Um...no. I don’t,” she said. “But my brother does and these would make great Christmas gifts.” *I am so lame*, she thought.

“I didn’t think you looked like the type,” he said. “Your book is back this way.”

He led her to the right corner of the library where he grabbed a book with an overly happy woman’s face on the cover. She read the cover: *The Secret Pleasures of Menopause*.

Oh, excellent, she thought.

“Did you need anything else today, ma’am?” he asked, still giving off that stupid grin. *Ugh*. She hated when people called her that. She particularly hated it when men who thought she was a sexually frustrated, menopausal woman called her that.

The café door opened with a jingle, and she leaned forward to see if it was him. It was not. He was now five minutes late. What would that mean to his little saying? If being on time means being late, then what does being late mean? She guessed it probably meant nothing at all, or that she meant nothing at all.

After that first visit to the library, she had visited every Friday since. She avoided him for awhile, embarrassed by their first encounter. But after a few visits, he introduced himself and, after some small talk, she was able to explain her search for the menopause book.

* * *

Mark gave her the full tour of the library in the beginning and suggested books for her to read. Some days, they didn’t even talk about books. They simply

talked. At first about the little things. His motorcycle and her sewing machine. About an article he read in the paper and the cute things her daughter said.

But, recently, the talks had become more personal and the space between their bodies grew smaller. His eyes were starting to wander, and she wasn't exactly wishing he would stop. He had even brushed up against her a few days ago when he was trying to squeeze through the shelves in the library. It could have been an accident, but the way he lingered there for just a second more than necessary told her that this was no accident. He was testing the waters, and the waters were warm and inviting.

But they shouldn't have been, she cursed herself. Her knees shouldn't have buckled, and her chest shouldn't have tightened. But they did. And she hated that her body had betrayed her. But, she thought, in its defense, it's hard not to react to something so foreign and mesmerizing. Her body had been neglected for nearly four years now, and she forgave it for not being prepared for such a sudden attack.

But it was not just her body that was betraying her lately. She truly liked Mark's company and loved their friendship. And she couldn't help but love what it was developing into. She was not an unfaithful person. But it was hard to be faithful to a man who was having an ongoing affair with the 55-inch television in the living room.

She often thought she was just being a typical woman and overanalyzing the situation. Mark probably thought of her as just another bookworm at the library and nothing more, and here she was making a big deal out of it. *I'm such a drama queen*, she thought.

* * *

But then there was this. The phone call inviting her to brunch.

What did it mean? Did he feel it too? What would he say? What would she say back?

She knew what she had to say. *I will tell him no. I am not interested. I have a husband and two beautiful children. He is married to a gorgeous woman. He is simply my friend. I refuse to think of him as anything more.*

I better practice, she thought.

Mark. We are friends. Only friends and nothing more. I love my husband. I am not a cheater. This relationship has to end.

Mark. We are friends. Only friends and nothing...

Then she saw him. Finally. He was approaching from across the street. She unbuttoned two buttons on her blouse. She checked her hair in the reflection of the window and teased it with her hands. She crossed her legs and

ever so slightly hiked up her skirt.

Something was missing. *I can't do this*, she thought. *What was I thinking? I need to go. But I can't now.* He sees me. She frantically searched her purse. *Please*, she thought. *I must have a spare somewhere.*

He was almost to the door. *Come on, come on*, she thought. There it was. Her emergency lipstick. She took the cap off and smeared the thick, red paste onto her lips. It felt like mud and she hated it. She hated the lipstick and she hated herself.



Escape
—Colleen Purcell

GYPSY CAB

by

Matt Perron

(first appeared online in *Gemini Magazine*)

I'd already been on the road for more than twelve hours when a woman with sleek curves and a large white flower in her hair hailed me from across Fifth Avenue in Park Slope. Picking up street passengers is illegal for car service drivers; but considering the price of gas and lack of fares, I'd stopped caring about that law a long time ago. I checked my mirrors for cops, and then swerved across the yellow line to the opposite curb. "Hurry it up," I said. "I'm facing the wrong way here."

Necklace beads clacked as she dropped into the seat behind me.

"Where to?"

"Left on Third, right on Bond," she said.

"Got it."

We rolled back onto the street. "Ain't you too young for this old-man music?" she said.

After two years in a town car, I was used to pushy patrons. But there was something different about this one; I thought maybe I'd heard her voice before but couldn't place where. "I listen to it when I'm working," I said. "Classical keeps me calm."

"How calm do you have to be to sit on your ass all day?"

"Drive one of these things for one night," I said, "see how calm you feel."

She grunted like she figured it'd be easy. "I'm the one paying. And I say change the station."

That familiar bitchy tone, she must've been in my car before. "I'm the one driving, and I say it relaxes me."

"Whatever."

And then I remembered. Could it be her? We reached the intersection at Fourth Avenue. I pressed a button on the driver's side door and, slowly, the side-view mirror angled toward me, showing the black flank of the car and then finally the window. She was skinnier and the change from tight T-shirts and jeans to the more stylish blouse and leggings had masked her on the curb, but now I

recognized the high cheekbones, olive-shaped eyes, and sharp nose. Samantha.

My hands tightened on the wheel. Time and again I'd fantasized about payback, but I never thought I'd actually see her again. And now here she was in my backseat. I locked my eyes onto the road.

* * *

It was April and my sophomores were battling rampant lust exacerbated by a spring heat wave hot enough to bead sweat on bare midriffs. Last period had arrived and, as usual for that time of day, it was practically impossible to get the kids to pay attention. Eventually, through some combination of manners and sympathy for me, most of them began to halfheartedly listen to my lesson. I tried to ignore the ones who didn't, but the girls sitting in the back drawing dress designs in their notebooks and gossiping loudly about the sexy Spanish teacher made it impossible.

"Hey, Samantha," I said. "They can hear you in Jersey right about now."

She giggled. "Okay, Mr. Teague," she said. "You go ahead."

I turned to write on the dry-erase board.

She must've said something under her breath, because the girls burst into laughter again.

I turned. "Samantha, please."

"What?" she snapped.

I knew this was a troubled kid, and yelling back would be a mistake, so I made an effort to control my building anger. "Sorry," I said, "but you're frustrating me right now. Would you please stop interrupting?"

"I didn't say nuthin'."

I raised my eyebrows.

She shook her head and sucked her teeth at me. "Whatever."

I continued the lesson. Three times I had to stop and warn the class that we'd stay after the bell if the work ethic didn't improve. Finally, after spending most of the period walking from table to table trying in vain to keep everybody focused on writing journals, the end-of-day bell rang. "All right," I shouted as I moved across the room and stood in front of the door. "You've wasted at least ten minutes of my time. And now you're going to make it up with ten minutes of detention before anyone goes home."

The students stopped talking, except for Samantha. "Fuck that," she

snapped. "I didn't do nuthin'. I ain't staying."

"Come on, Sam, just be quiet," somebody said. "I'm going to be late for rehearsal."

"Yeah, and I have to pick up my little sister," someone else said.

"I ain't staying."

"Samantha," I said, "you have to know you're the last one who should be complaining."

"What the fuck do you know?" She slammed the back of her chair into the table behind her and rose from her seat.

"We can't start the time until everybody is sitting down," I said.

A chorus of pleas and sharp demands erupted.

She wheeled around at her classmates. "Shut the fuck up!" Then she walked right at me. "Out of my way!" She grabbed the knob and pulled, but my heel was tight to the bottom. "I'm leaving!" she screamed, suddenly wild-eyed, lower lip quivering. "Get the fuck out of my way!"

Her anger verged on hysteria, and I almost let her go, but I knew that if she skipped out on another detention, she'd be suspended yet again. And I didn't want to let her out into the community ranting and raving. I held my ground. "Calm down," I said. "It's only ten minutes."

She backed off and kicked the door, narrowly missing my leg. "Let me out!"

"You've got to calm down first."

"Fuck you!"

The other students fidgeted at their tables.

"Everybody line up," I said.

They lined up along the wall beside the door, shuffling their feet and laughing anxiously.

"Destiny, get the principal," I said.

She pumped her head.

I opened the door just enough so that the students could fit through one at a time.

Samantha tried to maneuver around me to the opening, but I kept an arm in front of her.

She crashed into my elbow and then quickly backed off. “Don’t you fucking touch me!”

“You slammed into me.”

“Fuck you!” She sent a chair clattering across the room with a vicious kick.

The last student hustled out of the room, and I closed the door.

We were alone. Immediately, I remembered what she’d said about my touching her and wished I’d asked one of the students to stay.

“I’m going to get you for this,” Samantha wheezed and pulled at the knob again. “Let me out!”

I kept my face neutral and avoided eye contact until there was a knock on the door.

Principal Flores looked through the window and rolled her eyes.

I opened the door.

“What’s going on with her now?” she said.

“He touched me!” Samantha screamed and began hyperventilating again.

“She’s lying.”

