

Diverse Voices Quarterly
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Editor's Note

Hey, fans of all things literary and good!

So I fell out of love (June) and in love (November) in 2013. Being in that puppy-love stage is such a sweet distraction, but thankfully we're in the comfort zone and now I'm refocused. I also have a new reader (thanks, Angela) who's helped tremendously in picking out the personal essays and poetry in this issue.

Also included are a couple stories in this issue that are over our 3,000-word limit, but they're so good—I'm sure you'll enjoy them and all of the other writing here!

Hopefully, spring will quickly get here in the U.S. as I'm sure sick of the snow and ice.

Krisma

Diverse Voices Quarterly, Volume 6, Issue 20

Thanks to:

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Dah is the author of two books of poetry, *In Forbidden Language* and *The Second Coming*, both published by Stillpoint Books. His poems have appeared in numerous reviews, and are forthcoming in, *Orion Headless*, *Sandy River Review*, *Stone Voices*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Miracle Magazine*, and *21st Century Poets Anthology*. His third book of poetry is due for publication in 2014, also from Stillpoint Books. He is currently working on the manuscript for his fourth book of poetry. Dah lives in Berkeley, California, where he teaches yoga, meditation, and deep relaxation to children and adults.

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Kamaria Romeo lives in Brooklyn, New York, and graduated from Brooklyn College's BFA program in creative writing. After discovering a love of the law, she pursued and completed a master's degree in legal studies. Even more enamored with the law than ever before, shortly after, she began pursuing her associate's in legal assistant studies. Today, when she's not working toward the completion of her associate's degree, you can catch her penning fiction stories. Her fiction is forthcoming in *The Alembic*.

Robert Sachs is a writer living in Louisville, Kentucky. He earned an MFA in writing from Spalding University. He serves on the board of Louisville Literary Arts and has been a board member of Sarabande Books, a not-for-profit book publisher. His short stories have appeared, or are scheduled to appear, in *Mobius: the Journal of Social Change*, *The Front Porch Review*, *Boundoff*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Red Fez*, *The Blue Lake Review*, *Northern Liberties Review*, *Black Heart Magazine*, *Literary LEO*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, and *The 10th Annual Writer's Digest Short Short Story Collection*. His story "Blue Room With Woman" was an honorable mention finalist in the *Glimmer Train's* November 2009 Short Story Award for New Writers. He was a semifinalist in the Nineteenth Consecutive New Millennium Writing Competition.

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Diane Webster's goal is to remain open to poetry ideas in everyday life or nature or an overheard phrase and to write from her perspective at the moment. Many nights she falls asleep juggling images to fit into a poem. Her work has appeared in *Philadelphia Poets*, *Illya's Honey*, *River Poets Journal*, and other literary magazines.

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TICK TICK

Oh, look at that tangible rain.
Hear its tick at the window.

Tick, tick and more
Before the pour, the torrent.

In the north, a blather of clouds
Slumps and broods.

A last pistil of sun flares
And we're all inside

October's fist now,
Cold and colder, the eternal

Wet clamor. Oh, look
At the gold leaves chasing each other

Onto the ground. Look at
The galloping belly of the black sky.

—Mercedes Lawry

ANTITHESIS OF SMALL

To lift the Earth
like Atlas, an ant carries a grain of sand
on its existence. He does not strain
nor creak, because an exoskeleton
will not take the adjustment
from any chiropractor,
nor will it shed any spurs, little barbs,
a rain of needles from a dying cactus.
No, an ant flexes into profound
stability, a spire the sunset
cannot see, because underground
an ant is not small, but the world
itself.

—Doug Olmstead

THE FORTUNE TELLER

On the streets of Seoul,
fortune tellers sit cross-legged
next to birdcages on the blank sidewalk:
the bottom of the cage strewn with tiny scrolls,
and on a perch a single
white finch with clipped feathers.

I lean down to ask how much
and nod at the price,
handing her the bills folded like the pages of a book.

The fortune teller speaks a single Korean word,
and the bird hops down,
taking a scroll in its beak.

“You will have long life,” she says,
“and make your living with words.
Your parents very happy with your choices,
but a neighbor is jealous.”

But when I urge her to go on,
she gets angry, barking
at the bird, causing it to hang
from the side of the cage and look over its shoulder.

“Take the bird and leave,” she says,
opening the cage and thrusting the startled finch
into my hands. “Take money too,” then changes
her mind and snatches the bills back.

I am left standing with the finch
and cannot walk with it in my hand
or find room in my pockets,
so let it sit on my tongue,
opening my mouth to let it breathe
and selling fortunes to anyone who will listen.

—Michael Minassian

NICKEL, DIME, ANYTHING

by

Robert Sachs

Pipkin could see the neon light of Twig's Restaurant two blocks down. *Thank God they have electricity.* The wind was at his back, rushing him along; but at the first corner, it forced his umbrella inside out, breaking the tines. He stuffed it in a waste bin and hurried on. Nearing Twig's, an old man lurched out of a dark doorway.

"Change?" said the man, holding out a grimy hand.

Pipkin, startled, stopped. The man grabbed Pipkin's arm. It was a strong grip but he was smiling. "Anything will help," he said. "Nickel, dime. Anything."

Pipkin, with some effort, pulled away from the man. He was a pushover for anyone asking for a handout, but he didn't like being grabbed and he didn't want his money to be used for booze or drugs. And that smile was peculiar; it bothered him more than the man's grasp on his arm. More of a smirk than a pleading smile. Still, Pipkin could see the man was cold and wet and in need of help. In the spirit of the Chanukah season, he said, "Come with me. I'll get you something to eat."

* * *

It was the violent storm with ark-building rain. Wind had whipped around his neighborhood, breaking off the tree limbs, splicing power lines, and darkening large swaths of the city. A bolt of lightning and an almost-instant clap of thunder shattered the bay window in the front of Pipkin's ranch-style home, fracturing the large maple in his yard. The creaking noise that followed warned Pipkin the tree was about to fall.

He grabbed his brass menorah and two Chanukah candles and moved quickly into the kitchen. The entire top half of the tree crashed through his living room roof, flattening a wooden table and the four upholstered chairs his mother had insisted he take when he left home to live with Claire. Draperies flapped in the wind. Rain soon covered the roan-colored marble in front of the fireplace. Pipkin crouched behind the kitchen table, grabbing one of its legs and noticing for the first time his moist palms, a wetness not caused by the rain.

He knew from experience his basement would be flooded. *The dreidels!* Pipkin was halfway down the stairs to his unfinished basement when he saw

the rising water and a dozen dreidels floating like so many fishing bobbers amongst the empty paint cans, the old tennis racquet, and the extra crown molding he had meant to throw out years ago. His heart sank but he was careful not to wade in. *Isn't this the way people get electrocuted?*

Backing up the stairs, he resigned to deal later with this small part of his extensive dreidel collection—the recent acquisitions he intended to photograph and catalog.

This was his second Chanukah since the divorce, and he would celebrate alone this year as he did last. Claire no doubt was at a party, laughing at the things her new boyfriend said, devouring latkes like they were M&Ms and, he feared, making derogatory comments about his dreidel collection. He could almost hear the voice he grew to hate during their five years together. “A grown man with three hundred and fifty dreidels; can you imagine?”

Gottlieb, his next-door neighbor, called Pipkin’s cell phone. “Oh my God. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Pipkin said. “Just a little shaken up.”

“You need to get out of there, Alvin. The whole thing could collapse on you.”

“Get out?”

“Yes,” he shouted. “And now. You can stay with me. I’m calling the fire department.”

“But there’s no fire.”

“The place could explode any minute. Don’t you watch television?”

Pipkin rarely watched television. His research job at the brokerage firm required him to be looking at screens all day—there were four on his desk. At home, watching another screen was the last thing he wanted to do. “But...”

“Out, Alvin. Get out. Come over here. And now.” Gottlieb was screaming.

“Maybe you’re right.” Pipkin felt Gottlieb treated him as a naive bumpkin. He disliked having to agree with him.

“Now, Alvin. Now.”

Pipkin looked at the special Chanukah menorah and the brightly colored, twisted candles. As he started to light the *shamash*, the candle used to light

the other candles, he heard an electrical noise, a sizzle, and he decided Gottlieb was right. He put the candles in the pocket of his raincoat and, holding the menorah in one hand and his umbrella in the other, rushed out into the rain. He hesitated in front of Gottlieb's house and then went on. He couldn't bear to listen to his neighbor drone on about the Fascists who were ruining the country. And he didn't understand why Claire had so often taken his side. After last year's Fourth of July party in Gottlieb's backyard, she had yelled at Pipkin for arguing with their host about immigration. "Let it go, Alvin," she had said. "We're his guests. We're eating his food. Couldn't you just smile and let it go?"

"Let it go?" Pipkin had said. "If he were making the laws in 1932, your parents would never have been allowed in. I didn't call him a moron; I simply reminded him of this country's heritage. What was so terrible?" He remembered now how red-faced she got. No, he didn't want to be beholden to Gottlieb.

* * *

"What?" the man asked.

"You heard me. It's pouring down rain and it's dinner time. I'm buying." Now Pipkin grabbed the man by his arm and guided him into Twig's. Lou Ellen gave Pipkin a look of disapproval over the top of her glasses and maneuvered the pair to his usual booth in the corner by the window. She left a menu in front of the old man.

"Order whatever you want," Pipkin said.

"And you're paying?"

"Yes, I'm paying."

There was silence as the man studied the menu. His hair was red, fringed with gray and twisted in tight curls. His bushy sideburns flowed into his beard. Pipkin concluded he was younger than he looked. His coat was a musty brown. In the open air Pipkin hadn't noticed the smell, but here in the restaurant it reminded him of rotten cabbage. The man ordered coffee, three scrambled eggs, French toast, sausage, and hash browns.

"Sounds like breakfast," Pipkin said. "Have you eaten today?"

"Not yet."

"What sent you to the streets on a night like this?" Pipkin asked. "There are shelters around town."

"You're not thinking you're going to rub the belly of this old codger and

discover the meaning of life, are you?”

“Just making conversation. Alvin Pipkin.”

“Weasel.”

“Weasel?”

“That’s what they call me.”

“OK, Mr. Weasel,” Pipkin said, leaning closer to him, “Tonight’s the first night of Chanukah. Lightning struck my house and for all I know by now it’s burnt to a crisp. I need to light these Chanukah candles.” He put the brass menorah in front of him on the table. He placed the two candles in the menorah and lit one. In a soft voice, he chanted the three prayers while lighting the second candle with the first.

“I’m not homeless,” Weasel said, holding a sausage link between his thumb and forefinger, shaking it at Pipkin.

Pipkin gave him a look.

“I rent a room, but the landlady is nuts. She thinks she’s in love with me. That I’m her long-lost husband or something. Sneaks into my bed at night. Goes through my stuff when I’m out. That sort of thing. I decided to stay away for a while.”

“Where’d you get the name Weasel?”

“My name is Leonard Weisel. In third grade the kids started calling me ‘Weasel’ and it stuck.”

“Do you work?”

“On disability. Can’t work. Hey, what’s with the third degree?”

“No offense. Just talking.”

“Well, let’s talk about something else.” Weasel motioned to Lou Ellen for more coffee. “Why do you think your house might have burned down?”

“Tree crashed into my living room. The electricity was knocked out, but I heard a sizzle and got the hell out. Know anything about electricity?”

“Enough to respect it.”

“Basement’s flooded. I’ve got things down there I want to save, but I’m afraid I could fry myself.”

“I could take a look. Maybe help out.”

The two men finished eating, and Pipkin led Weasel through the downpour back to his home. As they approached the house, the extent of the damage caused by the fallen tree shocked Pipkin. Perhaps when he fled, he was too intent on getting to safety to pay much attention to the destruction, but now he could see the crumbled bricks, the gaping hole in his roof, the shards of glass strewn across the lawn, the downed wires. If Gottlieb had, in fact, called the fire department, they either didn’t come or came and left. In the morning he’d call the electric company and his insurance agent.

They entered through the back. Pipkin found two flashlights in a kitchen drawer and led Weasel through the kitchen to the basement stairs. But Weasel didn’t follow. Instead, he walked into the living room and was moving toward Pipkin’s bedroom.

“Hey,” Pipkin shouted. “This way.” At first he wasn’t sure Weasel heard him, but then Weasel turned around and joined him at the basement stairs, stopping one step above the water.

“What are they?” Weasel asked, pointing to the small pieces of wood and glass floating in the basement.

“Dreidels. You spin them. It’s a child’s game during Chanukah. I collect them.”

“What’re they worth?” Weasel asked in a voice as dark and smooth as old stone on the banks of the Ohio.

Was it the question or the way Weasel asked it that sent a slight tremor through Pipkin? It struck him for the first time that he was alone in his wounded house with a man he knew nothing about.

“Not much,” he lied. “My ex-wife thought I was nuts spending so much time with them. They’re just fun to collect. You know what the Hebrew letters on the dreidel stand for?” He meant to divert Weasel to something safer.

“I have a feeling I’m about to hear.”

“Nun, gimmel, heh, peh. It stands for, ‘A great miracle took place here.’” Pipkin liked assuming the role of teacher.

“Here?” Weasel asked. “Doesn’t look like a miracle happened here.”

“Israel. Diaspora dreidels don’t have the peh. They have a shin. ‘A great miracle took place *there*.’” That’s how you know a dreidel is from Israel or not. He pointed to the flood. “What do you think about wading in to retrieve them?”

Weasel bent close to the water. “Should be OK,” he said. “Power’s out. If it comes on while we’re in the water, we could be toast; but that’s not a big risk, is it?” He plucked the dreidel closest to him out of the water. “What’s so special about this one?”

“That’s a Vilplast,” Pipkin said. “About sixty years old. Handmade in Jerusalem.” He took it from Weasel, looking closely at each side.

“Is it ruined?” Weasel asked.

“No. I think it will be OK.” He was immediately sorry he told Weasel about the dreidel; it would only fuel his interest in the value of his collection.

It took ten minutes to corral the rest of them.

“Why’d you have ’em laying out in the basement like that?” Weasel asked.

“I was going to clean them,” Pipkin heard himself saying. “Just a hobby.”

“Doesn’t make sense,” Weasel said, taking the Vilplast from Pipkin and fingering it. “You ask a stranger to risk his life to save some worthless trinkets? You a doctor? Lawyer?” He looked up toward the dining room, the high backed chairs, the sideboard, the paintings on the wall.

Pipkin tried to laugh. “No, I’m a researcher. A geek.”

Weasel started to move toward the kitchen. “Mind if I get myself a drink of water?”

“Relax,” Pipkin said. “I’ll get it. Ice?”

But Weasel continued into the kitchen. “That’s all right.” He began opening cupboards until he found the glasses.

Pipkin followed him in. “There’s ice water in the fridge.”

“I said that’s all right.” There was an edge to Weasel’s voice Pipkin hadn’t noticed at the Twig. Weasel filled his glass from the faucet over the sink and sat down at the kitchen table, facing Pipkin. “Now why don’t you start telling me

the truth, Mr. Pipkin? How much are these dreidels worth and where are the rest of them?”

“I think you ought to leave,” Pipkin said. He tried to sound authoritative, in control. He was fingering the cell phone in his pocket, wondering if he could press 9-1-1 without looking.

“I’m not quite ready, Mr. Pipkin.” Weasel stood up and moved around the kitchen, opening and closing drawers. “It would take me only a few minutes to find the collection, Mr. Pipkin. Why so coy?”

“Look, I was nice to you. I bought you dinner. You’re making me nervous. Is this how you repay kindness?”

“Is that what it was, Mr. Pipkin? Kindness?” He took a large chef’s knife out of one of the drawers and moved toward Pipkin. Suddenly, he stabbed the center of the kitchen table. The knife stuck there, vibrating. “It sure would be rude of me to repay your kindness by being a bad guest in your home.”

Pipkin turned and ran toward the door, but Weasel was too quick and grabbed Pipkin’s arm. “I was going to be kind, Mr. Pipkin. You strike me as someone who would choose life. Is this how you repay *my* kindness? Now sit down.” He threw Pipkin back into the middle of the kitchen. Pipkin fell, hitting his forehead on the edge of the table. “We’ll play a little game. You like games, Mr. Pipkin?”

Pipkin’s eyes were wide. Blood oozed from a cut in his forehead.

“Put both of your hands on the table,” Weasel said as he pried the knife loose and held it in his left hand. He took the Vilplast from the pile of dreidels they had rescued from the flooded basement. “Both hands. Now.”

Pipkin complied.

“We’ll spin the dreidel,” the man said. His eyes were shining and he had the same odd smile Pipkin noticed when he first asked for money. *Nickel, dime, anything.* “Now we’ll see if you can summon up a miracle.”

LASTS

How many lasts can the dead carry
if each of their bodies takes on
the same hollowed shape
before they go? Head sloped back
behind a thinning neck, mouth
hung open like a child's, hungry
for the breast, and those heaving breaths,
uncontrollable—the body's final will
to move. Do they use it to suck in the last look,
last word, last thought, last day, last regret?
And does the soul, if it even is a soul, try to rise
clutching onto that end? Can it reach past
already cooled and stiffened skin, or does it stay
on the lids, weighing them closed, and on the inside
rim of lips, holding them wide? The face
of my husband's grandfather
as he listened to us say good-bye
could fit, like a charcoal outline
over my great-grandmother's,
the fallen-in cheekbones and panic
of dying in the dark. But the living
who dream of peaceful passing
while asleep—we know nothing
of what it's really like to leave the body
heavy with this its firsts and lasts,
heavy with this life, heavy
with want to hold on
as strong, or stronger, than we can
to the slipping memory of that last breath.

—Julia Kolchinsky Dasbach

DUST

What we think about
is our motion
almost never our stillness
What we dig into
is our past
almost never our future
We make tunnels
through the fallout
through the stretch
of remains that lie
from there to here
We climb our tree
and rummage
through our ancestors
searching for a likeness

In a rush of motion
we unearth
unfamiliar roots
locks of hair
faded photographs
old reading glasses
bundles of letters
and dried roses pressed
in between tattered pages
of secret love journals

We almost never think about
the future that it all comes to
when the dust
falling from our hands
is a weightless net
cast over the attic floor
The burden of years
having amassed their toll
their detachments their indifferences

—Dah

EVER AFTER

The photographs were lost
to the basement flood,
the attic fire.

Waters rose,
flames likewise,
drowning, burning,
all the old resemblances.

The black-and-white
childhood is no longer available.
Nor the sepia strangers
seeped in my blood.

History, memory,
float down river,
can't tell ash from dirt.
All those stiff and silent poses—
fish food,
minerals for plants.

I grow older,
a camera
spooling out
its own rolls of film.

A scarlet tomb,
a watery grave—
say cheese.

—John Grey

RESURRECTION

by

Kamaria Romeo

Silence. The only sound was a soft rattling that seeped into my sleep. Slowly, my eyes opened. As sleep wore off, the sound grew into the thunder of marbles skittering, dancing, and rolling across the floor above my apartment. Upstairs, my eight-year-old neighbor, Kevin, was sneaking in a late-night game. My daughter used to play marbles.

Their tiny, muffled notes whispered to me. They filled my room; surrounded me as I lay bundled in my cocoon of sheets. It was peaceful and soothing. Yet, I found myself fetching the broom and tapping the ceiling with the broom handle—one, two, three times—to make him stop.

Last night, after leaning the broom against the wall near my bed, I got back under the covers. I pulled them all the way up, until they were over my head and breathed in the smell of clean cotton. Feeling the cool metal against my thumb, I realized I'd touched the wedding ring on my finger. I hadn't been able to stop wearing it and had taken to absently reaching for it. Holding my hand to my chest was enfolding the ring in skin and soft sheets, was making it warm, lending heat to something cold and hard. But I only wanted to disappear, to seal off the memories that would slip in under the sheets with me, yet I could not.

The first time I saw Kevin, I thought I was looking at my daughter Jasmine. My spine stiffened at the vision. She was the ten-year-old girl I'd seen years earlier, but there were things about her that were strange: Her hair was shorter and she wore a boy's school uniform, a short-sleeved white shirt, navy-blue slacks, and black loafers. I stood there transfixed, watching her, and all but dropped my mail and groceries.

A woman had been standing with the child in the lobby of my apartment building that day. I was just about to step into the open elevator. Looking at me, the young pretty woman said, "Hold the doors please," then to the child, "Kevin, give me your hand."

Her words broke the spell I'd been under; I stepped back in shock when I heard her call my image of Jasmine "Kevin." My mouth opened but no sound came out. Goosebumps laced their way up and down my bare arms. I hurried into the elevator, letting the doors close before they could get in with me.

Back in my empty apartment, there was a ringing silence and a hum in

my head. I locked the door behind me. My limbs were lead and my bag of groceries was now heavy. I moved slowly and deliberately to the kitchen counter and set the bag and mail down. My hands wouldn't stop shaking. I saw my wife and my child in Kevin and the woman: Jasmine skipping along beside Julienne, her ponytail a soft lolloping tassel; her small, warm palm tucked into her mother's, neither wanting to be set free of the other.

The strength ran out of my legs, and I pressed my back against the wall near the counter. All at once I heard feet running full speed ahead—a child running—and my head whipped toward the ceiling. A door slammed. A familiar woman's voice called out. I stood stock still, my head tilted upward, tracing their movements with my eyes, listening until it hurt. Could it be?

Although I'd felt as though I'd left something behind, I crossed back over to the door and with trembling fingers, I bolted and chained the door. I did it to keep Kevin out. Convinced that I'd unwittingly summoned Kevin and the woman from my dreams, I'd wanted to keep this manifestation, a cruel visitation really, at bay.