Flores put a hand on my arm. “She’s never going to calm down with you in here,” she said. “Let me take care of this.”

I hesitated for a moment.

“Mr. Teague, please,” she said.

I went out into the hall to wait.

A group of kids from the class were hanging around outside the door. “Man, she really freaked,” one said. “Bitch is crazy,” said another. “You all right?” Someone patted my shoulder.

“I’m fine. Thanks for asking,” I said. “But I think Ms. Flores has it under control. You guys should head home.”

“You sure you’re all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

They drifted off down the hallway and left me contemplating the closed door. I snuck a peek through the window, but could only see Flores’ back. She nodded her head and I could hear her soothing tone, but not what she was saying. When I saw her begin to turn, I stepped back.

Flores and Samantha emerged. The girl sauntered past me and down the hallway like she owned the place. Her quick recovery disturbed me further.

“Can I see you in my office?” Flores said.

Following her down the hall, I drew measured breaths through my nose to combat the spreading scraped-hollow feeling in my stomach.

When we arrived, she increased my anxiety by closing the door.

“This is very serious, Derrick,” she said, settling behind her desk.

“I know. I’ve never seen a student act like that before. Is she all right?”

Flores nodded. “How long were you alone in the room with her?”

The hollow feeling spread into my groin, and I moved to the edge of the chair. I’d heard horror stories. “Not more than a few minutes.”

“She said you grabbed her breast.”

“That’s an outright lie.”

She leaned toward me and rested her elbows on the desk. “This is going to be one hell of a rodeo,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sure you know there’ve already been a lot of issues with her and her mother.”

I nodded.

“She’d rather believe in problems with our school than face Samantha’s much scarier issues.”

“I think I understand.”

She picked up a pen and tapped it a few times on her blotter. “This kind of stuff comes with the territory. I hope you won’t take it too personally.”

“How should I take it?”

“Just understand if it wasn’t you, it would’ve been someone else. This isn’t your fault.”

“I guess that’s reassuring.”

“Samantha’s got a file a mile long,” she said. “Still, there are procedures and we have to follow them. Just remember that the first year is always the worst.”

“Hope so.”

She smiled. “Sorry this happened to you. I’ll keep you posted.”

* * *

I wanted to drive to East New York and kick her out on the roughest street I could find. That could cost me my job, and I knew all too well the futility of trying to find anything else, but I didn’t care. It’d be worth it. I looked into the slice of mirror and found her staring back at me. “Recognize me?” I said.

“Yeah,” she said, seemingly without a trace of self-consciousness. “You, Mr. Bigshot teacher driving a gypsy cab. What’d you go and leave the school for anyways?”

My knuckles went white on the wheel. “You can’t be serious.”

She ignored my tone. “One too many cuties in your class?”

“Namely you.” I checked her reaction in the mirror.

She scrunched her face like I’d told a bad joke.

I wanted to park the car, reach over the seat, and throttle her. “Being lied about sucks,” I said. “Doesn’t take much to get people talking.”

“Yeah, right,” she said. “Like anybody ever listened to me. They found for you, didn’t they?”

“So. You think that’s all that matters?”

“I never thought you’d actually quit.”

I pulled the car to the curb and turned to look at her.

She peered defiantly back. The clicking blinker seemed loud in the closed space of the car.

“Are you admitting that tantrum of yours was an act?” I said.

“Yeah,” she snapped. “What of it? I had plenty to worry about without school.”

“And that gives you the right to mess up my life?”

She rolled her eyes and then looked out the passenger window. “Mess up my life he says.”

“You’re goddamn right. That place meant something to me.”

“Oh, please.” She turned her angry glare on me. “If the place was so goddamned precious to you, you wouldn’t have left. But you did. And now you’ve got no problem laying your dumbass mistake in my lap. After all, I’m only the moron who didn’t graduate.”

Her cell phone rang.

She pulled it from her purse and frowned down at it for a moment before answering. “Aurora here,” she said, suddenly calm again. “No, I don’t think so. It’s been a long night already. Nothing’s gone right.” She closed her eyes. “It’s way past midnight.” She let her head fall back against the seat and sagged lower. “Because I’m exhausted.” She opened her eyes, saw me looking at her in the mirror, and quickly straightened her posture. “All right then, if you put it that way,” she said. “What’s the address? Apartment?” She put the phone back in her purse. “Have to go to Dumbo instead,” she said.

I’d been driving long enough to know what her conversation meant, and I wanted her to know that I knew. “Meeting a client?” I said.

“None of your business.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“We do what we have to. Don’t we, Mr. Teague? And guess what? You’re the asshole driving *me*. So put the fucking car in gear.” She stared right into my eyes, daring me to contradict her.

I faced her for a moment, hoping to find some kind of retort, but there was nothing to say. She wasn’t the one who’d lost his cool in the face of impersonal bureaucracy and a callous rumor mill. No, she was far too street-smart to be intimidated by that kind of foolishness. I put the car in gear and drove her toward the high-rise apartment buildings lining the East River.

CROTCHWATCHERS

by

Andrew J. Peters

“The world is divided into two kinds of people: people who check out a guy’s crotch when he walks by and people who don’t.”

Raymond said it just as simply as if he was reading an oral report for his social studies class. He had a lopsided ’fro, a black trench coat, and black, chipped nail polish on the ends of his skinny fingers. He passed the joint to Dougie and looked out to the Hudson River from the pier.

“Girls too?” Dougie said.

“Totally.”

Dougie took a pull on the joint. “What about people in China?”

“Don’t know. Never been. But why not? They’ve got eyes and crotches too.”

Dougie coughed out smoke. Raymond took the joint back and leaned against the fence, propped up on his elbows, one knee bouncing. The fence blocked off the edge of the pier, but you could climb through the spot where someone had pulled apart the chain links. Raymond and Dougie had a prime location at the far end where the wake of passing motorboats swelled up against the wood beams around the concrete platform. The pier was filling up with groups of kids. Black girls with rainbow necklaces sitting in confidential clusters. Puerto Rican boys with primped eyebrows. The city schools had let out. But Raymond and Dougie beat everyone there. They cut class after lunch and took the Long Island Rail Road from Freeport, dodging the conductor. A free trip. Their Friday routine. Sitting on the pier and watching the crowd gather.

“What about straight guys?” Dougie asked.

Raymond breathed out a hit. “Some of them look too. They’re just more cautious about it. You know—like our gym teacher in ninth grade.”

“Mr. Bentsen!”

“Yeah. The guy was a total perv. Watching us all take showers.”

Dougie did his best imitation: “Young men, you must wash yourselves vigorously. Use plenty of hot water to open up those pores.”

“Fuckin’ scumbag.”

Raymond dug into his jeans pocket and pulled out a switchblade. He flipped it around while Dougie finished off what was left of the joint. A garbage boat loped down the river. Some of the other boys drew up to the edge of the pier and waved and called out to the workers.

“Hey, Papi!”

“You wanna be my boyfriend?”

Dougie’s eyes followed the barge. “Where do they take all that garbage?”

“New Jersey.”

Dougie laughed. “Sucks to live there.”

Raymond shot up to his feet. “Fuckin’ assholes!” he yelled at the garbage men. The Puerto Rican boys started laughing. Raymond gave them a ferocious look. He sat back down, bony shoulders tensed. “Someday they’re gonna carry me away in one of those boats,” he told Dougie.

Dougie flicked the butt of the joint into the river. “You say the craziest shit.”

“And you’re no crotchwatcher.”

Dougie picked at the safety pins holding together a frayed tear in his jeans. It was true; he had never thought about checking out a guy’s goods. Even his secret crush at school. It was too risky. Being one of the only white kids in his town gave people enough reason to beat him up.

“So what’re we doing?” Dougie said.

“Do whatever the fuck you like. I’m taking a walk.”

Raymond got up and slipped through the split in the fence.

Dougie called after him. “Chill, dude.”

Raymond kept walking.

Fuck, Dougie thought. Raymond had the cigarettes.

* * *

It was an obsession now that the thought had entered Dougie’s head. His eyes wandered around the pier checking out the guys in jeans, shorts, and sweatpants. Raymond said that you could see everything if you looked close enough. But mostly he just pointed out the ones he claimed had big packages.

“He’s got a big one. Leans over to the left.”

“Did you see the package on that guy? Like a baby’s arm holding an apple.”

“All beans and no frank, that one.”

Dougie couldn’t make out anything. He was starting to get skeptical. He could see a bulge here and there, but nothing like Raymond had described. The guys all wore baggy pants except for the real queeny ones in tight jeans. And if you looked too long at one of them you were dead. They’d come sashaying over and wouldn’t leave you alone for the rest of the night.