Last night, after hitting the ceiling, I lay awake and thought about how in the months following the funerals, I barely spoke, rendered mute by astonishment, anger, and terror. Alone in our home, memories beckoned and jostled for primacy: bringing Jasmine as a newborn home from the hospital; dancing with Julienne to a slow, soft version of "Que Sera, Sera" on the swirling brown grain pattern of our living room's stone floors after we finished putting it down; Jasmine's height chart on the inside of our pantry door that would never go any higher. There was no avoiding the memories' grasp, and they would all morph into what it must have been like at the end: blood and breath, both like slim, warm ribbons trickling out of them, growing thin, thinner. And there was no escaping what I knew: Their leaving had sound—their last sounds, scrambling voices, and sharp, dark noises like whips shattering the air all around them. No marble lullabies.

I curled into myself under the covers. A white, hot heat licked the insides of my chest and stomach, heat splinters softened my spine. I pressed my knees to my chest and tried to push the heat back down inside me.

To keep the memories from opening up in me like dark flowers, by the first anniversary of their deaths, I'd already put all the things from the house we shared into storage, rented it, and moved from Queens to the Brooklyn apartment in which I now live. Julienne's parents tried reaching out to me to share the hurt; they encouraged me to visit them and my family's graves, but I never did. I withheld myself and grieved in silence.

My dreams were a secret place inside me where Jasmine and Julienne still lived, for when I slept I saw their faces clearly; so I slept often. A year went

by. My days became a hole that I chased death down. Two years went by. I stopped spending most of my spare time asleep. Three transpired. My thoughts about the life I could have had stopped going around and around in my head. I stopped turning strangers into my wife and daughter as much, stopped snatching their lives back through people I didn't even know.

Yet I worried that one day I'd forget what insects Jasmine liked to collect and the strident tone in her voice when she'd declare, "I'm not a baby!" I feared that one day I would not recall what Julianne's favorite perfume smelled like on her; her loud, strange laugh; or the exact spot above her collarbone that she liked to have kissed.

All the same, a few months ago my past life was just beginning to crust over when the college students upstairs moved out, and Kevin and his mother moved in. Before that day in the lobby, I was only vaguely aware of a new presence above me, could hear dimly the sounds of their unpacking, their comings and goings in the background. And then I'd been still and quiet and been rewarded with rolling marbles; smooth, cold, perfect orbs with streaks of colors and fractal art like tiny hearts tucked into their cores. They might as well have been tossed down to me.

After I hit the ceiling, Kevin stopped playing. I sunk into sleep and tried not to dream. But in my sleep, an image filled my head. In it, everything fell off me, fell away, like rose petals, like water, sheets, clothes, hair, skin, dreams, teeth, cold and cracked, gone. Behind my eyes, a face swam through me, and I couldn't tell if it was Kevin's or Jasmine's. The face filled me up, until it spilled out and over and pushed out tears in my sleep.

At dawn, I left my soft nest of sheets and pelted down the straight-veined network of city streets on my motorcycle amidst an entourage of noise. I ended up at the cemetery. A half hour away in Long Island, it was a neat matrix of well-maintained graves that seemed smaller than I'd remembered. Even though I hadn't been there since their funerals years ago, I found their graves easily. There were fresh, beautiful, sweet-smelling bouquets near each tombstone, placed there by Julianne's parents no doubt. The grass was speckled with dew and the air around the graves was fragrant and still.

"I miss you. Where are you?" I murmured as I knelt near their stones. The cool morning air was a silent echo. I imagined not much more than air filling the dark emptiness of their coffins. I wondered how people could just disappear. I thought of a day about three years earlier, to footage of that day actually: The plane they were on riding low and heavy into a building hundreds of feet above the ground; to the hole in the tower that ate them; to the jagged mouth that gorged itself on gasoline and their plane's innards. I tried not to think of the heat and the smoke so black and thick, it looked solid as it bled from that charred hole all those floors up. I pretended not to hear people and

machines dying, death moans and grinding metal. I tried not to think about them in the hole, in the husk of their gutted plane. Planes, people, steel, glass and concrete melted to nothing but bone dust and ash, trembling down.

I worked the ring off my finger, kissed it, and tucked it into a crevice on Julienne's stone. I stood up, zipped up my jacket. Their marble headstones were polished and glossy, gray-blue, cold and hard. Their graves held so little of them: a vial of Julienne's blood, drawn days before her death and returned to me by our family doctor; a framed butterfly from Jasmine's collection; Julienne's rib bone and Jasmine's tooth, the latter two unearthed from the rubble by searchers and scientists. Each casket held their sparse remains in oval silver plated boxes with red crimson interiors.

Their graves did not seem to have much to do with them. I imagined them everywhere and nowhere, the hearts at their cores spilled to ash and scattered. I knelt down again, retrieved the ring, and placed it back on my finger. I donned my helmet, got back on my bike, and returned home.

I'd seen Kevin and his mother since that day in the lobby; at least, I'd assumed it was his mother. They resembled each other, not strongly, but enough so that I was able to discern a similarity in the shape of their eyes and their mouths. I'd seen them in our building's lobby again or on the staircase. I said nothing to them, simply glancing in their direction before looking down, refusing to hold their gaze.

In my mind I apologized to them a hundred times. In one fantasy, I held the elevator door open so they could get on the elevator with me. In another, I mustered my thoughts and my blood did not pound in my temples as we made small talk in the elevator.

In none of these fantasies did I tell them the truth: that I can almost forget what my wife and child looked like until I see Kevin; that his very presence reminds me that there is more than just a bit of my daughter left in this world; that his wreath of curly hair, his ovoid forehead, his dark arresting eyes open my slight heal.

This morning after returning from the cemetery, I see Kevin's mother again. She and I are both in the lobby when she looks at me, smiles, and says hi. This time I do not look away; there is no denying we'd seen each other.

"I...you..." I stammer, groping for words.

"Yes?" she says, her voice, her face concerned.

I imagine that she's not turning away from me, not being as rude to me as I was to her because my face betrayed my angst, because a thousand

different expressions flittered across it. Looking at her, really, for the first time, I can see that she looks a little like my wife did, that she has Julienne's smile. It occurs to me that all four faces, Jasmine's, Julienne's, Kevin's and his mother's, were four forms of the same flower. I feel myself opening up again, but it's a dark pull. I feel something dense and smoky building inside of me; it's growing and swelling until I feel like I'm about to rip open. I slow my breathing and it slows the rise. I think, if I don't blink, I might not cry.

My mouth grows dry. I'm surprised to find myself placing my helmet on the ground, fumbling to retrieve my wallet from my back pocket and producing Jasmine's picture. Taking her picture out is like unsheathing a knife, uncovering something wearied, cold, and sharp. I hand it to my neighbor. She looks at me askance but takes the proffered paper anyway. She glances at it, then looks back up at me.

"Who is she?"

"My...my daughter," I manage.

"Wow. Well, look at that," she says, exhaling softly. "She's Kevin's spitting image. That's my son's name, Kevin." Then "Where is she?"

"Dead. She died."

She gasps and says, "Oh," and adds, "I'm sorry. I knew something was wrong, I shouldn't have asked. That day you had a strange look on your face, like you'd seen a ghost."

Her voice trails off as she looks down at the picture again. We're both silent for a while. She tries to hand the photo back, but I won't let her; I push her hand back, motioning for her to keep it. She clasps her hand over mine and squeezes it gently, then lowers her hand.

She holds the picture that'd been passed from hand to hand, hers now. Her face, a warm flower, had softened almost imperceptibly from bearing witness. Rusty currents, like tiny tongues, travel up my throat. My "thank you" comes out in a whisper so that my neighbor doesn't hear and only my eyes speak.

ACCIDENT

The deer popped like a flashbulb
in front of the car.
My head cracked the side window
bursting star rays into glass,
into my mind, a black-and-white firework display
with the seat belt catching my throat
in an assassin's hand squeezing
heart throbs out of my veins,
closing my eyes in death.
But I awake, not like Sleeping Beauty
with a kiss upon my lips
but buried-alive screaming
until I see the car not a casket.
My love slumps in her seat belt,
a hanging victim with swing.
Someone hit her with a water balloon
filled with red food coloring
knocking her glasses off
taking away sight though eyes pretend they see.
I whisper her name afraid to wake her pain,
afraid not to wake her,
but she is beyond
good-bye,
since death did us part.

—Diane Webster

ANTHONY TINDELL

by

Ray Kemble

No one in the neighborhood had seen Anthony Tindell wearing his mother's clothes for some time. In fact, hardly anyone had seen him, *period*, not since he quit high school and moved out of Alma and Frank's apartment. He would come back to Pelham Bay to see his parents every month or so. On a few of those visits I saw him coming from or going back to the El station. We were both nineteen at the time. I never said a word to Anthony Tindell on those occasions. And of course I saw him on the night he was murdered.

* * *

I arrive home late that night, after two in the morning, after last call. I park near the grated front of Jimmy the Butcher's, three blocks from our house—the nearest I'm sure I'll find—and start out on foot through the dead streets. A bothered dog is making a repetitive yelp in some far off yard; otherwise, my footsteps are the only night sounds. I cut a familiar corner at Katz' Candy with its buckled steel shutters and start down the narrower residential streets, moving in and out of pools of weak lamplight, walking as best I can down the centerline of the lemon ice-stained pavement, past clipped boxwood hedges and deserted front stoops, empty porches and trash-clotted courtyards. Turning the final corner, my shoulder rubs the rough brown brick of the bulky six-story apartment building, the Mayflower, that sits next to our house. I'm expecting another quarter block of quiet pavement. Instead I find a knot of NYPD squad cars, roof lights swirling round and round red, yellow, blue; front wheels hooked on the curb; doors hanging open. They're pointed at the alley separating the Mayflower from my house. A dozen people stand around clutching flannel robes to themselves. Others sit in upper-floor windows, backlit by living room light. I stop, shift about. I decide I'm not involved; I make a wide pass around the people and go up my front steps.

A light is on in the kitchen. My father is there, barefoot, in his pajama bottoms, struggling with a wet matchbook he's rescued from a spill on the countertop. "What the hell's going on out there?"

"I don't know," I say softly, wanting only to go to my room. "Something. I don't know."

"Oh, thanks be to Jesus, he's home," my mother says prayer-like from her bed.

I close the door to my room but don't turn on the ceiling light. At the window I part the drapes and look down on the alley. Flashlight beams crawl about. They work the edges of the alley. They light up old brick walls badly in need of pointing, grilled basement windows, battered ash cans, sacks of garbage, shredded litter pressed into recesses. Men's voices, muffled, professional. Every so often one of the flashlight beams crosses the cracked and tilted concrete of the alley floor. *Oh shit.* I see the body, the dead man, facedown on the ground. His arms are thrown wide as if greeting the ground. He sleeps in a broad pool of blood that seems to spread from his head. Black when not illuminated, the blood reveals itself a rich carmine only when swept by a flashlight beam. I stand there for several minutes looking down, watching the beams glide about—ash cans, broken concrete, trash, dead man. Fascinated by the dead man. Then new voices come, with them the clatter of a wheeled gurney. At that, my fascination fades. I let the drapes fall shut and go to bed.

* * *

The next day we start to hear. When my father comes back from buying the morning paper, he tells us he learned through Paddy Shea our next-door neighbor who himself had heard from Fiona Casey the parish secretary who the dead man was. "Anthony Tindell," my father says, "Alma and Frank's boy." When my father says *Anthony Tindell*, my mother turns to me and says, "Oh, Ray, I'm so sorry"—as if Anthony's death might have some special impact on me.

"It was murder, probably drug-related," my father says. That was the rumor going around, that Anthony Tindell was into drugs. "No arrests yet, but they say Tindell was dead before they threw him off the roof."

I knew Anthony Tindell, that was true. Or, I should say, I knew of Anthony Tindell; I knew of him from the block, but we weren't friends. We were never together. I knew very little about Anthony Tindell. None of us did. Alma and Frank had bused Anthony to parochial school across town, while the rest of us neighborhood boys would walk an easy few blocks to P.S. 71. The same was true for high school: Alma and Frank had somehow found the money to send their son to Cardinal Spellman HS across the city line in Westchester; the rest of the boys (I was the exception, going to art school in Manhattan) went to Christopher Columbus, the district high school.

It was more than just us going to different schools. Anthony Tindell was an enigma because, obedient to our parents' wishes, we boys shunned him. It was his own fault, our parents said, because of the way he *acted*. In all our growing-up years, Anthony rarely came out of Alma and Frank's apartment. When he did come out, it would be a *show*. With no warning, Anthony, in

broad daylight, would explode into the street, balanced on a pair of his mother's heels, draped in one of her dresses, his hair wrapped in one of her scarves, his face decorated with a sampling of her makeup. He would pirouette about singing full-voice some nonsense tune, a song made up of only melodic syllables, to the confusion of everyone—to the adults talking in the street, to the boys playing stickball, and to the girls skipping rope—everyone would stop and watch in embarrassment at Anthony Tindell's performance. After a few minutes, privately satisfied he'd bow theatrically to the street and teeter on his oversize heels back inside.

"That damn *Mary*," my father would say, "you don't want to be seen with him."

And I wouldn't. None of us boys wanted to be seen with Anthony Tindell. Until the day he moved away, we shunned him. My father said, as did all the neighborhood fathers, *It's his own goddamn fault.*

In the months that followed, stories trickled in. Anthony Tindell had moved to Manhattan, to the West Village. He'd moved in with friends, friends he'd made outside of the neighborhood, outside of the Pelham Bay, who knew where. He had built a new life for himself with these friends—friends, we heard, who made for a *bad crowd*. And a *bad crowd* meant *drugs*. He was going to a cosmetology school—at least that was the word on the street. (*Well, that figures*, people said.) He would come back into the neighborhood only to see his parents, nothing more than sprints on and off the block. (*Come back to beg drug money from poor Alma and Frank, that's what. It's a goddamn shame.*) We took Anthony Tindell's aloofness to mean he wanted nothing to do with us. Who could blame him?

I'd seen Anthony Tindell on a few of those return visits, although I never spoke to him, nor do I think he saw me. I'd seen him walking rapidly, not looking right or left, striding between the Buhre Ave. El station and his parents' apartment. Even from a distance, I could see he was different, not the same Anthony Tindell. The vulnerability, the girlishness that everyone claimed was proof positive of his sexual *otherness* was gone. In its place was a toughness, a pose of defiance, a look amplified by (as my mother would call them) his *juvenile delinquent* clothes: sheaves of black leather, cinched jackets and rod-thin slacks. The only hint of the "old" Anthony was his hair, a shaggy brown in years past but now a bottled and styled carmine. Visible, too, even at a distance, was the black mascara he wore.

I would have shunned Anthony Tindell, even if I hadn't been warned. Anthony Tindell terrified me. He was not a physical threat; that would have been laughable. It was his very existence, his flamboyant presence on the block that terrified me. I was afraid the more people studied Anthony Tindell's

otherness, the more adept they'd become at seeing signs of *otherness* in others. For instance in *me*. I dreaded the day I might see a neighbor giving me a questioning look. I dreaded the day a boy from the block might ask, "What the fuck is it with you?" Fortunately, my studied masculinity—as with all the neighborhood boys' rugged posturing—provided us with immunity.

Nonetheless, I lived with the truth I had joined in the shunning of Anthony Tindell—not because I feared in the least his sexual orientation was infectious, but because my own was so uncertain.

* * *

My father comes home from placing a few bets with the corner bookie and tells us the latest he's heard. The haunting worst: Anthony Tindell was *alive* when he was thrown from the roof. "The coroner says he died from the impact." We hear of a last despairing struggle: "When they pried open Tindell's hand," my father says, "they found a button, probably ripped from the killer's coat when he went over the edge."

Minutes later at the supper table, my father, sawing at his minute steak, says out of nowhere, "I told you..."

"What's that?" my mother asks.

My father waits for effect. Timing is everything. He deflects: "We got any A-1?"

"What was it you told us, Bill?"

He reaches to take the A-1 from my mother's hand. "I told you fairies can't fly."

I say nothing.

Later that night back in my room, I again part the drapes. The alley is poorly lighted: a soiled 60-watt suspended over the sacks of garbage. It is enough, however, for me to see the irregular darkness on the pavement where Anthony Tindell's body had been. Someone has tried to scrub away the darkness—probably Günter the immigrant *super*—but he only succeeded in widening the stain. Dried foam on the edges suggest some cleansing paste, something Günter probably found in a tin on a dirty shelf in the boiler room: leaves of litter are dried in the residue. I look at the wider stain Günter made, trying to see within it the stain Anthony's blood made. I look until I convince myself I see the blood stain, the one Anthony made after striking the ground,

bleeding out until his heart stopped—the last of Anthony Tindell’s *otherness*, beyond which is only the vacuousness of the alley.

In bed that night I’m ill. It’s thinking of all the years I’d been part of shunning Anthony Tindell that is making me feel this way. How alone he must have felt. How alone we *made* him feel.

I’m ill too because I’m thinking about my own secret *otherness* in those same years. And of my cowardice. I hadn’t shunned Anthony Tindell because my father told me I had to; I shunned Anthony Tindell because I was afraid if I didn’t, it would reveal something about me. How many times in those days did I look out our front window to see people staring, to follow their eyes to the sight of Anthony Tindell pirouetting on the pavement, wearing something pulled from his mother’s closet and singing a nonsense tune? How many times did I want to run down into the street in time to catch him and to say to him something friendly? Anything. “Great show!” if nothing else.

I’m ill because a few hours earlier at the supper table, I’d had my chance, my chance to say, “You’re right, Dad, fairies can’t fly. But you know something, Dad? None of us can.”

MANIFESTATIONS

by

Veronica Reilly

Our firm's new paralegal, Amber, was sitting at her desk when I first saw her, right where my coworker Will had said she would be, with the posture of a dancer, spine erect but not rigid. Her dark hair was a shining cascade down her back. She turned without noticing me, absorbed in her work, and her porcelain face was translucent. I hadn't seen a woman I wanted to get in bed so badly in over a year. A jolt of electricity shot through my body.

I steeled myself to ask her out, not for myself, but for Will. I had already promised to invite her to have drinks with us so he could hit on her. I paused by the copier, thinking, *Why am I about to help Will get the woman I want? On the other hand, how can I possibly tell him that I want a woman?* Just by being a female in the most notoriously conservative law firm in San Francisco I already had at least one strike against me: I didn't want to come out to my coworkers as well.

Then a voice came loud and gravelly in my ear, "You're such a chickenshit."

I whirled around. No one was behind me.

"Right here, babe," the same voice said.

I turned my head slowly. There was a dark, wrinkled mass on my shoulder, about the size of a football. I screamed and tried to bat at it, but my hands connected with open air where I could see it.

From behind me, Amber said, "Is something wrong? Can I help?"

"Don't you see something on my shoulder?"

She came over and stared right at the thing. "No. Like a fly or something?"

"I'm an imp," the thing said. Amber registered no reaction. I looked at it out of the corners of my eyes. It reminded me of one of the gargoyles at Notre Dame Cathedral, except that it was a deep red, with shadowy black creases around each bent joint.

"Sorry," I said loudly, feeling terrified.

“Why don’t you sit down for a minute?” Amber put her arm around me and led me toward her cubicle.

“Tell her you want to go on a date with her,” the imp said.

We sat down on opposite sides of her desk.

“A few of us would like to invite you out for a welcome drink this evening, if you’re free. Or at another time, of course, if you’re busy. Also, I’m Morgan.”

“Way to act like a nervous freak,” the imp said.

“What?” I said.

“I didn’t say anything, but I’d love to!” Amber smiled.

“All right. Seven in the lobby. I’m sure you’ve noticed that no one at Overworked, Underpaid, and Sleep-Deprived leaves work before then.”

She smiled.

“I’d better toddle off,” I added.

“Did you really just use the word ‘toddle?’” the imp asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Yes! See you then,” Amber said as I walked away.

I rushed through the maze of waist-high, gray cubicles to the restroom and looked in the mirror. The dark, gnarled creature was clearly visible on my shoulder, sitting with its chin cupped in its hands, elbows on knees. It stared unblinkingly at me.

What did I do to deserve this? I thought and felt repulsed.

“I can hear your thoughts,” it said in a high, quavering voice. It crossed its arms and said, “You can call me Al.”

“Okay, Al. I’m going to ignore you from now on,” I said, hoping that would cause him to go away quickly.

“Good luck with that,” he replied.

I splashed some cold water on my face and dried it off slowly with a

paper towel, keeping my eyes closed, focusing on the rough texture. I decided to find Will.

He was studying the snack machine when I came into the bleak, white expanse of the break room. The air was heavy with the awful odor of burnt coffee.

“Fritos?” he said, hitting the number-letter combination before I even had a chance to respond. He got his usual: the sour cream and onion potato chips.

“How’d the invite go?” Will asked.

“Okay,” I heard myself say.

“You are super,” Will said. “When a hot guy comes to work here, I will totally hook you up.”

“Great,” I said.

“You’re a pathetic kiss-ass,” Al said.

“I’m not,” I said, forgetting once again to ignore its taunts.

“You’re not what?” Will asked.

“Not, um, feeling very well today.” Damned imp! It laughed, sensing my discomfort. Did anyone else have one of these things? Might I be surrounded by people with secret imps, invisible to everyone but themselves?

“Well, don’t crap out on me! You want some Dayquil or something?” Will said.

“Have you ever heard voices?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m hearing yours right now!”

“No, I mean, never mind. See you at seven.”

* * *

I met Will in the austere marble lobby at 6:55 p.m. We stood next to the golden urn of fake lilies. The imp was still there.

“How you doin’?” Will asked.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“You are sick with love,” the imp said.

“Sick with love?” I asked.

“That is an extreme way to describe my position here,” Will said.

“Who is sick with love?” Amber asked, walking up behind us.

Will and I looked at each other.

“No one,” I said.

“Morgan is,” Will said.

“Oh, this sounds interesting!” Amber said, “You’ll have to tell us all about it.”

“Yes, you will!” Al added.

“Let’s go,” I said.