Dougie bummed a cigarette from a quiet Spanish girl with slicked back hair and found a spare spot against the fence. He felt like there was a spotlight chasing him. Things were different when Raymond wasn’t around. The dude was a little crazy but somehow that balanced things out and made everything seem normal. Like on Dougie’s first day at Freeport High. He had just moved into town with his mom when she split with her boyfriend from the east end of the Island. Dougie stayed after school in the library because some kids told him he was going to get jumped on his way home. That’s where he met Raymond. Sitting alone at a table, Dougie was reading his first English class assignment: *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Raymond plopped down next to him, tossed his backpack on the table, and pulled out a stack of X-Men comic books. Dougie didn’t know much about comics, but Raymond had enough to say to keep the conversation going. When the library closed, Raymond walked Dougie home. They met up after school every day since.

Dougie searched through the crowd. Raymond had pulled disappearing acts before but usually not until they were on their way back to Long Island. He’d start running up Eighth Avenue like they were in a race, and Dougie would lose him. Or Raymond would duck into the subway saying they’d meet up later at Penn Station. Dougie wouldn’t hear from him until three or four o’clock in the morning when there’d be a tap on his bedroom window and a story that Raymond’s grandma locked him out of the apartment. Lately, Raymond spent more nights on Dougie’s bedroom floor than in his own bed.

The sun set and things got really lively at the pier. A group of guys brought out a radio and blasted Hot 97. Another group competed with a merengue station. Kids rapped, danced, and tossed back beers in brown paper bags. A middle-aged guy with a toupee stalked along the fence, trying to make eye contact with Dougie. Dougie got up and wandered toward the Westside Highway.

Halfway down the pier, he spotted a black kid in a trench bouncing through the crowd on the tips of his feet. They glanced at each other, and Raymond made his way over to Dougie, all casual. “C’mon, let’s get outta here.”

He pulled Dougie down the pier like they were evacuating a burning building.

* * *

The diner music reminded Dougie of sitting in a college admissions office. *All the lite favorites of the '70s, '80s, and today.* He and Raymond had been to the little coffee shop on West 4th Street before, but the owner tossed them out because they only bought one cup of coffee and kept ordering refills. The owner said there were “paying customers” waiting for a booth. Raymond called him a “goat-fucking spanakopita” on the way out.

But the owner wasn't around this time, and Raymond had a menu spread out on the table, flipping through the pages. “Order whatever you want,” he told Dougie.

Dougie looked at him strange.

Raymond reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a pair of twenty dollar bills, eyes never leaving his menu. When the waiter came over, Raymond ordered spaghetti and meatballs. Dougie asked for pancakes.

“Where'd you get the money?” Dougie asked.

“The kindness of strangers.”

The waiter brought the food, and Dougie hunched over his pancakes like a starving wolf. Raymond poured the entire shaker of grated cheese on his spaghetti and seasoned it liberally with red pepper flakes and salt. Dougie choked on his laugh as he watched him eat the concoction.

“Tastes better this way,” Raymond said. He groaned out a belch.

When Raymond wasn't scowling, which wasn't often, Dougie could see Raymond's eyes. Some people smile with their eyes, Dougie had heard on a corny TV show. Anyway, the expression fit Raymond to a T.

The waiter laid down the bill on the table before they finished eating. Raymond slid it over to his side. He rummaged through his jeans pocket to get the cash, and when he brought his hand out, a condom wrapper flipped onto his lap. Raymond flicked it to the floor and minded the bill.

“Hey—I'll pay you back,” Dougie said.

“Don't worry about it.”

“For real. My mom says I gotta get a job this summer. She knows somebody who can hook me up at Jones Beach.”

It was two months until graduation. Dougie had to earn some college money. Next fall, he was going to university upstate. Raymond never talked about future plans.

Raymond smirked. “The beach?”

“Yeah.”

“You know what that means.”

Dougie shrugged.

“You may become a crotchwatcher yet.”

They looked at each other and smiled. Then they laughed. Over the sneering waiters, the customers firing glares at their booth and at the awful lite music. Dougie laughed so much, his eyes teared up. It was just him and Raymond, a perfect moment, like when a thunderstorm passes and the whole world is golden.

“Hey, Dougie,” Raymond said. “When you get up to college, don’t let anybody give you shit. I mean...don’t ever let some guy take advantage of you.”

Dougie folded and refolded his straw wrapper into a tight wad. Raymond stared away with his hands shoved in his pockets. When Dougie looked up, he saw a gray-moustached man in a suit coming out of the kitchen. The owner. The man spotted Raymond and marched toward their booth.

“Get out of here. I don’t serve dirtbags.”

Raymond stood up, turned to the owner, and planted his switchblade in the guy’s stomach.

WEAVE

I have the thing that must be taken.
Removed, I will be as I should.

Knife, *there*, sawing my screams,
wild dog flesh frenzied by the needle.

I call to my mother who has given me up.
Each stitch catches my life.

Tight for his pleasure.
teeth clenched, the ritual night,

when I squat, when blood
or a baby comes out.

If I have been made right
Why does the thread pull so tight?

—Alison Hicks

A SELF-PORTRAIT

In the parking lot I watch a sparrow in a patch of brown dust.
A cloud of it swirls around her shaking feathers, brown wings
matched perfectly to her bath.

I wonder what bath would match me.

Powdery vermilion, perhaps?

Revealed in my black hair as a sign of wifeness.

Or turmeric, root yellow, musky like men?

Would I dare bathe in curry?

Is it sandalwood-scented talc,

smoothed over my skin on humid evenings
as a substitute for baths in the steamy summers of my childhood?

White?

I bathed today in powdered white sugar, dusting my skin with invisibility.

I watch a brown sparrow,
and I long for that dust.

—A. Anupama

author deconstructed

by

Matthew Ostapchuk

1986 – 2005

I.

The zygote, then the blastocyst, the embryo. Week 3 of gestation: brain, spinal cord, beating heart. Week 4 and 5: arm and leg buds, eye and ear structures. By Week 8, one can begin to see the true face.

i do not remember the womb, but i have read about childbirth: contractions, effacement, delivery. the amnion tears, releasing the fluid, a cradled and crushed infant. there is blood, pain, and illumination. there is a choking sob, breath— independence. i cannot imagine this. i cannot pretend to know my mother's pain. i cannot pretend that there was any truth for me in birth. it is academic.

there are photos of me as an infant, bald. i was nicknamed “the general,” after eisenhower.

II.

my father's odor is among the first true memories—the way it made my eyes burn and water when i crawled into bed with him and my mother early in the morning. i can smell it on myself now some mornings, the day-old sex that lingers oily on my skin.

and i remember, once, him walking naked to the bathroom, the dark ruff of pubic hair and his penis pendulous between his thighs.

i first notice the bands of scar tissue across his chest, shoulder to his waist, as wide as my wrist, when i'm six. inside he is rubber and plastic. as a young man, he stretched so thin that his vessels split.

i had always thought my father had a potbelly, the kind on which one could comfortably rest a beer can. my mother explained to me later, out of earshot, that his stomach muscles had been destroyed by the surgeries, nothing left to hold his guts back. maybe it was psychological, but i swear that when i pressed an ear to his stomach, there was a constant lion's roar—a digestive rumble of traffic.

III.

As the story goes, Romulus and Remus were suckled by a she-wolf. Romulus went on to slay his brother, splitting his skull with a stone.

one day after school i locked my brother out of the house. he ran from door to door, trying each. i laughed at him behind the glass, original to the house, almost two hundred years old. there was a quality to the glass that caused his face to warp, to droop in an odd way. he frowned, made a fist and reached through the pane. all i saw were splinters of glass and blood.

my father explained later that the boy scout tourniquet i used could have cost him his arm.

broth·er

Function: *noun*

Inflected Form(s): *plural* brothers *also* breth·ren

1: a male who has the same parents as another or one parent in common with another

2: matthew and spenser williams

we sat in the car in the parking lot of the pancake diner. my father said, "i didn't want you to have my disease. we went to a doctor. it's a process called 'artificial insemination.'" he explained to us the likelihood of passing on the marfan's. he explained to us our genetic variance, spenser's blond hair, my brown matte. his most pressing fear was that he would lose us when we knew. we were confused about the way his hands shook.

IV.

i am eleven when anthony sleeps over. i feel his breath in my nostrils and how his lips are chapped. instead, what if i had pretended to be asleep? he doesn't want to acknowledge our names. the next day at school he says "faggot," and i push him off the bench of the lunch table. i drive him into the floor.

while coordinating an after-school program in a local elementary school, i tried to explain to a seventh grader why his actions were inappropriate, what would be a more legitimate way to act. "Legitimate," he replied, "is just another word for 'rules.'" in seventh grade, i used to ball up my homework assignments and lose them in the bottom of my backpack or out the window of the bus. in seventh grade, i had seen all my friends naked.

summer camp was a place to experiment. my favorite belt was a rainbow. my favorite pair of shorts were those identified by a boy who sat behind me during the orchestra performances, slyly mentioned the "outline of cock."

in ninth grade i escape to a farm in new hampshire, the meeting school. this is where i bathed in spirituality.

someone was neglectful, letting the only two out kids on campus board together. it took me two fickle weeks to decide i didn't want him in my bed every night.

taylor sent me pictures of his penis, and his fleshy lump of a body splayed on a bed, pantomimed the ways he wanted to try fucking me. i entertained fantasies and i never let him know me.

Freud writes: "An invitation to a caress of the anal zone is still used to-day, as it was in ancient times, to express defiance or defiant scorn, and thus in reality signifies an act of tenderness that has been overtaken by repression. An exposure of the buttocks represents a softening down of this spoken invitation into a gesture."

the first person i fall in love with: jenny is a transsexual—she becomes "jenns," becomes "juska." he becomes "caleb."

on television i watched a man describe how he had shaved the hair of his chest into an arrow pointing at his balls. he had tried to shape his pubic hair into a heart and failed. i had never considered shapes. i stopped shaving my pubic hair in high school. the base of the penis becomes enraged, and the trunk and testicles against bare flesh are suddenly deflated and juvenile. i've seen my reflection, it was prepubescent years too long.

Jung claims: "The finest of all symbols of the libido is the human figure, conceived as a demon or hero." He must have been referring to the male figure, the penis.

looking at myself through the steam on the mirror: there was darkness where my eyes should have been and a black tousel on my head, black along my jaw. there were pale dimes of nipples. the mirror cut me off at the waist. it felt familiar, but when i wiped away the steam i didn't recognize the person staring back.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," Nabokov writes, "Look at this tangle of thorns."

V.

be·zoar

Pronunciation: \bee-zawr also -zohr\

Function: *noun*

1: a calculus or concretion found in the stomach or intestines of certain animals, especially ruminants, formerly reputed to be an effective remedy for poison.

2: Obsolete . a counterpoison or antidote.

3: Gut stone of grief.

every day from the age of five until i was twenty-one, i chewed my fingernails down to blood. extrapolated, that means i have torn each finger eight thousand times. it was an automatic reaction to the world. later, i resorted to picking the nails apart, pitting them against each other, or precise incisions with the cuticle cutters.

the chaplain's office in the hospital was wallpapered with that vinyl, vertical V pattern, easy to clean. the surgeon who tried to repair my father's broken watch heart had to sit and observe two young boys hear about the death of their father—he had blue eyes like my brother's, and they were so sad. there is no more eloquent way to explain. “we discovered another aneurysm on his heart, larger than we expected. his body just couldn't handle it,” the chaplain said to my mother.

even this long after ingesting the pills, the best i can remember of that time is fragments and mist. the chemical name is alprazolam, a benzodiazepine drug. a dose was half a pill. i once took fifteen pills at a time, and smiled and smiled and smiled and smiled. the kids i handed my surplus to ground them into dust and snorted the powder.

i wandered in the seventy acres of forest behind the meeting school, trying to get lost. i could never bring myself to stop paying attention to the direction of the stream or how many steps i'd taken. in my backpack was a knife, a navel orange, a hummus sandwich. i watched the squirrels chase each other and rut.

the blood from slaughtering chickens stained the snow, first bright red, then a deep maroon, then amber. i watched the sky every day, waiting for a fresh white coat.

VI.

i began to summarize life:

in a world of sleek wolves, i am an hyena.

my son will make all my mistakes.

the forests of new hampshire.

shreds of fulfillment.

my life, boiled down to moments of experience, definite spaces that shaped my crude reflection.

FLOWER PRESS

You come to me now,
opening the book to where
I was placed between the pages
so long ago.

You find me transformed,
a brittle blossom
crumpled in time
disintegrating in the fresh air of now.

The fragrance and moisture of yesterday
have permeated the paper days and years,
staining them with my youthful image
preserved in one-dimensional melancholy.

A delicate pattern of my former self
has been subsumed by the pages of the book,
while I—I, myself—dance in the garden.

—H. Pan Brown

AN EXTRAPOLATION OF THE MOVIE *LABYRINTH* IN THREE PARTS

1 — It was all about David Bowie's crotch. At a sleepover, we wondered whether or not the filmmakers had been aware of the singer's 3D like bulge. Dance Baby Dance.

2 — It's a story to get lost in about a place to get lost in, one with goblins or trolls on every upside-down staircase like an Escher painting or the mix-upped hallways of the Winchester Mystery house with its door to nowhere.

3 — When you put yourself into the narrative you prepare. Before you agree to enter, you procure a ball of thread made from one of Iman's wigs that, when unraveled, makes you forget whether you want to leave or stay because all you need is to lie down on the hairs plush piles where you can dream of sharp corners and turns that flesh out into cylinders, then circles, or cartoon dots that wormhole you anywhere because they contain each and every point of all abandoned and unsolved puzzles which are now yours to name.

—Jessie Carty

DISCOVERING PLAYBOY

by

Carole A. Poppleton

Like so many men in the 1970s, my father had a passion for Ian Fleming's novels and was always eager to see the newest film adaptation. Back then, Bond—*James Bond*—was played by Roger Moore, a suave, hip lady-killer who always performed best under pressure, whether that pressure originated from a cold-war Soviet agent, his bosses within the elite realm of the British Secret Service, or a sexy femme fatale he needed to conquer. James Bond was the epitome of cool, of virility, a man who wrote his own rules and lived a life of intrigue and adventure. He was probably every suburban husband's/father's hero at some point in his routine life of office, home, daycare, and "honey do" lists.

When a new Bond movie would open, my father would take my sister and me with him to see it. At the time this seemed like an ordinary thing, something daughters and fathers normally do together. However, I saw my first Bond film around age eight, so my sister would have been ten. Even in the '70s, Bond films were pretty racy romps. But I guess my father had to take us since I don't recall him having any real friends, at least not any males who visited our house. He was not one to play in a sports league or hang out drinking beer with the neighbors. A Yale-educated attorney, he had a certain off-putting air about him and often seemed out of place in our suburban neighborhood in Alabama. His uniform was a sport coat and tie, not khakis and a T-shirt. I spent almost every Saturday with him, doing whatever he needed to do: run to the office, rake leaves in the yard, slap steaks on the grill, and, of course, visit the local ABC store to purchase the week's supply of martini fixings. Going to see a Bond film and eating pizza afterward was just another event in our weekend, simple as that.

I guess it was an attempt to give my stay-at-home mom a bit of a reprieve, and she knew what movies we were seeing. Maybe she didn't care or didn't fully realize how risqué those adaptations were, but I did. My indoctrination into the milieu of sexuality, the complex dynamics between men and women, was largely formulated by James Bond movies and my father's reactions to them. Nothing made him happier than to see James finesse his way out of a deadly situation, challenge authority, and sleep with a string of gorgeous women. I watched both the screen and my father and learned that women like Thumper, Bambie, and Pussy Galore (who I thought was some kind of cat lover) were the standard to which all women should aspire: physically flawless, smart and sassy, and very, very eager to sleep with James, no matter what the consequence (quite often a roll in the hay with James cost the woman her life).

Around age nine, I was walking in my neighborhood with my best friend, a girl who lived two streets over and with whom I did everything. We were inseparable for several years in the early '70s, trying our best to make sense of a world still reeling from Vietnam, the woman's revolution, and psychedelic rock.

One day, I spied a brown paper bag, the kind we would get at the Piggly Wiggly grocery store, stuffed behind some dense, green bushes in a yard near my house. Curious, I retrieved the bag to see what was inside. My friend and I looked in and found a stash of *Playboy* magazines, perhaps thirty or so, discarded by someone for some unknown reason.

I remember feeling a flush of excitement and then something else, something akin to guilt. I knew these were “bad” magazines and not anything we should be looking at, but look we did. We slunk away into a quiet ditch and flipped through the glossy pages, staring at picture after picture of nude women, posing seductively and staring out at an imaginary audience. I saw their bodies, voluminous and curvy, their wet and parted lips, and read the bios that accompanied the centerfold spread: *Hi. My name is Brandy. I love to play volleyball. I want to study to become a teacher. I am really just a simple girl looking for my Prince Charming.* All of these fact sheets were “handwritten” in large, loopy, childish scrawls, some with smiley faces dotting the i’s. It was wrong, I knew, to look at these magazines, but somehow I could not stop. These women, like the ones I had seen in the Bond movies, fascinated me.

My friend was not as intrigued as I. She wanted to abandon the brown bag and act like we had never found it. But I came up with a better idea. I knew these magazines needed to be given to someone older, someone wiser, someone who would know how to dispose of them properly. I decided to take the bag home and give it to my father so he could get rid of them, maybe even take them to the recycling center, something we often did on Saturdays with all the bundled newsprint that accumulated in the house.

I remember how I felt when I presented my find to my father. It was that same strange sensation that I had done something wrong, that same feeling in the pit of my stomach that I was guilty of something—although I could not name what that something might be. Wasn’t I doing the right thing, turning over a huge stack of pornography to an adult? Upon receipt of the dirty brown sack, my father acted oddly too. He peered inside, then rolled the top down securely, sealing all those naked women inside. He praised me for bringing it to him because this was material that did not belong on the street or in the hands of children. “I’ll take care of this!” he said sternly and told me he would get rid of it. I had done the right thing. Despite these reassurances, I continued to feel awash in shame.