We went outside and walked up Hyde Street to a dark, crowded Spanish bar. Some art that looked like an unsuccessful fusion of the painting styles of Basquiat and Haring was hanging on the walls. A candle burned on each low table. The furniture was simple, dark wood. We took over an unoccupied table in a corner and squeezed onto the curved bench built into the wall.

“How’s the Feldman case going?” Will asked.

“A big, confidential headache,” I said.

Amber sat serenely; her skin glittered in the lamplight.

“What are you having?” Will asked, focusing on Amber.

“You know, I feel like having a Cosmo today,” she said.

“I’ll take a gin and tonic; get Bombay Sapphire if they have it,” I said to Will. He gazed at Amber for another moment and then sailed off to the bar.

As soon as he left, I turned to Amber. “So, what do you do for fun?”

“That was trite as all hell,” the imp piped up.

Amber smiled. I tried to maintain a neutral expression and ignore the

idea that she was smiling at the imp's quip.

"I like to salsa dance," she said. "How about you?"

"In my increasingly rare free moments, I like to watch artsy foreign films and browse used bookstores, like most sell-out art school grads," I said.

"An artistic lawyer! So, what kind of artsy foreign films?"

"Did you ever see that Indian film called *Fire*?" I asked.

"Wait, is that the one where the two women who are married to brothers fall in love with each other and begin a passionate lesbian love affair?"

"Yeah!" I said, pleased that she knew it.

At that moment Will returned. "Who's having a passionate lesbian love affair?" he asked, as he set the drinks down on the small, round table in front of us.

"The sisters-in-law in this Indian film called *Fire*," Amber said.

"Sounds pretty hot to me," Will said.

"It is," I said, smiling.

"Atta girl! You tell 'em," Al said.

Will looked at me strangely. I wondered for a moment if he could see Al.

"You know what's a great movie?" Will said, peeling his eyes off of me and turning toward Amber.

Not getting a response, Will plunged on. "*The Wedding Crashers*. That is one hilarious film."

"You're losin' her. Get rid of this drip!" the imp shouted in my ear. I jumped involuntarily.

"Are you OK?" Amber asked me.

"I'm fine. How did you get from *Fire* to *The Wedding Crashers* so fast?" I said.

"I think hot women was the connection for me—that redheaded girl—va-voom!" Will said.

“You have a good point. We’re lucky to have a charming redhead with us this evening,” Amber said, looking at me. She shifted in her seat, and her knee leaned against mine. I wondered if she was doing it on purpose or by accident. Either way, I just wanted to press my skin into hers, hard.

“Do it, baby,” the imp said.

Emboldened by the imp, I let my knee rest against hers, feeling an electric warmth spread through my body. Suddenly her knee moved away. I had lost track of the conversation.

“Come on! Tell us about your love affair,” Amber said, leaning in.

“Another drink anyone?” I asked. Maybe alcohol would fuel my courage.

“I just got drinks,” Will said.

I drained my gin and tonic, rose a little unsteadily, and wove over to the bar.

“What are you doing?” an angelic voice said in my ear. A very pale white creature, similar in size to Al, was now sitting on my other shoulder.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Who are you?” a man standing near me said.

“I’m a friend,” the pale thing said.

“Not you,” I said to the man.

“Well, then who?”

I shook my head and started walking toward the other end of the bar.

“Hey, I asked you a question, little lady,” the man called after me. I walked faster.

“Why are you living on my shoulders?” I asked.

“We are most effective this way,” the pale one said.

“What are you?”

“I already told you I’m Al,” the original imp said.

“You can call me Betty,” the other said.

“Why can’t other people see you?” I continued.

“Would that really improve the situation?” the pale one asked. She definitely had a point. I glanced back to see if the man from the other end of the bar had followed me, but he had apparently given up.

“Am I going crazy?” I asked.

No answer. Should I go straight to the emergency room and commit myself? I didn’t want to kill anyone, and I wasn’t sure how long it would be before these creatures would take over my mind.

“Are you done talking to yourself, miss? You want to order a drink?” the bartender said. I hadn’t even noticed him come up.

“Bombay Sapphire, on the rocks. Make it a double,” I said.

* * *

Over the next few days, I gradually adjusted to having the imps around. Each morning I considered going to the hospital to voluntarily commit myself instead of going to work. Mostly I tried to ignore them, although that was really impossible. More and more often I found myself screaming in public.

“Let it all out,” Al would say in a mocking tone and laugh.

“Ignore him,” Betty would advise.

Then I ran into Amber in a quiet moment outside the door to the women’s restroom at work, and she invited me to her birthday party.

“I’m not inviting that many people from the office, so don’t, you know, spread it around,” she said.

“Did you invite Will?” I asked.

“Yeah, you and Will. That’s it. And feel free to bring a date.”

“Oh, I don’t have a, um, I mean,” I began.

“You don’t have a boyfriend?” she said.

“Tell her, tell her!” the imps chanted.

“I don’t have any sort of partner, yeah.”

“And you never will if you stay in the closet,” Al said.

“Well, come by yourself then!”

I watched Amber’s lovely figure as she walked away down the hallway. She wore a form-fitting black, knit tunic, gray slacks, and Camper boots. Her bracelet looked like a subsection of slinky that had been microwaved or a piece of a Frank Gehry building. I was sure she had gotten it at the SFMOMA gift shop and I loved it. As foolish as it felt, I needed her. I could tell how perfect we would be together. It was an energetic thing.

“Here comes your big chance,” Al said.

“Shut up for once,” I said.

“Who are you talking to?” Will asked from behind me.

“Um, just myself.”

“You talk to yourself now?”

“Always have. Best way to guarantee an interesting conversation,” I said. “Are you going to the party?”

“Of course! Mmm-mmm-mmm. I think she’s into me,” Will said. He smiled and winked at me.

“Good luck, Romeo,” I said.

“Didn’t he get married and then die? That’s, like, two bummers in a row,” Will grimaced.

“Yeah, but he got the girl.”

Will smiled. “In that outcome, I have great confidence.” We simultaneously pushed open our respective restroom doors and took our leave of each other.

I locked myself in a stall and sat on the toilet. How could Will be so sure about Amber? Was he onto something? Or was he just overly confident? I got no sense from her at all about her level of interest in me.

“I think she likes you,” Betty said.

“But, as a friend, or more?”

“You’re dreaming, kid. She couldn’t even possibly guess you’re interested in women from the interactions you’ve had,” Al said.

“You know, Al, you’re not helpful.”

“But you know I’m probably right.” I was upset to realize that I agreed with him.

Over the next few days, Al continued to play upon my every doubt. By Friday, the day before the party, I was in a deep funk. I considered not even attending.

“You’ve got to at least go,” Betty said.

“No point,” Al said in a bored voice.

“Betty’s right. I’ve got to go,” I said. “I’ll try to put a move on her, and then I’ll know for sure.”

“Well, go ahead and give it a try,” Al said. “Then you’ll get over this foolishness in a jiffy.”

“Maybe you’re right. Not about getting over it, but I’m going to give it a try. I’m going to really be me, even if it’s just for one night.”

“Now you’re talking,” Al said.

* * *

The party was at Amber’s place in Bernal Heights. Upon ringing the bell the door immediately opened, but no one was there. Dimly lit stairs led upward. Was a bucket of water also waiting to fall on my head? I heard laughter from above. Will was standing at the top of the staircase next to a lever, grinning.

“I love these old-fashioned automatic doors. It’s so haunted house,” he said.

“Seen our hostess?” I asked, trying hard to modulate my voice so I wouldn’t sound eager or strange.

“Out on the back deck, last time I checked.”

“This is quite a place, huh?”

“Oh, there is a great view off of the deck. I’ll take you back there,” Will said.

“Thanks,” I said.

“No problem. Just want you to feel at home!” I knew that what he actually wanted to do was make his way back out to Amber. Then he put his arm around my shoulders.

“Here comes your moment of truth!” Al said.

I just wish you would all go away and leave me alone, I thought as loudly as I could at the imps. I wasn’t sure I could control the volume of my thoughts.

“Oh, yeah, you can,” Al said, “That was loud and clear, but no luck.”

“Why not?” I said. I could not remember to think to the imps.

“Good attitude,” Will said.

“Because we are you,” Al said.

My stomach dropped.

“Am I crazy?” I asked.

“It is hard for us to evaluate that,” Betty said.

“Definitely, but in a good way,” Will said.

The kitchen was large, dark, crowded, and dirty. There were big café-style drink mixer machines with frozen drinks in them.

“Amber’s roommate, Eva, is about to start a café, so she brought these machines over. The drinks available are piña colada and strawberry daiquiri. Try one!” Will began pushing his way through the crowd to the machines.

“Nothing like a stiff drink to get the old courage up,” Al said.

Will grabbed two large, red plastic cups from a stack on the counter.

“What’cha what’cha what’cha want?” Will said.

“The yellow one.”

“Alright. I’ll try this red one. Then we’ll go find Amber.” Will winked and shook the empty cup in his left hand slightly as he kept the drink dispensing button depressed.

I should just run away from here right now, I thought.

“Why not just go ahead and see how much Little Miss Slinky Bracelet loves you?” Al taunted.

“Ignore him. You don’t have to go through with this,” Betty said.

I willed myself to remain quiet, but the imps could hear the whirl of thoughts in my mind. Was I crazy? How could I get rid of these nasty things colonizing my body? Why were they advising me in contradictory ways about my love life, of all things?

“Hello!” Will said loudly, holding out a cup to me.

“What?”

“Earth to Morgan. Can you hold your drink now? I’m not actually a butler.”

“Sorry. Spaced out.”

Will looked at me in what I felt was a critical way. Were people beginning to suspect something? I would do anything to escape from these imps!

“Anything?” Al asked darkly.

“Try it!” Will said before I could answer Al.

I took a long sip of the drink and thought, *Is this where you start telling me to kill people?*

“I just wondered if you really meant *anything*,” Al said.

“Just about,” I said.

“Just about what?” Will asked.

“Just about the best damn piña colada I ever had! Let’s go check out the view.”

“Let’s roll.”

And then we were walking through a little coatroom with laundry machines and down a couple of steps, and there was Amber with her back to us. She was kissing a short girl with spiked black hair, leaning into her like a wind was at her back. Will and I both stopped dead. The world went into surreal slow motion. A guy coming down the stairs walked right into us and stumbled.

“Hey,” he said, his words slurring a little.

“Sorry, man,” Will said. Suddenly, I really admired Will. He was so composed, even while experiencing what must be such a shocking disappointment.

“Is that Amber’s girlfriend?” I asked.

“Looks that way.”

We moved out of the direct line of the steps and just stared. Only a few other people were out on the patio, since a very chilly wind was whipping around us. I tried to button my jacket, but couldn’t quite do it with the drink.

“I’ll hold it,” Will said.

“Thanks.”

The girls stopped kissing and Amber put her arm around the small girl. They talked in low voices we couldn’t hear over the wind.

“Well, damn,” Will said.

“I had a crush on her too,” I said, feeling warm but also relieved as I said it.

“What?”

“I had a crush on Amber.”

“She is pretty hot. I can see how she could convince you to switch teams.”

“It’s not a team switch for me,” I said, wondering if I had made a mistake in saying anything to Will.

“Oh. No wonder you never talk about who you’re dating. Does anybody else at the office know?”

“Nope.”

“So, should I keep it on the DL?” Will asked.

“Well, I don’t really like to be the subject of spurious gossip.”

“You can count on me, Morgster. We’re pals.”

And even though he said it lightly, I felt that he meant it.

I looked at my shoulders. Nothing was there.

Hey, guys, I thought.

Nothing.

“Maybe she’s just drunk; we both might have a chance,” Will said. Then he added, “But it looks like you might have the advantage.”

“Well, I heard she used to date some guy I went to law school with.” I felt suddenly generous. I wanted to give Will back a shred of hope.

“So you think she’s bi?”

“Probably.”

“Maybe we should team up! Get her to date both of us!”

“Will.”

“Sorry.”

COME HERE

You'll love
this one. I dog-eared
this one as a kid,
thumped through the pages, lost sleep,
found hunger, then came to know it unlike the back
of my hand. It's got
everything.

Love (sex), violence (sex), and the occasional
furtive glances at the horizon and the occidental
furtive glances at not becoming the beast of what we are
to become.

First off,
you'll really get
the plight of the protagonist:
metaphysically and unlike a drawing
of a toy box, actually is

like a toy box
where you find
a new truck
in there.

And dirt mounds
become structurally associative with heaven,
God becomes some sort of cosmic pedagogical sycophant,
yet, that makes it
good. Yet, that makes it

human. This book
changed me, this book
shaped me acceptingly,
reclusive to a sweltering garage,
like a father making a new banister—
the old one cut through to save you.

—Doug Olmstead

NECTARINES

for Rose Mary Boehm

We stroll along furrowed paths
that wind the waists of cliffs

toward the water sloshing over
limestone boulders. Your laugh

ripples among fronds of ferns
with each grin I give

over my shoulder. This morning
while you slept in a room scented

with jasmine, these ripe nectarines
were washed and tucked in

a picnic basket to satisfy
our thirst. Let us suck the fruit

from every hard stone
and spit them into the sea.

—Naomi Hamilton

WHAT COMES AFTER

by

A. A. Singh

April says our plants are proof of how we need to get it together before thinking about a dog. I am drowsy-eyed lying on the couch as pastel rays seep through our venetian blinds. She asks if I remembered to place our orchid in sunlight, and I think, *you didn't tell me to*—but I see what she is doing.

Still, I feel as though I would remember to care for something that follows me around and farts as much as I do. I stare at our television and wonder if I'd care for the plants I now have more than my hypothetical gassy dog if I spent some of my childhood in the Midwest like April did, tending her grandmother's vegetable garden with her father. I tell her about how responsible I was when I used to babysit my cousins. I tell her about how my family has depended on me with their kids for two decades.

April stands next to our table, left leg folded, foot pressed against her right leg supporting the rest of her weight. "You didn't have to bring the problems home," she says. "You didn't have to stay their guardian for longer than a couple days."

* * *

Talks of marriage seemed natural while April and I dated, but there was a dissonance I hadn't felt with her before when our talks evolved into something more serious. Into something about having kids.

I remember sitting in my mother's Florida room one night as April explained how important it was for us to be on the same page about kids before taking any further steps. The over-climactic sounds of my mother's Bollywood soaps percolated through the closed doors. *I've never wanted kids*, she said. Loud and clear. *And I probably never will.*

I hadn't thought about it very much and just considered it part of life, some inevitable event that would happen once I was married and settled down—once I was ready. Some event that just happened. No thought involved. Okay, maybe some thought—but not *right now*.

I remember telling April, whether I wanted kids or not, that no decisions had to be made right then. That we were still young and thinking like young people do.

I hoped she would change her mind—not to want kids, but to not *not* want kids.

* * *

I once asked my mother about her reasons for wanting to have kids. *We were married for a little while.* I remember staring at her. There had to be more. *We were married for a little while. That's just what comes after.*

* * *

My older brothers always joke about how they plan to handle discipline, *licks*, with their future children.

“I’m just going to give them licks at the same time every day,” they say, laughing.

My childhood, spent babysitting younger cousins, is probably why I am good with kids, why I am obsessed with things from my childhood, why I always thought having kids was just the next step. It’s as if we are programmed by our families, our media, our toys. As kids we play house, and then we fail to think about how our romantification of raising a family may supersede whether we are actually qualified—or not qualified—when the time comes.

My teenage years were different—in my early teens, my parents ceased to grow with me. As I grew older, I could see my relationship with my parents, my father especially, regressing into awkwardness. My father would no longer smile in pictures or hug me with both arms. Our family no longer used the words “I love you”—not even my mother who used to hold my hand when she drove me to elementary school.

April’s childhood revolved around a small Nazarene church her father pastored. She knew of her family’s constant focus in the spotlight. This meant no Pokémon or Power Rangers, no trick or treat. She felt like an adult when she was seven.

No one suspected her uncle, another pastor, was sexually abusing her. This is why we do not share childhood nostalgia. This is why, until she had truly assimilated into my close-knit family, it was easy for her to negate the possibility of kids in her future.

I sometimes wonder if this disconnect—when my brothers and I grew older—was sparked by the awkward tension that happens during and after puberty. At what point does it stop being okay for your kid to shower with you? Sleep with you? I will admit, I was probably too old on both of these accounts,

but there is nothing diabolical about my past. And while it's frustrating that my parents seemed to worry about such a thing, I find myself falling in line with this convention whenever I'm around young children. Did they teach me to be this way, or is it societal conditioning?

It seems that there is always a reason to worry: I hear that one in three women have been or will be raped in their lives—and it seems, too often, to happen in childhood.

Suddenly, my parents' awkwardness doesn't feel so trite a thing anymore.

* * *

When you're ready, do your plants stop withering and bloom beautiful flowers? Do the spider mites stop eating them? Or do you over-water them, fill them with so much love that they drown? Do they fry in the sun, out in the wild with no window to protect them?

* * *

I have this naive fantasy that having a dog will make me a happier person when I come home after a long day. Or a bad day. Or when I run myself into a wall with writing. Or when April and I fight. But what about the heartache pets bring when we realize—knock on wood—we live longer than they do? April wants a dog too, but she says it would feel like betraying her childhood dog who still lives with her parents.

Unlike April, I grew up with a lack of puppies and kittens. When my parents still lived in Trinidad, they had dogs—*roti-hounds*, dogs they would feed table scraps—but none of them were allowed inside. *No dogs in the house*, they'd say. *The fur will make Grandma's allergies act up*. My brother had a dog in Trinidad too, but it slept outside. Once we were in North America, however, pets were no longer welcome.

I remember my oldest brother dragging us to a pet store for a science project. We returned home with a turtle my brother named Rusty after his bronze shell.

There was no science project.

We gave Rusty to a maintenance worker in our apartment complex once he outgrew his cheap plastic aquarium. My mother said she felt bad for how small it was, and Eugene always spoke of his aquarium. Still, I can't help but think of the relief she must have felt when we waved good-bye to Rusty.

* * *

My brother once told me that his son—my nephew—was not allowed to stay the night at our apartment. *We will work toward that*, he said. *As a parent, I worry about things. Like what happened to April—you should understand.*

I didn't understand. But maybe these horrible things that happen to us are ways to pass it on to the next generation.

* * *

In my sophomore year at university, I spent my evenings, after class, driving to my aunt's house to tutor her two children. I couldn't find a job, and she wanted to help out. For the entire year, I appeared to be a role model—a father figure, even—to her children. Their real father was working long hours at a startup company in another state and flying back only for weekends. He was burnt out.

My aunt would sometimes fly out to meet her husband, and I would watch the kids for the week or so—take them to school, drop them off at soccer practice, watch terrible children's television with them, make sure they were fed and not bruising each other's faces with their knuckles. I always grew my beard out to make myself look more like an authority figure.

They called me Papa Singh.

After a long day of separating the children from “no, *you are*” arguments, I walked into the room with the younger one bawling—the type of bawling and sobbing and snotting that only happens after physical provocation.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

The older one shrugged and grinned, knowing the worst he would get is a lecture.

“Guys.” I closed one eye with my thumb and the other with my pointer finger, rubbing them softly. The crying sounded like an ambulance. “What happened here? Why is he crying?”

Another shrug.

The younger one wailed and whined between mucousy gasps. “He—he hit me—for no rea—son,” he said. “I didn't—even do—anything.”

I studied the older one's body language. He smiled at me, raising his eyebrows. He was testing me—a usual annoyance, but this time he broke me.

What is it that causes the human to hit?

Father Jailed After Sending Toddler to Hospital

Mother Gets 30 Months for Child Abuse

Drugs Found In Home, Parents Charged With Abuse

Animal Cruelty Linked to Child Abuse

Perhaps it's written in our DNA, fathers and mothers passing it down with each slap to our faces—a tiny, slow growing seed planted early and watered regularly. I was never abused, but I sometimes wonder if the few times I was hit by my parents is what made it seem normal—like I deserved it.

Maybe I did.

Or maybe it's hereditary. Maybe some poor child, put up for adoption by parents who feared how they would mess up and fail, is already doomed—maybe the child grows up to be exactly like his parents. Is it nature, or is it nurture?

There was no hesitation. Just a whoosh and my palm connected with his face. His eyelids snapped shut—an attempt to blot out the tears.

He later explained to me, as I apologize, that it was the shock, not the actual force of impact, that made him cry, that I didn't hit him hard and I shouldn't worry about it. I remember telling him how sorry I was, that I loved him, that I would never hit him again. I remember telling myself I would never hit anyone again.

* * *

The plants are dying. There are no petals left on the orchid.

* * *

When the my brother was sixteen, just a few days before the doctors removed an apricot-sized tumor from the back of his brain, we were huddled around his hospital bed in the intensive care unit. A teenaged boy had been rushed in earlier, and we knew something was wrong; his mother was screaming his name. My brother sat on his bed, unsure if he would wake up after his surgery, listening to what could have been his future.

We found out later that the boy was brain dead. There was nothing the doctors could do. His mother threw her body on top of him, begging the doctors to keep him on life support.

They had to pull the plug.

I can't make out the name, but I can still hear his mother's screams.

* * *

As soon as my brother moved out, he got a Doberman pinscher. I remember my brother staying in the car with Caezar as I reached through the car window to pet his head for the first time. I was terrified of him when he grew to his full size. Once, he cornered me when I was holding my newborn nephew. He snapped his canines, an ivory bear trap. *Let go of my human.*

He would become my favorite dog—the dog that taught me to love dogs. He would rest his head on my lap, cry if he could not reach me.

Years later, my brother and his wife will call me to let me know that they have put Caezar down. A tumor will grow in his jaw and the bleeding will refuse to stop. It will be easier to put him down than to let him suffer.

* * *

I am reminded of how my parents used to be when my baby cousin visits. My father, too awkward to hug his grown sons, becomes a singer. My mother holds my baby cousin's hands.