Weeks went by and I forgot about the bag of *Playboys*. I continued to ride my bike through the placid, steamy streets of our neighborhood, pick fights with my sisters, mark my progress at the local library in the summer reading competition. Life was humid and dull and some days simply too hot to venture outdoors, although my mother constantly commanded, “Go outside and play!”

Against my parents’ wishes, I would often sneak into their bedroom and rifle through their belongings. I loved to play at the bathroom vanity with my mother’s bottles and jars, to delve into her drawers full of silk scarves and costume jewelry. My father’s closet held mysteries too: rows of dark suits, freshly starched shirts with the dry cleaner tags hanging on the buttons, a rack with dozens of colorful

ties to try on. I enjoyed slipping into the coolness of their room to explore, a secret sensation of being closer to them by touching their most intimate objects, a secret sensation of breaking the rules. On this summer day, however, in the back of my father's closet, tucked behind rows of dress shoes and the smell of cedar, I saw something familiar; a crumpled, brown paper sack imprinted with the face of a smiling pig, beckoned me to pick it up and look inside. I knew what I would find, but I did it anyway.

Inside all those familiar magazines shone, glossy and slick. I pulled out one after the other and flipped through it, filled with that now all too recognizable sensation of fascination, guilt, and shame. But I couldn't stop. I wanted to understand why my father had kept them, why they still were in our home, hidden in the depths of his closet. These questions burned inside me, but I never asked for any answers. After all, I was breaking the rules and digging through his closet. Didn't I deserve this shame, this confusion? Despite these multifarious feelings churning in my stomach, I continued to check on the *Playboy* stash throughout the summer.

Maybe part of me was hoping my father would dispose of them, as he had said, and I would find the closet empty. Or else that other unnamable, peculiar compulsion to look through the pages at all those ripe and open girls was stronger than I realized. I saw them as beautiful and pathetic, powerful and powerless... So similar to the brilliant spies who always succumbed to the sexual charms of James Bond. I wondered if I would ever look like one of these models and compared their forms to my own and to the other bodies of women I had seen: my mother's and older sisters'. They looked nothing alike. The women in the magazine were obviously real people, but they reminded me more of my Barbie dolls, with exaggerated proportions and doe-eyed stares. They were like Bond girls, devoid of voice or movement.

Eventually, as summer wore on, I forgot about the *Playboys*, forgot to check my father's closet, grew tired of looking at those women's flawless faces and heavy breasts. I knew something about those females held power, over me and my father, but that power was limited. Like any young child, I was bewildered by the photos, my father's actions, and the way I felt; so I returned to the outside world of play, and bike riding, and lazy days spent running wild in the neighborhood with my friends and my dogs, things that I could understand. Eventually, too, my sister and I stopped going to see James Bond films with my father. Once puberty began, it was embarrassing and uncomfortable to watch anything of a sexual nature with my father or my mother. I retreated to my basement room, spending countless hours watching old Elvis films in black-and-white and playing records on my turntable. The space between my parents and I grew as I was thrust into the world of high school and its petty but oh-so-important-at-the-time dramas.

Like most events of childhood, the discovery of *Playboy* faded from consciousness, to be pushed down into the strata of memory, relegated to the far-flung recesses of my mind. I am not sure what dredged it up, what caused those synapses to fire and the thoughts surrounding that long ago time to surface. Perhaps it was watching a new Bond film or fingering a brown paper bag in the

grocery check-out line where I mused over the critical choice of “Paper or plastic?” I never did find out what happened to that worn Piggly Wiggly sack or those aging periodicals. Perhaps, when we moved, those posed and airbrushed figures were left in their container, deposited in another dark place, left in a trash pile for someone else to discover. Or else, maybe, they eventually found their way to the recycling center where a lonely city worker marveled at his luck, smuggling them home to gaze at those frozen bodies night after night. Or they stayed sealed in the bag, thrown onto the conveyor belt to be masticated to a fine pulp by some machine eager to devour their glossy pages and turn them in to something new.

ODE TO MY GUITAR

Orgasms should be this pure. Your
soft maple neck, holding the same

fingers that hold you. The way light
shimmers off your glittering body

when I swing you in my arms. My
digits slide up and down your

strings, stopping at frets only long
enough to make you sing or scream.

—William Wright Harris

GUITAR HERO

This afternoon, I asked Johnny Cash's fan for an encore. Rather than "Walk the Line," "Amazing Grace how sweet the sound" drooled from this short old Mexican's mouth while he strummed hairs

on his belly. Johnny knew more than those guitar chords. "Piano players pray for long fingers," he said. I didn't pray for fingers; "long" became an adjective associated with my fingers at birth. And my fingers have

touched white keys without repercussions—neighbors throwing their fist at my apartment door, monitoring volume control. Johnny asked me to sing, but he interrupted me,

"I survived all succeeding wars save Vietnam. Son, I squeezed my cheeks so tight in those ditches while hiding from the Vietcong. Holding my bowels was hell—couldn't make a sound."

I shifted weight to my good foot as I leaned on my truck; Mr. Johnny gave another exclusive how that grace he sung about slithered through his rotten good tooth while

carrying every beer can and bottle aroma he has ever drunk to help cope with the hell he has seen during Nam. And I just listened until his wife returned with two big brown grocery bags to their Chevy Caprice

that saw Mr. Johnny off when he was heading to fight in Nam. Johnny and his wife cruised off, and he shot his left thumb out his front window. He asked, "Save me on one of your pages—free of charge."

—Patrick Lee Clark

MUSIC AND BEER

by

Michele L. Whitney

My first memory was musical. I was four years old and had been in a fashion show where for entertainment this guy was playing the bongos. I loved the sound of those drums, and I wanted to recreate that sound. So I found a shoebox and beat my little hands on the box and pretended they were bongos and started singing my own song.

But the instrument I chose was not the drums. I am a flutist, or flautist, depending on who you ask, but I prefer the term “flutist.” From first to sixth grade, I went to a school that fiercely encouraged the arts. Our school had many music performance opportunities, the younger kids played plastic recorders, and the older you got, you had the opportunity to progress to beginning band and then to the coveted advanced band. There was always a reason for a concert, the end of the year, beginning of the year, Christmas, Black History Month. Our school’s band and choir was invited to perform at various places across the city.

In addition, trips to Orchestra Hall for Chicago Symphony Orchestra concerts were common. Anything that had to do with music, our music teacher, Mr. Elmore was going to make sure that we did it. When I was in second grade, Mr. Elmore even took us on a trip to see the movie *Amadeus*. After seeing that movie, I fell in love with classical music. As we stood outside the theater, I remember one of my classmates asking, “Is Mozart still alive?” We all laughed. But I secretly wished that he was alive because his music felt alive to me.

When I turned ten and entered the fourth grade, the kids in my school were required to choose an instrument to play in the beginning band. Choosing the flute seemed like the thing to do because a lot of other girls chose the flute to play as well. Mr. Elmore taught us how to fix our mouths to play, and we all began to take the head joint of the flute to see if we could make a sound. I took the head joint, placed my hand on the other end, fixed my lips as if I were going to give a kiss, slightly open, but gentle, and gave a slight blow.

It sounded like a horn with a stuffy nose, but I did it with ease. We already knew how to read music, so it was an easy transition to play an instrument. I began to learn the keys and the fingerings for the different notes, and soon my talent began to shine. Mr. Elmore took a special interest in me and chose a solo for me to play at the end of the year concert. The song I played was *I’m Called Little Buttercup*, a short, sweet, delightful little tune from the comic opera, *HMS Pinafore*. I practiced and practiced that song, and, in my mind, I could never seem to get it just right. Even the day of the performance, I felt like I had messed up throughout the entire song. But my mom and dad were so proud; they gave me love and praise after the performance. You would have thought I had played the entire opera instead of a two minute excerpt. But I still felt I had not done well enough.

After “Little Buttercup,” I began playing at my church and sometimes at churches in the area. At that time, we attended a small Lutheran Church with a majority African-American congregation. I think my mom and dad thought I was a bit of a phenomenon, not because of my amazing talent, but because I was a little black girl from the south side of Chicago that played classical flute music. And I was good at what I did. There were some of us, but there weren’t a lot of us. So my parents began investing in my talent. I began to take private lessons, and when I was eleven years old, I won a scholarship for a semester to take private lessons at the Sherwood Conservatory of Music in Chicago.

It was when I was taking private lessons at Sherwood that I began to realize I lived in a different type of household.