A similar thing happens when my brothers bring their dogs inside the house. My father smiles big and squinty-eyed, boiling chicken breast for the dogs. *They like this better*, he says. And when one of them pees on the tile floor, my parents furrow their brows and suck their teeth, and I can swear I hear a chuckle.

* * *

April surprises me when she imagines about how attractive our mixed kids would be or how she thinks I'd be a good father.

We are fickle. We are afraid of what we may screw up. There are so many variables to get just right when we make decisions for something we create, something that could reflect our inner most selves. Something that could grow up to be us—better than us, worse than us. I feel this way when I am hunched over a computer or a piece of paper. I feel this way whenever I am writing or composing a song or drawing a picture. April says my worst quality is that I am

a self-defeatist. She says I am my own worst critic, that I keep myself from growing and reaching my full potential by nipping ideas in the bud.

I wonder if this is what we are doing. If we are keeping ourselves from our full potential—keeping ourselves from being great parents—nipping ourselves in the bud.

I stare out our sliding glass door and watch the Muscovy ducks shimmy through the rough Floridian grass behind our patio. Since we moved into this apartment, our plants have been leaving us: Even our cactus—April named it Yoshi—withered and turned black. Black like Caezar’s nose.

April shrieks like a banshee. “Korra is still alive!”

Korra is our ginseng ficus bonsai.

I open the glass door. “I thought the mites killed her,” I say.

“She’s blooming though! Maybe I can go to the store and get some organic insecticide—that stuff I made on my own didn’t seem to work last time.” April is beaming, her cheeks puffy with excitement.

Maybe we didn’t fail. Maybe she will sprout again.

Maybe we should get a dog.

OLD ENOUGH NOW

by

Carolyn Light Bell

He was on his hands and knees trying to sweep the wreckage of his childhood away from himself with his arms. The sleeves of his hoodie were gathering the crumbs of his collections—shards of broken glass, shattered CDs, baseball bobbleheads, shredded athletic awards. He'd had one of his tantrums, the kind no one could stop, least of all me, not until the destruction was complete. He'd been tearing into everything he owned, hurling books across the room until his shelves were almost bare, yanking clothes off hangers, demolishing shells carefully collected from Mexican beaches where our parents had taken us on spring break, framed photographs with various girls in glittery dresses, and one of us with our arms around each other, mugging for Dad, the relentless photographer.

"I tried, always tried to have every one of the catchers from every goddamn team in the American League." He gestured in a wide loop at the cards he'd pitched on the floor. "And you gave me the ones where I had holes. You tried to fill them on my birthdays. Always trying to be the best big sister. But you can't do this one. You can't fix this."

I knelt over him, my arm hovering over his shoulders, longing to comfort him, wary of his temper. He swung his free arm back and I fell on my butt.

"Don't touch me! You might catch it."

"You're acting like an ass. You know very well..." I got to my hands and knees.

"I'm a bigger mess than this room. My whole head feels like a goddamn leaking radiation tank. I'm screwed." One by one, he picked up each baseball card, holding it high up off the floor, tearing it apart, and watching it precipitate down like cardboard snow. "I've totally fucked up my life and everyone else's."

"FYI, you can't fuck up my life!" I scrambled to my feet and crossed my arms.

"Oh yeah? You like being the sister of an asshole like me?"

"As a matter of fact..."

“And don’t give me one of your preachy little sermons. I don’t want to hear it. I hate that smarmy look you get on your ugly face.”

“This is my face, all right? I can’t help it if I give you looks. I love you even when you act like a total asshole and say cruel things,” I said.

“Well, don’t. You don’t get to control me any more than I get to control what Lindsay does. She wants to kill it! I’m not so sure...”

“She’s not ready for a baby and neither are you.”

“Remember the time I broke my arm? We were leaving the hospital and those Right-to-Lifers stuck those horrible posters in front of our car windshield? Mom got so mad. She just laid on her car horn. One guy was shaking his fist. I thought she’d run him over. When it’s yours, it’s not that simple.”

“You were like five then. They were horrible, but how do you remember that?”

“I’d just gotten a cast. Remember now? It hurt like hell and then I saw those bloody baby pictures through our windshield those wackos were shoving in our faces. Gross and disgusting. Well, that’s exactly what I told Lindsay to do—get rid of the baby. The one whose life we made. Like those billboards we’ve always laughed at on the way to the cabin with the little white baby peeking out from under a blanket—‘God’s creation.’”

“Does she already have an appointment?”

“Yes. But how would you know about any of this? You know nothing. You’re probably still a virgin! You never tell me anything about your life, always prying into mine. Well, not anymore. I’m a big boy now.”

“Yeah, a big boy. You’re right. You’re still a boy, and you’re bigger than me. But you can’t bully me away, and you can’t bully yourself by keeping it. You didn’t mean to do it. You were just stupid. It’s different when you want one. It changes your life forever. It would ruin high school and wreck your future!”

He was crawling through his collage of strewn debris, smearing streaks of blood in long trails on the wood floor. It reminded me of the red finger paintings he’d made when he was little.

“For you,” he’d said and thrust them in my face. He’d printed his name at the top completely backward, a mirror image. I’d taped the dried, wrinkled paper to my bookcase until one day it tore and I had to throw it away.

“You can break all your stuff and storm through the rest of the house, but none of this will make it go away. I hope your tetanus is up to date. Your room looks like a war zone.”

“Not your business. I’m the one feeling the pain. I’m the one who has to go along with the decision. I’m old enough.”

“What on earth is going on in there?” Our mother’s voice was tentative, scared. She was probably listening the whole time.

“Nothing, Mom,” I said. “We’re just cleaning up his room! We’re fine.”

“Well, time for dinner. Your father’s home and he’s hungry!”

“Right, Mom. We’ll be there in a couple minutes.”

“What do you think Mom would say if she knew?” he said, his chin trembling.

“What do I think she’d say? I think she’d tell you to wash your face and clean up the mess you made. Then I think she’d tell Dad you’re finally growing up.”

“That isn’t what I mean.”

“I know that. I also know you’ll figure it out. I love you, Stupid.”

“I love you too, Ugly Face.”

When I turned to look over my shoulder at him before I shut the door, he was finally crying.

WHY CAN'T YOU JUST LISTEN?

for Sean-Michael

I wanted magic, towering firs a-flicker with enough fluorescence to outlast us all. I brought us to DC to make new memories, restring your recollection with the fragile ornament of our new family, but after three days of monuments and lost gloves and dinosaur bones, my hand tightened into a vise around yours. Your body refused to yield to my annoyance, oblivious to the bounty I tried to hustle you past, as if a boy of seven, raised on palm trees and balmy yuletides could resist a pickup truck packed with snow. Nothing left to do but snap your picture, a moment I chose to record rather than inhabit.

Enough, I said
and for the hundredth time that day—

Why can't you just listen?

As if I listened
to your laughter as it disappeared into the air,
to the crunch of ice as you ran, giddy with cold,
to your innocence as I calculated
how many minutes I could afford to allow.

When you think back on that day, I hope you forget I scowled, remember instead that for a moment I forgot myself, smiled at you as snowballs flew.

—Caridad Moro

EYES ON FIRE

With what burning eyes
do I see the past

the black ash
that eats the edges
of the photographs,

the white ash
that covers my eyelids?

With what burning throat
do I recite the names
no one alive remembers,

names I have reduced to titles,
events, and relationships:

great-grandmother,
brother who drowned in Lake Van,
grandfather's first wife and son?

With what burning ears
do I hear the wind
traveling from the past;

the sound reaching my brain
with a series of sharp
cracks and scratches,

like old 78 rpm recordings;
the labels written in English
and Armenian—

one language bleeding
into the other,
as the record begins to spin

and I hear the music:
duduk, oud, my own voice?

—Michael Minassian

SEASONED BLEND

Morning coffee spews
onto my poem, its color
caramel washes a sonnet
where consonants ask

why the illusion veil
was allowed to yellow
unnoticed on a rung of
the marital helix.

Innocent streams smudge
curious metrical lines,
unsuspecting puddles
blot the poetic search

to peak within the
seasoned blend of
brewed tears and
laughter, percolating

above sagging sleeping
bodies as converging
dreams dissolve to make
history...

claiming us café au lait.

—Catherine Arturi Parilla

MY SISTER'S UNDERPANTS

by

Martha Clark Cummings

My sister's legs, long and skinny and brown from the sun, were spread apart, and the tiles between them were pink. She was wearing only her white cotton underpants. I don't remember why she had taken her pants off, except that she was always doing that. Maybe it was her pants she was working on with our mother's special sewing scissors we weren't allowed to touch. In her small bony hand, the black handles and silver blades looked lethal. I crouched near her, listening for the special creak of the glass doorknob. She was yanking, jabbing, the blades of the scissors pointing toward her. Then, in an instant, one sharp blade pierced the thin fabric of her underpants, the other just grazing her thigh.

"Oh, shit," she said, and even for that I admired her.

The scissors clattered to the floor. Bright red blood soaked the crotch of her underpants.

"Don't tell Mom," she said, pressing a handful of tissues between her legs. "She'll think it's started."

* * *

Mom had given us a lesson about what to do when our periods came. I was only nine, but Diane was eleven and our mother thought it was time. She brought us into the bathroom and opened the box of pads she had bought us, took one out, slipped down her pants, explaining that you would do this, of course, on your underpants, peeled off the strip covering the sticky side, then pressed it firmly into place. "There," she said, pulling her pants up. "And you're ready to go." The three of us were crowded together in the small bathroom while Dad was in the living room reading the *New York Times*. I watched my mother intently, looking back and forth between her and her reflection in the mirror.

* * *

My sister took away the bloody tissues.

I looked at the place the blade had pierced. She was just starting to grow hair down there. I couldn't get enough of looking at it.

“I’m going to cut these underpants up and hide them in the wastebasket. Don’t tell.”

I felt another shock of admiration. I was sure our mother knew the exact count of our underpants and would discover the missing pair, but Diane could tell a good lie about anything.

* * *

Today, Diane isn’t wearing any underpants at all. When I called her last night in Florida to tell her Dad died, she got on a plane in such a hurry that she forgot to pack any.

“What happened?” she asked when she came in the door, her overnight bag in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other, thinking, perhaps, that he had died in an accident like Mom. I had forgotten to say it was stroke. “Dad died,” I said, and my sister answered, “I’ll be right there,” as if she lived around the corner.

Rain is coming down in sheets. Neither of us wanted to spend the night in our parents’ apartment, so we came downstairs to my studio. I took the bed and she took the foam futon. She got out her sleepwear, an oversized T-shirt not quite oversized enough. She lay down on the slab of foam, her swatch of dark hair peeking out from under the shirt, even when she yanked it down. I wanted to ask her to cover herself, but I didn’t. Diane is always telling me not to make such a big deal of everything.

In my tiny kitchen with its green marbled linoleum—the floors in the bathroom and kitchen are the same as in my parents’ apartment upstairs—I am pouring water over freshly ground coffee, hoping Diane has at least pulled the sheet up over her legs. The smoke from her last cigarette swirls past me.