My dad and I were close when I was younger, and it seemed like we did everything together. Our favorite time was going to see the White Sox play at the old Comiskey Park. He would teach me everything I needed to know about the game, but the best part was that he bought me all the pizza, hot dogs, peanuts, and cotton candy that I wanted. Sometimes I would leave those games thinking I was going to explode. He would also buy himself plenty of beer. As I got older, I realized that he bought himself a lot of beer, not just at the baseball game. Actually, as time went on, I realized that my dad could not make it through the day without going through at least one six-pack of his favorite beer.

As my musical talent became stronger and I had more performance opportunities, my dad found more opportunities to drink. He started coming home from work drunk, was found drunk on the job or passed out drunk on the job, or sometimes he simply did not go to his job at all. Arguments with my mom were common, but they soon became a regular occurrence and were more physical. My mom became my emotional support, especially for any flute performances because my dad would usually be drunk.

By the time I turned twelve, Mr. Elmore consistently encouraged my talent by choosing another more difficult solo for me to play. The song was called *Entr’acte* from the opera *Carmen* by Georges Bizet. It is the introduction to Act III of the opera and a beautiful piece of music with a slow tempo. The most challenging thing about this piece of music is a high B-flat that is played toward the beginning of the piece. This note is one of the highest notes played on a flute, and up until that point, I had never played a note that high. In addition to learning the complicated fingering of a high B-flat, there has to be enough air in your lungs to make that note sing, or else it sounds like someone screaming.

The thing about *Entr’acte* was that if I didn’t get those first few notes just right, including the high B-flat, it would ruin the rest of the song. At least it ruined it in my head. It just would not feel right within my soul when I messed up those first few notes. I demanded perfection. If the first part wasn’t perfect, the rest of the song could go to hell. If it wasn’t perfect, I was required to give myself a private beat down to do better.

My mom loved to hear me play *Entr'acte*, my mom once commented that she wanted me to play it at her funeral, which I found intriguing. So by the time I was twelve, I had my own signature classical piece that I played everywhere, including church. The pastor had asked me to play a song one Sunday during the summer for a special church service. Instead of choosing a gospel tune or a hymn, my mom suggested I play *Entr'acte*.

We decided the whole family should be there to hear me play that Sunday: my mom, Dad, and my grandma. By then, my dad hardly went to church but would go if I was playing, especially to hear that song. My grandma was also living with us because she had Alzheimer's disease and could not be alone. I wanted my grandma there too because she never got to go anywhere, and I wanted her to hear me play. I thought it could help her.

The day of the performance was a beautiful, warm, summer day. My mom wore a peach sundress with a multicolored shirt over it to match. I wore a similar color dress. We had two cars, so the plan was for me and my mom to go early to the church, so that I could rehearse. My dad was supposed to bring my grandma and meet us there in time for the service to start. My mom had also asked my dad to make sure that my grandma was dressed okay. My dad said he would handle it. He was also having a beer for breakfast.

My mom and I arrived at the church, and I rehearsed for a bit and set up my music stand and background music. The sun was shining brightly through the stained glass windows in the church, and the warm air rushed inside the unair-conditioned little church. People began fanning themselves with handmade church fans. The choir took their seats and looked uncomfortably hot in their red and white choir robes. Soon, the church service started. I looked back for my dad, and he had not arrived, but that was fine, I wasn't supposed to begin playing until halfway through the service. The service went on and he still hadn't shown up. I kept looking back for him. Right before the time came for me to play my solo; I turned around to take one last look for my dad. He finally entered the church.

The ushers opened the door, and he slowly walked in wearing a beige wool sweater, and alongside was my grandmother, wearing a fur coat.

It was at least seventy to seventy-five degrees outside.

They entered the small church sanctuary and *everyone* noticed them. In my head, the church music stopped, and you could hear gasps all around. I was so embarrassed. They took their seats.

I turn around and it's time for me to play.

I nervously got up and approached the altar with my flute in my right hand and put my music on the music stand. The background music began to play. I had at least two measures; one minute of music to get it together. Time to start. The first couple of notes sounded a bit shaky. Here comes the high B-flat. *Crash*. It sounded like someone was being choked. I had failed. The rest was done. I tried to

keep playing, but nothing else sounded right. I gave up. I stopped playing and burst into tears and stomped my feet on the floor like a child. But wait, I was a child. I clenched my flute in my right hand and stomped my way over to the pew where my mom was sitting.

My mom was mortified and thought I was sick, and must have said, “What’s wrong, what happened, it’s okay baby.” My grandmother looked dazed and confused. My dad came to me and put his arms around me, and I collapsed and cried in his arms, as I rocked back and forth. I couldn’t stop crying. I was in my dad’s arms, the man who had just embarrassed the hell out of me, and I smelled beer. As a matter of fact, I smelled a lot of alcohol on him. If I would have lit a match, it would have set us all on fire.

The church began to applaud, and I’m thinking, *what the hell for?* I began to cry more. The pastor continued the service, but before his sermon he told me to finish my solo.

Did these people not realize that my father had just embarrassed the shit out of me by coming into church drunk in the summer time with a wool sweater on?

You have to finish.

Musicians just don’t stop in the middle of performances. I had broken a performing artist law. It is in the ten commandments of the performing arts that you just don’t stop in the middle of a performance when things get tough. You barely stop if the stage falls in.

I finally calmed down enough and broke away from my father’s arms and staggered my way up to finish the solo. It was probably the worst version of *Entr’acte* ever played, but I hit the B-flat with ease. I got a standing ovation.

If they only knew how I felt inside.



Wall Bell
—Gabriel Padilha

HALLOWEEN DECORATIONS

by

Brian Alan Ellis

Halloween really went to hell for the Davis family. It's a shame too, since my twin brother Jasper and I were such fans. Though Mom, she was Halloween's biggest advocate, always doing that extra something, which was nice since most of the mothers whose kids went to our school—the moms who dressed up like righteous, Bible-pushing Christians year-round—wouldn't go through half the trouble she did.

See, after Dad had died, Mom worked as a seamstress. Decorative statements were her passion, especially during Halloween, and she'd spend meticulous hours hand-crafting many of our ghoulish knick-knacks. In fact, she even tailored costumes for us.

The costume that stands out most, for me, was a near-replica Ghostbusters jumpsuit she'd made when I was six. (That same year she constructed a He-Man "chest-plate" for Jasper out of cloth and suspenders, which, compared to my sweet ghost-busting outfit, was pretty disappointing.)

As for decorations, Mr. Scary—a scarecrow mom had assembled extensively out of wool and straw and black garbage bags when Jasper and I were thirteen—was definitely the pinnacle of her efforts.

The life-size effigy, which hung from the lamppost in front of our house, looked so menacing that Jasper and I would watch from the safety of our kitchen window as people approaching our house either crossed the street or turned the other way entirely. (Heck, Jasper and I were so unsure about it ourselves that we sometimes did the same, which was basically how the name "Mr. Scary" started.)

Sadly, about a week into Mr. Scary's dominance over the neighborhood, the phone rang. It rang, if I recall, while Jasper and I were in the living room watching *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Mom answered and I could tell from the concern in her voice that something was amiss.

"I'm so sorry, Jeanne," I heard Mom say into the phone. "—yes, right away."

Jeanne was the 52-year-old widow who lived next door. She always brought us cakes and brownies, and was very nice.

Mom hung up the phone.

"How was Jeanne's Tahiti trip?" I asked, hoping the answer wouldn't be a bad one.

Mom stood there awhile, biting her thumbnail and gazing at the floor as though my question had fallen into the carpet and was lost forever. Finally she looked at us and said, “Devon, Jasper—I want you two to go outside and take down Mr. Scary.”

We, of course, tried reasoning with her, yet no ifs, ands, or buts were about it. So down came Mr. Scary.

“What now?” Jasper asked, sadly draping his limp carcass along our oil-stained driveway.

“Destroy it,” Mom said.

“What!” we both cried.

This was too much. Still, Mom wanted it done, and who were we to argue? So Jasper and I went ahead and disemboweled poor Mr. Scary, who, in the short time he was with us, had become, we felt, an illegitimate family member—something to fill the empty space Dad’s passing had left us with.

Later that night, at dinner, Jasper asked Mom if we could pray for Mr. Scary.

“If anyone deserves prayer,” she said, “it’s Jeanne. So let’s pray.”

We clasped our hands, closed our eyes, bowed our heads, and prayed for Jeanne. And once Jeanne was prayed for, we ate in silence until Mom spoke up again.

“Remember Jeanne’s son?” she asked. “The one in Heaven? We went to the funeral, remember?”

Jasper and I nodded into our plates. We remembered.

“Well, Jeanne didn’t like Mr. Scary,” Mom said. “In fact, the moment she saw him she burst into tears and locked herself in her house. She didn’t eat or sleep for two whole days.”

“Gee,” I said, “I knew Mr. Scary was kind of creepy, but—”

“Don’t you get it?”

I didn’t. I shrugged at Mom’s question.

Apparently, Jeanne told Mom that Mr. Scary reminded her of her son—or at least the body of her son—when he was found hanging inside her walk-in closet, dead from suicide, two years before.