Usually I would be at the community college where I try, mostly unsuccessfully, to teach English to people immigrants. Carlos comes to my desk after class, saying, “I can’t think. I have a terrible headache.” I tell him to relax. “Sometimes in my mind, it’s dark,” Carlos says. He hits himself in the back of the head. “I feel like I’m going crazy.” I tell him to breathe deeply.

I would give anything to be in the classroom right now, even with the “multiple repeaters” who have failed the class more than twice, even with Stella, who says “happy good evening” as she leaves.

But we have to go to the undertaker to identify the body. It doesn’t matter that they came to the apartment to pick him up and I was there. They could have mixed the bodies up. Or there’s a law. Like the law that says a police officer has to stay with you until the ambulance comes. Last night the

young Latino cop sat at the dining room table for two hours, staring at his hands.

“Is your father away?” the building superintendent asked me. “I haven’t seen him since Sunday.”

After Mom died, Dad and I weren’t too good at keeping in touch. Once a month or so we had dinner together in a fancy restaurant that just opened. He liked having an opinion before his partners did. I was not crazy about going to these places, but I didn’t want to deprive him of company.

The last time we had dinner, two weeks ago, was in a restaurant my father read about in *New York* magazine. The wine list numbered 850, he said. The owners had interviewed four hundred people for the thirty-five staff openings.

When we got there, the waiters reminded me of the young associates at his law firm, jockeying for position. He loved that. He wanted them to try even harder.

My father ordered saddle of rabbit. I had soft-shelled crabs. My father told me about the criminal he was defending, some guy who had robbed a liquor store on East 135th Street. He had retired from corporate law and was starting over as a criminal lawyer, but since he had gray hair and spoke with authority, his clients didn’t know he was a beginner. I reminded him that his clients, sitting in their prison cells, might not see the humor in their situation. That made him laugh harder. Lately he had been treating everything I said as if it were a really good joke.

He drank his first glass of red wine as if it were keeping him alive. Every one of the fingers on his left hand had flecks of saddle of rabbit, of mashed potatoes stuck to it. I don’t like having this last memory of him.

* * *

I pour milk into the two mugs of coffee and bring them out into the living room.

“At last!” Diane says, reaching. She does not get up and join me at the table but reclines on the futon, propped on one elbow. She sips the coffee tentatively.

“Yum,” she says. “It has a hint of vanilla, doesn’t it?”

* * *

Dad and Diane used to have these conversations about wine when we all lived upstairs and drank wine at dinner. Dad said if kids in France could drink at fourteen, so could we. He quizzed us about the shape of the bottle. Was it Bordeaux or Burgundy? I could never remember which one had the square shoulders. Diane remembered everything, so she got to be the official wine taster of the family. We were seated at the dining room table, with the linen tablecloth and napkins, silver serving dishes, crystal stemware. My father liked formality. He poured one swallow into Diane's glass. Diane would describe the wine, using various adjectives, adding images if she could. Something about this ritual disgusted my mother. It was clear that Diane was not enjoying herself either, but every evening he poured that swallow of dark red liquid into the deep bowl of her glass and waited, patiently at first, for her to come up with a description.

Diane held the wine in her mouth, then swallowed, her head cocked to the side as if she were listening for something.

"Frisky," she said. "A frisky colt kicking up his heels as he gallops away just when you thought you could catch him."

"Perfect!" my father said, as if she were a figure skater finishing her performance and he wanted to put both hands on her waist.

My mother sighed heavily and reached for the peas.

* * *

"Were they having sex?" Diane asks. "Were they still doing it?"

When she decided to marry Paul, the jockey, and move to Florida to train race horses, all she could talk about was how great the sex was.

I would rather not think about *any* sex but especially not Mom and Dad's, and especially not with Diane's pubic hair in full view and Dad lying dead in a box up in the East 80s. I want her to put on a pair of underpants, but I know she'll get mad if I ask. Why are you making so much of it, she will say. We're sisters.

"Sex? Mom and Dad?"

* * *

Every Christmas, Mom gave us underwear. Diane and I would sit at the foot of the tree, opening our identical presents simultaneously. Mom was on the sofa and Dad was in his armchair in his usual holiday bad mood, and Diane and I were handing out gifts on our hands and knees as if we were still

little children. The tree was in the living room window, so pedestrians on Fifty-Seventh Street could see it. Diane was wearing her Christmas nightgown, long red flannel with a plunging neckline, and when she pried open the shiny red box, she smiled a sly smile and looked at each of us, slowly. I had already put my box aside. It seemed like cheating that Mom used Christmas as a time to replenish our underwear.

“Look at these,” Diane said, holding them up in front of her. They were sheer and lacy, and I could see the red of her flannel nightgown through them. She stood up, rustling the tinsel, her broad shoulders relaxed, her loose mouth slack, lips parted, and when she began lifting her nightgown, from where I sat, her legs seemed as tall as the tree. I held my breath, knowing she was going to show me that place again, this time with Mom and Dad watching. When she knocked a small wooden rocking horse off the tree with her elbow, it made a splattering sound as it hit the tissue paper.

“Careful,” my mother said.

As she pulled down her old cotton underpants, her arm crashed into a string of lights.

“Careful,” my mother said again and there was another flash of her smooth slender legs, her dark hair down there and she was wriggling into her new panties as nonchalantly as if she were trying on gloves, her gown, bunched at her waist.

“Ta-da!” she said.

I watched from the floor as she twirled, so we could see her from the front, the side, the back, the front again and her hair down there was crushed, like a woman wearing a hairnet, and the tinsel on the Christmas tree shuddered and finally my father said, “That’s enough, Diane.”

She let her nightgown drop to the floor.

* * *

Rain crashes against the windows, startling us both.

“Look at it this way,” I tell her. “Dad had a major heart attack ten years ago. Even before that, their sex life was never any good.”

“How do you know that?” she asks.

“Because Mom told me everything, remember? Starting when I was old enough to talk.”

Diane sits up and folds her legs. “What did she tell you?” She always acts like she’s never heard it before.

“He was very passive. She always had to ‘do all the work,’ as she said.”

“What else?” Diane asks.

“Nothing else.” I am not going to tell her that he was obsessed with the movie *The Boys in the Band*, and had seen it sixteen times. If I did, the conversation would never end. “After I started therapy, I stopped letting her tell me things.”

I picture my multiple repeaters arriving at the classroom door to find the “class canceled” sign. I imagine the beautiful Cecilia, herself a former teacher in Argentina, going to the office to find out why. “Her father died,” she will tell the others, scolding them for celebrating the gift of a free hour.

There is a disappointed silence from Diane’s futon. Finally I turn and look at her, right between her legs, where she is wide open.

“Let’s get this over with,” I tell her. “Do you want to take a shower? I’ll lend you underwear. Afterward we’ll stop at Bloomingdale’s, and you can buy new.”

“Bloomies!” she says happily.

She stands up and pulls her T-shirt over her head. Her nipples are hard and dark.

* * *

Starting when we were about eight and six, Diane did striptease for the little boys who lived in the apartment upstairs while Mom was in her sewing room. She liked to wrap herself in sheer scarves and pull them off slowly while the boys watched. Once she was pulling off the last scarf for Eric, who was lying on the floor under her. I was sitting in the doorway to our room, watching her too, although I was supposed to be watching the long, dark hallway for Mom.

Diane was dancing over Eric, one foot on either side of his head. He was telling her to open her legs wider. She squatted over him and pulled the scarf between her legs, from front to back.

“Come closer,” he whispered hoarsely. Then Mom was in the doorway, shouting at Eric to get out and holding Diane by the wrist, smacking her butt, again and again, until it was bright red.

* * *

Diane comes out wearing my underpants.

“These are like the ones we wore when we were kids,” she says.

And I remember, again, her small legs spread wide on the bathroom floor and the sharp point of the scissors.

When I come out of the shower, my sister has put on her jeans and dropped her towel on the floor. Every detail of her—her broad shoulders, her strong arms, her delicate jaw—once seemed miraculous to me. She strode into a room and people turned to look, not because she was beautiful, but because she had that certainty about her.

I was sure that when I called her, when I reached her after Dad died, everything would be all right. It was the same with Mom. The first thing we needed, after Mom died, was for Diane to be there.

Mom died in a car crash. She was trying to leave Dad again. This time she had rented a car and asked the super to take her bags down in the service elevator.

“Going on a trip?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “A long trip.”

This is what he told us afterward. I think she meant that she wasn’t coming back, not that she was going to drive the car into the back of a 16-wheeler.

* * *

The guy at the funeral parlor rubs his hands together as if he were rubbing lotion into them. He is not the man in sunglasses who came to retrieve the body, put him into a body bag and asked if I wanted to keep his clothes. When I said no, he said it was a wise decision.

“They soil themselves,” he said.

This guy takes us downstairs to a large room with red carpeting where Dad is lying in a plain pine box. No fancy coffins for the soon-to-be-cremated. Inside the box, he is wrapped in heavy duty clear plastic, except for his face. Diane bursts into loud sobs as if she’s reenacting a scene from some TV drama.

“Yes!” she says. “Yes, that’s him.”

I study his face. His skin is pale and waxy, his lips glued shut.

Diane stops at the table with a pitcher of water on it and pours herself a glass. Then we go upstairs to fill out the papers.

Tomorrow I will be back with my students, with JuQing, who has so little presence, it seems I should be able to see right through her. Her voice is a whisper, her handwriting almost invisible.

After Bloomingdale's, where Diane picks up a dozen thongs with lace in front that I persuade her she doesn't have to try on, we go to the Brasserie. It was Dad's favorite place for lunch. It's our chance to pay our respects. In his will, he specified that he wanted no funeral, no memorial service, nothing to mark his death.

When the waiter comes, Diane orders a bottle of Beaujolais.

"It's the least we can do," she says.

I want to ask her not to describe it, but I'm pretty sure she wouldn't do that when it's just the two of us.

We order mushroom omelets and salad. We eat the French bread and unsalted butter while we wait.

"Now what?" I ask her.

"Now we get to look through all his stuff, read his letters, figure out what the hell was going on." The wine has been poured. She sips it and nods at the waiter. "We also get to pocket anything valuable and pretend it never existed."

There is no point in my saying that this does not sound like fun.

* * *

I will sit in one of the wing chairs, and Diana will stand in the window where we used to put the Christmas tree. Behind her there will be a curtain of rain. My sister will slip out of her jeans, then take Mom's scissors from the wooden box where we put away her sewing things and snip the price tags. Then she will pull down the underpants I lent her and try on her new ones. She will twirl.

"Ta-da!" she will say.

And there will be no one to stop her.

UPON RECEIVING AN UNEXPECTED GIFT

The book arrives wrapped
in thin skin
hennaed with the tattoo
of an ancient text
you stamped out
symbol by symbol—

painstaking work
I cannot decipher.
So much like you

To send the thrall
of beauty I cannot decode
veiled intent I interpret
as *I miss you*
when perhaps you meant
good-bye.

—Caridad Moro