Jasper's face went pale as Mom explained this to us. (I couldn't tell if mine had or not, but my mouth suddenly felt as though I'd eaten chalk.)

Afterward, Mom told us to run upstairs and make Jeanne a "Get Well Soon" card, which we, of course, did. Only, she never got it:

Jeanne, that following morning, would drop dead of a heart attack.

* * *

Halloween just wasn't the same after the Mr. Scary incident. It had become more obligatory than festive—a regression of interest that culminated the year our luck had really soured, once Jasper and I started high school.

See, after Mom had lost her job because of drinking, we moved in with Grandpa, who lived in Paradise Acre, a senior citizens community where people, when it came to Halloween (and almost everything else), were even less spirited than we were, which was fully realized when nobody on our block had or was going to be cobwebbing their home. This, to us, regardless of our slight aversion toward Halloween, was taboo, and it sent Mom spiraling into an existential tizzy.

Jasper and I, arriving home from school one day, saw her tearing down all the decorations the three of us (Grandpa wouldn't help) had put up in our yard.

"Mom," I said, "what are you—put down the—don't smash Dracula's spooky light-up castle, anything but that!"

Mom looked at me and said, "Jesus Christ, Devon, what's the point? We're the only ones who give a shit, goddamn it!"

It was the first time Jasper and I had ever heard Mom use the Lord's name in vain, let alone cuss. (Though, I'll admit, it was pretty impressive the way she'd managed both in one fell swoop.)

"What do you expect?" I said. "These Paradise Acre people are, like, ninety-seven years old."

"That's true," said Jasper, "they're already, like, walking Halloween decorations. You've seen them. They stumble around like zombies. Except most of them don't have any teeth, so they can't bite."

"Screw 'em!" Mom hurled a plastic jack-o'-lantern at a passing car. "We probably won't even have trick-or-treaters this year!"

I knew she was right about that.

Then Grandpa came out into the yard. "What's the commotion?" he said.

Mom looked at him very seriously and said, "Go back in the house, Dad."

When Grandpa refused, Mom walloped him with the broomstick that belonged to our “witch” decoration.

“Why, you rotten—” Grandpa turned and waddled back inside the house. “You guys are nuts,” is what he mumbled on the way there.

I wanted to follow him. I figured it was safer in the house, less crazy. *Donahue* was on.

“Well?” Mom handed Jasper a jack-o’-lantern. “You two gonna help me or what?”

Jasper brought his arm back and lobbed that orange son of a gun as far as it would go. I didn’t have the heart for such violence, so I neatly folded our cardboard skeleton in half and placed it under my arm.

“Don’t be a pussy!”

Mom really said this to me. She even scowled when she said it.

I turned to Jasper and figured we both were thinking the same thing—whether or not Christmas in the Davis family would suffer a similar fate.

Then a wooden tombstone flew toward me, and though my mind was elsewhere—the hanging of Jeanne’s son; the gutting of Mr. Scary; the buried bones of my father; the questionable mentality of my mother; the failing of Halloween, and the impossibility of Christmas—I still had the good enough sense to duck.

OXFORD AMERICAN

Did the editors
give thought to
the guide words
on top
of each page?

Lengua linguistica.

Not one, but two,
or three word meanings
reclining in the ticklish curiosity
of their birth.

Readers delight.

Did the editors
look at page breaks
for overall effect
to avoid the jolt of
my seeing *puta* in bold
on the top of page 1378
in the *Oxford American Dictionary*?

Poota/noun. Informal.
(in Spanish-speaking regions)
A prostitute or slut.

—Barbara Tramonte

CRISP

The cafeteria women
behind the counter
wearing white caps
made an apple crisp
you never forgot.

There you were,
a small brown boy living
on a brown hill,
this America still new.
In order to think
apple
you had to think
manzana
first.

But this crisp—the flavors
of cinnamon, butter, brown sugar,
and apples cooked to soft
golden loveliness—
lived in you
long after *manzana*
was the word you
had to dig for.

In the first years of
our marriage, I tried
every recipe, searching
for the exact taste
you craved, stalking
the secret, the way
to get to that part of you
I would never know.

But nothing matched
the childhood crisp.
Nothing came close, not a brown
betty or kugel or crumble.
Nothing I could find
was ever as good, could bring
back the taste you
thought you remembered,
and, eventually,
I stopped trying.

—Jessica Barksdale

FIRST DATE

I took you to the Taj Mahal
on High Street in Columbus.
November blew dark and damp
by dinner, biting cold
as we walked from the car. The air
inside rubbed warm and fragrant
as we settled across from each other
at a white-clothed table.

We drank sweet spiced tea softened
with milk, shared pakora and naan,
channa saag and aloo gobi
and tender aromatic rice. The spices,
the textures, my hand on your knee,
all new to you, as we sipped tea
after the meal. You laughed
at something I said, and I glimpsed
your reflection in a gilt-edged mirror,
face framed by dark silk curtains, gold bells.

I wanted to take you everywhere
in that moment, frame your beauty
and hold it. We ordered kheer,
thin rice pudding with pistachios
and cardamom. The waiter, a dark
beautiful boy with wavy hair to his collar,
brought one bowl, two heavy
spoons, just touching, nestled neatly
on a creamy-white, gold-stamped saucer.

—Emily May Anderson

EXED OUT

by

Lenny Levine

The thing is, I should be feeling good. Wouldn't you, if you were lying under a hot sun on a beach in Saint Martin in the middle of January, with your friends back in New York freezing their asses off under two feet of snow? I mean, who wouldn't feel great in a situation like that, you know what I'm saying?

Especially when you're there on that beach with a beautiful woman. And I'm talking supermodel-beautiful. Felice, with no exaggeration, makes J. Lo look like Rosie O'Donnell. I'm serious.

And smart? Smart doesn't even half describe her. How about, brilliant? How about, professor of economics at Columbia, is that smart enough?

"Yeah?" you might say, if you wanted to be a dick about it. "I'll bet sex with a brainiac isn't that great." Well, sorry to disappoint you, but it's incredible. It's beyond incredible, it's astonishing. Transcendent! Those are her words, not mine.

So I should be feeling pretty damn good, right? Wrong.

Because ever since we got on the plane to come down here, she can't stop talking about Andrew.

Andrew is Felice's ex-boyfriend. He's an economist from Harvard, and he just got appointed to some big presidential commission. It was in *The New York Times* the day we left.

"That smug, self-aggrandizing asshole," she said, tossing the paper aside as we sat in the airport lounge. "He's going to be even more impossible to live with now."

"So?" I said. "Why should you care?"

"I shouldn't and I don't, because it's not my concern, thank God!" She gave a little shudder and then looked in my eyes. "Josh," she said, "will you promise me you'll never regard yourself as superior to others?"

No problem with that one. I was about to speak when she put her finger on my lips and stopped me. "Don't say anything, I shouldn't have even asked. You don't have an egotistical bone in your body. You could never be anything like that insufferable prick."

She went back to her book, something by somebody named Milton Friedman. She didn't seem to like it much, because she kept shaking her head,

underlining things, and making soft sounds of disgust. I figured that was that, but of course, it wasn't.

* * *

We met about a month-and-a-half ago at Mister Sandman's, this place on Second Avenue where I tend bar. She came in one Tuesday night with two other women, semi-regulars whose names I forget, and she was instantly the best-looking woman there.

Her friends must have worked hard to convince her to join them, because she clearly was not having a good time. Guys were hitting on her left and right, and she was basically ignoring them. Finally, they'd give up and start talking to the other two. Maybe that was the plan all along.

Anyhow, there happened to be a basketball game on TV, and it was playing on the big screen behind the bar. St. John's versus Connecticut. Most of the guys were watching it, since other than Felice, who'd just shot them down, there wasn't much else to look at.

St. John's was, surprisingly, sticking it to Connecticut. At one point, they pulled off a perfect pick and roll, ending in a spectacular slam. All the guys in the place went nuts.

Felice glanced up at me from the vodka and tonic she'd been nursing and said, "What just happened?"

"A textbook pick and roll," I told her.

Maybe it was the word "textbook," I don't know, but she suddenly got interested. "What does that mean?" she said.

So I explained it to her.

"A pick and roll is the essence of teamwork in basketball. It's usually a big guy and a little guy. The little guy has the ball, and the big guy insinuates himself between the ball handler and his defender. That's called a 'pick.' As soon as the defender tries to get around him, the big guy pivots in the opposite direction and 'rolls' toward the basket. The little guy floats him a pass and it's two points."

As I said this, they were showing it again on the screen in slow motion. She watched with what I eventually came to know as her studious expression, an intensity so beautiful it takes your breath away, or at least mine.

"Hmm," she said as they replayed it from another angle, "why don't they just do that every time?"

So I explained to her about the different defenses: the belly-up against the ball handler, so the big guy can't get between, or the trap, or the double-switch.

She seemed fascinated. “You know,” she said when I was finished, “that was the most succinct and cogent sports explanation I’ve ever heard.”

“I hope that was a compliment,” I said, and she laughed.

The next night, she came back without her friends. It was slow and the place was nearly empty, so I wasn’t busy. We got to talking, this led to that, and she wound up staying ’til closing time, after which, I took her home.

We saw a lot of each other for the next few weeks. Every night, I’d close up the place and then go to her apartment. It could be 3 a.m., but she always greeted me at the door with a big smile on her face, as she pulled me into the sack. Then it was incredible, astonishing, and transcendent ’til nearly sunrise.

On the afternoons she didn’t have to be at Columbia, I’d meet her at a museum, and she’d show me the Fauvists, or the Pointillists, or the Cubists. I couldn’t tell you one thing about it, but I loved every minute. Because I loved watching the way she loved it.

This sportswriter friend of mine gets me Knicks tickets now and then, good ones, courtside. I took her to a game one night and she was spellbound. She said it was like watching trees perform ballet. I drew her attention to a zone defense the Knicks were using in the second quarter. When they did it again in the fourth, she spotted it, tapped me on the arm, and said, “Two-three zone, right?” It melted my heart.

Back in high school, I used to play some b-ball myself. I was that aforementioned ball handler who floated the perfect pass to the big guy on the pick and roll. All of that ended during my senior year, when I fractured my ankle in three places after my friend Tommy O’Ryan persuaded me to go skiing with him. It effectively put the kibosh on any chances for an athletic scholarship, and since my grades weren’t nearly good enough on their own, it effectively kiboshed college as well.

It was fine with me. If I couldn’t play ball there, there was no reason to go to college aside from meeting chicks, and I could do that anyplace.

My parents were a lot more disappointed than I was, and they showed it. In fact, they showed it so much and so often, I had to get out of there.

For the next six years, I crisscrossed the country doing factory jobs, driving cabs, tending bar, waiting tables, whatever. When it got too boring in one place, I moved on to another one.

Finally, I wound up back in New York, where I ran into Tommy O’Ryan again. He’d gone on to Dartmouth in the meantime and then made a ton of money in the stock market. Maybe it was because he felt guilty for dragging me along on that ski trip, but he told me about this upscale bar he’d just bought on Second Avenue and asked me if I wanted to manage it, at a ridiculous salary. How could I

refuse?

Two years later, Felice walked into the place and into my life. During the whole amazing month-and-a-half that followed, Andrew's name came up only once, when we were telling each other about exes.

I'd had lots of them, of course, but nothing even close to serious. She'd gone with Andrew for two years, living with him for the second one, which she said was an "unmitigated disaster."

"It's all in the past, and I'm so glad it ended that it's not worth talking about. It would be a waste of good time." And that's how it seemed to be.

Since it was intersession at Columbia, and Tommy owed me a vacation, Felice and I decided to go to Saint Martin. Then that moment came in the airport, when she read in the paper about his presidential appointment, and it all changed. It became virtually all Andrew, all the time.

"Academia is nothing but politics," she told me as I watched the cumulus clouds drift by the window of the plane, "and it's all a bunch of hooey. It doesn't matter how much you achieve, just how good you are at selling it. Andrew always had a talent for self-promotion, so I guess it really shouldn't surprise me."

"Mmm-hmm," I said.

"And the thing is, he's so sure of himself that even if his theories are flawed, people fall for them because he's such a charmer. It's infuriating. The country deserves better."

"Mmm-hmm," I repeated.

"Aah, what's the use?"

She went back to reading her Milton Friedman for a minute, then looked up and said the same thing to me again, just in different words.

"Mmm-hmm," I said yet another time.

In the hotel room, while we were unpacking, she flipped on the TV. Wouldn't you know, it was CNN with a segment about the economy, and who were they interviewing? You got it.

He was a good-looking guy, I'll give him that. Nice hair, even features, stylish tortoise-shell glasses, and a sort of half smile whenever he spoke. Felice stood in front of the TV and glared at his image. She rolled her eyes at some of his answers and yelled "wrong!" at others.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. "Hey, come on," I said as I reached around her and turned it off. She continued to stare at the blank screen as if he

were still there but hiding. I gently turned her toward me and held her. She clung to me.

“He’s just so hateful!” she said as I softly kissed her hair.

“It’s okay,” I murmured meaninglessly.

Later, we drove to Marigot on the French side of the island and had dinner at a place she’d read about called La Vie En Rose. It had a terrace overlooking the harbor. We sat at a table and sipped Kir Royales as we watched the boats bob up and down in the sunset.

“If this isn’t perfection,” she said, “they’ll have to redefine the term.”

A slanting ray of sunlight caught her face just then and, in that moment, she looked like an angel.

“If this isn’t perfection,” I echoed, “it’s doing a great impression of it.”

We studied the menus, which were in French and English. As I lowered mine and looked across at her, I saw that she had a faraway look in her eyes.

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

She frowned and shook her head. “Oh, I was just remembering how, in every French restaurant we ever went to, Andrew would insist that we speak only in French. He even told jokes in French to the waiter. What a pretentious jerk he was.” She shook her head again. “And still is, I imagine.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“And do you want to hear the height of pretension? He actually wrote a novel in French. There was no reason for it, just that he wanted to show off.”

“Ah.”

“If he liked something on the menu, he’d tell the waiter, ‘Mes compliments au chef!’ in a voice loud enough to rattle the silverware. Then he’d casually mention that he’d studied for a year at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris.”

“Uh-huh.”

“What an ass!”

During the course of dinner, I learned, among other things, that Andrew is fluent in ten languages, is one of the world’s leading experts on the 15th-century European Hanseatic League, and that he wrote a Noh drama in Japanese that was performed in Tokyo by the Shiki Theatre Company. It was told to me in almost withering disdain, accompanied by lots of eye rolling and shaking of the head.

Later that night in bed, I could've been imagining it, but it seemed like we were falling somewhat short of incredible, astonishing, and transcendent. Maybe it was that extra bottle of pinot noir, but I had my doubts. A whole big bunch of them.

* * *

And now here I am, sitting on a beach towel, watching her as she comes out of the ocean. Her heart-stopping body is glistening, her auburn hair soaking wet and pulled into a ponytail that sways back and forth, caressing her tan shoulders as she moves toward me, carrying her snorkel mask and fins. She plops herself down on the towel beside me and gives me a big, salty kiss.

"Oh, Josh," she says, "you've got to come in with me later and see this. It's like a magical kingdom down there."

She looks away for a moment, and her eyes take on that hard, distant look. I can see what's coming.

"You know..." she begins, but I interrupt her.

"Don't tell me," I say. "Andrew is an expert oceanographer. He's got a degree in it that he doesn't even use. He knows the meanings of more dolphin sounds than any other human on the planet. He's discovered a mountain range at the bottom of the Pacific that's named for him."

She gasps like I'd just slapped her. "Why are you being this way?" she says.

"Why? Because he's like a living presence around here, an uninvited guest. And since you can't stop thinking about him and talking about him, we may as well make him guest of honor." My eyes start misting up, and it's suddenly getting hard to speak. "It's killing me to say this," I blurt out, "but I think you still love him. Or at least the idea of him, but without the faults. Someone like Andrew, Felice. That's who you really want."

I look away, because if I looked at her for one more second, I'd start crying.

She reaches out and gently takes my face between her two cool hands. She turns me toward her, making me look into her eyes, which are burning.

"No, no, no, no," she says. "You're the one I want, Josh. You're the only one. People like Andrew only study life; you've actually lived it. You've gone out and done things they only wish they could do, but don't have the courage. You know more about people, real people, than they could ever read about or even dream of."

She kisses me softly. "I'm so, so sorry I put you through all that. I've been an idiot, talking to you like I'd talk to some colleague, being nasty and dissing some other colleague for getting more than he deserves. Believe me, Josh, that's all

he is to me, nothing more. I swear it.”

She kisses me again. “I should’ve known better. That’s the thing about academia; it’s so small-minded and petty. But you’re not, and I’m not going to be either. I promise you, Josh, from now on, I will never act like that again. Can you forgive me?”

Can I forgive her? Oh, man!

We kiss, long and intense. It’s like happiness has just blossomed inside me and filled every cell in my body. We sigh in unison and lie on our backs on the towel, holding hands while the sun bathes us in its glow.

I doze and have dreamy thoughts. Maybe I’ll go back to school. I can certainly get into a community college, and I feel like I’m ready for it now. I don’t know what I’d be interested in at this point, but there are so many courses that I’m sure I’ll find out, and she can help me. For the first time in my life, I’ll have a direction. Think of that!

I turn on my side and look at her. Her eyes are closed and her breathing is shallow and regular. She’s especially beautiful when she’s sleeping. I put my lips to her ear and whisper, “I love you.”

Her eyes stay closed. She smiles, as if coming out of a sweet dream. “I love you too, Andrew,” she murmurs.